Ghost Lineage and Other Stories

by

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Troubled Little Heaps

Marty refused to put on his insulin pump. He was terrified of it.

Mom called me upstairs after Marty ran into George’s bedroom. We were standing in the hallway that connected the bedrooms to the rest of the house when she showed the pump to me. It sat in the palm of her hand, a small black box the size of a cell phone with a screen stuck blinking Suspended over and over in the same bright blue digital text. Between the two of us and the pump’s clicking noises, it felt like a very narrow space filled with people trying to talk over each other.

“That’s it?” I asked.

The pump vibrated once, seemingly in response.

“Why did it do that?”

“It’s nothing. Just means it’s ready to be attached,” Mom said.

I could see why it terrified Marty.

Dad shouted from the kitchen down the hall, “Insurance didn’t cover it all. He has to use it.” He was pacing back and forth on the linoleum tile, each step causing the floor to creak. Dad was six feet tall and could fill an entire doorway. Most of his frustration was because he’d tried to get Marty to put it on peacefully and failed. My father’s yelling ripped through the walls like they were made of paper. But then, put a bear in a house and the house will feel small and ready to fall apart. Especially one as small as ours. Mom stood quietly and had no choice but to listen to my father.
“Come with me, Abe,” Mom said and led me down the hall to the bedrooms.

I followed Mom into George’s bedroom where we’d sequestered Marty until we could get the pump on him. The room resembled the closet of a music studio that someone had decided to live in. Guitars and equipment were crammed all around the room until you felt surrounded, like everything might spill on top of you in one loud chaotic note. On the back of his door, there was a black and white poster of two girls kissing in their underwear. George tried to convince my mother it was classy. She didn’t buy it.

Marty was lying on George’s bed, listening to my father yell and compulsively picking at his belly button. It was something he did when he got nervous. He kept staring at the ceiling, wincing every time Dad roared up again. George was sitting beside him, running his hand through Marty’s long tangled hair. It was one of the only times I could remember the two of them not fighting. George had my father’s short temper and Marty was twelve, which was usually explanation enough for why they didn’t get along. “Jesus, will he shut the fuck up?” George asked.

I started to tell him to calm down, that Dad was just letting off steam, but George cut me off with his gaze that seemed to say, *Stop being such a pussy.* His eyes narrowed behind his glasses, pissed off and blue. He was built like a bouncer, all broad shoulders and intimidation. I was four years older than him and he towered over me. George smacked Marty’s hand, “Fucking stop that. That’s disgusting. Playing with your belly button.”

“Sorry,” Marty whimpered.

“You need insulin, buddy. Your sugar is too high,” I said.
I thought of veins clogged with red Kool-Aid dust.

“You won’t even feel it,” I added as an afterthought.

“Yeah, baby,” my mother smiled and put the pump down on George’s cluttered desk, resting beside six cans of soda, none of which were empty. It vibrated once on the desk. We all tried to ignore it.

Marty didn’t want to talk. When he got upset, he would clam up and shake his head, keeping his lips squished together like he’d tasted something awful. Mom was explaining to Marty how small the needle was when my father shouted, “Does he have that thing on yet? He better.” Every few words, she’d bite her lip and try to gather her thoughts again. We were interrupted by a knock at the door that was too small and low to be my father.

“Shit, we left the baby out there,” George said.

“What’s that awful stench?” my little brother Eli shouted as he shuffled in. Eli had heard someone say this on television and started repeating it all the time. He was four, and it amazed me how he walked and talked like a little person. It was easy to forget that sometimes and be caught off guard by him. He was wearing a Chinese imitation Yankees cap. Dad had brought home a box of them from work. We didn’t even watch baseball and they sat where he’d left them in the garage. The hat was too big for Eli’s head and shadowed his entire face. He didn’t know who the Yankees were but he wouldn’t be parted from it.

“I want a waffle and green soda,” Eli said.

“Soda rots your teeth. Have juice,” I told him.

He ran up to me and flopped at my feet, wrapping himself around my left leg.
“I don’t want juice. I want sugar.”

“You don’t know what sugar is, monkey,” I said.

“Both of you, shut up,” George snapped.

It was amazing how quickly Eli could make himself cry. He sobbed and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. I think I heard sniffing, too. “Come here, Stink,” I said and then picked him up and sat him in Marty’s desk chair.

“We have to make Marty better. I’ll make waffles later,” I flicked the brim of his hat up and down once and he laughed, even though he didn’t want to. It was hard to look at Eli and not think of Marty when he’d been that age. If the blood work was right, Eli’s pancreas would give out just like Marty’s. One day his immune system would attack it and that would be that. I tried not to think about it. It felt like we were already failing him before we’d even finished letting Marty down.

“Stay in this chair and be quiet,” I told him.

Eli didn’t move.

I noticed there wasn’t any more yelling from down the hall. I figured Dad was sitting on the couch in his underwear and a t-shirt pretending to watch TV, too frustrated to pay attention. More likely, he was still talking to an empty room.

“Both the babies stopped,” George said.

“Be quiet.” My mother glared at George, “I need both of you to help.”

George and Mom were sitting on the mattress, holding Marty’s hands to encourage him. The pump was back in her free hand, ready to try again. She was hoping for better luck than what had happened when Dad tried.

“Talk to him,” she said.
“You know you need this,” I said.

Marty stared at me. I felt bad. I didn’t know what to say or do. Everything that came out of my mouth sounded like something from bad TV.

“Mom is so gentle, you won’t even feel it. This is what she does, and she’s the best. She never bruises or anything, right, Mom?”

“I’ve been doing it forever,” Mom said while she wiped Marty’s side with alcohol again. That was going to be the cleanest spot on his body five times over.

“It’s a tiny needle. We aren’t going to hold you down,” I said.

George agreed, “Whenever you’re ready.”

Marty nodded violently, but he couldn’t stop staring down at his right side. It was wet and bright from the alcohol. He knew that was where the needle was going. Mom started counting, quietly, “One . . . Two . . .” I watched her steady hand move closer to Marty’s skin with the thread thin needle. At the last second, he jerked his entire body and covered the spot with his hands. We pulled his arms back and placed them under his head. He kept them stiff, but only half-fought us.

“Okay, let’s try again,” Mom said as she swabbed the site with another alcohol pad. The smell was starting to fill the room, working back beyond my nostrils to the empty cavity between them and my brain.

“Try closing your eyes. We won’t count this time. You have to help us. Let’s work together,” I told him.

When my parents discovered Marty had diabetes, they both cried. Dad felt like he’d failed him. It was something he never wanted to give to his children. Marty was just lucky my mother had her concerns and tested his blood. Usually, they don’t find out until
something bad happens. It isn’t uncommon for children to slip into a coma before someone figures out that their pancreas has killed itself. Marty was too young to understand at the time, not even ten. He stayed in the children’s hospital with my parents and played Nintendo 64 while George and I took care of Eli. At first, he thought it was something like the flu. He’d get better. Then the doctor explained that unfortunately, he’d be this way forever, but these days he could have a relatively normal, healthy life, and do whatever he wanted to do. Not like when Dad was growing up, which was mostly guess work and one huge dose of insulin a day. Marty said he wanted to join the army. All except for that, the doctor said.

George petted Marty’s head, “Squeeze our hands if you have to.”

He held on at first, but started to wiggle his hips and get loose. He started kicking, flailing wildly. Holding on tighter was all we could do. Eli saw this and howled at the top of his lungs while jumping on George’s desk. Mom tried to get close, but he kept hitting her. She sat back in the chair, getting frustrated. “Damn it, Marty! If you don’t let me do this right, it’s going to really hurt and we’ll have to do it again.”

“Stop hurting Marty,” Eli said, just on the edge of tears. I turned and looked at him, offered him an empty smile and went to calm him down but George grabbed my shoulder and shook his head. “Come on, this is the only kind of insulin Mommy ordered,” George told him.

“It’s okay,” Mom collected herself. “Same thing. Close your eyes, honey.”

We got in our positions and held Marty’s hands while Mom swabbed and prepped. She explained that it was just an IV. It wasn’t deep enough to hurt him.

“We’re only going a little under the skin,” she said.
He squirmed when the needle came close again.

“Hold him down,” she said.

Marty thrashed and screamed as loud as he could, like we were torturing him. I lay over his legs and wrapped myself around them. George held his arms down but he kept twisting in place.

“Keep him still,” George shouted.

Marty kneed me once in the face. My head shot back. I punched him hard in the chest. Marty stifled a scream; then stopped fighting. The bedroom door opened and at first I thought it was Eli running out of the room, but I could feel my father before I saw him. Marty’s sobs and the strange mechanics of the pump were the only noises in the room. It was already at work, rushing fluid through a tube so small it looked empty. The machine calculated what Marty needed. Made it look easy, clicking away to itself. Mom did her best to wipe his tears with her sleeve. Dad stood beside us. He had a hand on Marty’s shoulder, not as a means of force, but of comfort. He was patting Marty gently. I could see the scar tissue on his legs from a lifetime of injections, swelling like tumors in his thighs. His faded green eyes, blinking softly, trying to focus.
It was a hot night in June. Our apartment sat on an empty road in a forested development full of foreclosed or soon-to-be-foreclosed bi-levels. The parked cars from the party went down the length of the road, disappearing around the bend. There weren’t any street lights and the trees seemed to drink up all the moonlight. Our friends had gathered on the porch and at every available window to watch what was happening. Lill was full of oxy and gin, sitting in her pickup truck parked out in the street.

I was almost hanging from her open car window, trying to talk her down. Even without much light, I saw how badly she’d hurt herself. Lill’s knees were still raw and pooling blood. The ugly fall down the front steps had been cushioned by the pills and liquor. She’d sprung up after, like it was the end of a magic trick—ta da—with her bent cigarette still between her lips.

I told her not to go. When she tried I climbed on the hood of her truck. I hugged the front tire and dared her to run me over. I wished everyone would leave, gather up their things and walk around us to their respective cars. She’d come with me and lie down on the couch. I’d clean the dirt and gravel out of her gashes. I’d want to kiss them, as if that would do anything besides spread infection. I’d know better and share my love with hydrogen peroxide and cheap Shoprite bandages which would sit awkwardly on her knees and need my constant attention.
Instead, Lill got out of the truck, half empty bottle of Corona in her hand. She threw the bottle at me, all strength and no aim. I heard it break against the pavement with a loud pop. She started punching me, digging her nails into my forearms. When she was done I considered hitting her, hard. I took a deep breath and suffocated my anger. It didn’t dissipate but shrank down to almost nothing. You could cut it out of me like a pearl. I watched her stumble up to the house.

Picking up the beer soaked glass was a Zen exercise, my own personal sand garden. I crouched over with a dust pan, trying to find the shards with the light from my cell phone while everyone left.

Lill was sleeping when I came in, tangled up in the blankets and sheets, her body contorted in such a way that it looked like something out of a torture manual. She snored, loud and awful, but comforting all the same. I wanted to get in bed beside her but an idea was starting to take hold and the more sober I got, the more it imposed itself upon me, like it was the only thing that made any sense.

Scented candles and vomit. The candles had burned out, leaving me with everything else. Lill couldn’t have done all that damage alone. Someone else had helped her make it and let her take the blame. The toilet had been missed more than once. Everything spilled down the left side, collecting on the floor. One of our better hand towels had been thrown down and left to soak in it. It was easier to light some lavender scented candles and leave the mess.

I stared at the containers of pills in the cabinet like they were my reflection. Then I flushed them all down the drain. What I left behind was a half-empty bottle of
Spongebob vitamins, some toothpaste, Tylenol and a few other assorted things that I thought were harmless. You couldn’t get high off nail clippers, for instance.

The stash of liquor in the kitchen was the harder. My heart wasn’t strong enough to simply spill them down the drain. I emptied them off our deck and onto Lill’s rose bushes. Something deserved to get drunk. Goodbye to all the old familiar names, close friends and confidants, Jack Daniels, Jim Beam, Johnny Walker . . . Crystal Skull. I didn’t think it was a permanent fix. It had to be done. I was afraid that these weren’t even the worst of our problems. Maybe we were just bad people. I found my way back to the couch and instantly felt dumber and fatter than I had been before.

When Lill woke me, the sun was nearly up. Standing beside me in her underwear and the same white t-shirt from the night before, three spots of blood and a little dried puke stained the cloth. I could see the large band-aids someone had put on her knees, which made her look like she’d gone rollerblading. You could almost notice a small cut on her chin, in the end it was barely anything at all. I smelled fruit and saw her chewing before I noticed the pack of Starburst in her hand. Lill had no appetite. Everything seemed to make her feel sick. She motioned to get on the couch with me.

I nodded, groggy.

Lill got under the blanket and rested her head on my chest, shivering a little. The air conditioning always ran cooler than it was supposed to. She seemed restless and couldn’t get comfortable until she took my arms and pulled them around her.

“Keep me warm,” she said.
I rubbed her arms, wrapped her legs up in my own. I avoided touching where she’d hurt herself, anything not to bring up what had happened, to even imply it through my fingers. Those parts of her body no longer existed. A small gash on her elbow I hadn’t known about caught me off guard. My hands stopped searching and I tucked them into the elastic of her underwear, resting on top of her smooth bare skin. Lill chewed her candy slowly, repeatedly nudging her chin into me.

“You should have something real to eat,” I told her.

“I can’t. Want one?”

“Got any cherry left?”

“A few orange and a lemon,” she said

“Orange, please.”

I listened to her peel the wrapper with one hand like a pro. Someone in a lab had taken syringes of fruit flavored chemicals and injected them into candles. We chewed loudly and didn’t say anything to each other until we were done.

“I got rid of everything,” I said.

She nodded and brushed the side of my arm, twisting my hairs together until they started to pinch and tug on my skin, “Well, there’s always whiskey.”

“Everything.”

When she was done processing what I’d told her, she turned her head awkwardly and tried to kiss me on the lips. The best she could do was the bottom of my chin. She put her lips to my beard but did so slowly, like she didn’t mind the taste of my hair.

Whatever we talked about after that, I don’t remember. Or maybe it was important, and I should remember, but I don’t. Sometime after, she kissed me. We pulled
each other close, only letting go long enough to remove our clothes. She sat up to pull her shirt off and I could see more of her ribs than I should have. But hers wouldn’t break like stale bones. They had life and resolve left in them, down in the marrow. Even then, so recklessly cared for, Lill was beautiful. I loved to think of the way she looked in the shower, the water traveling the curvature of her body. Drove me nuts.

She pulled the blanket back over us and closed her eyes, sleeping, or pretending to sleep. She held onto me without any apprehension, like she used to. We were trying to be gentle with each other and I couldn’t remember the last time that was the case. It made things seem new and reminded me of years back, before we were together.

There was this big snow storm. Instead of staying in, a group of us walked to the nearest bar, which was empty, and danced to trashy music till two in the morning. Lill and I wanted to go sleigh riding. The storm had cleared up by then but it was unbearably cold. Everyone else did the smart thing and went home. We went down this hill near the edge of the lake on the opposite end of town. The ice looked like a barren field. All the lights across the lake were shining, silver and gold. It was sobering.

From that distance, the glow from all the buildings and stores that were still lit up looked like one light, a star too weak and diminished for a sunrise. Lill told me it reminded her of Manhattan. I laughed. No one had ever made that comparison before. She told me that the city at night in an airplane was one of her earliest memories. Then she hit me in the face with a snowball. It was cold and abrasive, like a ball of broken glass, and managed to get down my jacket. I fell to the ground, and told her that was a terrible thing to do just then. I could feel how red and numb my face must have looked. After watching me in the snow, all sprawled out like that, she got on top of me. The
thought that she was going to do something cruel crossed my mind. Lill took her gloves off and brushed the snow away from my face. I watched the hot air leaving her lips in a cloud in front of me and knew that I was breathing in a little bit of her, that she was giving herself up, the smallest pieces first. She asked me if it was better. It wasn’t, but I could have kissed her.
Ashpool was a big enough town to have a yearly bar-crawl and rural enough to have one traffic light. Mihaly Gozer liked it for both those reasons. He was outside Buccaneer Bar and Liquors, begging for a drink above the almost constant crash of shopping carts in the parking lot. The store was sandwiched between an A&P and a post office in a strip mall and Mihaly paced the length of the building. The sky was pale, stretched thin. September was over and the leaves had begun to look like rust and fall. Even at noon he had his olive green field jacket zipped closed. He felt the cold through his tattered sneakers. It was Sunday morning. While Our Lady of Consolation Church was getting ready for mass across the street, a small crowd of regulars were already on their second or third drink in the Buccaneer. He had been in town for six months. Long enough to develop a reputation and get barred from most places.

He asked anyone that made eye contact with him for a drink. Sometimes he talked to no one. “I have the Stigmata.” He said. “Can I have a cigarette?”

A fifteen year old boy walked up to the blue outgoing mailbox with an envelope in his hands. Before the boy could deposit the envelope, Mihaly was leaning against the mailbox, looking at him with his one good eye. He’d lost the other in the service, wore a glass one for twenty years and lost that on a bender in Miami. Since then he’d resorted to an eye patch.
“Buy me drink,” Mihaly said. His accent was thick, sometimes he still slipped into Russian. The boy almost squealed. He was thirty pounds overweight and looked like a bologna. Eventually, the boy shook his head, “I’m not old enough.”

“Fat Bitch!”

Mihaly lunged over the top of the mailbox and pawed at the boy and his envelope. He snarled and banged on the mailbox with his fists. The boy ran. Mihaly did not know how to beg.
August of our Era

Chapter 1

I don’t want to think about anything. Thankfully, the weather’s on. A hurricane moves up the coast like an impressive brain scan, a swirl flashing red, yellow, and green. Clotted tumor of clouds. It looks funny crammed down into the diner’s small television. All that power, like a grenade in someone’s hand. Good luck, Florida. It means nothing to me. I can only picture Epcot buried underwater. Where the hell is Orlando? Is it inland? Then the bullet at the bottom of the screen gives everything a name. Hurricane Stephanie. Every year meteorologists get together and put all the names of their ex-husbands and wives in a barrel and pick. I can’t wait for Hurricane Erectile Dysfunction, Tropical Storm Credit Card Debt.

I wait for my client to walk in, playing with my fries and watching the television. I think about the grease and fat covering everything on my plate. Before I even start to eat, I’m filled with regret, wanting to get my stomach pumped. I try to stiffen up, act professional. I am on the clock after all. The last thing I need is to be found with my head down on the table, or a smear of ketchup on my shirt. Not that I’d worry much. But I did put on a clean shirt and tie—even pressed my pants.

There aren’t many people in the diner. There never are. But by midday, whatever day of the week it is, everything goes stale. Conversations are sparse and the customers
wallow. If we had lives, we’d be busy living them. The five or so regulars are like tree stumps. I imagine their fleshy asses growing around their seats, oozing over stools, arms putting down roots into the cheap coffee stained counter tops. Their veins will get lost in imitation marble.

When I was younger, I didn’t think I had the imagination to grasp a hangover, never having been drunk. I didn’t plan to, either. It was alluded to in movies where people looked sick and miserable and had lots of coffee after a long night of drinking. It seemed like a mystery illness. Now I understand there’s very little to it. It’s pathetic and stupid. I have a headache and I’m tired. Light and sound leave bruises on my brain. My eyes feel salted and I’m stuck waiting in Chuck’s Diner, which is its own form of punishment. Chuck was a real person once, he retired twenty years ago and those that have followed him seem to think that keeping the name is helpful. Franchising. It was the kind of place that stuck to fried food, grease, and lots of cheese. Their answer to the health food craze was simple—a burger without a bun and a side of cottage cheese. A few years back they did some minor renovations and put in tinted windows. They were installed backwards.

Outside it’s October, but the leaves haven’t turned, and the sun is hidden behind a few clouds. I still have to squint at the glare off my client’s new Mazda as it pulls into the parking lot. I work out of the diner, not that I have any intention of letting my client know this. I give the owner a little bit of money every month and get a spot in the corner. My booth is okay, sometimes the roof leaks in rain or snow and the ceiling tiles above my head look like soggy graham crackers duct taped together. What I like most is the ambivalence. I think people have to learn to appreciate the good things that come with
nobody caring if you have a pulse. I didn’t get any trouble if I showed up a little drunk or hung over like today. It wasn’t their business.

Craig Stevens, my client, walks in and looks around. Since I seem like a functioning human being, in comparison to everyone else, he heads towards me from the beginning. I don’t tell Stevens that he’s walking into my office, that all of my files are in the leather case at my feet. This is to be our first meeting, just a little lunch then back to our busy lives. Most of what I know is based on our conversation over the phone. He says he works for Aegis. If a man tells me he’s a medium-level employee with one of the biggest corporations in the world—I’ll believe him. Whatever his position is, it involves traveling.

Stevens is moderately successful, based on the little bit of bragging he did, wealthy by the standards of everyone in the diner. Graduated from Boston College with a degree in Communications. Sometime after school he married one Nancy Borowski. I can’t find anything else on her. They’ve been living in the same house for fifteen years. Otherwise, he posts occasionally on a Bruce Springsteen fan site. I don’t know about what, that would require going on a Bruce Springsteen fan site and I’m just not ready to do that. Before this, Stevens was just an agitated voice on a phone. He seems like he was once in good shape, probably an athlete, but now that’s gone. Average height, a little stocky, in his mid-to-late forties. His hair is missing too. While he’s been pulling clumps of it out of the drain and brushing it off his pillow every morning, his face has gotten pudgy and red. His smile is lost in a face swallowed by a throw pillow. Even in his high-priced suit, he’s just a scared fat man.
“Uh, Mr. Miller?” he asks, glancing around, waiting for someone else to come and save him, which shouldn’t have been hard. Stevens is a company man, and those guys like to handle everything they can internally. They have resources for their employees. Almost every company has a contract with one of those big security firms; some even have a few in house people to take care of things. I’ve been trying to figure out why I got called at all. There are two possibilities that I see. One: I’m all he can afford—he drives a Mazda. Maybe all that bragging is just a cover? Two: Whatever the problem is, he doesn’t want his bosses finding out. No private armies or secret police for him. I guess I’m a little out of line. It’s easy to talk shit on whoever is ahead of you in life.

“Have a seat,” I motion across from me.

He sits down and I say very little. More than anything, I’m polite, in a superficial kind of way. When he asks if I’m going to take more detailed notes I stop scribbling on my napkin and take out my notepad. I humor him. I don’t expect this to be anything serious. He shifts in his seat and turns off his phone.

“So, how can I help you today, Mr. Stevens?”

“Well, I don’t know how to say this, it’s my wife.”

When isn’t it? I try to get the obvious out of the way.

“Is there a chance that your wife might be cheating on you?”

“Never! No,” I’ve already offended him, earlier than usual.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s my fault, I’m just a little stressed over everything,” there’s more he wants to say but he cuts himself short. A waitress comes to our corner of the world looking for
orders. After Stevens says he doesn’t want anything, and I ask for more coffee, she knows she isn’t going to get a good tip. If she wasn’t disenfranchised before, she is now. I don’t think I’m getting anymore coffee. Stevens looks jumpy, he doesn’t want to open his mouth again, especially with waitresses coming around and interrogating everyone. I try to keep him on track. I’m mildly curious.

“You were saying.”

He tells me how his wife talks to Jesus. In fact, she tells a slew of biblical figures about her day, every day. He comes home and she’s asking Mary if she likes pork chops. Unless Moses actually has a deep concern about what dish detergent she’s using, she’s nuts. Maybe it plays into some bigger plan, a marketing scheme or something. She calls him Christ in bed. I start to write that down and Stevens asks about who will see my “report”—it’s a report now. I tell him I work alone, so no one. But I’ll probably tell my friends after I have a couple drinks in me.

“I don’t know if I can help with this. What about talking to a doctor?”

“Out of the question. I love my wife. She’s always been very religious, but this is something new,” he pauses and seems really strained for a few seconds. He gathers himself, “I’m going away. I want you to find out what’s wrong. Something has to be causing this.”

God’s bored? She’s schizophrenic? I don’t know.

“Well what do you have in mind?” I ask.

“I tried talking to her. She’s at home right now making the Last Supper for Jesus and the Apostles. She does this at least once a week, buys a whole turkey. Now I’m
supposed to go away tomorrow, five days. My wife doesn’t talk to anyone else. I’m just a little worried that—”

“You’re thinking about what happens when she tries to light her garden on fire and go to Egypt. On top of that, you don’t want anyone finding out. ” He starts to raise his hands up, like he’s going to disagree, and lets them fall on the table. I’m not sure if he’s ashamed of himself. This is a man out of ideas.

“Here’s what we’ll do. I’ll keep an eye on her for my regular fee, nothing crazy. If I find anything that leads to an actual solution, you pay me a bonus.”

He agrees. I ask a few other questions about his wife and their marriage, they all offend him. Stevens wants answers but is determined not to let me know anything about either of them. He’s a swollen illusion and his wife isn’t even that.

“We both come from normal, healthy families with God in our lives.”

Nothing normal about that.

“Do you mind if I ask how you heard about me?”

He looks at me a little curiously, like I’m out of line. I don’t think I am.

“For my records,” I say.

“Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Dohn are members of our church. Mrs. Dohn had mentioned something about you helping her with a little extortion problem.”

I wish I had a strong drink in my hand. I wonder if he notices how much I’m smirking.

“What did she tell you, exactly?”
“She talks too much, tells everyone everything. I remembered how much she raved about you. She said you were a hard worker, inexpensive, and handsome,” Stevens rolls his eyes. “Why are you laughing?”

Mrs. Dohn breeds cats for competitions and shows. She has an award winning Devon Rex breed named Fidel V. Ramos. I had an ad on the placemats of her husband’s restaurant at the time, so when the thing disappeared they called me. I remember checking dumpsters and kicking over boxes in alleys for a week, pissing off every random cat I could find. I still have scars on my hands. Then I was busy knocking on doors and posting Xeroxed signs on telephone poles. Not much else you can do in a situation like that. At the end of the week her nephew found the cat. He got the promised reward and I was thrown a few bucks for my troubles. It disappeared two more times before I caught the same nephew stuffing Fidel in a crate for round number four. Ugly cat, too. Eyes like a Martian.

“Nothing, Mrs. Dohn just loves her cats,” I stop myself from laughing anymore. “That was very nice of her.”

“To be honest with you, I’m not that impressed, but I don’t know many detectives,” he says.

Vernon comes around just in time to interrupt Stevens. I told him to wear his suit. He has to leave his jacket open because his stomach is too big for it now. I don’t think there are any stains on his shirt, and I think he showered so he won’t smell like piss and cigarettes. Vernon starts right up, like we’ve rehearsed so many times before. For Stevens, it seems like we’re just two people bumping into each other.

“Abe? What a coincidence. I’ve been meaning to thank you.”
“Thank me?” I act shocked, I’d blush if I could.

“You saved my life.”

Okay there, buddy, don’t over do it.

“You’re exaggerating,” I hope Vern doesn’t hump the table. So far he’s only been lingering behind Stevens, who has no idea what to make of anything and has been twisting his neck to get a better look at the man behind him. Vernon is a tall, pear shaped, gray haired man. He has thick black rimmed glasses and false teeth and spent the last ten years or so in a mental institution. I was a kid and he was already something people talked about, that was before his breakdown and the hospital. I used to call him the Caterpillar, ‘cause he reminded me of the one from *Alice in Wonderland*, sitting in his booth. All he did was smoke and drink coffee, like a big ugly bug blowing smoke rings. Vernon isn’t an example of falling through the cracks of the system; he’s been rushed out the front door into the Grand Canyon. They only released him because of budget cuts. Keep the lower risks patients doped up all day long and hope for the best is as far as policy goes. Take your pills, they tell them.

“No, you fucked them up good.”

Stevens’ eyes get big, but before I can say anything Vernon has moved onto something else. You get what you pay for, and I don’t pay him much. He’s a broken down automated animatronic George Washington, once the motion sensor sets him off he can’t quit. I could tell him my hair was on fire and he would keep going. He’s still standing in the aisle, and won’t do anything else until told to.

“I’m sorry, you’re doing business,” Vernon stops to readjust his scrotum mid-thought. “Pardon me. Vernon Rockefeller, the governor’s son.”
Stevens shakes the madman’s hand before he has time to consider anything. He offers a smile like somebody who doesn’t know how to. It doesn’t go well.

“Nice to meet you, I was just leaving,” he says.

Vernon’s paid, usually in cigarettes, to do this with all my clients. I don’t have many, and it helps to show some results going into the job, even if they aren’t real. It’s never a great act, and there are plenty of holes if you sit and think about it, but they never get that time if we do it right. If I’d know that Mrs. Dohn had given me such a glowing review, I wouldn’t have bothered. Vernon is legitimately insane but he likes to put on the airs of a business man, a wheeler and dealer in a sweat-stained shirt and an old cheap suit. It’s hard to take him serious, watching him talk to Stevens when I know he exposed himself to a girl working at the pizza place a week ago. One more place he can’t go to now. But I guess it helps keep him calm, pretending to be important and powerful when you can barely get through the day.

“Vernon, could you give me a sec’to finish with my client here. We can talk later.”

“But I never paid you.”

“Just a minute,” I point at Vernon, and then glance over at Stevens, willing him to stay seated and facing me. It’s like fishing with two poles at once. I’m about to get a hook in my neck. Vernon finds a chair a few tables away and looks in front of him at the placemat full of advertisements; there is no comprehension in his eyes. I slide a contract over to Stevens and ask for fifty bucks. I’m smart enough to at least get a signature before I do anything. I tell him the fee is for our meeting. Honestly, I just realized that I don’t
have enough gas to get home. I try to be discrete when he puts the bills down on my side of the table. I ask if he has a picture.

“Of what?”

“Your wife.”

His day continues to get worse. It’s amazing what fifty bucks will get you. After some awkward sifting through his wallet he finds a picture and places it discretely next to my money. I double check the address and phone number, ask where I can reach him while he’s away.

“Her name is Nancy, correct?”

For a second I think he’s just going to give up and grab the money and the picture and run out the door—take his chances with his wife and the imaginary nativity play he lives with. Bless his soul, he pulls through.

“When do you start?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Call me,” he says. Stevens shakes my hand, doesn’t seem too happy, but I don’t blame him. I watch him go from the window. He nods at me, starts his car, and wants to leave everything behind. Vernon picks himself up and comes back to my table.

“He seems like a nice fellah’,” he tells me as he sits down.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Don’t sit down, we’re leaving,” I yell.

“What?”

“The governor’s son? You’re impossible. Stick to what we wrote ahead of time.”

Vern nods and twists his fingers together in front of him. He seems to get smaller, squishing down like a squeezed out sponge.
“Could I borrow some money?” he leans in and speaks low.

“I already paid you. I’m broke, pal.”

“I just need money for cigarettes. My father won’t pay for anymore until the end of the month.”

Vernon’s father has to be seventy or eighty and that poor little mummy is still giving him money. The rate I’m going, an allowance at forty or fifty isn’t out of the question for me. It might even be an improvement if I can swing it.

“Quit,” I tell him.

“Can’t,” he’s already started to light up. Everyone leaves him alone because telling him to smoke outside is too much trouble. We take his second-hand smoke out of pity and frustration.

“Christ, Vern,” I shuffle the three bills that I was about to put in my wallet and give him a ten. He paws the money into his pocket, “I’ll pay you back.”

“No you won’t. Stop playing poker with those fucks at the carwash.”

“They’re my friends.”

The masculine waitress comes by. I never got my coffee. She rips the bill out of her pad and puts it face down. I take a look. Eight bucks.

“Ridiculous,” I shake my head. “No they aren’t your friends.”

“Abe,” he pleads with me some more.

We both look like salesmen, I haven’t quite decided what kind. I pay and Vern follows me out. Chuck’s sits at the base of a small hill, embedded into the side like fallen debris. Only half the lot is paved, the rest is gravel. At night, when you’re staring out the diner’s reverse tinted windows, it looks like you’re sitting in a restaurant on the moon—
your car is parked in the Sea of Tranquility. I’ve always liked that name, and it’s right, peaceful waters are just empty craters, deserts waiting to be filled.

I undo my tie and toss it in the back of my car. I drive a white ‘91 Ford Taurus station wagon. It’s loud, specifically it sounds like a large flock of slaughtered lambs. The thing also leaks fluids from every hose, pipe, and pump and starts to shake like a shuttle re-entering orbit if you try to go over fifty. Sometimes the pedal sticks and the engine runs with or without a key in the ignition. I get in against my better judgment. Vernon’s already on his second cigarette, cradling the weather balloon at his waist. Apparently the pills do that to him. Maybe they’re filled with spider eggs, stillborn shriveled spiderlings.

“Take good care of the kids,” I shout out my window.

Vern looks at me, and I’m concerned that he might just take my advice and go near a bus stop or something. Jokes.

“Nevermind,” I tell him. “Do your lines next time.”

I don’t want to think about how good a little money feels in my breast pocket, or how quick it will be gone. The closest gas station is at the intersection by the Shop Foods and town hall. All of it is held together by a traffic light they installed fifteen years ago. Its programming hasn’t been updated. It costs too much so there are always back-ups and irrational traffic patterns. The little computer that runs the lights is directing ghosts fifteen-years-old. Thirty-thousand people living over almost a hundred square miles, all trying to get through here. And the population rises, for whatever reason. Wyeth, New Jersey is massive and empty, with nothing to offer but more people. There are bi-levels and condos, man-made lakes and a reservoir. I remember learning about primitive forms
of life, how they don’t even have real brains, just enlarged nerves tangled together.

Wyeth is just a big jellyfish, an enormous empty-headed tapeworm posing as a town, periodically directed by one outdated traffic light.

By the time I get there, it’s four. The commuter rush will be here soon and then it’ll all die off again. Indeterminate Dark-Skinned Ethnicity Groucho Marx steps out of the storefront and asks me about how much gas I’d like and another ten bucks disappears. I haven’t made it home yet and I’m down thirty. Groucho has three other cars to take care of so I kill time. There’s a girl sitting on the curb at the other end of the station. She has her back to the road and the few bushes planted along the lot’s edge.

I look at her and feel invasive, like I’m watching a surgery or a car accident. She is beautiful, but she’s heard that a lot from the wrong people and that has made her mean. How many times can men paw at you before you become like that? It’s never love or anything good. I see a crumpled up green cloth, probably a bar apron. I keep staring at her sitting on the curb in her ripped jeans, some sort of tattoo on the side of her neck—black and twisted, right below the start of her jaw—and a plain green army cap resting crookedly on her head. She looks like she’d tell me off and beat me down. I don’t think she’s capable of any softness. She doesn’t see me because she’s too caught up in the phone in her hand. It has her full attention and she hates it and what’s about to happen. I can tell that much. Every now and then the girl will brush her bangs out of the way and tip the brim of her hat to keep the sun off the phone’s screen. She wants to avoid it, but instead she puts it to her ear and starts shouting and crying in almost the first second.

I watch her scream with her entire body. Her lean face and sharp features become distorted, dark cheeks flushed and red. Something makes her drop the phone down to her
side without getting to finish her sentence. I can almost see the words dangling there, but
I can’t read them. Now she doesn’t stop crying. Part of me wants to get out of my car and
ask her what’s wrong.

I’m not a perv. I’m a lot of things, but I don’t go around staring at young women
like some creeper, unless I’m paid to. I don’t enjoy this. When I had an office and my
clients came to me with a problem, I’d look them all in the eye and tell them the same
thing, Trust Me, I can help. I don’t say that anymore.

Besides, what could be wrong? I don’t know. I just want ten dollars of gas. I lean
forward, turn on my radio and think about how I want the leaves to start changing color. I
want it to get cooler so people have to cry indoors. She’s still sitting there, not crying as
much, trying to crush the little black phone in her hand. I watch her grind it into the
pavement as I drive away with less than a quarter tank of gas.
Chapter 2

I live on the lake like a squatter in my dead grandmother’s house. My great-grandfather built it back when there was money attached to our name. In a lot of ways, this was the start of the town. The abandoned vacation homes of the wealthy. Those bright summer lights on the lake, reflected in the water like a miniature skyline—a Manhattan transplant—gone in August. Only a handful lived here in the winter. Most of the lake houses still look like bungalows with Frankenstein additions, irregular fingers and toes.

Over all that time, little was done for appearance. The house is a kind of pine green, maybe a little greyer, the color of an old aluminum rowboat. It has been modernized in chunks, old skin and appliances shaved and new parts grafted. They forced it to be live-able. Things were inherited a certain way but I haven’t helped it along. Outside, the paint has held up fairly well, but I either need to repair the above ground pool or tear it down. I’ve left it empty. So many gaps and holes now, beams hold it together like a girdle. Keep it from exploding. It’s a beached ship taking on air. Plenty of other things need my attention. It’s all a question of commitment, which I lack. Two years living here like it was one long blurry weekend.
My idea was to read and drink on the deck until the daylight ran out. I needed a break from my work. Well, that’s what I kept telling myself. Meeting Craig Stevens was really nothing more than a discussion, weighing the possibilities of employment. I pick up my travel mug and take a long sip. Everyone has something they are convinced they can drink at ease without getting sloppy. A shot glass doesn’t hurt but drinking is like camping, rough it a little. I prefer Jack with some diet peach iced-tea. Is drinking diet redundant when you mix it with four shots? No. Maybe. I quit the book and blame it on how dark it’s getting. Wasn’t good anyway.

There’s a patch of spackle on the kitchen wall. It was my repair job after I made the hole. I don’t know why I did either. One afternoon, I came into the kitchen and there it was, like skin cancer. I suspect the VCR remote and an empty bottle of Jagermeister is buried behind it. Whenever I wonder about myself, I look at the patch, like a mirror. Twenty-nine—shit—single, barely employed, not too likeable. There’s liquor in my walls. My toes are tingling and I can’t feel my cheeks. I pick up the phone and dial my way home since my feet can’t take me. My father picks up on the fourth ring. Lately, it’s been hard to reach my parents. I wonder if they’re psychically screening their calls.

“Hello,” he sounds almost cheerful.

“Dad, what’s up?”

“We’re watching Seinfeld re-runs. Have you been drinking?”

I aim my mouth away from the receiver, like he can smell the alcohol on me.

“Nah, is Mom there?”

“What?”

He can just deal with my slurred speech.
“Is Mom there?”

“Yeah—it’s your son—What’re you doing this Saturday?”

“Uh, nothin’, probably,” I think I say.

“Well I want to put the first coat on upstairs.”

I used to hate when my father would wake me up on Saturday mornings to rake leaves or help him with work around the house. After I moved out, I thought I wouldn’t have to worry about that. That was before he made plans to finish renovating. I came home one night and he’d knocked down a whole section of upstairs, rearranging the house’s guts—putting in new pipe and rewiring the light switches.

“Okay.”

“Do you think you can finish the drywall by then?” he asks, like he doubts it.

“I was just taking a break, yeah, I’ll be done.”

If I had a hammer, I’d pick it up and start banging to give the proper illusion.

“Alright, here’s your mother. I’ll see you Saturday.”

“Bye.”

Dad goes back to laughing at whatever’s on. He passes the phone to my mother. I can picture them both sitting on the couch, my dad in his boxers and a shirt, mom in her sweats and slippers, drinking a glass of wine. The cat that won’t die even though they want it to is probably sitting on the back of the couch, getting its fur everywhere. My father has given up yelling at it. Whenever he does, it just shits on his side of the bed to spite him.

“Honey, are you watching?”

“No, I didn’t pay the satellite bill.”
“Did you pay the others?”

I hear my father asking my mother why I don’t pay my bills.

“Yeah.”

I think I did.

“Do you need money?” she whispers into the phone.

She’s probably walked into the kitchen so that my father can’t hear.

“No, I’m good,” I tell her.

“You sure? I have some things you can do for me around the house . . . run some errands . . . I’ll pay you.”

“I can’t, I have work.”

“Really?” her voice spikes. “That’s great.”

I look at the picture of the Stevens I left on the counter, paying close attention to Nancy Stevens for the first time since I’ve heard of her. The picture is from Christmas. They’re standing in front of their tree, wearing terrible sweaters and looking like they enjoy it. Her smile is framed by her neck length blonde hair. She is warm and good. I don’t see how she could cheat on her husband, he’s probably right, not for the reasons he thinks. She isn’t that type of person. I bet she has a perfect traffic record, maybe one embarrassing little accident while parking. Nancy doesn’t look crazy. I imagine her in the kitchen, cooking a whole Thanksgiving dinner and setting plates for guests that never come.

The more I think about it, it has been an awful dry spell. I can’t believe I had enough money once to buy this house. My job with the Stevens is how I’ll turn it all around. I’m going to start running every day and I’m going to work hard. No more pot.
No carbs. No chocolate. No cholesterol. I’ll drink skim milk. Cheese is the enemy. White American seems to taste better than yellow, or is that in my head?

“I was just calling to ask you what I should have for dinner. I need something healthy.” I walk back and forth between the fridge and the pantry, looking for the things my mother lists.

“Well, you can have a nice salad with bits of chicken—apple slices and peanut butter is delicious—maybe some soup? Soup is good.”

Fuck me. I actually have some of those things.

“What about a bagel? Could I have a bagel?”

“Sure, maybe just have half though, with a little butter.”

The fridge light glows on my face while I stare the food down.

“What if I shred some spicy cheese and melt it on the bagel instead of butter? Is that okay?”

“I guess so.”

“If I have a leftover slice of pizza too, is that healthy?”

“No, honey, probably not.”

I pass out on the couch and dream I’m the last man on earth. Everyone else is gone, but when I go on my computer (I still have power in my dream) there are e-mails from deposed princes trying to claim inheritances, and spambots with names like Ingrid Hergozeva and Keli Schmendt talk to me on social websites, offering links for free ringtones. Everyday, I get junk mail and coupons even though all the mailmen are dead. The machines that print them will keep on going. I talk to robotic telemarketers and subscribe to everything, endless credit cards and satellite television.
Shady Glen, as the sign announces, is a good place. They leave it at that; one of those vague meaningless names a developer pulled together. The neighborhood is built around a small lake in a series of interconnected rings. From the air it looks like an eroded and forgotten geoglyph, like the Nazca lines, ancient people tried to make a carving you could see from space. It should have been something, but the meaning is lost.

The Stevens house sits on a curve in the road and rises out of the hillside, a partially buried boulder. There’s a small boardwalk that leads its way over the hill to the front door, but the beams are old and worn into the earth and the stain has faded so that it looks like it’s supposed to be there. That’s the greatest feeling I get from the property, whoever cares for it seems to use a delicate touch. Everything’s natural, the way a river or a stream wears its way down into the nooks of the earth.

I park my car in the street and make my way down the boardwalk. Nancy Stevens is sitting in a white whicker chair on her front porch. She’s wearing a large straw hat and what looks like her gardening clothes, taking advantage of the warm fall. Something seems off, and it takes me a while to figure it out. Her lips never stop moving. I even watch her slap her knees and start laughing, like she just heard a joke. Nancy sees me coming and lets her laugh die down. She seems content to watch me and listen to my shoes tap along the planks. I’m dressed in jeans, a black flannel, and a pair of work boots. Standing in front of her with my canvas tool bag; I look like I never stopped working for my father.

“Mrs. Stevens?” I ask.
She looks at me and I wonder what she sees. She lets her smile do most of the talking. I wonder how she met her husband and what she liked about him. I’m betting he loved her smile. It’s kept her young. Her hair looks more blonde than grey and I don’t always notice the crow’s feet by her eyes.

“I’m a contractor, Abraham Miller like—”

“Abraham, in the Bible,” she says.

“Yes, exactly.”

So far, I haven’t lied too much. I take one of my father’s business cards out of my pocket and hand it over. His number is scribbled out with pen and replaced with mine.

“Your hands seem a little delicate for a working man.”

I look down at them, “I just believe in keeping everything neat and clean, I guess.”

“Fair enough.”

“Your husband didn’t tell you I was coming, did he?”

“Can’t say he did,” she doesn’t know what to think of me.

I laugh and roll my eyes, “I’m supposed to take a look at some wiring downstairs.”

“Could it wait? He’s away.”

“On business, I know. It’s not a problem, but I’m booked up next week and I know he wanted it done. I promise I won’t break anything.”

This time it’s her turn to laugh. I wonder how long it’s been since she laughed at anything but her invisible puppet show. “What kind of contractor are you?”

“The quiet kind. You won’t know I’m here.”
We are in the shade of a tree so old that it looks like stone, as if it might crack from its own dangling weight. Its leaves rustle together like old sheaves of paper. The tree must’ve risen out of a crack in the rock and then slowly driven it apart. Now the two or three broken shards sit like broken headstones. Someone else would’ve had it chopped down and called an excavator. Instead, her flowers bloom beneath it and they’re all beautiful. I don’t know what any of them are, but their petals burn bright like chemical fire amid the green.

“You know that rock was brought here by the last ice age? It’s part of some mountain in Canada.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said.

She looks at me like she forgot I was there, like I shouldn’t be.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Mary, I’ll be right back, hold that thought. I just have to show Abraham in.”

She never stares at an empty chair or anything like that. There’s no invisible hand shaking—the people she talks to are all around her at once, molecules of insanity in the air. Nancy opens the screen door and I follow her in. The house is full of antiques and sepia colored photos of collected families that could or could not be her relatives. I can pick out Craig’s things without any effort. There’s a framed vinyl copy of Darkside of the Moon on the wall, for instance, which I could probably do without. Oh, I love Darkside. People always say. Have you listened to Darkside? Of course I’ve listened to it, but what’s it doing in your living room?

“I guess you need to see the breakers? Craig had a guy over about two or three months ago to look at everything.”
“That’s a good place to start,” I tell her.

I end up in a laundry room staring at a closet full of circuits and wiring, all that time watching my father work and I know nothing. People like me do what they do because they lack practical skills. I put my bag down on the floor and wait for Nancy to leave but she just stands there with her arms crossed.

“That bad, huh?”

“That’s too early to say.”

“I knew he wasn’t a good choice. I don’t know where Craig found him, but I think he was a drunk.”

I try to tell her that I don’t drink. After a few seconds without my lips moving, I give up.

“Well I’ll be outside.”

After she leaves, I pull up a chair from the corner and pretend to look at the wiring. Everything becomes about killing time. While the door is closed, I can read in the closet. There’s something unique about reading *Lord of the Flies* by one dangling bulb. The walls were never finished and I see pink insulation sticking out like cotton candy, or stained gauze in a gaping wound. My tools are scattered on the floor and shift the dust around with my shoe. A few hours go by before I start to work my way upstairs, pretending to check the outlets with my volt tester. I can’t decide whether Nancy’s just crazy or there’s something more going on, some little gremlin in a closet pulling her strings. *Here’s your problem, monster was hiding behind the laundry basket. You’ll be right as rain in no time.* I’m looking for something to worry me: pills, a noose, a samurai sword collection, a gas oven, razor blades or a drawn bath. I don’t let myself picture a
gun. Somehow I doubt she’d leave things sitting around where I could see them, but I
check anyway. Every room.

The nursery is upstairs, across the hall from the master bedroom. Stevens never
mentioned any children. Their names hang from decorated plaques on the door in case I
have doubts. I still don’t hear any playing on the other side. I knock. There’s nothing, just
their names above me. Michael, Sarah, and Gabriel, written in bright multi-color font.

I try to get in quietly. No reason to let her find me here. The baby blue walls have
been kept bare besides the fading sponge painted suns and clouds. They look more and
more like accidents. Smudges. In the same way that you would board up an abandoned
house, someone started covering the walls in wooden panels. Emotions are mixed in with
the paint and paneling. Instead of three beds, there’s a large roll top desk and an office
chair. An open pullout couch is pushed up in the corner and covered in dirty laundry and
bedding. Nancy is singing outside, her voice coming through the window and curtains.
On warm days she could tend her garden and sing through the open window.

Little darling, it’s been a long cold lonely winter . . .

Little darling, it feels like years since it's been here. . .

I’m wasting my time, blundering like a freight train. I go back downstairs and
notice how much the house creaks when I move through it. You can hear everything. The
tools go back in my bag. When I come up Nancy is in the kitchen. Five or six plastic
containers are out on the counter, full of turkey, stuffing, and mashed potatoes.
Everything you’d expect from the day after Thanksgiving. I lean in the doorway, a
weaker John Wayne.

“I think I’m done for now.”
“Either you don’t waste time, or you don’t do anything at all,” she says.

“I’m pretty sure nothing’s broken so I kept my end of the bargain. That’s a lot of leftovers,” I try to grin.

“Are you hungry? We had guests over last night.”

No you didn’t.

“I could eat,” I say.

“Sit down. I’ll make you a plate.”

The kitchen is condensed and cozy. Benches are built into the wall in the corner, and the table is hand-made, seemingly out of scrap lumber that’s been stained and varnished. It doesn’t sit quite right and that’s why I think I love it. My fingertips run over the rough wood and make circles around the bolts holding it together. Norman Rockwell covers are framed and hung along the walls. I would’ve complained if they’d been in any other house, and frustrated if they weren’t in front of me now while Nancy Stevens puts mayonnaise on my sandwich.

“You like cooking?”

“When we first married, I hated cooking. He said the only thing he wanted were full ice cube trays.”

“That’s reasonable,” I say.

“He’s a damn baby,” she almost spits, “Every day he adds something to the list. Clean laundry, folded laundry, a home-cooked dinner, now that isn’t even enough—he needs some kind of meat on the table too or it doesn’t count. I would’ve said no if I’d known.”

“I don’t blame you.”
“He’s a baby, but he’s my baby. He wouldn’t make it a day without me,” this she says with pride.

She instinctively makes a great sandwich. We both eat and somehow get on the subject of our favorite films. Apparently we both like Hitchcock, and keep shouting out our favorites like they’re the answers to a game show on television. Later, while I’m in the bathroom, I check the medicine cabinet and the worst thing I find is an expired bottle of antibiotics. Nancy is on the phone when I get out. She’s wandered into the living room, the cord trailing behind her. I clear my plate and listen. I can’t hear much of what she says. She’s talking to Jesus and I’m guessing he sounds a lot like a dial tone. When she’s done she thanks me for cleaning up and keeping her company. I leave the way I came and Nancy stands by the front door to wave goodbye.

Before I reach the end of the street, I decide that I need a walk and a drink. I move my car away from her house and get going. In town, bars are always in walking distance. Everything else is stretched to opposite ends while liquor is right around the corner, like an optical illusion. There are two bars down the street from Shady Glen and I hate them both. Left or right, acids or bases, it didn’t matter. They both burned.

The Buccaneer is an oddly named bar located at least an hour away from the coast. I don’t know anyone inside. There are three Jets fans at the end of the bar that stick out, only because they’re so miserable. The building is made up of two small rooms, one for pool and darts, while the other holds the bar and a few stray tables and chairs. Michael Jackson keeps playing repeatedly. It seems like too much work to pick something else. On Thursdays this place is like a bad class reunion. If I look at it that way, I’m lucky.
By the third or fourth time I’ve heard *Billy Jean*, I’m on my way to spending the last of the money Craig paid me. It isn’t enough to get me drunk, but it’ll help. The bartender looks like she could use a drink too. It’s dead and she wants to go home before she wastes anymore of her time. I don’t know if the bar is empty because it’s a weeknight or if they’re all just avoiding her. She doesn’t pretend to like you and it’s hard to look her in the eyes. Things are easier when you get a smile and a lie. On my third drink, I open my mouth.

“I know you,” at least I think I do.

“No you don’t.”

“I saw you crying at the gas station. I knew I recognized that apron,” I point to the one she’s wearing, “I wouldn’t say anything but you remind me of someone I used to know.” I think she hears that a lot and doesn’t like me saying it.

She gives me a dirty look that I admire for its purity and purpose. “What’re you doing? I won’t go home with you, or go out back, and you can’t come home with me,” she tries to think of everything I could say.

“I just want to talk.”

“You gay? Or do you get off to that? No offense.”

“I feel bad and it’s been a shitty week.”

“It’s Tuesday,” her voice doesn’t seem to have quite so much hate behind it. She’s a woman that could load those words up with meaning, pack it in with gunpowder. It’s Tuesday, what have you done to me. The best I can do is shrug and put my hands up, as if she just proved my point. She nods and goes back behind the tap, filling another glass for the guys at the end. Looking at her just reminds me of all the bad things I’m trying to
forget. It must be something about tonight. On her way down the bar she turns, “Yeah, I know what you mean. I need a new phone.” Hell, she even made a joke.

These guys at the bar are sado-masochists. Four TV’s and they’re all playing clips of Sunday’s game. It clinches on Sharky Fats’ pass to Lou Dweller and the inevitable fumble everyone knows is coming. Robbed. Swindled. Ain’t fair. Shut up and drink your drink. The game was two days ago and everyone’s still sore. I never got football, all that time freezing your balls off in the stands, watching a team that never catches when you want them to, throws like shit, and can’t hold a line. Time slips and the only consistency is the music. I expect her to talk her way down the bar with the other customers but she doesn’t. She does her work and keeps to herself otherwise. Our conversation is something picked up and left to fall. Melting ice cubes rattling in a finished drink.

“You’re a private eye? Did you go to clown college too?” She says this while she wipes up beer rings on the counter. I should have lied and told her I was an insurance salesman. Even when she looks at my license, she thinks it’s a joke. We treat it like an embarrassing passport photo. Not that she’s wrong. As glaring errors go I think this is a big one and I don’t know what to say for myself, like I need an excuse. I was high when I filled out the forms. I was very into Raymond Chandler at the time and Humphrey Bogart seemed like a happy guy in all those movies. If something else had been on during my decision making process, things would have been different. Maybe I should say something dark and tragic. There was a girl involved and she broke my heart. But that doesn’t sound right either, it just sounds dumb and predictable.

“I guess it had something to do with 9/11 and Bush.”
She doesn’t bother calling me out. Instead, I get a glare that’s supposed to lead me to confess and she’s disappointed it takes me as long as it does to give up. I’m an idiot sitting at the bar showing her how long I can hold my breath, expecting her to be impressed when I pass out and hit my head on the way down. “Okay, I’m full of shit,” I tell her. It feels good to admit that to someone else now and then. I get tired of hearing myself whine.

“That’s pretty cliché. My pot dealer has more originality,” I’m not sure for a second if she’s being ironic or not.

“Then we’re both cookie cutter assholes. I’m a schmuck and you’ve become that girl who hates everything. Your pot dealer has us both beat.”

“The only difference is—I’m good at hating everything. I take great pride in my work,” she says.

“But you’re so nonchalant about it, like it’s just something on the side.”

“Nonchalant. I hate the sound of that. Is it French or something?”

I’ve been drawing on my bar napkin, mostly scribbling until I hit a wet spot and it tears. She watches me write *nonchalant* down and give it a French mustache. I manage this with enough swiftness that it actually makes her laugh and I don’t feel as useless anymore. While I’m at it, I make a set of lips and add a cigarette.

“Voila, now it is.”

She picks up my napkin and laughs again. The look on her face makes me think that she’s staring at it trying to figure out why something so stupid is funny. My doodle ends up by the register. I don’t expect it to be framed on the wall or even be there.
tomo. It amuses her for now. Her blue eyes are electric, bright neon lights. I watch them scan up and down the napkin one more time.

“I think this means we’re in love.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she tells me.

“But you think I’m charming. That’s enough.”

“I’m willing to settle.”

Usually you get a last call, but she just shuts off the television and tells us that it’s closing time. Without Michael Jackson playing, I agree. The three dads that have been complaining about football all night walk each other out. They all look at the clock on the wall and act like kids that realize they aren’t going to be home before the six o’clock fire whistle. I stand up and let the blood back into my legs, leave a tip. I hate when you become friendly with the person you’re tipping. No matter how much you give it just seems wrong. There’s a second where I almost leave my number, on another of my father’s cards. Instead, I stand around a little longer than I should. She’s cashing out the register, midway, she looks up. I wave half-heartedly and try to smile. Fucking idiot man-child.

“Goodnight . . .”

“Sarah,” she tells me like it’s her pin number.

“Really?”

“Yeah, surprised?”

“I just met another Sarah earlier, that’s all.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, bye.”
“Bye.”

It’s dark and my stomach is a poisoned fishbowl. I get back to my car and lie down on the hood, pretend to see the stars through the trees above me. Nothing shows less affection than a cold car body. I don’t want to drive home yet, listening to people on the radio tell me about vitamin supplements and how great the National Guard is. The night is long enough to let that wait a while. I can see the Stevens house up the street. Electric candles with amber colored bulbs illuminate the windows. From where I am they almost look like open flames, but their light is too bright and consistent. Knocking doesn’t seem like a bad idea. Maybe Nancy stays up late. She’ll be watching an old movie and invite me in. It won’t seem strange or troubling. So what if she’ll talk to a few people that aren’t there. We’re all fucked up. A devotion to gardening and some psychosis isn’t too bad. I’m wasting my time trying to make out the colors of her flowers in the dark when I hear a car coming.

Whoever it is creeps slowly down the street. I’m invisible from my spot on the hood. The engine sounds like it needs some repairs and maintenance, which I only know because it sounds like my car. I listen to crunching gravel and watch it come up behind me, some small shitty old car. Then it is gone and I’m watching tail lights. It drives like someone who doesn’t know the road. I’m surprised when it slows in front of my client’s house. Any of my doubts are shot to shit when I see the brake lights flash and hear a car door open. Someone gets out of the passenger seat. A minute or two go by and the driver pulls away, probably to turn around in the cul-de-sac up ahead. This is the part I hate. No one understands. It is always better not to know.
I don’t care to learn anything else. Right now, I like Nancy, and she has nothing but my sympathy. It could be something strange and harmless, like a communist book club, or maybe Craig forgot to mention her aunt was flying in late tonight. The chance that there might be trouble is what makes me get off my car and start walking up the street. Not that I’d be much help. I could run and scream, I guess. It’s a short trip, but I take my time, staying off to the side of the road. This is a dark and quiet neighborhood. Most of the houses tell the same story. They all moved here around the same time and now most of their children have left. While cutting across a neighbor’s lawn I catch the glow of nothing television from a solitary window. Some are more restless than others. I see the small car coming back and get down low. It stops a few houses away and turns off its lights. The car sits and I stumble over.

My expectations are always off. I don’t know what I think I’ll find. Where would she have met the young golf-pro I’ve imagined for her? I don’t have a camera; there will be no proof. Even if I planned on telling Stevens, I have nothing but my word. Your wife is cheating on you, I’ll say, and finish my burger, take a big gulp of something to wash it down, and leave him the bill. Avoid looking him in the eyes. That would go over well. I try not to scrape the soles of my shoes across their driveway and make my way up along their rock wall. The boulders look raw and exposed like an old foundation. The plants and moss growing over them brush across my face. I smell the green as I pull myself up into a flowerbed.

There’s about twelve feet between me and the front door, which means that it could be anywhere from six to twenty. Whatever, I’ll get a goddamn ruler and measure it later. From where I’m lying, I have a pretty clear view of the front yard. Nancy’s little
window lights offer enough to be impractical, nothing’s clear and my eyes can’t adjust to
the dark. I walk through the dirt and mulch, trying to avoid stepping on any flowers. I
hope they’re fine. What used to happen in the jungles when cavemen and animals
stomped on wild flowers? I keep close against the house and take a couple of quick
glances as best I can through the windows. Everything is quiet and just what you’d
expect, no broken glass or anything. I was never the sneaking around to peek in windows
type. It isn’t a skill to be proud of. But, I do pretty well until I trip.

I don’t hurt myself but I feel like an idiot sprawled out on the porch. I kick
whatever I tripped over and it seems to be a duffle bag. Smells old and dusty, like
someone’s garage or an army surplus store. I hope it doesn’t belong to the Stevens. Hello,
I ruined your flowerbed and broke whatever was on your porch; pay me. Then I see him.
He’s coming down the walk with two more bags pretty similar to the ones I just found.
They’re too heavy; I can hear it in his hurried breathing and the weighted pace of his
steps. I don’t have a really good look at him until he’s only a few feet away. I could be
wrong, but I think I see Jesus.

I don’t mean some dirty Deadhead who shops at Whole Foods for “vegetarian
eggs”. I’ve been to music festivals. No, I see a man that looks exactly like Jesus Christ
walking towards the Stevens’ front door. He’s wearing off-white robes and sandals that
look pretty used and authentic. They aren’t parts of a Halloween costume, but I couldn’t
testify to their historical accuracy. I’m not foolish enough to think that it is Christ, but he
looks like one of those Sunday school pictures. The kind where he’s petting a sheep or
whatever, fair skinned—almost blonde haired. Honestly, I thought he would have been
blacker. It could be the angle I’m at but he looks incredibly tall and gaunt. Either way,
this isn’t someone who knows what a Big Mac is. I surprise myself a little when I call out his name.

I do that and he screams. Then he drops his bags and runs at me. I’m still getting up when I see his face, mad and ugly, with a set of perfect white teeth bared. I take a punch and fall back over the bags. On my way down, I grab his robe and pull his face into the railing. It couldn’t have felt good. I crash into the screen door and he tackles me. The hinges break and it falls onto us, tearing the screen and mangling the metal frame. I’m tangled up in wire and sheet metal when I get shoved into the front door. As it happens, I see myself falling through it and into their living room. He’s not a body builder, though, and it just bounces me off like nothing. I feel like I ran into a wall. He takes this chance to bolt. Since I’m between him and the car, he cuts across the lawn towards the back. I hear him shout, “Klaus!” as he does. I’m stuck.

“Fucking cheap shit doors,” I yell and kick what’s left of the screen.

I run across the porch and meet him at the railing. We didn’t have a chance to choreograph anything, so when I jump I don’t time it right. I’m as graceful as a rock and I fall hard into him. The side of the house is built along a slope. Un-level steps made out of railroad ties lead to the backyard. We fall down them. The whole time I’m waiting to hear my neck break. I get lucky when he’s the one that rolls into the shed. But, he’s on his feet before I am. Whoever he is, he’s definitely in better shape. He runs and I follow him into the tree line. It’s hard to run through the woods with sandals and a robe. He gets caught on everything and I hear him scream. I hope he broke a toe. I can’t remember the last time I ran. My lungs burn and I’m taking branches to the face. To be honest, I shamble, smacking into trees and rocks and doing my best to keep up. I can never get close enough
to grab him. I keep pawing at the air ahead of me but nothing comes of it. We both spill
out onto the roadside. He needs a second to get his bearings and when he starts to run
I’ve already got my foot planted on the bottom of his robe. It strangl
es him and he lands
on the pavement. I get in a few punches before he can do anything about it. He throws
gravel in my face and I bend back hard on one of his fingers just to listen to him scream
some more. When he calls out for Klaus again, I’m a little confused. I almost turn around
in time. Something hard cracks my back and it’s my turn to go down. Everything
becomes pretty one sided after that.

Someone clears their throat and spits. They miss. Then they get into the same car
from before. I can turn my head enough to see that. Not much else. The dirt scrapes
against my face. Pain seeps in through the open cuts and scratches, down to twisted
muscles and ligaments, bruised bone. A concussion feels like thumbs dug into a boiled
egg. I’m bleeding. Nothing bad enough to kill me, I think. I don’t get a license plate but I
try to concentrate hard on the make of the car. It’s like looking at a broken mirror. The
car’s engine whines. They make a left and they’re gone. I roll over onto my back.
Something metal clatters beside me. Getting up is hard work. I dig at the ground and
crawl.
Chapter 3

Scabs, lumps, and bruises have gathered overnight, like foreign bodies under my skin. I’m still dressed and my clothes are covered in dirt, but I’m in my grandmother’s waterbed. I shake my head when I find dried blood rusted into the fabric of my shirt. It’s torn and buttons are missing. Her things are in cardboard boxes floating beside me on the mattress. The boxes try their hardest to sink and I wish they would. I packed everything up after she died. We should’ve buried them with her, like a pharaoh in a flea market time capsule.

The only time I come in here is when I find something else she left behind. Whatever it is gets boxed up or thrown on top of one of the miscellaneous piles along the walls. For instance she left an old TV Guide with family photos covering its pages, duct taped to a ceiling fan. My baby picture glued over Friday night’s programming. That’s somewhere in the room with me, pages curled, buried under garbage. I remember her wearing a diaper and walking in circles, playing an endless game of duck-duck-goose, squawking No over and over. In her mind, was she saying anything at all? If we’d listened, was it Morse code? Pain fires up my back when I sit up. My feet dangle, I stare down at the floor. I’m missing a boot and decide to kick the remaining one off. It knocks over a stack of VHS.
I close the door behind me and hope I don’t have to go back. The hall from her bedroom to the kitchen is like the mouth of a cave. I lean on the wall and favor my left leg. Breathing still hurts— I think that’s more from being out of shape than getting beat down by a pale tart in a robe and his friend. Three things catch my attention: the blinking red light on my answering machine, my erratic dirty footsteps from the night before, and a mangled camera tripod thrown on the kitchen counter. I run my hand over the back of my head and spine when I look at the tripod.

One message is about my credit card payments and I quickly skip over that. The next is from Nancy Stevens. I listen to it while I make coffee and look for something to help with the pain.

“Hello, Abraham, this is Nancy Stevens.”

The coffee pot is collecting water in the sink. I dump it out and fill it again, prep the machine. Then I limp over to the medicine cabinet and help myself to some Tylenol. They seem about as helpful as Flintstones vitamins.

“I have a little work for you today, if you’re interested. It shouldn’t be too hard. Seems like bears ruined my screen door last night. I don’t know—hold on a second—I’d love to watch Rear Window.”

I look over the tripod on the counter, imitate swinging it like a baseball bat and nod, consider where it met by body. The dent is about halfway up. It’ll never stand again.

“Sorry, you know how guests are. I’ll pay you for your time and for the parts of course. But, I’d like it done today, if possible. No need to make my husband worry about it.”
She leaves her number and I delete the message. Bears, come on. The coffee stings a cut on my lip. I try to shrug it off. Don’t make it more than it is. Scared the shit out of Jesus. Probably thought I was her husband. I’d like to talk to him. Ask some questions. Run him over with my car. Everything about me feels wrong, like all my parts weren’t measured before hand. Nothing fits, too loose or tight, not the right size. Try that with a space shuttle and see how it works out. I consider shutting off my phone and drinking myself back to sleep.

My rearview mirror doesn’t help. The glass focuses on the large cut above my eye, the edge of bruises out of frame. Reggie Bannister gawks at me from Mountainside Deli. It’s a fairly empty, winding, stretch of road. Besides the deli there are just trees, hills, and hiking trails. Some asshole in a wetsuit, or whatever, jogs by. He cuts off the road and into the woods a little before the Newton County Sheriff’s van and the eight or nine guys in orange picking up garbage. I bring the tripod with me. I keep looking at the broken leg and chipped paint while my own scrapes along the pavement. Muscles twisted into knots so tight they’re ready to snap.

Loache is sleeping in the van. His head leaning back, mouth open. He jumps when I knock on the glass. I can tell he’s hoping I brought him coffee, no luck. I climb in. It takes longer than I’d like, and I don’t mean to groan. The guys in orange never stop working at their half-assed pace. Either they don’t notice me or don’t care, doing nothing but standing.

“You look like fuck,” he says.
Loache has been in charge of community service for about half a year now. He’s given up procedure and leads batch after batch of sentenced criminals to this slab of road. You wouldn’t know that they’ve been here every day cleaning; a line of discolored Santas working in reverse, coming back in the weeks and months that follow to gather their broken, discarded gifts. It doesn’t look any better. “I love Reggie’s breakfast sandwiches,” is the only explanation he offers.

Loache looks me over, “Business or pleasure?”

“Business,” I say.

“This happened to you on the job?”

“Well, it wasn’t for fun. Where’s Frank?” I ask.

He directs me towards the back of the van, where his partner is busy napping. I tell Loache that I have to follow a woman around and watch her house later tonight and he can’t hide his excitement. He asks me one question.

“Is she a cow?”

“No, she’s pretty,” I tell him.

“Tits?”

In the back of my head, I rattle off apologies to the Stevens’ photo, and they keep staring and smiling.

“She has them. Listen, are you going.”

I invite Loache on jobs sometimes, because his car is good and quiet. It’s like a stealth jet compared to mine. I really like the seat warmers. But, as important as a warm ass is to me, I need him because he can use the sheriff’s surveillance gear for personal, illegal things, like driving up to the Stevens house and watching their windows. Right
now, he’s the rich kid with the Super Nintendo and I need to play. Loache got the job because his uncle is sheriff. I’m a little concerned that someone willingly gave him a gun, even a relative.

“I’ll bring my stuff, but I can only go tonight.”

“What did you do to Uncle Harold? Ruin his chances at re-election?”

“Nah, somebody robbed another grave. Tomorrow night I get to watch the church lot.”

“They take the jewelry?”

“Everything but the coffin.”

I try to figure why someone would do that. There are a few sketchy reasons I can think of, but I don’t know enough about any of them to really come to a conclusion. I used to hear rumors about pot laced with embalming fluid and PCP, but all that did was make me paranoid before I smoked.

“The widow’s been on the phone all day shitting a brick. She said something about calling her lawyer. Like we’re responsible,” he says.

“Who would ever think that?”

“I know. So are you gonna’ tell me what happened?”

I give him the basics and leave Nancy out to the point that she’s just a stick figure. The focus is on Jesus, Klaus, and the tripod. I hold it up now and then, show him the damage. I’d like to say Loache is quiet and considerate, but he does a lot of laughing. I’m afraid he’s going to wake Frank and I keep punching him in the arm. After he calms down he starts asking questions. We’re both playing detective.

“So you think Jesus drives a Dodge Neon?”
“I couldn’t say for certain, but, yes,“

“What do you want me to do? Are you going to press charges?”

Loache points at the tripod. I pass it over and let him take a look at it. He weighs it in his hands.

“No, I’m not going to fucking press charges. I want you to look for any Neon-ish cars reported stolen, and any people in the area named Klaus with a criminal record.”

“What makes you think it was stolen?”

“I don’t think it was, but after last night I’d report my car stolen if I thought there was a chance of it leading back to me.”

“Maybe,” he says. “This isn’t flimsy,” he wraps his fingers around the tripod like a club. “Who names their kid Klaus?”

“I don’t care. Could you help me, please?”

“I’ll look around. I’m just wondering what you’re doing.”

“My job, I’d like to have an idea of what’s going on.”

“Understandable, but wouldn’t it be easier to just ask her about the kinky shit she’s involved in?” Loache tries to work the three legs, pretending a camera is attached. He closes one eye and suggests I’m being filmed, “I mean, men in costumes and cameras showing up to her house at odd hours. If they were her guests there really isn’t any trouble. You either tell her husband or you don’t. She’s religious, isn’t she? Don’t tell me, she is—Shit—She’s dirty, I like her.”

I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m here because of my own limitations. Pretending I’m in control and capable of action. That lie tastes like cardboard and I can’t swallow it.
“Listen, something is wrong.”

“With you? Yeah. Relax.”

“I won’t relax. You know what I’ve been thinking about all day? The dirty
fucking sandal wearing asshole that cut my head open with his scummy fucking big toe. I
cleaned it out six times with peroxide and I can’t get him out of my head. Something isn’t
right and I’d really like to know what, because that’s what I got paid to do.”

All my yelling wakes Frank in the back. I feel the van shift from him
redistributing his weight. I don’t have any problem with Frank. He’s big and seems slow,
but he means well. Got the job without being related to anyone. Frank climbs up front
and sticks his head between Loache and me. He’s still yawning when he puts his hand on
my shoulder.

“Abe, chill,” he tries to calm me.

“Shut the fuck up Frankie,” Loache says.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Well, shut up,” I say.

Franks scowls. It’s like picking on a kid. He could bend me in half but he just
twists his lip. Loache gives my sleeve a little tug to get my attention, “Nevermind, I’ll
take care of it,” he looks at his watch. “Alrite, time to pack it up.”

Frank steps out of the van first and the shocks lift, relieved. Without him inside it
feels like everything weighs as much as a roll of aluminum foil. He gets the door for
Loache, who’s yelling before his feet hit the ground. Most people don’t like Loache’s
face. There isn’t anything in particular. I guess he just looks like a dick. When we were
kids he was covered in freckles, but they’ve faded, chipped off like dirt—if that’s
possible. Loache isn’t physically intimidating. He’s got a small build, so he tries to be loud and watches movies with tough cops so he knows how to walk. It doesn’t hurt to have one of Wyeth Township High School’s best Offensive tackles behind you, either.

“Line up! We’re leaving.”

Everyone does as they’re told. They look like an army of road cones. Their black bags are decently full. Larry Paige is third in line. We squint at each other for a second before either of us recognizes the other. I dated Larry’s sister a few years back. It didn’t work out. He was going to school in Newark at the time and his car got towed because of some outstanding tickets. Larry got drunk and climbed the fence to the impound, drove it out, and called me panicking. We talked about hacking it up and breaking it to pieces in his garage, dumping the parts in dumpsters and empty lots across the county. That was too much work, though. Eventually, he just crashed it into a mailbox and acted like nothing happened. His sister was the same way, but it was me instead of the car.

“Abe? What the hell are you doing here?”

“Hey Larry, how’s your sister.”

“Fuck you,” he laughs. “I think she’s pregnant again. Gotta’ go on maternity leave.”

Loache stares at me and Larry. We both shut up.

“Okay, dump your bags out.”

Most of them start spilling out their bags. Some leave piles on the side of the road, while others make efforts to scatter everything around. Glass bottles and crushed beer cans are tossed off into the woods, dirty diapers punted down the road. A few hesitate. Poor parking ticket Larry actually scratches his head and looks to me, like I’m in on
everything. I shrug. Loache shakes his hands in the air, emptying the contents of an invisible bag and the rest give in. It’s a chance to let some rage out, swinging the open bags in big semi-circles. Bright colored plastic and loads of stereotypical garbage go everywhere: broken styrofoam coffee cups, empty potato chip bags, rotten banana peels, grease-soaked happy meal bags, the broken parts to a tail light. It’s a trail of garbage along the road, spreading through the brush and on into the tree line. Loache seems pleased. He smiles and leads the men to the back of the van. Frank keeps everyone in line. When they’re all packed up and Loache is about to get in the car, I get his attention.

“Why’d you do that?”

“There has to be something to clean tomorrow,” he shrugs.

I don’t really know what I’m supposed to say to that. If he’s left to do this for the rest of his life, his legacy will be a quarter mile of slow rot and immortal plastics. The same coffee and sandwiches day after day, different men to order around, but it doesn’t matter—they all serve the same role. They all wear orange and ambiguous faces. There’s a Greek myth that seems relevant but I forget the character’s name. One rolls a rock up a hill, the other gets his liver eaten forever by vultures. Maybe both apply in their own way. Loache flicks me the finger and drives off. He intentionally kicks up as much gravel and garbage as possible. A burger wrapper lands on my shoe. There isn’t any reason to kick it off, but I do anyway. Pent up aggression. I bite down hard to cut my scream short after my left leg buckles. I like that I have to limp back to the car using the tripod as a crutch.

Reggie comes out of the deli and meets me by the edge of the parking lot. He smiles like a corny folk guitarist that plays at school assemblies.

“Hey, brother, need a hand, man?”
I get helped the rest of the way to the car. Reggie is owner and operator of the Mountainside deli, has been since my parents were in high school. You get a glance of his living conditions every time you order a sandwich. Reggie lives in a tiny apartment right behind the counter. The television is usually playing in the dated 70’s interior, complete with rabbit ears. I don’t know if they still work or they’re just for show. A lingering odor of fart, pot, and old German Shepherd sometimes sneaks over the meats and potato salad. Some people don’t like that dirty-hippie-guy kitchen vibe. He has his loyal customers, though. I think Reggie considers himself to be a kind of sandwich making shaman. Instead of a doctor, he suggests a liverwurst on rye toast with dijonaise. I want to ask him his feelings about heart disease, but I don’t get a chance.

“You’re a Miller, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“I know a Miller when I see one. Nice people, they like to laugh, always broke and in trouble.”

He leans me against the car. I clutch the side like I’ve fallen through ice and it’s the only thing keeping me up.

“I’m gonna’ get you that sandwich,” he says after I have my footing.

“Just a water.”

Reggie seems disappointed, but he goes in for a bottle of water. I open the car door and fall in. Can a kneecap pop off? It feels something like that.

“One water,” Reggie holds the bottle up and smiles. “On the house.”

I don’t know how water will help anything. Reggie didn’t find me out in the desert. It still feels good going down my throat. At times like these, water tastes like life.
After a few more sips, Reggie and I bullshit. He swears he isn’t related to the actor, but I
don’t believe him. There isn’t a lot to do and it must get pretty boring, being left out here
with only your thoughts and salami. His goal is to take as much as he can from this brief
human contact, drag it out. I can see it in the way he keeps looking at my car keys.

“You’ve been beaten down by love, that’s what happened to you,” he says.

“No, I haven’t.”

Reggie frowns and makes a *tisk-tisk* noise. I was just told the punch line of a joke
and didn’t get it.

“You’re not thinking clearly. Whatever led you to be like this,” he points at me,

“Those choices were influenced by love. You didn’t understand love and it beat you.”

“If you tell me that I need to join a prayer circle or something, I’m going to hit
you.” All these people tell me in their own way that there’s a hole in all of us that needs
filling by some kind of glorified hobby, like sports or religion, whatever you feel like
obsessing over. It isn’t that I don’t believe them. I just want my empty void left alone.
Reggie doesn’t break his smile.

“It’s easier to make a joke about it. Being open and vulnerable is harder. Love
does crazy things. I was in love once, lost twenty pounds without knowing, my hair
stopped graying, barely masturbated—you’d think that would be the opposite.”

“I guess.”

“Well that was love. It’s powerful. Love got your mother to try a ham and cheese
with mayonnaise even though she thought it was sacrilege. I was there, I saw it. Your
parents were in love.”

“When was this?”
“Nineteen-eighty-one.”

They were kids back then. When he handed them their sandwiches were their children’s future names written on the wax paper? I’m waiting for him to pull out Polaroids of Dad with long hair and Mom in her varsity jacket, honors society pin on her collar. Reggie should have given them some stock tips, instead.

“What do you memorize all your orders?”

Reggie shakes his head like someone off his meds.

“That’s not the point,” he says.

“I think that has something to do with it,” I let my bad leg dangle out of the car, like I might leave it behind. “Thanks for the water. I’ve gotta’ hang a door.”

“Doors are trouble,” he says. I hear the rattling of the pills before I see the prescription bottle. He shakes them in front of my face. “Unless you have a key.”

He’s a fucking fortune cookie.

“My dog, Thundar, had to take these. They’re pretty good, thought you might need them.”

I wipe my hand on my pant leg and stare at the bottle for a second before taking it. The pills go in my jacket pocket. I hope Thundar won’t mind.

Reggie offers one more bit of advice, “Things are only going to get worse until you acknowledge where you are.”

I look up and down the road, like I’m confused.

“In a spiritual sense,” he says.
Ghost Lineage

Ashpool was big enough to have a yearly bar crawl and rural enough to have one traffic light. The town felt fragile, the series of roads and buildings stretched thin over too much space, too many mountains, trees, and lakes. Even the sky looked like it had torn, just a pale blue streak. Ashpool’s wear and decay was inevitable, a part of daily life. Felt in the cracked and broken roads, empty houses, and closed storefronts. People were gone. Each one that died or left was part of the trickling half-life of the town. A particle in decline. One day everything would be lead.

The traffic light was installed fifteen years ago, at the intersection of Valley and Ridge road in the center of town. It watched over Our Lady of Consolation Church, town hall, a gas station, a diner, a CVS pharmacy and a small strip mall attached to a Shoprite and a movie theatre. Its programming was obsolete and it cost too much to update. There were always back-ups and irrational traffic patterns. The light’s little computer was busy directing ghosts.

Ridge road ran North and South like a compass needle, cutting the town in half. Travelling North led up to the lakes and mountains. South, towards Route 23 and civilization. To the West on Valley were housing developments, a few more churches, the battered women’s shelter, the high school and middle school. East, a small airport, senior housing, and an abandoned bowling alley. Bars stood in every direction. Ashpool was an
empty-headed tapeworm too simple to have a proper brain, functioning on enlarged nerve clusters and periodically directed by one outdated traffic light.

Because of Ashpool’s emptiness, its forgotten nature, its relative closeness but exclusion from society, that when they couldn’t kill you, but didn’t know what to do with you, and just might need you in the future—they sent you there. It wasn’t a prison. You weren’t tortured or harmed. No orange jumpsuits. Free-range assets of nations, corporations, and other interested parties. In the meantime, Ashpool’s neglect was encouraged, nurtured. Road signs were misplaced. Maps were printed in error. Census records disappeared. A GPS might never seem to get the zip code right. Almost twenty-five thousand people were born and floated in the ether until they died. The high school football team was so terrible and had such a long running losing streak that they played down their home games and left quietly, cloaked in secrecy for every away game. It was a magician’s trick, a masterful work of misdirection.

No more than a few hundred or so special cases were ever sent to Ashpool. They stood out the way characters in a town always did, but were manageable and never grew large enough to become anything else. During their time, the town’s exiled inhabitants found new life. The former Iraqi Information Minister had a late night radio show. He leaned towards Jazz, but he took requests. A group of Chinese dissidents set up a small silk production in the abandoned Queen of Peace Catholic School. They kept mostly to themselves, but enjoyed selling their products from a small church van in front of the Shoprite. One past vice president called Ashpool his home. He was allowed a small detachment of secret service agents and lived in seclusion. The town’s inhabitants were never entirely certain which vice president it was, because he spent his days in a
completely self-sufficient mobile panic room that resembled a bank vault on tank treads. The computerized voice that came out of the speakers mounted above the panic room doors did however prefer to be called, “Mr. President, if you please.”

There were stranger ones, too. There was the young fire dancer who performed in a mask and a hoodie at night, practicing her routine on some nights in the empty lot space between the movie theatre and the drive-thru line for the McDonald’s. It was something special. If you were lucky enough, it was something beautiful you could see on your way to getting a Big Mac. Then there was the man who bent old railway spikes with his mind. He wore what looked like an aluminum hat but claimed it was actually similar to the material used to line satellites. It helped him focus the energy from pulsars in deep space.

Besides these oddities, town life carried on in its regular fashion. The seasons passed, summers and falls were especially beautiful, winters were brutal, springs brief, cold, and muddy. T-shirts were printed for the annual bar crawl. The class of 2011 was able to participate in the bar crawl for the first time. A small congratulatory article was posted in the paper. Heroin made its way up as it always had. Nate Longo beat an out of town man so badly with an aluminum bat that they had to call a medevac chopper.

What tensions there were between the exiles and the people of Ashpool, were always dealt with, never officially. The townspeople that spoke loudest to the government about their rights and demands for restitution—in the shape of free cable and a Mercedes for instance—were always silenced in one way or another. Restitution, after all would have meant admitting that Ashpool existed as a place.
Chapter 1

Henry Karmoy hadn’t seen or heard from his brother Charlie in four years. And then there Charlie was, with a box of wine under his right arm and a small boy standing beside him.

Henry lived in Ashpool, like a squatter in their dead grandmother’s house by the lake. The house was a monster after generations of additions and renovations. It had once been a white summer bungalow hiding between the water and the tree line. He had planned to renovate the house himself. He wanted to take up fishing and dangle his feet off the lopsided dock into the dark cool water while he pretended to wait for a bite. But he spent more time with a rifle on the deck. Days spent shooting empty beer cans off the broken above ground pool in his backyard. On the day Charlie came, he was busy sweating and taking apart the front cobblestone walkway, brick by brick.

He tried to work in the early afternoon shade of the old trees beside the house. Taking apart the walkway was slow. It had sagged into the earth. The whole thing had been built from scrap. Some had words scrawled into their sides, others were chipped and broken or had bits of graffiti residue on them, flecks of purple or green spray paint here and there. A few still bore a company stamp on their face. They were the incomplete pieces of two or three puzzles thrown on the floor and shoved together. Weeds and anthills thrived and sprouted up through the cracks. Centipedes that liked the damp dark underneath the walkway fled into the uncut grass as he worked. He ripped each brick out
of the earth. One at a time, he threw them into the rusty blue wheelbarrow waiting behind
him. When he finished another load, he ran the barrow towards the growing brick heap
by the shed. He felt the strain in his back halfway through and forced himself to slow
down.

He’d lost his temper after his truck overheated. When he’d popped open the hood
he was wrapped in a cloud of radiator fluid. Chemical vapor soaked his skin, seeped into
his lungs. He found a shredded timing belt, broken and misshapen bearings, and a
cracked radiator. It sat and would continue to sit in his gravel driveway until he managed
to fix it, which wasn’t entirely likely. Taking apart the walkway felt better.

Henry was just short of six feet tall, broad shouldered, with dark eyes, unkempt
hair, and the beginnings of a beard grown out of neglect. He was covered in dirt, motor
oil, and salt stains from his own sweat. He wanted to get drunk and break something, his
truck, if he had an option. Henry thought of riding his grey aluminum rowboat to the
Buccaneer Bar across the lake. Instead he kept working; let himself sweat out the anger
and his need for a drink. Finally, he felt something pinch in his lower back. He winced
and bared his teeth, then wiped the sweat off his face with the inside of his t-shirt and
walked to the spigot on the side of the house.

The rusted green knob turned. Water began flowing through old creaking pipes.
He stuck his head under the sputtering rush and took a few sips of the mineral rich water.
He tried to put aside the pain in his back and everything else, just enjoy the momentary
cool. When he stood up he shook his head and ran his fingers through his wet hair. He
peeled a large white flake of paint off of the siding. He would have to scrape it all down
to the wood. Skin the house alive.
His family had forced it to be livable, dragged it along with every Frankenstein addition. No job was ever completed properly. Walls were framed but never put up. His grandmother’s possessions were still in boxes in her old room. The lawn was mangled, in some places overgrown and others bare and dead. It still meant something to him. Henry thought he would have gotten used to nearly thirty years of disappointing himself, but each new failure felt like the first and he was never prepared for it. He almost didn’t hear the minivan coming down the dirt path through the trees. By the time it was crunching down the stone in his driveway it had his full attention.

Charlie was behind the wheel of the van. He leaned against the house, in plain view and watched his brother park. Charlie looked at him once and honked the horn, one jarring insistent beat. There were plenty of reasons to be angry at Charlie but he had a hard time stopping himself from grinning. Charlie, holy shit. The light blue minivan had a cracked windshield and one head light and an empty socket where the other should have been. The van shook in place, and then Charlie cut the engine.

Charlie got out of the car, looked down at the ground, waved awkwardly with one hand, and went around to the van’s sliding door.

“Come on, come on,” Charlie said.

A boy hopped out and down onto the gravel. He was small, made smaller by the long dirty blonde hair hanging in front of his face. He reached up for Charlie’s hand but Charlie leaned into the van, slung a bag over his shoulder and grabbed a box of wine. Charlie slid the door closed without looking down at him. The boy stayed quiet and close to Charlie’s side as they walked up to the house.
Henry hadn’t seen his brother since he threw him out for trying to make thermite for Tetsuo Duffy, The Shogun. Since then, Charlie had grown a little rounder in the face, put on pants and a green polo, and got a kid. He also had a black eye and a wad of bloody paper towel shoved up one nostril.

Charlie frowned and patted the boy beside him once on the head. “Stay,” he said and walked up the front porch.

“Charlie, where the hell are you going?”

“Can I use your bathroom? Clean up? Take a bath?”

“Wait, you’re serious?”

“I’m a mess.”

“What happened? Who are you leaving me with?”

Charlie raised his index finger into the air. One second. Then he went inside.

Henry watched the screen door close behind him and shook his head, “Fucking hell, Charlie.”

The boy’s eyes lit up, two bright sparks like Charlie’s. “Sorry,” Henry added.

“Can I say it too?” the boy asked. He was smiling and hopeful. One of his front teeth was missing. He really did look just like Charlie.

“Does your—Charlie let you?” Henry asked.

“I don’t see him.”

“You know who I am?”

The boy nodded.

“Who are you?”

“Victor.”
What a shit name. Charlie would do that to a kid.

“You like that name?” he asked.

Victor thought it over and shrugged.

“You can always change it, you know. How old are you?” Henry asked.

“Eight.”

“Life’s tough when you’re only eight. You need anything?”

The kid shrugged.

“Stop shrugging.” Henry pointed to the front porch steps. “Have a seat.”

Victor took up his post on the rough concrete steps leading up to the house. Henry went back to work. While Henry pulled bricks out of the soil, Victor watched quietly. The boy dragged the soles of his beat up dirty sneakers back and forth over the steps, brushing aside bits of dirt and gravel, a mix of impatience and nervousness in his actions. Henry tried harder than usual to keep his eyes on the ground beneath him. The damp earth soaked through the knees of his pants. Still, he caught himself looking at the screen door on the porch and then down at the boy on the front steps. He pictured Charlie going through his medicine cabinets for drugs, his dresser for stashed money. Henry threw the next brick at the wheelbarrow with more force than necessary. It cracked in two and the wheelbarrow rang like a broken church bell. Victor smiled.

He listened to Victor open his mouth and take deep breaths, could nearly hear the words about to come out and then the abrupt halt that followed. The conversation false started five or six times. Eventually, Victor stood up and went down to the bottom of the front steps, started nudging a loose piece of the walkway with his sneaker.

“Uncle Henry?”
Henry tossed one more brick in the barrow, groaned and felt his back.

“It’s just Henry, buddy.”

Henry tossed another brick into the barrow behind him and sprawled out in the uncut green grass. The trees were full overhead, the woods across from the house, quiet. He wanted to hear birds singing. There were a few other houses scattered along his side of the lake, but they all sat empty. Some were owned by banks, others had realtor signs lingering on their front lawns. He didn’t miss having neighbors. He stared up at the sun peeking through the tree line, a white hole burned into the sky. Everything felt thin, frail.

“You were blown up,” Victor said.

He had been. Attempting to disarm a bomb in a Muslim community center. That was before Charlie started making bombs. He was surprised Charlie had told him. Then he wondered why.

“No, I wasn’t,” Henry lied.

“But you’re nigh invulnerable,” Victor said it slow, like he was reciting it from a textbook and wasn’t quite sure what it meant.

“Where’d you hear that?” Henry asked. It was his brother’s favorite way to describe him. Charlie heard it in a cartoon when they were kids. Since then it had tattooed itself on their brains. “You know what it means?” Henry asked.

Victor stood over him, his small frame blocking out the sun. He shrugged. Henry rubbed the inner corners of his eyes. He felt very tired.

“Means nothing can hurt you, almost.”

Henry didn’t answer. The boy looked disappointed for a second, and then eyed one of the loose bricks that had fallen out of the wheelbarrow.
“Uncle Henry, what if I threw a brick at you?”

“Don’t do that. It’d really hurt.”

“But it’d break into a million pieces. I heard you used to do it all the time.”

“Charlie used to throw lots of things at me. It was a favorite game of his,” he said.

The first had been a red Tonka truck in the middle of a fight and had escalated from there. When Charlie couldn’t find anything bigger to throw himself, he convinced the older high school kids to give it a try. It became a game. Two dollars for a shot at Henry, objects required approval. No surprises. No tricks. Most settled on rocks, one threw a tire iron. Henry got a few bruises, but never anything worse, which only frustrated them more. No high school junior wanted to be shown up by a twelve-year-old. Henry thought of ways to change the subject. He remembered the old bikes in the garage.

“Have you ever ridden a bike?”

“I like my scooter better. I fall off my bike,” Victor said.

Henry laughed and stretched his entire body on the grass. He thought he might enjoy the rack, or some other torture device, maybe something that twisted his spine like a corkscrew.

“You want to throw a brick at me and you can’t even ride a bike?”

“Yeah,” Victor didn’t see any problem with it.

“Well you’re gonna’ learn.”

The garage was at the end of the gravel driveway, beside the house. Whatever attempts Henry had made to keep the house together; he had not yet tackled the disorder
that waited in the old building where his grandmother Nell once kept the family car. The garage sat, gray and beaten, spots of white paint clinging to the wood beams making it look like the coat of some exotic, endangered animal. The doors were chained and padlocked, but hung crooked and open a crack. The darkness in the garage peered out from between the two doors. It was thick, tangible. Victor stood close to Henry.

“Are there spiders in there?” Victor asked quietly.

“Yep. Big hairy ones that have gone pale and blind because they haven’t seen the light in so long.”

Victor stepped back, “Really?”

“Do you see any squirrels around here? That’s ‘cause they ate them all.”

Victor, burrowed his head down between his shoulders. Henry felt for garage key on the ring in his pocket, “There are spiders, but just regular ones. They’ll leave you alone.”

He undid the garage’s padlock, pulled the rattling chain loose and tossed both to the side. Then he dragged open one door, its bottom edge scraping along the decades worn path through the gravel and earth. It smelled like rot and decay. A mouse or something larger had died inside. Henry frowned once at the smell, then breathed from his mouth as much as he could. The daylight felt diluted by the kicked up dust in the garage, shined on heaps of boxes taller than Henry. They were all files. Their files, Henry’s and Charlie’s. Solved mysteries. Adventures. Cases. They were the Hardy Boys. Beavis and Butthead. In the years before he’d thrown Charlie out, they had helped people. Tried to, at least, and never in any official capacity. They weren’t licensed. They didn’t put adds out in the paper. Charlie always knew, call it deduction, intuition.
After enough time passed it didn’t seem worth it to pay for a self storage unit across town. Henry was more bitter then, more upset with himself and Charlie. He’d taken all those carefully organized files, years of work, boxed them up in no order at all and left them to rot in the garage. Many of the boxes were warped and moldy from water getting in. Others had collapsed in on themselves like rotting pumpkins. Since then, Henry had started the slow, potentially futile salvage of the house and himself, but the smell of whatever had died in the garage and the sight of all those boxes made any small progress feel wasted. Maybe he was just bitter and hateful. But he had his reasons. His brother had had something. They both had, in their own way. Charlie drank it away, got bored, maybe a little mean. Henry had his own fights with the bottle and worked protection in Ashpool. Someone always needed someone willing to take a punch for them, and if they could pay, he was their man.

In addition to the boxes of files that Henry had stowed in the garage, there was more traditional garbage, half a dozen microwaves and old crate shaped televisions stacked into a tower, a VCR, a dented rusty brown tool box, and a weed whacker jutting out from a pile of junk like a piece of debris from a plane crash, and three bicycles tangled together on top of some boxes towards the front.

“What is that awful stench?” Victor was holding his nose.

“Might be squirrel,” Henry answered.

“Ewww.”

He looked down at Victor, sized him up as best he could and reached up and over the boxes. He grabbed hold of the nearest rubber bike handle and dragged it forward. The bicycles untangled and he stepped back and let them fall to the ground. He stood one of
the bikes up and wheeled it beside the boy, inspecting it by kicking the tires and spinning the pedal in place. It was pink, with purple handles and the tattered remains of what had once been a white basket resting on the handlebars like an abandoned bird’s nest.

“Here we are,” he said.

“That’s a girl’s bike,” Victor said.

“It definitely is.”

Victor ran his fingertips over the dusty pink frame, creating a clean streak.

“You’re picking on me. I’m not riding it.”

“Victor, I don’t know you well enough to pick on you yet. The other two are too big.”

“Fine, five minutes,” Victor said.

“You’ll ride until I say you’re done, we’ll see about the rest.”

He set Victor up on the dirt road in front of the house where he could see him. He told Victor to ride on the flat stretch between the mailbox and a crushed Miller Light can on the side of the road, no further. The first few tries he steadied Victor by holding onto the bike seat or resting his hand gently on the boy’s back. When he let go, Victor would lose control and start to fall. Either he’d grab him or the boy would steady himself at the last second.

“How much longer do I have to do this?”

“Until I’m done talking to Charlie,” Henry said.

They both looked over at Charlie. He’d come out of the house and was sitting with a porcelain coffee mug in his hands from the kitchen cupboard, box of wine beside him. Charlie saw them looking and waved.
Victor sighed, “That’s going to take forever.”

Victor wobbled in place and pedaled once, but too slow to keep the bike from falling over. He caught himself with his feet, tried pedaling again and then shuffled forward with both of his feet. It was a work in progress. Henry walked back across the lawn towards Charlie on the front steps. He stood at the bottom of the steps, still at eye level with his brother.

“I’ve got something for you,” Charlie smiled. His left eye was swollen and bruised the color of dark red wine. It looked like he was perpetually squinting. Charlie had washed his face off and tried his best to clean himself up. Aside from a small crust of blood around the rim of one nostril the bleeding in his nose had stopped and was barely noticeable. He reached behind his back and placed a squared glass bottle on the step beside him. Henry knew a bottle of Jack Daniel’s when he saw one. It was crudely wrapped in newspaper and rang against the concrete when Charlie put it down a little too roughly.

“Is that my newspaper?” Henry asked.

“It’s not important.”

“What’s it for?”

“Happy belated birthday!” Charlie raised his arms into the air.

His birthday was in November. It was a gift so belated it was almost on time. But it wasn’t really for that. He felt like one of Charlie’s girlfriends after a fight. Although whatever his brother was up to seemed a lot more rushed and desperate than anything he’d ever seen before. There wasn’t any charm. Instead there was panic.

“What happened to you, Charlie?”
Charlie took another sip from his mug. He had his entire hand wrapped around it. That and his ugly beaten face, the pained fake smile he was struggling to maintain, made him look pathetic.

It wasn’t how he wanted to remember Charlie, how he wanted to remember either of them. He thought of Charlie beaming in his makeshift Superman Halloween costume Nell had made. A matching pair of blue sweatpants and a sweatshirt with a brown piece of corduroy cloth with a red S patched on for a cape. Struggling to make sure he had the distinct Superman curl, repeatedly licking his fingertips and twisting his hair against his part. Charlie had bought into it all, it didn’t matter if he was wearing a homemade costume, he was going to fly. It was only two years later that Charlie built his first jetpack and jumped out the bedroom window and broke both of his legs. He never could get the thing to do anything but hover an inch or two off the ground. That was how he’d like to remember Charlie, with two legs in casts already working on something better, not bruised, drunk and trying to con him.

“You went as Dracula that year, didn’t you?” Charlie said.

That was the first thing he’d said that didn’t seem to be part of an act. Henry suspected it immediately. He could almost feel his brother dipping into his thoughts, grabbing hold of whatever scraps he could grab out of the air, filtering the memories and the distrust. It always felt alien.

“Yeah I did, the cheap fangs kept cutting my gums but I knew if I didn’t smile Nell would smack me in the head.”

“What do you think happened?” Charlie asked.

“I’m not the mind reader. I’m the hired muscle. You tell me.”
“I heard about that. How’s that working out? Protecting freaks for money.”

“It’s what you’d expect. I get to choose who I get hurt for. But sometimes I pick wrong.”

“They end up stiffing you?”

Henry looked at him, “They don’t deserve any help.”

“Wilks, I need your help. Some people want to hurt me.”

“Don’t call me that. I don’t want to know about it, Charlie.”

Charlie stepped towards his brother. Close enough to put his hand on his shoulder. He lowered his tone, tried to be affectionate. Henry had heard it before. “Wilks, come on. Chill out.”

Henry tensed and shoved him. He grit his teeth. “Don’t call me that.”

“Fine. They’re gonna’ hurt me, Henry.” Charlie’s eyes got big and pained. His voice cracked right on cue. “I don’t want the kid to see.”

Henry looked at Victor riding his bike and frowned at Charlie, “Where’d you grab him? A bus stop?”

“No.”

“Bullshit.”

“I didn’t see this coming,” Charlie said. He froze up. The color went out of his face. Henry started to ask. It had been so long since he’d talked to his brother, he’d almost forgotten how it was. Charlie was usually ahead of everyone else. Those rare moments of surprise were always a little frightening. Charlie just sighed. Henry turned to see. It was a red Ford Ranger pickup that looked like a half-eaten chicken leg. The front body was dented and freckled with rust where the paint had chipped, giving way to rear
which was all rust and gaping holes where pieces of truck had once been. It was barely
held together with duct tape and would crumble if hit hard enough.

Two men were in the truck and they looked like they belonged in it. They didn’t
bother to pull into the driveway. They just idled on the dirt road, maybe a car’s length
away from where Victor was riding. The driver had a thin face, a pale blonde goatee, and
long dirty blonde hair kept matted down by a tattered red baseball cap so faded it was
nearly pink. The other looked like a cherub, a plump newborn baby without any hair and
a face flushed from crying. Henry watched them talk to each other in the truck, saw the
Babyface point to Charlie’s van and Victor on the bike. The truck turned off and Redhat
lit a cigarette. He rolled down his window, “Hey Victor, where’s your dad at?”

“He’s indisposed,” Victor said.

The two men laughed through the open window of the truck. Redhat turned to
Babyface and shook his head, “Can you believe this? ‘Indisposed’.” His partner frowned
at the lit cigarette. “Will you relax! I have the window down, don’t I?”

Charlie looked at them once and wilted. Any composure he’d once had was gone.
He pawed at Henry, “They’ll hurt him. I have money. Do it for Nell.”

“I don’t want your money, Charlie.”

Even as he said it, Henry was moving across the lawn towards the truck. In one
smooth motion he dipped down into the uncut grass and picked up a loose brick. It was
chipped and covered with clumps of damp soil and didn’t fit comfortably in his right
hand. One of the edges dug into his wrist as he held it. He kept it close to his side as he
walked. Charlie rushed to catch up with him, breathing heavy. The low pant of a man that
hadn’t run in a long time.
The two men got out of the truck. Redhat saw Henry and Charlie and cut them off on the lawn while Babyface sauntered over to Victor. He squatted in front of Victor and slowly wrapped his soft bulbous fingers around the bike’s handlebars. His fat lips stretched across his face into a big ugly smile. Henry felt Charlie at his side, lurching in place, too afraid to move or not move. Henry tensed, he tightened his hold on the brick in his hand. He felt the precision of his anger working its way through his veins. It was pure, direct like a bullet. Redhat stood a few feet in front of them. He took one last drag of his cigarette and stomped it out on the lawn with his boot heel. His right hand was resting on the hilt of the buck knife sheathed on his belt.

“You left before we could finish talking, Charlie,” Redhat said.

Charlie eyed Victor. The boy hadn’t spoken or moved once since the men had gotten out of the truck. His eyes were locked with Babyface’s. “I told you we’re done. Leave him alone,” Charlie said.

“We aren’t done. You owe us a service.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” Charlie said.

“It doesn’t work like that. You’re a smart guy, Charlie, I think you’ll learn quick.”

Henry took half a step forward. Redhat glared at Henry and unbuttoned the clasp on his knife. “Who is this fag you’re with, Charlie? He’s eye fucking me.”

When Redhat spoke, the first thing Henry noticed was the hole in his smile where his left canine should have been. He didn’t know either of the men, but he knew men like them. They were the kind that hung outside the Buccaneer. He wondered if it was hard being a cliché. Then he thought about all the nights he’d spent at the Buccaneer himself, just another angry hick with nowhere to go.
“You should go,” Henry said.

“Fuck you. My friend is hungry,” Redhat pointed his thumb behind him at Babyface and Victor. Charlie shrunk down, the strength went out of his back and shoulders and he lowered his head. “Don’t hurt him, please,” Charlie said.

“You shouldn’t have run, Charlie. I can’t do anything about it,” Redhat said. For an instant he looked disappointed, like a customer service rep explaining someone their warranty has expired. He was sorry, he’d frown and apologize, but he wouldn’t lose any sleep over it.

Henry watched Babyface crane his neck back slightly, never letting Victor out of his line of sight. The rolls of fat collared on his neck unraveled, at first drooping like excessive skin on an ear lobe, and then slapped firm all at once, like it was caught in a strong wind. He was a red blubbery cobra. His mouth opened and continued to open, growing broader and broader until it looked it might devour the world. Henry hadn’t seen that coming. Victor didn’t cry or scream, he didn’t utter a sound or show any sign of understanding what was about to happen. Charlie bolted towards Victor. Redhat drew his knife and went for Charlie’s kidney. Henry grabbed hold of the blade with his left hand. Redhat started hammering on Henry with his free hand, landing blow after blow across his face and body. Henry focused on the knife blade tearing into his right hand. The intense burn running across his palm, digging into his fingers. Redhat pushed the blade forward with everything he had. It was inches away from Henry’s chest, blood already on the blade. He raised the brick in the air, ready to bring it down on Redhat’s face.

His brother screamed his name, “Henry!”
He looked up in time to see Babyface snap forward at Victor, ready to come down on his head and swallow him whole. Charlie wouldn’t get there in time. The burn increased and Henry tightened his hold, felt his own arm waver for a moment, the deepening cut severing tissue. He closed his eyes and focused, let Redhat land one more across his jaw. He lobbed the brick at Babyface with everything he had. It went through the air, one of the broken edges met the side of Babyface’s skull and crushed it, sent him reeling into the brush alongside the road. Blood burst into the air where his head had been like fireworks.

Henry broke the knife at the hilt.

It shattered. One loud metallic crack rang through the air.

Redhat looked at him in horror.

“What the hell did you do?”

Henry punched him once in the face. He felt his knuckles connect with Redhat’s nose and send his head back in one quick jerk. It left him sprawled out on the lawn. Then Henry winced and dropped the broken blade to the ground. He opened and closed his cut left hand twice afterwards, cradled it against his stomach. Slow drops of blood coated the grass beneath him. He ripped the bottom of his shirt, started wrapping his hand and called out to his brother behind him.

“How is he?”

“I think he’ll be okay. I think he’ll be okay.”

“What’s going on?”

“I saw this once before. Give him a second.”
Henry turned, saw Charlie cradling Victor on the lawn, shaking him hard, trying to wake him. His limp legs were lying in the grass, small unmoving feet in velcro sneakers. The boy’s eyes were open but out of focus, staring blankly up at the sun. Slowly his eyes began to register the light, his pupils shrank down and his eyelids lowered and closed once, and then rapidly his came back to life. Victor’s chest heaved and he gasped as if he’d been holding his breath.