Idiot Father

by

Mustafa Gatollari

A Thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Newark

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Rutgers University – Newark MFA Program

Written under the direction of

John Keene

And approved by

Rigoberto González

Newark, New Jersey

May 2016
Abstract:

*Idiot Father* is a small collection of short stories that takes a look at the humorous and sometimes tragic instances where value is given to, and guidance sought from, men who have nothing to offer.
Dedicated to:

My wife, Mariam. For putting up with my crap.

And, David Vadim: to honest work, by going after the can’t.

And Mike Tyson, just because.
Stories

Redo - 1

Mom’s Leg - 20

It’s Cold And Lonely In The Deep Dark Night - 47

The Walk - 85

We Kill Our Women - 108
“Babe, there’s a blizzard outside.” My wife, Mariam pleaded with me as I layered pants and socks and t-shirts and sweatshirts over my body.

“I know.” I said. Finally. Lacing up my boots. “But I’m going to see my son.”

“But they’re not letting any cars on the road.” This was true. There were police jeeps slipping and sliding on the snow-covered asphalt with small plows attached to the fronts of them. The borough of Rutherford, NJ was not playing any games this particular blizzardous night. My wife, Mariam, begged me to stay indoors. But we partied too hard the night before. Left our newborn son Zack, who was only four months old at Mariam’s mother’s. We were supposed to pick get him in the morning. The only problem was, when we woke up, the entire world was covered in white. And the snow kept coming down. So we waited all day for it to stop. But it wouldn’t. So I said “fuck it” and decided to head out in the storm.

I kissed her. “I’ll only be gone a little bit.” Determined to walk the three miles through the blizzard to her mother’s house so little Zack could have his Mama’s boob-milk instead of the Enfamel supplemental garbage that was in Grandma’s cupboard.

And when I stepped out into cold night, which I only felt with my eyes because the rest of my body was insulated with scarves and socks and multiple thermals and multiple pairs of track pants, I was assaulted with a silent loneliness. The streets were white and dead. The sidewalks empty. The powdery snow on the roads undulated with the wind.
It made me think of God. Well, more specifically the nature of my relationship with religion.

Growing up, I used to do the whole Ramadan thing. It wasn’t just fasting from sun-up to sun down for my family, but we’d have these prayers that went on all night. Meaning a typical day for a sharia-law-abiding Muslim meant not eating or drinking all day, and then jamming 2,000 calories of food down your throat in about 15 minutes, and then standing up for a good three hours, packed shoulder to shoulder in a mosque with sweaty dudes, listening to a 1/30th of the Quran each night, for thirty nights. And the sheikh or imam would take his sweet old time with it too, hitting each note of recitation like some nasally Arabic version of a Whitney Houston ballad. And depending on the masjid you went to, some of the Sheikhs took the “beautification” part of the Quran a little too far; their idea of “pretty” sounded like a cat moaning in the night - you found most of these with Pakistani imams, who all read and write Arabic, but their accents were - let me put it to you this way, if you think Desi people sound weird speaking English, just listen to them speak Arabic. Those languages do not complement each other, word of Allah or not.

As someone who only knew pretty much Arabic swear words, you can imagine my boredom during these midnight Allahu Akbar sessions. I’d have to commit to some pretty radical mental gymnastics to keep my mind off the fact my feet were swelling, my knees were killing me, or daring to ponder what kind of sick fucking God would demand me to tell him how awesome he was for hours on end. Weren’t my five daily prayers enough?
So in order to kill boredom and possible apostasy, I would entertain scenarios. I’d think about the best combination of martial arts I could take that would make me an invincible badass, or “screw this I’m finally going to practice guitar regularly and become a shred-God” and imagine that the ’80s were still alive and well and people gave a shit about hair-metal. But my favorite scenario I’d play out was the re-do game. That suddenly, out of nowhere, a genie would appear, or Allah would answer my prayers one day (I actually did pray for this) where I’d get to re-do one moment of my life. In the beginning I thought about lottery numbers and all the cool shit I’d buy with the money. Or getting in on Google early, or changing whatever event made my older brother such an asshole.

As years passed, my conviction in Islam waned but I remained a steadfast congregant of the “re-do church”. On long drives, or shitty movies I was dragged into watching with my friends, or extended toilet sessions (I like making sure I’m totally empty), the re-do game saved my life. And it was always interesting because depending where I was in life, my answers always changed. When I finished college, I dreamt of committing to a major that was actually useful, ie, not English. After my ex dumped me, I dreamt of going back and taking our relationship more seriously at its most critical point, or showing her Mom that I was long-term, husband material. I would “re-do” my laissez faire attitude towards acting and started classes with my amazing coach earlier, or I’d have applied to that one role a casting director told me I was perfect for, just seven days too late for. I could’ve been on screen with Colin Farrell. Definite redo material right there.
As I trudged through the snow, my legs burning like battery acid, walking through mounds of the thick powder, I thought of Zack’s birth and at that moment, I really knew what I would use the redo for.

When I found out my wife, Mariam, was pregnant, it was the morning after what was probably the greatest night of my life. The first play I ever wrote and directed just absolutely killed a packed house with four of my best friends making up the entire cast. I submitted it as part of this festival (which we ended up taking first prize in), despite the fact that we staged it on a zero budget and went up against seasoned-ass professionals. Now to give you an idea of just how good I felt, up until that point (and even somewhat to this day), I count one of the best experiences of my life as popping Molly with my ex girlfriend before I left on a wasted “business venture” with my misery-addicted father to Zurich; it was a proper send-off. If you’ve never tried pure MDMA, I suggest you find someone you care about, drink plenty of water, get into a well ventilated night-club that plays amazing music, and just hold each other. Have sex on it if you like, but, fair warning, you’ll be chasing that feeling for the rest of your life and it’ll never be as good as the first time.

Well the high I felt that Saturday night when my play was perfect and my friends were all hitting their groove and the audience was loving it, took a total shit on whatever sensation that Molly gave me. And I really, really love Molly.

My wife was sitting beside me watching the awesomeness of the evening as we sat in the production booth. I know she felt it too; the guys were down there just crushing
it. And days earlier we had talked about having kids a year from then and since I felt so good I naturally said something completely idiotic:

    Ya know, we could have a kid now, like, you could be pregnant now, and I would actually be fine with that. We can do anything.

That’s foreshadowing, in case I wasn’t clear enough for y’all.

Afterwards, everyone wanted to go out and party, we were in SOHO, we just had an amazing show, so it was only natural. But Mariam for some reason wasn’t feeling up to it.

    “Babe, where you going? The bar’s this way.” I watched Mariam walk towards our car parked outside the small studio theater place in Soho.

    She walked up to me with a look on her face that just screamed I’m sorry I’m gonna be a bummer right now, but there’s nothing you can do to stop it, “Baby, I kinda just want to go home, I don’t feel well.”

    I looked at my friends walking up the street. They were ready to get drunk and praise me all night. And they were all beautiful. Do you know what it’s like to be complimented by attractive people in a non-condescending way? It’s awesome. And Mariam wanted to take that from me because she had a fucking tummy ache. I was livid.

    “Sure baby, let’s go home.”
I was of course pissed off, but I was her ride, and what kind of shitty husband would I be if I let her drive home and sleep alone? So I said bye to everyone and told them to get extra fucked up on my behalf and got in my car and said peace out to NYC, very grumpy.

So here I am, in the car, pouting all the way through the Lincoln Tunnel.

“Baby.” Mariam turns to me.

“Yes, love?” I say, allowing my pissed-offness to emerge.

“I’m craving something.”

“Well yeah, we didn’t eat all day. Whaddya wanna eat?” I was hoping it was something quick, I could probably drop her off home - her cousins were sleeping over our apartment. I could leave her with the girls and head back into NYC and chill with my crew.

She looked at me guiltily, “Checkers.”

Now the thing about my wife is she’s a health-food nut. She eats all organic whatever and is an incredible cook and packs me these amazing healthy lunches. But her portions were really big so it kind of defeated the purpose of eating healthy - I don’t care how much leaner bison burgers are than beef, but if I’m chomping down two of them in addition to a brick of organic cheese and washing it all down with homemade baklava, my already ample ass is growing from J-Lo to Flo-Jo in no time at all. And it did.

So Miss Whole Foods (but really Trader Joe’s because only white people can afford Whole Foods) tells me she has a craving for Checkers. Now for those of you who don’t know what Checkers is first let me congratulate you for never having to visit the
hood. There’s a direct correlation to how shitty a fast food joint is to how deep in the
hood it is. And Checkers is the hoodest of the fucking hood. If you’re driving around in
an area with a Checkers, you should probably keep your car doors locked at all times and
have your passengers look around the car to watch for any shady characters about. If
you’re in a hood with two Checkers I swear to God you better turn right the fuck around
if you have loved ones.

In the car ride, Mariam quickly backtracks, “No, but it’s really out of the way
we’ll just eat whatever’s at home.”

Now I wanted to just dump her back at our place and say “fuck you very much”
and head to the party. But you know, there’s a great satisfaction to being the better
person in the relationship. Emotional ammunition I call it. *Let me show you how much
better I am than you.* I’m going to be so sweet to you that it’s going to be spiteful. And I
finally had a job for a few months with an actual salary, I could afford gas, and I could
definitely get her all the Checkers she could handle. Because hood prices.

“Baby,” I saw, putting my hand on her thigh in a way that she knows is deliberate
and only half-sincere, “If you want Checkers, I’m getting you Checkers.”

So I Yelp the closest Checkers after I pass through the Lincoln Tunnel and it’s ten
miles away in Passaic. Cool. I start driving there and notice that particular part of Passaic
isn’t as shitty as it used to be. I’m not fearing for my life driving through this area. No
boarded up windows on the houses, the cats walking around actually have their tails and
ears intact and have a little weight on them. If I’d been paying attention I’d notice that
this wasn’t a good sign. Less hood equals less chance of there being a Checkers and sure
enough when we got there, it was closed down. Mariam was really upset, I could tell. But she did what all grateful women are supposed to do and pretended like it didn’t bother her. Which was such a crock of shit.

Mariam put her hand lovingly on my forearm “It’s OK baby, we already drove too much, let’s get home, it’s late.” She patted my arm, “You tried.”

Oh there was no way I was going to give in like that, she had to know just how much better I was than her.

‘Baby,’ I looked at her, all sweet loathing, ‘You have a craving, and I’m going to fucking get you your Checkers. We’re going to Paterson.’

Her eyes widened in false protestation but I can tell she was secretly happy. Plus I was happy because I was willing to make myself uncomfortable for her happiness. So I was winning in the relationship. Smiles all around.

Now we headed to a two Checkers neighborhood and Mariam, despite being a total buzzkill that night, redeemed herself by being a fucking hawk. We only slowed down at red lights at particularly shady intersections and she stayed froggy the whole time. Now this might seem like suburban displacement paranoia syndrome, but I’ve got a dead second cousin, a stab wound, and about six attempted muggings to justify my fear.

Thankfully we got the food without any problems: Big Buford burgers, lard-dipped french fries (no exaggeration, they use lard and their fries, freshly hot, are about the greatest things in the world, but taste like Satan’s butthole once they get cold) milkshakes and spicy chicken sandwiches, I mean it was a fucking junk food apocalypse. And she ate a bunch of it. A burger. A chicken sandwich. Her entire milkshake, and a
farmer’s silo of french fries. I had never seen her eat so much. And she didn’t puke any of it.

Well, at least, not until the morning. And up until that moment I was oblivious to all of the signs of her pregnancy. The fact that she had a little pooch despite going to the gym with me six days a week and that she never had a stomach pooch before. The fact that she got winded quickly when we worked out, which never used to happen. The fact that she was extra emotional, and she woke up and puked a couple of times before, the fact that she had a craving she never had before, the fact that she had a retroverted uterus and always joked that the best way for us to conceive was if we did the no pants dance from behind and, holy fuck the fact that she was taking a goddamn chewable birth control pill, generess FE, which I don’t recommend anyone take, by the way.

So I head to the only place anyone should ever buy pregnancy tests: the Dollar Tree. That’s right, dollar pregnancy tests, which I bought three of because, I mean, they’re a fucking dollar each and the poverty logic of quantity over quality prevailed in that moment. And even though I wasn’t too proud to buy pregnancy tests for a buck each, I was too proud to use just one of them. I figured at least two would be completely useless, so I rang up three and sped home, ready to kill this awful doubt in my mind and chalk it up all the weird shit that was happening to a hormonal imbalance caused by the birth control.

Now I didn’t know much about pregnancies, in fact, I never really wanted kids. But when I took Mariam out on our first official date, I sat there, looked at her and thought to myself, totally randomly - in fact, I don’t even think it was me, must’ve been
Pazuzu or something - a thought flashed in my mind: “I could have kids with this woman.” And I never really thought about it again. But what I knew about pregnancy tests was that they took a little while before the results popped up.

Well Mariam pissed in that cup and I swear to God before the piss-drop even fucking came out of the little suction thingy and fell onto the pad two, BOLD, and I mean BOLD lines, highlight text, ctrl+B, BOLD LINES appeared on the pregnancy test.

We looked at each other. Mariam gasped, I felt sick. The dark, pink lines burned into my skull.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I pointed at the test like it was the Spanish Inquisition and she was a dirty Muslim prisoner.

Mariam was in shock, laughing in a scared, my-life-is-ruined kind of way, “Babe...heh...hooo….heh...babe...that means...I’m pregnant.”

“But you’re on birth control?!?”

“I know.”

I immediately ripped open another package. “Lies. Fucking dollar store. What the hell was I thinking? Go ahead, put your fucking piss on it.”

The second one. Same result.

Mariam looked off into nothing, musing aloud a sudden harrowing discovery, “The birth control the doctor gave me was chewable...generess FE.”

“You’re taking chewable fucking birth control?!?”
“The doctor recommended it babe.” She said, not looking at me. Thinking of how her life just changed. A higher being. She was Neo, I wasn’t even Agent Smith. I was Cipher. He sucked.

I handed her the third, She calmly put more piss on it. No fucking way.

“We’re pregnant.” She looked at me, nervously laughing, kind of freaking out. I didn’t say anything. She just kept laughing, but a sorta crazed laugh, which I found very innapropriate considering the circumstances: I mean our lives were just ruined and she’s losing her shit. Not cool. I need my froggy two Checkers hood girl from last night to be on the same page as me right now.

“Babe?” She said. I was still quiet, for a couple of minutes. Thinking she did this on purpose. My mind flashed back like in the montage at the end of a psychological thriller flick when you find out the mail boy was actually the killer the whole time and all of the vague lines he said during the movie suddenly make sense. Did I see her take the pills? **CUT TO Mariam complaining about the taste of pills, chewing them with a grimace on her face.** Well, yeah lots of times. Did she skip them on purpose? **SMASH**

**CUT TO Mariam counting her pills in that weird little compact case thing.** When did we conceive? **CUT TO Sexy time in the kitchen.** FUCK….I knew it. I could just tell right when we were done, that one was the babymaker. Goddamn retroverted uterus.

“Babe?” She asked. Tears in her eyes. She was rubbing my shoulder. I know she was looking for the man in the theater last night. The one who was OK with having kids.

I still didn’t talk and when I finally opened my mouth, all I could think to say was “So, is the clinic open on Sunday…or do we gotta wait till tomorrow?”
Obviously that didn't go over well. I was always supportive of a woman’s right to choose. As long as the choice was to HAVE AN ABORTION. I didn’t think that she’d want to go the other way. She was pretty much setting the women’s rights movement back like 50 years.

In those first couple of days after we had our lives completely changed thanks to shitty Generess FE birth control, I definitely acted the exact opposite way a husband should react to hearing the news of his wife’s pregnancy. I didn’t want to talk to her or see her. I accused her of not taking birth control on purpose because you know there’s been scientific studies that prove bitches be trappin’ dudes like that on the sneak tip. She spent the day at her mom’s to think it over. She didn’t want to make a rash decision. One of her best friends got an abortion in college and regrets it till this very day. So I gave her space, even though I knew she was going to want to keep it. I wallowed in my own fear and anger and general bitchiness.

She came back to our apartment. I was in bed, ready for an argument, the lights off, my fists balled up under the sheets.

She slid into the bed and placed her warm hand on my chest. I was shaking with anger.

“Babe?” She asked softly. Hopefully.


“I’ve been thinking about it a lot and…” She sighed. Her voice was full of love. This wasn’t the voice I wanted to hear. I wanted to hear one full of regret. Of sadness. Of
fear, of a voice not wanting to walk into a huge responsibility or the unknown. This voice was brave. This voice was maternal.

My mind was hot. Festering. We argued back and forth until I finally screamed, “You’re acting like a stupid fucking gorilla! You’re letting some dumb biological bullshit dictate your life!” I went on about some recessive animal genome that made us want to pass on our genes. That it was purely a rash emotional decision that would ruin our lives and she was killing our relationship.

Turns out she didn’t like being treated like a piece of shit by a man who farts too much in his sleep, and she began crying hard. Like I mean that sobbing, angry crying and moaning you only hear from someone who’s been truly betrayed. It was guttural, low, and ancient. And I could only react like a broken record in that moment,

“You can’t have this kid, it’ll ruin us, you can’t have this kid.”

And she said exactly what I wanted to hear and it scared the absolute shit out of me:

‘Oh I’m not having it. I would never have a kid with a man like you.’

Now maybe she was bluffing. Maybe I thought reverse psychology would never work on me. But she started huffing and puffing and freaking out, talking to herself like a crackhead while getting dressed and putting on leggings and socks and her jacket and at some point during this whirlwind of self dressing she managed to get her mom on the phone, who ended up coming over and taking her away.
I laid down in bed, alone, the entire quiet apartment to myself. I couldn’t sleep for a long time and I feared that if she got the abortion, it’d be over between us. And I wasn’t cool with that.

So we didn’t see each other for the next two days, just texting here and there. Until I finally called her and said I missed her. She said she missed me too and it was understood that we were gonna be parents from then on.

Now don’t get me wrong, I was still a total asshole about the whole thing, but the assholery diluted as the months progressed. I pretended to be happy when her belly started moving. Pretended to care when we found out it was a boy. I pretended to care about her dumbass baby shower and the little clothes her friends and family got for our growing some.

OK maybe I wasn’t pretending the whole time, there were moments when I laid down in bed and wondered what it would be like to smell his little head as he snoozed between us. I looked forward to seeing the little fucker wig out when he tried ice cream for the first time. I’d dream about not forcing him to be religious and not giving him shit if he ended up being gay and smiled at the thought of teaching him to not be an asshole. And as uncool and unmanly it was to be excited about having a kid, I really was excited, even if whenever someone would ask me if I was ready “to be a dad” or tell me that I “should get all my sleep in now!” I would only respond with, “yeah, I guess being a dad’s OK” or “Sleeping’s for bitches anyway”. Pretending like I didn’t give a damn was my coping mechanism.
But on the day of the pregnancy, when I saw Mariam’s vagina split open after two epidurals and ten hours in labor, and Zack’s swollen, weird-shaped head begin to crown, (the doctor used scissors to slice for extra room), when Mariam hunkered down and gave the final push and I cut his cord, he wasn’t breathing - it was hard to not give a shit then. I was crying like the big bitch I am, and soon, so was Zack. He was crying and crying and he didn’t stop until I spoke to him.

I’m convinced he recognized my voice.

I used to talk to him in the womb. Instead of classical music I’d play early ‘90s gangster rap, and I’d sing along with it. Or just rap my favorite verses to him. Because if I’m gonna have a kid, he’s going to have great taste in music. Because of this, I’m convinced that he got used to my voice and could recognize it. Because when I started talking to him to soothe him after he was torn out of Mariam’s womb and into the cold air and white lights of the delivery room, when I spoke he stopped crying, and he opened his black, swollen fish eyes and stayed quiet, just looking at me. They put him under the heat lamp and he stared at me as I blubbered and soothed him, kissing his forehead over and over again, being careful not to touch that soft spot on his skull I’d heard about.

The doctors crimped his cut umbilical cord, wiped him down, put him in a blanket, and brought him to Mariam, who was being consoled by her mother. As my wife breastfed Zack for the first time, and I was standing there, floored by my up close and personal experience with the miracle of birth, Mariam looked directly at me, with a stare that said, “Look, you fucking idiot. You see this? How much do you love this kid,
hunh? All that grief for what? Don’t you love him?” And I loved him a lot in that moment. I really did.

Now Mariam was pretty much in charge of all the major decisions when it came to the kid. Sure we discussed things, like what we were going to name him. She set on Zack from the get-go. Not Zachariah, or Zachary, but just plain old Zack. For two reasons. One: my last name is a nightmare. Too many syllables. A short, Non-Muslim-sounding first name is ideal for resumes. Plus the repetitive vowel sounds in his name roll of the tongue nicely, “Zack Gatollari.” Say it. Good, right? The second reason, is the one I like to tell myself and other people, that he’s named after the coolest TV sitcom star of all time: Zack Morris from *Saved By The Bell*. I mean, who could argue with that logic?

Personally, I would’ve named the kid, Jack, or, Mack. Now I know Mack sounds stupid. But, think about this: I could feed him human growth hormone once he hits puberty, a practice which, although seemingly unethical, any doctor would tell you yields no negative side effects as the body during that growth period assumes the growth is natural, so Zack’s biology accommodates the extra size without any problems. Bones grow denser to serve the additional muscle mass, and this kid could join the NFL, NBA, or be a Marvel Avenger without a problem. And with a name like. “Mack”, I mean, come on, he could join any sport and become an overnight sensation. *Here comes the Mack truuuuucckkkk!* The kid would pull his arm in an 18-Wheeler horn motion and the audience would shout *Hoooooonk Hoooooonk* in unison; just tell me that wouldn’t bring the house down? But I guess there are more important things in life (eye-roll).
That night in the snowstorm, when I finally made it to the block Mariam’s mom’s house is on, I had a hell of a time getting up that steep hill. I kept slipping and sliding and falling on the pavement. The whole time, laughing bitterly and saying my son’s name, “Zack. Fucking Zack, it’s for you Zack.”

I actually like the name Zack and didn’t give any push back for that. And since Mariam and I aren’t really religious we had a long and hard discussion about circumcision (see what I did there?). We read up on it, I thought that we didn’t need to do it because, you know, there’s such a thing as indoor plumbing and daily showers today and so long that we teach our kid to not be a dirty rascal his genitals should be grime free for all his life.

But then Mariam started out pulling statistics from the Mayo clinic and a bunch of doctors we asked suggested that it is better to get him circumcised so I conceded, as with every major decision with the kid (I mean she was carrying him and I kinda wanted him aborted), and decided to get his privates all diced up. Plus, most kids in the US get circumcised and I didn’t want him to be a teenager, and about to lose his virginity and have the girl he’s with get freaked out because it didn’t look like any of the other cocks she’s seen.

So the second day after he’s born they’re getting ready to cut this kid and the doctors tell me that he won’t remember it, he probably won’t even feel it, in fact, because they numb it with a local anesthetic cream and are feeding him sugar water the entire time. So I say, “Oh, OK that’s cool.” And they start wheeling him out of the room and I
follow them and the nurse stops moving the cart and looks and smiles at me and I just
nod. She nods back awkwardly and walks to the elevator and I follow her. It isn’t until I
walk into the elevator that she finally opens her mouth and her eyes get kind of wide and
she says, “Oh, you’re coming up with him? In the room?” It’s the “in the room” part that
gets me worried, because she says it with a kind of grimace on her face.

So I give her the only logical and appropriate response in that situation: “Well if I
was getting my dick cut I think I’d want someone who cares about me in the room.” She
laughs nervously and we go upstairs in the cutting room.

Now they strap my two-day-old son, this poor kid who was ripped from the only
home he ever knew about 16 hours ago, down on a table like the monkey in that Nine
Inch Nails video for *Closer*. I’m looking at Zack, his hands restrained, his chunky long
legs in these weird stirrups and my stomach starts to feel light and I get this nervous
tingling in my chest that only used to happen to me when I was a kid: right before my
father would toss me into the deep side of the pool to teach me how to swim or force me
onto the rusty Loop-o-plane ride at Keansburg amusement park so I could finally learn
how to “stop being a little faggot.” Good times.

The doctor then rolls in and looks surprised to see me and she says, “Oh, you
want to stay with him?” I give her the same quip I gave the nurse and she laughs
mirthlessly and begins taking out her tools. There’s the scalpel, which doesn’t bother me,
and then there’s this little metal cylinder thing that she quickly assembles with a flourish
of clanging metal and everything looks sharp and dental. She even has this thin piece of
blue paper. The Haitian nurse is standing by my baby with this cup of whitish water near his head.

The doctor rips a hole in the blue paper and places it on my son’s stomach and pulls his baby penis through the hole. She then takes his dick through the hole in the metal cylinder tool and pulls his foreskin over the lip of the cylinder. My heart’s in my throat pumping like crazy and my stomach is gone, I feel like there’s nothing but air in my body and I see Zack’s getting uncomfortable. He winces and when I look down I realize the doctor’s already slicing him. There’s blood and pink, veiny flesh. His cries come out in sharp pants, ghastly pants and it’s obvious he’s in pain so the nurse dips her finger in the cup of sugar water and places it in his mouth. Her face tells me she’s been here done that at least a billion times. He starts sucking, wincing with every cut but loving the sugar and he’s calming down. My eyes start to well up at the site of blood on my baby but it’s no big deal. I went through the same thing way back wen, right?

Then the doctor starts unscrewing a part of the cylinder, so now there’s this additional opening like a double ring, and she pulls the sliced pieces of the foreskin through the new opening of the metal tool. With all four slits through the cylinder, she squeezes down like it’s a goddamn sheet metal press at an ironworker’s smithery, and Zack howls so loud that his voice gives out. He tries to scream again but there’s no more sound left in his new lungs for this kind of agony. He’s blue and completely strained; all the veins in his baby head throb and his voice is gone. You know that gasp when you’ve encountered the worst pain in your life? When you want to shrink away from the world
but the hurt is so great it bloats you to a greater size and every inch of your body is all nerves and feeling? That’s what my son felt in that moment.

Zack howled and howled and I kept wiping the top of his head trying to calm him down as the doctor scraped away the white and red blood on his dick and Zack didn’t care about the sugar water he just wanted it all to stop and here I was letting them mutilate my son and when they were finally done his penis was flecked with pure white veins of fat and streaked with freshly cut flesh. The surgeon rubbed anti-septic on him until he eventually passed out from the pain.

Tears in my eyes, my hand over my mouth I looked down at her table and saw the little chunk of foreskin there and I haven’t regretted doing anything more in my life than putting my baby through that hell.

And the asshole a part of me would joke that my re-do would be pulling out of Mariam that night in the kitchen, or convincing her to take a different kind of birth control. And I’m not going to say I can’t imagine my life without Zack, I can imagine my life without him, but it fucking sucks now that I know what it’s like to have him as my son.

When I made it up the stairs to Mariam’s mom’s apartment, she opened the door, worried, in her sing-songy, French-Egyptian accent, all sincerity, all love. “Habibi! It’s so cold outside! Come! Come in!”

She handed me Zack and he takes one second to register my face and smiles, all cheeks, no teeth. He cooed. My God he loves me so much.
And it’s holding him that I remember the re-do game and If I could re-do anything, it’d be that god awful circumcision. I’m sorry I ever put him through that. I don’t care that he won’t remember it. Because I remember. I’m a witness to what he felt. I wish I never did that to my baby. It was the single most traumatizing event of my life and I saw a man get gunned down by about seven or nine cops in Jersey City on my way to see a movie.

So now, I don’t really play the “redo” game anymore, because I already know what my answer is. And I hope that me or my loved ones ever experience something that’ll warrant a new answer.

**Mom’s Leg**

Dad’s eyeing me when I step into the rehab rec room, squinting as if he’s thinking about something really important and just like that, he stops and smiles broadly, gives me
a nod. And in those few seconds between the squint and nod, just like every time I’ve seen him, I hold my breath and am relieved to discover he’s not angry with me.

It’s 1 something PM and he’s still wearing a bathrobe that’s pockmarked with cigarette burns. His slippers are dirty and run down and his eyes are haggard but he’s smiling and yakking it up with some of the other junkies. He blows smoke outside of the window and cranes his neck close to the metal grates whenever a nurse or chunky orderly walks by. He waves to them, runs his fingers through his thick, dark gray hair. The room is full of empty space and grey tables and black plastic bucket chairs. They looked like they were taken right out of an old classroom.

I sit down beside an Uncle Fester lookalike. He’s nervously chewing bubble gum and not blinking and I see that Dad is glaring at my jacket pockets with his green eyes. I look around to make sure no one’s watching then slide the mini-bottles of Sobieski beneath the table. They disappear into the tattered cloth of dad’s robe.

“You’re slick, you’re slick.” Dad’s laughing like rust and waving his cigarette - his way of patting me on the head. He sweeps ash off the table and winks at me. “So what else? What’s going on with you? How’s work? You have any kids with that girl yet? How’s your mom?”

He exhales his smoke with a smile. I look away when he mentions mom, not to mention things didn’t really pan out with my ex-girlfriend, Cindy, which I told him last time, I can’t look him in the eye. Instead I turn my attention to the high ceilings. The cracked sea-green paint on the wall. The way the pillars are shiny and reach upwards like smooth, thick trees. The cigarette butts on the white and mediterranean-blue tiled floor.
“So your mom’s good?” Dad asks, scratching at a dried fleck of paint with his fingernail.

“Yeah she’s good.”

“She’s able to get around OK?

“Just like she’s always done, you know how it is.” I readjust my seat and nod to Uncle Fester, who’s intently listening to our conversation and taking deep breaths through his nostrils. I can see the knicks in his closely-shaved head, wonder if Dad did it for him like he forced me when I was 7. “New equipment, but they can’t regrow a leg.’

“Where’s she working now?”

I shift in my seat again. The fact that I’m even here is a betrayal, let alone smuggling booze to my piece-of-shit-no-good-waste-of-life-son-of-a-bitch-father. Her words. ‘The hospital, still.’ I say.

“That’s good, that’s good.” He nods and sits in his chair, clicking his thumbnail against his teeth, the paint fleck still stubbornly stuck to the table.

I don’t look like him. His hair is young Elvis-nice and even though he’s got dark, puffy circles under his eyes and gray stubble, you can see why all the girls in Washington Heights went crazy for him. He was tall, no fat in his gut, and his skin was fair. His eyes were this sharp green - some recessed Euro gene that somehow found its way through a Puerto Rican family, and the girls couldn’t resist, including Mom. I wonder if Dad is fooling around with anyone in the center.

“I was thinking,” I say, “I might change jobs, though.”
Dad puts out his cigarette in Dunkin Donuts coffee cup and bent down to take a swig of the vodka. “Yeah?” He covertly screws the cap back on.

“Yeah, the History teacher thing I was telling you about.”

“Oh yeah you mentioned that. I loved History too, growing up. That’s what I was studying back home before I came here. You know that right?” Of course I know. Dad exhales smoke, it curls and fades in the air, he looks at it, lost in thought. He was obsessed with the Dark Ages and would tell me the horror stories of Grand inquisitors and their torture methods growing up. “You got the, you know, the diploma for that thing?”

I shuffle in my chair. “Well I took the Praxis test, I should hear if I passed or not in a couple of days.”

“That’s good! What, you don’t like the computer stuff you’re doing any more?”

Uncle Fester offers me a piece of gum but I decline. He retracts his hand slowly and begins to sulk, his shoulders slope forward and he shrinks in his chair.

My Dad jerks his head at me, rasps pleadingly, “Take the gum from him, Sam.”

I look to the dude. “It’s OK man, I’m good.”

“No, you should take it, Vincent here’s been trying to make reparations for all the shit he stole in the bad old days, right Vincent?”

“I gotta make reparations.” Vincent says, scratching his bald head.

He turns back to look out the window. A sleek, brown-feathered bird with a long yellow beak pecks at a branch. I stare at it with Vincent.
“He’s gotta make reparations, Sam, so take the gum from him. He’s trying to do the whole second chance thing. Come on, it’ll make him feel better.”

The gum loses flavor immediately, but I chew it while Vincent still looks out the window, trying to lure the bird closer.

I tell my Dad, “Yeah but, I, uhh, I’m kind of second-guessing the software development I’m doing with Jake.”

“He’s not paying you? Black people aren’t cheap like that. Ask him for a raise. He’ll give it to you.” Dad pushes his cigarette butt out of the grates in the window and begins patting his robe, searching for his pack.

“It’s not that, it’s just, I wanna do good work.”

“Good work?” Dad finally finds the soft-pack of Newports in a hidden pocket he must have sewn himself.

“Yeah, you know? Give back. I had no Puerto Rican teachers growing up, no Dominicans, Mexicans, fuck, not even one that could speak Spanish.”

“None.” Dad agrees, holding the cigarette still at his lips, before lighting it slowly.

“Exactly. We got these old teachers that don’t give a damn about us, so how the fuck are kids gonna want to stay in school? You got a bunch of old Italians calling us animals and not giving a shit what we do. I want to go in and show these kids that they can be proud of themselves, push some Latino history into the curriculum. Let them know that their ancestors are just as important as any white or black motherfucker that sets his own holiday.”
I’m not finished talking but I realize that I’m speaking louder and that other people in the room, including Vincent, are now looking at me. I sit back down on the plastic chair and fidget with the metal bars that support the seat. My finger touches an old, dried piece of gum and I draw my hand back up.

Dad just looks at me stone-faced. He leans in close, then warmly places his hand behind my head, cradling it.

He wipes his teeth with his tongue which makes a smacking noise and cradles my head with his hand. “Then become a fucking teacher; do what your heart tells you.”

He leaves his hand there for a moment and I see that his green eyes were duller than I remembered.

***

Jake’s pissed. He’s on his third beer already. He’s holding his eyeglasses in his hand and sweat’s dotting his forehead. I’m trying to find the perfect moment to unload the speech I prepared, but he’s got what him and I call, ‘the angry black man face’ on. And maybe angry’s the wrong word. He’s just really confused and trying to wrap his mind around the fact I don’t want to code with him anymore.

“A fucking teacher, man?”

“A fucking teacher.” I nod, trying to say it jokingly but it comes out ashamed.

The bar is too trendy - blasting soundcloud remixes of electronica Brooklyn bands with white girl lead singers. It’s some place in Midtown East with lots of matte metal and
deep red, angular decor and $17 cocktails. Jake’s girlfriend works here, so the price
doesn’t really matter. But still.

“I just don’t know why you’d want to sit in a classroom full of a bunch of a kids
who don’t give a fuck about anything except Instagram, sneakers, and fucking. It’s
gerated. You’re better than that man.”

“I’m there because they don’t give a fuck.” Right as I say it, the bartender turns
down the music slightly, and I’m sure everyone in the place hears me say it. I sip my
drink, which is strong.

The comedy’s lost on Jake, who’s gripping his beer bottle. He throws up his
hands. “Oh God, what am I supposed to say to that? What, am I supposed to tell you ‘one
man can’t change the world?’ I’m not gonna say that because that makes me look like a
bad guy. Of course one man can change the world.” Jake finishes his beer and right on
cue, some skinny kid from the behind the bar with a black dress shirt slaps down our new
drinks. I down the rest of my whiskey-coke and start stirring the new one. It tastes like
liquid hairspray but I keep drinking anyway.

“Yeah, like the guy who shot John Lennon.” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

“Well that was a government conspiracy.” He’s not having it.

“OK, well the guy who shot MLK.” I attempt again.

“Again, government agencies conspired to kill him, proven in a 2002 court case,
Coretta spoke about it. Google it, motherfucker.”
Normally this would be our playful banter, but Jake is heated. He takes a swig of beer and starts biting his lip, exposing the gap on his bottom row of teeth. He bites in time with the synth beat of the kinda eery song the bar’s playing now.

“Listen Jake, I got a near perfect score on the Praxis, I’m destined for this shit.” The attempt at humor again just comes out sad and almost pleading. I honestly didn’t expect him to take it this bad and the situation is way more awkward than I’d ever imagined. Jake has been good to me. He’s never held it over my head, but he could, because he has.

“So? A perfect score? What the fuck is that Sam? A goddamn moron can take that test and pass it, shit man, why do you think we’ve got a bunch of incompetent, dumbass motherfuckers becoming teachers? Perfect score! Don’t give me that! What about Python? Hmmm? The programming language you spent 2 years fucking learning? What about the fact that you hate dealing with people, that’s why I’m handling accounts, and you’re a badass coder who’s helping us build our business?”

‘Your business.’ I dare,

Jake almost throws his beer down. His eyes widen. “Oh, what, wait. Is that what this is, you want shares or something? How many times have I told you I wouldn’t have been able to build this shit without you?” Jake sits back in his chair and crosses his arms, which are pretty big for a geek. I wonder if typing a million emails a day counts as a forearm workout.

The synth intro is still playing, it now sounds like some terrible church organ from the future.
“Because if that’s what you want we can do that, I can do that man. Just say it.
Company shares, no problem. Fuck, you and I pretty much split whatever profits we got, right? You want your name on the bills too? I’ll do that man, just tell me. We’re partners.”

I know his offer is for real, which makes what I want to say even more embarrassing. “It’s not just that, J. It’s - I want to do this.”

It’s hard to look Jake in the face.

“You want to throw your life away? Work for years in a district that doesn’t give a damn about you? Takes away half your shitty paycheck every two weeks for taxes and union fees and pension and insurance? I know what it’s like, my mom was a school teacher for thirty years and retired with a fucking pension that doesn’t pay shit. I’m taking care of her now, not that school. Her fucking pension pays for cat food and heating during the winter. You’ll be lucky if you even have that shit by the time you’re done.”

“I know what I’m getting into, J.” I continue to avoid his eyes.

“Do you? Because I think you’re shooting yourself in the fucking foot.” He leans in close, his voice getting gravelly.

“Oh, wonderful fucking analogy man.”

Jake rolls his eyes which pisses me off.

“You know that’s not what I meant. Come on man.”

“Yeah sure, you didn’t know. You only see my mom every goddamn week.”

Jake gets quiet. He looks at me. “I’m sorry man. I didn’t mean it like that.”
I’m enjoying this moment when the conversation’s momentum in my favor. Now’s definitely the time for me to unleash the speech I prepared, I take another gulp and exhale.

“Jake, my mom, back in Mexico, had to work in a fucking factory stripping rose stems. Her family always asked her why she worked there? She didn’t need to work. She was pretty. She could marry a decent guy. Pop out some kids, have an easier life. But she said no. She insisted on working. 12 hour shifts.”

Jake throws his head back. “Dude, your mom told me all about this. No offense, but this shit has nothing to do with you picking a job that’ll ruin your life.”

“Just, hold on a minute man. She never told you this part, it’s important.” I blink a few times to ward off the haze that’s building up in my head, but the throbbing synth and smell of the whiskey keeps it put. I shake my head and continue. “She had to wear these thick cloth gloves that were designed for men. Overalls, designed for men. They dragged everywhere she walked. One day, the shift manager asked her to overlook the assembly line. So she takes a break from cutting stems and she starts taking care of business. Then something happens, the machine jams. My mom, doing exactly what she’s seen her shift manager do a thousand times, opens the gear box. Old machine, massive fucking thing.”

“Listen Sam, I know, it’s a fucking tragedy.”

“No dude, you need to hear this! Can I just get to my goddamn point?” I gulp the rest of my whiskey and hold it in my mouth tasting the cold syrup and bits of ice and booze that burn my throat. I start to smell cigarettes and I look around the room to tell someone to put them out but I can’t see who just lit one up.
Jake finishes his drink too and raises his hand to no one, signaling another round.

“So, she powers the machine down, greases up the gears, and turns it back on. Still no movement. She sees something lodged in the gears. It’s mice. A bunch of dead little mice smushed and smashed, gumming up the works. So she tries to fish them out. Sticks her hand in there. Then her glove gets stuck. The gears start moving. She panics, tries to get leverage, pushes her foot against the bottom gears to free her hand. She does, but her long overall pants get stuck. She tries to take off her boot, but it’s laced really tight. Seconds go by as she tries to take off her clothes but it’s too late. The gears swallow her foot up. She feels the bones crush one by one, snapping clear off her body. When they stopped the machine and pulled her out, her fucking foot was destroyed, bits of bone and flesh were all dangling off of her, man.”

Jake moves in his seat uncomfortably. He’s the one not looking at me now.

There’s a lull in the music, his girlfriend, Cindy, is changing the stations on an old iPhone they keep charged and plugged into an aux cable behind the counter. The same mix starts up again, a deep electro keyboard chord progression plays over and over again, slowly. The bar’s lighting dims to an amber glow, the same color of my drink.

“So she gets a wooden foot.” I say, lazily poking at the bits of ice in my empty cup. “No one in the family says, ‘I told you so.’, but you can tell they were thinking it. ‘That’s what she gets working for this fucking factory. That’s what she gets for her hard work, right?’ But the company pays her money, medical care is on them, of course. She’s at work three days later, stripping roses she’s out of her mind, yeah? But they make her manager. They give her a small house. Refrigerator. They take care of her.
“But she lost her fucking foot man, it was the least they could do. They aren’t good samaritans for being decent human beings. If that happened to her in this country she would’ve owned the fucking company and she could’ve afforded doctors growing her a new goddamn foot outta stem cells or some shit.” His chin is resting on his clavicle as he looks up at me with droopy eyes.

“Let me finish, J. She saves her money, to the point where she can afford to pay someone to take her over the border. It’s night, she’s in a bus about halfway to Texas, then her group gets stopped by Coyotes.”

Jake holds his beer, not drinking it. I wonder if he’s thinking about my mom, about the dinners at my house. About how she kisses him on both cheeks, and always tells him to stay away from Latin women, with a chuckle that’s half-love, half-warning. The chord progression in the song gets faster, filling the room up with low, synth sounds. A midi drum beat comes out of nowhere.

“And the coyotes are looking for girls. Pretty ones, dragging them out of the cars to send to the brothels.”

The music is really intense now, the progression is accompanied with other beats and deep, ominous laser sounds layered on top of one another, the room is filled with music. I picture my mom scared in the desert night that smells crisp and dusty, with a faint flashlight buzzing in her wide brown eyes.

“They stop and see my mom, Jake, with her wooden leg and tell her that no one wants to fuck a cripple. So they leave her. They leave her in the little bus with all of the
old people and young men and she rode that night until she got to Texas. Where she met her cousins who eventually helped her get to New York.”

A light, pained woman’s voice echoes over the track. Jake exhales and shakes his head, the amber light in the bar makes his eyes look glassy.

“And you know, I never, once in my life heard my mother complain about her foot. She was thankful, Jake. She believed that God or the universe, took it away for a reason. My mom would’ve been working in a whore house in Tijuana right now if it wasn’t for that accident. Now you might think she was an idiot for working that factory job or whatever, but it led her here.”

Jake’s looking into his beer. A lesbian couple bumps into our table. They look identical, two tall, thin and pretty pale-skinned girls with brown hair.

“Do you guys have a light?” one of them asks, trying not to topple over on her heels.

Jake shakes his head no. They shrug their shoulders and walk away, asking the table next to ours. I catch Jake looking at them.

We don’t say anything for a while. My head’s a little light from the music and the speech and the booze. Jake’s cupping his bottle of beer, twirling it on the table.

He finally sighs. “How full of yourself do you have to be to date someone who looks just like you?” He looks at me and smirks. I’m relieved.

“I know, right?! They look exactly the same! Goddamn narcissists.” I sip my drink and am caught off guard, again, by just how goddamned awful it tastes.
It’s only three days after dropping the news to Jake that we’re back in our old buddy routine, texting each other stupid memes and pro-wrestling GIFs. Today was the Ultimate Warrior flexing during a promo with the simple phrase, “I LOVE COCAINE!!” flashing in bright white text beneath his massive pecs. Definitely something Jake cooked up in Meme Generator. I catch myself laughing in the elevator of the school district’s central office, where two bland-faced women with teacher haircuts in their 50s look straight ahead, oblivious to my glee.

Carlos, my second cousin and connect in the school district, has his office on the ninth floor of a nondescript government building that’s existed since forever, the kind that’s been trapped in decades of mustiness, and a basement that would protect against a nuclear attack and probably house a small population for a few years. I start imagining laundry lines hanging from cubicle to cubicle. Murals smattered on the taupe walls, pieces of brown carpet cut up to fashion loin-cloths, hacked-up office furniture set on fire, with the survivors copulating in its warm glow as others roast rodents and pigeons over it, carefully placed on old keyboards.

“What’s so funny, cuz?” I whip around to see Carlos to my left.

“Oh, nothing, I just remembered something. Sorry.”

“No, it’s good, no one smiles up here man, it’s a fucking drag, man.” Carlos fist bumps me. “Come in, come in.”

We walk into his office, which is pretty pedestrian. Burgundy cloth chairs and cherrywood desks all ordered from the same school catalogue, no doubt. He offers me
water and I decline, then he cracks open an old laptop that hums. The screen is black and
it stays this way for a while.

Carlos drums his fingers in silence in the tabletop and the computer’s humming
even louder now. The screen’s still black, he begins pressing function buttons. “The hells
up with this thing?” He half-laughs, looks at me. “These things are the worst.”

“Yeah, they wouldn’t call it hardware if it was easy to use.” I immediately hate
myself for the joke.

“Yeah, I know, right?” His eyes light up when the screen finally brightens. He
logs into some school portal web application. He scrolls down a list of schools, the
computer lags. Carlos curses it under his breath.

“So you’re certified now man, I’ve got a couple of openings for History, right?”
He scrolls up and down with his mouse, gazing at the screen.

“Yeah.”

“And you’re bilingual?”

“Yep.”

He looks me straight in the eyes. “Good man. We freaking need it in this district.”

“Need it everywhere.” I rub my shoes against the coarse brown carpet, it makes a
soft, scraping sound that sends vibrations through my feet.

“Yeah, tell me about it. Well the good thing is because you speak Spanish, is that
we can place you wherever. Any schools you have in mind? Maybe I can swing
something for you. We’ve got that partnership with the Charters now. Everyone’s trying
to get placed up in there.”
“Yeah, I’m not about that Charter life man, haha.”

“Yeah right, you want to keep it OG, right? Haha. Let’s see…” He’s staring at the screen, thinking I was joking about wanting to go to a Public school. “Oh wow I’ve got an opening in Success I could place you in like, right away man.”

“No man, I uhh, I kind of want to stay away from Success. Or any Charter school, really.” I clear my throat.

He turns away from his ancient laptop, “You don’t want to go to a charter? Why?” He’s looking at me like I have two heads.

“Because the kids there don’t need help.”

“The money’s way better man. And that’s not true, you’ve got kids from the city who go there, they’re just kids who actually want to work.”

“Yeah but, I didn’t come up in a charter school.”

Carlos leans back in his chair, genuinely surprised. He presses his long fingers together. He’s got a little hair on top of his head, expertly gelled for maximum surface coverage and volume. I notice how nice his suit is, and think about the immaculate, patterned polos he wears to family barbecues.

“You went to George Washington, right?” Carlos asks as he brushes his goatee.

“Yeah.”

“That was a pretty rough school.” He smirks.

“Yeah I mean it wasn’t the safest.”

“Still isn’t.” Carlos raises his eyebrows.
“Well I mean, at the end of the day they’re kids.” I start to fidget in my chair and feel like I’m being interviewed. I straighten my posture.

“Yeah, they are, but then, some of them are not, you know? If you’re going to head into a school like that, just be ready...what did you do before teaching again?”

He opens his email inbox on the laptop, which takes a few seconds to load. He begins digging through it. In a few agonizing seconds, my resume is on his screen.

“Software development.” I tell him.

“Yeah says that right here. And you want to get into teaching now? Why the change of heart?”

I had the same conversation with him in my entrance interview, which was a farce. But now he’s leaning back in his chair and looks at me like I’m a refugee trying to make sense of a new country. Carlos starts gently rocking, switching directions intermittently. I notice just how quiet the room is now.

‘For the same reasons I gave in our first discussion,’ I tell him. ‘I think that it’s important for Latino teachers to really connect with these kids, and history is a personal passion of mine, so I’m really motivated to uhh, get in the classroom and share what I’m passionate about. I can connect with them and make a difference.’

Carlos stops bouncing in his chair. Still looking at me, nodding his head. “OK, but, are you sure?”

“Yes.” I say, trying to sound as confident as possible.

Carlos throws up his hands and sighs. “I’ll get you set up for an interview with Principal Mendez over at George Washington for late next week, how’s that sound?”
“That’d be great!” I exhale, happy that the questions are over.

Carlos stands up and walks me to the door. He pats me on the back and shakes his head as he exhales. “The district needs more teachers like you, man.”

“Thanks.” I mumble. He shuts the door and I look around the office, the dun brown carpet, the lifeless walls, and wait for what seems like forever for the elevator to arrive.

***

“Where is Jake?”

“He’s busy Mom.”

Mom’s ushering me into her apartment. I don’t know how to tell her that Jake and I won’t be working together anymore, but I have to. It doesn’t help that I can’t get my visit to Carlos’ out of my head.

I walk her over to the kitchen and have her sit down. Her apartment hasn’t changed in 25 years but the place is spotless. Every square inch smells like cinnamon - she’d always boil it from as far back as I can remember. Each day I’d come home, hoping she’d made rice pudding, but most of the time it was just the spicy sweet sticks simmering in a small pot. I keep telling myself I’ll do the same at my place, but I never get around to it.

The kitchen still has an amber-stained glass lamp hanging from a bronze chain above the mahogany table. Cornucopia fruit and vegetable designs decorate the beige tiles on the kitchen wall. Similar-patterned wallpaper fills out the non-tiled breakfast
nook she never uses. I don’t know where she bought the paper, she had to have peeled it off and replaced it with the same design every four or five years. Maybe she found a whole warehouse of it years ago and got a great deal. The paper was still white, the colors of the food still popped.

Mom’s face shines under the light. her nightly ritual - a dab of Vaseline. She swears it keeps her looking young and it’s hard to argue with her, there are only a few lines beneath her eyes that have settled into her cheeks over the years. Sure, her nostrils flare out a bit more now. You’d only notice if she let you see a picture of her when she first came to Washington Heights, days before she met my father. She’s wearing what she always wears after she changes out of her scrubs: black athletic shorts and a white v-neck t shirt. She pops her prosthetic off when she’s in the house and uses the walls and strategically placed furniture to get around. “It helps the stump to breathe.” Her words.

“Well if Jake’s busy, shouldn’t you be busy? Go help him! You two are running a business!” Mom almost shooes me away.

“Yeah right, and miss your sopa de frijol? No way.” I look into the pot expecting her black beans and corn and bits of sausage, but when I take off the lid, I see sancocho.

“Taste it, is it good?” Mom hands me a big, steel spoon.

I dip it into the pot. I hold its savory warmth in my mouth. The bits of yuka soaked up the brothy cilantro and sassoon and allspice. I take another spoonful. Sancocho was the only thing my dad wanted to eat after he’d shoot up. It was my favorite. She stopped making it after he stole everything we had for the hundredth time and she pushed him down the stairs.
“Mom…” I want to know why she made it today, I try to think of how to ask without bringing up Dad.

“No, no no, no, don’t, don’t.” Mom says. Knowing where the conversation’s headed.

She lifts herself up and grabs two bowls, shushing me the whole time. We sit and eat the sancocho in silence. I grab a second bowl, then a third.

She sits at the end of the table, her chin resting in her hand and she looks at me with a slight, warm smile, patting my knee or rubbing my shoulder. Only eating a little herself. Occasionally I look up from my meal and she touches my forehead, whispering “mijo” or “cariño.” I think of the trips to see Dad. Every time I’ve sat down at her table, meaning to tell her I’ve been double-crossing her this whole time. She’s never outright forbidden me from visiting him, but then again, I’ve never told her. And here I am, eating her soup like a fucking traitor.

“I visited Dad earlier this week.” I finally confess. I hold my breath and watch her.

She takes it in for a second, stops patting my knee, then starts up again. “OK, he’s your father. You’re a man, you can see him. No problem.” She folds her hands in her lap, happy to watch me eat.

“He looks better.” I don’t know why I say that. He doesn’t. I keep eating the soup.

“Well that’s good. Maybe he’ll learn to take care of himself.” She looks away when she says it. Keeps her mouth tight.

“He asked about you, Mom.”
“Ok.”

“He just wanted to know how you were doing.”

She exhales, getting tired of the conversation. “I’m doing good. Samuel, are you doing good? You have the same look on your face like when I took you to the pool for the first time and you stood on top of the diving board, scared to jump off. What’s wrong?”

I start twirling my spoon in the bowl. My stomach gets light. “I’m not going to work with Jake anymore.”


“He didn’t do anything.”

“What did you do? Did you do something stupid?” She leans in. “You’re making good money with him. You were working at the Best Buy before he gave you a job.”

“I know, Mom.” I remember standing in the laptop section, doing homework assignments and running code standing upright, craning my back under the halogen bulbs of the store on showroom laptops.

“He’s a nice boy, he’s been good to you.”

‘I know he’s very nice, Mom. I just, you know I’ve been thinking about teaching again.’

“Ok…” She moves back in her seat.

“So I got my certification.”

“Ok Samuel…”

“And I think that this is what I need to do with my life.”
“Teaching?”

“Yes.”

“In these schools?”

“Yes mom. History.” I can see this changes her.

She pulls her hair back in a pony-tail, the thick strands of gray start at her temple and travel in waves down, down, until it reaches the middle of her back. She looks tired, her lips grow thin.

“You tell your father this?”

‘Yes.’ I avoid her eyes.

“What did he say?” She bobs her head.

“That I should follow my heart.’

She clicks her tongue in her cheek and stands up, placing the bowls in the sink. I get up to help and hit my head on the amber, hanging lamp. I steady it with my hand.

“What?’

“Follow your heart?” She snorts.

“What?’

“So stupid. So so stupid.”

“I know what’ll make me happy, Mom.”

“No you don’t. You don’t know. No one knows!” She smacks her palm with the back of her other hand.

“I talked with Jake about it, already. He’s fine with it. He agrees with me. It isn’t only dad!”
“Your father is nothing. He’s a nothing, Samuel. He threw his life in the garbage. He’s a parasite, a worm. Don’t even talk to me about him. I think of him like I think of an old dog walking in the street, stopping to smell shit on the sidewalk. Follow your heart? Does that mean something to you?”

I look at her, I feel lost.

“Follow your heart?! What is this, a fucking cartoon?” She snorts again. I can’t remember the last time she swore. I stay quiet, stand dumbly. She continues, not waiting for my response. “And Jake, what did you tell him?”

‘Why don’t you want me to be a teacher?’ I manage to mutter.

She gets in my face. “It’s not the teacher that’s the problem you stupid! You don’t think!”

“Think about what?! What I want to do with my life?” I don’t remember ever arguing with my mother like this.

“Why Sam? Why do you want to teach?”

“I want to help people! I want to help kids learn.”

She shakes her head, sighs. “Do the kids want to learn? Do they want to read books? Do they want to know about history? Do you like trying to teach someone to care about something they don’t care about? Because that will be your job. Trying to convince someone to care. Do you know what that’s like? Every single day? Are you prepared for that?”

I see my mom pleading with my father as he’s high on the couch. I see her hiding money in the apartment, tucking it into her bra. I see my father riffling through our
cupboards. I see him carrying bags of our clothes, shoes, holding a TV set, walking it down the street. I see him on stoops with bottles of Olde English. I see him necking with a fat chick in jean shorts and too many moles on her face four blocks away from our own apartment. He doesn’t even notice me crying on the sidewalk. Or that I shy away from people and hide in my room typing on the IBM PS/2 mom finds at a church sale, a fossil of a computer no one wants. It’s blue glow more comforting than the loud bodegas and pool halls I’d find my father in, where he’d be slapping the backs of everyone, chatting it up with the world. King of the fucking mountain.

Mom’s voice cuts in. “What did you tell Jake? Because he’s a smart boy, I want to know what you told him. I want to know why you think this is a good idea.”

“I told him about your leg, mom.”

She stops. The room is dead. There’s a change in my mother’s eyes, they focus and begin to glow with a piercing heat.

“My leg? He knows about my leg. He sees my leg. What the fuck does my leg have to do with this?”

“I told him the story you told me. About the coyotes. About how you would have never made it here unless your leg got caught in those gears at the factory. The one you worked at even though it was a shitty job. You knew that it would pay off and it did. You made it here, because of your accident.”

Mom sits back down and rubs her left eye. She looks up at the ceiling. The amber light from the lamp casts a warm, soft glow on her face. She’s crying. She’s wiping the tears away but they keep coming. She’s using her palms, her shirt. I grab a paper towel
and she slaps my hands away. I try to hug her and she hits me hard. She’s not sad. She’s not weeping. She’s bottling her fury. She looks like she wants to press my head between her hands and yell into my face. But she continues to cry and clenches her jaw.

She chews each word. “If I had my leg. I could have walked across that border myself. If I had that leg, I could have kicked the coyotes away from me. I could have run away from that brothel. If I had my leg, I wouldn’t have felt like I needed to settle for a piece of shit like your father. I would have thought I deserved love. If I had my leg, I would be a whole person you stupid, stupid boy. So don’t you ever think God knows best or that misery is a blessing in disguise. Misery is only misery and we move on. But it makes its mark on you.” She pushes me away from her and walks away to her bedroom and shuts off the light and slams the door. I stand in the kitchen, alone, beneath the glow and dull hum of the lamp.

***

Back at the facility, Dad is in his usual spot. Blowing smoke out of the window. Uncle Fester is sitting in a corner, feeding doritos to a small brown bird right out of the bag. Stubble is coming in on the top of his head.

“You look tired, Sam.” Dad coughs. He is eyeing my jacket. I take it off and hang it behind my chair.

I’m looking right in his eyes. They’re watery, red. I can’t see the green today. ‘I was doing a lot of thinking.’ I say.

“Oh? About what?” He scratches and pulls at his earlobe lazily.
“I was thinking about the teaching position.”

“History, right? You going to teach English History? They’ve got the craziest shit. You know, they used to hang women who used to fuck when they weren’t married, they hanged them upside down and sawed them right in half. And they had this one device, like these metal prongs, like these circles with spikes on em,” he cups his hands in front of him to illustrate, he seems something I don’t, “and they would put it on their tits, and twist their fucking tits right off man. It’s crazy, crazy shit man.” He laughs and shakes his head.

An orderly walks past us. Dad waves and tosses the butt of his cigarette out the window.

“Yeah. Well it doesn’t matter, I’m not going to do it.” The words fall dryly out of my mouth.

“Really? Why?” Dad taps the bottom of the table, the signal to pass the juice. I slide the bottles underneath into his hand. I hold onto them tightly, he tugs a bit, looks me in the eye and I smile, let them go easily.

I smirk. “I thought it’s what I wanted, but not really. Jake and I working on securing this new contract for a tech finance firm. I’m handling the interface for the mobile app we’re developing. Plus, I’ve got shares in the company now. We’re equal partners.” I look past dad to see Vincent feeding the bird, he looks up and smiles warmly at me. He’s looking better. I ask him for a stick of gum, he happily digs into his pocket and fetches me a piece. I chew it.
“That’s good, working with all the Wall Street types, right? Those crooks got a lot of money.”

“Yeah, they do.” I say, annoyed.

“How’s your mom doing?” He’s scratching his neck, looking around the room and fiddling with the bottle cap beneath the table.

“Hey, Dad?”

“Yeah?” He says, scanning the room again.

“What did you ever see in Mom?”

He sneaks a swig of vodka and hides it in his jacket. He shrugs. “I was young, you know? The girls really liked me. You must have a lot of girls after you now, computer guy. You make good money, yeah? I’m getting out of here in another month, maybe you show me where you work?” He scratches at his arm. Little dried brown stains dot the inner sleeve of his bathrobe. He takes another swig from the bottle.


He hits another cigarette out of his pack with the palm of his hand and lights it.

“Because...there weren’t a lot of women like your mom. Loyal, nice. Good cook. Hard worker. That’s the kind of woman you want to live with, Samuel. Trust me. The pretty ones are good here and there. But a woman like your mom is someone who stays with you, no matter what.”

“That is until they kick you out.” I remind him.

Dad looks at me for a second, confused. Then he laughs, showing his yellow, lined teeth. “Well, I mean, I fucked up.” He adjusts himself in his chair.
“You fucked up a lot.”

It’s quiet, he scratches his eyebrow. “Yeah I know.” He sighs.

“Like, a lot a lot. You probably got more chances to get your shit together than any other junkie in the world.”

“Jesus Christ, Samuel, yes, I did. Are you mad at me or something? I like it when you come and see me. Why are you doing this?”

“I’m just saying you fucked up a lot. You do know that, right?” I’m leaning over the table now.

“Yeah I know that.” Dad retracts.

Dad takes an anxious drag. He’s about to lift his bottle up but sees a nurse and pins it down to his side instead. Vincent’s bird chirps in the back of the room, and he pets its head and whispers a soothing tune.

“And you treated her like shit.”

“What? I never laid a hand on her! There were way worse guys than me.” He points to his chest, ash from the cigarette getting caught in the chest hair peaking out of his v-neck.

“Why did you shuck up with her, Dad? Why did you lie to her for so long?”

“Samuel, what is this?” He leans back in his chair and throws his hands up. He looks small in his tattered robe.

“Why?” I persist.

“What the fuck do you want me to say?” He throws his hands up in the air.
“I want to know what you were thinking when you saw this loyal, kind, good cook of a woman and decided to ruin her fucking life for 10 years until she threw your ass down a flight of stairs.”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now? If it wasn’t for me you wouldn’t even be here, Papo.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah! Your mom is a great woman, but son, she’s a fucking cripple, she’s missing part of her leg. I did her a favor but then she’s telling me she loves me and I’m a nice guy. What the fuck am I supposed to do? She knew what she was getting into. I wasn’t perfect but you know what? Neither was she. So stop asking these stupid fucking questions.”

Dad settles back into his seat, satisfied with himself. He takes another drag of the cigarette and bounces in his chair, not wanting to look me in the eye for more than two seconds.

“Ok.” I say simply.

“Ok then. Try to be nicer next week. This is supposed to be a fucking healthy place for me. This kinda talk isn’t good for my recovery. Let’s talk about something else, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I hear a flutter of wings. Vincent’s bird escapes his hands and lands on the top of the metal grate that’s bolted to the window. The bird peers outside as Vincent stands below it, calling him down.
I step away from the table and wave back at dad. I stop the orderly who passes me.

“You might want to check that gentleman over there, I think he’s got some vodka on him. He’s not supposed to be drinking alcohol in here, is he?”

The orderly nods his head and walks straight to Dad’s table. I stand out of sight, listening to the scuffle and the sound of shattered glass. The bird’s squawk echoes out of the room and into the hallway, followed by fast flutters that reverberate and eventually die in the air.

It’s Cold And Lonely In The Deep Dark Night

The gym smells exactly like Tom imagined it would: salt and must. There’s the clanging of iron. A chorus of labored grunting from meathead cops. Vascular. Shipyard ropes straining underneath tight, tanned skin. Bodies so big they look like they’d work up a sweat simply grabbing a carton of milk from the fridge. Muscles so jagged it makes
breathing seem painful. Tom unconsciously adjusts the elastic waistband of his department-issued shorts, pushing up the flabby skin around his mid-section.

Behind a paint-chipped, rusted metal bannister in the middle of the stank weight-room is a bench press. Eight plates total on the barbell. A gaggle of grunting, swollen, red-faced gorillas with shoulders like tortoise shells atop their arms.

An enormous bald man with face of a bulldog approaches the bench.

“Fucking A Tony!”

“All day Tony!”

“This ain’t shit! Lightweight baby! Lightweight!”

The men pat him on his massive back. He sits down on the bench with a flourish of a concert pianist. Looks up to the other men and precisely smacks his face, his cheeks rippling. He lays down. Pushes up underneath the bar. All eight plates go up. 405 lbs, by Tom’s count and this man lifts it up. Down. Up. Down. Up. Down. U-u-u-p-p-p, d-d-d-o-o-o-w-n-n and back u-u-u-u-u-u-u-p-p-p-p-p-p-p and he slams the barbell back on the rack. He emerges from the bench, standing, flexing, screaming. Bulge-necked, red-eyed, blood ready to shoot out of his nostrils. Getting punched in the chest by the others.

Tom knows cops are a bunch of meatheads, his dickbag Uncle Jerry warned him as much, but he applied to the force anyway. Secure gig. Pension. Associates degree only. He could still refresh his YouTube page to see if his latest acapella cover of the current Top 40 hit went viral. The steady gig would cover his studio time. And if singing never pans out, well, at least he’ll retire with three-quarters pay. Besides, it’s not like
being a cop in Bergen County was dangerous. The worst he’d have to deal with is a kid speeding in the 3-series their dad bought as a consolation gift for being a shitty parent.

“That’s how Ruggiero does it baby!” The bald man bellows. The name registers with Tom. Ruggiero’s the reason he’s down here.

This monstrosity would be his new partner. His first partner ever, really.

He walks up to the enormous man, but notices his own pale, all elbow-reflection in the mirror. Comedic when juxtaposed with these moon-faced, performance enhancing mongoloids.

“Officer Ruggiero?” Tom asks.

Ruggiero turns out. Takes the entirety of Tom in, which isn’t much. “Jesus Christ, we got Casper the skinny ghost over here.” Ruggiero bellows with the other baboons.

“Kid how much you bench?” Questions a bearded Gigantor with a single diamond stud in his left ear.

Tom shrugs, “I’ve never lifted weights before.”

“What?! How old are you?” Ruggiero leans in, looking at Tom like he’s a bug in a jar.

“21.”

Ruggiero throws his hands up in the air like he’s angry at God. “Come on man! You gotta be kidding me! Listen You’re gonna do 135, right now.” The muscled men peel off three plates a piece from each side. Tom’s pushed onto the bench press by any one of them.
Ruggiero in his ear: “It’s just like a push up, except, you know, the other way around.”

“I don’t think this is a good idea.” Tom’s nerves seize his vision. The light blue ceiling above his head warps, moves. Strange, translucent designs are superimposed over them. Is this how all weightlifters feel before a workout, he thinks? It’s a terrible high.

“Trust me kid, you can definitely put this up.”

“But that seems like a lot.”

“Bro, you’re not a man if you can’t bench your bodyweight for reps. How much you weigh?”

“A hundred sixty pounds.”

“Then this should be lightweight for you man! It’s 135!” Just grab the bar, here, I’ll spot you.

Tom’s arms reach out to the bar above him. “Where do I put my hands?”

“Jesus fucking Christ there are lines on the barbell, match up your ring finger with them here,” Ruggiero moves Tom’s hands into place, “...and here.”

Tom braces, his arms push against the weight. Jelly. Vibrations. He moves the barbell off the rack. It shakes, stammers, and crashes down to his chest. Flashes.

Childhood. Kissing Cindy behind the movie theater, getting bits of her ponytail in their mouths, somehow. Singing *Billie Jean* to his mother as she claps her hands.

Ruggiero halts the weight before it crushes Tom’s diaphragm. He pulls it up one-handed, two-inches from Tom’s chest. Tom’s arms are still shaking.

“Come on man. You got one rep of this.”
Tom’s panicked, “Get it off me man!”

“Just push! I’ll spot you!”

Tom’s arms tremble and slowly push the weight up under the guidance of Ruggiero’s single hand. Tom’s elbows lock. “See you did it!” Ruggiero racks the weight.

Tom scurries away from the bench. Scarlet-eared. “It’s too heavy, I told you it was too heavy!”

“Jesus fuck kid, it was only 135. How’d you even become a cop?”

Tom snorts. “I passed the physical. I ran the mile and a half in under 10 minutes.”

“So? Running’s gay anyway. If you’re not here to lift, what’re you doing in the gym?”

Tom pulls at his waistband again, even more conscious of his flab. “I was sent down here to see Officer Ruggiero.”

“Yeah, that’s me. Why?”

“I’m your new partner.”

Ruggiero looks at Tom, holds his breath, and waits until he’s done scanning him up and down before letting out a huge sigh.

“Goddamnit. Come on, let’s gear up.”

***

Ruggiero speeds and weaves through traffic North on 17, until the roadside strip malls of furniture stores, gym supplies, and fast food joints become fewer and far
between and are replaced with dense, green trees and increasingly expensive cars glinting in the afternoon sun. A beginning of Summer, Sun.

“See the good thing about this area is that it’s got high property taxes, so you don’t have to worry about there being too many jews.”

“Ahh.” Tom says nodding.

“You know, Freddy? He’s the guy with the diamond stud. We call him Justin Bieber because he loves earrings.”

“Haha. Nice.”

“I know, right? Well his brother works for the IRS, you know they’re not just a bunch of bitches who do paperwork all day? Like, they have actual agents with guns and shit. Anyway, they busted this one Jew family in Teaneck for not paying property taxes for years. Said that their house was a place of worship. Said that they had more than ten people coming to pray every Friday or Saturday or whatever fucking day they do their Church on. IRS agents roll in and fucking catch like four of them sitting around watching TV and eating fucking corned beef sandwiches. Had to pay like 12 years of back taxes. Man I wish I was there to see that. Their little curls must’ve stood up right in the air!”

“Yeah that would’ve been great.”

Ruggiero takes the patrol Charger off the exit and cuts off another car. “Did you see that guy’s face? He wants to kill me! Oh I wish that motherfucker would just honk at me. I swear to God, sometimes I wish I could just drive an unmarked car so I could catch people trying to fuck with me. My wife says I got road-rage. She’s Jewish. She’s got road rage.” He points on the “she” and taps the steering wheel.
Tom nods and looks out the window, the trees zip by. The speedometer climbs from 50 to 60 to 70 to 80 to 85… “So is this where we normally patrol?”

“Yeah we’re supposed to be on rotation with the other guys, but we take the batteries out of the GPS units and keep the same routes. I like this area because once you get further down 17 South, we can circle through the mall, plenty of hot young bitches there.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah, milfs too. One time I fucked this broad in the Neiman Marcus fitting room.”

“Wow. Reall?” Tom says, trying not to roll his eyes.

Ruggiero looks at Tom and squints. “Whaddya mean, Wow? You’re damn right, Wow.”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant.” Tom begins to focus his attention on the nobs of the occasionally buzzing CB radio. The laptop where Tony showed him how to look up license plate numbers.

Ruggiero registers Tom is avoiding the conversation. “What, you don’t like pussy or something?”

“I mean who doesn’t like pussy?” Tom retorts.

“Gays.” Ruggiero offers, suspiciously.

“Yeah I guess you gotta point there.”

“So what’s the problem?”
Tom looks down at his uniform. His vest juts out slightly from his collar. He can see himself slouched in the front seat, swimming in his clothes, not being able to hold a guy’s-guy conversation with this fellow cop. He hears his uncle, some high-ranking Port Authority cop who was able to get him a spot in the Bergen County Sheriff’s office, saying, “I told ya Tommy. It’s not for you, Tommy. Stick to the restaurant and your little songs, Tommy.” It’s at this moment Tom does what people almost never seem to do in conversation with a complete stranger, and that’s confront an ugly and uncomfortable truth about themselves that they’ve been ignoring all their lives.

“I just don’t like talking about it is all. I mean what am I supposed to say to that? You had sex with a woman in her 40s who probably got a fuckton of plastic surgery that her very rich husband most likely paid for while she was shopping for Gucci purses and Ferragamo shoes in the country’s second-richest county. Bravo. And I guess I’m supposed to be impressed with the fact that you’re a hyper-sexual alpha male capable of lifting ungodly amounts of weight. I bet you get plenty of people who say you look good for your age? Am I supposed to say that? It’s hard to say because you’re completely hairless but your skin is puffy yet tight all over, making you look anywhere from 25 to 52? Goddamn I heard that the police were like fratboys, but I didn’t know it was this bad! So what do you want me say? You want me to pat you on the back like all the other mamalooks in the department? Or you want to talk about something I actually give a shit about? Because I’ve never been good at trying to fit in. And whenever I do try, It never makes me happy.”
Tom stops himself when he catches a glimpse of his shiny forehead. He’s sweating. His face is red. He’s angry? He takes some Chipotle napkins from the side door pocket of the car and pats himself down. Composure.

The ride is silent. The road murmurs.

Ruggerio finally whistles, “Damn man, you’re fucking crazy!” Like it’s the highest honor in the world.

***

Tom follows his new partner to the baseball field behind the Garden State Plaza, trying to unwrap the tight plastic off the ball Ruggiero just bought.

“Can you believe they charged fucking eight dollars for that thing?”

“It’s too much, Tony.”

“Yeah but we need a ball. Don’t even get me started on the glove.”

Tom stands at the plate, peeling off the rest of the plastic.

Ruggiero steps up, patting his black tactical boots with a well worn aluminum bat - a souvenir taken from a wannabe tough guy. “So how long have you been singing, Tommy?”

“Since I was four, my mother would keep MTV on all the time. I’d cry and bite her when she’d change the channel.” Tom finally wrestles the last bit of plastic off the ball and runs his fingers over his close-cropped, brown buzzcut.
“You’d fucking bite her?” Ruggiero readies the bat. The ball screams down the plate, hitting the back fence. It clangs, shakes. “Good throw.”

“Thanks.” Tom readies his glove for the ball. He catches it. “My mom loved when I sang, I used to know all the dance moves to Do You Remember the Time.”

“Is that the one where they’re in Egypt? With Magic Johnson?”

“Yeah that’s it.” Tom readies the ball and winds up for the pitch.

“Damn, that motherfucker beat AIDS back when it was a death sentence. Just goes to show, as long as you have money, nothing’ll stop you.” The ball flashes past Ruggiero again, he swings and misses. It hits the back fence. “Goddamn, you’re good.”

“Yeah well my uncle though I should play baseball instead of just singing and dancing all the time. He was my godfather and all.” He holds out his glove. The ball lands in it with a soft pat.

“What about your father?”

“Fireman. His lungs got all fucked up saving a family in Paterson. Died when I was really young.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah it happened before I could really know him. I just remember stubble and the hair on his chest. Grabbing it and giggling a lot. He liked baseball though, apparently. Took me to a game when I was two, but I only know that because my mom told me.”

Tom holds the ball in his fingers, moving it slowly. He sees the banners on the field: 2004-2005 Police-Fireman League Champions, Paramus Fire Dept.
Ruggiero taps his boots with the bat again. “Y’know, my wife likes singing a lot too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah…we’re kind of, well, I’m kind of in the dog-house right now.”

“Shit, I’m sorry man, is it bad?”

“Nah I mean, it’s not horrible. She’ll come around. I got plenty of time to do other shit now, instead of going to visit her parents all the time. Then my parents. Then going out shopping for curtains. I want to fucking kill myself sometimes, you know? It’s like I got all this free time now, it’s kinda nice.”

Tom winds up the pitch, but doesn’t throw. His arm falls to his side. “Hey.”

“What? Come on, throw the ball.”

“Well, I was just wondering, y’know, you ever want to learn to sign?”

“Me? Fuck no.”

“I mean, I think it’d be cool for you to know how. You’re going to get me jakked, right? Maybe I could teach you a few things.”


Tom shrugs and sends the ball down the line. Ruggiero cracks it, sending it right over the fence and into the parking lot. A loud metal thud, followed by the cracking of glass. Ruggiero winces, Tom looks at him, his face says HOLY SHIT. They run to the charger, their laughs trailing over the field.
It’s Tom’s first night shift and his legs are still filled with battery acid from the leg-workout hell Ruggiero put him through yesterday. He crumples into the Charger’s passenger seat.

“What the fuck did you do to me, man?” He gasps.

Ruggiero hands him a coffee. “A necessary evil man. I don’t know a single person who likes leg day. But that shit’ll make you grow all over. Releases natural testosterone.”

Ruggiero sips from his cup and fumbles to place it in the holder. The radio crackles, it’s dispatch.

“10-56 outside of Dog and Cask.”

Ruggiero rolls his eyes. “Goddamnit! It’s fucking Keensy.” He looks at Tom, who’s trying to drink from his 7-11 cup without burning his tongue. “I swear to God we waste all of our budget taking care of this drunk motherfucker.”

When they pull up to the bar, Keensy’s outside, wearing white painter’s pants and kicking at nothing. “Without Love” echoes from the bar, dances on the night; it’s t-shirt weather.

“I swear to God, Tom, winter can’t come soon enough.” Ruggiero says, slamming the door of the charger as he powerwalks to Keensy, who doesn’t see him yet. “A nice freeze kills all these worthless hobos. That’s why you’ve got so many of them in LA.”

Ruggiero grabs Keensy’s arm who dances away.

“Hey man, come on let me stay to finish the song. They’re doing Kar-ee-okee now. You know that?”
“Keensy, please, don’t fuck with us tonight.” Ruggiero’s already had it up to here.

Keensy’s drunk eyes bulge out of his forehead he scrunches his gray unibrow and rubs his temples, “Officer, how...do...you know my name?”

Ruggiero and Tom giggle, but then Keensy breaks off into a sprint straight through the doors of the bar.

“Fuck!” Ruggiero runs inside and Tom follows behind. They push through middle-aged, dyed-blonde women who reek of cigarettes. Through self-important, rotund local business owners with wedding rings in the pockets of their slacks, all of them trying to get laid. Keensy bolts towards the karaoke group, where a woman is hitting the final notes of ‘Without Love’ and Keensy’s on his knees as her voice reaches the bar’s wooden ceiling and the amber lights turn her black hair and eyes a glowing auburn. Tom already knows who she is by the way Ruggiero’s staring at her.

And when the song’s over, the room’s inflated with air that’s finally popped with the sound of applause. And it’s only when that applause come does Sandra dip her chin back to reality and she sees Ruggiero looking at her and the warmth of the music vanishes from her face and it’s replaced with lines of disappointment. Ruggiero approaches her but her but only catches a shoulder.

Her back’s already to them, heading for the exit. She’s out the door. Tom and Ruggiero stand with Keens, who’s still clapping. Ruggiero shoves him through the crowd and the drunk cries, “Ow, ow ow ow ow, fucking, OW!”
Keensy’s in the back of the squad car, chin in chest, dozing. Tom’s drumming his fingers on his thighs, looking at Ruggiero, who’s not blinking. Just staring out the windshield at the severed highway lines chopping, being filed away beneath their squad car. The radio crackles, Ruggiero shuts it off. He sighs, then turns to Tom, his face strained as if he’s selling his soul.

“You can teach me to sing, but I swear to God, you tell anyone, I’ll break your goddamn back.”

Tom nods. Smooth. No big deal. “Sure. Yeah. That’s cool.” Tom wants to smile, but Ruggiero’s sweating, the veins in his neck are more pronounced than ever.

“And by break your back I mean like the fucking Batman movie. I’ll lift you over my body and drive you down on my knee. You’ll be doing desk work from a rolling hospital bed.”

Tom suppresses another smile, shares it with his passenger window instead. “You got it.”

Keensy’s sleepy voice rolls throughout the squad car on their way back to the precinct, “Withouuuut loooooovvveee! Where would you be right now?” And then he starts to harmonize the guitar solo.

***
Ruggiero looks over his shoulders, his neck lurching, craning forward. He attempts to hide his entire 260 pound body beneath a black baseball cap as he follows Tom into the studio.

“Why the hell are there black waffles on the walls? This place is like a loony bin.” Ruggiero pats the soft foam with his fingers as Tom plugs in the headphones and tests the circular mics.

Tom rests the thick headphones on his neck, “All right, so all we really need to work on at first is pitch. Anyone can sound good as long as they can master a certain degree of pitch.”

Ruggiero taps his microphone suspiciously, his face softens. His big hands motion to the entire room, Vanna White style. “Why we gotta do all this?”

“It’ll work better if you can hear yourself in headphones.”

“Why?”

“Because your voice vibrates.”

“And that’s bad?”

Tom rubs his eye and sighs. Ruggiero notices. “Well don’t get fucking mad at me man, Jesus I haven’t even started singing yet.”

“Like you didn’t get mad with me doing decline bench yesterday?” Tom leans forward, clutching his chest. “I feel like someone took a boxcutter to my pecs.”

“That’s how it’s supposed to feel.” Ruggiero subconsciously flexes his own pectorals. Tom does his best to ignore the jiggling chesticular twitching, but it’s at his eye level.
“Yeah, but did I question you?”

“Well, no.”

“And you always say no questions, right?”

“Right, questions are for bitches. Real men figure it out.”

“Exactly. So stop being a bitch and listen to me.”

Ruggiero stares at Tom, his eyes blank first, then they widen. Eureka. He sees what he did there. “OK.”

“All right, so just listen to me now, put your headphones on.” Ruggiero does.

“Wow, they look like a kid’s size on that dome of yours.” Tom laughs.

Ruggiero sees reflection in a framed Poster of Prince on the wall. “You’re right...hey, is Prince the revolution too? Or is that the rest of the guys in the group?”

“What did I say about questions, Tony?”

“Right, right.”

***

In the sweaty weightroom, Ruggiero hums notes to himself, attempting to match Robert Plant’s pitch in Rock And Roll.

Freddy notices that Ruggiero’s been singing to himself a lot lately. The guy’s losing it. “What was that, Tony?” Ruggiero spins around and sees Freddy standing behind him.
“Hunh?” Ruggiero grunts, his heart beating more than the time he first deadlifted 535.

“Were you saying something?” Freddy’s not looking at Ruggiero anymore, but at Tom struggling on the Pec Deck.

“You got one more set there, Tommy.” Ruggiero shouts at him.

Tom winces, rubbing his chest. “Yeah, I know, then incline flies. I fucking hate chest day.”

“It hates you back.” Ruggiero subconsciously drops his voice low to match Plant’s pitch at the end of the track.

“The fuck’s wrong with you, man?” Freddy laughs. “You’re getting whacky hanging with this kid.”

“Whatever man, spot me with this.” Ruggiero bends over the 225 lb barbell on the floor and rows it upwards, touching his chest, Freddy stands behind him, awkwardly. The weight crashes to the ground.

“I saw Sandra at the Dog and Cask the other night.” Ruggiero’s neck gets cold, his eyes go down to the callouses on his hands. Sandra always told him to wear gloves, but if Arnold didn’t, he wouldn’t.

“Oh yeah?”

“Are things any better, man?”

“You know, they’re the same.”
Freddy sighs and scratches his beard. “When Nicky found out about my Indian chick in Jersey City, it took about six months, you know. You just gotta give them space. Girls get stupid, she’ll come around.”

Ruggiero shrugs and protrudes his bottom lip. Frowns. The universal sign for whaddya gonna do? “Yeah, I know, I know.” He clears his throat, thinking what else he could say to Freddy. “It is what it is.” The mantra of the Northeastern male from a working class background.

“Yeah, it is what it is, man.” Freddy pats his shoulder. “All right man, you did six last set, let’s get seven this time!”

“Seven, coming right...the fuck....uuuuuuuppppp!” And as Ruggiero lifts the barbell off the ground, right before it hits his chest, rowing upwards, feeling his back muscles squeeze, REO Speedwagon’s Keep on Loving You blares through the metallic, hewlett packard speakers of the gym and he subconsciously matches his grunts to the pitch of the lead singer’s voice. Freddy tries not to notice.

***

Tom’s in the studio pulling his headphones off gently. He stretches his bent arms, the wince more pronounced as he reduces the angle between his forearm and bicep. “That was good, Tony. You’re getting better.”
“It’s been fucking weeks man, I should be getting better.” Ruggiero snorts, leaning against the soft foam wall. Balancing on the black stools are impossible for him. “I wish we could get a couch in here or something.”

“Yeah, well, I wish this soreness would go away. You said it only lasted two weeks?” Tom winces again, rubs his biceps.

“Hey treasure that shit. I miss feeling sore that shit was the best. That’s when you knew you had a good workout. You come home, tired. All you want is a shower and a meal. Sit on the couch.” Ruggiero imagines Sandra sitting next to him, talking about whatever-the-fuck she’d blab on about. He smells her shampoo. She’s been using the same kind for years. It’s what he noticed when she threw his phone on the floor. The shattered screen displaying cracked dirty texts, a picture of a shaved vagina being spread wide open between two fingers. His response: DAMN ON MY WAY. Now he uses a piece of shit Android he just can’t figure out, and he hasn’t bothered to save any of the phone numbers, so he constantly has to scroll through text message conversations to find out who he’s talking to. Ruggiero’s unaware he’s staring into nothing. That his face has softened. He he comes to, Ruggiero sees Tom’s pale, sore forearms. The young kid’s sad smile. He turns away from the small man in the studio with him. Wipes his eyes.Covers them from Tom.

“Hey man, come on.” Tom puts his hand on Ruggiero’s shoulder.

Ruggiero feels the stupidity flooding his face. Hot. It breaks through his eyelids. Tom’s cold hand feels nice on his back. He deeply burrows his face into his own
calloused mitts. Warm breath and tears. He rubs his throbbing face but the crying doesn’t stop. “Is this gonna work man? Tell me this shit’s gonna work.”

Tom takes his hand off his back. His voice is even. Soft. “Come on man, you’ve been doing good.”

“I have. I know.”

“I can’t. I mean, I don’t know. Shit. I was good at baseball. My uncle still ended up being a dick to me. No matter how good I played.”

Ruggiero pictures Tom as a kid. Dumb little maroon baseball outfit. Pizza after a game. Dead dad. He hears Sandra’s voice, “You don’t give a shit about anyone but yourself. Don’t you know other people have shit to deal with too, Tony?” He had no response at the time. But now there’s Tom. People with their own shit to deal with. He sits up. A bigger man now. “Well your uncle was an asshole.”

“Yeah, he was. But was Sandy an asshole?” Tom doesn’t really ask a question.

Ruggiero feels better because he knows the answer. No. Of course not. She was an angel to put up with his shit for as long as she did. Definitely not an asshole. “Yeah. You’re right, thanks man.” The relief Ruggiero feels is unfamiliar and therefore, disconcerting.

“Thank you, man.” Tom shifts off the stool. “I was worried about guys giving me a hard time at the precinct. The training down in Sea Girt sucked.” Tom remembers the lonely weeks. The cliques he was never a part of. Esoteric slang. People glossing over him. Walking right past him. Quick handshakes. The snickers during sparring sessions. The pity grappling partners. Only one person waiting for him at graduation. His
weakness. Visiting his mother on the weekends. Singing Elvis to her over hot plates of macaroni. Those moments when he could forget and just enjoy some normalcy. Coming up with excuses to leave whenever Jerry showed up at the house. Fucking Jerry. “You know why I hate my uncle so much?”

“Cause he’s a dick? And I mean his name is Jerry, it’s hard to like anyone with that name. I mean Jerry Seinfeld’s funny and all, but he’s got one of those faces, you know? You kinda just want to slap him on the mouth. Hard.”

Tom smirks, looks down. Kicks the bottom of the stool lightly. He inhales the studio’s air conditioning “It’s like, what kind of man tries to hone in on his brother’s dead wife, you know?”

Ruggiero nods instinctively but then stops and grimaces. “What the fuck?”

“I know, it’s bad, right?”

“Oh my God! That’s fucking disgusting! I woulda fucking thrown him in a dumpster.”

“I know.”

“And locked him in it!” Ruggiero was standing up now, his body tense, enjoying the imaginary violence.

“Yeah.”

“And then let the fucking garbage truck take him to landfill.”

“I know man.”

“And see his ass get crushed in the fucking big ass compactor thing.”
Tom sighed. “Yeah…” He keeps his eyes down at the gray and dark green flecked carpet.

Ruggiero’s not aware of his heavy breathing. Something’s off about Tom’s silence. “And what did your mom do?”

Tom touches the top of the stool. Weak shrug. “I never asked her.”

Ruggiero exhales. Shakes his head.

“I just remember one night, him talking softly to her. You know? I was little, but I knew something was up. I don’t know if they did anything or are doing something. But like how can I know?”

Ruggiero puts his hands on his hips. “You can’t know.”

“Like what am I supposed to fucking say?!” Tommy’s rubbing his forehead pacing in the studio.

“You can’t even bring that shit up!”

“There’s no words for it!”

“You could look in the dictionary for years and still come up empty, man.”

Tom collapses on the stool. “So that’s why I gotta be out of the house, you know? I don’t want to know anything. This way I can see my mom, and just love her, and be good to her and not have to think about...well, you know.”

“Yeah.” Ruggiero says to himself, Then louder, “Well that’s nice of you. You know, still trying to keep things cool between you and your moms, you know?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.” Tom says, discovering this now. “But she’s my mother, you know?”
Ruggiero nods, biting his lip. “You know for a weird little bitch, you’re all right, Tommy.”

“And you’re pretty smart for a juicehead cop.” Tom chuckles finally.

He pulls out his phone and opens the YouTube app. “OK, now I think you’ve got a decent handle on pitch, now we gotta work on a song you can sing.”

Ruggiero’s brow furrows, he feels a sweat coming on again. “Jesus, Tommy. I don’t know. You pick one.”

“I think you should, man.”

Ruggiero huffs, looks up to the ceiling for inspiration. “You’re gonna sing it with me though, yeah?”

“A duet?”

“Yeah, a duet song. But something rockin”? You know? Not like that shit from Dirty Dancing.”

“That’s a good song though.”

Ruggiero huffs and sprawls his sausage fingers in front of him in protest, “Yeah I know it’s a good song. No one’s saying it’s not a good song. It’s a fucking great song, Patrick Swayze wouldn’t have danced to it if it was bad, come on. It’s just, you know, not appropriate for what I’m trying to do here.”

“Yeah I got you man, I was just saying it was good.”

“It’s gotta be perfect, Tommy.”

“I know….I know…”

“And for two people…”
Tom rubs his dimpled chin, feeling the light bristle of his sparse beard. “How about Under Pressure?”

“Ohhh. oh that’s a great song, man.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah that’s a good track!”

“Yeah, you know, you could do David Bowie’s part.”

“Motherfucking Goblin King! I like it!” Ruggiero smacks his hands, pumped.

“And I’ll do Mercury’s.”

“Poor guy, if only he had Magic Johnson’s money.” Ruggiero shakes his head.

“All right, I’ll pull it up.” Tom plays the song, Ruggiero smiles at the familiar bass line. He starts humming with the track, trying to match Bowie’s pitch. “Tony, then we build it up here.” Tom says, “It’ll get them going wild.”

Ruggiero smiles, convincing himself, “Yeah, yeah no this is good.” There’s something else. His eyes protest. It’s not the song. Everything about his face reads: I’M SETTLING. Tom sees it.

“What’s up? You don’t like it?”

“No, nothing. No the song’s good.”

“Listen, we don’t have to do it if you don’t like it.”

“No I think it’s a great track. You know, I like duets. There’s a lot of good ones.”

Ruggiero’s voice trails, he mumbles. Tom can’t hear it.

“Is there another one you’re thinking of?”
Ruggiero’s dome is red, he touches his fingertips together, forming a nervous
triangle in front of himself. “Nah it’s nothing.”

“Tony, tell me man.”

“Like..” Ruggiero breathes heavily, raises his eyebrows, “…did you ever hear of
Meatloaf?”

“Meatloaf?”

“Yeah, the fat guy. Meatloaf man. There’s this song he used to sing. I don’t think
we can do it though you know because I mean it’s like a guy and a girl sings it and I’m
not going to fucking sing a girl’s part and it’d be kinda weird if you sang a girl’s part it’s
just that Sandy really likes the song and we heard it on our first date and I don’t know the
name of it.”

Tom nods through Ruggiero’s rant. Watches his lips tremble. Anxious, a kid
making a plea to his parents to sleep over a friend’s house. An gigantic kid who
intimidates teens in the mall parking lot and cheats on his wife just because he thinks he
can get away with it. An enormous child who has the authority to use deadly force to plug
bullets in a suspect, but tosses the same firearm on a coffee table when he gets home and
plays Xbox. A man-child who was the only person to give him the time of day at a new
job, and is actually a fan of Tom’s singing.

Tom smiles. “What’s the name of the song, Tony?”

Ruggiero scratches his head. “I don’t remember.”

“Well do you know how it goes?”

Ruggiero frowns, “Yeah, of course.”
And when he opens his mouth to sing, Tom knows exactly what song it is. He suppresses his laughter, pulls it up on his phone and the two men got to work.

***

Tom notices the Dog and Cask’s crowd is consistent. Hipster bartenders with hummingbird and flower and cursive tattoos on their forearms hand out bottled beers and punch in orders on a touch screen, arranging credit cards in whatever mad method the waitresses use to tell each middle-aged, polo-wearing receding hairlined square apart.

Ruggiero’s scanning the room, his stomach simultaneously tight and full of air which makes him feel like it’s floating independent of his body. He smooths his black dress shirt - a color he consciously picked to better hide his inevitable sweat.

“I don’t see her, man.” Ruggiero’s worry is a shadow. He presses his wide thumb into his cheek. A nick from a nervous shave

“She’ll be here. Freddy says she does Karaoke here all the time, right?”

“Yeah.” Begrudging.

“Well, then she’ll be here. Just concentrate on that back-and-forth part. That’s the only bit that gives us trouble.”

“Are you sure it’s not gonna be weird?”

“Tony, I’m singing a girl’s verse. You’re trying to convince me to fuck you in car. It’s gonna be weird. But that’s the fun part.”
“Yeah, no, you’re right, you’re right.” Ruggiero lifts up his hands as penance, then stops mid-air. He points a trembling index finger directly ahead, “She’s there. Holy shit!” He looks at Tom, breathless, who is patting his back.

“All right, don’t worry Tony, I’ll talk to the dude right now.” Tom sprints away as Ruggiero sits in the chair, staring at Sandra who walks up to the bar and orders probably a vodka orange-cran. But she’s sipping something brown colored from a short glass instead. She drinks whiskey now?

Tom hands the man behind the macbook twenty dollars. “Tom and Tony, remember? We’re the cops. We’re up first, you got that? Make sure both those mics work.”

“They work.”

Tom looks back at Ruggiero’s nervous sad face, the big bastard doesn’t know what to do. “Just double check for me, will you?” The man pockets the money and nods his head. Tom then squeezes between XXL izod shirts and pink and white and seafoam green blouses and starts tapping Ruggiero’s forearm.

“We’re up first man.”

Ruggiero shakes his bald head. He’s licking his lips and squinting. Pained. Panicked. “No, no, no come on man this is fucking stupid let’s get out of here.”

“Tony! It’s fine! We got this! We’ve been practicing for a week!”

“Tom, I can’t, it’s a fucking horrible idea right no, we’ll do it another night.”

“There is no other night, Tony! We gotta do this now! Come on!”

Ruggiero pulls Tom in closes. His voice cracks. Fear. Pure fear. “I can’t do this.”
Tom holds his bald ears between his cold, white hands. “I don’t give a fuck if you can or can’t you big bastard. Remember when you spotted me with 135 my first day?”

“Yeah, the weight almost fucking crushed you!”

“But it didn’t! You fucking pulled it off my chest, and you spotted me and I got it up. I’m gonna spot you now you beautiful goddamn gorilla. You’re RUGGIERO! Didn’t you put a kid’s pitbull in a sleeper hold after the dog got into his ecstasy stash and started freaking out at the mall? This is only a bitch-ass, pussy ass microphone.” Tom smacks his face. The karaoke announcer’s voice surges over the bar’s noisy crowd. “Please welcome our first singers, the Bergen County Sheriff’s own, Tom Finnson and Anthony Ruggiero!”


They step into the spotlight behind their mic stand.. Ruggiero can’t see past the lights and monitor. Doesn’t know if Sandra booked it once she heard his ugly name.

“They’ll be singing a classic I’m sure a lot of high school sweethearts here will remember fondly, Paradise by the Dashboard light!” The crowd starts clapping. Whistles. Guttural compliments and moans. “Wow fucking great!” “That’s a classic!” “So good! So good!”

The swing beat starts. Ruggiero grabs the mic. He thinks of his first date with Sandra. He worries about the song. About his voice cracking. Of sounding like an idiot. He’s mad. He doesn’t want to settle for that. He doesn’t know how the words coming out
of his mouth will sound in that moment, but he knows how he should sound. That’ll have to do. His first line comes out of his mouth. He doesn’t need to read the words. He just sings.

Well I remember every little thing as if it happened on-ly yesterdaay

It surprisingly doesn’t sound like shit. People are clapping he’s actually singing it.

Tom comes in, getting in his grill:

Though it’s cold and lonely in the deep dark night....

Ruggiero’s not thinking about how weird the line

We were barely 17 and we were barely dressed

sounds coming from Tom, whose voice carries over the karaoke backtrack, over the claps and cheers and whistles of the crowd.

They’re performing. They’re having fun. Their getting their shoulders into it.

Tom’s doing this weird little fucking two-step but it’s awesome.

By the time the funky-as-fuck bass line (Tom’s line) kicks in, Ruggiero’s drenched in sweat and his body feels light like there’s a windy, open sky streaked with white, long clouds above his head. They’re syncing their movements, remembering stuff from the video. Attacking the verses with their elbows, turning to look at each other with mock contempt but really saying HOLY SHIT WE’RE ACTUALLY DOING IT.

Ruggiero hopes Sandra sees him nail the back and forth that’s coming up.

Lemme sleep on it?

Will you love me forever?

1. Let me sleep on it?
Will you love me forever?

And then Tom screams.

I couldn’t take it any further I thought I was crazy when a feeling came up on me like a tidal wave. I started praying on my God and on my mother’s grave that I would love you to the end of time. I swore I would love you till the end of time....SO NOW I’M PRAYING FOR THE END OF TIME TO HURRY UP AND ARRIVE

If Ruggerio could see himself he wouldn’t be the red-faced, bald, bent arm, pro-wrestler bodied, hunched dinosaur of a cop from North Jersey. He’d see a chubby, mutton-chopped opera singer in a disheveled Tuxedo. Equally sweaty. Equally flamboyant.

Tom, the funny bastard, is on his knees, trailing his voice off into the microphone.

It was long ago and it was far away and it was so much better than it is today
It was long ago and it was far away and it was so much better than it is today
It was long ago and it was far away and it was so much better than it is today

And then it’s over and there’s applause and Ruggiero hugs Tom and gets him in a bear hug. “Holy fucking shit dude!”

“I know man that was great!”

“I fucking love karaoke man!”

“Isn’t it the best?” Tom laughs.
The announcer’s mic sounds over the crowd as a drunk woman saunters behind the microphone, still clapping her hand, fighting with a waiter to light her cigarette. “Give it up for these guys what a performance, right?”

And then Sandra’s in front of Ruggiero. She’s wearing a black blouse, low cut, opened ovals at the arms. A white skirt. Her black hair’s wavy now with streaks of dark brown. She smells like the beach and cocoa. That necklace with the small diamonds rests on her tan chest. Then a man’s hand rests on her arm. Ruggiero sees someone he doesn’t know. Tall. Head full of hair. Dirty blonde / kinda graying hair. White teeth. He reminds him of Al Bundy’s neighbor.

“Tony, when did you start singing.” Sandra asks, genuinely wanting to know but the cat has Ruggiero’s tongue.

“That was a hell of a song man.” White teeth extends his hand. Ruggiero, in a fog, shakes it.

“Yeah.”

Tom slides up to shake Sandra’s hand. Curveball. We can handle this. “Hi Sandy! I’ve heard a lot about you. Tony’s told me great things.”

Ruggiero looks at her hand. The ring’s not there. Her nails are perfectly manicured. That color he always liked. English? French style, or something?

“As he?” She turns to look at Ruggiero who musters a smile.

“Yeah. I’m his partner, so we’ve been sharing stories.” Tom looks at Ruggiero, who’s focusing back-and-forth between Sandra and White Teeth.

“I’m sure Tony’s got a lot of those.” Sandra says flatly, not moving her gaze.
“Uh, I gotta go.” Ruggiero grunts and makes a beeline for the front door. Escape. His stomach aches, he cranes forward, almost too fast for Tom to catch up.

Tom’s damage control. “We’re actually working late tonight. He was nice enough to, uhh, partner up with me tonight. Nice to meet you!” He quickly shakes her hand and runs out the door.

***

The car ride back is quiet, save for Ruggiero’s deep breathing. His jaw’s clenched, making his face perversely defined. Tom counts the highway passing highway lights, one by one they cast an eery glow on his partner’s face. He makes it to one hundred and forty two until Ruggiero drives the charger onto the grassy shoulder and storms out of the Charger. He slams the door and screams. “FUCK!”

Tom gets out, knowing this’d probably happen. “Hey man, hey, come on.”

“What the fuck bro! It didn’t work man, the fucking plan, it didn’t work. She’s already fucking someone else.”

“Listen, you don’t know that! She’s probably just getting a drink with this douche man.”

“She’s fucking him. When a girl takes off her ring, she’s fucking another guy. Jesus Christ everyone knows that.”

“Listen you’re upset, that’s normal, man. The important thing is that she actually came up to talk to you!”
“And what the fuck man, you were supposed to have my back! Gas me up to her!
Why the fuck did you follow me outside? You should have stuck to the plan!”

“I did have your back! I followed the plan!”

“Really? Is that why we’re on the fucking side of the road now screaming at each
other? You think you’re so smart, making me fucking sing. Meanwhile, Sandy’s fucking
some other dude! You’re a fucking idiot, I should’ve never listened to you.”

“You’re the one who asked me to teach you to sing!”

“After you asked me to!”

“I didn’t twist your arm Tony!”

“This stupid faggy fucking shit, She probably thinks I’m a total asshole now
prancing on stage with your gay ass. I fucking HATE karaoke.”

Tom’s about to speak, but stops the words from coming out of his mouth, settling
for only a vague vowel noise. He clenches his fist, holds it up, and walks back towards
the car.

“What? You got something to say?” Ruggiero doesn’t know why he feels like
crying now.

“It’s nothing. Forget it Tony.”

“Fucking say it! You already fucked everything up making me waste my time on
this shit.”

Tom stops at the car door, turns to Ruggiero. You really want to do this now? Ok.

“You’re so worried about her fucking another guy, maybe you should have thought about
it before chasing down teenagers in the mall. Or banging anything that moves you horny bastard.”

“The fuck you say to me?” In a few long strides, Ruggiero’s in Tom’, his arm the size of Tom’s torso. Heavy breathing.

“What, you’re gonna hit me, Tony? Don’t blame me for fucking up your marriage!”

“Shut up Tom.”

“I was just trying to help you.”

“Tom, shut your pussy mouth.”

“I’m not a pussy! You’re the fucking pussy! You walked right outta the bar the second you thought Sandy was interested in another guy. YOU’RE the fucking pussy! If you loved her you would’ve stayed there! Or maybe you realized that she actually looked happy and comfortable for once and that shit scared you, because all you ever do is think about yourself you selfish big fucking idiot!”

Ruggiero howls and Tom’s above his head in an instant. Just like that Batman movie.

“I’m gonna break your fucking back Tommy!”

“Do it! I don’t give a shit!”

“I’m not lying!”

“Yeah you are! We both know you’re not gonna Bane me!”

“The fuck is wrong with you?!”
“Me? What’s wrong with you?! I thought we were friends Tony! And now you’re gonna bodyslam me?!”

Ruggiero’s arms stiffen. His posture changes. Straightens. Be the bigger man.

Well, not that bi. Ruggiero drops Tom to the grass with a soft thud. Walks back to the charger and peels off down the highway. Tom stands up, dusts himself off.

***

The next day Lieutenant Gantano calls Tom into his office. He’s spraying dead plants with a water bottle, shaking his head. “I don’t know what the fuck these things need, man. My wife talks to hers at home.” He sprays them again.

“How can I help you sir?”

“You’ve got a new partner.” Gantano puts his glasses on, fishes a manila folder from his desk, opens it up. “You know Freddy, right?”

Tom feels his face redden.

“You all right, Tommy?”

“Sir, what’s wrong with my current partner?”

Gantano rolls his eyes, tosses his glasses onto the table. “Look, if someone doesn’t want to saddle up with you, don’t take it personally. You were here because Jerry pulled some strings, don’t go around and cause trouble for people, OK? Because then I’ll just let him know you’re trying to give me a hard fucking time, so he doesn’t get mad
when I give you bitch work, OK? That’s OK, right, with you? I mean you act like you’re the fucking lieutenant here.”

Tom nods, “Yes sir, that’s OK.”

“Good.” And Gantano goes back to spraying his brown, dead plants.

***

Ruggiero doesn’t respond to the texts Tom’s been sending the past three weeks. Especially the ones that mock him for not knowing how to block his number. It’s gotten to the point where Ruggiero dreads even looking at his phone when it goes off. He now knows Tom’s number by heart. The only one he’s memorized in God knows how long.

He avoids the gym. He goes stir crazy working out in his garage; it doesn’t have the same feel as the weightroom. He can’t even listen to the car radio when he cruises around the mall parking lot, scoping out bitches - he finds himself humming the tunes, which reminds him on Tom, and looking for poontang just isn’t the same when there isn’t a soundtrack.

But every day Ruggiero’s phone rings, and every day it’s Tommy. Until a different number shows up on the caller ID as he hands an acne faced kid in a 2015 CL a ticket for speeding 4 miles about the limit. He answers. His stomach sinks. Sandra.

***
Tom’s in the gym. He eyes the weights on the barbell. A 45 plate, a 10, and a 2 ½ on each side.

“Bro, you can barely do 135.” Freddy says, pumping out a quick set of dumbbell shoulder flies. “You can’t max out at 160.”

“Freddy, when I want to learn how to trick backpage hookers into sucking my dick for free, I’ll ask for your advice.” Two other meathead cops doing lat pulldowns hear Tom. They laugh. Freddy reluctantly smiles. “Hey man, whatever you want.”

Tom looks up at the barbell. He spaces his arms. They tremble. He whispers to himself, “Lightweight. Lightweight baby.” His arms shake. They get the weight up.

Ruggerio knows this is when Tom works out. When he steps into the gym he sees his skinny ex-partners pale legs flailing on the bench press. The barbell on his chest. Tom’s face is red as Freddy stands over him, concerned. “Dude, let me get it off you.”

“Don’t fucking touch it, I got it!”

“You clearly don’t.”

Ruggiero runs to the bench and stands over Tom.

“The fuck are you doing here, Tony?”

“Come on man, let me get this off you.” Ruggiero says.

“I can do it!”

“You need a fucking spot man.”

“No I don’t.”

“Yes you do!”
“...fine. But don’t help too much!”

“I won’t you fucking psycho, come on.”

And Ruggiero lifts the barbell two inches above Tom’s chest, giving him enough room to push it up with his arms.

“All right man, focus and don’t forget to breathe or you’ll pass out.”

“Fuck you, Tony.”

“I love you too.”

Tom’s arms strain and shake and straighten slowly, his elbows halfway from being locked.

“You better not be lifting it Tony, I swear to Christ I’ll throw acid on your face.”

“You’re doing it man! It’s all you! Come on! You’re almost there! Take a big breath and push that motherfucker up! Just like giving birth man, come on! Give me that baby!”

Freddy scowls and looks at the other guys watching the weirdest psyche-session of all time.

“Tell me Tommy, is it a baby girl, or a baby boy!”

“I don’t care what it is, Tony, as long as it’s healthy!” Tom grits his teeth.

“Give me a healthy baby you skinny pale bastard!”

Tom gives a final grunt as his elbows lock and he slides the weight back on the rack and bounces up off the bench. “It’s a fucking girl! A beautiful bouncing baby girl!”

Tom slaps Ruggiero a five that echoes off the iron and cold concrete walls of the weight room.
Freddy watches the men walk out of the gym, Ruggiero’s massive forearm over the shoulders of Tom. He looks to the other meatheads. “What the fuck was that?”

***

By the time they’re on the baseball field, Ruggiero’s already finished his protein shake, Tom’s barely through half of his.

“So what’s gonna happen between you and Sandy?”

Ruggiero shrugs. “I was thinking a lot about what you said, about me fucking other girls and all that shit. And, you know, it was good to just talk to her, like, really talk for once. Find out what she wants in life.”

“What’d you tell her?” Tom slurped on his shake.

“Like we talked before, but it was always me just getting through a conversation. It was like cardio, you know? Just counting down the minutes on that fucking elliptical. But being honest, open and shit, like not thinking about fucking her, I knew that us giving it another shot was probably a waste of time. I’m not in love with this woman, I just miss having her around. There’s a difference, you know? It sucks, but, I’ll deal with it.”

“That’s mature of you.”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’d call it, I just know it’s gonna end with me banging some drunk bitch in AC on a weekend months from now, while Sandy’s drinking at home, wondering how she’d ever end up with a piece of shit like me. Besides, the dude she’s seeing sounds like you know, he’s good for her.”
“White teeth guy? He looks like Al Bundy’s neighbor.”

“Right?! Dude I thought the same thing! Yeah it turns out he’s a half-Jew, you know, so he’ll do at least fifty percent better than I did.”

Tom looks at Ruggiero. His bulldog face always squinting, because he somehow formed muscles there, his sheer body mass pushing and re-configuring all aspects of the human body. But the squinting isn’t strained. There are no pulsing vessels under his taut bald skin. He isn’t sweating. His breathing is even. Easy. Tomy finally talks. “I talked to my mom about Jerry.”

“Oh yeah?” Ruggiero stops thinking of Sandra, the divorce, him being thankful it’s going to be uncontested. He turns to face Tom. Other people’s problems. The bigger man.

“Yeah and...well...it turns out they...kind of have a thing.” Tom tastes something sour. He almost shudders. “It’s fucking gross.”

“What’d you say to her bro?”

“What am I gonna say? It’s disgusting? I think you’re worse than Hamlet’s mom, Ma?”

“Yeah man, but... you know. She’s your mom.” Ruggiero looks at Tom. Who nods, forces a smile

“That’s exactly what I told her man. I said it freaked me out, but that she’s my mom, and I love her.”

“That’s good man, that’s good.” Ruggiero’s earnest. Encouraging.

“Yeah?” Tom searches.
“Yeah man. That’s real good.” Ruggiero takes a piece of gum out of his pocket and starts chewing it. “So you Jerry and your mom gonna sit down to Thanksgiving dinner or some shit?” He grins.

“Oh fuck you man.” Tom groans.

“What? Maybe you guys can wear matching sweaters during the holidays or some shit.”

“Keep talking I’m gonna fucking put arsenic in your test, inject that in your ass and see how much you bench after that. All your muscles are gonna melt off. You’ll look like that guy from Robocop.”

“I’m more human than human bro my body will eat that shit up.” Ruggiero laughs. Now, they’re both cackling. “Yo, and hey, listen, about karaoke…”

Tom waves his hand faintly. “Hey man, I’m sorry you don’t have to do that shit for me-”

Ruggiero breaks in. “No bro, I wanted to tell you, that, you know, I’d be down to do it some more if you are…”

Tom smiles, “Really?”

“Yeah you know, like, we could go back there next week if you have a track in mind or something.”

“I got just the one. The perfect duet, we might have to lower it an octave or so though.”

“What’s the song?”

“You ever hear Scream? By Michael and Janet Jackson?”
“They did a song together?”

“Oh my God dude you have to hear it! It’s incredible!”

“Why the fuck do you always pick male-female duets?”

Tom pauses, “Because they’re the best ones?”

Ruggiero protrudes his bottom lip and nods his head and shrugs. The universal sign of Northeastern men from working class families when they have to admit you’re right.

Tom pulls out his phone and then loads the video. The two men stand in the field, as Tom turns the volume up and they’re both humming along with the song, matching the octaves as the day above them surely lessens and the sun changes from orange to pink and purple and finally night while they replay the track over and over again in the summer night’s t-shirt weather.

**The Walk**

My father, Frank, spits in the dirt and looks on ahead, trying to ignore me. The road is dusty; tufts of dirt curl over the long shadows of telephone poles cast by a blinding white sun. I stay quiet and keep after him, maintaining my distance. He’s done this before: stormed out of the house looking to get fucked up. I liked that he did that. It saved me from having to see him use in front of me, which he’s never done before.

But today I had to walk out with him. Part of me just wants to see where he goes; what he does when he’s not home with me and Mom; see the other life that he does such
a shitty job of keeping a secret. I always wondered how he managed to get money for his habit. He was already putting in sixty hour weeks at the shop and if he wasn’t working, he was getting fucked up and watching kung-fu movies on my Netflix account at home.

Another part of me is pissed because it’s my birthday in a week, and there’s a car we’ve been working on that he’s promised to get done by then. But I really follow him because I hope that he won’t want to use around me, that somehow my presence alone will stop him.

“Could you just fucking go already?” Frank spits again. He’s shaking his head.

It’s been more than 24 hours, at least, since Frank popped his last roxy, or whatever pills those were, so he’s on edge. I got my hands on his stash the night before and flushed it down the toilet because I didn’t want to see him high on my birthday.

“Fucking kid thinks money grows on trees, you had no right!” He’s talking more to the empty road and empty fields of yellowing grass than to me. Like they’ll answer back and say, “I hear ya Frank, kids today.”

I know not to say anything, it’ll only antagonize him. I can tell by the way he keeps opening and closing his palms that he wasn’t having any back-talk from an uppity 15-year-old who just trashed a good four hundred worth of painkillers.

“No notion of personal property. How about I throw out that Xbox? You see me fucking with that? That shit’ll rot your brains. But you don’t see me messing with that, do you?” He hocks a substantial loogie in the dry dirt. A dark brown spot in the parched tan.

“I was good to you. Wasn’t I?” He turns his head to side over his shoulder, so I know he’s talking to me. Still I hesitate to answer. “Well? I’m talking to you, son!”
“I was only doing what seemed right.”

Frank doesn’t say anything for a while. I just hear him grumble a little bit. He kicks at pebbles on the side of the road. A car speeds past us, giving us a short breeze and a buzz in our ears.

He finally mumbles, “You think you’re doing me good? The fuck do you know?”

I shrug my shoulders and pull my cap down to protect my nose. My feet are already turning red and I wish that when I followed him out of the house I put my sneakers on instead of these sandals.

“And don’t think I didn’t realize someone drank my beers.”

He complained that there were only two cans of Modelo left in the fridge.

“I know you sneaky fuckers drank them all!”

No we didn’t.

“Fucking beer vultures.”

He slammed back 10 the other night, probably with a roxy.

“Fucking vultures.” He mumbles and kicks a bigger rock, it spins and bounces off the dirt, forming a big cloud of dust that the wind carries over the old wooden cattle fence lining the road. It rests on a patch of blue grass that marks where the greenery begins. Up ahead there’s a large white sign with green letters that reads SIMMSMORE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT COMING SOON CALL FOR YOUR HAPPY NEW HOME: 706-821-3329. I walk behind him for a while, making sure to keep my distance. Frank is looking forward, his thumbs resting in the rings of his jeans. He clears his throat and looks over his shoulder.
“Did you get to eat breakfast?”

“No.”

Frank shakes his head. “You still trying to get on the football team?”

“I already made it. I’ve been practicing for a month now.”

“Then how the hell are you gonna stay on the team if you don’t eat anything? You got no problem drinking, I know that! I’m gonna get you some food, ok?”

“Ok.”

“Ain’t natural for a kid to go all day without eating.”

Being told to eat by Frank is like being told to stand up straight by the Hunchback of Notre Dame. He barely keeps anything down anymore, except for the occasional chicken wing or tangerine. Frank’ll get tired halfway through peeling one, so seeing him passed out on the sofa, his hands still clasped around a half-bare orange with rinds in his lap, is a regular occurrence.

“We just gotta make a stop up ahead, first.” Frank starts cutting through the grass which has to be newly laid. It feels soft and cool on my feet. I take off my sandals and I start getting chills of relief that rise up past my calves and into my back. It feels so good that I sigh.

Frank must hear it because he turns around and sees me carrying the flip flops in my hands. He chuckles, “Feels good, hunh?” He stops walking and begins kicking off his dark brown cowboy boots that have to be at least a hundred years old, He almost over in the process, but manages to take off his socks, balls them up, and tucks them into the
back pocket of his sun-dried jeans that are cinched tight across his waist with a metal studded belt.

“Yeah, that feels nice, that feels nice.” He holds his head up and breathes deeply.

In the distance are lines of identical white and beige ranch houses surrounded by a sea of fresh grass.

Everything in the development is new. The driveways are fresh and black and hold bits of reflective stone that glimmer when you see them at the right angle. The syrupy stank of manure and dirt waft from the hedges that look like they were taken straight off the truck from Home Depot and put in the ground.

“Must be nice, hunh?” Frank spits on the ground again. He walks up to the lease office trailer and tries the handle. It’s locked. He looks inside the windows and shakes his head. “You see any cars?”

I look around the development.

“No.”

“Nah, me either.” He clicks his tongue in his mouth and stands in front of the trailer, looking down the straight blacktop road the splits all of the houses in the development. “Guess no security on a Saturday morning.”

It isn’t until I see dad looking into the windows of the homes and nodding his head happily that I realize what he’s doing - he’s casing the joint.

“There’s no one living here, Frank.”

“Yeah I know that. Don’t need to be Sherlock Holmes to figure that out, son.”
I stand next to him and look through the window. “What are you looking at?” The house is finished, but completely empty. There’s nothing there for him to steal.

“Nothing. Nothing. Let’s get out of here.” He pushes off the window and walks away. I’m just waiting for him to ask me for a favor. Like the time he had me ask Mom to borrow her truck so he could teach me how to drive. We made a bunch of stops, this was before I figured out he was using.

We’re back on the road again, back to the heat of the dirt, my sandals slapping up dust and grit.

“How about that food, son?”

“What?”

“I said how about that food. You hungry yet.”

“I guess.”

“You guess? You’re either hungry or you’re not, it’s like taking a piss. You know when you’ve got to piss, don’t ya?”

“I guess.”

“How the hell can you guess if you have to pee? Do you have to take a leak right now, or not?”

“No, I guess I don’t.”

“Well thank you. And do you guess if you could eat or no?”

“Why don’t you just ask me already?”

“Ask you what, son?”
“Ask me to let Mom borrow the truck next Saturday.”

I see his shoulders stiffen up for a second and then he rubs the back of his long brown and grey hair. “Why, you want to go practice driving again? Because we could do that.”

“Sure, as long as we don’t take any pit stops, like last time.”

“Whaddya mean pit stops? I just stopped to see people last time.”

“Yeah well I don’t want to do that this time.”

“Well where we gonna drive, nowhere?”

“No we can stick to the road.”

“That’s fine with me!”

“You sure?”

“Son, what the hell kinda question is that? I’m not like you, ‘Mr. I guess’, I’m sure!”

“Because if you try to take me back to this housing development, I’m not gonna bring you back here?”

“Now why would you want to come back here?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe you’ll come back and want to dig up the plants and sell them to someone.”

“Plants? What the fuck am I going to do with some plants?”

“Or maybe go inside the houses and rip out the copper wiring that they put in the walls and take them to the scrap yard, or find a contractor willing to buy them?”
He stops again, this time looking back at me. His brown eyes soften when they do and even though it’s bright as all hell outside, they’re wide open. He’s giving me a look of what is almost admiration. “Now where did you go and get an idea like that?”

“The Wire.”

“What’s that?”

“A TV show.”

Frank snorts and spits in the dirt, still looking at me, like he’s amazed. He smirks and walks back up the road. “You can learn anything from TV these days, hunh?

We head up the road for another hour and I can already feel the sunburn on the back of my neck setting in, but thankfully it’s changed from white to orange, and I can actually look straight ahead without having to strain my eyes. My feet are throbbing and I know I’ve got blisters, but I realize where he’s going: the mall.

I know for a fact he doesn’t have any cash on him, and I didn’t remember to bring anything. And as tired as I am, I always wondered just how he got money for his habit, and I can only imagine what retail scheme he’s got planned for the mall.

A red Challenger speeds past us making Frank’s stained white button down shudder in the wind.

“That’s a nice fucking ride. I fixed one of those the other day. Gay color to get it in though, cherry red.”

“What makes it gay?”
“I really got to explain it to you? It’s not a respectable color for a muscle car. Leave red to Italians and girls. No, a real color on a Muscle is something classy and masculine, like a midnight blue. Now when we’re done with the Trans-am, we’re gonna put a nice midnight blue paint job on it. You’ll be driving around in that on your sixteenth birthday.”

He’d been working on the car since I was 10 years old. We went and found an old Trans-Am from a junkyard, somewhere with dust so fine on the lot it almost looked like sand, where there were weeds growing out in patches. We picked a car with a half-decent engine block. We still needed to shop around for all the other parts, and then take it to Hector’s for the paint job. It was supposed be my birthday gift.

“I’m gonna be sixteen in a week, Frank.”

He doesn’t say anything for a while. Then he spits.

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Same day it is every year.” It’s hard to look at him.

“Well...it doesn’t take long to rebuild a fucking Trans-Am. I know that car like the back of my hand.”

“Really?”

“Yes, fucking really. I could build a goddamn Trans-Am in a week from scratch!”

No he couldn’t, Frank was an OK mechanic on a good day.

“I’ll get it done for you, first thing tomorrow, you’re gonna see. I’ll get right to work on it.” Frank mumbles to himself again.
We walk in silence, with occasional breaks from the sound of cars speeding by, or Frank reeling to spit, his throat sounding off like a rusty chainsaw.

When we get to the mall, Frank high-tails it to the bathroom. The food court’s just a few steps away, beneath the large, domed ceiling that arches up from all sides meeting a large, square skylight, past the pink and blue and black & white store displays, the throngs of girls holding ice coffees with thin-stringed purses across their chest, bouncing at their sides. I imagine how great a chilled lemonade would be right now, but I’m broke, so I follow Frank into the bathroom.

The second I see the sinks and mirrors I’m reminded of Frank passed out on the tiles of our own bathroom floor. The image glows in my mind, burning in and out; fading, then reappearing. It’s the same with his laugh. Whenever Frank gets high, his voice takes on a nasally pitch and his giggles fall out of rhythm and cut through any conversation you try to hold with him.

“What’s the matter with you?” Frank’s splashing cool water on his face, wiping down his skin.

“Nothing.”

“Be a champ and stand in front of that door and make sure no one comes in?”

Frank takes the bundle of paper towels and pats his body down under his shirt. He drops his pants.

“Don’t look, unless you wanna see where ya came from, bud.”
He wipes down his crotch, then crumples up the used paper towels and shoots a fade away toward the trash that lands on the floor. He grins at me and motions with his head toward the clump.

“Pick that up for me, will ya?”

Frank’s scoffing at the prices in the Nike outlet. “One hundred and eighty dollars - for this weird looking piece of shit?” He’s holding a chrome, futuristic sneaker in his hand. “Do you think this looks good?” He asks me, putting the sneaker up to my face, as if he wanted me to smell it. I shake my head. “Who the fuck thought shiny silver and neon green looked good together? And then there’s purple? This looks like an alien’s condom or something.”

He smiles at me. I know he’s trying to lighten the mood; get me to laugh. But I don’t want to give him the satisfaction. I remember how he threw my door open, asking if I hid his pills. And how he slapped me in the face when I said I flushed them. I could tell he wanted to hit me more, but instead he pushed me against the cheap, wood formica walls of our bungalow. Pushed me so hard that tiny nails jumped out of the panel. I’ll have to hammer them back in after we get back home.

When he sees I’m not going to bite, Frank throws the sneaker back down on the display and ambles around the store, his thumbs in the rings of his jeans again.

He circles a rack where dozens of pairs of compression shorts are hanging and cranes his neck, looking around. It’s the usual madness of a Saturday morning. One worker is buried in the screen of his smartphone, trying to pull up a video for his
co-worker. The other, is arguing with some woman who has a Nancy Grace haircut and swears that she purchased her Adidas jogging jacket from this specific store and would like her cash refund because she paid cash. The clerk tries her hardest to stay pleasant.

Frank sneaks away to the dressing room gripping a bunch of compression shorts. A few minutes later he walks out empty-handed, spots me and nods towards the store’s exit. As we walk out he says loud enough for the employee standing near the front to hear: “I can’t believe I left them in the car.”

Frank goes to the mall restroom again and then walks out with seven pairs of compression shorts in his hand, all of them still have their tags. I’m almost impressed.

The cashier is asking Nancy Grace to step to the side and is more than happy to give Frank a gift card for the full amount, since he lost his receipt. He winks at the girl and then points to the irate customer.

“You should be nicer to her, it’s hard making a living as a young kid.”

“No one was talking to you, Sir.”

“You’re right, no one was. But isn’t that how a conversation’s started? One person starts talking first? Then the other person says something back to them. They don’t start with two people talking at the same time, or else that’d be whacky.”

Nancy Grace is ignoring him, looking away and tapping her foot. Frank shrugs and smiles again at the clerk and knocks against the countertop. He presses his gift card into his pocket and taps it.
I follow him out of the mall and through the wide parking lot. We’re side by side, headed towards route 183. The pawn shop is in a strip mall about a half-mile up the road. Frank’s whistling and drumming his thigh.

“Don’t act like that wasn’t slick. You didn’t think your old man could scheme, like that, could you?”

I say nothing; I just scoff.

“Fucking laugh all you want!”

Frank rips the card out of his pocket and brandishes it, tapping the orange swoosh logo.

“There’s $240 right here!”

Frank snaps his fingers and points to the card.

“On a Nike gift card. What, is your dealer a personal trainer or something?”

Frank shoves the card back in his pocket and shakes his head.

“Oh quit being such a fucking wise ass. You think you're so smart, hunh? You ever hear of laundering money?”

“That’s not what laundering money is.”

“Then what would you call it?”

“Stealing!”

Frank rears and turns back to face me. “Any asshole can steal! What I did was launder it, laundering requires planning, brains.”

“It wasn’t laundering.”
“Well maybe not to fucking you it isn’t! But to me, this is how I launder my money.”

“All right, Frank.”

“Well it’s fucking worked for me so far.”

He mumbles to himself as he shields his eyes from the bright orange of the noon sun.

“After I cash this, we’ll get you something to eat? Yeah? A pre-birthday meal? Where do you wanna go? Pick any place you want. Hardees? Carl’s Jr.?"

I don’t want to answer him so I just look on ahead: cracked black pavement, patches of faded grass, and an empty blue sky.

There’s loud, tinny Middle-Eastern music playing at the pawn shop. There’s no order to where anything is placed. Hookah pipes and hoses sit beside dusty Sega Dreamcasts and blow-dryers. All the jewelry - gold necklaces that spell names like “Jennifer” and “Ashley” along with cheap engagement rings rest on hand towels in glass cases beneath the counter. The ceiling is low, making the room feel even more cluttered and cramp. When the old Arab guy behind the counter see’s Frank’s face, he immediately frowns and starts waving his hands; shooing him away.

“No, no more buddy.”

“Farooq! What the fuck?”

“No, no more cards. You need to be careful my friend.”

“Careful? What the fuck are you talking about?”
Frank starts looking around the shop, at imaginary friends to back him up. He meets my gaze, I just shake my head. He’s unfazed and pulls out the card.

“Look brother, there’s $240 on this. Call and check the amount.’

“I will not call.”

“Farooq, you’re gonna fucking call that number. There’s $240 on it! I’ll give it to you for $200! Come on, you can buy your kids something nice!”

“Buddy please, you’ve got to stop doing this.” Farooq looks at me, then back at Frank, then back at me again. “You tell him, right? You’re his son? Tell him to stop this.” I shrug my shoulders.

“Don’t you fucking talk to him! How much you want it for? $180? $150? 150 is a goddamn steal and you know it! I should call the cops on you! Fucking deal like that, bleeding a man dry when you know he’s got no other options!’

“I want nothing from you. Go, get out, come on.”

Frank turns up his lip and furrows his brows. His pushes his long, sweaty middle finger in Farooq’s face.

“You’re fucking stupid, you know that? You’re throwing money away.’ Frank’s teeth are sharp and his body is coiled tight. I lightly touch his shoulders and he eases away from Farooq.

“I’m gonna fucking call INS on this fucking place, you’re going back to Baghdad motherfucker!”

“You fucking leave you! Now!”

Frank is shouting on his way out, twisting his neck to look back at Farooq.
“Abu Ghraib, bitch! You’re gonna get fucking Abu Ghraibed!”

Outside, Frank is deliberate, fast. The sun is a dark orange now, and my head is hot but the cool breeze chills my chest and legs, confusing my body. I start to wonder if this is what Frank feels when he’s fiending.

It takes him about a half hour before he slows his pace down to his familiar strut. We’re off the highway now, walking on local streets. I recognize the neighborhood and my stomach begins to feel light - a combination of hunger and bad memories.

“Hey remember this street?”

I do. I say nothing.

“Your mom kept telling me to not let you on it.”

Frank laughs to himself and slaps his thigh.

“You were crying so much that day. Took everything in that little heart of yours to nut up and go down this hill. But you did it, right?”

He must remember it differently.

Frank stops in his tracks. He turns around and looks up at the top of the road. I wonder if he is hallucinating me on my Ninja Turtles bike from K-Mart. Me gripping the ribbed handlebars with their green and orange tassles blowing in the wind. Me looking down the hill with a sinking feeling in my stomach. My toes tensed and curled back and my veins filled with concrete that spread to my hands and feet and stomach. I felt Frank’s hand at my back and I tensed up even more. I whined.

“Easy now, I’m not gonna do anything.”

“No Dad, promise.Promise you won’t push me until I say when?”
“Until you say what?” He smells like sweat and cigarettes. His hand is firm on my shoulder.

“When.”

And before I know it my bike is moving down the hill and I’m crying and Frank is laughing behind me. shouting, “You said when! Come on! Steer!” in between his snorts of delight. Then I lose control of the handlebars and I’m flipping over them and into a muddy ditch. The air is ripped out of my chest. I hear the bike scraping against the black road. One of its pedals breaks off and digs into the earth beside me. Frank’s head blocks out the sun.

“You ok? Jay, you all right?”

I’m looking at Frank now and he’s changed a lot from that day. His hair is long and scraggly and streaked with grey. The lines in his face are now more pronounced, dividing it into sections. He’s also lost about thirty pounds since then. But he still has the same default expression: there’s a slight smile, like everything’s a big fucking joke.

Frank’s looking down at the hill, hands on his hips, smiling. He turns and looks me, his dun teeth bare.

“You really busted your ass that day.” He giggles and spits again.

“Yeah, I did.” I try not to sound sour.

“What’s the matter? It wasn’t so bad. So you had a bump.”

“You pushed me before I was ready.”

“You would’ve never gone done yourself!”

“I thought I was going to die?”
Frank rolls his eyes. “Every kid thinks they’re going to die when they do something scary! It’s part of growing up!”

“Is part of growing up following your junkie dad around so he can try and get a fix?”

Frank looks at me, thinking of something to say, but I know he’s speechless when his shoulder slump. He looks down at the ground and begins walking away.

“You can go home when you want.”

I’m waiting outside of a small, baby blue, run down shack in some white trash trailer park. A Kid Rock song mixed with the sound of barking dogs is blaring from the neighbor’s yard as nine and ten year-old kids wearing bathing suits - even though there aren’t any pools or sprinklers in sight - speed around on pocket bikes. Flavor-Ice wrappers and empty cans of keystone light litter the front lawn. My stomach groans.

Frank kicks open the screen door. There’s a bagged white-bread sandwich in his mouth. He’s carrying a black plastic bag that he’s wrapped around itself a bunch of times in one hand, and a chilled can of Sprite in the other. He walks onto the porch with a satisfied swagger and hands me the soda, and releases the sandwich from his mouth - I catch it.

“Got him just before he was headed to the mall. See how things turn out?”

Frank chuckles and I follow him up the road. I’m done with the sandwich before we even leave the trailer park. I pop open the soda and Frank turns around.
“You ate it already?!”

“I was hungry, Frank, it’s been hours.”

He looks back at the house. “I’m gonna go make another.”

“No, it’s all right.”

“Come on, I wanted to sit down and have a picnic.”

“Hah.”

“What, I’m serious! I don’t got a blanket or nothing but I figured we could sit down for a few minutes and eat something.”

He’s looking at me and his eyes are widened. He’s shaking the hand holding the black plastic bag back and forth and he’s looking at me earnestly, waiting for a response.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

He stops shaking his hand and clicks his tongue. “Ooh, we’ll only eat for a few minutes. Come on.”

He jogs back to the house and comes back a few minutes later with another sandwich and a can of soda. I’ve already gulped down the first before he comes back.

“Let’s go sit over there.” He points to a tree up the road. We sit down in its shade and I tear into the second sandwich, the salty deli meat hurts my tastebuds.

“I put extra bologna in it for you.” Frank says in between bites of his own sandwich.

“I saw that.”

“It was good?”

I shrug, crumpling up the paper. I pop open the second can. ‘It was bologna.’
Frank taps his leg. He chews quickly. “You know I am going to get the car done for you, right?”

“Really?” I ask, purposely arching my eyebrows.

“Yeah, really.” He seems hurt. He takes another bite of the sandwich. “Why do you gotta keep saying stuff like that?”

“Frank, come on. What do you want?”

“I don’t know, how about a nice conversation? We never talk anymore.”

“Well who’s fault is that?” I feel my ears and face getting hot. I wipe my eyes.

“I’m gonna make it up to you, I swear.”

“Yeah, ok.”

“I promise, that car’s gonna be done.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the car dad.”

Frank offers me a trembling smile. “Oh come on. V-8 block. Bad-ass trans-am with a midnight blue paintjob. The girls are gonna love you. A week, and I promise, you’re going to love it.”

“You probably stripped it for parts in the middle of the night.”

“What?”

I look him dead in the eyes, his mouth’s wide open and his eyes are watered. I do my best to stay emotionless. “You heard me.”

“I’d never do that!” He throws the sandwich on the floor. “Jay! I’d never do that! Do you think I’d do that?”

I tell him, measuring the words. “Yeah, I do.”
Frank’s leaning in real close and tries to grab my hand but I pull away. He holds his head down and then springs up and turns around, away from me.

I’m doing my best to follow him through the woods. It’s the late afternoon and the air has cooled. The dark green leaves of the forest keep most of the sun out. Frank’s walking faster, his feet circumventing the thick roots and rabbit holes. I’m breathing out of my mouth and have to keep pushing my pace because he shows no sign of stopping.

His back and shoulders are tensed. He’s leaning forward, grasping the black bag tight to his ribs.

“All right just turn back now. It’s been fun having you around but just fucking go, ok? You know how to get home, yeah?”

His eyes are fixed ahead of him and his wiry body navigates through the woods like an old specter. It might be the heat, but it looks as if he is being carried between the trees; like he’s floating.

By the time we reach the rotted cabin, I’m exhausted. The little sunlight that manages to cut through the treetops leaves impressions in my eyes and when I blink, small black and dark-red dots dance in front of me.

I follow Frank inside. He notices and grunts in disapproval. I dust off an old log and sit down. The air is moist and everything smells like worms after rain, but at least it’s cooler than outside. Through the slits of my barely open eyes, I see Frank unwrap the black plastic bag, he’s looking down at its contents.
“So this is what’s happening, hunh? You’re really gonna watch this?”

Frank’s never used in front of me before. I’ve seen him high. Fucked up. On the living room couch passing out, his face dropping into his cell phone. Heard his voice change tone mid-word, undulate, and then trail off into a snore. Seen him passed out on lawn chairs, trying to break into the front door of our bungalow using a butter knife during a thunderstorm, trying to sell my graphing calculator to some random guy at a bus stop.

But he’s never used when I was watching.

He reaches into the bag and pulls out ten small baggies filled with a tan-colored powder. I start to feel sick. It becomes worse when he fishes out a small, insulin needle from the bag. He holds it between his fingers and pulls off its small, orange cap. My stomach sinks. Frank doesn’t remember, but one of his favorite topics of discussion when he was high was his fool-proof method of never becoming an addict: and that was to never inject anything. He wasn’t talking to me directly when he’d wax on about this, more the air in the room and whatever invisible audience of children at a drug prevention conference he was speaking at, but I know he’d remember if I brought it up.

“I thought you said you’d never push?”

Frank’s not looking at me. He takes out a zippo from his pocket and gets the spoon from the plastic bag.

“Yeah well, he was out of roxys so I gotta do this shit now.”

“You gotta do it?”

“Well I’m not making you sit and watch this, now am I!?”
He takes a small piece of wood and throws it on the floor near me. It lands with a dampened thud and crumbles apart.

“You know what happens to people who push.”

“Not everyone.” Frank is still.

“That’s bullshit Frank - didn’t you tell me that’s the one thing you’d never do? All the times me and mom begged you to stop taking the shit? All the times you came back home, clean for a few months. What did you always tell me about the people who pushed?”

Frank’s quiet. He’s twirling the spoon in his hand. It catches a bit of the sun that’s peering in through the rotted roof of the cabin.

“I said that they’re fucked.”

“That’s right, Frank. You said that they’re fucked. You promised me you would never push.”

The spoon in his hand shakes. He leans back out of the sunlight. Even in the dark, I can make out the thick veins running up his forearm.

“Well what the fuck do you want me to do? Snort it? That what you want? Fucking snort 10 fucking bags?”

“I want you to throw that shit away. Stand up and walk back home with me. We’ll watch an old, crappy Kung-Fun movie with that bootleg Bruce Lee guy, what’s his name?”

“Sonny Chiba.”
“Yeah! We’ll watch Sonny Chiba and if you have trouble going to sleep I could get some pot for you, I know a kid in my class whose brother sells it.”

Frank’s eyes are fixed on the spoon, it stutters in his palm. “It’s not that easy.”

“You promised you’d never push. You said if someone does that, then they’re fucked.”

“I’m fucked either way.”

“No you’re not, Dad.”

The room’s quiet. Frank’s not saying anything. The spoon stops shaking and eventually falls from his hand and into the plastic bag.

I want to tell him Thank You. I want to get up and hug him and thank him. But I’m shaking and crying, and my head is light. I get up on up to my feet and push myself off the wall. Frank’s turned his back to me and I see him reach into his pocket, pouring something onto his hand. I try to run to him but I trip.

“Come on let’s just go home Dad. We’ll call that place in Florida in the morning and-’

He snorts deeply. Then again, even more loudly. Then a third time. He rests his hand against the wall and hangs his head between his shoulders. After a while, he turns around and leans back against the moldy wood. He slides down slowly to the floor, exhaling. His legs stretch out in front of him. They’re partially lit up from the streaks of sun that pour in from the holes in the cabin’s roof. His eyes reach out to me and he blinks. In his pupils I see a lagoon that grows darker and darker.
“See? I didn’t push. It’s all right.” Frank looks at me. He licks the top of his left hand and wipes the tears of his eyes. He swallows deeply. “First thing tomorrow, we’ll work on that ride. I promise. It’s all right. It’s all right."

That’s all Frank says, his voice getting softer and softer until his eyes look like smudged ink stains. Then Frank blinks, and his eyes stay shut.

I let myself fall asleep to the sound of his steady, light breathing and hope that the night is cooler than the day.

We Kill Our Women

We kill the women in our family. Usually we run them ragged. Use them up like a worn-out pots and pans’ scraped of teflon by some fuckwad who used a fork or a metal spatula. We push our girls to the brink and then even further like a Chevy Nova with a sputtering transmission doing its best. Dimming lights. Sluggish, cold morning jump-starts.
These drawn out murders are what I know. The day-by-day deaths that chip away. Albanian bride stands still, stone-faced at her wedding; people wave handkerchiefs in the air above her head as they dance in a circle over crumpled bills on the polished wooden floor. The bride looks solemn because it’s improper for a girl to be happy to leave her father’s home. Some brides don’t even blink when an uncle or two drinks enough raqi to fire off a .38 in the air, effectively forfeiting the deposit for the hall.

Her stoicism doesn’t mean we don’t up and kill our women suddenly. That happens.

It’s why I stay in school, and tell mom and dad I’m too busy to even think about marrying a nice boy from back home. I haven’t kept a relationship going for more than a few weeks. Even those were secret. Clandestine operations. Top secret make-out sessions in cars parked in neighborhoods where I know no one will recognize me. Date nights in West Bubba Fuck, NJ. Ask me about the best steakhouse in Warren County. Go on. You want Afghani food in Hamilton? Or maybe you’re looking for a great Desi joint in Denville? I got your back.

Once the guys ask to go out somewhere in the city, or maybe party it up in Hoboken, I start to get real busy. Too busy to grab dinner. Too busy to call. Too busy to text. It just gives them an out really, which is probably what they’ve wanted all along. They can just fuck whoever they’ve been seeing when they’re not with me more often. I’m helping a philandering man be more monogamous. I’m doing them and the rest of the world a service, really. Cutting them off is my community service to the dating world.
It’s 3AM on the 3rd floor at Hackensack Medical and my grandmother, grey streaks in her light-orange dyed hair sits in bed, sighing in between sips of water. Her tiny blue and red capillaries are visible through her paper skin. There’s the hum of the tube lighting. She’s had visitors all day, trays of food sit on the windowpane looking over the parking garage and children’s unit. I watch a man wheel his pregnant wife into the building. The room smells of left out soup.

Nena asks how work at the diner and I leave out that Dad is talking with Rustem, his second cousin in the city, who married a woman 12 years younger. That Dad is thinking about about selling the diner and opening a second pizzeria with Rustem. Nena still thinks Manhattan is the terrifying shit-hole from the 70s, that real life is like *The Warriors* or *Escape From New York*. It’s not like North Jersey is any better. I also leave out the creeps, the fuckwads with Newport breath rolling off their yellow teeth. The guys my dad eyes from up at the cash register when he counts money or wipes down menus. Once I was old enough to get hassled, my dad awkwardly asked me, “Any of them try to touch you?”

‘No, Bob.’

“Because back when I had the place in Queens, they’d get drunk and put hands on the girls.”

‘No one’s done anything, Bobbi.’

“I was throwing guys out all the time in Queens. I thought we’d have a better crowd here.”

‘It’s all right.’ I told him.
He grunted in agreement.

My phone vibrates as I massage Nena’s feet. I know it’s probably a tinder match with a new guy, but I ignore it and look into her watery brown eyes as I work her callouses.

“Mire Nena.” I tell her. “Si je te?” I ask her.

She sighs. “I’m old,” she says, “old old old.”

Her thighs are swollen. She’s 97 and still walks where she wants, with the help of a cane. Her mother, my great grandma, lived to 124, or so she claimed. Her husband died when he was 27. A test bombing from Turkey’s first line of fighter planes or something. The pilot had dropped its load too early. 50 feet in either direction and he would’ve been fine. My grandfather, Nena’s husband, died of a stroke 14 years ago during dialysis. It was really a year after that, but we all knew he was doomed after the stroke. We kept up hope. She lived on the tasbeeh, the Quran in her lap. He looked like he was going to get better for a second there. My aunts came over and packed into that dense living room, My mom served bold-smelling coffee at all hours of the day, her hands red and cracked from all the washed dishes. The daughters took turns feeding him, talking to him. He strained his paralyzed mouth to speak, his tanned, leathery skin stretching from the pressure. Then staph. Then pneumonia. Then one final strain under the same tube lighting in Nena’s room, at the same hospital, the stink of tears and wet winter coats, thirty-two people packed into one room after they switched off the ventilator and he yawned upwards, looking at God knows what, grimacing, toiling, and then death. We all wailed together.
Now Nena has the tasbeeh glued to her fingertips, all this time later. When there’s a lull in any conversation, she’s whispering prayers on the beads - the alhamdulillahs, the allahu akbars. Years of telling God how awesome he is. Decades of repeating his 99 names back to him. You know, just in case he forgets one.

“Your hair.” She says. “It’s beautiful.

I look at it. It’s down to my ass now. She’s right. My hair is soft and brown with streaks of natural auburn. In high school, the other hijabi girls would pet it while we adjusted our scarves in the bathroom mirror. It’s my favorite part of myself.

‘Thank you, Nena.’ I go back to massaging her feet.

“You know who you remind me of?” She says this in Albanian, *A di si te dookesht?* She doesn’t smile when she says it.

‘Ku, Nena?’

“Nusa Arben.” I look up. No one talks about Arben’s wife. My phone vibrates again. Another match? Or maybe it was Carl, wondering where the fuck I am.

“Nusa Arben…” Nena says to herself, shaking her head.

Mom only mentioned the girl one night after my dad went to sleep grumbling angrily. He slammed a plate of lemon roasted potatoes down after pulling out one of my mother’s strong, black hairs. He extricated it like a magician, revelling in his find, whipping it out with a flourish, proof of her failure. Mom pretended to be apologetic, fussing and scrambling about the kitchen, trying to whip up a fresh batch. Dad, fully
embracing his role as the wronged husband, seemed to believe his anger as he stormed off into the bedroom.

When the door closed, Mom sunk into her chair and I poured us coffee. Then she told me the story of Arben.

His wife, Besa, was a young import, a beautiful black-haired girl; everyone thought he was so lucky to have her. Seventeen. From Skopje. Good family. Better than Arben’s, which everyone thought but no one said, because Arben’s father, Artyan, always had a few screws loose. And if you say something bad about one Albanian, you’re insulting every single member of their family, no matter how true it is.

Artyan, the insane dad, was tall and bald with a paunch, but had these mitts for hands, he worked as an engineer and sheet metal cutter and finally, a mechanic. He had what everyone called laughing eyes, surit e chjash, which was a nice way of saying he was fucking crazy. Artyan’s wife, Artellah, mashallah, kept the family together; she knew what to say to him to keep him at bay, and he behaved himself just long enough so they could lure Besa into a marriage.

Turns out Arben was just as unhinged as his father, just in a different way. When an old enemy of Arben’s came back from the old country, Arben invited him over for coffee to let bygones be bygones. The enemy arrived. Then Arben’s wife started screaming like they’d rehearsed. Three gunshots. Arben had her call the cops, crying, but they were already on the way. Arben ripped her shirt as the officers knocked at the door.

They told the cops that Arben wasn’t home, that he came home early for the shop. He was even wearing his greasy blue jumpsuit for good measure. The police asked
questions but the story stuck. My mom said that whenever she saw Arben’s wife after that, she was always very quiet. They got rid of the copper couches that the enemy died on.

Months later and Arben’s father was ambling around the house. Besa woke up and Artyan was in their bedroom, looking through their drawers. She screamed. When Arben asked him what was wrong, his father kept saying he knew the secret, he knew the secret, staring at Besa the entire time. He growled and balled his fist and Arben knew his wife wasn’t safe. His mom promised to talk to his father.

But Artyan kept lurking. His head drooped between his shoulders. He’d stand in the kitchen, watching Besa as she rolled dough for the petē. She’d turn to find him in his brown turtleneck sweater and olive suit. The pants pulled up tight across his paunch, revealing his white socks. He’d giggle and slap his huge hands against the refrigerator door and then scamper away.

Arben couldn’t kick his own father out of his house, so he did what he could. He gave their tenants a month to find another place and moved Artyan and his wife into the room behind them.

If the fans were off at night, they would have been able to hear Artyan jiggling the door handle, or his plodding footsteps in the grass behind their bedroom windows. Arben’s mother did what she could to talk to Artyan but he wouldn’t listen. They found him in the bathroom, staring into the mirror, pressing a razor against his face, covering his cheeks in tiny scratches. They decided to get him help.
When the doctor from Bergen Pines came to visit, Artyan’s face was covered in bits of blood-soaked toilet paper. He sat upright in his chair, answering all of the doctor’s questions. He blinked his eyes and sighed heavily between all his answers, Artella by her husband’s side, asking the doctor every five minutes if he wanted some coffee or fruit.

Besa spoke to my mother on the phone after the doctors left. “Lira you don’t know how happy I am.” Was what Besa told her. “They’re going to bring him in tomorrow.” She whispered. “I know I shouldn’t say this.” My mom only told her it was what was best.

Arben left early the next morning, he opened the garage at 7.30. When Besa was washing the dishes, Artyan came up behind her with a butcher knife and drove it into her back. She turned around and screamed and probably fought, because her forearms were covered in slashes. Arben’s mom heard the cries and ran into the kitchen and she tried to pull Artyan off her. He stabbed her too. When the cops arrived. Artyan was sitting at the kitchen table tapping the point of the knife against its wooden surface. The coroner report said that Besa sustained 42 knife wounds, his wife, 81. Artyan died in Bellevue. His son, Arben, sold the house and lived out of the office above his garage. He just died of cancer, alone.

Nena tells me the same story, wiping her eyes with a crumpled napkin the entire time. She leaves out some of the finer details. She didn’t know that Besa and my mom spoke.
“And this is why,” she says, waving a finger at me, “You need to be very careful with who you marry. “Qui-des”, she says, wagging her finger.

I kiss her on the forehead and walk to my car. When I check my phone, I see two missed calls from Carl, and a bunch of texts. The last one reads, “Val, can you please please call me when you get this?”

Against my better judgment, I meet him at Parkway Diner. I’m constantly looking over my shoulder and wondering if that Greek kid my brother sometimes goes to Pacha with is working now, but it’s 4am. here’s only the old-lady with the sorta-beehive hairdo wiping down tables and humming in this sad, high-pitch, asking me if I want any more coffee. There’s also the Dominican night shift manager with the glass eye who (exclusively) watches ESPN. He’s nice.

I’m eyeing the key lime pie and wondering if they use the same restaurant depot filling that dad gets for ours when I see Carl walk in. He’s all Adam’s Apple, freckles, and glasses. He’s wearing his ratty, black-fleece zip up and his white v-neck is coffee stained. I knew the goofball would be up studying all night. He’d gotten a shitty score on his MCATs and is obsessed with re-taking them.

I want to stand up to hug him but I don’t as he hovers over the table. I look at him from my corner in the booth and smile warmly.

He doesn’t take it that way and he sits down. ‘Hey…’ His lips part in confusion

“So what’s up?” I mutter into my coffee mug. “What’d you want to talk about?”

My stomach flips at the question. Self-fulfilled prophecy time. Just dump me. I’ll start
matching with some down-the-shore morons and forget all about Carl’s shaggy blonde hair and inexplicable love for Sadé.

‘You’ve been kinda distant these past few days…’

“Yeah, Carl, I’ve just been super busy.” Oh my God I sound like a heartless monster.

Carl winces. ‘Because it seems like, you know, I’m feeling like, you’re not interested and...um...are you breaking up with me?’

I usually don’t do this in person. I had to make a phone call once that wasn’t pretty, but the dude, Dom, was really more angry than upset. “But you’re a fucking 6 and I’m an 8!” were his words, I think. I didn’t argue with him.

But here’s Carl, in front of me. His tight chest moving in and out. Skinny, adorable, shaggy headed, aspiring gastroenterologist, Carl. The weirdo who wanted to put his ear to my “tummy” to hear the sounds it made and said he’d never heard another stomach like mine, which made me happy. The dork who held my hand all through Nightcrawler, gasping every time Jake Gyllenhaal did something terrible.

When he sits down in this sticky booth, in this highway diner that reeks of Pine Sol, I know he thinks it’s over. But seeing him lean across the table like this, I know he doesn’t want it to be, and I don’t want it to be either.

I grab his hand and kiss it. “I want some of that Key Lime pie.”

I nod to the dessert bar. Carl nods and I see his brighten up. ‘OK, yeah, sure!’

***
Carl just got accepted into Med School and I’m already in my second year. I get to spend more and more time with Carl since I’ve convinced my dad that working at the diner isn’t feasible due to the copious amounts of studying required for my degree. He agrees, proud that one of his kids was becoming a doctor.

“Are you going to miss this place?” My dad asks me, getting teary-eyed with pride that he did such a good job raising an amazing woman. His ego is overflowing.

I look at the diner with its dark red and white tiling on the walls and its checkered floors. The salty heat from the kitchen that I’d smell and feel on my neck when I’d sit in the single booth, poring over books since the second grade.

“Yeah Baba. I say.” Not entirely lying.

Truth is I could’ve worked two nights a week, no problem. Get some tips, see my family. But I want to see Carl on the DL. The only person who knows I’m dating him is Arben, my cousin from Connecticut. Mom probably knows too. She doesn’t utter a word, though, just make remarks like, “You seem happy today” as I’d run out the door to catch the bus to Columbia. Then she’d go back to doing whatever it is she was doing, with this slight smirk on her face. No point in bringing it up though, better for her to be in the dark in case any shit hit the fan. Plausible denial and such.

But Yllka hears it all. She’s sworn off FOB Albo men the second her ex-husband got angry and started breaking shit in the house three months into their marriage.

“I can’t wait to meet him,” she says, over the phone. I’m looking out the window from Dodge Hall. I found an empty classroom that was open and splayed my books out
on the table. I watch for Carl’s thick-haired head to bob up the grey stone stairs outside to meet me up here.

‘Well next week will be fun. He’s excited to meet you. His sister and mom kinda adore me.’

“Why wouldn’t they?’ Yllka says, ‘You’re the shit.”

‘I know.’ I see Carl out the window, just as I thought I would. Moving his head up and down. Sometimes when I’m there alone, I mock his steps with my voice. I call him humpty dumpty underneath my breath and hope he doesn’t hear me. And when he does, he just laughs it off. It’s in moments like that I fool myself into thinking it can last.

“We’re still on for next week, yeah?” He says, moving the hair out of my face.

I grin, ‘Yeah! Yllka’s super excited.”

“Me too! I mean I feel so honored to finally meet someone from your family.” Anyone else would’ve said that sarcastically, but Carl means it. Bless his heart.

I take his hand, “It’ll happen. Just...baby steps.” I kiss his knuckles. “Baby steps.” And for a second, I almost convince myself it’s true and try to forget about my cousin Mirela, or my Aunt Edona. Their vague lives in other states when they decided to shack up with Non-Albanian men. No wedding invitations. No Bajram visits. No one speaks of them. No one brings them up. Not even their parents.

***

Yllka invites us to dinner in Manhattan, which wasn’t the original plan, but she’s been dying to hang out in Midtown because she rarely comes into the city. Carl is the
coolest I’ve ever seen him and I’m a nervous wreck. Yllka is super sweet and welcoming and complimentary of the guy - it’s not like it isn’t going great, because it is. But since we didn’t get to do all of the regular tourist trap shit she was adamant about picking the restaurant. I denied her everything else so the least we could do was eat in Room Service in Hell’s Kitchen. The restaurant is dark and we’re seated in the back in a dimly lit, white booth that’s off to the side. This place is smack dab in the middle of gaytown USA so no self-respecting Albo would be caught dead in the area. So normally I wouldn’t be worried about being spotted her with my American boyfriend. But I know for a fact there’s a pizzeria right down the block that Rustem owns. So I’m sorta freaking out.

“You all right?” Carl rests his hand on my thigh.

‘Mm-hmm.’ I say, looking around. I don’t know why I’m so nervous. It’s silly. This city is huge. But this was dad’s old stomping grounds before the rent got too high and I start wishing we were in West NJ, eating at some low-key steak joint no one’s ever heard of.

“So what do you know about Albanian culture?” Yllka asks.

I look at her to let her know this is not an OK topic of conversation.

‘Just the little bit that Val’s told me.’ He squeezes my thigh. ‘You guys are big into traditions, right? Really big families, that whole Eastern bloc mentality, yeah?’

“Did she tell you that Albanian men are crazy?”

Carl leans in, trying to suppress his smirk, like he’s about to drop the greatest joke of all time. ‘Just the men?’ He looks at me and starts giggling.

“Ugh,” I say.
‘I know, I know, it was corny.’ He throws his hands up and takes a sip of water.

Over the hum of the Asian-Jazz fusion ambiance music they’re pushing through the speakers at this place, I hear distinctly Albanian voices. Excited voices. Sounds like they’re arguing but they’re probably just asking the other person what time it is.

“Shh, shh, do you hear that?” I hold Carl’s hand and look around the restaurant for my dad’s second cousin’s bald head, with its crown of black hair. I hear the voices again, more distinct, but it isn’t Albanian - probably Polish or something. I relax in my seat.

Yllka tries to pay the bill, but I don’t let her.

“See, that’s another thing about Albos, Carl. They’re kill you if you try to spend your money around them.” Yllka laughs and picks up her purse as I whip up her card and throw mine down on the tray. The waitress looks at the two of us, wondering who she should listen to. I, eventually, assert my will. Carl laughs at Yllka when she throws up her hands in defeat and I’m happy that the night isn’t a shit-show. That it seems normal to have Carl here with my cousin.

I like the brisk feeling in the night air when we’re outside of the restaurant. I like that Yllka keeps looking behind Carl’s back to mouth, “He’s awesome!” behind his back as we wait for her cab. I like that he gives her a warm hug when she gets in. I like all of the people walking around us beneath the lights. So I reach up to him and kiss him. Plant a big one right on his pretty lips. It’s the first time I’ve done it out in the open. I can feel his body relax and his eyes get all big and dopey. I rub his shoulders and hug him, nuzzling my cheek against his chest and then I see a bald-headed Albanian looking man,
definitely Rustem staring right at me - smoking a cigarette outside of his pizzeria. We make eye contact. He doesn’t say anything. I let my eyes fall away naturally, even though I can feel him staring at the back of my head. I tell myself he’s just mistaken me for someone else, wondering if that was recognition in his eyes or something else, I make a beeline for Port Authority, not even thinking if Carl is behind me or not.

***

The worst part about Carl is that he’s understanding. The worst part about Carl is that when I tell him that I want to keep us a secret, he says he’s OK with that. The worst part about Carl is that he just wants me to be happy.

“You’re over-reacting, maybe Rustem didn’t see you.”

‘He fucking saw me, Carl.’ I say, waiting at the gate for the NJ Transit bus back to Hackensack.

“I wish we could’ve stayed out a little later tonight, tomorrow being Thanksgiving break and all.”

I ignore him. ‘He saw me and all it takes is for him to say some shit like, “Oh, how come I wasn’t invited to the wedding!” Or some stupid shit like that.’

“Why would he say anything?” Carl has his hands up in the air like we are having a normal conversation talking about normal, non-ethnic people.

‘I love you but you’re a fucking moron sometimes.’

“Well thanks.”
‘No, that’s, god, don’t fucking pout like that.’ I hear myself talking, and I just sound like a bitch again. The bus screeches up to the gate. For once in the history of the fucking world, NJtransit is on time.

‘Look, I’ll call you, Carl.’

‘Please don’t stress about this, you’re making it a bigger deal than it is. And who knows? This might be a blessing in disguise.’ His eyes are brimming with stupid hope.

‘Don’t be an idiot.’ It comes out sweet. I kiss him and jump onto the bus.

At home, everyone’s asleep. I tiptoe into my room and read Carl’s last of many messages. “I love you. It’ll be OK.” I don’t want to respond, but then I imagine him worrying.

‘Home.’ I send the text. I want to write more but I toss my phone on the nightstand and try to forget about the whole fucking travesty of a night.

My mom wakes me up. “You want anything to eat before you go to school?”

‘No.’ I search her eyes, seeing if anything’s changed. If she looks at me any different. Nothing.

‘I’ll just grab something later.’ She nods and kisses me on the forehead and leaves the room.

Downstairs, dad’s in the living room, watching a 30 for 30 Documentary on Evander Holyfield. “Shame about that guy.” My dad says, his eyes are glued to the flat screen that my brothers and I chipped in to get him for Father’s Day. He got salty that
one year when we didn’t buy him anything and we never lived it down. The TV set was a way to get him to stop bitching.

“Four time Heavyweight Champion of the world,” he says, “and all people remember him for is getting his ear bit by Mike Tyson.”

‘Yeah, that’s a shame, Bob.’

“I mean Tyson was mean, he was great, but, just a thug in the ring. He wasn’t a real boxer.”

I try to dip out of the living room to avoid another boxing monologue, especially because I know Dad never boxed a day in his life, aside from slapping us around when we were younger.

‘What’re you doing today?’ He asks.

“Nothing, why?” I regret my response the second it leaves my mouth.

‘Well you’re off, ain’t you?’

“Yes.”

‘Why don’t you come by with me at the diner? I hardly get to see you, you’re always so busy. Spend some time with your father.’ It’s more of a statement-of-fact than a question.

I shrug and mumble, “OK.”

He drives us there in his blue F-150. He brags to anyone who will listen that he got for a steal. “I still can’t believe how good this thing drives.” He looks down at the
steering wheel and the column, then at the radio he never turns on, and the spotless interior of the car. “I can’t believe how good of a deal I got on this thing.”

‘You know how to buy things, Bob,’

“You got to, I mean, when you run a business.” He says it out the side of his mouth, snorting.

And for some reason on the way to the diner, I build up a whole fantasy in my head that Dad finds out about Carl and accepts us. I keep waiting the entire car ride for him to say something, but he only occasionally burps and sighs and scratches his clubbed-fingers against the pleather center console, chewing on the end of a cigar that was probably smoked a good four days ago. I watch it bob up and down, bristling the bottom of his mustache. When we get to the diner, it’s past the morning rush. I help Maria wipe down the tables and then tuck myself behind the front register with my dad. I count the receipts, Dad laughs to himself as he watches the news. “People are so stupid.”

‘Why’s that?’ I say.

I guess he doesn’t hear me because he just mumbles, “So fucking stupid.” To himself and shakes his head.

I’m separating the debit and credit card receipts into different stacks. I squeeze past him to open the register. I start counting the cash, recording everything in the composition notebook I covered in clear tape. I start counting.

After lunch begins to pick up, I’m passing out menus, seating people, and taking orders because Dad’s probably retreated to the back-room where he watches Albanian
satellite TV and smokes the unfiltered cigarettes he rolls himself. Sure enough, when I get a chance to answer the constantly ringing phone on the front counter, it’s him.  

“Could you bring me back three espressos?”

‘Sure thing.’

I think he’s probably chatting it up with the guys at Mennella’s poultry, or it could be the Sanzaris, because he talked about trying to get into construction again. He used to get a lot of sub work from them. But when I lightly kick open the black door to his Eastern European middle-aged man cave, I see Rustem and another hard-faced Albanian guy I’ve never seen before looking my way. I freeze at the door. Only the stranger acknowledges my presence, and then goes back to listening to my dad, who, from the sound of it, is talking about some Government conspiracy he cooked up in his mind.

I set the coffees down. It’s only then that Rustem recognizes me. He looks me in the eye and furrows his reddish brows. His grey eyes hang in the air. He looks at me and nods, his lip stiff.

My dad turns to me. “I’m talking with Rustem about the pizzeria in New York. Where was it again, Stem?”

‘28th street.’ He pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his adidas track jacket and offers one to my dad, who puts his hand on his heart when Rustem lights it.

Rustem looks at me. “Yeah that spot, over there, it’s good money. We do dollar slices, sodas. Hire a couple of Guatemalans, Mexicans are no good anymore.”
My dad nods his head. “Tell me about it, I’ve got a bunch of Ecuadorians and Guatemalans here too. But really,” my dad pats me on the shoulder, “no one helps you better than family.”

Rustem looks me in the eyes, searching. “Yes, family is best.”

My dad blows smoke over his shoulder, away from us all. “Valbona helps me a lot around here, even though she’s going to be a doctor. She’s in med school and she still comes to work.”

“Wow,” Rustem nods at my father, then turns to me. ‘You study in the city?’

“Yes.” I look in his eyes, trying to see if he knows anything. He nods again and raises his eyebrows.

“Columbia!” my dad interjects. He leans in points his finger up in the air.

‘That’s good. It’s nice to have a good girl who’s nice to her father. If I had a daughter, I’d want her to be like you.’ Rustem says as he sips his coffee, gazing at me.

I leave the smoky back room and go back to the lunch rush, wondering what the men talk about. I clear plates of unfinished club sandwiches and hot wings, I smell the tobacco coming from the back-room and hear the guttural chuckles of my dad, Rustem, and the other Albanian dude. My dad walks them to the door. I nod and wave, say goodbye. And they’re gone. No strange looks from my father. No weird vibes from Rustem. Just the same sounds of the diner, of forks and spoons clanging against ceramic plates, and the drawn-out, nasally conversations about “what the Jets really need to do”
on Thanksgiving or whatever-the-fuck. Dad goes back into his cave, but emerges in a
second running up to me with Rustem’s bright red track jacket.

“Go see if Rustem is still outside, quick!” My dad says, all sweat and emergency.

I grab the jacket and fling open the glass doors of the diner. No cars are parked
out front so I turn the corner to the other side of the parking lot,

Rustem walks right into me.

“Me falle, me falle.” Rustem says.

“Asje.” I say, and hand him the jacket.

Rustem puts on his jacket and pats his pockets, pulls out cigarette and lights it.

The wind’s at my back, it causes my hair to blow over my shoulder, I pull it back into a
ponytail. I’m about to say bye and head back into the restaurant, but Rustem speaks.

“Did you tell your father?” Rustem asks me. His voice is cold.

My back stiffens and I get a chill in my stomach that seizes my muscles.

He blows the smoke to the side of his face, still looking at me. “Because I didn’t.”

He says again, taking another drag of the cigarette.

I don’t know what to say. The wind blows into my open eyes. I see the grey sky
behind Rustem’s pale, lined face, the stubble that stands up from the dry skin on top of
his head and cheeks. He would look better with a beard. I’m speechless. Thoughtless. I
put my eyes down like the demure Albanian bride on her wedding day, ashamed of her
hopeful future.
“It’s not my place to say anything. Even though I see your father as my brother.”

He throws his cigarette out on the curb. He shakes his head. “What’s happening to women today?”

I stutter and can only think to say, “Thank you. Mire dite.”

He looks at me. “Mire dite.” And walks to his car. I stand there, arms folded against the wind as he drives off with the stranger. The wind grows louder.

***

It’s the day before Thanksgiving, and I’m in bed with Carl, staring at the textured white ceiling of his bedroom. He’s asleep, his big nose buried in my armpit. He hugs me like I’m a maternity pillow, one leg on top of me. I think of all the things I wish I’d to Rustem. In some scenarios I grab his cigarette and put it out in his eye. In others, I tell him off in Albanian and play the proud woman, saying how dare he attack my honor, what is the Albanian word for honor? I don’t know, I’ll have to ask my mom, all I know is shame, toorp. Everything is fucking toorp, toorp. You hear the woman chirping at their kids, jutting out their bellies and looking down each other’s bathing suits on a beach.

Toorp, toorp.

Satisfied from picturing myself as a consummate badass, I look at Carl’s sleeping face and imagine myself in residency. Working insane hours and sneaking away to see him on my lunch breaks, or kissing him sloppily in a closet, Grey’s Anatomy style. I think of not needing a cent from my family. I think of being a successful doctor. But what I can’t picture, no matter how much I try, is Carl and I married. Is Carl and I older, maybe
a little fatter, with kids running around a living room, with my dad and mom calling to check up on us, saying they’ll be coming over to visit for dinner.

I start to drift off into sleep. daydreaming of a graveyard. I’m walking through it. It’s cold, but there’s no snow. Everything’s yellow and brittle. I take a breath before opening up the heavy door to a mausoleum. Inside, the granite walls glow blue like a TV set left on in the night. The stacked slabs of stone are engraved with names like Viola, Violtza, Flora, Nora, Aferdita, Virgines. Each step I take echoes off the walls as I go deeper and deeper into the tomb. It starts getting brighter. The blue hue turns to white and I see a bride. I know it’s Besa, even though I’ve never seen a photograph. Her lips are pursed tight together. Make-up covers the scars where Artyan slashed her defiant face.

Even though she’s dead, she’s cursing, “fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.”