

What Men Do and Other Stories

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ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories is about men, men and women, and the problems that occur in relationships when one partner is more unstable than the other. In today's modern times, the role played by each gender has shifted mightily, and as women become closer and closer to being regarded as equals, many men have found themselves wondering what this means for them. The man is no longer the undisputed leader of the household. He is no longer the sole breadwinner. Without a clear role to play, some men find themselves pressured to lash out in some way, to overcompensate for their newfound insufficiencies, and their actions are not always what one would expect.

This is also a collection about loss and grief. Several characters in these stories are suffering from one emotional trauma or another, usually brought about by the death of a loved one. These characters find unique ways to deal with their grief. One such character hides his dead mother's body in his bedroom while another, a middle-aged widower, joins a couple of his late wife's friends for a sexual rendezvous in their new apartment. These stories seek to create a unique blend of tension, humor, and grotesqueness in search of some kind of understanding in these difficult times. This is a collection about men and their issues, but also, it is a collection that reaches out to that little part of us all that doesn't quite know where we belong.

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I had a romance novel inside me, but I paid three sailors to beat it out of me with steel pipes.
— Patton Oswalt

*What could be more useless than a man who couldn't fix a dripping faucet—fundamentally
useless, dead to history, to the messages in his genes?*
— Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

*He understood well enough how a man with a choice between pride and responsibility will
almost always choose pride--if responsibility robs him of his manhood.*
— Stephen King, *The Running Man*

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Flawed Characters: A How-To

Here's something to think about: many of the characters from literature that we love the most are flawed people. Once you say it, it seems like an obvious statement. However, in literature, readers often go into the reading experience forgetting the obvious fact that some people are flawed. On a fundamental level, most all engaging literary characters are flawed in one way or another. One could even argue that unflawed characters are not good; in fact, maybe they are bad. Uninteresting. They don't engage the reader. There is no shortage of essays written on characterization, and there are numerous pieces written on how authors can craft better characters. However, one aspect of characterization that people often overlook is the notion that some characters must be written in different ways because of who they are as people on the page, as people in the particular story. Sometimes these characters are rowdy, troublesome, maybe even creepy or evil. This essay will seek to explore the idea that there is a particular process the author must go through to render these flawed characters in such a way that the readers can still feel a connection. The reader may not root for Humbert Humbert like he or she does for Elizabeth Bennett, but there exists an emotional connection all the same. Stephen King states in his book *On Writing* that "Fiction writers...don't understand very much about what they do – not why it works when it's good, not why it doesn't when it's bad" (ix). That is one of the truer statements I've ever read when it comes to describing writers. However, what this essay will try to explore is the idea that sometimes authors actually do good things intentionally. No, really. They do.

Although Ernest Hemingway is noted for his hesitancy to talk about the writing process, he had much to say about writing in his letters to various people over time, most notably to other authors. In these letters, compiled by Larry Phillips into a single volume titled *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, Hemingway explores multiple times the idea that in fiction there is a difference between a “character” and a person. He explains, “When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people not characters. A *character* is a caricature. If a writer can make people live there may be no great characters in his book, but it is possible that his book will remain as a whole; as an entity; as a novel” (191). Hemingway suggests that there is perhaps a difference between a great character and a person on the page and that the novel relies more on people than great characters, leaving the budding author to wonder where this threshold lies and how one might combine the two concepts. Or, maybe an even better question: what exactly is the difference?

Hemingway goes on to suggest that most characters in fiction are based on people from the author’s reality, and for this reason, he strongly discourages other authors from doing so intentionally unless they are prepared to capture the real person perfectly. In a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald about Fitzgerald’s struggles while writing the quasi-autobiographical novel *Tender Is the Night*, Hemingway chastises his friend for basing his characters on real people. He writes,

I liked it and I didn’t like it [*Tender Is the Night*]. It started off with that marvelous description of Sara and Gerald...Then you started fooling with them, making them come from things they didn’t come from, changing them into other people and you can’t do that, Scott. If you take real people and write about them you cannot...make them do anything they would not do. You can take you or me

or Zelda or Pauline or Hadley or Sara or Gerald but you have to keep them the same and you can only make them do what they would do....That is what we are supposed to do when we are at our best – make it all up – but make it up so truly that later it will happen that way (69).

Hemingway is describing the process of writing characters based on real people, but I think this idea is also applicable when discussing how to write characters who are more real people than just characters. What Hemingway hints at but never really states explicitly is an idea that I think readers often forget. Authors sometimes forget this too: if our characters are going to be real, if they're going to be human, if they're going to be people as Hemingway describes, then they're going to have to possess some major flaws because the rest of us do too.

Flawed characters are a staple in literature across genres, inside and out of the canon. Literature is all about telling the stories of those to whom we can relate as readers. So, what do I mean when I keep saying flawed characters? The term could mean any number of things, but in this context I am basically describing characters with questionable morals who make decisions that directly harm other people, sometimes intentionally. They're the type of people who we would never want to meet in real life. We would likely hate these characters were they real people. This is why I think Hemingway's words are important. These flawed characters are usually versions of people readers know in their own lives, but the grit is turned up a few notches. These characters often have the capability to demonstrate versions of the worst sides of the worst people we know, but there is a possibility for each and every one of these characters to remain sympathetic to the reader if the author plays his cards just right.

Many authors have proven themselves to be masters at crafting likable troublemakers. Frank Norris manages to build a character in *McTeague* who physically abuses and later murders his wife but still manages to provoke sympathy from the reader. Cormac McCarthy has done this with numerous characters, none more disturbingly sympathetic than Lester Ballard, the serial killing necrophiliac from *Child of God*. Some authors, most notably those of transgressive literature, have staked their entire careers on an ability to make terrible people seem like characters worth reading about. Barry Hannah, Brett Easton-Ellis, Charles Bukowski, Chuck Palahniuk: the list goes on and on. Eventually, this unique aspect of characterization forces the author to ask how one creates an inscrutable, maybe even villainous, character without losing the reader. The stories I write tend to express a version of this sentiment, though I usually choose immoral and pitiful characters, men and women who are more sad and pathetic than scary, rather than amoral and dangerous characters that are more memorable, characters like McTeague and Lester Ballard. There is always a fine line between believable and cliché, between redeemable and a lost cause, and it is the author's job to convince the reader to hang in there with this cast of misfits. What I have learned in my brief time as a writer is that there are specific tools authors can employ that provide rather unlikable characters with an opportunity for, if not salvation or redemption, at least the chance at a sympathetic reading.

In a graduate fiction workshop last fall, we were required to do a craft talk on an element of fiction that we have trouble with. To prepare for my talk, I asked my classmates to name for me their favorite characters from all of literature and to tell me why. I had them do this without telling them that my topic was flawed characters, and I was both pleased and unsurprised to find that almost every character they came up with can be easily labelled as flawed. Examples ranged

from Twain's Huck Finn to Faulkner's Quentin Compson to Nabokov's Humbert Humbert to Maggie Tulliver from Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*. The characters I threw into the mix are the same ones mentioned above, Frank Norris' McTeague and McCarthy's Lester Ballard. Clearly, these characters are all over the map as far as the type of narratives they are a part of, and more importantly, they vary immensely in what their flaws are. Huck Finn is a rascal but clearly has a good heart. Quentin Compson has some unsavory feelings toward his sister but never acts on them. Humbert Humbert is a pedophile. McTeague and Lester Ballard are murderers. However, there are several common reasons my peers listed why these characters were their favorites. Some of the most common adjectives people used to describe these characters were: compelling, complex, conflicted, passionate, tragic, vulnerable, authentic. Taking a step back to look at these all together, they can be summed up in one word: human. Even though nearly every favorite character that was mentioned does something most would deem wrong (some even do things that might be deemed horrific), readers latch on to those characters because of certain traits they possess.

Let's take a look at a couple of specific characters before we jump into how one goes about writing them: Frank Norris' McTeague, Cormac McCarthy's Lester Ballard, and one from a more recent work, Josie Sigler's Joe from her story "Breakneck Road." These works come from three different centuries, they represent three very different types of fiction, and they display protagonists of varying levels of dingy morals. By taking a close look at these characters, one can begin to see patterns, a framework, so to speak, going on behind the scenes. There are specific methods employed by the authors that salvage their characters without flaunting the effort to do so. Nonetheless, the plot of each story is rather bleak.

Frank Norris's *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* is about a poor brute of a dentist with no hopes or goals other than procuring a large golden tooth to hang outside his shop. McTeague's happy, dull life is forever changed when he meets Trina, and it is ruined when she wins a large sum of money that she refuses to spend. For the largest section of the novel, the couple lives in squalor because McTeague loses his license to practice dentistry when a rival suitor for Trina reveals that McTeague isn't licensed. The couple sinks lower and lower in poverty as Trina refuses to spend any of her money. She has an eerily sexual attraction to her gold coins and would rather watch her husband go mad than spend any of her winnings. Eventually, McTeague begins to drink heavily and grows steadily angrier at his wife. He begins to bite Trina's fingers to punish her, breaking the bones and rendering her hands swollen and unusable, until he finally snaps completely and kills her. McTeague ends the novel stranded in the desert hand-cuffed to the dead body of the man who started his troubles.

Frank Norris wastes no time revealing to the reader that McTeague is plagued by circumstances beyond his control. He is described as a humble dentist with the personality of the draft horse, extremely stupid and strong, and even though he has read many books, he is "too hopelessly stupid to get much benefit from them" (2-3). When McTeague meets Trina, the woman he will eventually torture and murder over money, a monster is awakened within him. The reader learns during his time alone with Trina in early pages of the book that McTeague is not as innocent as his docility suggests. He molests Trina as she sleeps during a dental procedure, and the narrator lets us in on McTeague's dark secret: "Below the fine fabric of all that was good in [McTeague] ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his father and of his father's father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation, tainted

him. The evil of an entire race flowed through his brains” (25). But then Norris throws the reader a life-line, a reason to hang on with McTeague for a while longer. Even though his blood is tainted, the narrator surmises, “Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame?” (Norris 25). As a pioneer naturalist character, McTeague is presented as a helpless brute, unable to resist the urges that overtake him, and, moreover, he is harassed by antagonists from every direction in his life. Norris throws in the twist that McTeague does not want to be this way, further solidifying his helplessness, but also possibly offering him an out with the reader.

Lester Ballard’s story in Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God* is similar in that he is unstable and faces constant provocation from those around him. He has his land stolen away from him and is forced to live in the wooded hills, rotating from one hideout to another. The entire town casts him out and looks down on him, ridiculing him. Eventually, Lester begins to give into perversions, first by stealing and abusing the dead body of a teenage girl. This first body that Lester abuses is more an accident than anything else; he literally stumbles upon the bodies of two dead teenagers who had apparently been having sex. Once Lester loses this first body in a fire, he begins to hunt for more. He eventually turns to killing to keep himself provided with fresh and pliable bodies. A skirmish with the man who has taken over Lester’s house costs Lester his arm, and he wakes up in a hospital, surrounded by townspeople demanding that he take them to the bodies of all of the girls he has abducted. This is when the reader first realizes for certain that Lester has taken multiple girls, even more than what we have seen. He barely escapes being hanged by the mob by running to an elaborate system of caves before eventually giving up. The bodies are not found until years later.

What sets Lester apart from the usual crop of perverts, murderers, etc. are moments of extreme tenderness and rawness with Lester when he's alone in the woods. These moments help prevent the reader from totally turning on the character. Lydia Cooper writes in her book *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy* that Lester Ballard is presented to readers as a man feeling things readers are familiar with. After all, he is just a "A child of God much like yourself perhaps" (McCarthy 4). Cooper writes, "In stripping away the veneer of civilization, McCarthy reveals the uncivilized horrors in humankind's dark heart, but the darkest of hearts possesses an equally present yearning for companionship, respect, and love. Readers are encouraged to empathize with these instinctive desires and thus to recognize the shared bond between all humans" (20). Lester Ballard, though an utterly deplorable human being, manages to keep readers always invested in him. Though no one would openly root for him to keep getting away with his actions, most readers probably feel sorry for him more than anything else.

A last example is Josie Sigler's Joe from her story "Breakneck Road." Joe, an unemployed but still mostly functioning alcoholic, finds a baby in the snow on his way home. He, his wife, and his sickly mother-in-law take the kid in, and they quickly fall in love with the little boy, naming him Joe Jr. When Joe goes out for supplies, the reader learns that he supports his family by breaking into people's houses, always making sure to take only as much as they need. When he robs a series of houses to get money to buy supplies for the baby, the readers find themselves hoping he will get away with the crime. Joe and Cherry are eventually discovered by Joe Jr's actual parents, Randy, a dangerous man with an even worse drinking problem than Joe's, and his teenage girlfriend, the mother of the baby. Joe and Sherry are dirt poor, but they are

much better off than the actual parents who went so far as to leave the baby outside. Joe states plainly several times that he has been in as bad of a state as Randy multiple times, so he doesn't hold it against him. Joe and Cherry can't bear the thought of giving the baby back, but they do. Joe then makes the decision at the end of the story to steal the child back and make a run for it with his family, finally giving them all a chance to escape Breakneck Road.

King explains in *On Writing* his idea that writers should "construct your own toolbox and then build up enough muscle so you can carry it with you" (114). The idea is that writers can then take their toolboxes and fill them with the tools that best suit their writing abilities. An analysis of McTeague, Lester Ballard, Joe, and their stories can reveal several tools that authors can use to make flawed or imperfect characters seem sympathetic even when they are doing bad things. One of the easiest ways an author can make a character seem more sympathetic is by simply adding in an antagonist that is a much worse person than the protagonist. There must be some kind of antagonistic factor in place that necessitates the otherwise questionable behavior of the "good" guy. McTeague faces antagonism from various angles, but the majority of his woes are caused by his wife Trina and his supposed best friend Marcus Schouler, Trina's cousin and suitor. Trina refuses to divvy up any of her vast wealth, watching their family drop lower and lower, baffling McTeague, and Marcus is the cause of their financial woes, telling on McTeague and costing him his practice. These two characters appear malevolent compared to the docile McTeague, almost forcing his eventual eruption. Lester Ballard's actions are harder to come to grips with, primarily because his actions are so deplorable. He kills multiple young girls and then abuses their corpses, but McCarthy takes great lengths to make it clear to the reader that Ballard was driven out from society and had to learn his own ways to get by. Sheriff Fate is his primary

opposite, but Lester faces ridicule from multiple characters in the novel, including each of the women that he approaches. Each altercation explains his behavior a little more. Lester also has a friend named Reubel who beats his nine daughters because they won't stop getting pregnant. At one point Reubel even sleeps with one of his own daughters after interrupting her and a boy having sex in the woods, which somehow makes Lester's actions seem less heinous. Sigler's Joe has a clear opposite in Randy, the out of control drunk who makes Joe's alcoholism seem tame. Sure, Joe breaks into houses to support his family, but he also saved a child, the child that Randy abandoned in the snow to die. The longer Randy is on the page, the more Joe can get away with without losing the reader's support. Having characters like these to compare the protagonist to goes a long way in gaining the reader's sympathy.

Another method authors can use to help gain support for their characters is to give them weaknesses that readers can relate to and understand. McTeague is perpetually confused by the people around him and always feels threatened. His repeated phrase "You can't make small of me" reveals that he is intimidated by others and just wants to be left alone. Lester Ballard is lonely and angry. He has been cast out from society and has no one to talk to but the stars. When he abuses the first dead girl, he leans into her and "pour[s] into that waxen ear everything he'd ever thought of saying to a woman" (McCarthy 88). All he wants is for someone to listen to him or to care that he exists. Sigler's Joe is an everyman type. He's blue collar and broke. He struggles to put food on the table, to provide for his family, to fight his urges. He says multiple times that he wants to be a better man and that Joe Jr. is his way of overcoming his own father's leaving him. Each character has moments of self-reflection, whether it is McTeague feeling

inadequate, Lester feeling abandoned, or Joe wanting to be a better person, and these moments draw the readers in, almost coercing them into siding with these characters.

Some methods might not be as effective as others, and not all flawed characters need all of them. For example, a good way to rationalize a character's actions to the reader is to provide a good reason for those actions. This is especially important if those actions hurt other people. Sigler's story displays this idea with Joe's breaking into people's houses. If he were just breaking in to support himself, the reader might question his motives. However, in "Breakneck Road," it is made clear that Joe's mother-in-law is very sick, and they are taking care of her. Stealing from people is keeping this woman alive. That helps Joe's cause, but it is not until the baby becomes a part of the equation that the reader really gets on board with Joe's actions. He is now stealing money to buy supplies for the baby he rescued. At one point, he steals baby clothes because Joe Jr. does not have any. If Joe were just an alcoholic stealing money to buy more booze, he likely would not have many people supporting him. However, since his stealing is going to a good cause, supporting a rescued baby and a sick mother-in-law, his actions become much harder to judge harshly, and though the reader may wish Joe had a more respectable form of income, his motivations are as noble as they come.

A final broad tool authors can use to build support for a misbehaving character is a combination of awareness and narration. I group these two together because I think the narration dictates the level of awareness of both the character and the author. One response several classmates gave when I asked about ways flawed characters can avoid losing sympathy is by including an admission of guilt at some point. In other words, this character cannot go the entire course of the story or novel believing his or her actions are right. Moreover, the narrator also

should avoid defending the character too much. Therefore, one method authors can employ is having the character be self-aware enough to acknowledge his flaws. Joe admits nearly once a page in “Breakneck Road” that he is a drunk and mostly a failure. He looks at how messed up Randy is and recognizes himself. He acknowledges time and again that he needs to do better. In fact, that is one of his main motivations for saving Joe Jr; he wants a second chance. This awareness strikes a chord with the reader and greatly endears him or her to the character. In first-person stories like Sigler’s, the best route is to have the character/narrator occasionally speak of his insufficiencies. It prevents the voice from sounding too pretentious and guiltless, and, thus, it makes the character much more sympathetic.

This awareness can also be demonstrated in third-person narratives, though it will usually come by way of the narrator rather than the character. In *McTeague*, Norris sets up McTeague’s character in such a way that he is doomed to fail. He has no hope because he is a totally naturalistic character, a man besieged by his cursed heredity and the exacerbation of poverty and greed. Lester is described pitifully, and McCarthy makes sure to include poignant scenes where we see the man’s sadness. He howls at the stars. He cries while watching the river. He whispers sweet nothings into a dead girl’s ear. The narrator uses these scenes to describe the man and who he is, and eventually his heinous actions seem like footnotes to a tragic life. Lydia Cooper describes the narrator from *Child of God* by saying “...the narrative voice in *Child of God* seems intent on making the point that the reader ought to interpret Ballard as a sympathetic, or at least pathetic, man – an interpretation that grows increasingly absurd as Ballard’s depravity sinks to new depths, literally and metaphorically” (41). In both of these novels, an omniscient narrator knows what is going to happen from the beginning and warns readers by explaining the

hopelessness of the characters. From the very start there is an admission of something amiss, of some disorder or imbalance, and it helps the reader forgive the actions of McTeague and Lester.

Those listed above are only a few of the tactics that authors can use to make characters more sympathetic, but it is important to note that not every bad action can be glossed over and not all flawed characters can be saved. There is a subjective hierarchy of misdeeds. Joe robs houses, but he only takes as much as he needs. Most people can eventually understand that. After all, no one is really getting hurt. However, there is no real way to suggest that what Lester does to those girls is just, nor can one really argue that McTeague has earned the right to kill his wife and her cousin. Nonetheless, adding in weaknesses helps. Providing understandable motivations, like the fact that McTeague's wife is forcing him to starve because of her greed, gives him more leeway. However, it seems like there are definite lines that characters cannot cross. For instance, murder is much harder to explain than stealing. Sexual abuse is much harder to overlook than verbal abuse. Hurting children is almost never something a character can come back from. This is not to say that characters should never commit these actions. Often a story will call for some terrible deeds from characters. However, if one is trying to write a sympathetic flawed character, it would be best to avoid certain types of actions such as murder and rape.

A good example of a flawed character who does not remain sympathetic is the narrator, Clay, from Bret Easton-Ellis' novels *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*. Over the course of these two novels that are separated by over two decades of both real and fictional time, Clay gradually becomes more and more depraved. In the first novel, he escapes with some sympathy intact because though he watches an underage girl get raped and a friend get murdered, he doesn't participate and actually seems upset about it all, though he recovers quickly. However, in

the sequel, Clay has grown hardened by his surroundings, and by the end of the book, he has turned over a childhood friend to be murdered, and he himself has raped at least three different people. All of this is described in detail. Easton-Ellis wrote both of these novels from Clay's first-person perspective, and Clay never shows any remorse or growth or self-awareness. By the end of the second novel the reader realizes he has just been witness to several hundred pages of deplorable actions performed by an utterly unsympathetic character, resulting in an unpleasant and disappointing reading. This character shows how some actions are harder to come back from than others, but also, he represents several ways authors can fail to generate sympathy from the reader.

This essay would be incomplete if I did not also include some of the common mistakes authors make when writing these characters. I asked my classmates if there are particular ways that characters can lose them. In essence, are there specific don'ts to go along with the above list of dos? One common response is something I discussed above. If the character and/or narrator acts as though he or she is oblivious to the terrible actions going on, many readers will turn on a character. Along that same line, several people mentioned they would turn on a character if the narrative seemed to encourage dislike. So, just like authors should avoid overly defending their characters, they should also resist the urge to pile on them. Readers also have a problem with the stereotypical, like a man who drinks too much and beats his wife. They've seen that before, so it would take a special turn by the author to escape the typical response. It's also important that the character seem real. Writing characters who do bad things is liberating in a way because the author can get away with things with this character that he is not be able to with others. However, unrealistically bad characters or characters in unrealistically bad environments tend to

give readers trouble. Finally, the most obvious but unhelpful way to lose a reader is a uninteresting story. It goes without saying that it is important for the story to be interesting, but again, never assume the obvious. A character is much more likely to get away with things with the reader if the author has crafted an exciting and enjoyable story. Good writing can right a lot of wrongs.

All of us who write fiction have particular goals in mind. My primary goal is to provoke an emotional response from readers that lasts for quite some time after the story is over. I don't necessarily care if they remember all of the plot details or character names, but I want them to remember what they felt when reading the story. I have learned that it is a lot easier to induce this response if I surprise them, if I shock them with emotion. For this reason, I treat my own stories as personal social experiments. What would happen if I threw a shy, middle-aged widower into the bedroom with a younger, sexier couple who wants to sleep with him? How would he react? How will the reader react? I do this with all of my characters. How will Jeb's decision to sodomize his girlfriend with a racist stick figure hit my audience? People usually react more strongly to the negative actions of complex characters. What I want to do is show readers that these characters are real people, that any of us is capable of these horrible actions. In order to do that, the characters have to remain sympathetic at all times. Norris, McCarthy, and Sigler have all demonstrated that characters of varying degrees of depravity can remain sympathetic, maybe even likable, if they are written in the right way and with the proper characterization. I'm not quite ready to write about a character who crosses those last lines of subjectivity, the ones who do truly terrible, hurtful things like McTeague and Lester Ballard. However, with certain tools at my disposal, I like to think I could and that maybe, just maybe,

my readers will find themselves uncomfortable with how much they support these people. Our people.

GRAVERY

“She kept the artsy stuff up here and the headstones around back,” the man says out of the side of his mouth. “Maybe she thought that would be more discreet.”

“Whole headstones?”

“Whole headstones. Names intact. Dates intact. Dirt still stuck to the bottom.”

The two of them, the man and his new girlfriend, stand alone in the shadowy front yard of a small house surrounded by a quiet neighborhood, hands on their hips in the dark night lit only by fogged streetlights. The yard has the look of an overcrowded memorial garden glowing slightly in the darkness. Tiny green walking paths wind in disorganized circles around stone angels, dry water fountains, and a number of other sculptures, all of various sizes and levels of decay. There’s barely any room to walk, and the yard is fenced in by yellow police tape.

The man points to a knee-high angel with a bulging belly and blank eyes. “See that one there?” The woman walks over to it and kneels beside it. She cups the angel’s head like a child’s and glances over her shoulder at him. “She took that one from the grave of a Civil War vet. Guy was only nineteen.” He takes a few steps to his left. “See this one?” The woman walks to him where he’s standing over a heart-shaped rock engraved with a cursive letter R. “This one here came from two counties over off the grave of a stillborn. And that one?” He points at something almost hidden by the shadow of the house. “Got that one off her own granddaddy’s.”

The woman slips her arm through the man’s. She breathes in the quiet and whispers, “It even sounds like a goddamn cemetery.”

“Ain’t no dead folks here.”

“I know that.”

“You sound disappointed.”

She slides away from him and browses the spread like it’s a Saturday yard sale. He can hear her humming to herself. She’s right, he thinks. He can feel the density of the silence. A kind of weight, heavy and sodden. A humidity of no sound. He grinds his teeth for the noise of it.

“Where’d she get this one?”

The man looks down at an ornate vase stuffed with large granite flowers lying on its side. A bouquet for the dead, such a pale white it glows. “I’m not sure. That one wasn’t mentioned in the article.”

“I think I want one of these one day,” she says.

“What? When you die?”

She’s on her knees by the flowers, the vase sideways on the ground, flowers unspilled. She stands them up. The stone is heavy and discolored with dampness on one side from the wet grass. “Sure. Or before then. It’s kind of beautiful.”

“You want a dead man’s flowers.”

“Not these, necessarily.” She leans her face into the flowers and inhales. “They smell like roses.”

He shivers. “They’re just rocks.”

She nods and lets them drop with a thump, taking his hand to let him lead her around the corner of the house. She gasps when she sees the neatly lined rows of headstones that fill the backyard. The streetlights barely reach around the house, casting giant shadows that loom over narrow lines of grass crisscrossing through the pale stones. He hands her the flashlight he’d stashed in his back pocket.

He starts to tell her more facts pilfered from the article in the local paper about how the woman got away with selling these artifacts online for years before they caught her. He wants to tell her about how he got the listing on the house after the bank foreclosed and that it's his to sell once they remove the stones, but she shushes him and heads down the first row.

He hurries after her. The paths are so narrow that they have to put one foot in front of the other in some places. The headstones are separated by type, flat or vertical, wide or narrow, short or tall, creating different sections, giving the yard a kind of engineered over-crowding. Some of the stones are huge, and the man wonders how one person collected these. She would have needed help. "Equipment and time," he murmurs.

"What?"

"Equipment and time."

He follows a few steps behind the woman as she walks up and down each row, mouthing the names and dates to herself, the yellow from the flashlight quivering in front of her. She turns the corners sharply like a soldier at attention, and he has to catch her once because she turns herself off-balance. He starts to laugh, but she shushes him again.

"How long has she been doing this?" she whispers. "Years?" She's stopped in front of an ancient headstone barely legible underneath stains and fading, the name a blur of half-letters, the dates 18-something to something-73. She runs a hand over the front of it, reading it like Braille, hoping her fingers can see what time has erased.

"Decades," he whispers back. "At least twenty years. She's been all over the state."

“They’re beautiful. It’s kind of beautiful. Don’t you think?” She looks at him, eyes wide, fingers still reading. Lips pursed. He notices a vein on her temple, pulsating in the darkness. She looks like a child.

The man glances around. “This grass is going to take years to grow back after they remove the slabs. It’s going to kill the roots. Hard to sell dead grass.”

She touches his chin. “All you think about is selling things.”

“I brought you here because I knew you’d say that.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I knew you’d appreciate what she’s done.”

She stares at him. Shines the light in his face. Knocks his hand away when he tries to shield his eyes. “I’m beginning to think you forget to look at things,” she says. “Like you see them but you’re not really looking.”

“What’s that mean?” He grabs the flashlight from her and points it at the ground. She doesn’t answer him and turns in a quick about-face. She hurries off down the nearest row of headstones, tripping and stumbling in the dark. The man points the flashlight at her feet, trying to help her, but she keeps running from the dancing beam. She stumbles. Falls. Gets back up and turns the corner to the front of the house.

The man takes a look around him, at stolen stones and people’s lives, at graveyards crammed into a manufactured imitation, and all he can think about is the state of the dying grass. The pale yellow squares of the transplanted dead and their impact on the resale value of the land. He shakes his head and follows the woman to the front yard, trying to see what she sees in the stones.

She stands bent at the waist with her back to him, struggling with something and taking rapid, tiny steps toward the street. He calls out and hurries to her, and she looks back at him without stopping. In her arms, dragging her down with its damp weight and awkward shape, is the bouquet of rock flowers, the petals glinting slightly in the dim orange light. She meets his eyes, her chest heaving from exertion. Her face dares him to say what they both know he is thinking, that she's robbing something already stolen.

The man takes a quick look around the neighborhood and exhales. He waves at a car passing slowly by, the passengers all staring, the driver hunched over the wheel to get a better look. Seconds tick as the car disappears, and the man realizes the woman is still struggling with the dead weight of the stone, refusing to drop the flowers. He reaches around her to lift the yellow police tape.

Then she ducks under without a word and waddles away from him, bent over, lurching sideways into the street, off-balance and uneven, but moving ever forward and away from him, leaving him there to wonder if the dead know when their graves are robbed, if they can feel that something is missing.

The man looks back and notices the pale outline where the flowers were, but he can't tell what was there. It's just a faded spot in the grass.

STICK FOLK LOVE

Jeb sits on the porch swing, whistling and gently rocking back and forth, occasionally spitting tobacco juice over the railing. He whittles at a block of wood fashioned into the shape of a woman with slender legs, elegant hips, giant breasts. Her hands and feet are still blocks, and her hair is crudely outlined, barely done at all. She's not quite yet a person, not quite yet given over to life. Her breasts are plump and round, defying gravity in their refusal to droop, and realistic stretch marks slightly mar the smoothness of each. Jeb focuses his attention on the nipples. The areolas are neatly rounded and the nipples long, as if the stick-woman is cold and would shiver if she could.

The woman has no face, but still, she is some kind of beautiful.

I'm lying next to his feet, staring at the chipped ceiling paint and humming, the rough floor boards creasing and pinching at my back. I make up songs when I hum, notes that subtly resemble real songs but aren't. Occasionally Jeb joins in, and somehow our notes are often close enough to sound harmonious.

"What do you think?" he asks, and he points the breasts of the stick-woman out at me, proud of his knowledge of mammary geography. "I made them like yours."

I glance at his hands and stop humming long enough to say, "My nipples aren't hard, and you know I don't have stretch marks."

"*Yet*," he says. "You don't have them *yet*. These are your babies in the future."

"Well, that's encouraging."

He spits and folds up his knife, then opens it again. "I need to work on her pussy. I don't suppose you'd model for me?" He grins, his crooked teeth stained with tobacco juice.

I turn my face toward him. “You gonna copy my current one or my future one?”

He laughs, spits, rubs his thumb over the wooden breasts with their fine points. “I’d need to look first, then decide.”

I know he’s just trying to push my buttons, that he loves getting me angry so that he can make up with me. His favorite is when I get mad enough to punch him, and his eye is still faintly yellow underneath from the last time he made me that mad. He loves my temper.

“You keep that up, and you might not see mine again for quite some time.”

We both know I’m not really mad, but he still frowns, wounded, and I hate how big of a baby he can be. “I reckon I can do it on my own, Grace, but what’s the fun in that?” He looks at my face, then drops his eyes to the stick-woman. He begins to work on her hands.

The hands always give him trouble, but not as much trouble as the feet. He spends hours and hours making microscopic changes, smoothing the arches, rounding the heels. He saves the toes for last. He told me once how he hates the big toe because he can never get it to look right, that it always looks like a flat thumb. And he’s right. It always does.

“You know I hate when you pout,” I say. Then I hum something similar to “Rock-a-bye Baby.”

He doesn’t answer. He’s making her right hand into a tiny fist. His face is determined, his jaw set and shoulders stooped, his neck bent. He’ll spend hours in that position, carving their hands, fingers, and toes. He gets giant knots in his neck and shoulders that take me forever to knead out. “Rub me out, baby,” he’ll say. “Just a quick rub out.” But it’s never quick, and we both know it. He grunts and groans and winces as I dig in my fingers and knuckles, my elbow on the big ones, and when I’m done, he goes right back to work.

“Actually, I don’t care if you pout.”

“I know you don’t,” he says, and we pass several moments without conversation. I hum, and I hum, and he scrapes away at the wood, his strong hands making shape out of nothing. After a few moments, he says, “Hey,” and when I don’t look over, he says again, “Hey.”

I sigh and look up at him. He has finished both hands, tightening them into little clinched fists, with the exception of the middle fingers, which are flipping me off. I smile at him. “Cute.”

“Even my stick-lady here thinks you deserve a big ah-fuck ah-you.” The way he drags out the words makes me laugh, and, finally, he laughs too.

The flatness of her mid-section is beautiful. The lack of detail there is the most stunning part of the figure. Other than her giant breasts, she is sexless. Faceless and sexless, but so angry at me, her middle fingers pointing at the sky to prove it. “I like her,” I say. “She’s like my dream woman. She’s an action-figure for female defiance.”

“She’d be more defiant with a pussy,” he says.

I sort of agree with him in that I think she’d have some kind of weapon, but I don’t say this to Jeb. It would only encourage him. “How are you going to do the feet?”

He runs his thumb over her breasts, down her stomach with its protruding navel, between her legs. He turns her over so I can see her tight, round cheeks, smooth and glossy. “I don’t know. I got an idea for her, though. I was thinking of making her feet like those Chinese women’s feet. You know the ones I’m talking about?”

“Lotus feet,” I say more to myself than to him. “Foot-binding.”

“Exactly. Then I wouldn’t have to worry about the toes, you know?”

“It would make it so much easier for you,” I say. “You could give her a nice, big pussy and lotus feet to go with her stretch-marked tits. She’d be almost perfect.”

I don’t know how Jeb knows about foot-binding, about the golden lotus or the lotus gait. He’s a hick who has only left the state once, but he always surprises me with his knowledge, especially about the manipulating and ornamenting of women. He knows so many things that he shouldn’t.

“It ain’t like that, Grace,” he says, again. “I just don’t like making the toes.” He spits juice over the railing.

“I know you don’t, baby.”

“Wouldn’t it make her more ladylike? More feminine and beautiful and all that? Isn’t that what it was all about?”

I know he’s serious, that he’s not trying to make me angry this time, that he’s not trying to push my buttons, and I wonder if that is why his words make me so angry. Sometimes being stupid is worse than just being an ass.

“You know some of the lotus descendants still exist?” I say. “It was thought to be an honor for the eldest daughter of a poor family.”

“That right?” He spits, his head still bent. His voice tells me he already knows, but I go on anyway.

“She’d be a lady. She’d never have to work. Her one job would be her beauty, to be feminine. Her sisters, her normal-footed, plain and forgettable sisters, would go work in the fields. She never would.”

“All that in one of your history books?”

I sit up with my back to him but don't answer. Him and his internet again.

"Sounds like a pretty good set-up," he adds.

"Other than being a cripple."

"Goddammit, Grace. You know I just don't like making the toes."

I hum softly and think about how even today some women will cut off their pinky toes to better fit into high heels. Some traditions never die; they just learn to hide better.

"You really think my titties will look like that in the future?" I turn my head toward him for a second and then get up without waiting for an answer and walk into the house, *my* house filled with all of *his* things. My walls were bare when he moved in, but he's put up shelves on all the walls and has stacked them full of his wooden figures – animals, people, wagons and ships. Everything you can imagine, stiff and wooden and shelved for no one but us to gawk at. With its walls full of stickfolk – women, men, children, some with hinged joints and some without, some with clothing and some naked – my house looks like a sad toy shop. At night, the shadows of his figures move, and Jeb gets scared of his own creations. He always leaves lights on and darts from room to room like he's a phantom himself. I wonder if that's why he wants to cripple the new stickwoman, so he won't have to be afraid of her shadow chasing him in the night.

I grab a beer from the fridge and an apple and a knife and sit down in front of the television. I stare at the screen, at a man on a cooking show preparing some fancy cuisine with tiny portions. I cut slices off the apple, not entirely sure if I'm really upset or why.

Jeb and I weren't always together. We were once other people with other lives. I was still learning to teach, watching people, studying them. Jeb was a carpenter, specializing in cabinets.

He was married to a woman who loved him until he knocked it out of her, and I suppose I was in the same boat as she was, married to a man who thought he owned me, but people change.

I got a job at the community college, little pay but little responsibility, and tried to forget my past. I wish I could say Jeb had been one of my students, that that's how we met. Sometimes I long for a storybook life. In reality, I met him when we were both drunk but only he was trying to get sober, and I can't explain how it all happened. How he went from staying the night to staying the weekend. How staying the weekend turned into keeping a few of his things here. How he one day stopped looking for a job making cabinets and started the carving. His hobby turned into his craft. I told myself at first that I was just tolerating him, that I was helping him get back on his feet. I wouldn't admit that I liked having him around, that I enjoyed him. And now my empty house has shelves full of creepy wooden toys that Jeb swears can move, and I'm living with a man who thinks he's smarter than he really is.

Back when Jeb was married, he drank a lot, probably too much. It was a real reciprocal deal. He hit her, and she hit him back, until one day she had nothing left to fight for. When she left him after he lost his job refinishing kitchens, he started trying to get sober and took to carving stick-figures full-time. Whenever I ask to talk about the people we used to be, he gets frowned up and grabs his tools. It's like he carves himself away from who he used to be. In a cruel twist of fate, now I'm the one always drinking. Sometimes while I'm bent over papers, I look over at him as he smiles and carves, and I'm tempted to brandish my sweating beer bottles at him, taunting, enticing. But I never do.

Now, my house feels more like his than mine, filled with more of his things, occupied more often by him than me because I'm always working. He's always here, surrounded by his

wooden family. I keep telling myself it's better than an empty house, better than empty walls holding empty furniture, but sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't like him more if he still drank.

He shuffles in behind me, past me into the spare bedroom that I've let him make into a workshop. He hasn't had a job in months, visiting the unemployment office just often enough to keep the checks coming, but he treats the workshop like his office, and he works more hours a day than I do. I humor him with his hobby, with his ability to bring forth life out of wood, and every now and then he manages to sell one on eBay for a few bucks. He calls it his art and swears someone will take notice one day, and I smile at his finished pieces. I rub his shoulders when the knots get really bad. And all-the-while I go to work at the community college where I teach American history to teenagers and thirty-somethings who can't get into school anywhere else, rarely saying a word about how stupid I think he is, though I think it all the time.

An hour later, he comes out of his workroom, a smile on his face. "Grace, you remember that black boy I finished a few weeks back?"

I nod, sipping my beer. Jeb's favorite thing is to make obscene figures, ones that will make people blush, that will piss people off. He likes women with big pussies, some with surprisingly realistic mounds of pubic hair or giant clits, and he loves to carve males with disproportionally huge penises. Most of these figures are only slightly taller than your average Barbie, and somehow they all fit into your hand snugly, like they belong there.

Lately, he's been working with the heart of a persimmon tree that fell behind the house last fall, relishing in the black-blood color of the wood. "Did you know the genus of this tree, *Diospyros*, comes from Greek words that mean divine fruit?" he asked me when the lightning struck it down. It was still smoking faintly as we stood over it. There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

I stared at him and shook my head, wondering if it's safe for him to be on the internet so much.

He smiled. "Yup. They also say you can tell how severe the next winter will be by slicing open a persimmon seed." He took out a pocket knife and sliced open one of the fallen fruits that we normally ignored until they rotted. He opened the seed and stared at it, then up at the sky, then back at his hand.

"Well?" I asked.

"Hell, I can't read this shit. I'm no expert," he said with a grin. "But I can safely say, it's going to be cold." That day in the yard, as he stood there with the open seed in his palm, I called him an idiot and went inside, disgusted at him for again pretending to know anything. He later looked it up online and decided the winter would be a harsh one filled with storms and trials, citing a Native American folk tale to prove it. And the son of a bitch ended up being right.

He's taken to making dark-skinned people of various shapes and sizes from the dark wood of this tree, each figure stereotyped to the nth degree. He calls them his black army, his "brothers and sisters from the tree out back." I don't understand his fascination with them.

I've never heard him actually call anybody a nigger, never heard him badmouth any of the ones that live all along the dirt road on either side of us. It's like he takes his hatred out on the figures, men and women both black and white, in order to treat the real thing better. I can't help but hate him for this. I've told him to let it out, whatever rage, hate, or unfairness he may have, but he just smiles at me with stained teeth and bends his head over whatever life he holds in his hands, chipping away at it as he sees fit. His silence always makes me think about myself,

makes me wonder about my own prejudices, and I don't like it. I often wonder what happened to his anger, to the rage he used to have. How did it all just disappear?

His black women, with their large-lipped mouths, are draped with hanging breasts and giant nipples, unrealistically round hips and enormous asses. The men, long-limbed and gangly, are weighed down by cartoonish penises and large feet. He thinks they're hilarious. He brings each one out to me when he's finished, giggling like a schoolboy who has done something his mama would beat him for. He wants me to touch them, to rub my hands over the breasts and the asses and the giant dicks. He gets turned on feeling their smooth wooden skin.

I'm often startled at the near-accuracy of his exaggerations, the comical shapes of the figures. I catch myself feeling the disdain for them that he refuses to have. Every so often he'll bring me a particularly offensive figure, and behind the smile on his face there's something else, some expression I can't decipher, almost like he's challenging me to respond a certain way. Like he's goading me, but I don't know what about.

The black boy he's talking about is a figure he made to mirror one of the kids down the road. The figure is a model of everything racist, so exaggerated it is nothing more than a caricature of itself. The boy has a gaping hole of a mouth that grins stupidly, long spindly arms and legs, wide hands and flat feet, and a small afro, but it's hard to notice anything other than the penis that reaches past his knees. Somehow, in an act of artistic blind luck, the wood making up the boy's member is much darker than the rest of him, so much darker that it seems to glow in its blackness. The boy is bowlegged, and he bends slightly at the waist as if his burden causes him immense strain.

Jeb, in the mania he often experiences after finishing a particularly offensive figure, insisted that we let the boy, named Jerome after Jeb's favorite football star, watch us fuck. Assuming this was an innocent request and that the figure would merely rest on our dresser and watch from a distance, I agreed and lay down on the bed waiting for him. Instead of his usual routine of adorable clumsy foreplay, fumbling around until I mercifully make him stop, Jeb proceeded to turn me over and enter me from behind, forcing my face into the pillow. Seconds later, I felt the hard coldness of the boy's wooden penis poking at my asshole as Jeb taunted me. "Oh yeah. Here comes the hammer. Here comes the black hammer. Here comes the big, black-dicked boy from down the street." His words shocked and angered me, and Jerome's invasion of my ass angered me even more. The anger scared me, but I let Jeb do it anyway, and I'm still not sure why. It was almost like I didn't hate it, like I hated Jeb for making me realize I didn't hate it. I remained there on my knees with my face in the pillow, refusing to make a sound as Jeb and Jerome used me. Jeb was the only one I heard grunting, one hand on my hip and the other controlling Jerome, who was innocent, a pawn in the hands of a maniacal woodsmith. The second Jeb finished, I turned on him and knocked the figure from his hand before going after his face.

This is how he got the black eye.

He stood there, grinning and rubbing his eye, and I knew he wanted to ask if it was as good for me.

"I remember Jerome, baby," I say, my third beer sloshing heavily in my stomach. "He's hard to forget."

Jeb brandishes the boy at me, Jerome's darkly glowing penis winking in my direction. "Just sold the little fella for thirty-seven-fifty." He dances a little jig, making Jerome dance along with him, the boy's rigid limbs waving stiffly from side-to-side, and I wonder if Jeb realizes how offensive his words could be to some people. Jeb may be stupid, but he knows more than he should. I think he is probably innocent, that the glee on his face is over the sale of a piece of art and not a *boy*, but I wonder about his motivation. Why these black figures of his? What point is he trying to make?

"We should celebrate," he says.

"That didn't work out so great for you last time," I say. "Why don't we let Jerome keep that thing to himself?"

Jeb's babyish pout threatens to resurface. "You don't give one goddamn about my work, do you?" I say nothing, fuming in silence. He paws at the floor with his boot, Jerome's lightning rod aimed at the ground. "Can we at least fuck?" Jeb asks, his eyes pointed at his feet.

I smile at him and reach out my hand for Jerome. Jeb grins and hands him over. Looking up at Jeb, I take Jerome in my hands, working my fingers up and down his exaggerated length. He's maybe a foot tall, his stooped back costing him some height, but the length between his legs is laughable, ridiculous. Is Jeb really that insecure?

Jeb licks his lips, and I smell him, a mixture of sweat and tobacco. I speed up my fingers as Jeb's crotch bulges. He leans toward me for a kiss, and just as I feel his breath on my cheek, I look him in the eye and snap Jerome's big black dick right off of his wooden body.

Jeb is speechless, stabbed. “Don’t worry, baby,” I say as I hand him the broken boy and his cartoon penis. “It’s not his dick right *now*. It’s his big boy in the future.” I don’t know what I mean, but I don’t have to.

Jeb stares at the figure in his hands for several moments before dropping him on the couch and walking out, not even taking the time to slam the door. The way the little man still grins without a penis, with a bloodless wound splintered in his middle, turns my stomach. I pity him for being the victim of something he has nothing to do with.

Two hours later, it’s dark outside, and Jeb still hasn’t returned. I pretend he’s getting drunk, that he’s going to come home and try to knock me around even though he’s never so much as bruised me on purpose, to make me pay for breaking his toy.

Several more beers have made my belly full and my legs heavy as I slip my way into Jeb’s workroom. Blocks of wood of various sizes and shades are stacked in the corner. Littered across the room are various projects in different stages of completion. So many disfigured wooden shapes, stricken like poor folks in a crowded slum. Among them are the tiny hinges he sometimes uses to make limbs that bend and other tools of his trade that I don’t know the use of. Top-of-the-line items bought with my money, shipped to my house.

Figures lay scattered all over the floor, along shelves on the walls, piled next to the computer on the desk against the wall. The only other furniture in the room is a single wooden chair and a small box that holds Jeb’s knives and sandpaper gloves. As I look around the room at the workspace so cluttered but so neat, I admire Jeb’s skill. I never tell him how good his work is. I never have to. He knows he’s good. But as I look around the room and realize that the only

things in my house are the things he's made, it becomes clear that what he calls his art may actually be just that. These figures, incomplete and scattered lifelessly about his office prove that. They're not the same as the ones sitting on the shelves in the living room, the ones whose shadows seem to dance and move. The ones that are alive.

I let myself admit I'm afraid that Jeb won't come back. That he might take them all with him. That my house will become empty again.

On the chair, flat on her back with her legs splayed, is the sexless woman from the porch. Her shapely breasts stare at the ceiling, and her arms stick straight up, flipping off the entire world above her. I pick her up. She's so pale she reflects the light of the room. She still has no face, no mouth or expression, but Jeb has finished her hair and begun her eyes, carved dead circles on either side of a dainty nose. I rub my thumb over her pointy nipples, then her sexless crotch, relishing in the smoothness. I envy her cold eyes, her perfect breasts, the void between her legs. I try to envision my face on her body, but I can't make it fit. Her jaw is too round, her eyes too open. She is not me. She is not alive.

As my eyes and thumbs travel down her body, over the flat stomach and sculpted legs, I reach the two, small blocks where Jeb has laid the groundwork for her deformed feet. His tribute to the tradition of the golden lotus. I drop to my knees and set her on the chair, surprised at her ability to stand on her own, impressed yet again by Jeb's skill. But as soon as I take away my hand, I feel an immediate jolt of fear for her safety. She looks so beautiful and feminine but so tragically deformed and helpless despite the rebellious finger on each hand that dares the world to try her. She could topple at any moment and shatter, lost to the world. I scoop her up and run back into the living room.

Jerome is face down on the couch, his bent waist forcing his ass up in the air – his maker’s favorite position. I drop to the floor and lift him gently, whispering, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I need you, we need you, I’m sorry.” I stand him up on the couch, proud and thankful for Jeb’s ability to give the boy sturdy, flat feet. I take my faceless beauty and introduce her to Jerome, fully aware I am just a child playing in her room while her parents fight down the hall, a helpless someone trying to change things bigger than herself. Some traditions never die.

As tentatively as my drunken hands allow, I turn Jerome so that his back is to the stickwoman and her block feet. I check over my shoulder for Jeb, hoping he will come back, whether angry or sad or horny, just back in my empty house full of his things.

I help the stickwoman climb on Jerome’s back, whispering encouragement. “There, there. No one can hurt you once you can run.” I secure them to one another with electrical tape, and I set Jerome back on his feet. He leans, threatening to topple, but the faceless woman’s feet drag the ground and hold them both up. The going will be slow, but their balance will be steady.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jeb leaning in the doorway, watching me.

I stand to pull the cord on the ceiling fan to turn off the light and allow myself to lean as though I may fall over. As my rubbery legs give way, I wonder for a long second if he will catch me or if he will let me crash to the floor, and then his arms wrap around me. I look up at Jeb as he lowers me back to the floor, and I say, “I have to help her. You’ve maimed her to get back at me, haven’t you?”

Jeb stares at me in silence before sliding down beside me.

“I wish you’d at least given her hinges so she could hold on, Jeb. All she can do now is flip off the whole goddamn world.”

Between us on the floor, the couple leans toward the door. They look straight ahead, ready to face anything, stuck to one another without embracing, without love, held together by the need for survival. The woman glows mouthless in the pale light, and Jerome grins as he carries her. The two of us sit there in the near-dark next to the two of them, and I lean my head over so that it rests on Jeb's shoulder. "They almost make a pretty couple," I whisper.

"I tried to get drunk," he says. "Couldn't stomach it. Lost the taste for it I guess."

"Why couldn't you just give her some feet, Jeb?"

"I don't like making the toes."

"I know you don't, baby, but this isn't right."

Jeb looks at the room around us with its shelves and shelves of figures. "You got that backwards anyhow," he says quietly, pointing at the couple. He leans back against the couch as I stare at the figures between us, and I lift my head to look at him in confusion. "The wrong one is doing the carrying," he explains.

"I wish I hadn't broken him," I say.

The dim light casts shadows all across the room. The shadows of the couple stand tall and blend together as they lean toward the door, eager to spring. The stickwoman's arms and legs are rigid flags refusing to hold on, and the way she lets her middle fingers talk for her makes her seem dangerous, defiant. Jerome grins with his open mouth facing the world as he runs, his flat feet sturdy, his limbs firm and ready. Jeb closes his eyes, and I wonder what he's most afraid of, me or the shadows of his creations. Eventually, I know I will see their shadows run far from this place. All I have to do is wait.

I hold out my hand to Jeb. “Help me up.” He looks over at me and climbs stiffly to his feet. He pulls my dead weight up to him, and I touch his face and then grab his shoulder to turn him around. He yields easily. His back to me, I push on his shoulder to bend him over slightly. I ask him if he’s ready and jump before he answers. My legs heavy, I barely leave the ground and bump into him hard, nearly knocking us both over. He turns, and for a second I think he’s going to hit me, and I realize that’s not what I want after all. I just want to climb on his back, to jump on him and let him carry me.

“What the fuck are you trying to do?” he asks. He stares at me, through me, as we stand there in the dark. His face looks kind, gentle. I hardly recognize him.

I motion for him to come closer. “Carry me,” I say. “Let’s run together.” I grab the couple from the floor and hold them in his direction.

Without another word, he turns, drops to his knees in front of me, and offers me his hands. I climb on and wrap my arms tightly around his chest. He stands and faces the door.

“Now what?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Run.”

WHAT MEN DO

Charlie Reynolds chews on his fingernails as he sits on the edge of a bed not his own, shifting his eyes from the glass in his hand to the feet whirling around the room in front of him as he taps his own foot without rhythm.

Before him, around him, his client Mark Douglas and his wife Sara are dancing. They hold each other tight, her head on his shoulder, his hand on the small of her back, and they twirl and sway about the room with a grace that Charlie can't comprehend. Mark takes Sara by the hand and spins her out until their fingers are barely touching and then wraps her back in tight, and she laughs, and they kiss as Charlie watches.

"Mark, I do believe Charlie is nervous."

"I believe he is, too."

Charlie shrugs. Sara has removed her shoes. Her toes end in dark red nails and are wrinkled from the tightness of her discarded heels. Mark is in his deep, gray socks, sliding across the floor, followed closely by Sara's bare feet and toes. "I'm not nervous," Charlie says.

"Then come dance with us," Sara says.

"I don't have a partner."

"You've got us," Mark says with a smile.

Charlie sips his bourbon and gets up from the bed. The couple looks him over, eyebrows raised. He nods at them and walks past to the table by the door to refill his glass. The ice cubes in the bucket are slippery. "I don't dance."

"Then start," Mark says.

Charlie clinks the slick cubes into his glass and adds bourbon. He turns to face them and watches as they hold hands an arm's-length apart, their eyes locked on him as their feet dance.

"You guys are doing great," he says.

Charlie slumps back in to his warm place on the bed. The beautiful people in front of him have invited him into their bedroom, and Charlie's mouth goes dry as he watches Sara twist and turn. He takes a drink and imagines her naked, her curves free for his eyes to roam over as much as he wants. He watches greedily and then looks away.

Sara laughs as Mark pulls her in and leans her way back, so far back that she appears about to topple over. When he pulls her up, her cheeks are flushed, her eyes twinkling. "Mark, he says he doesn't have a partner."

"That is what he said."

Charlie watches them and wonders why they've invited him over. Pity? Revenge? As the manager of their finances, Charlie knows the price of everything they own, and this new apartment – half the size of their old one, the one Charlie helped them lose – makes Charlie feel crowded despite how much larger it is than the apartment he used to share with his late wife, the home he now floats through alone. He knows Mark and Sara so well by way of the numbers, but here in their room, watching them twirl and dance, he can't help but think of them as near-strangers that he will soon see naked.

Mark and Sara break their embrace and sip their drinks. Mark goes to the record player and changes the music. The smooth jazz, driven by trumpets, by saxophones and the gruffness of Louis Armstrong, stops. The crackle of the rotating record keeps the silence of the room in an odd sort of balance. Mark lets the needle just graze the groove for the next song, making it

scratch and crackle until he catches Sara's eye and lets it drop with a playful grin. The trumpet sings, and "La Vie en Rose" plays. He cranks up the volume.

"Dance with me, Charlie." Sara is standing with her legs crossed, a hand on one hip, the other holding her glass. In this moment, Charlie almost forgets everything, his guilt and nervousness, his awkwardness. Her beauty is that undeniable, that unavoidable. The tiny black dress that shows so much of her pale skin. The blonde hair curled around her face and its small mouth. "We should dance." She doesn't seem to be talking to Charlie, her eyes fixed and wet, watching the record spin as if she is picturing something beautiful. Her voice mentions him but is directed elsewhere, like she is speaking to the music around them. He sips his drink and leans back on the bed.

"Don't you think so, Mark?"

"Don't I think what, dear?"

"Don't you think Charlie and I should dance?" Uncrossing and re-crossing her legs, swapping hands with the glass and putting the other on her other hip, she sticks out her bottom lip at Charlie.

"Charlie, you really should just dance with her." Mark looks at Charlie with a small smile like something sour is in his mouth. Mark's hair is still brown, though a lighter shade, and the sharpness of his jaw has softened. His brow has drooped. These signs of age have made him even more handsome. "Sara, I think you're right. I do believe he's nervous."

"I'm not nervous," Charlie says a bit abruptly. Mark and Sara glance at him, then at each other. They laugh in a quick, simultaneous burst, their heads thrown back, their lips pulled apart and showing shiny teeth and wet gums. Charlie watches them, acutely aware of his graying

temples and slumping shoulders, of his looming height. He is the least beautiful person in the room and they all know it.

Sara and Mark slide back into each other's arms as Louis trumpets on. Charlie steps out onto the attached terrace for a cigarette. The night is cool enough for the smoke of his breath to mix with the smoke of his cigarette. He stares at the city lights and listens to the faint notes of the trumpets. The starless sky high above him is a deep navy blanket that looks warm to Charlie, and he shivers and sips his drink. He wonders why this side of town seems to have a different color sky than the one where Mark and Sara used to live.

Behind him, he hears voices. Sara laughs and then there's breaking glass. Seconds later, the baby in the next room wails, and Sara yells at someone to check on the child. Charlie catches the words, "Oh, Christ. I forgot we don't have a girl to do that anymore," and she leaves the room as the record continues to play.

Mark walks out and stands beside Charlie. "Kids, eh? They startle so easily."

Charlie nods and holds out his lighter as he turns to face Mark. He stares into the empty bedroom.

"So, let's get right to it," Mark says. "Why are you so nervous?"

"I'm not nervous."

"Then why won't you dance with Sara?"

"She's dancing with you." Charlie taps his ashes over the balcony and watches them for as long as he can keep up.

"I'll share." Mark takes a sip of his drink and glances over at Charlie.

"I guess I'm still getting used to the idea."

Mark shrugs. "It's nothing to get used to. It's what men do."

"Share their wives?" Charlie leans back against the railing. It gives a little, and this excites him. He wonders how many times Mark and Sara have done this, how many lonely men they've invited over, but he lets the question fade without thinking to voice it.

"Not necessarily, but they help each other out. Does that involve the wife? Sometimes, yeah. Sure." He takes a long drag, and the two stand in silence, listening, until Mark laughs and pats Charlie on the shoulder. "I mean, come on. You know what you came over here for."

Charlie winces. Ever since Mark first mentioned to him the possibility that he and Sara might invite him over for this sort of thing, Charlie has been anxious, terrified that they'd go through with it. He'd made the mistake of telling Mark that he hadn't been with a woman since Marie had passed, and Mark had then told Sara, who was insistent. She'd always had her eye on him, Mark had said. Charlie can't help but feel like this whole evening has been contrived out of pity, or worse, that it's all some cruel joke. At any moment they might turn on him, laughing at how stupid he is for thinking they would ever do such a thing as this.

Charlie studies Mark's face and sips his drink, trying to process Mark's motivation.

"What are you saying?"

Mark laughs again. "What I'm saying is you can dance with my wife."

"Why?"

"Christ, Charlie. Stop thinking so much."

"Speaking of thinking, we really need to talk about your account at some point tonight,"

Charlie says, almost an aside.

Mark laughs flatly and gives Charlie one final clap on the back. “Not tonight, my friend. The money will be there tomorrow.” He flicks his half-smoked cigarette over the railing. He notices Charlie watching him and says, “Trying to quit. I’m going to go clean up Sara’s mess. Clumsy bird.”

As he walks to the door, Charlie asks, “Say, Mark, just what are you getting out of this whole thing?”

Mark pauses. He turns and looks up at the sky. “It makes Sara happy to help people, and I like to make Sara happy. Besides, we’re friends, aren’t we?” As he reaches the door, he gives Charlie another sour smile. “Just come dance with my wife, will you,” he says, and then he walks inside and slides the glass door closed.

Charlie faces the lights again and tests his weight against the railing from time to time, recapping yet again the steps that have brought him here. The move had been unsettling for Mark and Sara. As their primary financial advisor, Charlie was the one who had had to explain to Mark that with a child on the way and the state of the market that he and Sara would not be able afford their place for much longer. Charlie had handled their accounts for years, watching mostly in silence as the giant amount provided by both spouses’ parents dwindled while Mark and Sara thrived, oblivious despite the occasional half-hearted hint from Charlie. He’d always resented their wealth and happiness. He worked six days a week, his wife Marie had done the same, and, still, they barely made it some months. Then the recession hit, affecting even the Mark and Sara’s of the world, and Charlie was fascinated.

Every few weeks or so for going on five years, the two couples had gone out for drinks, and each time they’d swear it was ridiculous how rarely they got together. The girls would put

their heads close and laugh as the men drank and talked about everyone's money but Mark and Sara's. Usually near the end of the night, Mark would finish laughing at something he'd said and would ask Charlie, some leftover smile on his face, "How're things looking? Any better?" Charlie would shake his head and clear his throat to begin to speak, only to stop short when Mark would say, "That's a shame. It'll turn up. Always has, right?" Charlie never pressed to keep the conversation going.

Then Marie was gone, and Mark and Sara had their baby. The occasional dinners stopped, the market didn't get better, and Charlie watched it all continue to dwindle in silence.

At first, their portfolio had seemed untouchable to Charlie, and he assumes that was why he remained mostly silent as it disappeared, like he was afraid acknowledgement would jinx the miracle. He'd been amused watching them, more his wife's friends than his, go broke by the standards of the elite. They are still financially stable, if not wealthy, and he is still beneath them, but he feels guilty for his potential role in closing the gap. Sure, there was no act on his part, but can't inaction be just as malicious? He knew the markets and what was coming; he knew what he should have told them. Marie had thought spending time with the far more wealthy Douglasses and having Charlie manage their accounts would make the two couples more alike. She had no idea how right she was.

Now, two years after Marie's death and months after the Douglasses have moved, they still grumble about annoying everyday expenditures and still ask none of the important questions. The downgrade of an apartment, still twice the size of Charlie's, boasts expensive furniture that fails to fill the spacious rooms. It still cries prosperity, just not as much. Now Charlie, at this new

apartment, in this new bedroom, nervously wonders how a man goes about sharing a wife and why he ever would, especially with a man at least partially responsible for a lost fortune.

Charlie drinks and allows himself to wonder, Is this my fault? Surely it is. He bends at the waist, hanging over the rail as it presses painfully into his legs. He stares down the many floors to the pavement below where tiny cars slide in every direction. Blood rushes to his face, and he feels the thrill of the weight shifting away from his feet. Just before the thrill can turn to fear, Charlie hears the wicked screech of the needle being jerked away from the record. Louis' voice shuts off with the chorus still hanging, and Charlie momentarily forgets the next word.

He sighs and walks back into the bedroom to find Sara holding her infant daughter, Maddie, and dancing in the empty room. She sings and spins, crooning to the tiny bundle in her arms, the baby's face streaked with tears. "Where's Mark?" Charlie asks her.

Sara glances at him and nods to the empty bourbon bottle by the ice bucket. "I always forget that Maddie doesn't like trumpets. How can she not like trumpets? What a silly child." She kisses the girl's hair and continues to dance around the room as Charlie stands awkwardly watching her. "Can you believe I have such a silly child, Charlie?"

"She prefers your voice to Louis'."

"Give me a sip of that, will you?"

Charlie walks to her and hands her his glass. She drinks, and Charlie marvels at how tiny she seems before him, how delicate she looks with a baby in her arms. He notices the small wrinkles around her mouth and a tired blueness beneath each eye. She takes a deep drink and hands the glass back.

"She's lovely," Charlie says. "What a lovely thing."

“Thank you, Charlie.” Sara smiles at him. “I forget how much you like kids.”

Charlie steps back and eyes the lipstick on the rim of his glass before taking a sip. “I always wanted one or two, but Marie never did. She said it would just get in the way of her career. That we could never afford one.”

Sara’s face flashes cold for a second but quickly returns to normal. Charlie flushes, and he wonders how aware she is of his role in their troubles. She was always more Marie’s friend than his. He’d never paid attention to her expressions before.

“Believe me, Charlie, I know the feeling,” she sighs and twirls away from him, dancing again. “Your Marie was always a smart one. So lovely, too. How long has it been?”

Charlie hesitates, briefly taken aback that Sara doesn’t remember. Marie and Sara weren’t terribly close, but surely she would store such a detail? “Two years next month,” he says. “Same as your Maddie.”

“That’s right. How unlikely.”

“Yes.”

“It doesn’t feel like it’s been that long, does it?”

“It does to me.”

“Do you miss her?”

“More with each day.”

“That’s sweet. You and Marie were always so in love. I was always jealous of that.” Her voice conveys little emotion, and with her back turned, Charlie imagines her smirking, rolling her eyes at his loss so small and insignificant in comparison to her lost fortune. But when she

turns back to him, her eyes are red. “I wish there were more I could do,” she says. “This hardly seems enough.”

Charlie tries to make eye-contact but fails. “I still don’t know why you’re even doing *this*.”

Her face is tender as she holds out the bundle in her arms. “Would you like to hold her?”

“I shouldn’t, Marie. I’ve had too much to drink.” He backs away a step. “No, I shouldn’t.”

Sara laughs, a gentle something like she is cooing to her child. “If we let that stop us, no parents would ever hold their children. They’d all be like Mark. Here. Come. Take her.” She takes the glass from Charlie’s hand, drains it, and places it on the table by the door. She walks back to him, her dress clinging to her skin like glitter.

“Here, hold your arm like this. That’s it. Let her put her head on your shoulder. Shh, shh. You’re okay. You’re okay.” Charlie wonders if she is talking to him or the baby and lets himself be soothed regardless. “Charlie, you’re a natural.” The baby stirs in his arms and looks with sleepy eyes at the large man holding her. Charlie wonders how he could ever have been so small. He stands up straighter and rounds his shoulders, the child lost somewhere in the crook of his arm. Young Maddie yawns and closes her eyes.

Charlie grins. “She’s so warm.” He rocks on his heels, turning slightly at his hips, dancing in his own awkward way. He looks around. “Does she hate all music?”

Sara shushes him and then puts a hand on his back and rests her head on his other shoulder. She sings softly and sways slowly with Charlie. He feels warm to his core. Her voice is rough and deep, and her lips, so close to his ear, send gooseflesh down his neck. He feels himself

getting an erection and wonders what kind of man becomes aroused while holding another man's baby.

Sara presses her body tight against him. She continues to hum, and they stay like that, tight against one another, until a soft snoring emerges from Maddie. Sara smiles and pulls away from him, holding her arms out. "May I? This one is safe in dreamland once again. Lucky lady."

Charlie watches dizzily as mother and child leave the room. He glances at the empty bottle on the table and lets his shoulders sag as he looks down at his bulging pants. He goes back out on the terrace, and the cold air stings his hot face. He pulls out a cigarette, lights it, and leans back heavily against the railing. He stares at the bedroom door that he didn't close, considering what is about to happen, how they got here.

Marie's death was sudden, but not entirely unexpected. She'd had a dream that they laughed about, a dream in which she was staring at a star-filled sky that erupted in bright white light, as if all the stars in all the universe had exploded all at once, and then the sky was dark and empty, like the deep navy blanket over Charlie's head now. They'd laughed about it, and then she'd cried and told him she loved him, and somehow they both knew something bad was looming. Two weeks later, the aneurism hit, and Charlie was the one crying, having woken up to his wife dead beside him, a stiff smile on her sleeping face.

His cigarette burns his fingers, and Charlie remembers where he is, that it's cold, that Mark has gone out for more to drink, that the baby is asleep. Sara walks back into the bedroom, looks for him and smiles. She goes to the record player, and a familiar refrain begins, but there are no more trumpets. Charlie flicks his cigarette over the railing, and it turns over and over during its decent. The words of a French version of "La Vie en Rose" drift out to him.

As he walks back into the bedroom, Sara asks, her hands gripping either side of the record player, one bare foot lifted in the air behind her, “Do you speak French, Charlie?” She looks up at him, smiling, and the tired blueness beneath her eyes makes her look older but maybe more beautiful. For a second, Charlie thinks she is another woman.

Charlie joins in with the refrain. His voice shakes with a slight croaking from the tobacco smoke, but Sara smiles at him.

“Dance with me, Charlie.” She resumes her pose from earlier, her legs crossed and a hand on her hip. Her other hand she reaches out for Charlie to take.

“I don’t dance.”

“Then start.”

“I don’t have a partner.”

“Oh hush. Tonight you have me.” She gestures at him with her outstretched hand.

He walks toward her and hums along with the words. Standing so close to her, Charlie realizes how unsmooth he is, how bad his pronunciation is, how clumsily he moves. He looms over her, but she doesn’t shy away.

She laughs and grabs his hand to pull him closer to her. She is warm and soft in his arms as Charlie remains rigid in hers. “Charlie, I do believe you’re still nervous.”

“I’m not nervous.”

She rests her head against his chest and presses herself tightly against him. Charlie’s head spins, the bourbon wreaking havoc, the moment taking advantage. Her perfume is familiar, like he’s been here before, like this has already happened in another time. “What about Mark?” he asks.

“What about him?”

“Won’t he be back soon?” Charlie feels himself being moved around the room and lets her lead. He is very aware of his loafers and worries for her bare toes.

“Not likely. He said he was going to take the long route. He thought you might be more comfortable with just me here.” She hums along with the music and rubs against him, purring softly. She lifts her mouth to his neck and breathes, rubbing harder as his body responds.

“Charlie,” she breathes. “I’m not nervous.”

Charlie nods and slips off his shoes. She leads him around the room, her bare feet leading as his pale gray socks slide behind them. He tells himself he isn’t singing to Sara but to someone else, still loving Marie but just trying to make do. He imagines his wife in his arms as he slides and turns, as he hums along with Sara. He stands straighter.

“You have to stop blaming yourself, Charlie. It’s not your fault,” she whispers.

Charlie wonders which she is talking about – his loss or hers – and then he wonders if it even matters anymore who’s to blame.

BONA FIDE

“I can’t tell your mama shit no more. She done got clever.” Hammer cursed and spat a fat wad on the dry dirt. He rubbed it in with his steel-toe. “How you think she got so clever?”

I grunted at him.

“You don’t know?”

I squinted at his mud-spit and chewed on my cheek. “I reckon I might’ve told her you ain’t never told her a true thing in all her life. I reckon I might’ve said something like that.” I watched his boots to know when or if I needed to duck. I shrugged my 17-year-old shoulders. I felt strong.

He laughed. “You told your mama I been fucking around on her?” He wiggled a foot at me. “You done snitched on your old man?”

My daddy made me start calling him Hammer when I turned 13 because he said I was starting to stand up too straight. Said I needed to round my shoulders to carry the weight of his name. Said he’d be the Hammer and my back’d be the nail. Hell of a way to enter my teens.

I looked down at him, him almost six inches shorter than me, him with shoulders as big around as a barn. I nodded and spat by his foot.

Hammer put his hands on his hips and whistled. “You done let some little girl make you feel like a man, ain’t you? Now you standing up to ya old man like you got a pair. Like I ain’t the one that gave you that pair. Don’t be unwise, son.”

Don’t be unwise, son. That’d been his mantra to me since grade school. Any time I did anything acting like I might be getting some kind of independence, like my first black eye or my first girlfriend, he’d sit me down. Put a big wad of chew in, making his bottom lip swell like a

cancer had taken root. He'd spit. Put a hand on my knee and say real slow, "Don't you be getting proud on me, boy. Don't be unwise, son."

I shook my head at him. "Ain't being unwise, Hammer."

He squinted at me. I watched the vein in his neck protruding, the muscles in his jaw twitching. His fingers curling and uncurling, fisting and unfisting. His mustache wiggled. My daddy was mad.

"You done told on your daddy then," he said.

"Ain't like it mattered. Mama ain't left has she?" I stood up straighter, looking down my nose at him. A boy can stand straight sometimes.

"You just remember that, boy. You didn't do nothin but hurt your mama. That's what getting wise does for ya, son." He squinted at me and shook his head before turning and walking away.

I stared at his back and wondered if Hammer might not be the wisest man I'd ever met. I swallowed and decided I hope he ain't. I hope he ain't even close.

MURRAY THE LIP-LICKER

Murray the lip-licker stands at the corner down the street from his apartment and watches the four lanes of heavy traffic. He considers backpedaling a few feet and taking off at a sprint so he can hit the busy street going full speed. Horns would honk, tires would screech, but he is sure he would pass through untouched. Murray would dare someone to hit him, and then he would lick his lips safely on the other side, checking his phone before his heart even realized there'd been any commotion. The blood wouldn't start pumping until seconds later, not until he'd pounded his chest and shouted at his dead girlfriend, "Look! I can run through cars without dying!" Then he would pocket his hands, turn his back on the crowded street, and wait to run out of breath, wait for his pulse to jump.

The signal changes and Murray calmly crosses the street, his lips drying quickly. It's two in the afternoon, and the day is hot and clings to him. The straps of his bag dig into his shoulders as he reaches the laundromat where he works as an attendant not even a full hundred yards from his apartment.

Sheila is sitting on the counter, waiting for him. She hops to her feet as the bell over the door rings. "How in the fuck do you manage to be late for work every day when you live less than a minute away?"

Murray shrugs. "Traffic." He licks his lips at her and tosses his bag on the counter.

"You're full of shit." She's short and thin with strings of mud-colored hair on either side of her face, the type of face that some might find attractive but soon forget. She's all bones and hair, skinny, wiry enough to raise concern, and she flaunts it with bare shoulders or baggy shirts and loose jeans. Today with a halter-top that advertises jutting ribs underneath.

Murray nods and takes the apron she hands to him. The words *Please! Let me wash your clothes!* in bold red letters across the front. He places it over his head and crosses his arms as he turns his back to let Sheila tie it for him. His armpits, just catching up to the heat outside and his brief trek to work, are lightly sweating. He shivers and tries to ignore her wandering fingers.

“You’re wearing her shirt.”

Murray turns to face her, and Sheila smiles at him and twirls. “You like it?”

“I used to.”

“Shut the fuck up, Murray. Hey, Gray-face may come by later to check on you. He was being a nag again today, asking about how I’m doing and shit. Figure he’ll do the same for you. How are you doing, Murray?” She grabs her purse from under Murray’s bag and leans into him. “You okay?” Murray nods and wonders when her constant coddling will stop. Sheila bites her lip and leans closer. “I can stay for a little while. We need to hang out anyway.”

Murray uncrosses his arms and steps away from her. His bony shoulders protrude from the shirt at odd angles, like they’ve been broken and hastily put back into place. His crooked nose and wild eyes. An angry pink circle around his lips. He’s repugnant but striking with a face not easily forgotten. So ugly he’s almost handsome. He feels her looking at his nipples as they poke through the thin fabric of his t-shirt against the back of the apron. He shakes his head.

“Of course you don’t want me to,” she says. “I didn’t figure you did. Will you call me later? Or before then if you need me.” She stares until he nods.

“You don’t have to babysit me, Sheila.”

“Screw you, Murray. Who said I’d be babysitting you? Say, what are you doing tonight?”

Murray knows she's about to invite him over yet again to the apartment she once shared with his dead girlfriend Ryka, the apartment Sheila now lives in alone, wandering about like some drugged-out spinster. "Working probably."

"You should come over. Hey, Murray, come see me. Let's talk about things, okay? I want to help." She doesn't wait for an answer and leaves. They watch each other through the glass windows until she disappears.

Murray opens his bag and takes out his notebook. He flips to a blank page and digs in his bag for pencils. His sketches, always black and white, mostly gray with shading, have an unnamed quality to them. A type of energy or wildness. Murray draws himself somewhere into each picture before shading over himself. No one ever sees him.

The bell dings, and a man in a long coat enters, a bag of laundry in his right hand and a 40oz Miller Highlife in his left. He is drenched in sweat, a black helmet of hair matted to his head. He makes eye-contact with Murray and gestures with his beer. Murray licks and goes back to his sketch.

"You don't care?" he asks. Murray shakes his head without looking up. "Why not?" Murray shrugs. "You're a weird dude, man."

When Murray finally looks up, the man is leaning to one side with the weight of the laundry bag in his hand. He flashes his teeth and then hides them. There's something about him that hovers between charming and menacing, and Murray quickly looks away. "You need something?" Murray asks.

"You wanna wash my clothes, man?"

Murray points at his apron, *Please! Let me wash your clothes!*

“Yeah, I saw that. Makes you seem a little overeager, don’t you think?”

“I have to wear it.”

“Why’s that?” When Murray doesn’t answer, the man nods as if Murray has just told him something he agrees with. “So how much will it cost me to let you wash my clothes?”

“I’ll have to weigh them.”

“Okay.”

The two of them stare at each other. “I do that after you leave,” Murray says. “There’s a ten dollar minimum deposit.”

“Okay.” The man grabs the bag and walks it over to Murray. He drops it at his feet and sips his beer as he watches Murray take the bag behind the counter. “Do you guys check pockets?” He reaches into his back pocket and slaps a crumpled ten-dollar bill on the counter.

“We’re supposed to.” Murray takes the dirty bill.

“Yeah, but do you? I’m curious.” The man smiles and takes a long drink. He doesn’t look to be that old, maybe thirty-five or so, and despite his filthy coat and tattered jeans, the 40oz beer in the early afternoon, he doesn’t appear that bad off to Murray. The man keeps his eyes leveled on Murray as he drinks and leans his head to the side as he waits for an answer.

Murray, unsure if the man is threatening or just odd, mumbles, “Sometimes,” and licks his lips as he drops the heavy bag of clothes under the counter. “If I’m bored.”

He holds out a slip of paper for the man to sign and then studies the signature when he hands it back. A fancy letter J and nothing else.

The abrupt sound of the bell startles Murray. “Hey,” he calls out. “When you need them?”

The man thinks for a moment and drinks from his sweating beer. Something drips onto his coat. “Tomorrow, the next day. Or whenever. Take your time.”

Murray watches him through the windows until he disappears and then goes back to his notepad, ignoring the bag of clothes at his feet.

A couple of hours later, Murray sits on the counter, his heels kicking at the paneling. He sketches tiny gray washers and dryers onto a page in his notepad. Dark shading gives the drawing a three-dimensional depth that makes the rows of machines seem endless and menacing. He has drawn himself somewhere in the picture, hidden in the shadow of a washer overflowing with suds. He drew a funny look on his face – the eyes crossed and the tongue sticking out. A happy face. Then he blackened it out with the dull end of his pencil. Smeared.

The bell over the door dings, and Murray groans and jumps from the counter as Gray-face walks in. “Murray,” he says as he walks up.

“Mr. Rawlings.” Murray licks his lips and begins to draw again, ignoring his boss, spreading shadows with his thumb. He pins his bottom lip under his tongue in concentration.

“I told you about sitting on that counter.”

“I keep forgetting.”

Mr. Rawlings has a white beard so thin it shows his faded, dead-looking skin and the blue veins crisscrossing underneath in tangled lines. He is a small man and wears a wind breaker and jeans despite the heat. He removes his trucker cap and surveys the room, rocking back and forth on his white sneakers. “Been slow?” he asks. He puts the cap back on his head as Murray nods. He peers over the counter to the corner where a man is sleeping on the floor. He smiles at a

family waiting for their clothes to dry and then casts his eyes on a petite black woman wiggling her ass as she folds her clothes. Murray looks around with him and remembers the customers are there.

Mr. Rawlings nods and puts his hands on his hips as he looks around once more, out of place. He removes his cap and runs his fingers through his greasy white hair before putting the cap back on his head. “Well, any drop-offs?” Murray points to his feet, and Mr. Rawlings walks around to look at the large bag of clothes. “You ain’t washed them yet? How long they been here? Are you even planning on washing them?”

“Probably later.”

Mr. Rawlings looks at Murray and opens his mouth. He closes it, opens it again. Stares at Murray’s red-circle mouth. “Well, don’t wait too late. Were you on time today?”

“Almost.”

“Almost.” Mr. Rawlings puts his hands back on his hips and shakes his head. He sighs and seems about to say something and then to change his mind. “Almost will have to do I suppose.” Looking sideways at Murray, he asks, “You alright?” He eyes the drawings on the counter, the one on top featuring a line of washers and dryers that seem to have faces. “I mean, you know, how’re you holding up, kid? These are pretty good.” He pulls one to him.

“I’m fine.” Murray focuses on his drawing, glad Sheila warned him about Gray-face’s revamped concern.

Mr. Rawlings waves his hands about him as if swatting at flies. “Well, I’ve never seen you normal, you know, before. The point is I wouldn’t know if you were lying, so I guess I might as well take your word for it.”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I talked to Sheila about you today, you know. She says I might ought to worry about you. I reckon you’ll say the same about her though.” He waits for Murray to answer and then adds, “You two make an odd pair, you know.”

“I’m fine. Really. We’re fine.” Murray is scribbling. The lines are deep. “Sheila worries too much.”

“Good enough,” Mr. Rawlings says. “Good enough. Aren’t you leaving for school in a couple weeks?”

Murray scrawls his first initial at the bottom of another finished picture. “Not going back. No money.”

There’s a pause. “Look, Murray,” Mr. Rawlings hesitates until Murray looks up at him, and they lock eyes until the old man falters and looks away. “Are you planning to stay on here then?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. Well, do you want to?” Mr. Rawlings sighs. “Look, don’t you turn into Sheila now, okay? She’s been here for too damn long. Needs more help than any of us do, you know. I think she’s on the drugs. I’d fire her, but, well. I probably should, but she works more than you do.” Mr. Rawlings pauses. “What if I say I won’t keep you on when summer’s over? Maybe I think it’d be for your own good. Snap you out of whatever this is.”

Murray squints at him and licks, not sure how serious he is. Murray considers asking him to let him stay, to admit that he needs the job, but he can’t figure out how to phrase it.

Hands still on his hips, Gray-face nods to himself again before Murray can answer and walks out without another word. Murray doesn't look away until the bell dings. Then he licks his lips, tears the finished picture out of his notepad, and flips to a clean page.

Sheila sounds sleepy when she calls him at seven-thirty, and Murray figures based on her voice that she's already had a couple bars of Xanax. "You there?" she asks, her voice thick like there's something heavy in her mouth, like her tongue is tired, too weighed down to move.

"Am I where?"

"Fuck you, Murray."

"Okay." Murray flips his sketchbook closed and drops from his seat on the counter. He is the only person in the laundromat. The light from the setting sun bounces off stainless steel, and the whole room glows orange. Murray walks to the wall of windows and watches the traffic.

"Gray-face come by?"

"Yeah, a couple hours ago. Nag, nag."

"Cool."

Murray doesn't answer. Traffic spurts in both directions along the main street in front of the laundromat. A long surge of cars and then a brief nothing. Noise and then silence, and Murray aches. He again feels the urge to run through traffic. This time, he wants to sprint through the window, too. He'd back all the way to the counter before taking off, then race full speed toward the glass and the orange glow beyond. He wouldn't even lower his shoulder, would simply burst through with his face and chest forward like a runner at the finish line, and he'd remain uncut as shards of glass flew on either side. He would dart across four lanes of rushing

traffic, never slowing or stopping until he safely reached the other side, waiting for his pulse to catch up to the moment. He'd turn in silence and stare at the laundromat with its shattered window, exhilarated, waiting for his breathing to get faster and faster as the moment expires, avoiding Ryka's voice between his ears. Her soft face looking through him. Once the moment has passed, his heart will pound, his palms will sweat, but the moment will be over long before his heart can catch its flurried rhythm.

"Are you even listening to me, asshole?"

"What? Yeah." Murray runs his hand over his head and turns his back on the street. "Am I doing what?"

"Are you going to come over later? I got some bars if you want a couple."

"Yeah, maybe."

He hears her voice still plodding as he hangs up.

He walks to the bag of clothes on the floor and lifts it. It is heavy, at least twenty pounds. Murray checks the clock. Barely an hour and a half left until closing, not nearly enough time to wash and dry the clothes. Definitely not enough time to fold them. He drops the bag to the floor and kicks it, angry at the clothes for being dirty, angry at them for waiting until an hour before closing to be washed. Sheila will be pissed. "Fuck," he grunts, barely a whisper. He kicks the clothes again. "Fuck," he says aloud. He hops back on the counter and stares out the window. His heels bounce against the base of the counter. After several seconds, he drops back to his feet and kicks the bag over and over again, screaming, "Fuck, fuck, fuck," kicking until pants spill out of the opening of the bag.

Out of breath, he grabs the bag, heavy with dirt and dinginess, and begins to empty the pockets.

The first pair of pants holds nothing but a ticket stub and some gum wrappers, what looks to be a ruined paper clip, and a blank sheet of paper, neatly folded. Murray tosses the pants on the floor and digs in the bag for more.

The second pair of jeans has a wad of dirty dollar bills in each pocket, the money stained brown, some corners missing. Heavy handfuls of change lay buried beneath the cash. Every pocket is crammed full of the limp, smelly bills and an assortment of coins. Murray counts thirty-six dollar bills and ignores the coins, which clank when he scatters them on the counter. He sets the paper money on top of the change and grabs another pair of pants. This pair also has its pockets crammed with clumps of warm coins and paper money rolled into little brown-green balls that smell of sweat and body odor. He adds it all to the pile and grabs the next pair, his movements quicker, hectic.

In all, there are eight pairs of dirty pants, the cuffs rolled up and caked stiff, all but one pair stuffed with wadded dollar bills that hardly look worth spending. The mound on the counter keeps growing, piling on top of itself, toppling clumsily. Murray licks his lips and counts. The whole mess adds up to two-hundred seventy-four wasted single dollar bills and at least another twenty dollars there among the clumps of change.

Murray looks from the pile of clothes to the door to the pile of money and back again. His red mouth shines as he rubs a filthy hand over his prickly scalp.

At a quarter to nine, Sheila calls again. "Hey, where are you?"

“Work.” Murray is lying on his back on the counter with his bag under his head and the lights dimmed around him so that the room is mostly lit by the streetlights outside.

“Been busy? I am beyond fucked up.”

Murray shrugs and then realizes she can’t see him. “Oh yeah?”

“Oh yeah. What are you doing?”

“I don’t know. I’ve got some clothes in the dryer. They’ll be a while yet.”

“Figures that you’re working late.” When Murray doesn’t answer, she goes, “Some drugs would do you good, you know. You’re more depressed than I am.”

Murray folds an arm over his eyes. He puts the phone on speaker and sets it on his chest. He says more to the room than Sheila, “Not really. Maybe.”

“It’s been three months.”

“It’s been almost four.”

Sheila clears her throat, and Murray knows what is about to happen. She’s going to tell him once again that it’s time to move on, and the words flood his mind wholly apart from her voice. She will tell him that what happened happened and Ryka would want him to move on, would want him to go over to her best friend Sheila’s place and mix Xanax with cheap rum and hot, flat Coke and let what happens happen. Ryka would want that, Murray. Murray, drying clothes can wait. Folding clothes can wait. “Murray, I’m worried about you,” she says, her voice slurred. “Sometimes I feel like you’re the one who got sick instead of her. Like you, like you - - -” Sheila stops speaking, and Murray hears voices in the background wherever she is, happy murmurings that he can’t quite understand. He hears laughter and marvels at how unfamiliar it

sounds. “I don’t know,” Sheila says. “Like you, I don’t know. I don’t know where you are, Murray. Where are you?”

Murray opens his mouth to answer and then closes it. He opens it again and asks, “You ever take any money from the pockets?”

Sheila laughs and says something to someone in the room with her. There’s more laughter. “Do I ever what?”

“Take money from the pockets.” He stares at the money, now neatly stacked and organized on the counter. He’d considered running it all through a washer.

“From what pockets?”

“You know, the pockets.” Murray gestures at the ceiling for emphasis. “Of any of the clothes that come in.”

“Oh, yeah. I see what you’re saying now.” Her voice is low and methodical, like she’s thinking really hard about how to put words together. “That totally makes sense now.”

Murray takes his phone off speaker and places it to his ear. “You didn’t answer me.”

“What?”

“I said,” he looks out the window and spies J, the man from earlier, his long overcoat flapping. Murray blinks, and the man is gone. “Have you ever taken money from any of the clothes at work?” Silence on the other end. “Sheila?”

“Hold on, I’m thinking.” Nearly a minute of silence goes by before she continues, enough time for Murray to wonder who she’s with, who’s there at Ryka’s apartment. “Yes,” she says finally.

“Yes?”

“Yeah, yes. I took seven dollars once. Oh, and a pack of cigarettes.”

“But you don’t smoke.”

“So? Free cigarettes is free cigarettes, man.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know, Murray, but you’re acting fucking weird. You’re killing my vibe.” She laughs again at something in the room with her. “So, are you coming over?” He hears a male voice ask Sheila to get off the phone. “I have to go, Murray. Come. Just come. Murray? Hey, Murray...”

“What?” he asks, and then the line clicks. Murray stares at his phone for a moment, not quite sure what to think. The dryer stops.

A little before eleven, after folding up the man’s clothes and placing them back in the bag they came in, Murray tosses the wad of money taken from the filthy jeans into his bag, along with his notebook and pencils. He takes a last glance around the empty room and leaves. Murray listens for oncoming traffic and studies each direction for headlights. He locks the door and walks to the edge of the sidewalk just in front of the laundromat, the heat of the night grabbing at him with its sheen of humidity. His armpits begin to sweat. The streets that were so busy and tempting hours earlier are now deserted.

Murray tosses his bag into the middle of the road and sprawls out after it. He lies on his back in the middle of the street, the yellow lines dissecting him like some abstract misunderstanding, one line solid and the other skipping over him with its dashes of paint. The lump of money is hard against the back of his head, and he smells its musky odor as he listens to

the vibrations of the city. He closes his eyes and lets himself relax and sink into the pavement. He allows himself to forget about a drunken Sheila and the stolen money in his bag. About dead Ryka. The street is still warm with residual heat, and his back sticks to his shirt.

He can hear the truck coming long before he lets himself become afraid of it. He has enough time to consider getting up three different times, but he stays still, his heart pounding. The wheels of the pickup pass inches away from Murray's head as the driver leans on the horn. Murray bolts upright and hugs his knees, his heart pounding. He stands in the middle of the street and waits until his pulse returns to normal before he checks both directions once again, brushes himself off, and calmly walks the hundred yards to his apartment to change his shirt before going to Sheila's.

As soon as he enters Sheila's apartment, Murray realizes he'd been right; Sheila had orchestrated the whole evening. An intimate "party" with a pile of drugs and cheap liquor and no one there other than a couple of girls and a middle-aged man reclining on the leather couch that separates the kitchen from Sheila's bed. Murray is almost touched, guilty for arriving so late.

She's been doing everything she can to help him out since Ryka's death. Getting him the job at the laundromat, "to take your mind off things," she'd said. Calling him multiple times a day, throwing herself and her drugs at him, begging him to open up to her, or at the very least, to have the decency to fuck her like he used to fuck Ryka. For three and a half months she had pursued him, and finally he had come.

Sheila jumps up on his arrival. "Murray," she yells. She wears a tight white tank top with no bra and staggers toward Murray as he closes the door, embracing him in a hug that smells of

rubbing alcohol and body odor. He barely recognizes her. The long muddy strands of hair have been chopped and dyed black, spiked into bizarre formations. Her eyes are bloodshot and puffy.

“Your hair.”

“New do. You like?”

“You look like ---”

“Fuck you, Murray.”

He humors her and accepts the drink she hands him. He was right about the flat coke, but instead of cheap rum, it’s vodka. She wraps her arms around him.

“Vodka and coke?” he asks, slipping out of her grasp.

“Shut up, Murray.”

“Yeah, shut up, Murray,” one of the girls adds before she erupts into drunken laughter. The two friends lean against either side of the middle-aged man’s misshapen gut. The one who speaks giggles into the man’s armpit while the other sleeps against his protruding stomach.

Murray wonders if Sheila had the guy on the couch pretend to want her to get off the phone. He nods at him and licks his lips. The man closes his eyes.

“God, what took you so long?” Sheila drops to the floor with a thump and splashes herself with her drink. She crosses her bare legs and looks up at him. He realizes she’s not wearing pants.

“You still haven’t moved your things into the bedroom,” Murray says.

Sheila glances past him to the closed bedroom door. “Her mom,” she says. “She said I could stay here until the lease runs out as long as I stay out of Ryka’s room.”

Murray glances at the door and licks.

“You can go in there if you want,” Sheila says. “But I wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t either,” adds the giggling girl. “That room is fucking creepy.”

“Shut the fuck up, Julie,” Sheila says. She rubs her eyes. “I always forget not to mix downers with downers.” She laughs. “When was the last time you were here?”

Murray takes a seat on one of the stools at the breakfast counter. Nothing has changed. No pictures taken down, none added. No new paint or curtains. Nothing but everything has changed in three and half months, and the only marker is a closed door.

He remembers the last time Ryka was here, the morning they took her across the country for some experimental treatment they all knew would never work. He and Sheila took turns sitting on the couch while the other said goodbye. Ryka’s parents hovered in the doorway like sentries. Overbearing guardians who would let neither the boyfriend nor the best friend come with them to watch the end. When they left, it was just Murray and Sheila there, and Sheila rested her head on Murray’s shoulder until he stood up and left, and this is his first time back.

He sips his drink. “It has been a while.”

Sheila’s eyes are drooping, and her head sags. “Seriously, asshole. What took you so long?”

“I had clothes to wash.”

Sheila raises her head in surprise. “You actually washed clothes? You haven’t washed any in weeks. I thought you were kidding.”

Murray shrugs. “There was something about this guy. He left some money in his pockets, too. A lot of it.”

Sheila stares at him and squints. “Oh yeah?” she asks after a delay.

The giggling girl has fallen asleep with her face buried in the man's armpit. The three of them sit there on the couch tangled like earbuds in a pocket, all cozy and intertwined. But to Murray all they seem is unnatural.

"What'd you do with it?"

"What?"

"Fuck you, Murray."

"Okay."

"I want some of that money."

"Okay," he says. "Remind me."

"I'm just kidding," she says. "I know you need it more than I do."

A while later when Sheila drags him to her bed and climbs clumsily on top of him, shirtless with dilated pupils blacking each eye, Murray finds himself counting dirty dollar bills and clumps of change, thinking of the guy with the 40oz beer, of how shitty it all is. He barely resists. Too tired of fighting her. His mind jumps from Ryka's face to the dirty money and back again, trying to relate them to one another somehow.

Sheila kisses him and then pulls away. "Fuck, your lips are so slimy. Gross," and he licks them in response and she laughs and takes her thumb and rubs it across both of his lips, removing some of the slime. "You're really kind of gross, Murray," and he wonders why that isn't stopping her. She grimaces as she wipes her thumb on his shirt. She leans down with her lips parted but stops again, hovering inches above him. "Wait, this shit isn't contagious is it?" Murray lies there still and silent, his eyes wide-open and staring at the girl on top of him. Ryka's

best friend. Ryka's little project. Ryka. "I guess I'll risk it," she says. He blinks, and Sheila touches her lips to his. She's wearing Ryka's lip gloss. He can taste her. He realizes who the new hair reminds him of.

Sheila moans and grinds on top of him, kissing him roughly, her teeth bumping against his, as Murray studies the room around him, careful to not move his face. Sheila's eyes dart open, and she jerks back. "What the fuck? Were your eyes just open?" She punches him in the shoulder. "Were your fucking eyes just open?" Murray shrugs, and she punches him again. "Why? Who the fuck does that, Murray? Who?"

"I do. Always have."

"Why? It's weird."

"I like to see what's going on around me."

"You are such a freak, Murray." Sheila climbs off of him and walks to the kitchen. Murray realizes she's wearing a pair of Ryka's panties, pale pink ones he bought her for a birthday. She comes back with a plastic cup and hands it to Murray. "Here," she says. "Drink this and see if you can still kiss me with your eyes open." She laughs and climbs back on top of him, watching as he struggles to prop himself up on his elbows to drink with her straddling his waist. Murray downs it all at once and winces at the chalky, medicinal flavor.

"What is this?"

"Shh." She pushes him down and kisses him again. "Ugh. They're slimy again already." She rubs her thumb across his lips and wipes. She reaches down his pants and fingers his flaccid penis. "What the fuck is his problem?" She works her fingers up and down, and Murray grimaces. Her fingers are cold. She's pulling too roughly, too desperately. She tries for several

minutes, kissing him all the while, taking breaks to wipe his lips. “I’m so wet, Murray.” She grinds. “Would it help if I use my mouth?” and Murray shakes his head and watches her. She sits back, her hand still wrapped around him. She draws in a breath. “I don’t think I want to do this anymore.” She rolls off of him and curls into a ball beside him on the bed.

Murray folds his arms under his head and stares up at the ceiling. The mixture of all the things Sheila gave him – the awful vodka and flat coke, the bars, whatever it was in that last drink – have made him lucid and alert, though maybe a little fuzzy, like there’s static at the edges. He stares at the ceiling, conscious of his drying lips. He wonders why Sheila would even try something like this knowing he still cares for Ryka, knowing all he and Ryka have done for her while trying to help her get clean. This makes Murray remember his first days with Ryka and how she vowed to make him help her save others but then couldn’t save herself. Now, she’s gone, and it’s all fucked.

He rolls onto his side and watches Sheila closely to make sure she’s breathing. In the dim light peeking through the blinds, she almost looks like Ryka, but he knows she doesn’t. He stares at the new short and spikey hair, dyed darker and cut shorter just since this afternoon. Ryka’s clothes and makeup. He knows it’s an illusion, but he so desperately wants her to be beside him that he considers trying, just to see what would happen.

He leans close and puts his mouth to Sheila’s ear, finally ready to tell someone what he really thinks about the shit handed to him, finally ready to open up to someone about how he’s really feeling. To tell someone that he’s been feeling pretty okay and can’t understand why. That feeling nothing is actually the problem. That he misses her so much that he can’t tell if she’s even gone, if she were ever there at all. It’s like he made her up, his imagination run wild. If he

could just tell someone about it, figure out how to feel something. He opens his mouth, closes it. He opens it again as the fuzziness turns into dizziness, and he is painfully aware of Sheila turning as if to listen to him as it all goes black.

When Murray wakes up, it's not quite light out and his head is throbbing. He remembers little after walking into the apartment but can't shake the vivid dream he'd been having of Ryka, her hospital gown pulled up around her waist, riding him. Her pale legs, sickly thin, clenched against his hips. Her head thrown back, hands gripping his thighs, laughing.

Sheila sits on one of the barstools, her knees tucked under her chin as she stares at him with a crooked smile. She is still shirtless, wearing only the pair of tiny pink panties and white socks.

Murray groans and rubs his eyes. "What the fuck?"

Sheila laughs. "Good morning."

"What did you do?"

Sheila widens her eyes and covers her mouth. "What? I didn't do anything."

"You drugged me?"

Sheila claps her hands in excitement and runs to dive into bed next to him. "Maybe. Maybe not. Probably though. I didn't think it would make your dick quit working." She snuggles up close to him, and Murray recognizes the scent.

"You put on her perfume too?"

"Shut up, Murray. We always shared."

"Did you always share underwear too? Hair? Make-up?"

Sheila looks down at herself and then back at Murray. He stands and begins to pace around the room. “Why are you so upset?”

Murray runs a hand over his head and then wipes his lips with his hand. “You didn’t have to slip anything into my drink.”

“You looked like you could use some sleep, Murray. Calm down.”

“Did we have sex?”

Sheila smirks. “I’d hardly call it sex. You just lay there the whole time. Smiling.”

“What part of you actually thinks this is what she would want?” he asks. He grabs Sheila’s shirt from the floor and throws it at her.

Sheila struggles her way into the tiny tank top before answering. “Why wouldn’t she?”

“What makes you think she would?”

Sheila tucks her knees under her chin. “I don’t know. I mean, I have needs too. I miss her too, Murray. What if we’d talked about it some?”

“Talked about what?”

“You know.”

“What?”

“Christ, me and you fucking after she’s gone. What if she and I talked about it, you know, before she, before she left? Would that change anything?”

Murray stares blankly back at Sheila, who meets his gaze for several seconds before dropping her eyes to her twitching fingers. She forces a laugh. “I’m just kidding, Murray.”

“I should get going.”

She grabs his arm. “Come on, Murray. I was just kidding. I was making a joke. Trying to lighten you up a little. Come on. Murray, I’m sorry. Murray.”

“I don’t think she would want this.”

“Okay. Then we don’t have to do anything else or ever again, but, Murray, can you just talk to me? Or at least listen to me talk to you? I don’t care if you actually listen. You don’t have to actually listen if you’ll just sit with me and be there while I talk. Nod every once and a while, lick those disgusting lips, I don’t give a shit.” She grabs his face with both of hers hands.

“Please, for just one second, can you stop being such a self-centered fuck?”

He turns for the door, and Sheila runs after him. She grabs his arm and plants her feet. Murray drags her with him. “Come on. I didn’t mean anything by it. Forget it all. Okay? Murray, let’s just hang out.” He gently removes her hand from his arm and opens the door. “Murray. Hey, no, seriously. Seriously? Shit. Murray, will you just hold the fuck on?”

Murray turns to look at her, one foot out the door, his mind already burying more thoughts that he refuses to acknowledge, adding to the growing pile of all things ignored. He needs a shower. He needs to think. “What?”

Sheila grabs his arm again. “You do realize she’s gone, right? Like, she is gone. She’s not coming back. Hey, hey, Murray. Stay with me. Hey, stay with me. She’s not coming back.” He turns to leave. “Look, I’m hurting too, Murray. Can’t you see that? Can’t you see that you’re not the only one?”

Murray licks his lips. “I’ll see you this afternoon at work.”

He closes the door to his dead girlfriend's apartment, careful to not slam the door though he wants nothing more than to slam it off its hinges, leaving Sheila to stand there in a dead girl's clothes, half-naked and skinny, arms and eyes wide-open, just waiting for someone to look in.

He glances at the closed door and bites his lower lip.

Murray passes the laundromat and stops at the edge of the street separating his work from his apartment. He waits for the signal to cross even though there isn't a car in sight. Across the way, he notices a man seated on the sidewalk, leaning against the building beside Murray's narrow apartment complex.

As he crosses the street, Murray recognizes the sleeping man as the owner of the clothes, the procurer of the pockets of dirty money. Murray stands over him and taps the man's foot with his own, trying to wake him gently. He kicks a little harder, and the man stirs. "Hey," Murray murmurs down at him. "J, hey." He kicks again. "Hey, wake up."

The man rubs his eyes and squints up at Murray. He smiles weakly. "Oh, hey, laundry guy. Did you enjoy washing my clothes?"

Murray plops down beside the man, his legs tired and heavy. His eyes have a bit of a twitch. "I checked the pockets."

"What?"

"You asked me if I checked the pockets. I did." The man doesn't answer. Murray watches him. "And I took your money." The man still doesn't respond. "It's right here." He pats his backpack.

“Well, fuck you, guy.” Then the man shrugs. “Keep it.” He gestures at an upturned cap resting between his legs. It’s layered with bills and coins not yet dirtied. “I don’t need it. I’m pretty good at this.”

Murray licks his lips. He eyes the shabby clothing of the man beside him, the jeans just as filthy as the ones Murray washed hours earlier. The tattered coat looks ready to crumble to pieces at the slightest touch, but the man’s face looks healthier to Murray than his own.

“There’s not nearly enough foot traffic on this street to produce that much loose change.” The money, that face, they don’t fit the man on the street in these dirty clothes. “What exactly is this?”

J rubs his eyes and sits up straight. “Life, man.” He laughs and gestures at the cap at his feet. “Actually,” he leans closer to Murray, “to be completely honest, I’m not homeless. I actually have an apartment just down the street. Got a house out in the suburbs, too. Nice place.”

“Then why are you begging?”

“Do you see me begging?” Murray looks at his face, surveys his apparel and the cap at his feet, and nods. “Let me tell you something, Suds. Can I call you Suds? Let me tell you something, Suds. If you look pathetic enough, you ain’t got to beg for nothing. The less you say, the better.”

“You do this for a living?”

“Fuck no. I don’t make that much.” He laughs. “Hell, this is all my own money actually. What you took is too. Baiting the pot, if you will. I just moonlight. I’ll head to my regular job here in a bit. Hey, I saw you last night.” Murray looks over. “Lying in the damn road. Nearly getting your head rolled over. What was that, man?” When Murray doesn’t answer, J leans right

in his face. “Hey, fucking answer me, man. You have a lot of my cash in your bag. Don’t fuck with me.”

Murray winces and leans away. He shrugs and licks his lips. “I have this thing, this fascination with traffic.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s methodical. Stop and then go. Stop and then go. When the light’s green and it’s all moving steadily, it’s the most amazing thing. All of those cars rushing past each other.” He pauses. “You know, I once almost saw someone die right there in that laundromat.”

J rubs sleep from his eyes. “Okay. I’m listening.”

“This woman with bright red hair and a baby on her hip came in and started throwing her clothes into a washing machine before even setting her kid down. The kid was screaming. You could just tell this woman was on the verge of something.” Murray pauses, not used to speaking so much at once. “I’d only been working for a couple of days, had just started there after...” He trails off. “So I was new, and all of a sudden, I couldn’t hear the kid as well from where I was behind the counter, drawing, so I looked up, and she’d put the kid in the washer.” He licks his lips and reaches in his bag to touch the wad of money.

“Oh yeah?”

“I couldn’t stop watching.”

“That’s cold, brother,” the man says.

“The lid wouldn’t shut,” Murray says, “but she didn’t try to slam it. She kept just lowering the lid until it reached the top of the screaming kid’s head, and then she’d raise it up again. She did that at least a dozen times. I remember thinking it was so bizarre that she would

go so far as to put the kid in the washing machine but then wouldn't slam the lid. Didn't she realize that would have stopped the screaming? She could have thought more clearly about things then. Just slam the damn lid."

Murray looks over and sees that J is staring down the road. He sighs and looks up at the moon disappearing in the early morning light, barely visible past the dying glare of the streetlight.

"But, no. Instead, she pulled the screaming kid out of the machine and held him. She rocked and cooed and stroked until the kid stopped screaming. Then she closed the lid and took a seat. I didn't hear another sound from either one of them the entire two hours they were there."

Murray glances again at the non-homeless beggar, the non-beggar, beside him and stands. He walks around the corner to his apartment out to the edge of the sidewalk and drops his bag by his feet. He looks both ways and spies the glare of headlights. He waits for them to get closer, for the vehicle, an eighteen wheeler going a bit too fast, to get near enough to fear. Murray takes a deep breath and gets ready to run.

Before he can take a step, J is there beside him, grinning, a hand on Murray's arm. "I know why she didn't slam the lid."

Murray looks at him closely, his heart pounding. The eighteen-wheeler comes barreling past them, knocking them both back a step. "I was going to do it," he says.

"Don't you have a sign on those washers? I swear I saw a sign."

Murray nods, remembering a sign on each machine that says in all-caps "PLEASE DO NOT SLAM LID!"

“You think she would go so far as to put her kid in the washer, but a little sign would keep her from slamming the lid on him?”

“Why the fuck not? People are weird like that. Sometimes the littlest things can bring a person back.”

Murray licks his lips.

“Quit fucking doing that,” J says.

“My weird thing about traffic, you remember? I just want to run right through it. How stupid is that?”

“Pretty fucking stupid.”

“You don’t get it. I don’t feel anything.”

“It’s still fucking stupid. But hey, go ahead.” J sweeps his arm at the road. “Jaywalk your heart out.” He barks a laugh. “Go on. Go.” Murray doesn’t move, and J gives him a rough shove in the back, knocking Murray out into the road. “Get this shit out of your system, man.” Murray tries to step back onto the sidewalk, but J blocks him, arms outstretched, bouncing side-to-side, no longer smiling. “You want to keep my fucking money, man? You do your stupid trick. You run.” Murray finally gives up and stands in the middle of the street, hands at his sides.

J shakes his head and starts to walk back around the corner, waving Murray away like he’s fed up with him. He’s carrying Murray’s bag in his other hand, and Murray opens his mouth to yell and then closes it again. He wants to yell at J, telling him to wait, that he’s almost ready.

The cars are closing in on Murray as he shuts his eyes and tries to not think about Ryka or the rushing in his ears. As the surge of cars reaches him, vehicles speeding in from both directions, Murray stands in the street, perfectly still but poised to run, blotted out by blurs of

color. His pulse races as he makes himself small. Cars honk and swerve. There's chaos and noise and screaming steel as J pokes his head around the corner to see Murray, now posed like a sprinter, standing still in the middle of the mayhem.

Murray looks both ways and sees the mess he's made. It wasn't at all like he'd expected.

BIRTHDAY MONEY

Roy Lemons walks in circles around the building of the Larkin County Post Office, sweating under his arms and trying to work up the nerve to break in. It's almost 8pm on a Friday night three weeks to the day since his last paycheck and five weeks since the day he was fired, and the sun has just dipped below the horizon. A fifth of Evan Williams churns in his stomach, and while it has given his world a nice shimmering glow, it's done nothing else but make his legs wobbly. He's still scared. Roy circles the building for the eighth, ninth, and tenth time before cursing loudly and then slapping himself hard across the face. He curses again, angry at the slap, angrier at his cowardice.

Roy makes his way back to his rusted Chevy and leans against the front bumper, staring at the building where he worked for over nine years. It'd been so easy to rob the place when the lights were on, when the doors were unlocked. When he belonged there. But now, with the building looming over him with disinterest, Roy can do nothing but chew on his cheek and hate himself for being a coward. He cocks his head to the side to get a better angle and nearly falls over. The building looks crooked as he leans, and for second he thinks that might mean something. Then he spits through his teeth and rubs it into the dirt with his foot and then climbs into his truck.

On the ride home, he listens to the radio turned all the way up, pretending to know the words, his windows down, the hot air slapping at his face. He thinks to himself that he's almost drunk and that, like always, almost's not nearly good enough.

Roy's wife Olivia is splayed on the couch when he returns home, her hair frazzled and her eyes red and wild. She wears one of his faded blue shirts from the post office, the patch with

his name on it coming loose at a couple of the corners. The shirt hangs open to reveal a pale and bloated midriff. “I knew your ass wouldn’t do it,” she says, crossing her long white legs.

Roy wrinkles his nose at the stench of body odor and booze floating around their one-bedroom rented house. A faint but pungent scent of decay hangs over everything, adding to the bad smell, encouraging it. “Hell, I bout did it,” he says, shifting his eyes. “I really did, but I can’t remember where they put them cameras up, see, and it didn’t seem safe with me not knowing and all.” He plops beside her on the couch and grabs the bottle of whiskey from her hands, hiding his face so she won’t see that he’s lying.

Olivia laughs, and the shirt falls open a little wider. “Didn’t *you* install those cameras?”

“Alright. I can’t remember where *I* put them cameras up.”

“What kind of dumbass can’t remember where something’s installed when he’s the person who did the installing?”

He leans to kiss her on the lips, but she turns away, and Roy realizes some of the stench is coming from her. He pecks her dryly on the cheek. “Lord, woman. When’s the last time you washed?”

“Bout the same as the last time you got paid.”

“What, you tryin’ to teach me a lesson or something? You on strike from showering ‘til I get another job?” He takes a long drink from the bottle and then passes it to Olivia.

“That. And because there’s no hot water.”

“Since when we been out of hot water?”

“You haven’t noticed your showers being cold?” Olivia asks, sloshing whiskey around in her mouth like Listerine. “Seems like you’d notice that sort of thing.” She pulls her shirt closed.

“You know I always take cold showers so I didn’t know different.”

“Well, there’s no hot, and I’m not taking a cold one,” she says.

“Hope you ain’t planning on me fucking you then neither,” Roy replies, crossing his arms like a child. Olivia laughs at him and tells him to go fuck himself, and they sit in silence for a few seconds. “I bout did it,” he says again. Roy works his jaw and runs a hand through his greasy hair. He considers asking her advice about how to best break in, but he can’t think of how to phrase it other than to ask how to just be a man and do it, and that doesn’t feel quite right.

A few years back, Roy was nearly handsome, but after years of hard drinking and being broke, his face has aged, the skin tight over his cheekbones and around his eyes. He looks more like his father every day, a fact his mama never forgot to remind him of when she was alive. His cheeks are sunken in and hollow like he’s underfed and can’t stop sucking on something sour, and his eyes always have the look as if someone is squeezing him around the middle. There’s a hunger about him, a sense of danger draped over him like a burden. “If it weren’t for them cameras, I’d have us some money right now.”

“If it weren’t for you being such a pussy we’d have some money right now,” she answers.

“Alright now, Liv. Ain’t no sense in that.” He looks over at her, amazed at how she has maintained her full figure despite their circumstances. He can feel himself wasting away, both physically and on some other level, but it looks like she may have even gained weight. He eyes her bloated stomach, her round cheeks, her dimming eyes. She used to be so beautiful that he was scared to take her out in public. He’d make excuses for staying in, afraid some other man would see her and want her more than he did. That some stronger man would take her from him. Now they are too broke and broken to go out anywhere anyway. And it wouldn’t take much of a

man to take her from him now. He looks at her hard, studying for some sort of sign that things are better than they seem. He wants to see her smile. He grits his teeth and sighs, “Ain’t no reason to start saying all that at me again.”

She leans toward him. “If it weren’t for you getting caught digging through people’s mail, we’d have some money right now.”

“I said that’s enough.”

“If it weren’t for you - -”

“I said that’s enough goddammit!” He glances at the closed bedroom door before catching himself. He looks back at Olivia, and she’s laughing at him.

“This is all your fault,” she says and then closes her eyes, the laugh still on her face.

Roy glares at the wall for several seconds and doesn’t answer. She hands him the bottle in silence, and he downs the last bit.

Olivia watches him drink, nearly smiling. Then her eyes drop. “What are we going to do, Roy?”

He sighs and leans back into the couch with a squeak of old springs. Olivia leans closer to him, her stench making him wince. “We can’t just leave her back there forever, baby.”

He grunts.

“Dammit, Roy, she’s starting to smell.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“She’s your mama. You and I both know I hated her more than anyone, but even she don’t deserve this.”

Roy chews on his bottom lip and nods. "Them cameras, though." He runs a hand over his head. "Christ, I need a cigarette."

"What you need is some damn pride. You got enough whiskey in your belly that you should be ready to do just about anything." She reaches to touch his face but stops short.

He glances at her and swallows. "I reckon I'll go see if Gary can help me out."

"You borrowed from him last week."

"Well, I'll borrow from him again."

"Okay." She moves away from him and fiddles with the corner of her shirt.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Damn right nothing." He stands and makes to leave. "Go take a shower," he says before slamming the door.

"I'd say four hundred is all I need, Gary. That'll pay for the cremation and keep my lights on until the end of the month."

"A saint, that mother of yours was. What was it she called you?"

"Roy-boy."

Gary laughs deeply, his hand on his chest. His thick mustache dances up and down.

"That's right. A goddam saint that mother of yours was."

"So how bout it? Can you help me out?"

Gary hands Roy a beer and motions for him to have a seat on the workbench. It's a little before 10pm, and they're drinking beers in Gary's garage with the door closed so his kids know

not to come in. One wall is covered with tools, the other with ceramics. Gary's wife won't let him park his truck in the garage because it crowds her creative workspace, so the room has become something of a rag-tag workshop for them both with a lot of empty space between them. The room is cold and bright. "Four hundred is a lot of change, Roy. Plus, there's that couple hundred I gave you last week."

"Yeah, but that was for Mama's last treatment. It didn't work, see. She didn't get no better. So, I don't know that it should even count in all this."

"You get my money back?"

Roy toes a two-by-four on the cement floor. "I don't reckon it works like that."

"Oh, it don't?" Gary smiles. "Four hundred sure is a lot of change, Roy."

"Gary, we're talking about my mama here."

"Yeah, and you wanting to burn her up apparently. I never could see how some folks does that."

"Well, I sure as hell can't afford to bury her right. And Liv won't let me bury her out back in the woods or nothing, so she's just in the bedroom right now, sitting up and smiling still like ain't nothing happened. We been sleeping in the living room for a goddam week."

"That's fucked."

"I'm a little fucked."

"Here, have another beer."

The two sit in silence for a few moments. "So she's just sitting in your bed right now? Deader than hell?" Roy nods. "Say, you don't reckon I could come look at her do you?"

Roy gnaws on a cheek. "The hell you want to do that for?"

Gary shrugs. "Curious. Never seen a dead woman up close." He stares at Roy and grins. "Besides, your mama was quite the looker." He grins wider and claps Roy on the back. "I'm just fucking with you. Quit being so damn sensitive."

Roy fakes a laugh and chokes down some drink.

"How's Liv?" Gary asks.

"Mad as hell. She's good, though."

"Ain't seen that sexy thing in a while. She still hanging on to that figure of hers?" Gary whistles. "I always love my women with a lil' extra round the middle." He pats his stomach and moves his hips around in a circle. Roy remembers the version of Olivia he just left, filthy with her pale belly peeking out through the folds of a frayed work shirt, and nods. "She know you come here again?" Gary asks.

"She didn't want me to. She wants me to go back to the post office."

"They wanting you back?"

"Nah."

"They still owe you some money?"

"Nah."

"Then what does she want you to go back for?"

"I know where they keep some money. Enough to keep us going 'til I get back on my feet. I tried to do it earlier but couldn't. They got cameras and all that. Got me spooked."

Gary nods. "That Liv sure is a fine woman, Roy. Be a shame for you to lose her over something like this. Over something like money."

"That mean you'll help me out?"

“I don’t know. Me and her might could work something out. For old time’s sake.” His teeth, stained yellow by years of dipping and not brushing, glow dully in the fluorescent light.

“Now, Gary, that’s not exactly what we had in mind,” Roy says. He chews on a dirty fingernail and then studies it before putting it back to his mouth.

Gary’s smile turns colder. “Well, I seem to have it in my mind just fine. I doubt Liv would complain neither. She might miss me.” He sneers and finishes his beer. “You came to me, remember?”

Roy glances at Gary and does some figuring that he’s already done several times. If Liv started donating plasma again, they could keep the lights on for a couple more weeks, but that wouldn’t pay for the cremation, much less the urn. The hot water needs fixing. They haven’t eaten anything solid in nearly a week. His truck refuses to crank more often than it starts. He fights the urge to hit himself in the face.

Roy sighs and shakes his head. “I can’t do it, Gary. Not Liv. I can’t just sell her to you like that.”

“Hell, Roy, ain’t nobody selling shit. It’s more of a mutual back scratch type deal.” He places a large hand on Roy’s shoulder. “I’m trying to help you out here, Roy. Four hundred dollars? I can’t just be giving money away.”

“Lemme give it one more go at the post office first,” he says. “Then I guess I’ll talk to Liv if it comes to that.”

“Sounds like you got a lot of faith in yourself,” Gary says, laughing. “Just let me know. I can have Tracy watch the kids and be over there in a jiff.” He claps Roy on the back. “Just be

glad you got friends like me around, Roy. Some friends would fuck your wife for nothin' at all. Help yourself to the beer. I'm beat."

"Hey, Gary," Roy says. Gary turns to look over his shoulder, the door already open in front of him. "I'm gonna do it this time. For real."

Gary smiles. "Of course you are, Roy. We got all the faith in the world in you."

As the door closes behind Gary, Roy wonders what Gary meant by we and tries to ignore the fact that the post office never did have him install any cameras in the first place, that they decided to save the money for something else. That he doesn't actually have much of an excuse to not break in. He slaps himself hard in the face and then washes down the sting with more beer.

He grabs some beers for the road and marches to his truck parked out on the street. Convinced he will be able to go through with it this time, he eagerly turns the key. After several failed attempts, he trudges back up the walk to Gary's front door.

The building is just as dark as he left it. Roy kills his headlights and lets the truck idle. The entire ride from Gary's, Roy has been doing the numbers in his head. He could pawn his granddad's watch. Olivia has an old locket that he could get rid of, too. They could collect aluminum cans from the neighbors. Liv could start babysitting again. They still have options. And, yeah, she was mad he got fired, but she was more upset he got caught. He'd always been so careful. They could still make it through this.

After Gary helped him get the truck running, Roy managed to get some cigarettes from him but had to listen as Gary spat on the ground and reminded him of his offer. "Remember now," Gary had said over his shoulder. "I could fuck her for nothing if I wanted to. Trying to

help your sorry ass out.” He’d stopped at the door and turned back. “Say, you might want to make your little visit sooner rather than later. You know, before someone tips them off that you’re coming.” Then he laughed and shut the door.

Roy now sits in his idling truck, staring at the dark post office, chain smoking the three cigarettes given to him. He takes long drags and breathes out slowly. He doesn’t open a window or listen to the radio. As he smokes, he drains the beers taken from Gary’s garage. The cab is one big cloud of smoke, making Roy’s eyes water and his lungs burn, but he continues to let the truck run as he stares at the windshield.

After finishing all three smokes, Roy sighs and sinks low in the driver seat of his truck. With a dead woman in his bedroom and a fading one in his living room, he considers blaming it all on the women in his life. Maybe this is their fault.

His mama had warned him from her deathbed that he was “turnin into a goddam shit just like his father,” a man who’d always said a lot more than he’d ever done. She only used profanity when she was serious, and Roy wonders what she’d say about him now as he sits idly by while her body decomposes in his bed, on top of the covers. He knows he has to get rid of her before she starts to haunt him even more. It has dawned on him more than once that he is at risk of becoming just another son who turns into his father and who can’t please his mother, and this dawns on him again now in his truck, half drunk and running out of options. He sniffs and shrugs, deciding he’s come too far to think about it now, too far gone to reevaluate. His mother’s body in his bedroom is a reminder of what he is and what he was and what he will be.

The dark Larkin County Post Office stands over Roy like an oppressive force. He blames the government, the U.S. Postal Service. “Those fuckers,” he mumbles. He blames Gary for pushing him like this.

He pinches his cheeks, kills a beer, and exits the truck.

Roy tries to elbow his way through a window on the back side of the building where the offices are but he is too timid. The glass cracks but won’t buckle. He elbows it lightly a couple more times, careful to not actually break the glass. He can’t force himself to punch through no matter how hard he wants to, so instead he pushes it gently, less gently, gently again, with a slow and steady pressure until it gives in several minutes later, surprising Roy and forcing his sweaty arm through a small, jagged hole with a delicate sound of breaking glass. His wrist takes the brunt of the force. He lets himself in and takes a quick look at the cut. He smears the blood on his t-shirt and begins to dig through drawers looking for the key to the mailroom.

Stealing from people’s mail is a lot easier than most people think. Even with checks and credit cards, a lot of people still mail out cash. True, it’s mostly grandmothers packing five or ten dollar bills for their grandchildren’s birthdays, but those add up. Around graduation time, there are cards with fifty, a hundred, two hundred dollars in them. There’s Christmas time. There’s social security checks and welfare to be had too, but checks are too much trouble, and Roy always limits himself to the cards with their cash because he never got any himself while growing up. No one ever gave him any, not even his parents. For him, taking money from birthday cards is like payback for all the ones he never got. He has a system in place. He carefully slices open the cards, reads them and smiles, takes the money, and seals them again. The grandkids will just think Nana forgot.

There are so many prime times to look for free money, but on this night when Roy finally again breaks into the Larkin County Post Office, bleeding into his t-shirt and desperate enough to consider offering another man a go at his wife, it is not one of those peak times. After several frantic minutes of searching, of slicing open and pasting closed dozens of envelopes, Roy has managed to net only seventy-five dollars and a striped tie. The latter he grabs with the happy thought that he can wear it to his mother's funeral, something nice to wear as he watches the smoke rise over his mother's body. He dully realizes he doesn't really know how cremation works, that he's picturing his mother rotating on a stick over a fire or lying on a gray slab in some kind of giant oven, and he winces. He puts the striped tie around his neck on top of the bloody t-shirt before he realizes that he can't tie a tie. He curses and wraps it tightly around his neck like a scarf.

Covered in sour beer sweat and wearing a bloody t-shirt and a brightly striped tie, Roy walks out the unlocked back door of the post office. When the door opens easily in his hands, Roy realizes it had been clearly unlocked and just waiting for him to come in. He kicks it and doesn't even think to close it behind him as he leaves.

He's almost to his truck and is planning how to break the news of the poor haul to Liv when he hears a car door slam somewhere behind him, followed by footsteps on the loose gravel of the parking lot. Roy stops and hangs his head as his stomach drops, ignoring the desire to take off running as the hair stands up on the back of his neck. "Goddammit, Roy." He turns and sees his former employer, Marvin, a tiny mouse of a man with glasses, walking toward him. He's hastily dressed in pajama bottoms and an Oxford dress shirt, half-unbuttoned to reveal a pale and

hairless chest. He pushes his glasses up his nose as he walks. “I knew it was gonna be your stupid ass.”

Roy shifts on his feet and shrugs. “Hell, Marv, how’d you know I was in there?” He notices for the first time that he is drunk and lets himself wobble a bit.

Marv throws his hands up as he reaches Roy and looks up at him. “You triggered the damn silent alarm, you idiot. You helped me pick the fucking thing out. Remember?” He shakes his head.

Roy grimaces. So that’s where the money for the cameras went, he thinks. How could he have forgotten about that damn alarm? “You gonna take the money back again?” he asks.

Marv looks at him with his mouth agape. “Take the money back? What do you mean am I going to take the money back?”

Roy looks up at the quiet sky in confusion. “Ain’t that what you did last time? Well, besides letting me go.”

Where they stand in the gravel parking lot behind the post office, the world is completely still. The gravel under their feet glows, almost like they’re standing in the middle of a 3-D picture in a book, and Roy looks at his hands to make sure they’re not flat, to make sure he’s real. He wants to go home and considers just walking away, but he worries about how embarrassing it would be if his truck won’t start. He shuffles his feet and looks down. His mind jumps from one possible response to another before he finally realizes he should run because he has nothing left to say.

“I need this money, Marv. Let me keep it. Please.”

Marv sighs. “I called the cops, Roy. You broke in and then opened people’s mail and stole from them. Again. That’s a federal offense. Surely, even you know that?”

Roy looks up in surprise, first at how Marv knew what he was doing and then because of the word cops. “You called the cops? Why would you do that? Here.” Roy holds out the tiny wad of cash. “I can just give it to you. I can just give it back, right? It ain’t much anyway.” He unwraps the striped tie from around his throat. “Here. I was gonna wear this to the funeral, but you can take this too.” He holds out both hands like a pauper, begging the man before him to take his offering.

Marv holds up his hands and shakes his head. “I can’t just take the money again, Roy. I shouldn’t have done it the first time. You have to quit taking this shit so lightly.”

“I’m just trying to bury my mama,” Roy says. He continues to hold the money out, and when Marv doesn’t take it, Roy throws it at his feet.

Marv takes a step back and waves Roy away. “It’s too late, Roy. They’ll be here any minute.”

Roy, as if he suddenly realizes his situation, drapes the tie around his neck and then puts his hands back in his pockets. “I live with a dead woman,” he says.

“Best thing to do now is just make peace with it all and we’ll just wait for the officers to get here.”

Roy shakes his head. “Make peace? How do you make peace with the dead?” He pictures his wife at home, lying on the couch listening to his mother rot in the other room. He imagines himself standing over his mother, watching her body sit and smile. What if he just dragged her out back? He could cremate her himself. He’d make Liv understand.

Marv takes another step back. “What’re you smiling about, Roy?” His eyes go wide and he starts backpedaling as Roy heads toward him. Marv trips over one of his untied shoelaces, and suddenly Roy is on him like some desperate creature. He slaps Marv hard across the face and then again. Marv struggles against him until Roy finally hits him between the eyes with his fist and knocks him unconscious. Roy takes a few deep breaths and looks around, shaking the sting out of his knuckles. The world remains still, and he unclenches his fist. He takes the tie, secures Marv’s hands together behind his back, and makes it all the way to his truck before he yells out an exasperated “Shit!” and turns on his heels. He unwraps the tie from around Marv’s wrists, tosses it over his neck, and grabs the cash from the ground. He wobbles over his former employer, letting himself realize what he has done, and then runs back to his truck.

Roy hears the first siren as he climbs in and begs his truck to start. It takes three tries, but the engine turns, and Roy peels out of there, leaving Marv face down in the gravel. Roy stares at the body in his rearview mirror as he drives away and swears that it is floating there on the glowing gravel. He rolls the windows down and accelerates.

Roy notices Gary’s truck as soon as he turns onto his street. He can’t even make himself get mad, but he pretends that he is. He hits the steering wheel with his fists and swears loudly. He runs fingers through his greasy hair and clicks his tongue. He fiddles with the radio until loud static pours through the speakers. He rolls the windows up and pretends to scream.

But he’s not really mad. He’s not even surprised.

Gary is walking out and still fiddling with his belt as Roy walks up. Gary nods and smiles at him. The two men pause beside each other, and Gary looks him over. His eyes linger over the

blood smeared on Roy's white t-shirt. "You look like shit," he says, and Roy nods. "Well, anyway, I reckon that was worth a couple hundy, but I can't see myself giving you no four hundred for that." He whistles. "She done got a little heavy, ain't she? Even for my taste."

Roy nods again and holds out his hand. As Gary places twelve twenties in the bloodied hand, he tells Roy to take some of it and buy himself a new shirt. The two stand in silence for a moment, awkwardly close to one another, close enough for Roy to smell his wife's shampoo on Gary's cheek.

"Well, you gone say thank you?" Gary asks, his hands on his hips. Roy grimaces, and Gary smiles and offers his hand. Roy shakes it without much enthusiasm.

As he walks away, Gary tosses over his shoulder, "She wouldn't even let me look at the damn body," before laughing and opening the door to his truck.

Roy sees Olivia standing in the doorway, still wearing the faded blue shirt and just her underwear. She has the shirt pulled tightly around her and looks defiant, her jaw set. His name patch dangles upside down by a single corner, hiding his name, and Roy notices that her hair is clean and brushed. She almost looks pretty, and Roy sees a much younger face, a much slimmer figure. He almost takes her in his arms but instead brushes past her.

Inside the house, the stench has gotten worse, and Olivia has gotten drunker and has had sex with another man. "Mama done started to turn, ain't she?" he says quietly as he sits on the couch. His mother permeates the room, and neither of them can deny it anymore.

Olivia nods and stays by the open door.

"You ain't even know he was gone pay me did you?"

"He told me."

Roy nods. "Before or after?"

"Does it matter?"

"I suppose not." He swallows. "I'm glad you ain't let him in the bedroom." She doesn't answer, and Roy studies her face. "They'll be coming to get me soon," he says.

"Who will?" she comes and sits beside him on the couch, and Roy catches a whiff of shampoo and lotion.

"Come here," he says, and she scoots closer to him. He leans over and takes a deep breath, inhaling her and her scent and he realizes he's really not mad at her at all. He puckers his lips and she lets him kiss her, but her lips are dry.

Roy sits back, and Olivia stares at him with wide eyes.

"Roy, what did you do?" She looks quickly to the door and pulls the shirt even tighter around her, so tight her stomach bulges against it. Her pale legs cross and uncross as she leans away from him. "Who's coming to get you?"

He doesn't answer and stands to his feet. He looks around at his dingy house, everything the bare minimum, everything faded. The only exceptions are the shelves that line the walls, covered with glass trinkets Olivia has collected over the years at various yard sales and junk shops. She cleans them up, polishing and polishing. They're the only clean things in the house, and Roy allows himself to admit he's going to miss them. "You ain't bought any trinkets lately," he says.

She blinks at him and looks around. "What? I got a couple. Just haven't had time to clean them up right."

Roy glances down at her and smiles. He knows she's lying. All they have left is time. They lock eyes until she looks away, her jaw still set and defiant, though maybe with a bit of a tremble.

He walks toward the bedroom and turns to look at her. "I'm going to need help moving her," he says.

He opens the door and ignores the nauseating stench that pours out, threatening to crush his other senses. His mother's body has fallen sideways on the bed, and though her smile is still there, Roy sees judgment and impatience in her milky eyes. He goes and sits beside her on the bed and tries to explain, but no words come out. She's a big woman with rolls of fat swollen with death, and her gray face looks like a melted doll's as Roy stares at her and tries to find some way to explain anything at all. Her flowery nightgown clings to her pasty skin, and Roy remembers that she'd asked to die in something nice. He considers changing her but decides there's no time. He quickly unhooks the tubes from her arms and nose, still left there from her death days earlier, and Roy realizes that the machines are still whirring, still blinking, still performing their duty even after death. He wonders when they'll come to get the machines and roughly unplugs them all. A silence settles on the room as Roy sits back down next to his mother and apologizes for everything and nothing and never says a word.

Olivia runs to the door and asks what's going on and why does she smell so goddam awful and what the fuck did Roy do? He tells her to grab his mama's legs, and she looks at him like she's never seen him before but walks over anyway. They each grab an end of the body, and it's cool to the touch and heavy and bent in odd angles, all solid and rigid. The arms won't bend,

and her back won't straighten, but they lift anyway, and Olivia's shirt falls open with her heavy breasts hanging out and waving over the dead woman.

Once they heave her off the bed, Roy looks at Olivia and Olivia looks at him, but they don't see each other in the same way. "I did it," he says. "I'm doing it."

"Doing what, Roy?" she grunts.

"I don't know just yet. Something."

She tells him this isn't how to do it, that setting his mother on fire is no burial, but he's not listening. He's grunting and shuffling his feet and trying not to sweat on his mother's body.

They awkwardly walk the body to the bedroom door and twist it and turn it until Olivia says she can't anymore and drops her end. She staggers back a few steps and stares at her husband as he fights with his dead mother. Roy finally sets down his end and grabs the legs and pulls and pulls, but his mother won't fit through the door, and then he loses his grip and falls backward, only to scramble back up again. Olivia stands back to watch, her hands on her hips, Roy's shirt barely covering her at all as she wobbles. Her frantic eyes shift from Roy to the front door and back again.

"Baby, why are you doing this? What's happening?"

Roy looks over his shoulder and says breathlessly to his wife who is almost crying, "Gimme just a minute here, will you." He stoops to a squat and pulls and pulls, trying desperately to break free until there's a loud snap, and suddenly Roy's mother flies forward and tackles him, pinning him beneath her enormous weight.

"Goddam, Liv, help me get her off."

His mother's back is broken, and the two of them struggle to carry her outside and around behind their tiny house. The backyard is just a pale square of dirt that stops at a line of trees. Roy drags his mother to the center of the space as Liv retreats to lean against their house. He begins to make trips into the trees, coming back with armfuls of branches, piling them around and atop his mother's body, humming to himself. "Go get that can of gasoline from the front," he says, out of breath, hands on his hips. He can taste the beer sweat on his upper lip. "Go on now and hurry up before they get here."

"Before who gets here, Roy?" She stands straight, defiant again. "Who's coming? What did you do? This isn't going to solve shit."

Roy wants to tell her that that's the point. At least it's something, but he just looks at her until she goes to get the can of gasoline. "And a lighter," he yells. "And some whiskey."

He can hear the sirens clearly right before the whoosh of his mother catching flame, and he notices she's all over his hands, his shirt and jeans. She's come apart all over him, and the first thing to melt in the flames is her mouth, the face stretching and distorting until the eyes pop. Olivia hides in the shadow of the house as red and blue lights start to flash from somewhere out front, but Roy stands right next the flames, close enough to feel the hairs of his neck singeing. Close enough to make his eyes water, and he's glad. This is a funeral after all.

He takes a few steps back as Marv and a pair of officers round the corner of the house, stopping short when they see a man unhinged, standing over the burning body of his mother. Roy looks up, grinning, and meets eyes with Marv before settling on his wife who is huddled in the corner with his shirt pulled tightly around her. "I'll be damned," he says, and he rubs a hand against his chin. "I'll be damned if she don't smell alright now. Like a cookout."

He crosses his arms and stares down at the burning corpse, a grin on his face, and the flames reflect in his eyes as the others watch, speechless and unable to look away.

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VITA

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