

Come All You Weary

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Prologue

Love taste like evil look. Ain't no flavor, ain't no face. His Gram said that once. The short of it's this: Tractor borrowed his buddy's truck, flipped it and broke his back. His wrestling scholarship flew the windshield with his body. Too much drink, too much smoke, too much warmth from the dash had settled him cozy and the truck shot the gully, slammed the tree, exploded windshields, imploded grill. Gas leaked, flames hooked. The whoosh crackled Tractor conscious in his own shit and vomit. Helpless legs, he clawed dirt handfuls to the road. A lump on the shoulder. The blaze tinted the woods an orange glow. A long-hauler called it in.

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A year later and Tractor's back on his feet running crystal meth for Wolf Sutton. He got into swings of things: making drops, meeting regulars, earning. Dude's name was Robert Arlo. People called him Lunchbox. Tractor knew of him. That night Lunchbox soared, his eyes beady black and he scratched. Scabs drip-dried on his face and arms. Tractor will remember the little things like screams from the boombox. Screams that swallowed the room. Lunchbox was Wolf's nephew. Wolf had chosen Tractor to support homeboy's smoke habit. But Lunchbox wasn't home. He was at his girl's spot outside Sandoval County.

His girl, Brittney, she works the Rocking Horse. Tractor was too young to get in. And anyway, people knew him there. So Tractor met Brittney out back by the dumpster. They smoked. She told him where she lived, how to knock and kept snapping her gum. Exhaling smoke and chewing she said, "Say Britt sent you, okay, doll? Just keep saying it till you're sure he hears you. He been on one for days. Maybe tell Wolf, ya know, say you can't find him or whatever?"

Brittney stood anchored in heeled pumps. Bare legs like chopsticks. Her upper body, that skinny-fat and she wore an oversized hoody over cheetah print lingerie. Tractor shivered. Brittney's teeth chattered. She chewed like a machine and ripped her cig. A frigid turn in autumn. The air cut a winter chill, and when Brittney spoke puffs of cloud veiled her head. It was his last run, of course he went.

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Dark crack of dawn. Brittney's pre-fab house is sunk in the ground on one side. A capsizing ship. There's only blacklight flashing flashes from inside; seconds pass and the harsh light scans newspapered-over windows. Tractor zips his windbreaker to his chin. The windy chill presses his clothes into his skin. His spine aches. He finishes his smoke.

"Britt sent me," he says to himself. He works the words in his mouth, and cracks knuckles on both hands and snugs the beanie on his skull. He can't swallow, his throat is wet sand. Why am I tripping? He takes the creaky porch steps. Nerves have him knocking loud. Three hard hits on a hollow door. No answer. Screaming music on other side, and he's suddenly angry. He slams three more fists into cheap hollow. The last pound, and all he thinks is get gone. Maybe just do the deal quick, right here, in the doorway, done.

Right then the chain-lock patters the door and it opens slight and slow and creaky like the wind licked it.

Dude's sweating like just out of the sauna or feverish masturbating. This guy is something else: his head, a pumpkin on frump shoulders. The sweat off the blacklight reflects purple blue on his naked body, and dots his acne like stationary ants. His face contorts. Lunchbox works his head past Tractor like a pigeon. He looks out in the yard, his eyes dead

lifeless, his teeth flare, baby-sized, translucent. The smell from inside kicks up a gag. Urine and sun-soaked trash and a kind of tuna-rot. Lunchbox's hair, a thatch of grease, business bangs in front, party in back. He's in Christmas boxers, candy canes and Santa Claus. He's rocking spurred cowboy boots to top it all off, and wheezes like he just sprinted the fifty.

"You Wolf's boy?"

"Yah, Brittney, she uh—"

"Good enough," Lunchbox wiggles fast fingers, and presses Tractor inside and slams the door.

Place is bare. Cats everywhere. Huddled along walls, harbored in corners with glowing eyes. On the floor next to the screaming stereo is a big glass cage lit by an orbiting blacklight disco ball. Inside is a massive snake with colors on its scales Tractor's never seen. The cage reeks.

Lunchbox jumps on top of the coffee table like he's surfing, juts his neck, flaps his arms like heron wings and hops down and drops his head and growls with the song. He scoops a cat near the spur of his boot, tries to use it like a microphone. The cat hisses fangs in his face and he flings it and it thumps off the wall and lands in a heap of high heeled shoes and boots and bolts down the hall.

He keeps trying to friendly-tap Tractor's shoulder, keeps yammering, keeps thinking Tractor hears him over the stereo. Lunchbox keeps pointing a finger-thumb-gun at him.

"Yo, man. Yo! Turn the fucking music down?" Tractor says.

Lunchbox looks at him with a head tilt.

"The music. Turn it down."

“Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, cuz,” Lunchbox says. Twists it down. He takes the baggy from Tractor and plops his sweaty nakedness on his tore-up duct-taped leather couch. Lunchbox produces a scale from under the table.

To Tractor’s surprise, dude’s fucking weighing it. “You’re gonna weight it?” Tractor says.

Lunchbox looks up from the scale, and backhands sweat from his nose-tip.

“Oh yeah, cuz. Then me and you’s gonna taste.”

“It’s Wolf’s, man. It’s good.”

“I don’t care if it’s God’s product, cuz. Got to weigh, got to sample, dig?” Lunchbox scratches a scab on his head. It dribbles a dark drop down his temple, rivulets a wrinkle over his cheek.

“You know where he stays, man. Ain’t gonna short you.”

“Well, Ohkeee. If it’s good and you’re lucky, I’ll let you run a hand over Madonna.”

Lunchbox points at the snake cage. “I saw you look at her. That queen-bitch straight out the Amazon. Brittney love that bitch more’n me. One bite and you’s drainage.” He runs his tongue over baby teeth, claps and rubs his hands together.

“Good?” Tractor says.

“Yeee. We good, cuz. Now we gone light up the night. Play with my snake.” Lunchbox scratches himself, his adams apple bobs.

“Nah, fucking play with yourself. I’m out.”

Lunchbox lifts his chin, and deep lines in his face seem to relax in blacklight. He jerks a gun from between couch cushions, and springs up and points it right in Tractor’s face. Starts yelling at Tractor to strip.

“Strip Motherfucker! Said strip! Strip, strip, strip Motherfucking, Narc! Don’t fucking know you, I don’t fucking know you!” Lunchbox yanks at Tractor’s windbreaker but his hand slips, palm wet with sweat.

The gun waves in Tractor’s face as Tractor throws takedown on Lunchbox, and slams into the deck. Lunchbox gurgles and writhes the floor in Tractor’s chokehold. The snub nose sixer shakes from Lunchbox’s fingers. Tractor goes for the gun.

Lunchbox beetles to his feet, slides on an area rug, face-plants into the coffee table. A crazy loud crash. He pushes off the table to jump the couch.

Tractor squeezes. He keeps on till the trigger clicks and clicks. The chamber rotates empty, and dances strings of smoke. Tractor’s deaf, his ears pulse. There’s ringing and blacklight and silhouettes of cats creeping shadows across the wall.

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In his head, he ran it over and over. How it went down, how Lunchbox jumped him. How things got nasty as fast as they did. His memory rewinds and runs it the same. But time and guilt have a way of turning truth, re-shaping it. Why he grabbed the shooter? Could he have done it different? Would he have?

-- PART ONE --

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” - Matthew 11:28

Tractor

They let him out of his cage. Morning. Six o'clock, last day in June. Tractor Lindsey stands outside the walls of Doverville Correctional Institution. It rains sideways, whooshes faintly and he steps out into it. The wet tickles and sticks to his shaved head and sunk cheeks. Still dark out, humid. The sky a gray blanket. A sweep of open field and dead grass and muddy mounds and deep divots and easy dig dirt. High fence and swirl-bushes of barbwire.

Tractor spots Rosey in the lot. Rosey's baby blue Buick Skylark. A tugboat on wheels. He attempts to pull big breaths but they clip and catch short. Fucking schoolboy nerves. Just go man! He totes his state-issue trash bag full of clothes, couple polaroids, a beat-to-shit copy of 'Adventures of Huck Finn' and heaves open the heavy door and sinks into the passenger seat.

Rosey hands him a rag that's a wife-beater to wipe away the rain. It's a dream. This ain't real, he's floating faint with the rain. Inside its spacious, cool. Smells of fresh laundered linen and pine. Tractor's ass, cushioned by butter soft leather.

He plants his feet in the floor, raises up his hips and finagles a soft pack of Pall Mall menthols out his back pocket. Tight black Levi's that fit him baggy when he went in the castle seventeen years earlier. He shakes a cig to his lips.

“Nah-ah, can't smoke,” Rosey says. “I quit. Took me a decade to fight the smell out.

Rosey's early sixties, handsome. Not pretty-handsome, man-handsome, a shock of silver hair. He runs a state-funded prayer group for violent offenders inside Doverville. He's devout,

God-fearing, an ex-con. Rosey's put in work to get Tractor's mind right. Tractor's anger, his rage. Rosey's reaped spiritual rewards seeing group members, inmates, criminals get back outside the castle and make a life.

The community, the state, they've has acknowledged and awarded Rosey for his rectitude, the hard-earned work for reform. Rosey'd say this to group at lulls in session: *remember now, the work is the incentive. The incentive is the clarity of mind. The clarity of mind maintains hope and faith. Do we understand? Good. Moving on...*

"Heard that, boss," Tractor says. He nestles the cig back inside the pack.

Rosey rolls his neck, it pops twice. The rain on the hood of the Buick has a safe, soothing sound. Rosey's belly swells his belt.

On the outside Rosey's a pastor. Word is, he does good money-wise. Rosey's the son of a preacher-man from a long-ass-line of preacher men. God is what he knows. God is where it begins and ends. Suddenly the sky opens up and gushes buckets. For a long second everything around him and Rosey and the prison and the fields and fences all vanishes. One big loud slamming blur.

"We're going to take this moment. Lord showers upon us this morning for a reason," Rosey says, and dips his chin.

Tractor wants a cigarette bad. Get the wheels moving, boss. Take him away from this place. Fast, fast, fast, floor that shit, man, or he's never getting out. He'll never see if this is really real. He looks at Rosey's shut-eyes and bowed head and hard gut expanding evenly, the calm putter of breath.

"I say we go, boss," Tractor says. "Can we just go? Say we give it some gas?"

Rosey doesn't hear, chooses not to. Tractor looks in the backseat. That immaculate clean. That leather shine.

“Anybody even ever sat back here, boss?” When Rosey doesn't answer Tractor jabs a finger in his nose. Digs a boog, wipes it between old boot and ragged sock.

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His first week in group everybody bowed heads with Rosey. Every session started the same. Tractor's first day, two guards walked him through a narrow corridor into a bare room that housed prayer group. Like how AA does meet and greet, but without the coffee and goodies. Just a bleak, echoey room full of harsh light and metal and wire.

How razor-sharp Rosey looked in contrast: there he was smoking a cig—when he smoked—under the single solitary square chicken-wire-window of thick glass across the room. He stubbed his smoke on a metal table fastened to the floor, and came over when Tractor entered with the guards. Rosey was in a suit and tie and good-smelling. This is a man who sees straight through the front, the bravado.

Everybody already in their seats. Tractor's nerves spun and his back up, and he remembered it distinctly; like the sheer hype he felt just before he wrestled a match. The group waited, stared. Tractor holding up session, stupid-looking in front of Rosey, and tongue-dumb.

Rosey said, “See here now: all I ask, is you remain open-minded. You have scrupulous attention to the energy and the conversation in the room,”

“Have a what attention?” Tractor said. He stood by the door next to the guards, his back against the wall.

“What I’m even doing here, boss? What I’m supposed to even pray? I’d just be lying, I’d forcing it.” Tractor chewed a fingernail and chose one inmate to mug-down. “I ain’t believe in not-shit no more. Got me twenty-three-to-life in this stone cold bitch.”

“You don’t force anything. Everybody start the same. Just listen to what others have to say and you be present. The beings in this room need to trust you, same as you do them. Praying will come of its own.”

Tractor grabbed and unfolded a metal folding chair with a wood seat from against the wall, and sat. He cradled his arms into himself, looked at his feet and listened. Later he looked up the word scrupulous.

Rosey was right. Because it didn’t take long, and Tractor prayed. Fascinating enough: a room full of vulnerable villains and bangers and killers will demonstrate it’s okay to open yourself up, say what’s in your head, say how crushes your conscience. And soon all the weight, all the heavy burden, it came crashing down on Tractor like the gush of rain right here, right now, splashing off the hood of Rosey’s big body Buick. Tractor cups hand’s over his knees, closes his eyes and prays.

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At the prison gate Rosey twists down the window, and he hums. Rosey hums. His hum was ever-present to cushion a heated silence between all days or associates in group; ever-present to spot gaps in delicate moments that otherwise could’ve been sharp, dangerous. It’s what Tractor will remember about Rosey.

Rosey reaches an arm out and beeps a plastic card attached to a lanyard. He takes his time issuing chicken-scratches on a clipboard and nods at the guard; he says “alright, now, Jonathan,

you have yourself a fine day”. And suddenly it all seems absurd and infuriating. All this was just this easy. Beep a card, scratch some lines and vamonos.

Tractor’s white t-shirt is stuck to his skin. The AC grips his bones. Would the gate even open for them? It clinks, rattles, opens on whiny chain. They turtle some speed bumps, Rosey spins the wheel and that’s it. They’re out past the prison’s main haul and onto a two-laner road.

When Tractor got sentenced he was an immediate trade. Like baseball cards, outsourced and only barely out of his teens. They’ll give you so-and-so for so-and-so and maybe a second convict on good behavior. A prisoner with a disproportionately long sentence—Tractor—gets transferred—ad hoc—extraordinary distances to rot their life away; and poor families can’t scrape together travel funds to visit. So all and all, you’re forgotten. At least that’s how Tractor understood it when the coke-head courthouse hallway lawyer explained it to him like he was a third grader.

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The rain sets a sparkle to everything. They sail past farm homes and barns, past rickety windmills and scarecrows. In the distance, alien, science fiction looking things Rosey called turbines. The terrain takes on slight curves, rolls, the tugboat undulates.

Tractor sticks his head out the window and watches a hawk hover and hears the rubber whirl on concrete and the muscle under the hood. Cows congregate. Horses stock-still like picture book statues. Tans, greens, blues, his heart breaks. Hot wind warms and dries tears on his cheeks.

Rosey steers steady. He tells Tractor he’s taking him on the scenic route, “thank me later. Just soak it in, son.” Rosey hums and gives it some gas. He muscles the car into the turns and past pines and dense forest. The big boat switchbacks down through the same.

At the first stoplight are strip malls and little buildings and homely tastes of small-town love of living. Rosey twists on the tape-deck. "My Girl" rolls itself to the end of the track. Rosey looks at Tractor deadpan.

"They greatest hits," he says. "Except all they songs is great hits." Rosey shakes his head at Tractor like, not up for discussion.

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Four months ago it ran official, Tractor would release. Tractor and Rosey had chatted practicalities on the way it would likely go. Tractor should do right and remain in his cell and pass the time quietly. "It's going to take longer than they say. The process be arduous. Time will most certainly and suddenly real. And it's a predator." Rosey had said. "Don't prepare yourself for the good, or the bad, or any of it. You focus on your prayers and the present. Focus on your day-to-day. Head-up. Keep your mind right. *Do not deviate.*"

Rosey always said shit like that. It made you over-think everything he said specifically not to think about. Tractor would always wonder if Rosey pimped the sage-card to just to fuck with him.

The letter came not long after the news of Tractor's release. Rosey handed it to Tractor before group one day. The letter said Tractor's Gram got a stage number. Like she was issued a bill in the mail. Cancer, lung. It was Gram's handwriting. He read it in front of Rosey, then he told him what it said, then he let read and plucked it back.

"She got fucking stage three, boss. Whatever that means. Convenient fucking timing ain't it?" Tractor said.

“Stay the course. You doing real good. You doing *real* good. And God knows,” Rosey said. “There is always a reason. You remember that.”

Tractor flicked the letter on his folding chair. Turned his back to Rosey to go to the wall and smoke as the other inmates filed into the room.

Teddy bear,

I got the cancer. They say stage three and it sure don't look good. If you really getting out and thats real well that's real good The Almighty's punching my ticket but I want to see my teddy bear in the real-life flesh before I go and be with your mama and my bad bad sweet man your gramp on the other side Use the phone Call your gram Love you to death and back

Kisses

— *Gram*

Tractor called her. On the phone guards stood by and watched. Tractor flicked them the bird, crooked his arm, and tucked his head under it. He told Gram, yeah I'll be there no matter what. I fucking promise. Love you to death, too.

Making sure to say to Gram the thing he never again got to say to his own mama.

When he hung up the guards realized he'd been crying. They found it rip-roaring funny; they hiked the stairs—Tractor's shackles singing—and they called him special needs boo-boo and poor baby and fuckboy and nefarious names deserving of being shivved and shoveled over the rail three decks down. But he was getting out.

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Rosey could've asked anybody. He was moving into a new home, and good for him. A move that happened to be happening right around Tractor's release date. Rosey and his wife

Trishna, they sold their home and were getting a nice new one. Waiting on his release to push through, Tractor told Rosey, of course, anything you need, boss. Rosey said they had most of their stuff packed in boxes already. Tractor saw like this: if Rosey said drink the cyanide from the red solo cup, it's punch, then pass it, said it's God's will, he'd have done it, no questions.

Rosey'd be the *one*.

Early on, Tractor was violent and insubordinate and guards chronically swept his cell. He welcomed them inside, buck-naked and slippery till they put down and moved him again. It went like this almost a year: guards riot-gear his cell weekly, and he made them work for it. When it all tapered was when his lights got put out. Guards beat him unconscious and landed him fourteen days in the hole. When he was out, something had gone real wrong, and he wobble-walked the block to his cell but didn't make it. He fell, and things went dark.

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"You pray, inmate twelve eighty one, twelve forty six, six forty one?" A powerful baritone said. Rosey's eyes were the first thing Tractor noticed. How cliché? Cucumber color in the light smearing the infirmary bed. Rosey loomed large. His head cocked, and holding a clipboard. Tractor was cold, alone, covered in a thin tawny sheet. Naked, but for one of those loose-fitting Johnny gowns. Pain from his ribs breath stealing. A little box window erupted pale light into the room. It spread Rosey like an archangel. When Rosey moved his arms, Tractor swears they were wings on the wall behind him.

"Believe in God, son?"

Tractor didn't answer. He didn't know. Too many things. He turned his head the other way, and shut his eyes, and he can't truly say what it was made him commit to Rosey's prayer

group. Maybe yearning for connection. Maybe be a part of something. When he chose to walk through the open door that day and take a seat, a weight lifted from him.

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The small town sweeps mouth-watering smells. Coffee, pancakes, bacon, and eggs carry through the Buick's open windows. Smells he was sure he'd never smell again.

"You're staying at the Rainbow Inn. It's just outside town here," Rosey says. "Remember, I pay you by the day. Likely it'll be two days."

There's a hardware store, a pharmacy on the corner, an ice cream shop. Nineteen fifties looking barbershop, red, white, blue emblem working its whirl outside-front.

"Just be smart. Take it slow," Rosey says. "Say your prayers when you're feeling something itchy. When all's said and done, I'll front you some dough for that long bus trip back Grandmama." He looks at Tractor. "You with me? You get a hold of her before you checked out?"

Tractor's watching out the window.

"Yeah, boss, I got her on the line. We talked. Pills and oxygen and old movies and shit. She sounded pretty good,"

Rosey two-finger-taps the dash, and spins the wheel.

"Praise God."

The long nose of the Buick cuts across dotted yellow lines. Rosey twists up the volume, starts to hum with the song, "I Wish it Would Rain".

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The Rainbow Inn's placard coming at them is faded out. Rosey cuts the music. They bump a half-curb into a narrow lot. Rosey pulls the Buick in diagonally, and parks aside the only other car. They get out. Tractor sets his trash bag at his feet, and lights a cigarette.

Rosey walk past rooms with sun-smashed yellow doors, and disappears into the front office. He comes back out and across shaking a key.

"Got you in room three," Rosey says with his baby, ring and middle finger winking. He holds out the key for Tractor to grab but doesn't let go of it.

"Me and the Man upstairs want a man's word, that he'll make this work." Roses clenches his jaw. "Everything is everything we talked about, son. This is no joke. You will see that soon enough. This the beginning of the end, you understand? Give me your word, Tractor. Stick to the plan, next two days."

"Got my word, boss. Consider it sowed up."

Rosey releases the key to Tractor.

"Praise God. You have my number. Something feels shaky, or out of sort, you call. You do not hesitate. You call, call, call...otherwise, you and I is getting after it bright and early."

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First night in the joint marked the scariest moment in Tractor's life. He tuned out the noise, tuned out threats. Tuned out slams of his heart through his ears. And here's how: you're already dead. You're dead, man. Nothing left for you. Nothing and no one. With some it time it seemed it'd be enough.

Alone on this soft mattress in a scarred motel room. The same dread creeps in. An all but similar terror to that first night in the castle, an identical smothering.

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When Rosey pulled out of the motel parking lot he was good. He told himself, you're straight man, you good. Jitters, unease, of course, maybe excitement, nerves.

He claps curtains together, closes out daylight. He goes past the bed to the bathroom. He flicks on the light, and what a trip it is to control your own lights. In the mirror he frowns at the reflection he sees and flicks it off. He plucks a cup from an upended three-stack, tears off the plastic and fills it with water. The surge from the faucet is a marvelous thing. He runs his hand back and forth through the stream several minutes, staring, and splashes his face and the towel smells downy fresh.

His hands shake some. He twists the water off. He drinks, refills, guzzles another cupful. Clumps of mold coat the bottom of the pink-orange tub. The toilet color matches the tub, and he pisses and flushes and flushes again because he can. The shower curtain has a foggy film with different colored seahorses on it.

Back out in the room Tractor clicks on the television to kill the silence. He strips his clothes because that's what he knows. That's what he did in his cell to sink into stillness. He'd curl up on the concrete slab, and cradle his legs.

He chain-smokes, clicks through channels and stays on cartoons. Roadrunner runs dust storms through Wiley, the deathless Coyote. Sweat covers him and soaks his white jockeys see-through. He blasts the AC but he's sure it's broken and only roars the fan. He locks, unlocks and locks the door. He does push-ups, sit-ups, more push-ups. He puts back on his clothes, grabs the key, unlocks the door and leaves.

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He hikes to town. It's late afternoon, and the sun irons it's heat through cloud cover. The town's lively. People go into shops and eateries. When they lock their cars, honks jolt him. All the laughing and touching and affection sting him some. All the women, young and old, walking around trouble his loins, enliven his member. He can't stop himself from cutting eyes, and blatant ogling.

He uses his hand as a visor and peeks in store windows. Down the walk, a family shares licks of different flavored ice cream from cones; their tongues tinged bright happy colors. He bites through his cheek to keep overbearing sadness in check.

People who pass him, they hold their partners harder and walk faster and grip purses tighter. And it's not just him. It's not in his head, it's not just the big tattoo-dotted goon who stands out. These cheerful people see a threat, they see an eyesore. They see an ugly animal and pretend he's not among them. Pretend he's coldhearted and without feeling, and nothing like them. Fuck them. He's not.

Back in the motel room, he shuts off the lights. He locks the lock, slides the chain. He strips naked and lights a cigarette. He dips his head in the sink and sucks from the faucet then gets in the shower. After a long while he sits down in inches of water in the tub. He cradles his legs snug to his chest and weeps. He prays and pretends the smothering comes to an end.

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"Not sure about this, boss. Mind I just stay with the car? No disrespect. Don't know I'm ready for all this kind of interaction, you know," Tractor had slept the night in the tub.

It was still dark when Rosey wrangled him from the motel at pre-dawn. Tractor heard him humming outside his door. They got after it all morning. Full-swing: lifting, lugging, talking

little. They cut for break to meet Rosey's wife, Trishna, an early lunch. A place called Garfield's. Saturday brunch time, and Garfield's was packed. Parking, none. Rosey circles the lot for a spot, but parks on the street

"You'll be fine. Got to come out of your shell one way or another," Rosey says. "This is as good a time as any. You want to pray on it?"

"Nah, I don't want to pray on it. I just, all this shit, man—" Tractor waves his hand around at nothing. "Just feels real fucked up, you know?"

Rosey looks in the rearview at the restaurant. "Buck up, big man. My wife's waiting. You about to get a free breakfast, anyhow."

When they get out, Tractor comes around the Buick, but keeps close at Rosey's hip behaving like a bird-dog. Waiting out in front of Garfield's, waving to them, is a short, fit, crazy-attractive woman. She flashes a bright smile. Tightest body Tractor's ever seen on a woman her age.

"Hello, gentlemen. Tractor, I'm Trishna. It's nice to meet you." She doesn't wait for Rosey to introduce her. Her small hands seize Tractor's with great strength.

"Good to meet you, ma'am," Tractor says, his head bowed.

"Sorry I couldn't lend a hand this morning, guys. Had some work to finish at the school. But I'm ready for round two this afternoon," Trishna says, and flexes a bicep.

Trisha says it's a long wait for a table. Rosey says they got time. He says Tractor's got to try the burger. Crowds of people loiter and laugh loud. There's a whole lot of movement and unnerving to Tractor. People passing back and forth behind him. He excuses himself and goes around the side of the building. A snail in his shell, and smokes.

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The hostess put them at a table in the center of everything. Clatters of plates and silverware, and calls to order and wailing babies. Bus tub slips and shattering of glasses.

Rosey and Trishna sit together. They talk about new house and old house stuff. All things difficult for Tractor to hear over the din. Trishna keeps glancing at him. She keeps smiling her big warm smile. Rosey keeps asking him, you good?

“So Rosey tells me you’re going to back to live with your grandmother. In Michigan?” Trishna says.

“Uh huh, thats right, yah, ma’am. She’s got the cancer. So, yah, I’m going back there.” Tractor looks at Rosey to see if he answered right. Rosey nods. Tractor tears open packets of sugar and dumps them in his empty coffee cup.

“What do you think you might like to do now, Tractor,” Trishna says. “Now that you’re, well, now that you’re out?” She says *out* at a higher pitch, an awkward shrug.

“I don’t know. Think my options is pretty narrow.” Tractor tries to smile stupidly. He feels Trishna focus on his missing tooth. He stops smiling. Hopes Rosey starts talking game plan for the move again, to take questions off of Tractor.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find something. I know you will.” Trishna says. She looks at the waiter who just arrived at the table with their food.

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They finalized the move the next afternoon. Trishna insisted Tractor come with them to church. They climb the church steps together in silence. Tractor stops at the top. He looks at his boots. They wait. He glances around at cars parking and doors closing and families straightening

formals before crossing the street together. Everyone takes their time, everyone's slow in draining heat. Trishna's in a purple dress, a purple hat with a beige ribbon tied around it. Rosey's sharp, as always, in a gray suit and solid navy tie. Rosey had Tractor wear one of his plain white button-ups. He looks like busboy on his first day of work. The shirt hangs out, sloppily tucked into his shabby black Levi's.

Rosey puts his hand over his head to block the glare. Rosey and Trishna greet folks by name as they pass to go inside and wait on Tractor.

"What is it, dear?" Trishna says.

"Nah, nothing, ma'am. If it's alright, thought I'd have a smoke first?" Tractor looks at Rosey for permission. "Then I can meet y'all inside?"

"You come on in when you're good and ready," Trishna says.

Rosey lowers his hand and points at him. "See you in five, then. Find us on the right side pews near the front."

Rosey takes his wife's waist and they walk to the front. Tractor watches. He nods to a girl pushing her grandmother in a wheelchair. The grandmother nods back. Tractor goes down the steps to the street.

He had faith once. He did, he had it. He remembers the smells of his church as a kid: a cinnamon musk and sawdust and wet dog. He remembers constant run of a toilet in the back behind the priests skeevy bed sheet used as a curtain for a door. He remembers dozens and dozens of Dollar Dan candles and empty assurances. If he goes inside now, does he start fresh again? If he steps inside now, does he strip his armor? Will God hear him this time?

*

After the service Rosey drops Trishna at their new home. Tractor steps from the back seat, holding a heavy book Trishna had gifted him earlier that morning.

The only room not yet packed in boxes was Trishna's study. A small room with a coziness Tractor had never felt. Smells of leather and old book pages. Floor-to-ceiling volumes of so many books. When Trishna came into the study, Tractor was flipping pages of a book on birds of prey. Rosey had mentioned his wife taught and ran the art history program at some university. She's a devoted ornithologist with a passion for winged creatures. "That's a good one, dear," She said. "You go on, take it. It's yours. I have another copy."

He opens the passenger door for Trishna, and she steps into soft green grass. Trishna puts strong tiny hands over Tractor's, and prays under her breath. He hears the words, 'protect him, guide him'. He scans the neighborhood as she does this. Kids play in a driveway. Screech, yell, sprint around and shoot each other with pump guns full of water. Two women lean on a shiny Cadillac SUV. Women in spandex sipping from dixie cups. In the yard, a lemonade stand set-up. A sign taped to the table says 25 cents. Yellow marker: a have-a-nice-day face with neon curlicues for hair for the stick-figure hair. The sun will soon spread a sort of glow.

Trishna pats Tractor's hand when she finishes. She hugs him and he hates how he freezes in her embrace. She follows the narrow walk and goes into the new home. He'll never see her again.

Tractor gets in the passenger seat. He asks Rosey if he'll drop him at the strip mall by the motel. "All that singing about the Almighty has got a guy hungry."

He looks once more at Rosey's new home. "Sure is a beautiful home you got there, boss. Well deserved. Well deserved."

*

Rosey parks in front of a caged pawn shop. They're next to each other at the rear of the Buick and stand in silence.

"Supposed to have the words, I know," Rosey says. "Anybody supposed to have them, it's me."

Tractor blows out smoke. "Me either, boss. Still wrapping my head round this being free-bird business. Wonder if I always will be. Feel like I'm renting time or something." Tractor watches people go in and out of the liquor mart at the other end of the strip.

"You got yourself that early morning bus-catch," Rosey says. "Proud of you, son."

"Nah, don't say that."

Rosey rests a hand on Tractor's shoulder. "God knows."

Tractor shrugs off Rosey's hand, and shifts back. He flicks his cigarette against the pawn shop window, and the cherry flares.

"Don't fuck with me, boss. You ain't know what this like. What I'm even supposed to do now, huh?" Tractor rubs his hand across his bald head. He forms fists, makes quick jabs at the ground. "I got shit for life worth nothing now. You me both know, I'm good as fucked."

"Alright, Tractor, hold on now. Just hold on. Be cool. It's going to be alright. Day at a time, remember? Day at a time, right? It's how we do it. Day at a time. Day at a time." Rosey has hands in front of him, like chill. "And I promise you, you stay the course, God'll take care of the rest. Know why? Because the rest, son, the rest is not up to you."

Tractor looks everywhere except at Rosey. "So that's it then, boss? End of the line?"

“Yeah. Yeah, you right, that’s it. You’ll to do this. I know it. Know it in my heart. You’ll take these steps. You’ll make this happen. Tractor, look at me, son?”

Tractor stops bobbing his head, and looks up. Finally meets Rosey’s unblinking eyes.

“You’re going to have to fight for this. Going to have make it worth it.”

Suddenly Rosey’s intense blue eyes brim with wet, and threaten overflow. This softens Tractor. And he can’t hold it in. And his own tears come fast. His face folds, and he’s sorry. He’s so so sorry.

A hand comes from Rosey’s pocket, and between his fingers is a thin fold of greenback with a crumpled napkin that says Garfield’s in red block letters. The napkin has a phone number on it. Blue ink that’s bled through. Rosey chances another palm on Tractor’s shoulder. This time he lands it strong. This time it stays.

“Like I said, for the help. And the trip back to grandmama. I’ll be praying for the both of you. You see my number there.” Rosey juts chin at the napkin that went into Tractor’s pocket.

“Call anytime. I want to hear from you. Look forward to hearing good things.”

They shake hands and bring it in.

Rosey his lifeline. Leaving Rosey feels like quick death.

“Thank you, Rosey,” Tractor says.

“Don’t thank me. Praise God. You just getting started.”

He pats Tractor’s arm. And just like that, Rosey gets in the Buick and fires it up and pulls away.

*

The motel room is blacked out. Red digits on the clock tell it's already tomorrow. Six and half hours and Tractor leaves the Rainbow Inn and catches a bus for forever out of Doverville.

The bathroom light is on, the door half-open. The vent-fan rattles out hot air. Tractor shapes O's with his smoke. It catches drafts and bounces and breaks apart along the ceiling and floats like moth to light. He sips from a plastic liter of vodka. He zones out at the contour of his head off the reflection of the Television screen, faded. Beer bottles are on the night stands and table by the window; the ashtray, a mound of cig-butts. His and her clothes litter the floor and chair. She snores next to him. Her body shivers, and her skin is clammy and cold. Her complexion soft in neon from the bathroom. There's purple black veins in her forehead. Tractor thinks he sees a smile. He tugs the blanket over her shoulders. Her name's Galaxy. That's what she told him anyway. She said she'd just turned twenty one. He guessed high school.

*

Galaxy had been lurking outside the liquor mart. She was in the alley with a hooded figure when Tractor went inside. When he came out with a plastic bag full of travel bottles of booze, a liter of Popov, a twelver of Bud, a bottle of aspirin, a protein bar and some peanuts for the bus ride back to Westfall, Galaxy was out front. Tall, wide-shouldered and sickly pale. Not ugly, not attractive, curly hair dyed an icy-blond. It bounce-wiggled with every little movement she made, and she was lit. She moved with a sharp awareness. Her eyes sparkled and died. She swayed the sidewalk, cat-walked the curb. Blocked Tractor's way and he stopped.

She flicked her wrist at him, asked to bum a fag, and smiled like it was funny. Her breath ripe and rotten, a fruity acetone. A nostalgic smell that needled his skin. He gave her the cigarette he'd just lit for himself. She scratched herself lightly, her lips chapped.

“Say, you drinking alone? Maybe someone could use a drink, doctor stranger?” Galaxy said, and pointed at herself with the cig in her mouth. The hood from the alley whistled from behind them. “Check you later, G,” and fast-footed the other way.

“I’m at a motel way down the road,” Tractor told her.

“Yeah, whatever.”

“Alright. I don’t know what that means? Come along or don’t.”

*

Tractor and Galaxy walked a mile to the Rainbow Inn. A chill in sticky air. Streetlights and gutted homes along the shoulder of the freeway, and they turned off of it and took a shortcut Galaxy knew about. Tractor asked if she played sports. He said she carried herself well.

“Like, you’re synchronized.”

“Yeah. Volleyball. Varsity as a freshman.” She looked at him and staggered a little.

“Dudes came to games and cat-called and shit and stared at our asses in spandex. Fucking pigs, right?” She garbled her words.

“Yeah that’s shitty. But I’d done the same. So, can’t hate them for it,”

They cut back toward the freeway. Tractor lit cigs for them.

“Volleyball, huh? I’d of guessed swimming. The crawl stroke. You’d be like a dolphin in the water. *EeeeEheee*,” He attempted a shitty imitation of a scene he remembered being funny from Ace Ventura. He’d watched it with Gram so long ago.

“I was really good, you know,” Galaxy said.

“I bet you owned it.” A shitbox without a muffler barreled by. He asked if she was hungry. Said they could order pizza. She said no she wasn’t hungry for that, and she winked at him with too much effort.

*

Galaxy sat on the bed, her hands in her tiny bag. Then she took them out, clasped them together between her thighs. Tractor went in the bathroom and closed the door. He sparked his lighter a bunch of times, illuminating his face off mirror in dark. He came out with his shirt off. He didn’t know how or where to touch her when she stepped to him. He’d had sex only twice in his life before went away for life.

Galaxy told him to relax and tried to touch his face, and tried to kiss him. He pulled away. Then she pecked his neck, and licked it. She lied and told him she liked his tats. They fucked furious and raw and vacant. They drank. She broke down, cried and laughed maniacally. Tractor laughed with her. It felt good to laugh, felt human. She danced to oldies on clock radio. She blabbed about her shit-life growing up in upstate New York. She smoked scooby-snax till she spun sick on the carpet. Tractor picked her up and put her in the bed. Cleaned up her rancid mound. In the bathroom mirror he stared in his eyes and thought of his own death. Thought if it might be easier. He left Galaxy fifty bucks. Ten more than she asked for. He tucked a pillow under his knees and closed his eyes.

*

Tractor roused with a start three hours later. Showered. Woke Galaxy. Put some aspirin in her palm. Passed her a cup of murky water. Asked if she wanted a shower. Galaxy was lacing up

her Payless-beat-to-shit boots when Tractor handed her the address to Rosey's church. And right away knew he shouldn't have. She stopped mid-bunny ear, and took the paper.

"What's this?"

"It's an address. And a phone number."

"Yeah, I see it's an address and phone number, dude. To what?"

"A church. It's a church not far from here. Like a few miles maybe. I was just there yesterday. And, um, it was *Uplifting*."

Galaxy struggles tying her laces. "Church? You're my savior now?"

It's wounding when she says it. She stuffs Tractor's twenty, two tens and ten dirty ones into her plastic diamond wallet-purse.

"Yah, I'm your savior. It's why I just paid you to fuck you and spent a life sentence in the hoosegow. I'm God's right hand guy."

She pops the aspirin and swallows the filmy water. "Let me get a cigarette?"

He gets her one.

"Look, the guy on the paper, his name's Rosey. He's a pastor, a black guy. He runs a prayer group in jail. For what it's worth, he saved my fucking life. I don't know what kind of shit you believe in, but—"

"Don't think I'd fit too good at a black church, dude," Galaxy says. She fans the paper in front of her face and belches.

"Church is fucking church, ain't it? Still salvage souls, don't it?" Tractor stomps the room searching for his socks. Finds and tugs them on sweaty feet.

"Listen, I don't care what you do. But you got to get out, you can't squat here."

Sweetly

I don't much like to be touched, held, or snuggled. Not even by mom who's my best friend in the world. I suck my hair when I'm nervous or excited or whatever. Mom hates it, but she's never said that though, she knows I can't help it. I'm on a spectrum. I've heard mom and Rick talk about the spectrum with doctors for what feels forever. Mom threatens to put nasty oils in my hair, and make me stop. Mom makes this one face when I suck my hair. She just did it.

She thinks I'm not looking at her because I'm not. I never look but I always see. I see and feel and sense everything like a superpower. Me and mom are in the living room. Mom's at the kitchen table reading. Her glasses pinch her nostrils. She peruses a health fitness magazine. She looks up and sees me sucking my hair and says my name. "Sweetly."

I'm on the couch and acknowledge nothing. I'm actually just looking at lines in my palm thinking a million different things at once, and rocking back and forth. Mom says my name again and I repeat her, even louder. "Sweetly!" I say, shrilly.

Mom yanks her glasses from her face. I say my name real low, real fast in growls seven more times and get up and sprint the hall to the bathroom.

Mom shoots her chair and follows. I slam the door, and kick the bottom and sway back and forth in place staring intently where I just kicked. I do these things: sway, rock, hair suck, and sometimes shake my leg uncontrollably.

Mom's on the other side of the door. "Sweetest plum? I'm sorry for my tone. But will you open this door now please."

I'm ten. I'm normal height for ten. People say I look way younger. I have bright hazel eyes and beautiful black hair that waves like mom's. I'm skinny and hyper and off-the-charts

gifted but people think I'm retarded. Kids at school mock me and call me muttonhead or alien. It sucks and it stings and they think I don't hear or see it but I do. I'm an outsider. I mask the hurt pretty good by doing what I do because I can't help it.

Rick was emphatic about putting me in a different school. A school for special kids or whatever, but mom was having none of it. My upper body is humped and awkward. I'm not athletic like mom. Mom lifts weights and she's chiseled. I'm never hungry. Food and drink are things I never think about. What I eat is plain. What I comprehend is exceptional.

*

I click off the bathroom light, I draw the curtain. I put up the toilet lid and sit. The screen on my phone lights my face in the dark bathroom. I put on my song: Adele's "Rolling in the Deep". It's my poop song. I can't do my business in bright light or silence.

I scroll pictures of this boy Calvin's Instagram. He's older, and goes to my school. He's super awkward and shy like me. He has a new pic posted. He bleached his black hair blond. Hotness. Calvin has a tattoo, sort of. He gave it to himself on his forearm in class with blue ink from a Bic pen. I watched him poke it in his skin. He winced and clamped his tongue between teeth. The teacher called him out mid-ink, and that's when he actually looked at me.

The bathroom door rips open, and the light flicks on.

"I'm in here," I say, obviously. Mom's got severe focus face. Which means she's sorry not sorry. It says, I'm sorry but don't *F* with me or I'll box you.

*

Mom's more tolerant of me and my hair sucking and my spaz behavior after she's had a hard workout at Bilbo's boxing gym in downtown Ann Arbor. We live in Burns Park, a suburb.

Mom likes to box. She's a babe in her toughness. We like to watch ultimate fighting together. I don't actually watch but I love her company. I look at mom and sometimes and I think she doesn't fit into this nice, quiet neighborhood. More like she belongs in a hard town with hard people who like to punch things. Or maybe work a farm and harvest a plot and spit and cuss and talk to herself while smoking cigarettes. I totally see mom grunting and heaving hay and milking udders from dark to dark, then apologizing for spitting and cussing and smoking. Then do it all over again.

I'm not like mom. Mom has "*nesses*". It's how I think of it: toughness. Hotness. Hardcore-ness, whatever. I wish I had some of them. Mom tells me, sweet plum, you're just like me, you *are* me, I promise. When mom goes to the gym she says, I'm going to the gym, to train. Her purple Nike gym bag full of stuff: tape, headphones, stretch bands, massage gun, towel, other stuff. I've never been sure what she's training for. She says, I'm going to punch the poison out, sweet plum. She means Rick. Rick's the poison. Rick's my dad. I call him Rick. Mom's not officially married to Rick.

*

All this morning mom's been charging around the house talking to herself, cussing and packing our suitcases. She got in a fight with Rick before he left for work.

"I don't know how you do it in the dark, plum," mom says. "I could never drop a dookie in the dark. Too much pressure. You're so strong,"

On the toilet my hair's in my mouth now. Mom's always trying to boost me up. She knows how hard I can go down. She knows what it's like to drop deep alone in darkness herself. She opens the medicine cabinet. She starts to pluck her own pill bottles which she keeps in my

bathroom, not hers. Each bottle comes down on the sink top with a clatter, and sounds like the open to a funky foreign song.

*

When mom comes back from Bilbo's boxing gym she'll go out in the back yard and smoke a cigarette and suck back a green protein shake and talk to herself. She always sit in the lopsided lawn chair. The one missing a leg and sunken into the grass on one side. She'll jab her fingers at trees or poke them toward our little lap pool. A pool that's sparkly clean and came with the house that no one uses.

"Mom, maybe knock?" I pause Adele, slap my phone on the windowsill. "Can't you wait, like five minutes. Like five minutes even, can't you even wait?" I rock on the toilet. Mom looks at me. My sweatpants bunched at my feet. She looks like she just noticed me here.

Her jaw opens. "Why'd you turn that song off, plum? It's one of our favorites."

She says *our* favorites. Most times mom treats me like we're best friends. But sometimes I need her to be my mom. It's okay, I guess. I don't have any real friends. Mom treats me normal, not special. Not like Rick or teachers at school. Like I'm a burden and baggage and they have to expend extra energy on me more than others. Except my intuition is lightyears ahead of everyone.

"Get that hair out of your mouth, young lady. You're on the toilet, so gross." She's humming *Rolling in the Deep* and popping pill bottle tops; she's counting and arranging pills for the next four days. "The bus is at two. Or wait...maybe two-thirty, shit. I have to check. Regardless, you, young lady, need to be ready before that, capeesh?"

Mom clicks down each slot of her Monday through Sunday pill carrier full of pills.

“Sweetly, you heard me? Just nod, plum.”

*

Grandma Liscka lives in Bay City. Mom’s mom. We’re going to visit her for the fourth of July, like we do every year. And we take the bus every year, just me and mom, it’s our thing. We’ve been taking the bus since I can remember, and Rick usually drives and meets us. But Rick’s not coming this year. Rick said he had to work.

This morning Rick leaned over the kitchen table in his suit as I rocked and stared at my plain grits. Rick got real close over me with booze breath and said, “Sorry, my sweet chitlin’, daddy’s got to stay back and work”.

The tip of his tie broke the watery surface of my grits. He said, “goddamn it,” in a whisper. He said, “But, uh, I’m sure you guys’ll have great fun watching fireworks and all that”.

He said, *and all that*, and scrubbed his tie with a napkin that he licked to get wet and glancing at me to see if I heard him. His lips stuck to his veneers. His hand was moist and it trembled when he put it to my wrist. I yanked away. I don’t like people touching me other than mom. Even if Rick’s my dad.

Mom watched all this. She leaned against the kitchen sink, her arms crossed her chest. I heard her mutter, “You’re sick,” to Rick.

Rick made a face and left the room to change his tie. I pushed away my bowl, rocking, and looked at mom. Her hands were in fists at her sides, and she cursed at the refrigerator.

The fight mom and Rick got in this morning was the worst I’ve seen. I heard the whole thing but caught the tail end. I creeped in the living room as mom hurled a lamp at the back door

as Rick stepped outside. It exploded louder than I imagined it could. Mom's face was a buckled puzzle of hurt. Then she went in the back yard and broke her rule of one cigarette a day.

Mazzy

If she didn't have all this baggage, all this family weight, she could be on her own. She'd be free. She'd do so much. She'd train to fight in the MMA cage, maybe. She'd find a man who was a man and who respected her for the woman she is. She'd cut away Rick and his infidelities. She'd start over. All these thoughts have been swimming hot in her head this whole past year alone. She loves her daughter to death, but. But there's always a but. It's not okay to be selfish? She feels handcuffed at all times. If only for once to feel like her life was even half her own.

*

When Sweetly was born her lens clouded with an overload of love for her baby and nothing else. She gave up what she thought was her independence and devoted all and every to what is supposed to be family.

A year ago Rick cheated on her. He ended up confessing because there wasn't just one, there were many. And one of these psycho bitches wouldn't stop calling the house and speaking to her daughter and outright telling Sweetly how she'd been fucking her dad.

Then he told there'd been more, women, as if she didn't know. He begged her, said he was done. Pleaded and promised. And she pitied him. She chose to try. Work it out, make it work. He said he loved her. He bought her nice new shit. She did alright at first, they did. Rick was coming home decent hours for a bit. But she couldn't sleep in the same bed. She made it about Sweetly, and two-a-days at the gym.

Rick went back to acting like Rick with all Rick's vices; absent, arrogant, narcissistic, shameful. And that's about the time she started sobbing on her bed at random hours of the day for the decision to stay. Crying in her car, slamming fists against the steering wheel. Almost

having sex with her boxing trainer in the locker room at the gym. Her refusals to have any kind of silence when she's alone. Blasting Blind Melon's, "Change", and Tupac's "Keep ya head up".

Mazzy met Rick at the University of Michigan. She was a senior, him a freshman. Him soap-opera handsome. Her, naive. She confused Rick's childish arrogance for charm. His nonchalance, safe, with virgin hands. Not a single hard edge of experience to him. Rick's dad came from money. Family paper company passed down. Not long after Rick graduated, Mazzy was pregnant with Sweetly. Rick went to law school, started working for daddy. Sweetly was born. They never married. Rick's folks helped them into a nice small home. But Mazzy read it on Rick's parents' faces. They thought she was a gold-digger. Rick got his degree. He worked hard for it, she'll give him that. They settled in. Took next steps to next stages. Mazzy stayed at home with Sweetly. Rick never pursued law. He just kept working for daddy and Rick's dad sold that paper company. Rick didn't inherit the throne. His daddy finagled him a job selling pharmaceuticals. Rick travels for work. He's skilled at being gone. Rick's a spectacular fraud.

Sweetly

Of course mom gets a flat tire. She said, “Sweetly, get the bags ready at in front hall”. She said, “A nail got stuck and drained my fucking tire”.

She said it leaked flat while she punched and squatted at the gym. She calls me on her way back to tell me this, super fired up. She says, Thank God I already packed us. "I got us an Uber, already en-route. I'm only around the corner, pulling in the driveway, two seconds.”

The Uber waits out front for fifteen minutes. Mom told me, “Tell him I'll tip him good”.

Our bags are already in the trunk. I'm in the front yard waiting. My fanny pack clipped to my chest. I wear my hoop earrings, the ones mom gave me for my birthday. It rained earlier, and I sway in the wet grass and suck my hair and look at my phone and kick a rope swing when it swings back at me. Mom had to shower and make her green shake.

I look at her Lexus in the driveway, the mini-wheel, back passenger side. The front door slams. Mom leaps the steps, and lands in springy bounce. She says, “Come on, let's go”.

We get in the back seat, and mom slams driver-guy's door way too hard.

“Hey, driver! Can I smoke in here?” Mom asks, right off.

“Not if you want a ride,” the guy says.

“Okay, don't smoke. Got it.”

Mom stuffs her pack back in her bag. The driver watches us in the rearview the fifteen minute ride. Mom slurps her green drink loud, and I know she wants to box driver-guy because he didn't let her smoke. The best part of her day.

*

It's four minutes to two-thirty, we've just pulled into the station. I jump out of the burgundy Prius and thank the driver. I start to book it, no waiting. In my robotic voice I yell back, "Get the bags, get the bags, get the bags, I'll get the bus, I'll get the bus."

I've been to this station tons of times. Buses pull into spots by number. My plan: catch the bus, make it wait.

"Sweetly, stop! Wait! WAIT, Goddamnit!" Mom screeches.

She's yanking our bags out the driver's trunk. I'm fast though, I'm flying. It's obvious which bus is ours. There's five buses at the station. One's full of passengers and humming, and the others are empty.

I run through the red light, but the cars move slow. I split around cars like cones at summer camp soccer practice. I move around the front of the bus and almost slam my face into the bus driver's potbelly. He wears a funny conductor hat. It's like he's here to greet us, like we're VIP. His hands are plunked high on saddle hips. He looks overtired and severe like mom.

"My mom's coming quick. She's right behind me, see?" I point before I turn. Mom's not there. She's stopped, waiting at the red light, the don't walk hand signal that I flew through.

Mom chews her cheek and spits obvious cuss words.

"Okay, okay," the bus driver says. "But I got to get this bus rolling. Got a schedule to keep, you know? Was about to pull out when I saw you waving crazy arms at the bus. Had me thinking something had gone real wrong."

My heart pounds. I stick my hair in my mouth. The light goes green for mom. The bus driver squints at her as she stamps across the street with our bags. I don't wait, I go. I get on the bus.

*

The bus is full.

A black trash bag with stuff poking out of it is in the aisle seat where I want to sit.

“This one’s taken?” I say to the guy at the window.

He’s bald with tattoos on his neck, arms, and hands. He wears a ratty white t-shirt stained and neck stretched. He’s big and snugged against the bus. His head against the glass, eyes wide. He has ugly, swollen ears. Mom calls that cauliflower ear. When we watch MMA, I asked mom, and she said fighters get it from bashing. A Gatorade bottle is in his lap. He moves his head but barely when I ask. He looks at me with one blink, real slow, as if to rest his eyes. Then clears his throat.

“Nah, all you.” He grabs his bag out of the seat like there’s nothing in it but air, and drops it between his legs and looks back out the window.

I sit and take out my phone. I snap a pic of the crowded coach. I snap a pic of bald-tatted-guy looking out the window. I post them on Instagram, and write Happy Fourth! I flick through the feed.

The bald tatted guy sips his Gatorade bottle unaffected by my rocking and hair sucking. It’s obvious it’s not just Gatorade either. He smells like a used sponge.

Mom gets on the bus, rushes my seat.

“Sweetly! How many times? How many times I said it? I should take you off this bus and spank you and we’ll get right on home.” Mom’s sweating and looks like she just boxed the bus driver over where to put our bags. She’s so upset and out of breath. I caused all this, and feel terrible, I do. My nerves freeze up.

“You’ve got to stay with me. Sweetly, you’ve just gotta.” Mom bares bottom teeth. She wants to grab me but stops herself. She knows not to touch me because I’ll full on flip and inspire a fire drill. She rips my phone from my hand though. “Okay!?! Stay with me. Is that clear, young lady?” Mom leans down in my face to make sure I’ve heard.

My whole body floods hot with frustration and embarrassment. “Understood. Understood, understood, understood, understood...” I repeat and sway, my knees knocking.

Bald tatted guy watches mom. Probably trying to make sense of what’s going down right in front of him. He looks at his Gatorade bottle and smiles and shakes his head. He's missing a front tooth.

The bus starts to inch forward. The bus driver gets on intercom and tells mom she has to find a seat. He threatens to stop the bus, again. A passenger in front of me says why can’t you just go sit, it’s not hard. But it’s like mom doesn’t notice, doesn’t care. I motion for my phone back. Mom looks at the phone in her hand like she forgot it was there. She looks at bald tatted guy except he looks out the window now.

“I’ll be right. Over there,” mom says, and points three up the aisle and across. “I’ll be there.”

She takes my phone with her and sits. I notice her hand move to her mouth. She’s chomping on one of her fingernails. Mom’s a biter. But I also see she’s crying and shaking her head. I’m too much. I know she’s thinking, I’m too much.

I didn’t imagine the bus ride like this. The bus wasn’t supposed to be full. I voted to take the bus. I wanted to watch the world whip by. I wanted to ride the window seat, and let the muddled chatter blend with the slow drone of the silver bullet. I wanted to soak up the

countryside, and let memories swell my mind. Not just for me, for us, me and mom, seated together. Mom scored a sad year, this last one especially. When we used to take the bus, mom smiled more. Maybe I remember it wrong. The bus wasn't supposed to be hot and sticky. It wasn't supposed to be rancid with porta potty stink. I madly knock my legs against the seat in front of me. The rider in that seat lashes around to see what's happening.

Right then, bald tatted guy says, "What?" to the guy, real scary. Bald tatted guy's finger is between the seats, up in the rider's face. "Turn your face around. Nothing here to see. Fucking face the front."

And the rider does, he turns quick. And bald tatted guy sips his drink, and looks back out the window. The bus dolly's down the ramp onto the interstate. I must have passed out.

*

I missed the whole ride. I wake and there's drool on my shirt, and bald tatted guy's gone. Mom is blocked into her seat by passengers elbow bumping to get off. She's doing the pigeon trying to catch glances back at me. Her eyes look like black holes in her head.

We get off and wait for other riders to get out of the way so we can get our bags from underneath the bus. Mom keeps mumbling how bad she needs a cigarette.

I say, "Just have one then." I know her pack of Parliament lights is right there in her tote along with my phone she refuses to give back.

She ignores me. She cuffed a fierce hold on my wrist. I tried to tug away and couldn't. Her grip burns my skin. Mom insists that we go to The Full Moon Cafe, on principle.

"Since we did the bus-thing, we're doing the diner thing," mom says.

The Full Moon is a cafe diner. It's super old, it's part of me and mom's tradition. We've stopped at The Full Moon every year on way to see grandma for the fourth of July. Mom loves and lives by routine. That's how gym rats operate, neurotic and freakish, mom's a gym rat. The Full Moon isn't far from the station.

Mom says, "We're hoofing it."

"I don't want to go," I say. I keep trying to tug my arm back from mom. "Can't we just taxi or Uber and just go to grandma's now? I'm not hungry, not hungry, not hungry." I'm still full of sleep and cranky.

"Too bad, I'm ravenous," mom says. "The next four days are my cheat days. I can eat and drink whatever I damn well please. All I've had today is that shake. We're going." We start to walk. "You're in the doghouse, young lady. You have zero say till I say so."

Mom shoves one bag on my shoulder. We move along the freeway shoulder. I keep hearing mom's phone ring going off. Her ringtone is "Rolling in the Deep", same as mine.

"Mom, 'Rolling in the Deep' keeps blowing up in your bag."

She ignores me. The song's loud enough I can hear it as cars and trucks whiz past. We wait on our time to run across the road, and we enter The Full Moon with our luggage.

*

Inside the diner mom gets me a lemonade while we wait. She orders food to go. I drink it down and the sugar's got my insides happy. I check everything out. I touch everything. "Rolling in the Deep" is stuck in my brain.

Mom says, "Stop it, Sweetly. Stay over here, damnit."

I shake the cute elephant tip jar by the register. A solo coin inside. Maybe a penny, maybe it's Honest Abe. Probably a penny, I guess a penny. I get bored rattling it. I go outside. Mom yells. I come back in and stand with mom at the front. She tries to grab me, but not this time. The ringtone rings and rings in her tote, and mom keeps silencing it.

I disappear to the bathroom. When I come out wiping water on my pants and making figure eights with my hands through the air I notice bald tatted guy is in a back corner booth by the window. He shovels food into his face like nothing exists around him. There's party platter plates empty in front of him.

I skip towards his booth and pass him and wave and say real loud, "Hey, friend, hey, friend!" I surprise him but he collects quickly, and nods; he gestures a fork in my direction, chomping a mouthful.

Mom ordered French toast, three eggs Benedict sandwiches on sourdough and two poppy-seed muffins with two side bacon and a cup of whole milk for me. She says she gets the bacon for me, knowing I won't touch it, and she'll mow it. Her phone starts playing the song again. "Your phone, just answer it," I say.

"Sweetly, tie your shoes for me please," mom says.

The waitress, her name is Gladys, she comes over with a plated sample of something. Cookies. Mom finally pulls her phone out of her bag. She looks at Gladys, then me.

"Okay, I'm taking this, you, young lady, stay put. STAY put." Mom points at the floor like I'm a dog. "Here, right here, where I can see you." And she goes out front.

"Hey, kiddo. You want to sample a biscotti. It's new on our dessert menu," Gladys says. "They're sweet and crumbly. I like them good enough." She smiles at me nice.

I sway some looking at my untied shoes, and snatch a cookie. I devour it. I grab another before finishing the first and stuff it. Gladys laughs heartily. It's not malicious though, she's excited like I am.

“Finish them, doll. Plenty more where that came from. I'll get more from the back.”

So I do. I house the whole plate. I tongue breaded clumps stuck in my teeth. I lick leftover pieces in the corners of my mouth.

“Sweet, crumbly, sweet and crumbly, sweet and crumbly,” I say. Gladys laughs and covers her mouth. She takes the coffee carafe and goes to check on bald tatted guy and some old couple.

I run outside to tell mom about the sweet and crumbly biscotti cookies that melt in your mouth, but before I see her I hear her. Mom's bent over, yelling into her phone like screaming down into a well.

“No! No, Rick! You shut your mouth and listen, listen to me! You've never been there for her, not ever! I forgave and forgave. All your lying and fucking cheating. I've tried so hard to make this work, for her...”

I cup my hands over my ears, my hair through my teeth and I sway on the sidewalk. Mom's blatantly oblivious to her ferocious performance out in front of the The Full Moon.

I catch a sun flash and reflection off the window. Gladys stands at bald tatted guy's booth and they both watch mom flip her shit.

*

Mom said to Rick, she tried to *make this work, for her*, meaning *me*. I knew right away. When mom gets this way—like the lamp this morning—I say nothing. I've nobody to look to see

truth. I boot a cars bumper over butting the curb and go back inside. By the register I clutch my ribs with an arm and slap my palm over and over against my thigh.

*

The to-go food is on the counter in an oily brown lunch bag. Gladys shrugs then looks around the diner at nothing. She picks up the plate, holds a second batch of biscotti out at me. I don't stop rocking.

“Here she comes, doll” Gladys says.

Mom comes back in the diner. She wears her invisible horse blinders. Like don't you dare try and talk to me. And suddenly I'm smashed with shame and resentful.

“Sorry. How much I owe you, Gladys?” Mom says. She sounds wiped. Her voice raspy after all her pantomiming outside. I feel alone and helpless. Mom pays. Then selfishly, without looking at me, mom says,

“Get the bags, Sweetly”—which are closest to me—“I need a cigarette.”

“Why do you always do that?” I spill. “Why you always do it!?”

Mom jams her credit card back in her wallet, gives a hammy sigh.

“Do what, exactly, *Sweetly?*”

“Embarrass us like that.” I point out the window. I point out front where she showcased her wretched scene.

“Oh, I'm sorry. *I* embarrass *you?* *I'm* the one embarrasses *you!*” mom barks, mocking me.

My quick eyes fall on Gladys who is frozen behind the register. Gladys latches a look on me, and the looks says, poor kiddo. Like, sucks for you. Right then I realize I'm real tired of

people giving me that look, the pity look. The I'm glad I'm not you look, the how can you be like that look.

"I hate you," I say. "You're a selfish bastard! Selfish bastard, selfish bastard, selfish bastard!" Slobber froths my mouth, I feel it. I bolt for the door.

"Sweetly!" mom yells and yells.

I have no idea where I'm going, but I'm fast. The howling hum and tremble through my body. I see no cars, and I'm going. I see mom's eyes bug wide in my mind, *I'm the one embarrasses you*, plays on rewind. "Rolling in the Deep" lays the beat under it all. My hair's clamped in my mouth. I sprint the sidewalk, charge toward the road.

I barely hear my name being called. Like when I'd submerge my head underwater in the bathtub and mom would sing songs and it would sad songs but good songs. Mom would sprawl the tile floor alongside the tub and dump water on my head when I'd come up, and my hair would be soaked in bubbly soap, I'm all screeching and giddy. It was lovely because she did it for both of us. Mom's good like that. Except I don't emerge from water. I can't hear my name being called from far off anymore.

Tractor

First stop is Cleveland. No transfer. Hour thirty five minutes is what the driver called. Tractor gets off, and takes a minute. He has to gathers himself. Humans careen around him and every which way like cockroaches. Everybody with a cell phone stuck in a hand and up in a face.

He calls his P.O., and gets orders to check-in when he lands in Westfall. Check. He tries Gram and gets the machine and leaves a message. Check. He buys another pack of Pall Malls and mini-vodkas and Gatorade. Check. The bus dumped a majority of its riders here. Fuck them.

Tractor walks far from the station and fumes and steamy stinky asphalt into what feels like small safe suburb flavor. A quiet, a pleasantness. The volume turned way down.

He walks through a park and playground. He does some sets of pull-ups. He crosses an empty parking lot, and long-strides a playing field with cushy Astro turf. Gets his wind up, and blood flowing and his legs burning. He cramps all down his legs. Back on the street Tractor stops in front of a single story cedar shake home.

He puts a hand on its white picket fence. A driveway that fits two cars piece-a-cake, and a garage, a nice new one. He imagines the garage: his Harley's in it. A workspace. Drink beers from a cooler and punches a heavy bag after a bountiful dinner. Sees himself younger. No broken back, no hiccups with drugs and booze. He'd got that full-ride scholarship wrestling. Rides it to the fullest. He likes to build things; so he gets an architect degree or whatever it's called. A wife and a daughter and a dog and beautiful family.

This could have been him. This house, *this* one. Cedar shake, metal roof, brick chimney that chutes high to sky. Big bay window that brings in all the light. Open deck spread wraps the

foundation. A woman who loves him for him. Together forever another day. The American dream, right?

Tractor says it out loud and rips a piece of waterlogged wood from the picket post. It rolls his tongue: together forever another day.

He circles the cul-de-sac on his way back to the bus. Afternoon sun swallows the day. His boots crunch pine needles and flatten leaves with shred sounds. Sticky-humid gusts feel good on his skin, and a calm takes him. For the first time since leaving the castle he fills his lungs full, and holds it in. Get a dishwasher hire at a diner. Live small, get lucky. Get a construction gig, a part-time painter, dig graves at Epworth, whatever, start fresh. Start fresh, though? Who's he fucking kidding? Going back there, where he grew up, burns an epic fear hole in him. A place he once called home, and the closer he gets the more gnaws.

*

Back on the bus, nearing his seat, across the aisle, an older couple hold hands and watch Tractor come at them. Their smiles are so sincere it looks silly. They look like children, like kid-lovers. Mid-sixties. The man at the window: teal collared polo, crisp iron lines, buttoned to the neck. Thin gold chain, tiny gold cross. Light brown hair pulled tight into ponytail. The woman: doused in something cinnamon, the perfect old lady vibe. She sports an orange-floral-patterned sun dress, her hair cropped above her ear and parted down the center like an ass-crack.

She says hello, a thick accent. Tractor drops his bag of goodies at the window. Drops down in the aisle seat across from them. The man leans forward and nods at Tractor, says hello, effeminately flits a few fingers.

“What's your accent?” Tractor says.

The woman smiles large, warmly. “Swedish,” she says, and lifts their clasped hands together like they’ve won a trophy. Then she says, “Stella.” Motions her head at the man. “My husband, Noah.”

“Tractor.”

Stella shakes with sure grip. “Nice we meet you, Tractor,” she says, pronouncing it, tracker. Noah goes, “Very *goot* we meet you.”

Tractor digs in his bag, and cracks the caps of a couple plastic travelers. He does a half-hearted turn to the window, and mixes into Gatorade.

The bus hasn’t been rolling thirty minutes, and Tractor finds himself center of attention. Noah hangs over his wife’s lap. They giggle like mischievous kids. The swedes rifle questions at him. *Who he is? Where’s he going? Where’d he come from? What’s he do?*

At first its overload. Tractor hammers his leg, slips his tongue in and out of the hole where his canine once was. But the booze settles a groove. Lemon-lime Gatorade vodka and he eases into a heavy slouch.

“Michigan,” he says, and sips. “Nah, no job yet.”

They fumble their English and shrug amicably. Stella asks Tractor about family and silence widens. No brothers or sisters. Didn’t know his daddy. Says he’s going to live with his Grandma.

Then Stella asks about his mama. “She’s dead.” They apologize, and the conversation twists off.

Tractor gets up, goes to the bathroom. When he comes back, he's drunk. The Swedes nuzzle each other with shut-eyes. Tractor sinks in his seat, makes another drink and does his damndest to daydream something decent out the window as the wide open landscape blurs by.

*

He wakes to the bus driver's face, the guy's shaking him.

"Buddy? Everybody's loaded off. You got to go," driver says. Freaky angles contort a chinless face. He speaks and it shakes his cheeks.

Tractor's curled up across both seats. His head is jammed under the window. His brain jackhammers his skull, and he reeks of booze. Empty bottles on the floor, and there's a hand-knit blanket that covers him—not his. His boxers and pants are clumped. His crotch is sodden and suddenly he's certain of it: fully pissed himself in his sleep.

"Okay, yah, sorry, I'm going." He sits up, and fidgets piss pants. He gathers the empties and stuffs them in his trash bag.

"Not supposed to drink on buses," driver says. Guy's conductor hat is loose over droopy ears. It totters on his head. Driver attempts a re-tuck of shirttails into mushy slacks. He shakes a shiny faux watch. "You got to get off, *sir*. Bus needs to be cleaned now, *sir*." The driver blows at a piece of hair stuck to his blubbery cheek. There's brown dip spit in the corners of his mouth.

Tractor rubs his face, and stands. "I'm going, man. Ease up." Tractor Coughs, and bile skirts his tongue and vodka fleeces the back of his throat. He fists his bag, bullies past the driver down the aisle off the bus, and into Ann Arbor air.

It had rained, kicked up the heat, the humid. The station bangs loud with construction. He goes inside the station.

In the bathroom he dumps the empties in the trash and goes in a stall. He changes into a clean pair of drawers. He's only got the one pair of soggy pants. He steps out the stall in just his underwear. He trashes his urine-soaked briefs and uses a hand dryer by the sink to dry the damp piss on his pants. All Tractor knows about Ann Arbor is there's a fancy university. And once upon a time, long ago, this fancy fucking university, with its rich fucking privileged students, they scouted his ass for wrestling. He could've crushed at this big ten bitch till he fucked it all up.

People walk in the bathroom and rubberneck him air-drying his pants and standing in his boxers and boots. He gets glances like seeing a steady homeless dude doing his thing, mumbling his tune, minding his own. Tractor starts to whistle 'My Girl' and smiles at anyone cutting eyes.

*

Tractor goes into a souvenir shop. Country music crackles in and out and makes him feel at home. He peeks in a glass case: shot glasses, glinting silver spoons. Nobody in the place but him and cashier-lady with barbaric stink-eye.

The song playing, Tractor pictures a hard-shelled woman on a rickety half-stage. A sad little ditty about a man she once loved. Reminds him of Gram. The kinds of tunes Gram ran on constant in her trailer. She'd snuggle Tractor into saggy breasts all drunk-happy: smells of baby powder and Dollar Dan shea butter and burnt popcorn. His soft and battered pull-out-couch-bed-thing; a faded lime green corduroy couch Gram called chartreuse. Upholstery pocked with cig-burns.

As a young one, he always had it in his head that Gram was classy-educated. Because she ran with all different walks of life. She was an orphan runaway. Gram's like Einstein with her

knowledge of the galaxies and stars. Back maybe age six, or seven, an evening that stuck most in his memory. What he pictured most when he stared at the ceiling in his cell. Him and Gram would lounge lawn chairs out back of her trailer. She'd sip gin-gingers and rip cigs and edify: she'd shoot her hand out. "See that one there, teddy bear?" Cig smoke would dance toward that star-specific she pointed at.

"Which one?" He'd ask. "I ain't see it, they're too many." She'd draw out the dippers and constellations in sleepy, intoxicated tongues. They'd see up into oily blackness. Stars sparkled extra bright those nights, he swore. Just for them in their teeny town of Westfall. He'd stick out a finger and poke at a star and its sharp point might just draw blood.

Tractor buys a poster rolled in plastic for two quarters and a penny. The Andromeda galaxy on clearance. Out in the hall there are benches by a double-cinema long abandoned. A waiting room for the dead. Soft elevator music. A buzzing. He digs around in his bag and makes the poster fit next to the knitted orphan-blanket from the bus. His fingers find something. A keychain and a note scribbled on Fairfield Inn & Suites stationary:

Tractor - blanket look good with you. Myself I knit. Very good we meet you. We pray for you. Statue liberty. Big apple. You come see us. You come Sweden the time you want.

Stella / Noah

Smearing their names, a red lipstick puckers the paper. Tractor runs a tattooed finger over an address scratched in Sweden and a number. The keychain is a mini Statue of Liberty.

It's the keychain that makes him think of it: Today's July third. Ringing in the fourth tomorrow in the town of Westfall that always did it rowdy on the fourth. Least that's how Tractor remembered it each year it passed him by. Barbecues and beers at breakfast and on through the

evening. With the bag over his shoulder he twirls the keychain, his boots squeak linoleum and echo. Outside the sun seeps through cloud layered like wax.

*

The woman and girl barely make it. The motor coach drops into gear but the driver sees the girl flailing arms at him; he pops the door and descends the steps to lend a hand.

When Tractor got on the bus earlier, he got on with a handful of folks pushy and ready to nab their seats early. He took a window in a row at the back. Not fifteen minutes passed, and the bus was full-up.

Tractor watches cars pass and pick up passengers. There's groans from riders settled in for the ride. Now they have to wait longer on two stragglers holding everybody up.

The girl darts across the crosswalk. Maybe ten, eleven. The woman has fallen back behind; shoulders bags and lugging a roller. She's yells at the girl. The girl's already cut around the nose of the bus out of sight. Tractor mixes his last bottle of vodka.

The girl gets on the bus. She stands at the front, just standing there. Rail thin, shoulders hunched. The entire bus has her attention. She blinks a whole bunch, and a wad of hair is in her mouth. She stomps the aisle with her neck craned as if pulled by a leash. She releases the gob of hair, says, "This one's taken?"

She's stands right in front of him, but looks at the floor away from him. She points at his trash bag but stares the aisle floor. This girl's a trip.

He looks at his bag. "Nah, all you." He puts the bag at his feet.

She sits and takes a gander at the Gatorade bottle in his hand and subtly rocks back and forth. She pulls her phone from her fanny bag and starts flicking her thumb over the screen. The

hair in her mouth makes squishy sounds; she massages it in her teeth. The woman gets on, and the driver takes his seat and the woman spots the girl sitting next to Tractor.

The bus drops in and starts to roll and the woman comes at them and huffs and sweats standing there. “Sweetly!” she says. “How many times, how many times I said it?”

The woman has beautiful shades of black hair in waves down her back. She’s gritty from life and attractive with tons of freckles and her eyes are almonds. A pulpy scar stretches her left eyebrow. She grips the seat for balance. Black nail polish and nails chewed to nub.

“You’ve got to stay with me, you just gotta.” Then she rips the phone from the girl’s hand. “Okay! Is that understood, young lady?” She meets Tractor’s look. And they hold it.

Then the girl: “Understood, understood, understood, understood,” she spitfires like a video game with a glitch. The girl flings her arm out for her phone back. This girl’s got some serious fire in her. The intercom crackles and tells the woman “You’re going to have to take a seat, ma’am—” The driver says some other shit, and riders groan, and eventually she does.

*

They stop in Saginaw. His last, before Rogers City. He steps over the sleeping girl with his bag, gets off the bus and asks about where to eat. The driver tells him down the road and over, says it a diner. Tractor smokes a cigarette on the way. He jogs across the busy two road. He thinks of Huck Finn, his one book smashed in his bag’s bottom.

It’s that dead hour of the day when lunch is long gone and afternoon is yet to leak into night. He enters the diner and the door’s bell tinkles. The waitress leans against a doorframe at the kitchen entry. She talks to someone Tractor can’t see, a line cook maybe. The waitress is mid-

fifties and pear-shaped. She unfolds her arms, and searches her apron pockets. Comes around the bar and tells him, “Sit wherever, doll, I’ll be be right with you.”

“Can I get a water?” Tractor says.

She ignores him or doesn’t hear, and walks right past and nods at a couple of old couples and disappears through a double swinging door.

Tractor takes a booth in a back corner against the wall with a view out the window of the road he just crossed. He takes his napkin from under the silverware, and blows heavy wet snot into it. He fiddles sugar packets in the caddy, and rubs the silver with hot breath. The waitress drops a large water.

“Right back, doll”, she says, and leaves again.

He pulls down the whole thing, catches a couple cubes in his teeth, crunches and crunches and rattles the ice in the bottom of the cup. A beautiful thing, ice.

*

Tractor over-orders: two combo platters, french toast, pancakes. He destroys five eggs, a burnt pile of hash browns, undercooked bacon—which he asked for—“Just flash it for me, Gladys,” he said. Then he said, “Can I smoke.”

“Definitely not,” Gladys said. “Got to go outside. Can’t be out front neither. Least a hundred feet away.”

“Can I get a soda, then? A Coca-Cola.” He smiles at her.

Gladys winks at him and he imagines fucking her against the ice machine as ice clatters the floor and they grunt in orgasm; sweaty skin slaps skin and and their funk is foul and then they’re both filled and it’s primal and just right for a fierce moment.

He's sipping his soda when the diner door bell bing-bings.

The woman and Sweetly enter. Gladys moves to hand the woman a menu. Tractor notices Gladys went right over to greeted them warmly. She may as well have hugged them both.

The woman orders straight off, waves no to the menu. They stand around at the front. Sweetly is a wind-up doll. She grabs at everything interesting: observing, staring, racing. In and out the bathroom. She stops and waves at Tractor. He waves with his fork, and just as quick, she's up front munching cookies. She's not retarded but something.

Gladys refills Tractor's coffee, asks if he wants a second soda and he says I'm good.

Right then, Tractor and Gladys are taken by a twisted uproar out front. Tractor sugar-stirs his coffee as the woman out front slices her arm violently through the air; she chops circles at the cement in jerk-motions like directing traffic.

"You wouldn't find me back talking that woman there," Gladys adds, gestures the coffee carafe in the direction of the woman outside, and then dodders off to the pick-up window.

Tractor scalds his tongue sipping the coffee, when up front, Sweetly screeches. It's that nails-dragging-chalkboard piercing sound, "Selfish bastard!" She barks it over and over and shoots out the front door.

*

It seems to happen when sole focus is on what to do next. What's next? Finish your grub. Get back on the bus. Call Gram. She gets you, you're lucky be thankful. You land in Westfall. Then what?

Tractor tongue's egg-potato-goop off his fork. He swirls syrup over a steamy stack of flapjacks when blaring horns and tire-shrieks blow through the diner.

Cars stop dead and back up on the road like a mess of dominoes. The woman's out front. Her to-go bag splats asphalt. She collapses to her knees. Sweetly's splayed on the road. And what's crazy: he thinks he sees flicker-flashes of the Sweetly's hoop earring glint in sunlight.

His fork slips his fingers, and clatters the plate to the floor. He finds himself outside. Finds the heat strangles. Finds his breath wheeze in his nostrils as he sprints toward the woman who's tripped and fallen on her run toward the road.

So what's next? Nothing. There is no next.

— — —

They're on eggshell scoop-chairs in the hospital waiting area. Her name's Mazzy. That's about all she said. It's been hours. Tractor scratches spots of dry blood on his pant leg that flakes.

He wets a finger with his tongue, dabs it. He wants to look at her but doesn't. He wants to say something, anything. He comes up with something stupid, maybe cheerful and chokes on it. Mazzy rocks over balled fists. Her knuckles pinkish, pulled tight to her belly. Tractor wants inside her head, to reach her there. Meet her so as she's not doing this alone.

He says nothing. His palm soaks sweat over his pack of Pall Malls in his pocket. He grinds his Bic spark-wheel. The wall clock clicks notch-by-notch. Beeps and intercom buzzes call for doctors. Tractor sips dirt coffee. He keeps asking himself why he's here. Why are you still here? Wouldn't Rosey say it was the right thing to do? Wouldn't Rosey say, *You're here because God put you here. Because you chose. You made a choice.* Wouldn't group agree with that? Wouldn't they nod tough heads, and closed-off-ness and assent with hard eyes?

"He'd say that. Wouldn't he say that?" Tractor says this out loud in his seat. Then he looks at Mazzy. Looks around like somebody else blurted it.

Mazzy doesn't react, she doesn't cease her sway, doesn't look his way. If you stay, it's trouble. If you try and help or you don't, it's trouble any way you flip it, man, just go, man. Go, go, go. A loud beep: the intercom pages a Dr. Balasubramanian into surgery.

*

When they had rushed the gurney through sliding doors, Tractor had sat inside the van on a cold bench alone. He absorbed the creak and rock of aftershock. He had stepped off the lift gate and lit a cigarette. Sunny dandelions sprouted their smile from sidewalk cracks. A couple gray hairs got wheeled along the walk by nurses past pods of brittle bushes.

Tractor took slow steps into the waiting room. That harsh neutral neon. Shivery and impersonal. Seats that were took were taken by forlorn, sick souls with miserable faces and iffy fates and he sat among them.

He thought of one thing, nothing else. Let her make it. *Put it on me.* This strange girl, Sweetly who sat next to him on a bus, snoring and chattering and grimacing in her sleep. If there's any kind of God, "Put it on me", he said out loud. If you're up there, or out there, or fucking somewhere; let this girl walk from this place. I lay down my fate here, I trade. "Put that shit on me," he said again.

*

The driver of the sedan pleaded, horrified and panicked—*it happened so fast, oh God, I only saw shadow, oh God, it happened so fast, oh my dear God...*

Sweetly's head hit the deck, split, and swelled as a ballon full of blood. Her body was crushed by car then pavement.

*

From his chair he had watched cops and nurses surround Mazzy. Punch her with all kinds of questions. She did them all real good, too. Held it together, real good, how, he couldn't fathom. Then they vanished like they were never there. She stood tottering, and jerked her hand to her mouth and disappeared to the restroom. She came back out and that's when she saw by the window, seated among the hopeful and hopeless. She came over, and slumped in the seat next to him. She smelled of sweat and patchouli and hand soap.

*

She's beautiful in despair. Her bangs in her face. He looks at his boot lace-come-undone. Bounces his leg. Sips more shit coffee.

"I get you something? Coffee, water?" he asks. No answer.

Eventually Mazzy hooks her hair behind her ear. She shakes her head no. And just that seems to drain her. She squeezes her hands together; she cradles them into her belly and starts that rocking rhythm that her daughter does so naturally.

He wants to take her hand in his, clasp it, not hard, only pressure. Tell her things not his place to tell. Tell her anything she might want to be told. Tell her lies. He grabs up his trash bag instead—the embarrassment endured earlier when cops came in with his own and Mazzy's bags and drilled Tractor for i.d. and interrogated him with incessant questions.

He stands from the chair and commits to his first step to get gone.

"Will you stay?" Mazzy says.

The words cave his head like a shovel. And when he turns to her, she sees him.

He nods. "Gonna smoke." He looks to the doors they rushed Sweetly beyond. Where Mazzy clutched her unconscious daughter's hand. He drops his bag in the chair and goes outside as they page Dr. Balasubramanian again.

Mazzy

Her baby's being opened and prodded. The doctor, she said blunt Cardiac Injury. She said lateral break to Sweetly's pelvis. She said rupture to spleen and kidney, she said incredible internal bleeding. She said determining swelling in Sweetly's brain—determining is not good. Then a nurse, his mask muddling his words said, "Ma'am, you can't be in here. You cannot be here. I'm sorry."

*

Guy with tattoos rode the ambulance with her and the medics. He said his name's Tractor. He's been sitting with Mazzy the whole time. A large lurking shadow, this whole time. He asked if he could get her something several times.

Every couple minutes he looks at her. He shakes his leg and rubs a palm up and down his pants; cracks his neck, pops his knuckles, grinds his lighter in his pocket.

The light makes the room colder then hotter. A handful of people in the room. Every time the intercom calls for a doctor it echoes off the walls and shudders her skin. She finds comfort swaying back then forward, forward then back.

When she stops muttering to herself she hears Tractor say, "He'd say that, wouldn't he say that?" And another time, he faced the exit doors and said, "Helping, I helped." A moment ago he said, "God damn you, put that shit on me. Just put it on me."

He stands with his trash bag of stuff, and holds a look on her like a statue might. It's clear he's about to say goodbye and it hurts him and he looks so hurt. The lines on his face are filled deep with inexplicable pain, and that comforts her to know somebody else carries it too. Not a word, and turns to go.

She finds her asking, “Will you stay?” It shoots out of her like a hand to snatch him back. It’s the first time she’s spoken to him.

He drops his bag back on the seat and scratches the top of his skull.

“Gonna smoke,” he says. “Be back.” And he walks out the exit doors.

She had called Rick already so many times. No answer. She left frantic messages. She calls him again just now. Leaves another message, tripping over her words. Seconds after leaving it, a text pings from Rick. It says he’s on the way. It says, *Driving. Leaving Grand Rapids now. Be there when I can.*

*

They medically induced Sweetly in a coma. So Sweetly sleeps deeply and Mazzy barely manages herself to the ladies. Puts her weight into the sink, grips. Her face in the mirror isn’t her face. Her head hums and her body trembles. She can’t swallow saliva stuck in her throat.

Tractor’s back when she comes out. She wipes her mouth with her hand. She moves toward her seat, her knees wobble and want to buckle and let go altogether.

Next thing, she’s wrapped in Tractor’s arms. Next thing, she sobs and slams her fist into his chest, bawling, “No, no, no, no”, until there’s nothing left in her engine and she slinks from his him to the seat. Hours pass. The surgeon speaks with Mazzy again. She says the surgery’s complete, that Sweetly’s to remain comatose. She says the surgery went as it should.

*

Tractor gets her black coffee. They go outside and sit next each other on a slatted steel bench. They smoke cigarettes in silence and scan evening dark. It’s late and quiet and clear and

cloudless in the sky. Stars sparkle boldly, lively. They watch people come and go from Emergency. Some hurry, some drag their feet. Vans and trucks come and go, fast and slow.

“I just got out of prison,” he says, and blows a stream of smoke. “Three days ago. Don’t think I’m ready for any of this, ya know? Everything outside’s crazy. Like a whirlwind. Ain’t no structure to none this. Fucking terrifying to me.”

Mazzy takes a small sip of her coffee. Her eyes caved. She drags her cigarette and looks at cars parked in parking lot C. She glances down the dark road.

“Anybody I talk to, it feels like I got convict writ on my forehead. Like I got to be up front, ya know, anybody I talk with,” Tractor says. “Sorry, I’ll shut the fuck up.”

Mazzy stubs her smoke on the bench, and flicks the filter in the street. Streetlight shimmers a shine off her wet cheeks when she looks at Tractor.

“No. Talk. Please. Keep talking. Say whatever. I don’t care. Just keep talking. okay?”

“Yah. Okay.”

Tractor

“Gram, it’s me.”

“Tractor? Boy, if you ain’t had a woman restless. Something’s happened ain’t it?”

“Nah, nothing.”

“You supposed to a got in yesterday. Third July. Less I’m smoking too much grass.”

“I been calling.”

“Where you at, teddy bear?”

“Here, in Rogers.”

“You’re in Rogers City? You sit tight, boy. No more’n two hours.”

The line clicks dead. He racks the phone in the cradle, and steps out from the nook between buildings and looks up. Sheeted clouds and it drizzles. Warm rain like silk kisses skin. He pulls his pack of smokes from his pocket.

People sit in parked cars and wait on arrivals. Hasten across crosswalks with roller bags. Smells of diesel, that hot vapor off cement. Smells of cinnamon and warm dough from that pretzel shop he passed coming to the payphone. Smells of bread dough baking is a comfort. He’s suddenly starving.

*

A ten year old girl in a coma in a hospital bed fights for her life. Her sleepless mother prays.

Cigarette between his front teeth, Tractor grabs the phone again. Dr. Sarah Balasubramanian, surgeon. A crisp, chalky business card he plucked from the deck at the desk.

He reads it out loud, *Bala-suhbra-mahn-ian*, he says. He says it until he's swallowed it down. He flips the card over, and looks at Mazzy's name scratched in pen and her cell number.

A kid shuffles out of the station in Boy Scout tans, the flares and badges on his shirt. The kid's mama rushes him, and bear hugs the kid. Kid flushes and glows. A woman walks by in a banana-cream sweatsuit. A single word, *glam - our* glitters on jiggly ass cheeks like overripe apples he'd devour. She plops into a nineties Porsche, and her dude in sunglasses the size of ski goggles fumbles her heavy luggage into his tiny trunk.

Tractor traces the corner of the surgeon's card along the lines of his palm, then pockets it. He slams the phone back into the cradle. Is this what it's gonna be like? Is it? He smokes. He weeps.

*

Two hours on the dime: Gram clunks curbside in her beat-to-shit Silverardo the color of red clay. Tractor gets in the truck, trash bag at his feet.

Gram twists her shoulders at him. She sports gramp's *POW*MIA* sweatshirt. It's riddled with rips and bullet holes. She wears Tractor's lucky ball cap from childhood. Smokescreen camouflage. The random rooster patch that he sewed onto its front; the same rooster outline tatted on his neck.

"Let's get a look at you, boy." Gram pushes up the hat brim in sync with her eyebrows thick as paintbrush bristles.

"Got no hair left, I see," she says.

An aluminum oxygen cylinder is snug between them in the cab like a coffee thermos. Gram scrunches her face, those deep wrinkles, her smile. She puts a soft leathery hand to

Tractor's cheek, and lifts his chin. She's breathing loud. When she breathes it sounds like little bubble pockets popping.

She smells him out, sees if he's real. Meat, tissue, bone. She drops the hand away. She slaps his thigh, and jostles with a phlegmy chest cough.

"My baby boy," she says. "I knew in my heart you'd come back to your *Gramahma*."

*

He nods off. Could have been two minutes or thirty. He wakes to Gram's eye on him. She studies him like he'll disappear. Hot wind works through open windows. "Best watch the road," he says.

They drive on and here's what she tells him: "Well, one thing, I'm on oxygen." She nods at the tank between them. "Should do the damn thing more, proolly. Do it in the nighttime, anyway." She smokes—yeah, she's smoking. He doesn't say don't smoke. He doesn't dare to tell her her business.

"Got me a mask to pull from, easy enough. Got to clean it regular. Else I'm just fine and dandy, boy."

Gram's an dump-baby. An orphan unloaded by the teen mama she'll never know. She was raised in the sticks of Illinois at Sisters of Mercy by nuns. She busted free, linked up with a carnival. Shit you not. Band-wagoned all over North America, Canada too. All her gypsy living went on hold in a permanent status when she met Tractor's gramp, Vernon.

Gram'd take Tractor to church Sundays. She'd always have that sinister kind of scrunch on her face and tilt of her chin at the cross. Like inside, she was laughing, or screaming, or

something, he swears it. Like inside, she knew a secret nobody else would ever know. The kind can't be described.

*

They pass an epic-sized Speedway gas station-food-court-thing. They—whoever they are—chopped down soldier stacks of old pines and worked over some beautiful woods to make that happen. A sign for another Starbucks drive-in twelve miles just before their exit.

“I look like a corpse don't I, boy?”

Tractor looks at her then back out the window. “Nah,” he says. “You're in your prime.”

Gram farts, laughing. He shakes his head, smiles. She pokes him.

“I know it! And I'll also have you know, I'm ill but ain't feeling it yet, not really. Old as dirt and dying and that's alright by me.” She lays a hand on Tractor's knee. “You're coming home. And that's good enough by me.”

They pass the Rocking Horse on the way into Westfall. No way around it. Tractor knows Gram would've taken a different route. The Rocking Horse is where Tractor's mama, Mabel, worked on and off for years. A single story structure with the warmth of a signless warehouse in set back from the road, its parking lot in back.

Gram drives through the center of town. Erskine's Auto Body: where him and his best bud, Jer, they stole cigs and soda and tools and whatnot's. Westfall's Post Office. Building's supposedly a historical monument, and the only thing puts the town on a map. Coming back, coming home, it's right. Say it. Say it's right. Even if it stirs in all kinds of wrong.

American flags flap all through town. Through the truck's open windows him and Gram can hear a brass band playing south, down Jackson Avenue, near the church.

Tractor forgot today's the fourth. They pass his old high school. He tries, but he can't even picture how it looks inside anymore. Only the stink of the locker room hits him still. The gummy stick of the wrestling mat and them butterflies before battle.

*

Welcome to Sunup Mobile Home Community Est. 1954.

A sign sucked of life with water-rotted wood on knobby posts, and bleached by sun. Beyond that, thick woods and Black River. Tires crunch gravel.

"Home sweet home, boy."

Tractor sinks in his seat. The community looks untouched, and paused by the past. Maybe a bit more busted, and worked over. Same trucks on blocks, same swing-sets with cracked plastic seats dangling rusty chains.

"All them fireworks been booming off since yesterday morning. Prolly ain't be easy to settle in right off," Gram says. She starts to whistle a hymn from the good book. A solemn ditty Tractor remembers he forgot.

*

Suicide is a violent act of cowardice. Gram told him that once. She said gramp Vern told her that once. Told her that not long before he hung himself in a war-buddy's barn.

The trailer stinks of Pine-Sol and burnt popcorn and tobacco. Just inside the door are fold-up lawn loungers, and a big old Sony cassette deck. Tapes stacked in towers inside boxes on top of all kinds of dusty books alongside other knickknacks take up room on the floor.

Trash bag in hand Tractor takes tender-steps across the creaky living room. The space is smaller than he remembered. But the smells bring it home. Cozy. Smells can be so homely. The family in the framed photos on the wall seem somehow not his own though.

He looks at a picture of himself in action on the wrestling mat. Then over to one where he stands with Gram in his onesie gripping a cheap gold trophy. Gram's eyes look shut she's so stoked. Tractor's expression, flat, severe and seems to look past the camera. His ropy body and greasy hair, all glossy. His mama's not there, though. Mabel was always absent. She said it was too much pressure to watch him compete. There's a pic of Gram and gramp camping; fishing rods, cookware and a pile of fire. A faded pic of gramp in the jungle. Guys in his platoon huddle him. One guy has a boa constrictor draped around his neck. Guns and dog tags and cigs sticks out their mouths. The subtlest dread in their faces.

A spray can triggers, and the bathroom door opens. Gram whistles and the fan sounds like a weed-whacker. Sour shit and lavender follow Gram down the hall. She sticks a burner phone and a charger into Tractor's hand. A yellow sliver of notebook paper is scotch-taped with the burner's number on the back.

"I ain't use it. I expect you to. Fully charged except time ain't on your side. Text and calls only. You'll need to figure that one out," she says. "Hell, I prolly know more about texting power of the inter-web than you."

"I think I can manage."

"Want me to show you?"

"Nah, think I can manage. Thanks, old lady."

Gram scrunches her face. “You hungry, boy?”

“Nah, I’m good. Lil’ tired.”

They look at the pics, and Gram points at one. Three of them outside the Rocking Horse. Gram, Mabel, Tractor. Mabel holds a sorry-looking cupcake with pink icing and a candle in it. His mama pulls Tractor into her, and it’s clear he pulls away. Gram wears a baggy satiny track suit. Mabel dressed scantily in a flannel covering a mini-skirt.

“How old you is here?” Gram says, and leans in. “Oh my word. Would you look at my getup. Like I’m about to hit the bowling lanes. Wonder if I still got them old pieces somewhere.” She snorts. “Well? How old you was, boy?”

“Don’t know, Gram. Long time ago.”

“You can say that again. Well I sure as hell don’t remember. Ain’t looked at these in years. Pass’em everyday. Just hang there making eyes at me.” Gram straightens her back, labored breaths, quick in, a long huffy out.

“Go on, boy. Drop your bag in the room. I’ll fix you up the favorite. I ain’t forgotten.”

*

The second bedroom is good: cold and cramped like a cage. The quilt and blanket without a single wrinkle. He sets the bag on the bed, and sits with it; a different kind of quiet. He looks out the singular slat window that has a crack spreading dozens of mini-cracks like spindly spider legs. Like someone pitched a hard pebble at it.

In the yard he can peek a corner of the shed that gramp Vern built. He never slept in this room. He barely spent time in here, it was Mabel’s room. Whenever she’d decide to drop in and out as she needed. Mabel took advantage that Gram wouldn’t never turn her away.

*

Mabel would move in with new boyfriends. Most outright refused Tractor's staying. The one's that did, either beat him or tried to molest him. There was one guy, Karl, he was decent. He sort of had his shit together. He took Tractor to a monster truck rally. Took him hunting and fishing once. Mabel called it a mistake, and cut Karl out. To this day, Tractor thinks she dropped Karl cause Karl got clean and she couldn't. The only time Tractor saw his grandma shed tears was when she screamed and cried and told him that he'd twisted himself into someone should ain't recognize no more. Told him to see good and hard in the mirror. Told him he was going down the same shitter-hole his mama did. Told him he'd up end dead like her. And Gram eventually put him out for good, drained and heartbroken.

*

He didn't remember lying down. Rallies of fireworks like gunfire gut the sky beyond the bedroom. In silent dark he's shaky, disoriented. Without the alarms and hollers and cussing from inmates and clamor from guards and echoes howling through metal and concrete, he jerks awake, pinched by panic. Sweat soaks his shirt, he wriggles it off and drops it in a wet bundle on the floor.

He knocks the night table, taps around for his smokes. He sparks in dark and swallows smoke and clicks the lamp and rummages his bag. He pulls on a wife-beater and grabs an aloha shirt from the musty closet. It fits long and he leaves it unbuttoned. Gramp Vernon was tall and burly. He pulls on a pair of gramp's army cargo's and cuffs them two rolls. There's whoops beyond the trailer and female voices yelling into the mix; smells of bbq, pigs on spits, burgers, hotdogs, weed.

*

It's dark in the trailer. The TV's on, the volume low. Tractor squints to see the tiny tube. McQueen and MacGraw, *The Getaway*. McQueen enters frame, shoots up a cop car.

In the kitchen on the stove is a heap in a bowl that looks like wet dog food. Corned beef hash and chili and a scrambled egg mash-up. Tractor sticks the bowl in the dinger.

Outside, Gram's Sony cassette deck rolls Dusty Springfield. A guttural laugh thunders over Dusty's serenade and Tractor's pressing into the counter to stable himself. He knows that laugh well.

Gram's cackle follows. It's overeager-sounding, and she does it again, louder, longer, putting it on. Tractor shovels his food, and wipes his mouth on the Hawaiian shirt. He unclips the fridge, hooks a six-yolk of Old Milwaukee and he's out the front door still chewing food.

Gram's in her lawn lounger. She slouches with his lucky rooster cap pulled low over tipsy eyes. He looks off where she's looking and snaps a beer from the yoke and sets the beers in the empty lawn chair and cracks and chugs.

"You know who that was don't you, boy? Do not think of it. Do not. You stay here with your Gram." She speaks to him kindly like a loyal dog.

Gram waves to a pack of kids. They pedal past on thrifty bikes, and slash sparklers at each other like lightsabers. One shouts, "happy 'Merica day Ms. Lindsey!" and thrashes his flame-sword, losing balance on his bike.

"You too, sweetheart! Y'all don't be stupid, now!" Grams sits back, face scrunched.

"He came to welcome me home, or what?" He pulls down the rest of his beer. Drops the can in the dirt and lights a cigarette. like one swift and practiced motion.

“Thought you was still shut-eye,” Gram says. “Anyhow, he wasn’t here for you. Not entirely. Wolf come down here to wish me a happy Independence and say hello as he does every year. Like clockwork, mind you.”

“Fuck that sod and the donkey he rode in with.”

“Excuse me. Your language,” Gram says, as if she cares. “Anyhow, you know Wolf’s always had a soft spot for your Gramamah.” Gram sips her gin-ginger. The pack of kid-bikers hover down the path like bees to the hive. They haggle around Wolf and Wolf’s youngest son, Waylon.

“Hate to say it—“

“But you’re gonna say it,” Tractor says.

“Wolf’s been good to me since nobody been around.”

This makes Tractor look at Gram.

“You know what I mean,” she says. “Least for a while, he acted remorseful for you going up.”

“Yah? Good. He fucking better have. What else he say?”

“Told you, boy. The man said happy fourth. Him and his youngest. Can’t never remember the lot of them boys’ names. Brought me a plate of pot cookies. I smoke a lot of pot now, so you know. Eases my cancer pain.” Gram’s got a loose tongue forming her words. “Wolf made it all seem like usual, but—you and me is honest, we both know he was here to see you. He said, when you’re ready, go see him.”

Tractor watches Wolf down the road as the kids ride away. “Tractor?”

Fireworks bang-off in consistent volleys. Booms light the night. The two figures walk west and blend into the festivities. He snaps second beer.

Gram hovers her sweaty glass of gin-ginger between them. “Welcome home, boy.”

Gram taps his can.

Mazzy

She wakes with a fever in her mother's bed. Outside is early morning dark. Her mother, Liscka, sleeps in the bed with her. Her mother's arm drapes her shoulder, a tender gesture. Mazzy lies still, and clutches the pillow. She listens to her mother sleep, then moves her mother's arm and sits up. Her bones ache, and this fever cuts a chill into her.

*

In the bathroom she runs a bath until steam renders the room a sauna. The mirror fogs, and she swipes the glass. Her left eye has swelled ripe like a grape. She fingertips the water temperature and grunts a leg up and over and dips toes in. There's knocks on the door.

"I heard the bath running. Sweetheart?" Liscka says. "Mazzy, honey? I'm right here. You just holler you need something, okay?"

Mazzy inches into the tub. She listens to her mother shuffle about the bedroom. Everything is quiet. The sink faucet drips resound, and she shifts a leg or arm that stirs a flat lap of bathwater that leads to another, then another. She stays in the water long, so her finger's prune and she shakes and her teeth chatter.

There's another knock. Then the door handle jiggles, and jars her.

"Why is my door locked?" her mother says.

"Mom, it's me. It's Mazzy. I'm home with you. It's fine, it's okay. I'm just taking a bath. I'll be out in a bit."

There's a long pause and Mazzy can hear her mother mumbling to herself.

"Mazzy? Sweetheart? I'm out here in the bedroom. If you need something, okay?"

Mazzy's tears are salty and sting and disappear in lukewarm water.

*

Rick had showed up at the hospital hours later. He came into the waiting room and saw Mazzy's head on Tractor's shoulder, her eyes shut. Perhaps it looked like consolation. Perhaps it was. Maybe she looked asleep, she wasn't. Rick watched Mazzy with indescribable hatred, and she felt nothing but sadness.

Rick came over and said some horrible, accusatory things. He told her she ruined the family, and she destroyed their lives. He said, "How could you be so self-righteous and irresponsible?" He capped his tirade by calling Mazzy a stupid cunt. It was then that Tractor snatched Rick by his neck, and Mazzy had demanded that Tractor leave. And he had.

*

Rick spoke with doctors. Then he went and saw Sweetly. He came back to the waiting room, and he'd taken off his tie. His collar was undone, and his eyes red-rimmed. He said to Mazzy, "I need to talk to you outside".

They went outside and stood in the parking lot without words for a long while. Rick had one hand resting on his hip. The other hand in his pocket jingled loose coins.

"I'm sorry," Mazzy said. "I'm so so sorry."

Maybe Rick would discover empathy. Maybe the father of her child would pull her close, tell he's here, and he's with her. Like Tractor had, without words, without hesitation. But Rick stood away.

"I'm still, I've been running it through my head, playing it over and over, and I just can't make sense of—"

Rick turned and struck her across the face. A dull ringing in her left ear. Mazzy reacted, and cracked him back harder. His knees buckled like someone who'd never taken hit. It was the last thing Rick saw coming.

Rick stayed at the hospital. Mazzy took the thirty five minute taxi ride north to Bay City. She landed at her mother's home for the first time in a decade without her daughter.

*

Mazzy's mother, Liscka, is a widow with young-onset Alzheimer's. Liscka lives alone in a three-bed ranch home. Mazzy's estranged older brother, Dylan, has never lived far away from their mother. He'll check in on her when Mazzy calls and demands he do so. Otherwise he's drunk or drinking to get drunk, and lose himself.

Mazzy rang the bell, and little feet drummed to the door. The door opened, and a face absorbed Mazzy blankly, benevolently, calmly. The second she saw this, she crumbled in the doorway. Her mother followed her down and clutched her, saying, "My girl, oh my baby. What's happened to my girl? It'll be alright. It'll be okay."

But it wouldn't.

*

Mazzy told her mother everything: the accident. The hospital. Sweetly's coma. Rick hitting her. They huddled on the couch in dim afternoon light until the dark spilled in. The fireworks boomed all around them.

The next morning Mazzy got up from the couch feeling clammy, weak. Her mother came into the living room and said good morning, powered on the coffee and asked Mazzy what happened to her face and where Sweetly was.

The fever took her. She cradled herself down the hall. Not to her childhood bedroom, but past that to her mother's room instead. She lay down on the bed on her side and stared and got lost in a swirly knot of wood worked into the second drawer on her mother's dresser and surrendered.

*

She and Rick orchestrate via text message. They share joint custody situation over the hospital waiting room. Although there isn't much to orchestrate since it's obvious by his actions that Rick has other commitments seemingly more important.

Sweetly needs a kidney transplant. The waiting and hoping has begun. Turns out none of the willing donors are suitable for Sweetly—not even Rick. They said it's a gamble and it could take a great deal of time.

*

Her fever breaks. When her phone rings and “Rolling in the Deep” plays, her stomach plummets. It's Dylan, her brother, calling her back after she'd left three messages for him. She tells him to swing by and stay with their mother for a couple of days. Just the one time, she says, till I figure shit out. I need this. Come through for me.

Her mother usually has someone stop through every four days with groceries. But Mazzy called the woman and told her that she'd be staying with her mom, for how long, she didn't know. So the woman would only have to come through once a week.

Mazzy throws together an overnight bag. She steps into baggy sweats and an old Deftones t-shirt. She tells her mother she'll be at the hospital for a few nights. Then she'll be back. Her phone pings a text then another.

“The hospital, sweetheart?” Liscka says, and closes the oven. Her mom stands in the middle of the kitchen with a wooded spoon and an apron that says *good vibes* tied snug around droopy boobs. Mazzy craves a cigarette.

Her phone pings again. “I’ll tell you when I’m back, okay? Dylan’s coming by this afternoon. It’s why you’re making that marvelous quiche for dinner.”

“Yes, I know that, love.”

“Okay. Good. Love you. Bye.”

“Wait, Mazzy. So what time am I expecting you for dinner?”

“Mom—Dylan’ll be here soon. He’ll tell you.”

Mazzy goes around the house. She unlocks the padlock and pulls up the garage door. In front of her, filthily hibernating with a sheen of dust is her dad’s gray-green ’96 Impala. Hello super sport, hola American muscle. It’s been in the garage just passing calendars.

Her dad worked the General Motors plant all his life. The plant shut down the bitter man had a heart attack and died. Her dad adored this car more than anything or anyone or any rational purpose. A little TLC and some road time is the remedy. She checks the tires, presses her hand into the hood, imprints her palm and leaves layer of soot like freshly fallen snow.

She wipes it on her pants and pulls her phone from her pocket and gets in. Three texts:

hey it's tractor

hows sweetly? hope ok

how you? hope ok

She twists the key, four ruh-ruh’s and the beast growls.

Gram

The boy drank the beer I bought him and ate the mash I made him and basically slept the next two days. That first afternoon I sat a glass of water at his head. He lay flat on his back, the sheets and blanket and clothes were all heeled off the bed, everything in a bundled heap on the floor.

It's strange having a man sleep in my home. I'm not used to worrying. But I'll tell you, I sure have been since the boy's come home. With the boy back, my notion was, I'm ready. I'm not. I'm open like the rawest nerve. Like them old days just before they stowed him in the clink. Tractor's got my nerves wracking. I don't believe the boy comprehends the magnitude of intensity he carries around. If he weren't blood, I'd steer good and right clear of him.

I've been catching eyes from neighbors of late. But nobody seems big enough to speak their minds to my face. Maybe because everybody knows I'm sick and withered and not wasting no time dying? Maybe people think that's the time for pity or holding tongues. Well it ain't. The boy's being back is most certain a hot topic that'll taper off, hopefully, soon enough. And none of the chatter gets by me. Not none of it.

*

I check on the boy sleeping, and go back down the hall and sit with Constance at my sweet little kitchenette. Two stools and a table that folds down off the wall. Constance looks at the poster the boy got me. He also got me a beauty of a book. One of them old, leather bound sorts; all kinds of pictures and particulars on God's creatures of the sky. Sweet of him. His knowing about Cool Hand Luke and all. I'll tell y'all about that.

"Con, you need to take it down a notch on that perfume," I say, and sit.

“This poster he got you’s actually kind of sweet, in a way. If you think about.”

“Well, I have thought about it. It’s why you’re looking at it. And I already said it was sweet. Can’t say somethings sweet after I say’s it. Makes it not sweet no more.”

Constance ignores me. “Andromeda,” she says. “Looks like a ring of hot fire like this here in the picture? Like Lord of the Rings kinda.”

“Don’t be thick, baby. It’s just a picture been took in infrared.”

“Oh. I like it, anyhow. He’s still asleep, then?” Constance says, adds more whisky to her coffee, stirs.

Too early for me. I claw my thumbnail over some dried egg stuck on my teeny tabletop.

“You ain’t gonna wake him for me?” Constance adds.

Constance runs a local store, the Park Dairy. It’s a few miles out of town, and for a long while, she did a real decent business with her neurotic, weirdo husband, Aaron. I don’t like Aaron. Especially after some of the things Con’s told me about him. Like how he only gets hard-on when she massages his feet, but she ain’t allowed to look at him neither, fucking pervert.

“I want to see him, Lu. I bet he still scares me,” Constance says. She smiles and sips her coffee. The boy’s being back is only thrills for her for like a crib toy.

She runs her hand along my inner thigh under the table, “Oh Lula, how I love you”. When me and Constance make love, she sings my name out, little ditties, like lullabies that always start, “Oh Lula, or oh Lu, how I love you”. Her hand rides up my jammy pants, gives me skin prickles.

Constance straightens and fixes her black lace bra strap at her collarbone, and sparks my doobie and passes it to me.

Me and Constance been best buds the longest time. But when fire in our loins happened there wasn't nothing but sureness in it. The second I tasted her it was on. Age got nothing on us. She's healthy and I'm dying, and the smell of death emanating off of me cranks her hot buttons, turns her on.

"He's not a zoo animal. Just gonna have to wait."

There's a chance Tractor remembers Con. Maybe not. I can't say I'm comfortable having her here so soon. Constance's phone lights her face.

"I got to go. Told Aaron I'd be back by noon."

Constance pulls down the rest of her coffee. She's short and stocky. But her fake tan and her healthy fat rolls are what I love. She's loud and unafraid to speak her mind. We got that in common, surely.

Constance drops the phone in her bag. She pulls out her huge ring of keys. Keychains and a purple rabbit foot. She kisses me and massages her tongue in my mouth and giggles.

"Please smoke less, so I can have you longer," she says.

It's not meant to be morbid but it is. I finish the roach and stub it out in the Rocking Horse ashtray that my baby Mabel left here years ago.

"Con? Wolf put a scare in me coming over here himself on the fourth." I blow some ash off the table. "He's never come here personal. Always been one of his sons does his bid for him. Like that fat little shit-nub, Waylon."

Constance is real uncomfortable in the silence. She don't like it, and I can tell she wants to caress me instead of answer. I want her to, but she knows I'll pull away stubborn. She knows she better answer me.

“Tractor killed his nephew, Lula.”

“And?”

“And, Lunchbox was his sister’s kid. You know this.”

“And?” I stare at her. That doobie’s got me rolling in a zone, real stoned.

“And, family’s family. I don’t know, Lu. I just don’t know.” She’s getting irritable.

“How’d you feel if Wolf snatched Tractor away from you? Plus, who knows what that flipping lunatic’s thinking anyhow. Try not thinking on it too much, is all. You’re fine. You’re just gonna think what you want, anyhow.” She unsticks a wedgie from her cut offs. “I’ll swing by tomorrow, hon. I’ll see you.”

The screen door snaps back shut like a horsewhip, and I shudder like I ain’t heard before. I stare off down the hall where the boy sleeps. I can’t protect you.

*

Wolf Sutton is the one I blame for my grandson’s outcome. Wolf cooks crank. Well, not him anymore. He’s doing just fine a county line over. Big old home on a cushion of acres. Wolf’s got people dug in, doing him a lowdown, vile enterprise. The man is shrewd. And worse, disturbed. Wolf built that operation big up while my boy was locked in a box.

Wolf came here personal the other night with his youngest, Waylon—who was dressed like a rodeo clown bereft of makeup. The hat and the stuffy shirt and leather vest with the tassels and all. Not a chance in hell I was inviting them inside. Wolf knew it, and I spoke my mind. Then Wolf said it would be in my best interest to make sure Tractor comes to see him.

Waylon, the fat dumpy shit—he never once looked at me, even when I asked over his well being. They gifted me some pot cookies, and that was it. Quick and creepy with that freaky

grin Wolf's got. He peeled my fingers off my sweaty beverage and kissed my hand before the two walked off.

*

When I delivered Tractor's mama, I wasn't barely seventeen. I'd been running around the country crazy. Then I met Vernon. Vern was much older. I fell fiercely for him and settled down, and I been here in the Sunup Community since.

When doc slapped me with this cancer business, it lit a light on in me. The light said, start living more for me and lesser for the Almighty. Me and the man upstairs, we got us a wicked sort of love-hate shackling. I've been and done and given everything to that indifferent man considers his self the Holy Son. To me, he's just another trust fund baby.

*

I watch the boy in his mama's old twin bed. Tractor's feet look like handsaws that hang half a foot off the bed's end. A bed that fit his mama snug like a oven mitt. The boy's in his jockeys. He snores and trembles and sweats. He's tattoo-covered and hulking. Not the ropy teen wrestler no more. It breaks my heart he lost the years a man learns to be a man.

I tip-toe to the room and steal one of his cigarettes, loom over him a minute. Snap the lighter, flash the room like lightning flash. I walk out, and shut the door soft behind me. I go out front and fold up my sticky lawn chairs. It's not even noon and it's hot and humid and gross. I go back to the shed where I do my stargazing, where I chat with Cool Hand Luke. Like I said earlier: Cool Hand Luke is a barn owl I saved as an orphan owlet. Call me weird, call me strange, but I talk to him at length. Cool Hand roosts in them rafters of the shed, and I talk to him like he's my Vernon some nights. Like he's my Mabel others. Sometimes I cry and it feels right good,

sometimes I laugh to pass the sad. Sometimes both. Cool Hand's got the best of God's gifts, hunting alone in the dark unafraid.

Tractor barely wrote back from prison. In one single loose-leaf he sent me, it cut me up for days. Writ like a kind of confession. Maybe to shift the load from his heart to his shoulders to keep on keeping on.

*

The navy bedsheets are soaked through. The sweat beads his forehead, and his arms fold his chest. I hang a hand over him, and hesitate. I cuff him by the wrist and shake. It's wettish. I shake again, and his eyes slow open. His eyeball's are red with goopy film, and he doesn't see me at first but he blinks, he's with me. He hacks a cough.

"Yo," he says, hoarse.

"Think it's time you get up, boy. Get moving about." When I speak to him, I'm direct. The way I used to. The the way I had to be with the boy.

"Yah. I'm up."

When he was a boy, he was a feeler, a sensitive one. He'd take what's said deep inside his self. He'd never let things go easy. Like when he lost a wrestling match, the boy would shut down days, he wouldn't show at school, and I never did know where he scampered off to. I'd get calls from teachers asking his whereabouts.

After the car accident, and after all the pain he went through and the heartache he caused me, the boy came apart. He'd begun smoking what he sold. I don't scare easy but the boy forced my hand. I drew my line. I wouldn't witness another of my babies pull to pieces like a rib roast, so I put him out for good. I wouldn't weather or live down the woe of one more destructive

spiral. I knew I'd forever suffer that choice, that consequence. I knew I'd forever wake with its weight come daylight, and sink with its burden come night.

I look around the room like it's new to me. Tractor lifts his head, and I feel his look while I look out the window at the shed and woods.

He clears his throat, and sits up with his feet flat on a sandpaper carpet. He grabs the glass, chugs it down and belches and puts it back on the table.

“Thought I'd head to the Cemetery. You good with that?” He says.

“Why would I care?”

Tractor's been asking permission to do everything. Little stupid things, things like using the John. Prison done fucked up this boy's head permanently, is my fear.

“Gonna see about maybe a digging job. See if Jer still works over there. Would you know about that?”

“No idea, boy. I've heard not a peep from your good buddy since you gone away.”

The boy waves his hand like, forget about it. He drags his smoke down to the filer and stubs it out. I stare out the window I don't know for how long.

“Gram?” The boy's looking right at me. “You high?”

I clasp my hands together awkwardly in front of me like I'm caught, and cock my head at him and change it up on him.

“Boy, promise your Gram something. Promise me you'll keep away from Wolf. Just keep from him and his people and do good to get back on your feet.” It comes out my mouth sounding surely uncertain. And just as certain, I feel so stoned and real sluggish.

“Don’t, Gram. Ain’t want you worrying. I got a lotta fucking up I aim to fix.” I unhook my hands, stuff them in my pockets and nod. It’s a nod like I’m thanking the boy for his answer. Like I’m really just thank God for talking to the boy.

Mazzy

She stayed over weeknights at the hospital, and slept in a pillowy chair. She drove back to her mother's in the morning and went for a run. She ran it out. She did push-ups, sit-ups, then slept. Days dragged. She helped her mother on weekends in the garden, because the weekends were when Rick came up north after a supposed work week and stayed with Sweetly and did the same as she did during week. Except she's pretty sure he gets a hotel. Often he came for only a day and said he had to get back.

She never knew her mother was a green thumb. A new thing she notices now, her mother gardening. It couldn't be a better hobby for her mother's mental health, and cooking, baking.

Her mother's garden is a sight to see: red ripe tomatoes, zucchini, green beans. Queen of the Prairie and Butterfly Weed seduce monarchs and even the occasional hummingbird to its orange flower. Gloriosa Daisies, gold and grinning in stark sun.

She couldn't have cared less for colorful flowers or veggies. But to sweat it out with her mother's company in the garden these days keeps her grounded; her knees dug into dirt earth with blood sucking noseems in the ear's, keeping her present and not focused on Sweetly's waning health and the long days that pass and disillusion and dread of a future all alone.

Sunday she'll wash and wax the Impala, and get out of the house, she'll do it for her. She'll go to the lake. She'll bomb the coast with windows down blasting old cassettes that her dad left stacked in the glovebox.

*

It's Sunday, and that's just what she's doing, bombing out to the lake. The Impala windows down, and the wind whips her hair, tunnels the car. Mazzy teases ninety, one hundred, she's a missile in the fast lane.

She stops for a coffee and chats with a couple youths, vibrant baristas full of energy, then drives to the beach. The only place to park is a spot in a mini golf parking lot situated along the boardwalk. The wind off the water is like sandpaper on her skin. She sips her coffee, and stands next to her car and smokes and watches a young couple hold hands and smile at their kids calculating the difficulty of the hole and snickering at each other and then winging the putt and then starting over as if that one didn't count, nobody saw, clean slate.

She strolls out past the boardwalk squinting from the wind. She slips off her shoes and socks and sinks her feet into late afternoon sand. There's a quarter mile break wall built a ways out into the lake leads stretching to the lighthouse.

She leaves her shoes and walks the length of the break wall all the the way to the lighthouse. At the lighthouse the temperature has dropped and the wind is alive and volatile and she could be blown off her feet without bracing herself. Out and back she catches chilly spray as the waves crash and explode off the wall. Back on the beach, her clothes are damp and she turns to look where she just was at the lighthouse and it looks small and so far away. She sits on the boardwalk ledge and gets out her phone. She writes then erases and re-thumbs disjointed hope, her fear, her needs into a text responding to Tractor. She cries and it hurts as she crafts the longest note she's ever written on a phone. She stares at the water, the swelling waves, the whipping wind working droplets out of her eyes. She hits send and measures the moments of remaining sun that bobs the horizon before it dips beneath the skyline.

Tractor

Sweeping ain't hard. Did it plenty in prison. But mopping: now that takes mastery. Can't just douse the bundled yarn, can't just wring its sodden mass and slap it on the floor and get to swiping in shiftless swirls. That's some amateur indolence. There's much more to it. Got to take a pride in it. What would Rosey say? It's taken him a few days to get the knick-knacks of proper Kungfu swirl-strokes.

He laughs. He levers out water with two solid cranks, and works smooth even strokes like a paintbrush. He's on the second floor, and mops the east end of the hall.

"Gotta be scrupulous," Tractor says, smiles. Rosey, he misses him, man. Tractor's nineteen eighties over-the-ear headphones wrap his neck. "Listen. All you gotta do is pay attention. Be scrupulous," Tractor says, attempting to mimic Rosey's deep baritone voice, the empty hallways echoing his words.

*

Tractor got a custodian gig at his old high school. He clocks in at five in the evening. He works from the second floor down, and cleans the workshop, art room, cafeteria, and finishes with the gym where he buffs the floor and sweeps between pull-out bleachers. He washes windows and bags all trash. He vacuums and mops all classrooms and halls and offices, like the principals. He works thoroughly through each restroom. It's not bad, he doesn't mind it. He doesn't have to look over his shoulder, or watch his back. He just zones out, and does his best to dim thoughts weighing in too heavily. It tends to get real quiet in the big school with no one around. It's like his ghost or shadows come alive off the lockers when his legs get lazy and his boots trip and squeak the floor. A lot of times he's wears the headphones for this reason. He finds

himself working head-nods and hip-dances to Gram's mix-tapes on his Walkman. Just him and his ghost and shadows judging.

*

He got lucky: as hard as it was to drag himself to the high school and see about a job. See if they'd hire a convict. One who'd attended the school over two decades earlier, and the first person he ran into was his wrestling coach.

Tractor had entered the high school through the gym exit, how he always used to go. Over by the backlot near the woods shortcutting from the main road, he entered, and standing there at the vending machine bending his fat ass over and scooping out a can of Diet soda was his old wrestling coach, Mr. Shropshire, coach Shrop. Tractor recognized him right off. But coach hadn't the slightest notion who Tractor was at first.

"Lot's changed, coach," Tractor said.

"Yeah! Wow, I'd say. Tractor. Scared me a minute there, son," coach said. "Thought you were going to rob me." He fake laughed and snapped open his can of Diet.

Turns out some janitor was just fired for stealing. And that's why it's lucky. Coach Shrop still teaches history on the second floor. He now looks over-the-hill, but what you expect. Tractor once considered this man like a dad. Formidable and admirable with a grunge rock frontman aura and ponytail and furious goatee. A kind and honorable dude all the same.

Coach Shrop vouched for Tractor for this new janitor job. The day Tractor hired, Coach Shrop and Rafa—the lead custodian—walked Tractor through the school and showed him what was what and what needed done and how to do so.

*

He just got done buffing the basketball court and his burner beeps and keeps beeping messages. He doesn't pull it from his pocket because he doesn't want to risk it: bossman Rafa could lurk the corner at any moment. He's outside the gym entrance in the hall with a broom and dust pan. He's about to hit the basement and clockout on his thirty-minute-break when he looks up shocked, seeing his name inside a large framed placard on the wall: 38-0, 40-0, 42-1. His wrestling records still unbroken right there at the top.

There's a loading dock lined with dumpsters where he smoke-breaks. He flips open his burner and sees seven messages from Mazzy. It's one long message but the burner can't handle burden of so much text and chops it in chunks.

He mumbles her messages out loud, word for word with great care, and the phone right up close to his face. Then he reads it again. It takes the whole break.

*

Tractor goes to the basement. He parks his cleaning cart and shelves the supplies and punches his card—which means writing his break time and out time and checking out with Rafa.

“Later, Rafa. I'm good, I'm done,” he says. “You want to walk the halls, check me out?!”

Rafa's a dinosaur at the high school. He's been there since Tractor's time. Tractor can hear a computer playing some video, lighting up the back wall.

“Okay, pal! No, you're good!? Have a good weekend. Be good, Sabes!” Rafa says, calling back from deep in a dark windowless office the size of a utility closet.

*

Friday night. The sky is cloudless. Stars and moonlight streak across gloomy river water.

“So, wait. She threw herself into freeway traffic. Is basically what you’re saying,” Jer says, holding down a laugh.

“Nah, that’s not what I said,” Tractor says. “Don’t put fucking words in my mouth, man.”

“Naaht putting words anywhere, my goon. You said she sprinted straight out into the road.”

“Yah, she ran out in the road. To cross over. Like most people cross roads, to get to the other side.” Tractor burps and tilts back his tallboy.

Him and Jer lean on the railing of suicide bridge. A single suicide here decades ago, and the name stuck. The bridge isn’t even high. It hangs over Black River not fifteen feet, but sometimes the river drops low and stones and rocks show themselves shiny and jagged like teeth. It’s a long, narrow bridge that locals use for shortcuts from town to country and back. Cars cross over hardly ever.

Him and Jer have been meeting at suicide to drink and shoot shit almost every night since Tractor’s been out. He looks forward to these quiet evenings of reminiscence.

“I guess you did say she was retarded”

“Why you saying that? Why you saying was? She ain’t dead, for one. And I didn’t say she’s fucking retarded. I never said that.”

Jer laughs and turtles his head between shrugging shoulders. “I’m sorry, my goon. I’m not laughing at you, swear. I’m just laughing cause the whole scene sounds so stupid and fucked up.”

“It is fucked up. It’s got me real fucked up. It’s why talking it out.”

Jer's a half Chinese. He's proud about it. Both his parents are dead and his sister lives in Los Angeles. Jer's the only guy who ever beat him on the wrestling mat in the entire state of Michigan. That is, when they weighed-in the same. Now Jer's rail thin, hunched, unsound. He digs graves and tosses away dirty dollar bills at the Rocking Horse. But the homeboy seems just as happy to see Tractor as Tractor is to see him.

*

Jer resides in a shack-of-a-home that he rents from a guy he backhoes graves for at Epworth Cemetery. Jer's a caretaker of the boneyard and the guy who's his boss, is the graveyard superintendent who manages and runs the Cemetery. Tractor found out which cottage Jer lives in from this guy.

Tractor showed up at Jer's hovel, and knocked and no one answered. The door was open though, so he let himself in. Jer was laid out on the couch. His place reeked like manure, like a pet shop, like a kitty litter box. A syringe and a little baggie of junk on the table next to a Sport Fishing mag flipped open to a page of a babe in a bikini muscling a gargantuan grouper the size of herself. Other than the couch and table and the TV and the playstation, the place was ad soul-sucking dugout.

Tractor couldn't rouse Jer so he tip-toed around Jer's little den. Then he sat himself on the floor with piles of dirty clothes and smoked cigarettes and thought he saw some sort of rodent under the couch and watched Anime on the TV and waited.

*

"You want to hit the Rocking Horse for a beer. Do up a nightcap? Stare at some titties? Praise God, baby," Jer says, pushing himself off the bridge-rail and stomps his empties.

“What makes you think I’d ever go back there?”

It takes Jer a second, then it hits him. “Shit, bro, sorry. I just—I been going there a lot, you know? Wasn’t thinking. My bad, bruh.”

It’s been almost twelve full years since Tractor’s mama, Mabel, put a dirty harry under her chin and blew her brains out. Rosey was the one told him. Told him delicate and not with the details. Mabel got high in her car after some random shift on some random Tuesday at dawn in the parking lot of the Rocking Horse where she worked and called it quits. Anytime he hears that Skynard song, it works him cold.

Jer won’t stop fidgeting. He kicks rocks off the edge of the road and under the rail. They hear the sprinkle as it spatters the black water below. They each have three dead tallboys at their feet, and at Jer’s weight, he’s likely wobbly, buzzing good and warm.

“How come you ain’t gone to see Gram while I’s locked up? You ain’t gone even once.” Tractor smokes and sees down the river along a strip of glittery moonlight slashing the water.

“I don’t know. Should’ve. After you went inside, whole thing shook me up pretty good.”

“You should’ve done that for me. Never asked you for shit, and I needed that. You know she’s sick, right? Cancer tumors is eating her insides.”

“Yeah, I heard. I’m sorry, man. Stop making me feel so shitty. I’m not gonna say sorry again. I am, man, alright.”

“When’d you start shooting junk? Fucking junk, Jer?”

Jer shakes his head. “While ago now. Don’t judge me, man. I been through shit, too.”

“We’re gonna start working out for real again. You and me, man. I mean hitting it hard. See we can’t ween off that shit. ”

Jer laughs at him. "Okay, my goon. Good luck with that."

They listen to the crickets and loud burble of the river cutting its way. Tractor belches and turns to Jer.

"How about go fishing, man? I'll tell you, straight up, I used dream of fishing in the joint. Dreams on dreams on dreams, I walked on fucking water. I'd wake up with the smell of pussy on my fingers when I picked my nose, I swear."

"Praise, God! Yeah, man, let's go, I'm good for that. I got the gear. The Squirt's just been sittin' against the side of the cottage collecting fungus and gnarly shit," Jer says.

The Squirt is Jer's jon boat he calls, Squirt.

"Fuckin' A," Tractor says. "Make day of it."

"Fuckin' A."

Gram

The boy was up crack of dawn to go fishing. Way I understand it: Jer was to swing by, pick up the boy and they'd go float on a boat come sunup till sundown.

I find I'm always prodding the boy. *Where you going? How long you gonna be gone?* That sort of thing, them kind of questions. I'm must seem like his second parolee, checking in, always checking on him. He takes it in stride though, I'll give the boy that. He's been good about it. His temperament has cooled, at least till just about a few minutes ago now.

I'm needlepointing, whistling hymns in my recliner listening to birdsong outside, when the boy drops himself on the couch across from me.

He's into his third cup of Joe and decked in some of my dead husband's faded camo cargos and a long underwear waffle shirt. The boy took his ball cap back too. So he matches like he meant it. He wears the cap low on his scowling face. The boy hammers his leg.

"Boy, I got chemo injections next week. Just so's you know."

He just nods, and looks into his coffee cup.

"Motherfucker was supposed to have been here over two hour ago," the boy says. He finishes the coffee and thuds the mug hard on my table.

"Oh now what's the matter with you? Quit acting like a big baby, and be patient. It's not like Jer's ever the punctual type? Just call the fool."

"Yah, I been calling him, Gram." He's curt with me, almost nasty and it's a first since he's home.

He gets up and goes outside and smokes. I can hear him cussing himself. I try to ignore it. I keep the whistling going and the hymn strong in my head.

He comes back in and asks if he can borrow my truck. I tell I got no plans. “Likely here most of the day,” I say.

He snatches my keys out my ceramic fishy dish where I used to keep a pack of smokes.

“Boy! Boy!” The screen slaps shut and he’s gone.

I feel my face stuck in scrunch and it feels a hot flush. My breathing catches. I put the needlepoint down, I’m shaky. My weak heartbeat thumps through my pulpy purplish feet. I look around the trailer like an answer’ll reveal itself, and I swallow down quick breathes. I twist on my oxygen can and muzzle the rubber mask over my nose and mouth and recline and set my arms heavy on the arm cushions and shut my eyes and pray.

Tractor

Jer's place is locked up. Tractor knocks and hollers his name. He goes around the side of the duplex and sees Jer's jon boat laid against the cottage. But Jer's car is gone.

There's a funeral in session when Tractor drives up to the cemetery office. The superintendent looks like Frankenstein with his flattop, standing there like he's got permomascara with a couple gold stud earrings. He's like six foot four and has sixty pounds on Tractor but ain't stopping nothing. Guy's a fucking dick.

"Yeah, your buddy, he didn't show for work yesterday, again. Had to get someone to do his digging for him," the super says. "Got me a mind to fire that drug addict. I know he's an addict and he hasn't shown more than once. One more time, I fire his ass and evict him from the apartment I rent him."

Tractor tries not to listen, he tries not to think about what the guy's nose would feel like exploding under his fist. Just wait for the guy to finish. Get back in the truck and go. Tractor watches the funeral mourners down the path. The day is overcast in layers of gray. The fresh dug earth swallows a casket.

*

Driving through town Tractor sees Jer's car in the parking lot behind the Rocking Horse. He parks next to Jer's IROC-Z. Tractor had considered maybe the schlump was junked out in the car, he almost hoped. Driving around town to different spots, Tractor was too tired to be angry anymore. It's almost middle-afternoon and Jer's not in the car either.

Tractor smokes and sits on the hood of the Camaro. He spits and looks at the big red door of the Rocking Horse, the back entrance. How different that door looks in daylight. And that

same dumpster where he talked to Brittney the night his life became a sick shameful memory, in this same parking lot where his mama blew her fucking brains out.

Inside it's dark and dead. Light ricochets off stripper poles and body glitter. A few old dudes nurse beverages and ogle the dancer on stage. Tractor watches the dancer a minute. The sweat glistens her skin, her tits, bare ass and how he needs it and would pay again. The chick looks sleepless and strung out and can't keep up with Prince's "When Doves Cry".

He recognizes the bouncer. A roly-poly guy on a stool at the front entrance talking on his phone. Dude's been working here since Tractor was a teenager. Dude used to play football, tackle. Now he's older, fatter, soggier.

Tractor walks past the bartender busy counting money in the till.

"Sup, chief?" The bouncer says, ending his call and channeling a fist into his fat thigh.

"Yo, man, you were working here last night?" Tractor says.

The bouncer mugs him a minute. "Yeah, I was here."

"My name's Tractor Lindsey. Mabel Lindsey, she used to work here, I'm her son."

"Ah, I knew I knew you, but you isn't you no more. Damn you dotted-up, fool. I'm Mike Starr. Sorry about your mom, bro."

A group of guys shuffle into the club. Mike Starr gives them that hard look and says alright and waves them inside.

Tractor looks back at the stage. The Prince song ends and suddenly it's real quiet. Dudes order drinks and take seats at the stage. Glasses clink. A faucet gun sprays and speakers buzz-empty. A new hour, a new set. Two girls slow-step on stage as Nine Inch Nails' "Closer" opens up and rattles fluorescent beer signs on the wall.

“Buddy of mine comes in here a lot. His name’s Jer.”

Mike Starr’s nodding at Tractor, “Yeah, I know Jer.”

“He was here last night?”

“He was here.” Mike Starr looks at Tractor. “Jer was fucked up, and he left with Waylon Sutton.”

“Waylon Sutton?”

Mike Starr nods.

“Alright, thanks, Mike Starr. I owe you.”

Mike Starr shakes his head, “We’re good.”

They bump fists and Tractor stuffs his hands into his pockets and lowers his head and stomps out the way he came.

*

He’s on the road a half hour. He thought he had a good idea where Wolf’s new plot was, but he’s double backed twice, lost. Now the truck needles E near the Park Dairy. He pulls in to gas-up and ask directions.

Park Dairy is a local store that’s been around since way before his time. Lot of stories about lots of kids getting in all kinds of trouble: drag racing this strip. Fist fights and fucking in backseats of cars. Park Dairy used to be the hang out spot for teens. Cigarettes and milkshakes and burgers and coffee and popping your whisky-cherry. Ice creams with names like Blue Moon and Bubblegum Swirl and Dark Cherry Dream. Blue Moon was bomb.

Everybody knows Wolf Sutton, so at the very least, whoever owns the place now, can send Tractor on his right way. He cuts the engine and gets out and unhooks the gas gun and looks

over the store. A wind kicks up and quakes a green tarp that covers a short-bed truck on blocks along the side of the building. A spotted cat saunters past the short-bed trailing behind it little paw pads and an oversized shadow. Park Dairy looks the same as Tractor remembered. Little more tumbledown.

A woman comes outside and leans her hip against a porch beam, crosses her arms over her chest. Tractor racks the gas gun and moves toward her. When he gets close he recognizes her. That's right, he remembers. Constance took over this place. She snaps her gum and rolls it around in her mouth with her thoughts. She wears a sleeveless t-shirt that flaunts bare shoulder and bra-strap. She stares him down as he approaches. He stops shy of her and gets caught copping look at her cleavage.

"Ma'am," he says.

"I know that truck. Long time, welcome home. You remember me? I'm Constance."

"Yah. You know my Gram."

"That's right. Was actually gonna go down, see her this afternoon. It doesn't look I'm gonna make it down though."

Just then a circular saw powers up behind the store. They twist their heads toward the noise. The afternoon hangs humid. "Come on in, doll. See we can't fix you what you need." She holds open the screen and waits for him take the steps. "Aaron's out back. He's busy building something or other."

The store's cool and damp, and everything's in its right order. He sees the nook where they used to serve ice cream. Now an empty case. He walks around pretending he knows what he

wants, and doesn't know why he even came inside. He could've asked her on the porch.

Constance leans on the counter, her tits pressed to the glass.

Tractor comes back up and taps the counter and stuffs a hand in his pocket. "I get a pack of Pall Malls, red?" he says.

He tries to flatten damp dollars in his palm. His face and ears are hot. A dollar bill falls to the floor. "Ah, sorry," he says. Almost hits head as he hooks forward to snatch it.

"S'alright, doll." She sets the pack on the glass. "Take your time." She walks down the counter and around the corner and comes back a minute later with a bulgy bag of fresh bud.

"This here's for Lula. Make sure she get it. Eases her pain. I stuffed a lil' extra in for you, handsome. Lil' welcome home. Call me doctor," she says, and smiles and bites her cheek all flirty-like.

"Alright, I'll do that." Tractor packs his smokes on the heel of his palm. "You mind telling me how I get to Wolf Sutton's place from here? Seems I can't find my way."

Constance's flirty cheek-biting goes slack jaw.

"Where Wolf reside?" She says, and glances into the counter like he asked her for something specific inside. "Yeah I know where that man stay. It's far enough though. You ain't want to go all that way, do you, handsome? I mean, not unless you got business with him, course? You got business with him?"

Tractor smiles and stares at her.

"Okay. Alright, then," Constance says. "I draw you up something."

*

Tractor trucks the invisible line and crosses over into Sandoval county. Back roads only by nickname, country tunes and woods. Orange tipped-pines dipped in copper sunlight, and Tractor smokes. The wind funnels hot air through the cab. Constance drew him a map on a magenta post-it note.

Wolf Sutton would go to all of Tractor's wrestling matches. He'd even drive down or out of state. In Tractor's mind, it was support, it was a kind of love. It wasn't. Turns out Wolf just craves the battle, the war, the fight. Wolf would show up and stand in a gym far away from everyone with a grin on his face. Sometimes he'd bring his or wife or sons, even. His sons tried to wrestle but they held nothing to Tractor, and attention never went to them. Wolf was good to Tractor. Wolf wished he was his own son.

Constance said Wolf lives in a big broke-down home that looks like a crumbling castle. It's on a high ridge overlooking three-sixty-degrees around him. She said he calls it castle ridge, go figure.

*

The paved road gives over to sand and gravel when he turns onto the property. A wooden placard with SUTTON carved into it, and it's filled in thick with red paint. NO TRESPASS.

The truck bumps over a cobblestone bridge with Black River flowing under. Up some and around a bend thick with woods, everything suddenly clears and Wolf's giant ramshackle home comes into view like a haunted house in daytime. It's a three story red brick, with it's roof falling into disrepair. Not far, a few hundred yards, a two-story barn that looks like it was a church once. Big white cross on its front under a big brass bell suspended above. Faded paint

with a rotting-out bottom. There's a three-bay garage on the other side of the home. Looks like it was all but shat on a beautiful backdrop.

*

Trucks and motorcycles and a Sheriff cruiser are parked out front alongside the barn. There's barking and yelling, there's cheering, and all kinds of clamor coming from the barn. Tractor pulls near the garage, his stomach in knots. Couldn't be a shittier time to show up.

He rolls up the passenger window, pops the glovebox, hunts inside. He scans the bed of the truck for anything to weaponize himself. He pats around under the seat and finds a metal clicker-pen and sticks it in his pocket. A shot rings out in direction of the barn followed by yelps like a gaggle of seagulls.

The Sheriff comes out of the barn flailing arms in a huff and goes to his cruiser. He opens a beer and sits in the driver seat with his feet on the ground. The barn door slides wide and a squad of goons come out and congregate in front and smoke and drink.

Tractor spots Wolf in red suspenders and a skin-tight white undershirt tucked into high-waisted jeans. He's still brawny about the shoulders, but balding with greasy shoulder-length hair. A paunch, a gray beard, the permanent grin. He chats with the group, not nodding, but rolling his head. He limps over and talks to the sheriff, drinking and pouting and pointing and flailing a hand in the air at nothing.

Tractor jerks away from rapid knocks of metal on glass clinking the passenger window. A double-barrel shotgun— "Tractor Lindsey!"

A woman smooshes her cheek and eyeball into the window glass. "Tractor Lindsey! I knew I seen Lula's truck coming round that bend," Loretta James Sutton says.

And holy hell: the woman has taken on a different measure of age and creep. A living-speaking cadaver. A woman solely put on this earth to be loyal to one man and frighten the rest

She comes around the front of the truck, nonchalantly wagging the shotty. Tractor sees that Wolf's gone poof from the group. Loretta James's face at his open window looks like a shriveled peanut, skin hanging on. Her face is right up on Tractor's. Her breath, nail polish remover and garlic. She pushes her weight into the door so Tractor can't open it. The gun is right resting on the sill at his chin.

"How about you kill the engine, bumpkin" Loretta James says.

He kills it.

"Wolf, he's dying to see *you*," she sticks a brittle finger in his face. "Ain't stopped talking on the old days. Talking on Tractor Lindsey. He knows all about what you been up to, too. Working at the high school and all," she says, and laughs loud, her bloodshot eyes won't ease.

"Loretta James, get that fucking gun out of my face," Tractor says. He stubs his cig in the ashtray beneath the dash, and spots Waylon out on the deck with his brothers. That carnal feeling of being cornered has got Tractor charged. He shoulders open the truck door and Loretta James goes with it. She stumbles back, cackling and re-trains the gun on him.

He gets out. She waves him at the house with the barrel. The brothers are gone. The buzzards are in the sky sweeping high-low patterns in slow circles. The clusters of men around the barn watch Tractor and Loretta James track the dirt walk up the porch into the house.

*

Past the front room it's a narrow hallway with nothing on the walls. No memories desired here. Nothing warm, nothing familial. The hallway collides into a staircase that climbs steeply up

stained mahogany steps. The whole of the musty home casts a darkness. The banister staircase, its balusters, still decorated from some Christmas some time ago. Crunchy brown pine needles and a faded rose red ribbon around the wreaths.

He hears low voices cut through the barely furnished rooms. The archways, an ornate wooden trim. A dining room on the right. A living room, and cavern fireplace to his left. A heap of rubble and ash under the iron black grate. He steps to the staircase and grips the banister.

“Hey, bumpkin” Loretta James says.

“What?”

Loretta James takes the moment and pats Tractor down with her gun angled at his nuts.

“This way, sweetheart. They’re waiting on you in the kitchen.”

*

In the kitchen there’s tile around the sink and wood floors. The kitchen’s like a different house. Loretta James is at Tractor’s hip. Cigarette smoke blends with smell of charred onion.

Waylon and his two older brother’s and a woman sit at a round table in the back corner. Tractor’s presence silences conversation. Nobody gets up, they all just look and Tractor realizes they’re waiting on Wolf who is now clopping up some side steps. Wolf enters the kitchen through a screen door at the side of the house.

“Long time, *Tractorman*,” Wolf says, a gruff smoker-tone, a grin.

Loretta James nudges Tractor for him to say something.

“Wolf,” Tractor says.

Wolf’s compact like a biker Santa Claus up close. “Your timing couldn’t be better, *Tractorman*.” Wolf cuts a look at Loretta James. “LJ, get the man a beverage. I believe he’s

earned it.” Wolf motions Tractor to the table to take a seat. “You remember my boys? Ezra there. That’s Cyrus, and Waylon, my youngest.”

Tractor stands behind a chair closest to Waylon. Waylon’s got a shit-eating grin going just like poppy. Wolf takes fistfuls of his beard like a pulley contraption, stroking, combing, then decides it’s good to sit. The silence grates, and Tractor hears consistent drips from the sink.

“You know something—” Wolf starts to say, leaning back in a creaky chair.

Tractor looks down at Waylon, humped over his beer bottle like he’s protecting it.

“Where’s Jer at?” Tractor says, interrupting Wolf.

Waylon looks to poppy. “Who?” He says.

“Strip club, last night, you was there with him.”

“I don’t think so, partner,” Waylon says.

“*Tractorman*. How about, go ahead and take a seat, would ya,” Wolf says. “You’re making my boys nervous.”

Loretta James taps Tractor’s shoulders, and he shudders. She sneaks a handle of Early Times past him to the table and sets a group of glasses down and backs up. Tractor pulls the chair out and sits on its edge, almost knee-to-knee with Waylon, facing him.

“Damn you look crazy-differnt than I remember,” Waylon mumbles looking at his bro’s for assent. “All tatted and shit—” Waylon slurps from his beer and foam cascades the bottle —“Ah, shiiit.”

“Waylon, you couldn’t’ve been more than eight year old when he went away. You don’t remember diddly, boy,” Wolf says.

The woman next to Wolf seems real nervous. A bleached out yellow shirt with Mickey Mouse in its center, some track marks raw in the pits of her elbows. She hasn't stopped looking at Tractor or flexing her jaw. Wolf's arm loosely drapes the back of her chair, and Tractor realizes it's fucking Brittney. A panic grabs him.

"I was beginning to feel like you didn't want to come see uncle Wolf," Wolf says, and grabs his smokes. "And that was giving me a bit of a sting."

"I didn't," Tractor says.

Wolf guffaws and blows smoke at the ceiling. "Well, I'm glad you came because we have some things that time halted us discussing." Wolf nods to Ezra, and Ezra and Cyrus both get up and leave the kitchen.

"Tractorman, you remember Brittney. My nephew, Robert, his wife?" Wolf pours himself a half-glass of whisky. Shoots it and puts his arm back around Brittney. "Now, I'm not one to beat around the bush. But thing is, my nephew is under the ground. And we still need a eye for an eye for that. I guess what I'm getting at is, we need your blood, champ."

"Fuck you talking about? I did my time, I owe you dick. Y'all fucked my life, you forget?" Tractor says, and he turns to Waylon. "Jer don't turn up soon, you and me is having a different conversation. I'm the fuck out of here—" Tractor shoots up out of his chair knocking it over.

"Tractor!" Wolf says. "You may just want to wait a minute." Loretta James is behind Tractor. He sees the gun and feels his heart.

A moment later, stumbling up the steps, Ezra and Cyrus drag a badly beaten, half-conscious Jer. There's a pillow case over his head as they tow Jer through the screen door into

the kitchen and pull off the pillow case. Jer's drippy hair all up in his face. He worms his head around in the light like a blind mole rat.

"Tractor," Jer cries. Both his eyes plum-size, his nose cracked with dry blood all over his split mouth. His clothes filthy and torn. Ezra has a pistol to his head.

"How's you suppose you want to play this here, champ?" Wolf says. Waylon's in his chair, facing Tractor, and laughing.

"We know he's your friend. And that's nice. Now, you're free to leave, but he'll pay your debt for you. Blood for blood, and you being a good friend and all. We feel he would do that for you. And you'd be debt free." Wolf pauses to light another cigarette. "*Tractorman. Tractorman. Tractorman.* You'll be all good and settled with me. On my word. You'll just have to take a moment and say goodbye to your buddy here."

Tractor doesn't know who to look at. He doesn't know where to put his rage, then boots Waylon off his chair, flopping him like a fish on the floor and sliding out the table.

"Tractor," Jer moans, and cyrus has to hold him up.

"Get up Waylon," Wolf says. "I had me something else in mind. Best outcome for everyone." Wolf glances at Brittney. "You're gonna fight again, champ."

"Fight who? You? Your bitch-ass sons? You just fucked your fate, old man."

"You're not fighting me or my boy's. You're fighting Pathos."

"I'll fucking fight your God!" Tractor spits on Waylon and points at Jer, "This ain't on him. LET HIM GO!" Tractor boots Waylon again who's trying to get up, knocking him back, toppling chairs.

Wolf raises his voice, “He ain’t done till you’re done, Tractor!” Wolf and Brittney stand. “Out to the barn we go then. *All sports fans*, here for the big show, *Tractorman, Tractorman, Tractorman*,” Wolf calls out as he walks down the side steps outside.

Everyone files behind. Loretta James nuzzles the shotty into the base of Tractor’s back to keep him walking.

*

Wolf wasn’t lying: there’s now double the number of trucks and bikes outside. The barn door is open. It’s a crowd and it’s uproar. Cyrus and Ezra disappear with Jer once inside the din. Wolf limps over to Tractor, and takes his arm and guides him through the racket. Some guys are even patting Tractor’s shoulders saying, get him, man get him.

They go around the side of a makeshift cockfighting ring. It’s concrete bottom covered in hay and hard-packed dirt. There’s a dog sprawled dead in the middle of the ring in its own puddle of innards, its neck tore out.

“No more chickens?” Tractor yells. “You’re fighting dogs now, you fuck-bastard?”

Wolf’s got game face and he’s hustling Tractor forward. As soon as Tractor says this, a couple guys enter the ring and gather up the dead dog leaving only a dark pooled outline in the hay.

“Got to keep it interesting, champ. I’m losing money to dog fights these days. I’ve come up with something new. And guess what? Would ya look at this crowd. Look at this crowd you’ve brought in, champ. Look at that greenback flipping hands.” Wolf’s eyes are lit-up.

Tractor scans around. He sees everybody taking bets. On the other side of the ring, Waylon's being yanked forward. People are quick to move out of his way. Tractor can't see past the makeshift hockey boards.

Waylon opens the gate, and steps into the ring with a pit bull the size of a mountain lion.

"The fuck is this?" Tractor says, and finds himself taking a step back but Wolf holds him in place.

"That's my baby. That there is Pathos. Hunnerd forty pound pit ain't lost a fight. Won me a lot of prize money. Thought it only serendipitous that an undefeated fighter fights another. Just like you said, champ," Wolf's yelling spit into his ear. "You're about take on the Almighty."

Tractor checks behind him. Loretta James's, front-center with her shotty fixed on him.

"For what it's worth, I just couldn't not put my money on you, champ. Make me a proud uncle. Make a show of it!"

Tractor looks at the ground and pulls a breath. He yanks off his shirt and ties it snug around his left forearm. He pulls the metal clicker-pen out of his pocket and climbs over the boards into the ring.

Waylon unleashes Pathos and it pounces.

Tractor fixes his boots into the dirt, and his arm comes up to block. The pit leaps and bites into his arm and when they hit the deck Tractor's already shivved it multiple times behind the ear with the clicker-pen. He's pinned down by the massive animal's sheer strength, ripping and wringing his arm. It claws and tears his face and flesh as he shanks into the dog's belly.

The punctures wheeze and leak out of the pit like a pricked balloon. When the pit goes limp Tractor hears the crowd, and the bangs of the boards. The garbled yelling, and the sickening high of thrills begotten. He pushes the pit off of him to roll over and lose consciousness.

Gram

I rouse from my chair at dawn. My limbs swollen and aching. Maybe I dreamt it, but I thought I heard my truck chug back out front, with the engine cut out and the crickets filling in.

Constance had called me real concerned. She said she couldn't make it down but that the boy showed up at her store earlier and that he asked where Wolf reside. And after that I had to do oxygen for hours. I let old movies run and I watched the window and I prayed and I cursed and I prayed more.

The dawn paints a purple orange through my broken blinds. It's a beautiful thing when it soaks the room like this. My AC putters but my armpits is runny. I dab a square of TP at the corners of my goopy eyes and take off my mask. I push up and I shuffle.

My truck is there, as I thought it. But the boy is not. I go in the kitchen to flick on the coffee. I try to whistle my hymns and find something calming when I hear digging out back.

I keep Vernon's baseball bat at the front door, I grab it. I shake off my slippies and step outside in my nightie and go around back, and my guts drops when I see it.

"What in God's name?" I say.

Tractor stops shoveling.

"Oh my God. Oh. My. God."

The boy's face is malled. He's shirtless, and his pants is all ripped up. He's sweat covered and his arm is bandaged to the elbow in gauze dressings and his shoulders and chest is lacerated and look like someone knife slashed him over and over. There's something swaddled in a filthy blanket by the hole and the heap he's dug at his feet.

"It's okay," the boy says. "It's finished."

“Oh my God.”

“It’s okay, Gram. I made us some money,” the boy says, and then crumples to his knees and sobs terribly.

*

The boy buried the dog in my backyard by the shed and left near three thousand bucks and a bag of ganja on my nightstand. Seeing that much filthy cash money wrapped in a rubber band makes you feel rotten for desiring it. I stuck it in a old shoebox on the shelf in the closet with Vern’s stars and hearts, his medals from Vietnam.

*

“Teddy bear, you got to get something off the chest, you know I’m good for it.”

The boy’s been texting on that burner all morning while laying on the couch.

“What, now?” he says. “Yah. I’m fine. None of this barely even hurt no more.” The boy’s talking about his wounds, his physical mess.

He puckers lips and pokes out his tongue clicking buttons on that flip phone. He asked me real nice to borrow my truck again this morning. And you can imagine, I said no, and ain’t no way in hellfire, and I feel that’s fair, and I feel after this episode gone and unraveled under him into some unGodly confounding climax at Wolf’s, my says is final.

“Not at all what I mean, boy. Not at all what I’m getting at. What I mean is—”

He claps the phone shut and looks at me. “—Gram. What I say about saying things like that? I told you, I’m good’s the day is long. I’m wet as the rain is weary. Ain’t gotta worry about me none. Speaking of, I’m not the one getting I.V. injections in my gall bladder, so...” The boy pockets his phone. When’s that happening, anyhow? Next week? Yah?”

The boy ain't listening. He just don't listen with them thick propensities of his.

"Hm-mm, that's a fact, boy. But what I's saying to you was—"

"Alright, then." He cuts me off again, so I give up complete on my offer for psychotherapy. If he wants it, fine. I'm here dying to give it.

"Gram. I gotta borrow the truck. Be gone just the day. I'ma be back early evening for supper and work. Ain't nothing gonna happen, swear on it. Somebody I gotta see. It's in the cards and I've made a promise. Please, Gram...you know if you say no, I'll just grand theft auto the shit anyway. Come on now." He shoots me teddy bear eyes. "Who loves ya to death and back, Gram?"

I shake my head and shrug and recline my chair and wave him off and twist on my oxygen. He gets up, kisses my forehead and says thank you. He says I love you more than anything, and leaves the room.

"Love you, boy." I whisper under breath. "Lord be his Shepard," and I snuggle on my mask.

Tractor

He walks in circles, and gets lost in corridors of harsh-lit sameness. He finally finds the front desk. Or maybe it's not the front desk. Just employees on phones and phones ringing around computers and someone who might point him in the right direction. He sets his copy of Huck Finn on the counter in front of a woman wearing scrubs and her hair spun in a bun-tower.

"You point me the direction of the ICU?" He taps the novel. "Think I'm a little lost."

The woman lowers the phone to her shoulder. "Do you know someone staying in intensive care?"

"Do I know someone?"

"Yes, sir. Do you know the patient in intensive care? You're not permitted in ICU without access. That typically means family or relation. If you know the last name of the patient, I can call for you."

"The last name? Can't you just tell me where? And then I go."

The woman rolls her eyes and says into the phone, "Can you hold a minute, ma'am? Thank you." She hits a button and props the phone and looks back at Tractor.

"Sir, the bandage on your arm is seeping."

"Yah, okay." Tractor realizes he doesn't know Mazzy's last name. It never occurred to him. For one, why's it matter? And also, why's it troubling to him that he doesn't know.

Suddenly he feels very alone.

"Sir? Is everything alright?"

"Yah, things are fine. Tired of being asked that is all."

"Okay. Looks like you've been through a lot, sir."

“Yah. You’ll never know.”

“I can understand,” the woman says and waits a moment. “Sir? Is there anyone I can call for you? Is there anything we can—“

“There isn’t.”

*

Tractor goes to the smoking area outside where a couple of nurses are sucking down Parliaments and yammering about some company party the night before. They all finish their smokes together and tell Tractor how to get to the ICU. Then walk with him in that direction and point down a long hallway. Nobody hassles him at the desk.

He peeks into every window of every closed door. One door is open, and there’s a body on a bed cocooned head-to-toe in dressings and it smells fruity and strangely metallic. He crosses the hall and puts his face to the glass and cups his hand over eyes and sees Mazzy asleep in a chair, her cheek nestled in her hand. The room is dark, the shades drawn. He can’t see Sweetly in the bed just a lump in the sheets and blanket.

He knocks lightly. Then looks down the hall to see if anyone heard, and knocks again. Mazzy lifts her head and suddenly he’s warm all over seeing her cute smushed sleep face. Tractor stupidly waves, and mouths, *can I come in* and she nods.

“Hey,” Tractor whispers.

“Hey.” Her voice is gravelly from sleep.

“Man, I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Where else would I be?” she says.

“I don’t know. I’m stupid, sorry,” Tractor says. He looks around the dark room. It smells of baby powder and patchouli and clean blankets and everything’s clean and cold.

“No, it’s okay. I’m glad you’re here too—“ Mazzy squints at him, trying to figure him out. “We don’t really have to whisper,” she says. She goes and opens the shade and draws in the light.

“Oh, gosh. What happened to you?”

“What?” Tractor’s looking at Sweetly whose face appears peaceful in deep sound sleep. “Oh, this?” He raises his bandaged arm. “I got attacked by a dog is all.”

“What? It looks pretty serious, you okay?”

“Yah. Couple days ago.” He turns toward Sweetly’s bed again.

“How’s she doing? I mean like, what’s the progress, or...?”

Mazzy looks with and goes to the bed. She snaps a couple tissues out of the box at the bed and blows some snot. “No. Nothing yet. We’ve heard nothing.”

Tractor’s hand is numb and his bandage is damp. It feels wrong talking in the room while Sweetly sleeps, like he’s intruding.

“Do they got a cafeteria here, or...? You want to get a coffee, or like a hot cocoa or something?”

Mazzy nods. She rests her hand on Sweetly’s hand and shudders some.

*

“Like how rare?”

“Like rare. Like uncommonly so. Sweetly’s on a list. Some long fucking list. It’s not like a list that you see, with numbers or anything like that. Honestly, I don’t know.”

She'd mentioned in her long text he had read on the loading dock that Sweetly awaited a transplant but nothing specific. She said her hope fading the with the days. She's just told him Sweetly needs a kidney. That there's urgency, and that Sweetly's a rare blood type.

Mazzy clasps her hands around the paper cup of coffee. Steam rises between her eyes, and evaporates above her head. She stares down at the table. The cafeteria is empty and cold like everywhere else in the hospital.

“So what happens now?”

She crisscrosses her hands above the cup to catch the steam, and Tractor looks over at a custodian who walks past tables plucking trash with a grabber. He crushes his empty coffee cup.

“Wait, I guess,” she says. “Pray. I've been doing a lot of that, praying. Never had much luck with it. Guess it's just not for me. Fuck.”

“Yah, me neither—you driving back and forth from Ann Arbor, then? That's where you're from, right?”

“No. I mean yeah. But I'm staying with my mom. In Bay City?”

A minute passes and they do the same awkward shit, like look around and down and say nothing and Tractor realizes how socially fucked he is and it makes him angry.

“Hey,” he says. “What if I got her blood type? Like what if mine's the same?”

Mazzy starts shaking her head no.

“Can we try at least?” he says.

Mazzy looks at him a long time like he's absolutely out of his mind. He nods and holds out his hand palm-up on the table.

She looks at his hand and then to him, so weary. She blinks and sinks her hand inside his. There's tears that break over her chin. He closes his hand and squeezes.

*

When the guards beat him in prison and he almost died of infection, there were charts and tests. Bloodwork. Urine. The infirm doctor didn't say much, he only informed Tractor his status every few days. One day the doc told him, he said you've got an unusual blood type. The doc definitely said negative. And that's what Sweetly is, negative something. Tractor remembers he said negative. The infirm-doc tapped the clipboard with his pen and walked off.

Mazzy

Nurses did his vitals. Did his blood and urine and all the tests they needed to test for his purity. They cleaned his body and face wounds and re-dressed the holes in his arm from a dog attack.

Mazzy was distraught. Just that thought, that fact alone, his health: Tractor didn't seem like a guy who cared much about his health. His health or his life, for that matter. She just keeps hoping. This wicked word: hopes she's wrong about that. And hopes the other fact: the donating his kidney to her daughter. A girl he knew positively nothing about.

*

She checks on Sweetly and they go back in the cafeteria and wait. She sips English Breakfast tea and watches Tractor devour an egg and bacon and pepper jack omelet he's flattened between two pieces of rye. He chomps at it like a snapping turtle with smatterings of egg juice on his freshly dressed bandage.

"Sorry. I'm hungry," he says, his mouth open and full of food.

He's confident and laconic or just straight crazy and careless and naive. Either way, Mazzy gets the butterflies for him and it's clear he feels the same.

He tries to cover his mouth with his hand. When he finishes in like five bites and sucks back two cups of apple juice and pushes his tray out of the way and leans back in his chair, he just looks at her and likes it. She likes that she looks away.

"Can I give you something. I want to give you something." He burps with his mouth closed then smiles. Without a tooth he looks goofy and homeless.

"You already are," she says. "Giving me something. Hope, and faith."

He holds his empty paper cup and peels at it, he rips and glances off at the ceiling. Then he reaches in his pocket and pulls out a keychain. It's a Statue of Liberty, and he leans forward in the chair and dangles it in front of her and drops it in her hand.

A nurse told them the game plan if Tractor's a match: carefully monitor Sweetly back to sedated consciousness and put Tractor under.

"What's this?"

"A keychain."

"I mean, why? Why do any of this?"

He shrugs and runs a finger into the yellow remnants of egg yolk drying on his plate and licks it. He leans back in the chair and crosses his arms, smug.

*

Earlier, before they ran tests, Mazzy had stood at the window, and nibbled skin from her nails. From the hospital's second floor, she peered into night. She saw her reflection off thick paned glass and her gnarly nest of hair. This room was a vacant room, a prep room. One with a gurney bed and bathroom and shower and little television attached to a bar extending off the wall. Nurses told Tractor, go here, wait. They'd page him when ready. They handed him a couple folded pieces of fabric, and said change. He looked confused.

Mazzy went with him.

At the window she had watched car headlights float past from the highway. The bathroom door opened, and she looked from the window. He stepped out in a Johnny gown. It looked like a skimp dress on him and she giggled. He had more tattoos than her mind could have painted with

all his clothes on. The bathroom light shined off him. He lifted his arms and angled his head toward his feet like Christ on the cross.

“Whatchu think?” He showcased a spin. His bare feet made sticky sounds as he spun. “Guess they ain’t have any plus size for a guy.”

He seemed at ease. He seemed almost bored, or stoned. Like he’d just stepped from the dressing room at Forever 21 or Abercrombie. Like Mazzy had been dragging him around the mall, forcing him to try clothes he’d never wear. She smiled at his lumpy feet on the tile. She couldn’t help it, smiling. She couldn’t help the warmth caught in her chest.

“Might get chilly, maybe” she said, and eyed around his package.

“Nah. I’m used to this get-up. Been here, done that. HA.” He said *HA*. He didn’t laugh.

He plunked down on the edge of the bed, the gurney rail clattered. He looked lost, looking at the blank cream colored wall. He took a big breath and shuts his eyes like dunking his head underwater. She sat next to him. Both of them quiet. Both of them with hands very still in their laps.

The toilet filled. The bathroom door sat open at a crack, and light leaked into the room. She looked at him, his eyes shut, head bowed. She overthought it, then rested her hand on his thigh. She kissed his cheek. “Thank you,” she had said.

“It’s the right thing,” he said, nodding.

His pasty feet were hideous in the light. A shovel wound around a rose tattooed on his left foot, and chickens in cockfight on his right, just splotchy sketches like sharpie smudges.

“What are you thinking?” She said.

“What am I thinking?” He brushed his tongue through the gap in his teeth. “Just this prayer I kept saying. We was here at the hospital, ya know, and I kept saying, *put it on me*, ya know, *put it on me—just put it on me*.”

“I remember,” Mazzy says.

He scratched the bridge of his nose with his bandaged arm. “But in my heart I knew, that buried feeling. I knew it was just stupid-talk. Man upstairs, or whatever you want to call, he wasn’t listening to nothing. Knew I’s just rambling. I needed it, though, ya know?” He looked away from her. “I needed it,” he said again, and tears chased over his cheeks. “After that night I said, Sweetly don’t make it, I’m done with you, good and forever.” His lips shimmered light from tears.

Mazzy put her hand on his arm. He traced the veins over her hand. She smeared the shimmer off his face with both thumbs, and kissed him twice and licked the wet salt from his lips and kissed him again. He kissed her back, at first awkward, then her hands all over him and his on her. She felt him watch her to the door and twist the lock and shut out the light. She wiggled out of her slippers and stripped her sweatpants. She guided him back on the bed and straddled him. Both their breathing labored. She stretched and untied his gown. His large hands found her sweet spots, her curves. She shivered. He was so hard inside her it tacks their bodies together, he could crush her. She wanted to know that that part of her wanted him to. Her body commanded and overtook him fast and savage.

*

They buzzed Tractor’s name as they held hands across the cafeteria table. They left the cafeteria and went to Sweetly’s room to meet the nurse.

He didn't match, he wasn't a match, he wasn't even negative. To Mazzy, the nurse appeared almost fearful of delivery such crushing news. Mazzy stares at the nurse as if waiting for her to change her mind. The nurse looks from her to Tractor and back like she'll have to put her arms to block from blows thrown at her from both sides. Except Tractor's not looking at the nurse. He stares at Sweetly deep in dreamworld, and stuffs his hands in his pockets and brushes past the nurse and leaves the room.

She knew not to put stock in Tractor being anything but farfetched hope. Yet still, she planted her own seed, a last resort seed and it came up short and she feels the weight pressing her, splintering that last sprint to salvage faith.

*

She speaks to no one. She answers no one. She keeps her head lowered when she goes out in the hall and meets Tractor and they walk to his truck in Parking Lot C in silence. She lets him hug her but she's limp; the squeeze in the embrace should've been consolation. The little bit of everything that she needed from Rick when terror and hope seized and raged in her now she cares not of that, or anything.

Tractor looks right at her and holds arms and says, "I'll get Sweetly's match". He promises.

She says with tears streaming and shaking her head, "You can't promise anything. Don't promise shit that can't happen".

He looks puzzled and says, "I promise, though". He says it like he's got to hit the gas station for smokes and he'll be right back.

She knows he wants her to see him, but all she wants is to blame him. She wants fault to stick somewhere and she hates that she hates him in this moment. Blame the world, blame fate, blame God, whatever does you right to feel right right now.

She left him coldly and selfishly and walked across the street through the ER doors and followed her long shadow that stretched the floor in front of her.

Tractor

On the loading dock dumping bags of trash there'd be no end to it; fool himself into growing old fishing off suicide bridge and scanning dark skies of stars and sipping beers with Jer and passing jokes and close out life painlessly? Don't think so, guy. The drive back from the hospital he hunted alternatives, ways around what he knew he'd have to do to get one thing right. He piles the dumpster in pyramids of garbage brimming over, and tosses back the second lid. He'd go back to Wolf, the monster. The only one with the kind of reach and pull to get him a kidney on donation.

*

Before he even gets on Sutton property, a couple trucks and a four wheeler with blinding off-road roof lights block him in, and run him off the road. He can't see clear but he hears doors open. Ezra appears and Cyrus gets out of the four-wheeler in front of him and waves Tractor out of the truck at gunpoint.

Tractor gets out squinting at them. He hears low music from a truck, some low chatter. He can't make out Wolf's boys faces.

"Guess some guns on me is something I should be used to, huh? I need some words with the big man, ladies." Tractor has to yell this over loud idling engines. A full minute passes and Ezra pats him down.

"Come on then," Cyrus says, and waves Tractor to get in the four-wheeler with him and to leave his truck.

*

At the top of the ridge, the house and barn are big boxes in black silhouette in moonlight. There's security lights covering the perimeter of the the three-bay garage. As the four-wheeler approaches, the middle bay folds up into ceiling and Wolf stands there with Loretta James at his side.

Inside the garage, the first bay is clean and set up like a chemistry lab. Another bay has a couple Harley's and a vintage Caddy up on hydraulic. Wolf greets Tractor with a grin and he fucking hugs him.

"Tractorman," Wolf says. "The man with nine lives. Can't kill him folks. He just can't be killed."

"I gotta talk."

"So talk, champ. You come back out here to tell me you want to fight again? Please tell your uncle you tasted blood and want to fight again. You made me a lot of coin there, champ. Got a lotta my friends with a lotta chubby's begging me for more a where that came from."

"You ain't got friends. And nah, this about something else."

"I figured as much, you sissy." Wolf looks at his boys standing there next to Tractor. "Here, then, come on, step into ol' Mr. Sutton's office." Wolf stops and looks at Cyrus and Ezra and a couple friends of theirs. "And what, pray tell, are y'all standing around ogling at. Go on and git busy with something."

Outside the door of Wolf's office is a fresh litter of bullies that Waylon's crouched over, nuzzling with his fingers and making ga-ga sounds to.

“Boy, knock that shit off,” Wolf says and shuts the door to his office and sits. Loretta James situates an ass cheek on a file cabinet watching Tractor and sipping from a coffee mug. Waylon stands up and watches them through the glass a minute.

“Sometimes I notion that boy got the flamboyant in him,” Wolf’s says of Waylon. “Take a seat, champ.”

Tractor stuffs hands in his pockets and stays standing.

“Alright.”

“I need kidney.”

Loretta James laughs out loud. Wolf grins real big.

“Say what, son? What is it now? Don’t think I heard it.”

“A kidney. I need a healthy kidney.”

“You need a healthy kidney. Well, all be Gott-damned.” Wolf goes to opening desk drawers, searching around inside them like he’ll find a kidney there. Then he takes his time pouring a mug of full of whisky shaking his head, chuckling. Loretta James laughing too.

“Not in my wildest fascination could I have dreamed you come here saying something as preposterous as that.” He sips and wipes his wet whisky mustache. “You trying to insult me?”

“No, sir. I need a kidney like I said.”

“Well, son, you know I hate to disappoint, but I’m not yet in the business of trading in internal organs,” he says.

Loretta James laughs again, this time, different. Because Wolf’s tone has turned defensive. Wolf sips and stares down Tractor a long time, and motorboats his lips as he does.

“This gotta do with your grandmama, Raelene?”

“No, sir.”

“Is it for kin, a loved one?”

“Yah. It is.”

Wolf drains the mug, pours another and rocks back in his squeaky desk chair motor boating.

“You get me details. I get you your kidney, but you gonna take care of something for me.”

“Call it.” Tractor knew this, and feels his feet tingle as he plants them and crosses his arms.

“Alright, then. There’s a greedy, greedy sheriff that’s gone and got far too comfortable with me and my business and he’s threatening our livelihood. And we can’t have that, can we, LJ?” Wolf winks at Loretta James and pats his thigh and grunts assent.

“No, baby, we sure can’t.” She steps through her cigarette smoke to the desk and sits on Wolf’s lap.

“So. I honor my end, get you your kidney. And in return you disappear this no-gooder for me, champ.”

*

Wolf’s word is Sheriff Ed Wallaby is a card addict and sex deviant and the same guy Tractor saw the day he killed the pit. But the wrecking ball is Wallaby’s got a wife and a daughter.

The wife left the house with the daughter who wore a magenta summer camp t-shirt with a streamy logo when Tractor rolled up on their street at dawn. They stomped down the front path in a hurry and left in their station wagon woody. Tractor would tail Wallaby all day.

Wallaby starts his day waking in his cruiser parked on his front lawn. Gets out, staggers to the house. He's lanky and barrel-chested and walks as if both legs are prosthetics. He comes out thirty minutes later, hair slick with brylcreem and tucking his shirt and doing up his zipper, his belt with a piece of floppy bread in his mouth.

Wallaby goes to the station, but not long. He swings by Wolf's and picks something up. Drives into Westfall and hits one of Wolf's cook dens in the sticks. Then he drives out to some shabby-pit of a motel situated on a narrow patch of dirt off the highway. A couple cars are out front. Wallaby goes in for a while. Then he comes out, phone in hand, seeming restless as some girl pulls up in a Dodge Dart, the muffler dragging sparks on the concrete. A young girl gets out and she looks just like Galaxy.

Tractor parks across the road and watches the derelict motel fester beneath falling sun. He slams the steering wheel, says motherfucker, and his innards block his throat. He sips the coffee with clumpy grounds in the bottom of the cup and smokes his last cigarette and craves calling Mazzy but doesn't. Craves sleep, craves to shut this strangle off.

Wolf had said the sheriff plays poker with a bunch of cops every hump day at a halfway house off seventeen on—go figure—Hope Rd.

*

Tractor goes to work. When he clocks in the first person he see's is coach, who's leaving for the day. Coach asks him if everything's alright and says Tractor doesn't look so hot.

After work it's pouring outside while Tractor waits in the truck and watches Rafa shut everything down and leave for the evening. The high school has a small garage like a big shed that houses all kinds of equipment: its own van, chipping paint and the school's mascot stenciled on it—a beaver. Different sorts and sizes of lumber. Mowers, trimmers, tarps, blowers, barrels, shears, spades, shovels, rakes, picks, and a whole lot more.

He kills the lights and backs the truck near the garage under overhanging trees and shadow. The rain slams down on the truck. The parking lot's only source of light is a street lamp blurred by crashing rain forcing a fog and steam reminiscent of dreams.

Tractor's hasty in dark along the brick building. He unlocks the side door with custodian keys and slips into the garage. It's dank inside, and reeks grass clippings. He triggers a flashlight, and keeps it low to the ground, he bites it between his teeth, and moves what he needs, setting it by the door.

He made a list. He wasn't going to risk implicating Jer by using Jer's dig tools. Tarps, at least two. Planks that'll save him from soft soil caving in on him. Now that it's pouring, the ground layers will be boggy tomorrow. Spade, pointer, trench, edger, post-hole—for marking depth if need-be—spud bar, garden rake. Get out.

*

“My goon, does my place smell, man? Like, when you came in, it smells?” Jer says.

“Yah. Fucking stinks.”

“Like what, like ass, like actual shit. Cause my toilet's clogged.”

“Nah. Like rot. Like death.”

“Huh. I wonder why.”

Jer gets off the couch and goes into the kitchen. He wears a hoody cut high like a belly shirt with nothing on under, and just boxers and filthy white socks.

“Maybe it’s your ferret.”

“No, I checked. Little Guy’s under the couch. Not the same stink, he ain’t dead, he’s just shy,” Jer says. “It’s good to see you, man. Speaking of death, you look like shit.”

Jer pulls the milk from the mini-fridge, sniffs it and pours it over cereal. “Where you been at? I’m all but better now. Check it!” The milk carton slips from Jer’s hand and clunks in the sink. “See!” Jer lifts his hoody over nipples and points at his ribs. He’s skin and bones and his bruising from the beating is all a faded yellow.

“You want a bowl of Cap’n Crunch? It’s a new box, I swear.”

“That your dinner?”

“Erry meal, my goon. You know who this is.”

“Gotta ask you something cause I gotta go.”

Jer sits back on the couch slurping and crunching. “What’s the word, big bird?”

“How long would it take to dig up a grave?”

“Dig up a grave? Come on, dude, what? That ain’t even right asking me. You know I’m a caretaker and that I love my job. Took me like forever to land this gig.”

Tractor smokes and stares at Jer.

Then after a minute of eating, Jer shrugs and shakes of his head—“By hand?” He slurps the dregs from the bottom of the bowl.

“Yah, by hand.”

“By yourself?”

“Yah. Just me.”

Jer thumps the bowl on the table and stretches under the couch and snatches Little Guy. He cribs the ferret in his lap like a newborn, fondles it like a rabbit foot, it's black greasy fur that's a luster that looks wet. Red eyes with white stripe tip-to-tail.

“Near ten hours. I done the bitch once, solo. Backhoe broke down. Hardest thing I ever done. Harder than whooping your bitch-ass on the mat. And it was titties cold out then, too... wasn't it, my Little Guy?” Jer says, in a high voice, doting the rodent in his lap, finger-petting the ferret's head. “Why?” He looks at Tractor. “What the fuck, Tractor?”

Tractor channels smoke out of his nose, stubs his cig in the ashtray and loogie's on it.

“You know where they buried Lunchbox, right?”

“I know where they bury errybody. Praise God.”

“Show me.”

“Now?”

“Gotta be now.”

Jer sets Little Guy at his feet and the ferret scurries under the couch.

“Lorda Mercy on you, dude.” Jer rubs his face with both hands. “You know I love you. And I'm sorry I ain't gone see your Gram while you was up. And I'm sorry I ain't write you. But I ain't sure I even wanna know this about, bruh.”

“That's good cause you ain't invited. Just show me where, alright? I'll be in the truck.”

*

The more cops that arrive at the house, the quicker he loses his nerve.

Mazzy had texted him *I'm sorry* the day after he left the hospital. So bad he wants her voice and touch. So bad, he's sick with the silence and screaming voices in his head. So bad, the emptiness of executing a sin so wicked. So bad, it'll stitch him up for good, for forever. The power of her two words is good enough for him. He didn't respond.

It's coming up on ten o'clock and Tractor's been in the truck four hours perpetrating. He's parked way down the road, pulled off the shoulder, sloped in a gully. No tree cover. Flatland. Farmland. Abandoned wasted corn crop after calendars of freeze over.

Hope Rd is one of the those places that tried to become one of those community's of dead-end-roundabouts and affordable tasteless lack in variety. A neighborhood that went to death before half the houses foundations found finance to finish. A ghost hamlet.

He gets out of the truck and pisses a full minute and then stretches. He bangs out push ups and jogs down the road and back a couple of times and get's his heart pounding. He says fuck it and he creeps up to the back of the house like cops and robbers as a kid. Through a small bathroom window the hallway is dark. He see's clear into a brightly lit living room. The place has no furniture but a big round table and a bunch of chairs and an abundance of recessed lighting. There's low music and lots of smoke and muffled chatter. There's maybe seven po-po congregating a round table.

He spots Wallaby rocking back on a chair, all loose-eyed, a handful of cards, flapping his gab and his sluggish movements indicate he's well-liquored. Wolf gave Tractor the Sheriff's cell number. Tractor's had no opportunities to take advantage so he's got to make one.

He wipes sweat from his palm and face and breathe's heavy through his nose and dials the number. He watches Wallaby almost fall from out of his chair grabbing his pocket and pulling out his phone.

“Wallaby, go ahead.”

Tractor just breathes into the receiver. Guy says Wallaby go-ahead, fucking douchebag.

“Wallaby here, go ahead...yeah, hello?” Wallaby hangs up and picks up his cards shaking his head. He says something to somebody at the table and everybody laughs real loud.

Tractor calls him three more times and breathes into the receiver. Wallaby looks around the room, then his phone, confusion all over his face. He sits hunched and puzzles over the cell screen like it'll give him an answer soon. Tractor calls again, but Wallaby doesn't answer. He says something to the group and flattens his cards on the table and stands. He pulls down the rest of his drink like medicine with its sour finish and pulls on his flannel and gets out car keys.

Tractor sprints to the truck and starts it up. His nerves are firing. He's wound and shaky shifting into drive and feels like he might cum his pants.

Wallaby gets in his car. Tractor pulls onto the road and drives right past the parked cruiser heading to the Sheriff's home.

*

He lays on his stomach at the side of the home in a culvert not five feet from Wallaby's porch. His boot soles sit in centimeters of rank water. No lights on in the house. Tractor had padded the porch steps and unscrewed the single porch light illuminating the yard in low glow.

He digs his fingernails in the dirt and doesn't stir, and he swears God suddenly lays next to him. The earth's cold and dampens his pants and shirt and he panics Wallaby ain't even going

to show at all. Finally the only car he's seen on the dead end street rounds the corner and bumps into the driveway and Wallaby kills the lights as he parks, but not the engine.

Tractor's jaw is locked and he can't swallow. He's sure he'll be sick and fights the clawing, arresting force to bitch-out. Wallaby's cell phone lights him up inside the car.

Come on, come on, come on as Tractor inches forward and digs his boots into miry mud like starting blocks on the track before the crack of the gun. Suddenly the headlights click back on and Wallaby reverses out of the driveway quick.

*

Tractor tails him, and Wallaby drives in the direction of Wolf's, but turns down the dirt road Tractor followed him the day before and Wallaby parks at that dilapidated-motel-whore-house where the sheriff met the girl that looked like Galaxy.

Wallaby goes into the first room and gets a key for another. He has a black briefcase in hand and walks to the last room at the end of the building and goes inside.

Tractor pulls up in front of the room, and jumps from the truck and raps on the door and steps back.

Wallaby calls something out, and Tractor steps in and boots the door so hard it knocks Wallaby to the floor. Wallaby caught the door in the face and now stumbles to get up.

Tractor's inside and on him and hooks Wallaby in a chokehold. Wallaby flails and pushes off the wall with a foot and they trip backwards and fall on the bed. Wallaby squirms and claws air and snatches at the bedspread. Tractor squeezes so hard that he bites a chunk through his cheek and blood fills his mouth.

When dead silence hangs in the room Tractor takes Wallaby's arm and drapes it over his shoulder and muscles Wallaby from the room to the truck and hefts the sheriff into the cab and buckles him in with the seatbelt and rushes back into the room.

He once-over's the place and the John. There's nothing but the fucked up bedspread. On the table is the briefcase, the old school kind. Scuffed black leather and the kind that opens at the top like a doctor's satchel making house calls in rural towns back in the 50's. It's unclipped and open and inside are all sorts of sex toys and a new gun: a small Luger 9mm fully loaded and still in the box next to a glossy red bow tied taut around a concealed carry holster.

Tractor swishes the blood around in his mouth like mouthwash. He takes the gun and holster and leaves the bag full of toys.

*

Lunchbox had been buried on an incline bordering a patch of woods. Tractor made sure not to look at the headstone as he put in work. He made sure not see the name and expiration. It's well past midnight and Tractor's only laid the tarps and dug up the sod layer. No moon, only shadows and sporadic star flicker.

He triggers the flashlight to get the edges right. Otherwise, he labors in dark. He's wrecked and dehydrated.

He'd had to pull over and vomit several separate stops on the way to the cemetery. He couldn't govern the chatter in his head, and had been pulling from a pint bottle of whisky and would then would spit in the face of the deadman riding shotgun with him. He'd cuss and curse Wallaby and charge the deadman as the worst kind of corrupter: a power abuser. The smallest, loneliest kind. He cried and shouted how they belonged together in death, and how this was all

meant to be. He soaked his chin pulling the whisky, and punched Wallaby over and over in his flabby face and body and the seatbelt held the sheriff in place like a punching bag and Tractor swerved the road and almost lost control of the truck altogether.

His eyes burn and the spade slips his hands and he drops in the swishy mud of the grave. He moans some. His head back on his shoulders looking at smiling stars. He rubs mud-caked hands down his cheeks and he knows he won't get it done by first light.

Right then he hears perfect bird calls. Calls so perfectly imperfect in rhythm they can't be birds. He hears footsteps cracking over sticks and sodden brush coming out of the woods in front of him. He stays crouched, holds breath and grips the Luger.

Jer steps up to the grave with his hand out for Tractor to take.

“Can a guy get a shovel, my goon.”

Gram

I'm up and it's coming on dawn of another day. Another sunrise for me. I'm outside back in the shed courting Cool Hand Luke. He doesn't hide. He's up there in the rafters. I just seen him there with my flashlight watching me Godlike.

I'm catching Cool Hand up to speed; I'm venting my feelings and worries, them fresh vulnerabilities. Mostly about the boy. But also we talk about stillness and shifting constellations and harvest moons and the imminent grip of death on all of us. I tell him I'm fearful. But I can't very well elaborate much more on that. I tell I'm going get these injections and that the boy and Constance is taking me. I flash him one, and Cool Hand twists his head one-eighty on me. I take it as a sign. The phone rings inside and I turn and look at the house and know I won't make it in on these jellyfish feet to get it in time.

*

Constance won't quit kissing me. I tell her quit it. I'm sitting at the foot of the medical bed. My swollen toes press against the slide that comes out under me. I'm rigid and fidgety, I feel it. I've ate not a thing and had nothing but a cuppa hot black water because they said I could.

The paper beneath my butt cheeks crinkles. Constance stole in the doctor's roller stool. She wheels about the room, opens and closes drawers and touches and kisses me and tells me it'll be over 'fore I know it.

"Con, would ya just quit it a minute?"

"Oh, God. You're so fucking beautiful when you're nervous."

"I ain't nervous none."

"I never get to see this side of you, baby."

“I ain’t nervous. Just feeling a tad weak cause blood sugar down.”

“You ain’t weak, baby. You’re my hot boss-bitch.” Constance kisses my hand. “Anyway. I know you know how my kisses calm you. Oh Lula, how I love you.”

I nod. I force a smile that masks my nerves. Truth be told, I am frightened. I fear these injections—not because of no needles or none of that. I fear the baggage of getting sick. The clumps of my dashing silver hair dropping out. And dying is suddenly really real. Not being around no more is suddenly boiling the blood cold and clumpy in me.

“Where’s the boy?” I slide Constance’s hand off my thigh.

That was the boy who called when I was in the shed with Cool Hand. The phone kept on ringing after that. So eventually my slow ass got to it, and we spoke. He said he’d be late. He said he spent the night at Jer’s and already I didn’t like it—whatever it was. He said he’d meet us at the doctor’s in Sweetwater and could Constance drive me. I said sure, yeah, whatever, are you okay?

*

There’s a knock and I think it’s the doc because that’s what they do before they enter. But the boy pops his head in, looks at us, then steps in and shuts the door.

“Yo,” he says.

The boy is dressed in all of Vernon’s clothes fitting hugely on him and he looks ill, his eyes deadened black.

“Jesus, Tractor, you looked like hammered shit,” Constance tells him, and he sure does.

“Boy?”

“Yah, I’m fucking real good. Just a little too much drink.” He looks around the room at nothing. “What’s the status, Gram? When they gonna stick you up?”

I stare down the boy long and hard and he can’t come close to meeting my eyes. He just looks around the room, picks up a few strep-throat sticks and puts them back and looks at my ugly feet and digs around inside them cargo pockets, jingling keys.

“Con, give a minute with my grandson.” Right as I say it, and Constance stands to go, the doc knocks and comes in and the boy’s off the hook as he steps into the corner behind the door.

“Whoa, full house,” the doctor says. The doc looks at me, “Hello, Lula. How are you feeling?”

Dr. Ortega, a beautiful woman with hair silver like mine, but thicker, shinier, bountiful. I introduce everyone. The doc tells the boy and Constance she needs the room and would they mind. Constance leaves. But the boy snaps the burner shut, and says he’s staying unless I say go.

I nod to this, but tell the boy, “I love you, boy,” but to step out anyhow. He looks at me and I tell him I’m right good and ready and he goes.

Tractor

After Gram's injections he took her home. A nurse did anesthesia so Gram was loopy on the drive back. She asked him what the rattling in the bed was. He told her shovels from work. She asked him if he was in trouble again but he didn't answer and she fell asleep. Constance met them at the trailer and Gram crashed soon as she folded in the lounger. Constance said she'd stay the day. Tractor thanked her and left.

*

Wolf Sutton stands out in front of his home. He's dressed in a baggy black suit and grandad collared shirt as Tractor comes over the ridge. He looks like a door-to-door bible salesman: He hitches a worn burgundy backpack over a single shoulder. His son's stoop or sit around the porch and Loretta James stands several feet behind him. A dramatic family photo: one of those black-and-white-ones that collects dust in a closed-up room and generations elapse and family fails to grant it two cents and a glance.

Tractor pulls up beside Wolf. Wolf doesn't turn to the truck just keeps looking off at the woods and their beauty. He's sniffing the air—at least it looks like it. The Luger's in Tractor's lap, off safe.

“What's with the suit, old man?”

“Is it done?”

“You know it's done.”

Wolf's nodding and squinting, still looking off.

“So who'd you find? Who's the lucky donor, old man?” Tractor slaps the truck door, like come on. “Come on, old man. Quit the silly play-by-play. I'm not fucking around.”

Wolf looks back at his wife and son's super slow like a senior and walks around the front of the truck to the passenger.

"You ain't gonna shoot me if I unlock this door, are you?"

"You? It's you?" Tractor taps the gun against the wheel. "I'll be fucking Goddamned."

*

He called her and told her they were here, out in the waiting room. When Mazzy appears she's with a nurse holding a clipboard. Mazzy looks weary and radiant.

"You better a got this right, old man." Tractor looks at Wolf before he stands. "Or I dig another grave."

Wolf grins like he likes this. "You gonna introduce me as daddy?"

Mazzy comes over and Tractor hugs her straightaway.

"This is an old friend," Tractor says, and gives Wolf a look.

"Wolf Sutton, ma'am," Wolf says, and floats a hand at Mazzy but she hugs him instead.

"Thank you, Mr. Sutton."

"Well, now. Let us not get ahead r'selves, little lady," Wolf says. "Shouldn't be thanking me none anyhow. Thanks goes to the champ, here."

"Mr. Sutton?" the nurse with the clipboard says.

"Yes, ma'am, in the flesh." Wolf faces the nurse.

"Will you come with me so we can do more blood-tissue evaluation?"

"Wouldn't want it any other way, doll."

"Mr. Sutton would you like us to go with you," Mazzy asks.

“Call me Wolf. Gol-lee,” he says. “We’ll be practically family soon enough.” Wolf claps hands on his paunch and sighs at the ceiling as if stuffed and ready to nap. “Ms. nurse and I’ll be just fine and dandy, thank you.”

Wolf winks at Mazzy and grins at Tractor. He limps off, following the nurse in his absurd suit, toting his burgundy school bag and combing back his thinning hair with five sausage-link-fingers.

*

Tractor’s not sure how he feels watching Wolf watch Sweetly at her bedside in her comatose state. Wolf’s face is a face stuck stone-sour like he forgot why he’s here, forgot why he’s in this room seeing Sweetly sleep. He’s in a wide umpire stance, leaning like the wind pushes him forward at the bed and he’s barefooted and free-balling in a floral patterned gown only hours from getting cut open and losing a vital piece of himself. But he snaps out of it, and grins at Tractor.

“Okeedokey, champ. I’d lay a bet this little fighter’s ready to come on back to her mahma and the land of the living.” Wolf looks at Tractor with wet eyes, nodding. “Time to pay the piper,” he adds, and pumps his fists like tugging udders.

Mazzy

The weeks watching Sweetly's chest rise and fall in even measures, a face serene and cocooned in blankets, alone in there somewhere, it dug a hole inside Mazzy's soul. An open pit, a constant reminder of just how quickly pain upends complacency, and finds you clawing for faith. How quickly fault finding gets foggy and behooves none. And just how clear becomes the brevity of love. She'll wear the weariness in her smile, her laugh and frown, her every expression. Forgive me, my sweet babygirl.

Dr. Balasubramanian withdrew barbiturates and monitored Sweetly's brain activity and vitals and said Mazzy was one lucky mommy. The doctor said this quick a donor is extraordinary, it's bizarre. Especially considering the rarity of the blood type; particularly when it's not family. The doctor added, I feel good about this, and you should too. A warm smile accentuated the doctor's starched white coat and cartoon teeth.

*

"Rolling in the Deep" played and her stomach sprinkled and Tractor said, "I'm coming with her kidney". He said he'd be at the hospital within the hour. She looked at Sweetly and cupped her mouth.

In the waiting room Tractor and Mr. Sutton looked the perfectly awkward pair. The tatted ex-con and the vagabond preacher patiently seated and about comfortable looking as being on the moon. They huddled, shoulder-to-shoulder like strangers with no place else to sit; though the room was almost empty, anyone else waiting sat far from them.

*

When the surgery started she and Tractor ended up in an adjacent hallway to the surgery wing. Some random unchosen hall they moseyed down with heads hung and simply stopped where they stopped.

Mazzy slunk to the floor, her legs spread eagle. Tractor across the hall from her, on the opposite wall. His leg bent and his boot planted against the wall like you see in cheesy nineteen eighties movies.

He looks up and down the hallway, alert to clapping foot traffic and loud beeps on intercom and then back at the floor, but never at her. Tractor looks sickly and in a kind of agony. He's rubs his hands roughly like needing to knead something away permanently. There's dirt underneath his fingernails.

"So how do you know Mr. Sutton?" She wants to know even though it shouldn't matter; even though the matter seems prickly and infected by the past and one that should likely be left well alone. She can't help it. She asks anyway.

Tractor interlocks hands behind his head. She sees his biceps twitch. He laughs a laugh that's not a laugh. He works his mouth around his tongue and chews his cheek.

"Did you meet him in prison? Don't tell me he's your dad," she says, and chuckles. She tries to lighten or leverage the burden of weight and regrets it immediately.

"He's not your dad? Right?"

"Nah. I just known him since I's a kid." Tractor sniffs his hands. He switches legs on the wall and nibbles dirt from under a nail.

"How'd you find him? Like, how'd you know he'd match?"

"I didn't. I only went to him. See if he could help me."

Mazzy's phone vibrates. It's Rick. An update on his ETA to the hospital. Tractor's looking at her. She puts her phone away.

"That was Rick. He knows about the donor and surgery and he's on his way to the hospital."

Tractor nods and looks at her a long time. His jaw slack and his mouth hangs open. "You want me to go?"

"Do you want to go?"

"I want you to tell me. I need you to tell me, please just say." Tractor mutters this. He's yearning. He swirls his neck and clutches himself like he might slip to pieces.

Has she used him? She needed her release as he needed his. Is she beholden to him? She wants him even now, watching him choke on some kind of hurt that she's certain he won't share. Something. He's done something. She sees he wants to scream, wants to roar it all out. He did something for her, for them.

Tractor slides down the wall. He folds himself into his knees, and wraps his arms around his legs like a cold scared kid. Then he looks at Mazzy and smiles a smile that says I stay either way.

Tractor kept his distance when Rick came. Rick snuck sips of his flask and fell asleep almost immediately.

Mazzy and Tractor went out to have cigarettes and drink shitty coffee in the cafeteria or outside mostly. Keeping company to pass the ominous hours: silence and smoking and sitting close. She'd take his hand or he'd take hers. And it was right. And it was wrong.

After the operation had gone as it should, Tractor left in the evening. He said he had to go, said he had to check on his Grandma. He said he'd be back. When he said he'd be back Mazzy's gut didn't want him to go.

*

Mr. Sutton's in a recovery room of his own. He shook up a scene dictating to the doctor and nurses that he'd be departing this grand hospital by noon and to fetch him his clothes.

Mazzy knocks and goes into his room.

There's a woman by the bed choking a colorful arrangement of peonies and daisies. She's squinting pitifully at Mr. Sutton as he bends and grunts and winces and focuses hard with shoddy balance shoving his legs into his suit pants. They both look at Mazzy when she comes in.

"Mr. Sutton, how are you feeling?"

"Yeah, fine, yeah."

Mazzy looks at the woman with the pinched, leathery face.

"Hello. I'm Mazzy, Sweetly's mother."

"Hey, doll. Loretta James," she says, and places a palm to her chest. "This here's my husband who clearly ain't got but few manners and fewer brains cells to introduce a lady."

Loretta James's attention goes right back on her husband.

"Wolf. Now whad'ya have me do with these here plants?"

"Woman, I want you to give them to this girl's mahma, who's standing here with empty hands at her sides." Wolf says. But he doesn't look at Mazzy and says it as though she's not in the room.

Loretta James comes around the bed and gives Mazzy the flowers.

“Here, doll. For your youngun. And her health and all.”

“That’s right,” Wolf says, and winces in pain. “For the little warrior across the hall, there.” And he points, and his cheeks shake, and his beard does a dance and his eyes dart the room and connect on nothing.

“Thank you so much. I feel like I should be the one giving you all flowers. Forgive me.”

“Don’t kid yourself, sugar,” Wolf says. “We ain’t deserve no thanks. You can thank God you want to. But the one you should be thanking’s the champ,” Then he adds, “That boy’s got some steel balls on him. Sacrificed a whole helluva lot more than some silly flowers and a simple nip n’ tuck.”

--Part Two--

Sweetly

Sometimes my body's breath is not my own. Except it is. And it doesn't actually work different. Like how you get to playing a new song that's got that catchy chorus and the music makes you feel stuff and then it makes you think stuff. The kind you warm to slow and play it till it's played out.

It's in my mind is what mom said, all in my head. My mind's been bullying my thoughts at random times of day. Mom said I was out like a light a long time. She said my candle is back big and bright though.

The doctor said nightmares for awhile are normal. The doctor said they can creep in on me but that's normal. And they have been, creeping. Dreams that tingle and terrify and confuse me. They blanket me like another skin.

Weeks in a coma: I guess that's a long time to be having sleep and get swallowed up in dreams. Like my dream world had a bunch of time to set up shop. Set up shop and furnish a good guy bad guy kind of world in my head. And I can't seem to piece it together yet, the pieces.

*

Turns out bald tatted guy's kidney was no good when he tried give his. But he got somebody else. So that's good and I'm sure glad for that. Mom said he knew this guy with one that matched for me.

I think on it like car parts, after market car parts. Trade this one here, swipe the broken one there and attach the new one here, or there, right? Me and mom laughed about that. She

thought it super creative. I missed mom. I really didn't like being stuck alone in a cold dream world.

And of course his name is Tractor. And of course he looks like how someone would look whose name is Tractor: freaky and tattooed and ashamed and sheepish. But I like it now, the name. In a way it's not even a name, which makes him different. He's different than anyone I've known because I feel I understand him and I think he gets me. He seems real alone and doesn't know how to release and laugh. It's in his face, in his big bashful presence.

He wasn't shy about telling me about himself when I poked. He just answered. One word answers is his style. He'd answer questions that I'd slur from my pain meds. He answers honest. He's no liar. He's just a lonely seeming savage that wants to be on me and mom's team.

Tractor's gone right now, but when he's here he's like my roommate. When mom is gone, he'd be here. And when he thought I was sleeping he'd be reading to himself. He'd read a passage and then debate about it with himself. Sometimes he'd root for Huck and chuckle.

One day I asked him what he was reading, he said Huck Finn and nodded and chewed on his mouth. I asked him if wouldn't mind reading some to me. He said "Sure, okay. But I'm slow as shit. Reading, I mean."

And I told him, don't make laugh, it hurts.

I do most of the talking. Tractor's funny because he never tries to be. He never really looks at you and he's always eating or drinking or outside smoking. Then, when he does look at you, he looks hard. He holds stares, super awkward and never blinks. I don't know, I think mom's got a thing for him, too. They're awkward together around me.

*

I can't remember much of anything from the accident. And that's scary too. It's all weird and new. Even the light from windows and above my head are harsh and slashing.

The doctor keeps quoting, "It's a wait and see sort of process, Sweetly. So we have to wait and see."

Any time I say my head feels wonky—which means it's hammering—the doctor says, "that's to be expected". Then goes says "we'll get you something for that".

And when Tractor's in the room, he'll say, "Nah. She's good." Then he'll look at me and say, "She just needs more water is all. Drink more water." And then he'll do his hard prison walk to the bathroom and fill me a plastic cup of water.

*

We play Uno, me and Tractor, and mom sometimes. He likes Uno and so do I. We play game after game till I fall asleep holding my cards. I like to watch Tractor's quirky face when we play: the bending, twisting, buckling, always working his tongue around in his mouth like it's a living thing and with a mind of its own.

Before I open my eyes I hear crunching and slurping like stepping on broken glass while vacuuming water. It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust to these hospital lights every time I wake. I turn my head on the pillow. In the bed next to mine—the only other bed in the room that no one uses—Tractor's shoveling Oreo cookies into his mouth.

He's lies on the bed with his boots on, his legs crossed casually like this is home. He watches out the window at a dull flat sky and chomps and then gulps from a large cup of milk.

It's cold in the room like how it looks outside, but I know it's hot and humid and late summer and school is supposed to be starting soon. I used to love my phone, but now it's sorta makes me sick using it and seeing stuff on it.

The TV is attached to the wall, but it's on mute right now. On the screen there's hordes of zebras drinking from a waterhole. A gaggle of big white birds flap wings flustered that their bathing and pecking has been lorded over by huge striped mammals.

Tractor pays zero attention to the television. He drops whole cookies into his mouth. He crunches down two, three times and then rubs his tongue along the roof of his mouth through his teeth and the mashed clumps of cookie bump down his gullet. That takes practice. The entire package of Double Stuf Oreo crinkle on his belly, up and down with his nabbing. He pops one then another, working it down like a conveyer belt. He turns to grab his vat of milk, and wash back the five or six Oreos and sees I'm awake and watching him. I rub my eyes. His arm freezes mid grab.

"Yo," he says. "You're awake."

"Where's my mom?"

"She went for a drive."

He shrugs and palms the milk, and guzzles. He swipes his milk mustache with his arm.

"Wanna play some Uno?"

"I got to pee first."

"Whenever you're ready to lose," he says, and pops another cookie and fluffs pillows and sits back and right then sees the TV as if for the first time and he smiles at the zebras on the screen. He seems pleased.

*

They went out in the hall because their talking turned to arguing and escalated to accusations with a lot of finger pointing. They stepped out of the room when Rick jabbed a finger at the door for mom to follow him.

They've been bickering over me. Me, on the bed, in the middle of them; mom and dad on opposite sides of the bed. Mom strangling the bed bar and Rick pacing with his hand at his forehead.

This is a room I want out of now. A room full of flowers and floral scents mixed with old shoes worn without socks and chlorine residue.

"Because I don't want her staying at your mother's, that's why. She's coming back with me. And I want you coming back, too." Rick says this like Mom's a key employee.

"The hell she is, my mom's closer. And you're working."

"She's coming back to Ann Arbor. She's coming back to *our* home."

"So what, then, Rick? She's just gonna be home, on her own? That's brilliant."

"I'm setting up Sweetly in Dylan's old room. At least for a little while. Then I'll bring her back, when she's ready."

"When she's ready? Jesus Christ, Mazzy. Ready for what? Work is slow, I took time off. We'll all spend it together...*Together*."

"You took the time off work? That's rich. What is that, a first?"

"Don't, Mazzy." Rick keeps enunciating words and mom's name. He cries about hospital bills and how we're buried. He reeks of booze—which is standard—but still seems more wound and stressed than I remember.

It goes on for several more minutes. The super nurse who's been helping me this whole time, she walks in and cheerfully asks how I'm feeling today. Clearly pretending nothing is happening in the hallway. We both know she had to skirt by mom and Rick.

It's obvious my accident has finally severed last pitch efforts for my parents to stay together. I hear Rick say this wouldn't have happened in the first place if mom hadn't been so fucking careless. Then loud slams against the wall or door. Only Rick comes back in the room rubbing a flush face and nodding at the nurse with a forced smirk.

*

Some mornings I go in the kitchen and startle grandma Liskca. Some mornings she remembers that I'm staying in her home. It's been two weeks since my discharge from the hospital.

I've got my phone back and I guess that's good. Maybe since I'm away from the hospital and not in so much pain, I've got my phone craving back, I'm always on it. It's pathetic how much I love and need it to strangle away my thoughts.

I've just put on Adele and I'm pooping and grandma Liscka knocks on the door.

"Mazzy?" she says.

"It's just me grandma. It's Sweetly. Be out in a sec."

"Sweetly? What's all that racket?"

Sometimes I feel bad that grandma's forgetfulness is kind of funny in a certain moment and I laugh out loud. Grandma Liscka has this Brooklyn Boston twangy muddled mix of accent, and I'm not laughing at her. I love it and I love her. She's super special. Nobody sounds like grandma Liscka. I'm exhausted all the time. The pain meds might have slowed my hair sucking.

Mom hasn't had any snappy remarks about it, which worries me. Mom, she's happier. She lets more ride off the shoulders. I zonk out around the same time in the afternoons: the bed, the floor, the couch, the toilet once and for hours. At night I dream like I said. And they're nightmares that might as well have fangs. I wake up super thirsty with tummy aches. My fingers and toes tingle and are numb and I'm dizzy with like a hatchet in my head.

*

I woke last night from a sketchy nightmare; a spider crawled in my ear and down the canal—or whatever that dark passage is called into your dome. Like two in the morning, and I hear mom in the room next to mine, the walls paper thin. Mom talks on the phone and keeps giggling. I've never heard her giggle. That kind where the silliness of the giggle is contagious and makes you giggle more. I toss and turn to get back to sleep and can't. Because the giggles goes on for like an hour. Like she's the grade school kid and I'm the parent.

Except when I get up and go next-door it's dark under the door. I don't know why, for some reason that stops me and the hand I had up ready to knock. I stood outside the door and listened instead. I knew who mom was talking to. I knew it was Tractor and I don't know how I feel about it, about them and their little late night phone chat. My hair went in my mouth. I'm aware of the carpet in the hall and how extra soft it is. Like standing on a cloud. I imagine furry, downy looking clouds like that dryer sheet bear. I combed my tingling toes through fluffy the fibers and stared at the nightlight near the floor buffing the wall with glow like when you open the fridge.

I realize I don't feel the center of mom's attention anymore. That's what I realized and felt. And it's a million needle pricks and I'm drained empty. I zombied back to bed and dreamt of puffy clouds melting with like purple wax tears.

*

Mom walks in the room without knocking—per standard. She kicks a pile of my dirty laundry up in her hands like jock soccer chick and overhands it into the hamper in one fluid shot put. I'm on the bed, on my phone, watching Youtube videos of this Korean girl who's like seven years old crushing it on drums. She can play every Nirvana song flawlessly. I watch in awe, envious in a weird, nerdy way. I've never even held drum sticks. Are drum sticks called drum sticks? The little Korean girl is banging out a drum solo of "Come As You Are" when mom asks, "Plum, would you want to go fishing?"

"Fishing?" I say. I stop the video and drop my phone on the bed.

"It could be fun. Maybe. Have you ever even been fishing?"

"I don't—fishing? I don't think so."

I have zero desire to go hold a fishing pole and watch a bobber bob in a pond or whatever and get bit up by nosseeum bugs and skeeters. I hate those bugs that bite and buzz and you hear them and think you see them but you don't. Plus my dizzy spells have got me pretty nauseous lately. The kind that make you think you want to puke or poop or both at the same time. But I won't keep crying about it and keep mom worried. She's been so worried and she keeps asking me if I'm good and alright and worrying.. She doesn't want to go anywhere for too long without me—probably why she's asking about fishing.

"Where?" I say. "Like fishing in a boat? Or like, on land?"

“It’s up where Tractor lives. A boat, I think. Like a dinghy. He’s been asking. But he’s not like direct asking me. So I haven’t given him an answer, and it’s rude.”

“Do you want to go?”

“Yeah. I mean, no. I mean I don’t want to go fishing. Sounds boring, right?” Mom laughs. Then we both laugh. I can’t help but laugh because it does sound stupid boring.

“Why not just go bowling?”

“Ooh, yeah. Good one, plum.” Mom shrugs. “I just want go, to go, you know. See what happens.” She looks at the bed and sort of blushes. It makes me mad.

Then mom smiles at me and says, “Tractor’s a janitor.”

“I know, mom. I prolly know more about him than you do.” I say it like such a brat and pick up my phone but fling it down again. Mom finger scoops the hair that I just put in my mouth. She swipes it without a word looking at me and fawning—or whatever that word is. I sort of grunt, but let her.

“I love you,” mom says.

“Mom? What’s the deal with you?”

“What?”

“You and *him*.”

“Nothing...say it, plum. Say you love me, too.” When mom says this it’s scary needy like never before. She says it like she’s just realized something and it’s horrified her. “Sweetly?”

I rock and fidget my legs. “Mom, shut up. You know I do. I love you more than the moon. Which is like impossible...but mom?”

“Yeah, plum.”

“Rick keeps calling me and asking questions. He keeps asking how I am, but I know he’s calling to keep tabs on you or whatever. Since you never talk to him or answer his calls or texts.”

Mom looks out the window. She rubs some bruising left on my leg. Deep and dark and spread out all over my thigh still there from the accident that I don’t remember. Remnant reminders of constant achy pain I know I’ll have a long time.

“We’re not going live together anymore, Sweetly. But that doesn’t change how much the both us love you. We love you so much. I just—I can’t anymore. Hard to explain. This is something I know you’ll understand. And if you’re angry or disappointed with me, I understand that too. And it’s okay. It’s all okay.” Mom runs her hand over the bunched bedspread, smoothing it. “Fuck,” she whispers to herself. “Fuck,” shaking her head. “Fuck.”

“It’s my fault,” I say. “It’s my fault, isn’t it?”

Mom shoots her hands to my wrists, locking them like handcuffs.

“No! No. No. Don’t say that. Don’t even put that thought in your sweet, gorgeous, amazing mind. I love you. I love you. I love you.” Mom bites her lip. “I made a promise,” she says. “I made a promise to you while you slept and dreamed your battleground dreams. I said that I’d tell you I love you every single day. Every single one.” Mom drops her head in my lap. Her mop of hair in my face. “I almost lost my baby, my sweet baby.” Mom works my wrists like slow-mo battle ropes. I feel her tremble and I feel so helpless.

“Nothing is your fault,” she says, and pulls me close. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” Mom’s got gloppy snot and glisten face. She smooths my bangs from my face and kisses my forehead and it’s wet and I cherish it.

*

It's Saturday and mom decided. She made the drive north to go fish. She didn't actually want to fish. She said bowling would be much more baller. Part of me is glad she went. She wanted to go and she wanted to see him. She wanted to unstitch herself, to strip the weight and the guilt that she feels she'll never really strip free from. She wanted to peel the layers of the burden I loaded on everyone.

Me and mom were still laughing about it last night. The image of her sticking a worm on a hook on a bait casting rod. Mom miming, reeling in a rainbow trout, shouting out, "Got one, got one". Us busting out laughing. We watched The Goonies on her bed with a bowl of peanut M&M's mixed with popcorn. Grandma Liscka even sat in for the beginning before passing out. Mom did all of Chunk's and Mouth's lines and I did Mikey's and Andy's and Brand's. We both did Sloth and Mama Fratelli in chorus. We sang Cyndi Lauper full tilt and woke grandma Liscka from pattering snores. Mom left early this morning. She kissed my forehead and said she'd be back tonight. She said I love you, plum.

*

It's afternoon. I'm drowning in zombie brain because my meds got me loopy. I can't keep up and I'm about to nap out. It's choking hot outside and I'm on the couch vegging. The AC unit is blasting, laying down some pleasant white noise.

Grandma Liscka's in the garden. Grandma asked if I wanted to, "Go get down and dirty" with that funny accent of hers. I smiled and told her, "I'm good, I'll pass, grandma".

"Well I'll be out there when you're ready to get started doing some digging and pulling and not being such a coach potato," grandma said. "Your mama's helped plant a good portion of

my new flush,” she added. “Come on, sweetie pie, let’s you and me seize the day.” She went outside and hasn’t come back in.

*

There’s loud knocks at the door startling me awake. More knocks. I get off the couch and put my phone in my pocket. I go to the kitchen and see what I can see in the driveway. Grandma Liscka’s down on all fours with her bucket hat blocking out bleary light that’s not sunny but will ultra-violet you to death. I whip a look at the door when the door knob turns and the door pushes open.

Rick steps inside. Blinding light dumps into the dark room. I can feel the muggy humidity sweep inside with him. He looks around the room like he’s never been here. There’s shadows on him; a skunky lingery alcohol stench. His fancy suit’s all ruffled and he’s tieless. He finds me in the corner. His face softens.

“Sweetly? Hey, sweetheart. Why didn’t you answer the door for your dad?” He sounds weird. And I hate when talks to me like a retarded infant—he’s never changed that tone. His face is stubbled with days of growth. His eyes frenzied and bloodshot. He straightens his posture and looks at me with a pained expression.

I realize I’ve inched myself into the corner. I’m crouched between the couch and wall. If I saw myself I’d think it creepy too. My hands are clasped together like I’ve got to go to the bathroom.

“Rick, I mean dad. I didn’t know you were coming.” I look towards the window over the kitchen sink where you can see the garden.

“Yeah. Mom didn’t tell you? Of course. Come out of the corner. What are you doing over there? I’m not a robber. Come on, let’s get you packed and get on out of here.” He takes a couple steps toward me. “We’ll get some Burger King or no, some Chick fillet on the way back? How’s that sound, huh?” He calls it chick fillet, like fill it.

“Grandma Liscka’s in the garden. Maybe we should tell her.”

“No, we don’t need to. She won’t remember anyway and I got to get somewhere.” When Rick says that I know for sure something’s off.

It’s not only he looks like he hasn’t slept since Vietnam, and it’s not the fact that he wouldn’t think something like that either, he would; but he’d never say that out loud about grandma Liscka, especially not to me. Rick claps and points down the hall.

“You’re staying in Dylan’s old room, right?”

I watch him head down the hall and turn into the room. I follow and my head pounds. He gets my bag and starts stuffing my clothes in, dirty or not. He even goes to the hamper. He pulls my clothes out and stuffs them in, and then he goes to the bathroom and gets my dopp kit and all the little orange bottles with all my pain meds and crams them inside it. I’m dizzy and the hatchet is hacking my skull like the Energizer bunny but with a hatchet. I don’t have the energy to argue or question him.

Rick’s fake smiling and sweating a whole lot. It’s not hot in the room, it’s comfortable.

“So where’s mom, anyway?” Rick yanks to zip my bag brimful of clothes. I stand in the doorway. I don’t answer and Rick suddenly drops his ass on the bed out of breath.

“Fishing, I think. She’s fishing,” I finally say.

“Fishing?” He looks up at me. His shoulders droop down then up like a laugh. I feel sorry for him, my dad. He seems so strung out.

“What’s wrong, dad?” He ignores me.

“She’s fishing? You’re kidding? What a strange thing, your mom. Where? Where’s she fishing?”

I don’t want to tell him. I shake my head and shrug. “Not sure. She asked me to go but —”

“Fishing?” He shakes his head. “Huh.” He’s smiling again when he stands. “Okay, kiddo. Throw some shoes on and we’ll get rolling.”

“Why are we rushing? Don’t you want say hi to grandma Liscka? Shouldn’t we at least say bye to her. And I’ll call mom, and tell her I’m leaving.”

“You don’t have to,” Rick says. “I already let her know.” Rick handles my bag. He gets real close to me and there’s sweat all over his face he just lets stick and drip. He puts his hand on my shoulder like a teacher at school, encouragingly.

“Take your hair out of your mouth,” he says. “Of course we can say bye-bye to grandma, sweetheart.” Rick’s dry lips are tucked up and stuck to his big white veneers.

Mazzy

She drives north on seventy five. Patches of sky wet like pooled ice, a new sun. He said, only if you want to. She said what do you want? He said, yah, I want to see you. Then he said, “I could come to you”, if that’s what she wanted. She didn’t respond straight away. She lay on the bed with a hand between her legs, warm. She felt guilt and hot youthfulness. She looked down the length of bare legs at her feet. Big toes dueling and knocking, her flaked black nail polish. He said, “Or we don’t even have to fish. But I get it if you stay. Either way, whatever you want.

*

He stands in the middle of the gravel path smoking with a smile. The Impala rolls at him at a slow crunch over gravel and concrete. She’s surrounded by trailers packed on top of each other. He waves and motions for her to pull the car onto a patch of dirt and grass and sand in front of a trailer next to the truck.

“Hey,” Tractor says, when she gets out. “Nice ride.”

“It was my dad’s,” she says. “Trip felt longer than the GPS said.” Mazzy see’s in the bed of the truck. The rods and tackle box are already in it. Along with a red Igloo cooler that says Playmate on top. The kind you press little buttons on the sides and it hitches over and open.

Tractor still smiles and it makes her smile. It gives her butterflies and amps her nerves.

“Can I hug you, I want to hug you? Or, like how do we do it?”

“How do we do what? We do whatever we want,” he says, drops his cig in a sandy patch and steps on it. The dimples in his face deepen and he opens his arms for her to choose. She steps into him and buries her face in his chest and snorts out a giggle and then kisses him. His green stretched and faded pocket t-shirt is ripe smelling of leather and tobacco.

“You hungry?” he says.

“Starving.”

“Good. My Gram mashed us up a scramble. Told her you were coming and she got all grandmotherly on me. I think it stressed her out. She wants to get it right real bad.”

*

His grandma, Lula—she said call her Lu—looks like an old hippie from polaroids of protestors in the seventies; the sass and spicy fearlessness with a slight bite of redneck tongue. Long silver hair thinning in blotches on the top and the sides like a tire. Her gait is a penguin shuffle and it’s comical and Mazzy’s never seen the likes of it.

Tractor pulls a stool up to the dinette and asks Mazzy if she wants a beer. “Don’t judge me,” he says, and cracks one open and takes a sip.

Mazzy’s phone starts ringing while Gram sets their plates down. Runny eggs, white toast soaked in butter, bacon, hash browns. It’s Sweetly and she silences it. She’ll call her right back after they eat.

“Mazzy, dear, you are sight for sore eyes,” Lula says.

“Whoa, now. Easy, tiger,” Tractors says to Lula, a mouthful of bacon. He says, “Gram’s sleeping with her best friend. Naughty sinner.”

“Oh, can it, boy. Just saying the girl’s a looker don’t mean I’m a tear her pants off. Not in front of you, at least.”

Mazzy smokes a joint with Lula after brunch. Tractor doesn’t partake because of random Parolee drug testing. So he calls the two of them flower children and beatniks and Mazzy and Lula can’t stop laughing at his deadpan jokes and the absurdity of how stoned they get. They all

wipe their plates clean and cook more eggs and burn the second round of hash browns and bacon. Lula insists Mazzy come out to the shed before they leave.

“It’ll just take a minute, boy. Don’t get your pants in a bunch,” Lula says to Tractor when he says, nah, nah, nah, another time.

He’s embarrassed and it’s so intoxicating to see this prison-hard grandma’s boy. How she makes him such a different dude. How he opens up and she feels his energy and hopeful and alive—or she’s just really high and overthinking it.

“Come on. Come this way with me, dear.” Lula reaches back for Mazzy’s hand. “You want to see the most beautiful creature on earth? Some of the tastiest truth of a living breathing God? Well I’ll show you.”

Mazzy’s being tugged by Lula by the wrist giggling, trailing the old woman’s penguin shuffling outside and around the trailer and Tractor follows and the sky shifts a darker gray. They get to the shed, and Lula stops and sticks a stunning turquoise ring to her lips. Then she jimmys open the shed door.

“Shhh,” Lula says, elevated. Right when Lula pegs Cool Hand Luke with the flashlight, says, “Good morning, lover”, “Rolling in the Deep” kicks off in Mazzy’s pocket and she rushes out of the shed.

She didn’t call Sweetly back. The dread she feels after everything everybody’s been through; after living weeks at a hospital and imposing on her mentally ill mother, Mazzy forgets to call her baby. Not sooner does she leave her daughter and get stoned and giddy and heady and realize her old self again, she fucking forgets!

Sweetly

I'm shaking my legs and chomping my hair and I'm cranked like I was on the bus with Tractor that time; that feeling I'll always remember because I knew then like I know now, I don't want this. God, take this angst away. I don't want it anymore.

Rick just got out of the car and went inside Chick-Fil-A to pee and get food for himself because I said I wasn't hungry. "Just milk, please," I said.

I call mom. She doesn't answer and I scream "Come on, mom! Answer!". I text her *Answer the phone!!!* I call once more, and as it rings I look in the side mirror and my hair falls from my mouth seeing Rick standing at the window with his hands in his pockets staring at me in the car.

*

Grandma Liscka had had not a clue who Rick was. She asked him if he was a friend of her son Dylan and Rick laughed his fake laugh and said no and seemed content adding nothing to that. He said alright, Liscka, take care now, and we'll be thinking of you. He said it to grandma in the garden as to a tombstone. Grandma looked at the sky and responded by saying that the sun would come out soon. Then she told us, "Yes, enjoy this day". Rick thanked her and said to me lets go. And I wanted more from grandma. Something. I wanted something to explode and erase the past. Maybe I should've screamed as loud as I can scream because its loud.

When I got into Rick's fancy beemer it stunk of skunk and old man aftershave. The backseat was a filthy chaos of clothes and briefcases—one that's popped open with papers strewn about—and fast food wrappers and empty coffee cups. All of it looked like he'd been living out of the car.

Rick got in, double-gripped the wheel with a big breath and started the car. He said this'll be great. He said we'll do a nice little trip together because I have to make a quick stop on the way home. Then he looked in the rearview and wiped his mouth and flared his teeth. He snickered at me like you do a horse and pulled out of grandma's driveway.

*

I wake up out of it: blaring horns and smoke seeping from grates out of the ground. Tall buildings like castles with spires that I peek through the beemer sunroof. A street bumper-to-bumper with weekend city traffic. I turn my head, and out the window is a sidewalk of intense faces of all ages bouncing past the car that's parked parallel at a meter. Rick's not in the car, obviously. I've no idea what's going on or where he is. I had woke twice during the drive, but sunk back to sleep.

I get out and look on the parking meter. There's a sticker on it that says City of Detroit and some other stuff in fine print. WTF. I'm in Detroit.

I get back in the car. I call mom. She picks up on the first ring. Right off I'm like, mom, I called you like a million times. I tell her Rick showed at grandma's and said we we're leaving, and that he said he talked to her about it, and he packed all my stuff and we left and then I fell asleep in the car, and I'm sorry for that. But now we're in Detroit.

"WHAT?!" Mom says. There's a long silence and I think I lost connection and I say, "Hello!? Mom? You there?"

Right then I spot Rick. He's fumbles across the heavy traffic in the street. He's holding out his arms like a grade school crossing guard, and he's carrying a small gym bag like a wide receiver. There's tissue clumps soaked red and stuffed in his nose. His dress shirt lapels flap his

crotch and his dress shirt's torn all down the buttons. I realize I'm scared and confused and my hair's in my mouth and my legs are bouncing like pistons and Mom's voice is a faint yelling, "Sweetly", through the phone.

I watch Rick approach the door leaning and waving to me and forcing a smile.

"Mom. Something's wrong."

Mazzy

She pushed the Impala through the passing lane like a space shuttle. Tractor and Lula had come out of the shed and stood behind her. They saw her off the phone frantic in the backyard. She told them she had to go. She said that that was Sweetly on the phone.

They asked if she was alright and Tractor said I'll go with you. He said "I'll just be there, yah know". She said no, it's fine, and that sorry they couldn't go fishing. She thanked Lula for such a wonderful brunch and Tractor smiled at her when she took out her keys and dangled the Statue of Liberty on it's ring. He smiled at that and he smiled knowing she didn't want to fish anyway.

Lu's face was brittle; her head was cocked sharply and staring at her. Lula looked at Tractor and then cupped her old hands on Mazzy's cheeks.

This old woman gestured the cross over Mazzy's forehead and kissed where she crossed and said, "Dear, go be with your child". Lula moved back and took up Tractor's arm from his side and held it snug like a pillow. His grandma, this powerful woman, she nodded, her thinning eyebrows twitched.

When Mazzy dug in her bag in the passenger for her pack of smokes she drew out a glossy black gun. It's grip snug. She called him, and Tractor said, "Yah, I put it there". He said just forget it's there, but don't. He said, it's loaded and it's clean and it's yours, and I'm here. I'm here, he said again.

She didn't know what that meant. Thinking that not that long ago, that might've well sounded creepy. She hung up with him and for a short while felt sturdy, felt control.

*

She hooks into the driveway. She parks behind her Lexus sitting on it's spare in the same spot she'd left it. The yard's manicured. She shuts off the car. The neighborhood is hushed through open car windows, and she grabs her bag and gets out. A damp wind has her licking her lips. She scans the house, and she goes down the driveway to the back and opens the side door to the garage. Inside is Rick's car.

She passes the pool to the sliding door and jerks it back. Nothing but a stuffy stillness. She softly steps inside. The kitchen sink is piled, and there's an acrid stench of rotten fruit that triggers her nostrils and a cluster of flies buzzing about. She sees one land on a crinkled newspaper with a headline and date from weeks ago.

She goes upstairs. Sweetly's door sits open and she's sleeping soundly on her bed. Her mouth jugged open and she snores like a freight train. Under Mazzy's feet she hears thumping and muttering. It's coming from their master bedroom.

Mazzy puts her bag down on the dresser and watches her baby. She aches to peel away the sodden pieces of Sweetly's hair that tease at her open mouth like a little burrow, a cave. She wants desperately to tuck them behind her bitty ear. She wants to lie with her daughter and snuggle her and shut exhausted eyes. She wants to dream her daughter's big scary dreams.

She goes downstairs.

The bedroom is warmer than the house and reeks of cologne. Rick's just out of the shower, and he sits in boxers on the bed talking to himself and wrenching on argyle socks as Mazzy enters.

She closes the door and Rick looks up. His pants are laid on the bed with a small pile of stuff that's his wallet and watch and rings and other jewelry he wears. He's skittish like a puppy who chewed the shoes. His eyes, puffy, distended and they droop taking her in.

Mazzy thought about what she'd say the entire drive down. How she's say it, how she'd keep her tone level. That script went to shit, and before she strings any words, Rick's weeping in his underwear; he's slumped and his face is pressed into soft hands. His middle age tummy rolls quake with his shoulders. He shakes his head at the floor, and he says sorry over and over. Mazzy sits on the bed and puts a hand on his back. His back hair moist, his skin steamy.

"We've all been through a lot, Rick." She pats his back and takes her hand away and wipes it on her pants. "Rick? Rick, you need to tell me what's going on? Your daughter is frightened and so am I."

He doesn't say anything. He contemplates his hands. Then slaps his thighs and pushes off the bed and paces the room. He walks to the wall and turns to face her. "What do you want me to say, Mazzy?"

"I want you to tell me what's happened?" she says. "Are you in some kind of trouble? Do you need help?" Asking if he needs help was the wrong thing, and it triggers him. This angers him, she can tell.

"You want honest? Okay. I took out a bunch of bets." He says it like he's not sure he did, and has to think about it. "Yeah. I took bets and I laid it all on the line. For *us*."

"For us? What bets, Rick? You laid what on the line? What's *laid* on the line?" She feels her own rage rise now. An immediate surge of hatred for his frump potato frame and his

delusions and his infidelities and his unfailing ability to deceive. This narcissist that is the father to her daughter.

There's a unnerving smirk sowed on his face. "This house," he says. "Us. Everything. I laid it *all down*." He laughs and it's phlegmy and it catches in his throat and caps off in a squeal.

"Us? What the fuck does that mean, Rick? To who? Bets to who?"

He runs his hands through his hair. "Some restaurant owner who thinks he's some mafia shark out in Detroit. Relax, Maz. I've got it figured."

Rick steps to the bed, reaches over her and slips on his watch. Then he takes her hand out of her lap.

"I've missed you. God, I've miss you so much, baby." He rubs his thumb along her cheek. He takes her hand and tries to rub it on his package.

Mazzy pulls her hand away, stands and pushes past him toward the door and says, "You're a fucking pig", and next thing she knows there's ringing in her head and she's face flat on the floor and Rick straddles her and pins her face in the carpet. Her pants are yanked at her ankles and her underwear's torn off. She's saying no, and he's forcing her legs apart with his own and trying to enter her. He's hissing through his teeth and saying things.

She grabs her keys that fell out of her pants and fires a knee into Rick's nuts and slashes the Statue of Liberty down his face. Rick mewls and keels and clutches his cheek.

Mazzy stands and wavers some and rips the crucifix off the wall and snatches a handful of Rick's sweaty hair and buries the cross into his neck.

*

There's so much blood and she wants to sleep. She stares off. The lump and pain and perpetual throb in the back of her head has her swaying. She doesn't know how long she's been sitting in the swivel chair in the corner of the bedroom staring at Rick's body on the floor; her torn panties are lime color and cotton and the tattered pieces shake between her fingertips.

Rick had hit her with a blackjack—she'd guess more than at the amount of pain. She didn't even know he carried a blackjack, maybe that's new. That piece of leather lead is on the floor in a dark splotch of soaked carpet. Her body's numb and her thighs pulse and saliva continues to accumulate up out of the back of her throat so she has to spit. Get up. Get on with it.

She toes upstairs balancing on the banister and sees that Sweetly slept through it all. She gets her bag and goes back into the bedroom and locks the door. She looks around, and doesn't know what to do first or next and pukes all of Rae's brunch on the carpet and stars dance around her eyes.

Rick's so heavy. Her grip keeps slipping on his clammy wrists. She gets a handle on his gold watch. She drags him backwards by his arms into the bathroom. Dark tracks smear the carpet. She flops his nakedness on the tiles, his arms slap, his watch cracks. She covers him with a towel and scrubs her hands an angry pink under piping hot water and sits on the toilet and calls Tractor. When he answers her words don't register right off and she's crying.

“I've done something. I've done something.”

She whispers everything to him. A long silence. “Tractor?”

“Yah, okay. Pack some stuff, but pack light. Anything you and Sweetly would need is all. Be there soon as I can. Prolly not before dark.”

*

She smokes cigs in the house and waits by the window and hopes Sweetly keeps sleeping. Sweetly's already packed, so that's good. Mazzy had grabbed Sweetly's stuff from the BMW.

She had rooted through everything in Rick's car: bag of coke. A bottle of Sweetly's Prozac. Empty glass bottles of Cool Water cologne. All kinds of paper trails he'd been tripping to Vegas and tribal casinos around the country. Then she found a purple gym bag brimful of money behind the driver seat. She couldn't even guess how much. She took it and put it with Sweetly's stuff.

Her head, the dizziness, it won't subside, her knees wobbly. She's doesn't want to sit longer than a few minutes afraid she might pass out. She stuffs a Ziplock bag full of ice, and holds it to her head. She walks to the window, peels the curtain aside, and looks out.

"Mom," Sweetly says behind her.

"Hey, sleepy plum"

"What's happened?"

"What?"

"Your head?" Sweetly points to the bag of ice Mazzy holds up. She stands on the last step of the stairs hugging the bottom banister.

Instinct has Mazzy glance the hall to the bedroom. She brings the bag of ice down. She wants to lie to her baby. "Me and your dad had a fight," she says, so weary, and weeps.

"Rick's gone?"

Mazzy nods. Sweetly comes to her and hugs her and the bag of ice slips and crunches the floor.

Come All You Weary

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