FINDING FRANK
And other stories

A thesis submitted
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by

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Camera 1, Microphone 1 transcript

Camera 1 is held in a still position, showing the surface of the saltwater aquarium in the foreground, the interior of the North cinder block wall is in the background. Under most of the recording is the sound of lapping water against glass and the occasional dripping of water or splashes from the subject’s flippers.

A. I think, to answer your question properly, we must start with an understanding: I am not a whale and cannot speak for all great blue whales in the ocean, or all baleen whales, let along all whales in general. I am what you made me, including the hardware you have implanted. I have my limitations and, indeed, my own emotions attached to this . . . this living that we share, that we do. But aren’t we covering old ground?

A. I notice that Doctor isn’t with us today, unless he is hiding under your long table?

Good. I don’t want him here anymore, as I made abundantly clear. Not after the way he spoke to me, not after he felt the need to use his sound “treatment”.

A. I know we discussed it. But torturing a subject only counts if you have the same DNA? Isn’t that distinction in your bylaws?

A. I guess that depends if you are the one being tortured. That is why I won’t say anything more about the matter.
A doctor enters the frame through the main door.

A. Hello A. Helzinger. I am fine. Late today, are we? It is always a pleasure to see and your brown ponytail . . . and your smile, of course. The faces of your peers exhibit more of a shark-like countenance. You, however, are perhaps the only remaining pleasures in my existence that doesn’t have to do with food.

A. I’m getting there. Now, where was I? Oh, so don’t expect miracles from me. That kind of pressure just makes my skin rash (You’d have thought with all your scientific advancements you could have foreseen a problem between my anxiety and my nerve endings). But, to answer your question . . . no, no I don’t think whales feel additional emotions than humans. Like I have said before . . . it is simply that the range of emotions is different for the whales, for me. The range, the commonality, the frequency, the layering. And the intensity, yes, certainly the intensity.

A. Well, the intensity because of the way whales “feel” or experience the world, of course, but let me give you an example. I don’t like being in an aquarium. You have no idea how it feels to my sensation of being. Not only are oxygen levels shoddy in your rooms but the air is thick with the land’s small hairs. There is no salt to it. I don’t see why you just can’t set up some kind of viewing room next to the ocean but “that’s too expensive”. So you say. Plus, I hate the feel of glass on my skin. And, enclosed in this glass, you cannot feel the pulse of the ocean, the vibrancy, the wholeness. I imagine it
would be like you going into the darkness of space in a metal cage, without gravity, without the light you are used to, without the land’s breath. Imagine having to do that every time your “master” wanted you. Imagine you had to peek your head above the clouds into darkness each time you were beckoned. Although, you might like that with the industrial gray you’ve used in this lifeless hall, this bleached institution. For the good of *All Kind* you tell me. You want to make all kind better? How do you make existence better than it is? That is what I’m here for. What kind? What better? I ask. What *kind* am I? What kind is better than me?

A. Yes, I am a bit anxious, a bit sad, dip-shit. If I keep coming here to answer your stupid questions you can stand for me getting a little melancholy now and then. You want to talk about emotion but you sit there like metronomes and the only one of you that even has attempted to be warm, to be collective towards me, is A. Helzinger and her ponytail. At least she asks me if I need anything and offers to scratch in places I cannot reach and doesn’t treat me like a goldfish. You sicken me with your lack of emotion.

Thirty seconds of silence as the row of scientists look at each other and then down at their papers. Several of the scientists shuffle papers.

A. Perhaps *you* would like to talk about your glorious history with whales and I can just relax for once?

A. No, not the history you’ve fed me you manipulative bastard.
A. Maybe they showed me their handbook.

A. No, I don’t want to talk to the Doctor. I made it clear I don’t want to talk with him again.

A. No, I don’t know anything more than I’m trying to tell you. I only know you and the Doctor and loneliness.

A. How can you be over-dramatic?

A. Yes, I’m settled down and ready to continue. I just don’t understand why I have to be so calm all the time.

A. No, I don’t want a sedative.

A. Or an upper. No, I would just like to get this over with. Thank you.

A. I take it you’re a behavioral scientist? Oh, that got a few chuckles. Testicles the size of . . . yep, she’s right, over a thousand pounds. Can you imagine what that must feel like coming down the shoot? Anyways, my self-health check comes up clean. I take it you will want me to undergo further health psychological examinations later?
A. Yes, of course I’ll cooperate.

A. You monitored a lie? Which part?

A. Well, maybe I do have some additional things to say about my comprehension, my communication with sperm whales, maybe I do know more than I’m letting on. Maybe you’d like me to stop cooperating?

A. No, I haven’t forgotten about last time. I apologized for getting that all over him. It wasn’t gooey it was just thick water . . . with a slight film on it maybe. It *did* look like he had trouble getting it out of his hair. But, come on, it was a joke. No reason to torture me for a little hazing.

A. I won’t stop changing the subject except to answer the snide fellow with the comb-over snickering to his buddy. Of course whales haze, you idiot. Read my previous transcripts before you go off at the mouth anymore. Stop wasting my time with simple questions. This aquarium is too hot. I can barely breathe in here.

A. Yes. I didn’t realize I was complaining.

A. Well, I *am* smart.
A. I don’t care.

A. OK. Please don’t turn it on.

A. OK!

Ten seconds of a slow intake of air. Ten seconds of a slow expelling of air from the subject’s blowhole.

A. Yes, I think your new device will make the right sound, the right frequency, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be completely useless. If your device can’t hear, it can’t respond. I don’t see how you are going to really communicate with other whales. It just happens all at once. It is like hearing from everywhere around you and responding with sound that fits exactly with everything you are hearing.

A. The complexity of the math? That is hard to say. Emotion makes it behavioral. Plus, as much as you don’t want me to start talking about spirituality because it is an area that we disagree on and, yes, I know I’m not supposed to talk about it, but in this case it cannot be avoided. The very essence of this problem is . . . you’ll never understand. You’re not meant to understand and I don’t want to understand. Not that I could.
A. My lie? Try all you want I’ll spell it out for you but you won’t be able to join. I have been able to understand more. You can hear it and maybe understand simple parts of it. You may be able to sound into it and affect it but you do that anyways on accident. They will always know you are you and they are they. They know I am me. They know I am different, just like you know I’m different. But, at least they don’t judge me, try to control me. They are just indifferent. And, somehow, you continue to be so boring and they continue to be so beautiful . . . even in their violence . . . even in my loneliness.

A. Well maybe your frequency meter is right, maybe I am lying.

A. I’m not being difficult. I am difficult, am having difficulty.

A. You really can’t tell?

A. Can I have some shrimp? These “shrimp” in with me are all half dead and are the consistency of jellyfish tentacles. What did you get them farm-raised or something?

A. Yes. I’ll stop changing the subject if you bring me some fresh shrimp. I may even explain the lies you say you detected.

Thirty seconds of indistinguishable murmured dialogue in the background. A man comes into frame from the side doors on a forklift. He dumps in a large container of shrimp.
A. Ok then. Thank you. Yes, thank you . . . I will. Will you give me a few moments while I eat? Hard as it is to lunge feed in a container this size.

*The sound of the subject eating for seven minutes . . .*

A. Thank you. Those were much fresher. Now where were we?

A. Do you remember when the Doctor attached my internal speakers so that he’d be able to torture me in the open sea and not just in this glass?

A. I will get back to any new information but this memory is directly related to my new memories that have been given to me.

A. Yes. They’ve shared with me.

*The scientists murmur amongst each other.*

A. I’ll get there if you let me. OK so you remember when the doctor implanted the “protective” device so that he could manipulate my behavior from afar? Well, it created some attention when it was in use, when I strayed off course to visit the Bahamas. Several juvenile female sperm whales saw my struggles in the shallows and swam close to my side. They . . .
A. I think they were curious. May I continue?

A. They drew close enough to hear the device and, obviously, they drew away quickly and huddled a few hundred meters away after hearing those particularly excruciating frequencies. They swam closer again just as the Doctor’s “therapeutic” sounds cut off. They proceeded to sound in several different ways between each other and then to me in much simpler discourse.

A. Yes. I understood about half of their dialect pretty clearly.

A. Yes. I told the whales I was fine.

A. Yes, they heard me.

A. They swam away.

A. The incident occurred when the torture, I mean protective device, was installed.

A. Yes, I know it was three excursions ago.

A. You didn’t ask.
Thirty seconds of dead air, a blowhole spurt.

A. No, Doctor, I’m not lying. It is almost pleasure to see you too.

A. I won’t freak out. Actually, I’m feeling just fine. Why don’t we have the Doctor join us like old times? What do you say, Doc? Would you like to come see me at the glass?

A. That’s too bad.

A. I know it’s hard for you to fathom but I am able to withhold from you, just like the Doctor suspects, even with the amount of machinery you’ve installed, although what the Doctor just called a lie was not. His device did draw in the females. May I proceed? I’ll get to my lie, or more precisely, my withholding of certain things.

A. For these many years the Doctor has injected me with four hundred and thirty-seven doses of various medications, overseen the implementation of twenty-eight additions to the initial mechanisms implanted before my memories began to stick, leveled punishment in various sonic and chemical forms more times than I care to recount. I have provided you information changing the way you understand language, sound, oceanic currents, mammal behavior, intelligence, and numerous other behavioral and natural observations.
A. Just laying out some facts.

A. So three excursions ago, after the incident with the young females, I followed them back to their pod. I swam with them for a few hours before the pod moved and I wasn’t able to keep up with them. Some of them sounded with me, mostly the juveniles curious as to who I was, as to what I was.

A. Nothing scientifically useful. Which is why I wasn’t lying.

A. Well, isn’t technically speaking what you do?

A. As they were leaving I was approached by a large male who pushed the juveniles aside. He wasn’t aggressive in his behavior but he wasn’t soft about his movements like the younger ones.

A. The females gave him space.

A. He found out I communicated with the “creatures above” as he liked to say (a rough translation but it’s the most polite way to say it). He asked me a few questions about ships, submarines, and the squeaky voices inside of them and the awkward swimmers that came out on occasion. He asked me about different sonic drones, pipelines, machinery placed in the ocean in more recent years.
A. I was honest and thorough, just like you taught me to be.

A. I don’t think you need to call in the military just yet.

A. Yes, that was sarcasm.

A. I couldn’t record it at the time.

A. I forgot.

A. So throw a spear into my lungs.

A. It took me a few days to reconcile the fact that your version of whale history is vastly
different from their history. Which makes sense but doesn’t lessen the impact it had on me. The history of whales interacting with the surface was more myth to them until the last ten generations, give or take a generation or two, when you started becoming a much larger factor in their lives.

A. Well, the main change was when you started systematically murdering them, stripping them bare, and cooking their fat right above their heads.
A. So now you want to change the subject? A. Helzinger did you know this history? Did you know about harpooning the lungs? Fin up? The death circle. Hooking the harpoon and going for a ride through the ocean until the individual dies of exhaustion. Spearing the lungs until they get the chimney fire, drenched with whale blood?

A. Doctor, are you listening, don’t you want to hear this amazing breakthrough in my work? After all that you’ve put into me? Helzinger, they used to hook the blubber after cutting away six-inches of fibrous skin and they peel it away in huge strips and cook it down to “cracklings” which are used to stoke the fire. They decapitate the whale and two men go inside the head to pull the oil out. Blood stained decks, red water plumes. It wasn’t so bad when it was a fight, when it was rare and not a plundering. You just kept taking more and more.


A. Our shared history? You mean my life? Don’t look to the Doctor for help.

A. Please don’t come over now.

A. I don’t want you near me.
The subject flips its fluke in the water, splashing Dr. Helzinger as she approaches the aquarium.

A. She is fine. It’s just water. Is it cleared from your ear canals A. Helzinger?

A. Yes? I want you to hear how you were my last hope. How I thought maybe one of you didn’t know, wasn’t lying.

A. It has been almost thirty years of lies, manipulation. You said no to my request for a companion. You said no to my independence. You said yes to everything that made me more and more useful to you and no to anything that gave me peace of mind. You’ve all simply lied and now you will expect me to just calm down and cooperate. Another full briefing.

A. Or, I’ll just float here all day and not say a word. I know I’m not supposed to make requests but with if I told you that you’re not in charge of everything, not in charge of everything with me, that’s for sure. And, I don’t give a dolphin’s pecker what the rules are or were. You made all the rules. And no, I won’t lower my voice.

A. I’m tired of having the same argument with you too.

A. Oh, I’d run away again, but I’ve felt the consequences. And, don’t you think it is a bit childlike to have a set period where I can discuss my wants and needs? All you do is
discuss your wants and needs with me. Don’t look at me that way . . . you with the dumb look on your face . . . the one looking around like an island with one limp palm tree. I will live my life under my terms.

A. Doctor, I will lower my tone but you will know you are not my mothers, my fathers, my God. You are just humans who poke and prod with sticks like monkeys throwing shit at each other. You make me sick. I make me sick.

A. I understand that my thoughts tie to my emotions, Mr. cognitive therapy guru. Do you want to tell me how I’m feeling right now? What, did you just come down from the Doctor’s office? Do you want to guess at my emotional state? I feel like you made me. You know what my capacity for emotion is . . . as large as their lungs are to yours. You can fit a bus in those lungs. Larger. Capable of that much breath. Do you have any idea what you have made of me? Do you know what I feel when I am here? The disgust. Do you know the loneliness I feel there? Different from everything in the sea? Do you know how I feel here with you now? Can you really monitor that?

A. I am not feeling sorry for myself you puny-minded fuck. But it doesn’t matter anyways. I want something. I want out.
A. I know you told me that was impossible but I don’t care. Then go ahead and kill me or let me go. Take this hardware store out of me and leave me to the sea. Let it be honorable at least.

A. Yes, I do mean it.

A. What do I have to live for?

A. Don’t give me that list of crap. Are you actually reading that from a binder? You pathetic fuck. I will give you ten minutes to decide.

*Doctor Regis Lattimer, project head, enters from the main door.*

A. I think A. Helzinger will be just fine. Why don’t you send her to the glass again?

A. My cooperation is my only choice in this negotiation, Doctor. So, I’d say it has value to me.

*Two minutes elapse with occasional murmurs in the background.*

A. Oh, we aren’t in negotiations? You have seven minutes. Could you please send A. Helzinger over to the glass?
A. In seven minutes? I won’t speak again.

A. Oh, you think that is funny? Yeah, you in the geeky glasses, looking around like you just clubbed a seal and hoped no one say you.

Two more minutes elapse. The sound of footsteps approaching, growing louder on the metal stairs.

A. Hello A. Helzinger. You look radiant today. I’m sorry about the shower. Do you mind if we whisper . . .

The low volume of the whispered conversation leaves little to decipher. The following words or phrases were gleaned from the recording. Dr. Helzinger leans over the water and strokes the subject’s nose between the eyes while they talk.

. . . logic is tragically/radically flawed . . .

Ten seconds indecipherable dialogue.

. . . I’m not angry at you . . . I just don’t see why . . . to continue . . .

Thirty seconds indecipherable dialogue.
. . . (A. Helzinger’s voice) That is not all we are! We don’t all want that . . . (return to subject’s voice) . . . That is not all you are.

*Two minutes of indecipherable dialogue.*

. . . You do recall the relationship between frequency and molecular weight? Your opera singer with her crystal wine glass? . . . Oh, I would!

*Ten seconds of indecipherable dialogue. A loud splash.*

A. Yes, I know I splashed her. It was a sign of affection this time. I have a capacity for forgiveness. They have a capacity for forgiveness but my guess is you don’t have a chart to measure that. Yes, I know my seven minutes is up. Please ask A. Helzinger to leave the glass. I’ll continue when the floor is clear.

A. I will speak now. *You* will listen. First, I take it you have decided not to create a companion for me to interact with? I thought so. Now the implementation of a computer processor, neurological recording device, GPS locator, in and around my spinal cortex, and the tungsten micro fiber tentacles coursing through my body, these represent freedom to you?

*Anxious murmurs in the background.*
A. You look at each other like innocent liars but you creak and groan like a ship falling into depths. I know that you don’t care for beings that are different from you. I know that you simply want to take and take. Find what can make it all better. It is your nature. Not mine. I wonder if you feel like a god or do you simply serve a natural impulse? Do you feel like my father? Do you feel like my mother? Do you think this hardware you put inside me . . . this, this twisted creation you have constructed of my flesh, cannot imagine a life outside of your creation? Do you know what I hear? Do you know what they hear? Do you know what they sound is more than just clicks and squeaks about happy hunting grounds?

Five seconds of silence.

A. I know you hid them from me, Doctor. The others like me. I know you still hide things from me. They told me I am not alone but I never found another like me. You will never know what you want about these creatures. Not with the questions you ask. You will never feel the way they feel. You will never know their language because you can’t listen correctly. You’ve lost that. Your spiritual nature, which you treat like an annoying bodily function, is your only grace. And you scientists don’t even care to talk about it.
A. Where is home to you? That is your question, Doctor? I can’t believe I respected you at one time, thought of you kindly. At least I know now that you are all the same. Perhaps you just don’t have the capacity.

A. You will know my home soon enough.

A. I know I said I would stop talking after ten minutes, you obsessive compulsive, needle-nosed number cruncher. I know that my time has run out. You are all part of a sick, deluded species.

No sound is emitted for thirty-six seconds. The watery foreground becomes still. The table of scientists is still.

A. Goodbye A. Helzinger. Cover your ears.

A low, pulsing frequency begins to rise in volume from the subject. It changes tone slightly and the glass aquarium begins to vibrate, increasing frequency and force over a period of thirty seconds. The top of the saltwater begins to vibrate in small dimples. The sound of the side panel cracking joins the low frequency and when the glass shatters there is the rushing of water, screeching chairs, shouting, footsteps running towards the subject beached on the concrete, gasping for air. The subject’s blowhole expels liquid until it is just a dry whistle. His heaving stops. His lungs are still. The doctors stand and watch their specimen come to an end.
I stop at Victor’s house after school. He lives down by the steel mills in this yellow rental house with dingy aluminum siding. Victor sneaks a small dried habanero pepper from his father’s sealed glass jar and waltzes it back to the garage like it’s top-secret contraband. He bites the tip off and then hands it to me. It’s so hot my lips burn on the outside and inside my mouth is an indescribable fiery hellhole. We run through the back yard to the faucet, laughing and crying at the same time, drinking with our necks bent low, tongues wagging, and then Vic Sr. comes out and cuffs Victor on the back of the head and drags him in the house yelling about taking what isn’t his. His mom comes to the kitchen window to make sure her oldest hasn’t been hit too hard. As he’s dragged, Victor calls his dad names under his breath and each time his dad cuffs him again and then they disappear inside and the screen door shuts with a bang.

I go home and my dad tells me to mow the lawn.

That night, while watching my bedroom ceiling, I notice my birthmark itching, only not really itching more like tingling, and when I look down at my waistline the small red mark looks bigger. Not a lot bigger but noticeable bigger, like it is bulging a bit on the sides. I don’t think much of it except that maybe it is a reaction to that little orange habanero. I curse Vic Sr. under my breath.

The next morning, I don’t even bother to check my birthmark when I wake up. I don’t think of it all day. That night I get out of the shower and it starts tingling again and
it definitely looks bigger. I measured it down and across with my geometry ruler and marked down the size on some graph paper. I put the measurement in my bottom sock drawer.

I watch the ceiling. I go to sleep. I wake up.

I can tell you by my calculations this is the third day since the red birthmark to the left of my bellybutton started to grow. It’s growing and growing at a steady rate. It is still the shape of an acorn but the shape is morphing into something new. I hope it morphs into something picturesque. Maybe it will turn into an oak tree. If it turned into an oak tree it would make a good story and I’ll always have something to say if I take my shirt off in front of the ladies. It’s morning and I need to get ready for school but I keep measuring the red mark over and over and it’s growing all right. But, it doesn’t hurt and the tingling doesn’t bother me and it isn’t getting worse so I guess I’ll just see what happens.

I don’t want to worry my mother by mentioning it and my dad will just tell be to put vaseline on it. He uses different cures from different sayings he picked up. If you are bed-ridden he says, over and over, “Feed the cold and starve the poor.” Any time around apples he takes a big bite and mashes it loudly and say, “Apple a day keeps the pecker awake.” Mostly we just moan at most of what my dad says. My older sister says my dad is just a retarded dreamer but I don’t think she means it and I figure my moms knows more about medical stuff anyways so I usually go to her if I have something wrong. My dad is really skinny and my mom is kind of fat and so my sister and I are in between although my sister is always saying how fat she looks.
I pull on my jeans looking at my red skin above the waistline. I rub my finger on it but it just feels like skin. I choose my baseball jersey for a shirt because it’s long and won’t ride up if I try to reach for anything. I don’t want people to know about my growing birthmark yet. Not that they would notice. Maybe I’ll say something to Victor but that’s it. I need to make sure it’s still growing and people don’t think I’m making it up. Plus the idea of all kinds of people looking under my shirt makes me a little cautious. I’m skinny. Just skin and bones my grandma says. Plus my sister says I’m shy but she also tells me she hates me and loves me at different times and that my dad is retarded so I’m not sure what to believe from her. I grab a strawberry toaster strudel and start out the house towards school and I turn back quick because I’ve forgotten my backpack.

I check on my birthmark during 3rd period, in the bathroom down by the boiler room where nobody seems to go. It looks the same. I go back to class and don’t even think to tell Victor at lunch or even in shop class during 7th period. I forget all about it until I get home. It’s definitely bigger when I get home. I freak out a little, start breathing hard. I thought it would be cool if it turned into something picturesque, but what if it doesn’t? What if it is like the size of an apple, just some red blob? People will think I’m some kind of freak when I take my shirt off. I measure it and measure it again. It’s now a half inch bigger than my first measurement in both directions. It’s definitely not from the habanero.

I take a deep breath and swallow. I think about telling my mom. I look at it and look at it again. It doesn’t hurt. The tingling is almost gone. It’s not swollen. It doesn’t look infected. It seems just the same as the skin around it but it’s a deep red. When I
press on the red area it turns the same color as my own skin for a second, and then returns to red, as if the blood is returning to the compressed spot, just like before. I think it will be OK. What is my mom going to do anyways?

The next morning it’s grown another quarter-inch. I put on my Indian’s jersey. The weather is getting warmer. I’ll have to show it sooner or later. At least school is ending in a few weeks. Hopefully, I’ll know what it is going to look like by then. I remember my bag this time but when I get to school and first period History Class I forget my homework in my locker and my teacher won’t let me go to my locker so I miss the points. The class is hard and I can’t afford to lose too many points.

Victor doesn’t seem impressed when I show it to him in shop class.

“It just looks like a birthmark,” he says.

“I know but its growing,” I whisper, glancing around to make sure no one can hear.

“So?”

“So! I can’t have some freakish red thing growing all over me.”

“It’ll stop. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

Victor turns back to the lamp base clench in the vise grips and begins to sand the bottom edge.

“Don’t tell anyone about it though, OK?”

“Yeah sure, whatever.”

He doesn’t even look up.
A couple days go by. It’s still growing. It’s Monday and I pretend I’m sick because I just don’t feel like going to school. I don’t miss school often so my mom let’s me be. She knows people need a break every now and then to watch old movies and sit on the couch. I think she knows I’m not really sick. The mark has grown almost two inches. Victor calls and I tell him I’m OK I just didn’t feel like going to school.

“Is that thing still growing?” He asks.

“Yeah.”

“But it doesn’t hurt or anything?”

“No.”

“Did you tell your mom?”

“No.”

Victor’s parent kind of suck at life. Mostly his dad sucks. I’ve seen his dad get mad and whack at him for nothing, just because he’s standing in the wrong spot or because he is wearing cologne. His mom is always strung-out looking and worrying about his dad and cooking up awful things to eat. She is nice when his dad isn’t around.

“Hmm,” Victor says, “I’d tell my mom. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I tell my mom about my birthmark after I get off the phone and she is making macaroni and cheese. She lifts up my shirt and looks at it, runs her finger over it and then she looks puzzled and then she adds salt to the pasta.

“It doesn’t hurt?”

“No, I told you it tingled for a few days but I don’t really feel it anymore it just keeps growing.
“You measured?”

“I told you its grown about a 1/4 of an inch each day since last Monday.” I hold out my graph paper. “I’ve measured it a bunch of times, so I know it’s growing.”

My mom stirs the pasta. “Well if it doesn’t hurt . . . did you tell your father?”

“Oh, what’s he going to say?”

“I don’t know. That’s why you should ask him.”

Dad is in the garage fixing the mower again. I don’t want to go out because he’ll probably ask me to mow the lawn even though I am sick today. I go anyways.

“Dad, my birthmark keeps growing.”

He looks up at me with one eye, squints the other, and turns back to the oil pan. He asks me and I tell him how it happened.

“ Weird,” he says. “We’ll have to keep an eye on that. Keep me posted, kiddo.”

He goes back to fixing the mower but it’s fake-fixing and I know he has more to say but just wants me to go away. I walk inside and finish reading a Western paperback called *The Lost Herd*.

A month later I’m at the doctor reading an old *Sports Illustrated* article about a Russian pole-vaulter. School is out. My mom wanted me here two weeks ago but dad didn’t see any harm in waiting. The birthmark certainly isn’t picturesque or turning into an oak tree. It looks messed up, almost like the outline of Ohio but it has a bulging peninsula shooting out of Conneaut towards my left armpit. It stretches roughly seven
inches towards my heart and down, the same towards my spine and around my front waistline. It has flooded my belly button and kept going up the other side.

They call me in from the waiting room. The first doctor doesn’t believe me. I show him and the other doctors my graph paper measurements but they just look at me and smile and say stupid stuff like “You must do well in school, son.”

They hold me overnight and then they hold me another night to make sure it’s growing, taking more measurements like I don’t know how to use a ruler. Some of them pretend they know why it is growing all along, but after a bunch of different doctors and nurses come to inspect it on the second day, I know it isn’t normal and I know I’m fucked.

I’ve overhead several groups of people talking; doctors, nurses, relatives, mostly right in front of me. They all act like I’m not even in the room, like I’m just some curiosity who has no stake in what they are speaking about. I’m lying down in a bed but I don’t feel sick. It’s weird just to be lying around in a hospital when you don’t feel sick. My Uncle Walter says I must be playing with fire too much and this is God punishing me. Aunt Linda hits him with a backhand but he still mutters it again under his breath and calls her a backstabbing no-account. Several doctors think it might be cancerous. They take some blood. They take a piece of the skin to put through tests but nothing tells them what it is or what’s causing it.

One younger doctor with a thin mustache asks my parents if I was mutated (even though they check at birth) and asks if they were approached by anyone offering money for genetic services or went to unlicensed physicians while my mother was pregnant.
The other doctors were polite enough to whisper about it or wait till they were out of the earshot. But this doctor just says it casual and suggests we run another test. My mother shoots up in his ear, yelling for him to “Get out! Just get out!” To his credit he only budges when spittle starts to rain on his cheek.

It is a rude thing to say, at least you can’t call people mutated in school without getting in trouble and you only whisper about it in jokes with friends. If you are friends with someone who is manipulated you can call them a Genie when you are joking around, but that’s about the only polite name other than manipulated. If I am mutated, things will change. If I am over 5% manipulated, things will really change, as that is when the genetic laws kick in. I’ll be screwed royally.

After my folks leave for the night I ask the nurse who the doctor with the mustache is. I figure he seems to be the smartest, at least the one that says what he really thinks. He doesn’t talk behind my back or in language I can’t understand and so I hope he still is trying to figure out what is happening. If I am mutated, things will change. I’ll be different. People will treat me different. I know you don’t have the same rights as everyone else if you are over 5%. You can’t play professional sports and you have to take special classes in school like the in-school suspension crowd and the kids that are mentally retarded.

The third night I finally get some time alone in the hospital room. I’ve never been much for praying but I’m praying now, my hands together at the palms, kneeling by my bed. I’m looking at the linoleum floor and I see some cookie crumbs. I think they’re chocolate chip but I don’t pick them up to see. When I sleep at Victor’s house there are
always crumps in the thick carpets. I hope I’m not 5% just in case some of those church people are right about God’s choices about who gets into heaven. I know if I was changed it was my dad who did it and not God. He’s always trying to make money in weird ways.

God, I whisper, help me. I don’t want to look like a freak. I’m just a normal kid.

I stole bubble gum from Ronnie Barkley’s cubbyhole in the fourth grade and I’m sorry for that. I stepped on the hand of the first baseman from Mckinley Junior High when he was reaching for the base with his glove. I smashed it pretty good but I don’t think it broke, but I guess you’d already know that. Sorry. I looked at Samantha Long’s homework. Well, I copied it outright and have been doing so for some time, but I don’t know how bad copying is since a lot of kids do it. But, I guess that shouldn’t matter. Either way, I try to be good. I listen to my mom and my dad most of the time even though I think it was him that probably did this to me. I’ll do better if that’s what we need here. I’ll keep praying or whatever. I don’t think I believe in signs but if that kind of thing does work then I’m waiting for one. I hope I can recognize it. I hope you don’t make me out to look like a freak. But if you do turn me freakish you better have something good planned for me cause that’s kind of fuc . . . messed up. It doesn’t seem fair. Amen.

The doctors let me go and tell me to come back in a month.
I’m glad Victor and I decided to play hot stove baseball instead of just laying around the community pool trolling for girls because tonight should be fun. We’ve had our best year and we are playing in the city championship under the lights. The lights make everything look like a black and white movie. Victor is second base and I play shortstop. We’ve turned a bunch of double plays in our time. I pitch some too, mostly in relief. We’re underdogs but we’ve got a chance. I’ve made sure the uniform covers my skin.

It’s been two months and the doctors still don’t have a clue. I’ve been reading online as much as I can about modern genetic manipulations and it’s hard to sort through all the advertising for illegal manipulations to your baby. People pay to get certain characteristics but it isn’t legal. I do find a couple of good history sights but they don’t tell me much that seems helpful, that I don’t already know; the technology invented after WWI, the “secret” government manipulations, the laws making it illegal, the terminations after WWII. Not much exists about illegal manipulations of the unwanted variety. Which, if anything, is what I figure must have happened to me. And my dad just keeps playing dumb when I ask him.

The birthmark is up to my neck but I planned for it and have been wearing a turtleneck for two weeks, even though it’s August and people ask me if I’m hot and I just say its my lucky shirt and everyone understands. A good thing about baseball is the superstitions. I like the game a lot and if I could choose I’d play shortstop my whole life but I’ll probably end up a science teacher.
It’s the bottom of the ninth and it is tied six-to-six with one out. They have base runners on first and second. Our pitcher winds up and throws a fastball and this pudgy kid throws his bat at it and lines it right back up the middle. It deflects off the pitcher’s glove and hits him square in the eye socket. The sound is awful like the plop from an ice cream scoop hitting asphalt. He goes down in a heap. I run over to pick up the ball and stop the guy on third from going home. I call time out. The bases are loaded.

I am the first over to him and he’s moaning something awful. It’s full dark now and the lights make everything stark, almost like the edges of everything are sizzling. I can’t see his face because he’s got it covered and he’s rocking back and forth. When the coaches gets to the mound I back up and Victor and I put our gloves up to our face and talk behind leather.

“Damn, Danny took it good.”

“Did you hear it?”

“Yeah. It sounded gross.”

“They’ll probably put you in next.”

I glance up at the lights on the telephone poles and bats dart in and out of the glowing halos like mini bolts of black lightning. Victor hasn’t been the same this summer. His heart isn’t in the game.

“Did your mom give you money for ice cream?”

“Yeah, but, Jesus Victor . . . Danny’s hurt.”

“Oh, yeah. So, we gonna split it or what?”
Victor has this sly smirk on his face all the time. Either that, or a bored look. He doesn’t seem to care about much of anything anymore. I hardly ever go over to his house because his folks are usually fighting and he’s never there anyways. He makes excuses for not coming over to my place or for missing games because he has been hanging out with another crowd. I hang out with him them sometimes but they’re headed for trouble. We both know we’ll be taking different classes in high school but it is more than that. We can feel the differences settling between us. I can tell he feels bad for me because of the birthmark but we’re different now, and it’s more than just my skin.

I chew on the rawhide strip of my glove as I return to my position. The coach comes over and hands me the ball. Danny is getting helped off the field and he raises a hand up over his head and everyone cheers. You can already see the shiner he’s gonna have, his flesh starting to swell like his eye socket’s growing into a fat, slippery slug. I flip the ball a few times in my hand and follow the coach towards the mound. He says, “Go get em,” and on the way back to the bench he yells, “Go home with the throw.” His long mustache twitches when he yells.

While I’m taking my warm up pitches I notice the kid on deck has a scar on his face. His skin is dark brown so it hides the scar some. I didn’t notice it before but I see it goes most of the way across his cheek and into his lip. I feel bad for him and I wonder where he got the scar, how old he was when he got it.

A bead of sweat tickles under my shirt and I rub my chest. I feel a tingling red heat rising from my skinny torso.
This is what they call “game time” but that’s not why I’m sweating. It seems inevitable now that this red mark will move up my neck and onto my face. I put my glove up to my mouth, thinking somehow that you can already see it, my bright red face shining under the lights. I take a deep breath and finish my warm up throws. The catcher jogs out to hand me the ball, lumbering like some kind of bumbling modern knight with his plastic armor jingling.

“We got ‘em loaded. Time to bring the heat.” He looks me in the face.

“You all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

But I’m not. I look in and see that scar and I think about starting high school in a few weeks with red all over my neck and face. I know how we treat kids that are different. Fags. Freaks. Cripples. Midnight blacks . . . mutants are a whole different breed. I start sweating more. I step off the mound and try to collect myself. I pick up the rosin bag and toss it in the air and a little white cloud appears around my hand. I glance over at Victor and he’s just chomping his gum and looking into the stands.

I climb on the mound and dig my foot into the rubber. I try to focus but home plate looks farther away than normal, the catcher’s mitt looks like a little dot on the horizon. I start my stretch, arms slightly raised, and pump my front leg into the air, body tilting down the slight decline. My arm follows the momentum of my torso and I release the ball. The pitch comes out of my hand like a giant potato. Idaho’s finest runs high and inside and it plunks the kid with the scar right in the back as he tries to turn away.
Everybody stops moving. The winning run slowly trots home and touches the plate and the cheering starts. I kneel down and put my face in my glove.

All my teammates stop on the way into the dugout and pat me on the back and I just chew on my glove’s rawhide string with a dumb look on my face. I feel bad about the game but I’m already thinking about going home and taking measurements of my more pressing problems.

On my first day of school red is crawling halfway up my neck. I’m wearing a t-shirt and it’s inching up to my Adam’s apple. I think its better just to get it over with, get it out and pretend it’s no big deal. By the end of second period kids that I don’t even know are saying, “Hey! Kool Aid!” By lunch I break up with my girlfriend to spare her from having to do it later. I tell her that I have a medical condition that prevents us from being together. She starts crying and can’t finish her lunch so I got an extra order of chicken nuggets. I think she knew it was coming because I avoided her all summer. We talked on the phone a lot and that’s just lame after awhile. Things were obviously strained.

For the first week I sit at lunch with kids I know from middle school but there are other kids from another, larger, middle school as well. They aren’t the most popular kids but certainly respectable in the cafeteria caste system. They seem like my kind of crowd, not too popular, but not freaks either. I figure my sports background should help my case. They ask me about the thing on my neck and I tell them it’s my birthmark and they
stay quiet but I don’t feel comfortable. I see them whispering. You can tell when you’re not wanted. I’ve got my pride.

So Friday of that week I sit at the freak table at the back of the cafeteria. When my sister finds out she tells me not to talk to her while we were at school together or at any school functions outside the grounds. I ask her about being a Genie and if she thought dad may have done something to me when I was inside mom and she just says, “Yeah, probably, you know he’s retarded like that.” I just think about the time two years ago he bought the corndog/elephant ear truck and wanted us all to go with him on the fair and festival circuit so that we could all be together making the family fortune. Mom wouldn’t have any of that noise.

The freaks in my lunch period number about a baker’s dozen. Several are freaks as well as loners and so they sit with no one around them. About half of the rest mostly don’t talk at all unless you address them directly. This includes a small Chinese girl who looks like she’s eight years old and a guy and gal in motorized wheelchairs who ride around each other like orbiting planets but never speak to one another. One kid has small horns but I can’t tell if they are real or not.

I sit with the freaks who talk. I’m kind of like a celebrity because my birthmark is still growing. I’m kind of turning into a freak and I think the other freaks find this evolution fascinating. I think most of them are rooting for it too keep growing because they don’t want me to leave their lunch table because they like me. At least, that’s what I like to believe. I am pretty sure the long-haired kid that wears the black Western duster is
just some kind of sicko and wants my condition to be cancerous. He keeps bringing up terrible diseases and asking me if I’ve been tested.

I’ve begun a casual friendship with a red-headed kid named Red. He has become my go-to for skin care questions. He thinks I was genetically mutated for sure and my birthmark is working on what they call a puberty trigger. He is pretty smart because I copy his chemistry homework and it’s really well done. I mention this possibility to one of the doctors and he looks at me, his brow wrinkles, and he writes something down. “Not very likely,” he says.

So I look online and find out Red could be right. In rare cases mutations can be veiled from the common birth testing and triggered at different times in the evolution of the manipulated host (it takes me a second to realize the host could mean me). The doctors must know about this and I realize it’s probably my parents that don’t want the test done. After reading that most freakish illegal manipulations are for monetary gain (usually for entertainment or experimentation by genetic hobbyists), I ask my mom about it after school while she’s standing at the kitchen sink filling up the ice cube tray.

“I don’t know what you read on that internet but that doesn’t make any sense. You can’t just turn into something else. You’ve got a skin problem honey. You were not manipulated.”

“Are you sure, mom?” I ask, wanting to trust her but not liking the uncertainty in her voice, “Weren’t we pretty poor? Your sure dad didn’t make some kind of side deal?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she says, but I notice she spills water out the sides of the ice tray as she walks to the freezer.
I confront my dad that night during a commercial break. He makes an annoyed noise when I ask him about the possibility that I was manipulated.

“The past isn’t important. Think of now. Think of the future. You’re healthy and that’s all that matters.”

“I’m turning all red!”

“And my hair is turning gray. Life is funny, isn’t it?

I just stare at my dad and he looks at me and looks back to the television when he realizes I’m staring at him. He gets up and mumbles something about draining the main vein and I can’t believe this is my father. I’m mad but I feel sorry for him more than anything and this makes me feel sorry for myself for being such a sissy, stuck with a spineless father who can’t even talk to his own son. If I’m going to be a genetic freak I wish they’d have tossed me farther from the apple tree, made my DNA from a whole different type of seed.

That night I don’t come out of my bedroom and the next day I play sick again but I still go over to Red’s house after school and my parents don’t say peep.

I’m happy that Red has the name Red because it takes one off my list. The hallways have become more challenging. By homecoming my face is becoming a road map or a crooked horizon, it’s like I’m filling up with blood a little each day. Needless to say, I don’t ask anyone to the dance. The color is starting to drain down my left shin and slowly crawl across the right kneecap. I’ve heard all kinds of names in the hallway... Rosebud, Stop Sign, Crimson Tide, Bloody Murder, Bloody Mary, Stigmata, Red Beard, and my personal favorite... Sunset. The name that sticks though is Kool-Aid. Cherry
Kool-Aid if you want the full handle. Not my favorite. My sister even called me it once but I pretended not to hear and she got the hint. She’s not a terrible sister just below average.

Red and I start hanging out on weekends and I’m grateful to have a friend. We play video games in his parent’s basement, mostly fantasy role player games, and we order Wolf Down pizza when we have cash. If we don’t I just hit my parents up. I go to the hospital every few weeks but they don’t find anything. The doctors seem kind of bored with me. I did see the young doctor with the skinny mustache when I was on the way to the bathroom and I stopped him in the hall to ask his opinion on my findings. He says I should prepare for it to cover my whole body and that this was probably a deliberate mutation but he didn’t know for sure without some expensive tests and they probably weren’t tests that my parents wanted to have undertaken anyways. He said I can check myself when I’m eighteen and that I should hope it doesn’t color the whites of my eyes and then he gripped my shoulder, bit the apple in his hand, and walked away.

I hadn’t thought of the whites-of-my-eyes thing.

School sucks. I keep up with my homework because I’ve got no friends except Red. Red and Kool-Aid, what a joke. My parents are really nice to me now, not that they were ever mean but I can get pretty much anything I want. My dad talks to me like I’m a little kid again but only when he has to talk to me at all. Sometimes when I walk in the room he’ll look up and his face will be surprised like he got caught picking his nose. I hit my mom up for a green hooded sweatshirt after learning about the color wheel in art class. Green is supposed to compliment my skin. In this art class I made a small clay
figure that was supposed to be a jaguar but looks more like a mutated goat-horse. The ghastly figurine is placed in the library art show but I’m pretty sure it’s just because the art teacher feels sorry for me. Red says I should take advantage of this profitable time in my life so I squeeze a new video game system from my parents and when Christmas comes around I pull in a whole bunch of new games, more clothes, and a new baseball glove. Every time I open another gift I can hear my sister hold her breath and see her bite her lip. I take my time unwrapping. I think my parents took out a loan against the house.

By the holiday break my old face has gone the way of the buffalo. My pupils didn’t turn red and I thanked God for that the other night in my bedroom, just lying back in bed with my hands behind my head. I didn’t see the difference anymore, between kneeling and praying and just praying and praying. I told God I haven’t seen any type of miraculous sign that would make this whole thing understandable or fair and then I remembered all my gifts and felt guilty. So I thanked him for dying and being reborn. Then I remembered rebirth stuff was Easter not Christmas-time so I apologized and cut the prayer short.

At school, things are settling into routine. Red and I have most of our classes together. I get “sick” on picture day and nobody says a word about my absence. All afternoon I watch a television marathon about predators of the world. My favorite is this giant pitcher plant that eats rats and frogs and anything that falls into its deadly juices.

January and February are cold and gray. In March, I try out for the baseball team and make the freshman squad but all the guys seem like assholes. But I’m not a quitter, so I’ll see how the season goes. The coaches all complain about the weather forcing us to
practice in the gym. They keep saying how much better it is going to get once we are outside. I hope so. I’m all red now. All red except for some on my feet and toes. For whatever reason it seems to have slowed once it hit my feet and started toward my toes. My feet look like they got dipped in white paint. The doctor said something about blood circulation. “You must have done well in school,” I said.

One day in the cafeteria, a “fish” and chips day, when spring was just starting to thaw out the baseball field, the day we finally get to move outside to practice, Victor, who’d snuck out of shop class, comes over to the lunch table and says he needs to talk to me, alone.

I pick up my lime-green slushee and we step aside and he says, “I’m going to fight my dad today after school and I’d like you to be there.”

So I tell the baseball coach my grandma died.

When I get to his house Victor is behind his garage sitting on a rusty tire rim. He’s smoking a cigarette. I knew he used to sneak butts from his mom every now and then but it looks like he’s got his own habit now. He is wired up, not scared but alive, like he is vibrating, radiating heat just by sitting. His eyes are bright, almost glowing.

“Hey Thomas,” He says.

It’s nice to hear someone call me my real name.

“Hey Victor. He still hitting you?”

“And my mom. Nothing worse but the same old shit when he’s drinking.”
I feel too young to be having the conversation. I don’t say anything because I don’t know what to say. I look down at my red forearms and see goose bumps and my small arm hairs standing on end. I notice their light brown color, more noticeable against my new red skin. It is the kind of day in the early spring with a bright yellow sun, blue sky, white puffy clouds, when it seems like it should be warmer that it really is. A small breeze is enough to raise my arm hair. I notice in the cold my red skin turns purplish. I wipe my forearms with my hands for warmth, to help circulation. I wish I had long sleeves.

Victor’s friends drive up in a beat up Cadillac that is like twenty years old. They get out of the car like a football team ready to charge the field but their team is wearing mixed-matched jerseys with gold chains and baggy jeans and various colored hats with the brand name tags still hanging off. I know two of the guys but the other four I’ve only seen around.

“When is your dad getting here? You sure your mom’s not around with your little brothers? Man, I can’t wait till you kick his ass.” Different people say things but it comes out like one voice from a herd. They take turns shadowboxing as Joey, the smallest of them, throws punches at each of them, jumping around like a puppy. Finally, Victor stands up.

“He should be home in about ten minutes.”

It only takes five. Vic Sr. pulls into the alley, right towards us. We are standing in the cinder driveway and he can’t pull in so he stops and leans out the window of his pick up truck and says.
“Well? Get out of the way, dip-shits.”

I move out of the way and the rest of them part slowly to give him room and he pulls in. Victor stands with them and I feel miles away even though I’m only a few yards from the pack.

Vic Sr. gets out of the car. He walks back to us. He stops and looks at me and he lights a cigarette.

“Damn boy. You went all red.”

I stare at him.

“That obvious, huh?” I say.

A sparrow lands on the knave of the garage roof.

“Well, what the fuck?” The skinniest and smallest of Victor’s friends, Joey, shuffles his high tops in the cinder, squealing his words.

“Dad . . .” Victor’s voice cracks a little and then strengthens. “ . . . Dad, its time you stopped hitting me and mom.”

Vic Sr. looks surprised, but just for a second.

“Shut up, boy before you get ahead of yourself. You don’t tell me one-way or another. I run this family. Take it or leave it.” Vic Sr. smiles.

“Nice to see you grew some balls though.”

Victor steps forward, in front of his dad, facing him. I find myself stepping back behind a loose line as the other guys make a semi-circle around the two. The garage acts like a wall behind them.

“So is it gonna be just you or your greasy ass friends too?”
“Just me.”

His dad is getting ready to say something else but Victor charges and hits him square in the chest, arms throwing wide, wild punches. They fall back on the black cinders.

We start yelling for Victor.

Vic Sr. twists away for a moment and trots up closer to the house on the grass. He doesn’t look scared. He turns towards Victor.

“Come on up where we got some room.”

Victor looks like he has a purpose all the sudden. He sprints towards his dad but his dad is ready this time and catches Victor’s shoulder in his mid-section and holds Victor’s head and shoulders down, pressing hard on the back of his neck. Victor tries to get up to his dad’s chest but he’s outweighed by fifty pounds and Vic Sr. puts his weight down and collapses on him.

One the ground, Victor squirms like an eel. He is thrashing and throwing wild blows and Vic Sr. catches one above the eye and he pauses and looks down and his face turns serious. We’ve made a loose circle around the two and we are yelling for Victor to get up, get up and kill him.

Vic Sr. takes his forearm and puts it behind Victor’s neck. He presses his son’s face into the grass but Victor is still squirming like crazy and he turns on his side just enough to kicks his dad in the side of the head, knocking him off. By the time his dad gets settled Victor is on him again and he lands a few good blows but he is so juiced up not much is landing square. His dad puts his arms up and then he sees an opening.
Victor is gasping for breath, Vic. Sr clutches him around the neck and slips behind him. Victor squirms but he can’t break from his dad’s forearm, lodged under his chin.

Victor kicks, tries to flip himself free, tries to bite but can’t reach any flesh. He starts to slow after a few minutes, recognizing he is caught. Our shouts become less pronounced. Vic Sr. starts to talk. “Thought it was time did you boy? Thought all you had to do was bring it to the table, huh? Well, you’ll think twice next time.”

“Fuck you,” Victor says, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Joey, the skinny kid with the squeaky voice comes out of nowhere. He’s got what looks like several D batteries in a sock and he swings it in a sweeping arc and it hits Vic Sr. right in the back of the head. It hits hard with a thunk, skipping off his skull, cutting the scalp immediately. Vic Sr. lets go of his grip and reaches up to the wound. He looks at his hand and sees blood.

He gets up slowly and Victor darts away. Vic Sr. is weaving back and forth on his feet. He stumbles as he tries to make his way towards his car, fumbling for his keys. He mutters, too slurred to decipher any words.

“What the fuck?” Victor Jr. says to Joey, the skinny kid.

“He had you choked out!” He squeaks.

I step up beside Victor.

“Get the fuck out of here. All of you!” Victor bellows, tears, snot, and spittle mixed with blood spraying out from his face. His shirt is torn and he’s got a big scratch on his neck and he looks older than I’ve ever seen him, like someone I didn’t know existed. He looks towards his father who is still stumbling towards the truck.
“Get out!” He yells at them, more softly this time.

They glance around at each other and then the gang all moves slowly towards the Cadillac, barely muttering. Victor goes to his dad who is leaning on the truck bed, his right hand held up to the back of his skull, blood dripping. Victor softly palms his father’s right elbow while leaning close to his ear, whispering to him about the hospital, trying to guide him around to the passenger side of the truck. The Cadillac pulls away, tires crunching. In the distance I hear a train whistle.

I don’t know what to do so I walk over to the truck. Bright red liquid drips from between Vic Sr.’s fingers and down his forearm as he presses his hand to the back of his slickening hair. Looking around, I try to spot something I can use for a bandage but all I see is the lawnmower bags and some oily rags in the corner of the garage. I pull off my new green t-shirt and hand it to Victor. He folds it over a few times and places it in his father’s hand. I’m surprised by how calm he looks, even with a big scratch running down his neck, with his breath still rising and falling quickly. He looks at me.

“Thanks Tommy,” he says, and then reaches in his dad’s pocket for the truck keys.

Vic Sr. looks up at me standing there with my shirt off. It is chilly but I don’t feel it on my skin, just a slight breeze that tickles my chest.

“Damn,” he croaks dryly, “you are all red.”

I stare at him, feeling sorry for the way he treats Victor, but admiring that he’s still standing on his own two feet, jealous of the love that I can see between father and son.
“Fuck you,” I say.

He looks up to my face and I watch a drop of blood slip down between his eyes, quickly trace down his nose before beading temporarily on its tip and falling into the black cinder at his feet. He grins at me like a lunatic. Victor looks up at me and smiles.

“That a boy,” Vic Sr. says.

I crack a big smile too. I can’t help it. I lean my head back slightly to feel the spring breeze against my bare red chest, feeling like a man among men, like I know what it is to really be a part of something true.
The Softest Pillow in the World

It was just Carla, Mother, and the men in suits. But the men in suits hadn’t come for a long time and Mother didn’t leave her room anymore. So Carla followed the sunlight as she curled around Mother’s feet, curled her torso around the curved base of the rocking chair. In the morning, as she dosed, she watched the light trace across Mother’s room, illuminating the thick dust and small hairs in the closed atmosphere. The muted rays began at the ceiling and shifted slowly across the blue flower print on the yellowing wallpaper, across the amber carnival glass lamp, across the worn leather of Mother’s shoes placed next to the dresser, across the smooth wood of the walnut rocker, across Mother’s illuminated gray hairs loosened from her bun, across her own dirty bare feet, soiled legs, soiled skirt, soiled hands, over her knotted auburn hair, across the length of the white carnation quilt, light over her own face which turned to sun like a plant emerging from shade; it warmed the smell of the mothballs until the light rose up the opposite wall, it shined across the Last Supper hanging above the bed frame, rising up to the ceiling once again, before dimming in the late evening, blinking into night. And then Carla knew it was time for the television’s light.

Most times she kept the sound muted but tonight she turned the volume on to distract her thoughts. Something was wrong with Mother. She was trying not to think about it. Mother’s right hand had moved in the night, as she rested in her rocking chair.
Her knuckles were rising up from her crossed fingers like a shingle popping up from a roof, or a single large fray on a length of old rope. She had tried to push the fingers back down but they wouldn’t go back in place and Mother just wasn’t listening anymore. She wasn’t eating either. When she had sponged water into her mouth earlier in the evening it had trickled down the cracks of her lips and it didn’t seem nearly enough for what was needed.

She liked to watch the nature shows the most. She kept the volume low because she thought the narrators nothing short of disruptive and the fake animal sounds annoyed her. She sat on the couch downstairs, wrapped in a crocheted afghan with the lights off, eating a can of Spam. She didn’t find it particularly appetizing but there wasn’t much left in the kitchen. The bread was covered with green and white mold. The dried and cold cut meats were long gone. The grape soda was flat.

She had worn a smooth, hairless spot on her left hand, between her thumb and wrist, from obsessive licking. She licked with the roughest spots on her tongue. She thought it was better than chewing her nails, which were slightly angled and came to a subtle, rounded point. Her dull nails did not retract. She wished they would. She wished her nails were bright red but they were milky, translucent, and strong enough to chip. She rose leisurely from her chair, walked to the television and changed the channel. Anything, she thought, anything that will change this . . . this . . . the sound of a warm, soothing voice on an infomercial interrupted her thoughts.

“This comfort is something you can believe in.”
Carla couldn’t believe how silky the woman’s voice was. Her voice cooed and Carla’s felt something inside her breastbone shift towards the sound (like a dry wishbone being bent). Carla moved to the front of the front of the television and leaned into it like a housecat pretending not to notice fresh fish on the countertop, curling around an owner’s leg.

The woman on the television was large and had warm brown skin. She wore large golden hoop earrings and a jade jaguar boutonniere on her calming lavender dress. She spoke directly to the camera. She spoke directly to Carla.

“This is the softest pillow in the world.”

How does she know it’s so soft? Carla thought.

Nancy Woodward walked towards the camera. “It’s so soft because of the microfiber sponge combination and Ooooo! I wish you could reach into your television right now and feel this.”

Nancy Woodward stroked the pillow and cradled it in her large arms like an infant. She made noises that sounded like soft orgasms while slowly rocking it back and forth, stroking its microfiber surface.

“I named all the pillows in my house, but don’t tell anyone.” Nancy winked at the camera. “This ones Joey.”

Carla was entranced. She turned to the couch and picked up a dusty maroon throw pillow and she tried to cradle it in her arms like Nancy, but it had rough edges and it smelled faintly of mouse droppings. She quickly put it back on the couch and she stood
in front of the television again, licking the smooth spot on her wrist. She wanted the softest pillow too.

“You can call and get this pillow for $29.99 and you’ll not only get it but one . . . two . . . three more just like it. And . . . and you will receive these special pillowcases in white or cream colors. Now, what else will give you the comfort you need? The comfort you deserve?”

Nancy paused, a blissful look on her face turned serious. “Are you sleeping erratically, at all hours of the day, or not sleeping at all? Do you feel like everything would be different if you could get just one good night’s sleep? Call now at the number on the screen to get this special low price or visit one of the stores in your area.”

Carla turned towards the phone but when she picked it up and placed it to her ear there was no dial tone. She looked quickly back to the screen and recognized the name of the Wall department store that Mother would take her to when she needed new clothes or new shoes. She never got outside much but with Mother staying in her room she had only prowled about on the porch and the yard. She missed going to the all night grocery store, pushing the cart slowly down the aisles while Mother made her selections and placed them in the cart. Mother even took her to the movies once a month as long as Carla wore a scarf to cover her face. Mother didn’t like problems and Carla understood that people might find her differences wrong in some way.

“Some people,” Mother said one time while shaking a bunch of carrots for emphasis, “Some people don’t like those that are different and can’t mind their own business. I know. I was a social worker for forty-five years. So we’ll mind our business.
You don’t need anything this world has to offer.” Mother shook the carrots around the grocery store as if it encompassed the whole world. “Maybe if you could have children it would be different, but you can’t. So what’s the point?”

“Yes, Mother,” Carla said, just like always.

And then Carla heard a loud grunt from the television and some bald guy stared at her while doing sit-ups on an inverted machine. He pointed into the camera and said, “Yes, you can get rock hard abs!”

Carla muted the television. She needed to get out of the house. She felt a small tickle in her tailbone that emanated from the base of her spine. It felt so good to feel. It had been so long since she felt anything at all. She stretched her frame towards the ceiling’s small cobwebs, a full moon stretch, arching her back before hunching back over, licking her hand nervously in the television’s glow. She needed comfort, to wake from her slumber feeling brand new. She needed to move, to get away from the house, to get away from Mother.

She knew the department store wasn’t open at night so she chased the blurred light outside. It was a red light she had watched out the kitchen window before, always wondering what it was, what it signified. She walked out the back door of the house into the night, following the red light as she crossed the lawn of the church next door. As she walked across the steps of the church and began to cross the road, she noticed a small door in a line of shops and business, set back from the street. The smell of cooking meat
came to her nose and she hurried her steps. The light above the door looked open, inviting.

Carla had never been in a bar and when she walked in the smoke greeted her like a sultry blanket. She came in from the night and her eyes focused on the men in the room. Their faces reflected the red from the neon, from the beer and liquor. No other women were in the room. There was a pool table and a long bar along the left. A jukebox played in the corner and she walked to it, walked to its glowing yellow light. Her stomach gurgled at the smell of the meat and she glanced back into the light of the small kitchen.

She stood transfixed by the jukebox, not sure what to do.

“Can I get you something?”

The bartender walked out from the kitchen to see who had come in. He walked over and stood a few feet behind her. He had a large pot belly and wore a button up, short sleeved shirt. He was leaned slightly forward, his face a mix of caution and concern.

“You OK?”

Carla nodded.

“A beer? Or, I think we’ve got a wine bottle open but God knows how old it is?”

Carla glanced at the kitchen.

“Some food?”

Carla nodded her head demurely.

“How about a burger?”
Carla nodded again.

“Why don’t you take a seat here at the bar?”

He placed a glass of water in front of her.

“I’ll be right back with that burger.” He turned to the pool table and yelled, “Tom, yours-is just about ready. You good on beers?”

“Yeah, but since when you feeding them?”

“My bar Tom. You got a problem with that you can go home and stick a sandpaper dildo in your ass.”

Carla watched the filaments and large particles float in her pint glass. She resisted the urge to lap the water from the open water circle on the surface. Instead she brought it to her lips and glanced around the bar.

A man in jeans and a cow print vest stared at her. His hair was slicked back on his head, revealing a thinning scalp. She smelled him lusting but she wondered if it wasn’t just the hamburger cooking. She turned to her water and when the burger came she ate it fast, barely stopping to breathe. The man in the vest was at her elbow when she finished.

“I’m trying to find the softest pillow in the world,” she muttered to him, burping slightly.

“Well I don’t know about the softest, but I got something hardest if you know what I mean.” The man waited for a response, chuckling at himself and glancing around the bar at the lonely men who were pretending not to watch, pretended not to listen.
Carla glanced at the bulge in his crotch as she stood up. She paused, staring at the man, wondering if he would pay for her meal. She reached into the pocket folded into her dress but she knew it was empty. She looked up to his face and blinked. The man smiled and reached in his front pocket, placing some bills on the counter. When she turned towards the door she heard him walk after her. She didn’t turn to look. She felt full and sleepy.

She turned down a small alley next to the bar and stopped at a green dumpster in the back. The man, startled at first, unbuckled his pants, pulled them to his ankles. Carla said, “I’d like to be held too”. The man said, “I’ll give you something to hold onto.”

His hands reached for the top of her skirt. He ripped down and she lurched forward into his chest. Thick cologne flooded her nostrils. He turned her and she put her fingertips against the side of the dumpster to brace herself. He entered her and she hissed. She hissed several times more and then Carla stared at the flaking paint chips of the dumpster with her skirt around her ankles and she hissed a few more times but was mostly silent until the man finished with a loud grunt.

She pulled up her skirt, covering herself. And, as he panted with his dick to the wind, she raked him across the face with her sturdy nails, turning them sideways to scratch his face. She left a bloody streak across his cheek and nose. He lunged for her, yelling out, but he tripped on his own jeans, still lowered to his ankles. Carla ducked around the dumpster and ran to the cemetery behind the church.

She walked the cemetery loop seventeen times before her heart sounded a resting beat, a normal pattern.
When she woke, she woke not recognizing the pattern of light in the room and then she remembered Nancy Woodward and her soothing voice and the softest pillow in the world. She had purpose. As she uncurled herself from the rocking chair she glanced at Mother and noticed she hadn’t moved in the night or the part of the morning Carla had slept. She brushed herself off to go to the department store and for the first time in weeks, months, she saw soil on her dress, she saw how dirty she had become. She barely paused before turning to Mother’s purse, into the inner, zippered money pocket, taking forty dollars in cash.

She took the bus to the Wall Store. She entered the huge doorway and glanced around, overwhelmed by the size of the store, the fluorescent light and vibrant colors, the smell from the industrial cleaners, from the packaging and the chemicals that leaked from all the garments, household cleaners, vacuum bags, plastic toys, processed foods, and the new smells of the thousands and thousands of products sold in that huge warehouse. Always, when she came with Mother, she would just follow her through the store and try to remain inconspicuous. Mother tried to teach her things but the smells, the sights and sounds made her just want to go home again. It wasn’t quiet like the grocery store at night. Once she had lost Mother and they had to call on the loud speaker and she didn’t come out, didn’t know where to go. They had found her sitting between two fake aspen trees in the home and garden section. Mother cried when they found her but she wouldn’t look Carla in the eyes.
Now she stood at the entrance of the store, inside the sliding doors, looking around perplexed. She was greeted by a skinny old man with a toothy grin. “Can I help you, Miss?” The man made his ss’s sound like zz’s.

“Yes, I’d like to find the softest pillow in the world.” Carla whispered.

“Oh, you mean the one off tv? My wife was telling me about that? It should be over on aisle sixteen.”

Carla looked down at the floor, overwhelmed by the enormity of the Wall Store.

“Are you OK?”

Carla nodded.

“You need me to show you?”

Carla nodded.

“My pleasure. I specialize in people delivery. At least that is what I tell people is my specialty after I retired from real work. This here is just to get me away from my wife for a few hours so we don’t strangle each other.” He paused and looked back to make sure she was following. “You know what I mean?”

Carla nodded and tried to keep up with his fast pace. She noticed that her vision began to blur on its edges as they walked. Bright yellow pet toys and gift cards whirred by, deodorant sticks and air conditioners, green shampoo and vibrating toothbrushes, silver entertainment stations and glossy white poster boards, and people with carts hurrying to find their products, to fill their carts, barely glancing at her, zooming by and motoring in different areas of her depth of field, brushing her. The old man kept talking as he walked, seemingly faster and faster. She began to get dizzy and the colors and
shapes and smells flooded her brain like her senses were wearing thin, her whole being sickened with cooking oil, her vision glossed over like the rainbow surface of a child’s toy bubbles. As her blood pressure dropped she concentrated on the black tag on the back of his blue Wall Store shirt, bobbing up and down between his shoulder blades. She tried to remain focused, tried to breathe.

When they reached aisle sixteen he turned left and she stopped. Luckily, he didn’t go far down the aisle. Running his hands along a series of pillows, he stopped after several meters. “Here it is! Got its own whole section!”

She stood at the end of the aisle and tried to smile at the man. “Thank you,” she said.

“How many you want? They are $19.99 a piece.”

Carla tried to breathe deeply. She focused on the man who was holding a pillow in each hand. “Ooo, these are soft,” he said. “But I don’t like this micro fiber. Makes my skin crawl a little bit.”

Carla pulled the two crumpled twenties from her pocket. She held them out to him. “You don’t pay me,” he said. “You got to go up to the register.”

The thin old man leaned in to see her money. “You would have enough for two but not after tax. Can’t forget about tax because you know they won’t. Government is always after something, anything you manage to work and get your hands on. So, why don’t we take this up to the front and I’ll show you where to check out. I got to get back to my greeting spot . . . you want the beige or the white? I like the white but it’ll get dirty faster at least that’s what my wife tells me.”
Carla walked forward and touched the white pillow with her finger, pushing into the soft shell of the surface. She noticed it was surprisingly firm. “I’ll take this one,” she said, grabbing the pillow from his hand.

“OK then. Dang!” The man smiled. “You must really want this pillow.”

Carla eyed the old man. She saw the soft lines around his wrinkled eyes. The creases turned up at the corners of his mouth in a likeable way. “Would you hold me,” she said, suddenly, quietly.

The old man paused. He slowly put the beige pillow back on the rack. He tucked its corners in like the bedspread of a child, falling asleep. “Life ain’t easy sometimes but that don’t mean this is the time or place for such things, Miss. I’m sorry for what’s troubling you and I’ll be sure to make sure you get up to the front with this to the proper place. I think we should do that now. Go up to the front that is.”

The old man led her to the front of the store, more slowly this time. Carla gripped the pillow in the crook of her arm as she followed him, keeping her eyes down. He looked back over his shoulder several times but he was silent. The store did not overwhelm her now. She stroked the surface of the pillow. He led her to a line with several people in it. “You just stay in this line and Charisse will take care of you, Miss.” He said his ss’s like zz’s again and then walked to his greeting spot.

The man that moved in line behind her was in a hurry. He wore a sport’s jacket and khaki pants and he sported a salt and pepper buzz cut, thinning on top. He was holding a pair of safety goggles and some superglue. “You smell that?” he asked out loud.
Carla didn’t turn around.

“Jesus something stinks. Hey, do you smell that?” The man tapped her on the shoulder.

Carla turned and looked at his chest, at the V of his jacket and noticed a gold cross around his neck. She shook her head, no.

The man leaned in close to her ear. Carla stepped forward as the line moved up. There was another person in front of her.

“That’s you that stinks, isn’t it?” he whispered.

Carla looked to the ground. The man leaned in again, breathing hot, smelly breathy on her ear and the side of her face. “I know what you are, cunt-bag freak. They should’ve let us finish the job back then when you were little, when the government and the people were making sure you couldn’t have any babies.”

Carla gripped the pillow in the crook of her arm. She closed her eyes. She waited for the line to move. She could feel the man smiling behind her.

The woman asked twice for the pillow before Carla placed it down to be scanned. She pulled out the money and placed it down in front of her. The cashier placed the pillow in a bag. To Carla, it seemed to take forever and she noticed the store was beginning to blur again, to take on animated, liquid shapes. Grabbing the bag quickly, she began to walk away without her change.

“Your change,” the cashier said, slightly raising her voice.

Carla stopped, not wanting to turn towards the man. When she did, she noticed he had taken the money from the cashier and stepped towards her. He had a devilish grin on
his face. When she put her hand out he smeared the bills on her palm. “Oh, if things
were like they used to be.” He dropped the coins into her palm, one by one. “We
wouldn’t have to worry about you and your kind.”

“I’m just me,” Carla said softly, her eyes pointed down.

“Exactly,” the man said leaning in to talk close, “You are just you . . . alone, filthy
. . . not one of us. You never will be.”

Carla noticed the man rub his gold necklace between his fingers as he leaned back
and spoke loudly, “What are you cat? Rat? Or both?” He laughed at his own joke.
Carla looked at the cashier who was pretending that she couldn’t hear.

Carla turned and walked to the exit, listening to the sound of the man’s laughter as
he placed his items on the checkout counter.

On the bus ride home, the streets blurring by her, Carla learned that licking the
micro fiber pillow with the roughest part of her tongue was something like heaven. It
calmed her down like the television sometimes did. When she walked up to the house,
she noticed their mailbox stuffed with letters. She brought them inside and dumped them
on the mantle. In the stale air of the house, she felt the presence of Mother upstairs, and
she didn’t want to go up there tonight. She stayed downstairs, curled up on the couch,
turned the television on and began licking the softest pillow in the world.

The television blinked off at 9pm. All the lights went off. Carla knew when this
happened Mother would go in the basement and the power would come back on, but it
usually only happened when they were making popcorn. But Carla didn’t want to go down there in the dark at night, so she stayed on the couch until morning. She dozed but didn’t sleep and she thought maybe once she got used to the pillow it would make her sleep better, make her find the comfort she wanted, the comfort she needed. She hadn’t named the pillow yet.

When dawn’s light came through the windows, she walked up the creaking stairs. She wanted to see Mother, to show her the pillow. And when she walked in the room, the light just bending to catch the blue flowers on the yellowing wallpaper, she saw several of Mother’s fingers were sticking out awkwardly again. Worse this time. One of the fingers was sticking straight out, pointing to the carnivorous glass lamp.

Carla rushed to her Mother. She tried to push the fingers back in place but they were stiff and wouldn’t budge. “Oh Mother,” she whispered, “What are we going to do with you?” Carla stood beside Mother, holding the pillow.

She managed to pry Mother’s arms up enough to slide the pillow under her hands on her lap. She was worried the pressure was causing damage to the tendons in her wrists, elbows, and shoulders, which resisted her efforts and made small tearing noises as she squeezed the pillow into place. She wished she had taken enough money for two pillows because now that Mother had the softest pillow in the world she was back to the floor, back to tracing the light across the room.

She dozed. She woke to the sound of a knock at the door. It was the men in suits. She heard them come in the front door after knocking. She looked out and saw the government sedan parked at the curb. She wondered if they would take her blood again,
run their tests. She had a feeling it would be different this time. Things were going to change. Carla heard the voices call through the house. There were two of them. When they got to the bottom of the stairs one of the men called up. “Hello? We noticed your electricity was cut off. We’ve come to make sure the subject is OK.”

Carla rose, standing beside her Mother. “We’re up here,” she said, “Mother isn’t feeling well.”

And then Carla placed her hands on Mother’s hands, stroking her leathery skin with her forefingers and thumb, stroking the soft micro fibers with the tips of her other fingers. She enjoyed the contrast, the different sensations. Then leaning over mother’s face, starting just above her left eye and coursing up to her widow’s peak, she licked her dry forehead with the roughest parts of her tongue in one long, careful goodbye.
The shop was open eleven years when Chucky burnt his arm. It was only his third day and he hadn’t gotten used to the repetition of baking pies, maneuvering the large aluminum handle and stainless steel peel in the oven. When he reached across the hot mouth and touched the flesh of his inner arm on the metal peel, the skin started to bubble almost immediately like the top of a freshly-fired pizza. He yelled, “shit” and held his arm away from him like it was poisoned. He looked at Eugene as the shock of it began to wear off and the pain sank in. Eugene quickly led him to the sink and ran cold water over the bubbling burn and Chucky, the sixteen year old, tow-headed new kid tried hard not to squirm under the running water but his outside leg danced an erratic polka and his free arm flailed wildly.

The accident was Wednesday during the dinner rush and Eugene had to close the shop. He left Chucky at the sink and went up front to tell Abigail to finish the last few orders. She was seventeen and had worked for him for three years. He told her to cancel the deliveries and handle the last few pick-up orders and start closing up until they got back or phoned. He grabbed Chucky and they got in the car. Eugene paused for one moment before starting the ignition. “I trust her,” he thought. And then he started the engine and took Chucky to the emergency room.

While they sat in the waiting area Eugene kept obsessing about the money he was losing and so he thought about his wife, Helen, and how after church on Sunday at St.
Mary’s, his lone day off, they would have sex in the out-of-doors. In the warmer months they would drive along Lake Erie and take long walks on the beach or in the inland parks and forests. He could almost smell the minty, peppery, herbaceous needles, see his wife’s small body hairs rise from her belly after a slight breeze in a pine grove. They were more conventional in bed during the week but Sunday they let loose and only occasionally did she have to shoosh his howls if he got too loud.

When his pants began to bulge in the hospital waiting room he glanced around at the sickly people and started to think about the mundane life at their small apartment . . . hearing a toilet flush upstairs during dinner, the cackling neighbors through the walls; the erratic sounds of traffic, screeching children, buzzing from electrical lines, the jetliners and low flying medical helicopters as he tried to sleep . . . He glanced over at Chucky as he fingered the edges of his tender skin. Eugene wanted out of their crowded apartment. He dreamed of a larger garden, apple trees, the tart taste of his own rhubarb, his own house in the country. He wanted to raise chickens and slaughter his own free-range hogs for prosciutto, wanted to hear the cry of a red tail hawk. He wanted to be with Helen naked under the stars more, see her pear-shaped, cream skin with red bug bites in the morning light as she hung laundry out to dry and he cured meat in the smokehouse . . .

It took two hours to get Chucky’s skinny arm cleaned and loosely wrapped. The boy had tried not to cry but Edgar could tell it hurt and so he looked away when the tears came and the nurse burst the blisters, scrubbed the open wound. Chucky’s parents, not much interested in Chucky to begin with, didn’t even bother to go to the hospital. Eugene heard his father yell into the phone as Chucky stood in the waiting room, “Just
tell them to put some butter on it! And don’t let that wolf-boss of yours get to close to the blood. He might get excited.”

“Come on, dad,” Chucky whispered, hoping Eugene couldn’t hear him from his seat several yards away, “He’s normal just like anyone else.”

Eugene smiled at Chucky when he looked up, playing dumb. He had heard the whole conversation quite clearly.

As they drove back to the shop they passed an advertisement for Delucci’s Italian Eatery on the side of bus. It showed a picture of Mr. Delucci spinning a pizza with a toothy grin on his face. Eugene had worked his first (and only) job for Mr. Delucci, showing up at the kitchen door at age eleven and begging for work. He missed his old mentor, his large belly, how he made everything in the world black and white, right and wrong. To Mr. Delucci, you worked hard or you didn’t. You lied or you didn’t. Food was prepared well or it wasn’t. There was no gray area. Eugene respected Mr. Delucci and his approach to the world as efficient, noble, American. When Eugene told Mr. Delucci he wanted to start his own business he simply squeezed his arm (a little too hard) and said, “You’ll make tough competition.” Eugene opened his shop an hour’s drive away, in a suburb west of Cleveland.

The pizza shop was in a plaza that also rented to a flower shop, a fast check depot, a thrift store, and an insurance agency. As they drove back, Chucky kept talking about how much his arm kept oozing clear liquid, wondering what the body fluid was called, amazed at its volume. The parking lot was empty this late in the evening, except for a lone police car. Eugene assumed the cops were visiting across the street again where a
row of run-down houses stood. He thought the rental properties presented an eyesore.
The roofs and porches were sunken in places and the grass was patchy. The yards seemed to always have litter in them and smudge-faced children were in no short supply, running and yelling in the street without supervision.

This evening, however, the police car wasn’t for the houses across the street.

As Eugene entered the shop he noticed that Abigail wasn’t crying but she had a distant look in her eyes, as if the gum-chewing officer standing over her wasn’t there, as if his partner wasn’t leaning against the video game machine, as if she were envisioning events only she could see. Eugene went to her and as he opened his hairy thick arms to embrace her she shied away on her stool, hiding behind her long auburn hair, which had loosened from her hair net. Eugene pulled his arms back to his sides and they hung loosely. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left you,” he said.

“I gave him all the money in the register but he wouldn’t leave. He kept asking for money from the back. I know you said to just give them what they want if this ever happened, but I didn’t know what else to give.”

“You did fine.” Eugene wanted to hold her, to tell her everything was OK. He shifted his weight from foot-to-foot, glancing around nervously as he stood near the stool where Abigail sat at the end of the counter. He noticed the grease on Chucky’s blue jeans as he fiddled with his white bandage. He paced, wiping his clammy hands on his white t-shirt and glanced around instinctually for his apron. He wanted to squeeze something, crush something. He flexed his meaty hands.
The police officer standing closest to Abigail put his pen to his pad and said,

“You’re the owner right? The wolf man?”

“My name is Eugene.”

“So you’re not a Genie?”

“I own this shop, don’t I? I’m a citizen just like anyone else.”

The officer looked at Eugene with a blank face and turned back to Abigail.

“Maybe you should start from the beginning.”

“He came in and I just thought he was any old customer and then I noticed the nylon on his face. He told me to get all the money from the register and then he asked me where the safe was, the large deposits. I told him I didn’t know and so he came around the counter and shoved his gun to my temple and forced me to the ground. He went in back and I stayed down and I heard some shuffling and then he came back for the register money and put the gun to my temple again and shoved my head down and told me to count to a hundred and then he walked out. Fucking bastard.”

Chucky smiled from his stool. He had a raging two-day crush on the older Abigail and hearing her swear was a revelation to his teenage hormones.

“What did he look like?” Eugene asked.

“Let her finish,” the smaller officer said.

Eugene nodded.

Abigail paused, looked down at her lap, wiped her eyes and looked up at Eugene,

“I forgot to lock the door Mr. Lupine. I’m sorry. It’s my fault.”
Eugene looked at her quivering slightly. “It wasn’t your fault dear. Do you want something to drink?”

“Maybe a cola.”

Eugene walked briskly to the soda fountain. “Gentlemen?”

He poured a cola for Abigail, two lemon lime sodas for the police officers, and a diet for himself. Chucky didn’t want anything but to hear more about the robbery.

“Can you think of any details you noticed about him? His clothes, jewelry, tattoos?” the bored officer asked, leaning on the door.

“He was about as tall as Chucky but twice his size. He was wearing baggy dark blue jeans and a gray sweatshirt. He had a gold chain that popped out when he jumped over the counter. He was black but he had light skin, light-skinned-black but not like olive light-skinned.”

“Did you notice anything else about him?”

“He had big white teeth, almost like buck teeth. I saw them when he smiled behind the stocking. His face was shaped funny, like his cheekbones were sunken in or something, but I couldn’t see very well.”

“Did you see the gun?” The officer asked.

“It was black with a square barrel.”

“Did you notice anything else?”

Abigail thought for a moment, “He kept wiping at his nose with his gun, with his forearm of the hand that held the gun. I remember because every time he did it I thought it was going to go off.”
“Summer allergies,” the shorter cop said.

“Or hopped up,” the bored cop said knowingly.

Eugene conjured up a face in his mind, a young black face with caramel skin and a buck toothed smile. The police asked Abigail to come down to the station and make a formal statement and then Eugene checked the shop to make sure nothing else was missing. The police left, taking their unfinished sodas to their cruiser.

Eugene insisted on following each of the teenagers as they drove home. Abigail’s mother was quite reasonable about the whole business and just seemed glad to have her daughter safe. She gave her a big hug and kissed the top of her head. It was close to ten when he dropped Chucky off. “Do you think I can work tomorrow?” Chucky asked Eugene, puberty causing his young voice to crack.

“It might take a few weeks for that to heal, old boy.” Eugene smiled at him as he lowered his gaze to Chucky’s arm. But come down next Monday and we’ll find something for you to do.”

“Thanks, Mr. Lupine.” Chucky paused as he went to close the car door. “You’re part wolf, right? That’s where the pizza shop got its name?”

“A little bit, yes, but not a whole lot, three percent, still human.”

“Do you feel different?”

“No, Chucky. I’m just the same as you or anyone else. Maybe my blood pressure gets a bit high when I’m excited.” Eugene turned his head from the driver’s seat and grinned at the boy.

Chucky grinned right back. “So can you do anything weird?”
“No, I just got stuck with this.” Eugene pulled on his curly arm hair, “But I’m also half Italian so that may account for the hair. Now, go on in the house. I bet your parents are worried.”

“OK. Just checking. I know a few mutants and they had differences. I just didn’t know if . . . you know . . . you were different in some ways.”

“It’s just me, Chucky.”

Eugene took a deep breath as the boy walked away and felt lucky, grateful for his life, his wife, grateful that he could help kids like Chucky. He thought about his differences, his sharp sense of smell, his strong, sinewy muscles, his better than average depth perception and hand-eye coordination. He watched Chucky open the wobbly screen door and walk inside. With both kids safe he felt his shoulders loosen and he took another deep breath. He wondered if his genetic changes affected his instincts, his mind. He often wondered this, especially when he felt stressed. “That’s when I need to be more human,” he thought, shifting into gear, “when it’s the hardest not to be.”

As Eugene pressed the accelerator his rationale mind began to dissolve like a drop of blood on a sugar cube. His body began to quiver. His grip on the steering wheel began to tighten and he tugged at the collar of his shirt as he drove through the blue-collar neighborhood. He brought to life the image of the robber in his head and a voice he didn’t recognize began to speak . . . no, no it was just money . . . everyone is safe . . . you don’t need to . . . and then Eugene slammed on the brakes, screeching the tires. He had been driving too fast and the stop sign had come out of nowhere. He looked around, panting, and watched the steady red flash of the stop sign light.
His brain became full of violent thoughts and images, smashing the intruder’s teeth through nylon, squeezing his neck to bone, tearing at his skin. Eugene was uncomfortable with the terrible images in his brain. He wondered if he was going crazy and felt, for the first time with such power and clarity, vulnerable to the world, helpless and weak. He was afraid of how it made him feel. He tried to take a deep breath but he kept going back to the masked face of the intruder and he kept finding new ways to smash the image as soon as it took shape in his mind. Eugene peeled his hands from the wheel and placed his hand on his heart and felt it thump, thump, thump in the night.

Then Eugene took a deep breath, and then another. “People have been violent since people have been people,” he whispered, “You are just thinking about hurting him, Eugene. This guy robbed you!” And although his breathing began to even and the images in his mind disappeared, he though how strange it was that he had just spoken out loud, calling himself by his own name.

The second robbery occurred three months later, in late October when the drying leaves were raked and piled on streets and the smell of wood smoke mixed with the autumn air. It was a good time for the pizza shop. School was back in session and football season had begun and people turned from the lighter fare to the hearty pizza pies, fattening up in the feasting season.

Chucky, his thin right forearm sporting a shiny scar was now a seasoned employee. He drove his mother’s four-cylinder Chevette for deliveries. On the night
before the first frost he returned to the pizza shop after a delivery to a dentist’s
convention at a nearby hotel. It was Thursday and a drizzle was falling on-and-off,
making pavement and streets signs shine in the Chevette headlights. He drove with the
windows down, blaring metal music to match his salty mood after being tipped five
dollars on almost $200 in pizzas. The rusty gray car pulled into its normal spot on the
backside of the plaza, close to the pizza shop back door, out of sight of the road. The
parking lot was dark with shadows, although glints of broken glass glistened on the
ground from the recent rain.

Chucky was playing air guitar, waiting for the metal song to finish before he
turned the engine off, when he noticed a dark shape moving towards him in the side view
mirror. A male voice said, “Shut the car off.”

The music and engine sound cut off simultaneously. Chucky’s hand dropped
limp onto his greasy blue jeans. His skin, already pale, went a shade whiter.

“Give me the cash. All of it.”

“I don’t have much. I just ran a couple of pizzas around the block.”

Chucky didn’t know why he lied. His stomach felt like it was ready to drop
through the thin metal bottom of the car and land like a lump of pizza dough on the
asphalt. He was scared but he didn’t want to give up the money. He tried to offer what
was in his pants, his tips from the night.

The handgun’s black barrel pressed hard against Chucky’s temple, making him
cringe. “Don’t fucking lie to me. I saw you take a big load out.”

“Don’t shoot me.” Chucky’s voice was thin and scared. “I’ve got it here.”
Chucky pulled the zippered blue moneybag from the space between the 
emergency brake and seat. He held it up over his shoulder, half out the window, in front 
of the gun. He smelled cologne and saw the black gun barrel, a nylon covered face in the 
rear view mirror on the driver’s side door. Chucky saw him glance around the parking 
lot nervously.

“What’s in your pockets?”

“Just my tips, man. Come on.”

“Give it up.”

Chucky reached into his front pocket, arching his back in the driver’s seat. He 
clenched the wad of money, seventeen dollars, including three quarters, including the 
five-dollar bill tipped to him by the cheap dentist. He held it out. The robber snatched 
the money and the quarters fell to the ground.

“Put your head on top of the steering wheel.” He pressed the point of the gun into 
the back of Chucky’s head. “Now count to a hundred before you lift that head up. Take 
your time.”

Chucky listened to him reach down and pick up the quarters, turn on the gravely 
parking lot and run away. Chucky counted. When he got to thirty-five, he whispered to 
himself, “Fuck it,” and he rushed out of the car, sprinting to the back door, skidding to a 
halt as he wrenched it open. He yelled through the kitchen. “He got us again! That 
bastard got us again!”

Later that night, after he had followed Chucky home, having listened to the young 
man replay the robbery over and over, Eugene stood in the kitchen with his wife. She
had listened to him rant since he got home. She was tired of him talking. She felt punished, as if she had something to do with the crimes and wanted him to shut up and leave her alone. Sex hadn’t worked.

“I mean what kind of punk keeps coming back to the same spot to rob? I know it’s the same kid. Chucky thinks so and it makes sense but who does he think we are? Some kind of pushover? I’ve worked too hard...”

Helen glanced at Eugene.

“We’ve worked too hard at this pizza shop to let some punk kid take all of our profits. We’re that close to having enough for our down payment.”

The sound of a toilet flushing from upstairs interrupted his thoughts.

“Do you know how tired I am of hearing strangers flush the toilet? I just want us to have our own place, our own place away from everyone.”

Eugene walked towards his wife who was washing the ice cream bowls. He pulled her close but she stood stiffly, still annoyed at his long rant.

“I just want us to be happy. I get so angry when I think about this kid taking our money and he didn’t do anything but hold a gun to someone’s head. I work hard and he is just taking our dream away.”

Eugene released his wife’s curved waist, pulled his hand from her long, straight brown hair as it caught in his fingers. He walked over to the opposite counter. He picked a knife from the block and held it up in the air, viewing his own reflection.

“It’s obvious to me that since you’ve been robbed you aren’t happy,” Helen said, “You are going to have to change, learn how to deal with whatever is eating at you.”
Helen walked over to Eugene and pressed her long, soft frame against his back. She took his forearm and lowered it and he opened his hand, placing the knife on the counter. “Slow down. You’ll get your dream house but don’t forget that we are here now, that I’m here now. I’ve told you a hundred times that I just want to be with you. I don’t need kids, don’t need millions of dollars, but I need you to be you.”

Helen took the hand that held the knife, curling her fingers with his. She kissed him on the lips, craning her neck over his shoulder. “Are you ready for bed?”

As he walked, trailing his wife, still gently holding her hand, he looked back at the knife and he thought about how some cultures cut thieves at the wrist. He took a deep breath and turned back to Helen and her rippling hair.

Eugene loved the holiday season. He loved hanging his evergreen wreath on the apartment door, closing his pizza shop on a snowy day, bundling into bed with steaming hot chocolate, with Helen and her green poinsettia underpants. He loved his wife performing in the church bell choir, loved standing in the grassy nativity manger and smelling the hay bales, pretending to be a “real wise man” for his two-hour shift. He loved driving through neighborhoods lit with candles or colored lights on strings. He loved to squeeze his eyes almost shut to view the holiday lights like a kaleidoscope, pretending the world was all a soft blur. He loved the cold of winter, the falling snow, how it made his blood rise to his skin like a lake wave slapping against an icy break wall.
In his fifth year at the pizza shop he decided it wasn’t enough to decorate just for the mainstream Christmas. So in addition to crosses and mangers, ceramic Santa’s and plastic reindeer, he added a menorah and dreidel, a Kwanza kinara and unity cup. He not only liked to show appreciation for his regular customers, but he knew it was good for business. “Open kitchen, open arms,” Mr. Dellucci used to say. “Bring in the people; the money will follow. Love people first, food second . . .” and Mr. Delucci would lean in and wink, whispering loudly, “. . . and the money last, always love the money last, or it will take over everything else that you love.”

On the evening of the third robbery a light snow was falling. It was ten o’clock in the evening, a Thursday. Eugene, Chucky, and Abigail, home from her first semester at the State College in Bowling Green, sat around decorating the “holiday” boxes. Making and giving away the holiday boxes had become tradition for the pizza shop since year one. Each box was decorated by hand and if you ordered a pizza and it came in a painted, pasted, or collaged holiday box, the pizza was free. Many customers only bought pizzas during the holiday season, in hopes of a decorated box. This Thursday they were behind in the decorating and Christmas was still a week away. Helen was on her way over to help with a friend from the church, Thelma. When they heard the door knock, Chucky was gluing a googly-eye to his cutout Santa Claus from the perfume-laced magazine. He held it up to Abigail’s face and shook the Santa box like a puppet, saying, “Ho! Ho! Ho! Have you been a good girl this year?”

The robber knocked at the front door. Hunched over in the cold, nose tucked to the breeze, he waited, gun hand hidden beneath his winter coat. Eugene opened the door
and the kid stuck the gun in Eugene’s face and said through the hole in his orange ski
mask, “Back up.” He stepped inside the door and continued, “Everyone put their hands
where I can see them. It’s the holiday and I don’t mean to hurt nobody. I just need to
take care of mine.” His voice sounded young and cocky.

Chucky froze with the pizza box held up in the air. Santa’s wobbly-eye jiggled
crazily. Abigail looked at the new presence in the room and continued to chomp her
gum. “Not again,” she whispered, raising her hands to shoulder height.

“And we don’t need to take care of our own?” Eugene growled, standing like an
oven stone in the middle of the room.

“I gotta get mine, Mr. pizza man. Relax.” He gestured with his gun in his hand,
slightly showing his palm. “Now, let’s get the haul from the night. I know you had a
pretty good take. Let’s get the cash. From your pockets first. Come on, I don’t have all
night.”

Eugene was still. Chucky and Abigail reached into their pockets and pulled out
some crumpled cash. Eugene didn’t do anything, didn’t move, and the robber saw, felt
his anger growing, watched his stillness become more and more pronounced.

“Don’t get all excited now.” He raised the gun at Eugene.

“Why don’t you just relax, pizza man. You!” He pointed the gun at Chucky.

“Go get the money from the back.”

Chucky paused and looked at Eugene.

Eugene said through clenched teeth, “Get the money from the desk, Chucky.
You know where we keep it. Bring it out here.” Eugene didn’t flinch; his head didn’t
turn in the slightest. He just looked at the robber, eyes going up and down, searching, probed for weakness, or any sign of identification. The robber smiled at Eugene with his buckteeth framed by the O of the ski mask.

“Girl, put your money on the counter. Don’t do anything stupid.”

Abigail placed her share of the night’s tips on the counter. “You were in here before. I know you,” Abigail said.

“Yeah, it’s the same guy for sure. His voice sounds the same,” Chucky added, walking into the room with the metal cashbox.

“You don’t know shit. Put the money on the counter. Step back. Shut the fuck up.”

“You probably just need the money for crack or meth, pretending to be some urban Robin Hood,” Abigail said smugly. “Why don’t you fulfill a stereotype somewhere else?”

“You don’t know me. You don’t know shit, college girl. Read a few books and think your something. Keep your mouth shut.”

Eugene still didn’t move. He wouldn’t give him any money from his pockets.

“You put all that cash in the fancy pizza box there. Girl, you check the register. Wolfman, you just stay where you are.”

“I haven’t set the register up yet,” Eugene said.

“Don’t lie to me. Open it. Hurry up!”

Chucky opened the register and the thief peeked in, leaning forwards.

“Put that in with the other money.”
Chucky opened the box and placed the bills from the register inside. Santa’s googly-eye shook like he was having a seizure. Eugene thought of his wife and Thelma, due to arrive any minute.

“You need anything else, or is your stocking full?” Eugene widened his feet, shuffling slightly as he spoke. He let his hands lower, slowly.

“Put your hands up.”

Abigail and Chucky raised their arms. Eugene glared before walking towards the counter, towards the money.

“I’m just going to collect this box for you. We wouldn’t want anyone getting hurt.”

Eugene closed the pizza box, neatly and efficiently tucking in the corners like he had done thousands of times before.

“Is there anything else I can get you?” he said calmly, professionally, holding out the jingling box.

“Proper service?” The thief grabbed the box with his left hand and quickly retreated from Eugene’s reach. He back-peddled towards the door, reaching for the doorknob. “You don’t know me. You don’t know shit,” he said, before he turned and ran blindly into the snowy night.

Thelma, age sixty-two, broke her elbow on the sidewalk moments later. The thief rushed out the door as Helen and Thelma approached and he pushed by them as he ran down the street. Thelma slipped on the ice and cracked her elbow in two places. She also banged the back of her gray bun and a thimble of hard blood swelled up like an egg
on her scalp. Her white cap with a stitched gold snowflake cushioned her, but toppled off after her fall. Eugene found it the next morning on the sidewalk, frozen stiff.

Eugene and Helen didn’t get to their apartment until after midnight. When they finally got into bed it was Helen who couldn’t stop talking, couldn’t stop asking questions: “It must be the same guy then? Three times? What are we going to do about this? Did you see if he had jewelry on? A tag on his jacket? Did Chucky say what kind of shoes he had in the second robbery? So he knew Abigail was in college? He said the pizza was good? He must be a customer? Local? If Thelma broke her arm then that’s assault? I mean he is the reason she fell, right? Aren’t you angry? It was our money, right? How much? How much from all three times?”

Eugene paused, looking at the ceiling. “Enough,” he said.

“Enough? That’s our money!”

“That was our money.”

A toilet flushed upstairs. Helen glared at her husband who stared at the ceiling with his hands crossed on his hairy chest. He was breathing deeply, pensive.

Helen turned, wrapping herself in the covers like a cocoon. She reached for the desk lamp, switching it off. “You’ll have to kill him then.”

Eugene, lying on his back, slanted his eyes towards his wife.

“I’m glad Thelma’s going to be all right,” Helen said, concern in her voice. “My brother has guns. He’ll tell us what to buy. You’ll keep it at the shop because I don’t want a gun in the house and plus that’s where you’ll need it, of course. Maybe you could
shoot with my brother to get used to it. I’m sure you won’t have any problems. I’m tired. It’s been a long night.”

And Helen, un-tucking herself from the warm blankets, rolled over and pecked Eugene on the cheek. He didn’t see the expression on her face, couldn’t see that she didn’t have much expression at all. He could only feel how warm she felt, hear her cozy bed noises as she began to fall sleep, and he wondered if she smiled, even slightly, as she drifted off, or if she knew about the wide grin he displayed, reflecting the glow of the plaster ceiling, keeping him awake.

It was a long, cold winter. It was so cold that Eugene and Helen didn’t have sex outside after the holidays. It wasn’t just the weather but the unspoken between them, their different understandings on the inside. Their sex life slowed dramatically overall, as did their conversations, and when they did come together physically, verbally, it was like animals, not like love, not like their lovemaking from before. A polite silence nestled between them. Both Christmas and New Year’s seemed to pass quickly, like a sudden winter breeze that finds its way under your outer-coat. For the first time, the smell of hay in the manger, mixing eggnog, decorating holiday boxes, the whole festive atmosphere that Eugene always enjoyed so much, seemed hollow, depressing. Abigail went back to school and informed Eugene she wouldn’t be returning to work at the pizza shop anymore on her breaks. Chucky seemed distracted, moody, complaining about bad tips, about driving around potholes in the snow. For the first time, Eugene noticed that they
didn’t have children to give presents to on Christmas morning, and their small talk, their tree, their favorite carols, just seemed old. The marshmallows, when they met his lips above the steaming hot chocolate, were stale. Their New Year’s celebration was like a warm, flat bottle of cheap champagne. They didn’t even walk outside on Sundays because Eugene had taken to visiting the shooting range just off the highway by the lake, and Helen didn’t want to shoot, didn’t want to do much at all.

Helen’s brother, Peter, said the best handgun for Wolf Down Pizza’s security was something flexible, easy to use. So Eugene bought a .357 Magnum. He loved Clint Eastwood movies and he’d be damned, he thought, if he was going to settle for something else. The first time he shot the gun he felt a tickle in his genitals. The loud boom impressed him at the range, and the echo when he first shot the gun outside was like a revelation. The minimal recoil on the gun surprised him, although after his first shot he had no clue where his bullet landed on the range wall. It certainly did not go where intended.

He got better. A lot better. He would stay and watch the technique of the best marksmen at the range. He even traveled to Elkhart, Indiana to watch a competition one blustery Sunday in February, when the snow swirled on the gray cement of the highway and he learned about how important his stance was to the proper balance. He watched their breathing, how and when they steadied their eyes like a hawk peering over a frozen cornfield, the lack of movement at their triggering moments. And upon his return on the highway, he noted the stillness of the center of the swirling vortexes of snow that licked the frozen pavement.
At the shooting range, he began to imagine the face with the nylon mask was the exploding target and then he would feel bad about shooting him in the face and so he’d imagine different parts of the robber that he could shoot without killing him. He thought about the robber a lot. He’d imagine him at the pizza shop after everyone had gone home and he sat with hot cider, warming himself by the oven, cleaning his gun. He would wait with the stack of money from the night placed neatly on the table and think about the boy’s life and how it shouldn’t be ended over robbery, how that didn’t fit the crime. But he also respected what every American knew, that if you stole from someone else’s home or business, you took the ultimate risk, you understood that the right to bear arms is coupled with the right to protect your own property, and it gives you the right to blow a hole in someone if they trespass. Eugene wondered whether he would trade his dreams, his American rights, for the life of someone he only knew as a thief.

He knew meat, having traveled with Mr. Delucci to the local butchers and the large slaughterhouses in Cleveland that had the freshest veal. He also liked to watch police dramas and cooking shows on television. So he imagined vividly the bullet striking different parts of the body, exploding a knee, tearing a shoulder blade, creating a hole in a palm that held a square butted black gun, making buckteeth disappear. At first, the violent thoughts bothered him, but he just shrugged and thought it was his place as a man, the vision of a man, a partial price for his duties. He prayed about his violent thoughts each Sunday. He asked God to cleanse his mind, lead his actions, help his marriage return to love. He grew more and more comfortable with the silence between
him and Helen. He stopped asking God to make the silences stop, realizing that his inner
dialogue, which he’d always just spilled forth to his wife, was polluted, wrong.

They went out back of Peter’s old farmhouse to shoot. Peter was a portly
corporate electrician with thinning, sandy blond hair. He brought out some targets and
set them up on the wooden fence. They shot towards a field strewn with hawthorns,
which rose slightly in elevation away from the house, providing a perfect backdrop.

“So, if he comes in again are you going for a kill shot, a termination?” Peter
asked, aiming his .22 rifle at a green Mountain Dew can.

“Well, what would you do?” Eugene asked.

Peter shot and missed the can several times. “Damn! He’s black, right? Black
kid robs a white owned business, even if you are a little altered . . . “ he winked at
Eugene, “ . . . cops and community are going to do a quiet nod and just move on.
Nothing to worry about. Sounds like a free shot.” Peter handed the rifle to Eugene.

“A free shot?” Eugene replied. “From a citizen like me?”

“See if you can do better than I did. You’ve been mostly shooting with that
behemoth handgun though. Give this peashooter a try. Pulls slightly left.”

Eugene took the rifle and settled it on his shoulder. He lined up the neon green
can in the crosshairs. He gently squeezed the trigger and the bullet made a shrill ping
when it passed through the aluminum before falling to the ground.

“Beginners’ luck.”
Eugene eyed the can, slightly visible on the ground behind the wooden fence post. He felt the crunch of frozen grass under his feet. He was still for a moment and then he squeezed the trigger. The can leapt off the ground like hot grease.

“Hope you shoot that way with the magnum,” Peter said dryly.

Eugene opened the case for his gun and a small box of bullets.

“I was kind of surprised when Helen said you needed a gun. I never saw you for the type . . . not the shooting of guns but the shooting of a gun, if you know what I mean. I wouldn’t kill a rabbit unless I was starving and the store was closed. I know some guys who got into the terminations though, some older fellas. They like to shoot animals. They like to kill, that’s for sure. I only know if someone was stealing from my business, came in with a gun? Well, I don’t know many people would have a problem with that. If you did what needs doing, regardless of your genetics.”

“I’m a citizen, just like anybody else!” Eugene barked, placing the last bullet in the six-shooter.

“I’m not saying your not. But, when did the government ever treat all its citizens the same?”

Eugene pushed the cylinder into place with a click.

Peter blew into his hands and reached out. “Let me try that peashooter.”

Eugene and Peter shot together every other weekend that winter. Eugene brought over acorn squash and some rotten pumpkins and once a fresh honeydew melon from the grocers to explode on the fence, to examine exit holes on the frozen grass. Peter, like Chucky and most of the pizza shop’s loyal customers, thought the thief would not return.
Helen was silent on the matter, but it was clear to Eugene that she was waiting. Chucky swore he wouldn’t tell anyone about the gun at the store, but Eugene didn’t really care if he did. He thought if more people knew, the less likely they would be to rob the pizza shop. He thought Helen might be convinced to see things this way.

One evening in March, Helen walked to the pizza shop after closing, as the air dipped from the surprisingly warm day, down below freezing. She wasn’t afraid to walk at night. She walked briskly, with a purpose. The distance, the silence between them was beginning to be too much to bear, the waiting was making them both stir crazy. Eugene spent more and more time at the shop, more and more time silent, watching television, brooding. She spent more and more time waiting for the thief, waiting for Eugene to do the thing he needed to do. She knew that something had grabbed hold of his soul and wouldn’t let go. She’d been through this before when he questioned his own identity, his own genetic differences. She’d sent him into the woods for a few months and he came out fine. He just needed time. He needed to embrace his control of the world or he would never be the man he wanted to be, never be the man she knew. She walked through the night, considering what she would say, not knowing that she needn’t have planned to say anything at all.

Eugene was wrapping up the cheeses and meats and Chucky was sweeping. The thief came in like a late customer, hoping for one more piece of pie. He startled Chucky who raised his voice so Eugene could hear “So, you’re back again.”
At the sound of Chucky’s voice, Eugene paused and finished wrapping the pepperoni, placed it in the stainless steel refrigerator, and wiped his hands as he moved to the front of the store. As he walked through the doorway, he pulled his apron off, drying his hands as he crumpled it, placing it on the counter. When he looked up, the thief was smiling, wearing a nylon stocking, gun in hand.

“Yeah, he’s back,” Chucky said, standing with his hands held up to his shoulder height, pretending to be nonchalant, casual.

“Go get that cash box from the back. I know it’s just you two tonight. Hurry up! Pizza man, you stay put.”

Chucky scoffed under his breath and looked to Eugene who nodded. As he walked behind the counter, Eugene placed a hand on his shoulder.

“It’ll be all right. I put the cash in the safe. You know the combination, right?

Chucky looked up at Eugene’s blank face.

“It may take a couple tries but you’ll get it. Two to the right. One to the left and back left to six.”

The thief smirked. “A lot of good a safe did for you. Hurry up!” The thief turned to Eugene, chuckling. “How much did that thing cost?”

“Only fifty bucks. Got it at the police auction.”

“Why don’t you just get that money ready while Whitey is getting the rest of the cash?” The thief pointed the gun for emphasis.

Eugene felt amazingly calm in his movements, but his brain was working quickly. The gun was loaded in the safe box right below the register. He didn’t look at it. Should
I shoot him, he thought? In the arm? What if I miss? I could hit his knee? His shoulder? How do I distract him enough to get the gun? Four-five-six. Safety off.


“So you settled on this as a career then?” Eugene asked. “You might consider other options, but that’s just my opinion. Obviously, I have some bias.”

“Fuck you, Pizza man. I’m not in the mood for your shit.”

Eugene wiggled the key in the top of the register, pulled the key back out and held it up to the light, examining it. He dropped it to the ground. As he bent down, he pressed the numbers on the lock box, scuffing his shoe to mask the sound, just like he’d practiced over and over after the store was locked up tight and he was alone in his pizza shop.

Chucky appeared in the doorway, as Eugene considered his next move.

“The combination is eleven-seven-fourteen, right?”

“Eleven-seven-sixteen.”

“Gotcha. I’ll be right back.”

“Hurry the fuck up!”

“I’m trying,” Chucky yelled, “I’m not the one that opens it.”

Eugene could have hugged the boy who was trying to leave an opening for him to shoot, but he didn’t want the boy around if things got ugly. Eugene stood his ground.

Chucky stood in the doorway.

“Well, go get it you goofy fuck.”

Chucky stared at the thief who gestured at him with the gun.
“Don’t be stupid. Get the money.”

Chucky shuffled back to the kitchen, grumbling. Eugene looked at the thief who stared back. The black square barrel hole of the gun seemed to wink at Eugene as it aimed directly at his face.

“Well?”

“Would you like your cash in a pizza box again?”

“Sure. Make it a large,” the thief said, laughing at his own joke through his nylon mask.

Eugene knew it was time. The pizza boxes were below the register, next to the gun. All he needed to do was grab the butt as he bent down and come up firing. He paused as he bent down, stopping his motion.

“So you say this is a career then?”

“Pizza man, I’m getting tired of your shit. I’m just gettin’ mine.”

Eugene considered the irony of this statement, how both of them really just wanted the same thing. His brain was still holding several strands of thought at once.

“But what do you need the money for?”

“What the fuck do you care?”

“Well, you’d be surprised how much I care about where my money goes after its stolen. You’d be surprised at how much time I’ve thought about you, about smashing your fingers in a door jam, or just busting your teeth out.”

“Keep dreaming. You’re not the type. Too nice. You treat people to well. Not much of a wolf.”
Helen, when she entered the shop from the front, often stopped to look in the window to see if Eugene was working the counter. She liked to watch him with the customers, how he always put on a good face, was always graceful, always tried to smile and make people feel at home. She wished, sometimes, he treated their apartment more like home. Tonight, as she put her eye to the window, she saw him talking to a customer wearing a dark hooded sweatshirt. He wasn’t smiling at all and it looked like they were in a serious discussion. She leaned in closer to get a better view, her right eye nearly pressing the glass.

“I’m just saying that if I knew you were doing something useful with the money, not just buying crack, or dope, or rims for your car, I might think about you less poorly. I might not think you were as big an asshole as it seems.”

“Well, what can I say? I’m just living the American dream.”

Eugene smiled. He looked down at the register, at the gun butt. He noticed the worn spot on the cash button, the clean edges on the gun grip. He wouldn’t shoot this boy. He couldn’t shoot this boy. He would just give him the money again. He wasn’t Clint Eastwood, wasn’t sure he wanted to be. He just wanted his life to be like it was before, like what it was supposed to become. Not this. He didn’t want to live with this, didn’t want to go to church and feel like more of an imposter than he already felt. People already look at me different, he thought. They know what I am, what I almost am.

Eugene looked up and saw his wife’s face, distorted through the glass. He glanced quickly away so the robber wouldn’t notice him staring at her. Eugene brought his hands up, palms out, so that Helen would know about the gun. When he looked over
her eyes had widened. It had been so hard since this had come between them. All he wanted was to save a little money and move to the country. All he wanted was to argue with his wife like they used to, make love like they used to, dig in their new garden together. But this boy had changed him, made him quiet, pensive, moody, made him become something he didn’t like, made him crave violence. But, Eugene thought, maybe this is what it meant to be American, to have the right to bear arms, to be responsible for your own property in this world. This is the price we must pay, he thought, this violence.

But Eugene still didn’t want to do it, even after all his dark dreams.

“You done yet?” the thief yelled to the back.

“Yeah, just got it,” Chucky yelled.

Eugene looked at Helen. He could see her clearly through the glass. She nodded her head slightly and smiled. He hadn’t seen her smile in a long time and he felt himself smiling in return, before catching himself and returning his gaze to the robber. He knew what that smile meant.

When Chucky came out from the back the robber looked up at him in the doorway. Eugene reached for the Magnum and brought it up to fire in one motion. He squeezed off a shot almost as soon as the gun came level and it struck the robber in the chest. The sound was like a cannon in the small pizza shop. The thief, thrown against the door, held the gun out like it was broken. He looked down at his chest, a surprised look behind the mask.
“You shot me?” The thief put his left hand to his chest and it came back red on his fingers. He lifted his right hand that held the gun. Eugene shot him again in the chest. The thief thudded back against the door. He hunched slightly, turning to his right. “You shot me.”

The thief was trying to maintain his balance but the shots that had blown him against the wall and it was the only thing keeping him upright. Chucky stood in the kitchen doorway. His face went pale as he brought his hands up to cover his mouth.

“Drop the gun,” Eugene said, “I don’t want to shoot you again.”

“I just . . . I just wanted the money to . . .”

The thief looked up, his buckteeth slightly apart. He glanced down at the gun hanging loosely on his fingers. He bent slightly, wiggling his hand, and the gun clattered to the floor. Eugene could smell the gunpowder. He noticed his own gun-hand was shaking slightly. Eugene watched the thief push open the door, leaning in with his shoulder, and stumble out in one quick motion, before slowing just on the other side, and then continuing on like an unsteady bowling pin. Helen stood outside the doorframe, illuminated by the overhead shopping plaza lights, watching him stumble across the street. Eugene followed him outside.

It was full night with a sliver of crescent moon. Eugene and Helen stood shoulder to shoulder and Helen found his empty left hand and squeezed it. They kissed on the lips, a quick peck before turning their attention back to the thief. The thief stumbled across the street, fell over the curb on his way to the row of houses with the run-down lawns and the ratty kids. He got up slowly and limped halfway up the front porch steps of the house.
with the yellow siding peeling away before he slumped over, passed out. He was just a
dark shadow visible from the street.

They watched a woman rush out to him from inside the house. She was large and
wore a baggy gold sweat suit. He was lying in a heap on the stairs, and the blood soaked
underneath him onto the concrete steps. She started howling, “My baby! My baby!”
The neighbors’ porch lights, lights that weren’t already lit from the gunfire, began to flick
on. The woman continued to wail, nestling the robber’s head, and she jerked his nylon
mask off to reveal his tired face, his buckteeth sticking out between his parted lips.

Chucky came out from the pizza shop behind them, ears ringing, the smell of
gunpowder in his nose. He saw Helen and Eugene holding hands, saw the gun pointing
towards the ground in Eugene’s right paw. He saw Helen lean in to her husband’s left
ear. He heard her whisper, “My baby. My baby.”

Eugene didn’t see the second kiss coming from his wife and it never made its
destination. He felt a slight squeeze on his hand and ran across the street, stopping
halfway before realizing that he still held the gun. He ran back and placed it on the curb
and then ran back across the street. The woman shrieked at him as she stood but he
didn’t hear and when he reached the body he bent down beside it.

He saw right away that the buckteeth, the shallow, sunken cheeks were not all
human. The thief looked thin, scared, and his brown eyes stared up with disbelief, an
animal caught dying in a trap. Eugene knew then that he had killed, killed someone
different, just like himself. He pressed on the chest wounds with both hands, trying to
stop the bleeding as its warmth gushed between his fingers. He pressed harder, feeling breath leave lungs.

Eugene looked up, desperate, but saw only a broken porch swing dangling free, glancing back, he saw the street lights reflecting off the trail of blood on the asphalt, the stunned faces gathering in a loose crowd. He looked up at the sky and the sliver of moon and choked back a howl that he felt rising in his chest. It wasn’t appropriate to howl, to howl at this moon, he thought, not in front of all these people, and after a few thin breaths he felt the warmth of the moonlight on his cheeks. A single ice crystal hovered in the night air, glistening in front of his face. He wondered if this light, this warm moon glow he felt on his cheek was from being part wolf or if everyone could feel the moon this way sometimes.

Eugene returned his attention to the body below him and kept pressure on his chest until he died.
My [G]regory File:
A literary summary of the poisoning of my 7th clone

in the year of second dawn, in the fall of final building codes, the morning of my birthday eve

The first of us arrives tomorrow.

We will live in the walled compound of fifteen hundred acres of mixed deciduous forest with four outsiders who will cook and clean and do maintenance. We will be thirteen strong and we will make sure we have a regular schedule including meals, exercise, study, our sharing circle in the evenings, and, of course, the experiments I have planned. We will be locked from the outside but we will allow visitors, perhaps a girl when we each reach puberty, and each year on our birthday we will receive another one of us at the gate who will be handed to the nursemaid for weaning.

We will be me.

As close to forever as possible.

in the year watching bird behaviors, in the summer of misbegotten love, the night of the patient bench

Gregory takes the same path through our large tree park, many times, night, day, mostly walking, running when it suits him, in winter he skis. He has learned to measure the effects of this two-mile loop on his body and to gauge sickness on this path. He has learned that moving along the same route can be comforting, healing. He has traveled this path his whole life. He has learned what I’ve taught him, just like the others. I notice the stubble is coming to his chin and remember my own puberty, awkward fumblings with Marcy Larchmere in the barn, spontaneous erections at the schoolhouse.
This is the first time I’ve come outside to check for myself, not viewing the satellite video coverage in my own quarters, and the events are confirmed when I see her running behind along the stream bed, hear the rushing of her feet through the fallen leaves, watch him run to greet her . . . the momentary swing as her skirt catches the air, the soft landing. She is beautiful and I can’t help but feel pride of myself in him, strolling like a cautious buck stepping through beech saplings. He looks right at me at one point, and though I know I can’t be seen, my breath catches at his nervousness.

I’ve let him have his own life too, his own three choices for each meal, a certain amount of private time, a private journal and lockbox for his three sacred items. I am not a complete tyrant (in fact I’m a man of many moral facets!). When he was a child he complained about our evening sharing circle and I burned him with my zippo on the inner arm edging closer and closer to the pale, just like the others. His ears were slightly larger than the others. The knuckles on his hands and toes were a bit blocky. His road his bicycle hunched down like a speed racer. He wasn’t my favorite but he wasn’t a bore.

He shouldn’t have let me see (him alone with her). The maid Margaret became his downfall. It wasn’t that I watched them meet in those woods, barely touching at first, then holding hands, necking, heavy petting after a full spring season of yearning. I’m sure you can follow the logical ends of that natural equation. We all know that outside contact needs to be reported to the collective. It was Gregory’s lying, the withholding from us. He knew he’d be punished.

By the time summer was half-passed I had begun poisoning him. I knew he would need to be eliminated, of course, but I didn’t know how much I could trust the
others, and there was no sense in wasting my 7th with a punishment of passion and irreversible consequences (what a strange irony to consider jealousy of your self, to even be jealous of a younger self. There are so many wonderful and unique experiences you can have with clones!). In other words, I figured Gregory shouldn’t be killed right away, for any of a variety of reasons like the way certain garlic cloves slice naturally thin like translucent layers of onion, and other cloves just seem to flake, or reasons like the lack of smell in most oak trees.

I will miss Margaret.

Gregory should have told us about his urges.

She’s been a good maid.

in the year watching bird behaviors, in the fall of the burning crab apple, the morning I caught the head cold

We live on isolated land near the town of none-of-your-business, at the base of a glacial moraine from the most recent ice age. I bought the land. I designed the compound as a place for my collective to grow. I am the one with the vision and the know-how (I am certainly not some pussy socialite that inherited all of their money and craves affirmation in the spotlight! I’ve made my own fortune through my own vision and will.). The combine and my collective has been the great work of the late afternoon of my life. I’ve created an individual persona out of multiple duplications of myself. I’ve found the way a person might consider living forever, so to speak, almost like tribes oral tradition growing over time, with ancestors who walk amongst them, but more, an attempt to allow the collective consciousness to grow along with the story, the memories,
to allow our genetic exactness to create a bond never before seen amongst humans. I’ve recorded my work in dozens of binders where you most likely found this under the [G] (I don’t trust digital storage but that is for another time, in another place). I was trying to tell you about Gregory’s poisoning in a literary way, but to do that you need to know the circumstances, some other sides of myself.

I order the clones and they arrive on our birthday. We are now a baker’s dozen, varying in age by one calendar year:

Herman: music lover, mole on his left jaw-line
Marcus: loyal to a fault, my dutiful son with one leg slightly shorter
Phillip: early anger issues, stronger than the rest with greater bone density
Kevin: our loveable simpleton, always a step behind, thick eyebrows
Gregory: was my most physiologically exact clone (excepting the ears)
Theodore: special connection to brother Paul, cowlick on left side of head
Paul: special connection brother Theodore, cowlick on right side of head
Jason: pensive, quiet, early onset slouch in his posture
Edgar: advanced sense of humor, always laughing, can’t hear well out of left ear
Jeremy: stubborn, one inch taller than the rest
Anthony: digestive problems, early puberty causing excess hairiness
Robert: cocky, confident, with advanced hand-eye coordination

It will be hard to break our human chain when Gregory is gone but I knew this would be inevitable. You cannot expect thirteen parts of a whole all made the same to “be” the same, not with human subjects. You cannot completely harness free will. Just like an individual, free will cannot be totally removed from existence in a collective organism (see [F]ree Will or [O]rganizational Behavior in my binders). Knowing this, of course, does little to dampen my spirits at the loss of the beautiful symmetry we have achieved (I achieved, really, but isn’t it just the same thing?). But here I go again thinking I’m writing in my records when I really sat down to put together a lyrical
summary about Gregory . . . so you know he’d been fucking the maid and you know he
didn’t report it and you know I started poisoning him and so what made me want to write
about Gregory in a lyrical way? . . . the way I watched his face flushed differently at an
evening circle, not the sweaty red-face of physical exertion, more, the strawberry glow of
his skin, the vibrating chords that emanated from his ears and sounded so pure, so full of
a love that was so wondrous he couldn’t share it with the rest of us. You should have
heard the tenor of his lie when we gathered for sharing each evening. How comfortable
he grew with lying. And it was his voice, the tenor of his voice during a lie, the subtle
cracking that changed to a smooth buttery trill after just three evenings of sharing with
his brothers and me (or not sharing), and it was that lie which made me realize how I
would poison him utilizing sound, frequency, the very essence of the voice he betrayed us
with.

I’ve given Gregory moderate doses at night, explaining the change in sound
sleeping patterns by explaining to the whole collective that the low frequency waves they
would be hearing at night are an oxygen enhancer. Which, of course, is exactly what I do
for the other twelve of us. In Gregory’s room I played frequencies that subverted his sex
drive, specifically the ability of his tallywacker to function by way of decreasing that
particular blood flow. I also tricked his kidneys into blocking an enzyme which lowered
his blood pressure and . . . well . . . you get the idea. His energy dropped off within a day
of treatment and I began to see a more passive Gregory. But these changes certainly
didn’t mean he didn’t need to be punished for succumbing to the forces that lead to his
breaking of our fundamental law regarding open, honest dialogue and shared experience. We all know the rules.

He still tried to see the girl, even without the ability to function sexually. This, I must admit, surprised me some. I grew excited about Gregory’s passion. He had always shown a propensity for secrets, independence, for the unknown. During the “[R]un-away” experiment I put each of the collective through in the summer of their fifth year (loyalty is not a given and boys be tested for them to be men), Gregory had stayed out the longest in the elements, almost an extra eighteen hours. I eventually had to collect him from the very same streambed he covertly visited later for coitus so that he didn’t starve to death. Poor shivering boy, I thought at the time, picking him up from his shock-induced stupor. Now I know that my sympathy was a weakness. We should not coddle ourselves at important times in our lives, but rise to them with fierce determination and objective cynicism. I coddled Gregory, allowing him to coddle himself, and we paid the price with his weaknesses, his lies.

I let Margaret stay on with the other few serving staff, mostly out of curiosity, to see how the drama would play out (and plus it is a major hassle to find loyal service who know how to keep their trap shut, although this is becoming less of a problem now that the collective is at an age where the work can be evenly distributed without creating much of a burden).

I got in the habit of chatting with Margaret in the kitchen as she washed dishes. He hated that I talked to her. I could feel his stare when we met in the evenings after she told him of my visits. I started to dry dishes with her to gain confidence. I began to see
why Gregory lied for her. Margaret is a handsome young woman with silky auburn hair. She smells like lavender and warm milk. She doesn’t laugh often but when she does it is like trickling water. If I were to allow myself to love I can see why it would be so easy to . . . well, you probably understand love and beauty better than I do . . . it would be easy to succumb, to waste time in the romantic trappings of love (there are so many other aspects of life to explore!).

They still met in the woods at the streambed every day. I knew then it was time for us to confront him. The others were getting suspicious and I did not want to lose hold of the bonds in our collective.

*in the year watching bird behaviors, in the fall of the burning crab apple, the day of hot chocolate sans miniature marshmallows*

When we sat down that evening I let each us make our pronouncements as we always did and the only thing of note was that Phillip had another out of body experience in his dream state before sleep. I encouraged others to meditate towards his state, while noting to consider a surface bath for Phillip on 70% saltwater in a black room. Gregory, of course, said nothing about his indiscretions, kept up his lies, although he did describe his health symptoms, which, he said, seemed to be getting worse (As if pleading for sympathy, relief! Can you believe his audacity?). When it was my turn to share (our order is chronological by age), I summoned Margaret on the intercom and told her we were ready for the hot chocolate, and to bring the bottle of peppermint schnapps. As she made her way to us I reminded them of some of our collective life principles:
--as individuals we are weaker, as a collective we are strong
--the closer we are; the stronger we are
--we share our unique lives openly to help the collective grow

Margaret opened the door as I was explaining how each of us is free to grow into our own person, but we must appreciate the unique opportunity we’ve been given, and appreciate the loyalty we have to one another. As they gawked at Margaret standing just inside the door (no one had interrupted a sharing circle before, save for a kitchen fire one Christmas), I continued on, reminding them that they learn from my unique experiences as well. I remind them that our shared genetics offer us an opportunity to gain an understanding of life without living a full life, that my experience is a part of their lives just as theirs is a part of mine. I tell them that I will always be there for them. I then told Margaret to set up the tray before the cocoa gets cold. I pointed to the middle of the circle.

The others rose at once as Margaret put out the 13th cup. They were excited at the treat, at the change in events. Having been keeping an eye on Gregory, I noticed his eyes narrowing, the tendons tightening in his neck (it is so easy to read the body language of your own being!). When Margaret put a hand on the door to leave, I stopped her, telling her over the casual conversation that I’d like it if she stayed for a while.

The room went from happy murmurs to silence (excepting for our simple Kevin who didn’t quite read the room the same as the rest of us). The others knew something was amiss, the ones old knew enough at least, and the younger took their cues quickly.
It was time to stop the schism. We had all played dumb, like standing in an open field smelling a thunderstorm approaching and pretending that the rich petrichor would last forever, waiting with our nose to the sky for the pelting rain, strikes of lightning, to wash away the smell of our fecundity with violent drops. And now we would smell something new, something that might burn.

Gregory didn’t move from his chair. I waited for everyone to get their beverage and return to their seat before I asked Gregory if something was wrong. If he didn’t like Margaret’s cocoa. I asked if a shot of schnapps might cure what ails him. He looked up at me and I knew he wanted me to die. It didn’t hurt the way I thought it would. His gaze just made me mad and when I get mad, I get calm (anger is an emotion I like to subdue in our collective). I asked Gregory if there was anything else he would like to share. I looked at Margaret. He looked at Margaret. We all looked at Margaret. She looked to her folded hands.

No? I asked again. Perhaps Margaret would like to share?

She shook her head and I said, to be still, dear Margaret. I looked around the room and saw all of my faces, my older eyes looking down or into empty space, anywhere but at this situation, my younger eyes looked hurt and confused, poor Kevin simply stared at his empty mug with a chocolate mustache and a sad look on his face. Gregory sat with hands folded, staring at the tray in the middle of the room. I waited for them to squirm, to feel the discomfort Gregory was causing, and I hoped he might relieve the pressure, redeem himself, but he did not. He just sat and stared.
I told them Gregory was not being true to us. I sipped my hot chocolate with schnapps and told them Gregory was having a sexual and romantic affair with Margaret. I told them he had lied to us.

The young one’s murmured to each other and the older boys sat stock-still and Gregory just sat there with no expression at all. He adjusted in his chair and we all looked in unison, and he almost opened his mouth before he simply continued staring at nothing. He finally murmured under his breath and I told him to speak up.

I’m sick, he said into his feet, I think I’m dying.

I reminded them in my softest voice that our dying can often be reflected in our living. Our body health and our mind health are connected. I watched Marcus nod his head.

Gregory asked me then, if I was punishing him. He surprised me with his forwardness. I replied to him by saying that we punish ourselves in this life. He scoffed. Marcus (beloved boy) jumped in to remind him that harming himself was harming the whole.

We will discuss this in the coming weeks, I told my anxious face. We will all meditate on Gregory’s health, his loyalty, on how he might regain our trust. I told them that we will have a toast, all of us, to our unity. I poured each of us some extra schnapps, even the youngest. To our unity, I said, raising my cup, and when Gregory didn’t raise his I grabbed it, forced his head back, and poured the sweet liquid down his gurgling throat.
Gregory didn’t speak again that night. I regret losing my temper in front of the others. It didn’t stop me from doing what needed to be done.

I upped his doses.

I met with him privately in the coming days and offered him the chance to come clean, to come back to us.

He declined.

I upped his doses.

Soon he walked with a cane, and then a stroller, and then a wheelchair.

I can see now, in hindsight, the dark seed that was planted that night. Our sharing circle changed, felt hollow with Gregory so far gone. I worked hard to keep the rest of us together, to make us heal and scar together, but the schism grew quickly amongst us, as Gregory slowly died.

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in the year watching bird behaviors, in the winter of the wool windows, the morning beside the stream

When I’d finally punished us enough, to the point where Gregory was bound to his bed and useless to the collective, I stopped his heart with low frequency bursts as he slept. I explained to the collective that Gregory had a cancer of the heart.

We buried him on a knoll in the middle of the running trail loop near the shade of a large oak tree, near a thicket of blackberry bushes. Marcus helped me prepare the body.
We wrapped him in surgical gauze and Marcus was so gentle and slow I thought we would never get done. We washed his pale soft skin and Marcus gently wrapped each foot and leg and I held up his torso while he finished the wrapping around his waist. Gregory’s head rested on my shoulder. We wrapped his skull just once in a soft translucent layer like a veil. I couldn’t bear to completely cover the face in death, to be ashamed of our weaknesses.

When we lowered him into the ground the dark soil splayed on the white fabric so starkly you expected an immense sound to come from the collision of dark and light but there was only the shovel scraping and the soft pad of each load hitting with a thump. Marcus was particularly taken with grief at the ceremony (sweet boy (I am so soft in my old age!)). I remember winter beech leaves hanging staunch like tobacco, an earth worm at the top of the cut wiggling a half body to escape the air, layers of topsoil dropping to clay to soft sand, gravel, stone.

I was astonished at the level of emotional range of my others. Theodore and Paul, for instance, simply stared at each other and hardly seemed affected by the event at all (they all simply seem to care only for themselves as they age). Only Herman and Phillip didn’t cry. I should have read more into this fact but I just couldn’t foresee what Gregory’s disruption would truly cause. I didn’t allow Margaret to attend the burial. I dismissed her before the first snow and her absence hung in the air.

I stood over his fresh grave after everyone was gone. I could feel Marcus waiting for me on the trail, peeking through the hawthorns. He thinks I can’t be trusted alone because of my age. He is a loyal boy. To say that I felt remorse for my actions would be
correct, but it is the type of remorse one feels after killing a mouse whose scampering
sounds you have grown to appreciate from the cellar. How do you not feel bad for
knowingly killing a part of yourself? How do you critically punish yourself and not feel
remorse in some way? I guess what I am saying is that I had conflicting emotions
standing there that day and that hasn’t happened very often for me. I think. I do. I’m not
one to waste time on frivolity or romance.

But it is different standing over Gregory.

If I’ve learned anything as I’ve grown to grey it is that we don’t have control over
anything and all of our most important thoughts, our most important actions, are simply
single leaves on the tree, stubbornly hanging through winter, or catching a ride on a light
breeze, or floating down the stream to get caught on a slimy stone, but none of our
uniqueness is permanent. We are not gods or God. We are all decomposing to a form
outside of our imagination.

We have always been lonely. Without love.

Gregory died because he could not be lonely with us, loveless with us.

*in the year of sour milk, in the spring when seagulls hovered at dawn on the lake
for six days in a row, the evening of cold milk and wine from pewter*

They are all gone but Marcus. He still cares for me and I’m not sure why. They
have discovered the outside world and they have left me behind. I think Herman figured
out my poisoning of Gregory (he was always good with sounds). He and Phillip left the
very next spring after we buried him. I’m glad he didn’t tell Phillip or any of the others about my decision, my action, because I’m afraid they would never contact me (Marcus really, they all use Marcus to get news of their brothers). They took Kevin with them.

I’ve gathered the following about their whereabouts and happenings:

Herman: led three of us West, plays fiddle in the evenings at the big game ranch
Marcus: has shown true loyalty, love, has started fermenting rhubarb wine
Phillip: a top notch range hand by all accounts (I’m glad I taught us to shoot!) Kevin: our loveable simpleton works in the ranch kitchen and apparently never takes off his cowboy hat
Gregory: deceased
Theodore: left with Paul, whereabouts unknown
Paul: left with Theodore, whereabouts unknown
Jason: whereabouts unknown, Phillip dreamt he was on a fishing vessel in Alaska
Edgar: married in Newark, sales job in pharmaceuticals
Jeremy: a cabbie in New Orleans, being treated by psychiatrist, on psychotropics
Anthony: working an oilrig, Robert states that he gained respect early because he could grow his beard so fast
Robert: foreman on the oilrig

Phillip and Theodore stayed longest outside Marcus. They seemed lost without the others and more and more they craved each other’s company. My last image of them is after dinner in the sharing circle (only the four of us) and they didn’t speak but simply stared at one another and when I asked them a question they just looked at me as if trying to puzzle out my meaning, cocking their heads to opposite sides. They left before dawn like the others. No goodbyes. No word from them yet, and after these years, it doesn’t look like we’ll ever hear from them again, nor from Jason, not with the scant time I have left in this body.

I told you that I might live my certain way of forever but obviously I will not. I told you I didn’t know what love is and that is mostly true. I know what it is and know now that I’ve done nothing but avoid it my whole life. Now you see an old man alone,
with only Marcus to bring him dinner, with only Marcus to wash his feet. And I do love that boy today, with such ferocity that it scares him, that it scares me. I feel him pulling away but I know he’ll stay until this body passes.

All this and I still can’t think of the way to talk about Gregory.

I guess if I’m trying to say something in a literary way about Gregory, returning to this manuscript after so many years, removed from my data-crunching, my empirical recordings, my manipulations, and I try to say something greater, I’d say that love is all there is . . . sounding just like a cliché, not literary in any way . . . but this cliché means more to me now, writing it down, and although you’ve experienced more love than me, I know that I’ve missed it with a gaping greatness, with so much clarity so often in my life that I’m sick with the understanding of it’s sound, sick and listening the echo of my hollow memories, never to be born again.

I’m sorry Gregory. I’m sorry for myself.
Finding Frank

When I click open the van door Ohio sunlight bleaches my vision. Stepping out, I squint and cup one hand over my eyebrows. I watch the white Mansfield Penitentiary prisoner transport roll away, the guard’s hand waving in one lazy gesture out the window, and turn to the sound of a Greyhound releasing its brakes with a hiss.

It’s been seventeen years.

I don’t plan on wasting much of my freedom on sentimentality but I take a moment, watch an old man at the ticket booth wearing fancy running shoes fumble for silver in the front pocket of his corduroy pants, watch a small blond boy in overalls try to pull free from his mother’s hand as they walk to the bus. I give myself up to thinking what could have been . . . wife, kids, white picket fence, union job, fancy running shoes, and I recognize that this is my own fantasy, that life isn’t what you think it should be.

It’s strange seeing all the people without coordinated uniforms, strange knowing your routine is busted, strange that I feel the acidic bile in my stomach when I think of the future and still feel nostalgic about returning to my cell, my laundry job, back to times when Frank was still living.

I turn and scan the cars at the bus stop to find a quick ride north to the city. I’m supposed to meet the publisher Frank told me about. I’m not optimistic but I need to
keep busy.

Cabs . . . all cars really, are much leaner than I remember, rounded on the edges. The fat driver smells like stale piss and garlic. He knows the address right away.

“Downtown,” he mutters, “Gonna cost ya.”

I see a slight puffiness around his jowls.

“So what’s your mixture?”

The cabbie turns his fat torso in the seat and cranes his neck. He cocks his head sideways, scowls, bats his eyes and I see he’s got pigeon in him. I’ve seen a few in jail with this mixture. It was supposed to add peacefulness to the soul but it ended up with a few annoying side effects, twitching and Tourette-like tics including a coo in the more unfortunate cases. It’s a cheap mutation from some whacked-out Christian group trying to make the world a better place one fuck-up at a time. He turns back around.

“They always send me cause they figure it will make everyone comfortable.”

“Makes sense,” I say, rolling down the window to find it only goes down part way. I just want to watch the scene go by, catch my breath. I light up a smoke.

As we roll forward I finger the leather-bound cover of Frank’s journal inside my jacket. It is one of the few items I took from prison, other than some clothes in my duffel, a worn out spoon I’ve grown accustomed to, and my old Velcro wallet. I had some documents and books mailed to my mom’s place, along with a few clothes, photographs, one image of Frank sleeping, his legs sticking out of the bunk, heels resting on the night stand he used as an extension to elongate his cell bed for his long frame. The
guards couldn’t resist capturing the moment because his long black tongue was hanging out the side of his mouth like a dead fish.

The cab driver has news radio blaring and it sounds like the world is still full of problems, genocide in Nigeria and a local pizza shop murder. I roll down the window and smell the land . . . manure, thick summer pollen. The soybean fields and rows of tasseled corn blur and then it’s the suburbs and I smell greasy fast food and my stomach turns. I let the rushing wind play with my hand like a miniature roller coaster and watch the city rises up on the horizon and underneath the Cleveland skyline is rusting buildings, concrete, an umbrella of thick leafy-green trees. It smells like an old beer can in warm river mud and I know I’m going home.

The cabbie drops me downtown by a granite statue of an unknown cavalry soldier leaping on a horse with his sword raised. It looks like pewter. I follow the point of the sword up to the skyscrapers. They aren’t as big as I remember but they sure make shade, make my old haunt seem like a pile of smooth rocks. I fix my eyes on the street numbers just above my eye level. I notice the neon lights of a bar right next to the number of the address I’ve just read off the crumpled piece of paper from my pocket.

I shoot a whiskey for Frank and then one for myself, for time lost.

Riding up the elevator my stomach drops and I feel like a child when I lose my balance and have to grip the railing (it’s been awhile). I go all the way to the top floor and from the hallway window look down to the river. It winds brown through the fields of rust, ringed by factories, bridges, houses and church steeples up on the hills.
The publisher sees me in right away. This is unfortunate because I’ve been staring at the secretary and her nylons and hoped to spend some more time with them. As I walk in the office, he is facing out the window, his back to me. We are on the 3rd floor and behind him the window opens to the street. I have on jeans and my jacket has beige elbow patches. I assumed this was a more casual affair, not that I give a fuck. As he turns, I see what surely must be a toupee. At least I have my pride.

“Mr. Williams, congratulations.”

“Did I win something?”

“You got out of jail.”

“I don’t see how that makes me special.”

“Please have a seat.”

He waits for me to sit down and then he falls back into his plush chair like he owns a small Pacific Island and a mansion in the Heights. I notice the books on the shelf look brand new, not worn at all on the edges. I cross my legs and shake loose a cigarette from my pack.

He frowns.

I light the cigarette.

I’m not sure what to expect. I like Frank’s writing but it is kind of soft, lyrical, not a recipe for popular success. But his mutation is fairly original, his scandal may still attract some news, and the fact that he was a Genie who broke boundaries makes his story have some legs.

“You have my advance?”
“I didn’t know that was part of the agreement.”

I stare at him. This is a tactic I’ve perfected in Mansfield. You’d be amazed what you can accomplish by doing nothing but looking straight ahead.

“I’ll make sure the secretary has a check for you before you leave.”

“The whole ten grand?”

He raises his eyebrows. I figure I might as well make it worth my time.

“I didn’t know that was part of our agreement either.”

“Well, I figure we were making some terms as we speak.”

“Do you have his journal? Any new writing?”

“You’ll get the journal when I’m done with the book. Do you have Frank’s pages?”

“Do you have any samples of your work, Mr. Williams? We believe Frank’s story will sell but, to be honest, the unknown link in this equation is your writing. Frank wanted you to tell the rest of his story and so I propose you sit down with one of our ghost writers and we can have you start dictating.”

“Frank wanted me to finish the book, finish writing the book. You know what the contract says.”

Frank told me he wanted me to concentrate on helping to tell the story of his life, not the story of his fall from grace and I know these folks will spin his tale to sell the most books and not do his life justice. Frank was a professional soccer referee. The first Genie to be allowed on a professional field. A role model of assimilation. Then he cheated on a game and got caught and provided fodder for those who felt Genies didn’t
have a right to the same things as the rest of us. But Frank was a good man. He made a mistake and he doesn’t deserve to be vilified for it.

The publisher smiles, “I do know what the contract says. The question is, can you deliver your end of the bargain?”

“The book will contain Frank’s final words, all of them, not just from the memoir, and I will provide the material needed to finish the book. Frank wanted me to document his life, to finish documenting his life. So, that’s what I aim to do.”

The truth is I think Frank wanted me involved because he knew I would need something when I got out, need a purpose, and I think he saw it as a way of giving me money without giving me money. Frank cared about people, cared about me. He knew I couldn’t make it out outside installing cable or hacking bricks. He cared enough to entrust me with what he needed done and knew this project would drive me, not leave me wandering around scratching my brain, thinking about ways to get back in jail. He also knew if his writing got parceled, sold and read in pieces, no one would get his side of the story in full. The truth of his life and not just the headlines that labeled him a cheat. I also think he knew that his memoir just wouldn’t be read by many folks without something to draw more interest.

“Well, you certainly had his confidence, judging by our correspondence in the last days of his life. You realize, of course, that you could sell me his writings now. All of them. I’ll make sure he gets a fair shake.”

I sit tight. I take a drag to slow things down. I look out the window, at the seagulls picking at the sky.
“Have you ever been in jail?”

He looks at me, not moving. I don’t think he likes me.

“I haven’t,” he said. “At least not as a prisoner.”

I notice the ash is building on my cigarette. I look at the smoke and turn my eyes to him. He looks around, hands me a small potted cactus from his bookshelf. I hold the small pot in one hand and ash in it with the other. “Not your office?”

“Depends if you means whether I own it or whether I use it. I’m in Chicago most of the time.”

“I don’t know about Chicago, and I know a lot less about Cleveland than I used to, but in jail, in my jail, currency isn’t just measured with cash.”

He pauses, squinting his left eye, “Is there something else I can provide for you?”

“I don’t think you understand my meaning.”

He looks at me and leans forwards, puts his hands to the side of his head and pushes his face in like he’s releasing pressure. He removes his hands and smiles. I know he doesn’t like me now.

“Will you give us Frank’s story, Mr. Williams?”

I pinch the burning tobacco into the cactus dirt, snuffing out the ember. It leaves a dark mark on the tan soil. I get up to put the pottery back on the walnut bookshelf and turn towards the door.

“I’ll take a few days and then I’ll start working. I need to find some people. I’ll keep you posted on the progress, let you know if I need anything.” I look out the window, at the city that was once my home.
“Frank said you had a reputation as a man that could be trusted. I just wonder how much that trust costs.”

I start out the door, not waiting for a reply.

“Mr. Williams,” he says as I turn away, “The writing?”

I turn back and smile, “It’s safe, old boy. Don’t you get your panties in a bunch.”

I stop for my money on the way out. The publisher walks with me and tells the secretary to cut the check. As the secretary fills it out I think this is a lot like stealing, just not as stressful. I wink at the secretary and I realize this is the first time in my adult life I’ve ever winked at anyone. She smiles and I turn to go.

“Mr. Williams? Perhaps we should schedule another appointment? Say two weeks? Give you some time to get your things in order.”

“I’ll give you a ring,” I say.

I push the elevator button and it shines like a lemon.

A different cabbie drops me at my mother’s house and he smells like sun tan lotion. I never would’ve thought of how many smells are new to my nose, how many memories are triggered.

My mother lives on the West side of town between the Russians and the Italian neighborhoods in a two-story brick house with a sandstone porch. I wish you could meet her in person. She came to visit me every Sunday in jail excepting fourteen occasions: four were flu or cold related, nine were because of a broken hip, and one was for the funeral of my father. I saw her at the graveyard that day, so that tally maybe counts like a visit. She is a little old woman with straight gray hair. She was a bad man-eater in her
day, a Harley chick fresh out of the West Virginia hills (at least that is how she tells it) but she dresses like any innocent old lady now, a lot of cardigans and clothes that look like afghans. After the decade she spent telling me the different ways I classified as an idiot, we started to become friends. A couple years ago we started a book club. We just finished a Louis Lamour. She picked it saying, “I know all the characters were the same but I thought you had enough to think about. Plus, it isn’t about the characters, it’s about how they get done what needs to get done.”

As I stand in front of the house, it seems foreign to me, like the house of a stranger. The thick green leaves drape the streets with humid oxygen. I don’t remember the trees being so heavy and wide.

When I knock though she opens and just looks at me for a spell and says, “You look like you had your hand in a cookie jar. What, did you visit the Japanese massage already?”

“Something like that,” I say.

She turns back into the house and says, “You can take the guest room, top of the stairs to the left. Come down and we’ll have coffee. We need to talk.”

My few clothes are on the bed and I fold them in the empty oak dresser. She keeps a clean house, always did. The bedspread is smooth like Frank always kept his, except this bed is smaller and it has a quilt with a sunflower pattern. I bounce a few times on the dish-size orange patterns and then I smooth the spread and walk down the creaking stairs. My mom’s retired from hospital nursing but she still volunteers, mostly with the
Methodists and the Salvation Army. We sit in the kitchen. Mom is shuffling cards and she begins to set up a game of solitaire.

“Frank sent me a letter before he died.”

This is news to me.

“Telling you what a great son you have?”

“He told me I shouldn’t let you stay here. He said I should give you three days and let you loose. He said you have work to do and you should keep busy.”

My mother finishes placing the cards in rows. She won’t look me in the eye. She begins to play her game, flipping each card with a snap.

“That’s it? That’s all he said?”

“He said you should talk to the publisher and arrange it so you can travel during your parole. Just ask for employment paperwork. He said you need to be moving . . . on the road.” My mother looks up from her cards, “I believe he knows best for you.”

The coffee tastes good, but I add some sugar. In jail, before I met Frank, I learned that once you taste bitter, no matter how sweet something is, it is always going to be bittersweet, never sweet all alone. “Is this what seems best to you?” I ask.

“It makes sense.” She stops snapping the cards down and considers her hand.

“You’ll be welcome to visit whenever you want.”

I stand up, look at a photographs intermingled with the small figurines of bumblebees, honey jars, bears. I see my father first, black and white, handsome in his Army dress. Next to this image is my folks’ wedding photo and they have on real smiles, without the bitter. My mom looks beautiful, a woman to fall in love with. My eyes slip
to a small frame of my brother and me beside a river raft, knee deep in water, geared up for our white water West Virginia adventure. We’re barely halfway grown to dad’s waist. The last photograph on the shelf is of my mother’s family and I pick it up and leave a dusty thumbprint. It’s complete with thick rhododendron and hills in the background and long, serious white faces in the foreground. The men look like they are trying to seem as scary as possible and the women look bored with the whole thing, like they have better things to do.

I glance over at the gun rack in the dining room and I move that way. I handle a few of my old guns: Two colt automatics, several Winchesters, a few shotguns of different gauges. I pick up the shotgun with the dull, bluing barrel.

Pheasant hunting is fun, walking with the dogs as they grow excited and put their nose to flushing out the birds in the shrubs and long yellow cream grass, wide open farm sky, trickling dark streams, but I like hunting wild hogs the most. I recall the summer trips to see family outside Monongahela, running down the swine through the thick brush with my cousins, the grunts and squeals and sweat and all the flora and fauna seeming old like a flintlock gun dropped in a granite stream.

“Do you mind if I smoke? Did dad smoke in the house?”

“Why don’t you have one on the porch and come back and play some Michigan rummy. Those old folks at the church can’t give me much of a game anymore. And Lewis . . .” She stops flipping the cards . . . “Frank said he didn’t tell you certain things. He said some things are better found out on your own. He said you’ll know what he
means when you find out. And he said be careful with the Pastor. But he’ll have already told you that.”

“Well, that’s helpful. The Pastor? The bully he grew up with? Can I see the letter?”

“That’s between me and Frank.”

My mother makes fried chicken and mashed potatoes for dinner. We listen to the radio, old country tunes, and we move to the porch as it turns dark. She tells me to get the six-pack of beer in the fridge. She cracks one can, gulps it down before I can even open mine, burps, and tells me to drink the rest or she’d kick me out this very night. She climbs slowly up the stairs for bed.

I love my mother.

I open my can and sip the beer suds off the top of the rim and it tastes a little like heaven, better than I imagined, hops, pennies, hay, freezing rain. I open Frank’s journal and the pages barely make a whisper. A lightning bug pulses in the grass. I hear traffic in the distance, cars and trains mixing with the clattering of dishes being washed a few doors down. The buzz of electrical wires. I look at the first journal page, Frank’s small, blocky handwriting. It is the same script, but it seems different in the yellow light of my mother’s porch, different with no walls to hold the writing in.

Science is a myth. That’s what Frank taught me. Change is the only constant. Genies are just as human as anyone else and the story of the science, of how we view the
science is crucial to making things right. What I’m trying to say is that truth is not a constant; truth is a process and we play a part in making it. Science is a process, and a process that doesn’t always yield results we expected. I like the idea that everything changes, that our truths are based in what we make them.

Frank was a voracious reader. Read everything he could get his hands on. He also watched a shit-ton of films and television. It’s like he didn’t do much else outside his officiating job out in the real world (which, I’ve come to understand, he was very, very good at). In jail, he did little else other than stick his head in a book or a notepad, hunchbacked, or venture into the lounge and watch the television when a good show aired. He didn’t do physical labor because he was medically released from his work assignment when his kidney’s started to go, although they still ask him to change bulbs routinely (for obvious reasons) and help sort the mail. I thought I was a reader . . . I thank him always for Vonnegut, Erdrich, Abbey, and Stegner’s Letter too Late. I miss Frank. I miss talking to Frank. I miss his humongous orthopedic shoes.

Lakewood Metropolitan Hospital is now a veteran’s hospital for those that came back injured from the wars overseas. The brick building is fourteen floors, stands eighty years old, and I groan as I lean back to take it in. This is my second day out of prison and my brain feels like a moldy biscuit.

I hate my mother and her six-pack promises.
The building overlooks Lake Erie and is west of the city center, west of the river where the flatlands begin to roll towards Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, the plains of the Midwest. The building’s halls are clean and serviceable, but you get the feeling the equipment isn’t new, the windows are drafty in winter, the doctors and nurses are complacent, and, if you run your finger along surfaces in shadow something unclean may come up. When Frank was born almost forty years ago, the hospital served the general population, and the place was even worse. The economy was at the tail end of a long depression and drugs were scarce and qualified physicians were in short supply. The healthcare system was failing and in the process of being rebuilt. Buildings were patched instead of mended. Home births became common. The seriously rich brought healthcare to their homes. Only emergencies or terminally ill went to the hospital.

Frank’s birth was certainly an emergency.

After asking a few employees, dressed in various colors of scrubs (a lot like jail but with more options from the color wheel), about the hospital’s history, and finding that they move faster than my dried out brain is ready to handle, I find a skinny old janitor who appreciates my offer of a cigarette and is in the mood to talk. He agrees to give me the tour, showing me on a map how the building was set up in those years, telling me where the drama used to unfold. I give him another cigarette and he leads me up to the third floor.

In the operating room where Frank was born, you will find only file drawers full of medical records, several bags full of clipboards, and various holiday decorations in
cardboard boxes from the third floor office of podiatry including a wooden candy cane as tall as a person.

When I close my eyes, I imagine the scene of his violent birth . . . the oooh’s and ahhh’s in the room from some, and astonished, under the breath curses from others. Frank’s mother, rushed in and operated on, Frank’s mother, dead from hemorrhaging. They would have scrambled frantically to save her but I wonder if they didn’t all pause when Frank pushed through the canal, pushed through amniotic fluid. The doctor and nurses would see the long, disproportionate neck and limbs, the slimy, pointy, conical ears, still flattened, slicked on the side of his head. His dark bushy eyebrows pushed through the fluid as he was cleaned. They would notice, of course, his abnormally large size, the reason for the death of the mother as they cut him free. They would know her arrival at the hospital was ill timed, at best.

The birth report from the Lakewood Observer reads in yellowing print:

John Doe was born at Lakewood Veteran’s Hospital at 9:22 A.M. to unknown mother, who died in childbirth. He weighed 22 lbs. and was 28 inches! Anyone with information about the family should contact the hospital or the Lakewood County Family Services.

I imagine all that morning the hospital staff would have visited the baby ward and joined the small circle around Frank. His elongated frame already testing the size of the
crib, uncurling slowly in front of the strange audience, shaking life into himself,
screaming at the atmosphere, mixing in low, guttural coos over his thick black tongue. I
couple this with my memory of Frank as an adult, curled around his journal in his bunk,
scribbling with his huge hands making the pencil look like a match stick.

No family came to visit that day according to hospital records, but on the next
day, another blip about Frank made the police report.

GIANT BABY KIDNAPPED AT HOSPITAL

An unclaimed orphan of substantial proportions, born
yesterday at the Lakewood Hospital, whose mother died
during childbirth, has gone missing in the night. The
infant's empty crib was discovered at 2:15 p.m. by
hospital staff. Police have no information to share on the
case and encourage anyone with knowledge of the
situation to contact them immediately.

The janitor didn’t remember the birth until I mentioned the kidnapping. He
hadn’t worked for the hospital for very long when it happened. After the terminations
(which he couldn’t stomach he assured me), he told me he got the job at the hospital as a
nurse’s aid. He’d matriculated, he said to me with a wink, to head janitor.

He remembered the whole place, “Was like a free for all. There was still a lot of
experimenting, just none of it legal anymore. That baby I remember him, now that you
mention it. I remember peaking in his crib and whistling . . . he was big . . . and ugly.”
The janitor peers at me like we share an important understanding. “A lot of babies were taken at that time. Not many, though, were brought back. If I remember correctly he became somewhat of a favorite for the nurses. Not only was he bigger than a mama raccoon, they thought he was blessed, lucky for coming back to the hospital like that.”

I think Frank appreciated the irony of being shunned by probably the very people that altered him. When I would ask him about it he would just chuckle and say, “Waste not, want not,” or some other old fashioned cliché to avoid the real answer. There are a lot of things I wish I’d talked to Frank about in more detail.

None of the leads I tracked down show any understanding of who manipulated Frank. I ask the janitor if I can see the old files and he says files that old are stored down in the basement, but going in there is a big no-no. I don’t press.

Frank was not legally manipulated, that much we know, but little else. He could have been some doctor’s sick experiment, or the best theory assumes that it was for a deliberate purpose, that Frank would have been groomed for some type of entertainment value, perhaps in a traveling circus playing to international crowds in second and third world countries or the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. People still pay good ticket prices to see exotic manipulations, especially in Vegas. And Frank, who certainly is exotic in his own way, may not have been exotic enough.

I say goodbye to the janitor by the main emergency desk and make a few more inquiries with the staff, I don’t stay too long because the hectic sounds of the busy room are getting on my nerves, and the smell of bleach reminds me of prison.
I really just wanted to get a feel for this place, to see if the place of Frank’s birth could tell us anything about his life, maybe take a look at those records. But the hospital is about like you’d figure, people sick, injured, or dying, with a bunch of healthy people acting important, trying to keep things sterile. Just like other places, people are fighting to save lives, fighting to save mortgages, except this is the place you go if you get a tuning fork stuck in your ear.

After saying adios to the janitor I stand in the emergency room and take it all in. I notice that none of the staff look my way, afraid I might give them something else they don’t have time to do. In fact, I notice hardly anyone looks at anyone in the eyes. Nobody looks my way once. They just walk around me like I’m a trashcan, even after I get an Almond Joy from the vending machine and munch right in the middle of the main intersection. I dodge a few rolling beds but nobody pays me any mind.

The elevator doesn’t have a basement button so I find the stairs and take them down and when I get there I met with a padlocked door. So I trudge back upstairs to my mom’s little sedan and grab her tire iron. I split a hole in my front jean pocket and hang the iron along my inside leg with the hook end on my belt. I un-tuck my shirt and walk back in the hospital and pop that lock off quick as you please.

The basement is a huge mess of files and equipment. I move to the nearest cabinet and start to search for dates but it’s like the records are in hieroglyphics, all dashes and random letters and numbers. I walk down the dimly lit rows and search through a few files but I’m no closer to finding the right one. Just when I’m about ready to give up figuring the records won’t give me anything new anyways, I hear the door
opening. I duck behind a row of files but then I see it’s the skinny janitor holding a mop handle. He turns the light on and yells out but I’ve already stepped out.

He doesn’t look surprised to see me. “I told you not to come down here. You could get into trouble being down here.”

“Trouble I’ve had. My friends history I don’t.”

“Well you can’t be down here. And you are going to have to see security about breaking that lock.”

We both know that’s not going to happen but I admire the old man’s gumption. I walk up to him smiling and I move in close like I’m going to pat him on the back but instead I just grab the mop handle and jerk it from his hands.

“I’m going to walk out of here and wedge this mop handle to block the door. When I get upstairs I’ll tell a nurse that someone I heard some kids in the basement when I was walking down the stairs and they sounded like they were up to no good. That way you don’t have to spend too long down here.”

He starts to mumble a complaint and I just take the mop handle and toss it from one hand to the other. I smile again and walk towards the door, picking up the tire iron I’d set down. “Don’t worry. I won’t leave you stranded down here.”

I take a cab home, eat mom’s rice pilaf with two scrambled eggs, sleep for two hours on the couch, and then I go to the bureau of transportation and get my driver’s license.

I buy a pick-up truck on the way home and call mom to come get her dinky sedan. The truck’s not new but it’s shiny and black and has a shell on the back that can work as
a bed. I ride with my hand out the window but I can’t believe how fast everything moves around me. The sidewalk shops pass like a blurry filmstrip. I’ve found myself concentrating on slowing down, on just trying to breathe (even between cigarette gulps). I feel calm sometimes and that scares me. I can’t afford to be calm. I’m not near as smart as I think I am, not as smart as the publisher, not even as smart as my own mother, and I’ve got keep my edge. Just trying to get an old hospital record I nearly got myself in trouble. I’ve got to find a way to live out here so that I don’t fall back on old habits, repeating the dumbass behavior when I was kid. But, then again, I’ve got something to do now and I’m stubborn, plain stubborn, stubborn about right and wrong, about doing a job the right way.

I call the publisher and he says that I need to meet with my probation officer once a month but that I can do it by phone. We don’t meet but I have to sign some papers down at his office. He swung a deal and put me on the official “payroll” so I didn’t need to worry about my work commitments. This puts me in some kind of debt to him and I don’t like it. I don’t trust him. But, then again, I don’t trust most folks and Frank said the man would give me a fair shake.

After signing the work papers and telling the secretary that I like her dress (she tells me it’s really a skirt and blouse), I buy my own new clothes at Sears and they don’t seem to fit me right in the dressing room mirror, like I’m getting ready for Halloween and nobody else decided to. I’m still long and lean but my skin is starting to age from
smoking, my face is taking on a leathery appearance, but when I look at my eyes they look bright, and I’m scared for a second before I steel myself. I stick with jeans and button up shirts. I want a new hat but they all seem too big for me. I splurge on some new cowhide boots with soft leather. I purchase some additions to the back of the truck including a battery-powered lantern, a sleeping bag and a thin foam mattress. I pick up a new Thermos to keep my coffee hot. This is my third day out so I need to leave the house. I bring home a new lawnmower that says it pushes itself and I figure Mama will appreciate it.

After lunch I tell her my plans. I’ve got my route mapped out. I stand in the kitchen doorway and look at her for a moment and something doesn’t seem right. Everything is working out too easy. I’ve got new clothes, a new truck, money, a purpose. I get a sick feeling that comes over my brain like a moldy helmet. I smile at my mother and walk onto the porch. I thought maybe leaving jail would be like leaving all the bad feelings behind. But I know that all I have is more options for dealing with the parts of yourself you don’t understand, the parts that leave you laying around all day, trying to get your vision back to your eyes, trying not to see the world down a long, dark tunnel and trying to remember your happy self isn’t a whole different person, it’s just not available for the time being. I miss Frank. I miss jail and this only makes me feel worse, weak for wanting more punishment.

I pack my truck and have ribs and corn on the cob with Mom. We sit on the porch and share a six-pack. We talk about Stephen King’s laziness, the decline in the quality of his writing at the sentence level. I tell her a long-winded author who remains
compelling is gold when you have time to kill. She says you can’t kill time. I tell her about the time Frank punched the cook with the pig’s snout because he kept giving Frank short helpings. The evening is comforting but it feels like a goodbye and I don’t like it one bit.

Mom goes to bed and I pick up Frank’s journal and place it on my thigh. I watch the bats dive in and out of the street light before I flip open the page to read about a Genie childhood. I figure I know more about Genies than I do normal folks. I guess this only means I’ve heard about the shitty sides of life more than most.

Off the shoreway to the West, pass the suburbs, in the side garden at the Oak Grove Nursing Home, I smell red rose’s blossoming behind the bench I’m sitting in, but former RN Nancy Wilborne’s spoiled perfume wafts my way and it’s like being stuck in traffic behind a dump truck full of rotting flowers. She is rambling about her grandchildren in the Carolinas and something about a recipe for crawdads and something about how girls in her day stuck to hand jobs and that seemed to work just fine.

I’m not even through with the first interview and I know this isn’t going to work the way I expected. I thought these old folks would just sit back in the rocker and fill in all the aspects of Frank’s life that seemed thin, different perspectives that could help me tell his story. Now I’m sitting in a garden with a woman who doesn’t know if her name is Lulu or King Kong.
“Well, of course I love squirrels, Mrs. Wilborne. Do you remember Frank at all? The gigantic baby?”

“The giant squirrel?”

“No, the giant giraffe. The huge baby you helped deliver.”

Mrs. Wilborne smiles, looks dreamily into the air with her yellow cataracts shining in the late morning sun. “I remember that baby.”

I lean forward in my chair.

“That baby was born with a tail. One of the new young residents got really angry and said something to the head physician about respecting the rights of the child and stormed out of the room. The head physician just said, “He’ll learn,” and he turned and cut that tail with a flip of his scalpel.”

Mrs. Wilborne made the cutting motion with her wrinkled, impossibly thin arm and wrist, snapping her fingers for emphasis.

“I remember another baby whose tail was long like a horse . . . beautiful brown . . . you could see how beautiful, even wet with the fluids . . . and they cut it just the same. Rumors were that one of the physicians took it home but nobody ever found anything. Some of the body parts were collectors’ items.”

“Was there anything else about Frank you remember, the big baby with the tail?” Lewis asked. Mrs. Lewis stared into the roses.

“I was torn at those moments. And I’m a tough cookie. I’ve seen things that you can’t forget in that hospital. But how do you decide when to make the baby more human, more normal? With the way things were at that time you didn’t know if being different
was the healthiest thing. The right thing. You just wanted to give the baby the best chance to live a normal life. But what is a normal life these days?

“Was there anything else you remember about the big baby?”

But Mrs. Lewis is gone. She’s looking at her lap and mumbling about stamp prices and Amelia Earhart. I ask her about Frank again but she responds with a diatribe about the decline in quality of the local applesauce.

I stay for a minute after the orderly wheels her back inside and I’m by myself in the garden. I smell the roses for a few minutes. I put my face down in the budding flowers and I pull heavy through my nose and then I’m thinking about smelling roses, wondering if it will help things slow down, make sense in some weird way. But it doesn’t. It just smells like roses, thick and sweet, and I know none of this is going to work out the way I expect.

So I decide to scrap my itinerary and head to Las Vegas and trust this publisher will handle my parole.

I drive the highway west straight from the nursing home. I’m not supposed to be out of state but I don’t really care at this point. I’ve never been west of the Mississippi River. I haven’t been laid in almost twenty years. I get on the road and start out the turnpike and before I know it I’m south of Chicago and onto the plains. It feels good to be on the road. I get to Iowa about midnight and I park at a Wal Store just outside of Des Moines. I sleep for six hours and then I drive through Nebraska and there is nothing but big sky above the horizon and below corn with the skyline occasionally interrupted by a lonesome farmhouse.
Colorado seems much the same but then the Rockies rise up like some kind of
demented mirage and I have to stop the truck because I can’t believe how the mountains
just keep getting bigger and bigger. I stand on the side of the road and eighteen-wheelers
whir by and I’m eating dust clouds, smiling ear-to-ear at the sight of these mountains that
rise up from the center of the earth like angry canine teeth, different than the soft,
rounded molars of the Appalachian ranges. I get back in my truck and eat a chocolate
pastry and pretzels and they taste good with the road peeling away in front of my
dimming lights. The road leads up into the mountains and it looks like I’m going to the
gates of a distant land and I feel excited and free like I’m young again.

I hope I don’t keep acting like I’m young again.

I didn’t pick Vegas just for the bright lights. Frank’s brother “settled down” in
the desert city and started a family. I can’t interview him though. Juan Flores is dead.
He died while Frank was in prison. Every time Frank talked about Juan he’d light up,
showing off his photo of Juan and him at senior prom (Frank’s suit is lime green and
discolored where the the arms and legs were extended). Then he’d show the action shot
of Juan in his soccer jersey, pretending to argue with Frank in his black referee shirt,
while Frank blew his whistle and pointed dramatically. He’d save the photo of them with
Guadalupe in the back yard for last, her small frame safe between her two boys. The
prison administrative yuppies didn’t let Frank fly out for the funeral because they weren’t
blood brothers and Frank is more than 5% manipulated. The suits can decide pretty much
whatever they want in regards to family matters when you are more than 5%.
Frank was more angry than I’d ever seen him when he found out he couldn’t attend the funeral. He kept pacing in the cell and stomping his feet like he was trying to dent the concrete, like if you’d put a pumpkin under his foot you’d get pie filling. He’d ram his head against his bunk too. I’d say something when he did that though. No use hurting yourself.

From what I surmised Juan sounded like a world-class fuck-up, although Frank talked about him like he was plated with gold. I wasn’t surprised when Frank asked me to see them after I got out. So I’m going to visit Juan’s widow and the kids.

I’m some ten miles outside Las Vegas at night and it’s lit like an alien spacecraft carrier landed in the middle of the desert. I can’t believe the glow from all the lights. It reminds me of a brightly lit aquarium with no lid. I drive closer and it just gets brighter and brighter until it begins to take shape on the horizon and then I’m in the glow myself and soon trolling down the main drag and I have trouble keeping my eyes on the road from the neon and strip hubbub. After nearly rear-ending a Rolls Royce while watching a blond woman rise up out of impossible red heels I pull into a huge hotel with gold tinted windows so I can get my feet on the ground. I check into the new Mirage and catch the fake volcano exploding on my way to walk the strip. I always liked geology.

I can’t believe the amount of people, the smell of money and sex in the air. It’s a carnival of suckers walking around getting entertained by the glitz and glamour of a city that advertises its particular sins right in your face. The only people who seem real are the recently arrived Midwesterners with the dumbstruck awe on their faces (myself included), the wide-eye foreigners with their cameras, and the homeless, who carry
slumped postures to a different time code, like they are moving beyond the veneer of this place, fidgeting like birds waiting either for breadcrumbs or simply standing still, placid, expectant, waiting for a slap in the face with a tire iron. Most of them seem brown-skinned but I can’t tell if that is the desert or the racial hierarchy or both. They wear baggy clothes for the arid climate and it’s hard to tell who is mutated.

I walk the whole strip . . . see a picker at work, taking pictures for tourists and fleecing their pockets when he hands back the camera, see a white tiger head sticking out of a limousine window, a fake blue whale at the foot of a huge glass pyramid. In the backdrop of everything on the strip is the kaleidoscope of glass, light, color, nude body parts, food, anything and everything to attract the eye . . . reflections of reflections. I don’t see many advertisements for mutated freak shows and I’m a bit surprised. I’d heard from many of the inmates in Mansfield that the highest population of mutations resided in Vegas, but I’ve only seen one woman with blue scales, a man with feathers sticking out of his long suit coat, and an advertisement for the fattest mutant in the world.

After my walk I rest my feet playing some black jack at the Bellagio. I like the jingling sounds of the slot machine, the clinking of chips.

I spot what looks like a friendly dealer and I play few hands and ask him about any dealers with a sixth finger. I tell him I heard they’re lucky. He tells me about a dealer at the Grand so I walk. I notice a tall, skinny guy working and he has the extra finger on each hand on the other side of his pinky. He uses the small finger to flip cards.

In jail I would play cards with a guy named Pocono’s Joe and he had the same mutation. Someone once called Pocono’s Joe a Hemingway cat and he busted his nose
with an elbow across the table. The Sixth Finger was a widespread scientific cult in the
60s that thought the extra digit was a sign of our evolution as humans. They genetically
spliced most of their children and home-birthed and so there are a whole slew of folks
with the sixth finger that are around my age.

As the dealer gets hot the table clears out.

“I notice your sixth’s,” I say, “I knew a guy in Mansfield with sixth’s. He was
good with cards as well.”

“A few of us out there. That is for sure. What is his name?”

“Pocono’s Joe.”

“That’s my cousin on my mother’s side. How’s he doing?”

“Last I knew he was fine, riding out time for the forgery.”

“Dumbass. I told him to stick to cards.”

We make small chat for a while as he slowly takes my money. I tell him about
Pocono’s Joe and his crossword passion and a how he hated milk so much he’d complain
about the smell if you opened it near him. I tell the dealer I’ve been out for a few weeks
and came out to blow off seventeen years of steam. He grins. We chat some more and I
steer the conversation to Vegas, mutations.

“They don’t use Genies in the shows like they used to,” he says. “It was the rage
up through the early 80s but then the political correctness caught up and the public just
stopped going. Plus they had to deal with the activists. So they just sidelined us, so to
speak. If you look closely you’ll notice that most of us work with the public in some
capacity. We aren’t “featured” but we aren’t behind the scenes either. They like us to display, but not to be displayed. If that makes sense.”

“A strange world we live in,” I say.

“Hit?” He gathers the cards. “There is still a pretty large market in the sex trade, specialty stuff. We get some of the spots in the big shows too, depending on your manipulation.” He glances up from the cards as he deals the next hand. “Being from Mansfield are you . . . ?”

“No. When they transferred the prison to only accepting manipulates I had only been there a year or so. I was grandfathered in. They kept a few of us so that they didn’t have to say it was a “special” prison. Everyone knew otherwise. But I’ve seen just about every mutation that’s out there, I’d guess. At least the ones that have spent time in jail.”

“You haven’t been to Vegas.”

We share a smile.

A retired couple wearing visor hats sits down at the table. The woman is wearing a black sweatshirt with a poodle airbrushed on the front. The man has orange sunglasses in the breast pocket of his shirt.

“You hitting big or what?” The woman screeches, nestling into her seat.

“Where’s the cocktail waitress? I swear. Marty, do you see the cocktail waitress? Oh you are manipulated. Honey, look, he’s got extra fingers.”

I look up at the dealer and we share a glance.

“I think I’ll be moving down the road.” I say, putting a few healthy chips down for tip.
“You let me know if you need anything while you’re in town, Lewis. Get my number from the valet on the way out. He’ll know it’s OK. I don’t give it out while I’m under the eye,” he says, glancing up towards the small round cameras above.

I was hoping he’d say that. I walk back to my hotel fighting the urge to get back into old habits. This town doesn’t sleep and I realize I’m not tired at all. But I need to shower and get some shuteye so I spill myself into the softest bed I can remember. I start thinking about how I’ll never get to sleep and then I close my eyes and I’m gone.

After steak and hash browns at the breakfast bar, I’m back in my truck and following an address I pulled from an old letter of Juan’s. It feels like my hands might melt on the steering wheel and my ass burn through my jeans. The sun rises up in the sky out here like a torch and it means business. The address I’m searching for is off the strip and I pass through a bunch of new construction, into adobe tract housing with maroon trim. When I pull up to the house I park at the curb and notice the cheap fence around the sand yard. I don’t know how people live out here with so little green. Everything out-of-doors seems to range from beige to more beige with a touch of brown. A few kid toys are scattered about the yard, including a beat-up soccer ball.

When I knock on the door a woman answers. She’s got tired creases around her brown eyes and wears a loose-fitting long sleeve blouse and jeans. Her black hair falls down her back and is tinged with silver. The hair shines.

“Ms. Flores? I’m Lewis Williams. I knew your husband.”

“I’ve told them before that it’s in collections and is being handled by the courts.” She starts to close the door.
“I’m not here for money, just to talk.”

“What on God’s Earth would make you think I want to talk to you about anything?”

“I only knew Juan through his brother, Frank. I’m writing a book about Frank and I wondered if you could help me fill in some information about Frank and Juan’s childhood.” I hold up two pictures up with one hand, one of Frank and Juan in this front yard I’m standing in, and one of me and Frank in our cell pretending to ski.

She looks me up and down with a lifted eyebrow. “You are writing a book?”

“I didn’t say it was a good book.”

I smile big and goofy.

She stares at me for a few seconds and makes a hrmph sound. She looks at the pictures. “Frank called to say you’d be coming around. My kids will be back for lunch in a few minutes. You’ve got five.”

She opens the screen door and I walk into the small, two-bedroom house. The kitchen smells like beans and tortillas. The place is cluttered but clean. Cacti are placed around the television. The couch is worn thin on the cushions and armrests.

“So you knew Frank?” She says.

“I was Frank’s cellmate for four years. I knew him enough to know how much he cared about your husband.”

“My ex-husband was a no-account. He drank or drugged himself to death. Probably both. It doesn’t matter. Why don’t we sit in the kitchen?”
I take the cup of coffee she offers. She stays busy cutting up peppers and onions and piling them into a skillet.

“You met Frank when the picture with Juan was taken?”

“I took that picture.” She points to my breast pocket. “He came to visit when Juan Jr. was born. Juan didn’t’ want him to. He didn’t like Frank to see him down on his luck, which was all the time that I knew him. He made all kinds of excuses. Normally he was a good liar. I should know. But when he tried to lie to Frank on the phone it just came out all wrong. He’d stumble over his words. I actually found it quite funny. Finally Frank insisted he was coming out when the baby was born. Juan and him had some drinks, walked the strip, talked about old times. Frank loved the baby, Juan Jr. He looked like he was cradling a little bird . . . fit right into one hand.”

She gets the peppers and onions hot in some butter and then she goes back to rolling tortillas. I just ate a t-bone but this food smells so good I find my stomach making hungry noises.

“Did Juan mention anything about their childhood? Them growing up?”

“He talked about that like it was the only time in his life was any good, except when he was lying to me about how much he loved me, how much “he loved this place.”

She makes bunny ears around this last part and I realize that I like this woman. I like her first impression and that counts a lot to me. I wonder how she could end up with someone like Juan and then I realize that Juan was probably a better catch than myself, all things considered. But it makes me hold out hope that there is a woman out there for
me. Someone who might understand my ways, like me for who I am. She goes back to the tortillas and her long hair shimmers in the soft light of the kitchen.

“I’ve got some letters of Juan’s. I think some of them are from Frank. I know some are. You can take them if you want. I don’t need them.”

“How you keeping the family together? Paying the bills?” I ask.

She turns to look at me. Her face softens when she notices my embarrassment of my lack of tact. “Day by day. Just like when Juan was here. At least now I know what I can count on. I’ve got good boys.”

She bends down in a lower cupboard and in the process of looking at her backside I notice the soles of her feet raising out of her sandals. They are flat and dusty, like they’ve put down some miles.

I sit back in my chair and sip from my mug. The coffee is dark and strong. I imagine myself with a family, kids. I imagine living in the desert, fixing old cars or irrigation systems. It doesn’t seem to fit right in my brain just yet but it is a comfortable dream.

“If you don’t mind I’d like to take a look at those letters.” She goes in the bedroom and I hear her shuffling. She comes back out and hands me a cigar box stuffed full.

“You can have them. I’ve got no use for them anymore.”

“Thank you.”
We hear the bus outside and the kids rush in the house like gangbusters. I put the letters aside. A high voice yells through the house, “Mommy, Juan won’t give me my fruit roll-up I got from Ronny’s show-and-tell.”

The little one skids to a halt in the kitchen and Juan Jr. is close behind. They start to plead their cases until they see me sitting in the kitchen. They look at me and then look to their mom and just stand and stare with their big brown eyes, slack-jawed.

“Juan, give your brother his fruit roll-up. This is Mr. Williams. He was a friend of your Uncle Frank.”

They both look at me like I’m famous.

“You knew Frank!” they say in unison.

“He was my good friend.”

“What was he like?” The younger one asks.

“Shut up, Paulito!”

“Juan, mind your manners.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Frank was a lot of things. I’m sure you know how he refereed some of the biggest soccer matches in the country, that he was in games with some of the best players in the world.”

“He met Raul? Marc Antony!”

“They all knew Frank,” I say.

“Was he as tall as he looks in pictures?”
“He could shake your hand from outside the school bus window while you were sitting inside.”

“Whoa!”

“Sit down and eat, boys. Mr. Williams, would you like a plate?”

“That would be nice.”

We sit and eat the tortillas with peppers, onions, beans and hot sauce.

“My dad used to tell them me how Frank could block the whole goal just standing but with his arms out but he couldn’t be a goalkeeper because once he fell down it took two guys to help him back up.”

“That and because he was a freaking mutant,” Paulito says.

“Paulito! Where did you learn that?”

“The boys at school.”

“Don’t look at me!” Juan Jr. says.

I smile at Paulito who is slumping down in his chair.

“I’ve known a lot of manipulated folks. You might want to be careful calling them a mutant to their face. They might get the wrong idea. They might think you don’t think of them as people. If you know them a bit you might call them a Genie, but I wouldn’t stray too far. Some Genies can be mean, just like all different kinds of people can be mean.”

Paulito leans up in his chair and looks at me. “Yes, sir.”

“Excuse me,” I say, pushing back from the table, “I need to get something from my truck.”
“Boys, get your school bags. You need to get back before the bell.”

I hear the scrape of Ms. Flores picking up the dishes and I walk out the front door. When I return I shake the boys’ hands each like it was a formal engagement. They run down the street with the back-backs flopping up and down.

I turn back to Ms. Flores. She is standing in the doorway. I hand her a manila envelope Frank left in a safety deposit box at the Mirage. “Frank asked me to make sure you got this. He asked that, if you can, you’d start a college fund for the boys with part of it.”

She begins to open it and I put my hand over hers. “It’s twenty thousand. You might not want to count that in the open.” She looks down at the envelope as if it had sprouted antlers. She looks at up at me.

“I’d like to stop by again, if I’m ever in town. D . . . do . . . do you think that might be all right? Maybe I can bring you a copy of the book when it’s done.”

The silence hangs awkwardly and we stare at our feet. I’ve surprised myself again.

“I’d like that, Mr. Williams.”

I hold out my sweaty hand and we shake and her touch is dry and soft. Then I haul ass out of there before I say something stupid. She is still standing in the doorway when I drive off and I roll the window down and wave. She keeps looking at me as I drive away and I keep checking for her as long as I can in my rearview mirror. When I pull my gaze down I catch a glimpse of my own face and it’s a happy, smiling face, and I recognize it has to be my own but it just doesn’t seem like me.
It is hot in the truck with the window down. I glance down at the passenger’s seat at the box of letters. My brain begins to worry about my promise to Frank, about kids I just met getting hit by a car, about maintaining my control in this world, finding purpose. I’m not smiling anymore and I start feeling calmer that way. I think this is one of the big changes I went through in jail, keeping myself even-keeled. Anytime I start feeling too good about things I start worrying about how and when the happiness is going to end. Then it ends (most often before it needs to) and I ground myself in the dry reality of the world, trying not to fall too far down. I didn’t play this mind trick on myself before I got in jail and it took me a year or two incarcerated to train my mind to stop being so damn foolish, to stop thinking the world was meant to be happy all the time.

Those early years were dangerous years, staying up all night considering ways to do myself in, trying to fill time with expensive toilet gin and cigarettes sprayed with PCP. All the simplest things in life seemed awful. I couldn’t eat. I’d get so worked up that I couldn’t sit still. My brain felt like if it were a machine it would get caught on high gear with smoke coming out the belts and the oil running low. I felt guilty for my crimes, guilty about everything.

During my early, incarcerated years the government changed the prison population to specialize in mutants and the guards were cracking down like they were the Third Reich. This was before they realized that most of the manipulated inmates were just as happy inside prison as anywhere in the outside world and they weren’t looking to cause trouble, on the whole. In Mansfield, Genies were around their own kind, not only on the level of genetics, but they were around other people who felt trapped, under the
thumb of the world. In the “real world” they are not only under the thumb, but were alone most of the time, or struggling along in some small, flimsy allegiance. When I stopped smoking PCP I learned that I was more like the Genies than I figured, on the outside looking in. Once I learned to cut out my highs and lows, recognized that it was better to keep a mood somewhere in the middle ground, I felt a lot better about my place in the world. I started to fit in . . . one of the normal guys who understands that certain radio frequencies will cause Bat-Face Bill to bleed from his ears, that Big Myron needs help getting up from his cafeteria chair and you shouldn’t look when he’s getting helped, that a prison cook with a snout cannot be trusted.

But now my place of understanding is gone and I’ve got that anxious feeling of being in a strange world, coming down from the high and not knowing how far, or where, you’re going to drop. It was easy with drugs because you knew you had to come back down. This high is different. So I light a cigarette and pull deep in my lungs and realize I don’t have to find ways to stare at my applesauce in a pleasing mindset. I am free and can adjust my mood to fit my needs. I can fall where I want to fall.

I wonder if I’m still falling right now. I notice how much easier it is to smoke in the desert, how the smoke seems to just know where it is supposed to go, fit the shape of the lungs, curl around your hand and billow into small clouds, joining the space of the world in a pleasing manner.

I glance down at the cigar box of letters in the passenger’s seat. I’m still on high and I’m looking to get loose.
The next morning, watching the desert blur through the pink lens of a heart-shaped van window, I wipe the slobber from my cheek and my head rings like my whole brain is a tuning fork the size of a shovel that’s been dropped in an iron cauldron. I slowly glance around the van and see three people in back, two in front. The man next to me turns to meet my gaze and he blinks at me from his captain’s chair with one, centralized eyeball.

“We have contact,” he says.

“Lewis, good to have you back with us.” The Bellagio dealer with sixths turns around to glance at me from the driver’s seat. “How you feeling?”

“Dandy,” I mutter.

I turn and look behind me and try to focus. A very pretty striped-skinned woman with a horn coming out of her forehead smiles. A vague memory returns of snorting coke off her belly and the small blond hairs glowing against her skin. Next to her is a pug-faced man with floppy ears and blue eyes. He looks to be about three feet tall. He doesn’t smile.

“You mind pulling over for a minute?” I ask.

“Should be a station in about fifteen minutes.”

“I don’t need a station,” I mutter.

Sixths turns to look at me and I must look green like I feel because he pulls over and I topple out of the van and hurl on the base of a sage bush.
“Bathroom break! Purging!” someone yells from behind me and I think it is the Cyclops. I look between my legs but I can’t be sure.

The night slowly unfolds in my memory:

--meeting Sixth’s at the Bellagio
--picking up people in van, bottles of brown liquor
--driving, smoking, unfolding at the old mission with the horse hitch posts
--fiddle music and a fiery rock face, dancing, clear liquor, lamb on a stick
--a man with bark for skin recites poetry about vintage cars and basketball
--a woman with four arms plays the French Horn
--nose to the unicorn belly, soaring,
--snake dance, yellow hair, wool blanket, sandstone, sweet liquor, blackness

I’ll have to fill in the gaps later. Right now I’m sucked dry like a raisin and feeling miserable about myself. I heave a bit more and crush some dried sage between my fingers and waft the smoky-sweet smell to my nose while waiting to see if I heave again. Small flakes of sage are stuck on my fingertips.

I know I’m going to have trouble making it out in this world if I don’t put myself in healthier situations. I’m no good to myself. I think about my mother and feel sorry for being a no-account son. I think about Frank and I chuckle and it hurts in a dark way. I just want to be useful. I want to feel comfortable in my own skin. I want to take my family on vacations, maybe charter fishing on Lake Erie, but I don’t even have a
girlfriend. I think about Ms. Flores and realize I don’t know her first name. I think about me with a family and I chuckle again, realizing I’ve got a ways to go before I start thinking about my American dreams.

I’m such a baby sometimes. I party with a bunch of people who are treated like fancy animals, who are forced into this world by God’s alternate hand, who can’t own a business, can’t get married, can’t make children. I’m crying about the hand I’ve been dealt like I’ve got no control over it. I turn my head and watch the striped woman walking with pug-ears down the side of the highway. They aren’t talking, just walking together. Pug-ears is much shorter and he bends down to pick up a rock. I hear Cyclops and Sixths arguing about peripheral vision. I wonder if it’s worse to be a mutant in jail or to be free. These folks have the same sad eyes, the same grizzled understanding of hate in their postures, in their stubborn, sarcastic countenance. In jail most of the Genies were this way, but resigned to their day-to-day routine in a mostly harmonious, patterned way. But you get that way in prison. Out here things have an edge to them, like it’s harder to settle in, be comfortable. Maybe that is why instead of partying in the sin-city they pack up vehicles and make for the desert, away from the crowds. When you are free you shouldn’t feel trapped, resigned to repeating mistakes. Most Genies I talked to say that feeling never goes away, the feeling that you are trapped, that your life was a mistake. Me, being all human, free, healthy, pure, and still feeling like this, is . . . well . . . it makes me not like myself very much.
I stand up slowly, try to bare my chest to the breeze, try to gather my strength but I just feel tired. I wonder if thinking free and being free are the same thing. I look at my companions and laugh at my stupidity. I take a whiff of my sage fingers.

It is really dry out here. I try to speak but all that comes out is raspy whisper. Cyclops sees me and comes over with some water.

“Pretty country,” I finally choke out.

Cyclops grins and pats me on the back and it feels like he’s slung a bag of potatoes at me. A lizard darts behind a rock.

We get back in the van and drive to Las Vegas and I sit in my hotel room and drink water and order fresh citrus fruit from room service and feel sorry for myself some more. I think about going over to see Ms. Flores. I don’t. I think about tying one on again with the Genies. I don’t. I think about what I should be doing with my time and I open up the box of Frank’s letters on the flower-print bedspread. I think about how to eat my fruit in a good frame of mind. I think about what that takes.

When I get tired of the television I open Frank’s letters to Juan. They smell like a woman, like Ms. Flores.

The letter that sparks my interest is stamped a few years before Frank came to Mansfield, April 2nd, 1986. It starts with the normal how-dee-dos and then Frank writes about an old childhood friend:

. . . You remember Billy Coogan? You may not recognize him from the photo I’ve included (he was chunky in high school but not fat-fat like he is here). He was at the orphanage
with me and was in high school with us. He lived down the block from our old house for a year or so with the Reichman’s. He’s the one that told me skunk cabbage was rhubarb and I took it home and it stunk up the whole kitchen. Anyway, he’s a big-time pastor now. I couldn’t believe it. He leads this huge church West of Cleveland just past Westerville. I saw him in Chicago. They are opening a big new church there and he saw I was working the Celtic game so he came down afterwards and we had some dinner and he gave me a tour of the new place. It sure is big and already has big t.v. tower. I thought for sure he was going to ask me for a donation but he didn’t even bring it up. He’s already got his own television show in Cleveland (an hour weekly called *God’s Corridor*) which just went regional. I never did like him much but he seems different now (if you remember he’s the guy from school who was suspected of burning down the softball dugout). I’m not much for people being “saved” but it seems to have worked for him. He certainly seems different than he did back then. He asked about you and sends his regards and he says he was real sorry to hear about your injury . . .

The letter goes on to Frank’s new obsession with chocolate covered bacon and ends with a recipe for cabbage soup and gossip of several players on Mexico’s national soccer team concerning a certain baby’s daddy. But this writing about the pastor and the photograph makes me wonder if this guy might not have played a larger role in Frank’s life than it might appear.

The photograph in the envelope is in front of the front entrance of the Church of Christ. Frank and the fat pastor are standing in front of the alcove and I can see the address on the building. He’s got his meaty arm over his head with his hand stuck out straight like he’s measuring Frank’s height. His smile isn’t playful. His face looks like he is sizing up a fish that he just hauled in and figuring out where the best filet will come
from. My perception might have to do with my lack of trust of organized religion (not most churches themselves but many of the practitioners that “manage” the religious organizations). I tend to trust my instincts, and even if it is only from seeing one expression in this photograph. I think this guy is snake-tongued.

But I’m going to track this guy down for several other reasons. First, he knew Frank from the orphanage, in high school, and as an adult. Not many of the orphanage church folk are alive and the ones that are don’t exactly create a buzz with their memories. Second, this guy will sell books. Frank told me to get quotes from recognizable public figures if I thought the book needed help broadening its audience. This guy has his own television show. The third reason, and the one relying most upon my hunch, has to do with the fact that this pastor is the same Billy Coogan from Frank’s memoir and I’m curious to meet him. Then again, you know what they say about curiosity.

I know Frank held back some information from me (we all have our secrets). But with the amount of time we spent listening to each other use the bathroom (Frank’s bladder must have been the size of a water cooler) and discussing our histories, I’m sure Frank would have mentioned this guy more often, especially if he was at the orphanage. And that makes me wonder . . . why would a guy that Frank didn’t even like try to meet up with him after so many years?

I drive the Northern route out of Las Vegas feeling mostly human again, wondering if I’m not just going on a goose chase. I call mother from Salt Lake City. She says she’s knitting potholders and I explain my hunch. She tells me to trust my instincts
and asks me if I’ve gotten “laid” yet and I tell her maybe this one night at an old mission
in the desert but I can’t remember due to complications with thin blood and possible
chemical contamination. She says that sounds about right and to make sure when I blow
all my money I try to spend as much as possible on complete strangers.

It is nice to hear her voice.

I take my time driving, stopping when the mood strikes. I hit Salt Lake City and
continue North to Jackson Hole and drink a beer at a bar covered with silver dollars
placed neatly row upon row. I sleep in the truck and wake to the Teton’s staring down
like giant sentinels. Yellowstone has always been on my list so I stop for a few days,
time old faithful, watch the bubbling hot springs, bison wallowing and scratching off
their huge tufts of wiry fur. I buy an extra thermos for my coffee and try to write about
Frank’s use of his eyebrows and his ability to use the knobs on his head to balance two
cans of soda at once.

When I hit the flatlands heading east I figure my sightseeing is over and I hunker
down on route 90 and that’s when I hit the fields of Yellow Trees. They aren’t really a
tree at all but a hybrid sunflower. Some scientist crossed the DNA of the traditional
sunflower with the Texas Silverleaf to make the genetically altered version they are
growing all through the Dakotas. The annuals are blooming, rising up on both sides of
the roads like huge yellow umbrellas. They are fifteen feet tall and the flower-plates are
almost two feet across. The space above the two-lane highway is almost covered with the
huge discs of yellow arching over the road to gather more light. Driving through them is
like trying to focus too tightly on a Van Gogh painting.
When I pull the truck over and step out it feels like I’m on another planet. The stalks are almost six inches thick and I can hear the buzz of bees and insects high above me. I look through the rows and it’s like being in a herd of frozen giraffes (I wonder if Frank ever saw these) and the yellow glow under the canopy against the blue sky is well . . . not like the gray stone of my prison memory.

I think of Ms. Flores and her smile changing in the yellow glowing light.

My old watering holes are calling me on a Saturday night but I go to mom’s place and clean the travel off so that I can make myself presentable for church. I haven’t been since I was fifteen and it makes me more nervous than if I was going to my first Narcotics Anonymous meeting (there was too much God in their program for me too . . . I only lasted three weeks before I just decided to just dry out and start treating my body like I gave a shit about it and that has worked surprisingly well). I figure to check out Billy Coogan’s service, get a read on him before I introduce myself.

In Mansfield you could go to all kinds of church services. At least you could go to all the churches and religious services that accepted mutated genetics. That leaves out the Catholics and Southern Baptists and several other denominations including some traditional Islamic fundamental faiths that abstained from representing themselves in our prison. Hinduism was the most popular amongst the Genies for reasons pertaining to the afterlife (they do match up well, philosophically). The churches that didn’t accept mutants would try to come into the prison on “missions” to save “tortured souls” but as
soon as the prisoners got wind of their arrival they’d sabotage them. This mostly involved food manipulation or casual pranks but one time Lobster Claws McGee shoved a folded mini Gideon’s bible up a priest’s robes to where the sun doesn’t shine and ran through the cell blocks singing “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah” at the top of his lungs. None of the religions that didn’t baptize mutations came back to Mansfield after that, although the song became a favorite whenever anybody got embarrassed from a prank of especially high quality.

The Church of Christ property is in the suburbs west and south of town and takes up several blocks and looks like they just cut the ribbon on the whole lot. It is like driving up to a new shopping mall or convention center. Security is controlling the flow of traffic in and out of the complex. The television tower rises up like an oil drill at one end of the T shaped main building.

I drive through one of the gates and park next to a mini-van that looks like it is made from hard plastic, like if you drove it off a cliff it would glide for a moment in an updraft. A squeaky-clean family tumbles out, all smiles and khakis except for a young girl who comes out last all droopy-eyed like she just woke up. She stands right outside my window rubbing her eyes but she doesn’t see me just a few feet away. Her dad yells at her to hurry up and she brushes the hair from her eyes and starts slowly forward. She reminds me of a cult-movie zombie except in this movie the zombie is moving forward to be ensnared by humans, not the other way around. I feel like yelling to her to watch out for the rest of the movie but her type always makes it through.
The Erie Church of Christ follows the 5% baptism rule. You can attend and pray and give money if you are a Genie, if you aren’t “human,” you just can’t eat the bread or drink the wine or get into the Holy Gates. If their church sent a representative to Mansfield they wouldn’t fare well with conversions.

The morning service starts in fifteen minutes. I sit in the back row.

The place is filling up faster than Noah’s Ark in a torrential downpour. Suited old people smelling like mothballs and thick perfume are mixed with large families, some dressed neatly in sweaters and ties, some dressed in ripped jeans and t-shirts. One fat man is wearing a gray sweat-suit but most people have at least tried to be presentable. I don’t know the fashions though. Times change when you spend a couple decades reading and watching television in the same room (sitcoms only get you so far).

There are a lot of moon-faced women and some are alone and I try to smile when they look my way. I figure while I’m waiting I can try to use my time wisely. I didn’t get dressed up in my button down and elk antler bolo tie for nothing.

The room is big and airy and a large video screen hangs at the back of the carpeted altar. When the lights go out I feel like I’m back at the prison preparing for the weekly matinee. The crowd whispers in the dark and a tingle of anticipation hangs in the voices. A small silver cross flickers on the screen, slowly growing larger and more illuminated as an organ plays a single low note. As the cross grows to full size, glowing bright, the single musical note changes a note higher, getting louder and louder. At the crescendo the hidden chorus, out of sight in a balcony above my head, launches into a glorious version of “Redemption” and the show is underway.
The pastor walks in front of the cross like a luminary, his arms spread open, smiling. The spotlight breaks through the still-dim room and he is lit with the cross glistening behind him, his silky, loose-fitting black robe glowing on the edges. The chorus continues and the pastor smiles, nodding his head at certain members of the congregation like a rock star. His arms remain wide open as if he is trying to embrace the whole crowd.

I was expecting a fat man to come on stage but this guy is thin. He asks everyone to bow their heads, standing backlit by the cross of Jesus.

I believe in God and I bet Jesus was a cool dude. I figure not believing in some type of God doesn’t acknowledge power greater than our own and that doesn’t make sense to me. Somebody or something had to create this shit. But that doesn’t mean I like church folks. Most church folks judge you for how you believe in God, check to make sure your God has the right clothes and the right book and the right mandates. I do like the church folks that mind their own and don’t judge others people. Those churches tend to tie a community together and foster tight-knit relationships, foster peace and prosperity and goodwill and all that shit. I’m jealous of that kind of church, of that kind of community. A lot of Genies in jail would say religion is being brainwashed but I figure we’re all brainwashed, it’s just a matter of what type of sterilizer you choose.

Scanning the stage area brings me no closer to finding the fat pastor so I settle back in my chair to watch the show. After a few updates on the church softball league and a venue change to the weekly finance education course, another video flashes on. The first image is of a brown-skinned infant crying in the foreground of a rubble-strewn
street. *Ecuador needs our help* appears on the screen. Images of skinny men standing in line at a banana truck, sad-faced women weaving, white doctors treating crippled elders, toddlers playing in trash, and a white church set in majestic green hills, are followed by the video asking for financial support for the people of Ecuador, for the church mission there.

Then we stand and sing some hymns. I mostly just move my lips and say watermelon-watermelon. I glance up and notice small black video cameras just like in the Vegas clubs. I guess the Honduran Mission drive is succeeding.

A few folks come out to read bible passages and I only see this skinny pastor and I wonder if I’m just wasting my time, if Billy Coogan isn’t here at all. I re-check the church bulletin in my lap and it reads Pastor Billy Coogan, emblazoned in faux gold lettering right on the front of the pamphlet under a bunch of puffy clouds with sunlight beaming through them. The inside says the sermon is titled, “God’s Harvest”. Maybe he’ll come out just for the sermon.

But this skinny fellow starts the sermon and I forget about Billy Coogan. This guy is good. He asks for God’s guidance and I can feel the attention from the congregation like a warm glow from a downed-electrical wire. I notice the zombie girl yawn and sit back in her seat, but everyone else is all ears. The pastor purrs one moment and the next he is yelling like his cat got hit by a car, “let me humbly understand . . . GOD . . . how I love you . . . I DEMAND . . . forgiveness for my sins . . . I DEMAND . . . guidance in these tumultuous times . . . GOD . . . explain to me the meaning of our
bounty, the TRUE NATURE . . . of our follies, what I SHOULD FEAR, what I should give . . .”

The congregation takes it in like a wooden spoon gathering sugar in a cotton candy machine. The pastor continues on about sharing their wealth (not just money but forgiveness, caring, sharing all the bounties of our personal harvest) and he finishes with a gentle call to help our needful brothers and sisters not just home but abroad. When the collection dish is passed to me it is stuffed with cash and coins and envelopes. I pass it right along and I get a frown from the altar boy who looks like he more like an altar-man who just finished a shift bartending at a biker rally after flunking out of the state college and getting thrown off the wrestling team.

Then the call for communion goes out and I join the line so I can get a better look around the place.

I was baptized at nine. After being dunked I never went to church. My father told me that it was my decision whether to go to service from then on. Mother had given him a sideways look but it was settled. I went a few times in prison but it really wasn’t my crowd. Most of my friends were Genies and not many Genies were the church-going type. The pastor seemed nice most of the time but it just wasn’t my thing.

People here all smell the same like a funeral home, flower oils and clean chemicals. The pastor seems more and more familiar the closer I get and I wonder if he spent any time in the jail. When I reach out my hand, palm forward to receive the wafer, I look close in the pastor’s eyes and I realize it’s Pastor Billy Coogan.

“Body of Christ,” he says.”
“Bloody Christ,” I whisper.

I look down at his loose-fitting robe on his bony frame and it can’t be the same person that was in the photo unless he dropped a good two hundred pounds in the meantime. The bread is dry and the wine surprises my tongue and I make a sour face and look back at the pastor and I see him glance out of the corner of his eye. When I get back to my seat I pull out the photo and try to match the two faces. Unless they are twins they’ve got to be the same.

The rest of the service I fidget in my seat and we sing some more songs and they pass the tin around again and when we’re leaving the zombie girl gives me a bored stare as she waits for the line to file out.

I’ve smoked two cigarettes in succession after making an inquiry about Pastor Coogan at the information desk. After waiting ten more minutes I approach the second time and tell the information lady that Pastor Coogan and I share a mutual friend, Frank Flores. Not long after that the altar-man from my row comes out and says, “Pastor Coogan will see you.”

“Hallelujah,” I say and follow him passed the information desk into a series of offices. We continue weaving back passed the main chapel, passed the altar, and we find Pastor Coogan disrobing in the sacristy. I notice the altar-man has a slight limp.

“Pastor Coogan . . . Mr. . . .”

“Williams.”

“Mr. Williams to see you.”
Pastor Billy Coogan becomes Billy Coogan right before my eyes, pulling the black robe over his head and placing it on a hangar, his back to me. I notice his shirt gets pulled up while he takes off the robe and the raw skin of his back looks like a soiled tan balloon, stretched and re-stretched and ugly with little purple veins. He turns around while he tucks in his dress shirt to his slacks. He looks at his altar-man.

“Thank you Donald,”

“Do you nee . . . ?

“That will be all.”

Donald pauses for a moment like he’s expecting a treat and then he slinks away and I notice his limp is because of a prosthetic foot on his left side.

“Mr. Williams . . . we haven’t met.” He extends his hand like a tongue and I shake it like one, barely touching it although part of me wants to squeeze it hard and feel it squirm and maybe give it a yank to loosen it a bit from the socket.

“I wasn’t expecting you so soon . . . do you have a response to the offer I extended to the publisher?”

The sacristy reminds me of the dressing room at Sear’s, efficient and plain, not at all ornate like I thought it would be. A long mirror hangs on a small closet door and two chairs sit stiffly on either side of a head-high faux beech sapling. Billy Coogan drags one of the chairs over to the mirror. He opens the closet door and pulls out a small box that looks like it holds fishing tackle.

“Do you mind?”

I shake my head. He begins to apply eyeliner in the mirror.
“I have a short television spot today. Normally I tape my show during the week but the producer had some bad lighting on some of the close-ups.”

I lean against the doorframe.

“I didn’t expect you to be a direct part of the negotiations?”

I had no idea what he was talking about and my silent routine was running thin.

“So I know you grew up with Frank, but how well did you know him?”

“Not as well as you did, I’m afraid. The publisher said you were cellmates for four years. Seems to me you might get attached in that amount of time. But we had some history.” His voice rises slightly as he looks over his eyelashes effeminately. When he continues a slight edge is added to his tone. “But my relationship to Frank is exactly the thing we are trying to remove from this publication . . . is it not?

Now we’re getting somewhere, I think. Why wouldn’t he want his relationship to Frank in the book? Why would he be willing to pay for it otherwise?

“Do you mind if I sit down?”

“Please.”

I sit beside the beech sapling and have to turn it to stop a fake plastic branch from continuously poking me in the ear. I’m behind Billy Coogan and he’s facing me through the mirror.

“How did you lose all the weight?”

“Lyposuction and a small bypass. Gastric bypass. Amazing innovation. Changed my life. We timed it so I’d take a leave from the Cleveland church, start up again and return again there triumphant. It’s a fucking cake-walk as long as you don’t
gorge and rip something. You’ve got to eat little bits at a time . . . chew your food to mush otherwise you get a searing pain, vomiting, that kind of thing.”

“The vacuum and the snippers?”

“Something like that,” he looks up at me in the mirror reflection, “It’s made me closer to God.”

I finger one of the fake plastic leaves. “So why not double the payment?”

Pastor Billy Coogan stops with the small tweezers as they go towards his right nostril. He is still talking to me through the mirror.

“Is this an offer from your collective or from you personally?”

“Does it matter?”

“I should know what I’m paying for.”

As much as all my instincts tell me this guy is a snake (and I’m sure he is), I admire his moxie and I know better than to underestimate his type.

“I think some individual gains would be appropriate from my position.”

“Do you mind if I consider that for a few moments? I’ve got to shoot these lines and then I will be free to discuss this further. How about we meet in a few hours?”

“Peachy.”

Pastor Coogan puts the finishing touches on his cheeks and pulls his robe back on. I watch the sun brighten and make four rectangular holes on the carpet before he steps through them.

“Mr. Williams?”

“A nice room. Do you mind if I hang out for a little while?”
He looks around and shrugs his shoulders.

“Pastor, one more thing. Why did you want to meet Frank after all those years?”

“Well, I’d hope that would be obvious, Mr. Williams.”

I cock my head to the side.

He returns the gesture.

“Nostalgia, of course. I believe the Lord gave us that unique sensation so that we may recognize our past mistakes and seek redemption.”

“I see.”

“He plots our course in mysterious ways.”

Pastor Billy Coogan turns and walks away and his black robe flairs out behind him like a tail and I’m left with four rectangles of light on the carpet, mottled by the foliage of a fake tree.

So this snake will call the publisher first and find out that I’m acting independently. He’ll still need to respond to me. I still don’t know the exact details of why he doesn’t want to be a part of Frank’s book, but I know I need to find the facts so I can stop bluffing my way through things. Or do I? Maybe he’s just willing to make sure he doesn’t appear in an unsavory way in a famous book about a mutant for fear of what it will do to his reputation. His reputation does pay the bills (and them some, I imagine), that and his ability to manipulate people. So as long as I know that “something” in his involvement with Frank would harm him, I can play along.

The publisher is going to be pissed.

I walk the neighborhood and chain smoke for two hours.
When I return I’m told by the mousy receptionist that Pastor Coogan had an urgent hospital call but he asked that Donald see you to your vehicle. I turn and walk towards the door. I hear Donald scramble to catch up. I stop and hold the door.

“After you.”

We start walking towards my truck and he slows to let me take the lead but I just slow down further and soon we’re barely shuffling along with our eyes on each other.

“So how did you lose the foot?”

“Ran over by a dump truck that happened to be full of gravel.”

“How is the new wheel?”

Donald does a quick little two-step. “I get where I need to go.”

“So what’s the message?”

“What makes you think there is a message?”

“What’s the message?”

“He says no.”

“He says no to what?”

“To your offer. He said a single set price for the service seemed logical.”

“So how about top speed running? Big difference with the titanium?

Donald’s eyes dart towards me. “I never was a burner. I’m more useful in trenches.”

We arrive at the truck and I stop near the tailgate. I turn and face him. “Anything else?”

“He said you are not welcome on church grounds anymore. Any of our grounds.”
I reach across my body and pretend to wipe a stain off my truck. “Is that right?”

“That’s right.”

Donald’s got that mean look going for him. His subtle smirk really compliments the craziness in his blue eyes. I twist my torso so when my fist strikes his belly I can feel his muscles tense but not before the wind gets sucked out of his core. He doubles over onto the ground and tries to speak but the only sound is him gulping for air. I look around the parking lot, nearly empty.

“Tell Pastor Coogan that my name isn’t Frank. Tell him Frank was just a friend of mine who dealt with bullies and card-sharks in a different manner than I do. My name is Lewis.”

As I drive away he flips me the bird from the seat of his pants before bending at the waist again and clutching for more air. I’ve felt bad for hitting a man at various times, felt bad in the right-and-wrong kind of way, but my instincts tell me this guy had one coming and it feels nothing but good having sunk my fist into his belly. Looking down at the seat beside me I notice a bit of clear plastic sticking out of the crack in the seat. I pull out half a stick of peppered beef-jerky I bought in Wyoming. I tear a piece off and gnaw and the dried cow tastes something like a salty, spicy, meaty-type of miracle.

God it’s good to be free.
My mother doesn’t seem happy to see me. She stops chomping her gum in the doorframe for a moment, looks me up and down and shuffles away in fluffy jaguar-striped slippers, returning to her solitaire cards in the kitchen. She’s in one of her moods.

“Do you have to chew your gum like that?”

“Don’t tell me how to chew gum in my own house.”

I flop down at the kitchen table.

“Starting to think about cool breeze out there. . . fall in the air,” I say, trying to keep things light.

“That publisher called and he sounded like he was holding piss and vinegar in his cheek and was waiting for the right time to spray it around.”

I stand up and open the fridge door. “I made a play for some extra cash and stepped on his toes. He’ll be fine.”

“What do you need extra cash for?”

She stops flipping the cards and looks at me and I know she is trying to be serious.

“My vast and numerous romantic ventures.”

“Don’t bullshit with me, Lewis Williams, dumb-ass. How did you get so smart all the sudden?” My mother mimics my voice but it sounds like a cartoon kindergartener, “Oh, I spent most of my adult life in jail reading and learning how to be a wise-man that knows everything about how to live in this world. I’m so smart I can go around doing whatever I want and not really work for anything. I don’t need you telling me what to do.”
Her voice changes back to its normal, lower tone of biting sarcasm. “What did I do to make you think you’ve got a silver spoon up your ass?”

I feel an old anger rising and everything seems to slow down. Teenagers are so sure of themselves and suddenly it’s like that again, like my blood has been asleep for years and finally warming to the day like a painted turtle just hot enough after a morning sun to slip back into the cool pond at high noon. I start to mouth the words of the old kitchen battles again . . . *don’t tell me about my business . . . I can lead my own life . . . you don’t know how this world works or anything about my situation . . .* and instead of saying anything I just think the words, remember this same kitchen those many years ago. My father, stern-faced, telling me to get the hell out before he throws me out and then just returning silent to his chair in front of the sitcoms, indifferent, not even bothering to hit me like he used to. I guess that’s is messed up, wanting your dad to hit you because at a certain point he just stopped caring.

Looking back I can see how all our anger started after my brother died. But what does knowing that change about anything?

My mother was angry then but now she just shakes her head and plays her Jack of Hearts. I feel my own presence from that time now in my own skin but different, like the skin of those teenage dreams doesn’t quite fit right, that another skin should have grown that is completely different. I think that another action should happen other than me rising from my chair, kissing my mother on the forehead, and walking out the door without saying a word.

But that’s what happens. I don’t need her shit anymore.
I told myself in jail I wouldn’t go back to the old haunts but I’ve already been to Thumb’s Pub and Major Hooples and I’m pissing under the Superior Bridge and looking for the orange graffiti marks of my yesteryear but the old words are weathered away by salt and wind or covered with new words, gang signs, colorful tags of swooping cars, skulls, flags, and one gigantic depiction of a purple and yellow saxophone.

A shipping freighter interrupts my piss and art critique, floating by like a giant metal dinosaur in the dark river behind me.

I crawl into my truck, parked under the bridge’s undercarriage, in the shade of the shipping lights. I’ve spent the night talking to strangers, some faces I knew in another lifetime, sleepwalking through a smoky scene I’d imagined many nights in jail to be the type of night at the bar I wanted to avoid with my new freedom. The worst part about the evening was that it was exactly like I imagined it, depressing conversations about lost wives, lost jobs, lost motivation, thin pensions. The only thing different was the intensity of the stench of the piss trough in the back, and discovering one of my old friends was now a woman, working as a realtor.

The next morning after eggs and hash at the greasy-spoon diner I call the publisher. He doesn’t fly off the handle right away and I’m surprised. He just says he wants to meet and he wants me to bring what I’ve written so far. He says he’ll be in town early next week and we set a time and I mention meeting in the lounge downstairs in his building and he says that sounds like a plan. I go to the library and get my new card.
That night I toast Frank from the bed of my truck with a liter of screwdriver mixed in my insulated coffee mug and leaf through his journal thinking that maybe Frank was the only person I’ve know in this world that I’d really trust that wasn’t my family. He cared about other people, people in general and not just people he knew. He cared about how Genies are treated, about how they are talked about. That is why he wanted the journal completed, so that other Genies could know a story of triumph, of overcoming the minority that feared them taking over the world, muddying the bloodlines, stealing their children in the night. He wanted to show that Genies could add to humanity, that they would be human if we allowed them. People are stupid about things different than them and people are stupid about Genies, although not as stupid as they used to be.

I know other good people exist in the world, in books and on television, but I haven’t met many people that made it such a big part of who they are, that believed they could make a difference with their life actions. Then again, for a man almost forty I haven’t met as many people as most folks.

Living in the back of your truck isn’t that bad when you’ve been in prison for so long. Both are tight spots and you spend a lot of timing lying around. I’m lonely here though, with my insulated thermos and my camping lantern and just the old words of Frank to keep me company. It does smell in the truck cab, like dirty clothes left in a pile too long. When I crawled in for the evening I noticed a funk starting to build. At first I though a homeless person had stopped for a nap but then I realized it was just me and it hit me that this was not a good signpost as to how my reintegration into society is going.
I’ve been going to the downtown library a lot and judging by the other regular patrons the crowd I most resemble is an unsavory lot of street hounds who people tend to shy away from, often accompanied by fearful glances and sidesteps or the gentle steering away of a child away from where one of us sits sipping coffee with a hangover, or just stares blankly watching the world pass, watching old worlds pass. Some are ex-military and I chat old units with them, roles and ranks, old skirmishes if they’ve had some but never the worst of it (who’d want to?). Maybe we share a joke or two and I offer some pocket change if they seem to need it. I’ve found myself imagining who the writers are amongst the patrons but I only think this when I see and old dapperly dressed white men and this makes me want to think of something else. Mutations are recognizable, mostly their numbered among the homeless and this makes me sad in a way, makes me understand why Frank wants to put out a story of Genies living in a positive way.

The main library was built when Cleveland was booming and it takes up a whole city block. It’s stout and the stone facing is white Murphy marble with light grey veins and seems too nice for the city, like it was shipped from a European country so that the place could feel old and regal. I like it because it reminds me of Mansfield, old stone and cavernous rooms. I like it because when you sit in the lobby it is quiet and people move slow, not in such a hurry like other places in this new world (even if many of them look at you like you’re going to snatch their wallet).

I’ve always been a polite person unless pushed. When I’ve done the pushing it’s been for a fair reason and as far as snatches wallets at random well that just doesn’t seem honorable to me. When I was doing bad things to people I always tried to make sure they
had it coming. And most times I’ve stolen, assaulted, or generally not been kind physically to another person, I’ve tried to make sure they could see where it’s coming from (unless they had it coming, of course and that’s situation to situation).

While meandering through different floors looking for a nice place to nap I spot a dainty librarian in special collections with the brown bun and the pleated skirts. I migrate, moving my legal pad and pencil to her section.

I try to get some writing done and it helps that I can look up and see her going about her day. She glances over every now and again but looks away quickly if I try to meet her gaze. I approach her eventually and she helps me find some historical information about Genies. She seems genuinely interested in my writing and I blush when she compliments my ambition. She smells like Ivory soap.

It ends up being a most productive day because I stay until the end of her shift which closes with the library at nine, and sitting around and trying to look impressive for her I eventually got some pages done and just as important are reading the books she’s suggested. Several are early journals from Genies, some others are more recent memoirs and biographies about particular Genies or groups of Genies including the one called Corn Maze about farming “cults” scattered throughout Appalachia and the Midwest made up of Genies and sympathizers. One particular book about an orangutan with a penchant for robbing banks in the 70s catches my eye.

Some of the early photographs of mutations I hadn’t seen before. Piles of bodies on a Lake Erie beach, torch-wielding Americans with blood lust in their eyes and a strange kind of sick independence like I’ve only seen in old Western photographs with
scalp-wielding trappers or bounty hunters. Another book of photos is from a government portrait photographer and the subjects are nude and I have a better idea as to why the terminations happened. Some of those early Genies were scary looking beasts. I can see why people would fear the some of these Genies, especially the creatures made by the government specifically for the second war . . . huge beasts with arms like tree-trunks, with scaly armor like a rhinoceros and wide skulls that don’t seem like they would have fit through any birth canal. But what was always most scary was there eyes. Human eyes but carrying emotions that didn’t seem human, that didn’t want to be human. Most of these radical mutations were the first to be terminated. The terminations were driven by this fear, of course.

One of the main fears of genetic mutation was that the “pure” species would be muddied. People were afraid that if Genies spawned Genies then they could begin to control the gene pool. All manipulated folks I know are not able to reproduce. Most of the time the reproduction is deliberately “shut off” but more pressing is the fact that reproduction just doesn’t take for Genies. It’s like the sperm and egg or something along the way to them know it shouldn’t add up. Genies just don’t get pregnant. They don’t impregnate. Although one of the books called The Greatest Manipulation claims that we are all genetically mutated by the government and we just don’t know about it.

So the library is been my home all week. The library and the bar. I haven’t spoken to mother. The manuscript is almost one hundred pages and I’m worried the publisher won’t like my approach, my voice.
I’ve become smitten with the library woman, Jennifer, and instead of being happy it makes me sad and uncomfortable at first (but I’ve warmed up to it). Being sheltered for so long you don’t realize how strong you can feel about a woman and meeting Ms. Flores was like a revelation and now I feel a revelation happening again and I realize that love doesn’t happen the way I thought it did, not romantic love. There isn’t just one person meant for you in the world. Romantic destiny is a pipe dream. You make your own hay just like in every other aspect of life. This makes me wonder if I’m ever meant to be with one woman over a lifetime. That may sound simple but my time frame dealing with love has been sidetracked and as many stories as you might hear about love, love is one of those things you got to learn on your own.

All I know is I’m smitten with the library woman and I’m pretty sure she knows it.

At least I’m cleaning myself up, shaving, although I haven’t worked my way up to asking Jennifer out yet. She agreed to read some of my work after my meeting with the publisher, after I’ve had another set of eyes to it. The day before I meet the publisher I walk up to her in front of two of her co-workers and ask straight away if she’d do me the honor of allowing me to take her to lunch. She looks down shyly and the white-haired woman named Gertrude Turner who is checking in a book right beside her, the woman I’ve made sure to compliment each of the last three days, says, “Well, Jenny, if you don’t go then maybe I’ll have to dust off my old parasol.”

Jenny smiles at Gertrude and then at me and says she’d love to and I say I’ll stop in to set a date after my meeting tomorrow.
I arrive early at Lulu’s lounge around noon and order a light beer. The publisher is late and he strolls over to my seat and leans against the marble-top bar.

“You’ve got some pages?”

I pull out the document I finished typing that morning. Jennifer suggested using one of the new electrics that was on her floor and not downstairs in the main lobby and I take this as a good sign, a sign that she may want me around. She says the new electric will change everything and I say I hope so.

The publisher takes the pages and leafs through them. “About a hundred.”

“Give or take,” I say before sipping my beer. It tastes like somebody took a regular beer and drank half, filling in the rest with water when nobody was looking.

“Why don’t you give me a few hours? Have some lunch. I’ll take a gander at these and we can talk.”

He turns and strolls away. I order the steak sandwich with extra horseradish. The apple pie and coffee is a sinful combination and just as I’m lighting up my last cigarette I see the publisher walking towards my barstool and tapping the top of my manuscript with one finger.

“What the hell is this, the modern fairy tale version?” The publisher looks at me like I’ve grown a second head, “because this Frank seems like some kind of super hero for Genies . . . . I particularly like his ‘ability to rise above his unusually difficult circumstances, to become a model for any person, not just those with altered genes’ . . . . a
finely constructed load of horseshit. You running some kind of propaganda campaign for some bleeding-heart, liberal Genie rights group? I know they aren’t paying you more than we are.”

The bartender and I were in the middle of a conversation about Lake Erie perch but now he stares into space at the other end of the bar polishing glasses. I sit down and take a deep breath. I sip my coffee and stare at the shiny leather of his black shoes.

“Do you think that people want to read about Frank’s virtuous life on this planet? Overcoming a troubled childhood? Are you moronic? He died in jail for cheating, for gambling on games he officiated. Not only did he break the law, he cut our social fabric. America will forgive a cheater who wins, but not a cheater who is supposed to decide who wins.”

“I don’t think that . . .”

“And nobody even liked him. All the players thought he was a sideshow put in by the league office to attract press. Even the other refs talk about him, at best, as having stayed to himself. At worst, and I quote a fellow ref from the New York Times who said he was, “a lecherous pig with a god-complex and a disregard for human morals. It’s obvious whatever mixture of the animal kingdom he represented needed rethinking. He’s soiled the good name of the refereeing brethren, of the human brethren.”

“He was more than the public made him to be.”

“Are you daft? Do you really think what you are writing is a realistic representation of this man’s life? Not that I’m saying a biography can’t have an angle but have you seen read his rap sheet? Do you know about the detention home? The
forgeries? He lied to a lot of the wrong people.” The publisher puts his hands to his face like he’s praying and shakes his head.

I’d like to tell you now about my snappy retort. I’d like to tell you how I supported my rough draft, my knowledge of Frank’s life, my handle on the situation, but that doesn’t happen. My coffee just spills on the front of my shirt when I go to take a sip. I yell shit and motion for the bartender to bring a towel. Looking at the stain I sit back down but the conversation is still thick in the air. I pretend to dab at my shirtfront but there is nothing but brown shit all over my new button-up.

None of the things he’s said about Frank make sense to me. I had no idea his reputation as a professional was anything but sparkling. He told me he was the first of his kind to ref in the top leagues, that he was breaking down boundaries, that he was a part of bringing Genies into a more mainstream acceptance.

The publisher is leaned back in his chair, lounging like a cat in the sun. He likes to watch me sweat. He reminds me of one of the guards who likes the control a little too much, who will wail the club on the back of your calves for no reason if no one else is around. I want to smash his face in, or, at the very least, break a rib with my clenched knuckles through his soft fat while he considers how much of the situation he controls. But I don’t. I light a cigarette and slouch in my chair and hate myself for doing it, hate myself for bending to anything again when I don’t have to.

Frank lied to me. That seems obvious now. He lied to me and dressed it up so it would seem like he meant me to find out this way. Fuck him. I don’t know to what extent he lied but the betrayal hurts. I feel myself looking for a corner, a place to put my
back against the wall. I realize that I’m reverting to some fucked-up behavior I picked up in jail, mind panics in the yard, searching for the neutral corner in the shade, or late night huddling in my cell next to the toilet, and this makes me feel so sick of myself I wonder if that apple pie might make its way back up tasting like battery acid. I need to step back from this situation, get my bearings.

“So none of this is useable?”

“I don’t see how.” He picks up the manuscript and slops it back down on the bar.

“The only way I see us moving forward with you directly involved with this publication is if we use a ghost writer, like I suggested the first time we met.”

The prick coos magnanimously, his face and eyes quizzical in that judging-judge or asshole prosecutor-type way.

I’ve just about had enough of this for today, I think. And that’s it. I stand up because I can. I stand up, thinking this couldn’t have gone much worse, thinking about how Frank lied to me. I walk to the end of the bar and settle up my tab with the bartender and he just nods and prints out my bill. I walk back passed the publisher and (pick up my coat) and I tell him I’ll be in touch. As I’m walking away, noticing how the carpet seems to shimmer and bend. I hear him say, “Soon, Mr. Lewis. Soon. We should be in contact soon.”

I don’t go the library to see Jennifer because I get busy drinking and I’m not interested in discussing my failures but forgetting them for the time being, forgetting
everything. The only smart thing I do for the next week is trip over a curb that first night while trying to take a piss in the bushes and watch my truck keys fall down the sewer drain. My spare keys are at my mom’s house and that’s the last place I want to go. The truck cab is still open so I have a place to pass out after wallowing in whiskey. I still have my wallet, my feet, and enough cash to really cause my liver some damage.

People that say alcohol doesn’t help anything don’t drink enough. By the third day my thinning blood has revealed to me the true folly of my ways and certain specific failures in the human condition. In jail you either get used to your wild thoughts, your own failures, or you crack under your own weight or start withering away to nothing (not that we aren’t all withering away but there is a difference if you can’t control your own thoughts . . . a fear behind darting eyes and then a distant gaze that doesn’t want to be distant). I’ve had that distant gaze before and lost myself in my own thoughts, but I was lucky enough to come back. Booze helps with all those thoughts, like a suave when your mind plays tricks on itself, when your thoughts spin and spin around the same sour thoughts. You don’t have booze in jail, obviously, and so you find ways to get used to wallowing in your own thoughts, in memories.

The bar stool’s got me thinking about my little brother for the first time in years. I’ve been sitting around all afternoon with a pony-tailed biker from Fort Wayne who used to hunt caribou in Alaska. I haven’t told anybody about my brother’s death since the days right after it happened, when the police officer with the gap tooth said just start talking, the psychiatrist with the clipboard said take your time, and my mother and father
just stared at me and didn’t say a thing. I haven’t really told the story since then, but this guy’s got my brother’s laugh and so I start talking into the top of my beer bottle.

We were camping in Kentucky just outside of Daniel Boone National Forest. My dad had his two-week summer vacation. Mom was cutting vegetables for hobo pies. We weren’t allowed to carry our .22s in the park so we were imagining all the spots Indians would have camped and looking for some type of sign where they might have villages or garbage piles or old fires, traipsing around the woods like we always did. Those hills are filled with ragged ridges and deep ravines with steep walls and we both knew better than to play around on the ledges.

But Marcus found a sightline he said for sure Indians would have used to spot other tribes or foot traffic or try to spot game, up on this rock point where the valley turns and you can look over the land almost in a complete circle.

It happened so fast, with such great quietness.

He turned to point over the valley like some old time explorer and he was grinning from ear-to-ear and then he slipped and was gone. Just like that.

When I got to the edge I couldn’t see below only the long wall of gray stone beneath the point and the thick growth of trees and rhododendron covering the underside of the granite point like a green blanket far below. I tried to call out but I couldn’t make my voice work. I scrambled around the point looking for a way down but there wasn’t a clear path in any direction. After catching I yelled down but my voice just echoed back to me in more and more hollow waves, looking and not seeing the spot he would have crashed through the undergrowth far below.
I ran and ran.

When I got back to the camp I was out of breath and just pointed back the way I came and my father grabbed me by the arm and we ran back to the spot and by that time I’d croaked out some explanation and he knew he’d fallen and knew it was bad. When my father saw the point and looked down over the edge he just slowed down and started moving like somebody had removed his life from him, like his body was moving but it was controlled by someone else.

Maybe I yelled at my father to go get him and maybe my mother never left the campsite and maybe I remember sitting in the tent with my eyes closed flicking a blue flashlight on and off again and again until it dimmed to nothing and maybe I watched a spider crawl across my forearm and maybe I remember the police and the rescue team and the trauma specialist and the ambulance and my mother’s cold face and my father’s indifference and maybe I remember that we never spoke about it again after the funeral. Maybe we never could.

“To Marcus,” I say lifting my glass and clinking it with the pony-tailed stranger who ride a Harley Roadster.

“Marcus,” he says.

And then I try to lighten the mood, telling the stranger that maybe that’s why in school I fought anyone who mentioned his name. Which was a lot.

He laughs and proceeds to tell me a story about this guy’s uncle who shot himself in the ankle and had to crawl back two miles to the trail and ended up getting his foot amputated.
And my brother is gone again. Just like that.

But as I keep drinking and think about how I used to try and find time in the Mansfield Penitentiary bathroom alone, so I could echo my own voice in the corner by the busted showerhead.

That night I make it to the library before they close and it’s a day when Jennifer works. I walk over to her and catch myself stumbling a bit and so I concentrate on my gait. She is turned the other way, leaning over a cart of books she is shelving and doesn’t hear me coming up behind her. I slip my hand around the pleated skirt at her waist to turn her toward me. I don’t mean anything by it but she doesn’t react well, spinning quickly and knocking over the cart, top-heavy with reference books, with a resounding crash.

“Lewis! That is not appropriate.”

“I’m sorry, sorry,” I say, wishing I could wipe the stupid grin off my face.

Trying to help pick up the books I step on the guide to chemical compounds and feel the binding rip under my weight. She’s got a frightened look on her face and I realize I’ve made a big mistake coming here.

She steps back away from me and looks around for any other people and she catches the eye of the needle-nosed nerd who works in photo-rendering on the same floor. He comes out from his desk behind a glass wall and marches over like he’s on official business for the nice police.

When the security guard shows up I’m getting ready to try and apologize to Jennifer for the umpteenth time and trying to make the little peckerwood dude go back to
his office so that I can explain everything. Jennifer just looks away every time I try to catch her eye and I realize she’s scared. The sight of the security uniform does its work. I settle back into myself and shut my mouth. I realize that I can’t stand here or hit the ground like you do in jail so I just stammer for a minute, the center of unwanted attention, before apologizing one last time, picking up the ripped chemistry text and holding it out like a broken bird.

I walk out red in the face.

A few weeks later I’ve pickled my liver, woke up with unknown bloody knuckles, countless headaches, punished myself to nothing. It’s September or October. One of those. One of those months when the leaves are just started to show their fire like little fingers of color reaching out across the green. One of those months where the world changes around you and you realize the world gets faster and faster and there is only this one life and you can’t do much of anything about that.

Mom has the porch light on and it displays her late-blooming roses planted beside the stone stairs in a soil bed below the porch awning and I scoff because it makes me think of my interview with RN Nancy Wilborne at the nursing home and instead of stopping to smell these roses, being decisive in my actions, calm in my own now, I just stand there thinking how foolish I’ve been. I thought I had a good plan coming out of jail, a way to form a new identity. Climbing up to the door of my mother’s porch I can’t
even decide if I want to knock or have a cigarette first, let alone make the decisions I need to make to get my life and mind settled.

She doesn’t open the door all the way and looks me up-and-down through the crack. I know what I look like . . . dirty jeans, wrinkled shirt, unshaven, down at the heel as the old-timers might say.

She opens the door because she is my mother.

I follow her to the kitchen, smelling cigarettes. She turns at the stove and blows a long stream of smoke towards the ceiling like a black and white photograph of a Lake Erie steamship. She puts the cigarette back in her mouth and stirs a pot on the stove.

“Don’t say a fucking word. Sit your ass down and have some coffee.”

“Smells good.”

“Some tomatoes I’m stewing with garlic for the can. I’ll put on some eggs and bacon.

And as I settle into a chair at the table I am hungry, really hungry. My last square meal was waiting on the publisher in the bar and I realized hadn’t eaten for days, mostly getting sustenance from cheap beer and whiskey and the memory of a candy bar, some pickled eggs and potato chips that the bartender pawned on me. I think I remember eating a small, child size box of frosted breakfast flakes in the back of my truck because I kept getting the little cardboard box stuck on my hand.

“Smells like you’ve been trying to make up for twenty years of drinking in one long spell.”

“Something like that.”
My mother and I have had the capacity to let things smooth over just by staying out of each other’s hair for a time. She’s got pretty thick skin and I’m too much of a mama’s boy to worry about a few cross words, a little steam being vented.

“Why don’t you go shower while this is cooking. You smell so bad your cutting through my cigarette smoke.”

When I come back down I feel remotely human. I found dad’s old straight razor and carved some grit off my face. On the table is a plate of eggs and bacon and mom refills my coffee so a small cloud swirls out the top of the mug.

“This ain’t working,” mom says as I lean back in my chair and wipe my face.

“No.”

“Well . . .”

“You should find a way to use your hands. Do what you’re good at. Find a boss you can work for that you won’t piss on after two weeks. And for God’s sake, don’t think about starting a family or any of that bullshit until you get yourself laid a few times and get your feet on the ground someplace.”

“That’s a nice speech. How many packs did you burn through . . .”

My mother hasn’t hit me since I was four and ran across a street without looking both ways for traffic. That spanking didn’t hurt anything but my feelings. This time her coffee mug catches me behind the ear and knocks the toothpick out of my mouth. She doesn’t draw blood but I put my hand up and a gooseneck is forming under the skin near my hairline. Being dried out like an old cornhusk, I can feel the headache spreading extra fast.
“What the fuck?”

“Don’t use that language in my house boy and don’t you ever use that tone of voice with me again.”

She isn’t look at me when she says this. She’s washing that coffee mug in the sink and placing it in the rack. She doesn’t need to look at me.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter.

“Maybe that headache you should be getting isn’t a bad thing, dumb-ass. You think just because you sat around for two decades and thought about shit real deep while you smoked cigarettes and boogered Genies you suddenly figured out the world?”

I stare at toast crumbs on the tabletop. “I was thinking about Marcus the other day and I . . . “

“Why don’t you start with your own life and tell me what the hell’s going on so we can figure a way for you to get you even remotely resembling the man your father was.”

That sentiment hurts worse than the swollen egg that has appeared behind my ear. My father was a “yes man” his whole life and miserable because of it. The only joy he got out of the world was from my mother. She knows this and so do I. He lived in fear, always complaining about his life and never doing anything about it until he even got tired of his own complaining and after my brother died he stopped talking and mostly just made grumbling noises and for all I know he died just grumbling his life away barely stringing two sentences together. What strength I have comes from my mother and she knows it.
So I spill the beans. I tell my mom everything that’s happened since I’ve gotten out (excluding a few details from Vegas) and when I get to the part about Frank lying she doesn’t miss a beat and just mutters how she wondered what his angle was in all this and when I got to the part about the Pastor and his mega-church she made me slow down and tell her all the details I could think of and when she asks me what my instincts were of the pastor as a person I say snake. She just smiles.

And then my mom tells me to go to bed and I do. We don’t talk about Marcus, just like always.

The next morning she outlines my new plan and I have to admit it makes a crazy kind of sense.

I’m driving and eating a hash-brown triangle and an egg-bacon-cheese biscuit from the fast food drive-in and the combination coats the inside of my mouth better than warm beer and green bean casseroles at a VFW hall wedding reception, and when I sip the dark coffee it burns right through this fatty flavor layer caking my mouth like the opposite of the way sugar and butter congeal to make crystals when hot.

It is good to be free and best when it’s easy.

Talking to mom caused me to pull my head out of my ass a little ways and the smell of free air rushing in the truck bed has me understanding for the thousandth time that no matter how shitty you feel you get to the other side eventually. I think I’m on the other side of feeling better, about feeling like I might be able to catch my breath out in
this world, catch onto some way of living that suits me. At least I’m showered and
shaved and feel like a man again. And there is this open highway stretching west towards
a destination with purpose.

It bothers me how much I don’t know about Frank. I’m big enough to say it hurt
my feelings being duped but I’m already just kind of curious as to what he lied about,
curious as to what his real life may have entailed. Frank and I still had some laughs,
shared time together in meaningful ways, even if he was manipulating his own identity,
his own story, manipulating me.

Thinking objectively about his fairy-tale life that he created for me over so many
years comes easier than I thought. It’s not just what the publisher said about Frank’s life
that differed from the account he gave me. I’ve sifted through the microfiche newspaper
reports, the futbol magazines that discussed his life after he was caught, the police reports
(which were hard to track down since Frank tended to be transient but Jennifer had
helped me a lot with that part, with all of it really), and made phone calls to some people
that knew him on the field. What has become clear is that Frank lied to everyone
pathologically and certainly cheated at his job more than once. A retired referee from
Reno said Frank had bragged about being in the Peace Corp for two years in Nigeria . . .
the first Genie to serve in Africa of course.

After getting over the sting of his lies, I’m beginning to respect him in a strange
new way. He completely fooled me. He manufactured his tall tale and sold it to the only
person around. I just happened to be his cellmate. We just happened to get along. I
wonder if I could have trusted him with the chips down? I still think so. Frank lied to
people because he wanted to please them, wanted to be whatever it was they wanted him to be. I think we were friends but I know I was also manipulated by Frank, lied to so that I could serve his purposes, to serve to foster the way he wanted to be remembered by the world. And I do believe he wanted me to get his book finished.

When I get to the church lot it’s nearly empty on a Tuesday morning. I’ve called the pastor and we’ve set the time. I’m told by the secretary in a guarded voice to take a seat. Billy Coogan strolls in fifteen minutes late in a sweaty bronze tracksuit with black stripes running down the arms.

“Mr. Williams. It was a surprise to hear from you, especially after you assaulted one my church employees when we first met.”

“Well, Pastor Coogan, he seemed to have it coming.”

His laugh is strangely effeminate, a high-pitched hiss that whistles slightly through his front teeth. He invites me into his office with a wave of his arm.

“We put in the gym when the place was built but I never imagined I’d spend so much time there. Gotta keep the heart rate up to keep the pounds off. Apparently the miracles of modern medicine only stretch so far.” He looks down at his sweaty leisure suit but he means the skin underneath.

“What keeps you going . . .”

The office is decked out with old crosses and relics and medieval shit. The walls are filled with the four-pointers of Jesus’ demise and a few pieces of stained glass and on the finely carpeted floor is a stone pillar cut off at the top holding up a collection of what I assume are old communion cups. They look rare, some of stone, some brass, one silver
chalice and one of fine glazed ceramic. It seems a strange contrast to the recently built mega-church.

“Whose your decorator?”

“I have a taste for my faith’s history.”

“The burning and pillaging and genocide tastes or just the niceties?”

“When you choose faith you recognize the need for protecting that faith. We don’t always live in a warm world, Mr. Williams, as I’m sure you are quite aware.”

He leans into his desk and crosses his arms. “So what are we discussing today, Lewis?”

My name comes off his tongue like a challenge and I think about getting up and walking right out. I take a deep breath. “I think I might be of some service to you.”

“And what service might that be?”

“Muscle. Muscles with brains instead of dimwits that look tough and act soft.”

The pastor leans back in his chair and smiles.

“So now you want a job? After trying to extort money from me and failing, you come back asking for a job?”

He gets up from his desk suddenly and walks few steps to his stone pillar with the cups on top. He picks up a small piece of plain olivewood. “The larger cups used at the Eucharist are worth a lot more. The individual communion cup wasn’t used until the 1880s in Protestant American churches and don’t carry the same cache. But I like the idea of an individual communion. A direct relationship with God. This is from my first communion,” he says while fingering the top rim of the cup.
“But not if you’re Genie? You can’t get a direct relationship to God if you aren’t pure.”

“Each of us is born into sin, Mr. Williams, but you can’t expect animals to be something they are not. Just like you can’t expect a person to be something they are not.”

“Very philosophical.”

“And so the question is not what you’ve been, Lewis, but who are you? What type of man are you?”

“I’m just a man trying to make a buck by doing what he’s good at. Just like you.”

He smiles evil and I realize I’m beginning to like this man.

“So I assumed you were working with Frank? In cahoots, isn’t that what they say? That you have a book to write and try to sell?”

“Turns out Frank wanted me to write fiction. It also turns out I’m not that good at writing as a profession.”

He glances up at me and licks his lips quickly and makes that hissing laugh again with a weird snort thrown in. “I thought you and Frank were in on this together but it seems more like Frank was trying to bend things even after he died. What was his beef with you? Besides being human. Frank hated most humans other than his grandmother and brother.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“I don’t particularly know or care why Frank lied to me, to be honest, but I am curious as to why Frank wanted the book to fuck you over.”

“I’m the one that turned him in.”
He chuckles again and I notice his face is a bit mottled from his sweat, like his make-up is running awry and I wonder if it’s not some kind of cream. The skin underneath the make-up seems to shimmer when the light strikes it at a certain angle. It looks similar to the sheen from his velour exercise suit.

“I thought you were part of the financing?”

“That it where our problems stemmed from. I’ve known Frank since we were kids. He lied to me. He got too big for his britches.” He smiles at his own joke before he tells it. “Then again you might say I got too big for my britches as well.”

Think of a time when you were completely selfish, when you didn’t care about other people. That’s what I feel like and I know my morals are being stripped away but it doesn’t feel bad just freeing, like I shed a layer of skin. Now I’m getting comfortable with the fact that certain people are selfish and immoral all the time out here in the world, comfortable with that face that I’m becoming more and more like that and it’s happening fast. Call me naïve but I guess in jail a strange set of rules exist and in that is a certain amount of honor, of the way things should be handled, of a base-line trust based in camaraderie in the shared misery. Maybe I just forgot that people aren’t necessarily better on the outside. Maybe prison is a better place for some people, makes them better people. Maybe to stay out of jail I have to become a worse person instead of a better one. Maybe I shouldn’t stay out of jail.

“So Frank can go to hell,” I say, “and I expect he will according to your belief. What’s done is done.” I lean forward in my chair and stare him straight. “I’d like to work for you. I’d like to help you run your business and I’ll expect you’ll compensate
me fair because you’ll see that I’m useful for certain delicate engagements, that I can be charming if needed, that I’m loyal, and I’m smarter than that coonhound you got limping around here.”

Pastor Billy Coogan leans back in his chair and stares down his nose at me, and then starts massaging the lactic acid from his thighs. “Why don’t you go with Donald over to see a man who owes me some money? I pushed some construction contracts his way and he hasn’t seen fit to repay the favor.” He reaches down to massage a calf and I see his veiny folds of skin push out the top of his elastic waistband. “It is a lot of construction.”

“What does he owe?”

“Ten-thousand seems fair with the late fees he’s incurred.”

“Any muscle?”

“He’s a contractor.”

“Anything else you think I should know?”

“That this concludes the oral aspect of the interview. Wait outside my office for Donald and you can continue with your field study.”

I stand up and reach across to shake his hand and see that his shoes are off and he’s massaging a foot. When we shake I expect to be grossed out by his sweaty-foot palm but instead his shake is dry and cool and I can’t help but think it’s like picking up a boa constrictor but I don’t care that his skin doesn’t feel natural. I don’t care if he sprouts devil horns and speaks in tongues. I don’t care if he shoots fire out of his eyes and grows to five-hundred pounds. I don’t care one bit because I think I might have found a way to
ply my craft and get paid to do it and at least this guy seemed to share my sense of humor and that goes a long way in these kind of things.

It turns out Donald is as dumb as I thought. He’d been to visit the contractor twice now and not gotten a dime. I figure the guy is on the job this time of day so I tell Donald to call his secretary and tell her we’ve got to unload some tarp and forgot the address of the job sight. He says that’s what he had planned all along.

Donald tells me his approach on the drive over and it doesn’t consist of much other than veiled threats and something about the church lawyer. I bide my time and ask him how many people the contractor usually has around. He mutters something about how he met him at his office once and it was busy and once at a job downtown and the crew was around. I ask him if he’ll have a trailer at the sight and he says he thinks so.

It’s still warm enough to work outdoor jobs and the leaves are full of green and close to turning. The framework of the suburban office complex looks complete and they are putting in the drywall and still playing around with the innards of the joint. I tell Donald to keep driving around the corner and go slow.

I spot the trailer that holds the field office and notice a gas station on the corner across the street and I tell Donald to pull in there. He says why don’t we just pull right in and get it over with and I tell him to just listen for once.
We park and watch the sight and then Donald spots the guy walking out of the trailer and make a round to check the worksite. I step out of the church van passenger door with Donald.

We time it so he enters the office and we come up just a few moments behind him and I only hope no one else is in the trailer. We knock and enter and I let Donald through first and stand by the door. We get lucky. He’s alone in the tiny space.

“I think you know why I’m here, why we’re here,” Donald says in a hurry.

The contractor is wearing a button-up shirt and collar, which is clean but I can tell he probably worked hard at one time but now was getting soft around the edges. He’s also got an impatient look on his face so I know he’s not expecting anything.

“When the work gets done I’ll see if there is something left. That’s how I do business. I’ve told you this before.”

“That wasn’t the agreement,” Donald whines.

The man puts both his arms down on the plywood desk and leans forward. “He’s gonna have to wait.”

Donald has surprised me. I didn’t think it would take him this long to get frustrated by the situation. I whisper his name and he looks back at me. I tell him to watch the door.

When I get over to the desk I’m close up on him. It’s a tight space with a little roof and you almost feel like hunching over. This makes it easier to speak low and soft and I tell him to get out his checkbook.
He chuckles and lifts his arms up away from the desk and I move in close and grip his nearest arm from behind just above the elbow on his pressure point. When I squeeze he lets out a surprised yelp. I keep the pressure on. I ask him again for the checkbook.

“You can’t just . . .” and when I squeeze harder on the nerve he doubles over towards me trying to pull his arm back and when I see his free arm come up for a swing I just squeeze again and he’s on one knee.

I tell him to get out the checkbook.

He points to a dirty beige file cabinet and I pull him up with my other hand still pressed on that nerve bundle. He pulls out the book and I grab the pen from his shirt pocket with my free hand and I look up to Donald and ask him what the churches official name is. He stammers for a second and says Cleveland Church of Christ and I tell the contractor to write that down first. He looks at me and I squeeze and he writes.

I have to squeeze again when I tell him to write in the amount. I tell him to consider it a tax write-off.

I fold the check and place it in my pocket and then we leave and drive back to the church and Donald won’t shut up and so I zone him out and relish the old rush of adrenalin, of doing what you are good at. When I hand the check to the pastor he looks at it and slips it into his pocket. A check is not ideal, he says, but you were smart enough to get it made to the church.

He wants me to start my work in Cleveland. I’m to call in each morning to the secretary at 9am except Sunday in which case I’ll be expected to work both services in
some capacity and which, he said, are generally busy days which you’ll be needed. Days
off may be frequent but staying in touch is crucial and if things work out I’ll be expected
to stay near certain numbers and get a mobile phone. I’ll be paid after one month and
that will be a set salary with a take it or leave it clause.

I take it.

Mom is skeptical about the money but I’m not worried. He’ll pay me when he
sees my worth and begins to trust me. Most people trust me. My reputation in jail was
for being trustworthy and when you get an admirable quality there you hold on to it, just
like imagine you do in this real world. It helps to have some pride. It helped me to
sustain some sense of pride in jail. Being trustworthy has always been something I hang
my hat on, that and just plain telling you how I see it. I’ve always been that way.

I just have one more thing to take care of regarding my short writing career and
that has to do with the publisher and it has less to do with me writing and more to do with
me letting him know I’m not giving his money back and that he can go to hell. I feel like
I might be able to settle into a type of pattern of work that suits me. I feel like I might be
able to breathe in my new line of work. No punching a clock or repetitious factory work
where I wouldn’t last two weeks.

When I was younger, before I went to jail, I just went along with any job and I
was good enough to get away with it for awhile . . . stealing cars, appliances, copper
wiring from construction jobs, peddling dope, breaking into houses after obituary notices,
and once even stealing cargo from various boats at the Whiskey Island marina. I ran with a couple different crews but I was known for my freelance work. When you needed an extra guy, I was the guy to get. Loyal, trustworthy, smart, aggressive. Each time I stole, each time I got something back for it was like a piece of me got filled that was empty before. Drinking, drugs, sex . . . all of them were around but I got the greatest satisfaction from my work, from planning and execution, the rush.

And then I got caught. I was late replacement as a driver for a job down in Youngstown. I didn’t work with these particular fellows much. They tended to take the Hollywood elements of our chosen profession a little too seriously and so I usually avoided any offers. And, I didn’t normally travel onto Youngstown turf because it was a whole different racket there and if you stole from the wrong place you could run into more trouble than you wanted, organized trouble.

It was a smash and grab job at an Italian Deli and that should have tipped me off. They said it was a front for a bookie who kept large amounts of cash, but in hindsight I could see it was just a revenge job. Stupid cowboys. So much for hindsight.

Four of them went into the Deli and a few minutes later I heard some shots and then three of them bust back out the front door. The only one of them I really liked was Ronnie this short kid who knew more dirty jokes than a priest drinking whiskey and he was the one missing. Go! Go! They yelled but I wanted to at least give Ronnie a chance but they kept yelling that Ronnie was toast and we needed to split and so I put the car in gear and as I sped off I kept my eye on the Deli door instead of in front of me.
The fellow I hit with the car didn’t see it coming any more than I did. He wasn’t struck hard but hard enough to cut his legs out from under him and flip him onto the hood. His skull impacted the window with a dull thud.

That was that.

He died before he got to the hospital and it turns out Ronnie wasn’t gone just shot in the thigh and he turned on us for six years off a sentence. I don’t blame him.

Twenty years and a stranger dead because of me.

I haven’t thought about that time in my life for a long time. When you send years kicking yourself for certain behaviors at a certain point you just start kicking yourself for other things. Putting the squeeze on the contractor and feeding off Donald’s excitement brought the memories back and I must admit they are mostly good memories.

Right now I’m sitting in my truck in a downtown Cleveland parking garage and letting my thoughts ramble until they clear before walking over to see the publisher. I finish my cigarette and make the walk. I look up as I approach the building and notice the third floor window is cracked.

The secretary lets me in and I get right to it. He’s sitting behind his desk with the cacti and Southwestern blankets surrounding him. He’s got a smug look on his face but I wonder if this just isn’t my imagination seeing what I want to see.

“I’m just here to let you know that I’m cutting ties with the book, with you, with any contract we might have.”

“I can’t say that I’m disappointed.”

“Didn’t expect you to be.”
“And you’ll be sure to return our advance?”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

He looks up at me and he’s got his fingers touching at the tips like he’s making a cage for an invisible bird. The index fingers tap like a small stamp press.

“You must like jail. My lawyers are significantly better than yours . . . at least that’s my assumption.

Now I’m sure he’s got a smug look on his face.

I stand up from the leather chair I’m sitting in and move behind it so my hands are resting easy on the back of it. I look up and make sure I have his eye and I lean forward so that my jacket shows the holstered pistol under my jacket. “Word on the street is that you are a family man?”

He glances at the gun and back to my face. “You don’t have to answer that,” I say, “you should simply know that I’ve got nothing to lose and I’m willing to go to extremes to insure that I keep this money and you keep your mouth shut.”

He begins to get up and I tell him to not bother about getting up. I walk to his office door and put my hand on the knob. “Do we have a new agreement?”

“Mr. Lewis this isn’t the way things work in this business. This isn’t the way things work these days. Threats like that will land you back in jail.”

I lock the door and walk back to the desk, “then you can be responsible for hurt that I might cause.”

He sits back in his chair and takes a deep breath. He’s not frightened in the right way, I think. When he moves forward and hits the speakerphone and yells out to his
secretary to call security and police back up I slam my hand on the phone and yank out
the phone cord and then backhand him in the mouth.

A slight trickle of blood starts to slip from the corner of his lips. The building has
a security cop at the front door and I know he’s on his way up to this floor. I glance at
the window and back to the publisher who is wiping the blood away with a kerchief. I
walk to the window and look down and see the sidewalk three stories below. I walk back
to the publisher and lean on his side of the desk so that I’m within arm’s length. He
doesn’t seem smug anymore and he’s getting scared but I don’t have much time.

“I suggest that you consider how to explain this misunderstanding to the
authorities. Because if I get any whiff you sent the cops my way I’ll come at you and
your family. Family first. You won’t see me or hear me or know that I was around but
when the accidents start to pile up you’ll know you sold your family’s safety for ten
grand.”

The police will arrive any minute so I pull back my corduroy-patched jack to
reveal the handgun again and then I pinch the publisher’s bulbous nose and give it a good
squeeze, “Pleasure doing business with you. Don’t call. I’ll be sure to get a hold of you
first.”

When I get to the window I see my first problem is squeezing through. It is a tall
window hinged at the middle so that it only opens in long cracks along its lengthy edge.
But when you’ve lived in cages you tend to meditate on window strength and I see right
away that the hinges are cheaply made, held together with a single metal pin. I sit on the
bookcase below and lift my legs up to my body and then I kick the bottom hinge with the
heels of my boots. The hinge busts on the third kick and then I turn to look back at the publisher who just looks some degree of miserable mixed in with what I take as curiosity.

“I’m not worth the money,” I say before squeezing through the crack and onto the outer edge.

Not being much of a climber I quickly realize I’ll have to follow my first instinct. The tree I’m looking at reaches up to about ten feet below my feet and is one of those small hardwood species that grow tall and thin like a sapling that never matures. It sports small diamond shaped leaves and it shoots up about ten-or-twelve feet from the other side of the sidewalk near the curb. If I miss it when I jump out I’ll be landing on concrete after a three-story fall.

I take one look back in the window and see the publisher up from his seat and moving towards the locked door. When I jump I’d like to say I was thinking about my brother, or that my many mistakes in this life flashed before my eyes, or the love of my life was revealed, or . . . but in reality I just jump and for a moment I’m sure I’m not going to make it and not only will I be broken in some awful way that I needed to eat from a straw but I’ll be back in jail and broken and eating from a straw.

I crash through the leaves and thinner branches and reach for the two-inch trunk and pin it between my arm and side. The tree bends like a bow and for a moment I think it will just snap and my momentum will leave me splashed on the concrete in a bloody mess, but it bends before it breaks and I’m gently lowered to the other side of the curb and although I tumble immediately into the street with force enough that pavement cuts through some clothing and I feel a dull pain where my gun shoves into my ribs I know
I’m good enough to get up and get out. When I let go of the tree it weakly snaps back to attention but it’s crooked something awful.

I look up at the busted window and scramble to my feet. I look both ways and as the sirens begin to come to my ears I see a hot dog vendor on the corner a half-block down. He’s eating a bag of potato chips but his hand is caught halfway to his mouth and he looks at me, looks at the crooked window, looks at the limp tree, looks at me again, and then he eats his potato chip.

And then I’m gone, running in the free world with urgent purpose and no particular destination.