NOTHING SHALL HURT YOU AND OTHER STORIES

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by

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El Pueblo Vencera

Argentina, 1977

Beatriz heard them pull up to her house. Her husband, Adelmo, did not stir. He slept soundly, his stink filling the room. She heard truck doors open and shut, and men talk in hushed voices below her bedroom window. Beatriz looked at the watercolor portrait of the Savior hung above her headboard and prayed for Him to drive the men away. He usually watched over her with warmth and caring, but that night He had lifeless, empty eyes.

Over the past year, whenever Beatriz heard these men whispered about at her diner counter, she dismissed it as mere stories and gossip. Articles about the men did not appear in the newspapers. The radio did not broadcast these horror stories nor were they reported on the evening news. Who was to say they had taken place?

But as these stories moved closer to San Miguel, Beatriz grew afraid. Mr. Rizian, a former suitor of one of Beatriz’s high school girlfriends, left the paper mill one Sunday and was not heard from again. Rita, the bright girl who managed the summer market, disappeared from her apartment. The previous autumn, Luciana’s son was snatched from his bed. Luciana, Beatriz’s best short-order cook, quit work and now lived in Salta with her sister.

On Christmas the men came to Beatriz’s neighborhood and took Eva Numez’s girls. Numez’s shrieking brought the entire neighborhood outside to see what had
happened. When Beatriz realized what did, she counted her blessings and went back to bed.

Still, Beatriz never truly believed the men would come for her family. She and Adelmo ran a barely profitable diner. Their oldest son, Ignacio, a philosophy major at NU Cuyo, was by no means the sharpest boy of his class. Their oldest daughter, Marcena, had not yet graduated high school. Their baby boy, Pichi, could not yet sit up. The men had no reason to come here.

But they had.

Beatriz sat up in bed when she heard the men march up her front stairs.

Then it sounded as if her front door exploded.

Beatriz was already on her feet and in the living room when the men invaded her home. One grabbed her by her hair and clubbed her to her knees. He kicked her in the stomach until she doubled over, screaming. He put his boot to her back and pressed her to the floor. She craned her neck, everything in her body afire, and looked toward the bedroom hallway.

Adelmo stood there, gripping the walls. Stamping his bare feet, he gave a high-pitched shout and charged the men. A baton lashed, lifting her husband off his feet. Stumbling like a drunk, he fell face-first to the floor. As one of the men slipped a black bag over Adelmo’s head and handcuffed his wrists behind his back, Beatriz saw the man was in uniform. He wore high boots and jungle fatigues. He was a soldier.

A soldier knelt near Beatriz, stabbed the couch, and spilled its stuffing. He examined the cushions, yelled “Nada,” and then stabbed the recliner. Beatriz heard
another soldier smashing plates in the kitchen. A third one, the one who’d assaulted 
Adelmo, went down the hallway to the back bedrooms and Beatriz heard her children 
scream.

A man behind her barked an order and the soldiers who’d been pinning her to the 
floor and destroying her furniture jogged down the bedroom hallway after their comrade.

Beatriz got to her knees and looked at the fifth and final soldier at her front door.

He was undoubtedly the commanding officer. Numerous stripes and bars were 
sewn on the collar of his shirt and he had a white cross pinned to his red beret. He was 
handsome. Thumbs hooked in his belt loops, his tall frame stood ramrod straight. He had 
a square jaw and a block-head, but a thin nose and high cheek bones dotted with 
pockmarks.

The officer’s eyes darted toward the bedroom hallway, where there came the 
sounds of a scuffle, but they came back to her as she knelt there, trying to catch her 
breath. She thought he pitied her, so she leapt to her feet and grabbed his uniform front 
and pleaded, “Don’t do this. Don’t do this.”

He pushed her and she tripped. As she fell, she saw him stop himself from 
reaching out to catch her.

She heard a man cry, “Damn it,” from the back bedrooms.

There came a gunshot.

Beatriz lay frozen, her mouth open. She dug her fingernails into the floorboards.

One of the soldiers dragged Ignacio from the back bedrooms. He wore only white 
briefs with the black bag over his head. He was fat; everything on him jiggled as he
struggled against the handcuffs. Another soldier followed, cradling baby Pichi. Pichi screeched and kicked his legs. The soldier whispered, “Shhh, child. Everything is fine. No tears, please.”

The soldiers brought their quarries to the commanding officer. Beatriz reached for Pichi. The soldier holding him kicked her. She held her side, weeping, and called to Adelmo.

“I’m here, honey. I’m here,” he croaked through the black bag.

Beatriz watched the soldiers take Ignacio and Pichi down the front steps and out of sight.

The last two soldiers came into the living room, one pressing his hand to a bloody gash on his shoulder. The other holstered his pistol and said to the commanding officer, “Little bitch stabbed Alomar.”

“Get in the truck,” the officer told them.

The soldier with the pistol snatched Adelmo off the floor by his manacled wrists and pushed him toward the front door.

“Fucking pigs!” Adelmo cried. “Goddamned sons of whores. Goddamned cowards.”

The soldier kicked Adelmo’s feet from under him.

“Shut up,” he ordered. “It’ll be easier for you.”

“Fuck your mother!” Adelmo bellowed.

Beatriz watched the soldier hoist Adelmo to his feet and throw him down the front stairs. Screaming, she hurried on her hands and knees to the front window and saw her
husband lying on the sidewalk. The soldier hustled to Adelmo, baton held high, and struck his head until it bounced off the pavement like a futbol.

“Stop,” the officer barked to his man. “Victor, stop!”

With a sly grin, Victor put away his baton. He dragged Adelmo to the humvee parked on the street and tossed his body in the back of it. Beatriz heard her children screaming inside the humvee. Victor stepped into the back of it and closed its doors. All was silent.

The commanding officer jogged down the front steps, but stopped midway to look at Beatriz through the living room window streaked with previous washings and flecks of dirt. He looked at her almost as if he wished to apologize for the inconvenience he’d caused. The front stoop light came on at the house across the street. Its sudden brightness blinded Beatriz, and by the time the light went out, the officer and the humvee were gone.

She stared out the front window, cotton-mouthed, surrounded by upholstery stuffing. The soldiers did not return for her. The night dragged on.

Though Beatriz watched the sun peek above the houses across the street, she did not see the dawn. She did not see her neighbors crowded at her front door. She did not see her sister arrive or feel her take her by her shoulders and lead her to bed. Instead, her world flickered like a movie skipping frames, like at the Cine de la Luz, where she, Adelmo, and their children spent so much time giggling at Harpo’s faces and at Chico’s fingers tumbling over piano keys.
The Cine de la Luz had been their favorite spot in San Miguel before the government closed it. Beatriz’s family loved Westerns. Ignacio had become fascinated with John Wayne at a young age. He mimicked his drawl and hefty, surefooted stance wherever he went. He’d waltz into his parents’ bedroom and say, “Well…what’re you makin’…for dinner?” Beatriz and Adelmo would laugh and applaud and Ignacio would waltz back out of the room and return for another performance.

Beatriz dreamed of Ignacio. In her dream, her son leaned against her bedroom doorjamb and did his John Wayne impression, but she couldn’t hear him. There were too many people talking in the room, yet when Beatriz told them to shut up they only talked louder. Finally, Ignacio turned and went back down the hall, his shoulders slumped and head hanging.

Beatriz slept late the following morning, and started her day like any other. Groaning, her hands pressed to her sides, she knelt at the foot of her bed and prayed. Her sister came in with a cup of tea and pleaded for her to get back in bed. Ignoring her, Beatriz went to Marcena’s bedroom.

Marcena’s slim body had been wrapped in white sheets. Her bedding had been stripped and her pillow turned over. A smudged brown-red streak covered the wall by the open window.

Beatriz took one step into the room. Her sister moaned, “Oh, Bea, I—”

“Where is it?” Beatriz whispered.

“What?”
“The knife she used to stab the man.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Beatriz hissed, “Cecili—.” Sharp pains in her sides choked her.

Cecilia reached into the folds of her dress and handed it to Beatriz: a butter knife.

Handing the knife back to Cecilia, Beatriz hurried out of the house.

She went in the small cubby beneath the front stairs and came out with Ignacio’s bicycle. He had ridden it home from NU Cuyo that May. Beatriz managed to swing one leg over the seat before she started shaking.

Ignacio had scratched “El Pueblo Vencera” on the handlebars. She had told him not to. Someone was bound to report him. The wire basket behind the seat still held his college textbooks, protest pamphlets their bookmarks. She had demanded he throw them away. He told her he had. He’d lied. Pichi had lain in that basket two days earlier as Ignacio pedaled them up and down the street, Pichi squealing with delight. How could Ignacio put his brother in this basket while ignoring her warnings? Didn’t he realize what he’d bring upon them? Beatriz got off the bicycle and pushed it from her. It rolled a few meters before it wobbled and fell.

Putting her hands to her face, she whispered, “Sorry, Ignacio.” She righted the bike and put it back in the cubby beneath the stairs.

“Come back inside,” Cecilia called from the front steps. “Please. Come back inside.”

Ashamed at how she’d treated Ignacio’s bicycle, Beatriz refused. She turned from her sister and looked at her neighborhood. The houses were similar: two-story concrete
squares with dented aluminum front doors and chipped slate roofs, their eaves hung with bright flower baskets. Only Eva Numez’s home was different. Her yard was brown, her flowers wilted.

Beatriz stepped toward Numez’s house and cold water stung her feet. She looked up the sidewalk and saw water running from under a pile of soaked newspapers. It flowed past her front stairs and washed down a sewer grate near the curb. She went to the newspapers, threw them aside, and found the source: a garden hose, Mr. Leon’s, her next door neighbor. The mustached old man appeared from behind the potted shrubs at his front door, his hands in his pockets. He barely met her gaze. Scowling, she dropped the hose and turned from him. Then she saw dark spots on the sidewalk and knew Mr. Leon had been trying to wash away Adelmo’s blood.

Trembling, Beatriz saw families watching her through their front windows. Once more the world flickered, its frames skipped. Beatriz felt light-headed, but when she saw her sister crying on her front stairs, this dizziness left her. She went to Cecilia, took her hand, and said, “Let’s have breakfast.”

The undertaker laid Beatriz’s daughter in a rough pine box and they buried her on Esperanza Hill. Beatriz refused to spend family savings on a plot in San Miguel’s Catholic cemetery. Cecilia rebuked her, but Beatriz countered: “I need that money. Travel is not cheap.” So, she had a small, quiet funeral for Marcena. Daniel Salazar, defrocked priest and neighborhood handyman, read from Job at the graveside.
Dr. Quintana came later that week with a chest compress, gauze, and explicit instructions for Beatriz not to get out of bed or go back to work at the diner. One broken rib was dangerously close to her lung. “The NRO took my David for treating one escapee,” Dr. Quintana said, stuffing her medical supplies in a little black bag, “but he’s not dead. I remember him.”

The next day, ignoring the sharp pains in her side that brought nausea whenever she breathed, Beatriz rode Ignacio’s bicycle to the town police station. It was a one-floor brick building behind a rusty chain-link fence, its gate always open. Inside, there was no one at the front desk. She called “Hola?” until Chief Braulio appeared. Fat, sweaty, Braulio fidgeted with a set of keys on his belt loop as he came toward her and embraced her. Braulio and Adelmo had been close friends. Their children had played together before the Braulios moved to a neighborhood uptown.

Beatriz began to speak, but Braulio told her, “I don’t know.”

“You do,” Beatriz said. “They come here for names and addresses.” She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from shouting. “They come to you.”

“They tell me nothing,” he said.

“You tell them everything. They must tell you where they take—”

Braulio sighed. “Bea, my family—”

She spit on the gold star pinned to his chest and left.

That summer Beatriz searched San Miguel and the surrounding province of Tucuman for her family. She rode Ignacio’s bicycle over hills and trails, only sometimes
darting through city streets and busy squares. Mostly she stuck to back roads and never moved at night. Her ribs pained her. She knew they were not healing, but she did not care.

She put photographs of her family, black-and-white headshots cut from the pictures in the bedroom hall, in Adelmo’s money clip. The clip was a golden donkey’s head, buck-toothed and smiling, a joke from her to Adelmo on their fifteenth wedding anniversary. When Adelmo laughed, he snorted and honked, his wide upper teeth jutting over his lower. She and the children always gave him a hard time about it, Marcena most of all. She’d mimic her father’s laugh and it would then become a game between her and Ignacio of who did the best impression, her of their father versus his of John Wayne. Beatriz wore the money clip on a silver chain around her neck and kept it inside her dress. As she pedaled Ignacio’s bicycle, the cold metal tapped at her breast.

Beatriz first checked the hospitals, pictures in hand. She refused to leave until someone answered her. Doctors did not. Instead, they nodded to nurses, who shook their heads and said, “We’ve seen nobody, had nobody by those names. Sorry, senora.”

Then Beatriz went to the police stations, but never alone. She waited to go inside them with groups of strangers. The police, like Chief Braulio, could not be trusted.

Policemen wouldn’t answer her either. She overheard them groan from back offices, “Another mother? My God, send her away.” Always the secretaries had the duty of frowning and telling her, “Sorry, senora.”
Finally she went to the churches, the ultimate refuge for those who escaped the death squads. Yet churchmen in silk robes and gold rings only offered her forgiveness and salvation, never an answer, never a place to turn.

“Forgive,” the Father at San Miguel told her, motioning to the pews of praying mothers. “Ask Him to protect your family, wherever they are. Pray for hope.”

“I do.”

“Then what more is there to seek?”

Dr. Quintana advised, “Go back to work. It might ease the pain,” and at the New Year, Beatriz reopened the family diner.

Beatriz prayed for the strength to forget her family. Dwelling on what the NRO might be doing or have done to them was driving her insane. She would not give the NRO, if they even cared she existed, the satisfaction of breaking her. Although she’d contemplated suicide, what had saved her was her hope of finding her family. After six months of searching, that hope seemed lost. If she could not find them, she wanted to be rid of their memory. It was too much of a cross to bear. So, she vowed never to be like Eva Numez, who sat home alone so beaten by her loss she wasted whatever life she had left.

Her diner reopened to two kinds of people: those who avoided her and those who ate quietly and left generous tips. She could stand neither.

That spring did not pass quickly. It was the season of Pichi’s birth.
On what would’ve been Pichi’s second birthday, Beatriz turned off the diner’s lights, locked the front door, and flipped the sign on the door to “Closed.” Sitting at the counter, she wept for lacking the strength to forget Pichi and her family.

Months passed. The summer seemed endless. The rag Ignacio had used to wipe the counters stayed dry in its porcelain dish by the sinks. She let none of her staff touch it.

June turned into July. It had been a year since they’d been taken, a year since Adelmo had shouted, “I got it, Bea,” after she called an order to the kitchen, a year since Pichi had opened his chocolate eyes to the morning and woke them all.

Autumn hit San Miguel in a harsh blast of wind and rain. Beatriz found herself working at the diner more. She covered her waitresses’ shifts no matter their excuses. She stayed later to clean the counters one last time. She even began opening on Sundays. One Sunday, as a customer chatted callously with her about the NRO as if her family had not been taken, she remembered what her grandmother said to her mother when she had told her family she was leaving Beatriz’s father for a younger man. “Women who forget their families aren’t women.” As Beatriz filled more of her time with work, she wondered what her grandmother would think of her.

Walking home from work on the Day of the Dead, Beatriz stopped at Eva Numez’s house. She crept up Numez’s front stairs and peeked in her living room window. A lone candle burned inside. Beside it, asleep in a rocking chair, was Numez. Although she was only four years older than Beatriz, she looked like a crone. Her chin rested on her chest, her graying hair wiry and tangled. Both hands were folded in her lap, and in them she clutched a ragged purple scarf.
That night, like every night, Beatriz prayed. She glared at her watercolor portrait of the Savoir and demanded He assure her she never became like Numez. She asked for forgiveness for trying to forget her family and wanted to know what she should do. She awaited His reply. The watercolor’s creamy, rosy-cheeked face remained expressionless. He had those empty, lifeless eyes again. But when the night quieted and dreams overtook her, Beatriz heard an answer, not from the heavens, but from inside: she had to know where they were. She had the right to know.

Beatriz began searching outside Tucuman. She hired neighborhood men who’d been laid off from the American clothing factories to cover her shifts at the diner. She assured them she’d only be gone on weekends. Soon, however, weekends turned to weeks as she went north to Jujuy, across the mountains to the high rises of Misiones, and south to Santa Cruz’s cold tip. No matter the province, whether from the mouths of nurses, secretaries, or barroom rebels who claimed to have heard a rumor, Beatriz endured, “Sorry, senora.”

She spent most of her money on bus fares. Soon, with only enough money left in her bank account to buy food, she resorted to riding Ignacio’s bicycle once more.

That winter outside of Catamarca, a beat-up sedan ran her off the road. Beatriz abandoned the bicycle and jumped in the ditch. When she recovered her breath and the car had sped away, she found Ignacio’s bicycle mangled in the opposite lane. She left it near the ditch and hitchhiked back to San Miguel.
Not having the will to work the diner, she sold it for a small sum to three Rosario businessmen. She had decided to leave San Miguel. Having grown tired of fiddling with the body of the snake, she wanted to go to its heart: Buenos Aires.

Her sister stopped by the morning Beatriz intended to leave. While Beatriz packed a knapsack of food and drink, Cecilia came into her kitchen and said, “I got something for you.” She laid a small length of white cloth on the stove. “I took it from Marcena’s burial sheets. Just felt like something I should do. You should have it.”

Beatriz thanked and embraced her sister.

“There’s no changing your mind?” Cecilia asked.

“No.”

“You can live with me and Pablo. You have nieces and nephews.”

Beatriz shook her head. “I don’t have my family. I’ve tried to forget and I can’t.”

“You can’t leave it be? How can you hope to make the NRO listen?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t keep living like this. I have to know.”

“And if they turn you away, will you come home?”

Beatriz nodded. Cecilia took her to the bus station and paid her fare. They said their goodbyes. As the bus pulled out of the station, Beatriz didn’t dare look out the window at her sister. If she did, she might never leave.

It looked just like the pictures of the American capitol building in her elementary school books. Made of white marble, parts of it streaked with green and flecks of brown and black, the Capital Federal rose above the Plaza de Mayo. Beatriz stood in its shadow,
the morning sun blocked by the lime-green dome with its bronze Lady Liberty pointing to
the distance behind her.

A tall iron fence topped with barbed wire surrounded the Capital. Beatriz gripped it and peered through its bars. Between the fence and building were rows of palm trees, budding flower gardens, and government officials going to and from various vehicles. Guards dressed in blue and white walked the grounds, rifles on their shoulders. They were big men, well fed, young.

Beatriz turned away and walked to the center of the Plaza, weaving between hoarse-throated vendors and tourists with their cameras clicking and beggars with Styrofoam cups so used to being ignored they did not bother to ask for change. She leaned against the base of the Piramide de Mayo, the two-hundred foot white obelisk that commemorated her country’s independence from Spain. It, too, had a Lady Liberty atop it. This one looked down on the Plaza, its expression calm, reserved, somehow wiser.

Beatriz took a wax-paper bundle from her knapsack and unwrapped it. Sitting against the Piramide, she put the wrapping aside and ate the last slices of a loaf of bread.

To the east, behind the Casa Rosada, heavy morning traffic echoed from Bolivar Street. Regarding the Rosada, the three-story brick compound where the NRO’s most powerful kept their offices, Beatriz felt she no longer had the strength to climb its fence, find the monster Videla, and demand to see her family. She looked at her calloused palms and turned them over. Thin veins lined the backs of her hands. Her knuckles were wrinkled. Her feet were sore. She was tired. Everything on her body sagged, pulling at her aching knees and back, clinging to her tender ribs. She suddenly felt how old she was.
She studied the Plaza’s buildings. They had seen women like her come and go. Faced with the enormity of this history, and with the anonymity of her situation, Beatriz longed for home. Old, alone, she sat in the Capital’s shadow, defeated.

Across the Plaza, between a bronze monument of a general on horseback and a new American café was an old phone booth. “Cecilia,” Beatriz muttered as her bread scratched its way down her throat.

She sat there a long time, weeping.

A bell rang in the Catedral Metropolitana on the western side of the Plaza. A line of statue saints stood on either side of its doors, their arms out. They looked as if they begged her to rise. She looked at the Lady Liberty atop the Piramide. Staring down at her, it seemed to ask: “Well?”

Beatriz got to her feet. She took the white cloth Cecilia had given her from her back pocket. It still smelled of Marcena’s greasy hair and knock-off American perfume. Beatriz tied it around her head in a bonnet, hauled herself onto the base of the Piramide, and reached into her dress. She held the pictures from Adelmo’s golden money clip aloft and began chanting, “Donde estan?”

Her voice gave out at sundown. She went to the American café for a cup of water and drank it alone at one of the tables outside. No one had paid much attention to her that day; however, a few people had looked at her as if she was crazy. Beatriz didn’t blame them. Although she didn’t feel the excitement that David must have felt when he contested Goliath, asking “Donde estan?” had made her feel better than working the diner, better than traveling all over Argentina.
That night she lay against the Piramide wrapped in a homemade blanket, her head on her empty knapsack, rolling from side-to-side in restless sleep.

Day after day she rose, bought a coffee from the café, and chanted on the Piramide. Slowly, the crowds stopped ignoring her. She didn’t know if they were actually listening to what she said or if they knew why she said it, but finally, to her relief, she had a voice.

Not long afterwards, the Capital’s soldiers gave her their attention. They began to pace the Plaza in small groups. Some seemed amused, some angry. One soldier was especially interested in her. She could never get a clear look at him. She often saw him watching her from the tables outside the café. When she’d go over to chant at him, to show the crowds she was unafraid of men like him, he would be gone.

Two weeks later, Beatriz was joined by three women. They were her age, although they looked much older. Beatriz had not seen herself in a mirror lately and thought she must look as old as them. She had not washed her hair since she left San Miguel. Her fingernails were long and dirty. She smelled of body odor. Her cotton dress was frayed. Her ragged appearance only drew more people and for that she was grateful.

As she chanted one afternoon, the three women stepped out of the crowd and onto the base of the Piramide. Each of them had pictures of sons, daughters, and husbands. Without any prompting from Beatriz, they began chanting, “Donde estan?”
When night fell and the crowds left, Beatriz asked them who they were. They told her their families had been taken. The pirate radio station out of Córdoba had mentioned what Beatriz was doing and they had come to see if it was true. They said at first they were afraid, but found when they chanted “Donde estan?” they felt better than they had in years.

More mothers joined Beatriz. They came in buses, taxis, on bikes and on foot from around the country. There was Adelgonga from Patagonia and Elena from Cuyo and Diana from Posadas. There was Eva and Rayen and Paula, Martina, Elizabeth, and Natalia, all holding Rosaries and pictures of their disappeared loved ones, all burning with the desire to know, “Donde estan?” They told Beatriz she was in the news. The pirate radio station had joined the Underground and some of its members had infiltrated the newspapers. They reported the activities of Beatriz’s group, stating clearly the group’s intentions, but never encouraging anyone to join. The mothers who joined Beatriz told her they did not need encouragement. The knowledge that one woman possessed such strength was enough.

When Beatriz’s group began to number in the dozens, she decided they needed better organization. They began chanting in eight-hour shifts so the Capital and the Rosada heard them day and night. They made cardboard signs with enlarged pictures of their families. They talked to reporters. At the behest of Mother Luciana, they decided to make and wear white bonnets similar to Beatriz’s. Beatriz could not get over the sight of the mothers, her sisters now forever, chanting in white bonnets.
The breathtaking moment for Beatriz came when the crowd at the Piramide parted and Eva Numez walked toward her holding pictures of her daughters. Tied around her head in a makeshift bonnet was her youngest daughter’s purple scarf.

Beatriz and the other mothers bought a full-page spread in the political section of l’Opinion. It showed a black-and-white grid of pictures of their disappeared loved ones. Above it, in bold print, was “Donde estan?”

Soon after the newspaper was distributed, soldiers began bothering the mothers. One morning, a young soldier pushed his way through the crowd, some of whom booed him, and took Beatriz aside. He told her, “If you don’t stop loitering at the Piramide, we’ll arrest all of you and you’ll get six months in jail.”

Beatriz assured him their loitering would stop. The soldier left, and Beatriz and the mothers began marching around the Plaza, moving from monument to monument.

The next day, the young soldier returned and took Beatriz aside once more. He gripped her elbow and hissed, “Do you want to end up like your families?”

Beatriz laughed. “To us, what more can you do?”

Candles encircled the Plaza, lit by members of the Underground. They flickered as the mothers marched past them. Beatriz held her sign high, chanting, the mothers following her.

Hurrying from the back of their line, Mother Numez tugged at Beatriz’s sleeve, pointing. A large man was talking with Mother Ramona and Mother Luciana on the other
side of the Plaza. Beatriz squinted. She could tell he was a soldier by the stiff way he stood. “What’s he want?” she asked.

Numez shrugged.

Beatriz sighed and made her way to the soldier.

Ramona and Luciana saw her coming. “He’s here for you, he says,” Luciana told her, pointing to the soldier. “Only you, that’s what he says.”

“Fine, fine,” Beatriz said and pushed past Ramona.

She saw his feminine nose, his pock-marked cheeks, his hard body. His lips had thinned and there were more wrinkles around his eyes, but he was still the handsome man who’d stood at her front door and ordered her family’s destruction.

The officer turned to her.

Neither of them spoke.

Finally, the officer cleared his throat and said, “Can I speak to you?”

They went in the darkness by the Capital’s fence. He stood close to her.

“They want to be rid of you,” the officer said.

Beatriz stood a bit straighter and said, “Try.”

“I’ll give you what you want,” he whispered, “but only you.”

“Why me?”

“Because you want to know. Because you have the right to know.”

Beatriz pointed at the mothers and said, “Do they have that right, too?”

The officer shrugged. “You can decide.”

*
He picked her up on Bolivar Street in a jeep with government license plates. They drove all night. She lost track of time in the silence between them. She removed the golden money clip from her dress and gazed at the cut-out pictures of her family. She caught him looking at them and put the pictures back in the money clip and the clip back in her dress.

The high moon aided the jeep’s headlights. It threw dancing, jagged shadows inside the cab. The air grew cold. Beatriz hugged herself and shivered. She figured they were heading south. Eventually, they turned off the main roads and onto dirt ones lined with thick foliage. Beatriz wanted to sleep, but wet branches kept slapping the windows, making her jump.

At dawn, they stopped at a guard post. The post was nothing more than a chain-link fence with a padlocked gate and a brick guardhouse. The lone guard, a clean-shaven boy in his late teens, lazily emerged from the guardhouse and walked toward their jeep. The officer rolled down his window. The boy saw him and his eyes widened. He stopped, stood tall, and saluted.

“Open it,” the officer told him.

About a mile from the guard post the road began to crumble until it became a slender trail that snaked through heavy jungle. They drove carefully.

Beatriz caught the officer looking at her and said, “I know you.”

He did not reply.

She showed him the pictures of her family.

He looked at her and said, “I don’t remember.”
The jungle clinging to the trail widened and gave way to a clearing atop a grassy rise. The officer parked the jeep. Through the windshield dotted with mud and grimy with dead bugs, Beatriz watched a line of black clouds roll toward them.

The officer turned off the jeep. “Get out,” he said.

She fumbled with the door handle, wheezing.

The officer went to her side of the jeep and opened the door. “Get out,” he repeated. She didn’t move. “This is what you wanted.” There was a weary bitterness in his voice.

Beatriz clenched her fists. She would not let him see her fear. She stepped out of the jeep and tried not to flinch as he slammed the door behind her.

He took her by her elbow. “This way,” he muttered. He led her across the clearing, taking the rise slowly. Her body shook, her lips moved in prayer, and now, more than they had in months, her ribs pained her. She closed her eyes and gasped for breath.

They stopped.

“Open your eyes,” the officer said.

She did.

Before her was a large hole. She could not see its bottom, just hundreds of tangled limbs and gaping mouths. The bodies were covered in lime, the powder thick in some places, thin in others. Men and women and boys and girls unnaturally embraced. Babies lay white and face-down, tiny fingers and toes. Stiff arms pointed at the coming storm.

The wind picked up. It began to rain. Faces became clearer, twisted, gaping. The rain revealed tattered clothing, nakedness, rot.
Beatriz looked back at the officer. She said, “You will tell the others?”

He nodded. She could not tell if there was any truth to it. “Turn around, please,” he said.

Beatriz turned. Her hands found Adelmo’s money clip. She held it tight. She heard the officer draw something from his belt.

She heard a metallic click.

Then, her world flickered and unspooled.
Nothing Shall Hurt You

I drove to the Hands of Christ Church’s spring revival in my eighteenth birthday gift, a black 2001 Chevy Camaro Z28, tricked out with a V8 engine, sunroof, and Infinity sound system. When Dad handed me the keys, he said, “Chicks will dig the car, son.” He was wrong. Six months later, my losing streak continued. It’d take more than a flashy ride to get me a lady. I was all thumbs with girls, a stutterer, stumbler, and fumbler. I’d never been on a date or gone to a dance. Vaseline, tube socks, and imagination had been my lovers since the ninth grade. But tonight that would change. Tonight I was going to ask Rebecca Flynn to Prom.

I’d fallen in love with her in study hall. We sat alone together, two nerds delegated to the back corner table. During most of the day, our study hall was home to tenth grade biology. On the counter beside us bubbled fish tanks, above them the evolutionary scale of man, an oversized, hairy dick drawn on Homo habilis in green marker. Senior study hall was supposed to be silent, but Mrs. Kendrick had given up after Christmas break. The jocks, who I called the “Below Seventy IQs,” threw paper airplanes and blew spit wads while the druggies slept, the popular girls giggled, and the band geeks guffawed over that week’s inside joke. Still, Rebecca and I followed the abandoned rules, the only acolytes in a sea of heathens. All period she diligently finished homework while I studied her from behind the latest pulp thriller I pretended to read.
I could see more than her beauty, although that was plentiful. She was slim. Some said she needed meat on her bones, but I knew where her curves lay hidden. They were at the tops of her shoulders, her lower back, on the nape of her neck. She didn’t need makeup. She had clear, pearly skin, like newly fashioned alabaster. Her auburn hair was always in a bun. I liked her fine, blonde neck hairs. It felt like spying a secret, like seeing a naked part of her without her knowing. That kept me up nights with the Vaseline, but like I said, I saw more than her beauty. She was a hard-worker, a top student in our class. She wrote her essays in careful, looping cursive. If she got math problems wrong, she stuffed the tip of her tongue in her cheek and tried again. She grinned when she conquered the troublesome equation and kicked her long, pale legs. She spoke with nothing but honesty. She was direct, no bullshit. Like me, she was friendless. Like me, she completed all of her homework even though she didn’t have to, because senior year at Everton High was a joke. Like me, she was a nerd, the lowest of the low, and we nerds have character. Jocks won’t admit it, but nerds rule the world. It’ll always be so.

The Hands of Christ Church bordered Mennonite country at the southern edge of town. Its only neighbors were foreclosed farms. Driving through all that dark, the tall, empty houses loomed, windows broken, doors yanked off hinges. Rusted farm machinery was strewn about the overgrown pastures, like their operators had been raptured at the height of the work day. I flicked my cigarette out the window and watched the tiny red dot dance on the road behind me. Smoking was my one rebellion in my otherwise well-ordered life. I’d be dead if my parents caught me. I lit another cigarette, took a drag, and tasted the bitterness at the back of my throat.
Rebecca was the only child of Horatio Flynn, the evangelical preacher who ran the Hands of Christ Church. The HOCC was ridiculed as a backwoods watering hole, the kind visited by independents, ex-Mormons, and descendants of West Virginia. It ran an ad every Sunday in the Everton Gazette of a spike driven through Christ’s palm, the bolded phrase “Feel His Pain and Power!” Other than whisperings that the HOCC’s revivals held signs and wonders, whatever that meant, I didn’t know much about it. Really, I didn’t care. Religion was not my thing. I was ignorant of the subject. My parents had been Catholics, soured to the Church by an uppity priest who, when he heard Mom and Dad were not planning to have children, said they were marrying for lust. Sure, my family celebrated Christmas and Easter. I knew God had a temper and Jesus did some nice stuff for the poor and died an excruciating death. There my knowledge ceased, though I knew enough to abandon the logistics of crucifixion, resurrection, chocolate bunnies, and colored eggs long ago.

My parents would have never let me go to the revival. They said Horatio Flynn was a charlatan and that his followers were lunatics. Tonight I’d told them that after dinner I was going to Derrick Hill’s to play the newest Tomb Raider and that I’d be home at ten. I felt bad about lying, but damn it, I was doing this for love.

Cresting a rise, I saw the church atop a far hill, a whitewashed clapboard house, its boards warped, paint cracked. The roof was missing shingles and the chimney had long since crumbled into a pile of bricks at the side of the house. As a house of God, the HOCC couldn’t have been more homely. In the backyard was a tool shed, beyond that a weathered grain silo, and beyond that an overgrown field. As stated on the flyer Rebecca
had passed out that day during lunch, somewhere in that field was a tent where the revival would be held.

That yellow flyer should’ve told me what I was in for. Printed at the top, the date, time, and location of the revival. Below that, a picture of Christ spewing snakes onto a pile of writhing unbelievers. At the bottom of the flyer was a warning stamped in red ink: “NOT FOR CHILDREN.” I should’ve taken heed, but instead I hung the flyer on the back of my closet door along with my drawings of Rebecca and the school pictures I’d collected of her that year. I often sat before my closet door and gazed at my shrine. What a lovesick puppy I was.

The school consensus was that Rebecca was just as kooky as her church and she was labeled a prude, Bible-thumping ginger. But what came first, the chicken or the egg? My dad wrote editorials for the Gazette. He was a fiery contrarian who’d argue against his own position to prove you wrong. He even grew an Osama bin Laden beard in the weeks after 9/11 just to push peoples’ buttons. He was a doubter, a “truther.” That didn’t mean I was a snobby intellectual, but I was branded one anyway. Had I earned that title or had I molded my personality to fit my school identity? Yes, I was short with the football linemen I tutored in math after school, but who wouldn’t be? I just wanted to get along, to be normal. Just like Rebecca, who refused to study evolution yet told wicked jokes about dead babies, I had a middle ground. I thought we understood one another. We could’ve been the perfect couple.

I turned into The Hands of Christ Church’s driveway, gravel popping. A wooden sign beside the drive read, “Trespassers Will Be Baptized.” It gave me the creeps. I
pictured a priest holding me underwater, his followers’ chants a muffled throbbing as I thrashed in the murk.

As I drove past the HOCC, I worried that perhaps I was mistaken. Maybe Rebecca didn’t like me. Maybe she just wanted to be friends.

It took until December to get her to talk to me. Whenever I’d lean over to tell a corny joke or make snide witticisms, she’d shush me and say, “Remember, silent study hall.” But after Thanksgiving break, she said hello at the start of the period, sat close to me, and laughed at my jokes. Nobody, I mean absolutely nobody got Rebecca Flynn to laugh.

Her attitude changed December second, a Wednesday. During lunch that day, I sat alone at the table near the large, grey plastic trash cans, next to the counter where everyone dumped their trays. The dank smells of half-eaten Salisbury steaks and watery green beans wafted over me. I thought my life couldn’t get any worse. Rebecca had me bummmed. I’d tried a knock-knock joke on her the day before and she’d shushed me again. If only she’d give me a chance.

Halfway through the period, Rebecca stood on a chair at the front of the room and cleared her throat. No one but me paid attention. She cleared her throat again and again until Mrs. Knowles, our rotund lunch monitor with the dyed black hair, flapped her arms and shouted, “Hey, you punks. Pipe down!” It took a few moments, but soon the room was quiet.

“Thank you, Mrs. Knowles,” said Rebecca. She wore a homemade wool dress with snowflakes stitched on it, red leggings, and black, buckled flats. The winter light
from the cafeteria windows cast her in a soft, pale glow. She looked wholesome, the kind of girl I wouldn’t mind taking home to my parents—if Dad could stop himself from being a braying ass.

Rebecca turned to us, her hands folded in front of her. “Hello, everyone,” she began in her mousy voice. “In three weeks Christmas will be upon us. I know when you think of Christmas you think of presents. Maybe you think of the latest videogame, the newest music CD or clothes. I urge you to stop thinking of gifts. Start thinking of Christmas as a celebration of your salvation. Christmas is not about Santa Claus. It is about our Lord and Savior, who—”

Someone let out a screeching fart that got everyone laughing. Horrified, Rebecca clapped her hands over her mouth. The culprit was Andy Kline, Everton’s star basketball player, all knees and elbows. He wore a snotty grin as he and his fellow basketball players giggled. He was the most obnoxious jock in our study hall, President of the Below Seventy IQs. He always gave Rebecca a hard time.

“Alright, Kline,” growled Mrs. Knowles, though she couldn’t hide her smile. “That’s a detention.”

I don’t know what came over me. Maybe I was outraged that the President of the Below Seventy IQs had ruined Rebecca’s attempt to pass her dearest beliefs onto us. Maybe I saw myself in her place, laughed at and ridiculed. Maybe I just loved her too damn much. Whatever the case, I pounded my fists on my table, stood, and shouted, “Hey, Kline!” The cafeteria went silent. Everyone turned. “Your voice is deeper but your breath smells the same!”
It took them a second to get my insult, but soon everyone was laughing at Andy Kline, giving him grief, making him blush. He sat fuming, his perfect eyebrows and chin morphed into a hateful scowl. And I scowled right back. Go ahead. Bring it, Kline, if you dare.

He dared alright. After lunch I made a pit stop in the boy’s restroom. As I got situated in front of the urinal, Kline’s buddies pinned my arms behind me and spun me around. My dick hung out of my fly, shriveled and scared. A wolfish grin spread across Kline’s face. He clocked me, snapping my head back, knocking off my glasses. His buddies laughed. I didn’t make a sound, just hung my head, mouth open, befuddled at my fate.

Kline looked me up and down. “Your voice is deeper, but your breath smells the same,” he mimicked. “I’ll have to remember that one.” He lunged forward and punched my dick. It flattened like a wet noodle. I squealed and collapsed to the sticky floor, kicking my legs. My groin throbbed. I lost my breath, hit by endless waves of nausea.

I must’ve passed out, for I woke staring at the cobwebs strung between the ceiling tiles. I stood and brushed myself off. My lower body ached. My knees shook. I gingerly bent and retrieved my glasses from the urinal. I washed them off in the sink, dried them with paper towels, and put them on. I could see again. Looking in the bathroom mirror, I saw my cheek was a deep red, the skin cracked in places. Kline’s class ring had left a mark, the faint outline of an Eagle. I slung my book bag over my shoulder and hurried to study hall. I’d missed fifth period French.
In study hall, I sat and stared at the tabletop, ashamed of letting myself get beat up so easily, and frightened that Kline and his buddies might jump me after school. I should’ve kept my mouth shut and done what nerds do—fantasize about protecting their crushes. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. It belonged to Rebecca, who whispered, “Thank you.” She gave me a tight smile, patted my shoulder, and began her math homework. I spent the rest of the period sore, but elated. An avenue to her heart had opened.

We became fast friends, chatting in the hallways between classes, passing notes in study hall, skipping lunch to do homework under the bleachers. We grew to know one another’s secrets. She knew what I thought of my father. “Spraying Jehovah witnesses with our hose when they knock on our door Saturday mornings doesn’t make him a radical,” I told her. “It makes him look like a jerk.” I’d also said, “He’s a reporter first, a father second. I’m an afterthought.”

She replied with sweet sentiments like, “You’re not an afterthought to God,” or “No matter what happens on Earth, Jesus loves you.” I didn’t necessarily believe her, but it was nice to say. The important thing was she listened. She didn’t hold back on me either. I knew her father liked to beat her mother with his belt if she overspent at the grocery store. She spoke of her father as if he was a monster, yet she also acted as if he had reasons far beyond her understanding.

“I don’t know why he does the things he does,” she told me under the bleachers that spring. “But he has God’s ear and that’s good enough for me.”

“He talks to God?” I asked.
She nodded. “God talks to him, too.”

I could hear my father: “If someone sat next to you in class and said God talks to them, would you sit and listen or would you find a seat across the room?”

When Rebecca spoke about God, which she did most days at great length, I’d listen respectfully. I didn’t question or mock. She got enough of both.

This afternoon I’d asked Rebecca if she liked me. I wanted to make sure of it before I asked her to Prom. Between seventh and eighth periods, I saw her walking toward me in the hallway. We were both skinning between our schoolmates in the crowded hall, loud with conversation and teachers yelling for us to get to class. Rebecca smiled, said, “Hey, Gibson,” and gave a little wave.

My throat was dry. I had been practicing since the weekend. I planned to say, “Rebecca, do you like me? Because I really, really like you.” Instead, my eyes darted to the floor and I rambled: “RebeccadoyoulikemebeacuseIreallylikeyou.”

She cocked her head as she passed. Nodding, she said, “Yeah.” Then she was gone, lost among my classmates.

I let out a sigh of relief. She said it alright. She liked me.

But now, driving deeper into the field along a mowed path, past the HOCC’s tool shed and grain silo, I wasn’t sure. Maybe she hadn’t understood and had just politely nodded. Maybe her “yeah” was sarcastic, like, “Yeah, I really like you, you stuttering pizza face.” I gripped the steering wheel, feeling anxious and stupid. I started to sweat. Maybe I ought to turn around and forget the whole thing, go home, admit defeat. Maybe going to Prom wasn’t in the cards.
“No,” I said. I’d never been a quitter. I had more character than that. The worst Rebecca could do was say “no.” Better to try and fail than never to have tried at all. God, I thought, I sound like one of the posters in our guidance counselor’s office.

I parked my car alongside the mowed path at the end of a long line of vehicles. I lit a cigarette and hoofed it toward the lighted tent in the distance. It was late April, unusually warm and windy. Determined to impress, I’d dressed my best. I wore a fleece jacket over a maroon sweater, and my cleanest pair of corduroy pants. I’d swiped my dad’s black dress shoes and dabbed some of his cologne on my wrists and neck. I’d combed my hair, parted down the middle. I’d popped all my pimples, too.

Past the parked cars, lanterns lined a trodden path and paper signs pointed the way to the revival tent, though it was impossible to miss, the monstrous concoction of white canvas, steel poles, and purple flags. It looked like a beached whale stuck with spears. Ten yards from the front flap, I passed under a large metal sign that read, “Where Will You Spend Eternity—Smoking or Non-Smoking?” I stomped out my cigarette and warily entered.

Inside, at least a hundred people were seated in metal folding chairs before a makeshift wooden stage. More milled about, chatting, cajoling. I saw familiar faces, teachers, administrators, classmates, drop-out stoners, librarians, gas station attendants, and the Saudi who ran the adult video store behind the Holiday Inn at the highway interchange. There were a lot of people from old Everton, too, the farming side of our township. They wore flannel, overalls, and heavy duty work boots. Their skin looked like
worn grocery bags. Some were obviously members of the HOCC by the pins they wore on their shirts which read, “The Hands of Christ—God’s Chosen Few.”

Rebecca told me in study hall that she was delivering the revival’s opening remarks. I wanted to make sure I was as close to the stage as possible. As I went down the main aisle, a foot tripped me. I stumbled, caught my balance, and turned. Andy Kline sat with two of his basketball cronies. All three wore lettermen’s jackets. Fools. They’d wear them to class reunions, I was sure.

“Here to see your girlfriend, Gibson?” Kline asked. He and his friends giggled.

“She’s not my girlfriend.” My voice was nasally. I sounded like Donald Duck. In a deep voice, I said, “Leave me alone, Andy. Just sit there and shut up.”

Kline looked at his friends. “This pencil-neck talks a good game,” he said. He stood, puffing his chest. He pulled back his fist. I flinched. He and his friends laughed.

“Leave me alone,” I told them, and hurried down the aisle. Andy Kline and his buddies spelled nothing but trouble. They probably came to pull a prank. If they tried anything funny when Rebecca was around, I’d show them what for. Who cares if I’d get my ass beat. I was her stalwart defender, her knight in wool and corduroy. This was love.

I sat in the row nearest the stage. The overhead bulbs that bathed the crowd in yellow light made the tent hot and humid. Soon, I began to sweat. Body odor had already begun to taint the air. As I took off my jacket to hang it on the back of my chair, the old woman to my right smiled and said, “Welcome, young man. Bless you.” She wore a flowery house dress. An HOCC member button was pinned above her left breast.

“Hey,” I said, unsure how to respond. “Bless you.”
An elbow jabbed my ribs. I turned to the man on my left, a bald, biker dude in a leather vest and dirty jeans. He motioned to the stage. “You ever see one of these things?”

“No.”

He grinned. “You’re in for a treat.”

In a few minutes, a tall man in overalls glided to the podium on the far corner of the stage, tested the microphone, and welcomed us. He announced that the HOCC’s junior pastor, Reverend Schuster, would conduct this service and then the revival would begin. We the audience groaned as if our movie had been delayed.

Schuster was young and fit, with a closely trimmed beard and sonorous voice. He paced as he sermonized, holding on to the lapels of his black blazer. I was bored. His talk of love, redemption, and suffering on such a cosmic scale was Greek to me. While most of the audience—whether in jest or devotion I couldn’t tell—shouted “Amen,” “Hallelujah,” and “Blessed be the Lord,” I didn’t respond. Schuster matched the man-of-the-cloth stereotype my parents had fashioned—all questions, no answers.

The service finished, Schuster thanked all of us for coming and warned that only those with strong faith should remain. Nobody left.

Schuster exited stage right and Rebecca parted the red curtain and walked to the podium. She moved with grace, her back straight, eyes front, arms at her sides, wrists cocked. She was as tall as most boys, an inch taller than my five-ten. She wore a knee-length purple dress, her body as shapeless as a bean pole. She was barefoot, with long,
alien-like toes. As usual her auburn hair was in a bun and she didn’t wear makeup. At the podium, she eyed the front row, spotted me, and smiled.

She cleared her throat. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m Rebecca Flynn and I have the God-given privilege to be the daughter of the newest prophet. My father preaches in this town and once a year demonstrates his faith by performing miracles of devotion in this very tent to spread the Word. Do you know what got him started?” She looked at us meaningfully. “Death.

“God spoke to my father when he was nine. He and his father were ice fishing. The ice broke and they both fell in the freezing water. My father pulled himself ashore and tried to help his dad, but it was no use. It was his father’s time. As his father slipped underwater, a voice rang out—‘Glory unto me. Go forth and preach it!’ My father thought a long, hard time on it. Finally, after many years of wandering through this great country of ours, he accepted his calling.

“And I’d like you to accept your calling as God-fearing Christians. Our church doesn’t have much. That’s why those collection plates you see going around are mere ashtrays. Thank you for your donations.”

A rough-looking, goateed man in an out-of-style tweed suit handed an ashtray to a bespectacled woman at the end of our row. When the biker dude handed it to me, I placed a dollar in it and gave it to the ever-smiling elderly woman. “Bless you,” she whispered.

“No,” I replied, feeling part of a Marx Brothers routine, “Bless you.”

Raising her voice, Rebecca said, “Ladies and gentlemen, Horatio Flynn,” and stepped from the podium with a flourish.
A short, thin man with a shaved head and horn-rimmed glasses stormed from behind the red curtain. He wore cream-colored slacks, a polo-shirt, and high rubber boots. He gripped the podium and leaned to the microphone with such ferocity I was surprised he didn’t bite the foam cover. “I won’t validate my daughter’s story. If you don’t believe it, you’re on the outside looking in. I won’t talk your ears off. I’ll prove the healing power of Jesus. I’ll prove the Lord protects the righteous. Mark, sixteen-eighteen: ‘Who believes will be saved, who don’t be damned. And these signs protect those who believe: they’ll drive out demons. They’ll speak in tongues. They’ll pick up snakes and drink poison and nothing shall hurt them.’ Amen.”

Scattershot murmurs of “Amen” from the crowd.

Horatio raised his arms. Rebecca drew aside the curtain. Gasps. A fat lady’s stifled scream. Mumbles from kids my age of “Cool.” Behind the curtain a dozen people were covered in hissing snakes. They were coiled about their heads, arms, and legs. One slithered about a man’s waist, a living belt. These people didn’t look frightened. They looked at peace.

Behind these believers was a three-piece band consisting of a piano, fiddle, and bass. It played a slow, mournful tune, heavy on the fiddle. The believers shuffled as if waiting for a bus. Horatio began to clap. The piano and bass picked up. The dirge became a jig. The believers came to life. They danced about Horatio, flailing their arms and legs. The band played faster, shouting incomprehensible lyrics. The believers wailed and babbled, eyes rolling. They praised Jesus and commanded Him to banish Satan’s demons
from the tent and cast them into an unholy wasteland. It was a maddening display of hoodoo, reptiles, and backcountry blues.

One of the believers loped behind the bandstand and returned with a bottle of Windex. He draped his snakes over Horatio’s shoulders, sipped from the bottle, and passed it to his brethren. Horatio cheered as they chugged the blue liquid. He took the last drink, gulping the bottle dry. He flicked his wrist and tossed the bottle at us. It flipped end over end, arching high into the lights, and came down with a hollow bonk on the crown of my smiling, elderly neighbor’s head.

I turned to ask if she was alright, when she stood, eyes shut tight, and sang, “Hallelujah, I been saved!”

Around the tent, HOCC parishioners jumped to their feet. There were more than I’d thought, at least half the crowd. They swayed to the music, clapping, eyes shut. Some wept, while others shouted they’d been saved although they hadn’t been doinked with a plastic bottle. Turning in my chair, scanning the crowd I saw with shock that Andy Kline’s buddies trembled at the sight of the HOCC member nearest them jumping and clapping, but Andy just calmly looked about with his usual wolfish grin. He caught me looking and winked.

The music stopped. The dancers stilled, Horatio took center stage, grinning in ecstasy, snakes heaped on him. I couldn’t tell which part of him was reptile or man. His body was a mass of scaly movements. He bowed and the snakes slithered off him onto the stage, toward the audience. People screamed. The biker dude next to me fell off his chair, hands protecting his face. More people fought to get out of their rows and to the
back of the tent. The stoners giggled. I was too scared to move. As the snakes came closer, I saw Black Death in their beady eyes.

But they stopped at the edge of the stage, curled up, tongues flicking, like trained circus creatures. Horatio hurried to the microphone. “Sit down everyone. It’s okay. Remember, if you’re righteous, if you believe, nothing shall hurt you.”

Slowly, people took their seats. Some remained shaken at the back of the tent, eyes wide. The biker dude lowered his hands from his face, straightened his vest, and told me, “It was scarier last year. Bigger snakes.”

One of the believers set a folding chair beside Horatio. He thanked him and beckoned Rebecca. “Honey,” he said, “it’s time.”

She hopped to the chair, sat, and extended her legs to her father. Horatio picked up a black copperhead and held it to her alien-like toes. “Lord,” he said, looking to the heavens, “if my daughter is a boozing whore, if she isn’t good to her parents, if she cheats in school, strike her down!”

The snake bit Rebecca’s big toe.

“No,” I cried. My voice was drowned out by gasps, yelps, exclamations of “Oh,” “Ah,” “Damn.”

Rebecca held up her hands for all to be silent.

We waited.

And waited…

Finally, she clasped her hands and said, “Praise Jesus.” She stood, twirled, and cocked her hip. “I’m a righteous girl.”
Breath whooshed from all of us, followed by scattered clapping and cheering. I was frozen. I thought I’d lost her to this deranged ceremony.

Horatio and Rebecca held hands and bowed. He went to the podium and leaned to the microphone with as much ferocity as when he first came onstage. “Who in this audience is righteous enough to test the Lord? You boys?” He pointed at me and at someone behind me. “Step up here then.”

I looked at those in my row, my finger to my chest. “Me?”

Andy Kline skipped down the aisle. “Come on, Gibson,” he shouted. “Let’s test Jesus. Let’s prove we’re righteous boys!” He raised his fists as he said it and the audience cheered.

I realized I was standing. I’d done it when I cried out.

Kline hopped onstage. He raised his fists again and the crowd cheered once more.

Horatio cocked his head and peered at me. “Well, son?”

Rebecca was looking from me to Andy, almost as if she knew why I’d come that night and thought I could show Andy up, that I was more righteous than him. Oh, if only I’d understood!

I scooted sideways down my row and into the aisle. Ascending the stairs to the stage, my knees quivered. I had to lift my legs up each step one at a time. I couldn’t take my eyes off the snake in Horatio’s hand. Its tail whipped, its maw opened and shut.

“Come to me, geek,” I heard it say. “I know how you fantasize about the girl.” I was taken aback. It spoke in the voice of my father.
Horatio led Kline and I to the center of the stage and turned us to the audience. No one was speaking, all eyes locked on us. It was even hotter under the stage lights. Sweat rolled down my forehead into my eyes. It burned. “You’re mine, pimple-popper,” said the snake.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Horatio boomed. “These young men want to test God’s judgment. Are they fools? Only He will let us know. Step forward,” he said to Kline. “What’s your name?”

Grinning, Andy stepped beside him and spread his arms. “Andy Kline,” he replied.

Horatio draped the snake on his shoulders. The crowd let out an “Oh!” The snake coiled around Andy’s neck and for a moment he looked terrified. The snake nudged his cheek with its muzzle, cocked its head, and looked him right in the eyes. Some secret knowledge passed between the two, something I have never understood. Then the snake slithered down Andy’s arm and landed on the stage with a thud. But it had me fixed with its eye. “I’m comin’,” it hissed. “Comin’ to getcha.”

Horatio clapped his hands. “Andy Kline, a righteous boy!”

Cheering.

Andy’s buddies chanted “Kline! Kline! Kline” like there was seconds left in the game, Everton down by one, Andy on the foul line.

Andy flexed his arms, triumphant. He leapt off the stage and jogged down the aisle. People slapped him high-fives. He sat and crossed his arms, nodding, pursing his lips. What a showboat.
The crowd quieted down as Horatio turned to me. “What’s your name?”

“Gibson McDonald,” I squeaked.

Horatio bent and took the snake in both hands. He lifted it high.

The crowd fell silent.

I closed my eyes.

Horatio draped the snake on my neck. The animal was warm, its body knobby, yet slick. I shuddered as something tiny and wet flicked my cheek. I heard hissing close to my ear, felt the snake prod the side of my head as it had done with Andy. It didn’t move for some time. I could feel it studying me. “Hey, Gibson,” it rasped. “Suck on this.”

Sharp, burning pain as it bit me once, twice, on my neck.

The crowd screamed. I heard people scramble to their feet as Horatio pulled the snake off me. I spun, staggering about, hands pressed to my neck. Blood flowed between my fingers. Making awful gagging noises, I folded to my knees. My blood spattered the stage. I felt a hand on my back, and was gently laid on the stage as I wondered what the hell was happening. Rebecca knelt over me, crying. I tried to tell her I was fine, but I couldn’t speak.

Then Horatio’s face filled my vision. He reached down and began to pound on my chest. He bent and for a moment I thought he was kissing me, but then I realized he was giving me CPR. I tried to shout. He pounded, kissed, pounded, kissed, as Rebecca wept over his shoulder. Up close, I saw Horatio’s scarred hands and forearms. His neck was, too, even the end of his chin. Snakes had been taking pieces of him for years. With a shudder, I passed out.
I came to when the paramedics were carting me across the field to the ambulance. They kept shouting, “Give him room, give him room,” but still a crowd followed, all of them so, so concerned. I was strapped to one of those orange skeds, an IV stuck in my left wrist. The bandages on my neck itched. My vision was blurry. The world came in flashes, but I saw I was shoeless. Aghast at the sight of my stocking feet, I thought, Dad’s going to be pissed. I began to panic. Then I saw Rebecca, still weepy, holding my hand, running with my stretcher.

“I’m here, Gibson,” she said to me. “Right here.”

Ambulance doors banged open behind me. It was now or never. Summoning all my strength, I wetted my lips and croaked, “Rebecca.”

She squeezed my hand and leaned close to my mouth. “Yes, Gibson, what is it?”

I swallowed hard. “Will you go to Prom with me?”

Eyes wide, her mouth a tight O, she slowly turned her head to me. “Aw, I’m sorry, Gibson, but I’m already going with somebody else.”

The gravity of her words was suffocating. My mouth flapped open and shut. I couldn’t find words.

The paramedics lifted me into the ambulance. “Go, go!” one of them shouted as he hopped into the seat beside me. He took my hand. “You’re gonna make it, son.”

I ignored him, still gaping between my stocking feet at Rebecca, who stood at the foot of the ambulance, frowning, like I was a stray cat she wasn’t allowed to take home. “Who is it?” I tried to ask. “Who’s your date?”
A tall, lanky figure stepped into view. Rebecca began to cry. She put her head on his shoulder and wept onto the leather sleeve of his letterman’s jacket.

The doors closed, and the ambulance sped away. I saw the lighted tent out the back door windows, and in front of it, the silhouetted embrace of Andy Kline and my true love. I screamed as loud as I could. My voice caught. I fell silent and stared numbly at the ceiling of the ambulance as the venom kicked in.
What Cannot Be Bought Is Never Free

Claudio left work early to arrive at the bank before it closed. That week he had sold most of his belongings and broken his lease. A university student who lived on the ground floor of his building had bought his Fiat Panda, Claudio’s car for almost twenty years. It was like losing a leg. He’d had the car when his father was alive, had experienced so much of the city from the driver’s seat, or while sitting atop the hood, the roof. When Claudio signed over the car, he knew there was no going back and it scared and delighted him. He now lived out of a duffel bag and slept on a cot in the marina common room. The Citroen he borrowed from a coworker.

He thudded in his work boots across La Caixa’s marble floor to the teller window and withdrew all his money from the bank. The teller cut him a check and Claudio asked for cash. He put the thirty-thousand Euros in his jacket pocket and patted it, smiling.

“I wish you all the best in your new life,” said the teller.

“Thank you,” Claudio replied, “wishing he could reach through the glass window to shake her hand. “Thank you so much.”

He drove back to Port Forum by way of the Ronda del Litoral and showed his pass at the security gate. Past a dock of cruddy trawlers and fishing boats, most of them belonging to men who worked at port, he parked in the employee lot and jogged to the marina, an angular, steel building done in the modernist style.
Forum was one of the most profitable ports in Barcelona, stretching for several kilometers along the Mediterranean coast. Everything at Forum was steel, glass, and concrete. Bushes or shrubs occasionally popped up along the crosswalks, but the only real greenery was during sunsets when the light hit the sea just right and an emerald flash bounced between the purples and blues. The sleek, industrial design was a message—Port Forum meant business and security. It was not the brash, vibrant Port Vell, with its powerboats and racing teams, nor was it Port Olympic, surrounded by fancy restaurants and flashy attractions like the Ice Bar. Port Forum was a serious, quiet port, a place to retire after a long day in the city. But time could always be found to party at the marina bar, where the boaters mingled and danced, and port workers drank for free.

In the marina, Claudio went down a back hall to one of the custodial rooms. Samuel was there, dumping a bucket of black, speckled water in the floor drain, bobbing his head to the music blaring through his headphones. Claudio jabbed him with his thumb, and Samuel jerked, slopping what was left in the bucket on his shoes.

“Bastard,” cried Samuel, pointing at the puddle in which he now stood. He could not keep from laughing. He shared his friend’s excitement. He ran a mop over the water, grinning.

Claudio handed Samuel the Citroen’s keys. “Thank you.”

Samuel pocketed them and hugged Claudio. “Have you told Eduardo?”

“Tonight, after I buy the boat.”

“Wish I could be there.”

“You can if you like.”
Samuel held him at arm’s length, shaking his head in wonder and envy. They were both men in their forties, made of taut muscle, the kind earned by decades of manual labor.

Samuel said, “No, I cannot. I’m leaving for Toledo after shift.”

“You can’t stay for one drink?”

“It’s Christmas, my friend.”

Claudio clapped his shoulder. “I understand. Wish me luck.”

“You won’t need it.”

After saying farewell to Samuel, Claudio headed to the west dock, taking everything in, the heavy sea air, the growls of the boat race coming from Port Vell, the distant honking and clattering of the city, its bass-like groove. My last night, he thought. Goodbye, goodbye.

On the dock, he met the Australian couple who owned the yacht at the end of the pier. The man took Claudio’s hand and thanked him for fixing their sump-pump. “You did a hell of a job,” he said.

“I do what I can,” Claudio replied, impatient to move on.

“Anytime you want a bite, come aboard.”

“Anytime you want anything,” said the man’s wife, a petite, pale, almond-eyed blonde. She turned her shoulder, eyeing Claudio. Her husband frowned.

Claudio wished them well and continued walking, hands stuffed in his jacket pockets, tight in his left the fat roll of Euros.
At the end of the dock was the Catalina 22. The bow was white, a red stripe painted on the sides, the cabin a faded mustard yellow, the rigging and mast flecked with rust. It was a little less than seven meters long from bow to stern, and had a single mast. The boat was thirty years old and had no name. Lorenzo wanted Claudio to name it, but he would not, not until it was his.

Claudio called for Lorenzo.

The dwarf emerged from the cabin, throwing open the door and wiping his oily hands on a red rag. He spotted Claudio and smiled. “I’ll come to you,” he said, and tottered aft, the wind throwing his long, grey beard over his shoulder. He came down the gangplank and hopped onto the dock. Neither man offered to shake hands.

“I have the money like you asked,” said Claudio.

“You have?”

“Yes. Is it ready?”

The dwarf sighed. The sun was setting. Silhouetted gulls pin wheeled over the sea, bickering over a dark shape floating in the water. The dwarf shivered. “There is still damp in the air. We’ve never had so much rain, no? It cleared for Christmas, no miracle, but it does make the holiday feel special. Don’t you intend to spend it with your family?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I have the money with me. Please.”

“Answer me.”
Claudio sighed. “My father worked here for thirty-five years. That frightened my mother.” He pointed to the water. “She thought he loved it more than his wife and children.”

“Was she correct?”

“No. Working the sea filled his day, but it did not fulfill him. She never understood. She made sure my sisters didn’t either. I was lost to her early on. Father died, I inherited his job. My mother and sisters moved to Madrid.” He made scissors of his fingers and cut an invisible string. “Snip,” he said. “Now, that’s more than you needed to know. I have the money.”

“Yes, you keep saying so.” The cabin door opened. A burly thug in wet, oily jeans and a black sweater came on deck. He ran his hands over his black beard and peered at Claudio.

Lorenzo said, “Your boat is not ready. The rudder and navigation systems still go on the fritz. I don’t want to sell you a lame vessel, my friend. Come back tomorrow.”

Claudio stepped at Lorenzo. He looked down at him, hunching his shoulders, jutting his chin. He felt the thug watching him. “You were to have this ready last week and the week before and the week before that. I am tired of sleeping at the marina. I am tired of you raising the price.”

“You will have to make do. Things come up.”

“What things?”

“Things.” Lorenzo arched an eyebrow. Claudio thought of the kilos of cocaine found at port last month and of the young Peruvian who washed ashore a mile away, his
forehead cleaved by an axe. He remembered how Lorenzo left when the drugs and body were found, and how he returned when the police had gone.

“I’m not afraid of you,” said Claudio, fighting the tremor in his voice. “I am paying you for a job done on time and that time is tonight.”

Lorenzo put his hands on his hips and squinted up at Claudio. “You know why I won’t sell you this boat tonight?” He prodded Claudio’s thigh. “Because you do not ask me to give only ninety percent, it is bad for business. If word gets around ninety percent is okay, why not eighty? When does it end? If you want this boat in excellent shape, come back tomorrow morning with our agreed price, plus five hundred Euros. Then you can board this vessel and go.”

Claudio glowered at the dwarf. “Fine,” he hissed. “See you at nine.”

“Make it ten.”

“Goodbye.” Claudio spun on his heel and stomped away, giving the dwarf his broad back.

“Hey,” Lorenzo called.

Claudio stopped, but did not turn.

“Where will you go in your boat?”

Claudio looked over his shoulder. The sun had gone down and the last of the light was going with it. The dwarf was a shadow. “Far from here,” Claudio told him, “from men like you.”

Lorenzo barked a laugh. “No matter where you go, you’ll find no other kind.”
In the marina bar, above the shelves of liquors, music videos were playing on the TV, a mix of American and Spanish hits and holiday favorites. It gave the bar a party atmosphere, yet also one of comfort, of a home away from home for the boaters docked here for the holidays.

The bar was a fifteen-meter square tent that sat outside the marina building, on a concrete pad, near the crosswalk that led to the docks. The tarp was like frosted glass. Inside, at the back of the tent, Magdalena and her father poured drinks at the counter. They were twins separated at birth by thirty years, both of them thin, dark, and nimble with the liquors. Wood stoves sat in the front corners of the tent. Arranged about them in no discernable pattern were card tables and chairs. A pool table sat on the tent’s left side, near it a long-dead jukebox. The aisle that ran to the bar counter between the tables and chairs was often used as a makeshift dance floor.

It was past nine o’clock. Claudio had been taking shots for three hours. He’d tried rum, whiskey, and tequila, but could not get drunk. He was too tense. This was the third time the dwarf had screwed him. First it had been the engine, then the mast, and now…Lorenzo only wanted more money. Claudio thought of stealing the boat in the early morning hours, but he didn’t know if the dwarf would be there. Claudio hadn’t the courage for theft, not with that black-bearded thug looming about. It was too depressing to think of the extra five-hundred Euros that Lorenzo was charging. Claudio raised his hand and asked Magdalena for a shot of brandy.
Claudio sat alone at a corner table, his back to one of the wood stoves, watching the rich, drunken boaters file into the tent, fresh from dinner or a stroll on La Rambla. The stove hissed. Wood popped. Claudio prodded the fire with the poker leaning against the stack of wood beside the stove and tossed in another log. Magdalena’s father raised a hand to him and Claudio waved back.

The boaters were all living out their dreams or running from something. They bought their vessels and sailed here to Barcelona, most learning the hard lessons of the sea through trial and error. It was a dangerous game. In that, Claudio respected them.

They came to him as those before them had come to his father. Claudio scraped hulls, fixed sewage pipes, fastened gangplanks, rigged sails, lubed cabin doors, scrubbed docks, and spent hours, sometimes days, fiddling with rudders, drive shafts, port holes, lifeboats, and wonky GPS navigation systems. As he did, the boaters opened their hearts to him. He was their mechanic, therapist, and priest. Many dockhands hated them, but to Claudio they were only people, as lost as him and longing for whatever peace they could find.

Claudio tipped his glass at the boaters who greeted him. Some stopped to give him Christmas tips. The bald Brit with the young wife who stepped out on him as much as he did her gave Claudio one-hundred Euros. The Saudi brothers, expelled from their father’s oil business for marrying Americans, thanked Claudio for firing the man who’d been stealing from their cabin, and tipped him two-hundred Euros. The Mexican and his wife who’d severed ties with their families over an inheritance dispute gave him fifty
Euros and salsa-danced drunkenly down the aisle, the wife shaking her ample breasts in her husband’s smiling, moon face.

By eleven o’clock, the bar was hopping. There was condensation on the tarp and the tent seemed to shake with every dance move. Claudio couldn’t have been happier. He’d collected twelve-hundred Euros in Christmas tips. He added them to his already fat roll. Yet, the cold reality of Lorenzo’s treatment of him weighed heavy on his mind. He got up to leave, to go to the marina to his cot, to think of how to handle the dwarf in the morning if he raised his price again.

Then Amelia entered the bar, and Claudio sat back down.

She entered behind her parents, who stumbled into the bar, laughing. She held the tent flaps open and satisfyingly regarded all she saw as if she would never have to see it again. She wore black heels, leggings, and a cheetah-print shirt under a brown jacket. A silver bracelet twisted about her wrist like vines, black and white stones dotting it here and there. She had a soft face, and seemed to always be on the verge of laughing at some private joke. Her eyes, however, disturbed Claudio. Each was a different color, one green, the other hazel. It was as if two different people were looking out through them, one kind, gentle, and the other cold and daring. Although she was always nice to Claudio, he never really knew with which eye she was seeing him. The only redhead in the bar, she stuck out like a lit cigarette among all the dark, fashionable clothes and heads of gray hair.

She had been at port since September. Her parents owned a Catamaran on the east dock, the Belle Lumina, named after her father’s financial consulting firm. Claudio had
spent many afternoons on the boat. Her father didn’t know how to care for the vessel, or if he did, he didn’t care to. He and his wife were either sleeping off the night’s festivities or out drinking in the city. Often they left their daughter behind.

She was attractive. There were many good-looking women at port who could afford to hide their aging bodies in layers of makeup and plastic surgery. Amelia was different. She still had the youthful beauty that comes with being nineteen and having your eyes opened to the world. Claudio liked that kind of real, natural beauty. It did not hide anything for it did not know yet how to hide it. He was attracted to her, but he had boundaries he refused to cross. After all, he was old enough to be her father. Other dockhands spoke of how they wouldn’t mind catching her in the shower or changing clothes. One worker had been especially obsessed. His name was Peter. He had been hired by Eduardo, who owned Port Forum, to fill a position that had suddenly become vacant. Peter called Amelia a fine piece of American meat. Claudio warned him that if he kept up that kind of talk, he would fire him.

“You can’t fire me,” Peter told him with his usual, rat-faced sneer. “Eduardo is the boss.”

In October, some of the boaters complained to Claudio that someone had been stealing from their cabins. By November, these instances had become a plague. Theft had occurred in almost every cabin. Claudio suspected the dockworkers. Only they knew the boaters’ daily schedules, and some of them had even been given keys to the cabins in case of emergencies.
At the beginning of December, Amelia’s father said a window on their Catamaran was leaking. He let Claudio in the cabin and said he and his wife were going out for the day and would be back after dinner. He told him Amelia was somewhere onboard and that the leak was in her room.

After her parents left, Claudio called for Amelia. When she did not answer, he climbed down the steps to the cabin’s kitchen and ducted into a short hall that led to Amelia’s bunk. He opened the door, turned on the light, and gasped. Arrayed on the bottom bunk, the dresser, and on the shelf beside the full-length mirror, were dozens of items, all stolen from cabins in recent months. There was the Saudi’s desk clock, a stack of foreign CDs and magazines, a few iPods, family photographs, maps the German accountant had lost, trinkets and souvenirs from Italy, Turkey, even from South America. There was a “Welcome to Brazil” button and a plastic Galapagos turtle. Everything was arranged in neat rows, as if Amelia had brought them from home and needed them organized in such a manner in order to feel at ease.

Claudio shut the door behind him and wondered what to do. He did not want the girl to get in trouble. Many of the boaters detested her parents. Some, he knew, would call the police. They might even press charges. He wanted to protect Amelia if for no other reason than he thought that she was a good girl whose parents gave her enough trouble.

He decided to focus on the leaky window. Work often cleared his head. He hopped onto her neatly made bed. There was a trickle of seawater leaking from the port window. No, it wasn’t sea water. It was merely condensation, common in all boats.
Claudio cursed her parents. What a waste of time. Yet, if they hadn’t called for him, he wouldn’t have made this discovery. The thief of Port Forum, he thought, and smiled.

He went to the cabin, calling for Amelia. He stepped into the wheelhouse and there, below him on deck, she lay in the sun on a beach towel, topless. Her breasts were small, her nipples dark, like copper coins. She wore sunglasses and was listening to an iPod. He wondered if she’d stolen it. Then he realized what he was seeing. He covered his eyes, felt his way to the window, and knocked on the glass. “Amelia,” he shouted. “It’s Claudio. I need to speak with you, please.” He heard rustling on deck, and stepped into the cabin, still covering his eyes.

She came inside, her bare feet slapping on the cabin floor. “You can look,” she said.

He took his hand from his face. She was tall, had wide hips and thick legs. Her top was on, the beach towel wrapped around her waist. Her sunglasses were resting on the crown of her head and she was looking at him with her cold, hazel eye.

“I didn’t see anything,” Claudio said.

She frowned. “Liar.”

He cleared his throat and crooked his finger.

She followed him to her bunk. He opened the door. “You first, I insist.”

She walked to the middle of the room, turned, and said, “I’ll give it all back.”

“No,” he told her. “I will.”

They stared at one another. She had gone from looking at him with her hazel eye to her green one. “You’re not going to tell anyone?”
Claudio shook his head. “Give me a bag. I’ll take these things.”

She got a grocery bag from the kitchen and went about the room carefully placing all she’d stolen inside it. When she tried to hand the bag to him, he shook his head and pointed at the closet and the dresser. “Open,” he said.

It was as he feared. There were more stolen items, clothes, handbags, shoes, jewelry. Shaking his head, he watched her put them all in the bag. When he took it from her, the bag was heavy. The sides bulged. He tucked it under his arm and turned to leave.

“Thank you,” she said.

He looked back at her. “Why do you do it?”

She shrugged. “I can’t help it sometimes.”

“I expect you to help it from now on. Understand?”

She nodded.

He left the boat and put the bag of stolen items in Peter’s locker. He went to Eduardo’s office, brought him down, and showed him what he’d “found.” Eduardo fired Peter. No one but Claudio knew the truth. Claudio told the other dockworkers that Peter was fired because Amelia’s parents had overheard him leering at their daughter. He told them it was a warning from which they all could learn—leave the boaters’ women alone, especially their daughters.

After that, there were no more thefts. By Claudio’s mercy Amelia seemed to have learned the error of her ways, but her parents remained as aloof about boat maintenance as ever. Several times a week Claudio found himself on their Catamaran, tending to some
duty they had long neglected. Amelia always hung around, curious about what needed fixing. She liked to talk. Claudio became her confidant, and in a much more personal way, her friend.

She was a college drop-out, grades she said, but he knew better. She’d probably stolen from the wrong person. She said she wanted to be rid of her parents. Her passion was horses. She wanted to live on a ranch in the western United States, to ride day and night, to camp under the stars. She spoke of it like she’d seen it in a movie, like it would be that easy. Claudio listened politely. He never spoke much, never told her about himself except what work he had done that day and what he had left to do. If he was twenty years younger, he might have pursued her. As it was, she was nothing more than the thieving American girl who liked horses. But he knew that was a lie. She meant something to him, but he could not put his finger on what.

After he would finish his duties on their boat, he’d pack up his tools and say, “Good day, Amelia,” and she would pat his shoulder as he left the cabin and tell him to take care and to come by whenever he felt like it.

“I don’t mind talking,” she’d say.

He sensed how lonely she was, how embarrassed she was of her parents, and would tell her, “I’m sure I’ll be back soon.” Her high, throaty laugh would echo about the docks.

As much as he tried not to, he liked her. She was part of his routine. He knew when he bought the boat from Lorenzo and was sailing toward the Atlantic that he would miss her.
Now, she sat at a table across the bar, watching her parents drink wine and play cards. They were too drunk to shuffle the deck, so she did it for them. Her parents rocked in their chairs, howling with laughter.

The tent flap parted and in sauntered Eduardo, a woman on each arm. People called to him, raised their glasses, and he let out a welcoming yell, pumping his fist. He wore a black suit, the shirt beneath unbuttoned. His chest hair was like a dark rug. On his head were childish sunglasses with neon green frames. He was drunk, as were the women, who wore a lot of makeup. They looked old and desperate. Their hair was done up in the old style, the bangs swooping back over their heads. Their cheap bracelets tinkled loudly. Eduardo approached Claudio’s table. He leaned down, chuckling, and said, “I would like you to meet my sisters.”

Claudio looked at the women, then at his boss. “I see the family resemblance.”

“Pah!” Eduardo threw his head back and laughed. He pulled the women close, looped his arms under their armpits, and squeezed their breasts. They giggled and smacked his cheeks. He grinned. “You want one? You can pick after I’ve finished.”

“No, thank you.”

“Always the moralist, this one,” Eduardo told the women, “ever since we were schoolmates. Well, Claudio, I hope your bed is warm tonight.” Eduardo and the cackling women walked about the bar, stopping to chat with rich boaters and various Port Forum staff.

Claudio waited until Eduardo was sitting and then he got a rum and coke from the bar and returned to his table. He stared at the carbonation bubbling in his glass. If he had
a home to go to, he’d go there, but he did not, and would not leave, not with Amelia leaving her parents’ table and moving through the bar, bumping into people, apologizing. As Claudio tossed back his drink, she bumped into someone else and—he couldn’t believe it. She bumped into the German accountant, and her hand darted in his suit pocket. The man turned, red-faced with drink. She apologized, and moved on, stuffing a few Euros in her jacket pocket. She looked about and set her sights on one of the tall Saudi brothers who stood chalking a cue by the pool table.

Claudio wiped his lips with the back of his hand and hurried to intercept her.

She saw Claudio coming and smiled, looking at him with her green eye. “Hi.”

“Hello.” He took her by the elbow and led her to his table. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, just stretching my legs.” She pointed at her parents, who were now lewdly dancing with the Australian couple, of whom the wife had flirted with Claudio that evening. “I’m no longer part of their night.”

“Sit.” Claudio motioned to a chair at his table.

She sat and set her purse on the tabletop. “Whew. What a long day. We drove to Tibadabo, climbed to the top of the church and everything. It was so cold up there.” She shivered.

Claudio sat across from her and put his elbows on the table. “Give it to me,” he said softly.

She frowned. “What?”

He leaned forward. “Give me the money.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”
“Would you like me to stand up and shout that you are a thief?”

Her lips puckered. “No.”

“Then give.”

She reached into her pocket and handed him a small roll of bills.

“All of it,” he said.

Rolling her eyes, she reached in her other jacket pocket. “This is all I have. I swear.” She slapped the money in his palm. He folded the cash and put it in his jacket pocket.

“I will give back this money to its rightful owners in the morning. Tell them they overpaid on drinks, say they were too drunk. They won’t remember.”

“They won’t miss it,” she said harshly. “It’s just paper to them.”

They sat for some time, leaned back in their chairs, like two children pouting. Finally he asked her, “Did you not learn from the last time? Do you not remember what I told you?”

She struck the tabletop with her finger. “My parents are crazy. I can’t stand them. There’s an eight-fifteen flight out of here to Atlanta tomorrow morning and I want to be on it. The only problem is that I don’t have enough money for the ticket. Last night, my parents cut me off. What would you do?” Her hazel eye was hot with indignation.

“I wouldn’t steal.” He looked around, fiddled with his empty glass.

Her disposition softened. “You look bummed,” she said.

“Bummed?”

“Disappointed.”
“Yes, in you.”

“I don’t think so.” She put her elbow on the table and rested her chin on her palm.

“If I tell you my sad story, will you tell me yours?”

The alcohol was getting to him. It was making him withdrawn, grumpy. He didn’t want to have to deal with her. He had Lorenzo to think about. Go away, he wanted to say. I cannot hear your sob stories any longer. I have my own problems. But she needed someone to listen and he had nowhere else to go. And she was right—the boaters wouldn’t notice the little she’d taken.

“Okay,” he said.

She folded her hands on the table. “They cut me off because they want me to go back to school.”

“That is good. School is good.”

“I hate it. I’m not college material. I hate books. I hate classrooms. I hate tests and papers.”

“You hate all these things, but what do you like?”

“I told you.”

“Oh, yes, your horses.” Claudio smiled.

“What’s with the grin?”

“Nothing.”

She laughed. “Come on, spill it, buster.”

Claudio folded his hands on the table in a similar manner as Amelia. The two of them looked like business partners wrapped in deliberation. “I come on your boat and
you tell me how you cannot stand being sailed around the world, living in your parents’
pocket. You say you wish to live on a ranch, you who have never worked a day in your
life. Look at these hands. They are dry and cracked. Look, I am missing a thumbnail.
Now, look at my face. See how beaten, how weathered?” He placed his hand over hers,
rubbed it with his fingers. “Now, look at your nail polish, how soft your hand. Touch
your makeup, your lipstick, your hair. Look at that bracelet. Tell me you would not miss
all of it. Please, tell me this.” He sat back, arms crossed.

She craned her neck and squinted at the wood stove, her tongue pressing her
cheek. “Well, I don’t know what’s crawled up your ass, but I know when I’ve been told.
Goodnight.”

He grabbed her wrist. “Don’t go. I am sorry. I was mean. Today, things haven’t
gone so well. Forgive me. Sit. Please. I am sorry. I am, um, as you say, very, very
bummed.”

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong or are you going to sulk all night?”

“You sound like my mother,” he said.

She pointed at her parents, who were still dancing with the Australians.

“Sometimes kids need tough love.”

He chuckled. “Alright, I will tell you.” He told her about buying the boat from
Lorenzo, how he’d saved money for years, how he could only afford a used vessel, how
he didn’t have time to fix one up himself because he had to run this port. He had to work
overtime to keep up with his rent, and now that he had everything squared away the
dwarf was screwing him again.
“He better have it ready tomorrow,” said Claudio. “If he doesn’t”—he pounded one fist into the other. “The little man will have a big problem.”

“Have you had to take matters into your own hands before?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been in fights?”

“Too many to count,” he lied.

“But you don’t want to fight him.”

“No.”

She scooted her chair closer and whispered, “Why not steal it? I know the boat you’re talking about. We could probably—”

“Yes, steal it, your answer for everything.”

“It might be the only answer for you,” she said.

He glared. “How do you know this boat?”

“Look, when you’re left on your own a lot, you tend to notice everything. I know the dwarf doesn’t sleep there. He leaves every night.”

“I know that, too,” said Claudio, “but he could be on one of the other boats he has here. And if he’s here, he could come back to my boat. No, Amelia. You don’t know Lorenzo like I do.”

She shook her head at him.

“Also, I don’t have the keys,” he said.

“Oh, please, it doesn’t take long to pick a cabin door, and you mean to tell me you can’t figure out how to start an engine without a key?”
Claudio looked at her. Everything she was saying was possible. He knew she could get him inside the Catalina, and once inside, he could have that boat out to sea in minutes. But he was not that type of man, and if anything went wrong...He thought of the dead Peruvian boy. He said to Amelia, “Haven’t you stolen enough tonight?”

“I wouldn’t be doing it for me.”

He said, “I appreciate the offer, but no thank you.”

“I don’t get it,” she said. “Why do you want to leave? This is your home.”

He spoke of his family, what he’d told Lorenzo on the dock that afternoon. He waved about him. “I am tired of this place. I am tired of fixing boats that are not my own and of hearing rich peoples’ problems, present company excluded.” He sighed. “What I would give to have your parents’ freedom. Not their money, which affords them that freedom, but that freedom itself. When I get my boat, I’ll sail wherever I please. I will be my own boss. I will be free.”

Amelia raised her eyebrows. “You sound like me.”

“I do, yes. Where we differ is that you feel the world owes you that freedom. I, however, am old enough to know the world does not care what I believe I am owed.”

“How old are you?”

“Forty-seven, too old to wait any longer...” He closed his eyes and imagined the chug of the Catalina’s engine as he stood in the wheelhouse, how the boat would rock in the waves, the sight of standing on deck and seeing nothing but water, of being truly alone. His daydream was broken, his soft smile erased, as he heard his boss’ high-pitched whinny bounce across the bar.
“And I am tired of him,” Claudio said, pointing at Eduardo, who sat at a far table nuzzling one of the women’s chests while the other ran a hand through his thick, black hair.

“Eewww.” Amelia made a face. “He looks like a creeper.”

“A creeper?”

“Scum.”

“He is scum. My father saved his father’s life in the war. His father owned this port. So, after the war, he gave my father this job. That creeper, as you say, is Eduardo, my boss. We grew up together. Or I should say I grew up. He is still a boy.”

Amelia leaned toward Claudio, smiling. “Why don’t you tell him off?”

“I’ve dreamed of it. I haven’t told him I am quitting. I’ll wait until after I buy the boat.”

“Do it now. You won’t see him after tonight anyway.”

“No. Not until I have my boat.”

“You sound like you’ve wanted to—”

“All my life.” Claudio grinned and pitched forward in his chair, his mind swimming with drink. She was right. If he wanted freedom, if he wanted happiness, and the world did not care for or give either, he had to take control. “I like you, Amelia,” Claudio said. “You’re a smart girl.” He pushed himself from the table and carefully made his way to Eduardo’s table.
Eduardo saw him coming. He took up his neon sunglasses and offered them to Claudio as Claudio sat at his table. “Take these, my friend. You’ll see the world in a better light.”

Claudio took the glasses and set them back on the table.

“No? They’re x-ray.” Eduardo looked at one of his companions’ chests and then at the other. “The effect lasts even after you’ve removed them!” Laughing, slapping his thigh, he sipped his beer and it dribbled down his shirt front.

“Eduardo,” Claudio said in a low tone.

“Yes?”

Claudio sat forward. His boss mimicked his posture, smiling, as if he were about to be let in on a dirty joke.

“Eduardo, we’ve known each other all our lives. And every moment I have hated you. Men like you are the reason the world remains as it is. I run this port, while you refuse to pick up a wrench. I toil so that you may wear your suits and drink expensive wine and fuck these whores. Tomorrow morning, I am leaving. You will never see me again. I do not wish you luck running this place. I wish you nothing but ruin. I hope all your fortunes fail. I quit, you bastard. I quit!”

As Claudio spoke, Eduardo’s face grew grave, as if each word was chipping away at his merriment. When Claudio finished, Eduardo stared at him intensely. Then his countenance broke and he threw back his head and laughed and stamped his feet. He laughed until he was weepy and had to wipe his eyes with a handkerchief one of the women offered him.
“You’re leaving? You?” His laughter became something else entirely, a malignant being that had been waiting to escape him. “I don’t think so,” said Eduardo, his eyes cold. “You know what kind of man I am, but I know what kind of man you are. You wake before dawn and pack it in well after dark. You love the work. You are an addict. Go on, leave Port Forum. You will return, I guarantee. You will ask me for your job back and I will make you beg. And you will because without this port, you wouldn’t know what to do with your day. True freedom would eat you up. You are like your old man in this way, just like him, stuck here, for life.”

Claudio snatched up Eduardo’s glass and doused him in beer. The women screamed. The bar became quiet. No one spoke. Only Bing Crosby crooned with David Bowie on the TV.

Eduardo’s face and hair was dripping. “A towel,” he hissed. “Goddamn it, a towel!”

Magdalena hustled across the bar with a white towel. Eduardo yanked it from her grasp, almost taking her arm with it. “Get away,” he snapped. He wiped his face, tossed the towel on the table, and pointed at Claudio. “Don’t move. Don’t take a fucking step.”

He stood, clenching his fists, but Claudio was too fast. He caught Eduardo on the cheek with a right hook, sending him stumbling backwards over his chair. As Eduardo fell, he hit the back of his head on the wood stove. The dull bonk echoed in the bar. People gasped. Eduardo’s women backed away, as if suddenly afraid of him. He lay face-up, splayed out, staring at the tent ceiling as if he couldn’t imagine such a thing having
ever existed. He blinked twice and rolled onto his side to glare at Claudio murderously.

“Get out,” he rasped.

Claudio’s feet were stuck to the floor.

“Get out,” Eduardo screamed.

Amelia took Claudio by the elbow and pulled him toward the tent flap. “Come on,” she said, let’s go. “That’s enough. He got the point.”

At the flap, Claudio resisted. Hopping, tugging at Amelia’s hold on him, he shouted at Eduardo. “My father was a better man than you’ll ever know! Your father knew as little about boats as you! My father was better than this place. He had gravitas, Eduardo.” He showed Eduardo his fist. “Just like me.”

“Come on,” Amelia cried, and pulled Claudio out of the tent.

Outside, he shrugged her off and stalked down the crosswalk to the west dock. She followed at his shoulder, trying to get her arms around him, to calm him. “I said tell him off, not deck him. Jesus, slow down.” She jumped in front of him and he almost knocked her over.

“Get out of my way,” he growled.

“No. Slow down. Cool off.”

“Amelia, goddamn it—”

She stood on her tip-toes and kissed him.

The kiss lasted not more than a second, but it was enough to stop him dead.

Then, regaining his senses, he pushed her away. “Amelia, don’t—”

“It got your attention, didn’t it?”
“Oh, Christ.” He threw up his hands and paced in a tight circle. Behind him, the bar was once more loud with music and dancing. He heard yelling and pictured Eduardo buying drinks for everyone. The boaters cheered their thanks, their loyalties always with men like him.

Claudio stopped pacing and peered at Amelia, his hands on his hips. “Go back to your boat.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Go.”

“No.”

“Now.”

“No!”

He sighed. “Christ.” He tilted back his head. The sky was dark, cloudy. A wind picked up, on it a hint of rain. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. “I just want to leave.”

“Me, too.”

“To your horses?”

“Really, I don’t care where.”

“Alright,” Claudio said, “alright, damn it.” From his jacket he removed the Euros she’d stolen that night. “Take this, take it.” He pushed the bills in her hand. He took out his own fat roll of Euros. “How much is that plane ticket?”

“I don’t want your money.” She pointed.
There, bobbing across the narrow waterway between the crosswalk and the dock was Lorenzo’s Catalina 22. There were no lights inside. The boat looked abandoned, lonely. It called to Claudio, pleading for its rightful owner.

He looked about. They were alone on the west dock. In the distance, a tugboat tooted. A helicopter chopped somewhere over the black sea. Claudio put the roll of Euros in his pocket and took her hand. It was so little in his, and although she was smart and tough and made him feel like a bigger man than he might ever be, he reminded himself that she was only a girl. But he couldn’t let her end up like him, jaded, bitter, hoping to hide from the world.

He nodded at the boat. “Ready?”

She grinned.

They went back down the sidewalk and crossed the planking over the narrow waterway. Claudio swiped his card in the slot on the security gate. The gate rolled back on its gears, its whine loud in all that quiet. They passed through the gate and hustled down the dock toward the Catalina, heads down, hand-in-hand, like a couple in a hurry to get home before a storm.

Claudio’s nerve faltered as he stood before the Catalina. He looked about, sure Lorenzo was lurking somewhere. Amelia tugged his arm. “Now or never.”

He took a deep breath. “Now.”

They crept up the gangplank. Claudio had her wait aft while he peeked through the cabin windows. Everything was dark inside. He waved her forward and she hurried to the cabin door, taking a small case from her purse. It was a glasses case, but inside it she
kept all sorts of picks and pins, tools of her secret, amateur trade. Claudio eyed the instruments, fascinated, wowed by her daring. She took two pins and wiggled them in the lock.

He was overcome with gratitude. “Thank you, Amelia. You, you—”

She shushed him. “I know. You’re welcome. You’re breaking my concentration.”

Seconds later, she said, “Almost got it. Yes. Yes!”

The cabin door clicked and swung open. The warm air inside wafted over them. It smelled greasy, salty, so much of what his father called “life.” Claudio couldn’t keep from grinning. Amelia put the case back in her purse. “Well,” she said, “are we going in or what?”

He put his arm around her waist and pulled her to him. She did not resist. They both closed their eyes and their lips—

“Alright,” said a gravelly voice. “Get off my boat.”

Claudio and Amelia turned.

Lorenzo stood on the dock, his hands behind his back, beside him the black-bearded thug.

“Come down here,” he said, taking his hand from behind his back, showing them the long, black pistol. When they didn’t move, Lorenzo pointed the gun at them.

Claudio put his arms around Amelia and helped her off the boat. Lorenzo and the thug stepped back, giving them room. The dwarf waved the gun, motioning Amelia forward. When she didn’t move, Lorenzo pointed the gun more forcefully and she
scampered behind him, head down, and stood by the thug, shaking, hardly able to meet
Claudio’s eyes. She was like a flower wilting in the hot sun.

Lorenzo drew a bead on Claudio. “Every night I check my boats. I have many
valuables inside.” He spit into the water. “Now, give me the money you were fiddling
with earlier.”

“I have no money,” Claudio told him.

“It’s in your left jacket pocket.”

“You won’t shoot.”

“I won’t?”

The dwarf held out his hand and the thug stepped forward and placed a silencer in
his fat palm. It was sleek, and the sound it made while Lorenzo screwed it onto the end of
the pistol was dizzying. Claudio looked left and right, but saw no one on the boats or the
dock. Everyone was still partying at the bar.

Lorenzo smiled. He fired. The gun coughed. The bullet zipped past Claudio’s ear.
Claudio jerked and glared at Lorenzo. For Amelia’s sake, he tried to be fearless. She was
clutching her purse, looking back and forth from him to the dwarf. Her brows twitched,
her fingernails scraped the purse’s leather.

Claudio removed his jacket and held it out for Lorenzo to take.

“Drop it,” said Lorenzo.

Claudio did and raised both hands.

“If only you had patience,” the dwarf told him. “I would have given you the boat
tomorrow.”
“Would you?” Claudio asked.

Lorenzo shrugged, took aim. “You’ll never know. Now, back up to the edge of the dock.”

Although his mind was screaming for him to keep still, Claudio felt his feet moving backward.

“Keep going, right to the edge,” said Lorenzo, walking after him.

Claudio had never seen such speed, such quickness as when Amelia lunged forward, her hand flying from her purse, in her grasp a small, black box.

She jabbed the box into the back of Lorenzo’s neck and Claudio heard the taser clicking and clacking, the excited whine of the electrodes. Lorenzo stiffened. The gun coughed again and the bullet zipped into the night sky.

Amelia might have been screaming, “Fuck you, fuck you,” but if she were it was lost in the pounding in Claudio’s ears as he watched Lorenzo’s eyes go wide and his mouth drop open. His sunburned face lit up like a cartoonist’s depiction of electrocution, a baby blue skull on a black background.

The thug pulled Amelia away and chopped at her wrist, knocking the taser from her hand. It spun end-over-end into the water—plunk.

Lorenzo folded his arms to his chest and clutched the pistol, gawking at it, as if praying that somehow it could keep him steady. He shook with spasms. He rocked onto his toes, lost his balance, and pitched forward off the dock. He didn’t make much of a splash.

He rolled over and gaped at Claudio as he sank into the sea.
The thug’s hands were at Amelia’s throat. She was screaming, trying to fight him off, but he was too powerful.

Claudio bounded down the dock, lowering his shoulder.

The thug turned, ready to catch him.

Claudio tackled him, and they both went flying off the dock into the narrow waterway with a tremendous splash. On the way down, the top of Claudio’s head hit the seawall and the cold, watery world he’d suddenly invaded slowly faded into nothing more than a passing dream.

There was nothing for a long time—and then there was Eduardo, looking down at him, talking, everything about him so, so white. He sounded like he was speaking underwater. Claudio’s eyes darted about. He was lying on a bed. He could barely move. He began to panic.

Eduardo put his hand on Claudio’s chest and his voice cracked through the murk. “You’re in the Hospital del Mar. Understand? The Hospital del Mar. Nod if you understand me.”

Claudio took a deep breath. He felt the rough paper gown on his skin. There was a wool blanket pulled to his waist. An IV was stuck in his left wrist. Yellow-white fluid ran in the tube. He closed his eyes and nodded. His upper body felt stiff, like it was cast of stone.

He tried to sit up, but Eduardo pushed him back down.
“Don’t move. You have on a neck brace. Got a concussion, might have pulled something in your back. Keep still.” Eduardo’s dark hair stuck up in black tufts. He looked unshaven, gritty. He still wore his suit from the night before. Those ridiculous neon green glasses poked out from the handkerchief pocket of his jacket.

Claudio coughed, winced.

“Here, drink some water.”

Eduardo brought forth a paper cup with a straw. Claudio sipped at it greedily.

“No, no, not too much,” said Eduardo, taking the cup away. His voice dropped an octave. “My head still hurts, you know. There’s a knot.” He rubbed the back of his head. “And I’ve got this.” He pointed to the purplish bruise on his left cheek.

Claudio looked away.

Eduardo frowned, shaking his head. “I’ll get the doctor.”

“Wait,” Claudio rasped.

Eduardo paused at the door.

“What…what happened…?”

Eduardo moved back to his bedside. “We fished you out of the west dock. Lucky we did, too, or you would’ve drowned. The American girl gave you mouth-to-mouth. She saved your life.” Eduardo wiggled his eyebrows. “You dog. She really likes you. She was here until six.”

“Amelia…where…?”

Eduardo shrugged. She didn’t say where she was going.

“Anybody… else in…water?”
“No.”

“The dwarf,” Claudio croaked.

Eduardo laughed. “You’re talking nonsense. Let me get the doctor. He wanted me to fetch him when you woke up.”

As Eduardo moved to the door, Claudio saw his jacket hanging on a chair in a corner of the room. He kicked his feet, grunting.

Eduardo paused, touching the door handle. “What now?”

Claudio pointed at the jacket. Eduardo brought it to him.

“The pockets,” said Claudio.

Eduardo reached in a pocket. “Yuck, this thing is still damp.”

“The other pocket…”

Eduardo looked at Claudio as if he were crazy. He reached into the other pocket and removed a silver bracelet. “That’s all, my friend.” He handed the bracelet to Claudio. It was Amelia’s, the metal that twisted like vines, the black and white stones. Claudio held it tight in his quaking hand. Then, grimacing, he threw it across the room where it bounced off the wall.

“What’s the matter?” asked Eduardo, stooping to pick up the bracelet.

Claudio shook his head. “I…I…” He motioned with his hand and Eduardo gave him back the bracelet. Claudio studied it and let out a short, painful chuckle. He looked at Eduardo, wetting his lips. “Can I have my job back?”

Eduardo smiled. “What did I tell you?”

Claudio nodded.
Eduardo stood back and crossed his arms. “Well. I am waiting.”

Claudio begged, and Eduardo gave him back his job. After that, Claudio begged for a place to stay, for a little while at least, and Eduardo said he could stay with him.

Later, when Eduardo and the doctor had gone, Claudio lay in bed holding Amelia’s bracelet. It was peaceful in the hospital that afternoon. Only a few chirps and beeps and the muffled voices in the next room disturbed the silence. Out the window was a clear, blue sky. Claudio thought he heard a jet airplane’s distant rumble. He closed his eyes and wished her well.
I don’t want to go to the high school football game. I’ll see couples holding hands, stealing kisses. The last thing I need. I’d rather stay home, drink a dozen brews, and fall asleep in front of Leno. But Glenville has home field advantage this year, never a good omen, and I’m a former Everton Eagle, class of ’94. I have to go.

We play Glenville every year on the last Friday night of October. Both towns clear out to watch. We hate each other, I don’t know why. Maybe it’s a hatred of neighbors. You hate them for just being there. The Everton-Glenville battles are conference legend. They’re brutal. Clotheslines. Eye-gouges. Sucker punches. We fight hard, but Glenville always beats us. We haven’t beaten them since 1976, a twenty-seven year losing streak. Neverton.

I drive into Glenville and park at the Dairy Queen, across from the police station, and walk the block to Trojan Stadium. Ahead I hear a marching band playing an off-key version of “Inna-Gadda-Da-Vida.” I walk with my head down, hands stuffed in the pockets of my denim jacket. A biting wind blows dead leaves over my boots to scuttle down the sidewalk behind me. Winter isn’t far off. It might snow this weekend. Halloween snow isn’t rare in this part of Ohio.

Glenville is a quaint little town, no bigger than five square miles, all the houses packed together. Everybody knows everybody, all of them filthy rich.
Dozens of vehicles are parked on the curb, across the road, on side streets, in driveways. I walk by the high school, its lot full. I turn up a concrete walk that wraps around the building. The band grows louder. Low buzz of voices. There, behind the school, is Trojan Stadium, teeming with hundreds of people waiting in the ticket line at the front gate.

The stadium sits in a depression. Playing in it is like playing in the bottom of a bowl, all eyes on you, everything moving up. It’s the best stadium in the PCL, painted white, facilities clean, lights shining bright, grass emerald green. The visiting bleachers are puny, but on the far side of the stadium, the home bleachers stand tall. Behind them is Glenville’s finest neighborhood. The houses sit atop hills as if perched on the backs of camels. I see a few lights there, curmudgeons who stayed home. How hard I’d have to work to live there, how out of place I’d be.

At the end of the concrete walk is a bronze, eight-foot tall Trojan warrior, his sword pointed skyward, his expression fierce. I make sure no one is looking and spit at its feet, an old tradition. “Bastard,” I say, and join the ticket line.

Trojan fans wear green and white. They hold their chins high, arrogant, at ease, doctors, dentists, accountants. A lot of them wear glasses and dress shoes. Eagle fans are talkative in red and black. The women have big purses, out-of-date hairstyles, their men booze-breathed, with three-day old beards. I’m proud to be an Eagle, glad my back’s sore, that I’ve got mud on my boots.

In front of me is a teenage couple, no older than fifteen, rubbing noses and whispering sweet nothings. I can’t help myself. “Oh, God,” I mutter. “Get a room.”
The boy turns to me and, his voice as squeaky as a chew toy, says, “Getting an eyeful, buddy?”

The kid has on an Everton Eagles hat. I cut him a break. “Sorry.”

The boy resumes Eskimo kissing his girl.

If only I was so lucky.

Inching toward the ticket booth, I glimpse a raven-haired girl at the front of the line. My mouth dries up. My heart beats faster. My palms sweat. I stand on my tip-toes and see she’s too old to be Charla. Another dark-haired girl passes by—wait could she be—but I know better. Stop it, Frank. Right now, Charla is in some dive flirting with whatever man piques her fancy. She’d never be caught dead at a high school football game.

I purchase a ticket, five bucks. Everton charges only three.

At the concession stand, I buy nachos smothered in hot, melted cheese. Though I can’t stand handing over my hard-earned cash to the Glenville boosters, I’m hungry. I sit in the last row of the visiting bleachers, alone. There are plenty of couples below me, young and old, proud parents, smiley newlyweds, high school sweethearts. There’s no escape. I eat a warm, salty, gooey nacho, and settle in to watch the game.

Near the end of the half I’m disappointed, but not surprised. Glenville is up twenty-one to six. Everton’s “athletes” can’t cut it. The Trojans are too big, too fast. With a minute to go in the half, Everton has the ball on Glenville’s forty-eight yard line.

“Hut! Hut! Hike!”
The quarterback drops back, steps into the pocket. Then I see something that turns my stomach. Everton’s tight end has taken a pounding all game. The Trojan defensive end is a monster, six-six, two-seventy. I played tight end. I feel the kid’s pain. But I can’t believe it—the kid lets the defensive end run right past him. The quarterback gets creamed.

The ref blows the whistle. The offense pulls itself together for a huddle, while the tight end rolls on the field clutching his chest. He’s not injured. He’s tired of pain, of losing.

“Quitter,” I mumble. “He’s a quitter!” I stand, shout, “Get up, you baby. You’re faking. I saw you! Faker!”

Then it hits me: I’m that tight end, a wounded Romeo, milking self-pity.

“Hey, jerk!” The voice comes from the front row.

A tall man with a ponytail points at me.

“That’s my son! He has asthma!”

“Yeah,” a few fans holler.

A bag of popcorn hits my shoulder.

I say, “I’m sorr—”

A soft pretzel zips past my face.

“I didn’t mean to—”

I duck a twenty-ounce Pepsi, drop my nachos, and scramble to the end of the bleachers. I cover my face as the crowd boos and slings refuse. I leap from my row, a
fifteen-foot drop, and fall to my knees in the gravel. As I get to my feet, two men take me roughly by the elbows.

“Hey!” I try to pull free.

I’m looking at two Glenville policemen. I stop struggling and they escort me out of the stadium. I shove my hands in my pockets and head back to my truck. I need a beer.

I drive to Sully’s, Everton’s watering hole, a low brick building, painted brown, topped by a steep roof. It looks half-bar, half-barn.

In the parking lot, I turn off my truck and rest my head against the steering wheel. Cupid hit me with his arrow at fourteen, and since then, the little creep has been stabbing me with it again and again. Heartache—the only card the gods of love ever deal. A nice guy my friends call me. They say it like I have cancer. They’re married, some have kids. I’m cursed, a doormat. But that doesn’t mean I should quit trying. There has to be somebody out there, a soul mate.

I pinch my right nostril shut and blow a snot rocket out the driver window. I need this drink. I gather myself and go inside.

Sully’s is crowded with twenty and thirty-somethings too cool for the high school game. Still, many wear red and black. The bar sits at one end of the building, above it a typical wall-length mirror with shelves of liquors. Between this and the other end of the room, at which there are a dozen round wooden tables, is a dance floor tiled black-and-white like dominos. I don’t dance. Well, maybe a slow-dance if the girl deserves it. I
don’t like the music Sully’s playing—hip-hop. I like the classics, the Stones, The Who, Zeppelin, music with balls, voice.

I end up sitting at the bar, nursing a Miller Lite. A disco ball drops from the rafters on a long wire. “Cotton-Eyed Joe” plays. I groan. The song reminds me of high school dances.

I turn to Sully, the tubby, middle-aged barman and owner, who works the counter in a flannel shirt opened over a yellowed wifebeater, a toothpick stuffed in a fold of his donut-shaped mouth.

“Can I get another?” I ask, holding up my empty soldier.

Sully twists off the cap barehanded and slides the beer to me.

“Thanks,” I say. “Somebody request this song?”

“No,” says Sully.

“I can’t stand it.”

Sully slides a beer to another customer.

“Play something else.”

Sully glares. “Why don’t you?” He plods to the other end of the counter.


“It does,” says the girl on the stool beside me. “Gotta give the people what they want though.” She’s a looker. She’s drinking a whiskey sour, chewing the ice.

I nod. “That you do.”

I’m not ugly, but I’m no Adonis. Hairy and potbellied, I have working man’s hands and a white scar that runs up my left nostril. This girl is way out of my league, her
black skirt hiked halfway up her long, tan legs. Her red top shows off what she has upstairs, and she has a lot. Dirty blonde hair falls past her shoulders. She twirls a strand of it around her finger. No rings.

“What brings you here tonight?” I ask.

“Drinks with the girls after work. They left, I stayed. You?”

“Got kicked out of the football game.”

She smirks. “Why waste your time? Everton never wins.”

“Have to support my alma-mater.”

She shrugs.

Everything about her face is welcoming. Her cheeks are unblemished, her mouth wide. Her chin has a dimple. Her nose is beaky, but it’s nothing I can’t handle.

I extend my hand. “Frank.”

She takes it briefly. “Lily.” She finishes her whiskey sour and asks Sully for another. As she reaches for her purse, I toss a ten on the bar. “Thanks,” she says.

A Johnny Cash song plays, horns blaring. “Love is a burning thing.” That’s more like it. I lean toward Lily as she tells me about herself. She’s twenty-eight, divorced. Her marriage lasted four years, her ex a louse with money, and lousy in bed. “He didn’t know my vagina from a hole in the ground,” she says, laughing.

I’ve never heard a girl talk like that. I let out an uncomfortable chuckle.

“I’m kidding,” she assures me, “laughing off my disappointment. We were high school sweethearts, got engaged at Prom. Make you puke, right? We waited until we finished college before we got married. We hadn’t been with anyone else. We were too
scared to say, ‘This doesn’t work anymore.’ Few months ago, he quit his high-paying job, a job with longevity and promise, to become a rock star. I finally saw him for the loser he was.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, thinking of my ex. “Relationships are a bitch.”

“You can say that again.”

I do. We laugh. I stop myself from spilling my own sea of heartbreak. Who cares but me? I ask what Lily does for a living. She says she clerks for an ambulance chaser, the bald cripple in the wheelchair on TV. I give her my best shit-eating grin and sing, “We spell hurt p-a-y-d-a-y.”

“That’s the one. The job’s shit, but it pays well. You wouldn’t believe the suckers.”

“I bet.”

“What about you?” she says. “What’s your story?”


“College?” She says it with the smarty-pants educated-kid tone I hate. I’m no bumpkin. I go to tell her this, but let it go.

“I was sick of school,” I reply. “I took a job power washing.”

“How long did that last?”

“Till now.”

“Wow,” she says, “talk about job security. Is it hard work?”

I flex my forearms. “Wanna arm wrestle and find out?”
Lily throws back her head and laughs, shows the lights her teeth. It’s infectious. I laugh, too. “How come I don’t know you? You grew up around here, right?”

She nods.

“You should’ve been in the grade above me.”

“My parents sent me to Glenville my last few years of school.”

I set down my beer. “You’re a Trojan?”

“Hell no!” She faces me, her hands on her knees. “I’ll always be an Eagle. I’m wearing red, duh.” She points to her chest.

My eyes dart to her breasts. They’re nice breasts. I look away, blushing. Charla would’ve pulled that trick. Don’t be hard on her, I think.

“How long you hanging around here?” I ask.

She picks up her drink. “Till I finish this.”

“Wanna dance before you go?”

She finishes her drink in two gulps, smacks her lips, and sets the glass on the bar.

“Let’s do it.”

She leads me to an empty corner of the dance floor. She walks with her back arched and chin out, heels clicking on the domino tile. Her legs are thin. She’s a cutie.

“Good song,” Lily says.

“What is it?”

“Garth Brooks.”

“I’m not too hot for modern bands.”

She rolls her eyes. “A critic.”
I place my left hand on the small of her back. Her sweater is soft, warm. She puts her arm around my shoulder. I take her hand. She’s got delicate fingers.

“You dance like a gentleman.”

I can’t think of a slick reply, so I mumble, “Thanks.”

We dance. I try like hell not to step on her feet. I keep looking three inches above her head, making like I’m concentrating, like I know what I’m doing. I try to make my body language say, I’ve danced like this a bunch. I’m a pro.

She ogles the scar on my nose. The silence between us is too loud. It makes me sweat.

“You driving home?” I ask.

“Can’t hear you.”

I put my lips to her ear and repeat the question. Her hair smells like herbs. She shakes her head. “I carpooled with my girlfriends. I’ll call a cab.”

“Good thinking.” I smile and twirl her. She giggles, surprised.

“That fun?” I ask.

“Sure.”

I do it again. She laughs that same laugh, eyes wide, showing her teeth to the lights.

Another song plays. Bono croons, “One love, one life, when it’s one need in the night.” Lily steps closer, holds me tighter. I’m not sure what it means, but I like it.

“This song’s not bad,” I say.

“It’s old.”
“Old?”

“Old like ‘Cotton-Eyed Joe’,” she says. “Old as in we were in high school old.”

“I don’t feel old.”

“I do.”

We dance. The song ends. We look at one another, smile, look at our feet. The floor gets real interesting. Finally, Lily brushes the hair out of her eyes. “Want to get out of here?”

“Sure.”

“Sometimes I go to the reservoir and look at the stars.”

“It’s a clear night.”

“That a yes?”

I nod. “I’ll drive.”

She puts her hand on my arm. I get that jolt of electricity, try to tell myself to hold off, Sparky, but it’s hard the way she’s looking at me. “Great,” she says. “Let me hit the bathroom.”

In the men’s room, I run my comb under the tap. Sully waddles in and pees at the lone urinal while I give my hair a few strokes and dry the comb on the side of my pants. I look at Sully in the mirror. “How do I look?”

“Same.”

“I’ll take that.”

“Got you this far.” Sully zips his fly, flushes. “Who’s the girl you’re sweet on?”
“Lily.”

Sully teeters past, reeking of booze. He belches. “She got a last name?”

I shrug, smile.

“Good luck, Romeo,” Sully says. He doesn’t bother to wash his hands.

I meet Lily at the front door and hold it for her. We cross the dark parking lot.

Gravel crunches underfoot. It’s tough going in her heels. She almost slips. I take her arm and hold on tight. Jolts of electricity again. We reach my blue ’92 Ford Ranger in all its banged-up, rusted glory. I open the passenger door for her. The hinges screech. “Sorry,” I say.

“Don’t worry about it.” She pats my cheek. My knees become jelly.

We pick up a six-pack of Budweiser at the Brew-Crew Drive Thru. I take back roads to the reservoir while Lily flips through radio stations, yammering about modern music. I don’t listen too close. I’m turning over the rest of the night in my mind. She has to know most of the reservoir roads are lover’s lanes. I have a rubber in my wallet, but that don’t mean I got to use it.

The radio DJ reads the night’s high school football scores. Glenville beat Everton forty-three to thirteen. I groan.


I turn onto Dyke Road, to a small field where couples park. I think of Charla in the bed of my truck on an air mattress we bought. Frank, give it to me, Frank. As my
truck winds down the road, I picture my face between Lily’s breasts, her nails at my back as I pump.

I bite a cuticle and watch the passing trees, lost in fantasy.

“Watch out!”

I slam on the brakes. My truck skids to a halt in front of a padlocked gate.

“Are you blind?” Lily almost shouts.

“Sorry, mind wandering.”

I peer at the gate. “They must close on weekends now.”

Her expression falls. “It’s okay.” Her voice is almost a whisper. “We don’t have to go.”

“We’ll go another way.”

She gives a little smile, happy again. I take her hand.

We end up in the parking lot behind the reservoir’s boathouse. It’s far from private, flooded with light from street lamps, State Route 43 thirty yards away. We talk in the truck, sharing a beer. Passing headlights keep blinding us.

“Wanna sit there?” I point to a rickety picnic table to the left of the boathouse, the first under a line of maples on the shore.

“Sure,” she says.

Tucking the six-pack under my arm, I get a wool blanket from the steel box in the bed of my truck and spread my jacket on the tabletop. We sit side-by-side drinking, the blanket wrapped around us. Our wrists touch. Her skin is smooth. To our right, dark humps of overturned canoes and rowboats. Water laps against the nearby dock.
“I could never figure why they call this the Glenville reservoir. Everything but that shore,” Lily points to the west, “is in Everton.”

“Not the shore,” I say, “just some trees, but Glenville gets what it wants. They’re state champs every year, all the rich kids going to college.”

She leans away from me. “Hey, I guess I’m a Glenville kid.”

“Sorry. I just don’t like when they cop an attitude with people like me.”

“Who’re people like you?”

“I power wash and still go to high school football games.”

“You can’t tell me Everton people don’t look down on those lower than them on the social ladder. It’s human nature. Nobody’s immune.” She pokes me. “Not even you.”

“Some fancy theories. Feel like I’m in school.”

She laughs. “Glenville has good people, Frank. Trust me.”

“Still, Everton Parks and Wildlife takes care of this place. Our police patrol it. But Glenville’s rich enough to slap its name on it while we do the shit work. It’s ’cause of their research lab, Omega whatever, government funded. That’s where the money comes from.” I finish my beer, crush the can, and slap it down beside me. “Glenville people don’t fish here, you know. The bastards say they’ll catch something.”

“Don’t get worked up. You’ll ruin your buzz.”

“Can’t help it,” I say. “In high school, a McDonald’s was gonna be built on State Route 43. After it went up, gonna be a pizza place, a dentist’s office, a new library, you name it. It was gonna put Everton on the map. Glenville swooped in and bought out the contract. They put it across from the old Burger King. Like they needed it.”
“I didn’t know. That’s not right.”

I shrug. “What can you do?”

We sit for a while, the breeze cooling my face. Leaves fall and swish on the grass. Talking about myself usually makes me uncomfortable, but it’s easy with Lily. What to make of that.

“Mind wandering again?” she asks.

I nod, laugh.

She holds up her empty can. “Can I have another?”

“Go ahead,” I say. “You ain’t driving.”

She pops the tabs on two beers, gives one to me, and taps her beer on mine.

“Cheers,” we say, and drink.

“You happy with life, Frank?”

“I guess so. You?”

“I guess.” She looks out over the water, her face half-lit by the moon. She studies the cloudless sky, the stars bright and myriad. “We shine,” she softly sings, “like diamonds in the, the autumn night. One heart. One hope.” She gives a little laugh and shakes her head.

We drink and talk. The wind blows colder. Soon, we can see our breath. Shivering, we huddle closer under the blanket.

She touches the scar on my nose. “What happened?”

“It’s stupid.”

“Please.” She squeezes my hand.
“When I was twelve, my little sister, Sherry, dared me to put scissors up my nose. I couldn’t resist a dare, so I stuck one blade up there. I remember saying, ‘Good enough?’ She nodded, smiled big. I said, ‘What’re you going to give me?’ Still smiling, she said, ‘A trip to the ER.’ Fast as can be, she took my hand and squeezed. Snip!”

Lily recoils.

“Blood shot out of my nose. Some got on the wall, the floor. Luckily, Dad was home. He’s an EMT. He put my head back, pinched the cut, held an ice cube on it, disinfected it, and stitched it right up. If it wasn’t for my dad, I’d have more scars than this.”

“Why’d she do that?”

I grin. “I told a boy she liked she had a crush on him.”

Lily tickles me. “So, you deserved it!”

I wriggle free and hold her at bay. “I never said I was innocent.”

She touches my scar again. “Poor thing.”

She kisses me. Her lips slow dance with mine. She tastes like Budweiser, with a hint of whiskey sour. She grips my forearms and pulls me closer. I put my arms around her and close my eyes. Later, we walk down the beach, the blanket around us both.

We spread it on the sand and I lay beside her. She grabs the corners and wraps the blanket around us. I kiss her neck, cheeks, ears. I bury my nose in her hair. “You smell like a garden,” I whisper.

She giggles and unbuckles my belt. I reach up her skirt and take off her panties. I pause, her underwear dangling from my finger. “Lily, I…”
“What, Frank?”

I can’t help it. I say, “Charla and me slept together the night we met.”

“Charla?”

“My ex. We met at Sully’s last spring. I’d just been dumped again. I was drinking at the bar and she sauntered over, asked my name, pushed her tits at me, almost purring. No girl had ever done that before. They haven’t done much my whole life but kick me to the curb.

“Every weekend we ended up in bed. I told her I loved her. We made plans. I thought she was the one. Then one morning, it was August fourteenth, I remember ’cause of the blackout, she called me a lousy lay and a dickless pig and left me. I found out later how many times she’d stepped out on me. All it took was for a guy to buy her a drink.” I hand Lily back her panties and wipe my eyes. “Christ,” I say, “I’m leaking.”

Lily takes my face in her hands, her panties soft on my cheek. I smell her on them. “I’m not Charla, Frank,” she says.

“How do I know?”

The wind dies to a whisper. Everything is still. Then she begins to cry.

I reach for her, but she pushes me away. She tells me, “I want to go home.” She stands, puts on her panties. She straightens her skirt and shivers. I try to hug her. She turns and walks toward my truck.

I ball up the blanket and follow her.

“Wait,” I say. We can’t fall apart already, not this soon.

She walks around my truck and tugs on the passenger door.
I put my hands on the hood of the truck. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Take me home.”

“I’m just thinking we shouldn’t go too fast.”

She squints at me, lips puckered. “There’s nowhere for us to go, Frank.” She tugs harder on the door handle. “Take me home!”

“Alright, alright.” I unlock the truck. We sit inside.

“Where do you live?”

She says, “Glenville.”

A knot grows in my stomach. It twists and tugs. I’m hit by a horrible thought. I decide to toss it out there, see if she bites. “You’re married,” I say. “Your husband wants to be a rock star.”

She presses her lips tight and looks away.

I grunt and lean forward, shaking my head, clawing at my belly. The knot burns white hot. Duped again, the nice guy. I glare at the reservoir. I feel sorry for her husband. My head snaps toward her. I’m ready to shout a volley of curses, but what would be the point? This is just another nail in my coffin.

I start the truck, throw it in drive. “I’ll take you home. You better tell me where to turn.” I zip out of the parking lot, tires screaming.

We drive in silence except for her occasional directions. Sometimes she glances at me and I give her the evil eye and she looks away, frightened or defiant, I can’t tell.
I turn down Glenville’s main drag and pass Fenwick’s Drugstore, Mama Piazzi’s Family Restaurant, Rosenbaum’s Diner, The Home Savings & Loan, Jack and Jill’s Fresh-Cut Flowers, the McDonald’s, the Burger King. Past the Dairy Queen, green and white streamers lay about the high school parking lot, leftovers of another postgame celebration, Everton’s losing streak now twenty-eight years running.

“Make a right,” Lily says.

I turn up a side street that loops around the stadium and smirk. The Trojan statue has been painted black and red. Score one for the Eagles.

We are approaching Glenville’s finest neighborhood, the one atop the rolling hills that overlooks the stadium. Lily points. “Turn on Lutz.”

The neighborhood is all cul-de-sacs and “No Outlet” signs, the lawns green, driveways paved. The houses look too clean, like TV show houses. Nothing bad happens here.

“This is the one,” she says.

I pull into the driveway of a two-story brick house and park in front of the garage. The truck idles. We don’t speak. She opens her purse and slips on her ring, the diamond huge, more expensive than I’ll ever afford. She opens the passenger door, puts one leg out and, not looking back at me, she says, “I’m sorry.”

“Yes, you are.” I say it more harshly than I want, and put the truck in reverse.

She gets out and weaves to her front door, unstable on those long chicken legs. I back down her driveway and stop in the street to watch her go.
The stoop light comes on. The door is thrown open. A man stands in the doorway in a black T-shirt and boxers, hands on his hips. He shouts at Lily, grabs her arm as she brushes past him and goes inside. The door slams shut. The stoop light goes out. I hear shouting from inside, bellowing. Then her shriek. I turn off my truck and cross the street. I run through Lily’s yard to her front door and raise my fist. I don’t have a clue what to say. I knock, I pound.

The stoop light finally comes on. The door opens, slowly at first, and then Lily’s husband steps onto the stoop. He’s my size, balding, eczema around his ears, “Guns ’N Roses” printed across his T-shirt. “Who the hell are you?” he demands.

I still don’t know what to say. I stand with my hands at my sides, lost. Lily appears behind her husband, who turns to her and asks, “Who the fuck is this guy?”

She lays her hand on his arm and pulls him back into the house. “He’s nobody, Nate.”

“She’s nobody,” I say. “I’m Frank.” I step toward her.

“He’s nobody,” she repeats. She looks at me, says it louder: “Nobody.”

She closes the door and throws the deadbolt. The light goes out.

I wait a moment before heading back to my truck. I stop in the street and rub my hands together. Unsure if I did the right thing, I wait for a sign, a gut feeling, but nothing is granted me. It begins to snow.

I get in my truck, start the engine, and push the pedal to the floor. As I drive, I ramble about beginnings, endings, whatever cosmic offenses I’ve committed. I say nice guys don’t finish last because they aren’t invited to the race. They have to sit in the stands
and watch jerks win the medals and turn them into bitter, used-up old shells. The nice
guys don’t learn to quit.

My eyes light on the Trojan statue in front of the stadium and I get a crazy idea.

I turn at the end of the street and drive across the stadium lawn, tires spinning,
kicking up tufts of grass. I ease off the accelerator and swing the truck around. I back it
up and hop out, leaving the door open. I reach in the steel box in the bed of the truck and
haul out a long chain. I walk to the statue, gritting my teeth, the chain dragging behind
me.

“Don’t think I’ll do it?” I ask the Trojan.

I throw a length of chain around the statue. I tie it in a hangman’s noose and pull.
The chain tightens snug about the Trojan’s neck. I walk back to my truck, lay on the
soggy ground, in my rage impervious to the cold, and tie the chain to my rear axle. I
scoot from under the truck, my back soaking, get inside, and throw the truck in drive.

I stomp on the gas. The engine roars. My tires spin. The chassis shakes, sending
tremors up my forearms as I grip the steering wheel. The truck slides side-to-side as the
statue fights against it. Soon I hear a deafening crack, loud as lightning. The truck
shudders, bounces forward a few feet, and comes to a dead stop. I’m titled up now,
watching the snow come down.

I stare out the windshield, dumbfounded. I turn and look out my back window.
My rear axle lies on the ground some feet from my tailgate, some wires, tubes, dark
liquid spurting from them like blood. The Trojan stands tall, sword held high, proud of its
fighting spirit.
The snow falls fast and wet. It sticks to everything. My wipers can’t keep up. I turn off the truck and sit in the cold, the dark, my head in my hands, and weep.

Nobody?

I am who I am.
Buck and Jack stumbled out of the red-lit bar looking like they’d fought their way out of Hell. Grinning, they threw their arms around each other and lumbered across the snowy parking lot, howling “Tuesday’s Gone” at the full moon, heads lolling amid clouds of beery breath. They’d spent all night at the Outpost, dropped all their cash on drinks and yeah, they’d tussled with a few men and had the welts and bruises to prove it. One ex-welder had gone home with a limp that was for sure. Finally Yelensky, the big Croat who ran the place, kicked them out, said he never wanted to see their skinny asses again.

They climbed in their Oldsmobile, a maroon ’95 Aurora they’d stolen last year from a Best Buy parking lot. It was scratched and spotted with rust. The upholstery stank of cigarettes and fast food, was sticky with spilled booze. The radio had crapped out months ago.

Buck started the engine and zoomed out of the lot, knocking a stack of trash cans on the curb into the ditch. Giggling, he sped down the State Route to the expressway.

“Turn up the heat,” Jack said, buttoning his flannel jacket to the neck and flipping up the collar. Buck ran the heater full-blast. It didn’t help. Though it was mid-March, northeast Ohio had yet to shake winter’s icy grip.

They took I-76 west toward Akron. Traffic was sparse. Every so often they passed other sputtering rust buckets and late night dregs of the road. The beer and fighting had

No Money
tired Jack out. He slouched in his seat, rested his head against the cold window, and let the heater’s rattle ferry him toward sleep.

Buck backhanded him on the jaw and Jack sat up with a cry.

“Wake up,” Buck snarled. “Don’t pass out on me, you three-beer queer.” He shook his head at Jack and the fuzzy red ball sewn atop his knit hat wobbled.

Jack rubbed his jaw. “Won’t. Never have.”

“Psh-shaw.” Buck rolled down the window and hawked a loogie into the night.

Jack couldn’t wait for the day he’d no longer have to see Buck’s ragged, rat-face. Fortunately, that day was today, this morning in fact, when Jack would swipe their stolen Olds while Buck slept and take it and his cash from the robbery all the way to New York City.

For eight years, since they met in juvenile detention when they were both sixteen, Buck had been the leader, the tough guy. He didn’t give a fuck what anyone thought and no one earned his respect. Sometimes he smacked Jack upside the head or gave him one on the chin to keep him in line. Yet, he had quiet moments, too. Some afternoons he sat on their duplex’s stoop and gazed at the woods across the street until dark. Jack didn’t know what to make of Buck when he got that way. It was almost like a switch had been turned off somewhere inside him. His body shut down and his mouth hung open, eyes empty. Buck bounced from hot to cold more times than an Ohio spring. But when he was hot, as he was now for robbing Maurice, he was sharp. Jack didn’t doubt they’d get through the night okay.
Jack had an uncle who was a janitor at NYU. The last time Jack saw him—God, how long ago was it, he wondered—the man said if Jack ever wanted to live in NYC, he’d be more than happy to find him a job and a place to live. Jack’s half of tonight’s robbery was his ticket out. In his mind he saw himself cresting a hill on the interstate in the Olds tomorrow night and seeing the Big Apple all lit up and spread before him.

He and Buck knew they couldn’t sneak a gun or knife into Maurice’s place, so their only weapon was the handlebars of an old bicycle. In their basement the night before, Jack had watched Buck saw the handlebars in pieces and run a rope through the hollow poles, knotting it at either end. Buck’s ingenuity impressed Jack. Turned out he was still good for something. The handlebars became a poor man’s nunchucks. When Buck slipped the nunchucks up his parka sleeve, the rope rested against the crook of his elbow. He could bend his arm naturally. They agreed this was the best way to sneak a weapon into Maurice’s house.

When they hit the Akron city limits, Buck exited the expressway and turned south. They wound through neighborhoods built in the 1930s, the brick streets icy, empty. Everything looked zombified, like lifeless shells of their former selves. Jack and Buck passed foreclosed houses, junked cars, dead trees. “And I thought our duplex was bad,” Jack said.

Buck grunted in reply.

A few blocks later, Buck said, “We’re near Maurice’s.” He took a shotgun shell from his coat pocket. “Take a hit.”
Jack made a face. “I don’t know.”

“I want this thing to go off without a hitch,” Buck said, handing the shell to Jack.

“Okay.”

Jack turned the shotgun shell over, unscrewed the bottom, dabbed his finger in the coke inside, and snorted it. It cleared his sinuses, woke him up. He sat for a while, feeling his brain ignite with loose electricity that pulled at his hands and feet as if he were a puppet. He dabbed more coke on his fingertip and held it under Buck’s nose while he snorted. Jack screwed the shell together again and slipped it back in Buck’s pocket. He felt alert, ready for the robbery.

Soon, they were cruising down Maurice’s street. Buck pointed at Maurice’s house, but he was going too fast for Jack to see.

They made a left at the end of the block onto a dead-end street. Ahead through some trees, across the Little Cuyahoga River, was the water treatment plant, coughing smoke at the moon. Where the street dead-ended was a one-lane gravel road running parallel to the river’s edge. Buck turned left here. They crept down the road, to their left the backyards of the houses on Maurice’s street. Halfway down the road, Buck parked the car and turned it off.

They sat in the Olds and studied the neighborhood—no streetlights, the houses dark, squatted close together. Chain-link fences with vinyl inserts bordered the meager yards. Except for the hum of the water treatment plant on the Little Cuyahoga’s far shore, all was quiet.
They were parked behind Maurice’s house. They could see the back of it. The silhouettes of two men moved behind a shaded second-story window. The silhouettes stood for a few minutes, came together, parted, and then the light went out.

Jack said, “Think that’s the room?”

“Positive. Yelensky was right.”

They watched Maurice’s place for another half hour, taking turns snorting from the shotgun shell, letting the coke settle in their bones.

Jack and Buck had heard about Maurice at the Outpost in early December. As Yelensky poured drinks, he began to flap his gums about an Akron shithouse run by a funny-looking Haitian.

Yelensky’s habit was cocaine. When Everton’s coke trade dried up after the arrest of the township’s biggest dealer, he tried to score in downtown Akron. He was directed to the rundown neighborhood across the river from the water treatment plant and told to look for a house with a purple door. He found the house easily. It was the neighborhood’s nicest.

Inside, he was frisked by Maurice, and then went to an upstairs bedroom where the dealer hid his product and money in a wooden box in the closet. Maurice gabbed nonstop about neighborhood history, what he’d gone through to be top dog in a rough trade, and how his product was guaranteed pure, no baking soda filler.

“I could not stop laughing,” Yelensky said in his thick accent. “He was a funny little man. He wore a loud soccer shirt. His dreadlocks in an ugly ponytail and his tattoos
look like he did them himself with a hot sewing needle. What made me laugh most was that at any moment I could knock him out, snatch his drugs and money, and escape out the bedroom window. One story drop to his backyard, boom across and over his fence and I’m gone. By the time he comes to, I’m home and high.”

After hearing that, robbing Maurice was all Buck talked about. He had talked of robbing the Everton Savings & Loan, but that plan was forgotten. “Cops would nail us for it,” he said one night, high on their living room sofa. “They won’t give two shits about Maurice.”

Jack wouldn’t do it. He’d shoplifted, had broken and entered a time or two before his last stint in county, but he’d never physically robbed anyone. “You’re just scared,” Buck told him.

At the end of February, Buck said they had to rob Maurice. They had rent and bills to pay. They hadn’t used heat all month and couldn’t afford many groceries. “We gotta sleep in the same bed to keep warm,” Buck growled. “I hate it.”

Jack said maybe they ought to think about getting jobs.

“Shit man, you think anybody will hire us, with our records?”

Jack said maybe they could enlist, see the world.

“Yeah, and get shot at by a bunch of towel heads. Where’s your head at, man?”

Jack said he didn’t know. He was pretty buzzed.

“Up your ass, that’s where.”

When Jack sobered up, his escape plan came to him out of the blue, a revelation, a gift from God. He told Buck he’d rob Maurice anytime he wanted. They picked the third
weekend of March. Before they went they blew all their money at the Outpost because they figured, hey, if the robbery went south, it was no use dying without having one hell of a good time first.

Sitting in the car coked up, watching Maurice’s house, Jack felt safe, like he and Buck had already robbed Maurice and were lounging at home, counting his cash, and all this waiting was a memory, something they’d laugh at later. Their escape plan was gold. After hopping out Maurice’s bedroom window, it’d take only a second to cross his backyard, jump the fence, and run down the grassy knoll to their car. It was almost a one-man job. But that chain-link fence with the vinyl inserts was bothering Jack. This had to go off without a hitch.

He nudged Buck, pointed at the fence. “We can’t see his backyard.”

“Who cares?”

“Could be dogs in there.”

“What dog is gonna be out in this cold?”

“A mean one.”

“Don’t puss out on me.”

“I won’t.”

“Be cool.”

“Cooler than you are,” Jack lied.

Buck called his bluff. “Alright, then,” he said, taking the homemade nunchucks from the backseat and slipping them up his parka sleeve. “Let’s go.”
They trudged down the gravel road, their hands in their pockets, and hoofed it up the dead-end street. They slipped over the icy sidewalk, the trees groaning above them, their branches swaying in the wind. The water treatment plant gurgled behind them, a steady gloop-gloop. As they passed a sewer grate, Jack thought he saw mournful faces twirling in the steam.

They turned at the corner and hurried down Maurice’s street. Jack cocked his head, listening hard. He swore he heard footsteps. He turned and walked backwards. He thought he saw a small, squat shape dart behind the nearest tree.

“What’re you doing?” Buck hissed.

“We’re being followed,” Jack whispered.

Buck looked behind them, shook his head. “Stop jumping at shadows. You snorted too much of that shit.”

“You made me.”

“Nobody put a gun to your head.”

Buck stopped, grabbed Jack’s elbow. “Here it is,” he said softly, “the house with the purple door.”

In this rundown neighborhood, Maurice’s place was a palace, two-stories tall, with a chimney, its aluminum siding white, clean. It had green shutters on the windows. The first floor windows were barred, the mailbox fitted with a silver padlock. There was a two-car garage with a basketball hoop in the paved driveway. There wasn’t trash in his yard, but rather a gravel walk lined with tiny lights that led to the front door, which as
Yelensky had said, was purple. Jack couldn’t believe this was the house they were going to rob.

“Gonna stand there all night?” Buck asked him.

Jack swallowed. “Let’s do it.”

He followed Buck up the gravel walk and knocked on Maurice’s door. Almost instantly, the stoop light came on, the purple door swung back, and a very black, scrawny man put the end of a baseball bat to Buck’s chest. “What’d you want?” he asked.

Buck said, “We’re friends from Everton.”

The man put the end of his bat under Buck’s chin. “Never heard of it.”

“Hop on 76-East, take the 43 exit—”

“Okay, okay. Whose friends?”

Buck cleared his throat. “My brother said he used to get his stuff here. He’s back from Afghanistan, wants to chill out this week.”

“Who’s your brother?”

“Um, Greg Connor,” Buck lied.

“Never heard of him.”

“He gave us this address.”

The man lowered his bat and looked at Jack. “What’s your problem?”

Jack shrugged and nodded at Buck. “I’m his friend.”

The man stepped into the house and said for them to come in.

The house was even nicer inside, clean, comfortable. A TV played loudly in a nearby room. Jack heard gunshots, explosions, and a soaring action-movie score. The
man shut the front door and locked it. Smiling, he said, “Don’t move.” He leaned his bat against the banister of a flight of stairs at the edge of the foyer and began to frisk Buck.

This had to be Maurice. He looked about forty, with a small, round head. His athletic shorts were blue, his t-shirt was orange, and he had multicolored beads in his graying dreadlocks. The backs of his hands were tattooed with flames that had lost their ink and turned green. One of his eyes was larger than the other and he had a gold stud through his bottom lip. Like Yelensky said, Maurice was a funny-looking little man. If Maurice had been a stranger at the Outpost, Jack guessed Buck would be the one to pick a fight with him.

Maurice didn’t frisk Buck’s arms and moved on to frisking Jack. “Everton, eh?”

“Yeah,” Buck said. “We usually get our stuff there.”

Maurice looked up at Jack as he patted his ankles. “You shit-faced?”

“We’ve had a few,” Buck said.

“Where?”

“The Outpost. It’s a hole in the wall—”

“The Croat runs it! A good guy, my best customer.” Maurice grinned. “What you need?” He crossed the foyer and beckoned them upstairs.

As Jack moved to the staircase, the sounds of the TV became louder. At the landing, he looked through the doorway to his right and into Maurice’s living room. The only light came from the big-screen TV near the front window. On screen, the Austrian Oak pinned a jungle-camouflaged terrorist to a door with a bowie knife and quipped, “Stick around.” Three ghouls watched it, their clawed feet propped on a coffee table. The
ghoul at the far end of the couch stared at Jack, a cigarette between his long, scaly fingers. Jack closed his eyes and shook his head and when next he looked the ghouls were gone. In their places sat three large African American men. The one at the far end of the couch watched him intently. He puffed his cigarette, crushed it in the ashtray on the arm of the sofa, and lit another. His eyes never left Jack.

Jack hurried upstairs. He wanted to give Buck a sign they were too fucked up to rob anybody, that they needed to get out of there, but Buck was already walking beside Maurice, trying to charm him.

“‘My brother ain’t picky. He give me two-hundred bucks, said to get what I could.”

“Two-hundred?” Maurice whistled. “Maybe I give you a military discount. My nephew is in Afghanistan, haven’t seen him for months. He writes me letters, sometimes an e-mail.”

They followed Maurice down a dark hallway lined with pictures of who Jack guessed was his family in Haiti.

Maurice said, “Two skinheads come by earlier. They didn’t like my prices, tried to jump me. Luckily, I had my baby.” He pulled a .38 from his back pocket. “Like to shoot guns?”

“Hell yeah,” Buck replied, a tremor in his voice. Jack prayed Maurice hadn’t noticed.

“The other day they passed a law if a bank takes your home, it can’t take your guns. God, I love this country.”
The three of them stopped before a locked door. Maurice took a keychain from his back pocket. “You still live at home?” he asked Buck.

“Nope, Jack and I rent a little duplex.”

“What you pay a month?” Maurice glanced at Jack, looking as if he’d known what they were up to the whole time.

“Not much,” Jack squeaked.

Maurice unlocked the door and held it open. “After you, boys.”

In the room, Maurice turned on the light and said, “I know you ain’t this stupid-”

Buck whipped the nunchucks from his jacket sleeve and brought them down atop Maurice’s head. The little man fell to his knees and Buck cracked the nunchucks across his cheek as he collapsed to the floor.

Buck raised the nunchucks again, but Jack caught his wrist. Maurice’s scalp was split at the crown. Blood was running out onto the floor. “See the guys in his living room?” Jack said.

Buck was quaking. “Gotta be quick.”

The room was as Yelensky described: bare and wood-paneled, with a dome light, a small closet behind the door. The shaded window looked back at them from the opposite wall like a yellowed eye.

While Buck searched the closet for Maurice’s wooden box, Jack rifled through the man’s pockets and found a rubber-banded roll of cash. Eureka! he thought. NYC here I come. He stuffed the roll in his back pocket as Buck turned, cradling the wooden box. “Anything good on him?”
Jack shook his head.

Buck set the box on the floor and opened it.

There was only one freezer bag of brown-white powder in the box. No money.

“Fuck,” they both said.

Jack heard a man downstairs call, “Moe! Hey, Moe!”

Buck hurried to the bedroom door, peered out, and closed it. “A light’s on by the stairs.”

On the floor, Maurice groaned.

The man on the stairs shouted.

Buck grabbed the bag of drugs and turned out the light. He ran to the window as Jack heard footsteps rushing up the stairs.

Buck tore down the shade, broke the window with the nunchucks. “Jump,” he said.

Jack swung his legs out the window, turned, grabbed the sill, and hung for a moment before he dropped into Maurice’s backyard. He sprinted to the chain-link fence and climbed it. Barking came from somewhere behind as he swung his leg over it. He felt teeth at his ankle. He grunted and kicked, heard a yip, and tumbled down the grassy knoll to the one-lane gravel road.

He fell against their Olds, saw a flash from Maurice’s window, and heard the bullet *ting* off the trunk. The crack echoed through the neighborhood. He dropped to his belly, crawled to the passenger door, and threw himself inside, squeezing between the glove box and the seat.
He whimpered as another bullet zinged off the gravel.

Buck was right behind him. He hopped in the driver’s seat and started the car. Boom—one of the back windows shattered. Jack cowered lower, pleading with God to let him live. Buck shifted the car in drive and floored it, spraying gravel. Gunshots followed them—*crack, crack*—as they accelerated past backyards. Then they were racing through the neighborhood at thirty-five, forty miles per hour, blowing through stop signs and red lights, Jack in tears.

When they were on the expressway, Jack sat up and wiped his eyes. His palms were bleeding. He didn’t know if he cut them on the window or the fence. He lifted his pant leg and saw two bleeding holes above his right ankle.

“Jesus...”

“What,” Buck said, “what?” He was doing about eighty. It was hard to hear him with the howling, hooting window.

“It bit me,” Jack shouted, cold wind blowing his shaggy hair about his face.

Buck glanced at Jack’s ankle. “It’s not too bad. It hurt?”

“Not really, but...Oh, man, what if the dog has—?”

“Had.” Buck showed him the nunchucks. One end was covered in blood and black hairs. “Damn thing almost got me, too. That pooch won’t see sunrise.” He laughed.

Moaning, Jack threw back his head. “What if I need a doctor?”

“Don’t know what you’d pay him with.” Buck jerked his thumb at the backseat.

“Until we sell this shit.”
Jack turned. The freezer bag of powder lay behind Buck’s seat. “Looks like coke, maybe heroin. How long will it take to sell?”

“How long? How much?” he whined. “It’s not like gas prices, you know. I can’t look up the going rate. Keep your panties on. We’ll find out soon enough.”

Jack felt like a livewire. His every nerve spat and hissed. He felt Maurice’s money in his back pocket and told himself his escape plan was still salvageable. The cash would cover medical treatment. No, the cash was his ticket out of Everton, gas and motel money, but could he drive with this ankle? He mimed pushing a pedal and winced.

He settled in his seat and tried to ignore the searing, teeth-grinding pain. He heard barking, imagined himself foaming at the mouth, biting strangers, having to be put down. They don’t do that, he thought. They cure rabies. Or do they?

Time crawled. It’d never taken them so long to get home.

Home was a decrepit one-story, one-bedroom duplex, its siding punctured by last summer’s hailstorm. The roof sagged. A gutter hung from the corner eave. The basement flooded every snowmelt. The rent was two-fifty a month, utilities excluded. They didn’t even have a TV.

Jack couldn’t wait to get inside.
Buck parked the car in the driveway and Jack hauled himself out of the Olds. He leaned on the hood to take the weight off his ankle, and gazed at the woods across the street. Beyond them lay the Glenville reservoir. The rising sun painted the ice red. Wind sucked tree branches toward the horizon. They beckoned him to run. But if he could only gimp, how far could he go?

Grunting, he limped up the concrete stoop to their front door. He glanced over his shoulder at the house down the street, their only neighbor on this lonely road. There was a light on in the living room. Jack nudged Buck. “Old man Rafferty is watching.”

“Relax,” Buck said. “That light’s always on.” He unlocked the door. “Max ain’t home neither. It’s like we never left.” Their landlord, Max, lived in the duplex’s other half. He sold tractor parts across the state and only came home twice a month. Jack prevented Buck from breaking into Max’s place all the time. Max liked to share beers with them. He was a good guy.

Inside the duplex, Jack hobbled down the main hall and went in the bathroom next to the hall closet. After he washed and bandaged his wounds, he closed the door and put Maurice’s money in his wallet. He’d count it later, when Buck was asleep.

He hung his jacket in the hall closet, left his wet boots on the rubber mat by the front door, and limped to the living room. Buck sat on the sofa, holding the nunchucks, the bag of drugs on the coffee table. There wasn’t much else to the room besides a worn, tan recliner in the corner that was missing an armrest. Jack sat in it and sighed. “So, what’re you thinking?”

“Maurice knew we were gonna rob him. He read us like the morning papers.”
“What was he gonna do when he got us alone upstairs?”

“She, man. I don’t wanna know.” Buck stared at the drugs, sizing them up.

Finally, Jack said, “So, what are they, coke or heroin?”

Buck set the nunchucks beside him on the sofa. He opened the bag, stuck his finger in the powder, and licked it. “Heroin!” He punched the couch. “Damn, son, we’re in for some green!”

They deliberated until lunchtime about what to do. When they couldn’t make up their minds, Jack made a pot of macaroni and cheese and he and Buck ate it in the living room and drank whiskey and watched the heroin as if it would give them some ideas. Then they slept.

Jack woke sometime during the night. He’d slept almost twelve hours. Robbing Maurice had exhausted him. He eased out of bed, doing his best not to wake Buck, who snored loudly, and limped to the living room. It felt like he had a club foot.

Standing in the moonlight knifing through the window, he counted Maurice’s cash. Almost five hundred dollars, more than enough to fix his ankle. Goodbye, Everton.

His ankle hurt, throbbing pain that made him clench his jaw. He sat on the sofa. A coil poked through the cushion. He shifted his weight so he wouldn’t feel it. He closed his eyes and formed a plan. Tomorrow morning, before Buck woke, Jack would take the Olds to the doctor in town, tell him a friend’s dog bit him, say he didn’t want to take any—tomorrow was Sunday. Okay, Monday morning he’d go to the doctor, who’d fix him up good as new. Jack would pay him in cash. There would still be money left over,
maybe three hundred dollars. So, it’d be off to the gas station, then the interstate and New York. He’d have enough for gas on the way and maybe one night in a classy hotel. Then he’d find his uncle.

It was simple. Put up with Buck for another day or so, take it easy on the ankle. Jack could almost see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Buck stopped snoring. Bed springs squeaked. Jack heard Buck shuffle out of the bedroom, grumbling. Jack saw spots, felt blood rush to his face. His spit grew hot. He still had Maurice’s money in his hand. He tucked the cash under his butt and did the only thing he knew that would send Buck back to their bedroom, no questions asked.

When the living room light came on, Jack’s head was thrown back, his eyes closed, mouth open in ecstasy. He had his hand in his shorts and was moving his fist up and down. Buck was frozen in the doorway, eyes wide.


“Sorry.”

“Stop fucking looking!”

Buck covered his eyes, said “Sorry” again, like it was the only word he knew, and swiftly turned and plodded back to the bedroom and closed the door.

Jack took his hand out of his shorts. Whew, that was close. He got up, turned off the light, and looked about. He had to hide the money. He wanted to keep it on his person. It was the only place he felt was truly safe. He decided to stuff it in his left sock. Sometimes when Buck needed money, or wanted to be sure Jack wasn’t holding out on
him, he looked in Jack’s wallet. Jack put his empty wallet in the pocket of his jacket in
the hall closet, a perfect decoy.

He went back to the living room and stretched out on the sofa with a wool
blanket. He had a troubled sleep, with dreams of buying heroin from a barking, broken-
headed Maurice.

They ate leftover mac and cheese for breakfast. They sat in the living room, Jack
on the couch, Buck in the tan recliner. Buck seemed weirded out by what he’d seen the
night before. He kept looking at Jack like he was either going to laugh or put to him a
series of dire questions. Finally, when the silence became too much, Jack kept up the lie.
“You do it, too,” he said.

Buck looked at him. “Yeah, but not on the couch…”

“Where else was I supposed to go?”

“The bathroom.”

“We’re out of toilet paper.”

“So, just shoot it in the bowl.”

“Didn’t feel like it.”

Buck laughed, shook his head. “Lazy.”

Jack smiled. “Plus with this ankle, it was hard to bend and…well, you know…”

Chuckling, Buck scraped his bowl clean and set it aside. He pointed at Jack’s
ankle. “Let’s see it. See what you’re hiding in there.”

Jack stopped chewing. He felt the wad of cash in his sock.
“Come on,” Buck said, “is it bruised or swollen or infected or what?”

Relieved, Jack rolled up his right pant leg and peeled back the bandages. The bite had stopped bleeding, but his ankle was swollen and yellow.

“That’s nasty. How’s your hands?”

Jack flexed his palms. “Scabby, sore.”

Buck nodded at the drugs. “We gotta take care of this shit.”

“Call our friends.”

“No, I don’t want to sell it bit-by-bit. We need to offload it, get what we can.”

“Should we set a price?”

“What do we need for rent and food?”

Jack set his bowl on the beer-stained carpet and counted on his fingers. “Four, five hundred bucks, and that’s just to break even.”

“We’ll ask for that or more.”

“Who are we gonna offload it on?”

Buck sat back, tapped his chin. He raised a finger. “I got it. I know just the guy.”

They decided to take the heroin to the only person who might buy it from them all at once. They decided to take it to the Outpost, to Yelensky.

After lunch, they put the heroin in an old book bag and covered the car’s broken back window with duct tape. It was warm outside. The snow had turned to slush, the sky blue for the first time since October. They wore hooded sweatshirts and jeans. Buck didn’t need his hat. Leaning against the car, watching Buck cover the broken window
with duct tape, Jack heard water playing in the gutters. Birds chirped, excited, spring’s welcoming choir. Nursing his hands, which were becoming painful, Jack saw their neighbor knocking icicles from his roof with a broom. “Old bastard,” Buck said. “Let’s party it up tonight. Blast metal, piss him off.”

“Yeah, when the cops show, we’ll ask if they’re looking to buy.”

Buck shook his head. “I’m joking, dumbass.” He smoothed the final strip of tape with the heel of his hand. “Stop worrying. Yelensky will take care of us.”

Buck drove to the Outpost, the book bag in his lap. As the Olds sped over the unpaved lanes that wound around the reservoir, Jack rocked in the passenger seat, holding on to his seatbelt. It was a beautiful day. Spring was at last getting the upper hand on winter. Jack rolled down his window. Warm, relaxing air filled the car. He remembered seeing a picture of the cherry blossoms in Central Park. Some kids in high school who’d gone on a field trip there said how nice the blossoms smelled, how all the pink made the city seem like a cotton-candy dream. Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough. Jack just had to get through today.

The Outpost haunted a small gravel lot close to a four-lane stretch of the State Route, between the Everton Savings & Loan and a pet boutique run out of old lady Donahue’s house. Day and night a neon sign in her front window flashed “Animals Welcome.” There were more cars in the lot than usual. Jack guessed another batch of locals had been laid off. Buck parked the Olds near the road and he and Jack headed to the front door.
Inside, the Outpost was a dark, sad, ugly thing that smelled like a high school cafeteria. On one half was the bar, on the other pool and foosball tables, and a broken jukebox. Roughnecks swapped opinions at the counter loud and fast. Dejected-looking men in working blues played pool. Jack hated this dump. He only came because Buck said his dad had been a regular.

All conversation stopped when they entered the bar. Two dozen veined, watery eyes turned on them. Jack and Buck tried to act casual. They went down the bar, nodding at some of the men, as the bar door swung shut, filling the silence with a hysterical creak.

Yelensky stood behind the counter wiping mugs with a white rag. Yelensky was near seven-feet tall, pimply, with arms and legs like sides of beef. His hair was bleached blonde in the fashion that had been cool when Jack was in middle school. He won the Fall Festival strongman competition every year. He threw his rag on the counter and said, “I told you guys not to come back.”

Buck smiled, turning on the charm. “Aw, man, we thought you was joking.”

“Cliff gets here, he gonna kick your ass,” said Yelensky. “You messed him up good. He got a bad limp.” He nodded at Jack. “You got one, too, I see.”

“He slipped on some ice,” Buck said. “But you can take it. Right, Jack?”

Jack nodded. “I can take it.”

Buck set the book bag on the counter across from Yelensky. The Croat looked at it, looked at Buck. “In two second, I’m gonna throw you out.”

Buck tapped the book bag. “Can we show you what’s inside?”

“I don’t care what in there.”
“I promise it’ll make up for the other night.”

Yelensky stared at the book bag. He sighed. “Alright, open.”

Grinning, Buck said, “In private.”

Yelensky took them in the back to a pantry lined with shelves of canned nuts, pretzel tins, and dusty cleaning supplies. The big man sat on a metal stool in the corner. It let out a helpless squeal. He crossed his arms. “Well?”

Buck placed the book bag on a small, oval table set against a shelf of grimy sponges. Jack remained near the door. Yelensky went to the table, opened the backpack, and felt the bag of heroin like it was a melon. “Where you get this?”

“We’ll take five hundred for it,” Buck said.

“Where you get it?”

“Don’t matter.”

“I say where you get it?” Yelensky repeated, louder.

“I said it don’t matter,” Buck replied, louder still.

Yelensky stuffed the drugs inside the book bag and tried to hand it to Buck. “Get out.”

“What’s your deal?” Buck whined, pushing the bag away. “This is good shit. You could sell it. You could make a fortune.”

Yelensky threw the bag at Buck two-handed like a basketball. Buck caught it at his stomach. It knocked him back a step. “Fuck you, dude!” He slung the bag back at Yelensky. The big man puffed his chest. The bag bounced off it onto the floor.
“Goddamn it,” Yelensky growled. He stepped over the bag and his meaty paws lashed. One thwacked Buck’s nose, the other Jack’s throat. Jack dropped to his knees, coughing. He felt a dry heave coming on. He heard Buck wail, “Christ, you broke it! You really broke it!” Buck knelt near him, his forehead on the tile, hands over his face. Blood seeped between his fingers.

“Punks,” Yelensky hissed. He grabbed their sweatshirt collars and dragged them into the bar. “I see you assholes again,” he bellowed, “You’re dead. Hear me? Got it?”

His sweatshirt choking him, Jack watched the Outpost’s yellow, water-spotted ceiling go by. Buck thrashed beside him, shouting obscenities. His heel whacked Jack’s ankle. Jack wanted to scream, but all that came out was a pathetic croak. The barflies guffawed. A sooty man in a train conductor’s cap leaned back on his stool, cackling, and poured beer on Jack’s head. It stung his eyes, slopped in his throat. He gagged and spit it up.

Jack heard the front door bang open and cried out as his ankle bounced over the threshold. Then he was weightless.

He landed on his back in a man-sized puddle. Shivering, he wiped his eyes and spit out a mouthful of dirty water that tasted greasy and flat. He rolled on his side and saw Buck, his bloody face splattered with mud, get to his feet. Buck raised his fists and charged Yelensky.

The big man backhanded him. Buck fell on his ass in the gravel—plop. He sat sucking air, folded at the waist like a broken scarecrow.

Yelensky stomped at Jack, who held up his hands, his voice a whisper. “Don’t.”
The big man stepped on his chest and pressed him deep into the puddle. He spat a warm hawker on Jack’s chin. “Got no brains, you.” He went back in the bar and slammed the door.

Soaked, stinking of beer and oily slush, Jack sat up and wiped his chin. His feet bobbed in the puddle—Maurice’s money! He scrambled for his ankle, reached in his sock, and removed the wet, doughy ball. “No, no, no.” He tried to peel the bills apart, but ripped what he pulled. He blew on the money, muttering “Please” between each breath.

A shadow fell over him. It was Buck, his hand over his bloody nose and lips. “The fuck is that?” he asked, his voice muffled. “Where the fuck you get that?”

Jack’s shoulders sagged. He couldn’t lie. It didn’t matter anymore. “It was in Maurice’s pocket,” he said. He offered Buck the money as if somehow that would make things better. “Five-hundred dollars, ruined.”

Buck looked away, chin out, eyes bulging.

Jack got to his knees. “Is your nose really broke?”

Buck’s head snapped toward him. He swung his fist. Jack ducked the blow and punched Buck in the gut as hard as he could. The air went out of Buck—whoosh. Clutching his stomach, he stumbled into a parked car and sat in the gravel, his legs folded under him.

Jack couldn’t believe it. Instinct must have taken over. Or maybe Buck wasn’t as tough as he thought. He looked pitiful sitting there, holding his stomach. He moaned to Jack, “You got me in the bread basket, man. That’s not cool. We’re family.”
Jack pulled back his fist, but he let his arm fall. Buck was right. Life with him was all he had, all he could ever hope to have. Buck was family, and he’d been ready to abandon him. Look what had happened—dog bit, beat up. What did Jack think, going to New York? He hadn’t seen his uncle in five years. He didn’t even have his address. Who knew if he still lived in NYC? Escaping Everton was a fucking pipe dream.

Jack stood, put the wet wad in his pants pocket, and offered Buck his hand.

“Come on. We gotta get the drugs back.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about the money?”

Buck was so heartbroken, Jack couldn’t look at him. “Sorry,” he mumbled, helping Buck to his feet. “I’m an asshole.”

“Damn right,” Buck said. “You’re a fucking turd.”

“Hey!”

They turned.

Yelensky’s head poked out the bar door. “Leave before I call the cops!”

Buck said, “Ah, shut your mouth you dumb Polack or whatever you are.”

Yelensky stepped out of the bar and stalked toward them, jaw clenched.

Jack and Buck hurried to their Olds and jumped inside. Buck started the engine. As Buck shifted into reverse, Jack grabbed his hand. “Wait,” he said. “The drugs…”

“Fuck’em.”

He peeled out of the parking lot, spraying cars with mud. He rolled down his window, flipped Yelensky the bird, and made sure he clipped the trash cans stacked near
the curb. As they sped away, the big Croat stood over the trash cans in the ditch shaking his fists, shouting threats.

At home, Jack tried to set Buck’s nose. They’d seen it done on TV. It looked simple enough. In bed, he straddled Buck’s chest and pinched the bridge of his nose. He felt the break. Buck screamed and pounded Jack’s arms. Jack told him, “Stop squirming, I almost got it!” Buck’s nose wouldn’t budge that final millimeter. Fingers slick with blood, Jack lost his grip. “Fuck it.” He made a patchwork of Band-Aids across Buck’s nose and got him a baggie of ice.

“Wish I could forget this whole fucking weekend,” Buck said, holding the baggie on his nose. He sounded as if he were speaking underwater.

“Me, too,” Jack said. “Need anything else?”

“Yeah.”

Buck punched him. He aimed for Jack’s nose, but caught him on the brow. Jack fell on his ass with a loud *whump*. He pulled himself to his feet. “I deserved that.”

“Turn out the light.” Buck rolled toward the wall. “Close the fucking door.”

In the living room, Jack sat on the sofa, holding the damp wad of money. He had to make this right. An idea struck him, not unlike his escape plan had, out of the blue, like a gift.

He carefully peeled dollar bills from the wad of cash, his tongue poking between his lips. He tore much of what he pulled, but after a half-hour, he had most of the five-hundred dollars spread out on the coffee table. The bills were still damp, so he took them
to the kitchen and placed them carefully one-by-one, side-by-side in the microwave. He set the timer for thirty seconds and pressed start.

The money revolved slowly on the glass tray. Jack leaned close to the door to get a better look. He heard crackling. Blue sparks shot out of the bills. Tiny bolts of electricity danced inside the microwave. Before Jack could stop the machine, there was a white flash. The bills caught fire and spewed black smoke. Jack yanked the door open and grabbed the money. He juggled it like a hot potato and tossed it in the kitchen sink. He ran the water and watched as the bills turned into mint-green goo. Cursing, he stuffed the goo down the garbage disposal with the end of a wooden spoon and flicked the switch. The grinding of the disposal was the sound of the universe eating Jack’s last hope. Shaking his head, he trudged back to the living room.

He sat on the couch, thinking, but nothing really came to him. He mostly stared at the bare wall opposite him. He sat like that until dark. He snapped out of his daze sometime after nine o’clock and suddenly felt closer to Buck than he ever had before.

He was beat, smelled awful. He took a shower, changed clothes, and checked on Buck. He was beat, too, really sawing logs.

Jack lay on the couch with the wool blanket up to his chin. He watched the moonrise out the living room window and then rolled over, shut his eyes, and slept.

Jack sat up, wide awake, looking about the room. Everything was as he’d last seen it. Still, something had woken him. He held his breath and listened. He heard only Buck’s snores.
The room spun wildly as he kicked off the blanket and swung his legs off the couch. He grabbed the cushions to steady himself. Dizzy, he closed his eyes. It hurt to swallow. He touched his forehead. It was clammy. He’d sweated through his t-shirt and boxers. His leg was on fire.

He staggered to the bathroom and turned on the light. His right leg was swollen to the knee, his shin inflamed, like he had a bad case of poison oak. He sat on the toilet and examined the white, splotchy bite. It oozed pus. “Oh, God,” he moaned.

He heard rattling down the hall. He turned off the bathroom light and crept toward the front door, hunched like an old man, peering at the knob. It moved, rattled again. The lock clicked. Jack ducked into the living room and hid behind the recliner as the door opened and two black men entered the duplex. One was skinny, the other fat. Both wore knit hats, gloves, and dark, baggy clothing. They removed their shoes and set them on the welcome mat. Fat began to speak, but Skinny put a finger to his lips. Buck’s snores filled the duplex. The men moved quietly down the hallway in their sock feet.

Jack crossed the living room and peeked down the hall. The bedroom light came on. The black men stood in the room watching Buck sleep.

Skinny yelled, “Wakey, wakey.”

Buck stirred. Fat lifted him with one hand and threw him face down in the bedroom doorway. The bandages on his nose came loose, revealing it to be a big, black bruise. Fat knelt on Buck’s spine, grabbed his elbows, and pulled, arching his back like a bow. Buck screamed and flailed. Jack recognized Fat as the ghoul who’d eyed him from Maurice’s couch.
Looking down at Buck, his hands on his hips, Skinny said, “Have a nice time at the Outpost today, my man?”

“Suck my dick, nigger,” Buck said.

Fat pulled harder on Buck.

“What’s this?” Skinny studied Buck’s bandages. “The Croat give you a boo-boo?” He flicked Buck’s nose. Buck grunted, said he’d kill him.

“Really? Gonna yell me to death?” Skinny laughed. “Where’s your friend?”

“Ain’t here, fucker! He left!”

“Don’t matter, we’ll find him,” said Skinny. Then he frowned. “Why you kill the dog?”

Buck stopped squirming. He craned his neck to look at Skinny.

“Maynard was Moe’s favorite.” Skinny took a small, silver pistol from his pocket and with his foot pressed Buck’s head against the doorjamb.

Buck cried, “No, wait, no, no, no!”

The once-ghoul hissed, “White trash bitch.”

The gunshot rattled the living room window.

Jack threw open the front door and leapt off the stoop into the snow. His legs buckled. The black men shouted. Jack got up and ran toward the woods. He crossed the road, stumbled over the ditch, and limped to the tree line. He looked behind him and saw the men running through his yard. He bowled through brush and briars, muttering “Oh, Christ, oh, Christ,” his leg throbbing. He stumbled across a trail. He followed it for about fifty yards before cutting back into the trees. The night air pinched his bare skin, stinging
where the briars got him. He hugged a tree, gasping. He heard them coming. A flashlight beam bobbed over the nearest hill.

He ran up a rocky crag. A branch caught his shirt, turned him around, and he tumbled down a steep bank. He sat up, holding his ankle, crying. Through his tears he saw he was on the reservoir’s shore. The ice was dangerous past February, but he had nowhere else to go.

Whimpering, he limped onto it. The ice moved beneath him, groaning like a sick dog.

He didn’t go far. His leg plunged through the ice and touched muddy bottom. His muscles stiffened, he ground his teeth. He tried to pull his leg free, but something was wrapped about his ankle, as if the reservoir were trying to take him under. Trapped, he slapped at the ice like a seal.

Light washed over him. He heard laughter onshore. He turned his head and squinted in the flashlight beam. He couldn’t see anything. He wriggled. His leg wouldn’t come loose.

The laughter stopped. A metallic click echoed across the ice.

Jack screamed until gunshots boomed and a bullet took off his jaw. He tipped forward and fell flat on his left ear. Blood pooled around him, warm on his tongue. “Not mine” were his dying thoughts. “Not mine.”

Geese honked overhead as footsteps hurried away from him. Then all was quiet and he was left folded over the ice, a puppet with severed strings.
I got the idea for the Molotov cocktail during American History class. We were studying social unrest, and Mr. Sattler was showing us a video about the Watts Riots. On the TV, a black man stuffed a rag in a bottle, lit the cloth, and hurled the bottle through a shop window. Whoosh—large, yellow flames ate that shop alive. I raised my hand.

“Yes, Jamie?”

“Mr. Sattler, what’d he throw through that window?”

Sattler eyed me with suspicion. “A Molotov cocktail,” he warily replied.

Whispers: “Why’d he tell her?” “Doesn’t he know she’s crazy?” “She’ll be at it again!”

Next period in Career Prep, I sat in the back of the classroom with the rest of the P through Zs. On my desk was a dusty old Dell. As Mrs. Gregory droned on about the importance of well-worded resumes, I Googled “Molotov cocktail.” I got one million, nine-hundred and twenty-thousand hits. The very first webpage detailed instructions on how to make the bomb. It also told a little of its history. According to this site, Molotov cocktails were used by rebel Finns to fight the Reds in the late 1930s, and by the French Resistance against the Nazis. Fighting arrogant, narrow-minded blowhards whose freely spouted insults brought nothing but pain—the Molotov cocktail was fitting. Steve McDonald deserved one, right through his bedroom window.
After school, I hiked a half-mile into Grover’s Woods, a couple acre spread of maples, cherries, brush, and trails behind my neighborhood, to a junk pile atop a grassy hill. There was the corroded shell of a 1947 Mercury Coupe, an old, lime-green refrigerator, a stove, a rotting wooden outhouse, children’s toys, a bicycle, bottles, cans, and jars, all of them rusty or smashed. A family must’ve squatted on the hill in the 1950s, before real estate developers ran them off.

I rummaged through the junk. I needed a large, heavy bottle. I couldn’t take one of our recyclables because Mom counted those every day. She liked to add up the deposit money and tell us how many dollars we were missing out on by not living in Michigan. “Ohio,” she liked to say, “may have the better football team, but it sure is one stingy state.”

Soon, I found what I was looking for, a forty-ounce, heavy glass bottle, dark brown, the neck dried with tan-colored mud. A mouse skeleton lay inside, the legs clutching a tuft of old, dead grass. I tried to shake out the bones. They rattled against the glass and clogged at the neck.

In our garage, I set the bottle on the floor, and poured it two-thirds full with gasoline from our red, plastic can. I hunted for a rag in the bins under Dad’s workbench. Beneath a stack of ratty towels, I found an old Seinfeld t-shirt depicting “The Kramer,” splotched with green and white paint from when we redid our bathroom last spring. I tore a sleeve from the shirt, and tore the sleeve at the stitching. I stuffed the ripped shirtsleeve halfway in the bottle, making sure a good portion of it was in the gas. I shook the bottle.
No gas leaked out. The mouse skeleton swam back and forth inside, still holding on to its clump of dead grass.

Looking over my shoulder, I sneaked to the trash cans at the side of house, near the garage. I was sure my parents had X-ray eyes. Quickly, carefully, I opened the lid and placed the Molotov cocktail in one of the cans. I shut the lid quietly and shot hoops in the driveway until Mom leaned out of the front door and yelled, “Jamie, dinner!”

I set my first fire when I was eleven. My friend Susan and I were exploring Grover’s Woods. The woods are very hilly, having been cut up by glaciers thousands of years ago. There are black, swampy ponds at either end that stink up the place in summertime. They stunk that August as Susan and I trudged through the woods. Our mission: destroy the boys’ paintball forts. The forts were pathetic, just plywood and two-by-fours slapped together with staples and rusty nails. It looked like a shanty-town back there, real Lord of the Flies stuff.

We hated the boys. We asked if we could play paintball, and they’d taunted us for being tomboys, teased wasn’t I, the pastor’s daughter, too goody two-shoes? What would my dad say? What would Jesus do, Jamie? It really hurt, because they were right. We were tomboys. We played Tarzan more than Barbie and Ken, liked mud and rain more than lipstick.

We destroyed the forts, dropped big, heavy rocks through the upper floors, tore down ladders, kicked down walls. I could hear the boys’ snickers as we did it and I
imagined their sobs at seeing the damage we caused. I remember turning to Susan and
sneering, “What would Jesus do, Suzie, what would Jesus do?”

Next we hiked to a small clearing that had a rope swing tied to a tall maple. Like
usual, Susan had to be the first to try everything. She climbed the tree and sat on a high
branch, her toothpick legs sticking out of her jean shorts. “Here I go,” she cried. Gripping
the rope, she swung on it in great, whooshing arcs, whooping all the way.

As I watched her swing, I got the idea she needed to swing through fire. Then
she’d be a real Tarzan.

I piled dry leaves in the rope’s trajectory and took a lighter from my pocket.

Now, I can’t say how this lighter found its way in my pocket. I must’ve gotten it
from the kitchen drawer. I wasn’t planning on fire-bugging. At the time, I didn’t even
know what fire-bugging was.

It was a dry summer. The leaves caught easy. Susan swung back, and the frayed
end of the rope passed through the flames. Sizzle! Hiss! The rope lit like a fuse. I looked
up at Susan, grinning she said later, as flames devoured the rope with long, orange
tongues. The smoke got caught by the wind and blew over me so that I had to cover my
face as I coughed and laughed. It was bliss, how the fire leapt up the rope, how easily I’d
created such a hungry, raging monster.

Susan’s screams snapped me out of my euphoria. The flames were almost
touching her shoes. I took off my shirt, to smother the flames, and slapped at the rope in
my training bra. I knocked off bits of burning hemp. They drifted about, landed on dry
leaves, and set the whole clearing ablaze. The smell of burning leaves was overpowering,
the smoke thick. Susan let go of the rope and practically landed on my head. Coughing, gagging, we covered our mouths and scurried about the clearing, stamping out the flames until our eyes stung from the smoke and the bottom of our tennis shoes were gummy. It was thrilling—could we stop the fire? Would the whole woods burn? I imagined what the lecture from my parents would be like, and the gossip at school: The Girl Who Burned Down Grover’s Woods. What a nickname!

Standing in the ashes as the smoke cleared, I couldn’t stop giggling.

My parents never knew, and Susan and I promised never to tell. Susan stopped hanging out with me soon after. I gave up calling her in middle school. She’s a popular girl now, all done up and speaking in catchphrases. It’s sad. She had some worth before she became a bobble head.

Soon, I began to sneak out to light small fires. I started with piles of leaves and twigs. I studied how the flames moved, what they liked to be fed. I moved on to newspapers, magazines, Barbie dolls, textbooks, scraps of timber. As I grew more proficient at setting fires, my passion became an obsession, my obsession part of my everyday life. I was, and am, a teenage fire-bug.

The work is exciting. You have to find the right spot, gather the right materials. You have to have craft, patience. Then you can have fun. Light it up. Watch it burn. Particles snap. Atoms sizzle. Whatever it is always lets out a helpless squeal before boom—judgment day.

By the time I was fifteen, small fires became boring. They had no daring, no danger. I longed to feel as I had that day in the woods with Susan, ecstasy mingled with
the fear of being caught and punished. So, I set fire to my friend’s basement couch during a sleepover. Nobody knew it was me. Her parents blamed an old space heater. A few weeks later, I lit up the curtains at Ali Aberdeen’s New Year’s Eve party. During the tenth grade talent show, I snuck under the stage and set fire to the props belonging to that spring’s production of *Cinderella*. In the biology lab, I placed a Bunsen burner near the propane tank, spun the valve, and asked for a restroom pass. In the hallway, I pulled the fire alarm. Everybody made it outside before the tank exploded.

My fires never hurt anyone. Not a softball player was injured on the ride to playoffs last May, even with the backseat on fire. Faulty heating, wiring, or other circumstances, were blamed. I was never caught. It irked me. I craved the frightening thrill of real, palpable danger.

This year, junior year, I got my wish. I was hiding in the girl’s locker room after skipping French class. I didn’t want to bomb a test I hadn’t studied for. I was sitting on the toilet, the lid down, waiting for the bell to ring, when the gym teacher, Mrs. Halloran, stomped into her office. Here was my chance. Next thing I knew, I was tearing up paper towels and piling them in the trash bin. Then the lighter I kept in my pocket was in my hand, and I was holding the flame to the paper towels. I stood there, eyes wide in wonder, as flames crawled to the ceiling. Then Mrs. Halloran’s meaty paw clamped down on my wrist. She dragged me out of the locker room, hollering, “What’re you doing, Jamie? Are you crazy? Have you lost your marbles?” Soon, we were all on the high school lawn, watching smoke billow out the gym windows.
Well, everybody connected the dots. They figured out I was the fire-bug who’d plagued our town for so long. They wanted to expel me, arrest me, and charge me with arson. Dad stepped in. He got them to let me off with a month’s detention and required therapy with the school psychologist, a nice, blonde man named Dr. Feld. The agreement was that if I fire-bugged again, I would face dire consequences. One more fire and it could be juvenile detention for me.

Dr. Feld soon understood what I’ve known for a long time. Setting fires is a stress reliever, and Lord knows I’ve got lots of stress. Being the pastor’s daughter isn’t easy. It was hard before people called me “Pyro.” I was treated okay in elementary and Sunday schools, but even then adults acted like I was different. They had high expectations, as did my parents. I had to act, dress, and speak appropriately. If I didn’t meet these standards, oh, “Jamie you’re such a disappointment.” My friends, however, didn’t care. We hung out, had sleepovers, trick or treated at Halloween, and sang carols at Christmas. I have only good memories from my childhood.

All that changed in middle school. I couldn’t just be Jamie Wilkins anymore. I had to be the Reverend Wilkins’s daughter. My friends began to treat me differently, like I was special, but not the good kind of special. I guess their parents told them what they thought it meant to be the pastor’s daughter. If I got an A on a test it was because I was the pastor’s daughter. If I told my tormentors to shut their goddamn mouths, they tattled on me. “Ms. Knowles, listen to what Jamie said!” “I can’t believe you, Jamie. Such language! You, the Reverend’s daughter!” Sickest of all is teachers relish giving me
detentions. I see the satisfaction in their beady eyes as they dish out the little power they have, the vindictive twerps. They love to see me fail—love that I’m a pyro.

It’s really a matter of identity and understanding. No one—especially people like Steve McDonald—understands our family. They think they do. They’ve read a book, seen a movie. They think we wake up, pray, eat breakfast, pray, go about our day, pray, have dinner, pray, etc. That’s a crazy family. That’s the evangelicals, the nuts. You follow Jesus. You don’t stalk Him.

We are not Jesus freaks. Dad is not a Jesus freak. Yes, he believes. Yes, he preaches, but that’s his job, and he works ten, eleven-hour days, seven days a week. He has a church to run, missions to oversee, a congregation to lead. And lead he does. He’s not just a good preacher—he is a good man. He’s kind. He never gets angry, even when some pseudo-intellectual loudmouth like Steve McDonald tears him a new one. Dad drives the speed limit, flies Old Glory from our porch, and supports every school levy not because God tells him to, but because that’s what’s right, and he’d do what’s right even if he wasn’t a man of the cloth. He has that much character.

Except for saving me from possible arrest and expulsion earlier this school year, he has never used his position to do me any favors. I have to work hard, sometimes harder, than other kids.

I’ve overheard parents and teachers say that if they had a daughter like me they’d either institutionalize or beat the crazy out of me. That’s why I love my family. We’re not Leave It to Beaver. We disagree, as most do. They didn’t like my ex-boyfriend or when they caught us lip-locked in the basement—thank God that’s all they saw. They don’t like
my music either, but these disputes pale in comparison to their concern for my well-being. They don’t think I’m crazy. Sure, my pyromania upsets them. I was grounded. I had my phone and TV privileges taken away. But soon they realized that Everton loves that I’m a pyro, and they know how much that hurts me. They know I don’t like being seen as a freak. So, they’ve supportive. They think I have a serious problem, and with a little therapy and a little prayer, they believe I can be “fixed.”

Unfortunately, I can’t be fixed. And really, I shouldn’t be. I am who I am.

Since I began therapy, I had gone almost four months without setting a fire. It was maddening. By Halloween, I was fiending. As much as I could fool Dr. Feld that I was doing alright, inside I burned with the desire to light up something, anything. I needed to smell smoke, hear crackling flames. I prayed and prayed and prayed for a release, an opportunity. And God listened. Into our lives, as if it were all part of His plan, walked Steve McDonald.

At three-thirty a.m. my phone jittered on my nightstand. I quickly rolled over and turned off the alarm. I’d already been awake for a half-hour, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my bedroom ceiling, asking myself was I really going to do this. Yes, I had to. I needed to shut McDonald up. I needed to teach him a lesson. He was goading me, begging for it, really.

I swung my legs off of the bed. I’d slept in black track pants, black socks, and a black sweatshirt. I put on my black tennis shoes, my leather jacket, and a black knit hat. I put the safety lighter I stole from the kitchen drawer in my jacket pocket. I stood still for
a moment, listening. Across the hall, I heard my father snore. My mother grunted, tossed, and turned. Other than that the house was quiet.

I opened my bedroom window, hopped into the flowerbeds, and hustled around the house through the backyard, my head on a swivel. It was a frigid night. We hadn’t gotten any snow yet, but the temperatures were well below freezing. The air clawed at my face. My shoes squeaked on the frosted grass. I could see my breath. My hands were cold. The air pricked my fingertips. I crouched by the bushes at the side of our house and debated whether I should go back inside and grab a pair of gloves from the hall closet. No, too risky. I’d have to do without.

I carefully opened one of the metal trash cans near the garage. The Molotov cocktail was right where I left it. I snatched it out of the can by the neck, closed the lid as softly as I could, and crept down the driveway. Our neighborhood was quiet, everybody cozy inside, sleeping. A few houses had left their Christmas lights on. The different-colored bulbs tossed rainbows into the night and onto the frosty grass. I threw a last look at my house to make sure no one was up. My parents’ bedroom window was dark. I had escaped unnoticed.

So, I began the three-mile trek to Steve McDonald’s house. As I passed under the streetlight at the end of our neighborhood, I held up the bottle. The mouse skeleton still swam inside, its bony legs clutching that tuft of grass.

The trouble with McDonald started this November. My father wrote for the religion section of the local paper, the Everton Gazette. Since Halloween, he had been publishing a series of articles about Christmas. They were pretty good, not too preachy,
on the tasteful side of sweet. They set the warm, holiday mood. Peace on Earth, goodwill
toward men, yada, yada, yada.

Around Thanksgiving, McDonald began writing letters to the Gazette’s opinion
section in response to Dad’s articles. His first letter, titled “December 25th?”, explained
how Jesus was not born in December. If what the Bible says is true, McDonald said, and
the wise men did follow a star in the sky, that meant Jesus was born in June. The fact that
the star was recorded by ancient astronomers proves that Jesus was not a December baby.
“A Savior’s misplaced birthday, small potatoes, Mr. Wilkins may say,” McDonald wrote.
“But it calls the entire holiday into question.”

This letter didn’t bother Dad. He read it with a straight face and set it aside.
“Steve is just being Steve. He’s right, you know, but that doesn’t change the significance
of the holiday. Let him talk. It’s good publicity for his new book. It’ll give him a nice
Christmas.”

When he was editor of the Gazette, Steve McDonald was nicknamed the Ass of
Everton. He loved bathing in hot water. After 9/11, he grew a Muslim beard and wrote
that US foreign policy was responsible for the day’s attacks. When Jehovah witnesses
came to his door, he sprayed them with a garden hose. During the Iraq War, he passed out
flyers at the high school graduation ceremony that encouraged the less-able minded
graduates to join the military to fight the Jihadists. Finally, after receiving hundreds of
outraged letters, the Gazette forced McDonald to resign. He fought and spat, but I don’t
think he minded moving on to bigger and better things. He has since become the town
recluse and local writer, shut up in his house, typing away, unless he is traveling up north
to lecture and debate with university professors, where he’s very popular.

I’d never admit this to my parents, but before he began attacking Dad, I admired
McDonald. He was a fascinating writer, full of bravado and wit. Last year, my ex-
boyfriend drove me to the local bookstore to buy McDonald’s essay collection, Small
Town Heretic. I used my Christmas money. My Christmas money! I was enthralled with
McDonald, as were a lot of kids at school. His writing made the world outside of Everton
exciting. He made us feel part of something larger than county fairs and high school
sports.

That didn’t mean, however, that he could insult me or my family. Just because I
admired his writing did not mean I would let his insults go unpunished.

After McDonald’s first letter in the opinion section, next he wrote how a lot of the
Christmas traditions, the tree, presents, and boughs of holly, were incorporated from
pagan winter solstice festivals. “What you celebrate is not the birth of your so-called
’Savior’, but the church’s clever marketing skills, its cheery, forgiving veneer that masks
its power-hungry core.”

This bothered Mom, who thought that the newspaper should have nipped this in
the bud. She told Dad he should come right out and respond to McDonald. Dad refused.
“Let him write what he wants,” he said to her. “If this trivia makes anybody toss
Christmas aside, they need more than what one of my little articles in the Sunday paper
can offer.”

The next week, McDonald turned nasty.
He wrote that the collection plate at United Methodist was not going to the poor children of El Salvador, like Dad claimed. Instead, McDonald said, “Your Christmas dollars are going to the church’s electric bill, to those twinkling lights on that grand wreath by the front doors. They are buying Mrs. Wilkins and her daughter’s Christmas presents!”

When Dad finished reading this letter at the dinner table, he slapped the newspaper down, screwed his eyes up to the ceiling, and said, “Sometimes Steve, oh, he just pushes my buttons!” His face was flushed, his jaw clenched. He gripped the paper and the paper crackled. Now, for anyone else, anger like this pops up once or twice a day, but for Dad, this was blinding rage.

“See? See?” my mother said, tapping the paper. “Should’ve been nipped in the bud!”

I agreed. While I enjoyed Dad and McDonald’s passive-aggressive back-and-forth, McDonald had crossed a line. He’d gotten personal. I told Dad, “You should shut this guy up.”

My mother crossed her arms, lips pursed. She looked like an angry bird. “Jamie, don’t use that language at the dinner table.” I apologized. She nodded, “Hmph,” and turned her head to Dad, her blonde perm bobbing. “I agree with Jamie, Larry. Put this man in his place!”

Dad ran his fingers through the few strands of hair he had left, messing up his gelled comb-over. He touched his beard, seriously considering what we said. Then he held out his hands for us to calm down. “No, no. All Steve needs is the facts.”
So, the next Sunday Dad published an article explaining where the collection plate funds go. In actuality, the collection plate never makes much money. On a Sunday morning, eleven a.m. service, the plate takes in maybe two-thousand dollars; barely enough to pay the custodial staff, the bills, and whatever else needs done in the community. Still, McDonald wanted to know who funded the Christmas decorations and who was buying our family’s presents. The answer was: Dad. Churches have been losing money for years and not just because of declining worshippers, but because since the economic crisis, the benefactors who support the church have had less money to throw around. Dad had been paying out of pocket expenses for years.

That wasn’t good enough for McDonald. Next week, he wrote:

“Mr. Wilkins, our beloved town preacher (I refuse to write ‘reverend’ as that title means nothing), is telling me where the money goes, as if I’d believe him. For, my fellow citizens, you must look deep into the motives of the source. Can we trust Wilkins? Of course not, as he would claim to be paying them himself. Although I believe him to be crazy based on his beliefs alone, he would be clinically insane to admit to his financial wrongdoings. Remember, to understand a man, we must study his character. And his character has raised a juvenile delinquent, a raging pyromaniac, who we all fear may set fire to our homes as we sleep soundly in our beds.”

Dad tried to hide the article, but I found it in his study, in the bottom drawer of his desk. When I finished reading, I balled up the paper and threw it into the fireplace. Before I had a chance to light it, Dad rushed into the room, shouting, “No, Jamie, no!” He
took me in his arms and held me while I cried. “There’s nothing wrong with me!” I kept repeating.

Dad said that I was a good person and a good daughter. The problem lay with Steve McDonald, not me. He said McDonald was a bitter cynic whose only real pleasure was to argue, contest, and wound. He said McDonald had nothing in his life but his writing, and that most times he was good at it. Because of that we should forgive him, turn the other cheek.

I heard my father’s words, but they were empty, for he felt the same rage I did, the same desire to strike back, an eye-for-an-eye. Yet, he denied it. He was afraid. As he held me, cooing weightless sentiments, I realized that while I was my father’s daughter, I was not my father.

At dinner that night, Dad told Mom and me to let it go. “My response just fed the flames,” he said, “so it’s best if we ignore him. He’ll peter out. You’ll see.”

No one was going to defend me. No one was going to do a damn thing. They were content to let me keep playing the crazy daughter role, let everybody keep staring at me, whispering about me, like I was some kind of monster, like I needed to be put away.

So, later that night, I snuck out and hiked into Grover’s Woods, to the shore of one of those black ponds, and built a small fire of leaves and pine needles. Into the flames I threw my copy of Small Town Heretic. It felt so good to see it burn, yet I felt betrayed, and this soured my joy. In refusing to condemn McDonald, my family was refusing to express their love for me. And I had admired McDonald, and here he was using my family and me to jump back in the spotlight. None of it was fair, none of it right. I sat on
my haunches, trying to come up with a plan, but nothing came to mind. I was too upset. I went home, so frustrated I couldn’t sleep.

It didn’t matter that the *Gazette* fired the editors in charge of the opinion section, or that the newspaper issued a formal apology to my family—because Mr. Sattler showed us that video.

After I left my neighborhood, I walked north, following the ditch along the State Route, and then turned west and cut through overgrown farm fields. A full moon guided my way. The leftover crops were frozen stiff and crunched under my feet like old bones.

I left the farm fields and hiked through a small patch of woods in order to hit the back of McDonald’s neighborhood. The cold was nerve-wracking. I passed the Molotov cocktail from one hand to the other, trying to keep my free hand in my jacket pocket for as long as I could, but it was no use. The cold found its way in there, too. So, I walked and jogged, passing the bottle back-and-forth between my hands, rotating my shoulders, trying to stay warm for my big, fiery throw.

Eventually, chilled to the bone, I emerged from the woods at the back of McDonald’s neighborhood. McDonald lived in a housing development behind the high school. I didn’t know his address, but I’d seen his house in the “Great Local Homes” section of the newspaper. I crept through backyards, in the darkness of the tree line. As with my neighborhood, everyone was in bed, warm, safe. I didn’t hear any dogs barking, heard no cars zip past on the road. It was almost as if Everton was frozen in time so that I could approach McDonald’s house unnoticed.
His house sat at the end of a cul-de-sac, the biggest on the block, a mammoth brick mansion with a white colonnade. The flowerbeds were bare, the basketball hoop in the driveway rusty, the net ratty. It was the only house on the block without Christmas lights. Its neighbors glowed bright with hundreds of white bulbs, while McDonald’s house was dark, lifeless.

I crept around the side of his house, looking about, making sure there were no witnesses. My footprints left wandering tracks in the frosty grass.

I circled the house once more, this time looking in the windows, hoping that McDonald’s bedroom was on the ground floor. My fingers were numb. I passed the bottle between my hands, blowing hot breath into my right, my throwing hand, flexing my fingers, to fight the cold.

There was his living room, his kitchen, his dining room, a den, everything inside so expensive and nicely kept, all of it begging to taste my fire. But there, in the backyard, at the corner of the house, beside a large juniper bush, I found what I was looking for: McDonald’s office. There was his computer, desk, on the floor his papers, on his shelves thick tome after thick tome, on the walls numerous plaques and awards, pictures of himself, his sardonic eyes and chubby sneer. Here, I knew, is where the bottle deserved to be thrown.

I walked backwards from the window, warming up my throwing arm. When I was about twenty feet from the window, I transferred the bottle to my right hand. It was hard to get a good grip. The cold had turned my hand into a claw. I blew on my fingers, but it was no use. I’d have to manage. I took the safety lighter from my jacket pocket and held
the bottle close to my eyes. “Sorry, buddy,” I said to the mouse skeleton, giggling, “things are about to get hot.”

Twitching in anticipation, I took a deep breath and lit the rag. I let it burn for a few seconds, stepped back, wound up, and hurled.

I could tell by my release that the bottle was going miss the window. It didn’t roll off my fingers. Instead, my frozen hand pushed the bottle forward, like it wanted nothing to do with it.

The bottle flew end-over-end and bounced—crack—off the brick wall next to the window. It shot into the air, and, still turning, landed at the foot of the juniper bush with a crash. There came a short, precise report, like that of a cap gun, and whoosh—the cocktail set the bush ablaze.

The flames towered to an incredible height. The sound was like nothing I’d ever heard. The bush roared like a beast from the nether regions of the world, so loud my ears hurt. But the details of the fire were what truly awed—how every nettle was its own entity and burned to nothing but embers, how those embers drifted into the night sky, each giving a little shake, their own private dance. I’d never seen such an onslaught of colors, reds, yellows, oranges, blues, greens, purples, all of them flashing one after the other, glimpses of this one and that. The most staggering sight was that the heart of the bush burned white, the purest kind of flame. I’d never been able to get anything to burn that hot.

Then the bush spoke.

“You there, stop! Don’t move!”
I fell to my knees, my hands clasped before me, grinning at the bush, convinced of this divine visitation.

“You’ll get it this time,” cried the bush. “They’ll lock you up for good!”

The booming voice did not belong to Jehovah. It belonged to Steve McDonald, whose great Irish bulk was hanging out of a second story window at the other end of the house. His eyes were bulging, as if he were being burned alive. His red beard wagged as he shouted into a phone, “Jamie Wilkins is on my lawn. Yes, the Reverend’s daughter! She’s at it again! She’s here, right now, burning down my house! Get over here now!”

I sprang to my feet. I didn’t think McDonald’s eyes could get any bigger, but they did. He screamed for me to stop as I took off across his yard. I ran down his street and back to the woods, toward the farm fields, toward home. My track pants swished with every stride, as if I was sprinting through piles of autumn leaves.

When I burst out of the woods, I skidded to a dead stop, out of breath. Sirens wailed. I couldn’t go home. The cops would be waiting. They’d arrest me, send me to juvenile detention. I couldn’t let them catch me. I needed to keep the flames alive. That burning bush had been a sign letting me know that I wasn’t a monster, a freak. I had a calling. I had to keep setting fires.

So, I ran. When my hands got too cold, I stuffed them under my armpits, and kept going, kept moving through the farm fields, along the ditch of the State Route, ducking into the black, cold water on my hands and knees whenever a car passed. I ran until I came to the edge of town, to the expressway. I hurried down the slick, grassy bank, and
took off down the highway, thumb out, smiling at the truckers and early-morning drivers who zipped past.

Finally, when I thought I couldn’t take any more of the cold, a beat-up Dodge pickup pulled to the side of the road. I ran to the passenger door and opened it. Inside sat a young guy a few years older than me. He had a fat, tired face, long, shaggy hair, and a dirty-looking goatee. Seventies rock blared from his speakers, Pink Floyd, I think. He smiled and waved me into his truck. “Come on. I’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

I hopped into the passenger seat. “Anywhere but here is fine,” I said.

“Wow, you’re pretty muddy, aren’t you? You have one hell of a night or what?”

I nodded. “Oh yeah, one heck of a night.”

His was name Darryl. He was a college student driving home for Christmas break. The interior of his truck was filthy. There were fast food wrappers on the floor. What looked like finely cut-up blades of grass were scattered about the console. He looked like a loser, somebody too cool to take life seriously.

I gave him a fake name, “Christine,” and said I’d go as far as he could take me.

Darryl talked about college, what classes he’d taken, how his semester had gone, the parties he’d been to. He kept saying, “It’s so much better than high school, man,” as if I couldn’t grasp how truly enlightened he was, like I was a dumb, naive seventeen-year-old girl.

“Hey,” he said, reaching for the pack of cigarettes on the dash. “You want one?”

“No, thanks,” I replied, watching him slide a cancer stick out of the pack.

“Okay, be square.” He shifted his weight to reach into his back pocket.
“I got it,” I told him. I took the safety lighter from my jacket pocket, pointed it at him, and pulled the trigger. A long flame popped out of the barrel. He flinched. His eyes widened and crossed as I moved the flame toward his cigarette. “Thanks,” he said, after I lit his cigarette. He took a few nervous puffs and filled the cab with acrid smoke.

I didn’t let go of the trigger. The long flame still hung between Darryl and me.

“Let there be light,” I whispered. With a giggle, I released the trigger, tucked the lighter back in my pocket, and patted it, my eyes fixed on the open road.
In dreams, the smell of wild olives is still fresh.

A storm was coming that night. In the garden, wagtails watched from swaying branches, small spectral shapes unwavering in the wind. Creeping between the conifers to stay hidden from the disciples, I crouched and parted the pine boughs. Yeshua stood by a patch of wildflowers, hands quaking. Our brethren snored at his feet.

The screech of a rook made him jump. It landed before him, cawed as if in laughter, and ran at him on stubby legs. Covering his eyes, he stumbled to a small clearing of pine. He fell to his knees, turning, shooing the bird away. The animal cawed once more, took flight, and merged with the clouds that rumbled and flashed above.

I snuck back out of the garden to fetch the soldiers.

When I returned, I marched up to him and took hold of his shoulders. I gripped him hard, held him at arm’s length. “Must you?” he said, choked with grief.

I hesitated. The soldiers awaited my signal. “I have no choice.”

He began to weep. “I have not done all I am commanded. Turn back. Please, turn back.”

I pulled him closer. “If this be true, why did you choose this night?”

He looked to the sky and moaned. “How could I refuse?”

I could take no more. I planted the promised kiss.
My lips burned, like I had put them to a flame. Trembling, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he muttered, “Curse you, Judas.”

“Be strong, master,” I replied.

We were bathed in torch light. The soldiers grabbed Yeshua and bound him in chains.

The disciples sprang to their feet, awake now, though I suspected they had been since I entered the garden. They cried out as they saw our shackled master. Peter, that great brute, leapt at me, brandishing his dagger. I grabbed the hilt of my weapon.

“Enough!” Yeshua shouted, as the soldiers led him away. “Let him live. His purposes you know not.”

Peter turned his eye on me, pointing his knife. “Another time, Iscariot,” he said. Then he led the disciples after the soldiers, dagger held high, ordering them to, “Follow! Follow!”

At the edge of the garden, a group of centurions sneered as I passed. One snatched my elbow and slapped a heavy pouch in my hand. “Here is your silver, traitor. Are you satisfied?”

I stuffed the pouch in the pocket of my cloak. “Not until every Roman in this city lies dead.”

The centurion laughed. “You will have long to wait, Jew.”

Someone screamed in the garden. The centurions unsheathed their swords and hurried toward the sound. Lightning struck with a deafening crack. The clouds opened
and soaked me in a veil of tears. I picked up the folds of my cloak and left at a brisk pace. I
needed a drink.

I was drunk for two days. I sat in a dark, stinking tavern, glaring from under the hood of
my cloak, consumed by trepidation and doubt. I paid for the wine with my pieces of silver
and was treated like a king.

Before I was a disciple, I was sicarii, one of the “dagger men.” Our mission was to end the
Roman occupation of Jerusalem and cast down the high priests who made their beds with our
oppressors. We would free Israel and establish forever the covenant promised to us by God. I
cut my first Roman throat at nine years old. I can still recall the warmth of the centurion’s
blood as it splashed my face. Many Romans took their last breaths under my knife. I cannot
remember every one of my murders, so great is their number.

The day I met Yeshua I was preaching revolution. Atop the Mount, surrounded by grass
and foliage fully greened in the height of spring, I raised my fist against Rome and
demanded to know who was with me. They laughed. The people I loved so dearly mocked me.
In small groups they left, snickering, as if I were another loopy prophet, half-clothed and
blithering about signs and scripture. Even my brother in arms, Barabbas, guffawed, putting
his hands to his pot belly and shouting, “What a leader you are, Iscariot! What a man!” Only
the carpenter stayed behind.

I could not believe my peoples’ derision. I fought for them. The previous morning I
had gotten a young Roman to renounce Tiberius before I slit his throat. I spent my days
and nights worrying about Israel’s subjugation, its heartache. I overheard my people grumble about taxes, the repossession of their land, how our priests lived like kings while demanding more sacrifice, more worship. They said someone should do something, and we did. That winter Barabbas and I quartered the magistrate who crucified our most recent zealot. Our names were celebrated in every tavern and inn for weeks. I thought we were one. How easily the people forget. How fickle.

Sulking, I hopped from the rock, planning to hurry past the carpenter and bump him with my shoulder. The paintings, the films, they lie. He never wore white. He never had milky skin or blue eyes or fair hair. He was a short, rough man, dark-skinned, with black hair, a black beard, and beady eyes. He loved green. They were the only color of robes he would wear.

As I brushed past him, he said, “Iscariot, may I speak with you?”

Gritting my teeth, I leaned close to his face. “You wish to mock, too? Go on. The others mock with whispers and giggles. What will you do?”

“Agree,” he said.

“You come from the same land as they and they don’t agree.”

“They do.” He gave the distant crowd an amused glance. “They are afraid.”

“Of what do they have to be afraid?”

“Change.”

“And you are not?”

“I am the changer.”
He did change—me. I believed the sicarii could free Israel. Yet for every Roman I killed, two more took their place, one a reminder of the man I had slain, the other a product of the killing itself. God was either with the Romans, or there was no God, and if so, what of the promise of Israel? There lay my pain, the talons that tore at my scalp. The only methods I knew—fear, coercion, murder—failed at every turn. And now my people had turned their backs on me. I was outcast, from my cause, from my own certainties.

I was the last of the disciples. The high priests called them sinners. Here is a better word—fools. No amount of miracles could cure their blindness. They thought Yeshua a genie, a spinner of fanciful tales, and that by following him, they would be granted power and prestige. They longed to one day become like the high priests. During our final meal together, as Yeshua blessed the bread and wine in that low-lit inn, none of them paid attention. They salivated over the sweet-smelling food. They thirsted for drink. Peter picked his ear, inspected his gummy find, and flicked it away. These men are saints? Of all of them, my soul walked the thorniest journey. Therefore, God gave me the hardest task. I could not resist. If I had, where could I have hoped to hide? To which ends of the earth could I have fled? I was called upon as the one, true disciple—this is how my loyalty is repaid?

I wrapped myself in a beggar’s shawl stolen from an old crone to watch him die. I trailed close behind, flinching at every blow as they whipped and kicked and stoned him. I prayed for God to be merciful. As always, He did not listen. Yeshua was bruised and battered, one of his eyes swollen black. Blood ran from his scalp where the thorny crown
was stuck atop his head. He groaned with every step, and when he paused to catch his breath, he asked someone, anyone, to please, kill him. He could barely manage the weight of the cross. He fell, I knelt to help. A soldier cracked a whip across my shoulders and I retreated into the crowd. Yeshua fell again and again, but I did not step forward. He had to face His Father’s will alone.

As we left the city, I noticed that I had tracked through his blood and left dark footprints on the road. They followed me to the place of skulls.

His screams still cut through the night, calling me to my unreachable grave. I have seen crucifixions, those of zealots and murderers and fools. I believed I would not be able to watch them crucify him. When the centurion raised his hammer, I covered my eyes. Yet when the nails pierced Yeshua’s wrists, I could not look away. When the soldier began to nail his feet, I prayed my master would pull himself from the cross, nails and all, and call his disciples forth. But he shrieked until, drowning in blood and spittle, his voice gave out. When they hoisted him on high, head hanging like a dead dog, a centurion clubbed his knees with a heavy wooden mallet until his legs broke. He gave a final screech, then hung there quietly, his chin on his chest. Soon, the crowd lost interest and went back down the beaten path to the city.

I approached the cross, creeping as if he were a sleeping child. I touched his feet. He did not stir. I could not tell if he was breathing. I heard women wailing. I turned. Mary, Magdalene, and Yeshua’s sisters were coming up the path, wiping tears from their dirty faces with the ends of their robes. I could not bear such anguish. I covered my face and fled down the hill.
I stayed in a tavern most of the night, drinking alone at a corner table. The place was filled with singing and dancing for the Passover Feast, heavy with the foul stench of drunkards, the floor sticky with wine. On a stool atop the bar sat a man playing a sitar, his face hidden by a black shawl. A fast, merry tune sprang from his instrument. I despised every note. Yet, I despised more the jolly, fat man dancing from table to table, babbling along with the melody, his lips and teeth stained with wine. There was a time when I drank with Barabbas, but not in the years since he mocked me, and especially not that night as my master hung dead.

Grinning, Barabbas danced to my table, grabbing at women as he went. He was the largest of the sicarii, a giant in tight-fitting robes. I had once seen him kill three soldiers single-handedly, crushing their skulls with his bare hands. His belly hung over his belt and his graying beard was wild about his round, moony face. He plopped in the chair across from me and said, “Iscariot, you are the only man here who sits. What will bring you to your feet?” He winked and offered me his bottle of wine.

“Go away.”

“Come, come, I will buy you a round. I am a free man now. We must celebrate.”

I leaned forward. “You should be dead on that cross.”

Barabbas threw back his head and laughed. He guzzled the wine and held out the empty bottle. Without so much as a grimace, he crushed the bottle with one hand as if it were the neck of a chicken. Pottery exploded onto the table. The people around us hollered. Barabbas swept the shards from the tabletop and said, “I do not blame you for
what you did. How much longer could you see miracles without the prophecies being fulfilled? A coming kingdom of God—how can you know such a thing to be true? Can you touch it, taste it?” He pulled a passing woman onto his lap. “This I can taste,” he said, and nuzzled her neck. She squealed and took off across the bar. He laughed. “David did not vanquish Goliath, Iscariot, nor did Jonah ride in a whale’s mouth. Noah did not build a boat. Job never found solace. These are stories. So, do not sit glowering at the rest of us. Join the feast.”

“Go away,” I told him, touching my dagger under the table.

He smiled. “So be it. But if you wish to drink with an old friend...”

He left, and continued visiting various patrons about the bar. I watched, waiting for my chance to strike. The musician in black played on. His fingers plucked the strings of his instrument at a frantic pace. Finally, Barabbas left the tavern alone. As he went out the door, he shouted to a table near the window that he would soon return. “I need to make room for more wine,” he cried, and the people cheered. I tossed a silver piece at the barman and followed.

I found him relieving himself in an alley around the corner. He swayed drunkenly, humming the musician’s tune, one hand pressed to the wall for balance. I crept up behind him, unsheathing my dagger. “It should have been you,” I hissed. Before he could turn, I plunged my dagger into the base of his neck. A shocked cry escaped his lips and he collapsed against the wall. Gasping, he briefly reached for purchase, and then he died, his body sagging to the dirt.
I wiped my dagger on my cloak, put up my hood, and left the alley. I passed through the market, loud with celebration, and moved with many persons who sang and swigged drink from wooden cups. People coupled on the ground under vendors’ booths and behind sacks of grain. A man broke open a barrel with an axe. Drunkards dove to the dirt to lap up the wine.

I hurried through this chaos, glancing behind me, unable to escape the feeling that I was being watched. I was sure someone had seen me murder Barabbas. So, I ran out of the city to the desert, tossing a handful of silver pieces to the filthy, moaning beggars at the city gate.

Beside a ragged outcrop, I made a small fire of brush and branches. I held my hands over the flames, rapt in prayer, asking if I had betrayed my master too soon.

At the edge of the firelight, I heard a hissing of snakes. I jumped up, my dagger drawn. A traveler moved into the light, his wares dragging behind him in a worn rucksack. He was dressed in black, most of his face covered by his robes. A sitar hung from a thin rope about his shoulders. “May I partake of your fire?” he asked.

“Please, sit,” I told him.

The musician left his rucksack and sitar on the sand. He sat across the fire from me and warmed his hands. They were patched red and white, the skin bubbled, as if he had been burned long ago. “It is a warm night,” he said, “but fire is always welcome.” His voice was soft, like he was afraid of being heard. He leaned back to stretch his legs. “I have a taxing journey ahead.”
“Where are you going?”

“There,” he said, waving at the darkness.

We talked at great length about his travels. He claimed to have visited the Far East, played for kings and queens. He had once seen eastern monks levitate, so deep were they in prayer. I told him of the miracles I had witnessed. He seemed unimpressed, although when I spoke of Lazarus, he nodded and stroked his chin. “That really is something,” he said. He sat forward. “You sound saddened to speak of such things. Is there heaviness in your heart?”

Across the flames, his eyes looked yellow, like a cat’s eyes. I said, “I suppose so.”

“I know men well,” he said. “The human soul can never be untwisted. We each have a thing which twists it, a yoke, if you will, which pulls us to the depths of our soul. Down there is a dark reflecting pool we would rather ignore. It sounds as if you have been staring into yours.”

I shrugged.

He cleared his throat, a phlegmy, guttural sound. “I love the power of music. Tonight for instance, in the tavern, you were there, sulking at the corner table. Is it fate that we have crossed paths? No. It is the music that brings us together, the song which plays at the bottom of our dark reflecting pools. You and I are similar, I imagine. My power is in plucking strings and making men dance, an easy thing, difficult to master. If a man becomes proficient at such a craft, anyone will move by his will. My music lost a little of its power today. That is what makes my heart heavy on this night. I played well,
but not everyone paid attention. Like you, for instance, for you my sound was faint. It grieves me.”

“I am sorry,” I told him. “My mind is captured by other concerns.”

The musician raised his brow. “Well, what of them?” he said. “Tell me of this heaviness. Tell me what lies in your reflecting pool.” He lowered the shawl wrapped about his face. He had a fat, puckered mouth. He ran a black tongue over his lips and nodded, waiting for me to speak.

“I betrayed a friend,” I told him, “for reasons I believe extend beyond friendship. Now, doubt clouds my convictions. I cannot help feeling my betrayal was misguided.”

We sat looking at one another through the flames. Somewhere in the bare trees a crow cackled. Beasts rushed across the desert. The musician cocked his head. “That is a dark pool, my friend, a black one, if I may say so. Yet, I cannot help but ask if you have done all you can.”

I thought of Yeshua lying in his tomb. He said he would be “perfected” in three days. How could he, when trapped by rock? “You speak wisely,” I said. “I must see my duty to its end.” I shook my head, laughing. “We do not know one another’s names. My name is Judas. And yours?”

A sudden wind drowned out the musician’s words. I did not ask him to repeat them, as he said he was tired and wished to sleep. So, we two made our beds across the fire from each other, our backs turned to the dwindling flames. As I slept, I dreamt the musician stood over me, watching me, and his cat-eyes glowed in all that dark like
lanterns burning on a far shore. When I woke the next morning, the musician was gone, the sand undisturbed where he had lain.

I moved Yeshua’s gravestone on the evening of the second day. With the rest of my silver, I paid two Roman soldiers to help. They were guarding the cemetery gates on the orders of the high priests, to make sure the disciples did not steal Yeshua’s corpse. I could not believe I was asking these dogs for their aid, but such was my situation. We three dug a trench beneath the stone, plied it with spears and sturdy branches, and heaved with all our might. It was hard, sweaty work, but finally the stone tumbled onto its face, smacking the earth with a mighty slap.

Decay wafted over us, the smell of Lazarus. The soldiers held their robes to their noses and turned away. Stepping over the threshold, not daring to cover my nose, I knelt beside Yeshua. He was wrapped in worn, bloodied cloth. His skin was pale, his eyes closed. His mouth hung open, his tongue a pale blue. I tried to take his hand, but his arm would not move. The body had gone stiff. “Leave,” I ordered the soldiers. Still covering their noses, they blinked at one another and went away. I could hear them moving back to the cemetery gates.

The sun set behind the gravestones. I bowed before Yeshua, praying the prophecies would come true. I squeezed his wrist, begged, “Wake up, dead man!” I touched his face. His flesh was cold. The blood dried on his lips flaked off on my fingers and filled me with dread.

“Judas!” I heard from outside. I jumped up and went into the dark.
Peter and the other disciples stood at the foot of the path that lead to our master’s grave. He stepped toward me, unsheathing his dagger. “Because of you, Teacher lies there!” He pointed to the tomb’s rank darkness.

I slowly slid my dagger from its sheath. “I deserve far more than you.”

Peter snarled. “Traitor!”

He charged. I prepared myself, but he paused mid-stride, grinning.

I was caught from behind. The dagger thrust into my side stole my breath and I dropped my weapon. I was pushed into Peter’s arms. He caught me and, snering, plunged his blade in my gut. I screamed and grabbed his wrist, but could not prevent him from drawing the dagger across my middle. I put my hands to my stomach. Warmth spread across my palms and dripped through my fingers.

Peter hissed in my ear. “Our father shall scourge you more than that, traitor.” I was grabbed by the hair, my head pulled back. Cold metal passed across my throat. I fell to my knees, gawking at the bloody spray I knew so well, my insides sagging out of my belly. I was kicked to the dirt and they all leapt upon me, driving their daggers in and out. Coins jingled in the pockets of their cloaks.

When they finished stabbing me, they stood over me, panting. Blood from Matthew’s dagger dripped into my eye. “Leave him,” said Peter. The disciples wiped their daggers on their cloaks and approached Yeshua’s grave.

With the last of my strength, I rolled toward the tomb. Peter stood at its mouth, standing atop the fallen stone with his hands on his hips, staring at me. His eyes, like the crows in the trees about him, were black. For me he felt nothing.
The disciples emerged from the tomb carrying Yeshua. They followed Peter down the path to the cemetery gates, whispering to each other. They handled our master roughly, like he was an animal they could not wait to butcher.

A seeping darkness swallowed the cemetery. Tiny dots of grey and white danced and faded in the blackness. My pain vanished. I could hear nothing. I closed my eyes and died.

My eyes opened. Angels had me by the elbows and knees, ferrying me across the night sky. I felt no pain, only numbness like that of sleep. Yet, I was awake. I looked between my feet, wondering if I would see Sheol in the distance.

No—on this earth I remained. These were not angels. These were Romans, the very soldiers I had paid to move the gravestone, the ones who had also taken the disciples’ money. They were carrying me to a large hole ahead, a mass grave meant for beggars and criminals.

I kicked free of their grasp. The soldiers screamed in terror and backed away, their hands on their swords. I got to my feet, hardly able to catch my breath, and put my hands to my throat. The skin was unbroken. There was no scab, no scar. Yet, my robes were still wet with blood.

The soldier nearest me unsheathed his sword. “A ghost,” he cried as he thrust his weapon through my chest.

I did not cry out or wince. I did not feel a thing.

The soldiers gaped at one another.
I grasped the sword by the handle and pulled it from my chest. I lifted my cloak. The red, fleshy slit above my navel came together and healed. “What miracle is this?” I whispered.

The other soldier buried his sword in my left shoulder. I staggered backwards, my arm dangling by a strip of flesh. Yet again, I felt no pain. Suddenly, the arm pulled itself up on invisible strings, fastened itself to the severed skin, and the wound was stitched together by an unseen hand. Within moments I was healed.

The soldiers spun on their heels and ran. They dove into the mass grave and scrambled across bodies, glancing back at me, calling to their Roman gods for mercy.

I stood there, clutching the sword, gaping at my body. I did not bleed. I had no wounds. It was as if that night I had never step foot in the cemetery. Had I died? Was I dreaming?

I stumbled back to Yeshua’s tomb, to make sure it was empty, that I had not imagined the disciples’ attack and grave robbery, that this wasn’t some kind of perverse afterlife, a damnation gone unmentioned in scripture. I reached the tomb. It was empty, though it still reeked of death.

My life had been restored, yet in ways I never imagined. Was I another Lazarus, or something sinister? The answers, I knew, lay with Yeshua. Often we twelve stayed at an inn near the market, as we had the night of our final meal together. The disciples had most likely taken him there. I dropped the centurion’s sword and ran, my robes flapping about me like bloody wings.
In the east, over the Temple, the sun was rising. Its rays alighted on various streets of the city, brightening alleys, casting long shadows here and there. Meanwhile, Jerusalem was waking. Merchants moved about the market, chatting, bartering. Some swept the doorways of their shops. Vendors were beginning to roll out their carts and clear their throats for the long day of peddling.

The inn sat on the far side of the market, two-stories tall, with a thatched roof of straw and dry branches that contrasted the building’s black mortar. I hurried inside. Jude, the owner, sat at a table on the far wall, staring into a jug of wine. Portly, bald, he had sad, tired eyes.

“Jude,” I said, moving toward him. “Have the disciples come here?”

He turned to me and said nothing. Perhaps he did not recognize me.

“Please,” I begged, “I need to know.”

Jude looked into the wine jug and nodded. “They brought his body.”

“Are they upstairs?”

He drank wine and sighed. “They are debating where to hide him.”

I ran to the stairs. As I rounded the end of the bar, I noticed a jug of wine on the counter. I was parched from the long run. I glanced at Jude. He sagged to the tabletop and buried his face in his arms. I snatched up the wine and drank.

I tasted…nothing. I gulped the wine and it dribbled down my chin onto my robes, but still nothing—not the remembered taste of the once-sweet grape or the feel of it wetting my clothes.

From upstairs came the cries of men.
I slammed the wine jug on the bar, and bounded up the stairs, the wood creaking and groaning. I ran down the hall, *thud, thud, thud*, barefoot, for I had lost my sandals in the cemetery. I threw open the door at the end of the hall, and came face-to-face with my murderers.

The disciples gasped. They were knelt around the table in the middle of the room, their robes still stained with my blood. Sitting on the table was Yeshua, naked but for the burial cloth wrapped about his shoulders. The sunlight streaming through the window cast him in an intense, orange glow. He was covered in scars and scabs, his legs bent at an unnatural angle. His eye was swollen a purplish color, his face a bloody mask. Most disturbing was that many of his wounds appeared fresh. They were bleeding. He blinked at me as if I were a stranger. A droplet of blood ran from his forehead, rolled off the tip of his nose, and landed—*pat*—on the floor.

Peter pointed at me. “Demon!” he cried, dagger out. He made to rush toward me, but Yeshua’s arm swung lazily from his body and barred Peter’s way.

He slowly turned his head to Peter. “No,” he rasped.

The disciples shrank from Yeshua and cowered in the corners of the room.

Yeshua put his feet to the floor one at a time, *whump, whump*. He kept the burial cloth about his shoulders as he shambled toward me on mangled legs, his head bent like there was a kink in his neck. “Who are you?” he asked, staring at me with lifeless, discolored eyes.

“Teacher,” I croaked, hesitant, afraid. “It is I, Judas.”

He shook his head. “I do not remember.”
I took his hand. It was still cold. “They killed me, master.” I pointed at the disciples. “I moved your gravestone. I waited for you to rise, and they came and murdered me and stole your body like thieves, like carrion.”

Peter growled and gnashed his teeth. “Lies!”

“No,” I boomed. I lifted my robes and ran Yeshua’s hand over my body. “I am healed, master. God healed me, his gift for allowing you to prove his word!”

“Gift?” said Yeshua, regarding his broken frame as if for the first time. He wiped his brow and gaped at his bloody fingers. He pressed his palm to my cheek. “You are cold,” he whispered, “as a corpse.”

I started. Something was not right. I could not feel his bloody palm.

A fierce wind blew back the curtains from the window. The disciples shivered and pulled their robes tighter. My robes fluttered about me, but I failed to feel the wind’s harsh touch.

I whispered to Yeshua, “What has happened to us?”

He swung his head toward the disciples. “Who are these men?”

The disciples clasped their hands in devotion and began to make professions.

“Where am I?” he bellowed, his voice thick with phlegm. He spat a mouthful of blood on the floor.

I took his elbow. “You are at Jude’s inn, master.”

“Master? Who is ‘master’?”

“You,” I told him.

His eyes widened, full of life as if faced with horrific memory. “Oh, God…”
He turned. The burial cloth slipped from his shoulders and fell to the floor. He limped across the room to the window and ran into the sill as if he could not see it. He pitched forward, tipped out the window, and landed below with a soft thud.

We ran to the window, pushing against one another. Yeshua crawled on the street, his bloody back bright in the morning sun. He struggled to his feet and looked wildly about. We called for him to remain still. He did not seem to hear us. He stopped turning his head and stared down the street, terrified. Then he turned and lamely ran, looking over his shoulder, as if someone were chasing him. Women screamed. Men scrambled out of his way. He hurried past a booth of hung chickens and continued moving out of sight, leaving bloody footprints in the dirt.

“Traitor! Monster!” Peter cried.

He pulled me from the window, sunk his dagger in my back, and shoved me across the room. Arms flailing, I stumbled into the table. I turned. Peter was crouched, ready. I charged him, took him by the robes at his neck, and flung him to the floor. I reached behind me and wrenched his dagger free. I leapt upon him and held the blade to his eye.

“Mercy, Judas,” he whimpered, as the other disciples held one another, trembling.

I could not stab him. My master needed me. I flung the dagger at the disciples’ feet and fled the room, and the inn, as Peter bellowed, “Traitor!”

I followed Yeshua’s bloody footprints into the desert. I tracked him for days until one evening atop an outcrop overlooking the plain, the footprints vanished. I peered over
the edge of the cliff to see if he had fallen, but I found no evidence of this. It was as if
some great bird had plucked him from the earth by the shoulders and carried him into the
sky. Yet, still I searched, for days, weeks, until I returned to his grave in the late summer
months and found the stone firmly in place. I felt defeated, abandoned. I sat on the
gravestone opposite his, staring at that nearly perfect limestone disk, praying that he
would appear. It rained. I never felt a drop.

When the rains stopped, my hair and clothes hung heavy from me. They must
have reeked of sweat and mold in the simmering days that followed, but I could not smell
them.

Incredible hunger gripped me. For weeks I ate and ate, stealing scraps from
peasants, hiding my face while gorging on tavern meals after robbing a boy of his father’s
gold. I heard that Yeshua had been seen in the desert by the disciples. I said that it was a
lie. Yet, given my insatiable hunger and thirst, and the numbness that held me captive
from the sensory world, I wondered if these rumors were true. Perhaps he did show
himself to the other disciples, those whom his father had not entrusted to perform the
hardest, most sacred task. My betrayal was just that. I was being punished. No, that could
not be. I was his most faithful servant. I was chosen.

My numbness became too much, and the endless waiting, to see him, to hear his
voice, for God to answer my prayers and tell me why I was cursed with such a state,
drove me mad. In a farmer’s field, I chewed mouthfuls of Jerusalem cherry, sucking
down its poison in hopes of ending my life. No matter how much poison I consumed, still
I lived. So, I ate, but nothing could cure the emptiness tearing at my insides. Everything
tasted the same. I could not tell if anything be on my tongue. The food dried up in the
desert inside me. Only my burning hunger remained.

Tired of waiting, needing to tell my tale to a kindred spirit, I went to Lazarus in
Bethany. In years past, my master and I had walked that treacherous road lined with hills
and valleys and rocks so sharp they cut through the thickest sandal. Its sandstorms had
claimed many men. In my former state, I could not have made the journey alone. This
time I did not have to rest or break for food or shelter. I moved through the storms and
sun like a ghost.

It had been said that after Lazarus’ rising, the young man spoke wisely.

Upon reaching him, I hid my face behind a shawl. He sat in a wicker chair outside
his sisters’ hut, white eyes staring at the purple horizon. An ever-hopeful fool, I neared
the young man, hoping to encounter that same stench as in my master’s tomb, but I could
smell nothing.

“Hail, Lazarus!” I called. “I am a weary man. Weary because I have—”

“Not yet discovered whether you are blessed or cursed,” he spat.

“Not exactly,” I mumbled, “but I seek—”

“All men seek something, traitor.”

“Traitor?!” I went to grab his shoulder, but stopped. He was bare-chested. His
skin’s grey pallor frightened me. I snorted. “You presume to know my name?”

“You presume to know mine,” he replied.

“Everyone knows Lazarus, raised from the dead by the Son of God.”

“Thank you for reminding me,” he sneered.
“Did you wish to stay in Sheol?” I asked.

“All is balance. Without is numbness.” He licked his thin, black lips, rambling,

“Names, useless. The face of one is the face of many. Glorified death is meaningless in abundant life.”


“Love,” Lazarus stated. “Softness for another,” he clenched his withered hands as if angered at something lost. “What is dead should remain so.”

“Who is that?!” The shrill cry came from behind us. Mary and Martha stood at the end of the path that led to their home, Mary with a jug of water balanced on her head, Martha with a basket of stones held to her hip. “Who’s that, brother?!” Mary hollered. Both sisters wore sweat-soaked robes, their faces dirty and raw from working in the sun. They were scraggily women, tough, vain. “You let just anyone roam around here, don’t you?!” The sisters stomped toward us.

“We are brothers,” I whispered to Lazarus. “We have returned from the dead.”

Lazarus smiled. He was missing teeth, the remaining ones brown and black. He croaked, “Yes, we are one you and I, I to answer questions, and you to ask them.

Traitor...”

“Stop that!” I hissed, glancing at the approaching women. “Please, Lazarus! Recall, I was the first to lead you from your grave.”

He shook his head. “Your hand never touched mine.”

The sisters were upon us. Lazarus, never looking in my direction, pointed at me and said, “I believe you remember Judas Iscariot.”
Mary and Martha dropped what they carried. The jug shattered. Water splashed their legs. They regarded me for a moment, faces flushed and pinched tight. Then each woman grabbed a handful of stones from Martha’s basket and began to throw them. I turned and walked away. Rocks bounced off me, most hitting my shoulders and skull. When the women ran out of stones, they cursed me in God’s name until I rounded the farthest hill and heard them no more.

Lost, I wandered the Holy Land. After many seasons, I found myself in the Potter’s Field. I sat, removed my sandals, and buried my toes in the blistering red clay. I put my head between my knees, to weep. I lacked tears. God had stolen them. I stared at the sun, wanting to go blind.

A hissing came from between my legs. Looking down, a viper flicked its tongue at me. I did not stir. It rose and struck my belly again and again. As it lunged, I caught it by the neck and held it to the sky. I wanted to grasp its tail and pull it in two. I had done so to many Romans and felt no shame. This vile creature would be no different. Instead, I tossed it aside with a sigh. A pitiful shell has no right to end existence.

In the distance, I heard the faint sounds of a stringed instrument. At the end of the field, the musician in black plucked his sitar in the sand. Wrapped in soiled robes, he sang, an awful, manic howl that leapt from the back of his throat.

I got to my feet. I blinked. He was gone. Yet, his notes still played on the wind.

Later that day, I stole rope from a nearby cottage. Heading to the lone tree at the edge of the Potter’s field, the musician in black suddenly appeared on the path ahead. His
cat-eyes glowed even in the harsh daylight. He crooked his scarred finger. “Judas,” he called.

“Go away,” I shouted, stalking toward him. “I know who you are.”

“And I know who you are, Judas, and how your god has cursed you.”

I clenched my fists.

“You expected a reward,” he said, “Do you not know your god?”

“I was chosen,” I growled.

He cackled. “Moses was also chosen, and he never saw the Promised Land.”

I swung my fist, but he disappeared. I spun and fell, kicking up a cloud of dirt.

I got to my feet and grabbed the rope. After reaching the lone tree at the edge of the field, I knotted one end of the rope around my neck and climbed to the highest branches. I wound the rope around the trunk before tying it to the branch below me.

I bounced once on the branch and leapt.

The rope snapped taut and my head jerked with a sharp crack. I wriggled at the end of the line, feet kicking. Spinning slowly around, I sighed, still alive. Suddenly, my head was yanked straight and I heard a loud pop. I was healed.

I hung there overnight, spinning in the wind. Crows pecked my flesh, but in finding that it vanished from their beaks, they flew to the treetops and eyed me curiously. Snakes gathered at my feet. Soon, the cat-eyed man appeared. He paced a tight circle around me, not speaking, glancing about as if awaiting some promised arrival. He disappeared at sunrise. As daylight washed over me, I wondered if our lives had been
reversed, if I had believed myself God’s son, would the poor Nazarene carpenter betray me in order to prove his word?

A farmer cut me down that afternoon. He was a short hunchback, his face covered in warts. He tried to help me across the field to his home, but I pushed him away.

“You should be thanking our Lord that you are unhurt,” he told me.

“I should thank Jehovah?”

Putting a finger to his lips, he shushed me. “To utter his name means death.”

“Let him try.”

“Do you not fear death?” the farmer said.

I took the frightened man by his shoulders, kissed him, and went over the eastern hills with the sun at my back.

Centuries later, at the tip of the Dark Continent, I swam to its southernmost rock and sat waiting. I asked question after question, hoping to finally be heard. It had been long enough. I deserved to know why I was cursed. I heard only crashing waves and the caw of gulls.

I dove into the sea and swam south. I swam for nearly two months, my constant strokes a faint slapping among the waves. My muscles did not tire nor did I feel the cold. One night I passed a chugging trawler. There were pale lights in the cabin windows. Smoke billowed from the stack. I heard men’s voices in the cabin. They were talking about the end of the world.
I do not know why I still feel the need to seek Yeshua, to ask God’s help. I should be done with questions. I am the answer. Still, I swam. I would sit at the edge of the world and wait, if that is what it took, until I was granted the answers I sought. And I call the disciples fools.

Finally, there it was, an iceberg towering over the raging sea. I climbed to the top, my hair, beard, and rags dripping, to a height where the howling wind drowned out the world.

By day, the sea is emerald-colored. By night, it is black. Nothing lives here. No birds weave in and out of the horizon. I am truly alone. Every day I watch the sun rise and set, but still no one receives my cries. So, I wait. When I tire of waiting, I sleep, rolling in troubled slumber, overtaken by the smell of wild olives.

Today I sit staring into this majesty, legs hanging over the icy edge. Before me is nothing but sea and sky and the sinking red globe. A sudden rumbling fills the air. Below me a sheet of ice breaks off and tumbles down the iceberg. It pierces the white crests with a thunderous splash.

It was in Zebedee’s rickety rowboat that I gave Yeshua my word. The storm lashed out at us, dark and swirling. Lightning illuminated the distant shore. Matthew cowered in the boat’s nose. Peter growled at the thunder. Thomas called to Yeshua, “We will be swallowed up! Protect us! Prove it again!”
Yeshua was knelt in prayer before the rickety mast. His shoulders slumped. He stood, soaked by the rain. Raising his arms, he shouted at the storm. “What more will it take?”

The storm yowled and snapped.

Yeshua began to step out of the boat. John snatched the end of his robe, crying, “Teacher, no!” Yeshua swatted his hand away.

I crawled across the deck and grabbed his waist. His wet hair clung to his head like a centurion’s helmet. “Let go of me, Judas.”

He stepped onto the sea and stood on the heaving waves. He glared, waiting for one of us to speak. Finally, he asked, “Is this enough?” No one answered. “Who dares follow?”

“I do!” I cried when the others remained silent.

“How far will you go?”

Yeshua’s green robes were now black. Both of us were drenched by the downpour. I stood, grasping the bucking rowboat’s side, squinting in the spray. “To the end of the world!”

I swung my legs over the side of the boat. Taking a deep breath, I stepped upon the water. The disciples cried out. For a moment, I stood on the waves face-to-face with my master. He looked terrified. Then I plunged into the cold sea. Quickly, Yeshua pulled me back onto the boat. He took me in his arms and kissed me on the lips. Lightning flashed. We huddled together, lashed by the rain, to wait out the storm.
I have kept my word for two millennia. He reveals himself to miners in coal seams and to grieving mothers on rain-slicked walls of warring cities. Children see his face in the clouds. Yet I remain alone.

I once asked him, “Body or mind, which has more value?”

He replied, “Soul.”

How right he was, for mine has been taken. It floats between the winds, taunting me with its memory. Only my constant hunger reminds me of what it is to be human.

While the Romans put our brethren to the sword, I sobbed in a Sicilian cave for him to see me. While he revealed himself to a murderous Jew and built a church upon one of my killers, I remained abandoned. Bashing my head against the cave walls, I screamed damnation at God.

Then, one day, I fled my cave. If he would not come to me, I would find him. And if he had buried himself where he could not be found, I would see this world and nothing more.

I have watched sunrises from atop the Himalayas. I have crossed deserts, the sand smoking and popping about me. I have swum oceans, run my hands along rough sides of beasts born long ago, monsters from another age. I have slept in the topmost branches of the Northwest’s wooden towers. I have let all rains shower me, yet I have never felt a drop. I have lain with many women, and never once felt orgasmic pleasure, or been touched by love.

For a time, I stayed deep in the jungles of the New World, hidden in caves no man has ever seen. I explored the bowels of the Earth and never found Hell. On savannahs I
watched elephants and lions band together to protect their young from jackals and drive them across the plain. There, in a world without man’s condemnation or God’s prying, I briefly found peace.

But the world’s beauty made my betrayal that much more traitorous and my damned existence that much more deserving. I did not love what I found, not the land, not its animals, not even the constancy of the heavens. It was magnificent how beautifully life and death was measured by time, but this magnificence stirred nothing inside me except that infernal hunger.

For many centuries, I thought I deserved this damnation. I threw myself to lions, but they only circled me, growling. Poisons did not kill me nor did sharpened steel. No number of bullets could cut me down. I once threw myself into a volcano, but I only bobbed in the lava. After lifetimes steeped in death, of walking roadsides lined with the crucified, of paddling past muddy banks piled with babies baptized in blood, of trekking through barbarian snow while covered in the ashes of our people, I no longer understand my purpose. The black and white of my time turns grey evermore. I am so uncertain and I doubt my uncertainty.

Time, like God, is so unkind.

He once said: “Be ready, for you know not when we shall cross paths.”

I have been ready for two thousand years. A day does not pass when I do not wish to see him. A night does not pass when his screams do not fill the air.

Closing my eyes, I kneel at the edge of this iceberg and ask, “Will you hear me? What can I say, what can I do, to draw forth your voice?” I expect tears to come, but as
always, they do not. I rage inside my numb, hollow shell. I only want to feel, even if it be pain!

Suddenly, a hissing comes from beside me.

The cat-eyed man asks, “How long will you wait?”

The sun dips over the edge of the world. The cat-eyed man is a shadow but for his eyes, two raging flames that never provide warmth. He grins, awaiting my answer.