The Origins of a Circle is a collection of short stories almost entirely interconnected by a first person narrator, Christopher Saxton. The primary focus of this compilation is the relationship between the narrator and his father, a seafood salesman who deals with his life, as well as his illness, though silence, adultery, and alcoholism. With these stories, I attempt to examine the often problematic, circular courses of behavioral characteristics, such as inclinations toward absence and silence that pass from one generation to the next. By putting characters in situations where they must choose to speak or choose to stay silent and by primarily using first person narration, I seek to show how these decisions are sometimes made. I have chosen to focus on the notion of how passive-aggressiveness can be used within familial relationships as a means of both cruelty and survival.
THE ORIGINS OF A CIRCLE

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by

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This thesis is dedicated to Jennifer Smith.
Buddy

The first time I heard the song “Guitars and Cadillacs” by Dwight Yoakam, I was nine years old and standing in the back of my father’s new Dodge Utility van, heading from Panama City back to Fort Worth, Texas. Buddy sat beside me, duct-taped into a La-Z-Boy that my father and I had set in there just before we left Florida. The tape was triple-layered around my grandfather’s ankles, stomach, and arms, but he could still snap his fingers and shake his white hair. Buddy’s lanky frame would not be stopped from pushing the chair back and forth, and between the gulps of watered-down High-Life, he assured whoever was listening of his plans to rock ua all ashore. He was beginning the slow declension from a three week bender. My father and I were rescuing him.

Still, he sang on.

As I lifted the golden tallboy to his lips, trails of the beer dribbled down his chin in lines onto his short sleeve button down. Through all of the liquid, I could make out the tank top undershirt beneath. I stamped my feet, strummed an invisible air guitar, and shook my head with my grandpa, howling: *Guitars and cadillacs/ And hillbilly music/ Are all I need to keep me hanging on.*

And so we drove like that. Whenever Buddy finished one beer and waved me back to the front of the van, he rolled his finger in little circles, signaling for me to flip the cassette back to the beginning of the hillbilly music. I stumbled to the front, trying to maintain my balance, and leaned over my father’s captain’s chair breathing heavy.

You boys doing all right back there? my father asked, taking a pull from his own can of Schlitz.

Yes, Sir, I said. Grandpa needs another beer, though.

I reached down into the styrofoam cooler that my father had stocked with beer while at a convenient store in Florida. Balancing myself between the two seats with my elbows, I flicked ice off of the top, then popped the can open. I handed the can to my father, and he guzzled down half of it. Then, he handed it back to me so I could dip a
plastic cup in the ice water and pour its contents through the small hole of the can. I did this until it was just about full, then placed the lid back down on the cooler. I looked up to see the road dark in front of us, trees, signs for rest-stops, the Peterbuilt and Mack trucks that we’d soon pass, then the speedometer, usually reading around eighty.

I’d look at the CB he kept on the dashboard next to his soft pack of Merit 100’s. Got any truckers on the horn? I’d ask. My father’s call name was Road Toad, and I was known as Tadpole.

No, Sir, he said. I’ll let you know when I do, though. I think I hear your grandpa calling for you back there.

And sure enough, Buddy always piped up. He said, Chris, you got my cold beer? Where’s my hillbilly?

I pushed the rewind button on the cassette deck. My father shook his head, smiled, and stared down the road. Make sure his tape is all down, he said, and make sure he doesn’t pee on the seat. If Buddy says he’s gotta go, well then hand him the piss jug.

Ten Four, Road Toad.

Over and out, Tadpole.

By the time I’d gotten back to Buddy and the La-Z-Boy, the deep chords and drumbeat of Dwight Yoakam’s song had started rolling again. The shock of the speakers sent vibrations through me, got my knees to shaking. I was working on my own routine of hip gyrations, toe-turning, and running the course of some stage where I could play every instrument at its most vital part, whether guitar or drums. But I was always singing, either for my father who had pulled me out of school on Friday after telling the teacher that it was a family emergency, then driving me out to Panama City without telling my mother, the grandfather whom I had just met the day before when we found him passed out on the couch of his riverhouse, or the car behind us with its lights flooding in through the two square windows in the back of the van, blazing me up like a nine-year-old star.

Up to then, Buddy’s name had never been mentioned to me.

My father, Eu Saxton, owned a small seafood store named Saxton’s Fish and Shrimp, located off of Old Mansfield Highway in Kennedale, Texas. It sat across the street from J&J’s Flea Market on a corner next door to Danny’s Rib and Brisquet. My
father had just printed up his first set of business cards, bearing the store’s name, the ink sketch of a shrimp, and the phone number below **Call for Catering.** Business was picking up. Only weeks earlier he had bought the van with the idea that he could hire weekend help to sell shrimp from it on the side of the road next to other flea markets and produce stands. It was Eu’s first step toward business expansion, and for my family, these were happier and more prosperous times.

I’m not sure whether or not it came as a shock when my father got the call that Friday morning from a worried friend of Buddy’s in Panama City, saying that Buddy was two steps short of the deep end. The caller explained that weeks earlier a close friend of Buddy’s had died, then soon afterward Buddy was diagnosed with chronic bronchitis and ordered to settle down from his rambunctious ways. He was allowed by one of the family to take up residency in their Florida riverhouse. Without hesitating, my father packed up his van, stuck a fluorescent orange **CLOSED** sign in the window of his store, then came to pull me out of James A. Arthur Elementary to keep him company on the fifteen hour drive. He must have sensed Buddy well enough to figure that it would only be a short matter of time before he drank himself to the point where lung conditions wouldn’t factor.

He explained this to me on the way out of the doors of James A. Arthur. I looked up at him.

Who’s Buddy? I asked.

He stopped beside the van before opening the door for me, then whipped the word grandfather out of thin air. He told me he’d explain things as we went along. I wouldn’t have known the words for it then, but my father had that twinkle of reunion in his eyes. I guess he still revered Buddy with the blind dedication that most men maintain for their complicated fathers.

I asked him to tell me something about my grandfather.

What do you want to know? he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. Anything.

Eu reached to turn the volume of the radio down. I guess I can start with the beginning, he said. I never actually met Buddy until I was about your age. Up until then, he was doing time in a Georgia prison for writing hot checks in several different states.
My mother took me the day that he got out, and we stood there just outside of the prison gates, waiting for him to finally show. After a while, my mother told me to straighten up, that my father was making his way out of the gates. I look up and there he is, dressed in this tan suit with his hair all slicked back. You know the first thing he said to me? He stuck out his hand and said, You’ll call me Buddy. None of this dad or daddy bullshit. Now take your hands out of your pockets. You look like some vagrant.

Even then, my father and I were on a first name basis and had been for as long as I could remember.

Later, I asked why he and Buddy hadn’t talked for so long. Eu thought for a second, then answered, staring pensively through the windshield, that he knew why but didn’t. Your grandfather once also told me this, he explained. Disappointment is something that goes hand-in-hand. He said, We all let down the ones we love time and again, and at times, they will fail us in return. I guess those disappointments got to be too much.

I turned back in my seat and tried to see what he was looking at. Nothing but road.

The way that Eu saw it, he was done being disappointed with Buddy and would fail as a son should he let the man die like that.

Then Eu slapped the steering wheel.

What? I yelled.

I forgot to call your mother, he said.

He took the next exit and pulled into a gas station. As I waited in the van, he walked over to a payphone. While he talked into the receiver, he stuck a finger in his free ear, then turned away from me. Once he was done, he came back to the van and asked if there was anything I wanted from inside.

Maybe a Coke, I said.

He walked into the store, then came back out with a styrophoam cooler, a bag of ice, and some beer. He handed me the soda and a pair of oversized mirrored sunglasses.

What’s this? I asked him.

He slipped his own sunglasses on, then turned the ignition, and revved up the engine. Your mother wants for you to see this as a vacation, he said.
I was asleep by the time we arrived at the riverhouse, but I vaguely remember my father nudging me. He whispered, Hey, we’re here.

The riverhouse was more of a trailer, and it was dark outside. The front doorway to the house was already open and a slice of yellow light shown through it. I could hear crickets creaking, a river running softly behind the house. I rolled out of the chair and landed on my feet. My father held me by the shoulders.

Where’s Buddy? I asked, trying to adjust my eyes. I put him to bed already.

Oh, I said. I started to trudge my way for the front door, but my father guided me around the side, then up a small staircase. My eyes were blurry, but I could still make out the drooping trees and running river. I remember smiling.

Your room is just to the right, my father said, and as I went through the back door, I could make out a house full of beer cans on the floor, counters, and tabletops. Cigarette butts were everywhere around, burned into the carpet, couch, and chairs. It smelled sour, like mildew. My eyes went huge, but my father quickly wheeled me around by the shoulders, guiding me into the back bedroom where it was dark again.

He closed the door behind him and kneeled in front of me. I want you to try and get some sleep now, he said. I have to straighten some things up here and then I’ll be in too. We’ve got another long day ahead of us tomorrow.

But what about the river? I said.

We’ll see about that in the morning, he said. Then, Eu pulled up the blankets, told me to take off my shoes, and helped me into the large, firm bed.

Is Buddy all right? I asked, pulling up the covers.

He cracked the door, then turned around. He leaned over and kissed my forehead softly. Just try and get some sleep, he said.

I woke up once while it was blue outside. All of the windows of the riverhouse were open, the cigarette butts and beer cans were gone, and the air carried the slightest scent of pine cleaner. I looked out of one of the living room windows onto the back porch and the river running behind it. The water looked and sounded too big for me to do
anything with it. I tip-toed through the living room and dining area to the closed door on the other side of the house. I pushed it open slowly and looked inside.

What I assumed to be the figure of my grandfather, turned on his side in the center of a four-post bed, snored beneath the blankets. On the floor beside the bed, my father slept, still wearing his boots and using his arm for a pillow. For a moment, I considered lying down beside him or else bringing him one of the blankets from my bed. Something told me I shouldn’t. Instead, I quickly walked back to my room and hoped that we would just get up and go.

In the morning, I saw my father outside smoking a cigarette next to the open van. There was a large, tan chair sitting by the side doors, and I could tell he was trying to figure out a way to get the large piece of furniture into the vehicle. I went to the bedroom to put on my shoes, then went back outside. Without a word, we each grabbed one side apiece and lifted the La-Z-Boy into the van.

I take it this is for me, I said.

Nope, my father said. He climbed in and pushed the chair more towards the center of the ridged, metal floor. He went to the driver’s seat, positioned himself, then leaned over to his right and looked behind. He said, That should be far enough back. Then, he worked his mirror around for a second. After everything was set, he stepped back out and said, This chair is for Buddy.

I followed him back inside the house, into Buddy’s bedroom. Buddy was still asleep. The clock on his nightstand read 7:10. My father handed me a large, heavy overnight bag and a smaller one that smelled like shaving soap and aftershave. He put a finger to his lips and directed me back outside of the bedroom. He nudged me along through the front door and back out to the van. I looked behind me and he was carrying a large brown leather suitcase. We threw them into the van in front of the chair.

We stepped back together. This looks all right, he said. Now, follow me.

Instead of going straight back into the house, Eu took me to the back along the side of it. There were two wooden lawn chairs set up on the porch. He pointed me to one of them. He said, Have a seat.

He sat down opposite me and lit another cigarette. He squinted and looked over the land, trees, and river. He said, First, I want to apologize for the fact that we can’t stay
longer. My father and I used to catch some good catfish right out there on that river. Someday soon, I’d like to bring you back out here. But right now, we’ve got some business to take care of. What we’re going to do isn’t going to be pretty. In fact, in most states, it’s illegal. But my father—your grandfather, Buddy—is very sick right now, and the only way to help him is to get him back to Texas. Are you keeping with me?

Yes, Sir, I nodded.

And the only way that we’re going to get him back is to make sure that he stays put in that chair and doesn’t do anything to put either of us in danger.

Like what? I asked.

My father shrugged, flicked ash between his feet. He said, For one, he could steer us right off the road.

No, I mean how? I said. I meant to say how? How do we make sure that he stays in the chair?

My father looked up at me. Well, that’s what I am about to tell you. I just need to make sure that you are okay with this.

I told him that whatever it was, I’d be okay with it.

When Buddy woke up later that afternoon, screaming, Goddamit Eugene, you cut me loose from this fucker! my father didn’t flinch. He yelled over his shoulder, You stay put where you are!

I was sitting in the front of the van beside my father, holding the CB. When Buddy’s shouts hit me, I went rigid with fear. We may as well have had some violent animal back there, chained into the corner, snarling to be cut free.

Where the fuck are you taking me?

I’m taking you home to Texas, Dad.

The fuck you are. Turn this goddam tugboat around.

My father reached down between the seats and pulled a dripping tallboy from the bottom of the cooler. He handed it to me.

You want a beer? Eu yelled back at Buddy.

I can’t breathe! Buddy hollered.
I could hear the chair thumping back and forth. I wanted to look back but was too afraid. Buddy told my father to give him a cigarette.

No can do, my father told him. Doctor’s orders.

I don’t know what doctor you’ve been consorting with, Buddy said, but this shit isn’t right.

My father placed a maroon inhaler between my fingers. Go give him this, he said, pointing to the hole at the bottom of the little cylinder. Hold it up to his mouth, then push down on the top. Eu clamped his hand together so the mist came out. It’s to help his lungs, he said.

I glared at my father. For a second, I thought that he was holding back a grin. He might have thought that I was in on his joke, but one look at my face must have told him otherwise. I sat firm in the chair. I wasn’t going near that man.

I mean this, Chris, he said. Your grandpa won’t hurt you.

I walked back to Buddy with the inhaler in one hand, a tallboy in the other. One like a weapon, the other a shield. Buddy looked up at me with fierce, blue eyes. Stringy, white hair lopped down along his brow. He was sweating like crazy. He shook his head and said, You get that shit away from me.

I stood my ground.

Then, he looked me up and down. He said, Man, who in the fuck are you, anyway?

I wasn’t used to the language that Buddy was using. Not so regularly, anyway. But I did know to obey my elders. Now that he was awake and speaking, it didn’t seem right that he be tied up like that. His fingers were trembling. He was heaving for air. I didn’t want him hemorrhaging like my father said he might or having a heart attack right there in the van. At that moment, the inhaler seemed to be the only thing bridging the gap between my grandfather’s life and death. Buddy must have sensed some sort of frailty in me because he softened his face.

Please, he said. You know this isn’t right.

In a fit of frustration, I started to reach for one of the tape ends.

Don’t do it, Eu said. He had tilted the rearview mirror, and I could see him glaring back in it. Remember what I told you, Chris.
Buddy hardened back up when he glared at my father. He shook his head, resigned and disappointed. He looked at his bound arms and legs, then sighed, Ahh, man. He started to cough. You gotta shake it up, he said, or else it’s no good.

I shook the canister, then put it to his lips, and pushed down on the metal top. His chest sunk in, he held his breath for a moment, then let out a small white puff of thin air. He kept coughing, trying to pull his fist up to his mouth. He pointed to the beer in my hand. Give that here, he said.

I put it to his lips as he eased back his head. His throat pumped up and down. I was amazed that he could guzzle so much without a single drop escaping. But that would change soon enough.

I’m sure that I had seen my father drunk before, but he wasn’t the type to swagger, swear, or get violent. Beer seemed to be a part of his hand, like the digital Timex or horseshoe ring. There were always white and maroon cans of Schlitz in the bottom of our refrigerator at home, in the cooler at the back of his seafood store, and in the styrofoam box that he kept by his driver’s seat. There was always a can within reaching distance. He drank it the same way that some people sip water or iced tea all day.

Buddy couldn’t get enough of it into his stomach, and quickly. He told me to keep them coming, and I did. By the time the sun set over the Dodge’s dashboard, he had taken in close to five cans of High-Life and a more cheerful, if not acquiescent, disposition. By that time our introductions were out of the way. As much as I would have rather sat up front with my father, there was no way to balance out time between the two of them as long as I was handling Buddy’s beer supply.

I guess because I was there and just someone to talk to, Buddy started telling me stories—pretty much half-truths, my father would later tell me—about when my father was growing up.

Ahh, sure, Buddy said, waving his arm around. Your daddy and I would go fishing all the time. I used to have to drag him out there, though. Eu will say I’m full of shit about this, but he was scared to death of fish. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. He could reel them in and get them up to me, but when it came time to yanking the hooks out their mouths, he
was nothing doing. I’ll be damned if he wouldn’t let the fish thrash around for air until it finally stopped flipping. Cruel bastard.

I looked up at my father sitting in the driver’s seat. His shoulders were broad, arms as round as my legs. At his store, I had seen him line up everything from catfish to flounders to shark on his large wooden cutting board, then chop off their heads and gut them in clean slices with his butcher’s knife. When I was much younger and still sucking my thumb, he once told me to stick my hand out over one of the wax crates full of fish so that he could use that knife to resolve my bad habit.

My dad was scared of fish? I said.

When he was your age, Buddy said, Eu was scared to even put his hands in with the minnows. Used to make me do it.

I knew the feeling. These bait were wiry and fast.
He used to say that he liked to fish with chicken guts better.
I knew the truth in that.
But that’s too expensive. Dries out if you aren’t careful.
I had heard this line time and time again, but either way, I was still scared to death of the slivery fish.

Buddy’s stories went on. He told me about the time he caught my own father, when he was sixteen years old, in a stolen car.

I balanced myself up against the chair and looked at Eu. I didn’t know that, I said.

There I was at a stoplight, Buddy said. And who do I look over to see, but that man up there in a brand new Corvette. I yelled at him, Eu, I said, you take that fucking automobile back where you got it. But there was nothing doing. He ducked his head, laughing with one of his buddies, then peeled through the red light headed for the state border. Over there, he knew of another fella that would sell the car off. You ask him sometime what he did with the money.

So I did the next time I went to get a beer for Buddy.

I bought him a brand new Buick, Eu said.

I walked back to Buddy, shaking my head. I asked Buddy about the Buick.
Piece of shit leaked oil like it was pissing, Buddy said. My guess is he stole that one too. Probably off of some poor, old woman. But I tell you one thing. You’re daddy sure was a shit-job con man.

My father gripped the wheel and edged around in his chair.

Say, did your daddy ever tell you about when he first met me?

Yes, sir, I said proudly. Coming out Georgia State after serving seven years for making the FBI list. That’s when you told him to call you by your first name.

Because that’s how real men address each other, he said.

And that’s why I call my dad Eu, I said.

Buddy rocked his chair a second, then eyed me impishly. Did he ever tell you about when he got into the racket?

Hey, Buddy, Eu said. I don’t it’s time for that.

Buddy waved Eu off then went on to tell me about how my father was later involved with the check schemes. His job, at first, was to drive the car. Buddy’s job was to drink Dickle straight from the bottle and cash his home made rubber paychecks at grocery stores. He wore an old hardhat and overalls, layered with the smell from having rolled around in a garbage dump. Eventually my father started doing the talking on the jobs himself. Just after he met my mother, Eu and Buddy were arrested. Buddy stayed in jail while Eu got off because of his clean record.

It’s not clean anymore, Eu said.

As we drove on, I kept thinking about what I ‘d learned. Up to then, I’d always thought of my father as the person that I knew—a seafood salesman. In a way, I felt like I had been cheated on some life that my father had lead before me. Not cheated in a bad sense, really, but I was starting to feel envious of their gangster-like criminal pasts. I began to see myself in their shoes, swaying people to believe whatever I wanted them to. It seemed like something out of Return of the Jedi, only this applied to real life.

Finally, we pulled over at a convenient store. It was around 8 p.m. and we were long overdue. The fluorescent lights hanging over the gas pumps lit up the dashboard and the front of the van. My grandfather was still trying to tell more stories, but his words were growing less and less comprehensible. He told my father to pick up more High-Life.
Eu suggested that I get out and stretch my legs. He needed to call my mother to say we’d be home soon. I asked him where we were.

Shreveport, he said.

Before heading towards the phone, he started filling up the gas tank, setting the nozzle in so that it would run on automatic.

I walked around on the pavement, stretching my arms and legs. In the dark, Louisiana looked like any other place. The air smelled like oil. I should have been tired, but the excitement was too much. My father said that while he called Mom, I should take the empty styrofoam cooler out of the van and dump the old ice by the side of the store. I went through the side doors, passed my grandfather, cleared the bags out of the way, and started to carry out the cooler. I looked into the store just then and saw an older woman with fading brown curls standing behind the counter. She was looking outside at us, talking on the phone. She started nodding her head quickly, then turned around. I jumped out of the van and turned to see what she was looking at.

I slammed the doors shut, set the cooler down, then walked over to my father. I pulled on his shirt. I said, Hey, we’ve got to go.

He was cradling the receiver on his shoulder. He said, Hold on a second. Eu held the phone against his chest and asked, What’s wrong?

The woman at the counter, I said. She was looking in the van when I was taking out the cooler. She must have seen Buddy taped down to the chair. She just made a phone call. I think that she’s calling the police or somebody.

Eu pulled his lips to the side and picked up the phone. He said, Hey, I’ve got to go.

He asked me to repeat what I saw, and I told him.

Probably it’s nothing, he said. You’ve been through a lot today. Just over-excited. He walked back to the van, replaced the gas nozzle.

I followed him into the store. The lights were so bright, I had to shield my eyes. The woman stood with her back to the opposite counter, looking as though she might bolt at any second. She kept eyeing the van, the register, and then us. Over and over. Eu strolled up to the counter, took a pack of chewing gum off of a small stand, and set it in
front of him. The cashier jumped when he reached for his wallet. When he pulled out a twenty, she sighed heavily, holding her hand to her chest. She stood there, assessing us.

Well, Eu said. How much does all this come to?

She stepped forward and rang up the order on her machine. Her fingers were trembling. She kept glancing at the door.

Eu slid the twenty forward. She picked it up and made him change quickly, slapping coins and bills out of the register. Once she finished, she stepped back.

As we walked out of the door, Eu picked up his pace a little.

Shit, he said. Dammit.

We got into the van. He turned the engine over, looked back at Buddy. My grandfather sat up. Where’s my goddamn beer? he asked.

I felt relief as we started out of the parking lot. The fluorescent lights slipped over the dashboard and darkness started to fill up the van. I smiled at my father, then I smiled back at Buddy. Through the rear windows, I saw the squad car behind us. Its blue and red lights came on. My father pulled the van over.

My first reaction was to jump in the back and start undoing my grandfather’s tape, but I knew that the cop would see me through the windows. I asked, What should we do?

Just sit tight, Eu said, sliding a stick of gum into his mouth. I’ll do all the talking.

The officer came up to the window shining a huge black flashlight. He looked to be my father’s age. He asked, How you folks doing?.

My father and I said, Fine.

He asked my father for his license and registration, then shined the flashlight into the car, spotting me, then my father as he pulled out his wallet. Of course, he held the light on Buddy for a moment, directing the light on to Buddy’s face. Because his hands were strapped down, he couldn’t cover his eyes. I half expected Buddy to ask what the hell was going on, then tell the police officer that he had been kidnapped, that he wanted to go home this fucking instant.

Instead, he sat there calmly. Buddy asked, Is there a problem?

The officer beamed the light back on my father’s license. He said, Aside from this van smelling like a brewery? Mr. Saxton, he said, would you mind stepping out of the car?
Eu shrugged and popped the door open then climbed out the driver’s side. They walked to the back of the van. Their silhouettes shown in the rear window, the officer running my father through tests. Eu stood on one leg for about a minute, then I watched as he extended his right arm completely then reeled it back in. All the while my heart was pounding. I wondered if the officer would make me drive the van. After a few minutes they came back to the truck and Eu sat in the seat with his knees pointing outside.

The officer stood in front of him. He asked, What is your relation to the man in the back?

He’s my father, Eu said.

Buddy yelled out, What’s the hold up?

And why is he bound to the chair like that?

It’s a game, Buddy yelled. The young ‘un here is an idiot for Indians. He just got a little bit wild with the tape, is all. Show him, Christopher. Show him and let’s get back on the road.

I turned to glance at him.

Well, get back here.

I looked at my father. He tilted his head back. Go show the man, he said.

I climbed out of the chair and went to stand by my grandfather. Buddy yelled out, Oh, please! Mohawk man! Don’t hurt me!

I thought of every Indian show I’d ever seen, where they ran around tee-pees and fought with cowboys. I pretended to be wearing moccasins and a heavy headdress. I padded my feet as if running in place, then lifted my chin up and down. I held my hand out in front of my mouth, then moved it back and forth. Woo-woo-woo-woo/Woo-woo-woo-woo.

Buddy yelled out again, Somebody. Save me!

I was trying not to laugh as I circled my grandfather. The floor started bouncing around beneath my feet. The officer took the light off of Buddy and started following me as I ran around the van. After a while, I was really getting into it.

Okay, okay, the police officer said. I just don’t think that duct tape is totally necessary.
That’s what I tried to tell him, Buddy said, but the kid’s so damn spoiled. Once he gets an idea in his head, it’s either his way or the highway. I agreed to one layer, but then he kept right at it.

The officer looked me over. You should learn to treat your granddaddy better, he said.

They all turned to face me. I thought for a second. I snapped my fingers, scuffed my foot, and said, I was just having fun is all.

Fun or no, the man said, It’s pure consideration.

Well, there wasn’t a report of any traffic violation, he said. You guys make sure to drive safe, okay?

The officer stared at my father until Eu nodded back at him. He handed my father’s license and registration back to him, then went back to his car. Once the lights stopped turning, Eu started the van. Buddy told me to keep playing Indian like crazy until we were out of the police officer’s sight. He turned his chair around, and we watched out of the rear window until the squad car made a U-turn and headed the other direction.

Buddy shook his head. Sucker. He pushed himself back around to face my father. Next truck stop you come to, don’t forget my High-Life.

At the next truck stop that my father pulled into, he bought them both beer and a Cherry Coke for me. He came back out to the van and unwrapped a cassette tape. He was tired of fiddling around with the radio, he said. Something about the song must have struck the right chord in Buddy. He was the first to start singing along with Dwight Yoakam, and then I joined in. Eventually, it was all that he wanted to hear. He said, Christopher, you always remember this song. Remember how little you need to get by in life.

I let Buddy try on my sunglasses at one point. We were all in a good mood, having just escaped the law. For Buddy and my father, this was old hat. But for me, it was the first con of my life. I felt out of place in the van without the sunglasses on because they’d become a part of my routine. But Buddy wanted to give them what he
called a whirl. I thought that they looked funny against his bony face and big ears, but with his big, toothy smile, he seemed to have a good time.
Highwater

Highwater was this kid I knew who used to get run over. In the fourth grade, he walked out in front of a station wagon while crossing Dunbar Lane on his way home from school. In the fifth grade he got dragged twenty-four feet down the very same street underneath my yellow school bus. Highwater got his nickname the first day he stepped into Ms. Graylock’s room at Woodhill Elementary wearing a tight red Polo and faded Wranglers that suspended at least three inches above his white-walled Swooshes. She didn’t even get a chance to introduce this trembling kid by his real name before Stevie Ruttiles pointed at the new kid’s tube sock covered ankles and yelled out, Damn, check out his shit fadin’!

We all laughed and Ms. Graylock snapped right back at Stevie. She said, Look at you. Idiot. Supposed to be in sixth grade and yelling in my classroom as if at your dinner table.

Either Isabelle or Candice whispered about Stevie, His momma’d feel ashamed if she gave a damn.

Everyone laughed again and Stevie sat back in his chair and looked around with that same dumb grin. Most times whenever a new kid came to class, Ms. Graylock had him say something or other about himself. But not Highwater. I guess she knew, being who she was, that it’s best sometimes to just get on with it. She pointed to his desk at the back of the room with her long pink fingernail. He stepped forward carrying a Dukes of Hazzard lunchbox in one hand, brand new reader clutched in the other. He was luckier than I’d been on my first day or else his book would have been smacked to the floor in seconds. But no one wanted to test Ms. Graylock any further. As he passed by my desk I could see the muscles in his jaw rippling back and forth, his pale neck and cheeks splotching with red. I knew what was running through his mind.
He was thinking, Not for long. Not me. Soon enough, I’ll be back at my old school with my friends. Highwater had a nickname. Time would hardly pass before someone like Stevie, Roberto, or Chance would corner Highwater in the boy’s room, recess field, or beside the chain link fence just off school property. They’d twist Highwater’s arm to where his fingers touched his shoulder blades. They’d tell him to sing his favorite song by Elvis, force a coughed confession that his family lined danced to honky tonk on Fridays. And he’d hone up to the fact that only pussies wear the chili bowl haircuts their momma and daddy give them in the kitchen on Sunday nights while listening to the radio. But Highwater managed to escape all that when he stepped out in front of Mrs. Simpsons’ yellow Plymouth. All that he got away with was the nickname.

Nope. If we’d have known that first day what would happen four days later—or even better, the next year, how not once but twice he turned from a skinny pale kid with shaggy brown hair into a flesh colored blur between two wheels of a vehicle, getting dragged down the street on his back until catching his shoulders in the dip that intersected Dunbar and Palmer, bouncing him off the pavement as though the blacktop was stretched nylon leaving him a stretched arch in the intersection for everyone to blink at and remember like still footage between four stop signs, beside a crossing guard dressed in a Day-Glo vest, a whistle in her mouth and a flat-palmed hand waving forward with its wrist, signaling to us it was safe to now cross the street—we probably would have called Highwater something entirely different.
Say her name, Sarah, and I see her thin face and frame as though I’m looking at an old cut up Polaroid. It’s heat warped from having been placed in the picture-filled bottom dresser drawer in my parents’ bedroom. She is one of many snapshots in that box of lonesome tired pictures of people who never actually met in their lives, but are now face to face, elbow to elbow in the dark, until finally they are taken out and spread on the carpet by my knees, waiting to be collaged until they are. The image that I’m stretching for first would be pie shaped with Sarah in it all long legged, bony kneed, bony shouldered, dirty blond and what some might call scrawny like trash or else waif-thin like a supermodel. In this one picture she is a slice of herself, back to me with her bumpy spine underneath her black shirt. Throughout the years before I had done without, but Sarah’d done without more of the macaroni and cheese, grilled cheese, spaghetti; all of the things that I can shyly shrug off a foods that we could afford at the time, things that Sarah, I know now, would gladly have swallowed whole after reaching for my mother’s and then for mine.

In the slice of door Sarah sits cross-legged, thin with a small behind and arms big as mine although she is eight years older. Her hair hangs down in greasy strands across her back with no volume to it, but her voice is this immensely soft thing that carries all over the bathroom, pinches through the inch of space of doorway she’s left open so the single phone in the house can reach inside.

She’s singing into the phone, No No No No, like a long, sighing Oh with little n’s cut in. I cannot see her face or eyes, but only the shoulders that stretch and fall around her neck as she rocks back and forth on the creaky linoleum.

I want on the phone. I am eleven years old and want to be on the giving end of Sarah’s line, singing Yes, yes, yes, yes so to hush her cries. But the voice on the other end is unclear where I cannot listen but only hear his barking voice at times. Sarah was so
thin, so small, so unlike my mother whose voice smelled like cigarettes in a whisper when she pinched my shoulder and wheeled me around so I could face her. She’d say to me: Chris, you cut this out now.

Sarah came to our house the prior Saturday night. My parents had slipped out to the bar called Tideflats where they’d dance and play pool on weekend nights, leaving me home alone with a number taped to the refrigerator where I could reach them, a microwavable fried chicken Hungryman in the freezer, and a night free to watch whatever television I wanted which was always, on Saturdays, The Love Boat followed by Fantasy Island. We didn’t have cable. They needn’t worry about that. So far as other mischief goes, I’d done most of the things a kid can do by that age to get his ass torn up when his parents came home—things like emptying a can of carpet cleaner behind the stove just so I could watch the white foam expand or blowing up whole tomatoes in the microwave—so basically I was a kid to be trusted, a kid without a curfew who crawled into bed whenever he grew tired, which was usually when the ten o’clock news came on.

The Saturday that Sarah arrived, I sat straight up in bed to the sound of someone pounding on the front door of my house, screaming her name, which I’d never heard before. Sarah, that voice said, get your scrawny ass out here!

I separated the curtain from the left edge of the window, keeping my face down beneath the windowsill. From this vantage I could make out most of the cement porch that wrapped like an L around the front of our house. The overhanging roof was supported by square columns of four-by-four inch posts. Around these supports wrapped green and white twines of honeysuckle plants. Corey paced back and forth between two of the columns, his boots making shuffle sounds along the concrete. Sometimes he would expand the pace by walking down the two front steps of the porch, onto our gravel driveway. Then he would lean back and cup his hands around his mouth and yell her name again.

My father was out there as well, dressed in his straw cowboy hat, faded boot-cut jeans, and a button down shirt. He wore a belt that had his name, Eu, branded in letters across the back. Dammit, Corey, my father. You need to cool off. My boy’s asleep inside.
My landlady’s next door. She’s sixty-eight years old. I don’t need her calling the police with you drunk like this. I don’t need the trouble for me and my family.

Corey being only a name to me then. He was a friend of my father’s with whom he sometimes paired up for pool competitions at the bar they’d just come from. Still, Corey yelled on. You bitch, he muttered, pointing a finger at the front window of the house. It was lit up yellow from the light inside. My father remained posted in the shadows of the porch beside the steps, ready to spring if Corey made for the front door.

Everything was bright like a light bulb flash in the dark as I walked into the living room. Rubbing my eyes, I B-lined toward the kitchen as if I’d innocently arisen for some milk or water unaware of all the commotion. It was the first time I’d seen Sarah. She sat on the edge of the couch crying, holding a blood stained paper towel to the corner of her mouth and a sandwich bag full of ice at her eye. My mother sat beside her, dressed in the black slacks and blouse she’d worn out that night. Both of them were rocking back and forth. My mother rubbed Sarah’s back. She said, Shhh, shh, honey. It’ll be all right.

Through the window I could see my father had moved up to the door. I guessed Corey had made his move. Eu held the slightly smaller man by his shoulders, asked him to settle down and let him drive Corey home where he could sleep this off. Tomorrow morning they could all discuss this with clear heads. Sarah’d turned to look at me while I walked past. I made sure not to seem as if I’d detected her blue eye, the way color spread like a storm out across her face.

What happened? I asked my mother, motioning toward the men outside.

It’s got nothing to do with you, Chris. Go back to bed.

I stood there waiting.

Just a fight, my mother said. A little scuffle at the bar tonight. Get what you need then go back to bed.

The man yelled Sarah’s name again, loud enough to rattle the windows in their loose panes. Sarah shook even harder.

I’m sorry, he yelled, arms spread and voice straining. Baby, please don’t do this. I’m sorry. I said I’m sorry.

Fuck you, she yelled, cutting into his sorry’s. Fuck, fuck you.
Again the man tried to push past Eu. You’re just as much to blame, Corey said to my father. I’ve seen how you look at her. Shit like that makes her think that she can pull this. Shaking her ass all over.

My father turned and his eyes leveled with mine. All right, he said to Corey. I think we’ve had enough of this. He clutched Corey’s shirt collar then walked the man backwards off the porch. Sarah turned to face the window.

Honey, my mother looked at me. Turn off the porchlight.

I crossed the living room toward the window and in the yard I saw the outline of my father holding a sprawled out Corey with one hand, using the other to pop him in the face. I knew there was nothing I could do, not that I wanted to. I’d been in plenty of fights with other kids at my new school and was glad to see someone like Corey take a beating, considering what he’d obviously done. It did shock me to see my father like that, like a distant movie star in the dim light of our yard slowly drawing his fist back, aiming, then throwing it forward. I flipped down the switch and their figures disappeared. I started back toward my bedroom and as I passed them I heard my mother say to Sarah, Eu is just going to cool Corey off then take him home.

Then everything was just as quiet as before. The headlights from my father’s truck shone through my bedroom as the two men, I supposed, drove away and back to Corey’s.

The next morning I woke up and Sarah was asleep in my bed beside me, smelling like a flower turned inside out. Her hair was tucked behind her ears and she was still wearing the denim jacket she had on the night before. Her hands were tucked into the sleeves and her chewed fingernails curled around their faded cuffs. She looked like a girl to me. I scooted down to the foot of the bed and slowly pushed myself up, trying not to disturb her. Sarah’s eyes popped open then darted back and forth until finally they settled on me. The corner of her eye was crowded with varying shades of light pinks and purples. She sat up quickly. I pulled the blanket over my mid-section.

Hey there, Kid-O, she said, rubbing her eyes. Sarah’s voice sounded like she was failing at trying to not slip on ice. She said, Sorry if I crowded you. Sorry if I kicked.

I didn’t even know you were there, I said.
She smiled and said, Well, good. Because it looks like you and I might be roomies for a while. I offered to camp out on the couch, but your mom won’t have it. She said your bed’s more comfortable. Sarah patted the mattress and gave it a little bounce with the edge of her hip. Plus, Sarah said, your mom said sometimes she gets up in the middle of the night to watch TV when she’s can’t get to sleep.

That’s funny, I said. She’s never had trouble sleeping before.

Sarah lay her head down on her crossed forearms. She said, Well, that’s strange. Oh well. I can sleep on the floor. It’s not that big of a deal.

Nah, that’s okay, I said. If anything I can sleep on the floor.

We both fit so far, she said.

I felt an unfamiliar tingle shoot up through my spine to the back of my neck. I’d never been slept beside someone so near my age. The thought of all the possibilities made me uneasy. Girls at school like Angela with her red hair and freckles and Toni Alshay with her blonde hair and no freckles were impressed with boys like Stevie Ruttles who wore spike haircuts, did somersaults off the jungle gym, and rode a Mongoose bike; not kids whose parents still cut his hair in the bathroom, who spent recesses reading, and rode a banana seated brown Huffy. Everything about Sarah’s girlness was brand new to me, especially the friendly smile.

I could hear my mother and father in the kitchen, smell grease from down the hallway. This sort of hot breakfast was reserved for Sundays.

Breakfast should probably be ready, I said.

Good, Sarah said. Then she whispered with a face that looked as though she couldn’t believe she’d made it this far, I am starving.

The week before, school’d let out for the summer. My parents decided that Sarah would spend the days with me and sort of serve as a babysitter, not that I needed one. On the weekends and some nights she usually worked at Greener Acres cocktail waitressing, but that was out of the question so long as Corey could get to her there. I’d gone without sitters since I’d learned how to work the buttons on the microwave and television remote. My father said Sarah was there to keep me out of trouble. I followed her around almost everywhere she went. I got a glass of water whenever she got one, a ham and cheese
sandwich from the fridge, to the couch, to the yard. Everywhere but the bathroom. After a while, my father started making jokes, said that I was her new boyfriend and laughed at my face as it burned to bright red. I quit following her so much.

Even still, late at night I would have to stop myself from following her outside, where she went to either smoke her menthols or sit and think. Around the same time each evening she would climb out of bed then go sit outside with her bare feet on the porch, the cherry from her cigarette arching in orange lines as it dipped and rose to her lips. The hollows of her cheeks were lit up by the moon. Usually I’d fall asleep staring like that. In the mornings I wondered why in the middle of the night she ‘d doused her neck in my father’s Brut cologne, the smell barely detectable beneath the cigarettes.

Quickly I grew completely smitten with the way she seemed so tough, how her hips moved in her jeans, her raspy, high voice that cussed when there was nothing on television. I was in love as much as eleven years allows. Old enough to feel sex in me, too young to know what to do or how to handle this except destroy the things I’d grown out of. I was tense, somewhat inventive. I spent one afternoon using an exact-o blade to scratch “The Sex Pistols” and “Quiet Riot”—random band names I’d heard that seemed different, older, and cool—into the table of my wooden desk. On the inside corner underneath the table one day I etched her name beside mine: Chris + Sarah. Then I mixed our names: Sarah Saxton. It sounded nice. I had big plans for the two of us that didn’t involve marriage so much as running away together. When I heard her coming, I scratched the etchings out.

I was standing in my front yard one afternoon, facing the highway that stretched five miles in length from the school district where I lived, where there were lots of closed and boarded Winn Dixie stores, a Mott’s 5-10, pawn shops and other stores that often had Spanish words drawn in Day-Glo orange and yellow across their windows—to the end where I lived before, where there were maybe two or three black kids at the elementary school and they kept mostly to themselves or got ignored by others. I went there until district laws changed the year before. I was on my knees with a spoon and a mound of unearthed dirt shaped into a circle with a clearing in the center, then on top of that clearing were dry straws of grass and leaves off a dead rose bush. I’d planted G.I. Joes, Star Wars figures, and He-People in the mound with their plastic unsmiling heads
sticking out toward the center. Their arms reached toward the flame I was about to make. I kneeled with a magnifying glass facing west, waiting for the sun to catch before my mother could come home from her job. I hadn’t seen Sarah since early that morning.

When Sarah caught my eye she was coming toward the house on the edge of the highway, eating an orange creamsicle that matched her orange and white striped shirt that showed her mysterious bellybutton just above those black jeans that didn’t hug so much as hold her like a loose fist. When cars passed I could see heads turn to face her, but she was far away from it all studying the gravel beneath her feet, the way her toes poked through her flip-flops maybe. She followed the gravel along the roadside, past the mailbox, then turned down into the driveway where I was sitting, watching with my pyre fort set up. I wanted the sun to catch just before she got to me so she’d startle and jump and we’d both stand back speechless watching things I was too old to play with melt. I wanted her to think me dangerous. But the flame didn’t catch. Sarah stopped anyway. Much larger now, smelling like cigarettes and the cold orange syrup dripping down her knuckles.

She crouched down and asked, How much do you really want this to happen?
I shrugged my shoulders.
Don’t you have a lighter? She shook syrup from her fingers. I thought all kids had lighters.
I hadn’t even thought of that, that I was of all kids. I was not one with a lighter so I shook my head. Nope. I looked at the house.
You’d better not take one of your mom’s, Sarah said.
Do you think she’d even notice?
Sure she will. She won’t notice until she’s lost her last one and then she’ll go looking for that one. She’ll end up finding it in your room, or a pocket, or something. Besides, you shouldn’t be burning your toys.
Why not?
All boys burn toys, she said. She stood and threw a shadow over everything. Come inside and watch TV. with me.
She didn’t offer a bite of her popsicle. Not that I really wanted one. She offered a free hand and I took it. I brushed my knees. We went into the house and plopped down on
the couch. Sarah picked the remote off the coffee table, sat back, and set her shoulder
against mine. She rested her wrist on my knee and flipped the floor model Zenith on. She
coasted through channels until arriving to Oprah. Sarah’s hand stayed where it was as
well as her shoulder. In the past week she’d come to think of herself as something like
my big sister, but to me she was not and I edged my shoulder deeper between the couch
cushion and her arm. She rested her head on top of mine and said, Now this is the stuff.

We sat there for a while until she asked if I drew.

What do you mean? I asked her.

Paper. Do you draw? Like with a pencil or a pen. I want to teach you something.

I nodded then went to my bedroom and came back with a spiral notepad and a
pencil. Sarah was already sitting on the floor with her knees folded underneath the coffee
table. She scooted over and I sat down beside her.

I looked up at the television, but Sarah touched my chin with her hand and turned
my face toward hers.
Okay, look at me, she said, pointing to her two eyes with her fingers. Sarah’s eyes were a
brown like insides of tree trunks.

Goodness, she said, staring back into my eyes. Just look at that green. She
brushed the pencil tip across the paper. Just like your Daddy. Man, you guys have got the
prettiest eyes.

I liked that she was comparing me to my father. I felt closer somehow to him
when she said that, that I was the sort of man who would defend her when people cussed
at her, called her a scrawny ass. I would drag them out
in the yard and kick their ass.

You gotta always start with the eyes, she said. The face is always framed around
the eyes. Remember, there’s about seven different shapes to these, and all say something
different. Yours are like almonds. She stopped drawing for a second and tilted her head.
She said, These eyes would never hurt anyone, would they?

I shake my head. No.

You’re going to make some girl really proud, she said, and happy to call you her
man some day.

Sarah sniffed and looked down at what she’s doing. She wiped her nose, her eyes,
then apologized. She coughed and laughed and said, I’m such a fucking baby.
If you want to, I said, I can draw your eyes next.

Jeez, she said and wiped her nose again. I’d be too scared to even look at them right now. At least the way you see them.

The swelling has gone way down, I told her.

She pulled my face forward and kissed my forehead. Isn’t this more fun than messing up your stuff? She asked.

I nodded my head and stared at her eyes again, moving my pencil in short strokes across my paper.

Late that night in bed while staring out the window at Sarah, I made it further than midnight by propping my chin onto the hard edge of the windowsill. My eyes were blurry rifts, but I didn’t want to take them off her. Suddenly the highway flashed and went dark in quick successions, like a blinking light making its way up the road. Across the street I could make out the car wash place, the auto repair garage, and the people who sold tire rims, gnome statues, and random junk from their fenced in front yard. Then my father’s S-10 eased up slowly in the driveway. His brights, I thought.

Sarah stood up, stamped her cigarette out, and went up the gravel driveway after the light blinked twice more. The door open then closed lightly. Probably, I figured, my father was telling her what Corey had said after calling our house from the bar earlier that night. He’d been calling every night from Tidewater, several times starting around six p.m. My mother’d answer the phone until finally Sarah took a call around nine then went into the bathroom.

In the morning I awoke just as I had before with Sarah lying there fully clothed.

At this time of year, the air wasn’t yet moist enough for June bugs and mosquitoes to emerge. At night during dinner we left the front door open so that a breeze could pass through the house. Scent from the honeysuckle that hung along the porch would catch in the breeze that passed through the living room and into the dining room. That Thursday evening my mother, Sarah, and I sat at the table with a large pot of spaghetti in the center, paper plates and colas set in front of us. No one said much until my mother, finally, told
Sarah that her mother had called my mom’s office that afternoon. She’d told my mother that Sarah was more than welcome to move back home.

Sarah sat there for a moment, clasped her hands, and set her chin down on top of her fingers. I spoke with my mom about that earlier, she said, and she’s already said she’ll have Corey over to reconcile as soon as I move my stuff there. Like we’re married or something. In her eyes all of this is my fault. For what she and Corey call, Misbehaving. Did she tell you that? She thinks I should have tried harder. She says it’s my sassiness, whatever that means. Sarah shrugged and took another bite of her spaghetti. She slurped a dangling strand, smiled at me, and then winked.

Again, more silence.

My mother was holding her tongue as usual. She was never slow to lend a helping hand to anyone, but Sarah seemed to cross my mother every way possible. I couldn’t imagine why, aside from the phone calls from Corey each night. I’d once overheard my mother whispering into the phone about Sarah. In a reluctant voice she’d said, Ya know, the girl does flirt just a little too much. I can see where Corey’d get pissed off at her. Not enough to hit her, no. But I admit, sometimes the way Eu eyes her, I could knock the shit out of him myself. I put her up in Chris’s room just for that reason. No way I’m going to let her sleep on the sofa. I hate to admit it about my own husband, but that’s like putting cake in a kid’s mouth and telling him not to bite.

Around seven o’clock, as we finished up dinner, the telephone rang right on time. Even though this happened every night, we all jumped in our chairs then looked at each other like, Who’s gonna get it? Sarah stayed glued to her seat and my mother finally got up, clamping her eyes tight and crumpling her napkin.

Thanks, Sarah said.

My mother said, Who knows. Maybe, for a change, it won’t be Corey.

Sarah and I sat there listening quietly for a moment. In the background I could hear my mother say in her politely irritated voice, She’s eating. I’ll tell her to call you later. You at the bar?

My mother came back and took her chair without speaking. Sarah and I looked at her expectantly. My mother shook her head and rested it in her hands. She blinked tight but the edges of her eyes were getting wet. She said to Sarah, I can’t keep this up forever.
Corey calls this time of day and he’s nice about it. He’ll call in half an hour more drunk and less nice. Two hours from now he’ll try to talk to me about it, then you’ll take the phone and go off into the bathroom. Once you tell him no again, the whole thing starts over.

I’m sorry, Sarah said. I just don’t know what to do. I can’t go out to the street. I can’t go back to Corey. He’ll kill me, Elizabeth.

I felt my shoulders rise. I felt caught between the two of them and began to resent my mother for scolding Sarah. She was just a kid who couldn’t help it.

My mother stood and took her plate to the sink. She said from kitchen, I’m just saying how it is, Sarah. You’re a grown woman. Maybe it’s not such a bad idea to go back to your mother. Surely she’s not going to force you to go back with him.

Sarah threw up her hands. I can’t, she said. I can’t. She’ll want me out so fast it’ll make my head spin.

My mother walked by, passing both of us through the dining room. Her face and neck were red. She wiped one of her eyes with the edge of her finger.

After a few moments, my mother called out from the living room, Sarah can you come in here just a second?

Sarah’s face went pale. She stood slowly and headed into the living room. I followed. My mother was standing by the front door with her arms crossed and something shiny and purple between her fingers.

Sarah’s shoulders dropped. She said, Oh. Mrs. Saxton.

Quickly, my mother told me to go to my room and stay there until she said it was okay to come out. I remembered the pile of toys I left in the yard and started to apologize and defend myself. I thought Sarah was in trouble for being a bad sitter. My mother’s face turned bright red and she smacked me hard across the cheek then said to go. Embarrassed, I didn’t want to look at Sarah. I headed to my room where I sat beside my bed with my back placed against its corner and I listened.

I couldn’t hear very much of what my mother was saying, but Sarah was trying to tell her that trash like this blows up off the highway all of the time. It could have made its way through the door. Just dumb luck.
My mother replied that condom wrappers don’t just appear. Nor do they blow in straight off the street into her door.

Sarah suggested that maybe I put it there.

My mother told Sarah to make a decision. Either she could call Corey, call her mother, or walk. She sure as shit couldn’t call Eu.

I was sitting in my bedroom, wondering if I should get my toys out of the yard or not. It began to dawn that this had nothing to do with me. I had no idea what a condom wrapper was.

When Sarah came to my room and started throwing her clothes into her duffel bag, I asked if there was anything I could do to help. She stopped what she was doing for a second then came and sat beside me on the bed. The sky had grown dark outside and I had yet to turn the light on in my room. We were both a pale blue sitting there together. The bed creaked beneath me. I asked her finally, knowing that no one else would tell me, What is a condom wrapper?

She wiped her cheeks and eyed my bedroom door. Then she kneeled down and placed her hands on top of my knees. Her jaw was cocked, cheek bones slanted from the lack of light in the room. She looked back at the door then quickly at me. She stared in my eyes, tucked her hair behind her ears. The anger in her face seemed to melt away. With a smile she I’d only seen in some of my father’s magazines she said, Let me tell you.

In a hurried whisper, Sarah explained everything she knew about condoms, about their uses, when they’re necessary, when they’re not. She used every obscene word—sometimes two or three words to explain the same thing. At times she would stop and ask, You know what that is? Sometimes I would nod and other times would not. She would point with her fingers to exactly what she was meant. Like learning a foreign language, one word was replaced with another and then another. My heart pounded, I throbbed everywhere as she held my hands, squeezing the muscles around my thumbs and palms as she spoke. Her tone was like none I’d ever heard in my life, not a teacher’s, not my mother’s; her words were monosyllabic, poignant, and furtive with a serrative mischievousness that only someone who blows up Tonka trucks with Black Cats might understand.
I waited until she was completely done with every description she could come up with, then I said to her, Oh, I always thought those things were called rubbers.

Sarah stood back from me and pouted. She said, Really? She stamped her foot lightly on the carpet and said, Well, fuck.

Still, I learned a lot. I nodded.

She shrugged and said, Well good. I guess.

Why was it in the house? I asked her.

To be honest, she shrugged, I don’t know. Haven’t used one. Not in years anyway.

Through the window I saw a beat up gold and brown Buick stationwagon slide into the driveway and honk. While dust was still settling around the car, my mother called for Sarah. Sarah gripped my hands, kissed my cheek and said, Be good. Before she walked out the door, she said to tell my father—if he ever said something about her when I was older—to tell him she really wished they’d had a chance.

She shut the door behind her and I watched as she climbed into the tank of a car beside her mother then drive away.

That evening my mother didn’t call my father to discuss what she’d found on her living room carpet or to tell him their houseguest had been told to leave. When Corey called my mother told him just where he could find Sarah. Around midnight, when my father finally pulled up into the driveway and gave the sign he’d given to Sarah on those other nights, my mother showed up in the lightning like flashes in her flannel night gown with her hair bundled up on the top of her head. Her arms were crossed, her eyes closed. She was fast asleep, leaning her right shoulder against a front porch column, waiting for her husband to finally arrive home.
The Ropes

We were sitting in the van on the bench seat with our feet on the pair of coolers positioned between us and the van’s open side doors. The first rain drop plopped onto one of the cooler lids and my grandfather, Buddy, said we should probably get at it. He leaned forward to reach the open side doors of the van, then pulled himself over the coolers in one step. His leg was like a line of starched blue jean stretched in front of me. I left brown Converse All-Star footprints on top of the coolers as I followed him outside. The sky turned from blue to purple to gray in the time it takes to snap and smooth a blanket onto a bed. In the field across the highway, grass curved to the right and passing cars started flipping their headlights on. The wind smelled like cardboard and felt like spring, but this was late August in Grand Prairie, Texas during the last summer that Buddy lived with me and my family, selling shrimp from a van on the side of the highway just outside of Trader’s Market on the weekends.

A makeshift dirt driveway alongside the highway between Trader’s Market and a Mr. M’s convenient store had become our permanent set-up spot to sell shrimp. It was a natural clearing in a patch of oaks on a plot of land owned by Emilio Sanchez; a kind, white haired man who liked my grandfather, who enjoyed the twenty pounds of free seafood each week. The small stretch of property, on which Mr. Sanchez’s house was also located, seemed out of place amongst the strip malls and What-a-burgers that were sprouting up left and right each week, making 1989, the year when I was twelve, a time in which Grand Prairie was one of America’s fastest growing cities.

Buddy was staying with my family for the third year in a row after having gone on a Jim Beam binge in his Panama City riverhouse. Each May, he’d come back to us looking a little more haggard than the May before, his body sunken in and eyes blood shot brown, his every word strained like he was sick of explaining. He was six foot two, but during these periods he looked something closer to my height at the time. Two
months would pass before his posture regained confidence, his clothes straightened out, and his face and blue eyes set back into their friendly, though mildly arrogant, position. It was a cycle he put himself through each year; an extensive vacation that began by cutting the leash on a friend’s death anniversary and ended, nearly a season later, with him feeling refreshed and, as is common with the newly sobered, wanting to whip everyone else into shape. This summer Buddy was determined to teach me how to speak to people, listen to others’ eyes before their mouths did the talking. He was bound, like my father, to teach me how to run the shrimp truck on my own.

The raindrops dampened Buddy’s short sleeve button down. The air pushed his combed back white hair forward so it stood in places. Buddy waved me to the front of the van and said, Get over here, Christopher, before we get soaked.

He was standing beside the three metal signs that various realtors once used to advertise property, but now belonged to our business and read in red paint over a smoothed out white poster board: FRESH SHRIMP; TODAY ONLY; and 5LB for $20.00. Buddy’s bony arms hugged around one of the signs and I ran to catch up with him. Together we lifted them from the ground and walked back to the truck side-by-side. Rain poured as if this was its last chance. The pair of eight-by-two-foot plywood signs that read SHRIMP in white and red from top to bottom were beginning to flap hard against the ends of the van. I ran over and took hold of the front one before a gust of wind could catch underneath and send it flying. Buddy opened the two rear doors. I turned the sign sideways and slid it in across the corrugated metal floor. Buddy went back for the smaller signs, then returned and told me to hop inside the truck so that I could grab them from him. He held them up so the pointed ends lead. Dirt was caked all along the sharp metal stakes and I spread my hands wide to get a spot that wasn’t dirty.

C’mon now, boy, he said. This shit’s coming down.

Hold on up, I said. I jumped out and took the stack of signs from Buddy and banged them against the back bumper to get the dirt off. So it doesn’t get all over the floors, I said. I’ll be the one who has to clean that stuff later.

Buddy said, Good thinking.

I shut the back doors and the wind became a moan, the rain a patter against the roof and windshield. We sat down beside each other in the two front seats. The van
seemed much smaller with the doors closed and everything packed up inside. The small
signs laid flat atop the Igloo coolers. The large signs set on their sides between the bench
seat. We both were heaving and Buddy found his inhaler on the dash. He held the maroon
canister to his lips, pushed the top down, and inhaled deeply. He sat in the driver’s chair
with his knees turned toward me. He breathed out and offered me the inhaler.

You want a hit? He asked, his grin large and toothy.
I smiled and shook my head.
He shrugged. It’s good stuff, he said.

I reached under my seat and felt around for a towel and finally found one that was
stiff like it had been there a while. I wiped the mud from my hands and offered the towel
to Buddy.

He shook his head and said, No, thanks. He’d already wiped his nearly translucent
cotton handkerchief along his face and hands, swiped at the water on his shoulders as if
dirt. He reached inside his back pocket and withdrew a black comb. He drew it through is
hair from his forehead straight back, sending the scent of brylcream through the muggy,
closed in space. He patted his head down and looked in the mirror. Yes, ‘sah, Yes, ‘sah,
Buddy said to his reflection.

I looked out the windshield, saw cars zipping by, emptying out the Trader’s
Market. I tried to sound matter-of-fact as possible. I asked, You think we should head
out? Now with everyone else leaving?

You and I both wish, Buddy said sighing. He tucked the comb in his pocket and
put his hands together in a clasp between his knees. He eyed the coolers in the back of the
van. He checked his watch and said, We got about three more hours before sunset. Cut
out now and we lose close to a fifty bucks in cash; that happens and your daddy won’t
make our paychecks. Plus, he’ll have our asses in a sling just on the principle that we left
early.

My father was thirty miles north up I-20 doing what he did on Sundays, and most
evenings after closing up the seafood store he ran, which was hang out watching football
at Tidewater. At that time, Cowboy rookies Troy Aikman and Emmitt Smith were get
their asses whooped regularly, even in scrimmage games.
I waited for a second, then said to Buddy, Maybe we could get rid of the few we’ve got left at the bar like we did that one day.

We’ve got no business going up there, Buddy said. Besides, you need to show that you can run this truck yourself. We peter out now at the first drop of rain, and I won’t hear the end of it. Neither will you.

I imagined Buddy and I strolling into Tidewater, a cave like place where I’d never seen much light except the illuminated liquor bottles shelved behind the bar and the dots that swung around the dance floor. Being a Sunday, the place would be quiet and have that dead lull smell of an afternoon beer joint. My father’d have his spot at the center stool with his arms crossed in front of him, staring at the television that hung in a corner. He’d swing his stool around when he saw us in the bar mirror, then suck at his teeth, pull his lips to the side. Although he’d be irritated, I knew Buddy’d only need to wave my father off, swagger up to the bar, and order himself a Sprite. That would be enough to keep my father quiet.

Buddy leaned back in his captain’s chair, resigning to get comfortable. He repeated our typical late-afternoon Sunday mantra, saying, Maybe somebody will come along in a Caddy and clean us out. Take the whole kit and caboodle.

Fat chance, I said. No one’s stopping in all of this weather. We should just dump what we’ve got and call it a day.

You see, it’s that attitude, Buddy said, wagging his finger. That’s the attitude you gotta get away from. Can’t be that way if you’re running this show yourself.

I don’t want to run the show, I said. I’ve got no interest in it.

Sure you do, Buddy said. You could use the money just as much as your daddy. It’s time you prove there’s more to you than reading books, strumming guitar, and listening to music where the people either look like cheap women or drugged out sideshow freaks.

I know, I said, falling back into the chair. You say it, Dad says it. Everybody says it.

I was frustrated as hell from hearing it and glad the summer was coming to an end. I could finally leave this truck behind, get back into school, and not worry about having to raise my voice, sell shrimp to people who probably didn’t need it, then get
hassled by my father whenever I didn’t sell out. My father had been keeping my pay, saying it would all come back at the end of the summer when I needed it. Now it was one week prior to school starting, two weeks before my thirteenth birthday. My father hadn’t yet mentioned my birthday present, but I was hoping he’d combine my shrimping money with however much he intended to spend in order to buy me an Epiphone copy of a Gibson SG. I’d been eyeing one all summer at Stanley’s Six Strings inside Trader’s Market. The guitar was slim and black, exactly what Pete Townsend of The Who and Ian MacKaye of Minor Threat played.

The first time that I had brought up the guitar was the last Sunday night in June. My father and I sat across from each other at a square table in the corner of Tidewater. He was wearing his ball cap that read “Saxton’s Shrimp and Seafood” across the white foreground and a polo type of shirt. He’d been in a good mood when we came in, but had turned sour since I told him that we hadn’t sold out. It was the third week in a row. Some time passed. He’d had a few beers and simmered down. He’d stopped grinding his teeth and staring at the spiral notebook in which the day’s sales were kept tallied. Finally, he asked what I planned to do with all the money I’d been making. I drew him a picture of the SG. We looked over the guitar’s body shape, the way it rounded at the bottom, then came up to two points just before dipping back down to the neck.

It looks like a devil’s head, my father said. He pushed the drawing toward me, smirking. You’ve already got one, he added. The one we bought you two Christmases ago.

You got that at Sears, I said. The tuners are broke. They won’t turn anymore unless I use pliers. Besides, I said softly, embarrassed to say this too loud, I’ll never make it big with a guitar like that.

You’ll never do much if you keep talking so low, my father said, not looking at me. You’ve got to work on that. Gotta speak up if you want to sell more shrimp. I’ve seen you in action, Lightning, and it’s not too good.

I looked down at the drawing of the guitar on the table. I thought to myself, It looks nothing like the real thing.
There’s a ton of other things for you to spend your money on. You should think about saving it. Besides, you’re gonna need it once school starts up. For new clothes and school supplies. Maybe you can stay on after the summer, once Buddy leaves. Then that extra money could go toward your guitar maybe. You’d like having all of that dough in your wallet.

This was the first time he’d mentioned me running the truck myself. Usually, most summers after Buddy left and I returned to school, my father hired on extra help. I’d been too young to work out there by myself where anyone with a gun or a knife could rob us blind. My chest seemed to drop right out from under me. I thought, Oh no. I looked up from the spiral notebook, wanting to make sure he saw my face and that I got this right the first time. I cleared my throat and said, Running that truck on the weekends by myself would be the worst thing in the world I could ever imagine. I barely have time for myself once school starts. I’d never do anything but school and that truck. I’d hate it. Every minute. I barely pull it off with Buddy there.

I don’t know, my father said. Could use the help and you are getting old enough. It’d be like having your own business or something. You’d be your own boss.

The last thing I want is my own shrimp business, I said. I laughed to myself and held up my fingers that were raw with splinters of shrimps’ heads. See these? I said. You’re the only Saxton in “Saxton’s Seafood.” I hate the smell of it, the cold water, dragging those coolers in and out of the van, changing the ice. All of it. Especially hate sitting in that damn truck all weekend. Not for fifteen dollars a day. This is just a summer thing. Just to help you out.

Prove to me that you can do better, my father said while jabbing his finger on the table, that you can sell those shrimp out consistently each weekend, and then we’ll talk about getting this guitar. Maybe then you’ll change your tune about staying on.

I looked out across the smoky bar, feeling I was getting tied down to something I didn’t want. It’s just not for me, I said.

He turned in his chair toward the television across the room. He said, Well, maybe it should be. I think you’ll really like it. Once you get a routine going and start making more money, you’ll be happily surprised. Just wait and see.
He was right about one thing. Selling did get easier as I got better throughout the summer, working out different lines with different people. The first thing I realized early on was the harder I tried, the sooner we sold out. The sooner we sold out, the sooner I went home. But between having no customers and nothing to do, I was bored like all hell as Buddy and I sat in the van. I’d already eaten the hamburger and chips for lunch. I sat back and stared at the rain on the windshield. I should have brought out a walkman, I thought. The van’s battery drained whenever I used its radio. Plus, Buddy couldn’t stand the music I listened to. Aside from their looks, he was convinced these no-talent jokers couldn’t sing or and strum more than three chords to save their lives.

A stack of brown paper sacks lay on the dashboard—sacks we used to hold the shrimp after they are put in a plastic bag—and a pen. I drew three sets of six parallel lines. I then took a pencil out of the glovebox. Buddy’s eyes were shut, but I could tell he wasn’t sleeping by the way he rubbed his thumb in and out of his knuckles, the space in which he used to hold cigarettes. I tried to get the sound of the rain, the smell of shrimp, and the whole notion of the place out of my head. I tried to imagine my fingers on the guitar strings, that way I could write down the number adjacent to the fretboard of the guitar down on the lines; something I’d picked up by reading magazines that taught sheet music for people who didn’t know how to play notes. On a couple of the weekends earlier that summer, I brought my acoustic with me. But it agitated my father to no end to think of me sitting there, playing it when a customer walked up.

Without turning his head to face me Buddy asked, Got one of your tunes going?

I turned the piece of paper over in my lap, feeling self-conscious, like this was something I should have known better than to do. Something that would have troubled my father, left him shaking his head while remarking what a weird kid he had. I looked out the window, away from Buddy.

Best name this one “The Shrimper Man’s Blues,” he said. Or “Can’t Make A Nickel to Save My Sorry Ass.”

I smiled and sat back with the song in my lap. But then he reached up to the dashboard and took down the water-stained spiral notebook that we used to tally sales.
He set it in my lap. It was open to the sheet with that day’s date at the top and three columns that listed out the sales in each of the three shrimp sizes. With a long finger he pointed to it.

Take care of that first, he said. Figure out your sales. Then count out your dough to make sure it adds up. We started out with sixty pounds of them little ones, twenty-three of the midlands, and twenty-five jumbos.

I know, I said. It was something I should have simply known to do, rather than fooling around with the sheet music stuff. I counted it all out, adding the numbers. We were down to about ten pounds of the small shrimp, five of the mediums, and three of the large ones. Luckily, because it was the end of the month when people got their paychecks we’d been busy all day selling shrimp left and right. Were it not for the rain, we could have gone home much sooner.

Two or three more stops, I said, and we’ll be on our way.

Away, I thought, from the smell of four day old shrimp that’s thick like smoke from a wood burning fire, that once it gets into your nose doesn’t leave. And closing up the van didn’t make it any better.

Buddy nodded his head with his eyes still closed. He said, Thank God.

The rain came harder. Water layered like clear syrup on the windshield, but I could still make out sparse headlights passing us. I decided not to work on the song anymore, useless as it was to get the notes without the guitar around. Instead, I put my head against the seat and listened to the rain beat against the roof.

My first thought, when I awoke with my feet tucked underneath me, was that we’d been robbed and I’d slept through it. I jolted. The sky was still gray and the water still on the windshields, but a man stood outside the passenger’s side window with a large umbrella, tapping the glass. His face was blurry. He wore a straw cowboy hat and multi-colored button down open to the small curly hairs on his tan chest. He was saying something. I rolled down the window half an inch and he stood higher.

Are you open? He said. I saw them signs going in. He pointed up the highway to Trader’s Market’s entrance.
I wasn’t sure whether or not Buddy would want me to get this one, knowing that he’d be more likely to get the sale. Because of my age, I was best dealing with women and some of the older folks. Buddy worked better with men. I was, as Buddy put it, still learning the ropes when it came to dealing with them, but coming along well enough to where I’d be working the guys soon enough. Throughout this past weekend, I had taken almost every single customer and I was doing fine. Even still, because the day had turned bad, we both figured it made more sense to let Buddy take this one. Maybe he’ll buy us out, Buddy whispered as he walked past me. After clearing his throat, Buddy turned on what he called his outdoor voice. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. He said. We always open. He had to duck to get back to the bench seat. Help me with this, Chris, he said, trying to lift the small signs so they’d turn on their tops and edge onto the floor. I stood up and grabbed them by their metal stakes and lifted. What should we do with the big ones? I asked Just open the doors and press the coolers out a little. That way I’ve got some room to get around. I opened the doors and edged the coolers away from the bench. Buddy kneed his way in between them, then set the hanging scales on a hook put in the ceiling. I looked up at Buddy before pushing the doors all the way open, before letting the rain inside the van. Buddy said, Get on with it. The door flew open when the man finally pulled it. He used his umbrella to stop water from coming in. He let the two doors fall against his back as he bellied in closer to the coolers. Hello, hello, he said. Hello, Helloo, Buddy smiled back. He took his place at the center of the bench seat, his big knobby knees barely clearing the cooler tops. The two men laughed. You better believe it. I turned to watch Buddy do his thing, but not enough to where it seemed I was staring. That tended to make the customers nervous. Well let me see here, Buddy said. He opened up the far cooler to his right, lifting the scales so the two didn’t collide. These are the shrimp we got on sale today, he said. The ones we got advertised five pounds twenty bucks. Otherwise they sell $4.99 per
pound. He reached into the cooler and picked a few up. He let most of the shrimp drop, but bounced a few in his hand.

Still got them heads, the man said.

No time to head them, Buddy replied. He let the full bodied shrimp with its pointed head and long whiskers plop back down into the brown water. This time yesterday these fellas were swimming. We got a truck that drives them up from Galveston every morning. Cost is figured. Plus, I always add in a few.

The man nodded toward the next cooler.

Buddy dropped that lid then moved on to the next box. These are somewhat bigger, he said. You get about 21 to 25 per pound, but you can tell they’re thick and meaty. Good for most anything, best for frying. Those are $6.99 a pound. He let another shrimp fall then moved on.

The customer followed the cooler tops with his body, but his eyes stuck to the small shrimp. Even I knew it was useless to even show him the big shrimp, but Buddy lifted the last cooler top closest to me. Already on the ice were two of the large jumbos, laid out, each one as thick as a roll of quarters. These are the best for frying or to barbeque, Buddy said. And I’ve only got these in for today.

Too much, the man said, waving his hand over them. I wouldn’t know what to do with them. He smiled a little anxiously at Buddy, then tapped the cooler containing the small shrimp with his fingers.

How about these again?

Buddy opened the cooler.

Can you do three for twelve? The man asked.

Buddy checked his watch. Too early, my friend. We haven’t made enough to buy the young ‘un here dinner.

The two men looked at me. I smiled back at them.

You’ll be here later then?

Look at what I got. Buddy waved his hand over the boxes. Ain’t a lot left.

I see. I see.

Three for fifteen, you may as well get the five.

The man nodded, unsure.
Take me two seconds to weigh them on up. Get you outta this rain and headed home with what you stopped for.

The man thought a for second. He peered up to the sky then back down at the boxes. All them heads. You can do three for twelve.

Nope. The lid fell. How many are you feeding?

The man gestured over his shoulder with his thumb and said, My wife and our boy.

Buddy smiled. What will she eat? You and your son can probably go through three pounds by yourselves pretty easy. Am I right?

He’s only two and a half. The man shrugged.

Well then what’s he gonna eat? Buddy asked. Three pounds is nothing. Five feeds a family. You won’t beat that deal. And if you’ve got some left over, just freeze ‘em. These ain’t been frozen. Consider it an extra pound or so for free. You can thaw ‘em out and eat ‘em by yourself during the game.

Buddy opened the lid back up. The man stood there. He reached for his wallet slowly at first. Buddy said, Well all right. Then he reached into the cooler.

I looked outside at the man’s gray and red pick-up as I heard the scales clinking and Buddy draining the water out of them. A woman with coal dark hair that fell around her shoulders played with a small boy inside the cab. He was standing on her lap and she was holding him by the hands as the two looked each other in the face. I heard the money drawer slide open and then close, and I watched as the man splashed through puddles back to his truck carrying the bundled paper sack beneath his arm. His jeans were tucked deep inside his cowboy boots. The woman set the boy back down between them. She looked straight forward and I could easily imagine her, before they even stopped, telling him to not come back with more than two-and-a-half pounds so that they could buy vegetables on their way home at the grocery store. I sort of felt sorry for them, knowing that five pounds was way too much for two people and a little boy like that.

Suckers, Buddy said.

They won’t finish five pounds by themselves, I said.
We ain’t here to make pals, Buddy said. That guy just paid a part of your wages. Don’t forget that. Plus, Buddy said, looking out the window, he’ll be back. He’s been here before. They always think you’ve forgotten their face.

Buddy took the spiral notebook down from the dashboard and made note of the sales in the farthest left column. I nodded and looked back out the window as the truck worked its way back onto the glimmering black highway.

A week following that night I’d drawn the guitar for my father, he and I sat side-by-side again at the square table in a corner of Tidewater. Buddy had already driven the van home, opting not to go into the bar where there was nothing inside for him but trouble. My father looked down at the spiral notebook between us as I flipped through the pages to that day’s sales. We still had several pounds left over and I’d given away too much throughout the day, tacking on a pound here and there to get rid of it. I told my father it would keep them coming back.

For what? He said. Free shrimp? It’s your responsibility we come out on top each weekend. How am I supposed to trust you with this truck if you keep giving all our profit away?

I’m not taking over the truck, I told him. Maybe next summer. Maybe. But not right now.

My father said, Look. I’m done debating this. When I turned thirteen I started buying my own shoes, my own clothes. All my own stuff. I delivered papers and worked all sorts of odd jobs. Whatever it took.

He downed his mug of beer and poured another from the pitcher that was sitting on the table. He leaned in toward me, his breath heavy in my face. He said, Tell me what I have to do to make you give a shit. To not keep coming in here every Sunday, telling me that you’ve got shrimp left over. Crossing your arms like you could care less.

I shrugged my shoulders and pushed back from the table. He grabbed my elbow, not hard, but enough to pull me forward.

Stop pouting like I’m some bully, he said. Sit up now and tell me what it’ll take. Name your price.
I jerked my arm away. I can’t help it if people aren’t interested, I said. Maybe we should try to sell less.

He said, I can go out there, work that truck myself, and I’m back home by four o’clock Sunday. Selling more than what I send with you. What do you make of that?

I glared at the near empty pitcher and sighed. I looked up at the ceiling fan twirling smoke around, then the TV. He lit a cigarette and set it into the ashtray, then picked up the pitcher and went back to the bar. I looked at my watch. It read 8:30. He came back with a full pitcher and a small hand held calculator. How much are you making now? He asked.

Fifteen dollars a day, I said, as if he didn’t know.

And how much was that fucking devil machine you drew? he asked, thumping a thick finger on the spiral notebook. And what kind of difference does it make if I give you a quarter for each pound sold?

It didn’t seem like much. I shook my head.

He leaned over the spiral notebook, pouring another beer and pushing buttons on the calculator.

Will I have to stay on past August? I asked.

He multiplied the pounds of shrimp sold by twenty-five. He wrote the number down then poked in a decimal.

Past when school starts? I asked. Every weekend?

Look at the number, he said. Look at that number, realize you’re breaking me. I’m not doing this completely for me, Chris.

I looked down. It read, $71.50.

I thought to myself, Wow.

And that’s after you gave fourteen pounds away, he said. Then came back here with another sixteen.

Even still, I thought. Every weekend.

The sun poked back out just as quickly as the rain had come. I heard a car pull up, what sounded like the engine of a very large lawn mover. Buddy looked over my shoulder, then back at me and said, I’m sick of sitting here. You take these folks, get rid of what’s left, and get us out of here.
I turned to look out the window and they were coming toward our shrimp truck. The whole drove of them from a Volkswagen van, tippy-toed making their way through the mud—grandmother, mother, father, a boy and girl. Both of the kids had spots of dirt on their faces. It seemed the stringy cut-offs and T-shirt the girl wore was something passed down from her not much older brother. The man and woman held hands. The woman used her free hand to hold up the dress in her fingertips. Every one of them except for the grandmother was barefoot and she was first to arrive, wearing a straw hat with a wilted dandelion in the sideband.

She talked like she was trying to hold her dentures in her mouth. Heyya, Sweetheart, she said.

Hello, hello, I said. That sure is a pretty flower, I told her.

This old thing? She shrugged and then felt for it. It’s probably dead, Hon. This one gave it to me at a truck stop in Lubbock.

She hip checked the boy and he stumbled to the side, then she reached for his hand before he fell to the muddy ground. The little girl covered her mouth and I smiled. I waited for the man to finally step up.

He squinted although the sun was not in his eyes. He wore glasses with earth-toned plastic frames and his hair hung shaggy, parted off to the side most likely with his finger tips. He reminded me of a cross between John Denver and that Randy of the Redwoods guy on MTV. They all stood there together shoulder to shoulder, looking like maybe they had missed out on Woodstock and were still in search of it. I thought, Wow. Hippies. Neat. I expected him to say Heeeyy, maaan, so I said it. Just like that

He shot a confused glance, then shrugged and replied, Hey there, guy. Whatcha’ got going on here?

I ran through all of the shrimp just like Buddy had, just like I’d been doing all weekend.

The guy scratched his head. I really don’t know, he said. Maybe if you could do the big ones here for $4.99 then we could talk business. Once you weigh in all of the ice and water I’m paying double what I would at the grocer. Besides, you don’t have enough of the little ones here to reach five pounds.
Tell you what, I said. I’ll weigh in all that I’ve got of the $4.99’s, then if it doesn’t come out to five pounds I will make up the difference with the big shrimp. How you like them apples?

Yeeeaahhh, he said. I just don’t know about that.

I stepped back from the coolers after letting the lids drop. He opened up the farthest left cooler again and picked up one of the laid out jumbos. Can you take off the head and weigh it out like that so I can get a sense of what it really measures up? He held it up to me with the tips of his fingers. The kids kept trying to climb up in the van. I was about to tell him no and to ask the kids to watch themselves, but, instead of waiting for me to respond, he went ahead and tore the head off himself and threw it on the ground. Its insides had come off all in his hands and he smeared the yellow and blue liquid across the cooler top. The boy picked the shrimp’s head up off the ground and started flying it around, chasing his sister. The man tossed the shrimp up into the scale.

Compare that to one of these others, he said to me, picking up another one of the big shrimp from the cooler.

I took the other shrimp from the guy then put it on the scale.

See? he said. It’s like half of the weight. Either you head them or sell it to us cheaper.

There was no way I was going to cut the cost, if only because this guy was being a jerk. I’ll sell you the little ones for $4.99, I said. But I’m not going down on these big ones.

These are what I want, he said. He banged an empty palm against the side of the cooler.

Not at that price, I said. And I’m sure as heck not going to head them for you. I let the cooler lid fall. That’s my last offer.

I looked at Buddy. He waved his hand low and with stiff fingers, telling me these folks weren’t worth the trouble. Suddenly I thought of what Buddy sometimes said after dealing with people who drove cars that barely ran, tried to get the shrimp too cheap, and had these scrawny kids with distant, faraway eyes. When these type of customers came up to the van, Buddy didn’t push anything. He’d only show the shrimp quickly and let the
people go. Then he’d come back to his seat shaking his head and would say to me, Five bucks will buy those kids a shitload of bologna.

The guy looked frustrated. His face was red, his wife was running her fingers along his back. The grandmother looked up at me, her smile long gone. She pushed her glasses to her nose and hmmp’ed.

I didn’t care if his head exploded. At that point in the conversation, I could have cared less if whole family starved, if they spent their last twenty bucks on these shrimp, so long as I got one over on this guy. I wasn’t even considering the guitar, the school clothes, or what my father might say if we were to show up with the extra shrimp. Since that last talk with my father, since the night of the raise, I knew there was no way I’d get out of this business. I’d be dealing with this sort of situation for at least a few more years to come.

I waited until the guy was so frustrated that he turned away, ready to wave me off. I had to try not to smile.

I said, Look here, partner.

He stared up at me.

I said, I’ll weigh these little ones, then make up the difference with the bigger shrimp here. That’s a better deal than you’re gonna get elsewhere. That way you’re leaving with what you stopped for. I nodded at the guy assuring him I was doing his family a favor. I kneeled and looked him in the face. This is my dad’s business, I said. He’ll run me into the ground if I give you those bigger ones there for less than what he paid. I could care less, I said, but it’s not my seafood to give away like that. You understand.

The guy’s shoulders dropped. The dad’s business line worked. He was about to say something else.

I cut him off. Let me just weigh ‘em on up, I said.

The rest of the small shrimp came out to two and half pounds—plenty to fill up maybe two people—and the jumbo shrimp was enough to fill two more. Either way they would still end up going to bed hungry. I knew but didn’t say that the larger shrimp when boiled came out tasting like rubber and the smaller were really too little to fry. I took the guy’s ten and two crumbly fives, then thanked him, and watched as they walked away to
their van. The mother had to slap the shrimp’s head from the boy’s hand. As we watched her do it, I smiled at Buddy while taking my seat and said, Just look at that dopey kid. He’ll have about another pound of those heads to play with once they’re all done pinching the things off.
Imposition

During the last years of my parents’ marriage, my father got into the habit of taking in strays. Not vagrants really, but people down on their luck who frequented the bar he owned and managed for a while called Tidewater. At least once a year, when I was between the ages of eleven and fourteen, I’d wake some weekend mornings or return from school to find a wrenched-up or tear-jerked person on the couch, using the remote to flip through court television. To cover their keep while they stayed in our home, my father would assign some short-term task. Typically, I was told to assist them.

I was never enthusiastic about these boarders. They often squandered my parents’ kindness or reassigned their misfortune into our Ft. Worth home. When I asked my parents why they harbored these folks, my mother rehashed a past I could not remember which involved nights spent in our old station wagon, eating bologna sandwiches. That was in 1977, long before my father took over Tidewater and my mother secured a job with the Texas Workforce Commission.

And no matter how much air I put out to these people, unfeigned went their attempts at camaraderie with me. They’d ask how my day went, ruffle my hair—those kinds of things. It was bad enough with my father spending most of his nights at the bar, but I was frustrated with these inept replacements. Sure, they all had their stories, but I wasn’t buying into them. Somewhere in life I had come to the notion that everyone, basically, moves their own hands. Something as simple as bending a finger to putting one’s fist through a window or mirror; somewhere down the line you decide how far you want a situation to go. But most people don’t want to deal with the consequences, they seek out others to take the burden on with them. My parents—because of my mother’s sheer benevolence and my father’s unwillingness to straighten matters with the house and growing affection for harder liquors that he drank—were exactly those others these people found.
Before my father appropriated the bar, my parents took in Delilah, a blonde and bone-thin woman in the midst of a break-up from her hard-knuckled boyfriend. He made violent threats when she refused to return to him. I remember her one night sitting cross-legged, trembling on our bathroom floor. Streams of mascara trailed down her cheeks. The door was barely cracked, I could hardly make her out. She whispered into the phone, Honey, don’t shoot their dog. And from then on, as she and I white-walled the interior, I kept my German Sheppard, Sparky, indoors.

Two years later, my parents let Danny, a man who claimed to lay carpet, into our home. He said he’d lost his job when a customer filed a harassment complaint against him. Danny told my father he’d simply asked the woman out, but I could tell by the way he held a fork and never chewed that Danny didn’t employ Shakespeare as a means of persuasion. He was supposed to replace the carpeting of our house in exchange for food and rent, but nothing got accomplished unless I was around. Eventually my mom found a porno tape in the VCR, and we realized how he was spending most of his days. My father, seeing the new carpet’s edges frayed and bubbled, ordered Danny to hit the road.

I found Daryl asleep on our couch one Sunday morning. Sunlight struggled through the off-white curtains as I tiptoed through the living room, eyeing Daryl warily. The coffee table was cluttered with beer cans and ashtrays. His stubble face was pale and worn. He smelled like the morning after floor of Greener Acres. A duffel bag lay on the couch near his feet.

Here we go again, I thought.

This was 1989, the year my father owned Tidewater Flats. I knew my mother and Daryl were sort of close. I remembered him from those Friday nights when she and I would visit my father at the bar. The dimly lit place was usually packed with people on weekends, two-stepping slowly across the sand-covered dance floor or sitting at the small wooden tables that filled the room. Sometimes a cover band played country and western from the red carpeted riser in the corner of the dance floor, or the rainbow colored jukebox blared music through loud speakers set in the ceiling. While I pumped quarters into the jukebox and pinball machines, my father shot pool and drank beer with his
regulars. My mother sat alone at the corner of the bar, reading some romance novel and sipping diet cola.

Sometimes Daryl helped my father out with the bartending. He was lanky with blonde hair combed off to the side. He would sometimes bat his large, blue eyes at my mother and rest his chin in his hand on the bar. They would laugh and scream over the blaring music, seeing how life was with each other. His vowels were drawn long and his fingers gesticulated as the tone in his voice rose and dipped. I eyed them cautiously, but my father just grinned at them.

Because of his effeminate nature, people jokingly referred to Daryl as the bar’s token fairy. No one seemed sure, or else wanted to be sure, of whether or not he was in fact, queer. Tire-gutted men in ten-gallon Stetsons would tap Daryl on the shoulder as he leaned toward my mother.

’Nother beer, Fairyl, they’d tell him, smirking, waving empty pitchers from side to side. People who knew Daryl better would shake their heads and frown. Girly or not, he was still their friend. The guy wasn’t flamboyant. Of course, he never brought another guy into Greener Acres with him. If anything, people only teased casually with a voice-mock here or a hand dangle there, but it seemed they had decided, because they couldn’t bear the thought of actually befriending a homosexual, to put Daryl’s sexual preferences completely out of their minds.

My father seemed to fall in with this crowd. I’d like to think deep down he knew times were tough, and he could not turn his back when someone needed a hand, that he genuinely liked Daryl as a person. But the facts are he could trust Daryl with the register, and he liked that Daryl didn’t garnish wages. He worked solely for tips. So far as I know, my father never spared a dime on him. As with many of the others my father assisted or let stay with us, he always expected something in return. So long as they carried out the requested job and did not interfere with his life or livelihood, my father’s benevolence spread that thin.

As Daryl lay there on the couch, I cleared the coffee table quietly, hoping not to wake him. I wiped away ashes and tucked the beer cans in my arm. He wrapped an elbow around his ear and rolled toward the back of the couch. I threw the empties into the trash,
returned with a can of Lysol and sprayed its contents into the ceiling fan. As the smell filled the room and white dots of mist floated down on to the furniture and Daryl’s clothes, I thought, Take that.

Making breakfast, I wondered what Daryl had done to find himself lodging here. Probably some crisis, I thought, with the sensitive-eyed, mystery girl he claimed to keep at home. I entertained the idea that she had busted him with some guy in bed, but the picture came all too vivid, too quick and I shunned it from my mind. I didn’t like the idea of a homosexual living with us, bringing what he did in his own home into mine. There were several obvious reasons, but the one that got me most had to deal with my father’s recent concerns about me and some fears that I’d been harboring for myself. I didn’t play sports and spent most of my free time reading, kids at school often messed with me, calling names like queer or pantywaist. At home I would sometimes sift through my mother’s romance novels, looking for the sex parts and my father once caught me in this act. I didn’t know what to tell him. He shirked and said there were better ways to spend the afternoon. He told me, half-jokingly, I worry about you. Still, people get an opinion, they hand it to you, and it begins to settle in like a burn.

I hadn’t seen my parents together for some time, but I guessed by the Timex set on top of the television and his boots by the door my father had decided to spend the night at home. Aside from a month earlier, I’d rarely seen his face. My parents constantly argued, especially late at night. My mother accused him of sleeping around, that she’d heard stories from other people who frequented the bar. She’d stopped going to Tidewater Flats on Friday nights because she was worn out thinking every woman she saw could be someone he was sleeping with. She would bring up the one lady, Sarah, who had stayed with us.

He’d remind her that was years ago. She was being unreasonable and inconsiderate. He had a business to run and a family to support. He was sick and tired of coming home to a filthy house and a wife who did nothing but complain about her job all the time. If she would clean the place every once in a while, he told her, and not bitch so much, he’d consider spending more nights at home.

She’d raise her hands and say, You’re right. You’re right.
To keep food on the table and a roof over our heads, my mother put up with it. In some ways I saw her as a very strong woman, and in other ways as dependent and weak. With me in the picture, there was no alternative. She didn’t want her son growing up without a man around, questioning whether or not ends would meet. My father constantly reminded her of that.

I set three plates around the glass covered dining room table, placed folded paper towels and silverware beside them. I thought, maybe just this once, we three could eat like a family, that Daryl would stay asleep, and no voices would rise. I opened the curtains. Tepid early spring sunlight filtered through the window, sparkling through the table, casting a tawny shadow across the linoleum of the dining room floor. I set platters of hash browns, toast and eggs around the table, and the Tabasco my father seemed to eat with everything.

I walked to my parents’ room and rapped on the door.

My mother said, Just a second.

Breakfast, I whispered. Then I waited a moment. I cleared my throat and started to sing what my she sang some mornings when I was tough to wake up. I said, You gotta get up, You gotta get up, You gotta get up in the mornin’…You gotta get up, you gotta get up in the…

All right already! My father yelled. I could tell he was smiling. He said, Give it a rest, Chris. We’ll be out in a second.

I sat at the table feeling the sunlight on my shoulders.

My mother emerged after a couple of minutes, smiling and tapping a Virginia Slim into her palm. She wore a flannel nightgown and her long, dyed-auburn hair was bunned back with a comb. She looked into the dining room. Wow, she said. She went into the kitchen, slid a plate from a cabinet, then set it on the table and went to wake Daryl.

My father walked in with his thin hair patted across his head. He looked across the table, rubbing bloodshot eyes. He chuckled at the sight of me sitting there like that, with the table all made up, and sat down at the opposite end of the table. His toothy grin cracked. He said, You’ve been watching Julia Childs again, haven’t you? I thought I told you to steer clear of that show.
I shrugged my shoulders. I just thought it’d be nice, I said.

Daryl followed my mother slowly. Just make yourself at home, she said. She directed him to a chair on my left.

Sleep all right? My father asked him.

Sure did, Daryl said. He seemed self-conscious, fidgeting in his chair. You do all this, Chris?

I looked at my mother.

Chris, you know Daryl.

Yes, I nodded, thinking, Another hard locker come to mooch off us for a while.

Daryl’s going to be staying here a while, she said.

He’s going to fix up the roof, my father said to me. With your help, of course.

I quickly pictured the two of us up there, and Daryl getting fruity with me. Forget it, I said. I’ve got too much homework.

You can make time, he said. Everyone pulls their own weight around here.

Two weeks, Daryl said, making a V with his fingers. Two weeks tops.

It was always two weeks. I gritted my teeth. There was no use fighting. I looked at the food set across the table, decided to clam up. For once, we’d eat like a normal family without my father starting some argument.

My mother almost jumped to pick the plate of eggs up. She forked some out for my father, then Daryl, and a little for herself.

When did you stop eating? My father asked, scooting the plate of eggs toward me with his fork.

Christopher has stopped eating meat, my mother said. Something he picked up in school.

She lifted the hash browns, shoveled some onto my plate, and then unloaded the rest on to Daryl’s and my father’s.

I said, I learned it in health.

I hear that’s the healthy way to go, Daryl said. A man could live to be as old as Moses on that diet.
Or else grow a nice set of tits, my father said. Besides. Egg’s not a meat. He smashed his food smaller, shook Tabasco sauce onto everything. He looked at me and waited.

My mother looked over. She said, A little won’t kill you.

It’s like liquid chicken, I said.

The clinking of forks and scrapes of glasses stopped.

I tried to smile. Liquid chicken, I repeated. In eggs. Don’t you get it?

My father propped his elbow on the table, rubbed his fingers in his palm. I knew what he was thinking: first those books, now this shit. He moved back his chair, stood, and lifted his plate. He shoveled the rest of his food onto mine. He sat back down, crossed his arms, and crinkled his napkin. He said, Now let’s see you eat.

Everyone was silent, waiting for my reaction. I stared at the mound of mixed yellow, brown, and red, then pushed it away, feeling shame ripple through me. This was the last thing I wanted to happen.

You see this? My father glared at my mother. Try to spend a morning with my family, it’s what I get. Screw it. I’ve got the bar to tend with. The Cowboys’ game starts up in two hours, and Acres is still a pit from how I left it last night.

He walked away, shaking his head. He murmured, Liquid chicken. I’ll be goddamned.

My mother looked at Daryl, then me, and pursed her mouth. She said, Chris, eat your breakfast. Then head straight to your room, and don’t come out until I say so. Daryl, I’m sorry you had to see this.

He said, Elizabeth, really. It’s no big deal.

She got up and followed my father into their bedroom.

The dining room was empty, except for Daryl and me. Daryl scooped the rest of his eggs on my plate. I was confused at first, and then he switched our dishes. Eat, he said, Quickly.

I understood what he was doing, and it only made me angry. I picked up my plate, put the food in the trash, then marched to my room leaving Daryl there alone.
I stayed in my room until early afternoon, replaying the scene over and over in my head. I thought to myself, I should have just done what my father asked and said nothing. Then maybe for once he would get someone else, like Daryl, to watch over the bar. That way, he and I could have spent the afternoon hanging out.

There was a knock at my door. We had a rule in my house—between my mother and me, anyway—that no one entered without the other’s permission.

It’s open, I said.

She walked into the room and sat down by my desk. Look, about this morning.

I don’t get it, I said. The coming, the going, then never coming back. Sometimes I wish he would leave for good.

Your father’s not an easy man to get, she said. I wish I could explain him myself, sometimes. He’s got a lot on his mind. His regulars aren’t coming out like they used to. He’s doing all he can to keep the bar from going under. I’ve had to pull from my savings just to cover the roof.

Then he sticks us with this guy, I said. Why does he keep bringing people into our home when he can’t bother to live here himself?

She said, Those hail storms last spring blew up a lot of shingles. If we get another season of downpours like that, it could rot the rafters and cave in the roof. We have to take care of this before it gets worse. Daryl roofs for a living and gets wholesale price on materials. He’s offered to do the work in exchange for staying here. Plus, Ms. Lindley’s agreed to take it out of the rent if we pay for it ourselves. Your father would have been crazy to turn that down.

Do you think it will take two whole weeks? I asked.

Probably less, she said. If he was only doing our roof it would take about five days, but since he’s got his own work it’s going to take longer. I’m not going to hound him to rush the job.

She stood and walked to the door. Look, she said. He’s probably not going to need your help often, but I want you up there in case he does. It’ll be over before you know it.
Most mornings Daryl was off to his own roofing job before I even poured my cereal. Unlike previous guests, he never seemed at ease with the situation. He didn’t leave his blankets or pillow on the couch, and kept all of his clothes stashed neatly in his bag.

Another thing separating him from previous boarders was that he worked pretty quickly. He got off from his own job around three o’clock, and beat me home from school by an hour. By the time I arrived that first Monday, he was already up there, kneeling on the roof. As he pounded away, I changed from normal school clothes into old jeans and a sweatshirt. I scaled the clunking aluminum ladder slowly, thinking that it could fall back shaking with me at any second.

Toss those old ridge shingles into the back of my truck, he said, directing me around with his long handled axe-hammer. His Toyota was backed to the edge of the house.

A warm front had pushed itself up from the coast, and we were feeling it heavily off of the roof. Daryl pulled at his shirt. Try not to send them through the window, he said, smiling.

I decided to make a game of it. As Daryl nailed down the loose or curling shingles around the house, I sent the old ones spinning to the bed of his truck. Most went in, but some didn’t. Within an hour I’d cleared the small, shiny stack.

I hardly noticed when he walked up behind me. But the instant he put his hand on my shoulder, I lurched forward and started to lose my balance. He grabbed beneath my armpit and pulled back. He said, Whoops, sorry.

I jerked my arm away from him and pulled it closer to my side. By the expression on his face, I wasn’t sure if his apology was for the startle or having touched me at all.

When I was your age, he said, my uncle started me out by taking me with him on summer and weekend jobs. He gave me a nickel for every one I got in. What are you up to?

Daryl nodded toward the pick-up.

Fifty-three, I thought, looking down at the pile. Hell if I know, I said.
I descended the ladder cautiously and threw the rest in his truck. Sparky started barking from behind the chain link fence that wrapped around our back yard. Is that about it? I hollered, going to pet my dog.

That should be fine, he said. I’m sure you have matters of your own to attend. Your mother left a list of chores on the refrigerator. Probably you need to get to that, then your homework.

I thought about letting Daryl have it right there by saying something like, Daryl, you’re probably you’re the last person who should start ordering people around. Then I figured it would only get something started.

I walked into the house, pulled the list from the fridge. My mother knew these notes weren’t really necessary, but I think it was one of the things she liked to do. At the bottom of every one she wrote, Thanks---Love, Mom. It was her way of reminding me, for when I came home and the house was empty.

The shingles arrived some time the next day, stacked around the rooftop in a line of brown paper rectangles. By late that afternoon Daryl had scaffolds constructed like shelves along the sloping sides. As we went through each step, he explained the process.

First things first, Daryl told me on Tuesday, is I explain the materials. I’m not trying to make you a roofer or nothing, but when I ask you to get me something, I want for you to get it without standing around unsure of what you’re looking for. This, he held up a shiny, pebbled shingle, is a three tab asphalt. These, he pointed, are nail holes. These are the cut-outs and this shiny black stuff is self-sealing adhesive.

Don’t you need to take off the rest of the shingles? I asked suspiciously.

Not with asphalt or fiberglass shingles, he said. But that’s a good question, Chris. Up north it would be too much weight if you kept adding on, what with snow and all. So, yes, up there you would pull up all the old roofing. Or else replace it section by section as things rot. But that, keep in mind, is a Yankee thing to do.

Got it, I said.

Now this is the way I figured it, he said, setting down the three-tab, then picking up a clipboard. You and your folks have a 1500 square foot roof here. Each of those bundles contains 27 three tabs; three bundles make what we call a square. Each square
covers 100 feet. In order to figure out exactly what we’d need, we have to calculate the square footage of the roof and divide by 100.

He started carrying numbers. He might as well have been writing Russian, considering my attention span and weaknesses in math. For the rest of the day I learned what things like galvanized ring shank nails, builder’s felt, rake, ridge shingles and drip edges were. I nodded my head as he went along, feeling the information get jumbled and compressed. I crossed my arms and started thinking about other things, like school and what was in the kitchen for dinner. Daryl must have caught himself at some point in his lecture.

I’m just telling you this so you know, he said. Most times I won’t even need you up here. Just try not to think of it as anything more than hanging Christmas lights or something. It’s a step-by-step process.

I thought about telling him we’d never hung Christmas lights, that those sorts of things were considered trivial in my household. Just like me being stuck up on the roof with him made little or no sense to me at all.

I would catch my father coming and going some afternoons, when he made random visits to check the roof or grab clean clothes. When we spoke it was brief. He would ask short questions, not stopping what he was doing. I drew out answers to something like, How’s school? by going in-depth about problems on a Geometry test, or my A in English. The conversations would turn to friends and girls, or as he jokingly labeled it, the pussy situation. He would then climb into his black Silverado and make his way back to Tidewater Flats. As I climbed the ladder and watched him drive away, there was the sense of us having just played a one-ended game of catch, in which I kept tossing balls that he did not return.

At nights, after dinner, Daryl sat with my mother as they talked about their day. He told her stories about the people he worked with and the distrustful customers who took time off from their jobs so they could spend the day in lawn chairs, making sure they weren’t getting ripped off by the roofing company. These people would ask, Who’s that? whenever a new employee showed up, or What’s that for? whenever a new set of materials was brought in.
Usually when my mother complained about her job, she did so with a resigned intonation that sent me reeling. My usual response was, Why don’t you quit if you hate it so much? But after hearing some of Daryl’s stories, I guess she didn’t think hers amounted to much. She could then laugh and smile while she went off about the day care teacher who got fired for showing up to work with whiskey on her breath. They spoke until they sighed and had little left to say. She seemed more content than I had seen her in years.

She told Daryl about my problems with math. Seeing no alternative, I let him examine my homework once it was finished. He sat behind me on the tan corduroy couch, using the same flat pencil that he used with the roofing. As we worked through the problems and he explained my mistakes, I forgot about the way his voice rose and fell, stopped fidgeting thinking that at any second my dad might walk in to see this weird guy leaning over me.

I departed from the notion that Daryl was gay at all, and therefore, not a threat to me. He was a man who spent days doing manual labor, then made time to sit and talk with my mother. He was willing to help me out with homework, talk about school without questioning my social life. It only took days for me to feel closer to him than, it seemed, I had been to my father in some time. So when he leaned over me—smelling of sunburn, hands thick and course from working all day—I felt okay with it. The only thing I feared about my father coming home, then, was wrecking the feeling that Daryl brought into my house.

As we worked on the roof or homework together, I often considered turning to Daryl to ask what had happened; what had been so bad that he agreed to do all of this in exchange for so little. But I knew better than to meddle in others’ affairs. Plus I didn’t want to embarrass him. Perhaps, looking back, I just didn’t want to know.

That Friday I managed to get a B on my geometry quiz. Daryl congratulated me by handing over one of his old tool belts. We joked about it knowing that, once he was gone, I would probably never use it again. By that time the roof was almost completed. We knew that by the next night it would be done.
We had flashed the new shingles along the bend of my L-shaped home and were working our way to the ridges and edges. Daryl would stand by while I measured out each three-tab before cutting it down. He let me make mistakes without any harsh corrections; instead, he threw another shingle in my direction and told me to try it over again. Sometimes, without looking up, I tossed it right back to him like a frisbee. When my father stopped by, I waved from the roof.

He paused for a second, then walked back out. He seemed small from where I stood.

Hey, Chris, he said. Why don’t you come down here for a second.

I looked over at Daryl.

We’re pretty much done for today, Daryl said. Go on down and spend some time with your daddy.

I descended the ladder quickly, skipping rungs as I jumped down.

What’s up? I thumped the dome light while walking in through the front door.

In here, he called from the bedroom.

Did you see the new roof? I asked. Looks pretty good, doesn’t it?

He tossed fresh shirts and jeans on the bed. I wasn’t surprised. I put my hands in the pockets of my new suede toolbelt, rolled the galvanized nails around in my palms.

How’s school? He asked.

Fine, I said.

He stopped and looked up. And your mother?

She’s still your wife, I joked.

He didn’t smile back at me.

We’re all doing fine, I guess.

My father stopped packing his bag and looked up. Before, I had seen all sorts of looks in his eyes: anger, joy, disappointment, and sadness. For the first time ever, his eyes seemed hesitant. He looked around his bedroom, lost, as if he wasn’t sure of his surroundings. He focused on the bed, then me, and then the ceiling.

I knew then I’d totally said the wrong thing to him.
Later that night he called my mother from Greener Acres. Rather than sit with Daryl at the dinner table talking, she went into her bedroom and spoke to my father on the phone. Every so often she came out, went to the kitchen, grabbed an Old Milwaukee, and then returned to her room. Daryl and I sat on the couch watching television, but I could still faintly hear her talking to my father through the bedroom door.

I’m not going to come up there tonight, Eu, she said to him. I’ve told you a hundred times why not. Plus, I’m tired and it’s late. You should have asked me yesterday. I know I’m your wife. Yeah, you should ask in advance.

I turned up the volume on the television. Daryl nodded his head, but kept his eyes glued to the bedroom door.

As I lay in bed that night I considered many things while making wishes on the glow stars tacked to my ceiling. It seemed years had passed since my parents had gotten along, when we did the sort of family things my friends talked about in school. I almost felt sorry for my father because it seemed that sometimes he really wanted to be a family man, but wasn’t clear of what that role entailed. In a way, I wanted this new life I had to continue, and then my father could start up again on his own. In other ways, I wanted for him to see how good things could be if he followed Daryl’s example. I wasn’t sure of what I wanted.

I must have dozed off. Muffled voices woke me up. I looked at my clock. In split red lines, it read 1:00. I tip-toed through the dark and pressed my ear against the door. My mother’s voice was hushed behind it. I turned the knob slowly.

I think Sally’s her name, she said. I’m not sure exactly which or who this one is, but I’ve seen her waitressing and working the bar sometimes.

I expected to hear my father start yelling. I pressed the door slowly.

I just don’t know what to do anymore, she said. I guess I keep hoping that things will turn around. I feel like we’re in the middle of a circle here. Been here done this. What now, ya know?

I walked on the sides of my feet through the hallway. The floor felt icy beneath my bare toes.
But mostly I want to just pick up and leave, she said. It seems that this bar has ruined my life.

I edged along as I came to the doorway leading to the living room. I pressed my shoulders to the wall, turned slightly to see inside.

I want us to be together, she said. You, me and Chris.

Her head was resting in Daryl’s lap. I stared at the ceiling, clenched my teeth tight.

Daryl said to her, What will I tell Chris some day?

I tightened my fists, almost feeling his words. I didn’t want him to say it.

When will he be old enough for me to sit him down, tell him, Christopher, I’m gay? None of it would make sense to him. That wouldn’t be right.

Everything around me—walls, floor, and ceiling—went blurry and mixed-up. I didn’t want to hear any more of this conversation, didn’t want to be a part of words they were using. No one seemed right. Everywhere I turned, it seemed the floor fell out beneath me. I covered my ears with my palms, went to my room. I banged an elbow passing back through the doorway. I only heard the loud thud, but couldn’t feel it. I wanted to feel it. I flipped on the light and made for the telephone. I dialed the number to Greener Acres.

Music roared in the background. A woman smacking gum.

Eu who?

Your boss, I said, plugging one ear. Please put Eu Saxton on the telephone.

This his wife? She asked.

I looked at my face in the mirror on my dresser. My mouth was turned out, eyes bright red. A tear hung off the corner of my nose. I sniffled and wiped it.

No, I said. It isn’t.

Oh. Well, I ain’t seen Eu but once tonight. Earlier. He left here with Sally.

Probably headed up the road.

Do you know where I can reach him?

I ain’t the faintest. Maybe try Sally’s house if you got that number.

The music went louder. I could barely hear her. In the distance I heard her say, I don’t know and I don’t give a shit.
The receiver clicked, then went silent. I sat there listening, still looking in the mirror, and cupping the phone against my chin. I waited and waited for my father to answer. I sat there staring, but no one returned.

The next morning I awoke to thumps of rain and the sound of a tarp being slid across the roof. I walked to the kitchen. My mother nursed a cup of coffee.

Morning, Sunshine, she said.
I ignored her. She couldn’t even bother making breakfast.
Is everything okay? She asked.
Yeah, I said. Fine.
I opened the refrigerator, realized I wasn’t hungry. I said, Dad didn’t call, did he?
No, she said. Should he have?
I was just wondering, I said. I walked past her to my room.

As the rain kept up throughout the weekend, I barely spoke to anyone unless they asked a question. I decided that when and if my father stopped by, I would try to explain that it’d be best if I went with him. I wasn’t sure just how to account for it, but I figured my mother would be better off with me gone. Even as I packed my own small duffel bag, I knew that what I’d conceived was impossible. My father was working on another life somewhere; something that did not include me.

By Monday the warm spring sun had returned. That afternoon, I came home from school to find Daryl kneeling at the ridge of the roof, nailing in the final top row of shingles. He wore a sweat splotched T-shirt and dark green ball cap. He waved and I ignored him.

I heard his footsteps on the roof, little pebbles tumbling down. I flipped on the TV while heading to my room.

I was changing in the bathroom when the screen door slammed. I hoped it was my father on one of his afternoon visits. My heart started to race as I heard tap water running, then footsteps grow louder as he approached the bathroom. My shirt was draped over my head, wrapped inside out around my elbows. The doorknob clicked.

Oops, sorry, Daryl said, and the door clacked shut.
I yanked the shirt back down over my chest. I stomped into the living room burning with embarrassment. My teeth clenched, elbows stiffened, hands fell into fists.

In this house, I said, we knock before entering.

Sorry about that, he said.

I recognized the dark green hat as my father’s.

Daryl looked at the television then back at me. He said, We should finish up the roof pretty quick today. After that there’s also your To Do list tacked on the fridge.

First off, I said, about these lists my mother leaves for me. I stomped into the kitchen, snatched it down, and walked back. I clicked off the television and said, You might think I’m an idiot when it comes to math, but Ms. Ludwig taught me how to read in the first grade, and I haven’t had a problem with it since. I crumpled the paper and threw it in the corner. And, secondly, I said, why don’t you toss me my father’s cap before you go and screw it up with all of your queer sweat.

What the hell’s gotten into you? He asked.

I rubbed my hands together, held them out like a catcher’s mitt.

He pointed. This old thing?

Yeah, that old thang, I said.

It landed in my palms. I was disgusted to see that thick mats of perspiration had soaked it all over. Dotted flakes of woodchips smeared across the white puffed up TIDEWATER logo.

Check out the name on the inside tag, he pointed, before you go getting yourself too worked up.

I pulled up the white, nylon square from the inside band. In smeared and faded purple ink it read Daryl Farmer. I felt my ears pulse red and cheeks turn warm. I wrapped the bill in a cone and handed it back to him.

Is that your handwriting or your boyfriend’s? I asked.

He inspected the tag. It’s my momma’s, I think. He shrugged, then wrapped the cap around his head. Whatever it is that’s possessed you, he said, I want nothing to do with it. I’ll finish up the roof by myself. Just make sure you get the list done before your mom gets home. Then start on your math and I’ll look over it after dinner.
He relaxed his shoulders and started walking back out the door. The way he did it so casually, I thought I could murder him.

I reached out and tried to shove Daryl across the threshold. He wheeled around quickly, grabbed the bones in my wrists. I tried to beat the edges of my hands against his chest. Do you know what you are? I yelled.

He spun me around, wrapped his arms around my waist.

What you’re doing? I continued.

He hoisted me up until my feet left the floor.

My hands wouldn’t budge. I yelled, Let go of me, faggot!

The more I struggled, the tighter Daryl restrained. I yelled every obscenity that I had ever been called in school or had overheard men say in Greener Acres. I tried to shake my shoulders loose, and I threw my head to catch his nose. But the air drained out of me until couldn’t move anymore. Daryl clenched me like a doll, expended against him. My head hung loose, all the warmth flushed out of it. I slumped forward, suspended. My chest pounded, ears rang. I heaved with frustration, tears running down my face. I wanted to reach to wipe my face but could not. I threw one last elbow that bumped soft against his ribs. I said, faintly, I saw you and Mom on Friday night. We were fine before you came. Now you’ve ruined everything.

He loosened his arms. My feet padded to the carpet. You, I said, should leave.

Daryl worked quietly into twilight. Once the final shingles were tossed in his pick-up and the last nails thumped down, he sat alone on the roof. I could hear him shifting above my bedroom while we both waited for my mother to arrive. As the sun began to fall, I felt more and more ridiculous about what I had said. I knew that Daryl wasn’t to blame for the way everyone was acting, and he didn’t deserve to be called all of those names. I knew that, eventually, I’d have to face him again, and that meant I would need to apologize.

My mother finally arrived with a trunk load of groceries. In the silence of our kitchen, we were unpacking food when the screen door slammed. We looked across at each other as though we’d been caught doing something wrong. My father treaded in
through the archway that separated the kitchen from the dining room. He wrapped an arm around my mother’s waist, pressed his cheek to her lips.

She pecked him quickly, then turned back to the cupboards. She said, Come to grace us with your presence this evening?

Actually, he said, I’m only here for a minute. We’ve got a big tournament on the pool tables tonight, and I stopped off to see if Daryl could help out.

Daryl looked confused. Tournament? He said. On a Monday night?

Should be a pretty big crowd, my father said. I could really use a hand. And you could probably use the extra tip money. What with you moving to your new place and all.

My mother turned to Daryl. You didn’t mention you’d found a place, she said.

The leasing agent called me at the bar, my father said. I think his name was Sidney something. Is that right, Daryl? He came by Tidewater Flats looking for you today. Says you can even move in tonight, if you like. Said he’d stop by the bar and drop off a key.

My mother looked at Daryl. She said, Well, that won’t be necessary. Daryl, you’re more than welcome—

Daryl turned to my father and said, Sidney Voertman?

My father shrugged and said, I didn’t catch a last name. He came by Tidewater Flats saying you left that number with him. He’s been trying to reach you for a couple of days.

He came into the bar?

My father nodded, glaring at Daryl. Looking for you, he said.

Daryl tapped his foot and slowly surveyed the floor. He took a deep breath, then looked up at my father. That’s great, he said. I’ll need to shower and change first.

Sure, sure, my father said. Get all cleaned up.

Um, Elizabeth, Daryl said, turning toward my mother. I’m probably not coming back tonight, so go ahead and lock up when I leave. Daryl then looked at my father. Unless you’re coming back, he said.

My father dangled his keys from a finger and shook them. I’m all set, he said.

Once Daryl left the room, my mother turned toward my father. You never told me about a tournament. When did all of this get planned?
My father detached from her. Friday night, he said. Right after you and I got off the phone.

He ran his hand through my hair as he passed me on his way out of the kitchen. I could hear his teeth grinding slowly back and forth. His face was settled into the same pushing glare that he had just before he’d dragged Ronny out of the house.

My mother followed him. Eu, she said. Please don’t do this.

They walked back into the kitchen.

Don’t do what? My father asked, holding the cordless phone against his ear. Who are you calling? She asked.

Mind your own business, he said, then into the telephone, Hey, it’s me. Tell Sally I’ll be back in twenty minutes. Yeah, the roof looks fine.

So that’s that? My mother asked. Her arms crossed, lips pursed. She reached up to wipe her cheek.

Someday, he said to her, you’ll thank me for this. It’s bad enough that I let him into our home, but then you go and fall for him. A queer, of all people.

You don’t know that, she said, shaking her head. You don’t know anything.

Do you want to know how I found out, he asked her, the truth about Daryl?

Saturday morning, this fella comes into the bar looking for our houseguest here. Tells me he’s been looking for Daryl. Can’t find him anywhere. He knows that Daryl works there sometimes for extra money. Just tell him, this guy says to me, tell him the tests turned out okay. Everything is fine. He can come home whenever he’s ready. Daryl told me last Saturday that his girlfriend kicked him out.

Besides, he said, turning to me, I don’t need his way and all that comes with it rubbing off on Christopher.

He could have knocked me absolutely senseless at that moment, and I would not have felt such humiliation. I shook with the frustration, anger, and embarrassment of having my own private uncertainties thrown out so senselessly. My cheeks started to burn. Everything inside of me said to walk away.

You think Daryl’s going to make me gay? I said.

My father didn’t answer.
I knew that I wasn’t. I knew my reasons for reading my mother’s romance novels; knew that whenever I made dinner or breakfast, I was trying bring some normalcy to my family. I didn’t play sports because I couldn’t stand coaches or the idea of showering with other guys. But right then I wanted to hurt my father the same way he was hurting me.

I said, So what if I am? Would you do to me what you’re doing to Daryl? Take me off somewhere? Get me out of your house?

Yes, he said. He looked me straight in the eye. I would. There’s absolutely no question about it.

Fine, I said. I meant it. At least we knew where we stood with each other.

You wanna talk ways? I said. I called Greener Acres on Friday night wanting to talk about what I’d said that afternoon. But, as it turned out, I don’t have Sally’s phone number. Or the number to wherever you two went.

My mother stepped away from him. Was this before or after you asked me to come up there?

It was just after 1 am, I said.

She thought for a moment, and then turned to me quickly.

I shook my head at her. I couldn’t get to sleep, I said. Either way, it doesn’t matter anymore. The roof is done. That’s all that you guys wanted out of him, right? Why you brought him here in the first place?

Daryl walked back into the room. His face was smooth and hair parted to the side. His duffel bag was slung over his shoulder.

You all good to go? My father asked him, pushing himself back up from the counter-top.

Ready as I’ll ever be, Daryl said. Then he looked down at me. I guess that this is, So long and see ya’, he said.

I wanted to tell him that he didn’t have to go if he didn’t feel ready, that I was sorry about that afternoon. But the expression he gave told me not to say anything, that he understood and that things were okay. He extended his hand to me. It sure was good getting to know you, Chris.

I shook his hand.
He straightened as my father approached. Together the two of them walked out of the house.

My mother stood there holding herself, trying not to cry too hard.

The screen door in the living room slammed. I heard an engine outside turn over. My father’s truck left the driveway.

I’m sorry you had to find out like that, I said.

You had no right to act like that, she said. She walked away and shut the bedroom door behind her.

Two days later she gave me a new key with which to open the front door. That night I awoke to my father rattling the walls from outside of the house with his voice, telling my mother and me to open the house. I was asleep in the beginning. I expected my mother to give in eventually, but instead watched from a slit of curtain through my bedroom window as all of the lights in the house that I could see from that vantage blinked out one by one. First the dining room, the living room, and then finally, the master bedroom. He yelled a while longer, then stomped out to his car. I got up and turned off the ringer to my phone. I guess my mother’d done the same because I slept though the night and into the next morning.

Three years later, I attended Daryl’s funeral service with my mother and stepfather, Stephen; a man she actually met through Daryl. In the large brown funeral home set in Rendon, Texas, we sat together on a hard wooden pew toward the front and center wearing black just like everyone else in the room, but each of us having our own memories of Daryl. I knew what he’d died from—what my father had ignorantly thought he was saving us from. My father was not at the service. He ended up not taking Daryl back to Tidewater Flats that night, something my father told me later. He figured it best to just let Daryl go back to home to whatever he had to leave in the first place.

I was nervous as we approached the open casket. I didn’t want to see Daryl’s face changed, scared he might be scarred with the lesions I’d seen in so many movies, on so many television shows. Daryl lay there in his blue suit with a crimson tie and starched shirt. His hair was combed back to the side as when he’d left that night, he seemed to
have the same grin he’d given me several times when I screwed up my homework or made mistakes measuring shingles. His face was gaunt, but there were no spots to notice. He was the same tall, blonde haired guy who’d picked me up one day and grabbed hold of me the way that I’d needed to be held, who let me kick and scream and cry until nothing was left in me. As my mother squeezed my hand, I knew he’d probably held her in some way as well and, just as she cannot imagine way he touched me, I can only fathom to what degree he reached her.

We turned around to walk away and I looked out over the dots of white faces crowding the room: his mother in a flower printed blue dress, her face leaned into a tissue; Sidney in the very front left aisle sitting alone, people I’d seen at Greener Acres years ago. Faces and faces of all the people Daryl had come across and set down in different paths once we’d known him. We looked at each other and smiled, wiped our cheeks, and nodded back.
I can see my breath in this Texas morning where the sunlight’s layered in orange, purple, and greens like watercolor paints over the pale blue sky. The ground is still wet outside my father’s house from last night’s rainfall. There’s chance it will fall more today as well. I slide a long plastic Igloo cooler across the backyard, pulling the box back with my knees bent like in some game of tug of war, gripping one of the thick handles in my fist. Shrimp jostle around but not too much in the cooler; the day is still early and the ice covering the shrimp remains in shards and is not cold water yet. The time is eight or so a.m. on Sunday. I wasn’t supposed to work today, but that’s how it’s getting to be with my father sick as ever, nerves shot to hell. He called me away from a friend’s house at 6 a.m. this morning. I suspect he didn’t sleep at all last night. I swear beneath my breath, and my breath comes out. I smell grease coming out the back door of the house: grease from frying eggs, from bacon, from the hamburger that my father, Eu, is cooking for me to eat for lunch later on today. I can picture the food, smell it, but not taste it and my stomach grumbles. This goddam cooler, I think, has got to go.

I must be thinking only about the food because I slide the cooler somehow along the corner of the concrete porch. The bottom of the box where it’s worn gets snagged. I pull too hard, too quickly, and the cooler topples over with the lid tipping open. Fifty pounds of unheaded shrimp and ice roll out the top and landslide until resting flat on the dewy grass and dirt. I step back and put my hands on my hips.

Shit.

As figured, Eu is suddenly there in the doorway wearing blue jeans, a three button collar shirt and a cap that’s gotten too big for his head. His shoulder is pressed against the
screen door to hold it open. In his hand he holds a large iron skillet from which steam rises. A year ago he would have freaked out from me doing this, would have run into the yard and started pointing at the stuff strewn on the ground and started yelling. But not today. Today he says, Uh-oh and smiles in a playful way. Then he turns and goes back in letting the screen door shut behind him.

After the shrimp have been picked up, set into a different cooler, hosed down, had the water drained from them, then set back clean in with the old shrimp, I grab the two sides of the cooler, bend over, then lift it to my chest so that I can place it into the van alongside the other two identical boxes. Only when the stab of pain hits my spine like the deep fastidious jolt of an icepick do I remember again to lift with my legs and not my back, otherwise I’m going to give myself a hernia. Technically, now we are ready to head out. I’m finally awake. I wipe my hands on the inside knees of my jeans, cross the porch, and hop over the steps. I open the screen door.

Walking through the kitchen I cup my hands together, blow into the crevasse between my thumbs, then rub my palms together. The air in this house is heavy with heating and I hang my jacket. Eu’s back is to me. He’s standing at the stove. He points with a fork to a plate on the countertop with eggs, bacon, grits. That’s yours, he tells me. Sit down and eat. I run my hands underneath the kitchen faucet, pick up the plate, and cross the linoleum. I sit down at the plastic topped kitchen table and start shoveling the food in my face, barely tasting anything aside from butter. Through the screen door I can make out the white van in the backyard, its doors still wide open, the three coolers lined up side-by-side together. Everything looks orderly. Right now that truck smells like pine cleaner and soap. Later it won’t.

Hardly a morning like this arrives when I start the day off without making the wish that our business would collapse, selfish as that sounds. I don’t wonder what I’d do if the chance should arrive. But then I look at Eu standing at the kitchen sink, rinsing the pan beneath the faucet’s cold water. There is his elbow, his arms, his boney hips and I think of the weight he’s dropped this past year. Three years ago when the Texas Health Department shut us down that first time we busted ass, tooth, and nail to raise the truck to their standards. There’s not a snowball’s chance in hell we could pull off now the sort of overhaul we did to the van back then. We can hardly repair the week to week things such
as leaks in the coolers and cracks in the scales that call for quick jimmy-rigging or else a
shrug that says, Later if there is time.

After a few bites my stomach starts to settle and I notice the sun has risen further
in the horizon behind the truck. It’s going to be sunny today after all. I think to myself,
That wasn’t so bad, the shrimp falling over. Maybe I’ll make some real dough today.
Maybe I’ll sell out early, come home quick and make an easy day of this. Fuck it, I think
to myself, I will. My fingers are still pink and burning from the cold, but I’m used to this
and pay little attention to them.

a place in this
Two years have passed since Eu and my mother, Elizabeth, split up. I’ve been living
with him and his girlfriend, Sally, since last July. I moved in twelve hours after I packed
my duffel bag in the middle of the night with whatever I could fit in it, grabbed my
Gibson SG guitar in its case, and left my mother and stepdad’s at one in the morning. My
no face was no longer burning red. My jaws were locked with acquiescence. I walked
sixteen miles through grassy backroad ditches beneath an audience of stars to get here.

Eu and Sally’s house is average sized for Rendon where it’s not so much the
house you live in, but the amount of land you have to set the house upon. For instance,
it’s not unusual for some around here to set a modular home on an acre of land, then
either add utility sheds around the house or go so far as to add another part of the house
onto the house. It does make sense; that’s why they use the term “modular”. My father
and Sally’s place is basically a single-wide, but there’s a large utility shed out back, a
circular gravel driveway in front, and half a dozen oak trees growing in the yard. Out
behind the utility shed he’s got a garden full of tomato plants, squash, some cucumber,
and three marijuana plants that almost reach my chin, planted dead center in the middle.
My father calls them Larry, Moe, and Curly. They’re to help out with the pain of chemo,
he’s told me. Something he says a doctor suggested. Eu’s offered a couple times, but I
won’t touch the stuff. I won’t tell him I think dope is for white trash because I know it
eases the cramps and headaches that come with chemo.

Sally is all right. I can tell she feels a little imposed upon with me here, but my
father is sick and I make life easier for him by being around—that’s what she tells me.
Thoughout the week I help her keep the house straightened, lend a hand to my father in the yard when he needs it. Every other weekend I sell shrimp by the roadside unless he’s simply not up to it, which is exactly what happened today.

spills

I feel the metal pan of the hanging scales on my shoulder then hear the crash as I lift up like an idiot into it. Everything spills; a load of cold water, shaved ice, and limp bodies come pouring down my hair and the back of my shirt until finally slapping to the cooler tops and linoleum floor of the van. Some are scattered across the cabinet we installed a few weeks ago, resting in the metal sinks or along the faucet knobs. I shake off the shrimp that wrap and cling by their whiskers, then reach to pull the soaked shirt from my spine. The place is a mess and I’m feeling like a jerk. Especially with this joker standing here in front of me.

He stands down there between the doors, in front of the coolers, wearing mirror sunglasses. He’s grinning huge with these big ass teeth and his face marked with pits from old acne. He throws up his hands and says to me, Ahh, shit man. I ain’t paying for those. He waves a pointing finger at the shrimp strewn about.

Cars zip by on the highway behind him. The day has turned bright and clear, the sky clean of clouds. The sunlight’s so bright it reflects off everything, even the black pavement of the street and the gravel beside it. Across the road from the van is an open field of waist high grass, sunflowers and bluebonnets. Just beyond that is a new apartment complex that, from here, looks like brown boxes in the distance.

I tell the guy, I know, man. I wouldn’t do that to you.

You couldn’t, he says.

I give him one of my looks and hook the scales back to the ceiling. He kind of pulls back, which is what I was going for. I keep my trap shut, though. Always let the customer have the last word, especially after you’ve just made a jackass of yourself.

Turning back to the cooler before he can say more, I dig my hands into the icy, brown water again. I’ve been doing this five years now—since I turned ten—and know distinctly how five pounds feels. Instinct, Eu calls it. You have to go straight in with
fingers loose, reaching deep for the cooler bottom, then clasp them together like a tractor’s claw pulling what you need together. If you press too hard the serrated prongs on their heads will jab like splinters into your fingers. Most times, you’ll end up with more than necessary, but it’s better to dump some back than stick your hands in that water. Sometimes it’s best to convince yourself that only the bones in your fingers exist—no muscles, no nerves, no feeling at all.

The guy stands on his tiptoes and looks up at the scale, making sure that I’m not screwing him over.

I say, I tossed in a few extra.

It’s just those heads, he says, and all that ice.

I tip the scale slightly to give him a better view. No water pours out. I ask him jokingly, How much ice do you see in there?

He flashes me those teeth again, saying we’re all right.

I grin right back to him. Yeah, we’re cool.

Once weighed, I empty the shrimp into a small white garbage bag. In one move, I spin it then wrap the bag inside itself. I twirl it again and snap a brown sack open behind me. I slip the bag in, roll the sack end-over-end, and put a tab of white masking tape over the edge. I wipe my right hand across the thigh of my jeans and pull a Sharpie from my front right pocket. I snap the cap off in my teeth and press my forearm along the bundle. Moisture presses at the creases. Across the barely flattened top I sketch the dense head, bowed body, and whiskers of a shrimp. In the whiskers I spell out “Saxton’s Fresh Seafood” in thick, curvy letters that end in pointed wisps. Beneath the edge of the tape I slip in a business card, this way if people want to make special orders they can call us before-hand.

To me, this is clockwork, but Dad calls it flair. Says it helps to bring back business.

I hand the bag over to the guy and in return he gives me a twenty dollar bill. I say, Thanks, man.

He starts walking away, then wheels around on the heel of his boot. Have fun cleaning that shit up, he says laughing.
I laugh with him but I can feel my ears turning red. I’m glad he’s finally leaving. As he walks away I turn around and write the sale in the spiral notebook: 5lb, then a dash, then $20.00. It’s the sale we have on the little shrimp. Otherwise they are $4.99 a pound. The medium shrimp go for $6.99, and the jumbos are $7.99 per pound. I open the register and slide the twenty in with the other bills, all faced. As the guy pulls his pick-up back onto the highway he waves and I wave back. I say to myself as he leaves, No hard feelings. Come back and see us. You ugly motherfucker.

nickname

Everybody knows I can bullshit an old man. Say the shrimp is five days old and we’ve had to bleach them because they look bad. I won’t hesitate to stare you right in the eye and say, Yes, siree. We got these babies in this morning. Straight off the boats down in Galveston, Texas.

Or else, Sure you can butterfly these popcorn shrimp. Fry ‘em on up. They’ll taste better than any Jumbo. But I’ve also got these Tiger Daddies I’ve been hiding for someone special. You seem intelligent—tell me if you can get a better deal someplace else. I’ll buy them out myself and start pushing vegetables. Saxton’s Fresh Alfalfa Sprouts. How’s that for a title?

I’ll say, Listen up. I’m damn near giving these away to you. But only now. This second. You can take it or you can leave it.

Nine out of ten times you’ll reach for your wallet.

It’s important we sell out before Sunday evening. On weekends, we set up outside a flea market in Fort Worth. My dad sometimes works by a car lot on Fridays, and on Thursdays, we send someone to the coast to get the shrimp. We have an Asian guy down there whose real name I can’t pronounce, but I know that his dogs live off fish guts and squid the man tosses on the docks. He dealt with my grandpa when he ran the truck but now deals with Dad since Grandpa passed away.

Grandpa’s the one who started me out with this. In those days we’d clear a thousand bucks per weekend. Those were the good days when shrimp cost half of what we pay now, and believe me this guy could talk. Most of my spiel I got from him. He
used to sit there while women of all ages brought him fruit pies, cakes, and fried chicken. He would tell me to hold down the fort and say thanks to the lady for my fine dinner. Then he’d split for an hour or so and that gave me practice. I used his fast, flowing voice and smooth gestures on the “suckers.”

I’ve never enjoyed this line of work, but it’s nice to close a sale. Especially when it’s a busy Sunday afternoon and the coolers are draining quickly of shrimp. Sometimes the cars line up five and six deep. That’s when you’ve really got to get in gear. The money’s not bad, I get fifty cents per pound even on the small ones. In a weekend I can clear eighty dollars, which isn’t bad pay for someone my age. Still, most of my friends are starting to get jobs either sacking groceries or at some place in the mall. I keep pressuring Eu to maybe hire outside help, especially for weekends like this one when I’ve got other plans. He says his nerves are shot. I know that he’s spending most of his time at the bar watching football. He doesn’t have it easy right now. He tells me as soon as the chemo lets up, as soon as the cancer goes into remission, we can start talking about me getting another job. Right now, he tells me, money’s just too tight.

Lay off those cigarettes, I tell him. Steer clear of those beer joints.

I will some day, he says. Don’t boss me around.

the order in which things fall

Everything happens in three’s, Grandpa would say. When my grandfather died of emphysema, Eu took it really hard. He stayed distant from everyone for a while and really started knocking back the hard stuff. When my mother found out about Eu and Sally’s affair she changed the locks on the doors of our old house. Usually, my father’s the one laying out guilt trips, but somehow she managed to pull a real fast one. Just after that the doctors found Dad’s throat cancer. Talk about timing.

Months passed and the radiation treatment didn’t work. It fried his saliva glands so that he could barely swallow, had to spray down his mouth with saline before eating. Now they’re trying chemo and hopefully it will work. But it’s taken away his hair, made him skinnier than ever. If this doesn’t fix it, there’s the last ditch operation to remove his
larynx. My father’s proud of his voice. He says it’s how he makes his living. I’ve seen people who’ve had this surgery done and they speak through their noses, mouths shaped like O’s. Their chins look collapsed.

Eu’s said to me while gesturing at his throat, Just imagine. Your voicebox. One day here. The next, gone.

During the radiation, I still lived with my mother, but since then I’ve moved in with Eu. His viewpoints on hitting and my new stepdad’s differ. Maybe if I’d been raised like that, I wouldn’t really notice, but I wasn’t and things turned rough in the few months I stayed with them. My mother never knew or else pretended not to notice. I try not to blame her because she never raised a hand to me. But she never really came between me and one either. She cannot cope with being alone, Dad tells me. I’m finding out a whole lot about both of them, Eu and Elizabeth. Sometimes I think there should be standard criteria for people to discover their parents have wants, stubbornness and fears; things they will place before anyone else, no matter who that person is.

**this instant forever**

Around 4 p.m. she pulls up in her car, a convertible LeBaron. Black. It needs washing. She’s got black hair feathered across the top of her head. She’s wearing a red blouse, black jacket, black skirt and black pumps. Probably just getting back from church, I think. She comes up to the van, barely making a cross all that gravel in those shoes. I smile. I start to give her the spiel. She tips her glasses down her nose, looks up at me and between smacks of gums asks, Where do you go when you need to use the restroom?

Excuse me? I say. I can feel the hairs rising on the back of my neck, the tension in my arms.

That’s what I thought, she says. She pushes her glasses back up her face and taps one of the coolers. Stick tight, she says.

I think to myself, Health department.

I look around the van to see if there’s anything I need to adjust or fix up. Some of the shrimp that fell earlier with the one guy are still on the floor, drying out. The
weighing scale’s face is cracked. The floor sticks to the bottom of my shoes when I walk. The page where I mark down sales are hard from placing my wet hand against it, letting it dry. The running water’s broke. Coolers in bad shape. There’s nothing I can do about any of this right now. I leap to the glove box and dig for our permits.

She returns and tells me to open the rear doors. She walks around, I open them, and she steps up into the van with a clipboard and checklist. I want to shoulder her out but that would land me in the clink. She wants to see permits, and I show her what I’ve got. She examines them and says, You’ve got one here for Texas, but not for Grand Prairie. Where’s your permit for this area?

I tell her that Texas means Texas, all inclusive. This line has worked before with other people. Just play the slack-jawed, ignorant kid.

She shakes her head and says, Yeah, right.

She starts at the front of the van, checking out my homework and the Geometry I’ve been struggling through all day, sort of checking to see if I’m getting them right. She notes the grease-stained paper bag which once held my lunch. Then she goes through the van as if holding warrants. First the trash bags then Ziplocks and brown paper sacks. She measures the scales and makes note of the cracked face. She sticks thermometers in the coolers and turns some of the shrimp over in the palm of her hand. She yanks up their heads and peels at their skins. She asks me about the lines that run up their middles then she throws them back in the cooler with the others.

Those things are three days old, she says, at least.

No they’re not, I tell her. My arms are crossed. I’m at the front of the van staying out of her way.

The longer she stays the dirtier things seem. The floor is layered with a sticky brown film and whiskers of dead shrimp hang from the scales. The thirty-gallon coolers sit faded burnt-orange and most of their drain plugs are corked with baggies. The makeshift brown cabinets of plywood and screws are splintered and warped beneath the strain of the new sinks. There is no running hot water to clean my hands.

She asks how often I mop the floors. Where do I keep the drained dirty water? Again, where do I go when I have to use the bathroom?
I can almost hear my father saying, Talk to her. Get her out of here. Do just like Grandpa would have done in this situation.

I want to stop her but my head’s too cluttered and I can’t think straight to say the right words without stammering. With each question I respond. I tell her, Sure, on a normal day my dad would be here. But you see he’s got chemotherapy in the morning. I’m out alone today. The pump on the sinks broke an hour ago. I’ve used towelettes since then. I change the ice regularly—two or three times just this morning. I drain the old water into large plastic jugs that we give to a neighbor with a squash and tomato garden. You could call and ask her yourself, if I had the number. I close up shop when I need to take restroom breaks. I walk to the 7-11 just up the street.

All the while, I feel an urge to yank the whiskers from the scales or else scrub the floors right there in front of her.

Up to this point, I’ve felt cold and almost sick. But as she shakes her head after closing the cabinet doors and sits down on one of the coolertops, a warm feeling spreads through my stomach, in my chest, up the back of my neck; the same feeling I get when my father assures me he’ll beat this disease, when I know from the look he gives he’s not sure he’ll beat anything. It’s over, I think.

Shut the doors, she says.

What?

She holds out her hand. In her palm are two small black dots of something I’ve seen only on the floor beneath cabinets at home and behind the stove.

You’ve got rodent problems, she says through her teeth, disgusted. You’ve got rodent problems, this van is a mess, you don’t have the permits to set up in this county and I’m shutting you down. This instant, forever. You won’t sell here again. Not after the city sees my reports.

I look at her hand thinking I’m going to get nauseated. But then there’s a sort of sigh within me, a feeling of relief. Still, I packed the van myself this morning. I practically installed everything in here myself. I should know these things are here. I should know better what to do, in order for my father’s business not to go under. We’ve been doing this too long.
She takes a cell phone from her purse and goes outside. She paces in front of the van as I pack up my FRESH SHRIMP signs. At one point, a cherry red Mustang pulls up. Inside, there is a man with a boy about nine years old, maybe a little older. They are sitting side-by-side wearing matching shirts and sunglasses. The gold wire frames make the boy’s face look small, especially his nose. When the man reaches over the boy to roll down his window down, the lady walks over to the car and leans over.

This truck has been condemned, she says, due to health code violations. There’s a store down the street if you are interested in seafood.

The kid looks up at me, squinching his nose so the glasses won’t slip. The father scruffs his hair and rolls up the windows. He waves to the woman and she waves back. I feel like I’m watching all of this from far away; it’s got everything and nothing to do with me. The car peels up gravel and finally she leaves, smirking. Before she goes she says, I don’t expect to see your truck here again, okay? Every time you set up I’ll come back to shut you down. Show your father all those papers that I gave to you. The ones with all of the infractions listed. Each of those infractions is worth a ticket, and I doubt you guys can afford any of that.

Take care, she says, handing me a card. I read the name. Rebekah Clark.

I lean back against the sinks, press my palms against the counter tops. Wow, I think. I can’t believe it’s over. In a way I don’t want to admit, I’m relieved.

Still, I have no idea how we’re going to make ends meet.

our silent arrival
Eu looks pissed and nervous when he gets there. He steps out of Sally’s Nova and tells her it’s all right. She can head on home. His jaw is going crazy as he walks towards me.

I’m really, really sorry, I tell him.

He wraps his fingers around the back of my neck. Get inside the van, he says.

I climb into the passenger’s seat as he gets in on the driver’s side. He doesn’t start the engine. Instead, he knuckles the wheel and looks straight ahead.

I’m not mad at you, he says. I just want you to know that. But you have to tell me, for the business’s sake, exactly what that woman asked you.
I can’t remember everything, I tell him. I hand him the copy of the check list. He looks over it. I say, She looked at the coolers and looked at the shrimp. Then she said she found mice stuff underneath the sinks and that we’re not to set up here again.

Mice stuff? He turns to me. His eyes are squinting. What do you mean? That wasn’t the only thing, I say, pointing to the checklist. What did she find, though? Droppings, I say. Something about rodent problems.

Rat turds? he says. Speak up now, dammit. This woman told you she found rat turds in the van?

I don’t respond just yet. It’s that word that drives me into my chair, saying nothing. I feel every bit of grime and stench that covers the van as if I’m breathing it in and sweating it out. I want to yell at him every time he says it, but if I talk I’ll start bawling and I don’t want that. Not now, not here.

Still, he keeps on. What did she ask you?...What did you tell her?...Answer me when I talk to you.

Finally, staring down at the floorboard, the black rubber mat on which my shoes are grinding, I say, Stop it. There was nothing I could do. Not without you here.

He shakes his head. Five years, he says. Down the motherfucking tubes. And I can’t believe you let her go without calling me so that I could come talk to her. That’s just not smart thinking.

In silence, we drive to this beer-joint where I know most of the people inside by first name. I sit at a booth in the back beside the pool table. Layer upon layer of cigarette smoke sways inches above the burn-riddled carpet. It seems to settle in my eyes. Women at a table argue with men at the bar over the volume of Yoakam crooning from the jukebox. My father is amongst these men watching the Cowboys on a television set in a corner above the bar beside the liquor bottles and big mirror.

Occasionally, this cocktail waitress in a short skirt strolls over to give me an order to go fill in the van. At one point, I come back to a plate of plain Lays and barbecued brisket. I chew the sandwich slowly, taking large gulps. A rail-thin blonde woman is shooting pool with her boyfriend. He, I have noticed, wears his pants too tight for his
weird bulky ass. She thinks it’s funny to wink a caked-blue eye at me and make subtle kissy faces with her puffy mouth.

She says, You’re gonna be so handsome some day.

The guy looks at me and smiles. Spots of dip dot his gum line.

Why, that’s old Fishhead’s boy, he says too loudly.

My father looks over then back at the television.

Well, he sure is cute, she says. For a fishboy.

I look at the sandwich to see that the moisture from my fingers has crept up into the bun. Even if it doesn’t, the sandwich smells like old shrimp. I walk to the bathroom and spit up in the sink. I clean my hands in the steaming water and avoid my reflection. I think to myself, Now this fucking sucks. I lift the receiver from the payphone by the rubber machine and start shoving the metal buttons.

In the background, I hear Stephen, my stepfather. You hang up that phone, he says. Tell him good-bye. He can call from his dad’s at a decent hour.

My mother whispers that it’s late and now the dogs are awake. Her voice is soft and hurried. She’s probably cupping the receiver. Her eyes, I would bet, are as scattered as her voice, looking at my stepfather, the ceiling, then the phone.

She asks me to hang on. I hear the screen door slam. The dogs’ barking grows distant. She picks up a separate phone, probably in the living room. I grow nervous that Stephen is listening in their bedroom.

I really want her nothing-but-complaints tone of voice when I ask how work is going, but she whispers, Just fine. Real quick. How are you?

Real quick. I want to tell her how my back aches from lifting heavy coolers all day. About this stupid woman in the bar who keeps staring at me. I ruined the business today. I don’t think I meant to. At least not then I didn’t. Either way, it’s gone now because I didn’t talk fast enough, soon enough. I fucked up. Everything. I have no idea how we’re gonna make the bills. Dad won’t take me home. Not yet. He’s saying we’ve got to sell off the rest of these shrimp.

Fine, I say. Had a run-in with the health department today. That’s all.

Yeah, but knowing your father, she says, he’ll have you back out in that van by next weekend. Look, she sighs, are you sure this is what you want? I mean, I know
things weren’t easy here with your stepdad and all, but we’ve been talking and he’s agreed to ease up. You have to understand, Honey. Stephen’s not used to having kids around. You just have to try and be patient with each other.

   Nothing was rough, I say. I’m just helping Dad out for a while.
   I don’t know, she says. I just worry so much with you out there on the road all day. All by yourself. Have you even eaten dinner yet?
   Dad brought out some steak when he came to get me, I tell her. And a potato with sour cream, so I’m pretty stuffed.
   The bedroom phone drops to the floor and we get silent. Stephen starts in. He says, This business of collect calls at ten o’clock is bullshit. I’ll give you five seconds before I pull the plug myself.
   I miss you, Hon, she says. Next time, try to call from your dad’s phone. Okay?
   Sure, I say.
   Stephen hangs up his line.
   She says goodnight and hangs up hers.
   I put down the receiver and wheel around to see my dad leaned against the bathroom door. He asks, Who you calling at this time of night?
   I shrug and say, No one. Time and Temperature.
   He takes me by the elbow and walks me through the bar. I feel a whirl of caked eyelids, football calls, and smoke around me. We head out the door, into the cool night air, through the parking lot, behind the van. He places both of his hands on my shoulders and kneels down in front of me.
   I’ve raised you to be the type of person, he says, that can talk straight with people. The type of person who handles his own problems and deals with them. Now, you’re your own boss. I can’t make you do anything, including help with this business and my treatments. But you will hear me out on this. You came to me, remember?
   I know.
   You know. So, if you think I’m mistreating you, you just give the word. If you want to go back to your mother and Stephen, I’ll drive you myself. Because if that’s what you want, I’ll take you there now. But you tell me right now. You decide, once and for all.
I search the dark pavement at my feet for some answer, hug myself tighter, close my eyes and shiver. I’m just tired, I tell him.

He pulls my chin up to him. Look, he says. I’m the sick one here. You think I don’t know what you’re going through these days? I went through the same thing with your grandpa not long ago. But you and I have got to stick together, Christopher.

I look him over again. There’s a look to his eyes. This is the first time all day anyone’s said my name and now he’s waiting for me to make my move, preparing what he’s going to say next. This is the way he wants to work. My initial response is to take his hands off me, tell him this guilt trip is bullshit and it’s something that I can see coming from miles away. Then maybe then he’ll get a feel for the anger and frustration I’ve been keeping tucked away, not toward cancer or phone calls or whatever, but toward everyone and everything that keeps this distance with hands that reach out to touch but do not. I take hold of his forearms that just a few years ago could have lifted me up onto his shoulders but have since grown small and the skin hangs loose around his elbows. His T-shirt is baggy around his narrowing chest and his ankles seem ill-fit in his white K-mart tennis shoes. The numb from my fingers shoots up into my spine, through my elbows and shoulders, and catches me right in the eyes. I have to remind myself that none of this exists—no muscles, no nerves, no feeling at all.

Because he is my father, because there is the cancer, because he’s scared to death, I tell Eu I’m sorry. I should have called him from her cell phone, told the woman to stay. Maybe we can get the van fixed up just right, then we’ll be back out running in a couple of weeks. I tell him I’m still learning, this won’t happen again. I don’t tell him this is just too much because that’s not at all what he needs to hear right now.

We both know there’s nothing more to say. Not tonight. Not for this business and not for each other. For right now, this will do.

Maybe we should just head on home, he says.

I think that’s a good idea, I tell him. I’ve still got to drain out the coolers and hose the van down. There’s homework to finish and it’s already dark out.
Stephen Harper had every intention of not going home to her. Not because he hated or disliked the woman, but loved her so much that he could not bare the sight. One more time, she’d throw her arms up and say. How many times do we have to go through this? When will our ship come in? When’s the big break? Many times, throughout the day, in the back of his mind he considered driving off, but stopped because he wasn’t sure just how to say good-bye.

This morning Stephen Harper walked off the job. It had been three weeks since he landed the work, when the bigwigs decided he’d suit better on the night shift. Twelve at night to eight in the morning for a fifty-six-year old man. He thought about asking why they had moved him to the night shift, but didn’t want to bother anybody with his whining. He figured they had their reasons, and to hear them first hand would only make him feel worse. They had made up their minds already and it made little sense to drag it out any further. He knew they’d only lie or something. It wasn’t part of their jobs to try and make employees comfortable. Just stick them where ever, at whatever time of day. If he doesn’t turn out as much as most do at one time of day, they will find someone who can and will. Besides, this had happened before on previous jobs. It meant they wanted him gone and didn’t care to pay severance.

The last place took away the stool where he worked so he would have to stand for eight hours. Stubborn and quiet, he went four weeks without saying anything until the pain throbbed so bad minutes seemed like hours. But suddenly after several weeks with the company he was placed on the night shift from dusk to dawn; hours when the fluorescent lights hanging high from the rafters seemed to flicker more than usual and the gray cement floors seemed colder. The staggered out machines hummed louder than ever. He found it hard to concentrate on his work at the C and C
Even still, Stephen approached this as bullshit work, a job for an idiot. On one hand the bosses had enough sense to know that it was better to waste paper than screw up doing the parts. It had been simple work. But he had been on the night shift for nearly two weeks when the parts began to stop making sense to him. This was the third night Stephen couldn’t make the holes. Hours crept by and he went without dinner. He grew frustrated watching his stiff hands push the part around, measuring out the holes with sleepy, bagged eyes. Once he got the first or second hole right, it seemed by the third they all blended together. Then, when he’d try to focus, the holes shifted further apart. If someone came by he considered asking for help, but Stephen felt he should know better. He shucked the piece out with his other mistakes. By morning there were dozens of worthless pieces piled up beside the C and C.

In his head he could make out the measurements precisely, and normally there was some sort of print to go by. But the parts in these presses wore out so fast that the company wouldn’t waste more money printing template sheets. Instead they used the broken pieces for the machinists to measure by.

If I could get just one, he thought, that’d make all the difference.

But he knew by Wednesday morning it was worthless even trying. The company would say he was costing them money. They would stick him someplace worse or else hand over the pink slip. Stephen had considered all the shops where he’d worked over the years. Some better than this one and some more run down. One way or another it seemed each shop had either shut down, ran out of business, or eventually quietly let him go. He had never left a job at his own accord. Anyone there would say it’s something you don’t do. You do not lie around on your ass while your wife hangs on to a job she hates. People aren’t supposed to run up bills, feeling sorry for themselves.

Stephen’s hands trembled slightly when he pulled up his goggles and looked around at the other men sitting at their machines. He rubbed his eyes, checked his Timex. It read 5 a.m. He looked at the mistake pile and wiped sweat from his forehead. The air smelled like any shop, like thin oil and steel. Ban saws zigged and drillbits whirled sparks. Men just like him with paunches and old jeans, sneakers and gray hair, were working just fine. Some sat at stools rolling their machine handles back and forth, their
bodies hunched over while peering through plastic goggles. Don looked at the night boss sitting in his office, going at paperwork in a tie and short-sleeves.

They won’t even notice, Stephen thought to himself, and if I try to explain no one would even listen. No sense in drawing this out with talk. If a person can’t handle their work, they should leave. He thought, I’m costing them too much.

He yanked his pliers and drill bits from the C and C. He set them into his toolbox, picked up his lunch kit, and walked into the dark morning.

Stephen didn’t want to drive home just yet. Elizabeth was there, getting ready for work and he didn’t want to start her day off like this. He drove around for a while in his pick-up, eventually ending up on a boat loading ramp on the edge of lake Taewokoni. He felt at the pocket of his tight, red t-shirt for the soft pack of cigarettes that Elizabeth. Daylight was still soft and pale blue with the morning. Oak limbs stretched over the lake water that was glassy, fresh, barley touched by the day. Don thought about the mornings that seemed so long ago when he would sit with Elizabeth, waiting for the sun to rise while drinking his morning coffee. She would appear from the bedroom smelling like Wind Song perfume, hurrying in her work slacks looking pretty as ever.

Elizabeth herself had been laid off from her job two years earlier. After seventeen years of working overtime and weekends for the Texas Workforce Commission, she got a letter in mid-December stating that as of January second, she’d no longer be needed. She went unemployed for two weeks, but then found work filing and answering phones at a sewage company. Part of the reason Elizabeth liked him to begin with was because he had the genuine eyes of a listener. Everyone in the world from the checkout kid to his bosses seemed to jump inside head and mix their problems up with his. He’d stand silent while they rambled, nodding his head and not saying much. He’d let them talk and talk.

But with Elizabeth it was different. When he was laid up sick, feeling down and useless, she’d tell him all this listening was his job for her. Although it seemed foolish, the thought encouraged him a little. She’d made him realize it was important that he be there. Even with this new job and the hours he was working, he tried not to complain. He felt it sort of his duty to listen. That’s the least he could do for her.
But this time it’s different, he thought to himself. She would have never quit, and I’m not sick or laid up this time. Just old and worn out, and that’s no excuse.

He looked at his fingernails snipped back to the skin with grease embedded in the grooves around them. The tips of his fingers were stained black with oil. They were thick, stubby, and strong—good for throwing fastballs in his high school days. But the rest of him was going piece by piece. His back gave him problems every so often and he couldn’t even read street signs any more without his eyeglasses. His sinuses were flaring up all year around and every few weeks he seemed to wake with more crud to cough.

He decided he could maybe talk to Dr. Hanson about all of this. Elizabeth had scheduled an appointment for Stephen for later that morning. They had seen Hanson for years. He helped with the leg and insurance sometimes, conferring with one specialist or another. Sometimes they talked shop, but nothing to this extent. He waited two hours before driving to the office, sitting by lake trying to figure out what he’d say.

After arriving at the doctor’s office, he sat on the table alone for nearly thirty minutes, waiting for his old friend. A short female nurse in white slacks came in the door with a clipboard, smiling at his file.

Where’s old Hanson? Stephen asked. He thought about his fingernails and shoved his hands beneath his thighs.

She said, The doctor is with someone else right now, Mr….. She looked over the clipboard trying to find Stephen’s name.

It’s Harper, he told her. When do you think he’s coming?

In a sec, she said. So, Mr. Harper, what exactly is bugging you today?

Ahh, Stephen smiled, It’s just the same old crud.

The crud, she laughed. Is that what you call it?

Sinuses, you know.

I see, she said. You’ve got a history of that. I can tell that you smoke. You should really cut that out, ya know. It’s never too late to stop.

When’d you say Hanson was coming? Stephen asked. I’d really prefer to speak with him about this. He knows what I take. He’ll set me straight and get me out of here.
I think we can get you in and out just fine, she said. She stood and walked over to a counter then picked up a stethoscope. I just need to run some tests. Now if you would please lift your shirt.

She set down her clipboard and adjusted her earpieces. Don looked over his stomach and took in a deep, uncomfortable sigh. He eyed the floor then stared back at the nurse.

His shoulders dropped. It’s okay, she said. I think we can manage if you’d prefer to leave your shirt on.

She placed the stethoscope at his back and chest. He breathed in and out hard without her asking. She wrote down some things, checked his nostrils and his ears, smiled thanks and finally left the room. After a moment of sitting there, Dr. Hanson poked his head into the room.

Hey there, Stephen, He said. How’s it going?

Fine, Stephen shrugged. What’s with the new troops?

Just that time of year, the doctor said. I guess I’m getting too old for this stuff. I’ve got more patients than the day’s got minutes. Good for the checkbook, but hell on the knees. Hey, here’s your prescription. The same old same old. Let me know if you have any more problems. Otherwise, I’ll see around this time next year.

Sounds good, Stephen said.

Take Care, Hanson said. He shut the door behind him.

Don sat there feeling silent. He swung his feet against the table. He rubbed his fingers along the paper on the table and looked around until he realized Schmitt wasn’t coming back.

Don drove slowly along the gravel road that leads up to their house. Since he’d gotten the job with Central Dynamics, he spent most of his free time fixing his El Camino, rusted with time. It had a rusted bed and a hole in the floorboard. The plan was to take care of some of the body work then redo the engine. An A-frame held the old block above the dismantled hood. These were supposed to be signs of a man making good with time, a man with a job and a productive hobby. It looked like junk when he pulled up beside it, clutter in the yard that needed tossing out.
He parked his car by the Chevy and started up the walkway. Sparky, their German Shepherd, ran up to the fence and nearly collapsed the chain link that held up his paws. The dog whined like a baby whenever Elizabeth left and damn near went nuts whenever she came home. Sparky licked his lips and jerked his head back as if to say, Come over here. Stephen abided and went to scratch the dog’s pointed ears.

Stupid old dog, Stephen said. You act like you never get no attention. The way you act, it’d seem you never get no lovin’s.

The dog smacked its lips and leaned hard into Don’s hand. Don looked in the dog’s eyes and Sparky seemed to sense it as he blinked and then looked away.

What are you hiding? Stephen asked. What’s your secret?

A neighbor’s small dog caught Sparky’s attention and Sparky leapt from Stephen’s hand to snap and snarl at the small dog.

Well, Stephen said. There you go. You just go on and talk with your new buddy.

Afternoon sunlight sliced through the blinds. The house smelled like Elizabeth mixed with dust and potpourri. Her coffee cup was half empty, its coffee faded brown and cold. A 1000 piece puzzle of some building that looked important was just about finished and set off to the right. On top of the chair was a romance novel with a tall, dark-haired man clutching a collapsed brunette woman. His muscles ripped through a white puffed up pirate shirt and her breasts seemed to fight against the string holding her dress together. These, Stephen knew, were pieces of a world that Elizabeth desired and longed to know. She deserves all of those things, Stephen thought.

Later, around five she pulled up into the driveway with gravel crunching beneath the weight of her Ford Taurus. Stephen pressed the cardboard puzzle piece between his thumb and forefinger. He spun it around on its pressed and cut edges. He’d spent the afternoon trying to decide how to tell her. He tried to take a nap at one point, but couldn’t find the will to rest. Instead he sat at the table trying to make sense out of this small pieced puzzle. When the car pulled up, he tried to curl his toes and for the first time in ten years, he doesn’t feel them there.
Sparky was barking as usual, whining and jumping and snapping back his head at her. She wore a light blue blouse, white slacks, and canvas shoes. She started to heave bags from the trunk. Stephen pushed himself up then headed out the screen door. The prosthetic leg seemed heavier than normal. He held the screen door open as she came up the wooden steps. She swung her hair from her eyes and looked at him, grinning.

She stuck out her cheek to him.

Don just kissed her cheek and smiled.

You okay? She asked. Did Hanson say something?

Stephen shook his head and said, Nuh-uh.

Elizabeth shifted the grocery sack from one part of her hip to another then nodded back toward the car. She said, I saved a fifty pound sack of dog food for you. Back in the car.

Stephen tried to smile, but his heart was pounding. He didn’t expect or want Elizabeth to be so cheerful. He kept feeling for his ankles or toes or anything.

Elizabeth’s smile dropped and she looked him over. Are you sure you’re okay? Just lack of sleep, he said. This new schedule.

Well, all right, she said. Just hurry back in. I’ve got some news from work to give you.

Stephen left then came back. She was putting up groceries. He walked through the kitchen and set the bag down in the laundry room.

I guess I should tell you, he said. He looked at the water heater. Sparky started whining and scratching at the back door. I guess that I should tell you I left Central Dynamics today. No other way to put. I just made too many mistakes.

Elizabeth leaned against the counter and let her head drop. Don wanted her to turn around, turn around to look at him. He stood by the heater on the planked wooden floor, preparing to tell his side. He wanted to tell her everything.

Elizabeth slammed the cabinet doors and threw her hands up open palmed. She reached the dining room without looking at him. She said, You’ll never guess what. They finally gave me a raise. Well, I guess that doesn’t matter. One whole goddamned dollar. They gave me a parking spot with a sign that reads my name. Then stupid, klutzy me knocks it over pulling in because I’m so surprised.
She sat down then lit a cigarette and whispered, Go figure.

Elizabeth turned in her chair. She said, How is it that you can just quit the first job you get after all that you’ve been through? Do you like these walls that much where you have to stare at them all the time?

I made too many mistake, Stephen said. I cost them too much money. You know how it is. If a person can’t do what they were to do then they aren’t fit to stay.

When did you begin to care so much about their money? Listen to yourself. Stand where I’m at and listen to what you’re saying. The only money you should care about is the money that buys food, pays for our heating. Did you think to talk to me about this first? Did you even think to ask if they’d switch you back to day shifts? Did you say how much it bothered you with your leg and your eyes?

You know that’s not me, he said.

No, I guess it’s not, she said. You just sit there take it like everything else. Stubborn and foolish. You and that pride. I scrubbed the goddam toilets today and I took out the garbage. Anyone ask you to do that? Just tell me that you’ve got something else lined up. One of your old buddies. Do they know of something else?

Stephen stood there, looking at her without saying anything. From time to time, Elizabeth complained about many things. But never once about him. Not to his face. He thought of all her quiet phone conversations at the dining room table while he was outside working on the truck and realized this is the steam she’s blown off with her friends; what she says when he’s out of earshot. These are the thoughts she would never share with him, the things she faced each time he got laid off or laid up.

In the back of his mind he listened to her lips trembling, listened to the tears that broke and fell down her cheek. These are the things that could not come from her voice, what she could not say but what she’s said so many times.

He listened to Elizabeth’s frustration with this life, with this man she was stuck supporting again. His stubbornness for not complaining and never speaking were the causes for her anger, the reason he was laid up for all of those weeks. He knew that his reasons are what Elizabeth needed now. He wanted to grab on to her and say these things, tell her he was sorry and full of hope and full of shame, that he’d always wanted to give her everything she deserved. He shut his eyes and stepped forward. He felt her soft
against his chest, then all there was her perfume. The smallest words were as intricate and heavy as anything, coming from deep inside his stomach, flowing into her tender ears. Without thinking, he measured out the sentences exactly and what came were, he hoped, the right words to say. He held her there tight beside the dining room table, his strained voice a murmur in their typically quiet home.
Offhand

In order for me to get this right, it means falling in love with her all over again.

I’d heard stories about Patti before we met. She was this girl who danced for the Dallas Ballet, known to wear and crack guys like an old set of slippers. Before I knew to put the name with the face, I used to see her around either at parties or the record store where I worked that year. Her cheekbones seemed to have been pushed into place with careful fingers, molded around eyes that matched the color of sunlight bounced off of stained wood, accentuated by a smile that held its own in a crowd. On the night we first met, at a house party crammed wall-to-wall with people, I’d just finished a set with my band Donkey Pinata. The bass amp was still droning on in my ears with Violent Femmes and Pixies covers when she pushed through the crowd, balancing two plastic cups full of beer, trying not spill. I nudged Jerry, my drummer, off the side of the fireplace and made room for this girl to sit down beside me. If someone had warned me, maybe, ten minutes before that she was going to do this, I would have probably left sooner.

She hands me the cup, sticks her hand out.

Patti.

My name’s Chris, I say.

Yeah, she says. I know. She takes another drink from her beer. Looking up but away she says, I like to keep close tab on boys who stare me down from across crowded rooms and grocery stores.

My first thought: Fuck. But she smiles and the weight of the room seems to lift. We sit there for a second, sort of nodding at each other. I try to think of something to say. In one split second, I see us at that instant, then her years later in a lacey white dress stepping toward me down an aisle in a room full of flowers, then a girl named Grace who looks just like Patti asking me for an early allowance. It gets to be too much and in a
single moment I go from absolute panic to sheer abandonment. I look around the room at all of the people, then turn back to her.

I’d ask you to dance, I say, but I have a wooden leg.

Her smile drops and then her eyebrows crease. Is there some sort of weird innuendo in that?

I have no idea, I say. I never even thought about it. I heard some guy use it on a girl last week.

She nods and peers down into her beer. Chics these days, she says. They’ll fall for anything.

I look over her shoulder. Who are you here with?

No one, she says. I came by myself. That way no luggage. I just wanted to drop by to check out your band. I like the name.

We’ve already got the first album title, I say. We’re thinking of calling it, Tear That Ass Apart.

Later on, I walk Patti out to her BMW. She writes her phone number down beside her printed name in a black and white playbill for that season’s edition of the Dallas Ballet’s The Nutcracker. I wonder if she carries these things around with her with this purpose in mind, but I don’t say anything. I go back inside with that warm feeling in my stomach and spine. Most of the people from the party have drifted out, and Jerry is stacking up the drums from his kit.

That girl, he says, shaking his head.

I know, I say. Just mind your own business.

She’ll be easy, he shrugs. But don’t expect more than that. Not without latching on to more than you can handle.

He was wrong, and Patti wasn’t easy at anything. She said, straight off the bat, You and I would make a terrible match. This was after she’d unveiled the information that another guy was in the picture before me, and now, in that picture, the three of us were standing there together, she in the middle. I had just come into that one year in life, when fits of bad skin and goofy, lopsided skateboard haircuts were exchanged for
developed cheekbones and a string of several girlfriends who, before, I would never have imagined even speaking to. I tell Patti, Do what you want, but I’m not into sharing.

She’s wearing a black cocktail dress, hair tied up above her head like a bouquet. You should really lighten up, she says. It’s not all that serious.

I shake my head. Our first date, and we’re toe-to-toe in a foyer of the Amon Carter Performance Hall, where lots of little kids dressed in crushed velvet dresses and white starchy shirts with bow-ties are carrying wooden nutcracker soldiers in their arms, seemingly running in circles around us, and I’m fighting every urge in me, when the kids circle closer—parent or not—to stretch out my foot and watch a few of them fall. Patti’d strained a ligament in her knee two nights before during a dress rehearsal, and an understudy is filling her place tonight.

You don’t want to leave, she says, tugging on my hand. I would have told you before if I’d have known that it bothered you that much.

I could go home right now, I say.

She shakes her head and reaches into a pocket of the wool coat that’s draped across her arm, withdraws a small cell phone, then starts pushing numbers. She keeps her eyes locked on mine and cocks her jaw. I can hear a steady voice flow through her receiver, and she rolls her eyes up to the ceiling, waits for the voice to stop then says, Heyya Brad, it’s Patti. I realize this is sort of abrupt, but don’t call me anymore. She looks up at me and says into the phone, You’re a jerk. She ends the call and puts her phone back in the coat.

See? she says. That easy.

We drive back to my house where my parents are asleep and tip-toe down the hallway and into my dark bedroom. I turn on the desk lamp as she walks around the room quietly, running her fingers along posters tacked to the wall. She pokes through CD’s, then takes my bass from its stand and sits down on the bed. She starts plucking at the strings. I sit down cross-legged on the carpet in front of her. What do you want to learn? I say.

I don’t know. Anything.

I climb onto the bed, wrap my right elbow around Patti’s, then fold my fingers around her small knuckles. I push her fingers in place along the fret board and, note by
note, tell her to pull at the strings beside the body of the guitar. After running her through it a few times, I pull my hands away and say play it faster. She nods her head and blinks every time she pulls a string. Hey, she says, that’s *Blister in the Sun*. She goes through the notes a few more times, and I start to laugh.

What’s so funny? she asks.

I don’t know, I say. It’s cool. Just to see you here like this.

Teach me something else, she says.

I lean back over and put my hands above hers again. I feel her press the deeper insides of my fingers, and I breathe softly against the back of her neck where wispy brown hairs are curled over and around. She takes a deep breath and turns around. No smile, no eyes, no nothing, just a soft warm push and openness, like silence. The next thing I know, Patti is on top of me, pushing my shoulders against the mattress. I run my hand up along the back of her leg.

I had a really nice time tonight.

My hand is starting to find its way up her dress. Me too, I say.

Patti closes her eyes and takes in a deep breath. Then, she reaches behind her and grabs my wrist. So don’t fuck it up, she says, by acting like a jackass. She pulls my hands and stretches them above my head.

In a way, I’m relieved, considering everything I’d heard, the way people groaned whenever I mentioned her name.

Chris, she says, her head pressed against my chest. There are a few things you should know before we start really tangling things up. There’s a big chance that some day I might fuck you over. I can be a pretty cold bitch sometimes. You saw it tonight at Amon Carter. Knowing me, if I were you, I would take me home now and never call again.

I think you’re underestimating me.

Not with those eyes, she says. You’re not fooling anybody. She rolls off to the side and blows hair from her face. You shy boys, she says. Need to be more careful. Put too much in someone else and that’s what you’ll be missing once these things are said and done.
Two weeks later, I was playing another party when I see Patti walk out the front door of the house with this tall, blonde guy in tow. I’d asked her to come out, but she declined, saying she had previous plans. I hadn’t noticed her come in, but Jerry pointed her out as she went through the door. I glance at Jerry, and he shrugs his shoulders, then nods at my bass as if to say, Keep playing. I shake my head, turn down the volume on the amp, and tap my singer Wes on his shoulder. I point. I have to go outside. I set the guitar down on its face, push my way through the crowd, then step outside into the cold night where people are stumbling in pairs across the front lawn and Patti’s pressed against her car, that guy in her face. Two other girls sit in the front seat, being anything but inconspicuous with a joint. I walk over to Patti. You mind telling me what’s going on? I say.

Patti pushes the guy off of her and throws her arms out to me. You’re supposed to be inside, she says, grinning.

What the hell are you doing? I ask her.

Her face is nuzzled into my shoulder. X, she says. Then she shoves herself away, starts rubbing her cheeks. She stares down with wide eyes. Wait, you’re not supposed to see me, she says. She points toward the house, says, Go back inside. She pushes past the blonde guy and climbs into the back seat. Go back and finish your show, she says. She motions for the guy to get in, and he climbs in beside her. Patti’s head stays down as the car pulls away.

The next morning I call, then drive over to her house. It’s January, and I don’t think the sun has reared its head in nearly two weeks. She answers the door and waves me inside. Her hair is stringy and greasy looking, falling down straight around her face. I silently follow her to the upstairs den where she sits down at the opposite corner of the sofa. I keep my ground by standing near the television, several feet away from her, where I can look down.

I’m really sorry, she says. I never meant for you to see me like that. We were all so fucked up, and we kept going to different houses. Then the next thing I knew, there you were.

Who was that guy?
She turns to the window, then back to me. Jonathan? Oh. He was the guy who had all the ecstasy.

When I came out, were you kissing him?
There are splotches of last night still coming back to me.
You didn’t sleep with him, did you?
I know I didn’t intend to.
That’s all I need to hear, I say.

I start for the staircase, stepping slowly and waiting for her to say she didn’t do it. Once I reach the banister, I turn around to face her. Little red splotches pepper her cheeks and neck.

It wasn’t so much that you made me look stupid, I tell her, but the fact that in the whole time we’ve dated, you haven’t so much as let me touch you. I don’t get it. It’s not that I need to, or that I’d want to push you. It just baffles me to think that you could let this guy fuck you—or whatever you did that you can’t remember.

Patti looks up from the couch, pushes herself up, and starts walking across the carpet with tears on her face. Don’t talk like that to me, she says. You don’t have the right.

I start down the staircase with her close behind me, and I want her to catch me and say that nothing happened, that she suddenly remembers everything and nothing went down, but her footsteps stop. I hold the doorknob in my hand and turn around. She’s sitting on the stairs with her face between her knees and her arms wrapped like shields around her head. Something pulls me. Everything about the actions I’m taking have to make her think this whole thing is over. Deep down I know this is anything but that. I hear her whisper, Don’t leave. I know that because she wants me to stay, wants me to forgive her, that I could completely have her. And I still want her. So I walk out the door, back into the gray day, and tuck away that sight of her, that feeling, as mine. I try to say to myself, That easy, but the feeling I have doesn’t seem to fit the words.

At the time, I had plenty from another world to deal with. A few years earlier, my father had been diagnosed with throat cancer, and after going through radiation treatments, surgery to remove his larynx, and several doses of chemotherapy, his doctor of the month
at John Peter Smith Memorial has called my father in to explain that the chemo
treatments aren’t working. He says they never had worked and that the guy who put him
on it messed up pretty bad. All that pain and hope for nothing. Ever since my father’s
voice box was removed, his ability to speak above an incredibly painful whisper has gone
right out the window. Usually, he writes what he needs to say on a 3x5 notepad that he
carries around with him. My father scribbles something down, then hands the pad up to
the doctor.

Could be six months, the man shrugs, handing it back to him. Could be less. The
doctor closes my father’s file, holds it against his chest. The important thing now, he
says, is that you start making plans, doing some of the things that you wanted to do
before, but have been putting off.

Like this is some well-deserved vacation.

On the way home, my father doesn’t want to talk about it. As he sits beside me in
my brown ’79 Bonneville, his cheeks sunken in, ball cap covering his head, he has the
nerve to write out, How’s the love life going? I’m still nerved up from the doctor’s visit
but can’t help but smile. When I was younger, he’d referred to it as the “pussy situation.”
I didn’t want him worrying about his seventeen-year-old son being caught in a drought,
so I tell him about Patti. She’s this waif-thin ballerina, I say, with a face to knock you
straight on your ass.

Sometimes, I would sneak Patti into my room whenever she dropped by in the
middle of the night. I don’t know who called first, but a few weeks after that last
afternoon, we started talking again. She was like almost any other person I knew at the
time who got caught up in screaming matches with their parents, and sometimes, she
would have sneak out to blow off steam. Then, she’d end up at my place around 12 a.m.
My mother and step-dad were usually in bed by ten, and I’d be up reading or listening to
music. The dogs would bark outside when her car rolled up, then after that, the sound of
the chain link fence that gave way beneath the weight of her.

On one of her visits, I tell Patti about my dad and his question regarding the
“pussy situation.” She laughs to herself. It seems a hell of a lot easier just being friends
with her; this way we can be more open and up front. I can tell her things about my
mother and stepfather, and she volleys back with some stories of her own. One night, she tells me about how her parents went twelve years thinking her mildly retarded. It’d take her over two hours to read a thirty page essay, and she was completely gone when it came to math. She was in the middle of her second sophomore year of high school before a typing teacher suggested she test for dyslexia. I ask her what it’s like to try and read words backwards.

She replies, They look like broken teeth.

It should have been a revelation for everyone, but Patti’d stayed bitter. So many years, she says, of sitting in classes with these stupid kids, parents thinking her less than perfect and letting her know in subtle, dinner-table ways. They all see shrinks, both separately and together, to learn how to deal with Patti’s passive aggressions.

We didn’t decide to get back together, but more and more often, we were sitting up all night talking and smoking cigarettes alone in my bedroom. Sometimes, we’d get restless and start fooling around. I would try to ease my fingers inside her jeans, but then, she’d pull my hand away and shake her head from side-to-side. It seemed like a game. She’d let my hand go down further, then she’d stop me and smile.

During one of those nights when Patti doesn’t want to talk, when things at home are past hectic and she stares out the window, she finally turns to me and asks, Why do you do this? You could have just about any girl you want. You’re cute; you’ve got your band. Why waste your time on me?

I set down my book and think for a second. I really like your smile, I say.

Is that the only reason?

Do I need to make a list, I say, of reasons I want you here with me?

She sucks in her lips and nods her head, then turns to look back out the window.

That’s why you and I wouldn’t last, she says. I can say that I like you because of your eyes, but it isn’t just because they’re pretty.

Patti’s lips would turn silver whenever she got cold, like someone had just painted her mouth with one of those markers. The first time I notice is Valentine’s Day night. We are walking down 5th Street in downtown Fort Worth toward Caravan of Dreams to see some play. Patti’s huddled against herself inside her wool coat that stays buttoned to her
Her hands are stuffed deep inside the pockets, eyes focused on the sidewalk. I keep glancing over to look at her trembling, ashy lips. She asks me, What are you staring at?

Your lips, I say.

Oh yeah, she says. They do that.

She reaches inside her coat, dips her hand inside her purse, and pulls out a cigarette. She stops to light it, then pulls her jacket back tight, tilts her chin toward the sky. She says, I love when it gets cold like this.

I look up. At first, the sky seems hollow, but even with the streetlamps and normal city light haze, I can still make out little points in the night.

Someday, she says, I want to know what all of that’s about. Not astronomy or physics. Whatever. Maybe it’s physics—how everything relates. But why do they need to be there? Why do we need to notice them? Stare at them. Figure them out.

I say, You want to figure out why we need to figure them out.

She takes a drag, huddles herself, then nods while blowing smoke toward the ground. She cocks her jaw, then stamps the cigarette out. A breeze catches some of her hair to push it forward. I’m not trying to make a point, she says.

I know from the way she clamps up and turns to walk with her back toward me that I should have kept quiet. Three things she hates: people making light of her; people asking what she’s thinking, and someone trying to make short conversation. I don’t remember the name of the play, but it’s centered around some kid who can witch water during droughts but is completely horrified when he gets anywhere near the stuff. I consider every way to get her talking again, but she’s got that glare that says, Shut up, before you speak. At one point while driving us out of the city, I ask, Which exit do we take? 35 North or South?

Her elbow is propped beside the window, and her face rests on two of her fingers. She looks over at me and says, hard, Don’t be stupid. You know the way home.

I have every intention of pulling the car over right there on the freeway and telling Patti to drive herself home. Instead, I slip between two cars, gun the engine, and exit 35 North.

This isn’t the right way, she says.
I stay quiet and drive and drive, pissed off. She clamps one hand on the dash and starts yelling, but I won’t listen. I drive north toward Denton, past the Fort Worth skyline, surrounding suburbs, and well-lit gas stations just off of the freeway. I drive until the only lights around are the two beams criss-crossed in front of the car. I steer the car onto the shoulder, kill the engine, then quietly pump the gas pedal.

If you fucked up my car, I will kill you, she says.

Take them, I say, handing her the keys. I open the door, the little bell begins to ding, the interior light blinks on, and I step out to the pavement. Patti brushes past me jangling her keys and says, Get in.

I step away from the front of the car, pull my jacket collar to the tips of my ears, and feel the night air layer my lungs with ice. I look at the huge sky, now riddled with light. I hold myself tightly, feel my fingers stiffen. I turn to face Patti. She clenches the steering wheel, then raises her hands as if to say, Are you coming or not?

I turn away. The engine whirs but will not turn over. She tries it again. If you keep doing that, I say, you’re going to drain the battery.

I hear the car door slam, then Patti coming up to me.

What the fuck did you do to my car? she says.

It will start in a second.

We’re out in the middle of nowhere, she says.

No, we’re not. I point to the gray silhouette of a house on top of a hill past the clearing of field. I say, Just over that hill is a lake with fish where my father used to take me when I was a kid.

Yeah, she says. Well, my father’s going to kick both of our asses if you don’t get my car started right now.

Your father is about thirty miles, I point, that way.

Her teeth are clattering. I walk back to the car and grab her coat, then set it around her shaking shoulders. I can start it right back up, I say. All I’d need to do is keep the pedal pressed to the floor, then turn the ignition.

She glances at the sky, at a semi as it howls past us, then turns her head back up. Fuck it, I’m all right, she says.

I take her by the hand and we walk to her car.
Lay across the hood, I tell her. It will keep you warm.

She smiles and we gently ease back across the car, setting our feet on the bumper, covering the grill with our legs. I adjust the coats like a blanket above us. Patti takes my hand, holds it against her stomach, then moves it down to the hem of her dress. I stare up at the sky, then close my eyes. She presses my hand further and further down, and then along the seam of her pantyhose. She pulls the dress up over her hips, holds her hand on top of mine, edges my fingers inside of her.

Patti nods toward the sky. Name them, she says.

More stars appear slowly.

I turn to kiss her, but she scoots her head away. She lifts her right hand and points up into the night. Another car whooshes past us. Stay focused, she says.

The next morning, Patti shows up on my doorstep, still wearing that dress. I need to borrow some of your clothes, she says. She shoulders through the front door of the house and B-lines toward my bedroom. I follow her down the hallway and shut the door behind us. She’s going through my closet, throwing things on the bed. One pair of jeans, two Hilfiger button downs, two white T-shirts, and a green Polo sweater.

That’s all my best shit, I say.

She stands on her tip-toes, reaches toward the top, pulls down a duffel bag, and throws it on the floor. Do you have any smokes? she asks.

I find a pack in my dresser drawer. She takes one out, sits down beside the dresser, and then pulls her knees up to her chin. Her head falls so that I cannot see her face. Her shoulders tremor, I can hear her sniffing. Last night, she says, was a huge mistake.

I sit down on the corner of my bed, setting space between us. Which part? I ask.

Oh, God, she says. Not that. Well, sort of that. I don’t know. She wipes her nose with her wrist. Her chin and mouth keep wrinkling and crumpling into those shapes people struggle to hide. I have no clue what to do. It’s obvious that she’s run away from home, but I’m not sure where she’s running to. I go over and let her wrap an arm around my neck. She smells thick of cigarette smoke and faintly of Fendi.
I don’t know how my mom knew, Patti says, but she did and she let me have it. Probably because we came back so late. I hit her first. I didn’t know what else to do. She kept following me around the house, saying she could smell it on me. What could she smell, Chris?

I stand and fold my clothes, start setting them in the bag. Where are you going to be? I ask. How do I get a hold of you?

I’ll call you, she says. Jonathan doesn’t want me giving out his number, and I left my phone at my parents’ house.

I look at her. Jonathan?

She’s hesitant. Different guy altogether, she says. He’s just this guy who graduated last year. His girlfriend, Helen, is a good friend of mine.

I nod and turn back to filling her bag. What do you want me to tell them if they call? I ask.

Tell my parents you haven’t seen or heard from me, she says. She’s wiping her face, smoothing out her cheeks. Except once. This morning. I called to break up. That will, at least, get them off of your back. Patti stands, turns around and says, Unzip me.

I do. She pulls a pair of jeans and the sweater from the bag. Turn around, she says. I just need you to do one more thing. Wait by your window for me here tonight. I’m going to drop by around 12 o’clock or so.

I can’t do that, I say. She’s reflected in the mirror on my dresser, but I lower my eyes and do not look.

You can’t or you won’t? she says.

I stare at the carpet. I’m supposed to stay with my father tonight.

Okay to turn around, she says.

I turn and she is standing on the tips of her toes, hands clasped above her arms, looking into the mirror. She drops to her heels, sits down beside me, and tugs lightly on my ear with her finger. She says, I’m not sure when I’ll get to see you again.

My father’s house was a modular white trailer set in the center of an acre of land. Every time I passed through the metal gate surrounding his home, the air turned colder, sky grayer. He had a U-shaped gravel driveway and, throughout that year, he’d started
planting young oak trees in the front and sides of his yard. They stood straight like young teenagers, fastened to wooden stakes with white kite string, fighting against the wind. That afternoon, after Patti had gone to her new situation, I drove to my father’s house and parked between his old Dodge Utility van and my step-mother’s red Nova, trying to figure out how I could get out of this.

A flood of heat pushes against me as I walk into the house. Already, I feel ashamed. Hey, I say, holding the screen door so it doesn’t slam. My father sits at the kitchen table, just beyond the living room carpet. On the wall beside him are pictures from before the cancer set in, him wearing cowboy hats, sucking on his front teeth, him in a fishing boat beside my grandfather, then some pictures of me as a little kid with that elementary school blue sky backdrop set behind me, a chili-bowl haircut wrapped around my head. My father looks up and smiles. I walk over to him. A pad of yellow legal paper is set out on the table with his handwriting scrawled in blue ink all over it.

What’s that? I ask.

He shrugs his shoulders, then flips the page over. He writes something down on the fresh sheet of paper, then pushes it toward me.

*Have you eaten yet?* it reads.

I ate before coming over, I say. He knows that it bugs me to eat in front of him. The summer before, he’d had a surgery where a tube was inserted into his stomach that permitted, with the extra add on funnel, either vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry flavored Ensure through it. He shakes his head and starts to write again. He pushes the pad towards me. *Just a little. For Sally.*

All right, I say. A little.

I go into the kitchen where Sally stands, tending to a steaming pan of chicken fried steak. Her brown and gray hair is pinned up in rollers, and she wears a powder blue blouse, slacks, and blue heels. Their poodle Scrappy sits beside her feet, wagging his tail and licking his lips. I kiss Sally on the cheek. There’s potatoes in the oven, she says. I wasn’t sure what you’d want for breakfast, so I just got waffles. Is that okay? She keeps her eyes on the pan for a moment, then turns to me. Or are you not going to stay the night?

I realize I haven’t yet taken off my coat. I sort of thought I had to, I say.
She wipes her hands on a towel that hangs from the stove. Well, it’d really help me out, she says. Plus, you know your dad would like it.

I say, What if I stay until eleven-thirty? Then dad will be asleep if I go. Or would that be too early?

Whatever, Chris. That’s fine.

It’s totally up to you, I say.

The timer on the stove begins to ding, and Scrappy starts barking. Sally edges the dog off to the side with her foot. She says, Go spend some time with your father. He needs to talk to you.

I walk to the table feeling guilty but know it will eventually pass. Sally said you needed to talk, I say to him.

He is caught up in a college football game on television but turns slowly to look at me. He pushes the pad forward with a pen set on top of it. I turn the pad around. It reads: *I need you to make a list for me. Things that you want.* I push the pad toward him across the table and rotate my chair to face the small television. The pad comes back at me. I push it away again. No, Sir, I tell him. I won’t do that.

He clears his throat. He squints and clutches the edge of the table. In a whisper that sounds like he is holding his tongue against the back of his mouth, he says, I need you to do this. I have to let Sally know. He swallows hard, then opens his eyes. They are moist. He says: Pictures. Rings. That kind of stuff.

Sally speaks up from the kitchen. Supper’s ready.

I get up and walk around. She stands with her back pressed to the wall, cigarette in hand, waving smoke out the window.

Did you know about this? What he wants me to do?

Look, she sighs, just do it.

Can’t you and I talk about it later?

When? she says. When he’s gone? Do you have any idea what that would do to him? Think about it. It’s one thing for all of us to make arrangements before. This way your father has something to do with it. You tell him that you’d rather wait until he’s dead to start going through his things. I mean, Jesus Christ.

Sally wipes her cheek and fans smoke out the window.
I stay to myself for the rest of the night. We eat, Sally leaves, then my father and I watch more football for a while. He asks if I want to go rent a movie or something, and I tell him, eventually, that I’ll be leaving later that night. He looks disappointed but asks again that I do the list sometime in the week. I tell him I will. After he goes to bed, I sit alone at the dining room table staring at the clock with a blank sheet of paper set out in front of me. I consider the things my father owns—from the watch he wears to some Elvis telephone that I had found one day while clearing out his storage shed. I write down one word and when the headlights from Sally’s car shine into and wave across the living room, I quickly fold the piece of paper, put it into my pocket, go into the kitchen, and wash my face with cold water. I put on my coat and step out as she walks in.

Do you want to talk? she asks, holding me by the shoulders.
I shrug her hand off and say, What’s there to talk about?

I drive like a madman from my dad’s house to my mother’s, flooring it down back roads and two-lane highways. I turn the heater up to full blast and roll the windows all the way down. I don’t want for Patti to come over anymore, don’t think I can handle any more of her surprises. But when I ease down the gravel road and see her car parked by the chain link fence, I feel glad. She steps out of her car to greet me.

You look pretty rough, she says. I didn’t think you’d show.
I probably shouldn’t have. Sorry to make you wait.
Are your parents up?
No. They would have gone to bed hours ago.
She follows me through the gate, then up the cement walkway to my parents’ front door. We’ll have to be really quiet, I whisper. We go to my bedroom, and I light several candles around the room. I light a cigarette off of one of them, sit down on the bed, and let my head fall toward my knees. Patti kneels in front of me, crosses her arms on my lap, and lays her head down. She takes the cigarette from my hand, takes a deep drag, then stamps it out.

You wouldn’t have left him if it weren’t for me, she says.

It’s dark in the room, and I’m glad because right now I can’t handle her looking at my face. I say, Why did you want me to come back here tonight?
Patti stands up and walks across the room. Candle light flickers across her face and when she says, I need you to be done with this, her words are like pegs for holes that seemed to have needed to be filled for some time. As she says, I need to know that you’re going to be okay with this, I wonder if I should have stayed with my father, then she would have had time to think. We would have all had one more night. She says, I know my timing is shitty, but I need to be out of your way right now. You have other things to focus on.

I finger the piece of paper I have tucked in my coat pocket and consider the word I wrote down: *Everything*. A word that is so tangible that right now I can reach out and grab it, an hour earlier could have touched it. I consider giving Patti my simple list, but know that, deep down, words can’t make someone stay. She says to me, Chris, I need the okay.

I take her by the wrist and start walking her through the house. She pulls away from me, opens the front door herself. I follow her outside to her car, and we stand there silently looking at each other. A snow that will not let up for three days has begun to fall, making the night that much colder, that much quieter. I open the door for her and tell her to get in. Just go, I say. She keeps her head down and I shut the door. Patti’s crying so hard that she can’t sit up straight, and I’m gritting my teeth just to hold myself together. As I walk back toward the fence and start to open the gate, Patti lets out a groan that hits me like cold water. Her engine turns over and the wheels from the car throw up rocks as she drives away. I go back inside, turn on the light in my bedroom, unfold the sheet of paper, and fall asleep at my desk.

I didn’t speak to anyone for about three days and even though I knew that Patti wasn’t coming back, I still sat beneath my bedroom window waiting for some sign. Throughout the night, in near dark, I tried to read, but nothing registered. I ashed cigarette after cigarette into a three-eyed Doc Marten, sometimes glaring at the curtains as if they’d whispered my name. I kept the stereo off, the whole room silent, so that I could hear her car coming up the gravel driveway. Sometimes, just before I went to bed, I would open the curtains, pull up the window, and let the night air unfold itself into my room. I’d imagine Patti standing there with her long brown hair tied back and her bright brown eyes looking up at me. I’d pretend we were together, staring up at the snow that’s
so uncommon in Texas, in that sky it seems graceful. I’d pretend that, together, we would try to pinpoint where all of this stuff begins. Perhaps by the hands of some old man dangling from a rope way up there, going at the clouds with an icescraper in hand, trying desperately to regain his stars. I would look and look into the nighttime sky to see where it all started, but the more I stared, the more snow seemed to fall until I’d finally decide to follow one or two flakes that would circle and sway, dance down onto my hands, and then disappear.
The Origins of a Circle

I have lifted the letter from my bottom dresser drawer where, over the years, I’ve learned to stash concrete memories. Again, I have to count on my fingers the years to the months to the weeks to the days to the hours and then minutes until I can reach back to June 26th; when the gurney was rolled out with its stretched, metal legs lancing down the wooden steps from the weary, white trailer house. A sheet lay out like some silhouette above Eu.

Beneath the small, gnat swamped fluorescent light of a motion detector lamp, my stepmother, Sally, and I leaned against the warm hood of the Pontiac that was not so much brown as it was gray at that hour. The trailer was gray, and the trees were all gray. The only things of unfeigned color were the sheet floating past us, the coats of those pushing it, and a large, yellow envelope that I held tight in my fingers. Not to be Opened until I am Gone, it read, on the cover in the liquid-morphine-shot-through-a-tube-to-the-stomach-sort-of penmanship that Eu had once the voice box was gone. It was the same handwriting often scribbled onto a 3x5 notepad. Eu explained the “neck-rope” attaching that notepad early on: So that I don't lose it. What with this dope and all making me so stupid. From that day on, no longer were there whispers unless the words meant enough to hurt that much more.

The legs of the gurney folded over the ambulance bumper and the doors shut behind Eu. I watched the tail end of the ambulance drop, then the wheels turn gravel, and the red lights spin. The ambulance rolled though the metal gat and eased clockwise toward the street. I thought to myself, I was with him only hours ago. Babysitting. He was thin in that paper covered hospital bed that lingered long across the living room. He was hollowed out and eaten from ankle to shoulder. Wearing light blue pajamas. His patched-hair head too big to be my father’s. But I lay down anyway, beside him as he
slept, that smell still on his breath. There was the rib cage of his chest. I wished for what we all wished for. I did it that moment. And as the taillights vanished around the corner into the night, I thought to myself, And now half of me gone.

2.

As memories of people fade with time, it seems the voice is always the first thing to go. I can describe to a T the letter Eu left. Long, yellow legal paper now worn soft as cotton with fading blue lines that run left to right. At some points the handwriting is curvy and thoughtful, while, especially toward the end, it’s like toothpicks sporadically laid down in spaces. On the top left side of the first page is my name; there is no name on the last page’s bottom corner.

Eu did not speak in nasals. That much I remember. Eu constantly spoke of my own intonation. You will not get anywhere in life, Eu said, so long as you keep your voice soft like that. Eu constantly looked out to make sure I wasn’t something to be looked down upon in any way, making sure I knew how to keep myself in check.

One night, I remember, we were sitting side-by-side at the front of the van, coming up from Galveston with a fresh load of shrimp that I would sell throughout the weekend from the van on the roadside. It smelled like the Gulf of Mexico in there. It was night and the road shot up black in front of us with yellow dashes sliding underneath the hood. Sometimes I would pinpoint a spot on the windshield where a mosquito had splattered and use it to sight then blow up the signs we passed. Usually they were green with white blocked letters: Fort Worth 386; Fort Worth 130; Fort Worth 26. When I managed to stay awake, it was how I passed the time.

Five long, wide coolers jostled in the back, stacked on top of each other. I was thirteen at the time and these trips were supposed to be our time together. But mostly it was business.

My mother, Elizabeth, told me later on that, to keep alert on these trips meth-amphetamines were dissolved into the cans of Schlitz Eu incessantly drank then flipped out to the highway. That, and not the Merit 100’s, she said, was what eventually led to the throat cancer. During those nights, long before the diagnosis, it was what kept the
teeth grinding, what kept the voice going. I would sit up straight in my captain’s chair when Eu reached over and turned down the stereo, usually playing some Freddy Fender cassette picked up at a truck stop along the way.

You move your own hands, Eu constantly reminded. Never let anyone tell you how to be. Be accountable for what you chose to do and not do, but always realize you made that decision with a point in mind. That you’ve got your reasons. Don’t regret anything.

PLOW, PLOW. Fort Worth 126. Yes, Sir, I said. Even then this had gotten somewhat cliched. I considered the irony in the advice Eu offered, but figured it best not to challenge.

Because you’re done for the instant you start looking back too much, Eu said. He tapped a fresh can, peeled back the top, and then slid the curved piece of aluminum in the hole. I’m serious about this.

Looking over to show that I was seriously listening, I nodded my head. Got it, I said. The words blended into the hush of wind that slipped through my window.

On those nights Eu offered all sorts of advice. Common things like, Always say, Yes, Sir and No, Sir. Same with the Ma’am’s. Whenever someone does something nice for you, say Thank You. Keep a stack of Thank You cards stashed in a drawer, and— whoever, it doesn’t matter, from grandma to the plumber—send these people cards. People keep those things. They can hold it in their hands and remember your face.

Always business.

Eventually, the volume of the radio stayed down. Eu repeated old stories with new twists here and there about the family history: pranks pulled, the father, Buddy, never met until the year Eu turned twelve.

On the second Friday of every month, Eu said. Buddy would drive to the local Army-Navy to buy coveralls and a hardhat. After that he would tie the hat to the bumper of his station wagon and drive down an old, deserted dirt road. He would put on the coveralls and roll around in the dump until the clothes were stained and smelled like all hell. Then he would leave the house with twenty dollars in his wallet and nothing but a suitcase of rubber paychecks in the car. He hit every single grocery store within three states: Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia. Sometimes Florida.
Was he supposed to be a garbage man? I asked. Or a construction worker?

Didn’t matter, Eu said, taking a sip of beer. Just so long as he smelled so bad that the people would want him out of there quickly. Right about the time he made Hoover’s Most Wanted list, people were beginning to catch on to his game. Back then you could get away with this pretty easily. Still, people were on the look out. One day a clerk noticed your grandfather’s shoes were a little too clean, considering the rest of his attire. He called in a manager to verify the check. They called the police and gave them a description of the car. That night they showed up at the motel where Buddy was staying, arrested him and threw him in the pen for ten years. I was two at the time. Mother had left him earlier on and thought it best if we didn’t go to see him. When we finally met, Buddy strolled through the gates, shook hands with the guards. They said they’d miss him and that he should keep in touch. Sure, sure, he told them. When he finally reached us—five foot ten in a razor-tapered suit—I was excited as hell.

I could imagine.

I said, Hey there, Dad. He looked me over, The name’s Buddy, he said. First things first. We address ourselves like men. And get your hands out of your pockets. You look like some vagrant.

Eu looked at me and smiled.

The lesson to be learned in all of this, Eu said. Is that you can tell most everything about a man by his shoes. Whether or not they’re polished, lace-ups or pull-overs. By the style, if you can guess it.

I looked down at my maroon Converse low-tops. The laces were dirty and frayed at the tips. Holes were in the sides from being dragged across my skateboard. I had written The Sex Pistols along the inside rubber bottoms. I sat back considering my distinctions and grinned.

By the time I turned fifteen, he had me driving the car, Eu said, leaning against the steering wheel to light a fresh cigarette. Not unlike you and me right now, we drove around the state together. Partners in business.

Even then, I was amazed at how easily Eu’d forgotten about the ten years of silence that passed between he and his father once the two were finally arrested together in Mobile, Alabama; that, aside from these runs, Buddy wanted little to do with him until
later when Buddy was sick himself and when he discovered he had a grandson. I’m amazed by how easily people pick and choose their memories, letting people that are lost grow enormous; the grandest heroes constructed with the sparest of material.

To me, based on these stories, Buddy was nothing short of a god.

I spent a solid day shopping for the pair of black shoes that would go with the suit Eu had picked out years earlier to match that of his dead father.

The funeral home director told me, People aren’t usually buried with shoes.

Eu, I told him. Would have wanted it this way.

Finally the man shrugged and said, So be it.

I made a mental note to pick up a Thank You card on my way home from the parlor that evening. Aside from that, I wanted nothing to do with the funeral.

3.

The letter from the yellow envelope begins:

Sunday, June 11th

It’s 8 o’clock Friday night and your car just left the driveway. Guess you had big plans with your buddies for the evening. Eating your McDonald’s, your eyes never left the clock. One hour passed and you were out like the wind. I wonder if you arrange these visits like this. Wonder if you would even stop by at all if I didn’t call to remind you that you said you would Monday. I wonder if you’ve noticed, as I have, this habit of yours to say that you will stop by, then call at the last minute to say you’ve gotten tied up. Probably tomorrow, you say. Wooden nickel promises.

I wonder if you realize that someday there isn’t going to be a tomorrow. It took my own father’s death to realize this, and there isn’t a day that I don’t wish he was alive still. I would walk the fifteen hundred miles to Panama City, just to wrap my arms around his neck and feel him there.

Inconsiderate, Eu wrote: the last dying lesson. I wonder if Eu remembered that I was there in those final fast moments as we sat at Buddy’s bedside at P.C. Memorial. A white flourescent light lit up his sunken face and chest. Eu held Buddy’s hand. The
monitor started blipping, letting us know this would be the last time that Buddy’s lungs would fill with blood. Eu matched his long breaths. The nurse’s hand squeezed my shoulder. No one wanted to let go. The way Eu gripped his hand only made me shudder more, tears running down my cheeks. The crescendo of the hum matched the pounding in my chest. Eu leaned over to his ear when things could not get any louder, then whispered, Let’s go fishing.

The old man’s thumb trembled up.

Eu recounted this story over and over. First, at the beach that night where we cried together, the wake once the rest of the family arrived, and even in the letter. I swear I felt my father’s soul rise and leave the room. Eu wanted everyone to know that Buddy didn’t die alone, that he could count on his son to with him as he died. Eu was there to take witness, even past the last moments, to something no one else could ever hope to fathom. When we were alone later, either in the shrimp truck coming up from the coast or as we sat together in some of those last, brief visits, Eu had all sorts of stories about later in his life, during the harder moments, when Buddy’s transluscent image would appear out of nowhere.

Don’t be surprised, the letter says, when later, perhaps, I appear before you at a time when you least expect it and most need me. I will be there at your wedding, and when your first child is born. Every big moment in your life, I will be there. Even as you read this, I am standing over your shoulder.

Even by passing on this last letter, it seemed dying was nothing Eu could fully realize. I guess Eu preffered to go out like some saint. On the Sunday night Eu broke the news to me, my sales record sheet from selling shrimp that day was completely off. I waited on my end of the phone line for Eu to tear into me with the same intonation that sweltered on those occassions. Instead, the voice on the other end, with its background bar music and people yelling, was patient. Almost casual. I was fifteen years old when Eu told me the doctors had said something that needed passing on, but not much worrying over. In a voice unlike any I’d heard from him before, Eu ushered me in with pamphlet descriptions of throat cancer, adding the notion this was something he expected, almost
felt inside. The voice was soft and relaxed, almost relieved. I was caught off guard. It seemed either the voice Eu had was completely encompassing or simply not there at all.

I remember that afternoon when I was nine years old. Buddy and I sat across from each other beneath the shade of an oak tree, pinching the heads off of shrimp. Thirty-gallon Igloo coolers sat on either side of us, filled with the shrimp Eu planned to hand over free of charge to some local bar for their fish fry. A small red radio crinkled country and western with its black cord extended through yellow patches of grass, up and into the flakey, white back porch door. Every so often a small breeze would pass, cooling us off, fluttering the thin door open. When it slammed back shut, I looked over my shoulder. I knew it was the wind, but hoped, maybe, I hadn’t heard the van pull up in the gravel driveway.

Buddy kept his head down and to himself. He was hunched over in his usual attire of jeans, a cotton buttondown, his brown loafers, and tan socks. He’d sometimes remove the ballcap to wipe his forehead with a white cotton handkerchief he kept in his back pocket.

The afternoon went on. The coolers seemed next to bottomless. For the hundredth time that day I pressed my small hands against my bare white knees and lifted myself from the aluminum chair. I paced the back yard, shaking fingers that were raw at their tips, swollen red around my knuckles. I walked to the inner tube I had blown up that morning, propped large and empty against the house’s grey siding. I checked the long valve stem and kicked the side of the tire to ensure a small leak hadn’t started since last summer.

I had glorious visions of sitting in the center, lake water lifting me up and down. I heard the applause that Eu clapped slowly as after I managed to balance myself, toes pinching rubber against the palms of my feet. Then a whistle as I lifted myself gracefully, feet over head, hands tucked behind my knees, and the silence of awe as my body rolled over in the air until soundlessly splitting the water.

I returned to my chair. I would show Eu what he’d missed, eventually, by not coming sooner.

You’re just about as antsy, Buddy said, as a one legged man in an ass kickin’ contest.
I shook my head, looked back over my shoulder.

Said he was gonna take a half day, did he? I suppose that’s not easy, even on a Friday.

Maybe, I said. But he did make a promise. I snap these shrimps’ heads, he takes me to the lake.

Even then I knew I sounded whiney.

Well if that’s what he promised, Buddy shrugged, I guess he’s set to it.

The lazy sun drifted over Buddy’s shoulder. Finally, I stood and took armfuls of the fresh untouched shrimp and started dumping the bodies into the trashbag full of heads. I didn’t stop until the contents of my cooler was transferred in with the rest of the garbage.

Buddy looked straight at me for the first time that day. The edges of a whiskered head of shrimp glistened his fingers. He tipped his hat. Your daddy won’t be pleased with that, he said.

No, Sir, I said, wiping my hands and heading in. I guess he won’t be pleased at all.

Eu walked into my room later on that evening. I kept my back turned and the lamp off to hide my face. The smell of some bar was thick in the words. Tomorrow, Eu said. Maybe tomorrow we can go.

4.

Three days later.

I can’t believe I never told you this, but everything I went through (radiation, surgery, even chemotherapy) I did it just for you. God only knows I would not have considered it otherwise. There isn’t a day that passes when I wish for this to end, when I can be back with my father. Even before the doctors told me, I knew that there was something in me, and that something would eventually be the death of me. Each step was just a prolonging process. These are times in your life when you need your old man around.
Eu makes a wish, in that same breath, that nothing like this happens to me, that I
am never stricken with cancer, emphysema, or AIDS. The letter asks me to stop smoking.
It was so strange how Eu found out that I had picked up the habit, and then confronted
me with the discovery. We were driving along the freeway in my brown ’79 Pontiac,
heading from one of the weekly visits to the state-paid-for community hospital for check-
ups. They had called Eu in early, and we thought it was good news.

I was sixteen-years-old, the shrimping business was gone. Lost to complications
with new health code regulations that, between me being in school and the chemo
treatment, would never be met. New sinks, the law demanded, with hot and cold
running water; restroom facilities placed inside the vehicle; permits that would have cost
thousands to attain. Eu sold off the van to pay some of the bills that were stacked and
ignored inside a bedroom dresser drawer.

This was one year after the series of radiation treatments had burned dry every
salival gland permitting Eu to swallow whole food. Eu constantly sprayed a moistening
solution along the new false teeth, dried tongue, and red gums. Two cases of Ensure sat
waiting at home. The doctors had just told Eu that the cancer had come back.

Eu reached up to the windshield, swiped a finger along the window then held a
finger out to me.

See that? Eu asked.

See what?

Eu wiped a yellow smudge along the sleeve of my T-shirt. Goddammit, Eu said. I
thought you were smarter than this. Can’t you see what these things have done to me?

I don’t know what you’re talking about.

Eu popped open the glove compartment and withdrew my box of Reds.

Light one up, Eu demanded, tossing the pack in my lap. Or are you too good to
share a smoke with your old man?

The surgical procedure to remove the voice box was inevitable. Eu thought of a
past as a con man and salesman. Eu told them, It’s how I make my living.

There is no other alternative, they informed Eu, their shoulders shrugged. And
even then, we cannot guarantee the cancer won’t return.

Eu lit up a single cigarette as I said, No, just forget it.
I’m doing this for you, Eu said, throwing the pack out the window. God only knows, I wouldn’t consider it otherwise.

He stared out the window at the world we were passing. It was a long mixed up blur that went too fast to make much sense.

5.

Wednesday, June 21

I want you to put your head against this here to feel my feeling the pain and fear running through me today and ever day that goes on. Even as I write this I can see how my brain is not working like it should be. These hands, these drugs, this cancer all all all. They come they go they come they go. I want for you to understand where I come from. Why I’m writing this. I am still here. You are the son.

Some days I wake and wish I hadn’t but know that each time I spend with you might be the last and these are things I looked forward to watching you grow. There can be a thousand faces to watch as die. Inevitably this is very alone.

The circle is on the third page, impressed so deep that it’s born into the first two pages. Eu must have slid the other pages under this one as he wrote. The circle’s there on the first page, there on the second page, then finally there in dark black ink on the third page. This is my aid, the point where I take a part in this. Touching is becoming and becoming is taking the responsibility of forever having a place where we can meet again, on a piece of paper.

Here at this circle that is larger than any life, I’ve been trying to catch up with Eu. Trying to trace. The same way he blindly, unconditionally, expectantly followed his own father. It seems natural, doesn’t it?
In the days when Eu wrote this last part of the letter, the doctors said the chemo simply was not working. The chemo never did work, someone screwed up ordering it. Because the bills were state sanctioned, the doctors switched out at least once a month. By the time Eu fell into the hands of a seasoned physician, all the hair was gone, the voice muffled to a whisper, and any gram of hope we had was exhausted. That’s when Eu sat down to write out these words.

The morphine dosage suddenly ascended. A matter of weeks, they said. Hospice was called. A bed was moved in. Nurse Johnson in the evenings. Plans were finalized and a headstone was chosen. The plot was selected beneath an evergreen tree.

*These days are going to be the hardest for you to handle,* Eu wrote on the 3x5 notepad. *It’s not going to be pretty. I will need you to be strong for me.*

I had to be prodded now more than ever to visit Eu. My reasoning was this: between the time spent apologizing for time Eu spent at the bar instead of at home, the hours of driving back and forth from the coast, and the time Eu called me in to watch my Buddy die, there was not much more in the way of memories. I felt the basis from which we started was plenty without being stuck having to watch Eu drift away. The voice went with the body. It seemed every procedure that Eu claimed to endure for me only pulled away from what I wanted to remember. And what I wanted to remember never existed. I no longer need to press my head to the page. It is stamped inside of me like any memory.

6.

Friday, June 23

*These days come and they go like a roller coaster. Sometime it seems I feel better than ever, other times it seems like God is just messing with me. I come and go in hazes. I’ve asked Sally if you’ve managed to stop by. She says you have, but I know that she is lying. She cares that much about me. Even when it seems I have no clue what’s going on, I am aware of some things. Your being here is one of them. I hope that someday you meet a girl like her.*
My only hope that in the future you think more of others. I will try to write more later. At this moment, however, I have nothing more to say.

Every time I reach that last sentence of the final page, I flip back to the first line looking for something more. Every year I read this letter for what it does not say.

Sometimes I stare at that last letter where there’s no period, waiting for that ghost that Eu mentioned to appear so that maybe then we can speak of forgiving.

Still, it does not.