This thesis titled

A Place to Be: The Relationship Between Setting and Character in Short Stories

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ABSTRACT

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A Place to Be: The Relationship Between Setting and Character in Short Stories

Director of Thesis: Joan Connor

This thesis addresses how setting and character in short stories can affect and reflect one another. Does place function as more than a location where plot occurs? How does it become a part of the characters themselves? Three short stories, “Babylon Revisited,” by F. Scott Fitzgerald, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” by Ernest Hemingway, and “Where I’m Calling From,” by Raymond Carver, are analyzed for their abilities to successfully link aspects of their settings to the qualities of characters. The essay finds that place is most effective when it influences the characters while also reflecting their emotional and mental status. Three original short stories by the author are then presented as attempts to consider the relationship between setting and character.
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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

When we talk about stories we often look first at character, dialogue, or plot but we may overlook the importance of place. Where a story takes place and its atmosphere can be as influential on a character as the events of the plot. While world building serves as an important anchor to the story for the reader in order to visualize the setting and understand all of the external pressures on a character, the environment can also reflect the emotional or mental state of the character. Setting then can mirror a theme that is also present in character development. In these ways, place is important to the writer and reader not simply as a way for the story to have some concrete presence in a real world, but also to communicate what is going on in a character’s life. Three short stories utilize place as an influence and reflection of characters’ emotional states. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” uses Paris as a representation of the main character, Charlie’s, empty past and the change he has undergone in his sobriety. For the deaf old man and old waiter in Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” the café is a refuge from depression and loneliness. And in Raymond Carver’s “Where I’m Calling From” the facility known as “Frank Martin’s” creates a constant feeling of unease that reflects the internal conflicts of the narrator and his friend J.P. Each of these locations affect and reflect the characters in their respective narratives that contain themes of alcohol abuse. In examining these stories we can see how place is not simply somewhere that the story happens, but also an imperative feature of the narrative that is closely tied to character.

In “Babylon Revisited,” the close third-person narrative allows us to see Paris with an awareness of Charlie’s past through comparisons to the France he once knew.
The descriptions of these once-familiar locations reflect the shift in Charlie’s persona. After arriving in Paris Charlie’s impulses cause him to seek out the places and friends of his past, but he finds that much of the city and his own attitudes towards it have changed. Even though Charlie asks about his old friends in the opening dialogue, we are told from the onset “he was not really disappointed to find Paris was so empty” (Fitzgerald 302). While Charlie is curious to reconnect with associates and later shows appreciation for the past, saying to Marion that it was “nice while it lasted” to be treated as “royalty, almost infallible, with sort of magic around us,” he is discomforted by “the stillness in the Ritz bar,” calling it strange and portentous (305, 302). Charlie feels alien in the Ritz, noting that “it was not an American bar any more” and “it had gone back into France” (302). Despite being a foreigner, the bar was once a place he felt “as if he owned,” but now he feels like an oppressed polite guest. Such change continues throughout his travels around Paris. The “ancient rendezvous” a few doors down from Bricktop’s requires that he be “damn drunk” to enjoy it (306). After seeing Honoria for the first time in years and walking the streets of Montmartre in an attempt to “see Paris by night with clearer and more judicious eyes than those of other days,” Charlie concludes that “all the catering to vice and waste was on an utterly childish scale, and he suddenly realized the meaning of the word ‘dissipate’—to dissipate into thin air; to make nothing out of something” (306). From the first section to the end of the story it is made clear through his perception of and reactions to the nightlife of Paris that Charlie has changed, he can no longer find joy in that life, and seeks only to reconnect with his daughter.
Fitzgerald’s descriptions also utilize cultural descriptions, with Charlie often calling things “American” or “French” to distinguish their cultural presence. The Ritz is the first indication that things have “returned to France” (302). This separation continues into Marion’s home, where the living room is described as “comfortably American,” but the servants in the kitchen make noises of “French activity” (304). While Charlie seems to appreciate the scenery of Paris and wants Honoria to learn French language, he also holds some contempt for the French locals who interact with Honoria and regard her as “no more conscious than a flower” (308). What Charlie seeks then is not only a home with Honoria, but also one reminiscent of America. Charlie makes reference to the American qualities, or lack thereof, of the setting around him, seeming at times to long for its presence. The contention between Charlie and Marion is further drawn out in their differences toward the American presence, as Charlie notes that “it seems very funny to see so few Americans around,” and Marion finds it delightful in that she is no longer compared to their affluent status (305). Charlie’s appreciation extends to the weather itself, saying that the morning on which he will take Honoria out to lunch is “a fine fall day—football weather,” a unique American comparison (307). And Charlie also notes that Marion was once described as possessing “a fresh American loveliness” that he never quite saw (305). Charlie praises American qualities and in doing so carries with him a longing to return home. America is the familiar that he can’t quite return to because of the economy of the time and his reputation, which is unknown in Prague (303). Yet, even as American influences are prevalent for Charlie, Fitzgerald creates a rather international France. Charlie himself is described as having “Irish mobility of his face”
“sobered by a deep wrinkle between his eyes” (305). And while exploring the nightlife he runs into Germans, Japanese, and other Americans that appear frightened (306). Charlie’s positive and negative biases towards certain cultures add to the international atmosphere and his physical, spatially situated displacement. The past and his native country are both places to which he cannot return. Charlie is stuck, physically and mentally, as an outsider in France and Prague.

Stillness and movement are repeating themes that take on positive and negative qualities depending on their application to character or atmosphere. The outward change that Charlie finds in his former favorite bars, such as the Ritz, while strange to Charlie is also a reflection of his own inner shift in pace. When he first visits the Ritz he tells Alix, the bartender, he is “going slow these days” to indicate his new drinking habits (302). This change is reiterated later when he meets with Lorraine and “felt Lorraine’s passionate, provocative attraction, but his own rhythm was different now” (309). Charlie’s life now no longer matches the pace at which Lorraine and Duncan wish to move. The narrative makes the distinction between sober stillness and quick drunken pace in the descriptions of the city and movements of Lorraine and Duncan. Charlie finds the Ritz oddly still from outside and inside the bar is now empty, indicating a more sober setting. When finding a restaurant to take Honoria to, he chooses Le Grand Vatel, the only one that doesn’t remind him of nights that “ended in a blurred and vague twilight” (307). And in describing his past outings, Charlie explains that there was “an increase of paying for the privilege of slower and slower motion,” indicating that when he is drunk time is expensive (306). While some of his old regular bars remain fast-paced, such as the
“ancient rendezvous,” whose eager employees are quick to welcome Charlie, they appear just as empty as the other bars. Along with the disappearing Poet’s Cave and Zelli’s all the landmarks of his past are empty or gone. The physical representations of his past, with the exceptions of Paul and his extended family, have slowed to a point of emptiness or kept going at their blurred drunk pace. While Charlie has also become still in his sobriety, the empty bars disturb him and his friends move too fast, leaving Charlie unable to really find comfort in either pace.

Outside of his former nightlife and bars, Charlie does find relief in Paris and in the presence of Honoria. These two often coincide as when Charlie wakes “upon a fine fall day—football weather” and is no longer depressed, it is also the day he takes Honoria to Le Grand Vatel (307). Despite his discomfort with the way the local French people react to Honoria, he spends his happiest moments in Paris with her. He ignores Lorraine and watches Honoria as she observes the room around them. And later when returning to her home, the setting reflects his love for her as he “waited in the dark street until she appeared, all warm and glowing, in the window above and kissed her fingers out into the night” (310–11). Once again Charlie is in a moment of stillness, but here he is outside in the dark street, while Honoria is “warm and glowing” sending a kiss to him for comfort. The contrast here is rather stark with Charlie in darkness separated from Honoria yet able to see her with the light she gives off, the moment mimicking his custody battle. Charlie believes he cannot have a home without Honoria. Even with the positive allusions to American culture, home to him would be just as comfortable in Prague if he were able to take Honoria. This is made clear when Lincoln Peters later tells Charlie that Marion has
consented to his taking Honoria if she can still maintain legal guardianship and Charlie agrees “wanting only the tangible, visible child” (316). To Charlie it is important to have Honoria with him, before “she crystallized utterly” without his guidance and before Marion’s “atmosphere of hostility” against him is “irrevocably implanted in Honoria” (310, 313). Charlie recognizes the influences an atmosphere can have on an individual and seems aware that Honoria’s presence adds much to his own happiness. This fact makes the ending all the sadder, when his past, through the disruption of Lorraine and Duncan, ruins his chances of taking Honoria with him. With Honoria withheld by Marion once again, Charlie falls to waiting for her, much like the bars of his past sit hopeful for the stray customer to wander back in.

While the settings in “Babylon Revisited” mirror Charlie’s depressed stillness, the café in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” is a peaceful refuge for two of its characters and an anxious workplace for another. The café is seen most plainly by the young waiter as a place of work and hindrance to his sleep. There is no magic for him there. Like the bars Charlie visits in “Babylon Revisited,” the café becomes a burden on the young waiter’s life, preventing him from returning to his wife in bed. The young waiter functions as an antagonist for the older characters and the café itself. He is too young, or too happy, to appreciate the value of the café that the old waiter and deaf man see. To the young waiter the café is purely functional, to serve drinks, as he provides alternatives that serve this same purpose when the older waiter chides him for being rude to the old man. The young waiter tells the older, “he [the old deaf man] can buy a bottle and drink at home,” and “hombre, there are bodegas open all night long,” to which the older waiter replies that
neither is the same as drinking at the café (Hemingway 381-82). At first the young waiter concedes the point, but then his later mention of the bodegas shows that he does not really understand the value of the café beyond serving drinks, despite the old waiter’s explanations. It is also the young waiter who tells the old deaf man to leave and physically closes the metal shutters. His constant hurry sets him apart from the old deaf man and older waiter, both of whom remain rather still until the end of the story. The younger waiter has a wife to hurry home to, while the older men have no one. His lack of appreciation for the café may then result out of having someone to love. This idea is furthered by the appearance of the soldier and the girl who “wore no head covering and hurried beside him” (379). Neither the girl nor the soldier stops at the café, their attitudes reflecting that of the young waiter who wishes to return home. Youth is not the only distinguishing factor, as the older waiter is quick to point out, but rather the soldier and girl have each other, either in a romantic relationship or family, and the young waiter has his wife. The young waiter admits that he is not lonely and this may be what is truly necessary to appreciate the café.

For the old deaf man and the older waiter the café provides a place of escape and sanctuary from the day. It is problematic to say what the old deaf man’s reason for being drawn to the café is, as we receive little information about him in the narrative, and other details come from the old waiter. If we believe the old waiter’s dialogue is reliable we can say that the two older men both suffer from loneliness. The deaf man, the old waiter says, attempted to commit suicide because he “was in despair” for reasons the waiter doesn’t quite know, but is likely tied to grief over the loss of his wife (379). We are told
that the old man sits in the leaves’ shadow at night because the dusty streets in the day settled with the dew at night and he “liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference” (379). Perhaps that is the only true reason he sits there, and the story the old waiter tells is fictional or actually about the old waiter. In either case it appears that the appeal for the old man is the stillness of the café at night. Unlike Charlie in “Babylon Revisited,” the stillness becomes pleasant to the deaf man. His deafness plays an important role here, as it makes it clear that the appeal is not the auditory quiet of night, but of the literal feeling of the setting. The dust and air have “settled” and relaxed, giving him peace. For the old waiter there is a similar, but markedly different, sense of peace. The old waiter sees the café as providing a service for “those who need a light for the night” and further notes that it is “clean and pleasant” and “there are shadows of the leaves” (382). He goes on to mention the desire for quiet and a place to sit with dignity and that the café was the only place that provided such things. Unlike the young waiter, the old waiter doesn’t see the function of serving liquor as important, as we see when he critiques a bar not for its liquor but for its setting. On his way to this bar he reflects on “a nothing that he knew too well” that he believes is in everything, including religion (383). From this reflection we can understand that his life has little meaning, there is nothing for him at home, he is lonely and cannot sleep at night. Instead, he must wait for daylight to sleep, showing that he finds comfort in light like that of the café. He fears the nothingness, and the darkness of night apparently brings it on, and “light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order” (383). While the café is not a reflection of their inner turmoil it does provide the old waiter and the deaf old
man a place to be away from the lonely depression that the waiter attributes to an “insomnia” that “many must have” (383).

Frank Martin’s drying-out facility in “Where I’m Calling From” also partly serves as a sanctuary to Carver’s narrator. But, Frank Martin’s is unlike the café in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” in that those living at the facility cannot leave without possible consequences. While, as the narrator insists, the characters are at Frank Martin’s by choice, the choice to stay acts as a self-imprisonment. This freedom to leave, yet realization of the importance to stay, creates an inner conflict that puts many of the characters on the edge of anxiety. This discomfort is clear when the narrator first describes J.P. He says that “it’s his first time here, and he’s scared” (Carver 208) and later J.P. doesn’t want Roxy to bring the kids to see him when she visits because, we can assume, he is embarrassed that he is there. Yet, if they leave Frank Martin’s too soon there is the fear they will have a relapse and start drinking again. Their will to stay and keep from drinking is representative of their strength. J.P.’s strength is demonstrated when Roxy suggests that they go out to lunch. As much as J.P. would like to leave, he also knows he must stay. The narrator similarly admits to his girlfriend that he must return to Frank Martin’s after their drinking bout. The residents at the facility need to be at Frank Martin’s, but being there is an embarrassing mark of shame and constant reminder of their past.

The dual nature of Frank Martin’s as a source of help and reminder of pain is mirrored in other dualities present in the story. The setting of Frank Martin’s, about which we get so little detail due to the narrator’s reluctance to spend time focusing on it,
puts “tamed” man in a developed facility surrounded by valleys, hills, and the nature of Jack London’s former home. The reoccurring references to Jack London draw other comparisons, as the novel Frank Martin mentions *The Call of the Wild* focuses on an animal that is half wolf and half dog, illustrating the struggle those in the facility face of the wildness of alcohol and tameness of sobriety (215). This battle with control has its physical manifestations in shaking hands and sudden illnesses that appear through the story. There is also the conflict between wet and dry seen throughout “Where I’m Calling From” in which wet symbolizes drinking or being drunk and dry represents sobriety. The drunks at Frank Martin’s go to the facility to “dry out,” much as the character in Jack London’s “To Build a Fire,” which the narrator refers to, attempts to build a fire to dry his clothing and warm up (221). The character in Jack London’s story ultimately fails on his first try, much like the narrator of Carver’s story, but the narrator in “Where I’m Calling From” gets a second chance. The internal conflicts of the characters between sobriety and drunkenness become external representations as they keep themselves in the facility, out of the “wild” of their surroundings, and travel through various states of wet to keep dry at Frank Martin’s. Their discomfort in being at Frank Martin’s comes across clearly as we receive little detail about the appearance of the place and instead focus on the stories they tell each other about their lives in order to pass the time.

The stories the characters tell one another serve multiple purposes for both the characters themselves and the reader. Sharing these stories about their lives, what they did in the past and what led them to Frank Martin’s, appears to be a therapeutic way to understand their own battle with alcoholism. But, as the narrator complains when J.P.
momentarily stops telling his story, “I’m listening. It’s helping me relax, for one thing. It’s taking me away from my own situation” (213). These stories distract the narrator, and likely others at the facility, from their own problems. Hearing these stories, and watching television, allow them to pass the time by escaping from Frank Martin’s and themselves. And as readers, we too escape Frank Martin’s in the detail of the locations that exist within the stories.

Many of the settings in the stories tell us something of the characters as well. J.P.’s story of falling down the well when he was twelve is symbolic of struggling with alcoholism. Although there is some irony in the well being “dry” the metaphor is completed by J.P. wetting his pants and becoming responsible for adding wetness to the well (210). At the bottom of the well J.P. sees “a circle of blue sky” with birds and clouds passing, “but nothing fell on him and nothing closed off that little circle of blue” (210). While in the well, J.P. “hollered himself hoarse” before being pulled up by his father with a rope. This narrative ties in with his recounting how he met Roxy when she was a chimney sweep and his becoming a chimney sweep as well (210). In both cases there are tunnels from which to escape, with his father rescuing him from one, and Roxy showing him how to clean out another. The story of the well is perhaps easier to use as a metaphor for overcoming alcoholism, with the blue sky serving as “a light at the end of the tunnel” or “clearer skies” to escape to and his father as the guiding hand that leads J.P. back to sobriety. But in the present, the saving role is taken over by Roxy, who has experience cleaning well-like structures, and to a degree the narrator, who becomes J.P.’s friend. In less detail we are told about Tiny’s stories and briefly of the man who travels places.
Both of these characters seem to take their time at Frank Martin’s less seriously. The man who travels is directly antagonistic, refusing to acknowledge his alcoholism, while Tiny uses his history as a joke until he suffers a seizure and becomes so stricken with the fear of his vulnerability that his persona changes. Their lack of stillness keeps them from connecting or acknowledging their issues. The man who travels and Tiny are less willing to confront themselves than J.P. and the narrator. Sharing stories can serve as a defense mechanism to hide from admitting alcoholism, or, in the case of J.P. and the narrator, to confront it directly while also using it as a distraction from the place they are in.

The stories that J.P. and the narrator share become important, perhaps more so than the physical location of Frank Martin’s, in relating to the “where” of the title “Where I’m Calling From.” As we learn more about each character through their own stories we discover who they really are. In the opening the narrator tells us “Like the rest of us at Frank Martin’s, J.P. is first and foremost a drunk. But he’s also a chimney sweep” (208). The labeling of J.P. as a drunk “first and foremost” is something that J.P. must overcome, as must the narrator. Being at Frank Martin’s is embarrassing for them because of what it means admitting to. J.P. does not want his children to visit, the narrator makes up excuses for not calling his girlfriend, who he knows is likely home, and when he dials his wife for the last time he admits “I’ll have to tell her” where he’s calling from (221). The reason for this fear of admitting that they are alcoholics, or where they are, is made clear by the man who travels when he claims “he’s not a drunk” and that saying so is “a serious charge to make” that will “ruin a good man’s prospects” (217). Overcoming that label of being “first and foremost a drunk” and becoming instead simply “a chimney sweep”
would be an accomplishment for J.P. and sharing his story through the narrative places the reader closer to him as that individual, especially when we see that Roxy still loves him as a chimney sweep. For the narrator, arriving at this sense of self, a person who is not simply a drunk, comes through his own story of waking up in the morning at the house with his wife to find their landlord about to paint. The narrator explains that while looking at the old landlord “a wave of happiness comes over me that I’m not him—that I’m me and that I’m inside this bedroom with my wife” (220). But even with the narrator inside, naked, out of the sun, the landlord still climbs the ladder to work. Along with his recounting of “To Build a Fire,” these stories seem to indicate the narrator’s realization that in order to become happy that he is himself again, he must work for it despite the difficulties he faces. He is more sure of himself in the end than he was at the beginning, partly as a consequence of being in Frank Martin’s facility, but more so because of J.P.’s story and the telling of his own. The “where” becomes a place within him rather than any external location.

Place is not always the physical representation given in the story, as “Where I’m Calling From” shows, the “where” may not be a location that exists in a physical space at all. With each of these stories there is an intersection between the interior of the characters and the exterior of their surroundings. It is easy to see when environment affects a character, either because it makes them cold, or wet, but new layers are added when such effects reflect the inner struggle of the character. Or, even further, when the narrative shows us how the interior motivations of a character affect the environment or its perception. We understand the change that has occurred in Charlie when we are told
how differently he sees Paris. Charlie’s present self and past self are much like the
division between the young waiter and older men in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” in
that the younger waiter cannot see the comfort that the older men take in the café. The
narrator in “Where I’m Calling From” experiences a similar division, but his is more
immediate than that which Charlie experiences. While Charlie initially seeks out the past,
he comes to realize that he detests much of it. For J.P. and the narrator their past
temptations still exist. They would both love to leave Frank Martin’s, but they cannot.
They can only achieve their goal by remembering who they once were and confronting
their past, while Charlie’s past only serves to drive him further from his future with
Honoria. In all of these stories, place, whether it be a clean well-lighted café, a sanctuary
of warmth to dry out in, or a home in Prague with Honoria, is an ideal in which to escape.
In reflecting their natures or internal desires, place becomes a character as well, but to
accomplish this the writer must orient the place so that we see human characteristics
within it. We naturally look for ways in which our environment has a life of its own and
this often comes from our own interpretations, biases, and experiences. Recreating such
an effect in a story injects a sense of realism that draws us further into the narrative. Place
then serves a story best when it not only influences the characters that live inside that
world, but also reflects their emotional and mental status.
Works Cited


The subway beneath Cincinnati smelled of piss dried on concrete. Every waft of urine made us hurry down the long entrance tunnel. Kyle knew the way to his hide-away by flashlight. His pale light followed the cracks that split the stained concrete under our shoes. Every few feet he’d stop and flick the light against the wall, spotlighting the scrawled letters of a tagger’s signature in puffy black ink. He told me there was one piece of graffiti he really liked along this wall, but he couldn’t find it in the dark. Behind us the dim sunlight peeked under the large metal doors and gave our way out an inviting glow.

Kyle said he found the doors weeks ago, with the bolt lock cracked on the ground, and had pushed his way through their heavy weight while exploring. Cold air breezed through the tunnel with every car that passed the vents connected to Central Parkway above us. A draft went up my shorts and I pulled the fabric tight against my skin. We were hopeful for a quick end to fall, but instead the weather played a mean game of switching between warm and cold days in typical Ohio fashion.

“How much farther?” I said.

Kyle walked backwards and put the light under his chin like a bad Halloween storyteller. The light caught the edge of his forehead where his hair dye had stained his skin red and made it look like the bloodied fringes of a re-attached face. Kyle had dyed his hair red to celebrate the Reds’ opening day. His father was livid, thought it made Kyle look ridiculous, so he had held him down by the neck and buzzed the hair off, leaving Kyle’s reddened scalp visible.

“You scared or something?”
“No. I just don’t want to get caught down here.” I pulled my cell phone from my gym shorts. The time, 4:30, glowed harsh in my eyes. My mother would call if I weren’t home by five.

“You said you’d check out my stash,” Kyle said.

“I know. I’m going to. You see me running away?”

The flashlight flew from his hand when his foot caught on something and tripped him backwards. Light scattered like a strobe until it rested at my feet, the beam shining on my Nikes. When I found Kyle with the flashlight, he gripped a banister that led up a set of stairs. He grinned and pulled himself upright.

“Found the stairs,” he said.

The tunnel stairs led to a large empty space like a concrete ballroom. Kyle gave me a quick tour with the flashlight, casting it against the wall nearest to us and up to the ceiling, then across the ceiling to the opposite wall, and down again. The ceiling was vaulted like a church, with support beams like ribs stretching across the room. Kyle pointed to the large tunnel holes at the ends of the room where the train would have passed through. We were on a platform meant for passengers traveling farther downtown or out toward Over-the-Rhine at the edge of the city. Yet none of it was used, every plan to revitalize the subway failed and not a single train ran. But Kyle said that wasn’t the coolest part of being down here.

Kyle led me to a small space tucked behind an unfinished wall with a gap just big enough for us to squeeze through. Other wanderers and homeless men sometimes came down here and slept against the walls under cardboard and old blankets. But none of them
could fit into Kyle’s nook. His sleeping bag, pillow, and blanket were tossed in one corner. A small pot with burnt scraps of wood and paper sat near the pillow. The whole space was the size of my mother’s walk-in closet, just big enough for three or four people to comfortably sit. Kyle knelt in the corner by the edge of the sleeping bag and handed me a magazine.

“You brought me here to read *Home and Garden*?” I said.

He held up a lighter.

“No, man. We need a fire. Toss it in the pot and light it on fire, a few pages at a time.”

Even just a few pages warmed the little alcove and scattered orange light against the cold concrete walls. The pages burnt fast, so we had to keep tearing them out and throwing them in the pot every few minutes. Kyle held another magazine and sat against the wall on the sleeping bag.

“Check these babes out,” he said.

He flipped through the first few pages, bent the magazine toward the fire, and revealed a naked woman. By thirteen most of the boys at our middle school had seen a *Victoria’s Secret* or, if they were so lucky, had a computer at home to access the free porn sites. We were fourteen, in high school, and behind the curve. Kyle’s older brother told him about a supermarket down the street that threw out its old *Playboys* when new shipments arrived. Kyle, dedicated as he was, went dumpster diving for porn.

“I’m going back for more next week. There were others I couldn’t carry. You want to come?” he asked once we finished drooling over the pages.
“My mom would kill me if she found that in my room.”

A pair of pajamas poked out beneath the pillow as I pushed against it to stand.

“You can always leave it here, man,” he said. “I’m not taking them home either.”

“You sleep here?”

“Yeah,” he said. He knelt by the pot, warming his hands then closed the metal lid. When he took the lid off, the fire had gone out.

“ Anything else cool down here?”

The flashlight guided us to the edge of the platform. Below us the tracks rusted with some of the wooden crossbeams missing. A large pipe sat on top of the tracks next to the platform and ran down the tunnel, disappearing around a bend. Part of its tarp covering had fallen away and dull green metal reflected against the light. The sound of rushing water passed faintly inside it.

“I bet I could fit inside that,” Kyle said. He gave me the flashlight and knelt at the platform’s edge. His fingers grazed the metal and he screamed.

“Oh god,” I said, yanking him back by his shirt collar. The light flashed against his big wet grin as he turned and held up his unharmed fingers.

“Gotcha,” he said. Reaching out for the pipe again, he placed his hand against it.

“It’s freezing. I can feel the water rushing through.”

My phone’s alarm blared and startled Kyle, causing him to slip and almost fall into the crack between the platform and pipe.

“Is that your mom?” Kyle said, standing up.
“No, I don’t get a signal down here. It’s my ‘get the hell home’ alarm. C’mon, let’s go.”

As we walked back toward the steps Kyle stopped and pointed the flashlight against the wall. Graffiti covered much of it down the steps. Up near the ceiling, out of reach from the taggers with their ugly signatures of swirling abstract lines, a dragon in bright green, yellow, and red floated around the corner. The dragon’s head curved toward a rendition of the subway tunnel with a station marker labeled “Brighton Street” crossed out and replaced with “Freedom.”

“That’s me, man,” Kyle said. “First train out of here, heading to freedom.”

The walk home wasn’t far from the Brighton station entrance. We lived only a few blocks past the abandoned storefronts, yet to reopen as new art galleries, where the homeless and addicts slept for protection against the wind. A vintage shop was just turning on its lights and outside the hipster kids drank Pabst Blue Ribbon in tight jeans while talking about their bikes. Kyle liked to give them the finger and make them feel uncomfortable. They never did anything back, probably because they didn’t want to appear racist, but it wasn’t a race thing at all. It was just Kyle being a dick.

We lived in the same brick building, Kyle and his father above my family, with an older couple living on the third floor. The brick was brown and dark with years of caked soot and dirt. Slender and smashed between two similar buildings, there wasn’t much room for us all, but stacked on top of each other we somehow managed through the seasons. Without central air or heat we took to using window units and room heaters, or in seasons of transition, we would rely on body heat. When we neared the house, the
lamplights from my living room penetrated the oncoming cold blue of dusk and made the sidewalk inviting. Just above our heads the windows were open and a shadow of my mother moved against the white stucco ceiling. From the second floor window above my own, the dull blue flicker of a television played in the dark. The loud shouts and screeching tires from the TV escaped through the glass and made my neck tingle. I looked back down to my own window and went up the crumbling concrete steps. Kyle stood his ground at the first step and didn’t follow me to the door.

“I’m going to run and get some soda from the store,” he said.

“All right,” I said.

Inside, my mother finished cooking. She held up her fingers. “I was this close to calling the police,” she said. Her head shook and she *tsked* with each shake. “You’d better be careful. You start making this a habit and I’m going to cut your allowance and that’ll just be the start.”

“It was nothing, Mom.” I washed my hands at the sink full of carrot shavings and other chopped bits of vegetables. Soapsuds mixed together with the discarded waste and caught in the drain guard.

“Don’t you give me that.” With her hip she shoved me out of the way to drain a pot of boiling potatoes. “Go change out of those dirty shorts and then come back here and we’ll eat.”

Outside my bedroom window Kyle sat on the concrete half-wall that ran up the stairs. The sky was turning a tan tinted black and the lights from the city blotted out the
stars. He flicked the flashlight on and off. Before I moved away from the window he jumped off the ledge and walked back toward the subway station.

***

On the bus to school the next morning Kyle tried to convince me to go back to the subway for a sleepover. All around us kids screamed and taunted each other. A few girls shouted names at a fat girl, Charlene, until she hid her face under her hood. Across the aisle from me Danielle whispered with her friend. They’d whisper, turn and look at us, then laugh and turn to the window again. Danielle had soft curving cheeks and her chin stuck out, sharp and strong. When she turned away, her braids flipped and the plastic snap-on bows clicked together. The purple rhinestones on the bows matched her shirt. She would match the colors of her bows to her shirts every day. The cliquey girls called her a baby for wearing the bows, but I thought they were pretty. I hadn't even had a conversation with Danielle. But I could make out her voice even when she ended up at the other end of the bus. Her speech felt lighter and fuller in my ears and made it distinguishable from the other girls' wailing and squealing. Kyle said to ignore Danielle and her friend.

“They don’t know what they’re talking about,” he said.

“What do you think they’re talking about?”

“I don’t know. Don’t care, either.” He watched a Buskin Bakery drift by. “I’m hungry.”

“Didn’t you eat breakfast?”

“No, man. Who eats breakfast when you get free lunch?”
Danielle’s friend called my name and Danielle pulled at her shirt’s sleeve, trying to make her stop.

“What are you doing this weekend?” Danielle’s friend said.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“He’s busy,” Kyle said. He grabbed my shoulder and pulled me close. “We’re going to hang out at the subway.”

“I don’t think we should go back there.”

“Your mommy ground you?”

“No. But I don’t want to end up grounded.” We were nearing the school, so I lifted my backpack on to my lap. “Plus it’s kind of boring down there.”

“Then bring something, man.”

“What the hell am I going to bring?”

“Language,” he said, hitting me in the shoulder.

“Seriously though.” I rubbed my shoulder and could feel the skin already tender.

“Fine, whatever.” He pulled up his backpack from the floor and it looked empty and deflated. “But it’s not like we got anything better to do.”

“Video games.”

“That we already played a dozen times.”

“We can rent a new one.”

“You’re boring me,” he said, pretending to fall asleep against the window.

Danielle and her friend stood in the aisle and followed the other kids off the bus. Kyle’s eyes followed them and he started pushing me to stand. He laughed his high-pitched
laugh and I knew he was going to say something only funny to him. “Get her to come and she can do poses from *Playboy*.”

I punched him hard in the arm and ran off the bus.

***

Between classes I had ten minutes to myself in which I started reading comic books at my locker. The hallway writhed in a mass of kids shoving their way to class or out of the building. My next class was right across from my locker, so I never worried about making it on time. Danielle’s friend flicked the back of my comic. She grinned without showing any teeth and it made her lips look plastic with a gloss of lip balm.

“Zach,” she said.

“Yeah?” Danielle wasn’t anywhere around. I went back to reading *Spider-Man*.

“Danielle wants to ask you out to ice cream on Friday.”

My hand trembled and shook the pages. I put the comic back in my locker.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure.”

Her friend swung her hips from one side to the other, shifting her weight back and forth, while her head moved in the opposite direction. Something looked wrong with her body and made her appear unsettling. Danielle seemed the most normal one of her friends. The others, like this one, often fell into dancing like they were in a musical with secret music. Danielle’s friend sang the name “Graeter’s,” the ice cream place not too far from school, then slipped into the crowd before the bell rang.

When I told Kyle of the change of plans, he punched me in the arm and said it would be the last ice cream I’d have. Neither of us had much luck with girls in middle
school. We both had crushes on this girl, Lizzie, who used to twirl her long blonde hair and come back from vacation with a tan that made her look like a weathered adventurer. But, when Kyle asked her out to go roller-skating she shot him down and that was enough for us both to stop trying. I couldn’t tell if Kyle was jealous I’d found a girl who was actually interested in me or mad that I would be ditching him after school. We made a pact to go to Brighton Station after I got back from ice cream and spend some time in the tunnel that night.

***

I met Danielle by the bottom steps outside of school after everyone had run out and the seniors drove off in their cars. We normally took the bus back; where it would drop me and Kyle off before continuing on to take Danielle and her friend into the nicer part of town with a small apartment complex that had a pool and regular security patrols. As the bus passed us Kyle gave me the stink-eye, then pressed his red bristled scalp against the window. I didn’t get it. Danielle was watching her shoes, small light purple canvas Converse that she had doodled butterflies on. Graeter’s was just a block and a half from school. On our way there between soft breaths I said, “It’s pretty,” referring to the sun ducking behind big cumulus clouds. The day was warm and I kept my sweater tied around my waist. But Danielle didn’t respond to my comment. She watched the cars that passed us and avoided eye contact.

At Graeter’s I ordered mint chocolate chip and she got black raspberry chip. The chocolate chip flavors were the best at Graeter’s. Every cup was like digging for chocolate gold and occasionally you’d find a chip that cut through a whole scoop like a
mini candy bar drenched in ice cream. We sat inside at a little purple table and chairs with shiny silver metal. The shop was freezing, but it always smelled like waffle cones and the cherry filled Danishes my mother bought on Sundays. An old Britney Spears song came on the radio. Without thinking, I stuck out my tongue and made a “bleah” noise, a chocolate chip dropping out of my mouth and onto my white shirt. Danielle started laughing with the back of her hand to her mouth, trying to keep her ice cream in. Grabbing a fist-full of napkins I wiped at my shirt, knowing the chocolate smear would stain and get me into trouble.

“My mom’s going to kill me,” I said.

“That’s what you get for dissing Britney.” Danielle tossed her head.

“You like her?”

“I did,” she said. “But not any of her new stuff.”

“Do you listen to Kid Cudi?”

“I love Kid Cudi,” she said. “But my mom is really religious and doesn’t let me listen to him. She doesn’t like any rap. Or Britney. Only—” Danielle snorted with a laugh, “this terrible Christian music that sounds like someone beating whales into prayer.”

“That’s terrible.” Through the window I saw an old man lock his car with the fob on his keychain, then run across the street between traffic. Danielle was watching me.

“Are you religious?”
Lifting up her cup she scraped the bottom of it, gathering all the remnants of the ice cream into one scoop, then popped the spoon in her mouth. With the spoon tight between her lips she shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I pray, I guess. And go to church with my family. But, I’m not really as religious as my mom. She has these figurines, little boys and girls with big heads in pastel colors, kneeling and praying, or dressed as angels, or sitting on a fence sharing a sandwich, weird kind of things that are supposed to be inspiring I guess. And she talks about Jesus a lot. ‘Jesus would do this. Jesus wouldn’t do that. Think of Jesus. What would Jesus want you to do?’ I don’t really care what Jesus wants.”

“He sounds cool though.” I wiped my mouth and saw the large green smear the napkin caught. “Gave food to people. Endless supply of wine.”

“Sorry,” she said, smiling. “I didn’t mean to offend you. Are you religious?”

I chuckled loudly and the girl behind the counter looked up from cleaning the counter. “No,” I said. “We aren’t at all. I only pray when I watch football or before a test or if I’m going to get in trouble, like with my shirt. I’ll be praying about my shirt.”

When we finished our ice creams we got water in small waxed paper cups, both of us quickly drinking a cup, then refilling them again. Danielle stopped me with her hand on my shoulder as I moved for the door.

“Here,” she said. She dipped the folded bundle of a napkin in her water and rubbed it against the chocolate stain on my chest. The water was cold and slowly spread as the fabric absorbed it. “It may have already set, but that may help.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Do you want to come over? Listen to some forbidden music?”
The little braided beads in her pigtails clicked against each other as she nodded.

On our walk back to my house Danielle told me she lied to her mom and had said she was going over to her friend Tasha’s house. If I had said no, that I didn’t want to go out for ice cream, they would have gone to the movies, then stayed up and done their nails. She showed me her nails, the previous pattern of green and yellow, like splatters of mustard, partially visible on some of her fingers, the rest chipped away. She and Tasha liked to come up with their own designs, cut them out on paper, and use the paper as a guide while they painted over the edges. When she asked me if I wanted her to do my nails I imagined Kyle’s reaction to seeing me wearing nail polish and I laughed so hard I had to stop walking.

At my house my mother was working in the kitchen, with the smell of lasagna or pizza lofting down the hall. By instinct, I grabbed Danielle’s hand to lead her to my room and felt it flinch at the contact. My room was always a mess. Danielle had to step over piles of clothes to get through the door. I followed behind her, glancing down the hall before shutting the door.

“Where should I sit?” Danielle said.

“The bed?” I said. Her back straightened and she rubbed her hand against the strap of her backpack. “Or the floor. I could clear a space.”

“No, that’s ok.” Danielle went over to the bed, sliding off her backpack and setting it down on a little patch of carpet. With practiced hands she straightened the rumpled sheets. Then, with a pivot like a ballerina, she twisted around and sat on the edge of the bed. I went on cleaning the room, tossing random piles of clothes together in the
corner by my hamper. Under each pile of clothes I found hidden items, CDs, trash, a plate, an action figure, and I would place them on the desk or bookshelf or toss them in the closet. When the floor was finally cleared and the brown shag carpet was actually a carpet, I turned to Danielle. Her eyes were glancing over the collection of soda cans that gathered dust on a shelf over my desk.

“I started collecting them four years ago when we went to Florida,” I said. I sat down next to her and felt the weight of exhaustion hit me. “I guess it’s kind of stupid.”

“No,” she said. “I just never met anyone that collected soda cans and wasn’t homeless or recycling them.”

I pointed to the first one, a cherry Coke, with purple and black lines zigzagging horizontally, small red cherries falling vertically, and a large red cherry replacing the ‘o.’

“That was what started it. It was before Coke sold that design in Ohio. I thought the design was really cool. My grandfather told me I should start collecting them.”

“That’s really neat,” she said, bending over her book bag. From the bag she pulled out a large book called *The Equestrian Guide to Horses.* “I collect horse stuff.”

“Have you been riding?"

“Never. But my mom said next year I could sign up for lessons.”

There was a knock at my door.

“What are you doing in there?” My mom’s voice called through the door.

Danielle’s face went red and she tucked the book back in her bag.

“Nothing, Mom,” I said.

“Is someone in there with you?”
“Hello,” Danielle said, quickly standing and surprising me. I got up and opened the door.

My mom wore her full yellow apron, stained over the years with various cooking mishaps. Underneath the apron she still had on her work clothes, black slacks and a white collared shirt with red lines around the edges. Peeking out from under the apron on her chest was the red embroidered logo of Bob Evan’s where she worked early morning shifts as a hostess while I was at school. She smiled at Danielle and went into friendly mother mode.

“Well hello there,” she said, pressing her hands together at her waist. “I’m Mrs. Duncan.”

“I’m Danielle.” Danielle shook her hand.

“We’ll be having dinner in about an hour. But, you’re welcome to join if you’d like.”

“Thanks,” Danielle said. “But, I should really go home soon.”

“Are you sure, Honey?” Danielle nodded her head, the beads clicking together.

“All right,” my mother said, placing her hands on Danielle’s shoulders. “All right. But, you’ll have to come back another time and join us.”

Danielle agreed.

My mother turned to me, her face taught, making her smile slightly sinister. “Zach, you be ready in an hour.” Then she disappeared down the hall, humming a tune by Etta James.
“Sorry about that,” I said, closing the door.

“Don’t worry about it.” Danielle went to her backpack and pulled a cell phone from the front pocket. She called Tasha and asked her to have her mom pick her up. They’d go out to the movie after all.

When she hung up she pointed out my window. Kyle was lifting himself up and peeking in. We went outside and met him on the stairs.

“Hey,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for you, man.”

“I have to be back in an hour. I don’t think I can go later.”

“Go where?” Danielle rested her backpack on the half-wall and leaned against it.

“Nowhere.” Kyle didn’t even turn to her when he said it.

“We found a way into the abandoned subway,” I said.

In my peripheral vision I saw Kyle’s eyes squint and he cursed under his breath. He let himself fall back against the half wall across from Danielle.

“Oh, cool,” she said, leaning in closer to me. “What’s down there?”

“Not much, a bunch of graffiti, some tracks. But we’re going to use it as a stow-away space and spend the night. Kyle found a hidden spot.”

“Are you going to take your cans down there?”


I turned my back to him and smiled at Danielle. “Yeah, maybe.”

“I could bring a horse figurine,” she said. “We could make like a little time capsule.”
“Who invited you?” Kyle was next to me. He grabbed my shoulder and made me face him. “Hey, let’s go.”

“I can’t,” I said, shrugging his hand off. “We’ll go tomorrow.”

“I’ll come,” Danielle said. “Tasha too. We’ll meet here tomorrow after noon?”


“Back off,” I said.

Kyle was getting close to Danielle and I had to step in between them, pressing my hands against his chest.

“It’ll be fine,” I said. “Why are you spazzing out?”

“There’s Tasha’s mom.” Danielle waved at a green minivan creeping down the street. The woman behind the wheel looked confused and her head jerked like she was afraid someone would run out and mug her at any moment. Tasha waved back at Danielle with that broad plastic smile across her face.

Kyle backed off at the sight of the minivan and leaned against the half wall.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Danielle said. In a flash she squeezed my hand then she was gone down the stairs and into the minivan as it stopped for her.

“No way,” Kyle said. “They’re not allowed.”

“Who made you king of the subway?”

“It’s my spot, man. I decide who goes.”

“Stop being a dick.”
He shoved me. I went to shove him back but the house door opened and Mr. Campbell, the hunch-backed old man from the third floor, stepped outside. He gave a short hello and went down the sidewalk toward his car parked on the street.

“Maybe you’ll like Tasha and you two can hook up,” I said. “Maybe she likes *Playboy.*”

Kyle bit the skin below his lips on the inside of his mouth, pulling the skin and making his lips go thin. He shook his head. The setting sun caught the red of his scalp and made it shine through his hair.

“Whatever,” he said, going down the steps and walking past Mr. Campbell as he drove away.

***

Saturday brought fall’s final push of a cold front down from Canada. The northern winds forced me to wear my winter jacket and a knit hat. My breath came out in short bursts of white air. Dinner had been pizza that hung heavy in my stomach in a warm dough ball and carried all of Italy in its smell. I waited thirty minutes before the van appeared around the corner. My mom watched me from the window, as I knew she would, claiming she worried that someone would snatch me from our porch. Tasha, Danielle, and I had devised a lie that had me staying over at a friend’s house out in the suburbs. Tasha had her brother talk to my mom on the phone, acting like this fictional friend, and Tasha acted like the mom. The whole thing made my mom suspicious, and seeing me dance outside in the cold for half an hour didn’t help. Tasha’s brother was eighteen and had just gotten his license. She said he didn’t care what we were doing, but
he agreed to act like he was picking me up if we all paid him five bucks. I waved to my mom and hopped into the sweltering van. Tasha had the heat cranked high. Danielle sat in the back seat next to me. Tasha didn’t even try to hide from my mom; instead she just giggled in the front seat and asked if we were really doing this. Danielle told her to shush. She had Tasha’s brother drive around the block, then drop us off down in front of the new art gallery. We gave him money and hopped out with our bags. As he drove off I felt the chill through my clothes. Danielle and Tasha dressed for the weather, tossing on their coats, hats, and gloves. Danielle’s pink coat matched her butterfly clips. The kids outside the vintage shop looked at us funny out of the corner of their eyes as they took long drinks from their beers.

Tasha and Danielle followed me down the street and around the small shrubs and trees that blocked the entrance to the subway. Kyle wasn’t here either. I tried to call him through the day, but he never answered and his father told me he wasn’t home, his breath heavy with alcohol. The man always scared me. He was as big as the doorframe with a wide belly that jutted out like he was pregnant. I’d never seen him wear pants, and the only shirt he wore was a faded grey Bengals t-shirt. Kyle once told me that his dad used to box in college and was paid to start bar fights. I never lingered there long.

Without Kyle it became my job to lead the girls through the tunnel with a flashlight I snatched from under the sink. The experience was different with the girls. Tasha squealed when we saw a piece of chipped concrete that looked vaguely like a mouse. They both complained about the smell, saying it smelled like the boys’ bathroom. I thought it would be a good opportunity to have Danielle clutch my hand, or arm, or pull
me closer, but instead she stayed behind with Tasha tight against her. They weren’t interested in the graffiti, even when I tried to show them an orchid painted in orange and pink, Tasha said it looked trashy. Danielle kept silent as we walked on and in their whispers Tasha was goading her on.

A voice echoed down the tunnel and I told the girls to be quiet. It sounded like a radio. I thought maybe workers had returned, or a homeless man had decided to camp out away from the chill. When we neared the stairs that led to the platform I cupped my hand over the flashlight and crept up the stairs on my knees. A soft firelight came from inside Kyle’s crack in the wall. The radio tuned to an all rap station playing something by 2Pac.

“Kyle?” I said, my voice echoing over the platform.

Tasha squeaked.

“What the hell is he doing?” she said to Danielle.

The radio stopped and the firelight was briefly covered. A small figure appeared outside the crack.

“Fuck off,” Kyle said.

With a deep breath I stood and uncovered the flashlight.

I argued with Kyle for a time until Danielle threatened to tell everyone that Kyle was camping out down here. It didn’t win her any points, but it did shut him up and let us in to his space.

“We brought these,” Danielle said, pulling a bag of marshmallows from her backpack. A box of graham crackers and chocolate followed the marshmallows. “For s’mores.”
We cooked s’mores with Kyle’s fire pot in the middle of the room and stuffed ourselves while listening to the radio. The s’mores seemed to lighten Kyle up and he let Tasha change the station to one that played a mix of pop music. Tasha told us her family was split up. Her father had moved up to Maine after divorcing her mother and losing Tasha and her brother in a custody battle. She said her mother was crazy, but the judge sided with her anyway. To get away from her mother Tasha started taking dance lessons and had learned the samba. She also enrolled in a Spanish class so she could flirt with the teacher who taught both classes. From Danielle’s backpack she took out a little Spanish dancer figurine with a big poofy fabric dress in black and red. On the bottom of its wooden stage was a button that made the dancer’s legs kick. Tasha made it dance around the fire to the radio, then kick at Kyle’s ear. He tried to flick it away, but when Tasha persisted, he laughed and let her kick the side of his head.

“I brought something too,” Danielle said, reaching into her bag. She pulled out a horse figurine that she had to hold with two hands. Its skin was furry, almost like felt, and caramel with a white spot on the nose and around its hooves. The mane was longer hair, the same material as a Barbie, which could be braided or colored with warm water and a magic brush. She hadn’t seen a horse until her mother bought her the figurine when she was eight. Each birthday her mother bought her a new toy horse that Danielle named and placed in a little stable in her room. “I want a real ranch someday,” she said. “With twenty horses.”

“What’s this horse’s name?” I said, rubbing my finger along its side and feeling the fake hide bristle against my skin.
“Buttercup,” she said. “Very stereotypical, I know, but I was eight.”

We laughed even though I suppose it wasn’t that funny. When it was my turn I brought out the cherry Coke can and told them the story behind it. Kyle hadn’t heard it before and he admired the patterns on the can, saying they looked like they were based on graffiti designs. He chucked it to me across the dying fire and said he had something too.

“Hold on, the fire is going out,” Danielle said. From her backpack she pulled out her book on horses. She paused for a moment and her face set. Her hands leafed through the pages, stopping at a few and marking them with a dog-ear. “I’ll rip some pages out of this.”

Kyle’s Playboy flopped on top of the page she was about to turn. She stuck her tongue out and made a gagging sound. Kyle laughed, his voice bellowing in the small space, deep and like his father’s that I sometimes heard through the ceiling.

“I don’t expect you to read it,” he said. “We’ll burn it.”

She took it by the corner and held it up between her finger and thumb like it was dripping sewage. Across the dying flame Tasha giggled.

“That won’t be enough,” I said. “Not for the whole night.”

“Oh, don’t you worry.” Kyle flipped down the pillow in the corner to reveal a whole stack of Playboys. “I’ve been busy collecting.”

“Gross,” Danielle said. She tossed the one she held at Tasha, who caught it with a slap between her palms.
Tasha began flipping through it. As she browsed, her finger would stop to point and laugh at a photo, then she tore it out and tossed it into the pot. She went on like this, taking the photos she found most hysterical and tossing them in.

“These are absurd,” she said.

A loud crack interrupted her laughter. We all looked up from the fire. Kyle turned his head to the entrance of the hideaway. With a vault from one leg to the other he jumped over Tasha and went to the opening. Leaning toward the fire, Danielle turned down the radio and listened. Another crack echoed through the station and was followed by a soft hissing noise.

“That’s weird,” Tasha said. Kyle shushed her from the opening and she smacked at his leg with the magazine, her face scrunched. “Don’t you shush me.”

He shushed her again. And another crack followed his sound. Then there was a roar, a rushing roar that sounded like a train. Danielle’s hand was on my knee, then gone before I could touch it. The air became lighter, like a wind had blown into the room.

“Hand me the flashlight,” Kyle said. I gave it to him, then stood on the tips of my toes and looked over his shoulder as he shined it into the platform. We saw it as soon as Tasha cried out.

“I’m wet,” she said, bolting from the floor and patting her butt.

In the dark Kyle found the billowing stream of water that shot over the edge of the platform like a fire hose and spread up and down the length of the room. The flashlight darted to the stairs where the water rolled down like a waterfall. Tasha was pushing at my shoulder.
“I’m wet,” she said. “I want to go. Move.”

“We should go,” Danielle said behind her.

The water was beginning to soak through my shoes as it grew past the rubber of the soles. We turned back into the room. Each of us took a job automatically, putting the fire out, gathering up our trinkets in Danielle’s bag, and grabbing Kyle’s pillow and sleeping bag. By the time we made our way to the steps the water was shin deep. The cold water made my ankles numb and difficult to move as the muscles refused to work. Kyle pushed Tasha to go first, then followed behind her, grasping at the slippery banister. Danielle went in front of me and I tried to help her stay up by keeping my hand against her back. I felt the strap of her bra and adjusted my hand higher, embarrassed. Another loud crack echoed behind us and there was a sudden surge of cold water that pushed me forward into Danielle’s back and sent us all slipping down the stairs. My butt and legs bounced hard against the steps before the floor broke my momentum. Danielle’s backpack slipped from her shoulders and washed over my stomach, the contents spilling out as the bag spun in the water. Like rag-dolls we were flung by the flowing tide down the entrance tunnel. Our limbs flailed as we struggled to keep our heads above the water. The rough ceiling scraped my knuckles as I tried to grasp exposed pipes. Danielle was lost to me in the dark and cold, the flashlight gone, my limbs growing numb, all my senses useless. The doors had been pushed open and the faint orange glow of the street lamps was the only light. The gaping hole looked like a wide mouth waiting to swallow us in one long drink. But instead we were vomited into the street, past the doors and
shrubs and sidewalk, down where the water finally dissipated as it stretched itself thin into the night.

I rolled onto my back, sore from my collision with the stairs, and watched the passing clouds catch the city light and become dirty cotton. A hand grabbed my own and Danielle appeared next to me.

“Are you all right?” One of her hair clips was missing, the other twisted around in an odd knot that made her hair stick up in a clump. Her coat looked a much darker purple and her breath white between her chattering teeth.

“Yeah,” I said. She worked her hand under me and helped me sit up, the soft warmth of her hand against my back.

Kyle coughed to cover up his crying. His knit hat was missing and I thought it was the dye on his scalp catching the light again, but then I saw the gash that ran along the top of his head and bled into his face. Next to Kyle, Tasha was kneeling, her butt resting against her heels, her hands folded in her lap, and she stared down the street. Something bumped my leg and when I looked down I saw Danielle’s horse book, swelled with water, floating in the gentle tide. Water still gushed from the tunnel’s mouth like a big white blow from a whale passing in the distance or when in the summer, on the hottest days, the firefighters or someone with a wrench would open up the fire hydrant and let the water shoot out so we could run through it. Or the water slide at King’s Island that I was too afraid to ride.

“Shit,” I said. “We got to get out of here before we’re busted.”

Danielle held the book in her arms and looked around for our stuff.
“I’m sorry about the book,” I said. “And Buttercup.”

She smiled.

“I lost my phone,” Tasha said. “I can’t call my brother.”

“We’ll go to my house,” I said. “We can sneak in and dry off.”

From far in the distance there was the wail of a siren. Kyle straightened up, wiping at his face.

“Let’s go,” I said.

When we passed the vintage shop one of the hipster kids asked us what happened. Kyle turned and I expected him to toss out some threat or swear.

“The subway flooded,” he said, smiling. “Flushed us out.”

“There’s a subway?” One of the kids said.

When we reached my house I still had my keys tucked in my jeans pocket and snuck us inside. The light to my mom’s bedroom shone dimly under her door down the hall. We took turns jumping in my closet and changing out of our wet clothes into the cleanest ones I could find lying around. Past the window a fire truck blared its horns and zoomed toward the subway. We heard more sirens and saw blue, red, and yellow lights all go past. There was a knock on my door.

“Zach, are you home?” my mom said.

The three of them looked at me. Kyle mouthed, “Say nothing.”

“Yes,” I said. “David got sick so his mom dropped us off here. I said that’d be ok.”
“All right,” she said. “Also, I appreciate the consideration, but you all left your wet shoes out by the front door. Not that sneaky. We’ll talk in the morning. Good night.”

By morning the story was all over the news. A water main in the tunnel, the big large pipe that carried water through the city, froze and broke, flooding the Brighton Street station. Pictures of it flashed on the TV screen while the four of us ate pancakes around the table. News crews had been on the scene shortly after the emergency workers, so many of the pictures were from that night, with a live report updating in the morning sun. While my mother watched from the counter, images of the street flooded with water flashed across the screen. The reporter noticed various items caught in a storm drain down the street. Kyle’s sleeping bag and pillow clogged the drain and caught smaller objects. Kyle muttered a curse and scratched at the large Band-Aids my mother had placed over the gash on his head. The young man on the TV, in khaki pants and heavy coat combo, bent down and picked up one of the objects from the blocked drain. I dropped my fork at the sight of the Coke can surrounded by Playboys, with the covers swelled and disfiguring the women. There too was Buttercup. Danielle sighed and her head drooped against her chest. The reporter reasoned that some homeless wanderer must have been living in the tunnel and said that authorities were looking for a body.

My mother turned off the TV and cleaned the table.

“At least you made it home safe,” she said. In a quick swoop she kissed the top of my head then went back to the dishes in the sink.

Under the table I reached for Danielle’s hand and squeezed. She smiled and I felt her fingers press around mine.
As I got ready for bed I noticed the spot where the cherry Coke can was missing from the shelf. I could have gone down the street to look for the can. But it didn’t matter. My collection felt insignificant in the scope of what I now valued. The cans looked like nothing more than empty containers. Yet I left them on the shelf because that empty space reminded me of what was abandoned below the city and everyone dear to me that survived its flood to carry on with our own history.
INTO THE PLASTIC NIGHT (CALIFORNIA)

Sazh watched the dashboard clock and waited for Meredith. He ran through the script in his head. He had stayed up until three the night before, reading the student film eight times, mouthing the dialogue to himself. Between classes he read it in chunks, writing forgotten lines in the margins of his notes, and his stomach lurched every time he started over. But he wanted to impress Meredith on their second ride together. She was an incredible, beautiful actress, and Sazh lucked out when Carl, the production manager of the film, needed someone to pick her up. On paper Sazh’s title was grip, but with the small crew working around everyone’s class schedules he’d fallen to errand boy. But he had no problem with this errand. Meredith had been antsy for the first night of filming and he listened to her warm up with voice exercises. Now on the second night, he felt ill prepared for his plan as he waited in his car, tugging at the damp clothes that clung to his skin. A sudden downpour had hit him a block from his car. The air conditioning had given him the chills, so he tried the heat, but it made him feel sticky, so he settled on soaking into the car’s tattered upholstery. He considered leafing through the script he had tossed in the glove box. The red apartment door opened; he recognized her shape. Thin, black stockings, a tight, green skirt, brown aviator jacket, and a pouf of blonde blurred through the rain. Sazh’s glasses fogged. He huffed on them, rubbed them against his shirt, and put them back on, smudged. Meredith popped her head in. The dead interior light left her face veiled in shadow, with only the dim, rippling blue of a nearby streetlamp highlighting her hair through the window.

“Danny,” he said, extending his hand.
She laughed a short, soft “ha.”

“What are you looking for?” she said. Her voice rasped the line. Water dripped onto the seat from her long frizzy hair. Rain beat against her jacket. The newspaper she held over her head protected little but her makeup.

“Just company,” he said.

“‘Just company.’ Company is free, hun. Try a bar.” She stepped back.

“Wait,” he said. “Two hundred an hour.”

She stuck her head back in. Her hair drooped like a wet mop on her head and hid her eyes in shadow under the dripping newspaper, but he knew the script called for them to be wide with surprise.

“Two hundred an hour,” he said.

“Christ, you must have one hell of a trust fund, kid.” She slid into the seat in one smooth movement, careful on her high heels, her body twisting with a practiced finesse that kept her mini-skirt from riding up. She closed the door, looked around in the car, made a small “ah ha,” and pushed the car’s lighter in. He flicked on the windshield wipers and drove off.

“Where we going?” She dumped water from her heel onto his floor.

“Have you ever been to a play?”

“A play? Like, a high school kind of play?” She put the heel back on and repeated the act with the other. These motions were not in the script, but were a consequence of a rain that wouldn’t exist in the perfect atmosphere of the movie. But she played around the
action, saying her lines as her hands moved and her face turned away from where a microphone would hang.

“Any kind of play,” he said.

“Sure,” she said. “I was in drama club in college. Top of the class.”

“Really?”

She laughed. “You sound shocked.”

He slowed down when he neared an intersection. The windshield wipers cut into the rain and exposed the clear road ahead for a moment before the pour distorted his view again. A station wagon next to him sped up as the light changed yellow and blasted a fine mist across his window. Sazh eased his foot down on the break. They needed the beat, the brief moment of pause to let his character’s embarrassment take hold. The light turned red and he stopped.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to insinuate anything.”

“Nah.” She shook her hair. Cold water spritzed the side of his face. “So, we’re going to a play?”

“Oh, yeah.” The light changed and he continued on. “It’s a little college play—”

He blanked on the three-sentence description of the play. The rain beat between the squeak of the wipers. The awkward pause kept his eyes on the road.

“Sounds interesting.” She continued with the scene and pulled a pack of cigarettes from her coat. The pack smacked against her palm in a three count. She pressed a soggy cigarette between her lips and said, “Really.”

“Really?” he said.
“Look.” She turned to him. The cigarette drooped from her lips in a sad arch.

“You want to pay for honesty or my interest?”

“Can’t it be both?”

She laughed. “Not if we’re going to a play.”

“Where would you rather go?”

The cigarette lighter popped. She held it with careful fingers. The orange coil accented her face in a soft glow. “Do you mind?”

He shook his head.

She pressed the tip against the cigarette, her right hand cupped. Sazh steadied the wheel and eased off the gas, hovering his foot over the break. The cigarette hissed, but didn’t light. She put the lighter back in its slot.

“Where you from, Danny?” she said.

“Napa Valley originally,” he answered. “Moved to L.A. about a year ago.”

“What for?” She simulated blowing a puff of smoke across his dash. “Acting?”

“No. Political science originally.” He went off-script, so far off. He glanced at the clock. They were running out of time and he couldn’t salvage the scene. His foot jammed the gas down and they rolled through a yellow light. A brown bucket Chevrolet darted out from a parking lot and Sazh jerked into the other lane. Cars seemed to sprout from the road and box them in like a metal forest. The containment made him anxious.

“Ah,” she said. She waved her hand as if sweeping it across a horizon. “And here our night begins.”
The slab buildings of the University of California were hidden behind the sheets of rain pressed against the window. But the gesture was not lost. He pictured the flat façade of Macgowan Hall with its dull brickwork and square white column accents. Macgowan was one of the modern buildings, distinct from the Roman revival printed on postcards. With a quick left across traffic, he turned into the large campus parking lot. The spots nearest the building were taken and Carl had wedged his Sebring convertible in the yellow zone. Sazh parked in the next row.

“You wanna get some coffee after filming?” he said. He clicked off the wipers and lights. The dim, tan glow of a nearby streetlight gave him the first good look at her face. She was dolled up like every movie prostitute he’d seen. A gaudy mask printed on her face. Her lips painted deep red, eyes thick with mascara, and a peacock flare of green eye shadow. Even the small mole on her chin looked darkened. Shadows from the rain on the windshield streaked down her cheeks. For a moment he thought she was crying. And something in the sadness of the image made her beautiful. She looked at the clock. Ten past eight. They were late for filming.

“Oh, Sazh. That’s nice, but I really can’t,” she said, her voice rose in tone and smoothed. Years of smoking disappeared in a sentence. She stepped out. “Thanks for the ride.”

She scurried across the parking lot in tight steps, holding the newspaper above her face. A little, warm fury fired from his chest to his arms. He slapped the steering wheel. When Meredith’s blonde tuft disappeared behind the door he turned off the car and followed her.
Macgowan Hall had emptied long before Sazh made his way to the stage auditorium. He liked the building quiet, when the students and audiences had gone home. The emptiness made him feel privileged, someone working behind the scenes. They never gave him keys, but he knew what doors were left open by maintenance and would sometimes wander the maze-like halls on weekends. He glanced through the windows of closed doors into dark classrooms, mute and waiting for morning. The soles of his shoes squeaked against the linoleum. From one of the small practice rooms down the hall he heard a stray musician practicing the cello. It faded as he neared the auditorium. Inside, Carl yelled at Meredith.

“You’re late and you’re wet,” Carl said. “Why are you wet in my wardrobe?”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. It’s raining, Carl,” she said. “I couldn’t do anything.”

“There are these things, Meredith. They open and close with a button. Hang over your head. Keep water off you with plastic. What am I thinking of?” Carl mimed the shape above him.

“An umbrella.”

“Oh, so you know of them.”

They both turned to Sazh. Carl’s gelled hair was a mess. He looked like a member of Flock of Seagulls. He cracked his thin jaw and rubbed his eyes. Carl always wore long button up shirts, unbuttoned, exposing some peacenik inscribed t-shirt underneath. His sleeves were perpetually rolled up. The button-ups always some shade of blue. The t-shirt he wore that night said, “Bombs of Love,” in big red letters with outlines of old atomic
bombs with hearts in their centers. Meredith shivered. The auditorium air conditioning blasted to keep the lights from burning. Goosebumps went up Sazh’s arms and his nipples pressed against his wet t-shirt. Two girls working on homework spread across the floor tittered at him. The rest of the cast sat in the first row of bench seats and watched Carl argue with Meredith on the little black stage. The olive green kitchen set the cast found at a thrift store surrounded them. They were shooting the play scene tonight.

Meredith and Joey, who played Danny, were supposed to drive to the building and watch a poorly written play from the 80s. The benchwarmers, many Sazh didn’t know, were to act out the play.

“We have to shoot tonight,” Carl said. “The outdoor shots are scrapped with the rain, so we’ll do the indoor.” He looked Meredith up and down. “But you can’t be wet. Sazh.”

Carl took a pen and pad from his pocket and scribbled something. He tore off the paper and gave it to Sazh.

“Call my girlfriend. Tell her to bring a hairdryer.”

“What’s her name?” Sazh read the number.

“Are you going to ask her out? Just call her.”

Carl screamed orders at the cast to set up for shots of the play. Sazh went back to the lobby where the payphones were.

He cleaned his glasses with a paper towel while the phone rang. Carl’s girlfriend answered. The phone clicked, followed by a deep sigh and a cough. Sazh adjusted his glasses against his nose. He couldn’t tell if they were any less smudged.
“Hello?” she said. Her voice was rough with sleep or smoke or phlegm.

“Hi. This is Sazh, I work with Carl, your boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend? No. That ship has sailed. But, what’s up, ‘Sazh?’”

Sazh turned his back to the phone and looked around the empty lobby. Outside, a streetlamp cut a tan, square hole in the night and framed the streaming rain.

“Well, we’re making a movie and—”

“Right,” she said. She flicked a lighter close to the receiver. Then took a breath.

“The hooker one. You know I auditioned for that?”

“No. How did you do?”

She laughed. “Sazh, who are you talking to right now?”

“I don’t know your name.”

“It’s Trish. You’re talking to Trish. And I’m here, and you’re there, and I’m not there. So—how do you think I did?”

“Wonderfully.” He flicked his finger into the coin return and found a dime. “But too talented to be recognized.”

She laughed again. “Yeah, yeah. He told me I would get it. ‘A shoe in,’ or whatever. A shoe in what?” Springs creaked through the receiver. “Christ, it’s raining like hell isn’t it?”

“If hell had rain, this would be it, sure.” Sazh played his finger along the phone cord, brushing his fingernail up and down against its metal spine.

“What was it you wanted?”

“Carl wanted a hairdryer.”
“Hah. Now I’m his stylist?”

“I don’t think you’d have to audition for the part.”

There was a thump on her end and something glass fell over.

“What did you say?” she said.

“What should I tell him?”

“Take a guess.”

She hung up.

Sazh returned empty handed, the dime snug in his pocket. Carl, livid at Trish’s refusal, had the crew raid the bathrooms for paper towels. Three girls patted Meredith dry while another held a hot light over her. Carl ran the shoot an hour into overtime until the camera operator started to complain. Meredith didn’t say a word. Not even when Carl left before they finished packing up and Joey mimicked Carl’s barking orders. She only laughed and walked with Joey to his car. Sazh drove home alone, hearing her laugh echo down the hall as Joey flickered the light switches and moaned like a ghost.

***

Sazh went to a little corner grocery store near Meredith’s the next night after driving past her place twice. He browsed the magazines plastered with Hollywood’s hot list. April meant national dirt-dragging month. They hounded stars and printed their lives in money bleeding ink. Sazh never paid for the glossies. He snatched one with Claire Danes on the cover from the bottom rack and thumbed through it as he walked around the store. When he got to the check-out counter his basket had milk, Captain Crunch, duct
tape, and eyeglass cleaning spray. He still flipped through the magazine and didn’t notice
Meredith in front of him.

“Sazh?” she said. He looked up. The magazine slipped from his hands and landed
in his basket. She didn’t look like the hooker he knew. Her hair pulled tight into a
ponytail like the end of a tattered broom. The pale tone of her skin with tiny freckles and
a single layer of lip-gloss made her face somehow more real than it appeared in his car,
like he could actually touch her. But her sweats and blue plaid shirt were her best
camouflage. If given a line-up he would have breezed right past her and selected some
flashy girl as “Meredith.”

“Hey,” he said.

“What are you doing here?”

He looked down at his basket.

She blushed, the freckles hued pink.

“Right,” she said. “Duh. I didn’t know you lived around here.”

“I don’t,” he said. The words slipped out. He wrung his hands around the basket
handle. “I was just over at a friend’s and had to get some things.”

He looked at her collection on the conveyor belt, cotton swabs, Band-Aids,
eyeliner, gummy worms, box of crackers, tins of cat food, and more that he couldn’t see
already scanned in her plastic bag. She waved her thin hand over the junk on the belt.

“Me too,” she said. She added green Tic-Tacs to the group. They matched her nail
polish, already chipping away.

“Getting ready for tomorrow?” he said.
“Oh, no. I mean, yeah, of course, but this isn’t for it.” She looked over her items.
“Well, the eye liner. But, I have a date tonight. It was tomorrow, but since Carl wants us all to come in a day early I had to move things around.”
“You’re seeing someone?”
She laughed and fumbled in her little, yellow purse.
“Yeah,” she said. “Well, I don’t get out much really with all the work my classes are throwing at me and the movie and, well, I’m kind of a home-body, yah know? I like my plays, and a light, and my cushy La-Z-Boy, and my cat.” She gestured to the cat food.
“So, it’s rare I get asked out. Hard to believe, right?”
“No, of course not. I just didn’t know is all.” He adjusted his glasses as the cashier punched the total on the register. “I thought guys threw themselves at you.”
She looked at the cashier whose face froze in a grimace. He coughed, “Twenty-two, fifty.” Meredith handed him a twenty and a ten.
“It’s Joey, actually.” She smiled at Sazh. “Have you talked to him? He’s playing Danny.”
Sazh shook his head.
“He’s really nice. I mean; you wouldn’t know it—” The cashier handed her change and she dumped it in her purse. “He’s such a good actor, kinda comes off as a jerk sometimes, but we talked the other day, and he’s really nice. He works at the community theater.”
Sazh nodded. “I’ve never been a fan, but that’s nice of him.”
“Yeah.” She gathered her bags and flashed a smile. “Hey, can you give me a lift again tomorrow? I hate to ask, but you’re really the only one that drives past me, and my roommate’s car is still busted.”

“I’ll be there.” Sazh unloaded his basket on the belt. Meredith waved and left.

The cashier moved like lightning, scanning Sazh’s items. Sazh paid with bunched up singles and when he grabbed the bag, he saw the magazine stuck inside.

***

The next night Sazh waited for Meredith. He watched the stars through mingling clouds. Sazh sprayed his glasses with the new cleaner, rubbed them with his shirt, and saw the stars even clearer. Meredith hopped in wearing the same wardrobe, with new eyeliner. They ran through the script, stopping at the first light, barreled through the second, and arrived a few minutes early. Carl was outside with the camera and sound boom and lights and Joey’s old Civic. The plastic blue gel over the light made the scene eerie, cold, and chilled. Carl had an aesthetic, he said, of “neo noir” lighting. He thought it was brilliant. Sazh stood off to the side, out of the shot, and watched as Meredith and Joey worked. The camera glided behind the car on a crudely rigged “dolly” made out of a library cart and desk chair rolled over plywood. Carl called action.

“What are you looking for?” Meredith leaned into the car window.

“Just company,” Joey said.

“Just company? Company is free, hun. Try a bar.” She stepped back.

“Wait,” he said. He stretched over and held out a wad of cash. “A hundred an hour. Upfront. There’s three hundred here. Three hundred for three hours.”
She stuck her head in the window, took the cash, and fanned it with her finger. Meredith’s eyes went wide. She added a little smirk.

“Christ,” she said. “You must have one hell of a trust fund, kid.” She opened the door and slid in. She looked around, made a soft “ah ha,” and pushed in the car’s cigarette lighter.

Sazh snuck off to the building. He jangled the quarters in his pocket. He checked around the lobby, found it empty, and went to the pay phone. He cleaned his glasses with some spray then took out Trish’s number and plugged in change.

“Hello?” She answered on the seventh ring. Her voice sounded distant.

“Hey,” he said. “It’s Sazh.”

“Sazh, you’re expecting me to do what for you now?”

“Nothing. I’m calling on my own.”

“Was it a party line last time?”

Sazh rubbed his hair and waited a beat.

“Hello?” she said. He heard springs creaking. “What are you looking for, Sazh?”

“Are you seeing anyone right now?”

She laughed. “Why, aren’t we forward. Why? Do you want me to see someone?”

He picked up a small flyer off the top of the phone. “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” in block letters was stamped across the header. A guy in his economics class played the lead, but he hadn’t seen it yet. Sazh started folding it in halves.

“Doesn’t everyone want to see someone?” he said.
“No, not everyone. Some people, Sazh, are perfectly ok with being by themselves. Some people actually enjoy it. Some people don’t like feeling dependent on someone else.”

“Are you one of those people?”

The sound of a spoon hitting the side of a mug clattered in his ear. He folded the piece of paper into a triangle and creased the sides with his fingernail.

“Sometimes,” she said.

“You don’t like to give straight answers do you?” He flicked the little paper football and nearly reached the trashcan by the door. She laughed.

“You never asked me a straight question.”

His hand went to his glasses, but he stopped himself. That little nausea he felt with every read of the script rose with his hand. On the sidewalk outside Carl set up the shot for Meredith and Joey to make their way into the building. Meredith held her hands to her mouth as Joey waved his long arms above his head like Kermit the Frog. His nausea turned hot and crackled up to his chest. He wondered if he could ever convince Meredith to date him or if she would keep her distance, closed off like she was now behind the glass, as untouchable as all the other stars.

“Do I—” Trish said.

“Do you want to go out Saturday?” he said.

She took a long drink of something, her throat glugging.
“All right, Sazh. Here’s the deal. Carl used me. He lied, to my face, in my home, in my bed, and left. You stay honest with me, no bull, and we’ll have a date. And no, you’re not getting what Carl got. Deal?”

“Now who’s being forward?”

“Deal?”

He glanced out the window. Joey and Meredith walked towards him, the camera following on its plywood pathway.

“Deal,” he said.

“329 Oakwood Boulevard. Eight pm. Pick somewhere nice.”

She hung up. He scratched the address on the back of a flyer and shoved it in his pocket. Carl walked in and jumped at the sight of Sazh.

“Jesus,” Carl said. “Scared the living hell out of me. I thought you bailed. Where the hell have you been? Help us with this damn camera.”

Sazh followed him outside. Joey and Meredith moved down the sidewalk to the edge of a streetlight’s glow. Sazh bent to lift the cart from the bottom. Under the light Joey grabbed her hands and kissed her. Sazh scraped his knuckles against the jagged plywood and dropped the cart. Carl lunged for the camera as it hurtled toward the ground. He exploded with a series of expletives. Once they had the rig inside, Carl turned on Sazh.

“You’re off the set,” he said.

“What?”
“I don’t need to give you a list of all the shit you’ve done. You’re out. You’re a shitty grip. Get off my set.”

Sazh’s ears grew hot and flushed. A year ago, Sazh carried mace after two guys mugged him on his way back from night class, but he threw it out after he sent it through the wash and turned his clothes toxic. Mace would have been perfect to spray in Carl’s face right then. Sazh stepped forward, his hands balled.

“Get lost,” Carl said. Carl shoved Sazh into the cart. The boom mike operator, a big beefy guy with a business cut, stepped between them with his hands out. Sazh tried to reach for Carl, but the operator held him back, his hand pressed against Sazh’s chest. The warm contact made him pause. The reality of the scene hit him with an acute awareness of the bright fluorescents shining on the linoleum and Carl’s loud breathing. A dimension seemed to pop out and add an unusual depth to what he saw. The operator shook his head at Sazh. His expression and the large bulk of him told Sazh to just walk away, Carl wasn’t even worth the fight. Under a sharp breath he swore at Carl and bolted out the door. Meredith and Joey, still under the light, saw him coming and split apart to let him pass. But Sazh ran toward Joey anyway and knocked him to the ground. She called Sazh’s name and then yelled for Carl. Sazh ignored her, running on to his car.

The air chilled his ears and cheeks. He put down all the windows, cranked the staticky radio, and drove across town just to shoot down the highway going sixty. The magazine in the back seat flapped wildly. By the time he got to the highway his anger abated. He drove west, past a dozen exits, reading the names without registering their meaning and headed to the shore. He sat on the beach, listening to the tide roar in from
the black horizon, and watched the lights of the city glimmer on the waves. There’d be some hell to pay. Carl had enough clout in the department to fire him. He thought about Meredith, leaning in the shadow and kissing Joey. He took his copy of the script from the glove compartment and shuffled through it. But he couldn’t place himself in the scenes. Instead Joey was Danny, driving her to the play, holding her hand in a supermarket, and sleeping with her in the final scene. He ripped out page after page, tearing each one into tiny pieces, and threw them to the sand like confetti. When the last was shredded, he watched the crabs pick through trash until morning.

***

On Saturday Sazh drove to Trish’s early. She lived close to campus, but Sazh had a habit of getting lost in the grid of the city. He crept down the palm-lined streets, glancing from the paper with her address to the numbers on the houses, apartments, and a post office. He passed a two story pink stucco building twice, each time noting the odd way the walls seemed to ripple in the light. On the third pass he realized it was her apartment. A gate surrounded the parking lot. He drove around the block and found a spot in front of the small post office. It was ten till eight. Sazh took out his glasses, sprayed them with the small cleaner, and rubbed them with his shirt. He held them up to a house light across the street and examined for streaks. Down half a block, people mingled on the lawn of a house party. They held beers and smoked and cheered for a song that echoed over the radio in Spanish. Sazh looked for the moon, but a yellow tinge of clouds covered the sky.
When he buzzed, she invited him up to the apartment. She greeted him with a beer in one hand, offered him a sip, and told him to wait on her bed while she finished getting ready. Trish’s age surprised him. She had to be a senior—he guessed twenty-three. She had a tattoo of a peacock on her exposed bronze shoulder. Her black sparkling shirt and black jeans and black combat boots made her look like Joan Jett with frizzy brown hair. The bed, pushed into a corner, was the only furniture in the tiny efficiency. She closed the bathroom door and blasted music he didn’t recognize. On the walls of her apartment were posters of Marilyn Monroe, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and Denzel as Malcolm X. A small-framed black and white photo of a man in a suit with black, slicked over hair and big ears hung above the bed. On the floor sat an open, empty pizza box with plastic cups in a circle around it. He got up and read the label of a half-empty bottle of wine that stood on the floor, next to a see-through phone and the bed. An unfinished mug of coffee sat next to the bottle, along with a glass pipe. The wine was a brand of Merlot he thought tasted like blood. The music stop and Trish slinked out of the bathroom.

“Ready?” she said.

“You like this?” He waved the wine bottle.

“Cheap drunk.” She shrugged.

He put it down and pointed at the photograph of the man.

“Alan Turing.” She reached under her bed, a ratty mattress and sheet nest on cinder blocks, and pulled out a box of books. She handed one to him. He read the torn jacket, *Enigma*, by Robert Harris. “Germans used special machines to code their messages in World War II. Turing was a Brit that broke it. Helped save our asses.”
“Never heard of him.” He handed the book back, she tossed it in the box, and slid it back under the bed with a clunk.

“You ever take a history class?”

“Not since high school. Why the photo?”

“Romance.” Her wry smile exposed a crooked canine tooth. “Admiration. He was a god of puzzle breaking. And I enjoy mystery. You wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

He noticed a “Make Love Bombs” shirt crumpled on the floor and recognized the red bomb logo. He nodded at it, “Carl’s?”

She opened the door, smirking. “Now you’re getting too nosy. Trash goes out Monday.”

He took her to a classy café that sold booze until midnight, then sold harder stuff until three, then sold coffee until eleven am. They talked about the future of music in bands like Nirvana, R.E.M., and The Offspring, whom she had blasted in the bathroom. He ordered them screwdrivers after pounding down cheap light beer. She was twenty-two and only a junior working on a history degree. She tipped her beer bottles to the ceiling when she drank, even if for a sip, and took time with the screwdriver. When a song came on that she didn’t know she went to the bar and asked. While she was gone, the boom operator from Wednesday night stumbled into Sazh and told him Carl was a prick.

“If I didn’t need the credits, man, I’d have walked off too.” He imitated walking off with his bottle as a stand-in. “You should really talk to the faculty advisor.”

Trish came back with another beer.

“Who’s this?”
“I’m Rick,” he said. “I worked with Sazh on a movie. Our douche bag director fired him.”

“Oh, really?” Her eyebrows arched at Sazh. “What’d you do? Sleep with his girlfriend?”

Sazh coughed into his screwdriver. “I apparently was a shitty grip.”

“Carl wouldn’t know a good grip even if you strangled him with one,” she said.

She took a sip from her beer and pushed her screwdriver to the side.

“You know Carl?” Rick said.

“Unfortunately. I made the mistake of thinking he’d be good for me.”

Rick looked back the way he came and raised his beer, then swigged it.

“I gotta go,” he said. “Nice meeting you.”

Trish sipped her beer.

“It was a cover by Sublime,” she said.

Sazh nodded. He took her screwdriver and poured it into his glass.

“Why didn’t you tell me Carl fired you?”

“I didn’t think it was important,” he said.

“It isn’t. He’s just another guy with a Napoleon complex. I told you I auditioned for that role, right?”

Sazh nodded.

“We’d been dating a few weeks. Three, or something. Told me he had this script and there was this part I’d be perfect for. It wasn’t until I showed up that I found out it was a prostitute. I was furious. But I auditioned anyway.”
“Why were you mad?”

“Would you be mad if I told you I thought you’d be perfect for the part of a misogynistic baby fondler?”

“So, why’d you audition then?”

She started to peel away the label of her beer. Her black fingernails clicked against the glass as they worked.

“I’d like to act,” she said. “I love history. But, I don’t know if it’s my life yet. I don’t know what my life is yet.”

“Yeah,” he said. She balled the torn off label and took another swig. He chewed peanuts from the bowl on the table.

“What about you? What do you want to do?”

“Same thing, of course. But I freeze up on the auditions. Can’t remember lines. Take jobs as a grip instead. I’ve done it three times now. I started in poli-sci, but switched to theater last year.”

“What do you mean ‘freeze up?’”

He shrugged. “Like a deer, I guess. I’ve been told I’m too cold. I don’t emote enough.”

She laughed. “I can see that.”

“Ouch,” he said. Sazh shook his head and laughed.

“Ouch?” See, you’re holding back. Stop faking it, Sazh. You need to put more into it. Feel the role. Feel the skin. Let it crawl inside there. And touch.” She reached across the table and put her hand to his chest. “Here.” She held her hand there for a
moment, and then pulled it back. “It’s not about memorizing. It’s about feeling it, letting it sink in, develop, and flood out at ‘action.’ A good role comes out of you, not the page, and it tells you something about yourself. You can learn from it, face some inner demon that reflects it, or make it a part of you. Acting isn’t about just putting on a mask, it’s about discovering human nature, and exposing it to others.”

“Is that the speech that got you the part?” he said.

She threw a handful of peanuts in his face.

“See,” she said. “Some god damn emotion. Flare, baby.”

“You should be my acting coach.” He brushed peanuts off his lap.

“Next time, sure. You gotta find your role too.”

He fished a peanut out of his screwdriver and flicked it to the floor. “My role?”

“Your role.” She slapped the table. “Your type. The type-cast that puts you center stage.”

“What’s yours?”

“Crazy pixie, anarchist, anti-Rapunzel, femme fatale, black widow, and so on. If it’s a woman with an ulterior motive, I can play it.”

“But not a hooker?” He smiled.

“Not if she’s one dimensional.” She finished the beer and stood, but sat back down. “You know the girl that got the part?”

“Meredith.”
“Yeah. Yeah. Kinky hair right? But puffier than this.” She put her hands out a good twelve inches from her head. Sazh nodded. “She only got the part because she slept with Carl. The whole department is incestuous.”

“Oh, c’mon.” Sazh slammed his glass and splashed his hand. “People bullshit about that all the time.”

She leaned back, pulling her hands from the table.

“Are you friends?” she said.

He looked over to the growing crowd around the bar. Trish squinted at him when he looked back.

“You got a thing for her?”

His cheeks flushed and he could feel the heat spreading.

“Yeah, maybe,” he said. “A thing.”

He swirled his screwdriver. She stopped him with her hand.

“What do you like about her?”

“She’s talented,” he said. “And kind.”

“And a nice body, right?” She pointed at her own breasts.

“Can we drop this?”

“All right.” Trish held up her hands.

She wiggled her empty bottle and went to the bar. Sazh swirled his glass and watched the screwdriver near the lip of it. He let it stop and settle. Little flecks of pulp spun around until they stuck to the glass. At the bar Trish pushed her way through a line. Sazh went to the bathroom.
On his way back to the table he went over to Rick and pulled him aside.

“Did Meredith sleep with Carl for the role?”

Rick braced himself against the wall.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “You didn’t know? Happens all the time, man.”

“Bullshit, he’s disgusting. She wouldn’t do that.”

“Nah, man. She’s with Joey now ’cause he’s head of casting for some play.”

Rick’s eyes wandered back to his table. He smiled at a blonde who waved a shot glass in the air.

“She’s not like that,” Sazh said.

Rick held his hand palm up and tilted his beer, offering nothing else. He slid back into his seat with his friends. Sazh went back to the table with his head ringing and ears hot. Trish wasn’t there. She wasn’t at the bar either. He asked the bartender if he’d seen her and he told Sazh that she asked to call a cab and took off.

He called Trish when he got home, but she didn’t answer. He sat on his bed, the sheets perfectly tucked, and his toes dug and clutched at the clean carpet. Outside, the traffic began to pick up. Passing headlights projected shadows from the blinds against his bare, white walls. The dark horizontal bars stretched across his face and the light reflected bright against his glasses before snapping away. His neighbors below sang loudly to Pearl Jam. Sazh picked up his nightstand copy of the script and started to read.

***

The following Tuesday, Sazh waited in his car. He watched the clock inch to nine. Her apartment door opened. At first he didn’t recognize Meredith in her own clothes
again, but it was her hair that made him realize it was her. He reached for his glasses, stopped, and flicked on his lights. She paused half across the lawn and walked toward him. Her jeans scuffed against the sidewalk, fringing their bottoms. She looked overly casual, flip-flops and a t-shirt with “Love Bombs” on it. He rolled down the window. She leaned down and smiled.

“Sazh?” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to apologize to Joey for the other day.”

“He’s not here,” she said.

“Want a ride?”

She looked down the street in the direction she was walking and then back at her apartment. She brushed her hair back and smiled.

“All right,” she said.

“Just company,” he said. She paused with her hand on the door. Her head turned and followed a car that passed by. She leaned into the window.

“Just company? Company is free, hun, try a bar.” She stepped back.

“Wait,” he said. He stretched over and held out a wad of cash. “A hundred an hour. Upfront. There’s three hundred here. Three hundred for three hours.”

Meredith shivered. The streetlight hit her face. Her stunned surprise looked authentic, more so than it had before. The scene fell apart with her look, something in her eye letting the moment pass, ignored. He shoved the wad into his front pocket. She opened the door and slid in. She pushed in the cigarette lighter and pulled a pack from her back pocket. He drove off.
“What is this?” she said. “The movie is over, Sazh.”

“Have you ever been to a play?” A car turned out in front of him, then quickly turned into a driveway next door. He kept his eyes ahead on the street, waiting for her to chime back in with the next line. He felt her gaze on the side of his face and when he looked over she was staring at him.

“Cut it out,” she said. “You’re creeping me out.”

“I wanted another shot,” he said. “I stumbled over things, I guess.”

“It was just practice, Sazh.” She put the cigarette to her lips, and then pulled it away. “Were you really that caught up in it?”

“I don’t mean the script.”

“Then what?”

“You. I wanted another shot with you.”

“Sazh.” She turned away. “I’m sorry, you know I’m seeing someone.”

The burn pulsed in his chest. He slammed the gas and jolted the car. Meredith’s cigarette dropped to her lap, the pack crunched between her fingers. She turned to him.

“Stop,” she said. “Let me out.”

“Did you sleep with him?” Sazh said.


“Carl,” he said. “Did you sleep with him for the role?”

“Carl? No. No,” she said. She turned away and then turned back. “Why would you ask me something like that?”
Sazh sped through the green light. His foot stayed heavy on the gas. Streetlights flashed through the car like a strobe light warming up.

“I just want to know what it would take,” he said. “What do I have to pay?”

“Stop the car, Sazh. Now. Stop it now.” He kept going. He gripped the wheel until his knuckles went white. She opened the glove box, but it was empty. She looked around the car, snatched the magazine from the back, and rolled it up. She held it back behind her shoulder. “Let me go.”

“I’ll start over,” he said. “From the top.” She smacked him on the shoulder, then in the face, the ribs, and back to the face. He held up his hand to block her and ran the second light, red. A car shot into his rear fender. Sazh’s foot slammed down the gas. They spun. His head smashed the driver’s window. His car careened onto the sidewalk, then swerved back into the street, and stopped. His head felt hot, wet, and pounded hard. His glasses were bent, one lens broken. The cigarette lighter popped out. Meredith reached for it. Sazh tried to grab her wrist. She slapped him in the face with the magazine and sent his glasses onto the dashboard. She grasped the lighter between her fingers. When he reached for her again she punched at his hand and burned him. She punched again and again. He clutched his hand and shrank against the door. She found the door handle and threw herself out of the car. He heard her scream as she ran back down the street. She screamed and screamed. Sazh looked around in panic, holding his unwounded hand to his throbbing head. He expected sirens, the other driver, or some Good Samaritan to jog over and ask if he was ok or drunk or what the hell did he do. But the empty street
surprised him, the other car had disappeared, and no one ran to the scene or her screams.

No one watched them at all.
Two hundred acres had burned overnight as the wildfire blazed a scar just outside Spokane city limits. He was supposed to write about it.

Instead he took a morning flight from Chicago to Detroit. The wireless was spotty. His fingers stumbled on the keys. He closed the laptop.

His mother had died. And because of her distrust of institutions she hadn’t left a will. Her logic frustrated him even from the grave.

She had wanted to be cremated, which was convenient. She had no friends, which was sad. But, she left little burden for him in these ways.

However, without a will the house was in legal limbo. Detroit wanted to claim the estate for a developer looking to build an empty lot.

He had inherited a mess. His dread grew as the cab neared the secluded wreck far down the street. The house had deteriorated with her.

It was blue when he left. He returned to a three story charcoal rendition of his childhood memory of it. The neighborhood had disappeared.

An empty overgrown lot replaced the house of his former friend. On the other side was a house torn open, a bulldozer parked on its lawn.

It was a similar story for the rest of the street. What wasn’t gone was in some state of deterioration.

His mother’s house was the last free standing building on the block. A crippled man in the land of the dead. A shell.

The curling lattice work along the gutters abruptly ended in jags. Shingles
hung from the roof. The shutters stolen. The grass dead.

The faded paint on the wood siding chipped to show the rotting wood beneath.

The shattered third floor window repaired with generous tape.

The porch banister broke under his weight and he barely caught himself on the support beam. He flung the banister into the yard.

The key had dangled on his keychain for the past fourteen years. The doorknob was loose, uncertain. The door opened halfway. Blocked.

Musky dry, heavy air wafted against his face. The interior a sharp contrast to the muggy summer air of August. The door refused to budge.

He paused before sticking his head into the engulfing heat. A paper bag of newspapers blocked the door. Brown paper bags stuffed the foyer.

Brown bag upon brown bag lined the walls, made tiny islands surrounded by small channels, and disappeared down the hall and up the stairs.

He left his bag on the porch and slipped in the door. The dust choked him. He coughed and put a handkerchief to his mouth.

The dust stuck to his eyes and made them water. A fear of mold or fungus added to his caution. He wasn’t certain what lived in paper.

The medics responding to his mother’s 911 call had to carry her out, the estate manager told him. City inspection was bound to follow.

The estate manager didn’t believe the house was salvageable. They’d give him a chance to take any valuables he wanted and auction the rest.

He followed the path toward the kitchen, stepping over wayward bags. A few
looked crumpled, like the medics had fallen into them.

The living room hid behind a light curtain held up by a small rod. He tore it down. More bags. Plastic storage boxes. Wrapping paper.

Pulled blinds and closed curtains covered the large bay window. Sunlight peeked into the room and sent thin rays cutting across it.

A small part of the red couch stuck out. The other half and most of a chair were covered with bags and boxes. A plastic plant in the corner.

Its leaves covered in dust like a survivor of nuclear winter. Against the wall, lost and invisible under the mess, he remembered a large TV.

He moved into the kitchen. He found the floor spot where she fell and died. The remnants of her waste.

A dried brown and green spot crusted to the floor. The stench rancid. The paramedics removed, but didn’t clean and no one else had bothered.

He grabbed cleaning supplies from the closet, where she always kept her stockpile, and scrubbed for an hour. Fresh lemons stung his nose.

After the floor had been polished to a shine he cleaned out the fridge and took trash to the curb. He had no idea if refuse still collected.

He thought of going back inside. Seeing what she had left in his room, if she had touched it at all. Instead he went downtown for a coffee.

While paused at a stoplight just at the edge of downtown, he saw his face in the window of an art gallery. His face on 62 inches of canvas.

He parked across the street and stared from his car. The colors were
expressionist, bright pinks and yellows and oranges. But it was him.

His face looked straight ahead. His eyes staring slightly up and to the left of the canvas. The old image of his face felt barely familiar.

He didn’t know any artists. Not even back in Chicago did he hang around any. Neither had he ever posed for an art class or a stock photo.

He stood outside the window. It was oil, he guessed. And he looked younger. The wrinkles around his eyes were gone. His cheeks concave.

Every feminine quality he once had was captured in swirling neon and pastel. Blond hair fluffed around his face, with thin dark eyebrows.

Inside he stood in the window, going over the details of the painting, trying to recall the photograph it recreated. A curator approached.

She smiled and asked, “Can I help you?” She pushed her thick black glasses up her nose and looked from him to the canvas and back to him.

“He’s me,” he said.

She compared the two again. “I’m sorry?” she said.

“The painting.” He pointed at it, then to his face. “It’s my face.”

She hummed shortly. “I don’t see it,” she said. “Are you sure?”

“Are you kidding me?” He stretched back his face with his hands and looked up to the left. “Does that help?”

She shook her head. He put a finger over his thin mustache and sucked in his cheeks. She squinted. He licked fingers and thinned his brows.

“Sorry,” she said. “I still don’t see it.”
His face relaxed and he brushed his hand through his hair. “It used to be longer,” he said. “Do you have mascara?”

The curator laughed and covered her mouth with her hand. “No,” she said. “Is this a joke? Is it your sister?”

“No. No.” He rummaged through his wallet but knew there’d be nothing useful there.

“No, actually.”

The curator looked him over again, then glanced to the back of the gallery, and said, “I don’t understand.”

“Me neither,” he said.

She showed him the wall plaque naming the artist. He sucked air through his teeth. The last name belonged to a deceased friend from college.

He nodded with a gentle accepting rhythm. The curator coughed and walked away. Her clicking heels kept a fast pace across the wood floor.

Four other paintings lined the wall above the plaque. None of them contained his face. Each followed the style of a notable movement in oil.

A dadaist fruit collage hung next to a cubist vagina. Surrealist pigs raced bicycles up a hill to the vagina’s right. Blue spots on the last.

The heels of the curator echoed toward him from the back of the gallery. She handed him a pamphlet. It was the typical artist’s abstract.

“What’s your relation to the artist?” She picked at her cuticles.
“Her older sister was a friend.” He examined the pamphlet.

“Was?” she said. When he looked back at her she pushed her glasses up and apologized. “I guess it’s not my business.”

“It was an accident.” He continued, “A car accident. I lost touch with the family when I moved away. Looks like I wasn’t forgotten.”

She smiled.

“Here.” She took the pamphlet, flipped it, and scribbled something. Her pen clicked and she handed the paper back. It was a phone number.

“She said anyone poking around should call her,” the curator said. “Maybe she’s looking for you.” The pen flicked at the large canvas.

He called twice from his car. After the first series of rings it went to voice mail. The second time the artist picked up immediately.

“What?” a young girl said.

He explained his return to Detroit, seeing his face, getting her number.

“Where can we meet?” she said. He didn’t know anywhere but “home.” She agreed to meet him there.

“I’ll meet you there after my class at 3,” she said. It was 1.

He went back to the house and sat on the porch stairs drinking coffee. He thought about her sister.

Around 4 a jeep wandered down the empty street. The artist talked to the young guy driving then grabbed bags from the back and waved him on.

She was shorter and skinnier than her sister had been. Her skin, however, was the same brown with light freckles. She dyed her hair black.
When she shook his hand her arm jingled with metal and plastic bracelets. She looked like the “hipsters” in Chicago. Skinny jeans. Plaid.

Converse high-tops. A large art portfolio under her arm, a messenger bag strapped to her back. Her walk wobbled. Her Spanish accent gone.

She was not her sister, but he could see the faint resemblance in her crooked nose, small brown eyes, and bright smile when she said, “Hey.”

“It’s a mess inside,” he said. “It may be better not to go in.”

She murmured an agreement and set her things down on the porch.

She explained the painting. It was actually one of seven she had done using an old photograph she found in a book her sister had left her.

The book was one of the few things she had of her sister’s. “My parents threw out everything she owned when they found out she was gay.”

He remembered. Weeks before her death she had outed herself when a drunk late night return broke into a long argument. Her parents snapped.

Scared and intolerant. They chose to throw her, and everything she owned, out of their house. It was Christmas break. She returned early.

They stopped paying her tuition and she dropped out. The university kicked her out of the dorm and she slummed it in his apartment.

She planned to work and pay her own way, return the next year with a loan. The car accident interrupted it all. Her death was blamed on him.

Her family kept the funeral closed. None of his friends were allowed to attend, but he was especially singled out and told to stay away.

“It was terrible,” she said. “They only told me what they wanted her to be like.
I didn’t know she was gay until they let it slip.”

She painted his face hoping to track him down. “I couldn’t find you on the internet, I didn’t know your name. Only the ones in the report.”

Another gallery on campus had two other versions of his face. It was the most exposure she could get. “I’m just starting out,” she said.

“The gallery you found was a big break for me. A professor of mine owns it and really likes my work apparently. Gave me a week long show.”

“Lucky week,” he said. “I’m only in town to get rid of this place.” He pointed a thumb at the house. “Then I’m back to Chicago.”

“Anything cool inside?” She wandered over to the window and tried to peek in.

“Actually, there may be some of your sister’s stuff.”

“What? Why?”

He stood and picked up her art things. “I left my college stuff here and some of hers was likely mixed in. If Mom kept it.”

He led her cautiously up the stairs. Making sure that none of them gave way under his weight. She hummed Indiana Jones’s theme behind him.

He took his time down the dim upstairs hallway. The light didn’t work. Without windows or opened doors he had to let his eyes adjust.

He ran his hand over some piles stacked along the wall and felt ribbons. His finger caught on a twig wreath and brushed across pine needles.

He opened the bathroom door. It was the clearest room he had seen so far.
Only the mold in the sink and up the shower curtain troubled him.

“It’s like Hoarders,’’ she said. He tapped his closed door. His old “Open/Closed” sign still hung from a nail he’d hammered when he was 8.

He had left the blue and white sign flipped to “closed.” His hand hesitated on the door knob.

“What?” she said.

“I haven’t been in here in fourteen years.”

She rubbed her hand on the wallpaper, etching a path in the thin dust. “You never came home?”

“This really wasn’t my ‘home’ anymore.”

She scrunched her nose and frowned. He saw her sister there in the dim light cast from the bathroom.

“Sorry,” she said. The knob turned and the door popped open like a quiet soda can. Time had frozen in the little room. Untouched.

He originally planned to stay two days, but he arranged to stay a week to clean and give the artist time to look through her sister’s stuff.

While he organized knickknacks into piles of what to sell and what to trash, she chronicled what she found on her Twitter feed @ArtlyAnon.

He cleaned the kitchen first, restocking the soured food from the fridge, and moving some things to the living room.

They took lunch breaks before she ran to class. On a tuna sandwich and chips break she gestured at the mess around them.

“What the hell happened?” she said.
“It was nice once,” he said. He looked around the kitchen. “Even this isn’t bad.” It wasn’t. The floor an embossed floral green linoleum. Blue lattice wallpaper, peeling around the borders of the mahogany baseboards, added to an earthy atmosphere. Everything else a light cedar. It had been a dream kitchen at some point.

Large enough to seat five at the table, but much smaller than the dinning halls in houses nearby.

“I don’t really know what started it.” He chewed his tuna sandwich, staring at the plate. “It got worse though when my brother was killed.” She wiped her mouth and apologized.

“He was military,” he said. “He talked about the risks, but it was a shock. He would have been proud to die in combat. Mom was devastated.” “What about your dad?”

He left the sandwich on the plate. His hands moved to twist his napkin. “Long gone. Left my mother when she was 30.”

“So, she just kinda flipped out?” She waved her arms around in a spastic impression of a crazy person, her bracelets clicked together.

He found three boxes that she had marked “college” in black marker. She told me they hadn’t been opened since #1998. Large enough to seat five at the table, but much smaller than the dinning halls in houses nearby. “I don’t really know what started it.” He chewed his tuna sandwich, staring at the plate. “It got worse though when my brother was killed.”

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“So, she just kinda flipped out?” She waved her arms around in a spastic impression of a crazy person, her bracelets clicked together.

Boxes = scented pay dirt (oxymoron?).

They’re like little care packages from #BedBath&Beyond. Cancels out the musky fumes of this place.

Other stuff in box #1: a curling iron and...
He chuckled. “Basically.”

He tongued pieces of sandwich stuck in his teeth before continuing. “But she always tried to keep things. Didn’t know what to throw away.”

“So, why did you stay away?” She took to using her chips as brushes, pushing around ketchup in abstract patterns. He chewed his chips. She watched him across the table, her eyebrows raised. Finally she gestured for him to go on. He sat back and swallowed. Coughed. “It gets personal,” he said.

She laughed. It was the first he heard her laugh.

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1 We helped each other with “the family problem,” as we called it. I could relate to her parents throwing her out. My mom tossed me monthly.

2 I’d come home to find some of my things on the porch. When she’d finally answer the door she’d say she found a vibrator, porn, or hormones.

3 She’d call me a product of the devil. Deny I was her child. Act like she’d call the police to escort me away. I’d go to my brother’s.

makeup. I didn’t ask her, sorry, him, about it. He’s sensitive about the whole thing.

One whole box was completely useless for finding stuff out about my sister. It’s full of old bathroom stuff mentioned above and towels etc.

But in the second box I found some photos that looked like they came from the same set as one I painted. A few of them together in fall. Her eyes were like mine, from mom,
He bit his cheek at its exact copy of her sister’s. “Fine, fine.” She waved him off. “Write about it or something. I’m sure it’s interesting.” Her hand waved around in the air. “Gotta be.”

“It’s not something I exactly want my name attached to,” he said. And tongued the fresh damage to his cheek. He thought of Spokane. The fire still burned and he hadn’t even written a word about it. “I write publicly and I don’t want to burn my bridges with history.”

She pointed a chip at him, clutching it like a dart. “I’ve got the perfect out for

4 My brother, the soldier, enlisted when he was 18. He was still active five years later. He loved it. But never stopped being gentle.

5 We’d sit down and sip beer, talk about the likelihood of her being bipolar. The next morning he’d drive me back to our house.

6 I’d wait in the car while he went in and talked to her. Sometimes it took an hour, other times maybe two or three. Eventually she came out.

and her smile like dad’s. Her cheeks were a little broader. Her hair natural brown, short.

#hermana

She has her arm around him, still mostly looking like a “her” then, and her nails are some crazy purple and blue wave. They’re looking up.

There’s another pic of her trying to ride a skateboard. Her arms stretched out. All her clothes look baggy and she’s wearing sandals. There’s two
photos of a vase on a window sill, one further and another close up. Her reflection in the window, her left eye closed.

The rest were fall scenes in the woods. Some black and white and depressed looking. The trees thin and students walked on a path.

I asked him about the photos today while we ate lunch. He said she took a photography course with a camera rented from the library.

She loved it, he you,” she said. “Anonymous publishing. No one will know.”

“No internet here,” he said. He carefully chewed around his cheek. She shook her head.

“Go to a cafe,” she said. “But, I do have this idea.”

She tweeted anonymously for two years. She refused to share the URL with her boyfriend or friends. She wrote about her sister. Or, at least, what she thought about her sister’s saga from the little she knew. Lately she scanned and published some unseen paintings.

But she had nowhere...
said. But she couldn’t keep it up because our parents didn’t want to buy her a camera. I’m looking for more photos.

A third box full of CDs and DVDs. I sorted through them but didn’t find any mixes that looked like hers. He said he couldn’t remember.

Later as I was leaving he mentioned she watched #ToyStory when she was depressed. I looked for it in the box but didn’t find it. I loved it.

I went through four boxes.

10 This cycle went on until I packed off for college. She said I could of course come back for holidays, or if things didn’t work out.

11 But there was my brother, hovering behind her, his eyes watching the back of her head. I took off and felt the great release of tension.

12 I didn’t look back. Never wanted to go back. He never asked me to.

Months later he was called back on tour and killed in the middle east.
boxes today. Inside one: a stuffed animal from those rip-off crane games. Its fur all tattered. bunny. He jumped. The Easter bunny’s buck-teeth smile made her laugh sinister. The brown of her eyes scrunched together. “I found these.”

She sat down and placed the mask on the table next to her. “There’s a whole box full of different masks. You can wear one and write.” “I hate to break this to you,” he said. “But I think I’ll know it’s you.”

She shook her head. “No, see, you open the house as a public studio.” At first he scoffed at the idea. Leaving a door unlocked in Detroit was an invitation for robbers. Advertising would be a beacon for them.

The funeral was the last place I saw my mother. She cried on my shoulder. When it was time for her to go home, she turned to me.

She said, “Why didn’t you go? Why did it have to be him?” I walked away. She never called. I lived off loans and scholarships. Cut Mom out.

So when her parents threw her out and she needed a place to stay I opened my doors wide. It was a small efficiency apartment, but we did ok.
But she came back with further plans. They’d have “staff” to work security, the two of them plus her boyfriend working on rotation.

And besides, she argued, he was losing the house anyway, what did he care about robbery? He argued possible murder. She called him paranoid.

Her sister never argued like this, he told her. She said, maybe she should have. He relented and left it up to her.

She moved the masks to a plastic bin with a lid and left them at the bottom of the stairs. Two days passed before he saw anyone again.

A dog in black sweats was awkward. Figuring out the way to mesh with a roommate can take years. But by the end of the first week we were gold.

We were in a daily swing. She’d come by after work at the coffee shop, I’d just get done with class, we’d crash and watch TV.

She’d help me with homework if she was interested. Math she resisted, but science and art studies were always her things. She knew bio well.

I got a can of lighter fluid for her Zippo.

It’s silver with a little four leaf clover on the body. Her initials #cleaninghouse

I found pictures he had taken of her with a disposable camera. They went to an art museum. She imitated the poses in the paintings. #hermana

Found smaller trinket things I asked if I could have. He told me to take whatever I wanted. It’s more mine than his, he said.

#cleaninghouse

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She moved the masks to a plastic bin with a lid and left them at the bottom of the stairs. Two days passed before he saw anyone again.

A dog in black sweats was awkward. Figuring out the way to mesh with a roommate can take years. But by the end of the first week we were gold.

We were in a daily swing. She’d come by after work at the coffee shop, I’d just get done with class, we’d crash and watch TV.

She’d help me with homework if she was interested. Math she resisted, but science and art studies were always her things. She knew bio well.

I got a can of lighter fluid for her Zippo.

It’s silver with a little four leaf clover on the body. Her initials #cleaninghouse

I found pictures he had taken of her with a disposable camera. They went to an art museum. She imitated the poses in the paintings. #hermana

Found smaller trinket things I asked if I could have. He told me to take whatever I wanted. It’s more mine than his, he said.

#cleaninghouse

But she came back with further plans. They’d have “staff” to work security, the two of them plus her boyfriend working on rotation.

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showed up with a fox and fish. They ignored him, looking away from his face until he went outside to the mask bin.

When he returned they were each in a different room. The dog took small American flags out from his mother’s room and burned their edges. The fox rummaged through a storage closet full of cook, self-help, and prayer books. The fish cut newspaper strips in the living room. He found an old calendar from fifteen years ago, all the dates filled in with his mom’s appointments, and a pen. He wrote in the kitchen.

He slept in his bedroom, taking the door keys hidden above the frames, and

---

19 She helped me study for a biochem test through the week. Rewarding me with pieces of popcorn dipped in butter. I was corn stuffed by Friday.

20 I have no idea how it went, but we went to celebrate my survival anyway. After tossing back shots at a bar we crashed a party.

21 A friend I vaguely knew from class had turned his house into a roman reproduction. Toga clad undergrads were everywhere playing beer pong.
I could only find three other people to go. We took turns going inside, not letting each other see which masks we chose, and kept far away.

Inside we tried to avoid each other and to look as indistinguishable as possible, but it didn’t work all that well. I knew who was who.

Today we agreed to go at different times if we could. Collaborations done only in shifts, switching rooms often. But it could fail.

I locked himself in. When he woke, four masked people worked below.

They never stopped working to talk to each other. Each masked person took on their own project, setting up their space in different rooms. Occasionally one might stop and watch another work. Standing quite still a few feet behind an artist. Then they would shuffle back to work.

He noticed four regulars. Despite their daily changing masks and the sweat clothes they wore he noted their height, weight, and mannerisms.

He thought maybe he could tell who was who by what they worked on, but he

#Anon

22 Chugging down keg stands. Shotgunning beers. All while in crowns of olive leaves and white bed sheets. It was a strange clash of times.

23 For us, as sophomores, it was something new, strange, and highly enticing. We joined in and took on the roles of lost time travelers.

24 But at the time things were hitting her pretty heavy. Drinking sent her into depression rather than inhibition. We tried to break the spell.
was the only one who actually worked exclusively on one project.
Yet, each had their habits. Everyday the skinny short one that he thought was his dead friend’s sister closed herself in his mother’s room.

Then she would move to cut newspaper into stars, next she glued pipe cleaners into mutant animals. For an hour she sculpted pine, then left.

After she left, he went into his mother’s room.

Unsorted bags surrounded the cherry wood bed. Plastic boxes stood on the mattress.

A space had been cleared along one wall. His mother’s matte painting of...
two robins on a twig still hung on the wall. The wood floor dusty.

He dug into a nearby paper bag and found only plastic grocery bags. Next to it a plastic crate on the floor stuffed with manila envelopes.

He hunted through the room, sorting nothing, and found no trace of a painting or some assembled art object. Only chintz and party supplies.

He never asked.

The next morning she returned with a new friend. They separated and began working on their projects.

Screw it I’m leafing through the pile he’s

Notes: She shivered in the cold night. I told him again that I’d drive. I’d be fine. I turned to her, said I’d take care of her. She nodded. / He threw up his hands and gave me the keys. I hesitated, then tested myself by walking a line to the car. I did ok. She didn’t pause again. / We talked as we drove, I told them both to crash at my place. She started crying again. He passed out in the back seat. I held her hand. / I told her I’d get her home. That we’d never do this
written. It’s all black ink scrawled against the straight blue edges and dates. About to read on.

kitchen and wrote in the calendars. He covered every inch of space with his story, filling his mother’s empty days and notes.

A subtle anxiety began to build in him as the days went on. He ignored his real work. Anxiety made him clean. The art became the cleaning.

On Monday his boss from the news outsourcing site ranted through the phone. Spokane still burned. He owed him a story. His paycheck on hold.

On Tuesday he went to a coffee shop, again. The other car t-boned us across the passenger’s side and smashed us to a pole. / The pole narrowly missed the driver’s side door by several inches to the back. She was killed on impact.

I’m shook up as hell. The boyfriend calmed me down. A subtle anxiety began to build in him as he went on. He ignored his real work. Anxiety made him clean. The art became the cleaning.

If he had been upfront... It was an accident, whatever. But, he took her from through the phone. Spokane still burned. He owed him a story. His paycheck on hold.

On Monday his boss from the news outsourcing site ranted through the phone. He died on the way to the hospital. / My BAC was just under the illegal limit, but they pressed hard for the DUI charge regardless. It didn’t stick. The other driver survived. / We both got checked for reckless driving.

The scene investigation determined we had both run the four way stop because of our velocity. / Her parents threatened more lawsuits. They told me to stay away from the funeral and refused to tell our other friends where it was. / I was able to find her grave by checking nearby

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opened up his laptop, logged in to the wifi, and stared at a picture of the fire. He wrote.

When he returned to his mother’s he put on some indistinguishable insect mask. A frog with a feminine build read a calendar in the kitchen.

He said nothing. He made a sandwich and ate it with his back to the frog so that he did not expose his mouth while he ate. Someone sobbed.

The frog’s shoulders shook. Small thin hands held its face beneath the mask. The soft plastic bracelets clicked under her black sweatshirt.

He read the date on the calendar and knew which one it was. Across @February1994 he had written about her sister’s death. And his move.

He held his sandwich, carefully placed it on his plate, and folded his hands in his lap. She removed the frog mask and wiped at her eyes.

She looked nothing like her sister when she cried. Here, in the light from the open kitchen window, she looked nothing like her at all.

“Why?” she said. He placed his mask on the table and rubbed his face where the plastic itched.

cemeteries. I went alone and bawled in the snow. / The guilt pulled me down and hasn’t really stopped. Friends of the guy lashed out at me. They didn’t care to hear my story and I didn’t try. / I knew they were right. I didn’t deny my responsibility for it. But I couldn’t take it every day. I transferred to Chicago. / I packed everything into boxes and thought of tossing it. Instead I dropped it off on my mother’s porch. Thinking I’d never see it again. / When I reached Chicago I started consultation and therapy. Changed my name and found new friends. Tried to move on. And I did for a time.
She held her face and stared through fingers.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I made the wrong choice. I should have--” Footsteps thudded above them. One of the others in his mother’s room.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You know that, right? I’m so sorry.” His cheeks blazed and for a moment his fingers paused over the mask.

He worried her boyfriend was above them. That he’d come down and see her crying. That there would be more trouble. That more would know.

“I want you to have the house,” he said.

“What?” She dried her eyes with her sleeves.

“The house, take it, use it for a studio, please.”

“I don’t want your fucking house.” She threw her mask at him and knocked over the chair as she ran out of the room. Down the hall more fell.

The feet above also moved and ran down the stairs. A turtle peeked around the corner.

“She’s gone,” he said to it. It disappeared.

After checking the house he locked the front door and went to bed without writing anything. He woke at 7 am.

The estate was arranged to be sold off to the city. He bought a ticket over the phone to fly back to Chicago in the morning.

He spent the day making a final pass through the house, looking for anything he may have missed that he wanted to keep. There was so little.

He didn’t bother to put on a mask. None of the artists showed up. When he
came across two masks in the kitchen he tossed them on a pile.

Spokane burned in his dreams. He woke covered in sweat.

Glass shattered against his window. He turned on a bedside lamp, an old blue airplane with the light in its belly, and went to the window.

A figure in black sweat clothes ran across the lawn and disappeared into the darkness of the empty block.

With only the first floor of his mother’s house providing any light for miles he couldn’t see what exactly had been left in the yard.

Fearing some sort of elaborate mugging trap or revenge plot, he went back to bed, which seemed a safe plan in his sleepy haze.

In the morning he woke early, with the sun just cresting far at the edge of the city and turning everything a grey morning blue.

After his morning preparation cycle, he called for a cab and went out to wait with his coffee and found his old face staring him down.

The painting from the gallery, the giant colorful recreation of his female face, leaned against the trashcan. Two small canvases joined it.

The two other paintings the artistic sister had mentioned. His arm wrapped around her sister in one and they hung upside down in the other.

The colors of the new paintings were restricted to blue and purple. Darker and lighter hues adding depth of shadows and highlights.

They looked so happy together. He could hear her laugh as they swung from their legs on the monkey bars. But the moment felt so distant now.
Down the road he saw the cab approaching. He tossed his bag over his shoulder and waited, giving one last look at the paintings.

He thought of stuffing one in his bag, the smaller one of them on the monkey bars. But he got in the cab and left them all.