The Valentines

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

The Valentines is a novel set in contemporary Ohio and Texas, in which the two protagonists, Tycho Guy and Lucy Bulo, embark on a cross-country road trip to find Tycho's estranged father, a once-famous professional wrestler, and con him out of Tycho's inheritance. Their grift is far more difficult than they anticipate, and all three characters are forced to reckon with their true intentions and the gulf that opens up between what they each appear to be and what they really are. An inversion of the parable of the prodigal son, the novel deals with themes of allegiances, freedom, and the inheritances, both good and bad, that are passed down through blood.

Vita

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Publications

"The Right Place," *Pacifica Literary Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2019, pp. 25-35.

"Stretch Marks," *Hobart,* 7 Jan 2019, hobartpulp.com/web_features/stretch-marks

"Delta Dawn," *Washington Square Review*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2018, pp. 117-130.

"Salad Kid Courts Oblivion," *Barely South Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2017, pp. 24-29.

Major Field: English

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Part 1: Ohio

TYCHO

It was January in Mid-Ohio and the white trash kids at the Hamilton Arms apartments were setting off M-80s in dumpsters and chasing each other with sparklers. Parents smoked cigarettes under porch lights, watching, huddled in shiny coats. New Years was a couple days ago, but everybody's calendars had gone wonky from blackouts down the eastern seaboard and as far inland as here, Columbus more or less. For a minute, it had been like an actual YTK. Lines for gas pumps, runs on bottled water and nonperishables. Proudly keeping their broadcasts going by generator, the AM radio people said we were getting bombed, we weren't getting bombed. Then a dude broke the news-cycle spell by driving a dump truck into a farmers market in Ukiah, California, killing somewhere between three and fourteen people. Here, everybody realized it was only a power outage when the lights came back on. They were making up for lost time, firework by firework.

Travis's blinds were drawn, but enough louvers were missing or crooked that I could see him sprawled shirtless on his couch, watching something on his phone. In my left hand, pinched between my thumb and index, I held a dead mouse by its tail. With the other, I patted my coat down for keys and the pill bottles I'd need. Travis didn't look up when I came in, just nodded at his phone. I locked the door behind me.

Lately, I'd been dropping by a couple times a week to feed my snake from the box of mice I kept in my car. They'd all died a couple days ago—from the cold, I think—but evidently their stiff white bodies still tasted fine, like a frozen waffle straight from the box. I'd had the snake for two years and still hadn't named it. A ball python, two-and-a-half feet long with a kind of sweet disposition if you could get over your fear of snakes in general, which, to date, only I had, and sometimes Lucy. Travis didn't mind the snake sharing his living room, but he refused to feed it. And after he woke up one night and found half a dozen pink and white mice huddled together on the coffee table like they were conspiring, he refused to let more than a feeding's worth cross his threshold. He told me, without any hint of sarcasm, that the mice were a liability. What if they chewed into his stash?

"I mean, you want to talk about a liability," I'd said.

"I don't, Tycho. Just keep your goddamn mice someplace else."

I didn't want to push it. I was lucky, I guess, that Travis had let me keep the snake here after my grandma told me to get rid of it. Recently, I'd come over and found him dangling his infant son, Marshall, over the terrarium, tapping on the glass with the knuckles of his free hand, trying to get the snake to do something to amuse the kid, but it stayed mostly still inside its habitat. It never moved when you were looking at it, except when it was feeding. And only sometimes then. At least the snake had company.

Marina and Lucy were out grocery shopping, so Travis had to stay home with the baby. He wasn't allowed to go to Walmart anymore after he'd shit his pants in home decor and thrown a fit about it. Much like now, he was often too fucked up to be in public, especially after the sun went down. Fortunately, his business required that his clients come to him. I was both a client

and a business partner, both and neither, which meant that he sometimes had a little trouble knowing how to address me when I first came in. Usually, it only took him a minute to acclimate. I would state my purpose always right up front, either by proffering cash or drugs, or saying something like, “Don’t mind me, I’m just here to feed the snake.” We’d been friends since high school, and it hadn’t always been like this. Just since he’d been slinging in earnest.

He said, “I’m too fucked up to be in public.”

I couldn’t tell if he meant to sound bitter or if he was stating a fact. The snake was coiled in the corner beneath the heat lamp, its body wrapped around its hollow plastic branch like he was trying to protect it from invaders. I dropped the mouse in and closed the lid. If you waited for him to strike, he wouldn’t. One day, I was going to install a camera in there. Like a nanny cam. Hit record, go to work or whatever, come home, and watch the day’s carnage around the dinner table with the little family I’d have by then.

“Don’t nobody want to be in public,” I said. “Clear off the table.”

His customary pyramid of Icehouse tallboys was stacked on the floor in arm’s reach from his position on the couch. Some were full, some empty. Travis didn’t care whether his beer was warm or cold, though I think he preferred it warm. The pyramid made for a complicated game of something resembling Jenga, but he made it look easy, pulling a full one out, replacing it with an empty. I don’t ever recall the stack toppling, except when he would sit up too quick and knock it over with his sockfeet. Which he did now. His eyes were milky red and I could smell stale malt on his breath from across the room. The apartment always looked like an episode of *Cops*, insofar as Travis was typically shirtless and there was, at the very least, weed all over the table. Plus the kid in the playpen and the fistholes in the walls and the ceiling fan missing a blade and

spinning on the lowest speed like it was about to stop but never did. Plus dim lighting. Plus the snake. If police barged in with helmets and shields and shit, you'd be like, *Yeah, that makes sense*.

Neither of us said a word as he restacked his pyramid.

And then the weed and weed accoutrements went into the Romeo y Julieta box, which was placed atop the orange cafeteria tray and stowed in the underneath of the coffee table. With a broad stroke of his arm, Travis swiped the remainder of table trash onto the floor, mostly mail and torn blunt wrappers.

"What you got?" he asked. "What are we looking at?"

"Depends," I said. "How long they going to be gone?"

Marshall started making hiccup noises in his playpen and, since I was standing, I picked him up. He smelled like breastmilk and Axe body spray, like a careful concoction of both. He was wearing a t-shirt with a cartoon buffalo on it and a disposable diaper. When I picked him up, he started chirruping and pinching at my face. The baby didn't care for his father except as a remedy for immediate needs, and Travis said he only liked me so much because I was fat, because I reminded the kid of a tit. It's true, I was terrifically fat. And it was not congenital or hereditary—I'd earned every pound. But I didn't appreciate being compared to a tit.

"You're not going to believe this," I said. The floor is a long way down when you're my size, and sitting on it can sometimes cause a scene. But, the living room being chairless, I did it, right across the table from Travis, and I dragged my legs as close to Indian-style as I could get them. Sometimes I felt like a cruise ship pretending to be a Honda Civic, doing Honda Civic things, wondering what it would even look like to do cruise ship things. My legs made a kind of

smaller, triangular playpen where the baby could occupy himself by failing to get stable footing. “But so power’s out and I’m shooting bottles behind my grandma’s house. It’s got real thick back there, like briars and shit, and I’m hacking through it with a stick, trying to clear a path. And lo and behold,” I said, “I come upon a mini fridge.”

“Like a mini refrigerator?”

“Totally. And I know I probably shouldn’t open it up. Like what if there’s rotten food or maggots or whatever? Something gross enough that the motherfucker chose to throw it into a field rather than clean it out. And not like at the edge of the field, not curbside. It’s in the middle of it. But also I couldn’t not look.”

The baby found a handhold in my beard.

“Might be body parts,” Travis suggested.

“Way better than that.” I pulled the slenderer of the two orange pill bottles from my coat pocket and threw it to him. “Read the label.”

He did and his eyes went wide.

“Dude,” Travis said, “that blessed name. I haven’t had a Darvocet since high school.”

“Discontinued in 2010,” I said, “because they were too perfect. And these are hundreds. I don’t even remember hundreds.”

Lortab, Percocet, the Oxies—far be it from me to disparage any dues-paying member of the American opioid family, but short of straight morphine (which, good luck finding it) or Fentanyl (not exactly recreational), you couldn’t fly much closer to the sun than Darvocet. They took it off the market because of its addictive properties, which, I mean, come on. It’s a fucking narcotic, not an iron supplement.

“Look at the name,” I told him.

“I am, bro. I’m meditating on it.”

“No, look who it’s prescribed to.”

The label was a little threadbare and pale, but the important shit was still legible. The name was Graham T. Chillowatt. I could see Travis using his phonics.

“Why’s it sound familiar?”

“‘It ain’t honest,” I said, “unless it’s Chillowatt honest.’ The Chevrolet dude on TV. With the bolo tie.”

“Wow,” Travis said. “That fucking guy. What else was in the magic fridge?”

I told him that was all, just the Darvocet, but that wasn’t true. Marshall was getting fussy. I bounced him against the spillover of my belly. Without consulting any doctor, Travis had deduced that Marshall was off, like cognitively—Travis’s word was *retarded*, but you’re not supposed to say that anymore—that Marshall had a learning disability or something, due to his tendency to stare at nothing, which was exactly what Travis was doing now, staring not at the pill bottle but beyond it, into some socialist future where all the drugs belonged to all the people.

“It says it’s expired,” he said.

“Pills don’t expire,” I told him. “That’s just so you’ll buy more.”

“Don’t think I’ve ever run into that problem before.” He took a full beer from his pyramid and replaced it with an empty. “Fucking government,” he said. “Fucking FDA.”

“I took one earlier,” I said, which was true, “and I feel stupendous.”

“Stupendous,” he said. “I remember stupendous.” And he pulled out his snorting tools.

A long time ago, I learned that if you wanted Travis to believe a thing, wrap the explanation in conspiracy, otherwise he'll puzzle over the logic of it and nothing will get accomplished. Blame an acronym. NAFTA is controlling the weather. The FFA did 9/11.

I put Marshall in his playpen and used Travis's marble pestle to crush two pills to powder on one of Marina's *People* magazines and chopped them fine right across the forehead of a famous woman I'd never heard of, to whom was attributed the quotation: *It was six days of hell*. Travis plucked a straw from a UDF cup, blew it dry, cut it in two, and handed me my half. I sorted the powder into equivalent rails.

Thing is, neither rail was Darvocet. He snorted it up all the same. When it came my turn, I performed a little sleight of hand. Instead of going to the rail, I brought the rail to me, and in the process blew the powder off the magazine before I snorted. I got a nose full of air and went through all the motions—leaned my head back, sniffed and hocked, licked my fingertip and ran it around my nostril. A bunch of subterfuge for nothing—Travis wasn't paying attention to me at all. He threw his legs up onto the couch and let out a groan, half satisfied, half depleted.

Junior year of high school, before the school board forbade off-campus lunch, me and Travis used rail Darvocets (or whatever we could find) in the Taco Bell drive-thru. Snort one, eat one; one for the rush and one for the long haul. After that, a couple burritos, and a couple of my grandma's skinny menthols, the rest of the school day, if we decided to go back, was a breeze.

I'd moved from Texas to Ohio the summer before my sophomore year, and me and Travis started running around when we were juniors. Way back before Marina, before their kids, before what passed for us as adulthood—before Travis did time—getting fucked up in parking lots was how one person became friends with another when one was a three-hundred-pound

honor-roll student with a weird accent and the other was an illiterate, redheaded, cold medicine abuser who even the teachers called *Sleepy*. We'd had cold medicine in common. Now, I was riding a sort of aggravating three-forty and my accent only came back when I was tequila drunk, but fucking nobody called Travis *Sleepy* anymore. That was half our lives ago. And when that much time elapses, it's easy for a friendship to become a kind of bland ritual, a performance you're phoning in. Maybe you fucked your friend's wife when he was in jail, just once, or you occasionally cribbed something from his closet stash. To sell, not to eat. And if you did, you felt bad about it. Couldn't sleep, started talking to yourself in your car, telling yourself how much of a fuckass you were. But time elapses, and you forget that too. So, it's not remarkable that somebody like Travis, whose memory isn't exactly a vault, might find that my grandma's Ambien and his memory of Darvocet looked basically alike. Both white, both oblong. Even your casual pillhead doesn't remember colors and shapes. In lieu of those, though, he might remember mental textures, how cigarettes taste so much better in the company of speed, or the way the music of the spheres sounds on opioids versus barbiturates. How one time Klonopin and a ton of beer allowed him to justify his own existence so articulately that even he believed it. How if there were a ledger—and there isn't—it would all balance out. What Travis had forgotten, what I remembered. That was when his skinny ass and my fat one would weigh the same.

Plus, it wasn't betrayal if you said what you were doing ahead of time. It's not a sucker punch if it's telegraphed. Last Thursday, Marina had been watching TV and pissed off for some reason, so me and Travis got fucked up in my car. We smogged the thing out like we were kids. I'd told him then, "If I disappear, hold tight. There'll be money coming your way. Just wait."

He'd just said, "Same, bro."

Now, I laid out a couple more rails. His was Ambien and mine, this time, was a real Darvocet, that gentle giant, which I'd fished from the other bottle in my jacket, something nice and sustaining for the long drive. Ground to powder, the pills were indeed identical.

"Say," I said, "text Marina. See how long they're going to be."

"She don't care what we do," Travis said. He popped up to orient himself with the table, and his cheek wore rashy bent furrows from the couch pattern. He coughed and laughed at the same time. "Afraid she's going to catch us?"

"Dude, I'm familiar with your wife's patterns of behavior. I just don't want to share with her."

He said, "Fair," and started punching at his phone. He took his rail and passed the magazine to me. "Not to complain, but this don't feel like Darvocet."

Above the snake terrarium, there was a poster of Dr. Dre wearing his mean face, which was framed in what looked like a gold cameo brooch. He presided over the room like a judge. A black King Solomon in an L.A. Raiders cap.

I took my line and faked a yawn. "I know, dude. Shit's got me sleepy."

"No," he said, "not sleepy. I feel fucking gilled."

I wasn't sure what he meant by gilled, but I agreed. He cracked another Icehouse from the pyramid, and I asked if there was a cold one. He threw an arm up in the air to indicate the kitchen and, in the process, knocked his phone on the floor. I watched him while he rooted around the floor to find it and thought about how redheads shouldn't get neck tattoos. The prison-green imprint of Lucy's baby foot looked like the rind on a bad, freckled cheese. Searching the floor with his shorts unzipped, completely oblivious—it was like watching

somebody sleep, at their most vulnerable. I wanted to tell him I would miss him, but there were too many reasons not to. Not least of which was that I was about to rob him.

There was a tectonic gurgle in my guts. The kind of noise you're not sure if other people can hear. I'd been eating Vyvanse since the morning, and I had to use the toilet.

The whole bottom shelf of the refrigerator was crammed with Ice House cans stacked on their sides and expired Muscle Milk cartons from back when Travis was trying to maintain his jail physique. The refrigerator, if you didn't open the vegetable crisper, was the cleanest room in the house.

Vyvanse is basically diet meth. Milder effects, but you don't have to wait till day three to sleep. It's the introvert cousin of Adderall, and I'd been trading for it since summer with an Ohio State studio art major named, no shit, Pilot Bland. First of the month, we would meet at Tee Jaye's Country Place on High Street and Morse and have lunch together. It was the only place in middle Ohio that served my Texas meal—chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, and, the rare ingredient, fried okra—but I wasn't going for the food. Pilot had monthly refills of thirty milligram Vyvanse capsules, which his parents paid for. To hear him tell it, he was some kind of hot shit on campus. Was spending winter break with his family in the Basque region of Spain. He was probably there now. Sometimes he had an Errol Flynn mustache, sometimes he didn't. I used to trade him weed until he decided to quit smoking in order to "spend more time with himself." Then the deal became thirty Vyvanse for ten Oxycodone. Once, he offered to be my personal trainer, said I was built like a tank, if only I'd start lifting. He wore shirts without sleeves and ate burgers without buns and left his fries untouched. All that to say, Pilot was a total fucking reprobate. He should've been my enemy. And yet, I would leave Tee Jaye's once a

month with three hundred percent more pills than I brought. I'd never been under any illusions about what I was or what I did. I was clear-eyed. At the very least, I considered myself to be a grown-ass man, and one who didn't throw the word *addict* around casually. But, if I'm being honest, I'd been getting a little too comfortable eating Pilot's prescription every day, dumping half the powder from the capsule into my morning coffee, eating the rest with lunch. Reliant is a better word than dependent. Insofar as a day without Vyvanse was becoming my true enemy, the enemy of my enemy, cunt though he was, was my friend. There weren't many things I was going to miss about Ohio, but I was going to miss Pilot Bland. Mostly because I only had six more of his pills to keep me.

Travis's bathroom was disgusting. I took my beer in with me and pulled the shower curtain closed to hide the clump of maroon and blonde hairs clotting the drain like a dead guinea pig. Marina's and Lucy's, respectively. Half a dozen magazines fanned across the toilet tank—*Us Weekly* and a couple water-crinkled back issues of *Delia's*, which is for teenage girls, but which I think Travis used for beat-off purposes. I thumbed through one of the latter and flushed the toilet to mask the horrible noise my ass was about to make, was making. I'd been shitting brown water all day. It felt like somebody had taken a lemon zester to my rectum. I imagined Graham T. Chillowatt in the same position on an undoubtedly higher dollar toilet. Knowing his stash of Darvocet was limited, shitting liquid, considering his exit plan. Maybe he made a similar decision to mine, and his involved cutting out pills, cutting out in general. Fortunately, mine didn't.

After I'd sprayed all of it out that I could, I tidied myself. In the absence of Gold Bond, which apparently Travis's family did not require, I liberally applied baby powder to my crevice. I could hear Travis snoring before I had my pants buttoned.

He was sleeping, but the baby was wide awake. Every time a firecracker exploded outside, Marshall tried to make a noise to match it. To keep him quiet, I hoisted him up and whispered baby talk into his funny little ear.

First, the closet.

Travis and Marina's bedroom was as nasty as the bathroom. Caseless pillows stained beige with drool and sweat. On the bedside table was a lavender vibrator-dildo combo in need of a trip through the dishwasher. Above their marriage bed hung the same painting that had been there forever—a landscape with wild horses. One corner of it was stained purple, with wine-colored dribbles on the wall beneath it. The stain was new. Neither Travis nor Marina were wine drinkers. I imagined an open bottle of Robitussin hurled through the air as the kind of punctuation meant to end an argument.

The closet was packed with Marina's clothes and shoes, dresses she'd grown too fat for, cardboard boxes with all manner of garbage inside—flip phones, unpaired socks, a hair dryer, a plush frog with its tongue hanging out, tangles of Christmas lights, credit card bills, a copy of *Lord of the Flies* with a swastika and nineties metal band logos scrawled on the cover. Behind the clutter, there was a loose panel in the sheetrock. In the only effort at handiness I'd ever seen Travis display, he'd cut the panel loose and rigged it on a top hinge, like a doggy door. And behind that door, Travis kept his money and his product. I wasn't planning to take much, just gas

money and my daily bread. The basics. But it had been a while since I'd dipped into his hidey-hole, and what I found there was not what I expected.

The cash was rubber-banded and vacuum sealed. Too much of it. The vacuum sacks created new denominations, stacks instead of singles. And it would be way more conspicuous if I broke open a bag and peeled a few twenties off a roll. So I took a sack. But the money was the least of it. He had a film canister full of what I was pretty sure was Dilaudid, which, as far as pills go, is the body of Christ, and the only bright side of having a loved one diagnosed with colon cancer. Under normal circumstances, Dilaudid isn't part of the available currency. There was ecstasy too, or Molly, whatever the kids are currently calling it. Yellow tablets stamped with emojis. That shit eats holes in your brain, though, and I'm not a teenager. There were other treats for me. Klonopin, OxyCodone, OxyContin. Bags, not bottles, of it. Bags full of blister packs with Spanish warning labels. Motherfucker had enlarged his domain without telling me. There was one of those pill clamshells, too, that women keep their birth control in, half full of something I couldn't identify, but which I nonetheless stuffed into my backpack. And, needless to say, weed galore. Sympathize with me, please. What do you do when you require a half ounce of weed, give or take, but all of it's bundled in bricks? Do you break into it, eyeball a half? No, you don't. Or I didn't. Because I was in a hurry.

While I filled my backpack, I was talking to the baby, not fully aware of what I was saying. Hunkered on the ground, grabbing with one hand and holding him with the other. I was apologizing, I think, for what I hadn't done yet. And I wish I would've taken notes. I'm not one of those dudes pathologically incapable of saying I'm sorry. But articulating it beyond that, beyond the simple fact that I was sorry—where do you begin? If you don't begin at the

beginning, with the very first thing you're sorry for, then all the important stuff gets skipped. Whatever I was saying felt sincere. Even though the baby couldn't understand, I felt like I owed him an explanation. And what's an explanation at its root but an apology you're trying to dance your way around?

Soon as I put the baby back in his playpen, he started smacking his lips, blowing kisses at me, at the snake, at his snoring father. Making the smack and the gesture, kissing and sending the kiss on its way—he looked so pleased with himself for authoring a noise. I wanted to give him something to show that I acknowledged what an excellent job he was doing, even if no one else did. Instead, I took things away, beginning with the terrarium. I propped the apartment door open with a snow boot and hoisted the thing up. Back when I bought the snake, I remember feeling lucky, like divinely elected to be a snake owner, because the terrarium fit so snugly across the backseat of my car. An impulse buy became a fucking edict of fate. But, then, the dude at the flea market who sold it to me had helped me carry it out, and, now, between the door and my car, I had to set it down a couple times. Not so much heavy as awkward. Snow was falling again, like ever so lightly, and the snake did not appear to be enjoying himself. But I got him stowed in the backseat of my car without incident. The box of dead mice was in the glovebox. I fished one out and fed him dessert. Him or her or it. If I'd ever learned which, I'd forgotten.

Back inside, I snorted half a Darvocet mixed with half a Vyvanse, wiped up the residue, and licked it off my finger. Kneeling before the coffee table, I was beginning to smell how this house would smell to someone who'd never been inside—foreign and hard to shake, like the first time you smell your dad's pillow.

And I was walking through the apartment like I was telling it goodbye. In Lucy's bedroom, I grabbed the backpack off the bed and hooked it over my shoulder. On the dresser, a pink and white striped Victoria's Secret bag full of nothing but tissue paper, a box of Junior Mints with a phone number written on it. The kind of evidence you should dispose of. I shook a few candies into my mouth and dropped the box behind Lucy's dresser.

The baby and Dr. Dre stared me down like they had some shit to say to me before I left. For a second, it was as if I had an actual choice. The thing about drugs, the good ones are always going to make you feel tenderer to the world than you really are, ready to forgive it just this once if it will give you room to make an actual decision. Sentimentality with conditions. But there aren't choices. Above all else, pills are deceitful. I blew a kiss to the baby and shut the door behind me.

LUCY

The wheels were carving black lines in the parking lot snow until one of the back ones went wonky, fucking up what would've been, in a perfect world, very pretty symmetry. My mom was way behind me. Fat and bundled in her pink winter coat, she looked like a Peep, if a Peep could walk and play games on its phone at the same time.

Supposedly shopping carts are on invisible leashes. If you take them past the parking lot, the wheels seize up. My science teacher, Pastor Wible, said technological innovation solves problems we didn't know we had. Blink your eyes and *Voila!* Or as Pastor Wible would say, *Viola.* The problem of the first invention (the wheel) gets solved by the latest (electromagnetic

shopping cart leashes). Unless the first invention was actually fire, which would make more sense. I'd heard it both ways.

Shopping cart wheels look just like regular wheels, no GPS things or sensors.

Probably fire came before the wheel.

But then think about it. If prostitution is supposed to be the first profession, how could the first invention be fire? Both firsts can't be true. If prostitution is the first profession, then the first invention would have to be money. Even if it was only primitive money like seashells or wampum or whatever. But if fire was the first invention, then fire-building would have to be the first profession. Not everybody can build a fire, but everybody can prostitute themselves. Or else maybe fire was the first money. Like you build a little fire, light a torch, find a prostitute. *Hey, I'll give you this fire if you suck my dick.* And only later did humans learn that fire is great for barbeques and bonfires. For hundreds of years, probably thousands, it was only good for pussy.

Unless the wheel came first.

The blue Walmart bags were flapping in the wind, full of two-hundred dollars worth of candy cereal and bagel bites. On the bottom rack was a family pack of toilet paper and a case of Mountain Dew. I gave the cart a shove and hopped on, rode it like a chariot for the width of a couple parking spaces until it skidded out.

Our car sat at the ass-end of the parking lot, all alone. Before the State of Ohio revoked my dad's driver's license, Mom would make him do the parking, even if she was driving. They'd switch seats—she'd waddle around the outside, he'd hoist himself across—and he'd park the car for her without a word, like they'd always done it that way. Without my dad, she had to find an empty space surrounded by empty spaces.

When I was little, people gushed about how me and my mom looked so much alike. The spitting image, but it's actually spit *and* image. Because we're all made in the image of god and god molded Adam out of spit and mud, which is totally fucking stupid if you're god. Like look at the mess you made. Mud everywhere.

The point is, my mom was my destiny. Daughters grow up to look like their moms. All evidence says future me will be a fat Peep, a woman who waddles. And one day, my ass too will have *Pink* or *Juicy* or *Slut* written across it in cursive, in Walmart, while I buy groceries for some dummy and the kids we love so much we could just explode..

In the car, we emptied our pockets in our laps. My pile included blue lipstick, a kelp sheet mask, a liquid eyeliner called Squid Ink, tropical Skittles, and two two-ounce bottles of lemonade-flavored energy supplement. From her ugly-ass purse, Mom pulled out a phone charger in its package and her own bag of Skittles.

"I win," I said.

"Nope." Mom pointed the phone charger at me like a crucifix. "This thing costed thirty dollars."

I did the math on my fingers.

"It's a tie then," I said. "These are three each, makeup and stuff is twenty-two, and Skittles are like a dollar fifty."

The charger she stole was for a different model phone, but she refused to believe it. She tried jamming it into all the slots at different angles. It's totally possible that theft came first, the first invention, even before the invention of property.

“Oh shit,” I said. “And these.” From my jacket, I pulled a pair of yellow sunglasses and put them on. “I do win.”

Mom lit a long cigarette and dropped the pack in the cupholder where she kept pennies and trash.

“Fine,” she said. “You win, I lose.”

“Then let me drive.”

“No.”

“But you said,” I said. “That’s the bet.”

“I said no.”

“Dad lets me drive.”

“Don’t care,” Mom said, rolling the window down just enough to let her smoke out. “You’re fourteen and your dad’s an idiot.”

“Fine,” I said, and I snatched her cigarettes, lit one, breathed it all in, and let it go from my nostrils.

When she moved, Mom’s coat made her sound like my baby brother in his diaper. She grabbed at me, but her arms were too short. If I crammed myself against the door, she wasn’t able to smack me or snatch the cigarette.

“Put it out, Lucy. Don’t play with me.”

“I’m not playing,” I said. “Either I drive or I smoke.”

I won and she knew it. She wasn’t going to let me have my victory, though. Bargaining means you lose. And you have to give up winning the stupid little fights if you’re playing the long game, which I definitely was.

“Only assholes wear sunglasses at night,” my mom said.

I didn’t say what I wanted to say because that would’ve forced her to climb out of the car, waddle around to my side, pull me out by my ponytail, and slap me. And that would’ve taken forever.

I waited until she merged into traffic. “I guess I’m an asshole then,” I told her, “and fearfully and wonderfully made.”

TYCHO

All I had to do now was wait for the minivan headlights to bend through the parking lot, and then the rest of the plan would fall into place by itself. All I had to do was sit.

That last Vyvanse had upset the balance I’d been trying all day to perfect. It wasn’t blending with the Darvocet the way I’d hoped. The remedy, obviously, was more Darvocet, but it would take a while to kick in. I needed to smoke a bowl to dull my edges. I was chewing the insides of my mouth between cigarettes, fidgeting. Still, I probably could have fallen asleep if I let my eyes close. I considered jogging around the car, or else jogging inside for another Icehouse, but both those things seemed irresponsible.

Across the highway, there were serious fireworks exploding. Screams too faint to hear followed by cracks of white light and falling colored stars. Not too long ago, me and Travis had watched a National Geographic thing about how the murder rate in Chicago triples on July fourth. How killers use the sound of fireworks to mask their gunshots. If you were already the kind of person who’s prepared to kill, the fact that you were also the kind of person who can wait for a holiday might make you superhuman. Apparently, the same doesn’t hold true for New

Years' Eve. The cold makes people more passive, lazier. People kill people all year round, burgle, vandalize, but it takes spunk to do it in the winter.

In Ohio, you're allowed to purchase all the fireworks you want, but it's against the law to shoot them off. I liked that. I liked that the kids with their bottle rockets and M-80s were committing crimes, that their crimes were in the same book of rules as murder and kidnapping. The little girl in a too-big Bengals coat was a criminal when she ran past my car, parading her guttering sparkler. In a way, it was reassuring to be among so many criminals great and small, in humble Columbus.

The little girl zigzagged between parked cars, more clothes than kid, her little torch leading the way like she was chasing it, which seemed symbolic of something. The sparkler was telling her where to run, but she was controlling it. The way divining rods work, or intuition—chicken or egg kind of shit. If there was something profound in there, I didn't have the patience to dig for it. When she bolted for the road, her daddy popped out of nowhere to scoop her up and carry her back to safety. He saw me sitting in my dark car and gave me a nod. One of those husky, square-headed white boys you find all over Ohio, always sporting a Buckeye hoodie and gym shorts. No matter how cold, those motherfuckers couldn't be bothered to wear long pants. I equated it, right or wrong, with stupidity. Nearly twenty years up here and the cold still drilled deep into my bones. The little girl's sparkler finally went out and she burst into tears.

The daddy was underdressed, which meant he was stupid. He was also fat and, because he lived at the Hamilton Arms, poor. People tend to associate fat and poor with stupid—I was both and I did it too. Used to be, in the fucking olden days, the kings were fat people and the poor were starving skeletons who were lucky to live past forty. Being fat showed you had the

money to eat. People like to think this proves that beauty standards are in a constant state of flux, that it's a matter of fashion. These same people talk about how big is beautiful. Speaking as a fat man who's seen himself in the mirror before, I can say with authority that there isn't anything beautiful about it. Ripples and folds and bulges, sweat, rashes, strange odors from hard-to-reach places, the raw indentation my belt buckle scored into the underside of my gut. The only thing proven by fat kings and starving peasants is that they didn't have McDonald's back then. And too bad for them. McDonald's is fucking awesome.

But then there's this: you're fat and poor, but, against all odds, you're not a dolt. In certain situations you might even pass for shrewd. There's an advantage in that, a kind of camouflage. It's possible to be so big you're invisible. And when you're invisible, you can do anything the fuck you like.

The heater kicked into high gear, blowing hard and hot, and I put my sunglasses on to keep it out of my eyes. The 1999 Saturn was not built for a man my size. My seat was pushed as far back as far as it could go with the terrarium behind it. The steering wheel pressed against my belly and my hair clung to the ceiling fabric. Snakes are cold-blooded creatures, hence the heat. They lounge in the heat, drink it up. Before too long, I was sweating like a glass of tea.

I texted Lucy a row question marks and waited for a reply, scrolled through the directions out of Ohio, checked my destination address against the one on my dad's website. The Vyvanse was starting to take hold. Cigarettes kept my mouth busy. I decided that all that stuff about invisibility might not be true after all.

It felt good to tell myself I knew how the world worked, but I didn't know shit. Invisible people don't have a special advantage. Take your average invisibles, like your Walmart people,

those busted-ass families of five who descend from the hills on Saturday to do their shopping. The mother's always wearing a neck brace or a cast on her arm, thirty but looks fifty-five. Dad's in all camo, distracted by everything. The kids have Cheeto dust encrusted in their nail beds, homemade haircuts, no chins. They're so invisible they become a spectacle.

If that's the extreme of invisibility, then the other extreme is fame, the kind where you're always jumping up and down, making noise so the camera will pan your way—that was my dad, Sweet Dave Valentine. He'd been kind of famous as a pro wrestler in the eighties and nineties. Yellow spandex tights and face paint, bleached hair, muscles, perennial tan. He never achieved anything close to Hulkamania. He wasn't any kind of household name, or not in my household—my grandmother hated his guts—but he was famous for a wrestler.

Before I moved to Ohio, I'd traveled with him for a couple years when he worked for WCW. I'd been in charge of the duffle bag he kept his costumes in and the special throat lozenges he had to take after yelling himself hoarse in the ring. His fear of invisibility was damn near pathological. It made sense, in a way, that I would inherit the thing he feared most.

If I spent long enough thinking about any one thing, I'd think myself into a quandary. Instead of thinking, I thumbed through the photos on his website. There's such a thing as too alert. The other side of alert, the farthest side, is paranoia. Before that, there's jittery. For the moment, I was only jittery.

Ring Rust Ministries—my dad's latest grift—was a halfway house for ex-wrestlers, a "sober-living community," said the home page, "nestled in the picturesque Texas Hill Country." I'd been through his website forwards and backward. There wasn't anything new I was going to find. The pictures were the same, the Bible verse banners slung across the top of every page

hocked the same inspirational sticktuitive bullshit. Testimonial paragraph attributed to sad-sack dudes told he stories of how they'd have never learned how to tie their shoes were it not for my father. He'd dropped the "Sweet" from his name. Now he was David Valentine, which made him sound like a life coach or a celebrity chef. His hair was short, more salt than pepper. He was still in great shape, but age had leached the old charm from his smile. He was pure charlatan. There were photos of him on every page.

The one I kept returning to showed him with arms outstretched, posing in front of a beet red Hummer with *Ring Rust* emblazoned in gold across the side.

I'm not the kind of person who goes around saying he's a great studier of human nature or whatever, but, Jesus Christ, pay a little attention and it's pretty clear that the only lucky people are the ones born lucky—the rich, the beautiful, the talented. The rest of us are stuck. And the only way to get unstuck is to take what you want from somebody else. There's no such thing as a self-made man, only thieves and motherfuckers too meek to steal. The meek do not inherit the earth —the meek get robbed, and I was done getting robbed.

LUCY

Mom required sustenance. She ordered corndogs and a milkshake from Sonic, and, so my dad wouldn't bitch about her not bringing any for him, she ate in the car. Squirting ketchup and mustard on a napkin, stirring them together with the corndog stick. Yellow and red make orange. No thank you, Mother, nothing for me.

On a fourth grade field trip to the Columbus Zoo, back when I was in public school, mI got separated from my class in the monkey enclosure, watching an orangutan with a plastic

bucket on its head slam itself into the glass wall that separated me from it. Under the bucket, only its mouth was visible. If the bucket came off when it smashed against the wall, the orangutan would put it back on before it tried again. I couldn't look away. It was almost inspiring to watch a stupid animal try over and over to break through its cage, but what was the point of the bucket? Like those Buddhist monks who set themselves on fire to protest Chinese imperialism or whatever—that's sort of respectable, but what if they dressed up like Disney princesses too? Or wore buckets on their heads? What would that symbolize other than everything's completely retarded.

That was how I felt watching my mother eat. She nibbled at the corndog batter until an inch of wiener was exposed. Fried food transported her elsewhere, to her disgusting happy place. Her Mariah Carey CD finished and started over at the beginning.

When the length of wiener was free of batter, she bathed it in condiment. It was the perfect time to jack another cigarette, but my mouth was still scorched from the last one. My mom then licked the wiener clean before she bit it off and moved on to the next segment.

I forgot to mention that she called corndogs *corny dogs*, which, like, I can't even explain how much that disgusts me.

There are two kinds of moms. At school, most people have moms like mine. Fat, tacky, and mean. The other kind only belongs to the rich kids. My dad calls them exercise sluts and fucking drools over them. Type two's kids are precious sunbeams. They never leave the house without spandex and makeup. Moms are repulsive, both kinds; ergo, fuck moms. In case you're interested, trust me, I don't think very highly of dads either.

My mom engaged corndog number three, and I got a bitchy text from Tycho, which I ignored.

Monday would be the first day back to school after winter break for everybody but me. I was suspended until the middle of January for a paper I wrote about some Native American folktales we had to read in Mrs. Lucenay's class. I'd only read one of them and it was boring, all about animals and the wind and shit. I thought my paper was pretty good. If the idea of terrorism had been around back then, the Indians would've been called terrorists. Because they didn't do war the same as white people. That was my main argument. The people who decide what words mean get to decide the difference between what's good and what's bad, which version is war and which is terrorism. The paper was only like three pages long, but I crammed a lot of stuff in there. It was the paragraph about school shooters that got me in trouble. And supposedly it was racist against Indians, even though it totally wasn't. I would be allowed to go back to school on January twenty-first on the condition that I talked to a counselor at the superintendent's office about my "violent ideation," whatever that means.

Mrs. Lucenay gave my mom a copy of my paper with the offending parts bracketed. After spending half an hour staring at it, Mom's verdict was that I didn't know how to write, by which she meant I didn't know how to think. She gave it to my dad to read, but he didn't. He spilled a cereal milk on it and put it between the couch cushions to dry. Tycho read it though. He said the school shooting stuff didn't fit, but about the rest of it he said, "Right on." He said, "Fuck the man," and giggled at himself.

That night, after my dad passed out on the couch and my mom shut herself in her bedroom, me and Tycho smoked cigarettes in his car. One of the white mice he fed his snake sat

on his knee, sucking its fingers while Tycho broke open a cigarette and mixed the tobacco with weed for a blunt.

He said, “You gotta tell them what they want to hear. You write angry. And it makes it look like you think you’re smarter than they are.”

“But you think it’s good?”

“Hell yeah, it’s good,” he said, “but who cares? Your teacher, what’s her fuck, that bitch is your only audience. Don’t nobody else read it, right?”

“Mrs. Lucenay,” I said.

Tycho spat on his index finger and wet the seam of the blunt paper. He rolled the paper into itself, lit the lighter, and burned the seam shut.

“I don’t care what her name is,” he said. He inserted the whole blunt into his mouth and pulled it out, admiring his handiwork. “You still doing plays?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

I said I didn’t know. I hadn’t been in a play sixth grade, since Tycho and my mom saw me in “Our Town,” which I was only in because the girl who was supposed to play Myrtle Webb got food poisoning and shit some of her guts out. That was like three years ago, when my dad was in jail.

Tycho lit the blunt and took two long drags, studying the burn and breathing on it.

“Maybe you’re not meant for school,” he said. He breathed his smoke against the cherry in a thin line until it turned orange and conical. “You want to make some money?”

I asked him what kind of money, and he passed the blunt to me like I was a grownup who he was talking to on purpose, who could smoke weed if she wanted to, not just because I'd followed him out to his car. Not just because I was wearing shorts in freezing weather and he liked looking at my legs.

He laughed and said, "The good kind of money."

Which was my favorite kind.

#

Mom's Mariah Carey CD was homemade—half Christmas songs, half regular ones. There were dozens of other CDs in the glovebox and under the seats, but she only listened to that one. Sometimes she'd scan the radio for a minute, through the AM guys complaining about George Soros or the Deep State, never explaining who or what that was or why anybody was supposed to be mad about it, but she always returned to Mariah, who warbled about the kind of basic-ass romance that my mom was one hundred percent on board with. Mariah didn't explain who she loved or why. No details, nothing concrete, just lovey-dovey love. The object of affection didn't have a gender or hair color or an asymmetrical face or any hobbies aside from Mariah. And by extension, my mom. That blank person was in love with my mom too.

But fuck you, Mariah. If you can't supply your own details, I can supply my mom's. Mom was the kind of woman who didn't put her blinker on until she was already turning. Who was married to a man who had a tattoo of my baby footprint on his neck and whose curtains (orange) didn't match his drapes (lifeless brown, as evidenced by the toilet seat). They started dating in high school, and they only got married because I was coming. Their marriage was two months older than me.

No idea if they were married in a courthouse or a church, or if they were actually, legally married at all. There were no picture of my pre-obesity mother in wedding white, or of my dad shotgunning a beer in a rented tux. We weren't a photo-taking family. They were ugly, and I was destined to be. Fourteen and blonde and skinny with tits, for the moment, I had two years left of cuteness before I went the way of my parents, who, married or not, had cohabitated for fourteen-and-half years. They didn't like each other, and if I tried to imagine them ever having liked each other, it didn't make sense. Probably they hated each other. But sometimes they would bathe and shave, my dad would put on black socks and his big-boy shoes, and they'd go somewhere fancy, a seafood restaurant. I knew it was seafood, because while they were fucking each other like we didn't live in a two-bedroom apartment with paper thin walls, like one of their children didn't know what fucking was, I'd inspect the refrigerator for leftovers. Fried shrimp, cheese biscuits, soggy fries, a plastic container of coleslaw. On these occasions, in the intervals of silence when the headboard wasn't slamming against the wall, my mother would sometimes call my father *daddy*. Which is how I learned to keep my earbuds in.

At the last stoplight before home, underneath a United Dairy Farmers sign, a homeless man with long sideburns and a tan dog held up a cardboard sign that didn't say anything on it. A blank piece of cardboard. My mom gave him two cigarettes and told him good luck. He used way too many words to say something like *God bless*.

We lived in the Hamilton Arms apartments, and next door was the Hamilton Oaks—white people projects. Mom pulled through the next door parking lot and stopped in front of their dumpsters, where she deposited a bag of Marshall's dirty diapers and her Sonic cup and all the

other cups that had accumulated behind the seats. We had a dumpster in our parking lot too. We had like six of them.

When she pulled into ours, I spotted Tycho in his tiny car. We parked six spaces down, and I hurried the first round of grocery bags in, dropped them on the kitchen table, and passed my mom in the doorway on my way out. Marshall was asleep against the playpen mesh, my dad was asleep on the couch. Every light in the house was on.

I moved faster than she did. For every handful of bags she brought in, I made two trips. The whole time she was bitching at my dad, what a lazy piece of shit, wake up and help us, but he didn't budge. I helped her put away the groceries. When Marshall started fussing, I picked him up from his playpen and danced him around the living room for a minute. He was just a baby, so I didn't say goodbye. I faked a humongous yawn and told my mom goodnight. It was a perfectly reasonable time for a young lady to go to bed.

There wasn't anything in my bedroom to say goodbye to. I grabbed a box of tampons from my nightstand, hoisted myself out the window, and closed it behind me. There wasn't time to think about whether I wanted to go through with it or not. I'd already decided and now it was too late. I don't know what kind of thought would've held me back.

In the parking lot, I heard Tycho's engine rattle into gear. It was snowing again. Fat flakes, the kind that are like fingerprints melting against the palm of your hand. The snake was in the backseat, Tycho was driving, and I was the passenger. Tycho pulled onto Hamilton Avenue and the front door of my house still had not opened. The blue grocery bags were still sitting there under the cone of yellow porch light.

His eyes were at half-mast. When his wheels hit the new snow, the car briefly fishtailed.

I said, “Dude, wake up. It’s snowing.”

The robot map lady on his phone told him to turn left in one thousand feet, and he said what sounded like, “I ain’t afraid of no ghosts.”

TYCHO

She got in the car, told the snake hello, and immediately she started bitching at me about something.

When I pulled out of the parking lot, she was leaning over her seat with her ass in the air, trying to lure the snake out of its corner. She tapped her fingers on the terrarium glass. I told her to put her seatbelt on, and, miraculously, she obeyed me.

“Your backpack’s in the trunk,” I said. “If you need anything, tell me now.”

Lucy listed snacks and a bunch of shit we could get once we were out of Columbus. My knees were wobbly and my ass was asleep. I handed her a cigarette to keep her subdued for a whole minute. It wouldn’t have been weird if she chose now to freak out, but I was hoping she’d wait till we were somewhere farther away.

The sign on the credit union said ten minutes to midnight, and the teenagers that worked at the UDF on the corner of Hamilton and the highway were gathered in a circle in the parking lot, still in their uniforms and aprons, eating employee ice cream and watching a roll of Black Cats machine gun across the pavement. Like twenty feet from the gas pumps. A homeless guy with a sign was frisking himself like he’d lost his keys. When we stopped at the light, he came up to Lucy’s window. He looked like an illustration of an out-of-luck man—pore-deep grime and

fucked up knuckles and a cigarette behind each ear. A black baseball cap that said *ASPLUNDH* in orange and a good coat the color of chocolate milk.

He asked us if we'd seen a dog. There was a slow deep-south twang in his voice. "He's brownish," he said, "kinda low to the ground. Heard them fireworks and booked it."

"Didn't see him," I said, "but we'll keep a look out. What's he answer to?"

"Just about everything but his name."

Was that banter? The light turned green, and I hit my hazards. I told him to hold tight for a sec. The middle console was full of receipts and cigarette wrappers, some loose cash. I rummaged in the dark until I found a blister pack of Xanax bars I'd lifted off my grandma forever ago. I popped one pill through the tin foil and leaned across Lucy to give it to him, along with eight dollars.

"Break a quarter off," I told him, "and feed it to your dog when you find him. Take the rest yourself. Get y'allselves a good night sleep."

He looked at the pill and seemed to recognize it. The smile that followed was a goddamn monstrosity.

"Well, damn," he said, gesturing with the hand that held the pill and the money, "if I can find the fucking dog. Couple Steel Reserves and a party pill, I might get lucky tonight."

I wished him good luck and told him to wear a condom. Under the highway, I saw his dog, or some dog, smeared against the curb with its guts foaming out of its mouth. It could've been any dog.

Lucy sat up and started fucking with her phone.

"What was that?" she said.

"That's a dead dog."

"That accent."

"He's from the South. That's how they sound."

"No dude, your accent. *Get y'allselves some sleep.* You sounded like a cartoon hillbilly. "

She was texting somebody, but I couldn't read who.

"I don't know, man." I said, "Wait till you hear my dad talk."

"Can we just get out of Columbus, please?"

"We are," I said. "Gotta run by two places and then we hit the road."

I waited for her to say whatever she was going to say. When I looked, her head was hanging halfway out the window and her earbuds were in.

#

Under normal circumstances, you couldn't have paid me to go south of Morse Road on a Saturday night. That was where football and drunk driving happened, the kind of shit I tried to avoid in general. If it weren't winter break, and if I didn't have an appointment to keep with Daniel Wu, then I'd have given High Street a wide berth.

Even with the holiday and the cold, the bars were bustling. Clusters of animated youths in puffy jackets shared cigarettes on the sidewalks, miming enthusiasm in each other's faces and hooting across the street at other clusters. One group would yell the first two letters of the state's name, and the other group would holler back the third and fourth. This was apparently a reasonable thing to do, a sanctioned display of regional pride, and if both clusters ran to embrace one another in the middle of the goddamn street, well woe betide the driver who mowed them

down. He'd spend the rest of his natural life in prison for murdering the region's best and brightest. I drove with my foot on the brake.

Daniel Wu lived right in the thick of all the college nonsense, in a compound of red-brick duplexes tucked between a bar and a laundromat with a bar inside of it. He'd been living there for years, and I'd never asked him why. He wasn't nickel-and-diming to college kids, and surely he was making enough money to move somewhere less obnoxious. At least compared to Travis, Daniel Wu was big time. If he didn't deal directly with some kind of cartel motherfuckers, then the dude above him must have. Travis was more of your paycheck-to-paycheck grade of dealer, and I was basically a hobbyist. I sold to disenrolled college kids, suburban dads, and my grandma's flea market friends. Between what I sold and what I ate, I just about broke even. Evenish. Daniel Wu, though, dude was the real deal.

To hear Travis tell it, Daniel was gay as a parade, but nobody knew for sure. His apartment was decorated in dark purple, like what crimson is to red, and his gait had a touch more waltz in it than your average Midwesterner's. That was the only evidence as to what kind of sexual company he kept, and it seemed thin to me. Dude was a consummate professional, and he knew how to keep his drug dealing separate from romance. Whatever his sexual druthers were, I guarantee he was doing more fucking than me and Travis combined.

I parked on the street and told Lucy to keep the doors locked and the heater running for the snake. She was texting somebody again and it made me nervous.

"You hear me?"

"Yep."

"What did I say?"

"Jesus," Lucy said, "I heard you. Stay in the car and keep the heater on."

"Who are you texting?"

"None of your business. Hurry up."

I wanted to tell her that everything that happened between now and Texas was my business, but I decided to wait. Once we hit the open road, I could lay down the law. It wouldn't go well, but it'd be better than chiding her now.

The duplexes were arranged around a courtyard, which consisted of a couple skinny birch trees and a picnic table where two Juggalos with eyebrow rings and giant pants sat, sharing a bag of Funyuns. They looked at me like I'd ruined Christmas.

I knocked on Daniel's door and wondered if maybe an Asian dude living among the riffraff wasn't the best camouflage of all.

He answered the door in workout attire and gave me a hug. In general, I do my best to avoid hugs, mostly because nobody knows how to hug somebody my size. Daniel Wu, though, he was a fuck of a hugger. A foot shorter than me, smelling like jasmine and cigar smoke—it wasn't like I could decline one of his hugs. He was a weirdo, for sure, but he was my superior. His hair was gelled into spikes that felt like fish bones against my bosom.

Midhug, he said, "Is this the last time I get to see you?"

"Might be," I said. "Depends how it goes in Texas."

He pulled away from me and held me by my elbows. "How long since you saw him last?"

"A while."

"Which reminds me," he said, "I have a goodbye present for you."

Dude minced off into what must've been his bedroom and shut the door behind him. His ass in spandex was like a boxing match between equal opponents. I didn't know which side to root for. I laid two thousand dollars in hundreds on top of his Blu-Ray player.

Last week, I'd cribbed Daniel's number out of Travis's phone. I'd taken advantage of my knowledge that all his passwords were the last four digits of the number for the pager he wore clipped to the pocket of his JNCOs in high school, before he got a cell phone, but well after everybody else had. I had to get a little drunk to make the call. For courage. You don't call drug dealers. And Daniel you didn't even text—you showed up during business hours. But because I'd never gone to his house alone before, and because what I needed was out of the ordinary, I figured I'd leave him a sufficiently vague voicemail and he'd call me back if the spirit moved him. But he answered. He was obviously suspicious about a call from an unknown number. I told him who I was, what I needed, and what I was doing in as few words as possible. I told him who my dad was.

I didn't know how it went with other dealers, but with Daniel Wu, instead of saying the name of the pill, you spelled out the numbers and letters that were inscribed on the pill you wanted. I had it pulled up on my grandma's laptop. He asked me what my lucky numbers were, and I said, "Three, seven, double you, a, ell, ell, a, cee, e." That's what it said on WebMD. He didn't respond for a minute. And in that minute, I listened to Grandma and her boyfriend Lex argue over the TV noise about whether Ross Perot was dead or not. I ran my fingers along the helix of my ear looking for wild hairs. A nervous habit of mine. If I found one, I'd tug at it until it came free. When Daniel Wu came back on, he said, "Might be thorny. Give me a week." And

he hung up. An hour later, he texted me. All it said was “No problemth.” The extra letters meant he’d have my order by Thursday. I texted back, “thankssa.” I felt like a fucking spy.

He was gone for a couple minutes, longer than it seemed was necessary for whatever he was doing. Never once had he asked about our families or our days. He wasn’t the kind of dealer who smoked a blunt with you and shot the shit. Warm and genial, but, like I said, all business. A normal transaction went like this: we gave him his money and he ushered us into his bathroom. The bathroom door locked from the outside. There we waited until he opened the door and presented us with our purchase. Travis would sit on the toilet and look at shit on his phone. I’d look at Daniel Wu’s cosmetics, which were weird and copious. We deduced that there must’ve been a safe hidden somewhere in his living room, maybe behind the Muhammad Ali poster or the TV, and he didn’t want us to see him open it. Every time I’d ever been over here, that was how it went. He’d open the bathroom door, give us our shit, and hug us both on the way out.

When he emerged from his bedroom, his hands were behind his back and he was smiling without showing his teeth.

In flash, I had a vision of how it could all go wrong. That it might be a gun behind his back. That they’d figured out my plan. That Travis was inexplicably awake and on his way. Maybe it was a taser. Daniel would incapacitate me, maybe tie me up until Travis got here, and then they would torture me until I confessed everything. I imagined them explaining the ways I’d failed to plan shit out adequately as they sliced off my nipples, how’d they’d seen through everything from the beginning. Until then, the adrenaline produced by finally enacting my plan had made me feel relatively sober, but with this new adrenaline in the face of torture, I felt both the opioids I’d snorted off Travis’s coffee table and the ADHD uppers I’d been eating all day. In

a fair fight, I could snap Daniel Wu's neck, but the bullshit I foresaw unfolding was not going to be fair.

Maybe Lucy's texts had ratted me out.

I must've winced when he brought his hands out. Instead of a gun or a taser or a death warrant, he produced a metal lunchbox, identical to one I used to own when I was a kid. Not the same one obviously. My dad on the front wearing his full costume—the white and purple facepaint and the armbands and the tights that looked like rainbow Jello. In the picture, he was younger than me, as famous as he would ever be. Tiny nipples, unreal abs. His skin sheened greasy. He was perched on the top turnbuckle of a wrestling ring. Behind him, the faces of the audience were blurred, but they were clearly cheering, standing, getting their money's worth.

The lunchbox itself was in pristine condition. None of the dings and dents I'd put in mine because I was a careless shitheaded child. Because I'd carried ham sandwiches and Nutter Butters inside, and the contents had been more important than the case. At the time of the lunchbox photo, judging by my dad's physical shape and his ring attire, I'd have been about two years old.

"Dude," I said, "this shit's like two hundred bucks on eBay."

I shouldn't have said anything about money—it was uncouth. The walls of what I assumed was his bedroom could've been lined with vintage metal lunchboxes depicting *C.H.I.P.S.* or *The A-Team* or various stars from pro wrestling's heyday. Daniel went bashful for a second, like he'd overstepped his bounds, like a gift between us might have gone too far. Or like he'd shown too much of himself. And then I got nervous: had he said he had something for me or something to show me? Was it a gift or an item from his personal museum trotted out for an

interested party? It wasn't like I'd never been given a gift before, but it had been a while, and it made me uncomfortable.

"I used to watch your dad every Saturday when I was a kid. Tell him he's got a fan in Ohio."

"I will," I told him. Now I was the bashful one. "He'll be super pumped to hear that."

Super pumped. With his free hand, Daniel showed me the way to the bathroom.

He said, "See what's inside."

When I'd called Daniel Wu, I'd done it from my grandma's landline. The receiver was caked in her pink powder makeup and, even if I held it at a distance, her terrible breath. It was a beige phone. A third of the tiny holes I spoke into were clogged with her makeup powder. And if whoever I was calling did not pick up for eight rings, ten rings, I could spend that time imagining the gratification of unclogging those holes with a thumbtack or a toothpick. Or I could imagine how, like shit, those clogs might release the fullness of their odor only when disturbed. I only thought about it, never tried it. Sometimes there were more clogs, sometimes fewer. The smell was multi-layered: on top was the too-sweet powdery makeup smell; layer two was layer one gone stale; layer three, the base note, was my grandmother's breath, which smelled the way chicken livers must look to someone who's never had them: gray and pink, sort of resinous.

The first layer, the sweet one, was how Daniel Wu's bathroom smelled. Today, there was a Chinese character drawn on the mirror in lipstick. A complicated letter, like a boxier Chinese version of *Q*, a maze without an exit. There was me in the mirror too. My shirt didn't fit well, and my beard was growing up my cheeks. I needed a diet and a nap.

Back when Travis was in jail, me and Lucy used to play a game after Marina went to bed called Kill Yourself as Quick as Possible. It had started with simple rules: pick something and explain how you'd do it. The object had to be something you could see. Like a morbid I Spy. I would feed myself to the snake. I would slam my throat in the door. Simple enough, but we had the months of Travis's sentence to complicate the terms, and, of course, we did. You can't bludgeon yourself to death with a table lamp because you would lose consciousness first. We brought in practicalities. My modes of death usually involved eating things one shouldn't eat. I would eat the carpet until I choked on it. Lucy would counter with the fact that I would get full first and fall asleep. Or, if I chose the coffee table to eat, she would explain how I would break my teeth before I ate enough to die. She would look so fucking smug when she said she would merely hold her breath until she suffocated. And because, in the beginning, she was more imaginative, and, in the end, more stubborn, she always won the game.

In a way, our game was about playing with equal signs. It was about balancing the two sides of the equation. Life plus *X* had to somehow equal death. Because the equations were hypothetical, and because they were usually too ridiculous to work, the closer we got to a viable death, the more remote it seemed. Death became silly.

There wasn't anything to kill myself with in Daniel Wu's bathroom. I could eat his hair gel and his essential oils, but I'd probably vomit them up. And I was too heavy to hang myself from the shower rod.

When I opened the lunchbox, it smelled like moth balls. Inside was the original thermos. The same photo of my dad wrapped around it, stretched to cartoonishness. His mouth was smiling in a way that didn't indicate cheer. More than smiling, he was baring his teeth. I couldn't

remember what my dad's teeth had looked like in real life. Whether they were yellow or white, crowded, big, or perfect. The background on the thermos, instead of an audience, was a desert horizon with cactuses, which didn't make sense in or out of context. The thermos lid was beige, like the exact fucking beige of dentist office waiting room chairs.

The lock jiggled, and Daniel opened the door with a smile. He handed me a plastic quart bag of brownish disks. The color of Werther's Originals but matte.

Still smiling, Daniel explained that if I got pulled over with this, I'd go to actual prison, not jail. The bag wasn't heavy. There were a lot of pills but it didn't look like five hundred.

I said, "This all?"

"Count if you want. Where are you going to keep them?"

"Under the spare tire," I said. I hadn't given it any thought.

"Come," he said.

I followed him into his kitchen, where he rummaged through a drawer and came out with a thing of saran wrap. He opened the bag and squeezed the air out, sealed it, rolled it up, and wrapped it thick in plastic film. Now, it was the size of a baby's arm. If you found a dildo that size in your girlfriend's sock drawer, you wouldn't break up with her about it, or even address it, but you would work extra hard to prove you were more than the girth of your dick. You would be concerned. Daniel told me he knew it was impractical, but that my best bet would be to drop it into my gas tank or pry off my door panel and hide it in there. I wasn't going to do that. I figured if I drove the speed limit and only got high at rest stops, then even if I did get pulled over, I wouldn't get searched.

“It’s been good to know you,” I told him as he led me to the door. “I hope they got one of you in Texas.” I meant it as a compliment, but when it came out it sounded a little racist. His smile didn’t wobble when I told him I didn’t mean Asians, obviously, that I meant I hoped they had drug dealers of his caliber, but how could they since he was the best. I laid it on too thick.

“I know what you mean,” he said. “Did you open the thermos?”

“Like the lunchbox thermos?”

“Open it.”

I opened the lunchbox and clamped it under my arm. I anticipated an odor when I unscrewed the thermos lid, but it was kind of pleasant, like Play-Doh, or the way air smells when you push it out of an inflatable toy. Kid smells. Inside was a film canister, and inside of that was one cotton ball and about a dozen blue and white Vyvanse.

“To keep you alert. Drive smart,” he said. “Be paranoid.”

At the front door, he hugged me again. I was counting Mississippies when he spoke into my armpit.

He said, “That girl’s young.”

“What girl?”

“The one in your car. You gotta be careful.”

“I will.”

“I love you, Tycho.”

“Yeah, thanks dude, me too.”

Five Mississippi and he released me, looked me in the eyes, and said, “Get your dad to sign the lunch box and send it back to me. We’ll call it all even.”

"Absolutely, I will."

"Don't do anything stupid."

"Dude, if I didn't do anything stupid, we wouldn't never have met."

"That's right, bro," Daniel said. "We never met."

LUCY

I didn't look at my mom's texts until she started calling, and by then they'd already piled up. A dozen messages and three missed calls. Her first message just asked me where I was. By number six she was threatening to call the police. The chances of her actually doing that were a hard zero. Drug dealers don't call the cops and neither do their wives.

She hadn't left a voicemail yet, but it was only a matter of time before she did. The creator had not endowed my mother with a pleasant voice. Even as letters on a screen, her shrillness was bloody. I scrolled through my contacts, found her, and blocked her number.

The air blasting from Tycho's heater smelled nauseatingly like maple syrup. The windows were fogging up, which made me feel somehow more exposed, less inconspicuous, sitting in a running car with a snake. I wiped my window clean with my sleeve.

Down the sidewalk, one guy in sweatpants rode on the back of another guy in sweatpants. Both their mouths were open, trying to catch snowflakes. Another guy wandered out of a bar, distressed, tugging at his hair and talking to himself. I watched him lean against the car in front of Tycho's, remove his shoes, tie their laces together, and try three times without success to hurl them at the power lines, readjusting each time for a better arc. Supposedly shoes hanging from

power lines marked a crack house. After his third failure, he untied the laces, put the shoes back on, and went back into the bar.

A boy I used to know lived somewhere nearby. His name was Reid, and he lived with his mom on a street full of nothing but college kids who littered their front yards with beer cans and catcalled any passerby even loosely resembling a woman, including me. It was Reid's fault that I had to leave public school halfway through seventh grade and transfer to Columbus Christian Academy where I clearly did not belong. He wasn't my boyfriend, but sometimes I'd go to his house after school to study. His mom would pick us up in a yellow SUV covered in lesbian bumper stickers, and I would sit in the back next to a baby seat, which was weird because I never saw a baby, not in the car or at their house, but the car smelled exactly the way my baby brother's head smelled when he needed a bath, sweet and a little bit funky, like hay and American cheese. There were orange cracker crumbs ground into the seat and crayons melted to the floorboard carpet. Neither Reid nor his mom seemed embarrassed at all that their car was so filthy. Their house was pretty gross too.

Me and Reid never actually studied. Seventh grade was easy. When it was cold outside, we'd make out in his bedroom or I'd watch him play video games until my mom texted that she was outside waiting. I think we both understood without ever having to spell it out that kissing each other was just for practice. He kept his hands to himself and never asked me to the school dance or whatever. And I didn't think about him when he wasn't around.

On sunny days, he would show me the graffiti he'd spray-painted on recycling bins or on the rotting wooden fences that lined the alley behind his house, and I would urge him to go

bigger, to paint something more inspired than his sloppy signature—murals, scenes, faces, coded messages. Nobody cared about some middle school kid's dumb name.

At the bottom of his street was a huge Catholic church with stone walls and stained glass windows high up in the eaves, heavy wooden doors with knockers. No graffiti. Basically a blank canvas. Its name was etched into the front wall at eye-level in letters two-feet tall: Holy Name Roman Catholic Church. My idea was to shoplift etching tools—a chisel, a hammer—and change the church's name forever. A pair of brackets and six letters. Under the cover of darkness, how long could it have taken? It would've been easy. And on Sunday, the worshippers would show up to find their church renamed the [Insert] Holy Name Roman Catholic Church. Reid thought it was hilarious because it was, but he made excuses. He was a painter, he'd said, not an engraver. Plus, his mom was superstitious about god. She'd kill him if she ever found out. Plus, blasphemy was an unforgivable sin, even if vandalism was only a misdemeanor. Reid had a lot of excuses. And when he finished listing them, I called him a pussy. *Don't be such a pussy* or *Dude, you're such a pussy.* His face melted for a second, cheeks caught fire, eyes went wide. Boys called each other pussies all the time. I didn't think it was a big deal, but everything that happened afterward, my whole upheaval, sprouted out of that one stupid word.

When Reid finally pulled his features back together, he called me a whore. He spat the word at me, the last he ever said to me, and his voice cracked, which probably made him even madder. He stormed off down the alley and pushed over a recycling bin on his way. I followed him back to his house but he'd locked me out. I waited on the curb for my mom to pick me up at the regular time.

The next day at school he refused to look at me. I wasn't surprised. Everybody talks about how hysterical teenage girls are, how fragile and moody and vengeful, but you haven't seen anything till you've seen a teenage male with a fucking booboo on his ego.

A couple days later, Mom picked me up from school, fuming about how the principal's office had called her and said she needed to come in the next day for a meeting about my conduct. She wanted to know what I'd done. I said I hadn't done anything. That made her laugh. And when I suggested that maybe they wanted to meet with her because my conduct was so outstanding, that, who knows, maybe they were going to give me a conduct award, she reached across the car and smacked me in the forehead.

The next day, I was called out of class to attend the meeting too. Mom was already in the principal's office. She hadn't bothered to change out of her daytime costume, which she called her fart clothes—a baggy shirt with bleach stains on the belly and black pajama pants covered in lightning bolts. She smelled like all the cigarettes. When I sat down in the chair next to hers, she glared at me like I'd humiliated her beyond her wildest imagination.

The principal cleared his throat a lot and danced around his preamble. The school, he said, was like a body, and each person was an integral part of that body, from the shyest student all the way up to him. And the body is only healthy when each individual body part is healthy, working together toward the common goal, which was learning, of course, but so much more than learning too. He explained to my mother how rumors worked in a school, how they spread like a virus among the students, how rumors could get so infectious that the teachers started to sniffle. He swatted his hand at the air in front of his face like that would make his analogy stay put. Before you knew it, he said, even the custodians and the lunch ladies were getting sick with

the knowledge of why exactly Sally had broken up with Jim or who had stolen the answer key for the big math test.

Mom was clearly confused. “Who’s Sally?” she asked.

“Sally’s just a—” He rummaged for the word but couldn’t find it. “There is no Sally, Mrs. Bulo. The rumor we’re discussing here concerns Lucy. And honestly, at this point, it’s more of an accusation than a rumor.”

When he said *blowjob queen*, I almost spit my gum out. He handed a piece of notebook paper to my mother, a drawing of me with a disembodied dick in my mouth, my name and title trapped in a bubble over my head. It looked like me the same way a state fair caricature looks like a person. We had an artist on our hands. In addition to the confiscated drawing, there was bathroom graffiti advertising my services at five dollars per. And the rumor had spread, virus-like, all the way to the crossing guard. The principal never said the word *prostitution*, but that’s what I was being accused of. The oldest crime.

He tried to revive his metaphor, explaining how being principal meant he was the primary-care doctor for the school’s body. It was his job to find the root of disease and pluck it out.

Mom was still trying to figure out if “Sally” was code for me. Doctors and diseases and bodies made of bodies—she was too confused to protest. I protested, though. I said I’d never given anyone a blowjob, not ever, not for money, not free, and definitely not at school. But they didn’t listen to me. I hadn’t been called into the meeting as a witness. I was evidence, exhibit A.

Only when the principal mentioned what he’d already decided would be the next step did my mom perk up. For the time being, he said, I would be placed in in-school suspension, at least

until he could determine what was fact and what was rumor. He told us to trust him to get to the bottom of it.

"The bottom of what?" my mom said. "You keep saying you're a doctor, and now you're some kind of detective. Are you better at those jobs than you are at being a principal?"

"Mrs. Bulo—"

"I get it. You must be awful busy with three jobs. There's only so many hours in a day. Maybe that's why this school is such a shithole." She picked up her purse and stood. "It's a shame you're not a lawyer too, because you're going to be hearing from mine. Come on, Lucy."

She led me out of the office by my hand and only let go of it to light a cigarette in the parking lot. I'd never seen her unleash her wrath on anybody but me and my dad, and I was kind of awestruck. She didn't have any hobbies or interests aside from a couple TV shows she watched religiously. She was petty and mean, a below-average mother, and that was me being generous. She had no talents beyond shoplifting. But if I had to inherit something from her, I hoped it would be her ability to burn a person to the ground in as few words as possible.

As soon as we were in the car, she called me a slut and pinched my leg so hard I bit my tongue. If she had to homeschool me, she said, she would make my life a living, breathing, walking, talking hell.

Slut, whore. I didn't know for sure that Reid had started the blowjob rumor, but who else could it have been? Tycho was taking too long. By now, I could've found Reid's house and thrown rocks through his windows, painted *pussy* on his door in bright red letters. On my way back, I could've changed the name of a church. Twenty minutes and I could've given Columbus something to remember me by.

But also, fuck that town. It wouldn't remember me and I wouldn't remember it. If the ground swallowed it whole the second me and Tycho passed the city limits sign, the world would be a better place without it.

Then came Tycho, kind of jogging down the sidewalk and grinning. He held his finger up and mouthed that he'd just be a sec. The trunk whined open and the trunk slammed shut. When he climbed his fat ass in the car, he handed me a metal lunchbox with a topless cartoon man on it and announced that he'd just purchased two thousand dollars worth of something called Soma. I didn't know or care why he thought that was a good idea, but it seemed to make him happy, so whatever, great. I'd known traveling with Tycho meant there were going to be drugs in the car, but I would've preferred not to know what kinds and how many. Too, I knew Tycho was at least a little fucked up, stoned at the very least, and when he jerked his car onto High Street and his tires squealed, for just a second I wished I was home in bed, underneath my blankets, watching something funny on my phone. Tomorrow would've been Sunday and, if I was home, nobody would've expected me to do anything, much less keep a grown-ass man from driving his car off the road.

"I think you got ripped off," I told. I opened the lunchbox and showed him. "No drugs in here."

"Somas are in the trunk," he said. "That there, young lady, is a piece of history."

And he proceeded to tell me the tale of its origin, followed by the very unabridged story of how he came to live in Columbus. He spared no detail. We crept through campus and the Short North, hitting every single stoplight. He was in storytelling mode, rambling like he'd had too many Red Bulls, smoking, steering with his knee. One story bled into the next. Flea markets

and funerals, the business lessons he'd learned from his grandmother, and how he came to be in possession of a mini fridge, which, apparently, he'd stashed in his trunk along with his steroids, my backpack, and who the fuck knew what else. I put an earbud in the ear he couldn't see and nodded along to the music like, Yes, Tycho, tell me more, I'm so interested in the details of your personal biography. Tell me everything.

TYCHO

The deal that sent me from Texas to Ohio was brokered behind my back. Dad had torn his bicep at WrestleFest in March, and he was in a pain-pills stupor when we got the phone call about my mom. He was in the same stupor for the funeral. Larry Buffo, a.k.a. West Texas Wild Man, who was my Dad's tag team partner in the eighties and my school teacher when we were on the road, he drove us down from Fort Worth to Houston for the services.

Larry's truck had a racy mural airbrushed on the tailgate that wasn't funeral appropriate, so we took Dad's Bronco. Dad slept in the backseat in his suit, and Larry played what I guess he thought of as his grief mixtape—country songs and power ballads about dudes made sad by women.

Larry didn't try to talk to me, but whenever the silence got too thick, he would squeeze my knee or knead my shoulder. I was pretty fucked up on cold medicine, and it felt like he was grabbing a hold of my bones. I imagined a giant blade extending from the passenger door like the wing of god itself, cutting down the windmills and fences and billboards and everything we passed.

Graveside were several Texas wrestling luminaries, dudes too tan and huge and hairy to be wearing suits, a couple gone-to-seed women from my mom's ring-girl days, and the skeleton crew of my dad's entourage. My grandma had come alone and brought her luggage. She was sitting in a folding chair playing solitaire on her lap. When my dad introduced us, she stood, pulled my hand out of my pocket, and shook it. I was twice her size.

"It's nice to meet you, Tycho," she said. She talked slow and loud, like I was a savage she was trying to convert. "I'm your mother's mother."

It was July in Texas, so everybody was sweating behind their sunglasses.

I hadn't seen my mom for a couple years before the funeral. The casket was closed and I was glad. In front of it, an easel supported a blown up photograph. A hazy, night-sky background, super soft focus like in soap operas or old porn. A Glamor Shot like they used to do in malls. Mom was smiling with her wonky tooth, pinching the lapels of her sequined jacket. She had bangs. I didn't remember her with bangs.

Every summer in Texas I had crazy allergies, sneezing till my stomach was sore. While Dad was recovering from his injury, I'd learned by accident that if I ate six Tylenol Cold and Sinus pills at once, thirty minutes later I would be floating through the world like a ghost, walking without moving my legs. I would bump into shit and knock things over, but my body felt helium-light. If I ate twelve, the whole package, my joints would tingle and every time I yawned I would lose feeling in my limbs and a wave of electric numbness would wash over me with the consistency of olive oil. I got to where I enjoyed the mild hallucinations, neon clots of bacteria raining across my screen. The pills made it take forever to jerk off, but when I came it

was like being fucking baptized. This I also learned by accident. For the funeral, I'd taken sixteen and I don't think I blinked the whole time.

During the talking, I glared so hard at the picture of my mom that her bangs fell off. They lay there on the ground while we waited for the preacher to hurry up and get to the ashes and dust part. The wrestlers and the ladies tried to pretend they weren't staring at me as I spilled over my chair. *How come Sweet Dave Valentine's son is so fat? Why's he so big and doughy when his dad is the perfect specimen of man?* I couldn't blame them. Fourteen and nearly six feet tall, but in the places my dad was lean and hard and tan, I was obese and pale. I was strong, but it didn't show.

Back when I was still in real school, before Dad took me on the road with him, I got invited to a birthday party by some kid whose parents made him invite the whole grade. It was a swimming party, and when I took my shirt off, a girl asked what happened to me. She meant what were those things that looked like scars wrapped around my sides where my belly lumped over my swimsuit waistband. What kind of accident had I been in? She wasn't trying to be rude.

Later, I thought up all kinds of shit I could've told her. The truth was weirder—that they weren't there and then one day they were. And maybe one day they would go away.

After the preacher finished and everybody shook my hand or hugged me, I was told to wait on a bench dedicated to a guy named Steve who was probably buried nearby. The cemetery was dotted with weeping willows like sulking Muppets. In the parking lot, yellow smoke tufted from both sides of the Bronco. I could only see my grandma, smoking in the passenger seat, but not my dad. He liked to argue from a reclined position. I bent my head back against the bench and looked at the cemetery trees upside down. Three weeks later, I was sitting behind my

grandma's flea market booth in Columbus, listening to her explain why she didn't take checks or money orders for her merchandise. She asked me how tall I was and if I was strong, if I considered myself to be a tough guy, because she could use one of those.

#

When me and Lucy passed the South Drive-in sign, and the marquee beneath it said closed for the season, which meant the movie theater was closed, not the flea market. The flea market didn't care about winter. Eighteen years ago, there wasn't much of anything that far south on High Street. A few more houses than there were now, but still not many. A one-man used car dealership where I bought my first car with money my grandma counted out of her cash box—a thousand dollars, and she expected change—was now a complex of storage units next door to a different complex of storage units. More parking lots, mattress stores, a Burger King with plywood over its windows, and something called The Triedmore Primitive Baptist Church. Used to, on a windy day you could smell blood and guts from a slaughterhouse that had since been leveled. Whenever I was manning the booth and a fly would land on my arm, I knew its legs had been recently wading in viscera. The flea market people put up with the smell and the flies, but when the Burger King and the mattress stores and the primitive church moved in, they complained, and the city razed the slaughterhouse.

Another five miles and then came the sign for Chillowatt Chevrolet, which was lit morning, noon, and night. The sign and the giant American flag that they flew at half-mast when important people died.

Lucy plucked out her earbuds.

"Are you lost already?"

"No ma'am," I said. "Last stop."

I told her the abridged version of the mini fridge story. How after lunch on one of the blackout days, I'd snorted an Ambien and a half to test the results. The plan had been in place for weeks at that point, and its original version was a lot more complicated than the version I would ultimately decide to go with. A ski mask, harassing phone calls to Marina in my best imitation of a threatening person, basically vocal blackface. Heavy on ornament, short on follow through.

That morning, my grandma and Lex, her boyfriend, had taken a Greyhound up to a casino on Lake Erie. They weren't coming back until the power did. I had the house to myself. I did jumping jacks and paced in the backyard, trying to ward off the sleep I hoped would overtake me. If the Ambien could knock me out when I was sober, Travis wouldn't be a problem. And knock me out it did, but first it showed me my plan on a backdrop of actual reality, not the dumb vacuum I'd built it in.

It was like waking up shaken, at three in the morning, assured beyond doubt that everything I'd ever valued was empty and frivolous. Some dark night of the soul kind of shit, except it was daytime. I sat down in the dead grass and went through the plan from start to finish, cutting everything that wasn't essential. The problem, though, was that nothing was essential. That nothing ever is. I fell asleep like that, sitting up, awoken, bereft, and when I for real woke up the sun was breaking like an egg yolk on the tree line.

I went inside and took my pellet rifle from the closet. My beard was sticky with cold drool. My left leg was asleep all the way up to my ass. I tromped through the lot behind my grandma's house, shaking my leg, hacking away at the grass and briars with the muzzle of the

gun. There was a plastic lawn chair beneath a hackberry tree where I'd sit and shoot Coke Zero cans off a log. Shooting cans was my version of golfing or getting a pedicure, an unjustifiable waste of time that became a habit.

Maybe twenty good minutes of daylight left. I only saw the minifridge because it didn't match the background. I lied to Travis when I told him I'd hesitated before opening it. I didn't think about it at all. Inside was the bottle of Darvocet prescribed to Graham T. Chillowat and a black pistol. It was heavier than I expected. It felt loaded, but I didn't know how to check. I'd never held a weapon more serious than my pellet rifle or a samurai sword, and I couldn't tell whether the safety was on or off. I pressed the muzzle against my forehead just to see if it was cold and told myself Mr. Chillowat's story in reverse. Or rather my lingering Ambien stupor told his story to me. The man in a tie, sweating through his business shirt, bent backward and tottering under the weight of the fridge, deciding that precisely here was the perfect spot to abandon his suicide kit. The different angles from which he tried to aim the gun at himself, his temple, his forehead, his heart. Closing his mouth around the barrel. I counted the pills and there were two missing. Twenty-eight. They'd been prescribed nearly ten years ago. The gun made sense, the pills made sense, but the mini fridge was absurd. The mini fridge made it a mystery. I was standing in the middle of a stranger's aborted suicide. In a diorama where I did not belong.

And the escape plan kicked into place then like a bullet into its chamber. It wouldn't be elegant, but it didn't have to be.

#

There were three stop lights between us and the Chillowatt sign, and we were briefly stopped at each of them. I thought the part of the story about standing inside a suicide diorama was pretty

good, but she didn't seem to care, which was fine. She did me the courtesy of keeping her earbuds out until I paused long enough to indicate that there wasn't any more story to tell.

A thousand dollars wouldn't have bought me one of Chillowat's cars. The windshields of his SUVs and luxury sedans were shoepolished with jargon and acronyms. Both entrances were barred with cattle gates, but I didn't need to get inside.

By the time I was seventeen, I was over six feet tall and only forty pounds lighter than now. I wore it better back then. I was big and I was strong. Fat didn't preclude strong. That was why my grandma bought me the car. A nineteen-eighty-five Honda Accord wagon, brown, with rust gashes along the runners, and a bleached spot on the hood the shape of Australia. She bought me the car because I was huge, to reward me for my hugeness. If you didn't know me, I was also intimidating. The car was meant to transport me to the homes of the clients who owed her. I would ring their doorbells and explain that I was there on behalf of their outstanding wager. By that time, I was eating a lot of Vicodin for a teenager, but fucked up or sober I wasn't a fighter. Fortunately, my size did the trick. Her clients were untidy old men in shitty apartments. They either paid up or invited me inside while they wrote my grandma a note explaining their plans to repay her promptly. I barely had to talk.

I'm still strong, which was why it wasn't a problem for me to hoist the mini fridge out of my trunk and haul it over to the other side of the cattle gate. I'd put my hazards on. I stepped over the gate and opened the fridge to make sure the pill bottle, now empty, and the pistol were arranged for maximum effect when, hopefully, Graham T. Chillowat opened it first thing in the morning. His refrigerator and suicide implements that he'd left on the other side of Columbus in a fucking field come back to remind him of the day he chose not to die. I'd drafted notes to leave

inside the fridge, rolled up inside the pill bottle, but none had said what I wanted to say, which was something like *You can't hide from anything. And fuck you, Graham T. Chillowatt, for trying. Your name and your flag are too big. If I can't hide, you can't either. I'm too fat, and you're too fucking ostentatious.*

But also, *Remember why you're alive*. I didn't leave any note. It had been too hard to strike a balance between both sentiments. Harder to say something that would keep him up at night. There was a third one, also rejected: *Try again.*

I arranged the gun and the pill bottle and shut the door behind me. Surely there was a security camera catching the contours of my asscrack in hi-def, and my license plate.

Back in the car, Lucy studied me for a second. Looking at me, looking past me.

"One sec," she said.

She started punching at her phone, and the light it threw on her face made her look like the victim described in an Amber Alert. More vulnerability than I gave her credit for. A pretty blonde teenager who'd been groomed for years by a perverted, obese drug addict. *After subduing the kidnapper and returning the abductee to her family, the responding officers reported that the perpetrator, one Tycho Guy, died of gunshot wounds en route to the hospital. An autopsy revealed him to be a habitual opioid abuser. It is reported that he is the son of former professional wrestler and philanthropist, David O. Guy, known more widely by his in-ring moniker, Sweet Dave Valentine. A ball python, found among the deceased's cargo, was euthanized on the spot. The arresting officers have been placed on administrative leave pending an investigation into their use of deadly force.* To be followed, naturally, by a couple sentences of cautionary fluff vis-a-vis the Opioid Crisis and its ravages.

Lucy hopped out of the car, hopped over the gate, and squatted in front of the mini fridge.

I could see her elbow moving and her ponytail wagging, but not her face. She looked smug when she got back in the car.

"What did you do?"

"Wrote a Bible verse," she said, "in lipstick."

She brandished the lipstick and applied it to her lips. It was the color of a blue crayon. While she puckered her mouth in the mirror, I could tell she was waiting for me to ask what the verse said. And I was going to ask, but I had to pursue a stray thought first; namely, would it be ironic for me to get an Amber Alert on my phone that described my own car with own my license plate number and my own self as the suspect the good citizens of Ohio should be on the lookout for? I've never been too clear on what was irony and what wasn't.

We passed a Dairy Queen and an Advanced Auto Parts before High Street became a highway with a number for a name, like a prisoner. Then I asked her what the verse said.

She pulled it up on her and phone and quoted: "Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me.'" She smirked at me. "Matthew 19:21. I cut the part about Jesus saying it. That seemed implied. And I'm pretty sure I misspelled treasure. I feel like I did."

I didn't know what to say. That she was brilliant, that I loved her, that if she was my own daughter then I would have some hope for my own shitty self. I lit a cigarette and took the half a Vyvance from my jacket pocket. It was half-past midnight and I was going to drive until I couldn't.

I said, “You’re fucking incredible,” and she didn’t reply. And the longer she didn’t reply, the more what I said sounded like something her mother would’ve said after being told about Lucy calling the neighbor lady a bitch. Some motherly passive aggression. *You are incredible*. Then Lucy said:

“What if he did, though?”

“What if he did what?”

“Gave all his money to the poor.”

It was hard to imagine. I said, “Then he’ll probably be glad to have his gun back.”

But that was the wrong thing to say. It wasn’t what I meant. I could’ve said something about how generous she was to look at the world that way, how I could probably stand to learn from her generosity. I could’ve told her I was lucky to have her for a partner in crime. But I didn’t say a goddamn thing.

Part 2: In Between

LUCY

It was only supposed to take like twenty hours to drive from Columbus to Tycho's dad's ranch. Eighteen hours and forty-four minutes to be exact. Even factoring in stops for food and gas, traffic, a nap at a rest stop, any more than a day would've been ridiculous. And I swear to god, if I'd been in charge, if I'd been driving, we'd have been there in time for Sunday dinner. Before we even got out of Franklin County, though, I could tell it was going to be a long trip.

Tycho pulled into a Dollar Tree, all dark inside except for the green security lights. He parked around back by the dumpsters. We were far enough outside the city and the suburbs that I could see actual stars peeking through the snow clouds. He loaded his pipe in the light from the dashboard. It was, no shit, ten minutes after we left the car dealership. It was one in the morning. If we didn't get arrested between the Dollar Tree and Texas, at this rate, it was going to take us a week to get there.

When he stepped out of the car, I set a timer on my phone. I gave him four minutes, which, like, I'm a very generous young lady.

That crystal moment when a kid realizes that adults aren't special or better—that they're just people who sometimes give their dirty asses a wipe or two and decide *okay, clean enough,* who stall out mid-thought between one sock and the next, fuckups like everybody else who have no business making the rules—I'm pretty sure my moment came earlier than most people's.

When I was little, we were supposed to go on vacation to Terre Haute, Indiana. As a family. I don't remember why they chose that destination. Neither of my parents had ever been there. And I was like six—I would've been happy with a water park. An hour on the playground at Chick-fil-A would've made my year. But they'd latched on to Terre Haute. I was psyched. We talked about it for weeks. I daydreamed about Terre Haute the way rich kids daydream about Disneyland. They started Googling local attractions only after the plan was set—the world's tiniest Holocaust museum, the childhood home of Scatman Crothers, a to-scale replica of the Lourdes grotto in France—and then arguing about each other's dedication to the plan. I didn't know how to pronounce the place, but I was sure they were saying it wrong. *If you don't want to go to* Tear It Out*, then say so.* Mom accused Dad of sabotage. And he in turn accused her of planning to bitch the whole time and ruin the trip. Obviously, we didn't go. The morning we were supposed to leave, I had my backpack packed with all the shit a six-year-old might need in Tear It Out, Indiana. Candy, a disposable camera, a sweater just in case. When I came out of my bedroom ready to go, Dad was asleep on the couch with his ass hanging out of his pants and Mom was snoring behind their bedroom door. Oh so quietly, I poured their favorite cereal—Smorz for Mom, Corn Pops for Dad—set the milk jug exactly between the two bowls, and waited, practicing my good-morning smile. Dad was the first to get up. He walked right past me to the bathroom, where he vomited into what I thought surely must've been the toilet but later—after I couldn't hold my pee in any longer, after my dad had gone out to the car to finish sleeping (something he did when he was hungover)—discovered was the drawer where I kept my bath toys.

So it wasn't like I was flabbergasted that Tycho was bad at this.

Huddled against the dumpster, my hero, under a giant light on a pole. In that orange spotlight, he might have actually been cute if he wasn't such a fatass. On the surface, he had a lot going against him, not just his fatness. He breathed too hard, through his mouth, which made a noise I don't think he knew other people could hear. Sleepy eyes with purplish lids. A rashy wedge of skin on the nape of his neck that was sometimes there, sometimes not. Some of his details, though, if he held still, were almost pretty. His irises were like two shades short of grass green, and I know everybody's pupils are black, but his were the absolute void. His beard grew patchy on his cheeks, blonder than his head hair, but there was enough on his chin to cover what must have been a weak fat-guy chin. Even so, if I caught him distracted and could get a long look at him, it wasn't hard to imagine him carved down to size. By paying attention to his face, the rest would catch up. With girls, even the enormous ones can be gorgeous. First time you see them you can imagine their possible selves, even more gorgeous beneath all the extra. It's easier to do with girls than guys. It was like girls, though, with Tycho.

Sometimes, the way he looked at me, I thought he wanted to fuck me. Other times, I wasn't sure. If he only wanted to fuck me when I was wearing tiny shorts, only sometimes, I could handle that. But if he was obsessed with me, if his whole plan was a trick to get me vulnerable, that would be a problem. He couldn't keep secrets, though. If he was a pedophile, he would've blabbed about it, probably to me. But he was too earnest. Even if he was able to keep secrets, they probably wouldn't have been very juicy ones.

When my dad was in jail, Tycho was over a lot. He would sleep over on the couch and drive me to school in the morning. We would go grocery shopping together. He and Mom got along fine, but it was clear he wasn't coming over nearly every day for her sparkling company. If

Tycho wasn't trying to fuck me, or else fuck my mom, then I guessed he was fulfilling some hokey male promise he'd made to my dad. *Take care of my family while I'm inside*. That kind of shit. But my dad didn't care about anybody who wasn't in his direct line of sight. When me and Mom visited him in jail, his eyes would go wide when he saw us waiting for him. Not like he didn't know we were coming, but like: *Oh damn, these people, I forgot about them.* Tycho thought about me when I wasn't around, which is different than being obsessed.

His four minutes were up.

I didn't know if snakes had ears, but I apologized in advance. Sorry, snake. I pressed my palm into the center of the steering wheel and leaned in.

Tycho did everything but shit himself. He dropped his lighter, threw his pipe in the recycling dumpster, and gave what looked like serious thought to booking it through the field behind the parking lot. I didn't let up on the horn until he started waving his arms at me.

"What the hell, dude?"

"Put your seatbelt on and drive the car," I said. "In the general direction of Texas, if you don't mind."

He clambered into the car and pulled his coat around his throat.

"You could ask me nicely," he said.

"No. You're getting high under a floodlight in an empty parking lot. But I don't know why you're doing that. Why are you?"

"I was," he said. "I'm not now." He was frisking the car for his cigarettes, but I'd tucked them in my shirt.

"No, you're not," I said, "but you know what else you're not doing? You're not driving. You're in a parking lot with a minor and a car full of snakes and steroids."

"I'm putting my seatbelt on."

"That's a great place to start."

"And it's just one snake."

"Yeah."

"And I'm fucking driving, Jesus Christ," he said. "At least I wasn't smoking weed in the car."

He was driving. That was true. We were heading southish now on a highway whose speed limit was fifty. He was going fifty. I gave him a cigarette as a reward.

"We need to get a couple things straight," I said. I lit a cigarette too. It seemed like a good enough time to air my grievances. "First, don't ever do that thing where you're doing something stupid and you say at least you weren't doing something stupider. Okay?"

"What am I supposed to do—?"

"Hold on. Back to number one. You're not allowed to say *at least* anymore. I can't stand that glass-half-full shit, Tycho. It's patronizing."

"Okay," he said. "But I feel like a lot of my sentences start that way."

"They do."

"So, like, bear with me."

"I will," I said. We passed a sign that said we were leaving Franklin County, which felt like an achievement. "Number two."

He said, "Number two."

“I don’t really understand our plan. We should make one.”

“I agree,” he said. “But, like, we’re clear on the basics, right?”

“I’m not. All I know is I’m supposed to pretend to be your daughter. Then what? We’re like magically rich?”

“Kind of,” he said. “I mean, it could go a couple ways. It’s hard to explain.”

He was leaning pretty hard into sheepishness, making himself smaller in the driver’s seat. I hadn’t expected him to roll over so easily, and I didn’t want to push him too far. You’re a real boy, Tycho. Remember that. Pay no attention to the strings.

I would have to remember to pat him on the head sometimes.

“Like, I can see how it’ll happen,” he said, “but it’s hard to put into words.”

“For sure, but can you see how that makes me nervous? You know your dad, but I don’t. I need a little structure. Does that make sense?”

“Totally.”

“Cool. Number three.”

“You mind if I ask how many of these there are going to be?”

“Just three,” I said. “Three for now.”

He nodded at the wedge the headlights carved out of the dark road. The shadows did favors for his face, gave it contours. I reached my hand out and rubbed my knuckles against his whiskers.

“Number three can wait,” I said. “Tell me another story.”

“You don’t want to hear no stories.”

"No, I do, but no more stories about you. Tell me about your dad. We're driving across the country to swindle this guy and I don't know nothing about him. Who is he? What's his favorite fucking color?"

Tycho seemed to think about that for a while, lit a cigarette, rolled the window up and down until it was just right. I pulled up the map on my phone. He'd told me before that he was going to have to work up courage to get on a freeway. Cincinnati, Louisville, Nashville, Memphis, Little Rock, Dallas, and, finally, Austin—a straight shot of freeways, but our freeway-less route was ridiculous, winding and zigzagging from tiny town to tiny town, giving cities a wide berth. Avoiding freeways added six hours to our ETA. How many miles did a grown man need before he found his courage? Obviously I didn't ask him that.

When he spoke again, he said, "Pussy."

"Excuse me?"

"I tried to imagine asking him what his favorite color was, and that's what he said—pussy."

"Okay, gross," I said, "and not particularly helpful."

"I guess not, but it is kind of funny," he said, but neither of us were laughing. "Oh shit, I got a story for you. I told you about Larry, right? The guy who drove us to my mom's funeral?"

"Yeah, the dude who had porn airbrushed on his truck?"

"It wasn't porn," Tycho said. "It was just kind of lewd. That's how they were back then. But so Larry. Before he was a wrestler, he taught high school down in Beaumont, where my dad's from. He was a couple years older and didn't care about partying like the other dudes did. When I was on the road with them, they were working for WCW. Larry was my homeschool

teacher, or my tutor, I guess, since we weren't ever home. They took turns driving from venue to venue, and I rode shotgun. And at night when my dad went out, me and Larry would watch TV in the hotel room or read books out loud to each other. I spent way more time with Larry than my dad.

"Wrestlers spoke their own kind of language, and Larry helped me figure out what the hell everybody was talking about. Face means good guy, heel means bad guy. Botch means somebody fucked up in the ring. Those were the easy ones, but they got way more complicated. You know what kayfabe means?"

"It sounds like pig Latin," I said.

"Yeah, I know. That's what I thought too. But it's just this made-up word, totally specific to wrestling. The simple definition is that, like, bad guys don't hit the bars with good guys. You don't ever drop your character, like ever, even at the goddamn grocery store."

"I thought this was a story about your dad."

"It is," he said, "but you got to have all the context first or else it won't make sense."

He listed off more vocabulary words. If you lost a match, you jobbed. If you won a match, you went over. None if it seemed important. The women they slept with when they were on the road they called *ring rats*. Like groupies, Tycho said, but trashier.

I hated jargon almost as much as I hated acronyms (Columbus Christian Academy, which I refused to call CCA, fed on jargon and hemorrhaged acronyms). And behind all of this wrestling bullshit, there were the companies that enabled them, acronyms—NWA, WCW, WWF, WWE—that paid these stupid grownup boys, whose favorite colors were pussy, who abandoned families to pursue their stupid dreams, to grab ahold of each other in the semi-nude,

to play pretend for a living. I'd already done my research. I'd watched Sweet Dave Valentine's matches and interviews on YouTube—grainy, VCR-quality snippets pirated off nineties basic cable—and his later work as a born-again healer of busted men. He was the worst of them all, preying on the used-up wrestlers the companies ejected. Tycho's dad deserved to be grifted. I just needed Tycho to tell me whether he was shrewd or naive, a sap or a hardass. Same as with shoplifting, you have to know the layout of the store before you can steal their merchandise. His vocab words were not useful.

"The only one Larry lied to me about was gas," Tycho said. "Gas meant steroids, but he told me it was something like perseverance. I was thirteen. He was probably just trying to keep me innocent.

"So this one night after my dad wrestled, we're in the locker room, just Dad and me and Animal Davies, this jacked motherfucker with cauliflower ears. They're naked except for their facepaint. By then I'm pretty used to colossal male nudity. Like I expect it, but sometimes it still surprises me. Animal's built like a spray-tanned suit of armor, but his penis and testicles are gray and pink and dwarfish, like a wound that hadn't healed right. I'm trying to stare at my book, but I keep looking at his weird dick, like reading the same sentence over and over. When I look up next, he has pants on, and he's waving a syringe at my dad.

"He goes, 'You want to gas me up, brother?'

"And Dad looks down at me and grins and goes, 'Tycho will do it.'

"So Animal's pants go down and his ass goes in my face. Dad presses his finger into Animal's butt cheek, and when he removes it, this pink spot rises up. That's my target. The plunger on the syringe is up, and Dad's fingers mold mine around the barrel. He tells me to stab

it right in the pink. Animal tells me to do it, too, that it don't hurt. I stab it. There isn't any blood. Animal doesn't even wince.

"'Now, you got keep it steady," Dad says, "and push the plunger in with your thumb.'

"My free hand feels like it belongs to somebody else. I find the plunger with my thumb and press, but it's stuck. Dad's thumb presses against mine. Still nothing. He moves my hand away, grips the syringe, and pushes with his own thumb, with both his thumbs, and still the plunger doesn't budge.

"And Dad goes, like, 'Animal, brother, I think you're full.'

"I don't even fucking know how Larry heard about it. It wasn't me that told him. But that night in a restaurant near the motel—I feel like it was an Applebee's—the table full of drunk wrestlers in their goofy street clothes, sunglasses hanging from strings around their necks, arguing about who'd fucked which ring rat, who'd lifted more that day. A waitress brings a tray of tequila shots with a shot glass full of Pepsi for me. My dad cleared the air for a toast. He's all like, 'Fucking boy's going to be better than all of us.' And he grabs my shoulder. 'Ten years from now, he can visit us in rehab and remind us what the belt looks like.'

"They drink and I gnaw at my chicken tenders or whatever. I don't even notice Larry's missing until he's there, whispering in my dad's ear. They go outside the bar for maybe ten minutes, and Dad comes back in alone. Nobody realizes he just got his ass kicked. He doesn't show it. He orders another round like everything's fine and pays the tab for the whole table, tells them we got to call it an early night.

"On the way back to the hotel, he's quiet, keeps pulsing his jaw and wincing. All of a sudden, he grabs me by my shoulders, squares me up, and brings his face right up to mine. Our

noses are touching. And he goes, 'Larry's a smart dude. You want to be smart, pay attention to him. You want to be a good fucking person, Larry's your role model. But he ain't no fucking father. You want to be a man, you pay attention to me. You understand?' I'm nodding my head and I tell him want to be a man. He says good, that's what he thought, and he spits this glob of blood on the ground between us. That's the last we ever said about it.

"They got fined for fighting, and Larry got suspended for breaking the jaw of a belt-holding champion. Still, any time Dad needed to fuck a stranger or get real drunk, Larry would show up with a movie or a book and keep me company till my dad showed back up again."

Tycho shrugged and smacked his lips.

"You need to pee?" he said. "Because I sure do."

The road was empty in both directions, no cars, no streetlights. He pulled over on the shoulder, left the headlights on, and jogged off into the darkness. When he got back in the car he said, "All better."

We drove on for a few minutes in silence. The story was over, but I felt like there was more to it. I waited for him to pick it up. When he didn't, I did:

"So he made you shoot steroids into a dude's ass?"

"He didn't make me do it," Tycho said. "Shit was different back then. It wasn't that big a deal."

"But you remember it. It sticks out, right?"

"Yeah, but not because of the steroids." His voice rose defensively, like irritated that I would suggest such a thing. But he caught himself and, calmer, said, "I don't know why it sticks out."

"When's the last time you talked to him?"

He twisted in his seat, trying to dig something out of his pocket—a blue and white pill, which he held up in front of his face, examining it, turning it in his fingers. Then he swallowed it dry.

He said, "Girl, that's a whole nother story."

TYCHO

The last time me and my dad spoke was eight years ago. He called my grandma's house to tell me Larry Poffo had died, and he clearly hadn't expected me to answer. He was prepped and ready to deliver the news to the answering machine, thirty seconds of information, like a promo he'd been rehearsing for an upcoming match—high energy, but solemn, like the feud had become personal. Like: *this time it's personal*. When I picked up instead of the machine, it took him a few minutes to recalibrate.

He started talking rapidfire, still calling Larry *Wild Man*, despite his being freshly dead. The only wild thing about him those last few years had been his white blood cell count, Dad said, or his red cells, whichever. Whatever it was Larry had been diagnosed with, he never breathed a word about it. All Dad knew was blood cells, and that it was probably for the best Larry went when he did. There had been money troubles, legal troubles, family troubles, all piled on top of his deteriorating health. Larry, who'd always seemed so steady and sober compared to my dad, had been waylaid by a series of bad decisions. Attaching his wrestling name to a used-car dealership in Killeen, advertising himself as a novelty officiant for weddings, and, lastly, sinking the remainder of his savings into the astonishingly bad idea of a franchisable chain of charter

schools across the Southwest—prep school combined with wrestling training camp. Larry had been a high school English teacher in his previous life, before he made the jump into wrestling, and the idea of ending the same way he began, as an educator—he'd decided it was too elegant, too symmetrical, to fail. But he couldn't follow through with any of it. As soon as the idea was formed and the money spent, he was already itching to move onto something else. That was before everybody started getting all bit up about concussions, before all the problems ex-wrestlers had could be traced back to wrestling.

"It's hard to say," my dad said, "but it looks like he shot hisself while he was overdosing, which, like, that's Wild Man for you."

"Wait," I said, "what? You said cancer or something. You said blood cells."

"Well, sure. But what? He's supposed to die in some fucking hospital?"

Of course, my dad, ever the goddamn showman, would chose to deliver grave news with a plot twist.

Dad made Larry sound like both an old man who'd been bedbound for years and someone who'd lived three lives since I'd last seen him. But the math didn't add up. Larry was maybe forty-five at the oldest, no older than Dad. I tried to propel my last memory-picture of him (tank top tucked into sweatpants, fanny pack, biceps veined like a topographical map) into a time-lapse toward decay. The muscles melting to fat, dirty roots sprouting from his bleach-blonde crew cut. The standing man sitting, the sitting man lying down, fat diffusing into fluids, fluids leaching out, pooling. Flies, fly eggs, maggots erupting from his ears and eyes, marching out of his gunshot wound like army ants. Skin peeling off the frame. I aimed at a sick man and overshot to a corpse that wasn't Larry Poffo at all, and I had to correct, back to Larry in a fanny

pack, teaching me fractions in an empty locker room. There wasn't anything between my memory of Larry and a corpse, or nothing recognizable. I couldn't picture him as anything but the muscly man who watched TV with me in the motel room while my dad was at the bar, or the strip club, or fucking a ring rat in Larry's room.

I must've realized then *why* the math didn't work: in eight years, Larry, same as my dad, had indeed lived multiple lives. Even when he failed, he'd had the fucking wherewithal to try something else. I'd been failing in the exact same way ever since I graduated high school. All my stories were drug stories. I was enrolled in my first semester at community college, at twenty-six, which felt like its own kind of failure; specifically, one that's too boring to tell a story about.

Larry's failures were grand. My dad's were grand. Whatever was the opposite of grand, that's what mine were.

And still Dad was talking

There would be a funeral, of course. Somewhere in Missouri, midpoint between me and Dad, who said he was currently stuck in nowhere Oklahoma at a physical therapy retreat. Larry would be laid to rest in the bosom of his peculiar parents. Dustbowlers, according to my dad, like the *American Gothic* couple but more stoic somehow, and wrinklier. Plus, Larry had an identical twin, Dad said, which how weird was that? It would be worth going to the funeral just to see the living twin mourning the dead one. Dude's name was probably Barry, my dad said, or Perry.

The West Texas Wild Man was from Missouri. Of course he was.

As we spoke, Dad was in the middle of contract negotiations with the WWE to appear at their December pay-per-view as part of a nostalgia gimmick, a battle royal chock-full of oldtimers. Wrestling fans, he said, weren't the shills they used to be. They had the Internet now,

and they knew where he'd been, they'd seen his Mexico matches on YouTube, they knew his bad-boy persona wasn't only persona. Nobody thought of him as just an oldtimer. At his age, with his credentials, he was ripe for a comeback.

A decade since he'd been on TV. Slogging through the indies, putting over kids unfit to stand in the same ring as him. This would be his triumphant return. And did I have any fucking clue what WWE was paying him, for a fucking one-off? Really, Dad said, Larry couldn't have chosen a worse time to die. Last year would've been way better. If he himself ever died, Dad said, big if, and it happened during something important, then I should blow his funeral off guilt-free. Birth of a child, he said, even a hot date. Don't bother coming. What would he care what happened after he was dead? At that point, he was just talking to fill the air, one-upping his own self. In fact, he said, bring all my enemies to my funeral. Let them gangbang my corpse. Throw my body in the trash. That shit's not important at all. But you know what is important? he asked. *Now* is important. This moment. Now, Tycho, is the only motherfucking thing.

When he paused then, it surprised me. I mean, his last line was built to be followed by a pause, but it went on too long. There was no way he wasn't high on something. I listened to the dead air for a sniff or a cough, but it was just dead.

He said, "Son, I'm in the best goddamn shape of my life."

I saw then what he'd been doing as he spoke, the same thing he used to do in hotel rooms while I watched TV. He might've been high or not high. Either way, I knew for a fact that he was standing in front of a mirror and he was naked, bathed in flattering light. He was admiring himself, alive and fatless. The death of his friend had done nothing but affirm his aliveness. The dead were ridiculous because he was so very much alive.

I didn't like it, but I felt the same way. Fuck the dead. I was sad about Larry, but I would get over it. I'd been sad about my mom too. It would take a little time, that's all. I didn't have the courage, though, if that's what it was, to be as flippant as Dad. Nothing stopped him from doing what he wanted to do, and—this is where the difference lay—the stupidest shit stopped me. Like hangovers, like being too sleepy.

Did I have all those thoughts in the moment, sitting on the floor beside the phone table, with my grandma's stinky-ass phone against my chin? Probably not. I've never been quick. Two and two would make four, eventually, but it took forever.

And then, on a dime: "But tell me about you. Jesus, Tycho, you're a man. It's been a long time. Tell me everything."

I told him a lot, very little of it true, most of it improvised. I don't remember everything. I didn't mention my grandma, and he didn't ask about her. The lies weren't pure fantasy. I'd been imagining myself as Travis for a while. Not because Travis was anything worth aspiring to, not because I wished I were him, but because he'd nailed his shit down. He sold drugs and was fine with that. He had a wife. He had a blonde daughter, a six-year-old named Lucy, who was the weirdest human I'd ever encountered. She looked like a grownup at three, had bags under her eyes at five, and, at six, was the smartest motherfucker in the house. Travis, back then, was impermeable. He hadn't gone to jail yet. He was making serious money. I took Travis as a template and embroidered him with respectability, reliability, a sweater vest and shiny shoes. I'd spun my fantasies out enough in my private time that, apparently, I could say them out loud if I was pressed

I was married, I told him, to my high school sweetheart. When it came out of my mouth it sounded ridiculous. He didn't laugh, though, so I kept talking.

There was a lot to say to cover up for the fact that I was doing, basically, nothing. Nickel and diming for Grandma, selling pills by the twos and threes. Living still, at twenty-six, off his child-support checks, which, if he'd had a lawyer or an accountant or any goddamn sense, would've stopped coming the moment I turned eighteen. Which details would be enough so he could fill in the rest of the picture? I kept telling him more. That I'd graduated from Ohio State with a degree in. That I worked for. That I thought about. That I lived and breathed. That I took and gave. That, unlike him, I'd built something stationary and, if I worked at it, it might one day become permanent.

"Fuck a duck, Tycho," he said. "You're married. What's her name?"

Before I could make one up, he cut me off. He said, "Shit, hold on a sec." And what followed was the aural equivalent of a phone hanging from a cord, a caller hanging from a noose, in a house, or a halfway house, that nobody would ever live in again. Maybe my dad had hung himself—it was possible. If all it took was a daughter-in-law to drive him to it, I'd have invented a one years ago.

His voice appeared again. "Listen," he said. "How come I didn't get an invitation?"

"You were in prison." Or that was what I'd heard. That's what the wrestling blogs said. His phone call was the first indicator that he no longer was.

"Jesus, boy, not prison. In Mexico, it's all just jail. And it's not even jail. It was like, what do you call it? I was held for questioning."

"For how long?"

"Six months," he said. "They had a lot of questions."

I was fully prepared to name my fake wife and bless our union with a bouncing baby, but he'd forgotten his question. The whole conversation lasted twenty minutes. His ride was here, he said. Let's talk soon. He said he was going to text me a photo of his abs, but he never did.

He did, though, mail me bus fare to get to Larry's funeral. Bus fare, a transcription of all the pertinent funeral details in his half-print, half-cursive handwriting. A polaroid of Larry wearing his fanny-pack-tank-top costume, posing in front of a sky-blue lowrider. Packed in a box, overnighted, addressed to me. The note inside said to bring my wife, bring my swimsuit, bring my appetite.

The funeral was supposed to be the Saturday before finals week, according to the note. I'd been taking three classes at the community college and working part time at AutoZone, seeing almost nobody but grandma and Lex, doing homework on the back porch in bugzapper light. Since August, no pills, or only a Percocet to sleep. No drinking. Weed on the weekends. Cigarettes only after the sun went down. I hadn't seen Travis since the summer. That was back before I got the snake.

I brought my swimsuit, even though it was December, and I brought the black shirt I wore when I swam. I brought my textbooks, too, and my appetite, and a photo Travis had taken of me and four-year-old Lucy at the fair, standing beside a two-hump camel. She looked weird in the photo, kind of demonic with her eyes bleached out, like she was caught in the middle of explaining how everything was about to change forever, and I looked terrible. An oversized football jersey, khaki shorts. My mouth looked like it couldn't close all the way. I towered over her in a way that looked domineering, almost sexual. Maybe, I thought, it wouldn't seem sexual

if the viewer thought I was her dad. The main problem wasn't so much my size as my hand. I had a cigarette between the fingers of the hand I'd placed atop Lucy's little head. The cigarette looked like a birthday candle to probably nobody but me. I didn't have a picture of me with anybody who could pass as a wife. But the one of me and Lucy was proof. I'd taken my phone to a Kinkos and had them print out only the one. Proof of ownership. I had a child. I wasn't sure what that proof would accomplish, but, by god, I had it.

Because I don't share my father's affection for plot twists and lurid bullshit, I'll just get the predictable part out of the way up front: he wasn't waiting for me at the station when I arrived. Nobody was. I called the number for Poffo I found in the phonebook. The funeral had been two weeks before. They sent one of their sons out to pick me up, and I stayed the night with them. The northbound Greyhound wasn't due until the next morning. I was surprised to learn that my dad had come up for the funeral. He'd brought a woman named Alex, who may or may not have been pregnant, depending on which Poffo was telling the story. The Poffos were a weird family, but not the kind of weird my dad described. Grandpa Poffo, Mother and Dad Poffo, and Twin Brother Poffo, two other interchangeable Brothers Poffo. They all seemed unbereaved, unbitter. When Larry's name came up, whoever was between bites of pot roast or creamed corn would deliver a brief anecdote about Larry as a kid, Larry as a troubled teen, Larry as an athlete. They were so comfortable using the past tense that I suspected they'd been practicing. A sentence only needed three words if you trimmed off all the fat. It seemed like they'd exhausted themselves years before with talking to one another. Like if I wasn't there, they would've eaten dinner, watched TV, gone to bed, all in silence. As if proximity alone proved they were family.

When Dad left the Poffos' after the funeral, he told them he was Puerto Rico bound. I asked them about his big-time contract, his triumphant return to wrestling. Apparently, he hadn't mentioned it.

That was the last time I talked to him, but it wasn't the last time I heard his voice. I was afforded that pleasure two other times.

LUCY

Ohio in the dark was nothing, but nothing in a kind of pleasant way. I don't know why, but it made me think of swimming at the public pool when I was a kid when it was almost too cold outside to get in the water, but not cold enough yet for the pool to get drained for winter, how the chlorine smells different then, like stronger, and it takes forever to get comfortable in the water, but even then your teeth are still chattering, and you stay in too long because you know once you get out you're not getting back in. Your pool friends are different than your regular friends. Getting out means it's over. And when you do get out because your mom's already dressed and calling your name and you can only stay underwater for so many Mississippis, your body feels smaller, like the cold water shrunk it, pruney hands and goosebumps, and the towel isn't big enough to cover all your skin. And that sleepiness that comes over you in the backseat of the car—you try to resist it because if you fall asleep now your mom will wake you up at home and then it won't be the same when you go back to sleep, that's how you spoil it. So you count down the landmarks—the baseball fields, the cigarette store where your aunt's ex-husband worked, the used car place with the inflatable gorilla whose belly said hablo espanol—until you turn onto the street before your street and then your own street, and your bed is so close you can smell it. The

normal sheets and blanket aren't good enough. You drag the army-color sleeping bag from the hall closet and lay it under the lavender mermaid blanket and the weird orange quilt from the couch. You climb in, still wearing your swimsuit, and zip the zipper all the way up and scoot as deep into the sleeping bag as you can until all the light is gone. Only then do you sleep. No dreams, no colors.

That kind of nothing.

Which, like, after eight or nine years old, forget about sleeping that good.

We drove for the first couple hours down unlit, two-lane highways, past miles of bare tree silhouettes and not much else, snow piled off the road, occasional houses with orange porch lights and mown fields. No traffic because country people sleep all night long.

Every half an hour we'd creep through a town named after a city—London, Florence, Lebanon. Like those people who name their kids shit like King or Honor or Serenity. Aspirational names. When I went to public school, there was a kid named Napoleon Gomez. At Columbus Christian Academy, there was a Faith, a Grace, and a boy with alopecia named Justice. It's like by naming a kid or a town something so fancy and grand, you're ensuring they'll never live up to it. Faith seemed okay as a person, but Grace was a clumsy elephant. And what the fuck is just about alopecia? Likewise, the towns. Both London and Florence were two square blocks of bombed-out antique stores with MAGA signs in their windows. The city fathers had meant well, I'm sure. They aimed high and missed. All we saw of Lebanon was the welcome sign.

Fortunately for me, Lucy was the name of an old-lady waitress or cleaning lady, so my bar was low.

Tycho must've thought I was asleep, because he was singing along to whatever came on the radio, whether he knew the words or not, only pausing to light another cigarette. For the country songs, he put on a twang and mumbled through the verses until one line would telegraph the rhyming word of the next (luck/truck, dear/beer). For classic rock, he sang the guitar solos. He'd linger on a station for a couple songs and then find another. I'd looped through my playlist twice already (Dua Lipa, Billie Eilish, Ariana), but I kept my earbuds in. I was thinking. His plan had gotten us out of Columbus, but mine was going to have to do the rest.

It seemed like he really thought he could just waltz into his father's home, present me as his daughter, and we'd be suddenly rolling in money. He hadn't mentioned how much money he wanted or how long we'd have to stay to get it. Or even what he planned to do with his guaranteed wealth, but I bet he'd been thinking about it—first he'd get rid of this embarrassing car, then he'd buy his grandma a house. The kind of shit poor people do when they make it. The difference between rich and poor is poor people spend all their fantasy money before they get it, and rich people don't let go of theirs. One of the differences. If his dad was really rich (which I kind of doubted—the bedazzled shirts and the Hummer screamed divorcee with credit card debt), then we were going to have to pull an epic con.

I started making notes in my phone. As soon as Tycho saw my screen light up, he stopped singing, but he didn't say a word.

#

Our tiny highway dead-ended into I-71. The roadside trees disappeared, and new manicured grass sloped up to the elevated freeway. The grass and the freeway were federal property, and the

trees were Ohio trees, hicks—they knew to keep their distance. A sign pointed right for Cincinnati and left for Columbus. Tycho seemed to be having trouble deciding.

"Having second thoughts, big guy?"

"No," he said, "I was just kind of hoping we could stay on the back roads. Freeways get me nervous."

"Okay, but it's three in the morning. There's no traffic. And it's only forty miles to Cincinnati."

"I know." He was caressing the blinker lever with his index finger, and his other hand was rooting around in his pocket. "I'm just psyching myself out."

"Are you fucked up?"

"No," he said, "I'm square. Just driving too long."

"Let me see your eyes."

I turned on the overhead light. He faced me and peeled his eyelids back. They were bloodshot, I guess, and a little glassy. Eyeballs are gross. I didn't know what I was looking for.

"Let's talk," I said. "You drive, I keep you company. We'll get food in the city."

He said okay and flipped the blinker. On the freeway, I asked him questions about his dad, and he gave me flippant answers. The freeway did seem to make him nervous. He wasn't smoking. Both hands white-knuckled the wheel at ten and two.

"So, like, what's your dad a sucker for?" I asked him.

"Fame," he said. "That's all I can think of. Twenty years ago I would've said muscle relaxants, but I think he's doing the straight and narrow thing now."

"I mean, where's his soft spot? Seems like he'd be sucker for sob stories if he's trying to help drug addicts. What's the best way to get him vulnerable?"

"I don't know, dude. Put him on TV and he'll do your bidding."

Tycho was way more comfortable talking about what we were going to eat in Cincinnati. Apparently, the local delicacy consisted of spaghetti noodles topped with chili topped with shredded, unmelted, yellow cheese. The city was famous for it. Of course they were. The kind of shit my dad would cook at three in the morning with the lights off, the kind of food you pass out in. But since we were on a schedule, Tycho said, he was fine with fast food, and he explained the hierarchy of the chains. Wendy's was the lonely bottom rung of a complicated ladder—barely edible, he said, like prison food you have to pay for. He listed his way up the ladder, naming the rungs so lovingly, like an astronomer explaining the night sky.

I was only kind of listening. If Tycho wasn't going to help me out, then I could come up with a plan on my own. The notes on my phone were starting to take shape. Without his help, the best I could do was aim our con at a generic grandfather, a white-haired, rich Tycho. Even if Tycho hated him, they had to have similarities. For instance, Tycho couldn't pass a homeless dude without at least talking to him or, more likely, giving him pills, lunch money, and a blessing. I based my plan on the idea of like-father-like-son. Who knows? If that didn't work, we'd go with Tycho's plan—improvise until we were rich.

He interrupted his fast food catalogue to ask me who I was texting.

"Nobody," I said. "Mind your business. You were talking about Burger King."

"Your folks call you yet?"

I told him they had. Three missed calls from my mom before I blocked her and a dozen from my dad after that, but they'd stopped coming about an hour ago. I'd almost blocked my dad's number after every call, but I didn't. It felt too sad and final. They'd probably start calling again in the morning, which for them on a Sunday would be noon. Tycho said they'd called him too. Were we supposed to be upset about it? It would've been weirder if they hadn't.

Cincinnati looked a lot sadder than I'd expected it to. Grace, the elephant girl, was from Cincinnati, and in chapel on her first day, Pastor Wible introduced her to the whole middle school and high school. Grace from Cincinnati. He asked her to say a few words about herself and her hometown. She said her name and immediately burst into tears. Everybody assumed she was weak, of course, or stupid. They smelled blood and spent the rest of the semester inventing new ways to make Grace miserable. Christian-school kids are hyenas with dimples. I felt bad for her, but I figured she really was weak and stupid. Seeing Cincinnati from the freeway, though, I had to give the girl some credit. Breaking down into public tears was a perfect way to describe it.

A dozen modest skyscrapers huddled close together like they were terrified of the rest of the town. Otherwise, no other building was taller than a couple stories. And like how you can guess the colors in black-and-white photos, even in the dark you could tell that Cincinnati was strictly beige. Through the center of the city, the freeway was lined with walls so you couldn't see anything but the road. Tycho asked me what a panic attack felt like. He was hunched over the steering wheel, squinting at the white lines. There were hardly any other cars on the road, but he was terrified. The freeway opened up again, and everything was familiar again, Midwestern—chain restaurants, mattress stores, and billboards advertising personal injury lawyers, plastic surgeons, and Jesus.

I didn't care where we got food, but I needed a drugstore. We found a McDonald's that shared its parking lot with a CVS. I told Tycho to get me a salad or something and took the twenty dollar be he offered me. I'd just be a minute.

I finished my cigarette by the brown pebbled trash can and tried to see what kind of human was working the register inside. Except for speed, fearlessness, and a back-of-the-mind awareness of security cameras, there's no real art to shoplifting in a crowded store. But an empty one requires a little more finesse. CVS, Walgreens, Rite Aid, they were all three functionally identical. The cameras, and the aisles they couldn't see, were all in the same spot, In the middle of the night, there was only ever one person working. My method would depend on whether that lucky fucker was a lady or a man.

My mom would've been so proud, like finally I'd found a way to put everything she taught me to use. It was almost a shame she wasn't there to see it.

She didn't take many hard moral stands (like a lot of poor people, her moral compass only came with two cardinal directions—disrespect was the gravest sin, and self-reliance the highest virtue—which made it an easy compass to calibrate), and she was definitely no feminist, but she believed with all her heart that the price of feminine hygiene products was a tax on biological womanhood. Every time the prices rose, it was as if shots were fired. She claimed she hadn't paid for tampons since high school. Stealing them was an act of revolution, her personal, monthly Boston Tea Party.

So when I got my first period—it was summertime and I was almost twelve—I understood that I was about to be initiated into something serious and radical. Mom let me borrow from her supply during the day, but she made it clear that I would be paying her back

with interest for every tampon I took. It was already past my bedtime when she announced that we were going to the store and did my dad need anything. By her tone of voice he knew he wasn't invited.

A Walgreens by our apartment. So close we could've walked, but she never walked anywhere. In the parking lot, she laid out the choreography. That was the one and only time she helped me steal. Inside the store, she provided cover, chatting with the old lady behind the register while I got what I came for. Two boxes of the same kind she used, the ones that always sat between the Windex and the witch hazel in the cabinet under the bathroom sink. I wasn't even scared. The feeling didn't have anything to do with fear, more like a kind of heightened alertness buzzing in my legs and fingers. I circled past the candy aisle and grabbed something an honest little girl would want, something brightly packaged, gummy worms or jelly beans. At the counter I showed them to my mom, like *please, Mom*, like I was normal kid who asked permission. And in the parking lot I was giddy, grinning, watching her face for approval. The only thing she said was, *Stop smiling, they got cameras out here too*.

If there's a such thing as a shopaholic, it's not stealing itself that they're addicted to. It's that feeling, the build, the moment of victory when you walk through the censors and they don't beep and the doors part for you. All the cameras and magnetic strips and watchful eyes are there to stop you, and they can't do it. You're outside, you win. Before that night, I'd seen my mom steal all kinds of shit, and I guess I thought it was because we were poor, that she was doing it for the family. Two-and-a-half years later, I knew better than to assume anybody had noble motives. The nobler they seem, the better the camouflage.

Now, I dinged in through the sliding doors and a rail thin white boy with a widow's peak and huge headphones shot up from behind the counter, guilty, like I'd caught him sleeping or jerking off. He welcomed me to CVS.

"Hey," I said, "you guys don't have a bathroom, do you? Like for customers?"

Company policy, he said. He pointed vaguely toward the McDonald's.

I said, "So this is really embarrassing, but is there a pharmacist here? Or, like, a woman?"

He was all alone. Someone trusted him with an entire store. His headphones were hanging around his neck like one of those pillows people wear on airplanes, and I could hear the muffled rapidfire clap of fake drums and laser beam noises coming from them. I reiterated my embarrassment and asked him if he had a sister or a company manual, because I was having my very first period and I didn't know what to buy. Tampons or pads, what kind, and what degree of absorbency, because—oh, the shame—I was gushing. His face was already red, but it turned redder. He did have a sister, but she was nine. He didn't seem to like thinking about her that way, as having a uterus somewhere inside. He escorted me to the feminine hygiene aisle and we stared at the pink and purple boxes. These are pads, and these, he said, are the other kind. There were probably instructions in the box.

As soon as he turned around to leave me with my complicated choice, I grabbed a box at random. Two aisles over was haircare, and I made a quick pass. The fancy electric razors were protected by a plastic case, but the cheap ones would work just fine. I didn't worry about security cameras. Unless things went very bad for me, I wouldn't ever be setting foot in Cincinnati again. A detour through the beverage aisle for a blue Red Bull, two bags of pistachios from a display box, and a paperback by Mary Higgins Clark called *Death Wears a Beauty Mask.* He rang me up

for the snacks, the book, and the unmentionables, placed them neatly in a plastic sack, and wished me good luck. And he meant it. I wanted to shake his hand or kiss his forehead—he'd let me do exactly what I wanted. He didn't care enough to be suspicious. Boyfriend material.

Outside the McDonald's, I smoked and watched Tycho eat. He finished one burger and started on a second, peeling up the bun to pick off the pickles and scrape away the mustard with a plastic knife. When we'd get high in the car outside my parents' apartment, we never fought. He'd let me blab about shit he didn't care about, about Pastor Wible or the idiot coach who taught geometry or the girls at school who looked at me like I'd just aborted the Christ child. We would bitch and laugh, and I liked it that way. Now, shit was serious. I felt mean for expecting him to take it as seriously as it was.

I set my cigarette on the window ledge and went inside to hurry his fatass up.

"How's your dinner?" I sat across from him and opened my salad box. "You about ready?"

In the car, he was still chewing when I unzipped my jacket and laid the shit I'd stolen on my lap. Electric clippers, a travel-size can of shaving cream, a bag of the same disposable razors I used on my legs.

"What you got there?" Tycho asked.

"A plan," I said. And from the plastic bag, I pulled out *Death Wears a Beauty Mask.* "A book about murder. And I got you some pistachios too."

"What kind of plan needs so many razors?"

"I'm still working on it," I said. "Keep telling me stories. They help me think."

TYCHO

On the bus ride back from Missouri, I tried to study for my finals, but I hadn't been able to pay attention. Whole semester, I'd been planning a bender to celebrate my hard work, a weekend of pills and good weed and beer. I'd even considered inviting people over to my grandma's house for a cookout. Travis, Marina, and Lucy. Grandma and Lex. A couple of the shitbirds I worked with at AutoZone, whichever of them had the day off. I even thought about inviting my American History professor, a lumberjack-looking dude, who I could imagine feeling right at home drinking in a backyard.

When I was a kid and couldn't sleep, I would distract myself from what felt like terror, the slow minutes of aloneness in the dark, by planning my next birthday party. From the most obvious items, the guest list and location, down to the minutest details. Color schemes, seating arrangements, my outfit for the day. Which guests' parents would keep a respectful distance from the festivities, and which would try to intrude, organize, participate. My mom was a participator who organized, on the floor with my friends, cooing over presents, and secretly cleaning up our messes as we made them. Dad stuck to the perimeters. He invited his own friends.

But while my party-planning fantasies as a kid were bound by practicalities—skating or pizza, six friends or ten—on the bus, I let my plans run wild. The apron I was wearing as I tended the smoker proclaimed my mastery of meat and fire, but it would not prepare the guests for the results, which I foresaw magnificently arranged on long oaken table—dishes of yellow and purple picnic food, ribs, brisket, chickens, a whole goose, because why the fuck not a goose.

The fact that I'd never lit a grill, much less cooked on one, didn't have anything to do with it. December was May in Grandma's backyard, and the lopsided hackberry that grew against the chain-link fence was replaced by two Texas pecan trees in the center of the yard, between which a hammock was strung. The overgrown lot behind the house became a forest, chain link became picket. If I saw something I didn't like, I erased it and drew something else. A gazebo, a concrete birdbath with a concrete boy pissing water into a basin, a couple puppies play-fighting, a shiny metal playground slide. Nobody was sliding on the slide, so I invented children, identical boys in matching overalls, who found Lucy wherever she was hiding and led her to the slide. They took turns and cheered each other's form.

The guest list didn't have to reckon with geography or mortality. I combined strangers with acquaintances and dressed them in beach clothes. The night cashier at the cigarette store whose name tag said Virginia, the front-row girl with the tramp stamp in my Intro to Psychology class—they both brought wine. Wrestlers who hadn't aged since the nineties showed up with gift-wrapped presents. Travis pulled beer from a keg. A line was forming. I conjured Marina from thin air to distribute cake to my multiplying guests. I introduced Lex to Grandma's dead husband, who looked like Kris Kristofferson in *Convoy*. Turned out, they had a lot in common, comparing their faded green tattoos, sharing a cigarette and secrets about my grandma. When the backyard was at capacity, I generously admitted the latecomer Poffos. After all, they had driven so far. How nice it must've been for them to find their Larry alive and in attendance, over there in the corner, pitching horseshoes with my dad.

It was nothing but idle bullshit, like watching infomercials with the sound off at four in the morning, but it did pass the time. Rather, it passed the time until it didn't, until the

embellishments became too busy, the backyard so fucking thick with make believe that my fantasy collapsed under its own weight. It's possible to paint a canvas blank with color. All the colors together make muddy brown, and mud dries to dirt, and dirt is as close as something can get to nothing.

When I was a little kid, the parties I imagined never got out of control. I would fall asleep before they could. On the bus, though, sleep wasn't an option. I'd have used anything to keep from thinking—a back issue of *Good Housekeeping*, a deck of cards, a chatty seat mate. Instead, the Midwest unfurled in the window like the boringest flag imaginable. And on a half-empty bus, nobody sits next to the fat man.

It wasn't that I was afraid of about thinking about my dad. I'd already decided never to cash one of his checks again. But that was the only gesture I could see myself making. Thinking too hard about him and getting nowhere would lead to thinking about other stuff. Community college—another gesture—was a dead end. I couldn't afford to go to a real school. Even if I could, what the fuck would I major in? I was too old to ponder what I meant to do with my life. At some point, I would have to admit that I was already doing it. That this, whatever it was, was it.

Underneath that thought was other shit. There wasn't a bottom. Or if there was, I hadn't ever been able to climb that deep. There's medicine to keep you from deepdiving, and her name is Percocet. But Percocet lived in my bedside table, in a matchbox with a picture of a cowgirl on it, and I was somewhere in Indiana, far from bed, between Jesus billboards and naked cornfields, wondering which part of America was the beautiful part, because all I kept seeing was trash.

Where are you going? one of the billboards asked. It only gave two options: *Heaven*, which was floating on a backdrop of sunny clouds, and *Hell,* whose letters were engulfed in flames. There was a toll-free number at the bottom of the sign. 844-FOR-TRUTH. I wondered what kind of person was susceptible to evangelical billboards. How many prank calls versus earnest ones? Did more drivers or passengers call? I wanted percentages, a pie chart. I mean, I was pretty low at the moment, and I couldn't imagine how much lower I'd have to be to call that number for answers. Yet, there I was, fucking calling it.

Hey, Lord. It's me, Tycho. A male robot picked up on the first ring. He thanked me for calling Gospel Billboards and insisted I press one if I wanted answers, two if I wanted to learn more, and three if I was feeling lonely or discouraged. I pressed three and a different male robot suggested that maybe I felt lonely because I was lonely, because my friends and family were far away. The second male robot had a Bostonish accent, like a petty thief in a cop movie who'd finally seen the light.

"Or perhaps," it said, "perhaps, you're surrounded by friends and family, but the feeling of loneliness persists."

The Boston robot was taking its sweet time getting to the point. I've never been the kind of person who listens to a Boston accent on purpose. I apologized and hung up.

Outside of Terre Haute, the passengers were allowed to stretch our legs at a truck stop named something very Indiana. Hoosier Hootenanny Respite Station, something like that. Most passengers made for the concrete picnic-table-and-ashtray area, patting themselves down for cigarettes and lighters, flapping their shirt fronts to let the air in. Inside were clean restrooms as advertised and economy-sized fast food restaurants manned by suicidal teenagers. On the wall

between the his restrooms and the hers, the floor-to-ceiling Indiana state seal depicted a man chasing a buffalo with a hatchet.

No telling whether I made the decision or it was made for me. Either way, I strode up to the counter in the convenience store annex, saw my quarry among the condoms and the eyedrops, and I claimed it. They didn't carry Tylenol Cold and Sinus, but they had Dayquil, Nyquil, and a package containing both. It was the quil part I was interested in. Let day be night and night be day. It was all the same to me. In the spotless restrooms, in my private stall, I chased the pills, two by two, purple and yellow, with Sprite.

One of the unsung qualities of drugs, both the good ones and the ones that would do in a pinch, is their decision-making capacity. In a way, it was like praying. Drugs might close doors, but they open windows too, just like God.

I skipped outside to mingle with my fellow passengers, my people, who lit fresh cigarettes off dying ones, who talked over one another, didn't listen. One of them deigned to bum me her next-to-last cigarette on the condition that I listened to her rhapsodize about the new life the Greyhound was taking her to. She knew all of us had destinations, but hers was worth talking about. I didn't tell her that my destination was a drawer with Percocet in it. I didn't tell her that, like her, I was once lost but would soon be found, as soon as the cold pills kicked in. Her name was Sharon. I named her Sharon Sharalike.

Back on the bus, I hadn't yet made any unmakeable decisions. When the bus dropped me off in downtown Columbus, I still hadn't. When Lex picked me up in his two-tone Blazer: none. As I dug into my Percocet stash: still none. I didn't have to. The decision was already made. I didn't have anything to do with it. All I had to do was obey. Doors and windows.

The sequence of events that followed was as much a mystery to me eight years later, en route to Texas with a minor in tow, as it was when it overtook me. I sold my textbooks back to the campus bookstore for pennies on the dollar, blew off my finals, quit AutoZone, and indentured myself to Travis in exchange for a magnanimous loan of weed, Oxies, and the names and numbers of a couple people who needed them.

At the heart of every relapse, if you look at it in the right light, is a redemption story. Amazing grace. I once was lost, then I wasn't lost anymore.

LUCY

We drove south through Kentucky. I slept through Louisville and Bowling Green. We were leaving Nashville when I woke up. Tycho was arguing with a man on the radio who was trying to convince his listeners that the man who murdered people with his dump truck in California was part of a wide-ranging conspiracy of Jews and Muslims, who had apparently decided to split the difference and team up to undermine what was best about western civilization, things like farmers markets and Sunday mornings. My mouth tasted like gluey, like the way papier-mâché smells. Technically, it was Sunday morning now, even though the sun hadn't come up yet.

When Tycho saw the clippers, he'd asked who was getting shaved, but I'd still needed to do some research. I fell asleep reading an article about a boy named Jonah, who gets diagnosed with leukemia at the age of ten. Sad enough, but it got worse. Shortly after his diagnosis, his parents separate—that's the nice way to put it. Really, his dad just splits because the weight of the total of human suffering is heavy on his merely mortal shoulders. A lot of the article was about how hard it is for a single mom to care for a kid like that, how her insurance keeps fucking

her around about paying for his meds and his chemotherapy, how the skin on Jonah's sick face keeps shrinking to reveal bigger, wetter eyes that break the mother's heart. Her church takes up a collection, or multiple collections, Sunday after Sunday, and word gets around to a cancer doctor, a pillar of his community and a good Christian, who volunteers the services of his clinic and his staff. With his help and the money from the collections, the cancer boy is guaranteed his first two rounds of treatment. The single mom, who had secretly stopped believing in God, finds her faith reinvigorated by the nice people at her church and that selfless doctor. During Jonah's first chemo treatment at the Christian doctor's clinic, the mother keeps getting texts from her neighbor about how her dog won't stop barking, more like howling and yipping, which is the worst. The mom tries to explain how she's super busy, how her son is hooked up to a machine that's poisoning the cancer out of him, and how, in general, it's a pretty bad time. But the neighbor lady is a major cunt, probably because she doesn't believe in Jesus, and she continues harassing this already harassed mother, whose cancer kid keeps looking at her with his huge watery and sleepy eyes, like *Mommy, why are you so distracted from me and my cancer*? Anyway, cunty neighbor lady keeps texting, and the mom thinks what if their precious family dog, who she'd tied up on the porch of their humble apartment when they left for chemo, had managed to strangle himself with the leash and was choking to death, hence the yipping, and how would that feel for her son when he comes home, weak from chemo, and finds his precious dog dead on the porch? Who will he blame? The mom, probably, or God, and the mom couldn't stand the idea of either outcome. She calls Jonah her sweet angel baby and tells him she'll be back in half an hour, to hang in there, kiddo, and she tells the doctor the same thing but in a more adult voice. So when she gets home, she hears the yipping faintly from the parking lot, which

means the dog is still alive but might that very moment be on the verge of certain death, so she bolts up the stairs and through the door, all business, and she does find the dog vocalizing its discomfort, but not on the porch and not due to a tangled leash, but because the estranged husband, who still has a key to the humble apartment, is torturing the dog on the kitchen counter, like plucking its toenails out with pliers or scorching its tongue with a cigar (the article didn't say), and the mother is like, *What's the meaning of this*? So, after subduing the mom in much the same way he subdued the dog, the husband explains how, once he abandoned his family, he became deranged, even though he seemed pleasant and harmless before, if a little flakey, and decided that Leukemia is too much to foist on a little kid, much less his little kid, much less his family, too much suffering and injustice. Suffering and injustice are things he's become preoccupied with in his absence. And in his deranged mind, this is how he saves his family from suffering and injustice—he kills them and himself and they reunite in heaven, minus leukemia, and minus the gambling debts and the debilitating addiction to what even he would admit was some seriously depraved pornography, both of which, the debt and addiction, he'd managed to hide from his wife for the last couple years of their marriage, even when it got pretty desperate. So first, he says he's going to kill her, and then he's going to kill little Jonah whenever he gets home from wherever he is. They'll both thank him in heaven. And as she's tearfully trying to explain to him that Jonah is currently, like that very moment, undergoing the treatment that has a not-bad chance of curing him of his horrible, unjust disease, the husband kills her. The article doesn't say how. And only when he's being interrogated at the police station by the cops the neighbor called because the noise was really getting out of hand over there does he understand what his wife was trying to tell him, and that despite the rampaging suffering and injustice that

just fucking comes with the territory of being alive some people are good and selfless and philanthropic and thoughtful, and their thoughtfulness sometimes gets implemented in practical ways, like with a check for ten or fifteen dollars or a by volunteering useful services, whereas the husband's thoughtfulness, now that he understands all of the circumstances, is beginning to seem poorly organized and selfish. Regrets wash over him, and rightly so, because his son is totally going to be an orphan now, and, depending on how the chemo goes, maybe an orphan with leukemia, and nobody is going to adopt one of those.

I'd just Googled *cancer kid sad*, and that shit was like the third result. The article was sloppy, and the last couple paragraphs tried to tie it all together with a religious message. I didn't cry or anything, but I was moved. And I'm a fourteen-year-old white girl—we're not exactly renowned for our ability to empathize.

Kid with cancer led to leukemia led to leukemia plus broken family plus financial woes—and there it was: the plan, or like the skeleton of the plan. Obviously minus the murder part. And no animals would be harmed in the making of our money.

Waking up, the plan seemed as good as it had when I was falling asleep, but there were practical things to consider.

For one, I had good hair. Blonde, shiny, and long, but not Amish long. If I got high and spent too long looking in the mirror, my hair could mesmerize me. Blonde was just the easy name, but it didn't even begin to describe it. There were reds and golds and ochres, some strands so white they were transparent. It would be missed. But I had a nicely shaped head too. Shaved, it would probably make me look edgy. I was less enthusiastic about the idea of being

eyebrowless. Before I told Tycho my plan, I wanted to see what leukemia kids looked like. Maybe they got to keep their eyebrows.

I followed the earbuds cord between the seats, but it wasn't connected anymore. I checked my pockets, under my ass.

"Where's my phone?"

Tycho answered too quickly. Maybe I'd left at the McDonald's, he said. How was he supposed to know? It was a prepared response, but a poorly prepared one. He knew I'd used it since Cincinnati. I think I knew what he'd done even before I berated him into admitting it.

"You threw it out the window," I said. "Where?"

"Somewhere around Cave City," he said. "In Kentucky. There was a T-rex on the side of the road, all lit up. Motherfucker was like two-stories tall."

"A T-rex? Like a Tyrannosaurus Rex?"

"Yeah, man. Not a real one. But like big head, teeth. You know what they look like. Tiny arms and claws. It felt like an omen at the time."

The sun was coming up. We were on a different number freeway than when I fell asleep. A hundred and eighty-five miles to Memphis. Miraculously, Tycho was going the right way.

"So while I was asleep," I said, "you hallucinated a dinosaur that told you to throw my phone out the window, and you obeyed this dinosaur."

He slapped himself hard across his cheek, exhaled hard through his nose, and slapped himself again.

"Bitch, I didn't hallucinate nothing. You been texting somebody, and you keep telling me to mind my business. This is my business. If we get pulled over, it's my ass going to jail, not

you. And every time you send a text, that shit pings a cell tower. Maybe your dad won't call the police, but your mama might. And the first thing they're going to do is trace that cell phone. I'm covering our tracks."

Again, he slapped himself again.

"Dude, stop hitting yourself. What are you doing?"

"My eyes are going kind of blurry," he said. "Slaps make them focus."

"How long have you been awake?"

He took a minute to do the math. "At ten o'clock, it'll be a whole day."

I snatched his phone from where it sat between his legs and punched in his passcode. We weren't even halfway there yet. Memphis would be halfway, and I wasn't sure Tycho could make it that far.

"Okay, Jackson is like an hour and a half away, and there's motels there. We can sleep a couple hours. You think you can make it that far?"

He said he thought so.

"And maybe you were right about the phone, but you do not have the right to take my shit from me."

"Yeah, I know. I figured I'd buy you a burner phone to make it up. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted," I said. "But you're going to have to buy two."

"Why?"

"If they can track mine, they can track yours too.

I let his phone drop from my open window. In the side mirror, I watched it skitter down the pavement and disappear behind us. I expected more of a reaction, but all he said was, "Fair."

"And by the way, if you ever call me a bitch again, I'll bite your fucking cheek off."

He said he was sorry, that it just slipped out. I told him if he could get us to the motel without killing us, all would be forgiven. And if telling stories kept him awake, then by all means keep telling them.

TYCHO

It was another couple years before I heard from him again. By then, everybody had cell phones, even my grandma. She kept hers in a holster clipped to the waistband of her skirt. As far as I knew, Dad only had the number for her landline. The beige thing still lay where it had, on the undershelf of the table beside the couch, collecting dust next to its answering machine. She kept the ringer off, because nobody but robots and collection agencies called it anymore. Every couple months, she would delete her way through the accumulated messages, sifting for news of the deaths of her friends. Mostly, it was robots.

That was around the time I'd purchased my snake from a man a few booths down from my grandma's at the flea market. Normally, he sold guinea pigs and baby rabbits he bred himself, and I would stop and give the cutest ones a scratch behind their ears. One day when I passed, he was wearing the snake around his neck like a feather boa, and I made the connection: boa, feather boa. I was likely fucked up, because it felt profound, like a peek into the secret commerce between the physical world and the spiritual. The kind of shit you think about on acid. Before I knew it, he'd transferred the snake to my shoulders. It felt like a beating tube-shaped heart, clammy, for sure, but warm in an interior way, emitting warmth less like a fire than a painting of fire. It seemed to make sense at the time. Its black body was patterned in green-gold

blotches that looked like masks. Black eye holes in a Lone Ranger mask, a skeleton mask, each mask blending into the next. The man brought the snake's head up to my own, eye to eye, or sort of. Its eyes were jet black orbs embedded on either side of its head, separated by a ridge, such that both eyes could never look at the same thing. I imagined the panic of seeing in split screen, of having to constantly unite two visions into one, or else having to choose which eye to favor.

That wasn't even the wildest thing about snake sight. Later, when I Googled it, I learned that they see in blues and greens, undetailed shapes differentiated only by heat registers. Like motherfucking Predator.

Its tail coiled around my wrist and I felt our pulses merge. I said something like, "It's a magnificent creature."

"Yours at the family price," the man said. "That your mom at number ninety?"

"Grandma," I said. "What's the family price?"

"What do you got?" he asked. "Other than an obvious connection with this snake."

"You like Percocet?"

Of course he did. Everybody liked Percocet. He introduced himself and told me that he wasn't much of a reptile guy, that the snake had been a pot-sweetener in a trade whose details were too elaborate for me to follow, involving stereo equipment, family secrets, and one of those motorcycles with a sidecar attached. The snake was causing unrest in his household. The rabbits were skittish, the guinea pigs had no appetite. More importantly, they weren't fucking. He said *fucking*, not *breeding.* I saw him fresh from the shower in an open bathrobe, trying and failing to create optimal sexual moments for his rodents. Smooth jazz, aroma candles. Like most of the flea market vendors, Grandma included, dude was kooky. One of those men who think the only rule

of business is to say your customer's name as often as possible, except he couldn't keep mine straight. Troy, Tyler, Travis.

With a name like mine, I'd learned to answer to anything.

On the drive home, I positioned the rearview mirror so that it reflected my new snake, coiled in the corner of his terrarium. I was now a snake guy, a more complex person than I'd been when I woke that morning, one who would soon possess empirical knowledge about snake behavior. I was eager to learn which of my stale traits the new one would supplant.

At first, Grandma allowed it. She wasn't pleased, though. So long as it stayed in its terrarium and its terrarium stayed in my room, so long as she didn't have to think about the fact that she shared her house with a snake, then everything was copacetic. But nothing ever stayed where I put it.

The first couple times I'd woken up to an empty terrarium, I would find the snake coiled under my bed or in the closet. I figured it was trying to escape the daylight or the blow of the heater or the AC, depending which time of year it was. I want to say summer, but I don't remember for sure.

The morning in question, I woke to my grandma pounding on my door. She wasn't much of a yeller, but she was yelling. There were only two house rules: knock before you enter and no toplessness. I figured the second rule applied exclusively to me, which was fine. She let me live with her for free —the least I could do was spare her the sight of my wrecked nudity.

When my head breached the headhole of my shirt, I saw the empty terrarium. The day came into focus—it was afternoon, not morning, or so said the clock. And my bedroom door was ever so slightly ajar.

“Don’t worry,” I called. “I’ll take care of it.”

When I came out, she was smoking in the living room, modeling impatience. It was easy to forget that she was a tiny old woman the way she commanded her domain. An arsenal of tools were stowed around the house, grabbers and graspers for hard-to-reach objects, pokers for poking, a narrow collapsible aerial antenna that once belonged to a car. I’d seen her use the antenna to gesticulate at Lex, tear down cobwebs, stir up air too stagnant for her tastes. It was half extended now. She was swishing it around her ankles like a cow swishes its tail.

“And how do you plan to do that?”

“Do what?” I scanned the corners of the room for my snake.

“You said you were going to take care of it.”

“What are we talking about?”

“You got a valentine,” she said. She brushed past me and took her purse from the coat rack. “I’m going out. I don’t want that man ever calling my house again. Make sure he doesn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I’m still not following.”

With her antenna, she lifted the end table’s skirt and poked around beneath it until what sounded like a voice from a drive-thru intercom issued forth.

“Call him,” she said. “Have a heart-to-heart. I don’t care. But you tell him If he’s got something to confess, he can find a priest. Leave me the hell out of it.”

The table skirt fell and Grandma left. Doors were not slammed in her household.

My hangover was spreading its roots, gobbling up real estate. I could feel my guts making porridge. The garbled voice stopped abruptly with a beep. I was going to have to lower myself to the floor to replay it. I stared at the carpet, wondering how the fuck I was supposed to

get down there. A ladder maybe, or a goddamn parachute. Evidently, Grandma had taken her poker.

I made coffee first, smoked a bowl and a cigarette, took a shit. Made plans. Found Grandma's hemorrhoid pillow and arranged it as a landing pad. Retrieved my phone and an ashtray in case I lacked the resolve to get back up.

Under the table skirt, the answering machine blinked red.

Dad was hysterical. I could tell it was him, but I couldn't tell what he was saying, or not immediately. He said my name, said my mom's name, kept saying how badly he'd fucked up. Gasping for air like he was hyperventilating. I tried to imagine a face to match the voice, but my templates were limited. When he got angry, he'd go silent. When he got sad, he would work out. Even when he'd yell, I'd been able to tell he didn't care that much, that he was yelling because he thought he was supposed to yell.

It was Sweet Dave's fault, he said, not David's. When he'd been laid up with his injury, my mom had called drunk. He told her to come over even though he could tell she was wasted. He was incapacitated with muscle relaxants and pain pills, but he still had urges. They could fuck each other sober, just like old times. Come see Tycho, he'd told her. Tycho misses you.

He told the answering machine he would kill himself in a heartbeat if that meant he could take it all back. Or that was how I translated his blubbering. He blamed himself for my mom's death. Good for him. It was more surprising that it had taken him so many years to come to that conclusion.

The answering machine was an antique, the kind with two tiny cassette tapes inside. It didn't log the time or date of the message, it didn't speak. There was no telling whether he'd

called weeks ago or that morning. He'd talked past the allotted time. He might have been talking still. Wherever he was, he sounded like he was on the floor, same as me. Maybe the thirty seconds on record was just preamble. Maybe he pulled himself together so he could better explain himself. Let me start again, he might've said. Let me explain it all perfectly, put our shared history into a context so goddamn tidy that our separate histories will finally make sense. And when he was done, he looked at his phone and realized the call had ended days ago, minutes ago. He'd said it, though. He wouldn't ever be able to say it so elegantly again.

Instead of playing it again, I pressed delete. The tape rewound. There were no new messages.

I was too hungover to get off the ground, so I settled in, sprawled out. The hemorrhoid pillow provided the same comfort for a head as it did for an ass, better even. It solved the age-old problem of where to put the ear. From the floor, I saw the snake coiled under the couch. I'd learned by then that snakes don't give a shit about people, even the ones that feed them. The deepest affection it would show for me was a kind of cold disregard. Which made us a perfect match. I didn't have to take it on walks or scratch its belly or talk to it in a baby voice. All it required was a stable temperature, ample light, and a steady supply of mice.

Its head rested on its coil. Only one eye looked at me. On the other side of its head, the other eye could've been looking at anything. In a way, I envied the snake its ability to choose, even if that choice didn't amount to much in captivity. Human eyesight, though, was flawed by design. What was the point of having two eyes if they always had to look at the same fucking thing?

LUCY

In the motel mirror, I cut off my ponytail. I'd forgotten to steal scissors back in Cincinnati, so I made chivalrous Tycho borrow a pair from the meth-head at the front desk. They were dull, the tips of the blade charred and filthy with a gummy residue I couldn't scrub off. But they did the job. With the ponytail gone, I couldn't change my mind.

Tycho sat on the toilet seat, yawning, while I cut my hair off in chunks and told him all about leukemia and chemotherapy and how his insurance had dropped us. I added characters and circumstances, bad luck piled on top of bad luck. We didn't know what else to do but come begging for Daddy's help.

"If he really does blame himself for your mom," I said, "then we can give him a chance to make up for it. Christians love redemption stories. It's almost poetic, right?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't get the feeling he spends a lot of time thinking about it."

"Then we can remind him."

Mine was a better plan than any Tycho had come up with. I didn't need him to give me a trophy or anything, but it might've been nice if he didn't shit on all my ideas. He looked like shit, like he was about to fall asleep on the toilet. When I turned the electric razor on, he winced and buried his face in his hands. We could fight about it later.

For now, I decided, my eyebrows would stay.

The first swipe with the razor felt final, like no going back. If I'd known it would be so satisfying, I'd have shaved it all off years ago. Hair flying, sticking to my skin. Neat rows like furrows in a mown field.

Tycho agreed to buzz the back of my head and behind my ears. He groaned like an old man when he stood up, and I felt his belly press against my shoulders. In the mirror, we were father and daughter. It was Tycho, really, who looked sick. With my head buzzed, I looked even healthier than normal. But I imagined us seen through somebody else's eyes, and there we were, the Valentines.

He clicked off the razor. "All done," he said.

"It's buzzed," I said, "but I still got to shave it bald."

"Girl, I'm about to fall asleep standing. Can we finish up in the morning?"

It was already morning, but I told him yeah, go to sleep. I could finish by myself.

#

The shower stream on my bare head sent a current of furry warm electricity through my shoulder blades and down my spine. At home, the shower came out in a sad trickle. Most days I would bathe in the sink—face, armpits, nether regions—until I felt dirty enough to endure the trickle. Mom bitched about it all the time. She liked baths, but by time the tub was full the water would be cold. Dad refused to let Gordon the maintenance man, an elderly sex offender who wore two pair of glasses, set foot in our apartment. Not because he was a sex offender, but because Dad couldn't be bothered to make our home look like it didn't belong to a drug dealer.

For the same reason, my hypothetical friends were not allowed to visit, not that I would've asked them to, even if I'd had any. Other than Tycho. Tycho, I reminded myself, was my friend.

At Columbus Christian Academy, my friend options were limited to misfits like Grace and Justice, which, please, I'd preferred to keep my own company. I was the girl whose jacket

smelled like cigarette smoke, who came mid-year from public school (which meant I'd been kicked out), whose parents didn't volunteer for the fucking cake walk or whatever. There was a standing invitation for parents to join their children, to worship and pray alongside them, at the mini church services (they called them DiscipleNow, no space) held before lunch every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Obviously mine never came. I never asked them to. Dad would've shown up in his Sublime t-shirt and fucking cargo shorts, and Mom, even in a six-thousand-dollar ball gown she'd have looked like trash. The rumor was I'd been kicked out of public school. Nobody cared what the truth was. Nobody asked. My parents would've been evidence against me.

The first thirty minutes of DiscipleNow were singing led by this senior named James Mark, a heartthrob idiot whose recessed eyes and weird ringlet hair made all the wholesome girls swoon—he played acoustic guitar accompanied by a revolving cast of high school girls. The lyrics were projected on a screen, but everybody already had them memorized. "Shout to the Lord," "Everlasting God," "O Come to the Altar." Basically pop songs with Jesus jargon. Except for me, all the students went to one of two churches. I could only tell them apart because one group raised their hands when they sang and the other group made faces and clutched their hands over their hearts.

After the singing, Pastor Wible would come up to the front and lead us in prayer. More jargon. That we would "run the race set before us," or that the Holy Spirit (which was like Jesus wearing a sheet with eyeholes) would "show up in this place."

For the first couple weeks, it was fun to watch the students' pious facial contortion, the how the dickhead from geometry who couldn't stop chewing his fingers until they bled suddenly

became a religious maniac, raising his hands and speaking in a pretend language. Girls sat with girls, boys with boys, except on the days the parents came, and then the orphans—meaning the kids whose parents couldn't get off work or were unpresentable—sat with the other orphans. We weren't allowed to read during DiscipleNow, and no phones, but it was better than class. It was its own kind of class—I got to watch people unashamed to act like jackasses.

But like how poor, fat Grace had to introduce herself to the whole school, I had to do that too, only I didn't cry, and because I was from Columbus, instead of the question about my hometown, Pastor Wible asked me what he called an icebreaker question—what was the one thing I would save if my house was on fire? He put the microphone in my face and I didn't know if I was supposed to do some Miss America preamble, like, "Well pastor, as an Ohio girl who loves her family—" I said something like, "I'd be okay starting from scratch." And he asked me if there wasn't a special photo album or an item in my keepsake drawer that I'd want to take with me. There wasn't. I mean, if there really was a fire, I knew where my dad kept his money—I'd take that and the car keys and get the fuck away from Columbus. But that wouldn't have been the right answer. The one I gave wasn't right either. I was supposed to say I would gladly risk burning alive to save our signed copy of the Bible that Daddy kept in his hunting drawer or whatever the fuck. My answer, or lack of answer, made me an outcast on day one, the bad girl who didn't have precious things.

And so I wasn't even surprised when my name came up that Friday. Every Friday, names got pulled from an actual hat, names and a passage of scripture, and whoever it was had to give a mini-sermon on that passage the following week. Pastor Wible was the baseball coach and my science teacher and a man with personal needs, so obviously he couldn't be expected to

preach three days a week and twice on Sunday at his regular church—he needed our help. My name was drawn and my passage was the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, the parable of the prodigal son.

My first inclination was to kill myself to avoid having to preach to the kids and teachers I hated, but after that passed and I actually read the fifteenth chapter of Luke, I became kind of inspired. People normally tell the story as an example of the boundless love of god. Like you can fuck up, but god is still going to welcome you back into the fold once you say you're sorry—but that's only half of the story. I mean, that part does happen. Prodigal son wants to be free, demands his inheritance, and hits the road, spends all his money on prostitutes and unclean food and the kind of drugs people took two thousand years ago. But it sucks, and he decides that his dad is the kind of sentimental dupe who will be so happy to see his son that he won't even care that the boy now has chlamydia and a face tattoo. And the son is right. Dad's so happy.

But the part people forget about, and part that I focused my little sermon on, is the other brother, the good son, the one who stayed home and always did what his dad wanted him to do, the one who, in fact, was busy working when the shit son dragged his busted ass home. And when the father declares a feast, the good son is like, *What the fuck, Dad*? *I've been working so hard and you never gave me a feast.* Moral of the story, which I tried to drive home to my fellow students, was this: you can suck up to god all day long and be good and never do drugs and never lay with ladies of the night, but god plays favorites. He might chose some degenerate over you, so don't get your hopes up.

It wasn't met with applause, my little sermon, but I was proud of it. And in the shower, it made me think of Tycho.

I tried to but couldn't imagine my parents in a blind panic, frisking themselves for the proper authorities to call, driving up and down the neighborhood streets, yelling my name. Dad wouldn't call the cops. I was sure of that much. How many times would they call my phone and get my voicemail before they gave up? *She'll come home when she's good and ready*, they might say, knowing full well I wouldn't, that I never would be. If my dad could stay sober long enough for his brain to kick in, any worry would give way to paranoia—if I came home, it would be in the back of a police car and my dad would flip. There wouldn't be any feasts.

I hoped Tycho's dad would be happy to see him. Fuck our plan. Maybe we wouldn't need it. Maybe his dad would break down crying and dress himself in sackcloth and cover his face in ashes. All the ways he'd fucked up as a father and a person, from that moment forward he would do everything he could to make it right. The fake granddaughter could slip out of the room unnoticed.

I stayed in the shower until the water got cold. And when I got out, the mirror was so fogged I couldn't see myself. I didn't wipe it off. I didn't want to see it until it was perfect.

The TV was too loud. I put on my pants and my bra, wrapped my shoulders in the hotel towel.

Tycho was starfished across the bed, snoring into a decorative pillow. Above the bed was painting of a lake and a boat. I dug a clean shirt from my backpack, turned the TV down, and pulled Tycho's shoes off. I felt terrible for everybody who had ever stayed in this room, newlyweds with bad credit, who wanted to be anywhere other than home for one night, who watched the same TV shows they watched at home but in a new bed. Women had become pregnant in this room, or miscarried in the bathroom and cried in the shower. Probably

somebody had died or had their first period here. The snake was coiled in its aquarium, and the heat lamp glowed the color of orange Starburst. The heater beneath the window made the same sound the refrigerator made at home, and the air it blew out smelled like the inside of a thrift store purse. There was a mini fridge with nothing inside and a mirror and two plastic cups wrapped in plastic and a bucket for ice and a piece of laminated paper that said which TV channel was which. This was a non-smoking room, according to a coaster. What they lacked in ashtrays, they made up for in mirrors. Free HBO, free mirrors. Nobody had ever wanted to sleep here. Like me and Tycho, they were too tired to make it all the way. They stopped here because they were tired and slept in the bed because beds were for sleeping. They watched TV because the WiFi cost extra.

I fished a cigarette from Tycho's jacket and smoked in the doorway. The noise from the freeway was a droning, spiritless roar. I could hear it but not see it. Our door faced the parking lot and, beyond that, a treeless, colorless field littered with segments of huge concrete pipe like kid-size tunnels, a rusted speedboat on a rusted trailer, and a double row of electrical towers foreshortening into nothing. Tycho's car was parked between a tow truck and a handicap space. America was a shithole.

TYCHO

The last time I heard his voice was only about a year ago. Late on a weeknight, a school night for Lucy, with Travis passed out on the couch and Marina snoring behind her bedroom door, me and Lucy did what was quickly becoming our ritual—smoking in my car until one of us got tired.

"I got bored during chapel today," she said. "Guess what I did?"

"You prayed for endurance?"

"Nope," she said. "I shook your family tree."

Ever since she was little, Lucy used information to get her way. She was an encyclopedia with an agenda, even if it wasn't always clear what her agenda was. Facts could be manipulated to set her parents against each other, or confuse them enough that she could do what she wanted, unimpeded. She used her phone like a quiver of arrows, all the world's knowledge a fucking swipe away—it was only a question of which arrow would best wound which target. Marina would be on edge for days after Lucy patiently explained how the Bible was written by time-traveling Druids, or how the public water supply was laced with estrogen. Once, after Lucy showed Travis a picture from the eighties of a grinning, besequinned Dr. Dre and read him a snatch of the man's earliest lyrics ("I'm Dr. Dre, gorgeous hunk of a man / I do tricks on the mix like nobody can"), Travis became so indignant that he threw an ashtray at the wall. I didn't know what she stood to gain by any of it, by showing her dad that a hard-ass rapper he admired was nothing but a cultivated product. She didn't like to let people get away with their posturing. Too, sowing discord, for Lucy, might've been its own reward. Made sense why she wasn't exactly swimming in friends.

I wasn't worried about whatever she'd found. She already knew about my dad, that we weren't on speaking terms. There was plenty about him she could drag up on the Internet, but I didn't peg him as Lucy's brand of famous—greased-up old man with feathered hair, medallion nipples, and a long list of non-felony crimes. She didn't have any reason I could think of to attack me with information. I didn't have anything she wanted that I wasn't prepared to give her—cigarettes, weed, the nighttime shelter of my car.

When she got high, she became either chatty or sullen. There wasn't any in between. The night in question was a chatty night, which was fine with me. The more she talked, the less I had to.

I almost breathed a sigh of relief when she finally asked her question. Did I know, she asked, clearly hoping I didn't, that I was named after Tycho Brahe, famous sixteenth century astronomer?

No, in fact, I wasn't. I was named for some great uncle on my dad's side, a semi-famous arsonist in the nineteen twenties who abandoned his family to pursue his dream. He would burn shit down in East Texas, fly to West Texas in his primitive airplane, burn something down there, and return east to do it all again. What had started as an insurance scam became a passion. There was a brief shootout with the Texas Rangers on a runway in Longview. He managed to take off with a leaking fuel tank but crashed ten minutes later in the recreation yard of a prison, where he burned alive inside the wreckage. Apparently, he kept a pair of toothless female opossums as pets and flying companions. They perished with him in the crash. That was the legend anyhow.

And, yes, every science teacher I'd ever had had marveled over my namesake, hoping for a budding astronomer but stuck with me.

"Sure," Lucy said, "but did you know that Tycho Brahe got his nose cut off in a duel about math? And he wore a fake silver nose. Like silver, the metal. He had to glue it onto his face every morning and rip it off at night."

I did not know that. When she was dispensing knowledge, she often forgot to pass the blunt. She went on, and I watched the orange cherry go dark between her fingers.

“And he had a pet elk,” she said, “who drank beer. People came from, like, far and wide to try and outdrink the elk. But the elk always won. Except this one time, when the elk was invited to a party alone, no Tycho Brahe, and everybody kept trying to drink more beer than the elk, but they couldn’t. They were passed out drunk and humiliated all over the castle, and the victorious elk trotted up the stairs and reared up on his hind legs in celebration. But he slipped, because he was wasted, fell down the stairs, and died. It was either an elk or a moose. There’s conflicting evidence. Makes more sense as an elk.”

“What was its name?”

“Dude,” she said, “I looked everywhere. No record of a name. Your snake doesn’t have a name either.” She held the blunt up between her face and mine. “Coincidence?”

I took the blunt back, relit it, and tried to remember if any version of the story of Tycho the Arsonist had mentioned the opossums having names. Were all the Tychos too goddamn lazy to name their pets?

“There’s another thing too,” she said.

Her phone flashed her face in pale pastels as she thumbed for what she was looking for. She had this way of raking her bottom lip with her teeth—the kind of gesture a woman might make on purpose, but not a girl. Her lips without lipstick were the color of undercooked salmon, and when she raked them, they went nearly white. The little divot between her nose and the peak of her lip, furred white-blonde in the phone light, seemed like the center of herself, the knotty core, despite its softness, around which the rest of her had grown and would continue to grow.

She held the phone out horizontal between us. A black screen with a Bible verse in glowing red remained just long enough for a slow reader to read it. Philippians 4:8. It told the

viewer to think about pure, good, noble, lovely things. Keep on the sunny side of life. When bad shit pops up, plug your ears, close your eyes, navigate by scent or sonar until something good, noble, lovely comes along.

The Bible verse screen was wiped away and replaced with a woman in pearls and tall, narrow hair. Behind her, a fake window framed a view of fake fields. A born aunt, the kind of lady who tries to talk to you in line at the grocery store. All sugar, she explained how her guest today was no stranger to battle. Once, he'd waged war against flesh and blood, but by the saving grace of Jesus Christ he'd learned who the true enemy was: the principalities and powers and the rulers of darkness. Before the camera panned to his face, I knew what was coming.

Dad in a modest gray suit, no tie. He'd finally cut his hair, a late attempt to outsmart his receding hairline. He wore a tidy grayish beard. When he smiled, which appeared to be his new default expression, the lines around his eyes spiderwebbed across his temples. He wore a lapel pin, a gold cross.

He and the lady sat in leather chairs with a table between them. On the table, a box of tissues, two blue coffee mugs. The set was a talk show mockup, complete with an implicit applauding studio audience. Guest and host's names appeared at the bottom of the screen. Hers was Joyce.

The video was nearly twenty minutes long. I could feel Lucy's eyes frisking me for a reaction, but she wasn't going to get one.

Joyce bade her bullshit audience welcome David Guy, founder of Ring Rust Ministries. But they might know him better as Sweet Dave Valentine, three time world heavyweight champion and infamous professional wrestling bad boy. First, Joyce wanted to know how he

went from this (a photo of Dad in full ring attire with his opponent slung across his shoulders) to the man seated across from her.

"Dude," I said, "I don't want to see this. It's a fucking gimmick. That's what wrestlers do. They play a character until people get tired of it. Then they play a different one. He don't got a sincere bone in his body."

Even as I was trying to explain him, I knew I wasn't doing it right. Everything was in pictures, a whole history, and I didn't know how to translate pictures to words.

"Obviously he's a fraud," Lucy said. "I'm not an idiot. Let me find the good part."

She thumbed through the video, past Dad's face as it modulated in high speed and lo-def from solemn to joyful, until we arrived, alongside Dad, Joyce, and a camera crew, at the double front door of a pale brick house with pine trim. The windows reflected a glaze of summer sunlight that was not Ohio's.

In the driveway was a beet-red Hummer with *Ring Rust* scrawled in gold across both doors. Next to it sat a low-slung sports car, defiantly parked to indicate speed and recklessness. What a cunt. He wore a busy t-shirt with skulls wrapped in the kinds of shapes amateur bodybuilders get tattooed on their biceps, jeans with ornamental pockets. He looked like the co-owner of a fucking vape shop, a fifty-year-old trying to pass for twenty, and failing. The interview portion of the show was over. Now, he was escorting Joyce through his house. An indoor pool with a guy in it who waved for the camera, a movie room with a reel-to-reel projector. An outdoor pool with another guy in it. He waved too.

Who is David Guy, Joyce asked, as opposed to Sweet Dave Valentine?

That was a question, he responded, that he was still learning how to answer. Sometimes Dad used to feel like he was watching his manufactured self perform. In the beginning, he said, it had been easy to separate the two. Sweet Dave Valentine was the wrestler, and David was the man. David was the friend, the father, the husband, and Sweet Dave was a costume he kept in a drawer. But over time, he learned that feeding Sweet Dave was more gratifying. He fed Sweet Dave, and David starved away to nothing. While Sweet Dave Valentine abandoned his family, betrayed his friends, and earned fleeting moments of fame, David the man could look on and shrug. His fake self hurt a lot of people along the way. His fake self used people. Joyce, he said, it's called compartmentalization, and Joyce nodded, all her orifices puckered in sympathy. But Jesus, he said, Jesus saw right through the mask, past Sweet Dave, past the muscles and the noise, to the starved man underneath. When you see Jesus face to face, he said, all the fakery just melts away. He paused, the pause became pregnant, became huge with child, before he said: Sweet Dave Valentine had a lot of excuses, but David has a mission.

"For fuck's sake." I jabbed my finger at the screen but the video kept going. "I can't watch this shit anymore."

"Doesn't it make you mad?" she asked.

"Nope," I said. "You want to make me mad?"

"God, Tycho—"

"If that don't make me mad, nothing will. And I'm not mad at all. Keep trying, though. I'm a little sleepy, but I'm not even kinda fucking mad."

"Oh my god, I'm not trying to hurt your feelings or whatever," she said. "All the fancy stuff he has, half of it's yours. All of it's yours. It's not like he deserves it. You just gotta stop being a baby and take it. You should be mad."

"Thanks for your concern."

"I'm not trying —"

"Lucy, I'm tired. I gotta get home."

"Fine."

She climbed out of my car and brushed ash from her shirt.

"Can I get a couple cigarettes for later?"

I gave her the rest of my pack. She walked through my headlights, sat on the doormat, and smoked alone, lit by the porchlight from above, below from her phone. I didn't drive away until she went inside.

At the stoplight by the UDF, I ate two Percocets. Ten minutes from home meant they would kick in after I'd driven home safely, unlocked the door without dropping my keys, kicked my shoes off, made a snack, opened my laptop in bed. If I timed it right, they would kick in right then. On the drive home, I would plan my snack, plan what I would watch. When I got home, though, Grandma was up, watching TV. I poured her a glass of her pink wine and poured myself some apple juice. The pills kicked in when I wasn't paying attention. I peed all over the toilet. I sat down on the bathroom tile to clean it up and stayed there for a while. When I finally got in bed, I watched the video of Joyce and my dad, all twenty minutes of it. I've hurt so many people, he said, now watch me help. When the video was over, I started it again. When I woke up, it was

still playing even though my phone was dead. All of it was still playing, every story I told myself, on a loop. And there wasn't any button that made it stop.

LUCY

In Arkansas, Tycho lost his freeway courage, so we weaved up forested mountains on two-lane roads. At the tops were hotels with smashed windows, graffiti messages, plywood doors, and tall signs advertising their lazy names—Mountaintop Inn, Altitude Motel, Vista Lodge. The ghosts of simpler times, before theme parks and beach resorts, when Arkansans in low places would vacation in the mountains, and the mountain people would visit lakes.

Up and down the mountains, we passed hillbilly shacks with yards littered with plastic toys, plastic swimming pools, fire pits, dead cars. Every other house flew a Confederate flag. There were confederate flags in Ohio too, which is stupid, but they were rarer. Here, they weren't only flags. They were window curtains and bumper stickers and tattoos. At a gas station in Benton, Arkansas, I waited in line for the unisex bathroom behind a shirtless dude with the biggest pistol I'd ever seen strapped to his thigh, tattooed up and down with white pride and swastikas and skeleton faces like he was the mascot for every suburban northerner's idea of the South. All he was missing was the banjo and too few teeth. The hillbilly houses looked just like him, or he looked like them.

At a Walmart in Hot Springs, we bought burner phones and a carton of cigarettes, and we smoked a bowl by the dumpsters out back. On our way out of town, a red-faced woman on the back of a motorcycle showed us her breasts.

Tycho ate at Long John Silver's and Taco Bueno. I filled up both cupholders with pistachio shells.

In montage, patterns were emerging.

Pop quiz: from shining sea to shining sea and all the shit in between—deserts, plains, mountains, cornfields, parking lots, slums, and gated communities—what do all the checked boxes of America have in common?

Answer: roadkill. Mostly deer, but also raccoons and possums and dogs and cats. On the side of the road in Broken Bow, Oklahoma, I saw my first armadillo. Its shell was nearly intact, but all the tender stuff inside was spurting out both ends. It had died in transit. Tycho said he'd seen hundreds of armadillos back when he lived in Texas, but he'd never seen a live one.

He told me an armadillo joke but fucked it up before the punchline. He tried another one:

"What do you get when you cross a highway with an armadillo?"

I told him I didn't know. Jokes, depending on who was telling them, either made me angry or depressed the shit out of me, and I was way too tired to be angry

"About half way across," he said.

There was nothing to laugh at. It made me feel a little better that he didn't laugh either.

All we saw of Oklahoma was a narrow, two-town wedge, and it looked like a browner, thirstier Ohio, flat with occasional trees. Every tenth license plate belonged to Osage Nation or Caddo Nation. Of course this was the place the American fathers offered up to the Indians, until, of course, they wanted it back. But, hey, supper's on us, and here's these cool-ass license plates. And everybody went to bed happy, the end.

And then we entered Texas.

I realize that when I called America a shithole I'd only seen three of her states. Having now seen six, I had a more accurate sample size, and I decided to stick by my judgment. Aside from the tiny-town courthouses, everything old was in bad shape, but the newer shit didn't fare any better. Fake-adobe strip malls full of vape stores and tanning salon chains, payday lenders, Subway, tax preparers, Sally's Beauty Supply. It all made perfect sense, but only in the context of the shithole. And nothing made so much sense as mattress stores, which were fucking everywhere—if the daytime world was full of so much trash, a comfortable mattress was the most important thing to own. That and blackout curtains. A good night's sleep all day long.

Dallas was too big to go around. We had to drive straight through its tangle of freeways. Tycho called the tangles "spaghetti bowls." The name was hokey but accurate. Four freeways met, dipped and climbed and twisted to avoid one another, and spat cars out at seventy-five miles per hour. Tycho kept his speed at a steady sixty five and refused to budge from the slow lane.

A green sign said Waco was ninety-four miles away and Austin was one hundred and ninety. Tycho converted miles to hours and announced that we were like three and a half from his dad's house. He took two different pills to celebrate. My ass was asleep and three-and-a-half hours sounded like forever.

As far as I could tell, the only difference between Texas and the other states were the billboards. Before, they'd start popping up on the outskirts of cities, gradually. First the ones about Jesus and hell and abortion, and then, past the city limits sign, they'd start advertising sophisticated shit like cancer hospitals and togetherness. Here, though, they never stopped. Signs for shooting ranges, antique malls, the cleanest restrooms, one hundred flavors of animal jerky, pecans by the pound. "You Don't Need No Teef to Eat Our Beef" and "Click It or Ticket" and,

Tycho's favorite, "Liberals Please Continue On I-35 Until You Have Left Our GREAT STATE OF TEXAS." That mixture of politeness and utter disdain, he said, made him feel like he was home again. I wasn't amused and I sure as fuck wasn't home. Being told every eighth of a mile to buy this or believe that, it was exhausting. I put my sunglasses on, scrunched up in my seat, and thumbed along the map on my phone.

Ring Rust Ministries was twenty-seven miles west of Austin. But If we kept driving south, in six hours we'd be in Mexico—Laredo on the U.S side and Nuevo Laredo on the other. The border was the squiggly blue line made by the Rio Grande. Maybe it was getting harder to slip over from the south, but what about the other way? Did land of the free mean I was free to escape?

I liked the idea of Mexico, even if I didn't know anything about it except what I saw in movies. That it was simple and old and dangerous. Cactus and pale pink houses, a country full of nothing but kids and senior citizens and dudes with mustaches and machine guns. Everybody wearing hats. I imagine crossing over alone, like into nothingness, and returning years later a completely different person, unrecognizable. *Transfiguration* is the word, like how Jesus went up the mountain, talked to ghosts, and came back down with clean clothes, different colored eyes, and clouds trailing from his fingertips. I'd imagined it before, disappearing into another place and coming back transfigured. It was harder to imagine what would happen inside.

Maybe that was the appeal, that anything could happen. And if Mexico was the same as America—stripmalls and billboards and mattress sales—then I could keep going south until I found something different.

There was a weird urgency to it too, to disappear, like if I didn't do it soon I never would. If I waited till I was eighteen, somebody might convince me to go to college—another four years—and before I knew it I'd be my mom all over again, pregnant and poor and furious.

That was partly why I'd said yes to Tycho in the first place. Like, sure, I'll go help you rob your dad. But I didn't think that was what he really wanted to do. He just wanted his long lost daddy back. That's what I'd thought at first, that he was using me as a prop to prove he was son material. That all he really wanted was a reunion. Not that he would ever admit it. But it did make more sense then what he'd been telling me—that after all these years the time had finally come to take what he was owed. If what he was really after was a grand goddamn family reunion, then I would only be in the way. And in that case, I could rob both of them and be twelve-hundred miles closer to Mexico than I was the day before.

But the closer we got, the more I started to believe that he actually hated his dad. He believed that he was owed something we were capable of stealing. And if we really were going to grift Sweet Dave Valentine, then we'd need somewhere to go afterward. We'd be rich and free. Why not Mexico? Tycho wouldn't like it, but that didn't matter. I could convince him to do whatever. He'd do anything not to be alone.

#

In Waco, Tycho freaked out loud enough to wake me up. He'd pulled over on a freeway overpass, in the tiny lane for emergencies only. Tractor-trailers blurred past, laying on their horns. The car smelled like weed—he'd broken his only rule and now we were going to die.

"Holy shit," he said, "did you see that?" He was craning over his seat, looking behind us. "We have to go back."

“Dude, what? Why are we stopped?”

He said, “I don’t fucking believe it.”

I didn’t either. He put the hazards on and crept down the emergency lane until he found an exit. We descended from the freeway and turned right into a block of housing projects sponsored by Salvation Army.

“It was only a couple blocks back,” he said.

“What was?”

“You’ll see.”

Over railroad tracks and past a church that had been gutted by fire, he found what he was looking for—two square blocks of fast food.

“Behold,” he said.

“Didn’t you just eat?”

“Yeah, but look,” he said. “In-N-Out Burger. I thought they only existed in California.”

“Oh my god, just hurry up. I’m tired of stopping.”

The drive-thru line snaked around the building. Tycho was too impatient. He parked and left me in the car with his snake and his drugs. It never occurred to him not to trust me.

Through the rear window, I watched the people in the cars as they inched their ways to the front of the drive-thru line. Trucks and cars and vans, faces framed by passenger windows. It was seven o’clock and the sun was down.

“Hey, snake,” I said, “I bet you’re bored down there. You don’t get to see any of the dumb shit I get to see.”

The snake didn't answer, because obviously. You don't talk to animals for their witty replies.

"There's a yellow Hummer," I told the snake, "and the man inside keeps yawning. He's exhausted because splitting his time between his real family and his secret family is a lot of work. It sounded like a good idea at first. But he found out real soon that two families means double the noise. He's got his phone turned off because both families kept calling, like when are you coming home, like, dinner's ready. All he wants is to take his burger to the top of that parking garage over there and eat it in silence."

The snake adjusted its coil so that its head could rest on its body. Like, *oh girl, tell me more.*

"Okay, a shitty red truck with ladders and tools in the back. The dude driving looks kind of like my dad, but his name is George. Remember my dad, snake? The redhead guy with my foot tattooed on his neck? You guys used to be roommates. Anyway, George used to be hot shit in high school. The bad boy, but the teachers all loved him, and he stood up for the nerdy kids who got bullied. Everybody thought he was great. But after high school, he started working for this ladder company, and his life didn't have any point anymore. This was back before you and me were born, snake."

If the snake was a cartoon snake with human facial features, he'd have been hanging on my every word. I could tell.

I told the snake about a lady in an SUV who was one-hundred percent convinced the world would end on her fiftieth birthday, about a guy in a car whose trunk was rattling with serious bass who believed that the spirit of his dead mother inhabited a pair of roller skates he

When Tycho came out carrying his burger sack, I told the snake about Tycho.

"This guy's on foot," I said, "and this is not his first burger of the day. He's like seven feet tall and super fucking fat. But when the light hits him right, he kind of looks like the guy from that movie about a superhero demon. He never even named you, snake, but me and you and him are about to rob his dad. Oh, he didn't tell you? Not surprised."

Tycho opened the door and stuck his head in.

"Here's the deal," he said. "I'm want to savor this here burger, which is hard to do and drive at the same time. You want to drive the last stretch?"

It was about time. I scooted my ass over the parking brake and settled in. The seat was hot in a gross way, like a still warm toilet seat. Tycho ducked between his car and its neighbor and hit his pipe.

"The trick is," I told the snake, "you got to let him think he's in charge. You pull the strings to make him dance, but you have to make sure he thinks he's the goddamn ballerina."