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Through different voices and points-of-view, these five interlinked short stories explore the opiate epidemic in southwestern Ohio and the long-reaching effects of addiction, poverty, and systematic persecution. The characters struggle to find meaning and hope in a world that disregards them. This is an excerpt from a longer project.

LET THEM LIE:
STORIES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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THE COME DOWN

We're in the truck scoping Clifton for bikes when Nicole screams at me. "Let me drive," she says. She's halfway out of the cab, coming down fast and sweating. We're on one of those rusted-over sets of train tracks and the clutch sticks and makes the truck stall out, so I pull the emergency brake and wait for her to come around.

"Move," she says, ripping open the door. She's jumpy and I don't think it's a good idea for her to drive but I also know it's not a good idea to argue with her, so I do whatever she says.

"Not my fault the truck's shit," I say, sliding—and it's true. Some neglected castoff of the Bush-forty-one-era she borrowed from a friend. The middle window's busted out the back, the tailgate's loose, and I'm certain the floor would fall out if I ram my foot through it. I close my eyes as Nicole releases the e-brake. She thinks I can't drive because I'm from the west, straight out of the dead, flat desert. No experience with these hills. Of course, she takes off expertly, like she doesn't feel the roll, like she doesn't feel herself falling backward.

The truck rumbles through the roads, its vibrations droning on like a lullaby. I'm asleep for a second, just a quick lapse, before she flies past a stop sign at Ravine Street and I open my eyes. This part of the road is dark, unlit. I can hardly make out the houses—skinny, row-style things with slivers for lawns. We've been here before.

"Are you even looking?" she says.

I had a hit three hours ago and she didn't. This isn't her talking; this is the come down.

Most of the time we work well together. Nicole drives whatever car we've borrowed, helps lift when she needs to, and pawns what we find because she gets more money than I can. I'm never there when she does it—I'll wait in the car or smoke outside, out of sight—so she can work alone.

Maybe she flirts a little. Shows off those teeth. She's got an upper middle class smile. Not sure where it's from—she grew up poorer than I did—but damn if it doesn't get her out of trouble. So, sure, maybe she plays Ron, the old guy who owns the shop. Rubs his arm or some shit. Maybe she cries. Tells him what an asshole I am or how I steal what's rightfully hers, and maybe he feels bad for her and slips her a few extra bucks and we need it so why should I question her?

But it's not like she does all the work. I do plenty too. I do the heavy lifting and I buy the dope. I'm the one who takes the fall.

“You're going too fast,” I say. “Slow down.”

She steers the car with her knees, lighting another trembling cigarette. Two days ago, she washed her hair in a rest stop bathroom and now it's somehow both dried out and greasy. She's wearing this pair of ratty old Levis, too tight on the belly, too saggy at the ass—she's starting to show.

“We aren't going to find anything if you flip the truck,” I say.

Really, I want her to slow down so I can pass out. I want more than anything to curl up in the seat of the cab and sleep and sleep and sleep. I wish I could do it. I haven't

slept through the night in years and I feel my eyelids pull downward. I used to be a great sleeper. Back when I was a kid, back out west, back before I met Nicole and before we started doing whatever this was, I could sleep anywhere—doctor’s offices, restaurants, amusement parks, train tracks. Used to run from my house to the rail yard in Barstow to sleep on the boxcars. Mom would bring home some shitbag from the bar and I’d walk out the front door. I’d watch the trains come in during the night, then fall asleep and wouldn’t wake until the next morning. I could sleep through the horns, the grinding metal of wheels. I trained myself to jolt up when I felt the cars move so I could jump off. I was a professional. But these days, if I’m not high, I’m wired, and if I am high, I nod off for twenty minutes and then I’m looking for more. It’s exhausting, but I can’t stop.

She flicks her cigarette butt from the window and turns the truck down a road with parking on both sides. It’s tight. I drop my hand into her lap, squeeze just above the knee, and linger there a moment. She doesn’t look at me, doesn’t acknowledge my thumb rubbing over her thigh.

“Stop,” she says, shuddering. I don’t know if it’s me or a cold chill.

Her stomach swells, pokes out from under her tank top. We’re not sure how far along she is. If it will stick. She said she’d stop when we first found out, about two weeks ago. We were staying with one of her old friends in a windowless basement bedroom. She stole a three pack of tests from CVS, took one while I was half asleep, sitting up on a stack of drool-stained pillows. I heard her curse from behind the door and after a few minutes she sat on the mattress in front of me, cross-legged, her brow bent and wrinkled like she wanted to say something serious.

“I’m going to quit,” she said, finally, clutching the bed sheet in both hands. “I want to live like normal people.” She kept going on and on about stopping, about getting help and going to meetings, and after a while she wasn’t looking at me any longer but staring at the sheets and the walls and up at nothing—maybe the ceiling, I guess.

And so when she was finally done talking I said, “That sounds like a good idea. You should do that if you want.” She didn’t look happy with that response. “What?” I said.

“Aren’t you tired?” she asked.

“I’m trying to sleep now, yeah,” I said, sliding down onto the mattress.

She dropped the sheet, rolled her eyes. She was so thin. Bloated in the abdomen but skeletal everywhere else. I didn’t want to look at her anymore.

“What?” I said, turning away.

“Never mind.”

And then she puked for a while and we didn’t know if it was morning sickness or dope sickness and I kept thinking about how all the shit that’s good for you will really just make you ill.

Nicole jerks the steering wheel toward a driveway.

“Is that one?” she asks.

It’s pitch black outside, and I can only make out a dull shape before me. It’s not a bike, I’m sure, but Nicole flicks on the headlights anyway, and in the brief illumination I

see a birdbath, swallowed with moss and crumbling. It's a concrete cherub dumping a bucket into the bath part, but a chunk of its head is missing and the water's all gone.

"No," I say, and she turns the lights off. Her feet work the gas and clutch as she backs up the truck. I don't know how she can focus on so many things simultaneously. She whips forward and squeals on toward McMillian, a main road with sallow street lamps that make the world look piss-colored.

Nicole swerves over the double yellow and yanks the truck back to our lane.

"Stay awake," she says, zigzagging. "This is your fault."

I guess it was. We were sleeping and I got up, sweating and sick, and I took the last of our supply before nodding off again. I woke to her screaming about an hour later, acting like she wouldn't have done the same.

But I left her the cottons. That was something.

"I need your help," she says.

She doesn't, really. We do this shit all the time. If it's not bikes it's catalytic convertors or, once, power tools from her sister's shed. We clip copper pipes and wire from the abandoned houses in OTR and she'll haul bags to the scrapyard by herself. She could grab some college kid's bike and throw it in the back of the truck without me, no problem. It was all in a day's work.

"Okay," I say. "I'm trying."

She drives through a red light, and I can't tell whether she saw it. There's not a moment of hesitation in anything she does, which I both admire and fear.

“Look,” she says. She swings the car around, the wrong way on a one way, and makes a wide U-turn into a gas station. “Grab it.”

Her eyes are bright and wild. The splinter of light from the broken fluorescents above us casts shadows on her chest, stripes along her ribs and eyes, and she looks hollow, scraped out.

I hop from the truck’s cab and Nicole takes off toward Calhoun, toward the university, which is where she’ll pick me up. Clifton’s the best neighborhood for bikes. We’ve done runs here nearly a dozen times, but I know we’ll have to move on soon. We’re pushing our luck. The good part about this area of town is that it’s dead in the summer. No one’s around to see me. But, always, even when I’m in a stupor, even when it seems as though I am too gone to know what I’m really doing, I feel a pinching, hot nervousness. A guilt Nicole says she doesn’t feel anymore.

A car pulls next to one of the pumps and I think it’s a police officer, but it’s just some girl in blue scrubs. I wonder what I look like, how I smell. I haven’t checked a mirror all day and I haven’t showered in four, just subsisting on whore baths at the Wendy’s. I hope she doesn’t notice me.

The bike’s propped up against the wall of the gas station, beside the giant ice freezer. Through the window I see a man standing at the register, tapping his fingers on the countertop. While the cashier pulls out his change, he looks around the building. He doesn’t see me. He’s not paying attention. My fingers wrap around the rubber handle and squeeze but I’m keeping my eye on the man. I pull away from the wall and push off, wobbly. It’s harder to steer than I remember. The front tire twists to the left and the bike

tips and takes me with it. My jeans had hooked onto the chain in the fall and I jerk but I can't break free in time. The man from inside walks out, looks to the spot his bike rested, then right at me as I struggle. You never know how somebody's going to react when they catch you, but there's always a brief flash of disbelief. It was the same with Nicole that morning.

I take off. My feet feel too small for my shoes as I run through the alleys, away from the gas station. A couple times I nearly lose my footing, stumble a bit. I crash into a trashcan, trailing wrappers and half-eaten, half-rotted meals behind me. Waiting for Nicole between two buildings, two houses taller than they are wide, I think maybe I've had enough.

I want to sleep right here on the ground, prop my head up on a cement block and dream. I can't remember the last time I slept. My head twinges and I slap myself to stay awake and after what feels like half an hour of crouching and sitting, I start walking. She'll be pissed when she realizes I don't have the bike. Any bike. She's going on eight hours now.

This neighborhood's a mix of junkies and clean fucks, poor kids and rich students living on their parent's dime. Frat houses beside crack houses. Dorms across from empty gravel parking lots. Downtown's just down the hill and in the winter, when the trees are naked and iced over, you can see the flashing tops of Cincinnati skyscrapers from up in Clifton.

The street smells like old fast food and battery acid. A single lamp on the corner lights up the block and the only sound is my own breathing. I come to a house with

children. There's a plastic kitchen on the front porch, lawn ornaments line the pathway, toy trains half-buried in the grass, and I'm wondering which thing I can take. I see those kitchens outside of children's consignment shops, think it has to be worth something. Maybe twenty dollars or so, and if we couldn't sell it maybe we could keep it. It's white and green, with pink windows and a big sticker of smoking oven racks stuck to the front. I try to pull it away from the wall, dragging the bottom against the concrete, but it's too loud, so I pick it up by the refrigerator shelf. It's unbalanced and I can't really move it down the stairs so I try lifting it up by the small window, but the plastic pane snaps and the whole thing falls down on my toes and I realize it's not worth the trouble.

On the opposite side of the porch, a wagon and a small child's bicycle hide between wicker chairs. The bike is a tiny thing, with thin, shiny ribbon sprouting from its handles. I raise the bike from its spot and throw it over the porch railing, into a patch of bushes. It's not the bike she wanted, but it'd be good for ten bucks.

It's too small to ride away on, so I carry it. I cross Clifton Avenue onto MLK. I walk slowly, watching for cops, listening for Nicole. It's a quiet night, and when she finally pulls over, she shouts at me from the window.

"The fuck is that?" she says.

I don't throw the bike into the bed, though it'd be easier. I unlatch the tailgate, ease it down, and place the bike into the corner of the truck. Nicole watches me from the broken back window, grins when I catch her. I slam up the tailgate and smile back.

#

The pawnshop's just off 75, a mile or so from the Lateral. Nicole says Ron will help her out but I don't ask why and I'm not sure I want her to say it out loud. She drums her hands on the steering wheel, beaming because she knows what's coming.

"You're not mad anymore?" I ask.

"No," she says, "but don't do that shit again."

"Never," I say, but I don't mean it. She wouldn't mean it either. We make these little temporary promises to each other, both of us knowing they're bullshit but never saying so. There has to be a word for promises you know you'll never keep. They don't quite feel like lies.

I press my head against the door and close my eyes. The truck jostles, gently rocking me into something like sleep. My last night in the rail yard in Barstow, I'd fallen asleep on a flatcar. I watched a load of oilers come in and then I don't know what happened. I must've been restless and rolling because when I woke up I was on the ground, my cheek pressed against the rocky ballast, and a wide tunnel of light rushing toward me. I was out of it with sleep—I thought I was dreaming, or maybe dead. The pinpoint of white grew out and as it expanded before me, I realized I couldn't stay in the rail yard anymore. It wasn't worth the risk and what was I getting out of it? Not enough. So I jumped up from the tracks and left and never went back.

"You gotta slow down," I say, awake.

She laughs and underneath the beats of street lamps, I see only her teeth.

I know I-75 like I know the veins running through my hands. I know the exit numbers and the neighborhoods they adjoin. I know the graffiti patterns on the sound

barriers and the construction spots. I know the speed traps and which overpasses dip into good hiding places. And I know Nicole's going too fast.

"Cops," I say. "Look out for cops. You're making me nervous." But she doesn't slow down. We're going to get pulled over. Cops can smell us, and the second they see us they know what we are. We can't hide it.

"I'm just trying to get to Ron's," she says. "Sooner we get to Norwood—"

Potholes puncture this stretch of interstate, clanging the rim of the truck against layers of road. The lanes narrow. Bright orange construction barrels swell out at our left and it feels like we've lost a foot of road on each side. There are few cars out now. No one to check Nicole for straddling two lanes. About fifty feet ahead, I see a dark spot spread across the road—a pothole as wide as a headstone.

"Watch it," I shout, and my body tenses up through my neck. The wheels collide into the gap in the ground, the hole six inches deep, at least. I rise inches into the air. There's a faint scraping. Like metal against asphalt, like bike against highway. Twisting my face to the back window, I see the reflectors flicker. The tailgate's open, bobbing over every bump in the road. The bike's outline fades into the black, flipping wheel over handle down the highway. Nicole slams her hands on the steering wheel and pulls the truck onto the shoulder, kicking up pockets of gravel and dirt that knock against the doors.

"We have to get it," she says. There's a catch in her voice. "You have to get it right now."

"I'm not walking out on the highway," I say.

“You have to.”

“I’m not killing myself for you.”

Her eyes start to well up a bit and I’m ready for a long spiel about how I’m such an SOB and she can’t count on me ever and she doesn’t need me anyway but instead we’re just kind of staring at each other and the wind rushes in from a passing car and it’s so strong it should knock her clean over, but it doesn’t. She’s still standing there. Her hair’s gone all wild from the gusts and the two wrinkles between her eyebrows are as deep as ever because she’s glaring at me like I’m the world’s biggest piece of shit and, I don’t know, maybe I am.

“But I can’t.” She looks down at herself, gut poking out because it’s the only thing left on her that does and I think, of course, she’s right. She can’t.

If I had any brains at all I would get in the truck and leave her bitch ass right there on the side of the road. I’m smart enough to know better than to run out on a highway in the dark and I’m not desperate yet so why should I do this for her? But I walk along the empty shoulder, toeing cigarette butts with the tip of my shoe. The bike’s an eighth mile down from the truck, lying in the middle lane, the front wheel turned up. The spokes look bent, but I can’t tell for sure, so I step through the barrels and onto the highway. Bleary-eyed, I make my way to the bike. The wheel’s lopsided and curled out. There are scratches along the frame; the wrap is pulling away from the body.

“It’s busted,” I shout. “Not too badly, though. We should still try it.”

I lift the bike up by the top tube and see, in the distance, a single white light flaring out in spears, and it’s like I’m a kid again, staring into the train, lying on the

tracks in the middle of the desert and pretending everything's fine exactly how it is. But it isn't. The brightness splits into two beams, and the shadow of a wind deflector emerges from behind them. Nicole waves me over. The construction barrel blocks her legs and feet. I can only see her torso and up, her face and her stomach staring back at me.

THESE HOUSES ARE ALL THE SAME

Her name was bolded in the Obits section of *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, which I normally wouldn't have noticed, except there was a picture too: her face in black and white, practically unchanged since I knew her. Shawna Thompson, 25, died suddenly on Tuesday, December 21, 2009. I knew what *died suddenly* meant. The Obits were filled with died suddenlys and died unexpectedlys and although most deaths are surprising at twenty-five, I couldn't help but wonder about how unexpected hers really was, about how the lines of our lives might have intersected more often, instead of running parallel.

We'd spent every day together the summer I was ten. After my parents split, my mom started worked doubles at the bottling plant and couldn't be home to watch me. Sticking me with Shawna's mom seemed like a better option than leaving me at home with my sisters to fight and destroy the house. So it began as a friendship of convenience, but I'd learned so much from her I couldn't help but think of her as a replacement older sister. The ones I had were too old or too mean. They didn't want me around, but Shawna always did. Shawna showed me around the neighborhood when we first moved in, introduced me to kids on the block and told me which kids to stay away from. She'd been in the neighborhood longer than anyone else and it gave her a kind of authority, and me too by extension. Most people only stayed a year—just until their parents' leases were up. Some others stayed two or three, if they were lucky. But Shawna had lived in her house since she was born.

I liked days with Shawna and her mom. They lived two doors down at the end of our dead-end road. Their house was old and blue and it smelled like a Laundromat, clean and dirty at the same time. Everyday, Shawna's mom gave us chores to do, like fold clothes or wash windows or scrape off dried hairspray from the bathroom fixtures with our fingernails. She tried to keep us busy. If we weren't busy, we'd go to the public pool or hang out at the park, trying to climb to the top of the swingless swingset.

But it was only that one summer, and our last adventure came quickly. That day, Shawna wouldn't let me into the house. Met me on the front porch where we played around for a while, digging tic-tac-toes into the wood panel around the front door. Her mom came outside and asked us to buy her some cigarettes and on the way to the corner store we heard a couple of neighborhood kids talking about a trampoline. Neither of us had seen one close up before. They hung flat on the walls at superstores and sometimes I'd see them in movies or on commercials around Christmastime. But no one we knew had one. So Shawna decided to ask about it.

The kids talking—T-Boy and Dusty and Jayca and April Townsend—they were all my age, a grade below Shawna. But everyone knew Shawna.

“What trampoline?” asked Shawna, breaking into their circle. She tucked the five dollars from her mom into her shirt like she'd seen her mom do, only Shawna didn't have boobs yet, so the rectangular outline of the bill stuck out underneath her tank top.

“T-Boy found a trampoline,” said Jayca, making room for us. “Right up the street.”

“Too fat to jump on it though,” said Dusty, shoving T-Boy. T-Boy laughed like he didn’t want to and I felt a little bad for him because Dusty wasn’t ever nice to anybody and also because T-Boy lived by the overpass with his grandma, and he smelled like sweat and sausage water and probably he couldn’t help that.

“You’re lying,” said Shawna, crossing her arms and scowling. She’d crimped her hair with the crimper she got for her birthday, but she missed wide sections in the back and looked, somehow, both older and younger than twelve.

“Am not,” said T-Boy. “Saw it over on Montgomery.”

Shawna eyed him, but I knew she believed him or else we would’ve been holding Camels and two fistfuls of Chiclets by then.

“Where at on Montgomery?” I asked.

“Pretty far up,” said T-Boy. “In somebody’s backyard.”

“Did you jump on it?”

“No. I couldn’t.”

“Told you he’s too fat,” said Dusty, laughing with April and Jayca.

“That’s not why,” said T-Boy. The other three kept laughing and he stopped talking, his face as red as Shawna’s dried-out, hand-me-down lipsticks.

“Come on,” said Shawna. “We’ve got to get cigarettes.” She grabbed my arm and we walked off, holding up our heads like we were more grown up than we were.

Our plan was simple: walk up and down Montgomery Road searching for it. The only problem was that Montgomery was one of the longest streets in the city—so big it had a route number: a 22 inside of a stout Ohio-shaped sign. The road cut the

neighborhood down the middle, stretched through our town and up north where, Shawna told me, the houses were so far apart you couldn't walk to them. But T-Boy was fat and a wimp and stupid too, and we knew there was no way he'd have made it past the neighborhood's only Baptist church. So we'd try up until then, and Shawna said we'd definitely find it.

We bought the cigarettes and Shawna put a pack in each pocket then shoved the change into her left sock. Her toes pressed against the dirty white pleather of her Velcro shoes, the top of her big toe rubbing a small hole through the top. But my shoes—my shoes were two sizes too big. Mom bought them after school let out, said they'd give me enough room to grow into for the year. But I'd only just started walking in them without tripping every few steps.

“Montgomery's just down that way,” said Shawna when we were out.

I knew where it was. Though she was my best friend, she sometimes treated me like I was still the new kid. She liked when people could look up to her, I guessed, like a big sister or a tour guide. And mostly it didn't bother me because I knew she could have been worse, like my sisters, who shoved me into dryers. Who tied me to stop signs with jump ropes. Who told me Dad left after I was born because he didn't love me.

“We got to drop those off for your mom first, right?” I asked.

“I don't want to go back there,” she said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Wouldn't you rather just find the trampoline? It doesn't matter as long as we're home by dark.”

Her dad left two weeks before and she was weird about going back home ever since. Shawna never brought up that he was gone, which was fine. My dad didn't live with us either and I wasn't there talking about it all the time. What could we say? We were leftovers.

Cars sped by us as we walked down the business section of Montgomery. Our shirts were two shades darker with sweat and the breeze from traffic felt cool against our skin. We passed a nail salon, a check-cashing place, a Chinese restaurant with a big red sign, and a Thriftway with no cart corral.

The longer we walked, the more excited I grew, skipping along the sidewalk, laughing because I couldn't contain myself. Every step forward was a step toward it. I could picture how big the yard must've been for a whole trampoline to fit in it. Was it black and circular? Rectangular? Hidden behind trees or near a creek?

"What do you think it looks like?" I asked.

"The trampoline?" said Shawna, her hair flying up in the wind.

"Do you think it's tan and square? Like on the Olympics?"

"Probably not."

"Yeah, probably not." I paused for a moment while we looked both ways before running across four lanes. "What do you think it feels like?"

"Like a sheet. Or maybe a rubber band. Something like from those cartoons when people's houses are burning and they jump from the windows."

I nodded, in awe of how she always had an answer.

Shawna fanned at herself with her hands. We should have stopped back at her house for water, at least. We'd had nothing all day and my mouth and throat burned.

"I'm thirsty," I said, but Shawna didn't respond.

We walked slowly, stepping around crumbling sections of sidewalk, stopping to pick the yellow flowers blooming from the cracks. I knotted the stems together, braiding dandelion crowns, as we made our way toward the mismatched façades of Cape Cods and gable fronts and bungalows. The neighborhood I'd lived in before was different. The houses were just rows of identical brown apartment blocks. The houses in Norwood were painted different colors. A short ranch house beside a three-story with a wrap-around porch. Some had trees in the front—real trees with leaves as wide as my hand—and some were apartments that looked like houses. The street was completely mismatched but I liked it.

I ran up to the houses while Shawna lingered behind, mostly keeping to the sidewalk but sometimes stepping a few feet into the grass to get a better look at me. I'd peek between the wire diamonds of chain-link fences, hop up to see over overgrown bushes. Shawna said I could do it myself while she waited in front, but she was giving me that look—or, rather, a non-look—like she did when we were at the pool, like she was too old for me, like I was a tag-along friend or some weird, out-of-town cousin. I only got the look occasionally, which made it worse.

"Hey," I called, "Aren't you gonna help?" I stood in someone's side yard beside a stack of firewood I could only imagine as filled with tiny spiders.

"Fine," she said. "One sec."

The street was silent and I could make out the faint unwrapping of plastic film. She slapped the pack against her palm, pulled out a cigarette, and stuck it between her lips. She didn't have a lighter.

Together, we walked to the next one, a purple box of a house. The backyard didn't have a fence. The grass was spotted, flat. A single lawn chair sat in the sun.

"Nothing," said Shawna, sighing.

We moved to the next house, three stories high with green siding and a tiny block of a porch. Shawna walked right up to the front window and looked inside.

"There's people in there," she said, her voice stuck between a laugh and a whisper.

I thought she was going to get us caught, but that's how the rest of it went, up the street for blocks and blocks: running into lawns and patios and gardens, looking for the trampoline, the two of us speaking too loudly, laughing. We searched at least twenty back yards before we reached the Baptist church, the end of our plan, its parking lot empty and door locked up with a chain.

"One more?" I asked, and Shawna nodded. The flowers in her hair had wilted, the cigarette in her mouth was damp with humidity and spit.

We came to a ranch with a hose stretched over the porch and my mouth and throat felt full of cotton balls and sand. I'd forgotten how thirsty I was in the search, in the rush of it, but it seemed more and more like T-Boy was lying and we were worn out and I might as well have something to drink. My feet ached from the lump in the sole—it hit the ball of my foot instead of the arc and I had an oozing blister.

“We should get some water,” I said. “I’m dying.”

Shawna led me up the walkway and pulled on the hose. A few droplets dribbled out, but nothing more because the water wasn’t on

“Grab it,” she said, the cigarette sticking out of the side of her mouth. I lifted the hose above my mouth as she went to the spigot. She twisted the handle until we heard the release, and a sudden flood of funny-tasting water poured from the top of the hose onto my chin and nose. I drank and drank, gulping as much as I could because I didn’t know when I’d next have access.

A hinge squealed, and we both turned to see a man four times our size standing in the doorway. He looked confused, not quite angry, and his chest hair curled over the top of his shirt. I froze.

“Shit,” said Shawna. She hopped off the porch and darted down on Montgomery. I watched her cut through bushes, shrink as she ran.

I looked at the man again as he lurched forward, like he was going to grab me by the shirt. I dropped the tip of the hose and ran too, sprinting as fast as I could. I tried to follow Shawna, shouting after her as she approached an intersection, but she kept running. She was taller than me, lankier, her legs at least three inches longer than my own. She was so far ahead of me. And then she looked back for a second, looked right at me, dead square in the eyes, and turned the corner, moving faster than before.

I couldn’t believe she left me.

I called her name but heard nothing back, and worse, the sun was hanging in the sky like a ripe tangerine and I knew I’d have to walk home alone before it got dark. I

yelled again and again until I heard a voice—not Shawna’s—screaming from somewhere to shut up. My eyes filled, and I sat down on the sidewalk, threw my flower crown into the street. I didn’t know if I was crying because of the man or because I couldn’t find Shawna or because she wasn’t telling me why I wasn’t allowed in her house and maybe it was all three.

I picked at shards of glass collecting around a telephone pole. Maybe she didn’t hear me. Maybe she was afraid. Maybe the man had been behind me and she was running from him, not me. Staring at him, not me. But I knew that wasn’t true.

So what I had done to her? What was it about me that sent people running?

“Hey,” said Shawna, standing over me, one hand on her hip. The cigarette was gone, but she’d moved the open pack to her front pocket. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. I dragged my palm across my nose. “Where were you? Why did you leave me?”

“Were you crying?”

“No.”

“Yes you were.”

I stood up, brushed the dirt and rocks and tiny chips of glass from my clothes. She never answered me, so I filled in the why for myself and I continued to as I stared at her black and white photo at the bottom of the newspaper.

And, well, she did come back eventually. That’s more than I could say for other people I knew.

“Let’s go back home,” I said, starting for Shawna’s house. “I’m tired. And I’m hungry.”

“I don’t want to go back.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t.” She crossed her arms. “You can come with me to find the trampoline or you can go back to your house alone.”

“Why can’t we go to your house?”

Shawna looked like she wanted to say something but couldn’t find the right words. Her eyes moved around rapidly. She bit down on her lip, started walking away from me.

“Why?” I pressed, following her as closely as I could. “Why?” I would crack her. This would be easier.

“Because,” she said. “If I go back, my mom is going to make us pack.”

“Like a chore? We always do chores.”

She stared at me a moment and then it clicked. She was just like the other kids in the neighborhood now. She was like everyone. She was leaving me alone, for real.

“When?”

“Two weeks.”

I should have guessed it. Her dad left and her mom couldn’t stay there. The same thing happened to us. It was why we moved again and again and again, why Mom bought me shoes that were too big and dressed me in third-generation hand-me-downs. Shawna muttered some things about calling and writing me letters, but I didn’t really believe her.

We started walking again on the opposite side of the street, back toward our houses. I kept quiet. Part of me hoped Shawna would cry or at least snifle, but she didn't. The dandelions were shriveled up in her hair, broken chunks tangled in.

"Let's keep looking," I said. I didn't want to think about Shawna leaving just yet. "We didn't check these." We'd left a whole side of the road unexamined.

"T-Boy's full of shit," said Shawna. She'd taken out another one of her mother's cigarettes, tucked it behind her ear like a TV construction worker.

"Come on," I said.

We stopped at a house that was two stories tall. The stairs in the front were busted through the middle, like someone had dropped a bowling ball down them. The yard didn't have a fence and the windows were boarded up. A few pine trees lined the back and just before them was a slab of concrete, its perimeter crumbling into the grass. It looked like it used to be part of a driveway. Piles of cement blocks, dead leaves, twigs, and clumps of dirt flanked it, and in the middle of it was a trampoline. It was small, like the kind pastel aerobic girls used on TV, only it was taller. It had been propped up on some blocks to give it height; the legs tied down loosely with torn strips of old t-shirts.

"Is that it?" asked Shawna. "We can't jump on that thing." She circled it, inspecting. "A real trampoline is big enough for four people, and you can bounce high on it and you can do flips in the air. You can't do flips on that."

"Maybe you can," I said. "We can try it. I think it will work. It'll be fun."

I needed the trampoline. I thought, stupidly, that somehow it would make Shawna stay. It sounded ridiculous to me even then, but part of me wanted to believe it. Or, if it couldn't make her stay, I wanted her to feel badly about leaving.

I lifted myself up onto the trampoline and stood straight up with my hands on my sides, like Peter Pan.

“See,” I said. “It’s fine.”

The trampoline wobbled and skipped as I jumped up and down, the metal legs grinding against the cement.

“Look how high up I am,” I said. She wasn’t crying or laughing or even impressed, and I just wanted her to be sad or jealous. Something. Anything other than fine.

“You’re only jumping like three inches,” said Shawna.

I continued to fly through the air, trying to get higher, trying to peek over roofs and treetops. I was nervous, the butterflies in my stomach morphing into whole birds, but after a few more bounces I grew confident. My arms stuck out from my sides and I felt like I was floating. I became weightless for a moment and everything but that feeling melted away in those milliseconds. I had a tingle in my limbs and down my spine, this funny kind of carefree excitement. I’d never been so joyful—that was the only word for it.

“Look,” I said. “I can even do a backflip.”

I prepped, took a few practice jumps to test how high I could get. And then bearing down as hard as I could, I shot back up like a bullet, pulling my legs toward my

chest and over my head. I came down hard, fast. My shoe slipped against my foot in the landing, catching the metal spring and causing the legs of the trampoline to fly from the cement blocks. I tipped backwards, pushing the trampoline forward. The last thing I saw was the trampoline falling over, coming right at my head.

I woke on the ground, Shawna pulling the trampoline from my legs.

Shawna asked if I was okay, then said, “Oh, shit.”

I blinked my eyes, trying to remember where I was. It was a frequent morning ritual after moving four times in three years. I sat up, examining my body. I could still move everything, but my legs were bloody, flesh caught onto the springs of the trampoline in the fall.

“We’re going to be in so much trouble when my mom sees your legs,” Shawna said. “When your mom sees them.”

“I won’t tell,” I said, and then I started to cry and, God, I didn’t want to cry. But I couldn’t stop, even after Shawna rolled her eyes at me, told me to toughen up.

“I’m okay,” I said, still on the ground. I stood, wiped some of the blood from my kneecaps, but only ended up spreading it down my shins, mixing my blood with dirt.

“I’m okay.” I dabbed my nose and eyes on my shirt. “It’s not that bad.”

I could still walk. It wasn’t that bad. The wound looked worse than it felt, and I felt worse than the wound.

“There’s gotta be another trampoline around here,” I said.

“I don’t think so,” said Shawna. She walked ahead of me.

“That couldn’t have been the one T-Boy was telling us about.” She didn’t say anything. My knees stung. “We can find the real one if we look really hard,” I implored. “Someone around here’s got to have one. We just didn’t look hard enough this time.”

“Look hard enough?”

“Yeah, we didn’t go that far.”

“Nicole,” Shawna said, turning, stooping to my face, “there isn’t a trampoline. All these houses are the same. There’s nothing here for us to find.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Those kids are stupid,” said Shawna. “They don’t know anything.”

She sighed. She didn’t want to talk anymore.

We had to get back to her house, give the cigarettes to her mom, hide my bloodied knees. We crossed the street, finding our way back through the forest of burnt-out streetlights and crushed beer cans, brown crisps of glass crunching underneath our feet.

NO VACANCY

The sky above the park was a peculiar shade, the misty gray of a dead tooth. Nathanael's brain steamed as he parked the Plymouth in the last spot in the last row of the parking lot. The nerves behind his eyes tingled. In the rearview mirror, he watched pasterled parents and their toddler and school-aged children saunter toward a white tent in front of the playground. He'd expected a crowd, but nothing like this. His daughter, Olivia, kicked her legs in the backseat, a braided basket teetering over her knees as she moved.

That morning, he'd left Guy's house empty handed. Nathanael dropped a story on him about how his direct deposit didn't go through but he had a check waiting at the bank but the bank was closed—even the one inside the Kroger—because it was Easter, and could he please, please get a loan. Just this once. After all the business he'd brought to Guy, it was only fair. He'd have the money tomorrow. And all Guy said was, "I'll see you then," and he tried to shut Nathanael's fingers in the door.

Nathanael pulled the magenta flyer from his pocket and smoothed it across the dashboard. The 13th Annual P&G Easter Egg Hunt. He found the flyer underneath the windshield wiper of a Mercedes SUV that morning on his way back from Guy's, took it for himself when he saw the big prize, an egg stuffed with three hundred dollars in cash.

With that much money, he could go back to Guy's, get what he needed. Try to get back in good standing. Guy used to slip him a little extra, give him new mixes to try. Nathanael wanted to be that VIP buyer again.

"You ready?" he asked his daughter, wiping his nose on the hem of his sleeve.

He figured Olivia was old enough to understand the basic concepts of an Easter egg hunt, though she'd never done one before. She could imitate. She could see the other kids running, picking, grabbing. She could do it, and if not, he could help her.

Families lined up along the edge of the playground, looking over the field and equipment, speaking to one another at an unbearable volume. The park was about a mile from the neighborhood middle school. Impossibly cramped and poorly planned, there was a community lodge to the left and five rentable shelters, filled with wooden picnic tables and abandoned wasps' nests. Opposite the shelters was a soccer field, sloped at its borders like a valley. Past the field, through a row of crabapple trees and all the way at the end of the grass, was an aluminum playground.

Underneath the wilting tent, at a registration table, a blonde woman in plush rabbit ears passed an information sheet to Nathanael. Her eyes sliced up and down his body. He smiled at her, though it made the throbbing in his temples worse, and she frowned. He returned the sheet of paper and walked with Olivia to the edge of the playground, where the grass and woodchips met.

The air smelled like waxy chocolate and lilies. Plastic eggs dotted the playground and field and trees. Nathanael searched for the big eggs. The money eggs. He knew the three hundred dollar egg had to be well hidden. The ones on the ground, the easy grabs,

would be lackluster: jellybeans, Tootsie Rolls, coupons for dish soap and laundry detergent. The ones hanging from trees or shoved between playground equipment would be better: Cadbury Cream Eggs, army men, freshly rolled dollar bills.

“I want Tooty Frooties,” said Olivia.

“Tooty Frooties are good,” said Nathanael, his throat hoarse from hours of mouth breathing. He dragged the back of his hand across his nostrils, startled at how warm his face had grown. “But you want to get the big eggs,” he said. “The big eggs have better prizes.”

He wondered if she understood, or if she’d remember in the thrill of it. She was a bright girl, like her mother, but so easily distracted. He feared she would get lost in the surfeit of colored plastic, trampled by bigger children high on the promise of sugar. Some of the kids looked young—one or two max, barely walking upright, hardly competition. It would be impossible for them to reach the eggs placed up in the trees. The eight and nine-year-olds would snatch them all up.

“Look at that one,” Nathanael said, pointing to a pink egg the size of a softball wedged between two thick branches. He bent down to her, still pointing as his knees popped and creaked. He was sloppy, sweaty, cold. His forehead and upper lip dripped lines that trickled down his neck and pooled above his clavicles. Untucked, his shirt was translucent in sprawling patches. He wished he had a jacket to cover himself.

“Right there,” Nathanael said, moving Olivia’s head with his hands. She locked onto it, pupils growing to the size of nickels, and grinned.

The blonde woman from the registration booth walked in front of the long row of children and parents. She carried a clipboard in one arm and held something—Nathanael couldn't tell what—in her left hand.

The woman spoke softly. Something about rules and safety. Something about playing fair. Parents looked at one another, mumbling and confused, but the woman didn't repeat herself. Nathanael was thankful no one gave her a megaphone. She put her left hand to her mouth and the cry of the whistle split Nathanael in half. A handful of older children darted toward the playground while the younger ones looked up at their parents, lost.

After recovering from the shock of the sound, Nathanael nudged Olivia forward. She ran toward the tree, wildly swinging her empty basket in circles. But as she moved down the knoll her pace slowed. Her eyes lingered on the ground as she noticed the eggs she'd passed.

“Not those,” he said, cupping his clammy hands over his mouth to amplify his voice. She didn't hear him. “Don't get the small ones,” he said.

Olivia opened an egg from the ground and pulled out a small slip of paper and stared at it a while. She couldn't read yet. He wasn't sure when they learned to read, when they developed their own, full personalities, how much they noticed or perceived or knew about anything. He didn't know anything. Wasn't sure if he ever had. He'd made it through high school and by some miracle made it to college. But by the end of his first year, he knew he wasn't cut out for it. The last thing he could think about was *The Dynamics of Physical Systems*. It was as if he had only a few rooms in his mind and they

were all taken up, a neon no vacancy sign buzzing faintly in his ears, reminding him constantly that he was at capacity.

Olivia crumpled up the paper and threw it to the ground then started again for the tree. She circled it, as if analyzing the best method of attack. She jumped up, kicked it, threw her empty basket trying to knock the egg loose. She'd never reach it. It wasn't fair.

Nathanael crossed the field to his daughter. He lifted her up, straining against her weight, though she was small. She grabbed onto the egg just as the sound of the whistle—three staccato bursts—cut through his head, and he set her down, the world spinning before his eyes. With the sparkling metal dangling from her lips and her fists pumping back and forth at her sides, the blonde woman from the registration booth plodded toward them.

“You can't help them!” she said. Her bunny ears wiggled as she spoke. “You're not allowed. It's against the rules.” She couldn't catch her breath and Nathanael stood silently for a moment while she composed herself, gulping for air. “It's for the children.”

“Yes, but—”

“*Only* the children.”

Parents watched him. If he hadn't felt so miserable he might have been embarrassed. But he didn't have room in himself to manage that much physical and mental stimulation, and so he felt nothing more than momentary throbbing in his temples, shivering fire in his core.

“I'm sorry,” Nathanael said.

He didn't want to be thrown out, if parents could be thrown out of Easter egg hunts. He knew Olivia wouldn't find the prize egg or any others if he retaliated against the rabbit-eared woman. He turned to his daughter and smiled at her. She was near tears, as he expected, always afraid of trouble. Some kind of anxiety he didn't understand.

"It's okay," he said. "Get as many eggs as you can. I'll wait for you at the benches, okay?"

He stretched out a bigger smile and ruffled the top of her head. She nodded at him and took off down the field, toward a clump of children surrounding a seesaw.

He'd never wanted to sit down so badly in his life. His body ached all the way through. The tendons behind his knees coiled up and he stretched them out as he walked, breathing in the discomfort through his nose and out his mouth. His stomach burned and bubbled. He sat on the bench and hunched over, squishing his organs together. He needed to use the bathroom.

One morning, in sopping sheets and chills, Nathanael woke up a junkie. It happened so gradually he didn't realize it until it was upon him. He'd started with uppers, staying up to finish his homework after his shifts at the shop had ended. Then he moved on to codeine and Xanax, and then his roommate gave away some leftover Vicodin and that was it. He'd found everything he'd been looking for. Then from Vicodin he moved to oxies and demmies and then, finally, heroin.

For the better part of five years now he'd been pushing entire paychecks into his veins. Through stints of unemployment, he'd pawn some of Nicole's old jewelry, the

stuff she never wore and wouldn't notice. Then he'd move onto other items: an untouched mixer they'd found; a new set of drafting tools; a crystal punch bowl his mother gave him, the nicest thing he and Nicole had ever owned. Once, he tried to sell off his aunt's truck, but got cold feet on the lot and Guy gave him a bundle on the house.

His last dose was sixteen hours ago. He tried not to go more than twelve. When he first started, he could go for days. There were no drawbacks and it cost him nothing and Guy gave it out like candy, trying to hook him. When he first started, it wasn't just something that alleviated his pain; it was the antithesis of pain.

Mostly, now, it was the ritual that pleased him. The anticipation. The peace. Some people would talk about that first cup of coffee in the morning, and how it tasted better than coffee they had throughout the day and how they looked forward to drinking it, and Nathanael guessed it was a little bit like that. A little bit like Christmas morning or just before he slept with a woman for the first time. And he got to experience it every day: the tingle of something new but familiar.

He'd take out his rigs and line each part straight on the apron of the bathtub. He'd pull a wad of cotton from the medicine cabinet, find a lighter, and get to work. Sometimes he'd move slowly, intentionally, prolonging the pleasure of the wait. But some days, more often as time went on, when things were tight or when Nicole was asleep outside the door, or when his stomach gurgled and cramped, he'd just do it. And with the push of a plunger, life muted and he was alone, blossoming from the inside out.

Now, his skin peeled from his face.

A giant white rabbit danced and hopped around the trees, a man's head pushed through a hole in the front. The ears stood straight up, stiff like they were made of plaster and painted. The man inside had a beard. Some of the children wandered up to greet him, but Olivia stood watching from the field. She was a wary child. Her eyebrows bent downward and her face pinched together. Nathanael waved at her but she shook her head and kept up the search. The rabbit thumped his foot.

Olivia roamed the playground, kicking over mounds of sand and ducking under deserted slides. The other children chased one another. They dropped baskets and picked them up and dropped them again. Nathanael watched his daughter, his eyes following her path, willing her to see the big eggs but she kept stooping for whatever was closest.

His head was a chunky stew. Wet goop streamed from his nose. He blew it in his shirtsleeve and leaned on the bench. He wished he knew why he was such a piece of shit. There had to be some definable quality in his character he could pluck out and tinker with—or maybe that was the defining quality. Maybe that was all there was. Maybe he was born a piece of shit and there was nothing he could do about it.

His limbs locked stiffly to his body. His joints were planks. He closed his eyes and tried to breathe slowly, focusing on only the oxygen entering and the carbon dioxide escaping. The process of it. Removing himself from himself.

The grass folded over in circular patches around the bench legs. Nathanael pushed his feet into the green, stretching as far as his legs would let him, washing the bare ankle from his short pants in dew. He bumped a hollow rock with the tip of his shoe—an egg!

He fell over fumbling for it. It was a blue one, lightweight, like maybe inside was a single piece of Bazooka gum or a single bill, wrapped up tight.

A violent pang in his stomach. He didn't eat breakfast. He didn't eat lunch. He was full of putrid acid and sludge, his body fueled by the gunk at the bottom. He started pacing behind the bench, focusing on his shoes. Wingtips. Black. Size eleven. He bought them for high school graduation and here he was, ten years later, and he still owned only two pairs of shoes. His mouth watered and he was overcome—suddenly—with terrible dread. He bent over and vomited beside the park bench, grasping at its armrest as he heaved, the egg rolling down into the sod.

“Are you okay, sir?”

A woman stood five feet away from him, clutching a fat baby stuffed in a ruffled onesie. He hadn't noticed them before.

“Hmmm? Yes, thank you,” he said. “Bad ham.”

He pulled up the wings of his collar and wiped dribblings from his mouth.

“Your shirt's wet.”

“Yes, I know.” He smiled. “Thank you.”

She looked him up and down and turned away, the downward tremble in her lips a short surge of disgust.

The egg glistened on the ground, dropped along the puddle. The woman moved ten or fifteen feet ahead of him, her back turned, her baby's head popping out from behind her shoulder, a kind of two-headed monster.

There was no breeze. He was trapped in his own stench—a sickly sweet perspiration. His hands began bursting in quiet tremors. He stood up and sat down and stood up and sat down and stood up again. He tried to walk but his calves twitched in spasms and he couldn't take it.

Nathanael crawled to the egg, grabbed it up.

“You're not supposed to take those,” the woman said, looking down at him.

“My daughter asked me to hold onto it for her. She's got so many they won't fit in her basket.”

He grinned and the woman's eyes lingered on him a moment longer, suspicious, before she walked away. He wiped the egg on his shirt and cracked it open, imagining the folded Franklins staring back at him. Inside: a piece of hard candy, the wrapper unwound and split, covered in tiny black ants. They dispelled across the blue and marched up Nathanael's fingers and wrists and he flung it all.

Olivia ran toward him, lifting her basket in front of her face, trying to balance it in the air. Kids meandered around the empty swing set. Some of the younger children spread piles of eggs out flat. The blonde woman blew the whistle and waved her arms and the hunt was over.

“Look, Daddy,” said Olivia.

She dumped her basket upside down and a rainbow rolled out at his feet.

Nathanael jerked backward. He wanted to go through the basket himself, take out the

money before she saw him, so she didn't even know what she was missing. So she didn't know what he'd done.

"Tooty Frooties!" she said. "Gum. Can I have gum?"

"You may," he said. He leaned forward. "Just don't eat it."

She stacked the open eggs inside one another like faceless Russian nesting dolls.

Nathanael edged closer to her loot. The shaking in his hands travelled up his arms and into his chest, into his heart. His feet tapped and skipped on the grass, gyrating his thighs. He could take them from her.

"What's this?" she asked, holding up a piece of paper no bigger than her hand.

"It's for free toothpaste."

Olivia folded the coupon and wedged it into her front pocket.

"Save for Mommy?" she said. But who knew when Nicole would be back?

Certainly not Nathanael. From the moment they brought Olivia home, Nicole would spend weeks away. She'd stay with them for a few months, then get picked up for this or that charge—Nathanael never asked, couldn't bring himself to check—then get released and disappear for a while. But she always came back and they'd be okay for a while, the three of them, all together.

One by one Olivia popped and twisted each egg open, spilling and dissecting the insides, examining the packets of candy. She organized the prizes by type and piled them accordingly into her basket: Smarties, taffy, Tooty Frooties, SweetFarts, Razzels, two different spinning tops, a mini yo-yo, and a fifty dollar bill. Nathanael pulled the cash from Olivia's basket while she ripped open a pack of Lemonheads.

#

Guy lived up north in the suburbs, nestled between two different sets of half-empty strip malls. It was a fifteen-minute drive, but Nathanael could make it in ten if he tried. After Olivia climbed into the front seat, he weaved through pedestrians in the parking lot and sped up I-75.

“Do I have to share?” asked Olivia.

“What?” asked Nathanael. “No.”

She gleamed.

The sky was still overcast, gray and beating like at any moment it might rupture. Olivia molded a tiny handful of Tootsie Rolls into a ball and shoved it into her mouth, cheeks puffing out like a rodent.

Nathanael pumped the window down and a pile of wrappers flitted up toward the roof like tiny, crumpled butterflies. Olivia laughed, mouth open, a glob of brown juicing on her tongue. The spring breeze whipped against his wet skin and for the first time all day, he felt a little better.

“Don’t open the door for anyone, okay?” Nathanael said after they reached Guy’s. He locked the car, left Olivia to stare out of the passenger’s side window. He ran to Guy’s door, pounded on it, tried to peer into the peephole. Guy was there. He was always there. Nathanael hit the door with his palms, called Guy’s name again and again.

He went around to the back patio and tapped on the glass door with his knuckles. He could bust through with his fist if he wanted. Maybe he would. He waited for a few

seconds, tapped again, and started back up toward the front before he heard the opening suction of the sliding glass door.

“You got cash?” Guy asked. Nathanael ran to the door, fumbled through his pockets for the fifty. His bones scraped against their sockets.

“Yes!” he said. “Yes, yes.”

Guy opened the door completely. He was dressed in a pressed suit and tie—Easter clothes. He waved Nathanael inside. The wallpaper was missing, shredded off the walls to reveal crusty patches of adhesive. A television rested on the floor, playing *It’s the Easter Bunny, Charlie Brown*. Children’s toys were spread out over the floor and the whole room smelled like vinegar.

“Church today?” asked Nathanael, teetering on his heels.

“Mass at eleven. How much do you have?”

“Fifty.” He flapped the bill again.

Guy walked toward the kitchen and pulled a rectangular tin from the top of the refrigerator. The kitchen didn’t have an oven, just a hole for it, a smile with a missing tooth. Guy was the best dealer Nathanael ever had—the only one who let him into the house.

Guy removed two glassine bindles from the tin and held them up.

“This is it,” he said. “Just so you know.”

Nathanael salivated. Every molecule in his body sent him lurching forward.

“Right,” said Nathanael. “Good price.”

“No,” said Guy. He straightened his back. His suit was too big, but at least he had a suit. That’s more than Nathanael could say. “This,” he said again, more slowly, “is it. This is all I have left. I’m not doing this anymore. You have to find someone else.”

Nathanael could worry about that later. He didn’t care. Only wanted the two packets. When he reached for them, Guy pulled them away, held out his other hand for the cash. Nathanael slapped the fifty down as fast as he could.

“I’m moving,” said Guy.

Nathanael nodded, claspng the packets in between his hands. Guy droned on about getting out of the business but Nathanael wasn’t listening. He could only feel the marbles rolling underneath his skin.

His rigs were in the car.

“Hey,” Nathanael interrupted. “I’m going to my car for a sec. I’ll be right back. I swear, I’ll be right back.”

In the Plymouth, Olivia slept stretched out across the backseat, torn wrappers surrounding her head, her lips purpled with artificial dye and every piece of candy from her basket gone.

Nathanael fumbled with the lock, swung open the door and rifled through the center consul. He imagined he must’ve been making enough noise for any child to wake up, but Olivia was out cold. He pulled out his Ziploc bag of cotton and syringes and bottle caps, caught another glimpse of his daughter before heading back to Guy’s apartment.

The incessant bubbling in his stomach curdled from withdrawal into something else.

Silently, he promised her he would stop. He wanted to stop. Or, rather, it was once removed: he wanted to want to stop. The trouble was, he couldn't remember that he wanted to stop later, when the dope sickness clawed at his bones, dripped from his pores. In those moments, sweating and shaking and sick on the taste of his insides, he could only remember what it was like to feel well again.

He wasn't surprised when Guy didn't answer the door. He thought about doing it right there at the doorstep, on the porch, but something about the act of it required a semblance of privacy, like fucking or shitting. He was a junkie; he wasn't insane. So he went back, sat in the front seat. Took a few deep breaths that were in contrast with his daughter's. No, he didn't need the ritual today.

In the vague seclusion of the car, Olivia sleeping peacefully behind him, he felt it at once: viscous ripples of the serene cresting at the back of his skull, rolling down his limbs. And in a second, the feeling was gone, and he was left in a nest of plastic eggs and wrappers.

LET THEM LIE

I spend my days bringing the dead back to life. They stumble in, pupils like two specks of dust, and collapse in the doorway. Or they're prostrate and blue on the blacktop outside. Or they're wheeled in, belligerent, because the officer or fireman or EMT or relative didn't administer the dosage properly, and in those cases I only try to prevent them from killing themselves.

But some of them are determined.

Like this last one. I'd personally seen to her three times—a hospital record—but she'd been in half a dozen over two months, and we had documentation of her emergency department visits going back half a decade. She came in complaining of gallstones, complaining of back pain, complaining of toothaches. She checked in after an overdose on Klonopin and Oxycodone. She was admitted begging for Suboxone because she'd entered withdrawal. In that case, the attending physician referred her to a clinic, but I suppose it didn't take because the next month she was in with me.

"Doctor Goddard, the family is ready," said Marsha, a nurse administrator. "That's the older sister." She pointed out the small window in the swinging door to the waiting room.

The woman in question, about forty, stood a little slouched with her arms folded, watching CNN flash on the television. Her hair was red, pinned up into a bun on top of

her head. She looked tired, but alert. Clean and put together. Not the type of person we usually saw in our ED. Not the type of person I usually informed of a patient's death.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “She doesn't look like a relative.”

Marsha nodded, then shrugged. “That's what I was told,” she said, tugging on the purple tubing of her stethoscope.

The woman didn't look related to the patient. Their hair, bone structures, build, postures were completely different. I tried to guess which kind of relative she would be—enabling or insufferable. I'd seen hundreds of addicts and addict relatives over the years, and they all had some air of fatigue and hopelessness and resignation. There were the ones who told me they didn't know how this could have happened because their addict was always such a good person. There were ones who stared at the TV when I spoke to them, nodding as my discharge instructions poured into one ear and spilled out the other. If there were siblings, they were usually strung out too, and if there were any children, they had the vague, vacant eyes of the unloved.

“Doesn't look older, either,” I said.

The patient was an opiate twenty-eight. Sunken face, bloated abdomen despite her dangerously low weight. Her skin sagged too much around the jaw. Deep wrinkles, fried hair. The first time I saw her, she'd overdosed while driving down Cross County Highway. She'd veered over the rumble strip into the median, her car tipping on its side. A police officer found her, dosed her with Naloxone, and began CPR. By the time she got to us, she was lucid and fuming. We took away her high, she'd yelled. I told her that she was dead and now she wasn't. That she should be thanking us.

The second time I treated her, just a few weeks later, two men had shoved her from the backseat of a car. She lay outside the entrance to the ED for a few minutes before one of the nurses found her. When I stopped by her room to check on her, she told me the smack looked a bit off—blue tinted, almost—and there was a voice in the back of her head that told her not to do it, but she did it anyway. And I couldn't begin to understand how a person could be pulled from death only to jump back in again and again.

There were hardly any frequent flyers when I first started in the ED. Had I known then what I'd be up against, I would have chosen a different field—neurology or cardio or even obstetrics. A specialty that challenged my intellect, not my patience. A specialty that didn't turn me into a human lie detector. I chose emergency because of its pace. Because I enjoyed making decisions quickly, enjoyed that spurt of epinephrine when under pressure. I was all fight early in my career. Back then, I mostly saw critical conditions: car accidents, emergent thoracotomies. There were also broken limbs, lacerations, occasional flu patients who perhaps didn't know any better than to waste my time. We had helipad transfers from out-of-state, victims of natural disasters. These were cases that I cared about.

Now? Now, I spend thirty percent of my day with a frequent flyer. They're unrelenting. They come in with self-inflicted injuries asking for *dil-dal-dul dilaudid?*—pretending as though they don't know exactly what they're asking for. Pretending as though I don't know exactly what they are.

I had always heard that doctors were the worst patients, but that adage came about before the opioid epidemic. In my experience, addicts were the worst patients. Their friends and families were the worst advocates. All of it was hell. My favorite patients were always the ones who listened to my advice. The ones who were interested in their own recovery. Addicts, at their cores, don't care about self-preservation.

Sometimes, after the especially difficult patients, I thought it would be better if we just let them lie there; let them die in their cars or in their childhood bedrooms or out on the street. None of them ever got any better. None of my OD patients had any intention of recovering. They'd call their dealers while in the hospital bed. They'd slink into the bathroom to shoot up again. Addicts are always planning their next move, their next slip into the hole they just crawled out of. Because they know we'll always be there to drag them back.

Marsha went to the waiting room, then led the sister to an office while I lingered by the nurses' station, reviewing the patient's file on my clipboard. I was assigned to pod B that day—serious cases, but not traumas. Mid to high-level acuity. I had a stomach pump, a chest pain, a fractured femur, and what turned out to be a kidney stone. And I did it all without breaking. With the real patients, I had stamina. I could juggle them. Manage my caseload on autopilot. But after patients like this, and there were more and more of them each day, I found myself drained. I'd walk more slowly between rooms, spend more time on paperwork. I knew I'd need a solitary moment after this one.

As I reviewed the OD's file, I remembered her begging for pain medication, demanding we bring her glasses of water. She was a frequent flyer. A drug seeker. Her

Automated Rx Report was covered with flags. She'd been trying to get opioids and benzodiazepines at three different hospitals across Cincinnati, one in Dayton, another in Chillicothe. If she had tried anything with me, I would've reported her immediately. But by all measures, when I saw her that morning, it was apparent her case was more urgent than fraudulent refills.

"Got to be quick with that one," Marsha said as she sat down at her computer, speaking as if we weren't in an ED. As if I weren't the attending physician. Marsha had been a nurse but was recently promoted to an administrative position and whatever power came with it—real or imagined—implanted itself deep in her brain.

Administration wanted us to spend approximately ten minutes with patients for initial diagnoses and no more than ten minutes for each subsequent follow-up. Almost every interaction with patients was regimented, and while there were no official time limits for informing families of a death, I tried to keep the same restrictions to maximize my productivity and minimize my own discomfort. For the real cases—the gunshot wounds, the cardiac arrests, the anaphylaxes—informing families of death could be excruciating. These are the unexpected, difficult deaths. The families aren't prepared. The patients weren't prepared. I had to answer questions, sometimes the same question more than once. I had to feign a level of compassion for the deceased, project care and professionalism. But with the addicts, everything was more clear-cut. I had an efficient, adaptable method for them.

Doctor: I have some bad news.

Pause, maintain eye contact.

Doctor: [Patient] died at [time].

Pause, maintain eye contact.

Assess reaction and adjust response accordingly.

- a) Crying: Offer comfort in the form of an arm or shoulder touch.
- b) Shock: Say, “I am very sorry for your loss. The healthcare team did everything possible.”
- c) Denial: Reiterate information. Offer to show body immediately.
- d) Anger: Back away, offer condolences, return in ten to fifteen minutes, when the relative’s rage has likely subsided.

Some of my colleagues attempt to soften the blow with: “[Patient] passed away” or “[Patient] has crossed over.” But these euphemisms serve only to comfort the physician, not the relative. Furthermore, I find that most relatives, regardless of the patient’s manner of death, need to hear the words dead or died for it to be real. When I’m informing family, I do not want to prolong the experience. I do not want to leave room for interpretation.

The red-haired woman was sitting in one of the armchairs when I entered the room. We inform family of a patient’s death in a private office located near the back west corner of the floor. The office has a single window facing a parking garage for nurses and lower staff. An old desk and two armchairs furnish the room, and there are four different boxes of tissues in four different places. Diplomas and worthless continuing education certificates printed from a home computer hang on the wall. It smells like the artificial piña colada air freshener plugged into one of the outlets—another choice of some

faceless hospital administrator. The woman didn't turn to look at me, so I walked around to the front of the room and sat across from her at the desk. Sometimes, if I thought I would have a lengthy conversation or if I thought there would be complex questions about the death, I sat in the other armchair. It was more comfortable and gave the impression of intimacy. But both of us knew the cause of death for this patient and I didn't see the point of dragging out the discussion.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” I said, shaking her hand. “I’m Doctor Goddard.”

“Good to meet you, sir,” she said. Her handshake was more rigid than I anticipated. Her fingers more callused.

I placed my clipboard on top of the desk and folded my hands over it. “I’m afraid I have some bad news.” Pause. Eye contact. “The patient Nicole Fischer died at 15:48 today.”

She stared at me a moment, and I assumed she was shocked by the death or possibly calculating the time conversion in her head.

“I am very sorry for your loss,” I said. “My healthcare team did everything possible.” She pinched her eyelashes, eyelids narrowed, and then cleared her throat as if about to speak. But she said nothing, so I continued. “The body is available for viewing, if you’d like, and afterward we have some paperwork for you to complete.”

“How did she die?”

“She was an addict.”

“Yes, but—”

“She died from complications arising from years of intravenous drug use.” The clock on the wall ticked three times. She fiddled with the button on her shirtsleeve, still watching me, still waiting for an explanation. I spoke quickly, “EMTs revived her on the street with Naloxone. They brought her to the hospital to be monitored because the half-life of Naloxone is shorter than that of heroin. She was argumentative and attempted to leave the hospital against medical advice but legally we could not discharge her for two hours upon admission. The patient presented erythema and dysphasia, among other symptoms. Medical records indicated that she was a mainliner, so I ordered several scans, one of which revealed a tracheal deviation from a retropharyngeal abscess. We drained the abscess, but the discolored purulent material indicated acute infection. The patient died following mycotic aneurysm of the carotid artery.”

Her mouth hung open, slightly.

“The walls of the artery in her neck were infected and the artery burst.”

“She was injecting into her neck?”

“Yes.”

The patient had been using for years. The majority of her veins were no longer viable. She’d moved from arms and legs to hands and toes and abdomen and, finally, neck. She complained of pain when she came in, but of course she did. Addicts always complained of pain because they wanted more drugs. So perhaps I didn’t believe her. Perhaps I didn’t react as quickly as I would have under other conditions. But ultimately I didn’t care if she was in pain or whether she was comfortable. I was there to make sure

she survived. The patient's comfort is not the objective of an emergency department physician.

"Do you have any additional questions?"

I glanced at the clock on the wall and noticed Marsha passing by the door, looking at us through the glass. It was just before six. My shift was eight to eight, and then I went on call. If I was lucky I'd have a moment to myself before eight, but more likely, I'd have to sneak away, dodge Marsha for ten minutes to breathe.

"No," she said, and then she started crying. "I'm sorry." She dug her palms into her eye sockets and wiped outward. "I'm sorry."

I handed her a tissue from the desk and she dabbed at her eyes, blew her nose.

"What did you do to help her?"

"My staff did everything possible."

For a moment, I thought I saw a flash of incredulity pass across her face. Marsha walked by the office door, glanced in through the window as she passed.

"Can I see her?" she asked.

"Of course," I said. The nurses had cleaned and prepped the body before the woman arrived. Everything was set.

The hall felt cooler than the office, less oppressive, better ventilated. Typically, when I led families to the bodies, I'd usually stop short just before entering the room, telling them to take as long as they needed. Then I'd leave them, update the nurse, and head to my next patient.

We made it halfway down the hallway toward the elevator when she slowed down.

“I’m sorry,” she said. Her voice cracked a bit. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I can.”

“Do you have someone you can call?” I asked, and she shook her head. I didn’t intend to appear impatient, but the hospital needed to get her signature before a funeral home could remove the body. Usually people learning of a patient’s death bring someone along for emotional support. People know what’s coming. Medical professionals don’t ask you to come in person for good news. “We can wait if you want, but you will have to view it at some point. The room is just a bit further down this hall if you want to try.”

She shook her head at me and looked as though she were about to collapse. Her eyes were huge. Her arms dropped, cardigan fell to the floor. I pulled my clipboard in front of me and saw the yellow slip of paper taped to the front of it. It read: Karen M. Klein, underlined, and below that: sister.

I had several administration-appropriate options. I could fetch a nurse to deal with her. I could offer her a hospital bed, allowing her time to recuperate and regain her footing. I could continue to guide her toward the body viewing.

Marsha, now back at the nurses’ station at the other end of the hallway, poked her head over the counter. She watched me, and I half-expected her to lift up her wrist to point at her watch.

“Are you all right?” I asked Karen. Marsha’s eyes fixed on me. I was creating more paperwork by the minute, more administrative complications for her to sort

through. “Would you like some water?” But I was the physician, and I needed a break.

“What about some coffee?”

“Yes, please, yes,” Karen said. She patted her nose with scrunched tissue.

We started toward the hospital cafeteria, which was on the same floor as the emergency department. The bun on top of Karen’s head began to droop down as we passed beds in various states of use and nurses who shot me disapproving glares. They all banded together, an unofficial union of them against doctors who spend too much time with patients, who disrupt their schedules, request too much.

Karen seemed like she knew exactly where we were headed, armed with the quiet confidence that comes from spending too much time in a hospital. She must’ve been here before.

“This hospital has the nicest cafeteria,” she said.

It was newly renovated, like much of the hospital. A chain coffee kiosk stood right at the front entrance. I ordered two light roasts and Karen took her coffee to the cream and sugar station. She dumped in half and half, three packets of sugar, and sprinkled cinnamon on top. I poured a bit of cream in mine to mask the taste and followed her to a booth seat.

“Yes, it’s quite nice, isn’t it?” I said. “I hardly ever come in here.”

The new cafeteria was more elaborate than the old one, and about twice as large. On the left side were rows of trays and prepackaged salads. The right side had three fast food restaurant fronts. Instead of the ceiling fluorescents that lit the rest of the hospital, warm pendants filled the room, a single light above each booth. It felt more like a hotel

restaurant than a hospital cafeteria. It seemed like an odd place for admin to spend so much money, but what did I know?

Karen removed the lid from her coffee cup and blew on the contents. “I don’t read the paper anymore,” she said, noticing a spread out stack of *Cincinnati Enquirers* and *USA Todays* on the table beside our booth. “Just buy it for the coupons.”

She didn’t want to talk about her sister and maybe that was the best way for her to cope. She could hardly look at me for more than a second. Maybe she blamed me for it. Maybe she should have.

“Sunday’s *Enquirer* has the best ones,” I said.

She agreed, nodding as she sipped coffee. The cream had cooled mine, so I took a swig, expecting the burnt, acidic swill I was accustomed to from coffee chains and break rooms. But it was delicious. It was fresh, smooth. Sweet and nutty. I wanted to close my eyes and savor it. Maybe I needed the break more than I thought. The two of us sank into our stuffed vinyl seats and drank without speaking, our booth filled with the sounds of our occasional sipping and the clanking of passersby.

She looked incredibly thankful, nearly pitiful.

My pager beeped. The screen flashed green for a few seconds and then dulled into black. Someone wanted a callback for a prescription. That could wait a few more minutes—it was nothing.

“You guys still use pagers?” She dipped her upper lip into the hot coffee, testing its heat.

“A few of us do,” I said. “The younger ones prefer their phones, but I don’t trust them. They can lose signal in a building like this. Perhaps I’m a bit stuck in the nineties.” I laughed, and she smiled politely. “It was a simpler time.”

“I don’t know about that.” Her bun had wilted down the side of her face and hung just below her ear. “Do you like being a doctor?”

Our ED logged upwards of eighty thousand visits a year, which was a respectable number considering our market saturation. There were ten emergency hospitals in the city, and more scattered throughout the suburbs. More hospitals meant more competition, which meant administration was always trying to find our “key differentiators” to market. As if, when someone has suffered a concussion, he’s going to choose the hospital with extra wide beds and not whichever ED is closest.

But the day-to-day pressures were more tedious. Admins demanded quotas, time restrictions. They wanted us to both push patients through a revolving door and somehow make sure they left with a smile, ensuring five star reviews online. “High patient satisfaction scores are our lifeblood,” they’d tout one day, then, “efficient time management is our lifeblood” the next. As if the two didn’t have an adverse relationship. One of my colleagues told a quality department administrator once that the patient satisfaction survey should consist of only a single question: did you live?

But if that were the case, I would have had an extremely unsatisfied patient that day.

“For the most part,” I said, finally. “There are things I could do without.”

My pager went off again and I smothered the sound with my palm, its vibrations prickling my skin.

“Such as?”

This could have been a three-hour conversation, but I tried to trim down my list of grievances. “I spend hours of my day on paperwork. They’ve moved it to computers and tablets to make it faster, but they’ve added more forms, more boxes to check.” I laughed again, uncomfortably. “But other than that I suppose I enjoy it.” I couldn’t remember the last time someone had asked me that question. Probably during my residency. People assume doctors love being doctors, or, if nothing else, that they love the money. After burning twenty-two years in an emergency department, I found the latter to be true.

“I’m boring myself.” I said. “What do you do?”

She was a comptroller for a law firm. She had two daughters and had recently received custody of her niece, who was four years old and couldn’t speak in complete sentences. She was divorced, which she never said explicitly but I picked up. She lived north of the city, just off 275, where she could have a backyard like she’d always wanted. I liked the way she spoke, the way her mouth moved, one side rising a few millimeters higher than the other. She was clear, even-toned about the uninteresting; spoke rapidly and loudly about her children and her work. And then she let out a long, sad sigh, and sat up in her seat.

“I appreciate this,” she said. She held her hands around the waxy paper coffee cup as if she were cold. I didn’t think she wanted me to say anything. “For years,” she said, “for years, I’ve had the fear that someone would call me and tell me they found her dead

in a dumpster.” She looked down at her coffee, swished the liquid in the cup. “It’s a very specific fear.”

“I can imagine,” I said. But I couldn’t. I didn’t know any addicts personally—not really, not in a way that made me fear for them.

“It’s hard to remember a time before I was afraid of that call.”

I nodded, took another drink. I wanted to drink more slowly, but the cup was half-empty and cooling. This break couldn’t last forever.

“It’s been at least ten years,” she said. “She ran away with her first boyfriend when she was sixteen.” She paused, then laughed to herself. “When she was five she would pretend to run away. Pack up a towel with toys, a book or two, and a loaf of white bread, and then she’d wrap it all up around a broomstick, like in those old cartoons, and carry it over her shoulder. We’d find her reading between the neighbor’s bushes or sometimes she’d get tired of waiting for us to find her and come home and pout.”

I struggled to reconcile the images of this aspirant runaway and the woman I found in the fetal position on the floor of her hospital room, vomit crusted into her hair, clutching an empty sandwich bag and screaming.

My pager interrupted us again. Marsha with lab work. I shoved the black plastic back into my pocket.

“At least she isn’t in pain anymore,” Karen said.

“That’s a comfort,” I concurred.

“But I still feel like I could have done more.”

“Guilt is common.”

“Is relief?”

I didn't know what to say to her. I didn't have an opinion. It just wasn't my place.

“I practically raised her until she was nine years old,” she said. She dug the tissue out of her cardigan pocket, but saw that it was soggy and unusable. She pulled a napkin from the dispenser at our table and rubbed it together, creating friction, making it softer. “God, what am I going to do?” she asked. “What am I going to say? What do you say?”

It was rhetorical but earnest, and I wanted so badly to answer her. I couldn't picture friends and neighbors lining up with prepared dinners for her family. Does anyone care when an addict dies?

She blew her nose, then crumpled the napkin in her hand. Her coffee cup was empty, or nearly so. She picked it up and dropped it down on the table, its hollowness echoing flatly against the Formica.

“More?” I asked.

“No, but thank you,” she said. She sighed again; relieved or resigned, I couldn't tell.

“Did you try?” she asked, after a long pause. “Did you do you best?”

Answers ran through my head. There were multiple ways to address her question. Of course, ideally, I was supposed to say yes and the matter would end. Or, I could say yes, then refuse further questions and leave the rest to my attorney. I knew this. But at the time, there were too many possibilities and there was no precedent. And worse, I knew I couldn't tell her the truth: that I wasn't the physician I used to be. That my empathy had been broken—no, not broken. Chipped away at, leaving me with only a sliver.

“No,” she said. “Stop. Never mind.”

I was relieved to be the beneficiary of such compassion. I did not deserve it.

“I didn’t do my best either,” she said.

While we were away, orderlies had moved the body from the bed to the morgue, which was in a numbered room in the basement next to Pathology. Marsha spotted us while we waited for the elevator.

“Doctor Goddard,” she called, twenty feet away. “Doctor Goddard, we paged you.” She walked hurriedly, her nurse shoes clomping on the linoleum. She tilted her head at Karen as she approached, but didn’t say anything. Marsha knew who Karen was. That she’d just lost her sister. But Marsha offered no condolences, nothing. Perhaps she’d already exceeded her administrative-suggested compassion quota for the day. Or perhaps the nurses were more like the doctors than I realized. We all of us had to separate ourselves or risk injury.

“You have patients,” she said. “We sent in a PA for sutures but we’re going to need you for two other patients in B.”

The middle elevator opened up. Karen started for it.

“I am escorting a family member,” I said. “I’ll be back momentarily.” But I wasn’t sure if that was true. We’d spent nearly an hour getting coffee. “Can you send in Barnes or Johnson?”

“Yeah, but they won’t be happy about it,” she said. “They have their own patients, you know. You need to be quick.” She would report me to the floor administrator, who

would confront me, then report me to the department director, who could do a number of things to make my life miserable. I could receive a write up, probation, termination.

Karen and I kept silent in the elevator down. Her face was colorless, her breathing deep in an attempt to calm herself. When the doors split open, she walked through them slowly, her hands trembling. The basement's overhead lights flicked on as we made our way down the hall, the low hum of fluorescents accompanying our steps. The air was stale and unmoving.

It's difficult to predict how a person will respond to seeing the body of a loved one. Some say nothing. Some sob uncontrollably, or grab the hands, or kiss the lips. Some declare that it isn't the relative at all—a peculiar kind of denial only time can upend.

When we came to the door I knew I had to give my prepared speech to her about paperwork and signatures and bereavement counselors, but I could hardly get it out. Her sister was behind that door. Her little sister, Nicole Irene Fischer. Age: twenty-eight. Weight: One hundred twenty-two pounds. Height: Five feet, six inches. Green eyes, blonde hair. Straight teeth that had grayed and grayed and grayed around the gum line. And that was just what I knew. Her little sister stretched supine on a stainless steel table.

“Take as much time as you need,” I said. “There's no rush. When you're done, come upstairs and the nurse at the front desk will have forms for you to fill out.” It was difficult to look at her, so I put my hand on her shoulder and stared at the tufts of hair flying from her hair tie. “I'm so sorry for your loss. I'm sorry I couldn't—I'm sorry. Truly.”

She had her hand on the knob. As I moved toward the elevators I heard it—the swing of the metal door, and her low, deep howl. Her painful, cavernous cry.

My pager beeped and vibrated. I ignored it. The doors opened on the ground floor. I passed the nurses' station, passed the waiting room, where eight people sat. I walked out the front and onto the sidewalk. I made it to the edge of the walkway, beside a red brick column and an Emergency way finding sign.

It was cold, just a month after Christmas. A few people smoked on the corner by the parking structure. The floodlights of the hospital façade cast shadows that cut across their faces. They looked tired. Spent. Like the only thing keeping them going was that one cigarette. It was a city full of exhausted people. People who couldn't help themselves, and people like me who didn't want to help them.

IN THE SHADOW OF SKYSCRAPERS

The buildings stood three or four stories high, repainted in bright purples and yellows, but still familiar to Nathanael, even as he ran by them. He liked to run in the mornings before work but his flight into CVG didn't land until eleven. It was lunchtime before he got to the Airbnb, and then he stayed on the phone with Chuck, his sponsor, longer than intended, and now the streets crowded with people and traffic and noise. He couldn't hear the sound of his feet hitting the pavement, the slow, fixed rhythm that marked his sobriety.

The restaurant he passed was a vacant storefront with spray-painted plywood nailed across the window casing the last time Nathanael was in Over-the-Rhine. He couldn't recall whether it was one he'd stripped for copper but he'd definitely pulled from this block. He'd torn through the whole neighborhood. He'd taken catalytic converters from cars, broken into houses, fenced scrap metal and old televisions. Now, he ran between hipsters waiting in line at gourmet doughnut shops and candle labs and microbreweries. He'd never seen the place so full of people. It was as if he'd been transplanted back to the turn of the century, back to the peak of the neighborhood, back before the city let it suffocate and the streets names were all in German and the river was sudsy with beer.

He didn't need to be at his sister-in-law's until six thirty, so he headed toward the park. They were going to have dinner, a reunion of sorts, and that night he planned to tell

her of his intent to pursue custody. His daughter had been in his sister-in-law's care for the better part of three years and he hadn't seen her. Not in person, anyway. Months before his return to Cincinnati, he forwarded references, had his probation officer call, sent letters and little presents for Olivia. He'd been laying the groundwork, trying to ingratiate himself before he took her back, because he wanted it to be easy. He'd already missed so much, already caused so much pain.

Years ago, back when Nathanael lived over on Hamer Street with Jake and Nicole, in the apartment with the caved-in roof and mold that grew in squelching pockets behind the wallpaper, a third of the houses were empty. Firefighters let them burn, police ignored distress calls. Part of Nathanael wanted to run down his old block, feel the asphalt under new footing, see if his building had been razed or converted into million dollar condominiums, test himself. But maybe it was too soon. He didn't want to risk a trigger.

The park he ran to used to be a small plot of land they called Needle Park—where he and all the other area junkies hung out. He had spent countless nights passed out on benches, sleeping beneath trees when he was too stoned to walk home. The park looked different now, bigger and cleaner, like a rich neighborhood park. Water jets shot up from the ground and little kids ran through them, away from them, through them again, laughing. There was a small fenced section for dogs to play in off leash, and there were healthy, fat trees. It was like nothing he remembered. He'd have to bring Olivia here.

A man with a limp walked up to him and asked for change. Nathanael couldn't see his face at first, the glare from the sun blotting out the man's features. But a cloud

passed over as Nathanael pulled a five from his wallet. It was Jake. Thin in the usual way, looking about ten years older than he was.

“Holy shit,” said Jake. “Nate, man. Heard you were up in Warren County. What are you doing in town?”

The last time he and Jake were together, they rolled Nicole out of the backseat of Jake’s car, dropping her in front of an emergency room. The hospital would Narcan her, they knew. Jake, strung out on Dilaudid in the driver’s seat, kept shouting: just leave her, just leave her, *just leave*.

“I’m visiting my daughter,” Nathanael said.

“Oh shit. Forgot you had a kid, man.”

Nathanael wasn’t sure whether to give Jake the five, but handed it to him anyway. Jake was always a good guy, but he was still a junkie. After Jake first started using, he stole a box of DVDs from a friend’s house. He brought it to their apartment and left it by the front door, staring at it, then he put it in a closet because he couldn’t bear to look at it, and then he returned the box—left it right on the stoop. And after Jake was out of sight, Nathanael grabbed the box and sold every DVD inside.

“Listen, thanks,” Jake said. “I appreciate it. I really do.” Jake shoved the bill into a pocket of his cargo shorts. “Where you staying, man?”

“Fourteenth and Vine.”

“Woah, fancy. Moving on up, yeah?”

“It’s just an Airbnb. I didn’t think you’d still live here.”

“They can’t push us all out,” he said, laughing. “Nah, it’s just too hard to leave home, you know?”

Nathanael nodded. It had been his home for almost a decade. But after his release, he knew he couldn’t stay. This city could break you. He knew too many addicts, too many others trying to get clean at the same time, and failing. He’d see the park and want to nod off. He’d pass a Frisch’s and think about locking himself in the bathroom. On the weekdays before he moved to Oregon, he’d drive the hour up to Dayton to different NA meetings, just to avoid running into his old crew.

“Well,” said Jake, “if you aren’t doing anything later, you should come out with us. A guy I know in Price Hill’s—”

“I don’t have a car,” Nathanael said.

“It’s cool man. We can just take the bus.”

“I don’t know,” said Nathanael, leaning back. “I’m really only here to get my daughter.”

“All right, all right.” Jake eyed Nathanael up and down, making Nathanael aware of his wallet and watch and shoes in a way he’d never been before. He wondered if he had made strangers feel this way back then. If he still did.

He spent hours deciding what shirt to wear, pressing his slacks, walking around his room in his new dress shoes to break them in. He knew he was overdressing, but he couldn’t help himself. He looked sharp, like he had his shit together. When he could no longer contain himself, he left in a cab. Winding through the hills along I-71, a strange

kind of déjà vu overtook him, seeing his old home through clean eyes. He'd been on this drive hundreds of times—often behind the wheel himself—but now he could see it: cobalt graffiti sprawling outward in loops along noise barriers, shreds of rubber lying flaccid over guardrails, Victorians sitting high in the hills, digital billboards shining above trees, advertising plastic surgeons, then car dealers, then Coca-Cola.

His sister-in-law lived north of the city, adjacent to a rich neighborhood, in a more modest area. It only took a sidewalk or a set of tracks to separate disparate communities. He knew her house well—mostly from breaking into it for power tools and jewelry and cell phones—but he couldn't remember the outside. He searched for an image of it on his phone but it didn't seem familiar to him. He arrived twenty minutes early and his sister-in-law answered the door in her bathrobe, her red hair twisted tight, side pieces frizzing out wildly from her temples.

“Hello, Kari,” said Nathanael. “So nice to see you again.” He didn't want to hug her but he thought he should shake her hand at least. She deserved that much.

“It's Karen,” she said, opening the door wider to let him in. Her eyes narrowed. “Call me Karen.” The only people who called her Kari were family members and he wasn't family. He'd always been the man who ruined her sister—never mind that Nicole was halfway gone when he met her, eating pills every hour and stealing from the register at work. “You're early,” she said. “Olivia isn't home from ballet yet.”

The house was tidy in a rehearsed way: cleaner than normal—he knew from breaking into it how wrecked it could get when Karen didn't expect company. But it was not so clean as to be distracting. Not so clean as to give the impression that she had

cleaned. It looked perfectly lived-in. Magnets cluttered the refrigerator, pinning spelling quizzes, crayon drawings, and photos of the family. Nicole's face was absent.

"How long are you in town?" Karen asked.

"Four days," Nathanael replied. He sat at a barstool, unsure whether he should help prepare the meal.

Karen tossed a bag of broccoli into the microwave.

"Where are you staying?" she asked.

"In an Airbnb near downtown."

"Near downtown? Like OTR?"

He nodded. "It's different now," he said. "It's safe."

"Lipstick on a pig."

"No, it is. It's almost Hyde Park nice. I think you'd really like it." He paused, then felt a little braver. "You and Oli should meet me there for lunch before I leave."

Karen gave him a half-laugh. At some point in its history, there was a one-in-four chance you'd be the victim of violence in Over-the-Rhine. He remembered hearing the statistic on the radio while he was driving through town, looking for bicycles with Nicole. He agreed with it, but what could he do then? The hosts on the radio said the neighborhood was more dangerous than Compton, than the South Side of Chicago, and that was a hard reputation to shake. People still didn't trust it.

The back door creaked and a man's voice carried to the kitchen, followed by a soft, high-pitched one. Heat swelled into Nathanael's face. He hadn't seen his daughter since she was three years old. He had only a single photo from daycare picture day, stuck

to the plastic cover in the first wallet he bought after Warren County. His hands shook, anxious and giddy. Olivia came into the kitchen.

There she stood.

It was strange to see her as so big and so small at the same time. How much of her was Nicole's? How much was his? What was hers and hers alone?

"Oli, this is Nathanael," said Karen, turning to the little girl in the wispy rainbow tutu. Olivia scrunched her face at him, stayed right in her spot by the doorway. "Don't you remember him?" She looked at him like she was trying to place his features. Surely, he looked different now. He'd gained weight. His eyes weren't sinking, lifeless in his skull.

"Don't be shy," said Karen, nudging the girl. "Say hello. He came a very long way just to see you because he loves you."

Steven, Karen's second husband, entered the room and the girl hid behind his leg.

"It's okay," Nathanael said, smiling through the tremor in his lip. "It's okay. We can talk after dinner." He hadn't prepared himself for rejection, but of course this was how it would happen. He could fault no one for lost memories. How could she know him? How could she know what it took to get him into that kitchen? He needed to be patient.

"Good to meet you," Nathanael said, turning to Steven.

"I believe we've met," Steven said, his hand covering Nathanael's. A faux pas Nathanael hadn't foreseen. For all he remembered of his time with Nicole's family at hospitals and holidays, he couldn't remember meeting this man. "Are we ready to eat?"

Torn coloring book pages and graded homework covered the dining room table. Steven collected the debris and set the table while Olivia watched. At dinner, Nathanael determined to lift his status in their eyes. Maybe he'd boast a bit—but it was better to be thought of as arrogant and successful than to be remembered as a drug-addicted deadbeat.

“I'm managing seven guys at the counter,” he said when Karen asked about his job. “I'm making decent money now. More than ever. But it was a big promotion with lots of responsibility, so I guess that's expected.” Steve and Karen exchanged looks—he was bragging too obviously.

“You must work a lot,” said Karen. She bent over Olivia's plate and cut up the long noodles. Olivia waved her away.

“I can do it,” his daughter said. So independent—that was hers alone.

“Not as much as you might think,” said Nathanael. “I still get plenty of time off. I started fixing up houses too. As a side gig, you know.”

“I have a buddy who does that,” said Steven. He took a drink of water and set the glass down quietly. “Lucrative stuff.”

“It really is.” He didn't say he first started learning about houses by ripping through them. High half of the time and frantically unhigh the other half, finding what he needed became like muscle memory to him. Only now, the motives were different.

“I'm glad things are going so well for you,” said Karen. She pushed a twirled knot of fettuccine into her mouth.

“Why are we eating at the table?” Olivia asked.

“Because we have company,” Steven said. “We eat at the table when we have company.”

The girl squinted at him—she didn’t believe him—and in that millisecond of doubt, Nathanael caught a glimpse of Nicole.

He thought the dinner was a success. Steven laughed at his jokes. Karen seemed impressed with his new life. He made sure to mention his apartment—a three bedroom—and the school district. He had a savings account and started a college fund for Olivia too, but he couldn’t figure out how to bring up those details naturally.

Before leaving, Nathanael invited them into lunch the following afternoon. He wanted to be alone with his daughter, but Karen wouldn’t allow it, and he knew it was better than nothing. In the cab, Nathanael asked the driver to pass the exit, to take him through downtown and back up to OTR. The interstate bent around a lush hill and once around it, the city skyline opens up against the river. The look of it always lit him up, sent a rising tingle of awe through his spine. It was how he wanted to remember his time here.

Dark red booths lined the walls of the chili diner, with two seaters down the center. He sat at a table near the front window and waited. The waitress came by to refill his water glass twice.

Olivia had to like him, if nothing else. Maybe she couldn’t love him yet, and he couldn’t expect her to. At best, she knew him as a package in the mail. At worst, his worst. He had to practice patience.

Behind rows of cars, a red bun bobbed up and down, and then Karen and Olivia came into the restaurant. Olivia stopped short when she saw him.

“Sorry we’re late,” Karen said, ushering Olivia into the booth. The girl sat across from Nathanael and smiled briefly. Karen was typically punctual. Maybe she couldn’t handle the pressures of motherhood as well as he thought.

“It’s fine,” he said, smothering his annoyance. “Have you been here before?”

“We don’t eat out unless Mom has a coupon,” said Olivia.

“Mom?”

“I mean Aunt Kari,” she said, smacking her forehead with her palm and laughing.

“I see,” said Nathanael. He looked to Karen, who wouldn’t meet his eye. Did she call Steven, Dad? Did she mean to? Did she know who anyone was? “That’s smart,” he continued after a moment. “Eating out is a treat.”

“Yeah, but we never do it.” Olivia took a long sip of water through her straw.

“Are you my real dad?”

The waitress stepped up to their table and took their orders. She smiled at Olivia, kept her face neutral when speaking to Nathanael. Karen spoke to the waitress, asking her questions about the menu, about ingredients, about calories, like she’d never had chili before. Maybe she hadn’t heard Olivia. Maybe she wanted Nathanael to answer. Maybe she hoped by ignoring it that the question would disappear and Olivia would forget she’d uttered it.

“Yes,” Nathanael said to Olivia, after listening to Karen and the waitress go back and forth. But Karen heard him and stopped.

“Here,” said Karen, handing Olivia a handful of quarters from her purse. “Why don’t you go play some games while the grown ups talk?” Karen scooted from the booth to let Olivia out, and the girl ran toward a block of vintage arcade games along the back wall. “You already did it,” she said, whispering in such a way that Nathanael knew she wanted to yell, “but don’t say it again. Maybe she’ll forget. You can’t say you’re her father when—” she looked like she didn’t want to say it, lowering herself into the booth, “—when we don’t know for sure.”

He never thought for a moment that she wasn’t his. He could see it in the toast of her skin, the quiet upturn of her mouth. He was there when she came into the world. He cradled her small body in the NICU. He remembered feeding her, changing her. He remembered driving her around in borrowed cars while he and Nicole dropped by pawnshops and made deals, though he wished he didn’t remember that.

“We know,” he said, digging crescents into the palms of his hands with his fingernails. How could she suggest otherwise?

“I think we should do a test, just to be sure. We both know Nicole did whatever she could to get—”

The waitress placed platters of greasy food on the table. His plate of chili fries steamed up in his face.

“I don’t think it’s fair for you to say that,” said Nathanael, keeping his voice as flat as he could. He was sweating. “I’m on the birth certificate. I was there when she was born.”

Olivia ran to the table and crawled underneath it to reach her spot. She grabbed her coney with two hands and chomped into it, shredded cheese falling down in clumps. Of course she was his.

“We can’t be sure,” said Karen. “Not without testing.”

Olivia looked at them while she chewed her food, paying attention but surely she didn’t understand. She couldn’t.

“I am sure,” Nathanael said. Some women at a table against the wall turned to him, and he took in a few deep breaths. “I am sure,” he repeated. “And I want to see more of her.”

“I don’t know.” She unfolded a napkin over her lap. “She has a stable situation now, which is more than she had for the first few years.” Olivia’s mouth shined with grease. Karen stirred a packet of Splenda into her iced tea.

“I am stable,” said Nathanael.

“Maybe for now.”

“But I am,” he said, probably too loudly. He wanted to scream it. Maybe if he was louder she’d believe him. “I’ve been clean for almost three years. I’m doing so well.” Some people may never forgive you—he had to accept this. It was drilled into his head in NA meetings, in prison, in his own, private life lessons.

“Oli, why don’t you go play some more games?” asked Karen. “You’re finished with your coney, right?”

The girl nodded, crawled under the table, and ran to the back of the restaurant.

“You can’t talk like that in front of her,” said Karen. “I can see that you’re not ready for this. It’s responsibility you can’t imagine.”

At his halfway house, he learned about conflict avoidance, about escape skills and thought stopping; about self-obsession and compassion. But he couldn’t muster up the lessons now. He could only try to stay calm, reiterate his points.

“You can’t hold it against me anymore.”

“You’re only clean because you spent two years locked up. You can’t come back into her life and leave again when you decide you like narcotics more.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Where have I heard that before?” Karen picked up her fork and put it down, then picked it up again. “And after what you did to that little girl’s mother—” she caught herself, swallowed, spoke in a more measured tone. “You’re lucky I’m letting you see her at all.”

Karen thought of Nicole as happy and healthy before Nathanael. It was all bullshit, of course. When Nathanael met Nicole, she’d been eating Oxy for months. She’d dropped out of college, lost her job. He met her at party and something sparked and then caught fire and then everything burned down. It didn’t take long. They lived in and around the city for years before Nathanael was finally caught breaking into a house. He thought it was empty, but the homeowner slept inside, waking to the sounds of shredded plaster. Nicole, the skinny thing, squeezed through a window and spent the night in the woods. She OD’d a month later, Nathanael locked in a cell an hour away. What could he have done? His calls were ignored. His letters undelivered. Nicole only visited once, just

after he got in, and he didn't get permission to attend her funeral because they weren't legally married.

"You know," said Nathanael. Then he stopped himself short. He wouldn't help his case, yelling. He straightened his posture and turned to his daughter. She jerked the joystick of the Pac-Man machine, leaning with it in whatever direction she pulled. "I miss her too." He thought about her often—he must have loved her. But it was hard to remember if it was her or maybe something else. Almost everything was muddled in his mind. There was only one clear picture. "My attorney and I think it's time to pursue custody," he said, finally.

"You have an attorney?"

"Two. One in Oregon, one in Ohio. I've been looking into it for months."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't want this to be a long, drawn-out process. I wanted to show you how well I'm doing—show you that I'm ready. She's already six. How much more do I have to miss?"

"I don't see how it's my fault. You made your choices."

"You're right, but." He faltered. He was the only one to blame here. How can you prove to someone that you've changed when she's seen the worst of you? Seen what you're capable of? "But I think it's what Nicole would want," he said. He meant it.

"Because you were so familiar with what she wanted." Karen set her fork down again. Neither had eaten much. The heat was gone. "Do you know how often she called me about you? Needing money because you stole her shit?" Karen paused and Nathanael

knew he shouldn't answer. "Listen, you've done nothing to raise Oli so far. What makes you think you can now? Because you don't steal anymore? Because you don't spear yourself in Wendy's bathrooms anymore? Now you're suddenly qualified to be her father? Who's to say you won't relapse?"

There was nothing to guarantee he wouldn't relapse. Even now, he'd get the occasional craving. It would happen when he watched television or smelled vinegar or passed certain people on the street. But after so many years of sobriety he knew his triggers. He knew how to avoid the worst of himself.

"My chances for relapse are lower now that I've been sober for three years." For all of her faults, and there were many, Karen was logical. He needed to persuade her with facts, with statistics.

"Lower isn't good enough."

"My drug tests are always clear. I let you speak with my probation officer. I gave you references. What did you think that was about?"

"Planning to visit."

If he'd never see his daughter again then what was the point of all this?

The waitress brought a single slip of paper to the table, asked them if they need anything else.

"No," said Nathanael. "We're done here."

Jake. He could only think of Jake. Jake still lived on Hamer Street, in their old building. In their old unit. When Nathanael returned to his Airbnb, he changed into his

running shoes, leaving on his jeans, his button down. He didn't even lock the door—just took off running north on Vine.

In the old days, if he wanted cake, his mouth watered and he'd have a slice. If he wanted a woman, even when he was with Nicole, the swell below his belt took over. But his ache for dope was deeper. It came with tunnel vision. It came with panic. He felt longing in his whole body, the relentless pull toward destruction and serenity. The tremor in his veins rippled through his bones, dimmed his head.

The cravings still came, and they hit him hard. He was practically drooling, sweating. Blood bubbled through each capillary in his body. His arms prickled, sent tremors through his neck and head. He wished he could count the ways in which this city had ruined him.

He pushed through blocks of people, zigzagging clumps of lost suburbanites, visiting, exclaiming, staring up at what was once collapsed. His hairline dampened with sweat as he crossed Liberty. The further north he ran, the fewer people he passed. The fewer restaurants and shops and bars. More locked up buildings, boarded up panes. The neighborhood was yawning, stretching into itself as if only dreaming before.

He stopped when he reached his old house, a Queen Anne Revival the color of a broken robin's egg. On the top floor, his old unit, an extension cord hung from the window, drooped down and over to the second floor window of the neighboring building, another Queen Anne surrounded by a construction fence and signs that read *No Trespassing* and *Danger* and *Reporte inmediatamente toda herida o golpe a su supervisor*.

When he lived there, the front door didn't lock, only the individual unit doors did. Now, it was bolted shut, a key box on the doorknob. He knocked on the door, waited, and hoped Jake would and would not answer.

But Jake's eyes and forehead popped out from the window. He pointed to the basement. Nathanael remembered right where it was, the half-window put in decades after the place had been built. He squeezed through, dropped down into the dark. The floor was dirt, the walls made of crumbling masonry. He remembered it perfectly—the roughness of it. The way the brick felt when he rested his head on the wall after Nicole finally kicked him out and he spent the night in the corner.

The living room was just as it had been, maybe with new layers of dust. Two milk crates rested by the window, water bottles upon water bottles cluttered the floor, nearly empty or all gone, a shadeless lamp connected to an extension cord, sitting on the floor. There was a stack of neatly folded gray t-shirts beside the lamp, and a Bible with a Rubik's Cube on top. He wondered if Jake still kept packets pressed between the pages of Ecclesiastes. The last time he and Jake were together in this room, Nicole OD'd in front of the window. He pictured her there, lying flat and turning blue. Now, he couldn't pull himself away and yet he'd never wanted to leave a place more.

“Glad you're here, man,” Jake said, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Nathanael stood, couldn't bring himself to move. He shouldn't have stepped foot into the apartment. He knew better. Yet his body quivered at the thought of that gentle pierce, the calm wave that would follow.

“I don’t have anything right now,” said Jake. He took a gulp of water from one of the bottles. A syringe rested on the top of the milk crate and Nathanael’s entire body grew rigid, attentive.

“Gateshot,” said Jake, noticing Nathanael staring at the orange cap. Just a few years ago, Nathanael would’ve tried to take the loaded syringe. Blamed someone else or added in detergent or Advil to whatever was left. Part of him still wanted to grab it.

“How’ve you been?” he asked. He moved his focus from the needle to Jake.

“Can’t complain,” said Jake. “You want some water or something? If you have cash we can—”

It would be so easy. Who would know? He didn’t have to take a drug test for weeks. He could do it and all of this would go away. He could get away with it. He knew he could. Karen wasn’t going to let him have Olivia back anyway and what case did he have to take her back?

But was that all there was? He needed out of the room.

“No,” said Nathanael. “I can’t. I’m clean now.”

“Good for you, man,” said Jake. “I wish I was.” He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, then grabbed the Rubik’s Cube and twisted it.

“You can be.”

In some strange way, he owed Jake an apology. He needed to make amends.

“Twelve step?” Jake asked.

“Sort of.”

Nathanael modified it as best he could. At first, it was difficult to buy into the higher power idea. It took weeks of meetings before he tried. It made him uneasy, distrustful—the belief in a higher power never fit into his experience of the world. Plus, many of the addicts at the Saint Mary’s NA meetings in Centerville were sanctimonious, the sorts of ex-junkies who swapped their crack pipes for Bibles. He approached his recovery a bit differently—thought of the process as rewiring a house. He made a plan of action, kept at work, used an expert for help. He went to meetings and maintained contact with his sponsor.

“Is there anything I can do to help you?” Nathanael asked. He could make amends in some way. It wouldn’t be right to give Jake all the money he owed—Jake’d just use it for dope—but he could do something for him. He could invite Jake to his apartment for a shower and some food and maybe somewhere comfortable to sleep. And if Jake wanted to quit—really wanted to quit, not pull the same junkie bullshit he and Nicole had done a hundred times—he could help.

Jake made his way to the bathroom and after a few seconds, Nathanael heard the shower running. He thought of all the times in his life when he wanted a hot shower. How, now, he could have one whenever he wanted and it was something for which he couldn’t be more grateful.

Karen called around six. He thought it must’ve been a mistake when he saw her name flash across his screen, like perhaps she’d pocket dialed him. Jake, comfortable in Nathanael’s sweats, slept soundly on the couch.

“I think I should apologize,” Karen said. “I’m not trying to—I mean. I can’t imagine being away from my children. My girls are everything. I do understand how you must feel.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Nathanael. He moved to his temporary bedroom. “Because I’ve been working for years trying to fix this. I just don’t want to work the rest of my life trying to prove to you that I’m in control. That I’m not going to relapse.”

There was a long pause, then a sigh. Hope hung in the dead air of the phone.

“Maybe we should consider our options,” said Karen.

Finally. An acknowledgement of his progress and competence. A moment he’d longed for so intensely he nearly burst out laughing and crying all at once.

They agreed to meet for brunch the next day at the place just below Nathanael’s Airbnb. He wanted Karen to see Over-the-Rhine. See for herself the changes it had undergone. He hung up feeling more hopeful than he had before coming back. He was nearly there.

And then the thought of how close he had come to throwing it. Jake snored. He’d have to get him out. But could he send him back to that place? Not even a night of reprieve? He’d have been thankful if the situation were reversed.

A few hours into the evening, Jake still asleep on the couch, Chuck called to check on him. “I know it’s been a big trip for you,” he said. “I wanted to know how you were feeling.” Children laughed in the background. He must’ve been with his grandkids. Nathanael was warmed by the thought of another’s happiness, especially now that his own was so very near.

“I’m doing great,” said Nathanael. “Never better. I think things are going to work out.”

“Good to hear,” said Chuck. “Keep me updated. Don’t hesitate, okay? I’m putting in a new bathtub this weekend and that’s nothing that can’t wait.”

“I wanted to tell you, I ran into someone. Someone from the old days.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He knew he shouldn’t have let Jake stay over. If it had been okay, he would have told Chuck about it right then. He had to hide it and then tomorrow he’d forget about it. He’d made a mistake.

The next morning, Nathanael woke to an empty apartment. Jake left him a thank you note on the TV stand, scribbled in ballpoint on two sheets of toilet paper.

Karen and Olivia met him for brunch on Race Street. Karen wanted to sit outside and enjoy the sunshine so the three of them sat at a small patio table next to a short wrought iron gate. The restaurant gave kids modeling clay to play with instead of crayons, and Olivia rolled the clay into strips.

“It’s nicer down here than I expected,” said Karen. “Clean.”

She leaned back into the sun and closed her eyes.

“I told you it was better,” said Nathanael. He watched Olivia knead the ball of clay and start over, flattening out long sections.

“Why don’t you move here?” asked Karen, opening her eyes. “Well, maybe not here, exactly. But back to town.”

He was glad to see the city changed, but he wasn't sure he could stay longer than a week. Returning to his old home made him think of Nicole, of the old days, the old highs.

"It would make this easier, if you lived in town."

"You're right," he said. She smiled at this. "But Oregon is great too. Lots of nature, great schools. There would be so many opportunities for Olivia." His face throbbed from grinning. Was he trying too hard? Could he? Olivia wrapped a wet clay ring around his index finger.

"We need to see you more frequently overall," said Karen.

Olivia took his wrist in her plump little hand and twisted a band of purple clay. A bracelet for him.

"It matches mine," Olivia said, squinting at him, holding up her arm.

"My car broke down," someone said, in the distance. It couldn't be. Nathanael looked around the restaurant, along the sidewalk.

"Once we get more familiar with your life, I'll feel more comfortable letting you have her alone," said Karen.

Nathanael heard Jake's voice again: "My daughter and me are trying to get to Cleveland but the car won't start. My mom's dying, you see. We got to get there to say goodbye."

Jake swayed near a street corner, waiting for the light to change. People walked by him, pretending not to hear his voice, though it carried over traffic.

"And I'd like to see the schools," said Karen.

“Anything helps,” cried Jake. “I’m a veteran just trying to see his mom.” He stopped a woman putting change in a parking meter. “You got any spare change?” he asked, surprising her. She backed away from him. “I said, do you have any change?”

“Olivia’s getting great grades, aren’t you?” said Karen. Olivia cheered excitedly.

“Thanks, m’am,” said Jake. “You got anymore? It’s my birthday today.”

“I’m star reader this week,” said Olivia. “I read five books.”

Jake limped closer to the restaurant. Nathanael slid down into the iron chair, put his hand over his face, thought of praying even though he didn’t believe in God.

“Maybe we’ll start with two or three trips out,” said Karen, Nathanael nodding at her, almost frantically, like if he were hyper-involved with Karen, Jake would disappear. “And you can visit here more often. And maybe in a year or two Oli can visit alone and we can go from there.”

Jake stopped at the corner of the patio, wobbling.

A year would be too long. She wouldn’t want to come.

“Hey, you guys got a few bucks?” Jake asked two brunchers. They ignored him completely, staring straight at one another, chatting.

Karen turned around to Jake, then back to Nathanael.

“Sad,” she said, tapping her fingers on the table, kicking up her knee, restlessly. “I thought you said they cleaned this place up.”

“They did,” said Nathanael. “People don’t beg in places without money. No one panhandled here ten years ago.”

“Only because they’d be shot for standing outside.”

Jake stopped in front of their table. His eyelids drooped unmistakably.

“Natertot,” he said. “This is your daughter, yeah? Nice to meet you.” His words rolled together, no spaces between them, yet he didn’t sound drunk. He didn’t have a slur, exactly. He smiled slowly at Olivia, who looked to Karen but didn’t move. “I think I left something at your place last night. Can I go up?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Nathanael, standing.

Karen glared, pinched her mouth tight.

“It will only take a second,” Jake said. He swayed back and forth.

Nathanael walked around the patio partition, grabbed Jake by the arm as hard as he could and threw him forward.

“Get out of here,” Nathanael said. “Now.”

“What’s your problem?” Jake couldn’t meet Nathaniel’s eyes—his eyelids couldn’t stay open. He was nodding, mouth open.

“I’m going to call the police.”

“Calm down, man. We’re cool.”

Jake could hardly keep his feet to the ground.

“I think you need to sit down,” said Nathanael, gripping Jake’s arm tightly and dragging him to the building next door. He pushed Jake to the wall.

Just leave. Just leave.

Jake slid down to the ground. Nathanael watched his chest rise and fall before moving back to the table, making sure he hadn’t, somehow, overdosed. Though, perhaps in the chaos of an overdose, Karen would forgive and forget.

“He’s okay,” Nathanael said. “Just nodding.”

Karen hovered over the table, pen in hand.

“Why did you shove him like that?” asked Karen.

“I didn’t.”

“You did. Is this the sort of company you keep?”

“No, absolutely not.”

He reached for Karen’s arm, then stopped himself.

“I think we’re going home,” she said, pulling away.

“No, don’t. I—”

“I don’t think it’s legal for you to be associating with junkies,” said Karen.

“Wouldn’t that be a condition of your probation?”

“No, I wasn’t associating,” he moved closer to Karen, touched her arm. Flecks of clay clung to the fine hairs on his fingers and forearm and pulled at his skin. “He just needed someplace to sleep for the night. I was trying to help him.”

“You’re just the same as you ever were.”

“I’ll take a drug test right now.”

He backed away, took in a few breaths. The look on Karen’s face—he was scaring her.

“Say goodbye to Mr. Nathanael, Oli.”

Nathanael kneeled to his daughter, squeezed her in a hug that wrapped his arms all the way around to his shoulders. She kissed his cheek and then Karen yanked her

away and Nathanael stayed in his spot on the ground, watching their figures fade into the waves of shoppers and diners, behind the shining new facades of old buildings.

He called Karen's house but the phone rang continually. Called her cell and went straight to voicemail. He wanted to leave a message for her to explain—well, he didn't know. What more could be said? There were no magic sentences, no words to erase the real pain he'd caused and no phrases to sway her. When he heard the beep on the line, he still tried to think of something to say, something about forgiveness and faith, but his mind was jumbled and he hung up. He knew he should call Chuck. Or Tom or David or someone from his group. Call anyone.

When he finally gave in, finally committed to the idea of a higher power—one that wasn't a god—his first impulse was to make it tangible. To make it Olivia. "That's not a good idea," said one of the group members, the man he'd later make his sponsor. "I get the sentiment, but I don't think it's the way to go." And at first Nathanael was indignant—he could put whatever he wanted in the position—but then he thought, maybe Chuck was trying to tell him something else. Maybe he knew all along.

He paced around the apartment. Sat and stared at the walls, sat out on the balcony and looked down at the crowds of people. After a few minutes of battling with himself, thinking, why not and why bother, he moved onto the street and ran. He cut in and out of traffic, cars honking at him as he listened for the steady left-right thumping of foot and rubber and asphalt, but he was unable to hear beyond the buzzing in his own head, the buzzing that led him back to Hamer Street.