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My thesis is a collection of stories about men and boys who are trying to figure out what
it is that they should be doing.

I THOUGHT THIS IS WHAT WE WERE DOING

by

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GAME

Even though sixth grade had only been over for two weeks, school felt now like a thing other kids did. I had a real job repoing cars with Uncle Dan, the two of us driving around the city in his rollback truck like captains of a big ship, and I made twenty bucks for every car we got back to the yard. That first time he took me on a job I had been standing outside Justin's house, where his dad was packing their luggage into their station wagon. Justin was kicking the tire and making a stupid clicking noise with his mouth, and neither of us was saying anything. They were going to a beach in South Carolina, and his dad kept saying he wished he could fit me, as if I'd asked to go or wanted to. He made having a dad around seem kind of annoying, and truth was it didn't really bother me that much that my dad was in jail. At least I didn't have to ride all day crammed into that crummy little car singing songs or whatever they did, and I could pretty much do whatever I wanted every day in the summertime. Still, I was bummed that Justin was leaving.

“Bring me back some shells or whatever,” I said to him.

“There's girls in bikinis everywhere,” he said.

“Well bring back one of those too, then.”

That's when Uncle Dan had pulled up in his truck and asked if I was up for riding along on a job. “Hell yes, Curly,” I said. Uncle Dan was a big guy with hair like crashing

black waves. “Well, chump,” I said to Justin, “I’ll catch you on the other side.” I climbed up into the truck, and that was that, I had a job for the summer. I didn't even bother coming home the next morning since we were out all night anyway. I'd been sleeping on Uncle Dan's couch since.

He had just taken over the business after my grandfather croaked, so I felt I brought a certain professionalism to what was otherwise a rather seat-of-your-pants operation. It was my idea to start keeping a log of the waitouts, for example, a waitout being when someone's got a car in their garage or somewhere else you can't get to it, or maybe it's someone who you know is going to come out yelling with a big dog or a weapon so you've got to wait till they're asleep. So we were waiting some guy out and I asked Uncle Dan, “Are a lot of these guys repeat offenders?” He just laughed because apparently they were all repeat offenders. “OK, then,” I said. “Next time you have to come here to wait for this guy, you'll have some information to go on. What time he goes to the grocery store or whatever.”

He just laughed at me and said, “Nobody goes to the store the same time every night, Fosty. People are unreliable. Especially the dumb hicks around here.”

For that first log I wrote something like, “Suspect leaves house at 2100 hours wearing blue jeans and stupid shirt.” Uncle Dan read it and said, “Fosty, he's not a suspect. He's just a guy behind on his payments. Just write 'guy' or something. And we're not in the Marines, so just put whatever time it is in o'clocks.”

I looked at the t-shirt he was wearing, which had a hole right in Neil Young's

forehead and a stain on his guitar, and said, "It's your business, Uncle Dan."

I helped get the time down on a repo too. While Uncle Dan shimmied his way in and put the gear in neutral, I'd chain up the front axle and then work the levers on the truck. We always worked quiet and fast, and I loved pushing the lever forward and feeling the lurch and pull of the winch when it dragged the car up the ramp like a bad dog. There was just nothing better than that.

On our way out one night I asked Uncle Dan to stop by Mom's so I could get some clean underwear and socks. He pulled up on the street outside and I ran in. Mom was on the couch watching some new televangelist because Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker had both sinned big time a few months earlier. She wasn't working because of everything that was going wrong with her. She had pain in all her joints and intense migraines and some other stuff. She looked up at me when I walked in and said "Fosty," with a soft surprise in her voice, like I had floated down through the ceiling with good tidings. Only the light from the television was on her, on one side, and the other half of her was swimming in darkness. Her whole house was lit with night lights, because of her migraines.

"Hey, Mom," I said.

"Oh, Fosty," she said. "I'm sorry if I've been a bad mother. I'm just so sick. I hurt all over."

You could tell when she was on too many pills because she got weepy and her

eyes were like planets with no atmosphere. There wasn't much you could do but give her a kiss on the cheek and tell her it was all OK.

I went up to my room, and it was just like I'd left it. The bed wasn't made, and on the nightstand there was half a glass of water. The suit I'd worn to my grandpa's funeral was laid out flat across it the same way as if someone were wearing it, the pants at the bottom and the jacket wrapped over the dress shirt at the top. It looked like I'd been raptured.

I heard Uncle Dan come in and say hi to Mom, then walk through the kitchen to the bathroom. I pulled a few pair of socks and some underwear out of the dresser, then I took off my jeans and t-shirt and put on the suit and clipped on the tie, and looked at myself in the mirror for a minute, then took the steps four at a time back down to the kitchen. I heard something drop in the bathroom and Uncle Dan swear, and a few blue pills rattled out under the crack in the door. He came out not long after and picked up the pills and said, "I was trying to find some aspirin." He put the pills back in the prescription bottle and set it in the medicine cabinet, and stood there looking at it. "Hmm," he said, and closed the cabinet. He came out and stood in the kitchen doorway and said, "Got dressed up, huh?" One of mom's night lights on the wall over the sink was throwing the shadow of a cheese grater all over the kitchen. It made his face look shot full of holes, except the opposite. The holes were the Uncle Dan parts, where the light got through, and the rest was dark. "You all set?" he said, scratching his ear.

In the living room Mom was writing a check for the man on TV. "Mom," I said.

“Stop writing checks to these guys. They're no good.”

“They're men of God,” she said, whispering the word God as if he were a secret we had to keep just between us.

“No, Mom. I mean the checks. The checks are no good.” I'd seen the letters from the bank. She'd already bounced one that summer.

The guy on TV was pacing up and down the stage and sweating a lot. He said that faith was just knowing what was going to happen next. Simple as that, he said. I had never had a clue what would happen next, though. For thirteen years everything that happened was a complete and total surprise, starting with being born and then with Dad going away and Mom falling apart so bad she had to take pills that made her act like someone living on the moon. You couldn't possibly know any of that stuff was going to happen, I didn't care what that preacher said. I picked up the remote control and changed the channel, and Uncle Dan said, “I'll meet you in the truck. Bye Susan.”

Mom looked up at me and smiled, and put her hand on my face. She said. “I'm praying for you, Foster. Be careful. Stay a kid a while.”

She was always saying that.

We drove by a couple of addresses on the list, but no cars. Uncle Dan asked me what time it was, then he drove us to a hotel parking lot out by the airport and parked under the shadow of a big tree, facing the Denny's restaurant next door.

“What are we doing here?” I asked. I looked at the list and the notes we had next

to each car, but there was no mention of a diner.

“Special job,” Uncle Dan said. I'd already been on a couple of his rogue assignments, and they tended to put me in awkward positions and throw the whole night off course. The fat man's wife's Corvette, for instance. *I* called it a rogue assignment anyway, but Uncle Dan just called it “a little something on the side,” like it was a helping of mashed potatoes and not a complete waste of our time. Every couple days the fat man's wife would call us up and say, “That slug took my car,” as if it didn't happen all the time and we were supposed to be outraged. But fifty bucks is fifty bucks, Uncle Dan said every time we went to the strip club, found the car, and brought it back to her. “Well it's only five bucks for me,” I reminded him. But each time Uncle Dan was lowering the car down the ramp while the woman watched from the driveway with her arms folded, the Fat Man was squeezed into the front seat with me, watching through the rear window as the front license plate, which read “Was His,” was rolled away from him again. You had to feel a little bad for him, but still, he was so big I had to put my legs on the driver's side of the shifter, and he smelled like sweat and strip club perfume and breathed like a big animal, sometimes crying the whole way from his wife's nice house to his crappy motel room. I hated riding with the fat man, but Uncle Dan always said, “He's just a guy, Fosty. A little down on his luck, that's all.”

So needless to say, I wasn't excited about whatever it was we were doing here. “What kind of special job?” I said. “What's the car?” I was a little annoyed by the lack of information.

“We'll know in a few minutes,” he said.

At just before twenty hundred hours a black Firebird pulled in, and a pretty blond woman got out a minute later. Uncle Dan said, “You've got to be fucking kidding me.” The woman tied an apron around her as she walked inside, and we watched through the glass as she clocked in at the register. Uncle Dan wasn't saying anything, but I knew it was his wife from the picture in his bedroom, and from the fact that he was breathing hard through his nose and gripping the steering wheel so hard it seemed like it might crumble into pieces, or like he was going to rip the thing off and throw it through the windshield. Mom had told me that they'd only been married a few months before she moved out, earlier in the year. I thought her name was Ann, but I wasn't sure.

Uncle Dan put his hands in his hair and said, “That's the son of a bitch right there. I know where you live, Dennis.” His wife was behind the counter, pulling her hair back into a pony tail with a barrette between her teeth. No one said anything for a minute—she was lit up in the bright restaurant like an actress, and we watched her like watching a television show. Then the Firebird pulled out of the parking lot and rolled out onto the highway, but we didn't follow him. I was so used to the sound of the truck's engine that it seemed too quiet in the cab. I pretended to look at the list again and said, “I don't see a Firebird on here. Is he behind on a payment?” I knew right away it was a stupid thing to say.

“No,” Uncle Dan said. “But I think I might be.”

His wife moved back and forth in a hurry, sometimes with several plates balanced

on her arm so delicately that I was sure they would all fall and shatter against the floor soon.

“I need to knock something down,” Uncle Dan said, still watching her. He let out a deep breath and started the engine, and looked over at me, forcing a smile. “OK,” he said. “Let's go bowling.”

Diamond Avenue was on the north side, which was a side of town even more beat up than the west side, where we lived. The houses all had two drooping front windows and porch rails that were splintered and warped, sloping downward at each end so they looked like sad faces from the road. It wasn't uncommon to see a dog babysitting a child on the sidewalk during the afternoon, or a grown woman weeping at a bus stop where the bus hadn't stopped for years. And of course, Diamond Lanes wasn't much better. The bowling alley on the east side was clean and sharp and lit up the whole street at night with its flashing neon pins getting knocked down by a glowing ball every few seconds. It was a place you wanted to go into, where you could imagine families like Justin's bowling and having a great time together. But Diamond Lanes looked like a place where they might be manufacturing bowling pins, not knocking them down for good, clean fun. I'd never been inside, but the gray cinder block exterior didn't exactly convey that anything exciting was waiting on the other side of its dingy, yellowing door. The B on the electric sign had stopped working long ago, so it was only lit up to say “owl,” which is what people had started calling the place. They'd say, “Let's go down to the Owl and get a

beer and a lane.”

When we pulled into the parking lot, Uncle Dan took a second look at a shitty looking Chrysler parked in the handicap spot. He said he could have sworn it was a car he and his dad were trying to get two years ago. Said he even remembered the license plate number. He called in to the yard to double check the plates, but said to go ahead with it, so I lowered the ramp and hooked the chain up, then reached in and put the car into neutral. I walked around to the darker side of the truck and took a wiz, counting the frozen deer eyes in the field on the other side of Diamond Avenue. Before my dad went to jail, we were sitting outside at Grandpa's place, which was Uncle Dan's now, and Dad said “Still some good game around here” when we saw three deer chewing stalks out in the cornfield. I wondered then what he meant; could you play games with them?

When I was done whizzing I climbed up and turned the headlights off for a second, then flipped them back on to see fifteen fluffy white tails bouncing off into the darkness.

Uncle Dan said it was the right car, so we pulled it up onto the ramp, then we went inside. The wooden sound of pins knocking around echoed off of everything, and Tom Petty was singing “Don't do me like that,” a song I particularly liked. People seemed to be having an OK time in there, drinking their Budweiser and hurling a big stupid ball at the floor. One ecstatic lady in her sweatpants screamed like she'd won a new car when she got all her pins down.

Uncle Dan asked the guy at the counter, some guy he knew from high school, to

please inquire over the intercom if anyone drives a Pontiac piece of shit they hadn't paid for in a while, 'cause we were towing it away. The guy wrote it down and picked up the phone and said pretty much exactly what Uncle Dan had said. Everyone stopped and looked around at each other for a second, but no one said, "Yes, that piece of shit is mine." Who could blame them?

"I don't know how to bowl," I said.

"Does *anyone* here look like they know what they're doing?" Uncle Dan said, loud enough for a few heads to turn our way. "It's not really that kind of game, Fosty." We got some shoes and a Coke and a whole pitcher of beer, which Uncle Dan just drank out of instead of pouring it into a glass first. He was a pretty big guy, which I might have said already. Even the bowling ball looked small and light in his hand, and he let it loose down the lane like it was shot out of a cannon. No pin was left standing, and one even flew out into another lane. He did a little jig like a dance you'd do at gunpoint, and a guy in the next lane where some of the pins had landed turned to say something but thought better of it when he saw how big and possibly nuts Uncle Dan was. Our gate wouldn't come down for the next turn, so we pushed the button to call the guy from the counter over.

"Maybe don't roll it so hard next time," the guy said after he had fixed it.

"Don't tell me how to bowl, man," Uncle Dan said to the guy, smiling at him with all his teeth showing, like a cartoon. You could tell his mood was improving.

I could barely lift the ball and rolled a gutter just about every time, so Uncle Dan

gave me some pointers for keeping it out of the ditch, which is what he called the gutter. Like keeping my shoulders straight and lining up my arm with the marks on the floor. I hit a few down on the eighth frame and yelled “Hallelujah!” to be funny, like the preacher in Mom's church did when he knocked people in the congregation down by smacking them in their heads. When I turned around Uncle Dan was talking to some girls, and they were giggling at me. I knew the pretty one, Gwen, from our neighborhood, and I'd seen her at school a couple of times. She was a couple years ahead of me, going into high school after the summer, I was pretty sure, but I think she had been held her back a year or two.

“Gwen said, “You go to West Heights, right?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Why are you wearing a suit?” she said.

I started to tell her about my grandpa's funeral but decided not to. “We're working,” I said. “Sort of.”

“Cool,” she said. “Anyway this is my cousin, Julie.” Julie smiled, showing the popcorn kernels in her braces. Her hair was off her head about four inches in the front and she smelled like aerosol chemicals.

“Hi,” I said. I kicked at the bowling ball machine with my bowling shoe.

“You look like your dad,” she told me.

“You know my dad?” I said. The girls both looked to Uncle Dan, and for a second it was like everybody was trying to figure out what would be said next. All the faith had

gone out of the conversation. “Oh, sorry,” she said. “I thought he was your son!”

“Nah, he's my brother's kid,” Uncle Dan said, and tousled my hair a bit.

“In other words, your...*nephew*,” Gwen said, and laughed.

“I guess he is. Never even thought of it.” Uncle Dan made a pleasantly surprised face, like he'd just taken a bite of a terrific sandwich.

We bowled for a bit with the girls, not really keeping score. Uncle Dan showed them both how to line up with the marks on the floor, but they mostly bowled like girls, setting the ball down on the floor first and rolling it from under their legs and right into the ditch every time, cracking themselves up with how crappy they were at stuff. When the game was over Uncle Dan asked them if they wanted to come for a ride with us. They looked at each other with some kind of secret eye language, and Gwen said, “Alright. Just for a bit, though.”

Later, Uncle Dan was showing Gwen how to shift gears. She was sitting on his lap and grinding the hell out of the transmission. Julie was messing with the radio and she stopped the dial on a song Uncle Dan would normally have hated, and which I definitely hated, but he was letting things slide left and right tonight. You could tell he was having a good time, but the night was so off course it made me nervous. “Where the hell are we going?” I asked. No one answered.

Uncle Dan took a drink from his flask then gave it to Gwen. She took a big pull off of it, and offered it to Julie, but she didn't want any. I tried to wave it off too, but

Gwen and Uncle Dan really wanted me to have a drink.

“Come on, Fosty,” Uncle Dan said with a disappointed tone. “One little sip won't hurt you.”

“You can do it!” Gwen said, like a cheerleader. I felt like I was in one of the drug commercials they showed you in homeroom, but they were working so hard at peer pressuring me I didn't want to let them down. I only meant to take a little but when I held it up to my mouth Gwen reached over and tipped the flask up so that I got a whole mouthful, plus some down my shirt. I swallowed because it burned, and then I coughed hard on the back of Julie's neck.

“Ew!” she squealed.

“Sorry,” I said, handing the flask back. It felt like I'd swallowed bees.

“Fosty,” Uncle Dan said, “I have a serious question for you.”

“OK,” I said.

“Lean in,” he said, so I leaned toward him, and he whispered in my ear, “Have you ever seen boobs?” Only his whisper was louder than he thought it was, and the girls laughed and I felt my face heat up like a tea pot, and thought about hurling myself right out onto the road.

“Aww,” Gwen said. “Leave him alone.”

“Hey come on,” Uncle Dan said. “You weren't supposed to be listening. But maybe one of you could help my nephew out and let him take a quick peak. I won't even look, promise.”

Julie made a show of covering herself up with her arms. You could tell she was having about as good of a time as I was.

Gwen was steering the truck now, and emitting little chirps of joy at driving such a big vehicle all over the road. Uncle Dan reached over to Julie and cupped his hand over the poofy bangs rising off her head and said, “Wow. That’s amazing.” Julie rolled her eyes at him and climbed over me to the seat on the passenger side of my lap, sitting as close to the door, and as far away from Uncle Dan, as possible.

“Oh, come on.” Uncle Dan said. “Grow up.” He reached out and roughed up my hair a bit. “You having a good time, Fosty?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Good. That’s good. Because the minute you stop having a good time, Fosty, we’ll do something else. You just let me know, OK?”

“OK,” I said.

Outside the truck, houses were moving past us like a carousel, but most of the lights were off. The streetlights sharpened the curved edges of cars parked along the curb. We were all sweating through our clothes and hoping someone would tell us what else to do.

Except Gwen, who was giggling helplessly as she steered us right up onto the sidewalk. Uncle Dan grabbed the wheel with the hand that wasn’t on her thigh and said, “Whoa, there, horsie.” I tried not to think about us crashing into something. I felt the growl of the truck’s engine right inside my head, like it was my brain, and my feet started

humming like wheels. This is what it feels like to drink alcohol, I thought.

Julie said, "We should be getting back."

"Are you sure?" Gwen said. Her skin was shimmering in the dashboard lights like water under a full moon. I'd seen her before, like I said, but I'd never really got a good look at her, and never like this. She was beautiful. Her eyes were light blue and big enough to swim in.

"Oh come on," Uncle Dan said. "Don't be a buzz kill." I didn't know if he was talking to Julie, or to Gwen, who was prying his thumb out of the waistline of her jeans. No one was paying any attention at all to driving the truck. I squinted hard when I saw that we were angled to glance off one of the parked cars, and I tried to warn whoever was steering now but instead only a strange noise came out of my throat, something I couldn't reproduce if I wanted to. I closed my eyes completely, then I felt us lurch back to the road, and heard Uncle Dan say, "Who the hell *is* that?" When I opened my eyes he was pushing Gwen off his lap, checking one side mirror then another. I heard it too. Someone was honking, long steady beeps followed by a few friendly short ones, like Morse code. "Where's that coming from?" Uncle Dan said. Nothing but an empty stretch of road on both sides, as far as I could see. Then Gwen said, "There's a man back there." She was looking through the back window, and when I turned around, sure enough, there was a guy in the Chrysler, waving one arm out the window and honking with the other.

Uncle Dan looked in the rear view mirror and said, "Holy shit! We've reposed a live human!"

Gwen said, "Is he someone you know?"

"Who cares?" Julie said, but she kept looking right along with the rest of us. The man was waving his arms frantically now.

Uncle Dan pulled the truck over to the side of the street and we sat there for a minute, all four of us turned to watch him like he was something in a zoo.

"He must have been asleep in the back," Uncle Dan said. The man had stopped waving and honking and was just looking back at the four of us, these people who had been driving him all over the road like a boat in a storm. I was more embarrassed for us than for him, but also I thought that this could be another fun job, driving people around while they slept in their cars. Sometimes you were just too tired to drive home yourself, or maybe you drank too much, and maybe your wife and your kids were at home and they wanted you to come home too and you could call us and we'd just come get you. We'd call it Dan & Fosty's Live Human Repo, and on the doors of our trucks there'd be a picture of a man asleep on a rollback ramp, all tucked in and comfortable, and me and Uncle Dan waving from the cab.

"Sit tight, kids," Uncle Dan said. He got out and went back to talk to the man. As soon as he was out of the truck, Julie said, "Can we just go back to the bowling alley now? It's not far."

Gwen said that Julie could do whatever she wanted, but she was having fun. Something crossed in front of the truck's headlights quickly, a possum or an alley cat, and disappeared to the other side.

“I'm scared,” Julie said. Gwen let out a laugh, like she just couldn't believe what a ridiculous person Julie was.

“Scared of what?” Gwen said. I had the feeling they didn't know each other that well. She looked at me with her eyebrows raised, looking, it seemed, for my disapproval of Julie too. I didn't want to take sides, but since Julie wasn't looking I made a face that conveyed my complete disappointment with all buzz kills the world over. But the truth was, I was scared too. I thought about how when the rollback had two cars on it, Uncle Dan said that it was harder to stop. You could feel the weight of it too, thousands of extra pounds of metal behind us, and there was always this feeling when we were on a downgrade that we might just pick up speed all night until we slammed into something as hard as Uncle Dan's bowling ball into those pins. And that's what this night was starting to feel like, especially when Julie opened the passenger side door and ran up the sidewalk without looking back, all washed out in the brightness of the headlights until she turned the corner at the end of the block.

Gwen just shrugged and said, “She's like that.”

We turned around to see what was happening with Uncle Dan. He was standing by the ramp and looking up at the guy in the car, whose head was poking through the window. The guy had a beard but it seemed like he was bald under the baseball cap he was wearing, which just said, “Duh.” Uncle Dan was gesturing something to him, and Gwen started filling in what he might be saying in a pretty hilarious way. “I'm going to need to see your boobs, sir,” she said in a voice meant to imitate Uncle Dan's. Her joke

made everything seem less strange, somehow, and we cracked up. But then she was looking at me in a funny way. “You really ain't seen any?” she asked.

“Not in real life or anything,” I said. I could feel my face going purple again. Gwen looked back at the guys to make sure they were still there, then she lifted her shirt and pushed her bra up off one breast. It fell out and hung there, fleshy and lovely, like some kind of new fruit, but I couldn't help but think that it seemed as embarrassed as I was, all alone out there in the August night. Part of it was white from where a bikini had been. She pressed her nipple lightly with her smallest finger and said, “No big deal, right?”

We felt the truck's ramp being lowered, and Gwen pulled her shirt back down. We watched as Uncle Dan winched the Chrysler down onto the road, then unhooked the chain. The man waved as he drove off, swerving into the wrong lane for a second before righting the car. Uncle Dan climbed back in and said, “You just never know what's going to happen next, do ya?” Then he said, “Looks like we lost one. She gonna be OK?”

“Yeah,” Gwen said. “Her folks aren't far from here.”

No one said where we were going next, but I didn't ask this time. Someone pushed in the cassette tape and it was Neil Young singing about the lonely boy out on the weekend, which was a bit of a downer at the moment. I wondered what Justin was doing right then, or if he was even awake or if his dad made him go to sleep early even on vacation. I imagined them tossing a big colorful beach ball to each other in the water, or maybe water skiing, or maybe him and his dad were secretly nudging each other's elbows

at the girls on the beach and having their first beer together. The whole idea brought me down a bit, because who needed all that crap anyway? I started getting pissed off thinking about it, the way Justin seemed to be bragging sometimes about stuff he and his dad did together, like I'd ever want to go hiking or camping with that balding goofball.

We were back in our neighborhood now, and Uncle Dan was driving slow past a house, looking in the driveway, but it was empty. He turned at the next light and went up a block to Fred's Bar & Grill, and there was the Firebird we'd seen earlier. Uncle Dan stopped the truck on the street and left it idling. "I can't go in there," Gwen said.

Uncle Dan just said to wait there. He walked quickly across the parking lot and pushed the door to the bar open with his foot. For a moment I saw several faces in the dim light inside, lined up along the bar and looking at Uncle Dan like he'd just stormed into their living rooms. The door closed before I saw what happened next, but it wasn't hard to figure out.

"Your Uncle's funny," Gwen said. A big tree down the street in someone's front yard seemed to shoot its leaves out in all directions; an explosion of black birds that streamed across the sky in front of the moon. The moon looked like a dirty face.

"Yeah," I said.

Uncle Dan came stumbling out of the bar in a hurry. Gwen gasped. When he crossed in front of the headlights I could see blood running from his lip and from one ear, and two men came running after him out of the bar, one of them carrying a busted beer bottle and the other one shouting, "You're a dead man, Danny!" as he climbed into the

truck and put it in gear, then floored it.

Uncle Dan's house was only a few blocks from Mom's, but unlike most houses in that area, which were bunched together along the street, he lived at the end of a long gravel driveway on the edge of a cornfield, and beyond that was an area of woods that went back half a mile or so until it hit the train tracks. This was the house he and my father grew up in, and where my father lived before Mom got pregnant with me. Uncle Dan told me stories about him sometimes, like the one when they were kids and they hopped the train to school every morning. And how one day the train was going too fast to jump off so my dad pushed Uncle Dan off first to see how bad it would hurt. It hurt pretty bad, Uncle Dan said. He broke his leg and he had to get stitches over his eye. Their dad, who was my grandpa, of course, picked my dad up somewhere in Illinois where the railroad police had him handcuffed to a chair. It was the worst licking my dad ever got from his dad, so bad he couldn't walk for a few days and didn't go to school. Uncle Dan said that sure, he had a broken leg and cut his eye, but he was probably the lucky one in that story. And he said my grandpa never talked to my dad much after that, which is I guess why I never met him and only saw him at his funeral. He just decided there was something not right about someone who would push his own brother off a moving train. Which was maybe true, I thought, but for some reason the story made me wish I had a brother just as much as it made me wish my dad wasn't in jail. It wasn't until later that I realized it was the same guy in both wishes.

At the house Uncle Dan showed Gwen his record and cassette collection, which took up most of the living room wall space. She put on an AC/DC tape and plopped herself down on the couch with her feet up on the coffee table, and asked if he had a beer. He came back with three, one for me that I had no intention of drinking, and he held out two blue pills for Gwen.

“What are they?” she asked, picking up one and looking at it.

“They're like vitamins,” he said. “But you know, instead of for your health they're for a good time.”

She washed them both down with a swig of beer and said, “Your Uncle is trying to get me all screwed up, isn't he?” You could tell that maybe she'd been in similar situations. “Well I can hold my own,” she said, punching Uncle Dan lightly in the arm. “Don't you worry.”

After a while Uncle Dan rolled a joint and put on a record, and they smoked while I just lay back on the floor and listened to them talk for a while about music and about high school, about some people they both knew from the neighborhood, and about her dad, who Uncle Dan I guess knew from earlier. I fell asleep but woke up sometime later because the record skipped a few times. Usually Uncle Dan got pissed off and got up to move the needle, but I could hear him and Gwen talking on the couch in low voices like nothing had happened. The Rolling Stones were singing about horses, and the smell of pot smoke sat in the warm room and stung in my nose. Gwen said “Your hands are rough, Danny,” and then she asked if he could feel her heart and Uncle Dan said “Yes, but its not

beating,” and she laughed. I wondered where her mom thought she was, if she was worried about her. Then I imagined that we were driving around town in the rollback, me and Uncle Dan, just picking up people who were out there lost in the night like Gwen and her cousin and the man who fell asleep in his car, that we could pick them all up and take them back to their homes one by one. We'd say to their moms and dads and daughters and sons, here they are. We brought them back to you.

I THOUGHT THIS IS WHAT WE WERE DOING

Since Monday I'd been trying to remodel a house with a crew that could barely get out of bed and knew nothing about construction. It was Friday now and Charles sat on the porch stoop in the same gray denim overalls and graying face stubble, camouflaged against the colorless ramshackle house behind him. I rode up on my bike dripping sweat and swearing against the hill I'd just climbed, and Charles grunted at me once and sipped from his flask, which had been made to look like a small pair of binoculars.

“Let's go get 'em,” he said, meaning the rest of the crew.

We drove to Baxter's place first, a small brick house in a long row of others like it, and I opened the van door to go knock, but Charles stopped me. “Doorbell,” he said, and laid a hand on the horn and kept it there. A steady whine blared from the hood until shouts came from windows and doors all around us, telling us what time it was and pleading for us to shut the fuck up.

“It's wake up time, honey,” Charles said in response to one woman who came to her window just to glare at us. I thought maybe he was crazy. He took another swig from his flask just as Baxter appeared in his doorway, wrapped in a blanket and holding up a finger to signal that he'd be out in a minute. We waited another twenty minutes and he never reappeared, so Charles gave a farewell beep and we drove on to find Fuzz and the brothers.

“Roger’ll be here today,” Charles said as we waited outside Fuzz’s place. Roger was the owner of the company, if this could be called one. I’d never met him, having only worked for him since Monday—he’d been in Florida all week for unknown reasons—but I’d been told that he wasn’t above withholding pay when things didn’t look legit. “It’s pay day,” Charles said. “And we ain’t done shit this week, don’t look like.”

That was true. The morning that I’d first biked down to south Philly, with a few tools thrown into my backpack, I’d found Charles sitting on the stoop, and the first thing he said to me was, “So you’re the expert?” He showed me the work they’d done inside, and when I told him that the little they had accomplished would have to be redone, he named me Job Foreman. On a job where a guy like me was instantly declared most qualified to lead, it wasn’t that surprising that they hadn’t accomplished much. The rest of the week I was just “Boss,” but the title didn’t add any weight to my authority, and not much more had been done to make us look like a crew worthy of paying.

We left Baxter’s and drove to pick up the brothers, whose names I never tried to learn and never did. They both sat on the van’s metal floor, the smooth-faced one with the short dreadlocks nodding sleepily to a tinny beat from a pair of large headphones. “Hot back here,” the other brother said. “I can’t even *breathe*.” He looked like his blood had been drained. His brother kept nodding to the music as if nothing had been said, and I raised an eyebrow and gave a sympathetic what-can-ya-do? smirk to show that I cared, then turned back around in my seat.

Fuzz, a balding man with patches of thin red hair and a bony scalp showing

through in places, was the only white guy on the crew other than me. He hadn't changed clothes and still smelled like the beer he'd spilled on himself at lunch the day before. He climbed into the van and sat on an overturned five gallon bucket behind us. He adjusted the bucket under him and nodded cordially as he addressed each of us in turn: "Boss. Charles. Black Ass Motherfuckers."

No one said much else.

We drove through the neighborhoods of South Philly, past long stretches of row houses where families were already out on their stoops, trying to escape the early morning heat. On a corner two black girls swung a rope in slow broad circles while a third girl hopped over it neatly, all of them singing a rhyme they'd learned from their mothers who had done the same thing, and for a minute I felt nostalgic for a memory that wasn't mine. It was so heavy and thick I had to close my eyes and focus on the work ahead, on how in the world we were going to get enough done in one day to justify getting paid for a whole week.

"I do not feel like working," Fuzz said from behind me. Charles handed him his flask and said, "Son, it don't matter a lick how you feel."

The house we were supposed to be flipping was just as we had left it the day before, as wonky and off-kilter as a kid's museum. Window frames jutted too far past the drywall, and trim work was nailed askew at odd angles. Every door had been cut far too short for its opening and there was a hole in the wall that separated the living room and

master bedroom, big enough to push a wheelbarrow through—which we knew because Fuzz had done so several times. You could barely step through the place for all the piles of plaster and busted up two-by-fours and ripped out sinks.

It had been tough to get anything done and to keep track of everyone too. I had put Baxter on repainting the stairwell banister, and every time I'd looked he was working, sitting on a step and moving a paintbrush carefully over the spindles. It wasn't until Wednesday that I realized he'd been sitting beside the same spindle all week, on the very same step, and that the paintbrush was stiff and caked with dried paint. The brothers lost interest in any job I gave them after a while and ended up on the front stoop, splitting a six pack of warm beer and ogling at passing teenage girls. “Be right in, Boss,” they'd say if I asked them to do anything, but if they did come in it wasn't long before they were back on the porch.

Charles and I weren't much more efficient, though we tried. We had started and abandoned several tasks—patching a hole in the kitchen ceiling, removing the pile of rotten wood from the master bedroom. But something else was always calling for our attention, looking more dire than what we were doing.

Why patch a hole in the kitchen when there were ten holes in the living room?

Why pass up one mess to carry out another?

“Lunch!” someone was always yelling.

And when we did go to lunch, it was never long after we got back that Charles was passed out on the porch swing with the brothers, all of them gently rocking the

afternoon away.

And Fuzz. Fuzz didn't like to work nearly as much as he liked to talk about women, which slowed down anyone who was actually trying to work. He orbited me and Charles like a tethered ball you wished you could hit like one, telling stories about the women he'd been with—their various physical dimensions and sexual perversions—but he almost never lifted a finger to help us. He often stood right in our way, refusing to move until he'd sufficiently gotten across to us just how enormous a certain woman's ass was or how another one was so ugly but had beautiful eyes. Just focus on those eyes and you were alright, he said.

We all stood just inside the doorway and looked around at the mess, except Charles who got to work right away, but on what exactly it was tough to tell. We stood there until Fuzz wandered into the kitchen and the brothers shrugged and sauntered back out onto the porch.

“I just don't really know what the goals are,” I said, watching as Charles exerted great effort to hammer a wood screw into a two-by-six on the floor, for no real reason that I could see. “What are our *goals*?”

“Check the list,” said Charles, happily.

“There's a list?” He stopped hammering and produced from his back pocket the list Roger had apparently left for us, and handed it to me. It was long and detailed. “Holy shit,” I said. “We haven't done anything.”

I called the men back together.

“We have a real lack of teamwork here,” I said.

“No we don't, Boss,” said Fuzz. “We've got a lack of commitment.”

“It's more like a lack of focus,” one of the brothers said. “I can't concentrate on a damn thing. Maybe it's too *much* focus.”

“Please,” I said. “Please.”

The first thing on the list was the kitchen. It was to be expanded four feet into the living room. This was a thing that would look substantial, like work was being done. It was our only hope. I pointed to the wall separating us from the kitchen area. “We're going to knock down that wall and move it,” I said. “No one gets paid unless this gets done by lunchtime.”

“When's lunchtime?” someone asked. “Is that soon?”

“When we're done,” I said, pausing for effect, “with the *wall*.” I really felt like the boss for the first time at that moment.

The guys fought over the sledge hammer and pry bar, grunted as they swung and pried, and yelled in unison when a large piece of plaster broke off. This was the first thing they'd taken any interest in; I hadn't seen them so happy or productive. Destruction was the only thing they were any good at, or maybe it was that I had actually rallied them. As the men worked I began to hold on tight to a new vision of who I was, who I really might be. I was a supervisor, a general leading his men into battle. A family man at work, giving orders. A leader of men!

There was no room for Charles and me, eager as they were, so we went out back

and gathered enough scrap two-by-fours to rebuild with. When we came back in with an armload each, even Baxter had shown up and was swinging a hammer with the others. We hadn't had music as we worked all week, but that day Charles set his beat up old jam box radio to an oldies station that played mostly 60's soul music, Otis Redding and Sam and Dave, and it was beautiful, the whole crew working together and humming along with Carla Thomas and Sam Cooke. It started to feel like a real job, even after Baxter carried out an armload of plaster and didn't come back.

“I'm going to be a father,” I told Charles. I hadn't told anyone, and it just came out like that. He stared at me for a moment.

“No shit,” he said.

“What's that?” Fuzz asked.

“Boss man's starting a family,” Charles said, shaking his head. “Starting a family.” The hammering stopped.

“Who with?” one of the brothers said. Something about it was suddenly embarrassing. They were all watching me with serious looks of concern in their eyebrows. It was as if everyone in the room was straining to picture me with a wife and child.

“Yeah,” I said. “My girlfriend Ally is a few weeks along.” I made an exaggerated belly with my hand, but I didn't know if she was actually showing yet.

“You better find a job,” one of the brothers said. They all started hammering again, and they had the wall down in under an hour, even had the nails pulled up from the

floor.

Charles and I set about re-framing while the brothers watched for a bit, before wandering off to the porch for a well-earned break. Fuzz sat on the floor and watched, and I gave Charles the measurements as he cut the two-by-fours over his knee with a skill saw that was missing its safety guard, the rusty teeth of the open blade spinning a few inches from his denimed thigh. After each board was cut I hammered sixteen penny nails through it, wedging it between the top and bottom two-bys, tying it all together flat against the floor.

“Where did you learn how to do all that?” Fuzz asked. He seemed genuinely fascinated by it, that I had what could almost be called a skill.

“My dad,” I said. I wondered where old Dad was right then. He was a man who knew how to get lost for years.

The three of us raised the newly framed wall together, and I measured twice where it would sit. We marked the ceiling and floor joists so we'd know where to nail, and before long we had a solid skeleton of a structure in place, and were cutting drywall sheets, and covering the wood square-by-square until it disappeared behind our accomplishment: a goddamn good looking wall. It felt like a divine miracle had occurred, and I yelled lunch.

I called Ally's work from a thick yellow rotary phone at the bar. I wanted to tell her what a great day it had been.

“Who's this?” she said. Her voice was warm and heavy and sweet, like something you'd drink at Christmas that you knew might make you sick later.

“It's me. It's Pete,” I said.

“Oh, hi Pete.”

“I don't know how to tell you how great things are,” I said. Charles set another can of beer in front of me. “I get paid today. I'd like to take you out tonight. Let's talk about the future.”

I was on maybe my third beer and words were already falling out of my mouth like rotten apples from a tree. Fuzz said something that made Charles laugh and whoop.

“I guess you're drinking?” she said.

“I'm having lunch, is all. I get paid today. I'm going to take you out tonight. Anywhere you want.” I thought maybe I'd propose to her after walking by the river a bit. Or maybe just see how things went.

I looked up to see Fuzz feeling up imaginary breasts over the bar. He moved his fingers like they were on strings being pulled from the ceiling. “Shit,” one of the brothers said, the one with the goatee and the low voice. “How you gonna bury your face in those small titties?”

“I'm sick, Pete,” Ally said. “I don't feel much up for a date.”

“Come over and I'll cook for you. Steaks. Pasta. Anything you want.”

She let out a long sound that would have been a turn on if I didn't know it was just a moan of exasperation. “I've got an appointment in the morning, you know. I'm not

supposed to eat much.”

“With a doctor?” I asked. I imagined some sort of clear jelly being rubbed onto her skin. A fuzzy green television monitor next to her.

She breathed hard through her nose. I pictured her there in her cubicle, though I'd never seen it and didn't know what she did exactly, or if there even was a cubicle. She worked downtown with my sister, typing. My sister had introduced us a month earlier.

“Yeah,” she said. “I gotta go, Pete. My boss is pacing nearby.”

“OK.”

“Bye, Pete.”

I turned around on my stool and tried to look around, but the bar seemed suddenly very dim, like someone had turned a dial somewhere, and the open door to the place blazed bright yellow like the farthest corner of a vision you might have if you were dying. It was unbearably hot, and I couldn't see much of anything. A large bead of sweat ran into my eye, and for a moment I thought I might just fall right off the stool and lay there on the floor, and nothing sounded better.

Sunlight flooded the room for a moment, and I saw that Fuzz was talking to a guy who was small enough to be a horse jockey. “You need work?” he asked him. A big mess of desire and hope and love tried to slide right out of my chest, but I held on to it somehow.

Fuzz turned and nodded at the phone and asked, “Your girl?”

“Yeah,” I said, looking only at my hand clasped around the cold beer can in front

of me. “We're having a baby. We're getting married.” Everyone held their beer cans and shots up for a silent toast to my life. Jobs like this you were whoever you wanted to be, and no one believed any of it anyway.

When we got back in the van the horse jockey came with us, still carrying his beer. No one had eaten and everyone acted surprised to be a little drunk. Charles called Roger on our way back to the house, to give him our hours.

“The brothers both got, what do you guys have, thirty?” They each nodded from the back of the van. “Yeah, thirty. I got forty by end of today. Uh, Fuzz forty, he was here all week. Boss Man's got forty. Yeah, Petey. He's working out great, just fine. Knows his shit! Uh, Baxter, ten—”

The jockey guy that had just joined us introduced himself from the back as Fray.

"And Fray's got twenty," Charles said. “Yeah, Fray. F-R-A-Y. Fray.”

As we drove I thought about the wall we'd built, and about the cash I'd be carrying home, and I started to feel a little better, like maybe what I'd told Fuzz at the bar was still possible. Fray told us a story that ended with him waking up in Rittenhouse Square in his underwear, and that got everyone laughing. Charles said, “I don't care where I wake up tomorrow, so long as there's a little moulah in my pocket and a pretty lady next to me.” I don't think any of us believed that was how this would turn out for Charles that night. Still, everyone was in pretty good spirits when we walked into the house, but it didn't last long, because there was Baxter, back from wherever he'd wandered off to earlier,

swinging the sledgehammer at the wall with a look of great determination, knocking down what we'd rebuilt, destroying it with a grin. Most of it was busted up in large jagged chunks under his feet, a messy pile of our futile effort at being worthwhile men for a day. A slow-moving hip hop song droned from the radio, with lyrics that conjured a leisurely life of riches. We stood there blinking at Baxter in disbelief.

“What?” he said. He set the heavy end of the sledge hammer on his tattered shoe and held the handle proudly. “I thought this is what we were doing,” he said.

“You stupid doped up negro,” Fuzz said, and lit a cigarette.

“This is the worst job I've ever had,” said one of the brothers. “I mean the *worst*.”

The other brother picked up a rubber mallet and said, “I'm going to kill him with this.”

It took three of us, me and Charles and Fuzz, to hold him long enough for Baxter to disappear out the back door. When he'd calmed down he threw the mallet against a wall and said, “No god damned sense of moral outrage around here.” He left by the front door shaking his head, and his brother followed, mumbling that it was too damn hot and Roger wasn't coming anyway.

There was a halfhearted attempt to repair the damage, but no one felt like doing the same thing twice in one day. Charles, Fuzz, and I sat on the porch swing and fanned ourselves with our hands for a long time, waiting against hope. I stared for a bit at a long sorry patch of pale yellow sky above the houses, watched as a collection of clouds moved

slowly across it, pushed along by a breeze I wished I could feel down there on the porch. I went inside and patched a hole in the living room, then came back outside and sat down again, trying to decide what else there was to do. A few kids chased each other up and down the block on bikes, coming and going with playful screams and the happy dinging of bicycle bells, here one second and gone the next, leaving the street quiet again.

We waited most the afternoon for Roger, but he never came. It occurred to me that maybe he didn't exist, that we'd been working all week for a phantom of Charles' imagination. Fuzz left first, saying he'd get his pay from Charles later, but Charles didn't last much longer. He stood up from the swing, and the rotten wood of the porch creaked under his feet when he did. He looked down oddly at it for a moment, as if he were surprised, and then looked back out at the silent street. The bikes and kids were gone now and the light was going.

“Well, Boss,” he said. But there wasn't anything either of us wanted to add to that, so he nodded gravely at me and stepped off the porch and down the stoop. The van turned the corner at the end of the block a minute later, vanishing into the oncoming evening as quick as a ghost.

STOP MOTION

In his teenage years, rather than replace the Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader posters on his walls with favorite bands or bikini-clad girls, Russ had simply drawn mustaches on their faces with a marker. Now, early in the evening of his thirtieth birthday, he sat on the floor of the bedroom he grew up in, leaning against the frame of his old twin bed, looking up at them. He thought that perhaps he should graffiti the posters anew, draw something on them to indicate this stage in his life: no longer in his twenties, and back in the same room.

From downstairs he heard his dad on the porch kicking the mud off his boots, and then the door opening and closing and his heavy footsteps on the carpet. A can of Budweiser popped open and the television came to life with voices changing each time his dad switched channels with the remote.

On his phone a voice message from his mom wished him a happy birthday. She was saying that some people freak out on their thirtieth, but that it was best to just treat it like any other. Russ noted that she was barely over thirty when she left his dad and moved to Florida, pregnant with a child that wasn't her husband's. What he remembered most, though, wasn't her leaving, but her absence: the years of coming home from school to what quickly went from a family home to a bachelor pad. The thousand car races he and his dad watched with TV dinners warming their laps, and the day his dad brought

home two shiny new TV trays with pastoral scenes of grazing deer painted on their surfaces—those trays being the biggest change the house saw in the 80's.

He hung up and he pressed the speed dial for Lola, his ex-girlfriend. When she picked up Russ said, “I was thinking of coming to Louisville tonight,” which was almost as much news to him as to her. It had been a month since she'd moved. In the same way his mother used to put his dad's beer in the attic or outside in the car when she thought he'd had enough, Lola's move to Louisville was partly meant to break their cycle of mid-night reunions. So far it had worked: the two hour drive had proven just enough effort to prevent him from showing up at her place and talking his way into her bed each night, the way he'd done for months after their break-up.

“I don't think that's a great idea,” Lola said. “I couldn't let you stay here, you know.”

“Why not?” He could hear her doing something, opening and closing dresser drawers, or maybe still rearranging things in her new place. She would be wearing the light blue jeans with the rip in the knee and her dad's blue high school softball t-shirt. Her hair would be wet from her Saturday afternoon shower, swaying at shoulder length with her movements. Since she had moved, he realized then, he had pictured her in an apartment not unlike the one they lived in together. He wondered now if she felt the need to make it look different, to match her new life there. Even in their old place she needed constant change, to move a vase to another room or a painting to a different wall, never quite content with aesthetics that Russ hardly noticed.

“Why not *which?*” she said. “Why is it not a good idea to come to Louisville tonight, or why couldn't you stay here—which do you mean?”

“Both,” Russ said, but quickly added, “The first one. Why is it a bad idea to just come hang out for a night?”

“Well, aside from the obvious reasons, I have plans,” she said.

“Like what?”

There was a pause, some shuffling of things on her end. She breathed out through her nose into the receiver and said, “With Sarah.”

“I don't know her,” Russ said quickly, an old habit. Lola dropped names she knew you didn't know, as if you did. It was one of those odd little things about her that annoyed him when they were together, but now it seemed pretty minor, and he didn't know quite why it had bothered him so much. Maybe he'd been too uptight, he thought.

“A girl I know from high school,” Lola said. “She moved here and we've become friends. Anyway, we're going to this bar called Gary's Tavern—I've never been there—then we're going to this other thing you would *definitely* hate.”

“Maybe I've changed,” Russ said, pulling at the newly-regrown hair above his lip. “It's been a whole month.”

“You probably haven't even changed your socks, Russ. Anyway, it's like a party for this band we're friends with. They're showing a movie about how they made the album.”

“OK.”

“Like a documentary, you know. It's a record release party thing. And then they'll play their album, so dancing will be encouraged.”

“That doesn't sound too bad. I could use some encouragement.”

“Well it will definitely be too pretentious and hip for you, and you'll do nothing but make fun of it all night and ruin everyone's vibe, and then while we're dancing you'll sulk at the bar and get pissed when I dance with someone.”

“When?”

“If.”

“A certain someone or just a someone?”

“I don't want to get into all that right now, Russ. I just want you to know what you're getting into if you come. It will be fun, but don't expect our usual thing, you know.”

“OK.” He could hear water running on her side of the phone, and a cat meowing. It would be the gray one, Baxter, perched on the bathroom sink and pawing at the stream from the faucet. Russ used to like having him there while he shaved or brushed his teeth, as much as he got in the way.

“So, you're coming?”

“I don't know. It's my birthday, you know.”

“It is, isn't it? Happy birthday, Russ.”

“Thanks.”

Downstairs his father was slicing two frozen pizzas. He cut his own into triangles, but Russ' into squares because he knew Russ liked pieces without crust just as much as with. They watched part of a race and finished their dinner in silence, and finally his dad pushed his TV tray away and reclined his end of the couch, knocking his shoes off using only his feet and letting them fall to the carpet. Within minutes he was snoring loudly. Russ went up to the bathroom and started to shave off his mustache, but decided against it. He went to his room and tried to call Lola again, but she didn't pick up.

At the south end of town he stopped for gas and a map. He'd only been to Louisville once, as a kid when his parents took him to the Kentucky Derby, and wasn't sure how to get there. He remembered the drive though, the excitement of making the trip, of stopping at a gas station like this one and his mom buying him taffy. And he remembered the tall buildings and fast-paced traffic of Cincinnati, the biggest city he'd seen, and driving along the river as they entered Louisville and then holding both his parents' hands as they walked into the entrance of what looked to him then like a kind of castle, with arches, pillars, and flags all around. They ate chili dogs with pickle relish that he spilled down the Sluggers t-shirt his parents bought him at the baseball factory that afternoon, and his dad gave him his first sip of beer while his mom was in the restroom. But other than the clockwork recurrence of the stampede moving past them in a cloud of dust, he remembered almost nothing of the race itself.

What was important in life were the peripheral things, he was thinking now as he

checked his oil—the things you tried to ignore on your way to something else, or while the something else was in front of you. *This* was important, he thought—this dipstick is important, how it feels in my hands, how the oil smears along its smooth blade and is wiped clean and tells me something about what is inside.

He remembered his mother wiping his shirt and telling him he reeked of beer, but he also remembered the smile she was barely hiding when she said it. Even though she eventually left his dad for his drinking, she also drank with him before that, and sometimes sending Russ to the corner bar for a six pack when he was only twelve, where he would get in as many arcade games as possible before Carlton said, “It's bad enough I'm serving carry out beer to a minor, Russ. I don't need to have one loitering too.” And his parents would share the beer on the porch each summer night, nights he remembered now as the best in his life.

In the gas station he bought two Lotto tickets and won exactly what he paid for them. At the edge of the highway he opened a beer from the cooler on the passenger floorboard and left Dayton for the second time.

When the Cincinnati skyline appeared blue and bright in his windshield, cars were moving past him like a river around a sand bar. He had thought he was driving fast, but now he realized he was driving slow, like his dad tended to do. They were slow-moving men, he and his father. In a biology class weeks earlier Russ had learned that every mammal's life lasted one billion heartbeats. The heart of a mouse drums out in two frenzied years, but a whale's thrums so slowly that it can take him two hundred years to

hit his billion, and as a result his whale songs stretch on for days, like a record played too slow. Russ with Lola sometimes felt like an elephant trying to dance with a hummingbird. He wanted to slow her down, stop her fluttering about. But it was he who moved at a different pace than the rest of the world, he knew. Maybe theirs was simply a problem of rhythm.

He swigged the rest of his third or fourth road beer and carefully dropped the can through the back window to the truck bed. The night was blurred just slightly, traces of red snaking from distant taillights, like a photograph exposed too long. He thought of Lola, imagined her the way he liked to: mostly naked and in bed, looking at him at some point behind his eyes, searching his intentions. She'd stare right into him like nobody's business, and he liked that about her, that strange intensity, even as uncomfortable as it could get at times when he was having his doubts about them.

In sex they had rhythm, though. She slowed to him and they moved together perfectly. He couldn't imagine a better match in that way, and maybe that was the only thing that kept drawing them back to each other.

He thought about the day he met her. Lola was in her senior year at the university then, and she walked into the campus art gallery sipping green tea from a straw, wearing blue jeans and a yellow cardigan sweater. A week earlier Russ had helped set up a video installation for an artist who used stop-motion animation with razored images from magazines and books, and he'd been taking his lunches there, mesmerized by the surreal, choppy clippings that moved along the screens. They reminded him of the robotic, insect-

like movements he'd watched King Kong make when he was a kid, primitive displays frozen in each scratched frame.

He could replay the whole scene in his head this way still, like a movie of them. When she came in, he was leaning against a far wall, eating a ham sandwich and watching the video he liked most: a blank white screen except for the horse in its center—or rather, horses—they changed each millisecond—some of them rocking horses, some horses with jockeys on their backs, others with cowboys or Indians riding them. As the images changed, there appeared to be only one galloping, ever-changing horse that never moved from the screen's center.

“Wow,” Lola had said, sidling up next to his spot on the wall. “That’s really neat.” They both stared straight ahead at the screen, sipping and eating.

Russ pointed his half-eaten sandwich at the screen and said, “You know, it’s like that guy, Plato, says.”

He usually took his lunches in the back row of a classroom, picking up whatever bits he could of astronomy or British literature or art history. The professors liked him when he came into their offices to hook up a printer or fix their email account, and maybe they felt they were changing the course of his life in some way by allowing him to sit in on their lectures for an hour here or there. But Russ knew it was only scraps, bits of information he was accumulating—not like pieces of the same puzzle but pieces from different puzzles that would never quite fit together or form a complete picture. He was OK with that. And occasionally, like the afternoon he met Lola, he enjoyed playing up the

fact that he was a non-academic on campus, but one who happened to know a few things too.

“That *guy*?” Lola laughed, and looked at Russ for the first time. “Do you work here?” she asked, eyeing his name tag.

“Yeah, with the computers. But see what I mean about Plato? It’s like there’s all kinds of horses up there, but what you’re seeing is *The Horse*. The Plato *ideal* of the horse. See?”

“Weren’t you in my algebra class last week?”

“Probably.”

What didn’t work out in the end had nothing to do with their enjoyment of each other. They spent their time cooking from Internet recipes and then entangling themselves on his couch to watch movies. They drank beer (Russ even learned to enjoy an occasional import, so long as Lola was buying), and frantically removed each others' clothes each night. And they debated everything: how to discipline a child, how much astronomers really know, whether people should be allowed to be openly racist, the age of the earth. Russ loved the bits of knowledge he was getting from his lunch breaks, what he could understand of it, but he was still put off by experts who claimed to know things that were in his view unknowable. And Lola’s arguments tended to lie on what she saw as the safe side of the sharp edge of Occam’s Razor (which she had explained to him, during a debate about the possibility of intelligent alien life in the universe). It was easier to believe A than B, she often argued, B always being Russ’ view. Things were fine like this

for a while. They gravitated toward a cozy center, a place in each others' ideologies and world views and manners where they thought they could live. Alone together, their differences made them fascinating.

But at Lola's parties, or at Russ' wood-paneled dive bars, they embarrassed each other. Russ, in the presence of Lola's friends, said the wrong things, held the wrong views, and wore the wrong clothes. And Lola, around Russ' friends (if one can call high school buddies one happens to run into from time to time friends), seemed pretentious, constantly in a fight with one of them about the bands they played on the jukebox or the politically incorrect comments they made. So they had learned to stay at home, in Lola's apartment, where he had moved after breaking his lease. But when she decided after graduating to move back home with her parents for a while to save money, perhaps already thinking about moving to Louisville, and Russ moved in with his father, temporarily, he told himself, they no longer had what they needed to survive as a couple: a private, comfortable spot where no one could see what an odd match they were.

Just inside of Louisville he called Lola twice. "The bell it tolls for thee, Dear Lola," he said out loud as it rang, but still there was no answer.

He turned away from the river and toward the heart of the city, then stopped at a gas station and asked for directions to the place Lola had mentioned, Gary's Tavern. The man behind the counter asked, "Is it one of those where a lot of kids are standing around smoking outside? Rock and roll bands and all that?" He had a tattoo of a cross on his

forearm, a fading green symbol of his faith.

“Yeah,” Russ said. “I think so.”

He followed the directions for Bardstown Road, where the gas station guy said the place might be, and then he drove up the strip of restaurants and bars looking for it without luck. Tired of driving, he parked the truck at a spot along the street and walked up the sidewalk. There were a lot of other people out walking too, mostly small groups and couples, ranging in intoxication from tipsy to drunkenly obnoxious. A girl just ahead exited a bar and vomited onto the sidewalk.

“Excuse me, Miss,” Russ said. The girl looked from the mess at her feet to Russ' face, her expression the same for both.

“Did I get some on you?” she asked, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

“No,” Russ said. “You OK?”

Her face was contorted into a point and directed at Russ like a satellite dish, searching for signals. He could tell not much was going to get through, but he went on anyway. “Listen,” he said. “Do you know where there's a party for a band tonight? There's a movie about the album or something? A dance party, I think? Or this place, Gary's Tavern?”

She swayed and caught herself by putting a hand on his shoulder, breathing an aggressive smell in his face and looking him in the right eye with her left one. “Sorry, dude,” she said. “I don't have the foggy-ish idea what you're talkin' about. I really don't and I wish I could help you. You seem like a nice man and I want to help you, but I

probably look awful. My ex-boyfriend is in there and he's playing our jukebox song for some fat flooz. I'll rip his fucking heart out.”

“I'm sorry to hear it,” Russ said. He wasn't sure what else was expected of him now. They were standing there on the sidewalk together like the last two drunks on the dance floor.

Russ started to go, but she said, “Wait, Gary.”

“Russ,” he said. “I'm Russ.”

“Yeah I know Gary. Gary's is that way.” She was leaning against the wall of the building now, and pointing with her bare foot. Her shoe had fallen off and was lying toppled on the sidewalk. Russ thought it would probably be there in the morning, as discarded as her mound of puke.

“Thanks,” he said, and started down the sidewalk in the direction her big toe had wiggled.

He found the place a couple blocks past where the lights and restaurants ended, and to his surprise—though he knew she was supposed to be there—he saw Lola sitting at a table outside with another girl. This was so like Lola, he thought as he hopped over the small wrought-iron fence that separated the sidewalk from the bar's concrete patio. To be exactly where she plans to be. Lola's face widened when he sat down. “Oh my god, I can't believe you're actually here,” she said. “Wow.”

“Here I am,” Russ said, and he too was amazed by the fact as he said it. Amazed

that he could simply decide to be a hundred and fifty miles away from where he started that evening, and then to be there. And that here was Lola; he'd found her in a strange city, sitting at a table outside a bar. How easy it all was to just go find someone and sit with them, no matter where they were. Until this moment Russ had felt a whole mountain of outside influences on their relationship, an intimidating combination of insurmountable odds against them being together. But look how easy it was. The thought that he—he alone—might be in control of his life was new and frightening. Things didn't just happen to him, did they? Tonight he had said: I will go see Lola in another city, and here he was, doing just that.

“There you are, indeed,” Lola said. “Sarah, this is Russ. Russ, please meet Sarah.” Russ held his hand toward Sarah. She was a stout girl with curly hair to her shoulders, and the sad oval face of an art school dropout. She didn't seem to notice his hand—just smiled weakly and sipped her beer.

“Well?” Lola said. She looked great with her hair short like when they were together, college-smart looking. Russ tried not to focus too much yet on her full round mouth, her perfect small tits under a green sweater and those long smooth legs disappearing into her skirt. The sharp slope of her pale neck. Skin like Plato's ideal of skin.

“Here we are,” Russ said.

The girls exchanged a quick glance, but the meaning was lost on Russ. A sudden breeze blew in, carrying with it something unnameable, not the smell or even a scent, but

something dirty and brown and ancient from the Ohio River.

“So, we’ll finish these, then go to the party,” Lola said.

A small brown bird landed on the fence behind her for a moment, and just as quickly flew off.

“I mean, it’s not really a *party*, since it is at a public place. It’s a public party.” She laughed. “For the public.”

“A public party for the public partiers,” Russ said. “That sounds great.”

“Oh, and happy birthday,” she said, touching his arm for a brief moment. “I know I said it earlier, but that was on the phone. Wow, I can't believe you're here.” She was smiling, and Russ thought that the things she'd said on the phone, about not staying with her tonight—they were just things she thought she had to say.

“Anyway,” Sarah said, apparently picking up a conversation from before Russ had intruded. “I think maybe that little Indian place on Fourth? But then we'd go out for drinks after and there's really nowhere around there.”

Russ asked what they were planning, and Lola explained that a friend from high school was visiting soon from Seattle. Then she said, “Yeah, we'll just have to drive somewhere else if we eat there.”

This was the kind of thing Lola liked doing: making elaborate evening plans. Having fancy dinner parties or making a big to-do about something as simple as taking a friend from out of town out for a night. She sometimes slipped into a vaguely English accent in such conversations, leftover from her semester abroad. Russ fought back his

annoyance. This is no big deal, he thought. This is who she is, and I could live with that. We like other things about each other.

“I certainly don’t want to bring her *here*,” Sarah said, and they all glanced around at the expensive tattoos, the pint glasses of clear yellow beer. It seemed to Russ that he was the oldest person there, the only one with a growing gut or who might have had a mustache in high school. There were Pabst Blue Ribbon and Miller High Life signs from a different time and place, strangely imported, a little more roughed up than the place. There was an insincere blue collarness about it all. He tried to imagine his father here, having a beer with some pals, but couldn't.

“It’s too...*Midwest*,” Sarah said. Russ thought then that she looked a bit like the Venus of Willendorf statue he'd seen a slide of in some class or other.

“So what’s wrong with that?” he asked. He felt put off both by the place and by her dislike for it, simultaneously. An awkward moment went by. Next to them, a man spilled beer in his lap, and everyone at his table laughed outrageously. Under their own table, Russ pressed his leg against Lola’s, but she moved away and drank the last of her beer.

“Ready?” she said, pushing her chair out to stand up.

They stood outside a brick building next to a bouncer, waiting for Sarah to find a parking spot. People filed in and out, guys with perfectly messy hair and tight faded shirts with band logos on them, tattooed girls in jeans and blue eye shadow, people who seemed

to have walked right out of iPod or Volkswagen commercials. The music alternated between muffled and shrill with the opening and closing door. Lola's hands were deep in her own pockets, inaccessible, so Russ linked his arm through hers and pulled her closer to him.

“There's Sarah,” she said, unlocking their arms and moving for the door. “Here, hold my keys.”

Inside there were two rooms, one with a bar, the other showing the film, which had just started. They stood next to Sarah in a mass of people, all staring straight ahead and holding their drinks, watching as four guys on-screen explained in shaky black and white their recording process. Russ pulled a strand of Lola's hair back from her cheek and kissed her there, and then lingered with his mouth near her ear until she pulled away and gave him a crooked smile, full of pity and of something else Russ couldn't quite identify, something not good.

There were nights before she had moved away when Russ could still charm his way into her arms. Back then, standing outside her bedroom window, he'd know from some nearly imperceptible hint in her sleepy grin and in her eyes—no matter how persistent she was in telling him to go home, or how many times she told him how pathetic he was coming to her this way at this time of night after their break up—that soon she would be letting him in quietly through her parents' back door, leading him by a hand through the sleeping house to her bedroom. But now he couldn't tell what her face was saying to him. She turned her head back toward the movie screen, and for a moment

Russ felt confused and disoriented, for at that moment when she turned her face away from him, it appeared on the screen in full color, that same nearly imperceptible hint in her five foot wide smile, but for the camera, or someone behind it—not for him.

He was still taking that in when Sarah asked Lola, deliberately, he thought, for Russ' ears, when her next date with the drummer was. She said it that way, not using his name: “When is your next date with *the drummer?*”

Russ tried to ignore the tightening of his ribcage, the sudden rush of heat in his throat. He pushed down the question he wanted to scream at Lola: why would she let him drive here tonight when she knew that he only came to be with her?

Instead, he breathed into her neck and kissed her there, wrapped his arms around her from behind and pulled her against him.

“Russ,” she said, squirming some but then resting her head against his shoulder. She sighed heavily. “You have to stop.” But he tightened his hold, buried his face in her hair. After a moment she squirmed again. “*Russ.*”

On screen the camera moved through the band’s home studio, then cut to an empty high-ceilinged church where one of the band members—three days of facial growth and short dark hair—dramatically played a piano, microphones placed strategically atop pews and hanging by their cords from above. The other instruments—a distorted guitar, a bass, a keyboard, and finally a thumping bass drum—faded in slowly, joining the piano, and the camera panned over the band members’ heads in an open Kentucky field.

“Please—”

“No,” she said, but softly, caving a little.

“Don't do this to me. I'm here. This moment matters.”

“We broke up, remember? I moved away.”

“Then what? I followed you here. That's a crucial detail. I'm here, tonight. I made that decision and I am here.”

The camera zoomed in on the drummer—pixilated and sweaty, dark hair and a Superman jawline—sitting behind his drum set with a grin.

“Let go of me,” Lola said quietly, firmly. “Now.”

She'd never spoken to him this way, with such obvious resentment, with authority and anger in her voice. He let go of her awkwardly, as if he'd just realized he'd been hugging a stranger. He wanted to say something, to right what had just happened, how unfair it was. But his mind felt like a blank sheet of paper that was suddenly filling up with words in a language he couldn't read. He pushed his way through the crowd toward the restrooms, bumping into people too hard, disregarding a guy who said, “Hey, watch it, buddy.” He locked the door to the bathroom and kicked the toilet paper dispenser off the wall. He sent bloody wedges of the mirror into the sink, then sat on the floor and wailed once, a wordless scream directed at the ceiling, as high as it ever went.

“Everything OK in there?” a man asked from outside the door.

“Beautiful in here,” Russ said. “Nothing could be better.” He wiped the sweat from his face with his hand. A quiet moment went by, a lull in everything. Even the music

had stopped.

“So fuck off,” he said.

Someone was knocking. He hadn't moved an inch, he thought, had driven a hundred and fifty miles to sit on a bathroom floor thinking about the thirty years that had led up to this moment. He did the math: four hundred thousand heartbeats. And for each one he had made a decision to do a thing or not to do a thing.

“Let someone else go,” the knocker called in. “There's a line out here, man.” A minute went by, and then more knocking. The music began again, and Russ couldn't stand the thought of going back out, of seeing Lola there, of feeling a swarm of warm bodies around him and being almost a part of it all but not quite, like sitting in a classroom on his lunch break, like not quite being enrolled in anything.

There were more voices, a hubbub surrounding his bathroom activities. He went back over it: he'd broken things. He'd drawn a crowd. “This guy in there he won't come out,” someone was saying. “He was yelling. It sounded like he broke something.” There was only sitting there or going back out the way he came, right into the buzzing hive. He looked at the cuts on his hand, the blood drying on his knuckles. He felt the pulse in his neck now, but with each beat he decided again to go on sitting there.

Lola was outside the door now. “Russ, is that you in there? Hey, come on, you have to come out. Let's go talk somewhere.”

Russ thought about where he would sleep that night. Maybe in the bed of his truck

in the stadium parking lot. Then in the morning find a diner.

“Russ,” Lola pleaded. “This isn't fair.”

Then what? There would be no Lola tonight, or tomorrow. He would go home, go back to work. Network some computers. Come home and have dinner with good old dad. Watch races until they died on the couch together.

Outside the bathroom he heard the music crescendo and the room applaud. He stood up and unlocked the door without thinking about it. Lola was standing there with her arms crossed, looking at him with disgust and anger displayed by every inch of her body. A small circle of people around her looked at Russ like he might be crazy. Was he crazy? If enough people think you are, maybe you are, he thought. A man pushed by him into the bathroom with a pained expression on his face.

“Sorry,” Russ said to Lola. “I'm sorry.” At first she didn't say anything, just stood looking at him with her eyebrows turned inward and her pupils like faraway planets. Most of the circle began to wander off or formed into a normal restroom line, but the place had taken on the feeling of something staged.

“You've been dumping me since you met me, Russ. Now you show up here and you expect what, a birthday present from me?”

“I love you, Lola. I want us to be together.”

“No you don't,” she said, already turning away. “You just don't want us to be apart.” With that she disappeared into the crowd.

Crossing the sidewalk onto the street Russ shook Lola's keys from his pocket and walked to her car. He was thinking only of his truck, of finding it and driving—where he didn't know yet, just driving to clear his mind and get back what he had earlier in the night: clarity and purpose. He clicked her car unlocked with a beep from the middle of the street and climbed in and it started with a new car hum. He would find his truck then call Lola to tell her where she could find it. It would be OK, she'd get a cab or a ride from Sarah or from the good looking drummer. Fine. She'd be mad at him but she already was, and there was no real inconvenience, not really. So he thought about the way they'd come, hazily, drunkenly, and put the car in reverse to un-parallel it from between two others. But he wasn't used its suddenness, its sensitivity to a heavy drunken foot on the pedal, and so came the unmistakable crumpling fiberglass sound from behind and an alarm stabbing through the early morning night, drawing attention from across the street where some were already leaving the place he'd just angrily shoved his way out of. A bouncer was crossing the street toward him.

He left the keys in the ignition and walked, fast with his head down, in what he thought was the general direction of his truck and away from someone calling “Hey buddy, you can't leave!” There were other bars, more people on the sidewalks, some tottering and following their car keys, some in pairs, drunk and laughing against each other, and he tried to vanish in among them. A cop car passed slowly, its lights lit up but no siren, just moving down the avenue.

Not much later it was quiet and warehouses lined both sides of the street, soulless

monstrosities at this time, at one with their sharp black shadows on the ground, and now it seemed so suddenly that there was not even a tree or a moving car or another person anywhere. And soon he was sure he should have turned somewhere else, a left back there, yes, but no, maybe up ahead, so he continued on in a straight line, in the direction he felt right about, toward some pull on his soul from a point elsewhere. The Lone Ranger and his horse, Russ thought, remembering the black and white reruns as a child because his dad loved the show, the way the Ranger would call and his horse always found him. He would find his truck too.

He walked through a neighborhood, quiet but for a dog's desperate howl and a train whistle. He dragged his hand along a chain-link fence and felt his fingertips go numb and was surprised when he set off a motion-sensing light and a dog barking inside the house. Not for the first time Russ imagined himself the only man left alive after something terrible, alone in a world without consequence. But minutes later he turned off of a black street and onto a brighter one, feeling himself pulled like a small moon back toward the light and the sound.

ON PAPER

The key from the bank didn't work in either door, and the truck sat so high on Jake's mudding tires that Foster wouldn't be able to work the lock without some height over it. Out there where Jake kept his trailer, twenty miles outside of town, it was nearly pitch black, but Foster wouldn't use the flashlight for fear of waking him. So he felt around the yard with his boots until he stumbled over something at the edge of the woods, sending the shadow of another thing at his feet scratching off through the grass in a hurry. He drug the two cinder blocks over and stacked them by the driver's side, then balanced himself on them, working the Slim Jim down into the door's metal guts and looking over his shoulder at Jake's front door every now and then, expecting each time to find him standing there or just behind him. His nerves were in his hands now and he couldn't seem to catch the control arm, though he'd been doing this since before he was even a teenager. He imagined again the possible violent showdown he had thought about so many times in recent months, ever since Jake had come back from his duty in Iraq with a piece of shrapnel buried in his heel like a hidden weapon, and stood himself between Foster and the one thing he wanted. Foster didn't know if he could fight or not, having never been punched or thrown a fist himself; but Jake was a Marine, equipped not only with experience and training and what was probably now a level of comfort with violence that Foster would never have, but also, Foster guessed, equipped with weapons,

with guns and knives and whatever else unstable men came home from war in possession of.

By some luck he caught the arm finally and yanked up and popped the lock. He opened the door and the dome light lit up the trees while he pulled himself up into the cab, then closed the door behind him quickly to kill the light. In that half-moment he was climbing in he caught a glimpse of a picture leaning against the speedometer panel glass, the same one that was in his wallet. In it Simon wore a grin and an undersized striped blue sweater, with phony laser lights pulsing and beaming behind him. He looked slightly confused, as he often did—he was a bit spacey, like Foster had been as a child and still was at times, Clara often told him, in his own head rather than in the world around him. Foster saw other things in Simon that almost made it seem as if he really could be his son: his odd sense of humor, his fanatical tidiness, his thick dark hair (from Clara, of course, but even so). Before Jake had come back it had all fallen into place so effortlessly, Foster's plans so simple: to adopt Simon and marry Clara. To do what millions of people all over the world did every day without trouble—to start a family with someone he loved. And Jake's level of involvement in Simon's life had been so sparse and insincere that not even Clara had thought it would be a problem getting him to sign the papers. But this was one small power he still had in the world, and he held it tight in his fist for no other reason than his pride. And he had forced Foster into this idiotic dance with him, into sneaking here in the night to take the one thing the man cared about and use it as leverage against him. He again doubted it would work, but they had tried pleading and they had

tried demanding and this, he felt, was now his only option, as unpleasant as it was.

Foster reached for the picture in the dark and slid it into his back pocket. He then found the dome light switch and turned it to off and slipped the key into the ignition, glad to see that it worked there. He put the truck in neutral, then opened the door again and hopped down, hooked the chain to the axle, and at the front of the ramp pressed the button for the winch. The links of the chain came to life and went taut, and the truck turned slowly up the ramp, the tires so wide they barely fit and hung over on both sides like love handles. The sound of the rollback's engine and the electric whirring of the winch motor and the metallic creaking of the ramp under the weight—it was never a quiet operation, taking a man's truck in this way.

A light came on inside the trailer, and then the porch light. The door opened and Jake appeared on the steps scratching at his head and watching Foster with an expression somehow mocking and curious at once. His hair was military short again, with what looked to be a self-inflicted haircut carried out with something dull. It stood awry in dirty blond clumps, like tufts of dying grass. He wore only a pair of white boxer shorts and a pale green t-shirt with a yellow stain down the front.

“I didn't call for a tow,” he said.

Foster pushed the button to level the ramp, thinking it best to put off any possible confrontation until the truck was firmly in place, strapped down to the rollback and conveying in no uncertain terms a change of ownership.

“You here for the bank or is this personal?”

“You're behind on a payment,” Foster said. “It's nothing personal, Jake.”

“Uh huh.”

The ramp was leveled out now and Foster reached into the cab and pulled out the clipboard with the parental rights papers. He hadn't planned this part very well, he realized, and wasn't sure how to broach the subject of what was essentially a bribe. He walked to the foot of the steps and stood there in front of Jake, who towered over him from the fourth step in an unsettling, nonchalant manner.

“Not signing a damn thing,” Jake said. “They give me thirty days and my payment's already in the mail which means you're just thieving out here, Foster.”

“This isn't about the truck,” Foster said, holding the clipboard and a pen up to him. “These are the papers about Simon, Jake.”

“I recognize them. You and Clara have been shoving them in my face for a year. Ain't signing *them* either.”

“I'm willing to take your truck down and drive on home if you'll just do the right thing here. I've tried everything else. You've forced my hand, is all. I don't want to be out here doing this at two in the morning any more than you do. I love that boy like he was my own and that's all I care about right now.”

“Yeah,” Jake said, and looked up at the stars as if he'd lost interest in the conversation.

“Yes,” Foster said. “It is.”

Standing out there like this, Foster felt like he'd been yanked out of his own life.

The sound of his tow truck rumbling out there in the middle of nowhere seemed like the only thing keeping him connected to the world. Looking up at Jake now with his own words still echoing in his head he remembered what Clara had told him when they first started seeing each other, when he asked her if she still loved Jake, or ever had. “No,” she'd said. “But I love my son, and my son loves Jake.”

He couldn't help but think of Simon's five year-old brand of excitement as they pulled into the 4-H grounds for the truck show, that as they drove past the trucks he drummed his feet on the floorboard of the car and held his ears and nearly squealed, and that he'd been the first of them to spot Jake standing on a bucket out there polishing the front fender of his new toy, and yelled “My dad got a new truck!”

Foster had heard from his old friend Sam at the bank that Jake had come in to get a loan for it, but hadn't expected this cartoonish thing with exaggerated tires and ridiculous suspension; it looked like it might come to life and start talking. There was a decal over the windshield that read Made Fer Mudd'n. Watching Jake as they drove past, Clara had said, “He can barely keep up with support payments, but he buys this? What is it anyway,” she continued, turning to Foster, “with you men and your trucks?” But it had been her idea to take Simon to spend the afternoon watching local hicks joy-riding in the mud and driving over cars, and she must have known Jake would be one of them.

Foster felt mostly indifferent to automobiles, even as much as he was surrounded by them every day at the salvage yard. He had never understood the enthusiasm some people could muster for what to him was simply utilitarian, a mostly hollow thing on

wheels for moving people and things from one place to another. But he didn't mind working on them or towing them or reposing them from people who missed payments. And he certainly didn't mind that he'd built a successful business doing these things.

But one thing he knew to be true: you could tell a lot about a person just by sitting in their car for two minutes. By their garbage, their CD's, the things they kept above their visors or in their glove compartments. Most of what he knew about his own father he'd learned this way, by shimmying his way into the beat up van he kept parked outside the cheap motel he'd lived in since getting out of jail seven years ago. He couldn't just knock on the cheap motel door where he lived, of course—they didn't really know each other. The last time he'd talked to him Foster was a kid, not more than six years old. They would have nothing to say. So instead, he sat in the driver's seat of his dad's van one Christmas afternoon and looked through the trash on the floor and dashboard—numerous McDonald's coffee cups, old newspapers, receipts for Marlboros. A discarded Louis L'Amour western lying in the passenger seat with a broken spine, and the van's engine cover off so that the motor was exposed on the floorboard between the seats, a brick wedged in it to hold in place an air hose. An empty revolver under the driver's seat. These are the things he knew about his father.

And what Simon knew about his, other than a few surprise visits that never lasted more than an awkward half hour, was mostly contained in that single afternoon at the truck show. They had watched Jake's new truck racing around the track, bouncing over muddy hills and ramps like a stupid happy dog, and then they watched as he received the

first place medal afterward, Simon cheering him on the whole time, and Foster knowing he'd be hearing about this for weeks at home: My dad races trucks. My dad won.

At the bank the day after the truck show Foster asked Sam to let him know the second Jake's payments went delinquent, and Sam put a key in his hand and said to wait for his call—it was only a matter of time, he was sure, and Foster could do what he wanted when that time came, so long as he kept the truck at his own yard the same way he did with their other repos.

“I think it's a shame about Jake,” Sam said then, and added, “Everyone's got to do what he's got to do, though, you included.” Foster wasn't sure what he meant by any of it, and he'd gone home with Jake's truck key in his pocket trying to shake the thought that anything he did at this point would be wrong in someone's eyes.

Now twenty miles outside of town, in what felt like Jake's world, the plan just seemed silly and childish. Foster felt like a bully, or as Jake had called him, a thief. Especially when Jake's gaze fell from the stars to Foster's eyes and he said calmly, unexpectedly, “Take the truck,” and turned abruptly to open the screen door. He paused there, halfway inside his trailer, and added, “You and I both know it won't change a thing. Not about the boy or the truck or me or you or Clara.” With that he stepped inside and disappeared. But before Foster was even back to the cab or had fully processed what had just happened, he heard like a gunshot the screen door slamming closed again and turned around quickly, thinking maybe he'd already been shot or stabbed or punched, but instead

he just saw Jake limping quickly across the yard toward the street with his hands in his pockets, heading only God knew where out there in the black night.

“Where are you going?” Foster called out.

Jake didn't turn around and he kept walking, but Foster heard him say, “To get my truck back. Where else?”

On his way into town a few minutes later, Foster passed him on the road, limping his way determinedly in the same direction he was driving.

The far back corner of the salvage yard was cordoned off with a chain-link fence and with signs Foster had put there years earlier, to make it off limits for customers or employees, for anyone but him. Here he kept his first car, a 1978 Ford Pinto given to him by his Uncle Dan when he was sixteen, complete, when he'd received it, with a Rolling Stones bumper sticker in the back window and pot stems littering the floor mat. It would still start if he hadn't run it out of gas on his birthday two years earlier, doing donuts and tailspins around the yard with his friend Owen, who he'd grown up giving rides to.

His mother's last car was parked next to it, an ugly brown Dodge with torn upholstery, a car he'd ridden in for a good deal of his childhood, always on the way to or back from church, it seemed. His mom drove with her hands at nine and three, leaning forward and scanning the road for danger. She prayed aloud as she drove, that Jesus would send his angels to protect the car, as many as he could spare to surround it on all sides. If he couldn't send one for her side, she prayed, then protect Fosty's first.

The radio was all that worked in it now, and each year when her birthday rolled around since she'd died, Foster sat in the car and listened to a few minutes of the local Christian station and hoped she could hear it too.

He unlocked and opened the gate and drove Jake's truck into the one spot left, next to the Pinto, but could have almost parked the truck over top of it. He locked the gate again and walked the nearly half mile back out of the yard and locked that gate too.

Before Clara or Simon, or Jake, for that matter, had entered Foster's life in such a formidable way, he spent most evenings with a few buddies from the yard and with guys he'd known in high school. A couple of them were married now and had children, and others were like Foster, occasionally meeting a girl around town and dating until it fell apart. He and his friends drank lite beer each night on his porch and talked politics or movies or sex; he had smart friends, he thought, guys who could hold a conversation and knew a little about the world. None of them had finished college, but most of them had at least gone for long enough to realize it wasn't for them, and had picked up a few things on the way.

He'd known Clara Daniels back in high school, although they ran in different crowds, and even then he'd watch her cross the campus some afternoons with her long brown hair swinging down around her waist. But they didn't talk much until ten years later, not until the day he saw her parked on a side street at the Fall Festival, trying in vain to turn her Corolla's engine over. Her little boy was strapped into a car seat in the

back with chocolate ice cream on his mouth, watching with awe as the Ferris wheel rotated outside. When Foster tapped on the window, Clara's face distorted and she buried it in her hands.

He had heard on one of their porch nights from Owen, who had been good friends with Clara for years, that Jake had enlisted before he knew she was pregnant, and then just after learning he was a father the country went to war and he got sent over—a double whammy, Owen called it. He hadn't had much to do with her or the boy since, had only sent a few emails and pictures—and now he had voluntarily signed on for a second tour in Iraq. So Foster figured Clara wasn't just crying about her car not starting.

He towed her car to the yard and told her he'd fix the starter the next day. He gave her and Simon a ride home, and at her apartment on the east side he carried her car seat in and sat it on the living room carpet. Her place was small, a couple rooms in one of the cookie cutter apartment buildings that had been going up over there in recent years, and rented mostly to out-of-town college students and recent divorcees. She thanked him and apologized for crying. “It's hormonal, I think,” she said. Then she added, “No, it's not. I'm a mess, I'm sorry. Thank you for being so nice, Foster. You're a real sweetheart, I always thought so.” And now she was looking right at him and touching his cheek and then kissing the other cheek. When he walked outside he felt like he'd been walloped in the head with a two-by-six, the way a cartoon character might fall in love.

Foster sat in his office with all the lights but the desk lamp off. From the window

over his desk he could see the parking lot and the sign that read Fosty's Salvage and Towing, and the empty street just beyond it. He held the clipboard with the parental rights papers in front of him, and his pen over the line where Jake's signature would go. If he were to simply forge the signature, what would happen? He tried to imagine Jake contesting anything in a legal manner, but the thought was laughable.

He scribbled the name Jake S. Burch in a messy, backwards slant across the line and observed it at arm's length. He could probably get away with it. He shoved the clipboard into a junk drawer and locked the office behind him.

He got into the S-10 pickup the yard used for errands around town and drove it back toward Jake, who he spotted still moving along at his shrapnel-heeled pace barely a mile from his trailer. He turned around at a break in the median and pulled up alongside, slowing to try to match his speed. "Gonna take you all night, Jake. What is it you're planning to do anyway?"

Jake kept on, not looking anywhere but toward town. Foster saw now that he was wearing both his Purple Heart and his mud race medal.

"I'll give you a ride," he said. "Hop in."

"Don't want a ride."

"You've got fifteen miles to go, Jake. You're a disabled veteran. I'll be damned if I'm going to let you limp fifteen miles after I repoed your truck."

"Stole."

"Get in Jake. Let's go get a cup of coffee and talk about this. Let's be civil about it."

We're grown men—this isn't right.”

“Ain't is it.”

“What can I do here? What is it you want from me?”

Jake stumbled over something and winced with pain, but caught himself and kept going. “You can leave me the hell alone and let me do what I do, that's what I want from you. That's what I want you to do. Let me do what I do, and you do what you do, and we'll all do what we do and don't matter a lick what's on paper. I wipe my *ass* with paper.”

Foster thought it just his luck that this was his rival, a man he felt sorry for and who wasn't playing by any rules he knew of, limping his way to the salvage yard to do a very sensible thing: to take back his truck.

But he wanted to do things the right way. He wanted his family, and for them to be only *his* family. To be legitimate. He didn't like the thought of Jake—of anyone—showing up to take his son whenever he thought fit. Was there anything at all wrong with that?

But he knew he'd lost this one. Maybe lost the whole thing, for that matter.

“OK, Jake. Have it your way.”

At the yard he opened the outer gate and drove back to where Jake's truck was. He parked and sat looking at the square mile of busted and dismantled automobiles, all his. Rows of smashed up junk he'd turned into money.

Out there the crickets got into the cars and made their homes in them, hid in every

available space, and they were all singing and it echoed off the metal and fiberglass and seemed ten times as loud as it ought to be.

Sometime later he stepped out and went to the fence and studied the cars inside. He noticed that his mother's needed air in both tires on the driver's side, and he made a mental note to refill them the next day, and then wondered why it mattered, why refill tires on a car that won't be going anywhere? But he would anyway. And he would put gas in his old Pinto and maybe drive Simon around in it some time. He thought about Simon then, and missed him as if he'd been gone for weeks, though it had only been earlier that night that he read him a story and tucked him in. And he thought of Clara and how lucky he was to have her, and to be going back home that night and climbing the steps to a bed she'd be asleep in. He took one more look around at the yard, then removed the padlock to the area that held Jake's truck and swung the gate wide open.