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The five stories in this collection follow the residents of a small, western Virginia town, Rocktown, situated in the Shenandoah Valley.

DEER IN THE VALLEY

by

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THE WORM KING

The home builder had done a fine job making the house look like a Spanish missionary—big pink stucco façade in a western Virginia town of brick and wood and stone—but had done a poor job with the foundation or insulation or whatever crucial part was supposed to prevent flooding. Each time it rained the basement took on about two inches of water and two hundred earthworms. Warren’s least favorite chore, by far, was clearing out their dried-out corpses after the water drained away, though he did take some pleasure in the way they snapped in half, just like a pork rind.

“Stop that,” his mom said. “It’s disgusting.”

“It *is* pretty disgusting,” he said, examining the two halves, shriveled and brown, almost like pieces of overcooked bacon. He threw them in the old shoebox. Warren picked up another worm, its dry carcass sticking to the moldy carpet, and snapped it in half.

“Cut it out, Warren,” she said, but that was it. After the death of his dad—a music teacher with calloused fingers and thick brown hair on his calves and forearms—his mom no longer threatened as much as reasoned. Warren, eleven years old, found he had more influence in their family unit. She let him stay at home alone when she ran errands, though just as often he went with her. He liked helping her shop for groceries. He could always pick out the best avocados and bananas.

They worked through the morning until around noon, when his mom went upstairs to get them some lunch, baloney on white with yellow mustard in the middle. They folded them up and ate them like tacos. “Gringos,” they called them. It was one of Warren’s favorite snacks, but with the worms scattered on the floor, neither of them could manage an appetite.

“Let’s take fifteen,” his mom said. They went out on the porch to eat. It was mid August and very hot. The sky was high and cloudless, the same shade of blue as their old pool. They had stayed in their old house for another year, until the memories, and the mortgage, became too much. They’d been living in the rental for nine months.

“Be nice to go swimming,” he said, testing.

“You think you hate those worms? Try having to fish all those mice out of the pool. And all those leaves. Good riddance. I’ll take the worms any day.”

He knew she’d say something like that, but he had wanted to hear it anyway. She never let him wallow on their old life. It was only forward now. Just the two of them.

Their neighborhood bordered the local college—in fact, their street was the buffer between the two, a mix of students, young couples, and old people who had lived there long before the school had started to absorb the city—and they could hear the sound of the marching band practicing for the upcoming season. Soon they would both be going back to school, Warren to fifth grade, his mom to eighth, where she taught Natural Sciences. They listened to the marching band for a while, the rumble and crack of percussion. His mom ran her fingers through his hair, then folded his shirt tag into his collar.

“New year coming up. Fresh start, okay? I don’t want to get any more calls from the principal. Or hear about any funny business at parent/teacher conference. Okay? No International Space Station. No Iraq. No CIA or FBI or spies or anything like that. Are we clear?”

“Mom,” he said, embarrassed.

“I’m serious, Warren. No more tall tales. I know things have been hard, but you have to promise me this one thing.”

“Okay,” Warren said. “Promise.”

The marching band stopped playing and the neighborhood fell silent. A weed whacker buzzed a few yards over. A cardinal sang. (Over the course of the summer, from this front porch, his mom had taught him the different calls.) A truck engine sounded down the road.

It came into view—a big U-Haul—and pulled alongside the house across the street, a house Warren’s mom called the OK Corral due to the frequent police visits to break up undergraduate parties late at night. The lawn was a rectangle of dirt, the only grass coming up in clumps around the concrete slabs of the walkway. The students had been evicted about a month ago.

“Looks like we got us some new fellers round these parts,” she drawled.

“I reckon,” he said. He pretended to spit a stream of tobacco juice off the porch, wiping his mouth off with his sleeve.

She eyed him. “That there’s a mighty unhealthy habit and Doc Holliday thinks you ought a quit or you’re liable to break your poor mother’s heart.”

“Doc Holliday was a dentist, mom.”

“Right, exactly. Gum disease.”

They watched the driver get out. He was nearly bald, but broad shouldered and vigorous. Jumping from the truck, he landed softly on the pavement. His clothes looked sharp and clean.

“That-a-one’s a city-slicker,” Warren said, but his mom was quiet. He looked up at her, but she was far away. The man across the street looked over at them, grinned and waved. Then he went around to the other side of the truck. They heard the passenger door open and close. When the man came back around a boy was with him. Warren’s mom squeezed his arm.

“Look,” she said, dropping the act. “Looks like you’ve got a new friend.”

“He’s practically a baby, mom,” Warren said.

“New neighbors,” she said. “It’s so exciting!”

“We have neighbors,” Warren said.

“Yeah, a bunch of college knuckleheads and the old folks who call the cops on them.”

Warren didn’t want new neighbors. He wanted the OK Corral back. He wanted to sit with his mom on the porch spooning globs of cookie dough ice cream toward their faces while the students shot off fireworks. No one else at school got to stay up past midnight.

He went down into the yard and played solemnly, pretending to ignore his mom and the new neighbors. He sneaked a look at his mom every once in a while, but she was

still watching the man unpack over the top of her *Popular Science*. After about half an hour, he saw her walking toward him out of the corner of his eye. He acted surprised when her shadow cast over him.

“They’ve been working hard over there, don’t you think?” she said.

“I guess,” he said, stabbing at the ground with a shovel, trying to break through a bundle of roots.

“I’m going to get them something to drink, then let’s go introduce ourselves.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“Warren. These are our new neighbors. We’re on the same team.”

He kept jabbing at the roots with his shovel.

“Fine,” she said. “Suit yourself.” She went back inside and came out a few minutes later with a pitcher of blue Kool-aid and some festive paper cups from Warren’s last birthday. She crossed the street, waving first at the boy, then the man. The man held the cups while she filled each one. The boy drank a cup and grinned as she filled it again, his two front teeth missing, and Warren was certain he had never seen such a stupid smile all his life. His mom tousled the boy’s hair, and then motioned back toward Warren. Warren pretended not to see, trying to concentrate on the tunnel he was digging. Earthworms wriggled back into the dirt, trying to escape the afternoon sunlight.

He looked back across the street. His mom was laughing at a joke that the man said. She started to pour the boy another cup of Kool-aid. His third? Or fourth even? The pitcher was nearly empty and Warren was suddenly overcome with thirst. He dropped the shovel and started across the street, composing a hard look on his face as if

he were only going to investigate what was making all the commotion, the same face of the police whenever they arrived to break up the college parties.

“And this is Warren,” she said when he came up to them.

“Nice to meet you, Warren,” the man said. “I’m Ron. And this is my son, Scott.”

“Hi,” Scott said.

Warren acknowledged him with a nod.

His mom placed her hand on Warren’s back. “Scott’s going to be in the second grade this year. He’s got the same teacher you did—Mrs. Beattie.” She looked back at Ron. “Warren loved Mrs. Beattie.”

“Well that’s good to hear,” Ron said.

“I’m going to be in fifth grade,” Warren said, looking at Scott. “That’s the highest you can be at Keister.”

His mom said, “Maybe you and Scott can ride the bus together.”

“I ride with Chuck,” Warren said.

“Well maybe you can switch off, and let Scott sit with you sometimes.”

“Then who will Chuck sit with?”

She gave him a hard look. “Well at least make sure Scott has a seat nearby.”

“Okay,” Warren said, with no intention of keeping his word. School wasn’t for another three weeks, and he planned on avoiding Scott until then. He had actually hated Mrs. Beattie, who had been the one to call his mom when he told Ann Marie Harris that his dad was stationed in Siberia doing research on snow monsters, and was glad Scott was stuck with her.

Over the next few weeks he spent as much time inside as he could. Only until his mom started protesting did he go outside, and then only to the woods behind the house, away from Scott and Ron. He explored all the creek beds and clearings, and even found a small glade with a patch of smooth grass and leaves and tufts of white fur. Nearby were deer pellets. From the den he followed a deer trail through the woods and came across an old junkyard. Through the trees, not too far off, he could hear the traffic from the highway. It thrilled him to think such a thing was tucked away, hidden, and yet so close to civilization. When he got back home, and Ron was sitting there in Warren's own rocking chair, discussing zoning and school districts and other boring things, Warren decided he wouldn't tell his mom about his discovery.

*

On the first day of school Warren's mom and Ron walked Warren and Scott to the bus stop. Warren was embarrassed. His mom hadn't walked him to the bus stop since he was in the third grade. He rushed the parents off as soon as they made it to the stop so none of the kids on the bus would see them. But he didn't like how easily she caved, heeding his pushiness, not even bothering to protest or fuss over him or anything. He watched as his mom and Ron walked back down the street.

He looked at Scott. "Your shirt's girly. Cats are for girls."

Scott pulled on the two corners of the shirt, drawing it out like an apron. "This is my favorite shirt," he said, distressed.

"It's girly," Warren said.

“Cats aren’t girly,” Scott said. “Tigers and lions are cats.”

“Little baby cats like the ones on your shirt are girly.”

“Well I like it anyways,” he said, and Warren was glad not to pursue the topic anymore since he owned a cat and didn’t want to give Scott any ammunition to use against him later on.

“My dad had a cat,” Warren said. “But it’s not girly like other cats. He used to be a stray, and he’s real mean. He has rabies but he knows not to bite me. He fights off dogs and raccoons and stuff.”

Scott seemed to interpret this as a peace offering rather than a rear-guard action and smiled. “That’s some cat,” he said, wowed. “I bet he won’t bite me, either.”

Warren was relieved to see the bus coming so he wouldn’t be tricked into further bonding with Scott. The bus-driver, a middle aged lady that wore a different brightly colored, bedazzled outfit each day of the week, introduced herself to Scott and welcomed him to Bus 26, the best bus in all of Rocktown.

Warren scanned the seats for Chuck’s red hair. Usually they tried to get one of the seats over the back wheel wells that could be kicked to produce a satisfying racket, deep and hollow. But he couldn’t find Chuck. Then he remembered on Mondays Chuck had piano practice and his mom drove him to school.

“Where’s Chuck?” Scott asked.

Warren ignored him. Both wheel-well seats were taken so he slid into a seat near the back. Scott sat down next to him. The trees rushed by the side of the bus. Warren loved the bus ride, a slice of anarchy between school and home, the only authority figure

too preoccupied with not wrecking to maintain order. Getting into the spirit of things Warren wadded up a piece of paper from his backpack and threw it at Ashley Corbin—braceface—who was a few seats up on the right. Warren ducked.

“I know it’s you, Warren,” she yelled back in her nasal, whining voice. She looked toward the front of the bus. “Mrs. Smith! Warren’s throwing things!”

“Knock it off!” Mrs. Smith yelled to no one in particular.

Flush with victory Warren leaned back into his seat. Scott looked at him with a mix of awe and shock, and Warren narrowed his eyes and looked into the middle distance in what he thought was a rakish way. After some time Scott opened up his Pokémon lunch box and pulled out a granola bar.

“I didn’t get breakfast,” he said. His lunch box was packed with Little Debbie cakes, Cheetos, and a Lunchable, things Warren’s mom would never have bought him. Scott saw him staring. “Want something?”

Warren didn’t want to accept any generosity. “No way,” he said. “Lunch will probably be chicken nuggets anyways.”

*

Lunch was not chicken nuggets. It was fish filet—the worst. When Warren got home he was in a bad mood and went to find his mom with the intention of whining. She was in the kitchen, listening to The Beatles, painting her toenails. Warren couldn’t remember ever seeing her do this.

“What are you doing?”

“Painting my toenails, silly,” she said.

“Why?”

She straightened up in her chair and looked down at her toes as if considering my question. “Don’t you think they look pretty?”

Exasperated, Warren gave up and just watched her. She started painting the other foot. He loved watching her concentrating on a project, a good book, the taxes, or slicing produce he just washed.

When she finished, she said, “I’m going to pick out some furniture later today at around six. Scott’s coming. Would you like to come?”

“No,” he said and started down the hall to his room.

“No thank you,” she said sharply.

He stopped and gauged her tone. “No, thanks,” he said.

He went down the hall to his room and waited by the window. Then he saw Ron and Scott walking across the street. Ron’s shirt was pressed and even Scott was wearing a little polo. The front door opened and Warren strained to hear what was happening. There was laughter and he had to fight the impulse to join them like he had on the day they moved in. He couldn’t allow himself any more lapses in resolve. Soon he heard the door open and close again and he watched them walk across the grass to Ron’s car on the curb. His mom was wearing sandals, showing off her red toes. She wore a purple skirt he had never seen before. She looked beautiful.

He left his room and went down the hall to the office, which was really more of a storage space with a desk and a corduroy loveseat his dad would lounge on while

listening to Beatles albums. When they first moved Warren sometimes found his mom in here, curled up on the loveseat, one of his dad's old button downs tucked beneath her arm. She'd been crying, he always knew, even though she would put on a brave face when she heard the door. She would pull her feet up, so he could sit with her on the other side. He hadn't seen her here since early spring, months earlier, and the door was usually closed.

Warren lay down on the loveseat and looked at all of the Beatles memorabilia, the one thing his dad collected. There were brightly colored posters, a plush yellow submarine, and a tour t-shirt signed by George Harrison, his dad's favorite. The heart of the band, he'd told Warren. The one that kept them together.

*

The noise of the door woke him up. He heard his mom and Ron call out goodbyes to one another from across the street and then the slam of the door. She caught him trying to sneak back down the hall. The light turned on.

"Look at your face," she said. She reached down and ran her fingers along where the corduroy had marked his face. She looked concerned, and he could see that she was studying him, trying to solve a problem. He thought he was about to get a scolding or a lecture, but she said, "I hope you come with us next time." She walked to her room to change clothes.

Over the next couple of weeks his mom and Ron continued to see each other. He avoided Scott at school and on the bus. One day, his door cracked, Warren heard Ron ask about him. He'll come around, she said.

But he didn't come around, and after several more weeks, she arranged a playdate between he and Scott and ignored him when he protested. It was mandatory. They were going to be friends.

*

The next day Warren's mom served the three of them—"The Boys," as Ron had taken to calling them—some hot dogs and Kool-aid before ushering Scott and Warren off to play. Behind their house was a small open field surrounded by woods. At the edge of the field were some trails that led through the woods to a nearby park, which is where he told his mom he was taking Scott.

"All right, sweetie," she said, shading her eyes with her hand against the late afternoon sun. "Be back by dark." She went back to talking to Ron, and Warren started walking toward the field.

Scott followed behind Warren, skipping to catch up and grinning with that gaping hole of his.

"You spilled Kool-aid on your shirt," Warren said.

"Yeah," he said. "Your mom said it looks cool, like tie dye."

"It looks like blue Kool-aid." Warren walked faster. Grasshoppers took off from the tall grass as they walked, dark and heavy, the low thrum of their wings more like a

helicopter rotor than the high whine of a fly. They would fly several yards ahead only to take off again, a sort of reverse wake, as the boys kept on toward the woods.

“Check for ticks,” Warren said, channeling his mom, once they’d reached the tree line. “If you don’t they’ll crawl up and hide in your hair, and at night while you’re sleeping they bite you and you get Lima disease.”

“Lima disease?” Scott peered down at his legs, afraid to look closer.

“Yeah, it’s where the beans come from. After you get Lima disease they take you and bury you in the ground and lima beans grow out of you. That’s why they taste so bad.”

“I hate lima beans,” Scott said, sitting down on the dirt path. He un-velcroed his shoes and took off his socks to make sure nothing had sneaked in. While he did this Warren hunted for a good stick. He found one, but had to wrench off a stray branch before it was perfect. They started down the path. As Warren walked, he struck hanging leaves with his stick, sometimes jumping to reach tall branches. He admired the authority and prowess that went into these feats. He looked down at Scott and smiled, full of contempt and wonder at the trust the boy was putting in him, trudging happily along behind him. Instead of taking the path toward the park, he’d chosen the one that leads off toward the highway. There was an old junkyard he wanted to see, that he wanted to show Scott. He savored this feeling of power, of knowing what Scott did not.

In the woods it was darker. The sun was low in the sky, a fading orange, the color of old traffic cones. Small, quick shadows darted across the dirt path from squirrels in the branches above. Warren the pioneer. Warren the capable. Without so much as even

a compass or a map, he marveled, he knew exactly where he was going. Old license plates and rusted tin cans started to glint among the undergrowth. The frame of an old Beetle was off to the left and he hooked off the path and headed toward it.

Warren didn't hear Scott, so he turned around. Scott was still on the path.

"Let's go," Warren said.

"This isn't a park," Scott said.

"No duh," Warren said. He turned around and kept on, not waiting for more questions. Leaves began to churn and scrape behind him. They crossed the ravine that was littered with more old license plates and then went through some brush into another clearing. In the open space, overgrown with grass and vines, were more old car frames, their rusting skeletons like ancient fossils of a long extinct species.

"What's all this?" Scott said quietly, awestruck.

"There used to be an old racetrack here, but there was a wreck and all sorts of people were killed so they shut it down and the woods grew up on top of it."

"Hah," Scott said. "That isn't true. You can't fool me. Woods take way longer to grow than that."

Warren wanted to strike him in his smug face with his stick. "Okay," he said.

"You got me there. But I only said that because if I told you the truth you'd get scared and go tattle."

This seized him. "No way. I wouldn't be scared. And I wouldn't tattle. What's the real story?"

Warren put on like he was considering telling him, really agonizing over the decision. Then he sighed, sadly. “I can’t do it. I know you’ll just get too scared and tattle.”

“Nuh uh. No way. I’m no tattle tale. I swear.” Scott looked at Warren sternly, his feet apart and his narrow shoulders squared off to show he was serious.

“All right,” Warren said. He looked both ways and then leaned forward and whispered, “There’s a mutant that lives out there. Part man, part worm. They call him The Worm King.”

“No way. I don’t believe that,” he said, but when Warren put his finger up to his lips and motioned toward the shacks off to the edge of the clearing, Scott covered his mouth with both hands. He whispered now. “You’re just pulling my leg.”

Warren shrugged and started to root around in some of the garbage. In an old dryer an animal had made a nest. Scott walked up behind him. “It’s not true. Because if it was then you wouldn’t be out here.”

“He sleeps during the day. Or at least he’s underground, digging,” Warren said, poking around in the nest with the stick. “They don’t really know what he’s doing down there. All they know is he won’t come out until night. It’s too hot during the day and he’ll dry up.”

Scott looked off toward the setting sun. “We better get going soon.”

“Not so fast,” Warren said, looking back at the old dryer. “I’m still looking around.”

“How do you know it?” Scott asked. “How do you know about the Worm King?”

“It was in the newspaper,” Warren said. “The Worm King killed some people a few years ago. Even a little baby. He tunnels to the yard outside your house and goes up to your window and knocks three times,” he tapped three times on the dryer, drawing each one out, each click not much louder than the snap of fingernail clippers, “and then when you open the window to see what it was, he grabs you and drags you back to the junkyard.”

“That’s not true,” Scott said, voice trembling. “The police would of killed him.”

“They tried,” Warren said, starting to scare himself. “But there are tunnels all around here, under our feet, and he can dig wherever he wants. There are openings everywhere and he can pop out anywhere.”

The light was failing. Scott started to tug on his sleeve. “Let’s go. We got to get going before he comes out.”

“All right, all right,” Warren said, but he was plenty ready to leave himself.

They walked through the brush and into and out of the ravine. They walked close together now, and Warren was glad Scott was there. The sun had set and the blue shadows grew as twilight fell, and Warren was scared. Even if his story was not true, maybe parts of it were. Maybe there was someone who dragged kids into the woods. Would his mom have told him? Would she even know? They passed the rusted out Beetle, and then there was a great crashing noise behind them. Both boys screamed and ran forward, toward the path, toward home, and Warren’s leg was seized out from under him and he thought I’m going to die, but as he lay on the ground the crashing noise diminished and he opened his eyes to see the white tail and antlers of a buck running

through the woods. He saw Scott up ahead, running along the path, and Warren picked himself up and followed Scott's screams through the darkness, back toward home.

*

When Warren got home, no one was on the porch, and the house was empty too. Warren poured himself a glass of water, his hand shaking. Blood throbbed in his temples. He walked through the empty house, turning on lights as he went. He knew his mom was over at Ron and Scott's house, and he imagined Scott spilling his guts, wailing and accusing. He knew she would be furious and that Ron would be furious and they would come over and yell, ganging up against him. Ganging up against him just as they had over the past months, except now it would be forever. They might not ever come back. They had a house over there, a new family. He started to cry. He wasn't sure he could cook for himself, but he knew he had to eat, that to keep going he would have to eat. He went into the kitchen and turned a burner on. He found eggs and a potato in the fridge. He put the potato in the pan and then cracked the eggs on the side as he'd seen his mom do before, but shell shattered into the pan, and clear, gelatinous egg snot ran down his wrist and into his sleeve. It seemed so much easier when he watched his mom, the way she could toast bread and scramble eggs and cook sausage and hum the melody to "Strawberry Fields Forever" all at the same time, but he couldn't do any of those things. He was useless. He ran to the bathroom to clean the egg off, and he sat on the linoleum floor as the bath water ran, steam billowing up and fogging the mirror. Then the music stopped playing, and he turned off the water. Everything went silent. The floorboards

creaked in the hall. He watched the door through the fog. There were three knocks, and he screamed. The door swung open, and his mom walked in and sat next to him on the floor, and she told him about all the wonderful things that were coming their way.

WAR STORIES

I worked as a park ranger after my tour of duty in Iraq. This was before I decided to use the GI Bill for a Computer Science degree. I had romantic notions about being a park ranger. I thought I would be tranquilizing rogue bears and releasing them into deeper forests. Or on top of a fire tower, scanning the blue-green peaks for lightning strikes and wisps of smoke, sending GPS coordinates to teams of firefighters and water-heavy helicopters.

With my experience in the Army, I should have known better. Occasionally I'd help change the tire of an overloaded RV or pull someone over for a DUI, but mostly I drove along the Blue Ridge Parkway and made sure people weren't having sex or getting stoned at the scenic overlooks.

Two months into work, I drove up on a car, a big, old silver Buick that was gyrating on its shocks. Jesus Christ, I said under my breath, but really I was excited for any break in the tedium. The Buick was the only car out there. It was a Tuesday in September, which my coworker Warren had explained was a slow part of the season—after the summer vacation crowd, but before the leafers show up in the fall.

I parked my cruiser on the other end of the overlook. It really was a nice view. This stretch of the Parkway looked west, down into the Shenandoah Valley, rolling green farmland with thickets of trees between the fields, towns no more than a gas station and Hardees sleeping across from one another at a crossroads.

The Buick was still gyrating. I walked over, flashlight in hand, even though it was morning. The windows were lightly fogged and I could make out two figures, a mix of clothes and skin. I tapped on the window and the car stopped moving. “Fuck,” I heard a woman’s voice say. But it wasn’t the voice of a teenager. “Shh,” another voice wheezed.

After some panicked movements, the passenger side window rolled down, and an old woman looked up at me. She combed her blue hair with her gnarled fingers. The man stared straight ahead, eyelids heavy, an arm draped over the lady’s headrest. She gave me a salacious grin, crimson lipstick smeared across her dentures. “Good morning, officer.”

This was the point where I would usually deliver a stern lecture, but to teenagers or drunk rednecks, not a couple of fogeys probably having a torrid affair, a delayed midlife crisis. I was in my mid-twenties at this time, not accustomed to bossing the elderly around.

I regained my composure. “Move it along,” I said. It’s amazing how easy you fall into this sort of language when you assume the role. They straightened their clothing, adjusted their belts, and drove off, giggling like teenagers.

I rehearsed the story on the drive back to the ranger station, a little concrete and wood hutch near Waynesboro. But the more I replayed it in my mind, the less interesting it became, and by the time I told Warren, the other ranger on duty, I couldn’t muster the humor in it. He sensed my disappointment with the job.

Does anything interesting ever happen on this mountain?" I asked. I was embarrassed by my question, and by the nasal whine I asked it with.

"What, didn't get enough action in Iraq?" Warren was in his early forties with a long gray-blond braid down the middle of his back. He was something of a survivalist and enjoyed watching *Frasier* reruns on the hutch TV.

I explained to him I had only been a 25B, an information technology specialist. An official geek for the Army, basically. I spent most of my tour updating software and troubleshooting PC problems for officers with the computer literacy of my grandma. My nickname within the unit was Clippy, after the bug-eyed, talking paper clip from Microsoft Office.

"Well I think you should count yourself lucky."

"I do," I said. "Not sure I was cut out for the infantry."

"Still, though," he said. "You did your part."

I shrugged. By that point I was numb to the back-patting and beer-buying that is being a veteran among civilians. The closest thing I saw to action was when a few mortars were lobbed into our FOB one night, blowing up a latrine. I called it "Poop Harbor," which my CO did not appreciate.

Warren and I watched *Frasier* for a while.

"Daphne is a fox," I said.

Warren nodded. He adjusted the volume up two notches, and then back down.

"You know anyone with PTSD?"

“Not anyone close to me. At least from Iraq. My uncle gets some treatment at the VA in Roanoke. I think it’s PTSD related, but I’ve never really talked to him about it. He was in Vietnam.”

“That’s military only, though, right? The VA?”

“Yeah.”

He thought about this for a while. *Frasier* was on commercial break. A man with a British accent poured what looked like a mixture of red wine and Kool Aid over a white carpet sample and smeared it around with an expensive looking vacuum. Warren changed the channel to a baseball game, the Mets and the Braves. A pitcher was winding up, but Warren flipped back to *Frasier* before he released. I wanted Warren to stay on one channel, whether it was *Frasier* or baseball, but I was just the new guy and he was the old hand, and with that came certain prerogatives.

“That’s been a big thing recently. PTSD. Everywhere you look, someone’s writing an article about it. What do you think about all that?” He glanced away from the TV, making eye contact, then looking back. He opened the back of the remote control, and removed the batteries, then replaced them again, snapping the plastic piece back in place.

Despite being somewhat aloof, Warren was my favorite coworker. Some of the other guys were either jerks or wannabe Daniel Boones, and spoke of the general public with such contempt you’d think they built the Parkway themselves. Warren was more mellow. There was no act. He was a good cook and brought in food when we were working, sometimes Tex-mex type stuff, but usually southern home cooking, lima beans

and mashed potatoes, roast beef. His chicken pot pie is still the best I've ever had—the right ratio of breading to ingredients, not too soupy, with lots of rosemary and big chunks of potato. Sometimes we'd play cards, with him almost always winning, no matter the game. Sometimes he preferred not to talk and would read thick books on botany—"if civilization collapses, game will be overhunted within months; foraging is how you'll have to survive"—but most of the time we watched *Frasier*. He owned the collected VHS, their cardboard covers worn away at the corners. They were probably a collector's item even then.

This new line of questioning was unusual, though, even more than Warren. He didn't often ask questions, and certainly not personal ones. I was feeding off his anxiousness.

"I've never had any reason to doubt it," I said. "I mean, the reason I haven't talked to my uncle is because he's crazy as hell. One mean fuck. But maybe he was that way before Vietnam."

To my surprise, Warren looked relieved. "Yeah I think so too. I mean, yeah, I think it's a thing too, PTSD. Sometimes I think I've got it a little. Maybe more than a little. I don't know how you go about measuring something like that. But I get nightmares sometimes, difficulty sleeping."

"Were you Desert Storm?"

"No," he said. "Just some shit I saw."

"Recently?"

“No, because I was reading the last Harry Potter book at the time, so,” he paused, counting back for a moment, “four years ago? Five? Five. It was about this same time of year. Leaves hadn’t started to change yet. I was just doing my sundown sweep, and I was irritated, because I wanted to come back here and read. I’d probably gone twenty or thirty miles when I ran across a BMW halfway in a ditch, hazards blinking. It must have been one of those newer models where the hazards come on as soon as there’s a collision. Made me real nervous. I pull over and grab my flashlight. Broken glass is everywhere. I shine the light on the car and two eyes light up. I about shit my pants. It was a deer head, hanging out over the hood of the car, mouth open, tongue sticking out. Definitely dead.”

Warren paused for a moment. He took a drink of water. The setting sun was slanting in at an awkward angle, and he stood up to adjust the blinds. In the late afternoon half-darkness he sat down and continued his story.

“I looked inside and there was two people in the front seat, all mashed up. Mutilated. Like something from a horror movie. Their faces were caved in and shiny. Shit was still oozing out. I stepped away and threw up on the side of the road. Then I called the ambulance, told them to bring along some body bags.”

“I looked at the deer again. Its body was on the hood, legs inside the cab. Blood was all over the hood. The deer was all cut up. Lacerations everywhere, guts hanging down over the dash. Died trying to free itself, thrashing against the broken glass. In the process it killed those two people. Kicked them to death. They were just trapped in their seats. Who knows how long it went on? Thirty seconds? Five minutes? Were they

knocked out early on or did they know what was happening the whole time? I haven't worn a seatbelt since."

"Fuck," I said, somewhat cautiously, still wary of this outpouring from Warren, who rather than asking me to deal, would hit the table twice with his finger.

"After I got my shit back together I went back to the car and shined my beam back through, only kind of half looking at the bodies up front. And there was this little girl in the back. Just absolutely still. Looking straight ahead. She didn't respond at all to the flashlight. I opened the back door.

"Little girl, I say. But she doesn't respond. Catatonic, is what the EMTs later said. I picked her up and carried her over to the cruiser. I sort of laid her down in the back seat. The EMTs gave me a hard time about moving her. Back injury risk and all that."

"I called the EMTs again and said there was a little girl. Said they'd need some sort of kid shrink. They told me that unfortunately their kid shrink was on vacation in Hawaii. That's an EMT thing if you haven't noticed. Smart-asses."

The light from the window came from over Warren's shoulder, and I was having trouble seeing his face. I reached behind me and turned on a lamp. Warren blinked several times in the new light, and continued.

"The clean up was a mess. The blood on the floorboards was ankle deep, from both the deer and the parents. Once the EMTs arrived they stopped giving me lip. The only person unfazed by the whole thing was the wrecking company driver, but I figure you see a lot of heavy shit in that line of work. The guy put on some canvas gloves and

yanked at the deer corpse. I told him I'd take care of all that in just a little, that it was legally our responsibility, but he told me he was on a schedule and kept at it. Really I was relieved. The noises it was making were just awful. And of course more blood starts pouring out. He jerked the thing free and dragged it across the road. Big guy, this driver. He grabbed it by the front and back legs and hefted it down the mountain. You could hear it crashing down through the brush. Took three weeks of thunderstorms and sun for that smear running across the road to go away.

“Where was this?” I asked, feeling an obligation to respond. “How far down?”

“Between mile 76 and 77. Just past the rock outcropping. The deer must have bolted across just as they were coming around.” He waited a moment for me to follow up, but I could think of nothing.

“After the EMTs had cleaned up the bodies, the tow truck driver chained up the BMW and threw the gloves into the back of his truck ‘Damn shame,’ he said, and drove off.

“They took the kid to UVA. I think her name was Saraline. From what I understand, she lives with her grandparents in Ruckersville. I've thought about getting in touch. Maybe if she was doing well, I'd be able to move past it. But if she wasn't, I just don't know.”

I waited for him to go on, but that was it. We watched TV. I brewed a pot of coffee. Warren stood up, closed the blinds completely, and went out on patrol.

We fell back into our routine—*Frasier*, cards, pot pie. I tried to teach him a little about programming languages, but that was a lost cause. I should've known better than to try and teach a man who owns the collected VHS of anything something about computers. His story stuck with me. I started to see the way he carried himself, the pure exhaustion he was using to push himself through each day. Maybe it was just sleep deprivation. Maybe it was something else.

Since he was afraid of the answer, afraid of learning that Saraline was similarly shattered by the wreck, I decided to look for her myself. If she was in good shape, I would let him know. If she wasn't, I wouldn't.

I searched through the September, 2007 files of the database until I found the report, filed by Warren. There were some truly gruesome photos, worse than anything I ever saw in Iraq—not that that's saying much in my particular case. The deer. The car. The two faceless parents. But nothing of the girl. By then she was probably already on her way to UVA.

Using the last name of the victims from the incident report—Corbin—I googled her name, but there were too many, and even when I added “Virginia” and then “Ruckersville,” there was nothing. I cut out “Saraline” and searched for “Corbin” in Ruckersville, hoping to find the name of her grandparents, and I found a number.

I called, “Hello, this is Kyle Bartlett, with the National Parks Service. Is Saraline around?”

“Excuse me?”

“Saraline? Does a Saraline live there?”

“Oh, well, you must mean Samantha.”

Had Warren gotten her name wrong? “Yes, I’m sorry. Samantha. Is Samantha around?”

“Well,” the woman said, somewhat confused. “Yes. She’s in the back. John’s working with her. Getting her ready for the show.”

“May I talk with her?”

There was a long silence. “Sir, I think there has been some confusion. Samantha is a horse.”

“I see,” I said. I apologized, and after inquiring, without luck, if maybe there were other Corbins in the area, I hung up.

I called the local EMTs, but wasn’t surprised when no one had been there. The average turnaround for those guys is probably no more than a year since they don’t pay you dick, and mostly it’s volunteers and twenty-somethings looking for a little excitement before realizing they wouldn’t be able to pay their mortgage on twelve bucks an hour. People not all that different than myself, really.

Then I remembered the wrecking company driver. I pulled the files again and found the receipt. “Dale’s Tow Service,” in Fishersville, VA. I called the office.

“Hello?” a female voice answered gruffly.

“This is Ranger Kyle Bartlett, with the National Parks Service”

“Oh, hello,” she said, brightening. The last thing a wrecking company wants to do is lose its government contracts.

“I’m looking for a driver who did a job for us about four years back. How many drivers do you have?”

She hesitated.

“There’s nothing wrong. No one’s in trouble. I’m just trying to clear some details up. Family has contacted us and we’re missing some information in our report.”

“Well, we’ve got two drivers. Dale and his son. Our son. I’m the wife,” she said, laughing sheepishly.

“They’ve both been driving since 2007?”

“Yes.”

I couldn’t remember any detail from Warren’s story about the driver’s age. “This guy was a big guy.”

“Oh, that’s Dale. Ricky’s tall, but he’s a beanpole. They kept saying he’d fill out, but it hasn’t happened.”

“All right, well thank you. Is Dale available?”

“Actually, yes. Just got back from a job.”

The ambient noise of the office in Fishersville rose when she pulled the receiver from her face. Then there was silence for a few moments. I watched a spider crawl across the floor.

“Hello?” a man said.

“Dave?”

“Yessir.”

“This is Kyle, with the National Parks service. Up at the Parkway. I’m trying to get some information about a wreck from almost exactly four years ago.”

“I work a lot of wrecks.”

“Yes, but this was unique.”

His silence suggested skepticism.

“A deer kicked two people to death. It was trapped in the windshield glass. I believe you threw it down the mountain.”

That seemed to work. “Yes, I remember. Don’t remember anything about throwing any deer, though. I think you’re mistaken.”

“Relax. I’m not trying to jam your gears up here. I don’t care about you throwing a deer or anything like that.”

“I remember the wreck, but I won’t say that it was particularly unique. I seen a whole family with their heads clean off from skidding under an 18-wheeler. Look about like someone was topping crops.”

“Okay, but do you remember a little girl?”

“No, sir. Don’t remember no little girl. Just the deer. They was pulling out the bodies when I got there. Left the deer to me. The ranger on duty was pretty shook up.”

“But nothing about a girl?”

“Not that I can remember. It was a ways back. Memory’s pretty good, though.”

I wasn’t getting anywhere. “Well, do you remember anything else?”

He thought for a while. “I thought it was unusual no one came to pick up the car. It was in pretty good shape. Shattered windshield, some dents in the hood and bumper,

but nothing structural. And I got plenty of Volvo body parts on the lot already, so no expense there. Engine was golden. Usually folks'll come by and at least sell the scraps, but this thing could've been driven off the lot. Now, the interior was another story. That was a mess. That was no fun. But I cleaned it up and sold it after ninety days. Cleared eight grand."

"You said Volvo? Volvo parts?"

"Right, yeah. Course it was a Volvo. They was from Charlottesville."

"You're sure?"

"Yessir."

I tried to wrap up the conversation, but I'd unleashed a torrent of past stories of other coups he'd had over the years and the various ways he'd used his wits to make some money. "Yeah, okay," I finally said. "Thank you for your help, Dale."

"Then there was the F150, only a few years old. This young hotshot couldn't get the tow fee together so he loses his truck. His whole truck over a few hundred dollars! I couldn't believe it."

I hung up.

I checked the window for Warren's truck, but he was still out on patrol. Then I went back to the filing cabinet and pulled the file, and saw that Dale was right: it was a silver Volvo Passat. I was sure Warren had said a BMW. But that was an honest enough mistake. Given what had taken place, who cared what the make of the car was? But what about the girl?

If he'd been wrong about the car, could he have been wrong about the girl? Maybe she hadn't existed at all. I hadn't found a trace of Saraline. Not in Ruckersville, not in the official report, not from Dale. Had Warren made her up? Was she something his mind had created during his nightmares? If this was the case, had Warren been aware of this when he was telling me the story, since what had really occurred mattered less than what was haunting him at night?

I wanted to ask him these questions, or at least more tactful versions of them. But the moment never came. In December, four months after our conversation, he didn't show up for work. I asked around and no one seemed to have any idea. The boss grumbled about Warren's increasing unreliability and didn't seem surprised by any of it. After a couple days, I feared the worst, that it was only a matter of time before they found his body dangling from some overhead plumbing.

But who is "they"? I'd never heard him mention anyone else. No family, no friends. I assumed there were some people in his life, people who would report to the station if something had happened, but now I wasn't so sure. He didn't own a cell phone, which wasn't actually that unusual in the area, given the spotty cell service in the mountains, though I doubt he would have had one regardless. I wouldn't have been surprised if he didn't have a land line either. I went back to the hutch desk, looking for an old employee directory. I found one, at least two years old—two or three of the names on the list didn't work here anymore—and called Warren's number on it. It rang continuously, and I listened to the rings for a solid minute before hanging up. Certainly the boss would have had Warren's address. He was Federal employee, for Christ's sake.

But it wouldn't have surprised me if Warren had given them a dummy address, and besides I didn't want the boss to know I was snooping around. Instead I ran his name through the government license database to find his address. He lived in Grottoes, VA, fifteen or twenty minutes up highway 340.

I wrote it down, thinking I would go check it out tomorrow on my off day. But then I began to worry that he had fallen and hurt himself in some way, or was having some sort of medical emergency, or was simply depressed and on the verge of killing himself, and that waiting a day might be too late. It was the slow season, and I reasoned that the odds of Warren getting hurt were greater than there being a life or death situation on my stretch of the Parkway during the hour I would be gone. I closed the hatch door, leaving all the lights on to make it seem as if it weren't abandoned, and climbed into my cruiser.

I barreled down 64, off of Afton and down into the Valley and turned north on 340. The highway hugged the mountains, and the blue shadows from the soft, low peaks swallowed long stretches of the road. Then the sun would burst forth for a mile or two, before you plunged back into artificial evening. To the west were farms and the occasional small house or trailer along the road, fake geese feeding in the lawn, cinder blocks encircling flower beds. The highway crossed small creeks and curved around outcroppings of rock and then there was the sign for Grottoes, Home of the Grand Caverns, Pop. 2,600. At the only stoplight in town, I plugged the address into my GPS, and within a few turns I was at Warren's place, a townhome in a small block of five or six homes. I thought maybe there was some mistake, that he'd somehow tricked the

Federal government as well. I had imagined Warren lived in some small, spartan cabin in the forest, canning fruits and skinning squirrels, but this was obviously my own failure of imagination. I more or less just imagined he'd lived in the Ranger hutch, just slightly different in a slightly different place.

I was still skeptical, though. I knocked on his door, with no response. After checking over my shoulders, I dropped down off the brick stairs into the bed of dry, old mulch and tried to look through the curtains, but the mountains were blocking the light from the back window and I could only see my own reflection. So I walked around the side of the building.

In the backyard were a couple clotheslines, maybe communal for the building, and a small, carefully tended garden, with tomatoes, eggplant, etc. I figured that had to be Warren's. A couple houses down, not far from the clotheslines, a small, very pale shirtless boy, maybe seven or eight years old, was playing with a wooden stick. He saw me and paused.

"Hey," I said. "Does Warren live here?"

He kept staring.

"Warren? Older guy? He's got a ponytail?"

The boy nodded. "Yeah. Ponytail." Then, as if overcome by shyness, he ran inside. I hope he wasn't calling the cops. Not that I'd get in any serious trouble with the local cops, but then I'd have to explain what I was doing here, which meant I'd have to explain to my boss what I was doing twenty miles from my post.

I looked in the back window and could see a little more, though still not much. A kitchen, like any other. Crockpot on the counter. A small breakfast table with two chairs. Did anyone ever sit in the chair across from him? Did he even sit in one of the chairs? Or did he take his meal straight from the kitchen to the couch in front of the TV, just like I always did?

I looked back to clotheslines, hoping to see the boy. I wanted to know when he'd seen Warren last, though maybe that wouldn't have been very useful. So instead I went to the car and got a tire iron and then smashed out a small window in the back.

To avoid being shot in the face, I yelled, "Warren! Hey, Warren! It's me, Kyle. You all right buddy?"

There was no response. I dragged the tire iron around the perimeter of the window frame to clear out the loose glass. Then I gripped the sill and hauled myself in, the glass crunching beneath my boots. It was a small bathroom, very clean, except for a glob of blue toothpaste in the sink. A woodblock print of a fox hung on the wall over the toilet.

Before opening the door into the wider house, I yelled again. "Warren? It's Kyle. Just came to see if you were doing okay. You there, Warren?"

Still only silence, and I opened the door, very much hoping a deranged and confused Warren wouldn't be on the other side with a shotgun. Instead there was only silence and a clean and simple living room with a large, worn couch. The primal fear of my own death was replaced by the original one, that I'd find Warren's body here. The permeating silence, the spotless apartment, it no longer seemed a place where somebody

lived. I walked through the living room. There were more woodblock prints: cows, bobcats, hawks, deer. And then I noticed his mark on the corner of each: a stylized W.

I climbed the stairs to his bedroom, taking the last few steps slowly, not wanting to know, because I felt I already knew the answer, but when I reached the top I found a small office, a full bath, and a small bedroom, but no Warren. The bed was made, the carpet lined from a vacuum. Maybe he has a new girlfriend and he's staying over there most nights, I reasoned. Maybe he's in love, and he's got a new perspective on things, and that's why he's stopped coming into work. But that was hard to believe.

I went into the office, which was a little more disordered than the rest of the house. And then I saw on the desk, among a couple other papers, and a few dried, pressed herbs, a picture of a little girl. Saraline. It was from the same series as the other photos. Here, though, the EMTs had a blanket around her and were loading her into the car. While the others were clinical, there was a something more desperate about this one's composition. Warren wasn't just capturing information on this one. And so she existed. I took the photo, then put it back, thinking I didn't want him to know I'd come, but then I realized I'd busted out a window so he'd know either way, so I took the photo back and slid it in my uniform's shirt pocket.

I drove back to Afton.

The next day, on my day off, I went back to Grottoes to repair the window. I hoped to find Warren or at least a neighbor I could talk to, but either no one was home or no one was answering their doors, not even the little boy. I fixed the window and then let myself out the front door, locking it behind me. There was still no sign of Warren.

Google and Facebook didn't lead anywhere—Warren wasn't exactly the sort of person that believed in the virtues of a strong Internet presence. Maybe he'd gone on his own search of Saraline. He was certainly more resourceful. I hoped he had better luck than I did, and I hoped what he found brought him peace.

Weeks passed and I started to relax. December turned into January. Snow fell. From on top of Afron I would watch the pure, quiet whiteness of the fields and farms below. Word eventually got around that Warren had opened up a store just outside of Asheville, selling MREs and Bug-Out Bags, teaching survival techniques along with an Iranian named Farhad, but whether any of that was true or not, I have no idea.

SHOWALTER TOYOTA

Caitlyn and Crowley Showalter's parents crashed a speedboat into the wake of a harboring submarine just outside the Norfolk Naval base. Eyewitness accounts stated the boat was going dangerously fast, skipping off the water, and when it hit the wall of wake, crumpled as if hitting concrete. The recovered bodies were both naked. Though the official report didn't explicitly mention it, the speculation was they were having sex—"preoccupied," the report stated.

Caitlyn believed this rumor was true. Four years ago their mom had been diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer and had, against all odds, beaten it. After she went into remission, the entire family celebrated for weeks. And then kept celebrating. And then celebrated some more, and soon Caitlyn realized this was no longer a celebration but simply the new normal. Having dodged a bullet, their parents were hell-bent on living it up. They took dance lessons. They got stoned. They bought a speedboat.

Caitlyn had grown up helping out around the family dealership, washing cars, doing small engine maintenance tasks, learning the inner workings of the business, particularly the numbers, which was where she excelled. (Crowley had been banned from the lot by their father when Crowley, at sixteen, had placed blow up dolls in the passenger seats of six of the cars, right when the owner of ABC Cab Company, a born again Christian, was looking to expand his fleet with four minivans.) When their mom, who had done most of the number crunching and paperwork for the business, was

diagnosed, Caitlyn took over her responsibilities. Then, eight months later, when the post-cancer celebrations began, their father started to show up to work only a couple days a week, and Caitlyn was left, at the age of twenty-six, as the de facto boss.

Things limped along as she adjusted to her new responsibilities, and sales even started to climb in the quarter before their parent's death, but after the wreck, her two lead salesmen, sensing a second ship was about to sink, went for the life rafts. One salesman moved to Haley Volvo and Imports across the street and the other to a Ford dealership in Lexington.

She hired a couple of recent JMU graduates who were less than useless and, after firing them, she tried to sell the cars herself. This was even worse. Gregariousness and charm were not her strengths. She knew that when making a sale you weren't selling the car, but the fantasy the car would bring—the beautiful blonde who'd accompany you in the sports car, the camp songs your kid would sing in the back of your 4Runner, or even simply the iPhone jack that would make your morning commute that much more pleasant. She had seen her previous salespeople pull it off hundreds of times. But she could never seem to conjure the illusion. It sounded false in her mouth, and she could tell she was embarrassing the customers. She abandoned this strategy and tried to stick to her strength. She would begin by telling the potential buyers about the features of the cars and which car she thought was best for them, dropping in performance statistics, mechanical tidbits, payment plans, warranties. The customer would nod along politely, and then climb in their car and drive off. Dealing in practicalities didn't work; buying a

new car was rarely practical, and using that language sobered the potential buyers up when what they wanted was to be convinced to make an impractical decision.

In the past months, as things began to look grimmer, a desperate quality was creeping into her pitches, which, she knew, was chasing off even the customers who came in knowing exactly what they wanted and how much to pay, those that shopped for a car the way they shopped for toilet paper.

It was noon, a busy time for dealers, as sometimes people took their lunch break to grab some fast food and cruise the lots on Motor Mile, and a man in a suit and tie, a lawyer judging by the tasseled loafers, was asking her about pick-up trucks.

“I’ve been getting into mountain biking and road cycling.” The man slapped his small gut. “This used to be a good thirty pounds heavier. The endorphins are great. Clears my head after a long day of work. Have you tried it out?” He looked her over, her short legs and squat body, and decided to move on from the subject.

She tried to make light of it. “No sir, I ride my Corolla. Easier on the legs,” she said.

He looked at her strangely and then moved on. “Anyways, my Chrysler isn’t really built for going up mountains or hauling a bike rack, so I’m looking for something manageable but also with a bed big enough to fit the bikes.”

She showed him their three Tacomas, and went through her usual list: the nice size, not too big, not too small, the relatively strong gas efficiency, its excellent resale value and, of course, its reliability.

“You’ll be sleeping like a baby with this car, it’s so reliable.”

He seemed confused. “Why would I be sleeping in my car?”

“I mean, at night, in your house. The night before you go to work.”

“How will this car help me sleep in my house?” Now the man seemed genuinely interested, though Caitlyn could tell the curiosity was more about her pitch than the car itself.

“Because it’s so reliable. You won’t stay up at night worrying whether it’ll start or not.”

“I don’t do that. I’ve never done that. Do people really come here and complain about that problem? Buffalo or Detroit, I could see, but in Virginia?”

“Well, with this car, you certainly won’t start,” she said, flourishing what she hoped was a winning smile, but knowing it was only exaggerating her desperation. At this point she just wanted to exit this conversation in way that wouldn’t result in a negative Yelp review.

She lost the sale. Not that she had it to begin with. And with a mix of relief and despondency—a cocktail of emotions she’d grown accustomed to since taking over the family business—she watched the man climb back into his Forest Green ‘96 Grand Cherokee and drive across the street to Haley’s Volvo and Imports.

She went back inside to the main building. Sloan, Showalter Toyota’s secretary and last remaining employee, played on her phone. Caitlyn would have chastised her—months ago—but now there was no point. Caitlyn was just grateful to have someone else around, as if they weren’t circling the drain, though she knew it wasn’t exactly loyalty on

Sloan's part: Sloan's husband had just received a promotion and as soon as Showalter Toyota closed up shop she intended to settle into early retirement and play Candy Crush until her fingers bled. Caitlyn knew this, because these were Sloan's exact words.

Caitlyn went into her office and stood self-consciously at the big panel windows, staring out at the field of cars as she had seen her dad do for many years. Then she sat at the desk to look at bills. This was it. At the beginning of the week she'd told herself if she didn't clear \$2000 she would throw in the towel and sell the dealership. She started to sort through the paperwork any prospective buyers might want. After the death of her parents, Haley from across the street, her dad's old rival, had offered to buy the dealership, but Caitlyn had felt at the time there was too much of a celebratory note to Haley's offer and, young and dumb, she resolved to turn Showalter Toyota into the best dealership in Rocktown. Thinking of it now, she began to grind her teeth again. She opened the drawer and took her plastic mouth guard from its case and, as per Dr. Formica's instructions, placed it in her mouth.

She looked across the street at Haley in his suit, watching on as one of his salesman talked the lawyer into a new station wagon with all wheel drive. She called the dealership and Mona, one of his secretaries, picked up. "How can I help you?" she asked, an octave higher than what could possibly be a natural speaking voice.

"I'd like to speak with Sean Haley."

"I'm sorry, he's not available right now. Could I take a message?"

"Mona, I'm looking at him right now. He just fist bumped Jerry. Will you just run and grab him?"

Haley picked up the phone. “How many hours a week would you say you spend watching me from your window?”

“Oh fuck off, Sean.”

“Well that’s not very nice.”

She sighed. “Sorry. Rough couple of weeks.”

“I see.”

“I’d like to revisit your offer, if you don’t mind.”

“My offer? That was, what, a year ago? Maybe more?”

“Fourteen months.”

“And from the sound of it, things haven’t improved since then.”

She was saying all the wrong things, she knew. Negotiation exhausted her. Running the dealership exhausted her. She just wanted it to be over. Maybe she’d take the money and buy some rental property. Maybe she’d pay down the mortgage on her parent’s home, teach high school accounting and take extravagant vacations to Turks in Cacaos during the summers, even if she burned under direct sunlight within minutes.

“Just give it some thought,” she said. “I’d appreciate it.”

“Okey dokie,” he said.

She went back to looking over the numbers, and after some time, her phone began to ring. It was Crowley.

“Hey, Caitlyn, how’s it going?”

“Kind of got my hands full at the moment, Crow.”

“We haven’t talked in a month, and that’s how you greet me.”

“Right. That’s how I know you’re about to ask me for something.”

“Hmm. Fair point. Where’s my money from last month? Never came through.”

“For me to send you money, people need to buy cars.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. I can’t give you any money. There’s no money.”

“What do you mean there’s no money?”

“What do you mean ‘What do you mean there’s no money?’ I can’t explain it any simpler than that. The business is tanking and I don’t have any money to send you.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me? I’ve got bills to pay. Debts, things like that.”

“Have you considered working? You exchange your time and labor for a paycheck. It’s time tested.”

“Well that’s not any good. I don’t like that. Not at all.”

“We may have to sell the dealership.” She said this offhandedly, as if it were no big deal. The less he was involved, the better. As legal co-owner, she would need his signature, of course, but she hoped that was all.

There was silence.

“Crowley? Crow?”

“Well all right, sis. I’m coming on home.”

“Hold on a second.”

“Can you send me some money to make it back?”

“Wait, Crow.”

“Seven hundred dollars.”

“Seven hundred?!”

“Yeah, that’s how much a plane ticket from Atlanta costs.”

“Atlanta? I thought you were in Philadelphia”

“Not since four days ago.”

“Why can’t you drive?”

“I sold my car.”

“Why?”

“Well you didn’t send me any money last month and I owed some guys some money. These guys, you know, *really* wanted that money, so I sold the car.”

“That was a very nice car Crowley. Did you at least get a good deal?”

“Well, liquidating assets in an emergency situation doesn’t usually bring back top dollar.”

“Three hundred,” she said.

“That’s not going to do me any good.”

“Five hundred.”

“I can make that work. Thanks a lot! See you soon! Love ya, sis!” He hung up.

She stared at the phone for a moment. Then she dialed the number for Rockingham Heritage Bank to arrange a \$700 transfer to his account.

*

Despite being barred from the dealership, Crowley was the favorite—quick to laugh, eager to please, with a gift for physical comedy. Their parents would be furious at

him after a parent/teacher conference and force him to do some chores, like rake the leaves, to instill some discipline in the boy, and within minutes he'd have them in stitches as he swam laps in the leaves, his face pinched in Olympic concentration. He would come in after completing half the yard and they would have forgotten all about it. After their mom beat cancer, Crowley and their parents grew even closer. They viewed him as a sort of lifestyle coach. All along, their father had said more than once, he was right. Here we were working our fingers to the bone, and he's got the secret. The Tao of Crow, they called it.

The absurdity of their parent's death, Caitlyn suspected, robbed Crowley of his ability to mourn. He was unable to look past the event itself to the loss of his mother and father. To him it was simply a cosmic joke, and when extended family came to console them, he drove them away by frequently retelling the event, slapping his knees, laughing manically, joylessly. His sense of humor, already sarcastic, became simply bleak. Soon after the funeral, he dropped out of school, shifted from city to city. Occasionally, he would come home for various reasons. Most recently, he had to get veneers because he'd lost his two front teeth after getting punched in the face for kissing a frat boy full on the mouth. His Facebook feed had dozens of photos of him grinning into the camera, gap-toothed, blood running down his chin and staining his Lacoste button down. Each photo had one Like—his own.

But he wouldn't stay home long. Within a day or two, Caitlyn and Crowley would be at each other's throats. It was for the best that he moved on. Caitlyn couldn't keep up with both him and the dealership. One or the other. That was it.

*

She waited for him at the luggage pick up at the Charlottesville airport. The flight was delayed, and she couldn't help but suspect that Crowley was somehow responsible. After the plane finally landed, she saw him in the crowd. His clothes were sharp and expensive, his beard overgrown but still fashionable. Their parents' sense of style all went to him.

Despite herself, she was elated to see him. Though she was worried about what trouble he would cause, about his pathological inclination to turn things to shit, she was looking forward to him visiting. She was lonely and had been looking forward to their infrequent phone calls, even though they spent much of the time arguing. She worked a lot and used this as an excuse for not pursuing a social life beyond the dealership, but she knew this was a willful delusion, and that even if she weren't working so many hours, she would still spend all of her time by herself. She had two cats, though when she went on a few miserable OK Cupid dates, she always only mentioned one. The dates rarely called back, and she didn't even really want them to call back. Having another person across the table, staring at you, expectant, waiting for you to engage with them in some flirty way was exhausting. She slept with one of them as a sort of external masturbation, but it wasn't really worth the trouble. She preferred her big, empty home. She preferred her big couch with her cashmere blanket. She preferred her cats.

She tried to compose a more neutral face and then waved to get his attention. He waved back and smiled, then gave her a hug, lifting her off the ground.

“God dammit, Crow. Stop it.”

“Good to see you too.”

“Where are your bags?”

“Just carry-ons.”

“Sell the rest of your stuff along with the car?”

“I’ve been here for less than a minute and you’re already riding me. Give me a fucking break.” This was one of Crowley’s pet maneuvers—frame the debate in such a way that he’d made a few miscalculations and that she was unable to let things go, forcing her into the role of domineering, uptight sister. She felt a migraine coming on, her energy failing. She gave him the keys.

“I’m sorry, Crow. I’m getting a headache. Mind driving?”

“Sure thing.”

When they got home, she lay down on the couch and tried not to think, believing that if she made her mind empty enough, the waves of pain would have nothing to crash into. She listened to Crowley clink around in the kitchen, opening and shutting cabinets. The kettle began to whistle and a minute later he came into the living room with a cup of tea.

“Just a little sugar and milk, right?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He left the cup on the end table and walked toward the kitchen. His footsteps stopped.

“What,” he said, “is that?”

She looked up from the couch. Crowley was staring at the small vase on the dining room table.

“Mom and dad’s ashes. You know that.”

“But why is it in the table?”

“I don’t know. Where should it be?”

“The mantle? The closet? Buried underneath the goddamn house? Not on the kitchen table.”

“I talk to them sometimes when I’m eating.”

He gave her a look.

“Well, move them if you want to.”

He slid past the table, carrying his suitcase up the stairs. “No fucking way.”

*

It was dark when her headache subsided and after a cup of tea she felt surprisingly fresh. She turned on the TV. It was already on the Food Network, her favorite channel. The only channel she watched, really. She did not cook herself—hated to cook. To her, food was merely fuel, and she ate most of the same things day in and day out. Cereal for breakfast. Sandwich for lunch. Takeout for dinner. But she still liked the channel. She found the methodical, rhythmic preparation relaxing, the simmer of oil in the pan, the cutting and slicing and seasoning.

Crowley's shower turned on upstairs. He had gone straight to his childhood room, though it was the smallest room in the house, and their parents' large bedroom remained vacant. When Caitlyn had moved in she decided she would take over the master bedroom. She was, after all, the new master, and she was looking forward to sleeping in the king size bed, taking advantage of the walk-in closet and enjoying the jet driven hot tub. But it didn't last. She had lain between the ice-cold sheets for an hour, wide-awake, feeling very much like she was in a mausoleum. Then she went back upstairs and carefully removed the stuffed animals from her childhood twin bed at the end of the hall and quickly fell asleep.

Crowley's shower cut off and she listened to the muffled zipping and unzipping of luggage. He likely wouldn't fully unpack his clothes for another week. In a few minutes he came down the stairs and asked her how she was doing.

"Pretty good actually," she said and, seeing what he was wearing, immediately regretted it. He was dressed to go out.

"Great," he said, drumming a rhythm on the banister, "as soon as you're ready we can go downtown."

She lay back down. "I don't know if I'm ready for *that*."

"Well, we both know you're bullshitting me, so just get on up and get ready. You'll have a great time once we're out." This was only sometimes true, but Crowley took those few times as a license to try and drag her anywhere he pleased. It had gotten to the point where whenever they went somewhere, Caitlyn felt obligated to act as if she were suffering, even if she was having a great time, because she knew any outward signs

of pleasure would be used against her later on. Crowley couldn't seem to remember to get the oil changed in a car or pay a bill on time but had a photographic memory for when she laughed at the redneck joke at a Richmond comedy club five years ago.

"I don't think it's a good idea," she said, already aware she had lost, already thinking about what she would wear. Now it was just a matter of dignity. "I've got to be up early for work."

But he wasn't listening. She heard the fridge open and then the crack of a beer.

"You're driving," he called from the kitchen.

*

They went to a beer-and-burger dive and drank. To her surprise Caitlyn was having a really good time and after a few drinks she forgot to pretend she wasn't. She even stopped checking her watch, calculating how much sleep she would get that night. She had missed this. Music. Drink. People.

Crowley had made some friends sitting at the bar next to him, a man wearing a Shenandoah Pride hat, the local dairy plant, and a girl with a fake tan that made her skin darker than her lips. Crowley had them both enamored.

Caitlyn heard her phone vibrating in her purse. It was Haley. She told Crowley she'd be right back and then stepped outside. The air was cool.

"Hello?" she said.

"Caitlyn, hi," Haley said. "I'm sorry to be calling this late, but I've talked to my bank about financing, and I'd be willing to come by to discuss figures."

“Oh, sure,” Caitlyn said. “No problem at all.”

“Okay, so how about 10:00. Is that all right?”

“Sure, that’s great.”

“And again I’m sorry for calling late. You’re sure tomorrow is not a problem?

Quick turnaround, I know.”

“No, that works.”

Haley hung up.

Caitlyn waited outside for another moment, cataloguing the things she would need to do tomorrow to make it seem like the dealership wasn’t actually failing, or at least that it was only a slow decline. Then she tried to put it out of her mind, searching for the elation she had felt earlier. But it was no use. She could only think about tomorrow’s meeting and she once again felt the weight of all her responsibilities. She wanted to go home.

When she went inside to collect Crowley, she found him telling a story to the couple at the bar, who were in near hysterics.

“I mean, really—how stupid do you have to be? We aren’t talking about a rowboat here. We’re talking about a *naval* vessel.”

“The sex must have been good,” the woman said.

“Yeah,” the man said, “Must have. There are definitely worse ways to go out!”

Crowley looked up to find his sister standing behind him. He didn’t flinch. “Hey, I was just telling them about the old rich couple that killed themselves in the middle of a little Afternoon Delight.”

“It’s time to go home.”

Crowley didn’t protest. He and the couple exchanged goodbyes. The man waved and said to Caitlyn, “Watch out for sub wake!”

*

They didn’t talk on the drive home. It was raining lightly and Crowley rolled the window down and rested his arm outside. At the stoplight, Caitlyn looked over and saw the little red stoplights scattered on the droplets caught on the hairs of his arm. Rain dripped down from the roof into her car, but it wasn’t much, and she didn’t care.

Once they were home they pulled out an old bottle of single malt Scotch from their father’s liquor cabinet. Caitlyn made a Scotch and water for both of them. They went out on the back porch.

The wood was warped, the planks rising up and falling away, giving the effect of a wind-whipped lake. Peels of paint were gathered against the wall of the house, pushed there by the breeze that travelled across the cornfield behind the house. In the distance, through the gauze of mist, the red lights of radio towers blinked on and off.

They drank in silence and listened to the sound of water funneling through the gutters. Crowley stared at the ceiling of the porch.

“Do you know why mom painted the ceiling blue?”

Caitlyn shook the cubes of ice in her tumbler. “No.”

“She said the wasps wouldn’t build nests in the cross beams because they’d think it was sky and move on. That they wouldn’t know the difference between wood and sky,

the shit they fly around in all day. I mean they're probably fucking color blind. But it worked. They never built any nests. It doesn't make any fucking sense."

She watched him take another drink. "I'm going to sell the dealership to Haley tomorrow. If we don't sell it, we'll lose the house too. Don't screw this up."

He considered this, and then, with no trace of humor, said: "I'll try not to."

"You've got to start growing up, Crow."

Yeah," he said. He took a sip of scotch.

"We're almost thirty years old."

*

The next morning Caitlyn woke up with a vague queasiness she recognized as the start of a hangover. The kettle downstairs whistled. She threw her covers off and walked to the top of the stairs,

"Crow?" she called.

"Yes?" he asked, half yelling, then, after removing the kettle, quieter: "Yes?"

She started down the stairs. "What are you doing up?"

"Going to work. It's a Monday."

"To work? Wait, what?"

"The dealership."

She felt suddenly sick, or even more sick, and descended the stairs faster now.

"Wait, Crow. You can't come to the dealership," she said. "I'm meeting—"

But she stopped as she turned the corner. There was Crow, apron over one of his father's business suits, adjusting a gleaming cuff link. He had shaved and his hair was slicked back. He looked like a young Cary Grant. He smiled, veneers sparkling.

"I'm meeting with Haley today," she said. "I'm selling the dealership."

"I know. You told me."

"Why are you wearing that?"

He fingered the hem of the apron. "So I don't get oil on my suit. Obviously."

"I mean the suit."

He was silent for a moment. He flipped the eggs, in two smooth, graceful movements, then pointed at her with the spatula. "What do you plan on doing after you sell the dealership?"

"I thought I'd pay down the mortgage on the house and then maybe teach."

At this he laughed, a sharp, surprised bark.

"Sis, please. You're a numbers person. That's fine. That's okay. You're good at it. But kids would eat you alive. People, in general, are not your strength. When's the last time someone else has been in this house, I mean other than me."

"You don't know anything about my life. Who I spend time with." She said this with some weight, as if to give him the indication that there was indeed someone special he didn't know about.

He walked slowly toward the table, and before she could realize what he was up to, he snatched her cell phone. He sheathed the spatula in the drawstring of the apron and scrolled down her recent history.

“Okay, so the last ten calls, all of which were over the course of two weeks, were to me, Haley’s Volvo, Comcast, and Mr. J’s Bagel and Deli. Is your sizzling romance with Mr. J? Or the cable guy?”

“God, you’re an asshole,” she said.

“You see my point, though?”

“No, I don’t. I see you being an asshole. That’s what I see.”

“My point is, you don’t want to sell the dealership.”

“Of course I don’t. But it’s tanking. It’s either sell or keep circling the drain until it’s too late to sell.”

“You act like the dealership is yours. It’s not. It’s ours.”

“Seriously? Who has run the damn thing all these years? Where have you been?”

“I’m here now,” he said. “Here’s the deal. You call Haley up. Tell him you want to meet at 2:00. And if I haven’t sold a car by then, we sell.”

“Crow...” she said.

“2:00 o’clock.”

“And then what? What happens if you sell a car?”

“We stay in business. I move back here. I mean I already have. All my stuff is here. This is it for me. I’m tired of skating around everywhere. This is the only place I’ve got any grounding.”

She wasn’t sure she had ever heard him talk to openly. She watched him, still somewhat suspicious. He saw her watching him. “I’m serious.”

He plated the eggs and brought them to the table. Then he removed two china cups from the glass china cabinet of their mom and dad's wedding set. Caitlyn couldn't remember the last time they actually used this stuff. Had they ever? Crowley set the saucer and cup in front of each of them and poured the tea. She reached for sugar and he caught her hand.

"No," he said. Then he pulled over the cremation remains and stirred in a spoonful of ash into each cup. He held up his cup, and looked her in the eye. She saw what it meant to him, making peace, landing, making the family whole again. She lifted her cup—and they drank the mixture down.

THREE PATHS

While I was in middle school, Ska, a sort of hyperactive pop-reggae featuring loud horns and louder clothing, dominated the radio waves. This was the late nineties, when the radio waves were still relevant. Ska-kids, as opposed to those of us who listened to the music of our older sisters, like Bare Naked Ladies, or whatever classic rock was passed down from our dads, were cool. They made out with girls. They got into fistfights. They rollerbladed and wore JNCOs or Lee Pipes, the baggy, ultra-wide jeans that could fit over skates.

Michael Hiles was a ska-kid. We sat together at lunch. He had long, straight, shoulder-length brown hair, which he parted down the middle, as was the style at the time. I envied his hair. Mine was also long and straight, though blonde, but I could not get the part right. My hair looked like the bowl cut of toddlers.

I was thrilled when he invited me over for a sleepover. He lived with his dad in a split-level in a newer development just outside of town. Along with some neighborhood kids, we played capture the flag with Nerf guns. A fight broke out between Michael and Scott Chappell, another kid that sat at our lunch table. The game dissolved and everyone went his separate way.

Michael was still fuming when we got back to his house.

“Fucking Scott,” he said.

I watched him with a nervous smile plastered on my face, which I kept on as Michael opened his dad's unlocked gun locker. He pulled out a black handgun. Other than Boy Scout camp I had never been around real guns before, and those were only .22s. This is a .45, he told me. Big enough to kill a bear. We went outside, and he shot a tree stump in his back yard, the bark chinking off with each bullet. The stump had hundreds of holes. I kept looking back at the porch doors, waiting for his dad to come out and yell at us. I didn't want to get in trouble. But he never appeared.

"Fuck you," he whispered between shots. After several clips he calmed down and put the guns back. We watched MTV, and for dinner we made ourselves Bagel Bites. I slept in the couch with a fitted sheet as a blanket. I never saw his dad, who kept his bedroom door closed the entire time I was there.

When I get home my mom told me she'd been anxious all night. Before the sleepover she had tried to get in touch with Michael's dad, which she claimed was standard parental procedure, but he never answered his phone. I didn't tell her about the guns.

Years passed. By high school Michael and I had drifted apart, found new friends or reconnected with old ones. Our circles didn't overlap. With my friends I played video games, stole traffic cones and made terrible movies with names like "Crimson Sky." Sometimes, along with my more socially ambitious friends, I would attend football games.

Akeem Jordan was our star running back. With him carrying the ball, we won States two years in a row. His agility and balance were astonishing, almost balletic.

Opposing linebackers would dive toward him and come up with only a mouthful of turf, Akeem pirouetting away. When evasion wouldn't work, he simply used his ridiculous size and strength to plow through whichever hapless defender stood in his way.

Around the same time Michael Hiles became a tattoo artist. One of his first subjects was Akeem Jordan. The tattoo said, "The Chosen One." Of course this spread around school. Everyone got a good laugh.

Less funny was when a year later, during our senior year, Michael robbed a Food Lion with an assault rifle. In my Government course, people passed around the newspaper photo of his arrest. After stealing the money, he had run through a nearby housing development, stripping off layers of clothing. The picture showed him in cuffs, wearing only boxers. He had the same long, brown hair that I had envied so much.

He went to prison. I went to college. Akeem Jordan went on to lead the local university to a Division II National Championship.

Over the course of college I forgot all about Michael and Akeem. I was concerned with the triumphs and defeats of that time—drinking and drugs, grades and tests. Discussing ideas, discovering literature. Losing my virginity. Breaking a heart and having my own broken.

Years after graduation I was back in Harrisonburg, and Michael pulled up next to me at a stoplight. He didn't recognize me, but I recognized him immediately. He was fully tattooed and drove a large, black pick up truck. When I got home I Facebook stalked him. He's a professional tattoo artist now, and a born-again Christian. Most of

his posts are lines of scripture or photos of recent work. He seems to be doing well. I hope so.

Akeem Jordan is in the NFL. For a few years he played for the Philadelphia Eagles. Most recently he was a linebacker in the very good defense of the Kansas City Chiefs. I watch his games, seeking out his number. He looks much smaller, even slightly undersized. He's not always a starter now, the hero of Harrisonburg High School.

Sometimes I'll see him in a close up as he extricates himself from a pile of bodies. Sometimes I'll glimpse the tattoo. It does not make me laugh. It makes me think of Michael. Not the Christian. Not the tattoo artist. Not the felon. But the charismatic sixth grader, wearing jeans far too large for him, jeans that only exaggerate the scrawny frame of an adolescent boy.

NEEDLE AND YARN

Brandon picked up knitting at the Veterans Hospital in Richmond. The Army sent him there to detox when he returned from Afghanistan. As they weaned him off heroin, his mind raced and his hands shook, and knitting helped occupy both. At first, some of the other soldiers gave him a hard time, but after a couple months he was making scarves and gloves for nearly everyone on his floor. “Make me a red and yellow scarf that say ‘202.’ Redskins, son,” said a kid from DC who’d lost three fingers and an eye. They would all stand outside in the parking lot, smoking cigarettes in their wool beanies.

Soon after he was released Brandon returned home to Rocktown. He moved back into his old room among the N64 games and Eminem posters. Looking west from his window, he could see the Allegheny Mountains. That night he dreamed of the poppy fields outside Charikar and jerked awake, drenched in sweat. He fought down the impulse to use with some exercises his counselor had taught him and went out on the back patio to smoke. Possums scattered from the overturned trashcans, eyes glinting in the porch light.

His dad frequently asked him if he wanted to come down and watch the game, and his mom doted on him, doing his laundry and telling him what the local girls were up to. His parents handled him with a theatrical warmness, eager to make him feel welcome. He knew they meant well, but he sensed their uncertainty about how to behave around

him, about what he had seen, about what he had done, about who he now was. He decided he needed to get out of the house. He started hunting for a job.

After a few false starts he found a job washing dishes at New Horizons, the Mennonite retirement home. New Horizons was on the northwestern edge of Rocktown, what the locals called “Mennoland,” sometimes affectionately, other times not, depending on whether they were stuck behind a horse-and-buggy or admiring its quaintness as they passed, driving in the opposite direction.

Brandon liked his job. He found the repetition of it, like knitting, relaxed him. So long as the dishes were finished in time for the next meal, no one bothered him. It was easy to lose himself in the rhythm of scraping and wiping and drying. He liked the process of taking something dirty and then, after running it through the enormous, sputtering dishwasher, having it emerge gleaming and pristine. And he liked the jet of steam that billowed from the dishwasher when he pulled a rack of dishes free, briefly fogging his glasses.

He had a knack for machinery and viewed himself as the keeper of the machine, its benevolent master. When it stopped working, he knew what had gone wrong from the timbre and frequency of its pings and whirrs. The other dishwashers mistreated the machine and when Brandon came into work the first thing he did was clean up after the previous shift. He picked out the shattered crockery and the stray bent utensils stuck in the machinery. He emptied the strainer, refilled the soap, and applied oil when needed. Cheryl, taking note of his thoroughness—“proactivity,” as she put it—gave him more shifts and soon he was working doubles, which suited him just fine.

Between shifts, he would smoke on the concrete loading dock and then go knit in the lobby. He sat in his usual chair outside the dining hall, away from the ringing phones of the front desk. *Southern Living* magazines cluttered the corner table along with a Bible and a Mennonite weekly. The brown carpet was worn down, frayed at the edges.

Most people he knew didn't like retirement homes—the whiff of decay, the reminder of an inglorious end—but Brandon didn't mind. He liked the feeling of being totally separated, of being in a small, self-contained community, a colony on Mars.

While knitting on break, he watched an old woman shuffle past him toward the dining room doors. Her arm was in a sling. She peered through the windows.

Brandon said, "I don't think it's open quite yet. Not for another hour."

She turned toward him. "If I were looking for food worthy of a trough, I'd go out to a farm."

Brandon stopped knitting. "It's not that bad. I eat it."

"It's bad."

"Well, I mean, it's not great."

"It's bad."

Brandon shrugged. He went back to knitting. The woman leaned in, placing her large purple glasses on the bridge of her nose. She had a wild flare of white hair, like the plumage of an exotic bird. She reached down and felt the scarf he was working on between her thumb and forefinger.

"Say," she said, "You're not half bad. Not as good as me, but then again I've got a bit more practice under my belt. Who's that for?"

“I don’t know. Used to be for other soldiers, but now I’m just keeping it all in my closet.”

“You military?”

“Used to be, yeah.”

“No wonder you can eat that garbage in there. You say you have an hour before dinner starts up?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“I’ll make you a deal. You go in there and grab us a couple eggs, and I’ll make you some corn pudding.”

*

The woman lived at the end of a long hallway on the second floor. While they waited in the elevator, they made introductions. Her name was Anne Nardi.

Anne was tiny and clean and carried her huge glasses on top of her head like a movie star. Her posture was still good and the only reason she was in a home at all, she said, was because of her bouts of dizziness, which is how she recently crashed her car.

“It happened just two weeks ago. It wasn’t too bad but I broke my clavicle and they had to do some surgery. Now I have to sleep on my back, which I hate. Usually I can tell when a dizzy spell is coming, but that one came out of nowhere.”

Her apartment had white carpet and a large, comfortable couch. Paintings of sailboats and birds hung on the wall. Her balcony overlooked a small pond and a stretch of woods.

Anne moved around the kitchen, occasionally asking for his help because of her arm. “The doctor’s been impressed with my recovery,” she said. “The secret is great genes. My old man was ninety before he keeled over. My mom was one hundred and two. We’re practically roaches.”

She leaned in toward Brandon. “The other secret,” she said, “is water aerobics.”

With one hand, she cracked two eggs and mixed the corn, milk and flour and spread it in a glass pan. After putting the pan in the oven, she took off her oven mitts and placed her glasses back on the top of her head.

“My ex-husband was military too. Flew supply planes in Korea. You’re not supposed to talk about that at New Horizons, though. Makes the Mennonites uncomfortable.”

“You’re not a Mennonite?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s just the place my son and I decided on. I don’t remember the exact logic at the time. Maybe I didn’t want to be surrounded by a bunch of people jabbering at me all the time. The Mennonites are good people for the most part. You could do a lot worse.”

Brandon nodded.

“Well this is my home,” Anne said, as if they’d just walked in.

*

Two days later, while Brandon was using some steel wool to scrape the residue of overcooked powdered eggs from a pan, one of the waitresses told him someone was

asking for him in the dining room. Brandon sprayed some water into the pan to let it soak, took off his apron and washed his hands.

Anne was in the dining room. She looked at him. "I've come to ask for a favor."

He rubbed his chin.

She said, "When do you get off?"

"What do you need?"

"I accidently dropped a pitcher of tea and there is glass on the floor in places I can't reach. On account of my arm, it's hard for me to bend over. In return I'll bake you one pie of your choice, so long as the pie does not have meringue, as I've never gotten a handle on the process."

"Who usually helps you with this sort of stuff? What about your son?"

"John lives in Seattle. The home's staff will sometimes help, but they take their time and they don't particularly care for me. I once accused a man of stealing."

"I didn't know Mennonites were particularly well known for theft."

"Normally, no, but when an item is there and then it is not, the person's religion doesn't really come into play."

"I get off at four."

*

The tea, sticky with sugar, was all over the kitchen floor and up under the refrigerator. Anne had placed some paper towels here and there, but the tea was still stuck to the floor. Pieces of broken glass glinted among the dark pools of liquid.

“I’m sorry,” Anne said. “Just got a little woozy, maybe from my medicine, and the next thing I know, it’s slipped out of my hand and crashed on the floor.”

“What medicine are you on?”

“Well aside from the usual cocktail for menopausal old birds, some painkillers for the surgery, which I don’t exactly love for obvious reasons.” She gestured to the spill.

He nodded and went back to scrubbing. A small shard of glass cut his knee as he crawled along the linoleum.

“Damn,” he said. “I mean, darn.”

She laughed. “I was a nurse back in my day. You’re not going to offend me. Now, hold on.” She handed him a paper towel. Then she retrieved a Band-Aid and some Neosporin from the bathroom.

“Thanks.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Thank you.”

The next day at work she brought him a blackberry pie. Later he ate a piece and gave the rest to his parents. It sat in the fridge and eventually had to be thrown out. He suspected baking was not her strong suit.

*

Many of the nightmares the other vets at the VA had were explicitly military—crashing in a helicopter brought down by an RPG, emptying an M60 into the side of a school bus, etc. Brandon’s were more nebulous. One time he answered a knock on his door and as soon as he cracked the door it was kicked into him, knocking him to the

carpet. Four men, all with box cutters and ski masks, poured into his room. They stood over him and screamed. He lay on the floor, waiting to die. In another dream, he was pumping gas and something somewhere exploded. The reservoirs of fuel beneath the concrete? Another car's engine? The world erupted. All around him was fire. He crawled into his car and lay on the floorboards, waiting to die. It was almost always like this.

When he had these dreams at home, he woke up in his own urine and did the laundry himself. Considering the strangeness his parents already handled him with, he did not want to have this conversation.

But sometimes, like his first night back in Rocktown, he dreamed only of the poppy fields outside Charikar. The crops lined the dirt roads they patrolled, tall and purple, beckoning. The bulbs bobbed amiably in the breeze. It was only natural for the soldiers to sample some.

Soldiers would sneak items out of the base—flak jackets, knives, MREs—and trade with vendors in town for ten or fifteen grams. At the start of his first tour, Brandon had not been among them. He found it despicable but would never have reported anyone. Part of the reason he joined up was to get away from all that stuff—the Adderall, the Ritalin. As the tour rolled on, however, he no longer blamed anyone for managing however they could.

To his surprise, he did not have trouble managing his anxiety in the field. When they had contact on a patrol, he was as calm as someone could be when scared shitless.

He fired where the other soldiers fired, ducked when the other soldiers ducked, and aside from a scar on his left calf from a small piece of shrapnel, he made it back unscathed.

Back home, he enrolled in Blue Ridge Community College and took a semester of random classes, trying to find something that stuck. He liked his Spanish class the most and decided to major in that. But his interest flagged the following semester and his grades dropped and he fell back in with his old crowd. He was scared at the relief he felt when the orders for his second tour arrived in the mail.

It was during this tour he began to use. He was still able to keep his composure in the field, but he could not handle the long hours of nothing back at base where he could only think of the next patrol, the next contact. Everything that had distracted him before—video games, music, movies, magazines, porn—didn't help. He held them in front of his face and registered nothing. Then on his mother's birthday he went into town to buy his mom a trinket and returned to base with ten grams of horse tucked in the sole of his boot.

*

Over the next four weeks, as Anne continued to recover from her car crash, Brandon went down to her apartment and helped her with random chores. In an attempt to be economical, she had bought a huge jug of laundry detergent, but now with only one arm, she couldn't effectively pour it. Brandon washed out an old milk jug and poured some of the detergent in there, so both containers would be easier to manage. He helped organize her closet so she could reach things on the top shelves.

After awhile he came to suspect she was just inviting him over to have someone around. She was moving around well now, mostly leaving the sling behind. This was fine with Brandon. He enjoyed her company as well.

By the time she was completely recovered, they had given up the pretense of reliance, and between shifts Brandon would go to her apartment to knit and watch TV. Anne was a Braves fan and baseball season was just starting up. She claimed to have a distant relation to Bobbie Cox, second or third cousin by marriage, and did not approve of Fredi Gonzalez, who took over after Cox's retirement. Gonzalez's management of the bullpen particularly upset her.

"Cox was one of the greats," she said. "Hand me that yarn, please. The ochre. Thanks. Cox and Weaver. LaRussa gets a lot of credit, but he's always been lucky with players. That's true of Weaver too, he always had good players. But he made them even better. He made good teams great ones. LaRussa doesn't deserve any credit for the Cardinals. The Cardinals could have Herbert Hoover up there and they'd win the series."

Anne was an old New Deal Democrat and held former president Hoover in an ire rivaled only by the Designated Hitter rule, which she found to be unmanly and barbaric. Brandon was a casual Orioles fan, but they mostly watched the Braves because he got tired of arguing with her over the DH rule.

Between innings, Brandon stood up. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "Hey, mind if I smoke on the patio?"

"Go ahead."

After finishing a shift at New Horizons, Brandon pulled into Sheetz to fill his tank. He had not deposited his latest check, so he went in to pay with cash.

Walking back to his car, he saw an old green Pathfinder pull up to the pump next to him. Brandon tried to pretend he hadn't seen it, but soon Scuzz, an old classmate, was climbing out of his car and waving. Brandon tried to manage a smile.

Scuzz grinned. "Brandon? That you? Man, you bulked up."

"Yeah."

"You back? Well, I mean, obviously. But for how long?"

"Like eight months."

"You still active duty? Can they send you back?"

"Not me, no." He didn't go into details.

"What you been up to?"

"Moved back in with my folks. Might go take some more classes at Blue Ridge. Right now I'm just working at New Horizons."

"The old Menno place?"

"Yeah."

"No shit. What's that like?"

Brandon shrugged. "I like it."

"Well, damn man. Good for you. It's really good to see you. Everyone's gonna be thrilled to hear you're back. I'm bartending at Finnie's now. You come by and I'll hook you up. Beer, liquor, whatever you need." Scuzz tapped his nose and winked.

Brandon looked past him. Scuzz's face became serious. "Listen man, it's really good to see you. I mean that. People were worried about you. I checked the obits whenever I picked up the paper. I hope that's not fucked up to say."

Brandon could tell he was serious. "Thanks man." They clapped hands.

Scuzz grinned again. "Shit man. I'm not trying to be a downer. Just, you know, had to be said. Seriously, though, Finnie's."

Scuzz pointed at him and climbed into his pathfinder. He drove off.

Brandon started his engine and drove half a mile before realizing he had not pumped his gas. He drove back and after apologizing to an old man who had just pulled into his spot, Brandon filled his tank and went home.

*

They were sorting through Anne's closet, picking out her ex-husband's old clothes. She stood in the closet, handing things through the nearly closed door. He tried them on in her bedroom. After he changed, she would come out of the closet and inspect. He wore a beautiful wool suit.

"Brandon," she said. "You look fantastic."

"I feel ridiculous."

"No. Really. If you took your glasses off and got a decent haircut you'd look almost like Cary Grant."

"Who?"

“You can’t be serious. You’re just trying to make me feel old. Well good job because it’s working.”

“I’m sorry but honestly I have no idea who that is,” he said. “Why do you still have this stuff? Wouldn’t your son want it?”

“He’s tried it on, but it doesn’t fit quite right. He’s stockier. Okay, he’s fat. It looks fabulous on you, though.”

“Can’t really imagine an occasion where I’d be wearing this.”

“Well it’s not doing any good in there.”

“I’m going to wear it to work later. My boss will love it. Cheryl, I’ll say, I’m gunning for your job.”

They went to the kitchen to get a drink. Still wearing the suit, he sat on the couch with his glass of water. Anne sat next to him and started knitting. They watched TV.

After some time she looked up. “Aren’t you working on a pair of gloves?”

“Left them at home.”

“Well I’ve some extra yarn if you wanted to work on something else.”

He shook his head. “No thanks, I’m good. Maybe later.”

They turned back to the TV. Fredi Gonzalez was marching back to the mound between every other batter, calling for a new reliever.

“God damn it,” Anne said. “The whole pen is going to be worthless for the rest of the series.”

Brandon pulled his phone out and checked the time. “Well I’ve got to head to work in a bit.”

He changed clothes in her bedroom. He immediately missed how the suit had held him. His own clothes now seemed cheap and ragged.

After putting the suit on a hanger, he draped it over his shoulder. “You sure, Anne?”

“It’s yours.”

“Well thanks a lot.” He paused for a moment. “Mind if I use your bathroom?”

*

As a result of her accident, the state of Virginia revoked Anne’s driver’s license. It was true she had lost confidence in her reflexes, but she still felt it was an injustice. How many incompetent drivers were still out there endangering others? Stupid or drunk or chatting on their phones? At least she paid attention. And now she was confined to the nursing home.

This was what hurt most. When her son had arranged for her stay at New Horizons, she consoled herself with the independence granted by her car. She took drives on the Blue Ridge parkway. She went to the university’s arboretum and to Hardees for biscuits and coffee.

But now she was marooned. Her only escape was through the nursing home arranged bus trips to grocery stores and balloon infested social events. This is when she was most aware of her age—being handled like a child, kept on a schedule, grape juice and snack time, a fourth grade field trip. Other members of the home did not seem to mind. They chatted about grandchildren and Bible verses and Anne steamed, staring

holes through the glass. After snapping at people several trips in a row, she gave up and spent most of her time in the apartment, knitting and watching the Braves.

Most days she enjoyed her time alone, but increasingly she was overcome with the sense she had wasted her life and alienated the people she loved. Then she met Brandon. She couldn't believe her luck at making a new friend so late in life.

She woke up on a Thursday at six fifteen and had two cups of coffee along with oatmeal and a strawberry yogurt. Then she changed into her swimsuit and cap and pulled on her robe and slippers. She walked down the hallway to the front entrance. Sandi Nunez was at the front desk. Anne waved and went on to the pool entrance. The water aerobics class was just starting, but Anne wanted to swim laps today.

She hung her towel and robe and took off her slippers. She went to the white concrete stairs and eased herself into the water. It was warm but still the water came as a shock. Then, relief. It amazed her every time, the dissipation of tension and ache. Suddenly she moved freely, buoyant, slipping through the water. She swam her laps, ten freestyle, five backstroke, five butterfly. Then she rested at the edge of the pool, buzzing with endorphins, kicking lightly.

She swam to the stairs and climbed back up to the less forgiving physics. She dried off and removed her swim cap. Then she walked back down the hall to her apartment.

After showering and changing clothes, she ate some lunch—chicken salad on wheat bread—and read some Agatha Christie in her chair. She dozed. When she woke up again, she was restless. She knitted but was careless in her agitation and had to undo

everything she had made. She checked her watch—it was nearly three. Brandon sometimes did not work dinner on Thursdays, but she wanted to go and check. She hadn't seen him in over two weeks.

The dining room was empty. All the tables had been cleared from lunch and most had been reset. A waitress at the far end was polishing silverware. She did not raise her head when Anne walked back to the double doors of the kitchen. She pushed one open—it was heavier than it looked—and peered in. The kitchen was enormous, much larger than she would have expected. Cooks stirred giant vats of slop. Others chopped vegetables. Potato peelings were scattered across the floor. To Anne's right there was a coffee station and to her left she saw Brandon spraying down a rack of dirty plates with a sink hose.

“Excuse me, ma'am?”

Anne turned around. It was the waitress.

“I'm sorry, lunch is over and we don't start dinner until four thirty.”

“Oh. I'm not hungry.”

“It's okay, Sherene,” Brandon said, walking around the dishwasher. “She's just come to help me with the dishes.”

“I certainly have not.”

He looked at the waitress. “It's cool.”

Sherene shrugged and went back to the dining room.

“What *are* you doing back here?”

She chewed her lip. “Mind taking me to Wal-Mart? I need to buy my granddaughter a birthday gift.”

“Yeah that’s fine. But I don’t get off for another half hour. Want me to come down and get you?”

“No, I think I’ll wait.”

Brandon thought about this. “All right, stay there. I’m getting a chair. I just mopped and I don’t want you to slip and hurt yourself.”

He disappeared through the double doors and came back with an extra chair. He sat the chair near where racks of glasses were drying, close to the concrete loading bay where he smoked. He helped her across the wet floor to the chair and went back to work.

He was silent as he worked, scraping plates, rinsing them off, then loading them on large plastic racks before pushing them through a giant dishwasher almost the size of a VW Bug. She worried about his silence, wondering if she should be back here, if he were annoyed with her for seeking him out and violating his space. Was she being presumptuous?

“I didn’t think it would be so big,” she said, after the machine had finished a cycle and the noise died down. A rack of glasses emerged from the dishwasher. Then a rack of silverware. Steam rose off the gleaming metal.

“What? The dishwasher?”

“I always imagined you back here washing everything in a sink.”

He laughed at this. “That would take a decent chunk of time.”

She felt foolish. Reddening, she said, “Well it’s not like I spent a lot of time thinking about it.”

He went back to work. Still restless, she stood up and, taking one of the napkins that lay folded in a stack, began to polish glasses as she’d seen him doing when she first came in.

“You don’t have to do that,” he said.

“I’m no good at just standing around.”

“All right. Well, thank you. But stand on the rubber mat there so you don’t slip.”

She took a couple steps to her left and began polishing. She could see why he liked the work. It was active solitude, the peace of mind without the physical restlessness. They fell into a rhythm and worked wordlessly. The machine roared and then fell silent. She wasn’t sure how much time passed when a short, square shouldered woman came to give Brandon a load of pans from the kitchen.

“Finish these and you’re cut, Brando.”

“All right, sounds good.”

The woman spotted Anne. “Excuse me, ma’am. I’m sorry, but you can’t be back here.”

Brandon said, “She’s with me.”

The woman shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. It’s a liability thing. She gets hurt and lawyers start to get involved, we’ll both be out of a job.”

“I wouldn’t sue anyone,” Anne said.

“I believe it ma’am, but your carrier might. Sorry, but you’re going to have to wait outside.”

Brandon shrugged at Anne. He walked her back to the dining room.

“Just wait in the lobby. I’ll be out in ten at the most.”

After fifteen minutes, he came out. “Sorry for the hold up. Had a chat with Cheryl.”

“I didn’t mean to get you in trouble.”

“Oh no. It’s not a big deal. And she’s probably right.”

“Did you get fired?”

“No way. Cheryl and I get along fine. She treats me right. Just by-the-book is all.”

“Well, anyways, I’m sorry.”

He pulled on his windbreaker. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. He was being slightly aloof and she couldn’t tell if it was because he was annoyed with her.

“Wal-Mart?” he asked.

“Yes, let’s.”

They drove to the Wal-Mart just outside of town. Strip malls passed by. Food Lions, sub shops, Christian bookstores, tanning salons. Then rolling farmland, fields brown from fall. Holstein cows lazing beneath a tree. The soft scrape of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

He poked around the computer section while she picked up some items for herself—detergent, deodorant, toothpaste, Oreos. After she was finished shopping, she found him in the Sporting Goods section. He was going through the fishing aisle.

“Do you fish?”

“No, but I’ve always loved the lures. A lot of thought goes into these. Hard to imagine it matters much to the fish, but maybe it does.”

They checked out. He loaded the bags into the back seat. After she was in, he climbed into the driver’s seat and pulled on his seatbelt. They drove back to New Horizons. Brandon carried the bags to the dining room table and emptied the contents. After he was finished, he neatly folded the bags. He sat down.

“You don’t have a granddaughter, do you?”

She looked at him. “What?”

“What little girl doesn’t want Tide and toothpaste for her birthday?” He gestured around the apartment. “Where are the baby pictures? The family photos?”

She opened her mouth and they both waited for something to come out.

“Well,” he said, a new edge to his voice. “What’s up? Aren’t you a little old to be making this stuff up?”

Anne walked to the couch and sat down. “I do have a granddaughter. Kind of. It’s complicated.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Suzie. She’s the daughter of my daughter-in-law. From a previous marriage. They live in Seattle now. I’ve never met her.”

“Why not? How long have they been married?”

“They’re very busy and they’ve only been married a few years,” she said, but as the words came out she realized it was actually closer to five or six. The wedding invitation was hidden beneath a pile of papers in her desk. It had been held in Seattle, too far to travel on her own, which her son must have known.

She shook her head. Softly, she said, “My son and I don’t speak very often.”

She pulled out her needle and yarn from her purse. She started working on a blue and yellow scarf.

“I mail Suzie these things. When she was younger, maybe she wore them. But now she’s almost fourteen. She isn’t going to wear knitted things from her grandma. She’ll wear whatever teenagers wear. But I keep sending them. I can’t help it. I’m sure she thinks I’m just her stepdad’s crazy, senile old mom. I’m sure she dies of embarrassment every time she gets one of my packages.”

Brandon’s face hadn’t softened. “So what? That still doesn’t explain why you would lie to me about it. What do I care if you have a granddaughter or not? Why didn’t you just say you needed to run to the store?”

“I hadn’t seen you in awhile and I was worried you wanted some space. I felt like I had to get out of here and I needed an excuse. I’m sorry.”

He was silent. He stood up.

She started to cry. “Brandon. Please.”

“I need to go to work,” he said. He walked to the door and left. Anne rubbed her hand up and down the armrest until the palm became raw. The TV was still on from

before the trip to Wal-Mart. The volume was low. She watched paid programming. A new detergent that removed any stain. A pocket sized blender that cut through anything. The pitchman made alfredo sauce and passed it around, for everyone to try. Spectators looked on, awestruck at the unbelievable transformations taking place before their very eyes.

Anne went to the kitchen and poured herself a large glass of wine. Then she put on her nice dress, light purple with long elegant ripples. She had worn it during her son's high school graduation. She made up her face. After finishing her wine and pouring another glass, she tried calling her son. Like usual, she got his voicemail. "John, this is mom. Just wanted to see how you're doing. I hope everything's going well in Seattle." She tried to think of something else to say, something about Suzie, but the beep came. She listened to dial tone.

She went back to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet to get the Percocet from her fall, but could not find them. She rummaged through the different shelves and then checked the floor around the sink and back behind the toilet. Then she knew. "No," she said. "Oh no."

*

Brandon took two Percoset to calm down. Then he took another two. He went out on the loading dock to burn one before work. Radio towers blinked red in the distance. Vapor trails skewered the sky.

Then he heard Cheryl in the kitchen. “Ma’am, again, I’m sorry but—”

Anne cut her off: “Where’s Brandon?”

He knew it was over. He took one last drag of his cigarette. He snubbed the butt out on the brick wall and pitched it into the sand bucket. He walked through the heavy swinging doors.

Cheryl and Anne stood by the coffee station. They turned toward him. Anne wore a beautiful dress, her face made up. Silver earrings glinted in the fluorescent light.

“Brandon!”

There wasn’t any sense in denying it. Brandon withdrew the orange pill bottle from his pocket. It was almost empty. She slapped him hard across the face. He dropped the bottle and it bounced twice and then rolled to a stop against the trashcan. The blow must have hurt her hand because she grabbed it with the other hand, massaging the knuckles between her fingers. He resisted the urge to reach out for her. This was for the best, he knew. It had been stupid to get her involved in his life. She started crying again, black rivulets running in the wrinkles around her eyes. She turned and ran out of the kitchen.

Cheryl looked at Brandon. “Well, Brando, looks like it’s the end of the line. You know I can’t keep you on.”

He nodded. He walked to the trashcan and picked up the bottle. He left.

It was around seven. The sun had nearly set, casting cold shafts of light against gray clouds. Brandon drove home. He showered for nearly forty minutes. The hot water tapered off after half an hour and for another ten minutes he stood in the cold stream.

He dried off and put on deodorant. He called Scuzz.

“Hey man what’s up?”

Brandon said, “You working at Finnie’s tonight?”

“Fuck yeah man. You should definitely come down. Stacy’ll be there. And Max and Hannah. And Jessie, too. You remember little Jessie?”

“Aaron Sidwell’s little brother? The kid with the weird red mark on his forehead?”

Scuzz laughed. “Yeah that’s the one. He’s a regular dude now. Chill as fuck.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Word.”

Soon Brandon was downtown going hard at it, tequila shots and car bombs, tits and perfume, chasing fluttering white ribbons across cold bathroom countertops, the familiar taste dripping back into his throat. Just like Ritalin. Just like back in the day.

*

Weeks passed. The playoffs ended. Anne watched the games, only partially aware of the inning or who was on the mound or why the manager was arguing with the ump. She checked on the geese in the pond and found one Thursday that they had moved on. She knitted. She swam laps. She signed up for a Friday excursion to go pumpkin picking. She listened to Hank Williams and Ray Charles. She read the paper.

On the second page of the November 20th paper there was a photo of Brandon. “Veteran dies of suspected overdose.” Brandon Riley was his full name. She read

through the article and set the paper down. For a long time she stared into space. Was he wearing the gray suit in the coffin? She imagined the pallbearers, clad in knit scarves, carrying the coffin to the grave.

She walked to the kitchen to get a drink. She made herself a gimlet. Then she opened the door and sat on the back patio. A breeze stirred the branches of the trees around the pond. She set her glass next to the ashtray on the patio table. There was a pack of Camels that Brandon had left behind. She tried to remember what it was like to need something so viscerally. She opened the pack. Three cigarettes remained, including the flipped lucky one, and a green plastic lighter. She pulled the lucky cigarette out and lit it, inhaling. She started to cough but quickly regained herself. The familiar buzz warmed her head. She finished the first and lit the next. It had been years since she last smoked. She had started in high school and continued on through nursing school, then Korea and her courtship and engagement with Charlie, then for years after John's birth. She never missed smoking generally but always the particular moments—with coffee, after sex, a long car ride with one arm resting out the window, and most of all the camaraderie. She missed her old coworkers, the jaded nurses, complaining between puffs about needy patients and arrogant doctors. Smokers share a second language that crosses all cultures, the borrowing and giving of cigarettes, granting and taking a light, sometimes even the sharing of a single cigarette, the intimacy of it, almost erotic. It was a shared cigarette that had led to her affair and then the divorce from Charlie, the estrangement from her son. She regretted it, yes, but there times when she did not. She still remembered his hand cupped around hers, shielding together the match from the

wind, eyelashes ceremoniously low. Then he withdrew, a flash of orange, cigarette alight. He exhaled, and with a sly smile, passed it to her. She could still taste his lips.