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These four stories explore the spaces between perception and reality, between commitment and estrangement, and between what's ruined and what remains. The characters have landed at the frayed edges of change, at a place where they could still control whether to go forward or backward, or whether to pull at the unraveling threads.

FOUR STORIES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I
ON MILL STREET

To his neighbors on their front porches along Mill Street, Larry sounded defeated on nights like this. Larry and Melissa's son, Chip, needed school clothes. He'd also need a pair of high-tops if he made the middle school basketball team.

"I know, Melissa," Larry said. "I know."

Similar late summer conversations had spilled into the street for generations, long before the textile complex across the street shut down. Similar worries, similar questions.

"When is enough just enough, Larry?" Melissa said. "We had to use Chip's grass-cutting money to buy his school supplies."

But nobody outside the couple's living room knew that Larry agreed with everything Melissa was saying. He had no reason to defend himself because she already knew he was doing his best. She knew the textile factory had been the only employer within an hour's drive in any direction, and most of the laid-off workers left immediately for bigger towns like Greenwood or Augusta or Columbia. She knew Larry wanted to leave, too, to move the family, but that they stayed so she could help her parents, both retirees from the mill, who lived a few blocks up Mill Street and were getting older and older.

Melissa had found a job writing parking tickets for the police department and serving as bailiff in traffic court on Wednesday and Friday mornings. They had survived on her wages while Larry looked for work, but just barely. He'd gotten only one job offer, part-time greeter at the new Walmart over in North Augusta, but he'd turned it down. He wouldn't drive that far for so little. That had been right after the factory closed, and he felt sure he could find something better.

"Maybe it's time to think outside the box a little," Melissa said. "You used to talk about starting your own business doing repairs on houses."

"Yeah, but who could even afford to pay for repairs around here anymore?" Larry said.

Most everybody who hadn't left when the factory closed had already retired and barely could afford food toward the end of the month before the Social Security money appeared in the bank. If something broke and it wasn't essential, it stayed broken.

"Why not try, though, Larry?" Melissa said. "Think about the example you're being to Chip. He looks up to you, you know. You're his role model, still."

"Still," she said, because over the summer, Chip had found a job. Larry's half-brother, Philip, paid Chip to cut grass, \$40 per yard, really good money for a 12-year-old. Philip was a decade older than Larry, and they'd never been close. They had different fathers. Philip's father had been vice president of human resources at the factory back in the '60s and '70s, long before the factory closed. After he died, their mom married Larry's dad, who was a regular wage earner.

When he turned 18, Philip went off to Carolina and never came back. He got a high-paying job at Fuji, a couple hours away in Greenwood. Fuji, that Mecca for laborers, where, Philip once told Larry, the cars in the employee parking lot were so nice they looked like solid gold shining in the sun. But when the textile factory closed, Philip came back to town. As laid-off workers left, he started buying their houses, one by one. A lot of the homes he now owned were still vacant, and that's why he needed Chip to cut the grass.

Lately, Philip had been buying homes even from the retirees, then renting the same houses right back to them. Retirees who had sold out to Philip were the ones who could afford the softer toilet paper and to take their grandchildren to the beach once a year.

"With all that property, Philip would have something for you to fix," Melissa said. "I don't know why you don't just ask him. That's all Chip did."

"I guess Chip's more of a role model for me than vice versa," Larry said, and that was one reason he'd never asked Philip for a job. Even after two years without work, even after his unemployment benefits expired, he still wanted something better. Something his 12-year-old son couldn't achieve. Something as good as, if not better than, his old job at the factory, where he roamed from building to building fixing broken spinners and weavers and sewing machines. Plus, Philip didn't give out favors for free. He'd question every decision Larry made, both at home and at work. If Larry bought a new truck, Philip would say he got ripped off. If Larry kept his old truck, Philip would call him a tight wad. He'd been that way since before he left town for college.

“If we can hold on for a little longer, I’d like to wait for the right thing,” Larry said.

Sometimes, Larry heard rumors about a new company that might lease part of the old textile complex and offer some jobs to the laid-off workers who’d stuck around. Now, though, out his front window, small trees grew in the gutters of the textile complex. Weeds crept across the parking spaces and the ventilation fans groaned in the wind. Even the “For Sale” sign bolted to the side of the finishing plant had faded.

“Larry, I’m just so tired of this,” Melissa said. “I’m tired of eating rice and beans and chicken livers. I’m tired of patching Chip’s clothes. We’ve lost enough, don’t you think?”

“I can’t argue with that,” Larry said.

“Then why not talk to your brother?” she said. “What could it hurt?”

“Half-brother,” Larry corrected, “and he’s just not the kind of guy I want to depend on, you know?”

He didn’t know how to explain it, but something about his brother made Larry uncomfortable, something about the way he prowled around town in that brand new F-150. It reminded Larry of the guards that creep along behind prison work crews out on the highway. Philip spent more money than he could possibly bring in from all the property he’d bought, especially considering half the houses he owned stood empty, and most of the tenants he did have looked like drug addicts or sex offenders sitting on their porches on the other side of the textile mill, a new class of people that seemed to appear

out of nowhere weeks after the mill closed. Philip had graduated with a business degree from Carolina, though, so he must know what he's doing.

"If all else fails, we could sell the house," Melissa said.

"I guess you mean to Philip, right?" Larry said.

"If he's buying, yeah," she said.

"Well, that's just crazy, Melissa" Larry said. "You do know we'd still have to pay rent, right?"

"Of course I know that," she said, "but right now we're essentially paying rent to the bank. If we sold, at least we could afford school supplies and actual groceries for a while."

"I'm sorry, but I just refuse to rent my own house from my brother," Larry said.

"I mean, yeah, we've lost a lot, but I don't think it's time to stoop that low yet."

"I think that's the problem," Melissa said. "You're just too proud to do much of anything, but you're not proud enough to provide for us the way you should."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he said.

"What do you think it means? Just look around. I'm sitting here telling you I can't live like this anymore, and you're still content to wait for this magical job opportunity of yours."

"OK, OK, I get it. I'll look harder," Larry said.

"You've already looked harder, Larry. What you haven't done is talked to your brother."

Larry could smell Lee Rogers' cigarette smoke from next door coming through the windows, and he knew that Lee and several other of his neighbors would be straining to hear his response. He had no words that would make Melissa happy. He understood her frustration, but he had no way to make her understand his. He stood up and closed the mini-blinds, blocking the view of the abandoned factory until tomorrow.

"I haven't wanted to mention this," Melissa said, "but I'm thinking Chip and I might move in with my parents. They have an extra bedroom, and their house is paid for, and I can use the money I'm making to buy the things we need."

"Melissa," Larry said, "please. Just stop."

"And you can come with us, or you can stay here and figure out how to keep the house and buy groceries and pay the utilities with no money coming in," she said. "I love you, Larry, and Chip loves you, but this has gone on for too long."

Her eyes looked through him, without expression, for several seconds.

"One more chance," he said. "Give me one more chance. I'll call Philip tomorrow. If he can't help I'll apply again at that Walmart."

She released a loud exhalation that sounded like steam coming off the old boilers that used to heat the factory's oldest buildings. In Larry and Melissa's living room, the sound meant she'd agreed, reluctantly, to whatever he'd said. They'd been together 20 years, since high school. He'd witnessed her give birth. Yet he'd never appreciated her more than he did right now, for the patience she continued to have with him. He could think of no words to communicate this feeling except, maybe, a promise.

"If I haven't found a job by Halloween," he said, "we'll sell the house to Philip."

###

Larry had been forewarned. That day when the factory laid everybody off, the superintendent brought in a career counselor from the high school across town to give the workers some parting advice.

“Take whatever job you can find,” she said, “no matter the pay, no matter the hours. Waiting around for the perfect job will make you good at one thing: waiting around for the perfect job. I’ve seen it happen over and over.”

As he sat on his front porch, waiting for Philip to stop by as promised, he thought about that last day, about the carders and the weavers who sobbed as the owner announced the news, about the sheriff’s deputies that escorted everyone to the factory gate, a dozen or so at a time, to be sure nobody stole anything, and about Philip who had already left town by then. He wondered why Philip even returned if things were so great up at Fuji. Philip had never explained that one. They’d only spoken a handful of times since Philip returned and it had never come up, and it probably wouldn’t come up tonight. Philip had a way of controlling a conversation, of keeping you on edge.

“So Melissa’s a cop?” Philip asked as they sat side by side on the porch swing, overlooking the ruins of the factory, having just finished a lasagna dinner Melissa prepared after work. The sun slipped behind the old six-story finishing plant, and Philip finally removed his sunglasses. Though he was 10 years older, Philip looked about Larry’s age, if not younger.

“No, not a real cop. She works at the station, writes parking tickets, stuff like that,” Larry said.

“OK, well, I guess I knew that,” Philip said.

He pulled a joint from a Luden’s cough drop box.

“You think she’ll radio me in if I light this up?” he said.

“No, of course not,” Larry said. “I can’t be so sure about the neighbors, though.”

“Well that’s pretty much always the case, now isn’t it?” Philip said, and he laughed, and his laugh sounded out of place on Mill Street, and it reminded Larry that the world was a strange place, capable of sudden change. A job interview on his own front porch with a lit joint two feet away, with a brother-turned-stranger who’s afraid of his wife? Odder things had happened in the world that day, Larry thought, and like that career counselor had said, you take whatever job you can get, no matter the pay, no matter the hours.

Larry refused the joint.

“So, I wanted to talk to you about something,” he said.

“Remember that old place?” Philip said, pointing the lit end of the joint toward the abandoned factory, looking nostalgic.

“I took a couple history classes over at Carolina,” he continued. “You never went to college, did you?”

“No,” Larry said.

“Well, that’s too bad. I remember this history professor I had,” he said, “we thought he was a Communist. Well, he got to talking about these old textile mill towns, saying they were nothing more than a 20th century version of slavery.”

“That’s interesting,” Larry said.

“Well, yeah, it is if you think about it. The factory floor was the 20th century cotton field and the mill houses were the new slave quarters. Sure they had to pay the workers, but still.”

“Um-huh,” Larry said, “but that all changed before we came along, you know?”

“I guess it depends on how you look at it,” Philip said.

“I own this house, for one thing,” Larry said, “And we made decent money over there. Me and Melissa both.”

“And now the place is shut down,” Philip said, “and what have you been doing with yourself?”

“Looking for a job, for one,” Larry said.

“Well, I guess it could be argued that you might be a freed slave who won’t leave the plantation?” Philip said.

What a shame. Philip had already forgotten he grew up right here, blocks away, in a kerosene heated mill house, just like Larry. He’d graduated from high school here. His parents were buried here.

“On the phone it sounded like you might have a job opportunity for me,” Larry said. “Is that true?”

Philip snuffed out the joint in the dry soil of Melissa’s dead African violets.

“Oh yes, it’s true,” Philip said. “Very true. What I’m trying to figure out now is what kind of employee are you going to be. A thinker or a doer.”

From the back pocket of his jean shorts, he pulled a bank envelope and emptied it on the floor of the porch, counting out 10 hundred-dollar bills.

“Right now I’m thinking you’re a doer,” he said. “This is just a signing bonus if you can help me out.”

“Why don’t you tell me what this is about?” Larry said.

“Let’s go for a walk,” Philip said.

He put the money back in his pocket as they crossed the street and began to trace the perimeter of the old textile complex. Larry ran his fingers along the faded “Safety First” signs at each factory gate. At the bottom of the hill they entered an area where the streetlights no longer worked, a place where almost all the houses across the street stood vacant. Philip pulled out a set of keys and unlocked a padlock that held the gate closed. He opened the gate just wide enough to slip through.

“This is crazy,” Larry said, but he followed his half-brother, he followed the bank envelope sticking halfway out of his back pocket, through the gate, to the back entrance of the finishing plant, which was not locked. The doors were never locked when the place was running, when someone cared, so Larry was not surprised that the place stood open now.

“Don’t come in here during the day unless you’re not afraid of bats,” Philip said, and Larry realized that Philip had been in the factory recently, maybe earlier today, before he came over for dinner. The old place smelled the same, like paint and gasoline, but it felt colder inside, even though the AC units had been hauled off, sold for scrap with everything else. Philip turned on his cellphone’s flashlight, which hardly dented the darkness as they looked for the stairwell that led to the basement, where, Larry

remembered, the research lab had been located back in the '70s, when the factory tried to transition to synthetic fibers.

“What I need you to do,” Philip said as they descended into a deeper darkness, “is to get power back on in this basement, this old lab in particular. I don’t need to know how you do it as long as it’s safe and it’s quiet.”

“Why do you need power down here?” Larry said.

“That doesn’t matter right now,” Philip said. “I just want to know if you can do it, and if so I want you to also get these old exhaust fans working, and I want you to be sure nobody, not even Melissa, knows you’re here. I’ve still got some, well, some permits to get worked out, so we technically shouldn’t be down here just yet.”

“Do you have a portable generator?” Larry said.

“Yes, but that’s just too loud so close to the street, Larry,” Philip said. “If it were that easy I would have just done it myself.”

The town still had some street lights behind the old textile buildings, and the breaker boxes in the finishing plant had been replaced only a few years before the factory closed down, so Larry thought he could do it. He wasn’t certain, but he could worry about certainty after Philip gave him the bank envelope.

“Then the job is yours,” Philip said, handing over the cash and heading for the stairs. “Let me know when it’s ready, and I may be able to offer you more work.”

###

The thousand dollars smoothed out the rough edges at home. Melissa paid off one of the Visas almost all the way, which made plenty of room to buy new high-tops for Chip and to pay for his physical, which the middle school required before basketball tryouts. Having chicken for dinner, or cube steak, or take-out barbecue, instead of livers and beans made other things seem better, too. Melissa found her black police uniform and her boss, the police chief, easier to deal with.

Larry enjoyed working in the basement of the finishing plant across the street at night. He told Melissa he and Philip were rewiring a doctor's office in North Augusta, that they had to work during the night when patients weren't there. He drove his old truck across town and left it behind the Baptist church, then walked back to Mill Street and slipped through the darkened gate with his toolbox and his flashlight after making sure no one was watching.

Getting the power back on was easier than he'd thought. It had simply been turned off at the main circuit box, and the basement already had its own breaker. He didn't tell Philip that it took only an hour to figure out. Fixing up the exhaust fans took more work because they were so old. One night after almost getting electrocuted because of an ungrounded wire, Larry called Philip from inside the plant.

"You really should replace these fans if you want this up to code," he said.

"Up to code?" Philip said. "If I was interested in code I would have hired a real contractor, Larry. Can you get them working is my question."

"Yes, I'll get them working," he said.

Those kind of interactions bothered Larry, but just when he grew annoyed, Philip would send another payment, sometimes loaded onto Visa gift cards. Melissa took a couple of the cards to the Columbiana Mall over in Lexington and brought home new lingerie from Victoria's Secret, and when she tried it on that night, Larry could not remember how she looked in a police uniform any more than he could remember how it felt to be unemployed, even though it had been only three weeks since he'd first called Philip.

"I'm going to transfer you to inventory control and security," Philip said over the phone later that night, after Melissa had changed into comfortable pajamas and fallen asleep. Larry seldom saw his brother in person. Philip still lived in Greenwood, and he traveled to Atlanta, Savannah, Charleston, all over. "This work is more fast-paced, but I think you'll do well."

Inventory control amounted to shopping for tons of batteries, nail polish remover, those flares that truck drivers light up when their rigs break down, toilet bowl cleaner, ammonia. Philip insisted that he buy no more than two of the items from the same store, and to leave all of the items on the first floor of the finishing plant, not the lab downstairs.

"Spread this out as much as you can," Philip said. "Shop in Greenwood one week, then in Columbia or Augusta the next. Go all the way to Atlanta once in a while. I'll pay you back for mileage."

As the weeks passed, Larry developed a shopping routine, hitting the 24-hour places like Walmart in the middle of the night and the chemical supply places first thing in the morning. At dawn he ate at one of the Waffle Houses along an interstate, and he

felt no guilt about the cost since he was on the job. Even if he questioned the intentions of his employer, he was still working. When he'd worked at the textile factory, he couldn't be sure every piece of cloth that rolled off the looms would be worn by a good person. Over the years he'd probably fixed a machine that went on to make clothes for criminals, drug lords, whatever. The world was a complicated place full of intricate connections.

Security detail was more nerve wracking, though he could work from home. From his living room he watched out for people moving around across the street outside the complex. If anyone slowed down, he stood up and looked through the closed mini-blinds to make sure the car passed. Unless of course it was Philip, or Philip's friend in the Camaro, who parked up the street at what used to be a playground and slipped through the factory gates around midnight once or twice a week.

"Who's out there?" Melissa would ask, but the question evaporated into the noise from the TV as he settled back in on the couch. "You're acting weird lately," she'd say.

Some nights cop cars drove by slowly, shining their searchlights on the upper floors of the factory. They always kept going, as if only half interested in the place. The factory was the geographic heart of the town, so people passed it regularly, but since it had stopped pumping, nobody paid it much attention to it anymore. Sometimes people did stop to look around the place, and Larry would get worried and go onto the porch. A few times he'd actually walked over to speak with the visitors. They always turned out to be from out of town, or else they'd been natives and had returned for a funeral or a class reunion and thought they'd look at the old place since they were passing through. Soon, Larry could tell these types without leaving his living room.

Late one afternoon a film crew made several passes back and forth in front of the abandoned factory's main gate. The cameraman said he planned to sell the footage to political campaigns to show in their ads while talking about trade deals, foreign competition and lost jobs.

###

The film crew got Larry thinking. He may be the last worker to ever earn a wage at this creaky old complex, the last of his kind at the end of an era. His parents, his grandparents, they'd all made a living here. Philip's father, too. And now, a hundred years of manufacturing had been reduced to his midnight runs back and forth across Mill Street. It was the kind of thing a newspaper reporter might enjoy writing about. The paper had stories like that once in awhile. The last World War I vet who died a few years back. The last train passenger on the Seaboard line. The last prisoner ever strapped into the electric chair down in Columbia.

Philip got in touch less often, but when he called to check in the next day, Larry mentioned what he'd been thinking about, the historical significance of what they were up to and all. He thought it would make interesting conversation, especially since Philip had talked about history that first night they'd visited the mill. Of course he never planned to actually call a newspaper reporter. He wasn't an idiot.

"I guess I didn't tell you?" Philip said. "Part of the job description is keeping your idiotic mouth shut at all times. That, principally, is why I am paying you so well."

In fact, Philip had reduced the pay to \$500 a week, which was still pretty good money for the time Larry spent working. To replace the other \$500, Philip agreed to make Larry's house payment for him. It was easier that way, he said.

"Sometimes it's just hard to come up with cash to send," he explained. "It's much easier to send your house payment from one of my online accounts."

As with any job, the repetition started to wear on Larry. The secrecy, too. He'd had to invent several new middle-of-the-night jobs to explain his absences, and his income, to Melissa. He'd wired a new student center at USC-Aiken and a new Hardee's in Greenwood, and she'd started to look at him strangely when he made up these stories. He'd also grown tired of ignoring the uneasy feeling the work gave him, a feeling that grew even worse on his third visit in a month to buy fertilizer at the Aiken County Farm Supply, which he preferred because he saw no video cameras or computer screens in plain sight.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you were running a meth lab," the clerk said in such a friendly way that Larry could have waived the whole question off with a smile and one simple lie about weeds on his farm or whatever. Instead, the question caught him off guard and he dropped his wad of cash, then knocked over a display of sunglasses as he bent over to scoop up the roll of \$20s.

"It's OK, I'm just joking with you," the clerk said, but Larry knew he couldn't go back there again, and if the same thing happened at other stores he'd run out of places to shop, and he'd be unemployed again.

Later that day, at home, he handed over his most recent \$500 to Melissa, and she mentioned taking a few days off work and going to Myrtle Beach. The water would still be warm in mid-October, and Chip had a couple days off school for teacher work days.

“Plus, you’ve gotten stressed out since you started back working, Larry, and I worry about you,” she said. “You could use a few days off.”

He couldn’t get away, though, not with Philip counting on him to keep an eye on the place and run the supplies. It had been six weeks, but it felt like he’d worked another year at the factory since he made that phone call to Philip. His back hurt from hitting the ground whenever a car passed and he was near the factory gate in the middle of the night. And in the factory, alone at night, he’d started to notice noises that were amplified by that thirsty emptiness. It seemed impossible that there ever could have been enough workers and machines in this town to fill those buildings, working together day after day, generation after generation.

“I bet Philip would give you a few days off,” she said. “Why don’t you just ask him?”

“It’s just too busy right now,” Larry said.

“Will you just think about it?” Melissa said.

“It just won’t work, but you should go,” Larry said. “And take Chip. You deserve a few days at the beach.”

“Maybe I will,” she said. “I’m really proud of you, you know? Of how hard you’ve been working.”

He'd spend every night in that abandoned factory for her, and for Chip too, without flinching. But he needed some time without them, a few days without arranging his life around their movements, a few days without pretending to be somewhere else.

"We'll miss you," Melissa said. "I'll text you a lot of pictures."

He needed a few days to think. Could he stop accepting payments from Philip, or have a conversation with him, or write a letter, or just disappear and see what happened? He was not an idiot, or idiotic. He knew what had been going on in the basement of the finishing plant, in that old lab. He'd seen Philip coming and going. That other guy too, in the Camaro with DeKalb County, Georgia, plates, and the next time Larry slipped through the gate after they'd been by, most of the supplies had been used, and the whole place smelled like a different kind of chemical.

"I hope you do," he said. "Eat some shrimp for me. And bring back some saltwater taffy."

"Are you sure you're OK?" she said. "You seem so sad."

It was for shrimp, for middle school basketball, for the Columbiana Mall, that he'd done what Philip asked. But a few nights ago, on the Channel 10 news, he'd seen the faces of four people arrested for making and distributing meth. Their eyes burned through the TV screen; they looked around his living room. When Larry crossed the street that night, listening for distant traffic, those same faces looked down on him from the darkness of the upper-floor windows. If there was a way out of this he would greet shoppers with more sincerity than anyone ever thought possible. He would look into their

eyes and and welcome them from the heat of the parking lot and wish them all things good and all things honest.

###

The morning before Melissa and Chip were due back from the beach, black snow dusted the yards and the rooftops. It coated the cars parked parallel along the street. It wasn't exactly beautiful, but neither was it disturbing. The scene had a strange power to transcend ordinary concerns like cause and effect, for just a moment, for just long enough for Larry to step onto the porch in his pajamas before even considering the source of the ashes.

Lee Rogers, Larry's neighbor, stood on the sidewalk with his beagle on a leash, looking up at the tower of black smoke that spiraled up, past textile complex's smokestack.

"Has anybody called 911?" Larry yelled down the steps to Lee, who responded by pointing anew at the smoke. It was a Sunday. Other than Lee, the street was empty, and the world had been muted by a rumble not unlike the sound of textile machinery going full bore. A low, rushing noise, punctuated by clicks and snaps, a noise that had never stopped throughout Larry's life until the factory ceased operations two years ago. Larry stepped back inside for his phone. Where had he left it? As he searched, the sounds of sirens cut through that other noise. More neighbors emerged from their houses, some of whom Larry hadn't seen in years. The neighbors yelled back and forth to each other,

porch to porch, and walked into their yards and onto the sidewalk to join Lee Rogers, staring at the black smoke.

Larry texted Philip.

“Just sit tight,” Philip texted back. Then, a few minutes later: “Any chance you can still get in there?”

All three of the town’s fire trucks had arrived, and young volunteer firefighters who had never done more than aim hoses at grass fires and fully involved mobile homes were leveling the factory’s perimeter fence, racing past the “Safety First” billboard at the main gate and into the maze of alleyways between the century old buildings.

“Not a chance,” Larry said. Then he texted a photo of the scene.

“Then enjoy the show, I guess,” Philip replied. “I’m in Atlanta.”

By lunchtime, ashes the size of Sudafed boxes danced in the air like angels. Could it be this easy? To sit on his front porch and wait for the fire to destroy his connection to Philip and all evidence of what had gone on for six weeks? If it were up to the firefighters, whose hoses couldn’t spray beyond the third floor and who had been ordered not to enter any of the burning buildings under any circumstances, there was no need to fear justice. They were no match, and the fire grew bolder. It spread to the upper floors of the finishing plant, to the dye works, to the empty warehouses on the far side of the property. The low hum became a roar, flames poked their heads through the windows of the upper floors like workers on a break. Firefighters from nearby towns rolled up, reported for duty, patted each other on the back even before assessing the blaze.

Melissa’s boss, the police chief, and his three officers watched the crowd, which matched

the fire's aptitude for growth. From all sides of town people walked toward the column of smoke as if compelled by nature, taking the same paths they'd walked for years when they clocked in for their shifts. As the fire grew, they hugged each other. They wiped tears from their faces.

Philip texted again: "An update?"

An update? This fire was cleaning up Philip's mess. It was taking an intricate trap and springing it wide open, so that Larry could walk away. That was the update. It was a white hot reset button that Larry didn't even have to push. He ignored Philip's text because the fire gave him that permission. As people on the sidewalk mourned their fading past and faced what many already knew, that the town would never again be an industrial powerhouse, that a new industry would never move into the complex, Larry inhaled deeply, as if in meditation, the smell of charred rubble. The relief, the symmetry, the perfection, the good fortune. He didn't start the fire, but he almost wished that he'd been smart enough to think of such an elegant solution.

Then, as if sensing Larry's joy, the rest of town caught up with him around mid-afternoon, about the time a five-story fire escape came loose from the finishing plant's shifting bricks and teetered back and forth on its ancient concrete shoes, like Chip when he first learned to stand, right-foot, left-foot, right-foot, left-foot. Like Chip it lost its balance and tumbled, away from the blaze, falling more slowly than seemed possible. As it reached its tipping point, it seemed to pause in mid-air, and the crowd pushed backward, off the sidewalk, into the yards, even though they already were at a safe distance, and when the steel fire escape crashed against the pavement, the crowd cheered,

and some people went home and returned with lawn chairs and coolers, six packs of beer, portable stereos, charcoal grills, packages of hot dogs, and Halloween candy even though trick-or-treating was over a week away.

Larry never left the porch.

After dark, the silhouettes of neighbors dancing moved recklessly in front of the industrial furnace that had painted the whole world orange. To keep the blaze from spreading, firefighters turned their hoses on the homes, the church and the doctor's office across the street, giving up on the factory's buildings. As the firefighters approached his yard, Larry left his porch for the first time all afternoon. He mingled in the crowd, talking to old co-workers, childhood friends who'd moved away to bigger towns an hour or two away. They'd heard about the fire on the news and decided to drive over. It was good to see everybody. Then, in the middle of everything, Melissa and Chip appeared, pulling their suitcases behind them, pushing their way through the crowds, spotting Larry.

"This is insane," Melissa said. "What happened here?"

"It's been like this all day," Larry said. "Since first thing this morning."

The orange sky, the collapsing buildings, the impromptu street festival -- it all reflected in Chip's eyes as the same contagious spark that had infected everyone else, that showed no sign of ending as police officers and sheriff's deputies from other municipalities kept watch.

"We had to park ten blocks away," Melissa said. "How did this start?"

"I don't know," Larry said. "Isn't it wild?"

He dragged the luggage onto his dripping wet front porch and into the living room. Chip followed him, walking past a couple of teenagers sitting on the curb making out. Melissa wanted to find the police chief, to find out if she needed to get into uniform and help with crowd control, or at least go to the station to answer the phones. And to find out whether anyone suspected arson.

“I think it was just an accidental fire,” Larry said.

“I saw a state fire marshal’s truck when Chip and I were walking from the car,” she said, “so I’m guessing they’re already investigating.”

She wanted Larry to make sure she had a clean uniform in the house while she looked for the chief. In the house, Chip pulled a box of saltwater taffy from his suitcase and offered Larry a piece, but the wrapper had fused itself to the candy in the heat of the suitcase, and Larry gave up and tossed it on the kitchen counter. Chip offered him another piece. It, too, couldn’t be freed from its wrapper.

“We picked it up at the Walmart heading out of Myrtle Beach,” Chip said. “So maybe it’s not the best kind of taffy.”

Smoke from the fire had created a haze even inside the living room. The glow of relief that the fire had brought radiated all afternoon and into the evening, but in the house, it felt like the last day of a three-day weekend, a weekend that had seemed interminable when it started. There was no reason to consider its end, and no reason to think that it would end as it did, abruptly, when Melissa returned.

“You’ve got school tomorrow,” Larry said to Chip. “You should get a shower, right?”

He searched the hall closet for a fresh towel to send into the bathroom with Chip before remembering they were still in the clothes dryer, along with a couple of Melissa's uniforms.

"Dad?" Chip said, and when Larry returned to the kitchen, Philip stood there. He'd let himself in the back door. With the noise from outside, Larry didn't hear the door squeak.

"We need to talk," he said. "Privately."

"Philip," Larry said. "What are you doing here?"

Chip's shower water started.

"Take a wild guess, little brother," Philip said.

"The fire?"

"You started it, didn't you?" Philip said.

"What?" Larry said. "Of course I didn't start it. What are you talking about?"

He laid Melissa's police uniform across the couch.

"I think you did," Philip said. "I think you saw an opportunity to destroy my investment and you just couldn't help yourself."

"This is crazy," Larry said. "If you have some proof, maybe you should go to the police or the fire marshal. But, oh wait, you might not want to do that, right?"

As if on cue, Melissa walked through the front door, followed by a fresh rush of smoke. Philip started coughing.

"I'm going into the station," she said. Then, noticing Philip leaning against the entertainment center, coughing, she added, "Is everything alright here?"

“Needless to say, you’re fired,” Philip said.

“What is all this about?” Melissa said, but Philip acted as if she hadn’t spoken, making his way through the living room, onto the porch and into the crowd that still lined Mill Street.

“What’s going on, Larry?” she asked as the screen door closed them back in.

“Go on into work,” Larry said. “I’ll tell you when you get back.”

He wanted to tell her everything, the whole story, from his first visit to the abandoned factory with Philip all the way up to this morning when the complex caught fire. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea, though. She’d be bound by duty to tell the police chief everything she knew. The chief would want to arrest him for trespassing, not to mention the drug charges, and he’d be the prime suspect if the fire marshal opened a criminal investigation. Though they had been barren for a long time, the cotton fields were on fire. Telling Melissa would be no different than a slave turning himself in for igniting the blaze. Chip turned off the shower water and yelled for a towel. Larry turned his phone on and started looking for Philip’s number.

CHAPTER II

THE GUEST ROOM

About six months ago, when Greta wanted to hire someone to help clean the house, we interviewed four people, one after the other, on a single afternoon. Greta had been feeling sick because of the pregnancy, which was why she needed help to begin with. Every half hour or so she left the kitchen table, during one of the interviews, to throw up in the guest bathroom, leaving me to make conversation with these people. Or in at least one case, leaving me to stare at the tabletop silently with a candidate who didn't speak much English while, through the walls, Greta made violent retching noises and flushed the toilet.

Jill was the fourth and final job candidate, and Greta felt better by then, though she still looked pale. So pale that Jill took notice and walked across our kitchen, which she'd never been in, found a glass in the first cabinet she opened, and brought Greta some ice water, all without being asked. That sold me on her right then. She wore a uniform, too, and that was a nice touch. It reminded me of something an old car mechanic might wear, a denim jumpsuit thing, but not greasy or masculine looking. It fit her so well I wondered if she'd had it tailored and, if so, where she'd found such a good tailor in Charlotte. I also wondered how, exactly, you put on a suit like that. Did you lay the suit out on the floor and slide into it like a snake? Or did you step into it and pull the whole thing up over your hips and shoulders?

I hadn't listened to everything Jill said during her interview, but she seemed like the obvious choice as Greta and I discussed the candidates later that night in the great room.

"I mean, you want somebody who can think for herself and not have to be told every little thing, right?" I said.

"But it seemed like she didn't care whether she got the job or not," Greta said, "or like she thought she already had the job. I couldn't tell which."

"Let's just be honest," I said. "Could any of the other three candidates even climb the stairs while carrying a basket of laundry? I mean, seriously?"

When we built the house last year, we decided not to install an elevator and to put that money into a pool (which we still haven't had built yet). The laundry room was in the basement, two flights of stairs beneath the bedrooms.

"One of those other candidates might pull a muscle vacuuming under the clawfoot tub, or tumble off the balcony while trying to dust the chandelier in the foyer," I said. "She'd probably break her back, and I'd get home and find her laying there."

"Poor you," Greta said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I said.

"I know what this is really about," she said. "You think this Jill is hot and you like the idea of having her walking around here."

"What?"

"Just tell the truth, Robb," she said, "While we're 'just being honest.'"

“This is not about me at all,” I said. “It’s about you having some help around here that’s actually qualified.”

“I saw how you watched her walk across the kitchen,” Greta said. “She saw it too. You know what? I bet that’s why she thought the job was already hers.”

“You’re right, Greta” I said. “I was impressed. I was impressed that she took the initiative to get you something that you needed. I guess that makes me a sick pervert.”

She looked at me suspiciously.

“My God,” I said. “Just hire who you want. Tell me who to pay.”

I opened my laptop to see if I had any pending sells in my inbox. Greta went upstairs to bed. The next morning, to my surprise, she wanted to offer Jill the job. She said she may have just been hormonal with the pregnancy and all, and that she was sorry she’d accused me of, you know, having a thing for a maid.

“That’s OK,” I said. “I just want you to have what you need.”

Like I said before, that was six months ago. As the weeks went by, Greta got bigger and more dependent on Jill, who became a regular part of the place, cooking dinner and shopping for groceries and stuff like that while Greta painted the baby’s room and drove back and forth to Babies ‘R’ Us to buy stuff: changing tables (one for upstairs and one for downstairs), a bunch of baby books, a bookshelf to put them on. On and on. Early in the mornings I’d hear Jill downstairs cooking eggs or dusting the window blinds, and every time I saw her in that little denim jumpsuit I was grateful we’d hired her. She was almost like a second Greta, a Greta who wasn’t growing bigger by the week, who hadn’t gotten obsessed with preparing our house for this baby.

That all changed over the past week or so. Greta got super-interested in cleaning the house herself. She said she'd read about it in one of her pregnancy books. It's called "nesting instinct," when an expectant mother has no choice but to make the home perfect for the baby's arrival by cleaning and re-arranging everything. She started going through boxes of tax records and using Q-tips to clean the dust from the crevices in the floor molding. Nothing Jill did was good enough.

That made things tense enough, but the day before yesterday, Greta came in from shopping and discovered Jill undressed and asleep in our guest room bed. I just happened to be home. Even though I can work from home, most days I like to get dressed and leave for work like a normal person, to go to the library or a local coffee shop with my laptop to work.

I realize that sounds hard to believe. The part about Jill being asleep in the guest room, I mean. Who takes off their clothes to nap on the job? In her defense, the guest room is the most peaceful room in the house. Greta read a couple *feng shui* books before we moved in so she could buy the right furniture, carpet, and curtains for the guest room. She wanted our guests to wake up feeling positive about things.

None of that mattered when Greta found Jill in there asleep under the covers, her uniform on the floor at the foot of the bed, the little denim ballcap she sometimes wore tossed aside with the pillow shams.

"I have so had it with you," Greta yelled. She'd started to shake by the time I got downstairs to see what had happened. "You've probably had jobs where you got paid to lay on a bed, but this isn't one of them."

As she yelled, Greta moved like a ballerina, despite being eight months pregnant. She ripped the covers back and tossed Jill's uniform in her face in one motion, with such confidence that I stood there in the doorway, admiring the amazing woman I had married. She was like a mother bear sensing some threat to her home and her child and ridding her world of it.

"The books haven't been dusted in months," she said. "Every ceiling fan in the house is coated with dirt, and every time I need you I have to yell for five minutes before you appear, mysteriously, from God knows where."

She treated Jill like the dirty mop water she hurled down the driveway, and Jill stared at me, expectantly, as if I might intervene at any second, but I just stood there. Her look haunted me for an hour after she left that afternoon, and it kept bothering me on and off after that. It took me back to high school when our marching band went to Carowinds, that theme park down at the state line, and I couldn't afford to go. A girl I knew from the clarinet section volunteered to pay my way. When we poured off the bus at the front gate, I left her behind and didn't see her again until the ride home. All the way home on the school bus, when I caught that clarinet player's gaze, it made me feel so miserably sad. I finally learned to stop looking back there, where she sat.

###

I didn't expect to see Jill again. But, yesterday, Greta left, without explanation. I got home from working on my laptop at the library and she was not there, which is not unusual. She shops a lot and still goes to walk at the YWCA. Hours passed, though, and

she didn't appear, and she didn't answer her phone. I wandered the house, looking for a clue about how long she planned to be away, and I found something: In our bedroom closet, the Carolina Hurricanes duffel bag, which Greta had packed when we first learned she was pregnant, lay upside down. Greta had packed everything we needed for a two-night stay in the hospital, including my favorite snacks, changes of clothes, toothpaste, a tiny green outfit for the baby – green since we had not found out the baby's sex. Now, everything was missing from the bag except my clothes and bathroom stuff. Even my snacks were gone.

I started texting. Not only to Greta but also to her brother, Luke, and her mom and dad, Ginger and Jim. Her dad had been my business partner before he retired two years ago, at age 55, and moved to Orlando, 12 hours away.

--If you know where Greta is, please just let me know she's safe, I texted to all three of them at once. I thought about calling the police, but they'd just decide she had left me. I'd watched enough episodes of COPS to know that. In the meantime, I couldn't just let the house fall apart, so I called Jill. I can't take time off work, ever, or I could lose a ton of money, and who knew when Greta would be back?

Normally, when something weird happens, like Greta firing Jill while I stood there watching, and you see that person again, you have to deal with some strangeness for awhile. It makes conversation kind of awkward. Everything you say just re-hashes the weirdness. I like to just get that weirdness out in the open.

"Just let me have it," I said when Jill arrived last night. "Go ahead rip into me so we can get to something more interesting. I deserve it."

But Jill walked on into the house and got to work folding towels as if she'd never been fired, as if the day before had never happened. She cooked spaghetti while I sat on the sofa in the great room, keeping an eye on my email inbox in case I needed to make a sale and also on my texting app for a message from Orlando. Sooner or later, though, I knew Jill would want to have her say, and I was right. As we sat at opposite ends of the dining room table, she started up.

“So Robb,” she said, “I need to know what’s really going on here. Am I fired? Am I no longer fired? Was I never fired? Am I here to work? Or did you just call me over to hang out in the guest room?”

They were simple enough questions, and I understood Jill’s predicament. She wanted to know if she had her old job back. I’d want to know that, too. But I didn’t know the answers. Greta had left, had packed a bunch of clothes, the breast pump she’d just bought, the baby shower presents from the keep pile. She seemed to be actually gone, and I couldn’t get in touch with her.

“And where’s Greta?” Jill added.

“In Orlando, I think,” I said. “She was here yesterday morning, and—”

“Wait,” Jill said, picking up her plate of food and placing it at the setting next to mine. “You haven’t seen her since yesterday morning?”

“She was here yesterday morning,” I said, repeating the last thing in the world that I knew to be true. I had seen her, sleeping late, when I left for the library. She had been acting strange, after she found Jill in the bed and kicked her out of the house, I

mean. But Jill had been in there alone, asleep, and if Greta suspected anything else, she didn't let on, at all.

“So she left you,” Jill said. She was sitting beside me now. “Are you going to go down there? You know, to talk this out in person?”

“I don't know what to do,” I said, “or exactly where she is. Orlando is just my best guess.”

Greta's family had not texted back, which told me they must have known something. If they didn't know, they would have texted back asking what I was talking about.

“I think you should go,” Jill said. “That's what I'd do.”

I knew she didn't mean that. I knew her. She never said what she thought. She may have decided that telling me to go would make me stay, or that if she said to go and I stayed, she could say, “Well, I told you to go talk to her. Don't blame me.” Or else she hadn't forgiven me for what I did, for not defending her, and this was her way of punishing me, making me think she didn't care one way or the other what I did or didn't do.

“You're right. Maybe I will go down there,” I said. “I guess I could leave in the morning.”

It was the time of day when someone should turn on a light, but Jill hadn't moved. If I could have seen Jill's face, it would have given her away. I could have seen if she really wanted me to stay, how she really felt.

“Good,” she said. “I really am pulling for you guys. Regardless of what may have happened, there’s a baby involved, Robb, a person, and I want what’s best for the baby. Believe me.”

My phone beeped, lighting up the room for a second, a text from Greta’s parents.

--Hi Robb -- Just stay up there. Don’t make things worse, Jim & Ginger.

“Is it her?” Jill said, standing behind me now, her breath tickling my neck, her hands on my shoulders. “What does she say?”

###

An hour later, in the guest room, I asked Jill to bring me the six pack of Newcastle Brown Ale from the fridge, and then I asked her to leave in case Greta showed back up for some reason, though I felt sure she wouldn’t. I wanted to be alone, to think. Greta had been gone 36 hours, had probably settled back in with her parents in their condo, where just two years before I had helped them move in, had set up their WiFi for them. I had written the WiFi password on the back of a business card and stuck it on their fridge with a magnet. Greta had probably seen my handwriting tonight as she entered the password into her phone so she could scroll through her Facebook feed, a feed she hadn’t updated in days. Not even one of those vague profile updates like, “The new journey started today. May the Universe guide me,” followed by encouraging comments like “You are so brave” and “Positive energy coming your way.”

And that’s where I got the idea. Even if Greta wasn’t updating her feed, I could still communicate with her by posting to her profile, like any husband would do. She’d

see it before knowing she'd seen it. Or, her mom or brother might see it, and they'd tell her about my posts. Greta might even have to call to tell me to stop.

So, reclining in bed in the darkness, I posted, "Quiet night here at home. One of the last for a long, long time I hope." By midnight, 48 people had liked my post, and several comments popped up -- "Enjoy it while you can. #gottaloveit #2amfeedings" and "Oh man is your life gonna change when that baby comes! #justyouwait" -- but no evidence that Greta or her folks had seen it.

So half an hour later I tried again: "Loneliness. Was that supposed to be part of starting a family? #ironic." That post got only a couple stray likes but lots more comments. Things like "Everything ok man??" and "Let me know if you wanna talk. Msg me." But nothing from Orlando.

I got out of the bed to use the restroom, carrying my laptop out of habit, its cord trailing behind me like a tail. In the fridge I found only the Coronas Greta used to drink occasionally, before the pregnancy, and my stomach ached, not from Jill's spaghetti or the sight of weak beer, but from the rottenness of the day, for the fact that Greta was gone and the boldest action I had taken was a vague Facebook post that Greta had just ignored, or maybe she'd called over to her little brother, across the room, "Hey, Luke, look at this. Come look at what my husband, the father of the child I'm carrying, just posted."

I'd felt weaker before. The day, back when I sold cars, that the bank repossessed our Malibu came to mind. In a way this was worse. At least then I had failed from overconfidence, not from weakness. I sat down in the great room, opened one of the Coronas, and in the glow of my laptop, I typed, "I'm done. I'm done, next time anybody

sees me there will be a long line and a hearse out front.” Within minutes, the post had comments by the dozens: “jesus man. take a cold shower” and “thinking of you” and “this will pass Robb. Just don’t do anything stupid” and “Just get thru the night, man” and “I been there. You got this.” On and on, and on and on. People from previous jobs, from high school, from my one year at East Carolina, even, a parade of compassion and advice.

I fell asleep. My mom called my cell phone around 2 am, hours after she’d normally be sleeping off her two glasses of Barefoot wine. “What’s going on, Robbie? Your Aunt Shea called and said you sounded really depressed on the computer,” she said. “Did I wake you up?”

“Yeah, somebody must have hacked my account,” I said. “I better go check.”

I drifted back asleep but another sound woke me. The doorbell, possibly for the first time since we’d moved in the year before. Then it rang again. It took several seconds to figure out where the sound had come from. On my way through the house, I stubbed my toe on the clawed foot of the pool table, and I still had a grimace on my face when I opened the door to someone I hadn’t seen in 10 years: Cameron Counts, from high school. We had never been great friends, but our school was so small everybody knew each other fairly well.

“I can come back if this is a bad time,” Cameron said. “I was just in the neighborhood.”

“No, man, come on in,” I said. “How you been doing?”

“Hold on. I got something in the car to get,” he said.

Cameron had parked out in the cul-de-sac instead of the driveway. He slipped into the fog at the edge of the yard. Somehow, I could see better outside than I could inside the house. I held the storm door open with the foot that was not throbbing until Cameron re-appeared, holding a small set of bongos.

“I saw your post,” he said as he followed me through the darkened rooms. “I know it’s been a long time but your address was on whitepages.com. This house is wild, man.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I would offer you a beer, but—” as we sat down I motioned to the empty Coronas on the coffee table and tried to generate that mischievous grin we would have shared 10 years earlier, at a high school party where we measured fun by how many empty bottles or cans were lying around.

“No worries, man,” he said. “No worries. Like I said, I saw your post and thought maybe I could come over. It’s been a long time but—”

“Oh. That post,” I said. “I really didn’t—”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me,” he interrupted, “and I won’t stay if you don’t want me to.”

“No, man, you’re cool,” I said. “It’s not that. I should just tell you what happened. You see, Greta, my wife, is in Orlando, and I was trying to get her attention, and—”

Cameron was making a habit of interrupting: “When I went through this, before I got help, I mean,” he said, “I could sometimes listen to certain songs.” He started tapping out a rhythm on the bongos, sort of a slow shuffle, quietly at first but with more precision as the minutes passed, and he seemed to enter some sort of trance. Each time his palm

slapped the drum's head, my eyeballs made contact with my skull. Soon, though, I noticed it wasn't so bad if I didn't try to focus on the rhythm. I relaxed and let my head sink back into the recliner.

Then, he started singing:

*When your day is long
and the night, the night is yours alone
when you're sure you've had enough
of this life, well hang on....*

It was a song I recognized from our childhood. R.E.M. "Everybody Hurts," a song we sang in jest when somebody got dumped by his girlfriend or broke his collarbone on the football field. I thought he was making fun of me, but he knew nothing about Greta. He was not joking, and his voice had something in it, some sincerity, like the words meant something to him, and he was conveying something to me. I fell back into the overstuffed chair. When the song was over, neither of us said anything for a while. I think I dozed off thinking that the next morning, I would leave for Florida. I'd sit on the gazebo outside Greta's parents' condo if they wouldn't let me in. I'd tell the truth. Ask for forgiveness. Ask if we could just start over.

I heard Cameron place the bongos on the table, pushing a few beer bottles out of the way.

"You mind if I get a picture?" he said.

It didn't matter to me. Cameron couched beside my chair and held his phone out so that both of our faces appeared on its screen. Around dawn, when I was back on Facebook erasing my last post, I saw the picture. Below it, Cameron had typed: "This guy's gonna be alright." It had 12 likes and no comments.

###

After he left, I packed a bag for Orlando, then fell back asleep. When I woke around 10 am, I reached for my laptop and made a couple quick sales, then waited around to make a couple more, and by then it was lunchtime and I hadn't gotten out of the bed yet. It was too late to start a 12-hour trip. Jill was downstairs, in the kitchen. I could hear her emptying the dishwasher, rinsing out the Corona bottles I'd left down there. She came upstairs cradling the stack of towels she'd folded the day before.

"So that was quite a show you had going on Facebook last night," she said.

I ignored her, even as she walked through the bedroom toward the master bath, looking down at me over the stack of towels.

"If you're that obsessed with Greta, why won't you just drive down there, Robb?" she said.

"She's my wife," I said. "You can't be obsessed with your wife."

She sat on the bed beside me, then reclined against Greta's pillow, and I knew that sending her away last night just prolonged an inevitable conversation, a conversation about feelings, and where we stand, and what it all means, and what we should do next.

“Apparently you can,” she said. “I mean, a fake suicide post? If that’s not an obsession. What’s weird to me is that you never seemed all that interested in her before, at least not since I’ve been around here.”

She sat up and picked some lint off the bedspread as I hit send on a message to a client just starting his day out West.

“It’s not my fault,” I said. “If that guy Cameron hadn’t come over in the middle of the night I would have erased it right away and nobody would’ve seen it.”

“Not your fault? My Gosh, Robb, has anything ever been your fault?”

“You don’t have to stay here, you know, if I’m getting on your nerves,” I said.

My inbox dinged. Another potential sale had come in.

“Um-uh,” she said. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily. You’re not just going to decide that I got fed up with you so you can tell yourself, ‘I just can’t find a woman who can tolerate me.’ Me, me, me. Wah, wah wah.”

“Jesus, are you finished yet?” I said. “I’ve actually got stuff to do here.”

“There’s something I’d really like to know,” she said. “What exactly do you think is happening here? Because I think I know what your problem is now. I’ve got you figured out.”

“I had no idea that hired help could be this insightful,” I said. “I guess this is a pretty good deal after all. Hire a housekeeper and get a shrink for free.”

If the house hadn’t been empty, someone would have appreciated my assessment. I felt sure of it.

“That’s just it,” she said. “That’s exactly what I mean. Now you’ve decided I’m just an annoying employee, and there’s nothing anybody can say to convince you otherwise. I mean it, Robb, just tell me. Just tell me what you think has been going on for these past few months. I’d like to hear it from your point of view.”

I closed my eyes. Mid-day is always a slow time for sales, but still, I could think of something better to do than to sit here in a therapy session with Jill. Still, it was kind of fun to be talking like this. It might help me decide what to do. It might be a rehearsal in case I did go down and talk to Greta tomorrow. They were a lot alike, Greta and Jill. Not like sisters, exactly, but maybe cousins. Jill would be the cousin who went skinny dipping in the canal growing up while Greta volunteered at the hospital or something. Greta was the one who would disappear mysteriously when things got tough while Jill would stick around to hash it out so she could decide whether to stay or go.

“So are you going to tell me my problem?” I said.

“You think something up or you decide something, and it becomes the truth for you, that’s your problem,” she said, “in a nutshell.”

“That makes no sense,” I said.

“You can’t separate what you think from what’s true and you don’t have to,” she said. “You’ve got enough money to create your own reality, I guess.”

“Well, that’s quite a hypothesis,” I said. “Too bad there’s no way to test it.”

Jill reached over and slammed my laptop shut. I barely got my fingers off the keys in time to avoid her smashing them.

“It’s actually real easy to test,” she said. “Just tell me the truth. What you think is the truth, about us, about why Greta left. The whole story, start to finish. The truth.”

###

There just wasn’t that much to tell. We interviewed Jill, and like I already said, Greta thought I had a thing for her, and maybe I did, but only because she reminded me of Greta. It didn’t matter one way or the other because I planned to be away from home when Jill worked anyway. I tried to mix things up and go places like the library or the locally owned coffee places downtown to get online. But Caribou Coffee at Foxcroft was still my favorite place to work. They have good WiFi and you know what you’re getting from a place like that. It’s not like Starbucks, where you never know if they’ll be a place to sit or if the coffee was roasted 10 years ago.

The only thing that bothers me about Caribou is the way they have those vinyl easy chairs set up in pairs, as if everybody walks in for coffee two by two and has lots of important stuff to talk about, as if it’s not possible to sit and have coffee by yourself. What really happens is you sit down alone and another person, all alone, has to walk up and ask that awkward question – “Is anybody sitting here?” – even though it’s so obvious you’re alone.

So, one day in Caribou, after Jill had been working for us a couple months, a young woman named Dawn asked me that very question, if anybody was sitting there, in the seat opposite me.

“Nah. Go ahead. It’s all you,” I told her. I moved my coffee cup closer to my side of the table that sat between our two chairs, and that ended our conversation, more or less. She opened a textbook. Interior design, I think. Dawn looked like she’d had a rough morning. She wore a black hairnet which she took off and stuffed into her back pocket after she sat down. Everything else she wore was black, too, but not in a high school gothic kind of way. More in a fast-food-breakfast-place-uniform kind of way.

She had a name tag above her left breast that said “DAWN.” I remember it because, at first glance, I thought it said “DAMN.” Other than the shiny name tag, the only other non-black element to her attire were the remnants of flour on her pants legs. It looked as though she had rubbed her hands there quite a bit while baking something. And, oh yeah, also not black was this two-inch or so span of skin you could see right above Dawn’s sock line when she sat down beside me and her pants legs rose up a little.

Something about every stitch of Dawn’s clothes being black, even her shoestrings, got me imagining Dawn in whatever apartment or dorm room she called home. Early that morning, before work, getting ready for work, taking a shower. I imagined her arm reaching out of the shower for a black towel, then digging around in a pile of laundry for the black clothes she now wore.

I imagined myself going home with her right then and untying her black shoelaces, peeling her out of the black layers one by one until whatever soft warmth inside lay bare.

It’s bad manners to stare at the skin above someone’s ankle, so when I found myself doing so, I made a deliberate effort to look around the coffee shop at the antlered

animal heads, the exposed pine beams, the fake fireplace crackling, even in August. I'd noticed all this before. Usually there are long pauses between sells when I work.

By work I mean wait and be ready to act. I run 21 blogs that deal with the topic of supplemental health insurance options for Medicare recipients. Each blog has a form to fill out if you want more information. Every day 25 or so people, most with aol.com e-mail addresses, submit that form, and I immediately sell their contact information to one of a dozen or so insurance agents who then follow up with the interested party for the purpose of selling policies.

Originally I sent all these leads to Jim, Greta's dad, in exchange for a flat monthly rate. This whole thing was more or less his idea, but I knew how to build it. Jim sold so many policies that he could retire early, so now I sell the leads, and I often I take in \$2,000 a day, tons more than I ever made selling Chevrolets and Buicks. I don't keep all that, of course. I pay a search engine optimization guy \$1,000 a month to keep my blogs high in the search results, and I pay Greta's little brother Luke \$1,500 a month to write content for the blogs. It doesn't matter what he writes but I need something new on each blog every couple days. It's good money, but I have to be fast. This kind of data has an expiration date. If it's more than a few hours old, I have to discount heavily to make a sell because by then the person who filled out the form may have already bought a policy or forgotten about the whole thing.

And mid-morning is my busiest time of day. By then, the "Today Show" has devolved into a series of bad advice columns, and the buffet lunches are not open yet. It's prime time for network traffic at the retirement villages of the East Coast, plus it's rise-

and-shine time in Arizona. So staring at Dawn's lower leg area was costing me money. Yet I ignored my itch to open my laptop because that's always such a conversation stopper.

"I'm glad this place stayed open out here," I said in Dawn's direction. "It's nice. I heard they closed a lot of these places a few years ago."

Dawn looked up from her interior design textbook just long enough to agree that it was, indeed, a nice option for a mid-morning break, all of which she expressed with one word: "Yeah."

"But I don't know who they're trying to fool with all the Arctic decor," I said. I pointed out the antlered animal heads all around us and the reindeer paws on the upholstery as if I'd never noticed them before. "I mean we all just walked across that 90-degree parking lot, right? Now we're supposed to be in Alaska?"

She looked up again, picked up her coffee cup and laughed. Actually it was more of a louder-than-usual exhalation. I was out of observations. Once again my gaze lowered. She stood and closed the book in one, sudden motion and walked to the restroom, then out of the shop.

After Dawn left, I opened my laptop. Four contacts had come in and I was able to bundle them together for a quick sale with only a slight discount since they were only an hour old.

After I made the sale I realized I'd forgotten what Dawn looked like. In her empty chair I could picture only a neat stack of black clothes waiting to hold her body again. At her home I imagined drawers full of black undergarments, a closet full of black clothes. If

I hadn't forgotten how to carry on a conversation, if I could have kept her around a few more minutes, maybe I would be home with her now, helping her out of that dusty black uniform. I'd lost it, any charm I ever had. I made a lot of money selling these insurance leads, but to sell cars for a living, it took boldness and charisma, in the perfect combination, and I'd lost it.

I went home, even though it was mid-afternoon, and Jill was there and Greta was not. Greta was out shopping for baby stuff, and the guest room door stood open, and the sunlight coming through the window in there hugged the rounded corners of that mattress and I knew it would do the same to Jill if she would slip out of that denim uniform, and so I just asked her, as if I were asking her to bring me a fresh Newcastle.

“Would you take that little jumpsuit off?” I said.

“I don't think so,” she said. “I don't do stuff like that for money.”

She backed away, across the kitchen, toward the door to the carport, but she laughed a little, too, as if this were a game, and she hadn't left the house, and she certainly hadn't slapped me.

“I didn't offer to pay you.” I said, “I'm just asking because I want to see how you do it. I won't touch you. Just take it off and keep it off for five minutes, then put it right back on. That's all I'm asking.”

“I could tell you had some problems the first time I came here,” she said. “I just wasn't sure what they were.”

“You're right,” I said. “And I know it's not fair to you, and I wouldn't be asking except I'm just intrigued by, well, by you, by the way you move and the way you dress,

and like I said, I wouldn't even touch you if you said not to. And I'd never ask again if you'd do it just this once. I promise."

I couldn't tell what she would do, whether I had talked her into it or whether she would turn and escape into the carport and out of the house forever. I'd said all I could say, though. It was time to keep quiet, to act like I didn't care one way or the other what she did, whether she bought the car, whether she touched her zipper.

She walked toward me, past me, and the look on her face, a playful disbelief, told me to follow her, into the guest room where, slowly, she did everything I had asked, standing beside the bed, the suit unzipped to her waist. Then she pushed it down her legs to the floor, wiggling her hips a little in the process, selling it, yes. Then she just stood there, staring back at me.

"Your shoes, too," I said. "I want the full effect."

She kicked those off without untying them, then stepped out of the denim puddle the suit had formed at her ankles. I stepped toward her and she didn't turn away, didn't lift her hands to keep me at a distance. I didn't plan for all this to become a regular habit. I guess she didn't either. And each time, we agreed to stop, that this would be the last time. That's what we were talking about a few days ago, the day Greta got home unexpectedly, the day she found Jill in the guest room undressed, pretending to be asleep.

"I think Greta knows," she said. "She's been treating me differently."

"It's this nesting instinct," I said. "That probably has a lot to do with it. She's always talking about hormones making her act strangely."

“No, I mean a lot differently,” Jill said, “for the past week or so. She’s been doing a lot of my usual work, too. I wonder if she found a condom wrapper or something in here while she was cleaning behind me? Or your shoes. You’ve left them in here several times.”

“I’m trusting you to make sure something like that doesn’t happen,” I said.

“When the baby comes, that’s the end for us,” she said. “I can’t afford to get fired now that I’m finally back in school.”

Before I could agree (I always agreed), we heard her Babies ‘R’ Us bag rustling through the kitchen door. I grabbed my clothes and dashed up the stairs. Jill dove back under the covers.

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“I didn’t know that’s what you did for a living,” Jill said. She’d been in Greta’s closet while I poured my heart out, trying on some of Greta’s non-maternity clothes as she listened.

“What did you think I did all day?”

“I don’t know. Stock trading or something,” she said.

“You really don’t know anything about me,” I said.

“I know enough.”

Five ripe sells waited for me, in my inbox. Six hundred dollars. Maybe eight. Yet I didn’t have the energy to steer the cursor around the screen. Jill sat on the bed beside

me, then rested against the pillow, smoothing out the wrinkles in the housecoat of Greta's she'd found and put on.

"I just tell people we met in a bar," she said. "It's a lot simpler. And I hope you never talk to that Dawn again."

"Who?" I said, then I remembered Dawn, who probably baked biscuits today or had just gotten home from Caribou Coffee where she'd been able to do her homework without having some guy staring at her shoestrings and trying to strike up a conversation.

"Seriously, though," Jill said. "What are you going to do when Greta comes back?"

"Who?" I said, but she didn't bite.

"Seriously, Robb," Jill said.

"If Greta walked up those stairs, right now," I said, motioning toward the hall, "and she saw you in her bed wearing her clothes, you mean?"

"You know that's what I mean," Jill said. "What would you do?"

"What would I do?"

"My Gosh," she said. "You don't have a clue, do you? Just imagine it. Imagine she's coming up the steps. You hear her footsteps. What's your instinct?"

We could have gone on like that the rest of the afternoon. Me stalling, Jill wanting an answer, me stalling a little more. Jill doesn't give up easily, though, and if I didn't answer now, she'd be asking again tonight or tomorrow.

"I'd rip that housecoat off and start giving it to you," I said, "making as much noise as possible."

“No you wouldn’t,” she said.

“Well, if you know so much, what would you do?” I asked.

“I’d look her in the eye,” Jill said, “and say, ‘Robb has something he wants to say to you,’ then I’d step into the hall to listen.”

“And what do you think you’d hear?”

“I’d hear you saying that things had changed, that you’d fallen in love with me, that you wanted what was best for the baby and wanted an amicable separation, that you’d pay for her a place to stay,” Jill said. “What else?”

“That’s a lot,” I said. “Could you write all that down?”

She laughed, and I opened my laptop. Even if she had written it out for me, I could never have said something so clear and honest. I hadn’t been those things to Greta and I couldn’t be for Jill. If Greta walked up the steps, I’d tell her the truth. That I’d just gotten so lonely. That this baby meant so much to her but, to me, it was an abstraction, a problem to be solved. That at the end of the day, this Jill meant nothing. That we needed a fresh start. What else could I say? I can’t afford a divorce. Not right now.

CHAPTER III
THE FOUR HORSEMEN

“Maybe it was just me,” Chris said after we found four seats together on the Amtrak back to Raleigh, “but the whole game struck me as kind of, I don’t know, silly?”

Devin and Adam, their heads against their Amtrak-supplied pillows, glanced at Chris but didn’t answer. We’d just seen the Carolina Panthers beat the San Francisco 49ers in Charlotte and had gotten back to the train station just in time for the trip back home.

“You know what I mean?” Chris said. He looked back across the folded-out train table and into the blank stares of Devin and Adam. Then he turned toward me, in the seat beside him.

I’ve never been one to leave people hanging when they’re trying to start a conversation. That’s how I got to be one of the Four Horsemen to begin with, 23 years ago, in tenth grade, as a big group of us stood around the cafeteria, waiting for the fifth-period bell to send us to Algebra. We all knew Devin had the hots for our Algebra teacher. Most of us did. Unlike the rest of us, though, Devin talked about her all the time, saying that if only she would keep him after class, he could lay her across her desk and help her wiggle out of that pencil skirt.

When some of the other guys asked what Devin would do if he found himself in just that situation, Devin started thrusting his hips and chanting the Pythagorean

Theorem: “A-squared plus B-squared equals C-squared. A-squared plus B-squared equals C-squared. You know what I’m saying? A-squared plus B-squared equals C-squared.” His question seemed rhetorical, but Devin kept it up, waiting for somebody to answer. “Yeah,” I said, finally, “We know what you mean.” He stopped thrusting and put his arm around my shoulders. The bell rang. We walked to class together.

I didn’t know what Chris meant about the Carolina Panthers’ game being silly, though, and in the past 23 years I had learned not to say I did when I didn’t.

“Silly?” I said.

“I don’t know. It’s just – the outfits, the bright colors, that big, furry Panther mascot running into the stadium with smoke going everywhere,” Chris said. “Fans with their faces painted beating on drums. Imagine you didn’t know anything about football. Nothing at all. How would what we saw today strike you?”

“As kick-ass,” Devin said. He pulled off his red, oversized headphones and rested them around his neck. “That hit Kuechly laid on their running back? My teeth rattled and we were in the second deck. I bet the guys standing at the urinals felt that.”

Adam sat up straighter in his seat, his pillow dribbling down his shoulder, then onto the floor. “I know,” he said. “I bet the water in the urinals shook. Can you imagine how that must feel? I bet he’ll sleep in the ice bath tonight.”

“I wonder if they have those ice baths on the plane back to San Fran?” Devin said. “If not they should.”

“I bet they do these days,” Adam said. “Don’t you?”

“That’s kind of what I mean,” Chris interrupted. “I mean, this is supposed to be just a game, right?”

“Yeah,” Devin said. “Is that your point?”

Devin looked at me to gauge my reaction. I looked out the window. This early in the season, in September, there’s still daylight outside when the train pulls out of Charlotte late Sunday afternoons. But we hadn’t left the train yard, and freight cars blocked my view.

“Forget it,” Chris said. “It must just be me. For some reason, the whole spectacle struck me as a little strange, especially after not seeing a game since last Christmas. That’s all. Forget I mentioned it.”

“Alright, man, alright,” Devin said. He slipped his headphones back on but didn’t click play on his iPod’s playlist. Devin shares playlists with us for both directions of the train ride to see the Panthers in Charlotte on Sundays. Megadeath, Metallica, Tool, Guns & Roses and Pavement for the trip down; Toto, REO Speedwagon, Sting and even some Kool & the Gang for the ride back to Raleigh. It’s the same stuff we listened to back in high school, often while shooting pool on Friday nights at Devin’s house. Devin still has the same pool table. It’s in his garage now.

Normally I don’t listen to Devin’s playlists. I prefer looking out the window, watching for new things. On the train, the towns come out of nowhere. You’re mesmerized by the trees gliding by, and with no warning, a dozen or so backyards materialize and then, a town square with a few people walking around, maybe a dry fountain or a Civil War memorial. We’ve made this trip at least a hundred times in the

past 15 years, but each time I see something new. Sometimes I even see a town I've never noticed before, which seems impossible, but it's true, though "town" isn't quite the right word. They're more like rows of buildings at crossroads with a flashing light above them. They come and go before you've had a chance to even look for a town name. Even the bigger places like Kannapolis and Burlington just sort of materialize. Train riders do not see welcome signs to let you know you're somewhere until you're there, right in the middle of someplace new, and still moving on.

Devin doesn't seem to care whether I listen or not, just as long as the four of us meet at 5:30 am at the train station in Raleigh five or six times each football season. Basically, all of the 1 pm games. Devin is the kind of guy you can't say no to, and he really doesn't even ask anymore anyway. He assumes we're all up for spending our Sundays like this. He owns the four stadium seat licenses, which he bought before he got married, when he had more money, and the licenses give him the right to buy four season tickets every season. The rest of us pay him back for our tickets gradually throughout the season. He even brings everybody a biscuit and coffee from Hardee's or Bojangles' when we meet.

In Charlotte, after we get off the train, he hails a cab to take us Uptown to Bank of America Stadium, and he has never once asked us to help pay for it, even though it costs 10 times more than the city bus we could get on outside the train station. It seems kind of weird to me, all this trouble he goes to, but that's Devin.

I have to admit, most Sundays I'd rather stay home, sleep in, cut the grass, or whatever. I try not to, but Devin's assumptions that we're all up for nine hours on a train

and four hours in a football stadium all without being asked first has started to bother me more lately. I don't understand this impulse of Devin's to keep the Four Horsemen – him, me, Chris, and Adam – alive. I've never talked to Adam and Chris about it, but when Chris started asking about football, I couldn't help but wonder if he felt the same way about our little group.

“I still wouldn't mind knowing what you mean,” I said to Chris, “about the game today?” He looked up from inspecting a fingernail cuticle. Chris was the fourth and final Horseman, after showing up at East Fork High after Christmas break in our junior year. He'd come from Santa Barbara, California, wearing sandals. A few years later, when I was at N.C. State, a bunch of guys wore sandals – Texas, Birkenstocks and all – but not at East Fork High, not in 1993, except for Chris. We called him Jesus for the first few weeks we knew him. “What happened to your robe, man?” we'd say, or “Let me see those scars.”

His locker was right below Devin's. They got to talking one day, and the next Friday night, when I went over to Devin's to shoot pool, Chris sat there in the corner, a pool cue wedged between the soles of his sandals. It was Devin's idea to call us the Four Horseman. Adam had suggested the Fab Four, but Chris said it already had been taken. Adam, Devin and I knew the Four Horseman had been claimed, too; I didn't mention it because pro wrestling would have been pretty hard to explain to Chris.

“I can't explain it,” Chris said. “It was just a feeling sitting out there in the stands. There's so many – what, 50,000 people? – all yelling at these guys?”

“Seventy-five thousand,” Adam said, putting his game program on the laminate tabletop.

“OK,” Chris said. “Seventy-five thousand, then, all cheering when somebody gets his head bashed in or his neck snapped back, and probably brain damage in a few years. You’ve heard about this brain disease they’re saying football players get.”

“Injuries are part of the game,” Devin said. “It’s actually a lot safer than when we played.”

My Gosh, we hardly played. What Devin meant was that the four of us went out for football our senior year, though none of us had worn pads or a helmet before tryouts that July. We all made the team, but most likely because everybody made the team at East Fork High.

“It’s not just the safety issue,” Chris said. The year we played Chris started the season as back-up punter. A couple weeks into the season, the starting punter got accepted into the arts school across town to study classical guitar, so Chris got bumped to starter. The rest of us were backup tight ends and linebackers who seldom saw the field.

“You said something about mascots and team colors,” I said. This was the most interesting conversation we’d had in years, and I wasn’t quite ready to let it go, even though I could see the topic had started to irritate Devin.

“Yeah, that was probably part of it, too.” Chris said. “It reminded me of ancient Rome or something. All of us looking down into a pit, watching some kind of carnage.”

“The Gladiators or whatever never got paid hundreds of millions of dollars, though,” Adam said. “Right, Devin?”

Adam had a psychology degree from Appalachian State, but he'd never used it. Instead he worked for a concrete company pouring foundations and sidewalks and patios all week and often on the weekends. Since Devin taught high school world history, Adam considered him a scholar.

"That's right," Devin said. "If you outlasted the lions or bears, your prize was keeping your organs inside your body."

"I'm not sure paying them makes it alright," Chris said.

"Makes what alright?" Devin asked.

"Makes it alright to stand there cheering like mad men when a guy gets his brain pounded into sand like that," Chris said. "I have clients who make more money than football players and they don't have to put their lives at risk every Sunday at 1 o'clock. I don't know. I shouldn't have tried to explain a weird feeling. Let's just forget it."

"No, that's OK," Devin said. "There's nothing wrong with saying how you feel, man. If you feel like the game is too rough then why don't you just say so?"

"Yeah," Adam added. "It's best that you let us know. My company got the concrete contract at a new condo complex out Capital Boulevard. I'll tell my crew not to be too rough on the spikes with those 16-pound hammers tomorrow in case you happen to drive by."

"Great, Adam, thanks for that insight," Chris said. "Like I said before, let's just forget about it. Just drop it. I should have known better than to talk about something abstract with you guys."

I should have known better than to keep the conversation going in the first place, but it was too late to go back now. It was up to Devin to let it go. If Devin could leave Chris alone, Adam would do the same. It would be a quiet train ride home, and then we'd have a couple weeks before the next game, and the whole thing would blow over, and we'd be the Four Horsemen again when we showed up at the train station at dawn.

It made me wonder, though, how we got along so well back in high school, when we saw each other every day? Back then, if Chris said something crazy, something like, "You know, that Algebra teacher really isn't that hot?" Adam would just punch him in the shoulder and that would be the end of it. And if I picked up Chris's argument, saying, "You're right, I saw her at the grocery store last Saturday without makeup and thought it was my grandma," Devin would question my manhood, and I'd take it all back.

"Well, I'll just say one more thing," Devin said, "in defense of abstract thought. As a teacher, the lowest grade I can give students now is a 60. We don't want the kids to feel too bad about themselves, so no more zeroes. They can do absolutely nothing. They don't know the First Amendment from Ancient Rome and I still give a 60. I don't know, man. Something has always seemed wrong about that to me. These kids are 16, 17 years old."

"That's crazy," Adam said. "We're creating a bunch of softies looking for an easy way out. When we were that age you got tackled, you got your head pounded into the ground, and you liked it."

"You're right," Devin said. "Someday we're going to be watching professional flag football."

“You guys sound like somebody’s granddad,” I said. Chris could take up for himself, sure, but I still wanted to cool things down before Adam or Devin said something that would offend other passengers on the train.

“Or watching a bunch of punters playing soccer,” Adam said, ignoring me.

“Yeah,” Devin added, “and saying ‘Namaste’ to each other.”

Chris put his earbuds in as the train crossed over Interstate 85 near Concord. On the pavement below, tail lights glowed in the dusk, barely moving. This is the point in the trip when Devin usually points to the cars below and says, “See? That is why we take the train.” Today, though, he didn’t mention it, though I wished he would have said something routine like that, something to get things back on course. Instead, no one said anything for about 15 minutes, and the argument seemed to be over.

“You know,” Chris said, “I think I’m the only one of us to ever make a tackle in a live game.”

Devin had put his earphones back on, but he still hadn’t hit play. Adam picked up the information card about the dining car. Once again, I could have left it alone and no one else would have asked Chris for clarification.

“Who did you tackle again Chris?” I asked.

“It must have been the placekicker,” Devin said, removing his headphones.

“No,” Adam said. “I remember what he’s talking about. That game at Eastern Guilford? That guy returning Chris’s punt? He was gone. Chris was the only guy between that beast and another touchdown.”

“I don’t remember any of this,” Devin said, but we all knew he did. How could he forget? We’d talked about it several times before.

“You mean you don’t remember seeing Chris’s helmet flying through the air after that guy ran into him?” I asked.

“His knee hit me right in the chin,” Chris said. “Snapped my chin strap in two.”

“Oh yeah,” Devin said. “That was the night your mom and dad came out on the field. I do remember that.”

“That guy played at State and then got drafted by the Rams,” Chris said. “They won the Super Bowl his first year.”

The train slowed and then stopped in Salisbury. We watched out the window as an old man struggled to fold his walker so he could board. The train steward stepped onto the platform to help. The old man stomped out a cigarette.

“I threw up all night after that,” Chris said. “That’s why my parents took me home, Devin. I was about to throw up out there on the 35 yard line.”

“And it looks like you turned out OK,” Devin said. “That’s my whole point.”

“I had other options and I got that scholarship at Davidson. I was thinking just now, though, that what if football had been my only way to go to college? That’s my point, Devin. What if football had been the only way I could make a living?”

“Then I guess the world would be short one wealth management adviser,” Adam said. He waited for Devin’s approval, and looked puzzled when it didn’t arrive.

“Did you ever think that maybe you just weren’t made for football?” Devin said.

“Yes, I know everybody’s different, but still,” Chris interrupted. “I mean, just think about it. You’re a history guy, right? Fifty years from now, or a hundred years, I wonder what our grandchildren will think about all this? About us paying hundreds of dollars to watch people get seriously injured. That’s all I’m saying. People used to think it was perfectly safe to smoke cigarettes. Would you let your kids start smoking cigarettes? Does your high school encourage cigarette smoking?”

“So you’re saying you want to quit coming down here on Sundays?” Devin said. “If that’s what you mean, just say it, man. There’s no reason for all this philosophy.”

“I’m not saying that,” Chris said. “I’d just like to think I can communicate a simple point. That’s all.”

“Well, why not quit coming?” Devin said. “If you feel weird. That’s not cool is it? I mean, I don’t want to force you to watch something you’re not comfortable with.”

“You’re not forcing me to do anything,” Chris said, looking directly at Devin now. “If I want to stop I’ll stop.”

“Because, you know, I can sell your tickets on StubHub or NFL Ticket Exchange. It’s not like you paid me for them yet anyway,” Devin said. “Just remind me to check with the guy who buys them to make sure he has the balls to sit through a football game.”

“Devin,” Chris said, “we’ve been friends a long time, and I’m going to let this go. I’m willing to let this go if you are. There’s no reason to throw away a friendship over this.”

“Friendship?” Devin said. “Is this really a friendship? I mean, this is all we ever do together anymore and it sounds like we can never do this again.”

Outside, the tree line broke as we crossed the Yadkin River, and the sudden change in scenery, even at dusk, grabbed our collective attention for a second.

Downstream, a power plant gushed gray smoke.

“This train is polluting the hell out of the environment, Chris” Adam said. “That can’t be cool, can it Chris?”

“Shut up, Adam,” I said. “Let’s just stay out of this.”

“I don’t know, Scottie,” Devin said to me. “Do you even know that guy? ‘Our grandchildren will think we’re barbarians!’ Was anybody offended that I brought ham biscuits this morning? I forgot to check with Chris’s grandchildren.”

Chris and I had never been that close, but this whole conversation had been my fault. I’d prolonged the conversation because I had been curious about what would happen if Chris picked a little at the last strip of glue that held us together. I’d been bored, too bored to watch the trees as they thinned and turned into towns, then turned back into trees again.

“I’m hungry,” I said, “and the dining car closes at seven. Let me out, Chris.”

It was a gamble. I’d hoped someone would follow me – someone besides Adam, I mean. If Devin or Chris didn’t follow me, I’d have to sit back down and say I’d changed my mind, that I wasn’t hungry after all, and I’d have to hope that everybody could keep their cool for another couple hours.

“I’m hungry too,” Devin said. “Want me to bring you something back, Adam?”

“Maybe one of those microwave pizzas if they have any left,” Adam said.

We walked up the aisle, grabbing each seat for stability. No matter how many times I've done it, walking backward on a train that's moving forward still feels strange at first, like something has gone wrong with the laws of physics.

"You're taking all this too seriously," I said as Devin and I stretched out in the nearly empty dining car, each of us taking up a seat for two. "Don't you think?"

"I don't know, Scottie," he said. "It just sucks."

"What sucks?" I said.

"I don't know. I see these kids every day at school, and sometimes I just wish we could go back, you know?"

I didn't know what to say.

"Don't you?"

"Back to what?" I asked.

"Nevermind," Devin said. "Forget I mentioned it."

Behind him, the back sides of shut-down furniture factories glided by, their concrete crumbling in the moonlight. Inside the train, I searched for something in the past worth re-living. High school, college, year after year, all a blur. Had I not lived those days fully enough to care that they had come and gone? Had I not lived those moments deeply enough for them to leave an impression in their wake? I'd lost jobs, gotten new jobs, gotten married, divorced, gone on business trips year after year, eaten at nice restaurants, lost touch with friends, made new friends.

Nothing really stood out. Yet, for some reason, the first Thanksgiving I spent with my now ex-wife's family came to mind. Without warning, and with the food already on

our plates, her mom asked everyone to say something they were thankful for. I couldn't think of anything to say, and after a few awkward seconds of mumbling, I looked down at my plate. "The food." I nearly blurted it out. I was so glad to have an answer. "I'm thankful for this food." My brothers-in-law and their wives chuckled quietly, winking at their teen-age kids who had already shared their thoughts about the importance of relationships and faith. Now, looking back, it didn't seem like such a bad answer. Isn't it good to be thankful for things that you can see and taste, here and now?

CHAPTER IV
IMPOSSIBLE THINGS

The darkness of their dorm room invited an uncommon honesty, so Gene told his roommate Jaydn everything. It took a while, and Gene knew he was repeating himself. He wondered if Jaydn had fallen asleep, so he asked him, and Jaydn said no, that he was only deep in thought, that he was thinking about his oldest sister, Rhoda. It just so happened that this Rhoda had an empty room for rent across town. Gene could move in at Rhoda's, here in Greenwood, and stay out of Barnwell, his hometown, and away from the wedding coming up in August. Away from Katherine's wedding, which would probably be the event of the summer down there in Barnwell. Gene sat up. Jaydn was right: Having responsibilities, like paying the rent, might clear his head. Maybe that's how everybody did it? By staying busy cutting their grass or cooking their dinner or starting a business?

Alone, on Rhoda's porch the next morning, a Saturday in the middle of May, the same plan made less sense. One of the chains holding up Rhoda's porch swing had come loose from the soft wood of the ceiling. Weeds thrived between the bricks of the porch steps while dead plants, still in their pots, hung from the hooks above his head. Gene could still call his grandmother, Grandie, to come get him. He could explain everything as Grandie's Buick hugged the two-lane highway back to Barnwell.

Did he need to pay rent to Rhoda when his hollow bedroom door in Grandie's condo could hold back the entire world? Sure, Katherine's wedding would be just blocks

away. He'd hear the church bells and the bagpipes. Katherine always said she wanted bagpipes. But Grandie's air conditioner, as it battled the relentless heat, could dampen all but the loudest sounds from outside, and he could sleep through the whole thing, with his dreams penetrated only by the smell of the scrambled eggs and bacon waiting for him when he got up.

"Hey there," a voice on the front porch said. "You must be Gene?"

The voice had come from the screen door, which was so dark, either from dirt or by design, that Gene couldn't see the house's actual front door, which had stood open as he loitered on the porch, contemplating whether to leave.

"I didn't know if you planned to knock or what," Rhoda said, opening the screen door.

It was Saturday morning outside, on Edgewood Street, but it looked like a Monday for Rhoda, whose black skirt, dress shoes, and silky top could have come from Grandie's closet. Jaydn had said his sister Rhoda was the oldest of five kids and that he was the youngest, but Gene did not expect Rhoda to look this old. As his eyes adjusted to the dirty, brown screen, tiny wrinkles around Rhoda's eyes and mouth appeared. She looked at least 40.

"Well, do you want to come in?" she said. "We've got an audit coming up at work, so I'm about to go into the office for a few hours."

Audits, offices, hours – this was the language of grownups, of making your way, of sacrificing, even your Saturdays – especially your Saturdays – for something important. When you're on your own, life is not a honeymoon. The best you can hope for

after a long day's work is a glass of wine, jazz on the stereo, or maybe Sinatra, or the Everly Brothers. Vinyl.

"Here's the lease agreement," Rhoda said, handing over a page of still-damp ink. For \$300 a month, Gene would have his own side of the pantry and his own shelf and drawer in the fridge. He'd have his own bathroom, and his bedroom already had been furnished by Rhoda's last tenant who had just moved out to live with her boyfriend.

Back outside, tree roots buckled the sidewalk. As Gene walked to the bank to withdraw the first month's rent and security deposit, he tripped and grabbed at a neighbor's picket fence to regain his balance. He looked around to see who had noticed. Only the empty cars parked parallel on the street and the windows on the houses. In this neighborhood, the tree branches filtered the sunlight and softened it before allowing it to touch the ground. It was the perfect union between light and shade, unlike in Barnwell, where the very same sun assaulted Grandie's condo complex, pounding the asphalt and gulping up the retention pond, leaving it a soft patch of mud by the Fourth of July. The same sun. So much in life had to do with where you were.

And with how much money you had, and Gene had a lot. More than nineteen-hundred dollars. He still had a four-digit balance on the ATM receipt after withdrawing the \$600 for Rhoda. Gene had maxed out his student loan eligibility back in the fall, even though Grandie said not to, but he'd proven her wrong. He'd been smart enough to save the refund from Lander's business office. He didn't save it all. He bought a lot of music on iTunes, about a thousand dollars' worth, and he'd borrowed Jaydn's car to go out on a few dates with Katherine, and there was that trip they took to that music festival,

Bonnaroo. Someone less responsible would have bought a used car, or replaced the laptop he'd accidentally left in the school cafeteria. That person would not be paying rent at his very own place, a house on Edgewood Street. Even the name of his street sounded independent and grown-up. Edgewood Street. Not Blissful Road or Whippoorwill Trail or Lovebird Lane.

He stopped at the Scotchman convenience store at Edgewood and Main, a block from the house, and bought a newspaper. He slid it beneath his arm as he continued along the sidewalk, grateful to be here. Not grateful that Katherine dumped him, but glad that it wasn't him getting married at the Presbyterian church in August. Grandie was right: There was always something to be thankful for. Back at the house, a note clothes-pinned to the screen door said Rhoda had already left. Go around back, it said.

###

Grandie binge-watched HGTV with a particular fondness for a show called *House Hunters*, on which Realtors and homebuyers, usually couples, toured properties and – always within the half hour – settled on the best fit. Everybody on the show was spoiled, demanding granite countertops and double vanities in their master bathrooms. Rhoda's back yard, for example, would be a deal breaker for any couple who'd ever been on *House Hunters*, though Gene could detect the remains of a previous order in the yard, like the stone path, which he felt through his shoes beneath the layer of bent-over weeds.

Like Rhoda's note said, the back door was unlocked, and Gene entered the kitchen, which would be a tough sell on *House Hunters*, too. It was just a short hallway

running along the back of the house with the appliances lined up on one side and the counter, sink, and pantry along the other. Elsewhere in the house, the crystal doorknobs were shining selling points as Gene walked up the hallway of closed doors toward his bedroom. Gene opened his blinds and saw, through the branches of a struggling Rhododendron, the grey hospital that loomed over the neighborhood.

But not even the most down-to-earth homebuyers could imagine a future for Rhoda's living room, where a bulky TV rested on a straight chair, and a particle-board desk struggled to hold up a hulking computer monitor from the '90s. Nail holes decorated the walls. Two people could not sit comfortably in the room because boxes or stacks of papers occupied every surface except for one couch cushion.

Fixing up the living room would be Gene's first summer project, his first way to keep his mind off home and off Katherine. The thrift stores of Greenwood would be full of furniture, wall art, and actual TV stands. Or the TV could go. He'd ask Rhoda to help pay for the improvements tonight or in the morning, and she'd have to do something with her boxes of tax information or whatever.

The next two days passed, though, with no sign of Rhoda except for a lone glass of water, left sweating on the kitchen counter. In the late afternoons, Rhoda's Mustang would crunch the acorns in the driveway, then the screen door on the back of the house would slap against its frame. Then Rhoda's heavy heels pounded the hall's hardwoods and her bedroom door closed, its lock clicking into place. A toilet flush, the squeak of tub faucets, and there would be no further sightings of Rhoda. On the third day, Gene

considered leaving her a note, but he wanted to discuss the living room renovations in person. The weekend was coming up, and she'd be off work, so he'd wait until then.

On Saturday and Sunday, he saw only her flower-patterned housecoat floating, ghostlike, and when he glanced up from his iPhone she had vanished, once again, behind her clicking lock. The next Friday, Gene left a note on her bedroom door, but she didn't come home from work that Friday at all, and she never appeared all weekend, and on Sunday night, Gene took the note from the door and tore it into two, four, eight, then sixteen pieces.

By the third weekend Gene had forgotten about improving the living room. He seldom left his bedroom, so there was no longer any urgency. Though Jaydn had insisted that Gene stay off social media, Gene had started scrolling through his friends' Snapchat Stories on his iPhone. He'd unfollowed Katherine, and Katherine had un-friended him, most likely at her new fiance's insistence, so what could it hurt? Everyone else he knew was either at the beach or on a mission trip to Honduras or West Virginia.

Which reminded him of an article he'd seen on The Huffington Post about a school building in West Virginia that got re-painted every single week each summer. A church group from some other state would arrive on a Monday with scaffolding and old clothes. The group would spend the entire week painting the building. The next Monday, another church group would show up in painting clothes, with no idea how pointless their week of labors would be to the impoverished children of the mountains.

They may as well have stayed home, rented a room for the summer, or spent all that gas money on Amazon or iTunes. Gene placed his iPhone on Rhoda's former

roommate's nightstand. It was 11 am on a Tuesday, the first day of summer. He fell asleep.

###

Two hours later, Gene awoke with a new mission, fully formed, in his mind. This is what he would do: Listen to every album in his iTunes library, from A to Z, then write a music review for each one. He'd bought about a hundred albums in the past year, often on the recommendation of someone – a suitemate, Katherine, someone pumping the keg at a Lander Kappa Sig party. Buying music was more fun than listening to it, so each time he opened iTunes, he spent more time shopping than listening. Now, though, this music could be an investment that pays off. He would listen, and put his reviews on a blog, and he could sell ads on the blog to make money. The blog could connect with other music lovers, even change the world. Why hadn't he already thought of this?

The mission's clarity propelled Gene into the kitchen in search of a pad and a pencil, and there it met its first setback. But no matter, he got dressed and walked to the Scotchman, which had three yellowing Steno pads in a stack, on the same row as the motor oil and brake fluid. The store didn't sell pens or pencils, and Gene meant to ask the clerk on the other side of the security glass why not. The clerk. She would be the perfect reader for his new blog. Surely she bought music and could make use of thoughtful album reviews, just like Grandie never bought anything without checking Consumer Reports. Where better to find such insight about music than – the blog needed a name.

“Do you listen to much music?” Gene asked the clerk, who, having rung up the Steno pad, gestured to the slot at the base of the security glass. Gene slid his debit card to her.

He tried again. “What kind of music do you like?”

She slid his receipt back through the slot.

“Can I take this pen?” he asked.

She said something, but the speaker on the security glass didn’t work, and rather than ask for clarification, Gene thanked her for the pen and left, and out on the sidewalk, he arranged his entire iTunes library in alphabetical order, and clicked on the first album, Aberdeen City’s “The Freezing Atlantic” from 2005. He put in his earbuds. He’d need the Internet on Rhoda’s computer to set up a blog, but he could still get started. What is a music review other than words on a page, anyway? “The Freezing Atlantic” plodded along, accompanying Gene’s walk along Edgewood Street and through the front door, into the empty house’s living room and to the desk beside his bed.

The hospital down the street had a front lawn the size of a football field. Someone cut at least part of the grass almost every day. The mowing equipment’s noise blended into the fabric of the neighborhood, but with “The Freezing Atlantic” pulsing in his head, Gene couldn’t hear the buzz of the blade. This made the lawn care man’s movements seem even more fluid as he floated above endless rows of open grass, turning 180 degrees with ease. As long as grass grew, here was a man with a purpose. Why couldn’t Gene be like that? He was: As long as he had an album to review, he had a purpose. The album

ended, and the sound of the mower on the hospital's front lawn resurfaced, and with the pen from the Scotchman clerk, Gene started his review:

“Why did I buy this album?” he wrote. “It isn't too bad, though. Good energy. I wonder who recommended it. If Katherine were here, she'd say turn it down.”

He drew the outline of five stars on his page and colored in two of them. He'd write a longer review later. It was time to move onto second album review, this one for The Avett Brothers' “Gleam II” from 2008. Someone at a frat party had recommended the Avett Brothers, and just seeing the band's name on his phone screen brought back that red Solo cup he'd held, the beer foam that still lined the cup each time he emptied it. He remembered the dancing – the dancing – he'd done with a girl named Ingrid, rubbing himself against her jeans which she wore like an apple peel. He winced even now, months later, at the memory of his behavior and at the chorus of smartphone cameras watching him and Ingrid dance.

But this album sounded nothing like that night: “It opens with a sleeper,” he wrote, “and then another sleeper starts: acoustic guitar, rough voice guy singing.” By the end of that second song, though, the Avett Brothers had erased the distance that separated them from Edgewood Street in Greenwood. The song, called “Murder in the City,” had fallen out of a tree, like a ripe apple. So Gene listened again, and again, and what was there to write on the pad except, “fantastic song”? He started the song a fourth time and stood up, then raised his arm in the air, grabbing at some mist, as he sang along with the line, “Always remember there was nothing worth sharing like the love that let us share our name.” What magic.

Through squinted eyes he saw a figure in the doorway of his bedroom, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over her chest. Gene tugged at the cord of his earbuds, and they fell to his waist.

“No, please, go on,” Rhoda said. “I was enjoying the show.”

Gene tossed his iPhone onto the mattress, then picked it back up to scroll through the screens of apps.

“I just wanted to remind you of the rent,” Rhoda said. “You can put it in the drawer under the coffee machine any time this week.”

Gene nodded, then rolled the earbud cord into a tight circle, but Rhoda didn’t move from the doorway. Did he need to say, “OK, I understand? I’ll put the money in the drawer?”

Instead, Rhoda spoke again.

“There is one more thing,” she said, shifting her weight to the other clog.

“I,” she started, then swallowed, then resumed more quickly: “I may have someone over tonight – a friend from work.”

“OK,” Gene said, and his response sounded more like a question, like he was impatient or annoyed, even though he wasn’t. He considered the needs of others, especially people he lived with, especially people he was in a relationship with, even if that relationship was only landlord and tenant. He wanted Rhoda to know that.

“Do you need me to leave?” he said. “When your friend comes over?”

“Actually, Gene, that would be great,” she said, and she stepped into the room, as if Gene’s ability to utter a complete thought had dissolved some invisible barrier.

“But my friend,” she said, “He will probably come over other times when you are here. It’s not a secret or anything, but I’d appreciate if you didn’t tell my little brother. It’s just simpler, so my family doesn’t get the wrong idea, you know?”

Why would he tell Jaydn? How could he tell him? He’d have to text him. When Jaydn suggested that Gene move in at Rhoda’s, Gene thought his old roommate would visit a lot, but Jaydn hadn’t driven up from Charleston even once all summer. His new girlfriend lived down there, too, so –

Rhoda was still talking: “I’m not doing anything wrong,” she was saying. “It’s just too complicated to explain.”

“No worries,” Gene said. “I’ve got stuff to do tonight anyway.”

Thirty minutes later he slid his flip flops from beneath the bed and entered the late afternoon heat, passing the law offices and bank branches of downtown. He thought about going inside the Inn on the Square to check out a wedding rehearsal in progress, but settled instead on the public library which, he soon discovered, subscribed to *Rolling Stone* magazine. Gene found nothing in the current issue that he couldn’t have written. Nothing in the three back issues either. Their access to musicians and concerts made *Rolling Stone*’s writers special, but what Gene had was the ability to connect with ordinary people, like the old man sitting in the library beside him, reading *USA Today*. If this old man needed advice about what album to download for his grandchild, would he rather ask Gene or read *Rolling Stone*? Gene thought about asking the man this very question until he saw his hearing aids. The man also launched into a pretty serious coughing fit.

On his way back home, Gene spent \$35 on a pair of computer speakers he found in CVS. His earbuds had started to make him itch. He'd write the new speakers off as a business expense. The whole night, actually, had been a business trip – a trip that should have lasted longer. When Gene walked into the living room, shopping bag in hand, he heard Rhoda and her friend yelling each other's names while banging something – a headboard? – against the wall of Rhoda's bedroom. People had sex in the dorms at Lander, unlike at Presbyterian College, where Katherine and her new fiance went to school. But even at Lander you had to listen for it. It sounded like a rustling in the dark when you got back from a night class, and you knew not to turn on the lights but to walk back into the hall and disappear a while longer.

This, though. This was how grown-ups did it. They filled the house with their wails and swear words, and their tenants just had to know better than to walk into the middle of it. It took Gene only three steps into the living room to learn this lesson. He walked backward, onto the front porch. The man's name was Everett, if Rhoda's yells were to be believed. Everett's voice had been more of a murmur, like Gene's P.E. coach in high school giving quiet encouragement as the two most out-of-shape kids tried to finish the mile run or do their ten crunches.

Just as it occurred to Gene that he could walk around the block a few times, the front door opened and Everett appeared. Gene noticed his Saucony tennis shoes first. They were huge and untied. Then he saw the man's giant hands, hairy arms, and fleshy face. He wore a watch and medical scrubs. Everett acknowledged Gene with a slight nod

as he walked past him, down the steps, into the street, toward the hospital. Out in the street, he lit a cigarette.

###

Everett came back. Over and over. Not every night, but a lot. Nights with Everett started with Rhoda home from work earlier than usual, banging stuff around in the kitchen, waking Gene. The smell of lasagna or barbecue chicken entered Gene's room not long after. Then Everett arrived, through the front door for a while, but eventually he started using the back, the slapping screen door announcing his arrival. Rhoda and Everett would eat and talk for 20 or 30 minutes at the kitchen counter, then disappear into Rhoda's room.

Good food had not been part of life at Rhoda's before Everett. Rhoda usually brought home takeout from Outback or Moe's for herself. Gene saw the leftovers when he heated his daily bowl of oatmeal, made more tolerable by maple syrup from Rhoda's side of the pantry. Now, though, Everett sucked shrimp scampi from his oversized fingers at the kitchen counter while Gene microwaved Spaghetti O's. Rhoda never offered Gene food, but some nights she and Everett disappeared behind the clicking lock without eating much off their plates, and if things looked untouched, Gene took a few ounces of steak or a few layers of lasagna. Later, when Rhoda scraped the plates into the trash, she never seemed to notice that food had gone missing, and Gene wondered if he, too, would be so unobservant when he was 40. Would he learn how to treat people like they didn't even exist while not being all that mean?

Then, in late July, about a month after Everett's first visit, two Yamaha stereo speakers appeared next to the computer desk in the living room. They were about three-feet tall. A stereo amp rested on top of the speakers, still connected to them by brittle wires.

"I thought you could use this stuff, hotshot," Everett said, walking out of the kitchen spooling spaghetti onto a fork.

"Where'd you get all this?" Gene said.

"It's been in my attic since, I don't know, the early '90s?" Everett said. "Before you were born? I have an old turntable and a tape deck, too, but you can probably just plug your smartphone into this amp. It'll sound a lot better than those computer speakers."

After the first few days, the album reviews had grown harder to finish, and now weeks had gone by without him reviewing a single album. These speakers, though. They would open up the fullness of the music so Gene could capture the emotion of it in his reviews. The reviews would be good enough to put online so he could start selling ads, and just in time. He could afford August's rent, but after that, paying September's would be a much bigger deal, and October's would be impossible.

After Everett and Rhoda disappeared, Gene found his Steno pad and wrote "Pet Sounds" by The Beach Boys at the top of a fresh page. No self-respecting music fan should be without this record, Katherine had said as they drove along the bypass looking for a place to have dinner one night last fall. Gene had borrowed Jaydn's car that night and driven over to pick Katherine up from her dorm at Presbyterian College. She

downloaded “Pet Sounds” for him, right then. She knew his iTunes password. She’d known all his passwords since they met in the tenth grade. The “Pet Sounds” download included the mono and stereo versions, and now, on Rhoda’s couch, Gene couldn’t remember which one Katherine had said mattered most. He listened to both versions between 8 and 10 pm, pad in hand, writing, “I’ve heard of these guys but never paid much attention before. This is an extremely good album. The instruments in use here make for an intriguing combination of sounds, pet or otherwise, ha ha. The lyrics are good, too.”

The pen rolled onto the floor. Gene leaned down to pick it up, but instead, he flicked it hard, farther beneath the couch, as the album started for a third time and he heard, for a third time, how nice it would be for this Beach Boys’ singer and his girlfriend to be older, to hold each other close the whole night through, and all summer he had succeeded at not thinking about it, but come to think of it, wouldn’t it have been nice if Gene had stayed in his dorm room to listen to “Pet Sounds” that night instead of going to that Kappa Sig party? Wouldn’t it have been nice if that girl Ingrid had not smelled like peach blossoms in the middle of winter? Wouldn’t it have been nice, too, if someone hadn’t tagged him in a video of himself grinding against Ingrid’s back pockets? Wouldn’t it have been nice if Katherine had given him a chance to explain that things were different at Lander? That these things happened and they didn’t mean anything? That he’d never met Ingrid before and probably would never see her again? Katherine had said Gene needed to grow up. That she needed someone she could trust. Fair enough. But wouldn’t it have been nice for her to give him a chance instead of getting engaged to this

youth minister, this Boy Scout or whatever he was supposed to be. Wouldn't it be nice if Gene could write a review of "Pet Sounds" that would be good enough to make Katherine understand?

He found the pen and moved on to "Please, Please Me" by The Beatles ("old school rock with some slow spots here and there, kind of surprised it's not better") and then Beck's "Morning Phase" ("Didn't this win album of the year? I guess I can see why."). The next morning, he started on the Cs with The Cars' self-titled album. "Why do I like this?" he wrote. "Should I be admitting that I like this? I know that song 'Who's Gonna Drive You Home' on 'The Squid and the Whale' soundtrack, but this is much, much better." Five stars.

Rhoda and Everett would like The Cars, so he cued it up for when they both arrived later that evening.

"I thought you guys might like this," Gene said as they sat at the table, waiting for some leftover carryout to re-heat in the microwave.

Rhoda paid no attention. "You're probably right," she said.

"The Cars, huh?" Everett said.

"Weren't they popular when you were younger?" Gene said.

Everett leaned over and whispered something in Rhoda's ear and she giggled and slapped his knuckles, and Everett started talking about the stupidity of the hospital system's board of directors, the money he sees wasted even from his lowly position of respiratory therapist. Rhoda agreed, saying that nurses get an \$8,000 bonus just for saying they'll work two more years. Gene left The Cars playing and went into his room. When it

ended, he came out to the living room for his phone. When he unplugged it from the amp, a violent buzz filled the room, rattling the windows. He left it that way.

###

An hour later, with Everett gone and Rhoda's shower running, Gene could no longer tolerate the noise, and he had time for one last album review for the day, the one for "Wish" by The Cure, so he set up shop on the couch. His reviews were getting better. "Could there be a more depressing sound produced in a recording studio?" he wrote. "Does the history of recorded music offer a sadder-sounding album? Dread. More dread. Then a happy song about being in love, sung by the voice of dread, still all crackly sounding. Does he have throat cancer or a mouth full of grits? Who could go for this?"

"My boyfriend loved this album," Rhoda said, from the kitchen doorway, in her flower-patterned housecoat, her hair in a towel wrapped around her head. "I haven't thought about that song in years."

Her lips moved along with the lyrics – "a perfect day for letting go... for setting fire to bridges boats and other dreary worlds you know" – but almost no sound came out of her mouth, just a hoarse whisper.

"The Cure, huh?" Gene said.

"Yeah, I can still remember when he bought that cassette at Musicland in the mall," Rhoda said. "It was raining and his truck, his Ford Ranger, leaked, and the little slip of paper that slid into the cassette case got wet and it blurred the colors."

Gene wanted to say something thoughtful, or maybe share some memory of his own. Like the time he and Katherine had shared an umbrella inside the band bus on the way to a football game because the bus's window wouldn't close all the way and it was raining. But then he'd have to talk about her, and Rhoda would probably tell Everett, and the two of them would be full of advice about going down there, to Barnwell, and trying one more time before it's too late, before the wedding, and Gene knew none of that would work, and the whole point of being here was to get away from all that anyway, to start over. Plus, The Cure had put Rhoda into a trance.

"Were y'all serious?" Gene asked, half-expecting her not to answer.

"Oh God yes," Rhoda said. She'd followed this boyfriend, Daniel, from Charleston to Greenwood because he got a soccer scholarship at Lander. They were going to get married, have kids, the whole deal, but they kept waiting, on graduation, better jobs, home ownership, saving money. They'd bought this very house, on Edgewood Street, and were saving money to fix it up. While waiting, though, Daniel met someone else, out at the Capsugel plant, where he worked in the human resources department.

"They live up in Spartanburg now," Rhoda said. "They have three kids. Probably a dog, although he was more of a cat person."

"Geez," Gene said. Then, hoping to deliver Rhoda back to the safety of happier times, he asked, "Does Everett like The Cure?"

"Everett?" Rhoda said. "I don't know."

"Does he like music in general?"

“I’m not sure,” Rhoda said. “They had that stereo he brought over here, but didn’t he say it had been in the attic a while?”

“Who’s they?” Gene said.

“Everett’s married,” Rhoda said. “He has kids not much younger than you. In high school, I guess.”

On Edgewood Street, Everett’s voice, always quieter than Gene expected, had grown intertwined with the sound of the mower on the hospital lawn, the buzz of the air conditioners and the weed eaters all around, the sound of the hospital Dumpsters crashing to the ground after the garbage trucks picked them up and shook them empty each Tuesday morning. He was part of this new life, this independence, this odd little family.

“Well, is he going to leave his wife?” Gene asked after the next song ended. “I mean, y’all seem pretty serious. At least to me.”

“No,” Rhoda said. “It’s not like that. Why do you care so much anyway? It’s not your business.”

Gene didn’t have a chance to answer before Rhoda turned back into a floating housecoat. He remembered the day earlier in the summer when he walked to the library and returned in time to hear Everett and Rhoda in the bedroom. He didn’t think about the sex. He thought about the man in the library that night reading *USA Today*. The man could have sat anywhere in the periodicals section. Almost every seat had been empty. But he sat right next to Gene, making loud breathing sounds, one of which triggered a wild coughing fit that made the pages of the newspaper wave like a flag in front of him,

making the hairs on Gene's arm issue a warning to leave, to get away. That same breeze blew through Rhoda's living room as The Cure wished impossible things.

###

August started, and some nights after Everett left, while Rhoda showered, Gene started playing "Wish" on Everett's old speakers in the living room. Just about every time, Rhoda appeared and listened, and they talked.

"How about you?" Rhoda said one Friday night. "What are you going to do with the rest of your life?"

The future seemed ghost-like in Rhoda's living room, a place impervious to the passage of time until Gene's phone beeped and set the world into motion again. It had been a while since anyone had texted. The ceremony was the next evening, at 6 pm in Barnwell. Gene could drive down there. Nobody would kick him off the back row in the church. Or he could call her. Phones worked that way, carrying the sounds of voices across the man-made lakes and half-closed shopping centers that divided them.

"I don't know what to do," Gene answered, and for the first time in his memory, Rhoda watched him. She watched him, quietly, for a few minutes before disappearing for the night. As The Cure played itself out, Gene wished she had pulled one of the barstools from the kitchen and sat down. He wished she had asked him what was wrong. He would have told her everything and then asked her what to do. He would have asked what she could have done differently, all those years ago, to stop herself from turning into a middle-age woman so lonely that she cooks big meals for Everett, then lays under him for

10 minutes so he can feel like a man, then gets in the shower so he can leave more graciously. He would have asked her that. Instead, he took two Benadryl so he could sleep.

Mid-afternoon the next day, Rhoda appeared in Gene's doorway. Everett would be stopping by, she said. It was his day off and he was out running errands for his wife.

"Why don't you join us for dinner?" Rhoda said. "I'm making plenty."

They sat in a row at the kitchen counter, on barstools, with Rhoda between Gene and Everett, who was in one of his moods where he found everything funny, from the pieces of rice that Rhoda put in her salt shaker to the number of flavors it took to make Diet Dr Pepper. As Rhoda set the table, he turned his powers of observation onto Gene.

"You're a little young for a mid-life crisis, aren't you, chief?" he said.

"Oh, Everett," Rhoda said, placing squares of eggplant parmesan on each plate. Gene felt her studying his expression to see whether she should intervene more forcefully, to see if he could handle a little ribbing from Everett.

"No, I'm serious," Everett said. "Now's the time to be out going balls to the wall. You're young, and single. I'd give anything to go back to your age again. Hell, just for one night would be worth it."

Gene stuffed his mouth, partly from hunger and partly to keep from having to answer.

"I saw a hot little nursing assistant yesterday about your age," Everett continued. "Want me to bring her over here tonight? I could probably talk her into it for you."

"Jesus, Everett," Rhoda said.

“I’m just saying,” Everett said, “I mean, it’s Saturday night and I don’t see him doing anything else.”

It had been a while since someone had so brazenly made fun of Gene. Since high school, freshman year, before he met Katherine, who had the power to grant Gene a pardon from the Everetts of his school who couldn’t resist knocking the plumed hats off anyone in a band uniform.

“Actually,” Gene swallowed, “I already have plans for tonight.”

“Good, that’s more like it,” Everett said. He reached behind Rhoda to slap Gene on the back. “Who is she?”

“I thought we could have a wedding,” Gene said.

“A wedding?” Everett said. “That’s moving a little quick, isn’t it? Who’s getting married?”

“You – you and Rhoda,” Gene said.

Everett pushed his plate away, knocking over the pepper shaker.

“So this is your idea?” he said to Rhoda. “You invite him to eat so you can do this?”

If she had said, “Of course not,” or “that’s crazy,” or if she’d simply told Gene to cut it out, he would have backed off and forgotten the whole thing. The idea had just materialized as he proposed it, just like his blog, just like moving in at Rhoda’s, just like dancing with Ingrid. But Rhoda said nothing. She kept eating, and she watched Everett, waiting, as if he were a kid who needed to sit still and quiet through an entire church service.

“We could have the ceremony in the living room,” Gene said. “You’ve been together for at least the summer, and I think it would be nice to have some kind of ceremony to, I don’t know, let each other know how you feel. The CVS has candles.”

He volunteered to find a good Internet radio station on his phone, maybe some jazz or classical songs. He could even write their vows: Everett and Rhoda could promise never to have affairs with other people and to meet up when agreed upon. To be thoughtful and respectful lovers in word and deed from this day forward.

“It is a perfect day for it,” Rhoda said, and she put her arm around Everett and leaned her head on his shoulder, and the entire summer rested there with her, on his shoulder. If Everett had to shrug it off, as Gene knew he would, couldn’t he at least do it gently? Couldn’t he put his arm around Rhoda as he lied about needing to run another errand that he’d forgotten about. Couldn’t he promise that he’d be back tomorrow night, or later in the week, or next weekend? Any promise would do.