

HOUGH, DAVID MATTHEW, MFA "STORIES." (2017)  
Directed by Craig Nova 83pp

This collection of short fiction explores relationships in different wilderness and domestic settings, as well as renders of the dramatic emotional experiences that occur within the characters of these various settings, and communicates the challenges that these settings create for the lives within them.

“STORIES”

by

David Matthew Hough

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2017

Approved by

---

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by David Matthew Hough has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
THE FOLLY.....	1
ONE LAST TRAP .....	17
IN THE PARKING LOT .....	44
LICENSE .....	54
SMILE AND FIX IT.....	72

## THE FOLLY

I don't know what it is, but when someone else screws up I'm at my finest. There is a hard-edged calm and focus that comes over me. An intensity and clarity that makes me feel more alive than anything. Nothing else provides me this rush. It's like a drug—close to what I imagine an air traffic controller feels when a plane is crashing, or what a cattle driver senses the seconds before a stampede. The rest of the time, like most of us, I plod along distracted though the days and nights, feeling restless, vaguely detached, impulsive, lonely, and bored. But this, this is like a superpower, like drawing strength from the sun, and in the presence of chaos—zeeeeooooom! All those feelings disappear. When everyone else is crashing into each other, I'm navigating the storm. Nothing else does it—not sex, not drugs, not scoring A's on tests, not stealing my parents' car and driving on the highway with the lights off for as long as I can—all of which I've tried. It just doesn't cut it.

With James, I knew it was coming. He was the assistant trip leader for the twenty-one day sea kayaking expedition I'd been sent on—a kind of pre-rehab interception my parents convinced the judge would be just as good as incarceration—and from the first instant I saw him I knew I didn't like him. Un-tucked uniform, beaded-hemp bracelets, and a pair of twelve-gauge shotgun shells plugged through the stretched-out holes of his earlobes. It wasn't the specific items of his appearance that bugged me; it was how hard he worked at making sure we paid attention to them that turned me off. He'd bragged

about his own stints in wilderness behavioral programs, and used words like *Street* and *Truth* as if the way he said them gave them special meaning. And he had this way of pivoting against our trip leader, of trying to get down to our level. “No way I’d make *you all* work like that,” he’d say after a particularly difficult challenge. The way it came across... *You all? Work?* As if the five of us were just one mis-stroke away from prison. As if we’d never lifted a finger in our so-called privileged daily lives.

The fact was, James was more delinquent than any of us, and he wasn’t very good at his job. He skipped out on morning gear inspections and never once helped with the daily latrine pack-out. And he avoided bigger things, like planning for our survival challenge and sharing during our circle-chat round ups—these AA-like de-briefs before lights out that dredged up the day’s success and failures. He was there one minute and gone the next. I could tell it put a strain on our trip leader, but I figured there wasn’t much he could do. I didn’t care about any of that as it happened either, and at times I even envied his cavalier and aloof behavior, yet as my mind cleared and I dried out, I judged his slights with more and more severity. Stupid things I shrugged off, like not boiling seawater before dishwashing, or leaving his American Spirits smoldering under clumps of peat moss where he thought no one would find them. But riskier episodes, like goading us to leap off cliffs of an island’s abandoned granite quarry, or practicing emergency drills knowing there’d be an afternoon squall—those lapses, I’d bet, were just the kind that’d be ripe for a big court settlement. If we’d been allowed cellphones or even

letters, I'd have reported him to my parents, not just to get me out of there, but to show them how careless they were for sending me away. So when, before lunch the last day, our trip leader said he was leaving the five of us with James, that he had to drive back down the coast for the vans, I asked if I could please drive back down with him. He grimaced with reluctance, sighed, and told me "this was important for me to see through." He sped off to the mainland before we unpacked our sandwiches.

After lunch, the sky turned from a warm and cloudless backyard-barbecue kind of sunshine to a pearly haze of chilly grey overcast and had the beginnings of a steady easterly breeze. Our planned route called for us to cross over to the mainland and traverse up the coast. It included two scheduled breaks and was just a little over our ten-mile an afternoon average. But James offered an alternative. He'd let us skip midday siesta, shave off a few miles, and make camp early. We'd have to approach the last island from open water, he conceded, and we'd leave the protection of the channel. But we'd save hours of time. We'd get to the beach and just chill. No one in our group was going to complain about less paddling. It was Day Twenty. Our shoulders ached, our palms blistered with calluses, and we wouldn't have to boil our MRE's in the dark. We all just wanted to go home. It was an easy sell.

We launched our kayaks and sprinted the last five miles inland. At first we convoyed together in formation. I worked to keep pace with the group, dug my paddle blade hard into the water to make each stroke count. We sort of raced each other and there was a satisfaction to the pace, an earned payoff from powering over each wave

crest, and an exhilaration from surfing down each swell. I would glance back every handful of strokes to track our progress.

Less than an hour in, James pulled out way ahead and we all sort of drifted into our own rhythms. The numbered red and green buoys that guided our passage kept us loosely together, but we'd broken from a tight formation to a widely-spaced single file row. I fell behind. The afternoon breeze rose to a steady wind and the whitecaps whipped spray across my bow. Clouds followed and a series of heavy showers swept over us. The drops needled every which way. A screen of rain stung my face. The downpours soaked everything inside the cockpit, and a pool of water sloshed under my calves and thighs. My hands slipped along my paddle. The water's edge was so close it could swallow me whole, and with one rogue wave surge I'd be swamped. Everything was out of focus. I couldn't see anyone else and I didn't know if I'd be able to find the channel marker to re-enter the protection of the bay. I knew the islands were ahead and the mainland was somewhere off to my left, but the suddenness of the shower disoriented me, and I was lost in the water that drove down from above and splashed up from all around me. I looked back to the lunch island and it was lost behind an advancing menace of fog. I laughed back at the wind, braced forward in my kayak, and adjusted my direction straight into the waves, wind, and fog. I wouldn't be on course, but I wouldn't end up turned over or lose control. I had a strange image of myself adrift and then marooned—a savage with days of beard growth and a raccoon fur as my only clothes—and then the news broadcast that would feature my eventual rescue. I'd be a hero. My parents might never even send me back to school.



A loud hollow gong rang out behind. It was followed by shouts of excitement. The shower wavered and there was James, hovering next to the bobbing channel marker a few hundred feet off my stern. He held one arm high with his kayak paddle and the other cupped in front of his mouth. The five other boats were rafted to him. One was capsized in a dead-man's float right below the surface and Paul, the kid I shared a tent with, was cartwheeling his arms in a crazed front-crawl toward it. James struck the floating metal beacon with the flat of his paddle and the metal gonged out again.

"*Boo yah!*" he shouted, and whacked the painted steel one more time. "Boo ya ka shaaaaah! Power baby! That's right! I said it! Power though it! Stroke! Stroke! Stroke!" Paul was the smallest of us, his wrists barely thicker than his paddle handle, and without his PFD he wouldn't have been much of a swimmer. The first day, we flipped our boats for practice man-overboard drills, and he threw up in the water. Chunks of his lunch bobbed up around his lifejacket and his pale, quivering face. But he kept swimming. And he kept rolling his kayak. "Boot and rally," he said, and with a gulp of seawater, he gargled—as if within the privacy of his own bathroom—and spit the leftover puke back to the ocean. As I closed the gap between us, I called out to him, and his wild eyes and shivering lips widened with relief. I tossed him my throw bag and towed him back to the group.

"That's how you get it *done!*" James said. He stretched his paddle out toward me, in a kind of extension for a high-five, but I couldn't allow myself even this simple gesture. The rain sputtered. "Powered through it," he went on. "Man! Wheooooow! That was *awesome*. Let's power it out. All-Most There! All-Most There!"

It was a straight shot, less than a half mile to the peninsula of Ripley's Neck and then our campsite on a small island just beyond called The Folly. No one spoke as we dipped through that final stretch, and James seemed to know that he should keep it slow. Sights of civilization re-emerged in the distance: the bay windows and wide lawns of summer mansions, the ladder rungs of a town's water tower, and the coned spire of a church's steeple. The lobstering traffic at the boat ramp, where we would pull out in the morning, was so close we heard the chatter on their CB radios and smelled the bait luring the seagulls circled above.

We beached and made camp. "You all deserve some time to yourselves," James said and hiked out of the clearing. He'd been doing the same thing every night, would set up his bivouac a couple hundred yards down the shore, camouflaged by a spruce thicket or up behind an inapproachable precipice wall.

We loafed around for a few hours and explored the tiny island amongst ourselves. The rain stopped after we'd set up camp, but we were all still wet. With no one around, we broke the 'Leave No Trace' protocol, and collected a heap of weathered planks and driftwood. We doused it all with the last of our bug spray, and with a whoosh, started a bonfire.

Paul vanished for a while, and when he returned he said he brought us a surprise. He unzipped his backpack and presented a family-sized spaghetti sauce jar full of prison wine, a murky cocktail, fermented from leftover fruit slices and bread crusts he'd hidden under the bow of his kayak. He'd been drinking it in secret since week two, and with a bashful smile said it'd be better to share now, rather than have it go to waste. He certainly

couldn't bring it home. He raised it in mock-salute in the direction James had left.

“Power!” he shouted, and took a big gulp. He lurched and choked and then drank again.

He passed it toward me.

“Well?” he said. I hesitated. There went twenty days. It was like drinking a combination of rotting pineapple, fresh globs of construction glue, and the antiseptic tinge of that urine-colored flavor of Original Listerine. Fruit flies speckled the slick skin of its surface. It was disgusting genius. I passed it back. With an admiring hatred of that so-called rehabilitative journey, and with the dread of my inevitable relapse, I let out a whistle of mock-celebration the sinking of this all-time, new low.

Why stop there? That was the consensus. After sunset, none of us felt like going to sleep. Quincy, a third-year freshman from Nantucket, the kind of kid who could ‘jump-start a truck with a cactus,’ transformed a Clorox bleach bottle into a water bong, and demonstrated how to get high from smoking the purple buds of thistle flowers. Micah and Jonathon, two twin boys, both near-translucent albinos, stripped down to their underwear and swam out to steal the nearest lobster pot. From the beach they hauled back the line and dragged the trap up and over the rocks, the metal cage jangling and clanging like a train of rusted grocery carriages. When we pointed out that it was empty—no lobsters, not even the bait—Micah roared with exaggerated rage, whirled about in a near-naked, human tornado, and discus-tossed the wire crate into the fire. But not all was lost. I recalled a cooking show—the host grilled some sort of shellfish atop a bed of pine needles, and within the hour we had filled the muddy bowl of the nearest tide pool with a shimmering pile of several dozen, violet and blue-shelled mussels from the bay.

We caved in a part of the fire, laid the shells right on the embers, and roasted the harvest in one shot. The mussels hissed and steamed. At the first sign of spreading open we raked them out of the coals and ate them like Neanderthals at a banquet. The char from the shells rubbed off on our fingers and the brine dripped down our chins. Micah started to smear soot on his forehead, as if preparing tribal war paint, and soon enough all our chests, shoulders, and faces were darkened with black handprints and smudged symbols.

Paul had talked a big game throughout the trip, so when he stumbled off to our tent, and left the spaghetti sauce jar with us I didn't think anything of it. We just laughed at him, and worked to finish off the rest of the booze. The tide crept up the shore and I felt regret for when it would finally drown out the fire.

It wasn't long before, back up the bluff at our tent, when Paul started to moan.

I figured he had the spins. His feet were hanging outside our tent. He was going to pass out, and I'd be awake in the tent, lashing out blindly against the trapped mosquitoes. It'd been hard enough sleeping sober for the past three weeks.

I backed away from the fire and crept toward his legs, thinking that I'd startle him, root up the tent stakes, or collapse our rain fly. Make him squirm. The beach we'd camped in was a mash of sand and crushed shells, and as I crawled up toward the seagrass, the suddenness of the darkness surprised me. I couldn't see much ahead. The fire behind me lit up the beach and the sand, the strip of dried seaweed and the litter in its tangles, our three tents like dark mounds above, and the dense wall of chest-high alder bushes behind them. Beyond that, I could see the outlines of taller

trees, spruce and tamarack, and a bright half moon floated above the scattered cloud layer, brilliant enough to wash out most of the stars.

To be fair, all five of us talked a big game. But then, kids who didn't, the ones who cringed at red ink and failing grades, the kids who were always home for curfew, always accounted for during the school day, who knew when the third beer should be the last, the ones who swallowed pills with a pinched nose, and the ones who donated blood after school but buried their faces in their shoulders at the sight of a needle—those kids were never on trips like these. Some of these trips cost more than a college semester.

I didn't even really know that much about Paul, only what he'd told me. For the most part he'd been a decent tent mate. He never once crossed that invisible, stay-on-your-side-even-in-your-sleep, tent line. He said he'd been in rehab twice, and was on this trip because he'd been found unconscious in the lavatory during in-school suspension with an empty pint bottle of vodka and an enema funnel-tube jammed up his ass. He had three tattoos etched in dark blue ink on his right forearm, each inscribed with the date of a different overdose he'd somehow survived. So, when I crawled up the beach and looked in the tent, I was stunned. I didn't know what had happened to him. My first move was pure reflex—I brushed my hands down my arms and torso and did a quick survey to make sure I hadn't caught whatever Paul had: just a sunburn, two fresh mosquito bites on my belly, and a giant charcoal cross that spanned across my chest. Otherwise, I checked out ok.

Paul did not. He was curled on his sleeping bag. The smear of ash on his forehead was gone and he was red, blotchy, and sweating. His eyelids were puffed out, bloated, like slices of grapefruit, and swollen all the way to slits.

He rolled over, grabbed at his stomach, and when he opened his mouth all that came out was a hacking cough and a high-pitched wheeze—the squeaky kind, like when you try to make a whistle out of an acorn. It was then that I noticed in the pile of undigested mussel bodies in the grass that Paul had eaten a half hour before.

I rested in a squat. Down the beach, someone had thrown a tire into the embers. The blackened finger paintings we'd drawn on each other's faces and chests—the lightning bolts and pentagrams and eagle wings—they all now seemed very, very wrong. Everything was wrong: the snarled coil of line from the stolen lobster trap, the paraphernalia-ized bleach bottle lolling in wave foam at the water's edge, strewn burnt mussel shells everywhere—all of it added up to a picture, and I closed my eyes against the things I didn't want to see. These were the things that happened on last nights for people like us. These were the things that we did.”

Paul coughed again, bent his head toward me, and moaned in pleading desperation. I called his name to him, like a question, and he just coughed again. I reached out for his leg cautiously: he was burning, his skin hot and dry, like an iron skillet baking in the sun. I grabbed his ankle and the sleeping pad and whisked him out of the tent and, as if a toddler in a sled, dragged him down the beach slope. The laughing at the fire died down and Quincy asked if Paul had pissed the bed. Jonathon sprayed out his mouthful of prison wine.

“What the—what’s on his face?” Jonathon said.

I’d slid Paul next to the fire and knelt down beside him. He sat up and hacked out a succession of rattled coughs. A new layer of tread ignited and flared up within the half-burnt tire. Weird blue and green flames sputtered in ripples along rubber and the rolling tower of black smoke gushed wider. We were all caught by the sudden burst of light and smoke and craned our necks skyward to follow the eruption of sparks rising up into the clouds. Paul coughed again and grabbed my ankle hard.

“That can’t be good,” Quincy said. He pointed first to the smoke and then down to Paul. “Um, he keeps coughing. Move him back, maybe a little? What’s wrong with him?”

“No idea.” I said. I was worried about his breathing. I was worried that he was poisoned. I didn’t really know. “He threw up outside the tent. Maybe inside too. I don’t think he’s sleeping this one off.” I stood up. Paul looked up at me with his hands around his throat. “Make sure he doesn’t choke if he does it again. Keep him on his side.” I waved toward the mussel shells. “And hide some of this stuff with something. Sand or seaweed. I don’t know. Christ. I’ll be right back.”

I half-jogged out of camp and caught a few snippets of bickering and anger, but after I put away some distance, their voices were gone. I slowed to a walk and stuck close to the relative brightness of the beach shore. The beach sand ended and the mounds of barnacle-pocked rocks forced me up away from the water and into the sea grass. The wet blades wet swiped against my shins. Wind rushed ripples over the water’s edge and a frothy bed of seaweed slopped up along with backwash of the incoming surf. James’ tent

was set as far away as possible, on the exact opposite side of the island, half-hidden a few paces above high tide, in a grove of silver-barked birch trees. Definitely not within earshot. Not close enough to hear anyone's screams.

His rain fly was up and I had no way of telling if he was awake inside. There was no yellow warmth from his headlamp, no washed-out blue shimmer cast from his phone. His backpack was outside of his front entrance, in the corner under the vestibule, propped up next to his neatly paired water socks, his gear stored like we'd all been instructed to do.

I carefully ducked under the tent's entryway. I made sure not to rustle the dewdrops collected on the nylon walls. A moth fluttered underneath the rain fly and its dark shape thudded back and forth against the interior screening. James was inside. He snored slightly.

I first grabbed his water shoes and then I lifted his backpack. It was much lighter than I expected and I slung it silently around my shoulders. As I backpedaled away back down to the beach, with his shoes still in hand, I made sure my feet didn't snap any branches. In thirty seconds I had the med pack and the satellite phone. I dropped his watershoes and jogged back to the fire.

Why didn't I wake James? Why did I, in the short jog back to the campsite, decide to tell everyone that when I went to his tent, James wasn't there? I didn't want to give up the moment. I didn't want to lose the rush. I can't explain it, but James would've taken it away. He would've wanted it just as much as I did.

Back at the site, Paul was worse.



“He spit up,” Quincy said. “I’m not sure he’s even fully conscious.”

That was that. I told them that I couldn’t find James, but I at least had the med pack and the phone. I didn’t wait for approval and just made the call. I put the phone on speaker and we huddled around it with our backs to Paul.

After relaying the information of our location, the dispatcher said they would track us by the locator on our phone, and that she would try to get someone at the closest emergency room on the line.

A chirp and a click ended the hold music, and I was suddenly connected to the Emergency Room. A doctor answered. He sounded ancient, slightly foreign, but cool. Anaphylaxis, he said when I described the symptoms. Allergic reaction. I protested and repeated what I told him about the prison wine. He breathed out with impatience.

“Even monkeys fall from trees,” he said. He must’ve heard the confusion in my pause. “Everybody makes mistakes. Now, find the auto-injector. You must have one. It’s like a marker. Or long glue stick. Clear with a yellow or orange cap.”

I asked for clarification and switched to speaker-phone so everyone could hear. “The epi-pen. Adrenaline. By law you must have one. Likely two. It will halt the reaction. It will give us time.”

“Our guide left,” I told him. “We don’t have anything. That’s why we called.” Another pause. “Then,” he asked, “who among you is in charge?”

I got nods from all around. “I am,” I told him. Quincy nodded and produced the orange bag with the pens.

“Do it now,” he said. “He might not wake up, but it will be working. You have to get him to me. The epi-pen will last twenty-thirty minutes max. The paramedics will meet you on the road but there is no way for them to cross the inlet before it’s too late. A LifeFlight helicopter is fifty-minutes away, not much behind the Coast Guard and the ambulance. There is a good chance you can get him to us before you have to use the second pen and then we can control the swelling. *But you must wait as long as possible to use the second pen.* Until the last possible second. Do you understand?”

I told him I did.

“And you must keep him calm,” he told me. And everyone else. Everyone must remain calm. Who among you is in charge?” he asked.

Micah and Jonathon were running their water bottles back and forth from the high tide, with manic automation. Quincy, who was not even looking at Paul, dumped pot after pot of water over Paul’s body, and repeating over and over again that he was going to die.

“I am,” I said.

“All right, then. Inject him. And then hold him. You have to be the one to hold him, and let the others paddle you across. If his throat closes again, he’ll soon go blue. He’ll have whatever oxygen that’s in his blood, and then nothing. You will have to do give the second shot. But it won’t work like the first time and he will probably go unconscious. But, hear this, if you focus and can keep everyone calm and relaxed, you will succeed. Go now,” he said, and hung up.

Quincy started to tell Micah that he knew it wasn't alcohol poisoning, and I told him to shut up. I told everyone to immediately stop. I didn't explain anything. Made everyone count to ten.

I ordered Jonathan and Micah to lash three kayaks together and Quincy to help me with Paul and I injected him. Quincy and I carried Paul's swollen body to the middle kayak, put him in, and I got in behind him. We launched off the beach back into the strait and headed across the bay for the boat ramp. I think they were all relieved to be leaving, like getting away from a crime, though we hadn't done anything wrong. The phosphorescence churned by the force of their strokes whirled up in kaleidoscopic brilliance, combined in small swirls the water surface's reflection of the stars. It was an unbelievable thirty minutes. With one hand I was cradling Paul's sweating, puffy head and neck against my shoulder, whispering to him that help was on the way, while Quincy paddled ahead on the lookout for rocks, calling out directions to Micah and Jonathan to lead us safely to shore. With my other hand I held the second epi pen, had the edge of the yellow cap levered against my thumb. He gurgled and foamed, but he kept breathing. I had a strange instinct to inject the second pen, to disobey the doctor's orders, even if I knew that it wouldn't work and that Paul would die. I would have done it to make the story even worse. With that epi-pen and with Paul's struggling breathing, wheezing and then whistling against my chest, I watched the flickering lights at the top of the town landing

The red and white lights of the paramedics flashed over the horizon before we reached the bank and the paramedic crew was on the beach and then down at the water's

edge as Micah and Jonathon paddled the last few strokes to shore. One of the medics set up an IV, right there on the beach, and another gave Paul an injection. They let me ride in the ambulance and then again in the helicopter that lifted us off from a nearby baseball field. As we rose up in to the sky, I saw the lights of the state troopers still flashing at the loading ramp, the smoke curling up from the beach of our campsite, and a searchlight from the mainland focused on James' kayak paddling toward the shore.

## ONE LAST TRAP

“You think we can get away with it?” “I don’t know.”

“You think anyone’s out here? You think anyone can see us?” “Maybe, maybe not.”

Chase was trying to get me to steal some lobsters before heading back to the landing. He’d already explained to me why the bay was so empty and how boats weren’t allowed to fish on Sundays. The sun probably had another two hours left. He knew it all. How a female lobster’s tail feelers were shaped like the rubber bristles of a toothbrush. That a male could be calmed by gently rubbing the small plate between its eyes. Before the turn of the century, you’d only see them served in wigwams or prisons. They’d been so plentiful, he’d said, that they littered the flats at low tide just like the buffalo had once populated the prairie.

I was against his plan. We’d been on the bay, fishing and drinking all day on a boat he’d rented just for the occasion, and hadn’t caught a thing when he mentioned the lobsters. I laughed it off because I thought he was only half-serious. The bay was crowded with fishing boats, jet skis, and day sailors. There were hundreds of homes on the shore with windows overlooking the water. His response: wait for the fog. So, while we emptied our beers he worked his magic. With every piece of trivia the lobsters in the traps became closer, more real, easier to imagine in our small boat.

As Chase talked, the fog rolled back from the east as the wind settled. The offshore marine layer, like a cloud in a tube, funneled into the bay. All of the traffic on the bay headed back to their docks and moorings, or back up the river to haul out the landing. We watched as it happened, in silence and in just a few minutes. A white band of haze obscured the horizon, a blending of sea and sky, and the water became still and glassy. Everything in the bay began to vanish: the rocky islands and barren sand bars, buoys and ledge markers, the Capes and Colonials with their wraparound porches and wall-to-wall glass windows, the steeples and bell towers and hills behind them, and finally the cabin cruisers, sport fishermen, and day sailors not yet done for the day.

Chase swept his hands out wide into the fog gathering over our boat as if he had conjured an eclipse of the sun.

"No one's going to see us," he said and pointed to where I thought was still the shore. "You want to go back empty handed?"

"You can't even tell me where's east or west," I said. "Why don't we just dig steamers? Get a few pounds. Tide will be dead low."

"That'll make it even easier. The traps will pop right up. Less water, less pulling." I exhaled deep and shook my head. "They'll know it was us," I said.

We'd used the public town landing to launch the boat that morning. Even if it had been Sunday, most of the traffic had been commercial. Men in waterproof overalls, orange rubber gloves, and black rubber boots at work stacking bait boxes and piling gear on to their boats. Pick up trucks stacked with traps. Probably a gun under every driver's seat and a rifle in each boat. There had been a few terse smiles, but they took their time

moving their dinghies out of the way when it was our turn to reverse down the ramp, and even though it was clear we had fishing gear and coolers to carry down the narrow catwalk, not one of them move their bait boxes or traps to let us pass. It was a working pier and we were in the way. This was their dock, their landing, their bay. If our clean t-shirts and tidy cargo shorts didn't at first, our SUV with out-of-state plates gave us away. I remember thinking that we'd be lucky at the end of the day if our tires still had air. "We'll be gone before they figure it out," he said.

Chase eased the throttle and the boat drifted. Chase focused on the depth finder on the console. I slid over to him and flipped on the GPS. A breeze whipped up and the waves around us curled with short white crests. The fog would blow away. But the fog remained. We could see maybe a hundred feet. Nothing but mist, ocean waves, and a dozen or so buoys. The current carried us toward a yellow and white set of buoy and toggle. We waited until our boat struck the buoy, then toggle, and then listened to them both knock and drag alongside the hull backwards, like fingertips strumming and scratching a milk jug, until spinning off.

Chase raised the engine and checked to make sure we hadn't snagged a line. A foghorn echoed into the bay. I couldn't tell from where.

"Boat?" I asked.

"Lighthouse," Chase said. "Every minute and a half. We'll hear it again. You'll see."

I clicked for the time on my phone. Chase pulled out the gaff hook. I tilted my ear and strained for the sound. The boat drifted and passed over a handful of buoys, and

Chase stood by with the hook just in case we managed to tangle up in one of their lines. I wondered if the fog was thick everywhere in the bay, or if there were clear spots, or even if just beyond what we could see was still a bright summer day. When the sounded on schedule Chase pounded the deck twice with the butt end of his gaff and pumped his fist with victory. He looked at me as if this was just another reason to trust him. That he would be right.

“My dad took me out there all the time when I was a kid,” he said. “Petit Manan Lighthouse. It’s not manned anymore, but the horn and light are still active and maintained by the Coast Guard.”

I zoomed out on the GPS to call his bluff. Sure enough, he was right. Petit Manan Light, five miles or less, to the southwest blipped into focus on the screen.

“And five miles north,” Chase said and pointed at the top of the map page, “Mistake Island. It’s the foggiest place on the seaboard. Seriously.”

“Two traps,” I said. “No more.”

Chase spun around, poked the gaff in the air like a spear, and told me to trust him.

The first trap wasn’t easy. Chase caught both the buoy and toggle and held them overboard while I heaved thirty-feet of bristly nylon pot-wop on board until a green-wired trap splashed out of the waves. With rope burn in my palms and a slice in my thumb from a razor clam clung to the line, I stepped back unwilling to wrangle with the three lobsters flapping in full-body curls. Their claws were menacing, but Chase knelt right down and plucked them out like rabbits from a magic hat. In his excitement, he’d let the buoy hang over the side of the railing and let paint rub off into the deck gel coat.



“Come on man,” I said, and worked the heel of my shoe to clear the stain.

“Lighten up,” he said. He steered us toward another line of buoys to make sure we wouldn’t grab from the same fisherman’s route. “That was nothing, Next trap will be full of them. Just have to go deeper.”

As we began pulling up the second trap a horn ripped through the fog. It seemed like it came from on top us, or someone from in our own boat. It was like the emergency test signal on the television or radio, but the with the severity and authority of a guard tower or prison alarm.

I dropped the rope. Chase released the buoy and toggle. A lobster boat—a freshly painted beige, gray and white desert camouflage—appeared thirty yards off our bow. It’s horn blared out again. Chase waved and smiled. I saw the cooler still open with the lobster sitting out on the deck.

The lobster boat’s prow came about fast, circled once, crashed through its own wake, and wheeled toward us. It was decaled like a jet fighter with a row of cartoon shark teeth, two aggressive sloped eyes, and a pair of American and Confederate flags. The boat’s turn was so immediate that made a small whirlpool. The waves caught us broadside, tossed us up and down, and I had to brace on a railing and hold on.

The boat’s captain leaned out of his pilothouse. In his right hand he held a gaff hook. His arms and legs bulged like the tubes of an inflatable raft, and he had a wide beard of black curls that covered his neck and face. His green hip waders were streaked

with dried mud and smeared with grease. His eyes were hidden under the shadow of a black baseball cap. His boat splashed closer to until he was less than a boat length away.

He shouted something I couldn't understand, only that it was urgent and angry, and with his gaff hook and pointed at the buoy next to our boat that we'd just dropped. It was the only thing between our boat. "Private property," he called, and then pointed to the lettering on the roof trim of the pilothouse. It was his boat's name, Bad Co. in block white letters, bordered in black and another set of American and Confederate flags. At the end of the lettering, jutting out of the pilothouse like a flag, was a lobster buoy. I didn't know if it was law or just custom to display their buoy and colors, but the same black, red, and white on the buoy of the Bad Co.'s pilothouse was identical to the buoy that was floating between us in both pattern and color.

"Watch yourselves!" the captain yelled out. With one thick arm he steadied himself and he leaned further out, extending himself overboard sideways, and reached with out in our direction with his gaff hook. He was only a few feet from us now, the waves splashing in all directions between our two boats, the diesel exhaust hanging heavy in the fog. I was caught in the swiftness of his actions as his boat heaved toward us. His gaff hook overshot the buoy and sliced down into the waves. He held his head up and looked at me wide-mouthed and extended the wooden handle and steel hook.

Chase put the boat into gear. The abrupt motion knocked me to the stern. I landed hard, square on the post for the negative battery terminal, and flailed for the starboard railing. Chase accelerated to full throttle away from the Bad Co., with no caution for what

could be ahead, and plunged us back into a thick cover of fog. The captain of the lobster boat watched as we sped off, still hung suspended, leant overboard like a python extended from a vine.

“Nice name,” Chase said, over his shoulder. “Bad Company. Does he think that’s cool? Not the sharpest tools in the shed, huh?”

“What the fuck, man?” I said. I dragged myself forward and braced myself against the boat. “No one’s going to see us? You think he saw us? We have to get out of here. Now. Turn the boat around. I’m serious. And slow the fuck down.”

"Asshole," Chase said. "Total prick. Most of them are cool, but you definitely get your assholes. He’s the one who’s not supposed to be out fishing. Should have got his numbers. See if you can look up his boat. They might be public domain.”

I shook tried to knead the pain out of my thing. I had a Charlie horse and was all pins and needles.

“He saw,” I said. “He definitely saw.”

Chase pointed to a dark blip on the GPS but didn’t slow down. "We'll loop around here on the way back. It’s a small and bar island. We’ll be in too shallow for most boats at this tide. When it gets low most of the bigger boats have to stick to the deeper parts of the channel. I’ve been there before. It takes less than thirty minutes to walk round it. Not much, but there is a little tree cover. Not enough to hide a fire, but we’re not staying that long.”

I wanted to say let’s just get out of here, but if we went back to the loading ramp now we’d run into someone, maybe the Bad Co., or someone who was a friend. They all

knew each other, looked out for each other, and would like nothing more than to run into us on some suspicion of wrongdoing. I also didn't think it was as simple as Chase was trying to lead me to believe.

"I know what just happened," I said. "That guy was trying to grab us. Listen to me." Chase kept driving and I knew he could hear me. I shouted at him and the oncoming wind. "He didn't miss. He was trying to grab u!"

Chase didn't answer, but slowed the boat back to a reasonable speed and relaxed his hand off the throttle. He shook his head and sort of chuckled.

"Double D's, One Prolonged Blast, Nauti Lust... how many of those boats did we see today with the most ass-stupid names. All of them." He raised a fist and made a jerking off motion in the direction from where we came. "Bad Company. What a dick! All those guys. Total dickheads. If I were going to name—"

A loud boom cut him off. It came from nowhere and everywhere. The echo was like the slap of quick surf against hard packed sand.

"Get down!" Chase shouted.

I collapsed back to the deck. There was another boom and another. I clawed myself up and yanked the kill switch cord. The engine quit. There were at least four more shots—the same heart beat action of the shotgun barrel emptying and loading followed by cracks in the air. I held my hands over my ears and closed my eyes. Shot splashed the surface of the water like an angry rain. It seemed like it came from every direction. A diesel engine revved up high, decelerated, then revved up high and held steady. I wanted to pick up my head, jump out of the boat, beg for forgiveness, and surrender.

The diesel engine got close again, but I didn't get up to measure. Then it droned off, stayed loud, became distant, then nothing.

The salt water stung the slice on my thumb. My thigh cramped and twitched involuntarily. Red rashes spread over my arms from rubbing the fiberglass decking. It looked like I'd pissed myself in the front of my pants.

Chase tried to grab the cord from my hand and I pushed him away.

"Ok," I said. I clenched my fist and forced my eyes back to focus. "I'm done."  
"Why'd you pull the cord!" he shouted. "Give me back the cord!"

"I'm taking us back," I said. "Out of the way," I hopped up on one leg and ammed the kill switch back into place. The small windshield was covered with condensation from the fog, but I wasn't worried about hitting anything anymore. I started the boat and waited for the GPS to load. "What do you mean?" Chase said.

"I told you. They knew it was us. They shoot people who steal their traps. That's what they do. That's what they did."

Chase opened his mouth but couldn't come up with anything fast enough. We both watched the GPS initiate in silence. I'd driven in the fog, but didn't think it would be that complicated. Chase sat in the seat behind the steering wheel, right in front of where I was standing, as if he wasn't going to give up the wheel.

"They probably have radar," he said. "I told you, the water is shallow here. They can't get any closer." He motioned to the depth finder. "I'm telling you, we should just get out of deep water and hide out for a while. If he did see us, and I'm not saying he did, he'll get sick of us and leave us alone."

Chase started to get up and grabbed for the wheel around me. I blocked him with my waist, pushed him back, and told him to get the fuck off me.

“Sorry,” he said. “Sorry, sorry, sorr-ee... Relax, will you?” He got up from the chair and stood beside me. “If I turn that depth finder on you’ll be able to see. We’re ok. No one is going to kill us for three little lobsters. *Three little lobsters?* Just relax.”

The cooler holding the lobsters was still out in the open.. It was one of those cheap Styrofoam coolers that barely held a twelve pack. I remembered thinking that it was too bad that it couldn’t hold more, or that we hadn’t bought a bigger cooler, and then remembered how seconds later I thought it was probably for the best. That I didn’t want to get too drunk. That I didn’t want to be stuck out on the water because of some careless mistake. Did I think that, or was it a feeling? And if it was a feeling, hadn’t I felt that concern before?

If that guy was after us we’d have to get to where he couldn’t. Would they kill us over three lobsters? What’s that, fifteen bucks? Twenty? A warning shot, something to scare us off, and then they would be on their way. Maybe they’d key or car, or even light it on fire, but we would get back, maybe even file a police report on the vandalism, and everything would be fine.

“Let’s go,” I said, and I tapped on the depth finder so he would show me how to turn it on.

He nodded, changed a setting on the GPS display, and traced out a bearing. “Keep going to that sandbar there,” he said, and pointed out a small island no larger than a

football field. “We can ground out and when the tide comes back up it’ll be dark. And it’s less than a half-mile to shore. Maybe only a couple hundred yards too deep to stand. We could almost walk back. Worse comes to worse we ditch the boat and say it was stolen.” I wasn’t sure the rental company would believe the boat was stolen. We’d have to trash the truck ourselves. Mangle up the license plates—maybe smear some fish guts on the windshield in a message that said Flatlanders Go Home! Release the emergency brake on the launch ramp and let the trailer jackknife into the mud. Cut out the radiator and catalytic converter and make it look stripped for scrap. We could make it happen. This was possible. If hiding out on a little island for a few hours was the worst of it, I’d figured we’d do all right. I pushed down the throttle for more speed. More fog collected on the windshield and I could taste salt. The boat’s bow was trimmed high and it was moving with purpose, almost as if it was skimming over the surface of the water. The depth finder went down fast from ten to eight, and then to just four feet of water. Maybe no one would follow us. No way they’d risk running aground for three lobsters.

I caught the third trap less than a quarter of a mile from the sandbar. “Neutral!” Chase had shouted. Neutral! But it was too late. I didn’t see it. The boat was pulled backwards, like a dog yanked on a leash, as the rope spun around its propeller. The engine revved and then choked itself out. It was as if an anchor was pulling us down backward into the bay. Water rushed over the transom and into the boat.

“You caught one,” Chase said. He splashed his feet and laughed. At least three inches of water was sloshing around the deck. Gas tanks, oars, and the lifejackets we’d

yet to try on were all of a sudden free floating. A rainbow formed in colorful waves from the oil rising out of the bilge.

“Last time I let you drive,” he said. “Not to worry. I got a knife.”

Chase raised the engine and a tight spool of green nylon line was spun around the propeller. It led in a straight line to a toggle, the small tan float, which twisted and dipped just a few feet behind the boat. Where was the buoy? Wasn't there always a buoy, and a toggle? There was nothing else floating around the boat. I looked back at the console.

The GPS glowed blue. Maybe a quarter of a mile to the sand bar.

“Cut the rope,” I said. “Quick. We're almost there.”

“It's practically on board,” Chase said and yanked again on the trap. “One more try. I bet it's full of them. Give me a second.”

“No fucking way.” I snapped. “No fucking more.”

“It's going to be lost anyway. As soon as we cut the line no one will get it. It's a waste.”

I couldn't tell how far the sun had set, but the fog was still thick and good for cover. I looked at the small sandbar island and wondered if it was inhabited.

“It's private. Put in some kind of wildlife trust or nature preserve,” he said, knowing. “Illegal to even camp without permission. There's no one out here.”

I was ankle deep in seawater. Whatever buzz I'd had was lost. It was my fault we were listing there just yards away from the small island. And there was Chase. I'd pushed him and he hadn't even got mad. He was ten times the boater I was and I never should've taken the wheel. Of course I'd caught a line. But did he say so? I felt the embarrassment



on my cheeks and looked away to hide my face. I'd been too harsh. And I didn't want to argue anymore.

"Right," I said. "Fine," I said. "Just hurry up and let's get out of here."

Chase tapped the depth finder screen. "Less than two measly feet," he said. "Now, let's see what's for dinner."

Chase cut the line and pulled the trap on to the railing. Inside was a small cooler, barely enough for a six-pack, wrapped in plastic and duct tape. Two combo locks instead of the regular crimp rings secured the steel mesh on the trap door. It teetered there on the stainless steel rail while we watch it drip into the boat and ocean.

"Drop it back in," I said. "Let's go."

"Wait a second," Chase said. "Will you just wait a second? Maybe we can use this."

"I just want to get out of here," I said. "I want to go home. Let's forget it."

But Chase already had slid the trap completely onboard. It lay in the middle of the deck, the cooler floating in the trap.

"Chase," I said. "Let's go. Pass me the bilge pump and let's get out of here."

Chase helped me bilge the boat. We took turns with the hand pump until it was empty. The trap was still on the deck, but either through a sense of guilt or urgency Chase agreed to get the boat in order and safely ashore before going any further. Before we started pumping, I'd worked myself up to almost calling ourselves in. To radioing the Coast Guard and confessing the whole thing. Mayday Mayday Mayday. Save me from myself and save me from my friend. I didn't have any idea what the fine for poaching

lobsters was, but I didn't think it could be that high. I doubted that it would mean jail time. Their boats would respond, searchlights and sirens, and they would tow us safely to town. There would be an inspection, licenses checked for warrants, citations delivered, and we would be on our way.

But while we were pumping, my arms tired, feet soaking, and cuts stinging, Chase began to hum and sing. At first I was annoyed, and wanted it to stop, but I couldn't help myself, and was soon singing along. And then we started laughing. I don't know who started it, but once it had begun it was torrential. We laughed at the Bad Company and the crazed beard of its captain, and we laughed at the line I'd snagged on the propeller. We laughed at how cheap he was for renting a little boat without an automatic bilge pump and we laughed at how scared I was that I thought we'd get the electric chair for pinching a few traps. We both knew we wouldn't be able to tell anyone about this any time soon. Maybe whatever was behind those locks would be worth it.

\*\*\*

Instead of lowering the engine and making any sound, we paddled the rest of the way into shore and ran the boat aground in a narrow cove on the sandbar. Sand fleas and early summer mosquitoes attacked us. Chase suggested we rub our skin with gasoline for repellent, but I thought that was going too far. While he dipped into the fuel tank, I sat in the bow and emptied the water from my shoes. My stomach grumbled and I thought about the cooler underneath me, and the trap in the boat between us.

"What do you think it is?" I said.

“I thought you’d never ask,” he said. “Could you pass me the anchor?”

I didn’t see much to lose. I unhooked the anchor from the hold and passed it to Chase.

He knew exactly where to hit the locks. He used the anchor point as a hammer and they each popped free with neat, easy clicks. He cut the tape and plastic as if he was filleting a fish, and then released the latches from the cooler.

“Fuck a duck,” he said. “Will you look at that?”

I didn’t know what I was looking at. A stack of three blocks wrapped in white waxed-paper, a clear take-out container of empty-capsules, and five rolls of bills were neatly packed in the little cooler. Chase whistled and whispered to God. I sucked in a breath, closed my eyes, and counted to ten.

When I opened my eyes Chase wasn’t looking at the cooler any more. He was holding my shoulder and pointing to the shore. I followed his arm to a point maybe fifty feet away. I saw the frayed end of the nylon line first. It looked like it had been stretched and chewed. The rest of the rope was short, less than twenty feet, with two loops in sequence spliced into its strands. It was still mostly in the water, floating on the surface, and with each small crash of surf it looked as if it were somehow crawling its way ashore. On the other end of the line, the unfrayed end, was the same black, red, and white buoy pattern they’d seen on the Bad Co.

“Think of the odds,” Chase said. “Me must’ve been following his line.”

“I’m calling the police,” I said. I reached for my pocket. Chase pushed a little harder on my shoulder. “We have to call the police. I’m calling now. We can still get out of this.”

“Hold on,” Chase said and smacked the phone out of my hand. It landed on the deck. “Just hold on. Here’s what we do.” He paused and grabbed my other shoulder as if we were in a huddle. “We’re already ground out. We’re on the beach. We have at least another hour before we hit dead low. That means two, three hours tops of waiting. No police. No lobsterman. OK? OK.”

He released me, turned around, and shoved the trap overboard. He spun back around, picked up the cooler from the console, and tapped the lid like a drum. “And then we go home.”

We left the cooler with the stolen lobsters in the boat and Chase brought the cooler he’d just opened onshore. “We’ll eat plenty on me,” he said and laughed. “Besides,” he continued, “we probably shouldn’t risk a fire.”

He was smiling and collapsed next to me. The beach sand was rough and packed with crushed shells. The tamarack trees closest to us were thin, sick looking, covered in moss and lichen. A seal carcass rotted on a clump of rocks nearby.

“It’s temporary,” Chase said and patted the cooler. “What do you think?” I asked.

“Could be anything. A lot of pills up here. I’d guess heroin. Oxy. Close to Canada, so could be coming or going.” “But what will you do with it?”

“Could do a lot with it,” he said. “Those were twenties on the rolls. Could just dump the bricks. Or not. I’d cut you in either way. Half and half. Fifty-fifty.”

“Think they’re still out there?” I asked.

It was hard to tell what was visible. I was sure the sun had set, but was still able to see white of our boat hull now beached on the shore.

“We’d hear them,” he said. “They might have caught us on radar, but there’s a lot of mud and rocks out here. We’d hear the engine if they were close.”

All I could hear is the light wind, the mosquitoes around my ears, and the wash of the waves on the shore.

“Even if they were,” he said. “What are they going to do? Kill us? It’s one thing to shoot at someone who’s actively pulling your traps. That’s their livelihood. That’s federal law. But I don’t think they can come up to you on a beach and start popping off rounds.”

I squeezed the cuffs of my pants to wring them out. My thigh throbbed. “You could soak it,” he said. “The salt water would do it some good. I’ll help you.”

“I’m not taking my pants off. I’m not going back in the water.” “Who’s watching?” he said.

I had my pants off and was inspecting the bruise on my leg by the light of my phone when when a flare shot popped off above. It came from somewhere close offshore

and lit the fog into a cloud of bright red and orange. Two more flares exploded and suddenly the beach was bright and alive.

Chase took the light and sprinted to the trees. I grabbed my shoes, but left my pants behind and followed him barefoot away from the shore. A shell cut the ball of my left foot. Chase told me to hurry and shined his flashlight already behind the tree line. I followed his path, half-hopping trying to keep the weight off my foot, and told him to turn the goddamned light off.

I ducked down against the trunk of the first spruce tree from the beach behind a heap of dried sea grass. I called out to Chase, but he didn't respond. I pried the periwinkle from my foot and the blood slicked down my heel. A diesel engine hammered at a high tilt somewhere beyond the cove. Chase appeared, pulled me up under my arms, and fireman-carried me through the short thicket of tamarack trees and alder bushes, and didn't stop until we both collapsed to the beach to the other side of the island's shore.

Before I could catch my breath, a spotlight punched through fog and it hit the island with a wide beam of daylight.

"We know you have it," someone said. We both rolled over and crawled on our hands and knees up back up the beach to the stand of thin alder bushes. A few hundred tamarack and birch trees, with trunks no thicker than my arm, stood between us and the other side of the island where we ground the boat ashore. The searchlight's brightness carried through the screen of needles and leaves, and it's wash reflected back on the ocean the shine of the desert camouflage paint on the hull of the Bad Co. It was maybe a still a fifty yards off the shore. The cartoon shark teeth and eyes, comic and juvenile in

the daylight, now glinted with an actual hint of malice. There were was a soft white glow from the navigation screens in the pilot house, but the boat itself was dark and not using any of its running or all-around lights. The captain, still bare-chested in coveralls and wearing the black baseball hat, leaned out of the pilothouse as he swept the trees with the searchlight. “Give it back and we all go home.”

“Ass in my pants,” Chase whispered. “They’re bluffing.” “Let’s just give it up,” I said.

“They’re going to get stuck,” Chase said. “They’re in too shallow. There’s not enough water.”

“You’re on private property,” the captain said. “And I’d put money you don’t have permission either.” He went back into the pilothouse and turned off his searchlight. Another light came on and the captain read off a notebook. “We got two One Day Non-Resident Fishing Licenses bought at Millets General, seven-thirty this morning, last names Cookson and Goose.” He flipped a few pages and kept going. “We got one reservation Pigeon Hill Campground, Guisti party of 2.” He put the notebook down and pointed searchlight back on and at our boat.

“Small towns,” Chase said. “Go figure.”

“That boat is rented through Four Corners Marine,” he said, zooming in on the company decal on the stern. “That’s right up the road. I bet they’d like to know where there boat is right about now.”

I grabbed the handle of the cooler but Chase held it tight. “It’s over,” said. Chase just shook his head. “Still too far,” he said. “Too shallow.”

“These guys know our names,” I said. “Let’s just give it back.”

Chase put his hand over my mouth. I tasted the salt and sand from his palm. I shook my head and raised my fist to punch him. “What the fuck do you—“

“Why don’t you think he’s called the cops?” he said and laid his palm over my fist, collecting my hand back down from the air. He was staring right out at the boat when he said this to me, and it was the look on his face that made me, once again, believe that he was right. It was a standoff. They couldn’t come ashore and leave their boat. We couldn’t get in our boat and take off.

There was another voice, this one over a CB radio. It was distorted and staticky.

“The tide is still going,” Chase said. “If he wants it, he’ll have to come ashore and get it. As soon as he hits the water, we break for it.”

“Break for it fucking where? The boat is on the *fucking beach!* There is nowhere to go. *Fucking nowhere.*”

The CB radio responded to something and the captain called out again. “We got your Suburban at the Harrington ramp.” More from the CB. “License plate E-O-J,” he called out. “Niner, zero, fiver. Rhode Island.”

Chase’s head sunk and he swore. He shook his head a few times and stood up behind the tree. The captain directed the spotlight at my pants on the shore. My wallet was in those pants. My license. My bank cards.

I turned away from the beach. The searchlight carried through over my head to the ocean below. The waves were calm and there was no surf. The tide would be almost



dead low and the sea would slack and be at it's calmest. I was in a pair of wet underwear and t-shirt, propped up by my elbows, laying down in the sand in the dark. I only vaguely knew where I was. It was half a mile to shore, but what was even on that shore? A road? A town? A way to get back to the car? My thigh throbbed. My foot was still bleeding. I might even need stitches. Stitches meant the Emergency Room. My health insurance card.

The searchlight was still on my pants on the shore. I sat up to put my shoes on Chase whispered at me to get down but I ignored him.

"I give up," I said. I held my phone out to him. I still had service. "I'm calling the police," I said. "This guy is going to kill us."

Chase still had the cooler tucked in his arm like a football. "I'll hide it," he said. "Can always come back."

I stood up. "Whatever," I said. "You're crazy. I'm calling them. Do whatever you want."

The captain swept the shore again. The light crossed the tree right in front of me and I tensed up as if it would somehow hide my arms and legs from being seen. The searchlight went back down the beach and on the boat, and then it went dark. The pilothouse still glowed a faint white but the captain wasn't in sight. The diesel engine then revved up with a loud whine. The boat turned and drove back into the fog and was gone.

"He's leaving," Chase said. "I told you. He can't get in here."

I didn't believe it. I stepped back into the thin grove of trees. Without the searchlight I could only really see the bright white of our boat's hull and the sand of the beach.

"He's still out there," I said. "He's not going anywhere." Chase walked up next to me. "I have an idea."

I was still holding my phone. I hadn't even checked to see if I had service. "We swim for it," he said. "Let me show you. We can make it. Take a look."

He turned around and went back to the opposite shore. I followed him back down the beach and we walked to the westward tip of the island. It seemed even darker than before and I could not tell where the rocks and seaweed ended and the ocean began.

"Over there," he said. I didn't know where until I caught the first red light above the fog layer on the horizon, then a series of red lights in a tower, and then a small handful of white house lights over a short stretch of the bay in which there was no fog.

The distance across the channel was long, but most of it was a tidal flat of mud and we wouldn't have to do much swimming. The lights on the shore made it seem even more possible. The fog was lifting. I could make out actual houses with lights shining from their windows and cars in their driveways. One of the houses had a dock and a floodlight. The horizon above them was almost clear and a few stars were already visible in the sky.

I clicked my phone on. It wasn't even nine o'clock. I still had service, but wasn't thinking anymore about making a call. I knew we couldn't give up the cooler. I was thinking about what would happen when we made it to shore. I needed my pants, my

wallet, and something to keep my phone dry. Maybe put everything in the cooler and get dressed back on land. Walk to town. Check in to the motel. Use a fake name. Go in one at a time. Call a taxi from the hotel and head back to Ellsworth or Bangor. Spend the night miles away. Rent a car. Or fly. Leave the boat and trailer. Leave the car. And leave Chase.

“We should grab the lifejackets,” I said. “Just in case. I’m going to grab my pants and the other cooler. Something to put our stuff in. And the tape from the first aid kit.” I paused. “Actually, you get it. I want to look up something. I’ll wait here.”

Chase clapped his hands together and then me on the shoulder. “It’s not that far,” he said. “Don’t worry. It’ll be easy. It’ll be worth it.” He started toward the boat. “I’ll be right—”

The searchlight was back. His engine wasn’t running, but the captain of the Bad Co. had his boat broadside to the shore. He was much closer this time. Closer than we thought possible for him to get in. It clicked off again and the boat vanished. Then a small flame appeared and lit up the pilothouse. The captain was holding a wine bottle stuffed with a flaming rag sideways over the side of his railing. He aimed the spotlight back on our boat for a second, clicked it back off, then threw the bottle.

The bottle smashed into the port side of the hull. Whatever fuel that was inside spread in wide streaks of fire along the boat and up on the shore. The captain had a second one ready and this one landed inside the boat. It exploded right behind the console and lit up the entire shore.

I didn't wait to see anymore. I sprinted down the shore toward the ocean. The beach sloped down into a ledge rock I lost my footing. I tumbled down the seaweed covered rock slope and landed in the mud flat below. Chase was already ahead of me and I tried to follow the sunken holes of his path through the mud toward the water. The mud sucked up my right shoe only a few feet from the ledge. My left shoe held on only a few more paces and then I was barefoot. I sunk past my ankles by the time I hit the water and I worried that I wouldn't make it. Chase shouted "Come on," and then he splashed down into the water. I trudged after him, as if trying to free myself from quicksand, until I was almost knee deep in the channel. I tripped over myself trying and belly flopped face first into the shallow water. I surfaced and grasped and kicked out at the water. My feet connected a few times, but soon I was swimming into the channel. Chase was treading water next to the channel marker, a floating green can marking the deepest section of the channel. He still had the cooler tucked under his right arm, but with his left he was waving me over, and he was shouting my name.

The explosions from the boat's fuel tanks flashed through the sky. Flames of oranges and yellows flared higher than the treetops. The boat console launched up and over the bow of the boat above the high water mark like a missile. A lifejacket bubbled and hissed, tangled in the branches of a birch tree, its nylon and polystyrene filling melted into fires of purple and blue. Whole sections of the hull floated on the water, their epoxy coatings burning like floating candles. A monstrous tower of smoke piled up above the fire into the sky.

In the momentary brightness, I could see Chase's face. His right eye was swollen shut and his mouth was bleeding. I thought he was missing a tooth. He grabbed my arm and I let him hold my shoulder as we floated.

The captain swept the island again with the searchlight. Chase and I swam behind the green can and watched as the Bad Co. slowly reversed and then circled back to the far shore of the island. The captain shouted out something guttural and there was some broken chatter over the CB radio. The Bad Co. came back around and this time scanned the water off the shore. We huddled close behind the green can. It was only a matter of time. If we were treading water, it was deep enough.

"I'm going to make a break for it," I said." "Wait!" Chase shouted. "Look!"

The Bad Co.'s searchlight was out and its engine back on. The captain revved the engine up to high whine and then eased it down to idle. It sat there for a few moments. "At the island," Chase said. "Over there."

The far side of the island, where we had beached the boat, was aglow again with flame. A group of alder bushes were consumed with fire. The flames were as high as some of the taller trees. The closest row of tamarack trees would soon catch and burn.

"The sea grass must've caught," he said. "Just dried out hollow tubes of carbon, really. Perfect for starting beach bonfires. And upwind like we are, it's not much of a surprise. It hasn't rained since we've been up here. You know, just under the soil it's all peat. Once that stuff starts going..."

The Bad Co.'s boat heaved in reverse. In the firelight I could see the captain spin the wheel and work the throttle levers. He swung the boat around back toward the open bay and motored off into darkness.

The fires of the alder bushes spread back down along the beach and into the piles of grass. Chase and I treaded water and watched as the small bushes formed a ring of fire around the island. In no time the fire was hot enough and the tamaracks and birches crackled into the blaze. We swam backwards across the channel toward the shore and watched the empty spaces between the trees filled with flame. The fire swirled, leapt, and engulfed the branches. The trunks cracked and the bark split. By the time I could feel the mud once again under my toes the fire had reached high over the crowns of the tallest trees. Each one burst from within into wild torchlight until the island was completely consumed. I felt the bottom and bounced a few more feet until I could finally wade through the last feet of water. There was another hundred yards of mudflats to slop through and then we would be on solid ground. The ball of my foot still had something stuck inside and putting my full weight on it made me cry out in pain. I looked back and the fire raged behind me. The boat was smoldering and unrecognizable.

When I reached rocks on the shore, I saw the flashing lights of police cars coming down the coastal road. I heard the sirens and a helicopter approaching. I watched Chase climb up the rocks ahead and toward a streetlight above the tree line. As soon as I wondered if he would stop and wait for me he immediately did. He called my name but I didn't respond. He climbed back down and stood in front of me. There was a dog barking

now and voices down the shoreline. He was about to ask me what was wrong and then he saw my feet. There was already a new puddle of blood.

Hold on, he told me, and he sat down on the cooler. He didn't wait a second. He sat down on the cooler, slid his sneakers off, and stood back up. He gestured for me to take his seat and handed them over to me. He actually was missing two teeth but still smiling. He helped me put each shoe on and laced them together for me. Once they were on and tied tight, he lifted me up with his arm under my shoulder, and together we climbed up the rocks toward the tree line.

## IN THE PARKING LOT

The pickup truck honked and flashed its high beams. The guidance counselor watched it circle the lot around the row of waiting buses, but when the driver waved over at him through the guidance counselor couldn't recognize his face. He had his visor down and there was glare from the sun on his windshield. The guidance counselor waved back a friendly anonymous goodbye, thought "can't this guy know I can't see him?" and started across the lot to his car. But the pickup accelerated in his direction. Before the guidance counselor could cross into the first row of cars, it became clear that whoever it was intended to block his way, and stopped in the middle of the main lane for traffic.

"I thought it was you," the driver called out and laughed. His window slid down and the man behind it waved again. "Sorry if I scared you. I wanted to catch you. If it was you."

The guidance counselor smiled, shuffled his briefcase to his other hand, and shook hands with the driver. He had no idea who the man was. "Oh no, I was just headed home."

"We talked on the phone," the driver said. "Yesterday. It's me."

"No, no," the guidance counselor said, and switched his briefcase back to his right hand. "I know. I know it's you," the guidance counselor pointed to his glasses and smiled again, even though he still had no idea. "I just couldn't see."



Ha, I know. I'm just messing with you," the driver said and laughed again. "I'm here to pick him up. He had practice."

"Right," the guidance counselor said, raised his eyebrows and smiled, a face that he hoped showed that he did in fact now recognize the father. Who is this? He thought. Why now? "Right, of course. They should be out any minute."

"I left a message," the driver said with a big smile. "Just a few minutes ago. I got out of work and I called. Had to leave a message," he rapped his knuckle on the steering wheel and chuckled. "Isn't that always the way?"

"Sure is," the guidance counselor said and then shook his head and wiped his nose, something he did when he was nervous. He then remembered exactly who the father was and looked away. It was a father he had called the day before. He was going to report something he suspected was happening at the home and wanted to make sure he had his information right. It was an awkward call and he felt like it'd been a mistake as soon as he'd done it. After he hung up, he replayed the conversation in his head, and thought that if it'd been him on the other end, he'd be suspicious. There were a million ways to get the information right. And he didn't really have to call. He'd never admit it, but he just wanted to hear the man's voice. As if by just hearing it he would know if what suspected was true, and if the boy's father was guilty. He had thought he was being sly before he made the call, but as soon as it was over knew it'd been a mistake.

It was about a boy who'd been historically trouble. A teacher reported seeing his back and shoulders covered with bruises. He worried that the father somehow knew

about the report and that was why he was talking to him now. This was his proof. The father had somehow found out. There's no way he'd walk over to his car now. He could imagine himself being followed and more.

"But," the father continued, "I figured if I got myself over here fast enough, I'd still catch you. And here you are."

"Oh, right. Right." The guidance counselor looked over at the school building. The main office lights were still on but he couldn't see anyone moving inside. Above the main office window was a surveillance camera housing, a black orb the size of a basketball, and the guidance counselor felt better knowing that he was in its view.

"Well, if there's something you wanted to talk about, I'm always here. I didn't get to say it on the phone, but you can come in anytime. It was really just a formality. We call all the parents of kids before the big push of college conferences. Really, we call everyone. Just to make sure we have all the right information. We'll make sure he gets everything he needs during our next conference."

"I get you," the father said, still smiling. "I get you."

"You have no idea," the guidance counselor said. "Can't be too early. I've been on the phone all day. Tracking everybody down."

The father nodded again, this time shaking his head with sympathy.

"Just to make sure," the guidance counselor said again. "Addresses change. We send every home with forms for parents to fill out, but we never get them back. If we don't have the right address then, well, we don't want anyone to miss out on any

opportunities.” The guidance counselor shook his briefcase up over the driver’s side mirror as if inside were the opportunities or addresses he was talking about.

“I’m glad I caught you though,” the father said.

“It’s good to see you,” the guidance counselor said, hoping to appear sincere. His eyes glanced across the lot toward his car and then back up to the school bus above. Was the driver watching this? Were there any other adults around?

“I’m not so good on the phone,” the father said. “I like to talk person to person. Face to face, man to man.”

“Right,” the guidance counselor said and extended his hand again toward the window. “Well, it was good seeing you.”

The afterschool bell rang and a few students burst from the front doors. With his hand stretched out toward the driver the guidance counselor looked back toward the first wave of students. Whoops of laughter and shouts of horseplay filled the parking lot as the stream of students fanned out in all directions. A special needs boy the guidance counselor knew was running in their general direction. He had flat cornsilk hair, was hunched under a monogrammed backpack heavier than a kitchen cabinet, and shuffled to the left because of the hard plastic brace encircling his calf. Another boy from the same classroom was chasing him, this one with a thick pink scar the shape of an oyster shell bulging from his forehead, slick with sweat like a slice of raw tuna, and was swinging his backpack over his head like a giant sling, oblivious to the situation and the adults around. The boy who was being chased stopped short and collapsed to the pavement before the

backpack hit him. The backpack's momentum carried forward and ripped the backpack from the boy's hand and sent it flying into the sidewall of the bus.

"Boys!" the guidance counselor shouted, with the correct measure of anger and stern. He was grateful to have something to pull him away from the father, something to illustrate his power, and he turned on the boys. He opened his mouth to say more but both boys apologized quickly, and scurried off in the opposite direction. The bus driver didn't seem to have noticed that something had hit the bus. The father in the pickup had been smiling as he watched the boys' and the guidance counselor's reactions.

"You know," the father said as he watched the boys run off, "boys will be boys. Same as always." He slapped the car door outside his window. "Me and my brothers were all the same way. No helping that."

"I hear you," the guidance counselor replied and looked back toward the buses. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "But, still, we all have to learn sometime." He hoped that this might be taken as a hint and that maybe the conversation should be over.

But the father was still looking at where the boys had chased each other off into the parking lot. "Me and mine," the father said with a nostalgic smile. He made a fist with one hand and punched it into the other. "We'd wail on each other. Beat the crap out of each other. Bruises and black eyes—you name it, we broke it. Back then, no one ever batted an eye over stuff like that." The father punched his hand again. "It was natural. It made us tougher."

“Things *were* different then,” the guidance counselor agreed, but his tone and eyes were contrarian. “It was a different time.”

The father laughed again. “Nowadays,” the father said, “your kid gets into a fight and he’s some sort monster. They send him to counseling. They put him in special classes. They make it worse. And then they don’t do anything. They send him to a special school. They never listen.”

The guidance counselor looked away. He knew about the father’s son. The boy had been send to a behavioral school. He remembered seeing the boy escorted away in handcuffs from the cafeteria, a sack of spent rage, and how it took days to replace the windows that overlooked the courtyard. It was part of his reluctance to do anything at all. The family was troubled and was trouble.

The father looked at the guidance counselor and pointed at him.

“Or they say nothing and someone from the state shows up at your house while you’re having dinner.”

The guidance counselor took a full step backward. This was it, he thought. That’s the doorway of retaliation. He looked at the father, but the father’s hands were now wide open and he was smiling apologetically at the guidance counselor. He was the picture of agreeable.

“Can you believe that?” the father asked and clapped his hands, this time as if in prayer. “But it’s a good thing. They should get called. What kind of parent wouldn’t want you to call? That’s *exactly* what we want. *Exactly* the kind of people we need working at

our schools. We've got nothing to hide. Someone should call if they think something's going on. It's a good thing. That's you doing your job."

He couldn't believe this was happening. He didn't want the father to think that he'd understood everything, that the buses were too loud, and that the noises from the windows were making it too difficult to continue. He pointed to the hood of the bus over them. "Are you sure you didn't want to go inside?" he asked. "Or set up a meeting?" His voice cracked a little. He caught himself and coughed into his hand. He even waved a little as if to clear the exhaust fumes.

"Of course someone showed up," the father continued, and clapped his hands again, but not any gesture to show that he believed the guidance counselor. "It's not the first time. We used to get called all the time when his older brother was still at this school. You have no idea how many times I was in here, in that office. I know how it all works. I know the system. I work for the district. I know these people. Nothing happens. They do nothing."

"Good," the guidance counselor said, trying to sound impartial. "I wished it'd worked out better for him. I should get back inside—"

"They showed up!" The father cried out. He clapped his hands once more, this time loudly, and then he collapsed his hands into a double fist and shook his hands outward. He spoke with vindication and righteousness. "Did you hear me? The woman who came definitely said it was a 'he.' Only two of you here that would make that kind of call. And you're the only he."

The guidance counselor saw the father now and whatever fear he'd held over him vanished. He thought to himself, so what? He hadn't noticed before, but the father's hands were tiny. In fact, the father now seemed smaller than both of his sons. The hands almost looked like they belonged to a girl. The guidance counselor didn't think his fingernails ever looked so manicured or so clean. The pinkness of them, pumped up with blood from being folded tight, made them seem even smaller. He questioned whether or not the man shaking his clasped hands in front of him was capable of bruising anything at all.

"We really need to get out of the way," the guidance counselor said, and because he knew the invitation would be rejected, he offered it again. "Are you sure you won't come inside?"

"You know, you could have called though," the father said. "You could've asked."

"I'm sorry?" the guidance counselor said. "These buses are blocked in." He pointed to the first bus. Its stop sign was still extended and flashing red but the students were all on board. "We should probably get out of the way."

"It's just not that easy. You have no idea. That's the way it was with his older brother. Day, after day, after day, ...*that* kid was in a fight every day. You must hear it all the time, but *I* was at my wit's end." The father wiped his hands free. "His younger brother, he's not like that at all. He's smart. He doesn't get into trouble. It's not his fault."

The guidance counselor pulled his arms around himself and shook his head. He narrowed his eyes as if focusing on the buses in the lot. He was finished here. If he was

going to accuse him, fine, accuse him. But if he was going to beg for understanding without giving him more to understand, the guidance counselor had no time left for him. “I think we’d better go,” he said.

“You can’t have any idea!” the father said, this time almost pleading with the guidance counselor. “Maybe when he was still here, you talked to his older brother. Maybe you knew. I don’t believe the coincidence. And yesterday, I get the call from you for the address, and last night they show up during dinner. I’m telling you, I got nothing to hide. Search me. But I want you to be straight with me. They don’t tell you who, but I figured it’s going to be somebody from the school. Kid goes away on a school trip, they say they find all kinds of bruises on him, and they need to investigate. Due diligence, she said. Just be honest with me. I don’t have anything to hide.”

“He should be coming out of the door over there,” the guidance counselor said and held his briefcase up to shield himself from the sun. Part of him wanted to stay and see how they son would react, seeing the two of them standing there. But he didn’t see how it would make any difference now. They’d investigated and they’d found nothing. What would they do now? What could they do to him? “Your son,” the guidance counselor spoke up, and pointed vaguely beyond the buses. “They usually come out from that door over there.”

“I got a right,” the father said, begging. “I got rights.”

The bus first in line jerked free of its parking brake and rolled a few feet forward. The driver pushed for a gentle second on the horn.



“What a day,” the guidance counselor said, squinting now against the gleam of the bus, almost feeling bad for the father. The sun was setting fast, and no matter where the guidance counselor held the briefcase up, it seemed the glare was coming from everywhere. “Never enough time,” he continued, with a fake yawn. “Like I said, anytime you need us, you can call. Have a good one.”

The father reached out again at the guidance counselor, this time with both hands, and waved them around with grasping hands, as if there was a line floating between the two of them, but he couldn't catch it. He grabbed two, then three more times, at the thin air. The guidance counselor took another step back and regarded the father with clinical concern. The father gasped, thumped at his chest as if afflicted by a sharp, choking pain, and asked, “but why?” The guidance counselor shrugged. He almost said, “What could I do?” but he decided against even this small gesture and walked back toward the school. The buses would be loaded soon and the force of traffic would compel the father along.

## LICENSE

Charles was a mechanic for a dealership major enough to get tickets to the Indy 500 every few years, but was a lifelong subscriber to public transit. He grew up in the city and was one of those people who would never try out for a driver's license. When a car repair needed to be tested, he would have to ride shotgun, or sometimes even in the back seat when the owner insisted on coming along. If he happened to be the only mechanic in the shop, he'd have to get one of the salesmen to drive. Eddie refused to help when it was his turn. He was the youngest salesman, barely twenty-five, and he milked his boyishness with no shame. He wore sharkskin suits, pointy dress shoes with silver buckles, and some kind of gel in his curly hair that made it always look wet.

"Forgot my glasses," Eddie said. He waved the same way he did when he sped past Charles at the bus stop after quitting time. This little self-congratulatory wave.

"Against the law."

Eddie had ducked out twice on test drives. The first time he rolled his eyes and told Charles he'd be right back. He went outside to the sales lot and stayed there. Charles didn't say anything, he wasn't going to chase the kid, so he just initialed the work order and let it go. The second time was the last service of the night and the customer wanted the car so he could pick it up after work. Charles knew it was Eddie's turn and gave him half an hour notice. He hurried to make sure no one would have to stay late. Eddie just left. Charles watched him as he sped off. So he initialed the order again, and this time he

thought he would be forced to complain. And he would have, if the customer hadn't called later the next morning. The engine was smoking out on the highway. Pouring out from the hood. Charles had forgot to put the refill cap back on. The customer topped it off, four quarts, and the car ran fine, but wasn't convinced by Charles about the improbability of any damage. Charles covered it up and bit his tongue. He didn't want to make it a big deal, for both their sakes, and hoped that Eddie would just give in. That's why he'd called out from the service window. Everyone on the floor would hear Charles and there'd be no question about Eddie's going along.

Charles leaned out over the counter and gave the keys a jingle. He'd never seen Eddie with glasses. Not once. He didn't forget anything. "Come on hotshot. It's a roadster. You'll love it."

"Two beers with lunch too," Eddie said. "Sorry Chuck. Wish I'd known."

But Eddie hadn't gone out for lunch. Charles had been behind him in line at the canteen truck.

"I'll buy you a coffee," Charles said. "Back in no time."

Eddie held up a finger and stared outside. The glass bay doors were open to the street traffic, and the only motion outside was from the red, white, and blue triangle flags whipping on their wires. Charles counted two appointments on the white board, neither of them Eddie's, and Eddie was up last in the walk in slot. It was there, undeniable, written in with big red dry bubble letters. Eddie asked Charles to wait a second and a few of the other salesmen looked up from their computers. All five of them except Eddie had

driven test runs with Charles. It took fifteen minutes and none of them had ever complained about Charles taking too long or worried out loud about losing a sale.

"Hey Stiles," Charles said. "Got a minute?"

Stiles was the manager on. He was a big man from the Southwest who had been a regional manager then dropped back to sales. Another shiny suit kind of guy, but seemed to mean it when he smiled or shook your hand. He wheeled around on his chair.

"Can do," he said and then looked over at Eddie. Eddie was Stiles' best salesman and Charles knew he didn't want to piss him off. "You got someone waiting back there? How can I help?"

"I got it," Eddie said. "Just need a few."

"He just needs a few Charles," Stiles said. "We all got to feed the donkey."

"Lots of cars piling up," Charles said. He shook the keys and pointed at the other keys on the peg board. "This guy has them coming in every ten thousand miles. We never used to make warranty calls. We never had so many cars coming in for nothing at all."

"It's good business," Stiles said. "Good for everyone. Good for you."

Eddie picked up the phone and dialed. "Keep them coming," He said, calling over to Stiles with this see-through deference, an up-and-coming brown-noser kissing ass to the old coach. "Just like you said. That's what you do. That's how you sell."

"Right," Charles said. Things were usually good with him and the guys on the sales floor. But this thing with Eddie was making him look like the bad guy. He leaned over a little more and lowered his voice to Stiles. "You going to make this guy drive or what?"

“You got to admit,” Stiles said. “He can sell.”

Charles saw what was coming. Wilson said ‘smoke break’ and Hughes followed him outside. Beech and Powers hid back in their computer screens. It was actually Stiles up next on the board. You could see him weighing the options, tapping his pen on the service desk and circling his eyes around for an answer. He opened his arms as if to say ‘What can I do?’ but Charles wasn’t about to give in. The sales floor was quiet and Charles heard himself breathing harder.

"I really have to make this," Eddie said to Stiles and tilted his head toward the phone. It was if Charles had left the service window. Eddie went back to his computer and started talking into the phone. "Mr. Jacobs," he said. "How's the good life? How's the new ride?"

Charles dropped the keys on the counter. Stiles bent his head and ground his palm into his temple as if trying to rub out a stain. Charles watched as Stiles’ face got red. Stiles forced a hollow sigh and then smiled. Eddie said to Mr. Jacobs “of course I can hold,” and held the phone out away from his ear. Stiles turned his back to Charles and walked away from the service counter. He passed by Eddie’s desk toward the other salesmen.

“Beech? Powers?” he said. “Which one of you wants to get a cup of coffee?”

Neither of them looked up. Powers whispered something and Beech cupped his hands in front of his mouth to cover a laugh.

“Can’t boss,” Beech said, “Got an appointment.” Powers smirked along with Beech.

“Come on,” Stiles said.

“Going to the RMV,” Beech laughed again. Stiles crossed his arms. “Don’t start,” he said. “It’s true,” Beech said. “It’s today.”

Powers burst. Charles had heard this all before. One of them would start and it would go round and round. People always think the guys in the garage are the rough ones. These guys were the real pricks.

“Taking his little girl for her permit test,” Powers said. “Or is it the actual road test? I can’t remember. You can do them both the same day now. You believe that?”

Eddie was still on hold. He wrapped his hands around the receiver and joined in. “That’s right,” he called over to them. “My little brother didn’t even do driver’s ed. Took the hit on the insurance, but he doesn’t care. Kid’s got three jobs and—,”

“Aren’t you on a call?” Stiles said.

“One of these days,” Beech said.

“She’s going to pass one of these days.” Stiles pounded a fist on Beech’s desk. Powers and Beech looked past Stiles at Charles. “Maybe she can drive old Charles,” Beech muttered, but the joke was over and the room went back to silent.

“You two. Knock it off. Beech, take the keys. Charles, go with Beech. We’ll sort this out later.”

Charles felt like a child. Stiles threw a twenty-dollar bill down on Beech’s desk. Eddie was back on the phone, asking Mr. Jacobs about the car again, and if he could ‘guesstimate’ his mileage. He eyed Charles with a tight grin and offered to Mr. Jacobs to

schedule something soon. Beech crumpled the twenty into his pocket and flung his suit jacket on. He ignored Stiles' apology and held his hands out to Charles for the keys.

“Well?” he said. “Happy?”

When Eddie's license was suspended that summer, he began riding the bus with Charles. Charles had the good sense not to make any comment about karmic justice and didn't discourage Eddie from sitting with him, even when Eddie started drinking on the bus. They both travelled only to the nearest subway station; just twenty minutes before they would both get off and part ways. And it was in Charles' nature to be conciliatory. Maybe, Charles thought, when Eddie's license suspension was over, he would stop being so selfish and give Charles a break every-once in awhile.

So, Charles sat and listened to Eddie as he bragged about his biggest sales. He was at first surprised when Eddie ranted about the laziness of the management or the cheapness of his customers, but Charles learned that it didn't matter to Eddie if Charles repeated anything he'd tell him.

"You don't hear it," Eddie said. "But the *lines* these people use." They had just left the depot and Eddie started right in. He was drinking an oversized can wrapped tightly in a brown paper bag and Charles didn't think it was his first of the evening.

"I can understand a man trying to get a deal," Eddie continued. "But think about who you're fooling! Who thinks they can out deal a car dealer? I've already asked them everything I need to know. And they forget! They've already given themselves away!" Eddie acted with the sense of invulnerability and carelessness suffered by the worst of his generation. Eddie would go on and on about the importance of making a customer

become a customer for life, but would mimic the voices and mannerisms of men with recurring accounts because he earned nothing from their contracts. He spoke as loudly as if he were with his buddies drinking in the dark corner of some bar, and made the same animations in the small space of his bus seat that he would make in the break room, either shadowboxing a customer with quick one-two's until knockout, or dancing a victory celebration as if the closed sale were an end zone. Eddie didn't hold back either when it came to women. There were no women on the sales floor except the ones who processed loan applications, and they were all fair game for Eddie's evaluation. Women that came in alone were a special sort of target. Eddie ooked about getting them to "pay to play" and "ride or drive." Charles knew when passengers in the back of the bus had heard Eddie by the looks they made when they passed on their way out the door.

But Eddie was different. He set his pace early and sprinted all day long. Eddie scheduled his online appointments for the morning as often as he could so he'd never miss a walk-in during the lunch spurt or the evening golden hours. A few salesmen caught on and tried, but most were too comfortable in their routines. He was there before Charles on most days and Charles never saw Eddie on the bus in the morning. He'd be at his desk wheedling customers over the phone, or circling the showroom with a potential sale, coffee and donut in hand.

Charles listened and tried to stay non-committal. The bus driver's eyes in his rear view mirror perked up. Charles counted six of them on the bus. Two younger women, maybe in their early thirties, with their babies slung around their chests in those brightly colored pouches, sat facing each other on opposite sides of the aisle just a few seats back.



Charles didn't recognize them, and they didn't smile or not smile when Charles looked over at them. Both were wearing running shoes and figure forming aerobics suits.

Another young man, about Eddie's age, was sitting by the door in front of them. He wore a hooded sweatshirt stuck through with rows and rows of safety pins that seemed random and somehow menacing to Charles, and a pair of stuffed up skateboarding shoes with gold lettering and thick laces. He was sideways across his seat, leaned back casually against the window, with his left leg jutted out into the aisle, where he let the fat laces of his skateboarding shoe sway and dangle.

"You think I care what neighborhood you live in or where your kids go to school?" Eddie went on. "When I ask you about your commute or when I want to know about where you like to take your vacation? Poor people don't sail in the Finger Lakes. Poor people don't ask if you can throw in the ski rack from the floor model."

"Easy Eddie," Charles said and looked back at the women with their babies.

"Take it easy."

Eddie brushed Charles off. "Those girls know exactly what I'm talking about," Eddie called out to them and raised his beer. "Don't you girls?" The women didn't even blink. "See what I mean? Probably drive a Prius. Or a Subaru."

"Just enjoy the ride," Charles said.

"You know who the UN should send to the Middle East?" Eddie said. "The 38th parallel? Fucking car salesmen. Parachute a whole squad of car dealers down, packing payments, and on first pencil you'd have Boko Haram or Isis or whoever laying down

their weapons, signing on the dotted line and buying up America. Full pops!” He made little finger guns and shot up the bus seats. “US, of fucking, A!”

The young man with the sneakers chuckled. He was chewing his fingernails and Charles couldn't help but look at the blood on his cuticle. The young man rubbed his finger on the fabric of the seat in front of him. Charles would have ordinarily said something and held himself back. Charles was not like Eddie. Charles was the other kind of person who rode the bus. The kind of person who exaggerates a coughing fit when a passenger talks loudly on a cellphone. The kind of person who says “Excuse me, I think you forgot something,” when someone leaves behind a newspaper or piece of trash. Charles was technically a senior citizen, but was able-bodied enough to stand the whole ride and often did after giving his seat up for someone more needy. He didn't think of himself as strict, or a boy scout, but he felt strongly about the rules for public spaces. Nobody should have to listen to whatever you're playing on your headphones and nobody should have to sit in whatever was just on the soles of your shoes. It was just common courtesy was his thinking. Sitting next to Eddie tested the bounds of Charles' tolerance. He was split between offending Eddie and letting Eddie offend everyone on the bus. On the best evenings, when Eddie only spoke loudly or dropped a casual profanity, Charles felt somewhat like a trapped and reluctant hypocrite, but would otherwise shrug off the experience. On the worst evenings, when Eddie would step beyond the line with particularly graphic or vulgar observations, Charles wouldn't cool down until much later. Sometimes his memories of the evening broiled for hours before he fell asleep. Sometimes he even re-enacted them in his dreams.

The young man let a few of the fingernails drop to the floor. If he hadn't been complicit with Eddie's behavior on the bus, Charles would've asked the young man to pick them up. Instead, Charles settled for a scowl.

"What was that?" Eddie said. "I'm sorry?" Charles said.

"That? That look? You going to tell me you didn't just give that guy over there a look?"

"I'm sorry, Eddie." He lifted his left hand and tapped his wedding band. "I don't give any guy any looks. Good one though. Real good. Tell the guys tomorrow. I gave a guy a look. Slick."

"You ever play poker?" Eddie said. "If you had to guess, what would you say was your tell?" Would the look on your face right now be your bluff? Is that your move? You don't think you gave that guy a look? You don't think I saw you give him that look?" Eddie got a little closer. "What, you never picked a booger before?"

"Come on," Charles said. The nail biter was now watching them. "What are we talking about here?"

Eddie stood up and grabbed the straphanger in the aisle closest to Charles. He wasn't even making an effort to hide his beer. He looked down at Charles with the same face he had when he talked about the salesmen who couldn't make their quota and began comically scratching the side of his nose with his finger.

"You never mined for gold?" "Eddie—"

Eddie scratched his nose harder. "Pick it and eat it?" "Funny. You're funny."

Eddie leaned down directly over Charles' face. He dropped his nose scratching and pinched his nostrils instead.

"Let one rip and watch people guess if it was you?"

"No." Charles saw the nail biter smirk. "Definitely not. Sit down, will you?"

Eddie laughed a little and took the empty seat next to Charles. He spread his legs wide into Charles's space. The bus slowed to a stop and a handful of strangers sat around the both of them. Charles thought the moment was over. But then Eddie leaned his upper body into Charles' shoulder, extended his open hand in front of Charles' mouth, and whispered in his ear.

"Do it right in your palm before you give a hand a shake?" Charles straightened up and elbowed Eddie away from him.

"Get out of here," he said. He shouted loud enough for the driver to look back in the mirror.

Eddie pushed back. "Never? Not once?"

"Decency, Eddie. It's called decency." Another man his age would've never acted that way. It was unnatural. Eddie was making an ass of himself. Charles wanted to push him across the aisle and at the same time he just wanted him to shut up. People were staring.

"You know what I think?"

"You have no idea," Charles said.

"You don't think I know you?" Eddie said. "You don't think I see?"

Charles slid across the aisle seat and moved to the front seat of the bus. He filled the other seat with his tool bag. Eddie swung pole to pole up the aisle toward him.

“Excuse me, ladies,” he said and swirled his can around toward Charles and paused before them. “That man over there is a genuine hero and he deserves some company. We’re lucky to be on his bus.”

The woman on the right arched her shoulder inwards and drew a blanket from within sling over her baby. The other woman made the mistake of nodding at Eddie, like when a man does when he says hello to someone on the street he doesn’t know.

Eddie paused and pointed at her. He turned back to Charles, shrugged, and plopped down in the seat in front of the two women, his legs sideways in the aisle. The woman shifted backward in her seat, but there was nowhere to go. Charles had moved to get away from Eddie, but now felt he’d made a bigger mistake.

“Really,” Eddie said and bent down to confide to the women. “We should be grateful. Your babies should be grateful. They will be. The world needs more men like the Chuck-ster over here.”

Charles looked at the women with sympathy. They were about the same age as his daughters, who would both never ride the bus because of moments just like these.

“Come on, Eddie,” Charles said. “They don’t want to hear about it.”

“Oh yes they do,” Eddie said. “You girls should have just seen Charles in action over here. I’m telling you. This man is a hero.”

Charles chuckled a little, tightened his eyes into a squint, and cocked his head to the side. This was the same gesture he’d make with his children, or anyone he wanted to

send a warning. To Charles it meant that he was looking at you, but wanted you to think he wasn't sure he was seeing you right. That maybe you weren't showing him your best self. But Eddie didn't respond like most people would. Instead, he stared Charles down while he emptied the rest of his can. Charles worried that women thought he approved of Eddie's behavior. Or worse. That he was his friend. But he also knew that if he didn't do something Eddie would get worse, and sometimes being friendly with a drunk was the only way to get them to stop.

"It was nothing Eddie." Charles patted the seat across the aisle. "Come on up here. I want to pick your brain about something."

Eddie didn't take the bait. He laughed and spit up a little of his beer. "Hear that? That's just the Chuck-ster being modest. You girls Catholic? I didn't think so. Born and raised here. Can't trade a good deed for a sin. That's not how it works. Isn't that right? And that right there, that's false modesty. Isn't it Chuck? That's bearing false witness."

"That's right," Charles said. "You're right. But I'm the lucky one. Why are you sitting way back there? I can't make up my mind about these snow tires. Maybe you can help. I thought I had it pulled up, but can't figure it out this damn thing." Charles held up his phone and used another technique he used with his children. "You have one of these?"

Eddie ignored Charles and hung his arms and chest further over the seat. The woman shushed her child against her chest and shifted again toward the aisle. Soon she would be spilling off the seat. Her friend put her arm on her shoulder and gripped her. "Let's go," she said. "It's ok," the other one said and began bobbing her baby in quick

motions timed in pace with the shaking of her knee. Charles sensed that she was gearing herself up for something and watched her as she turned to face Eddie.

“Go ahead,” she said. “We’re game.”

Eddie sucked in a breath. “Both of you?” he said. He stood up again and made a big show of dusting his suit coat off and flexing his chest. “I don’t know, Chuck. You think I can handle two at the same time? I thought for a minute they were just like the other new girls in the neighborhood. There’s a word for that? I know it. Hold on. It’s a—“

“Single parent,” the woman said. “Single parent is the word you’re looking for.” “Well, that’s one way to say it,” Eddie said and scratched the side of his hood. “I was thinking of another.”

The bus stopped and opened its doors. It was always a big stop and the curb was crowded with university students and nurses from the hospital. Charles lost track at after fifteen because he was trying to keep an eye on Eddie. The women shuffled their seats so they were sitting together.

“Watch what he does,” Eddie said to the women. “Just wait and see what the Chuck-ster has in store for these poor slobs.”

Charles didn’t say it, but he wanted Eddie to shut up. Who made him the goddamned announcer of the bus anyway? It wasn’t right.

“Take it easy, Eddie,” Charles said. “Let’s just get home in peace.”

Eddie slid again into the seat in front of the woman. “Watch,” he said. “The goddamned bus police.”

Four more stops. He wanted to get out and walk the rest of the way. It was the weirdness of it that bothered him. The interrogation. Eddie was clean-cut and paid attention to his appearance. If anything, he should've shared Charles' instinct about public hygiene. But picking his nose? Smelling his own farts? What was the big deal? He wasn't the type to shy from a confrontation. He was better at a fight than he was with living with something. It was the image of Eddie pinching his nose and offering his hand. That's what Charles thought about. Eddie hovering over him with his hand on the straphanger. The snot in his nose and the whiff lingering on his hand.

The bus moved forward. Charles drifted in his thoughts of shame for a whole section between stops and by the time the bus stopped again, somehow Eddie had got both the women talking to him. He was translating the Spanish in the advertisement banner over the window for a local competitor of theirs. "Don't ever pay full," he said to the woman who spoke back. "Then you're what we call a pounder." He cooed to the babies and shook his keys in front of them. "And the best thing to do: Walk away. Worst thing you can do. But then come back. And then, do it again. Spend all day with him if you have to. Nothing he can do. Ask him a million questions. Then ask them again."

The bus stopped again and filled. Eddie kept going and the people on the bus leaned inward toward him. A man closed his book and a younger woman pulled out her headphones. He had a whole goddamned crowd.

"That's their trick," he said. He turned to an elderly woman and asked her. "What does a good car salesman do?" The elderly woman shook her head like a goddamned school girl. "Come on," Eddie said. "You know. He asks questions! What's your name?"



Where do you work? How far do you commute? He's got your income pegged in thirty questions. You know when he passes you that paper? Slides it across the table with the magic number?"

Charles couldn't believe it. These people, half the bus, all craning in, listening to him and his magic. Just like the other salesmen. Just like the customers. Charles thought the women should have hated him. Charles tried to imagine work the next day. Eddie would go in, tell everyone about the bus, and it would be the end. Charles couldn't avoid him. Even if he made it though the ride, even if he managed to avoid Eddie at the canteen truck, or the break room, or god forbid, the urinals in the men's restroom, they'd have to cross paths again. Something would never be the same. It would just keep getting worse.

"You know what you do then?" Eddie told the crowd. "You ask him? Ask him how he got to that magic number?"

The elderly woman smiled and dabbed her eye. The two women with their babies asked Eddie if he would take them when they bought their next car. Eddie grinned and loosened his tie at them suggestively. "There was probably some way you could afford me," he said.

Charles watched Eddie keep going, but was listening to the voice in his head. It asked, what would happen on the walk to the bus stop or what they would say while they waited on the bench? Would they sit together? Charles imagined what it looked like if they didn't, and how much worse it would get. No, they would sit together. He'd make it into a joke. Get it out into the air and get it over with. In the end it was weird, but it was really nothing. It would be over, he thought. It would be over. But then he looked up at

Eddie, who was staring at him as he spoke. Or would it be? And if it wasn't, how long would he put up with it?

“And never,” Eddie said to the crowd. “Never, never, never, use the dealer mechanic. Ten times out of ten, they'll screw you. And never trust one who doesn't have a license to drive.”

He looked at Charles the same way he looked at the women when he loosened his tie. He shot his finger gun and gave his little wave. The women laughed again and Charles wanted to tell them something. Wanted them to know how much of a monster Eddie was. The bus stopped and everyone was getting off to transfer. He was going to lose his chance.

“He lost his license!” Charles shouted past the people trying to get off the bus. “He could have *killed* someone! He could have killed your babies!”

The women looked at Charles in disgust. Eddie tapped the nail biter on the shoulder and gestured to the rear exit of the bus. “Get a life,” one of them said to Charles. “And get a license,” Eddie said over his shoulder. “It's not a fucking charity.” Charles watched as they climbed down the bus together and waited until all the passengers got off. The driver said something to him, repeated it, and then just stepped down the stairs and off the bus. The engine was running but the lights suddenly turned off. Eddie, the nail biter, and the two women with their babies turned around to look back up at Charles. Charles imagined Eddie narrating their whole history together, spinning his virtues into flaws, and making fun of everything he'd ever seen or heard him do.

Charles walked the rest of the way home. He followed the Esplanade along the river into the North End and became encouraged by the open faces of the cyclists and joggers passing him by. The evening had all of the promises that came with a long summer. The willow and maple trees were full and green. Families of ducks paddled by the blooms of evening primrose and chicory on the banks of the river. Charles wondered what it would be like if he gave up the bus altogether. Maybe he needed a change. It was with a certain wonderment that he found himself paying attention to the bicycles as they whizzed up toward him and sped off out of sight, and he began working out the details of a new commute in his mind. He was a mechanic, after all. How hard could it be? He hadn't pushed a pedal since he was a teenager and he couldn't remember ever owning a bicycle, but once he was at the shop he hurried through the transaction to make sure he made it out before closing time. He ended up with a helmet a few sizes too small and wasn't ready anyway to navigate street traffic yet so he wheeled the bicycle home. When he finally made it to his front door his wife met him with narrowed eyes and he lost the confidence he'd felt along the Esplanade. He gave her such an empty laugh that she knew something was wrong. Charles was only able to avoid talking about Eddie and the bus ride by telling her that it was a gift for their daughter. It was a great sale, he said, and that he would store it in the basement until she came home for Christmas.

## SMILE AND FIX IT

My sister Sarah and I were driving to meet our mother at Lowe's to buy a lawn mower. I'd been doing the driving because she was still nervous about being on the road after she'd been read-ended the week before. Her Wagoneer had been totaled from the rollover, and even though I was sensitive to her anxieties, no matter what I did behind the wheel was grounds for criticism.

Without meaning to, I'd done all the wrong things as we drove west on the triple lane section of highway toward the big box stores. I blocked traffic instead of yielding, I didn't signal to change lanes, and I cut people off. Sarah's knuckles were white as she held the "oh shit" handle inside the truck. Tension came out of her in gasps, deep breaths, and long periods of closing her eyes. I offered short apologies and smiled at her, and took both my hands off the wheel in an open-handed gesture of confession.

"Hands on the damn wheel," she said. "Will you just?" she started, but then closed her eyes again and let out another breath. "Just pay attention. Just get me there so I can get out of the car."

On impulse, I told her to relax. This was exactly what she did not want to hear. "Really?" she asked. "Really?"

I had made a few driving errors. Micro-errors, really. But with each mistake I'd made amends with deferential nods, mouthed 'I'm sorry's, and sincere smiles of apology. The drivers of the cars around me understood and all was well. We came to the last traffic

light before the hardware store. One easy left, a brief power struggle over the best parking spot, and we would be walking inside. I was already thinking of something to say when we got out of the car—something less sarcastic than “We made it!!!!” and less over-concerned than “Do you want me to drop you off at the front door?” when she turned the radio off and snapped her fingers at me.

“You’re in the wrong lane,” she said and pointed at something in the direction of the traffic light. “You can’t make the turn.”

“Yes,” I said. “I can.” I didn’t understand the problem. “You’re in the wrong lane to make the U-turn,” she said.

I didn’t see her point. At this intersection on Route 9 there were four lanes. The two regular traffic lanes on my right, and the two turning lanes for the left. To enter the Lowe’s parking lot, all I had to do was make a quick U-turn, an almost immediate right, and I would be off the main drag. I chose to be in the outside of these two turning lanes so making the quick right would be almost seamless. I ignored her and just shook my head.

But she was persistent.

“The car in that lane,” she said and pointed. “Right there. What if they’re making a left turn? What happens then?”

“What?” I said.

“If they turn left,” she said, pointing again in that direction. She was exasperated. “What happens? What will happen?”

I still didn't understand. "What the hell are you talking about?" I asked. Opposing traffic was slowing down. The light must have changed and it was soon going to be a green arrow for me.

"You can't turn!" she said. "You can't turn if they go left!"

And then it dawned on me. For whatever reason I didn't get it before, but then I did. It didn't matter if I was on the outside because of basic physics and the problems of two objects occupying space. If I tried to make a u-turn while traffic to my inside left went ahead and turned (and was followed by more inside traffic turning left), I would cause a collision. I have made hundreds, if not thousands of u-turns in my life, and I should've known better. As I thought about it, I wondered how many times I had been in that same position before, and how many car accidents I would have been at fault for. I knew what to do. I lowered my window and waved at the driver next to me. Thankfully I'd already let this car to my left do some lane changing. They'd feel obligated to return the favor.

"Can I go first," I shouted into the traffic wind and smiled apologetically at the grim faced man who I'd just car-danced with a minute earlier. "I made a mistake and I'm in the wrong lane."

This doesn't always work. Most of the time, I can accidentally veer into a parallel lane, jump my turn at a four way stop, or make my way to an exit through three lanes of bumper to bumper traffic. I sometimes get what I call 'diving blackouts', it's as if I suddenly awake minutes away from where I'd started, and wonder how I'd travelled so many miles without having any recollection of the places I'd crossed through. It gets me

into all sorts of traffic problems and when it happens, I have to act fast and fix the problem. These mistakes are genuinely honest, and if I can manage to convince the drivers around me of my sincerity, I can usually make it though. Sometimes though, people aren't easy to forgive. Sometimes a person will sit stonily, eyes trained on the steering wheel, and refuse to acknowledge me calling to them from my window. Sometimes a car will speed up, cut me off, or give me the middle finger. I've had obscenities shouted at me and crazies follow me to parking lots. I remember once trying to make a left exit at a light and the older couple that refused to acknowledge my gestures. They sat in stoic solidarity, shielded against my horn and pleas. Even after I nudged my truck into a severe forty-five degree angle into their lane, they would not relent. They turned their car right back against mine, as if to teach me a lesson, and refused to let me pass. Like a boulder in a river, cars flowed around us for a full light cycle, until I was able to reverse back into oncoming traffic, dip around them, and make the exit.

But this time it works. The driver waved his wand as if swatting a cloud of insects and let me through. I waved back and mouthed 'thank you' and made my u-turn. He made his left and all was right with the world.

I smiled back at my sister. She was slumped into the seat corner from the force of the quick turn. "No problem," I said. We emptied off the main artery and coasted easy into the parking lot.

Sarah didn't contest my choice of where to park, but by the sound of her door slam, I could tell she wasn't ready to let it go.

“You don’t get it,” she said. “You never think. You break it, and then you just smile and say ‘I’m sorry’, and you fix your way out of everything. It sucks. I’m sick of it.”

She went on to list a pile of recent transgressions, and not just from driving. The painted shut window I cracked open. The dented hood from a rear-ending with the convertible I borrowed. The sunroof glass on the soft-top shattered, different time, same convertible. The roofing tar in the kitchen sink, the sawdust clogged in the basement sub pump, and the rhododendron bushes I’d over-trimmed with the snow blower. She said something about her dog that I refused to hear.

“But I fixed all those things,” I said.

“And that’s not even people,” she said, finger in the air, not listening. “You just don’t think.”

“But—,”

“You shouldn’t have had to,” she said. “They should never have broken in the first place.”

This stung. Though she might’ve been partly right, I felt that she was going overboard. I was, however, in a tough position. I’d been living at her house since September, almost six months at that point, as a sort-of boarder at-will. She’d asked me to stay instead of finding an apartment for the school year, and cited a number of reasons: the money I’d save, the things I could fix around her house, and the help I would be with her newborn. It all sounded great at the time, and for the most part things worked. My sister and I were and still are best friends. But we’d never agreed on anything that laid out



expectations. No matter how many home projects I completed, my position was tenuous. I felt like I was always holding my tongue and on high-alert to never do the wrong thing. At this moment, I felt like I was being treated unfairly. She could say whatever she wanted and I had to take it. Sure, she was right in a lot of ways, but what she was saying wasn't the whole me, and I thought I was working really hard to be better.

She went ahead inside to meet our mother. I usually visit the discounted woodcuts and spend too much time sifting through bargain cages but I sensed that this would be another annoyance and followed my sister's lead straight to Outdoor Power. My mother was talking to a clerk and waved us over. She was wearing her gardening outfit. Under a pastel floral-print jean jacket she wore a t-shirt from a family camping trip to the Bay of Fundy—a Red Canadian Maple Leaf that shouted STOP ACID RAIN—tucked into a pair of rolled up grass-stained khakis. Her excited smile was from finding a deal—a fancy new Husqvarna the salesperson was describing—and she grinned with excitement.

“Will you get a load of that!” she said, pointing at the wheels of the mower. “Self-propelled! It drives itself!”

We both hugged her. My mother asked if we should look around but Sarah got right to business and asked the clerk about the price reduction. We both knew that this would be the one. Even though it was too much for her—it had the same engine found in some ATV's, LED headlights brighter than most cars', and even a shock and strut suspension system—the deal was what mattered. It was ridiculously too much, a Humvee

when she needed a Civic. But, as it was being sold as a return, a thirty-percent markdown, it would be too tempting for my mother to pass by.

But I was thinking of what my sister had said and wasn't listening. I had roofed her house, built her a pool deck, installed her kitchen lights, and replaced her bedroom windows. Painted half the rooms in her house while she was on vacation. I wanted to say that she liked that I could fix things. That I certainly made up from it with all the good I've done. That my intentions were what mattered, not what had happened. But like any good argument with yourself, you begin to think of how you are wrong. I counted half a dozen car accidents she didn't know about. In her cars and in others. I had her husband's tools soaking in naval jelly behind her shed, hoping to clean the rust off because I'd forgot them outside in the rain. There was a squirrel I'd hid in the wishing well that was too frozen to release from the a have-a-heart trap, and a nick in the pool liner I'd made when fixing her deck—it would start to leak with the thaw if I didn't patch it soon. I was reckless. A disaster. I worked myself up and got a panicky feeling in my chest. I remembered the bump on my nieces' forehead from running straight into the aquarium glass when I let go of her hand. My palms started to sweat. I tried to stop thinking but mistakes kept piling up.

My mother flapped the print-out at me, right as I was trying to escape the images of a chimney fire. "Hello there," she said. "Earth to David. What do you think? Is it too much?"

I looked at my sister and snapped out of it. The real reason we were there was because when our mother bought her house a few years ago she borrowed Sarah's lawn

mower. She still had it. Now, Sarah wanted it back. I didn't think my mother should have been entertaining this mower. It was rugged and could last her the rest of her life, but after add-ons and warranty plans, it would end up costing her more than I paid for my first car. My sister didn't even need her mower back. Her husband had a new ride-on. I knew my sister wanted my mother to buy this mower. She wanted to get out of this store, to be done with our mother, and to get back her lawnmower. We also knew that once our mother had a deal in her mind, she would never go for an ordinary mower, even if it was brand new and half the price. It was a twisted thinking about worth, which I am sure I have inherited. If we didn't get this mower, the trip would likely be extended, off to Home Depot, then maybe Ace or Harbor Freight, looking for a better deal and a better value. So even though my mother wanted it, she'd have to be encouraged, convinced that the decision was a good one. Instead of saying any of this, I decided to get excited about the mower and help my sister.

"I like it," I said. "Orange. Safety. Big tires. You'll never lose it. You'll always see it coming. You'll never get stuck in the mud."

"She means do you think it's worth it?" Sarah asked.

"Or should we just keep looking," my mother said, "even though there really isn't anything else worth it here. I don't know. Do you think?"

Sarah had the mover information rolled up and tapped it impatiently in her hands. "It was returned," she said. "But that doesn't mean there is anything wrong with it."

My mother got agreeable. "It says the original owner complained it wouldn't start for them," she said. "But they have to disclose these things. Says here it starts just fine."

“We could start it up,” I said. I grabbed my mother by the shoulders as if bracing her for adventure. “I’m sure they’ll let us. How could they say no? Let’s ask for a test drive!”

Sarah nodded in agreement. “It’s perfect for you,” she told her. “It’ll practically mow the lawn itself. And you’ll have the best lawn on the street.”

We found a clerk and got permission to test the mower. I wheeled it in front of my mother until we made it the giant sheds on sale by the contractor’s entrance. I checked the oil and showed my mother the purity of the fluid.

“Barely touched!” I said. “Probably never sliced a blade of grass in its life!” I got an exaggerated look on my face. “Let’s see if there’s any proof!”

I turned the mower on it’s side and asked my sister to shine her phone’s flashlight for our mother. Underneath the mower was spotless.

“Look closer,” I said to our mother. “See if you can find any markings on the blade.”

My mother looked and laughed. “I think you’re right,” she said. “Put it down. Put it down. I want to try!”

I steadied the mower back to all fours and presented the pull cord to her. “After you,” I said.

My mother rolled her eyes at my sister, but my sister encouraged her on. “All in the wrist,” she said, like a golf coach, and then mimed the pull start gesture.

“All in the wrist...”

It pattered to life on the first try. My mother clapped her hands together with a little *A ha!*

“And so quiet,” she said. “It’s like I’m in stealth mode!” “The Samurai of Sod,” I said. “That’s what they say.”

She gave me another good-natured roll of the eyes. “Are you going to show me how this works?”

I scratched the side of my head and squatted down to the mower. “Hmmm, turtle means slow... rabbit means fast...” I looked up at her. “Both hands on the bar? Ready...?”

She gripped both hands around the handle and the mower sprung forward. She laughed and followed it up the first lane of parked cars, the mower blowing dust on the pavement. She did a circle, easily turned back down the lane of cars and called us over. She was red and a little sweaty, but smiling and happy.

She motioned to the rabbit throttle and smiled a little wider. “Do you think we can get it to go faster?”

Sarah and I smiled back and both squeezed down an empty spot on the safety release bar. I nodded and counted down to three with my fingers before throttling to half-rabbit mode. We laughed, the three of us, as we held on and power-walked behind the mower as it propelled itself around the parking lot. My mother insisted we each take turns testing its power. On my turn I used my mouth on the release bar and shouted “Look Ma, no hands!” On Sarah’s turn she bragged that she could round the lot in less than a minute. My mother cheered her on as Sarah half-jogged behind the mower, making

wild swerves and weaves around the lampposts and small pavement islands. She bumped it into a fountain by the Garden Center but kept the pace, this time mouthing her own little ‘Yikes!’ before rolling on. My mother and I both clapped as she crossed into the giant orange paint lines by the entrance. Sarah let go the safety release and the mower glided gently unmanned a few feet before stopping almost perfectly right before us. The clerk came back out and clapped along with us. He opened up a plastic bag and gave my mother a blue and orange Husqvarna hat. She put it on her head, crooked it a little to the side, and told him that she loved it.

Over a thousand dollars later, my sister and I wheeled the mower out to the truck. I loaded it onto the bed while she stacked the oil and accessories into the cab. My mother held the paperwork and tapped the side of the truck with her fingers. She took off her hat and had got quiet. It was as if she didn’t want the trip to end.

“But what happens when I get home and the both of you are gone. What happens two months from now when it breaks?” she asked. In two months time I would be gone, finally out of my sister’s house and hours away.

Sarah opened her mouth to say something and then closed it. I knew what she was going to say. But she isn’t the one who changes the oil in the lawnmowers. Or winterizes and then tunes up the little back-up generator. She doesn’t stop what she’s doing to replace the regulator on the water heater, or cover the appointment with the electrician when there’s an overload in the breaker box. It’s not going to be her that takes care of it and she knows it. She’s pushed this mower on to my mother. Standing there, the receipt and warranty in her hand, our mother could give in to her buyer’s remorse. Go back

inside and return the thing. And the whole saga would start again. Sarah wouldn't get her mower back. Nor the time spent chasing one down before all the snow was gone. She rolls her eyes upward and lets out another sigh.

“Just tell her,” she said to me. “Tell her you'll take care of it. That's what she wants to hear.” In her voice was defeat, but also a begrudging comfort of the inevitable. I wanted to tell her right then that I would try to be better. That I would think before I spoke. I would tread lightly and try not to break anything. That my beard trimmings would never clog the sink, my truck would always be on the pavement in the driveway, and the burn permit I'd just bought from the Fire Department would be ripped to pieces. But at that moment all I could do was what she wanted, so she could win, and we could go home.