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This thesis, composed of five short stories, contends with life in rural Virginia, with the unbreakable bond that forms between the land and its inhabitants. These characters often wish to leave, to manufacture a different reality than the one they have been given, but are hesitant to abandon their hometowns and the coarse relationships that come with them.

BLOOD SPORTS

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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Tilled

Paul spent his after-school hours with his buddies Ray and JW in the cornfield that circled his front yard. When the school bus halted at Paul's old white farmhouse, the boys stomped off with no thank-you to the sweaty driver and loped up the drive, arms and elbows shielding their heads from the shaken-up dirt road.

"He sounds boring," Paul said, finishing their conversation on the bus regarding Tommy, a clean-cut kid with loafers and a combover who was new to the county school.

"I think he's cool," JW said. "He brought a pocketknife to school and used it to open his Pepsi at lunch."

"I've never seen anyone do that," Ray muttered.

"Exactly. He's a try-hard." Paul turned his head and spit into the road; he'd practiced enough to just about make it look effortless. All of the boys were gawky and haughty, but Paul was the most of these things. "Plus, I heard he's from up north. No one likes a democrat."

They slung their lunchboxes in the general direction of the oak tree in the front yard before crashing into the field. The stalks were an ashy gold, dried and shriveled from the summer harvest. They swayed awkwardly as October squeezed into November, waiting for Paul's dad to trample them with the John Deere.

The boys' bony legs could've easily slithered between the stalks if they didn't prefer ruining things. They ran perpendicular to the rows, bowing the tall stalks and dimpling the perfect columns they hadn't yet touched.

They stopped when they found their clearing in the middle of the field, the size of which was roughly the size of a generous hall closet. They sat Indian-style to not bump knees or feet but it was hard to settle comfortably on mashed down stalks and chunks of corn rotted from the cob.

Ray shook out a pack of cigarettes he stole from home and a book, the pages of which were so old they were almost orange. He tossed the book at Paul, then flicked his lighter until his cig came alive.

"*The Temptress?*" Paul read the cover of the book, which featured a man lumpy with muscles and a woman in an ill-fitting dress that resembled a poorly fastened towel. "Jude Deveraux?" But he pronounced it "Deeverox." "Not this shit again."

"I just grabbed it from my mom's bookshelf, man, *chill*," Ray coughed on the dry smoke and threw the pack at JW, who had taken the book and started thumbing through the pages. "S'not like you read them anyway."

Paul did read them but wouldn't say this. "Still. If Pops sees me with this he'll think I'm some sort of queer." Ray stole whatever paperbacks were covered with dust from his mom's shelf and smuggled them to his friend. There were no books in Paul's house but he'd use Ray's mom's to whip out when his old man was stuttering out a drunken story. Paul's mom used to have a shelf, but his dad burned it along with her handmade quilts when she left.

“*He came to her, holding her so tightly she could barely breath,*” JW read sardonically, his fist clutching his chest. “*God, Chris, you’re going to be the death of me. It’s a wonder I found you,*” JW snickered. “Your mom’s obsessed with yuppie garbage. Your dad should torch these books so he doesn’t have to jack off alone in the shower anymore.”

“Just because he takes long showers doesn’t mean that’s what he’s doing, idiot.” Ray grabbed the book and shoved it at Paul, who carefully straightened the pages and stashed it under his knee.

They chain smoked for an hour, talking about high school football tryouts that none of them would ever attend, Mrs. Frander’s saggy tits, and beer they’d never drunk—not because they couldn’t seek it out, but because the clingy, stale smell of it was already rampant in their homes. When the sun began to set, Ray and JW headed to their trailers at the park down the road, but only after they dug a hole to bury the cigarette butts in.

Paul stayed in the clearing after they left under the guise of making sure they didn’t miss a stray cig, but really to read Jude Deveraux until the sun ducked behind the stalks. Some of the words were big for him, but he covered almost thirty pages, creasing ears where he wanted to reread. He wondered how the hell Chris, some rich journalist girl, could fall for two perfectly obscure cowboys that kidnap her. What was her obsession with neck kissing and dudes’ large hands?

A blunt sound startled him and he flung the book into the mesh of stalks where it was already dark, but he realized it was only his dad’s billy goat bleating. He passed its

scraggly frame on his way inside after retrieving the cracked book, dry rotted rope tied around its neck connecting it to the oak tree.

“Son!” his dad was bent over untying his boots when he walked in. “Y’all boys mess around out there so late. What do y’do? Tag? Maybe you’re too old for that.” His eyes were drooping from the Jim Beam he drank on the way home; his eyebrows slid up his face in an attempt to look like he had an attention span.

“Nothing.”

“I was the ‘sact same way when I was your age. Did I ever tell you ‘bout the time when me and Ronnie used to steal those lawn gnomes from the neighbors? I was ‘bout in ninth grade then too. Boy!”

“I think you have,” He could’ve whipped out his book to pretend to read if it there wasn’t so much skin on the front.

“It’s a good story, alright. What should we eat? I bought hotdogs on the way home. The jumbo franks. You love those.” He brandished the plastic-wrapped meat in the air, the 7-Eleven bag falling to his feet.

Paul nodded but didn’t say how he’d rather eat the neighbor’s taxidermied cat. Hotdogs were a brief food, one you can make in five minutes and eat walking away, the reason he didn’t argue or ask for spaghetti. His old man could only stay awake long enough to make dogs, but that didn’t stop the queasiness that jolted him when the house smelled like plastic and machine meat.

The following day JW and Ray invited Tommy, the democrat from up north, to hang out after school. Paul threatened to skip out but his interest in the polo-wearing, pocketknife kid got the better of him. The sun was out but a hard rain was falling, so instead of the cornfield the boys moved to Ray's trailer down the road.

"Devil's beating his wife." Paul took off his Redskins hat to shake the rain from his hair.

"What?" Tommy squinted at him, like narrower vision would improve his hearing. His eyes were a bright innocent blue, his face somehow free of zits.

"That's what they say." Paul rolled his shoulders because they were suddenly stiff. "Around here, anyways. When it's raining but the sun's still shining."

"That's cool, I guess." Tommy had a few inches on the rest of them, his shoulders a bit broader and more defined than a lot of kids their age. Paul made a mental note to start working out.

They sat on Ray's porch that was covered with sheets of aluminum masquerading as a roof. Rain jangled on the surface as they took turns dipping out of a Skoal can.

"You can't swallow," JW said to Tommy, who was turning the can around in his hands, studying the directions. "It'll make you sick."

"You spit it," Ray demonstrated by leaning over and spewing the brown over the porch. Tommy concentrated on packing the tobacco, then tucking the plug into his gum. He jutted his chin at an awkward angle. The three boys watched as he moved his tongue to probe the wad, then spit the juice impressively far over the banister.

“Yup. You got it.” JW’s words were diluted from his own wad. Paul watched Tommy move his jaw in circles, touch his hint of an Adam’s apple and move his fingers up and down his throat. The boys were silent except for the occasional wet sounds of spitting.

When they finished the wads, they went inside the squeezed trailer and turned on WWE. They watched several reruns of faces being clobbered and blood mixing with sweat and bumpy men straining and tumbling over each other.

Tommy began squirming during round eight of The Undertaker body slamming some bearded, unimportant wrestler. At the start of the second fight, he coughed, hunched over and vomited on himself.

“Oh shit, not my mom’s couch,” Ray grabbed the nearest cloth—a potholder from the counter—and shoved it at Tommy. “You okay?”

“I swallowed it. Earlier,” Tommy held his shirt away from his body, squirmed in his seat. His forehead was creased, sheepish. “By accident.”

“The whole wad?” JW stared at him, mouth open like a fool. Tommy nodded.

“Aw, man. You’re gonna feel like shit for a while.” Ray walked toward his bedroom. “I’ll get you a shirt. Paul, show him where the bathroom is.”

Paul led him into the trailer’s narrow bathroom and watched as he hauled his shirt over his head. He took it from Tommy and laid it in the sink. Tommy rested his forearms on the toilet, his shoulders bunching as he retched into the bowl. He coughed and sputtered, spits before being sick again. Paul considered leaving him to it, knew he should give him the privacy to be feeble alone, but he stood there and watched. Tommy’s

sharp bones pulled at his pale, freckled skin. His biceps were corded with the beginnings of muscle. His awkward elbow kept banging against the counter each time he strained. Paul watched the way his stomach concaved when he vomited, the way his belly hollowed and wrenched along with his sounds. He knelt next to him, placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Once it’s all up you’ll feel a lot better.” He patted his shoulder a few times but didn’t know whether to take his hand away or not. Tommy’s skin felt sticky.

Tommy’s breathing was heavy but the sick was gone for now. He turned his head to the side, rested it on his forearm. “Sorry.”

“Nah, it happened to me, too,” Paul lied, sliding his hand away jerkily. “When I first did it.”

“I’m not like people around here.” He smiled at Paul, chagrined, voice echoing in the bowl.

“No shit.” Paul noticed vomit on his lip, brown flecks of tobacco in the crease.

Ray pressed into the room quickly, the door handle bobbing a hole into the cheap wall. He held up an AC/DC shirt. “You alright? My mom’s gonna be home soon. She’ll wonder why you’re so messed up.”

“I’m fine. I need to get home. Mind if I use the phone to call my mom?”

“It’s almost five,” Paul got to his feet. “We should all be heading home anyways.”

Ray nodded, disappeared to inspect the couch.

They began to leave, but Paul hesitated. “Your mouth,” he held a wad of toilet paper up, nodded toward his face. Tommy felt along his lip, then took the paper from Paul’s hand and guided it along his mouth, wiping away the sick.

“All better?” Tommy asked. He met Paul’s stare with an open gaze of his own. It was one heavy with a level of maturity that Paul hadn’t yet seen, and also one of embarrassment and unease. He was standing here, not playing tough, but owning his weakness, something Paul had never thought to do. It was new and refreshing, Paul figured out then. He took a step closer to Tommy.

“Yeah.”

Tommy eyed him, stretched the band shirt over his head, washed his hands. Paul stood there flustered, confused why he’d crowded him. He moved to widen the door.

“Thank you.” Tommy faced him, their breath touching in the narrow space. Their chests and hipbones grazed as Tommy slid by to exit; a rousing stirred in Paul. He noticed how Tommy had a sterile smell, like car air freshener mixed with Windex.

Paul’s farmhouse was still dark when he walked up the drive. He scrambled eggs, made toast but burnt it. His dad was later than usual but that gave him the silence he needed to breathe.

There was no light left outside, just an old and bitter blackness, but Paul was restless. His skin felt chafed, bruised, like the weak you feel when the flu chills come on and there’s nothing you can do but ride out the next two weeks in soreness and nausea. He rubbed his hands up his biceps, felt the fat where muscle could be, and went outside

to the back porch. He jumped until his fingers connected with the low porch roof above his head, then hauled himself as high as his arms would take him. His elbows shook, the knuckles in his fingers ached. He lowered himself until his feet skimmed the cracked wooden deck, then up again. He reminded himself to breathe on the third rep when his head began to feel squeezed.

He raised himself ten times, each time going less distance than before. His muscles were ripped and fiery, his head throbbing, but it felt good to do something. To work up a sweat, to have that kind of pain—a good and healthy and innocent kind. He released his grip and jumped down only to fall on his ass, but he didn't care because that pain felt good, too.

When his breathing evened, he lit a cigarette from a stolen pack. He dragged hard then sputtered out the smoke. He waited five seconds then pulls hard again. He finished the cigarette in less than a minute, needing to fill himself with something, even if it didn't last.

The back door swung open as he hacked, and his old man looked down at him, drunk and stupid. Paul noticed the glow of his truck's lights against the cornfield that he hadn't noticed before. He never remembered to turn them off.

“What's wrong with you, son? Could hear you a mile away.” He swayed as he spoke, his double chins visible from Paul's vantage point.

“Swallowed the wrong way.” Paul reached for his pack beside his leg to cover it, but his old man was a more observant drunk than he thought.

“You’re smoking?” he bent down and grabbed the pack from his son, teetered as he did so. “Son of a bitch.”

“No,” Paul said lamely.

“Then who do they belong to?” He shook the pack in Paul’s face for emphasis.

“Who? Is your sorry mother back? Is she hiding under the porch?”

“No.” He coughed to hide his flinch.

“So they’re yours.”

“They’re Ray’s mom’s,” He hated the whine in his voice.

“So you’re a thief and a smoker.” There was spit on his dad’s mouth.

“You’re a smoker.”

“I’m not a stupid fourteen-year-old boy!”

Paul got up, avoided eye contact and tried to circle his father like he was avoiding a feral cat. His dad swung him back against the banister before he could reach the door.

“That was your last cigarette.”

“Okay,” he said, still looking down.

“I’m going to call Ray’s mom.” His dad was sweating, cheeks red in attempt to get a reaction. Paul knew he wouldn’t call, probably didn’t even know who Ray’s mom was.

“Fine by me.”

His dad chuckled. “Look at that. I raised a smartass.”

Paul rolled his shoulders, felt the burn in them again. It somehow felt better now than it did before. He raised his chin. “I guess you did, old man.”

“Son of a bitch,” he said again. He ripped two cigarettes out of the pack and threw the rest on the porch, stomping on them with his muddy work boot. “If you like cigarettes so much then you can eat these.” He shoved them at Paul’s face.

“No way,” Paul lurched to the side, tried to slide by, but his dad but he fisted Paul’s shirt to hold him in place.

“Be a man and eat them.” Paul could smell the whiskey that was seeping from his dad’s pores. He stared at him, knew this could end in a fistfight or in a mouthful of tobacco. He was suddenly exhausted, the fire in his biceps now aching along with his head. He thought about how he should have stayed at Ray’s to watch WWE, about Tommy, how his hands were larger than his and reminded him of the dude in Jude Deveraux’s story. Moisture threatened to seep into his eyes. He grabbed the cigarettes and shoved them into his mouth and chomped until the paper and the filters and the tobacco were a liquid mess in his mouth. He swallowed, choked, swallowed again and then pushed past his old man who chuckled, then fell against the banister.

That night, he retched with just as much force as Tommy had, his tears falling into the toilet bowl.

Much to the boys’ liking, Mrs. Frander took the whole ninth grade on a fieldtrip. Five buses carried them to a theatre an hour down the road to see a Shakespeare play, which was much to their disliking.

“I hope somebody in the play gets killed,” JW said, settling into the theatre chair. He rubbed his head, spiky from a fresh buzz cut. “That’s the only thing that will make this interesting.”

“It’s *Julius Caesar*, you jackass. Of course somebody gets killed,” Ray said. Paul was sitting between them, but he was looking at Tommy, who hadn’t gotten off the bus at the same time, so he was stuck a few rows ahead between some nerds.

“Nerds,” he said, nodding toward them.

“Poor Tom,” Ray crossed his arms. There was a smear of dirt on his elbow from God knows what. “They might be more his speed.”

“Don’t know. Kid tries to hang,” JW said, as if the opportunity to join their group was a prized commodity, which was as far from the truth as Mrs. Frander’s tits were from her body.

There was about a hundred kids in the ninth grade, which was big for the town. Another school was there, too. A city school, from the looks of the kids, kids that dressed like Tommy. Paul was grateful when the lights darkened, that he didn’t have to look at them anymore. The stage was small, but the players commanded it with a determination that wasn’t bred into anyone Paul knew. The Roman sandals snaked up the men’s legs, their togas cinched at the shoulders, which left biceps and forearms exposed. Julius Caesar was middle-aged and blonde, and he clasped Brutus’s shoulder so sturdily that Paul’s arm tingled.

The boys straightened as they anticipated the stabbing, and they all sat rigidly in a refusal to flinch as it happened. The fake blood sprayed the stage as the conspirators

jabbed their swords into middle-aged Caesar's back, then pulled them from his body. It was a flurry of bogus violence and flying limbs. Paul could hear the slipping of their sandals over the rough stage despite the yells. He noticed Tommy was looking off to the side as the men dipped their swords in Caesar's blood.

"On guard," JW said to Ray, his legs bent, one hand holding his water bottle up like a sword. Packs of students were filing out of the auditorium and the chatter from individual groups morphed into a monotonous buzzing.

"I don't think that's the word," Tommy said, sidling up to them. "I think it's 'en' guard. Like another language or something."

JW turned on him. "Fight me, bitch." He wacked Tommy with the bottle playfully, then jabbed him in the ribs, then the face. A few other kids stopped to watch the show, which made JW puff out his chest and swing a little harder. He laughed manically, like a kid with too much sugar.

"Forgive him, he's ADHD but his parents won't do shit about it," Ray said to a group of girls frowning at the scene. JW jabbed some more at Tommy, parried, came back, all the while yelling come on, hell yeah, come on. Tommy winced when his jaw took a tough shot, and he shoved JW hard enough for him to falter and fall into a nearby group of kids. Finish him, someone called. JW's got it coming now, someone said. Go, Polo Ralph Lauren.

JW straightened his shirt, and, embarrassed, came back swinging. Paul figured that's the only thing he knew how to do at that point—protect the small amount of masculinity and badassery that he had. Tommy shoved him back again, and then again.

“Stop,” he said. “I’m not into it.”

“Hell you are,” JW said. He was no longer joking and now was panting with near desperation. He aimed his head downwards and charged like a steer. Panicked, Paul stuck his foot out and tripped him. The noise when JW hit the floor was muted, but he came up with an impressive split lip. Despite the oohs and ahhs of the crowd, Paul could hear JW shout, “What the hell?” at him before disappearing, hurt, through the small crowd.

Everyone was muted on the ride home; the highway sounded louder than the chatter for once. All the windows were open since the buses generally lacked any sort of ventilation system. Paul chose to sit next to Tommy, because Ray and JW had already claimed a seat and he definitely wasn’t welcome to join.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Tommy said. “You’re a traitor now.”

Paul knew this and regretted what he did only partly. Tommy was still new and clean and fascinating that it made it worth it. There was something else there, too, but he didn’t let himself think about it for too long. Besides, the fight would be over in no time, and it was as soon as Ray dragged JW back to their bus seat.

“Sorry,” Paul offered first.

“It’s chill,” JW said. “Sorry,” he said to Tommy.

“It’s chill,” Tommy said. And so the fight was done and together they watched Ray attempt to sweet-talk a girl from history class. JW leaned up from the seat behind.

“This is going to fail,” he said, an inflection of concern for his friend in his voice.

“Girls are so difficult,” Tommy said. “Like, say what you want.” Paul couldn’t help but think this sounded both sad and rehearsed.

Paul watched Ray’s face redden as he listened to the girl. Her head was bobbing back and forth with energy, her ponytail swinging. A humiliated smile fastened to his face as he rose, nodded to the girl, then slumped into the seat next to JW. Paul couldn’t help but feel the embarrassment himself. That nauseous fear that came along with rejection had prevented him from ever asking anyone out. “She’s not even that cute,” Paul supplied.

“She’s just spooked from that awful play,” JW offered. “And you idiots fighting like girls. Or maybe it’s your terrible new haircut.”

They settled in the ripped vinyl bus seats as the traffic slipped away. The bus rocked harder than normal once it hit the country roads. Paul’s shoulder brushed Tommy’s every time they hit a particularly enormous pothole. Tommy was fiddling with his pocketknife.

“You really don’t look like someone who carries one of those, you know,” Paul told him.

Tommy flicked out the small blade. It looked more like a fingernail file. “I know. Thought it might make me blend in more. I don’t even really know what you use it for.”

“Not to open Pepsis,” Paul said. They laughed, and it was something about their relaxed bodies, their acceptance of pauses in the conversation that made Paul feel as if they were in on a secret. Maybe they were. Tommy handed him the blade and Paul ran his finger over it, then snapped it shut.

The cornfield seemed duller, more rotten when the afternoons slipped into darkness earlier after daylight savings fell back. The boys were back in the cornfield, Tommy in tow. The temperature was humid for the beginning of November and all of the boys smelled faintly of sweat. They smoked, dug ruts into the ground with the heels of their boots as they talked, burnt the occasional beetle with the lighter as it crawled out of the corn. JW and Tommy didn't get too close to one another, but the tension appeared low and more like embarrassment than anything else.

"What are we gonna do when your dad decides to get off his ass and mow the field?" JW asked, flicking the lighter with his thumb.

"Ray's place?" Paul mused. "Who knows if the tractor will even start. He's had that thing since he was a teenager. Probably stole it."

"No way," Ray's forehead was creased. "You know how much trouble I got in for the stains on the couch?" Tommy flinched but says nothing. The boys realized Ray's blunder and studied their hands, cigarette packs, their feet. "Anyways," Ray coughed. "She said y'all can't come over anymore."

"JW?" Paul asked.

"You know my mom's still on maternity leave," JW muttered, kicking the dirt. "She lurks around the house all damn day."

"Isn't she kind of old to be pregnant?" Ray asked.

"She isn't. The factory just thinks she is. Stupidest shit." He leaned back, bending another stalk as he lay on the ground. "Tell your old man to leave the field. We'll put jackets on. It won't get that cold. This is the best spot we got."

“This is *our* spot,” Ray grunted.

“You know he’s going to do it. Probably will do it even faster if I ask him not to,” Paul said, but watched Tommy study the three of them. He wondered if he had friends from wherever he came from—worthwhile friends, like Ray and JW. He had that hushed personality, though, that made him seem like a loner, like someone who coiled up inside his own head and didn’t surface for days.

JW grinned. “What if he can’t?”

Ray leaned forward. “What?”

“Kill the tractor,” Tommy mumbled as he unconsciously drew lines in the dirt with his finger. JW and Ray whipped their heads to look at him, but Paul was already studying his face, his jittery fingers.

“Yes.” JW was close to panting with the thought of ruining something.

Paul looked at them; his face split with a cold grin when he thought about hotdogs and muddy work boots and how tender his muscles were from heaving up that sweet, bitter tobacco.

They emptied their backpacks jerkily; scrutinized the contents until they found something that could clog the engine. Ray came up with two thick books stolen from his mom’s bookshelf. Loretta Chase. They jogged to the old tractor parked by the house, their necks bobbing back and forth toward the driveway, as if Paul’s dad would abruptly emerge from the beaten gravel. Tommy climbed onto the wheel tentatively, unsure. He gently held the hood ajar as the boys shoved the books between the belt and the greasy

engine. He slammed the hood hard enough for it to shiver, the clap of metal smacking together with a boom.

A ringing silence followed the noise as they eyed each other, then they bolted back into the cornfield, hollering as they went; stomping on stalks and clumps of dirt, slapping their hands against their mouths until the reverberations of their voices sounded like Indian calls. They ran through the rows, shoved each other with dusty fingers, kicked up the dirt in a vertical spray. Sweat beaded above their hairless upper lips and bled through their shirts; JW jerked his off, threw it in Ray's face and cartwheeled. Tommy stopped and laughed, a deep and broad noise that sounded like it belonged to someone old and wearied. He reached over and jerked a cornstalk from the ground and hurled it across the field, knots of dirt falling over their heads.

They collapsed in the small clearing at the edge of dark, their chests heaving and shoulders vibrating with energy still not exerted. For now, though, they were satiated.

Ray and JW headed home when the next cigarette pack was finished and the butts were buried. Tommy waited for his mom to pick him up at six. The boys stared at him when he told them this, the concept of a parent waiting to chauffeur foreign and curious to them.

"I hope you don't get in trouble," Tommy said to Paul as they watched Ray and JW walk toward the dirt road. Their backs seemed broader for some reason, firm. "That was fun, though. I've never done anything like that."

“I won’t,” Paul wasn’t fully convinced, but he could see how wired Tommy still was, lips parted, pupils dark and dilated. The books might not even make a difference, but he wouldn’t tell Tommy this.

“This place seems kinda spiritual,” Tommy gestured to the dead field. “Like, you guys can do anything in here and nobody would know.”

“I wish.”

“Why? What can’t you do that you want to?” Tommy scooted closer to him until their shoulders were touching. When Paul didn’t answer, he prodded. “Ever bring a girl here?”

“No”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. Just haven’t.”

Tommy leaned into him. Paul found his Windex smell alleviating. Something about Tommy was pretty and honest and immaculate. Paul knew that wouldn’t last long if he didn’t move away. Something would dim in his eyes with time, as his nostrils become numb to the dirt road dust and the smell of cow shit. “Me either,” Tommy said.

“Done anything like that, I mean. But I’ve thought about other things.”

“What do you mean?”

“Things.”

They were silent for a moment. The air seemed tight and colder than usual. Their hands eventually found each other in the dirt and Paul squeezed his fingers. He turned his head to speak but instead they were kissing and it was wet and awkward. Their hands slid

against each other's faces, leaving dirt streaks. Tommy's sweaty hair was too short to hold on to but Paul tried anyways. They were jerky and rough, the movements coarse. Paul shifted closer to Tommy, his pants squeezing him.

A rustling in the field startled Paul. He shoved Tommy away.

"What the hell?" Tommy rolled on the ground once, dirt and corn clinging to his white shirt.

He noticed how dark the sky was getting. His dad was probably home. "You can't be here," he said, panicked. A dull noise sounded close by, the bleat of the billy goat. He heard the dry noise of stalks being mashed, could feel the shadows as if they were coming to inhale them.

"What?" Tommy got up, wiped dirt from his jaw.

"You need to go," Paul shoved at him again, his hands shaking.

Tommy stared at him for a minute, his lips mashed in a line. He grabbed his backpack. "White trash," he hissed.

"Fuck you," Paul pushed him again but Tommy ran this time, crashing through the cobs.

Paul turned toward the sound of the goat, its hooves mashing old stalks as it entered the clearing, short rope dangling from his neck. His dad stood beside the creature.

"The goat chewed through the rope," he said as way of greeting, holding up the ripped dry rotted end. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing," Paul could feel his eyes watering, the pain in his stomach as hysteria swirled inside. He wondered how much his dad saw.

“Who was the kid?”

“No one. Someone new. Just a city kid.” Paul didn’t give his father a chance to respond before he crashed through the cornfield toward the house. This time he was careful to weave through the rows, not letting any stalk touch him. He didn’t know why, but it seemed like touching anything would burn.

Inside, he slammed his bedroom door and changed his clothes, wanting the dirt and the smell of Tommy and school and cigarettes away from him. He swallowed repeatedly to hold in sobs. He knocked the Jude Deveraux book off his dresser as he fumbled through the drawers. He picked it up and ripped the cover, then the pages, until there were only clumps of paragraphs and binding.

There was a knock on the door before his dad walked in. Paul felt him watching his movements as he frantically grabbed shirts and pairs of boxers from the floor, the room feverish. He stared at the scattering of paper, slid a piece around with the tip of his boot.

“Listen,” he said, his voice crusty. He sat on the corner of Paul’s bed miserably, as if his jeans suddenly shrunk to choke his thighs. When Paul kept moving around the room, head down, cleaning all he can, he spoke again. “Look at me.”

Paul stopped, raised his head. The tear tracks burned on his pinked cheeks. His dad looked mild, no color rose up his fleshy neck. But there was redness in his eyes, a sort of panic stifled in his irises. He may be a drunk, but he could put a few things together. Paul watched him tap his fingers on his wrangler-covered knee, staring at the

floor. He seemed sober for once, perceptive. “You know what?” he began. Paul stared at his ceiling fan light hard for the white to blind him enough to dry the tears.

His dad heaved out air from his lungs instead of continuing. He stood. “I’m gonna have to plow that field down tomorrow. Stalks are so rotten they look like milkweeds.”

Paul moved his throat to swallow but his mouth was dryer than paper. “Makes sense.” His answer was quivery and he hated how it still sounded closer to a woman’s, even after his voice dropped over the summer. He wondered how many cigarette butts his old man would till up as he tried to bury today in that stale dirt.

His dad nodded and drags his gnarled hand over his face before rising to leave. His stride was calm and gentle, and as he exited he slammed the door, as he usually does, but not hard enough for the windows to quake.

Popsicle Sticks

The wedding wasn't supposed to start until six, but they were running late because of the crow with the broken wing. It was Brian's niece's wedding; he figured it was one of those things where she wanted a pretty little ceremony and then the marriage would go to shit in a couple years. Didn't matter much to him if it did or not.

The bird, a compact, ugly thing, was flopping around near the mulch pile by the drive. Brian was buckling his son into the backseat when they heard a noise like a fish writhing on land, the good wing beating the ground in an attempt to become airborne again. A quick strike to the neck with the end of a rake would've been easiest, but Owen fiddled with his booster seat buckle and asked if they could help it.

He used his son's discarded popsicle sticks from the trash to set the broken wing and sprinkled cornstarch on the cuts scoring its breast to stop the bleeding. Must've been a hawk, judging from the punctures. It might make it, might not. Owen sat on the counter sucking on another popsicle, watching his father's hands, orange syrup on his chin. If his small button-down got stained, Brian's ex-wife would give him hell at the wedding. They'd been divorced for nearly a year, but she was still in good with his sisters. In their heads, his drinking validated her cheating. Not the other way around.

They made it just as the reception was beginning. He had clumsily taped the wing in his kitchen, used the fresh popsicle stick to hold it against the bird's nervous body and

left it in the garage. He didn't know what he'd do with it tomorrow, but Owen considered its life salvaged, which was all he cared about.

The wedding party hadn't finished their photo-shoot at the lake down the hill from the tent. Owen only had a small stain on his collar. Barely noticeable. He looked good, looked like Brian. Everything seemed too glossy inside the tent, even though it was one of those pseudo-rustic weddings where everyone had cowboy boots peeking out under their formalwear.

He danced with his ex-wife. She still wore the same perfume that smelled, to him, like lake water. She'd cut her hair a few weeks after the divorce, and that was the first time he really noticed how small her neck was. He touched it, barely, as they moved. She dug her nails into his shoulder every time they swiveled on the parquet floor. Owen sat with some relatives at a corner table. Brian watched as the bride came over to pretend she knew him better than she did. The photographer took a photo with her veil draped over both of their heads. She fanned it up, then down again, Owen laughing, fingering the lace. How well he understood people for his seven years. Brian had read an article once about how kids with divorced parents matured at a more rapid rate.

After the rice was strewn at the bride and groom who teetered, red faced with drink, to their limo, Brian walked Owen and his ex to her car and watched her buckle him in. She always had him during the week. She licked her thumb and attempted to rub out the stain on his collar, her mouth mashed in a small line, but she said nothing. He always softened when he saw her with Owen, could almost forget the boyfriend she managed to happen upon while they were still married.

Brian switched to whiskey once he was home. He spilled some but instead of cleaning it, he drew in the puddle with his finger. The sun. An outline of a tree. Cattails. He couldn't remember when that night he checked on the bird, but whenever it was it was dead. He didn't bury it, just tossed it in the woods. About a year later, the puppy he'd get for Owen would root out the delicate bones from under the fallen leaves and chew them in the yard. But that wouldn't matter, either. Owen would be at soccer practice. The coach would say he had real potential.

Glaze

Rhoda said she didn't believe in holding on to things already lost, and that was how she justified spinning her husband's ashes into a glaze for her pottery. She received her husband in a modest glass urn nearly a year ago. She'd learned, according to the internet, that the average person transmutes into approximately five pounds of ash, but Vern weighed in at close to seven—she'd measured it on her scale in the bathroom.

“It was those spare tires he never got rid of,” she joked once to her friend Maude, who looked at her joylessly.

“I was going to say that heart of his,” Maude said. “So big.”

Vern had been the town's deputy sheriff and then, when his superior passed suddenly due to a quick battle with pneumonia, sheriff. Interim Sheriff. He'd been in the middle of beginning his campaign for the spot when he passed. And while Rhoda would utter no word of it, she harbored some relief that he wouldn't lose, embarrassingly so, to a more able-bodied, able-minded person. He pattered around in his inherited police car patrolling up and down the valley of Crozet and Ivy. The town shared one big road that spanned city limit to city limit like a sturdy tree trunk, the smaller roads unfurling like vines to lead deeper into the town's lower corners.

Rhoda liked Vern at work, stout in his driver's seat or the office chair behind his desk, and that was her time to spend in their shed with her pottery. She'd created a miniscule name for herself in town; most of the folks from church and the neighboring

families had a bowl or pot or vase spun by her, fired in her kiln in the garage, and set with a muted glaze.

Now some of her pieces sat on a decorative table in a swanky yet understated art gallery in Ivy. She stood behind them, as if the table would protect her from light small talk. The gallery had a fancy French name and was difficult to find, being in the small foothills where winery bordered winery, and this, of course, made it more appealing. New age. Airy, though no one but Rhoda would probably admit to this.

A man appeared at her table, picking up her business card.

“Rhoda,” he said, reading the card and flipping it around to scan for other information, which was not there. “Like rhododendron, huh?”

She smiled as if she hadn’t heard that one before. “Not quite,” she said without humor. She watched him concentrate on a muted purple serving bowl on the table, his finger tracing the wide-lipped circumference. He reminded her of a sea turtle, with the shallow slope of his head and a set of flat lips. A pair of round glasses sat high on the bridge of his nose.

“Exquisite,” he said. “Reminds me a bit of Peter Madlen.”

“Who?” she asked.

“Madlen,” he repeated. “You mightn’t have heard of him. New Zealand-born potter, passed a few years back.”

“Exquisite,” she repeated back to him, sipping from her champagne flute.

“How do you make them so polished?”

“My husband,” she said. Then: “He helped me make a nice glaze. I use it sparingly.”

“And why’s that?” He placed her business card in his front shirt pocket.

“He passed about a year ago, so my supply is limited.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But you don’t know how to remake it?”

“Afraid not.” She stood from her folding chair so that they were closer to eye level. She was slender as a broomstick, the thin rods of her arms appeared fragile, crossed as they were over her chest. Her white hair, which looked so brittle it could snap if you bent it wrong, hung to the middle of her ribcage, but she fastened it up more often than not. Still, he couldn’t have been more than a handful of years younger than her. He had the demeanor of a sheep, one of no suspicion and too much affability, his condescension almost charming because he appeared unaware of it.

“Do you do custom work?” he asked nicely, sensing her impatience, she figured. There were people milling about in small groups, even smaller ones standing, practicing that disgusting art of small talk. Another painter in the gallery was motioning to himself, then back to his painting, his arm swooping enthusiastically.

“Sure,” she said. “Give me an idea of what you want, and I’ll do my best. You still have to pay for it if you don’t like it.”

“Of course,” he said. “I just purchased a house in Wintergreen, so I’m passing through on my way there. I would love to have one of these for the place.”

While he began explaining, in great detail, his vision for a large open-mouthed vase, Rhoda watched the older woman who owned the gallery use her finger to slide

through the classical music playing on the speakers. Rhoda herself still had a flip phone. She was at the age of being suspicious of new technology, and also at the age when she didn't mind telling folks her suspicion was a ramification of her age. Someone at another table was purchasing what looked like a dead tree branch, which no doubt cost hundreds. That was the thing about some city folk, they mistook rustic for art. The gallery owner had invited her to showcase tonight because her work was "authentic" and "local."

"You mean homemade, bordering on crude," is what Rhoda had responded to the woman, who batted her eyelashes in discomfort.

She left that evening with a thorough picture of what the man—Eddie, she learned from his own business card—wanted. She sold two other serving bowls to a woman. Since the exhibition lasted another week, she left her pieces out on the table.

"Foggy out," a woman said friendly. Rhoda recognized her from church but didn't recall her name.

"Be careful driving home," Rhoda replied.

"You, too," the woman said. She placed a hand on Rhoda's arm. "You're not scared living in that old house without Vern?"

"Not that old," Rhoda said, then decided to back off. This woman thought she was being nice, after all. "Shoot, if anyone broke in it would be me defending us, not Vern."

"No kidding," the woman said. "Well, I guess I could never see him hurting a thing."

Rhoda looked up Madlen on her elderly laptop. She couldn't help herself. She took the compliment ambivalently, because his art looked bland—forlorn, almost, and while she admired that kind of pain a hand could sculpt she didn't want it coming from her own. She loved Vern, knew she still did, despite her embarrassment of him while he was alive, her embarrassment toward him now, his ashes in her pottery shed, some scattered on the oak workbench where they'd slipped through her hands.

Her orange tabby weaved around her ankles while Rhoda worked her hands up and down the clay mass that would eventually be Eddie's vase. The cat rubbed against her workbench, gray ash clinging to its fur. Vern had been allergic to cats, but a few months before his death Rhoda had come home with the animal, telling herself that she didn't give a damn, she'd wanted a cat for years. Vern sneezed and snorted and wheezed and when Maude came over she suggested either Claritin for Vern or a new location for the cat.

"You want him, Maudie?" Rhoda had asked.

She blinked. "I'd take him until you found a new home for him," she said. "I don't like cats, but I'd do it for you."

"I meant Vern." She winked. She'd had the suspicion that they'd been seeing each other. She'd known Maude for a few years, but couldn't decide if she was growing suspicious—another ramification of her old age, a tragedy—or if she'd underestimated her husband's game this late in life. He'd been working later, which everyone knew was the first sign of an affair. She also noticed he started licking his lips the way Maude does when she ate: the corners first, then the full flesh of the lip. For her, that was enough.

Now, she smoothed the bottom of the vase on the wheel, thought of Eddie, his ugly plaid button-down, the freckles on his face that could be liver spots, and his candidacy. When Rhoda wanted to make someone go away, she could typically evade them, but he refused to let her rudeness seep in, take charge.

Her cat slouched under some yard equipment when Maude walked into the shed.

“You becoming deaf, old woman?” she asked, removing her gloves. “I’ve been knocking on your front door.”

“Figured you were a Jehovah’s Witness,” Rhoda said.

“I pity the one that tries to bring you to your knees,” Maude said. “You forgot about lunch.”

They ate at a BBQ shack down the road called Spit. It was cheap enough and good enough to draw most everyone. That’s what Rhoda liked about it, seeing the community group from church around a large table, the ladies that nested at the club pool on weekdays prodding their big portions and exclaiming, what a steal!, and her plumber propped at the bar on his lunch break. Vern ate here often enough on his own breaks. He came in once while she was there with Maude, he and his deputy sitting at a table on the opposite side. He came over to kiss her cheek.

“Not sitting with your sweetheart?” the owner asked.

Vern had laughed, his belt brushing Rhoda’s shoulder as he headed back to his table. “It seems she married me for better or worse, but I guess she didn’t marry me for lunch.”

“Oh, Vern,” a woman at the next table had said. She turned to Rhoda. “He’s such a good egg, isn’t he?”

Oh, Vern, they’d say, Can’t hurt a fly. Oh, Vern, such a little pistol. He and Rhoda were invited to dinners and Fourth of Julys and engagement parties because everyone loved him, or at least that’s how it added up to Vern. Rhoda stewed over these people for years, how they’d look at each other and shake their heads when Vern was kneeling on the ground showing the kids how to start a fire from scratch, his crack sliding out from his tight jeans. Oh, Vern, they’d say. Or how they’d laugh when they saw him dressed as Conan the Barbarian for Halloween, his square frame doing him no justice, or how he backed into a fire hydrant once trying to help a Little Debbie truck get unstuck in the snow. Oh, Vern. He tries so hard, he means so well. Oh, Vern, could make a snake chuckle. Oh, Vern, he just needs a sturdier belt.

“They don’t like you,” Rhoda told him once, finally, sadly. “They think you’re cute, and fun to watch.”

“Shoot,” he said, inspecting his broken turkey caller. “If you’d relax, Rhod, they’d like you too. They’re just scared of you.” He chuckled. “Hell, I am. If I weren’t, I’d ask you to return those pants to Ronald McDonald,” he nodded to her yellow trousers, elbowed her with great emphasis, and quickly shuffled out the door.

“Not as good as it usually is,” Maude sighed at her bbq now, as if someone had really let her down. She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin.

“Your taste buds are just worn out,” Rhoda said. Maude was in her late sixties and kept a perm and her face caked with makeup. She had no filter, and this made she and Rhoda the best of friends. Her husband was still kicking, but retired, so Maude came out of retirement and picked up a part time job in a bookstore to restore some hours of peace without him. Their children had children and migrated to different states. It was lonely, this part of life.

She’d always been good for Rhoda. “Hags,” she’d say about the women laughing with—or at, however you’d like—Vern. The time recently came, though, when Rhoda was unsure if her defense of Vern came from the part of her that bolsters a best friend, or if it was something else entirely now, something strikingly personal. He looks good in green, she’d said once when they were at a wedding. Ease up on him, Rhod, he’s trying, she’d say. Ease up, Vern used to say, they all mean well. Ease up. Ease up.

“So,” Maude said now. “This Edward.” Rhoda had begrudgingly told her friend that he was coming to her house to pick up the vase she would make him. He’d also offered to bring dinner.

“Eddie. He just wants a vase. Seems lonely.”

Maude sighed and straightened her sweater in the way Rhoda knew she was about to chastise her. “You’re ready? To have another man in the house?”

“It’s not like that,” Rhoda said dismissively. “It’s business.”

“That’s one word for it.” Maude gazed out the window, relaxed. A pang of anger rose from Rhoda’s gut. Her friend felt so comfortable mothering her. She’d had four kids, after all, she thought. Can’t stand to not have someone to boss around anymore.

“Seems like you have a problem with it.” Rhoda folded her arms across her chest.

“Me?” Maude’s eyes widened as if she’d just been told the bbq was not grass-fed beef. “It’s not my concern. I’m just worried about you.”

“This isn’t about me, I don’t think.”

Maude wet her lips before responding. “You’ve never properly grieved him.” She said “him” with what sounded only like a breath. Like the way a mouth forms around the name of a person that’s seen everything there is to see about you. Rhoda pictured them touching, together, talking about her. Vern showering at her home while her husband was away, getting Maude’s peony perfume off him. Vern cooking on her stove. Vern touching her hair. Vern being grateful someone meek cared for him.

“Properly,” she spat. “There is no properly. I dump his ashes in pottery glaze for Christ sake’s.”

“You can say it’s careless all you want,” Maude said. “And I think it is. But, dammit, you’re glorifying him, and I know you’re not too stupid to understand that.” Rhoda frowned, huffed, but said nothing.

Maude slowly pulled a ten-dollar bill from her wallet and held it in her hand until the waiter returned for the checks just so, it seemed to Rhoda, she could place the bill on the check slowly, halfheartedly, so everyone could feel the small gust of her dissatisfaction.

“You’re supposed to mellow with age,” Rhoda told her. “Give him the damn money.”

“Says the woman that sold her husband’s ashes to the pastor just last Saturday.”

“Think of it as the woman who made Pastor Guthrie a beautiful set of soup bowls.”

“His sixteen kids are eating out of soup bowls with Vern in there,” Maude said, a rise in her voice.

“He has seven kids,” Rhoda said.

“And another on the way,” Maude scoffed, swiping a crumb off her side of the table. “Should be illegal by now to have so many, don’t you think?”

Rhoda hardly ever dreamed about her son anymore, but she did the night before Eddie came to her home. She agreed to let him retrieve his vase and he insisted on bringing takeout—the best in Wintergreen, she’d probably never had chicken so moist!

She and Vern lost their baby in the second trimester, to Rhoda’s stomach knotting into ungodly fists in the middle of the night, to their sheets wet and heavy with blood. They’d been married for two years. They had agreed not to find out the sex of their baby, but Rhoda felt it was a boy curled inside her. She saw him once, years after the miscarriage. She awoke in the darkness, with Vern snoring slowly beside her. A small boy—dark hair like Vern’s, black eyes like hers—stood beside their bed, his arms at his sides. He wore small overalls with a flannel underneath, his boots mud-caked from running in the yard. He gazed at her naturally, lovingly, like he’d come into his parents’ room after a nightmare to sleep between them. When she reached for her son, her hand came away empty, grasping at nothing but the wall in front of her. She didn’t believe in God, but felt that if there ever was a reason to, it was because of this. The night before

Eddie came, the dream was nothing but a recounting of that, but this time her son had touched her first.

She couldn't explain why she was eating dinner with Eddie. He was adamant about it, she'd told Maude at lunch, who was skeptical when Rhoda explained it was, under no circumstances, a date. Rhoda never dated after Vern, but when he was still alive she always thought she would.

Eddie arrived in a Lincoln and a paisley button-down that looked too snug at the neck. He oohed and ahed at the vase, turned it upside down and did much of the same, then right side up again.

She placed paper plates on the table. Keeping things casual. Eddie didn't remark on the plates as he heaved chicken and vegetables onto them, holding each one with a splayed hand as they bent under the weight. She poured them a hefty glass of wine and listened as he detailed the history of the restaurant from which the chicken came, its location in Wintergreen, and how this was the third time he was eating their food this week—how embarrassing! She drank her wine, ate quickly, and observed the fine hairs on his head nodding back and forth under the wind from the ceiling fan.

“Family?” she asked.

“A daughter in graduate school. Studying art, of all things! Takes after her old man's—”

“Divorced?”

“Widowed,” he sobered. “Cancer.”

“I'm sorry,” she said.

“You have to say that.”

She shrugged. “You did at the gallery. When I told you about my husband.”

“Like I said, you must say that.”

“What else must you say?”

He thought for a moment, his crow’s feet creasing deeper. “That you like this food.”

“I meant seriously.” She sipped more wine.

“Seriously,” he mirrored her with his own glass. “Especially if you’re going to interrogate me all night. You have to say I made a good choice on the meal.”

She let out a gust of air. “I haven’t shared a meal with a man that isn’t my husband in decades. I’ll loosen up.”

“It’s not just that,” he said. “You like to make people uncomfortable, I think.”

She laughed humorlessly. “And yet you’re here, having dinner with me.”

“I don’t think it’s a bad thing. Maybe a sign the weather isn’t so good above you, yeah? But that’s okay.”

“Is it?” she asked. “You’re not as conceited as I first thought.”

“Oh, I am,” he said. “I’ve seen plenty of vases better than that.” He pointed at his special order on the counter.

When she finished laughing—an earnest, hefty laugh that cleared her head—she offered to open a second bottle of wine, which they did, and moved to the porch swing. Rhoda wouldn’t admit that she liked Eddie, that something about him stirred something else in her. She let him place a hand over hers, and then they listened to the bullfrogs, the

cicadas, and the slosh of the liquid in their glasses when they sipped. Perhaps it had to do with him being from out of town; he made his opinions of her on his own, with no help from the country club ladies or Pastor Guthrie and his coven of children. Or even from Vern, who'd always made her look better than she was, who softened her edges by being next to her.

She reminded herself that Vern was sleeping with Maude before he keeled over, that it wasn't just a hunch of her own. It couldn't be. Feeling warm from the wine, she leaned over and kissed the corner of Eddie's mouth, then the full front of his lips. He startled, then his lips returned the motion. Rhoda's mouth was more insistent, a production for herself that she could, in fact, still want this. When she pulled back he smiled, touched her hair too softly. When she pulled back Eddie still looked more alarmed than appreciative. Perhaps she had, in fact, manufactured the attraction in her head. How senseless. Vern had only been gone six months; why did she need to prove she could move on? Why couldn't she, just for once, ease up? She excused herself.

When she went into the bathroom she splashed lukewarm water at her face, worked the soap into a foam between her hands. Once she washed them, she rested her hands on the counter and stared at herself: deep, callous wrinkles, but no laugh lines, a naturally attractive face, pinched mouth. A level looking woman. Folds in her forehead, rigid cheekbones. A face effusing petulance—that's what people saw, she knew.

"I'm going to my shed, if you want to see it," she told Eddie as she walked by the porch swing where he reclined. Her attempt to change the mood worked, and he followed, leaving a good five feet between them. He seemed too big for the house now,

the yard, even, his smell and voice and politely humped frame were no longer peculiar in a good way. She felt the weight of her own frame on her spine, felt like her entire presence was embarrassing.

“Messy,” he said, observing the rows of broken pottery, her kiln, splattered glaze. “The sign of a true artist.” He ran a finger over the cracked pieces on the discard shelf.

“And look at you!” He turned to the fat tabby tucked loaf-like on the counter. “He’s fat as a mud turtle!”

“Are you allergic?” she asked.

“No, no,” he reached out to stroke the cat, who recoiled uncomfortably under his hand. “More of a dog person myself, but I love all animals. No discrimination here,” he said, raising his right hand.

The air in the shed was musty, and Rhoda figured that’s what she smelled like all the time now, not from the shed, but from old age, from disuse.

“Your wife,” she said, watching Eddie circle her kiln. “What’d you hate most about her?”

He cocked his head. “What’d I hate?”

“Yes.”

“I did not hate her.” He’d lost his playfulness, and Rhoda noticed how different he looked when his face settled into something firmer.

“I didn’t say you did.”

He thought for so long the silence started ringing. Rhoda shifted uneasily. “I remember the way she was with our daughter. The way they fought once she was a teenager. She resented me, I think, because Casey gravitated toward me.”

“That’s normal,” Rhoda said.

He slid between a shelf with more forgotten bowls. “I don’t think ‘normal’ is good criteria to use when talking about family. It doesn’t work. Makes relationships go to hell, if you will.

She started to respond, but a crash made her jump. Eddie’s elbow or hip or shoulder knocked a plate to the ground, which made him gasp and also made the cat lurch across the counter toward the exit, its tail barely grazing the urn, just enough for it to teeter. Rhoda didn’t reach out to stabilize it, but Eddie did, although not fast enough.

Vern’s ashes sifted across the concrete floor once the urn busted, a small cloud blooming above it. The silence had a heartbeat of its own now, as they both gazed at the mess on the ground.

“Is that—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Rhoda said.

“Is that,” he started again, but his eyes flit around the shed, to hers, back to the floor. “Should I go?”

“Sure.”

She tried to walk him to his car, but his strides were longer and faster than her own. I’m sorry, he kept repeating. Golly, he said. Good Golly. I’m so, so sorry. Her hands were muggy with sweat.

“Hey,” she said, attempting to control the ruined state of affairs. “You were right. Chicken was very moist. Thank you.” She felt jittery, cleaved, senseless, stupid. She doesn’t remember if they hugged, though probably not, but his taillights made her hydrangeas glow red, the light making their shadows leer across the gravel.

It wasn’t until the next morning that Rhoda realized Eddie did not pay her for the vase, nor did he take it—that neither of them remembered a transaction was involved. She’d left the mess over night, but rose the next morning, drank her coffee, and watched the humidity fog at her windows. When she went into the shed, she picked up a broken piece of the urn, held it against her belly for a moment before placing it in the trash. She removed the porcelain shards first before scooping some of the ash in her hands and placing it in another bag. Her dress got smeared with dust and she took it off, felt the air stick to her skin, the nooks behind her knees and elbows, ears, and kept working. She’d just retrieved the broom when Maude appeared at the door.

“Have you truly lost it this time?” she asked, taking in the broom, Rhoda in her cotton underwear, Vern on the floor. She adjusted her silk scarf nervously. “My God.”

“Just a small accident,” Rhoda said, looking at her but not really.

Maude knelt next to her. She almost touched the ash but her splayed fingers thought better just before. She stared at the ash, her knobbed hands threaded together nervously. Finally, quietly, she said, “How could you be so careless?”

Rhoda sighed. “Go home, Maudie.” But it was clear she was gaining speed the longer she knelt by the floor.

“I mean really, Rhoda. You kept the urn out here in the cold, in the weather, where anything could happen to it? How could you do that to him?”

“The worst that could happen was this,” she said.

“You were terrible to him,” Maude made a sound that might’ve been a laugh on a good day. “And you still are.”

“He’s dead.”

“Like I said, you still are. Did you care? Did you ever really care?” She picked up a piece of the urn and rubbed her fingers against the smooth edges. She picked up another, then another; her mouth mashed in a line.

“You should take them,” Rhoda said. “Clean them up yourself if you want. You loved him more than I did.”

“Rhod, Jesus—stop.”

Rhoda laughed humorlessly. “Hell, pick out any vase in here. All yours. Free of damn charge.”

Rhoda dusted her hands off and used the counter to pull herself back up. She left the shed, Maude watching her with a bewildered expression, with eyes that she knew also held tears.

The yard needed to be cut. You could hear the scream of an ambulance slipping down Ivy’s main road. Rhoda reached down and grabbed at some weeds by her flower bed. That’s what Vern used to say almost every day in the summer, that there was always work to be done in this yard, that it’d consume you if you let it.

Blood Sports

I've learned over the years that if Dad said something was probably alright to eat then don't eat it. He's dead now, and I never really considered looking into his death. I thought of this as I folded a piece of old deli turkey into fourths and dropped it on the floor for one of the dogs to lick up, then tossed the rest of the pack in the garbage. The old Rottweiler mix got to the meat first, slapping his jaws together before licking the white linoleum. Gum was stuck there from when Dad accidentally fired his 57 Magnum straight through the floor about four months ago. "Christ," he'd said when I ran out from my bedroom that night. "Forgot this one had a hair trigger." He died two months later.

Someone hollered from inside the barn and the dogs took off. They wouldn't get in—my brother always kept the doors slid shut when he hosted cockfights. The dogs wove through the mesh of trucks parked in our yard as if they were real hunting dogs. I couldn't see them once they got past the garden 'cause it was so late. I flicked the porch light off so none of Eli's drunk friends would shuffle up to look for more booze. Amazing how easy it is to camouflage a whole house when you're dealing with the right kind of people.

Eli's girlfriend was on the couch under a hunk of blankets. She slid her fingers through pages of a magazine and I could tell she wasn't really reading anything. Not even looking at the pictures. She never seemed to mind his side business but every once in a while her mouth fell into an odd shape that you only see on unhappy people. People in

debt, people whose car got totaled. She'd been helping me box up Dad's clothes in his room all night. It took me awhile to get around to it, had to let his death settle a bit before rummaging through his shit, but Sherry insisted the sooner I did it the easier it would be. Lord knows Eli wouldn't do it.

She held out her hand and asked for the remote.

"You don't live here," I reminded her.

She didn't look up from the magazine. "Turn on something, then, Red."

There was some sex scene on when the TV lit up, and for a second I thought it was on a porn channel Eli was deep into earlier. It ended up just being a racy movie. A man was reaching into a woman's underwear, pulled, let the fabric snap back. I could see the woman's ribs, too. I was gonna change it but saw Sherry was watching it from the couch, magazine limp in her hand. We had been in the same grade in high school, my brother two years ahead. She was different than the rest of the girls in middle school because she had black nail polish, a boyfriend, and later on a car that didn't wheeze. Her vanity didn't last long, though, cause she cut all her curly hair off after graduation, stopped wearing makeup. Now she just looked like a young Conway Twitty.

I left it on that channel and went back to the kitchen and started rearranging the cans. Don't know why, but I always got antsy when there were people over. Didn't matter if they were doing anything illegal or not. Something about extra sets of feet made my skin crawl. I got that from Dad; he never wanted people around. Once he got drunk he would swear he heard people in the woods that weren't really there.

"Bobby," he used to say. "Bobby is coming to get me."

We'd ask who Bobby was and never got an actual answer, but about a month ago an old stray dog started coming around from the woods. We named him Bobby because it just seemed appropriate. He was long, skinny, and scared. His snout was scarred from where someone used to fight him. He warmed up to me once I started putting out canned beans and dog food at the edge of the forest. Now he sleeps at the foot of my bed.

Eli came in after midnight and there was still the sound of jacked up engines leaving our driveway. His pockets were thick with bills which meant his rooster must've won. He even leaned down and kissed Sherry on the temple which also meant his rooster was still alive.

“Sold the Albany,” he said, kicking off his boots by the corner of the couch.

“Thought he was your favorite,” I said, but actually was kind of upset. That rooster, which Eli insisted on naming The General because of his impressive muscle-mass-to-body-weight-ratio and the way he commands the ring in his sparring muffs, was mean as all hell, and I liked that. He wasn't scared of my brother, and judging from his bleeding hand, old General got him again tonight.

“He only has a few more rounds left in him, I'd reckon,” he said, grabbing a beer from the fridge. “Scott bought him, but he can't take him home for another few days, 'til he gets a better cage. I don't mind lodging the bastard a little longer.” His eyes were bright and his face was flushed and my skin always got a little itchy when he was like this—all doped on winning and selling, moonshine and coke.

“You’re too kind,” I said. “Especially since you say he’s weak, like one of the sickly cocks you kill off so you don’t have to feed them.” Scott and Eli were not necessarily friends, more neutral acquaintances than anything. But around here if you weren’t after each other you might as well consider yourselves friends.

“Nope, he’s paying me a little extra to hold him,” he said, “I’ve been running all over hell’s half acre to make this kind of cash. Now I can take it easy, spend time with my lady. That’s what’s important.” He winked at me like he knew that’s exactly what wasn’t important to him.

I stared him dead on. “Is that what your horoscope’s been telling you?”

He ignored me and sat next to Sherry on the couch, rubbed his nose against her ear. I’d been forgotten, which only nagged me a little bit. They fell quiet, and I wasn’t sure if it was because they were concentrating on the movie or on something entirely different, or if Eli was thumbing through his cash for about the third time, so I disappeared into my room.

Bobby was in there furiously licking his paw. I brushed my hair, removed what little eyeliner I had on, and climbed into bed with my headphones on. They were a nice pair someone left at the diner I worked at, so I bagged them. I listened to the old stuff Dad used to put on in his truck, but not the extra sad stuff he’d play after Mom left us. That was next level, think: Randy Travis’ spiritual album.

“We don’t need her no way,” Eli would say after she did leave, when he was about sixteen and I was about thirteen. He’d cast his arm around my neck like he was

wrangling something. I'd agree with him but only to his face. Somebody needed to tell me how to be a woman.

Now that Dad was dead Eli was all I had and that scared me good. On one hand he would split somebody's face if I told him they were messing with me, on the other I think he'd just do it for the hell of doing it, that he wouldn't really care if someone had been messing with me at all. I liked to think I didn't need nobody, but after you get a certain age you realize having somebody is more important than air.

We were alright in terms of money, though. Between Dad's life insurance, Eli's not-so-discreet business, and my waitressing gig we were better than a lot of middle class people who act more secure than they are. There'd even been talk that Eli offered our dad for the insurance money. I didn't think he was that batshit, but I never let it go. Rumors have to come from something true, and all that. I remember him not shedding a tear over Dad, of going on about his business, of been angry that he could go on being normal so soon.

Mid-summer pressed down hard, the sun seemed close enough to suffocate us all if we paid too much attention to it. Me and Sherry threw on our bathing suits and took off to the quarry to swim and get a tan. I don't think either of us really wanted one, but it was a reason to go somewhere isolated. After you see the same people all the time it's amazing how good it feels to be in the middle of nowhere, even if it's at the bottom of a quarry. Eli was still asleep from the night before, but he probably wouldn't have come anyway.

The quarry was in the bowels of Schuyler and difficult to find. There was a body of water at the edge of it, something man-made on the other side of where they blow up the rocks. If you climbed up the ledge, there was a good fifteen foot drop into the water, and everyone around here has cannon-balled or flipped off it. The rock wall used to be smooth as a butter knife, but now the reachable part is littered with graffiti. We weren't the only ones with the idea—a few others were already at the pool, laid out on blankets or up to their necks in the brown water.

Sherry and I settled our towels on the smoothest piece of ground we could find, but it still hurt to lay down with the rocks underneath. She was wearing a red bikini and had a belly button ring in the shape of a snake. It was humid and her hair stuck up in frizzy curls around the edge of her face. To my disappointment I recognized a few people I'd gone to high school with, along with everyone you pass on the way to work or at the Laundromat. The people you smile at out of familiarity. We'd bought a six pack and a tube of Pringles. Sherry popped our beer caps with her lighter and frowned around. I hated that, how she always had her mouth mashed that way.

“We can finish up your dad’s closet tonight. Go through those bill drawers and we’ll almost be done, kid.”

I hated how she called me a kid even though we were the same age. I don't know why she figured she deserved to be older than me, but I could be a bigger person and admit she acted like she was most of the time.

“Didn't we come here to not think about that?”

“Right. We could get tats instead,” she said, shrugged. And that was the kind of town we lived in—when people got bored they stuck ink in their skin and said it symbolized their mom or their dead animal.

“You wanna get a matching tattoo with me?” I kicked gray dirt at her. I was always smart with her, used to be because I didn’t like her, but she’d been around for so long now it was more like I didn’t know how to say any different, and that if she ever did leave us I wouldn’t know what to do.

“Hell no. I don’t like you enough.” She rubbed her thumb under her ribcage. “But I’ve been thinking of getting something here.”

“Well, it’ll be a no from me.” We’d gotten bored before and gone to a piercing place. I just got a second hole in my ears while she did the belly button thing. As much as I wanted to be hasty and careless like her I wasn’t like that. I had to think about permanent stuff, like a normal person.

Scott and some other people came rolling over the dirt mounds that separate the quarry from the rest of Schuyler. They set up shop next to us, rubbed their Styrofoam cooler in the dirt until it burrowed down enough to not slide. Scott was smaller than Eli, his facial features less haggard. I remembered seeing him at our dad’s funeral, in the back row, unshaven and wearing a wrinkled polo.

He sat beside us, but hesitant. People still treated us cautiously, crept around the edges of us as if we woke up everyday and forgot that our father was gone and they were waiting for the memory to strike us again. Sweat slid down the side of his face but he

didn't wipe it. He mentioned something about the heat. A very safe and popular choice when people are trying to be all delicate.

"Fucking unrelenting," Sherry said, and waded into the dirty water.

"Shame everyone had the same idea," he said. "Does anyone around here work?" Something about him came off as pitiful or lonely, I couldn't decide which. He was also the kind of guy you couldn't help but like a little bit.

"Last time I checked you don't do a whole lot, either," I said and he rammed his shoulder into mine. He was also the kind of person you could not see for months and it'd be normal when you picked back up again.

His Adam's apple bobbed like he'd swallowed a golf ball. "I'm sorry, Red." He rubbed the back of his neck and the hair on my body started to raise because of the shift he was making. "About your old man." I damn near hated when people said sorry about tragedies. Sorry doesn't unbury anybody.

"Yeah, we're doing alright."

"Eli holding up?"

"You talk to him more than I do."

"Not about that." He paused. "I didn't realize he was sick. Your dad, I mean."

"Depends what kinda sick you mean. Alcoholic sick, maybe."

He nodded and decided to drop it. He offered me a nip of bourbon from his pocket, and when I shook my head he said, "Good girl."

We soaked in the water. I tried not to let my head dip under because people ended up with ear infections from this place all the time. Sherry was laughing at something

somebody said, her head tilted back, her delicate throat arched more offhandedly than I'd seen in a while. I swam up to the shallow end when bubbles frothed up on the surface, figured it was a snapping turtle down below. I studied the graffiti on the rock beside me. Some of it was artful—big swooping letters and streaks of paint. Some initials were carved there, bordered with a heart. Other initials were followed by insults, the occasional dick drawing.

Scott rose from the water, dripping, and ran his hands across the wall. He emptied his beer bottle, cracked it against the rock, and used a sharp edge to carve my initials. I watched his rough hand wield the glass, his fingers white from the pressure. A drop of blood bloomed on his palm.

I looked farther down the wall of rock, seeing Sherry and Eli's initials together from years ago, and then Eli's just on his own. It was carved big and messy, no doubt from where he'd done it as a teenager. There was spray paint smeared over it now, so sloppy it was nearly unreadable, but there it was—killer—done so fast it dried in streaks.

"Take a look at my masterpiece," Scott called, shaking out his hand. And boy, did I go running back to him. I didn't feel sick right then, calm almost, like maybe I could've done that myself if I was mad enough. Like maybe Eli damn deserved it. I reached out and fingered my initials and wished, suddenly, that I'd touched Eli's name. I smiled at Scott, but it wasn't sincere, not anymore. I wanted to kiss him and hit him for just being there, for being in my goddamned space. He tried to shield my eyes when the wind picked up and set dust whirling. It whipped at us like it meant it. I smacked his hand down and let it get me.

Sherry dropped me off at the house and I started pacing. You know how sometimes you ignore a thought, swallow it even though it's hot as all hell, but when you decide to let it out it's there and as serious as a heart attack. Like your father coming back from the dead. Eli was God knows where, so I started sifting through drawers in the kitchen, the ones with paper sticking out like jammed fingers. I don't know what I was thinking I would find. But there was nothing. I went to Eli's room and poked around. His sheets were crammed up between the bed and the wall and his pistol sat pointedly on the nightstand. I looked for D'Con or Antifreeze that he could've been slipping into Dad's Jim Beam. I was surprised how devastated I was to find nothing. Of course I wouldn't. There would be no giant confession typed out on his dresser. His tracks would've been covered the instant he did anything; he was basically a ghost himself.

It was that weird time of day when dark's edging in but you can still see everything, so I took the papers I'd dropped on the floor and a bag of trash outside and lit it in the old rusted trash barrel. The fire smelled like plastic and released a dark gray smoke. I sat back on the damp grass and started thinking of what I knew about my dad, my brother, and what I didn't. Everyone just thought Dad died because he smoked more than a wood stove and was probably close to liver failure. No questions about it. I'd been the one that found my dad, slouched diagonally on his mattress, the laces on his workbooks half untied. The ceiling fan blurring in circles above the bed. That's what I always thought about still, that ceiling fan whirring like it's got something to say.

When Eli came in he was visibly drunk, his face red like he might blow up from too much alcohol. I was making a sandwich in the kitchen when he strolled in.

"What's burning?"

"Trash."

He surveyed me. Eli was stupid in a lot of ways, but he knew people. I hoped he couldn't tell I was extra rigid because I thought he might be our father's murderer.

"What's wrong with you?"

"I'm hungry," I said and licked the peanut butter off the spoon for emphasis. "We went to the quarry today."

"That's what Sherry said."

"Didn't know you saw her today."

"I called her. She wanted to go to dinner but I was busy."

"You should treat her better," I said. "She's the best you're gonna do."

He turned the kitchen faucet on and off absentmindedly. "Why so pissy tonight?"

I put my hands behind me on the counter because they were gonna shake. I was entering an area of no return. That was something I tried never to do with anybody, especially Eli. "You know, we never even considered looking into Dad's death," I said calmly. His green eyes might've hardened, but that could also be me reading in too intense.

"Why would we have?"

I shrugged in a way I thought might look effortless. "Maybe he had cancer and we never knew?"

"He probably did. Who cares now?" He didn't look away, and I didn't say anything. I could hear a plane fly overhead, heard the sound fade, too, but I didn't break his eye contact. "What's up with you, Red?" he said finally, stepping closer.

"You kill him?" I blurted, and it took me a minute to realize I'd done that. Sunk my whole ship. "Why does everyone think you killed him?"

"Who you been talking to?" He edged on up to me. "Doesn't matter what they think. You think I did?"

"I don't know."

He smiled. "How do you think I did it, Red?" He was in my face now, and I reached blindly for the spoon behind me. The damn spoon.

"Like this?" His large hand wrapped around my neck, delicately. There was no pressure, not yet anyhow, but his thumb pressed faintly on my jugular. I knew he could feel it throb, and I knew he knew he had me, that I would never go to the cops, to Sherry. That my outburst was futile, because at the end of the day I didn't want to live in this empty house alone without my brother.

"No," I said finally. "I saw him. There were no marks on his neck."

"That's right. There weren't." When he reached behind me I flinched, but all he did was cop my sandwich and stroll into his bedroom.

I locked my own door when I thought I'd give sleep a shot, but I do that anyways considering the riff raff Eli traffics through all the time. Tonight I also put a chair under

the doorknob. It was for my own peace of mind; I knew Eli would never come after me like that. I had to move it twice to let Bobby out so he could bark at nothing and by the time some light poked itself over the Blue Ridge I'd only clocked an hour of sleep. I laid in my bed that morning thinking of retaliation like a damn child. I remembered Scott was coming to retrieve The General after another fight in the barn tonight, so I threw off the covers, put a pair of Eli's boots on at the door and beelined for the barn.

The chickens hummed real nervous when the barn door whined as I pulled it open. The goats were laying in some hay chewing their cud and the normal, fat chickens were coming down from their roosts. I slid through the cages with the fighters in it. They were red and sleek, the thoroughbreds of the chicken species. A few were pacing as much as they could in their metal cages, which was only a step or two. I got too close to one cage and got pecked. I kicked at the cage because I felt like I needed to assert dominance. The rooster, a skinny little Kelso named Pecker, fluffed his neck up. I knew Eli thought he was clever with that name. The General was on a shelf near the feed bin. He was a big dude and his eyes were almost orange, like his small body was somehow full of the devil. His beak was parted slightly as he watched me approach. I didn't come around the barn much so I knew I was making him tense. I pulled down on the metal tab and released the bar that kept the cage closed. He overturned his food as he flew out.

"Go free," I said, shoosing him toward the door. He went with it for a minute, almost to the entrance, but then he had enough of me and went for my ankles. I kicked at him but he dodged my stumbling feet. I realized that his wings hadn't been clipped in a while because he flew up at my torso. His spurs got me good and I doubled over to hide

my face and his feet sunk through my hair to scratch my head. I made sure my eyes were covered with one hand while I reached for his scrawny neck. I threw him off and grabbed a rake by the door while he came at me again. When I socked him with the stick end he hit the ground, stunned, and I thought he might be dead. But he hopped up and took off out of the barn. I ran after him with the rake, followed until he hit the treeline, could no longer see him in the woods.

It wasn't until I was heading to the diner a few hours later that it started to pour. It had been dry as a bone all summer, but I'd known it was coming, could feel it already in my kneecaps even though I was too young for that sort of thing. Dad used to say that about me, that I was too young for a lot of things. My dumb little car had wipers that streaked, and since we lived so close to the quarry there was a permanent sheet of dust on the windshield. I rubbed my elbow against the glass on the driver's side to make it better. Our goats, however, were disinterested in the downpour and were chewing weeds in the garden. The chicken wire I put around it never stopped them. They could hop it like shorter, fatter deer. One was climbing on the hood of my car and I eased it off with my elbow. They were like cats, always landing upright, too sinewy for any damage to come to them. Inside the car, the dash read *Engine oil change soon*, but it'd said that for weeks.

I stayed busy at work, cleaning tables better than they deserved and changed a few light bulbs that'd been out for weeks. My boss didn't ask me about the scratches on my face, which was good because I hadn't thought of a decent excuse. I slipped a few quarters from the tip jar and played some sad music while I felt sorry for myself. When I

went home it'd be my damn funeral, and I'd done it all to myself. Sure, this had been me looking for answers about Dad, but it was also an uglier, hoggish thing: retaliation for Eli treating me like shit all the time. I needed to grow some balls and leave. The even uglier thing: I never would.

The light from inside the barn was hard and yellow. I parked down the driveway because of all the trucks littering the yard, ominous, as if they were guarding the barn, or snakes perched high in the grass. I'd stayed well past close at the diner, but then decided to buck up and tell Eli what I'd done—although he already knew by now, for sure—and tell him I'd pay back the money for the chicken, that what I did was petty and we should be upright people and talk about it. Then I'd probably go scream into a pillow. I went straight for the barn, slipped in behind the crowd of sweaty, damp men. A few looked at me but most of them were too intent on what was going on in the ring. Two roosters were going at it, although I didn't look over. Stuff like that made my stomach turn. Their wings made a shuddering sound as they sparred and the men hollered and grunted like boars.

I stepped over a chainsaw by the back and made my way around the perimeter of the barn. Eli was leaning against the back wall, arms folded across his broad chest. He wasn't even watching the fight, but his eyes were on me and boy did I feel my stomach drop all the way through me. We stared, unmoving, for God knows how long, until the door slid open again and Scott walked in. Eli mouthed something at me—inside—and I

listened to him. The stench of old hay covered everything. I slammed the barn door closed, revulsion clawing up at the back of my mouth.

Bobby was dragging something through the yard and I heard someone whistle at him from behind the barn. It was Eli, and when the mutt jogged over to him, he plucked the limp body of The General from Bobby's mouth.

I started to apologize, but he cut me off. "I'll deal with you later." He tossed the chicken into a wheelbarrow by the mulch pile and disappeared back inside.

Sherry didn't say a whole lot to me inside, she was back to flipping through her magazines. I went back into Dad's bedroom and kept on cleaning. I went through the mail, his sock drawer, everything until all the shit was bagged up and ready to be hauled out. I didn't even cry this time; it just was what it was. I cleaned until I heard the truck engines start up and take off, heard the dogs bark as they ripped through the woods.

When Sherry yelled my name I took off to the porch, and that's where Scott and Eli were tearing at each other. It struck me as pathetic, that these men couldn't use their words but prefer to use the blunt edges of their knuckles. You could barely see them until they stumbled close enough to the house for the porch light to come on. They rolled over a rose bush, and then Eli doled out a punch hard enough to stun Scott. He disappeared into the barn and came back with a metal cage with a rooster inside. It appeared to be Pecker, his second-best compared to The General. He set the cage down beside Scott and ambled inside. I watched Scott stare after him, stunned, and we looked at each other for a long time. I guess he was assessing if this was adequate payment or not, and I guess he thought it was. He picked up the cage and stumbled to his truck.

Eli was slumped in a kitchen chair when I came in, Sherry digging thorns out of his back with tweezers. He held his glass of whiskey and ice up to his jaw to numb it.

“Fuck you, Red,” he said. “Fuck you.”

"You should've told him I let the rooster go," I said. "He likes me."

Eli grinned and it was genuine humor that lit up his face. "Is that what you think?" He paused long enough to readjust the glass. “Besides, what kind of brother would I be if I threw you under the bus?” He laughed.

It felt like a sock to the gut and I looked at Sherry but her face was expressionless, her arms almost robotic as she picked at him. I wanted her to tell him just about anything, tell him to be kinder to me, tell a fucking joke if nothing else, but she didn't.

When we'd been at the quarry I'd tried to figure out what happened to her, why she changed so much. “Why'd you stop wearing makeup after high school?” I'd asked. “Why'd you cut your hair off?”

She shrugged. “What was the point?” It wasn't really a question. You could tell she was done looking for an answer, or that she'd never been all that interested in one.

He never came after me, never demands money or jack shit. What he does do is stop talking to me—not maliciously, even. I'm just a ghost in his house, someone he tells to take the trash out or to pick up liquor on the way home. He pretty much does it all himself, though. He spends most of his time at Sherry's. It wasn't until I had the house to myself did I think about Dad some more, how I'd never ask Eli about his death again. I think about the quarry, the fixing the house needs. Eli tried to teach me one time how to

replace a rotted board on the porch, how to pry it from the others, but I was never strong enough to get it loose.

“You just can’t,” he said, shrugging, not upset about it in the least. He used his shoulder to push me out of the way.

I considered really leaving for good, seeing Eli’s face once he realized I wasn’t coming back, or Sherry’s—but when would that be? How many days, or weeks, would pass before they decided they shouldn’t have taken me for granted? A worse, more probable thought: that time would never come.

I think about painting my toenails pink, turning the rusted tub upright in the yard and planting petunias in it. I think about being pregnant one day, what that might look like for me, the feeling of my body bloated under the weight of another human. The promise of that person linked indefinitely to me. I think about what it would be like to go back to the quarry, alone, and just float. It would be daytime and the dust that drifts over the hill from busted rock would fall, cloak the surface. My eyelids would be gray with it, so would my neck and stomach. I’d float for so long Eli and Sherry would come looking for me, but when they’d get to the quarry they’d scan the dull water. They wouldn’t see me, or they’d think it was just debris, some floating dead thing. Nothing alive, but I am.

Brain Freeze

Sometimes Ruth hangs out at the 7-Eleven after school to drink Slurpees, but really it's to see if her father stops for gas and a pack of Certs. Wintergreen flavor, more often than not. She's seen the green packaging in his hand from the bench by the air machine. He slips through at least once a week on his way home from work but she doesn't know where he lives. She figures it's back across the mountain, otherwise he wouldn't need to fill up so often. She's also deduced that he chews the mints instead of sucks on them, or else he wouldn't need to buy them every week.

“And then Mrs. Sommer just handed me the detention slip. It's not like I was flooring the goddamn pedal through the school parking lot. Can she really get me for that? She was manning the crosswalk for fuck's sake,” Chey says, her lips rosy from a cherry Slurpee. She's a solid eight with dark curls and an hourglass frame you don't see often in high school, but an immature sixteen. Boys like her, so girls like to be suspicious of her. Except Ruth, who's a mature fourteen and considers herself a solid five. Ruth, who considers them friends because no one else feels like either of them is worth the effort.

“She's probably bored and looking to take out her marriage problems on someone,” Ruth says. She has no idea if this is true. Maybe Mrs. Sommer isn't married. She has the personality of a piece of cardboard after all. But it doesn't matter. It's easy, this friendship, because you can say anything that means nothing and it's welcomed.

“Definitely. You don’t bite your nails that bad and not have problems in the marriage bed.” Chey curls her hands into fists to hide her own bitten nails. She says things like “marriage bed” every once in a while and Ruth figures it’s stuff she’s picked up from her parents or maybe their preacher. Stuff like “diaspora,” “comedic relief,” or “Lord God Almighty.”

“Skip it,” Ruth says. “Detention.” She’d never do it herself, but she’d never have detention in the first place. Ruth never does anything bad, but she never really does anything good, either.

The sun hits her directly in the eyes now, which means it’s about quarter to six, which also means her dad’s not coming today. At pump number eight—his usual if it isn’t already occupied—is a lifted F-150 with two ridgebacks in silver cages on the bed, their barks like moans.

“What if it’s her day to run it? God, she’d probably slit my tires.” Chey tosses her Slurpee into a trash bin, flicks her eyes over the parking lot, over pump eight. There’s a softness to her face for about a second, and Ruth despises it. She’d rather Chey tease her for waiting like this, every day, wasting money on Slurpees that taste stale. *Pathetic*, she’d rather hear. *If you were more like me you wouldn’t need nobody*. Not true, but Chey liked to think it was. “Ready to go home?”

Chey never mentions Ruth’s dad at the gas station—or lack thereof—when they’re slouched on the bench or reclined on the hood of the car or when it’s past six and every middle-aged man has already made his commute home. When he does come her unending stream of gossip halts and together they observe his pumping of gas and his

saunter into the store as if they might be held at gunpoint and asked how many steps he takes from station wagon to snack aisle.

“If his pants were one size bigger you might not notice all those bulges,” was all she said once—helpfully, she obviously thought. She never encourages Ruth to confront him or tells her this routine is obsessive and empty of a positive outcome and that’s all nice, Ruth thinks, that silent acceptance of her impending defeat.

They drives an old gold hatchback with deep bucket seats and a back wheel that shudders at stoplights. It reeks of Bengay from when it belonged to her dad and his busted up shoulder, but it’s a set of wheels Ruth won’t have for another two years. They drives like Toretto on crack, with CDs of Fleetwood Mac or Marvin Gaye crashing through the speakers at such a volume that bass bleeds with drums and voices with keyboard and so on until all you can hear is a general sense of instrumental chaos. None of this bothers Ruth. The music burns her eardrums enough to ward off thoughts of anything, biological father or otherwise, as they careen around roads narrow as hipbones, pavement sloughing off as they get closer to the chalky dirt ones outside of town.

They turns the volume down now to yell over a particularly extensive guitar solo. “Clint Moneymaker’s mom is inviting people over before the dance on Friday for dinner,” she hollers. “I should probably pick you up at five so we’re there early enough to talk to the host.” She winks. “Well, the host’s son.”

Their heads flop forward as a tire collides with a pothole. Clint Moneymaker lives a few houses down from Ruth. He has one green and one blue eye, which some girls find

disturbing but Chey thinks insinuates a bad boy personality and is therefore enticing. He reminds Ruth of one of those Shetland dogs with the mismatched eyes. She likes it, too, but has never voiced her opinion one way or the other.

“I haven’t decided if I’m going,” Ruth says. Her grandma took her to a Dress Barn across the mountain last week and they came out with a glittery spaghetti-strapped thing of a modest length that made Ruth even more unsure of where she stood as a wallflower.

“This’ll get those boys’ attentions,” her grandma had said.

“We can leave if it sucks,” Chey says now. “One of us should talk to Clint, though.”

Ruth stiffens—does Chey know she has one foot in the pro-Clint camp? She’s only spoken to him a few times when he unloads firewood in her backyard. Her grandma’s too stiff and knobby to chop it herself and Ruth too bony and unsteady. Besides, if it came down to it, the night would end with Clint and Chey sneaking off to an empty room. It always did, no matter who the guy was.

“Hatchback’s all yours if it ever comes to that,” Chey says blandly, as if reading her thoughts. Like maybe a boy wanting to unsnap Ruth’s cotton bra and stick his hand down her pants would have to be the world’s last attempt at procreation.

Ruth’s grandma is cooking up fried bread when she gets home. She’s a lanky woman with large hands and skin grainy with age spots. She keeps her hair snapped in a clip at the nape of her neck, but errant silvery strands always crowd her deep forehead.

“Boots,” she says without turning from the woodstove.

Ruth kicks out of said black boots and adjusts her socks that were jammed at the insole. The house has a perpetual smell of pine and floor cleaner, something Ruth hated when her mom permanently dropped her there four years ago, but now the smell is something she could never fall asleep without, never stop feeling in her teeth. She picks up the fire iron and jabs at the flames in the woodstove. The house is about three decades behind the times with limited central heat and lamb figurines carefully placed on top of cabinets, paralyzing stares pointed at whoever’s unfortunate enough to be around 6’1”.

“Did you save any room for real food or are you full of sugar?” Her grandma always seems politely indifferent to Ruth’s social activities, but Ruth knows it’s because she wants her out there, to mess up a few times, to fill out her skin and bone structure in a way she doesn’t know how to yet.

“Full of sugar.”

“But you will eat. How’s Cheyenne?”

“Chey’s Chey.”

“Is she picking you up for the dance?”

Ruth tells her about Clint’s party.

“Clint’s a good boy.” She wipes her butter knife on her pants. “Dance with him.”

“Grandma.”

“I’m serious.” She grins, lessening the stiffness of her face, her eyebrows curving slightly at the ends like horizontal commas.

“I’ll try my hardest,” Ruth drawls as she pushes holes in the bread with her finger.

“That’s a lick and a damn promise.” Sometimes Ruth felt as if her grandma would function better in high school than her. She had the personality for it.

“I’m full,” Ruth says finally.

“Sufficient,” her grandma says. “You say, ‘I’ve had sufficient.’”

Ruth flosses her teeth before bed, for the third time today. Braces were never in the budget and the centimeter gap between her incisors appears, to her, to be a chasm. Sometimes she takes a little black rubber band used for braids and wraps it around her two front teeth and keeps it there for as long as she can stand. She practices saying words in the mirror without her lips curling above her teeth. Beaver. Hawaii. Green bean. Jesus. She scrubs her face—acne-free, a blessing she’s thankful for every day, and not just because Chey’s face exhibits the ruddiness of it. She whips her hair around a few times, hoping it’ll be tangled and give the stringy pieces some volume when she wakes up in the morning.

In bed she considers what it would be like to be married to someone like Mrs. Sommer, someone hell-bent on rules and only using number two pencils—absolutely no gel pens. Is she different when she slides into bed at night next to this phantom mate Ruth tries futilely to assign an identity, a face? What about Clint Moneymaker? Whose face does he picture when he’s jacking off? Or maybe he somehow has a girlfriend that Ruth hasn’t seen at school and he doesn’t have to take care of himself all that much. It sure as hell isn’t her face that he thinks of, but she allows herself to pretend that it is for just a

moment. That when he sees her at his party he'll say, *nice dress* and she'll say, *we should dance when they play that new Billy Currington song*. She snorts.

Ruth credits her ineptitude with boys to her father. She hasn't seen him since around the third grade when he and her mom divorced. "A self-prioritizing son of a bitch," her mother had called him. She'd only seen him at the gas station six months ago. She recognized his thin hair and soft jaw like her own. She'd gone home and asked her grandma for a picture, which was reluctantly relinquished. It had been him, except now in slacks and a polo, the unofficial uniform of a desk job. Ruth had always imagined he'd be doing something with his hands.

If he'd been around then at least she'd know how a man works, how they move within their own homes. How does he operate when he's not popping mints at 7-Eleven? She imagines how he'd look in her grandma's kitchen, his gait as he moves from sink to stove—making her eggs? Yes, making her eggs. *Scrambled or fried, boss?* he'd ask. *Fried*, she'd say, because mature people ate their eggs that way.

It's the middle of October, but Chey has her shirt pulled up to her midriff to catch a tan. They're reclined on the hood of the hatchback in the 7-Eleven parking lot, a little later today because Chey did her time with Mrs. Sommer. Ruth didn't feel like taking the bus so she waited in the hall, smacking her boots together as she sat with her back against the wall.

"For the love of all that's holy," Chey muttered when it hit four o'clock and she flung open the classroom door, slinging her backpack over her shoulder.

“Do you think it’s possible to become immune to brain freezes?” Chey asks now, squinting against the sun and fiddling with her drink straw. There are small moon-like indents on her forearms where she sunk her fingernails into her arms. This, Ruth learned, was a sign of when Chey was not in control. Sometimes she’d drag her fingernails further down her arm and create small welts. Ruth tried it once but, disheartened, found she wasn’t that dramatic in nature.

Ruth considers brain freezes for the period of time Chey probably thinks it merits. The gas station is thronged with cars, small lines beginning for pumps. The owner of the store is sitting on the edge of the ice machine smoking Pall Malls.

“Don’t know, but if you can, why put yourself through all those brain freezes just so you never have to have one again?”

“For immunity.”

Ruth crunches on her straw. “Be alotta Slurpees.”

Chey grins and begins emptying her drink, her throat working the slush down.

“Are you serious?” Ruth performs a half eye roll. Chey loves useless dares and dumb ideas and occasionally ones that are harmful to herself or someone else. Ruth chooses to not pay her any attention if she’s around to witness one of these ideas.

Chey stops midway through and screws up her eyes. “Ow,” she says and reclines back on the windshield, massaging her forehead.

“Well, duh,” Ruth says, not looking at her but instead at a couple walking into the store. The woman steps in gum on the asphalt but doesn’t notice.

Chey begins to laugh now, the freeze dissolving. “Well, it doesn’t hurt to try.” She begins to say something then stops, her gaze on the gas pumps.

The familiar station wagon’s lights turn off at pump eight and Ruth watches as her dad gets out and swipes his card on the machine. He’s wearing a green polo today, the back of it bunched up from the car seat. He hooks the nozzle into his tank and leaves it pumping as he heads into the store. He has long strides, Ruth notices, and that makes his shoulders shift more than the average person’s as he moves. She wonders if that strains his torso, or if he’s even aware of it. Does he have back problems? She doesn’t know how old you have to be to have such an obscure ailment but it seems like everyone over forty does.

He disappears into the store, but only long enough to purchase the Certs. Ruth feels Chey looking at her, even when he exits through the sliding doors. She takes a sip of her Slurpee for something to do even as her eyes stay on her father. His hair is dark like hers, his buzzed in the back but long and knotty-looking on top. She notices, not for the first time, his small gold wedding ring as he places the nozzle back on the pump and crumples his receipt. She feels bitter, as she usually does, when he pulls out of the station. But what does she expect? Confronting him has always been an option that’s understood as inconceivable. What would she do if he looked over? There’s no way he’d recognize her, even though she feels like she might still have the flat body of the third-grader he last knew her as.

Chey smiles at Ruth, but stays silent. She hops off and deposits their empty cups in a messy trash can. Ruth bites at her nails as she thinks, wondering what—and who—

he's going home to. He never buys anything else, no extra candy or drink or even tampons for his wife. Ruth likes to think he would buy something for her if he cared. If he maybe noticed his wife had a bad paper cut one morning and he bought Band-Aids that evening because, honey, it's better to keep it wrapped up. But he's never noticed. Never looked to his left and seen the two gawky adolescents peering at him from the hood of a gold car.

Clint Moneymaker is in Ruth's backyard when she gets home. He's wearing jeans and a denim jacket and the overall outfit is lamentable but Ruth likes that he's not just wearing gym shorts like most guys.

Her grandma meets her at the door and trades her backpack for a wad of fives.

"Why don't you go pay him?" She winks and closes the door before Ruth can object. "Go on," she shouts through the storm door.

Ruth stands on the porch for a moment, deciding whether she should just go in the backdoor and hand her grandma the money or actually give it a shot. She watches him stack the wood in the back corner of the yard, the frayed green tarp crumpled at his feet. He's pulling the blocks from the pile on the back of his truck. There're ugly green track lines in the grass from where he mashed it with his big tires. He's carefully stacking the wood, shaking the pieces a little after placement to ensure they won't fall. He scored his little side business last winter when an older couple down the street couldn't chop their own wood. It broadened when Ruth's grandma started paying him to bring it and stack it and leave some by the back porch.

She walks in his direction, slowly, as if her feet were growing roots and fastening to the red dirt. He's older than her, but only by a year. A year can do a lot, though. Give you a kid. Send you to jail. Break your heart. A year is watching the monkey grass you grew in Life Science sprout new growth. A year is arriving at day 352 of staying at grandma's with the knowledge already in your gut that your mom isn't returning from visiting her long distance boyfriend.

He pauses when he sees her coming, tossing a block of wood back on the bed.

"Thanks," he says when she thrusts the money at him and pockets it. Their hands touch for a moment and she notices how rough his are.

He leans against his truck, an elbow resting easily on the bed. Maybe he's settling in for a conversation, she thinks. The sun catches his eyes and Ruth notices for the first time how the blue one seems much brighter than the green one.

"You, too. For the wood." She glances at the pile. "Won't it get wet?" She surveys the damp ground. "Then it doesn't burn."

"Not if you stack it right," he says, "It's all about the placement." He pats a log. "But if it ever does you tell your Grandma to give me a holler. I'm no scammer." His eyes crawl over her face. "You're getting home late."

"I was hanging out with Chey." She wishes she hadn't mentioned her.

"Cool," he says with a head nod. She watches for any indication that he's into her best friend. She thinks maybe he brightened up a bit when he heard her name, maybe stood a little taller. It was hard to tell with the evening sun casting shadows. "That's nice you don't have to ride the bus. That she drives you."

He moves back to the wood and begins to lift a few pieces into his arms. Was the conversation over? She probably lingered too long. She didn't say anything interesting enough and now it's over.

"If she ever can't drive you for some reason just let me know and I'll give you a lift."

She relaxes a little, but begins backing away. Better to quit while ahead. "That would be awesome."

"Hey, you coming tomorrow?" He says this a little louder as Ruth increases the distance between them.

Is this her formal invitation? She attempts a slouch in the most casual and careless way she can, channels Chey's practiced disinterest. "Depends. Is it worth my time?" The attitude is off, like a teacher attempting hip-ness.

He brightens at the tease, hopefully, and not at her. "Might be." He smiles a smile that's something other than polite and then he's back to stacking wood.

Ruth imagines Clint's house to be modest and maybe uninteresting and she discovers the next evening that she's correct. His home is made of cedar with a generous front porch and a garage that's bigger than the actual home. His mom is not there and no one seems surprised by this. Apparently it was just a cover so parents wouldn't be concerned. Ruth had also been unaware that no one actually planned to go to the dance.

“It’ll be way more fun,” Chey says. She’s wearing a shimmery silver dress that is flowy from the waist down. She didn’t overdo her makeup this time, either. “No chaperones here to tell us we have to dance a foot apart.”

Precautions had been taken. Three cars are hidden in the garage and the rest are parked in the backyard so neighbors won’t be suspicious. A trash bag is taped over the front picture window so it’ll look dark inside to anyone walking by. The house’s now crappy aesthetic is in disagreement with the formalwear everyone is in. Ruth recognizes many of these kids, but also many are older and nearly seem too old to be at a high school party. She sees Mike Candler, a tall beanpole of a kid who’s in her third period and Maggie Moore, an overly friendly average girl who always says hi to her in the hall. There’s nothing more to say about her really.

Clint comes out of the kitchen juggling a heap of paper plates and two buckets of chicken from KFC. “You told your parents you were coming here to eat, so we’re gonna eat,” he says, dropping the plates on the beer pong table and then the chicken. People laugh, and so does Clint, although Ruth can tell it’s only sort of funny to him.

“KFC?” Chey asks, wrinkling her nose.

“KFC,” he deadpans, again with the half joke. She smiles and their eye contact lasts a couple seconds longer than Ruth would have liked.

The music stays low while people take turns picking up a breast or thigh or drumstick and eat standing around the living room in different groups. Chey and Ruth sit on the stairs with Average Maggie and she talks politely about her advanced

trigonometry and her desire to play field hockey again after suffering from a sprained ankle.

“I feel like I owe it to the team to just get back out there,” she says, popping a chunk of meat into her mouth.

“You are really something,” Chey says, her eyes on the crowd of boys in the kitchen. There’s a small pile of chicken bones on the table between them, the guys licking their fingers clean of grease while shots are poured. Clint extricates himself from the group and strolls over to the staircase.

“Glad you guys made it,” he says.

“Couldn’t pass up an invitation from Clint Moneymaker,” Chey says. “And also a chance to get dressed up.”

“You all look great,” he says, making eye contact with all three girls.

Average Maggie begins to speak, but Chey talks over her. “Thanks.” She turns to Ruth. “Especially Ruth over here. Your hair is amazing tonight. How did you do it?”

Ruth smothers the need to cringe. She doesn’t want the attention on her, especially if it’s a handout. She remembers that Chey probably is trying to help her out in a very Chey way. “Lots of clips,” she says. Her grandma had helped curl her hair and twisted it into a voluminous updo Ruth never knew her hair was capable of.

“Nice dress, too,” he says, and Ruth nearly chokes on nothing but air. Had he said it? Holy shit, he said it.

Chey looks at Ruth again, her stare saying everything from *this is when you say something back to don’t fuck it up yet, Ruth.*

“Thanks,” is all she says, playing with the strap of her dress.

He smiles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He runs a hand down the front of his white button-down. Ruth has never seen him in anything other than flannel or denim before and she has to keep reminding herself that this is, in fact, the same Clint MoneyMaker that was unloading wood yesterday in her backyard.

When his friend comes to steal him for shots, Chey smiles and then looks at Ruth. “It’s okay,” she says, shrugging. “You’ll get him next time.”

They get drinks, and for once Ruth is happy to chug down the questionable punch. The music gets loud and the dancing starts up when someone switches off the lights in the living room. From then on Ruth can only get an idea of who a person is, with only the kitchen light illuminating the rest of the place. Chey and Ruth dance and for once Ruth really dances, swinging arms and rocking hips and she hates to admit it but it’s because no one can see her all that well.

She loses Chey at some point, but she doesn’t care too much because Awkward Maggie is there to talk to. As the night goes on she starts to worry about where Chey is, if she’s too drunk, or if she’s with Clint.

“I’m actually going to try to get to the dance. I drove, if you wanna come,” Awkward Maggie says. Ruth thinks this is a good option because her sense of stress is growing the longer Chey is gone. She could just get a ride away from this house. She doesn’t really care where she gets dropped off. Awkward Maggie doesn’t drink, ever, so she’s probably the only person to get her out of here anyways.

Ruth goes to retrieve her purse from Chey's car. She knocks on a few closed doors as she walks down the hall, hollering "Chey" only once per door. It's not until she gets to the garage that she finds her. Or more accurately Chey's bare shoulders in the back of the hatchback. She's facing away from the window, her dark curls pressed against the glass, one arm stretched up to grip the grab handle.

Ruth knows that she should turn around and go back inside now, right now before she sees more, but instead she steps toward the car. It's then that a guy's head raises up from between Chey's legs and Ruth makes eye contact with a set of green and blue eyes.

When she was little, Ruth remembers her dad trying to get her to play in little league.

"But they're all boys," she said, wearing a giant orange shirt with the number 17 on the back and *Mechanicsville Gators* on the front.

"There's one other girl, kiddo," he'd said.

She'd played one game and one of the boys knocked her out of the way to catch the ball. It was her ball to catch and she knew she would've caught it. She'd cried after the game, her knees scabbed, and her dad had scooped her up, held her high and said, "You're a champion, kid. You have to know that about yourself, always, kid, always."

She thinks of this now, for some reason, as she darts back down the hall, her stomach rolling. From the alcohol, she tells herself. She won't cry, won't admit that at some point in the night she'd considered Clint her opportunity, not Chey's. But it was never like that at all, she'd blown it up in her head. She tells herself this as she gets in the

car with Average Maggie and lets her play dumb pop songs for the fifteen-minute drive to town. She doesn't want to go to the dance but she doesn't want to go home either. She has Average Maggie drop her at 7-Eleven.

Ruth feels foggy. She speaks to the owner as he smokes, his dense frame leaning against a handicapped parking sign. She doesn't retain any of it and moves inside to pour herself a Slurpee from the shitty machine. She chugs some of it and gets a brain freeze and thinks of Chey and wants to just scream for once and let everyone look at her and wonder what the hell is wrong with that odd girl in a pretty dress that couldn't possibly be hers. She's about to throw out the drink when the glass doors part and her dad walks in.

He's wearing a polo and he scratches at his stubble as he walks to the snack aisle to grab Certs, no doubt. Ruth stands there holding the Slurpee in one hand so tight that the cold makes her fingers numb. It's late, almost nine, so why is he here? She tells herself he worked late. Or maybe his wife actually needed tampons or Band-Aids for once and he noticed and came here. He doesn't look at her as he grabs the mints. She always thought maybe he'd feel some sort of connection, like hey, I made you, you are mine, and he'd just come over when he saw her and apologize for being horrible for all these years. That he'd know what to say.

She starts to run out of the store now, wanting to dissolve into the air so she could be swept away from this grungy parking lot, from Clint and Chey and her dad.

"Hey, Ruth," the owner hollers. "Pay for that." He nods at the Slurpee.

Ruth turns, but her dad is at the register now, his attention on her. She's standing between the sliding doors and they keep trying to shut on her but jerk back when they detect her presence. It's also in this moment she realizes she never got her purse from Chey's car. She walks numbly to the register, just to sit the Slurpee there and run, but her dad is watching her, probably doing math in his head. He has to imagine what she'd look like now, or maybe he doesn't think of her at all.

"Ruth," he says suddenly. "My god."

She's been waiting to hear him say her name and always thought it would sound differently for some reason, like the curve of the R would be inherently familiar to his mouth, the frequency of her name on his lips the cause of the wrinkles around them. She knows this was absurd to consider at all, and it seems even more so now. He said it awkwardly, as if he couldn't get his mouth around the vowel.

The owner watches from behind the counter with uneasy curiosity. Ruth still holds the Slurpee, anger fueling her grip now more than fear. She realizes that he probably knows she's living with her grandma in this very town. That she's going to high school a few streets over, the same high school he went to. That when he gets up for work he knows he has a daughter he abandoned years ago also getting up to brush her hair and stress over outfits and go to the snake pit that is high school. A daughter he decides every day to disregard.

"I'm sorry, who are you?" she says, staring at his face.

He looks at her, either empty of a response or choosing not to have one. She leaves the store now, her footsteps heavy. No one calls after her, not the owner for the

payment or her father for something, anything. He probably never will, she thinks as she throws the Slurpee on the windshield of his station wagon, the red slush fogging the glass immediately and sluicing down the front, under the hood.

She doesn't stop, just keeps walking in the general direction of home. The payphone at the end of the parking lot is ringing, ringing. Maybe it's for her. Maybe it's them calling because she knows she's there. She'll want to apologize, because Clint MoneyMaker was supposed to be her shot, as unreasonable as that is. Maybe it's her grandma calling, asking for her to come home, wanting to say she misses her. That would be nice, she thinks as the ringing stops and she continues to clomp down the sidewalk. That would all be nice.