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Inspired by my experiences living in the radioactive hills of Southern Idaho, this is a collection of stories about the sometimes strange and fabulous ways the natural world and humanity intersect in rural or small-town settings, and how that collision speaks to the interior lives of the characters themselves. In most of these stories something as ordinary as nature itself can become something strange or fantastical. Often the settings or occurrences in the stories bring to the character's attention their own sense of paralysis or alienation.

FREE DRINKS FOR THE LIGER MAN:
STORIES

by

Christopher Swensen

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Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

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

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

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FREE DRINKS FOR THE LIGER MAN

My father needed me to do the shooting. His hands were both too stiff and too shaky for the job. Useless. After I helped him dress, we headed out early morning. The blue hour, dawn poured like an oil slick. We were accustomed to late night jacklighting in the hills, but today was different, today was legal.

My father always needed the hunt more. In the past he would take me, little Eric, to show me the right way to shoot game, the place where heart and lung meet. Me being smacked and pulled hard by the arm in the dark when shots were missed always linger when we go out.

I am grown now, and my father needed me to hunt. His sad insistence to be lost in the hills instead of in his bottles, it was like a junkie hustling for a fix. Most years it was poaching, a jacklight tag in the long nights of winter. This time he had an honest-to-god tag bought with scratch tickets. He needed me to do the shooting.

I drove us in the old pickup through the hills. There was nothing for miles but abandoned ranches too close to the phosphate hills and plant, the vacant Stinker Station, empty and frozen in time. Past the old Woney Peters place, roughhewn cages of rusted iron for a long-ago roadside zoo. "Ligertown" announces the painted sign. Happy memories there for me and my sister, taken by our mother to see the rare "ligers" pacing desperate and wild in dry summer heat. Those were the days before the great escape, when Idaho hills were filled with the ligers and hybrid wolves. We had watched them on

tv, as the local authorities hunted them down, one-by-one, and our father had hooted because he had thought they must be having the time of their lives. I pulled us off the paved road and into the hills, we said nothing, out here the truck's antenna picked up no radio, there was only the occasional sound of tires on cattle grates.

I found a place to park us. I took my rifle; he carried the old tarp. Now retired, my old man could barely walk. His face always seemed stiff. His jaw clenched like he's passing a peach pit. It was the years working in the plant pouring the phosphate slag on the hillside. He had helped make a dozen or more of the black hills seen from anywhere in Walker Springs. There was a time he would take me to watch the phosphate slag be poured. Nauseating smell like a thousand matchsticks struck at once. Hissing hills that grew with each pour.

He told me, "This stuff is used for everything, the roads, our basements, everything. These man-made mountains of slag will be here for a hundred years just like regular hills." The strange radiation of that place—you could feel it moving through you. For years he poured something into the land, and something was poured into him. He could have sued, but then no one can really sue. Not The Company. Not in Walker Springs. He was a company man. So, he had told me many times for many years. A company man. A man of integrity.

We stalked along the border of BLM land. The years of jacklighting the hills had made us experts on the elk and their trails near here or the rez'. The night before we had heard a bull bugling his cows along the way. Today as we tracked them, it was me that was slowing us down. My mind was elsewhere.

“Your legs painted on? Git,” He jeered at me, mouth taut with chew. If things were better I would have left him to hunt for his own damn self, but we live together. He could not live on his retirement alone, so we barely get by together. So, we poach together. As we crested a hill overlooking a watering hole, we saw it.

At first it looked like a mountain lion. No—much too big for that. It walked with a wounded gait. It was almost as big as a horse. I peered at it through the scope of my Remington 30.06. Its fur was a mottled gold and brown in the rising sun, patchy and missing in places. Its mouth, my God, its large mouth—foaming and hung open. The eyes were wide, a look on its face like permanent surprise, like it had trouble taking it all in. It stopped for a moment, resting to drink from a pond. Its tongue lapping up water from its paws. It was sickly but powerful—this strange miracle in the mountains.

“Goddamn, it’s one of those ligers,” my old man sputtered. There were rumors one might still be alive after the incident, there were at least a couple unaccounted for. Unaccounted for years somehow. I could hardly believe one could survive in Idaho so long. I watched for a long time through my scope as it put its nose to the wind, and began to walk through the valley of sage, head hung low.

“Goddamn it, shoot boy.” I knew he was thinking of the bounty, by both The Company and the county. I didn’t want to shoot it. I wanted to watch it.

“Goddamn it fucking shoot it.” He gripped my shoulder tight. I pulled the trigger.

#

We were in *The Walker Times*. The liger splayed on the earth. Its tongue hanging from its mouth. Us over it smiling. We received the bounty of a few thousand dollars.

The next day my old man had disappeared with a chunk of the money I had given him. I knew he would be spending it at the scratch ticket machine in town. I knew he would be thanking God almighty for the large buttons. I was headed to town to get lit with the boys. To celebrate my newfound celebrity as killer of the last Idaho liger.

As I drove to Walker Springs I thought about what if I'd let it go. The thought of it being out there in the hills, that's what I had wanted.

I drove past the black rock hills Mickey, Brandon and I combed as kids with our .22s. Rock chucks, magpies, the McPherson cats, all game for boys with time on their hands. Walker springs around the bend. I drove along the river that cut through our small town and drew in tourists to nature hike or float the river currents. As boys we had told the visiting yuppies that "crazy man" Henderson loved to catch rattlesnakes and liberate them of their tails with a serrated Marine ka-barr before setting them loose again. That got the outta towners walking real careful in their Birkenstocks. Good times.

Now I was driving past the hidden hot springs that feed the river, and only give themselves up to strangers in the winter with their hot breath. The one by bridge next to the old inn, secreted away in springtime, a place for first kisses—Anabelle. I had not talked to her in a while, she used to send me postcards from places she's never been. Each one marked up with lipstick kisses, and red-letter messages, *this could be us—* *Would love to go with ya—don't be a stranger XOXO*. Last time I saw here I walked to the house unannounced. There was a strange truck parked there. Was it for her or one of her roommates? When I walked in a strange man was talking to Annabelle. He wore the overalls of The Company. He smelled like matches. I grabbed a wine bottle off the

kitchen table and smashed it over his head. Annabelle tried to tell me he was just a cousin, as he lay there confused. I just shouted at him. Not really words. Just an awful sound.

I thought for a moment to get her a postcard for our town, to stop at Sam's General Store. One of the infamous Ligers peering from a rack of tacky sunglasses, and psychedelic lighters. *Your never gonna' believe this*, it might say.

I thought better of it. I kept driving.

#

As I pulled up to The Oasis bar, I could see my old man at a bench scratching his lotto tickets. Holding a quarter tightly in his knuckles, spittle at the corners of his mouth. I did not know whether to feel sorry for him or beat his ass. I worried this was what was left of my life, this imprecise rage, this thwarted pity. He had not seen me, I just walked into the bar.

When I entered, the bartender hit a cattle bell. "There he is. The hometown hero. Tonight, free drinks for the liger man." Everyone applauded. People asked to get their picture with me. They asked me *what it was like?*

"I don't know what it was like. Nothing really."

Were you scared?

"Not really."

What were you thinking when you saw it?

"I don't know."

I headed to the table to meet the boys.

“Well, well, well, look who it is,” Mikey tightly gripped my shoulder. “The liger killer, hometown hero.”

“I can’t believe you got it in one shot, man,” Brandon said as he scooted a beer glass in my direction. “That’s some badass shit.”

“Just lucky I guess,” I said as I took a big sip.

“The manliest shit you could possibly do is kill lions,” Brandon explained. “Or maybe an Elephant or a Rhino.”

“Well then, that settles it. To our bro who is finally a real man—for the most part.” Mikey raised a glass with his good hand. He was still giving me shit for not serving, even now, but I was used to it. When the three of us had barely graduated high school we all vowed to join the army. I could not pass the physical examination. Heart defect. A gift from The Company hill. My inheritance. I told the boys I had to stay. Had to take care of the old man. They almost believed me. I could have then got a job at The Company, instead, I spent years doing odd jobs. There’s always demand in Walker Springs for maintenance, fixing windows, painting and drywall, whatever.

When they got back from “over there” Mikey was more inclined to drink and find excuses to fight strangers at the bars. Mostly yuppies or hipsters. His prosthetic hook, He refused to talk about it, except to sarcastically make pirate noises. Brandon never talked about what happened, but now he blinked hard, like it took twice the effort.

When Mikey got to laying into to me Brandon always came in with some snide remark. Like he was evening the score. He bumped his elbow against Mikey’s prosthetic.

“Hey what’s a pirate’s favorite letter? You think it’s the sea but it’s the arrrrrh,”

Brandon said with a laugh while he lit a cigarette.

Mikey pointed to the door.

“Look who it is. It’s the handless man.”

The handless man, a local that would sometimes appear in the bar or on the street. We never really spoke to him, but in this moment, we watched him talk up a pair of out-of-town girls as he held his drink to his chest, his arms crossed.

“Maybe he lost em’ serving. Don’t be dicks about it, guys,” I said.

“No way. Nubs are too smooth, and besides according to my girl he’s lived here forever, and he always had been like that,” Mikey said. He pointed with the cigarette in his good hand for emphasis.

“Oh shit, he’s a phosphate baby or some shit then, right?” Brandon said as he was pouring himself a new glass from the pitcher. “I’m surprised we don’t got more of ‘em you know?”

“You would know all about that wouldn’t you, Eric,” Mikey said as he bumped my arm with his. “Your old man still as shaky as a dog pissing razorblades?”

“I wonder how he puts on and takes off his pants?” Brandon was laughing as he posed the question in the handless man’s direction.

“Easy. Velcro fly. Easy to pull it apart. Or some other kind of special thing, but I wonder why he never wears a prosthetic. The plot deepens,” Mikey said as he took another long drag.

“I know how,” I said, “He wears suspenders and when he needs to, he slips out of ‘em, and puts the nubs in his pockets and shoves,”

“Bullshit,” Mikey laughed. “But I would pay good money to see that. We should ask him.”

“Can’t. Once I almost beat handless man’s ass,” Brandon said, draining a glass. We both looked at him in amazement. “I didn’t actually fight him, but I wanted too. He gave me shit ‘cause I was talkin’ to this outta town girl, and he told me to be more respectful and I about decked him right there. I had to walk away from that shit.”

Mikey laughed.

“Good thing you didn’t fight a man with no hands. I mean motherfucker doesn’t even wear hooks for god sakes. You beat him and congratulations, you just beat up a cripple. Ridiculous. He beats you and you look like a bitch. It’s a real conundrum.”

“Hey liger man! Nice job!” the handless man called in my direction. Some drinks were sent our way. Mikey and Brandon made dismissive remarks as they watched the handless man wave at us, then dance and flirt with the nearest girls, swaying his hips to the jukebox’s *Best of the 80’s* mix, trying to make seductive faces on a smokey dance floor.

Mikey drained his glass and gave a long sigh. “Fuck this place, I can’t watch this shameful display. Let’s go to the Wagon wheel.” I would have protested but we were already through the door.

#

A full night of drinking in the town’s 3 bars. Mikey was boasting about his plans to go back to the Oasis and fight the first man in sensible shoes. We marched under the buzzing canopy of bar signs and streetlights. Mikey and Brandon were singing half

remembered lyrics from the radio, catcalling the outta' town girls who laughed among themselves and gave us the finger. In the distance I saw my father in the lime green glow of the Scratch ticket machine. Still scratching. I slipped away, mumbling something about cigarettes and taking a piss. Mikey and Brandon stumbled towards the distant thrum of a sloppy cover band, The shouting of women. I slipped away into the dark pathways that followed the river. The cool air felt good on my aching head. I lit a cigarette and leaned against a light pole. I found the coolness of the metal comforting on my head. I leaned into it, and watched the pale insects swarm the air around the light, while I made a futile effort to blow smoke at them.

“Liger killer, what up!” A voice from the dark. The handless man was walking his way from town, he was red faced, and swaying loosely with each step. “Liger, liger liger, liger man, just hangin’ in there? Don’t party too hard,” He laughed.

“Whatever man, fuck off,” I mumbled, cigarette in my mouth. The buzzing of the lamp began to irritate me. “Fucking whatever, hands man.”

The handless man continued up the path, until he was only barely visible. He then stopped and turned towards the river.

“Damn liger man, I got to piss like a mule.”

I just made a jerk off motion towards him with my hands, “Whatever man.”
But then I peered sideways.

The handless man was whistling as he took his nubs and deftly shoved them into his pockets. He pulled his pants all the way down to his ankles and rose with a sigh of relief as he pissed towards the river. I laughed quietly to myself, dropping my cigarette

from my mouth and burning my arm.

“Goddamn it.”

“Careful, liger Man, shit will kill you,” The handless man laughed. He began to sing loudly into the cool air, his voice cracking in the cold. “In the jungle, the mighty jungle the liger sleeps toooonnniighht.” He kept singing, his nubs on his swinging hips. He sang like a crooner to the river. I felt the buzzing in my head rise.

“Hey, shut the fuck up.” The handless man only grew louder.

“AaaaahhhhhWhhheemmmmaaawwwwwaaaa.”

I rushed the handless man hitting him in the back of the head with my fists. The Handless Man raised his arms in a sad attempt to protect himself, his piss spraying in every direction. He tripped over his own pants swearing. As he tried to rise, I kicked him down towards the river, a tangle of limbs lassoed in Levi’s tumbling into the dark. He disappeared over the edge. I heard rustling of bushes, rocks tumbling, splash of water. I looked to the river. I could make out The Handless Man wading to the shore, and a sad waddle up the muddy riverbed, his pale legs still exposed, wet denim clinging to his legs.

“Fuck you, Liger Man. What the fuck?” The handless man reached the shore and looked up to me. “Fuck you forever, liger man. You dick!” He struggled to pull up his pants with the same deftness that removed them. The handless man began walking along the river away from town. I suddenly had wanted to leap into the river and help him out. I wanted to call out, offer him a ride, to apologize. I wanted to say I was sorry that I put him in the river, sorry that it had been funny he was born this way, sorry that he was probably just another sad phosphate baby, sorry that just looking at him, and hearing him

had made me sick, had made me want to throw him into the water again and hold him there. I just stood there.

Soon the handless man was too far away to be seen or heard. I went down to the river's edge and sat on a rock with my face in my hands. I cried out into the dark. Not really words, Just a sound.

BLACK LICORICE

Richard is driving home for the funeral. The only good news he brings with him is a 2-years sober token. It feels cold and heavy in his pocket. He pulls into the gravel driveway of the old house. It looks the exactly how he remembers it. The green paint coming off in flakes on both the house and porch so that you could see the old wood underneath that filled the bodies of him and his brother with splinters in the summertime. It was a bit of a ways from town and nestled amongst the old barley fields, but close enough to an old Union Pacific cargo line that passing trains could shake the whole house.

His mother Tammy comes out the front screen door. She looks frailer than he remembers. When his dad died, she had found new strength and energy. It was a better time. now she reminds him of before, a look of tired resignation, a feeling that lately was familiar to him. They embrace awkwardly on the lawn.

“You don’t look like you’re eating enough Richard,” she tells him.

“Long drive and not enough sleep,” he says.

They go into the house. The walls are still haunted with the old water and nicotine stains they swore as kids were faces. The old element heated radiators that knocked with warmth in the winter. How many times had dad whooped them because Richard and Joey loved to turn up the thermostat?

“You can stay in Joey’s room I suppose,” she says, “Just have to change the sheets, I barely have touched anything.”

“I will be fine with the old couch,” Richard tells her.

He puts his bag in the old familiar room. There was Joey’s bed still unkempt. Piles of old unread Tom Clancy books and dirt bike magazines, issues of *Soldier of Fortune*.

Tammy comes in, “I couldn’t touch a thing, I thought you could help me box up his stuff or if you want anything...” She has instinctively walked in and taken one of Joey’s baseball caps of its hook. She holds it close to herself in her hands.

“Of course, mom.”

#

His earliest memories are in those rooms of that house. It used to just be Richard being woken up by the loud freighting noises of the passing trains and his father with his biker friends partying in the living room. The Door’s “Mojo Rising” playing so loudly he thought something was going to kick down my door drag him into the night. He remembers tearfully walking into the smokey living room, being given a taste of beer with a laugh and rub of the head. He remembers that bitter taste that sticks with him even as his mom lays him back to rest.

To Richard his dad always seemed so fully formed, like he was born into his overalls from the company plant. He always smells like matches except on the weekend.

Then he had that familiar scent of booze that Richard smells as he's carried by his proud father. He drinks every day after work and sometimes his moods can be good. On the good days their dad takes both him and his younger brother Joey to the old gravel pit. There he tries to induct the brothers into his man's world of guns and dirt bikes. They plink away with .22s at old cans with his cheering and adulation while their mother sunbathes on a beach towel reading old books and smoking cigarettes, occasionally looking on with concern.

But there had been times when their dad had a temper and would be set off unpredictably with terrible fury. He whoops them for playing with the thermostat. Whoops them for being loud during the Sunday afternoon movie, whoops them for fighting over toys, whoops them because as stupid boys they love to throw rocks and sticks for their dog Bear to fetch on their lawn. "This makes it harder to mow, wastes my time," dad says. He pulls them crying from the closet they hide in and tells them for every stick and rock he finds they get whooped on. Afterwards they sit together sniffing in the quiet and shame of beaten and punished boys. Tammy would try to stealthily cheer them up with otter pops. As he gets older, Richard sometimes resents her for not doing more for them. Not leaving with them to go someplace far away. But he knows she was scared too. The muffled shouting through the walls of their room. The blows that make everything momentarily shake and then there is quiet. They all felt dad walked with heavy steps, because they were all listening and hoping this would be one of the good days.

The morning of the funeral Tammy is cleaning in the kitchen.

“Mom it can wait,” Richard pleads.

“I know, it’s just I keep putting it off, and I need something, anything to do right now,” She says as she puts down a kitchen rag. She is bracing herself up against the kitchen counter. She stands there quietly for a moment and then finally she breaks and is crying. Richard embraces her.

“It’s so fucking stupid,” she says, he has never heard her talk this this before. “To go out like his father.”

“I know mom, I know,” he says, and he feels soon he will break too. “We need to be at the funeral home by 10, but take your time getting ready.”

Richard drives Tammy to the funeral home in his truck. The funeral home’s artificial veneer looks like a dollhouse. It’s the same one they went to as kids when their dad died drunk driving his Harley into oncoming traffic. He vaguely remembers the starched formal cloths they wore. The way he was told by his mom its ok to cry, but he just watched as they quietly lowered the casket into the earth.

They go in through the front and Richard is supporting his mom like she is a much older woman; their steps are heavier the closer they get. Inside are a lot of familiar faces from around town. Richard can easily recognize Joey’s high school friends, the generous losers and outcast of the class of ’04. They are the ones wearing dark beanies that match their suit jackets. Ties in the wrong sizes like kids in traffic court. He sees

Sandy, she is there out of respect for his mom who she knows, but she pretends not to see Richard. She has her hand tightly wound around the arm of a man he does not know. While his mom talks with some work acquaintances Richard is greeted by his old friends Zach, Mikey, and Eric. They were drinking buddies in younger days before Zach and Mikey took off to join the army. They came back with prosthetics and metal throughout their bodies. Often Richard would be out with them till three in the morning listening to them joking about the shrapnel in their bodies that always sets off metal detectors in the courthouse when they are on the way to divorce hearings. Always during stories like this they would laugh and order another round of shots.

“Hey man it’s been too long, sorry ‘bout everything,” Eric says as he embraces Richard.

“Yeah, really sorry man, shits fucking terrible,” Mikey says subtly offering a flask.

“No man, not right now.” Richard says. He does not want to admit to his sobriety. Suddenly in this moment it feels like a thing fragile, quaint and childish.

“Hey, we don’t know them as well, but Joey’s friends are having the wake at the First National,” Eric says. Suddenly the barrage of organ music and Richard is relieved to join his mother.

They approach the closed casket, and Tammy and Richard stand there for a long time. It doesn’t feel real, not being able to see him. His absence now is both obvious and strange. To lose his brother, his baby brother Joey, to drunk driving like it was written in

their blood. Now he was gone. He feels nauseous and heavy. He feels somehow responsible because he did not watch over him. Tammy squeezes his arm and they are silent for a longtime.

#

It is high school, and Richard is a popular freshman and plays on the school basketball team, the Diamondbacks. Joey is a in middle school, and he is still awkward, but smart and takes to science. After school Joey annoys him with his boy's trivia and interests. At dinner Joey tells them about geology, history, or how he learned in school that the liking black licorice is in the genes.

“It's a concept called, something like genetic determinism,” Joey says with that showoff authority of young teens. “Whatever you are is like written in your genes.”

“I don't believe that,” Tammy says. “You can become anything you set your mind to, especially if you study more and spend less time chasing girls,” Tammy says comically menacing Richard with her fork. They all laugh.

#

Early on in high school Richard is interested in history, the stories and grand acts and dramas of it all. For a while he thinks he might go to school for it. But he also loves partying with the team and classmates. grades begin to slip and by senior year he is barely getting by. For him the place to be is in an old duplex rented by the older brother of Zach, who he played basketball with. His brother was in college and lets them all party

at his run-down apartment. They would get blitzed on secreted away beer and cheap whiskey like Old Crow.

“Do you know the Old Crow handshake?” Zach’s older brother would say. “You put your hands together like this and *Squak!*” At nightfall they sit in the back of a rusted white colored Toyota pickup truck that is on blocks in an alley behind the apartment.

To help at home Richard gets a job at the carwash owned by George Katsamedes. He is out in the summer heat scrubbing cars with chemicals that temporarily turn his skin blue. It is the cashier girl, a fellow student named Stacy Cosgrove, who tells him he should use gloves in between scrub downs.

“Some of those chemicals seep into your skin and long-term can really mess you up, and we wouldn’t want anything to happen to the hands of the Diamondback’s star shooter,” she says.

They start dating. One night after Friday’s games instead of partying with the boys Richard and Stacy take her mom’s old Subaru along the winding paths out of town to the hills where Walker Spring’s ends. They lie on the hood looking at the spray of stars and she is telling him about all her big plans for law school. She is convinced she gets good enough grades she can get into her top schools, while he puts his hands to her.

“Why do I like bad boys?” she says with a self-conscious and flirty laugh.

“I am your black licorice,” he says with a laugh.

“What does that mean?” she asks.

“Kiss me and I will explain.”

They kiss and explore each other’s bodies in the dark.

#

For the whole junior and senior years, they are going steady. They talk about going to the same schools for college, but his grades are not so good. His SAT scores mediocre and as a basketball player he begins to suspect he is nowhere near good enough for scholarships. She has her pick of the whole country for schools. He is looking at a future in community college at best. At the end of the summer after he has graduated there is a tearful Farwell. “Goodbye my black licorice,” Stacy tells me him with a kiss. She is leaving to Emory; he is still right here. Richard feels for the first time in his life true profound regret, the kind that makes you heavy and nauseous with something inside.

Richard goes to trade school and becomes a skilled welder. He gets a job at a tank manufacturer; they make everything from large propane and natural gas tanks to water tower frames. Its good money and he gets an apartment in town. It is a shitty part of town near the train yards, but it is his and his alone. At night he gets a strange comfort from the whine and thump of cars being coupled, the sounds of dogs and the breaking of glass bottles. Out there somehow, he sleeps like a baby. Within walking distance of his place is his favorite hangout; The First National bar with its tacky Irish pub trappings and green neon. It’s there he spends his 21st birthday with his fellow D-backs Mike, Zach, and Eric. He goes to the bar and announces he would like his free shot. When the bartender asks

what he wants the naïve Richard says Old Crow. The formidable middle-aged bartender pours a shot for him and herself.

“You know what I like about you? You’re a cheap a date just like your old man!” she says with a laugh.

#

With the money from his job Richard buys a Honda Rebel. The first time he rides it to the old house Tammy is not amused, she is thinking of their dad going in the wrong lane face first into an oblivion of high beams.

“You don’t need to worry,” he tells her, “Its different with me.”

Meanwhile Joey is struggling in his senior year in school. Mom is insistent Richard be a better role model, that he looks out for baby Joey, and spend more time if he is going to be in town. He no longer holds the same interest in science. He spends most his days playing video games. On the weekends him and his stoner friends are spending time at the same duplex Richard did. Sometimes he drags Joey to his apartment to sober him up, before dragging him back to mom. He is concerned for his baby brother, but then didn’t he turn out just fine? And wasn’t Joey clearly the brains of the two?

But when Joey does graduate, he is still living at home with mom and working shitty jobs like pizza delivery. Tammy tells him she doesn’t mind because it’s easier to keep an eye on him, he is after all the baby of the family.

Richard ultimately convinces the right people at his job that they should give his brother work as front security. They are convinced not just because he one of their best welders, but because despite the fact that there are plenty of veterans around town none of them can consistently pass a drug test or background check the way his brother can. Joey begrudgingly accepts and puts off smoking with his friends because he wants to get tammy off his back.

“Besides, I can always make up the difference and drink on the weekends,” Joey tells Richard with a laugh.

For a while at least, things are good. Richard keeps his head down with his good union job, and his brother works the graveyards at the front gate where he tells his brother “it’s easy, just don’t let people take the copper out the walls on the weekdays is all there is to it.”

On his 21st birthday Richard takes Joey to the first national to get him drunk. A fun bonding experience. Another round of Old Crow, now family tradition. They are thrown out at closing time, and Richard is strangely proud to induct his little brother into his adult’s world of staggering home in the morning hours down familiar streets with a head that is dizzy with the night.

It was around that time Richard met Sandy. She is working as front desk at one of the hot spring spas on the south side of town. After work she always drinks at the First National just like him. She is charming in an earthy kind of way. They bond over a mutual love of jack and coke and lonely smokey rooms on Friday nights in “charming”

drive through towns like their own. He impresses her with his knowledge of old films, motorcycles, and genetic predisposition to black licorice. When she learns he is a skilled welder and metal worker she is very interested. She tells him about her side hustle, her big plans for the future. She sells lawn ornament and rustic decorations online through her business The Rusted Rooster. After some parting shots Richard takes her for a ride on his bike to her place and she shows him her collection in the front yard of her little shabby house. At first in the dark it looks like junk, a typical scrap heap. When she turns on the lights at the front of her house, he can see a certain charm to it; metal cut outs in the shape of bigfoot, old wagon wheels and painted and tie dye oxen skulls mounted on racks. He is impressed with it.

Richard and Sandy are happy a brief time together. He begins helping her on her lawn sculptures. In the shop next to her little house, he teaches her how to weld and they create a dazzling array of lawn sculptures; metal roses made from copper and steel, brightly colored pinwheels, and ornamental weathercocks painted silver and gold. when night falls, they make love smelling of flux and ash. It is the closest he has come to a normal domestic life.

But the drinking gets worse the only thing keeping Richard's head above water is the job. It becomes clear to Sandy he has no intention of slowing down. They fight often. Soon he no longer makes time to help with her ornament business. It is a Thursday night and he is already a few shots in when he goes to her house. She confronts him on the porch about no longer keeping his word. No longer working with her on the thing that brought them together in the first place.

Richard feels something well up inside him. He grabs her wrist, she looks at him with shock, a fearful kind of pleading.

“let me go,” with an exasperated gasp. For a moment he almost strikes her, but he feels sick. He lets her go with a push. She is shouting something he cannot understand, his ears are ringing. He picks up one of chairs on her porch, old sturdy thing with metal frame, and throw it through her front window. She is crying now. He walks into the lawn and is kicking and throwing and tipping over every ornament he gets his hands on. But the welds are good, in his impotent rage he only breaks the fence around her yard when an ornate weathervane comes down in a clatter of steel and concrete sidewalk. He struggles to start his bike while she is crying on the porch. He rides away with his shame and rage.

The next day he tries to call her, but she does not answer. He goes to her place, but she is not there. He asks around the First National and all their other hangouts, but he can tell by the pity or feigned disinterest that they are lying on her behalf. He finally truly realizes and accepts that she is afraid of him, and she is right. He realizes what has been lost to him. There it is again, that feeling, nauseous and heavy.

It is the first time Richard stops drinking. In his apartment he takes every bottle and opens them. They are stuffed together in the sink, slender necks facing downward. Is it really as simple as that? these bottles to blame for his fuck ups? It's the thing that makes the most sense in the now. This grand gesture.

He starts going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. They meet in the same gymnasium he remembers playing his first games of basketball in elementary. Him and a small group of strangers talk awkwardly about bad coffee and stale donuts before they sit in a circle and share stories like this one. It takes everything in him not to snicker when they talk about higher powers. It's all too funny to him, these strangers trying to save each other with their failures. Yet he keeps going for a few months. The irony is not lost on him that he is being asked to turn his back on the best and most memorable times of his life. To face down what remains of it sober and serious without those familiar neon lit faces that make living worth the doing.

It's a lonely time, his brother is still the wild child he wanted him to be in younger days. He could see all his old high school hangouts through the windows of The First National as he passes on his way home. could hear the familiar shouts of small-town women and comforting racket of bad local bands. And after all, had he not been a "productive drunk" most days, keeping his job and making good money? Wasn't he better company to coworkers and friends? Wasn't it a shared love of whiskey that had gotten him Sandy in the first place? He convinces himself he is who he is supposed to be, it's just his temper that he needs to watch. After 3 months of sobriety, he walks into the smoky warm light of the First National, where his friends greet him kindly: *Where you been man? It's been too long.*

But there are those long nights alone at the bar looking into its polished mirror and seeing his father's face looking back. One night after hitting it hard he leaves on his motorcycle. He drives along the rural and rocky roads as quickly as he dares to go. He

sees the Union Pacific train making its way with blaring horn. He is racing it to a ringing crossing nearby. He can see a bored engineer's face lit up in the engine. He is racing it to the crossing. He guns it and tries lean into a turn, but the bike does not have enough purchase on the gravel. He comes flying off as bikes skids on the gravel road parallel to the tracks a good distance. When he gets up his arm feels strange and numb. He walks to the light of his bike's headlamp. He picks up the bike and struggles for a long time starting it. Finally, it hums to life and he drives home.

When he wakes up the pain in his arm is excruciating. He drives himself to the hospital and learns he has a fracture in the bone. He is given a cast and sent home. He takes time of work and tells his mom over the phone what has happened. In the afternoon he is smoking on his porch, trying to ignore the itch in the cast or his splitting headache when his brother stops by with a six pack. "Sounds like it's your turn to disappoint mom," Joey says with a laugh

They sit on the steps and look at Richard's bike, scratched to hell on one side, and horribly dented at its gas tank.

"Seriously though, what the fuck happened?" Joey says. Richard thinks for a long time what to say.

#

Richard decides he needs to get away from home and the let the strangeness of another place wash over. He finds maintenance work at a shipyard in San Diego working on cargo haulers. Getting away from home is as good as getting away from himself.

One last blowout with his brother before he leaves leave town to his new job. Richard and Joey go to the old gravel pit. It is late summer. They shoot cans and bottles with dad's old guns till it gets too dark. The flares from the stacks of the old plant in the distance reflect in the pond that formed at the pit's basin. They sit at the water's edge and share a six pack of Rolling Rock.

"Why did you give up on your science dreams?" Richard asks. Joey looks out at the water

"You know how it is man, when your young the world is all possibilities, but then you get to know yourself."

"I don't understand," Richard says.

"It's like black licorice man, I just wasn't made for that shit." A moment of silence "But we are trying, that's what matters right?"

"I don't believe all the stuff, 'bout it being written inside of us." Richard says. They quietly peer out onto the water, the rippling reflections of radio tower beacons.

"Why didn't you go to college, for history and all that?" Joey asks. Richard doesn't have an answer, not one he was willing to say. Joey throws his bottle into the pond and opens another one from the six-pack. They sit in quiet for a while watching the reflections in the pond.

"Do you think we are like dad, the way we turned out?" Joey asks. He is picking away at the label on his bottle.

“Think about the way he treated mom and us? Would you ever do things like that?” Richard says.

“No. course not.”

“See then, we are nothing like dad, not where it really counts.”

“Then why is it whenever we hang out, we are always drinking?”

“Shit,” Richard says, “What else is there to do around here?” He tosses his bottle into the pond.

#

When he leaves home for the job in San Diego, he settles into a small apartment downtown, close to the bay. It was expensive and small, but he preferred it that way. Its loud at night but the noise helps him sleep. He joined another group. They met in the basement of an old catholic church called St. Anthony's. unfamiliar faces under an unfamiliar ceiling, but it was the same stories, the same failed and broken inevitabilities. At night he walks alone downtown past the drunk kids and tourist, and it takes everything in him not to knock hats from their heads and start pointless fights. On nights like that he sits on his tiny porch and smokes cigarettes and watches the cargo ships bellow out into the darkness. He puts his mind to his work and hobbies like repairing and studying a small boat engine he buys from a scrapyard. He covers the carpet of his living room in blue tarp and puts the engine on cinder blocks. On his days off he works at it with oily fingers and tools trying to make sense of its parts and function. At night he dreams of

putting the engine on a small boat and following those cargo ships into the wide open and unfamiliar dark.

For a while there is a kind of quiet and lonely peace in his life in San Diego. At the meetings he meets a woman named Katie, they bond over mutual snickers and faces during all the higher power talk. They have coffee and he makes her laugh with stories about the antics of him and the old friends back home. He makes her laugh with his dorky trivia about black licorice. She takes him to meet her 8-year-old kid Travis. On the weekends they go for long drives along the beaches of Carlsbad and while 8-year-old Travis eagerly chases small crabs, they talk about the whys and how of their sobriety while they gently throw rocks into the churning waves. He learns about her ex who treated her and Travis in a way that's all too familiar. That's why she needs sobriety. That's why she needs sober people in their lives. Soon he gets his 2-years sober token. It feels heavy and cold in his pocket. It says *Know thy self*.

It's around that time when Richard gets the phone call. It is filled with police talk euphemisms like *Incident* and *intoxicated*. He learns his baby brother Joey is gone.

After the funeral Richard and his mom come home. It is dark and they rest for a moment on the porch talking about the old days. Before going in for the night she squeezes Richard's shoulder. He tells her he will go to bed shortly. He sits out there for a long time listening to the familiar sounds of trains crawling through the darkness towards him. He grabs the bottle of Jameson from under Joey's bed. He takes it to the porch and throws it. He expects the gratifying sound of glass shattering. It lands with a glassy but

hallow blow. Acknowledgment it's still out there in the dark. He sits and watches the distant train crawl towards the old house. In the distance He sees another approaching light. Its Joey's approaching wake; the boys packed like sardines into an old blue chevy. He thinks how easy it should be saying no, to face the rest of the night sober. He thinks about everything that has been lost to him; but also, those sad desperate stories in church basements. He thinks about the impotent grand gestures and black licorice. He knows there's a little fight left in him tonight. The train is roaring past now shaking everything and he sees the gleam of the bottle in the grass. Richard goes onto the lawn and picks it up. Its dewy and feels heavy and substantive in his hands. The truck roars to a stop in a cloud of gravel and dirt. The boys see him shielding his eyes, bottle in hand. He cannot hear them, but Richard knows they are calling his name. The night takes its course.

ZOOCHOSIS

Ligers in the hills. Police were hunting the big cats one by one. They had not scattered to the wind but had remained close by Carl's Jungle Kings Emporium. They were savagely gaunt. Bellies stuck to spines. Ribs wearing loosely the thin fur. Natty manes to adorn sad sloping faces.

#

Sarah began the hungover drive to the Dutchy's to meet her mom. Her idea. The radio of the old Chevy truck throbbed and ached with earnest tunes of the 80's. She lit a cigarette; she had quit cold turkey almost one year ago, but given the circumstance she felt obligated to relapse. The Bengals admonished the world to walk Egyptian and the inconsiderate sun shined on from a shroud of clouds. She tried not to think about the pain in her head. She tried not to think about her job of the Coffee Hut with all the shiny machines, and always disappointed faces. She wanted in that moment to only to think of her father. Found in his old car with his oxygen tank miles from town. None could say what it was he was doing out there, but she knew. She knew why it was he had used his last moment driving in the dark, wheezing out his last breaths.

They used to go to the Zoo often when she was a little girl. They would sit on a bench and watch the predators pace back and forth. The Walker Springs Zoo was less than stellar before being shut down. Eventually they would no longer be able to keep the underfed animals in rusted old cages; animals that paced oddly and bobbed their heads to

a strange unheard rhythm. The zoo would shut down. The ligers, the prize of the zoo, would go to a low-quality eccentric who kept them on his land. He christened their new home Carl's Jungle Kings Emporium. He kept them in smaller cages. He fed them boiled pork steak.

Before that though Sarah and her father would eat vanilla ice-cream and take in the Walker Springs Zoo in all its dilapidated Idaho glory. Her father would look at her and say, "Do these animals really look happy to you, in these cages?"

"I don't know." She said biting into the moist ice cream cone.

"One of these days you and I should break them all out. Then that bear over there can have all the picnic baskets he wants."

"Picnic baskets? Aren't you supposed to be a scientist?" she chomped into more cone and smiled with her gapped teeth.

"Next you will be telling me bears don't wear ties."

#

She arrived at Dutchy's she saw her mother there in a wide brimmed black hat and sunglasses, looking like some femme fatale from the silver screen. She wondered in times past how it was a ponytail having hippy dad with a PhD in biology had married a woman who acted and dressed like she was Grace Kelly for invisible cameras. Sarah took a perverse pleasure at meeting her at this greasy spoon joint, even though she knew she would hate it. She had not seen her mother, Marcy, since the funeral this time last year. She had wanted her mother to be sadder somehow on that day. She had remembered how when they had lowered him in the ground her mother had simply held her and said "Sorry

kiddo.” So, when Marcy suggested a brief meetup while she had time in her now jet setting lifestyle, Sarah had suggested Dutchy’s. Even Marcy could not say no to such sentimental gestures.

Dutchy’s featured a sign in front of it of a smiling cow offering up on a plate one of its own with a sesame seed bun. Sarah and her father would always have a good laugh about that creepy sign, with its Disney cannibal charms. They would come here in decreasing intervals before his final diagnosis— Sarah put out her cigarette in the parking lot as her mother looked on with practiced judgement. “I thought you quit,” Marcy said after they settled down in a booth.

“Guess not,” Sarah said sipping her black coffee. Her mother looked at her own coffee with suspicion and scooted it away.

“You know your father would call me out of the blue, and you know what he would say?”

Sarah looked with interest, “Dad would call you?”

“Oh yes, and he would tell me he’s not happy. Not happy with his job. At the time I just told him he would work through it. Your father was a good man, just a little immature. I sometimes think, I know it’s terrible, but sometimes I think it was partially his mindset that made him sick.”

“Mom please.”

“Sorry, that was insensitive, it’s just, the body has a way of knowing. But yes, he would call me before he got really bad, and tell me all the ways he felt things had come *unaligned* as he called it.”

“Oh,” Sarah said nothing more while she sipped more coffee.

“Don’t be that way, He didn’t call you because he wanted to put on a brave face, I’m sure.” There was the familiar awkward silence for a long while, untouched toast, neglected plastic jellies, and staring out of the diner windows. “Still, it’s a crying shame. I should have been more supportive; I should have told him take some vitamin E before it got as bad as it had.”

Marcy was to leave for the east coast to continue research for her book. She had recently hit it big with her Salem witch themed paranormal romance starring a conflicted but passionate Cotton Mather. In the novel the brave puritan battled werewolves, demons, evil witches, and all the other terrors of *The Invisible World*; *The New York Times* called it a *triumph of sexually charged thrills*.

In the parking lot of the diner Marcy produced a gift bag from her car and handed it to Sarah. Inside was a plushy puritan peering angrily with large button like eyes. It was a stuffed Cotton Mather. Sarah looked at Marcy as if pleading for explanation.

“We are talking movie rights; this is a prototype of merchandise. You really should come out east some time, and we can go to the eventual movie premiere together.”

“Yeah, cool.” Sarah awkwardly held the plushy.

“Oh, Kiddo I am so sorry.” Suddenly there was an ancient sensation of familial affection. Marcy reached her arms around Sarah and gripping her began to squeeze lightly in small, controlled intervals. Their sunglasses collided as Marcy tried to

intersperse kisses on Sarah's cheeks in a mix up of affectionate gestures. Sarah was at first shocked, then just pat her mother on the back.

"I am fine, really."

#

Sarah drove to her boyfriend's place thinking of why things had turned out the way they had. She had heard strange reports of how it had happened. The car tore through the rural backroads plowing through an old cattle fence. Him found in his car by befuddled ranchers. A man dead. Her father Jim.

He had been a Grateful Dead obsessive who explained to 12-year-old Sarah that it was normal for Jerry to get a couple notes wrong on purpose, "to make sure the audience is awake," he would claim. "When you find that moment, that's when you're the real deal." He fell in love with an elegant lady who dressed like Cher. They hooked up over "Hell in a Bucket," and found Marcy had become pregnant a while later. He was just finishing up his PhD in biology, research promised good money, but it wasn't having a baby money, and she was coming soon.

He ultimately took a job with the Spudtown Frozen Food factory as Quality Assurance, in Pocatello, Idaho. There he made sure none of "The Many Wonderful Spudtown Products" gave "Happy Consumers" "Highly Poisonous Botulism." It was dull corporate work, but it paid extremely well, and they could raise their daughter somewhere safe. Time went on, Jim and Marcy split up, and Sarah left the nest as it were. Now Jim had fell into an unescapable routine. But had he been so unhappy? There had been no evidence on their few last outings and conversations together. When he got sick,

they spent as much time together as possible playing board games and going to Dutchy's, even if he could only watch her eat. She ultimately wondered why he had not said anything about what he had intended his last night alive. It did not take a genius to know what this once militant animals' rights activist had wanted in that neck of the woods where there are only old ranches, and Carl's Jungle Kings Emporium.

Sarah herself remembered the last time they ate at *Dutchy's*. There were the pleasantries, the *how's it goings*, and nostalgic trips down memory lane. They talked about the Walker Springs Zoo, the ice cream cones and watching the bears and ligers. He would then just look out the diner window and say with a smile "We should have broke them out before they closed it, should have set them all free." She would smile too, that was just dad being whimsical. When she told him, what had happened to the young ligers in he just gave a shake of his head. Were his eyes glistening in that moment, or was that dishonest memory?

#

Before her father's death she was obsessed recently with a French film he had shown her as a girl. In it was carried out the obligatory melodrama; faces are slapped, names are called out, romances made and broken. After a scene like such would play out a scientist would dryly explain how all before mentioned behaviors matched that of rats. At one point he placed a rat in a metal box, he filled that box with electric current. At first the rat would scurry and climb till it realized there was only inescapable metal walls humming with cruelty. The rat would simply collapse, staring out with beady eyes at

nothing from its home of high voltage rut. The French scientist explained the rat always surrenders in these circumstances.

#

Sarah's roommates lived in an old duplex. The roommates had self-identified as Anarchists. Living with people who all had bartender jobs with under the table money and living in mild controlled squalor had a sort of vicarious appeal to her. The house also had two pit bulls, whose political leanings were yet undetermined, but had very nearly destroyed every bit of furniture. Most of the white walls in the house had been drawn on with colored chalk. There were giant green grasshoppers and large mushrooms sweeping across the bases of the rooms now. In the living room a half thought out mural of forty-two iconology and visual Rasta-spiritual shibboleths. In the middle, Michelangelo's God, on visit from the *Sistine*, reaching out with his divine fingers to a half interested hairy red ape.

One half gnawed chair was currently occupied by Andy, who lazily was strumming an acoustic guitar while staring at the white ceiling. As Sarah entered, Andy looked over and saw Sarah's chest, and something else, a glaring set of black puritan eyes. She was holding the Mather doll in one hand, in another, would you look at that, a twelve pack of beer. "What is that thing? It's freaking me out," he said of the newly acquainted puritan.

"You better not be high right now, you guys promised you would wait for me." Sarah threw the Mather doll to the dogs, they sniffed cautiously before they set to God's work.

“Is that Sarah?” called Franklin from the kitchen, “did she bring beer?”

“Hell yeah,” The other roommate, Mike, was already chugging away.

Franklin entered the room bearing vegetarian delights of rice and beans with buttered asparagus for everyone.

Sarah took a place on the couch with its thoroughly chewed cushions. She lit a cigarette and began chugging one of the beers, she lay back puffing smoke into the air. Andy laid back in his chair.

“I said I wanted to get high tonight and I meant it.” Sarah produced a plastic bag of shrooms from a pocket of her denim coat. “Boom, bitches.”

They settled on the couch at first to watch as many b-horror movies as they could, but soon that lost interest. They slid like jelly to the shag carpet and stared up at the white ceiling. The texture of the ceiling almost boiled like a strange ocean of milk, the shag carpet caressed goosed skin, every sad song they played over the stereo made them feel like they would die.

The vibe brought her to tears; she was thinking about the stories she had heard about underfed ligers in hot cages on a rich man’s land.

“Hey guys you hear about that private zoo that weird guy has those big cats in?”

“The whole world is a zoo,” Andy said, almost with a straight face.

“All zoos are bullshit man.” Mike was examining his hands with newfound interest as he said this, his fingers suddenly reminded him of cage bars, “No fuck that place.”

“My point is...” Sarah trying to steer the less than sober symposium her way,
“Somebody should sneak onto his land and break them out.”

“That would be the tits,” Mike was taking further interest in his fingernails.

“I’m saying we could do it,” Sarah blew smoke from a cigarette into the air and marveled at the coiling of the smoke. She imagined breaking those cats out, setting them loose into the misty hills of local folklore. She imagined for generations they would talk of Wild Idaho Ligers, savaging hunters, and roaring obstinately at the world of man. She knew it was childish fantasy, yet she couldn’t shake it, it lived inside her now.

“You would like to break them out E.L.F. style, I forgot how hardcore you could be,” Franklin was laughing as he said this. Sarah sat up, and suddenly felt like a giant, the shag carpet like a forest swaying in the wind. She felt something akin to invincible.

“No am serious, lets fucking do it.”

#

The night was an inky blur. They had drunk up their fill of wild ambition and went off into the night dressed like goodwill ninjas. Franklin’s driving swerved much less than expected. This impressed all his passengers as they precariously hung onto the sides of the truck’s bed, hooting, and hollering the whole way.

There was certainly a moment they reached the electric fence perimeter. They must have cut through the fence because they were in. There were glittering eyes in the night, rumbling from insatiable throats. Franklin had bolt cutters, unless of course they bent the bars and broke the locks with their hands, their blood felt game for anything. They roared off in the truck triumphantly, shouting the whole way. There had to have

been a moment she pulled the bandanna from her mouth and took in the eager and cool air as she greeted the kaleidoscope of stars with wind in her hair.

#

They woke up in the house like scattered debris, among the shredded and chewed Cotton, thrashed furniture, and now almost equally blacked out ambitions. Sarah raised herself from the shag carpet with crumbs of chips in her hair. Clinging to her clothes were dried leaves, grass, and mud. *Oh Shit, That's Right!* The night came back like drunken jigsaw; the corners first, there it is... *The Ligers of course! ...Christ!?* The others awakened slowly. Each one greeted the morning with redundant mystery; *What in the ever-living fuck happened? What's on my clothes?* Sarah snapped her fingers gesturing to the television in the house. "Turn that on, local news!" Dehydrated they watched the glowing screen with neanderthal faces.

The headline read: *Jungle Kings Released.* Before a smile made it anywhere near Sarah's face there were new reports. cops in sunglasses bearing rifles into the dry hills. The anchors announced the situation was deemed too dangerous for animal control. Police were hunting the big cats one by one. They had not scattered to the wind but had remained close by private zoo. They stood by not looking like the fearsome archetypes that leap and roar through the mind; the beasts were savagely gaunt. Bellies stuck to spines. Ribs were wearing loosely the thin fur, with natty manes to adorn drooling faces. They were standing together as they fell one by one. The only remaining one did not stand stoically among the swaying dry grass, to roar in fierce and futile rebellion. The last

one looked on with agape mouth and amber eyes of confusion. Sarah watched as they killed it.

THE INSECT YEARS

It was humiliating when the antennae sprouted. They were nubby and sore at first. Wild, impetuous, and flailing in the early days, with a mind of their own. Then weeks later they rose, springy and obstinate against her best wishes. Liz would spend hours looking in the bathroom mirror, moaning at her surreal plight, this Kafkaesque embarrassment. She was far too ashamed to see a doctor, and besides her insurance was terrible. Liz had certainly heard about such rare transfigurations against all reason or logic. She was entering her Insect years.

Her first instinct was to conceal her metamorphosis with viciously aggressive fashion. Every morning her antennae gently concealed beneath a stylish beret, or a feminine and sleek fedora. She was a hat person now. No big deal.

She was becoming more sensitive to light. She took to dark sunglasses at all hours, night or day, or even indoors. Her body's most egregious betrayals yet to come. At night she began to notice her torso would glow, so that she looked standing naked in front of her wall mirror like an obscene nightlight. She took to wearing heavy coats and scarves everywhere she went.

She was beginning to feel an ever-present synesthesia. Her paintings, from when she had been ambitious in her art, tasted to her eyes like something naïve and bitter. She had thrown them all out, jammed angrily into her apartment's dumpster without ceremony one night, sending a dozen screeching feral cats into the inky dark.

She felt in her back strange twitching. Wings that sprouted, brittle, rough to the touch like sandpaper, folded to her body. She was terrified of them, and did not dare expand or stretch them out, feeling in such a gesture a final acquiescence to unwanted transfiguration. They remained tightly pressed to her back beneath heavy layers of fashionable compensation.

She thanked God for her library job. Loud noises and crowds of people had become something of a *bête noir* for her. She found solace in the relative quiet of stacking shelves in the dark corners of the city library. Sometimes she would be complimented by patrons at the front desk for her keen fashion sensibilities. “You look just like some kind of French intellectual,” she had been told more than once.

“Thanks,” she would shyly say stamping books. She had to be careful not to blush, when she did, she gave off an eerie, otherworldly glow.

Once, while pulling books from the return bin the hairs on her arms had brushed up against each other, a cricket song rang out throughout the front area of the city library. The front desk staff looked to each other with wild confusion and excitement. “Great, are we going to have to have this place fumigated?”

The final betrayal of her transformation was to make her one joy, her job, into agony. She had begun to feel a strange urge to lick the pages of books. She began to fantasize about tearing away whole pages and stuffing them in her mouth, manically engorging herself on some paperback somewhere secreted away in the dark political science section. She kept these urges down. Liz knew if she was caught licking the pages of an Oxford English Dictionary, or nibbling the edges of a Carson McCullers, or Albert

Camus she would never live it down. She began an impressive collection of books for her enjoyment in the privacy of her own home. She was told by more than one bookstore owner she must be a scholar, and so stylish too! Again, she suppressed chemical reactions that would try to pierce the veil of her heavy makeup. Did her beret mysteriously flutter just now? A trick of the light.

Her home was beginning to resemble a library of sorts. Was she partially some species of silverfish? If so, her single mother had certainly not mentioned anything.

Slowly over the course of a couple of years she adjusted to this lonely life, returning every night in her bundle of heavy cloths to a dark apartment filled with stacks of ravaged, nibbled books. Sitting alone in her apartment with its hoarder sensibilities she would often feel in those moments, as midnight crept up, an unrelenting loneliness that shot through her like electricity. Since her changes she had not so much as dared let anyone touch her. She had not seen her old friends either, how could she explain her condition, her way of dressing and being? Suddenly there would be a strange urge to catapult herself out into the night. For what?

Sometimes she had gone out into town in her full regalia. She had felt like an outsider peering into common night life, like a fashion savvy astronaut observing alien lifeforms on the down low. She observed tipsy karaoke and sloppy drunks falling over each other in heaps of laughter in smoky dives with a transcendental awe normally reserved for birdwatchers. The loose lipped intoxicated would pass her on the street gently muttering the verses of "Sunglasses at Night." She spent nights like that looking sadly at herself in various bar mirrors, finishing off an appletini, (she only liked sweet

drinks now), trying not to be transfixed by the neon beer signs, or hanging Christmas lights of sports bar affectation. On those nights she always came home aching with something intangible and cruel. After a good cry she would dream of finding herself someplace mossy and dark. Someplace soft and damp, surrounded by the short-lived glow bugs of the warm summer nights from her youth. She remembered being with her mother, capturing them in a glass jar to be her nightlight. As she slowly fell asleep, she would watch the light of the glow bugs slowly dance and fade.

In true desperation she eventually turned to online dating.

There were of course others like her. She met Steven on “Buzzer,” a sort of Tinder for those of the insect persuasion. They met up at Entomology, a trendy new city bar for people like themselves. It was kept damp with an impressive battery of humidifiers. It’s decor manic; thick darkness punctuated by hanging lamp bulbs. Multi-color neon light fixtures zig zagging throughout the whole building. Her and her date shared a fishbowl, curly novelty straws sprouting out of a drink garnished with a lone tiny umbrella.

He wasn’t exactly her type. He was oddly rotund and short. But he was self-deprecating and funny. He said he was a writer. He wrote copy for websites selling swords. He was an expert on pitching items to man children with flourishes such as *unleash your inner Musashi Miyamoto with the Crimson Dragon Bushido Blade with churning sea motif tsuba and real ray-skin handle*. He would say they were better off buying houseplants and cooking stuff, but they all wanted WWI trench knives and sleek black ninja throwing stars.

“It’s embarrassing, but it’s a living I guess.”

“That’s really cool,” she would politely lie, because at least he was kind and easy to talk to. He said he was an A-1 listener, with a smile.

“Go off, queen.” He would laugh lighting her cigarette for her. “The way you look, I feel like Humphrey Bogart or some shit.” She would smile and strike a pose with her cigarette, something like Elizabeth Taylor. They both loved old films. Him *Vertigo*, her, *Night of the Hunter*.

“You know how to whistle don’t ya?” she said with a smirk in between drags of her minty menthol cigarette. She had not felt this sexy in years.

He regaled her with stories of renaissance fair marketing trips, occasionally stopping to readjust his flat cap, which she immediately understood was to hide his own pair of those humiliating, rebellious appendages.

“That’s a really cool hat,” he told her with a shy smile, gently nudging her beret. They were not exactly each other’s type, but when the conversation lulled, they both happily observed, with hypnotic obsession, the neon light fixtures throughout the bar that buzzed in the dark with sanguine electric mystery. Their hands met awkwardly. Then their lips.

She took him to her place. At first, she was embarrassed at her stacks of mauled books, but he gently picked at one of their frayed edges and only laughed. “I totally get it. Let’s just say I have a lot of houseplants.”

There first-time love making had been suitably awkward. Because of her glow Liz had insisted on wearing a heavy sweater to keep an intimate dark close at hand. Steven

did not mind this, as he had plenty of hang ups about his rotund body, being as he was part ladybug. They lay together mostly satisfied.

#

They spent a lot of time together with his friends at Entomology. There was Margo, who was quiet, demure, and would always compliment Liz on her fashion, but if they sat together, she would rub up against Liz's heavy cloths or start to subtly try to nibble on her hair. Liz would always have to brush her away politely and suggest they like, uh, play darts or something.

"Ok," Margo would say in a breathy sing song kind of way. Margo loved to talk to nobody in particular, as if addressing the cigarette smoke in the air. She would happily announce she loves cats, knitting, and leaping multiple stories into the air to get the tastiest leaves. She would giggle at some unheard joke and happily sip her drink through a straw, swaying to some unheard music.

There was Thomas, a rhino beetle of a man. He was boisterous, always hugged for a moment too long, and played pool all night hitting the balls a little too hard. He had been kicked out of most bars for this, but the condition of the tables at Entomology was so bad that a laissez faire attitude prevailed, though occasionally a patron had to be removed from the tables, it was a habit of the insect drunks to stare at the beer branded table lights with bewildered glee.

Things had been good at first. Nights with this ragtag gang. Nights with Steven too; sometimes intimate, sometimes not, but plenty of watching of old films that they both loved. She knew it must have been something adjacent to love at the very least; he

did not seem to mind if, as they sat on the couch, she snuck a bite or two of Eudora Welty, or Joyce Carol Oats halfway through *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

Liz soon found an addiction to karaoke. Every Monday night at Entomology she would be belting out some Alanis Morsette (*Jagged Little Pill* era) while her friends cheered her on. Margo would mumble almost indecipherably the lyrics to “Fly Me to The Moon,” only getting into it the very end, reaching inhuman notes in the final verse that would alarm dogs three city blocks away. Steven performed old hits like Biz Markie’s “Just a Friend” perfectly from memory. Thomas never sang himself, but in solidarity howled wildly at everyone else’s performances and slammed the tables in some loud strange, hooting, ecstatic joy.

In these moments Liz felt that she had found a place of belonging. Routine set in, something to look forward to despite her transformations, her increasing sensitivity to light and sound now made more bearable.

One-night things had taken on a contentious note. Steven was performing a perfectly serviceable “1999,” by Prince and the Revolution but there had been some strange heckling from a corner table in the dark. Voyeurs of the non-insect type, baseball cap wearing bearded men, in a conspiracy of snickers. They occasionally interrupted loudly the festivities with inappropriate howling about the need for a giant fly swatter, or spray. Entomology didn’t get many visitors like this, but there was often a table off in the back where people like this might smirk and laugh and say something coy about fumigation. Halfway through “1999” such remarks made their way to the mirrored stage. Steven stumbled and nervously fidgeted as the heckles came on, about how he was “an

absolute unit, the size of the lad,” or “Momma’s perfectly round bug boy.” The charm of a Prince classic drained, going from jovial, to seemingly eternal embarrassment. When Steven sat down Liz rubbed his back empathetically, “Fucking Bastards.”

Steven only looked into the reflection in his beer glass. Something distorted, familiar but surreally strange, grotesque in its contours.

Soon things had slowed down. Steven was spending less time at Entomology with Liz and what were now her friends. While politely brushing away Margo she would chat with him on her phone, he explained nicely that he was working late, too tired for anything else. “Don’t come over,” he would admonish, “I’m a real mess.”

When they did find time to be together, he was mostly on his phone. Texting with who? He was constantly asking Liz to go with him someplace else. Someplace other than Entomology.

“Why? That’s our place, we all love it,” she would say. “It’s karaoke night.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he would brush her off. “Ok, fine.”

One night when Steven had said he could not come out, she was walking drunkenly through the streets with Margo and Thomas. They had wanted to get out for a change and take in summer humidity; to drunkenly take in the sights of the streetlamps turning on in the dusk, like they were Japanese sakura trees in autumn. They saw then some kind of commotion in front of The Braying Mule Pub. Someone rotund shoved over. A woman shrieking, “Get away you freak.” Two men kicking the figure. Liz recognized at once it was Steven. Thomas leaped into the fray tossing away the men like dolls. They fled into the night. Steven lay on his back, trying desperately to roll himself

on to his side, to stand up. Thomas and Margo pulled him to his feet. Steven fought them off with an impotent shout.

“Enough guys. I don’t need your help.”

Liz tried to take his arm but he pulled away. In the distance a shout from a passing car. Indistinct hollering from an open bar door. A train rumbling through the night. A badly secreted away snuffle from Steven as he began to walk towards the lights of downtown.

“Steven.” Liz tried to take his arm.

He pulled away and looked at Liz, Margo, and Thomas. He shook his head and walked away, ignoring Liz who called his name one last time.

#

Margo and Thomas were not so eager to go out anymore. Margo preferred to stay in her home, after one day she had been caught walking around in daylight by a gaggle of eight-year-old boys, who as if in a trance, pulled off one of her four arms. Liz had sent flowers and visited. Margo only spoke through the crack in her door. “Oh, hi Liz, I am sleepy ok?” through the crack Liz could see in the dark of Margo’s apartment, great mounds of dirt.

“Are you sure you’re ok Margo?”

“I’m sleepy, thanks, bye, bye.”

That was that.

If Margo wouldn’t go out, then neither would Steven. Liz was back where she had started months ago, with her collections of masticated books, that old feeling cutting

through her. She was back to going out alone. On karaoke night at Entomology, she stood alone on the stage wailing Stevie Nicks or Eurhythmics to a mostly empty and smoky darkness. As a song would end, she would stand on stage a moment too long, looking into the mesmerizing stage lights, that buzzed right through her. A lone clap from the dark, a voice telling her “it’s someone else’s turn, are you ok?”

#

Late that night at The Braying Mule Pub she took a seat and ordered a whisky and coke and stared for a while at her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Drink after drink while she looked mournfully at the ridiculous hat and scarf, the heavy coat covering her glow. She stared at the bar lights, trying to lose herself in U2’s “With or Without You.”

A charming man sat next her and ordered a whisky on the rocks. He raised the glass at her, “what are we celebrating?” he asked her. He was handsome, older, and she liked his eyes. She raised her glass.

“To a new life and possibilities.” She said with a woozy smile. They cheered and clinked glasses.

He was witty and made her laugh. When she felt she was losing herself she pulled out a cigarette, which he lit with a promptly produced zippo. She felt in that moment a kind of momentary relief. They laughed and played, getting a half dozen drinks deeper as the smoky night crawled along.

“I like your cute hat, very stylish.” He tipsily took the hat from her head and put it on his own while making a cheeky face. She gasped. Two antennae raising from her head twitching and gesticulating nervously.

The man put her hat gently on the bar. He turned his back to her and picked up his whisky and downed it all in one go. His hand was shaking. He got up and left.

#

She ran home. She burst into her apartment. Her furnishings, the pictures of her time with her insect friends, of her time with Steven, it all seemed so ridiculous. She quietly walked to her bathroom and turned on the light. She just looked at herself. She looked at those damn antennae. She grabbed a pair of scissors. For a long time she held the blades near the offending appendages. With a shriek she closed the blades on her left Antenna. The pain was dizzying and frightened her. Green ichor flowed steadily from the wound. The abandoned organ twitched and contracted in the sink like a finger. She passed out on the cool tiles.

She woke up lightheaded, dizzy. The blood had mostly dried on her face, but still the wound bled slowly. She felt anxious and afraid. She wandered, tripping over herself, to the door of her apartment. Something had made her want to be outside. She practically slammed into her door, struggling to open it with her weakened and trembling hands. She ran out into the street. She was running, her eyes drawn to the streetlamps. She felt hot. She pulled off all her cloths. She could feel the small hairs of her body catching the air, trying to hold onto it. For the first time her wings extended, they took on a rainbow sheen in the moonlit air. Almost her entire body was luminous. Her feet left the ground. She was buzzing down the street now. Her eyes were drawn to the windows of every house she passed. She saw, perhaps hallucinating, happy families and couples on couches, faces a glow in their television sets. She saw parties, smiling faces, lovers stealing kisses in

archways or on living room couches. She felt bitter sweetness at these visions, her heart envious and tender. She rose up higher.

The homes all looked like dollhouses now, playthings. She could not help but laugh, though she felt cold, and occasionally had to wipe blood from her eyes. She was over downtown. She saw Margo and Thomas swaying drunk through the streets. They stumbled along, arms around each other. They were looking up and cheering her on. She smiled and called out, but her voice was raspy and weak. She rose higher now. She looked like a drunken star tripping its way through the night sky. She became transfixed on the moon. It was luminous and buzzing with something— or was that her own head? She climbed as high as she could into the sky. She began to feel cold, her hands and feet pins and needles. Her whole-body trembling, and her wings burned with strain, then gave over to numbness. She was so high up she could no longer tell the difference between city lights and the stars. She had become even more dizzy and lightheaded. She felt her wings giving out. She looked around the horizon nervously. She suddenly was falling, towards the ground, in and out of consciousness. She glimpsed for a moment lights moving across the ground— car headlights? She headed in the direction of the lights hoping it was town.

She passed out once more tumbling out of the sky.

She landed somewhere wet and soft. The smell of foliage woke her. She was surrounded by dancing lights—glow bugs? She could not tell if they were real or visions. She could barely move, all strength leaving her body, though it still gently lit the surrounding ferns and mossy earth. She watched now the glow bugs gather around her,

drawn to her. She was for a moment scared of her fading strength, then she felt a bitter sweetness. Soon she felt nothing, her only awareness, watching the lights in the darkness that danced, flickered, and faded.

WOLVES THAT KNOW YOU BY NAME

—Listen. It was the old country, before you were born. In those days it was not uncommon for strange unexplainable things to happen. A man breaks a loaf of bread and finds in it a nose. A woman walking home is frightened from the road by strange riders with the heads of stags. Boys in a terrible prank nail a girl's beloved lamb's head to a tree in the woods; it is found singing and crying for hours before its final rest

In those days I still served our Mother the Holy Church. I had not yet left to the life of a layman. I had not yet seen the three black miracles that defrocked me in mind and spirit. It would have been easier to become an atheist, but I had that terrible epiphany; The turned throne of Almighty God.

It was the Old Country in a small village now forgotten, (I cannot even find it on modern maps, but in those days it was not so uncommon for people to disappear, or even whole villages). I was called to a small house to give final confession to a delirious old woman named Kasia. She was a woman beloved by the people. Her last days I heard tell had been cause for alarm before she fell to a fever and illness that would no doubt be her end. When she first fell ill, she was often found at the edge of the woods surrounding their village. She would wander about with a lantern and her departed husband's pistol, calling out to the dark. She had to be coaxed in her madness by her children and neighbors back home. It went on like this until she was too weak to leave even her bed.

She was an odd one. Found as a girl in a blizzard the same night as the massacre and burning of the Lebedinsky estate, of which her own father had been a victim. Efforts were of course made to learn the truth of that night, but she was silent for years. What terrors had occurred that night had also robbed her off her voice. It was thus assumed brigands or some other mischief and for years afterward night watches were more common— themselves leading to all sorts of strange talk of will-o-wisps and strange riders and voices emerging from the great tree line that separates the village from the rest of the provinces.

When it was assumed Kasia would not last much longer under fever I was called to the house to give last confession. It was Anya Lebedinsky and her husband who were able to generously spare me a carriage and its driver. It was a cold but still night and you could see and hear all that stirred between the briars and brambles of the woods. It was, as I looked out bundled in vestments and my overcoat, a night filled with wild things peering through the dark places. When I reached Kasia's cottage her children waited anxiously as I entered her small room. She lay in her bed muttering strange things as I took her hand and asked her if she was ready for final confession.

"Father there is no absolution for me," she said with some of her remaining strength.

"There is always forgiveness child," I said holding her hand.

"The night of the Lebedinsky fire, my role, I cannot be forgiven." I would be lying if I said that my curiosity was not piqued.

“All that is said here is between God and us,” I told her. “What happened that night my child?”

She proceeded to tell me this tale thusly.

#

Her father Alexi, the hunter and carpenter, lived on the outskirts of Lebedinsky estate. In those days it was not unheard of for wolves and bears to be a problem on the many pathways around the village at night. Most of the year Alexi helped at the estate with carpentry and small repairs. In the winter Alexi was tasked with hunting the various beasts, keeping them at bay. Kasia lived with him and knew him after the death of her dear mother to be mostly a drunken terror at night. He would drink and rant about what he thought he was owed by the estate, by God, and life itself, as he threw finished bottles into the fireplace. Meanwhile a frightened Kasia would prepare them supper or sit at their small table mending his hunting cloaks. Some nights he would run out of drink and send her out to the estate with some of their dear departed mothers' jewelry to pawn to the manservant Botik in return for stolen bottles of brandy. It was perhaps this that she most resented about the man. So, on this night little Kasia with just her small cloak, whittling knife, a stolen box of matches, and a pearl earring, set out on his debauched errand. She was planning perhaps to instead make for herself a small camp away from her father, to enjoy a private fire and hide her mother's earring. Many nights she did just that, sitting by a small fire and cursing his name. But this was a night that threatened to storm so she made her way along the long dark path from their cottage to the estate. All the

while walking through the snow, she lit matches and imagined in their little fires a warm place away from her father. Grand dreams that were quick and golden but smelling of sulfur.

As one of these visions died, she saw in on the path a shape sleek and large, eyes shining a wild yellow and gold. The wolf caused her to gasp and fall backwards.

“Do not be afraid little one,” said a voice raspy and strange.

She thought to cry out, but the unexpected voice perplexed her even as she froze in terror.

“How is it you can speak?” she said.

“Speaking is easy, because we always listen,” the voice said. As its speaker walked forward, she saw it was a scarred and great white beast. Behind it were more shapes, maybe a dozen or more.

“Stay back!” she cried drawing her small knife.

“You have one knife, we all have many,” the great white beast said as it smiled, its maw of yellow teeth bared. She was surrounded now, a dozen or more great wolves circling her, sniffing the air with powerful snouts, the steam of their great mouths reeking of wild game and quick death. She thought then to pray, she thought to cry out, but what does it matter the hopeless and rejected prayers of lambs caught by lions?

“Do not be afraid little one, you would be but a morsel. What we seek is more,” the great white said. “We know of your father; we have seen how you curse him at night.”

“The Hunter! We hate him,” called a frenzied voice from the pack. “Shooter! Trapper! Poisoner! Killer! Skinner! Tracker! We hate him!”

“What do you want?” Her voice trembled.

“It is easy, little Kasia, we will serve you, worship you even, if only you will help us.” As the great white said this, they were nuzzling her, letting their rumbling throats push against her so that she could feel it in her bones.

“How do you know my name?” she said

“It is easy,” the great white said, “we always are listening. Now listen, to be rid of the hunter when he is full of his strange drink, it will be easy, only you must help us with the door.”

The strange and cruel request stunned her, yet what choice did she have? She knew implicitly that to try to refuse them, to try to run away, they could easily fall upon her. And had it not been her father who sent her out here anyway? Sent her out so that he could drink and pawn away the memory of her mother. And what hope is there for anyone who is known by name to wolves? She felt in her apron the little earring, and tepidly nodded her head.

“Yes, I can help,” she said with a trembling voice.

As she rose, she was suddenly pushed and pulled through the dark by their nipping jaws and powerful bodies. She could scarce see above their mighty forms as they corralled her through the dark with frenzied yelps and growls, till they reached the cottage.

She thought about crying out to her father, that he might save her. But she knew by this time at night he would be sleeping off his drink. He would be helpless against the great multitude that now surrounded her.

“Go now little one,” the great white said with a powerful nudge. She did not think even he should be condemned so, but she was terrified, so she tearfully walked to the door. Looking back, she could see them, pairs of glittering eyes in the dark, a dozen or more.

She opened the door slowly.

“Father—”

She was thrown to the ground by their rushing bodies. They all fell upon him in his bed. He woke with a shout and cries. She could see his torn nightshirt, his familial blood upon their jaws. A terrible sight she could scarce handle. She ran outside as fast as she could in the snow. She knew now that the Lebedinsky estate was her only salvation. She ran as fast as she could but could hear behind her the howls and snarls of the pack, a dozen or more. She could see the lights of the great estate in the distance and she cried out. Something suddenly had her by her cloak. She was pulled backwards into the snow, dragged into the dark woods.

“Where are you headed little Kasia?” The great white said standing above here. They had surrounded her once more.

“Please, what more could you want from me?” she cried out. They mocked her cries with howls.

“You were headed to the big house? No? that is a great idea. A warm place with plenty to eat and drink. Will you help us little Kasia?” She did not fully grasp the gravity of the request, but she only nodded her head. Once again, she was tumbling through the dark, nips at her heels, powerful hairy bodies smelling of blood pushing her forward with unholy speed until she landed on her hands and knees at the great lawn of the estate.

She could see the glow of the great fireplace through the windows, the congregation of shadows, a celebration. She looked back and could see their faces hiding in the hedgerow at the boundary of the great lawn, beckoning her forward. She walked towards the great door. Many nights before she had knocked in the night to trade away her mother’s jewelry for her father’s drink. She thought of all the ways she might warn them. Ask those inside for help. She rapped on the door. Through one of the side windows a maid she knew could be seen. The door opened, just a crack.

“Kasia what are you doing here on a night like this?” the maid Masha said. She could plainly see the tears on Kasia’s face. The fear and cold gripping her.

“My father threw me out, may I please come in, it’s very cold.”

There was a pause, then she opened the door. Kasia expected the worst, but she walked in and the door was quickly closed. Kasia could see out the window their faces looking in. Breath on the glass.

“Let’s warm you up in the kitchen, poor thing,” Masha said as she took her quietly through the great hall to the dark kitchen and let her warm her hands by a small stove. The kitchen was warm, and the sight of the small but judgmental kitchen staff

brought a kind of comfort to her, after having spent so much time in the company of wild things. Masha left her to warm up as she carried out various tasks for the Lord of the manor. She tried to be quiet and blend in as she warmed herself and thought how to tell them what had transpired. She was young enough that anything she could say would sound like a child's foolishness, and old enough to know they would not easily believe her. As she dried her tears and considered saying a small prayer for her father the servant Botik walked into the kitchen. He was the one she often pawned jewelry to on orders of her father. He was the ranking servant, and an obvious petty tyrant.

“Kasia! Little woodland creature, what are you doing here! Lord Lebedinsky is trying to have a nice dinner with the family. We do not need any old peasant skulking the halls for loose cutlery.”

“Please, sir, can I stay here tonight. I have nowhere to go. My father, he was—he was—I have nowhere to go.”

Botik looked to a concerned Masha who shook her head in confusion.

“Look, I can't be stealing away bottles tonight, you will have to come back some other night,” Botik said.

“Please take this, and let me sleep in the kitchen tonight, you will barely notice me,” Kasia said as she took the pearl earring from her apron and held it out to him. Botik took it into his hands and inspected it.

“Well, I can hold onto this for the next time your father needs more drink, but you absolutely cannot stay here tonight. Masha take her out of here.”

Masha led a pleading Kasia to the great hall back towards the front door.

“Please you have to help me...my father was eaten by wolves, and I fear I am next,” she begged.

“Kasia, I am sorry, but I cannot indulge this childish foolishness tonight. If I do not do as Mr. Botik says I could lose my position do you understand?” Kasia in that moment thought to thrash on the ground, to beg and cry, but she had resented the way she had been treated by Mr. Botik, how even now she was disbelieved by Masha. “Now I am sorry Kasia, but will you please leave?” Kasia got up and wiped the tears from her face. She turned to the door. Masha watched dutifully as Kasia went to the door. She opened it slowly, wind and snow gently blew through the threshold.

Masha was about to make some remark about not letting in such a ghastly draft when she was cut off but a great sinewy body leaping over the threshold and through the hall. Masha gave out a confused and shocked sigh as the jaws of a monstrous grey wolf clamped down on her neck, dragging her to the ground and shaking her with terrible strength. Suddenly a torrent of wolfen bodies came pouring through the door. Kasia thought of running through the open door when suddenly the great white stopped her with snapping jaws, herding her in deeper into the estate’s great hall.

“The doors!” he was shouting “The doors! Open all the doors, little morsel!”

To the sight of a dozen or more snarling faces she opened the doors to the dinner hall. They came clamoring in like a raiding army, like the khazars of her books. Shrieks and cries. The clattering and clashing of tipped chairs, broken dishes and tipped crystal

glasses. They fell upon the entire Lebedinsky family in a frenzy. Lord Lebedinsky made a futile effort to get his rifle from the mantel piece, till a half dozen jaws gripped him by the wrists, legs, and shoulder. He struggled like a great old elk, before being felled by the great white's jaws gripping his neck from behind with a sickening crack. Others in the family, like the Lebedinsky sisters tried to hide, crawling beneath the great table, but were pulled out, and they were met with pitiless jaws. Cries and shouts could be heard throughout the great house. Servants ran from room to room, seeking escape as the wolves scattered every which way, cornering maids and manservants who could be heard crying out, slamming doors and hiding. As Kasia tried once more to sneak away in the melee she was cornered by the great white, "All the doors!" he yelled at her "All the doors!"

She led them to the great hall and the kitchen, but the door was locked. "Open!" shouted frenzied voices.

"I can't," she explained through tears, "I need keys!"

"Keys! find Keys!" came frenzied and sanguinary voices moist with recent carnage.

She began searching the nearby fallen. She saw someone she believed was Botik, though his face was a mess of mangled flesh. In his pocket was both her mother's earring and a ring of heavy keys. "Open! Open!" was the chorus of voices as she opened the kitchen. There were shouts and cries of struggle, the sound of a pistol perhaps, then the now familiar sound of the quiet struggle of jaws on necks, fangs on flesh. In this way

they drove her towards every door in the great hall and up the stairs. Often a maid could be heard behind a wooden door, begging for her life, praying to God Almighty. “Open! Open!” the chorus of voices, a dozen or more. The doors she dutifully and tearfully opened, and in each one new horror, more cries for mercy met with pitiless and animalistic hunger.

When the wolves were certain they had killed all in the house they took Kasia to the dining hall. She feared she was next. “The strange drinks!” the great white shouted, “Pour them all so we may drink them! Pour them all!”

As their jaws snapped at her and taunted, she took all the wines and brandies, and she poured them into large bowls taken from the kitchen. She poured and poured as they watched sniffing and licking their chops. They began drinking in a wild frenzy. “More! More!” they would shout, as she served them all. When they all had their fill and were sick with drink, they turned to her and snapped “Dance!” With snapping jaws, they made her dance upon the table while they howled, taunted, fought, and vomited amongst themselves and the savaged dead.

Finally, a drunken tiredness overtook them, and they all gathered around the open mouth of the great fireplace. If Kasia tried to sneak away the great white would snap at her, “Stoke the fire!” he would say groggy with drink. She sat in the corner, sick with fear and watched their heaving bodies by the fireside.

When she was sure they were all truly asleep she snuck one last time to the front door. She saw it wide open. She thought to run straight through it, but something stopped

her. She thought of her own role in the terrible events and filled with a strange determination did not go through the door, but rather shut it slowly. She gently walked into a nearby drawing room. She took one of her matches from her match box and lit it. With the match she ignited a curtain. She watched it go up with a satisfying glow. She ran through the front door, closing it loudly behind her.

She watched from the great lawn as the house slowly went up. Amongst the howls of wind, she could hear their cries as they realized what was happening. They were crying out. Calling her name. Cursing. She ran in the direction of the village. Behind her she heard a crashing sound. She looked back and could see the great white, body filled with glass and covered in burns, limping her way. She prayed as she ran, hearing her voice called out from behind.

She kept running as the voice grew faint, until at least she could hear voices, see lanterns in the distance. Villagers running in the direction of the fire.

This was the unbelievable tale she told me. At first, I was in disbelief, thinking that I had heard the ramblings of someone delirious with fever. Afterwards she spoke her last words, of which I at the time did not understand, though I was stricken by the mad certainty with which they were said. Soon she grew more delirious and unresponsive to my questioning. I gave her last rites and went out of her room to the family. I told them all that could be done has been done. They thanked me. As I left there was a terrible racket. I ran back into the cottage. The family were in her room crying out her name in

confusion. Kasia was not in her bed. Her window had been broken. We all trudged through the snow outside the house with lanterns. There outside her window was a bloody trail leading to the woods. We followed the trail as far as we dared in that winter night, calling her name.

“You better turn back father, it’s a cold night you’re not dressed for it,” my carriage driver said. We looked on with wonder and concern at the night’s events as her sons and daughters went deeper into the wood with lanterns.

FOOLISH FIRES

The Inn was haunted. It used to be a sanitarium. Now it was bed and breakfast whose draw was natural hot springs and cynical stories of the sick and dying. Its old walls would perspire with feverish hot water in the winter. It was a center piece of Walker Springs, a place that used to be a railroad town, a place to pass through. Now Walker Springs was small tourist attraction for those interested in stories of hauntings and Indian massacres. Today was a big day. The people from the *Ghost Hunters* tv show were visiting the Hot Springs Inn Bed and Breakfast. Big tippers supposedly.

At five in the morning Chelsea got a ride from her brother Eric to her shift as a cook and cleaning help. He was groggy from a night of poaching, jacklighting the hills with his father., trying to blind wild things with quick and sudden dazzling death. When she walked in Jason, a high school friend of hers who had weaseled his way into front desk and management, was already at the front desk eagerly awaiting to tell the day's guests stories about the drowned girl Alice. He had already excitedly spent the prior night with the *Ghost Hunters* crew, knocking around the halls with blinding lights. Knocking around the old hallways, and basement. Peeking behind old water heaters and calling out into the dark at Alice. Asking her if she is scared. Asking her if she is in pain.

Chelsea went to the basement to help cook breakfast for the guests with Robert, a 70-year-old Vietnam vet who still worked to live. He told her the same stories he always

did in between batches of pancakes egg dishes from the 60s. He told her about cooking for the Rat Pack in lavish and long-gone Las Vegas hotels. He told her about cigarette penny packs, where Jimmy Hoffa is buried. He told an uninterested Chelsea about flying medivac dust-off mission in Nam to pick up “zombies,” the ones who were dead before they knew it- he told her about cooking for the Rat Pack in lavish hotels.

On her breaks Chelsea smoked cigarettes with the housekeeper Sadie. They talked about *The Ghost Hunters* crew. The cute boom mike intern. They shot the shit about the Inn’s owner and his cheapness that was letting the place fall apart, or about what drunken guests had to be chased out of pools at 3 in the morning. They talked about anything but tomorrow. Before Chelsea went back to the kitchen, they talked the guy who died in number 4 that one night. Cleaning up his room. “It could only be good for business if this place becomes even more haunted, I guess,” Sadie joked.

“I would never haunt a place like this,” Chelsea said putting out her cigarette, “Humiliating.”

While delivering breakfast on trays to the various guests Chelsea could overhear Jason excitedly telling ghost stories to a half-interested family in swim wear. He was gesticulating wildly with his one arm, talking about strange sounds, and slamming doors. He was hamming it up as she passed. She cringed when she heard a rude child in swimming goggles ask how he lost his arm. Jason only nervously laughed. “Oh no, it’s alright, he’s just curious. Let’s just say when I visited as a kid I never listened to my parents.” Humiliating.

On her way back the kitchen Jason tried to get her to corroborate some story about creepy sounds in the night. "Tell 'em Chels, about all the goings ons around here at night," He said gesturing to a half-naked yuppie family who were standing with beach towels in their hands.

"Yeah, real spooky stuff," She said.

At lunch break, Jason visited her to try and shoot the shit with her, still high on the vicarious thrill of proximity to minor television celebrity. At lunch Jason would often come to the kitchen and try desperately to make Chelsea laugh. It was what he had lived for. He would turn the radio to Spanish salsa music and try to dance with her. She would pretend to laugh and tell him "I really needed to get this cleaning done," or "I need to finish these dishes." He would look dejected with childlike exaggeration and then help her. She was not afraid to be cruel to men when they had it coming, but Jason, who she knew had loved her since seventh grade, she pitied the way you might pity a three-legged dog. But she knew and feared every day in that kitchen he was building up the courage to ask her for coffee or dinner, some occasion for her to shoot down. She was relying on his lack and backbone and professionalism as a manager to prevent the inevitable moment of embarrassment. When he would help her with her cleaning in the kitchen, he would ask her about her day in that transparently insincere and cloying way of shy men who have something they want to say, and she would be sure to complain about some guy she had met or wanted to hook up with, or this and that, while Sadie might walk by with handfuls of towels and a knowing smile on her face. She was not frightened of him or even particularly disgusted. And she had after all taken advantage of his past affections to get

this job despite her history of DUIs and court mandated rehab. There was after all a time when she felt she could leave Walker Springs. Before the DUIs, the years of probation. Before her whole life had felt like it was the time after. Now she was lucky to have this job because the Inn and its cheap owner were always desperate, always hiring halfway house junkies and losers.

#

In the middle of the day after work her brother Eric drove Chelsea home in his truck. She was feeling good, flush with the generous tips of the tv crew. Eric pulled up to the to the run-down little house she rented with a chuckle, “Well look who it is, Chels.” It was her on again off again boyfriend Robbie, sitting on the porch. Shaking his head Eric took out some chew and stuffed it his mouth. “You good here?”

“Yeah, I am fine, thanks,” she said, climbing out of the truck.

“Before he leaves make sure there is still coppers in the walls,” Eric said with a laugh as he drove away.

“Hey skater girl, long time no see,” Robbie said as he went to embrace her. They sat together on the porch. Each time she saw him he was slimmer, his hair wilder, his skin paler.

“Robbie what are you doing here?”

“Just thought I would come to town and see what you’re up to,” He said. She knew the real reason he ever came back to Walker Springs was to ask his mother for money. That he would come see her had always felt like a loose consolation prize for youth wasted together.

She should have been angry, but the way he would disappear, disappear to “tour” with his little band and reemerged in town from time to time, she could only envy it. She knew if she left with him as he would often ask, she was not strong enough to survive his varied and seasoned addictions. If she left with him, she was leaving to a junkie’s death-to be found entombed on a couch in a stranger’s dark apartment. A half-starved iguana in a terrarium. A Blu-ray menu on infinite repeat.

“You hungry?”

“Just stopping by, but I didn’t come to mooch, I come bearing gifts,” he said. He pulled a bag of pills from his jeans.

#

They knew cold water extraction has saved their lives. Shirtless he sat at his alchemy of tea filters and Dixie cups at her table. She kissed the back of his neck and wrapped her arms around him and asked him how he has been. He told her about Oregon and Washington. Places so far away they are other planets. He told her to come with him this time, like they used to always talk about as teens. Jump on the train like the crust punks and see the world. The guys (in the band) love you. It is a nice dream. Impossible, bittersweet.

“I got Sprite in the fridge. You drink most of it, I need to cool it with this kind of shit. And let me make you dinner.”

“I’m good,” he said, dripping with his alchemy. Each time he is more distant, harder to grasp. She knows each time he leaves less will come back. Both their lives now are just the time after. They knew college was never in the cards, or money. But when

they graduated, they got serious. There was at least the apartment, the cat, jobs at the old record store and bank. Nights of hash and pills with old friends, an apartment ringing with a cough to get off chorus. The miscarriage— they never talked about it, but whenever they met again for the first time in a long time, it weighed heavy on every word, every conversation. Any talk about the future, the past, lived in its wake, unspoken but ever-present. They survived it, but they were not surviving everything that came after. The addictions, the running in place.

They finished their elixir, he drank most of her share, and laid on the couch intertwining fingers and staring at the ceiling while listening to NOFX and Bad Religion. When she woke up, he was gone, along with most her money.

#

As night fell Chelsea went to The Oasis bar. Whenever she was broke, she could count on some outta towners to buy her a drink or two. She wondered how long that would last. What would happen when she was old? Faded into the background. Faded into the smoke and music. Someone you only can see in the peripheral. The tall dorky boom mic toting intern from the *Ghost Hunters* program walked in and sat next to her.

“Pancake Girl, thanks for breakfast,” he said.

She laughed in a way that showed off her teeth and tongue. She blew smoke into the air and stuck a pose like an old movie star.

“Ya know, I usually make somebody buy me a drink before they get to say that.”

“Say no more.”

They laughed and got a few beers in. The intern, Zach, told her about how he studied film at NYU. How embarrassing this was, this intern shit. How much of a douche his boss was. His boss who entered every haunted hotel or building wearing his tight shirts and shouted after the ghost like he was asking the mysteries of the infinite to fuck around and find out. As they were enjoying each other's company she saw Jason walk in. He awkwardly greeted them both. He tried to act unsurprised they were there. He had heard Chelsea's old flame Robbie was in town it had made him want to drink.

"Hey look who it is, the man with all the ghost stories," Zach said with a slightly tinged air of mocking superiority as Jason took a seat next to Chelsea.

"Yeah, yeah, hope you guys got what you needed. Lot of history in this place," Jason said nodding to Chelsea. "Just ask her, she knows all the stories too. We both go way back, us and this place I mean."

"Something like that I guess, boss," Chelsea said with a subtly mocking deference.

"Oh, so I am *boss* now?" Jason said.

Zach moved to Jason's side of the bar slapping him on the back in a seemingly friendly way, though it startled Jason. "Hey man I gotta ask," a slightly tipsy Zach said, "What happened with the, you know." Zach was gesturing to his own right arm in exaggerated way.

"Oh that," Jason said with an awkward laugh pretending for a moment he didn't know what was being asked by this man that towered over him.

“You can just ignore him boss, he’s just being a drunken dumbass,” Chelsea said in a playful tone. “Stop being rude and buy me another round.” Upon hearing her flirtatious voice Jason felt a familiar kind of disappointment.

“Sorry man didn’t mean to offend, it’s just I heard you talking about it with the guests, like it was its own ghost story,” Zach said offering his hand in some kind of gesture of masculine truce.

Jason just smiled and nodded his head in a thoughtful way, a play at looking mournful and profound. “long time ago is all... but tell you what, buy me a drink and I will tell you.”

Zach ordered shots for all three, they clinked glasses and Jason theatrically toasted “May we always get what we want never what we deserve.” Zach laughed, Chelsea rolled her eyes, she had heard it many times before.

“So then, what’s the deal if I can ask?” Zach said.

“Hey, you know what we should do, we should dance,” Chelsea was trying to say to Zach, but he was determined.

Jason smiled nervously ordering from the bartender another shot, “You know what’s funny man? In high school I was a competitive swimmer. I was set up for scholarships all over the country. Ask Chelsea she knows,” he said in a mockingly accusing way. “nowadays, I can only swim in circles.” Jason laughed a little at his own joke. Chelsea again rolled her eyes as she blew smoke, another of his repertoire.

“Very good man, but seriously,” Zach said.

Jason again took on a theatrical kind of mournfulness. “Well man, so it was a long time ago. I was at this high school party out in the boonies, big bonfire, kegs set up, the whole deal. It’s out there by the river where they say you can see the “water babies,” you know about them right?”

“Yeah, yeah, the drowned Indian kids, keep going,” a slightly impatient Zach said.

“Well, there was a girl a was really into you see. I wanted to do anything to impress her. But she was really into someone else,” Jason was looking at them both. “anyway, she was clearly falling for some guy at the party, so she was hanging out with this guy and all his crust punk friends, you know the kind of kids that jump onto the trains. Well, I tried to impress her. There was a train passing nearby and inspired by those kids I decided to try to do what they do and jump aboard a train. As the Union Pacific was roaring down the track, I said to them all *watch this*, and just went for it.”

“No shit, Jesus,” Zach said.

“Didn’t quite make it, I guess. I was a little drunk you see, and the gravel was loose around the tracks.”

“Jesus that’s fucked,” Zach said shaking his head, “sorry man.” Chelsea was putting out her cigarette and shaking her head, because she had remembered the trip to town to get him to a hospital. The wetness of his sweater. Him crying out for his mother. Scared animal in the dark.

“I love this song; we should dance dumbass,” Chelsea said gripping Zach’s arm and flirtatiously leading him away from the bar.

“Thanks for telling man, that’s hell of a story,” Zach said as he let himself be led towards a clear spot by an old jukebox and the scratched and worn pool tables.

Jason nursed a beer as he awkwardly watched them dance, he saw Chelsea’s smile and laughter, the movements of her body, and felt the same as he did the night he watched her fall for Robbie in the glow of that pallet fire. Falling for the punk kid and his emo covers on a stolen guitar. There dancing grew more intimate with time and Jason had to turn his back, only to be confronted with himself in the bar’s mirrors, and them in the smoky background, swaying gently now to a slower song. She had whispered something in his ear, and soon they were on their way out. Jason eagerly followed them out into the parking lot. A gentle snow was falling. A quiet dark night.

“Hey Chels!” he said as they were laughing and walking away. She turned around.

“What’s up boss?” she said in a voice that was nonchalant, but he thought maybe he saw something in her eyes. A sadness. He tried to think of what it was he had wanted to tell her, all those years ago. What he should say now. What words could be like a hook in the heart.

“Just remember, we got work tomorrow, early.”

A look like relief from her, then a chuckle. “Ok boss,” She said with a mock salute, stamping her foot for comical effect.

“Don’t worry chief I will take good care of her,” Zach said. They walked away together laughing.

#

He convinced her to come with him and “Steal” the company car, his bosses’ Denali, while he slept at the Inn. They took the SUV for a joy ride. They stopped at a gas station near the Inn, and he bought more cigarettes, couple of forties of Olde English, and some condoms. They drove to the place she said they used to go when she was younger. “Where you can see the whole town from a hill, and off in the distance.”

They parked where the small town was shimmering silver and gold, and snow slowly gathered on the windshield. They listened to the radio and smoked his bosses’ stash of weed. They made out and slipped into the backseat to fuck. It felt good in that moment to be desired for her flesh and blood. To feel and breathe the hot breath of burning with living.

Afterwards they laid sticky in the leather seats smoking what is left of the weed.

“You really believe in ghosts?” She said with an exaggerated exhale and cough.

“I don’t really believe in anything like that- except maybe dybbuks. They are kind of like ghost, but they only possess someone. Not like they take you over or shit like that, but they get inside you, and haunt you. Make you live like a ghost, cursed.”

“Deep shit, man,” She said sarcastically, pulling on her top.

“Hey, you asked.”

She asked him to drive her home. She watched the city lights and thought about what he had said.

#

Sloppy drunk, Jason went to Chelsea’s house and waited outside a long time, for what, he did not know. He picked up a rock from the ground and threw it through her

bedroom window. He ran away at the sound of the shatter but slipped and face planted on the hard ice. He rolled around in his parka, cursing at first, then he just laid on his back staring at the snow falling gently on his face. Even drunk and numb its coolness was soothing. He lost track of time till Chelsea was standing over him, arms stuffed into the pockets of her denim jacket. She did not seem as angry as he would have thought.

“What the absolute fuck Jason?”

“Sorry, I didn’t think you were home.”

She helped him up. They sat on her porch in in silence. In the distance the freight train passing through, the shouts of drunk outta towners. He sniffled like a boy.

“I will pay for your window.”

“Fuckin A you will.” She lit a cigarette, took a drag, and passed it to him. He coughed because he did not really smoke.

“Why don’t you like me Chelsea?” She took back the cigarette and took a long drag. She did not want to say it was because she could only ever feel sorry for him. That he was more a boy than a man. Still that boy from that night. Trying to leap and grab at something impossible. Still crying out. He was haunted like her.

“Jason...I thought we were over this shit. It’s not your fault. It’s this place, it’s the Inn.” She put out the cigarette in the snow. “It’s this place, this town, this inn. The stupid ghost stories. I just can’t stand any of it anymore. When I was younger, I knew I would do anything to leave. but shit happens. Now this place, it’s like purgatory or some shit. Like we are just another sad story for outta towners passing through.”

They sat like that for a while.

He got up and walked down the snowy street into the dark.

#

The old gas station on the way to the Hot Springs Inn. Teens were smoking cigarettes in the alley next door. They could only be seen by the cherry of their cigarettes. Neophytes of a wasted life.

“Hey man, can you buy us some tall boys, we got money,” they asked him from the dark.

Jason bought the tall boys, and a 40 of Olde English for himself. Also, a cheap plastic lighter with a catholic icon. Our lady of Mount Carmel.

“Hey, don’t forget your change,” the clerk said.

#

Chelsea headed to the home where she grew up, before mother left. Her house had suddenly become a little too drafty for her. She walked along the long curving rural road. Headlights of passing cars swerved and honked as she gave them the finger. She reached the old run-down home in the hills where her brother Eric and her father lived together. They were stringing up something in the garage with the game hitch. An elk with no rack. She wanted to tell them you’re not supposed to shoot the females. But they of course had been poaching again.

“Hey, Chels, what are you doing? You walk here?” Eric hugging her, realizing she was swimming in the night.

“Idiot, that’s how ya git killed,” Her dad said in his stiff voice.

“Glad to see you too dad. I was hoping I could stay here tonight. Let’s just say my heat is off for the night.”

He just shrugged indifferently.

“Of course, Chels, you’re just in time, wild venison is on the menu,” Eric said.

Eric took a knife from his father’s stiff hands. He tapped the large belly of the Elk. She had seen them dress and gut game before, but God, not like this. He opened her like a coat. It came slipping out. It was slick with its mother. Limbs gangly and tangled, steaming in the cold. It did not move except for its chest. *Jesus Fucking Christ it’s still alive.* It opened one eye. Its breath was like a long sigh. She saw herself in the well of that eye. It grew silent and still. She felt nauseous and lightheaded.

#

Jason went into the inn’s kitchen, well past midnight, when the *Ghost Hunters* had previously knocked around. The witching hour they had called it. He went into the laundry room. He piled all the towels and lost and found swimsuits into a hamper with eager purpose. The hamper he struggled with his good arm to maneuver through the hallways to the large dining room next to the kitchen. He placed the hamper beneath the elegant curtain of a tall window. With the lighter he tried in vain to burn a towel with a lighter. No luck. In the kitchen he grabbed cooking oil and poured it into the hamper. This time it flared up with a satisfying glow. He went upstairs with a flashlight, knocking on all the guests’ doors. “Fire!” he was yelling. Groping senselessly through the smoke, he led them. Through the dark halls they would follow the light. “No need to worry, the way out is over here.”

#

Chelsea woke up on the hot leather of the old family couch. Eric sat next to her with a beer in hand. “You all right? I would offer you something but seems like you already have had a busy night,” He said. She sat up and lit a cigarette. She saw something out one windows. An orange glow, warming to the eyes.

“You see that?” she said rising to her feet.

“Jesus looks like half the town is on fire,” Eric said.

She went outside into the cold. She could see it in the direction of the inn. At first, she walked in its direction. Soon she was running. She got close, she could see the old brick masonry crumbling under a dancing and frenzied inferno. Even at a distance the immense heat of it weighed down on her, she felt it in her chest with every breath. For the first time in a long time, she wondered with frightened exhilaration what would she do tomorrow if everything was ash. This fire, she was burning with it.

End