

WHEELER, ANNA MARIE, M.F.A. *Your Love Is Safe With Me*. (2012)
Directed by Mr. Craig Nova. 87 pp.

This novel follows Rachael, a young, educated woman, as she descends from a stage of unsatisfied existential curiosities into a criminal underworld, where her appetite for disillusion is met with humanity's most crude and instinctual answers to the problem of desire. Drugs, sex, money, and revenge influence Rachael's relationship with her brother, Jesse, a convicted felon, Jose, and a young prostitute, Diamond, as she struggles to define the difference between who she is and what she must do.

The structure of the novel attempts to reflect the consciousness of its narrator, Rachael, as she recalls various episodes from her recent life, which weave in and out of time and space, but together seek to tell her story in the only way Rachael knows how to tell it. Linguistically, the novel seeks to inhabit the mind of its narrator, a frazzled and yet contemplative mind, and to engage the necessary narrative contradictions that define and develop a character.

At the center of the novel is the narrator's desire, a center from which all other conflicts must emanate. Rachael's lyrical journey through her memories seeks to reveal the intense emotional connection between her character and the conflicts she witnesses. In this way, the language of the novel seeks to deny reality as much as to illuminate it, to reveal what it is not as much as what it is, and, for Rachael, what it could be.

YOUR LOVE IS SAFE WITH ME

by

Anna Marie Wheeler

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

BODY

To give a body is to say here is my body, look and see. Arms and legs, like almost every body, and hands and feet, and a belly that is soft and white and pale breasts that lay bare beneath breath and paler hair. Nothing is sacred nor is anything profane.

Once my body was not mine. I did not own it. I did not have the strength to keep it. Me beneath him and he held it. I didn't fight him with it. Just then I had never owned it so I didn't even think to fight for it. Just then when it was his not mine I hardly knew I had it. I think I would have never known it had I not known so much how I could feel it that those things that I could feel were mine forever no matter what became of me.

That moment I was gone. I was not where he was but in another world where what he did was beautiful. He did it to me because he was God's accomplice. I was not flesh. I was spirit. He was not wrong. He had been called upon. The place where I went was white with blue rain that did not fall but hung in the sky, long heaven-reaching streams that did not collide with earth or anything. The rain did not hurt me and the white was not blinding. All around me I could only hear the way that I had chosen to be this naked, and to lay in this bed naked and breathing. The rain

was the sweat that leaked out of him and over me, and the wet wrung out of my eyes and filled my mouth. I spit it out.

I brought it on myself, and nobody needed to tell me that. Everything that came after was only more of what I had coming. But before that, before Dominique and the murder and Diamond, before anything else, there was still that day always there to remind me of what I had wanted, but I had gotten, had begged for even before the begging. Me and that man and what we did that day. I never think about it, except how I had it coming. I asked for it just like this:

My brother Jesse ran a boat off Norriego Point. We called the place where he docked his boat The Fishman's Wharf, because that was the bar that stood up like a lighthouse above where the boats came in. This particular night I sat on the docks below the Wharf dangling my feet so that they hung just above the water, and I watched while the ebb was especially slow just before dusk, before the boats came crashing through it and left their violent wake to wreck the quiet dusk-calm. I was a boat-washer, and so I sat with my pail of blue bleach and waited.

Before I came down to Destin, to that sparkling fisherman's village where the beaches were whiter than the clouds and the water bluer than the sky, I had been going to college in the North. I had been very smart in college and convinced many people of my potential. My professors talked to me about all the things I could do with my life. They saw, of course, what people see when what they want is what's on the surface and nothing underneath. Underneath was where I had hated college and wanted none of it ever again and never again to see their faces. So when Jesse had

said, "Come down to Destin," I imagined the corral reef that he talked about, the amber rock jetties and the blue water even bluer than the sky. Jesse was right. It was beautiful. It sparkled in the sun, every part of it, every road and rooftop and grain of sand that ran for miles so that you couldn't even strain your neck and see a place where it wasn't stunningly beautiful.

"I don't have any money," I had said.

So Jesse said, "Don't worry about it. You can be a waitress, or whatever. I'll get you a job. You can work on the boats."

"On the boats?"

"There's always something to do on the boats. You like to clean? You can clean the boats."

Cleaning the boats wasn't easy. I liked that about it. I liked that it took all your strength and everything else you had. At first you were cool in the evening breeze so you worked in your old shorts and some old t-shirt. You scrubbed the rim around the outside where the guts from the fish had splattered earlier in the day and dried stiff in the sun. By evening the guts were so stiff you had to straddle the stern and reach over with both arms and scour them off with bleach and salt water. Sometimes there were lost hooks hung up in the glue of the fish's guts and you had to be careful not to run your hands into them or catch your foot on a snag. By the time you had scrubbed the hull clean of guts and hooks you were sweating, even in the evening breeze, so you'd take off your shirt and start spraying down the deck. The hose was heavy and the deck got slippery. Soon you were hot all over and your

blood was running so fast all through you and you got down on your hands and knees to scrub the deck floor with your pail of bleach. After you scrubbed it, then you mopped up loose dirt and more loose guts that had cooked and dried in the afternoon sun. You scrubbed the deck and the upper deck if there was one, and then you mopped it all up and sprayed it all down again. By this time you were spraying yourself with the hose, too, and it was heaven, after all that scrubbing and blood running through you, to hold the hose over your head and spray the salt water so it soaked your skin and cooled your bones. Then, after you had cleaned out the cabin and taken out the trash and scrubbed and cleaned out the bucket at the bow where they kept the day's baitfish, and after you had sprayed everything one last time, then the boat was clean and you were done.

It took hours to clean a boat. Two hours at least, sometimes three or four hours, depending on how big it was and what kind of fishing it had done. I cleaned three and sometimes four boats in a night, so that usually it was dawn or almost dawn by the time I sat down to smoke a cigarette. I turned over my pail and sat and smoked and waited for the sun to come. I watched it rise, coming out of an eastern yellow haze and getting bolder until it hung just above the ocean, just bright and bold enough to wake the Gulf of Mexico.

Some nights I came ahead of the boats so that I could watch them come in, and before they came I watched the sea. The sea was an inexhaustible thing. I always thought that it could see me back when I saw it. It's impossible, I think, once so close to it, to ever break free of your love for it. It does something to you- it makes you

want it long after it's gone. The first thing I loved about the ocean was the way it could heal things like bruises and scars. It washed away what was rough and crude. But it could heal inside, too. It could soothe, with its languid, irrevocable breadth of sympathy, being full of things that had died or were still dying. It was good for a broken spirit.

You didn't look out to the sea passively. That was a bad way to be, and the fishermen who had done it for so long accidentally would tell you where long impressionable lingering takes you out on the sea. Still there was a time when I didn't think it mattered, the wind on the water and whatever, watching it without expecting any consequence to come from it. Everything breeds something. That is what the ocean knows.

I came to Destin in late Spring, alongside the seasonal onrush of vacationers. They came every day in droves, and for miles east and west the beaches were overrun with thousands of shiny bodies. All day long they could be heard laughing from their balconies, twenty stories high, and their thousands of hotel windows flickered on and off throughout the night.

I had only imagined this kind of place, a place where beauty was not antique and delicate, a thing to be touched slightly. This place was made of the vibrant kind, a hot beauty that crashed in the waves. You could find it in the bright new dawns and the new pulsing sunsets. In Destin, even the sky was different, and hung lower to the earth, and meant more, somehow. I ached to be full of it and to forget the things that had come before it, all kinds of remembrances I was happy to let go. It

wasn't because I couldn't hold things, but because of the way that things seemed to try to hold me, to keep me down or out of the brightness and loudness. But Destin gave me new desires. It lit me up.

It was an evening in September. I was alone on the dock when a fish-head named Bennie sulked over. Like lots of the fisherboys, Bennie was dark and leathery. He had wild dark hair that he tied back with a dirty and sun-bleached bandanna, and all his body but his thighs was burned gold. Bennie had no business with me except that he knew Jesse from the docks and was always up drinking at the Wharf summer nights after hot long days on the water. He had that wind-beaten face and those violent eyes that had not been told about staring out at the ocean before it was too late.

"What'd'ya got going on?" Bennie said.

"Nothing." I said. "Waiting on the boats."

"I never seen you sitting here waiting on my boat." Bennie was drunk. He must have had a morning run and gotten in early. Either that or his boat hadn't gone. But that was unlikely. The boats always go.

"Well I don't wash your boat," I said.

"You ought to though! You wanna?"

"I'd take the work. Who does it now?"

"Does what?" Bennie said.

"Washes your boat, man. Who washes your boat?"

"Shit. Not me."

"Then who?" I said.

Bennie shifted every time the wind shifted, moving in a way that let you know he needed something. "Some fucking bitch," he said. "That skanky bitch always bringing her kid around."

He was talking about Wendy, a muscled girl who was already unfriendly. Word on the dock was she had a bad habit, and her little girl was mean like a beaten dog.

"Scowly bitch," said Bennie.

"She needs the work. She's got a kid."

"She's trouble, though. I like you better, you know? You're sweeter."

"Watch it," I said. "Jesse won't have that talk."

Bennie laughed a madman's laugh. "I ain't worried about Jesse. He's my greenie. I taught him everything he knows."

Bennie was full of shit. "You didn't," I said. "I know who taught him."

"Who taught him?"

"Andrew taught him. That's why I wash Andrew's boat."

"Fuck Andrew. You need some work or not?"

"No way. I'll get thrown over. I'm not taking any of Wendy's boats."

"I know. She's a scary bitch. What I was gonna say though, was, I got some other work for you, maybe." The wind was blowing and Bennie was shifting, rocking

his torso and his legs over the dock and holding his feet flat over the water, and they went the way the water went, left or right when the breeze blew.

I knew him about as well as I knew anybody in that town, by the way the sun tugged on his skin and tried to get in through his dark, salt-filled pores but couldn't.

"What kind of work? And is it good money?"

"It's good money. It's good money. This buddy of mine and me, you know, we do this thing, for a little extra money. He does it mostly, I mean. Sometimes I just help or whatever."

"What's this thing?" I said.

"It's good money, though," Bennie said, squinting at the sun coming on harder. Any day you could catch a fisherman staring at the sun.

"So, what is it?"

"You just let him take a few pictures. Not a lot, you know. Just about an hour. He'll give you a couple hundred, maybe three hundred dollars."

The sun was coming on harder but the breeze was cooler, the air all around brought in the salt while the moon brought in the tide. Looking South, out toward the open Gulf at that hour, you were looking right into the sun. It was hot and it made the water look hot, but like the wind the water was getting cooler and you knew it. The breeze blew in and went back out before I said anything.

"So you make porn or whatever? On the side?"

"It's nothing real dirty, you know, just some pictures."

"Yeah, I get it." I said. "I'll do it. Where?"

For the first time since he'd sat down Bennie turned his whole torso to look at me. All that time the ocean had had him, but then I had him and his eyes didn't refocus, like they should if you turn to look at something close up after looking out toward something far away.

"Well, it's a buddy of mine," he said. "Works on engines back in Bluepoint Bay."

"Bennie," I said. "Jesse ever hears anything about this and we're both dead. You know that, right? You know that. And I mean I may be dead, but you are fucking brutally dead."

Bennie shrugged a little and he was thinking it over, thinking how it might be a bad idea. I wondered why he thought it was even worth it, the risk of it. But those fisherboys were all just crazy. They were always just out to catch something. Bennie was no better than anybody.

"Nah," he said after he'd finished thinking. "Nah. He'll never know."

Bluepoint Bay was in Sandestin, inland and to the north. In the moonlight the place was eerie and romantic. Beyond the huge iron gates at the entrance was a private yacht club and a row of million-dollar condominiums that sat in shady groves above the golf course. I had to sweet-talk the night attendant to let me in.

The Bay wasn't a place for fishing boats; it was lined with luxury yachts and cruisers, and there was always some gossip in Destin about which celebrities had tied in at Bluepoint. Even the docks seemed elegant, and I half expected to see an

old man, sharply dressed in a butler's suit, maybe, sanding and polishing the planks, one by one until they shone like marble. And the sound of my step when my heel hit the wood sounded somehow faintly like the clink of crystal glasses.

It frightened me, that sound. The white-topped waves stretched to the opposite shoreline, and they seemed to whisper while they rolled, as if to not wake the boats by the shore. It was dark, and there was no one anywhere in sight. I felt a chill, and remembered what I was there for, but I had no shame. The clink of the crystal was the sound of something beautiful, I told myself, and I told myself that if Jesse could have understood what it was I really wanted, I think maybe he wouldn't have wanted to kill anybody, and maybe he would have waved me on. Of course, I was wrong about that. I guess the crystal did mean something, but it wasn't the something I'd hoped was coming. And now that it's over I can't help but think that every time I have walked into despair I have heard my own footsteps taking me there always sounding like the clink of crystal glasses, and I have always been deceived.

So that's how I asked for it from Bennie's buddy. The boats came in that evening and I got out of the way while they came, one by one, pulling in backwards and docking. Hordes rushed the docks, a slew of tourists seasick and sunburned who made big teathy grins in front of the day's catch, freshly dead fish hung up on the racks through their eye sockets. The captain stood with them while a deckhand took pictures. When the crowds came off I went on and scrubbed down the decks long into the night.

CHAPTER II

LOONEY

The way it worked in that underworld, I had already earned my money, and Bennie's buddy knew it as well as anybody. He was holding out, but after everything that had put me there I sure as fuck wasn't giving up at getting dicked by a fat prick on some senator or other's fancy yacht for nothing. He must have taken me for a new girl, or just plain stupid. It was my first time getting shafted like that, but you had to know sooner or later it would happen. In a way, I'd been waiting for it. I wasn't crying when he rolled off of me, only bleeding a little. He'd had a piece in his left hand the whole time, and now that he was done he was fooling with it, clicking and releasing, watching me. I sat up.

"What's your name?" I said.

He was still panting, his bright red forehead dotted with sweat, looking mulish enough to foam at the mouth, and pointing the handgun at my heart. "Get the fuck out of here," he said. He had a deep voice, and dark eyes like everybody who worked the water.

"You have to pay me first," I said.

"Get dressed, now, and get the fuck out."

“Don’t you want your pictures? Bennie said three hundred dollars, for pictures. Are we gonna take them or what?” I heard my voice breaking and betraying me, but there wasn’t much worse he could do to me, and, anyway, if I could act the part, he’d have to figure, especially because it was Bennie who sent me, there was a good chance I knew motherfuckers just as tough and fucking nuts as he was.

Finally he laughed. He was heavy, big arms and a broad chest, with a deep, ugly laugh that rolled inside it. He was ugly as a boar.

“Fine. Get in the shower,” he said. “And put on some fucking lipstick.”

He took pictures of me in the shower. He had a real expensive-looking camera, so I bought that he probably did do the picture-porn gigs. I’d just come at the wrong time, I guessed, or been the wrong type. He took some more in the bed, and on the floor, from the front and from the back.

“Put your ass in the air,” he kept saying. “Spread your knees.” He shot from underneath. The pictures were vile, each one of them a rare distortion of whatever about me had any kind of beauty in it to begin with. “You’re not too bad,” he said at one point, in a slow and luring and scoffing way. It frightened me, the fucked-up way he’d said it. I thought he might sack me again, because he stayed naked, but when the camera was full, he said I could get dressed, and he finally put his own pants back on.

“Little girl,” he said to me. “Are you a daytime whore, too?”

“I’m no time a whore. Just let me get my money and I’ll go.”

“I want you to come back.”

I thought to laugh at him, but thought better of it. “Yeah, maybe. Right now, I’m in a hurry.”

“Why, are you itching? Here, stay a while and I’ll share.” He loaded his pipe with a fat yellow rock, gave it a little heat and handed it to me. “It’s Bennie’s stuff,” he said. “Good shit.”

“Money first. Bennie said three ones.”

I should have known he would have something like a heap of hundred dollar bills under his bed. If I’d known, I’d have thought to maybe poison the bastard and get out of there a lot better. I didn’t know, but I should have. Bennie had too much business to be hooked up with his ugly ass, especially if weren’t worth something. I tell myself I did it for Jose, and because it was for Jose, and not for me, it didn’t really matter. Still, I wish I’d planned on it.

After he’d handed over the bills, I hit his pipe. It was good shit, the rock from Bennie. It always was, because Bennie was a bastard, and made a bad name for himself getting to the good stuff. I’d even heard it said there was a price on his head. This was all just word on the docks, but I said as much to his buddy, who didn’t look up when I said it. He’d stretched himself out on his bunk, put one arm behind his head, and lay the other over his bare torso. He was scratching his big pig belly.

“I want you to come back.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“Well, what’s your name?”

“The fuck you want my name for?”

“If I’m looking for you, motherfucker, I need some name.”

So he wrote down a number and the name “Looney” on an old bar receipt.

“You can ask for me there. I don’t need no more pictures.”

I said, “I know.”

I left before dawn. The marina was just as stunning in the early dark morning, all the decks slick like marble and sparkling. I was good and high for a few minutes, not thinking, but like always it wore off fast. Soon I felt that terrible ache in my stomach and realized I was crying.

CHAPTER III

SOMPIT

Jose had been calling collect three times a day from the jail, but I didn't take his calls, or Jesse would see it on the phone bill and know I'd been lying to him. I had been lying to Jesse for a long time, and the worst of the guilt always came from the things I simply didn't say. I didn't say to Jesse that I was there the night Jose was arrested, when the cops crept up on the trap house and broke it down. I only said that Jose was gone for good, and that I didn't know or care where.

As much as I wanted Looney castrated, and as much as I could have used all that money under his bed, Jesse could never know about him. I said to myself that I would never tell him, especially because of why I had done it. He would ask and I would lie, and he would know I was lying and act unsurprised but while I lay in bed asleep that night he would be out hunting for the man who made me do it. It wouldn't matter who took the blame, as long as there was some human flesh that could be torn for it. An eye for an eye is what Jesse believed in, and blood for blood. I imagined my brother at the trap house, bearing on the door, kicking it in and opening fire. He was crazy enough, when he was angry, to kill for me, to avenge something he called my honor. That's why he could not ever know that I took off my clothes to make Jose's bail. Jesse would think through everything, and make, in his

mind, the most righteous judgment, and that judgment would be on Jose, and Jesse would deal it out. My brother was full of righteousness. I loved him for it, but I couldn't let him have it, so I never told him anything.

His first night locked up, Jose used his one phone call to tell me that I had to tell his mother. He couldn't do it himself, he said, and besides, he had only one phone call.

"What the fuck am I supposed to say to her?" I asked him.

"Tell her I'm locked up. Don't tell her why. Just make up something. I don't care. Just don't tell the truth. You have to. She's got the deed to my car."

"Goddamnit, Jose." I was pacing in the kitchen of my brother's house.

"Goddamnit, Jose."

"Baby," he said, "I'm sorry. It's the only way. I got to get out. I got to see you again, baby. You know I love you, baby. You're my angel. You've got to tell her, so you can get me out."

Before we hung up, Jose recited seventeen phone numbers from memory, seventeen friends who might give a fuck enough about him to throw in some money. Out of them, only his dealers, Ra and Philly, who needed him around to do their driving, laid down anything.

They were good guys, good to me anyway. Philly brought the powder up from Ft. Lauderdale, and Ra cooked it into what the neighborhoods wanted. They threw in a hundred each for his bail, and said how good I was to him. Ra said he

deserved to sit in there with no cigarettes and no clean underwear.

“That’s what he get so he’ll learn,” he said.

Philly didn’t say much, except that he had it coming, smoking that shit, acting crazy. “Everybody who smokes that crazy shit got it coming.”

Their two hundred and the three I made off Looney was what I needed to buy the bond.

Jose’s mother, Sompit, was a poor, broken-spirited woman, not quite five feet tall, and never smiled. She’d had five husbands and three sons. The oldest, much older, had fled to Japan, looking for something better than her solemn, plastic-Buddha-statue-laden poverty, and he never came back. The second– whose jealous father had returned once and beaten Jose’s head open– was incarcerated by the state of Alabama six hours away. Sompit went to visit him when she could afford it, once or twice a year. He had twelve years still to serve. Jose was her youngest son, twenty-six years old, and his Filipino father, her fourth husband, had abandoned them both when Jose was still very young. Maybe nine or ten, Jose had said. He couldn’t be sure.

The only piece of hope in her life was a small, leather-bound book of payers. In the very early mornings, she sat on her couch wrapped in blankets and held the book open, as if reading from it, but her eyes were closed while she chanted its verses, and the sing-song labor of her payers filled the house with a terrible sadness. The walls echoed her desperation. She was a broken spirited-woman who went on

singing, and for that I knew she was somehow also strong. Still, no sight on earth moved me to such despair as the sight of Sompit swaying in prayer, her table ornamented with so many little statues of broken-faced buddhas, laughing elephants and mala beads so worn down that the symbols and faces painted on each bead were barely visible anymore. They were faded memories. Sometimes Sompit took up a little Buddha and gripped it against her heart, whispered the name of her sons over and over, and wept without a sound.

Nights before, when I lay awake on Jose's thin chest, I listened to her murmuring loudly in her native tongue. To hear her speak, you'd think she had lived in America a year or less. In fact she had come from Thailand with her second husband at nineteen years old, but her English was still strained and poor. I thought maybe she had never wanted to learn it. She hardly needed it. She had only one son left, and he never listened. But I didn't think her weak or stupid for that, because, to hear her pray, you might think she had lived and died a hundred times, and knew all there was to know about being anyone or anything.

One morning before dawn, I lay awake in Jose's bed listening to her voice. The syllables she chanted were like nearing drums. They called to me. They thrummed just beyond the closed door, and the doorknob trembled at each beat. In my mind I could almost see her floating outside the door, half way to the ceiling, her legs crossed and her eyes squinting through me and seeing my soul and all the things about myself that I had never known. I couldn't help myself. I climbed over Jose and out of the bed, thinking that I would open the door and find her floating

there.

I stepped outside the bedroom, but the short hallway that led into the living room was empty. The one lamp that sat beside the couch lit the end of hallway, and I went toward her voice. She was there on her couch, as she always was, covered in blankets, staring into her prayer book and reading aloud. She must have heard Jose's door and known that I was there, but she never looked up. I went into the kitchen and filled a glass of water. She never stopped. I washed the glass and put it back, and passed by her again and through the hallway and climbed over Jose and back into the bed. I lay listening and fell asleep. In the morning, I wondered if it had been a dream.

Her car wasn't in the driveway when I got there, which meant that she was still folding starched towels at the motel where she resented how the Hindus she disliked paid her so little. Usually she came home around midnight. It was nearly that when I pulled my car into the grass. I let myself in and made sure the bolt was tight behind me. I felt safe in Sompit's tiny house. The front door led immediately into the kitchen. On the stove was the usual pan of jasmine rice mixed with little scraps of egg and pork. There was a bowl of chicken legs, left over from the motel kitchen, and a bottle of Tabasco and a shot glass of soy sauce. It looked like she had been hoping to feed three. I filled a plate, and a glass full of water, and went into the little living room, where Jose and I often ate. The kitchen was full of houseplants and was warm, but the living room was always cold. Two sofas faced each other. Folded neatly at the end of each were stacks of five or six blankets, some with holes and

some with sequins. The table in between the couches had two place mats, some sprawling sort of vine, a television remote, piles of clean, white mail, a telephone, and Sompit's beads and small book of prayers. I turned on the television, but muted it. I wrapped myself tight in two blankets and ate in silence, thinking of money, and all the other things I could do with what I had. I had enough to take a bus to Pensacola and catch a flight to Mexico City. Khun was Sompit's rice-eating cat. After he licked my plate, I washed it with the only soap in the kitchen, a bar of motel bath soap, and put it away. I got some more water, and lit a cigarette. I had no dope but just then I didn't mind. I didn't want her to see me high. The room was filled to the brim with the silence of all its living things; the trailing ivies and Hibiscus leaves, the Dali Lama in a dusty frame, and so many cracked caricatures of the Brahmans and nirvanas. I lay down and thought of what I would say to her, if I would lie to her. I thought also of my brother Jesse, of what lies I would tell him, and how I would explain the deep bruise on my face and broken lip that Looney had left when I struggled. The cat lay with me, and I fell in and out of dreams, and in and out of memories.

I thought of Sandy's place, the first night Jose took me there and showed me all the things I needed to see in order to understand who he was. For a long time, I didn't realize that he did this willfully, out of honesty. I took for granted all the true things he gave me freely, so that I could never say that I didn't know, that I had been misled or manipulated, that no one had asked me, and so that I could never be called a victim of anything but my own choice.

I remembered my first dark turn down Lang Road and a sharp right into the dirt driveway dead-ending at Sandy's porch. I was with Jose, in his car, and I was with him because he had asked me to be. "I want you to meet my people," he'd said. I was intrigued by the shadows cast all around him, and the scar across the back of his head, and the way he seemed always to be lost in dark memories, and I wanted into them.

Jose switched his headlights off just before we swung into the driveway, a patch of wet, turned up earth. The place stunk. He took my hand and led me up three wooden planks. There had been four, but the last one was rotten and sagged to the ground. The front door had been broken down before. It was patched up with plywood and nails, and, from the inside, boarded shut. It was more than ugly, the sight of it, an untended mantle made of vinyl and plywood and simple poverty, filthy enough on the outside to seem condemned, a shack-trailer rusted together, the roof sunken and the broken front door boarded shut. Behind the trailer, a forest full of heavy night and all the deadest parts of night, fallen limbs and leaves turned to black creek soot feeding pure black death back into the roots that grew the things that fell apart. There was a smell coming from it like from some asylum cellar, not the smell of empty death but the empty smell of nothing having ever lived.

"Cops show up, you go out the back window and straight back through that," said Jose. He must have known I was smelling it and he must have smelled it, too.

"Where's it go?"

“Out to the bayou. You can swim but watch out for the fish with sharp teeth. Razor-teeth-fish,” he said. He smiled. “Don’t worry, I got you.” He put his arm around me and pulled my forehead to his mouth when he said this. “I got you, I got you,” he whispered, while we climbed the steps. “Shhh,” he said. “Just in case.”

Jose's familiar knock brought Cal, a Vietnam veteran who Jose called a real crackhead, a straight free-baser. He moved the boards and inched the door open enough to peak out at us. “Who’s there!” he said, his voice hot.

“It’s Jose, man, get the fuck out the way.”

“Who’s that!” said Cal. His monstrous eyes were fixed on me, horrified and hostile, as if I were the ghost of a woman he’d slaughtered years ago.

“None of your fucking business. Move!”

Cal backed up and Jose pushed through into the narrow foyer, pulling me in behind him, keeping me close. Cockroaches scattered at my feet. Sometime around this thought, I must have fallen asleep, because the roaches ran up Cal’s face and disappeared through the slits of his eyes. His pupils grew suddenly to twice their size, and I knew it was because the roaches ran in that he was at once blasted out of his mind, and his mouth agape with wide-open smiles.

The sight woke me in a sweat. I listened for Sompit, and ran my eyes across the room for a sign that she had come home, but the house was still as a graveyard, silent as a grave. It wasn’t fear that gripped me, but some kind of certain horror. For the first time since he had been taken, I ached for Jose to be with me, an ache so deep I mistook it for love, and to extinguish it, I shut my eyes.

Back in my memories, I stood in Sandy's bedroom. Her door was wedged shut as well with pieces of paneling from the walls, a long-stemmed hatchet, and a baseball bat. Sandy sat cross-legged in her lounge chair at the far center of the room, her arms clinging to the armrests. All around was chaos, and she was its mistress. Her gray hair fell waist-long and kinked, as if each strand had been singed. In front of her was a broad table, low to the floor, where all her lewd instruments were spread out on display— a glass pipe, a heap of chore, several lighters, one small hand-torch, a scale for measuring grams and ounces, a closed pillbox, a few scattered pills, probably just valium but I couldn't see well, and a metal stem the length of a pen. Among all of this there was a lit candle, a pack of menthol cigarettes, a compact mirror, a tube of lipstick, a little rag doll with a few sewing needling stuck in it, and a stack of Chinese throwing-stars. To her right there was a telephone and to her left a boom box, and everywhere in between were pieces of trash, clothes, dishes, and junk. The carpet was damaged and filthy, as were the curtains nailed tight over the half-boarded windows and the tattered quilt on the bed.

There were others in the room. Philly was there, crouched against the wall, and Ra leaned into the bathroom doorway. Tina was curled up on the bed with her cousin Pixie. They were the two most homely strippers I'd ever seen. Germane, who they called Mane, stood beside Sandy. Everything was still, and everyone stared at me. Sandy smiled, "Oh, she's pretty, Jose." I smiled back. "A lot nicer than your last little cock-sucker," she said.

Mane wore a sinister smile, looking me up and down, but Jose saw it and moved in between us.

“Yeah, she cute, Cuervo,” said Philly. “I think she more my type.”

Jose laughed. “No way. This is a good girl.”

“A good girl?” Ra leaned toward me. “You a *good* girl?”

“I’m here with Jose.”

“That’s right,” said Sandy. “That’s the right thing to say.”

“Yeah, I like how she say that,” Ra said.

“That mean you don’t get freaky?” Mane sneered.

“Shut the fuck up, boy,” Sandy said to him.

Jose turned to Ra but kept his eyes on Mane. They exchanged money, and Sandy said, “Where’s my hit, huh?”

Ra took a bag of rocks from his pocket, broke a piece and handed it to Sandy. He looked at me, then at Jose, and back at me. “Is you a good girl, for real? Do you smoke this shit?”

I shook my head.

“Alright. That’s good. That’s real good, cause Jose need a good girl. He need one *bad*.”

The girls on the bed were awake and giggled. “Where you work?” said Tina.

I said, “Around the docks.”

“Oh really? That’s where you trick?” Ra said.

“No,” Jose said. “She don’t trick. She’s good.”

The strippers sneered, but Sandy smiled at me.

“Damn, I hope that be the truth. Damn I hope it be, cause my cousin here need some help!” said Philly. He slapped Jose’s head.

“Yeah,” Sandy called out while she loaded her own pipe. “Yeah, you help that boy.”

Jose pulled my hair back and kissed my shoulders.

Sometimes I think I could have stopped what was coming, if I had only understood. But I could not understand; I was too good. I thought I was special, but I didn’t get it. I was nothing but good.

When I opened my eyes, Sompit was standing over me. “Where Jose? Where Jose?” She had her purse in one hand and a bag of laundry in the other. She must have stayed late at the hotel to washed her own laundry. She looked terrible and old with her saggy face and her squinty eyes.

In my head was Jose’s voice saying *don’t tell the truth*. But Sompit chanted the question like she chanted her prayers. She sang it over and over. I shivered and couldn’t help but wonder if maybe she already knew everything. Even as she shuffled to the opposite couch, sat down and set her bags on the floor, she was ominous, as if something otherworldly in disguise. She put her hands in her lap and squinted again. “Where Jose?” she said.

“Jose's not here,” I said. I sat up slowly. The cat left my lap and sauntered to her. She swatted him away.

“Where he gone to?” she said.

"He's in jail."

"Jose in jail?"

"Yes."

"Why Jose go in jail?"

I bit my lip. I had not yet thought of what I would say.

"Why! Why he have to go jail!"

"He had some drugs," I said. I said it suddenly, without deciding to say it, so that later, maybe, when Jose asked me why I'd done it, I could say, with some sincerity, that I didn't really know.

For a second she pondered, or perhaps thought nothing. She said, "Jose do drug?"

I nodded.

"Jose know better than do drug. Jose brother in jail twelve more year." Her voice was weak now, and breaking.

I said nothing, though I knew she wanted me to. I looked over at the table where the television was on but silent. Sompit was fond of very old films set in Thailand or somewhere close to it. On the screen, in black and white, a woman with long sable hair ran through an open field. At the edge of the forest, she threw herself under a tree, tearing her dress on a fallen branch. Beside the television were Sompit's little buddhas, still as death, full of sagacity and balance and emptiness. They looked tired and far from home. Sompit, too, was far from where she ought to be. And I wondered what she thought she was doing here, in the middle of all this

spiritless violence. Hoping? Proving something? She should have known better than to entrust her sons' lives to this place.

"You tell me whole truth," Sompit said.

I looked back at her and nodded. It didn't matter now. I couldn't change anything.

"What kind this drug?" she asked.

It seemed strange that she would know, or have any way of knowing, the meaning of the words we used to talk about the things we did. We called it hard, rock, gold, bread. We called it smoking, blazing, loading, tweaking. We called it a hit, a shot, a blast.

"It's cocaine," I said. "He smokes it."

"Smoke it? Smoke crack? Jose smoke crack?"

I remembered suddenly a late night at Gigi's, in bed with Tiffany and her girlfriend, Rain. When the boys came back they were blasted and loud. I sat up and shouted for Jose. "Bring me my motherfucking crack!" I yelled. The girls looked at me excitedly, amazed and even afraid, I think, because I had no shame.

I looked away from Sompit. I wished she hadn't said it. Somehow it would have been easier for me to say it myself than to hear her say it the way she said it, knowing that she was a poor woman because of it, and less loved.

"I made a lot of phone calls today," I said. "I called around. Not many people want to help out, you know, because he has those other court dates. I don't know how many, three I think, for driving without a license, and the assault charge, and

stuff." I did not look up to see if she understood. I hoped she didn't. "So, the thing is, when you have lots of pending cases, bondsmen don't want to help you out, because they think you might run, but you probably know that. But I found one guy. Actually, honestly, there is just one guy. I called all over the county. Only this one guy says he'll do it. But he wants collateral, and that's okay, because we have Jose's car, and he said that would work, for collateral, so in case Jose runs, the bondsman will keep his car. So I called and worked all that out. I'm going to meet this guy in the morning, to get Jose out. It's a long drive, but I have to sign the papers and all. And then he'll go over to the jail, and he'll put up the money, and they'll let Jose out. But still he charges money, you know, the bond guy."

"I have no more money," she said.

"No. It's ok. I have the money already." I spread it out on the table between us. "That's five hundred dollars," I said. "That's what it costs, because that's ten percent of the bond. So if I give this guy-

"Where this money come from?" she said. "This your money?"

"Yeah. Well, some of it's mine. His friends helped. It's ok, though. We have enough."

Sompit was silent. She wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and took the cat in her lap. "Why you not leave him there?" his mother said.

It broke my heart, the way she said it. I knew she wouldn't understand if I tried to explain it, the way I said I loved him, but didn't really love him, just ached for him, because it had been too long, and gone too far, and now I needed him just as

much as I needed what came with him. But she didn't ask me if I was like him or did what he did, and I didn't tell her that it could just as well have been me in there, and Jose sitting here with her, asking for the deed to his car, to get back the girl who could complete his desperation, and so I didn't answer.

Then she said, "You listen. You do this good thing for me. I promise I will do some good thing for you. You be good for me," she said, "I be good for you."

That night I lay alone in Jose's bed. I had never been alone in that bed before. I had no business in that bed. Not alone. In the beginning, when it felt like love, Jose and I spent three days in that bed, sleeping, holding, smoking, touching. He told me about himself, where he had come from, and about Diamond, and how he had become what he was. "She did this to me," Jose said. "She made me into this."

Jose was a driver. He drove the dope and the money back and forth between Destin and Fort Walton, and, since he was driving anyway, he drove the girls around town to do tricks and got commission. It was good money. Money enough to get high every day and go out every night. There was even a time, before Diamond, when Jose had a savings account. He was going to send his mother back to Thailand. That's where she wanted to be, he told me. And he told me about his father who had gone to California, who had left Jose and Sompit when Jose was nine years old. He sent birthday cards to his son, but nothing more, never letters or checks. On Jose's sixteenth birthday, there was a car in the driveway, and a long letter, hand written. Jose's father invited him to drive the car to California and begin a better life. The

only condition was that Sompit could not come, and could not visit, and was not to be mentioned to anyone. "She is a disgrace to your blood," Jose's father wrote. "She will die soon. Before this happens, you should be with me." Jose kept the car, and made a living with it. It was a deep blue Porsche with solid black windows.

One winter night, about three years before I came along, Jose got a call to pick up a girl in Destin. She was in a bad spot and needed help. A couple of blocks behind the Oasis, the lowliest bar in all of Destin, was an abandoned fish warehouse beside an apartment complex called Campeche Run. That's where Jose went to rescue a girl he'd never heard of. He drove around to the back of the apartments, and the girl appeared five stories up. She ran down the metal stairs. Jose could only catch glimpses of her turning a corner and flying downward, her long blonde hair streaking through the air in quick flashes of light. He could see the red shine of her mouth, and he could make out the soft glow and curvature of her bare legs. He opened his door and stood to see her better, and the spot where he stood is where he fell. Diamond's thugs came from behind and beat him facedown into the ground. One of them had something like a wrench, and beat it against Jose's skull. When he was down, his hands crushed and his head broken open, they drove away in his car.

He was almost dead by the time Diamond came back for him. "I guess she just felt guilty," Jose said. She went back for him in his own car and drove him to the hospital. When he woke up in his hospital gown with fifty-seven stitches around the back of his head, she was there, smoking a cigarette out the window. When she saw him awake, she climbed in bed beside him. "She always claimed she wasn't the girl

on the stairs. I believed her for a while, but it was probably her. Anyway, I saw her,” Jose said.

From then on, until the night I showed up, Jose and Diamond ran together. He had the highest-priced trick in town, and she had her own personal driver. Together they scored enough to stay high all the time. But Jose said it was always D who wanted to get more, who had to have more. She never wanted to stop. As soon as they'd score, she'd want to turn another trick to buy more. Jose said she was crazy, but she couldn't have done it without him. She was helpless when he left her.

Even then it was crazy to think that he would unwittingly turn me into what he was afraid of her becoming. But he didn't know my heart, and could not have known it, because I never told him, just like Jesse could not have seen it coming or ever done anything to stop it, because I never let on how far I had gone.

The things we did say in the beginning were honest things. When we lay in bed for days talking about where we had been and what we were becoming, those were the days when it felt like love. It felt like love honestly, even though we were high most of the time, because when we came down we found each other, and said to each other that what really mattered was not the high, but what we found when we came down.

But the night I spent alone in that bed after doing what I did to get him back, it didn't feel like love, although I wanted to call it that. Really you could call it whatever you wanted, because you'd never admit what it really was. You wouldn't admit even to yourself that you couldn't take being so fucked-up and gone-wrong on

your own, and you needed him to come back and be just as fucked-up and turned-bad with you. You needed to hear him say he wanted it, because you wanted it, too, but couldn't face the thought of being the only one wanting. It wasn't love, exactly, but it was a love of something. I fell asleep remembering that I had reached out for it, the first time Jose help up his pipe. He called it a glass rose. He loaded it for me, and showed me how to use it, and held it up, and I reached out for it. I could never say that I did not reach out.

Sompit made rice every morning. That morning she made one full pan, plenty for three. When I woke up, I found her at the stove. She pointed to a mug on the counter and said, "Careful. Hot." She had made me coffee. Sompit was good to me. I had only been coming around for a few weeks when she gave me a key to the front door and showed me exactly how to always make sure the bolt was tight whether I was going out or coming in. The next week she put an extra set of towels in the hallway bathroom, along with some rose hyssop soap and some dusty boxes of bath salts, a new comb, a plastic bottle of nail polish remover and a perfume labeled in a language I couldn't read. The next week, she began to make me coffee— one spoonful of dry, bitter grinds in a cup of boiling water. I was grateful for it.

When the rice was done we were ready to go. We put on jackets and left the house in her car before sunrise. She had insisted on driving, though I was sure she had slept less than I had. The dead of winter in Destin was about as cold as the ocean at that time. The miles we drove against the shore were silent for a long while.

After a long while, Sompit pulled a pack of menthol cigarettes out of her purse and handed them to me. "I got for Jose," she said. "You give to him." I said okay and took one out to smoke. The taste of it in the early morning was the taste of him, of being up until dawn getting high, smoking menthols, finally coming down around dawn, about the time birds started filling up trees. Jose liked to go for days. If you could keep it coming, you could run on it without food or sleep for days. It was just a trick, really, that you played on your mind to make it say ok, keep going. But when he came down he hit a pit, his mind split. He was raving mad and desperately sad, until finally he was asleep, and he slept and slept. I thought of how he would be waiting for me to come for him, to save him. One night alone in his bed and I knew why I wasn't going to just leave him there, where he needed to be, locked behind bars to sweat and shake. To me, he had been a perfect lover; relentless, jealous, selfish to a fault. In spite of myself, I followed him into wastelands, into tiny, leaky apartments where babies were left on the floor starving, and down onto dirty bathroom floors for that quick fix just because he could want so much. Nothing compared to being wanted that way.

"Jose so stupid," said his mother while I smoked and cold salty air made a rushing sound in the rolled down window. "He can have good life. You be good girl to him and he get job. Why he so stupid? You not good to him?"

"I am," I said. "I try to be."

"Why he don't get good job and take care you?"

Of course I knew the answer to that, and I said nothing.

“I think you be good for him. I think, maybe, maybe my fault he do so bad, because I pay him attention very little when he small. Jose dad was bad man. I think he never take care of me. So I say I will take care myself. So I work so much when Jose small.”

“I think maybe it’s no one’s fault,” I said.

“Then my next husband no love Jose,” Sompit said. “He beat Jose and love me. He love me but he beat Jose, because not he real son. And I love my husband, but I say you no love me you beat my son. This my son. But Jose dad no love Jose too. Jose real dad go far away. Jose real dad leave me, because I not from Philippines, so I go back Jose brother dad. Jose brother dad, he beat Jose. So I say I love you, but I love my sons more. So I have to leave him. He beat my son.”

“It was right,” I said.

“I don’t know I was good mother. But so hard when I have three sons. Jose brothers, they bad, too. Jose brother go into army, because government say, you go into army you no go into jail, so he go into army. Now he gone. And Jose other brother go into jail for drug. He spend long time like whole life there. Now Jose bad. Now I have two son in jail. I think maybe I bad mother, or why my son so bad?”

“No, you’re not a bad mother, you’re not bad,” I said. “Jose loves you,” I said.

“Jose not love *me!*” she said quickly. “Jose do this thing *me*. I work so hard, and Jose no work, and live my house still. Jose twenty-six year old and still live my house, eat my food, take my money. Jose go jail before I pay get him out.”

Jose had never told me about that. "I didn't know," I said.

"When Jose lose license. Jose driving car drunk. He have to go jail and I have to pay money get him out, and pay money get him he car back."

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"This first time. First time I pay so much money. Then Jose come home say he promise get job pay me back, take care me. But Jose say there no job and no one hire him. So he stay my house, eat my food. Then Jose drive he car everywhere. I say no drive car or get caught. Cop take away car I can not pay for second time. But Jose no listen to me. Jose no *love* me. Jose no listen to me and he drive car, then he get caught. He call me from that jail say get him out. Why his friend not get him out then?"

I had been a regular brat for thinking I had to explain all that business about the bondsman. She was not stupid, his mother. Everything she said was true. Jose didn't have friends, only dependants, and those he was dependant on.

"Why his friend no get him out?" she said again. "Why he no call his friend get him out? I not have money this time. So I have sell my thing, sell my necklace my ring to pawn shop get him out. Then still I need more money. I call my friend say can you loan to me. My friend, he say, I give to you this money you let me see you without these." Sompit tugged at her clothes. "I take my clothes off for this. Get my son out jail. And my son no love me."

I said nothing, but remembered the time when I watched Jose go into his mother's bedroom, dig a glass jar up from the dirt of a floor plant, and take all the

money she had. "I'll put it back before she gets home. She'll have more than when she started," he said. And when she came home there was dirt on the floor and it was gone. And the time I stood by while he asked her for five dollars, but she only had three, and he wanted it anyway, and she gave it to him.

"So I think I cannot help my son. But maybe you can help my son. I tell you. If you help my son, I help you. I not have much, but someday, one day I help you. I take you Thailand with me soon. I have house there, where my daughter live now."

Jose had never told me about a sister.

"You help Jose, you just stay with Jose, help him, love him, tell him get job take care you, I do some good thing for you. I give to you my house."

I looked out across the ocean and smiled to think someday she might take her buddhas back to where they came from, back to a land of snakes and mudslides and malaria and one good night's sleep. She would sell her television and everything she had worth anything and leave Jose and his brother behind their bars and take the bus to the airport and just fly away. She could keep doing what she always did, stirring rice and washing clothes. But instead of in a stale American motel cellar on a run down tourist beach, maybe outside a small house set among ripe red rice fields, scrubbing gently against a washboard while watching, in the distance, the water buffalo. What was she doing here, just suffering and dying? Building up merit for the next life? What was she doing so far from home?

"You love Jose?" she said to me.

It was a strange thought, but I wondered if maybe I could, not as I had, but in a different way completely, love in a land where the people ate cicadas. Surely that was better than love while stepping over babies who ate nothing as I left their mother's bedroom, where she lay blazing somewhere too close to the heat of death. I said yes.

"Good," she said. "I think you be good to him. You help me. But I think you have to love him."

Again, I said that I did.

"Jose love me then I maybe not need you, but I think Jose love you. You help him, you do one very good thing. Jose tell me he love you. He tell me that. So I know he not tell me that when he not love you. Two sleeping in same bed should have same dream."

She turned on some music, something I couldn't understand and didn't need to. I liked it.

"Everything will be okay," I finally said to her, and somehow believed it.

When we got to the jail, Jose was not there. He had gotten out on bond the night before. I couldn't imagine who would have come for him, who would have had the money and who would have even cared.

All the way back to Fort Walton, Sompit asked the same questions. Why was her son so bad—why was he not good to me—why if he loved me would he not protect me. I said nothing, but watched the swamplands go by, and thought of who it could have been, who it had to have been. And my stomach turned sour and my eyes

burned when I realized it could not have been anyone but Diamond. She had beaten me to him, and he had gone with her.

CHAPTER IV

THE OASIS

We met in a bar on a quiet night, the kind of night when nothing's happening and you expect nothing will. You've been through so many of these nights that you've almost grown fond of them; you've been over the way nothing ever really happens so many times in your head that you've come to trust it. Then a gun goes off outside your window, and what you think you know is meaningless.

The dullness of the evening had taken over like a lone lit lamp takes over an empty room. At the Oasis I was drinking alone, bent over the bar with my chin in one palm. Josiah had gone night fishing with a new kid he was trying to get on the good side of, a kid from Alabama with money and his own boat to boot. Because Andrew had been gone for weeks— we hadn't heard a word from him— I was hoping to find him in the Oasis, or hoping that he would find me, rather, slunk over a beer and hanging on to the night like nothing else could give me what I wanted. Andrew, I liked to think, was what I needed, and I suspected he knew that I liked to think that.

From one dusty corner an old man shooting pool balls by himself made a loud sound of something like thrill, a sound as if to indicate to the rest of us that something could be happening we hadn't bargained for. I turned toward the front door and saw blue lights flashing outside the building, framing the front windows in

tedium against languor, inconstant azure beating against the steady pale that lit the parking lot. At the end of the bar there was a middle-aged man watching the television, a series of violent scenes in which a young girl was slit into small bits by razor wire, by invisible strings that slung across a wide room and ran through her calves, then her torso, then her throat. I left my seat and stepped outside.

It was late, past midnight, and the air after dark had just begun to turn cool. A calm breeze made the moment almost cold. Twenty feet in front of me a couple of cop cars had pulled perpendicular to a fastback, saloon-style Mercedes-Benz, bronze with shiny black windows. I could see into the car when one cop, a taller man, shone his flashlight through the windows and waved it around on the inside. The shorter cop, smaller all over, had backed three bystanders away from the Mercedes. There was a tall, ugly guy with thin hair, a dark-skinned boy with an enormous scar across the back of his head, and a girl, maybe twenty, stunningly beautiful, clutching to her own arms and seeming cold, shaking long blonde hair back from her high cheeks when she yawned, though her eyes looked nothing like tired.

I watched from where I leaned against the brick building. I had lit a cigarette on my way out the door to give the impression that smoking it was my first objective, the scene with the Mercedes merely a sideshow. The girl had seen me, had gazed briefly a few times. Her face was all boredom and ambivalence. The dark-skinned boy— he looked boyish from a distance— had seen me immediately when I came out of the door, had watched me until my cigarette was lit, and had not looked back since. The tall, ugly guy seemed to have never noticed me at all. He was being

questioned alone and to the side now. A second cop car had come onto the scene, parked itself along the front of the Mercedes, and a woman in uniform came out of it with her notepad already open. I was watching her pull the beautiful girl aside for interrogation, watching the way the beautiful girl fell backwards against the cop's car just gracefully, yawned, smiled, seemed bored, and brushed back wild strands of hair. I was watching her and so I didn't notice right away how the dark-skinned boy had turned to face me, was talking to an officer and pointing to me, and the officer had nodded and the boy had shifted his shoulders forward before walking towards me. He was wearing a bright orange hooded sweatshirt that was only barely too big for him. When he was ten feet from where I stood he raised his left hand in the air and waved, and when he waved he smiled some kind of sly and pleading smile and I saw at once that he was no boy and his eyes were slanted like a snake's.

He said, "What's your name?"

"Rachael."

"Rachael, I need some help. I'm in trouble. Will you help me, Rachael?"

I took a step back and looked behind me like there might be another of him.

"Don't do that," he said fast.

"Do what?"

"Don't look over. They're watching. Don't act funny. Rachael, I told them your name was Amy. That's a pretty name. Rachael I mean. But I need you to be Amy, just for a minute, just say you know us. As long you have a license. You got a license?"

There was nothing about the moment that should have made me want to help him, but the way he kept saying my name made me shiver, and I was all of a sudden curious as hell about him. He had the look of aboriginal furry, like he might eat me or worship me, depending on my next move.

It must have been what he opened in my mind– a door to the sight of myself roasting over a fire, war-paint maybe melting and running down my face– that made me begin to nod my head and say OK.

He cut me off. “Good. I’m Jose, that’s Diamond.” He tossed his head slightly toward the beautiful girl. In the moonlight, the scar on the back of his head seemed to pulse. It ran from the lower left corner of his face all the way around to his right temple, curling like a hook. “We’re good friends of yours, ok? And you’re taking me back to my mom’s place.”

“I am not,” I said, imagining again my wrists and feet bound with heavy twine, and the flames all around me; my head shaved clean as his and his scar now running across my face.

“Just say it, please. Rachael, please. Just take us down the street. This cocksucker over here– it’s my fucking parole officer’s brother.”

“Why? What have you done?”

“Twenty bucks. That’s all I got. Twenty-two bucks in my pocket.”

“What the fuck is this about?”

“I’ll tell you. Just not now. Come on.”

Over Jose's shoulder, the tall, ugly guy was being handcuffed and not looking around. He disappeared into the backseat beneath those flashing lights.

"Come on," Jose said, and I felt my lips fall slightly apart like they might have begun to speak, but instead only took in a dose of cool air and I went with him, toward the small army of police and the beautiful girl by the Mercedes Benz.

"Name?" the cop said to me right away. It was the taller one, and he looked at me like maybe I was covered in shit, or had a mouth full of it.

I said, "Amy Perry."

He wrote it down. "Never heard of you."

"Why would you?"

He looked at Jose. "Age?" he said to me.

"Twenty-one."

"You hang out here a lot, Amy?"

"No sir," I said. "It's just a job."

He pointed with his pen toward the Oasis. "You work in there?" The jukebox could be heard in the parking lot, and just then it was playing Lynyrd Skynyrd, *Gimme Back My Bullets*. The Oasis was always playing something like that, something southern and full of fight. "You're not familiar."

"I'm new. Anyway, I'm a friend of Jose's."

"So he says."

"So what?"

"So he's breaking parole."

Playing the game was easy enough. What I couldn't shake was this girl, this gorgeous figure in the corner of my vision and her unflinching eyes that I couldn't see but I could feel following my mouth and my every move. Heat and light sparked in from the corner where she was nothing but a blur of color.

"That's my fault," I said. I said it out of terrible envy, I think, and because she was powerless and I was not. "I was supposed to pick him up hours ago. It's my fault, really. I'll take him home now."

"Oh will you?"

I nodded, and noticed how Jose and Diamond had inched themselves closer to me so that now we were on one side, and the cops were on the other.

"And what do you know about that car?"

The tow-truck had arrived and some guys were latching up the Mercedes.

"Nothing," I said. "I've never seen it."

"Don't fuck this up," the cop said to Jose, and, as he walked away, he turned back to me. "This town will suck you up and spit you out," he said.

When the last of the cop cars disappeared down the street, Diamond laughed out loud and began to hurry toward the door. "Goddamnit-somebody-get me-a-drink," she said to herself before we were inside the bar. Nothing had changed since I had walked out. The old man held his cue by himself in the corner and my half-beer was where I had left it, but I pushed it forward and asked for another one.

"It's on me," Jose said over my voice, and Diamond laughed at him when he did.

“I.D.” said the bartender, who was a fat man with fur curling over his open collar. Jose pulled a dirty plastic badge from his pocket and held it out. He held it low, like on purpose, and I could read it: *Okaloosa County Jail. Inmate. Joselito Masungsong. DOB: 10/27/1981. ID#* and so on. “That’s all you’ve got?” said the fat man.

Jose said, “The date’s on it,” and the bartender handed it back.

Diamond came up close. “Hey.” She nudged up against him. “Come here a sec. I need to talk you.”

“What.” he said back to her.

She grinned with her bright gorgeous mouth almost laughing, said, “You know what I’m talking about,” and slipped past us toward the bathrooms. Close up, she looked younger. Nineteen, I thought, or maybe even eighteen, flawlessly symmetrical, fierce features, eyes set wide apart.

Jose looked at me like he was sorry and said he’d be right back. I watched the way he followed her, never looking at what he was following, but surely so aware of it. Surely she was as beautiful to him as I knew she must be to everyone. I had never seen a girl so gorgeous.

It seemed to me that she stunk with beauty. It was the worst and most fierce, most victimizing beauty I had ever seen. It was all wrapped up and flew around in her flaxen hair, the electrically blue force of her eyes, the flexing bronze of her skin in light. And the crux of it all was her mouth, a flushed, hot hem of flesh that hung dangerously open always, a kind of fire at the center of her. There were too many

words for how beautiful she was, and she knew them all and walked with them waiting on the sharp edge of her tongue. I hated her instinctively.

They came back together after five minutes and Jose slid in beside me at the bar. He was high, but on what was had to tell. I was only a moderate and entirely functional user. I knew nothing about hard drugs. Diamond took a seat several down.

He leaned in close and said to me, "I've never seen you before."

"I come here all the time."

"Yeah? I don't that much anymore."

"I haven't lived here long."

He said, "Sorry about all of that, by the way. You did great."

"Do all the cops in this town know you?"

Jose looked over his shoulder at Diamond. She was intentionally not noticing us. "That's my girlfriend," he said. "Well, was my girlfriend. We broke up today, actually. Anyway, it's a long story. It was a stolen car, I guess."

"You guess?"

His eyes, though never actually leaving me, were not fixated either, but darting around the room just perceptibly, memorizing corners and shadows, maybe, and always aware of the doors. "Like I said, really long story." He paused and I drank my beer, wondering what, if any, was the right question to ask next. Then: "I hate that we met like this," he said.

"Why?"

He waited a few seconds and smiled that same sly but pleading smile. "I don't know. You're a good person."

"How would you know?"

He didn't answer. "We could hang out sometime," he said.

I peered around him and nodded in Diamond's direction. She was entertaining the man at the end of the bar who had been watching the television before. She was chatting at him and he was mesmerized.

"She's another long story. I'd die for her, but we're no good."

"How'd she get the car?" I said.

He shrugged a little. "You ask too many questions." But it was sweet, somehow, the way he didn't seem to mean it and the way his eyes seemed to say that he would tell me because he wanted to and I could believe him when he did. His eyes were black as a cat's.

Diamond needed to go across the bridges, to Fort Walton Beach. Jose got in the front beside me, Diamond in the back. We were silent. The bridges went west from Destin, over the bay and toward what people called The Island, and then beyond The Island, west over the next bay and into Fort Walton. I hadn't taken those bridges before because I'd never needed to, but I knew the way that followed from Gulf Shore Drive onto Highway 98, past the Fisherman's Wharf and the docks, and a little further past the marina, past Harbor Docks Village to the place where Norriego Point wound itself around the harbor, to where it came back around to nearly touch the tip of the isle. That was as far as I knew to go and where the bridge began. Jose

said, "Just keep going," and black water flanked the bridge as far as you could see, black satin that fell from either side of the bridge like curtains. The bridge arced over the bay and came down onto the island. After no more than a mile the second bridge arced up and the black curtains fell and rose again. At the first stop light in Fort Walton, Jose said, "Go right," and after a little while, "Left here." I followed his directions, feeling as far away from the pure white beaches as if I had driven all night. Really the drive had been less than ten minutes, but there were no stately stucco houses here and the palm trees seemed sharper, the whole starless night now somehow like a syndicate, while Diamond put on lipstick and smoked cigarettes in the backseat, never making a sound.

I turned the rear-view mirror toward her. "I guess you got lucky," I said.

She looked up at me smiled. It was such a bold, surprising smile, so full of genuine delight, that I had to look away. She leaned forward and offered me a ten-dollar bill. "Take it," she said. "For the gas."

But I shook my head, and noticed in an instant the perfect curve of her hands, her long and neatly polished nails bright red.

We pulled, finally, into the parking lot of an apartment complex. The buildings were grey and the parking lot unlit. Jose pointed toward a place to stop, and when we were parked he said, "Kill the lights." I obeyed. Jose turned toward Diamond.

"D," he said after a few seconds.

She was smearing more makeup over her face in the dark, holding up a tiny compact mirror and a cigarette with the same hand. She looked up at him in silence, then back into her mirror.

“D,” he repeated.

“What? Goddamn.”

“How are you getting home?”

“I got a fucking ride,” she said. She snapped her compact shut and stuck her short cigarette into her mouth, pushed the door open with her free hand and climbed out the right side. Jose got out after her. They stood a few feet from the car talking, and even in the night I could see their eyes burning on each other like wildfires, his black and hers blue and both hot and angry. At the bar, he had said we would talk, but now I thought I could see it all, everything I wanted to know, watching her lips move and his hands fly back, her weightless hair float around her throat and his heavy cheekbones shift in his face. She was screaming all over her body, her small, firm arms wrapped around her chest, her collar bones bare in the cold, and it looked to me like her whole body was screaming, standing still with no hint of composure. Jose was screaming, too, but you couldn’t see it; you could just feel it coming from him. His mouth moved too slowly, as if on purpose and only to say *you know what lives inside me*, so that I could feel him murder and cheat and lie. Diamond, she didn’t feel like anything. When you tried to feel what was coming from her you felt nothing at all.

Jose got back into the car and smiled at me. He wasn't perfect and he wasn't beautiful. His frame was small under his oversized sweatshirt. He was taller than Diamond but not very tall. Still, he must have learned how to seem lovely, silent and violent all at once. "I have to stay here," he said, and I smiled back. "It's not what you think."

"It doesn't matter," I said.

"It does, though. Can I see you again?"

"Twenty-two dollars," I said.

He dug into his pockets and pulled out a few bills. "I got seven. You want it?"

"No."

So I left him with my phone number and noticed as I was leaving that Diamond had been standing outside waiting, leaning like a reed bent by the dark breeze into the shadows outside some doorway. Jose knocked on it and, when it opened, she followed him inside.

Anyway, he didn't have to be beautiful. He had only to be for me in one moment something I had never seen, and something willing and someone entirely unlike me. I was amazed that he was so unlike me, so sure of himself and risking everything. I was scared to death of him, maybe because he was in love with Diamond or maybe because he had a scar across the back of his head, maybe because he talked so smooth when for all I knew he was a convict, an abductor. So I was scared and I didn't care. Then there was that other way of being beautiful, and he was that— smooth brown skin and black eyes, a skinny torso and a paranoid

mind. There was the snake and the cat and the liar and the way he leaned in closer—too close, maybe, and the way he did it like he knew it was too close but he went there. There was all of that beauty and all of that fear.

Before he got out of my car I said, “I don’t know who you are.”

He said, “I’m a good person, deep down.”

That’s the kind of thing that makes you want to go running, but instead you sit still and wait for what’s coming. A part of me, anyway, was sure I had it coming. I was asking for it just for the hell of it. That’s scary enough even when you don’t know it. Self-destruction, when you don’t even know it, that’s like everything you ever were without meaning to be it. So I was going to take Jose and he was going to love me for it. That’s what I said, in my head.

Fate is inferior to choice, and that’s that. It didn’t matter at all that he was likely a downright liar and that she was so killer, so arrestingly lovely and mean. It didn’t matter, either, that I was nothing compared to her, less divine and less devastated, not as tall and my skin duller. It didn’t matter. I crossed back over the bridges, and all I knew that mattered was that whatever he had was something she wanted. I chose to want it just because she had it. That’s all there was to it.

CHAPTER V

NORRIEGO

We don't live on Norriego Drive anymore. My brother Jesse went down to Barbados to get on the shark boats. I asked him to take me but he wouldn't. We had a good thing going, he and I, back when the windy nights had an honesty in them, the two of us feasting on wahoo and egg noodles, casting lines from the lower dock under a crescent moon. Days when it would do nothing but rain and we would do everything like it was shiny because we were too good for it, because it didn't matter and couldn't stop us. We'd walk in it, sit in it, talk in it, smoke in it, and it would come down harder. We'd stir up some shark and potatoes for dinner and afterwards bait the crab trap with the tough skin flap left over. I guess I fucked our good thing up worse than what good things I'd fucked up before it, but, being honest, I doubt my brother would have hung around that harbor much longer if he could have.

The place was a sad thing to lose, the harbor and the palms and the boat docks and all. I didn't stop to think how losing it would be until I hung out past the rafters that last night, stretched my neck out over the high dock, stretching to be sure tears running off my chin would hit the harbor below and go with it, crying. Not a loud or angry cry, not like when somebody's done you wrong. It was the kind of

cry when you're nothing but broken, body, heart and mind. Jesse stood beside me, shaking his head like he was trying to think of any other way, but couldn't. "The way it's gotta be," he said. "Nobody's fault. Sometimes just how the chips fall. Can't take it back, you know? The way it's gotta be."

Good nights, we'd laugh out loud at our beautiful but fucked-up backward town, where after sunset the dock lights came on along the bay, lighting up the soft-looking underbellies of seventy-foot sport-fishers roped up just inside the shadows of Mesoamerican-like mansions. We'd laugh at the people who lived in them; old people who'd worked too long and were too tired to know it. Their televisions were on but they were fast asleep in their dark rooms. Their boats would go nowhere, only float and moan like sleeping whales on top of the water.

Crushed as I was, I think I almost made him cry. But he wouldn't have, not for me to see. He went back into the house and I went on with my weeping, thinking whatever this was it couldn't be losing. All kinds of punishments fit for the crime. Already the guilt and the shame like shackles wore at my ankles and already there was the kind of broken heart you can't bare to feel because it isn't yours, it's somebody else's who matters more to you than you do. In my case it was Jesse's, whose break was in me, and it hurt worse than any I had ever known. Give me his broken heart and the guilt-shame shackles and anything else and you won't hear me complaining, only don't let this be losing. And I knew damn well I was losing, and not just me, Jesse too. My brother had my broken heart in him and we were going

down that losing road, signs at every turn, arrows pointing, and the only words for any direction saying, "I Know I Have Lost."

Jesse got to Norriego first and had made a fisherman of himself. One year working bitch-crew on the charters and now he was bona fide, first mate on the *Speak Easy*, a big game sport fisher, and he could tie a better blood knot than anybody on the dock. Captain Pete watched him work himself into dirt and brought him on without giving a damn what other bitch-deckhands had to say bout it. Only when somebody asked him why those boys like them born and bred on the docks got no promotions and Jesse got first mate not even knowing the longitude, that's when Captain Pete said, "You know goddamn good's I do them asses got the quit in them."

That's how Jesse told it, but I knew every word was true, because, in the first place, I'd never once known him to lie to me, and in the second place, quit wasn't a word Jesse knew. Once he got the hang of first mate- took him no more than five trips- he got the house on the harbor and worked those long days. Sunup to sundown if it called for that, which it usually did, and he kept at it. "Times are fucking lucky," he said on a long distance call to me. "The tide is on my side, kiddo. You wanna be here now, trust me. Come the fuck on down."

Josiah knew how to get to me. We'd grown up right beside each other and without anybody really around to say don't do that dumb shit, don't go learning that lesson, until we'd gotten maybe too good at learning another thing the hard way. Now lots of thing we thought we knew better than the rest.

I guess what Jesse hadn't thought of was how time was a distance between us now. Last time he saw me he knew me good and well, knew how I always thought myself ugly in the morning and felt nervous in the afternoon, knew how I liked to stay up late putting powder up my nose and reading cold Russian literature. But then there's time and it's a distance between you no matter where you come from.

The night I came down to Destin, without any way of saying who I was now or what I was after, I fell into a kind of frenzied awe over the big house, the tall decks, the sparkling black water, the overgrown moon in the wide black sky. After we embraced and Jesse said something about how awful I looked, I laughed out loud and ran through the picketed wooden gate that opened into a green courtyard. A tall rose bush was in the center of the courtyard, beyond it the boat-dock and beside that the lemon tree. Left of the roses, wooden stairs went up to the first deck. It wrapped all the way around the house and was strung with birdhouses and wind chimes. Four sliding glass doors opened into the main level of the house, and in front of those the deck stretched outward toward the harbor, so that you could stand at the doors and look way down south to where the water came spilling into the sound, or you could sit in one of the hanging chairs or at the picnic table or in any of the deck furniture that was made of wicker and watch over the harbor. A roof went all round that deck, and off the left of it was another deck, a level higher, open to the sky, and off that another, higher again. The second deck stretched right to the water, and the third spread out over it, suspended there by several beams that were driven down into the harbor, as this deck was also the roof of the boathouse.

Giddy because already there was sand in my toes and the night was so warm you could drink it and because the overgrown moon was bigger than I ever knew the moon could grow to be, I ran all around the yard and under the decks to where the yard met the dock and the dock met the water, to one end of the small dock where an ornate bench sat under a baby wild olive to the other end where the dock led inside the boathouse, and back out of the boathouse and past the two palms in the yard onto the patio, which was under the low deck, where Jesse had all the tables blood-stained, strewn with bait and hooks and lines, and where Jesse stood watching me run mad like a wild dog. The last thing I came to, the thing I could hardly believe I had come to after I had come upon everything else, was the banana tree, its polished green leaves looking like wings and shadows of flapping wings.

I said to Jesse, "This is yours?" And he smirked but still was trying to act like it was no big deal, a three story house with a green tin roof set right up against the harbor, backyard ruffled blue water lined with yachts and Aztec-temple-looking houses with pools on their roofs.

I became happy. In the first place, I imagined that I had become a better person, better even than most people, maybe, because I didn't hate anyone and the many ways that I had learned to love things and then leave them made me strong in my spirit. When loneliness started to work on me, I could cross the highway to the beach and listen to the ocean roaring like a lion's mouth, angry with you for thinking yourself so vital and the world so small. The ocean would tell you all about

loneliness, how it was a lie, and how nobody anywhere, no matter how he wanted to be, would ever be alone.

Some days, before dusk came on at all, I would walk from our house on the bay and out into the neighborhood of bay-hugging houses, down the sandy streets and along the rows of palm trees, banana trees, lemon trees that here and there were bursting yellow with the sun. The neighborhood was three long streets of stucco houses and houses made from weathered planks balancing on tall wooden legs. Some of the houses were nearly mansions. Others were balancing houses with yards full of pale green reeds growing somehow out of the white sand, and here and there a lemon tree or a burnt rose bush. Our neighbors did not seem to come outside. Seemed like they were haughty people hiding away inside expensive rooms, occasionally throughout the day drawing back lush curtains to let just a little sun come in or to peer out over the shallow water where they could not ever find themselves. They were nothing like people from the north who were always so eager to move among each other and crowd together into heady coffee shops. These people hid from the shops and the streets, as if there were nothing worth going out into the world for.

Some nights, too, I walked off alone down the rugged shore where the seaweeds tangled into the boats which were not on docks but just slightly sitting against the slope of the beach. I moved among the boats and the shore's green hair and the scattering of jellyfish shiny in the moonlight. Then the thoughts came on, heavy as I was lonely, and the wind picked up the scent of them, and my thoughts

and the wailing wind made a harmony until a light storm blew through and carried the harmonies away.

But all of that was back in Norriego day, before there came a kind of rage out of the human world like the fault line of the species had given way and all at once we began shaking and trembling, quaking like maybe we were terribly angry but really we were just breaking from the inside out.

CHAPTER VI

BARBADOS

I asked Jesse to take me, but he said no. “Barbados,” he said, “is where the money’s at.” I wanted out. I wanted to go.

“You’ve got to stay with the house,” he said.

“Why? We can just send a check back. I need to get away, you know? I need it.”

But he shook his head. “Somebody has to stay with the house. You want me to stay with the house? Fuck it. I’ll stay with the house. You go catch the goddamn sharks. Take my SIG. Hit between the eyes. Always right between the eyes. That goes for the fishermen. Anybody fucks with you– and somebody’s going to fuck with you– you hit dead between his eyes, knock him overboard. Got it?”

Jesse tapped on his forehead when he said the last part. He knocked with two knuckles on a spot in the middle of his face that was all bone. It made an empty sound where the skull was weak.

“Fine,” I said. “Whatever.”

“Hey, lighten up. You’ll come visit. Nowhere down there for you to live, anyway.”

“I can live wherever,” I said.

“Forget it. You’ll come visit. Right now, I got to catch fish. You got to stay with the house.”

I wanted to say fuck the house. Fuck the house and this town and everybody in it, all these filthy leeches and dirty tramps, and fuck everything he’d worked so hard for because I hadn’t and I never bargained for it and I wanted out. But I knew what he’d say. He’d say he’d put his sweat and blood into it, worked day and goddamn night for it, given it to me without asking for anything. He’d say we were in it together. He’d get angry and say fuck it then, let it go. Just give it away. Let’s come back to nothing. And I wanted so much to say let’s never come back. But he would say why.

Andrew was downstairs packing that night. His last trip had gone out that morning, and now they were both going to go. Andrew had found their spots on The Baroness, the commercial-fisher leaving Puerto Nuevo at dawn on the first day of October. It would swing over Cuba and pick them up from a port in Alabama. Winter-long it would run in and out of Bridgetown and troll the Caribbean Sea. I would drive them over and see them off and I would come back to stay with the house. Only Josiah would never have gone if he knew anything. But he didn’t know anything because I’d never said so. That was the only good thing about his leaving. My last chance for him to never know anything. My last chance to get it right and make good, because we had a good thing going, he and I, and we were in it together.

Close to midnight, we got into Andrew’s truck and drove west. I knew the highway that went along the beach better than I knew myself. I knew how miles of

dunes would look from the sky because I knew when the road went up and when it came down. I knew where, from the sky, the water would be dark and where the water would be light. We were going to the Port of Mobile.

Once past the bridges and on the straightaway toward New Orleans, Andrew turned on the cabin light and opened the glove compartment. Jesse was driving and talking mostly to himself about the weather, predicting out loud what the wind was like fifteen miles out.

“It’ll be cold, goddamnit. I’ll tell you that much. Goddamn will it be cold,” he said.

“Look in the floor,” Andrew said to me.

Under the tackle and the tarps and so many empty beer cans there was a flat plate shoved up beside the driver’s seat. I gave it to him.

“I just keep thinking about Donnie’s boat, you know,” Jesse said. “Wasn’t so cold but goddamn. You know I almost goddamn died. You know I think I almost did. He was out for me, that sonofabitch cousin of Donnie’s. Motherfucker would of offed me for a twenty, I swear to god. When I came walking down the deck– goddamn– so I come walking around the corner– I come walking down real quiet so they didn’t know and I heard that motherfucker– the fuck was his name– Mallard– they called that fucker Mallard. I heard the motherfucker Mallard say, *well, what’d’ya think? Now or later?*”

Andrew had his cocaine all poured out the plate. He'd emptied the whole eightball and had his knife between his teeth and was rolling a dollar bill over the coke with his cigarette lighter, breaking the rocks down into fine powder.

"You think now or later? He's bound to catch a good amount more. And Donnie was there saying, yeah, yeah, we'll ride up on the rigs. Fucking oilrigs is what they were talking about. And then there was Jeff, that bastard, Jeff said, why not drop him underneath?"

Andrew and I would look at each other now and then, just for a second, when Jesse would get loud or come to a part he'd told different last time he told the story. It was hard to tell, too, who he was talking to since we'd both heard the story god knows how many times and he was always changing it up depending on who was listening. When Andrew was done with the dollar he peeled it off the plate and handed it back to me and I licked it clean. He took the knife from between his teeth and started cutting the dope.

"So I was figuring out, you know. Those fuckers, man, what could I do? Five of them and one of me. Talking about putting me down under with the fish on the fucking ice. Sick bastards. They were going to fucking kill me. Slit my throat first maybe, maybe not. Maybe just send me down below to shovel the ice or some shit and drop the fucking door. One thing I knew though they were going to fucking kill me. Christ. Christ, makes me sick just remembering."

We'd ridden that highway back and forth a hundred times. Locals liked to call it Bloody Highway because of how many cars were always crashing on it and people

dying up and down it from Panama City to New Orleans night and day. It ran right along the beaches and right into every port along the Gulf as far as Texas. In September, when the fishing was slowing down, Jesse went out of this town called Safe Harbor, went out on a boat belonging to some captain named Donnie. It was nothing but a five-day trip, but his head wasn't where it needed to be. Even Andrew said to make those trips, to go out on that water and stay for days you had to be at least a little something, some kind of crazy in some way.

“Thing is though, you know, thing was, I was catching mad fish. I was reeling those bitches in, so they couldn't off me just like that, cause that was their money overboard if they did. So I knew I had a couple days, you know.”

He was pretty worked up by the time Andrew passed the cocaine his way, and was just getting to the part where he would jump overboard.

“But then, you know, on the other hand, maybe not. Maybe I didn't even have an hour. I didn't fucking know. What I knew was, we were getting mighty motherfucking close to those oilrigs, and fuck me if Mallard wasn't looking at me over his shoulder every five fucking seconds, fucking sketch-like, and now we where in the middle of the goddamn Gulf of Mexico. Not a piece of land for a hundred fucking miles, so how hard was it going to be? It ain't hard. And then I started thinking about how nobody even knew about me being out on that boat except you.”

So finally I knew he was talking to me. I thought maybe he was warning me. Maybe this was his last story is what I was thinking, and he was telling it one last

time just in case, just to make sure I knew and would always know, and if he never came back I would know why.

“Nobody knew I was out on that fucking boat except for you and the motherfuckers on that boat. Mallard, old fucker always just looking off at the water like there was something fucking out there. Probably that crazy bastard did see something out there. And Jeff, a fucking felon, you know, bald-ass head, didn’t give a fuck about nothing. And Donnie, you know Donnie had killed people. You knew just looking at him that he’d kill you. It was just a matter of for what. What’s your fucking life worth? Two grand, maybe. Maybe three grand. But I guarantee you there’s fuckers who’ll kill you for two grand. That’s what your life is fucking worth. Let me tell you something. Your life ain’t worth shit out there. Not shit. You’re fucking money or no money is all you are. And I swear I was only still alive cause I was still fucking money.”

The coke was good and kicking in pretty hard. My mouth had gone numb and that faint buzzing was just barely beyond where I could hear it but I knew it was there. One more line and I would hear it, but I wasn’t thinking about it because I was listening to Josiah like it was the first time, because I had the feeling he was trying to tell me something you’ve maybe got to hear three or four times before you really hear it and it hits you. What he was saying then I was thinking was going to hit me any second and I was going to get it, and when I got it I was going to know why he had to go down to Barbados, after all, and why I had to stay, but more than that I

was going to know what I had to do to make it without him. He was telling me and I was listening.

We were in Mississippi by the time he got to the part where the boat started leaking fuel, right out there in the middle of the oilrigs, so far from human kind you could close your eyes and forget who you were. That's what Josiah said it was like when the boat ran out of fuel, and he was so sure he was at his end, and despite his ever believing in God or no God, he walked to the helm and closed his eyes. That's when he forgot who he was, he said, and forgot everything else except that there was a voice he could hear coming from his own mouth, and he could hardly even feel his own mouth moving but he could hear his voice, and it was saying, "God. I think I need you now, God. You help me out or I think they're going to kill me. I guess I'm saying I need another chance. I'm saying I don't know how but I need a way out and I need it right now. Now or never, God." And the way my brother tells it, when he opened his eyes, even though he can't remember ever even meaning to open his eyes, when he did he could see the light, the head lamp of another boat coming up out of the night like coming up from the underworld, where his boat was headed. He tore off his shoes and his shirt and dove into that water as cold and dark as the devil's own heart and he swam for his life.

All the boys got a good laugh out of that, he said. "Of course they thought it was a fucking riot," he said. "Said I came swimming up with my pistol in my fucking hand shouting *They're gonna kill me They're gonna kill me!* But you know what? You know, I'm still not sure they weren't going to fucking kill me. And as for God, man, I

don't know. All I know is that boat came out of nowhere. All I know is that boat wasn't on the radar, so that boat came out of fucking nowhere."

In spite of what too far out or too much salt was maybe doing for my brother's head, I wasn't worried much about him. I knew at least something about those goddamn fishers, that they came in gangs and turned on only two kinds of other fishers: the greenies and the lonely. But Jesse had just finished out his second season, and a damn impressive season at that, he liked to say; so there was nothing green about him anymore. Lonely, though— anybody could get caught lonely. On Donnie's boat, lonely is all Jesse was. Lonely prey, not even crazy enough yet to know it, to know how in this crowd nobody likes to see a man walking around lonely. Get too close to a lonely man, you might start to feel that old grief in your heart, might start to recall what you gave up once for what you're stuck with now.

Anyway there were only five people on that boat and four of them were well acquainted, had been running those winter trips out into the oil rigs for years, bringing all the marlin back in, and the snapper and the red fish too. Turns out— the story goes— that the boat's owner and it's captain met ten years back in a feud over a woman. Ended up she went with the captain and married him, but everybody knew how now and then she was still fucking the owner. Then there was Donnie's cousin Mallard, and, Jeff was a buddy of his. So there you had it. Four men knowing each other all this time and running boats together. Not Josiah, though. He knew nobody. He had his boots full of switchblades and his Beretta and at least fifteen fishers vouching for him back on the docks in Destin. But this was Donnie's boat and this

wasn't Destin. Donnie's boat was called *Sheila*, after that woman, and she went out of Safe Harbor, where blades and bullets don't count for shit when you come strolling up unknown and god-forbidden-lonely.

Jesse knew it, too. It never needed to be said. The day he came in on the *Poor Boy* when I knew for certain he'd gone out on *Sheila*, came in to Safe Harbor and raised a hand in the air from a hundred feet out, that day I stood at the docking ramp and saw how lonely a man can be. I raised a hand back.

Jesse told me his story, but I'd already heard it from *Sheila's* crew, as they'd docked a few hours earlier. Captain Donnie said, "A downright fucking good damn fisher," and, "Craziest kid I ever seen." Only what anybody said about my brother never mattered a bit to me. What I knew was who he was, not what he'd done one night way out on the ocean. Anyway, that's what I liked to think I knew. But even Andrew said to do that kind of thing, to make a life like they did out on that water, you had to be some kind of something, different or crazy or lonely or something, and his eyes lit up like steel against flint. This time, Jesse had Andrew, so I wasn't worried.

Me, I had Jose, whose name was the last word out of Jesse's mouth in Mobile. "You know what to do," he said. "Shoot straight. Bet high. Speak easy, you know. Don't go around philosophizing, fucking blowing their minds and shit, you feel me? Write the checks. Lock the doors. And stay the fuck away from Jose."

CHAPTER VII

LOVE

The week before the boys left for Barbados, I lost my job down at the docks. I would have lost it months before, had it not been for Andrew. He was always covering for me when I didn't show, and never said a word to Josiah. It went on like that all summer, and I showed up enough to make rent, and to eat, and to take Jose's collect calls from the jailhouse, now and then. My brother rarely asked where else my money went. Sometimes I had a little, and most of the time I lied. I told him I was paying to see a shrink in Santa Rosa, and I said the medication he gave me made me flush and my eyes water. Josiah wasn't stupid, but love, they say, is blind.

Andrew's boat was the last I ever washed. It came in just a few minutes after dark. Andrew and his crew were with a couple of military guys who'd gone out for a night ride and not really much fishing. They had caught a few things but didn't want them and were too drunk to deal with bags of fish on ice, anyway. The deckhands packed up and headed off not far behind the drunk military kids. Andrew said to me, "There's not much to wash up," and he sat down on the dock to clean the fish they'd left behind. I mopped up the deck, emptied some ashtrays in the cabin and opened a beer I'd found on the floor. It oozed and spit some foam, but it was still cold. I lit a

cigarette and sat down beside Andrew. He was slicing along the silver underbelly. Andrew was careful not to look away from what he was doing, though he could have, because he knew that blade and those fat fish bellies like he knew what it meant when the wind turned west. But he wouldn't look at me. He must have known that I loved him whenever we were alone.

In the beginning, Andrew often came over to our house on the bay and broke out fine white lines of cocaine onto the kitchen table. Andrew was a fish-head, like Josiah said, and like Josiah wanted to be. Andrew would usually bring fish, too; red snapper or sea trout or at least bait fish so that if there was nothing to cook right away, we could bait the lines and hang over the upper deck, getting high and drinking plenty of cold beer and taking turns going back inside to snort a line from the table. Sometimes this abundance even seemed to be enough.

Andrew never brought bad coke, and he never asked anything for it, since lots of times we let him sleep at our place anyway. He only sometimes had a place to stay, when he wasn't fighting with his girlfriend or dad or grandma. He never fought with us, though, and the fact alone that his coke was never bad made me think he was probably reliable and not really against us and maybe even someone you could trust. Josiah didn't trust anybody, but Andrew more than most, so we let him stay even when we weren't home and he always gave us something for it.

In my heart I was sure that Andrew was good and that he was full of something beautiful and terrible, something he had lost or lived through, running from it or hiding from it or just trying to go on after it, after all. I started to love him

for that. His eyes were as far gone as I imagined they could go, but they stayed with me when we talked. He looked at me and I knew that I didn't know him and that maybe I could but it wasn't up to me.

The lemon tree beside our dock was laden with bright yellow fruit in late June, and on one of those June nights Josiah and Andrew came home, their skin dirty and burned a light brown, their finger nails filthy, smelling like the sweet dark beer from the Wharf. Josiah carried a big Spanish Mackerel by the rig in its gums and he grinned at me when he slapped it down on the kitchen table. Right away he went to the refrigerator and brought out three Coronas, a lime, a bowl of homemade marinade and Tabasco. I set to slicing the lime while Andrew began to clean the fish, dragging his blade down from the gills, slicing skin away from body and stripping the flesh off the vertebrae in a way so graceful I had to notice it. Josiah gave me a knowing look, knowing I was watching Andrew, and made a scene of popping open the beers. "Good day," he said, meaning he'd made plenty of money on his trip and probably had fished like hell. That was a good day, working like hell and making plenty of money.

"How do you want to cook it?" I said, nodding toward Andrew and the bloody Mackerel.

"Grill it up," Josiah said.

We moved out onto the porch where there was a grill and some picnic tables and plenty of bright moonlight coming in over the bay. That's when I noticed finally that Andrew was angry about something. It wasn't in the way he looked or even

talked because he wasn't the kind to curse into the wind. I could only tell by the things he did, drinking his beer fast, heavily, hands gripping everything he held too tightly. He paced the deck broadly and went on gripping things tight while we cooked and ate.

All night that night Josiah talked about the new girls who were coming into town for the summer, moving in like a flock of geese, making loud gawking sounds from the shore, but plenty of them hot as hell and plenty of lush little sluts in town with their grandparents just for the week so you couldn't go wrong with them. Josiah went out to chase them down after dinner, and when he was gone it was me and Andrew, Andrew turning up another bottle and me saying, "What's wrong? You can tell me what's wrong."

He shook his head, starrng out, looking like he was just saying no to the water or the current or whatever it was out there too deep for his own two hands. I knew I could get him where I wanted him because I'd seen him looking for the longest time not far away past me but far away at me, and then looking away like he was doing now, shaking his head and simply meaning he couldn't stop it, whatever was coming. Andrew was beautiful like a broken statue, somehow still perfect with golden skin and crooked teeth.

He left my bed long before daylight, before Josiah came home and could have found us there, not naked and not fucking, just all wrapped up in each other, kissing and gripping and just for a while not seeming to mind that was happening shouldn't be happening or that one of us, at least, was doing something wrong. But Andrew

was even better than I had bargained for; a truth-teller, and I hadn't counted on that. Josiah came into my room in a kind of furry the next morning.

He said, "He'll never love you, man, you know why? You want to know why? Because I won't let him. I won't fucking let him."

I was starrng back at him, half-awake, astonished. I was all wrapped up in Andrew's arms and hair and hardly realizing yet that he was gone.

"It's stupid. It's a stupid idea. It would never work. You're different people. You want different things."

"What the fuck does that even mean?" I said.

"It means you're different people, you know."

"No. I don't know. I don't know what that means or how we could not be different people or not want different things, like I don't want myself I want Andrew and he wants me and I want him to want me."

"Rachael. You've got it all wrong. I mean that's sweet and all but come on, you're smarter than that."

"Smarter?"

"Think about it. Just think about it, the two of you. It's Andrew, you know. He's a fishhead. He wants to go fishing. Not like you, man. You went to college, you know, you like poetry or whatever, philosophy. Not like Andrew, man. He wants to drink and to fish. Is that what you want, Rachael? Be smart."

So I was ashamed of myself for a while and I found that I had started crying sometime around *whatever, philosophy* and Josiah had stopped talking long enough for me to say, "Well, what if it is? What if I do want that?"

Josiah just shook his head and stood in the doorway, just stood in the doorway shaking his head. "You don't," he said, and went out. I stayed in my room wrapped up in my covers thinking for a long time *poetry or whatever, philosophy*, ashamed of myself for that.

When I'd gotten out of bed, Josiah said, "Why do you want to fall in love so bad?"

I said, "What are you talking about?"

"All the time you're just running around trying to fall in love. Like calm down. What's your fucking rush?"

"I'm not in any rush."

"You're in a fucking hurry."

"Well." I looked out the window and stirred some whiskey into my coffee.

"What's wrong with that?"

I didn't think that Josiah had ever been in love and I imagined that he did not want to be because he considered himself too free. He was a wanderer, after all, a gambler and a drinker and a practical man, and he never loved any place he went to better than another.

"In the first place, it's stupid," he said.

"What do you know about it?" I asked him.

"I don't know shit, but I know you don't drop yourself in the water like fucking bait and wait for it to bite you."

I laughed at him. "That's the stupidest shit I've ever heard. Love doesn't work like that. It's not about baiting a hook."

"The hell. You're about baiting a hook, I'll tell you that."

And so our last together, the night of his last trip, I sat on the dock quiet beside Andrew. For a long time I'd thought he would come back to me. I waited up for him nights, in all dark except for maybe a candle lit and a lone cigarette burning. I waited for weeks for him to come back to my bedroom, but Josiah had been right. He wasn't coming back and I hadn't really wanted him to, because sitting silent on the dock while he sliced open the little snappers I didn't want him to reach for me or anything. I was thinking instead of how Jose would be over in a few hours and how I wanted some coke. I would get some from Jose, but if I could get it from Andrew too then that was better. "What've you got?" I said.

"A little. Not much. How much you want?"

"Whatever," I said. "Whatever's on hand."

So we went back into the cabin on the boat and broke out a half gram. He said, "Ladies first," like he always did, and didn't lean in too close or watch me for long. I watched him always, though. He was still this one beautiful thing. We rode home together in his truck. He was never anything but kind.

CHAPTER VIII

NIGHT RUNNING

Jose came out of the night like an angel or a demon, although at the time I wasn't likely to care which much less know the difference. There was a cunning nothingness and eagerness in his gestures, flow of his feet against pavement, because he didn't care where he was going even though he probably knew but if he was wrong it didn't matter, he'd go wherever. I guess I'd felt that way before. I guess maybe I thought if he could be who he was and be happy, be full of some kind of completeness at least, I could too. I thought I could do what he could do.

On our way out the door, the door that went out under the decks, I was creeping and running towards because it was so close and I had to get out of it, maybe I was actually laughing or tripping or crying, I don't know. But Jesse had heard well enough how quiet I was trying to be and he yelled down from upstairs. "Rachael! Hey! Where are you going?"

Jose looked over his shoulder toward that voice but I tugged on his hand and kept moving forward, going fast and quiet and probably laughing or whispering with all my lungs. I thought we'd get out without anybody seeing but Jesse had come out the door from upstairs and was there when we came from under the decks. He was there on the steps coming down from the decks just still and watching, saying,

calm in his voice and Andrew standing on the deck looking down from behind him, "Where you going?" Maybe he was asking me or maybe he was asking Jose or both, Andrew looking on like he'd known all along.

"I don't know. To get a drink or something. It's a good night to drink, right? We're going drinking. What are you doing?"

Jose wasn't saying anything. I was waiting for Josiah and Andrew to look at each other and look like they both knew something but they didn't, only Josiah came down the steps and right at the same time Andrew behind him, their feet moving at the same time down the steps like troops advancing so I was ready for Jose to die. But Andrew just stopped at the bottom and stayed there when Josiah said, "Rachael, come here a second," and walked around under the steps, stopped in a shadow where I couldn't see him but he could see me because I wasn't hidden in hedge and darkness, but he was standing with his back against the moonlight so I couldn't see his face but he could see me, moonlight on my face, moonlight burning my eyes even. "Rachael, what the hell are you doing?"

"Nothing, man. I'm doing nothing. We thought we'd go out drinking. Hey, hey, you got a cigarette on you?"

"You oughtta just stay here, man. You don't know this guy, you know? Just stay here man, we'll just chill. What the fuck are you on, anyway? You're eyes are fucking ridiculous right now."

I was moving around trying to get out of the moonlight. "Jesse, you know, calm down, man, he's cool. Really good blow, though, you know, like really good. Like goddamn. I just wanna go out drinking. You gotta calm down man."

Josiah laughed a little and said, "Holy shit. Yeah, pretty good I guess. Alright, alright. Then we'll all go."

"Josiah, hey, I love you, man, but you gotta calm down. I'll be fine. Fine. It's not a problem."

"Alright. So you don't want us all to go?"

"Like I just met this guy. Like I'm just getting to know him."

"Just tell me where you're going then. You can tell me where you're going."

"Oasis. That's where I met him. We'll be just like right down the street, alright? Really. It's not a problem."

"You go somewhere else you tell me. You call me."

"Alright man just calm down."

"You'll let me know?"

"Yes, man, I'll tell you, I'll tell you."

We came out from behind the porch steps and Jose was right there where I left him, pacing up and down the driveway with his phone flipped open, smoking and not paying attention to Andrew, crouched on the bottom step, smoking too and just watching him, a hawk crouched on that bottom step so I wondered how Jose could help but try and hide from him but he wasn't. I smiled at Andrew just because I felt like smiling. He didn't smile back much, maybe a little, kept looking like some

crazy hawk while I went toward Jose and his car and Jesse came out past the steps to watch me climb in the passenger's side. Jose had his phone to his ear and waved one hand up at my brother who waved one hand back. I felt like I had just gotten out of murder, found Jose's cigarettes and lit one. It made me smile how good it tasted and how good it felt driving off now, windows down, off down Gulf Shore Boulevard. Jose was already on the phone with somebody, talking about when and where and how to get something, but he reached one arm over and put his palm a little above my knee where my leg was bare because the breeze had blown back my skirt and left it there.

We were going someplace and didn't know where. Seemed like Jose couldn't have cared and it was fine by me, since I'd be anywhere before where I'd been, back in the mad heart that sucked me in and spit me out of everywhere I'd come from. Ask me then where I'd come from and likely I couldn't have told you. Maybe I'd have said from college or maybe from a liar's den. Truth is I didn't know where I'd been. What I told Jose was, "I just felt like coming down."

He said, "Where were you before?" and I said, "You know, other places, around."

He laughed and said what's that supposed to mean and I said nothing, just I hadn't really been anywhere. That much, anyway, was some truth about it, even though in a big way I thought I'd been a lot of places, been around enough to tell you some things you ought to know. Like Jesse always got sort of angry, that or just amused, when I acted like I was smart about things or knew about one thing better

than anybody. He'd laugh at me or go along with it for a while and then laugh or if he was having a bad day just tell me to shut the fuck up, I didn't know shit.

Having been on those docks as long as he had I guess Jesse figured out fast enough how he didn't know shit, so me coming down with my college education and my pompous trail of proper suitors, he put me in my place. "Whatever it is you've figured out by now, read all about in a hundred books or whatever, forget it already. I'd be surprised if a single fucking thing you learned on your bunk bed will help you out when shit goes down. Someday you're actually gonna need to know what you're talking about."

I tried to stand up for myself. "Whatever, man. Just cause you couldn't hack it, couldn't handle the burn of eyes on you asking you questions, doesn't mean it never meant anything. Just cause it wasn't what you wanted doesn't make it worthless." "Yeah, well, I'm still saying. That's not how you figure shit out. Philosophizing. Sitting around talking about it and writing about it all goddamn day. Walking around like a goddamn poet all the time. I'll tell you this. Any good poet I know is a good poet cause he's lived through shit. Cause he figured it out first and then-then-*then* he wrote it down. You get it? I'm not even saying I've lived through shit. I just know that, man, I just know that."

"Yeah? Then how do you know that?"

"Man look around a minute and you'll know that. That's your big goddamn problem, Rachael. Listen, you're so busy like goddamn thinking all the time you don't even look around."

And just then Josiah would have said something like that because Jose was driving, headed I didn't know where, and I wasn't even looking where we were going. His voice getting caught up in the wind coming in through the windows was saying to someone how he was coming across the bridge. I maybe noticed just then that we were still a ways from the bridges but I guessed he knew that. I guessed from the beginning he knew what he was doing, so that was just one thing I did wrong. He dropped his phone into his lap and the hand that was above my knee just barely held on there. He said did I care if we made a quick stop. I said a quick stop across the bridges. He said just on this side of Fort Walton. "Light me a smoke, will you?" he said.

"What's in Fort Walton?"

"Some people. I'll let you meet some of my people. Cool?"

"Yeah man, it's cool." I handed him a lit cigarette, heavy menthol filling up the mirrors because I had rolled the window up to light it. "Your people? What kind of people are you people?"

"They're good people, baby. Don't worry. It'll be a quick stop then you can drive us."

"I don't know Fort Walton."

"I'll show you," he said. "Cool?" He said, "Hey, by the way, you look fucking beautiful."

It's not like I didn't lack and lack abysmally the kind of common sense Josiah was always telling me about how I needed to have. Me and just about any bad situation and like lightening after thunder it was bound to happen; we went together. So I didn't need any convincing from Jose that his people were good people and us going where we were going was going to turn out ok. The thing for me was no need to convince me because I didn't care. I could think maybe it would be fine and just as easily I could think maybe it wouldn't and far from that being something that scared me it was instead a lot like something I was looking forward to, just a little distress and a little suspense and a little bit of a risk you love to take. Just then I loved to take it. Like that it didn't matter just enough for me to slip my risky palm up under Jose's where he had my leg and like a spider, with that flare of instinct, his fingers sprung out and curled through mine and he squeezed my hand, not looking at me, and I squeezed back, not looking at him.

We went over the bridges together. By the time we'd barely crossed the Island whoever was on the other side waiting called again. Jose didn't let go of my hand but let go of the steering wheel instead, flipped his phone up to his face and caught it between his shoulder and cheek. His free hand went for the cigarette pack in the console and his two knees braced the wheel, steadied it when it tried to stray, drove us down into Fort Walton as well as any set of two hands. I had to smile and wonder about that, about how maybe any part of him could do what any other part

could do, like how I already knew his mouth was good for kicking and the scar across his skinny skull good for reaching out and grabbing you. I guessed his hands could do the talking and his feet were good for a kiss.

Jose didn't say hello like a question when he answered the phone. He said, "At the breach," and hung up without waiting for an answer.

"The breach?" I said.

"That's the light, where you're first coming into the Fort."

I said, "Strange."

"Yeah? Why?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's just a weird thing to call a place."

Jose though was thinking about something else, where to run to next most likely. I guess he thought about it at least for a second, because after a while he said, "I didn't name it."

Jose and me, we were good from the start, good for each other like when two voices come toward each other in the dark. Like when you just know I knew Jose was my good thing coming mostly because of the way he didn't care or didn't seem to where I'd been or why, where I thought I'd go or not go. I thought I'd go right alongside him over the bridges or wherever just until we were safe and he could say without any kind of worry where he was from and what he was after. One thing I knew- it wasn't what anybody else was chasing. Like when you meet a man mining for gold in a ditch where people say there's no gold and you go into that ditch with him; that's how Jose was somebody to follow.

We took a turn north up Beal Parkway. All the time Jose was making small jokes and saying baby hand me this, baby hand me that. I played with the radio and when he asked I counted the cash left in his wallet, twenty-two dollars and a few crumbs of rock. "We got to up, okay?" he said.

"Yeah I guess. I mean I wish I did but I don't know much about it." I was wishing we weren't driving so I could see Jose's eyes and how they flinched when I said that, meaning only to him that I wasn't a part of where he was from. I wanted to say how I wanted to be.

CHAPTER IX

JOSE

It seemed like a long time before I loved Jose. Josiah couldn't understand and would not understand it. "Fuck Jose," Josiah said, and "Just leave these fuckers alone and get on with your life." I tried sometimes to tell Josiah that you can't get on with your life and leave a part of it behind you because to get on with it you've got to take it all and carry it. I said there are still so many things to learn and you never learn them all but you try. Josiah said, "That's bullshit. Just let it go," and he said other things he never knew hurt like, "Let dead dogs be dead fucking dogs," and "You don't love him- you don't- you can't cause you never even knew him. You're in love with a fucking junkie? Whatever. You can't love a junkie- he's not a person- he's a fucking junkie. You're in love with the fucking street or what?"

But Jose was a wanter and I was a wanter, too, and without him I'd never have known it- I'd have gone on wanting without knowing it was wanting- like you're carrying around a disease with all the symptoms but nobody anywhere to tell you what you've got. By the time I met Jose I had the wanting bad, worse than he did, probably, even though he'd been born into it. All around him he'd always had things to feed it, whereas I had just been carrying it and carrying it, hungry and not

knowing I was hungry, so you couldn't really tell who had it worse by the time we met.

Josiah had known it about me all along I guess, but it was too late by the time he'd gotten around to saying it. He said, "Everybody's got it bad, you know? You know, I guess you think you've got it worse than most people. I don't know why. Maybe you do. Maybe it's harder for you or something. I get that. But what you're doing, man- what you're doing won't make it better. Maybe somebody can fix it- not me- maybe you can, somehow, but not like this." By the time Josiah said that I already knew I had it bad, and hearing Josiah say he knew it too and couldn't fix it- I took that like some kind of affirmation, like I was fucked and there in Josiah's voice was my free pass to be fucked and to fall apart and what he was saying was *when it happens I will understand*.

Turns out I was wrong about that. It's not what he meant at all, but I didn't question it then. What I did was cry on his shoulder for a while, say I was sorry I had to be so crazy and he had to handle it. He put his arm around me while we leaned out over the harbor, the mullet making fat splashes and the banana tree leaves lapping against each other in the breeze, sounding like a whipping sail.

But that was later, when all of that happened, when all these things that felt like truth and felt real and inescapable came together and forged a curse that you could catch just standing back and knowing it was there. What happened before was when it felt romantic. I felt like I was becoming more beautiful because it wasn't long before Jose called. I invited him into our house.

Only a few weeks had passed since we met at the bar. I had told Josiah the story. When Jose showed up, Josiah and Andrew were in the kitchen with a couple of the crew from Josiah's boat, and they were throwing cards down around the kitchen table. We were smoking up and I passed the bowl to Andrew and there was a knock from the door upstairs. Jose was on the deck. He hadn't known which door to go to. Josiah stood up heavily like he always would when it was late and someone came knocking. People came knocking plenty in the late hours, though— because of the energy of the place, I thought, because the waves never sleep and so neither did these coast-roamers, these almost-gone-overboard sailors with their sagging, wet eyes. I set the bowl down and let the buzz sink in, set my mind down into it like lowering an anchor, and it held me there. Josiah called my name from the front of the house and I looked up toward Andrew, who was looking at me. I knew I had won something from him then, and I smiled as slightly as I could. They came around the corner, Jose following Josiah, and I stood. Jose smiled when he saw me, pressed his hand into my mine briefly and his mouth into my cheek and I looked him up and down and smiled. Josiah and Andrew alike were watching, judging, scowling, even hating. It is so easy to love someone who will hate so easily for you.

I took Jose down to my room and I knew my brother was watching us leave the kitchen and turn down the stairs, listening to our footsteps as we went down and having one of his bad feelings he always had about things. Jose had brought something to keep us awake, but it wasn't what I was used to. When I saw what he pulled out of his pocket I tried to act like I had seen it before, a short glass tube that

wasn't wider on one end than on the other and that Jose called the stem, a little mess of steel wool that Jose called the chore, a piece of metal line that Jose called the pusher, and a bag full of little yellow rocks, the kind that glistened in the low lamp light.

I said, "I was thinking more like cocaine."

"It is cocaine," said Jose, handing me a smaller rock and letting me roll it around in my palm. "It's hard cocaine. Same thing, just better."

"It's crack?"

Jose seemed amused. "You smoke it."

"I know what you do," I said, though I didn't really. What I knew was that you went off the deep end, but I didn't give a damn. The minute I knew I could have it I wanted it, maybe because I'd never had it before or maybe because it was better than what Andrew was giving or maybe because it came with Jose and I was going where he was going. Than again, maybe I just wanted it and that's all.

Later, because I was running with Jose and Josiah had wanted to know where I'd been and why, what I turned into was criminal for how false it was. I lied like nobody's business. I lied to Josiah because I was as free as he was; only we both knew I shouldn't be. And I lied plenty to Andrew even though before long he was a liar, too, and soon I lied just to get better at it, and I learned from Jose so I guess I got pretty good.