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What a bunch of goddamn babies we've come to be. Where's the courage? Where's the pain? Nobody suffers anymore. If you're sad, you're abnormal. Fuck that, I like being sad.

--Robert Olmstead, *A Trail of Heart's Blood Wherever We Go*

There must be diamonds somewhere in a place that stinks this bad, / there are brighter things than diamonds coming down the line...

--The Mountain Goats, "The Young Thousands"

These stories often concern themselves with men chasing down a flawed sort of manhood. In these characters' minds, masculinity is a romantic mix of failure and drink, of chasing the wrong women and brooding in the face of calamity. These people like being sad; they mistake self-pity for courageous pain. They search for diamonds not in spite of the stink, but because of it, scouring for hope in the imaginary since they know hope is much scarcer in the reality they've so haphazardly constructed.

VILLAGE OF PETRIFIED MEN

By

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APPROVAL PAGE

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SHE WAS AN EGYPTIAN CARTOON

To hell with her is what I was thinking. Because she had just left and there were dishes smashed all over the kitchen and all I wanted was some breakfast, but I couldn't because my feet were bare-assed and the kitchen floor was all full of ceramic bits ready to cut me wide open, so I just sat on the couch, hungry, and looked at the whole scene-- with those broken dishes and the damn cooking show Jen left going on the television and the clothes that were lying on the floor because she said she wanted out that instant, and she pulled the door open so hard the chain lock came out of the rotten door frame so there was a draft creeping in ankle high from outside and this whole thing looks a hell of a lot like Good Riddance.

A minute later I had my head in my hands and I was crying like a big dumb lonely baby and I just wanted all of my major organs to shut down. As much as seconds before I wanted her to bug the hell off, now I wanted her back so we could watch that local access God channel we used to watch late-night with the woman preacher and the guy who went by Brother, and all Brother did was say Yes and Amen and hold his hands up like he was praying and me and Jen, we used to have a drinking game where we'd say Yes and Amen and good-God-knows-what-else along with Brother and if we messed up it was a big swig of Mad Dog--she used to like the strawberry-banana where I liked the old-fashioned grape but both of 'em tasted like those cans of frozen juice concentrate mixed with battery acid, so why we drank them in the first place I got no idea.

But that television--the one still showing some tarded-up guy making some fancy, Frenchified version of pork chops while I cried my stomach sore--was a good measure of how things were with me and Jen. If things were good on her little visits, we watched something like local access God people and laughed our crazy, you'd-think-we-were-kids-again heads off, but if things were bad Jen would put some shit on like these cooking shows. She knew I hated them not because I hated cooking--I mean, you should see what I can do with canned beans in sauce and a stick of pepperoni--but cause I had this pigmy-type kitchen in my apartment where you could stir a pot of what-have-you from the living room couch. Try making braised beef, or sweet potato casserole, or whatever in those conditions. But with that show on, and the Frenchy guy getting the pan sizzling, and me missing Jen all to hell crying on the couch, I kept it on because I couldn't move to get the channel flipper and 'cause she had run off to her place in the mountains and she wasn't coming back. *Kiss my ass goodbye*, she had said, and was out the door letting that damn ankle-high draft send all the blood out of my feet and into my red toes and up my legs back into my infant heart and I just stared at them and felt cold until my eyes cleared and the guy on TV was saying Look at that and Beautiful golden brown and if he were in the room I didn't know if I'd throttle him and throw the hot skillet out the window or weep into his greasy lap.

But just then the phone rang and I had it in my lap because something in me thought she'd call but knew she wouldn't--I guess you'd call that hope. I answered on ring one and sure enough it was Jen and I heard her say Hello and then there was this

rushing sound over and over again.

--Where are you?

--The highway. I got a flat.

--What do you expect me to do? Don't you got mountain friends can come and help you?

--I'm barely past Kernersville, Jackass.

--You left two hours ago.

--I had lunch at the pub. Are you going to help me?

--The pub is *my* hang out.

--Now's not the time, Dale.

--And you broke all my damn plates.

--So what if I did?

--'Cause now that it's convenient you want my help.

--Nothing convenient about it.

--Oh no?

--Dale, do you really think you're the first person I called?

This was not exactly the conversation I imagined when I hoped for the phone to ring with Jen on the other end. But that was what I had come to like, or love or whatever, about Jen. It was tough to tell what you were going to get from her one minute to the next.

--You coming or not Dale?

Give me one reason is what I wanted to say, but it came out Where are you?

--Just before Exit 10. Bring a coffee, it's getting cold.

The line went dead after that.

I stayed on that couch for a bit telling myself I didn't want to go, that I didn't want to help her, but then I nearly forgot my shoes getting out the door, and swore to myself the one thing I wouldn't do was bring coffee to some woman who just left me and smashed up my dishes. Not that I was crazy about them; they were dingy, not quite white and my mom gave 'em to me free when I moved into my new place. But the things could hold a grilled cheese as good as any other plates could, and now I had nothing left but my own two hands.

I got onto the highway and got up to 80 MPH--standard cruising speed--but it must've been a slow day or the cops were out because I was passing everyone and I'm on that sucker daily and even the grannies do 80. So I slowed down to a shade under 70 and decided Jen could wait until her ass fell asleep in her seat 'cause I wasn't going any faster. I got to thinking that slower was probably the speed I should have taken with Jen. I knew pretty early on things with her would be weird when we met at a work party at Ned from Shipping's house and she was a friend of Laura the Secretary's, down from the mountains for the weekend and we faced off in some beer pong--which made me feel like an idiot kid again and not some 9-to-5 UPS driver--and her and Laura beat me and Ned and then Laura came up and said My friend thinks you're kind of cute and so later on in the night with a few more beers for bravery I walked up to her puffing on a big ol' stogie.

--Hi, I'm Dale.

--Dale, I hate cigars.

I tucked the thing behind my back but you could still smell it.

--Get out of my face with it, Dale.

And she walked away just like that. I puffed down that stogie damn quick and stole some mints out of a jar on the counter and said Hello and she said Take two and I don't know what we talked about after that because I was focused on how she cursed like a sailor and let her bra strap hang out the side of her shirt and off her shoulder, the way she burped a low bass burp after a swig of beer but still had the eyes and the lips and the ass that you'd crawl over glass for. I'm no idiot, so I know we just got drunk and went home together and she told me since she came down most weekends 'cause she had no friends left in the mountains we could make it a regular thing since we were easy strange for each other.

Still, she reminded me of one of those old Egyptian cartoons they painted on walls. She'd come down, and we'd order take-out and watch crappy television, then do our thing at night, and we didn't talk about much. But I knew there was something else down there inside of her, and I just wanted her to stick around long enough for me to see it. She couldn't just be this flat character painted on a wall, she was person with all the dimensions and troubles and hopes that thickened in her marrow like the rest of us. I was sure of it.

But it was hard to get deep with Jen, no matter how I tried. As long as we kept to insulting the TV and bumping till the mattress broke we were fine. It was when we made like an actual couple things went all Jerry Springer for us. The first time we actually went out to dinner, at my insistence, I tried to order the bacon-chicken sandwich for Jen

because Ned said that would be suave as hell. But she nearly brained me, said it was a new millennium and women could tell what they wanted their damn selves you useless Cro-mag, which was a pet name she would throw around a lot. One time, Ned asked me about Jen at work and I told him She's a real organ grinder, and Ned said You mean, like, you're her dancing monkey? and I shrugged. Hadn't thought of it like that, I said. What's the other way to think about it? Ned asked and I told him I meant she can say things'll grind up your organs, the liver and kidneys and the like and Ned just laughed and said I hear that, Brother like what I said was a normal thing to say about someone so I took it back. But later, when she flipped out and broke the plates, I guess I should've known I was right, and maybe I should have seen the reaction coming when I asked her to dinner at my parent's house.

Meeting the parents was a boyfriend-girlfriend thing and she was having none of it. She asked me what in our history had given me the impression she'd want to do that, and I guess she had a point but I was stuck. I had let her name slip on the phone when my mom asked if there was anyone special and I said Her name's Jen before I could get my slow-motion brain to stop and think about what it was doing for a goddamn second, because Mom can't let shit like this go and it'd be How's Jen and What's her parents do and When are you gonna pop the question and What color will the bridesmaid's dresses be--all those questions from now until Kingdom come if I didn't invite Jen to dinner and show them this wasn't any big deal, that nothing would come of it probably.

Still, when I woke before her and sat there thinking stupid hazy morning thoughts about her coming to dinner I imagined her being impressive as hell. My dad would get a

kick out of our God channel game, because he's always joking about that stuff too, and her and Mom could talk about that Italian chef guy on TV who, near as I can tell, has some form of Tourette's but can do some shit with veal you wouldn't believe. In my head it was all set, we would be a regular couple, Romeo and Juliet, without the double-suicide thing. But, of course, in reality I asked her over coffee and the plates started flying and it was Why would I do that and Do you even like me? And I said Hell yes I like you.

--But I'm terrible to you. I make you feel like the Idiot King all day, then sleep with you at night to shut you up. I just can't do it anymore, I'm tired of feeling like the goddamn wicked witch.

--Are you breaking up with me? I asked.

--We're not breaking up, Dale, because we weren't dating. I told you we couldn't 'date'. I mean, it's not like we've been exclusive right? You've seen other people haven't you?

I was sure she was lying, cross-my-damn-heart sure. I knew enough of her to know she'd tell a lie like she was putting a shield up in front of her.

--Of course I have, Jen. Plenty of girls.

The lie scraped out of my throat like a jagged pebble.

--I just can't do this anymore. It's not worth it, treating you this way. It's not good for either of us.

--You don't mean it when you pick on me, I say.

--I don't?

--No, you're just afraid of commitment.

I'm going to hold a seminar one day about ways to keep your dishes in one piece. Telling the girl you're sleeping with--especially when that sort of thing don't come around your block too often--that she's afraid of commitment would be Cardinal Law One on the list of Things Not to Say. I might have spared a couple of the small saucers if I hadn't let that slip. But I did, and she busted up the place and before she left she said You're clueless, Dale--probably to make herself feel better after going all bat-shit, then I guess karma caught up with her on the highway. But if I have a hold on the situation, karma is a bit of a pansy because it just flattened her tire with some cosmic wood nail and that ain't enough by a long shot, I don't think.

Driving as slow as I was when the highway split off west, the road seemed like it'd never end. I never liked this stretch; how it goes down to two lanes and all the trees seem like they're leaning over you, plotting to crush your ribcage flat. My chest always gets tight on this road and the cars passing by seem side-swiping close and if those cars were moving quicker and I didn't want Jen to sweat it out so bad, I'd've laid on that gas pedal hard. Thing was, now I was the one sweating--I pictured Jen bone-dry on the road side--and I figured it probably wasn't just the road but that maybe I had some blame in all of this. I've always found a way to fall in love with any girl who would pay me some attention sex-wise. I told my high school prom date I loved her in the back of my mom's car when she whispered Let's do it the breathy way I only ever heard in late-night cable movies. Then, when I bar-backed after school I puppy-dogged around after this waitress who offered me a joint in the back alley during a break and let me put my hand up her shirt once. She got me fired eventually.

So I knew I was like that and during the whole Jen situation I said to myself Don't be like that Don't be like that and I sang that Eagles' song in my head, going *Take it to the limit, one more time* like those were the only words in the song and I was doing pretty good, but soon enough she was coming every weekend instead of every other weekend, and even though she said the mountains were boring as hell it felt like something else. Like we were drawn to be together. I was soaked in that feeling, so of course I invited her to that dinner with my folks, not learning a lick from my mistakes. It'd be good for me to get away from her for a while, I thought passing Exit 14. I'll just do this one thing to help her on her way. Just a little boost out of my life and that'll be that. I can do that wipe-my-hands-in-front-of-my-face thing and move on. I got the image of me doing that motion in my head, and imagined Jen disappearing right in front of me, dissolving into the wind. The truck swerved a little and the car next to me blared its horn and I had to snap out of it and right myself.

The traffic let up after some construction, and I was all of a sudden pulled up behind Jen's car on the side of the road and there she was, leaning her hip on the back passenger side and for a second I hoped she'd stood there all this time waiting for me because even though I was thinking Let's just get through this and No hard feelings and all that, I hadn't forgotten the sty she made of my apartment. I set my hazards on and sat in the cab for a second trying to calm the quick beat in my chest, leftover I think from the near brush I had with that car a minute before. It took a little while, long enough for me to look at the coffee in the truck's cup holder and to feel foolish enough that my chest relaxed but my face went red. I took a deep breath and got out.

--Which tire?

She kicked the one at her feet, the rear passenger side tire.

--You got the tools out?

--They're all right here, I'm not a dummy.

--Just can't change a tire, huh? Need my help?

--Quit while you're ahead, Dale. You bring my coffee?

I turned around and looked at my truck for a second, then turned and shook my head.

--Slipped my mind, I guess. Let's go ahead and get this over with.

I grabbed up the tools and got the jack in the place to lift the car up, but then I heard her sigh all heavy and she said something to me. She said Thanks for coming out here, and goddamn my simple heart picked up its pace and while I jacked the car up off ground I was asking that dumb organ Do you remember what we talked about in the car and Can't you just change this tire and get this forest fire of a woman out of your life? But my heart knows what I'm just getting now and that's that love doesn't have an off switch, that love isn't much more than muscle memory and you can't stop it any more than you can stop the cells in your body dying and growing back.

Jen knelt down and leaned in behind me.

--I want to watch so I can do this myself next time.

That's what she said, and meanwhile her smell was sneaking up my nose and there's no helping I wanted to throw her in my truck and take her back to my apartment and strip her clothes off and kiss her neck and bellybutton and knees and commit that

flour and brown sugar smell to memory, try to encode it in my DNA.

But I didn't do any of that stuff. I changed the flat, went through the whole bit of wrenching off the four nuts and getting the tire off, rolling it around on the roadside looking close for a tack or a nail, but there was nothing there so I gave it to Jen to look over and I plopped the spare donut on. While I was jacking the car back down Jen came back over.

--There's no nail in it or anything, I don't think.

--Well, the donut's on, so you're all set.

--What do you mean 'all set'?

--Tire's changed. My job's done.

--Oh no, Dale, I can't get to Boone on that little thing.

--What am I gonna do about that?

Jen pointed to a couple of gas stations just off the exit. She said You're coming with me. I hate gas stations.

I looked at her, then at the stations in the distance.

--You won't get your tire plugged at one of those giant highway gas stations, I'll tell you that much.

--Then we'll drive until we find one that will help us.

I couldn't do anything but stand there shoulder-slumped and stare at her because the smashed plates or the cooking show or the drive out there or that damn cup of coffee in the truck or the tire changing had worn me out all of a sudden. I couldn't find one reason in my head, not one good reason, for me to have come out and help Jen. She

asked and I came running, and that was pretty much the Mobius strip our whole relationship--Jen called it a 'fling'--had traveled on.

I said Give me the keys.

--Excuse me?

--If I'm going, I'm driving. Otherwise, have a nice life.

Jen frowned at me, but not like she did when she was about to call me Cro-mag, but more like I was something she was trying to translate.

--Let's go, Jen. Give them up and hop in. I don't have all day.

I sounded calm and collected and in control even though the shake in my gut would have put a decent number on a Richter scale.

Jen said Okay, okay and gave me the keys and we both got in and I started the engine. Usually, Jen's car ran real smooth, but heading slowly up the exit with the donut on we rocked and bumped like we were on some funhouse mirror road.

--I can't believe you came, Dale. You're some pushover.

--That's a hell of a way to talk to a guy who just came out here and changed your tire.

--I knew you'd come, that's all I'm saying.

--Whatever you say.

--I mean, come on Dale, you do anything I ask. All the time.

--Well this is the last time, better enjoy it.

Jen frowned, opened her mouth to say something but then stopped herself. We had cruised pass the two big gas stations and down a street neither of us knew. The donut

kept us going slow and the only thing in my head was that lilt in Jen's voice, the way she said *All the time*. The pity in it churned my stomach.

Silence filled the car as we trudged along and Jen kept giving me sideways looks, humming a song I didn't know the way she sometimes did laying in bed with me. The road seemed to run for miles with no sign of stopping, until finally we came upon a Stop sign and to the right was a main strip, or close enough to it. Starting down it, we saw a whole slew of gas stations, one after the other and Jen kept saying There, turn, turn, and grabbing at the wheel like a crazy person. But they were all quick-stop stations with no car bays or mechanics.

This one won't help, I kept saying back. We're not stopping.

After four or five stations, I told her not to worry and Jen settled back into her seat.

We were quiet for a few minutes and then I hear myself say You know, we don't have to break up.

--I'm just saying, Jen. We've had time to calm down, maybe now we can speak rationally.

She gave another sideways glance, but held this one long enough for me to meet it. Her eyes were polished steel, taking me in the way she did at Ned's party, but the longer she looked the more they softened and got murky and then she sighed big and spoke.

--Rationally? You can't even admit we never dated. That there isn't a relationship to 'break up'. Like that time you bought me that ring after I specifically said we weren't

buying each other stuff, least of all expensive jewelry.

I told her I didn't remember doing any such thing.

--Oh, yes you do Dale. Remember I told you to take it back and you said you did but I found the jewelry box two weeks later hidden under your bed.

--Why do you think that was such a big deal for me? Maybe that's your problem, Jen, you made me out to be some child.

--Dale, when I refused that ring you cried until you fell asleep on the couch.

--I did not cry that hard.

--Yes, you did.

We went silent for a second but I could feel the words building in her, words she wasn't sure how to say but once she did would swallow up all the space in her car.

--I was going to leave you back then, Dale. That was it for me, but I stayed because I was worried what would happen to you. I thought you might come unglued if I took off.

--I'm not the one who threw plates all over the place.

--I was hoping you'd throw me out.

I was waiting for some sour feeling to coat my stomach, for the pressure to build behind my eyes, for my foot to slam on the brake and to start screaming or sobbing or both but all I said, nice and quiet, was You're a piece of work Jen, and that was actually all I was thinking. But every part of me sagged with the burden of this thought, my eyes coated with tears because I had told myself a steamer trunk of lies about how I didn't care if Jen came to love me but also that I thought she could, that all we needed was some

time. That damn “Take it to the Limit” came back in my head like it was blaring on the radio, and now I could remember every word.

Just as the gas stations were giving way to ranch houses farther down the road, I spotted two Mexicans next to a small shack with a sign that read *Enrique's Tire and Auto Repair*. Hand to God, that's what it said. My lungs pulled back in and the static-electric pops in my head calmed down and I pulled in and Jen sighed real big.

The one smaller guy sat against the wall putting an engine part back together, so the bigger guy that had been standing right on the roadside helped us. Without saying hardly anything, he waited for me to get the tire from the trunk and he took it and disappeared into the shack.

Jen and I stood there outside staring at the ground, and the fatigue came back into my body with a force and I was happy just to wait silently for the fixed tire. I felt Jen look at me once, but I just kept on looking at the ground, feeling the seconds pass.

The guy came back out with the tire fully inflated, but I could hear the air hissing out of it. He walked past us, nodding for us to follow, and we went around the back of the shop where there was a big metal tub full of water. Immediately after he dropped the tire in the water a stream of little bubbles came rushing small and quick to the water's surface from a hole Jen and I couldn't find back on the highway.

The guy pulled it out and ran his hand over where the air had come from.

--I can fix it, he said, so quiet I almost didn't hear.

Jen asked how much.

--Plug is ten dollars. Jen looked at me and I knew she didn't have any money, but

I gritted my teeth and nodded at the guy and he went back inside to plug the tire.

--Well, this whole mess is almost over.

I didn't answer, just squinted down into the tub of water. I had run out of things to say, finally, but what I was finding peering down into that water, seeing myself reflected in it, was that I was goddamn tired and not talking anymore was just fine with me.

But then Jen came up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder. She said, her hand squeezing a little, Are you going to be okay, Dale?

That lilt was back in her voice again, talking like I had just skinned my knee on the playground, and it sent a slingshot of heat up my spine and I turned on her quick.

--Christ, Jen, can't you stop for a goddamn second? You keep talking like your words are some damn leash you keep me at the end of, but I'm done talking. You hear me? Done. You can go off to the mountains and be as alone as you want to be or you can screw every tent-pitching tourist that comes through town. I don't give a goddamn anymore.

I was yelling like something in me was coming loose and it felt good, but the skinny guy against the wall had leaned up to look at us worried, I think, that he'd have to call the cops. I waved to him as best I could to say things were all right. But Jen came up real close to me again, now with a hand on each shoulder facing me.

--Oh, Dale, I just don't know how you expect me to believe that.

Fine, I said, or something short like that, and before I know it I took a step back and with a hand on each side of the metal tub I lifted myself over and *splash*, dropped

myself right in.

Jen said What the hell, Dale?

--How's this? I yelled. --Come take a look Jen. You see any air leaking out of me? Any blood? Come find the holes you've made, the ones that you don't think'll ever heal.

Jen came over and said Dale, you're acting like a crazy person.

--Just look for a second, Jen. Stop talking and look. There ain't one hole in me. Not one. I'm going to be just fine, okay? Just fine.

I got out of the water, checking before I did to make sure I wasn't lying. Then I was standing in front of Jen dripping streams of water on the dusty earth and that tired feel came back deep into the core of me as quick as it had left. I reach in my back pocket and pulled out my waterlogged wallet and peeled out a twenty.

I told her to give him the whole thing and I started walking toward the street.

--Where you going, Dale?

I turned and tried to quell the shiver that was setting in.

--Sometimes there's nothing more to say.

--At least let me give you a ride.

I shook my head and started down the road. A few stations down, she caught up with me and pulled in, insisting I let me drive her. I said okay, long as she'd wait while I went inside so I could wet my whistle. My soaked clothes were chilling me, and I had gone in to get a coffee, but they had one of those machines that make Frozen Co'cola's and I decided I hadn't had one in forever and wet clothes or not I was getting one.

Back in the car heading for the highway, the Frozen Co'cola tasting so good I didn't care about the quivering cold in my chest, Jen licked her lips hard and said I'm sorry Dale, I really am. I just half-smiled but didn't reply because I was worn out on words and trying not to notice how that pity-streaked lilt had gone out of her voice and how nice it sounded.

She let me out just before the on-ramp at my insistence so I could walk back down to my truck. We didn't say goodbye, or anything like that, because it seemed one of those times when saying that would only make the leaving more foolish. I held onto the look in her eyes long after the car had pulled away. It was the look of those light after-storm clouds which really looked just like before-storm clouds but either way they I felt a comfort I had to shake my head at. I started the walk back to my car on the side of the highway, not a song in my head, drinking the hell out of that Frozen Co'cola and still trying to beat down my rebel heart.

VILLAGE OF PETRIFIED MEN

The other night, I flipped a table over at the bar trying to get some hellraiser to go on and leave already. So my boss told me to take a few days off.

"You told me to go over the top," I said. "You said it would keep the peace."

"I know what I said." He was looking at his hands, sitting at the bar after close. "But last week you busted that guy's nose when he threw his cue stick at the wall, and now you're flipping tables over because some guys were tossing peanuts at the television."

"The guy called me an asshole."

"I don't care what he said. Fact is, you're scaring some people."

"Oh yeah? Who?"

"Me, Joe."

And that was that. He told me I couldn't come in to drink either, which kind of set me off so when he went in the back I stole a six-pack and the baseball bat we kept hooked under the bar. After a few days of sitting around my apartment, and a visit from the landlord wondering after the rent, I decided to get out of town. The place was closing in on me, and drinking at home wasn't the same, sitting there watching TV feeling myself sink into the cushions. There was no one to talk to, to joke with and pretend things were all right.

The only place for me to go, that I could think of, was my stepdad's house in

Cranston. He had left for me and Mom when he died, so I called her up at her place in Cape Cod.

"Why do you want to go back there, Joe?" she asked.

"I just got to clear out for a while, that's all."

"I don't know," Mom's voice sounded airy these days, full of holes. "I've been thinking maybe we should sell it. It's not like we have great memories there, Joey, and I could use the money."

I sighed big. "Jeez, Ma, can we just wait on that until I can get up there and relax for a while?"

"Are you in trouble, Joey?"

"No, Ma. And it's Joe now. I go by Joe."

I got off the phone with my mother and started packing. Even if I came back, I decided, it wouldn't be to this place. I had nearly everything packed--there wasn't much--and wrote a note to the landlord along with two hundred dollars that read *Best I could do, keep the deposit and rent this place to whoever you want. Thanks.* Fact is, I could've covered the rent with money from the bank, but I just wanted out quick as possible. Last thing I grabbed was that bat I had taken from the bar. I had tucked it under my bed the same day I took it, but I knew it was there the whole time. I thought if I left it there long enough I'd forget about it. But all it made me think about was my stepdad.

Out in the parking lot, I took a few cuts with it and heard his voice, telling me about the hump in my swing, or about how many people he struck out in high school. It had been so long since I played that the bat felt alien in my hands, my stance awkward

and forced. The memory of my old swing, at least for my muscles, was long gone. I took one big hack and could hear my stepdad's voice as if he were right there, telling me to stop swinging out of my shoes. I tossed the thing in the back of my truck, got in and started the engine, but then I let it idle, thinking back to when I was thirteen, when Grady lived with us, and I played ball.

*

My stepdad, Grady Davidson, had been drafted by the Braves out of high school as a right-handed pitcher, but opted instead to be the first in his family to go to college. He went to Clemson, and threw his arm out during Fall League eating up junk innings in a blow out--he told more than once of the snap in his elbow on a 2-2 slider--and that sent him back to Cranston and his uncle's carpentry business which he took over when his uncle retired to Florida. He rode the laborer's life hard with twelve-hour days and hundred-proof nights, always at the Doryman where my mom waited tables. I can see how serving someone enough drinks can fool you into thinking there's some connection there--I've seen it happen.

Some nights his crew would come to the house with him, and we'd stay upstairs while they played cards, drank beer, and ate spaghetti out of huge pots in the middle of the table. I'd watch through the rails of the banister and saw that they all looked the same, somehow. They all had the same cracked hands as Grady, with probably the same stinging smell of cheap bar soap and they all had faces like cinder blocks. They drank,

and threw cards around the table, and told jokes I knew were dirty and they did it all with the same stern look like they were all staring down the world, like they all came from the same village of petrified men.

Then, not a year after he came to live with us, Grady fell through a rotted roof overlooked by some careless inspector and broke his leg in two places. He couldn't work, but got a nice settlement and sold off the business to one of the senior guys in the crew and that left him to sit around and yell at the Red Sox games while the empty bottles multiplied at the foot of the chair. Once, when a reliever gave up a ninth-inning home run, he picked the bottles up, hugging them against his chest, and carried them to the backyard. Once there, he'd yell *Low and Outside* and throw the bottle to the bottom corner of the shed door. Then *Low and Inside* and do the same. *High and Tight. Climb the Ladder. Waste a Pitch. Hit Your Fucking Spots.*

He was never really violent, he'd just sit in that recliner, picking stuffing out of the arms, getting drunk and staying quiet, keeping to himself. Those games were the only things that could really set him off. When that happened, I would usually take my sister with me over to my friend Tommy's. He was the other kid in the neighborhood, and we used to stay up late at his house and watch zombie movies. *Dawn of the Dead* was the one we watched most, and Tommy would go all chucklehouse when the zombies would take a bite out of some woman's neck or pull the guts out of a biker's stomach, but a lot of the time I couldn't laugh with him. I spent most of the time thinking what it'd be like to be one of those zombies going tear-ass through the world taking what you wanted and eating whoever got in your way. Some nights, Tommy would sneak some vodka from

his parents' liquor cabinet and we'd combine it with lemonade mix and drink until our bellies felt warm.

Once we were drunk, I wouldn't even look at Tommy rolling around on the floor. I'd fix my eyes on a zombie and try to mimic that dead stare. Sometimes, the movie would end and Tommy would have to nudge me and tell me to get the hell out.

Early one spring, about a year after Grady's accident, I decided to go out for the Junior Varsity baseball team.

"Now what in the hell you want to do that for?" Grady asked me when I announced my plan over dinner. "You're not going to be any pro, that's for sure. There's people who know from day one they'll be pros and don't make it."

"No hurt in trying," I said.

"I've seen you play in the youth league," Grady said. "You think you're going to make the cut?"

"Stop picking on him," Mom said.

"I'll stop picking when everyone stops picking on me," he yelled.

"No one picks on you," I said.

And then he was up and over to my side of the table and right in my face. "What do you know about it? Huh? Every time those ballgames come on the television, they're picking on me, every time your Mom drives me through this town and I see some new house being built, that shit is digging deep into my side. This food," he picked up a slab of roast beef off my plate and slammed it back down, "paid for by that fall I took through some rotted roof, it all tastes like a big old spit right in my face. I got thick skin, but I can

hardly take it. And I'll be damned if I let you, Little Joey, get your thin, little-boy skin torn up by things as foolish as hoping and striving to be a better Christ-knows-what."

"That's enough," Mom said.

"I'm teaching this boy a lesson," he yelled. And with that, he stormed out of the room.

I lay in bed that night, knowing he was right. I'd never been much of a player. Not one of those terrible, picking daisies in right field players, but nothing to write home about either. The occasional base hit, can make the routine plays with an occasional error peppered in. And even if I did make it, I'd ride the pine all year for sure. I fell asleep thinking of walking slow up to the tryouts, all blue-faced and undead, letting ground balls bounce off my body, taking all day to round the bases, then getting cut and sinking my teeth into the coaches arm as he crossed my name off the list.

But the next morning when I woke up Grady was sitting at the foot of my bed.

"Get your ass home damn quick from school today," he said, tossing a glove, one of his old ones, onto the bed. "How long we got until tryouts?"

"Three weeks," I answered groggily.

"Well, then we got to shag ass." He stood up to go. "Back here by three." With that he was out the door, and I don't remember ever getting dressed for school so quickly, or wanting so bad to get home.

The training started that afternoon as promised and didn't let up all three weeks. We went to the park down the street and played long toss for forty minutes to warm up. I thought he might have to short hop me a few times but he hit me hard on the fly every

time. He would stop here and there to show me a few things: how to point my glove at where I was aiming, how to crow-hop, he taught me to speed up my catch and release. I had always played second base, since I was small but that first day he pulled out his fungo bat and sent me to the outfield.

“I’ve always been at second,” I told him.

“You got an okay arm,” he said back. “And it’s only gonna get better the more we work. You’re an outfielder for sure. Those long legs of yours will track anything down out there. We just got to work on your range.”

He sent me out to center and started hitting balls to the left of me and the right of me, in front of me and over my head. Never once did he hit it straight to me.

“Any dope can put out his glove at a ball straight to him,” he yelled from home plate. “I’m showing you how to be a ball player.”

We did that until it got dark and even then we kept going until I lost one in the black sky and it almost took my face off.

“That’s enough for today,” he said, and we headed home. He didn’t say much in the way of praise or criticism, except to say, “Where’d you learn to put your glove up to block the sun? That’s smart thinking.” It was a little thing sure, but I couldn’t remember him ever saying anything nice to me, and I spent that night thinking of the things I could do the next day to get more compliments out of him.

We kept up with the fly balls and long catch, and we started hitting soft toss against the cage. Grady showed me I had a hump in my swing and put my back foot at more of an angle to give me an anchor. Suddenly, I felt more comfortable with a bat than

I ever had. I was lining each ball right into the same spot in the backstop. Eventually, he'd yell *inside* and throw them there or *outside* and throw them there and I would pull them or push them opposite field, depending.

When we weren't training, Grady had me on a crude training and diet program. I had to drink a quart of buttermilk a day--I'd choke the stuff down, sometimes cheating out of a few sips, but mostly I drank it--and squeezing tennis balls in my hands three hundred times each daily. He brought me these dumbbells he got at a yard sale and had me do this repetition with them where I cinched my elbow into my side and pulled my arm out and then back to strengthen my rotator cuff.

"I thought only the pros injure those things," I said.

"Pros that don't do this workout," he said back.

Grady's whole demeanor changed, too. He hadn't quit drinking--that seemed too much to ask--but he didn't brood in front of the games anymore. Instead, I'd sit with him and he'd point out so-and-so's pretty swing or how someone should have taken that curve to right field and look at how that reliever hung his breaking ball and if anyone ever leaves a ball that high up on me, I should slam it into the gap or retire from baseball forever.

Then, with only a week until tryouts, we started actually batting practice. I'd never seen Grady pitch, only heard stories, and I was determined to sock his pitches deep into the outfield.

He started off by throwing me nothing but change-ups, and with each one I thought I had it lined up and I swung out of my shoes, and that thing would dip right

under my bat. He didn't say a word, didn't show anything on his face, just let me go on swinging and getting hot under the collar and cursing at myself. After about fifteen pitches he finally stopped.

"What did we learn?" he asked.

"Not to go up against a former major league draft pick and his goddamn change-up."

"*Goddamn* huh?" Grady said back. "I've never heard that big shot talk out of you before."

I just shrugged.

"What you should have learned is that how hard you swing isn't worth a damn. You can swing hard in the same spot all day long and the pitcher will just throw to some other spots and get you out."

"So what do I do?" I asked.

"You got to adjust. Hell, I told you those were change-ups and you swung like they were fastballs right down the pike. A change-up is an off-speed pitch. You wait, drop your shoulder, and drive that shit into right field."

He went back to the mound, and grabbed a beer from the six-pack he had set on the ground. We did thirty or so more change-ups and I started to get the hang of it. First, I dribbled a few down the first base line, and soon enough I was ripping line drives into the right-center gap.

Then, without telling me, Grady came with some inside heat. It came close enough that it brushed me back, knocked me into the dirt.

“What the hell, Grady?” I said, getting up and brushing myself off.

“You were too close to the plate,” he said. “You think I’m going to just give you that outside corner? Give me a break.”

I stood back in there and waited, holding the bat white-knuckle tight. He reared back and came with another fast ball and I swung as hard as I could, and missed. Grady shook his head, but acted like he wasn’t going to do anything. Then, his next pitch caught me in the meat of the calf.

“Jesus Christ, Grady, why you dead-legging me like that?”

“Didn’t I tell you not to swing so hard?” He took a big gulp of his beer and threw it on the ground. “Am I wasting my goddamn time here? You tell me. Or are you going to listen?”

I was still pissed about the bean ball, rubbing my leg to dull the pain. “And what if I don’t listen?”

“Hell, don’t listen. I don’t give a shit.” He turned and started walking away. “Just don’t come crying when you get cut is all.” He picked up his beer and headed to the outfield and towards home. It took me a few minutes to apologize and get him back, but I did. We walked back into the infield and he pulled one of the beers off his six-pack.

“Here,” he said. “You’re too damn jittery up there, all amped up to crush something. Drink that down fast.”

“Mom’ll kill me,” I said. “Hell, she’ll kill you.”

“Your mom don’t have to know,” he said, smiling. We’d never shared something like that, something secretive. I downed the beer quick as I could, choking a little on the

suds. We hit BP for another hour or so then called it quits. I got better in the next couple days, learning to catch the pitch out of Grady's hand, dropping my shoulder if it was a breaking ball, keeping my head steady, taking the ball where it needed to go, choking down one or two beers a day. It seemed I was always telling Mom how much better I was getting, and I could see how happy if all made her. Not even that I was improving, but that me and Grady were getting along and that he had cheered up some.

The last day we trained we just played long toss. Grady told me I knew all I needed. I was ready. And I needed to rest it a little for tryouts the next day. On the way home from the field, we passed a house being build with a sign in front that said "Tomlinson Builders".

"There was a time that shit would say 'Davidson Builders'. But those days are gone, I guess."

"You get a lot of time to relax," I said.

"Yeah," Grady said, still looking at that house as we passed. "Too much time. Gets me to thinking I'm useless."

"Well, if I make the team it's thanks to you and all your help," I said, but Grady just kept on looking at the house.

"I bet I could find a hundred things wrong with that structure." He looked it over real slow, his eyes sort of glazing. "Why I ever left that thing to a dumb-dumb like Toms, I'll never know."

We walked the rest of the way in silence, and Grady's limp became more pronounced as we did. He slumped over a little, wincing and cursing under his breath.

I made the team and so did Tommy and it was great. We celebrated by watching *Dead Alive*, and for once I could laugh with Tommy when, say, the guy runs over a slew of zombies with a lawnmower, because I wasn't thinking about the damn sadness of being a zombie, I wasn't thinking about Grady sitting there deep in that recliner thinking heavy thoughts, I wasn't worried about him shouting at me or my mom. Tommy and I split some beers that night too, some Grady had gotten me as a making-the-team present.

"Just don't tell your mother," he said, winking. And when me and Tommy drank, I felt myself getting used to the taste. Beer wasn't a flavor that seemed foreign and harsh with every sip anymore, my body was starting to recognize it and respond with warm greeting.

But now with team practice, I didn't have any time to go throw around with Grady. I would get home at supper time, beat to hell from practice, and then after dinner it was upstairs to get my homework done. For the first week or some, Grady asked me about practice, what drills we did, how the coach handled everyone, was I adjusting to life in the outfield okay. But soon he grew quiet again, like he was before at the dinner table, going through two and even three beers sometimes during the meal.

"Where you going?" he'd mutter when I was headed out to Tommy's.

"Down to Tommy's, Grady. Just watching a movie, no big deal."

"I bet that scrawny-armed kid can't hit a high fastball to save his life."

"Lay off," I'd say. "He's a friend of mine."

"Well, if you'd rather jerk off with your friend than fix your swing, be my guest."

It was always insults now, always how my arm was going to go shit, or that hump would come back into my swing, how I'd be lucky to hit .200 or get into the game at all once the errors in the field started mounting up. But still, over at Tommy's we'd watch zombie flicks and I didn't get that empty feeling in the pit of my stomach. I wasn't laughing every second like at *Dead Alive*, but I wasn't putting myself in the zombies' shoes anymore. We were drinking more and more every movie night. By the time the season was about to start we were up to splitting a 12-pack during a double feature.

Soon enough it was the first game of the season, and Grady actually perked up for a change.

"It's so nice to see you in this mood," my mother said at the breakfast table.

"It's this fella's big day," he said, pointing at me. "You ready champ?"

I shrugged. "I guess?"

"Now what kind of competitive spirit is that?" he asked.

"I'm ready," I said. "Just a little nervous." The truth was that me and Tommy had watched a couple movies the night before and tied a big one on. But I ate my breakfast all right, and Grady and Mom said Good luck and See you at the game and I went to school and it wasn't too long before my hangover went away.

We were doing team warm-ups when I saw them walking up to the field. Mom was looking at the ground until she looked up and found me and smiled, but sheepishly. It didn't take too long to see why. Grady was wobbling up to the field, drunk as can be-- so much so I was a little surprised to see there wasn't any beer in his hand. He waved when he saw me and stopped, got into a hitting position and pointed to hit front shoulder

and mouthed the words *drop it*. Then he dropped his own shoulder and nearly toppled over.

“Let’s just go sit down Grady,” my mom said. I had never seen them through that sort of distance, and for a second I wondered for the first time why my mother was with Grady, why she married him and stayed with him when all he did was drink and bitch and moan and watch Red Sox games. It was a thought that really could have dragged me down, but the coach called us all in and I shook it out of my head.

I was starting in left field, I couldn’t believe it. I got to run out there when they announced the starting line-ups and then I went out to my position and saw Mom and Grady sitting across the field in the bleachers with all the other players’ families, and I was suddenly filled with pride. I’d never had time to feel that way training with Grady, since I was all the time trying to make him proud of me. Now, standing alone in left field, I had no one to think about but myself. And I felt damn good.

The first couple innings passed without incident. No balls came my way, a couple of slap hits for each side, but nothing brewing to write home about. My first time up, I bounced a curve to second base. I had seen it coming, dropped my shoulder the way Grady had said, waited and waited and waited for that ball to spin and fall away, and then grounded it to the fielder, not weakly but not hit as strong as I could. Still, jogging back to the dugout, I saw Grady nod to me, and I saw he had a flask in his hand.

The other team struck first when the lead-off hitter drew a walk in the fourth and the guy behind him doubled into the right-center gap, knocking the run in. I watched it all happen from my spot in left, wishing I could do something, and then our pitcher

retired the rest of the side in order. I led off the next inning.

The first pitch came inside--probably not as inside as I thought--and under my breath I said *If that's how you fucking want it* and I swung so hard on the next three swings that I swung around on my heels. Each time I was picturing the ball rocketing back up the box, right into the pitcher's chest with his smug grin. Grady was right there leaning on the fence when I got back to the dugout.

"What about everything we worked on?" he asked.

"The guy brushed me back," I said, my voice stung with anger.

"So what, Mary," and he pushed the side of my face. "Did that hurt? Was that a brush back?" My face went hot, my eyes flashed. For half a second, I pictured hitting him back, watching him tumble over. "Don't make me think I wasted my time," he said, and walked away.

I shook my head, too mad now to say anything to anyone. It was the first time Grady had put his hands on me, ever, had put his hands on any of us that I knew of. The strange feeling in all of it, I realized, was not how pissed off I was at him, but how quickly I recognized that I had wanted to do the same thing back to him.

No one on our team could do anything against that pitcher. He went eight strong, and got me two more times, one a swinging K, the other a lucky pop-out to the first baseman. I was swinging out of my shoes on every pitch, closing my eyes tight. Each time, I heard Grady groan louder. From left field, I saw Mom sitting slump-shouldered but still clapping. Grady shaking her hand off his shoulder when she tried to calm him down. He was yelling at the whole team now. Calling us lazy. Worthless. An insult to

baseball.

In the ninth, Tommy pitch hit for the third baseman and squeaked a single between first and second. The guy after him tried to bunt and popped out. Then our right fielder flew out to center. And it was all up to me. I couldn't help but look at the stands on my way to the plate. Everyone was standing. Mom had her hands pressed together in front of her face, and Grady had his arms crossed, one hand shaking a probably empty flask. His eyes said something. That I couldn't do it.

I stood in that box and thought of Grady falling through that ceiling, the bone in his leg breaking, how the musculature hadn't been as strong yet. Weak, I thought, he was weak. I clenched the bat hard, twisting it in my hands. The pitcher, one out away from his complete game shut out, threw his first pitch. It was coming straight at me and my knees buckled. I hit the deck as the ball smacked into the mitt. It was a curve, a good one, and a strike. I looked over at Grady and he shook his head, but pointed to hit left shoulder and I hated him for being right, hated my mother for standing next to him, for being smart enough to know how shitty it all was but not smart enough to find a way the hell out. I got back in the box, and stared out at the pitcher, and then over at the opponents bleachers. There was an older couple- a man and a woman. They were both cheering, the man with his arm around the woman. She was saying *One more out, Honey* and he was saying *Come on, Brad, no batter, no batter!* I got in my stance. The pitcher still had that smug grin. And I don't know if I said it out loud, or just thought it in my head, but what I said was, "Throw that shit again, I dare you."

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In my truck, as I started driving, I thought of what it would've been like if I'd got the winning hit. If that pitcher had grooved me one and I took it deep, knocked both Tommy and me in to win the game. I thought about what that might have done to change things. Maybe I wouldn't be driving to that house, I thought.

But what happened at that game was the pitcher came inside again, and I leaned into it. I caught it on the calf, right where the bruise from Grady's pitch was. I didn't yell or scream or say anything. I just rushed the mound and tackled that pitcher. After that it was all arms and dust and grunting. I bit that pitcher on the neck. He punched my on my back, my arms, my head. I didn't care. I couldn't feel any of it. Couldn't hear the yelling, or feel people fighting around me, trying to pull me off of him. I bit him again on the arm, I kicked and flailed. It could have been days later when they pulled me off of him, and the whole brawl stopped. Over on the bleachers, my mother was crying and Grady stood with a half-grin on his face, idly shaking his head. Later on, he said, "If you couldn't win the game, at least you started up a good fight."

They kicked me off the team and I never played ball again, and sometime after that I moved down here and tended bar and drank too much and got in fights and none of them were any different than the one with that pitcher.

Rather than turn left when I got to the main road and head towards the highway, I went right to make a quick stop first. The bar was dark except for a couple neon signs in the windows, the place almost seemed darker during the bright light of day. I grabbed the

bat out of the truckbed and headed inside. My boss was at the bar, tending to a couple of regulars when I walked in. He crossed his arms at the sight of me.

"This is yours," I said, putting the bat on the bartop. "Sorry, I just got a little hot under the collar."

"That all?" he asked, and I pulled out a five-dollar bill to give him for the beer I took.

"Look," I said then. "I'm clearing out of town for a little bit, maybe a week or two. I got to clear my head."

"Sounds like a smart idea," he said, arms still crossed.

I told him then I was sorry for all the trouble and maybe I could come work when I got back and he said we'll see how right I got my head screwed on. I apologized one more time as I went to leave and he sighed and offered me a cold beer.

"I better not," I said, and waved as I walked out the door.

Once I got out to the highway, I decided I shouldn't go back and work at the bar even if they'd take me. There had to be something else I could do for money, something I might like. The more I drove, the more I thought I should stop and call Ma, to tell her we would sell the place. Just put it behind us and move on.

But then I thought *Not yet*. Let me see it first. I had to get up there, to live in Grady's house, to see if it felt like home, like where I came from, before I could sell it off.

LINER NOTES TO THE ALBUM *OUR LOVE WAS AMELODIC*

Every note of this is for you. For those wisps of hair over your eyes. For your cheeks, red and scratched. You were a perfect wreck of a woman when I found you, Joni, but magisterial in your way. I thought of those eyes and those cheeks and that hair with every pluck of a guitar string, with every pedestrian chord strummed. I recorded these songs for you at a cabin in Portland between July and November. Log Cabin Studios didn't charge much and even cut me a deal when they saw I was in it for the long haul. All that money that you yelled about in the last weeks, how I never spent anything on you anymore, well I've spent it on you now even if it's not in the way you'd want. Even though I have you all the money I could from day one--when you busted up all those Smiths' albums at the music store--and you screamed about your old boyfriend loving Morrissey so much he bailed for the west coast to catch his show in San Francisco. Do you remember? You asked me how you'd feed or clothe yourself, said he hadn't even paid the rent before he left. And you wasted no time moving in with me and the bunch of albums you had with you filled my apartment like plush new furniture so I could ignore all my awful sculptures. You played *Born to Run* or *Harvest* or *Music from Big Pink* and I think that's when my songs started coming to me. It must have been. I know, once you'd left, that this was the only way to get you back. The way you always said you'd bang Dylan's voice, or how that time in Champaign, Illinois you said you'd slept with Rick Danko--there was a quiver of worship in your voice. So I hired this guy Stan

Danford to be the engineer once I got to the studio and couldn't figure out thing one on the soundboard. He had two albums to his credit: The Shimplasters' *Copies of Frankenstein* and Totally Evil's *Totally Evil*. He played them all the time during breaks, screaming over the playback how the albums were part adrenaline and part Grand Guignol when all they were, as far as I could tell, were layers and layers of distortion. Stan did take a month of his time to teach me four guitar chords and a couple of scales, so he wasn't all bad. And Joni, even though you used to say my hands were lifeless mounds when I worked on sculptures, I got them moving pretty good over the frets after a while.

A lot of the first songs I wrote were all the ones about loss. Not just you, but the friends I lost too. You know I didn't have many, but the few of them sat me down and, to a person, called you "whore" or "trash" or "gold digger," and I let them all fall by the wayside, because how could they be right? What with the passion you brought to bed, how you were always in the apartment, always looking to go out to dinner or to the movies or a concert. It was that passion that pushed me out of the loss songs and into the good-times-we-had songs. Fact is I wrote the whole bunch pretty quickly. You'll hear a lot of instruments, if you ever hear this album; I didn't play them all. Session musicians, I'm sure you know, don't come cheap but I have no reason left to *penny pinch* as you called it. No future left to plan for. Blank spaces in pictures where you once were. And sure, I know we never had any pictures taken, but it's an emotional image, that's what songwriters do.

Anyway, Stamper Casp played all the drums, and I really think his on-coming deafness helped. He kept saying he worried he'd stop hearing his grandchildren on the

telephone and that worry came out in the tiny ping of cymbals. In his love of brushes on the snare. In the hushed tapping of someone clinging to all he has left. Beautiful stuff. Bass players, on the other hand, are a little trickier than drummers--I went through a bunch of them. The way they all checked notes and progressions, name-dropped artists they'd played with, tuned and retuned their instruments--it was all so much like the way you checked labels, but not price tags, on dresses and set up shop in front of the mirror teasing hair or smudging make-up. I tried to tell you that you were plain, the most beautiful plain. That you didn't need dress after dress or those chalky pads of foundation. At night on that old mattress, you were an undeniable truth laid bare, an axis the world could spin on. But you wouldn't listen, snatching up all the magazines and hair products, getting yourself bogged down in the trammels of fashion. You wouldn't fade, you said once, into the dull mosaic that was the Decent Looking People of the World. You wanted me to rise above it with you, said I was handsome and didn't try hard enough. Maybe if I shaved everyday and cut my hair. Maybe if I ironed my shirt so my collar didn't hang there like overcooked pasta. And I did those things, but still just before you left you said I'd never have beauty again. But you were wrong--I have these songs, my beauty to share with the world, to leave behind when I'm gone.

And those marplot bassists tried to take it over. Show me a famous bassist and I'll show you a guy who tries too damn hard--and that includes Rick Fucking Danko. I'm sorry, I am, but every bassist I hired tried to hijack the whole thing. They'd try to sneak a solo into track six ("This *is* a Goddamn Pipe"), or yell at me to tune my guitar. They didn't get it. How rotten love can pull the heart's sound sharp, or stretch it flat. How the

right note and the true one aren't the same sometimes. One of them had a busted amp that squealed when he wasn't playing. I got a twenty second clip of that, which is about all the bunch of them were worth. The last guy, Solomon Tessler, was a skyscraper of a man. Tall and black, he looked like a blues guy and acted just as cool. He let the notes ring endlessly off the walls, setting the imperfect heartbeat to the whole album--Solomon really drones on track nine ("You Can't Eat My Heart With Your Fingers") and I think it makes the tune. Plus, he never asked questions.

Money on the album got tight pretty fast, the way it did with you. The bit of money I made on my junk metal sculptures dried up when I stopped pitching my work to galleries and making the weekly trip to the junkyard so I could spend all my time with you. By September the album had almost emptied me out. I tried to sell the pieces I'd kept around the apartment, but they wouldn't sell. I couldn't find a steady job and I couldn't call my parents because they thought the same thing my friends did about you and the last words we spoke were harsh. No one understands us, Joni. They all think love is some sort of give and take, the old two-way street. But I know what love is: It is not something to accept, but something projective that we all pour out. We pour it out all over, wherever we can. I gave my love to you and once I did it was ours; whether you put it in your heart or a paper shredder didn't matter. We had love, Joni, if you get anything from the album get that.

This guy Chas played all the lead guitar and keys. He played for almost nothing, so I gave him carte blanche and he took it and ran, playing for almost a month, layering six and seven tracks on top of each other. It was a bit much, but I let him go, since I

could cut it up later and use what I wanted. At the end of October, I kicked everyone out and recorded my parts. The whole time, I thought about the day you left, about that single-word note--*goodbye*--you'd stuck to the fridge. The rest of the day I wandered around the city and downtown felt like junk metal. The rebar embedded in the cement buildings, the antennas cowlicking off skyscrapers, the shiny glare of hot dog stands--I couldn't put any of it together in my head to look like something. I got home at night and measured the seams between the floorboards, I put on *This Year's Model* and tried to do that hop-dance you always did but I felt tethered to the earth. I sang along with the songs, putting your name into them, and when the record stopped I started making up my own songs, and I knew they could be my love letter to you, a way to pull loose and reach you.

For some of these songs, I ate chocolate and smoked cigarettes so I sounded like something dragged across pavement, like Tom Waits low on batteries. On others, I drank only water and ate celery for days to achieve a weak trill. I taped a picture of you to the music stand in front of the microphone. You'll hear that track fourteen ("Killing Poets") is just the sound of me sobbing while I lob light bulbs around the studio. The early tracks make more sense, as Stan put it, because they are about the first days of us, the honeymoon days right after we met in Back Alley when we made sense: How you could silently unbuckle my belt in the back row of the movie theatre ("Weekend Matinee"), how we could always agree on wine ("The Power of Merlot"), how you didn't think yet that I was cheap and sad and afraid all the goddamn time ("Paying Bills in the Basement"). Later on the album falls apart the same way we did into humming dirges

and threnodies as the instruments crackle and fade, wax and wane, screaming over each other only to end in silence, but if you listen close on one track I break the silence by smashing a copy of *The Queen is Dead* off the studio's parquet floor, try and pick it out. "Puff the Magic Dragon" seemed the perfect cover because it's clean-sounding and beautiful and uncomplicated and--like everything I knew besides us--all a fucking lie. Stan just didn't know what he was doing; he gave me these strange looks when I had him cut up takes and paste them together out of order or loop vocals over one another or run guitar takes backwards. He said he didn't know where track seventeen, "Keep the House, Lose the Home," was going, called the first track "Foundation," a pop gem and wondered why the final song, "Tomorrow Morning's Coffee," had to sound like I took a chainsaw to a rocking chair, but he just didn't get it. This music isn't about us, it is us. THIS IS A GODDAMN PIPE.

And as for the last song, true story. Listen close to it. Close. I got up the morning after you left and made coffee, the kind you love. The smell gave me hope. Hope that you'd come back. Remember how it was in the beginning? We started with beauty, Joni, true beauty. Two lonely people who'd finally found each other in Back Alley Records over a stack of cracked Smiths' albums which, I don't care what anyone says, is as good a start as any but not good enough to stop us from tearing it all down in the end. Our love turned into a raucous vase-breaking amelodic banging of cooking pots and crippling silences weighing down the bed frame. But I know now what I didn't know then. That you wanted me to get a job, find direction, bring money back into the house. But you didn't tell me, never told me, and let it metastasize in your brain which mainlined

it to your heart and then we convinced ourselves it was too late and the end came savagely quick. After you left, I wrote you a poem and would have sent it with a copy of the Radio Shack application I'd filled out but I had no clue where to send them, and it was probably for the best anyway since women have never responded well to my letters. Never. And the poem? Awful. Bad images. No meter. Forget rhyme scheme or scansion. Those guys you read, Dylan Thomas and William Blake, they used words like bullets straight through whatever heart they caught in their crosshairs. After the poem, I remembered that other Dylan you adored, Bob Dylan. The days where Bringing It All Back Home wasn't echoing through the apartment were few and far between. That's when I knew I'd gone into the record store, met you there for a reason. Music had brought us together and it would be the only thing that could reunite us and in the end, it cost me everything. Everything. I invited all the players over, even the bass players, to hear it when the album was done but only Solomon and Chas showed, and Chas left two minutes in when he heard what I'd done to his parts, but not before kicking a dent in the fridge and giving me the finger on the way out the door. Giant, statuesque Solomon sat through the whole album and when it ended he just nodded and said, "Blues, Man" like he'd say it about a turkey sandwich. He's probably the only person who'll ever hear this. I won't make any more copies, there's no point. This album is the sound of the nothing I have left and you are the only one who needs to hear it, Joni. So, I'll leave the lone copy with the clerk at Back Alley because he said you'd been in not too long ago, and I'll hope you come in and pick this up. I'll leave my number in case you don't remember so you can call, though by the time you respond if you ever do there may be nothing left of me

since you took it all with you, the love I gave you and all its accessories, whether you wanted to take it or not--and the few tiny bits that may have slipped from your grasp when you left were absorbed by this take so that now the last remnants of me have been extracted by some trivial function of magnetism, all my suffering boiled down to nothing more than an output of modern recording. This record is dedicated to the hope that the version of you I knew will come back to me, the version that loved me too, had to love me, that thing we radiated could only have been love so come back before it all falls in around me because I swear to God, Joni, the seams between the floorboards are getting wider, the walls are separating at the corners and the upstairs neighbors could fall through the ceiling at any moment. The trash collectors won't take my sculptures and they're glaring at me all over the apartment and they love this, my unraveling, because they hate me for bringing them to near-life, for being brought so close to beauty only to be denied it. And I can't go downtown anymore, I just can't, because it feels bombed out and gutted with nothing left. I've been playing the early songs over and over in my head, Joni, and we could be that good again. Listen to the album, please, and hear what you want to hear from me, find what you need to find to come back because it's there. I swear it is. I have a job interview next week, full time, benefits, the works. I'll write a new album then, we can write one together, about how we can be, vacations we can take, inside jokes we can share, breakfasts we can eat in bed, groceries we can buy together. We can do anything, Joni, please bring the music back to me, I can't be without it anymore.

WASH US AWAY

It takes a worried man to sing a worried song.
"Worried Man Blues", The Carter Family

Russell came back after dinner and framed in the trailer's doorway like that, late afternoon sun pouring in all around him filling the whole place up, he looked like some savior coming to help us out of this thing and back into a proper house. But then he came in and closed the door and muttered *That goddamn woman* under his breath, talking about Mrs. Atwell a couple doors down who already got her insurance check and had hired Russell on to help build her place back up.

"Welcome home," I said.

"I'd appreciate it, Alice," he said, slow with exhaustion, "if you'd stop calling this tin can our home."

I got him to come in and take a load off on the couch. Then I called Dwayne in and gave them both a tuna sandwich. We ate mostly cold sandwiches now with it shifting to summer, tuna or chunked chicken. The damn stove gets this thing heated up too fast. I grabbed three cans of Coke and joined them on the couch. We all hunched forward, paper plates resting on our knees. Russell started in on his day at Mrs. Atwell's when Dwayne burst out and cut him off. He was shouting about stuff he learned at school. His voice echoed hollow off the metal walls.

"We've been learning about the New World in history," he said.

"What New World is that?" Russell said, smirking some.

"You know, Dad. Columbus and America and all that. You know he thought he was in India?"

Me and Russell both busted out laughing, the sound ear-ringing loud in the trailer. I remembered being in first grade like Dwayne, learning about all these people finding all these new frontiers. I remembered how exciting it all was.

"Pretty soon," Dwayne kept going, "we'll be learning about Lewis and Clark and all the others who built all the towns in America. All the new places that people popped up."

"That's great," Russell said, but he put down the half sandwich he was holding rather than take a bite. He looked to the one small window behind the TV. He stared down to the curtain in front of the back room. His paper plate was tipping in his lap. Used to be he never sulked like that in front of Dwayne. We finished dinner without much talk. Now and then, Dwayne would blurt out the name of one of Columbus' ships. He asked us what happened to the Indians, they hadn't learned that yet. Neither me or Russell answered.

After dinner, Dwayne did some homework in the backroom. Russell stayed on the couch flipping channels. He ended up stopping on Wheel of Fortune. "Anyone call today?" he asked when I joined him and I knew who he meant.

"No insurance," I sighed. "But the good news is no concrete guys either."

"Figures," Russell said, going back to the TV. Our insurance money was being held up, for our house and our check-cashing store downtown, and for whatever reason

they couldn't tell us why. Just kept saying 'Pending'. But no one had told Lakeshore Concrete since the state commissioned them to pour a load of foundations in Hancock County and their records said our street was all paid up. So they poured a foundation on our property and demanded we pay. They'd been calling for three weeks now.

"What is wrong with that teacher of his?" Russell asked like we'd been talking about it already.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Just what I said. She's got something wrong with her teaching them about building new land and all that damn foolish mess."

"Well," I said, turning back to the TV. "She's just trying to teach those kids a little something. I don't see the big deal."

"Course you don't see the big deal, Alice. You're not out everyday rebuilding some old lady's house for grocery money while your family sweats it out in this goddamn tin can. She's telling those kids that history was people building things for themselves and making their own way and excuse me if that ain't a mile of neck-high shit. All that 'new world' was build by suckers with no other way to feed themselves for people who paid their way across this country."

"All right, Russell. Will you just try and relax?"

"I'll relax when I'm in my own goddamn house and when my boy ain't being fed lies like history being hard people making their own future, because it's more like a hurricane comes along and fucks up a whole lot of people who don't got much to begin with and where in the hell is our insurance check?"

"Well, shouting isn't gonna get the check here any faster," I said.

"Yeah," he said, standing up. "Well, neither is walking around calling this thing our home, pretending everything is hunky dory." Then he was out the door and I knew where he was going, to sit on that beach chair he'd set on the foundation.

There was a noise in the kitchen and Dwayne was standing right there. His shoulders were hanging heavy, tears fixing to fall from his eyes and I could have slapped Russell one for that. "It's all right," I told Dwayne. "You're father is just upset, that's all."

Russell stayed outside till after Dwayne was in bed and I laid on the couch alone thinking why did my husband have to get so mad? He knew Dwayne would hear that, and nothing good was coming of him running out to that beach chair all the time. He could at least come in and be with his family, let us all bear living in this trailer together.

The next morning, with Russell at Mrs Atwell's and Dwayne at school, I headed downtown to look in on the store. I'd been going down there, cleaning the place up little by little, since there wasn't much for me to do at the trailer but stare at those close metal walls.

We were one of the few still in a FEMA trailer, and the rest of the town was coming back to life. The frames of new houses sprouting up where old ones had been washed away by the hurricane. The banging of hammers, the grind of power drills, men yelling measurements across lawns--all those sounds swelled and echoed up and down the road all day.

But even now there were still jagged bits of the storm left behind. Waves of trash

and silt lined the streets. Some of the yards, even with a new house going up, had trees in the back tipped over, roots ripped from the earth and all dried out and chalky. Seems everywhere I go there was this silence settled over the town. There weren't hardly any cars around and whenever I said hey to people we were both hushed as monks. It was like the whole of Hancock County had decided if we kept quiet long enough the next storm might pass us by.

News stations from everywhere had sent people down as soon as a few weeks ago to take pictures of our town and probably the whole county and plenty of Louisiana too, and they were always flashing those shots on the screen or printing them up in magazines and newspapers. Most of them were in black and white, the early ones full of crumpled houses and sunken-faced people fighting tears and the later pictures of people smiling and gritting their teeth as they hoist up another wall on their new house frame. In the pictures, we were a people pulling ourselves out of a deep dark well. Most nights of the week, I stay up next to Russell asleep on the couch looking at the only picture book we got left that the storm didn't take. It made me sad as anything to see that house and yard and even that squeaky front door, the happy shine in Russell's eye. It was all so much to lose, but after a while I tried to look at the pictures as a catalog, as a list of things we'd get back. And the news photos helped too, made something in me surge, made me believe maybe we were coming out of it.

When I got to our flushed-out storefront downtown, guilt cut a notch into my hope. Happens every time. I know why I go down there and clean the place up, and its not just to get things running again. What I can't bear to tell anyone let alone Russell or

Dwayne was there was a moment when I was glad the store had been ruined. I was standing over the sink in the trailer just after we'd moved into the thing, when it was still in that makeshift camp a bit more north of the delta, and this quick relief breezed through me realizing I didn't have to go down to that place and cash people's checks so they could get their phone turned back on before they took the rest to the off-track betting spot. It felt like taking advantage of those poor people, in that moment, and I was glad to be done with it. It seemed such a strange, dark thought, like one I don't tend to have, and maybe that's why it stuck with me. So I go down to the store and sweep up and run a mop over the floor--somehow silt keeps getting in even now--and spend the whole time thinking about the insurance coming and all the good it could do. We could get this place back up running, or maybe try something new if Russell wanted to. Main thing was we'd have the house back and be out of that sardine can.

I got home from the store and showered. Tried not to bump my elbows off the stall. I got out and was in my robe, drying my hair, when Dwayne burst through the door. He was yelling *Guess what? Guess what?* It took all my energy to calm him down. He was near hyperventilating. Pacing around. The trailer was swaying.

"We're having a pageant at school next week. Will you come? Will you?"

"What kind of pageant?"

"Teacher keeps calling it a pageant, but principal says its an assembly. It's for Flag Day, I think. Whichever Hooray-USA holiday is up next and we're all going to be pioneers."

"Like the people who discovered the country?" I asked.

"Yeah Mom," Dwayne said, rolling his eyes. "But not just them. All these important Americans who did stuff first. First to fly, to go to space, all that junk. I'm George Washington!"

"That's great, Dwayne. Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"You think Dad'll come?" Dwayne's voice went all of a sudden quiet.

I tilted my head like to say you should well know better. "Course your dad'll come, why wouldn't he?"

Dwayne shrugged and smiled, then hugged me hard around the waist. He charged to the back room. The whole trailer was shaking. Then, soon as he was gone he stuck his head back through the curtain.

"By the way, Mom," he said, his eyes big as hubcaps. "I need you to make me a costume."

When Russell got home later his eyes were circled dark with fatigue. He half-hugged me at the door, then moved to the couch and plopped down. He mumbled something under his breath like *dry wall days and chicken salad nights*. His voice was ragged, like an idling engine when he whispered to himself.

"Any word from the insurance people?" he asked with this slow air-sucking tone. Like he knew the answer.

"Hello to you too," I said. "Come on and eat." And me and him and Dwayne ate on the couch. Dwayne told Russell about his assembly. About pioneers and American history. How he would be George Washington. I tensed up the more he talked, worried he'd mention the costume. It was an extra cost, one I didn't plan to tell Russell about.

But Dwayne skipped right over that, asked his daddy if he'd come.

"Can't think of anything I'd rather do." Russell offered his son a tired smile.

Then Dwayne gave Russell a look I wasn't ready for. It wasn't kidlike but all clear-eyed and stern, understanding. He knew just what he was doing not telling Russell about the costume. He knew we had money troubles since the hurricane, knew Russell was doing his best to provide. It was the first time I'd seen that, Dwayne acting like an adult. It made my throat catch.

Later, with Dwayne in bed, Russell and me settled onto the couch to sleep ourselves. After a few minutes he got started sniffing.

"Do you have a cold?" I asked.

Russell cleared his throat. "No," he said, gruff.

I hadn't ever seen or heard Russell cry. Not in all our years. But that's what he was doing. Not sobbing hard or anything, but even in the dark trailer I could see the wetness in his eyes.

"You don't know what it's like," he said like I had asked him already what was wrong. "Getting up everyday rebuilding someone else's house when you know you don't have one of your own, that your family doesn't have one."

"It keeps you busy," I said, weakly.

"That ain't enough, Alice. Not by a long shot. You know I've always liked working. Liked using my hands to build something. That house, even if it's for Mrs. Atwell, that's the emptiest work I've ever done."

"I know it's not enough, Russell," I said. "But it's something."

He shrugged. "Sometimes something's no more than nothing."

"Dammit," I hissed, "We're all struggling. We all want our house back, but that doesn't mean we can just treat each other however we want. We make each other miserable now, it's not just gonna go away once we get in a house again."

Russell sat up and I told him to go ahead and go out to his chair and leave us in the trailer, but he just sat there rubbing his head, and I fell asleep wondering when he was ever going to lie down. And if I was right and things'd never be the same again.

The next week passed without much change, our post-hurricane habits firmed up into our days. Me and Russell barely talked at all, but he kept right on mumbling himself. *Goddammit* when he got home to no word from the insurance company. *Another day* when he set out for the morning. *Pioneers* he'd say when Dwayne gave him rundowns about the pageant. He'd shake his head never in front of Dwayne but after he had gone behind the curtain to finish his homework.

I managed to cash in a bunch of change I'd saved and hopped the bus to the mall where I got some cotton rolls for Dwayne's wig, some second-hand baseball pants, knee-high tube socks, and a used navy blazer for his coat. I even found a new picture book and a disposable camera for cheap at the Dollar General. On the way to the mall I figured to see the rest of the county in the same shape as our street. Houses just getting going, people sitting on deck chairs on empty yards where homes used to be, fallen tree limbs and trash still around, still not cleared. But here and there houses were up, insulated, sided, being painted. Just before the mall there was a big Coming Soon sign in

front of a new supermarket going up. It seemed strange, to see a big building like that going up before all the houses were up and fixed again, but a couple people on the bus were oohing over it, pointing it out.

Coming back from the mall, it was like watching the hurricane roll back in. The closer we got, the more broken down everything got. I had to keep looking at the picture book--thinking about taking some new pictures, checking things off in the catalog--till I was back in the trailer.

On the night of the assembly, Dwayne was so excited he was blinded to the sight of that costume on him. I was out of practice hemming, and it showed. The blazer was big on his tiny frame. Bits of his brown hair snuck out from under that mass of cotton I called a wig. The pants were okay except that he had nothing else but sneakers to wear on his feet. Heck, maybe he did notice all that, but he was smiling too wide to let on.

I took a couple shots of him standing alone in the kitchen. The fridge crowded him on one side. The front-wall cabinets on the other. I had on my black dress, the only decent thing the water didn't get to. It looked okay in the bathroom mirror, but it felt like I put it on sideways.

So much of the day had been spent getting Dwayne ready that when Russell came in from Mrs. Atwell's asking after the mail, I realized I forgot to even check. It was a small comfort, to have forgotten it. But Russell shot me an I-should-know-better look and was out to the edge of our yard where the box was and back with a handful of mail. He closed the door behind him.

His eyes were wide. There was an envelope from Henry and Long Insurance.

Russell looked at me. Then at Dwayne. The envelope was small, thin. Check thin. Russell went and sat on the couch, with Dwayne and I following behind. We didn't sit down, but huddled over him. Like we were all sharing a tiny fire. All trying to keep warm. Russell tore the envelope open on the short side with his teeth. Out slid a three-times folded piece of paper. Russell was looking the paper all over, not even reading it at first.

"What's it say?" I finally blurted out.

"Do they have our money?" Dwayne shouted. We all heard the echo, all looked at the walls.

Russell calmed himself down enough to read the letter. He got through it and let it fall into his lap. I tried reading his face. He didn't look miserable, but there wasn't joy there either. He kept looking down at the letter. No check fell out from between its folds.

"Clerical error," he said.

"What's that?" I asked. Me and Dwayne both leaned in closer to hear him.

Russell looked up at us. "They say its a clerical error. That's how come we don't have our money yet. But they got it about figured out, and we should see it soon."

"Finally," I said, putting my arm around Dwayne and pulling him in. "Finally some news."

"I'd've rather opened that envelope to a check," he said. I gave him a sideways look and Russell looked down at Dwayne and smirked. "But I guess that's something, ain't it Mr. President?"

"It sure is." And Dwayne hopped into Russell's lap, the two of them laughing. I couldn't help but take a picture with Russell full-on smiling for once.

"We're going to be late, you two," I said finally, kind of sad to break up the sight of them. "But I got a cake in the fridge to celebrate when we get back. How's that sound Dwayne?"

Mom," he whined, playful.

"Sorry," I corrected myself, standing up straight. "Mr. President."

The school auditorium smelled musty and there were large, dark spots where mold had been scrubbed out of the carpeting. There wasn't much flooding in the school, but it was enough to give me guilt for all those parent council meetings where we shouted over each other about updating the school, to fix it with money we didn't even have.

Not long after me and Russell sat, the lights dimmed and the show started. Dwayne's teacher played the piano at the foot of the stage and the kids came out singing "God Bless America" and once they were all lined up on stage the show began. They came out one by one and introduced themselves, talking about what they were famous for. There was a Martin Luther King, Jr, a Chris Columbus, Rosa Parks, Thomas Jefferson. Every now and then the whole class would sing something like "Yankee Doodle Dandy."

Then Dwayne stepped to the front of the stage. Russell took my hand, squeezed it.

"I'm George Washington and I was the first President of the United States." He

was beaming ear to ear, not stiff and nervous at all like the other kids. "I was a famous general and won a lot of battles. And don't worry, I won't cut down your cherry tree."

The whole crowd laughed and above it all I heard Russell laughing the loudest. I had nearly forgot the camera in my purse and I pulled it out quick to get a shot of Dwayne, smiling into the spotlight, the crowd and the other kids and me and Russell and the ruined houses and streets and the outside world nothing more than blackness outside of his circle of light.

At intermission, Russell and I sipped on some bitter coffee in Styrofoam cups and looked for Dwayne to come out from backstage. While we waited, a woman approached us and she introduced herself as Patty, Mrs. Atwell's niece.

"Awfully nice to meet you," I said.

"Great to meet you," she said back. "Your husband here has been a real lifesaver for my aunt."

"Happy to do it," Russell said between sips of coffee.

Patty's face went flat all of a sudden. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but Russell didn't you say you guys had insurance from Henry and Long?"

"Yeah, we finally heard from them today."

"Oh, did you get your check before everything happened?"

Russell shot a look at me. "What do you mean?" I asked.

She told us how on the news there was a report that some big wig from Henry and Long had been skimming claim money after the hurricane. Russell said how ours was just a clerical error and we'd get our money, but Patty went on about how the news said

all claims are on hold until the trouble is sorted out, but that FEMA would provide for food and such in the meantime.

"I'm going to go call those sons of bitches," Russell said. "Alice, you stay here and wait for Dwayne."

"But we can all go," I said.

"No, stay with Dwayne. I'll see you at home."

Patty was near tears when Russell walked away and out the door.

"Nothing to be upset about," I said, hoping she believed me.

They called us back into the auditorium before any of the kids could come out, anxious I guess to finish the rest of the show. The rest of the kids came out, one pioneer after the other, and for the finale they played "When the Saints Go Marching In." I didn't take the camera out of my purse once.

I told Dwayne how great he did when he came into the lobby after the show. I knew it sounded half-hearted, but it was what I could muster.

"Where's Dad?" he asked, smiling but puzzled.

"He had to go home and check on something," I said.

"Did he go ahead to get the cake ready?" Dwayne asked.

I smiled but didn't answer, hoping he would take that as a yes.

On the walk home, I had Dwayne stand in front of the pharmacy so I could get his picture. He looked so good, so happy. But behind him, reflected in the store window, the town looked muddled, watery. I brought him around to the brick side of the building and took another shot there.

We walked the rest of the way in silence until we got closer to the trailer and I saw a bit of smoke rising from behind. *Dear Lord*, I thought and picked up my speed, pulling Dwayne along with me.

The trailer, once we got there, looked all right, but the smoke was still rising and I followed it around to the yard and that's where Russell was. He was sitting smack in the middle of our houseless foundation, on that lawn chair, a fire of all things going in front of him. He was singing a song to himself I couldn't hear, and he didn't have a shirt on.

"Russell, what the hell you doing?" I asked.

He stared into the fire like it had a hold on him. "I tried calling Henry and Long. Took nearly half an hour of busy signals before I got through."

"What'd they say?" I asked.

"It was a machine after that." He cleared his throat, kept on staring into the fire. "Machine said Hancock County claims were on hold. Indefinitely. Patty was right, sure enough."

"But we'll see our money eventually," I said.

"Eventually," Russell said, letting a puff of air out from his lips. "That mess'll take months. Hell, maybe a year."

"FEMA'll give us some money to eat though," I said. "Maybe you could find some more construction work. Could be worse."

Russell finally looked up at me and Dwayne. "Hey, Mr. President," he said, calm and even. "Think you could go inside and pull that cake out of the fridge, maybe put on your pajamas."

Dwayne nodded, but looked at me. "It's all right," I said. "You go on."

Before he walked in, Russell put his hand to his forehead in salute. His eyes were glassy in the firelight. Dwayne saluted him back, without smiling, and went inside.

"Jesus, Alice," he said, looking back into the fire. "So we'll get our money, when some starched collar says so by the way, and then what?"

"We get our house back, Russell. Like we've been wanting."

"Then there's still work to find and the store to fix and bringing money back into the house again. I think we need to accept this won't be over for a long while, house or no house."

I shook my head at him. "So let's just give up and build a fire and sit there and watch it burn all damn night. Let's not try to do anything."

Russell finally looked away from the fire, dead-on at me. "We're on a long road to nowhere, Alice. When're you gonna see that? Not just us, not just me you and Dwayne, I mean all of Hancock County and Southern Mississippi and the rest of the goddamn Gulf Coast." He dropped his head. "Insurance ain't pulling us out of nothing."

"Can't we just get our house and go on from there?" I asked. "Do we really have to look at every trouble from here till kingdom come?"

"Our house coming is months away," Russell said, suddenly quiet, almost whispering. "Maybe even a year. Can you keep sleeping in that thing, Alice? Can you even do it one more night? Keep eating sandwiches on the couch, putting Dwayne to bed behind that curtain?"

"We can because we have to," I said but I stumbled on my words a little. I saw

that long line of days in front of us, morning after morning waking up on that couch. The idea of it poked sharp in my side. I tried to shake it off.

"I'm not hearing any more of this," I half-shouted and stomped my foot. "Put that fire out and come in for some cake and cut out that talk, for Dwayne. For me."

"You go on," he said, all faint. "I'ma enjoy this fire another second before I put it out."

I wondered if Russell'd always been like this and I was just noticing it now, or if it was the storm that did it. I walked to the trailer door and turned to face him again.

"We're strong," I tried to tell him. "And you're a good man, Russell. We'll get through this."

"Yeah," he said. "Well, good strong men ain't getting too far these days." He went back to singing some song low in his throat. I thought to take a picture to show him some day down the road--thinking for a second we'd look back and laugh at how sad-sack foolish he looked right then--even raised the camera, but I thought better of it.

Right when I was inside, Dwayne came out of the back in his pajamas. "Is Daddy okay?" he asked.

"Oh sure," I said, realizing I had to sniff back tears. "He's a little upset 'cause the money's going to take a little longer than we thought."

"But we'll still get it?"

"Of course we will," I said. "Did you brush your teeth?"

"Before cake?"

"Go on," I said, my voice cracking. "Then you can go to bed with the taste of

cake in your mouth."

He smiled and went into the bathroom in back. The cake was on the counter by the fridge. It was chocolate sheet cake, his favorite. I got a knife out of the drawer under the counter and bumped into the cabinet behind me. I got some paper plates and set them out next to the sink. When I made the first cut, I bumped my elbow against the fridge and made the slice go jagged. I shifted the cake some to give me more room and knocked the plates into the sink and then I was crying, hard, biting the knife handle to keep quiet.

Outside I heard Russell pouring water on the fire. I went to the window over the television and watched him. He was still singing that song, louder now, so I could almost hear it. All the other nights when Russell went outside I felt so alone, like he'd abandoned us to get away from the trailer and the storm and all. But watching him then, with the steam rising in front of him, head raised to sing to the black sky, I saw he wasn't getting away from anything out there. Past him, everything was sharp and cast in full moonlight, half-built houses and empty lots going on until darkness. I thought of all the empty space outside of Dwayne's spotlight at school, of all the world set outside a camera's lens, how that all still existed, still suffered even if we weren't looking at it. How Dwayne was behind the curtain now, how there was the trailer door between my husband and me, but really we could all be in the same spot, all tethered together by the same grief, the same want. I held myself real still then, got close to the window so I could make out Russell's song and then, I went back to the kitchen and cut three big slabs of the cake, not for comfort--'cause me and Russell probably wouldn't even touch it--but

to feel for a minute like we had something. All the while I cut, my eyes watered and I was humming along with Russell and then full on singing with him, the same lines over and over again, *They're trying to wash us away, they're trying to wash us away, they're trying to wash us away...*

GET UNDER CONTROL

First off, Dad, I know I tackled Mom on the train tracks and that I separated her shoulder and that the train I heard coming wasn't there so let's get all that out of the way. But I also know, because I can remember things and once you end up in a place like this people seem to think you're either forgetful and ask you seven times a day Ben did you take your medication this morning? when I'd already put that little ruffled cup to mouth like an hour before, or they think your deaf when Hobie or George say dinner is ready and you don't move that second but sit there because goddamn, in this place you don't got much freedom, and they come up real close and yell COME ON DOWN TO DINNER BEN right into my ear. Anyway, what I remember about the thing with Mom, that no one seems to mention, is that I picked her up off the gravel and carried her like a mile and a half back to the hospital and got her some damn medical attention. I was torn up pretty bad over what I'd done, and so I couldn't really blame you for the yelling and the sending me here and the regimen of antipsychotics or *partial dopamine agonists* as some of these lab rat nurses like to say because they don't like throwing that psychotic word around in here.

So what happened on Father's Day had nothing to do with I was mad at you, or held being here against you or anything. I was looking forward to eating some of those famous sliders of yours and seeing Mom, since last time she came in she still had a sling on and I wish I remembered when that is but those drugs, they make your hands feel like

they're dipped in paraffin wax and you can hardly keep your mouth closed so keeping track of days isn't always top priority.

But yeah, so on Father's Day I had my day pass all ready to go and it was only George and Hobie on as orderlies and me and George get along fine but lets just say that me and Hobie aren't exactly on the same page. But I was set on behaving so I could get out of this hell hole and come on home with you guys because spending this much time around crazy people is enough to make you feel the world is closing in on you, cinching you in tight to a spot you don't want to be in, and I was just sitting there and Andrew--I guess he's as close to a friend as I got in here--had a Civil War documentary going on the television because he's a history buff and me and this woman Phyllis and a couple others around here that never talk, bunch of wastes of space like Greta and Fran and Jon and Jenna, we all were minding our own business watching TV and there was Hobie leaning in the doorway and I didn't need to look over to know he was eyeballing me, maybe looking and wondering why my leg was twitching, probably thinking I was off my meds when the reason could just be I was anxious to get home and see my family but you weren't picking me up until three. He might have been thinking too was I the one that set his shoes on fire the other day because that was a big to-do where the fire alarms went off and we had to, all of us, stand outside while firemen came, and yeah Dad it was a little embarrassing to be outside because the road runs right in front of here and people could drive by and say There's that bunch of crazy people and I'd be grouped right in with them.

That was like a week before Father's Day, maybe eight or nine days, but Hobie isn't one for letting things go. He's been checking my mouth everyday after meds like I'm

one of the bat shit mutes, making me lift my tongue and swirl it around and stuff. And yeah, fine, it was me that set his shoes on fire. I did it, no use denying it now. But that day time was moving in slow motion, and there's never anything to do around here, and all morning it was Hobie talking about his new shoes and weren't they nice and he'd shined them himself. I had to close myself in my room to get away from his talking, but then all I could hear were those shoes pounding down the hallway, toward my door, closing in and the stomp got deafening like it was right behind my eyes or something, so I fished some matches out from under my mattress and snuck down to Hobie's room, and there were those shoes in the middle of the floor, with their glaring sheen and they caught pretty quick with all that polish on them.

So maybe he has a reason to watch me, but what I don't get is why they automatically blame something like that on the disease they tell me I have, this problem in my head. Couldn't it be this place, with its high off-white walls and too few windows? Couldn't it be they got some totally sane people in here and the darkness and bleakness of these halls and rooms drove them to do some things maybe they wouldn't otherwise? Maybe it isn't medication I need at all, but to not be around all these crazy people, even Andrew who I guess is as close to a friend I have in here. And Hobie should know that it is just as easy to tuck a pill back deep in your cheek rather than under the tongue, and then store them in your pillow through a little hole you made in the side. I'm telling you Dad, there's nothing good about a pill that makes you feel like you're wading through oatmeal all day. That is not what a cure feels like.

So Hobie had his suspicions but I was keeping my head down and we were all

trying to enjoy some Civil War documentary but Phyllis is on the edge of the couch, wrapping a string around her finger till the tip's blue the way she does, and we all know it doesn't take much to set her off. Then there's a mortar shell blast on the television and she jumps a little and says Did you see that? to Andrew and he just grins and shows his mouth full of corn kernel teeth.

"Take it easy, Phyllis," Hobie says. "Or we'll just have to turn this off."

"You won't have to do any such thing," Andrew said, leaning forward on his cane.

"You just don't get her going, Andrew. Let's have a calm afternoon, okay?"

"Just leave him alone, Hobie," I said, even though I meant to keep my mouth shut.

He took my day pass out of his pocket. "Just give me an excuse, Ben."

They have a weird visiting policy around here, that's for sure. Since technically when you took me here I volunteered to enter, and there wasn't any police involvement-- something I never thanked you for, by the way--I can get day passes to get out of here. But they are for special occasions and go through whoever's in charge, which was Hobie at this point. Most everyone else here isn't allowed to leave or couldn't if they wanted to. So a bunch of families were coming here for Father's Day or I guess they were supposed to but the only one that made it here was Andrew's son before all the shit hit the fan.

Andrew is a funny guy, and we get along pretty good. They say he's got dementia, and yeah he gets confused from time to time, doesn't know what year it is or I remind him of his name, but he's an old guy and that stuff happens. Anyway he calls me Youngblood and we'll play chess together or sometimes walk down to the corner store in the town square if George'll take us. Hobie and him get into arguments about it

sometimes, with Hobie saying we shouldn't be allowed out so much, but George probably knew I'd flip shit if I had to stay in this damn place all day everyday so he'd take us anyway. And Andrew tends to burn candles in his room (who knows where he gets them) and get the wax all over his pants and this corduroy blazer he's always wearing. So one time not too long ago we got to the store, this idiot kid is behind the counter with a friend of his and George is outside because, unlike Hobie, he trusts us.

"These two are from *The Home*," the clerk's fat friend muttered and I shot him a glare he didn't see.

The two of them mumble back and forth about how *they* come in a lot and what crazy drugs *they* must be on and then the fat one was pointing out the wax on Andrew's clothes saying I guess they don't make them change up there and Andrew heard that one.

"You little pissant," he said, and I went over and put my arm on his shoulder as if these guys don't mean a damn thing.

"This guy your dad?" the clerk asked me.

"What if he is?"

"Well, tell him to change before he comes back in here." He nudged his friend and smirked. "It's bad enough you I have to serve you people, you guys don't need to look like you spent all morning jerking off."

Thing is, when I lunged at the clerk then and took him to the ground and punched his nose and his fat friend couldn't pull me off and George had to come in, I know it wasn't the smartest move. Of course I do. But it wasn't the same thing as when I tackled Mom, not the same as hearing a train that wasn't there. It was what that kid said, actual

words from a person standing right in front of me that set me off. Being on my meds wouldn't have helped any, except maybe to stop the throbbing in my hand for the rest of the day. Andrew was grateful as hell for that and that night I heard him yell through his bedroom wall to mine, saying Goodnight Youngblood and thanks again and I yelled Goodnight back and for a while after that I could hear him singing "Summer Wind", I think it was, and that ragged voice was about as good a thing, as human a sound as any to fall asleep to in this god-forsaken place.

And Hobie knows we're close so he's always trying to bait us, and I knew that's part of why he was getting on Andrew for not riling Phyllis up with that Civil War show. But he busted out that day pass and I shut my mouth quick because there was the cookout and seeing you and hopefully seeing Mom in a better mood than when she came here.

I can't blame you for never visiting really, hell Dad I wouldn't come in this place for a million bucks. And I appreciate you getting my note about not bringing Mom back here, or maybe she didn't want to come back anyway because of the way she left here before. She brought me that chocolate cake, and said her arm was healing up all right and the sling was just for precaution. I was buried deep in the meds then, since they got me going on them right when I came in and then Mom came about three weeks later which is when the stuff kicks in, and believe me that is a feeling to get used to, or maybe just to learn to put up with, but it was like I could hardly make words to talk to her.

And she started crying and saying maybe I didn't need to be in here, that maybe there was nothing really wrong with me and I would've agreed with her if I had the words and told her that maybe being in here would let me think some things through, that

maybe it was stress since I became assistant manager at the grocery store--which, you got to admit, would make sense considering I got the promotion and then I smashed all those tomatoes in the produce section because they smelled poison, and not long after that the thing where I thought someone had locked me in the stall in the employee bathroom, so I kicked the door in. There's all kinds of studies, they talk about them on the news, showing that stress can do some crazy things to the mind, things that might at first seem like they need medication. It's not like when Phyllis will go off and writhe and moan on the floor, just lose control and let all the anarchy of the human body take over. I'm not trying to say anything about Phyllis, really, since she only really hurts herself, never anyone else. I'm just saying it's different.

The other thing about when Mom came was that when she said what she said, about me not needing to be there, I wondered why she hadn't spoken up before. Maybe tried to keep me out of this place. Plus she started talking, trying to clear her throat, about how I would be home soon, out of there and back with you guys where I belong. But I knew better. Hell, she probably did too. We all know that even though I checked myself in, they've decided I've got something I need to *get under control* and they don't seem to be in much of a hurry to say I've done that. And then there were Mom's eyes, all bloodshot and sad, and there was some doubt in them, and me not really being able to talk wasn't helping, and when she finally said goodbye and Hobie of all people helped her out to the car, I got up and walked over to the window and I saw you out there, waiting in the car. And, like I said, I get it. But watching you through that old, rippled windowpane, opening the door for Mom, shaking goddamn Hobie's hand in thanks, I

wanted just that little touch, Dad, I don't mind telling you. Just something because through the window you guys looked like some miles-off gauzy scene. And then I felt tears streaming down my face, I saw my hands gripping the window frame hard. It wasn't like how you'd normally feel the cry coming on, how it wells up in you and then your eyes tear up and you're crying. I just all of a sudden felt them coming down my face, and my hands could have been anyone's clutching that window. I remembered that feeling for a long time after, and Mom's faint voice and how it was laced with disappointment and it took a while of that going on in my head before I thought to cut the hole in my pillow and hide the pills there.

And man I was feeling better Dad, really I was. Even the thing with the shoes, it didn't feel like I had to do it, like I'd peel my skin off if I didn't. It just felt like Hobie was pissing me off and this was a way to shut him up and that noise, the stomping noise I heard, I think I just remember sounds--like on the train tracks that day, I remembered the sound of a train--and again the stress (of work, of being in here) gets me confused for a second, makes the sounds maybe a little more real. That's not crazy, not the way I see it, that's poor stress management. Because, honestly Dad, I don't feel crazy. You can see it in Phyllis and Andrew and the rest, there's something in the look of them that's crazy, pure and simple. Something angular built into them. But not me, Dad, I don't feel that way and I stand in the mirror lots of times, for long stints, trying to see that hard edge of crazy, but I haven't found it yet.

Even after Hobie threatened to take the pass away, which is a situation where if I were crazy I would've gone off right then and not waited, I stayed calm as ever. I snuck a

grin and wink at Andrew when Hobie turned and Andrew gave back a slight smile and turned to the television. He'd spent the past couple days talking about introducing his boy to me.

"You two'll hit it off, nice," he said. "He's a banker. Smart guy. Chip off the old block. Maybe the two of you could play chess."

And he was nearly thirty, Andrew was pretty sure, and I was looking forward to talking to a sane person a little closer to my age for sure. There was that daughter of Phyllis' that came by from time to time, but she had the same fat-cheeked, eye-swallowing smile Phyllis had and something about her that made it look like she could pretty easily be in a place like this herself.

That Civil War thing kept going and Andrew was sort of just spacing out, his eyes glazed over, not really watching it, and Phyllis was giggling to herself over the battles. They went to commercial and said we'll be right back with more of *Gettysburg*, which it turned out was a mini-series movie and not a documentary at all now that I was paying attention to it.

"Afternoon meds in fifteen minutes," Hobie announced and looked at me. I smiled back.

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

I told him Not a thing, just trying to behave is all and he nodded but I knew he was still suspicious, still had his arms crossed in that way.

Just a minute after was when Andrew's son walked in. He went over to Hobie and they shook hands and talked like they knew each other, or had spoken before, and the guy

was clean-cut with cropped hair and khakis and a polo shirt. Looked like he'd come from the golf course or casual Friday or something. Anyway the program was back on, so I was trying to not eavesdrop too much because people don't really like it if you stare at them from the minute they walk in. And I didn't need Andrew's son thinking right off that I was a nut-job.

The son then came over and put a hand on Andrew's shoulder to get his attention (he was still spacing out). Andrew said hello but he sounded cloudy and his son said It's me Dad, it's Walter and Andrew said of course and he reached up to hug his son. Walter scanned the room then, looking at Phyllis and the rest who were all watching the television and then his eyes met mine and he offered a slight nod that I returned.

I wanted to give them space so I went back to watching the program, though I couldn't tell where in the war it was, which battle was which, it was just something to pass the time since I knew with Andrew's son here it wouldn't be long until you got there to pick me up. I could hear Andrew and Walter talking, I mean they were sitting right next to me I wasn't being nosy, and the sound filled my head a little. It had been such a quiet day, with just Hobie and George and that one nurse that we only see at the meds window on for the holiday, the usual bustle and pulse of this place was quelled and it was a nice, roomy quiet that had settled in. But Phyllis had to have the volume up pretty high on the television, and now with Walter here, Andrew and him were talking and having to raise voices a bit to hear each other over *Gettysburg* and you know I always get antsy when there's a lot of noise, so after a minute I got up to introduce myself to Walter.

They kept talking at first when I walked up to Andrew's chair, Walter was sort of

squatting in front of him which why he didn't just get a chair seemed strange to me. It was like he had one foot out the door. Anyway, I put my hand on Andrew's shoulder, the same way Walter had, and said quiet at first So this is your son? But Andrew looked up and said Huh? What? because he couldn't hear me over the television.

"I said is this your son?" I repeated louder.

"Oh yeah," he said then, smiling. "This is, um, Walter. Walter, this is Youngblood."

"Name's Ben," I said and offered a hand to shake.

"Good to meet you, Ben," he said. "I'm Walter." He looked like one of those business guys who knows the value of a good hand shake, but when he took my hand he barely squeezed it at all, and it was awkward because I hadn't quite finished the shake when he tried to let go of my hand. I tried not to look at him like he was too weird, him being Andrew's son and all, but that was a strange first impression. I mean you wonder why things happened like they did, but when I'm surrounded by hard-ass Hobie and some guy that won't shake my hand properly and then we stand there in some awkward silence for a bit after that until I finally say Andrew says you're a whiz at chess to the guy for lack of anything else to say.

"I'm not too bad," he said.

"We should play," I say back. "Maybe next time you're around."

"Yeah," he said, looking back down to Andrew. "We should do that sometime."

And I knew what that meant, that he wasn't really looking to ever play me in chess, and I started to wonder why he was being so rude.

"Are you feeling okay, Dad?" Walter asked Andrew then. "You look a little pale."

"Just tired is all," Andrew said back. "These bones are always tired." He smiled, cracked out a little laugh. I laughed along with him, maybe too loudly but I wanted him to hear me over the TV.

Hobie was still in the doorway, and Walter turned to him and asked was it a good idea if maybe Andrew went upstairs to lie down, and somehow I heard him but Hobie didn't, so he put up a finger like *one second* and went over to the television.

"I'm turning this down some, Phyllis," he said. "We have visitors."

I thought Phyllis would maybe pitch a fit, but just after Hobie turned the TV down, the show cut away to a news bulletin. Phyllis went wide-eyed when she heard the anchors say a gorilla had escaped from a nearby zoo. I would have watched too but Hobie and Walter were back to talking.

"He just doesn't look good," Walter said, trying to keep quiet now that he could.

Hobie nodded and approached Andrew. "Andrew, you want to go upstairs and lie down a while, maybe get some rest?"

Andrew just waved him away. "I'm having a visit with my son."

Then Walter said, "Maybe some rest isn't such a bad idea, Dad."

The words came out of my mouth before I really thought through whether to say them or not. I asked Hobie and Walter what they thought they were doing.

"Mind your business, Ben," Hobie said.

Phyllis squealed and on the screen I saw they were showing footage of the gorilla

running up the median on Route 9. They had blocked traffic off somewhere, and these guys in white suits with tranquilizer guns were following close behind the animal.

"Phyllis," Hobie said then, "I will turn it off if you can't watch quietly." Then, into his walkie-talkie thing clipped to his belt he called George to see would he mind putting down his turkey sandwich and helping out.

"I'm serious," I kept going. "Andrew has been talking about you visiting for days now. He wants to see his son, not be bottled up in his room."

Then Hobie told me to go sit down and he wasn't go to say it again.

"Come on Walter," I said. "Why come down here if you're just going to put your dad upstairs?"

He started to say something to me and then stopped, looked at Hobie. "Is this one a trouble maker?" he whispered, but I heard it.

"This *one*?" I said.

That was when Phyllis screamed because they had cornered the gorilla and they were firing tranq-dart after tranq-dart into him. She wasn't giddy about it anymore, her big cheeks wet with tears. George came in then and Hobie said Finally, think you could take care of Phyllis for me, and then I saw that Walter was trying to help Andrew out of the chair. He said to Hobie he didn't know what kind of place he was running there, where *they* can all do whatever they want. I took a step toward him, just to pick up Andrew's cane, but also maybe to ask him how he could treat his father like that, and Walter saw me move and flinched. Can you believe that Dad? He flinched like I was infectious or dangerous or something.

"Why can't you leave him be?" I asked.

He just kept telling Hobie how he couldn't see how the crying, screaming woman and the loud television and, I couldn't believe it, this kid with his twitching leg could be good for his father and why didn't he just take Andrew out of there and leave.

"Ben, you go sit down now," Hobie said, taking the pass out of his pocket again. "Or you know what."

Hobie looked at Walter and saw he was looking at me like I was something to be taken care of. So then Hobie does this thing he's never done before where he comes over and takes me by the arm to lead me to my seat as if I'm some sort of invalid that can't do things for myself. I shook him off and asked him did he need to look like he was tending to me in front of this guy while I pointed at Walter.

Walter, meanwhile, got Andrew up and was leading him to the stairs. I started asking after Andrew didn't he want to stay down here and was he really that tired and he couldn't meet you, Dad, if he went up to rest and he should do what he wants. Phyllis was still crying and yelling and George was saying there, there its almost time for meds and the anchors on the TV were pleased to see a crisis come to an end, talking about excitement stirred up and now order restored. And Hobie had me by the arm again and was really pulling me now, trying to get me back over to my seat and there was Walter leading Andrew by the arm, and George with a hold on Phyllis setting her down and those useless mute bastards sitting there not-really-watching it all. The television went back to *Gettysburg* and the sound of the movie was louder than the broadcast, or it seemed that way in my head, and it was like I could hear Walter whispering Andrew's ear

You're sick, you need your rest, you shouldn't push it in your condition, and Hobie's grip felt like it was breaking the skin and my brain felt all of a sudden like it was expanding in my skull and the last thing I think I said was I called out to Andrew.

I don't remember wanting to attack Hobie, no more than I usually do, but there I was all of a sudden on top of him and swinging my fists, catching him on the head and the arms, scratching at his face. I heard this noise, this shrill loud noise and it was a second before I realized it was my own scream. Then there were hands on me, that turned out to be George trying to pull me off Hobie, and Hobie got a hand free enough to press the red button on his walkie-talking thing and that meant there were cops coming and looking back, I should've felt a sinking feeling then, I should have felt it all coming apart, how I wouldn't get to see you or Mom, how I'd have to explain what happened, which I guess is what I'm doing now. But instead I felt this rising feeling, this deep warm shot-in-the-arm feeling and I shook George off once and hit Hobie in the gut and then Phyllis was slapping at George trying to get him off me and I turned real quick to see Andrew trying to pull out of his son's grip, I swear that's what it looked like. I pulled myself off Hobie, who was now trying to wrestle me back down, and George was trying to get a hold of Phyllis before coming back to me. Then I was across the room and driving my shoulder into Walter's gut and luckily I missed Andrew. We fell and sprawled into the lobby and Walter was just trying to pin me down while I tried to wiggle free and swing at him and his perfect hair cut and bright blue goddamn shirt. I wanted him to fight me, that's what you do when another man comes at you, but he was restraining me, just restraining me and I looked into the other room and George had

Phyllis restrained and the nurse had come in and was helping Hobie up, and the goddamn mutes still hadn't moved.

Then the sirens came first far off, enough so that I had to consider if I really heard them, and then closer and closer and I looked up into Walter's face and he was saying Calm down, just calm down to me over and over. I don't want to hurt you, he was saying loud and slow, doing that thing where he thinks I'm deaf or slow or both and I couldn't take him saying it over and over and I struggled but he had me pinned good and my eyes welled with tears and I let out this cry that felt like everything in me breaking up and liquefying and pouring out. I did that for what felt like forever and no time all at once and then the police were coming in the front door and Hobie was pointing at me and I wish I hadn't seen you then Dad, standing just outside the door, a policeman keeping you from coming in. I wish you hadn't seen me red-faced and pinned to the floor. I wish I had been able to stop myself from doing what I did.

They won't let me out of my room now, and the only thing to do is write it all down, one of the therapists here even said it might help. But its been two weeks and I don't feel any better. They're giving me injections now and I don't feel that different but it'll kick in hard soon and I'll go back to feeling nothing.

Phyllis came to the door the other day. Her and Andrew visit from time to time, but George or Hobie have to stand right outside the door when they do. Andrew usually just says Hang in there and I don't know that he even remembers what happened, what I tried to do to Walter. I can still hear him singing through the walls, but it doesn't help me sleep as much. Anyway, I asked Phyllis did she ever remember what it felt like when she

had a fit and she said it was like going blind, that it was just a tiny blackness she was trapped in. I told her that I was hoping she'd say she saw God or something enlightening like that. And she waited a second before she said Maybe God is blindness. I've been thinking about that a lot, not as much about what she said but how it sounded. She didn't sound crazy at all, Dad. That tone she had sounded rational, almost as if she was saying something I'd say.

I'm sorry I am this way, Dad, even if its stress which I'm starting to think that is me just kidding myself. Most days I look out the window in my room, just to feel like I'm connected to the world, and I watch people go by and try to imagine walking with them, having conversations. Sometimes I try to write down what we'd talk about, but this is the only thing I can ever manage. To try and write down what happened and figure it out, but really just to say to you and Mom I'm sorry and that maybe you shouldn't come visit because pretty soon it won't be me here anymore but just my body, this fleshy casing full of drug after drug after drug. I'll have that waxy numb feeling all the time, but at least I won't hurt anyone, least of all--if you believe me and try to forget I'm here for a while--you.

THE SMELL OF CORDITE

It took a while, but Dan talked Jill into going to the Patriots' Day parade with him and Dylan. They had been taking Dylan for a few years now--since he was three--and he loved walking down to the town square to see the men dressed like old soldiers.

Dan thought it might be good for Jill to go; she hadn't been out of the house, had barely spoken in three days. Not since Dan woke up to her screaming, to the blood on the sheets, a trip to the emergency room, a doctor saying *ectopic pregnancy*. She cried and cried in the exam room, they gave her something to sleep, and she'd been mostly quiet since.

"Come on, come on," Dylan said all the way up the road. "We're gonna miss it."

It was the normal parade crowd. People they always saw around town offered nods they returned. Joe and Stacy Hutch from down the street came up and said hello. Stacy asked where they'd been hiding, smiling wide and toothy like she always did.

"Jill's been sick," Dan said, pulling Jill in close and smiling down at her. "She's getting better though." Jill shrugged him off and looked at the ground. Stacy and Joe exchanged a glance, told Jill to feel better, and said goodbye.

Jill scowled at Dan, mouthed the words *I'm sick?*

"What else am I supposed to say?" he asked, but Jill had already looked away.

"Here they come," Dylan said.

The parade was small and always started the same way. A bunch of local women volunteer to dress as Betsy Ross and carry a large American flag down Main Street. They wave at the crowd and smile, the crowd applauds. Next are the Shriners, with their tasseled conical hats, carrying a banner asking for donations. After that some of the local firefighters roll down the street on the fire engine, waving and mugging like they were on a Macy's Parade float.

Dan lifted Dylan up because he knew his son like to see the fire engine. Dylan nudged his mother's shoulder. "Look, Mom. That thing is huge!"

She looked up at him and smiled weakly, put a hand on his knee and for a second it looked as if she would fall.

"Are you okay?" Dan asked, but she only shook her head, turned back to the parade. This was tough for her, he knew that. The doctors told them it could be tougher to conceive now. It had already taken so long, a couple years, to get pregnant this time and Dan thought Jill wanted something to blame, the way he did. The way he spent the night after they got home foolishly going through the medicine cabinet, reading the side effects off every label, checking the soap and the shampoo in the shower for chemicals that had hazardous-sounding names, how he ended up curled in the tub crying and woke there what seemed like hours later and snuck into bed. Jill moaned in her sleep, and Dan laid there wondering what her pain felt like, if it settled on her like a film, the way his had. Dylan was the only thing that worked on the hurt, to see him laugh or smear maple syrup across his face at breakfast. Dan's hurt didn't go away around his son, it just softened.

"The grand finale!" Dylan shouted, because that is what Dan had said to him at their first parade when the old soldiers came around the corner and up Main. Dylan went silent and let his jaw hang open as the soldiers came into the town square in five tight lines.

Dan put his arm around Jill and looked up at Dylan, smiling. She looked up too, but her eyes didn't light up; they remained flat and cold, staring at Dylan as if trying to figure him out.

One of the soldiers yelled "Halt!"

"Wow," Dylan whispered to himself, not noticing his mother's stare.

"Aim!" The group raised their rifles off their shoulders and into the air.

"Here it comes," Dan said.

"Fire!" And the entire regiment fired a round. Dylan squealed and covered his ears. The sound startled Jill, knocked a tear from her eye.

"Fire!" Dylan squealed. Dan tightened his grip around Jill.

"Fire!" The crowd erupted in applause. Dylan clapped loudly. The noise rang in Dan's ear.

"Company march," the man yelled, and the soldiers made their way up Main, away from the crowd, signaling the parade's end.

"Can I try to find some shells, Mom?" Dylan asked.

Jill started to help Dylan down from Dan's shoulders, but she winced so Dan set him down and he ran off with the other kids to find the empty cartridges the soldiers left behind. Last year most of the kids found one but Dylan never did and he cried the whole

way home. Jill was watching Dylan search with his face close to the ground, her eyes sharp and intent. She wanted him to find a cartridge so bad, Dan realized, and so did he. His chest heaved at the thought of carrying Dylan home in his arms, trying to stop Dylan crying before Jill had a breakdown. It seemed he was always the one to deal with Dylan's tantrums. But Jill was upset now, Dan thought, with good reason, and he would gladly spare her that small grief if he could.

He imagined his wide-eyed son finding a shell and bringing it over to him, imagined turning the shell over in his hand to show Dylan the black scoring inside. He would lean in close and inhale that sulfur smell, breath it deep into his nose. Dan would talk about the residue inside the cartridge, how it was called cordite and it was the charge that made the bullet fire. He'd use the word *propellant*. Dan would tuck his son's hand around the shell and tell him to store it in his sock drawer. At night, when Dylan slept, Dan would sneak into his room to dig out the shell and smell it again and again, until the smell was gone. The smell of the charge, of things set into motion.

Some children were returning to their parents, shells in their wide open palms. Just to their left, a small boy tugged on his Dad's pant leg. "Look, Dad. Look! This one's a dud! It didn't fire! I got the whole bullet!" A group circled around him to see, oohing and aahing the whole time.

Dan didn't have to look at Jill to know she'd heard; he cringed to think something so trivial could upset her, make her mouth go cracking, winter-morning dry.

He swallowed hard. "We're going to be okay," he said, not looking at her but keeping his arm tight around her shoulders. He had been saying this to her whenever he

brought her tea, or climbed into bed next to her. He told her she didn't have to speak if she didn't want, he knew she was upset. It was okay to be angry, he told her driving home from the hospital. Suddenly Jill broke away from him. She was crying openly now.

"Stop saying that," she said, her voice faint and breaking. "That everything is going to be okay. We're at the Patriots' Day parade, Dan. A stupid, rinky-dink town parade. This thing shouldn't be able to make me cry." She wiped her face. "But here I am."

"We can try again, Jill. We can keep trying."

"I've been trying to tell myself that." She looked away from Dan, hugged herself hard.

"You're upset," Dan said, trying to put his arm around her again. "We're both upset."

"Upset, Dan? Upset is the best you can come up with? I'm in bone-deep pain. Like nothing will ever be the same again. Do you know what that feels like?"

The noise of people passing and shuffling their feet and talking and laughing rose in Dan's ears, his throat seized and his arms went slack. The feeling he had inside wasn't empty at all, it was heavy and dense and thick like a cutting board. Down the street the soldiers and the Betsy Ross's and the Shriners were all sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups and eating donuts and it made Dan hot with anger and embarrassment. His hands shook and his cheeks stung with tears. Jill suddenly looked murky, unrecognizable. "I don't know," he finally said, but it had seemed so long since his wife spoke that he wasn't

sure anymore what he was answering.

Dan turned to the street looking for Dylan. All the other kids had been called away by their parents, and now that Dylan was alone he looked up for his. Dan met eyes with his son, saw Dylan look from him to Jill and back again, watched a rock fall from his hand as it went limp. Dylan stood up arrow straight then, took in a deep breath, and put his hand up in a still wave.

And with that he went back to looking for shells, his face even closer to the ground now, while around him men with brooms began to sweep the sidewalks and street gutters. Dan reached for Jill and placed one hand on her stomach, the other on his. She didn't pull away but looked at him, searching his eyes for something. He stared off past her, focusing. He was feeling for signs--for a softness in her flesh, a coolness on her skin, maybe a hard, deep-set node. He searched until she finally closed her teary eyes and shook her head. Dan looked at Jill and then at the rest of crowd milling all around him. He wanted to get Dylan and go home.

Gently, Jill lifted his hand from her stomach and, with the same tired care, let it go.