

Southburbs

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

Robert Schuster
Bachelor of Arts
Oberlin College, 2009

Director: Susan Shreve, Professor
Creative Writing

Spring Semester 2015
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Copyright: 2015 Robert Schuster
All Rights Reserved

DEDICATION

To Dad, Mom, and Barbara Bear, for being there.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank: Ryan Tanner for his love and support, and for his putting up with my generally being glued to the keyboard; Chelsea Ward for her belief and inspiration; my family for their encouragement; Susan Shreve, Stephen Goodwin, Helon Ngalabak, Courtney Brkic, Alan Cheuse, and Jennifer Atkinson for reading my writing and listening to me ramble; Richard Braithwaite and Ronald Onorato for sparking the flame; George Mason University and the English Department faculty and staff for helping me through; and Mark Parsons, Benjamin Pullen, Joel Scheib, Lindsay Dupertuis, Alex Michel, Aaron Payne, Gabriel Scaringello, Zach Stritzinger, Daniel Hegner, and all the rest of my friends who have stood by me and my crazy self for all these years.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	vi
A Prank	1
White Car	26
Shame.....	41
Counseling	45
So Proud.....	57
Sometimes.....	71
Home Invasion	82
You Never Know	99
Just Do It.....	111
Waiting.....	117
Learning to Drive	137
Biography.....	149

ABSTRACT

SOUTHBURBS

Robert Schuster, MFA

George Mason University, 2015

Thesis Director: Prof. Susan Shreve

Southburbs is the story of Alex Andrews, a timid high school senior living in the millennial American South. As he slowly accelerates toward his uncertain future in the wake of his sister's unfortunate death and myriad other smalltown scandal, stories told from his perspective and those of his family, erstwhile best friend, school counselor, and others paint a larger picture of stagnation, dysfunction, and confused hope for what might be in store after he goes out on his own.

A PRANK

“Nothing like this will ever happen again.”

Alex, who was little more than a warped twig, blinked himself to awareness at the tail end of his friend’s emphatic statement. The muffled growl of the tiny engine ebbed and flowed behind the firewall, a layer of shining, plastic woodgrain, and a sprinkling of dust, lapping at his ears, sinking him into half-sleep. He sat up straight, dropping his tingling hands palms-down onto his thighs with a slap.

Stuart’s face came into focus in the orange and green electric light. He grinned, and the lines of his expression flickered, winking in and out of the wash of the dashboard.

“Excited?”

Alex nodded, and said, “Hm?” He shook his head, then nodded again, slapping his legs in the dark, without a pattern. Tap tap tap.

Stuart flipped the cabin light on. “You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

Alex flinched under the sudden brightness. “No, no. Sorry, I was distracted.” He looked back out the passenger-side window, as if there had been something there he’d been watching in the woods alongside the road. A deer maybe, quick to bound off into the undergrowth at the first sign of the slight movement of his fingers on the door, his

fresh-pocked cheeks and wavy hair brushing he window glass, but strangely curious, bold, direct in the face of a loud and bright and moving assembly of metal. Two eyes glowing yellow out of the trees, the way he knew they did from so many cartoons and so many childhood nightmares, there in a flash and then gone the instant he looked again.

“Kalan said it, yesterday, during the planning meeting. Nothing like this will ever happen again. We’ll go down in history.”

Alex looked back at Stuart, met his tired, excited stare. “I don’t know.”

Stuart flipped the lightswitch above him, and they were back in the dark, the remnants of light dancing around in their vision with the glow of the tach and the radio. “I know. It’s Kalan. Everything to him is a big deal. Passing pre-calc was a big deal. Dating Karen was a big deal, both times. Having to take PE despite being on JV football Freshman year was a big deal. Everything.”

Stuart reached over to Alex to grab his shoulder, but pulled back. Instead, he held his hands out in midair, as if he were about to indicate the size of something he were going to brag about.

“But this is a chance for everyone, for us. We can make this a big deal too. Senior pranks are our chance to get away, just once, with telling high school to go fuck itself.” He brought his hands down hard in midair, stopping them level with Alex’s chest, when he said “fuck”.

But Alex was staring at the seat in between his legs. It was black, the tips of the fabric accented in the low light. “You sure we’ll get away with it?”

“It’s the one good tradition here. The security guards expect it. They love it. They don’t come looking for you. The only way you could get in trouble is if you burned something down. Seriously, remember last year?”

They both chuckled. It had been porn, everywhere. Cutouts from *Playboy* and *Hustler*. Every one of their older classmates’ fathers’ stashes that had been discovered years ago and marked for that very day, cut up with scissors and smuggled in in the folds of several spiral notebooks to keep the pictures crisp, easily distinguishable from a distance. The principal’s office was practically wallpapered in pictures of orgies and bodily fluids. There were genitalia in every classroom, taped to the ceiling tiles, slipped underneath phones, inside the lockers of students whose popularity was questionable or whose spaces were simply within reach. The lockers at school were never locked; the Honor Code emphasized the importance of trust and respect. Stuart claimed he’d heard from his older brother Tom that the real reason was someone once brought a gun to school and planned to take it out during a break when everyone was between classes. Or was it a knife? Alex only kept things in his locker for the first week of the first quarter of Freshman year. After that, everything stayed in his backpack.

Stuart chuckled, and Alex followed him. They were sitting together in first period Trigonometry when Mrs. Yancey pulled out her textbook from her desk, shrieked, and flung it to the floor like it was a dead bird that had fallen on her from a tree. She carefully peeled the centerfold from the front cover and ripped to confetti over the trash can.

Everything that was immediately visible that Monday morning was gone by the time lunch break ended, without a word, and without an admission from the Seniors nor the cleaners. Even after weeks of teachers accidentally stumbling on a particularly well-hidden penis or pair of breasts, no one was punished. There was a mandatory assembly for the Seniors, to lecture them on their soon-to-be-adulthood, he thought. Stuart accepted his brother's version of it, which was that they used to do that every year, even when there wasn't a prank, or at least not one anyone could figure out, just as a matter of routine, and so they could let any inquisitive parents it had been taken care of.

"I guess I just – I don't want to be remembered for putting a porno up on the Theater Club's projector."

"That's not your plan, is it? Last year's prank?"

"No, no. I don't –" He swallowed. "I don't really have a plan."

The clock showed 11:30 PM in neon green on the radio. Stuart shrugged, put the left blinker on, checked his mirror, and put the car into drive. They eased away from the curb and onto the empty road, and then Stuart put the pedal to the floor.

"We'll figure something out. Everyone will be there. Besides –"

The wheel dropped into a pothole with a thunk and then shuddered back out. Alex lifted up out of his seat for a moment, grabbing at the armrests on his sides. He thought he saw the disembodied yellow eyes again, streaming away behind him, watching the back of his head and the taillights winding down the residential streets, alongside copses separating golf greens, belonging to some animal that his sister Chelsea would have been able to name in a heartbeat, and then they were gone.

“Besides,” Stuart repeated, tapping him on the shoulder. “It’s better to be remembered for something.” He emphasized his speech with an airborne hand again.

“Right.”

* * * * *

Slim, flaking pine trees stood guard along the long, winding drive to the cul de sac, an open-air vestibule at the base of the steps to the administrative office, where students too young to drive themselves were taxied to and from school by chauffeur parents just off their full-time jobs.

At the soonest opportunity, they fired their parents from the taxi job, received a set of birthday wheels, and shot out of the surrounding woods, slalomed around the line of waiting luxury cars, pulled up to the guardhouse where they could flash their IDs and check into the student parking lot. To Alex, it was something inexplicable, that overexcitement he saw blooming up in his classmates’ faces and voices on their sixteenth birthdays, but then Stuart’s time came, and then Alex’s, and he understood. Checking in at the guardhouse for the first time on his own a luxury installed at school to serve no purpose other than to evoke a feeling.

But what a feeling. Exclusivity, a once-in-a-lifetime reminder of the onset of adulthood. Plucked from a wide field of similar reminders. Alex always expected he would have something clever to say to the guard on duty, but he fumbled for his ID most of the time, and his chest was tight as he was waved silently through into the parking lot.

On the midnight approach, he reached for his wallet. Stuart laughed and tapped the steering wheel.

“What? Oh.” Alex slipped it back into his back pocket. “They already know us anyway. It’s not like –”

“It’s not like they’ll care tonight.” He laughed again. “I bet we’re not even the first ones here.” Stuart tapped the accelerator, bucking the car forward into the turn, straining both of them against their seatbelts. He turned on his blinker. After only one blink, he clicked it off again.

The light was on in the guard house, and they rolled down the window as they rolled up to it. Around the door, a saxophonist played some meandering tune from a tiny set of speakers up on the desk, next to the register. The book was closed. The guard sitting there in the corner of the shack thumbed through his phone, eyes half-closed, hat pulled down tight. His wrinkles in the lamplight made him look like a shading exercise from art class, pinned up in the corner, shifting ever so slightly as they approached.

Stuart stopped the car at the wooden stop sign, the white line painted yearly across the asphalt. The saxophone squealed. He looked up at the guard, seeking his eyes, but the guard just held up a tired hand, the other still on his phone, and waved them on through.

They didn’t move. Stuart looked up at him again and waved himself through along the same line. A xylophone, or a marimba, they weren’t sure, joined in, and then took over from the sax, percussive jabs threading into the thick, purple night.

Alex looked from his friend to the guard whose face he was certain should have been familiar, and then leaned over in front of the steering wheel, steadying himself with his hand on Stuart's leg, and spoke.

"We're just here to pick up some stuff," he wavered.

Stuart shushed him and tried to shove him back into his seat.

Alex continued. "My textbooks. I left them in my locker. You know, homework." He gestured, and from his eyes his hands resembled a book opening and closing, and then clearly as a different action, writing on a sheet of paper. Of course this man knew what textbooks were, what homework was. He wasn't an idiot.

The guard didn't wave a second time. The whole band had joined back in under the buzz of the lightbulb.

Stuart waved and nodded in thanks, put up the window, and pulled away into the lot.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Alex looked at the floor. "I don't know. Reflex, I guess."

"I told you, he doesn't care. This happens every year. Look," and he gestured out at the handful of dark, sleek shapes, cars on the far end of the lot, winking gloss and chrome under the headlights. "What'd I tell you. Everyone's here."

"Not everyone."

"Lots of people."

"Who?"

"Who knows?"

Alex sat in the silence after Stuart's door slammed shut, listening to his breaths and the distant, ubiquitous chirp of cicadas conversing through the night. He looked back over his shoulder, out the back window of the car, at the guard house. It was small even up close, a rough wood shack with a green metal roof, and a hundred yards away it glowed microscopic against the backdrop of skinny pine trunks, grey shifting into the purple-blue of the clouds. How long was the man's shift? Unlike the bugs, the music didn't carry this far. They wouldn't know if he wasn't there, or if he'd written anything down in the register, names, license plates, descriptions of the would-be culprits. Did he remember anything that had come and gone before him, who passed by on the little road?

There was a tap on the window. Stuart stood outside, leaning down, gesturing toward campus, first with one hand, then both.

Alex inhaled and unbuckled his seatbelt.

* * * * *

The closest building was the cafeteria, a low brick square that he knew from the others in the dark by its location only. There weren't any signs on school grounds. Supposedly, there once were signs, nice ones donated by some alum who struck it rich, or a legacy, or the class of something or other, big carved wood platforms with engraved plaques naming each and every one of the seven high school buildings and explaining their contents. They disappeared one by one over the years, decades before, and no one had ever put up the money to replace them. New donations went to repaving the parking

lot, renovating the gym, or hiring new teachers with impeccable credentials to replace the ones asked to leave the previous year. Stuart said his old brother knew the guy who stole the signs, that he did it to make an overly subtle statement. They were all still sitting in a garage somewhere in the surrounding suburbs, collecting cobwebs. Every so often, he would pull up the door and grin at them all clustered together, milling about in awkward silence. Pointing nowhere, indicating nothing anymore.

They may also have just decomposed over the years, wood and bronze not being on such great terms with the dripping summer air. And really, the school wasn't big enough to justify signs. Alex almost laughed when he was mailed a campus map and directory before freshman year, but his parents were pleased. A high school with more than one academic building? With a campus. Green space neatly arranged to give students a reprieve between upper-level academics. It really was college preparatory. Signless, though, no one knew the buildings by name: they were just the Admin, the Library. Humanities, Sciences. The auditorium, the gym, the cafeteria.

The lights in the cafeteria were off, and they could make out the outlines of folded tables and chairs through the bay windows and double doors. No movement, no trespassers, and no sound. They moved on into the interior, an open quad with benches that held no one, and paths that went nowhere fast, swirling around patches of semi-dried mud and dead grass before arriving at the various entrances to the library and the two low classroom clusters. Hedges and sculptures would have completed the scene, but they had yet to be donated specifically, and nothing could be reallocated for such frivolous purposes from the funds earmarked for the rejuvenation of the football field.

Alex trod on his tiptoes, rocking back slightly onto the balls of his feet, careful to keep up with Stuart but not fast or heavy enough to make any real sound. There were no footprints ahead for them to follow and join up with, and there weren't any they left behind in the hard-packed dirt, but he glanced over his shoulder more than once just to be sure. The patterns on the bottom of his shoes were nothing remarkable either, but he could never be too sure. All it would take was for one administrator, one custodial employee, one peer with a grudge or a cruel desire to point out a stray print. How come Alex's footprints are going from the cafeteria directly to Sciences when everyone knows that he always has Euro after lunch? He lifted his toes up, didn't use the back two thirds of his soles.

"Come on, slowpoke."

Alex stopped in his tracks. He stood on the points of his feet, then stepped off into the grass. "Just being careful."

Stuart shook his head. "Whatever. Hear that?" He raised his hand and pointed vaguely toward Sciences. Alex followed with his eyes. "They're that way."

"I don't —" but then he heard it, a sharp, short tinkling, glass and a squeaky toy shaken in a plastic bag. There was nothing else like it in the whole senior class.

"Karen," Stuart agreed. "Come on."

He jogged off toward Sciences, cutting across the grass and another path that jutted out diagonally from the Library. Motion lights cut on as he approached, bathing Alex and the short grass, both vibrant and dried, in harsh yellow-white. He looked back over his shoulder again at the sparkling red-brown wall of the Library lit up like a

firehouse, the glare and flare off the sliding glass doors bouncing back through the motes in the air. The quad shone like a stadium for half a minute and then abruptly cut out leaving Alex blinking. Stuart was in the doorway of Sciences, out of the path of the motion sensor.

“Deer in the headlights,” he waved, “come the fuck on!”

* * * * *

Twelve of them were idling around the fume hood in the chemistry classroom, chortles and expressions of disbelief echoing away from them down the hall when Stuart and Alex shuffled in. Kalan and Karen were on the far end, newly dating again as of that night, not even thirty minutes prior, arms entangled like two trees that happened to grow too close and onto each other.

Harrison, Stuart’s fifth-grade best-friend, leaned against the side of the hood inches from Kalan’s elbow, smiling in time.

And Leigh, Joshua (not Josh; that was what his mom called him), Mackenzie, and several others from their class of one hundred, with their backs turned, whom Alex could only name if given the time to recall the individual points in time when he’d thought too long about the appropriate response to their ribbing, speaking too late for anyone to hear. Despite it being far after-hours, they were all still dressed as close to school-appropriately as ever, collared shirts half tucked-in, the stray pair of flip-flops making an appearance

instead of closed-toed shoes. Pastel and flower patterns from an innocuous living room wall.

There was a pause in the conversation when Harrison noticed the two interlopers. He looked just over the heads of his friends, and everyone dropped off, heads turning.

“Stu, and . . .”

Stuart stopped and nodded, a flick of his chin upward to acknowledge them.

“Hey Kalan. Harrison. Karen, guys.”

In the silence between them, Alex noted the flasks of clear something on the fume hood and in the hands of a couple of the group, passing hands. The chemical cabinet door in the back hanging open with an acquired key in the lock, red lanyard dangling free. Across the lab counters, several jars and beakers fanned out, full of metal and oil, familiar and foreign labels of substances not readily available.

They received several nods in response, and Alex approached in Stuart’s tow.

“This is your idea of a prank? Fucking up Mrs. Jemison’s lab?” Stuart stepped forcefully into the circle and qualified his disbelief. “I mean, that’s cool. Simple, easy.” He searched for eye contact. “Whatcha having?”

He reached for the full beaker on the fume hood counter, but Karen slapped his hand away and moved to block him. “Asshole.”

“Jeez, alright, I’ll get my own.” He held his hand to his chest.

Alex ventured, “Read the label.” Karen and a couple others joined in.

“Methanol.”

Stuart's eyes widened. "Oh." He turned to the crowd. "You saved my life. How can I ever repay you."

"Stop being a fucking idiot."

He ignored the comment. "How about this? Anyone got a lighter?"

Some shuffling, exchanged mumbles and rumblings, and a hand brought one forth into the center of the circle. He took one of the drinking beakers, at one point filled to the brim with ethanol, and poured out a splash onto the back of his hand. Kalan grumbled.

Stuart flicked the lighter a few times. Nothing. He hand it to Harrison who rolled his eyes, produced a drop of fire with a click, and set Stuart's hand on fire.

A collective gasp escaped into the room and out the door, down the hallway, audible to anyone listening at that dead time of night. They backed off, and then contracted back, enclosing him, bringing Alex with them. The flame undulated and morphed, rippling along his friend's knuckles and twitching with the movement of his tendons. Even the overhead lights seemed dim in comparison with this tiny, pattering blue flicker surrounded by and reflecting off of wide eyes and wide pupils, bared teeth, slow inhaling, nervous chuckles self-consciously cut short. And the whole time, Stuart grinned, standing upright in a way that Alex rarely saw his only real friend, proud like the scraggly black wolf who accidentally led the pack to fresh carrion.

"Does it hurt?"

"It tingles a bit." He wiggled his hand from side to side, tracing a blue-orange line in the air. "You can cap it." He offered his hand up to the group, from one awed

face to the next. “Seriously, it doesn’t hurt. Just put your hand on top and it’ll go out.”

No one reached out. “Fine. Alex, come on.”

Alex hesitated too, but he met Stuart’s eyes, saw in them his own begging for some kind of help, an easy, simple out, and he reached into the circle and placed his hand squarely on top of Stuart’s with a light clap. He didn’t feel anything but the damp remnants of the alcohol, and the fire was out.

Kalan nodded and handed the beaker back to Stuart, nodded again as Stuart took a swig and passed it back just before he cringed and twitched, trying his best to pass it off as an ecstatic smirk. The over-tanned, pastel apparent source of Alex’s ostracism proffered the drink to him in turn. He looked to Stuart who in turn looked at some indeterminate point above Harrison’s head by the joint of the fume hood and the wall.

“I’m good.” Alex shook his head at the glass under his nose. “I’m good.”

Kalan laughed again, pulled the beaker back, and sipped from it, biting his lip from the sting. “Suit yourself . . . Alex, right? Your sister’s the one who . . .”

There was a break where all sound disappeared from the room, breaths stopped, the rattle of the ventilation system and muted chirp of crickets failed to register for a split second, and then Stuart interjected, “Kalan, Jesus, man, don’t –”

And Alex, “It’s okay –”

“– say shit like –”

“– It’s okay really.”

Another break. Then Alex, not smiling, not looking anyone in the eye, taking particular pains not to see any part of his friend even out of the corner of his eye, reached for the beaker in Kalan's hand.

“Really. It was two years ago. I'm fine.”

He looked through the liquid, lightly swirling and viscous, leaving a smear down the inside of the glass, eighty-odd milliliters, and then tipped the beaker spout against his lips and swallowed it. The burn of the second gulp drizzled down into the space below his lungs, spidering out into his ribs and then along his shoulders to his arms. He coughed once, and handed the empty beaker to Kalan. “Ow.”

The edges in the room didn't take long to start bleeding into each other. The corners of the room, base molding, the peach glow of cheeks and ears left momentary trails as they moved in conversation, resuming their original state of casual celebration. Alex found himself simultaneously trying to inch himself closer to the talkers in the group and make a subtle move toward the door. He heard Stuart in the distance trying to explain the lineage of pranks that had been passed to him by Tom, his older brother, rating them sporadically. Some were simple, plastic wrap on toilets, plastic spiders in teachers' desks, real spiders in lockers, and others were complex, the contents of whole classrooms moved from one to another, building to building, out into the parking lot or the quad or onto the roof. Having all the brand-new computers play fart sounds when they were switched on, burps when they were shut down, and some particularly clever Senior's idea of a redneck accent shouting, “gawt-dangit Cletus!” when a fatal Windows error occurred. You could hear him laughing at his own joke on the recording, Stuart

said. Alex took this moment to start giggling, realizing then that nothing he could possibly think of would stand up to something that funny, and that his hands and feet and chest felt warm and expansive, they were leaking themselves out into the thin space of air surrounding them, like just an inch of fleece wrapped loosely around his extremities, tightly on his ribs and shoulders when he breathed in, and he knew that he had never been drunk before this point but was pretty sure that this was what it felt like at least according to what he'd always seen on TV and read about in books. Who was to say that he wasn't, except maybe the group of his stranger-peers surrounding him then, Stuart blending in too, he was sure he'd snuck something from his parents' liquor cabinet before but it wasn't something he talked about unlike everyone else here, he was sure this wasn't the first time they'd stolen from the chemistry cabinet, maybe even during class, and if anything happened a doctor would know if he was drunk for sure, or a police officer, without even administering a breathalyzer, just by looking at him, seeing his blanket of warm air, the way he swallowed his spit more than usual. He squeezed his hands to his cheeks, underneath his eyes, closing them to clarify the words slurring about his brain. Breathe in, breathe out. What's next?

The door to the classroom slammed open with a pop and he stumbled backward into a girl whose name he remembered, after apologizing, was Theresa. Everyone stood frozen for a second before recognizing one of their own and exhaling as one. Alex knew his classmate in the door from three previous years of high school, but his heart was pumping and he couldn't recall the name.

“Look,” he said, and held the glass up for them to see. It was the size of a pickle jar, with a similar yellow vinegar sloshing about in it, translucent and swirling with particulate. Rotating slowly, completely submerged in the jar, some pink round mass, a knotted, gnarled tumor folded in upon itself and twitching in the light of the classroom under their observation. As it turned, Alex followed its lines and folds, pulling from the contortion that it was a body, tracing the outlines of its legs, fore and hind, the zipper-notched ridges of its spine curled into a tight C-shape. As its face floated down toward them, he saw the tiny, cropped snout, the ears flattened against its head, its eyes squeezed shut, never opened in the first place.

He started at a yellow flash, a spark from between the eyelids, as if it had decided to stop escaping into itself in its formaldehyde womb and instead wake up and see the face of those who had put it there. But it was just glare from the overhead light on the jar, hitting it just so, and Karen broke the silence, “Fetal pigs?”

There were two more jars under his other arm, the biggest one still on display in his hand. “Fucking gross, right?”

“I already had to dissect those in class, they’re –” she started to explain, but Kalan cut her off with a wave of his hand.

“They’re perfect,” he said, and ushered the pig-carrier out of the room and motioned for everyone to follow. Karen went first, and then the rest. They put their beakers under the fume hood and filed out after him, whispering amongst themselves, speculating, crafting theories on the fates of the stillborn piglets in their chemical tombs.

Stuart was the last out, turning only to see Alex still standing in the middle of the room, not knowing what to do with his warm, radiant hands, his tense, hot ribcage.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“With everyone else. Right?”

“I don’t know. I think we should just leave.”

“Come on.” He waved Alex over and then turned and walked out.

“Right.”

* * * * *

The entrance to the library was visible from any other place on the quad, the entrances to any of the other buildings surrounding it. Its wide glass doors were clear from every angle, not obscured by trees, potted plants, decorative shrubbery or other groundskeepings. From across campus, anyone could look through the polished panes and see the opposite interior wall, over the librarian’s desk and the check-out station.

Even in the dark, over the spotlighted heads of the group, Alex could see the outline of the desk, reflections off the computer screens, the slowly waving shadows of the stacks on the far wall. The group milled about in front of the library, in the automated lights. Stuart pushed forward, Alex hung back, and the murmur of voices rose and melded into the swampy noise of the night.

A wet, solid smack bounced between the buildings. And then another, some unnerving combination of a boxer hooking a side of beef and a fish, flopping desperately on a boat, being hit with a mallet, moist and heavy. He stood up on his toes and saw the dark, damp shape, one of the piglets lying in a puddle at the bottom of the library door. A trail of slime slid and dripped quietly down the glass, pooling at the base.

Someone, maybe Harrison, or maybe Stuart, or Karen, or the pig-carrier, it could have been any one of them, let out a low whistle, murmurs of shock and disgust that gave way to laughter, a rolling group cheer that flowed with the shadows of the group swaying and flickering across the grass and the building walls. More whistles and applause followed in a pile of aimless celebration, increasing as the group egged on one of their number to uncap a second jar and send the second little pig flying in a wide arc, contrails of preservative falling behind and underneath it. The squelch of the impact, a direct hit on the doors that rippled them like a pond, set the mob cheering and hooting, a shout of “bullseye!” The little grey-pink projectile flopped down onto the pavement, rolling a few inches before settling next to its brother.

The third one followed shortly, jar and all. It spun like a football, hurled in a quick spiraling arc and shattered against the bricks to the left of the door. Glass shards zipped off in all directions, tinkling and scratching as they went, and the formaldehyde splashed like a water balloon, popping quickly in a little, multi-fingered splat on the clay and mortar.

Through the cheers and jumping for joy, Alex could see the third little pig, leaned up in the crook of the wall and walkway below the spatter of its jar. It was greyer than

the other two, smaller, and resting upside down on its skull. A shard of glass had made a neat incision, straight and clean as a scalpel in a teacher's hands, across its belly, and the flap of skin hung down from its own weight, exposing the mottled grey and brown innards. One small, snaky piece poked out, folded in a tight U-shape. Alex thought he might be able to fit it back into place just by pushing on it with his finger.

The sharp laboratory smell finally hit him then, and he stumbled back and sat down hard, the warmth from his limbs traveling together and turning to fuzz behind his eyes, pressure against the insides of his temples. From the crowd, he caught Stuart's eye, and his friend broke away from the congregation and kneeled down beside him.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." Alex blinked a few times and swallowed hard, pushing down on his gag reflex. Don't retch in front of everyone.

"You shouldn't have chugged all of that. It's hard stuff. Not worth risking your health just to impress these idiots." Stuart looked over at the group, leaning back from Alex, straining to see what they were up to now that the pigs had been used up.

"I'll be okay. I just need to sit down."

Stuart nodded. "You okay here? Do you need to go inside?" He looked over at the rest of the group again. They'd started to wander away, the mess on the library walls already passed through their consciousness.

Can we leave soon? was resting on the back of his tongue, but every time he tried to say it, he felt his stomach bubble upward, and he had to concentrate, swallow repeatedly, not move. Finally, he was able to get out one word, "Sure," and nod, and

Stuart patted him lightly on the shoulder and jogged off to follow the others. The piglets stayed put, sagging in their puddles that slowly drained away in rivulets along the concrete.

* * * * *

When he caught up, they were in Humanities, in the History classroom that doubled as the room where they had Health Freshman year. That was the first time he met Miz Hollinston, the school guidance counselor, as his Health teacher, where she told them at length about the failure rates of condoms and the reasoning behind the school dress code rules, “So no one gets any funny ideas from seeing their peers all done up!” She’d made them put up swear words on the board and then walked through all of them explaining why it was disrespectful to use them, why they shouldn’t be ashamed to just explain themselves to each other. “Asshole is just another word for anus, and without that very useful piece of anatomy, we’d all need colostomy bags!” Everyone laughed.

They only took the class because it was required, for the grade, but she took it seriously, and the classroom layout reflected that, with a long whiteboard along the side surrounded by posters with positive messages, flanking the chairs that all faced the front of the room where her desk was. The students had to turn to pay attention to the board, where most of the class took place, twisting themselves to her direction.

The crowd huddled together at the far end, by the bookshelf in the corner, shuffling through the volumes there, giggling and half-whispering to each other as though

there were someone wandering around outside who might hear them if they continued as they had in the Sciences at the fume hood. A handful of books were scattered around their feet, covers open, face down, face up, tossed or dropped or otherwise overlooked in the midst of the activity. Karen emerged from the group with a book in hand and turned to them, flipped it open, and started, “Oh, you remember when . . .?” and then, pointing to the page, launched into the paragraph on puberty and anatomy in a concerned high pitch, like that of a mother on a television show. They were silent at first but soon joined in guffawing, punctuating the faded textbook’s outdated language, its repetition of “hip” and “cool”, its uncanny valley cartoon illustrations.

“Excuse me. Excuse me!” she commanded, and they fell about themselves.

Stuart stood at the back, against Miz Hollinston’s desk, half-smiling, looking down at his feet, and then up across the room, saw Alex, walked over to him by the door. He said nothing.

Something changed hands a few times, passing in and out of sight until Karen took hold of it and tossed the book aside. It hit a desk and fell to the floor with a whap. She shook the object in her hands, and it rattled, click-clack-click!, a short metal tube. Others offered up suggestions, encouragement, their ideas of brilliant artistic vandalism, talking over each other.

“F!”

“No, C-minus, C-minus –”

“See me after class –”

“Needs work!”

“She does need work –”

“I want a divorce, and sign it Principal Hollinston –”

“No, wait, let me –”

Harrison pushed through and grabbed the spray can from Karen’s hand, shook it a few more times for good measure, and held up his hand to stop the rest of them, have them stand back while he went to work. They stood in awe as the words took shape in fuzzy, round black spray on the whiteboard. Dribbles of paint ran down at the points where he lingered, brushstrokes for emphasis.

He stood back smiled, and then turned to the rest of them.

“Bitch slut?” asked Kalan. “She’s a bitch, but –”

“Come on,” Harrison responded. “You know there was some funny business going on before she married Principal Hollinston. Everyone knows that. She was like, barely seventeen, eighteen.”

“Our age. Everyone knows that,” said Karen.

“You hated her class.”

“Whatever,” said Kalan. He snatched the can away and strode toward the door. Alex and Stuart sidestepped him as he stepped up. “I’m doing the next one,” he waved the can at Harrison. “Something funnier.”

Karen followed, then the rest of them, one by one, not laughing now, just mumbling, and then Harrison at the tail end, who passed close right by Alex as if he were just brushing past another desk or stray chair and looked Stuart directly in the eyes for a

moment before he went out the door into the hallway and caught up with the group in the deep night air.

Alone in the classroom, the two friends stood a few feet apart, looking around, avoiding the drying message splayed across the wall. The clock jittered and ticked above the door behind them, unviewable from any seat in the room save one. More times than he realized, Alex tried to find something to say. They should try and clean it off the wall. They should call the police. They should rat out Harrison, Kalan, Karen, Theresa, the whole lot of them, go immediately to Principal Hollinston and explain what happened to his wife's classroom and the library and the chemical cabinet, erasing themselves from the whole plot except as observers following out of sight, spies relaying vital communication back to HQ. Classroom vandalized. Culprits at large. Bring paint thinner. Stop.

Stuart finally broke the silence between them by opening the door and looking out into the hallway. They could hear the chattering voices somewhere off in the unspecified distance, another classroom perhaps, or just leaving the building for another one awaiting its own painted masterpiece.

He looked back at Alex. "You want to go?"

"Go home?"

"Yeah."

"In a second." Alex walked over to Miz Hollinston's desk, stepping over the strewn books, careful not to disturb the evidence. He took a pen from the cupful of them in the corner, a sticky note from the stack next to it.

“What, did you finally think of something great for us to do, after all that?” He raised his voice. “They’re not going to differentiate between us and them. Let’s just go, before someone really does call the police.”

Alex didn’t respond. He was trying his best to write in as nondescript a way as possible, generic block letters that would be untraceable, that anyone with hands could have written. They were wobblier than he’d intended but clear enough, printed, a complete sentence: I’m sorry. He went to sign his name, hesitated, considered putting a pseudonym, hesitated again, put the pen back, and stuck the note in the center of the desk.

He breathed in, turned around, and walked toward Stuart, his friend.

“Okay?”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

WHITE CAR

Mr. Jeffrey Andrews told everyone, especially his Director of Marketing, that he loved his job. And definitely his wife, Marge. And of course his daughter, Chelsea, and his son, Alex. There was no sense in reminding them as he'd said before that he had never envisioned himself as a salesman. The Director of Marketing, Mr. Benjamin Wendell, corrected him every few days on his job title, when he said it wrong on the phone with a client.

“Hey, Jeff, don't sell yourself short!” He shouted his encouragement across the chilled office air. His voice carried through the dust-moted sunlight beams that illuminated Jeffrey's thankfully small bald spot and hit him square-on like a paper airplane snubbing its nose on the chalkboard from the back row. Jeffrey imagined picking it back up, smoothing out the paper tip between his fingers, and launching it back toward Benjamin, over the cubicles, and through the windowpane to soar off into the open sky.

“Right, yes, Marketing Operative.” He looked down at his desk, to the left of his phone, to the tacked-up picture of himself with his wife and kids on vacation in Orlando four years before. Donald Duck's eyes followed him from every angle. And clearly, he was designed to always look exasperated. It had been ninety-seven degrees and every surface was dripping with condensation, including Jeffrey's face, his laugh lines and tear

troughs and red, patchy cheeks emphasized by sweat. Including his armpits, which the photograph had caught him scratching through his polo. That photo had cost him fifteen dollars and fifteen minutes in line. Preempting his family's requests, he bought three more copies, but the only other one still left in existence was Marge's, framed and displayed in the center of the foyer endtable, next to the spot where he left his Corvette keys.

He looked down at the stack of business cards just underneath the photo. And then back up to stained patch of cubicle wall fabric next to the computer monitor in the exact line of speech to Benjamin's cubicle.

"That's what it says on my business cards."

"Isn't that what it says on your business cards?" They spoke simultaneously.

"Yes, that's what they say," Jeffrey responded.

"Jeff, you're a valuable part of the team. You're great at what you do. Don't you forget it!"

"Thanks, Benjamin."

Jeffrey could tell Benjamin hadn't moved during the whole conversation. The heightened encouragement of his voice only got louder, and Jeffrey liked to think that, five years on, he had whatever the equivalent of perfect pitch was for volume.

"Benny, Jeff. Benny."

"Right, Benny. Sorry."

Jeffrey had taken his wife and children to Disney World with his bonus and subsequent promotion a year into the job. Before that, he'd worked as a salesman at a

different company. With the distracting sun ray at the exact angle of his scalp, he couldn't for a moment remember what he used to sell. Marketing something something.

* * * * *

When the sun had thankfully inched its way down the windowpane to light up the window-facing walls of the tech support cubicles, it occurred to Jeffrey in an instant glint off of someone's stapler that he would soon be shutting down, packing up, and heading home. The evening commute snuck up on him, and he jokingly attributed it to old age, even though he knew he was not old and he knew that that joke was tired and unfunny. Everyone always laughed at it, even Marge, except for Chelsea and Alex, who probably thought he really was old and soon to be committed to a nursing home with a name like Meadowdale Mews. It would, of course, be nowhere near anything resembling a meadow. Or maybe the meadow had been dug up and flattened and re-planted with more uniform grass. What was a dale, even? Mews, for the old ladies rescued from being eaten by their cats after a nasty fall to the kitchen floor, too far away from the telephone?

But the commute was exciting. Its speed and efficiency was unpredictable to anyone but the radio man giving Jeffrey and everyone else on the road a recommendation to take the exit they'd just passed. But he made it exciting, with the Corvette. Marge had called it his mid-mid-life crisis, and he chuckled for a second. It wasn't even that expensive, he insisted. He needed to break the bank to properly call it a mid-life crisis.

She chuckled in return, for the same single second. "Don't joke about that."

It was his boyhood dream to have a Corvette, a wavy, sleek-haunched beast of chrome and steel and plastic. Until he and Marge were married, he was never without a poster of one on his bedroom wall.

“I hope you don’t plan on keeping those up forever.” What was he, fourteen? They didn’t challenge her or insult his maturity the way a similarly wavy, sleek-haunched model would have, so they managed to reach a compromise by moving them into the TV room, over the couch so that they couldn’t be seen from any sitting position in the room, only from the moment of entrance or exit. Jeffrey had them mounted and framed at the same place they took the wedding and baby photos that replaced them in the bedroom.

The poster Corvettes were Stingrays in red and blue and yellow. He could only find a white one for sale. He gave up on plans to have it repainted when he found out it would have cost as much as the car itself. He gave up on repainting it himself when he checked the cost of the equipment he needed to do it properly. Not even for a Christmas gift, he checked himself when he entertained the idea. Not even for my birthday.

But it was still a Corvette, a stallion that changed him into a forty-five minute knight at a joust, the only time during the week when he truly stood alone on the field. Some days it was his brave charger carrying him and his lance, and others an indescribable, otherworldly beast foaming at the mouth and steaming from the ears. Or maybe it was a dragon, spitting fire, and so full of life and anger that there were moments when he couldn’t tell if it was going to fling him from its back or encourage him to hang on with a snort and a roar. Jeffrey thought about naming it. Every good car needs a private name, some term of endearment. He narrowed the list of names down to seven

before letting slip to Marge that the list even existed. She chuckled, shook her head, and said nothing. He filed the list away and forgot soon after where he'd put it, amongst his work-from-home manila folders, so the car stayed nameless.

But it was still a Corvette, and the shifter felt full and shook in his hand when he knocked it down a gear to pass a string of far more practical cars, like Marge's Hyundai, on the freeway. It made him smile every time.

The elevator door opened at the exact moment when the seconds on his clock flipped over to zero and the rest of it blinked five forty-five. He heard Mrs. Wendell's belting hello to the whole office and the undirected murmur in response. After her, though, was something unfamiliar to Jeffrey. It was a round, loud, blunted babbling, almost as enthusiastically projected as Benjamin's team-building statements, but with seemingly no direction. As it got closer, he could make out some words interspersed in the noise, and even some complete sentences. Mrs. Wendell spoke over it to each cubicle she passed.

"How are you doing?" She emphasized the "you" and there was a pause as she quickly picked up each coworker's name from the outside label pinned to the doorways. "Have you met our son Michael?"

Everyone's responses were still murmured, but approving, cutting the introductions short as they turned back to their computers to hopefully finish up the contents of their calendars and planners and to-do lists before the autumn evening set in.

"It's good to see you again. I'll leave you be. I'm really just here to remind my husband that working to feed his family doesn't mean he can avoid going home to that

family.” Her laugh was too fast, in the same breath as the end of the joke, taking the place of the punchline entirely. Jeffrey cringed and then rearranged his expression as Benjamin and Michael Wendell appeared in his doorway.

“Oh – Jeffrey, hello!”

“Afternoon, Mrs. Wendell.”

“Oh please, it’s Angela. Working hard so late? Have you met my son Michael?”

She smiled wide and stared directly into his eyes, nudging her son forward by the shoulders with her hands.

“I don’t think so.”

He was Benjamin’s son, alright. Same neat, short blonde hair. Same shape of the jaw, cheekbones, probably, when he gets older than, what, three or four. Same smile, though Jeffrey gave Michael the benefit of the doubt in assuming his was genuine. He was just a kid, after all. Michael babbled a convoluted sentence that seemed to be about working on computers and directing something.

“Say nice to meet you Mister Jeff, honey.”

With the help of Angela’s suggestion, Jeffrey figured that what burbled and sputtered from Michael’s mouth was a reasonable approximation of a greeting. He put on the shadow of a pleasant smile, but he must have let his perplexity show for just a split-second, because she responded immediately.

“He was diagnosed with a developmental disability when he was just two. He’s made a lot of progress. We have him in a special program. You’re doing very well there, aren’t you, you little goober?” She leaned down to pet his head as she said this, and then

finished by tickling under his arms. He squealed and ran and ducked under Jeffrey's desk.

A muffled, tinny clip of *Ride of the Valkyries* played from Jeffrey's pocket, startling him. He hit his knee on the underside of his desk, holding the "fuck ow" on his tongue, remembering that Michael Wendell was hiding somewhere within a few feet of his feet.

"Sorry, Angela, it's Marge, I have to get this, sorry." He pulled his phone out and rotated his chair away from Angela.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm here to see Benny anyway."

"Hey, honey, how was your day?" Marge said over the phone.

"Michael, honey, come on, let's go see daddy." Angela stretched out her hand into the cubicle.

Michael crept out from under the desk and looked up at Jeffrey. "Make-up!" he shouted, reaching up with both hands to Jeffrey's phone arm.

"Long day, busy, almost done here. How was yours?" He tried to turn further away from both Angela and her son, but he had already found the middle position between them.

"No, Michael, no make-up right now."

"Jeffrey, what's going on there? It's loud there."

"Make-up!"

"It's loud here, I know, sorry, Benjamin's wife is here with her son."

And then they were gone, along the cubicle line toward Benjamin's desk on the end. Jeffrey could hear Marge and her ambient noise much clearer now. It sounded like she was on the road, her voice was underpinned with low fuzz and the indistinct mumble of the rush hour evening news recap.

"It's loud there," he said.

"I was just calling to remind you to pick up Chelsea from field hockey practice."

"Right, I know, every Wednesday, track and field."

"Field hockey."

"Right."

"I'm stuck trying to get to Alex's dojo. Traffic's awful. An extra twenty minutes of karate won't hurt him."

"Tae kwon do."

"Right."

"Jeffrey, honey, you sound tense."

He realized he had been rubbing the space of his cheek next to his nose rather hard. He could feel his skin shedding, slippery and sharp at the same time, flaking against his fingertips, nestling under his fingernails. He took his hand away from his face and leaned forward toward the computer.

"Nothing, nothing. Just, long day, busy."

"You told me."

"Sorry."

"You sure it's nothing?"

He looked at the Disney World picture. He was embarrassing himself, hand under his sweat-soaked arm, unaware of the camera flash until a split second after it had already happened. Chelsea and Alex were beaming around Donald Duck's feet, and Marge, in her massive sunglasses and the tiny crack of a smile, bearing it. She was doing her best. He shivered, and in that moment of simmering self-consciousness, answered her.

"Margaret. I told you. I just had a long day."

Her tone changed, somehow lower and higher at the same time, and he knew he'd made a mistake.

"I know that sound, how you sound when you've got something on your mind, after twenty years together, of course I'd know that sound."

Of course she knew that sound, the sound when he was annoyed at the small-talk that they didn't need. At his personal frustration of forgetting his daughter's after-school activities but remembered his son's. At the cosmic irony of Marge's preoccupied memory conveniently complementing his own. That's when you really know you married the right one. He put his forehead in his hand and leaned on it, his elbow resting on the desk. "I'm sorry, I promise, I'm fine."

"I need to concentrate on the road."

"Marge, honey, come on, I'm sorry, I don't mean it, I'm just stressed, but it's just work. It's not you, I promise. I'm sorry."

"I know." Her voice changed again, back to regular Marge, anxious Marge, the Marge he just expected when he came home every day. The Marge he married decades

ago but who was noticeably different, a sapling planted in the backyard that he watched extend its branches upward and outward even as its roots dug deeper and harder into the soil. He relaxed and slouched down into his chair. “Don’t forget Chelsea. Call me when you get her.”

“Okay.”

“Love you.”

“Love you.” He let the phone down with a plastic clunk on his desk.

“Make-up!”

He inhaled sharply through his nose and swiveled back around. Michael was standing there in the center of the cubicle doorway, pointing with a stubby red finger up the line of Jeffrey’s nose to the spot between his eyes. Michael scuttled over to him and he leaned down in his chair to meet him, stopping at eye level and arm’s length. The boy pushed his fingertip against the tip of Jeffrey’s nose, not a poke but a slow mashing together of hand and face, and then both of his palms were on Jeffrey’s cheeks, pulling them apart and smearing them together the way a potter works clay to remove air bubbles before flinging it onto the accelerating wheel. He wished for a second to move away, but his wife’s sunglasses and fractional smile reminded him, she was trying her best, and he kept himself still, keeping his face a solid foundation for the child to work with. His lips were smashed and pulled, a line drawn down from the bridge of his nose along the philtrum and into the odd symmetrical divot on the underside of his chin. Then tugs on his earlobes, tracing his sideburns up to his exposed hairline, and swiping across his forehead with a coarse, imaginary brush.

“Michael, no! Oh my god I am so sorry.” Jeffrey felt Angela’s voice tug her son away from his face. He realized upon opening his eyes that her red fingernails were firmly gripped around her son’s arm, and that he did not remember closing his eyes in the first place, or holding his breath until his lungs gave a dull shudder. He exhaled.

Angela’s face was red through her make-up, foundation Marge called it, and other than the clutch she had of Michael’s shoulder, she seemed unable to decide what to do with her extremities.

“I am really sorry Jeff. I didn’t notice him get away from us.”

“It’s alright.” Jeffrey pulled his face up and sat back in his chair, looking up at Angela’s highlighted hair.

“Make-up’s his favorite game, he just likes pretending to apply it to people’s faces and take it off and reapply it.”

“Oh? – It’s alright.” He corrected himself, but too late.

She continued, pulling Michael in close to her legs. “Ever since he saw me putting on lipstick, he just can’t stop. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to let him get away.”

“It’s alright really.” Jeffrey reached over and logged out of his computer without looking. “You and Benjamin and Michael have a good night.” He got up and, with a nod toward the two of them and another down the line of cubicles, walked quickly off to the elevator, refusing to glance back.

“See you tomorrow, Jeff. Good work today,” Benjamin shouted to him. Jeffrey knew he was still at his desk.

* * * * *

Jeffrey noticed the mirrors in the elevator as he was approaching the ground floor lobby. He knew the fact of their existence, but for the first time he saw they were embedded in brushed aluminum panels, split apart three to a wall. His reflections moved together and yet separately, and he danced back and forth on his toes like a child tiptoeing about on an iced-over pond, hearing the tapping clink of his shoes against the floor. The make-up that Michael had applied to his face like the invisible golden thread to the Emperor's clothes appeared to Jeffrey on the depths of his laugh lines, the valleys of his furrowing and unfurrowing brow. He turned his face from left to right, and back again, examining the stage makeup, Pierrot's face, with its single painted tear, standing up onstage at the mercy of the plot and his audience. He took a bow, and stopped midway when the overhead numbers reached one with a lurch and a loud ding.

From his prostrated hairline, the invisible makeup melted away, and he was acutely aware of the pits and flakes and developing rosacea that from a distance looked like blush, and the bald spot that he held in common with so many of his coworkers, and his father. And his grandfather. And Marge's father. There was no way around it. He smeared his fingers along the lines from his tear ducts to his lips, and felt the grease transfer, but he was just left with his familiar face. There was no way to reapply the makeup. He was fucked.

He shuffled through the lobby and out to the parking lot. In the heat radiating up from the asphalt, illuminated in the purple-orange setting sun, he looked along the curb to

the nose of his white Stingray emerging from behind the silhouettes of his coworkers' cars. A young man he'd never seen before was standing by it, at a respectful distance, tilting his head.

"This your car?" His voice was high and excited, and he flashed his teeth in a smile as he spoke. He had a file folder and a sealed envelope in his hand, and a nametag. Josh. Courier.

"Yep, Corvette, nineteen-seventy-five." Jeffrey pulled out his keys and unlocked the door. He looked at the space between Josh's shoes and the pointed snout of the car, at an unremarkable spot of concrete. A wisp of summer humidity lingered in the autumn air in that space, like hot breath.

"Man, I bet it's fast. It looks fast. A lot faster than my car." He laughed and smiled again, shifting his delivery from one hand to the other and back.

"Well, sure. I mean, it's got the small engine, but —"

"The red ones are faster, right?"

Jeffrey inhaled and gazed along the length of the car, its undulating profile lines, back to the flared tail. But it had the smallest engine, the first year of catalytic converters that reduced its proud, elevated roar to an annoyed growl, the year of plastic bumper coverings that barely let the old, pitted chrome shine through. The only one he could afford, and in a sad, faded yellow-white that refused to match the teenage dreams pinned to his walls.

"Ha, yep, everyone knows red's the fastest color."

There was a still almost-silence filled with their held breath and the low background hum of electricity and motors surrounding them.

“Well, I have to pick up my daughter.”

Josh raised his delivery-filled hands in acknowledgement, never dropping his smile. He looked about to say something, but then turned and walked to the entrance of the building.

* * * * *

The white car’s engine buzzed and pumped to life, and, after pulling the shift knob through the gears with the clutch in and giving it a little gas to ensure it didn’t go back to sleep, he guided it, rumbling, out of the parking lot and out onto the road. He accelerated quickly, but without squealing the tires, feeling through the steering wheel for the exact vibratory moment of power and efficiency that was his signal. Smooth push of the clutch to the floor, quick smack of the shifter into gear, and clutch out again. They seethed with anticipation for the on-ramp. What sort of creature are you today?

The compressed strains of Wagner jumped up from his pocket again, interrupting his reverie. Jeffrey reached into his pocket between third and fourth gear to retrieve his phone. What now? He hesitated with his thumb, and then placed the phone on the seat between his legs, face up and still ringing with his wife’s name flashing across it. When it stopped ringing, he dropped the car into third and urged it around the curve of the road and onto the freeway. The battered screech of the pistons fell into a low-wavelength

rumble that enveloped his ears. There it was: today he was with a fearsome lizard, smoke trailing from its nostrils, resistant to domestication but willing to play along, to challenge him at the end of a long day. His phone shook once in his lap, and he took his eyes from the road for a fraction to see his Marge's message.

“Don't forget to pick up Chelsea.”

And back up to fourth.

As Mr. Jeffrey Andrews coaxed the aged, off-white Stingray up past the speed limit, he relaxed into the seat and the growls of the engine. The texture and divots of the road transmitted through the wheels to his feet and hands. They traveled along his arms and legs like so many amperes of current and into his muscles and veins. Into his heart. Into his lungs. He inhaled, and in a moment, he had lifted from the road, off into the air. They weaved between, around, and above the other cars on the road. The travelers they passed seemed lost, unimaginative, weary, and guided toward home only by the sense of automatic navigation possessed by a mule or a mutt. He smiled a wide, bare-toothed smile for the first time he could remember since the day before.

He dug his fingers into the hair and scales of his faithful, snarling, proud old dragon as it carried him up into the bloody autumn sky. They wheeled and turned together, and he felt the high, cold winds peel back the layers of make-up from his face, and then the layers of wrinkles and skin and thinning, graying hair. He exhaled, and there was nothing left of him. The dragon spiraled into the atmosphere. He was free.

As he approached the exit, he put on his right turn signal automatically. Don't forget to pick up Chelsea. He put his hand back on the switch as if to turn it off.

SHAME

The book from the library said that it was completely normal for children of a certain age, when they no longer were just children, to feel a certain way, to have certain unprompted and often unwanted thoughts, urges, feelings. Desires was the word the book used. Stuart flinched when he read it, as if the act of naming this swirling, unformed mass of thoughts suddenly made it purposeful, even intentional. And then they would be undeniably his fault. That was the worst part about it, that introductory wording, and he slammed the musty pages shut and hid it underneath his bed, in between the tubs of old toys, stuffed animals and wind-ups and Happy Meal trinkets. The next day in homeroom, he was quizzed about the book's contents by the boys who had dared him to check it out in the first place. He would need to get a passing grade in their eyes if he ever hoped to not be subject to these sorts of dares again, the first step in a long, arbitrary string to middle school friendship. But they were masters of interrogation already, and he fell for the trick question: what was his favorite picture in the book? Books for adults don't have pictures, right?, picture books are for little kids. This crinkled paper-smell book with the nondescript, scratchy green cover and its soft, embarrassingly encouraging lead-in to the complex world of metamorphosis and multifunctional body parts—this was a book for adults, with no pictures to be found.

His face flushed when they started jeering at him, and he looked down at the surface of his desk, started scratching away at the smiley face drawing he'd penciled in weeks ago. No pictures? You didn't even check it out. No pictures, ha!, what a lame-o. Stuart found the pencil marks harder to rub out than he'd expected, and he concentrated on licking his fingers and trying over and over, the voices around him fading to a buzzing hum.

* * * * *

It took him three weeks to get up the courage to pull the book back out from the recesses of his room, and even then it sat at the bottom of a stack of textbooks, unopened, keeping its sharp smell contained, limited only to his memory. It's perfectly natural; there's nothing to be ashamed of. These desires are something that every budding young woman and man... he did math first, because it took him the longest, and then English, science, and history, if he had time and didn't feel like taking on the stomach-pit feeling of lying to his parents and finishing the rest of his work clandestinely in the bathroom, in the back of the car on the way to school, in homeroom and finally during morning break, his last opportunity. Underneath his history book he would catch a glimpse of that blank green cover and feel the memory of the scent drift and expand from the inside of his skull to fill the whole room.

Finally, in a shot at schoolyard redemption, he closed his door, closed his eyes, pulled the book from under the stack, and opened it up to whatever page its well-worn spine might choose. He dared a glance. No pictures, nothing but text and text and more text. Maybe he had been right without knowing it, and they had just had the upper hand,

the ability to laugh at him because of course they knew better, of course they knew about these things, why wouldn't they? Who was to say that he wasn't the expert here, after only one—now two—pages? He started reading. Girls, on the road to womanhood, experience many of the same changes that boys do, but also many different ones. For example, girls may notice their breasts beginning to grow, accompanied by some tenderness and sensitivity that can be uncomfortable and pleasurable. He leaned back. Pleasurable. Desire. There's nothing to be ashamed of. The words solidified in the front of his brain and he scratched his head, an itch, a crawling on his skin manifested by the language both motherly and clinical.

The itch satisfied, he leaned back in, and there was the smell again, and he wasn't sure if he was supposed to be reeling dizzily away or begging to turn the page, or if he wasn't already doing both with his eyes glued to the words on the page as they trailed off mid-sentence. He flipped the page and learned in one second that he had been wrong after all, his potential peers right to pull him apart at his desk.

There was a chart, a diagram of a person in progress, each step laid out with approximate ages, little lines pointing, annotating her body. Here was the baby, there was the child, the prepubescent, the pubescent teenager, and finally the woman. Stuart's phantom itch spread down across his neck and shoulders to rest above his lungs where it met the twinge of his rising stomach, and then he heard himself inhale and spin, falling out of his chair at the click of the door.

“Stuart, honey, I got a call from the school library saying you hadn't turned in—oh, oh honey, it's okay.” She reached out to him and he sat against his bedframe,

clutching half-heartedly at the open book on his desk and mumbling something, an amalgam of every excuse he had ever used.

“Stuart, honey, it’s okay. It’s perfectly natural. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

He couldn’t stop himself from crying.

Stuart’s mother returned the book for him the next Monday and paid the overdue fine of two dollars and seventy-five cents. He worried that he’d have it taken out of his allowance, but she never told him how much it was. He told the boys in class the next day that his favorite picture was the one with all the naked women’s breasts on it.

COUNSELING

Erica Lee Hollinston, or *Miz* Hollinston to her students, adjusted the nameplate on her desk minutes before her open office hours. It was a time of day when she put on her imaginary second hat, when she was the school's High School Guidance Counselor, and all that that entailed. Conflict mediation, study skills, life advice, amateur psychoanalysis, no psychiatry yet, but she hoped soon she'd be able to dispense ibuprofen the way the school nurse could, or even write prescriptions, with air quotes, for Tylenol Extra-Strength or, if the situation was dire enough, NyQuil and a pass to go home early. Miz Hollinston was all that and more for two hours, and forty-five minutes of lunch, every Tuesday and Thursday, except Dress Assembly days. The rest of the time, she had to make do with History and Health in her triple-purpose classroom. It was only a matter of time, she figured, before they'd give her a separate office for the Counselor position. She had the nameplate already. She rubbed the brasslike metal rectangle with her sweater sleeve pinched between her palm and her fingers until it gleamed.

The nameplate was supposed to read Erica Lee Higgins (III, after her mother and grandmother), but Bill Hollinston, her husband, insisted she change her name when they were married, for the sake of propriety, and tradition. "You want people to stop asking questions? You want it to go away, well, I promise you this is a good first step to fixing

it.” She didn’t agree, but she called the office supply store to request the change that day, and luckily they hadn’t done the engraving yet, so they changed the order form free of charge. She thought maybe her mother would have been alright with her and Bill if she’d kept her family name, but getting her mother’s approval might have just been a different kind of good first step. Besides, Bill was a traditionalist. Her proposal, all puffed up with second-wave feminist indignation, washed right over the ‘50s sensibilities lining the then-new wrinkles in his face like the waves of an outgoing tide rippling the hairs of a beachgoer’s shins, cold, sharp, reaching for some semblance of hold, but ultimately ineffectual in their receding. It was amazing what power nearly twenty-odd years between them could have.

Erica started at the sound of a knock on the door and clunked the nameplate down in front of her on her desk. She flipped it around the correct way with a spin of her wrist and then sat back in her chair. “Come in!”

The door cracked just a sliver, and a tuft of mussed hair pushed its way through, as if drawn by inevitability, gravity, rather than intention. Then a forehead, and two searching eyes that darted from one side of the room to the other. Checking to see if there really is anyone in here who could have granted him permission to enter, in the off-chance that he’d entirely imagined her voice, just in case he could retract from the doorway, turn and beat a hasty retreat to the aimless unstructure of free period. But he made the mistake of making eye contact with her, and she knew right then who it was, recognizing a timid twitchiness that gave him away, that never fully went away even as the years went by and he became more and more able to speak his mind in class, to talk

directly to any classmate, regardless of who they were, what their past with him was. He wasn't fully there yet, but maybe he'd make it by the time he got into college somewhere far, far away.

“Alexander Andrews. Yes, Alex. Come in, have a seat.” She gestured with an open palm to the plastic chair on the opposite side of her desk. Alex shuffled into the room, nodded, and looked around again. When he was reluctantly sure that she really had called him in, he closed the door with a soft click and made his way to her through the skewed desks and half-pushed-in chairs. Even with the room in complete disarray from the previous period, from Jared and Kyle momentarily regressing to elementary school and throwing paper airplanes to each other with equal parts calculus homework and profanity written on the undersides of the wings, she still was the most put together person in the room. Alex was always one of the easier students to work with, if not the most satisfying to hear from. He didn't open up the way most others did, had hesitations when it came to divulging classroom gossip, much of it about him, but it did surprise her how in-tune he was with the rest of the student body. For someone with a lifelong contract of mutual social rejection from everyone save one or two others, he was as up-to-speed as anyone else, albeit quietly so. And just as important if not more so, he came to Guidance Counselor office hours voluntarily. When he did show up, which was more than once a year. Which was more than the vast majority of students. Her number of regulars was increasing year by year, slowly, but steadily.

“Miz Hollinston.” Alex shouldered his backpack, shifting it up to the joint between his neck and shoulder.

“Sit down, Alex. What can I help you with?” She motioned again, and this time he sat down lightly in the chair. His legs were tense, and he sat on his hands, leaning forward to her desk, and then away, coiling and compressing himself. If he got up, he would have to open the door back up on his way back out. Erica figured she would have time to get off one parting remark to him before he left the room, and that might pull him back, get him to open up a bit more before his time was up and someone else needed to drop by. She remembered Bill always calling her by name, “Erica, what’s it gonna be today?” though of course all teachers and faculty called students by their first names unless they were in some serious trouble. But when he said it, she listened, she didn’t know why, but she heard it as a gesture of respect not superiority, not condescension, but an indication that they were in some ways on the same level, that she could trust him and he her. And that had played out, more or less, she supposed.

It was that trust, not to that same intensity, but to that same place of familial closeness and familiarity, that she had strived for for a hair over fifteen years. First from her first-graders, then her fifth-graders, just on the doorstep to teenage freedom, knocking to get in, then her middle-schoolers raging against each other, and finally the high schoolers raging against themselves. This was where she could help them.

Alex was totally silent except for his measured breaths, inhale and exhale that sounded like reversed versions of each other. He was probably counting them. She slouched a bit, relaxed and leaned forward on her elbows, daring him to match her. It worked, and he exhaled audibly once and for all and stopped with the yoga breaths.

“Miz Hollinston...”

“I’m listening.” She put the weight of her torso on her arms, focusing it down into the points of her elbows on her third-or-fourth-hand desk. She imagined the drawer below the surface dropping to the floor from the pressure, even though she knew that wasn’t how pressure worked. Intensity, more like.

“Miz Hollinston, I just wanted to ask you...” he looked up above her head to her two framed degrees, AAS and AA, both in Education, apparently able to be split into science or art depending on the facility and the program, identical frames from Michael’s, a subtle, dark red with black shadow over it, squared edges but rounded out toward the viewer so as not to appear sharp, dangerous. The line of frames followed the entire span of the wall, motivational posters and quotes from various American presidents (and some un-American ones too) in black rectangular frames and flowering script all the way to the corners, pictures she’d paid for herself over years of being unable to expense anything beyond what was absolutely necessary for the classroom and being unable to effectively make the case that this inspiration was integral to the absorption of either national or world history.

Past that, to their left, the left of the door and all the disarrayed desks, the chalkboard that should have been replaced years ago, covered in thick, waving drafting paper, taped up to the wall with duct tape that would rip the countless layers of paint off the bordering cinder blocks. The message underneath it in black spray paint, removable, but difficult to remove. Miz Hollinston was instructed by the school administration, to cover the profanity as best she could so as not to potentially offend her four full History classes and one section of Freshman Health, which involved two full sheets cut from the

drafting paper roll in the Art department, carried separately with the help of Bill, her husband the Vice Principal, who didn't have a chalkboard or a whiteboard or any blank space in his office to vandalize, who said nothing, but at least helped her tape up the pieces to cover up the offending wall and wiped his hands and said, "That does it." He put his hand on her shoulder and patted her comfortingly, affectionately, "They didn't mean it, Erica. They're just kids. Fuck, they're just kids, they don't know."

She looked back to Alex's face, which was fixed on the paper, or some point in between it and the motivational poster with the eagle swooping down from the tree on the mountain, in for some prospective kill, with the words, "GO FOR IT," and the subtext, "You never know when you'll get another chance," and she coughed into her fist, and they both jumped a little in their seats, jarred from the momentary reverie back to the reality of amateur high school therapy and the prospect of solving some pressing emotional mystery.

"...I just wanted to tell you, well, that I didn't do the homework for class that you assigned, and, I, I was hoping that you could give me the assignment again, because I forgot and you see it was just—"

"Alex, please," Erica stared him down, directly into his twitching eyes that sought to find any purchase on the wall around her head, the shelves in the corners, or the faux-brass nameplate that was the only real separation between the two of them at that one point. "You never forget your homework. And I can't imagine you'd forget this week's lesson, the Children's Crusade, terrifying stuff. Right up your alley."

“No. Really. Miz Hollinston, I, just, could you just give me the pages for the homework?” He shifted on his hands, his rear moving from edge to edge of the deep blue plastic seat and back again, like he was being shifted around, shaken lightly.

He was lying, which was quite out of the ordinary for Alexander Andrews. When he forgot his homework, which had happened before she realized then, or when he hadn't done the reading, or when he was too distracted by something else in the classroom to have heard the Health lectures she had just given on prophylactics and their chances of functioning properly in any given situation (not as high as you might think), he usually just owned up to it, flushed red, looked down at some indeterminate point in spotted patchwork linoleum. He admitted defeat, not gracefully, not readily, but honestly at the very least. Alex wasn't a liar by habit or profession, and it showed.

“Alex, please,” she repeated. “This is your time. It's your time to say what you want, what you need to.” She sat up straight, gesturing to each side with her hands, pointing out the absence of all the rest of the universe, encompassing their total isolation in this little cinder-block room in the Humanities building of a little prep school in the middle of the still-humid Southern suburbs.

“The homework assignment, Miz Hollinston.” He stopped fidgeting to say it, was totally still. “I didn't mean to miss it, there's just been so much going on.”

Erica sat back. “Alex...” she crossed her arms, and then reached them out to place her hands palm down on the desk, soft and obvious. Straightforward. “I'm sorry about your sister.” No response. Keep going. “Grieving, healing,” what are the right

words? “moving on often takes longer than just a couple of years. It’s very hard. I can’t say I’ve—”

“No, that’s—”

“Gone through the same things as you have—”

“—not it.”

“—but I’m here if you need to talk about it.”

“Oh, okay.” They both spoke at once, at and started, looking at each other in the eyes, momentarily uncomfortable, made to recognize in each themselves in each other’s attempts to say something that they could not say.

After a moment, she wrote down the homework pages she was sure were already noted down in Alex’s day planner in his backpack and handed him the sticky note across the table over her nameplate, from the stack that she always used to distribute one-off scribbings, as a teacher, not as a Guidance Counselor, giving a homework assignment for credit, not coaxing out what she was sure he had meant to truly come and tell her. She stared him down, looked directly into his pupils, as he took the note from her hand, his fingers not even an inch from hers.

Alexander Andrews stood up, note in hand, shifted his backpack again, and walked away, pushing the chair in in the same movement. When he was at the door, Erica spoke up:

“Are you sure there’s nothing you want to tell me? Nothing you need me to know?” He knew who wrote he message, she could see it in the way his eyes strayed to

the wall every time he was in class. Years, much less weeks, have nothing on clandestine knowledge of the forbidden, the inappropriate.

But he said nothing. Alex shook his head, stuffed the note in his pocket, and stepped through the crack in the door, closing it without a sound behind him, leaving no trace he had been there but her mind and the minisculely shorter stack of square paper stickers marking the corner of her desk.

She was sure he'd be back. Maybe he'd tell someone else, and she could find out about it over lunch with Bill, in the break room at the end of lunch break minutes before her next period began and every other teacher was already securely reestablished in their classrooms. No one had ever failed to show up again, if they were voluntary.

At least another two hours and five minutes to go.

Erica Lee Hollinston ne née Higgins folded her fingers together on her desk, waited for the next knock on her door.

* * * * *

“Next. Yes? Come in.”

A tall, gangly young man stepped through the door, dressed in ratty clothes and well-past-worn tennis shoes. Before she saw his face, she thought maybe he was one of their current students; he wouldn't have gotten away with the scraggly to-the-collar hair, much less a T-shirt and jeans, without at least a week's detention and trip to her office for a change into XL khakis and a polo. But after a second of blank unrecognition, she realized, and exclaimed:

“Francis! Oh my goodness it's so good to see you!”

He nodded, and smiled a small smile, standing behind the chair on the other side of her desk. He held the back of it with his hands, moving them along it, close together and then far apart, without a pattern. Eight years shouldn't have put such circles under his eyes, but there they were, etched in and grey, but at least there was still the smile, the cocky-but-shy eighteen-year-old smirk she remembered so well from his frequent, mostly voluntary trips to her office. His family could have afforded a real therapist if they'd felt they'd needed one, but Erica was all too happy to sit and listen to him recount his high school apprehensions, her left hand under her chin, her right taking notes in a notepad that would end up conveniently not contributing to his student file or permanent record.

“Hello Miz Hollinston.”

“It's Erica, Francis, as always. Particularly now that I'm no longer your teacher.” She motioned to the chair, but he didn't sit in it. “What brings you here? I didn't know you were stopping by. What a surprise.”

He kept shifting his hands back and forth along the chair back. His eyes were fixed on her. He smiled again, and stopped his hands for just a moment to say, “Just wanted to see you. Say hello. You know.”

“Well, I'm glad you did. I didn't honestly think I'd see you again, what with you going off to college and all that.”

She reached compulsively to her nameplate but stopped, just resting her fingers along it before pulling them back to her lap, twisting the ring on her finger with her thumb. The tired look on Francis's face unnerved her; it made him look old. It was the look she always thought she had, the way she felt other people saw her when they took

note of her in their peripheral vision in the hallway, or between buildings. Going to college, getting a degree, getting out didn't make people old; it kept them young; staying, marrying Bill mere months after graduation, working for Associate's after Associate's while working part-time, that's what had pushed her into middle age by twenty-one. The vicarious involvement in her students' lives, in Francis's student life, the ones who didn't know her whole story but who were willing to share theirs with her during free period: that was something to hold onto as tightly as possible lest it slip away like the ocean waves and the sand they carried out with them. He could have been something to her, something like what she thought she might have been to Bill, clandestine and yet obvious to anyone who might look. But yet there he was, in front of her, looking exhausted, his face and exposed arms matching his clothes, just worn, ready to be thrown out.

He was silent. She tried to engage him once more: "It's been so long."

Another knock, and she jumped once more, more surprising than a doorbell ringing out from across an empty house. Francis didn't move. The door opened, and Bill Hollinston poked his face in, round and lightly bearded, the result of his recent tiring of the razor and the time it took to trim each and every hair on his face without nicking himself, it was all too much to deal with in the morning with only one cup of coffee at the most, "Dammit, Erica, don't we have any new razor blades?" and her responding, "Yes, Bill, I'm sure we do, somewhere."

She pulled her eyes Francis's and synced them to Bill's. "Bill? What is it, dear?"

He didn't speak for a moment, gathering himself, and finally projected outward an authoritative statement of purpose. "Miz Hollinston. I need to speak with you for a moment."

She looked down to her own hands, now resting in her lap. "I'll just be a minute."

"Alright, Miz Hollinton. Frank." He nodded to Francis.

"Mr. Hollinston." Francis nodded back over his shoulder, nodded to Erica, and turned to leave, following Bill out the door, out of the classroom and away from her.

SO PROUD

Alex, who was not more than a warped twig, wrestled with his father's tie. Over the shoulder, under the large end, through the rabbit hole, but no that was knots in ropes, like sheepshank or half-hitch, that he would have known how to tie had he not quit Boy Scouts. In tears he'd walked home, the lanyard key his mother gave him clicking against the deadbolt, turned first in the wrong direction again. Resting his backpack onto the couch (never the floor), resting into his mother's arms, resting his mortally wounded pride.

The tie was difficult on purpose, he thought, it was confounding his best efforts to be presentable, to present himself to the insular microcosmic world of the school dance. And not just any school, but high school, the last school in the sequence of schools that would make up schooling until they transformed through the haze of borrowed paper recommendations and borrowed electronic money into higher education. And not just any dance, but Homecoming. The last things that crossed his mind were the commemoration of the returning well-suited graduates and the grand old tradition of losing a home football game for them. Before that was the sludge-like dread of his first Homecoming dance ever, Alex having skipped the previous one for reasons concerning his health and well-being. But who was he kidding, he thought, he had missed the dance last year because of a nagging nervousness that gripped his mind ten feet from the door

and spread throughout his body. He leaned against the dusty yellow molding on the stairwell-side and let his feet drag out from under him, pulling his sport coat up to the hairline on the back of his neck. His mother called it a nervous breakdown, but he did not feel broken down. It was erasure. In a fit of cowardice he had simply ceased to exist and then the night was over. And they'd lost the game too.

Foremost was still the tie which he had forgotten how to tie. Dammit, he cried, and splayed his hands around each other in fury. And then the stubborn silk relented. He pulled the skinny end, sliding the twisted, patterned bundle up to his bony collarbone. Collar flipped down, flipped up again, smoothed out, flipped down, and buttoned. Knot straightened. Perfect. He stared at himself in the full-length bathroom mirror with fluorescent overhead light and smooth underfoot tiles providing a complete white frame around his baggy, black-clad one. He shrugged his shoulders, but the sleeves were too long no matter what he did. The stitched-on cufflinks clicked together every time he moved, the sound of an unknown metal cheaply, hastily painted to shine like brass.

Perfect.

* * * * *

The Homecoming Committee in charge of all aspects of the celebration eventually decided on holding the dance in a large tent, what they called a gazebo, on one of the island clubs' properties. Alex couldn't remember which. He didn't know the names of any of them; he didn't have a boat to dock there, and he hadn't gone to a swimming pool since the elementary school swim test. The theme was "By the Light of the Moon", which had been put up to a vote against "The King" and "Gone With the

Wind”, but apparently there hadn’t been enough Elvis fans in the student body, and the teachers vetoed “Gone With the Wind” because they were worried someone might show up as the black maid, or worse, that someone might put on blackface to complete the character. He hadn’t cared, though he did vote for the theme that won because he knew nothing about Elvis Presley, and never saw the movie. It wasn’t that he didn’t give a damn, but that dancing by the light of the moon seemed the best way to obscure appearances, to rub out flaws that in soft night light would show only as blurs with a dull sheen.

The gazebo, he thought, also meant that he could duck out silently at any time, should any more urgent event arise that needed his attention. A car accident, a heart attack, a serial killer on the loose, any freak occurrence. Maybe not anything, he thought, but something minor that is at least major enough to warrant disappearing into the night to the parking lot.

He imagined the scene, the sweet strains of the theme from *Bodyguard* floating through the muggy night air, softening even the mosquitoes’ resolve as it surrounded the unit that was Alex and his date. A female of unknown origin and description, he reached frantically for facial characteristics, settling only on “soft” and “open”, his arms finally resting in the small of her back above her hips. The buzz of his cell-phone would bridge their thighs, rattling his pants and her swaying black dress. She would look at him, sad and understanding, saying, You have to go, and he would nod and leave her in the middle of the floor. Of course she would wait for him to return all night, her only movement being to migrate to a forlorn corner, but never once taking her eyes from the spot on the

edge of the movable wood-paneling where his scraggly blond hair had faded into the dark. Another boy, an upperclassman with varsity letters and a Cadillac truck, might bring her some punch in a small, dented plastic cup and ask her to dance, but she wouldn't even look at him or take the drink. I'm waiting for someone, she'd say.

The Homecoming Committee set up ticketing so that you could buy a single or a double pass. The double pass was discounted to encourage couples to pay for a portrait from the photographer whose portable studio was set up on the outskirts of the dance floor, near the plantation-house building of the club. Alex and his best friend Stuart tried to buy a couples ticket to save money, but the Committee's ticketing table informed them that couples were boy-girl only. Stuart decided to stay home because his parents would have made him pay for it. Alex's parents bought him a ticket.

* * * * *

"What kind of corsage do you want to get?"

"Corsage? Mom, I don't –"

"You know, one of those flower things you put on your wrist."

"Yes Mom, I know, but –"

"Oh don't worry, everyone gives their date a corsage. It's tradition. You won't look silly."

"I don't have a date."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Well. Let's get one just in case."

“What? No – ”

“I think white is best. A carnation. It goes with everything and doesn’t have the connotations of red roses.”

* * * * *

Alex went to the hall closet to get his dress shoes. He called to his mother downstairs to ask them where they were even as the hallway light glinted off them in the dark when he opened the door. The leather was pitch-polished, giving them away in the back of the cupboard amidst the sand-caked sandals and scuffed tennis shoes used for yardwork. He reached in and pulled them out, smelling their warm, smoky scent several feet before they reached his face.

He’d only ever worn them once before. They were bought new several years previously along with a pair of black slacks and a matching button-down shirt. Before his sister’s funeral, Alex had never dressed formally for anything. He grew taller over the years, consigning those clothes to the donation box in the garage that his father dropped off on the way to work whenever it topped out. His feet never grew again, already having reached a clownish size before his body caught up to them, but despite the shoes’ continual fitting he never wore them since, never bought a suit to match. The laces were too smooth at first and kept coming undone, and he remembered helping to carry the casket, itself too heavy and his participation only symbolic, and being unable to do anything but madly stare down at the loose flopping plastic ends clicking back and forth between his shoes and the ground. They were distracting him, he thought, they were being so loud that, if he didn’t fall out from under the brass handle, everyone would

notice and think, How could he be so disrespectful, his own sister, taken before her time and he can't even tie his own shoelaces or hold up his coffin-end. Click click click click. The weight of it on his shoulder wasn't much either. His father was taller than him. Still, it pressed angular into his shoulder so that he thought it might rip his shirt, just pull and tear it clean off as they held the metal-bordered wood up high and then stepped outwards as they lowered it to the pedestal.

The shoes were still stiff and unbroken, and they bit into his ankles as he stepped into them one at a time. They creaked like old wood. Alex tried to lace them up, but the leather cords still slipped along each other, flicking out of their own loops and curls to click maddeningly against the glossed surface. He bent down, dropping to one knee to grip them tightly and yank them through the nooses. His reflection peered up at him from the gloss, inverted and ballooning out the other end like his body had bloated up at sea, laden with too much salt, and it sucked up more like a sponge when he moved to stand and switch to the other knee.

Alex's mother called him again from downstairs, Have you found them yet, she said, They're in the closet in the back, where they've always been. Unless you don't want to wear that pair because of well your father has a pair that aren't your size but they're close and I don't think he took them to work today.

And he called back, No these are fine. I'm okay wearing my own black shoes. They feel just like they used to.

* * * * *

Alex and Stuart had planned at one point to make a joke of it and alleviate their anxiety by renting matching gaudy tuxedos, overdressing in overcompensation. Stuart told him that his older brother, Tom, now long-graduated from high school and college and off somewhere west as an architect, had gone to Homecoming his senior year in a yin-yang-styled suit that was half black and half white save for two little diagonal patches of the opposite color. His date had worn a summer dress with flowers that had skulls replacing the pollen. They were asked by the high school counselor acting as chaperone to please change into something more appropriate. They left instead. In the spring, they showed up dressed in the same clothes, but Stuart's brother wore the skull dress and his date wore the suit. They were thrown out.

Alex always laughed at this story, but we wouldn't let on that it reminded him more than he was comfortable with of Eagle Scouts, showing up to meetings in only partial uniform or none at all because it hadn't gone through the wash, merit badges flaking off where his mother had attempted to stitch them in a gesture of encouragement. And then accidentally bleaching the entire piece so that the only way to discern his accomplishments was to remember the threading patterns on each circle independent of their colors.

He asked Stuart what the theme of Tom's Homecoming had been.

Community and Character, he said.

* * * * *

He dragged his fingers against the railing spindles painted yellow to match the molding. He thought at any moment he might grab hold of one of them and not let go,

and, slowly melding with it, be unable to continue on towards the foyer. But the spindles were slick, like round smooth columns of some ceremonial hall, and Alex could not remove his gaze from his feet down in front of him. Each step brought a shining black point down into white carpet which gave way as he pushed his hair from his face, forcefully but without precision, so that when he lifted his feet it would move back into place as if it had never been disturbed. He kept expecting the click and tap of shoes on the floor, but all that came from each step was a muffled something, not even a sound but like the afterthought of a word. What is it trying to say, he thought. What can it tell me that I don't already know about myself? Words of encouragement from this set of stairs might only consist of a joke, a suggestion that he take a deep breath and keep his heart-rate down unless he wanted a repeat of last year's collapse.

Alex lifted his hands to the railing halfway down, tall enough now to reach it at the same height as the brass grip that was carried for him. He gripped hard on it. Feeling the sweat of his palms react with the thick paint to stick like soft rubber and slow him down, he only pulled harder, to leave that sweat and that anxiety behind. It burned up in friction as his palm became warmer, and he thought it might heat the entire banister, leaving it pink, not white, and steaming for hours after he had left so that when he finally came home he might touch it on his way back up, ascending to the thought of having finally held the coffin-handle on the way out, having finally grown up and learned what it is to be a man.

What it is to be a man, he thought, to step out onto a ballroom floor overlooking the marsh and ask one of the warm, tired faces for a dance out of no compulsion or

desire, but for a stupid tradition. Commemoration is always like this, always glorifying an event that at its very best is pathetic like the losing of a football game, of a sport that means nothing to some and everything to others; an event that at its worst leaves you in a permanent position of inadequacy, always reminded of your inability to live up to the occasion. Unwillingness to live up to it, he thought. Unwillingness. His shoes reflected the light of the bulb buried in foyer chandelier, and he closed his eyes and stepped down from the last of the carpet onto the solid, worn wood floor.

His mother shouted from the kitchen, and he could hear the pride in her upwards pitch. She wanted pictures, his very first Homecoming, how exciting. The first that he actually might go to, he thought, how exciting. What a milestone, she said.

* * * * *

Stuart called him over two weeks after the service. He apologized for taking so long but his parents had yelled at him for even thinking of interrupting Alex and his family's period of mourning. It was tough, Stuart said, because the one thing you want to do when something bad happens is to find something good and focus on that, at least that's what I would have wanted. And I wasn't allowed to even ask you if it was the same for you.

Alex didn't respond to the subject. He wanted to say that he hadn't even thought about it at all, that it was just something that he knew had happened but that strangely didn't change him. But he knew that was a lie when his focus drifted as much as it had been. Thanks, was all he could think to say. It's the effort that counts, his mother would have told him. The effort, no matter the success of the act.

Instead they planned for high school, for the time Stuart's brother had spoken of to their rapt attentions, when they would look upon themselves and see not middle-schoolers yearning for maturity, but adults in the midst of it. It would be a fundamental change in the social order, they decided, in the very nature of things. A shake-up, a breakdown, everyone left to their most central characteristics, and people would see clearly for the first time who was truly a jerk, who was really riding on nothing but image. It would be a revolution, and they could see each other and be proud that they hadn't changed, even in the worst of it; they would emerge into the 9th grade unscathed and for the first time the flags they flew would be impossible to ignore. You can be yourself, Stuart said, and people will at least respect that now.

I've always been myself, said Alex, and you think people will suddenly start to care?

Stuart responded that it was not so much that they would care. It's that we're not invisible. We're not those guys anymore. We're just people.

Alex thought for a moment and said he would like that. He smiled, even though he was still skeptical. It was like crossing a finish line, he thought, that he never thought he would even see.

Everyone at school in the fall said they were so sorry, and for a brief moment he rose from obscurity, but that moment lapsed, his social and emotional paralysis returned. He didn't bother with any other people when he saw them stripped down to reveal the same things he'd always seen. He was blank once more.

* * * * *

“Okay, now stand right there by the door and look excited.”

“I am excited.”

“Yes but you have to look it. Come on, give me that big smile.”

“Go.”

“Come on, you can smile better than that, you look like you’re going to the DMV,
not one of the most – ”

“Just take it.”

“One of the most important events in high school.”

“Mom. It’s just a dance.”

“If it were just a dance then you wouldn’t be dressed up all so nice.”

“I only dressed up because you’re supposed to.”

“If it weren’t so important then how do you explain last year’s incident, hmm,
Alex?”

“Mom, just take it. Just take the picture.”

“Not until you smile.”

“The suit looks stupid. It’s so big.”

“Your father made sure not to take that one to work today because he said it was
the one that fit you the best. It’s a very nice sportcoat.”

“It’s still too big.”

“Say cheese.”

“I’m just going to drink soda. And laugh at people for making such a big deal – ”

“Okay that was good, now again.”

“Isn’t one picture enough?”

“Don’t you want to remember this moment?”

“I mean – ”

“Years from now you’ll look back on this and be reminded of all the good times.”

“I bet we’re going to lose the game again this year.”

“Smile big.”

“Fine, okay.”

“Perfect. Your sister would be so proud.”

* * * * *

Alex waited, repeatedly adjusting his tie in his reflection in the windows that flanked the front door. He waited for his courage to build, for his one hand to check and make sure that his keys and wallet were in his pocket, that his fly was up, that his cellphone was fully charged and set to vibrate in his other pocket in case of the speculated, dreaded-but-hopeful need for a quick and reasonable escape from what he was sure would be several hours of ego-testing boredom. He waited for the clock to strike seven-thirty, half an hour before doors opened and just long enough to let him arrive fifteen minutes late, assuming traffic, in his mother’s gold Saturn. He waited, and thought that maybe he would arrive and that face he couldn’t quite picture would emerge from the close-knit crowd in the muddy, buzzing swamp air and remove the pressure of tradition, imply in an awkward but clearly outstretched hand that he would be worth something there and all this fuss really was for something real after all. Not just for the Homecoming Committee’s socialite dreams and the expectation that one of these times,

one day, the alumni might see their old team win by a touchdown in the fourth quarter. He waited for the spectacle to dissolve into a figure of comfort that could brush his shoulder and through the loose, too-big wool tell him that he could do it. He waited, and wished not to be tripped up by his shoes.

He waited, and his mother rushed back from the kitchen with the still-chilly plastic box, the corsage still inside it. He took it and his fingers wiped away the condensation. The white petals peeked through the transparent lines.

Just in case, his mother said.

* * * * *

“Now you be good.”

“I know Mom.”

“Have fun.”

“I know Mom.”

“Drive safely.”

“I know Mom.”

“Give it to someone special.”

“Mom!”

“We love you. You’ve grown up so fast.”

* * * * *

Alex, who was not more than a warped twig, dressed in his father’s smallest-but-still-too-big wool suit, wrestled with his thoughts in the foyer of his house on the eve of the Homecoming dance. His mop of dirty blonde hair fell into his eyes when he moved

to adjust his unresponsive coat, but he had always refused to cut it or style it out of an odd sense of self-worth in his own perpetual confusion. This was all trying to trip him up, he thought, to spite him and magnify the fact of his indecision. There were still so many steps to the welcome mat, so many seconds until he turned the doorknob and pulled it open to the rush of hot, thick night air.

And yet, he thought, so much for preparation. Who was he kidding, it was just a stupid tradition celebrating nothing of any greater importance, and then his mother leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek, a smile, a thumbs up, the implication of the same from his father who would be working late as usual, the single faint breeze on a completely still night that shocked him momentarily and he wondered if his shoes were tied tight.

Alex stepped into the door-frame and stared out in the chirping black night. The electronic locks on the car clicked open. And then he was on the front steps, framed by the light from the doorway.

SOMETIMES

Sometimes a golf cart would go speeding by so fast they could have sworn it was a real car. Golfers and their capri'd wives feel the need every so often to press the plastic pedal flush with the floor of the cart, gunning for zero to sixty from the tortured electric motor. The worst is when she and Vanessa are walking on the paved paths that double as sidewalks and they couldn't hear the cart coming. The only signal for them to dash off the path to the green on one side or the curb on the other is a hum like a mosquito and maybe the sudden clunk of laughably small wheels hitting a divot. The couples driving the carts don't even have the courtesy to shout out a warning, waiting until after they've almost hit the girls before yelling, boxy cart still whizzing along. Vanessa thinks it might have been safer to stick to the street because at least then they could hear the real cars coming from around the ridiculous suburban curves of the road, some old geezer breaking the speed limit for the first time in his brand new Mercedes that has never seen sixty miles an hour.

But she doesn't want to go in the street, not even at Vanessa's insistence, not even with the golf paths a hazard. She will not relate the story, though it might help explain her aversion, of the drive home in the dark. The headlights brightened a cone in front of them to a lighter shade of grey on the snake-like two-lane road through the woods and the marsh. She and Alex were in the back seat, quiet but conscious of each other, and out of

the corner of her eye she could see him looking peripherally back at her, his eyes lit only by the green illumination from the gauges in front of her father. They turned around a blind, sweeping curve. She winked at her brother, opening her eye again to see the green glow. She was distracted by a similar glint outside the car that in a wet brushstroke like watercolors drew itself across the road and over the hood. The buck's blank, terrified face froze in the windshield glass, outlined in neon from the dash, and her father shouted something unintelligible and leveraged his weight against the brake pedal, his body rising from his seat. Noise flooded into her ears, the instantaneous shouts of her mother, her father, her brother, and possibly her own throat in reactionary terror, though she couldn't tell, and what she thought was lonely, sad momentary scream of the deer as its back broke against their speeding truck.

Then they were outside the car, its front end mangled, run off the road, Alex breathing heavily and quickly to disguise his sobs, her mother holding the two of them close with tears of shock streaming down onto their heads. Her father walked back and forth between the shattered deer and the broken car, its unnaturally white airbags deflated and hanging limp out the open doors. He muttered over and over, oh my God, fuck, oh my god, while being transferred on 9-1-1. She noticed all of this in retrospect, filling in the details with what most likely happened, her attention drawn at the time by the body of the buck that ricocheted off around the curve of the road. Without the lights from the car she could only see its dark shape, but she imagined it had been looking at her.

Her mother asked her if she was okay, but she didn't respond, and it set her to crying again, shouting to her father, I think she's hurt, I think Chelsea's hurt, please get

someone here fast, please. She finally spoke up to ask if they could call the vet too. It's hurt she said, pointing out to the dark mass beyond the bend. Oh honey, her mother said, pressing a wet cheek against her hair. Oh honey. It's not hurt anymore. It's okay. And then Alex sat down and asked how they were going to get home. Sometimes, she says to Vanessa, it's just better to stay on the golf cart paths. Their curves are slight and visible across the green, and illuminated in the dark by streetlamps.

Alex always says golf was a stupid sport anyhow. He was angry a lot lately, at a lot of things, and golf was something he kept talking about. She makes the mistake one time of telling him about the crazy middle-aged men wearing bright polos and sunglasses just assuming the path would clear before them, and he never let the subject go since. He talks about how he hates all sports, but golf especially. You can hardly call it a sport, he says, when the only physical activities are swinging a club a few times and walking from green to green. And even then, he says, they cut out walking by speeding all over the place in those stupid little carts. No wonder they all have heart attacks and die in their sixties.

Sometimes they have to drive very quickly to finish a game before dinner, she says. She feels compelled to play devil's advocate. Or maybe the forecast says it will rain and they don't want to be out and struck by lightning because it took too long to walk. No one gets struck by lightning, he says. It's such a rare occurrence. Unless you're being really stupid, he says, it's not going to happen. If they get hit by lightning they deserve it for going out and playing a stupid sport where you lift a big metal stick up into the air in an open field. They start to fight, not physically because that would get

them both grounded for a long time, but in that way that feels to her like looking for just the right spot to walk through the bushes into the neighbor's yard where you aren't supposed to be. They look for just the right spot on each other with every sentence. She hates to be told she is stupid. Alex hates to be told he is weak. They both hate a lot of things, even though Alex is more open about it. She thinks it's because he's older than her, and older people have had to deal with more things they don't like.

But then Stuart and Vanessa get dropped off. She and Alex pair off with their friends and retreat to their rooms on opposite sides of the house, Vanessa following her past the stairs and the living room to her room at the end of the hall. Her room is the same eggshell blue it's been since her parents brought her home from the maternity ward twelve years ago. They never let her change it when she wanted it to be pink, but then she came to enjoy it more, and now boasts of it to her friends at school, all of whom had succeeded in convincing their parents to repaint. The windows are always open with the screens up, even in the spring when the humidity rolls in and causes her bookshelf to creak and expand and yellow the pages on it prematurely.

Sometimes she and Vanessa sit on her bed and pull books from the shelf and read them to each other. They both claim it's random, but they always come back to the same books, the ones that are the best to read out loud because it's more about placing themselves in the story than about not knowing what will happen and surprising each other. That's why she always ends up with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Her parents didn't want her to read it when she was so young, they said to wait until high school when it would be assigned anyway, to stick with Nancy Drew and Harry Potter and the mystery

of young adults. It's too serious, they said. Alex thinks so too. You won't understand it, he said. But she wishes Alex could be more like Jem, a brother whose fights she knew wouldn't leave lasting impressions, who she knew would be there more often than not, to whom sibling rivalry was a playfully automatic part of growing up. She loves Scout and her bravery and their survival in an environment so different from hers, where nothing was a golf cart narrowly missing mowing down children and nothing was a pristinely kept series of greens and lawns pretending to be horizoned fields. The thick almost-summer pouring through the window helps her trick herself that maybe beyond the backyard is not an invisible fence and someone else's crab grass, but the dirt road past the Radley place to the schoolyard. She wants her parents to be like Atticus, but they are just themselves, the nondescript default parents she has always known.

They drop their kids off at school each morning and go their separate ways to work, one to an office advising companies how best to focus their marketing strategies, the other to a company's marketing department office. She wants justice and knowledge, she tells Vanessa. Brave and bold but quiet, not trying to get into their kids' lives so much as guide them along from the background. Parents that would only step out of the passive protector to put on a suit and defend the weak in court, and then roll up the sleeves of the suit and shoot a rabid dog like a soldier. Vanessa says marketing was very important. Without it we wouldn't have any idea what people were doing in the world, or how times have changed. If your parents were Atticus Finch, people here would still be lynching each other, she says. I really like your parents. They do interesting, important things.

Sometimes, there are deer out on the lawn at night, and she calls Vanessa over to the window to look at them. The lights on the opposite house are turned out, so the only source is from her bedroom, framing their faces. It glints off the deer's eyes. She thinks it makes them look like they're coming out of the dark, deep forest to see what is on the other side. They come past the trees onto the lawn and freeze at the sight of her house and the streets and houses beyond it. Alex says that they don't understand what is happening out of their habitat. Things like houses and lights and roads don't make sense to them, he says. That's why deer get hit by cars all the time. We put roads through the forest and they don't understand that the road means they're walled in, that if they try to cross they'll get shoved into the grille of a truck. She covers her ears and sings Miss Mary Mack loudly. It's his least favorite song. He knows what he's doing, and so does she. She doesn't want to think about broken deer flung back into the forest they tried to leave.

On Sunday mornings, she wakes up early to go to the lagoon and watch the herons. The lagoons are so small, nothing like the salt marshes surrounding the development and extending outwards toward the ocean, but big, stilt-legged birds like them as much as anywhere else before people get up to get an early start on nine holes. She doesn't sit too close to the edge of the water though, because she's nervous about the alligators, even though, when Alex points this out to her and laughs, she claims to be an expert on pointing them out when they're pretending to be logs. You can see it in their eyes, she says, and gestures to them, outlining the lone alligator's face. They think they look like logs, but from far away you can even see where their face is. You can tell

they're watching you. She knows her brother knows she is right, but he still warns her to keep away from the shore just in case. There might be snakes in the reeds, he says. You don't want a cottonmouth to jump out and bite you, because they will. He grabs her suddenly by the arm and pinches, and she jumps, startled, before pushing him away. I don't have to watch out for them. If I'm lucky, the herons will come and eat them and I'll see one flying away with a big brown snake in its beak. They can't get every single one, he says. She scooches further up the bank and looks out across the water to the still bird, its feathers shining grey in the orange morning sunlight. It doesn't move for almost ten minutes, and then suddenly it alights and is gone over the trees.

Sometimes she abandons the path altogether, daring Alex to follow her between tall, thin pines through the needle-covered forest floor. He tells her that it's not a real forest, but she likes to think of it like that, and calls it the woods every time. They're not supposed to be in those thin patches of growth between the paths, not unless they're groundskeepers and landscapers. She ran into a man once, in a blue jumpsuit and hat with a reflector vest. He yelled to her from the other side of the treeline that she should get back onto the path so that she wouldn't get lost, but she moved closer to him. Why are you wearing that orange vest, she asked. You'll scare away all the animals. He shouldered his wheedwhacker and pushed his protective goggles up onto his hat. I'm not trying to see the animals, he said. The jacket is so that no one thinks that I'm an animal, in case I get hurt or need help. She was quiet, and he directed her back towards the path. Now miss, you should stay on the paths. If you get lost or hurt, people might not see you.

She turned to him and put her hands in her hips, glaring up at his stubble-covered chin. I won't get lost. I can see the golf course from everywhere in the woods.

Sometimes she wishes she would get lost, if only to see what real woods looked like from the inside. She imagined they were not so thinly and neatly covered in trees, that they were like in books, thick and impenetrable except by a skilled set of eyes, feet, and hands that knew their way through the underbrush. She thought maybe she could take Alex, and Vanessa and Stuart along with, and they would explore the places far away from beige-sided houses and twig-free lawns. The woods are like a city, a metropolis she had read, tall and close and densely populated, but you have to know where to look to see anything in particular. It's like walking downtown, she says, and you see all the buildings and shops and it feels like a city, but you don't know where to stop, what places to try out. Like window-shopping. She thinks, in the woods you can window-shop and look at a pine tree and say that it is a pine tree, but she knows more than that. In theory, she can guide herself into that space, rather than simply through it, and in that world they are free of golf carts and their unpredictable but always-visible paved paths, and the deer there aren't neatly arranged like bushes but appear unexpectedly and disappear the same way, in a flash. She thinks of the buck's eye and shudders and apologizes.

One time she relates the story of the crash to her brother, thinking maybe he thinks about it just as much as her. Maybe he tries not to think about it just as much as her. He says he hardly remembers it, only that the truck was wrecked, but she can see in his eyes, he saw it too, the harsh green glow. He says she has no idea how it felt then, if

it felt anything at all, it was just another confused animal that didn't understand its new boundaries. They don't know what it means, he says, that they can't cross it. She wishes that they did so they would stop trying. Maybe there could be a time every day where no one would drive by, and they would be trained to know that's when it was safe. But then they would be trained, and then what would be the point. Then isn't a deer sort of an opposite road, she asks him. Deer don't know what a road is, but when we drive across where they are, and we hit them and crash and go off the road, we're trying to cross too. Do we know what the deer are? Alex doesn't respond to her question. She is upset at him for thinking she is stupid.

One Sunday evening they walk as a family, the four of them, out along the paths between the houses and organized patches of pine trees and long-, sharp-leaved bushes. The sun is deceptively high in the beginning of May, and it sinks faster than any of them notice when the evening breeze rolls in, bringing with it the dusk buzz of the crickets and gnats and mosquitoes. Her parents move hand-in-hand, slowly, several feet behind her, and Alex is up front, moving quickly when she catches up and then slowing just a little too much when he is sufficiently ahead. She secretly quickens her pace to catch up to her brother, knowing partly that it will coax him to move again, but also because, she thinks, he doesn't need to be that far in front of her. She turns to look across the golf course and stops, pointing. Deer, she says. A whole family. Far on the other end of the green, against the treeline, a group of four deer are stopped and waiting, their heads all attentive in her direction, seeing her the moment she saw them. Her parents move up behind her and look as well, and she whispers over her shoulder to Alex to come quick, before they

leave. They are in a line, posed similarly of their own accord, that automatic response to the slightest motion that she has seen so many times from her bedroom window. The buck is the biggest, ten points she thinks, he is too far away for her to count, but he is so large that he must be, the intricacy of the antlers still tied in her mind with some notion of experience, a wisdom of the woods that they possess even in their blindness to roads and golf courses and artificially planned, wooded medians between yards.

Just as Alex comes back to meet them, the deer scatter, melting back into the trees behind them mid-jump. Isn't that beautiful, her mother says, it was a deer family with a father and a mother. Good job, Chelsea, for spotting them. I never would have seen them all the way on that other side. Alex is upset that he didn't get a good look at them; she can tell from the way he is silent for once. She says it's nice that there weren't any crazy people on golf carts driving past to scare them away. Her father laughs. Alex still thinks golf is stupid.

As they move closer to home, Alex walks ahead again. The sun, now down, colors his light hair orange, like a lamp glowing after it is just turned on. She runs to catch up to him, matching her pace to his by watching their white shoes move in time on the pavement. He is still silent. She looks to him, and he looks back. They both laugh, the silent challenge communicated in an instant, and they are off, dashing in the direction of their house while their parents stand back. She thinks for a moment, and then, grinning, veers from the path across the green median, over the curb, and onto the slow winding street, making a shorter course towards home. Her mother shouts for them to be careful. Alex responds that they will in the midst of calling his sister out for cheating, her

head start only apparent in his second-place status. And then she is out of sight around the corner.

Sometimes she wishes she could be a heron, standing still in the water one second and in flight on wide grey wings the next. Sometimes she wishes she could be a deer, able to push through the underbrush with natural ease, at home in the real woods, not understanding the unbridgeable gap of the road.

HOME INVASION

Francis felt the weight of the baseball bat in his hands, smacking it sharp against his palm the way he'd seen batters on deck do, and Tom and Jerry when they were trying to kill each other, and Tweety Bird when she whacked Sylvester upside the head. He supposed he was more like the latter two examples in this case, but he was sure that those characters, or the artists drawing them, had taken inspiration from some pinch hitter they'd seen on TV. Yes, that was the only appropriate way to make sure that your baseball bat is made of aluminum or wood and not plastic for whiffleball or foam for some strangely violent childhood game.

Well, it couldn't be that strange if Tom and Jerry, Tweety and Sylvester were appropriate Saturday morning fodder. Once the smacks were loud enough to be menacing, solid enough to suggest contact with skin, Francis looked up to the long tabby driveway that wound through the arranged ferns and bushes to the porch steps and the dark house at the top with only one light on in an upstairs window. The bathroom window, I think.

He made sure to step as lightly as possible on the concrete-and-shell paving, his tennis shoes just heavy enough that he could crack and snap any unfortunate piece of seashell by accident, by just stepping on it at the wrong angle. Why not just go barefoot? Much quieter that way. He knelt down to remove his shoes, and the shell fragments

jabbed through the tear in the knee of his jeans and into his skin. He bit his lip, but the repetitive image of skin slicing and flaking away, skin being skinned, was too much after only a moment. He hopped up without tying his shoes.

Because tabby hurts, and the more you walk on it, the worse it gets. Squirt gun fights in the summer aren't nearly as fun when the ground is sharp, and the woods and fields and even the mulch on the side of the driveway are full of chiggers and ticks. And rattlesnakes. You don't get used to any of that, that lot of little things that added up. It definitely had to be with tennis shoes. They might have been too loud, but if he'd had to make a run for it, for any reason, he wouldn't be able to do it across the stabbing pavement or through the dried pine needle mulch unless he had a good pair of soles to help him out. He wouldn't be able to stand it barefoot. The slap of the bat against his palm was louder than his footsteps anyhow.

The bathroom light winked out the instant he stepped from the driveway pavement to the decorative stone path that spurred off from it toward the front door. He stopped, inhaling sharply and holding it, not sure that anything he was doing at that point would stop someone inside from seeing him. Would they be able to see him? What was he wearing again?: the ratty white t-shirt that he usually slept in, with Viva Las Vegas! printed across it in big red letters. A pair of ragged jeans that were faded to grey and white on the knees, shins, everywhere his skin rubbed. And the tennis shoes, of course, with big white, flopping laces that would shine under a flashlight. Hardly camouflage. If he was being honest with himself, he hadn't put that much thought into all of this; it was much more of a welling up or a coming together of feeling, miniature streams that

drip in the underbrush after a heavy rain and coalesce into a real stream. Anyone could see where the water came down and swelled in pools, but no one could predict where it might go, what piece of leaf would give way and let the water flow in which direction until . . . Francis had put some thought into the basics, but everything else was riding on a knot of stuff bunched up behind his ribs. The clothes were an afterthought, just what had been lying around; he'd never even been to Vegas.

His eyes adjusted to the lack of light from the top floor. No one had popped out to find out why on earth he was standing in front of a house at eleven at night with a bat. It was safe to move again. He released his breath, had he been breathing at all?, ran his free hand through his short, sharp hair, and stepped flat-footed down the stone path.

The key was where he remembered, where he hoped it would still be. It wasn't like them to change anything, really, or put things out of order, even when it was for the best. He took the crudely-glazed Aunt Jemimah pottery figurine in both hands, tilting her back as if looking up her long, wide, polka-dotted skirt, to reveal a pockmarked key resting on a piece of paper. Francis picked them up and set the caricature back down, wincing as the exposed clay on the bottom scraped on the porch surface. The lock was effortless, and the door was quiet, and in a second he was inside in the quiet of the house, away from the low-frequency hum of every insect in the world announcing their presence at night.

In the dark, he unfolded the piece of paper. Make yourself at home, and below it, a smiley face. Funny. If I come back through the front door, I'll bash Aunt Jemimah to pieces. Or take her with me. Made myself at home.

The floors made him nervous. Even though they were relatively new, hardly anything that would appear on a historic home tour, they were old enough that a stray one, some individual board no longer perfectly varnished into place, might give him away. After all, at just over a quarter century himself, he had begun to notice bits and pieces of his body not sitting quite right, his limbs misaligning for a moment like a printer feeder, just long enough to crumple the last sheet of paper into uselessness. He listened, as he stepped on the balls of his feet, for the growing cartilage crackle of his knees and the pop of bones in his ankle when he put weight on it just so. He could feel the grating, gritty sound of cartilage scraping against itself. There was no telling what dead tree guts would do after twenty-five years if a human body with only a little less love and care than the daily recommended dose was already coming to pieces.

Despite, or perhaps because of his careful footfalls, the floor gave off no unwanted sounds other than the light tap and squeak of shoes on varnish. He reached out with his free hand to feel along the wall, the waist-high molding familiar under his fingers. It glowed blue in patches under the moon's beams, and when his fingers passed through them, they leapt out of the darkness, pale green and disembodied, and then his arm, shoulder, neck, and face appeared and then disappeared. He stopped at the last patch of moonlight before the hallway to the stairs and lifted his fingers up close to his face. No dust, no dirt. Could have predicted that. Childhood had involved many things, but weirdly never a featherduster.

Francis pressed himself back against the wall, turning the bat in his hand, leaning with the support of the other around the corner to check if anyone was hiding in the dark,

just beyond where he could see. The carpet that began there and extended all the way down and then over the stairs in a reverse cascade to the landing, the second hallway with its nonfunctional lightswitch, the second bedroom, the office, always locked, then the bathroom, and last the master bedroom . . . that carpet would muffle anyone's approach. It was good for him, at that point, because he wouldn't have to be so conscious of the noise he was making, and the stilted, difficult way he was walking, but the same could be said for anyone else there. It wouldn't be about being quiet anymore, not that he'd done such a great job of that up to that point, but about finding a place to hide as quickly as possible. Either that or swinging the bat hard with both hands like he was going for a fastball with runners on base. Follow through, if it comes to that. He hoped it wouldn't, because he had something he wanted to say to them first, and caving in someone's skull from around a corner meant that they wouldn't be able to hear him. No one was in the hallway. A few practice swings wouldn't hurt, just in case.

He stepped away from the wall, out into the open floor, far enough away from anything that the bat wouldn't reach, and wrenched the bat around with his shoulders.

That was terrible. Eye on the ball.

Don't flinch, it doesn't have teeth.

Follow through, don't throw the bat.

He swung again, and again, adjusting his grip on it, realizing that it probably would have been best to practice outside, when he could let go of the bat at any point it wouldn't hit anything or anyone. Just lost my grip, just an accident. Anyone who came up to him would believe him. Weirder things have happened than dropping your bat in

an imaginary bullpen in the middle of the street in the middle of the night. But not here, not in the house.

He paused, mid-swing, illuminated in a moonlight patch. Anyone who looked in his direction from anywhere then, from any window or from the bottom of the stairs while he had a lapse in his attention, a break in his perception, would be able to see him perfectly, like he'd been caught in a camera flash. This would make the perfect photo for the newspaper article that's going to be written.

He knew it would be written too, how formal and terse it would be at first, and then how melodramatic it would get in its later iterations. He even had some idea of the headline, though he wavered right then on what it might be. Two Dead in Senseless Home Invasion. Three Dead in Apparent Family Dispute. Two, Three. He still had his tennis shoes on, still was prepared to run, fast and loud, but if it really came down to that...

A few minutes went by, and a clock struck one, and he jumped, having forgotten about the existence of such a loud clock. The electronic Westminster Chimes were accompanied by his quick exhale and a single Bong. He spread his fingers across his chest, feeling his heart and lungs expand and contract, counting the beats, losing count of them, gaining it back when they finally slowed down. No one was at any of the windows, that he could see, or coming down the stairs for a midnight snack like he'd done on autopilot more times than he could count.

It's time, he said aloud, and strode down the carpeted hallway, flat-footed, and started up the stairs. He let the bat hang down by his side and bump against the edge of each step as he walked. Whump whump whump, all the way up to the top.

* * * * *

The door to Francis's room was cracked open, as if someone had just peeked in and out to check on a sleeping child. He found himself taking a detour from his tenuous plan, pushing the door further open and inward with the tip of the baseball bat. The room was the same old square, nearly identical in all its dimensions, with foam green walls and a carpet on the carpet that had sunk in to the point where they might as well have been inseparable. If the top layer hasn't been pulled up from the bottom layer, it's fused down now. He felt the change in texture through his soles as he walked from one to the other, and each step brought a small cloud of dust that lit up in the blue light from the window. He shuffled his feet, prolonging the transition between fabrics as much as he could.

There, on the wall, was his car calendar, American Dragsters, pinned up with a thumbtack to September, a once-shocking purple Barracuda that he never changed because he could feel the hole for the tack getting looser with the flip of each month, and the changing calendars for each year. And also because he'd moved out that September, the day freshman year started circled in pink, and the words, "Get your shit together," on every day of the week leading up to it. It was all untouched in all the years that he hadn't been back since.

Next to the calendar, a height chart that his mother refused to let him take down, with a series of anthropomorphic animals of varying heights congratulating him on

surpassing them. The tallest was a giraffe, which he easily cleared in 8th grade. “Wow,” it said, in a speech bubble. Hung next to the giraffe’s enthusiastic face was the dusty frame holding his high school diploma, the frame that was too nice for his parents to risk in the mail, even after he graduated.

If he’d really wanted it, he could have picked it up in person at any point. He pressed the tip of the bat up against the glass over the diploma and just eased forward, leaning his weight pound by pound through the athletic grip and aluminum shell onto the envelope-sized pane. He dug his feet into the top carpet, gritting his teeth at the tinny snapping sound of spiderweb cracks in the diploma frame. Is that enough? He resisted the urge to take a swing at it, fling it straight off the wall and into his headboard, or even better, through the window and out into the driveway.

His bed was still made too, inhumanly neat the way only a soldier or a mother could pull off. The corners looked carved, planed and chiseled, right out of an interior design catalog, and the whole spread was faded. Right out of an old catalog. Jerry the Bear was even there, propped up against the pillow with his arms out to give a hug. Francis distinctly remembered putting Jer-Jer up on the shelf in the closet the first time he’d been grounded and never taking him down again.

He half-expected to see himself, six, eight, twelve, seventeen years old, coming into the room to ask what he was doing.

“What are you doing?” he said out loud. “I’m not sure.”

He pushed Jer-Jer over with the tip of the bat, untucked the squared corners of the bed, sheets, comforter, and all, and pulled the tack from the wall, letting the calendar fall

to the floor. He dropped the tack into the wastebasket near the door and heard it rustle in the plastic lining in the dark, the only thing to be thrown away in years. The bedroom, while still not lived-in, at least then bore the marks of someone attempting to use it in some way, a guest having messed things up a little, done a half-assed job of putting things back the way they were, and then left before their hosts could protest with stern silence and a forced cough behind a raised hand. In the simplest terms, I'm refusing to clean my room. At least then it wasn't a sort of shrine to parental voyeurism. The soft light through the window outlined a place where someone was, rather than where someone had been. The postcard-picture echo of a boy's room.

As Francis turned back to leave, he heard something. A scrape. A click. The sound of metal on metal, a key in a lock, maybe.

He hadn't been locked in his room in a long time, pounded on the door and yelled at it that his homework was done. That he had meant to mow the lawn. I didn't mean to hit the dog. I swear I didn't hide the belt. I meant to write those thank you cards. He hadn't meant to walk in on them. How long was it again, four thousand some days? There hadn't been anyone to lock him in for a while now. Who's there? He stopped and hefted the bat in both hands.

Nothing. He was aware of the dampness of his grip, and he squeezed and choked up on it in anticipation. Still nothing, no one jumping out from the corner to grab him or swipe him off his feet. In his own room, he felt like he was the one being intruded upon, expecting the stalker to reveal themselves at any moment, put a hand across his mouth, tell him not to say a single word, that no one would believe him. When all he heard were

his own quick, quiet breaths, he let the bat down in one hand and reached for the door in the other, and that is when it happened, explosive, the room lit up like a camera flash, a pop like the sound of bone breaking, but everywhere, in the air around his head, and then another one that heard whistle past his head. The splintered door caught him flat on the tips of his fingers, cracking them back in many directions to his knuckles, palm, and wrist. He let out an animal grunt of pain and tripped backward over the embedded carpet, his uninjured hand still clutching to the bat instead of reaching out to stop his fall.

“Call nine one one,” he heard as his tailbone thudded into the carpet. “I got him. The police are on the way?”

That buzzing sound, breaking wood and a ringing bell, and the glass in the window falling into the carpet with a crackle. It’s just getting worse, adding to itself, yelling, it won’t stop.

“Out of my house!” His father’s compact figure blocked the doorway, arms outstretched around the grip of a pistol. The gun was something unexpected, but Francis accepted it in a second as part of his family’s apparently capability for violence. “Out of my son’s room!”

“Dad,” he choked out, squeezing his injured hand into a ball. In the dark, the impression of his father’s eyes looked wide. Shock, surprise, maybe. Or rage.

“Dad, it’s me.”

His father relaxed his grip on the gun, and as it dropped an inch, Francis shoved himself back up toward his father’s shadow, swinging the bat up with him awkwardly in an amateur uppercut.

“Francis—” and then the aluminum ping like a ball on a chain link fence and the gun was on the floor, thankfully not firing, thank god for that carpet, and his father was clutching at his hands and tangling their limbs together in the dark. He flung their entwined masses into the doorframe and then let go, pushing himself away. He brought the bat around sideways for another swing, and this time it was a solid, deep-seated thwunk, the sound of Rocky Balboa punching the side of beef in the freezer. The vibration shot up his arm to his shoulder in a twinge, and he dropped the bat, ready to take a single or a double if he was lucky and fast enough.

His father’s body slumped in the doorway. He knelt down to it, touching his fingers to his father’s neck. He’d seen a main character or a paramedic do it that way in every TV show, movie, videogame, and comic book in history. No heartbeat. He’s dead. The body’s silent but visible inhalations confirmed that Francis had not killed his father, and that he was lousy at checking for a pulse.

His cheek was already starting to swell, and though it was too dark to see for sure, Francis knew it was that specific, brutal purple color particular to bruises. Blood trickled down in a neat, dark line from the corner of the old man’s mouth, the side he would sneer from if he’d ever thought to put on anything but a full-on smile, yellowed smoker’s teeth exposed. The blood looked as if he’d drawn it on with a marker, it was so straight, and only when it was all the way down at the base of his father’s neck did it spread out like a pressed felt tip, blooming into the neckline of his shirt.

He’d had a short speech prepared, but it escaped him then. He just repeated himself. “It’s me, dad. What were you doing in my room?”

Francis reached down to grab the bat from the floor. There was a crossed smear of blood a few inches down, the kind that a mosquito makes when crushed with a quick slap to the arm. Next to the worn aluminum tube, a tiny gem glinted in the rug. He picked it up between two fingers and held it up to the light from the window; it was one of his father's teeth, filling included. He put it in his pocket, but when he came to the door and his father's unconscious form, folded over on itself and drooling darkly into his clothes like a sleeping dog, he reached back into his pocket, took the tooth out, and dropped it with a flick into the wastebasket. He waited to hear it plink against the thumbtack, but he just heard the plastic shiver.

* * * * *

The cops are on the way. Got to make this quick now.

Either his father had gotten denser as he'd aged rather than just smaller, or Francis just didn't know his own lack of strength. That, or both. He dragged his father by the feet down the hallway to his parents' bedroom. He left the bat leaning in the crook of the stairwell. Not within easy reach, but to grab it on the way out, or go back for it in only, what, eight strides? The pistol was still lying, safety off, its black machined plastic and metal stubbornly refusing to glint on the illuminated carpet. He wouldn't take it. Part of it was just fear, like cooking with oil for the first time, that he would slip up in some way he didn't know and the gun would go off into his leg, hot canola spattered all over his forearms. The other half of it, or maybe it was more, was that picking it up would mean he'd have an easy out that he could take in the snap of a second, without thought, and whoever showed up first, the cops or the first responders, would have to call

someone else to scrub his brains off the bedroom wall. He rubbed his arms with his hands and then against his shirt.

He left the gun where it was. He wouldn't take it, but he glanced back up at it as he dragged his father out into the hallway.

The office door was next, locked, as usual, and for the first time in a long time, he jiggled the handle, trying to see what was inside, to explore his parents' books and desks and documents, their adult secrets. He reached for his father's shirt pocket, where he'd found the key when he was twelve and folding laundry, but realized when he pressed his hand against the warm, wet shirt over his father's breast that there was no pocket. They were only pajamas. That shirt was probably long gone. It's just as well. He continued his clumsy shamble down the hall. The dregs of a bloodstain in the carpet trailed after the wisp of hair on his father's head. It looked like someone had drawn it with lipstick. That would wash out. Eventually. With enough scrubbing and the bubbles from a box of baking soda and a bottle of vinegar.

He tried to lean his father up limply against the wall before trying the master bedroom door, but the old man was off balance, heavy in his head and upper chest, and after a couple of tries, Francis left him prone, nudging him aside against the molding with his foot so that he wouldn't be stepped on by anyone passing through.

Whonk whonk whonk. The door shook in its frame and reverberated through the walls. The hollow rattle of shaking particle board and fancy veneer echoed in the hall. If he'd been downstairs, he would have heard it, seen it in the windowpanes, felt it everywhere but in the old, solid wood floorboards.

“Mom. It’s me. Francis.”

He heard the swish of his mother’s bare feet on the rug, and then the light clicked on and shone in a line from under the bottom of the door.

“Mom. It’s me.”

“Frank?” He expected her voice to be shaking, but it was just a flat, straight question as if he’d been recognized at a party from the across the room. Had she heard the clank of metal on bone before, or felt it through the bed?

“Yeah Mom. It’s Frank. I came home.” He placed his hands on the door, palms flat, and breathed in deep, listening for the click of the lock unlocking. When he heard it, he shoved the door inward with all his weight. He felt it connect. Probably her shoulder, and her face. Shuddering through his arms. He stepped into the room and shut the door behind him.

She was on her hands and knees, turned away from him, a wet rattle with each breath, moaning endlessly. He knelt down next to her and turn her to face him with both his hands on her shoulders, and saw that her perfect triangle of a nose had been snapped sideways. Her lips and chin were slathered in a shiny, wet mix of saliva, mucus, and blood, and when she breathed out, horrified, it bubbled from her nostrils and over her teeth.

“Why?” she asked. Her voice was steady despite the gulps of blood and spit. She stared at him. Everyone always told him that he and his mother had the same eyes, and he saw himself reflected in the wet, black-brown of her irises. The dark knot of nerves and anxiety unwound itself behind his sternum. It unfolded into surprise. And then

sadness, the way he'd felt if he were five again and just realized he'd been lost in the mall, unable to recognize anyone and searching every face for the only one he really knew.

Francis shook his head and looked away. What was it I wanted to say?

"I don't know," he said.

He left her on the carpet to wipe at her face with her sleeves and reach out for the tissues on the bedside table. "Mom. Don't move, please. Stay right there."

He looked at her curled up, backing up against the foot of the bed, and at the spartan accommodations of the room, nothing on the walls, a reading lamp with no books in sight, a tumbler with two ice cubes and a bottle of unmarked pills on the other table, a beaten white dresser with only two pictures on it, one of him at age three in a sailor's outfit in a photo shoot, and one of his parents at their wedding, his father's face a triumphant grin, his mother's the soft satisfaction of a contest prize.

She called after him as he opened the door and stepped over his father's hand that had fallen across his path, walking back to the baseball bat by the stairs and the gun on the floor.

He heard her call why again, and what was he on, and did he need money, because they could give him money, and all he had to do was ask, and what did they do to deserve this from him after all these years, and why did he cut them out when all they wanted was to take him back. Familiar questions, as much accusatory statements as they were real questions. You don't expect an answer.

And how would answering them change anything, anyway?

Because I feel the overwhelming need to.

Only antidepressants which didn't seem to be working and definitely don't list some sort of violent, reverse empty-nest syndrome as a side effect.

Yes, I could use money, but I can't ask for it from you.

Everything, the same reason anyone cuts their parents out, like a septic limb needs to be amputated, but sometimes the infection has just spread too far and there's nothing you can do to save the patient other than to do everything in your power to alleviate his suffering before the end.

He was sure they would have taken him back, and that's what he was afraid of. When he pulled his father into the room and propped him up next to his mother, she glanced over at the swollen lump taking over his jaw and reached up to put her hand on it. The whole time, she never broke eye contact with Francis. They had stopped talking entirely. She just looked resigned, as if she'd expected this all to happen at some point, that he'd been such an estranged son that this form of closeness was the only logical conclusion. It's a weird form of poetic justice.

He pushed the gun over to them with his foot, but it stopped short, nestled in the carpet. The bat felt suddenly very heavy in his hands, like a wooden Louisville Slugger from a middle school game, the first time playing fast pitch. Batter up.

* * * * *

Francis heard the 2:00 AM sirens coming down the street, ringing and dopplering like they were closing in from all sides, at every point in space around him.

He sat on the edge of his bed, stroking the matted, patchy fur of Jerry the Bear compulsively, picking at each pill and curl and snarl. He rolled the stained bat underneath his feet like a massive rolling pin, back and forth, back and forth along the carpet. The lights in the window changed from the grey-blue of night to the bright red and blue flashing of the police cars pulling into the driveway, and leaned down to kiss Jer-Jer on the top of his head, wiping away his tears and the stuffed bear's imagined ones with a finger. It's okay. Shh, it's okay.

YOU NEVER KNOW

“I’ll be home soon.”

“Alright. I might be there before you, for once.”

“Surprising.”

“Hm?”

“You should have sold that piece of junk car years ago.”

“You know, I think I might just go and trade back for it. With yours.”

“Jeffrey, I was kidding.”

“You can still take the bus to work that way. Or maybe I could drive you.”

“Hush. I’ll be home soon. Leave the light on.”

“We could take the top down, you could let your hair down. I’d find a way to grow some more so I could let mine down. Who’s that vixen in the Corvette with Michael Keaton there?”

“Jeffrey.”

“That’s what they’d say!”

“Jeffrey, please, don’t sell my car.”

“I was kidding. I was kidding.

A pause.

“See you soon honey.”

“See you soon.” Mrs. Margaret Andrews, Marge to those who knew her, Margie to her mother and her father, and her husband on good days, jabbed the button to end the call. It was actually the impression of a button, on a touchscreen, the first of what she hoped wouldn’t be many from work, but she wasn’t holding her breath. It was still so much less satisfying to push than a real button, even one that was still ultimately just sending a digital signal to a microchip. There was still some flimsy piece there to move a fraction of a millimeter, to feel the inaudible click through her fingertip.

But she smiled and expressed excitement when the department distributed the phone, cutting-edge and shiny at the time, when her old flip-phone finally swung too far into a perfect back bridge, snapped its hinges. These new smartphones were proof of the state’s concern for, investment in, the local court system and all its peripherals, arms that reached through and around every section of the county government. They care about you up there in the House! She smiled wider and nodded, mumbling something that sounded positive.

She pushed her way out the sliding door, still broken for even longer than she’d had the phone, three or four models obsolete at least, and onto the sidewalk and reached to drop the phone into some deep recess of her purse when it buzzed. And then another, and she put it up to her ear and clicked the power button on the side and was about to answer hello? when it didn’t ring again, and she realized it wasn’t ringing. Just a couple of texts.

She unlocked the phone. The first one, from Jeffrey:

How much do you think I could get for it? I could probably get the Vette back and get you one too

The second one from Alex, her son:

Mom I'm going to hang out with Stuart. I did my homework

She responded:

Back before dark please. Call me when you get there. Love you

And seconds later:

I know. Love you too

For a few seconds, she waited for another response, anything at all from her son though she had no idea what he might say except *love you too* again, redundant, not really like him; a dry follow-up from her husband, maybe something like *Alright, alright, you win, I'll get you a Corvette too. No need to twist my arm.* Followed with *And one for Alex too, just to be fair.*

But nothing else happened, except the new message indicator blinked back up to "1". That stupid glitch; no one knew how to fix it. It just decided that something that had been listened to before, once or twice or countless times would suddenly need to be heard again, just to be quieted. Every so often, things need attention, to be reminded that they still have some significance. This one, though, it was like a toddler, waddling up, wide-eyed, tilting its head, and then hooking its little fists right into your ribs because it didn't know any better. That was the only way it knew to function, and unlike the toddler, the phone couldn't be trained. No one could fix the glitch, and now that the state

had paid for the phone, it wouldn't replace it until it was broken. She wasn't about to smash it, however obnoxiously functional it might be.

Margaret stopped, sidestepped up against the brick wall at the joint between two buildings. She opened the message, pushed play, held the phone to her ear.

“Hey Mom, it's Chelsea, I was just wondering where you were. I don't know if you remember, but practice let out early today, like I said, so I'm just hanging out here. Just wondering where you are. Hopefully close. Love you, see you soon, come pick me up, bye.”

“Love you too.” Margaret's thumb hovered over the delete button, but then the “1” indicating the new messages blinked out, as it always did. She dropped the phone into her pocket and resumed walking toward the bus stop.

* * * * *

The street steamed in the late fall afternoon, shoes tapping through puddles, whipping drops into the mist that hung above darkened concrete slabs, pieced together, a puzzle on a picnic table, sprayed accidentally by a hose.

“It's late again,” the man in the wheelchair said.

“It's always late,” said the man who pushed the wheelchair, his hands still on the handles, ready for when the bus finally showed.

“You always say that,” the man in the wheelchair said.

“And you always say it’s late!” the handler man shouted, directly into the wheelchair man’s left ear.

“If it would come on time, then I wouldn’t say it.”

The bus was late, but Margaret said nothing. She stood as far as possible from the two ragged, grey men while still visibly within the radius of the bus stop. It was just a sign bolted to a metal post, leaning slightly in the concrete. It had been hit at least once by something, possibly the bus itself, in its hurry to make up for lost time, and painted over in green and then grey and then a different shade of grey.

She knew the route based on what her receptionist had written up for her that morning. The first time she wasn’t being dropped off at work, or driving on her own, and now directly home instead of swinging by school or the gym to pick up the kids. Alex could drive, had been driving. He’d probably drive himself all the way to college and back, get new friends to help him load and unload piles of clothing and notebooks in the car. Taking the bus was better, less effort, less money, better for the environment supposedly, with that big old diesel belch every time the driver so much as moved any pedal, pulled any lever. Besides, there was no bus to Jeffrey’s office, but there was one to the courthouse and the annex, her office. Her receptionist took the bus, when her boyfriend worked an early shift; her boss took the bus, when his car was in the shop. These two frazzled, smoky gentlemen here in the wheelchair and the torn slacks took the bus, and that was good, because without it, what other choice did they have?

Then there was the pop and roar of the diesel engine and the bus scraped up along the sidewalk toward them, lurching to a halt, alarm shrieking as it lowered to the ground.

“Sometimes I wonder,” said the wheelchair man, as the handler man ferried him on board.

“What.”

“Sometimes I wonder if you hate me.”

“What on earth makes you think that? When have I ever said—”

“Of course you wouldn’t say it. I wouldn’t say if I hated you. I need you.”

“I don’t need you. There are plenty of people out there needing to be pushed around in a wheelchair. If I hated you, I could just walk away and find someone else.”

“But you wouldn’t say it. You wouldn’t say it, if you did.”

“No.” He kneeled down and adjusted the floor straps around the wheels, and the sidewall straps to the back of the chair.

“Exactly. Sometimes I wonder if you hate me. And you’re just waiting for the right day, just a little rainier than today, just a bit slippery. The bus comes along. Late.”

“Of course. As usual.”

“It comes along and whoops! your hands slip and WHAM!” He clapped his hands together, and Margaret jumped. The bus driver turned to look at the two of them, smiled, shook his head, closed the door, took off from the stop. The rear of the bus popped and whooshed behind them, and the fog on the windows streamed by, leaving stripes to see through to the other side of the street.

“Why would I ever do something like that?”

“I dunno. If you hated me. It’d just look like an accident.”

“That’s awful. Just awful. You think that?”

“Sometimes.”

“That’s awful.”

“You never know.”

The handler man reached down to check the straps, cinch them tighter around the chair.

Everyone on the bus was silent. Margaret took the last available empty bench, a couple rows back from the front. Every other seat was full, quiet, passengers staring askew through the streaks in the windows or down at their phones. She found it hard to look anywhere but at the two men with whom she’d waited at the stop. Were their smudged shirts and khakis some sort of uniform? They didn’t have nametags.

The bus driver shouted back to them, “Y’all hear? Some kid arrested on murder charges just yesterday. His parents.”

They nodded, and the wheelchair man joined in, “It’s crazy, he must have been damaged in the head, you know? Maybe they did it, maybe he thought they did.”

“They don’t know yet.”

The handler man interjected, “Maybe they didn’t discipline him enough when he was little.”

“Or they hit him too hard. They don’t know. It’s just terrible.”

“Crazy people!” shouted the wheelchair man. “So many crazy people, it’s scary.”

Margaret glued her eyes to the street passing by through the haze of water on the windows, counting the umbrellas, different colored shirts, boarded-up storefronts, anything simple and sequential. Those parents, that kid, a kid of almost thirty – she

fought the urge to announce to the bus that they were her neighbors, that she'd known them, that their son had babysat her children when she and Jeffrey took a much-needed personal night, and there had never been any concern. No so-called warning signs. He was a sweet kid. Weird, but no weirder than any other teenagers she'd known, no weirder than her own Alex.

And his parents were lovely people, weird, but no weirder to her than anyone else one generation older. Just that slight perspective shift that took a fraction more effort to overcome in casual conversation, the split second gap of social planning before responding to a hello across the lawn over the buzz of the mower. They were her neighbors, which meant that she couldn't be the one to process the busywork of their case, to be any sort of liaison between police department and public defender, be anything but a bystander in something that she was closer to than anyone else involved. She might testify, if she were asked, but she was certain she wouldn't be. You never know.

She pulled the signal handle almost too late for the bus driver to stop where she needed to switch routes. He gave her a look that she couldn't decipher in the time it took for her to step off the bus and the bus to speed away with a gout of blue-grey smoke. The sidewalk was freshly wet here too, but there was a chill in the air, a little sea breeze off the marsh. She waited for the next bus. It was already late, and she was still miles from home.

* * * * *

When she closed the door on the dusk, she still hadn't heard from Alex. She pulled off her shoes and dropped them haphazardly to the side of the door, reaching with her other hand for her phone buried somewhere in her purse so she could text him and find out where the hell he was.

"I'm home."

There was a scuffling sound, the sharp clink of glass, and then more scuffling, shuffling, furniture moving.

"Jeffrey?"

"Kitchen," came the soft reply.

She gave up on the search for her phone and strode through the foyer to the kitchen. Jeffrey was slumped over in the chair, elbows on the table, hands in his hair. His face was wet.

"You gave up?"

He gestured to the newly opened bottle of brandy on the table, already a quarter empty, and the empty glass next to it. "Gave up trying to put it away before you got back."

She sat down next to him. She reached out to move the glass, but then put her hand next to his arm, her fingers up against his elbow, just resting them there as if they were in bed dozing off together with their separate books fallen open, dogeared, on the covers.

"You want one? I'll have another one too, I think."

She nodded and went to grab a glass from the cabinet. They tapped cheers with their glasses and downed them. It was like sour caramel, rubbing alcohol. She sat back in the chair, and then she noticed the wireless receiver in the opposite corner of the table, the phone turned toward the wall, blending in with the same yellowed beige. She reached for it, pointing with the antennae at Jeffrey.

“You were listening to the message again.” She shook the receiver at the wall-mounted phone by the doorway.

Jeffrey didn’t say anything. He resumed his slumped pose, elbows splayed. He closed his eyes, to avoid eye contact, or to hold off another round of tears.

“Jeffrey. You can’t let things go.” She slammed the receiver home on its dock. She thought she felt the house shake around her, her body, arms, hands shook along with it. “You can’t – that stupid fucking car, and why do you keep torturing yourself with her voicemail. Why do you keep torturing me?”

“It’s all we have left –”

“It’s not all!” She grabbed the bottle from the table and put it up in the cabinet above the fridge, the glasses in the sink, Jeffrey up from the table.

“You have to stop this. It’s the same every time; it’s not going to change.”

He nodded.

She held him at arms’ length, her hands on her shoulders, and then brought him toward her, his body limp and giving like she was hugging a plush toy, a bear or a bunny with round, blank eyes and an upturned v mouth, something always concerned with more than it could let on.

After a few minutes in silence, they were interrupted by the distant mosquito buzz of her phone. She broke away from him to get it.

“Alex,” she said.

“Good.” He nodded. “I’m going to bed early, honey. Sorry.”

“It’s alright. I’m sorry about the car.”

“It’s alright. It always was a piece of shit anyway.”

“Yeah, it was.”

* * * * *

Just before eleven, Alex was on his way home, and the message indicator blipped back up to “1” on Margaret’s phone. She hadn’t missed any calls.

She pushed back, stood up from her seat at the kitchen table and went over to the portable phone on the wall. It really was the exact same color as the wall. Had they chosen that on purpose, or had they just been lucky that the two had faded and yellowed in tandem, meeting up at this point so that they were intertwined, indistinguishable. Would they continue on that same path months from now, two, three, ten years from now?

She closed the door, careful to keep it quiet, not to let it echo upstairs, and pushed play on the voicemail, which blinked with a computerized, red-segmented “3”. The first two messages were recent, left there on purpose to cover the last one. One was her, two weeks before: “Alex, don’t forget to take out the trash before you leave. You’ve been

doing it since you were six. You know what to do.” Was she being sarcastic? She couldn’t tell, and she pressed the delete button with a click.

The next was Alex, calling from school, she thought. It was a garbled combination of bad signal and someone talking in the background, maybe music playing, she thought she could make out some sort of beat, but she lost it each time amongst the static squeals and blips of dropped sound. After sixty seconds, it automatically cut off. Delete. Click.

The last, expected message was over two years old. Late April. Tuesday.

“Hey Mom, Dad, Alex, just leaving a message because none of you are picking up your phones. I forgot my library book. It’s *the Odyssey*. And it’s due back today or I might get a fine. Or detention. I don’t know which, I’ve never forgotten a library book before. If you see it when you get home, can you bring it to me after school? Thanks, love you, bye.”

That was the end of it. Click.

She went upstairs.

JUST DO IT

Stop it! Stop it right now, Tommy! You know you shouldn't be doing that. What would your mother say if she saw you hiding there? What would your mother say if she found out you were crawling around in the dust and dirt, ruining your nice clothes? You should be ashamed, cowering in the corner, wishing everything would stop and everyone would go away and just leave you to yourself. How can you think like that? You're supposed to go out and make friends. That's what school is for, making friends, not running away from everyone who decides to pick on you. Why don't you stand up for yourself, huh? Why don't you stop being a coward and go out there and make some friends like the normal kids? Is that so hard? Is that too much to ask? Can't you do something so simple and straightforward – or do you always just choke and give up? Tommy? Are you even listening to a word I'm saying, Tommy? Stop hiding. Stop being afraid. Stop wishing and get up! Get up goddammit! Tommy, do I have to make you get up? Don't make me come over there, because you know I will. I swear, if you make me pick you up, I'm going to . . .

Tommy got up. He brushed off his arms and the seat of his pants. Then he looked around to see if any passing classmates had stopped to watch the spectacle he made. He glanced down at his shoes as he shuffled his feet back and forth. They were newly bought that week, from a nice store downtown named after some man whom Tommy had

never heard of. “They look nice . . . respectable,” his mother had said. All Tommy knew was that they were shiny white when he had first put them on and, during the week at school, had become grayer and blotched and smudged. He looked, mildly displeased, as another stain formed around the bleached rubber soles from his movement, swiftly and easily soiling the remaining clean sections of his shoes. He fought back the urge to yank off his stained footwear and throw it against the wall, worthless and ugly as it had become, as he had made it.

But a passing teacher had noticed him and trotted up to see what the matter was, kneeling down to his level. She seemed to think Tommy had been crying in the corner, which he most certainly had not been, but she persisted anyway, asking, “What’s wrong?” and, “Are you okay?” and even, “Do you need to go see the nurse?” Tommy mumbled a reply to each question, barely looking up from scuffing his stained shoes in the dirt. The teacher frowned and knitted her brows. She placed a hand on his shoulder and frowned again when he twitched away from her, clutching his arm to his chest. She rose up quickly, towering several feet over him, and looked out over the playground, and then back down to Tommy’s downturned head. She put out a stern hand to him, accompanied by a stern voice. “Come on, let’s go find you someplace to play until recess is over,” she directed. “There are all sorts of nice people about that you can play games with.”

“No,” Tommy muttered, keeping his arms plastered to his sides. “I’m okay. I can do it . . . ma’am.” He hastily added the last word. She sounded as if she might get angry at any second if he slipped up, or maybe even if he accepted her hand. He could do it

himself. There was no problem that he needed her help with, or anyone's help for that matter. He looked up to search for open playground equipment and noticed the teacher was intently staring at him, her open palm still offered. Her eyes held his gaze and pleaded with him, begged him to just take her hand, give in to her and she would make everything better. Mesmerized for a second, he stood there at the corner of the school building, paralyzed between going and leaving. Would she really take him away?

A picture of his mother came to him, superimposing itself onto the teacher's face, melding and conforming to her look until they were indistinguishable. From her hand, a pair of shoes issued forth, sparkling white. They were radiant, the brightest in the store, commanding attention like no others could. "These are for you, Tommy," she said. They were respectable and charming, with laces neatly tied and looped at perfect intervals, all glittering pale and clean. They frightened him, with their perfection. They were like the hands extended to him, trusting and scornful. Gentle and stern. They expected so much but allowed so little. He tried to push them away, afraid of what he might do to them, of what they might bring upon him: wandering eyes would latch onto them . . . ruin and degradation. He was saddled with an impossible burden. In love, he was given something that only made everything more difficult. No matter how hard he tried, the shoes would never be respectable once he put them on. They would be dirtied and he would run and hide. Stop whining, Tommy! Why do you always have to mess up? Can't you just wear the shoes, Tommy? Can't you just take her hand? Take her hand, Tommy.

No, he decided, and broke their mutual gaze. Tommy dashed off quickly, saying something quiet and unintelligible to the teacher. He ran as fast as he could, altering his steps so as not to kick up or add excess dirt to his shoes. He scanned the playground again, searching for a place where he could take refuge again, but somewhere where the inquiring, longing gaze of the teacher would not take notice and where her stern-but-sympathetic hand would not reach. He saw the glinting light green paint of the jungle-gym. It would be perfect, a personal prison that he wouldn't try to escape.

He looked down again at his shoes. By now, they were completely covered and stained. When they would be washed, they'd come out tan, and nothing would ever make them perfect again, the way they were when he first wore them. He focused harder, in futility, on changing his steps, stomping each foot squarely and painfully down with each stride, minimizing the chance that the toes would scrape the ground when he lifted his foot again.

He heard a voice. "Hey look, it's the little retard!"

Tommy tripped on the outstretched sneaker, stumbled, and fell. He instantly put his hands out in front of him, flailing in fear at the ground. He slammed into the dirt, losing his breath, the remaining clean spots on his neatly ironed shirt, and several pieces of skin from his palms and wrists. All he could think about was still just getting to the green-painted jungle gym. If he could only get there, he'd have a place to stay until they called everyone in for class. He opened his eyes to, but was met with several pairs of tennis shoes blocking his view.

“You didn’t ask if you could play tag jerkoff, but I guess you can be *it* if you really want to.” The boy who tripped him stood over him, surrounded by the sun above which blinded his vision. Tommy pushed himself up slowly onto his knees, and inspect his injured hands.

“Only a retard would actually want to be *it*, right?” the boy said. Others nodded their assent, and one of them chuckled. “Heh, retard.”

Tommy looked up again at the ringleader, resisting being blinded by the sun. He saw that the boy was offering his hand to help him up. But he didn’t take it, knowing that it would just be easier then for him to be tripped or hit or kicked again. He began, “No. I really just want to –”

The boy sniffed and scuffed dirt around with his feet, creating a small tan cloud that moved over and settled on Tommy’s skin and clothes. “What? Why don’t you wanna play tag, retard? Are you a pussy? Why don’t you get up pussy?” He crossed his arms. “You don’t wanna make me . . .”

Tommy couldn’t hear the rest of what the boy said. The entire world zoomed out and distorted, and all that was present in his vision was the sun framing the boy’s face and his dirtied clothes. Tommy looked down at his hands, blood beginning to bubble up from the scratches where the skin was hanging off and sticking up irregularly. Tommy reached back and grabbed the inside of his right shoe, pulling it off quickly and gripping it with the heel facing outwards. In one seemingly slow, continuous motion, he swung his arm up and around into the sunlight halo around the boy’s head, breaking its hold so that he could finally really see the boy’s face. The boy’s sneer turned slightly to a gape

as the shoe impacted heavily with his face and nose, making a thud and crack, and spraying blood down his face. The boy fell to the ground, clutching his purpling nose, moaning and sobbing in agony.

Tommy sat down heavily, shoe still in hand, now stained with blood and sweat in addition to the dirt and dust all around. He dropped his head down onto his chest and cried.

WAITING

Alex, who was not more than a warped twig, re-read the message glowing in the dark of the office. The walls flickered blue-white, bathed in the wash residue of the light from the computer screen bounced off of his cheeks, his slack mouth, the strands of hair that he had to brush from his wet eyes, sitting tired and sunken in the middle of the night. He tried to make out the hum of the computer against the tapping of the rain on the window, the patter of water from the whirr of the fan and actuator arm on the plate.

The response had come days late, when he had given up hope, resolved to forget he'd stepped into the whole thing in the first place, deliberately. But there it was in front of him, after he refreshed the page, logged out and back in again, checked the inbox and junk mail for some sort of follow-up: "haha just kidding" maybe coupled with "im not a fag" or some sort of threat of retribution. But none of it was there, just the short affirmative punctuating the date, time, and place. No number to call. It wasn't that serious. Or maybe he was as skittish as Alex was. But three days, Saturday, that was serious. Definitive.

He pushed his hair from his eyes again, brushed it behind his ear, ignored the clumped sensation spreading from just below his stomach. What would he say? He deleted his fifth attempt at a reply. It might have seemed too overeager. Or not eager

enough, the way the response he had expected was, insulting, disgusted, downright combative, or worst of all dismissive.

He pushed back from the desk in the rolling chair, careful to stay on the carpet. The wheels were ineffective that way, but also silent, a trade-off he'd discovered through years of clandestine computer use. It was the first among many compromises: headphones only or no sound at all; no bookmarks, write nothing down, always delete your history, remember what you were looking at or at the very least how to find it again; be ready with the cordless phone, be ready with an excuse for why the first call didn't go through, be ready to be knocked offline during peak hours; use toilet paper, not tissues, so you can dispose of them without a trace. The phone issue had luckily been solved when they finally installed a splitter so that Dad could work from home after-hours, but Alex still kept the cordless within arms' reach.

The system seemed to work well. The only time he'd been caught, it was videogames instead of homework, though it's possible there were other times, other things that no one felt the need to bring up.

On that thought, he scooted back up to the computer, cleared the history, closed the browser, and shut down the computer. Saturday, three days from then. Actually, only technically two if the blinking clock in the corner were to be believed. But sleep was far off with his stomach being nudged and twisted from the bottom up.

He closed the door to the office, keeping the knob turned and then letting it back out slowly until he felt it slip into place with a tap just like the rain outside, convenient, and the door wouldn't budge. He padded down the hallway, barefoot, each step

deliberate, avoiding the creaks and whines of the house by memory where carpet wasn't available. Holding the railing to keep control down the stairs but practically flying, not wanting to lose momentum lest he be unable to regain his stride, on a roll.

The kitchen was black highlighted in blue, the occasional flash of yellow as the trees waved outside and a streetlamp shone just so through a gap in the leaves, between rainstreaks. Alex drew a glass of water from the tap; the refrigerator revved up when it dispensed filtered water, and the tap water tasted fine, a bit like sulfur, damp beyond just the wetness of water like the smell of mud after the rain has just begun to evaporate. Drinking the entire glass without tilting it down for a breath, he realized his lips and mouth had been dry, as though he'd just ended a frantic sprint away from something, a coach, a scout leader, a group of jeering fellow Seniors hoping to rope him in, in the dark familiarity of his home. He poured another glass and downed it.

His innards were still wrapped around themselves, tightening in places where he didn't know they connected. Putting more into his stomach probably wasn't such a great idea, or maybe it was just that water wasn't going to calm anything down. He felt it move, heard it slosh, and leaned himself against the counter, breathing slowly, deep. Saturday afternoon. Two days. Less than three, he could even count down the hours now without losing his place.

Did it matter what he wore, what he brought? Would they eat in? It wasn't a date, but maybe it would be a good idea to respond, suggest they meet somewhere nearby, a fast food place, a diner, somewhere he could make an easy escape when his brain inevitably flipped and his body followed suit and he made some transparent excuse

to step outside and run to his car where he would feel his date's, not a date, his hook-up's eyes on the back of his head as he sped off back home. That way, at least, he wouldn't feel the pressing need to tell anyone what had transpired, because nothing would have transpired. He'd close his email account before he even had a chance to see the disappointed, haughty response waiting for him, or wait for it to show up. I knew you'd chicken out. Don't bother with an excuse, because I don't care. When you grow up, you'll realize what you missed. Have a nice life.

Alex reached on his tiptoes for the cabinet above the refrigerator. He didn't need a stepstool this time, though he still couldn't quite see what was in it. This was the best it would get, just beyond eighteen, about as tall as Dad. He swept his hand from one side of the shelf to the other, searching for the clink of his nails against glass. Last time it was vodka. He and Stuart were bored.

"We're in luck," he said as Alex grabbed it down by the base, "My brother says vodka's the best to start out with. You start there and you ease up to the heavier stuff. He was lucky too. Before they stopped drinking, that's what our parents had the most of." Neither of them could cough their way through more than a couple of sips, though their torsos were warm and pleasant and loose, and the bottle went back up into the shadowy corner.

This time, it was different. The base was wide and round, decorated with shallow curves and grooves. Even in the blue dark, he could see that its contents were brown. Or red, but definitely not the viscous clarity of his sixteen-year-old foray into his parent's liquor cabinet. He held the label up close to his eyes, brushed his hair out of his eyes,

squinted at it. Brandy. That would have to do. His stomach made a sound, jittered. Two days, closer by the minute.

He pulled the corked cap and took a sip. It was hot, but pleasant, burnt caramel and the faintness of fresh paint or a gasoline pump down the street. He gulped and immediately started coughing, arm over his mouth, muffling himself into the rain that continued outside. When his throat calmed, he capped the bottle and pushed it back into the cabinet, unable to see exactly where it was or had been in the first place. They wouldn't notice the arrangement of it, how it was rotated, which side it was closer to, but he did his best to estimate, nudging and turning it with his fingers. There. No. There.

Freshly warm, wrapped in the flickering ribbons of dark and streetlight, he was relaxed again in his own home. Two days isn't so bad. Enough time to be ready.

He made his way up the stairs, feet flat but put down with care, one at a time, in silence.

* * * * *

He had to break his leave-no-trace rule at home to print out the directions. The only thing worse than having anyone find out at home would be someone finding out at school, in the library, pulling the sheets off the printer before he could get to it. There was no good excuse for driving out to the exurbs on a Saturday; he wouldn't know what to do but own up. One of the librarians chiding him on the misuse of school resources. Ms. Hollinston, giving yet another inappropriately mixed prescription of concern,

support, advice. Principal Hollinston, expressing his disappointment, calling his parents in for the first time to have a serious talk about Alex's disregard for his health, his future. Kalan or Karen or Harrison holding it up to ask him a question that was more an announcement than anything: where are you *going*? Stuart, not being able to look at him anymore without wondering if there was something else going on from their very first childhood moment together.

Better for the old family picture to be the only witness. Chelsea in that photo was everything he wanted to remember of her, and nothing he didn't. No snooping in his room, pre-teen requests to play house with her, watch a movie, go outside, when he felt he had all the reasons in the world not to. Just the good things: the sister who would keep secrets, because she knew Vanessa would tell Stuart; the sister who learned to leave a closed door closed, who asked Mom to read her the same books Alex was read, who understood every word, and asked every question but the ones she knew he didn't know. The sister who learned how to drive alone in the time it took him to finally remember to put the parking brake on so the car wouldn't roll down the driveway and into the bushes again. Who raced him across the golf course while people teed off, laughing at their scowls, hiding in the woods, following the deer and looking up to see the tips of the pines all reaching up to the same point in the same swathe of sky.

He put the directions in his backpack, between two textbooks, mentioned softly in passing that he was going to meet Stuart at the mall, smiled and nodded at Mom when she told him to be safe, smiled and nodded at Dad when he paraphrased Mom. "Tell him we say hi."

The highway out of town was empty for a spring Saturday. It would have been nice to have it that way when he'd taken this exit, Dad in the passenger seat, onto the highway in the Honda for the first time, missing fourth gear while he was checking his mirror and putting on the left blinker to merge. He didn't have to account for anyone else this time, speed up, match speed, hope someone would be kind enough to allow him to share their space for as long as it took him to fit in, meld into the highway traffic sending people in every direction, to every place imaginable, away from home.

No one was out with him this time. He entered the highway still going forty-five and took his time pushing the car to fifth. One hour, and maybe a few minutes. On time, there's no rush. He glanced over to the paper directions in the passenger seat, arranged neatly so he could see them. He would throw them away at his regular gas station, a mile from home, on his way back, whatever the time of night.

Four exits, and then state route the rest of the way. No rush. Can you be fashionably late to a one-night stand? Probably, if you've done it enough. But first time should be by the books, whatever books those are.

On the off-ramp and over the overpass, Alex saw the glint of the sun off the river, through the trees. It snaked off to the ocean, splaying out into the marsh, swamps along the banks sinking and rising under the tides. The road mimicked its path as closely as concrete could to water, two lanes each way, one toward the highway and then on to home, and the other out alongside the water, maybe even to its source. He had never been out this way before; he, his family, everyone he knew, only needed to drive on the city roads, or the interstate, to get to anything they felt was important, to the immediate

outskirts of town, the suburbs and the strip malls. Without intending to, he'd come to a new frontier on his way to an intentional one.

What really was out this far, just beyond the gaze of his world, his and everyone else's immediate field of vision? He would find out, explore, be the trailblazer to arrive home and tell everyone just what he'd discovered on the other side of their collective isolation. Would they be surprised, frightened? It wouldn't matter; he'd have been there, and no one could take that away from him.

And if he turned now, he wouldn't have to worry about undeserved fanfare when he got back. He'd walk in the door, Mom would say, "Welcome home," Dad would repeat it from the den, Chelsea's picture on the entryway table and on the coffee table and the kitchen wall and the office desk and Mom and Dad's room and everywhere he could think of would smile a small smile forever implying what their parents had just told him and hinting at some understanding of each other's plans and indiscretions, the kind that curled up under some old headlines in the dusty back corner of their minds, the little part of being siblings that comes forward through a glance or nudge that says, "I know what you wanted. I know what you were trying to accomplish. It's alright that it didn't work out."

As the pines flashed by him just inches from the shoulder, the familiar twist at the back of his spine reared its head. Roadside signs appeared with more frequency as the sun sank in the sky and everything turned purple and orange; they warned of railroad crossings, sharp, dark curves and sudden drops in recommended speed, deer that would see the flashing headlight cones and inexplicably dash onto the asphalt toward them.

Where was the brandy when he needed it? Why was it in the trunk? Of course there was really no good reason to have it in the car, in fact every reason not to, but the pull of his intestines, the joint between them and bottom of his stomach didn't cease. About twenty minutes, now.

When the sun was just blood on the horizon, Alex pulled over onto the side of the road, pulled the parking brake, and put on his hazards. He pulled out his cellphone, only for use in case of emergencies and for notifying his parents of his whereabouts, and for the first time ever, he lied into it.

“Just getting to Stuart's now.”

“Honey, don't call while you're driving.” Mom sounded fuzzy, more distant than he expected.

“Sorry. Just. Wanted to let you know.”

“I trust you honey. Just be safe.” He heard a rustling on the other end. “Going to watch some movies?”

“... yeah. Maybe. We'll figure it out.”

“Alright. Your father and I are just having a quiet night in.”

A pause. He thought he could hear her breathing, inhaling before saying something, but she never did. He didn't either, until finally he started to crack, steadying himself against the wheel and pulling his legs up so his feet were flat on the floor for the moment when he would admit what he was up to. She spoke first.

“Tell them hi for us. Have a good night.”

“You too Mom.”

“Love you.”

“You too Mom.”

He anticipated the hang-up, but he ended up pushing the button first. They knew, didn't they. How, who knows, but what else could that . . .

Alex looked up out of the windshield to the spot of asphalt and grass ahead of him illuminated by his headlights. There was nothing there, a few pebbles of loose something or other, gravel maybe, dirt, flakes of bark and rotted pinecone fragments too far gone for the squirrels. A spark further down the road caught his attention, disappeared, something glittering in the scattering of the headlight beams. Another car, or a bird, or a buck or doe, or a fawn who didn't know any better than her parents not to stop to stare at something mysterious, investigate something intriguing.

He put the car back in gear, dropped the parking brake, and took off again.

A few minutes late it is, then.

He can wait.

I can wait.

* * * * *

The trailer looked the same as the rest around it, resting on a foundation of cinderblocks covered in squares of decorative trellis. They served only as another easy purchase for kudzu which was overtaking the remnants of some other vine, something

that may have flowered or even had leaves once. Why the man he'd been corresponding with, planning for, lived out this way was anyone's guess.

Alex walked up the wooden staircase, holding the brandy in one hand, in a bag, in case it was unwelcome, seemed rude. Who carries a half-full bottle of his parent's liquor over an hour away to meet a hook-up, anyway? It was the best he could do given the circumstances; his unseen friend had to understand that. It was more for him than for anyone else, anyway, the only thing that would drown the swarm of butterflies flailing at the bottom of his lungs, pushing his heart into overdrive.

He went to knock on the door, hesitated, squared his feet, swallowed, swallowed again, went to knock again, and the door opened. He dropped both his hands to his sides, unsure of what to do with them.

“Hey.”

“Hello.”

“I was worried you'd bail.”

Neither of them knew what to say to that. They couldn't make small talk; they didn't know each other's names, which was part of the agreement. Alex was going to insist on it, but the opposite party brought it up first, suggesting it either as “the way things usually go.” What did that mean? What number was he, and why did it matter at all, given the inherent nature of the situation. It was just an experiment in the most scientific manner possible: there was a hypothesis he wanted to test, but without any sort of community support, this was the best way to get results. At what price, knowledge.

Alex finally offered up the brandy, a queer sort of housewarming gift, but his counterpart held up his hands.

“My parents are out of town too.”

Alex swallowed and nodded. He turned to go back to his car, where he would return the brandy, sit in the driver’s seat and inhale and exhale and inhale again until his not-date got cold feet, got impatient, worried about his sanity, and he could drive home to a sneering electronic message.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to look at his not-date. He couldn’t have been much older than Alex. They were both gangly, off-kilter. He had the awkward beginnings of a beard; Alex was clean-shaven by school dress-code decree. That’s who lives here in this home that is not his. A kid like Alex who has nowhere else to go because he doesn’t know where else he can be. Neither of them knew any better.

“Hey, hey. Thanks. Let’s go in”

Alex nodded and followed him through the door, clutching the brandy in both hands, crunching and wrinkling the paper bag around it. The room was narrow, with a low ceiling, a couch. A door at one end, the kitchen and another door at the other.

“So how do you want to do this?”

Neither of them knew any better.

* * * * *

His name was Jack.

“Thanks.”

He was expectant, leaning out the door on the tips of his feet, holding onto the frame, arms wide. He wasn't smiling outwardly, but Alex saw it in his eyes.

“Oh. Sorry. Alex.”

“Nice to meet you, Alex.”

“Same. Jack.”

“See you around.”

“You too Jack.”

Alex turned away from him and carefully pulled himself down the stairs, toward the car. Whatever it was that they'd had to bring the tension down was wearing off but still there leaning casually on the backs of his eyeballs. Hopefully it would be gone by the time he got onto a major road. It should be gone by then.

As he pulled away along the gravel drive, away from the trailer, he looked into the rearview mirror, caught Jack with his back turned, closing the door in the dark. That was it.

Where his anxiety had been, romping about his innards and snarling at his throat, a totality of nothing took up residence. That was it. Was that it? Was he running or being pulled back, or neither, or something else entirely that he couldn't pin down because of its abstraction. The only way he could clarify the contents of his brain, stop them from slow-dripping down his spine to pool in the pit of his stomach was to summarize them, even more unsure than before, as “I don't know.”

He didn't know. And that was it. The sky was overcast, grey-black by that point. The dash clock silently switched to five past eleven. Earlier than he'd expected, but later than he thought. Would he write Jack back? Just thank him for his time, the bare minimum of politeness, say he'd had a good time, was glad he came out. He didn't know. Who knew at all?

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes from home. That was all it would take to be back, and Mom and Dad would wake just long enough to recognize they'd been woken by their son returning, safe and sound, the quiet opening and closing of the front door and the soft shuffle of shoes coming off and coming to rest by the doormat.

It had started to rain while Alex was approaching the edge of the salt marsh, a couple of drops at first, fat and loud on the windshield, and then a group like a spray from a hose, until finally the single massive cloud overhead had had enough, rolled over and split its head open, a snap of lightning, shuddering boom of thunder, and Alex found himself driving headfirst into a curtain of water. The road ahead was rendered down into greasy slurry, mixed together in the low beams in front of the sedan which he pushed onward over the speed limit. Had any unknown stragglers been left on the road before, they were gone now, driven indoors by the forbidding clouds and subsequent downpour.

He squeezed the wheel at ten and two, pulling up on it like a much older man, hunched, peering through the bottom edge of the windshield that was slowly fogging up.

He reached up to wipe the condensation away, using the base of his palm where he had no spare sleeve. The glass was cold to the touch, and the water smeared across it, mixing with the sweat and grease from his hand. Inside the car was a strange mix of heat and frost, wet coming in through the vents meeting dry in the roof of his mouth, the back of his tongue.

As he breathed, the glass fogged up again, and he shivered, squeezed the steering wheel tightly with his left hand, and reached for the aircon switch with his right.

Through the stripes of rain in the grey-black sky ahead, he saw the road veer off into the marsh, a turn-off to a fishing spot below a bridge, a lone truck parked there with its lights on and wipers going furiously at their futile job of keeping the glass clear in the middle of the storm. He saw, in the rear view mirror, lit up by the interior lamps, a figure hunched over the steering wheel, a cup in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The truck's cabin was hazy and bright, and he tried to make out the driver's face, but then it was dim, dimmer, cut across by rain and splashing slashes coming up from the road, and then he couldn't see it anymore.

He turned his eyes back to the road and his headlights caught a white-brown flash, a tiny, mad dash directly across the asphalt in front of him. He defied years of supervised, teenage experience, pages of the driver's manual, Dad's repeated advice, and put both feet down on the brake. Under the water noise, he heard, felt, the wheels squeak and give up, and then a heavy *ba-thump* that carried up through his legs and back. Whatever it was, a squirrel, a possum, a rabbit scurrying off home as fast as it could – did it see him coming? He hadn't seen it. How close was it to where it was trying to go, and

what sound did it let out that he couldn't hear underneath the engine, the tires, the brakes, the rubber and the water on the road surface. A little spark of something in the headlights, eyes shining fierce and yellow.

When the car came back down an inch, off the body, in that fraction of a second, he remembered – let your foot off the brakes, off the accelerator, don't touch them, turn into the skid, maintain control of the vehicle, relax.

And whatever it was that went right under the wheels was hopefully dead, and quickly, without even realizing it.

After he'd come to a stop, he sat there, the car's interior lights on and the engine stalled, and he breathed, heavily, counting down from twenty, and then back up. He was still on the road, that was good, and pointed in the right direction, probably. That was good too, in this weather. Just start the car again and get going. Only a few miles. You're still dry, and only a few miles to go.

Instead, he turned the keys back toward him in the ignition, keeping the lights on, pulled the handbrake, opened door. His arm and leg were soaked through before he even turned to get out. The rain was thick and lukewarm, heavy and aggressive humidity, and he stepped into it lightly, flinching, like getting into the shower without testing it first. One foot and then the other. He slammed the door shut, but it was just a tap amongst many on the road.

Whatever it was, it was thankfully, definitely dead. It was only a car length away, a crumpled lump of wet fur near the solid center line. It must have rolled, tumbled down the road along with him. Or he hadn't skidded nearly as far as he'd thought. When he

came up on it, it was soaked so dark that it looked like it hadn't even been hit. Where was the blood – it was just water, so much water. He could only guess that he'd been right, and it was a rabbit, and not a big one either.

“I'm sorry,” he said, and turned back to the car.

When he went to open the driver's-side door again, he paused. In the roar of the storm, there was a small whine, something he hadn't noticed before. Was something wrong with the car, something leaking from it, decompressing? It wasn't high-pitched, or piercing, or low and rumbling, but it cut through between each of the thousands of millions of raindrops the spattered on his head and arms and the ground around him. Tiny and desperate to be heard. He walked around the car, rubbing his arms and pushing the pooled-up water off of them to make way for more.

There it was, still. He kneeled down on the ground and leaned down, head sideways, in a puddle, the car and everything he could see all around him was in the puddle with him. There it was.

Huddled and rag-wet in the crook between the passenger's front tire and the tarmac was a cat. It had wedged itself against the rubber, mouth open and the source of the whine. A calico, white and brown in spots, not a kitten, but not much more than one. White and brown, and then the rabbit's dash across the road in front of him made sense – stalked by the hunger-stricken cat, tired and soaked, spooked by Alex Andrews, who was not more than a warped twig, as he sped confusedly past on the road home. I'm sorry, he thought again.

He reached out to the cat, arm bent awkwardly to the side as he lay on his side against the car. It shivered, sniffed at him, shrunk from him, mewling the whole time.

“Psst. It’s okay. Psst. I’m here.”

The cat cowered, shoving itself further into the gap between the wheel and the pavement.

“Come on. It’s okay. Psst.”

It swiped at him, and he yanked his hand back, bashing his arm on the underside of the car, scraping it as he pulled it to his chest. The cat shot out from its hiding place, veered around him, and ran off across the road, into the grass shoulder, down toward the marsh. Alex followed it, holding his arm, checking to see in the fading light from the receding car if he’d cut himself, if he was bleeding or if it was just the rain rolling over and over down his skin.

The shoulder sloped down in an embankment several feet down from the road before flattening out into shrubbery, stubby scattered trees, and clumps of reeds in the mud. The old salty rotting of the waterway floated up to him the further out he ran. Eventually, as the mud began to suck at his shoes and he pushed through the reeds, the sulfurous air overpowered the metallic smell of the rainstorm that had gradually let up, and then he was in the thick of it, wading up to his ankles and then his shins, and then his knees, in the dark, pock-marked swirl of the marsh water. He’d lost sight of the calico, searching in the twilight for a swift-moving patch of white that would give it away, not sure if his eyes had adjusted yet or the illumination he was seeing was just his own imagination, filling in what he thought he might see out there. In the daytime, this place

was full of obvious life: egrets and herons standing one-legged on top of silt that would give way under anything else, single shocks of feathers at attention; lizards, salamanders, snakes swirling their way through the shallows, in between the reeds, their heads up just above the surface and leaving a momentary trail to ripple out into nothing behind them; a solitary alligator, or a pair of dolphins spooling about just out of reach of a fisherman's line, surrounded by unsuspecting, jumping, frantic schools of fish; a doe, a buck, and two fawns, heads down, and then up, simultaneously, staring in the same direction, poised. In the dark, he had known all of it was still there, all those eyes on their own and then suddenly aware of and on him. He had no way of really knowing, but he knew. It was all still there, just outside of his reach and the little sphere of his peripheral vision.

He stopped, clutched his arms to his body and rubbed them with his hands, wiping and flinging the water from his body. He held his breath while he twisted the wet out of his shirt, listening for any sound in his wake as he let it hang wrinkled and damp against his chest. Behind him, there was the fuzzy glow of the car's headlights, scattering into mist. There it was again, that's it, the cat, a faint, sharp whine, unsure. It was lost.

Alex turned to his right, then his left, and there it was, nestled in a patch of reeds, just above the waterline, bunched up in a tight curl, a little patch of white broken up by splotches of brown and the swaying lines of the reeds. He waded over to it, shuffling his feet underwater, pushing them through the mud and over pebbles and no doubt the frogs and salamanders and fish whose home he'd entered.

This time, the cat didn't back away. It was shivering and dirty, soaked through. It was much thinner, more ragged than it had looked before, almost run over, dripping

from the rain underneath the hot metal undercarriage of his car. It continued mewling as he approached.

“Shh. It’s okay.”

He reached out with one hand, then the other, pulled himself up onto their little island and scooped it up into his arms in one motion. He turned around and sat down in the mud, his lower legs still submerged, freezing, his back crossed by reeds. They were soft enough to give way when he leaned against them. The calico squirmed in his arms, paws splayed, extending and then contracting, but shortly it stopped mewling and relaxed. It curled into a ball, its face in the crook of his elbow, its tail in the curve of the other. His head hurt, and he closed his eyes and started rocking the cat slowly, swaying back and forth, repeating himself to it in a whisper. He thought he could hear it purring.

LEARNING TO DRIVE

“This is illegal, you know.”

“Come on, you promised.”

“Alright. Seatbelts on,” he says, quoting his parents every time they were in the car together. He is sure they even said it when they were alone, or in the car without the kids. He did. Force of habit.

Alex turns the key in the ignition on the old Honda, Mom’s old sedan, the family’s beater car, an old workhorse he’d been gifted when he turned sixteen and would be most likely be stuck with for the foreseeable future. It survived every roadtrip, every drive to and from school, and even fifteen-year-old Alex’s impromptu driver’s ed classes, his parents alternating when they were sufficiently frightened with his pedalwork. It had been deliberate, to spare the nice new replacement SUV and Dad’s midlife crisis Corvette, and if it could live through all of that, it would never die.

Chelsea is giddy in the passenger seat as the engine buzzed to life. She gasps when the tachometer drops and Alex taps the gas pedal a couple of times, the car in neutral, just to keep it from sputtering out.

“Is that normal?”

“If we get caught, it’s your fault.”

“Mom and Dad are out of town.”

“There are police on the roads, you know.”

She stays quiet after that, mouth closed tight. The engine gives a few low growls and then gives out, the lights in the cabin flicking on.

“This thing.”

“Is that normal?”

Alex turns the ignition again and keeps his foot on the gas this time, holding the engine at two-thousand. It seems to appreciate that more and settles into a steady purr, a temperamental old tomcat fed wet food instead of dry.

“Yeah, it’s a piece of . . . it’s old and crappy.”

She snickers. “You can say shit if you want. I’m not a baby.”

Alex doesn’t say anything, just looks at his sister with a grimace she can’t identify, somewhere between a smirk and pursed lips of concern. It contorts his face. She frowns back at him and sits back hard in her seat.

“We don’t have to go out if you don’t want.”

He releases the parking brake, puts the car into reverse, and turns his head, resting his hand on the headrest behind his sister. She turns to follow his gaze, down the driveway to the street, and then looks at him, at the side of his face. He is biting his lip, pushed up off his seat with his feet hard down on the clutch and brake.

“Really. I’m worried now.”

“We’ll just stay in a parking lot. Everyone’s at church right now.”

* * * * *

He pulls into the parking space in the center of the empty lot, edging the car forward until it sits perfectly in the rectangle, bracketed by invisible neighbors on three sides. He pulls up the parking brake and turns the key toward him in the ignition. The rumble tapers off and the interior electric hum dies with a quick, fading whine. They sit together in the silence of the car exhaling, relaxing now that it's job is done for a moment. Metal and plastic creaks and bends on the edges of their hearing. Sunlight beams through the windshield, highlighting the dust motes and bringing the temperature back up. She shifts in her seat, under the light, shuffling against the flecked cloth.

“Alright,” he starts. “Before you can do anything, you need to make sure you know how to do everything.” He points to the ignition switch. “What’s this?”

“It’s where you put the key,” she offers.

“Sort of. It’s the –” and then she joins in with him, “ignition.” He nods. “Right. And what’s this?”

“The stick shift.”

“Yes, the shifter.”

“Right.”

“What’s this?”

“Wipers. Blinkers.”

“Blinkers. Wipers are the stalk by you. You can tell from the symbols on them. See, this is a wiper and the spray –”

“I can’t see the symbols from here. I probably could if I were sitting where you are.”

“This is important. If you crash the car into a ditch, Mom and Dad will kill me.”

“I’m not going to crash the car with the wipers or the blinkers.”

“Just pay attention. I’m demonstrating.”

He puts the clutch in, puts the key in the ignition, and turns the car back on. The whole thing rattles and then settles. He is narrating the whole time, explaining why each step has to be taken, what will and won’t work when certain things are done. She is looking straight ahead, not smiling, not frowning, just a blank stare out the windshield across the parking lot at the edge of the woods. He puts his other foot on the brake and drops the parking brake against the center console. If you don’t do this, the car might roll away, forward into someone, or backward down a hill. You have to make sure you keep one of the brakes on at all times if you’re going to stay still, unless it’s totally flat, but even then you might move a little and it can be scary. You also have to keep the clutch in unless it’s in neutral, because otherwise you’ll stall out, and that can be scary too. Other driver’s freak out, start honking, floor it around you, but they’re just impatient, you just have to remember that and ignore them and just be calm, put the clutch back in, start the car again, put it in gear and go. Just always keep it in gear and keep the parking brake off if you’re in traffic. It’s safer that way. People are so lazy with automatic transmissions, they’re so used to just bumping it into park and not doing anything and then bumping it back into drive. You just need to be aware of what the car is doing at all times.

“Are you paying attention? You’re not paying attention.”

“Sorry.”

“This is serious. You need to know what to do.”

“In like five days maybe I’ll have taken enough notes to start the car myself.”

“Okay, we can just go home then.”

She reaches over and stops him from putting the car in gear, catches his gaze, stares him down. “No. I just . . . Dad let me turn the ignition in the car since I could sit up front. He told me all this stuff too, not just you. You can explain it to me again *while* I’m doing it.”

“I just want to make sure –”

“Come on, please.”

He looks at her. She has a wide, assured grin now. He looks back at the steering wheel, at the fuel gauge that shows three quarters of a tank left, the oil and battery and temperature all reading normal, perfectly in the middle. No warning lights in sight, no yellow-orange-red. He sighs, turns the ignition again, and holds out the keys in midair, over his sister’s hands. She holds them out, then reaches up for the keys. He pulls them away, starting to smile as well, but she grabs at them and in one frantic motion, she has them in her grip, has her seatbelt undone with a clack, has the door swung open and her legs swung out onto the pavement.

Alex sighs again, unbuckles his seatbelt, and opens his door. Chelsea is already rounding the driver’s side taillight on her victory lap to him.

* * * * *

“I can’t get it to work properly. It just, it just, it just won’t do it.” She throws up her hands in frustration. The car has just jolted forward, then back, then forward again, shocking the two of them into tightening their grip on the interior.

They have moved about fifty feet in fifteen minutes. They’re angled across three separate parking spaces, a row over, toward the field at the edge of the lot that gives way to trees and underbrush.

“It’s okay,” Alex says. “Everyone has trouble with it, at first.”

He remembers what this was like, handling a balloon with teeth clenched and waiting for the inevitable harsh pop, the hushed moment before the doctor puts the needle into an upper arm and then the pinch and twinge of fluid forcing its way under the skin. Every so often, after many starts, hundreds of shifts, a few balloons at every birthday, yearly boosters and blood draws since birth, he feels his arms tense and his heart beat in time with the dropping of his stomach.

“Who invented this?”

“Mom still stalls out sometimes, and she’s had this car since I can remember.”

“How do you know when to press the gas?”

“It’s when the clutch engages. You feel it engage and you just ease on the gas.”

She turns the car on again, puts it back into first, drops the handbrake, and squeezes the steering wheel. The seat had to be pulled up closer, and even now, she is still sitting a little too low, her eyes fixed just over the crest of the dashboard, across the hood to the asphalt patch feet in front of the car.

He squeezes the armrests on both sides of him, fighting the urge to put his hand on the wheel, on the shifter, anywhere in the driver's half of the bubble.

“You'll just feel it, just evenly take the clutch out while putting the gas in, you'll just feel it engage, and –”

The car lurches again, metal bumps and thuds ricocheting around and petering out. It sounds exhausted, fed up. Another time, let me rest, please. Her right foot snaps back to the brake. She lets out a noise like a peeved cat, guttural, takes the key from the switch and drops it in the storage bucket by the shift knob.

“What do you mean you'll feel it, I can't feel anything, it just feels the same the whole way. It sounds like it's starting to catch fire and blow up whenever I do anything.” She drops her hands to the seat, squeezing the fabric bolsters, pulling and scratching them with her fingernails.

He had hit the steering wheel when he was at this point, smacked it with open palms like he did his computer blue-screening, losing the past two hours' worth of schoolwork.

“You just, you have to pay attention. You'll know it when you feel it.”

“Bullshit!”

He stares at her. He's never heard Chelsea swear before. Now that he thinks about it, it shouldn't be that surprising. He is sure she says all sorts of stuff he's never heard, when she's at school, in class, under her breath. When she's staying over at Vanessa's, the way he and Stuart did at sleepovers when they were in middle school, testing out how loudly they could say different words, whether or not the other had the

same breadth of sailor's vocabulary, depth of usage. But this is his sister. Did the times when Mom and Dad yelled shock her as much as they did him; did she put on headphones on her bed and zone out under a blanket of sound, coordinated like the tessellations of an afghan, varied like the squares on a quilt? Had she gotten a detention and a grounding in elementary school for being told on just for explaining the meaning, spelling, and proper usage of a handful of forbidden words? Crying to authority that it wasn't inappropriate when it was educational, learning that for adults, punishment was just as often for nothing more than the principal of it as for some real lesson to be enforced.

“It's like how people describe love in movies, “You just feel it,” but there has to be something —”

“I'm sorry. I don't know how else to explain it.”

They were quiet.

“It's how Mom and Dad explained it to me. I think it's stupid too.”

She looks at him. He smiles, trying to connect.

“But it worked. Eventually.”

She smiles back at him. A rap on the glass, and they both jump. Alex inhales sharply, and Chelsea sits back hard from the front edge of the driver's seat. Now she can barely see over the gauge cluster. Alex stares straight ahead.

The police officer walks around to the driver's side window and motions for it to come down. Chelsea stares up at him, then looks to Alex, then back to him. She starts to open the door, but Alex stops her. “The window. Open the window.”

She fumbles for the button.

“It’s not working.”

“The power’s off. You have to turn the key.”

She reaches for the key, drops it, puts it in the ignition, turns it all the way. The car sputters to life, and Alex exhales, “No, no, just the power –” and she is pulled between so many different impulses that she makes a little noise of shock through her nose from the back of her throat, drops the clutch, stalls the car. It bucks, and the police officer hops back. When the car is silent again, clearly not moving, he steps back up to the door and taps the window again. This time, it rolls down with a hum when she pushes the button.

He leans down, steadying himself with one hand on the door, the other on his hip. He has sunglasses on, and he looks over the tops of them. It reminds Alex of a picture of a librarian he once saw in a TV show with little half-moon spectacles on a gold chain pinched onto the end of her nose. She never looked through them; they were only there to give that look of stern authority, a total lack of humor.

“What are y’all doing out here?”

He seems to be looking both of them directly in the eyes, daring them to say anything but what he knows to be the truth.

Alex speaks after a moment of thought. “Just showing my sister how to drive stick.”

“Is that true?” Now he looks at her only.

Chelsea nods. “Yes.” She adds quickly, “We weren’t going out on the road, just here in the parking lot.”

“How old are you?”

She looks down at a spot between the edge of the seat and her feet. She moves her feet squarely to the floormat, away from the pedals. “Almost fourteen,” she mumbles.

“And you?”

“Sixteen. And a half. Close to a half.” Alex reaches for his wallet. The officer waves him off.

“Son, unless your parents are around here somewhere, hiding in the bushes maybe, you need to head home.” He says it as if he expects confirmation that their parents really aren’t crouched a few feet into the woods, camouflaged and peering out from behind a pine tree with binoculars. “You live nearby?”

“Yes sir,” Alex says.

“Good. You drive her and your self home.”

“You don’t need to see my license?” He is actually a little disappointed now.

“No, just don’t put your little sister behind the wheel of a car. Until she has her permit, anyway.”

“Yes sir.”

The police officer stands back from the car, pats the roof with a couple of heavy thunks that they can feel through their seats, and then gives a single nod toward them and turns back to his cruiser. It’s parked halfway across the lot, behind them. It takes him a

few minutes to walk all the way back; they watch him in the rear view mirror. When he gets to the car, they unbuckle their seatbelts, open their doors, and dash around to each other's seats.

Alex stalls the car twice before he finally manages to putter off in first gear, grinding into second as he leaves the parking lot and takes a right turn onto the main road toward home. They pass several elderly couples in golf carts, their clubs and bags strapped to the back, puttering along the winding paths between holes that Alex realizes he has never learned the numbers for. They are probably just beginning their game at this time on a Sunday. He checks in the rear view mirror for the cop, but there is no one behind him.

Chelsea is laughing the whole time. Alex wants to ask her what is so funny, but he knows exactly what it is. He just can't bring himself to laugh.

* * * * *

Alex wakes up to the sound of the garage door opening. It's still dark in his room, the blinds dark grey and rippling in the air moved by the fan. He rolls over to look at his clock. It's two in the morning. His parents aren't due home until Tuesday.

He pulls the string on the blinds and presses his cheek up against the window, focusing one eye outward in the dark. The tail end of the Honda, bathed in yellow, like a giant flashlight shining from underneath him, rolls into the garage, and then door starts closing. He feels the rumble in his feet.

He pads downstairs and down the hall, on autopilot, his navigation entirely by muscle memory. When he reaches the inside door to the garage, he can't open it. The knob is being turned the other way. The person on the other end quickly lets go.

"Chelsea?"

A muffled affirmative wavers through the door. He opens it, and she's there, in her pajamas. His eyes are adjusted to the dark now, and he can see the pattern on them. It's rabbits amidst carrots, turnips, and leaves of lettuce.

"What are you –"

"I did it."

He is confused. He wonders if she can see his face in the dark, if she can see what he looks like through the haze of sleep and night and dumbfoundedness. He can see the rabbits moving as she moves, hopping back and forth, from foot to foot. She is grinning wide.

"I did it, I got it all the way up to fifth gear!"

"You took the car out?" He doesn't know what else to say. Maybe she is joking.

She reaches out to him. The keyring is in her hand. He takes it and feels the familiar form, the ignition key fob.

"You were right, too. I'm sorry I was mad earlier, but it didn't make any sense at the time, and I was so frustrated."

"Hmm what?" At this point, he is not confident that this isn't all a dream.

"You were right. I knew it when I felt it. That's the only way to describe it: you'll know it when you feel it."

BIOGRAPHY

Robert Schuster is a Creative Writing MFA candidate at George Mason University. He volunteers at 826dc, plays bass guitar, and enjoys reading and writing fiction about bad things happening to generally good people (and bad people too). He lives in Alexandria, VA, with his fiancé, Ryan.