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THE HILL FIRE AND OTHER STORIES

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Bachelor of Arts in English

Miami University

May 2011

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

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We hereby approve this thesis

For

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For the department of

ENGLISH

And

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S

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ABSTRACT

THE HILL FIRE AND OTHER STORIES

MICHAEL PUTNAM

The following stories contained here are the culmination of two year's work in the realm of the short story. In that time, I have further honed my writing voice and shaped these works in a way where they work in conjunction with each other as well as on their own. An over-arching theme I have in the work is a character (in these instances, specifically a man) who is unsatisfied with his current position in life but unwilling to put forth much effort to make a significant change. In some instances, that change is then forced upon the character by another source. The procedure behind writing these stories was one of trial and error. I have grown substantially as a writer in these two years, and to get these stories where they are now was a matter of trying something and then adjusting the work accordingly based on the feedback of that attempt. These stories, at least to me, feel cohesive enough to be included together in a collection, should that opportunity present itself.

INTRODUCTION

The strongest direct influences on the work in this Thesis, or at least what was in my head space the most would be Saunders, Diaz, and, if I'm lucky Karen Russell. The Saunders and Russell I was trying to channel at least during "A Road Story" and "The Hill Fire." The Diaz comes into to play, for me, during "The Stake Out" with my attempt at dialogue. Since the turn of the year I have read "This is How You Lose Her" and "Drown" in that order so I think his way with dialogue was what helped me get "The Stake Out" down and into this Thesis.

If I can say that I gleaned anything from those authors, aside from Diaz's excellence with conversation, I would hope that it would be the humor as well as their ability to seamlessly play with the boundaries of the absurd and the surreal and blend those with the everyday. With both Saunders and Russell, they make the story feel so effortless and no matter what they tell you, whether it's on the first page or the fifth, you are immediately on board with that piece of information the rest of the way.

For as little David Foster Wallace as I have actually read, I think he is hanging over me at all times. No one would describe my writing as Wallace-esque, I simply can't be macro and micro at a moment's notice, but his work is constantly with me. During my senior year at Miami, I attempted to read *Infinite Jest* with my Capstone professor and both of us threw in the flag before halfway. I managed to get through *The Broom of the System* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* since then, but not much else. I don't know what it is, every time I read something by him, I want to turn around and try to write a story. And at the same time I want to toss my laptop out the window because how could I ever get close to that?

Other works that have struck me particularly hard in my past year or so of reading have been *The Isle of Youth* by Laura Van den Berg, *The Anchor Book of New American Short Stories*, *Among the Missing* by Dan Chaon, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (regrettably one that I never came in contact with during my high-school days), and *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* by Michael Chabon. My time at Cleveland State has been the Short Story period of my education. Sure, I was assigned plenty during undergrad, even *Jesus' Son* which I reread during my time at CSU with all new eyes. For some reason, short stories never clicked with me in the past, but after entering the Master's program, I have dove headlong into the style.

Authors that I will always carry with me in some capacity are Ray Bradbury, Stephen King, and Oscar Wilde. Wilde was the first author that I became engrossed in their story as a writer. Wilde's story has been the backbone for most of my academic writing in the realm of Literature. Bradbury I have always marveled at his blending of the ultra-fantastic with the ultra-realistic and will constantly go back and read my favorite stories. He was probably the first time I was introduced to the idea that writing could be a part of a genre without being genre fiction. With King, I was hooked from a young age where I first read him to make my parents concerned. I felt edgy reading King, but over the years as I have worked through his catalogue, I have come to respect a lot of his work on its own merit. Sure, when they stink, they really stink, but when he's on, I think he can tell a story with the best of them.

King has also shaped the writing you see here, although not to the extent of others I would argue. During my time at Cleveland State I have spent most of my time behind the keyboard trying to figure out how to fashion a story. I used to be so concerned with

what type of writing I would fall into, terrified to ever breach the ranks of genre fiction. It took me getting my Master's to realize that I should write what I want to write and I will pick up the skills along the way. King has held back his talents in spots because that is the type of writer he has decided to be with his audience. For me, I still want to strive for something that hits you as hard as the last sentence in *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, but I need to stop stressing over whether I can sound like Chabon or not.

With the writing contained here in my Thesis, the first story to be written was "The Hill Fire." I have been working on that one since my first semester at Cleveland State, in some capacity, and yet it is the story in this group that I am the most unhappy with. This is probably due to the amount of time spent with it and where I think it's at creatively. The story has gone through many revisions and more than a few cold rewrites. And still, the version I have in my Thesis, while certainly the most polished, still isn't hitting correctly. I can't seem to crack it, I have the hook, I just don't have the story. "The Hill Fire" will be a trunk story for me, I like the hook so much that I don't want to give it up, but I know I need to spend some more time away from it still.

When it comes to the story I am most satisfied with, it would be "A Road Story." This one I feel to be the most complete and firing on the most cylinders. It's a "story" I would say, a man finds out his wife is dead on a road trip and deals with it. I wish I could have succeeded with a few "aha" moments and subvert expectations, as I feel the story tends to follow a linear path. Overall, I am happy with the outcome and have been shopping it around to various journals in the recent months. I am concerned that the utter lack of interest by those journals might be telling me something, though.

The three works of flash fiction that I have included in here are some of my better attempts at getting a story across without wearing out the welcome. I like this short form of story-telling a lot, I just fear that the reason they're short is not because that is how long I needed in order to tell the story but because I am not talented enough to actually turn them into stories with page-long scenes. I am still working on finding the ability to write a story in a way that does it the best service. Right now, these flash fiction pieces could probably be longer, and I can't decide if that will work better for them or bog them down.

"But Only for a Week" was the story that surprised me the most. As I was writing, particularly after wonderful advice from Imad to set the piece at the party instead of somewhere in the ether of the narrator's mind, I was able to have a lot of fun writing it. I don't think it is the best story of the bunch but it was the one where I could feel myself "stretching my legs" the most while writing. This could partly be the case because it is the certainly the most realist story of the bunch.

All of the stories in this Thesis are at the point where I can go through the draft and not make any monumental changes. I need to stop reading them at some point because I will always flip two words or add another word and that process has proven to be detrimental. I'm curious how I will view them in a year's time. They're significantly better than what I turned in when applying to Cleveland State. But I have the feeling that in not much time I will read any of them and know they'll need a full rewrite or I should abandon the idea completely. If that's the case, I'm hoping it to be just the way it goes with writing.

That last part is something that I am particularly troubled with at times. I wrestle with whether I have told stories in a way that can get me published consistently. I am scared to submit them because I wonder if a year from now I would write them with a noticeable difference. Maybe I haven't hit that threshold yet where I am thinking of enough topics. Part of me believes that I need to reach the point where if I'm happy with a story at that time, it's worth sending out. I imagine that I will be coming up with ideas in the future that grab me just as much as these ideas now. I just worry that I'll have one "burning Jesus statue" story and once it's used up, that's it, I've used it. There is constantly the promise of a better version of this story, that mythical version that I have in my head that somehow just won't translate to the page. I hope that one day I will either be able to write the words I see vaguely in my thoughts, or I will be confident enough to know that they are merely my brain trying to trick me and there will never be an absolutely perfect choice of word.

My path as a writer started the same way as many I would assume by now. At an early age I started employing my mother to write and draw Batman stories for me and we would assemble them into book form (she would staple the pages together). As I grew, I took over coloring duties and then finally started writing them all myself. She continued to be my lead editor, however. Once I was around the age of ten, I would go spend weekends at my grandparents' house where my grandmother had (and still does, it is willed to me in fact) a typewriter. This was a keyboard setup, came with spellcheck and a Delete key and everything, it is the most beautiful machine in the world to me.

That typewriter was where I really learned how to fill a page. My stories of Batman grew now into mini space operas and surprisingly violent crime stories. But my grandmother, one of the smartest people I have ever come in contact with, took over editing duties and was unafraid to let her red pen flow. She was the first person to start really asking me about my stories and what my process was and what I wanted to say. I'm sure my parents did when I was younger as well (to some degree), but it was with my grandmother, at the counter with a bowl of goldfish and a stack of paper, that first had me really thinking about what I was putting down with the clicks of my fingers.

I had a teacher in high-school, unfortunately all the way into my senior year, who turned me on to stuff that wasn't Chuck Palahniuk or Bret Easton Ellis. Robert Weida took it upon himself to tell me things like, "So, you didn't like *Catcher in the Rye*, you know he has some other stuff too, right?" Mr. Weida held me accountable for my writing and continued to help me with it beyond our time together at school.

At Miami, I was graced with a number of wonderful professors, specifically Margaret Luongo, who not only was my Capstone professor but also took me on for an independent study during my final semester to continue my capstone project. In our Capstone class, Margaret had us reading Italo Calvino, Padgett Powell, and others, but she took the approach of reading the author's first novel and then reading their most recent. By the end of that semester, I felt intimidated but relieved that all writers were not their most polished form from day one. With Calvino I saw the greatest change, as we read *The Path to the Spiders' Nest* and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Going from one to the other was such a contrast and showed just how varied an author's topic could be

but how a reader could still find those similarities that were a part of them all along the way.

During our independent study, along with a sprint course she snuck me into with Chris Bachelder, she continued to get me out of my “rock star writer” phase and start putting the wheels in motion of making me a more careful writer, and one that valued reading much more. During my year out of school, unfortunately, I started to regress, but I was able to recognize my lack of focus and get to Cleveland State just in time. I suppose my career as a writer so far would be a long road toward not acting like an idiot with the words I choose to put on the page.

My plan for the Fall is to attend an MFA program. If that goes off without issue, I will have writing that is better than what I have here and (hopefully) in publishable form by the time I am out. If I’m exceptionally lucky, I will even have job prospects somewhere. If for some reason I do not end up attending an MFA program in the fall, I will most likely transition into teaching in some capacity, assuming I will be able to find a job. My writing will continue with either outcome, along with my reading.

My immediate plans for my creative future, wherever I end up in the professional sphere will be to really consider what I want to do with my creative output. Junot Diaz came to speak during my first year at Cleveland State and made the comment that he doesn’t think anyone should write at all creatively until at least the age of twenty-five. I believe that he feels those wishing to be writers should spend that time reading prodigiously and experiencing life. I plan to continue my writing, I will be twenty-six in July, but I think I spent far too little time reading, especially during my undergrad.

I plan to dive into as wide a range of reading as I can find and write along the way on a regimented schedule, but not with the stress of feeling like I need to produce something good. This is my plan at least for the summer. Depending on what I end up doing in the Fall, I imagine I will either continue in that vein or be amping up my writing considerably in a program somewhere. I realized through the course of my studies for my Masters, with all of you as mentors as well as a few others, I have significantly more to learn when it comes to being a good and productive writer.

I think the biggest shift I will try to make with my writing going forward is to consider the reader. I still need to tell the stories that I want to tell, but I realized over the last two years just how imperative it is to keep the experience of the reader in mind. Not just whether you are telling them a good story or if you are trying to trick them, but their mental state when they are sitting down with your work. I want to really be careful with my word choice. If I can accomplish that, my writing will hopefully be more concise and readable but also get closer to hitting somewhere in a general spectrum of desired emotional responses with my readers.

I know that I will always be a writer. Wherever my professional life takes me, I am going to continue my creative pursuits. The closer I can stay to this world, the world of academia and like-minded individuals, the happier I will be in the long run. I've got a lot of reading and a lot of writing to do before I am anywhere near where I see myself inside. I selfishly hope that is the case with everyone. I don't know if I'll ever really get there or if it will be a constant ghost, but I know that with the background I have received from my undergrad and especially from the time spent receiving my Master's, I will at least be on the right track to attaining that. I've hit a funk in my writing, but at least now I

am capable to seeing that and still doing something productive that keeps me moving toward my ultimate goal of being considered an author by more than just my immediate circle of friends.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iv
INTRODUCTION	v
CHAPTER	
I. BUT ONLY FOR A WEEK.....	1
II. THE ROAD STORY	17
III. THE HILL FIRE	32
IV. MAKING BABIES	41
V. PACKER #19	45
VI. PROGENITORS	48
VII. AT THE RETROSPECTIVE	51
VIII. THE STAKE OUT	53

CHAPTER I
BUT ONLY FOR A WEEK

Nick Hocking sat in a deck chair beside his wife, next to a pool that did not belong to him. The pool belonged to his neighbors, the Roberts, who lived across the ninth fairway. Nick could see his back porch from where he sat. Unlike the homes of his neighbors, there was no foliage blocking the line of sight. Behind their sliding glass door, his children, Terry and Laura, would be watching something on the television, most likely chosen by the babysitter. A babysitter neither child appreciated. He'd hear about it all later, before bedtime and during bedtime. For now, his only concern was the graduation party of Tanner Roberts, a boy Nick had become acquainted with, albeit from afar, over the previous the five days.

Tanner had attended Walnut City North, the same high school Terry and Laura would attend, but not the same one either Nick or his wife had attended. Current and future students will reap the benefits of a school built post Y2K, ready to connect students to almost every inch of the world. Nick had never asked Tanner about the school, never talked to Tanner at all really. There was an occasional wave between them as Tanner headed to school in the mornings, Nick at the door seeing his wife off to work.

Nick worked remotely, as of the beginning of the year. He had left his previous job to work for himself, taking freelance work from companies with too much money to spend. He wrote web content for sites that didn't want to write their own. It was easy work, typically projects that required little effort on Nick's part. This led to Nick staring out the window sometimes, watching the golfers that ended up on his slice of fairway. Since the summer began, Nick found himself unable to daydream, a seven and a nine year-old in constant search of entertainment. But Monday thru Friday that week, five days only, the two were away at the Fairfield United Methodist Church Little Leaders day camp.

"They're bored, they're fine," Carol said.

"I was thinking about something else, actually."

"Do tell."

"Work stuff," Nick said.

"I bet," Carol drained the rest of her beer. She stood up and shook the bottle at Nick proposing another.

Nick nodded, "We need food?"

"Make a big plate?"

Nick headed in the opposite direction of his wife, along the pool, toward the food table. The party was empty at the moment, the Hockings arriving early allowed them to be quite obviously noticed by their hosts. It also gave them a fair shake at the food, and enough beers to make the walk across the fairway a little looser. The pool was quiet, how it had been all week, except for the occasional swim by Tanner and his two female companions. Nick felt accustomed to the pool, almost as if he had also spent the last five

afternoons lounging on a reclined deck chair. This was in part due to the binoculars he had found in the downstairs mudroom, high on the shoe shelf, encased in black leather.

With Terry and Laura at home, he never paid attention to what Tanner had been doing. Nick worked, diligently, the first two weeks of summer vacation as he had since starting his freelance work. He also succeeded in keeping his children from boredom for the most part, a juggling act he would not tell his wife about but one he saw as a victory.

Nick scooped potatoes onto his plate, half of the pile he covered in ketchup. He loaded up two hamburgers with toppings and stuck a hotdog on top of it all. Tanner's dad saw him at the table and, as Tad Roberts was want to do, gave him an exaggerated thumbs up then a dramatic wipe of the forehead, indicating the grill he was working over. Nick smiled back, always unsure with Tad how to respond, but especially now that they were up close.

Tad Roberts walked over.

"Nick, we're glad you came," Tad said, giving Nick a sidearm hug that could crush someone's lungs, or at least knock the wind out of them.

"Carol and I wanted to stop by early, movie night later with the kids. They hate the babysitter."

"Which one's that?" Tad asked, waving to someone over near the house.

"Muldunes girl? Matsanoff? With an M, something long. Lives down near the entrance off 204."

"Couldn't tell ya. Anyways, how's work? Hear you moved to the home shift, how'd you swing that one?"

“Freelance work, I can set my own rates. But freshly vacationed children don’t lead to productivity I’ve found.”

Tad laughed heartily, not because he found it funny, but because that’s what Tad did. It was one of those laughs Nick expected to end with a pat on the back. Nick didn’t know where the Roberts went to school, if he had to guess he would say somewhere outside of Dallas, or Atlanta.

“Tanner’s been, I guarantee you, waking up around one, two o’clock, sittin’ in his underwear playing that heist game, jerkin’ off until, I don’t know, then these two babes just come over and lounge by the pool with him.”

The time frame this all occurred within wasn’t one hundred percent accurate, but Tad surprised Nick with the validity of the rest.

Tad grabbed a handful of barbeque chips, devoured them, and poured himself a Coke from one of the open two liters. “The life he gets to live. It’s summer and all, but almighty, he’s got it good. One of these girls, I’m telling you, a little firecracker. But, you’re going to hell.”

“Excuse me?”

“You won’t tell. The wife. Your wife, my wife. Never mind.”

Amanda was the girl he was thinking of. Nick wasn’t sure of the other girl’s name. Amanda enjoyed people knowing she was present, that things were going on in her life. When she told stories, her own name would typically come up, more than once. So by Tuesday, Nick was already certain her name was Amanda.

Tad chugged the rest of his Coke and poured another, looking over toward the grill. There was nothing on it at moment, already too much food for the amount of people here, and Tad Roberts did not serve cold meat.

“I can’t imagine having a pool at that age,” Tad said. “Not one little lady but *two*. Two babes come over and get into bikinis with you. I mean, the boy’s got his father’s body, at least the one I had in high school, but *two* bikini-clad hotties, oiling themselves up, tight butts and all that.”

The bathing suits Amanda and her friend wore fascinated Nick. The top and the bottom were always a distinctly different color, but not just on one girl, on both. Not once did Nick see a color repeated. Nick wondered how the distribution of these suits was handled. Did they trade constantly, utter anarchy between who had what? Before realizing how cumbersome it would be in practice, he wondered if one kept the tops and the other kept the bottoms. Or maybe Amanda had them all, all the tops and all the bottoms, and she dictated the colors of the day. The other girl didn’t look like the one that held the bathing suits in that relationship.

“It’s hard to believe,” Nick said. He turned back toward the pool.

“Oh, yep, the wife, sorry ‘bout that.” Tad waved over at Carol, who waved back. “Glad to see you, Carol.”

“Good to see you too, Tad,” she said.

Nick walked back over to the umbrella he shared with his wife. The same umbrella the girls had sat under all week. The other girl stuck mostly to her seat in the shade, and she never engaged the golfers in conversation like Amanda. In the last five days, Nick saw more golfers roaming his stretch of the fairway than he’d seen all year.

Nick found their conversations more than a little disgusting, despite being unable to hear what was said. He wasn't sure who was to blame in that scenario. He wanted to assume it was the golfers, given their age, given their unnecessary proximity to the girls, given the bikinis.

"How was Tad?" Carol asked.

"As Tad always is."

"Was man stuff discussed?"

"Man stuff was not discussed, surprisingly," Nick said, certain that any attempt to describe their conversation led to trouble.

"I haven't seen Susan yet."

"Her parents flew in, probably in the house," Nick said. He put the plate between them and sat down, new beer already tabbed. "Thank you, love."

"Thank you," she said. Carol grabbed a fork and went straight for the un-ketchuped potatoes. "Did you introduce yourself when you used the bathroom?"

"They seemed to be getting along alright without knowing my name."

"But what should I do when I go in there?"

"The same?" Nick thought that was the wrong answer.

"A man can nod and keep walking. I'd need to say something."

"Then I'd start off with the neighbor thing then see where the conversation takes you."

"Maybe I'll just wait," Carol said.

"Till we get home?"

"Till they come outside."

Tanner Roberts came outside the sliding door. “Can I toss your plate?”

“That would be wonderful,” Carol said.

“Any more beers?” he asked, he tossed the plate into the trashcan by the coolers.

“I think we’re both still nursing,” Nick said.

Tanner nodded, to Nick’s disappointment clearly unconcerned with the answer, the conversation in general. He walked back over to the Hockings with a can of orange soda and stood over them. “Thanks for coming Mrs. Hocking, Mr. Hocking.”

“Thank you for inviting us,” Carol said.

“How’s your summer going?” Nick asked, taking a large swig, wishing he had asked for another beer.

“Just lounging around, nothing spectacular.”

Nick would disagree, as Tad would disagree. Tanner’s schedule was a thing of legend to Nick. He saw it for five days, he couldn’t imagine how much Zen energy would be radiating off of the boy after going through an entire Final Senior Summer. Nick remembered spending a lot of time with his friend Ryan during his. They played video games, but nothing like the heist one that Tanner had. And they saw girls, occasionally, but in public settings and with all involved wearing maximal amounts of clothing.

“Nothing exciting?” Nick asked.

“Nope, not that I can think, I spend a lot of time out here by the pool.”

“You sure do. Who wouldn’t, right?”

“Oh yeah, a couple friends usually stop by and we hang around out here.”

On Thursday, Tanner was out getting everyone lunch, as he did every day. Lunch time for the golfers as well, and Nick had his ready to eat, but waited for Tanner to return. Then Amanda, in the sun, hand in the water, stood up and took her top off. Nick couldn't hear the conversation that the two were having. He saw Amanda point at the other girl, then shake her head. The she waved her hands toward the golf course, then over to the houses on Nick's side of the course. The other girl looked, first at the houses next to his with foliage, then at Nicks, with no foliage.

"I would be out here everyday," Carol said.

"One really likes it, she spends most of her time bronzing up."

Nick believed the other girl probably looked at a few windows specifically, brain telling him it was his she focused on. She had bit her lip, and then she took her top off as well. And for the next five minutes until a car door slammed around the front of the house, the other girl joined in something Amanda did every day. "To keep it even, duh" he had heard Amanda say once. As soon as the car door sounded, the friend scrambled to get her top on. Amanda walked over to the table with a saunter, putting the top back on after sitting down next to Tanner. He'd seen it before, at least four times, what did it matter?

"I never realized we were the only ones without a tree line. Nicky why don't we have a tree line?" Carol asked, the first signs of alcohol in her voice.

"We'll have to get one," Nick was tense.

"I bet we'd look like ants though," Tanner said.

"Oh no, not ants, it's not *that* far," Carol said.

"You're right, hmm, bet you can see us out there," Tanner said.

“Not with my bare eyes,” Nick said.

“Bare eyes?” Carol asked.

“I better make my rounds once while the crowds light, it’ll be impossible soon.”

Tanner smiled at the two of them, took a sip of his can, and walked along the pool toward the food, his father, and some people Nick didn’t recognize.

“Another beer?” Carol asked, standing up, a flash of unbalance corrected with a grace that came from years of being a dancer.

“Want me to get it?”

“Stay here, yah nosy neighbor,” she smirked, her nose wrinkled, Nick smiled in return and watched her bend over, screech open the cooler lid, and grab two more Light beers for the two of them.

Nick looked back over to their house, Carol returned and placed the beer down next to him. “Appreciated. So you really want a tree line?”

“Think they’re bored to tears yet?” Carol asked.

“It’s only been half an hour.”

“It’s been an hour.”

“What do you think she has them watching?” he asked, took a sip.

“Something terrible, something I would love.” She looked around the pool then back at their home. “Receive any requests for the movie later?”

“Rumblings of Ichabod Crane.”

“We need to place an October-only rule on that.”

“Laura likes it too.”

“Laura likes it because her older brother likes it,” Carol said.

“So you’re going to be the one to tell him?”

“Ha! Dad’s job. And I jump sides once those two get involved in the conversation.”

Nick wondered what stop number Tanner was on the party tour for the other kids. Nick’s party had been one of the early stops, a few close friends stayed till almost dinner. The Roberts were going to have a blowout later that evening, they had a blowout three times a summer already. Nick wondered when Amanda and the other girl would show up. Tanner was probably just as worth being seen around as he was being seen.

“I can’t believe they haven’t come out here yet,” Carol said.

“The girls? You mean Susan and her family?”

“This is starting to get to wiggle-level.”

“I’ll go with you if you’d like.”

“It wouldn’t matter, you’d still be able to nod and pee. Then on the way out you wouldn’t even have to nod again. I’ll introduce on my way in, then I’ll have to say *something* on the way out. What if more joined them?”

“You’d have to introduce again?”

“And I would have just gone to the restroom, and everyone that was inside initially would know that.”

“But you just washed your hands.”

She gave him the pitying look, “That’s not what they’re thinking.”

“I don’t think they would be thinking about anything. Half of them would have probably forgotten your name,” Nick said, looking inside as if he was going to be able to see through glass that only reflected the two of them back.

“I’ll have forgotten theirs as well.”

“They won’t care.”

“They’ll care,” Carol said. “I’m going to wait. A little longer, maybe it’ll be time to save the kids.”

“You won’t,” Nick said.

“If I have to, I’ve thought about it enough that going in there while I know they are in the living room, the house even, is not possible for me to handle right now.”

“I’m sorry it shook out this way.” It seemed irrational to him, but Nick did irrational things too. He wanted to believe when the other girl joined Amanda for those five minutes, she was just doing something irrational as well. But instead he believed she was sacrificing herself for his prying eyes, proving that nothing was sacred. Nick should not have seen this second unveiling. Amanda was obviously feeding off of the thrill, the other girl was not.

“Would it be weird if we went for a *second* plate?” Carol asked, halfway through her beer, as was he.

“I’ll head up there,” he gulped a few times to finish the bottle. “Should we top off, eat again, then hit the fairway?”

“If Susan doesn’t come out before then I can at least blame the babysitter for an unreasonably short conversation with her.”

“She’ll be hurt,” Nick teased.

“She’ll get over it.”

“Ready, break.”

They both stood up and parted ways, Nick needed to get his bearings once he turned to start walking. Nick didn't want to think about the kids having a second camp this summer. Before, he imagined a couple weeks of solid work time to be a blessing. From where he stood beside the pool, ambivalent, Nick wanted to sink to the bottom, if only for a moment.

Tad didn't see Nick this time as he reached the table. There were more people getting food by that point and Tad was in the middle of an elaborate, certainly embellished, story about one of his employees at the factory. The employee was "plain plum-brained" according to Tad, although said with a good nature that comes from enjoying giving your employees a hard time, "especially the twenty-somethings."

There was so much laughter coming from the grill. Like that inexplicable comradery Nick found Tanner shared with whoever he played the bank heist game with over the internet. Nick couldn't hear what Tanner was saying to these people, even with both windows open, but after five days of sticky mines, zip-ties, and clown masks that were too eerie, Nick saw the boy and his crew knew each other more than Nick knew most of his friends. At least, Nick thought, relating to the stealing of massive amounts of cash and taking hostages in an online world.

Nick felt just as distant from the people that were laughing with Tad just a few feet away as he did the ones Tanner digitally robbed banks with. They were as far to him as London, or Tennessee, places the rest of Tanner's crew might live. Nick wondered if any of them were older, not much older, but closer to his age. He wondered if Tanner considered them a friend.

“How are the potatoes?” a woman next to him said, vaguely familiar in a “walking her dog every night” sort of way. “How are you?”

“Great,” he couldn’t guess a name. “How have you been?” A ring. “And your husband?”

“Oh, well the boys just started at North.” She piles potatoes onto a paper plate.

“Can’t wait for that.”

“Isiah is in football, Grant is hitting us up for track *and* band.”

“My apologies.”

“Right? What are you going to do?” she pours a glass from a two liter on the table. “Say hi to Carol for me.”

“For me as well,” Nick said.

He turned around, and there they were, the girls, sitting at the table he and Carol had been at. They were each in a sundress, tan legs crossed toward each other, sipping from cans of soda.

Nick stopped at the table in front of them. He wanted to believe it to be because this was the designated meeting point with his wife last he checked. He could have stood by the coolers, where she was supposed to be, but he didn’t. Nick looked from the coolers to the girls, pleading to both equally with his eyes.

“Hello,” Amanda said.

“Hello, sorry, my wife.”

“Were these your seats? We can move,” the other girl said.

“No, we were probably leaving.”

“With that plate piled up with food? Road food?” Amanda asked, teasing.

It probably wasn't as funny for how much Nick laughed. In fact, he knew it wasn't. But he laughed at this and turned toward Amanda. "No, I guess we were going to eat, or take it with us. The kids won't have eaten."

"Don't you want to cover it?" the other girl asked.

"Oh no, we're right across the fairway."

"Oh, so you can probably see us, can't he Molly?"

Her name was Molly. That was the name of the one he betrayed.

"That's weird," Molly said.

"I'm sorry, Molly," Nick said, barely.

"Yes," Molly said, responding to a question.

Carol walked out from the house, triumphant, Nick looked around and saw Susan with a group, mostly ladies, and looked back at his wife. Carol sauntered down the steps up next to him, gave a quick fist pump. "I ducked where they dived, I made it out alive, who are your friends?"

"This is Molly and this is Amanda," Nick said.

"That's right," Molly said, giving Nick a concerned look.

"Well, we should be going, love," Nick said.

"You're right, Nicky, leave these two alone."

"I'm appalled by the things you do," Molly said.

"What?" Nick dropped his beer.

"It was nice meeting you." Molly said.

A few people by the coolers were looking their way. The buffet table hadn't seemed to notice. He watched his beer, spilling gold liquid as it rolled along the cement and into the pool.

"Nicky, what is wrong with you?" Amanda said coquettishly.

"Nick, why didn't you get that?" Carol asked.

"Molly, I'm sorry," Nick said, handed the plate of food to Molly instead of his wife.

"What do you want me-?"

Nick knelt down by the water, he grabbed the bottle, sleeves down, with his watch-wearing hand. For a moment he again debated letting himself fall in. Once underwater, he could spend a few seconds collecting himself, then swim across the pool, climb out, and walk across the fairway without speaking to anyone. But he didn't, he stood up and faced the women with a dripping arm, a Light beer now filled with pool water.

"At least our Peeping Tom is not an ogre."

"What?" Nick dropped the bottle again.

"At least you didn't fall over. Into the water. Are you alright?" Molly asked.

"Molly, I'm sorry."

All three of them stared at Nick, people at the coolers talking and looking at Nick. In a few short strides, Tad Roberts reached their table. "Something wrong?" he asked, annoyed.

"I just can't seem to get a grip, on this bottle." Nick said.

“Little early for that. Maybe you should take your husband home, Carol,” Tad said.

“I certainly should.”

“Wonderful party, we’ll have to do this again sometime.” Nick said. He took a large sip from his bottle then put it down between the girls. He gulped down the water and turned to leave.

“Yeah, the next time Tanner graduates from high school,” Tad said.

Carol pulled Nick along the pool to the fairway. Nick refused to look back.

“I’m sorry,” Nick said, mouth lined with chlorine.

Later that night, through the screen door leading onto their porch, Nick heard Tanner and his friends by the pool. All the adults must have been gone, he heard cursing, and shrieks of delight, boys grabbing the taught, bare stomachs of girls and tossing them into the water. He imagined walking over there, across the fairway, bare feet on cold grass. He imagined standing on the diving board wearing only his swim trunks. Would Tanner and his friends all pause and look his way, would they wait with heightened anticipation for him to dive gracefully into the water? Water calm like it had been earlier, now that all had stopped their horseplay to watch Nick on the board. Or would he have to stand there and wait for his opening, assume there would even be one?

CHAPTER II

A ROAD STORY

Driving down Interstate 70 in a rag top, sunglasses on, I realize my wife is dead. The smell doesn't tip me off, the car has its own cigarette stench soaked into the fabric upholstery. An abrupt stop for an accident up the highway sent her into the dashboard. She never wears a seatbelt, she isn't today. But she got so good at keeping herself from trouble until now. Her body would react almost like a dog, leaning into the sharpest turns without issue. Better, she didn't need to relearn each time she got into a vehicle.

I ask if she's alright, if she thinks it's safe to touch her. It looks like there is an ambulance up ahead where the wreck happened. Yes, I can definitely see an ambulance, I tell her. Just hold on. She doesn't respond, or move, or wail in pain. The traffic stops, I put two fingers to her neck. People have to still be doing that. What else but the wrist would be better? No heartbeat, and her neck is cold. I have imagined what feeling for a pulse and not would be like. It's much different than this, nothing feels how I pretended when I was younger, nothing like how they show it in the movies. The traffic jam continues while I ask her more questions. The man sitting in the car to my left is screaming into his cellphone, looking everywhere but the direction of my car.

I pull her back to an upright position. What to do now? In previous dreamed-up instances involving the dead, particularly the dead in vehicles, humor is used to good effect throughout the scene. And these always end as soon as my fingers confirm the person is in fact dead. I never imagine anything past the point of mortality. It isn't my wife in these either, the one that keeps me feeling meaningful, gives me purpose. Usually it's a stranger, maybe an acquaintance, but never my wife. This time it doesn't end, and the traffic is moving again.

There is no checkpoint. I imagined there would be a police officer waving cars through. If it was nighttime he'd have a flare in his hand or a flashlight to signal drivers are allowed to pass the scene of the accident with caution. Can someone hold a lit flare? Comedy instead of Drama, I'd find a hat in the backseat and pull it down over her face to pass the officer. We would continue on this way all the way until we reached Denver, and there would be hijinks, plenty of hijinks, to bring down the tension at the most opportune times. A buddy comedy, a real *gasser*, through all ninety-three pages of the script. Thankfully, officer or no, she is wearing sunglasses like me, albeit they are now cracked. No, not just cracked, totally nonfunctional.

I need to pull over, I need to call the police. But what about that abrasion on her forehead? Assuming that is the medical term for the mark above my wife's left eye. The fact that she has been dead awhile, or I assume that she has, I imagine is important. An officer would think the injury came from a domestic dispute. Maybe she has red marks on her neck from a rash and he gets the picture that I strangled her. Even if he sees blood and flecks of skin on the dash, he will probably assume I was so fed up I slammed her head against the dashboard. She's cold, that rules out it happening during the accident, I

assume. Or what if I am pulled over farther up the road, they haven't heard about the accident. She's so cold, undebatable, and the dash is bloody, preposterously bloody, an officer would start thinking some specific things about what happened to this woman.

And what if I cross a state line? From Ohio into Indiana or even Ohio to Indiana to *Illinois*. What does it mean if someone takes a dead body across not one but two state lines? Maybe that's a conspiracy, not one but two felonies. A conspiracy because a person gets that far from where the death took place. In the age of technology, how can I Google something like that? My phone has GPS (for multiple applications), Bluetooth, Friend Finder, social media, my cell phone signal is always on. I can be triangulated by satellite, maybe multiple. A Google search, along with a body, state lines, a whole world of conspiracy-related business. That many details and the body, an open and shut case probably no matter what state you are in at the time.

I can't take my Love to the police, then. A sign tells me about the last rest stop before Illinois; I resign myself to reaching Denver, doing the ridiculous journey alone. Another sign says just across the border is a McDonald's and a Shell Station. A two-state conspiracy before we stop for gas.

Then she says. "Next rest stop, please?"

I am somehow able to stay on the road after she says this. I miss seeing if her mouth moves. Do I turn my head to see if it's in a different position than, what, stationary? What is the original position for her head? Then she says, "Did you hear me, babe?"

"Can we make a pit stop in the next city, stop at McDonald's, get gas."

“The sign said that would be thirty miles. I don’t know if I can hold it that long. I need to collect myself for a minute.”

“Rest stop it is, beautiful.”

I pull into a parking spot over where the trucks park. People milling around, dogs chasing brightly-colored, loudly-squeaking toys. I turn the car off and look at my wife.

“Do you, uh, need any help?”

“I’ll be fine, I think, thanks.” her mouth doesn’t move. Her voice hums out from her lips into the car. “Do you need to go?”

“Not now, no.”

“Probably should, just in case. Go, I’ll hold down the fort.”

Her eyes are closed, her forehead is clotting, lines of red run down her face. I turn the car off and exit the vehicle. I watch her in the passengers’ seat, walking backward to the bathroom. When I come out, she’s there. Her shoulders slumped a little more, but she’s still there. I try to set her upright, but her body won’t respond. How long does it take for rigor to set in? Was this rigor mortis? Is that the term, rigor mortis? Popping sounds come from her body as I try to shape it into a straighter posture. I check the trunk for a blanket and come up empty. She will be my co-captain the entire way. Denver or bust, she’s riding shotgun without a blanket.

We pull into the McDonald’s after I fill up. She says, “Double cheese, medium fry, whatever you’re getting to drink, as long as it isn’t lemonade.”

I find a secluded parking spot and try to remember the last time I considered the two of us sharing a straw. Is there a protocol for giving the dead refreshment? I suppose I

put the drink up to her lips, stick it *in* her lips. Will her throat start moving? Lips sucking, drawing in Coke from the paper cup? Will there be any missing? She'll probably be upset if I don't. I leave the car on and switch two new air fresheners to Max Scent.

Then I get the two of us McDonald's somewhere in Illinois. In a movie, when I came back there would be a crowd surrounding the car. I leave the windows open by accident and a family of four in an SUV pulls up next to us. No, I don't leave them open. Before I turn the car off, my elbow subtly rests on the button for her window. The parents don't notice. They are halfway inside before their kids call them back. They try and try to get their kids to stop staring at the lady in the car with the outrageous, running red makeup and come inside for a cheeseburger. Then the madness starts, a confrontation with the father, either a real Samaritan in a drama or a bumbling idiot in a comedy. Whichever, it spells trouble for me and all the butts in the theatre seats pucker up. But it's just her, right where she was when I walked inside. No cars anywhere near us, no one standing by our car.

"How did I expect to do this?" she asks once I'm back in the car.

"Should I open your mouth and stick some in? I thought we were trying the straw for the drink and you just moving your throat."

"I'm not even hungry. Can I say I was joking? I appreciate you getting a straw for me, though. I don't know how this would work."

"I'll eat while I drive. Ready?"

"Ready." She says.

The air fresheners aren't working. The smell is getting worse and will soak into the upholstery with the cigarettes. It already has on her side, I'm sure. If I try to sell the car, the guy at the dealership will say something like, "Ho, buddy, what died in here?" and give me a look. Then I fail to fill an extended silence between the two of us.

"How long until we reach St. Louis?" she asks. "I haven't paid attention to the signs."

"Aren't even halfway through Illinois yet."

"It's on the border, right?"

"Like Kansas City, stuck between two states. We'll see another sign."

There's a beat, and then she asks, "How long will you wait to marry?"

"What?"

"To re-marry. How long?"

"I, hadn't really-"

"Of course you have, we both have. Everyone in every relationship ever has thought about what they would do, maybe not this specific situation, but. I would have had this conversation before the embolism," she says.

"Embolism?"

"Better than calling it a gas bubble," she says. "Gas bubble sounds less heroic."

"Something popped in your head? What are the odds of that happening?"

"I'm not connected to the Internet. I know how it happened, I guess everyone gets that luxury at least. No hive mind though, no past relatives."

"What about, you know?"

"I know, but I can't tell you."

“I thought you said there was no hive mind?”

“That’s something you know not to say.”

She’s not falling apart. The smell is terrible, but nothing is falling off her body yet. Would it? It has to. The hair and nails keep growing, but at some point the skin has to give. Is there a way to drain her blood, slow the whole process down? If I pull hard enough on her arm, does it all come spilling out? Is taxidermy something that can be learned overnight? Isn’t taxidermy an art form? Is there a way to preserve her until it’s my turn? I can’t imagine how to do any of this without my wife.

“Should I bury you?” which suggests I will be able to. “Do you want to be buried? I don’t know if you want to be buried or cremated.”

“Relax babe, relax. You can’t take me to a funeral parlor, or bring me to the police. So send me back to the Earth. I’m an organ donor at least.”

“I could drop you off at a university, at their science center?”

“It’s summer vacation.”

The conversation lapses for a bit. But still, even when I can dictate the conversation, there are topics too heavy to broach. I won’t bring them up, and I won’t have her do it. If she brought up the letter, if she knows about the letter now, not even the whole letter, it makes sense. I bet she knew before, why isn’t she bringing it up now? Women know these things. They either really know or they know, *that* is the Hive Mind.

I can’t turn the radio on. Music, public radio, the news, everything marks time. Albums forty minutes give or take. News/podcasts twenty-eight to thirty minute segments. With more time comes more opportunities to come clean. So why keep a record of those half-hour spans where we avoid the topic? She could know every word of

that letter, then that would be it. I could make that be it, but I won't broach the topic, and I can't bring myself to turn on the radio.

"Something wrong?" she asks.

"Thinking."

"You're lying." she pauses, I make her pause. "What are we going to do with me? What are you going to do with me?"

"Don't want to see Denver?"

"Not Denver, tonight. When we get to the hotel."

"I could wrap you in a blanket, or a rug, take you through a back door?"

"What kind?" she asks. "How many flights of stairs?"

"Shag? For comfort? Six flights? Four?"

"Probably heavier than other kinds. Someone sees you with a body-sized rug on the back stairs?"

"No one is supposed to see you."

"Then what's the rug for?"

What about burying her in a corn field? Or near a corn field. There must be a spot secluded enough. But even where there are woods, there are not really woods. Not dense woods you could wander through and really get lost. Only woods when you are at the edge, you could see through to the other side. Welcome to the highways through the Midwest. The soil is probably hard too. I'm pretty sure it's called soil, not simply "ground" or "dirt." All these corn fields, the only spot without any corn is the road. Most of those are paved by now too. How long to dig? Do farmers patrol their land? Don't they bring along hunting dogs when they do? Aren't they always hunting in the woods when

they're not working? If I was a farmer, and I lived out here, I would hunt when I wasn't working. I might as well leave her on a bench with her sunglasses and a newspaper. No wonder there's premeditated murder. Crimes of passion are always solved. I envy serial killers, who can deal with a dead body not once, but multiple times. The ones that write letters to Heralds or Tribunes or the police chief himself? The ones that dare people to find them? Fuck those guys.

We almost flew to Denver. She tells me in March she wants to go to Denver. And then she decides that we haven't been on a road trip for a long time, not since Delaware. She Googled "cool places along I-70" and "memorable pit stops Ohio to Colorado." So we decided to drive. If she had died on an airplane, utterly crushing for me still, but I would be able to handle that a little better. If she had died on an airplane, we would have passengers across from us to attest that I never touched her. Another passenger would have seen us get on the plane together, joking about my choice of boots and talking about the altitude. On a plane and not in a car, there would be protocols to follow, there would be distractions. I wouldn't have to fill her mouth with words other than ones about the letter. I could panic in public and there would be so much going on, so many people consoling me, telling how to handle the situation or how they were going to handle the situation, nothing else would come to mind.

"Wasn't this all wilderness?" I ask.

"Probably," she says. "Not all of it, I'd bet. Some of it grassland, or plains. Were these the wide-open plains?"

"Once not so orderly."

I pull some cologne from the center console and spray the car and her a few times. I turn the air vents with the scented clips her direction. I light cigarette. Why stop in Denver? I-70 goes farther, and there are other highways that connect to it. Highways to take us farther West that then loop around and head back East. “What about California, to the coast?” I ask.

“You are not going to put off dealing with me until California.”

“But Denver’s alright?”

“Denver’s more reasonable, I want to see Denver. We already have a hotel.”

If we had been born earlier and doing this road trip, she would be buried already. Time even to have a small, but poignant, funeral. Before cell phones, I bet farmers had tons of land that wasn’t so hard and they weren’t able to get to that often, even when they found the time to hunt. I could have grieved a little, then found a phone and called her parents. I would have handled this properly. Instead, we’re in the present and not the past, still heading to Denver.

“Maybe we can find a Home Depot and get a shovel,” I say. “At least try? What if a farmer’s shotgun is the answer to my problem?”

“It’s not.”

“It’s not?”

“It’s not.”

We stop near Columbia, Missouri a little after five o’clock. There’s a motel with only one floor that stretches out in both directions away from the front desk in the center.

I ask the lady at the counter for a room towards the end, to be considerate of the guests about my smoking.

“Smoking’s fine,” she says, indicating her ashtray.

“Just the same,” I say.

She shrugs and gets me a key, “All the way on the end, for the considerate man.”

Then she lights up a cigarette and sits back down, turning the volume on her TV back up.

I carry my wife into the room like she’s sleeping, or like a macabre version of crossing the threshold. Parts of her pop and creak while I navigate the doorway. There are twin beds and I put her down on the one near the window. I push the bed against the wall and open the window. Unless someone takes the trash out tonight, no one should find her. We can be out by morning. It’s probably only that lady and she probably starts cleaning closest to her office. In the movies, come morning her son peaks in the window all wide-eyed. He drops the trash bags he’s holding, maybe they weren’t properly tied, bottles clink on the ground and roll away from him. As per the script, the wife and I make a speedy getaway, tossing the room keys over my shoulder, accepting I paid with a credit card and some things can’t be avoided. Then we’d really be fugitives, or *I* would really be a fugitive. There would be no time for reflection, immediate internal monologues sure, but certainly no reflection.

“TV or no TV?” I ask.

“TV,” she says. “I don’t care what it is.”

So I turn on the TV but not the lights and stand in the glow of Standard Definition. Then I light up a cigarette and search on my phone for a place to buy candles.

Will the smell get worryingly strong before I get back? Does a Do Not Disturb sign make any difference in this scenario?

“I’ll be back,” I say.

“You just sat down.”

“I know, but I’ll be restless while-”

“Go get your candle,” she says.

So I go get my candle, along with a shovel, and fertilizer. The guy at the register barely looks at me, he’s busy flirting with the girl running register across from us. Whatever they’re talking about sounds barely work related. I pay with cash. A motel on a credit card is one thing, motel and hardware store is a whole other story when dissecting a man’s actions to prove guilt.

Back at the motel, a reality show about Hippos is on: *Hippopotamus: Lake Demon*. The show is graphic for its TV-PG rating. These animals are vicious, toward each other, toward other animals, people too, we are told. They have no problem capsizing a boat full of people, seemingly without any reason. The hosts of the show are still keen on getting right up alongside these animals, however. None seem concerned a hippo could eat them, or tear their limbs off, or simply drown them in the muddy water with their weight.

“You’ve got to believe these hippos have their reasons,” she says. “They’re saying ‘unprovoked attacks’ but wouldn’t us being in the water where they live be considered provocation? The candle smells nice, by the way.”

“I thought it was alright. I got a shovel and fertilizer too.”

“And you thought the boy at the register was really talking about sex with his co-worker.”

We lay in our beds through two more episodes of the Hippo show. Can I hide her and make it back to our house? Do a driving tour of Denver and make the trip back, would she keep that long? Is there a refrigerator that fits in my trunk? If I try to fit her inside of a refrigerator, will she be stuck like that forever? What about a stand-up freezer, one that drags behind the car on wheels. Would her limbs fall off? What will her insides turn into? What will the blood be like, or the other stuff? Even if I do find a stand-up freezer and a hitch to pull it, it's not like we can talk during the ride, with her sealed away. She might as well not even come at that point, pulled along in a freezer. There is no way she would keep. She's already gone bad, she won't get any better. Only an idiot wouldn't see this. I'm not an idiot. A coward certainly, but not an idiot.

After another episode of hippos I ask, “Like to go for a drive?”

“Can we ride with the top down?”

“Sure can, you'd be like Miss Kansas.”

“After winning Miss America,” my wife says.

We drive with the top down for a while, even with open air the smell is too much. I comment on the store fronts and how quaint the town looks with no one around. It could be any town, I'm not really paying attention. She agrees, but it isn't the same. Something changed after I picked up her rigid corpse from that twin bed and buckled it into the passenger's seat for the last time. She knows I cannot keep her, I know I cannot keep her.

So with that, what more is there to say? The letter might as well be folded in the cup holder and also buried three hundred miles below our feet.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“I know you are, you really are,” she says.

“I’m terrible, but that was terrible. It never should have started, let alone go anywhere. It never should have crossed my mind in the first place.”

“We’re all terrible, babe.”

I make it out of the tiny downtown onto roads where the speed limit posts are farther apart. I let my foot rest heavier on the accelerator, our hair is blowing in the wind. Her hair is the same as mine, not rigid like the rest of her. Unless scientists and grave robbers are mistaken, it’s still growing too. Why shouldn’t it be? Even when we’re cremated aren’t we still growing, or at least nearly growing? Don’t we attach ourselves to something else at some point and change along with it? I’d like to believe at the very least we don’t disappear entirely.

The field where I finally stop is nothing like I imagined. No cars passing, no farmers plowing, just us in the moonlight. The dirt is soft, soft like it would be in the movies. I dig and dig and dig, then place her in the ground. Before I toss the first shovelful on top of my wife, I promise to push the beds together when I get back to the motel. Then I toss dirt on my significant other until I fill the hole back in again.

CHAPTER III

THE HILL FIRE

Jesus had been burning for seventeen hours. Reported to Mayor Gibbons, the only suggestion as to the cause an errant bolt of lightning. Word spread through Morton before dawn, and we had all packed our families and headed to the hill to see for ourselves. This first trip, we grabbed our families and went, the late ones deciding against the car and walking, due to the traffic taking up the surrounding blocks. Once it was decided that some deliberation was needed before, or if, Jesus was to be put out, we all went back for our lawn chairs and picnic equipment. As dusk settled that evening, Jesus looked like He was holding a very long torch with a very short arm.

Jesus was sixty feet tall and carved out of wood. He was at the bottom of the hill, next to the church, standing on a carved stone block. The designs on the stone were a greatest-hits of Jesus' life, the money lenders, the loaves and fishes, the crucifixion, and of course the resurrection. The resurrection side of the stone was facing out, upon the highway, like Jesus Himself. Jesus' arms stretched out over His head, East to West, and He stared into the sky with reverence. The fire started on the hand pointing West.

A perimeter was quickly placed around Jesus, police tape and orange saw horses made a U-shape at the base of the hill. The Reverend, Donald Henry, was vacationing in the Keys and famously kept his phone off during these trips. Police Chief Rob Lutz held congress near the church, along with Mayor Anthony Gibbons. They were in the Blue Lot, the parking lot at the back of the church and closest to the messiah. There were police and rescue vehicles parked haphazardly across the blacktop, fire trucks near the lone hydrant in the grass behind the church. The hydrant was guarded by the Fire Chief, Junior Lawrence, a bull of a man, unwilling to let anyone near the water supply.

News crews started showing up around lunch time, by nightfall we had people from stations in Pittsburgh and Chicago represented on the hill or on the street on the ridge at the top. Everyone that could hold it together long enough to answer a few questions was allowed to speak into a microphone. People who didn't even go to the church, hadn't gone their entire lives, were allowed to weigh in on whether we should put Jesus out or let him burn down to the stone. They made the argument that it wasn't the church's Jesus, it was the town's Jesus, and this argument was spun into the statue being the nation's Jesus. Jesus was trending online by eight o'clock Monday night, the whole country weighing in on the topic.

The general mood on the hillside was calm, party-like with grills and yard games at the top on the ridge, in the Red Lot. Those of us on the hill spread our blankets and enjoyed the company of family and neighbors. Despite Jesus having lost an entire arm to the fire and nearly a quarter of his torso, most of us in town didn't look at this as a bad thing. Only the news crews had suggested something darker going on below the surface.

But cable news was a dying breed, they needed to come up with something to beam back to their networks.

Jesus' arm had come falling to Earth once the fire ate away enough of it. Junior Lawrence allowed it to be put out, begrudgingly, so as not to allow the hill to catch. He conceded to us having a dry summer that year. We didn't have a problem hosing off pieces of Jesus once they had left His body. It was 'spraying down parts of Jesus still attached' where we took issue. The hillside seemed in agreement on that. Which is why Jesus continued to burn and we felt inclined to watch.

We elected a representative for the hill, an older guy, Chip Turner, a parishioner since birth. Amiable, fit, well-spoken, he got a lot of microphone time. And it was Chip that kept us all abreast on what the Reverend and the Mayor and the Chiefs were saying. He told the bottom of the hill in between conversations and let the information flow upward until it reached those on the ridge. Like a banner at a football game rolling up a section of the crowd after a touchdown.

Family members out of town, watching at home, were telling us the news crews crying arson pointed to the unfortunate situation with Austin Ricart, town alcoholic and resident deadbeat, earlier in the afternoon. Austin heard about the fire at the point when he was drunk enough to care and sober enough still move around. He stumbled down the inclined, snake-like pavement that led to Blue Lot and the back of the church. No one noticed him until he was halfway up Jesus' leg, koala-hugging the thigh and unable to go any farther.

Even though at the time there were only a few of us on the hill, it would have been the right thing to stop Austin or at least tell someone about his attempt before he

made it so far. But no one did, and they needed a ladder to get him down. To the chagrin of everyone, one of our children, we aren't sure who, posted a video of the police tasing Austin after their retrieval, Ricart uncharacteristically unwilling to accept the handcuffs being offered to him. We tried to point out in our interviews that the man, albeit intoxicated, only made it to the leg before getting stuck. How could anyone expect a person to scale Jesus all the way to His arms and get a fire started? It was windy up there.

The Chiefs kept having the same argument.

“For Chrissakes, He’s going to catch the hill on fire,” the Police Chief would say.

“It’s a sin, it’s being kept under control,” Junior Lawrence would respond.

Then the two would holler insults walking back to their side of the parking lot.

Junior Lawrence had the fire hydrant, and the fire was still too high up for anyone to reach with buckets. Members of the Church Board and Town Council tried convincing him to put the fire out. He said he’d put out anything risking the hillside, but until someone put him on the phone with Reverend Henry, no one touched the statue. Even the Reverend’s wife turned her phone off this year, so there was gridlock on the issue. Lawrence himself was imposing enough for none to want near the hydrant, and his men were the frat-brother, skin-branding kind of the loyal.

The Mayor, along with the Board and Town Council, put together a collection drive for another statue made of the stone used for the base. They broke their \$250,000 asking goal well before sunset, and were nearing half a million, thanks to the campaign going viral with churches across the country. But still, whenever Junior thought the Police Chief would try something, he sat on the hydrant and refused to move until Lutz was back on his side of Blue Lot.

“I’ll use the same hold got me to State senior year, don’t think I won’t, Lutz,” Chief Lawrence said.

Around midnight, when the fire had eaten through the tops layers of His torso and was moving now in three directions, most quickly toward Jesus’ head, the Mayor walked over from the Police side of Blue Lot to the Fire side. The fire fighters parted to allow Gibbons access to their Chief. Junior had removed his coat and boots, down to a tank top, pants, and helmet. He sat in a lawn chair next to the fire hydrant, arm resting on the large screw at the top.

“That can’t be comfortable,” the Mayor said.

“What’s a little pain for the well-being of my Lord and Savior,” Junior said.

“I’m going to remove you from your post, I am removing you from your duties.”

Junior shrugged, “S’alright, I kinda figured you would once this was over.”

“No, I’m removing you now. If you and the rest of your firehouse don’t turn on your hoses and put the fire out, the police will do it for you.”

“No they won’t.”

“What’s going to happen when that torso comes down on the ones at the bottom.”

“They’re too close, but we’ll put it out,” Junior said.

“Them too? No, I’m sorry, but I will not let that torso maim and kill members of our community, even if they are too close to their flaming messiah.”

Junior had no response, soon the Mayor walked back over to the Police side of the lot and the firefighters closed back in on their leader. A news crew made it down to the Blue Lot, throwing out words like ‘negligence’ and ‘scandal’ and filming ‘Local

Government In-Action.’ Those of us talking to people on the outside were told that became a circulating headline. We were told Morton was the only thing on the news that night in the Tri-State area.

And yet, things stayed relatively calm until the white vans with the decals showed up on the ridge in Red Lot. The decals were of a glistening knight, in Medieval chainmail, driving a flaming sword through a brown bear. The vans belonged to the Lakeside Community Church of Spearfish, South Dakota and out of them spilled thirty-some members, holding signs. Their leader had a bullhorn, his name legally changed to Brother Bill, two first names. We knew this because the whole country knew this, the LCC traveled often.

As soon as they realized who had arrived, the news crews on the hill rushed down to Blue Lot to join the conversation. Within minutes, Brother Bill was giving a press conference, his brothers and sisters behind him shouting buzzwords at various intervals. Foreign Wars. The Betrayal of Isreal. Sodomy and Scissoring. Their signs were monopolized by images of third-trimester abortions, famine-ridden Africans, and grainy print-outs of infectious diseases. They kept flipping them over to show the hillside, a perpetual memory game with a title like “Reasons God Hates You.”

“And this statue is just another road sign from God. Go back, turn around. You’re heading toward a cliff and there’s shark-infested water below. Repent,” Brother Bill said. “Don’t look at this as an Act of God, look at it as the Last Desperation of the Lord. We have gone so far off track that he must sacrifice his son once more to get our attention. The Romans didn’t believe, the Jews didn’t believe, *we* don’t believe, and he’s going to make us sorry.”

Brother Bill turned away from the microphones periodically to address the hillside. He told us Jesus would not burn if we did not sin. It was so simple. He also told us the Second Coming was upon us and if this wasn't a sign, he didn't know what was. Neither did we. Brother Bill traded off between air time and bullhorn as the fire overtook Jesus' face and most of the arm pointing East. The Mayor, the Chiefs, and the rest of us continued to watch. But then our town reaction was decided for us.

After the fifth or so screech from the bullhorn cut off and Brother Bill turned back to the cameras, Austin Ricart came running down the inclined pavement, leaning forward precariously, hands behind his back. Two police officers were cautiously running after him, not doing so well, trying to stay upright. Austin reached the bottom and saw the crowd of reporters around Brother Bill and made it over to the group unscathed.

"Dog-licking, bigot-ass, cunt mouth," Austin Ricart shouted. He pushed to the front, no one in the immediate area sure what was happening, and head-butted Brother Bill to the ground. "That's for all the hateful bullshit that comes out of your mouth."

That's when things got really ugly.

The LCC dropped their signs and descended on Ricart, but he was using the mass of sport coats and cameras for protection, so they descended upon the news media as well. The LCC members were all fists, fingernails, and teeth. No one head butted Brother Bill in front of millions of people. The Police ran over to the brawl and pulled anyone they could in any direction that wasn't near the fighting. The firefighters ran over to help as well the mayhem taking place in the center of the parking lot. Police Chief Lutz used his opportunity to once more go after the hydrant.

Chief Lawrence hung back from the fighting and before Lutz could make it off the asphalt and into the grass, Junior had taken a sledgehammer from one of the trucks and destroyed the connection used by their hoses. This didn't stop either man from entering into a grapple, trying to take the other to the ground. Those with cameras couldn't decide which to focus on, the battle for the hydrant or the battle for Austin Ricart's soul, until a loud crack came from Jesus' direction.

His torso had finally snapped, engulfed in flames, like doing the limbo would be enough to gain our attention. This sent the first wave of people, especially those at the bottom, collecting their belongings and headed up the hill. So much taking place it was impossible to focus on just one thing. The camera operators that had managed to wrestle clear of the fray felt the same way. Lenses darted from the fight, to the wrestling match, to Christianity's most prominent figure. Jesus bobbed up and down, ready to tear clean off from His waist.

And then He did, the grass where the flaming mass landed catching fire immediately. The ones that thought about leaving the hillside with the first group decided that was the right time, and those of us left finally noticed each other. Were we going to be shown up by a bunch of jerks from South Dakota? Were we less interesting than two chiseled, shirtless men, soaked to the bone and wrestling in a mud pit? No, we were not. There may not be any more Messy Messiah chili dogs or Devil's Own three-meat pizzas served in Red Lot, but we would not go quietly into the night.

So we dropped to the ground, wiggled around until we had some momentum, and flung ourselves down the hill. Rocks tore our pants and scraped our elbows, but none of us tried to stop. We knew the road to salvation wasn't paved with velvet carpet. You

needed to break a few bones to get to Heaven. Hatred would not be the last thing America saw before going to bed that night, it would be love and fire.

CHAPTER IV
MAKING BABIES

Doctor K---: Adding 3 points to Athleticism, you have 3 points left to spend.

S---: Could we have a rundown of everything, the points we've spent? Want to make sure we have this all right.

Doctor K---: Intelligence at 8 points, Virtue is 7, Athleticism, after the most recent allotment is now 8. Appearance 7, Luck is a 7, and finally Affinity to Religion a 5.

S---: Three points to spend?

Doctor K---: 3 to spend.

S---: Once you hit Enter? Our son starts cooking?

Doctor K---: Not necessarily. There's a two week retainer period, allowing you to make changes. Once your son reaches the finalization period you are unable to make changes. That's when everything starts mixing, he won't be cooking though.

S---: We can shut it down during the retainer period? Change the point totals?

Doctor K---: Yes, but we don't advise that. We'd like to you walk out of here confident in your numbers and the baby you have chosen. We've found dwelling on it

and coming back for changes can have adverse effects on those choosing incubation creation.

S---: Religion. Can you describe a five in Affinity to Religion?

Doctor K---: Your child would attend church with you, or grandma if that's how it is in your family. Maybe there is a flourish of worship practices leading up to college. Typically, faith wears out in their twenties, regardless if they are away at school or stay nearby.

S---: But if the number were seven?

Doctor K---: Religion at a 7, they take their own kids, but maybe they have doubts after hitting age 40 or so. Studies, lots of studies completed since the program's inception.

S---: Two on Religion please, my mother will be elated. Don't need a nine in Intelligence or Athleticism, and eight in Appearance sounds conceited. Before I choose Luck, Virtue for the last point.

Doctor K---: You have now allotted all 45 of your points.

S---: We have the Gold Plan, with Gold Plus we'd have fifty?

Doctor K---: Gold Plus would give you 50 points. Unfortunately, any plan higher than Gold would need to be paid out of pocket, that's where your insurance coverage stops. But really, anything higher than Gold, to be honest it's excessive. My children have a few 9's and once you get there, it's a little like, we get it, you're really great at that. Whatever that is. Children in the program that are now adults with 11's or 12's have yet to quantifiably prove those numbers are superior to a 10. Even a Silver Plan makes a great kid. You're paying for your child, they're going to come out better than average. So we're happy with these numbers? Intelligence 8, Virtue 8, Athleticism 8, Luck 7, Appearance 7, Religion 7. That's all-

...

N---: I'm sorry, I shouldn't have thrown your keyboard.

Doctor K---: Why we buy wireless. Keyboards, mouses, monitors they're all write-offs. The clicking drives nearly 65% of people to an outburst, they tell us. At least, they tell us it's the clicking. Heavy duty screen on that window, too.

N---: I like our numbers.

S---: I like our numbers too.

Doctor K---: These are great numbers.

CHAPTER V

PACKER #19

First, I tested the waters. I pulled hair from my beard and shipped it with boxes of holiday stationary. Needing the job, and wanting to impress my boss, I pulled hair when I could. And never more than a few strands at a time, I couldn't raise suspicion. Then, I decided to expand.

Paw Paw, Michigan. Greenville, South Carolina. New Milford, Connecticut. Patchogue, New York. Bulb-like follicles at the ends, brown, black, and blonde, the oily strands dropped into a box, tape-gunned shut and thrown onto the conveyor belt. The scanner tossed the orders onto pallets. Boxes labeled Overnight or Next-Day Air arrived before we returned the next morning. Our sprawling country, pieces of me sent to every part of it.

Winnetka, Illinois. Voorhees, New Jersey. Santee, California. Batesville, Arkansas. Cheek hair, chin hair, neck hair, even nose hair. Pulling nose hair stung and made my eyes fill with tears.

Grinnell, Iowa. Vancleave, Mississippi. Edina, Minnesota. Vienna, Virginia. The normally full beard became patchy and sparse, I ran out of good hair around Shirley,

Massachusetts. I started clipping chunks from my scalp and placing them at the bottom of the

boxes, underneath the packing peanuts or the crumpled-up paper. I stopped caring about the money when I got to Pinedale, Wyoming.

Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. Whiting, Indiana. Mercer Island, Washington. Socorro, New Mexico. I spit into a box going to Luverne, Alabama. Tips of finger nails went to Geneva, Ohio. I bled onto a twenty-five pound statue of a dancing frog going to Sarasota, Florida.

Flower Mound, Texas. Harrogate, Tennessee. Apex, North Carolina. Parker, Colorado. I stopped wearing condoms with Amy, the girl from the jewelry room, in her car in the parking lot on our lunch breaks. Mark, the returns guy, hid stacks of complaint letters he received and we agreed to be blood brothers. Larry, riding wire-frame carts to bring us orders, told me to stop flushing and mark the urinal with a sharpie so he knew where to pee.

Albany, Oregon. Bowie, Maryland. Price, Utah. Cumming, Georgia. The morning I was fired, the boss found me in the break room with a fifth of whiskey and a small hatchet I brought from home. He blew up, said he saw this coming, said my productivity bottomed out in November. He asked if I enjoyed stealing time from the company and, therefore, money right out of its pockets. He called me lazy, irresponsible, and ungrateful of the opportunity to work under him. He told me packing boxes was bigger than us, that I was selfish.

CHAPTER VI

PROGENITORS

Our grandparents always found us. For years, my wife and I packed up our possessions and moved to another city. Then they would find us again. They never called asking where we were, and we never called them. Our grandparents were cordial in the beginning, said they just needed proximity. They'd move into the neighborhood or the next sub-division over.

We'd let our guard down, and they would pounce, arriving always at dinner time, crock pots in hand with wine for the grownups. There was an incident in Madison involving the destruction of our front door and tire tracks on the carpet. They were cycle heads, Gram and Gramp, and when they moved they moved light. My wife offered them Brian, our oldest, after they found us somewhere near the place EST became CST. They refused, said it was the whole family or nothing.

We transitioned to hotels, staying only a week at a time; our children enrolled in online school. Still they found us. Gramp and I exchanged black eyes at a movie theatre

in Charleston. Her parents did all they could, up to and including buying us a blueberry
island on a lake in

northern Maine. We changed our names, sold our possessions, and burned our clothing with the boat we rode in on. The kids were gone by that point, unable to cut it on the road.

But our grandparents burned their boat too when they landed on shore. One violent month ensued: hand-made traps, make-shift weaponry, deplorable acts committed by both sides. Until it was me and Grams, both too bruised and shell-shocked to care. So she taught me to fish, and how to plant a blueberry bush. Turns out she grew up Down East and summered near that lake every year 'til college.

CHAPTER VII
AT THE RETROSPECTIVE

K: I don't understand how assisted suicide can function as art. You have not swayed me.

M: Physically or emotionally?

K: He has them handle the guns, they all use guns. Just because the chunks get painted over afterwards.

M: So no redeeming quality or artistic endeavor shown? He's lazy.

K: They're in a museum, he got a gallery, but yes, he's lazy.

M: What if I stood over a canvas and pissed on it? What if-

K: No scat stuff here. And no one pissing on a canvas will help reconcile this. This isn't over our heads kind of stuff.

M: Brain matter, gesso, and paint. And hollow points.

K: And then what after this? People? Pets? Cityscapes?

M: Something less mass produced. He's already said, in an interview.

K: There are more galleries, actual paintings ahead.

M: I'll be along. A few more minutes.

K: Look at this as a conjunction of souls, the permanence of death and art, but don't try and sell me on of it. You have not swayed me.

M: Noted.

K: Give you five extra minutes to compartmentalize. Fifteen minutes I'm going to the food court.

M: That says something.

K: It says you woke up late this morning and so I'm stilling waiting on a first meal.

CHAPTER VIII
THE STAKE OUT

Donald ashed his cigarette into the car's metal ashtray and blew smoke out his half-rolled window into the dark woods. "So we think it's empty up there." The two men were pulled off the winding, tree-lined road and staring up a driveway.

"Everything Charla heard, family up there last week left a few days ago. Thursday, she thinks. Charla figures they cleaned up a little over the weekend and are waiting for the next to arrive."

Donald wanted to try the house during the day, after most of the people around had made it off to work. But Thomas insisted that it go down after dark. The real ass-crack of night. They hadn't even met until after midnight, Donald cursing and smoking the whole walk over to Thomas and Charla's place.

"There's a floodlight on a motion sensor but it only hits part of the driveway. Lights around the porch and the garage are never on."

"The other house up there has a separate driveway?"

"Halfway up the driveways branch off."

"And we are a hundred percent sure this place is empty?"

“No, Donald, we are not one hundred percent. I’d say I’m at about seventy-five percent, Charla’s at about ninety-eight, but really, it’s a fifty fifty. Maybe worse, right?”

“Maybe worse how?”

“Either it’s empty, the owners are up there, or there’s a new group.”

“Wouldn’t it just be whether someone was up there or not? What does it matter if it’s the owners?”

“What if they’ve seen me in the shop before.”

“I thought you wanted to do this? I thought I was told to bring masks?”

“I’m just laying out some gravity on that one.” Thomas said. “If there’s a new group up there? Charla said they’ve had bachelor parties. What if we try to break in on a bachelor party? I’m only saying. It’s not like I can come back without going up there.”

“But the house probably doesn’t belong to someone in the bachelor party.”

“It does for the weekend.”

Donald tossed his cigarette out the window and rolled it up.

“You can’t ash that out in here?”

“If we see a car, we go back,” Donald said.

“What if they’ve given out the garage code and we don’t see the car?”

“I thought we determined houses don’t do that, so they can lock down if necessary.”

“What if they did this time,” Thomas said.

“We’ll be able to see as soon as we round the hill whether there’s someone awake in that house. Then we can decide how to approach it.”

“What if it’s someone up there sleeping?”

“Thomas, the house is empty.”

Thomas turned and looked at his reflection, into the truck bed. “And you threw the tarp in the back?”

“The tarp is there. I taped down the cushions too.”

“If we’re stealing TVs for subsequent resale, *Donald*, I want those televisions in sellable condition. Charla said the side cushions were probably just as important.”

“The side cushions too. Go ahead and check.”

“I believe you,” Thomas put his hand on the doorknob then back on the wheel.

“We are not waiting any more. You spent a whole goddamn day talking to me about this house.”

Thomas continued to sit, staring ahead into the night.

“Thomas, either get out of the car or let’s hit the road, we aren’t invisible.”

And then Thomas turned. Donald never knew why, and the results were far from earthshattering, but Thomas was then a different person.

Thomas jammed the keys back into the ignition. “Ok, let’s put it into the driveway.” Thomas started up the truck and put it into reverse. The gravel kicked up as Donald was thrown forward.

“Thomas-“

Thomas revved the old truck’s engine, barely making it up the first hill then slammed the brakes two hundred feet later. He turned left and onto the much steeper incline toward the house. A metal black bear on a pole told them they were entering Bear Country. The engine gave another bellow as it pulled itself along.

“Thomas.”

Thomas threw the car into park in a spot down another small hill before the house. “We can walk the rest of the way,” Thomas said, unbuckling his seat belt.

“Thomas, that was an irrational decision you just made.”

“We’re up here,” he opened his door. “I don’t see any lights on.”

“But if you aren’t ok without knowing if someone is in there.”

Thomas reached behind Donald’s seat and pulled out a baseball bat, the handle wrapped in hockey tape. “They’re probably sleeping.”

“We can turn around if there’s even a hint anyone’s home.”

“Donald, we have decided to rob this house. Unless we are out-muscled in there, we are going to take as many TVs as we can fit in the back of my pickup.”

Donald got out of the truck and followed Thomas up the driveway. He waved his hands around, searching for the motion sensor. For only a few seconds he could imagine not finding it and turning around and walking the five miles home. Forget the truck. But then the sensor found them and the two were flooded in light. Donald squinted but didn’t turn away from that brilliant cone of illumination. If he was going to serve a penance, it may as well be in miniscule chunks of discomfort.

Thomas opened the outer door and stepped into the garage, putting his mask on. Donald put on his own cotton mask. He pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight and shone it around the dark space. There were no cars, just recycling bins and workbenches and rolled-up flags and empty space. His light found the inner door with a long knob attached to an electronic keypad. To Donald it was the kind of knob you expected to see inside a house, on a bathroom or hall closet.

“Thomas, why don’t we try those sliding doors on the deck, see if one’s unlocked?”

Thomas brought the baseball bat down on the knob. It broke off cleanly and with barely a sound except for a *chunk* followed by its collision with the garage floor. The action sent the numbers on the keypad into fits of blinking panic.

“Think that triggered an alarm somewhere?” Donald asked.

“No, do you?”

Thomas started up, unconcerned with the light Donald was trying to provide him. Donald turned it off just as it hit a ceramic fish sculpture at the bottom of the stairs where his partner just stood. He put his phone away and headed after Thomas up the narrow staircase leading into the house.

The kitchen was dark, the living room illuminated vaguely by a bunch of tiny lights from devices on the entertainment center. Reds, greens, and blues telling where something was located that could probably be sold for some money. But they did not have time to deal with the inevitable mess of wires that accompany all of those devices. Thomas turned on the dim light above the electric stove top.

“So now that they will know we’ve been here,” Donald said.

“We start taking TVs.”

“Why not silverware?”

Thomas caught the tone, and gave it back. “And sell it one piece at a time in a stall on the weekends. I want the TVs, I want to *keep* the TVs, to be honest.”

“We could probably each keep one.”

“We aren’t keeping anything. Whatever we get is getting flipped.”

“Would you rather us leave?”

Thomas appeared again from another door. “I would not.”

“You don’t seem in the right state of mind. You have an aura that doesn’t sit right.”

“What other state of mind would you like me in.”

“One where we haven’t broken something and brought a baseball bat inside with us.”

“What about the bachelor party?” Thomas put the baseball bat on the counter and leaned up against the dishwasher. “How many swings do you think I would have gotten, even with help?”

“We could probably fix that door.”

“We aren’t fixing the door.”

“Maybe there’s a scuff, but it’s probably not unfixable. Covering our tracks, right?”

“Donald, we are leaving the handle as it is.” Thomas walked across the kitchen into the darkness. “There’s a thirty in here. How big do you think the one in the living room is?”

“Fifty-five?”

“We might have to leave that unfortunately.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. Now, depending on the other sizes in the house, we could situate them in the cab so they were next to each other but not sliding around on top of each other. If

there are two bedrooms upstairs, with two more thirties, we take these and have ourselves a nice, snug fit in my bed.”

“Did you measure the bed?”

“No, I know my cab and I’m looking at this television,” Thomas said from the darkness.

Donald started up the open staircase. At the top he found two more televisions through open bedroom doors. “I think we’re good, Tommy.”

“Should I back the truck up or are we carrying them down the hill?”

“I’ll see if I can get these two downstairs.”

Donald unplugged the first television from a sparse bedroom, and walked into the hallway and into the other bedroom. He put it down on the bed and turned to the second television, same brand, same model. He heard a sound he assumed was Thomas bumping into something, but of course it wasn’t. When were those sounds ever just your partner bumping into something? He was unplugging the second television when he heard a male’s voice from two flights down.

“Hello?”

“Don, wouldja shut up?”

Donald walked to the balcony and called down to his partner. “If you have anything in your hands, put it down.”

Donald descended into the kitchen and stood next to Thomas at the top of the stairs leading down to the garage. Thomas found his bat and then found the proper pose to hold it in for the big reveal. A man’s face entered into the weak light from the kitchen, his hands raised and empty, palms out.

“Are you the homeowners?” the man asked, keeping his current posture. “You the maintenance guys?”

“We are not,” Donald said. “Is it just you, or are there more behind you?”

“My wife’s down here.”

“Are we here too early?” a woman’s voice asked from the darkness. “She said we could come after midnight, when I called earlier. We just got in from Cleveland.” She said the last as if it was the answer to the rest of what she said.

“You two are probably perfectly alright showing up now,” Donald said.

The husband still had his arms raised. “We aren’t blocking you in.”

“We appreciate that,” Donald said.

“What do you have?”

“TVs.” Donald answered.

“*All* of them?”

“There’s one in the living room.”

“Too big?”

“We left you the one in the living room,” Donald said, attempting an edge to his voice but not getting there.

“Should we go out to the car?” the wife asked.

Donald motioned with his head, “How is she going to be?”

“She’ll be fine,” the husband responded. “We have our bags, are you done upstairs?”

Thomas stuck the baseball bat through one of his belt loops.

“I can be.” Donald walked the length of the living room and up the stairs.

The wife poked her head from around the corner, “So we’re coming up, right?”

“As soon as I’m back downstairs,” Donald said from two floors up. He stacked both televisions and then went back to join his partner. The stairs were wood, or at least made to look like wood and there was no railing. Each step felt like his shoes would slip out from under him. Donald wondered if he dropped the televisions if he would leave them on the floor and walk out. Even though he knew it was their responsibility to clean up the mess, as another human being. “Alright, you two come up, and we’ll be out of your way.”

“The door, though,” the husband said. “What about the knob?”

Donald assumed the man was unable to see his incredulity, “My man, this right here *is* that situation. And it seems to be working out pretty well for everyone so far, I would say. The two of us are the ones that were going to do this, and we have. The outer door locks, but you’d need to find the spare laying around if you wanted to lock up when you left for the day. You could give her a call in the morning and find out where the key is. Or they’ll probably drive out here and see about getting it fixed.”

“What if we see you driving around?” the wife was back in darkness behind the wall.

“Depends when you leave. We both leave around seven most mornings. We get back around six o’clock.”

“What about buying milk?” she asked.

“Go to the big box on 40. We don’t shop there. You’ll be going to the bars down in the city, I imagine.” Donald said.

“You’re really taking the televisions?”

“We are really taking the televisions.”

“What if we don’t want you to?” the husband asked.

“We can do this however you want,” Thomas said, able to perfectly generate menace from a cold opening. “Would we kill you? No, of course not. Would you be spending the first night of your vacation here in bed? No, you wouldn’t.”

“Both of us?” the wife asked.

“If you tried to get involved in an active way, who’s to say what I would have to do. I could give you a bruised hip or I could try to gouge your eyes out.”

“It’s our honeymoon,” the wife said.

“Well congratulations,” Donald said. “If you two want to come up here into the living room, we’ll head down the stairs and be out of your way. The sooner I can get these TVs out of my arms the better.”

“Can you fix the door?” the wife asked.

“They will fix the door for you,” Thomas said.

“I could probably fix the door,” Donald said.

“What about your voices?” the wife asked.

“What about them?”

“What if we tell the police what you sound like.”

“The police will sound about how we do, not all of us are blessed without a geographically-linked accent.”

“So you’re leaving with three TVs?” she asked.

“And then you two will start your honeymoon and know this scenario had a one in whatever percent chance of happening,” Donald said. “Even smaller, it happening on your honeymoon-“

“The first night,” the husband said.

“There you go, even smaller still. Lock the door behind you and give the home owners a call in the morning.”

“But what if you come back?” the wife asked.

“We won’t. And if this happens again, I would do the exact same thing you did here. Defend what you gotten defend, but unless you have the advantage, I wouldn’t do anything heroic.”

“Keep an eye on what they bring with them,” Thomas said. “I know a guy does these bats up with nails instead of keeping a gun in the house.”

The husband moved first. He trudged up the stairs, right hand trailing behind where he pulled his wife along. He was a tall man, but not well built, although taller than Donald had expected for his level of docility. But Donald was grateful for the man’s demeanor. The wife Donald barely saw, a whisp passing under the low light from the stove top and then into the darkness of the living room. Just two eyes looking at him and his partner. Donald wondered how composed he would have been in the husband’s situation, with something to protect against unfavorable odds.

Donald and Thomas descended the stairs.

At the bottom, Donald poked and prodded with the handle until he got it back on the door. “I’ll just leave this unlocked, you never know if this pad still works. I wouldn’t risk it if you were stepping out, just let the homeowners know. The handle is back on.”

“Thank you,” said the wife.

Donald and Thomas exited through the door they had entered not half an hour previously, Donald locked it behind them. He turned toward the house on his way down the hill, looking as directly into the flood light as his eyes would allow, attempting to soak in more of his penance. There were harsh spots in his vision even back at the truck. The televisions fit, a lopsided triangle on the cushions like some contraband company logo. At the bottom of the driveway, Donald imagined the couple still standing in darkness, the stove-top light not quite reaching them in the living room. He imagined they stayed that way until morning, when they could be sure it was safe to finally unpack their things and start their honeymoon. But he lied and told himself they would be loading their temporary dressers without any residual fear.