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# **Stories from the Workplace**

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## INTRODUCTION

When I first began this collection I was reminded of a newspaper article I stumbled upon several years prior. The article focused on a man named Henry Darger, a name I later adopted as a tribute in my story “The Ride Home.” This particular article used Darger’s profession as a custodian as a way of framing its posed questions concerning what Darger has since become celebrated for, his posthumous contribution to what many refer to as outsider art.<sup>1</sup> Darger, who is recognized as one of the most prominent self-taught artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is responsible for painting close to 300 watercolor paintings that illustrate his epic tale, a 15,145 page long manuscript entitled In the Realms of the Unreal.<sup>2</sup> It strikes me now that in juxtaposing Darger’s career as a janitor with a discussion of his artistic contribution, the author was relying on the unexpected to hook his readers. Admittedly, I found myself drawn in by the contrast. Something about this idea of a janitor spending his free time creating and reigning over a fantasy world both intrigued and surprised me. While reading the article I caught myself picturing this man taking great delight in the cathartic escape such an artistic undertaking would have likely provided. It was not until I proposed this collection

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Thévoz, the Curator of the Collection de l’Art Brut in Lausanne explains that ‘Art Brut’, or ‘outsider art’, is a type of art comprised of works “produced by people who... have not been culturally indoctrinated or socially conditioned.” Thévoz goes on to distinguish these artists as being on the fringes of society, and creating their works outside of what is commonly deemed the fine art system of schools, galleries, and museums. ‘Art Brut’, he says, is often characterized by a raw originality that critics feel is undiluted or unadulterated by society. The Anthony Petullo Collection of Self-Taught and Outsider Art, “History of Self-taught and Outsider Art.” 2007, 15 April 2011 < [http://www.petulloartcollection.org/history/article.cfm?n\\_id=4](http://www.petulloartcollection.org/history/article.cfm?n_id=4)>.

<sup>2</sup> Although this is the customary shortened version of the title, the full title is actually The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Galindeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion. American Folk Art Museum, “Henry Darger.” 2000, 13 April 2011 < <http://www.folkartmuseum.org/darger>>.

that I found myself questioning my own reaction. What about Henry Darger fascinated me? In fairness to myself I must admit that I was impressed by the sheer amplitude of his work. In fact, after spending a year crafting the stories in this collection, my admiration has only grown. Still, I must confess that part of my reaction can be attributed to the fact that he was a custodian. In all honesty, I was guilty of making a judgment about Henry Darger that I had based solely on his occupation.

We make judgments everyday about the individuals that we meet. Usually these judgments are based upon what we can readily distinguish about these strangers. In these instances we rely on appearances to dictate these judgments. In other cases, we use questions to discern an individual's creed, sexual preference, or occupation, in order to inform our opinions. In each instance, these judgments are rooted in our own personal values. Throughout my time here at Mount Holyoke College the concept of value has been recast multiple times in both my English and Politics courses. In my Politics courses the question is centered primarily on the issue of who or what we value as a nation-state. In my English courses, however, the debate is framed around the question of what constitutes good literature.

With each debate I began to develop a sense that establishing a concrete value system was inherently problematic for a writer once one considered the fact that every value is intrinsically linked to a judgment. What I mean by this is that these value systems feed into one's natural desires to pass some sort of final

judgment on one's own creation. For some, this is the desired role of the writer. For others, myself included, the writer is observer. In a critical essay entitled "Creative Writing 101", Raymond Carver explains that his first Creative Writing teacher, John Gardner, believed that revising was one of the most integral parts of the writing process because, "A writer found what he wanted to say in the ongoing process of seeing what he'd said."<sup>3</sup> What Carver and Gardner both seem to be suggesting is that it is the writer's job to see and unveil, not to cloak in the blanket of his or her own values or judgments.

My aim with this collection was to challenge the idea that as a writer you should place value. I set out to write a collection that combined something that I felt was being ignored or undervalued in both literature and politics. In terms of literature, I found that most of the short stories I was reading often either glossed over the workplace entirely or only referenced these occupations so that they might rely on common stereotypes for purposes of characterization. Essentially, most mentions of the workplace acted as a way of building a character's internal psychology. With this collection, I wanted to challenge the popular notion of worth by combining an image of the workplace, which is something I felt was missing in many classic American short stories I was reading, with an accurate image of the worker, which is something I found was being undervalued and manipulated in American society. It was my hope that by merging both spheres of discussion I could push the discourse further.

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond Carver, "Creative Writing 101," The Story and Its Writers: An Introduction to Short Fiction, ed. Ann Charters (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2007) 947.

There are some critics who are likely to disagree with my assertion that the image of the American worker has been distorted, and in turn has become undervalued or ignored. Most likely these critics would point to instances threaded throughout American history in which the blue-collar worker is celebrated, even glorified at times. In fact, one does not need to even venture further than the 2008 Presidential race and a man named Joe Wurzelbacher, perhaps better known as ‘Joe the Plumber’, to find such an instance. In this case, a simple exchange between ‘Joe the Plumber’ and then Senator Barack Obama on the topic of taxes became an exploitative way for both the Republicans and the Democrats to express their kinship with the common man. ‘Joe the Plumber’ became so synonymous with the working class that he was referenced eleven times in an October 2008 debate between the candidates, a number that eventually lead CNN to declare him, “the star of the final presidential debate.”<sup>4</sup> The working class image presented by ‘Joe the Plumber’ is inauthentic because it does little more than compartmentalize a man by his vocation. Such a constriction is not only demoralizing, but it is also erroneous. As Barbara Ehrenreich, author of Nickel and Dimed, points out, “Low-wage workers are no more homogenous in personality or ability than people who write for a living, and no less likely to be

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<sup>4</sup> Lauren Korenreich, “Who is Joe the Plumber?” CNN, <<http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2008/10/15/who-is-joe-the-plumber>> (accessed April 19, 2011).



funny or bright.”<sup>5</sup> Essentially, who we are in America has been reduced to what we do.

On Labor Day in 1971 former President Richard Nixon stated that, “The work ethic holds that labor is good in itself; that a man or woman becomes a better person by virtue of the act of working.” While I agree that the act of labor or industry can be a formative experience, this idea that men and women become better simply by working has become dangerously distorted in our society so that now there is a link made between one’s individual morality and one’s success in the workplace. From this logic it follows that a person is perceived to be good if he or she works hard, and if he or she works hard then he or she will profit. While there is no rigid class structure in America, there is still an implicitly capitalistic idea that the good, or the industrious, will be the most successful.<sup>6</sup>

My short story collection grew out of my desire to reassess this idea of utility and success within our society. I wanted to create characters that were both definitively shaped by their workplaces, but also had an internal depth that moved beyond these archetypes. During an interview with Studs Terkel, Nora Watson mused that, “Most of us... have jobs that are too small for our spirit. Jobs are not

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, Nickel and Dimed: on (not) Getting by in America (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002) 8.

<sup>6</sup> A common example of this can be found in the rags to riches tales that were authored by Horatio Alger (1834-99). Alger wrote well over 100 books targeted toward young boys. In these novels he depicted children who were “struggling valiantly against poverty and adversity” but who ultimately “gain[ed] wealth and honor.” Algerism promoted an idea that not only was there an inherent morality to be found in the struggle against poverty, but also that industry was always rewarded. Although there have since been critiques of what many refer to as the Alger Myth, the American dream is still intrinsically linked to this idea of the noble worker who is afforded endless opportunity and success. “Horatio Alger.” The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2007 ed. < <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0803314.html>>.

big enough for people.”<sup>7</sup> What Watson seems to be driving at is that, no matter how fulfilling a job may be, it can never fully possess a man or woman. There will always be a spill-over, or rather something within the man that the job cannot fully contain or express. It is this tension that I wished to encounter, the tension between who a man is and what he does for a living. While I admired the nonfiction works of reporters like Studs Terkel and Barbara Ehrenreich, I was more interested in the ways in which fiction illuminates this tension. Writers like John Updike, Elizabeth Strout, Anton Chekhov, Eudora Welty, and Margaret Atwood were my main influences throughout this endeavor. Undeniably, the talent and craftsmanship exhibited by these men and women would be enough to inspire any young writer, but more than that, these writers are known for focusing many of their narratives through the lens of what some would deem to be mundane or everyday life. By highlighting the everyday, these writers are able to cut across gender, ethnic, racial, and class lines. Consider the fact that Chekhov, whose short stories are over a hundred years old, is able to capture an understated vision of humanity that is still accessible to modern readers.<sup>8</sup> These writers recognize that the mundane holds that sign of universal humanity that speaks to,

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<sup>7</sup> Studs Terkel, Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do (London: Wildwood House, 1975) xxiv.

<sup>8</sup> I should point out that when I first began this collection I initially focused my attention on short stories that dealt with work. Reading these stories only left my own stories feeling empty and hollow. I was reproducing, not producing. It wasn't until I read Chekhov's novella "Ward No. 6" that I finally encountered a story that left a lasting impression on my own writing without having my stories read as if they had been derived from someone else's formula. Chekhov's strength is his rejection of the conclusive story, the story that takes it upon itself to answer the questions that it poses. The result of this outlook is that Chekhov's stories are more resonant, and his characters more realistic in that they defy explanation. Anton Chekhov, Ward Number Six and Other Stories (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

and binds together, all of us. From each of these writers I learned how to create more compelling and consistent characters through tone, setting and plot.

Since my stories are all character-driven, I had to learn how to allow these characters to steer the story, rather than trying to force them into a story. Perhaps more importantly, though, I became more aware of the relationship between reader and writer. In Jean-Paul Sartre's essay entitled "Why Write?" he reasons that, "To write is both to disclose the world and to offer it as a task to the generosity of the reader."<sup>9</sup> Such a statement perfectly explains what I hoped to accomplish with this collection. I sought to reveal my own view of the contrast between labor and value while also challenging the reader to reevaluate his or her own standpoint.

Sartre casts the writer as magician, responsible solely for exposing the rabbit. It would be a poor magician who explained his tricks to every questioning audience, just as it would be a poor writer who tied up the loose ends of a story for their curious reader. In his critical text, Burning Down the House, Charles Baxter writes that:

It seems to be the nature of plots to bring a truth or a desire up to the light, and it has often been the task of those who write fiction to expose elements that are kept in secret in a personality, so that the mask over that personality . . . falls either temporarily or permanently . . . What emerges is a precious thing, precious because buried or lost or repressed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Why Write?" The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends, ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007) 670.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Baxter, Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1997) 113.

My intent was to expose the dimension in each of my characters in order to unmask these characters, as Baxter might say, while still having them maintain the shroud of self-delusion that every individual wears. At first, I attempted to build this dimension through narrative commentary. In my first drafts I utilized the third-person perspective as a way for me to guide the reader into perceiving the character in a certain way. It was through this method that I tried to build sympathy for some of my more grizzled characters, like the short-tempered Hank Darger in my story “The Ride Home” or Jimmy in “Union Men.” What I found, though, was that the characters seemed inauthentic in these drafts. By relying on this narrative commentary to draw the readers into my characters, I was doing exactly what I had set out to avoid. It became apparent that such an approach was too forceful and detracted from the power of these men and women. Charles Baxter addresses this difficulty of approaching a character with flaws in Burning Down the House. Baxter writes that there is something “deeply interesting and moving” about the flawed character.<sup>11</sup> However, he is careful to acknowledge that “It’s difficult for fictional characters to acknowledge their mistakes, because then they become definitive: They are *that* person who did *that* thing.”<sup>12</sup> It seemed absurd for me to attempt to build believable characters who were not confined by their jobs, only to have them become defined by their mistakes. I did not want to limit these characters by defining them with my own value systems, but rather, I

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 14.

wanted to highlight and expose that part of them that resisted definition. It is this slippery element of a character that makes him or her the most appealing, and the most human.

During this time I began to draw character maps, which are graphs that look like the most intricate spider-webs. With these maps I set to paper the cast of characters, the ways in which each person related to the others, and the core desires, conscious or unconscious, contained within each individual. Once each map was finished and I was staring at a mass of intersections and contradictions representative of my characters, I began to realize that my characters had become inexplicable. What I mean by this is that like most individuals my characters could no longer be clearly defined. It was from this exercise that I gained a deeper understanding of my characters and became comfortable allowing them to stand on their own without explanation from a narrator. In a letter Anton Chekhov wrote to a colleague, he explains that:

The artist must be only an impartial witness of his characters, and what they said, not their judge... if an artist whom the public believes decides to state that he understands nothing of what he sees, that in itself is of great significance in the realm of thought and is a great step forward.<sup>13</sup>

Chekhov indicates here that the author must not be judgmental of his or her characters, but rather let those characters speak for themselves. After drawing my character maps, it became clearer to me that the more poignant way of building

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<sup>13</sup> Chekhov also wrote, “Shun all descriptions of the characters’ spiritual state. You must try to have that state emerge clearly from their actions.” Anton Chekhov, Anton Chekhov’s Short Stories: Texts of the Stories, Backgrounds, Criticism ed. Ralph Matlaw (New York: Norton, 1979) 269 & 270.

sympathy for my characters was to let my characters do it for themselves. In many of my stories, like “Last Call,” “Union Men,” and “Old Dog & Old Tricks,” the characters are revealed through both their dialogue and the contrast between what they say and what they think. I took great pains not to tell my readers what to think about Jean’s abrasive behavior in “Old Dog & Old Tricks” or Eddie’s outburst in “Last Call.” Instead, as Sartre said, I tried to offer these characters up as a task for my readers to grapple with.

In the above quote Chekhov touches briefly on the idea of a well-stated problem when he explains that the artist must try to state that he understands nothing of what he sees. Chekhov seems to be suggesting here that an author is more valuable as an observer, rather than analyzer. In yet another letter to A.S. Surovin, Chekhov gives more weight to this notion when he explains that, “You [Surovin] are right in demanding that an artist approach his work consciously, but you are confusing two concepts: *the solution of a problem and the correct formulation of a problem*. Not a single problem is resolved in *Anna Karenina* or *Onegin*, but they satisfy you completely only because all the problems in them are formulated correctly.”<sup>14</sup> Again, I found that I only understood the importance of Chekhov’s advice after multiple revisions. In many of my first drafts I had a desire to tie up at least some of my loose ends, to make the lives of my characters neater and tidier. A lot of people tend to think of revising as a neatening process, and perhaps for some writers that is what happens. In my own experience, each

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 272.

successive draft became more disorderly, the plot became more unfocused and the characters more scattered. Out of this mess I tried to pull out what felt the most authentic to me, and pinpoint the mess of intersections that I had outlined as a reference. As my characters grew, their problems became increasingly complex. Just as it's impossible to solve, or even sum up, all of my own problems with a few sentences, it's equally absurd to think that the resolution of a story would include a solution. Certainly, given the definition of both of these words, this statement may seem counter-intuitive to some. This statement, however, ties back to my attempts to distinguish the role of writer as observer. While it is true that a writer has an obligation to conclude a story that does not mean that a writer should solve a story. In this instance the resolution of a story points more to the story being settled in some way or another so that the reader is able to discern, "the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things."<sup>15</sup>

The strength of a story is rooted more in the expression of a character and his or her problems, than in any insincere solution that might put the reader at ease. Some of the best short stories that I have read, like Eudora Welty's "Where is the Voice Coming From," Elizabeth Strout's "A Little Burst," or Yoko Ogawa's novella "The Diving Pool," all resonated because they were unapologetic in their depiction of the unnerving. In each story the responsibility

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<sup>15</sup> Raymond Carver, "On Writing," *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, ed. Ann Charters (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007) 945.

falls to the reader, who must wrestle with the fact that these characters have only created more problems in their attempts to find solutions.

Throughout the course of writing and revising for this collection, many people have asked me what sparked my interest in the subject of work, value and industry beyond the academic reasons reviewed above. Out of the myriad of societal ills, why are these issues of value the ones I chose to address? Oftentimes when people ask that question, I find myself wishing that I had a character map for myself that I could reference. I grew up in a family that defined success and wealth not in terms of material gain, but rather in terms of contentment and happiness. My father, who I have often referred to as “the smartest man I know,” mows lawns, trims hedges, and pulls weeds on the weekends in order to make ends meet. When I was growing up this was a nagging contradiction in my life. I could not understand why a man with as much intellect as I saw in him was spending his workdays as a laborer and his weekends behind a lawnmower. Finally one Saturday, when I was helping him weed a neighbor’s garden, I asked him, and his simple explanation was that he enjoyed working with his hands in the sun. From then on I became gradually more aware of the prideful way he regarded a neatly trimmed lawn, or a perfectly raked yard. More than that, I became more mindful of the utility of each of his jobs.

For my father, success and contentment was not to be found in a cubicle or an academic setting, but rather in being able to look back on a finished product with a sense of pride. His calluses and grass-stains certainly do not subtract from



his intelligence, although there is a tendency within our society to be dismissive of this type of work. I'm recalling now a conversation I had with my cousin, who has followed a path similar to my father's in terms of vocation. During the conversation my cousin recounted a few travel stories and then observed that throughout his travels he noticed that while women in America immediately questioned him about what he did for a living, it almost never came up with foreign women. Of course, I was skeptical at first, but he explained that even when he returned to Canada, which is where he was raised, the women were definitely interested in his job, but it was not the first thing they asked. On some level, this conversation fueled my interest on the subject of labor and the way in which over time the concept of hard work has grown so that now it is akin to an American ideal.

While these conversations comprise the driving influences that have been the easiest for me to articulate, there is a more intimate, core reason that I rarely admit. My curiosity for the subject grew out of my own fascination with writing and, more specifically with what it means to be a writer.<sup>16</sup> Most writers you talk to will speak of a certain compulsion to write, but for me this gravitation has always been paired with a sickening feeling of self-doubt. In fact, I have often found myself tiptoeing around the use of the word 'writer' for fear that some

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<sup>16</sup> In her collection of essays entitled *Negotiating with the Dead*, Margaret Atwood draws a distinction between writing and the writer when she notes that, "Writing – the setting down of words – is an ordinary enough activity . . . Anyone literate can take implement in hand and make marks on a flat surface. *Being a writer*, however, seems to be a socially acknowledged role, and one that carries some sort of weight or impressive significance – we hear a capital W on *Writer*." Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 4.

actual writer might reveal my fraud. Admittedly, when I heard the title ‘writer’ it carried with it a connotation or set of stereotypes much like the ones I have been trying to combat in these stories. To refer to myself as a writer seemed as if it was inherently laden with more impact, more seriousness somehow, than to simply say that I was writing. Margaret Atwood identifies the idea of the writer by offering up for consideration the image of the double, the fractured individual. According to Atwood the title “writer” is unsettling because it is composed of “two entities we lump under one name.”<sup>17</sup> There is the “person who exists when no writing is going forward... and that other, more shadowy and altogether more equivocal personage who shares the same body, and who, when no one is looking, takes it over and uses it to commit the actual writing.”<sup>18</sup> In Atwood’s language, the act of writing takes on a sinister glow that awakens in me that same curiosity and compulsion that Sartre sums up when he classifies writing as being for some an act of flight, and for others an act of conquest.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps, had Sartre been acquainted with Atwood’s version of this double figure, he might have recognized that there is a large subset of writers, myself included, who find that writing is both flight and conquest. Never has this tension been more pronounced than when I began this collection. Like Jimmy, a character featured in my story “Union Men,” I found myself inexplicably drawn toward that which scared me the most.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Sartre, 662.

This collection became a way to escape my reality, while simultaneously conquering my fears.

I have become increasingly familiar with the idea of a double, first in literary works like “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” and then in Margaret Atwood’s analogy, although it has never been a particularly comfortable concept. Over time I have come to realize that the reason the notion of a double unnerves me is primarily because it is interwoven with my self-doubt about myself as writer. This semester I found this fear perfectly articulated in Elaine Scarry’s book, The Body in Pain. In her text, Scarry presents readers with another vision of the double, one that I had always felt, but had never found written. Scarry writes that the body in pain is fractured, in much the same way I imagine a writer is, so that a divide builds between the voice and body.<sup>20</sup> For Scarry, when the body is contained and limited by this pain, “the voice becomes a final source of self-extension; so long as it is speaking.”<sup>21</sup> In a later chapter, Scarry highlights the importance of the imagination, or as she refers to it, the “ground of last resort,” in prolonging the onset of pain.<sup>22</sup> While reading this, I felt an immediate identification with this double, the one brought on by pain. During my freshman year at Mount Holyoke College I was diagnosed with late-stage chronic Lyme Disease. This is not something I am choosing to disclose in hopes of gaining sympathy, but rather as a way for readers to better understand my struggle with

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<sup>20</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford United Press, 1985) 33.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

the concept of “writer.” Although my diagnosis was just four years ago, my struggle with this condition has lasted well over a decade, and during this time I constantly questioned whether my compulsion toward writing was driven by my need to “escape” as Sartre puts it, or if I phrase it in Scarry’s language, my need to access the “ground of last resort.” Last summer I finally found a treatment plan that helped alleviate my pain. While I was overcome with an incredible sense of relief, I also felt a strange, inarticulate fear. Would I still write if I had nothing to escape from, and no pain to conquer?

There is a common idea that creativity flows from pain or sacrifice. This is a stereotype that I subscribed to for a large period of my life, when I was afraid that without my pain I would lose my double. It is not that the influences I cited earlier are false, but rather that this collection rose out of a combination of all of these factors, and so to obscure one left my Introduction feeling misleading. This particular reason is one that has taken me quite a few months to unearth, and it’s not one I think I even fully understand. Interestingly, my process for self-reflection is exactly the process that I used with revising my stories. With each revision, I found that my characters revealed their complexities more until their motives, intentions and problems were all as intricate as the character maps I had drawn out. Now, while they are each shaped by their workplaces, it is clear they exist outside of them as well. Hopefully, I have achieved my goal of capturing a clear vision of the worker double, who is torn between their own internal desires and the external demands of an occupation.

Perhaps it is a universal experience to question whether or not we might be outsiders or frauds. For much of my life I have refrained from calling myself a “writer,” and lost in my own self-importance, I was unable to see that I was not the only one. Raymond Carver wrote that for a long time he regarded his writing process as “my uncomfortable secret” that somehow “revealed my own shortcomings.”<sup>23</sup> What I have learned from writing this collection is that we are all right in assuming that we do not fit in the mold that these occupational titles afford us. This is not something we should shy away from, nor is it some uncomfortable secret that must remain unspoken. In actuality, we do not fit into these molds not because we are inadequate, but rather because they are incapable of containing our spirit. In order to create an authentic character, then, a writer must not allow him or her to be defined by the writer’s personal values or judgments, or even by the character’s own mistakes. The authentic character must be a composite figure that resists these easy labels and, in doing so, challenges the reader to think beyond him or her.

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<sup>23</sup> Carver, “On Writing” 945.

## THE RIDE HOME

“Mr. Darger?” the little girl pulls on his sleeve with thin, slimy fingers.

“Behind the line, Sandy.” Ignoring the question, Mr. Darger closes the school bus door and listens for the hiss as the bus starts to accelerate.

“My name is Cindy,” the girl howls. Her face slides into a frown, but she inches her sandaled feet backward. Still, she leans her body far over the line and grabs for his sleeve.

“Mr. Dar-ger?” Cindy yanks on his sleeve again. He almost jerks his head from the road at her insistence, but instead he just nods his head toward her.

“My mom said I should tell you if my stomach feels funny.” He looks into the large rearview mirror above his seat. Cindy is clutching her stomach, and her eyes look wide and pleading, like Danny’s used to in the middle of long road trips. For a moment he can hear his ex-wife, Sabrina, scolding him to pull over or at least to start looking for a rest stop. The first few trips he had argued with her, trying to make some trivial point about not encouraging a weak will. It’s not good to coddle the kid, he usually said, a perfect echo of his own father. There’s a difference between coddling and parenting, she would retort in a voice so strained with anger that it sounded as if she was speaking through a rotating fan. Each time their son had ended up throwing up in a plastic bag, or a spare cooler, or on the car floor. Back then Hank always had an opinion, usually a contradictory one. He disagreed about parenting styles, paying for school lunches, afterschool activities,

and the use of training wheels. These days he still has his opinions, but mostly he keeps them to himself.

Looking into the rearview mirror as he pulls the bus over, Hank cannot help but notice the loose, meaty slabs that fill the sleeves of the t-shirt Cindy is tugging on again, and, perhaps worst of all, the way his shoulders slope down now, as though crushed underneath the weight of his once virile ego.

“Does your stomach feel funny now, Cindy?” Hank asks as the bus whines to a stop in the breakdown lane. The children behind him whisper excitedly, making wild conjectures about the sudden break in schedule.

“I’ll bet we’re going to get pizza,” a kindergartner whispers in the same yelp that all children use. In the seat next to him his friend bellows something about the potential to see a gory car accident.

“I was right all along,” one boy yells excitedly across the bus. “He is a kidnapper.” The younger girls toward the front of the bus begin to scream and cry.

“I’m not a kidnapper,” Hank growls into the mirror, but the girls are already crying and the boys are growing feverish with their imaginings.

“You are too! My brother said so!” One of the more brazen fourth graders shrieks.

“I know karate, Mis-ter Dar-ger!” his friend in the seat next to him taunts. It is clear that the more he argues, the more electrified they will become. It is not often that children get the opportunity to question authority, and Hank knows that

just because they have not yet learned the word ‘coup’ does not mean they don’t secretly crave to take part in one. And so, he waves a silencing, dismissive hand toward the growing mob and glares at the insurgents already jumping on the brown seats. As they sink stubbornly into their seats, the revolution quiets and quiets. Finally, Hank kneels down. Eye-to-eye with Cindy now he can see that she looks paler than usual.

“I’m going to feel for your temperature, Cindy.” He reaches out his warm, wrinkled palm, but she recoils. “I’m not going to hurt you, Cindy. Remember what your mommy said?” The girl nods and closes her eyes before leaning forward, her forehead meeting his palm. Skin against skin, he sighs, remembering all the things he used to take for granted.

“Am I burning up, Mister?” Cindy asks, a faint smile crawling back onto her face.

“Nah, I think you’re going to be just fine.” Hank pushes against his knees with his palms and labors back to his feet. “Does your stomach still feel jumpy?”

When the girl nods he offers her his cell phone and tells her to stay in the front seat. Then he edges the bus back onto the deserted road. He listens as Cindy calls her mother and fights back the worry in her own voice. Soon she pulls on his sleeve again and wordlessly slips his cell phone into his open palm.

“Alright, guys, we’re taking a detour.” The kindergartners begin circulating rumors again about pizza, ice cream and French fries, but when Hank doesn’t answer the excitement dissipates into groans.



Cindy's house sits in the middle of a cul-de-sac, an overgrown lawn and chipping white shudders making it stick out like a sore thumb next to the other manicured properties. As Hank navigates the narrow turn-about he tries to remember Cindy's mother, Bess, in his elementary school class, when their own fingers were sticky with paste and shiny with glitter. It seems like another lifetime entirely. He can only think of the Bess he knows now, the one standing anxiously in front of the screen door now, the one whose neighbors gossip about the state of her lawn in the grocery store.

The school bus door screeches open. Cindy struggles into her backpack straps and skips down the three steps. She gives a quick wave from her front lawn before disappearing into the house. The screen door slams behind her. He drops the rest of the children off at their respective homes. At some stops parents frantically wait at the sidewalk for an explanation of the delay. Hank explains to each pair of raised eyebrows, each furrowed brow. At every stop he wonders whether they gossip about him once the bus door squeaks closed. After the last kid has straggled off the bus, Hank finally relaxes into his seat.

For the first time since the custody hearing, he does not dread the ride back to the bus depot. Before Sabrina and Danny moved out it had been the best part of the day. Danny had always ridden on the bus home with him from school. Everyday he climbed up the three stairs and pushed to the back of the bus with the rest of the crowd. And when the bus pulled over or stopped unexpectedly, Danny would shout his whispered guesses just like the rest of the mob, but after the last

stop Danny would scoot closer and closer to the front of the bus, gasping with laughter each time his father caught him in the mirror.

“No switching seats while the bus is moving!” Hank might yell as a challenge. When Danny was still in pre-school Sabrina had outlawed Hank from playing a similar game with him. In the game Hank would chase his son around the house yelling that certain rooms were forbidden for entrance. The game wasn’t entertaining unless Danny broke these rules, causing Hank to erupt in rehearsed anger, roaring and stomping his feet.

“You can’t play games like that, Hank. It confuses him,” Sabrina said once after the game ended in Danny crying.

“He’s smart enough to know when I’m faking. Aren’t you, champ?” Hank asked while Sabrina wiped at his tears with her thumb. Even though Danny had nodded his head up and down, the two only played like that on the bus afterward, with Hank yelling out hollow rules and Danny tentatively breaking them.

When Danny finally got to the front seat, when he would finally tug on Hank’s shirtsleeve, for once he was not just Mr. Darger. He dragged out the syllables of the name like a perfect song.

“Dad-dy?” Danny would chirp.

“Yeah, Danny?” Hank would respond.

“Can we listen to the radio?” Danny would ask, fumbling with a stuck zipper or untied shoelace.

It wasn't the same anymore listening to the radio without Danny humming along behind him. For the past few months he had ridden home in silence. Today, though, with the children's insults still rattling in his head, he found himself fumbling with the radio controls once more.

The truth was Hank had never much minded his job until Danny left. He would never admit it to himself, or anyone else for that matter, but he liked how much more honest children were than adults. Adults spent too long figuring out what was appropriate, what was proper. But kids, they acted on a whim. They laughed as loud as they wanted whenever they wanted, and they cried for as long as they could because of the wrong flavor juice box. Kids were all angles, knobby knees and bent elbows, blunt words and stubborn tantrums. Adults, on the other hand, gossiped about you in the grocery store and then turned around to pat you on the back. They told you to your face that everything was going to be okay, and then giggled with one another about your naiveté. Most adults Hank knew were spineless, just like him. Even in some of the fifth graders he could see it starting. In the morning their brows wrinkled just like the parents he dropped them off with in the afternoon. In the very back of the bus they started poisonous rumors and sent them forward with the most innocent of smiles. In one or two children he had even begun to notice that telltale slope of the shoulders.

Before his divorce he had tried explaining it all to Sabrina after work one night. It had been raining all day long and so the drive back to the bus depot took longer than usual. By the time they got home Danny was half asleep in the back

of the car. “Tired, little buddy?” Hank asked before scooping him up into his arms. Dinner was waiting on the table. Sabrina kissed them both and ruffled both heads of hair.

“Mommy? Did it come yet?” Danny had whispered into his father’s chest.

“What’s he talking about, Sabrina?” Hank asked as he laid him on the couch.

Sabrina just shrugged. “Probably just dreaming.”

“Did you know that you always shrug before you tell a lie?” He rustled in the drawer for a bottle opener.

“It’s nothing,” Sabrina said dismissively. “I just told him about this suit I ordered for him.”

“What the hell does he need a suit for?” Hank asked.

She turned and faced him before speaking. “You remember how Tracy from next door was telling me about her sister’s son?”

Hank nodded even though he couldn’t remember much about Tracy beyond the fact that her dog never stopped barking. “Well you remember how she told me that he transferred to that fancy private school two towns over?” Hank nodded again, a quicker more impatient nod than before. Sabrina had a way of stretching important news out so that it lost its meaning. She considered it contextualizing. Hank saw it more as manipulation.

“What’s that got to do with the suit?” he asked pointedly. His head was halfway in the fridge, looking for a beer behind the condiments.

“I went down to the library a few weeks ago and emailed that school to request a few pamphlets. Did you know they offer scholarships?”

“What the hell are you getting at Sabrina?” Hank’s voice was louder now. Danny shifted on the couch.

Sabrina jumped at the change in his voice, and then the story she had been slowly unraveling came falling out all at once. “I sent them Danny’s standardized test scores from last year and a few old report cards. I didn’t really think anything would come out of it, you know? Funny thing is it’d been so long since I sent all of it that I kind of forgot all about it until they sent me a letter last week.” She left the cutting board, rinsed her hands in the sink, and began sifting through a stack of mail on the counter. From the stack she selected a few pieces: a pamphlet, a thick, white envelope and a bulging manila one. “I was waiting for the right time to tell you. I just didn’t want to get your hopes up, but I guess now is just as good a time as any.” From the smaller white envelope she pulled out a typewritten letter. A school crest was printed at the top of the page. She handed the folded paper to Hank, and then directed him to the third paragraph. “They want to schedule an interview with the two of us, and Danny too, of course.”

“An interview, huh? For this Crest Point Place?” He hadn’t been able to say the name without snorting. “It sounds like the name of a soap opera.”

“I know we hadn’t really discussed private school, but like I said I just sent in the test scores on a whim.” While Sabrina turned back to the carrots, Hank twisted the bottle cap off of his beer.

“It doesn’t sound like that to me,” Hank challenged. Sabrina stopped cutting. “It just sounds like a lot of thought went into it is all I mean. You’re not exactly a big reader so I can’t imagine you just happened to be at the library. Not to mention how many phone calls to Danny’s school you would have had to make to get those test scores and report card copies. It is just a public school, you know, I imagine they’re less efficient with their paper work.” His tone was harsh and biting.

Sabrina ignored Hank’s pointed insult. “Like I said, I didn’t want to get your hopes up.”

“Why the hell does he need to be going to a private school, anyway? You and me both went to public school and we turned out just fine, didn’t we?” He wrapped his arms around her waist.

“You and I,” she corrected.

“Huh?”

“Well it’s just you said ‘you and me both’, but it’s ‘you and I’.” In between each word she sliced down into the carrots so that her correction was punctuated by the rhythm of her knife. “Besides, don’t you want something more for Danny?”

“More than what? We’ve got everything we need here, don’t we?” The room was silent, save for the chopping. “He’s too young to be worrying about that stuff, Sabrina. Kids should be playing in the mud, not worrying about scholarships and suits.” Hank noticed a cardboard shipping box on the kitchen

table and opened the flaps to find it empty. “Where’s this suit now? I want to see it.”

“Upstairs, in the back of the closet on my half.” She heard him begin to climb the stairs and added, “Don’t go tearing through there like some lunatic either.” The closet was the thing Sabrina had hated most about the house when they moved it. At the time he had thought it was endearing, how attentive she was to detail. He remembered thinking that if he were a bachelor buying a house he would only have looked in the closets at the real estate agent’s insistence. Sabrina, though, had looked in every closet, inspected all of the shelves, asked the woman countless questions about hangers and shoes. It was their bedroom closet she hated most. It was too small to share, but the room itself wasn’t large enough to fit an armoire. He had tried not to laugh at that, armoire, the word sounded absurd with Sabrina’s twang of an accent.

“It’s not like I have a lot of clothes, Sabrina. We can always share the closet.” Their real estate agent liked this idea. She used the term communal spaces.

“You’ll probably accumulate clothes, Hank. You can’t just assume you’ll have the same four shirts the rest of your life.” Something in her insistence had irritated him.

“What’d be so wrong about that? My clothes are comfortable and I’m comfortable in them.” His voice had gotten louder, but the real estate agent had still pretended like she did not hear.

“It’s not always about comfort,” Sabrina had said, placing her hands on his chest to soothe him. “Don’t you think that you might need a few dress shirts and slacks, some nice ties, a pair of leather shoes?”

“What the hell do I need that stuff for? It’s not like I’m going to drive the school bus in a suit and tie.” He saw the faint wrinkle of a smile on her face. “Why can’t we just share the closet, indulge in all that communal space,” he had said, looking over his shoulder at the Barbie doll of a woman examining the molding. Sabrina had laughed then and the argument was over. The arguments had ended so quickly then.

Now opening the closet, Hank realized he had accumulated more clothes than promised. He had about fifteen shirts now, most of them flannels that he’d worn so often that some of the younger kids would bet about which shirt he’d wear. Still, he snorted when he remembered what Sabrina had said; the suit would be on her half of the closet. Her dresses, shirts, skirts and other frills took up well over half of the closet. In fact, some of her workout clothes were even hanging on the same hangers as his shirts. He began filing through the items, pushing past hanger after hanger.

On the last hanger, pressed against the closet wall, hung Danny’s suit, preserved in a clear plastic bag. There was a pair of black pants custom made for his son. He had a hard time imagining Danny willingly trading in his elastic waistband for the uncomfortable metal clasps on these dress pants. Sabrina had bought him a nice black jacket and a blue dress shirt too. He imagined her



buttoning him up like a miniature CEO before pushing him into some headmaster's office to parade around. The thought left Hank infuriated. For a moment every muscle in his body felt rigid and taut, as if the slightest movement might snap him like a rubber band. When he recovered, he brought the suit with him downstairs.

“You really want him to wear this thing?” He held the suit up in front of Sabrina, hoping that she would finally see how foolish the whole ordeal was. “His old man would never be caught dead in this get up.”

“His old man has no reason to be in a suit like that, Hank, but this isn't exactly your area of expertise.” She gestured with the knife toward the kitchen table, and he hung the suit off the back of one of the chairs.

“Course it is. Parenting my kid is always going to be my area of expertise.” He tilted his beer bottle back and took a long sip. “Just because you finished a few years of community college doesn't give you the right to —,”

“To what Hank? To want better for Danny? To want our son to get an education? I knew I shouldn't tell you about it. You have to have an opinion about everything.”

“He's too young. These kids — they grow up too fast.”

“These kids? Hank, you're a school bus driver not a philosopher. Don't push it.” He could feel his veins bulging and the words pushing against his teeth. “I swear, sometimes it seems like even that job is too much for you. You're too sensitive for your own good.” Her back was turned and she was cutting carrots

when he put down his beer. By the time she turned around again. The knife was pointed to where he had been standing, but Hank was at the door with Danny cradled in his arms.

“My kid’s not going to be some private school snob. Period.” He carried his son outside into the rain and laid him in the backseat of the car. Sabrina screamed something inaudible from the screen door. Had he been less enraged he might have wondered what the neighbors would think. He might have predicted that their elderly neighbor, Mr. Cooper, would recount an exaggerated version, a version with Sabrina screaming and crying and the smell of burning rubber emanating from his tires.

At the time he hadn’t been thinking about his neighbors or even the guilt that would follow. He had only been thinking of Danny in his suit, a court jester in front of prodding teachers: men with glasses that fell down their long, pointed noses, women with their thin, stringy hair pulled into tight buns. If he was honest with himself, though, it was more than Danny. It was memories of Sabrina trying to dress him in this or that outfit, circling Classified advertisements seeking businessmen and cubicle workers, asking her own father to offer him job after job at every holiday dinner. Hank drove for hours with the radio playing static in the background and his veins still bulging. When Danny woke up they hummed along together until Hank saw that look reflected in the rearview mirror, his son’s eyes wide and pleading.

Hank pulled the car over and got out. He laid his jacket in the mud for Danny to kneel on and then he leaned against the side of the car to wait. The sound of his son throwing up was impossible to ignore, but still he pretended that the rain drowned it out. “You know your mom wants you to go to some private school?” There was nothing but silence for a while and then his son came and joined him against the car. He handed his father the muddied jacket.

“Is this one of those adventures you’re always talking about, Dad?” Danny asked.

“What adventures, champ?”

“You know, how you always talk about the open road when we’re driving back from school?”

“Yeah, I guess this is sort of like that.” He helped Danny back into the car. “You like the open road so far?” he asked buckling as he buckled his son in.

“What do you mean so far? You mean there’s more of it?”

“The road never ends, buddy.”

“Dad?” Danny asked as Hank started the car once more.

“Yeah, Dan?”

“Do we have to see all the roads tonight?”

“You miss Mom, huh?” He looked back at his son who was nodding somewhat hesitantly. “You know she wants to enroll you in a whole new school?”

“She said that they have a band and a drama club and a new playground.”

Danny paused and bit his lip. “She told me that if I wanted to I could play an

instrument.” He fiddled with his hands before continuing. “Would they let me play the drums, Dad?”

“I think they’d probably have to,” Hank said, turning the wheel so that the car drove in a horseshoe.

“You can come and watch. Mom said you two would sit in the front row and stuff.”

His veins stopped bulging and for once he was only filled with regret.

“Sure, champ. I’d like nothing more.”

Now, on the ride back to the bus depot, Hank can think only of the way the kids had taunted him this afternoon, of the protective way their parents wrapped their arms around them just because the bus was a few minutes behind schedule. They watched his bus drive away in the same way he imagined his neighbors had watched his car drive away that night. Although he has never heard what the parents whisper behind his back about him, he is sure that it’s the same sort of thing their children yell to his face. Rumors have a way of escalating in small towns. From Hank’s experience, they take root in the homes, whispered excitedly between adults, and stem outward into the public so that soon the man in front of you at the bank looks at you as if he were looking at a baseball card. He knows all of your statistics — divorced, without custody, inadequate father. Even though Sabrina never called him a kidnapper, the way she pulled Danny from the car that night when they pulled into the driveway before he had even turned the car engine off made him realize that she was frightened of him. His

own wife was frightened of him. For the week following he slept on the couch in the living room, his drool pooling around his face every morning when he woke up. On the seventh day and after the thousandth apology, Sabrina told him that he could move back into their bedroom, but that she was moving out of it. He nodded and pressed his lips together, never once throwing the tantrum that was bubbling inside of him.

When he reaches the bus depot Hank parks his bus next to all the others, bus number 32. He walks down the aisle once, checking for trash and closing windows that have been left open. Finally, Hank locks the bus door. He fumbles for his car keys and lumbers inside his old car. The seats are littered with a month's worth of fast food containers and paper cups, the rubble of his divorce. Somewhere beneath the layers is an air freshener that has been long ago overpowered by the stench of grease. He reminds himself that in the morning he will have to buy duct tape and nail polish remover, a combination that will make the store clerk eye him nervously. Over the years, though, he has found that only nail polish can remove the big, block-letter swears that fourth and fifth graders cover his seats with. The duct tape he will stick in unsightly squares over anything he can't just rub away — the erratic pencil holes, the carved initials, and the statements of love written in permanent marker. It will take him close to an hour or so, crouched between the seats, to remove all of the thick, cartoonish lettering. He only cleans the bus on Wednesdays, a ritual that reminds him of when it was

time to call Danny. Years ago, before Danny had entered high school, he had tried to call every night. Some nights he would read a book over the phone, others he would tell a joke that had been circulating amongst his kids all day long. By the time Danny hit middle school, though, he talked about things Hank couldn't help him with.

“Can you teach me how to tie a tie?” Danny asked one night after revealing that he had a date to his first school dance. Hank imagined Sabrina laughing to herself. He even imagined that she put Danny up to it, goaded him into asking for Hank for advice he was incapable of dispensing.

“No, I can't,” he said simply and sourly.

Now he is relegated to once a week, in between Danny's drum lessons and tutoring sessions. He is just another extracurricular activity, and not even one that looks good on a resume. He can't imagine that his son still wants to hear about which cuss word has been the most popular this week, or how he has carefully navigated Cindy's sickness. Hank sits in the bus depot until after the sun has set, and the parking lot lights have flickered on. He tries to think of some way to engage Danny, to make him whisper his name with the same wonder and respect that he used as a child. He is surprised when he notices that it has begun to rain, or rather it has been raining. The trails of rain are acting as a filter for the parking lot lights so that they are nothing more than an amber blur on his windshield. Beyond the light, though, Hank can still make out his mammoth school bus. Tomorrow night he will have to call his son, whose voice is now deep enough to match his

own, but in the morning, during his route, Hank's voice will be the only voice of reason. In the real world Hank feels that he will always have a son who has outgrown him, who is probably better off without him, but on his bus he is always the expert. On his bus there will always be a Cindy, who needs the reassurance and comfort of an adult, or a revolution that needs an opponent. He will always be needed on the bus, even if nowhere else. There isn't much that Hank knows for sure, but he knows that even though everyone always changes, everything always stays the same.

## IN CONFIDENCE

In the summer, when the heat of the kitchen became unbearable, one of the men would prop open the wooden backdoor. Another, the sandwich maker, would plug in an old stereo to drown out the noise of the door slamming against the metal dumpster behind the restaurant. From behind the food window, and the shelves lined with cooking wines, and the flame rising from the stove, the men would chant and clap along with the salsa music. Oftentimes a distracted dishwasher would keep beat, drumming soapy utensils against the edge of the sink. When the owner was drawn away from his spot of authority where he leaned with crossed arms against the doorframe between his office and the kitchen, one of the more brazen cooks would begin dancing. Usually it was Rico who left his station first, yelling and gesturing his arms toward whichever waitress was his girlfriend at the time. Taking her hand he would spin her out firmly, all the while winking at the hostess. The rest of the men would join, emerging from behind the cooking station like cautious prey. For the first few moments they cast darting looks toward the manager's office or the front of the restaurant. And then, as if driven away by the sharp beat of the drum, their fear was gone, replaced by their varying shrieks and stepping feet.

On a slow night we all gathered back there, clustered in groups. The more experienced waitresses balanced trays of prepared salads against their hips while the hostess circled them anxiously and rattled off the various reservations for the night. Those who were working a double shift hovered in front of the bread



warmer, sneaking fresh breadsticks before heading off to some corner of the restaurant. The bussers waited in front of the vertically sliding doors of the dishwasher and listened for the rush of water to end and the next rack of steaming glasses or dripping tray of silverware to be ejected. On my first few nights as a busser I had tried to imitate this impatience, snatching for the trays upon ejection only to recoil in pain from the scalding temperature.

That first week, I was unsure of everything. The two girls responsible for training me had explained little more than the way in which the tables were numbered. Mostly I learned through imitation, watching carefully as they performed a task and then trying to mimic it perfectly. I had been watching both girls take turns hauling heavy loads of silverware from the kitchen to the waitress station for polishing. For the first few nights I stood next to them uselessly while they carried the large, square silverware trays down the hallway. I spent most of that time wondering how their twig arms didn't snap under the combined weight of all the forks, spoons, knives, ladles and meat tenderizers. Even if the load was especially light, indicative of a slow lunch, the plastic trays themselves were still an awkward length and width to walk with. By the fourth night it was my turn to carry.

“*Cuidado!*” Manuel said, and shooed me away with two dishrags from the dishwasher. I watched as he slid the vertical door of the dishwasher upward. Steam followed, and then the tray of silverware emerged shiny and loud from the washer. I pressed forward again. Again, he stopped me.

“*Espera,*” he scolded, and then he considered me with his one good eye and smiled a gaping, boyish grin. “Wait,” he spat with the same pride I was used to seeing on the face of my little brother whenever he conquered a new spelling word. With outstretched arms he offered me his dishrags, and when I took them he mimed how to use them like mittens on either side of the plastic tray. I mumbled ashamedly as I hoisted the silverware up from the counter and shouldered past him. It was a dumb mistake. I shouldn’t have needed to be told that the silverware would be hot to touch.

As I passed, the manager uncrossed his thick arms and leaned toward me. He seemed bigger, taller, and even wider, now than when he had first interviewed me. On that day he had worn an easy smile, tired eyes, and a baggy t-shirt. Now his smile was forced and his eyes narrowed into squinted slits. “You figured out which one is Manuel’s glass eye, yet?” He waited for me to laugh, but I could barely force a smile. When I looked over my shoulder at Manuel, Alex scoffed. “Don’t get any ideas, Jen, he’s at least twice your age.”

“I didn’t mean it like —,” I started, but he had disappeared into his office. I had interviewed for the position two weeks prior in that very same office. Alex had been wearing the same t-shirt, the same stained apron, and the same blue baseball hat. At my best estimation he was only six or seven years older than me, which put him at an impressive twenty-two or twenty-three. That alone was enough to intimidate me. My oldest brother was twenty-one and he had nowhere near the authority that Alex wielded. A whole kitchen was under his jurisdiction.

A whole restaurant was his to survey with furrowed brow and crossed arms. He had been casual throughout the interview, leaning back in his chair with his feet propped up on his desk so that when I sat in the offered seat the bottoms of a worn-out pair of Nikes had confronted me.

The interview hadn't lasted more than ten minutes. He had asked the requisite questions about previous work experience, of which I had none, and about when I had free time, of which I had plenty. Then, pulling himself upright in his chair, he had asked me when I could start. At the time I had tried to mask my surprise. I was given an old apron scrounged out of one of the cardboard boxes stacked against the wall, and then I was dismissed from his office.

The same door that had closed behind me then, slammed behind me now. I paused for a moment, but decided against my urge to barge into his office and clarify. I just needed to learn to take a joke. As I hoisted the silverware onto my hip, I heard Rico drumming his hands on the counter. Before I was out of earshot I heard Manuel join in, and finally Jose began to yell after me, beckoning me to come back. "*Baila? Baila!*" His calls got more insistent, more demanding, the further I walked down the hall, but I did not turn around.

It was too early in the summer for the tourists to be crowding into the dining room, exhausted with sunburns and endless, yawning hours of leisure. Although I had yet to serve these tourists, I had spent enough summers alongside them to know that they swarmed to the area toward the end of summer, which

ironically always coincided with the return of the jellyfish. Tourist season, then, meant swamped coastlines. Whining children stood at the water's edge testing the boundaries one toe at a time, and then retreating, holding a stung appendage for a parent to nurse. It was this crowd of alternately over-attentive parents and defiant children that I knew would soon descend upon the restaurant, and it was because of this sense of an impending crowd that I felt that the need to acclimate myself to the restaurant was an urgent one. What most people don't know about working in a restaurant is that most of your work consists of preparation. Before the mealtime rush a worker has a variety of jobs to attend to like stocking straws, paper towels, wine, beer, butters, creamers, and napkins, as well as refilling salt and pepper shakers, folding cloth napkins, cutting lemons, mixing dressings, cleaning bathrooms, and changing tablecloths. No matter how much you prepare, though, the crowd will always find you scrambling for a lime or an errant birthday candle.

During my first few weeks, Manuel was the only one of my co-workers I talked to, and even that conversation was largely limited to sign language. The two girls who had trained me had already outgrown the novelty of their newfound authority. On those slow nights early in the summer, they would beg me to cover for them so they could leave early. When they were there they spent most of their time polishing silverware in the waitress station and analyzing the events of their weekends. While they polished, I dealt with the customers. Most of my time was spent running between the kitchen and the dining room with plates of unfinished food to be packaged away in Styrofoam leftover containers. When I brought

stacks of half-eaten entrées, Manuel would shake his head in disgrace at the wasted food. Sometimes I rubbed my stomach in hunger as the excess food spilled into the garbage can. When I appeared in the kitchen, searching frantically for something obscure that a customer had requested, like packets of oyster crackers, Tabasco sauce, steak knives, plastic bags, or plastic silverware, Manuel was the first person I turned to. It became like a game of charades, with me acting out clues until a look of understanding broke across his face. Whenever Alex discovered him rummaging through the storage shelves, he would lecture him about staying at the sink and doing his own job. Manuel never understood the lecture, or if he did he never turned me down when I asked for help. In my first few weeks, he showed me how the freezer was organized and where everything was stored in the pantry. I sensed that by mastering these job requirements I could equip myself for this tourist surge. I set about learning the tangible things. It was because of this, that I overlooked the need to learn the politics of that little restaurant. In learning how to prepare pretentious mixed drinks, how to set plates to best obscure tablecloth stains, how to most efficiently polish silverware, how to appropriately pry the breadsticks away from stingy or glutinous guests, I somehow ignored the more glaring lessons.

Alex called me into his office at the end of my first week. “You drink, Jen?” he asked, leaning over the metal desk.

“I’m sixteen.” I offered as an answer, but he didn’t seem convinced.

“I’ve talked to a few of the waitresses, and they say you’re doing a good job, picking everything up pretty quickly.”

“Yeah, I’m really trying —.”

“Look, I’m a busy guy, so I’ll get to the point.” He propped his Nikes up on the desk again. “I just wanted to ask you about the drinking thing. I notice lately we’re missing a lot of booze.”

“I swear I didn’t —.”

He laughed at me, which left me more annoyed than relieved. “It started happening before you got here. To be honest I think it’s your little boyfriend there, Manuel. I’ve seen him sneaking down to the liquor closet a lot lately.” He sighed, and I realized he looked a decade older today than he did yesterday.

“Gonna have to let him go if I can’t figure it out.”

“He’s probably just going down the basement to help me find something. I still haven’t learned where you store a lot of things. Manuel has been a real big help.”

“Maybe for you,” Alex reasoned. “But he’s slower than ever at the sink. Every time I turn around he’s disappeared again and I’ve got to chase him down.”

“Once I get everything figured out, I won’t need his help as much,” I explained.

“That’s sweet and all,” Alex interrupted with a smug grin. “But the bottom line is we’re still missing booze and Manuel’s the only one who goes down there consistently.” My face must have look surprised, because he continued as if he

owed me some sort of explanation. It occurred to me later that his justification was probably more for his benefit than for mine. “You see, that’s the real benefit of being boss, Jen. There’s nobody above me checking to see if I’m right. I don’t really need the thief, just a thief. If I make an example of one guy, the rest will fall into line.” Alex hoisted himself up from the chair and circled around the desk. “If I were you, I wouldn’t focus so much on Manuel anyways. Just focus on doing your own job. The rest will fall into place.”

When I got up to leave he opened the door for me. “See you tomorrow, Jen.” He swung his arm over my shoulder. I had never been that close to him before. I stiffened under the weight of his arm. His hand stayed on my shoulder until I pulled his office door open. When he finally closed the door behind me I couldn’t help but shiver.

I didn’t smoke, but it was during that first job that I began to take cigarette breaks. Usually I would be disposing of the leftovers from some overpriced shellfish dish that I could never afford, let alone never afford to waste, when I would see one of the waitresses slip out the backdoor. For the first few weeks I ignored this entirely. I just passed the plates off to Manuel and headed back to the dining room. But one night, as the clam shells from the night’s Seafood Special slid from one customer’s finished plate into the garbage can, I slammed the plate into the sink, apologized to Manuel, and headed outside after the waitress. From then on, my self-designated break time always coincided with one of the

waitresses; most of the time it was Olga, who would flip over a discarded crate and tell me about the ways of the world.

“How you like it so far?” she asked on one of these breaks, the accent that she tried to suppress around the customers returning.

“Everyone seems nice,” I said distractedly, looking for a crate of my own.

“Don’t get too used to it.” She snorted an ugly kazoo like noise, and took another drag on the cigarette. When I didn’t respond, mostly because I didn’t know how to, but in some part because the smoke was irritating my throat, she continued, “You’ve got to learn to play the game. You’re good at the job, but it’s not enough.”

“What do you mean not enough?” I found a crate and turned it over.

“How long was your interview with Alex?”

“I don’t know, five minutes or so.”

“Five minutes, huh?” Again the kazoo noise. “Five minutes means Andrew only hired you because you’re pretty.”

I tried not to seem surprised. After all, that seemed to be what she wanted, the thrill that would come shocking me in some way. “He hired me either way,” I answered defensively. “Besides, like you said I’m doing the job.” It took me a few minutes to notice that I had begun to bite my nails.

“I also said that doing the job is not enough. For one thing, you’ve got to stop flirting with Manuel.”

“I don’t flirt with Manuel.”



“You might not think you flirt with Manuel. Manuel may not even think you flirt with Manuel, but those men are stuck in that kitchen all day everyday. You are giving them something to talk about, and that is never good.”

“Why?”

“You are not as smart as you look,” she groaned, but it was clear she enjoyed this, teasing me in that way. “You come into work at three or four and then leave on sore feet at eleven. You complain if you’ve got to get up and do it again the next day. Those men in there —.” She hiked her thumb behind her. “Those men get here around eight or nine in the morning and stay till close. All day everyday they sit behind their stoves and they talk to one another. It’s not worth their time to know you. Chances are you’ll be gone like that.” I looked up to see she was stepping on her cigarette. “Better for them to get their fun out of you while they can. They watch you come in and out of the kitchen asking Manuel for this or for that.” She gestured dramatically from left to right with her hands. “They see this and they start talking about you. They start saying you do this or that in the walk-in freezer. Doesn’t matter if you did, doesn’t matter if you didn’t. As long as they think you did, that’s all that matters.” Her lecture ended abruptly, as if she had just remembered that she had tables waiting. She propped the screen door back open with her crate, but before heading back inside she leaned on the door frame and added, “You think the men will respect Alex if they think a middle-aged man with a glass eye has a better chance with you than he does? All men care more about respect than anything else. Compared to respect,

nothing else matters.” Her accent was gone now; her work voice sounded like it belonged on a yacht off the coast of some island. Following her back inside, I could already hear a father scolding his daughter in the dining room, even above the rush of the dishwasher and the jumble of music coming out of the stereo.

Throughout the following week, I noticed how Candace was careful to pull down her top before approaching tables of businessmen. I saw the way she scooped down lower than necessary to set meals in front of the suited men, cooing out warnings about the hot plates. And not only did Olga lean over to take their orders, but she drew out her kazoo of a laugh into a high-pitched giggle each time one of the men joked about the weather. At the end of the night, when everyone crowded together to compare tips, Olga’s roll of cash was always the thickest. She counted out her ones with sharp flicks of her wrist long past when the rest of the staff had stopped tallying. Then, as she pressed a few of the bills onto my chest, she gave me a wide grin.

It was during that week that I saw how quickly the men scattered back to their stations whenever Alex appeared in the kitchen doorway. When he caught them dancing, the men didn’t even look him in the eyes for most of the rest of the night. “This is a restaurant, not some glorified nightclub. You understand?” Alex asked as he inched his face closer to whichever man had the misfortune of being closest. The unfortunate man, often Manuel, nodded in affirmation, although once Alex had retreated, all of the cooks struggled to piece together his words.

“Glory fried?” the men repeated, until they erupted into laughter. Still, most of the men there knew how to please Alex. For the most part they knew to nod when he cornered them with whatever accusation, to respond even when they couldn’t decipher one word from the other, and to act scared when he threatened them, however emptily, with Immigration.

“*Niño!*” Alex yelled across the kitchen one night toward the end of the week. When Manuel didn’t look up from the dishes he was stacking into racks, Alex marched across the tiled floor. “*Niño!*” he yelled again, his voice just as loud despite their change in proximity.

Manuel considered Alex and smiled that same toothy grin. He finished stacking the plates before he responded. “Manuel,” he explained, pointing to himself. The kitchen grew quiet save for the sizzle of the oven.

“*Niño*, turn off the stereo.” I had heard the other men call Manuel *Niño*, but never to his face, and always accompanied with snickers. It seemed to be a mostly harmless joke about the way Manuel had taken to wearing a backwards baseball cap. I couldn’t tell whether Alex actually meant to be calling a grown man, ‘boy,’ or if he had simply overheard the nickname from one of the cooks.

Either way, his command was met with another smile. Manuel shook his head. “I am not boy,” he managed with pride. Pointing at his chest, he continued, “thirty-eight.” Alex looked nervous as he scanned the kitchen. Seeing that the rest

of the men were busy handing off steaming meals to impatient waitresses, he relaxed his shoulders.

“Manuel, just turn off the stereo already.” For emphasis Alex pointed at the stereo, and waited while the man dried off his pruned hands and unplugged the stereo.

By mid-July the floor fans had been unpacked, and then, packed back up after two waitresses had tripped over them on separate occasions. “Every year it’s the same thing with these fucking, goddamn fans,” Candace had screamed at Alex as Rico helped her up from the floor. It was Alex who pulled her back when she looked as if she might kick the clunking box fan straight across the floor. Candace, though, had been luckier than Olga who found herself coated in an acrid vinaigrette dressing after tripping over the fan next the salad bar. That was the first time, but certainly not the last, that I ever heard Olga speak in her native language, a guttural and violent clash of consonants and hand gestures. After that, Alex had ordered that I pack up the fans and haul them down to the basement.

“Have Manuel help you,” he sneered and clapped his hand against my back. Before retreating into his office, he winked at me. I didn’t protest, but I also did not ask Manuel for help. The truth was any reprieve from the dining hall came as a welcome relief, even if it did involve the cavernous basement.

I had not been down in the basement, except to retrieve a few sizable bottles of wine, since I had first been trained. From the kitchen there were two

staircases that led down into the basement. The first was in the kitchen's back room near the ice machine and the back entrance. It led down toward where the empty beer bottles were stored, stewing in their own pungent, sticky aroma. The second staircase was just past the coat hooks, where all the waitresses hung their purses and griped about their mornings while they tied aprons around their bulging waists. This staircase was just before the entrance to the dining room. I took this second staircase to avoid walking past Jose who always seemed hungry for a new dance partner.

This side of the basement was little more than a large, dark room. Olga had mentioned that it used to be a large bathroom for an older restaurant, which explained the shattered floor length mirror that leaned against one half of the far wall. Most of the room, though, was filled with large metal shelves that hold boxes of Styrofoam containers, straws, napkins, towels, toilet paper, soap, disinfectant, ground coffee, coffee filters, extra silverware, birthday cake candles, and seasonal decorations. I cleared a place for the fans in between a box of mop heads and the door to the liquor room. From the liquor room I could hear two of the afternoon shift waiters whispering, their hushed voices shifting seamlessly from Spanish to English. Alex had told me last week that he scheduled the Latino men for only the afternoon shifts, because otherwise it distracted the cooks too much.

“I can't have them yapping away when we're swamped with orders.” It had made sense when he explained it, but I saw the way the afternoon shift

waiters disappointedly counted their tips, quickly pocketing the meager amount as soon as the nightshift shuffled in and hung up their coats. It hardly seemed fair when I considered the fat roll of bills that I had seen Candace try to clasp her wallet around the night before.

The men emerged from the liquor room giggling in synchronization until they spotted me. They noticed me, and for a brief moment it felt like I had caught Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. Each of their coat pockets bulged outward. Extending over the tops of two pockets were the slender glass necks of liquor bottles. One of the men, Roberto, I think, held up a finger to his lips. The other shrugged a pair of sloping shoulders.

“Boss asked us to bring these up for him,” he said simply. They made their way over to the first staircase, the one that led to the back exit.

“If he asked you to bring those up for him, then why don’t you go up this way?” The way the men eyed me afterward made me regret asking. Roberto pressed in so close to me that I could see where he had nicked himself shaving earlier that morning.

“What’d you say?” His voice was deep, but hushed. The other waiter, the one whose name I couldn’t remember, clapped a palm to Roberto’s back and pulled him away from me.

“Look, first thing you’ve got to learn if you want to last here is that the wait staff looks out for the wait staff.” The nameless waiter scratched his head. “How can I explain this?” he asked, directing his question toward the man next to

him. He pulled one of the bottles from his pocket as if in a gesture of trust. “The turnover at a place like this is quicker than you realize, and most of us got nowhere else to go.” I recognized the bottle as one that we typically keep on the top shelf in the waitress station. This particular one was a slender tequila bottle with the word *añejo* scrawled in gold curls across the top of the label. Once, while preparing a third tray of drinks for a table of gargoyles, bulky and expressionless, Candace had confided in me that even the most distinguished of men could rarely tell the difference between aged and unaged tequila. In a pinch, she had advised, you can always substitute, especially if it’s their third drink. At the time she had been on top of the step ladder pushing aside dusty bottles in search of a bottle like this one, a bottle whose gilded lettering perfectly matched its gold contents. The waiter pulled the stopper out of the bottle he was holding and drank from it. His face creased into a thin circle as he swallowed. Then, passing the bottle to Roberto, he continued, “Bottom line being that you get our backs, we get yours.”

“You keep your mouth shut and we put in a good word for you with the kitchen staff,” Roberto summarized.

“So, imagine that all the sudden the guys in the kitchen slow down that order that Olga sends you to bring out for her,” the other waiter continued. “Or let’s say the next time you run in needing them to rush an order for Candace, Rico somehow loses the ticket.” I nodded and he leaned in close, closer than Roberto

had. “So the question is —,” for the first time he realized that he does not know my name.

“Jen,” I supplied.

“So the question is then, Jen, do you have my back?” He angled the bottle toward me, offering me a sip, drawing me in to complicity. I thought about Andrew’s advice and Olga’s warning. If it wasn’t Manuel, the thief could just as easily be me. Before I knew it, I had grabbed the neck of the bottle and taken a sip, wiped my mouth with my sleeve and handed it back to the man. At the sight of my face, which puckered at the woody taste of the tequila, the two men began to giggle again as if they had never stopped. With a backwards wave from the stranger and a bow from Roberto, they disappeared into the dark basement. I heard them climbing up the back staircase and the faint slam of the screen door as it closed behind them.

Candace found me a few minutes later, sitting on an overturned cardboard box with my head between my knees. “Alex sent me down here to ask whether you were planning on living down here?” I didn’t answer. Instead, she flicked on a light switch I had never known existed. “You feeling okay? You look worse than the time Olga convinced you to finish one of her cigarettes.” That night had been the only time I ever actually smoked on my smoke breaks, and it had ended with me doubled over. At the time Olga hadn’t done more than laugh. Candace, though, now rubbed one hand over my back. “You been sneaking from the liquor closet or something, Jen?”



Even though she threaded a giggle through her question, my spine still straightened at the accusation. “Nothing like that. Just overheated, I think. It feels like an oven down here.”

“No. It feels like an oven in the kitchen. Down here is like an igloo comparably. If you’re feeling well enough to be left alone, I’ve got to go check on my tables.” With her back turned she added, “Alex wants to see you when you feel up to it.”

Alex’s office was air-conditioned. Other than the dining room and walk-in freezer his office was the only place to escape from the heat. When I knocked he told me to come in, a command he punctuated with a ‘quickly.’

“I can’t afford to cool the whole place. Well I probably could with all this summer business.” The hum of the air conditioner filled the silence. “You know, it’s written into your job description that you have to laugh at my jokes.”

“Candace said you wanted to see me.” When I spoke my voice cracked, but I hoped Alex hadn’t heard it over the roar of the air conditioner. During my encounter with the two thieves I hadn’t noticed how much I had sweat, but in the cool air the sweat began to freeze so that I couldn’t help but shiver.

“Yeah, I’ve been making up the schedule for the next few weeks, and it looks like we’re understaffed. You feeling okay?” I nodded and he continued. “If you’re interested, we’re going to start training you to waitress.”

“You want me to waitress?”

“I’ve been thinking about it. I’ve got to change things up around here, lay down the law, and set some boundaries, that sort of thing. I realized how important it is to surround myself with people who respect me, and who respect themselves. Manuel, he doesn’t fit in here. He spends his day taking shit from people half his age. Imagine that?”

“Why Manuel?” I asked. The question made me dizzy. Someone in the kitchen started banging against the pots.

“You ever notice they get louder as it gets hotter?” Alex asked. “They’re like fucking animals. Sometimes it’s all I can do not to have the whole lot of them deported. I guess we’ll just have to settle for one this year, huh?” As he spoke he turned the air conditioner up higher. It still felt as if it were too humid for me to catch my breath. “Now, go ahead, what were you talking about?”

For a moment I stared blankly at Alex’s expectant face. He raised his eyebrows. “What did you say?” he asked pointedly.

“I didn’t say anything,” I mumbled. The taste of tequila was strong in my mouth. I imagined Alex could smell it from across the desk. For a moment I wished that he had smelled it. I imagined the anger my transgression would elicit. I smiled to myself when I pictured the betrayed look he would give me.

A wide smirk split across Alex’s face, instead. “Anyway, like I was saying, we’ve been missing a few bottles of that top-shelf tequila I just ordered, the one with the gold lettering. Unless I find the real thief by tonight Manuel’s out on the street.” I thought of the two men giggling as they climbed the stairs up

from the basement. For a moment I found myself formulating the sentences that would save Manuel, but Alex was already opening the door to his office and gesturing for me to leave. “Like I said, I can’t pay to cool the whole place, Jen,” he joked. I heard my own laugh, loud and long like Olga’s, and then the door slammed behind me.

On my first night as a waitress Candace taught me how to hold a tray that was wider than the fans I had struggled to carry down the stairs only a week earlier. “It’s all about balance,” she said. “Hold the tray in the middle like this. No, angle your elbow more like this. There, perfect.” She had me practice first with an empty tray, then with a tray of empty plates, and finally with a tray of entrées that needed to be brought to one of her more unruly tables. “If you can handle these guys, then you’re as prepared as you’ll ever be.” I watched Alex beckon her into his office, most likely to discuss my progress. By the time I returned from the dining room, empty tray tucked under my arm, Alex’s office door was closed.

“Manuel came in to pick up his last check this morning,” Roberto announced to me while he clocked out. “He was swearing up and down that he didn’t do anything,” Roberto said. “Can you imagine that?”

“Did Alex file the police report yet?”

“If he had Manuel would be halfway to Central America by now.” In the corner, near the sink, two new bussers laughed and whispered to one another.

“Maybe it’s for the best,” I said. My throat felt sore as I spoke. “He never fit in here. He was probably homesick anyway.”

Roberto laughed. “Ain’t no such thing as homesick for men like us.” He swept his hand around the kitchen to indicate the kitchen staff. “Home is a privilege.” He smirked and drew closer. “You know, Jen, it’s hard to be homesick when you know that going home will make you sick.” I pictured the sheepish way Manuel had looked at all of the expensive meals I had wasted by scooping into the garbage can, but the thought made my stomach turn.

“I’ve got to get back to training, Roberto,” I said. I turned my focus to a recitation of the dressings. By the time Olga had returned I had moved on to rehearsing the list of Specials for the day. She adjusted my hand underneath the large tray a few more times and quizzed me on our varieties of soup.

“Now remember, flatter them, show them you’re interested in them,” Olga advised when she led me to my first table, a group of balding men. “It never hurts to lie,” she said over her shoulder.

## UNION MEN

It was Sal who had come up with the idea in the first place. At the time he had been slurring so badly that the other men had made him repeat the whole long-winded ploy. The men had been drinking since they had left the construction site, each of them taking turns complaining about how few hours were available.

“It’s not winter and they’re cutting already,” Mark had said in between gulps of cheap beer.

“Not even Fire Watch,” Sal had muttered. He was holding his head up in his hands, at times letting it fall from side to side so that it came dangerously close to striking the table.

“What’d you say, Tom?” Jimmy had asked.

“Something about Fire Watch,” Pete had interrupted.

“I said —,” Sal began, and his head had lolled to the right. “I said they’re not even doing Fire Watch.”

“How the hell you know that?” one of them had asked.

“I asked the foreman this afternoon.” Sal had grown serious then. He had sat straight up on his stool. “Stop laughing, I did ask. It makes me so mad, so burning mad.”

“Burning mad?” The men hadn’t been able to stop themselves from laughing. Some of them had even pounded the shaky table for emphasis.

“I’ve been real mad a lot in my life, Sal, but I’ve never heard anyone call it that,” Jimmy had teased, slapping a hand against his friend’s back.

“You guys know what I mean,” he had said. And then, even though the bartender had warned him time and again, Sal took his lighter from his pocket and flicked it so that the flame silenced all of their laughter.

Every morning for the past two months Jimmy had tried to talk himself out of the nightmares. He roamed through his empty house, scolding himself as he rummaged the laundry room for socks or as he shaved in front of the bathroom mirror. “Of course you’re going to nick yourself if your hands are shaking,” he often muttered. “Get it together. You’re too old for this shit.” For most of his life the nightmares had come and gone like a pendulum, usually brought on by stress, but usually assuaged by a night spent drinking or a day spent working. The more his back ached, and his muscles snarled, the deeper he slept. He had known plenty of men who had left construction work for a cubicle job after getting married only to complain at the bar that they missed being tired. “It’s a whole different kind of tired, man,” his buddy Earl had once lamented wistfully to a group of laborers while searching his pockets for a cigarette. “I miss that bear’s hibernation.”

“The rest of the well-deserved,” one of the union men had consented with a sigh. When Earl had finished his search empty-handed, Jimmy had pulled out his own pack of cigarettes and slid a cigarette across the table toward him.

“Thanks, Jim.”

Jimmy had shrugged in response. “Us union men got to stick together.” That statement had raised a cheer from the group of men with them that night, and had driven one of them, Tom probably, to order another round for all of them.

Jimmy had hoped that a long day of work would stop the nightmares, would bring on that rest of the well-deserved, and so he found himself grinning uncharacteristically when the Union called him to explain that they would need him back on the job. He hadn’t mentioned the fire or expressed his surprise that it had only taken a month to repair the damage done to the site. Even though the official word on the fire was that it had been linked to a serial arsonist, Jimmy knew the union was probably still under investigation. The last thing he wanted to do was to raise suspicion. Any suspicion could mean that work would be suspended longer, or that the hotel would begin to look for non-union contractors, or, worst of all, that the investigation would shift focus somehow. He hoped that the sooner he got back to work meant the sooner he got back to sleep. Besides, it was always better to keep your mouth shut and your head down when jail time was involved.

His nightmares hadn’t stopped when he returned to work, though. In fact, they had just increased in frequency. The other men had even begun to notice the change. “You alright there, Jimmy?” Pete asked him on Tuesday when they were partnered up to help build the formwork. They were only a few floors up, but Jimmy couldn’t hide his tremors.

“Trying to quit smoking is all,” Jimmy lied. “The tremor stage should pass in a few days.” He hoisted the next square module above his head and waited for Pete to screw it into the framework.

“Thought you might be nervous about something,” Pete replied over the sound of his screwdriver.

“Nervous about what?” Jimmy asked, but Pete hadn’t heard his question over the machinery. Jimmy forgot about the exchange until later when Sal found him smoking in his truck after work.

“Pete said you quit,” Sal said pointedly. The man leaned against Jimmy’s rolled down window so that Jimmy had to exhale into the truck’s cab.

“You caught me,” Jimmy said with a shrug. “I just didn’t have the willpower after all.” He rolled the cigarette between his two fingers and tried to avoid looking Sal in the eyes.

“You feeling okay, Jim? You’re looking pale?”

“To be honest, I haven’t been getting much sleep.” His voice was a low whisper, the same one he had used in Confession as a child. He shifted in his seat in order to face Sal. The man’s face was grim. Jimmy had never seen his friend’s face without the hint of a smile. In fact, he looked like a stranger without his smile. It reminded him of how uncanny it had been the time he saw Wrecking Ball at the local department store. “I’ve been feeling a little weird, actually, Sal.”

“What kind of weird?” Sal asked. He drew uncomfortably close to Jimmy. “You talking about the snitching kind of weird?”



Jimmy nodded his head up and down. He watched as his friend's face broke into a wild map of wrinkles. His scowl was set so deeply that it looked more like a thick scar. "I was thinking I'd turn myself in and take the full wrap," Jimmy said slowly.

"You're an idiot," Sal spat. "The Justice System don't work like that Jimmy. You can't just pick and choose whose sentence you want to serve. You give them one name and they start probing deeper until they've got the whole goddamn list." Sal kicked at the dirt before stalking away toward his own truck, and leaving Jimmy to finish the cigarette he could no longer enjoy.

Since Jimmy's conversation with Sal, the foreman had made a point of pairing Jimmy with younger laborers. "It's a good mixture of experience and —," the foreman always began whenever he complained.

"And youth," Jimmy had grown accustomed to finishing. "It's alright, you can say it. Old age happens to the best of us," Jimmy added good-naturedly. Sometimes he playfully rapped his knuckles against their hardhats to mask his frustration. No matter how easy it was to play along with their excuses, Jimmy still always found it surprising that the foremen, with their grizzly bear beards and boulder bellies, could never just tell him the truth. Even his mother wouldn't have sugarcoated the situation. The other boys don't want to play with you anymore, Jimmy, plain and simple, she would have said, patting him on the head with a flour-covered palm. Of course in those days the remedy was just as plain and simple, a new toy of any kind would attract the neighborhood boys just as quickly

as the ice cream truck. As far as Jimmy could tell, there wasn't much difference between men and boys except that men were more stubborn. His offense had been far worse than taking his kickball and going home in the middle of the game, though. He knew he made the other men nervous now. Yet still the foremen always persisted with the same excuse for pairing him with the newer workers. Experience.

He spotted this particular on-site foreman from the parking lot — a man nicknamed the Wrecking Ball in honor of his round shape. He wished he could remember his given name now, especially for means of flattery, but the name did not come to him as he parked his truck and finished his cigarette. Finally, defeated, he approached the foreman, hardhat tucked underneath his arm.

“Look, man, I don't know whether you remember me. I've worked under you a dozen or so times.” The Wrecking Ball did not look up from his clipboard. “I'm not complaining or nothing; I'm just wondering whether you could consider pairing me up with someone with a little more experience.” Again the man did not respond, but his fingers began to drum against the clipboard as if tapping out some obscure answer in Morse code. “Every day for the past week one of you foremen has me stuck training the new guy, you know?”

Wrecking Ball wheezed in the way he often did before speaking, a symptom either of his obesity or of site exposure. “Then you're well suited for it. This hotel is one of the biggest jobs of the year.” He flipped through the stack of papers in his clipboard before whistling to two men next to a large pile of cut

wood and directing them toward the far side of the wooden staging. Finally he turned back to Jimmy. “We’ve already had enough setbacks already. I don’t have time for your bullshit complaints,” Wrecking Ball muttered. With two fingers he signaled a group of men over toward him. Besides —,” his smile spread over the top of the clipboard. “As I understand it, you’ve gone a bit off the deep end.”

Jimmy took pleasure in the image of Wrecking Ball as an actual wrecking ball, in transit toward an imposing concrete structure. He pictured the man squealing like a pig upon impact, and then the thick chain twisting him around and around while he whined. Since returning from this last layoff, it was thoughts like these that got Jimmy through his day.

“Fine, then, which one of these guys is lucky enough to get stuck with me for the day.” He followed the foreman’s thick finger pointed at a younger man standing in the distance. The man was tall and thin, like Jimmy could faintly remember being at one time. Of course, that time had been back before years spent lifting, carrying, climbing, hoisting. That time had been before he had worked on the stone wall for the shopping complex two summers prior, and the decade before when he had spent a month of workdays helping to repair the dam near the nuclear power plant two towns over. Over the years he, like most of the men who had worked alongside him, had come to resemble the areas they had constructed. His hands were as rough as the concrete he used to pave the roads, his shoulders had grown broader with every boulder he had lifted, and his skin had been made thicker than his work gloves by the unrelenting sun. The newer

workers were easily distinguishable by default. They hadn't been worn around the edges like the older men yet. The younger man Jimmy was approaching was certainly no different.

“Saw a guy fall from scaffolding half that high once,” Jimmy said, clapping his hand around the shoulder of the younger man. “Ambulance didn't get here fast enough, died of internal bleeding right on the ground.”

The younger man put on his hardhat and turned to the top of the scaffolding. “Half that height, huh?” Jimmy shrugged in response, “Let's see, that looks to be about twenty, thirty feet, wouldn't you say?” The man turned to face him, the plastic brim of his hardhat just inches from his forehead. “Cut the shit, man. Union sites harness you up for anything above eight feet.”

“Someone's been reading his manual before bedtime.” Jimmy put on the hardhat he had been carrying and extended his now free hand. “I'm Jimmy, been working in this union for twenty plus years now. From the looks of you I'd guess you've been in for about a month.”

“Name's Roger,” he said, hesitantly swinging his hand to meet Jimmy's.

“The longer you spend working these sites the more you'll realize half those regulations are pure bullshit. If you got a deadline coming up, nine times out of ten they're not gonna waste time looking around for a harness and then hooking your ass up.” He paused in his lecture and eyed the younger man. “You know what you do then, Roger?”

Jimmy waited for the younger man to take a guess, or even just to prod him for an answer, but he didn't. Instead, Roger adjusted his gloves and his tool belt, ignoring him like an insolent teen might have. Jimmy had never had children, had never even particularly cared for them, and so it was not very often that he found himself sympathizing with his father for all the years he had put him through hell. He felt that sympathy building when he spoke to Roger, though, and had to resist recycling his father's rants about the disaffected youth. He persisted with the dramatic motions of his story, instead, despite his audience's lack of interest. He was used to a big crowd at the work site, a circle of jostling men that had heard his stories too many times to count. All that was gone, though, and he was left talking to a man from a generation who preferred watching reality television programs about work more than actually exerting themselves.

"Forget it, man," Jimmy pulled a pair of work gloves from his back pocket. He couldn't resist finishing the story, though, even if Roger remained unfazed by its open ending. Pointing a finger in the younger man's face he resumed his lecture, "If the job's unsafe you just walk, alright. Just remember that?" Roger nodded, and Jimmy tried to be satisfied with that response. He slid his gloves on finally, using them to build dramatic tension. "No job is worth your life, that's for damn sure. 'Sides, the union's got these regulations for a reason. Somebody's got to enforce them." Starting toward the scaffolding, he paused only to yell over his shoulder. "Forgot to mention, you and me are pouring concrete all

day. Better start looking around for one of those harnesses so we can finish before your curfew.”

It was a long way up to the top of the scaffolding. Jimmy usually preferred to take the stairs, which zigzagged upward like a fire escape. Roger insisted that the ladder attached to the staging was faster, though. “After all, don’t want to miss my curfew,” he had said. The smirk that followed found Jimmy following him up the ladder with angry fists clenched tightly around each rung. He had never been particularly fond of heights, not since his father had fallen from a roof when he was little, but that fear seemed amplified now. His hands were all he could look at. Just like a word that is repeated too often, they began to feel distorted. In fact, they seemed to inflate and swell with each successive rung. Both men climbed with their harnesses slung over their shoulders, the workingman’s yoke, but for Jimmy it felt like he had been trapped in a net.

“You like the view from up here?” Roger asked him once they had made it to the top. For most of the climb, Jimmy had been focusing on counting each of his breaths, so when Roger spoke he jerked a little. The north side of the scaffolding faced away from the city so that it was spared the view of the snaking, polluted highway and the obtrusive shopping malls structures, each of which Jimmy had spent months working on. Instead, the scaffolding looked out over the type of wide undeveloped field. Directly below them the rest of the men could be seen carrying lumber from this pile to that pile. If one looked outward, though,

out toward the pasture and the stretch of sky it was possible to lose the ground beneath one's own feet. It was the type of view that consumed a person.

“You say something?” Jimmy asked dismissively. Roger had already stepped into his harness and was fastening it with a metal carabineer to the metal beam above them.

“I asked if you liked the view up here. You look hard enough you can see the mountains over there out on the horizon.” Roger leaned over the edge of the scaffolding to point one steady finger at the mountains. While he spoke, Jimmy pocketed his own trembling hands.

“I don't have time to admire the view.” Jimmy scowled, and slung his harness from his shoulder. For a moment he felt dizzy. At least when he had been climbing the ladder there had been something to hold onto. He stepped away from the edge before strapping on his harness. Although his back was turned to Roger he could feel a sense of nervous heat emanating from behind him, from where the man was standing. He was reminded of a bar fight he had gotten into many years prior. He had made the mistake of hitting on the most attractive woman in the bar, in violation of his own Golden Rule. These women were either always taken or always snobs. Either way, they were the women you could count on buying drinks all night only to watch them drive away in someone else's car. This particular woman had been surprisingly down-to-earth, and so Jimmy had known that her boyfriend's name would show up soon enough in their conversation. He had not expected the man to show up in person, and yet before her hulking boyfriend had

even tapped on his shoulder, Jimmy been aware somehow of the man's anger building behind them. Roger's own heat was not seething in the same way, but still it unnerved him. "You know, Roger, the last partner I worked with that wanted me to admire the view with them is on maternity leave right now." Jimmy attached his own harness to the beam above them. While he spoke his harness clanked above him like the chain of the wrecking ball he had pictured earlier.

"Didn't mean nothing by it, Jimmy," Roger said. "Look, look." He pointed his finger more insistently this time. "You see Wrecking Ball down there? He looks like a snowman waddling around. Man, you're not even looking, Jimmy." Jimmy followed Roger out to the edge, his heart pounding like a gong against his ribcage. Down far beneath them was the Wrecking Ball, his legs like toothpicks beneath his round stomach. "You can't tell me that shit's not funny, Jimmy?"

Jimmy bobbed his head up and down in agreement. "Hilarious. Listen, you plan on helping me over here or you want to just ogle our foreman all day?"

Roger's mouth tightened. "I can see why you come so highly recommended." Jimmy felt dizzy than when he had been looking out over the scaffolding. He wondered what Roger had heard and who he had heard it from. Roger continued, "You know I've had more fun working with women before; when they nag me I can at least look at their tits." The two men moved away from the edge of the scaffolding. Once they had secured their harnesses, the concrete pump machine began propelling wet concrete onto the staging. For the rest of the morning Jimmy and Roger trudged through the cement with the long, hose-like



cement vibrators they had been issued. The tool was heavy like a snake and its bottleneck ending had to be pressed down into the cement to vibrate out the air holes. With the whirl of the machinery, the two men fell into a comfortable silence. Jimmy relaxed in the silence. While he worked he thought about the offer his brother had made earlier that morning.

In the kitchen that morning he had scooped coffee from its tin into a filter and had sat at the table waiting while it dripped into the carafe. Most mornings he would have shifted around the mountain of dishes, stacking them as if there were an organization to it. He had been laid off for a month now, though, and so the dishes had all been scrubbed and dried. As the coffee had dripped he decided that even though he was hungry enough to hear his stomach moaning, he was too lazy to extract the frying pan from the cupboard. When full the pan cupboard reminded him too much of a game he had always played, and always lost, with Derek, in which each player took turns removing a block from a tower. The first one to topple the tower lost, and the loser always had to clean up. It was the clean up that Jimmy hated the most, and it was the clean up that deterred him then. His coffee had been weak, but he had drunk it anyway, stretching his legs out underneath the long, wooden table. He didn't mind the silence much. It was a trade-off for all the space and freedom, or that was what he told Derek, anyway.

“What the hell you need a whole house for, Jimmy?” Derek would say whenever he called, his voice always squeaking around the word hell as if he

were afraid their mother might still overhear. Jimmy would protest, as scripted, scratching his head nervously as if for the benefit of some viewing audience.

“What am I gonna do, get some apartment where I have to check everything with a landlord first? Nah, I need my own space.” The house was a small Cape Cod, with steep staircases and one cramped bathroom, yet during these conversations he spoke of it as if it were a palatial estate. There was something about the house that felt like an anchor to Jimmy. He had tried to sell it before, but each time he had felt too guilty, as if it were a part of him he was putting up for sale.

“Are we talking about the same house here? The one Aunt Rosie called ‘downright unlivable?’” Derek often asked. The two would slip into laughter as they recounted the summer that their Aunt had come to help take care of their father. That had been the summer that his father had insisted on fixing the shingles without the help of a roofer. “It’s about time you boys learn how to be the men of the house,” his father had said; puffing out his chest like the cowboys would do in the old Western movies they watched together. “Derek, hold the ladder,” he had ordered Jimmy’s youngest brother. While their father climbed, Derek’s fists grew white with apprehension. The two boys squinted to watch him climb over the edge of the roof and disappear.

Had Jimmy been a few years younger, Derek’s age maybe, then he too might have begun to fantasize about the way that the sunlight formed a halo around his father. At his age, though, he had only scoffed when Derek mumbled

something about the sight reminding him of last Sunday's sermon. "Next you'll be saying Dad looks like Santa up on the roof," he had whispered to his brother, knowing that if their mom heard she would march him straight to confession. The boys had waited in silence after that, the sun dulling everything around them so that the grass began to look as white as the house and the house as white as the sky. Even then the moment had seemed more like a dream, with everything muffled and washed out by the humidity and the sunlight.

Finally, their father had poked his head over the edge of the roof. "Thought I had my hammer in my tool belt, but I must have left it in the toolbox. Run and grab it for me, Jimmy?" he had said, and Jimmy had taken off running, into the house and past his mother who had begun to gripe behind him about his father's absentmindedness.

"I swear —," he caught, and then, "Lose his head if —," His mother was always complaining and so he had little trouble filling in the blanks. When he was younger, he had felt she was programmed like a refrigerator light, to begin a lengthy diatribe whenever the screen door opened, and to stop whenever it slammed closed.

In the upstairs closet of their house, the same creaky house he had since inherited from his parents, his father kept his toolbox tucked between a crate of winter coats and a box of discarded toys. With his head deep inside the closet, the noises had sounded at first like the groan of the staircase, his mother, probably, coming upstairs to punish him for what he had said to Derek about God being a

sham like Santa Claus. She was still irate with him for telling Derek about Santa Claus in the first place so he imagined his punishment would include his father's thickest belt. When his mother's shadow had not darkened the closet doorway behind him, though, he had made his way hesitantly over to the hall window. By angling his head, he had been able to make out the vision of his father flat on the ground with Derek knelt beside him.

Their Aunt Rosie had arrived shortly after. She had the bedside manner of a filing cabinet, but she was a hard-worker. With her around the chores had gotten done, the meals had been cooked, and slowly their father had healed. He hadn't been the same, of course. No one ever was after a fall like that. He drank more often, which meant Rosie had stayed months longer than should have been necessary. In fact, he drank so much on Saturday nights that he stopped going to Sunday sermon altogether. At first, Rosie and their mother had escorted the boys, but once she left, they had all begun to sleep in on Sundays.

"Don't know how you expect me to iron when I can't even move my elbows in this damned room," Jimmy had mocked that morning on the phone to his brother so that both of them remembered how eagerly they had waited for their mother to snap at Rose for swearing. Their mother had done little more than crease her lips, though, a reaction which forever cemented their vision of Aunt Rose as being some sort of mythical being.

That morning Derek had called before Jimmy had even begun to search for his hard hat. "Hey Jimmy, didn't mean to call so early," he had heard his

younger brother sipping coffee in between words, “Elaine and I were just looking through the Real Estate section and there are some really amazing properties for sale.”

“Tell him it’s a buyer’s market,” Elaine had prompted from the background. It had occurred to Jimmy long ago that Derek’s persistent pleas might be little more than a task on a long to-do list designed by Elaine. He was either a dutiful husband or else a loyal brother, calling at least once a month to try to convince Jimmy to move out to the Midwest. Each time Jimmy cited the same tired protest so that it even began to taste stale in his mouth. In truth he knew that he had too much space: too many pans, too many stairs, too much legroom, but he knew that the real reason would offend Derek more. Even though both their parents had passed, and their Aunt Rose before them, he had always felt he had more family on the east than in Iowa. For ten years he had spent every week in union meetings or barrooms or strike lines with the same men. Together they had built casinos, elementary schools, stone walls, hospital wings, and parking plazas. He finished his coffee and added the mug to the sink, knowing that by the end of the week it would be piled high with dishes again.

“It’s a buyer’s market, you know,” his brother had echoed, the real estate jargon had sounded foreign in his mouth.

“Is there a number to call or something?” Jimmy had asked, rubbing his head habitually.

“A number? You want a number?” Derek had asked frantically. In the background he had listened as they scrambled to flip through pages. Finally Derek had rattled off a number and Jimmy had scrawled it down on a scrap of paper. “Everything okay over there, Jimmy?” He never asked for the number. “You still riled up about that fire?”

“No, haven’t thought about it at all, to tell you the truth.” This lie slid out smoothly, like frosting on a cake.

“What’s the union saying?”

“I didn’t go to the last few meetings.”

“Seem like important ones to miss, don’t you think?” Derek had inherited their mother’s ability to turn even the most innocent of questions into a guilt trip.

“It was an arsonist, plain and simple,” Jimmy asserted. “That’s what happens when you’re too cheap to have someone on Fire Watch.”

Derek sighed, “Right, well call that number I gave you and ask for Gloria.” Gloria, the name had reminded him of a waitress he had once met whose makeup was caked on so thickly that she had left a stain on his pillowcase.

Jimmy was still trying to remember the difference between Gloria the waitress and Gloria the grocery store clerk when the lunch bell rang. When they broke for lunch, Roger ate with a group of the other men while Jimmy sulked in his truck with a cigarette. He tried not to imagine what Roger and the other men were talking about, but that only left him free to think about the nightmares.

Leaning a tired head against his headrest, Jimmy closed his eyes and began to daydream. In his dreams Jimmy was thirteen again giving a sermon from the pulpit in his old church. He wore thick, black robes with holds that swallowed his nervous, shaking hands. Although he spoke slowly and methodically, his words sounded slurred as if he were listening to them from underwater. The sermon usually lasted for a few minutes before the wooden podium began to lift away from the ground. He climbed on top of the flat, wooden surface as it rose past the stained glass windows toward the high vaulted ceiling. By the time the podium stopped rising and he steeled himself enough to look over its edge the church was filled with people whose faces he could barely distinguish. He could only recognize his father, who was positioned awkwardly on the pew, encased in thick, plaster casts. The churchgoers were each mumbling separate, but equally impassioned, prayers. As they spoke the volume grew until the collective sound of the prayers became so deafening that it was impossible to hear Jimmy's desperate screams for help.

When his daydream ended and the lunch bell rang, Jimmy ground out his cigarette in the car ashtray and peeled himself from his leather seats. He made the trek across the parking lot, past the groups of clustered men and toward the scaffolding. This time, Roger climbed behind him. This time there wasn't a pair of feet obstructing Jimmy's view of the sky. He felt for a moment as if the world had been turned sideways, but he kept on climbing.

“You always been this popular around here?” Roger shouted while they climbed. Jimmy tried to recall who he had seen Roger eating with.

“I actually grew up in this union,” he yelled down. “My dad was a member of the union before me. He used to take me to protests before I could even hold a picket sign. These people used to be like family.” Jimmy was surprised that his voice was steady.

“So what’s the deal then, the guys said you were nothing but a Bi Card Member?” Roger called out.

“Pie Card Member, huh?” Jimmy found himself laughing. “Now that’s a classic. I haven’t heard someone be called a Pie Card Member since I was fifteen.”

“What the hell’s a Bi Card Member?” Roger yelled. Jimmy had made it to the top of the scaffolding and was stepping into his harness. He was glad that there was no one that could overhear them, certainly not over the churning sound of the cement pump behind them.

“A Pie Card Member,” Jimmy clarified. “It’s someone who doesn’t really believe in the union. It’s just a check to them.”

“So you’re one of those, huh?” Roger’s eyes widened and he licked his lips. “You’re one of those Pie Card guys?”

“Not in the least,” Jimmy answered simply.

“Then why —?” But Jimmy was already walking toward the cement pump, his chest puffed out like a cowboy’s.



“You know if I’ve got to be partnered with you, you could at least tell me why Tom called you that,” Roger said over the noise of their machinery.

“It was Tom, then?” He lifted each of his heavy, cement-covered boots up and planted them back down. “He always was overly dramatic. Those idiots think I’m going to rat them out. They don’t think more of me than that. You know I was the one who bailed Tom out after he got in that bar fight, what was it five years ago now? Me? I’ve never missed a goddamn union meeting until this year, and I’m the fucking Pie Card Member.”

“What do you have on them?” Roger was standing still now.

“They ask you to test me? They put you up to this?” Roger shook his head from side to side. “They did, didn’t they? I didn’t sign up for this shit. I’m taking fifteen,” Jimmy said, and he pulled a cigarette from his pocket. He draped the cement vibrator over his shoulder and trudged through the wet cement toward the north side of the scaffolding.

“You’re not supposed to use a lighter this close to the site,” Roger warned weakly.

“Save it for your friends,” Jimmy snarled back at him through clenched teeth. He flicked at his lighter and touched it to the end of the cigarette. “You think you know people. You think you know people and you can confide in them, you know.” Jimmy grumbled. “You think you know people,” Jimmy yelled loudly back toward Roger. His partner plodded toward him. At least he had finally done something to catch the younger man’s attention. “You think you can confide in

people, trust them. I would have done anything for those idiots.” He wagged his cigarette outward so that the ash fell down toward the men below. “I mentioned one time that I’m a little skittish about some stuff, you know?” Jimmy waited for his partner to nod in response. When Roger did, he offered him a cigarette. While they smoked Jimmy told him about the fire. If he was going to be shunned for telling he might as well tell, he justified. Besides, he told himself later, in a few weeks he would be in some apartment in the Midwest far away from the union. He’d never pegged himself as a man who ran from his problems, but he’d also never had a problem that wasn’t his alone. “Just once, I say that I’m feeling a little bit guilty, and all the sudden I’m blacklisted. I’m fucking shunned. Shunned, after all I did for them. After all I did for Tom.”

“You climb the scaffolding, Jimmy. Light the top and once you get back down we’ll light the bottom,” Tom had been bent over and was scratching the plan in the dirt with a stick.

“Why can’t we just start it from the bottom?” Jimmy reasoned.

“Won’t do enough. I figure we have about ten to fifteen before the cops show. If we want to do the most damage we have to light the candle from both ends.” The men had laughed at this pun, giddy with liquor and illegality.

“Where’s the harness?” Jimmy had asked, but the men had just laughed more. “Well, why can’t you climb, then, Tom?”

“I can barely walk in a straight line,” Tom had pointed out. “What’s the big deal, Jimmy? You climb all the time.”

“You scared?” Mark had asked, inching forward so that his feet dusted over the drawn plan.

“Not scared,” Jimmy had said, his hands already shaking, “it’s just — it’s stupid is all.”

“They should have Fire Watch, Jim. It’s mandated right on their work permit for this site,” Pete had reminded him. That night Pete had started out as the most sober of them all, but as their plan had developed his arm movements had grown more fervid, more violent. As Pete spoke his right hand had slapped into Tom’s chest and Mark had doubled over in laughter. “We’re union men, through and through,” Pete had continued as if he were in the front of a picket line.

“Thicker than blood,” Mark had chimed in.

“We could just go on strike?” Jimmy had proposed with raised eyebrows.

“Union won’t strike over something like this, Jimmy.”

“But we’ll burn a site down over it?” Jimmy had argued.

“Let me rephrase, the union can’t strike over something like this. It’s up to us to enforce the regulations.” The speech had energized Jimmy so much that he found himself nodding in agreement, but when he looked up at the scaffolding he had felt as if he were shrinking. As he climbed he hummed to himself, a song that he hadn’t heard in years. The song had been Rosie’s favorite hymn, and the one that most annoyed his mother. It was slow and mournful like a dirge. He couldn’t

remember the words, but he could picture Rosie mouthing them to herself while she ironed. Once on the top of the scaffolding, his humming had grown louder. He had drenched the few rags Tom had provided him with in gasoline and positioned them around the roof. While his men waited below, Jimmy had lit each rag and then raced toward the ladder. As he descended from the scaffolding he watched as the sky turned red with fury and the flames swallowed the stars whole.

On the ground he had not waited for the men to finish setting fire to the bottom of the building. Rather, he had raced toward his truck, still shaking with fear. Jimmy had spent the night like that, his truck parked in his garage and his hands glued to its steering wheel. He had let the answering machine record the telephone message from the union that reported the lay-off and the unexpected fire. When he had first heard the message he had the sensation that he was trapped in some distorted version of the nightmare that haunted him. In fact, he had spent much of that day waiting to wake up.

“Why the hell would you trust me with a story like that?” Roger asked when Jimmy grew silent. The man’s tone was defensive.

“You’re a union man. Thicker than blood, and all that,” Jimmy explained.

“How’s that working out for you?” Roger exhaled deeply and let his cigarette ashes fall.

“They’re just looking out for their own. I know that. Soon as I started second-guessing everything I just wasn’t one of their own no more.” Roger nodded and twisted his mouth up in agreement. “You can’t be half a union man,

you know, Roger. As soon as you start putting yourself first you're just not a part of the whole anymore." Jimmy's harness clanked above him. The two men ground their cigarette butts into the metal scaffold beams below them and trudged back toward the cement.

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## OLD DOG & OLD TRICKS

On nights when Jean drove the van home from work, she often wished it were more inconspicuous, less white, less boxy, and less deafening. These things were everything she loved about the van when she was on the job, but when she rounded the corner onto her narrow street she wished the thing would shrink and slide into her garage with the ease of a sports car. Instead, she had to clumsily align the thing with the curb, a task that required multiple attempts and usually resulted in the overturning of her neighbor's garbage cans. When she was working she liked the prideful way the van announced them, with its rambling engine. She didn't mind the blocky, blue letters that spanned across its length, advertising their purpose: Animal Control. On many occasions she had even found herself wishing her own beat-up car drove the same way, high and mighty, parting the cars before it like a supremely royal being. In front of her driveway, though, the van looked cumbersome and intrusive, an uninvited houseguest. On these nights she would often survey the thing from her bedroom window with anxiousness, wondering how her neighbors would react.

She had volunteered to drive the van home on that particular Tuesday because her own car was in the garage. After parking the thing she had gone into her house wondering how many shifts of Neighborhood Watch she would have to take in order to assuage her neighbor's complaints. Roger, in the house to her left with the ugly yellow shutters, always whined about the way the butt of the van obstructed where he put his garbage cans for collection. On the right Mrs.

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Bedallis would murmur about the difficulty she had encountered leaving for work in the morning, her eyes would grow uncomfortably wide as she recounted how her Buick had barely scraped past the wide van. And, of course, the Coopers across the street would surely reserve some snide comment about the van being an eyesore they had to put up with. In the morning, then, she was not surprised when she was woken by someone knocking on the door. Instead of answering, she had lay in her bed with the thin, red blanket one of her ex-boyfriends had given her pulled up to her chin. She waited for the knocking to stop, for the knocker to give up. Now, as she recounted the story to her partner Leo she was careful to omit this part. There was no need for him to picture the tedious way she had picked at the lint on the sheets and flexed her feet, waiting.

“I jumped up so quick I almost tripped and slammed into my nightstand,” she exclaimed with a clap of her hands. Leo whistled through the gap in his teeth. “I’ll bet he sure as hell wasn’t expecting me to answer the door in my bathrobe.” Jean said, as if her bare legs had been a calculated challenge to her visitor.

“How do you know?” Leo adjusted the rearview mirror as he spoke. He was always fiddling with something. It was one of the things that had first made Jean hesitant to work with him all those years earlier. She hadn’t liked the idea of having a partner in the first place, never mind one whose constant, agitated motion would be sure to panic the animals. When she had first told her now ex-husband Paul about Leo, he had just laughed and said that she never had played well with anyone, as if she were an infant throwing a block at a sniffing play

date. In her first weeks with Leo she had taken to calling him “The Hummingbird” to Paul with a tone of disdain. He’s inept, absolutely inept, she would bellow down the hall while she made dinner and Paul showered. Over time she had gotten used to Leo, though. She had even come to find herself appreciating the way his overbearing cologne masked the smell of sickly animals, and the way his quick, gangly arms could net a stray dog quicker than anyone else’s.

“For all you know,” Leo continued, “he’s been scoping out your place with a pair of binoculars for months.

“Trust me, I would have noticed. This guy was tall enough to pass for Bigfoot, a monster of a man, really.” He hadn’t been that tall, five foot ten at the most, but she had learned years ago that men only paid attention to exaggerations. Her morning visitor had been hairy enough to be Bigfoot, that much had been true, with arms that reminded her of a gorilla’s thick coat of fur. “So anyway, he just starts slamming on my door like a maniac this morning around seven. By the time I get downstairs he’s even yelling like an imbecile. Then when I finally answer wouldn’t you know it but he stammers, he just stammers, Leo. Turn right here, no, not yet, you see the sign?” Leo turned the van into the crowded parking lot of a fast food restaurant, and maneuvered it into the drive-thru line. “Well, wouldn’t you think after pounding on the door all that time he’d be a little more prepared?” Jean knew enough not to expect a response from Leo. Even if he was



listening, he only ever spoke to interrupt. These days she paused more for dramatic effect than conversational purposes.

“What do you want?” he asked. While she decided he rolled down the window and leaned his head out of the van to examine the menu. He ordered the same grease-soaked bacon and egg sandwich every morning, but he still perused the menu as if it were a newspaper. That was why she always let Leo drive. It was easier than having him muscle his way around her so that he could salivate over menu options like an unfed dog.

“The usual and you’d better get a few hamburgers too.” She said the last part already anticipating the look of disappointment that would accompany her request.

“You didn’t, Jean?” He groaned, although there was a hollow, tinny sound to his voice that told her the question was not sincere. Not only did he already know her answer, but he also couldn’t honestly say he wouldn’t have done the same thing. “You have to maintain boundaries, Jean. There’s a protocol for this sort of thing,” Leo asserted. “These people have to call into Animal Control to get a trap set, not take a walk down to their neighbors.” Jean rolled her eyes. For all Leo’s talk about establishing strict boundaries between work and home Jean had personally seen him adopt three strays already, one which had even been left tied to the door handle of the Animal Control van last month when it had been his turn to drive the van home.

“If it had been your neighbor that showed up at your door complaining about a stray you would have done the same thing, just sans bathrobe.” Leo rolled his eyes either at her terrible joke or at how pathetic she was. “If I hadn’t taken care of setting the trap this morning it just would have been one more thing on our to-do list this afternoon. All we have to do is go back and bait it. Three or four burgers should work for bait.” Leo ignored her. “Trust me, Leo,” she defended. “He got an earful of the boundary speech on the way to his yard.” Leo was already turned toward the menu-board yelling clarifications at a confused fast-food worker.

“Jesus, first they forbid us from coming inside, and now they subject us to this hell.” Leo leaned further over so that his mouth was close enough to kiss the board. “One of those bacon and eggs is without cheese, without cheese,” he emphasized, stretching out the middle of the word like a photographer might.

“In their defense, we really should have known better than to go inside a restaurant after picking up that skunk.”

“And they should know that this technology is less effective than stringing two metal cans together. Besides, a fast food joint hardly qualifies as a restaurant.” He had given up on ordering properly and was driving the van up toward the window, instead. A flustered teenager handed out a bulging brown bag. While they waited for their coffees the teen tried unsuccessfully to lecture Leo on proper drive-thru etiquette. Jean scoured the bags, going through a mental checklist as Leo drummed rudely against the steering wheel.

“You have to wait for us to repeat the order back to you before driving to the window,” the boy whined, his voice snapping around the word ‘before’ like an elastic band.

“You get all the hamburgers you need?” Leo asked once the cashier had handed him two Styrofoam coffee cups. Before Jean could answer Leo was pulling the van away from the window, ignoring the boy’s request that he wait for a manager to explain why it was important to wait for the order-taker to usher them forward.

“They act like they’re operating a fucking runway or something! I wouldn’t be surprised if next they hire some of those guys —.” He snapped his fingers. “What are they called, you know, the guys with the orange sticks that direct the plane?” Jean shrugged her shoulders, and Leo sighed with defeat. “You’re supposed to be my partner here, finish my sentences, wipe my brow, give me directions, all that stuff I can’t do for myself.”

“Sorry Leo, I can’t stop thinking about the stray. Three burgers ought to be enough, right?”

“Probably, your neighbor said he thought it looked pretty small, right?”

“From his description it sounded like it was about the size of a Terrier. You should have seen the way the whole neighborhood rallied against the thing, ready to drive it off their street with pitchforks or something. The Big Foot guy who came and got me, he kept rambling on about rabies. Then this real over-bearing mom started complaining about town safety. This old woman even had

the nerve to say he looked vicious, like she could even get a good look at the poor thing in the first place. I tell you; sometimes I wonder who the real animal is.”

She let her voice trail off so that Leo might join in her diatribe, but he was too busy fiddling with the ancient GPS. He cursed at the Siren-esque voice that was tempting him to drive into a stone wall. Turn left now, the voice beckoned stiffly. “I’ll tell you one thing I do know,” Jean continued, droning over the GPS. “That’s the last time I volunteer to drive the van home. That moron had the nerve to ask me if my husband was home.”

“He didn’t?” Leo feigned shock, but Jean continued undeterred.

“Yeah, after I answered the door he looked around me like I was a lamppost, like he was smelling the air for testosterone, and then he said to me, you know what he said to me?” She waited but Leo didn’t even attempt a guess. “He said, ‘Is your husband home, sweetheart?’ Can you believe —,”

“You know,” Leo interrupted, puffing out his chest like a bird during mating season. “I think that’s the first time I’ve heard anyone equate our profession with masculinity.”

“We are kind of the cheerleaders of the Police Department, huh?” Jean agreed.

“I got a PD assist call two weeks ago and when I got there two officers were cowering in their patrol car with this pipsqueak of a pit bull was barking at their car door. On the phone they said the thing was looking ferocious. So naturally, when I get out there I look like an idiot holding my bite stick in one

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hand and the catch pole in the other, all for this harmless little thing that was just a little frightened. I think there was a better chance of it licking me than biting me. Once I locked the sweet thing away in a cage, though, and the officers had come out of hiding, they still had the nerve to start in on me. You know Hodges, the weasel looking one? He started calling me ‘mall cop.’ I swear to God, next time I’m videotaping the whole lot of them cowering inside their patrol cars. I save their asses and they still start in on me. How the hell do you figure that?”

“You still get more respect than me,” Jean said. “After I told this moron that the Animal Control van was mine, his eyes almost fell clear out of their sockets.” Leo slowed the van to a halt, and they both leaned out to inspect a lump on the side of the road.

“Road kill?” he proposed, but Jean shook her head from side to side. “Must be a sweatshirt, then?” Leo asked. “Oh yeah, I can see the sleeve now.”

He accelerated again and Jean continued. “Just because I’ve got breasts I can’t deal with a few animals? I wasn’t even on duty and I still got shit.”

“You could have told him you weren’t on duty. The Animal Control number is in the phone book right where it’s always been. You think he brings his work home with him?”

“That’s the thing; he had a cable van in his driveway. Next time my cable goes out I’m pounding on his front door at six in the morning to ask for a house-call. I just hope to God he doesn’t answer the door in his bathrobe.” She shuddered dramatically, letting her coffee spill out onto the seat for the sake of the

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joke. They had been driving the same van together for the past six years. Each seat was marred with coffee stains, grease splotches, and blood splatters so that Rhianne, the girl she partnered with on Leo's day off, had once referred to them as Jackson Pollack paintings. Jean had repeated the joke to Leo who had laughed like he was having a seizure until finding out Rhianne had been its originator. He asked about her with the curiosity of a jealous lover trying to piece together details about an ex-flame.

"How's the Rhino?" he would question, feigning disinterest. "Did you two have any adventures while I was away?" Sometimes Jean would play along, detailing impossible zoo escapes that concluded with the two of them cornering a lion in a cul-de-sac. More often, rather than answer she would just ask about her own Tuesday replacement, an asthmatic twenty-five year old who seemed better suited for a position at a videogame or comic book store. Now Leo was rambling about how the Rhino must have spilled something or other last Wednesday, as if this alleged offense were indicative of some larger character flaw, when Jean interrupted. They had both eaten their sandwiches and the greasy bag filled with hamburgers was growing cold in her lap.

"We've still got to bring these hamburgers by the live trap I set in that moron's yard. Head over there now before the day gets too hectic."

"I'll have you know, Jerry never orders me around like that," Leo said, but he turned the van toward Jean's neighborhood.

"That's because Jerry can't get an audible word in around his wheezing."

Earlier that morning she had wedged the trap into her neighbor's hedges, a task that had required her to crawl on her elbows and knees into the bush. While she had worked she had been berated by a crowd of neighbors: an elderly woman with a metal trowel who objected to the mistreatment of her hedges, a mother worried for the sake of her two children, who Jean suspected could have benefited more from being chased by a stray dog than by being coddled, and her Big Foot neighbor who in between leering at her outstretched legs made remarks about the cruelty of such traps. Despite all of this, Jean had still volunteered to bait the trap while Leo waited in the van. Not only would it be easier than explaining to Leo which of the nearly indistinguishable lawns housed the trap, but it would also mean that she could forgo an entire day spent listening to Leo griping about her neighbors. Better to just endure the pain herself than to listen to a filtered, over-exaggerated version of it on repeat.

Jean instructed Leo to park the van in her driveway, and then, carrying the greasy bag of hamburgers, she made the short trek down the street to her neighbor's yard. The crowd had dispersed since this morning, although the elderly woman was still working in her garden next door. Jean made her way to the backyard, thankful that at least the balding man's car was gone from the driveway. Jean had learned long ago, however, that the only universal truth that seemed to hold any bearing at all was Murphy's Law. Anytime there could be a Big Foot neighbor leering at her, there most certainly would be. She had begun the task convinced that she would be met with at least three angry, over-

caffeinated adults. Since it was not very often that her life did not work like a self-fulfilling prophecy, she found that she was both surprised that at her age she could still be surprised. The elderly woman, though, was still so occupied with her own garden that she hadn't noticed her at all, and Jean theorized that by some stroke of luck the mother she had met earlier was too preoccupied protecting her children from some other fabricated terror to bother her.

It was with this sense of unexpected relief that she approached the trap only to find that one of the two children she had met earlier was waiting for her; in fact, he had seated himself just in front of the cage. He growled when he saw her approach. "Momma won't let us play outside because of you." She saw then that he was not seated there by accident, nor had he chosen his spot because he was curious.

"Looks like you're outside right now, though, doesn't it?" Her voice was impatient.

"Momma doesn't know, though." Everything about the boy already annoyed her; from his accusations to the methodical tone he used to express them. Not only did he have the nerve to be obstructing her in the first place, but he seemed bored while he was doing it.

"I've got to bait a trap. As much as I'd like an assistant, I've already got one in the van." Jean forced a wide smile like the ones featured in toothpaste advertisements. "You've got to scram."



“Who said I wanted to be your assistant anyway.” The boy glowered up at her. “Sounds like a pretty dumb job if you ask me.”

Jean sighed and knelt down so that she was eye-level with the boy. “Your mother is right. You shouldn’t be out here until we catch the stray. If you don’t head back home I’ll bring you myself.” Jean was bad at lying. The last thing she wanted to do was to escort this boy, whose hands she was sure were clammy with sweat and germs, back to his home. For years she had encountered animals with rabies, and mange, and parvovirus, but not one of them had ever unnerved her as much as this boy did. He didn’t budge when she threatened him, nor did he flinch when she drew nearer, waving the paper bag as if she expected him to scatter. Instead he picked aimlessly at a few pieces of grass and then rested his chubby cheeks in his sticky hands.

“What’s in the bag, Missus?” he finally asked.

“None of your business,” she answered, before realizing that answers like that only served as bait for boys like him.

He leaned in on his haunches, and surveyed his surroundings. To his left the elderly woman was digging in her yard, surrounded by piles of rich soil on all sides. He spoke quietly, as if fearful that at any moment the woman might sniff him out by his sugary scent. “Is it candy?” he whispered, keeping his face turned toward the woman.

“No,” she answered. His face did not fall like she thought it might. “It’s a dog toy for the stray. Nothing you’d be interested in.”

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The boy tapped his pointer finger to his lips. Even seated in front of hedges with grass-stained, elastic-waist khakis, he somehow managed to look like a seasoned dictator considering possibilities for negotiation. “Show me?” he challenged, climbing to his feet, and brushing the dirt from his knees.

“No,” Jean said. She took a step back. “Either you scam or I’ll sic the old lady on you.”

He drew nearer, his breathing was labored like Jerry’s, but his steps were evenly, calmly paced. “Open it?” He said, pointing at the bag. “Let me see?” As he got closer she could see that he was older than she once thought.

“I’ll bet she knows where your mother lives,” Jean said in a reasoning tone. She directed the bag toward the woman gardening. “In fact, I’m sure she would be more than happy to take you.”

“She barely knows where her own house is,” the boy said, but the words sounded foreign in his mouth, as if it was something he had often heard his mother or father say in passing. He was advancing still closer to her, so that now he could breach the distance between them in just five small steps. She inched backward, hoping he wouldn’t notice the retreat.

“I’ll bet you’ll feel awfully stupid if I do let you look inside the bag.” He stepped forward again. “It’s just a few cold, slimy hamburgers to catch the stray.”

“I thought you said it was a dog toy,” he interjected. “Nothing special, you said?” Jean entertained for a moment the image of this little boy stuck in the cage, his sausage fingers wrapped around the metal rods, his marshmallow cheeks

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puffed out into a pout. “Momma won’t let me have hamburgers anymore, you know,” he remarked, as if the thought had just occurred to him. He had finally laid out his terms. She would get no peace until the boy had a hamburger. That much was clear. She considered for a moment that she might be able to sprint to the trap, dodging the boy along the way, but it occurred to her that she would be winning the battle, not the war. Even if she could bypass the boy in this instance, it would only augment his irritation with her. He would just become more committed to guarding the trap. Winning such a battle would be the surest way to lose the war. She could either help the stray or spite the boy.

“If I give you one will you leave me alone?” she asked in a low voice. The boy shook his head from side to side and held up two fingers. “Two? You want two do you, you greedy monster?” The boy nodded solemnly. Jean opened the bag and inspected her bait, three meager hamburgers for the poor canine. She considered tossing the boy the two greasiest burgers, an option that would have left only one pitiful burger for the stray. Just the thought of this boy gnashing at the burgers while she baited the trap was enough to make her feel nauseous. Even imagining the way his little rounded, dull teeth would struggle with the meat drove her nuts. She was sure that a boy like him was used to his mother cutting up some sort of rice burger for his dinner in the kitchen while he stuffed himself with potato chips in front of the television. Jean was certain that the boy probably ate all of his meals, with the exception of his Thanksgiving feast, in front of the television. She was sure that unlike the stray her little obstacle had never had to

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work for food once in his entire life. In fact, she found herself thinking, he probably didn't have the slightest idea where a hamburger even came from.

"You know where a hamburger comes from?" She asked. She opened the paper bag and peered inside. The boy shook his head from side to side.

"That looks like the bag they give out at the Burger Baron's?" he guessed.

"Not just these hamburgers, any hamburgers. Do you know how they make them?" The boy shook his head again. Jean felt the knot in her stomach begin to unwind. She felt a smile forming. "They use the meat from stray little boys, all those little boys that go missing from their Mommy's and Daddy's." The boy's eyes were wide now. He took a step backward, and Jean advanced. "You know anyone like that?"

"I don't know anyone stupid enough to believe that, if that's what you're asking," the boy retorted. Jean clenched up the paper bag in anger. "I still want two."

"You want to take two burgers from a stray dog, huh?" Jean began to yell. She was reminded that the elderly woman was still diligently gardening. She lowered her voice before continuing. "What a good little negotiator your parents have raised you to be. How proud they must be." The boy crossed his arms. "You want to eat a dog's burgers, then I'm sure you won't mind eating them like a dog would." She pulled two burgers from the paper bag and threw them on the grass. "What's wrong?" Jean asked. "I'm sure a boy like you will eat just about anything, won't you?" She gestured toward the two burgers in between herself

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and the boy. “Eat up.” The boy had been silent for some time now. His eyes were fixated on the two burgers, which had come separated from their buns Jean had tossed them. Still, he did not budge.

“Either eat up or move over,” she heard herself command. The boy moved to the side with his head drooping, his spirit wilting.

“I just wanted to play outside for once,” he mumbled.

She watched him retreat down the street before turning to the trap. Jean overturned the bag and the hamburgers, as well as a few crumpled napkins, spilled out. Both the flimsy hamburger buns and the napkins went back into the paper bag. The first hamburger she tore in half. Wiping the grease down the side of her khaki pants, she searched the yard before hiding both halves in the middle of the hedges. She hoped these would be enough to lead the stray toward the trap. The second burger she tossed just in front of the trap entrance, and the third she planted underneath the food pan. That was a trick she had learned from Rhianne, who had explained that the movement of an animal overturning the food pan would increase chances of the trap springing. Before leaving she bedded the trap, insulating the floor with clumps of grass that she pulled from the lawn. “Now he has two bald spots,” Jean muttered to herself as she admired the dirt spot in the otherwise perfectly coiffed lawn.

Leo was leaned against the van smoking a cigarette when she returned. “What the hell took you so long?” he asked, burying the butt beneath his boot as she approached.

“Does Jerry put up with that?” She gestured toward the smushed cigarette before getting into the van. “It doesn’t screw with his asthma too bad?”

“Did you spring your own trap or something?” Leo prodded sourly. She was reminded of the image she had concocted, the little boy trapped inside the cage.

“We’ve gotten seven different animal negligence reports since you’ve been gone.” The pair climbed into the van, and Leo fiddled with the GPS.

“We’ll start with the first one and work our way through.”

“I still can’t believe Rhino just takes orders from you like that,” Leo snorted. He entered the first address into the GPS, though, and pulled the van out of her driveway.

“Rhino takes orders from me because she’s smart enough to know that I always know what’s best.”

“Turn left here,” the GPS commanded, “turn left here.” Leo struck the machine with his palm. “Recalculating . . . recalculating.”

“If you knew what was best you would never let me drive,” Leo said with a smug grin. Behind them an impatient driver began honking. “You think I can blame a faulty GPS on an accident report?” he asked before turning left into traffic.

“Sure,” Jean said. She relaxed into her seat. “You can justify almost anything these days.”

As their blocky van drove past the hedge Jean looked out the window for the trap she had planted. There was no sign of the little boy lurking around the hedge, but she was sure he would be back soon. She considered telling Leo that she planned to check on the trap after work, but decided against it. Instead she relaxed into her seat and tried to forget the image that was troubling her, the image of the wandering stray dog.

## LAST CALL

Every year Eddie closed the bar on the night of the first snowfall. It was something he had done since he had inherited the bar, and all of its traditions, from his father a few years prior. The snow came earlier than expected that year, so early, in fact, that no one had even begun making conjectures regarding the date or amount. None of the older generation had yet complained about their creaky joints, hypothesizing that this ache in their ankle or that pain in their knee meant something larger about the weather pattern. Nor had his mother yet telephoned him, binoculars still in hand, to report on some little known species of bird that was migrating through, their flight surely a signal of a coming snowfall. Perhaps it was because of this unexpectedness that Eddie's regulars clung to their beer mugs that night, unwilling to concede to tradition.

"How's the old man doing, Eddie?" Doc had asked earlier that night, the bar door swinging closed behind him. It was when he stamped his boots clean on the wood floor that Eddie had first noticed the flakes of snow dusting the tops of his shoes, his broad shoulders, and his balding head.

"Old man's doing fine. Talked to him just last night, said he'll be just about ready to kick your ass in pool again come Friday night." Eddie had bent the bottle cap off of a beer and slid it down to Doc's waiting hand.

"I know he's your pop and all, but not once has he ever beat me without cheating. Can't say he stands much of a chance now that he's older 'n dirt." Doc



had grinned and sunk down on one of the stools closest to the door. “Think it just started snowing when I was making my way down here from the factory.”

“I thought as much, gonna have to be an early night. Last call in ten probably.” Doc had nodded at the time, and most of the other men had done the same when Eddie had made the more formal announcement. At least an hour had passed, though, and the men had made no motion to leave. Instead, Frank had ordered another pitcher for his table. When Eddie had refused the men had taken to pounding their fists on the bar, shouting for prompt service. It was the same empty complaint the men chanted whenever there was any sort of obstacle placed between their outstretched, expectant hands and their next drinks. Prompt service is the only thing we do well, his father had once joked during such a protest. At the time he had made a sweeping gesture with his hands indicating the sticky countertops, the wood-grained walls, and the dusty lampshades that were still a fixture of the bar. Now Eddie just complied, filling one of the plastic pitchers up to the brim, hoping that this gesture would appease the regulars.

“Lemme get another one.” Joe held up his empty glass. Behind him, the men at Frank’s table were almost finished draining the contents of the pitcher into their glasses.

“Last call was an hour ago. You were here when I told everyone. No one’s getting another drop from behind this bar tonight.” Joe stood up, his stool screeching as its legs scraped against the floor. He had been working at the factory since long before Eddie could even drink himself, and so, when he stood

the other men fell silent as if a judge were entering a courtroom. He balanced his belly on the bar and leant forward, crossing his burn-dotted arms. For years he had insisted to the men that the burns were self-inflicted, marks from experiments gone wrong in welding. That summer, though, after a day spent drinking while fishing and then drinking while eating, he had confessed that his wife, Maureen woke him up with a cigarette on the mornings after such binges. At first, Eddie had misunderstood him, picturing baby-faced Maureen offering her husband a cigarette over breakfast, but when Joe had simulated what he meant, pressing his fingers to his forearm with an exaggerated, drunken sizzle, Eddie had cringed. Now whenever he pictured baby-faced Maureen he imagined her in her tattered bathrobe standing over the couch her husband was passed out across, her fingers like talons around a poised cigarette.

“No sense closing the bar on account of a little snow,” Joe bellowed. “We’re all just as safe here as we would be at home,” he asserted, again calling forth the image of his burnt flesh. He leaned farther across the bar, his face pressed so close to Eddie’s that he would have been just as capable of preparing his own drink. “Another gin and tonic, Ed,” Joe demanded again, his voice flat and low.

“Like I said before the bar is closed.” The men at Frank’s table whispered to one another. For once their words were not laden with the same exhausted tone that accompanied a conversation between men who had seen each other all day long, every single day, for the past decade. There was an anticipatory element, an

unknown, which made their beer taste sweeter, their whispers more excited, their own faces more animated. “None of us have our snow tires on this early. I’m not feeling guilty for one of you morons running your car off the road and freezing to death, especially when most of you have open tabs that could pay off my mortgage.” Doc snorted in the corner, but Frank did not move.

“It’s dry powder; it always is this early in the season.” Frank pounded his glass down on the bar and slid it toward Eddie.

“He’s got you there, Eddie,” a man hidden in the far corner booth remarked. Eddie knew it was the slurred voice of the Police Chief, but he hoped the other men were unable to recognize him in the shadows. If it had been his father behind the bar, the Police Chief would have advised a taxi be called for Joe, who was already too drunk to realize that he was holding someone else’s glass, having used his own to punctuate his point. In his teenage years Eddie had even seen the Chief escort a few of the men to the exit personally. He doesn’t move from his corner booth now, though.

“Joe, you’re not getting another drink tonight whether you hit me or not,” Eddie said, adopting the same even tone he used when negotiating with his children. “But I can sure as hell guarantee that if you do hit me you won’t be getting another drink from me for a very long time.” Joe considered this threat before nodding. For the first time he looked old to Eddie, his once broad shoulders now bowed by years of labor, his easy grin edged with wrinkles. Eddie could still remember the way Joe used to greet each of the regulars with a slap on

their backs, hard enough to spill their drinks. The few that had protested would have felt ashamed only when Joe pulled out his wallet and thumbed through the ones in order to pay for their next beer. He was too prideful to ever pocket his wallet once he had pulled it out.

Back in those days, back when Eddie had first begun working at the bar, Joe wouldn't have hesitated to throw a punch or two, whether or not it meant being banned from the bar for months. Eddie wasn't sure whether his quick surrender said more about Joe growing older or Joe growing more dependent on the alcohol. He was sure, though, that for all the times his father had come home with a black eye or two, he had always gotten more respect from Joe and from all of the men for that matter. It was a trade-off. After one of the men swung on his dad he would have trudged into the bar with his head down, braving a look at his father only when necessary. It reminded Eddie of the way two men acted around each other after they had accidentally seen one another naked, as if there was an intimacy between the two that had never existed before, one which they were at once ashamed of and intrigued by.

Since taking over the bar, Eddie had never had to hit one of the men. It was something his wife Christine still remarked about on the phone to her friends. "Oh, you know Eddie; his voice is so calm he could put a snake to sleep. None of those men know how to handle him. The only thing they respond to is fists. Eddie just confuses the hell right out of 'em." Christine spoke with a playful tone, laughing at the thought of her husband challenging one of the bulky factory

workers. Eddie knew she meant no harm by it, but he'd also seen the way her face had lit up the morning his brother Tom had told her about all the bar fights he'd gotten into on his travels. Tom, seeing her curiosity, had turned around to face his brother with confusion.

"I'm sure you come home with these stories all the time, though. Right, Big Guy?" he had asked while jabbing at Eddie's beer gut.

Christine had chimed in before Eddie could. "Not once has he come home with any story that exciting," she had said while she rinsed out their coffee mugs. "Things have changed since your dad turned the place over, Tommy. Your dad's able army of regulars is more like a Broken-Down Brigade these days." She had laughed at her own joke, and continued even when it was clear that neither Eddie nor Tom would be joining in.

"Bet your dad wouldn't be too happy if he heard you saying he was part of some Broken-Down Brigade."

"Always so sensitive, Eddie, it was just a joke," Christine had insisted, although Eddie noticed that when her father had died two years later Christine had stopped referring to his regulars as the Broken-Down Brigade.

He watched now as those regulars filed toward the door, their spirit tempered by Joe's surrender. The men lingered at the coat rack, pulling on their thick jackets, rummaging around in their pockets for ragged pairs of work gloves. A few of them talked about whether the snow would persist and how it might affect factory production, but for the most part they were silent. Doc warned the

younger men, the ones who would still listen politely, about black ice. Eddie was thankful for the warning because he knew what it meant. Sure enough, the men began to move faster once they knew Doc would soon be recounting the week he had been laid up in the hospital after a particularly nasty fall. Finally, one by one they trudged out to their respective cars and pick-up trucks. Their headlights each flashed brightly in the front window of the bar before slipping away onto the road.

This was Eddie's favorite part of the night. He locked the door behind the men, popped open a beer for himself and began to clean. First he wiped down the tables and the surface of the bar with the same wide, circular wipes he had perfected when he was just old enough to see over the bar. There was a mindlessness to this part of the evening that Eddie reveled in. Not only was the silence a comfort, but the methodical nature of the work permitted his mind to wander. After the countertops he sterilized behind the bar. He wiped over the eight colorful tap handles and rinsed their drain tray in the small sink. He had just begun to take inventory of the beers when he noticed the pair of headlights shining in the front window.

His first thought was that the headlights belonged to Joe's rusted old Ford truck. Still, as Eddie set aside his damp rag and approached the front door he was aware of a sense of relief, as if he had been waiting for such a moment for the past decade. He imagined telling Christine the story of a vengeful Joe kicking the door of the bar in, grunting like an animal, and laying siege upon the man who had refused him drink. The story was absurd, partly because Joe was not a grunter, but

mostly because none of the men behaved with such calculated vengeance. Their anger was that of impulse, driven by a lack of restraint, and as such it would not have been capable of being zippered into a coat and driven away. Anger like that doesn't wait for anything, even for an empty bar.

Large, wet flakes were sinking from the sky, blurring any vision Eddie might have had of the man that soon emerged from the truck. The headlights faded, the truck engine quieted and Eddie watched as a figure came into view. From the shadow, Eddie could tell that this was not Joe, nor was it any of the men from his Brigade. The figure was tall and gaunt, almost skeletal in appearance, with wild hair that reminded him of the lion at the zoo that he and Christine had taken the boys to the month before. With long strides the man approached the bar, his wild strands of hair catching snow like bare tree branches. From the front window, Eddie could see him pick his way over the obvious patches of ice, only to stride right onto the more dangerous black ice Doc had warned about earlier. For a brief moment he flailed about wildly, his arms making frantic circles. Then, the skeleton began to fall forward, bony elbows and knees jutting back and forth as he tumbled.

“You alright there, sir?” Eddie shouted from the front door.

“Just twisted my ankle, I think. I'm more torn up that you don't recognize your own brother.” In the light of the open doorway, Tom's face was suddenly visible beneath a mass of braided hair. Eddie stumbled his way out into the

parking lot and hoisted his brother onto his shoulder. Once in the bar, he helped Tom onto one of the sturdier stools.

“You could have called, Tom,” Eddie said. He scooped some ice from the machine and packed it into a worn towel before handing it to his brother.

“Wasn’t sure whether you’d still be at the bar, to be honest. I know Dad always packed it in early the first night it snowed,” Tom adjusted the ice pack on his ankle, shifting it from his right to his left hand. Eddie thought about clarifying his comment, but he had a feeling from the way Tom wasn’t looking him in the eye that they both knew he had meant something else. It had been six months since his father’s heart attack and five months since he had last heard from Tom. Eddie wasn’t surprised by the fact that the last time they had spoken it had been a collect call from a payphone. He had been more surprised by the fact that Tom had seemingly found the last payphone in existence. No matter how many times Tom disappeared for months or years at a time, it always irritated Eddie. He was irritated when Tom left and he was irritated every time he showed up like a one-man parade. “Is that why all the men are gone? I was kind of hoping they’d be around.”

“You know how bad the roads get on the first night. They never lay down sand early enough,” Eddie said. It was one of the empty, stock complaints he often heard adults repeat as if they were reading from a script. Since taking over ownership of the bar he found himself recycling similar expressions,



noncommittal phrases meant to ease open conversation with any stranger. “I just don’t want any blood on my hands is all.”

“You and I both know that’s not why Dad closed up early. Please, tell me you take the boys out sledding like he used to take us, out to that big old hill near where the pig farm used to be?”

“Used to ’til a few years ago. Those boys aren’t like we used to be. Christine and I tried to take them to the zoo last month and you’d have thought we were condemning them to execution.”

“Yeah, well I guess we’re all getting older.” Uncomfortable in the silence, Eddie let out a subdued, exhausted snort. Tom gestured toward his leg. “Do me a favor and tell your boys I twisted my ankle jumping off a waterfall or something?”

“Yeah, sure, how do you want me to explain that terrible hairstyle for you, though?”

“You can tell them the truth on that one. I had this old woman braid it for me when I was down in Jamaica.” His voice got higher when he was excited. When they used to sled together Tom’s voice would sound like a whistling teakettle the whole way down the hill. “My hair doesn’t quite braid the way I thought it would, though. Jamaica is real beautiful, though. Some of the whitest, softest sand I’ve ever seen.” He pulled the ice pack off of his ankle and laid it down on the countertop. “You and Christine ought to check it out.”

“Got too much work at the bar to be running off to Jamaica,” Eddie said, emptying the ice into the sink as he spoke.

“You’ve got your whole life to spend running Pop’s old bar.” Tom propped his leg up on the stool next to him. While Eddie finished his beer he remembered that they had reenacted this very moment for years on end. On nights when his father left early, leaving the brothers to close the bar together, Eddie would wipe down the bar, clean the floors, and restock the shelves, all while Tom drummed his hands on the counter and recounted some exaggerated story about how far he had gotten with his Saturday night date. “You really ought to go out once in awhile,” Tom would say in between reenacting the way Suzanne had moaned in his ear, or the way Laura let him get to second base before the end of their first date. Of course, more often than not these stories were embellishments. He had probably never gotten further with Laura than sneaking a few sloppy kisses.

“You almost ready to hit the road?” Tom asked now, running a hand through his drooping braids.

In the parking lot Eddie worked to clear the ice from his windshield, while Tom fiddled with the defrost dial from inside the truck. Eddie had barely begun on the back windshield when the first pair of headlights turned back into the parking lot. Confused he watched as six more pairs jerked into the lot and angled their way into ill-defined spaces. “Homecoming party for me?” Tom yelled from the truck, a smug grin crossing his face.

The Police Chief was the first one out of his car. Had it been one of the other men Eddie might have protested quicker after hearing that the bridge was out and the men would have to stay the night. Had it been Joe or Doc Eddie would have been suggesting that the men spring for motel rooms even before they had finished explaining. But he respected the Chief too much to interrupt, and so Tom spoke before he could. “If you didn’t stay at our bar, we’d be insulted,” he joked. The men had already noticed Tommy’s truck was parked in the lot. Most of them had begun to surround the truck and were cheering for their returning savior before he even spoke. Eddie realized how apt his comparison had been, a one-man parade.

The regulars liked Tom’s hair, which only frustrated Eddie more. In between their excited explanations they would pause to ask him whether it had hurt to get done or how he showered with his hair twisted like that. “There’s no other detour, then?” Eddie asked when Frank became distracted with fiddling with his own thinning head of hair.

“Nah, they’re still repairing the North Bridge, and the accident we told you about is going to take near two hours to clear —,” Doc began.

“Say, how long did that take? More’n two hours?” Frank asked, angling his beer mug toward Tom’s hair.

“Tell you the truth, I don’t really remember. I was out drinking the night before and I passed out on this little spit of a beach just as the sun was coming up,

you know. Well I wake up to this real sweet giggling noise and my eyes are barely open before I realize that my head is in this real beauty's lap —,”

“I thought you said she was an older woman,” Eddie interjected.

“Let him finish, Eddie,” one of the men yelled. “Besides, who said older women can't be beauties?” The man nudged the guy next to him and starts muttering about an older French woman he had once met when he was in the Navy. It was a story Eddie had heard so many times that sometimes he caught himself mouthing the words, especially the worn-out punch lines about the differences between French and American women.

“So she's tugging on my hair, twisting it all around and telling me in this thick accent how lucky I am that she found me before her brothers did. And I'm lying there thinking that that's not the only reason I'm lucky, you know?” The door opened and banged to a close behind Joe.

“Just thought I'd grab my extra cash out of the glove box,” he said, and then straddling his favorite stool, he continued, “good thing yesterday was pay day, huh boys?” Joe slammed his roll of bills onto the counter and smiled a wide but tired grin at Eddie. “I guess I'll be needing that refill after all.” While Eddie filled and refilled glasses, Tom continued with a story that urged the men across miles of coastline with animated insistence. The story seemed to have no beginning or middle, which left Eddie with the cold, slippery dread that maybe it would have no end either. He imagined it pressing on into the middle of the night, while the snow piled around them, a long diatribe about sex and weather. With

every exaggeration Eddie felt his mouth clench into a tighter pucker. Tom described the woman who braided his hair as being dark-skinned with impossibly light eyes, the tiniest waist he had ever seen, and the most voluptuous curves. The waves, according to Tom, were at least twenty feet high, but somehow he was able to surf them like a professional. Tom was a good liar; that much was true. He knew enough to lie about things that those around him knew very little about. Most of the men hadn't left the state in years, never mind taking a trek to a tropical beach. Lying was a craft that Eddie had perfected only after years of trial and error in his marriage, and so it bothered him that Tom was naturally good at it. While Eddie recalled all the times he had stayed unnecessarily late at the bar enjoying the silence, Tom began to recount a day spent smoking the finest of cigars with a group of musicians.

“You holding up alright over there, Eddie?” Tom asked once when Eddie slid him another beer. The story had paused for the fifth or sixth time while one of the men stumbled his way to the bathroom. Frank had taken to calling them intermissions, each time snorting at the formality of the word as he rolled it off his tongue.

“I'm holding up fine. Pretty soon, though, we've got to figure out what the plan is.”

“What plan?” the Police Chief asked, tucking his shirt in as he emerged from the bathroom. The men all quieted, ready for the story to start again. “What the hell you talking about, Eddie?”

“Well we can’t just drink all night.” The men disagreed immediately, wheezing out their own affirmations to the contrary. “Whether or not you can drink all night, I don’t plan on serving you all night,” Eddie clarified. “I’ve got some blankets in the back. We can push some of the tables together and take shifts sleeping.”

“Shifts sleeping? How old are you?” Tom asked, tipping his beer bottle back and draining the contents. “We’re men and we’re snowed in at a bar. You know what Pop would have called this?” He waited until the men were captivated, until each of them leaned in toward him as if drawn by some magnet. “Heaven. Heaven is a bar with no last call.” His bottle clattered as he slammed it onto the counter. Eddie watched while it wobbled, and then swung toward the ground. He lunged for it, but missed. It shattered at Eddie’s feet. “You never did have very good reflexes,” Tom joked. “How’s about I pay you the nickel you just lost and we call it even?” The men’s laughter filled the bar.

“You can take your nickel and shove it,” Eddie spat.

“I think I’ve pushed Eddie over the edge, guys. You want an apology, little guy?” The men laughed louder. This time Eddie joined in. His was a quick, tense laugh that unnerved and quieted his customers. Soon the bar was silent save for Doc’s hacking cough and Eddie’s laughter.

“I think you have, Tom. I think you’ve finally got me so goddamn fed up with your bullshit, with all your lies. You remember what you said last time we talked, Tom, right before you hung up the phone?” Eddie picked up Joe’s empty

beer bottle by the neck. He flung the bottle against the far wall. Glass flew across the room like shrapnel. He snatched Doc's before the man had time to react and threw that too, not even bothering to watch as the glass shrapnel dropped around the bar, settling onto the floor, the bar countertop and the dishes of peanuts.

"Remember how you said you'd call the next day to check up on Pop? Or that you'd be flying back as soon as possible. Do any of your lies sound familiar to you, or do you tell so goddamn many that it's hard to keep track?"

"We get it Eddie. I get it. Just calm down." Tom's voice was so high-pitched with excitement that he sounded as if he had inhaled helium from a balloon. Eddie's face had grown so swollen and red with rage that he looked like the balloon itself.

"Your hair looks like a blind woman braided it with her feet," Eddie yelled, his lips rounding out the words slowly and deliberately. The Chief snorted.

"Let's at least take it outside. There's no sense ruining Pop's bar over something like this." Eddie nodded and followed his brother toward the coat rack. Together they bundled into their coats, laced up their winter boots and trudged into the parking lot. The regulars followed behind, each grabbing a beer from behind the bar first. In the overhead spotlight the two brothers squared off before beginning to circle one another. Each lunged forward and then darted backward, cautiously measuring one another up.

It was Tom who threw the first punch, his fist connected with Eddie's jaw. As Eddie crumpled into the snow Tom shook his hand in pain. Eddie struck next,

tackling his brother around the legs so that they both fell backward. The snow sunk around them so that now shoots of grass and patches of dirt offset the white expanse. He slammed Tom's face into the snow, leaving behind a rough imprint of his round nose and narrow face. Tom swung his elbow backward into Eddie's face. The men chanted around them, lifting their beer bottles as they yelled. "You think you're so much better than everyone else, don't you?" Tom yelled from above Eddie. He watched as his brother struggled to get up from the snow. When he had almost reached his feet Tom kicked him in the stomach. One of the men, Eddie couldn't tell which one, warned Tom to take it easy. "Just cause Pop gave you the bar, you think that makes you the boss of the whole fucking world." Tom kicked him again, and Eddie let out an insuppressible groan. This time a different voice interrupted, but Tom was undeterred. He kicked Eddie a third time, hard with his right foot. His left foot ground into the snow in preparation, leaving behind a wide footprint. It was the Chief that spoke up this time, telling Tom he could either stop or face jail time.

"I got nothing against a little fighting, but there's no sense in sending your brother to the hospital." With his face sideways, pressed into the snow, Eddie watched as his brother's boots stomped away toward his truck. He listened as the car door opened and slammed. The radio started, loud and angry, and the truck sped out of the lot and turned toward the direction of the motel. Eddie was vaguely aware of trying to stop Tom, mumbling something about sledding with the boys into the thin layer of snow and dirt. By the morning the snow would have



blanketed over the blood from Eddie's broken nose. Joe and Frank carried Eddie into his bar. Doc made him up an ice pack and the Chief began cracking jokes about his beating. The men repeated the story until dawn when it had become so distorted that Eddie didn't even recognize his own place in it anymore.

"That's the stuff of legends," Frank snorted when describing the way Eddie's face had contorted after he had begun yelling.

"I'll have nightmares about that face for years to come," Doc agreed.

The men left early the next morning, each leaving behind a trail of tire tracks in the white snow behind them. While he cleaned the glass Eddie debated what to tell Christine. He imagined describing the fight from his perspective, the brutal way he had tackled his brother and smothered his face into the snow, the bewildered look on Tom's face when he had run away in the middle of their fight. He thought that Christine might scold him at first for ruining his already tenuous relationship with Tom, but he knew that even while lecturing him her voice would have an uncontainable string of pride running through it. His boys, of course, would have to be warned about the dangers of fighting, but he suspected that afterward they would look at him with more respect. Eddie locked the bar behind him and taped a 'Closed' sign on the window. He would be taking his boys sledding that afternoon, after all. His men would just have to understand.