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Abscond

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Abstract

This collection of short stories is heavy with the overwhelming sense to escape something. Whether it be an emotional or physical escape, an attempt to forget one's past, to forgive a loved one of their mistakes, or even in some cases, an escape from oneself—the characters in these stories all find themselves in positions to move on in new directions—to abscond from their current situations and to change their perspectives into an alternate way of seeing and feeling. These stories are realist and literary, unified in their theme of observing ordinary persons in unordinary circumstances; the emotional dilemmas and the consequences that follow the character's choices, and sometimes visits the quiet stillness that is felt when a person is lost within themselves.

Abscond

Jessyka Lee

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Poison Oak

Dean hadn't thought it through ahead of time, he just did it, without a real plan or even enough supplies to last. He had been sober the morning he picked her up from her mom's house. Just to prove that he could be. Still, somewhere inside of himself, he knew that when he took the girl that it would be for longer than just the weekend.

"This is a big step, Dean," Susan had said as she passed him a small backpack through the opening of the screen door. "I want her back on Sunday morning. We go to church now. She has to be back by seven at the latest. You got it?"

Dean bounced nervously from one foot to the other, the way a guy does when he's done too much crank for too many years and has been sober for two whole days. He waited outside for the girl to come onto the porch— considered the peeling paint along the house's trim, thought of what it would feel like to scrape it off with his finger nails, the way the thin shards would jab at his tender nail beds.

He kept his head tilted back, tried to control himself from fidgeting around like an anxious idiot. He couldn't look at Susan. It was all he could do to maintain his focus on being still, on not grinding his teeth down to nothing.

"Are you listening?"

"Yep. Sunday. I promise," Dean said.

“Yeah, well, you promise a lot of things.” Susan walked away from the door and into the family room where she paused at the coffee table, just long enough to readjust the placement of one of her glass figurines; some kind of woodland creature that Dean couldn’t make out from behind the grid of the screen. He flinched at the sound of Susan’s shrill voice, like the cackle of a bird, as she called for the girl to come on out of her room.

Susan went into the kitchen and positioned herself in front of the refrigerator, she opened the freezer door and stared blankly inside of it. She kept her fingers wrapped around the handle as she held the door, thought about how badly she wanted to stick her head inside and lay it gingerly on top of the bag of frozen corn; just to cool herself down, to calm down. She remembered that Dean was still on the porch, that he could see her and was likely watching, and so she stared a long while at the boxes of fish sticks and chicken nuggets, as cloudy streaks of coldness escaped from the inside.

Dean’s visits to the girl had been sporadic. He said it was different this time though. Now that they finally lived in the same town he’d be coming to see her every weekend. He’d call Susan up with plans to take the girl to Chuck ‘E Cheese, said he had some gifts for her, some toys and treats and things she’d like. He’d swear to be there, arrive on time, but he rarely ever showed up. The times he would, it was always much too late into the night and Susan wouldn’t let him in the house. Even from the sidewalk that lined her fenced in patch of yard, he’d be swearing obscenities, waving a fist around in the air like a conductor leading a marching band, red faced and blurry eyed with anger and resentment, whiskey, and God only knew what else.

During the times that Susan would agree to let him visit, she knew exactly what that scenario entailed. She'd be watching out the kitchen window as the girl would rock back and forth on the porch swing, pushing the weight of her small body with one foot. She knew the girl would be waiting and waiting for hours on Dean to show up with these gifts he spoke of, to take her to the beach like he'd promised this time. The girl would be bathed and dressed nicely, shiny hair pulled back out of her face, the way that Dean liked it. Susan would watch the girl's head jerk up at the sound of every approaching car, she'd be smiling and happy— but only for a minute and then her head would droop back downward again, slowly, like letting helium out of a balloon, as each approaching car would pass on by. Susan would eventually come outside and kneel down in front of the girl so that she could look her in the eye, try and cheer her up a little. She'd be saying that Dean called and was sad to find out that he had to work at the last minute but that he'd come by to see her soon.

Now, he was on Susan's porch and she was feeling knots tying themselves up inside of her gut. She had expected him not to show, as usual, but there he was chewing on his bottom lip and jerking his limbs around like small volts of electric shock were pulsing through him. For a moment, she allowed her mind to drift back to a time when she knew him better: when he kept his hair short and his face shaved, back to when he put real effort into things, like being good to people and having a job— basic things, really. Such a distant memory now that she sometimes wondered if that part of him was made up, or if maybe she had dreamed about it. It didn't feel like that Dean ever could have existed— even in his most basic form.

But it was still important to her; this idea of family, of parenthood, of a child knowing her own father. Even though his being around felt wrong. Even though he always managed to fuck things up. And she knew— this time would be no different. Perhaps not any different than all the times before, but possibly worse, because this time he was taking her for the whole weekend.

He'd begged Susan to let him take her, said he'd be clean when he showed up and wouldn't use while he was with the girl. She didn't say yes for any reason other than *for* the girl, who had picked up the hand held phone that was attached to the kitchen wall and listened in on their entire conversation, cried and cried about it for several days when her mom had said no.

"You never let me see her Susan," Dean had said on the phone that day. "She's my kid too. You can't keep me from seeing my own kid."

"You know the rules. No drugs, no booze. I always know when you're high too, so don't think I won't notice."

"Rules. Fucking rules?"

"Yes Dean, rules. She's five. She needs to be taken care of while she's with you. Not left in a car for an hour and a half while you slam as many beers as you can and then drive her back home afterward. Real quality time you're spending with her."

"That happened once."

“That’s not normal Dean. That’s not a normal parenting mistake to make. Can’t you see that?”

“I’m trying to change. You know that I’m trying.”

“Well. Try harder.”

“She’s going to find out one day that the reason I never saw her was because you’d never let me. She’ll find out and she’ll hate you for it.”

“I’m not the one that disappoints her, Dean. I’m here for her. Everyday.”

“Jesus. Can’t you put down the blazing guns? For once?”

Susan had hung up the phone on him, came inside the kitchen from the back patio to find the girl sitting cross legged on the cold linoleum, still holding the receiver, her lower lip trembling, her eyes wide and wet.

“Why?” the girl had asked.

Susan had gone to the girl, stroked her face gently, said, “Why what, baby?”

“Why won’t you let him see me?”

When Susan tried to hug the girl she pushed away from her embrace, rushed down the hall and into her room, slamming the door behind her. She wouldn’t talk to her mother for three days after that; only opened her mouth to ask if she could see her dad, and she only asked in the early morning hours when she knew that her mom would be in a good mood, more likely to say yes. With every time that Susan said no, the girl would glare at her from across the breakfast table with her thin arms folded against her chest, would push her bowl of cereal onto the floor and leave it there for her mother to clean up, splattered

milk and cheerios everywhere. By the end of the third day, when Susan had tried to explain that it wasn't a good time for the girl to see Dean, she stared back at her a long while, remaining quiet, before telling her mother that she did, in fact, hate her.

Dean had his hands shoved deep into his pockets, was hunched over with his shoulders up near the sides of his head. Susan still hadn't invited him in, was looking him over now as she held a pen and a small pad of paper, like taking inventory or completing a check list.

"Which campground is it again?" she asked.

"I already told you."

"Tell me again."

"We'll be up at Meadow Creek. It's not exactly a campground. I mean, the whole place is a fucking campground."

"Language."

Dean covered his mouth with his hand. The girl came running from the back of the house, her shoes clattering loudly against the tiled entryway. She pushed past her mother and through the screen door.

"There's my girl," Dean said, and stretched out his arms to her. It had been almost four months since he'd actually seen the girl and when she hugged him with her warm cheek pressed against his, squeezing him tightly like she was afraid to let go, it made Dean's heart sag and ache.

"Sunday," Susan reminded.

“I know.”

Dean carried the girl off the porch and down the sidewalk, knowing all the while that Susan was still standing in the doorway, watching them. He put the girl in the cab of his truck, helped her to buckle the safety belt, and waved to the girl’s mother as he rounded the rear end of the rusted pickup. From the drivers seat, Dean leaned over and whispered to the girl, and then she pushed herself up a bit so that she could see higher out of the window.

Then the girl shouted, “Bye, Momma!”

Dean pulled out onto the highway, left the windows of the truck rolled down so that he could feel the briskness of the air come through against his face in strong blasts. He thought that maybe the girl would complain about it being too cold, but when he looked over at her in the seat next to him, she just smiled back like she didn’t mind at all. Soon they were off the freeway and were headed down a gravel street that was so rutted and pot-holed that the girl had to brace herself with one hand against the dash and the other wrapped around the handle above the passenger door.

“Hold on tight,” Dean had told her, and before she had time to reply, he was already parked out in front of a beat up shotgun style house. There was a woman sitting outside on the front steps of the house, her arms draped over her knees casually, her body sinking in with the rotting wood planks beneath her. She had bleached out hair with long dark roots, was smoking a cigarette, very slowly and deliberately, seemingly unaware that her bra was clearly visible under the looseness of her shirt. The woman looked like she had just woken up, though it was late in the afternoon. She didn’t stand when she saw Dean’s pickup

approaching, seemed more to accept his presence in her driveway like she had known he was coming. Dean helped the girl climb out of the cab and introduced her as they neared the woman on the stairs.

“This is my baby girl,” Dean said, then he looked down at the girl. “This is daddy’s friend, Arlene. Can you say hello?”

The girl didn’t say hello, she didn’t speak at all, she stood behind Dean’s legs, hiding her face from the woman.

“Hi there, little girl. You want some juice or something?” Arlene had her head tilted to one side, was doing her best to seem sincere, but even Dean could see that the woman had no experience with children from the awkward way she held her body, that she was obviously unsure how to approach the girl. For a moment, the girl seemed to consider the question as she looked out at the woman through the gap between Dean’s legs, then carefully shook her head no. Arlene finally shifted her head from its uncomfortable position and stared up at Dean. “Bout time you decide to show up.”

“You got everything ready?” Dean asked, “Everything I asked you to get?”

“Everything except the blow up mattress. Guess we’ll be sleeping on the ground. It will be fine though. Maybe we can find some grass or something, pitch the tent there?”

“Damn it, Arlene. I ask you to do one thing.”

“I tried. I did. I got all the other stuff. I even got one of those lantern things.”

The girl tugged at Dean’s pant leg and when he leaned down toward her, she asked in her smallest voice if the woman was coming along with them. Dean just patted her head

softly and gave her a look like she should already know the answer. Arlene stubbed out her cigarette along the side of the stairs, rubbed her palms against her bare thighs, anxiously, then she walked up the length of the porch without saying anything, knowing that Dean and the girl would follow her. She turned, suddenly, before reaching for the door handle, leaned her skinny body back into Dean's and asked like whispering, "We gonna get high before we go?"

Dean covered the girls ears with his hands and gave Arlene a hardened look. Her body slumped away from his, like she was folding up inside of herself. Dean shook his head yes, but did so very slightly, so that the girl wouldn't feel his movements, and followed her into the house. He immediately left the girl alone inside the dank and narrow living area, went with Arlene into a back bedroom.

"Just wait here a minute," he said to the girl from halfway down the hall.

The house was blackout dark, the heavy curtains drawn tight. The girl stood next to the front door, too nervous to move or to sit down because she hadn't been asked to. There were very few pieces of furniture, all of it covered in mounds of white cat hair and flakes of cigarette ash that reminded the girl of dirty snow. There was a recliner along one wall and a couple of plastic chairs that were lying on their sides. The small end table had phone books stacked underneath it where it was missing a leg, a shadeless lamp sat upon it, casting the room in a soft yellowish hue.

In the middle of the room was a neatly folded silver tarp, a rolled up tent, a few sleeping bags, a lantern, and a cooler. The girl went to the cooler and opened it up. There were colas and juice boxes and four pre-made tuna fish sandwiches. She scrunched up her face, wondered where the rest of the bags of groceries were, the ones that would have the

packages of marshmallows and bars of chocolates for making s'mores, the cans of baked beans, the plastic wrapped hot dogs and the condiments. The girl hoped that Dean remembered that she had asked him to bring extra flashlights because she was still afraid of the dark. That even though he had laughed at this request that he would still have brought them, because she was just a kid and kids are sometimes scared of things like being in the woods at night, of the possibility of having bears come down the mountain to pull little girls from their sleeping bags, never to be seen again.

Dean was talking about something that the girl couldn't understand when he came back down the hall with Arlene. His words were jumbled and loose in his mouth like he couldn't fully form them into articulate phrases. He stopped abruptly, patted at his pockets, looking around the room as he did. The girl waited for him to say something more and when he didn't, when he just kept patting the same pockets over and over, she stretched out her arm to him and held the keys to his truck in her hand. He winked at her and snatched them into his fist.

"Well then," he said to the girl, "let's get this show on the road."

The girl stared down at her feet. "I don't want her to come with us," she said quietly. "I thought we were going camping, just us. I thought we were going to tell ghost stories?"

"We can still tell ghost stories, baby girl. Arlene knows all kinds of good stories. Don't you Arlene?"

The girl moved her eyes upward to meet Arlene's blank expression, was not convinced when she nodded her head in agreement and said, "Sure do. Really scary ones."

Dean and Arlene began hauling the camping gear out to the pickup truck while the girl watched from the doorway, frowning with each trip they made in and out of the house. Dean knew that the girl had been upset by the news of his friend coming along, but he knew too that he'd somehow make it up to her, that Arlene would make a good impression on the girl and that it might be nice to have a female around to fill up any lengthy silences that might occur. Someone to help out with those moments that sometimes come when a father simply doesn't know what to say to his young daughter. Dean knew that he had the girl's best interest in mind when he invited Arlene to join them.

They all loaded into cab of the pickup, the girl squeezed in between the middle of Dean and Arlene. She waited a long time before saying anything, then finally, after working the question through in her mind several times, thinking of how to properly word it, she asked her dad what she had been wondering since they got to Arlene's house.

"Does Mom know that this lady is coming with us?"

"Her name is Arlene."

"I don't think she'd like it if she knew."

Dean glanced over at her briefly.

Then the girl looked down at her lap and said, "Why do you have to ruin everything?"

Even from the time they arrived at Meadow Creek, the camping trip was already both not at all what the girl had expected, yet habitually predictable; for being disappointed was the only thing she knew to rely on about her father. It took only two

days for them to run completely out of food. The last tuna sandwich had been given to the girl, mostly because nobody else was hungry. The girl was supposed to have been home that morning, at seven am, but evening was nearing now and she was still at Meadow Creek with Dean and Arlene. They had not told ghost stories, or made s'mores, they did not have any flashlights or baked beans, they did not get dragged away by bears.

Dean made the girl stay outside by herself during the daylight hours, told her to look for smooth stones to skip across the creek, to count how many times she could make them bounce along the surface. The girl did as she'd been told, leaving her dad and Arlene to get high in the tent and fuck like sweaty pigs on a spit while the sun blared down through the trees. At night, Dean would lay down next to the girl, zip her up to her neck in a sleeping bag and wait for her to fall asleep. He'd stay there with her for as long as he could stand lying still. He'd listen to her breathe softly, stroke her hair, her downy cheeks. He'd wonder why he couldn't keep her, why things couldn't always be the way they were right then.

On that third day he had to send Arlene in the pickup to the nearest town to get food for that night and the next morning. He had resolved to take the girl home as soon as daylight came, but in the meantime he had asked Arlene to buy a few things: a coloring book for the girl who kept complaining about being bored, a flashlight, which he had forgotten, to quiet her down about the darkness that slowly crept in around them like a thick fog, gummi worms or pop rocks or something like that, something to make her feel special.

Dean and the girl sat facing one another in the grass. He lounged backward against his hands, pressed them firmly into the moist ground, was unconsciously aware of how the girl exuded a quality of patience that he could never understand. She was clever and well behaved and he knew that she had learned those things from her mother, that he couldn't take any credit for her delicate mannerisms, for the kind of softness she had to her. He watched her intently, doing his best to focus his attention on her and to not look up in angst with every sound that resembled an approaching car. He tried to ignore his worry that Arlene wouldn't come back for them, that she might take too long coming back at all. Dean strained to keep his eyes wide open, alert, while the girl showed him how to weave clover flowers together to make a necklace.

"Where'd you learn how to do that?" he asked her.

"Mom."

"You having fun with your ole dad? This has been fun, right?"

The girl didn't look up at him, she just kept pulling clover flowers from the small cluster of them in the grass beside her. She was tying the stems into tiny knots, concentrated hard as she looped other stems through, making a long chain. "Why didn't we all go into town for food?" she asked.

"Because. I wanted to spend some time with my girl."

"Don't call me that."

"Well, you are my girl. The only one I've ever loved."

"What about Arlene?"

“Arlene and I are just friends.”

The girl tied in the few last flowers, held up the necklace to show Dean. He smiled at it which made her consider for a moment that she might give it to him, held it outward and let it dangle on the ends of her fingers before pulling it back in toward her, sliding it over her head and around her neck.

“Maybe your mom will let us hang out more. You’d like that right? You should tell her that you’d like that. She’ll listen to you.”

“She never listens to me,” the girl said.

“Well, if you want, you don’t have to go back at all. You can just stay with me. I’ll listen to you.”

She stood to her feet and brushed the grass from her legs, the shadow of her petite body fell upon Dean’s face. “I’m hungry,” she said. “Also, I heard Mom tell you that I couldn’t miss church today.” The girl reached up under her shirt and itched her lower back, then her thighs.

“Don’t worry about Mom. It’ll be OK. It’s my turn to have you. I get a turn, too.” The girl was still scratching her thighs as she made her way toward the tent. “Where you going? Why you itching so much?”

The girl didn’t answer him. She slowly unzipped the door of the tent, climbed inside, laid down on top of the sleeping bag. She lay there on her back a long time listening to the insects buzz and creak and sing, to the lulling sound of the water rippling

in the creek, placid, like the shimmy of the leaves against one another, like hushed tambourines. Soon, she was asleep.

Arlene did end up coming back to the campsite, but it was much much later into the night than Dean had anticipated. The girl had been asleep for several hours and Dean was left alone with nothing but his ticking thoughts, his pacing feet. When Arlene finally pulled up in the pickup truck, she sat inside the cab until Dean came to her and opened the door to pull her out. Arlene was hardly lucid, her eyes rolled back into her skull; she was unable to respond other than making a face that showed Dean that she had no idea what he was talking about when he asked her where the food was, the flashlights he'd sent her out for?

“What the fuck are we supposed to eat, Arlene? The kid is starving.”

Arlene pursed her lips, held out her hand to him in a loose fist, revealing a small plastic baggie of white powder. His tone, his body language shifted immediately.

“Jesus, did you have to be gone all night? I thought the cops were gonna show. We can't sleep here tonight. We can't keep the girl here. Her mom knows where we are, she'll find us.”

Dean poured some of the powder from the bag onto the side of his palm, a little white mound on the flat part between his thumb and pointer finger, bumped it up into his nose. Then he did it again. And again. Arlene stayed in the truck while Dean hurled their gear into the bed of the pickup, laid the sleeping girl on the bench seat next to Arlene so that he could pack up the sleeping bags and the tent. After gathering everything from the

campsite, he slid into the cab and started the ignition. Arlene leaned over and mumbled something he couldn't quite make out.

"The air? You want me to turn on the A/C?" he asked. The girl had her head in Arlene's lap and Arlene was stroking her hair, mumbling over and over. "Speak up, goddamn it. I can't understand you," he said.

"She's hot. Like, really hot, Dean."

"The girl?"

"Yeah," Arlene said slowly. "She has a fever or something."

Dean ignored what she was saying, rolled down the windows, bounded down the dirt roads as quickly as possible. He didn't know where they should go, where they might be safe, so he just drove and drove until his thoughts melded together into one solid lump, like a heavy meal in the pit of his stomach. He remembered a motel on the state border that he'd once lived in for a few months before he met Arlene, before he was trying to get sober; it was cheap and far enough away that they could hide there without the cops thinking to check it.

"How much money is left?" he asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"I sent you out with my wallet so that you could get what we needed. I'm asking how much is left? We have to get a room for the night."

Arlene moved the girl's head from off of her lap so she could reach underneath herself and pull Dean's wallet from her pocket. She opened the flap and showed it to him. It was empty.

Dean shook his head, furious with himself for sending her on the errand, she was always messing things up. He pressed down harder on the gas, felt like punching the steering wheel a few times, felt like bloodying up his knuckles to dull the helplessness that moved through his body. He drove out toward the border motel anyway, would come up with a plan when they got there, something would come to him, he was sure of it.

After three and a half hours, the place was in view at last, the same familiar place that he once called home. Dean slowed the truck to crawl. He watched from the window, allowing his head to move with the scenery as they rolled past the yellow strip of adjoining rooms, past the motel office and the big neon sign that read: *Comfy Rooms- Available by the hour*. He decided on the parking lot of the truck stop right next door. There were a couple of sleeping semis lined up in the back area and Dean had managed to squeeze his pickup between two of them. When he turned off the ignition, the girl woke up.

"Where are we?" she asked him.

"We're going to sleep here for the night. Just until I can figure something else out," Dean said.

The girl sat up and looked around. She saw the glow of a late-night diner in front of them and the semis on either side and the motel on their left in the near distance. She scratched at her face, said in a small breathy voice, "Why are we parked way over here?"

“This is where we’re staying, baby girl. Close your eyes. We have to sleep in the truck tonight.”

“I don’t feel good,” she said.

“Close your eyes,” Dean said again.

The girl leaned back into the seat and forced her eyes to close. She couldn’t keep from scratching. She heard the sound of the truck doors open and then close again. Her face was itchy, her legs, her arms— everything felt like it was on fire. She was consumed by shooting pains of heat and the overwhelming impulse to scrape her nails along the surface her skin. The girl couldn’t take it anymore. She started to cry.

Dean was outside the truck smoking when the girl started wailing, Arlene was with him, and she pressed her face against the window when she heard the girl from inside.

Dean shouted through the glass, cigarette smoke escaping his mouth in big wafts, “What’s the matter baby girl?”

The girl kept crying.

Dean yanked open the truck door. “What’s the matter?” he asked her again. The girl didn’t answer, just kept crying more loudly, her body lifting and falling with the rhythm of her deep breaths. She scratched more fiercely. Dean’s chest began to heave with panic, he didn’t know how to make the girl calm down, couldn’t even get her to say what the problem was.

“Stop it! Stop crying!” he said, covering his ears, but this just made the girl’s cries more frantic and desperate. “Arlene,” he called out. “Can you do something about her?”

Arlene threw her cigarette against the pavement, stubbed it out angrily with her toe, walked to the passenger side of the truck. She opened the door and held the crying girl in her arms.

“I’ll take her inside the diner,” Arlene said. “Maybe she needs to go to the bathroom?”

She carried the girl across the unlit parking lot, nodded a polite ‘thank you’ as she passed through the diner door while a hefty man with a thick beard held it for them. The customers at their tables, some pouring ketchup on their scrambled eggs, some emptying miniature containers of cream into their coffees, all stopped in movement and conversation to look up and stare at Arlene and the crying girl as they passed by. Inside the bathroom, she set the girl down on the countertop, wiped back her wet hair from her little face.

“Calm down girl,” Arlene said, in her most soothing voice. “Calm down.”

An older woman with grey knotted hair and wide hips came out from one of the stalls, adjusting her lavender cardigan as she made her way to the sink, but she became distracted in route by concerning herself with the crying girl. The woman looked on while Arlene repeated to the girl that she should calm down. She couldn’t stop herself from gently tapping Arlene’s bony shoulder until she turned around.

“You do realize,” the woman began, “that that girl has a bad case of poison oak?”

Arlene was startled by the woman, by the coldness of her fingers against her skin, she hadn’t heard the woman come up from behind them.

“How do you know?”

“How do you not?” the woman said. “That girl needs to see a doctor right away.”

Arlene scowled hard at her, wished that some people would mind their own business. She picked the girl up off the counter and carried her out of the bathroom, back through the crowded diner with its' wall of worried faces, across the darkened parking lot, holding the girls hot body pressed to hers, causing them both to sweat and shake. Dean was still outside the truck, smoking. The girl was still crying.

“Something's wrong Dean,” Arlene said. “A lady in the bathroom says the girl is sick, poison oak, says we need to take her to the doctor. I think she's right. She won't stop crying, she's really hot.”

“We can't take her to a doctor. You spent all the money.”

“What about the ER?”

Dean shook his head.

“Just feel her. Feel how hot she is.”

The girl cried harder and louder than ever as Dean placed his clammy palm against the back of her neck. He held it there a long time, like he knew it would likely be the last time he touched her.

He sped along the highway, the heavy darkness all around them, the orange headlights of the pickup the only ones on the road. There were a few things that he knew for sure: he knew that when they got to the hospital that Arlene would be the one to take the girl inside, he knew that the nurses would take one look at the girl and rush her back into a room right away. He knew that Arlene would walk out through the automatic doors

of the ER by herself, and that the two of them would leave the girl there. This is almost exactly what happened. He waited in the truck, wide eyed and clenching his jaws. When he saw Arlene hurrying back outside, he started the ignition. She jumped into the cab and slammed the door hard, sighed audibly and slowly like she had (just at that very moment) become overwhelmingly relieved.

“What’d you tell her?” Dean asked, as he pulled out of the hospital parking lot.

“I said we’d be right back.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “That’s probably best.”

They had just enough gas left to make to the edge of town, had to turn off the ignition and coasted the rest of the way into a service station. It was one of those old mom and pop places that have self serve pumps, the kind that lets you fill up your tank before paying, and that’s exactly what they did— laughed like bandits at how easy it was to get what they needed without much of a fuss. As they drove, Arlene used her house key to scrape out what little was left in the baggie, which wasn’t enough to get either of them high, but she still held the key to Dean’s nose, smiled as he inhaled it, then turned the baggie inside out and desperately rubbed the thin plastic against her gums. When they finally made it home, Dean poured himself into Arlene’s bed, his body aching with craving. Still, he knew he’d have to wait until morning when he could get a hold of some money. Unless, of course, Arlene could coax a neighbor into lending them some cash.

He lay next to her in bed. Wide awake. Arlene had somehow managed to fall asleep. She was pretty when she was still and quiet. Then he rolled on top of her, touched her face until she opened her eyes, fucked her hard until he came, grunting as he did. His

mind went blank and calm as he fell back onto his pillow. If only Susan could see how good his intentions really are, how hard he tries even though the odds are always stacked up against him, a tall brick wall that he so desperately wants to break through. He doesn't understand how all his plans are destined to fail when his intentions were always so good.

Dean closed his eyes and thought of the girl. He imagined himself at her bedside, holding her hand, helping her take sips of cool water when her mouth becomes dry. In his mind the girl dozes for a while and then she opens her eyes and looks directly at him, checking to make sure that he's still there.

Running on Empty

Jenna and Lance found Pat's Camp by chance, listed right there in the brochure underneath The Woods Inn Spa and Resort. Their trip had begun in Florida, where they had traveled to from St. Louis. Jenna's old roommate from college had graduated that weekend, a less than celebratory affair that involved sitting in the crowded stadium seating for several hours and an early dinner at the Cracker Barrel. Jenna almost didn't even make the trip down, and she almost didn't bring Lance with her once she decided to go, but they both wanted to get out of town for a while. Florida had only lasted two days, but when Lance suggested they make a real road trip of it on the way back—take their time with it, see the sites, maybe even camp along the way—Jenna had no hesitations. They didn't have any gear, but could get by with very little. They were good at things like that. Jenna pulled into a Walmart parking lot before they hit the interstate, looked over at Lance from the driver's seat in the way that she did when she wanted him to wait in the car. She liked handling tasks like these on her own, and he trusted that she would get what they needed, be in and out in no time. And she was: carrying plastic bags full of granola bars and energy drinks, a bright orange tent tucked into a pouch and slung over her shoulder, a double sleeping bag, a small pack of cooking knives, and an ice chest.

They stopped along the way at the Georgia welcome center to rest their backs after being in the car for nearly six hours. They were sweaty and tired as they approached the building, it's bright blue roof retracted like an illusion with visible waves of heat. Inside, the air conditioner blared, and for a moment they both just stood in the entryway next to

the wall of tourist pamphlets and the giant peach cardboard cutouts to let the cool air blast them. The volunteer on duty slid a thick packet across the counter toward Jenna, after she'd asked for a guide that had the locations and pricing for camp sites and hotels. Jenna and Lance were not at all into staying at the KOA sites with the gleaming swimming pools filled with loud children, the options for cable TV with free HBO, and convenient RV hook ups. They wanted something well off the beaten path, something deep into the woods where they wouldn't have to deal with other campers. The guide gave ratings for each place listed and briefly outlined the amenities that were available, and Pat's Camp promised a solid three-stars for dirt lots in the woods at two dollars a night.

Back in the car, Jenna put the address to Pat's Camp into their GPS, which showed another forty-five minutes of drive time ahead of them. In a few short minutes, they were off the main highway and Lance's beat up Nissan Sentra was rattling down the county road toward the camp, nothing around for miles except the thick rows of trees that lined the narrow strip of pavement.

"I hope we have time to set up the tent before it gets dark," Lance said, his window rolled down, his hair blowing wildly in the wind.

Jenna looked at the clock in the dashboard. "We have about an hour and half," she said.

Lance turned up the music, nodded his head to the rhythm as they rode out deeper into the woods. Finally, they approached a wooden sign in the shape of an arrow that had been hammered into the dirt on the side of the road, it read: Welcome to Pat's Camp.

Lance turned at the sign and slowed down, proceeding with caution. At the end of the dirt

driveway, on the right hand side, was a lopsided structure that looked as if it had been built with fence posts and scrap wood. Lance took the path on the left, where mobile homes of all sizes were crammed in next to one another, set up with elaborate awnings and outdoor patio furniture and fire pits. Kids were riding bikes and as they passed by the double-wides and pull-alongs, one by one, and it became clear to Jenna and Lance that the people who were staying in them were actually *living* in them— congregated and gathered outside, fixing stuff or barbequing or just sitting; staring at Lance's car as it slowly passed by like it was the strangest thing they'd ever seen. They followed the road that led by the mobile homes until it turned into a circle and brought them right back to where they began, back to the wooden structure. Lance parked in front of it and they both sat there in silence.

He was still facing forward when he asked, "Should we just leave?"

"Maybe we should try and find Pat?"

"I didn't see any other tents."

"Me either."

"I didn't even see designated lots for tents."

Jenna got out of the car and gnats swarmed her face immediately; she swatted at them as she looked around for someone who might work there, then poked her head back inside the car through the open window.

"Sign says this is the general store," she said. "I'm going inside. I'll be right back."

She walked up the stairs and onto the porch. She tried the front door of the building, but it was locked. She peered through the windows only to find the inside to be dark and

unoccupied. Lance got out of the car and leaned up against it. A litter of five or six kittens were rolling around in a patch of weeds, fighting with one another and meowing loudly. Lance picked one of them up and held it close for a moment, then set it back down right away.

“Flees,” he muttered, as he brushed his hand against his pants.

“No one’s here,” Jenna said.

“I think we should just leave. I really don’t think there’s camping here.”

Jenna crossed the porch and looked out toward the back. Off to the side of the store was a dilapidated barn. She glanced over at Lance, who was still standing next to the car, chewing at his hangnails, and she knew that meant his anxiety was rising. Without saying anything, she descended the stairs and started for the barn. Lance rounded the car and began to follow her. He stopped abruptly and stood very still, almost like he had been paralyzed.

“Jenna,” he said, his voice small and panicked. She didn’t turn around. She didn’t stop when he called her, even though he knew she heard him. “Jenna, don’t go in there.”

“I just want to look.”

The barn had no doors or windows so it was easy to see inside without having to go in. A large electric table saw was set up in the middle of the space, piles of wood shavings and partial 2x4’s on the ground beneath it. There were several claw-foot bathtubs, rusted and rimmed with brown water along the bottoms. Deep throated bullfrogs croaked from a place that Jenna couldn’t see. Stacks of firewood were neatly arranged to one side, and in the far corner was a hefty man in denim overalls filling a bucket from a

low faucet. He startled when he heard Lance call after her again, turned quickly to face them, his hair greasy and wet from the heat.

“Hi,” Jenna said. He stared hard at her. “Um, we’re looking for Pat?”

“Who?” the man said, his voice heavy with a southern drawl.

“Pat? This is Pat’s Camp, right? We’re looking for a place to stay tonight.”

The man began to approach her, water sloshing out of the bucket and onto his pants as he strained to carry it. “Oh, you mean Phil?” he asked, and when he said Phil, it sounded more like *feel*.

“Who ever runs the camp sites?” Jenna asked. She took a few steps backward and turned to look for Lance, who was still far behind her and gently shaking his head, his eyes wide and nervous like she should stop asking questions.

“That’d be Phil,” the man said. “He’s out right now. Be back in ‘bout an hour or so. I can show you where to set up your tent if you want?”

“Ok. Yes. That would be great. Thank you,” Jenna said. She and Lance followed the man at a short distance and whispered between themselves.

“I don’t know that we should stay here.”

“Let’s just look at the site and decide after we see it.”

“Are you kidding me? What was in that barn, Jenna? Skinned animals? I feel like we’re in a low budget slasher film. We’re the two dumb white kids on a weekend road trip, lost and looking for a place to stay, somewhere in back-wood Georgia. They all start out just – like – this.”

“Jesus, listen to yourself. You’re being paranoid,” Jenna said back, swatting at the gnats around her face.

“Shit like that *does* really happen, Jenna. And that is like a textbook line you just said right there, the same thing that the pretty girl always says right before she’s chased through the woods and falls down repeatedly.”

Jenna paused to look at his face. “I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not?”

“I am absolutely being serious.”

“This is why I complain about you staying up all night to watch those stupid movies. It’s getting in your head. Nothing is going to happen.”

The man led them to a small squared off piece of dirt near a murky body of water that had a thick layer of moss and chunks of fallen tree floating along the surface. Next to the lot was a mobile home, so close that you could hear the people inside it talking. The man stood with his fists at his hips, spit out a long string of brown liquid and just stared at them.

“This is literally someone’s backyard,” Lance said quietly.

“Thanks. We’re going to look around a little.” Jenna said to the man, who nodded at them and then continued down the path. Jenna walked over to the swampy body of water. Lance followed, placed his arm around her shoulder.

“We can’t stay here,” he said. “I don’t feel comfortable.”

“Why not?” Jenna asked. “It’s not that bad. Besides, the other camp site we were looking at is over two hours away. We’d never make it in time.”

Lance sighed deeply, thought it best to stay quiet.

Jenna looked around, tried to take in her surroundings, searched for something convincing enough to make Lance want to stay. She didn't want to have to get back into the car. Her body ached and she was tired and she wanted to be done with being in the car for the day. Nearby was a long worn out dock that overlooked the swamp; a woman was sitting at the end of it, her bare feet dangling over the edge, casually swinging back and forth as she held a fishing pole over the water. Several children of various ages were around her on the dock, all of them yelling and cursing, smacking one another, threatening to push each other in. All of them overweight and unsightly, unashamed by their pale flesh hanging out from the bottom of their shorts, stomach flab exposed beyond the hem of their shirts.

"Just getting some dinner, that's all," Lance said, gesturing toward the woman fishing.

A scruffy black and white dog leisurely trotted over, pausing to look back at them, its' teats hanging so low they were dragging in the dirt. Gnats were swarming and landing on the dogs' face, concentrating on a deep pink socket where it's left eye should have been. Jenna knew that was the deal breaker.

"Ok. Let's go."

"Thank God."

The walk back to the car was silent with Jenna a few too many paces ahead. Lance knew that she was annoyed with him, it was always the same fight. Jenna got inside the car and

slammed the door closed, buckled her seatbelt. As he slid into the driver's seat, Jenna huffed loudly and crossed her arms against her chest.

"I'm sorry, but this place is creepy."

"It's not *that* creepy. It's just different from what you're used to."

"It's different from what normal people are used to. To any other people than the ones living here."

"Where are we going to stay tonight? There's no time to get to another site and set up camp. This is really our only option."

"We could drive back into town and stay in a motel?"

Jenna took in a deep breath, then blew it out slowly. "Why did I buy all that camping stuff then? If we're just going to stay in motels?"

"I know. I'm sorry. I just don't feel ok about camping in someone's backyard."

"Fine. Let's just go."

Lance started the ignition. "We'll stay someplace really cheap. Just for one night. We'll wake up early. Get a nice breakfast somewhere. Then go check out that other place we were looking at in the book? The place in Tennessee."

Jenna was silent. He could see her tense up her body as she stared straight ahead.

"Does that sound alright? Jen?"

"I mean, what else are we going to do?"

Lance reached out his hand and tucked Jenna's hair behind her ear. "Hey," he said quietly. "Tomorrow will more than make up for today. Ok? That other place is supposed to have waterfalls and hiking trails, it'll be great." Jenna let her arms fall to her sides and finally looked over at him. His face was soft and pleading, desperate for even a small signal: a smile, a nod, anything to tell him that she wasn't going to stay upset. "I promise," he said.

"Ok," she replied. "But only for one night." She grabbed the Georgia state guide from where it sat on the dashboard and began flipping through the pages labeled 'motels.' There wasn't much of a selection for places in that shit-hole town, even in the somewhat bigger towns nearby there was only one motel listed for under sixty dollars a night.

"Looks like we're staying at the Knight's Inn," she said.

"Yeah? What's the guide say about it?"

"It's got 1.5 stars. Says it's clean and cheap."

Lance feigned his enthusiasm, smiled through his words as he said. "Sounds good to me."

*

Lance pulled into the Knight's Inn motel just after nightfall, parked the Sentra in front of the lobby office. The entire place consisted of one long strip of maybe ten to twelve tiny rooms in the saddest shade of pale yellow. They stood outside the lobby doors and rang the bell over and over until someone from the inside finally appeared and buzzed them in. An Indian woman smiled widely through the thick plexi-glass window and separated

them. Without asking questions, she passed a small slip of paper through a secure slot at the bottom of the window.

“Please sign,” she said.

“How much are the rooms?” Lance asked.

“Thirty dollars. No tax. Do not worry. We take cash.”

Lance looked over at Jenna and nodded questioningly. She stepped up to the window and began to fill out the form. She paused while still looking at the sheet of paper and then asked the woman, “Do you really need our address?”

“Just sign,” she said. “All is confidential.”

Jenna signed the form and passed it and the thirty dollars back through to the other side. The woman stared at them, like she wanted to remember what they looked like, then she slid them the room key.

Lance re-parked the car in front of their room, which turned out to be exactly what you would expect from one that only cost thirty dollars: dingy, cramped, and rank with cigarette smoke. They tossed their bags onto the bed and sat down on the edge of the mattress, side by side, facing the room’s darkened window.

“Not too bad, huh?”

Jenna tried to smile. “At least it’s what it was advertised as.”

“That is true. It’s clean and cheap. You gotta give it that.”

Silence.

“Should we go back out for dinner?”

Lance shifted and then stood up to face her. “Yeah, what are you thinking?”

“We passed a Mexican restaurant a few miles back when we driving in.”

*

La Fiesta was standard in all the ways that Mexican restaurants in America are; same menu of taco and enchilada platters, bright florescent colored wall paintings and décor, the music playing over head in Spanish. They were shown to their table and slid into the booth seating on opposite sides of one another. They both ordered the Grande nachos supreme with no meat and a margarita and then silently looked around. Jenna watched as the family of four next to them ate and talked, the mother with thick glossy hair, young and pretty, wiping sour cream off the face of a small child. Lance stared at the mosaic designs on the lamp above them.

“So,” Lance began. “When we get back home.”

“I don’t want to talk about when we get back, yet.”

“I don’t really want to talk about it either. We can’t avoid it though, Jenna.”

Silence.

“We have to figure this out.”

She tilted her head to one side, exhausted by his persistence. “I need more time.”

“You have to see that I am trying.”

Jenna didn’t respond, instead she bounced her legs nervously and looked off in a direction that felt so far away. She couldn’t think of what to say. She didn’t have an answer for him. The waiter brought the food and the drinks and set it before them. “Can we just eat?” Jenna asked. “Please.”

Lance put his head down and sipped from the straw in his margarita. "Yeah, ok."

By the time they got back to their motel room, they had both downed three margaritas a piece. They were feeling good and tingly and back to where they used to be; back to when they smiled like they meant it and laughed without hesitation and held each other like two people who couldn't seem to get enough.

Lance unlocked the door and they both tumbled inside and onto the bed. Jenna rolled from her back and onto her side, she awkwardly reached for her boots, pretended to tug at them. Lance knew she wasn't really trying, he always helped her with her boots. He slipped them off for her, slowly, and set them at the foot of the bed. He stretched out next to her and then touched Jenna's face. She closed her eyes and gave into it. They made love that night for the first time in weeks. They did not speak or whimper or question their movements; instead they silently pulsed in rhythm of one another. Afterward, they fell asleep right away with his chin rested atop her head, her small body tucked in close to his, wrapped together in raw nakedness.

*

The heavy yellow curtains over the motel window didn't close all the way, leaving a slight gap in the middle where the two ends meet. The early morning sun shone brightly through the slit, coming in at such an angle that allowed for the light to fall directly upon Jenna's face. She squeezed her eyes shut and reached for her aching head, wishing she had aspirin or anything at all that might help it to stop pounding. She rolled over to Lance, who was snoring with his mouth open. She poked her finger at his cheek.

“Wake up,” she said. “I’m hungry.”

“Can’t we sleep a little while longer?” he groaned.

“I need coffee.”

“Ten more minutes?”

Jenna got up and took a shower, the enclosed tile space was hardly big enough to turn around in as she soaped her body, and she had to use her hands to collect pools of water to splash on herself and rinse off the suds. She turned off the water, which had begun to run cold, and wrapped herself in a towel. When she came out of the bathroom, Lance was dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed, tying his shoes, the curtains drawn fully open, boasting a view of the cars commuting to work on the single lane road that ran past the motel.

“Speedy’s Eatery,” Lance said, still tying his laces.

“What?”

“Look out the window. Across the street.”

Jenna dropped her towel and slipped into a clean pair of underwear and a tank top, looked out across the busy road. She had to squint through the sunlight to see the particle board sign, large enough to need two thick posts on either side. Someone had painted red, uneven letters on it that read: Speedy’s Eatery.

“What about it?” Jenna asked.

“Breakfast. You said you were hungry.”

“Yeah, but I meant for food.”

“C’mon, you’re into mom and pop joints. All the locals eat at places like that, the hole-in-the-walls with the rinky-dink painted signs. Those are the places that always have the best food *and* the best service.”

“Lance, can’t we just go to a Denny’s or something?”

“I know what you’re thinking, Jenna.” He put up his hands as if to silence her. “Just trust me on this one.”

They packed up their stuff and locked it in the car, left the Sentra parked at the motel, and after sliding their room key through the mail slot in the lobby door, they walked across the street to Speedy’s Eatery. There were no other businesses or people around, aside from the motel and the cars whizzing past them. The restaurant was small and constructed of cinderblocks, white washed and grim looking, sparse patches of weeds lining the building where plants had once been. Perhaps, those plants were green and vibrant at one time, perhaps the restaurant had once been in better shape, with clean windows and fresh paint, bustling with customers smiling widely as they came and went, toting boxes of left-overs, patting their full stomachs as they waddled their way to back to their cars. Lance opened the door for Jenna and they both stepped inside. Nobody was around, no other customers, no hostess to seat them, nobody at all.

“Are they even open?” Jenna asked, searching for something that had their hours of operation posted, some indication that they were allowed to be there.

The door had been unlocked. The generic neon blue OPEN sign was lit up. They stood in the doorway a few minutes, just waiting. Jenna walked in a little further, stood next to one of the five available tables; all of which were that plastic patio furniture that

you'd find outside pool areas in apartment complexes, the kind of table that would have the hole in the middle for a big shady umbrella, the kind with flimsy matching chairs that topple over easily. The tables were topped with thick plastic coverings with patterns of holly berries and poinsettias, and small vases with dusty fake flowers, muting the purples and pinks to lonely tones of brown. Jenna approached the front counter, which was just out of sight from the doorway; a cash register was placed off to one side, and paper print out menus were stacked neatly to the other.

Jenna waved Lance over. "I found menus?" she said.

She and Lance stood at the counter looking over their options when they heard a voice approaching from somewhere back in the kitchen. The voice emerged along with a large, disgruntled woman in sweatpants who was speaking into her cell phone, her hair a mess of unkempt plaits. She stopped abruptly when she saw Lance and Jenna standing there, then she sat down on a chair behind the counter and continued her conversation.

"I don't know. I already told you," the woman said. Then she was quiet a minute before saying, "Look, I gotta go. There's people in here. No, I don't know what they want."

Lance swallowed hard. The woman ended her phone call and then just stared at them without saying anything.

"Are you open?" Jenna asked meekly.

"Sign says we are," the woman said, her expression one that was clearly annoyed. Behind the woman was a short order window to the kitchen, where rows and rows of white wonder bread were stacked up and falling over. Jenna looked at the menu in front of her. She considered just thanking the woman for her time and leaving. The longer she

thought of what she could say, the more pressure she felt. The woman was staring at her, with those stern eyes, just staring and waiting for her to decide. She could feel her face becoming flushed and all at once she was overwhelmed with a sense of obligation to just hurry up and choose something.

“Do you have coffee?” Jenna asked.

The woman pursed her lips and nodded. “I can makes some,” she said.

“Ok, we’ll have two coffees. And. Do you have a breakfast menu? I see pulled pork sandwiches here. There’s a Rueben. Um...”

“We got what you see there,” the woman said.

“No vegetarian options, huh?”

“You can have a number one.”

“Yeah, we don’t eat pork, so...”

The woman sighed loudly, then mashed her lips together. “That’s all we got,” she said.

“K.” Jenna looked at Lance, but he just shrugged and looked back at her. She clenched her teeth and hoped he would just say that they should leave, but he didn’t. He didn’t respond in any way at all. She looked at the menu again, then back up at the short order window, at the loaves of bread. “Can we maybe just get some toast? Two coffees and toast, please?”

“How many tose?”

“I’m sorry?” Jenna asked

“How many tose?”

Jenna looked at Lance again, pleading for help. “How many toasts,” he whispered.

“Oh, um. Maybe just four slices? Is that ok?”

“I *guess* it is,” the woman said, standing from her chair, carefully positioning her legs to hold the weight of her body. Next to where she was sitting was a coffee pot that she filled with water and Folgers grounds. It gurgled its way to life, straining to brew like it hadn’t done so in a number of months. Then the woman went back into the kitchen, where Jenna could see her making toast on the grill through the short order window, her mouth saying words that Jenna couldn’t hear. Lance took a seat at one of the tables, placed his hands in his lap and chewed on his bottom lip. Jenna sat close to him, was quiet a while as she looked around more closely at things. There were no pictures on the walls, no framed one dollar bill or mementos of pride in their business, no real décor beyond the Christmas themed table clothes. The place didn’t even have a restroom available for customers.

Soon, the woman came out from the back with their coffees, carried them over in two 20 ounce Styrofoam cups, “We ain’t got no lids,” she said. “Here’s some creams.” She placed a ramekin of little half and half containers on the table, gave Lance a long strange look, like she wanted to ask a question, and then went back into the kitchen.

He took a sip of his coffee, recoiled quickly at how hot it was. “I wonder why she gave us these big to-go cups?”

“I don’t think she wants us to stay.”

Jenna picked up a half and half container and opened it, noticed that it was curdled and gently set it on the table. She picked up another one and looked for a use-by date, then she picked up another, then another.

“These are all expired,” she whispered.

“Not very good for business.”

“Lance, I don’t think this is a real restaurant.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I think it’s a front.”

“A front for what?”

“I don’t know? Laundering money? There’s no way this is a functioning restaurant that makes an actual profit by selling pulled pork sandwiches.”

Lance shook his head, “Nooooo. No way. It’s not a front, Jenna. It’s just a small town. Maybe people here are really into pulled pork?”

“Did you see how she looked at us when we came in? All suspicious, like she wasn’t sure why we were here? She gave us our coffee in to-go cups, her creams are all expired. Lance, you know as well as I do that nobody in town eats here. She has like, two things on her menu.”

“Ok. Maybe it’s just a really shitty restaurant. But it’s not a front for anything. Where you get these crazy ideas?”

“Oh, *I’m* the one with crazy ideas? You thought Pat’s Camp was going to be the last place we ever saw.”

The woman came out from the back again with their toast wrapped up in parchment paper, which she just handed over to them and then waited, obviously rushing for them to just pay her and leave.

“Do you have a bag or something? Maybe some jam packets? Or butter?”

The woman made her way back around the counter, handed Jenna a paper bag and then pulled out a college ruled notebook and pen. She wrote down their order slowly, checking the menu for reference of how to spell coffee and toast, giving each item a price after thinking long and hard, like she was making it up as she went along. The paper read:

Coffee 2 - \$3

Toasts 4 - \$2

“Is five dollars,” the woman said finally. Jenna dug out a twenty from her pocket and handed it to the woman. She sighed heavily and then took out a calculator to figure out how much the change would be. “Fifteen back?” she asked, confirming what the hand held machine told her.

“Yes,” Jenna said. The woman opened the cash register without punching anything in first and started counting out ones.

She counted aloud, “eight, nine, ten.” She ran out of ones when she got to ten, looked at Jenna like she wasn’t sure what to do. Then she pulled up a big silver metallic handbag from under the counter and took out her own wallet, dug through it for more ones, and after retrieving a few more, she started counting them all again back from one. Finally, she gave Jenna back thirteen dollars in ones and the remaining two dollars in

loose change. Then she shut the register, which vibrated closed with a loud *ching*. The woman stared hard at them, shifted her body so that she was leaning into the stare, and she stayed in that position until they left the building and were outside the front door. Jenna looked back a few times to see her peering at them still, through the unwashed windows, until they were back across the street and out of sight.

Jenna dumped the bag of toast and her coffee into the garbage can of the motel parking lot. “She didn’t even have enough change in her drawer to break a twenty, Lance.”

“I know. That was weird.”

They both got back into the car. Jenna buckled her seatbelt. They were quiet and still for a few long minutes, neither of them knowing what to say. They watched the cars on the road go by in flashes of color. It wasn’t even eleven o’clock and already it was hot outside, making sitting in an enclosed space nearly unbearable.

“Man, what’s with Georgia?” Jenna asked.

Lance laughed at that, rested his hands on the steering wheel.

“I’m still hungry,” she said.

“Yeah, I know. Denny’s?”

Jenna nodded her head as she smiled a sad little smile.

She looked out her window, pressed her forehead against the glass. She felt like she was supposed to say something— something good and hopeful. She faced him as he started up the car. It rattled and shook as he put it in reverse and slowly backed up. His gas light was on, which normally annoyed her, the way he always ran for so long on empty.

She didn't say anything about it though. She didn't say anything at all. Instead, she reached over and took his hand into hers, held it firmly as they rolled back onto the interstate.

Happy to Oblige

Henry leaves the public library that day after almost six straight hours of studying for the LSAT; the weight from his leather satchel, chuck full of books and legal pads, causes him to move slow and teeter out the front doors, hunched over from sitting in those uncomfortable wooden chairs all day, his joints creaking like an old man's. Having made it down the stone steps that lead toward the parking garage, he pauses before walking to his car and rests his body on a nearby bench to smoke a cigarette. He hasn't enjoyed one since much earlier that morning and his wife hates it when he smokes in their car. *It leaves a terrible smell, Henry. You don't want to expose our son to that, now do you?* She always knows too, even if he sprays Febreze or some other deodorizing spray to try and cover it up, even when he drives with the windows rolled down to air things out, she still knows.

He sits on the bench and begins to relax as the sun warms his face. He closes his eyes, smokes slowly, like savoring the last few bites of dessert. Henry pulls his cell phone out of his pocket: four missed calls, all from Karen. As if she doesn't know exactly where he is.

Karen is the kind that checks in about every little thing. She needs permission before making even the most minor decisions, or for Henry to validate the ways in which she chooses to spend her time. She texts him that she's picking up dog food, or pictures of Elijah in his highchair smearing jarred baby food around with his small chubby hands, or which contestants have made it to round six of American Idol. It is never about anything important, or anything he cares about, and the more he ignores these senseless text

messages, the more of them she sends. They have been married not even two years, but already Henry is exhausted by his newfound responsibilities as a husband and a father, and now with being a pet owner to the mixed breed Labrador that Karen rescued, only after vaguely discussing it with him first, which was a strange move on her part in itself. It's an older dog that had been abused and was appropriately named, Shaky, who pisses on the floor and hides instead of barks when the doorbell rings. The library has become a weekend retreat from his real life. He uses that time to study, and the library offers a kind of solitude that he deems necessary, and because of this, he often finds himself taking more time than he actually needs. Karen complains of his absence of course, the way she does about everything else. *But you have such a lovely home office, why don't you study here?* Henry is then put in a position of having to explain to Karen that he has to study at the library because there are too many distractions in the house, that it makes him feel guilty to be cooped up in his office all day while he can hear her and Elijah laughing and enjoying themselves, that the LSAT is among the hardest exams to pass and that he needs to be very focused.

Henry stares at the screen of his phone, thinking of calling his wife back, of how he'll have to come right home once he does. He takes another long drag and tells himself he'll call her after his cigarette. Henry watches as a small boy in the park across the way kicks a big orange ball back and forth with a man who he assumes is the boy's father. Henry's admiring how happy they both look when he hears a voice in the nearby distance saying something over and over. He listens more closely. The person is saying, "Excuse

me.” Henry is the only one around and it’s then that he realizes that the person is trying to get his attention. He stands up and looks beyond the thin trees that are blocking his view. A woman is approaching, almost aggressively, walking right toward him like maybe he has unknowingly done something to upset her.

“Excuse me. Sir?” she says, much closer to him now. She seems to be lost, is looking around like someone trying to familiarize themselves with their surroundings.

“Yes?” Henry asks. “Is something the matter?”

The woman stands before him, appearing to be quite confused. She is much younger than he had originally thought when he saw her from a distance, now he’d guess mid-twenties maybe, nearer to his own age. Her skin is what gives her such a hardened look, weathered and scarred along her face and chest, like someone who suffers from bad acne and too much time in the sun. She smiles at him, and when she does, her eyes soften at the corners. Henry does not smile back, he’s still waiting for her to respond. From the way she’s looking at him he feels as if he’s being evaluated in some way, like his worth is being determined. Her stomach is exposed, just slightly, as she lifts her arms to gather her hair back into a rubber band that she wears on her wrist, though her bunching it together doesn’t help that it’s matted to her head on one side. When she finishes with her hair, she pulls her shirt back down to cover herself like she’d been embarrassed, though Henry doubts very much that she was.

“Nothing’s the *matter*. Well, not really,” she says. “It’s just that...” she looks down at Henry’s phone, cradled his hand, and smiles at him again. He understands right away that she wants something from him. “Could I use your phone?”

Henry is quiet a minute. "I was actually just on my way out."

"I won't be long. It's just to my aunt's place. She was supposed to pick me up four hours ago." She turns away from him just long enough to use her fingers to frantically rub at her nose. "So, would that be cool? Just for a few minutes?"

Henry hesitates. He's trying to think quickly, but can't come up with a good enough excuse to say no.

He passes her the phone. "Ok. I mean, I *do* have to be heading home, so..."

"Yeah. I get it. It'll only be a minute."

The woman turns around and takes a few steps away from him in the opposite direction. "Hey. He said yes," she shouts. A second later, a lanky, yet vaguely toned guy comes trotting over in their direction, his sneakers squeaking against the pavement with each fluid movement. He is shirtless and wears low hanging shorts that show off the top of his underwear, has to hold his belt loops to keep them up as he makes his way over to them. His imperious smile is worn too casually, like a man with nothing to lose, which comes off equally as intimidating as his tattooed body; his arms sleeved from top to bottom, phrases like *Ride Till I Die* are etched along his neck and abdomen.

"Thanks man," the guy says. "I'm Derek, this is my girl Trinity. We've been waiting out here in the heat for so many hours. Brutal."

Henry shrugs and says, "No problem." He suddenly feels ridiculous in his loafers and creased khaki pants. "I do have to be somewhere though."

Derek waives his hand like he understands. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. For sure."

Trinity fumbles with the phone like she's unsure how it operates, taps her finger against the touch screen more times than necessary to make a call. Henry is about to offer to help her dial, when she finally presses it to her ear and waits. A minute later, her face scrunches up and she looks at the screen again, hangs up the call. "Shit, wrong number." She exhales like she's annoyed with someone other than herself and dials again. While she waits for an answer Henry holds in his impatience, taking in big gulps of air like he's trying to rid himself of hiccups. He lights another cigarette and pretends not to listen as she speaks, her voice heavy with resentment, to who he imagines is her aunt on the other line. He puffs away in silence, stares off in another direction, as if he's minding his own business.

"Well, what the fuck?" Trinity says, holding the phone far enough away from her ear that Henry can hear the muffled, unapologetic murmurs of the aunt's voice, not the actual words, just the sounds, like the parents in a Snoopy cartoon.

"You said one-thirty, it's almost... What time is it Derek?"

Derek looks at the watch on his wrist. "It's almost four, baby."

"Four o'clock," she snaps. "Also, I might need to stay longer than one night. I was thinking me and Derek could just crash on your couch for a couple days?" She pauses, listens with frustration on her face. "No. I can't go to my mom's house. You know why. She's the one that threw *me* out. She don't give a shit about me." Silence. "You coming or not?" When she pauses this time, Henry can feel that Derek is staring at him. He's fairly certain that the staring has been going on for a while now, which is why he doesn't look

over. For some reason, he knows that Derek wants him to and he feels strange pretending not to notice the density and the weight of apprehension. The longer he keeps his face turned, the more he can feel Derek eyes upon him. Eventually, Henry convinces himself to casually shift his body, make it seem natural as he finally looks in his direction. Derek doesn't say a word, just stares right at him, hard and unflinching. Then he turns up his mouth into that fucking cocky smile of his. Henry blinks nervously. "I'm at the library," Trinity says. "No. The one by the park. Ok. Bye." She holds the phone awkwardly and then says to Henry, "I don't know how to hang this thing up."

"Oh, just hit the red button."

She presses the button, then looks at the phone again.

"Fancy," she says. She does not give it back. "Hey, you think I could bum one of those?"

"Baby, you're always reading my mind," Derek chimes in. "I was thinking that exact same thing." He takes a few small steps closer toward Henry and leans in, just enough to make Henry's body clam up with a deafening discomfort; he clenches his fists a second to release some of his tension, and then he hands them both a cigarette and the lighter from his pocket. He has never been in a fight in his life, he thinks he might do ok if he had to, but he's not interested in pissing anyone off enough to find out. He can't imagine why this guy, Derek, would mess with him when he's being so generous, but he knows too, that a guy like Derek probably doesn't need a real reason, other than that he

just wanted to. He smokes and waits for Trinity to hand back his phone. He can't think of how to just ask for it without sounding like a dick.

"What'd she say?" Derek asks.

Trinity reaches out, a gesture that seems like she's about to give Henry his phone. "She'll be here in twenty," she says, then she pulls her hand back toward her body. "Can I make one more call?"

Henry just looks at her. A silence hangs in the air. Derek takes a drag and leans in even closer, bounces around a bit like he's amping himself up before a big game. Henry can feel Derek's hot breath against his neck, or at least he thinks he can, and he knows that Trinity isn't really asking, that she's going to make another call regardless of his response.

"I need to call my mom," she continues. "I wanna see if I can get some of my shit from her house, clean clothes and stuff. No one's been home for weeks. She took away my key when she threw me out. My aunt says she's home right now. So, that ok? If I call her really quick?"

Henry nods his head that she can, but wonders how long this will go on, if they'll end up asking *him* for a ride home, and what might happen if he lets them into his car: he imagines that Derek has a gun hidden on him and will point it to his head as soon as they all pile inside, that they'll take his wallet, his phone, his shoes, while yelling for him to get the fuck out before they shoot him in the face. He imagines standing where his car was parked, shaking and shoeless, completely helpless, as they peel out of the parking garage

in his new SUV. His driver's license is in his wallet, his credit cards. They might see his address on his license and go then to his house to rob him; steal his wife's jewelry, their plasma TVs, the antique ceramics and the silver candlestick holders that Karen's grandmother had left her, they might even hurt Karen and Elijah. They could rifle through the kitchen drawers until they find the duct tape, use it across Karen's mouth and wrap her wrists together so that she can't scream or call the police. Elijah would be in his jumper, frightened and alone, crying and crying loudly as Go Diego Go blares on the television over Karen's muffled voice, begging for them not to hurt their baby, while the good-for-nothing dog scurries under the bed, sure to keep silent. They would likely just take what they needed and be done with it, they don't seem like the kind that would actually want to kill anyone, but more the kind that would get a real good laugh out of scaring the shit out of them. He tries to remember how much cash he has on him, almost \$300, he thinks. Henry wants to give them the money he has, he pictures himself throwing the cash on the ground and then bolting, making a run for it, but he also understands that he'd have to make it seem like he's just this really nice guy who was trying to help them out. He reaches into his pocket and grips his wallet tightly, he rehearses in head what he might say to them. *Sorry to cut you off but I really need to go. How else can I help? You need some money? Maybe for a taxi?* The more he ponders this option, the more it feels like his only chance for escape, the only way to ensure that he does make it home ok.

Without being aware of it, he starts to bounce up and down on his toes, just slightly, he doesn't know how long he's been doing that when he catches himself. As soon

as he recognizes this, he stops, he doesn't want to seem impatient. He just wants to leave.

Trinity turns her back as she makes another call.

"You live around here?" Derek asks him.

"Other side of town," Henry says.

"What are you doing over here then?"

Henry points to the building behind him with his thumb. "Library," he says.

"Yeah? What you doing at the library?"

"Studying for a test."

Derek's eyes get squinty like he doesn't understand why a grown man would be studying for anything.

"It's for school," Henry explains. The sun has become cumbersome where he's standing and he wishes he could ask for them all to move into the shade. Every part of his body feels hot. He thinks that if someone were to place their palm on his forearm, or anywhere else not protected by his clothing, that he might burn their skin with his own. His arms are getting blotchy with patches of red and his throat feels tight and dry.

Derek's face relaxes from his expression of suspicion. "Kinda old to still be in school, huh?"

Henry shrugs. "Takes some of us longer than others."

Trinity turns back around and finally hands Henry his phone. "Cute kid," she says.

"On your phone. Your screensaver or whatever. He yours?"

"Yes. Yes, that's my son. He just turned seven months."

“He looks just like you,” she says.

Henry hopes that whatever Trinity and Derek plan to do to him, that the picture of Elijah will buy him some sympathy. That maybe if they know he has a son, a young son, they won’t harm him or rob him or try and find out where he lives.

“I’ll bet you’re a really good dad,” she says.

Henry’s throat closes almost completely. He tries to swallow but he can’t conjure up an appropriate amount of saliva. He wipes his brow. “You know. Kids are a lot of work,” he says.

“Yeah, but I bet you’re the kind of dad that like plays with him all the time, and doesn’t lose your shit when he cries and stuff. Right? I’d bet you were like that.”

“I am. I mean. I try to be. I try to be a good dad.”

“Hey Trin,” Derek says, nudging her with his elbow. “This guy’s still in school.”

“Oh yeah? For what?”

“Well, I’m applying to law school,” Henry says, immediately wishing he hadn’t.

“Wow,” Trinity says. “Well, aren’t you fancy.”

“No,” Henry says, and shakes his head.

“You are though,” she says. “You got this slick little phone, and that perfect fucking hair cut on your pretty little head. I’ll bet you drive a fancy car and live in a great big fancy house too, now don’t you?”

Henry is unsure how to respond. The heat is really getting to him. He suddenly feels very dizzy and he wonders if he might vomit. “No, I don’t.” he says, nearly stumbling backward. “My sister cuts my hair. I live in an apartment.”

Technically it was a condo downtown with a decent view of the city, but they didn’t need to know that. Henry wasn’t a privileged kid growing up, he never went without what he needed, but always had to work hard for what he had. His parents were strict and expected more from him than most people’s, helped him out financially when it was necessary, but never without it costing him greatly; guilt trips and constant nagging attached themselves to any single favor, which never seemed worth just figuring things out for himself.

Henry wipes his sweaty palms onto the front of his pant legs. The friction that it causes has a strange comforting sense to it and he continues this motion a little longer than he should, in the same way he sometimes continues to scratch an itch beyond what is necessary; it just feels good.

“You got a wife? Girlfriend?” Trinity asks, a smug expression in place.

Henry straightens up. “I do have a wife. She’s actually waiting on me. I have to bring some stuff home from the store. So...” He puts his phone away, safely in his pocket.

“She really pretty?” she says, more like an accusation than a question.

Henry realizes that there is no polite way to end things with these people. “I should get going now,” he says. “I’m glad you got your ride situation worked out.”

“Hey, what’s your name, anyway?” Derek asks.

“It’s David.”

Derek puts out his hand like he wants to shake on it. Not at all what Henry expected. “Good to meet cha, David.”

“Yeah. You too. Take care, then, huh?”

Henry does not walk to the parking garage. In fact, he moves slowly along the sidewalk in the opposite direction until he’s walked twelve blocks the wrong way, turning around periodically to ensure that he isn’t being followed. He does this until he feels calm enough to start back toward his car. There is a heaviness in his body, aching and burning through his limbs and muscles, and it’s then that he realizes how very tired he has become— not from the walking, of course, but from compressing all that tension, all of those emotions into the bottom of his stomach. He takes careful notice to how many bars that he passes on his way back, the many opportunities of release that he’s losing out on. It could be so easy to stop in and slam a whiskey or two, to collect himself and clear his head. He lingers longer than he should outside the entrance to Smokey Joes, he knows the bartender that works there, the blonde one that he kissed once on New Years. He wonders if she’d remember him. His phone vibrates in his pocket, as if on cue, and he knows it’s Karen without even checking it. Henry moves more quickly down the sidewalk, doing his best to keep his head up and his eyes straight ahead. Derek and Trinity must be gone, surely her aunt has picked them up by now.

When he does get back to the garage, his breathing is normal again and the red patches on his skin are gone. He unlocks his car and climbs into the driver’s seat, the heat from inside engulfs him completely, thick and heavy like being in a sauna, except now the heat feels soothing. He sits very still and closes his eyes. He knows that he is safe. He

thinks that maybe he'll start using his home office again. Karen is right, it is a lovely office. He remembers that he forgot to call her back, he wonders how many voicemail messages she's left him. He straightens up and starts the ignition, tells himself that he shouldn't take his usual long route back. As he drives down the side street that leads to the freeway, he rolls down his windows. Everything around him looks the same; the gas station with the cheapest cigarettes in town, the bowling alley with its purple painted awnings. He lets his arm hang out the window as he merges into the fast lane, cool rushes of air coming in from every direction.

Test Drive

Jeffrey was a man who valued routine and regime. It was important to be able to control certain things in his life, and he liked knowing what to expect. He was meticulous and specific about the way he laid out his work clothes the night before, ironed and starched his shirts and slacks. He worked out to his P-90X video before the sun even rose, faced the wall of mirrors in his exercise room as he curled weights toward his body, clenched jawed and menacing, like he could *feel* himself getting stronger. He always measured out an exact amount of wet cat food for Sycamore and would drink two cups of coffee, quickly, while it was still hot as he watched his cat's small mouth take in chunks of chicken and beef puree from its small white dish.

It was a Tuesday, the last day of the month, which was always a good commission day. He expected that he would sell at least four cars by the end of the day. Maybe more. He had been the top salesman at Dream Team Auto for the last seven months running. His closest competitor was a coworker named Alan, who had also come into work early that morning. Upon arriving, he walked over and leaned up against Jeffrey's desk, crossed his legs at the ankles. He cautiously sipped his coffee.

"I almost had you beat yesterday," Alan said, then he used his tongue to make a clicking noise against the roof of his mouth.

Jeffrey leaned back in his chair, folded his arms behind his head. "*Almost* isn't gonna cut it, buddy."

"Well, today's a new day."

Jeffrey raised his eyebrows. "You wanna put a wager on it?"

Alan considered this. "Sure thing," he said, tilting his head to one side. "Seeing as how I know I'm going to win."

Jeffrey leaned forward, tapped gently at the bobble-head Obama doll that sat on his desk as he determined what the conditions would be. "Ok, then," he said. "Who ever makes the most in commission by closing time has to buy the other person a steak dinner."

"That's it? A fucking steak dinner? C'mon Jeffrey, at least make it worth my while."

"Alright. A steak dinner and season tickets to the Cards."

Alan smiled widely and put out his hand to shake on it. "You've got yourself a deal."

By one o'clock Jeffrey was way up in sales, had already sold two cars while Alan was still working on closing his first deal of the day; a Range Rover to some skinny Beverly Hills wannabe in yoga pants and oversized sunglasses that covered her entire face. Selling cars to women was the worst. They were so finicky yet oddly specific, while knowing nothing about what they actually wanted from a vehicle. Jeffrey passed by Alan's desk on his way to the break room and had overheard the woman say, "I think I want the red one instead."

Alan hesitated. "The red one, huh? Well, it does come with more options, and a three year bumper to bumper warranty."

“Yeah,” the woman replied. “And it’s cuter.”

It was all Jeffrey could do not to laugh out loud, instead he gave Alan a sarcastic expression and a thumbs up.

Jeffrey never took lunch breaks. Sitting down to eat, sitting down at all, meant being away from the action and losing sales. He grabbed a banana from the basket of fruit on the counter, ate it quickly, while still standing of course, and headed back toward the showroom. His boss caught up with him midway and complimented him on his already outstanding performance for the day, clapped him hard on the back and told him to keep up the good work. Jeffrey had just crossed the showroom floor, was scoping out the lot for potential customers from the large windows that faced outward in every direction.

That’s when Marissa walked in. She was eating a sandwich and carrying a venti Starbucks something, chewing with her mouth open as she approached him.

“Hey,” she said casually, like they were already acquainted. “I need to buy a car,” she took another bite from her sandwich. “You want to sell me one?”

She was wearing cut off shorts and a tee shirt that hung low on her small frame, the kind of girl that didn’t need makeup to be attractive. (She had clearly put no effort into her appearance that day.) Her eyes were puffy and red, her long blonde hair was oily like it hadn’t been washed in days. Maybe it was the confident way in which Marissa carried herself, maybe it was her *fuck it* attitude? Jeffrey wasn’t exactly sure what it was; he couldn’t name it or pin point why, but he was very drawn to her. Another girl was there with Marissa, hanging around in the background, a dark haired girl with glaring eyes and pursed lips. Jeffrey had the other girl figured out from the get go, she was the hard nosed

skeptic kind. Her name was Tess and apparently she was there to make sure that Marissa didn't spend more money than she had budgeted for; Tess was there to be the voice of reason.

Jeffrey introduced himself, laughed and pointed to Marissa's sandwich. "I skipped lunch today. You wanna trade me a car for that panini? Looks pretty tasty."

She kept on chewing. "Not really," she said.

"Ok then. A car it is. What are you looking for?" He led them both onto the lot, walked slowly and listened intently as they paced up and down the aisles of cars.

"I think I want a wagon," Marissa said.

"A wagon? Alright, that's cool."

"Yeah. I like having a lot of room, and I don't want an SUV. I have kids, so a sedan won't be big enough. Also, I go camping a lot and need something I can just kind of throw my gear in and go."

"Camping? Camping's cool. I've been camping a *few* times. This buddy of mine, he's like going out into nature every weekend. Just like, hiking and fishing and stuff. You into that?"

Marissa looked over at Tess like she was unsure whether he was serious or not.

"Yeah," she said finally. "I'm into that."

"I have this one that I think you'll love," he said, using his hands to emphasize the word love. "Hang tight. I'll bring it around for you." He smiled at her a moment and waited for a nod of approval. "I just gotta grab the keys, then we can take a test drive."

Jeffrey pulled around in a red Jetta wagon, one with a moon roof that opened up the entire length of the top of the car, leather seats that warmed with a touch of a button. A built in GPS navigation system greeted Marissa as she slid into the driver's seat. She rested her hands on the wheel and looked into the back seat where Tess was, shrugged her shoulders and waited for a response. Tess didn't say anything—just had on her face the usual scowl and shook her head no.

“This car has more options and extras than you could even *dream* up.” Jeffrey started pushing buttons, adjusting the satellite radio. “What's your favorite radio station? I've been jamming out to a lot of country lately. The new Montgomery Gentry song? Oh, so good.”

“Yeah, um. I don't think this is really what I had in mind,” Marissa said.

“Too many options? I don't want to try and sell you too much car, if that's what you mean?”

“Well, for starters, it's red. I'm not really the kind of girl that drives a red car.”

“I got this same model in black, comes with all alloy wheels. It's a sick ride.”

“I couldn't take a car this nice camping. I'd be too afraid to scratch the paint or get it dirty.”

“Ok. You tell me what you're looking for then.”

“Reliability. Endurance. Safety. Something with less buttons, perhaps?”

“How much is this car?” Tess asked from the back seat.

Jeffrey turned to face her, grinned in a way that showed off all his teeth. “How much do you want it to be?”

“I knew it. It’s too expensive. Get out of the car, Marissa,” Tess said.

Marissa got out from behind the wheel and stood next to the car. She squinted her eyes away from the harsh midday sun that was blaring down on her. It was at least 95 degrees and she felt hot and flustered, sweat dripping from between her shoulder blades down to the small of her back. She leaned forward with her hands resting on her knees as she exhaled slowly, already exhausted, unraveled by the vigorous process of buying a car, by Jeffrey and his advantageous ways. And they had only just begun.

*

Earlier that morning, Marissa had managed to wake her roommate Tess by standing in the middle of the kitchen crying loudly. She wore only her underwear as she held her face in her hands like she was ashamed. It was the kind of cry that was hysterical, pausing only to take in deep breaths. Tess didn’t have to ask what was wrong because she already knew, instead she held Marissa in her arms for a brief moment and then immediately started making her breakfast. Tess wasn’t the emotional type, she never knew how to respond correctly to fits of hysteria, to any moments of tenderness really—crying and babies and puppies all did nothing but annoy her. But she did know, that for whatever reason, food always helped things. Without speaking, she scrambled up three eggs, toasted a bagel, sliced some fruit. She plated the food and set it on the table, told Marissa to sit, then she said, “Stop crying now. Eat this food.”

Marissa did as she was told. In her most distressing moments, she always did as instructed, the way a kid does when she's behaved badly or made poor decisions.

"Now," Tess continued, "what'll make you feel better?"

"I don't know. Nothing."

Tess huffed with aggravation, stood with her hand on her hip as she towered over Marissa, who must have appeared so feeble and vulnerable sitting there in her underwear, curled up small with her legs against her chest. After several long minutes, Tess straightened up and asked, "You want to go buy a car today? Will that make you feel better?"

Marissa used her fork to push the food around on her plate. "Sure," she said.

The suggestion hadn't come from nowhere. Marissa had been complaining about needing to buy a new car for months, but had been less than proactive in making that happen. She perused craigslist a few times only to complain about the lack of selection and the high prices, but really she was just being lazy about it. Her Subaru was about to die on her any minute, it still ran ok, but had almost two hundred thousand miles on it, and the registration tags were due to expire next week. Marissa loved that Subaru, but figured she might as well try and trade it in while it still ran and get at least something for it before it completely took a shit on her. She had looked up the car's value on Kelly Blue Book, it was listed for \$4,000, but she knew she'd be lucky to get two grand. Still, a little something was better than getting nothing.

*

“Hot out here, huh? Can I get you some bottled water? An iced coffee?” Jeffrey asked, approaching Marissa with swift strides, his carsalesman smile still intact. Marissa stood up straight, looked at the thick veins bulging out of his neck and wondered how often he worked out, what he was like in his real life? Jeffrey must have only been in his early thirties, but he had his schemey one-liners down like he’d been slinging cars his whole life.

“No, I’m ok,” she said. Tess came around the back of the car and stood next to Marissa. Jeffrey gestured in her direction.

“How about you then? Beverage of some sort?”

Tess rolled her eyes. “Can we just stay focused on getting Marissa a car?”

“Just doing my job here. Making you feel comfortable is part of it.”

Marissa handed the keys to the red Jetta over to Jeffrey. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“How long have you been selling cars?”

“Nine glorious months.”

“Really?” Tess asked. “You think this is glorious?”

Jeffrey’s face got serious, his voice went low. “No, it’s not at all. This is not what I want to be doing.” Then he reapplied his grin and added, “Gotta pay the bills somehow, right?”

Marissa looked down at her feet and asked quietly, “What is it then?”

“What is what?”

“What would you rather be doing?”

“Me? I want to be a fireman. Always have. I’ve been taking some training courses over at the Academy. I want to do some good for the community. Busting into houses, saving people and shit.”

She lifted her head to meet his eyes. “Yeah,” she said. “I could see you doing that.”

“Honestly, I hate telling people that I’m a car salesman. Like I said though, gotta pay the bills.”

Marissa and Tess followed Jeffrey back into the showroom where they neatly arranged themselves around his desk, talked further about what Marissa wanted in a car, got to know one another a little better. Marissa learned that Jeffrey had gone to college and received a degree in business, had fallen into the real estate trend of flipping houses and had made a ton money, but spent it all just as quickly. She found out that he worked for his Dad in the winters snow blowing driveways, that it was a profitable business that had brought him out of the hole he had dug himself in, but that he had made no money the previous season because it never snowed. That’s how he ended up at Dream Team Auto.

After narrowing down her possibilities, Marissa agreed to test drive another car, one within her price range. Jeffrey grabbed the loaner keys to the car he had in mind for her, while Marissa and Tess waited outside the showroom for him. He pulled up in a black sedan. (The girls looked confused.) Jeffrey started in on his sales pitch as soon as he got out of the drivers seat, told Marissa that she could get that brand new car for less money than a used wagon, which was what he knew she wanted but that the wagons didn’t come with warranties; that he couldn’t vouch for where they came from or for the *real* condition

that they might be in, that if she bought a brand new sedan, he could say with confidence that nothing was gonna go wrong with it, and that if it did, she'd have that amazing three-year-extended warranty that would cover anything and everything. Then he tossed her the keys.

Marissa circled the car a few times, popped the trunk to consider the available space, the leg room in the backseat, the accessibility for car seats. She felt disappointed. It wasn't what she wanted. It was a fine car, just not what she was looking for. She could tell that Jeffrey was reading her expression and was losing steam. She stared at the car a few more minutes, thought that maybe she should just test drive it. Just to see how it feels. Suppose that in trying it out she changed her mind about what she *thought* she wanted. She fidgeted with the keys in her hand while Tess and Jeffrey watched her, then she climbed into the drivers seat; the other two followed her lead.

"Ok," Jeffrey began, "you do know how to drive a manual transmission, right?"

"Yes, I know how. It's been a while, but I know how." Marissa adjusted her side and rearview mirrors, could see Tess picking at her fingers with a bored look on her face and instantly regretted bringing her along. She reacquainted herself with the clutch and the break and then started the car. Jeffrey was going over where the lights and windshield wipers and blinkers were as Marissa pulled out of the lot, smoothly, without stalling.

"Whoa, just like a pro." Jeffrey said.

Marissa focused on the road. She could feel him staring at her as he talked more about the car's warranty and standard options, then he said, "So, now that you know so much about me. Can I ask *you* a question?"

“Sure,” Marissa said, keeping her hands at ten and two.

“Why do you seem so sad?”

Marissa jerked her head in his direction. “Excuse me?”

“I mean, I’m sure you’re a really cool chick. It’s just that, you seem so sad.”

Marissa stared hard at the road. She wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Just tell him,” Tess said. “It’s not like you’ll ever see him again.”

“Yeah. I mean, I’m your *car salesman*. Who the fuck am I going to tell?”

“He has a point,” Tess said.

Marissa merged onto the highway and shifted into fifth gear. “I got dumped this morning,” she said.

“Seriously? Who in their right mind would dump you?”

“Oh, it gets better.” Marissa sped up, changing lanes as she did. “Today is the anniversary of my mother’s death.”

“Wait? What?”

Tess leaned forward from the back middle seat, her head protruding between the two of them. “Her mom died three years ago today. Her stupid fucking boyfriend dumped her this morning. Both things on the same day.”

“Jesus Christ. No wonder you’re sad.”

For the first time that day, Marissa actually smiled. She drove with the flow of traffic a while but was sure to get off at the next available exit, maneuvered through a residential zone, then pulled into a grocery store parking lot.

“I need to smoke a cigarette,” she said.

Jeffrey nodded. “Me too.”

The two of them got out of the car and leaned up against the trunk. Jeffrey handed her a Camel, lit it for her, and they smoked a moment in awkward silence, the sunlight blinding them both.

“Sorry for unloading on you like that.” Marissa said.

“No. Don’t be. I was the one that asked.”

“Is this your typical way of selling cars? Making people feel vulnerable?” She asked, in a joking tone, but most of her was serious. She wasn’t sure why he was working so hard to impress her when he knew that she was already going to buy a car from him.

“Absolutely not. This day has been just as weird for me as it has been for you. I’m sorry if I caused upset. It’s just that, it’s not everyday that I meet someone like you.”

“What do you mean?”

Jeffrey shrugged. “You just seem really cool.”

“You keep saying that. Look at me. I’m a fucking mess.” She puffed on her cigarette. “You don’t even know me.”

“You’re right. I don’t. I can just tell. You’re going through a rough time is all. Everyone has shit in their lives that they have a hard time with. You’re a tough girl. You’ll get through it.”

Marissa tucked her hair behind her ears, the way she did when she got nervous. Then she completely broke down, couldn’t help herself from crying, right there in the

parking lot of Shop N' Save. She looked around the lot to see if anyone was watching, thought of what they would see if they were; a sobbing girl standing outside of a car she was test driving, sweaty and hot, smoking cigarettes with a car salesman. She didn't know how her life had become so pathetic and suddenly she understood that this Jeffrey guy, a complete stranger, had somehow seen her for exactly what she really was: sad.

"Oh no," he said. "I didn't mean to make you cry. Shit. I'm so sorry."

"It's not you."

Tess pulled herself out from the backseat of the car and marched over to where they were standing. "Look," she said, "I kinda have to get back home. I didn't think this was going to take so long. I'm supposed to meet up with Bryan in like half an hour." She tapped her foot against the concrete, waiting for a response. Marissa looked at Jeffrey, hoping he would know how to handle things.

"We can take you home," he said. "Come on, I'll drive."

Marissa hesitated. "Don't you have to get back to the dealership? Won't they wonder where you've been?"

"If I'm not worried about it, then you shouldn't be."

They all loaded back into the car, buckled their safety belts, blasted the A/C. As Jeffrey got back onto the highway, he leaned his body in toward Marissa's. "Your roommate really needs to chill out," he said in a low voice.

"Do not talk about me like I'm not sitting right here," Tess said.

Jeffrey kept looking over at Marissa, "You see what I mean?"

“She’s always like this.”

“Still here,” Tess replied.

“Girl, you need to relax. Smoke a bowl or something, geez.” Jeffrey said, laughing through his words.

Marissa turned up the radio. A country song was playing. “That’s a great idea,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“Well, not for her. She doesn’t smoke, but I could go for that right about now.”

“Yeah? That’s too bad. I’m fresh out.”

“I have some at my house.”

“Nice,” Jeffrey said. “Mind if I join you?”

Jeffrey pulled up in front of the girls’ apartment and followed them inside. Tess disappeared immediately down a long and dark hallway. His mind suddenly went back to Alan and the bet they’d made. He wondered how many cars Alan had sold since he’d been working on this deal with Marissa. The apartment was nicer than he had expected it to be— a well-furnished open floor concept, granite countertops in the kitchen, stainless steel appliances. Marissa went into a back room to get her pipe while he wandered around a little, looking at the artwork on the walls, the set up of the living room, the kid’s playroom where he found himself lingering a while— taking in the wooden train set, the cars and dolls and stacks of books. This was the kind of house he had always wanted. He lived in a

small and empty studio apartment at the age of 36. He'd never married, had no children, and was working as a car salesman for fucks sake. All of his friends and family members were having families of their own, planning dinner parties and play dates, taking vacations. Everyone seemed happier than he was. Everyone except Marissa. He heard her feet approaching as her flip flops scuffed along the hardwood floor.

"Here," she said, passing him a glass pipe. "It's pretty strong stuff so don't hit it too hard if you aren't used to smoking."

He took a big hit and held it in. "Thanks, little girl," he said in a strained voice. "But I think I can handle myself."

She took the pipe from him and took in a big hit as well. "You sure you aren't going to get in trouble for being gone this long?"

"Naw. I'm lead salesman. They fucking love me there."

"What about for going back to work high? They gonna love that?"

"They wont know. Unless you tell them."

"Why would I do that?"

"I don't know. I mean, it's kinda inappropriate, right? Us talking like this, spending time like this. If you wanted to get me fired, you definitely could."

"I have no intention of doing anything like that."

Jeffrey took the pipe again, hit it, and blew out a plume of smoke. He smiled at her with squinty eyes. "And what exactly are your intentions?"

Marissa cleared the bowl and put it away into a velvety pouch. She looked confused, put up her hands like it was obvious. "To buy a car," she said. "In fact, we should get going. I'd like to get this whole thing over with."

They drove back to the dealership in a high and uncomfortable state of silent avoidance. Marissa stared out the window as to not make eye contact with Jeffrey, or to initiate any further conversation. She thought of her kids who were out of town for the spring break holiday with their father. She wondered what they were doing at that very moment. She watched as the rows of trees that lined the streets passed by in quick uniformed flashes of greens and yellows. She thought of her mother who loved this time of year. It reminded her of a particular Sunday afternoon when she was seven and her mother had brought home a small plastic wading pool; the way she had sat perched on the edge of a cloth folding chair with a cigarette in her lips and the hose in her hand, pressing her thumb over the spout, shooting umbrellas of water into the air.

Jeffrey stopped at an intersection. She could feel him looking at her. When she turned to face him, she was nearly smiling.

"What is it?" he asked. "You look like you want to say something?"

Marissa looked forward. The moment had passed.

"The light's green," she said.

Marissa had once been told that a body could become contaminated by the ugliness inside of it, by grief and loss and loneliness. It had felt that way for her for months, like whatever it was that was moving inside of her had gone septic. But it wasn't just that her kids were gone. It didn't even have to do with her mother or her boyfriend leaving her, it

was more than that, ran deeper and harsher than that. She couldn't figure out exactly what it was or why it was happening, but at this point in her life Marissa wasn't afraid of losing other people. She was afraid of losing herself.

"So, what's up with your boyfriend?" Jeffrey asked, breaking through her thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "Just making conversation."

"I told you, we broke up."

"You think it's for good? I mean, I don't know how he could let a girl like you go."

"Please stop acting like you know me."

"I spent the whole day getting to know you."

"You spent the whole day listening to me cry about how shitty my life is."

"It's only shitty right now. Things will get better soon. You'll see. And fuck that guy that dumped you. He doesn't deserve you."

"That's what people always say. That you're better off, that everything happens for a reason, that you'll find someone that treats you like you should be treated. That's a bunch of bullshit. How do you know that things will get better? How do *you* know what he deserves? Maybe he's the one that's better off."

"Jesus. Listen to you. Where the fuck is your confidence? You're this incredibly beautiful girl, you're smart, you're funny. You don't seem like the type that takes any shit from anyone. Why you taking shit from this guy?"

“Because I put him through a lot.”

“That’s not a good enough reason.”

Marissa stared hard out the window again and hoped more than anything for Jeffrey to stop asking questions. She wanted away from him, had an urge to get out of the car and run down the street in the opposite direction. She just wanted quiet. It was strange to Marissa how she could be constantly surrounded by people, yet still feel so very alone. People were exhausting and utterly disappointing.

When they finally got back to the dealership, Jeffrey parked in the visitor’s lot. Marissa got out of the car as fast as she could, waited on Jeffrey, and then told him, “I’ll buy the car.”

“Yeah? It’s a nice ride. You like it?”

“It’s a sedan. I didn’t want a sedan.”

“I can show you a few more if you’d like.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“It’s fine? You’re buying a car. You should be excited. Aren’t you even a little excited?”

“I said it’s fine.”

“You’re literally the saddest person to ever buy a brand new car.”

“What difference does it make? I need car.”

“Well, you don’t have to compromise for something that you don’t really want.”

“Sometimes you do. Give me a good deal, and I’ll take it.”

Jeffrey somehow ended up getting \$6,500 for Marissa’s trade in and sold her the brand new sedan at cost, the same deal that employees would get using their discount, which of course meant that he waived all his commission. Back in the sales office, Jeffrey was having the paperwork printed out for her to sign when Alan stuck his head inside the doorway, a shit eating grin on his face.

“I’m up to \$9,300 for the day,” Alan said. “Where you at bro? You spent a fuck ton of time with that hot little number at your desk right now. How much you make on *that* deal?”

“Man, fuck off.”

Alan made an expression like he just smelled something foul. “Ooohh, that bad huh? Well, hopefully you’ll get something worth while out of it.”

“Seriously, it’s not like that. Marissa’s a really nice girl.”

“Yeah. They all are,” Alan winked at Jeffrey. “Until they drive off the lot.”

Jeffrey went back to his desk and set the paperwork in front of Marissa, pointing out all the places that she needed to sign. He watched as she worked through the signatures as swiftly as she could, set the pen down gently and asked, “Is my car ready?”

“I’m having it detailed for you right now.”

“How long is that going to take?”

“Thirty more minutes?”

Marissa frowned.

“No longer than thirty minutes. But hey, at least we get to hang out a little more.”

“It doesn’t need a detail. I really just want to go now.”

“Ok,” Jeffrey said. “I’ll go check on it. Why don’t you head on over to finance.”

Marissa stepped into the office as instructed and took a seat in front of a plump bald man who was printing out more paperwork. She completed the required signing of documents, paid the man by writing a check for her down payment, zoned out entirely while she was supposed to be listening to his spiel on extended warranties and roadside assistance, gripping the edge of the plastic chair that she was sitting in with all of her strength, praying for it to be over. Her skin was crawling. She focused on her breathing. Never in her life had she wanted to leave a place so badly and not been able to.

When that part of it was all over, Marissa stood outside the showroom, leaned up against the wall and smoked a cigarette while she waited for Jeffrey to bring over her new car. When he finally pulled up and hopped out of the driver’s seat, it was all she could do to walk over to it at a slow and steady pace. Jeffrey rounded the car and got into the passenger seat. Marissa slid inside and shut the door. With both hands on the wheel she asked Jeffrey if everything was settled.

“Technically,” he said, drawing out the word. “I’m supposed to go over all the car’s features with you.” He leaned over across her lap, gently grazing her thigh as he reached for the buttons on her driver door. “These are your power windows,” he said, moving them up and down. “Your blinker and wipers are here. This is—“

“Yeah. Thanks. I think I got it.”

“Yeah? Ok. Just make sure when you receive the online survey for customer service that you mark that I showed you everything. I don’t want to get penalized.”

“Will do. Thanks for everything.”

“No problem at all.” Jeffrey said, not moving from the seat. She could see him in her peripheral vision, staring at her as she looked straight ahead, hoping he would get the hint and get out of her fucking car.

“So, yeah,” she said, her eyes still focused ahead. “Thanks again.”

He opened the door but still stayed in the seat. “Sure thing,” he said. There were a few more minutes of silence before he pulled his body out of the car. Then he leaned his arm along the top of the opened door, poked his head back inside.

“I was thinking. You’re phone number is on all your paperwork. Would it be okay if I sent you a text sometime? You know, to like, hang out or something?”

Marissa looked over at him. “I don’t think so.”

“Yeah. That’s ok. I just thought. Well, never mind.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just am not in a place to be starting anything new.”

He didn’t say anything after that. She looked at him a long time as he stood there, hanging on the opened door, like he was waiting for her to change her mind. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he gave her a forced smile, shut the car door softly and tapped on the roof of the car a few times. She ducked her head down to look at him once more through the passenger window. She gave a small wave, and then, she drove away.