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Where You Know Gerry the Most

Matthew Jacobs Bell
University of Missouri-St. Louis, mjbrg4@mail.umsl.edu

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Matthew J. Bell
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Advisory Committee

Mary Troy
Chairperson

John Dalton

Steven Schreiner

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Gerry likes Janie. He keeps telling you this. She's your waitress: perky blond ponytail, glittery pink lips, her petite eighteen or nineteen year-old frame outfitted in a stonewashed denim skirt and a standard wife-beater that has "Wendell's" arched across the chest in red. Gerry has these alert eyes, and the most honest, most threatening smile you think you've ever seen.

There's an orange neon light shimmering in the front window of Wendell's. It's a small bar. Gerry and you are sitting in the back by the pool tables. Some regulars are at the bar, rough, impulsive-looking guys. A few heavyset women and a few super-skinny women are sitting and standing with them. Everyone's wearing jeans. On the jukebox next to the small dance floor in the corner, a man's low voice is singing this unhurried, clear-cut country song. A couple of guys are playing pool, and both of you are watching them, listening to the solid pops of billiard balls hitting into each other. You've been sitting with Gerry for over three hours now. The worn, crisp scent of cigarette smoke and sawdust lingers everywhere.

You see Janie talking to the busboy. This punk kid, this hillbilly kid, has his dirty green trucker hat tilted to one side. You see the kid grab Janie's ass. Janie turns and

slaps him, and the smack of her palm against his cheek leaves everyone silent. For a moment, the whole place is still. Then she takes the full pitcher of beer she's holding and pours it on his head. This gets the bartender and the guys at the bar going, hooting and hollering, and Gerry gets into it, too. "You see that, Grimes?" he asks, jabbing your arm, pointing at the gangly busboy drenched in draft beer. He knows your first name is Henry, but he keeps calling you by your last name. "Smooth one kid!" Gerry shouts. "Way to charm her!" Laughter bursts out of Gerry, and you can't help but be infected by it. Real hard laughs overtake the both of you. When Gerry laughs he blinks a lot. The kid looks a little sorry now and a little humiliated, and then he looks at you laughing at him. He's from around here, you can tell, and you can tell that he can tell that you're not. You look away.

Near the bar, the man with the handlebar mustache and one of the smaller women, the one whose mouth is turned down at the corners, begin to sway against each other with the music, her back leaning into his chest. Years ago, back when you and Carol just had the apartment, she would rock with you like that in your tiny living room after work was over. She would put on the cassette of that saxophone player she always used to listen to, grab a couple of beers from the fridge, and just start pressing herself into you, moving her hips real slow. That doesn't ever happen anymore. Carol never drinks anymore. Back when you lived on Lucas Street, way before her decorating thing started to take off, she used to be wild. Those days were the best. Some nights, at least a handful of times, you were able to score some coke off of the college kid who lived downstairs and get Carol to do some bumps with you on the coffee table, and that stuff always got her going, got the two of you talking your eyeballs out about your future together, about your shared dream

of living in a loft downtown and ordering-in Chinese every night, and you like thinking about those late nights on Lucas Street now, how she would always get frisky after a while, kitchen-table frisky or over-the-patio-railing frisky. You like thinking about how afterwards, while both of you were panting and sweating and catching your breath, she would look at you fierce, hook her hand around the back of your head and yank you against her hard like she wouldn't ever dare to let you go.

That was in the beginning, almost ten years ago. A few days ago, Carol said she wanted some time apart. Not a divorce, but a separation. She explained the difference to you, like you didn't know the difference. A divorce is permanent, she said. A separation is just space.

In the window across from you, you see your reflection. Your eyes are swollen from an inescapable fatigue. Getting a decent night's sleep has become a ridiculous ambition you no longer strive for. You loosen your tie some more, run a hand through your short black hair. You need a shave, but you're by far the most primped man in here.

Wendell's isn't a bar you frequent on a regular basis. In fact, you wouldn't have ever known about this bar if it weren't for that crazy rich woman, Brenda, who decided she wanted to look at this property way out here on the goddamn forgotten frontier. She'd seen a misleading picture in the paper of this big-time fixer-upper with a gazebo in the back on maybe five or six acres and got it in her head that she could patch up the place and flip it for profit. She told you she had a vision. You told her it wasn't a good idea. You told her one of the partners in your office had looked at the same property a few months ago and had advised you to not waste her time bringing her out there. That the house was sitting on what was called "soft ground" and the foundation was sinking.

That it was in desperate need of a new furnace, and the roof over the kitchen didn't have much longer before it completely collapsed onto uneven hardwood floor. She seemed to listen carefully to all of this and then told you how in college one of her art professors had said she was an "instinctive person." You explained how you've been in real estate for over seven years, how you've seen next to everything, and you were certain that putting money into anything that far south was like throwing it away. She didn't want your advice. She set up a time and wanted to meet you at the property this evening, way out off Route EE—a goddamn gravel road—and she never showed up. Tomorrow, she'll probably say she forgot to call. That she thought about it and you were probably right. She's done it before. Fucking rich women. You showed up and after a while figured out she wasn't coming, and so you drove up the road a little bit and saw, in front of a thin aisle of evergreen trees, the tall sign of this dive flashing red: Wendell's. A beer sounded refreshing. That you've never met Gerry before tonight seems hard to believe now. Not too long after you walked in, he just came up and sat down next to you, jumped into a few of his stories. Like you and him were old pals.

"Hey boys—need another?" Janie's twang is real thick.

"You're not gonna pour it on us are ya?" Gerry asks, showing a few of his gray teeth, sort of nodding his head toward the scene of the spill.

"Oh, did you see that?" Janie smiles. "Mess with me, and you'd better be ready to take it," Janie says, animated as hell.

"If you want me to take care of that little punk, I will," Gerry tells her, no blinking whatsoever.

She starts to fidget with the corner of her apron. "That's all right, sweetie. I can take care of myself." She grins big and begins to retreat back toward the bar, but before she can get away Gerry opens his mouth again.

"How much you tip him out every night?" Gerry asks, in the confident way he talks. He's been doing this all night, using restaurant lingo around her. He used to work in a diner, he's told you.

"Too much," she says, looking back at the kid resting an arm on top of the cigarette machine, a toothpick bobbing in his mouth. "But I oughta chop his hand off for as many times as he's done that." She turns back around and then gasps at Gerry. "Oh, no—God, Gerry, I was just saying."

You see Gerry's face kind of crumbling at that, and his eyes look away. She's noticing his prostheses, his fake hand, and her face is kind of crumbling, too. You know she just wasn't thinking; it was just one of those things that someone says without thinking, and for that matter it looks pretty real, the hand. Gerry is the toughest guy in the bar, he has the biggest forearms you've ever seen and (you can see most of it because he's just wearing that plain black t-shirt) a barbed-wire tattoo that extends from his left wrist and wraps around his entire left arm, but maybe it's because of all the beer he's drunk and how she reacted like he would be offended, like something like that would offend him, but you feel like you know him well enough to know that he's upset. Still, he plays it off. Tells her some made-up story that you catch big chunks of: a boat, a lack of gas, a swamp, a crocodile.

"I've heard that one, Gerry," she says, real playfully.

Finally, you say, "We'll take another, sweetheart."

In one slow, emphatic motion she plants her hand firmly on her hip, juts her elbow out, and turns to Gerry.

"We'll take another, sweetheart," Gerry says.

"Okay, baby. I'll be back." Her eyes stay on Gerry the whole time.

When she leaves, you and Gerry watch her ass shift from side to side as she makes her way back to the bar. Gerry lights up a cigarette. "She's my favorite part of coming in here. You know? Shit, I don't what it is, man, but she's got it." Smoke spills out of his nostrils while he stares at the backs of her legs.

"You should try flowers," you tell him. "Something she wouldn't expect, like some orchids," you say, lighting up a cigarette too. Carol likes orchids. Carol doesn't know you smoke.

Gerry has killed a man before. He told you the story. It was one of the first stories he told you. This was back when he used to cook at that diner. He was walking back to his car and some drunk was having trouble opening his door, kept jabbing his keys at the door and missing the keyhole. Gerry tried to help him. He went over to the guy—it was barely raining—and put his hand on the guy's shoulder, just trying to be friendly. The guy didn't like that. The hand on the shoulder. Next thing, the guy turned and swung on Gerry and was waving a knife around. Got Gerry in the hand. Gerry grabbed the knife from him and held it out just to let him know he better leave. The guy started turning away, slow and drunk, and it was muddy. The guy slipped in the mud and fell backwards right on the knife in Gerry's hand and the blade went straight through the back of his throat all the way to the other side. It was a real sharp knife, Gerry told you. Anyway, a couple of people saw it happen. He got manslaughter. Two years. When he

told you, he added at the end, in this casual, uncomplicated voice, “I had time to move the knife.”

“Yeah, maybe I’ll get her some orchids, Grimes.” He looks at you kind of sinisterly. “Or you know what? That’s a nice suit, Grimes,” Gerry tells you. “Maybe she’d like me better if I had your suit.”

“Maybe,” you say. “Maybe you’ll give your life to her and she’ll ask you for a separation!” You say this kind of loud. A few of the bigger guys turn your way. You feel like you’re pretty tanked.

“Calm down, Grimes,” Gerry says. “Pretend we’re back at your office, and calm down.” He thinks it’s funny that you have a regular job in an office. “I swear man, you kill me. You’re a fucking nut. I like you Grimes. Let’s take a shot.”

“Tequila,” you say.

Gerry nods, shouts out the order to Janie. After she comes back with the drinks, Janie stands there as you both pound them down, hands on her hips.

“You’re the only thing that makes me happy,” Gerry says to Janie, no playfulness at all. His eyes stay on her eyes. She looks at the floor. You imagine Gerry sitting in his apartment at night, thinking of Janie. You know he has an apartment, or at least he told you he does. He’s sitting on his mattress, smoking, giving the wall these shy intense glances, responding out loud in his most delicate voice to this fantasy: *I like you too, Janie.* You imagine Gerry imagining what it would be like to be with someone like that, a girl like that, someone so uncorrupted—he’s told you he’s imagined this before. *Will you stay, Janie, just for a little while longer?*

“You’re old enough to be my father,” Janie says and winks at him as she walks away.

"We can live on the moon," Gerry shouts out. You know this isn't the first time Janie and Gerry have gone through this. Gerry's obsessed with the moon. He keeps telling you specific and unspecific facts about the moon. "Moon's a quarter of a million miles away, Grimes," he tells you. "It's huge, man," he says. "Do you think we could see it if it wasn't so huge?" He tells you how he used to chase the moon when he was a kid.

"I have to piss," you say.

You walk past the cigarette machine down the narrow hallway, past the men's room and out the back door. It's October in Missouri. A thin sheet of yellow light escapes from the crack in the door, and you can see well enough. You pee next to the grease pit. You finish, and for what seems like a long time you take-in the tall shapes in the woods behind Wendell's. As far as you can see there's nothing but trees, and in the dark, they look like the silhouettes of giant men. You imagine this dense army of crude goliath soldiers looming just past the curb. The door screeches open, and you turn around to see Janie. She's fiddling with her ponytail. She's twirling her hair and flirting with you, and you can tell this isn't the first time she's done this with a man, telling you she has never seen you around here before, asking you what you're doing at Wendell's. As she jabs a boot at the ground, you notice her face seems more complicated now, distressed.

"I hardly make nothing working here," she says, sliding her foot back and forth over the dusty white rocks. "I'm not living with my folks forever, though." Janie is close to you. Her hair smells nice, like strawberries, or cherries maybe, some kind of sweet shampoo.

"You're young," you say with an assuring tone. "And you're lucky you're not in real estate, believe me." You tell her about the rich woman. About the rich woman's vision, about what the rich woman's professor said, and the whole time you're thinking about Carol—while you're standing in the cold with this young girl, who's probably fifteen years younger than you—about all the clutter of making dinner with each other and planning for your next meal with each other, picking out furniture with each other and making more time for each other; there's this vague memory you have, like the memory you have of the excitement when you first started driving and that feeling of always wanting to drive, of the delight of Carol's company when she was with you. Janie likes your tie, she says. She rubs your tie between her fingers, tells you how turquoise is her favorite. Clothes, she says, are what she's interested in. You start kissing Janie. First, just soft kisses, both of you kind of laughing, like it's a game. Janie pushes the tips of her fingers through your hair; you feel the edges of her eyelashes brush across your cheek. The sharp October wind stings against your face, and she's going down on you. Closing your eyes, you try to picture Carol's face—the way it was in those younger years, those apartment-on-Lucas Street years—but you can't. Instead, you think of the rows and endless rows of beastly, long-haired giants holding fat wooden clubs, and axes and dull blades. Just past where the gravel lot ends. You wonder what they're waiting for.

Pretty soon, Janie is fixing her shirt and her apron, giving you a guilty smile and going back inside. Then you go back inside. Gerry is eyeing you all the way back to the table.

"Feel better?" Gerry asks with a real smart tone. "Long pee," he tells you. He looks concerned, like he's considering something. "I'll tell you what Grimes, you should start coming up here more often, man—I really like you. I really like you a lot." Gerry hits your shoulder, gives you a nod. He turns back toward the pool tables and after a moment looks down at his fake hand, starts fiddling with his fake fingers.

You think about this, about coming out here all the time. And there's this real sentiment you sense in his words that pulls at you. You will come back up here, you think. And you tell him you will. You'll be best buddies. You pour him a glass from the pitcher. For the first time in a long time, you feel a spark of relief.

From the side of the bar Janie gives you these obsessive, affected glances. You know Gerry is looking at Janie looking at you.

"You know what, Gerry?"

"What, Grimes?"

"I just hooked-up with Janie outside," you say, real serious. "After my piss."

He's silent at first. Then he says, "I just got her under the table before you, Grimes, didn't you see?" He's laughing hard, hitting your arm hard and getting a real kick out of it. He doesn't get it. This sober look comes over his face. "What time you going home tonight, Grimes? 'Cause I got somewhere I want to show you."

You remember last night at home. How you came home and walked in and she was standing behind the island where the stove is making some kind of list like she's always doing. How she looked at you, how her hair seemed so short. Her dangly earrings unmoving as she stared at you with that familiar look, her face gripped with that patronizing sadness. It was late. "Have you found an apartment?" she asked while you

stood in the doorway. "I haven't really even looked," you admitted, as cavalierly as you could, so aggravated that you had to even entertain the notion. Seriousness invaded her face. "We're not making sense right now," she said, calmly, after a minute or two, the pen still in her hand. You said nothing. You stayed silently furious. She told you that she had found one for you, a nice place close to your office. You told her to lighten up. Then she told you how this whole thing, no matter which way you spun it, this whole thing was about trust. She said you were a rotten, rotten person. You walked to the table and picked up the empty glass and threw the glass at her. She ducked, and the glass shattered against the cabinet like ice. The memory of that phantom feeling came back to you then, the same memory you had outside with Janie, and you wanted to touch Carol's face again. You tried to, lifted your hand toward her when she stood back up, but she backed away. She screamed like you were trying to attack her. "I just want to touch your fucking face!" you said, with so much energy you felt exhausted after you said it. She gave you that look again, like she could understand things that you couldn't.

"Why? Where are we going?" you ask Gerry.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you, Grimes." He flashes a thin smile from the side of his mouth. You don't know if this is a threat or just Gerry's raw conceit.

You're in the gravel parking lot of Wendell's underneath the red sign that lights the whole parking lot bright. You're standing next to Gerry's truck. "You're a fucking nut, Gerry," you say, swaying on your feet.

From behind you, you hear Gerry's piss sizzling on the gravel-covered ground. "There it is, man," he says.

It's a full moon. It's huge against the black sky, and there's something about the size of it—you get this real good sense of how big it is for the first time in your life—and there's something about a moon that big that really gets you deep in your gut: it's this horrible feeling of how something can be that big and it's this horrible feeling of distance. "Where in the fuck are we going?" you ask.

Gerry walks toward his red pick-up truck, his shirt is pressing against his muscles in the wind. His square head is chiseled so that you can see his cheek bones under the red light. "We're fine, Grimes," he says, opening the truck door. "You'll see."

Gerry's driving on the train tracks, the truck's bumping up and down as it rides over the rails. "This is it, Grimes! This is where we're going!" he says, real excited, bouncing on his seat. "You're a fucking nut, Grimes!" he says. Rattling against the stiff padding of his truck, you decide you're beginning to love Gerry. And you can't help but wonder if Gerry is it, your soul mate, who you've been searching to find for so long. Because there's something ruined in Gerry and crooked in Gerry that really matters to you. You can make out the front car of the train now, and you tell this to Gerry, this dark machine a few miles up ahead where the track begins to curve straight in the tunnel of trees, right at you. It's heading towards the both of you. You can hear it, too, its gears chomping. It's the firmest, most exhilarating sound in the world. Your window is open, just cracked a little, but as the truck rises off the rails, bundles of air are stuffed through the open space and shot at you, and the air smells like cold rocks. You feel it burning on the skin of your face. "Maybe I'll do it this time, Grimes," Gerry says, gripping the steering wheel as hard as he can. You don't care. This is where you know Gerry the most. Gerry asks you to hold his free hand. You reach out for it and grab it, and he jerks

his arm back and it snaps off—you juggle it a few times trying to get a grip on it, but you can't. The hand falls to the bottom of the truck cab. "HA!" he laughs. The train whistle begins to blow loud. "Fuck you, Grimes!" Gerry shouts, looking at his hand. "HA!" It's so loud. The train is close enough so that you can see the grates in the panels of the front car; you know if he doesn't swerve in about five seconds, that you and Gerry and the old red pick-up both of you are barreling down the track in will be completely demolished by the train's weight and velocity. You're breathing as hard as you can, heart pounding. You feel like you fit here. You think of Gerry putting a knife through another man's throat. He swerves.

You're still alive. The truck is stopped on another road just off the tracks. The wind is getting stronger, shrieking past the hood. Gerry looks ahead, takes these quiet, deliberate breaths. And peering out the windshield with him, out at the dull, gaping landscape in front of you, you feel two or three unremarkable tears slide down your chapped face. You hear the click of Gerry's lighter, the spark of a flame, and you feel a wave of warm smoke slide across your skin.

"Did you see it, Grimes?" Gerry whispers. "Did you see how close we came?"

First Date

"It's not that hard to find," Sonny said in a quiet voice.

Diane watched him as he looked past her and then down at the coaster he was slowly spinning on the bar.

"I have some, actually." His voice sounded apologetic, like before he'd said it he'd sensed she'd be disappointed but felt he had to be honest anyway.

Peppers was crowded tonight. All around them people were talking. She sat next to Sonny at one end of the long bar that took up almost the whole left wall of the restaurant. A thin cloud of steam rose off the sizzling fajita meat on a nearby bar table, and down at the other end of the bar, she watched a bearded man in a red hat steal a nacho off an abandoned plate. As she slowly sipped her straw, she soaked-in the cluttered mess of everyone's conversations, the way the threads of everyone's voices were tangled up together into one huge ball.

What Diane had asked Sonny about was heroin, how you find it, but she'd meant for the question to be rhetorical. They'd come to the topic by accident. Just for chitchat, she'd asked him what he thought about the unusually warm weather this time of year

because she'd noticed they were both wearing short sleeves when it was the middle of October, and he'd said, "I know. I love it though." Then, while a news promotion was playing on the television in the bar he asked her if she'd heard about that math teacher in Nixa who had come home from work and shot his wife in the head while she was sitting on the couch watching television, and then had gone out on the deck and shot himself in the head. "It's just horrible when you hear something like that," she said. And then she mentioned that other horrible local news story about that sixteen year-old kid who had been killed by his classmate over a few pounds of heroin. Sonny said he'd read about it. That's when she said, "I mean, how do you even find something like that in Missouri? Heroin?"

She wasn't disappointed. For one thing, she didn't even know this man, Sonny. "Well, I've never seen heroin. Marijuana, sure. Just not heroin."

Sonny gave her a polite half-smile, ran a hand through what remained of his thin, silver hair. He had long eyelashes. He was too tan for October. He smoked Parliaments. Bleach speckled his jeans, but his brown polo looked cleaner, though faded. McPherson Pools was the name of the company written underneath the surfboard decal on the right breast of his shirt. It was his company, he'd told her when she'd asked. Looking at his glass of gin, he said, "I get it from one of the Mexicans who work for me. I don't buy it a lot. A few times a year. And I only smoke it. No needles, nothing like that." He looked like the kind of man who had been in a war, but she was afraid to ask. "You want another?" he said, glancing at the second margarita she'd finished.

Her date, Richard, should've been here forty-five minutes ago. He'd said he might be late, but this was ridiculous. The cell phone number he'd given her last night

over the phone was in her purse, but she refused to call him. Surely he would show up. Wouldn't he show up? How humiliating it would be to be stood up by someone she'd met on the internet. Didn't Richard know the kind of courage it took to meet someone for a first date? Sitting there on the hard barstool with her short curly hair clipped back in barrettes (a risk she rarely took), her new blue halter top showing what was probably way too much cleavage, Diane started to feel silly. Getting ready earlier this evening, she'd been starving and, just to be safe, she'd planned out her meal before she left her apartment from the online menu: the Santa Fe salad, and if he asked her to choose an appetizer—and only if he asked—then the vegetarian quesadilla. But now she didn't even want food. "Why not just one more drink," she said to Sonny, managing a goofy, closed-mouth grin. Sonny was the kind of guy, she thought, who could talk to anyone about anything, and did.

He raised two fingers at the tall bartender, like he was giving him the peace sign. He lit up another cigarette, turned his attention back to the game on the T.V. inside the bar.

She didn't date a lot, but the dates she'd recently gone on had been with guys she'd met online. Months ago a movie theater owner had taken her to a sushi bistro. She'd liked how muscular the movie theater owner had been, but didn't care for his breath. For the most part, it didn't bother her that the movie theater owner never called again. Weeks after that Carl, a computer programmer, had taken her to a bowling alley that served pizza. None of the dates had been particularly tragic just bland. Sometimes she wondered if her dates were suspect of her age; under "age," on the website, she'd written she was twenty-seven. But that was a lie. In the Spring, she'd be thirty-two.

Richard was the first man she'd agreed to go out with since Carl. For a while nobody appealing had requested a chat from her. For a while, she'd thought she'd never find anyone right. Her whole life people had always described her as a guarded person, a private person, inward. Some nights she would have this nightmare where she would be stuck at the bottom of a swimming pool, and no matter how hard she yelled up to the blurred faces above her nobody would hear. No matter how hard she swam she couldn't make it to the surface of the pool. One morning a few weeks ago, after jerking awake from this dream, she called Carl, asked him if he wanted to go for coffee.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Carl had said when she called. "I met someone, a girl, Paulina, on the website," he'd said. "We're kind of dating now." "Oh that's great for you, Carl," she blurted, too enthusiastically. "I'm not surprised you found someone." Carl told her she was sure to meet someone soon. "You're a really good bowler, Diane," he assured her before she said goodbye. Ever since then, whenever she drove by the bowling alley, she felt sick to her stomach.

About a week ago, she'd started chatting with Richard, a divorced contractor with no kids. In his picture he looked like an ex-football player, an ex-football player with glasses. Last night was the first time they'd talked on the phone. Hadn't they hit it off? Talking last night, right away they'd gotten onto the subject of vacations, and right away they seemed to be in sync. They both liked beach vacations the best, but also, they both liked the serenity and fresh atmosphere of the mountains. "You probably get a lot of time off," he said, "as a teacher." That was what she'd written under "occupation" on the website, *teacher*, though she'd only substituted a few times and hadn't particularly cared for how unfriendly the students had been. She almost said to Richard, "I'm really just a

waitress right now," but she didn't. And as the conversation went on, more details starting matching up. About movies he said he was into science fiction, but he couldn't do fantasy. "Oh no," she said. "Me neither." Also, wine—they both liked dry red wine, and margaritas too. Then she brought up Mexican food and Peppers, how a friend at work had mentioned the margaritas were good, and he said he'd like to try it. Was it her braces? She remembered him saying, before she hung up the phone last night, "You have braces?" like it turned him off. She wasn't wearing braces in the picture she'd posted on the website.

"You ever been to Phoenix?" Sonny asked as the bartender put a new drink in front of both of them.

Diane looked up at the football game on the television, sipped her drink. "I've never been there, but my brother lives out there, in Tucson. He seems to like it, doesn't come back much anyway."

"Phoenix is a pretty cool town," Sonny said. "We used to live there. We used to move around a lot when I worked for this one construction company. I used to a work with a guy in Phoenix, a real tank of a guy, and his wife's name was Margarita," Sonny continued, nodding toward her margarita on the bar. "She was a Mexican lady, with these really big lips. You know the kind, right?" Sonny said, laughing and pursing his lips in a funny way.

Diane nodded, laughing a little at his face, and took a bigger sip of her drink. "I haven't been out there. We're just not very close, my brother and I. He's so much older."

"Yeah, people are afraid of the heat, but I hate winter, you know?" Sonny took a drink of gin, a drag of his cigarette. "Man, that guy, Joe, Margarita's husband—we

called him Joe the Indian just because he kind of looked like an Indian—he was crazy. I mean, I like to get a buzz every now and then, but Joe the Indian, man, he was full-blown. And a mean drunk, too."

"Like how?"

"Shit. He drank too much, you know, and then he came home to his wife--and I'm not one to get into other people's business--but Claire being friends with Margarita and all. It was sticky. He would hit her. Or sometimes he would just make her do crazy shit. Like this one time, OK," Sonny said, turning toward Diane and putting his hands out in front him like he was showing her the size of a big fish. "Claire told me about this one time when Joe came home to Margarita after a night of drinking, after he'd really gotten good and whiskeyed up, and he found a few dirty dishes from the night before in the sink. And so what he did was he went into the bedroom and woke up Margarita and brought her into the kitchen, and told her to take the dishes out into the yard and wash them with the hose. Because, he said, he wanted the neighbors to see that his wife could actually wash a fucking dish."

"I wouldn't have done it."

"Oh, but Joe the Indian was a big dude, and not someone you challenged, you know? So she did it. Fucking right. And afterward, while she was standing right there, after she had washed the dishes with the hose," Sonny said, laughing a little, "he stepped on the dishes. Or kicked 'em or whatever, and broke 'em."

"Why would someone stay with a man like that?"

Exhaling, Sonny said, "Exactly. But they had a daughter together, and he paid the bills and whatever. She loved him, I think, I don't know. I mean he was good guy when

he was sober. I tried to talk to him about it a few times, about treating her better, and he would get real apologetic. Real sad. But."

She nodded, took another drink and eyed, not for the first time, the gold wedding ring on his left hand. Seeing it, she suddenly thought of her late mother; she thought of a particular evening when she was a girl and had walked in from the yard to find her mother sitting at the kitchen table. On the stove the potatoes had been boiling over. Chicken was burning in the oven. "Mom?" she said. Then again. Her mother looked at her, her face hard, unapologetic. "Leave me alone," her mother said. "Please."

She had a handful of childhood memories like that one, of coming into a room and finding her mother sitting in a chair, or standing by a window, lost to some memory, unraveled. Diane's father had died a few years after she was born. A truck driver for most of his life, her father had been hauling a load of sheet metal up to Kansas City and had hit some black ice and lost control. The truck had overturned. There had been a woman in the truck with him who had died too, a waitress from Joplin.

Sonny took a hard drag. "You know what I think?"

"About what?"

"I think whoever he is, he's not worth it."

She looked down into her margarita, then back at Sonny, realizing what he meant. "Oh, yeah?"

"I'm just saying he's got no class keeping you waiting for so long."

She smiled, a full smile. "I think he's just late. He said he'd be late."

"Well, I would never do that. That's not how you treat a woman."

"How do you treat a woman?" she said, playing along.

"Look, I'm not a prince of anything, but you don't keep a woman waiting is all I'm saying."

Then, as Sonny's smoke washed over her, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a gray-haired man with a big build come through the door wearing a sport coat and glasses, and a fluttery sensation that began at the top of her spine shot down the center of her back, down through both her legs and went all the way to her toes. She ran a hand over the back of her neck. Heat flushed into her face, and she again thought of their conversation last night, how Richard had mentioned he'd wanted children someday. She hadn't confessed it to Richard, but never in her life had she had the desire to birth a child, or to raise a child; the whole business of creating another human being seemed absolutely horrifying to her, but now, with the expectation of coming face to face with her Richard, a new spirit erupted inside her and with it the capability of motherhood. In fact, motherhood suddenly felt like an important step, even a necessary one, toward living a rewarding life. An image of her future-self leaning into Richard's chest in the food court of the Springfield Mall, standing there in a long spontaneous embrace with their infant son sleeping inside her big round belly, this image emerged in her mind with such clarity and energy it seemed to her to be prophetic.

But when she turned on her barstool to see him completely, she saw he was not walking toward her. She saw the man greet a younger man in a turtleneck at a booth on the opposite wall. She realized her mistake, and the light nervousness she'd been overcome with just a moment ago quickly grew denser and denser, until finally she was a huge fat thing sitting there on the barstool. She ran her tongue over the metal notches of

her braces, tasted a hint of her strawberry lipstick, and the acceptance that she had in fact been stood up hardened like a small rock in her stomach.

"Hey, you OK?" Sonny said, his eyes tightening.

"Sure. I'm fine," she said, as her lips drifted back to the top of her green-striped straw. This time she didn't stop sucking until the green drink was all but gone, until her suction produced that hollow gurgling at the bottom of the ice. "So what's it like? Heroin?"

Out in the parking lot, she was reminded of the unusual warmth, that the world was melting. A rush of wind struck her cheek. She smelled Peppers on her clothes, the leaves in the grass on the parking median, the faint aroma of gasoline. Sonny stopped and turned around. He said, "I can drive you if you want."

Diane looked down at the traffic on Battlefield, the lights of restaurants and gas stations bleeding together far in the distance. "Carelessness is the worst thing," her mother used to say. A horn honked. It was nice to feel tipsy. At St. Johns, a few years ago, her mother had died in her sleep in a small room on the fifth floor in the middle of the afternoon. She'd had heart problems for years, her mother, and after Diane had gone away to school and her brother had moved out west, her mother's health had declined quickly. In the hospital bed, just days before she passed, her mother admitted to Diane that she hadn't done nearly as many of the things she'd meant to do: she never learned to play the piano, hadn't jumped out of a plane or met Dolly Parton. Diane believed herself to be a good judge of people, and Sonny was harmless. "I'll ride with you," she said.

As he drove, she looked down at the blue polish on her fingernails. Under "favorite color," on the website, Richard had written *sky blue*.

At a stoplight, she heard loud opera music emanating from the car beside them. When she looked over, she saw an older woman with a long, expressionless face looking ahead, motionless. A paper bag blew in front of their car. Gray shadows covered the faces of storefronts where the streetlights didn't reach. “Do you ever have nightmares?” Diane said to Sonny.

He looked at the woman in the car next to them, then straight ahead. “Yeah, I guess. Sometimes.”

“Me too,” she said. “Sometimes.”

Sonny’s neighborhood surprised her. It looked like a nice neighborhood. At the bar, she’d imagined him living in a dingy apartment, even a trailer. But they were in a clean neighborhood parked in front of this quaint ranch-style home. “This is where you live?”

“All my pool crap’s in the garage,” he said, as he turned off the truck in the driveway. His yard was browning but neatly cut. Three evergreen bushes lined his walk. Unlocking the door, he said, “It’s kind of messy.”

His house smelled like smoke and peach air freshener. It wasn’t messy. The beige carpet looked like it had recently been vacuumed. No clothes lay on the floor or on the blue couch or loveseat. He thought this was messy?

Diane sat on the couch as Sonny walked around the corner into the kitchen. The wallpaper was a plain cream with thin beige stripes. A small painting of a girl standing

near a tree hung on the far back wall. The painting seemed out of place in relationship to the plainness of the house. There was something disturbing and dark about the look on the girl's face, the intensity and fear in her eyes in contrast with the peaceful landscape around her. "I like that," Diane said about the painting, still considering it.

"Good, isn't it? My son did that. Yeah. Derek's up in St. Louis at school right now, got a scholarship. Claire's up there now, too, probably buying him all sorts of stuff. Even though we don't have any money to spend." She heard him open the refrigerator while he talked. "Anyway, don't know where Derek gets it. Certainly not from me and not from his mother." She turned back to look at Sonny. In the poor yellow light of his house, he seemed simpler. It hadn't occurred to her in the bar that Sonny was a father. He had two beers in his hands. "Derek just has that kind of mind, I guess."

Sonny sat down on the loveseat next to the couch, put the beers on the coffee table, one in front of him and one in front of her. He reached to the side of the loveseat and pulled up an orange shoebox. With the box on the table he said, "We should hear some music." He picked up the remote and turned on the stereo. "This guy plays a mean clarinet," he said. "You like jazz?"

"Sure," she said, staring at the box. Next to the television in the large brown frame, Sonny was holding his wife in his arms, his hair long and shaggy, hers big and curly, both of them wearing these warm, genuine smiles.

He lit up a cigarette and took a drag and then put the cigarette in the ashtray on the table. Smoke spiraled toward the ceiling. He put a plastic bag filled an eighth of the way to the top with a coarse yellow-brown powder flat on the table. Next, he pulled a clear glass pipe the size of a small carrot out of the shoebox. With the teaspoon in the

bag, he scooped out a small amount of the powder and put what was in the teaspoon into the pipe. He offered her the bag, “Do you want to smell it?”

The bag felt oily. The heroin smelled like vinegar, which surprised her and the stench of it almost caused her to reconsider; she thought that maybe she had made a huge mistake in coming over to his house. But she didn’t say anything about leaving. She said again about the painting, “It's pretty remarkable.”

He looked up from the table. “Thanks.” She watched as he rolled the bag back into a tube. The casualness of his movements, his matter-of-factness, calmed her. He tapped his foot to the smooth digressions of the clarinet. "He paints a lot of animals too."

"What kinds of animals?"

"Oh, I don't know. Birds, like owls and crows. Sometimes fish. When he was younger it was cars. I remember the first time I discovered he really had talent was when our German Shepherd died. Ozzie, we called him. Like the baseball player? Derek was twelve, maybe thirteen then. After Ozzie died--the dog I mean," Sonny said, smiling, drinking his beer, "Derek filled up this whole entire sketchbook with drawings of this one Corvette."

"A Corvette?"

"Yeah," he said, meeting her eyes. "And it wasn't like he ever shared that kind of stuff with me back then, OK, but I remember one day in particular right after Ozzie died when I was in his room. This was back when we were living in Phoenix. Derek was over at his friend's house, and I was in his room. I wasn't snooping in his stuff or anything like that, but I used to do that sometimes when he was young. Just sit on his bed, you know, when he wasn't home. Just to get a sense of his space. And I saw his

new sketchbook on the nightstand, and I started flipping through it. I'd bought the sketchbook for him right after Ozzie died, thinking it might help him get his mind off the dog because I knew he was getting into drawing. That was his first hard experience like that, Ozzie dying."

"How did he die?"

"Our dog? Just old age. He just got too old, went blind, deaf, had trouble walking. We had to put him to sleep. I mean, it's the humane thing to do when they get like that. But they were close, Derek and Ozzie. Ozzie slept in Derek's room at night."

"That's tough for anyone."

"Right, for anyone, especially a boy. So I got him the sketchbook to take his mind off things. And we had this neighbor across the street who owned a baby blue, 1967 Corvette coupe. You know those old corvettes with the vents on the side?"

"I think so."

"Well, that Corvette was always parked out front of our neighbor's house because the owner--this super fat guy with real slick hair--he was a show off, OK. And Derek had a perfect view of that car from his bedroom window. On every page he'd sketched different versions of this car. Different shades, different angles. Sometimes just a rearview mirror, sometimes just a wheel. The thing was, up until that point, I didn't know Derek was capable of anything like that; he'd just seemed like an average kid, kind of lazy. But it'd only been a few days since I'd gotten him the sketchbook, and he'd filled up the whole thing. He'd been spending a lot of time in his room, and I'd thought he'd just been sulking about the dog, but he'd been working like mad, OK. Drawing. The

Corvette from the front, from the side. Like that. The whole sketchbook like that. Real vivid pictures." He shook his head. "And that's when I knew that it wasn't just a phase."

"Kids can surprise you, I guess."

"He just has that kind of mind."

She nodded, put her beer to her lips. Taking another sip, she looked back over at the picture of Sonny and his wife on the entertainment center. She wished it wasn't there.

"That kind of really talented mind," Sonny said.

"Sure." She took the pipe that was offered to her. She was smoking heroin now, lighting the powder and sucking in; she kept her finger over the shotgun hole on the side of the bowl as the powder sizzled. Then she released her finger, and the warm smoke rushed inside of her lungs. As she exhaled, she coughed, and quickly her body went numb in a wave. She could feel the smoke filling her arms. They passed it back and forth: three hits, four hits. Soon Sonny said, "I think the bowl's cashed."

She took a sip of her beer. Minutes went by until she realized the potency of the effect, the calmness, the quiet exhilaration. "I want to lie in the grass," she said.

"Yeah, yeah. OK."

Standing up she felt dizzy. Then she got her bearings. Then they were both outside and the air felt fresh. His yard was big and empty, surrounded by a boundary of evergreen trees. Sonny said, "Let's lay down in the middle." His voice sounded like he was right next to her face, and also like it had been sucked into an invisible tunnel in the air.

They made their way to the middle of his backyard, and she lay down on her back. The grass was wet against her head and bare arms. Sonny knelt down beside her on his lawn and took off his shirt and lay down on his back.

Diane laid her head on his chest, and Sonny began to stroke her hair, working his fingers into her curls, slowly, from the back of her head to just below her neck. Sonny said, "I like the way you feel." Soft spikes of grass squished beneath her. A warm blade of air slid across her bare legs. The moonlight shone bright. She heard his heartbeat completely in her ear, and hearing it, she remembered the train ride to Chicago she and her mother and brother had taken years before. She remembered her mother and brother had left their seats for some before-dinner-drinks, and she, barely in high school then, was left by herself to stare out the window at the endless corn fields and dilapidated barns, fat water towers and empty highways that filled up the pale evening. The train ride was a kind of adventure for the three of them, her mother had said, but sitting there alone she imagined that she had not come with anyone. That she was traveling by herself. She thought of the sleepover she'd gone to just weeks before where a best friend had awoken her up in the middle of the night to ask her--with the kind of dramatic urgency that this particular best friend had mastered--if Diane believed in reincarnation. If she believed that after you died you came back again as someone new. That this life was a journey to the next life. Diane, still half-asleep, had admitted it was something she'd thought about, but wasn't sure. She'd found it hard to fall back asleep after that. And sitting in the otherwise empty row of seats on the train Diane wasn't able to get the idea of that word out of her head—*reincarnation*—and that's what she focused on while she stared out the

window as she listened to strange voices all around her, of being on her way to some incredible reemergence.

Missing

On the corner of Claymont Avenue and Claymont Court Laura stops walking. Her home is just three houses down, right before where the cul-de-sac begins. It is snowing now. The flurries that less than an hour before were almost invisible, have thickened. Fat flakes settle on the rooftops, on the flat neighborhood street, begin to cover the grass. Laura can see Diane's brother's pick-up in her driveway, the gray smoke sputtering out of its muffler, and on her porch in his long green coat and dirty white sneakers Frank is knocking on her door, casually peering into her window. Even though when they spoke on the phone earlier this morning she told Frank she wouldn't mind having lunch, the sight of him upsets her. He is early. Laura did not expect him for another hour. This is why she went on her walk, because she thought she had more time, and her first instinct is to turn and walk around the block once more. She wonders if maybe lunch could be avoided all together. It is a selfish thought, a cowardly one, and she does not want to act on it. Certainly, she is old enough at fifty-two, to be more mature than that. Soon, the decision is made for her. Soon, he turns and sees her and waves. She waves back.

With each step that crunches down into the soft padding of this Saturday's newly fallen snow, Laura finds herself recalling the quirkiness of Diane: the way she would always park in one of the three handicap spaces by the front entrance of the school on days when she was running a little late for work (most of the time), despite Principal

Leland's constant threats to tow her car away; the braces she always complained she felt too old for, and her habit of smiling with her mouth closed around men she was fond of; those corny cowboy boots she bought on a whim after seeing a picture in a magazine and the blisters she suffered because of them; her thirty-third birthday when, just over four months ago, she dragged Laura to that silly country bar with the mechanical bull in the back that neither of them had had the courage to ride. And Laura has always been more private, has always been perfectly comfortable by herself at the day's end, has always found a kind of contentment in the predictability of her routines, but when Diane joined the faculty at Rockville Pines Middle School this year, as Laura spent more and more time with her, it was nice once again to have that camaraderie, that refuge of friendship. How hard it is to find. They were going to go somewhere this summer, the two of them—to Chicago, or New York even—they hadn't worked out the details but had begun to make tentative plans over their morning coffee, or whenever they had some spare time after work or on the weekends. "Just to get out of Springfield," Diane had said. "To get away from these crude Missouri men," she had joked. Allowing herself to be coerced by the charm of it, Laura had agreed, even with all the headaches of travel these days, that getting away might be nice. She told Diane she had never been to New York and wouldn't mind seeing the sights. Of course, no plans were ever made. All of that was before. Diane has been missing for just over nine weeks now, and for just over nine weeks Frank and Laura have been looking for her, together.

From the center of her walkway, he waves again.

It was Laura who called Frank initially. On that Wednesday, the third day Diane didn't show up at school, it was Laura who retrieved Diane's emergency contact card that

listed Frank's number. She had met him once, just in passing after school one afternoon. They had barely exchanged names. When she called, he was on a job painting a new apartment complex on Kimbrough. Laura told him how in her concern she had driven by Diane's house that morning, how there was no answer at the door and Diane's car wasn't in her carport. Frank did think it was strange, but he didn't want to overreact. Still, they both agreed Diane wasn't one to not show up for work, at least not without letting someone know. It was Laura who called the police. From the beginning, it was obvious that Frank and Laura would behave as a team.

When she gets to the front of her driveway, he says from her porch, "Aren't you cold?" He has a quiet voice. Frank is fifteen years older than Diane, a taller, heavier version of his sister. Most of his shaggy hair is gray, but a little blond remains. The glasses he wears have small lenses and look funny in a way, disproportional at least, on his big head. He was at the Lake of the Ozarks for a few days selling his fishing boat to a friend for extra money to help them with the search for his sister. Before he left, he told Laura to call his phone if there was anything to report.

"I don't mind the cold. Besides, it's beautiful out, don't you think?" Laura is not unhappy to see him, but she feels like he's developing feelings she doesn't share. Lately he's been calling more, and at later hours too, telephoning after she's gone to bed, just to ask her how she's doing, to tell her inane details about his day. They went for ribs last week, and he said he wants to get a private investigator, told her he was going to sell his boat. She thought it was a good idea, the investigator. But she's not sure what his intentions are anymore. She isn't interested if that's the case.

"I guess it's pretty," he says about the snow, rubbing his arms.

“How was the lake? You buy any of that good fish you were talking about?” she asks, smiling. She takes off her winter hat, unzips her coat. Her short hair, too, is grayer, but she has aged gracefully. Walking, exercising and eating right has helped her figure remain trim, and she enjoys being active.

Frank almost smiles back. And because of how wooden he usually seems, she finds this glimmer of emotion in his face to be almost moving. “Yeah, got it in my freezer,” Frank says, glancing up at the wall of clouds above.

It took the police two weeks to find Diane’s ’96 Toyota Corolla. Her red sedan was parked in the side parking lot of the Ferris Furniture off Chestnut. The furniture store's surveillance cameras were not setup on the side parking lot so no footage had been obtained. Laura cried for a long time in Detective Landers’ office when she saw the image of Diane's car in the parking lot. Detective Landers handed her a box of tissues, said they were doing all they could. “It’s possible she was put into another car," Detective Lander said. Frank said, "Another car?" Detective Landers frowned. "It's possible she was abducted," the Detective said. Laura sometimes does not care for the Detective’s candidness. Everything Detective Landers says is delivered in the same plain, flat voice. “Some of these guys are really disturbed individuals.”

They couldn’t rule it a kidnapping because no demands had been made, he explained. A warrant was acquired to search her house and her computer; they suspect she met this guy online, on one of the dating websites she visited. There have been no leads since they searched her house, but they have people searching the websites she had been frequenting. Last week, in Detective Lander’s office, Frank punched the desk.

Afterwards, when he took Laura for some ribs, he told her he thought Detective Landers wasn't doing a good job.

Farther up the driveway she asks, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, hope you don't mind I came a little early."

"Let me grab my purse," she says, opening her door.

"So no news, huh?"

Laura has come to the conclusion that the worst is inevitable. In her foyer, she looks back down at the whitening ground and at the dirty slush by his shoes; she finds it hard to look at Frank's eyes because she feels like if she does Frank will see this in her face—*the worst*—Diane's pale, bruised body marooned on the edge of some rocky riverbank or covered in wet leaves at the bottom of an unassuming ravine. "No news," she says.

Once the authorities were called, concern grew. Colleagues at the school, teachers who had been bitter before the police became involved at having to take up her workload and constantly monitor the substitutes, became genuinely alarmed and wanted to know how they could help. Frank's ex-wife, Shirley, called Laura, wanting information, wondering if she could help in any way. "I tried talking to Frank about it, but you know how he gets," Shirley said when she called.

The News-Leader followed the story for weeks, and they continue to post Diane's picture in the Sunday edition. And the local television stations picked up the story too, but lately, the media has lost interest, as other, more enticing news has erupted. A manager of the Pancake House on Campbell called a black woman, a professor from a local college, a "nigger," after she complained about the quality of the food and the

unfriendliness of the service. Those two priests, two prominent, respected members of the community, were arrested for creating and trading pornographic pictures of a number of neighborhood boys.

Of course, the reporters have seemed concerned about the legitimacy of the case as of late, which probably has something to do with this loss of interest. This has everything to do with Detective Landers. From the beginning, Detective Landers (despite the fact that he was the one who initially volunteered the idea), seemed reluctant to commit to an abduction story. "Did you ever consider that she could've just left? Started over? Left no trace of clues as to where she was going on purpose? What did she have to tie her down?"

"What about switching cars at the furniture store?" Frank asked.

"Maybe she met someone, fell head-over-heels for someone and decided to runaway with him."

"Why would she do that without telling me or her brother?" Laura asked. "It doesn't make sense."

But this idea of Diane running away was perpetuated after a few of Diane's old girlfriends had been contacted by police. These were women who Frank knew but Laura had never met (although she had on occasion heard Diane speak of this girlfriend or that one). Diane had known these women in college, had lived with them, and she would catch-up with them over the phone a few times a year. They had expressed deep concern, Detective Landers said, but admitted they were skeptical that any crime had been committed. They told Detective Landers--Laura heard both their statements secondhand--that even though it did seem strange, it wouldn't surprise them if Diane had just decided

to leave, that she was a good person, sure—it was just she had in the past been bad at returning phone calls, that she had that kind of personality: impulsive with men, careless, self-involved. They were seriously worried, of course, the Detective told Laura, but they just knew how she could be.

Skepticism has gained momentum at the school, too. So that now, it has become a kind of fact: Diane decided to start all over, despite all the responsibilities she would leave behind, despite the people she would hurt. "Frankly, it wouldn't surprise me at all," Rodger Edmonds, the veteran pre-algebra teacher said to Laura in the lunch room just two days ago. Laura stayed silent. How well did he know her?

Laura doesn't buy it, has never come close to believing Diane would do such a thing, and she tried to get the detective to understand this early-on. "She wouldn't just leave her students—I know she wouldn't do that. She loved them." The detective held his hand out in front of him, shook his head. "We're looking into everything, Laura. But it's not my only case. These cases can be difficult," he explained.

Frank drives. Rockville Middle School is closer to the college, near downtown, but Laura lives farther south, closer to Diane's house, away from the busyness of the city. It takes them fifteen minutes to get into town. When they reach Glenstone, the roads are full of traffic. Springfield is never, ever prepared for winter weather. They turn right, and they pass the cemetery, a steak house with a pawn shop next to it, a boomerang-shaped motel. Further down the road, her eyes are drawn to the contrast of the white snow set against the bright purple neon of a vacant strip club called, Darlene's. She has grown up in this small city and knows the scenery well. "Well, we weren't supposed to get this much junk," Frank says, adjusting his wipers to a higher speed. "That's for sure."

Driving in the truck cab with Frank, Laura feels like she's known Diane for half of a lifetime, but it hasn't even been a year.

This summer, in late July, Laura had come to school to hang up some things on her wall, to get her room ready for the school year ahead, and when she was leaving, as she was walking down the barren seventh grade hallway (daydreaming a little, letting herself imagine the silence that filled the hallway to be swarming with the clutter of children's voices, of locks clicking and lockers closing), she saw a woman fall. All the way down at the other end of the hall, on the short staircase right before the theater doors, a woman tripped on the stairs. And Laura couldn't have done anything to prevent the accident from happening—she was too far away—but the staircase wasn't so far ahead that she hadn't been able to watch the accident unfold: a toe of a sandal catching the lip of a middle stair, a knee banging into the top edge of the next stair up, a short, shrieking gasp, the briefcase flying into the air and a barrage of papers and make-up and pens spraying out onto the hallway floor.

"Are you OK?" Laura yelled quickly, jogging toward her, not recognizing the woman as she approached, but aware of the new teachers that had been added to the staff to account for the new elementary school populations that Rockville Middle School was set to inherit. The woman was on her feet when Laura reached her, fixing her hair with her hands, pushing her blouse back into her khaki shorts. "I'm a goof," she said, in an exasperated voice, half-laughing while her face reddened. "I'm such a goof." She was shorter and bustier than Laura, with short, curly brown hair and these rich arching brown eyebrows that Laura couldn't help but envy.

"I'm right down the hall," Laura said, bending down to help her with her things. "I teach science," she explained, reaching down to help collect the fallen papers.

"Oh, no, don't touch that, not that. Sorry. My notes. I'll do it. I like to keep them in order." She sounded anxious, and the strength of her tone of voice contrasted with the vulnerability in her face in a way that Laura thought of as harsh, and the harshness seemed practiced. "I can't believe myself sometimes," Diane said, standing up, stuffing the last compact into the front pouch of her briefcase. She paused. "Well, thank you."

"You sure you're OK?"

And then her eyes began to wander past Laura, concentrating on something further down the hall. "Oh, my, God," Diane uttered, sounding horrified. Laura turned.

"What is *that?*" An animal stood in the center of the hallway in front of them, and Laura stared at it, realizing she had asked the wrong question. She knew what it was. Possums weren't animals she saw often, but certainly more than a few times in her life she'd crossed the path of one on the road, sometimes having to swerve out of her lane to avoid them. Such an ugly creature. It began to move, staying close the lockers, waddling toward the two of them from the far end of the hallway at a fairly quick pace, not so fast that they didn't have plenty of time to react, but at a speed that seemed to Laura to be counter-intuitive as she looked at the size and shape of the animal, something comparable to an oversized rat.

"How did it get in here?" Diane gasped. And that question was more appropriate, how incongruous this animal seemed inside the walls of the school; Laura felt—while recognizing the silliness of her reaction but incapable of dismissing it—

anxious, unprotected. How *did* it get inside? But more importantly how to get it back outside? Instinct, as the animal came closer still, seemed to direct the both of them in a frenzy of panic, to the nearest classroom. Diane shutting the door hastily, bursting out into furious laughter. Laura soon followed, becoming overcome by the hilarity of the circumstance. "Oh this is silly. There's a door on the opposite side of the stairs, around the corner. We have to run for it."

So they ran, in a girlish hysteria, to the exit across the hall.

"WE MADE IT!" Diane screamed as they reached the open air.

After they had tracked down the maintenance man and informed him of the intruder, Laura posed the idea of going for custard. "Don't we deserve a reward?" With some reluctance, Diane agreed to go for custard. Over vanilla concretes at Barney's Diane's initial wariness toward Laura seemed to fade.

"You OK, Laura?" Frank asks, as they slow down to a stop at the light. "You're not very talkative."

"Oh, sure. I'm fine. Just thinking." Looking out the window, she spots a series of odd-looking icicles hanging from the awning of a strip center, shaped like a row of sharp, crooked teeth.

"Do you mind a buffet?" Frank says. "There's a good one up here."

She tells him that a buffet is fine. She is not hungry. Not for the first time, she notices he has the same narrow nose as his sister. Frank doesn't talk about his relationship with Diane much. A few things here and there. Once, in that first week in the waiting room at the police station with a hand on his face he said, "She's smarter than me. She's a smart girl, real intelligent. I was so proud of her getting her degree,

becoming a teacher." He looked then like he was concentrating on a memory that was too hard to explain.

They didn't seem to spend that much time together, Diane and Frank, but Diane spoke of her brother often. Diane said his wife left him for someone, someone Frank had been business partners with years ago, and Diane confessed to Laura that she sometimes worried about how hard the divorce was on her brother. In the police station that second week, Laura and Frank were drinking coffee in the lobby, and he mentioned his ex-wife had called him that morning to see how things were progressing. In a clumsy effort to escape the bleakness of their environment, Laura casually began to pry, admitting she heard he was divorced. "We never had kids," Frank said, looking at the carpet. "I guess that's part of it. Things just get so messy after awhile," he said, stirring his coffee with the plastic straw. Then he had dismissed the conversation with his hand, shooing it away, as if they were talking about some naïve dream of his youth.

Dinner followed that first custard date with Diane, and then another lunch, and happy hours too, and by the time classes began they were having lunch together every day in the teacher's lounge. As soon as school started, there was so much to talk about. They gossiped about the other teachers, like Roger Edmonds and that terrible comb over, or Janet Gibbons and her disturbingly provocative clothing. And they talked about themselves, their past lives, their futures. Diane had grown up in Springfield, but confessed after college, she'd lost touch with most of the girls she used to spend time with. Working as a waitress was what she had been doing for money before she landed the job at Rockville. She wanted to meet somebody—she wanted that the most. Laura thought it was bizarre how she would go online to meet men. Some of the websites

sounded so silly: *RomanceinSpringfield.com* or *Findinghimonline.com*. Laura couldn't relate.

Laura talked about her failed relationships, men from her past who hadn't been right. She lived with a man once, a carpet salesman, a neat man with a nice house on the south side. Martin. He had a mustache. They'd lived together for two years. It had happened so quickly, the two of them moving in together, and looking back on it, she wasn't sure who proposed the idea. For a while it was nice. Usually, on Saturdays, they went to a park near his house and explored some of the most beautiful hiking trails. Sometimes, in the evenings, they played chess; he taught her strategies whereas before she'd only known the basic rules. He was a smart man, a smart business man. It's hard to say why things happen the way they do: you grow apart. He rarely talked about anything other than his work, which was annoying, yes, but, more than that, she just grew unsure of him. He became unavailable, consumed by work, and then at times by something she couldn't put her finger on. At home he had a favorite chair in the guest room that he would sit in for hours and hours, not reading or sleeping just sitting, looking out the window, uninterested in her concern. One day, with him in the car on the way to the store, Laura confronted him about his lack of participation in their relationship, asked him if he had another woman in his life. "Of course not, sweetie," he said, putting his hand on her kneecap. He seemed so preoccupied she wasn't sure how to read him. She never knew, though. Eventually, Laura made the decision to end it. It was almost as if he had been asking her to.

"I guess I've just sort of stopped looking," she admitted to Diane at the bar with the mechanical bull that night of Diane's birthday. And then almost to justify herself, she

said, “I think lonesomeness, on some levels, Diane, is just something you have to accept, something you have to endure.”

“Really? I disagree,” Diane said, trying to get the bartender’s attention. “You’re sort of a defeatist. I’ve noticed that,” Diane told her, with a breathy kind of laugh that was meant to be dismissive, that Laura found insulting. And she enjoyed the friendship they were growing together—she’d gotten caught up in her work the past few years and had lost touch with so many of her old girlfriends—but sometimes Diane could be cold, sometimes she didn’t want to be around Diane at all.

At The Panda Buffet Laura wanders around the islands of food, not really looking. Frank tells her about the crab Rangoon, how good it is. “Stay away from the spring rolls, but definitely get yourself some cashew chicken.” She grabs what he advises, but her mind is not in the restaurant. It is on the homework she still has to grade, the parent-teacher conferences next week; work, early-on amid the questions of her friend’s disappearance, was difficult to focus on, but she’s getting back into now, finding out again how much she loves it. Teaching—that’s who she is. Friday’s classes were so rewarding, and she’s been reliving them all day.

The first half of class they went over the test for their last unit: *The Sun and the Planets.* Like she always does the day after an exam, with every class she went through each test question. In the second half, for each of her five hours, as the students were still examining their grades (which on average were the highest of the year), she introduced the new unit: *Beyond our Solar System*. For five minutes or so, without saying anything, she dotted and shaded the chalkboard with the yellow chalk, creating a saucer shape which spanned across the entire width of the chalkboard. As they do every year when

she does this, the children began to laugh after a few minutes. In each of her classes the reaction to this silent activity at the chalkboard was pretty much the same. Questions and comments murmured and then were blurted out behind her. *Misses Meyers? She's lost her mind!* She loves their enthusiasm. Everyone laughing, she finally turned, dusted the chalk from her fingers. She had their attention.

To help setup the next unit, she first went through a few major concepts from the last chapter. "Now, remember when I told you that it would take one million planet earths to equal the mass of the sun, a fairly average-sized star. And remember when I told you how our planet is approximately ninety-three million miles away from our sun, an equivalent of seven light minutes. What if I told you that in terms of our universe, those kinds of figures are relatively insignificant, relatively too small to consider. What if I told you that Alpha Centauri, the closest star to our solar system, is over four light *years* away, about twenty-five *trillion* miles. That's the *closest* star, and within our galaxy that kind of spacing between stars is not out-of-the-ordinary. In fact, it's normal." For a moment, she stood quiet and looked at the children. Teaching the same material for so long, she has developed a kind of theatrical presence with her lectures; she knows how to draw the students in by pausing in the right places and emphasizing the right words. "There are billions of stars in our galaxy. There are billions of galaxies in the universe. And the nearest galaxy, M31, using this scale size as a model of our very own Milky Way," she continued, turning to the chalkboard and waving a hand at the crude illustration she had created, "keeping in mind the incredible size of these stars and the incredible distances between star systems within our Milky Way—the nearest galaxy would have to be a chalkboard all the way out these school doors one-third of a mile

down the street at Rockville Pines Elementary." She scanned the classroom, as the children tried to grasp these huge concepts. They would go through it much greater detail in the coming weeks. This was just a teaser. Summarizing, she said, "What we will learn in this unit is that our universe is a big place. What I'm trying to explain is we live on a tiny, tiny, tiny piece of it." In each class she had time for a few questions before the bell rang. Some of them richer than others. *Who counts all the stars and galaxies? How many planets are there in the universe? How much homework will we have in this unit, Misses Meyers?* She answered them all the same. With a smile she said, "We will just have to wait and see, won't we." But one question stood out. Francine Coomb's question is what she broods over now as she waits for the man in the chef's coat to finish restocking the fried rice. Quiet Francine sitting in the front row of her last hour. Francine, so bright, so intuitive, such a creative thinker. *How many universes are there, Misses Meyers, beyond this one we are in?*

Laura goes back to the table, and after awhile Frank brings back two plates. He does not take off his coat, begins to eat quickly, determinedly. "I spoke to the Private Investigator again this morning," he tells her between mouthfuls. "He told me he was out of town, but that I could, that we could, meet him at his office tomorrow. That he'd be back. I mean, if you want to come. You don't have to. I'll pay—I got the money from the boat."

She picks at her food. "Sure. I can do that. I can help with the money, too," Laura says, looking at her plate. They have talked about it before, a private investigator. It sounds almost hopeful. The idea of the boat, of selling his fishing boat to a friend at the lake, this was his idea, and she had endorsed it. But listening to the eagerness in his

voice now she feels like she has given him reason to believe it will solve all of their problems. She wants to tell him this is not the case.

Near the buffet, a young man in a sweatshirt drops a plate. She sees it happen, the plate slipping out of his hand while he reaches for the ladle of the sweet and sour sauce, the plate bouncing off the edge of the buffet counter, food spilling onto the bottom of his sweatshirt, the plate splashing into pieces on the floor. And the noise gets to her, so that when she raises a hand to her mouth in reaction to the accident, she realizes her hand is trembling. Those kinds of unanticipated sounds lately, like a car horn on her way to work or the phone ringing in the evening, have become difficult to handle. Calming herself, she sees Frank's attention is not on the shattered plate. Instead, she catches him, not for the first time, looking up from his soda, stealing glances at her, and she has lived long enough to know what these kinds of looks mean. "I could cook you dinner tonight—I could throw that trout on the grill. I've kept it on ice," he says. He plays with his glasses when he's nervous. She notices that and doesn't respond right away. Too much time goes by and he says, "We're in kind of the same place, Laura."

But that's not what she thinks, and she wonders if maybe she's been leading him on. All of it is too much, and in a kind of panic, she says the wrong thing, she says, "I get so worked up now when I hear loud sounds like that," talking about the plate, and she sees him shrinking away, back into himself. She wants to tell him that there are times when she's not sure if she and Diane were as close as she thought. Maybe she's been elevated to an exalted place in Diane's life, a place she doesn't belong. She wants to tell him that she didn't want to go to Chicago or to New York or anywhere because she doesn't like to travel. But she feels guilty for having those kinds of thoughts, and she

remembers Diane's fragile voice in her room just before school one morning, a finger rubbing over her teeth, saying, "Did you know some of the students call me brace face?" Laura had shaken her head. She had not known. Finally, she says to Frank, "Oh, I have so much to grade tonight. I couldn't possibly make plans tonight. Thank you, though, Frank. That's nice of you to ask."

The waiter returns before Frank has time to say anything more. Frank insists on paying the bill. In the parking lot, the snow is still coming down. With his gloved hand he wipes off his rear window. "I'll just take you home then now. I'll call you tomorrow? About the PI?" She says that would be fine.

They do not go the same way back. The main avenues are too congested and although the roads are getting worse, Frank has enough faith in his truck to take a different route, a back way. She doesn't mind. As they drive, she thinks of Francine in the front row of sixth hour, a straight A student, a first class student. Laura read somewhere years ago this hypotheses, this sensational suggestion, that she finds herself wondering about from time to time, that she thinks about now while ruminating over Friday's classes, over Francine's question. Not just that there are more universes, but that there are endless universes, not just beyond this one but inside of it, too, everywhere, interwoven into the smallest bits of all matter everywhere are infinite realms of space. And this one, this universe, is just a single part of an endless sequence.

On one side of the road they take back home there are trees, and soon a fence begins. It is an old fence. The sections are ten or so feet long, five feet high, with three bridging posts connecting one section to the next. Some of the bridging posts have been weathered off on one end and now lay down on the white ground, but for the most part,

the fence is in good shape. She follows it with her eyes as they drive, as the road curves up this hill and down the next, then straight. Miles of straightness. She does not realize the truck is sliding until Frank curses and begins to pump the breaks, and as she watches him do this, her stomach sinks. She grabs the handle above the door. For a long stretch he does not have control, but eventually they stop, unharmed, on the side of the road near the fence. It all happens very quickly and afterwards Frank is quiet. For tens of seconds, they both sit in the cab in silence, and she thinks she wants to open the door but doesn't at first. Frank shakes his head at the wheel, fixes his glasses on his nose. "I need some air," Laura says finally, opening the door. He gets out of the truck too and comes to stand next to her by the fence, and she almost says that dinner with him tonight might be nice. In front of them is a clearing. A small, sky-blue house sits on a slanted hill with a few acres of farm field beside it. No cars are passing. There are the faint, distant sounds of branches rubbing against branches, snow piles plopping to the ground, drops of water breaking against the brittle skin of fallen leaves; everything is as still as a cave. It is a cornfield, and the snow, a giant cloud sinking into it. A few crops are still standing, staggered along the back acre, and she takes in those pale corpses of cornstalks hulking down like old men in front of her, and the red, rusted tractor frame which sits on the edge of the field near the trees. She puts her hand on the fence. Against her bare palm and fingers, the wood feels rough and wet. "How long do you think this fence has been here?" she asks, looking down at her hands.

"We'll head back the other way. It's my fault—I didn't think I needed sandbags today," Frank confesses, ignoring her question. "The truth is my little pickup isn't much in the snow." Then he takes a breath, as if he's preparing to say something else, but

instead, he fiddles with his keys in his pockets, and she thinks that perhaps he is ready to leave. There's that worried look on his face again. She's seen it before, and she wants to tell him that this whole thing, that all of it will work out in the end. But she cannot.

"We should go," she says. "It's getting cold."

Possibilities: this is the word she has hung in big black letters above her chalkboard, and this is the word, the idea, she hopes, above all else, her students will be able to grasp the full potential of by the time they leave her class. It is not an easy word. Not a good word—never has she pretended to take comfort in it. Yes, it is possible, Francine, that this is an endless maze of universes we are trapped in, that between each of us, is an infinite network of infinite space we cannot see, and how can you expect to find anyone inside of it? How can you expect anyone to find you?

Back on the road, Frank makes a few more comments about the surprise of the weather, which has not let up. It is amazing, she thinks, how much the storm has transformed the landscape. He is quiet at the wheel, focused, and they make it back to her house without anymore trouble. A service the neighborhood association employs has already shoveled her driveway; she is grateful for that, grateful that Frank will not have the chance to offer his assistance with shoveling.

"Looks like you're taken care of," he says as they pull in her driveway. "But I'll call you in the morning then."

"Maybe it would be best," she says, looking out the truck window, "if you just handled that stuff. The investigator. Maybe you should handle that stuff yourself, Frank."

She can hear children's voices shouting at each other in a neighbor's yard, can hear the sound of a shovel scraping on a nearby walk. Frank's mouth tightens, and staring at her closed garage, he nods.

"I'll see ya, OK, Frank?" she says, opening the truck door and looking back at him.

As soon as his eyes meet her eyes, he looks away again. "OK," he says, "I'll see ya."

From her walkway, as tiny darts of snow slant down into her, she watches his truck ascend up the slope of her road, watches it reach the crest of the hill and then disappear into the blurred background of gray sky.

Crime Spree

Right after Teresa broke up with me, Roger and I were up at this bar we used to go to, drinking beers and smoking cigarettes. I was so exhausted from all the thinking I'd been doing about the future. I kept saying stuff like, "I don't know what I'm gonna do. I wasn't prepared for this."

Roger kept nodding his head, like he knew exactly what I meant.

Teresa waitressed at Darlene's, a strip club up the street from my old apartment. That first time she'd appeared in front of my table to take my order, I'd fallen in love: shiny brown movie star hair, night black eyelashes, skin that belonged in a magazine. In the beginning, there was so much magnetism between us we couldn't be separated. We'd only been seeing each other a few months when I moved out of my one bedroom and into hers. We had all these dreams at first. But a few months after I moved in everything changed. I lost my job at the title loan place. It had to do with the fact that the Global Economic Crisis was beating the shit out of everybody. But Teresa didn't understand any of that, and she soured quick, said I was leeching off her. She said she couldn't stand leeches. "Am I supposed to fix the Global Economic Crisis?" I said. She said I drank too much, and she wanted me out. I had less than fifty bucks to my name. "Where am I

gonna go?" I said. She didn't care. And I knew there was something she wasn't telling me. You don't kick somebody out on the street, you don't reach into somebody's chest and rip their heart open just because they like to have a beer every once in a while.

"I don't want to have to be the one to say this, Pete," Roger said, with a serious face, "but she's probably fucking somebody else."

I had an idea who too. That wiry manager with the mustache she was always talking to up at Darlene's. I wanted to do something to him; I wanted to hurt him, and maybe I would have, if Roger hadn't of told me about the guns.

Roger knew a guy who worked in the security booth at the airport parking lot, and they'd been doing this scam where Roger would lift the cars from the airport and take them to a guy he knew who gave him cash and stripped them for parts. But after they did a few cars like this, the security guard got paranoid and wanted to quit. Roger had a way of talking people into things though, and he talked the security guard into doing one more car. And in that last car, in the glove compartment of an old blue Volvo, he found them: a pair of nine millimeters, fully loaded.

"What are you gonna with 'em?" I said.

"I don't know," he said. "They're nice guns though."

And I don't remember who mentioned gas stations first, me or Roger, but I remember it started out as a kind of joke. One of us said something about how it was sort of serendipitous that Roger had found two guns right there in the glove compartment of the Volvo when the two of us were flat broke.

Roger and I had grown up together, but after high school we'd lost touch. The truth is I'd pretty much forgotten about him. Then one day--this was months before I started seeing Teresa--he was sitting on a barstool next to me, still with a million curlicues of black hair twisting out of his giant Jew head and that fat Jew nose taking up most of his face. Usually when that happens, when I see someone I haven't seen since high school, they fire off the standard questions: married, kids, et cetera? Roger didn't though, and I was glad. When I was in my twenties, I'd done that, married a girl and had child with her and the whole thing, but it didn't work out. Sometimes it doesn't work out, and that shouldn't be something you're required to defend all the time.

When I saw Roger again after all those years, I remembered how he used to be a kind of baseball God, how back in high school he threw the kind of heat that can make you famous. "You ever do anything with that?" I said. "Didn't you play ball in college?"

"I got into some trouble," he said. After a couple more beers and a shot of whiskey, he told me the story of how he got kicked out of college. He'd dated this ex-cheerleader for a while, some ditzy redhead with a newly found love for pot. One night the two of them bought a dime bag from a dealer she claimed to know and went back to her place to smoke and drink Jager. They'd polished off a couple of bowls and most of the bottle before she showed him the lump in her leg. "She wanted me to diagnose her or something," he said. "You believe that? It was huge, the lump. The size of a baby's fist." After he considered it for a while, the craziest thing happened: he saw the lump move forward an inch, and the cheerleader gave him a look that told him she'd seen it move too. The lump started zigzagging all over, Roger said, like a little mouse inside of her skin. He'd never seen anything like it, and it freaked him out. She got hysterical too,

pleaded with him to do something. So he grabbed an exacto knife from her junk drawer and went to work on her leg. "Pretty soon, there was all this blood. Fucking everywhere," he said, exasperated, lifting his hands up off the bar to emphasize the helplessness he'd felt. "She passed out, and I started crying like a bitch," he said. "If her roommate hadn't come home, she might've died." Even though he'd scarred up her leg pretty good, even though he'd nearly killed her, she didn't blame him. She loved him; they were drowning in love for each other, Roger said. But still the college found out about it, and he was expelled. And though they still had all this love for each other, too much had happened, and they broke up. Later he found out that the pot they'd been smoking had been laced with Dust.

"Dust?" I asked.

PCP, he told me.

And after he said that, I remembered I'd heard the story before from someone else. How Roger, high on PCP, had butchered this girl up and had gotten in a lot of trouble because of it. I remembered that the story had confirmed an impression I'd had of Roger as someone to stay away from, but hearing him retell it, hearing the guilt and the sadness in his voice, I realized the story I'd heard all those years ago had been truncated to suit a perception of Roger that was unfair, that was too simple. People are always doing that, stuffing other people's mistakes into neat little packages.

I started seeing him all the time at that bar. Maybe I just liked it that I'd known Roger all those years ago. It was like we were kids again, even though we were both in our thirties.

We wanted to hit somewhere out of the way, somewhere that didn't have a whole lot of traffic, so we drove up Highway 71 from Springfield in the blue Volvo; Roger had decided to keep it, and he'd switched out the plates. In Jasper, Missouri there was this place Roger knew about, Ralph's Refill. Ralph's sat on the long curve of a two lane highway, nothing else around but a wide open field dotted in places with the shadowy outlines of cows.

Roger killed the lights and pulled down a dirt road that snaked to the side of Ralph's. In the car we pulled our ball caps down low on our faces. After a time, we saw the clerk lock the door and flip the OPEN sign over. From our parked position, we peered into the windows of Ralph's, made sure only one clerk was working. Roger reached into the glove compartment and pulled out the guns, handed me one. We didn't need to fire them, we agreed; we just had to look like we were capable of firing them. The gun steel felt cold and hard in my hand. I put the gun into my sweatshirt pocket. We each smoked a cigarette and had a moment of silent meditation.

He went around back, and I waited for him to get into position.

The moon shined blue light over everything. The gravel parking lot crunched beneath my feet as I approached the entrance. There were four pumps. A pink neon light hummed in the window. It was cold enough so that I could see my breath every time I exhaled.

Beneath the CLOSED sign on the door, I knocked on the glass. "I had some trouble," I shouted to the clerk through the door, one hand thumbing in some vague direction behind me, the other clutching the gun in my pocket. "A ways back."

The clerk came up to the door, unlocked it, and cracked it open a few inches. I saw his nametag: DAVE. He was a big man, a kind-looking man, thinning brown hair, a round, clean-shaven face, large, square-framed glasses. His breath smelled like pickles.

"Sorry, sir, I'm closing here," he said in a thick country drawl.

"What about my grandmother?" I said.

That was the signal.

Roger, who'd been standing on the other side of the door, slammed the door back into Dave and Dave fell backwards. Roger kicked him in the face and threw him headfirst against the side of the counter. I dropped one knee down on Dave's neck and shoved the gun barrel against the back of his fat head. I had never done anything like that, and it felt like lightning had been shot into my blood. I held squirming Dave down as Roger went for the cash.

"You two are damned to hell," Dave shouted from the floor in a shaky, tearful voice. "You are damned to fucking hell!"

Out the window I saw a deer standing beside an abandoned Chevy on the other side of the two lane road, right there in the middle of that bright blue night. "Hurry up," I said. "There's somebody coming. There's somebody fucking coming." And truthfully, I didn't actually see anybody coming, but I sensed it, foresaw a parade of police cars speeding toward us, then surrounding Ralph's gas station on all sides; I saw a hundred guns pointed at my heart, looked into a hundred hateful eyes eager to destroy me.

Cash in the bag, we tied up Dave with electrical cord we found on one of the shelves and booked out of there, drove through the genius labyrinth of back roads I'd charted before we'd gone in, a route that brought us out to Highway 65. We drove like

old fogies back to Springfield, where we spent hours searching for a paramedic Roger knew from way back who always had cocaine.

At a motel just off the highway, we partied with an eightball of coke and a case of good European beer.

"It's glowing," Roger said about the cash as he fingered the pile of bills on the bed next to him. Minus the cost of the eightball and the beer, we had made just over six hundred dollars.

"You did good driving today," I said to Roger. We were sitting on separate twin beds, facing each other. Under the yellow fan of lamplight on the nightstand, there was a bag of coke and some lines of coke cut up on a magazine.

"You did good too," Roger said. "That escape route was first class."

"Thanks," I said, snorting a line. "I put a lot of thought into it."

"No shit," Roger said, and did a line too. "No shit you did. It was first class, Pete. You know that, right?"

"Yeah," I said, opening two more beers and handing one to Roger. "I put a lot of thought into it, you know."

"That's an understatement, Pete."

Then, looking down at the coke, I said, "Do you think he's right?"

"Who?"

"Dave."

"Who's Dave?"

"The clerk. Dave. Do you think we're damned?"

"Damned? I don't know," Roger said. He took a drink of beer, glanced down at his hands, then back up at me. "How would I know? How do you if you're damned?"

"I don't know. Maybe you wouldn't know. Maybe you wouldn't ever really know."

In a few days, the cash had dwindled down to nearly nothing.

"I know of another gas station like the one in Jasper--a way-out-of-the-way one," Roger said. "This one's in Marshall. If you're up for it."

We were sitting at another bar, killing time, watching baseball. "I'm not sure," I said. "I don't know if I want to do that again."

"Sure," Roger said. "I understand."

But Roger kept pestering me, and it was hard to argue with him in the end. I'd just been trying to get back on my feet for so long.

For a while we went on like this, sticking places up at gunpoint and living like fearless kings.

And it wasn't always gas stations. In Jefferson City, we made eight hundred dollars robbing a dry cleaners and four hundred more dollars sticking up a pawn shop.

Sometimes, because of the circumstances, you had to take an action you wouldn't normally take. For example, at that pawn shop in Jefferson City, while Roger was fiddling with the cash register, I slammed this little Chinese girl's head into a television because she wouldn't stop screaming. Next thing I knew, the television screen had cracked and the little girl's face was covered in her own Chinese blood. But that's the

way it was. You had to think on your feet. And if you had a mind for it, we came to realize, you could get away with anything, live however you wanted to live, make your own rules. After a while, we were no longer afraid of getting caught. There wasn't some mastermind detective on our tails: cops were stupid. And besides, if we were going to get caught, what would it matter if we did one more?

For the first time in our lives we weren't mopping somebody else's floor, or sitting in a cubicle staring at somebody else's screen. It was the most honest work I've ever done in my entire life, and I don't mean honest by society's bullshit terms, but I mean honest in terms of the governing laws of the larger universe: survival by will and force.

After Jefferson City, we hit places up north, places around St. Joseph and Kansas City, and then came back down. In the time between robberies, we partied: just by ourselves, or sometimes we met people like us, people who had been knocked down and were trying to get back up, people who liked to get high. If Roger and I separated at a place, after a time we would somehow always find each other again and get back on the road. We were like brothers that way. Usually Roger drove, and I spent a lot of time staring out the window, lost to my endless wandering thoughts. I liked to read the billboards on the side of the highway to try and draw out their secret prophetic meanings. Every once in a while, a storm would coalesce in the sky in front of us, and all this blackness would stretch out over the sleeping trees while furious gusts pushed the whole world sideways; and there's nothing more beautiful than that, seeing the indefatigable energy of the universe squeezed into a Missouri autumn sky.

I only fired my gun once. This was at a gas station in Kansas City. The last in a string of scores that had given us a pretty big pile of cash.

We were both in a bad place that night. For days before, Roger and I had been blowing all kinds of coke, and having come down from the reeling speed, my skin itched with bitterness. I told Roger I could take care of the gas station by myself if he worked as a getaway driver. Roger was too hungover to argue. He told me to hurry up.

The cashier had all this defiance in him. I think the cashier owned the gas station, looking back on it. I glared at that cashier down the barrel of my gun. He stood behind what was labeled "bulletproof glass."

"You'll have to shoot me," he said, his whole dark-skinned body stiffened with cowardly panic. The English language did not belong in this man's mouth, and there's nothing more infuriating than a foreigner thinking they can call your bluff and get away with it.

I gripped the gun with both hands, cocked the hammer.

"You'll have to shoot me."

I fired one round off. The bullet shattered the not-so-bulletproof glass. The power of the gun blast sent a jolt through my arms. There's no way to prepare for that kind of sound.

Giant shards of broken glass lay on the counter and on the floor. A refrigerator kicked on. I smelled hot gunpowder and fried chicken. The bullet had missed the cashier, but I could see in his eyes that I'd changed his life forever. He knelt down on the floor with his hands up in complete surrender, shouting in a language I didn't understand to a God I didn't believe in. The pathetic groveling of that cashier made me paralyzed

with hatred for him. I pointed my gun at him again and put my finger on the trigger. But I couldn't do it in the end. While that man stared at me on his knees begging for his foreign life, I peered through the membrane of his eyeball, down through the congeries of vessels and veins behind his face, all the way down into the chambers of his arteries, and I could see heart pulsing, could hear it throb. I could feel his heart beating in my heart, and it sent a terror through my bones. I grabbed the cash as quickly as I could and shot out to the car.

Back on the road, Roger drove fast, angrily, past dark cobwebs of ancient Missouri trees, finally turning down a dirt road and parking behind an old, dilapidated green barn. For a long time, we were both quiet, listening to the wind push past us. I had my window down, and while we sat there cloaked in darkness, I stuck my hand out into the November air and let the coldness slide over my fingers.

"I thought we said we weren't going to fire our guns no matter what," he said.

"I had to."

"You could've killed him."

"I didn't."

"But you could've. Don't you see that?"

The moonlight came through the branches in a way that painted bars of shadow across his big Jew face. I hated him then. He had all this envy that he disguised as righteousness. I realized by the sound of Roger's voice he was afraid of me. I realized that he realized that I had power that he didn't have. I wondered if that's how Roger felt all those years ago when all the girls wanted to rip off their panties for him because he could throw like a real major leaguer.

"Let's go get laid," I said.

He didn't argue. We went back to a motel and ordered two escorts from a service I found in the phonebook, and a few hours later two girls were at our door, an overweight redhead in fishnets and a meth-thin brunette named Rachel with crystal clear green eyes.

Roger had a thing for nailing redheads in cars, so he took the redhead for a drive. I was left with Rachel in the motel room. For nearly an hour I made animalistic love to her on the twin bed, on top of the dresser, and against the motel room door. When I finished with her, we lay sweaty and exhausted on the floor together, smoking in silence. After a moment, she started sobbing.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," she said through her tears. "I used work at a tanning salon."

I took a drag, watching the cherry embers peel away at the tobacco. "I used to work in a cubicle."

She laughed a little at that, and put her head against my chest, and for a moment I pretended we were real lovers. Wisps of cigarette smoke spiraled through the room like withered souls. For a long time we lay there together on the floor, her head on my chest, her legs tangled up with my legs. Her hot breath warmed my skin. Beneath the cigarette smoke, I could smell her sweet sweat and lilac perfume. She traced her fingertip over the lines in my palm, slow and careful, like she was trying to decode a secret message that had been imprinted on the inside of my hand.

"What's the secret?" I said.

She locked her fingers in my fingers, squeezed tight.

"You smell good," I said. "You smell like paradise. Do you know that?"

Days later, Roger and I were back in Springfield partying with the paramedic again. By evening, Roger was passed out in the bedroom, but the paramedic and I were still wide awake, snorting lines of something off the paramedic's coffee table. Every time I snorted a line my nostrils burned. The paramedic had all these stories about being a paramedic, and it was hard to tell what was true and what wasn't.

"We picked up this guy the other day," the paramedic said. "Man." He was still wearing his red paramedic jumpsuit from his shift the day before. His eyes gaped open and he kept swallowing. "We got this call the other day for a guy out in Ozark, OK. And we get out there--and this was out in Ozark, you know, out in the sticks--and we get in the house and this old bag was screaming."

"Why was she screaming?"

"I knew by the way she was screaming it was gonna be bad, and we get in the living room and this guy was leaning against the couch, blood fucking everywhere."

"What happened?"

"He had blood on his face. Cuts all over his face, a big gash in his neck. His arm was basically gone."

"What happened?" I hated the suspense.

"A raccoon. Fucker came out of the woods and mauled the guy while the guy was cutting down this dead tree in his backyard. Just out of nowhere. The way the guy's face was cut up, it looked like he'd been attacked by Wolverine. The raccoon had chewed off

half his nose. If his wife hadn't been around to scare the thing with the shotgun, guy might not've made it."

I didn't like that story. It made me uneasy. I looked at the lamp on the nightstand, at the gray daylight piercing through the crack in the curtains. The paramedic snorted another line, swallowed. I didn't want to be around the paramedic anymore; I wanted to see Teresa. I craved the feeling of her hair in my hands. I wanted to tell her I was sorry for everything and even if she didn't want anything to do with me I wanted her to know that. "I have to go," I said to the paramedic.

"You gotta do what you gotta do," the paramedic said. His nose was bleeding from whatever we'd been snorting.

"Are you OK?" I said.

"If you gotta go, you gotta go," the paramedic said. "I'm not making the decision for you."

I left, took the Volvo up to the strip club where Teresa used to work, but she wasn't there. The bartender said she didn't work there anymore, and neither did the manager with the mustache. My insides clenched. A tall blond with tits like balloons asked me if I wanted a dance, but I didn't want anything to do with those girls--they were all made-up frauds looking for a way into my wallet. I had a couple drinks at that strip club, and after about an hour I realized I just wanted to be alone. At a liquor store up the street I got some more whiskey and then drove up the road a little ways and parked in the side parking lot of a furniture store. I sipped whiskey in the parked Volvo, thinking. I had the cash in the car--we'd put together a decent-sized pile of cash--and I wondered what it would be like to just leave, just take the money for myself and get out of Missouri

for good. A blanket of gray clouds blocked the sun from view, and I stepped out of the car, lit up a cigarette.

A woman in a Corolla pulled up next to the Volvo. I watched her get out of her car. She didn't see me. She was walking toward the front of the store, putting something into her purse and not looking up. Her cheeks were red from the cold, her short curly hair pushed up against her face from the sharp breeze. She had that kind of rare, clean, simple beauty that people often overlook for the phonies.

"Excuse me, Miss?"

Five feet separated us. I only meant to ask her the time, or something innocuous, just to let her know I was standing there, to let her know I existed. I meant her no harm. But when our eyes met she got this look on her face like she was staring at a hideous beast, like she had never seen someone so vile. I couldn't believe the look on her face. When someone looks at you like that it's more hurtful than anything. I pulled out my gun and grabbed her tiny neck. Immediately I regretted it. I meant her no harm, but I knew no matter what, having showed my gun and having grabbed her neck, I couldn't turn back. Before she could scream or say anything, I hit her in the head with the butt of my gun and dragged her squirming body into the backseat of the Volvo. I taped her hands together with Roger's duct tape, taped her mouth shut. I couldn't turn back. I drove.

A few miles up the road, I pulled down a utility road near some trees, just to get my thoughts together. Looking back at her, I tried to ease her panic and mine. "This isn't me," I said. "I'm not going to hurt you. You know that, right?" I took some whiskey and told her about Roger, about the money we'd saved up and how we were just getting back on our feet. And then I got the idea that she might have a phone in her purse. I found the

phone underneath a mix of makeup and pens. I kept reminding her that I wasn't going to hurt her. Holding that phone in my hand I wanted to cry. I didn't know what to do.

Then I felt something pierce my hip. My guts wrenched with pain. I looked down; she'd somehow gotten her hands free and found Roger's knife and stabbed me with it.

Next thing I knew, we were both outside on a cold gravel road. It was hard to stand. As I pulled the knife out of my hip, she stood still and stared at me with this terrified face, but soon she was on her feet. She ran around the car and got in on the driver's side. I watched her drive away, and I was alone again. I promised myself that no matter what I was going to hunt her down and do terrible things to her for leaving me there. I could hear Roger's righteousness in my head telling me what a fuckup I was, what a hopeless case.

I spotted her cell phone on the gravel next to me and picked it up. In that moment, I was so crushed by sadness I felt invincible. Some phone numbers you never forget.

"Hello?" In the background, I heard silverware clinking on a plate. "Hello?" It was my daughter's voice, and she sounded just as I had remembered her sounding, like her words were made of tiny white radiant diamonds. It had been years since I'd heard her voice. She'd grown up to be twelve, maybe thirteen years-old.

Finally, after I caught my breath, I said, "Maggie?"

"Who is this?"

I imagined myself with giant arch angel wings standing firm in front of her voice and daring violent, slow-witted men to try their best to get past me.

"Who is this?"

I rubbed my fingers over my chin, surprised by the thickness of my beard. In front of me, there was a tangle of leafless trees bending over the road, and just beyond the sloping turn of the road, I could hear the zooming of cars on the highway. Gusts of cold air sliced across my face. My side ached in waves. I threw the phone on the ground and stomped on it. I kept stomping on it and stomping on it and stomping on it until nothing was left but a mess of crushed, broken pieces.

Postgraduate Education

Three years into the new millennium we finally graduated from college. We'd all gone to the same state college, and we'd come together along the way to form a group of friends, though because we'd all grown up near each other, some of our friendships went back farther than that. Ted and Burt had belonged to the same country club their whole lives. Herb and Pete had played on the same baseball summer club team since the end of their eighth grade year. By the time we were sixteen each of us had gotten to know Bimmerman because by the time we were sixteen Bimmerman had sold all of us weed. But when we got to college—that was where we came together as a whole group. That was where we materialized into a gang from the vast current of undergraduates, much like the raw space-stuff of a young solar system coalesces to form a whole new world.

Everybody except for Ted graduated in five years. Ted was a year older than the rest of us, and he'd spent his first year after high school waiting tables and taking a few classes at St. Louis Community College. Though he eventually made into our same state university, he almost didn't graduate. Despite all his attempts, he couldn't pass College Algebra, a degree requirement. He had a hard time applying basic algebraic formulas, like sine and cosine, and the quadratic equation. On his fifth attempt at College Algebra,

he convinced Burt to take his algebra final for him in exchange for a bottle of Jagermeister and a six pack of Red Bull. Burt didn't mind math, and it was easy to stand-in for Ted because College Algebra was an online course. It turned out to be the smartest move Ted ever made in college because Burt passed Ted's algebra final with flying colors, and Ted was able to graduate in six years at the same time as rest of us.

On graduation day our parents came down to congratulate us, to take pictures with us in our caps and gowns and to treat us to steak dinners at our favorite restaurants because we deserved a good meal and had no money of our own. At dinner our parents toasted us to long and healthy futures and handed us sentimental store-bought cards, the kind with bright flowers or a funny cartoon printed on the front. With careful appreciation, we opened our cards, trying not to look too eager for the check on the inside. We couldn't believe the amount on the check: it was way too much or way too little. Pete didn't get a check at all but instead, inside Pete's card there was a gift certificate to Red Lobster. The amount written on Burt's check, we speculated (we would never know for sure), most likely didn't fit inside the tiny rectangular box.

But no matter what reward we received at the end of that culminating day, as we held that card in our hands, our parents were sure to consider us with faces that forecasted some future disappointment. Tiny clumsy smiles emerged on their mouths. They told us they were proud of what we'd accomplished, that they'd never been so proud of us, but even though we'd hit a milestone in our lives, it was only a beginning. We needed to make good decisions, to treat people the right way, to work hard. We needed to keep working hard, they said. And before they went back to their hotels, we made plans to

meet them for breakfast the next morning, but not too early, because we wanted to sleep in.

Then we went out. We went out and drank cheap draft beer and took Jager bombs and bong rips and rolled ecstasy and tried to get laid by anyone who would have us, or for those of us who had girlfriends, we tried to get laid by them. And late in the night in the ratty houses or apartments we were renting, we lay awake in our beds with our girlfriends or alone or next to passed-out drunken strangers, slowly smoking cigarettes, watching the tendrils of smoke snake across our walls and slip out the cracks in our windows; we rubbed the tips of our fingers across our soft bellies and the sides of our necks, gently, almost unconsciously, reminding ourselves, in no certain terms, of the bizarreness of the whole thing, and we wondered what it was we were going to discover: where we were going, where we were going next.

We went home. For Herb this was the only logical move. "I need to save up some cash," Herb told us. Pete and Ted had never wanted to move back in with their parents, but they had no other options. All parental funding had ceased, and they were forced to go home immediately. Burt probably had a secret stash of cash somewhere, a trust fund account with a prestigious financial institution, but he went home too, though it wasn't too long after that when he moved into his own apartment.

For Bimmerman, this transition wasn't right away. After graduating, he continued working in the same restaurant, waiting for something to happen, trying to figure out his next move.

We'd gone to school with guys who by the time we'd graduated had already taken these amazing leaps out into the world, who already had big-time corporate positions in faraway cities. Bimmerman had roomed with this guy his freshman year who had dropped-out to launch a career directing foot fetish films in San Fernando Valley. We wanted to do something crazy like that. We wanted to take calculated risks.

But we didn't. We went home. After a summer of fruitless deliberation, Bimmerman gave up on his bigger dreams and moved back. In the end, all of us moved back to our parents' houses in West County St. Louis, a vast, affluent suburbia stuffed with country clubs and Home Depots and acres upon overflowing acres of gorgeous, majestic Missouri trees.

Such delightful pleasures were waiting for us when we arrived.

There was never a shortage of orange juice. We'd forgotten how delicious a cold glass of orange juice tasted in the morning. We'd forgotten how wonderful our mothers' pancakes were. Our moms were fantastic undiscovered culinary talents. Herb's mother had been hit by a bus and killed when Herb was fifteen, but Herb's father cooked the meanest ribeyes in the Midwest. At Herb's graduation party, his father had everyone over for ribeyes and mashed potatoes and this strange but wonderful asparagus casserole he called, "aspararole."

"Eat up, boys," Herb's father encouraged us. "I made more aspararole than me and little Herby can handle."

We smiled with our mouths full. We inhaled aspararole. We couldn't believe we had ever thought about not coming back.

In those first few days or weeks after moving back, a kind of deep physical relief sank into our bones. Everything was so clean, and we remembered what it was like to have HBO. The smell of scented candles, clenching that familiar firm carpet in our toes—it was all so therapeutic.

But it didn't last. Soon the mood at home began to change. Did it change? We found ourselves noticing a difference; there was a digression, it seemed, back to pre-college conditions. At the most inconvenient times, our mother's or father's voices would track us down with laser-guided accuracy. Bimmerman's mom was the worst. When Bimmerman's mom yelled, it sounded like she was politely seeking his assistance in warding off a strangler: "Joseph? Are you busy? Joseph?"

"What!"

The most unpleasant household chores would be demanded of us in the guise of innocent requests and inquiries. Could we do some weeding in the garden if we had time? Did we mind scrubbing toilets? Did we remember how to clean out the gutters?

And during dinner our parents would probe us with questions about our days or the job hunt, how it was going, or about our love lives or Iraq or did we need any socks, and no matter what we did to combat them, these deliberate, insidious invasions would never stop. We were certain they were trying to take us over again, as they had once tried before, and we craved our independence. We thought of Martin Luther. We thought of Davy Crockett.

While we were clearing the table they would always look at us skeptically and ask, "You're not going out again, are you?"

We looked back at them with the same degree of skepticism and told them that we were, for a little bit, but not to worry, not to wait up, that we were just going to Burt's apartment and might be out late.

Weeks after moving back in with his father, Burt moved out again to an apartment in Clayton, which was where the old, old St. Louis money was. Clayton, according to Pete, was an area of town where many residents had annual ego-building rituals that involved burning massive barrels of cash just because they didn't really need it. Burt didn't even have a job. He had just emerged into this world from a golden vagina, which was like winning the lottery every day.

Of course, it wasn't like the rest of our parents were living in shanties by the river. Out of all us, maybe Pete's folks weren't exactly making it rain, but they still lived in West County. We were all West County boys, blue-blooded nobles, to our way of thinking, compared to the likes of those who came up in the bare-knuckled blue-collaredness of South City or the gangbanging bloodbath of East St. Louis. Compared to Burt however, we'd grown up poor.

Burt's father had gotten into the webpage design business when the webpage design business was still in its infancy. By the time we graduated, Burt's father had the kind of clients who advertised during the Super Bowl. His parents lived in Chesterfield in an eight bedroom palace, but they also owned a lake house in Tahoe and part of sky scraper in Kansas City. We hated Burt for how lucky he was because we knew that luck had everything to do with it, but we didn't hate him at all because Burt was a good guy.

His new place was a haven, especially in that first year after college. The balcony overlooked a beautiful clean street of yuppie bars and coffee cafés. Right when he moved in he bought a fifty-inch flat screen television, and a Bose sound system, and a weird orangish-purplish painting of an obscure image that Herb said looked like a dragon slayer and Bimmerman said looked like a giant African muff.

That was where we spent most of our time that first year after moving back, at Burt's, or at a bar near Burt's called The Dime. We didn't have careers yet, but we were working on it. In the meantime, we cashed in our graduation checks, or borrowed money from our parents. Herb sold his comic book collection. Bimmerman and Ted waited tables at El Ranchero. Pete stole money from his mother's wallet, like he had done when he was fifteen. Pete took Burt out to Red Lobster with his gift card, and made Burt pay him in cash for his meal.

Burt was engaged. It had happened our senior year of college. He had gotten down on one knee in the middle of the student center parking lot and asked Ana to spend the rest of her life with him. We couldn't blame him. By that time he'd been with Ana for years. And he loved her more than anything. He pronounced this one night up at The Dime. He grabbed her hand while we were all sitting at a table near the bar—this was after we'd all had a couple beers and a round of Jager bombs—and he said, "I love you more than anything, Ana." Then they made-out right there in front of us. His love was shameless. Burt was the plainest, most average-looking guy we knew, and Ana was ridiculously gorgeous. We were certain she had some American Indian or Latino in her gene-line, with that smooth, milky-brown complexion, that wavy, silk-black hair. By the

time we graduated, Ana was in law school at Washington University. Ana exuded nothing but sex and maternal affection, like a moon goddess. Burt was so freaking lucky.

When we were honest with ourselves, none of us ever imagined we'd be as lucky in love as Burt, but we weren't always honest with ourselves. Ted broke-up with his Chinese girlfriend, Gina, because she was starting to love him too much and he thought he could do better. Ted was tall and goofy-looking with a giant bush of thick, curly brown hair that Pete called "The Puff" behind Ted's back. Ted had known about this for years, but he never said anything to Pete because, we guessed, he felt bad for Pete. Pete didn't have much hair. Pete was nearly bald.

"I liked Gina," Herb said. "No offense, man, but she was way too good for you."

Pete said, "You're an idiot, Ted. Do you know that? You thought you could do better than Gina? I want to buy you a beer, Ted, just to congratulate you on being such a fucking idiot."

And Pete probably would've gone into one of his rants right then if Bimmerman hadn't shown up. He came up to our table with a new mustache, wearing jeans and sport coat, and he sat on a backwards chair and told us the story of the sperm bank.

He'd worn the sport coat to the sperm bank because he'd wanted to look professional, he told us. The nurse had given him a clipboard with a packet of forms to fill out. He'd written in his name: Joseph Bimmerman. There were two other guys in the waiting room filling out forms. "And these guys," he said to us, gripping the top of the backwards chair, "they were younger than me. I mean, they were probably still in college. And I thought, what are they doing? How can they be so cavalier about reproducing? And then, of course, I started thinking about me and how irresponsible I

was being. And I looked down at my name, Joseph Bimmerman, and I thought, my mom would shit a brick if she knew where I was. But I really needed the money, because I was fired the other day. Did I tell you that, Ted?"

"No, man. That sucks."

"Yeah, well, no more El Ranchero for me I guess. Fuckers apparently have never been in traffic. Anyway, sitting there in the sperm bank, I started thinking about life, you know, how it's all about reproducing, right? I mean, isn't it a good thing, giving away my little Bimmer Swimmers, keeping the human race alive. I kept going back and forth, looking down at my name, and I started panicking. I mean, like, why are we alive, what's going on?—that kind of thing. And right before I really went over the edge with these uncertainties--"

"Bimmer Swimmers?" Herb said.

"Yeah. And right before I really lost it thinking about all this stuff, my cell phone rang. And I wasn't going to answer because I didn't recognize the number, but I did answer it. The guy on the phone said, 'Is Joseph Bimmerman there?' And I said, 'This is he.' And he said he was calling from the Midwest Insurance Company in Westport. He said they wanted to interview me. I have a fucking interview tomorrow. You believe that? As soon as I got off the phone with him I scratched my name out on the clipboard and gave back to the nurse. She looked at me like I was fucking wacko. I booked the hell out of there. I don't want any little Bimmerman's running around. Could you imagine that? Fuck."

We couldn't imagine it. Bimmerman was a loon. One time, in college, Bimmerman walked into The Shoe Salon wearing nothing but a black sock over his

genitalia. He walked right up to the perky blond says clerk, put his hands on his hips, and asked her if she could fit a size twelve.

"What's with the mustache, Bimmerman," Burt said, putting his arm around Ana's chair.

"You look like a young Alex Trebek," Ted said. We all cracked up with laughter. Ted could occasionally wow us with a surprisingly exceptional observation. Bimmerman did indeed look like a young Alex Trebek. But Bimmerman remained cool, just stroked his mustache and said nothing, poured himself a beer and lit up a cigarette. He looked confident, at ease.

"I wish I would get a call back," Herb said. "I should have picked a different major."

"They'll call," Bimmerman said, his voice crackling with wisdom. "Just takes time."

Was it just a matter of time? Because this was the imperative that had come to rule our lives: where were we going to work? Finding a job was impossible. We hadn't preplanned. The degree, we had let ourselves believe back in school, would be enough. But it was harder than we thought.

Most days—in that foggy interim of joblessness—we did nothing but sit in front of the television high on weed or waiting for someone who had weed to call.

Sometimes we picked at our resumes or made our own profiles on online job-hunting websites. On rare, inspired Saturday afternoons we took the time to print out tens of copies of our resumes and mass-mail them like pizza coupons.

Right away, to our dismay, Herb got a call from a Hollywood producer. The producer was looking for a good creative writer to help with a new ABC prank reality show called *Joke's on You*, which, Herb explained, was some kind of spin-off of the MTV series *Punked.* The rest of us had majored in some aspect of business, which had seemed like a useful and marketable education, and Herb had majored in creative writing. We'd always thought that Herb's major had been ridiculously impractical and self-indulgent and that he would never get a job with a degree in creative writing. Pete was always making fun of Herb's major, in part, because Pete had once asked Herb to critique his story about alien ninjas who turned into robots at night, and Herb's critique had been less than favorable.

But despite our skepticism, Herb acted as though he'd expected a job like this to fall in his lap. "I don't want to sound cocky," Herb told us. "But I'm not that surprised. One of my teachers posted a story of mine on their website. Mr. Star, this producer, had stumbled across it and was really impressed."

Mr. Star from Hollywood? It sounded like a made-up name. We couldn't believe Herb's luck. It was unbelievable that creative writers were in such high demand that a producer from Hollywood would be searching for creative writers in Missouri.

Not too long after Herb told us about the job, we found out the truth. Mr. Star was actually a fourteen year-old kid with an abnormally low voice who mowed lawns in Pete's parents' neighborhood. Pete had given this kid a six pack and a half-pack of smokes to call Herb and pretend he was a Hollywood producer who wanted to offer Herb a job as a creative writer. Not knowing how to end the call, Calvin, the kid with the

abnormally low voice, had told Herb he'd be in touch with further details about the position. Pete had made up his mind to tell Herb the truth, but because of Herb's cockiness about the job, we persuaded Pete to let Herb sweat a little before he spilled the beans.

Then days later, Herb met Pete and Ted up at El Ranchero for dollar pitcher night, and Pete and Ted found out that Calvin had gone rogue.

When Herb came up to meet them at El Ranchero he was carrying a briefcase.

"Why'd you bring a briefcase up here?" Ted said.

"I wanted to show it to you guys," Herb said. "It's for my interview. It's from Turkey. It's a Turkish briefcase. My dad says it's top of the line. You're going on an interview, my dad says, and you need a good Turkish briefcase. Makes you look like you know what you're doing. Feel it."

"Why a Turkish briefcase?" Ted said, putting his fingers on the brown leather.

"Because they have the highest quality," Herb said.

"It is soft," Ted said. "But it kind of looks like a purse."

"Hey," Pete said. "Easy, Ted. Look, Herb, it's a pretty good briefcase, but I wouldn't count on a briefcase getting you a job. I mean, it doesn't work like that."

"I know," Herb said. "I've got this job in the bag anyway."

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure about that job," Pete said.

"It's in the bag," Herb said. "I'll be making six figures easy. My dad and I went looking at Porsches the other day."

"You went looking at Porsches?" Pete said. "How do you know you'll be making six figures?"

"Mr. Star, the producer I told you about, gave me a follow-up call. He assured me that I'd be getting six figures. Also, a time-share in Winter Park."

"Wait a second," Pete said. "What do you mean he gave you a follow-up call? What's he doing giving you a follow-up call?"

"What do you mean, *what's he doing?* That's his job, Pete. He's a producer. He makes follow-up calls."

"That's not his job," Pete said.

"Are you a producer, Pete. Let me ask you something, Pete. What have you produced?"

Pete looked at Ted. Ted looked at Herb. "What has Mr. Star produced?"

"Time Warp and Titanic."

"Titanic?" Pete said. "Are you freaking kidding me? Titanic?"

"Ever heard of it, Pete," Herb said. "The one about the big boat?"

"Jesus," Ted said. "That's a major film."

"What are you talking about, Ted? You know goddamn well Mr. Star didn't produce the Titanic."

"I'm just saying it's a major film," Ted said.

"Why would Ted know something like that?" Herb said to Pete, looking at Ted.

"Goddamn it, Herb," Pete said. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. It was supposed to be a one time thing. Calvin went rogue."

"What are you talking about? What's he talking about, Ted? Who's Calvin?"

"Hey, don't look at me," Ted said.

"Herb, Mr. Star, your producer, he's not a producer."

"How do you know?"

"He's a fourteen year-old kid who lives in my neighborhood. His real name is Calvin."

Herb glared at his briefcase and looked up at Pete. "Whatever—if he's fourteen, how is his voice so low then? Answer me that!"

"He just has an abnormally low voice," Pete said. "He's a freak."

"Is this true?"

"I'm afraid so," Ted said.

Herb didn't say anything for a long time, just stared at his Turkish briefcase. "You guys are dicks. Did everyone know about this?"

"Yeah," Pete said.

"You guys are dicks." Herb grabbed his briefcase and stormed out of El Ranchero, and much later that night he sent out a mass text message to all of us: YOU GUYS ARE DICKS. We felt bad for Herb. Pete felt so bad he called Herb's father and apologized, told his father the joke had gotten a little out of hand but that the briefcase was first rate, a real good investment.

It wasn't too long after that when the insurance company called Bimmerman back. They'd made a mistake, they told him, had gotten his resume mixed up with somebody else's. They wished him well, but they were looking for someone with more experience. We were beginning to realize that the joke wasn't just on Herb. The joke was on all of us. We had spent years in pursuit of generalized bachelor degrees that were of little currency in the post-college world. We felt tricked, bamboozled by the false

promises of our liberal arts education. Experience was everything. Who would be interested in us?

Then, after months and months of false hope, we got bites.

Real employers who were genuinely interested did call. A law firm in Clayton, near Burt's apartment, called Herb. Grover's, a Midwest grocery chain, called Pete. Burt got an interview with a manufacturing firm. Though he had the opportunity Burt didn't want to work for his dad, he told us. He didn't want to be controlled; he wanted to make it on his own. And we all knew what he meant, not wanting to be controlled, wanting to succeed on his own merit, but later, in private, we would question if Burt had what it took to really succeed in anything.

Before our interviews, we researched what to wear, how to carrying ourselves. What questions we were going to be asked, how to answer them. How did our education prepare us for the position of Regional Sales Specialist? Why were we interested in the supermarket industry? Some questions we stumbled through. Some questions we tackled like great philosophical poets. But no matter what the job was, there was always that one impossible question that left us, at least for a moment, completely stunned: *So where do you see yourself in five years?*

We scratched our cheeks. In five years? Ted saw an expo line. Burt's mind went completely blank. Pete imagined himself owning his own drywall company, and Herb thought of risotto. Bimmerman envisioned himself under the cool Californian sun having toe sex on camera with a Pilipino girl named Pai Lee. Of course, we didn't say these things. Eventually—after we caught our breath—we said what they wanted us to say. In

five years, we said, we hoped to have reached a certain level of success at a strong firm like this one, to be a positive part of a professional community. Our interviewers looked reluctant, but eventually they caved.

By the end of that first year after college, we all had jobs. It didn't matter that they were the wrong jobs, that they were positions that didn't require a degree or at least not the degrees that we had spent five or more years working toward. It didn't matter that Herb was just a filing clerk or that Pete was the assistant manager of cart boys and cashiers. Burt got a job in the quality control department of a rubber band factory. Bimmerman eventually got a job selling women's undergarments to discount lingerie stores.

Ted had a few interviews, but none of them called back. He got offered a promotion to assistant manager at El Ranchero. He didn't have any other options, so he took it.

None of us cared that our new jobs were in many ways humiliating and soul-crushing occupations.

We were confident that somehow, eventually, we'd figure everything out.

Besides, these new positions did not define us in any way. These were the jobs meant for other people that we had stolen—borrowed—on our way to the real thing. Our employers didn't know it, but we were using them. We were working under false pretenses. But our employers didn't need to know the truth, as long as we did the work. And we had to admit there was a certain kind of prestige in having our own computers.

Ted didn't have his own computer but was given a log-in to the office computer, so it was almost it same. A computer was important. A computer said: I am important.

We went to meetings, sent out faxes. We braved rush hour traffic on Highway 270. This was the first time we felt like we had really entered the world, and it wasn't so bad.

And a funny thing happened after we got jobs: we didn't stop going out. It almost seemed like we went out more than before. Who went out where and how often was how we judged our allegiance to one another. We sent each other emails or text messages that simply said: *Going Out?* There was always an occasion: Friday night or Saturday night, birthdays and happy hours, Labor Day and President's Day and Memorial Day and Wednesday, or just because the cold weather had come and there was that certain kind of crispness in the air at the end of September that reminded us of high school, of the wide open future of high school.

"Going out" meant getting drinks and looking for girls. The more hair he lost, the less confidence Pete had in talking to any version of female, but he was still all the time giving Herb tips on how to meet girls. It was Pete's contention that Herb was born with a rare condition in which he lacked the appropriate brain synapses to generate any kind of game. This wasn't implausible. Herb was all the time fumbling his words in front of attractive waitresses or other people's girlfriends. Herb had allegedly been laid twice in college, but we were certain that these instances had been somehow accidental, or were just completely made-up.

After breaking up with his Chinese girlfriend, Ted didn't date anyone else. Pete assured Ted he would never find another girl who would tolerate The Puff. Then one

night, when we were all waiting for Ted to finish his shift up at El Ranchero, a girl who worked with him, this tiny, spunky blond server with big hoop earrings named Carla, came up to our table. She asked us if Ted was seeing anyone. "You're talking about The Puff," Pete said. "You're really interested in The Puff?"

It turned out she was. Carla and her friend came out with us to house party in Ballwin, but Ted paid them no attention. He spent the whole night playing pool and watching the Blues lose. We didn't understand why Ted would be so indifferent to beautiful spunky Carla. Toward the end of the night, after everyone had consumed a great deal of keg beer, Pete was making-out with Carla on the couch, and Herb was making-out with Carla's pimple-faced friend. We were happy for Pete and Herb; this was the only time they ever had any luck with girls—when a lot of alcohol was involved and the girls had exhausted their other options.

Later, when Burt asked Ted why he'd given Carla the cold shoulder, Ted told him it had to do with his ex-Chinese girlfriend, Gina. "I miss her," he said. "I think I made a mistake."

Bimmerman fell in love with a mom he met on the internet. She was a single mother named Montana who lived in Wyoming. He happened upon her picture on a social networking site, thought she was attractive, and read in her profile that she was a huge Tony Bennett fan. So he sent her a message.

One time I saw Tony Bennett in a hotel lobby, he wrote her, and Tony Bennett sneezed on me.

You should have saved his snot! she wrote back. I would've bought it from you!

This was how it started.

Next they traded favorite songs. Montana's favorite Tony Bennett song was *Forever.* Bimmerman's was *The Good Life.* We had no idea that Bimmerman listened to Tony Bennett. "I've been listening to Tony Bennett since I was a kid," he assured us.

When he showed us her picture, Burt said, "I don't know why, but she seems like she would be an equestrian."

"A hot equestrian," Pete said. "Which is pretty typical," Pete said. "Equestrians are generally hot."

"Actually, she's not a fan of horses," Bimmerman said.

"How do you know that?" Ted said.

"When she was a girl, she was taking a horseback riding lesson, and her horse got startled by a bee, and reared up and threw her off."

We were amazed that Bimmerman knew such a random, specific detail from Montana's childhood. We were amazed how much he talked about her. "Her daughter is three, and even with her parents' help, she's having a hard time juggling it all. You know, school, work, motherhood." After a few weeks, we felt like we'd known Montana for years. She was studying to become an English teacher because she loved poetry. They started talking on the phone late into the night, and sometimes she would read him her favorite poems by Pablo Neruda and Edna Saint Vincent Millay. "They're really great poems," Bimmerman told us. "Deep, you know? She told me poetry helped her cope with her ex-husband's affair. She thinks that literature might help to better articulate my feelings about my parents' divorce." And we knew that he was falling in love, that it wasn't a superficial infatuation but real, honest-to-God love, because

Bimmerman just wasn't the type of guy who read Edna Saint Vincent Millay, and he never talked about his parents' divorce, not to anyone.

Bimmerman started acting crazy with love. He couldn't sleep. He stopped smoking weed. He craved pea soup. We had never considered that our friend Bimmerman, the young Alex Trebek, the guy who used to sell all of us weed, the guy who walked into The Shoe Salon wearing nothing but a black sock when we were in college, would be capable of pea-soup love. But he had it bad—there was no denying it—the only problem was his girl, Montana, lived over eight hundred miles away, in Cheyenne.

Bimmerman made up his mind to go see her. It was going to be a surprise. He bought a plane ticket and made a reservation at a Holiday Inn. In the weeks leading up to his trip, his imagination wouldn't stop wandering. Sitting at stoplights or standing in elevators or eating dinner with his parents, he would suddenly be transported into the same daydream. In the daydream, Montana faced the bathroom sink in their hotel room wearing his favorite navy blue dress shirt, and as he put his hands on her hips she halted the motion of her toothbrush and smiled a toothpaste smile at his reflection in the mirror. He buried his face into her beautiful brown hair, and as he did, she slid her free hand over his fingers on her hip in a way that said she understood what is was he was trying to satisfy: something sexual and not sexual at all, but a dark, child-like craving.

The week before the trip to see her, he had second thoughts about the surprise factor. She had a job. She had a daughter and would need to get a sitter. He decided to email her: I'm coming to see you…I have to see you…no takebacks—I already have my plane ticket! I can't wait!

But it turned out she wasn't as enthusiastic as he was about him coming to see her. She sent him a return email with the subject line: PLEASE DON'T COME. Right after reading her email, needing to share his tortured confusion with someone, Bimmerman forwarded Montana's email to Ted. He'd forwarded the email in confidence with specific instructions for Ted to not forward the email to anyone else. Right away, Ted forwarded the email to the rest of us, and we couldn't believe what she wrote:

Joseph, I have been sitting in front of this computer screen for twenty minutes not knowing exactly what to say, so I'm just going to write now. I lied to you. I don't want to hurt you anymore than I already have. The truth is, I'm not a single mother. I'm still married. My husband did have an affair, but we never got a divorce. He is on his second tour in Iraq right now. He's been gone for six months already, and I hardly ever get to speak to him...when I do, it's never for very long. I have been so alone in his absence, raising our daughter all alone, and when you and I started talking, it was like my heart woke up again. I know that sounds cheesy, but it's true. You woke up my heart, Joseph. But still, I can't take this any further. My husband made a mistake that hurt me, but I know he loves me and that he is a good man. He is. He's over there fighting for his country, and I can't betray him. I just can't talk to you any longer. I hope you can respect that, and I hope you know I will always hold a place for you in my heart...

"I might be driven to sell your love for peace, or trade a memory of this night for food. It well may be. I do not think I would."

Always,
-M

That night, Bimmerman lay on his bed and listened to his Tony Bennett playlist on his iPod. He turned it up as loud as it would go, letting the heavy weight of heartbreak crush down into him. Laying on his childhood bed and listening to Tony Bennett's mature, melodious voice, he understood what he needed to do. He needed to join the army and fly to Iraq and fight for his country. He fell asleep and dreamt he was crawling up a giant sand dune under the inescapable Iraqi sun as the steady percussion of bullets hammered past him. Helicopters flew overhead. Bombs boomed fireballs in the

distance. "Joseph!" Montana was yelling from the top of the sand dune. "Hurry!" She waved a giant American flag against the harsh desert wind. But the more he crawled the bigger the sand dune became. Progress proved impossible. "Joseph!" Montana wailed. "Joseph! Joseph!"

"Joseph! Wake up, sweetie! You're having a bad dream!" When he opened his eyes, he saw not Montana but his mother, wearing the pink microfiber bathrobe he'd gotten her for her birthday, holding a glass of orange juice.

"Mom?"

"You were having a nightmare, sweetie, that's all."

And as he guzzled down the refreshing orange juice and remerged into conscious life from the cobwebs of sleep, he realized he didn't want to go to Iraq at all. He didn't even know what the war over there was about. But one thing was painfully clear: he needed to move out of his mom's house, ASAP.

Bimmerman and Ted got an apartment together in Des Peres. Ted complained he could hear Bimmerman jerking off at night. Bimmerman was smoking way too much weed, Ted said. Ted didn't mind weed smoke, but did he have to smoke it all the time? And Bimmerman never, ever helped with the dusting or vacuuming, or scrubbed the shower. He was disgusting, Ted said. We felt bad for Ted, but reminded him that Bimmerman had just experienced a horrible heartbreak, and that everyone grieves in different ways.

Ted, Bimmerman told us, was the nicest, cleanest roommate he ever had; Bimmerman loved living with Ted and couldn't imagine a better roommate.

Herb and Pete got an apartment in Manchester, five minutes away from where Ted and Bimmerman lived. According to Pete, to our surprise, they seemed to get along.

"Well I never see him anyway," Pete admitted to us one night up at The Dime. "He's always in freaking class. That's where he's at tonight."

"Herb's getting his Masters?" Burt said. "That's cool. I've thought about that."

"Not his Masters," Pete said. "I guess he's using some of the cash he saved up living with his dad on classes at the St. Louis Institute of the Culinary Arts."

"He's going to cooking school?" Ted said.

"Yeah," Pete said. "Said he doesn't want to be a filing clerk for the rest of his life. I don't blame him. I mean, what's he gonna do anyway, with a degree in creative writing?"

"That's a good point," Bimmerman said.

"Yeah," Ted said. "That is a good point. But Herb's got a good head on his shoulders. He'll figure it out."

"I guess," Pete said. "I mean, Herb's one of my best friends, but he's not as level-headed as you might think."

"What do you mean?" Ted said. "Why do give everyone such a hard time?"

"It's not just me giving him a hard time."

"What is it then?" Ted said.

"He screams, man."

"What does that mean?" Burt said.

"I mean he fucking screams," Pete said.

"OK, so what. I scream," Bimmerman said. "Your mom screams—she screams like a wildcat."

"I'm serious," Pete said. "More than a few times I've come home and caught him screaming in his room. Like really loud. Like angry loud. Just screaming, man. You know? AHHHH! Like that, but louder."

"That's weird," Burt said.

"Yeah, that's a tad odd," Bimmerman said. "Why is he screaming?"

"I don't know. Who fucking knows? Shit, his mom was run over by a bus when he was fifteen. I think he's kind of wacko, you know? Like a little crazy."

We sat in silence over our beers, picturing Mrs. Fremont engrossed in some thrilling romance novel at a stoplight on her lunch break (she was the kind of woman, we had learned from Herb, who read as she walked). We saw the WALK sign across the street light yellow, and we saw Mrs. Fremont's feet begin to move. She didn't have a chance. It was this bus driver's first day on this particular route; he had been distracted by a fly on his windshield coming around the turn, it would later be reported, and hadn't even seen a stoplight. This was the best part of the novel, the part where the protagonist, the lonely government accountant not entirely aware of her striking beauty finds herself trapped in the City Hall elevator with *him*, the giant, muscular firefighter, the one who saved all of those orphans' lives. Their eyes meet in the unmoving elevator—and there is an energy in that elevator, a raw, uncontrollable force, a voracious sexual energy that tingles through this accountant's entire body, that tingles down to Mrs. Fremont's very bones.

And then Mrs. Freemont looks up to see it: the number 14 zooming toward her; her eyes meet the bus driver's eyes; this is the end of her life.

Finally, Burt said, "So what do you do? When he screams?"

"I just knock on his door," Bimmerman said into his beer glass. "And he stops."

"Herb's a pretty cool guy," Burt said. "But that's really fucking weird."

What else could we say? That was all there was to say: Herb was a cool guy, but that was really fucking weird.

"Hey," Pete said. "Anyone wanta play some Golden Tee?"

We played Golden Tee. Whenever we were confronted with a difficult or awkward moment in a conversation, we played Golden Tee. We spent endless hours in the dark, smoky corners of bars, hunched over Golden Tee arcade games, methodically calculating the arcs of our approach shots, the angles of our putt-lines, "Getting"—a phrase Burt coined one night after holing out from the tee on a par four—"geometric on that biatch."

The more and more we continued on in these strange new lives, we became convinced that time had shifted into a higher gear. The small variances in each day seemed to be greatly out-weighed by the consistency of each week. It felt as if we had entered a vast desert of sameness. We became highly accomplished in the art of the morning routine: ironing, shaving, packing our Tupperware with some chips and a sandwich. We knew exactly what second we had to leave our doors to make the stoplights we needed to make in order to ensure we didn't hit bumper-to-bumper on

highway 270, which was like getting hit in the face a thousand times. Rarely did we leave on time.

Ted could never figure out the morning routine. Ted's car keys, Bimmerman told us, were constantly disappearing. More than once, Bimmerman had to drive Ted to work because he didn't know where his car keys were. Later, Ted would find them in an inner jacket pocket or stuffed between couch cushions, or he wouldn't find them at all and would have to get new keys made. Pete started calling Ted "Car Keys Ted," a nickname that at first seemed too obvious to be funny, until it was used in a group setting, in which case it became a three-syllable triumph we couldn't wait to let roll off our tongues.

To escape this sameness, we went out more. We began to explore beyond the yuppiness of Clayton and The Dime, beyond the cultureless sports bars of West County. We journeyed to the butch, blue-collared watering holes of South City. Large chunks of our paychecks were wasted on outrageous bar tabs in red-bricked Soulard or at all night black jack tables in the sad, smoke-filled riverboat casinos. We listened to brass bands and punk bands at downtown blues bars and Dogtown dives, and devoured the ripe, raging rock and hip-hop of University City. We had had no idea that St. Louis oozed with so much music, that St. Louis had such texture and contrast and energy.

The third summer after college Ted recruited us to complete the roster of the El Ranchero softball team. We played softball in the thick, suffocating St. Louis summertime air. Victory on the softball field momentarily filled the aching hunger in our hearts for real accomplishment, but when softball season was over and a chill returned in the air, we felt a sense of unease. The beautiful yellow and cranberry-colored leaves

once again decorating the giant trees of our childhood were glaring reminders of how quickly our lives were moving by.

And what were we doing?

Sometimes, at bars, or at parties, we would find ourselves cornered in conversations with old classmates or really attractive girls, and before we had time to make a small, ice-breaking joke or even just a minor remark about the weather, we would be trapped by that dreadful, defining question: *so what do you do?*

We tried saying that what we did wasn't what we did, not really. That what we did, at the moment, was just to hold us over until we got to what we were really meant for. Time, we tried to say, was all it was, and experience. Knowing someone. We had our degrees, we mumbled. We had graduated from college—if that's what they were asking. But in the end, we were forced to spit out the truth: we were the filing clerk at a personal injury law-firm in Clayton, the assistant night manger at El Ranchero in Ellisville, the assistant cashier-and-cart boy manager at the Grover's Grocer in Des Peres; we double-checked the quality of rubber bands, or sold inexpensive negligees.

During Ana's last year of law school she moved into Burt's apartment officially and it didn't take her long to redecorate. She took down the orangish-purplish painting and hung up in its place a different painting of a cocker spaniel. She put scented candles in every room. But we hadn't fully realized how domesticated Burt had become, not until one night, after a long Golden Tee battle at The Dime, when Bimmerman suggested the idea of going back to Burt's for afterbars. Before Ana had moved in this would've been automatic, but Ana had other plans. "Actually guys," Ana told us, "Burt and I have

a big day planned tomorrow. I have to study, and then we're going shopping for some new linens, and maybe a new television. Do you mind if we just call it a night?"

"Is that cool, guys?" Burt said, looking at Ana.

It was cool. We all had our own places. We knew what happened after a certain point. You got engaged. You moved in together. You shat, or you got off the pot. We knew we had very little to do with this progression: over an indeterminate period of time, it just happened all of a sudden, like an avalanche.

When the Cardinals were in the playoffs, Burt decided to have a keg party at their apartment. Just hours before the game, Herb sent us all a text message: *made roast beef sandwiches for the game*. We couldn't believe that Herb would go to such trouble for us. We hadn't even considered that it might be necessary to bring food. Herb showed up with a giant platter of carefully constructed roast beef sandwiches. We sat on the giant L-shaped couch, mesmerized. The clarity of Burt's new television made LaRussa look older around the eyes. Awesomeness glowed off Pujols' skin. Growing up in St. Louis we had all learned at a young age that being a Cardinals fan was so much more than a seasonal hobby. Cheering for the Cardinals was a physiological need, essential for strong bones and healthy heart muscles, like potassium.

Ted was late. We hadn't even noticed until Herb turned to Bimmerman in the middle of the first inning and said, "Where in the fuck is Ted?"

Bimmerman stroked his mustache with his index finger and surveyed the room. "I'm not sure," Bimmerman said. "How the hell should I know?"

"You're his roommate," Pete said.

"Hey, Burt," Bimmerman said, ignoring Pete and staring at the far corner of the room, "what's with all the red paint?"

"We're going to paint this back wall," Burt said, filling up his beer. "Me and Ana. You know, for the Cardinals. Landlord said it was fine as long as we paint it back before we move."

"Where is she? Ana?" Herb said.

"She's in a study group," Burt said.

"Say, Burt," Pete said, "Have you guys set a wedding date yet?"

Burt shrugged. "We want to wait until she's done with law school."

We all turned back toward the television. We didn't know what to say. It had been years since he'd proposed. We didn't understand the importance of waiting until Ana was done with law school, except to say that as a rule Burt was noncommittal. He was afraid to take the plunge, and we all knew it. We wanted to shake him really hard and tell him to seize the opportunity when he had the chance, that he had this perfect creature in his grasp and if he didn't take action soon she might leave him forever. But before we were forced to say anything else, Ted walked in the door with his Chinese girlfriend.

"Hey guys," Ted said. "You remember Gina?"

She looked different, more sophisticated, dressed in form-fitting blue jeans and a Cardinals jersey. Her boobs looked bigger. We couldn't believe that a girl like that would date Car Keys Ted. But during the next commercial break, as Ted got beers for the two of them and sat down on the couch next to his beautiful Chinese girlfriend, Gina, we noticed something else: Ted was skinny as hell, and the rest of us had let ourselves

go slightly. The sedentary drudgery of our new lives had taken a toll. Even Pete, who had been something of an intramural baseball phenomenon in college, had developed a bit of a beer gut. We looked down into the foamy fluid in our keg cups and silently vowed that at some point in the future we were going to give up drinking all together, and why not caffeine and high fructose corn-syrup and aspartame? We lit up a smoke and settled back into the pace of the game with a new attitude: we were going to get fit.

After the third inning the Cards were up by one, and the game became something of a pitcher's duel. Somebody mentioned college, how long ago it seemed. Pete brought up the time in college when Bimmerman walked into The Shoe Salon wearing nothing but a black sock. "That was a long time ago," Bimmerman said, looking at Gina with a defensive face.

But Pete kept at it. "He did, Gina," Pete said. "He had a crush on this blond sales clerk, and one day he got really wasted and wanted to do something about it. So he walked into The Shoe Salon wearing nothing but black sock over his stuff, you know, and asked her if she could fit a size twelve." We all laughed at that. Gina had heard the story many times before, but she pretended she was hearing it for the first time and cracked-up with laughter. That story got everyone every freaking time. But Bimmerman wasn't laughing. After the heartbreak from Montana from Wyoming, he had transformed into a sadder version of the Bimmerman we used to know. He said, "Shut up, Pete. Why don't you eat a roast beef sandwich and shut up."

It was clear that Pete was hungry and had forgotten about the roast beef sandwiches, because right after Bimmerman reminded him he turned to the tray of

sandwiches and made himself a plate. "The sauce is a mixture of cucumber and horseradish I've been perfecting. The cheese is Havarti," Herb said.

"They're delicious," Gina said.

We all agreed that they were indeed delicious.

"They're just sandwiches," Herb said, nonchalantly. "It's not like they're braised lamb chops or anything."

Braised lamb chops? We were grateful for the sandwiches, but we secretly believed that Herb's culinary confidence was no different than his creative writing confidence had been, a disillusionment he allowed himself in order to cope with the truth: he was just an ordinary guy. Still it couldn't be denied that the sandwiches were great. "These are great," Pete said, standing to the side of the couch, devouring a mouthful of sandwich. Then something happened. Pete was gagging. Was he gagging? He started smacking the top of the end table with an open palm. At first we thought it was just Pete being Pete, trying to get one of us to look like a fool. But then Ted said with an unusual sense of urgency, "I think he's choking," and all of us sat glued to our chairs, trying to figure out if he did in fact have a large chunk of roast beef stuck in his airway or if it was just a prank, in which case each of us refused to be the one to fall for it. We waited for Pete to unclench his face and scream: "GOTCHA!" But he didn't. It wasn't a prank. "DOES ANYONE KNOW THE HEIMLECH!" Herb's voice was bigger than it had ever been. Tears came down Pete's face. He looked to be in the worst kind of agony, and he started waving his hands toward his face. Herb seemed to understand Pete's confusing dactylology because he ran into the kitchen and came back out with a glass of water and gave it to Pete. And as Pete took his first sip he looked like he was going to keel over

and die, right there in Burt's apartment, but then he started looking OK, breathing these slow and measured breaths. We watched him as carefully as we had ever watched anything in our lives, beginning to monitor our own breaths, remembering oxygen, oxygen, oxygen—never again would we take it for granted. We wanted to plant trees. We wanted to donate money to one of those environmental groups who focused on saving the Amazon. We couldn't believe what they were doing down there, killing off all that rainforest, destroying such a vital organ of our world.

"Are you all right? Herb said, putting a hand on Pete's shoulder as Pete leaned back into the couch.

"I think I'm OK," Pete said, breathing hard. "Man, this happened a couple weeks ago."

"Really?" Burt said. "What's wrong with you?"

"It's my esophagus," Pete said, staring at the floor. "I was recently diagnosed with eosinophilic esophagitis. I didn't think it was that serious, but I guess it is."

"E, O, what?" Bimmerman said.

"EE for short. It's a chronic disease where my esophagus gets inflamed, for whatever reason I don't know. And sometimes food gets caught. It's called food impaction."

"Jesus," Herb said. "I thought you were going to die. I thought I was going to get manslaughter for slicing the roast beef too thick."

"No, I wasn't choking like that," Pete said. "It wasn't caught in my airway. It was caught in my esophagus. You can still breathe, but it feels like that. It feels like your choking."

Pete just stared at the floor with a hard face. Sweat glistened on his temples. We stared at him, at his thinning hair, his hard, pale face, his deceptively normal-looking throat, and we had glimpse then of what was coming: of old age, of death.

Then, on the television, there was a crack of the bat. Pujols had hit one deep to left field. Way deep—no question it was gone. Gone? It was upper-deck. The Houston fans were silenced. We broke out in a roar. Pete made no noise whatsoever but shook his fists in the air. We couldn't believe it. Our playoff hopes were still alive. Pete looked relieved. A half-inning later the Cardinals had won the game, and we realized then that in the grand scheme of our short, fragile existences, the only thing we could truly count on to provide pure, uncorrupted joy was the clutch-hitting in October.

But the Cardinals didn't make it to the Series that year, and things went back to normal. We fell back into step with the monotony of the jobs we hated. Sometimes we would see a commercial or have a conversation with our parents that would inspire us to apply for different jobs, but they always seemed to be jobs that we didn't really want, or weren't in any way qualified for. We went out more. Herb quit his job, and went to work in the kitchen of El Ranchero while he finished up with cooking school. It counted as an internship, he told us. As practice for one of his finals, Herb had everyone over to his and Pete's apartment and made us his new spicy eggplant recipe.

When Ted showed up with Gina, we knew it was getting serious again.

After everyone sat down at the table and we began to dig in, Bimmerman said, "How come Burt didn't' come over?"

"I don't know," Herb said. "He never responded to my email."

"He's feeling pretty down," Ted said.

"Down about what?" Pete said.

“You didn’t hear?” Ted said.

“Hear what?” Pete said.

“Burt got fired.”

“From the rubber band factory?” Bimmerman said.

“Yeah,” Ted said. “Apparently he didn’t show up for work a few times, and they fired him.”

“I think you told me that, Ted. But I’ll be honest I’ve been smoking a great deal of weed lately.”

“That’s an understatement,” Ted said.

“So why doesn’t he go work for his dad?” Herb said. “I mean his dad owns part of a sky scraper in Kansas City, doesn’t he?”

“I don’t think he’s talking to his parents. I think he had a falling out. His dad, I think, thinks he’s wasting his life.”

“Wow,” Pete said. “I can’t imagine not talking to my parents.”

“Me neither,” Herb said. “My dad is my best friend.”

“So what about Ana,” Bimmerman said. “What does she think?”

“You guys seriously didn’t hear about this?”

“Hear about what?” Pete said. “What happened?”

“Ana left him. For some guy. Some astronaut.”

“An Astronaut?” Bimmerman said. “I thought Burt and Ana were madly in love or something.”

"I don't know," Ted said. "He said she told him he just didn't have the kind of passion that she needed in a man. That he wasn't driven enough. She moved out, gave the ring back and everything."

"Wow," Pete said. "I thought they were going to make it."

"Well," Bimmerman said, with just enough sadness to remind us of Montana from Wyoming, "girls are unpredictable."

"Yeah," Ted said. "I guess it doesn't always work out the way you think it will."

"Well, I feel bad for Burt, but you guys are bringing me down," Gina said. "Can I say something positive? This is great eggplant," Gina said to Herb. "Awesome. You're a good cook, sweetie."

"Thanks," Herb said. "The thing is though, now that I'm actually working in a kitchen, you know, at El Ranchero, I'm not sure if I want to do it for the rest of my life. I mean, I never realized the back of the house was such ass-kicking work."

"Jesus," Pete said. "You're lost."

"You're talented," Gina said. "I think you should realize that." She smiled and raised her glass. Herb blushed. "Cheers, Chef Herb," Pete said. We cheersed to Chef Herb, and none of us took much notice, not even Ted, that Gina was just drinking water while the rest of us were drinking Herb's wine. We would realize it weeks later though, when we got that text message from Ted that almost brought us to tears: I'm going to be a father, boys.

One of *us*, The Puff, our friend Car Keys Ted, was going to be a dad.

Car Keys Ted—Fatherhood? It was baffling.

Burt stopped going out. That's how we knew how bad it was. That's how we knew he was sinking into a deep, deep despair that would never entirely go away. We knew that Ana had destroyed something in his heart, a crucial, hard-to-get-to part of his heart—and we wanted to tell Burt that it would be OK eventually, that, over time, he would get back to normal and find someone to replace her—but we couldn't. Bimmerman constantly reminded us that we couldn't. "How do you replace a moon goddess? How do you get back to normal after part of your heart has been destroyed?"

In the following days and weeks after we'd learned the news of Burt at Herb's dinner we found out more about this other guy, the astronaut. The guy's name was Freddy Wicker. She'd met him at school. He'd given a speech in one of her classes about attention to detail in the workplace. Detail in his job was incredibly important. He was an astronaut. It started out as just a cup of coffee, and one thing had led to another. It wasn't like she didn't care about Burt, Ana told Herb when he called her (Herb had to hear it from the horse's mouth, he told us), but it was just that she had fallen in love with somebody else. Burt just didn't have any direction, she told Herb. Burt just didn't have any passion for anything. We all tried calling Burt, but he wouldn't pick up his phone. He wouldn't answer his texts. His email account had been set on auto-reply. We went by his house and nobody answered his door, nobody looked to be home. He'd banished himself. We thought we'd lost him forever, and who did Freddy Wicker think he was? An astronaut? A freaking astronaut?

Herb got the key to Burt's from Ana. He sent us an email with only a subject line: SHE GAVE ME THE KEY TO BURT'S.

I thought you already had a key because you and Burt were lovers, Pete wrote back.

Ted didn't write anything but sent a picture of Clay Aiken holding an ice cream cone.

Bimmerman wrote, Please refrain from sending any personal emails to this address.

In twenty-four point font, Pete wrote, CAR KEYS TED IS A FUCKBAGGER.

Herb replied: Meet over at our apartment after work, and we're going to rescue Burt from the abyss of isolationism he is surely drowning in during this dark, debilitating period.

Pete replied, That creative writing is really coming in handy, huh Herby?

Pete bought a case a beer after work, and we all hopped in Bimmerman's truck and headed to Burt's. When we got to his apartment, not surprisingly, nobody answered the door, so Herb unlocked it.

We couldn't believe what we found.

Burt was sitting on the couch watching a muted infommercial in a dirty track suit, looking like he had just woken-up from a long, bear-like hibernation. We could smell his body odor, and he needed a shave really bad. And painted all over in red paint on the white wall of his apartment were numbers and mathematical symbols. The whole wall was covered in what looked to be a series of mathmetical formulas. We considered that in his hermitage Burt might've tapped into a genius corner of his mind that he hadn't known about before, and in doing so had been able to solve the great Eisteinian blunder of The Standard Model, bringing together the impossible marriage of general relativity

with quatamn mechanics, forming a complete and accurate theory of everything. We all knew about this theory because we all liked to watch the Science Channel late at night, stoned. And for a moment, standing in Burt's basement looking at the impossible maze of red numbers on the wall, we realized how connected we all were to each other and to all other forms of energy, how the entire universe lived inside each of us, how the entire universe was trying to understand itself through each of us: we realized that we were nothing but mere conduits of understanding.

Then, after looking at the wall for what seemed like a long silence, Herb said, "Isn't that the quadratic equation?"

"Yeah," Bimmerman said. "That's the quadratic equation."

"Isn't that for parabolas?" Pete said.

"What's the parabola again?" Ted said. "I hated math."

"I don't know why I painted it all over my wall. I had to memerize it in College Algebra, and I just knew it, you know? I just wanted to look at a formula I knew. I was always good at math. It made sense. I just kept painting it and painting it on my wall. I don't know why."

"Have you gone Wacko Jacko on us?" Pete said, grabbing two beers from his case and handing one to Burt. "Get a grip, man. Take a shower."

Burt took a breath. "I know, you're right. I know." Burt looked down at his dirty track suit, took a sip of beer. We knew he was relieved to see us.

"Is the parabola the one that we used those big calculators for?" Ted said.

"Can I get one of those?" Herb said, talking about Pete's beer.

"Yeah, can I get one too?" Bimmerman said.

We all sat down in front of the big screen sipping beers, and as Burt flipped through the silent channels, Bimmerman said, “Hey, did you hear Car Keys Ted here is going to be a dad?”

“I’m terrified,” Ted said. “I want to shit my pants all the time.”

“That’s pretty cool," Burt said. "So you getting married, then?”

“Yeah,” Ted said. “I guess at some point. I don’t know. And hey, you better pull yourself together because you’re going to be the best man.”

“I’m not the best man?” Pete said.

“Shutup, Pete,” Herb said.

“Well, I think I might need a job, Ted. If you’re hiring at El Ranchero,” Burt said.

“Ted and I will have to interview you,” Herb said.

“So where do you see yourself, Burt,” Ted said, “in five years?”

Wacko Burt gave us all a crazy look, grinned, and from deep in his belly he let out a loud, crazy-man scream. We didn’t know how to respond to that, not at first, not until Chef Herb followed with an equally loud, equally crazy scream. Pretty soon we were all screaming, as loud as we could.