

VICIOUS CHILDREN AND OTHER STORIES

by

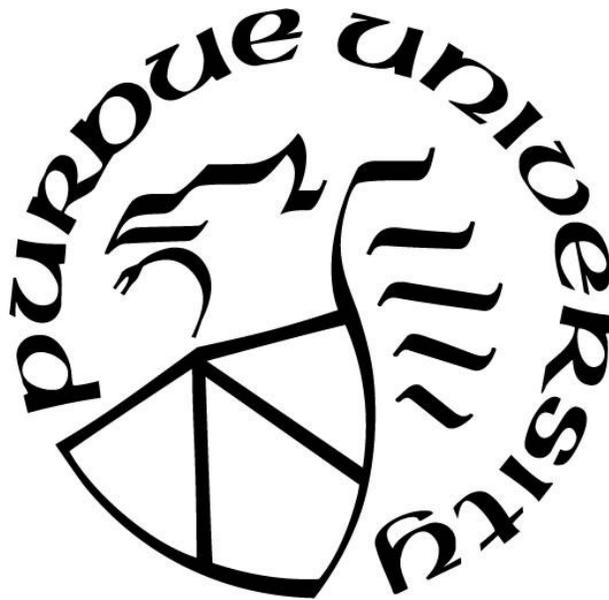
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All of my writing is dedicated to Sophie, in some way or another.

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ABSTRACT

Vicious Children and Other Stories contains four stories, each concerned in their own way with boyhood, friendship, masculinity, and alienation. *Vicious Children* is a novella that follows two brothers, Jesse and Danny, as they explore a time in which their roles in their community and family are changing. In “What Else Are We Going to Do With Them?” a group of young boys fight betta fish to the death, leaving one of the boys, Josh, questioning his enjoyment of the fight. “Gash” deals with the main character, Adam’s, memory of a traumatic event in contrast to the lighthearted way he and his family tell the story in the present. Finally “Don’t You Have a Name?” follows Zach, a content moderator for a social media platform, who finds that, although he excels at the job, it comes at the cost of his mental health.

VICIOUS CHILDREN

PART ONE: SUMMER

I

It was detasseling season in Thrace, Illinois, late June, the air bubbling over with humidity and heat and the lonely chorus of cicadas that littered the town and surrounding fields. This meant that, like most of the other teens who were too young to get a job elsewhere, Jesse woke up at four in the morning to meet at the designated parking lot outside of the Schute farms, where they'd be taken out into the fields to work until the early afternoon. After staring at the ceiling for a few minutes, he dug the gunk from his eyes that had built up while he slept and stretched. Looking over, he saw his friend Mark already staring out the window.

“You sleep at all?”

“A little,” Mark said, although Jesse could see from the droop of his eyes that he was probably lying.

Two weeks before, Mark's parents had dropped Mark off to stay with Jesse's family for a couple weeks. Mark had already been staying at Jesse's a lot anyway, so it didn't seem like that much of a change except now he ate dinner with them and was expected to keep up on chores while he was there. Mark's sister Vera had died in her crib that winter—SIDS, no one's fault—and now his mom was going to stay with her sister for a few weeks.

There were rumors floating around town about what happened, the most typical being that Mark's mother was hysterical, terrorizing Mark and his father, and the most bombastic being that his father had told her to leave after an argument about sex. Jesse remembered his mother cussing about one of the older neighbors who, upon telling her about the latter rumor, said, “Yeah, it's a real shame, a fella gets put in that position,” making sure to tell Jesse that people ought to mind their own business.

Jesse had been at Mark's house though, and the truth was that their arguments were a lot more boring than anything people dreamed up, which had a lot more to do with daytime soaps than reality, he thought. They argued a lot—screaming, throwing things sometimes—about the same things most families Jesse knew argued about. They argued over who cleaned, over who should pay which bills, over which bills they could pay late with all of their medical expenses.

Jesse and Mark slowly started to spend less time there, and more time at an abandoned house off Greer Lane, where they would go to smoke cigarettes and dig through the debris of the family that had lived there before.

In his bedroom, Jesse could smell the cream of wheat and eggs cooking in the kitchen. His mom must have been up already, although she normally got up as Jesse and Mark were leaving for the Schute farms. He stood up and slid into the pants he'd worn the day before, stiff with dirt and sweat. "Well, if you aren't going to sleep you might as well eat something."

Mark stood up, "Yeah, I know," he said, not making any further effort to get dressed.

"You'll be bitching all day if you don't."

"Yeah, fuck off, I get it," he said, finally digging through the clothes that he still kept in the surprisingly light backpack that he'd brought over where he kept two pairs of pants, four shirts, as many pairs of socks and underwear, a toothbrush, and a can of the kind of deodorant that choked out every high school locker room in the United States.

Down the hallway in the kitchen, Jesse walked in to see his mother already in the uniform she wore as a food server at the local nursing home. An incredibly short woman, the stove came up almost to her sternum, and since she had to lift her arm relatively high to stir, she looked, to Jesse, particularly determined to stir the cream of wheat in the pot. She turned around when she heard Jesse's shuffling feet. "Morning, hon, is Mark up yet?"

"Yeah, he'll be out in a minute. Working early?"

"No," she smiled, "I've got big news."

Jesse raised his eyebrows. "What kind of big news?"

"Just you wait until your papa and Mark are out here. Papa'll want to be here when I say it."

"Oh, okay," maybe because he was still tired from staying up late to watch Argento's *Deep Red* the night before (he and Mark often stayed up late watching old horror movies they could find for free on YouTube, which meant they watched a lot of Italian giallo films), but he couldn't think what surprise might be in store. Instead, he filled a mug with coffee, asking his mother if she had had any already, and thought about the images circling around in his head from the movie: the panning shots from the killer's point of view as they surveyed a desk strewn with child's toys, the tingle he and Mark both felt at the camera positioned behind a hand gloved in leather as it reached out to grab a woman by the hair or stab a man, the unseen eyes that

penetrated the dark and, Jesse's favorite, the shots that switched rapidly between the killer's and victim's eyes.

For Jesse at least, it wasn't the violence that excited him—he often felt his stomach churn unpleasantly at most movie violence, even if every time Mark covered his eyes and said “this is sick, dude,” Jesse made sure to remind him how fake the blood looked, too red, not worth being shocked about. What he loved was the power of observing when, in his own life, he felt so *observed*. Ever since his brother Danny had gone to prison for selling prescription drugs behind the high school, his parents had kept a tight leash on him, and although he didn't mind having to work in the summer or wrestle during the school year, their obsession over what he was doing, where he was going, and who he was with when he left the house (he wasn't aloud to hang out with anyone they hadn't met), made making friends difficult, especially in his first year of high school. His solution, more often than not, was to wait until they went to bed to sneak out of the house, always careful that they never found out.

Of course, after Danny's arrest a lot of the kids who used to invite Jesse out to bike or play basketball at the rec center started getting nervous about being seen with him by their parents, and by middle school this attitude had worked its way into the parents as well, as if, by the time he'd turned thirteen, he'd used up his store of childhood innocence and was now susceptible to the same influences as Danny was, often addressed as “that other Kaczmarek boy,” instead of his own name by adults who had known his older brother.

By then, too, the other kids had caught on to the fact that the Kaczmarek family was tainted, taking free reign to insinuate that Danny was “someone's bitch” in prison. Although he'd always been close with Mark, their friendship had been solidified when Mark got detention on his behalf for punching Chet Wilson when, before a geometry exam, he made a joke about calculating the circumference of Danny's asshole before and after prison.

Coming to, he asked his mom if she needed help with breakfast.

“Nope, I'm just about done. Why don't you go make sure everyone's awake.”

As Jesse made his way down the hallway, his father stepped out of his own room, scratching his chin and saying “Mornin’,” which was, as most of his greetings were, kept at a few syllables.

“Mornin’,” Jesse mirrored back, turning quickly into his own room where Mark was lying down, finally asleep on the sleeping bag he'd brought over, even though he could have

stayed in Danny's room where there was still an unused bed. Jesse took a rubber band off his desk and shot it at him. "Wake up, butthead."

Mark pawed at his face. "Fine."

"Don't you sass me, young man," Jesse said, picking up another rubber band.

"If you fling that, so help me—" Mark started, as he was interrupted by a rubber band hitting him on the lip. He sprang from the ground, his wrestler's body geared towards explosive movement, and before Jesse could react Mark had his hips pinned to the ground and his arms barred.

"Alright, alright," Jesse said, "I get the point."

Mark rolled him over like a gator, somehow standing already by the time Jesse realized what was going on. Mark sniffed at the air like a dog, the smell of bacon now flooding the small house. "Marge is fucking awesome. You and Rick better be nice to her," he said, making his way to the kitchen.

With everyone at breakfast, their plates and bowls loaded with food, their cups with coffee and juice, Margot wasted no time in getting everyone's attention. "Jesse, your father and I have good news."

"So I've been told. What's up?"

She grabbed Rick's hand, folding it between hers. "Danny's getting out early on good behavior."

This didn't come as a surprise to Jesse, or anyone else for that matter. Outside of drug use and occasionally selling to make a few dollars, he'd been an A student who was set up to go to U of I on a scholarship, and spent whatever time he wasn't at school, working at Walmart, or driving around with his friends either playing video games or reading. He'd also been the one to teach Jesse how to ride a bike when he was too afraid, when to throw a bottle rocket at the right time so it would shoot up into the air instead of towards the ground, and how to memorize his multiplication and division tables.

In fact, most people were surprised at the length of his sentence—initially seven years—for a first time offense, but with the introduction of opioids into south central Illinois as a common drug, the new judge who presided over his trial felt it necessary to make a point to deter others, not that that seemed to work much to Jesse, since the last six years had seen a rise in

overdoses, mostly by people his parents' age who were trying to deal with the back pain and stress of their jobs.

"So, when'll he be back?"

"Next week!" she said, throwing her hands out to the sides of her head. "Isn't that great?"

Jesse nodded. "Yeah."

"We're supposed to be there on Saturday at eight. Do you guys want to come with us?"

"If I'm invited, I'd like to," Mark said. Since he was always around the house with Jesse, Danny had been a surrogate brother to him, even offering to drive him home from wrestling practice when he had to pick Jesse up. Jesse knew that Mark missed Danny, probably more than he did.

"And you, Jes?" Marge asked, using the nickname that Jesse hated because, he thought, it made him sound like a girl.

"I guess," he said, starting to feel like there was something wrong with him for not being happy about it.

"Don't get too excited," Rick butted in, his voice sharp with accusation.

Jesse clinched his fists tight. His parents had criticized that he hardly ever went with them to see Danny anymore when they made the drive out to Pinkerville. "It's not that I'm not excited. It's just," he paused. Everyone was looking at him, waiting for him to finish. "I don't know why you want me to pretend that everything's normal."

"Nobody's asking you to do that," Marge said. "We understand you might be nervous, but he's your brother."

"Yeah, a lot of good that's been lately."

Marge put her spoon down. "You will not talk about your own brother that way."

"You can't tell me how to think about this, mom, I'm sorry, but—"

Rick cut in, "No, but you can keep that shit to yourself."

"You would say that," Jesse said, although now no one reacted directly to what he said.

Marge turned to Rick. "I just don't understand."

"Don't worry, he'll come around," he said. They continued talking as if Jesse and Mark weren't there.

Jesse looked over at Mark, who was twirling his spoon around in his cream of wheat. He looked up and shrugged at Jesse. Jesse scarfed the rest of his food and slung his backpack, where

he kept his gloves, work shirt, and a half gallon jug of water, across his back. He motioned for Mark to come along.

“Thank you for breakfast,” Mark said, grabbing his own pack, and they were out the door.

II

Off to the side of a dirt road that ran through one of the Schute corn fields, Jesse and as many young teens as could fit in the trailer hitched to the back of Marlon Schute’s F250 huddled around, stood around smashing the orange and black bugs that lay scattered on the ground able only, it seemed, to chirp impotently and track the boys’ movements with their bulging red eyes, as if their thin legs and small wings couldn’t move their stubby bodies, roughly the size of a man’s thumb. There was, upon getting a good stomp in, a satisfying crunch, the boys thought, as they paced along the dirt road that took them to the fields throughout the day.

Jesse was more or less content to do this until Marlon, cousin of the field’s owner, told them which rows to detassel that day. Although he was typically used to it after two weeks, he was aware that day of the sun bearing down on him, the rays of light on a clear day something, he thought, like an angel might present itself in the Old Testament: an indescribable force that made him shield his eyes, or else. As he pulled his hat lower over his eyes, he noticed Mark, examining one of the cicadas, turning a leaf over to get a better look at the cicada, which seemed to hunker down, slowly retracting its spindly legs under its body and tucking its wings.

Jesse’s mom always referred to Mark as a “gentle giant,” but Jesse didn’t think that Mark cared particularly about the bugs. He could see from the crushed carapaces on the ground around his friend that he clearly wasn’t watching his step. At first, he wondered if Mark had noticed some singularly interesting cicada, but as he walked up to him he couldn’t see anything unusual. It was just like the other ones, he thought, but he asked, “What’s up with that one?” anyway.

Mark looked up, blinking and disoriented, as if he didn’t know exactly how he’d gotten where he was. He looked at the bug and then at Jesse. “Nothing.”

“Look, I’m sorry about earlier,” Jesse said.

“You’re just saying that.”

Jesse couldn’t really argue with that—he wasn’t actually sorry—but he didn’t know what the big deal was. “What, am I just supposed to be happy? What about all the shit Danny’s put my the rest of us through?”

“Jesse—” Mark interrupted himself, carefully letting go of the leaf with the cicada.
“Never mind.”

Jesse sometimes wondered what was going on in Mark’s head, but didn’t know how to ask. Mark had a knack for giving short responses that could be, at times, enigmatic, although most people (Jesse sometimes included) thought it was just because Mark wasn’t too damn smart. This habit of Mark’s had led to him being dubbed Lenny after their freshman lit class read *Of Mice and Men*, although Jesse would challenge anybody to a fight on Mark’s behalf—a practice that, given Jesse’s diminutive size compared not only to Mark but many of the other children at school, was its source of ridicule which landed him the nickname George. Both Jesse and Mark held out some hope that most people would forget John Steinbeck existed, much less two characters from one of his books, by the time their sophomore year started.

Before Jesse could say anything, Marlon, who was studying agriculture at the local community college stepped out of the truck, where he waited in the air conditioning to hear from Ollie Schute, who managed the whole farm. He tucked his shoulder length blond hair behind his ears as he adjusted his Monsanto cap and paired the boys off, pointing them in the direction they were supposed to go and giving them a rough indicator of where to stop and what time he’d be back, as if “late morning” meant the same thing to everybody.

Most of the kids took off in the direction Marlon pointed, the younger and more enthusiastic ones running, although Chet, of all people, complained to Marlon that he wanted to be paired with Kate Lynn Parks. They were as much of a thing as they could be in a group of teenagers hired to rip off corn genitals for four weeks. It was the kind of showy thing that always annoyed Jesse, all the worse that it was Chet. *We get it*, Jesse thought, *you have sex or whatever*.

Marlon laughed, “Woo boy, if you aren’t careful we’ll have to detassel you.” A couple of the boys whooped, but most people rolled their eyes.

When he got to Jesse and Mark, he said “Alright lovebirds, take off over towards those trees over there,” pointing vaguely at a small stand of trees off in the distance.

“Any questions?” He asked to anyone still standing around as he stepped into his truck. When no one answered, he told the boys to watch the time if they want a ride and drove off, kicking up dust.

Jesse and Mark made their way down the rows, snapping premature tassels off each plant and tossing them on the ground. The leaves, meshed together, formed a sort of room around the two as they worked, speaking to the rows that came up just past Mark's eyes, their backs to each other. The only evidence of the others was their orange caps bobbing up and down the rows and the occasional shriek or laugh as they goofed around. Jesse could feel the sweat beading inside of his gloves already. By the end of the day, he'd have a good bit of skin missing from his hands if he didn't find a chance to air them out, unlike Mark, whose hands, calloused by corn and weightlifting, were hard and dry like their fathers'. For a while they were quiet, the only sounds the clanging of the water jugs they'd tied to their backpack straps that banged against their legs.

Throwing a tassel on the ground, Jesse fished around in his backpack, pulling out a smashed red and white pack of cigarettes from his backpack. Marlboro reds were what most of the boys who didn't chew smoked, their bitter taste and strong smell making them, of course, superior to lighter varieties. Jesse bought them from an older guy in the neighborhood who everyone knew sold them to minors for ten dollars a pack. He took one out and placed it between his lips, already dry and flaking against the paper. Lighting it, he bumped Mark on the shoulder and held the pack out to him. When Mark turned around to grab one of the smokes from him, Jesse interrupted him before he could say thanks. "You alright man?"

Mark lit his cigarette, ducking his head so no one else could see what he was doing. "I'm fine, just restless is all."

"Bullshit," Jesse said, coughing as he inhaled.

"I just think you should be less of a bitch to your family."

"What? I can't force myself to be excited."

"Look, I know Danny fucked a lot of stuff up for you guys, but fuck what anyone thinks about you because of that. Get your shit together."

"I don't know," Jesse said, "I guess I could try to find the bright side."

Mark turned around to face Jesse. "Your brother's coming back. There's your bright side."

Jesse wished he could evaporate into the air unnoticed. Of course he shouldn't expect Mark to be sympathetic to his relatively minor problems. He realized that his own family had always been a surrogate for Mark's, whose dad had never done anything more fatherly than, after Mark's mother left, leaving a can of corned beef hash out for Mark to make for breakfast on the

first day of his detasseling job. Hell, he didn't even bring Mark and his stuff over to Jesse's house when Mark made the move. He just called Jesse's house and, when Jesse answered, asked in his slow half-drunk voice if his mom was home. When they worked out the details, he just said Mark would be by soon. He showed up with only a slim backpack full of things.

Mark kept detasseling, bending the top of the stalk until he heard a snap and quickly ripping it away from the plant to minimize the damage to the plant. He picked up the pace, his arms machinelike as they broke and tore: bend, rip, step, bend, rip, step. Jesse had to work to keep up, his fingers rolling around in his wet gloves, the muscles in his hand burning with the effort, his back cramping as Mark still made quicker progress than he could. It was clear that he was trying to leave Jesse behind until, out of nowhere, he stopped. And just said "Coyotes," in the two syllable way he had: coy-oats.

As Jesse made his way to where Mark was, he could smell the den, the musky odor of wet fur and rotting meat, the iron of old blood. From the looks of it, the den was recently abandoned, probably because of all the people stirring about, and there were still clumps of fluffy gray and brown hair from the coyotes shedding their winter coats. He bent down to get a closer look at the depression in the ground, and thought of the pack that lived out behind his house in the stand of brambles, the way they slunk around at night, how he could hear them chase down a deer, yipping as the larger animal heaved and moaned, although most of their hunts were probably small neighborhood cats and dogs that people left out. He stood up and looked at Mark. "Sure stinks."

Since they'd started around six, Marlon was back just after eleven in the morning. Although everyone had brought their own lunch or was waiting to eat at home, he took a sack from his truck and passed everyone ham and cheese sandwiches, now slightly above room temperature, and a bottle of water, still frozen and undrinkable. "Here's your bonus. Don't spend it all in one place," he said as he made increasingly daring tosses with the sandwiches, throwing Jesse's to him like a frisbee.

Since Jesse and Mark had already eaten their lunches while waiting for Marlon to show up, they decided to play a game after he started the truck again. They each took the top piece of bread off their sandwich, revealing sweaty, sticky American cheese, and stuck the sandwiches cheese-first onto the truck's tailgate to see whose would hold the longest. A couple of the other

kids took interest, supporting one sandwich over another based on slapdash criteria—the sogginess of each remaining piece of bread, the fact that Mark’s sandwich had a fold of ham sticking out of the top that flapped in the breeze—until, hitting a large rock, Jesse’s was thrown to the side of the road, where a turkey vulture landed as soon as the truck moved on.

While picking up their bikes in the parking lot, Jesse and Mark were approached by Josh, one of the boys who had taken an interest in their sandwich competition and had been trying to convince Mark to try for varsity wrestling when school started. He made his way to them doing small bunny hops on his bike, catching himself when he almost fell over and saying, “I’ve never tried it before,” to Jesse as if he cared how well someone could jump on their BMX bike.

“You have to point your toes,” Jesse said.

Josh looked blankly for a moment before saying, “Thanks,” although he wasn’t looking for advice. “Me and my buddy were looking for someone to play a little basketball with. You guys got time for a few games? We’ve seen you guys at the rec center.”

Jesse looked over at Mark.

“You know I don’t have shit to do, let’s go.”

“Alright, we’re in.”

The four boys rode shirtless through the streets toward the rec center, their bodies shiny-pale where their work shirts covered them in the morning. Jesse’s hair, which his dad called girly because of his long bangs that hung over his forehead, kept blowing in his eyes as he followed Mark, whose back, he thought, looked lean but bulky, his lats widening as he dug his arms into his bike handles in a way that Jesse didn’t remember. He thought about how he looked in the mirror, still athletic but not in the way that looked impressive. His arms were still spindly, his neck long and thin. He thought he looked a little bit like a chicken with no feathers. He wrestled, too, but in the smallest weight class of any of the guys on the freshman team, which meant half the time he was wrestling girls—which, depending on who he was talking to, made him lucky because *dude, what if they’re like, really hot*, or unlucky because *I don’t know how you don’t get a boner dude*, but really he tried not to think about it, and he didn’t know why anybody else would. He was just there to wrestle.

When they got to the rec center, they settled on the game: twenty-one, if your team goes over you drop down to thirteen, make it take it, best two out of three. Jesse and Mark normally played a few times a week, just the two of them, although they knew that Jesse would win horse,

and Mark would win one-on-one without variation, so they fell into a natural rhythm between the two of them in the first game, with Jesse either taking a shot or running a screen so Mark could get a layup in. Although their strategy was simple (too simple—if anyone who actually played basketball seriously played them, they'd be toast), Jesse liked feeling as if they could read each other's minds. He could look almost instinctively to where Mark was on the court, ready to react to whatever Jesse had in mind.

In the first game, it almost felt cheap using the make it take it rule, but when Jesse offered not to do it Josh told him not to get cocky, clearly insulted at the idea he couldn't overcome what Jesse considered an unfair rule in the first place, relishing, as it did, in giving the advantage to the winning team. They won the first game 21-10.

At the start of game two, Josh's friend checked the ball at Jesse hard, jamming his wrist. Without thinking, he took his left arm away to shake the hand, making a wild pass to Mark that almost went out of bounds until Josh got it and took it to the net. Jesse held his wrist, trying to roll it out. "Man, fuck you."

The guy shrugged, smirking. "Sorry."

"Sorry my ass. You know how to check." Jesse looked over to Mark, who looked him in the eye and nodded, and although he wasn't entirely sure what it meant, he felt assured simply because it was Mark. When he checked the ball, he stayed back, letting Josh take a long shot that Mark snagged and ran to the other half of the court, passing to Jesse who was able to make a clear three pointer. They went on to win the second game, too, although this time it was closer.

Jesse was ready to leave, after the bad check. They'd planned on going to the house off Greer Lane after detasseling, and he was itching to go. The house was, as far as Jesse could tell from what he'd read, probably an old Sears catalogue house built at the beginning of the 20th century, an American Foursquare that had added to it over the years a breezeway that lead to a smaller living quarter, a carport that still had a Bel Air under it, a metal chicken coop that leaned against the house, and a greenhouse that doubled as a sun room coming off the kitchen at the back of the house, as if the each owner of the house had determined that every outside wall needed to serve some other function.

He and Mark had found the place biking around the backroads a few weeks back, and were surprised to find it still furnished, although everything had at one point been wet, and was now stale and musty. They threw out one chair that was covered in mildew and black mold.

Since then, they'd started hanging out in the living room when neither of them wanted to be home and going through the old occupant's stuff, most of which was broken or moldy beyond keeping.

He was surprised, then, when as they were leaving Mark asked the other two boys if they wanted to tag along, and unhappy that they agreed. Jesse glared at Mark, and he said, "Just don't tell anyone about this place. We don't need people being fucking idiots."

On the way to Greer Lane, they passed the correctional center again, riding right by the eight-foot fence topped with razor wire. There was some sort of obstacle course that Jesse had never seen anyone near by the frontage road they were on, and further off were the cell blocks. Jesse always thought he'd see someone eventually, but it never happened. The buildings remained eerily lifeless to everyone who passed by, only to guess as to what happened in there every day. And guess they did.

Josh pulled his bike along Jesse's and blurted out, "Hey, you're the kid whose brother is in Pinkerville, right?"

Jesse could tell that Mark was trying to get along with these kids because he'd more or less have to on the varsity wrestling team, so he tried to play along. "Seems to be the case."

"Isn't that place like, maximum security or something," Josh said, his eyes gleaming at the thought of a juicy story. Jesse had seen it in people's eyes before.

"Yeah."

"Have you heard any fucked-up stories from your brother?"

"He says it's pretty boring for the most part," Jesse said, although the truth was that he hadn't been to visit Danny in at least a year. "He spends a lot of time in class."

"Has he ever seen someone get killed?"

"Nope."

"What about someone dropping the soap?"

Jesse felt a familiar tingle on his tongue. "No."

"What about him?" A joyless smile came over his face—a kind that Jesse had become familiar with over the years, there for someone to signal that they knew they were getting under his skin.

“Will you shut the fuck up?” He didn’t know why people were so obsessed with whether or not Danny was being raped in prison. The image of his brother being held down flashed into his mind and black spots filled his vision. It was stupidly cinematic, more something out of *The Shawshank Redemption* than real life, but nonetheless Jesse felt his jaw clench as rage built in him. Normally, Mark would come to his defense here, but he just offered a weak *Come on, man*. Jesse was on his own.

“Come on, I’m just joking,” Josh said. “Lighten up.”

By the time they got to the house off Greer, Jesse was uncomfortable with Josh and his friend (who, by now, Jesse didn’t care if he never learned his name) being shown the house. There were a lot of things he didn’t like about them, but more than that it seemed like his and Mark’s place away from everything else.

When they got to the house, the two strangers went immediately to the barn that sat across the driveway from the house. After Jesse showed them how to get up into the hayloft, the four of them found a stash of paint cans. In a lot of them, the paint had hardened to a rubbery consistency, but a couple dozen, by chance, were still full of wet paint, although it had separated over the years.

Although Jesse wasn’t too keen on destroying things around the house, the boys found themselves taking turns throwing paint cans from the hayloft window, each throw by Josh or his friend getting closer to the house until, with careful aim, Josh managed to get a can through the window of the living room. Jesse felt, however irrationally, like a paint can had been thrown into his own house, but instead of saying anything he climbed down from the loft and made his way to the house, careful not to get in the way of flying paint cans.

He decided to look around in the basement, which he deemed unlikely to have a paint can thrown into it on account of the lack of windows. Although he was normally afraid of going in the basement alone—okay, maybe he watched too many horror movies—he’d packed a flashlight in his bag that morning in case they decided to bike over to the house. When he got down into the basement, it was full of the same thing any hastily abandoned basement would be: boxes of old shit.

Rummaging through the boxes required his work gloves—they were the perfect place for brown recluse spiders to hide—but otherwise Jesse didn’t have any problems with digging through the boxes except for the fact that everything was exactly what he’d expect to find in the

basement of an old farmhouse. There was a fake Christmas tree, boxes of screws and hardware, thin plastic pots meant to start plants in, wood scraps. It was a lot like his grandparents' basement, even down to the wood burning furnace, except dirtier.

Then, he came across a box wrapped in a tarp that was surprisingly light compared to the others. He tore the tarp away and cut the box open to see rows of VHS tapes, neatly arranged. Brushing dust off of the spines of the top row of tapes, he saw that each movie had a date range on it. The top row ranged from January through June of 1989, the bottom row the second half of that year. His first thought was that it was someone saving old recordings of TV shows, like he remembered his grandma doing, every day recording *Guiding Light* in the kitchen so she could watch *The Young and the Restless* and still have time to finish all of her housework.

But then he found a key at the bottom of the box. He looked through the basement, tracking his light across the walls, and eventually found a locked door to a storeroom that the key fit into. When he opened it, it was full of boxes roughly the same size as the one he'd found outside, although these ones were wet, some of them sitting in water that seeped in from the cracks in the foundation. Jesse opened a few of the boxes in the storeroom, and each was the same as the box he'd found outside. He could tell that the tapes in the storeroom wouldn't be any good, though.

Eventually, he heard banging coming from upstairs, which startled him at first until he remembered that he'd left the three others out by the barn. He could hear Mark going through a "welcome to my crib" joke as he clomped through the living room. He ran to the box with the dry tapes and threw a few into his backpack before heading up the stairs and reluctantly playing along with the others.

That night when his parents went to bed, he nudged Mark who, although clearly sleepy, was still up on his laptop. He'd remembered that, in their basement that they hardly used because of the mine subsidence that had almost pushed one of the walls in which was slowly leaking water into the house, making everything damp, there was a TV and VHS player that might still work. "Hey, come downstairs," he said. He was still mad at Mark for entertaining those two fuckwits, for not saying anything when Josh implied that Danny had been raped.

"Why, what's down there anyway?"

"I found something cool at the house today."

“How cool are we talking?” he asked, his brow furrowed in faux skepticism.

“Well, I don’t know if it’s cool yet.”

“Anybody ever tell you that you should work in sales?”

“No look,” Jesse said, pulling one of the cassettes out of his backpack and holding it up in the air.

“An old tape? Is that from the house?”

“Oh yeah,” Jesse said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“What’s on it?”

“I don’t know.”

With that, they both went down to the basement, where the VCR was still luckily hooked up. After putting the movie in, they waited under their blankets on the couch. The first thing on screen, after waves of static, was a woman with frizzy hair piled high on her head and around her shoulders. She was pointing outside the camera’s frame and saying “Over there, over there,” while the camera zoomed in and out on her tits comically fast (no doubt a riot at parties where home videos were busted out). The camera panned over to where she was pointing: two children, maybe twelve and four, the older holding up the other while she tried feeding a llama that spat in her face. As the child started screaming, both adults, still laughing, went over to her and the camera cut to the next scene: a shaky shot of a field and a nasal voice saying “This is Manassas National Battlefield Park, the site the battles at Bull Run, both of which combined amounted to almost 25,000 casualties in this one spot alone.”

“This makes me feel like a weirdo,” Mark said, shifting closer to Jesse on the couch.

“This is what finally made you feel weird?”

“I mean it. I feel like they’re going to walk in on me watching their home or something.”

“If they walk in on you watching their home movies right now, I think we’d have other things to worry about.”

Mark rolled his eyes. “You’re so stupid.”

In the video, the cameraman was still talking about Bull Run while the toddler from the last video climbed on top of a cannon. “Okay,” Jesse said, “But we can both admit that these people are pretty weird regardless.”

Mark laughed. “Yeah sure.” He put his hand on Jesse’s, who made no attempt to move it. “Hey, I’m sorry about earlier. I know I was letting those guys be assholes.”

Jesse looked down at their hands and squeezed. “It’s fine, I just need to learn to stand up for myself.”

“I won’t argue with that,” Mark said, “but I was still being a pussy.”

“You saw me this morning, we’re all pussies sometimes.”

On the screen, a new scene played, this time a video of several drunk adults at a family whiffle ball game who couldn’t hit the ball. One guy swung so hard that he did a 360 before stumbling and falling on his ass. Mark locked eyes with Jesse. “Who the fuck would record this and decide to keep it, anyway?”

Jesse laughed nervously. “I don’t know, it’s really stupid.” As Jesse was saying this, Mark leaned in, accidentally butting their heads together as his lips met Jesse’s. He was, Jesse thought, a bad kisser if he compared him to Liv, who he’d dated until she moved back to Chicago with her dad. His tongue, a warm Mountain Dew slug crawling too far down Jesse’s throat as if it was searching for something, was rougher, his lips more chapped, his bites like he was trying to eat Jesse’s lips. Still, Jesse let himself lean back, his head resting on the damp headrest of the leather couch and Mark’s hands falling to his wiry chest as he leaned over Jesse.

They stopped for a minute, confused. Mark looked sheepish, his face red. Jesse brushed his hair aside and pecked him on the cheek. Mark smiled, then slumped down, laying his head on Jesse’s shoulder. “What the hell was that all about.”

“What do you mean? You started it,” Jesse said, halfway paying attention to the moronic family videos that still played. This is what Jesse wanted at the moment: his arm around Mark, the voices of the parents trying to teach their kids how to fly a kite, distorted by the bad microphone as they lost their patience, Mark’s eyes shining in the blue light of the television. It was a moment that existed only in that cone of light, outside of which there was nothing for Jesse, only darkness.

“Like, what does this make us?” Mark asked, his face more earnest now, almost puppyish in his curious eyebrows.

Jesse’s ears were burning red. “I don’t know,” he said, the words barely scraping out of his throat. As the movie ended, the screen went black and then, flashing back on, too unbearably blue.

The rest of the week before Danny came home, Jesse and Mark did their best to ignore what happened during the day at least, and they kept their distance physically, too. Everything was surprisingly normal, to the point that Jesse almost hoped they would just not address it. They played basketball, watched movies, went to work, and hardly, Jesse told himself, thought about their kiss or why it happened. “It’s really not that hard to hide,” Jesse said the night before Danny got home when Mark brought it up, “everyone calls us butt buddies anyway.”

“I guess.” Mark said, “But are we like, a thing?”

“I thought you wanted to get into the varsity team.” They were watching *Zombi 2* on Mark’s laptop. A woman’s eye was being impaled by a sliver of wood.

“God, you’re so cynical, I fucking hate it. It doesn’t make you grown up.”

Jesse kicked at his bedframe. “You don’t think you’d get hazed or anything?”

“I’m saying I don’t care, Jes.”

“That’s stupid to say now when everyone thinks you’re like a real hot shot.”

“I’ll just have to be good at wrestling and like dudes.”

“You’ve been in a locker room, you know that’s not how it works,” Jesse said, as zombies made their way across the Brooklyn bridge, the movie implying that they’re an unstoppable force before the credits rolled, with their obnoxious synth sweeps over the steady beat of electric drums and keyboards.

Jesse watched Mark roll over, and put his hand on his shoulder. “I’m just afraid of how stupid people can be, you know?”

Mark sighed. “I know.”

Jesse lay next to Mark, trying his best to be a big spoon. He wasn’t sure if he was doing a good job, but he felt the tension in Mark’s body relax. “Do you think we’re just attracted to each other because we’re both fucked up?” He was glad when Mark didn’t respond, hoping that he was asleep. He leaned over to kiss him on the forehead when, because of the loud music from the laptop, his mother opened the door.

Although Jesse tried to scramble to a respectable distance (which probably looked a lot worse), his mother paused before saying “Noise, bud. Some of us have work in the morning, including you,” and walking out the door.

With Mark still deep in sleep, Jesse had nothing to do but listen through the thin walls to the hiss of his parents talking in bed. He couldn’t make out much of what they were saying, but

he could hear *more than friends*, and *talk about it soon*, which was enough to keep him up. He stared at the ceiling which, in the blue-lit dark, seemed to be spinning around the fan if he looked in the wrong spot, like he'd been thrown into a centrifuge.

III

Watching Dawn break over the horizon, a thin line of gray the color of his cell walls, Danny felt like what he remembered of being a little kid on the final car ride home at the end of a long vacation. Restless, he couldn't find a comfortable position in his bunk, like the muscles in his back and legs were rebelling against him. He had to get out, to stretch his legs, to piss on the side of the highway, to sleep in his own bed. He had not slept in his own bed for six years.

Sitting up to use the toilet in the corner of the cell, his rustling must have woken up his cell mate Malcolm, who sat up too, sniffing loudly and running his sleeve across his nose. "The 'rents coming for you?"

"Yup, maybe my brother too." He hadn't seen Jesse in about a year. They all three used to come and visit a few times a year, but since Jesse started working and going out more, his schedule never seemed to line up with their trips out to Pinkerville. "But we'll see about that."

Malcolm ran his hand along his bald head, "Whether your bro's there or not, you still lucky you got family coming." Malcolm's own family, who lived closer to Pinkerville, came to visit him as often as they could—about once a week. His wife Danae in her ruffled blue church dress with matching hat, his son, who was no older than seven, wearing his grey three-piece suit, all meek "yes sirs" and "yes ma'ams" when talking to the prison staff. They looked just like the picture Malcolm kept under his mattress. Except in that photo Malcolm also had an older daughter, a couple years younger than Danny. It wasn't until Danny saw the photo that he realized Malcolm had a daughter at all. "We're both lucky men."

"Yeah," Danny agreed, although to be honest he was afraid of what might happen when he got out. He'd heard stories about how hard it is to make it on the outside after leaving Pinkerville, and although he knew he had more resources than Leroy, who, while Danny was serving his time, had gotten out and been arrested again for stabbing someone "a little bit," or Whitehead, who had been homeless before he was in and, the last Danny had heard, was living in a halfway home, Danny also knew what Thrace, Illinois wasn't going to be the easiest place to do it.

"What are you gonna do when you get out?" Malcolm asked.

Danny thought about it. The night before, he'd had to fill out a bunch of paperwork in some office in a part of the building he'd never been to—unnerving as it was to realize that, after spending six years of his life at Pinkerville, there were still large sections of the building that

were totally alien to him. There they'd explained what he'd get when he got out: a couple shirts, a pair of jeans, cheap boots if he wanted to use his commissary money to buy them, and a debit card with whatever was left from his commissary account. Signing his name and realizing he'd be free in less than twenty-four hours, he realized exactly what he'd do, if his parents would let him.

"I'm going to get a fucking burger. Like, a real one." He thought about the food in Pinkerville, best described in both appearance and flavor as beige, and realized that it had been a long time since he'd enjoyed hot food. "Put some jalapenos and barbeque sauce on that shit," he said, even looking forward to the burger grease dripping down his hand even though he was normally a fastidious eater.

"Well, that's good and all, but what are you going to *do*?" Malcolm leaned back in his bunk.

"Like for work? Shit, I don't know, whatever I can get."

"Don't you have anything you really want to do?"

Danny paused for a moment. He'd fantasized about life after prison as long as he'd been there, he'd even worked towards a carpentry certification through the jobs program, but now that he was on the cusp of leaving he realized all of his desires were incredibly small. "All I know is I'm going to eat a burger, and I'm going to go to bed in my own bed, with no one sleeping across from me. No offense."

Malcolm laughed. "None taken." Then, more seriously, "Stop playing, you know what I mean."

"What, like whether I want to go see Mount Rushmore or some shit?"

Malcolm waved his hand at Danny. "Man, forget you." He rolled over with his face to the wall and pretended to be asleep.

Danny called Malcolm's name quietly to get his attention, but when he didn't answer Danny let him be. In about half an hour they were supposed to come get him, so in the meantime he did pushups and sit ups, doing each over and over again until his lungs and muscles burned and eventually he had to stop. It took a while—he wasted a lot of time doing body weight exercises in his cell—but when he was done he lay down, sweating and spent, on his mattress. Just as he felt the slow churn of drifting off to sleep, he heard "Kaczmarek." He looked up at a guard he'd never seen before: a man that, despite his goatee, looked babyish because of his round

head and blue eyes. Danny could barely see the man's grin as he locked eyes and said, "Your lucky day. Come on, now."

For the first time in years, Danny went to a private restroom where he changed into the facsimile of civilian clothes that the state had given him. The room itself felt surprisingly dirtier than the showers that he shared with the other inmates, if only because those rooms were constantly blasted with soap and water. The toilet, too, seemed dirtier than the one in his cell. There's an understood rule: don't shit in your cell. No one wants to sit twenty feet away from someone taking a dump in the open. Here, the same rule didn't apply, and the previous person had failed to flush everything.

Through the dingy yellow light and the smudged mirror, he looked at himself, the tan long-sleeve button-up hanging off his shoulders, so much thinner than when he'd arrived now that he was exercising, the same as the jeans hung loose on his hips, although he did not yet have a belt. In the mirror, his head looked skeletal, his cheeks hollow, hair buzzed short, eyes dark and sunken. Between the clothes, the change in his face, and how pale he was from living mostly inside, if Danny had seen himself at that moment on the street, he would have thought that man was a junky, in a way he wouldn't have thought back when he was one. Or, more likely, they'd pin him as an ex-con.

Well, before his time in Pinkerville he would have. Back in Thrace, there was a minimum-security prison just outside of town, and back when he worked at Walmart he could always spot someone who'd just gotten out and didn't know where to go. They, too, had these clothes that never fit. They sometimes walked aimlessly around the store for a while or asked for jobs, but Danny never paid them much mind, assuming that ignoring them altogether was better than the hovering that associates were encouraged to do to cut down on shoplifting. Now, he almost wanted to go back to the Walmart he used to work at when he got home just to see if he'd be followed. Almost.

Hitching his pants up, Danny walked out into the hall, and the goateed man lead him out to the parking lot where he saw his mom's red '98 minivan waiting for him in the fire lane right outside the door. She was resting her weight against the car, trying to act as casual as possible, and when the goateed man left them outside she stood looking at him for a second before wrapping her arms around him and squeezing her head into his ribs so hard he couldn't breathe.

He hugged her back, his chin resting on the top of her head, the smell of her shampoo bringing him home again, not because it was particularly sweet or floral—it was actually unpleasant to him growing up, the chemical smell almost singeing his nose after she got out of the shower—but it was her's.

“I’m just getting out, and now you’re gonna put me in the hospital with that grip,” he laughed, hugging her back. “You been working out or something, Ma?”

Wiping her eyes, she laughed. “Oh shut up, can’t you take anything seriously?”

“It’s hard to do when you’re laughing. You’re a bad influence.”

“Oh please, you don’t need any encouragement,” She said, lightly slapping him on the back.

Danny took a breath, relieved to hug his mother in a way that he couldn’t have imagined since childhood, and looked around. The sun was up now, a pale pool of light behind the slate of the sky, and the wind that scoured at his face whipped plastic bags and food containers all around the parking lot. He walked around the car, sticking his hand through the open window to shake his dad’s hand.

“How’s it going, old man?”

His dad nodded, grasping Danny’s hand in his calloused mitt. “Same old same old. Nothing too exciting.” He’d said this, or some variation of it, every time they’d come to visit Danny, no matter how long it had been since they’d seen him. Even after the tornado went through Thrace, leaving it up to Danny’s mom to tell him. Now more than ever, Danny wondered what was going through his dad’s head. His dad, who spent countless hours watching the show *Cops* when Danny was growing up, always with the takeaway *Don’t do the crime if you can’t do the time*. His dad, who was straight-laced as they come, up by five every morning, in bed by 8:30, hardly drinking anything stronger than a cup of black coffee, at least as long as Danny could remember.

Danny looked at his father, who looked down when their eyes met, letting go of Danny’s hand and drumming on the steering wheel. He cleared his throat, pressing the button that slid the passenger door open. Danny went to plop down next to Jesse, who looked like he was sleeping, and when he threw his bag in third row of seats he was surprised to see who he thought was Mark lift his shaggy head up, startling both himself and Jesse up with a scream. Jesse looked at Danny, his eyes wild and bleary as if he’d seen a ghost, so Danny gave him a noogie, raking his

knuckles across his brother's head until he struggled to get away. "Hey bud, what's new? I haven't seen you in a while."

"Oh, nothing much," Jesse said through a yawn.

Danny couldn't tell for a second if Jesse had gone back to sleep or not, since he kept his hair over his eyes, the veil of any disaffected teenager's own making. Trying his luck, Danny buckled his belt, happy to find that it still stuck like it had years ago requiring him to jiggle it until he heard it click, and decided to keep talking to Jesse.

"Come on, don't give me that. I'm the one who's been in there," he said, pointing at Pinkerville CC, "and look at me. I'm almost a carpenter now—or I could be. What's going on?" Danny smiled. "We've got ways of making people talk in there, you know."

"Oh stop," his mother said

"I'm just playing around," he said.

After a pause, she said, "He's working on the Schute farm this summer with Mark," she paused for a moment before saying "his friend."

Danny turned toward the back seats. "Hey, I remember you. How's it going, man? You still a monster on the court?"

"Still got the layup down at least," Mark said, miming a shot. "Jesse's got three pointers down."

Danny was happy to hear this. Although he'd never been athletic himself, he'd learned some of the mechanics of sports so he could talk to his dad and brother about them, and he'd found a way to explain the layup that helped Mark get better at his foot placement: outside long, inside high.

"They're both on the wrestling team now," his mom said.

"Is that so," Danny said, sizing them both up, noticing that Mark had gotten large, unlike any of his parents. "This kid over here's a fucking weed, man. Somebody overwater him or what?" he said, swinging his arm back to tap Mark on the shin.

When no one responded, he kept talking. "Looks like I'll have to read up." Trying to keep his spirits up, he said, "I don't know what you two are trying to do to me—you know I don't know fuck all about wrestling, and I gotta know if you're whooping someone's ass at a meet or not." They both nodded along.

As they started down the highway, Danny wanted to keep asking questions—he wanted to know everything, to somehow catch up on six years of mostly missing out—but he couldn't help but feel the resistance from everyone else, the people he thought he'd be most able to talk to again.

Flipping his hair back, Jesse said, "He's probably going to try for varsity next year." Danny turned around and high-fived him.

"I think you'd make it if you stay in your weight class," Mark said.

Jesse brushed his hair over his eyes again. "We'll see."

Danny didn't know what he really expected from the conversation, why he thought, too desperately perhaps, his family would be willing to slip into casual conversation again, and as he watched the soy bean fields glide by, so wide and open, so green, refreshed as they were by the irrigators that sprayed on and on, his stomach churned, his head almost floaty in a feeling of vertigo that he'd hardly experienced since his first days in prison. Back then, as his bowels hurt since he was too self-conscious to shit in front of anyone, and as he paced around his cell until his cellmate told him to "sit the fuck down," he had finally realized something important: he'd fucked up.

What did this mean to Danny at the time? Back then, he thought about all of the things he couldn't do anymore. He was a month away from graduating high school and, despite spending a lot of his free time getting high and driving around or playing video games with friends, had gotten a scholarship from U of I that would have paid for half of his tuition. He didn't know what he wanted to do in college, but he'd figure it out, he thought. He was dating a girl named Kyleigh at the time, and although they'd talked about renting a place together some day, she broke up with him after he got arrested (which, to be fair, he didn't blame her for).

Back then, his worries were so aspirational, always about him and his potential careers or love interests, all things that he couldn't give two shits about now. Sure, he wanted to find a job he cared about. That's why he went through the carpentry training program. He found joy in building, and secretly dreamed of getting into acoustical carpentry. But what he really wanted was to have a normal meal with his family where they talk about the weather or some shit. He wanted to watch the news while they ate tuna casserole because everyone was too tired to actually cook, to come home to his mom hoeing weeds out in the front lawn, always so proud of her tomato plants, to look out at the soft pink sky and see through the shadow Jesse and Mark,

their faces still round and pudgy like children, as they biked up to the house. But they weren't the children he remembered. He wanted them to see him and not a criminal.

Danny still convinced his dad to stop for burgers once he said he could use the last of his commissary funds to pay for it, hoping there was enough on the card. Although the cashier probably saw a lot of people dressed kind of like Danny in his fresh-out-of-prison clothes, he liked how normal everything felt: getting blasted with cold air as he opened the door, standing and shifting his weight on the sticky tile as he waited for the people in front to order, choosing food from a menu (which, given the fact that he hadn't done so in years, took a while), his dad insisting that he pay for his and mom's food, Danny filling the dinky paper cups with ketchup, shooting his straw wrapper at Jesse, tasting, even feeling, the salt on his tongue from the fries, wiping his mouth every few bites of his burger with the back of his sleeve, the heavy, almost sick feeling in his gut after a meal so rich.

Then his parents started talking, and they wanted to talk about jobs. His mom, in the usual way she had of approaching a subject that might be contentious, said "So," before taking a long drink and clearing her throat while Danny looked on. "What are you thinking about work?"

"I guess I'll start looking for a signatory contractor so I can finish training."

"Well, we can always hope someone will take you on," she said into her drink.

"But what about the tornado that went through? Surely they're looking for people, hell even apprentices."

Danny's dad cut in. "They are. But you know," he shrugged, "that don't mean it's gonna be easy to find someone willing to take you on, especially with so many people looking for work now."

Danny curled his fingers into a fist and let go, a nervous habit he developed in his early days at Pinkerville when, being the rural-suburban boy that he was, still with his "baby fat" as his mom had always called it, he was singled out for being a pumpkin. It was nothing much, a few guys from one of the white gangs boxing him on the ears for associating instead with one of the Narcotics Anonymous groups, which were normally ignored on account of being boring and all about God, and telling him to mind himself. That was about the extent of the violence that Danny experienced personally in prison outside of seeing some chomo he never talked to get stabbed out in the yard, but the threat was there. He kept tabs like everyone else did on who was in what gang and other drama.

“I don’t expect it to be easy, Dad.” Danny felt the creeping suspicion that out in the world, too, he would be gangless. His dad had asked his own boss if he’d be willing to give Danny a shot. His boss told him he’d do what he could, but never got back to him. “But I just need one person to give me a shot you know?”

Danny was quiet for the rest of the car ride, watching the nondescript fields slowly morph into the familiar places of his childhood, although skewed from how he remembered them. The grain silo outside the south side of the town, abandoned for years as neighborhoods grew around it, was now covered in kudzu vines, the central point of a small park off of a bike path that lead into a patch of new homes that, when Danny went away, had only been a few frames going up haphazardly in the fields. Around the Walmart where he used to work, the strip malls and parking lots had spread like a weed, the backroads he used to cruise while high with his friends now commercial property.

Then, as they made their way into town, there were the old neighborhoods that he remembered. Many of the houses had new siding and roofs from the tornado, and quite a few were still half sided or had strips of vinyl hanging from one or two walls, and a few still had plywood nailed over the windows. Still, Danny recognized the homes of people he had known—the craftsman bungalow at the corner of Ash and Polker with the wide window opening out to the roof that he and his girlfriend Kyleigh would sneak out of to watch the stars in the summer; the odd neighborhood of Queen Anne homes with their patchwork of rotundas and offshoots where Jeb lived, an eccentric boy who always wanted to talk about Whitman or Ginsburg or some other writer that Danny didn’t care about but let him go on about anyway as they listened to old Pavement CD’s in the basement, Danny working through his physics homework, Jeb writing something and periodically asking Danny what he thought. Closer to home, there were the ranch houses and trailers that Danny had grown up around on the outskirts of town, overlooking the fields, the houses low to the ground, the plots mostly yard, a flat and wide area from which Danny could look out at the rest of the town and beyond—so many places he had known, now a different color, a different car out front, a different family inside.

When they pulled into the driveway and Danny picked his few things out of the back of the van, his mom asked him how it felt to be home, swooping in again for a hug. Danny looked

out past the soybean fields toward the Thrace Correctional Center. “It’s like I never left,” He said.

Later, they were watching the Cubs game in the living room, still arranged, luckily, as Danny had remembered it in a typical Midwestern way: an overstuffed couch and loveseat set facing opposite of each other, and a ratty brown recliner that his dad sat in, all arranged in a semicircle around the TV. Danny’s dad asked him if he was keeping up with baseball at all, and while he’d always watched enough to talk to his dad about it, after a couple years in prison he’d stopped seeing the point. As they struggled through a conversation about whether or not it was the Cubs’ year, his dad placed a cellphone in his hands, not saying anything at first.

Danny decided to speak up. “What’s this all about?”

“Well, if you’re gonna be looking for jobs and all that, we don’t have a land line anymore.” His dad adjusted in his seat, as if physically uncomfortable.

“Shit, thanks, Pops,” he said, batting at a *Welcome Home* balloon. “How much do I owe you when I get a gig?”

“Nothing,” he said, flipping through channels during the commercial break. “But there’s gonna be some conditions, you understand?” Danny’s dad always said this, “you understand,” when he was getting ready to be a hard ass.

Danny braced for it. “Fair enough, what kind of conditions?”

“Curfew’s ten. Once you get a job, post your schedule on the fridge—”

“Sounds—”

“If we call and you’re not at work, you better pick up.”

Sitting up, Danny said, “Christ, I thought I just got out of prison. I get some rules and all, but—”

“Well your mom and I don’t want you to go back.” He said, raising his voice but still looking at the TV.

Danny stood up now, thinking *what the fuck is his problem* but catching the words in his throat. “Mom, can you talk some sense into Dad?” he yelled into the kitchen. He balked at the idea of having the phone at all if it was going to be, essentially, a tracking device.

“Daniel, I think it’s fair to expect you to follow a few rules.”

“Alright, I get some rules, but what, are you guys going to call me throughout the day to make sure I’m being a good boy?” Jesse, who had been sitting awkwardly in the corner of the

room, it seemed, because he wasn't sure it would be okay for him to leave, got up and went to his room.

Danny's dad spoke up again. "If you don't like the rules, you can move out."

Danny threw his arms up and bit his tongue. The preposterousness of the statement struck him: where the fuck would he go? It was such an unreasonable thing for his dad to say that he was dumbfounded. "Alright. Well, I'm going to check out the old room."

"Dinner's almost ready," his mom called.

"Thanks Mom, I'll come out if I'm hungry." He walked past Jesse's room, the door closed, and thought about knocking, pressing his fist against the familiar pattern of the laminate, the faux grain of it running in nonsensical directions. He kept walking instead. His childhood bedroom was largely unchanged: the same desk he'd had in high school that all of the drawer bottoms had fallen out of, with the same old computer and monitor, the twin-sized bed that his feet still hung off of, which had the same quilt he'd always used which a great grandmother had made long before he was born and was just now becoming threadbare and fragile, the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling that he'd put up as a small child but which he never stopped looking at on occasion.

He opened the window that he used to blow cigarette smoke out of when he was in high school, thinking at the time that he was sneaky until his mother started asking him about the smells that wafted through their thin walls. He got the picture, and started sneaking out of the house altogether to smoke in the bramble patch. What a shithead, he thought. He would work to be more appreciative, but it was clear that meant something different to him than it did to his dad.

He turned the light off and closed the blinds, looking up at the dim green of the stars on his ceiling and thinking they were dimmer than they used to be. When he heard his mother call his name, he lay quiet in bed, the quilt pulled up to his shoulders. He would find a job, live a normal life like anyone else. He'd even start tomorrow, first thing in the morning. He'd put on the clothes that his parents had picked out for him, even though they were, like the prison clothes, too big, and he would make calls, ride his old bike if it still worked, walk if he had to, whatever it would take to show his parents that he was taking initiative. He took a deep breath, sat up, left his room of his own volition, and ate lasagna, trying his best to make small talk with his dad until he went to his room and fired up his old computer.

Although he planned on waking up early in the morning, he thought he'd have time to see if anyone was still playing *Starcraft* anymore. He used to play with his closest friends, and he sent them a text asking if anyone was up for a round. While he waited, he played a few rounds with some randos, losing to cheesy strategies that he'd never have fallen for at first, but eventually he started remembering how to balance resources while building toward rushing his opponent's base. It was freeing to be able to plan, to watch those plans play out, to lose or win a game that didn't have any stakes to it, and by the time he looked at the clock it was just past 10:30. He'd have to call it a night. Shutting off his monitor, he looked out the window. As his eyes adjusted, he saw, out past the fields towards the back roads, someone about Jesse's size pedaling quickly through the night.

IV

On the ride to Pinkerville that morning, all Jesse wanted to do was try to get some sleep. He'd spent the rest of the night sighing and staring at the ceiling while thoughts slipped half-formed through his mind until, when Mark woke up, he told him what had happened.

"Dude, you better not be messing with me," Mark said.

"I fucking swear."

Mark sat up. "Any chance Marge doesn't say anything? She doesn't seem like, you know." The word *homophobe* seemed somehow weird to both of them, partially because it was the kind of thing corny adults called people, and partly because they weren't *gay* gay.

"No way, I think I heard them talking last night. They kept talking about abstinence when Danny was in health class, and when I was dating Liv, they made me carry a condom. Of course, you know all the weird rules they had about us being alone together." Jesse and Liv were only ever supposed to be together in public, unless one of their parents were home, and even then they weren't supposed to be in a room together where they had too much privacy. Jesse's solution was to lie about when her parents were home, which he hated doing, but not as much as he hated the rule. The problem was that they knew Mark's family was never home. They're totally weird about sex—

"We weren't even doing it!" Mark blurted, struggling to keep his voice down.

"But the point is that we *could*." In the silence that followed, Jesse felt embarrassed by the prospect—he was attracted to Mark, but he wouldn't know where to start, and trying to visualize it made him aware of his naivete. He knew what butt sex was, his sexual imagination being limited almost exclusively to penetrative sex, but everything he'd ever heard about it made it sound painful and gross, and the few older girls, like Candace Harding, who'd let someone do it had been marked as sluts by anyone who was interested and whores by everyone else, although before he'd known that, Jesse thought she was just like everyone else. And then there was the other connotation. He thought about Josh, Chet, everyone else who made jokes about anal rape, the victim always the target. Slut, whore, bitch: it made Jesse think how fucked up everyone was.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Mark joked, slipping into a new pair of gym shorts. "You haven't even bought me dinner yet."

"I'm being serious right now."

"Yeah, I know. But what's the point?"

“The point is I think they’re gonna make you go back to your dad’s house.”

“What about the basement?”

“You’d probably die of like, mold poisoning or something.”

“Is that even a thing?”

“Can you stop it?”

Mark shrugged. “Whatever. I’ve been fine for this long.”

“That’s a word for it.”

Practically punching his clothes into the bag, Mark scoffed. “I can handle my shit, okay?”

“Okay,” Jesse said, cracking his knuckles, which were sore from detasseling the day before. “I guess we should go try to act normal or something.”

His mother was the first to speak in the car, a few minutes after getting out of the city limits. “So, boys,” she said, pausing. She looked over at Rick.

“Marge, I’m driving here,” he said as if he was incapable of doing both things at the same time, even though Jesse had seen him talking to clients for his boss while driving hundreds of times.

“Okay, you just stay quiet then.” She turned to the boys again. “First of all, Rick and I want to let you boys know that your feelings are totally natural—”

“Oh my god, mom.” Jesse covered his face with his bangs.

“And that you should feel free to talk to us if you have any questions. Right, Rick?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m an open book, or whatever they say.”

“But we’ve talked about it, and we do have some rules in our house,”

“You’re kicking Mark out, mom. We get it.”

They both looked back at Mark, who was sitting quietly in the back seat, his hands folded neatly on his lap as if he were awaiting judgement.

“We’re not kicking anyone out, we just don’t know where he’d stay.”

“What about the basement,” Jesse asked as a last-ditch effort.

“Honey, you know that’s not safe. Who knows what’s growing down there.”

“It’s okay, ma’am,” Mark said. “I understand.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I hope we’ll still see you around the house for dinner and all.”

Mark smiled, but didn’t say anything.

“It’s just that we don’t know how to... we’ve never had to approach this scenario before, and we just want to make sure you boys are being safe.”

“We aren’t fucking, mom.”

“Language, young man,” Rick said.

Jesse was annoyed that that was the only thing his father had to say about it. “It’s not like one of us is going to get pregnant, anyway.”

“Jesse!” Marge blurted out.

“Let’s take a time out,” Rick said, turning up the music. There was some mopey 90’s rock song playing that might have been The Smashing Pumpkins, judging by the fuzzed-out bass chords and rough, whiny vocals. He tapped along to on the steering wheel, even if he clearly didn’t know the beat.

Jesse was content to look out the window now that he’d killed the conversation, even though it was foggy, and the only thing he could see were the shadows of trees out in the fields that looked like the ones he saw every day, and the occasional dome of amber light that highlighted a Casey’s gas station or McDonald’s, which were mostly empty at this time on a Saturday, and it was like someone had taken the buildings and put them in a museum. Jesse knew, of course, that these places were made to be familiar, consistent, homey, but to him it was depressing that they were just like the ones in Thrace. It was like he couldn’t get away. He wondered what Danny thought about going back to Thrace. He’d been excited to go to U of I, had wanted, he’d told Jesse once, to work as a mechanical engineer, traveling around the world to work all kinds of projects Jesse couldn’t even picture. Now he was just coming back home.

Marge turned the music down. “I have to ask, are you boys together?”

“You think this is the best time, Margie?” Rick butted in.

“I think it’s fair to ask. I don’t know what to tell my family if someone were to ask.”

“It’s none of their business,” he said.

“I mean, would you be *spooning* someone like that if you weren’t going steady with them?” She threw her hands up. “I’m just curious about what’s going on with my baby. Sorry if I’m being nose-y.”

“We aren’t sure, ma’am,” Mark said. “I mean if we’re a thing. We’re kinda clueless, too.”

“Oh, what’s the term for that? You’re bi-curious? Is that it?”

“Something like that,” Mark said, “except I’m not too into girls.”

This whole conversation, Jesse thought, was getting worse as it went on. Since it was chilly, he’d worn a hoodie, which he flipped over his head now to signal he wouldn’t take part in the conversation and pretended to be asleep.

The rest of the day had been disorienting, too, like disconnected scenes from a movie. He’d felt the same way about Danny and his father’s arguments as he would watching a movie, keeping a safe distance. Although Mark hadn’t stayed with them long, having Danny home on the same day Mark had to leave was like the bulge in the basement wall. Something deep underground had shifted, putting pressure on the foundation of Jesse’s life. Although Danny tried to deny it, Jesse knew he was a stranger now. There were six years between them now, and Jesse didn’t even know if he wanted to try bridging that gap.

He knew he had to get out of the house, but he had to wait until everyone else was asleep, and he didn’t know what to do with himself. It had been a long time since he’d had his room to himself, and he found himself looking up porn (his parents were woefully ignorant about the internet). But it was all so boring. He was tired of everything being boring to him, like he was defective or something. Other than that everything else was working, and he thought he’d give it a try, but his mind kept wandering away from the acrobatic poses the porn actors held, although it was impressive that the woman could balance on one high heel with the other leg practically behind her head while the guy went to town. But he couldn’t get into the camera angle, the lens pointed directly at their taints, as if that’s all anyone wanted to see.

He was getting ready to give up when he thought about the kiss in the basement. Even Mark’s gross tongue was at least a little intriguing, and he imagined it lower on his body. He imagined it like a scene from one of the bad romance novels they’d read random pages from at the house off Greer, although he was unfortunately still on the dirty, ripped leather couch. Letting his imagination go, he didn’t take long, but after the initial relief there was another feeling that tugged at him. He felt like a dog whose owner had just come home after he accidentally shit in the house, like he wanted to hide in the corner with his tail between his legs.

When he hadn’t heard any movement from outside his room for a while, he decided to sneak out, which he could easily do from his own window, which had never had a screen to keep bugs out. Stepping out into the yard, he felt the cicadas in his blood, their feverish chorus,

emerging from the ground after more than a decade to fuck and sing and molt and sing and fuck some more. In the cloudless and heat-hazed night, the moon cast soft shadows and pale light across the neighborhood, colors blending together in the contrast between light and dark, the ranch houses, double wides, and grid-like streets blanketed in the calm that often drew him out on late night walks.

He could see clear across the neighborhood and, as he moseyed into the back yard, across the soybean field out to where the interstate was, he saw, as if rising from the ground itself, several shapes slinking close to the ground. His heart jumped at the realization, but it was just a few coyotes, looking back at him as they quietly made their way across the field and into a stand of trees.

He unlocked his bike from where he'd tied it up in the carport and started pedaling toward the Greer house. The backroads were surprisingly empty for a Saturday night, leaving it open for him to swerve around, popping cicadas under his bike tires until he started to feel bad about it. Alone at night, everything felt almost stereotypically more ominous: the trees' shadows hung over the road, the road leading up to the house was now a tunnel that he had to squeeze through, the hill practically a mountain. When he finally made it to the front door of the house, he felt like it was looking back at him, like it could see his secrets while his eyes couldn't penetrate the black behind the windows.

There was an easy way to get on the roof through the house, but confronting the building's face, Jesse lost his nerve. There was another way if he could climb one of the drainpipes, which he'd never tried before even though Mark had bet him he could do it. He pulled himself up to the low roof of the breezeway and walked up to the pipe, placing his hands on it to see if he'd be able to grip it well enough. Although the brackets keeping it in the wall were rusty, metal shaving off as he ran his fingers across them, he decided to try it anyway.

Placing his feet on the wall, he started upward, trying not to pull too hard toward his body with his arms. He made it to the top, but when he reached out to grab the ledge of the roof, the force pushed the drainpipe to the left. He practically jumped right up on the roof while he watched the pipe clamor down to the ground. "Fuck."

He lit a cigarette and looked over the town, all specs of light at this hour, except the correctional center with its flood lights. There was the fence that he could trace most of with his eyes, and the cellblocks, which hid the yard from view for the most part, the guard tower. Miles

behind this, he could see the bridge on the interstate where it went over highway fifty-one, the tractor trailers' lights creeping along the horizon. To the west was town, which was mostly dark now, and further beyond that Jesse could just make out the glow of the lights coming from the Walmart. This was the world, he thought, as he flicked his cigarette onto the top of the carport.

After more sitting and smoking, he decided to find a way off the roof, eventually determining that if he could hang low enough off the ledge, he would fall safely onto the roof of the breezeway. When he let go of the ledge, he kicked off the wall harder than he should have, and wound up landing on his heels, a sharp pain shooting through the left one. Although nothing *felt* broken, he could hardly move the joint, crying out when he tried to point his toe. He was afraid that riding his bike would make it worse, but he didn't have a choice. He set out, pedaling as well as he could.

Eventually, though, he had to stop and walk his bike, maybe three long miles still from home, hobbling like he was, until the sky was just starting to gray around the rim of the horizon. When he finally slipped into the kitchen, Rick was making breakfast. He cracked two eggs into the skillet as Jesse walked through the door and just looked at him as he made his way to the trash can. "Well, you gonna come in or not?"

Jesse stepped into the kitchen, trying to hide his hobble. "Sorry, dad."

"Where were you at all night?"

"Nowhere," Jesse blushed.

"And where the hell is that?"

"I'm sorry," he said again.

Rick flipped his eggs and took a long sip of his coffee before answering. "I'll take it easy on you. Been a long day for all of us. But if I catch you out after curfew again, you're grounded." He walked over to the sliding door leading out onto the back porch and looked out. "If you're gonna sneak around at night, you might as well be smart about it."

"Been a lot of coyotes out. Just saw five or six walk over that way," Jesse said, not sure exactly why but feeling like he should say something.

"Huh. They must be the ones got the Johnson's cat the other day."

"Good night, dad."

"Good morning, Jesse."

Still blushing, Jesse walked as straight as he could into his room, hoping that no one else was up because the pain of moving his ankle was too much to bear. He locked the door behind himself and crashed into the mattress, thinking of canines slipping around in the dark

V

The next day at 5:00 am, Danny woke up, stretched himself on the floor, and did pushups until his chest could no longer keep him off the ground no matter how hard he pushed and grunted. He did the same thing with situps and leg lifts before lying on his bed and staring out the window while he felt the familiar burn of his muscles, now tired and loose. From the window, he could only see the shape of a turkey vulture swaying lazily in still grey sky. It was a habit that started in Pinkerville, partially out of boredom and partially because he was afraid of being too effeminate, “soft,” as his father had said as he was growing up in reference to his smooth, thin arms and the paunch the protruded slightly above his waistline.

He’d gone into prison with the constant fear of being someone’s “girlfriend” as people liked to joke about prison. One of his friend’s dads had a board game called Don’t Drop the Soap that, when they were younger, sat just out of reach on the board game shelf. In it were cards like the one titled Prison Bitch with flavor text that read “‘At first you were my cell mate, now you’re my soul mate.’—Tyrone.” And while there was of course sexual violence, after a while, Danny was surprised to find out how much consensual sex took place, too. He and Malcolm had even flip-flopped on sexual favors occasionally, a purely transactional exchange where they took turns getting their own nut off. These were, Danny would never admit, his first successful sexual encounters, he thought as he stood up to get dressed, walking over to the two piles of neatly folded clothes on his desk.

His parents had given him two sets of clothes: a slate blue dress shirt and khakis, and a pair of boot cut jeans and a long sleeve Carhartt shirt. He could imagine his father picking out the shirt, performatively hem-hawing about it, pointing to the clearance shirts that would break down in a couple of months until Mom convinced him to “just get the damn thing.” Danny rubbed the coarse chambray between his fingers before putting the shirt on. Slipping into the stiff new jeans, too, he appreciated the difference from the polyester blend of the prison uniforms. Still, as much as he appreciated the dress clothes, he couldn’t show up to a site asking for work in slacks. They’d send him home for not having proper equipment, and laugh at him for his foolishness when he walked out the door.

Which reminded him: he needed boots. He supposed he could at least make it to a work site in his tennies without too much embarrassment, but he knew he wouldn't be able to actually work until he had some. Fuck he thought, considering the benefit of asking for \$30 to get a pair at the Walmart that should last until his first couple of paychecks were in. He'd have to. He heard a knock on the door.

"Hey Dan-Dan, hope you're up already," Mom said, her voice still bleary with sleep. He always remembered her being an early riser, and hoped that she wasn't up late arguing with Dad on his behalf.

"Be out in a sec," he said, glancing at himself in the mirror, smiling that he almost looked like a normal person, at least in his neighborhood. "Thanks Ma."

She poked her head into the room without knocking while he was still buttoning his shirt. "Think we can get a picture?"

"Is this like my first day at school or something?"

She shrugged. "It's the first day of something, now get out here."

"Let me get my clothes on, for Christ's sake," he chuckled, happy, after all these years, that his mother could still give him a hard time. He'd always been a momma's boy to a degree, but not in the way people are often chided for. They were the only two in the family that joked much, in contrast to Dad's aloof focus on work and Jesse's angst that, Danny thought last night, he'd like to smack out of him in a moment of frustration.

"Hey Ma, can I ask you something?"

"You have to smile first. Why don't you act like you just got outta jail or something," she said, snapping the picture to catch his lips curling slightly.

"Well, I was thinking I'll probably need boots, so I was wondering if I might borrow enough to get a cheapo pair or something." He saw her mouth tighten, her eyes drift as she thought about whether or not she could. "I'll pay you guys back as soon as I can. I just need something until I can get a real pair."

"Wait here," she said.

He stood, digging his toes into the worn carpet at the doorway of his room like he'd done thousands of times growing up until she came back, placing two twenties quickly into his hand like it was an illegal transaction. Her and Dad had always talked openly and amicably about

money, and Danny didn't know what to think about this secrecy. Still, he decided he wasn't in much of a position to ask. "Thanks Ma. Like I said, the first paycheck I get."

"Don't worry about it," she said.

"Well, with reassurance like that, how could I?"

"I'm telling you not to worry about it."

Danny watched her walk off into the kitchen. He could hear her fill the coffee maker with water and, shortly, the trickle of the water into the pot, like someone trying to be quiet about taking a piss.

At Walmart, Danny was glad not to see anyone he'd used to work with in the store—hell at that point, he'd feel bad for them, he thought. Although he was trying to make it to a work site still early in the morning, he had some time to browse the aisles of bullshit stacked haphazardly as far as he could see. It'd been so long since he'd set foot in a department store that he was overwhelmed trying to find anything. It was like the store was a kind of maze with the walls shifting behind him as he went. There was no way to back track, he could only press forward into rows of kitchen appliances, trash bags, notebooks, a thirty-foot stretch of nothing but pens, ranging from a quarter to thirty dollars each.

By the time he realized how large the grocery section was—back when he worked there in 2010, most Walmarts weren't Supercenters—he asked for help. The worker, a college kid who'd clearly worked the overnight shift, lead him to the clothes aisle that he must have passed ten times as she yawned through some pleasantries about how the store had changed their layout recently. Danny just nodded along. "That'll happen."

When they got to the shoe aisle, she walked off before he could ask any other questions. Overall, he was happy she did. He imagined that's what she'd do to anyone else, which is exactly what he wanted: to be treated like anyone else. He found the cheapest pair of boots, \$27 before tax, and tried them on. The boots were stiff, and something on the inside had been cut improperly and was now stabbing into his big toe. Although he didn't really have any other options, he took a few tentative steps as if he was trying out how the shoes felt (really, he wanted to know what he was getting himself into), when he saw his algebra teacher from middle school, Mr. Tom, who was a friendly man with a walrus mustache who was known for two things: he would encourage any student to succeed in his class, no matter their attitude at the beginning of the semester about

what they could do, normally succeeding in getting them to pass; and he always wore shirts that were too short, his belly poking out as he reached for the top of the board to point at an equation. Danny liked to remember this first point about Mr. Tom, although he'd be lying if, in the name of social cohesion, he'd never made any underboob jokes about him.

When Mr. Tom looked at Danny, his eyes widened, then he looked away until, realizing Danny had seen this, he waved stupidly, exaggerating his hand's path. "My goodness, I didn't recognize you, Daniel. What are you up to?"

"Oh, shopping for boots. You?"

"Got a flat tire on the way out the door," he said, holding up his left foot, his big toe poking out of the loafer. "How are you doing?"

Danny went over his goals with Mr. Tom, his carpentry certification he'd gotten in Pinkerville, his plan to get into the union eventually. Since Mr. Tom had always been supportive, he wasn't ready when, with pursed lips, he said "Well, that's very good, all things considered."

Danny swallowed hard. "Yeah, damn right it is." He was maybe being overly sensitive about it, but what the hell did anyone mean saying "all things considered" about his situation? He laced his shoe too tight as he shoved the boots back into their box.

Blushing, Mr. Tom stammered "I mean, you're doing well, it's just not ideal is all. You were a very bright student."

Danny didn't say anything. He was a new person to Mr. Tom, and there was nothing he could do about it. The eager boy in his middle school classroom was a druggie, an ex-con as far as he's concerned. A blight on the community, with the opioid epidemic making its way into their small town. Sure, he'd gotten caught selling drugs behind the high school, but he'd been made an example of by the judge, anyone could see that. He wasn't the person bringing heroin there.

"Well, I have to be going now. The day won't wait. It was very good seeing you again." Mr. Tom said as he shuffled away.

"Take care of yourself," Danny said to the man's back.

After making some calls to the union office in Belleville Illinois, Danny found a worksite that he could feasibly make it to on his bike, in the neighborhood outside of the new strip malls across town from his house. He'd get there later than he wanted, but surely biking would show

some gumption, wouldn't it? He pulled his bike out of the shed behind the house, looking at the rusty chain and gears. He could wiggle the pedals by hand in the crankshaft, which means the ball bearings might be falling out. The seat, too, was rusted lower than he needed, which meant that his knees were up to his chest when he pedaled. Luckily, the tires still held air, at least for the day, but that didn't make him look less ridiculous as he biked down the commercial district on his rusty child's bike. Growing up, he and Jesse had called them DUI guys, to the amusement of their father.

Still, pedaling down the road he did not think about how much of his childhood humor had been built off cruelty towards others—something that had made itself apparent throughout the day—but instead embraced how out of place he must have looked to all of the drivers, for a few minutes allowing himself to be unbothered by the judging eyes of motorists as he felt the wind blow through the chicken fuzz on top of his head. It was beautiful to be outside. To be biking even down a trash filled street as everyone else was rushing to their nine to five jobs, to go home to his family and start smoothing things over with them, helping his mother in the garden, that is what Danny wanted. Maybe he'd even corner Jesse into an actual conversation if he could swing it.

When Danny pulled up to the work site, the contractor was just getting out of his truck, taking a long swig of coffee before realizing that the spindly man on the bike wanted to talk to him. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He pointed to the nametag on his chest. "Alfonso, what's going on?"

Danny took the man's posture in: not aggressive, but alert, proper. Although he likely wouldn't put it this way, he stood almost like a ballet dancer, his back strong and straight, which gave him air of confidence and authority. "Well," Danny said, straightening his own posture, "I'm looking to get involved in the carpenter's union, got a certification and everything, and I'm looking for a signatory to help me get a leg up here."

"You're looking for work."

"Yeah, that about sums it up."

"What kind of experience you got?"

"Well, see, that's the thing, I have a certification—"

Alfonso cut in. "Certification nothing. Where from?"

"Plains Community College."

“And they don’t have you doing no work outa there?”

“I was kind of a special case.” Anticipating an interruption, Danny paused to let Alfonso ask a question, but instead he just raised his eyebrows in anticipation. “It was a degree program out of Pinkerville, so I wasn’t really allowed to go out to job sites.”

Alfonso rubbed his chin. “Shit.” He drew the word out the way you might say “umm” when you don’t know what to say, and Danny prepared for the worst. But Alfonso’s demeanor softened a little. He leaned in when he said, “Look, I run this operation so I can hire whoever I damn well please, and I know as well as anyone it can be hard to find someone who’ll give you a shot,” he said, pointing to his dark brown arm, “but we got a lot of guys out here looking for work you know.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Well, shit, these guys, nine out of ten of them have experience on a site.”

“Right.”

“Well, shit, we got deadlines man. If you don’t have the experience, how do I know you got the ability?”

“I would imagine I’d get the ability from experience.”

“That’s the catch man. Look, I want to give you a chance, but you’re gonna have to wait in line. I got commitments already, people out here looking for work. If you can wait, I’ll get back to you eventually.”

Danny all the sudden felt the heat of the day pressing down on him. It was late morning by then, and as the sun came out from behind the clouds it felt like all of the earth’s moisture was trying to escape at once. He wiped his hand across his face. “Any idea how long?”

“Nah man, I ain’t giving you a guess, ‘cause I don’t want you waiting around. All I can say is I’ll get back to you.”

It was, Danny reminded himself, better than nothing. He wrote his name, address, and number into Alfonso’s notebook, shook his hand, and biked off back towards home. When he got home, he looked at his phone while he ate lunch, hoping to hear back from one of the friends whose numbers he still had. So far, he’d sent a text last night as he was getting ready for bed, and no one had answered. But eventually his phone buzzed, and he unlocked his phone to see a message from Scooter, who got his nickname from a time when, as a kid, he saw his dog

scratching its ass in the dirt and, thinking it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen, started emulating it, sliding his pants across the muddy grass.

He was a goofy kid, a year younger than Danny. They'd met in middle school at Thrace Comics, at a Magic the Gathering tournament. At the time, Danny threw all of his energy—and all of the money he made detasseling over the summer—on the game, and would often pester people to play with him, so after they first met he'd invited Scooter over to the house and they played almost every afternoon. The message was nonchalant. *yoo what's up D Bag? there's some people getting together tonight if you want to chill lol.*

Danny had mixed feelings about going to hang out with Scooter. Sure, by the time Danny had gone to Pinkerville Scooter had been kind of a fuck-up, and from what he'd heard years ago from his parents (his dad liked to point out the failures of all of Danny's friends for the first year or two) he had flunked out of high school and was constantly moving between his parents' house and whatever girlfriend's he had at the time, and Danny put a lot of the blame for that on himself. Wasn't he the one who convinced Scooter it would be okay to smoke pot for the first time in his sophomore year, on the swing set behind his parents' house? He knew how impressionable Scooter was, eager to please. *Let me check with my parents lmao.*

fr man what's up with that?

Yeah, it's like a halfway house or some shit. The rents have a boot up my ass. I kinda get it though.

whatever you say dude. people are wiggling out that your back. We should fucking rage.

Danny didn't think this was true—Scooter was, after all, the only person to text him back so far—but he could only hold so much against people. *If you guys are getting faded idk man I'll have to watch from the sidelines.* He sent another quick message—*parole you know?*—to clarify that he wasn't sober forever, but the more he thought about everyone sitting around getting high, the less he wanted to go.

Danny's phone lit up. *Bummer dude.*

Yeah, he said, biting his tongue at the anger he felt at the understatement. A real fucking bummer, he thought.

VI

To Danny's surprise, his parents did let him go out, although not without a stern warning about curfew. "10:00 pm sharp," he said, trying to show that he was taking everything seriously: the job search, the restrictions—he was a better person, if only he could find a way to prove it.

"Well," his dad said, "how's the search going?" Before Danny could answer the question, a bat cracked on the television, a pop fly, and his dad yelled, "What the hell do they pay this guy for? Twenty-one million dollars this year! Money well spent."

Danny wanted to remind his dad that even the best hitters are lucky to get on base a third of the time, but thought twice about anything that could be considered snarky. "Honestly, the pickings look a little slim right now."

"Well, we're kinda at the end of a bubble."

"What about the tornado? There's still all sorts of dinged up houses."

"Sure there's that, but everyone's hiring temp workers. Lot of non-union guys, too, fixing things for cheap." There were two views on labor in Thrace: either you thought unions were an obstacle to people finding work to line the pockets of the union leaders, or you thought everyone non-union was a scab who did shoddy work. Danny's dad fell into the latter camp, spitting out the words "for cheap," which held, for him, the dual poison of bad work and low wages.

"What about those subdivisions out on the west end? They aren't half done yet," Danny asked, although he feared he knew the answer. After six years they should have been done already.

"Developers went belly up after the ground tested high for lead." It was common for developers to start building before all of the necessary precautions were taken, and this often got overlooked, but Thrace had been a mining town at the turn of the 20th century, and the developers were unlucky enough to start building as a new director of public health who bothered to enforce lead laws took over. His father's own employers had gotten burned on that deal. "Lot of guys lost their jobs after that."

Danny thought about all of the boarded-up windows he'd seen on his way back home and while he was biking around that morning. While he'd assumed that most people were still waiting on windows—there had, indeed, been a significant backorder list—it occurred to him that many of those windows would stay boarded. "Hell, they should have tested that before they started."

“Lot of people struggling to put food on the table,” his dad said, leaving it at that.

Danny wasn’t surprised that his dad took this stance—it was a polarizing issue—but he blurted out, “What’s the choice, then? A bunch of kids get lead poisoning so some developers can make money off their cheap houses?”

“I’m sure they’d rather have food on the table.”

Danny threw his hands up. “We’ll have to disagree on that.”

“That’s your problem,” his dad said. “You want to be high-minded. What are you gonna do when you have to take a job that doesn’t fit your ideas of what’s right?”

“Ideally, I’d find a different job.”

“You oughta take whatever job you can get. You want us to support you forever?”

“Noted,” Danny said, checking his phone for the time. It was only 6:30, but he decided to text Scooter to see if he would meet up earlier than everyone was getting together. After a few minutes he got a text. *come on over dude, same house as ever.*

Scooter’s parent’s house was tucked away in a patch of mid-century modern houses that sloped asymmetrically toward a lake surrounded by cattails and willow trees. The houses, like nothing else in town, were a holdover from the 50’s and 60’s, when the mines around Thrace were still open, and the Brownstone Boot Factory employed just about everyone else, both of which supported a managerial class that would have purchased such a house. When Scooter’s house came into view, Danny remembered maybe his favorite feature: although otherwise built like a normal ranch house, this one had a roof that sloped drastically in one direction, creating a half story where Scooter stayed, and although he had to stoop down to stand up in that room, he always found it cozy, with shelves built into the walls and a small window that overlooked the lake.

He parked his bike and knocked on the door, realizing that he should have brought another shirt because he’d already sweat through the t-shirt he was wearing, the oversized garment clinging to him awkwardly. Scooter’s mom, Linda, opened the door, smiling wide, her teeth stained red by her always-red lipstick. “Daniel,” she said, holding her arms out until she saw the state of his shirt.

“Yeah, it’s a longer ride than I remember.”

“Well,” she said, eyeing him again, “you look good. I suppose you had a lot of time to exercise.” Before Danny could answer, she yelled, “Scot!” at the top of her lungs.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said. “How have you been?”

“Oh,” she said, opening the door wider and gesturing him in, revealing the wineglass in her other hand, “nothing new happens around here. Just enjoying the single life.” When she said this, she placed her hand on his shoulder.

Danny would have to ask Scooter about what happened. He didn’t know if he wanted to open that can of worms with her. He took a step back from her and sat at the island in the kitchen, hoping that communicated he wanted space. “Y’all were fine with the tornado and everything?” he said, draining his glass of water and trying not to think about what she was implying. It had been six years, after all, but that would be like getting a boner from your mom touching you, he told himself.

“Oh, it didn’t touch us here. Mostly down by the trailers, you know how it is.”

Danny didn’t know what she meant by this, but he nodded anyway. Linda offered him a glass of water, refilling her wine in the process, and they made small talk until Scooter came downstairs. When Danny went in for a real, two armed hug, Scooter diverted with the half-hug-half-handshake that men do, that stunted affection. Danny could feel that Scooter was even bonier than he was, and had just a little of the bitter cumin smell of body odor.

“It’s been a minute,” Scooter said, with the familiar slur of impaired speech.

“You know, I’ve been all around,” he said, trying to get a look at Scooter’s pupils. When he couldn’t get a good look, he checked the time: 7:15. “Hey, when were people getting together? I rode my bike here and, well, curfew and all.”

“Shit dude, we’ll take my car. You mind driving?”

Danny wasn’t sure if his driver’s license was still valid, but he couldn’t be home late and he could tell Scooter was in no shape to drive. “Yeah, if it’s close. I’ll toss my bike in the back.”

On the way to the house Danny learned from Scooter that his parents had mutually separated after he’d moved out of the house. “How old school is that?” Scooter said. “Like, that’s some real dedication.”

“Was it bad when people weren’t around?” Danny couldn’t remember ever seeing them argue, or even be upset with one another. In fact, he couldn’t remember too many times where

Scooter's parents interacted with each other at all. It was just one more thing he remembered that, in hindsight, had to change eventually.

"No dude, I was totally like..." Scooter's voice trailed off. "I didn't know what to think about it."

Although he was afraid of the answer, Danny asked what Scooter had been up to since his arrest. They'd both been arrested, but Scooter's parents could hire a better lawyer, and although Danny didn't know the details he wouldn't be surprised if they'd pleaded that Scooter was influenced by Danny to get involved in dealing, which seemed like a harsh term for what Danny was doing: essentially, trying to make some money off the opiates he was prescribed after getting his wisdom teeth removed. Either way, he'd hoped that Scooter would get his shit together, or that his parents were just repeating rumors about him, but his rambling answers to Danny's questions that amounted to the idea that he was "finding himself" didn't give him much hope.

"Yeah," Danny said, "But what are you doing?"

Scooter coughed into his hand. "It's hard right now dude."

"I'm finding that out."

"Damn, you're looking already. I'd take my time."

"Nah, I've gotta find something to do. My folks are helping a lot by letting me get my feet, and you know how my dad is."

"More power to you."

Danny asked himself if Scooter was always so hard to talk to. Was he always so boring? It was like talking to the husk of the boy he'd known. Somewhere out there the real Scooter had molted, happy and free of this old skin. Danny noticed himself tapping rapidly on the steering wheel, the movement a pressure valve for the tension in his body. "I've done a lot of waiting, you know?"

"Well, if you can wait a little longer, I heard about something for you to do."

"Is it legal?"

Scooter laughed, which started him coughing again. "Oh, it's legal. I've got word that Amazing! is going to open a warehouse outside of town. They're gonna be hiring tons of people."

“I’ll look into it,” Danny said, hoping he’d snag an apprenticeship before then. He’d heard mixed things about the Amazing! corporation, but he knew that they’d hire felons or anyone else who’d take the job and not complain. “You should, too.”

“I don’t know, I’ve heard they’re pretty strict about drug testing.”

“A big corporation doesn’t give a shit what you do as long as you can pass one when you get hired and not show up stoned to work. They aren’t going to waste the money doing random testing.”

“We’ll see man.” Scooter pointed at a house with half the windows still boarded up at the corner of the street. “Pull over here, man.”

When they pulled up to the house, cars parked haphazardly in the yard, a bonfire taller than he was in the back, he already knew he shouldn’t stay. It was a parole violation waiting to happen. Still, he decided to try and play nice in case he was just being paranoid. Besides, maybe some of his old friends had gotten over their old bullshit. Opening the front door, though, he could already smell weed. He could tell it was good, an almost minty smell. He just had to think of it as a test, he thought.

In the house, it was dark. Burnt-out lights had never been replaced, giving the impression that the walls and ceilings were skewed, and obscuring many people’s faces. A few voices called out his name and he waved at them. One told him they were going to get fucked up to celebrate his freedom. He imagined slamming back a shot, hitting the bong they had on the table that was fashioned from a flowerpot and a Zebra pen, whatever they offered him. He could lose track of time, show up home whenever, act like he remembered more than a third of the people there. Instead, he held up his hands. “Thanks guys, but I’m kinda sober right now. Parole and all.”

After a moment, he wound up standing in the kitchen holding a Natty Light (it was cleaner than any of the glasses) thinking about what excuses he could make for leaving. It was only eight o’clock, and maybe, he told himself, he was just in a bad mood. That wasn’t it, though. The house itself was depressing, Danny thought, the wood paneling that had been stripped off the walls and leaned haphazardly around the rooms in small piles, the kitchen floor that had been stripped of its laminate, the bathroom door that had to be kept shut by sticking your leg out.

Scooter had told Danny it was going to be a party, but it really seemed like everyone getting high on their own together, at least in the house where almost everyone was watching

reruns of *The Chappelle Show*, sitting quietly but not reacting to it. He decided to step out into the back yard, where he'd seen the bonfire from the street. There were surprisingly few people out by the fire, and to Danny it looked like the majority of the fire's size was the result of one shirtless guy who kept running up from the woods behind the house with brush and logs that had been cut and dried. He worked frenetically, sometimes tossing the larger logs and showering people with sparks, until someone, presumably the owner of the house, came out and yelled "Enough with the logs, Parker."

Parker yelled back, "Just trying to be helpful." When the other guy went back into the house, he turned to Danny, who had slowly gotten closer to the fire, and repeated himself as if he had a case to make.

"Fire's looking healthy," Danny reassured him, and he wrapped his arm around Danny, putting most of his weight on him. Danny guided his fall to sit him on a log that had been cut into a seat. "You did a good job. Drink this," he said, handing Parker the can of Natty Light, "It's close enough to water, bud."

Looking around, he noticed someone standing, like he had been, away from the groups of people. When the smoke from the fire cleared, he recognized Cassandra, who he'd been in the very informal games club with, where he learned to love *Starcraft*. Free of his beer and sure that Parker wasn't going to get up, he walked over to her. On his way over, she seemed to recognize him, smiling and looking away. "Hey Cass," he called, waving.

She pulled on her earlobe, a habit that he vaguely remembered because it was weird but a little endearing. "Kaczmarek? What are you doing in a place like this?"

"Enjoying my freedom, I guess."

"Looks like you know how to enjoy yourself."

"That makes both of us."

They started talking, and Danny learned that after saving money for a couple years, Cass was going into her last semester in a nursing program. She was in town visiting one of her friends, who had dragged her to the party. "What got you into nursing?" Danny asked.

"It's practical," she said flatly. "I mean, of course I *like* helping people, but let's be honest, it's not hard to find a nursing gig."

"Hey, that's as good a reason as any."

"What did you do?" Cass asked.

“Oh you didn’t hear?”

“No, what did you do in prison?”

“Oh, I was trying to be a carpenter, but we’ll see how that works out now.” Then something crossed his mind. “You’re one of the first people to ask me that.”

“Uncle went to Pinkerville, too. Double homicide.”

“Yeesh, you hate to see it.”

She laughed, “You can say that again.”

“Yeesh, you hate to see it,” he said, and she smiled as she smacked him on the arm.

They talked a little longer about school and prison, about *Starcraft* and the other people who had been in the game group. Most of them were all over the country by now, in grad school or working in some STEM field. One was a medievalist. Danny was happy to hear that they were doing well, that they’d gotten out of Thrace, but another part of him hated that there seemed to be two options for people of his generation: stay in Thrace and hate it, or leave and act like you were never from there at all. He wondered if there could be anything else.

When he checked the time, it was 9:30. “Shit, I’ve gotta bike home like, ten minutes ago. It’s been great meeting up, do you want my phone—”

“I can take you home,” she said, blushing a little and twirling a strand of hair around her index finger.

Danny tried not to get ahead of himself—it had been six years, but he didn’t know that she wasn’t just being nice, and besides the logistics of it seemed daunting. “Do you have room for—” he started, thinking about his bike, but then he thought about going back into the house where Scooter was, the room of nondescript faces, everyone vegged out around the TV. “I’ll get my bike from Scooter another time,” he said.

In the car, Cass wound up being more upfront than Danny thought she would be, to his relief. “It’s a shame you have a curfew. Maybe we could have gone to my place and talked? Well, my friend’s place.”

They both thought about fact they they’d abandoned their friends, and thought better about sneaking over there to do anything. “There’s an old trick I used when I was still in school,” Danny said.

“We’re a little old to be acting like high schoolers,” she said, glancing over at him.

“I don’t know,” he said, “you didn’t seem like someone who got in any trouble back then.”

“Oh, depressingly little trouble,” she laughed. “So, if you don’t mind me asking, what was your plan?”

“You ever sneak into a boy’s house or something after everyone was asleep?”

“Oh god no. I was a perfect angel.”

“That’s good—you should be an angel in high school—but maybe you’re mature enough to handle being irresponsible?”

“How am I getting in?” she asked, cracking up. “I feel like a burglar or something. Let me get my black turtleneck and cap out first.” They went over the plan: she would drop him off, drive to her house, which was close by, and change to give her something to do so she didn’t come back too early. Then she would park a few houses down upon returning. Then, when she walked back behind the house, she would wait—without tapping—by the window to the left of the grill on the porch.

Danny told her to pull over outside his house, and before he got out of the car she told him to wait. When he turned around, she pulled him toward her by his shirt and they kissed briefly. “Now go say goodnight to your mom.”

“Well,” Danny said, taken aback and hoping everyone was getting ready for bed. “If you insist.”

“That’s what you get with repressed high schoolers,” she said, shrugging as he closed the door.

Danny checked the time before opening the door: ten minutes before curfew. When he walked into the living room where his parents were waiting, he bowed performatively. “As promised, I’m home by ten. Out of curiosity, do those minutes roll over?”

Rick laughed, “You wish.”

“A guy can always try.”

“Well,” Marge said, “we’re both beat. It’s past our bedtime—oh, but how’s Scot doing?”

Danny dodged the question, saying he was beat but he’d talk about it soon, and going back to his room after hugging his parents good night. Before going into his room, Rick stood in the hall blocking his progress and said, “Thanks for keeping your word. It means a lot to your

mother,” leaving out how he felt as he always did when it came to anything he deemed remotely mushy.

“Of course, pops. Good night.”

“Good night, and don’t get too discouraged yet.” Before Danny could thank him, he closed the door behind him.

In his room, Danny changed into basketball shorts and stuck his head out the window, where Cass was waiting, fiddling with a blade of grass. She had changed into shorts and a large shirt herself. He held a finger to his lips. “The walls are paper thin. You could hear a mouse take a piss.”

Still, Cass giggled as he helped her through the window, amazed at her ability to be a “bad kid.” She looked up at the glow in the dark stars on his ceiling. “You know, this was kind of about reliving a youth I never had, but I think you’re taking it too far aren’t you?”

He shushed her. “You’ve probably got something embarrassing in your bedroom, too.”

“Mr. Mole is not embarrassing, he’s a treasure.”

“Don’t tell me Mr. Mole is a stuffed mole.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you that.”

Danny made sure that his door was locked, and when he turned around she was already topless, laying on her stomach on top of his Lego print blanket. She was surprisingly fit, he thought, her shoulders so defined he could trace all of the muscles. “Someone’s all business,” he said, taking off his own shirt and lying next to her.

“I’m a working woman. No offense, but I’ve got things to do other than you, too,” she said, tracing his clavicle with her index finger. Danny had forgotten what fooling around was like, and over the years he’d forgotten how much he’d missed the feeling of another person’s skin on his, their hands on his body, the lingering tickle of nails across his hipbone. She rolled him on his back, gripping his hips in her thighs, sitting tall. He placed his hands on her hips as she said, “Quick question.”

“Ask away.”

“Were you ever, you know, *with* anyone in prison?”

Danny, you idiot, he thought. Of course he should get tested. “Kind of? My cellmate and I had an arrangement,” he said, and he noticed Cass grinding her hips against his.

She leaned next to his ear, nibbling on the lobe. “What kind of arrangement?”

“Just blowjobs and stuff. It was reciprocal, after we’d been cellmates for a couple years. It helped take the edge off, you know?”

“What did you think about it? Did you like giving them?” She was grinding harder, rubbing the smooth fabric of their shorts against their genitals.

“It was fine,” he said, starting to feel uncomfortable with the conversation, but also considered he might not have to worry about talking about getting tested yet. “I mean, it was just because we were buds.” Her movements got jerkier. “But you want to get it over with. Maybe the best trick I learned for that, after a while, was to sort of stick your tongue out once it’s all the way in. Drives a dude wild.” She started shaking, her hand she wasn’t using to steady herself squeezing his until he felt the nails digging in. He felt his own release, the vaguely bleachy smell of it reaching his nose as they both huffed even though it felt like they’d just started. “Do you think it’s weird?”

She paused. “I think it’s kinda hot,” she said, blushing again.

That wasn’t what he asked her, but he decided not to say anything. He felt strangely used, although maybe he should have said something when he was uncomfortable. He told Cass that he had to be up early, and they exchanged numbers. When she was gone and he was left to stare at the stars on his ceiling, he hoped Malcolm was doing well, that he was at least getting along with his new cellmate if he had one yet. After a while, he felt his phone buzz. It was Cass. *Sorry if things were awkward btw. Maybe we could get together again and talk about it?*

He wasn’t sure what “awkward” meant to her, but he figured meeting again would be a good chance to talk about how he felt. *Yeah, sure. I’ve got nothing but time rn, so hit me up.*

PART TWO: FALL

I

While the time around Danny's arrival seemed to come all too fast to Jesse, the time after seemed to stretch on forever, like watching Marlon's truck arriving in the fields at the end of the work day. It didn't help that he was homebound for the last week of the detasseling season, on account of the fact that when he'd dropped down from the roof of house on Greer Lane, his heel had bent, rupturing his Achilles tendon. When he tried to stand the morning after, a sharp pain radiated from his foot, and he lay back down, nauseous. He could hear the news blaring from the TV, and someone in the kitchen putting dishes in the cupboards. He hobbled out into the hallway, ready to admit that he'd snuck out, when he passed the open door to the basement. Almost without thinking, he faked a fall down the stairs, sitting on his butt and making sure it hit each stair hard.

By the time his mother made it to the top of the stairs, he'd grabbed his ankle with both hands and was groaning in pain. She'd jumped into action, practically throwing him over her shoulder and carrying him to the couch in the living room. She rolled his pantleg up and felt the ankle gently. Exposed now, Jesse could see that the ankle was swollen and bruised, blood pooling under the skin. She shuffled him into the van with Danny's help, and the whole family took him to the emergency care clinic, where Jesse sat ashamed on the crinkly paper in the doctor's office until he was given a boot and told he would have to avoid walking without it for at least eight weeks, and that it would be six months or so before he could wrestle again.

On the way out, his dad whistled at the bill. "Boy, we could've got the damn thing at Walgreen's for \$30."

"We wouldn't have known what to do, Rick," Marge said.

"Just look at this. Everything on these doctor's orders is common sense."

"I didn't know you were an expert on the Achilles tendon."

"I'm just saying maybe we should have done a little research before going to the damn doctor about it."

"Come on, Pops," Danny cut in. "You saw the same ankle we did."

"I'm not trusting my son's medical care to the goddamn internet, Richard."

He was gritting his teeth now. "I don't know why everyone's ganging up on me. All I'm saying is we don't need to throw money away. Besides," he said, looking at Jesse through the

rearview mirror, “what the hell are you falling down the stairs for.” Instead of answering, Jesse buried his head in his hands, sobbing because he couldn’t tell his family what had actually happened as much as he did because he realized money was probably tight already. “Shit, I’m sorry, bud. It’s just... we’ll find where we can make some cuts.”

As his parents continued arguing, Jesse fell asleep in the car, feeling, as he drifted off, a hand rubbing on his shoulder. It was the troubled sleep one’s body forces one into at times when it doesn’t know what to do, and Jesse dreamed that he was riding his bike through town, except everything was empty, and it felt like he’d been biking forever, his throat hurting. He felt in his pocket to make sure he still had a few dollars and tied his bike up outside of a gas station, only to find it empty when he got in, all of the coolers turned off. When he walked out of the gas station, Mark was leaning against one of the gas pumps. Jesse stopped in the doorway, and they looked at each other across the lot. As Mark was getting ready to speak, Jesse woke up, sweating, in the back of the van, his brother shaking him awake, saying “Hey bud, we’re home.

The next few weeks dragged by slowly. Jesse never responded to Mark’s texts when he didn’t show up to work that next Monday, and his dad was the one who called the Schutes about his ankle. He wanted to fade away, lying in his bed watching bad movies under his sheets forever, watching the sun rotate around his room. He watched *The House That Screamed* and *The Short Night of the Glass Dolls*, *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Reanimator*. He had nightmares for days after watching *Suspiria*, closing his eyes to see the camera as it followed the trajectory of a pair of scissors as they went into the chest of one of the girls who attended the school the movie took place in. When Mark texted him after a few days *Hey, I heard about your leg. That fucking sucks dude, let me know if you want me to come over*, Jesse again didn’t respond, and when he received another text *What’s up bro are you ghosting me?* he turned his phone off altogether.

One day while Jesse was doing his mobility stretches, Danny poked his head into Jesse’s room without knocking. “Hey, you’re probably bored as shit.” Over time, Jesse had noticed Danny spending more time at home as he had trouble finding jobs, at first leaving early in the morning, making phone calls all afternoon, or sitting in his room well into the evening presumably filling out online applications. Eventually, though, Jesse could hear Danny’s socked feet shuffling across the carpet at any time of day or night, seemingly only staying in his room

for dinner half the time. He was, Jesse thought, like a ghost lurking somewhere just beyond his perception, and then, all of the sudden appearing in the flesh.

Jesse looked up from his computer. “What are you talking about? There’s so much to do here.”

“Well, it’s about time I called it a day looking for work. You want me to show you something.”

Jesse checked the time on his computer. It was 1:30 in the afternoon. “What is it?”

“It’s just a game,” he said. “You like strategy games?” When Jesse shrugged, Danny stepped all the way into the room. “Come on, give it a try. It’s not like I’m interrupting anything.”

Jesse slipped out of bed, balancing himself. After almost four weeks, he felt like his muscles had gotten weak already, and although he wasn’t hobbling as much anymore, he could feel his left leg straining with the weight of the boot each time he swung it. In Danny’s room, Jesse sat in front of the computer while Danny leaned over him, messing around on the desktop. “So, how’s the search going?”

Without looking at him, Danny said “Well, I’m still looking.” He pulled up a chair and sat next to Jesse. “But I’ve gotta say, I’m running out of places that it’s worth applying to.”

“What’ll you do if you can’t find anything?”

“That’s not really an option, bud.”

Before he started teaching Jesse how to play, Danny made him look over the keys that he’d need to memorize, but Jesse couldn’t remember them all, spread out as they were across the keyboard. Jesse wasn’t a great typist in the first place, and had never memorized the layout of the keyboard once he’d learned how to cheat on the tests in keyboarding class. He started the tutorial for the game, Danny giving him pointers along the way, but he couldn’t follow what was happening on the screen while trying to remember and find all of the keys, and he could tell that Danny was hoping he’d do better.

“Dude, I can’t play these kinds of games.”

“Yes you can, just pay attention.”

Jesse *was* trying to pay attention. But Danny had always made him feel stupid. While he’d picked up quick on anything athletic, he’d also struggled for hours while Danny had taught him math, since neither of their parents could remember how to do more than basic arithmetic,

which their mom could calculate in her head up to two decimal points, or fractions, which their dad had memorized conversions of down to 32nds—the kinds of math they had used for work. Danny had walked him through word problems and more complex math until he went to jail, and Jesse had struggled with algebra in middle school and geometry in his freshman year. He just wasn't as smart as Danny, he thought.

When he died for the third time, with minor coaching from Danny, on the game's first mission, the chunky space marines in bulky red armor that he was controlling smashed to death by green orcs, he stood up. "Do you mind if I go now?"

"Oh come on, let me show you some things," Danny said. "You don't have to head off so quick."

"Sure," Jesse said, but he couldn't get past the lingering sense he had around Danny that his words got stuck in his throat. It made his whole body itch, like he was having an allergic reaction and if he didn't leave he'd die. He watched Danny beat the mission effortlessly, somewhat following the advice he was given and nodding along. After a brief cutscene, Danny turned to him.

"Is everything okay?" Danny asked.

"Sure."

"That's not an answer."

"I don't know what you want me to say."

"I don't *want* you to say anything. I'm asking a question. What's going on, bud?"

Jesse stared out of the window toward the bramble patch in their backyard, the tangled branches creating a wall between their house and the field. He'd kill for a cigarette, he thought, to calm his nerves. To give him time to wrestle down the words that were running around in his head. "It's just weird, having you back."

"I'm sorry," Danny said, turning towards Jesse in his chair.

"You're sorry?" Jesse said, the question an accusation. He told Danny about the bullying, about their parents staying up late, arguing after he went to jail—they'd gone to marriage counseling for a while—about the fact that they'd get up early as often as they could on the weekends to go see him.

"Hey," Danny tried to interrupt him.

“And I stopped going because I felt like I couldn’t get away from you,” Jesse continued. “I didn’t want anything to do with you, if I’m being honest.”

“I know I fucked up,” Danny said. “Do you think I assumed everything was peachy while I was in Pinkerville? Get some fucking perspective, Jess. You have every right to be mad, but come on.”

Jesse stood up from his chair and started walking back to his room, swinging his boot into the door frame and wincing.

“Careful, bud, are you okay?”

“Stop calling me bud, or Jess.”

“You’re like a lion with a thorn in its fucking paw, man. I’m trying to talk to you.”

“I don’t have anything to say,” Jesse said, swinging out into the hallway and then into his room. As he watched some movie he didn’t even know the name of, he heard Danny leave.

A few days later, Jesse’s mom made him leave the house. “It’s about time you stopped loafing around,” she said. “Besides, if you want to wrestle at all next year, you’ll have to start moving around again.”

Jesse wasn’t sure he wanted to wrestle again. He wasn’t sure he really wanted to do anything at all—not that he could tell his mom that. It was almost August, and in a few weeks he’d be back at school, still wearing his boot for a couple weeks just in case. “I won’t be able to compete until after Winter break. Would it even be worth it?”

“Jesse, you have to stay busy.” When Jesse groaned, she said, “Besides, I’ve already worked out a volunteer opportunity over at the library for you.

“What am I going to do at the library?” He’d never been in the library, a converted double wide behind the rec center, so beyond being snarky he literally didn’t know what he was supposed to do.

“Whatever they have for you to do. You’ll get to move around a little, and I’m sure they could use the help. It’s only Phyllis and Glenda there.”

The two women who worked at the library, volunteers themselves who kept it open four and a half days a week, were twins that were some age Jesse couldn’t pin, although people normally said somewhere between eighty and ninety. He couldn’t argue with his mom about that.

“When do I need to be there?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Do you have any big plans?”

“No.”

“Well that about settles it.”

“I can’t walk all that way,” Jesse said. A last-ditch effort.

“Danny will drive you. I’ve already talked to him about it.” She sighed. “He doesn’t have anything going on either.”

The brothers hadn’t talked since their argument a few days before, and that afternoon their dad’s truck was silent except the slow howl of Hank Williams’ “Your Cheatin’ Heart.” Jesse finally decided to break the silence. “How’s dad listen to this stuff all the time?”

“Yeah, we’re liable to get every dog in the neighborhood riled up,” Danny said, braying like a beagle as he turned the volume down.

Jesse laughed. If he was being honest, he’d missed Danny’s goofy sense of humor. “So uh…” he started, but his words still felt stuck.

“So?”

“Are you just dropping me off or what?”

“I’d volunteer with you,” Danny said, “but I’ve got a hot date today. Well, kind of a date. Don’t know if you remember Cass or not.”

“How are you getting dates already?”

“Already nothing, it’s been years, Jess. Besides,” he said, “you could if you wanted to.”

“Yeah right,” Jesse said, scoffing.

“What about Mark?”

“You think I’m queer or something?”

“I already talked to Mom about you guys.”

“That wasn’t anything, really.”

“Look, you don’t have to be out to the world, but be honest with yourself. If you like dudes, you like dudes. Besides, you’re free to try whatever the hell you want. Let’s say you and Mark get together. Doesn’t make you anything, necessarily.”

They were coming up on the rec center, and Danny was going as slow as he could get away with, trying to make sure Jesse didn't find a reason to cut the conversation short. "Yes it does."

"Let's say you guys have butt sex or whatever," Danny said.

"You're making this weird," Jesse said, blushing.

"Fine, it's weird. Anyway, let's say you guys do it, and afterwards you're both like 'eh.' You've had sex, but you wouldn't do it again. Does that make you gay?"

"Yes?" They were parked in a spot now, Jesse thought. He could leave whenever.

"You buffoon," Danny said, raking his knuckles across Jesse's head. "You can lead a Jesse to an answer, but you can't make him admit it. The point is no, you don't have to worry about what it 'makes' you."

"I don't know," Jesse said, thinking about the way even he talked about it at school. Just about anything was grounds for calling someone gay or a fag, from wearing the wrong clothes to not finding certain girls attractive to not playing sports or even doing the wrong activities like sewing (unless it was in the context of camping) and sure, no one thought that meant someone was literally gay, but also... Jesse couldn't make sense of his feelings at the moment.

"Trust me on this, Jess," Danny said, and they both looked at each other for a moment before Danny said, "Besides, you're a kid, you're not allowed to have sex yet. It's against the rules—but if you do, don't be a dweeb about it. Feel free to ask me about rubbers and all that—I know Mom and Dad won't talk to you about it."

Jesse unbuckled his seatbelt, "alright, I get it, I get it. I'll see you later."

"I'm here to talk any time, Jess."

"Thanks," Jesse said as he closed the door.

In the library, after either Phyllis or Glenda—he forgot which one was which because they were wearing the same outfit, vibrant stretch velvet pants with striped shirts that were roughly the same shade as the pants, in different colors—gave him the job of shelving all of the books that had come in that day, handing him a Dewey decimal chart and sending him on his way after making small talk and asking about his family, Jesse tucked himself in a corner before starting, pulling out his phone. He pulled up Mark in his contacts. *Hey, sorry I've been a shithead. Meet up soon? At my house or something?* He slipped his phone back in his pocket

and got to learning where all the books went, not expecting to get an answer, but after a few minutes he felt the buzz.

He pulled the phone out of his pocket without bothering to check if he was out of sight, almost dropping it as he swiped on the lock screen. It was Mark. *Sure thing, Casper.*

Yeah fuck you too Jesse texted back. Mark just send back an emoji that was blowing a kiss, which he'd often done ironically—or Jesse had thought it was ironic—in the past. Jesse went back to shelving, his heart fluttering.

II

The Amazing! warehouse, built just that Spring outside the town of Thrace Illinois, was still white and clean, shining as it seemed to materialize out of the heat shimmer in the fields at the end of the frontage road. Possibly because the building itself blended in with the pale ring of the Autumn sky, it seemed to leap out, Danny thought, to fundamentally change the landscape in the blink of an eye. Where he might expect the rolling hills of corn to go on uninterrupted, the warehouse sat, almost 500,000 feet dedicated to the distribution of every asinine product Danny could imagine.

Adhesive foot pads that “draw toxins from the body”? They’re there. Toilet paper with the face of select presidents or celebrities, for only \$10 a roll? If you’re foolish enough, why not? Danny was one of 1,200 people (a number Danny’s parents would repeat proudly as they read the newspaper) whose job depended on this kind of careless spending. Each worker was responsible for picking an item every six seconds on average, a feat that required scurrying frantically through rows of products and hoping your items were close enough, sometimes jumping to reach high items instead of getting a ladder, slinging up to fifty pounds as quick as you’re expected to move a book or hat, and they couldn’t do this if no one lost their headphones or decided they really didn’t want to go to the store for new underwear.

Not that Danny was in a position to complain. The whole of the warehouse that he scoured every day held, he was reminded, a considerably larger amount of freedom than the 34 square feet he had to himself in the Pinkerville correctional center. And on this day, Danny reminded himself again as he flicked a cigarette butt out of his car window: he could still be in jail. It was his responsibility to be grateful, and to an extent he was. He got to help his parents with rent, and they’d laid off on him since he’d held a steady job. Besides, his dad’s hours had been cut for the time being, since the jobs at the Amazing! warehouse were still new and people weren’t ready to have work done on their houses after the last hit to the economy.

And since Danny was so very grateful, he didn’t ask too many questions when Caden told him as he walked by the central office, a rectangular room the size of a double wide trailer with Plexiglass windows all around from which Danny and all of the other floor workers could see the supervisors monitoring the pace they worked at and checking cameras to see if anyone was taking unauthorized breaks, that he’d start training on the forklift after only a few weeks there. “You’ve got major potential,” Caden said, patting Danny on the back and giving him a wide grin

that showed his teeth white and straight like chicklets. He was a recent college grad, and had the aggressive positivity that Danny sometimes saw in the counselors he never trusted and didn't listen much to. "You seem like a smart guy, and I just know you'll get the hang of this."

Danny nodded. "Hell yeah, when do I start training?" He didn't know what Caden was smiling about. He thought it made Caden look stupid.

Caden frowned for a second, wrinkling his nose like the word "hell" had a bad odor to it, but then his eyes brightened up as he grinned and said "Whenever you come back from your locker."

"Be right back," Danny said. Turning toward the central office, he looked at the rows and rows of scaffolding packed neatly with pallets from which he would pull merchandise and, once he picked enough items, would send them down a chute to the packing area. All of this was overlooked by the central office and, although he was trying to stop making these comparisons, the structure reminded him of living in the correctional center, where cell blocks were arranged in several branches all easily accessible by a central security hub. Even the use of yellow paint for the scaffolding and picking bins was similar to Pinkerville CC.

What would have happened if Danny had said he didn't want to learn how to drive a forklift? Of course, he did want to learn—picking items for ten hours at a time wasn't exactly exciting—but what if he didn't? Could he have really said no? The Amazing! corporation operated under a softer power than the guards in Pinkerville, but the answer, he thought, was still definitively no.

In Pinkerville, you might get beat for reading the wrong book or, if you're in solitary for "harassing" an officer, you might be threatened with not getting your meals, but the Amazing! corporation was governed by the manager's simpering smiles as they gave you more work to do, or politely warned you about not meeting your efficiency goals. Just yesterday, Danny thought, Klemperer, who had hurt his back in a Humvee accident in Desert Storm, got a "pep talk" for only meeting 96% of his quota. Some manager in a blue polo, fingers in his belt loops as if to say *lemme shoot straight with you here*, told him "We just really want all of our associates to achieve the best they can." Danny would have to ask Klemp next time he saw him if they were trying to get him to go to the med facility.

In the break room, Danny saw on the wall opposite from the door a new poster on the wall, the kind of thing he saw and thought maybe Scooter was lucky for failing his drug test to

get hired. On it, a woman light brown hair that went past her shoulders which, Danny thought, meant it should have been up in a ponytail or bun. She was carrying an empty yellow bin and smiling at the camera, her eyebrows raised almost as if she had been surprised, in her attempt to smile for the thousandth time, for the perfect picture. Danny looked at the stupid face she was making and reading the poster's message about how unions aren't "customer obsessed" and are therefore "a threat to all of our jobs," and thought about how he had more freedom to piss when he had to in prison. The Amazing! corporation packaged messages like this all the time: death by a thousand smiles.

Danny, it should be noted, had never driven a forklift, and Hailey, who had been tasked with training him, wasn't much help. "If you want to raise the fork, you want to take *this*," she said, grabbing one of the knobs on the dash, "and pull it."

"Seems easy enough." Danny said, trying to be agreeable, although Hailey was anything but: a leathery woman with a smoker's voice that gave everything she said a gravely edge, especially when she cussed at the machine for "not cooperating," and spat on the warehouse floor every now and then as they moved from place to place. He appreciated the change of pace from the managers' aspartame sweetness. He pulled the handle back to raise the fork.

"Don't touch nothing until I tell you, now."

Danny put his hands up by his face. "No problem."

Hailey stopped the forklift abruptly, jerking them both forward, and pointed at a pallet.

"Okay, line 'er up."

"Line her up?" Danny asked, not entirely sure how she wanted him to do this.

"That's what I said," she said, raising a flattened hand straight up.

"Oh, we're lifting that then," he said, pointing to the pallet."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, damn it, just drive up to it."

So he did, inching toward the pallet while she told him to "lower the damn fork already," and barked at him when he tried to raise the fork, "I said not to get ahead of yourself." Training went like this, him jerkily performing basic maneuvers with the forklift while figuring out her vague directions, and her telling him when to stop and start, cussing when he went too fast or too slow, until lunch.

As he was walking into the break room, Danny saw Caden getting ready to walk back onto the floor. Caden waved enthusiastically at him. “How are you liking the lift?”

“I haven’t killed anyone yet, so it’s all good,” Danny retorted, although he was still glad to be doing something other than picking. “When’s the next training session?”

Caden frowned again—twice in one day, Danny thought—and cleared his throat. “Well, we hadn’t formally planned on more training.”

“I mean, I can’t do it as fast as you all need.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, we’ll be lenient for a few days at least while you get up to speed.” Danny, still unsure of what any part on a forklift other than the throttle and the fork was called, didn’t know if he’d be able to catch up in a few days. He mumbled something about not feeling prepared, and Caden interrupted him. “Don’t worry, you’re a smart guy. You’ve got this,” he said, nodding his head. “And if you need any additional help, there’s a manual in the break room.”

“Where at?”

“Oh,” Caden didn’t break his smile this time, “it’s somewhere in here,” he said as he walked out of the room.

Danny would have searched it out, but he only had half an hour, and besides Klemp’s lunch lined up with his and he wanted to ask him how the old man was doing. He sat down next to Klemp, who was resting his thick arms on his belly while he waited for the microwave to finish. “Heard one of the Polos giving you shit about your numbers.”

“The bastards,” Klemp said, glancing around. “They wanted to send me to the med facility, I told ‘em no way, I’ve got my own doctor, been dealing with my back since I got back from the war.”

“Good.” They both knew the on-site doctors were mostly there to claim for Amazing! that the workers were at fault for their injuries. Technically, since no one could follow OSHA guidelines and work fast enough, they could argue it, so anyone who could afford it found an impartial doctor. Klemp was lucky enough to have insurance through the Army. “Well, how are you feeling anyway?”

“Shit, I’ve been eatin’ Neproxin like candy, had to lay down with a heating pack last night, but it ain’t doing much.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“Only thing to do is have surgery, and I can’t do that,” Klemp said, and they were both quiet for a moment, listening to the chatter of other associates around them. Then, Klemp said “They said they couldn’t have me hobbling around on the floor. They’re cutting my hours so I can rest for now.”

“How long?” Danny asked, swallowing a bit of his sandwich. He already knew the answer.

“Didn’t say,” Klemp said. They both knew what this meant, in the long term. Reduced hours wouldn’t be enough to save his back, and eventually he’d break and quit, or they’d have to fire him for poor performance. “The bastards. Had this arrogant smile the whole time, too, like they always do.”

“Well, I’ll root for you anyways, you old fart.”

“If you were rooting for me, you wouldn’t be wishing for me to stay here, that’s for damn sure.” Klemp said with a joyless smile, his food now getting cold beside him. “The bastards.”

Home had been tense since he’d gotten out of prison, so he was excited to share the good news with the family after work. Even if it was just more responsibility, he’d have another skill he could take to another job, if eventually another job would take him. Before he could get his coat off, he could tell Jesse was getting a mouthful from Papa for not showing up to his volunteer gig at the library after school. “Don’t you take anything serious,” his dad said.

Mom, as usual, jumped to his defense. “It’s an honest mistake. I’ll make sure he’s up from now on.”

“If he’d go to bed at a decent time, it wouldn’t be an issue.”

“I just don’t see how he’s supposed to learn to be more responsible if we don’t let him make mistakes.”

Rick huffed, then turned his attention to Jesse, who was, as usual, letting them argue around him. “You know what my old man would have done if I’d have skipped work because I was out all night?”

“Right, we can whoop him like your daddy. Have you met yourself before we were married?” Ma asked him, laughing.

Rick, blushing, said “I still made it to work.”

“Boys, you should have seen the way I had to push him out of bed in the morning.” Jesse was smirking now, happy to see his father’s righteous indignation undermined.

“That’s enough,”

“He’d tell me ‘Oh, I’m so hung-over baby, make me some breakfast,’” she said, putting the back of her hand up to her brow.

Quieter now, Rick put his fork and knife on the table. “Alright Margot, I think they get the point.”

Danny chimed in, “You’ve eaten his cooking, Ma. He was acting so you’d feel bad and cook for him.” Everyone but his dad laughed. Danny slapped a piece of ham steak and some boxed macaroni on a plate and sat down at the now quiet table. “So, I’ve got good news.” The other three looked at him, Jesse and Rick with blank expressions, Marge unable to contain her excitement, her eyes shining already. “They’re training me how to drive a forklift at work now.”

“How wonderful,” his mom said.

“Come in handy next time you’re looking for jobs,” Rick said. He took a sip of his soda before asking the question Danny dreaded he would: “You get a raise for that?” While many would have found the question gauche, Danny’s father always wanted to make the point that the boys should get paid fairly for the work they do, even balking a little at the volunteer opportunities Danny had done during his brief stint in the Cub Scouts. It was, as far as Danny could tell, a perversion of a necessity from when he was growing up. His dad didn’t talk much about his childhood, except to say Danny and Jesse should be happy to have food on the table every night.

“They didn’t say anything about it,” Danny said. He knew his dad was worried about money, but he didn’t know what to do about it. He was trying to save up money to move in with Cass when she graduated from school at the end of the semester and he was already helping with the bills.

“You oughta ask then.”

“I don’t think a lot of companies hiring people in my position really negotiate like that,” Danny said, hoping that would be the end of it.

“Well, you’d be a damn fool not to ask.”

“It’d be foolish of me *to* ask, Pops.”

Rick looked incredulously at him, “If you don’t bring it up, you’re letting the opportunity slip by on you.”

“They’ll find someone else who won’t ask for more money is what they’ll do.” Danny didn’t like to talk to his Papa about this kind of thing. His dad had worked at the same company for so long that he didn’t know what most other jobs were like anymore. His mom knew better as a lunch lady what Danny’s experience was, but she could probably tell that Rick was already in a bad mood.

“Well forget them, then. I didn’t raise two damn cowards who can’t stand up for themselves.”

“Yeah, I leave this job and go where? Your company?”

Rick stood up. “I tried, damn it.”

Danny looked down at his plate. “I know, but that’s not the point I’m trying—”

“Which is more than you’ve done since you came home, sitting around and waiting for a job to come to you, then you take this dead end gig,” Rick said, walking into the living room.

“Rick, you know that isn’t true,” Ma said, and everyone was quiet again.

Danny threw his half-eaten plate of food in the fridge and made his way into his room, where he spent the rest of the night looking at job listings and blowing smoke out of the window. When he came out to finish his dinner, Ma was clipping coupons in the kitchen. He asked her if Jesse was still around, and she said he was in his room. When he went to check, coming in even though no one answered his knock, he found the room empty with the light on. No one likes a snitch, he said to himself, and made his way back to his room, where he spent most of his time that wasn’t at work.

Lying down, he sent a text to Cass. *How many days till January? I gotta get out of here.*

With the thin walls and lack of a lock, it felt like a cell to him. His own thirty-odd feet that he could call his own but couldn’t protect from the prying eyes of others. The big difference was that he could leave whenever he wanted, now that his curfew was lifted (one of the benefits of being employed in his father’s house). But what would he do? He got a text from Scooter *Got an eighth sure you don’t want 2 smoke?* and didn’t bother replying. Instead, he lay in the dark, a creeping sense that he was fucked settling into the pit of his stomach.

III

Mid October, Sunday at 10:00 pm, Jesse was getting off his shift at the Golden Corral, where he washed dishes. Although his Achilles tendon had mostly healed, he hobbled out to his bike in the parking lot. No matter how careful he was with the dish sprayer, his feet would be soaked within half an hour of his shift, and on his long Saturday shifts he'd lose some of the skin off his feet when he pulled his socks off at home. It wasn't a bad job, he thought. When he worked with Hector and Molly, they'd get in fights with the sprayers while they acted busy, or cover for each other if one of them took the trash out as an excuse for a smoke break. Besides, he was still able to volunteer at the library every now and then.

When he walked out the back door, he saw Mark's new car, a rust red '84 Reliant K station wagon, parked by the dumpster. Mark was riding Jesse's bike in circles around the lot, practicing bunny hopping. Outside of the couple times they'd played basketball together since the start of the school year, Jesse had only seen him around school, although they didn't have any classes together since Jesse had barely qualified for college prep classes and Mark had barely passed freshman year. Mostly they passed each other in the hall, although Mark was normally around his wrestling friends and no offense to Mark, but Jesse didn't want anything to do with Josh. Jesse sometimes felt abandoned, even if he was the one who stopped talking to Mark that last summer.

Mark slid to a stop. "You got anywhere to be?"

"No one having a party tonight?"

"I'm inviting you to one, dingus," Mark said.

"I kinda stink," Jesse said. And he did, smelling mostly like beef grease and dish soap, with a hint of mildew. "Thanks for asking, though."

"How about a ride home?"

Jesse shifted his weight on his aching feet. "Sure, if it's not an issue."

Mark smiled. "Not at all. Hop in the wagon," he said, taking Jesse's bike and throwing it in the trunk.

Jesse sank into the front bench seat. The foam inside, he could see through an exposed portion, had started turning into dust. The dash hardly lit up, and half of the chrome-like hardware around the vents was gone. "Sweet ride."

“Oh, make sure you don’t roll that window down. I had to push it up with my hands last time,” Mark said. The car sputtered awake when he turned the key, and he beat the radio with the meaty part of his hand until the chorus of some old song Jesse remembered his brother listening to cut in—the pure emo melodrama of *Cut my wrists and black my eyes/so I can fall asleep tonight*.

“A little on the nose with the song choice, huh?”

“It’s just a mix I have. So, what’s new?”

“Just Golden Corral.”

“Yeah, how is it?”

“Easy, but gross. Do you know what a fatberg is?”

“Like an iceberg?”

“Yeah, but it’s just grease that we wash down the drain. I heard about the last wrestling meet.” Mark had gotten best overall not only in his weight class but for the day. He was happy to recap, and they talked about wrestling until they passed Jesse’s house.

Jesse started to remind Mark where he lived, but he raised his hand up. “You want to go for a quick ride?”

“I have curfew in like, five minutes.”

“Just tell them you had to work late,” Mark said, turning onto the backroads.

“I didn’t really want to go to a party.”

“Man, fuck the party,” Mark said, his eyes, focused on the road, glowing from the dash.

They pulled up to a lot with several gravel mounds that the city kept to put on the roads every couple of years, got a blanket out of the car, and lay under the stars. “Hunter’s moon,” Mark said as he sat down. The sky was clear, and under the full moon they could still see for miles out into the fields, watching the cars go along the interstate ramp. When Jesse sat down, Mark sidled up next to him, their arms brushing together.

When Jesse lay down, Mark followed suit, and they stayed that way, a foot apart in two parallel lines, staring at the moon. “Fucker’s bright,” Mark said.

“What are we doing here?” Jesse asked. Propped slightly on his elbows, he could see the vague shapes of coyotes prowling in the fields below.

“I don’t know,” Mark said, unexpectedly coy.

“Well what do you want? Is this a date or something?”

“It could be?”

“Mark, we haven’t talked since August.” The coyotes in the field started their hunting calls, a jabber of barks that turned into howls as they took chase after a deer that they caught quickly, having surrounded it. It looked like a juvenile that had been separated from its family, and the three coyotes dragged it to the ground, tearing at its fur. Once the noises died down, Jesse picked up the conversation. “Would you want to be open?”

“What,” Mark said, still watching the dogs below.

“Are you okay with people knowing you’re a homo?”

“Jesus, you put it real nicely.”

“People won’t be that nice, and you know it.”

“Yeah, I know.” Pausing, he continued, “I don’t know though. Could I take my time and figure out what I want?”

“Man, I’ve had a long ass day, and we’ve got school tomorrow.” When Jesse stood up, the crunch of gravel startled the coyotes, and they hunkered down, falling to their bellies by the deer carcass. “I’ll see you around.”

IV

Two weeks after he'd started on the forklift, Danny was having trouble keeping up with the workload. He'd mentioned feeling undertrained to Caden on several occasions, and although he finally found the forklift safety and operation manual, he was trying to learn how to do it piecemeal over his lunch breaks because he was told he couldn't bring it home or copy it. Klemp, before he quit, told Danny to find another job. "I'd just as soon live off my Army pension. If that Humvee didn't kill me, I'll be damned if these bastards do," he said, "Although I understand about your folks and all."

Danny's dad was pretty much working PRN at this point, and he felt like he couldn't quit, but because of his schedule it was hard for him to get into an interview. Besides, even if he did get into an apprenticeship, he'd be making less money for at least a year. He ultimately decided he'd just tough it out until he was in a better position to quit. Klemp's replacement, a lanky kid who always looked a little lost wandering around the warehouse, had already been hired, and Danny didn't really care that much to get to know him. Caden had introduced them, smiling the whole time, but Danny had forgotten his name.

Danny had hardly slept the night before. He and Cass had talked about what they would do as far as moving. She told him it would be fine if he had to stay with his parents. He'd told her no way in hell. Now, walking into work, he looked at Caden bleary-eyed and pretended he knew what he was saying, nodding along until he said, "Carpe diem, Daniel."

Yawning, he started bussing pallets around, working as fast as he could while feeling in control of the lift, just like Caden had asked him to do, until he got a call on his walkie talkie. It was another manager. "Kaz, we've got pickers out here who can't do their picking. I know you're new, but you've still gotta meet your quotas."

"Just trying to follow safety guidelines," Danny said, more to piss off the manager than anything else.

"Follow them faster. You're a bright kid."

"Roger."

He just had to put the pallet of sexy cow costumes he already had in its spot before grabbing the one he'd been asked to bring over. He raised the pallet, slipped it into place, repeating Hailey's instructions to himself as a joke—put that there, not that, *that*—until he backed away from the shelving unit. But when he tried to lower the fork nothing happened. The

motor whirred alright, but the fork wouldn't lower. He decided to take a look to make sure the hydraulic hadn't seized. Foolishly, he'd checked this while under the fork itself, and although he didn't know exactly what he did, the fork came down quick, the hydraulic system totally failing from a lack of routine maintenance. He barely managed to notice this, and as he dove out of the way the fork clipped his shoulder before hitting the ground with a crash.

Danny tried to stand up, but found that he couldn't move his left arm to do it. He rolled on his back, did a sit up, then got on his feet, thinking before the pain settled in *I can't believe I broke my shoulder for a fucking cow costume*. He paced in circles trying to get a grip on what was going through his head, but by the time he'd thought to grab his walkie talkie and tell the manager it'd be a while before he could get the pallet to him, several people had come over to his area.

One of them was luckily, he thought at the time, Caden, who he was sure would understand what happened. As he tried to explain, through the adrenaline confusion, the turn of events that lead to his shoulder being broken, Caden had him sign some papers. "So we can get our medical staff to look at you," he said, his straight white teeth gleaming. "Let's get you all fixed up here," he said, guiding Danny into a chair where he sat jabbering about how he couldn't miss work.

Danny read the accident report while on unpaid leave, waiting for his shoulder to heal. He'd been deemed at fault for not following safety procedures and failing to maintain a safe position while working on the forklift. As long as his shoulder had no further complications, he'd be able to return, but on a probationary period with reduced hours. When he called HR to figure out if he could contest the report, on account of the fact that he'd never received proper training, he'd had a hard time understanding their answer through the pain that the pills he'd gotten from the hospital did little to manage since he couldn't get opioids on account of his criminal history, but he thought the person at the end of the line said something about him signing some document he couldn't remember.

On a cold morning in late October, two days after the incident, he smoked what he told himself was his last cigarette and thought about what he'd do next. He had some money saved up to help with the bills, medical or otherwise, but after six weeks he wasn't sure how much would

be left. With his father short on work and him now injured, he realized Jesse might have to help tie up loose ends at the end of the month. He decided to call Cass about it.

She answered on the first ring. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” he slurred from lack of sleep. “It’s just, I’ve been thinking about it, and I don’t know if my family can afford for me to move out after everything.”

“That’s okay, you know?”

“Yeah, but we were thinking about, you know,” he said, unable to come up with the words.

“That was before a forklift fell on you. Don’t be a dummy.”

“But what about you?” he asked. She had tens of thousands of dollars in student loans, and one of the reasons they were interested in moving in together so soon in their relationship was to help her pay them off faster.

“I’ll manage myself,” she said. “Or, if your family could use the help, I’d be willing to put up with some extra rules for a while—but only a while—while we got on our feet.”

The thought had never occurred to him. “Cass, this is why you’re the smart one,” he said. He told her he’d talk to his family about it, but even if they said yes, in the meantime he’d have to figure something out while he waited to see if he’d ever actually be back at the Amazing! warehouse again.

With one arm in a sling, he felt awkward and useless in the house. He’d never broken a bone, and he’d never had to consider how he’d do something with one arm. He spent days trying to play games on his computer at the difficulty he normally did, but found himself aggravated that the real challenge was swinging the mouse around accurately enough. He did, however, figure out a way of washing the dishes in the sink that involved a toilet brush he bought at the Dollar general, an amount of dish soap his dad called “irresponsible,” and a little over an hour of his day as he slowly shuffled dishes around the sink, dipping the toilet brush in a cup of soapy water and brushing. If he was in a good mood, he pretended he was doing a watercolor painting.

Since his dad was home more often than not now and finally had time to finish patching up the siding on their house that had been torn off in April, Danny also spent a few afternoons handing his dad whatever nails or tools he asked for while he nailed the siding into the wall. It

was almost the color of the old siding, but in the right light Danny could tell the difference, the old vinyl sun-faded.

On the day they finished putting up the new siding, his dad bought a celebratory six pack, and they each had their one beer as they sat on the back porch watching the turkey vultures swoop lazily over the now empty fields, only needing to flap their wings occasionally. His dad took a sip and offered some light conversation. “Amazing how they stay up there like that, big as they are.”

“Yeah,” Danny said, not sure if his dad was trying to get to some point or, less likely, he just felt like making a casual observation. “That’s what you get with hollow bones.”

“I guess it goes to show you can be big and ugly and still fly, and all that,” Rick said, still looking at the sky.

Danny thought he knew what his dad was getting at. “You calling me ugly?”

“I realize I’m your old man,” Rick said, “but there’s no way in hell your mother’s gonna give birth to an ugly child.”

“You guys been fighting? I’ll tell her you said that for a price.”

“Oh, my ass,” Rick laughed, pausing before he continued. “I guess I’m proud of you and all.”

“Oh jeez, don’t set the bar too low.”

“Nothing low about it. I know I’ve been a hard ass, but you’re doing better than you think.”

“I appreciate it, Pops, but I feel like I’ve had a little trouble getting my footing.” Danny felt the cold breeze. He let it fill his lungs. It was, he reminded himself, still good to be out.

“You don’t say? Well, it seems like things are all topsy turvy, and you’re doing a damn good job staying upright, or whatever.”

“You’re not great at this, Pops.”

“Eh, you get the point.”

“I’m just giving you a hard time, but thanks. It means a lot.” He paused to take a drink. “Of course, we’ve still got bills to pay.”

Rick sighed. “Yeah, we do.”

“You know, Cass and I were looking for a place, and she has a job lined up already.”

“That so?”

“Well, we were wondering if we could make an arrangement with you guys.” Danny related the situation—her student loans, his cut hours once he returned—and brought up the idea of Cass staying at their house. They’d both be able to contribute, and she’d be able to pay off her student loans. “It would be a temporary arrangement,” he said.

“Hell of a man I am, huh?”

Danny knew his dad had felt emasculated since his hours had been cut, his sense of masculinity tied up in his ability to provide for his family. “I’d say you’re not doing a bad job.”

“Marge and you kids’ll be keeping us above water if I can’t find something quick, and let me tell you, no one’s hiring right now.” After the small boom in work from the tornado, the construction companies seemed to be struggling more than they had beforehand.

“Lucky for you we live in the 21st century, Pops,” although he knew that there was no magic string of words he could say that would make his father realize that he’d been raised a certain way that didn’t make sense anymore.

By the time Danny returned to work a few weeks later, his dad had gotten a temporary job on yet another new building out by the strip malls. It was likely to be the new normal, at least for the time being, a tenuous stasis. He walked into the warehouse for the first time in six weeks, greeted by Caden’s familiar phony smile. It was the only familiar face. That’s how quick turnover was.

“How’s the shoulder?” Caden asked, making a windmill motion with his left arm, looking like a real dingus.

“I’m not doing that any time soon, but it’s... functional.”

“Functional is *good!*” Caden said, more excited than he had any right to be about it.

Danny agreed as he made his way to his locker, although with a different idea than Caden had. He would be functional, do what was asked of him, but if they wanted anything more of him they could kiss his ass. He would be a functional employee. In the breakroom, there was a new series of anti-union posters tacked on the walls, urging employees to report coworkers who were “harassing” them with questions about what they were paid, and whether or not they’ve been injured, or using “loaded language” like “living wage.”

He worked at his own pace, slightly below his expected quota, and when Caden brought up his production over lunch he nodded along, saying his shoulder should be “tip top” once he’d

gotten used to moving it around as much as he needed to. Caden smiled, close mouthed this time, pensively, most likely calculating whether or not they'd have to fire Danny, but one or two percent of his quota was a game of chicken Danny was willing to play with them as they struggled for trained employees to staff the warehouse. As he was leaving for the day, his shoulder so tired he could hardly raise his elbow out to the side, Caden waved at him.

“Hope the shoulder heals up quick,” he said, the nicest threat Danny had ever heard.

“We'll just have to see,” Danny said back, walking out into the parking lot, a vast area illuminated by light posts, beyond which Danny couldn't see anything, its own dome of light separate from the world, he told himself.

Danny rolled over in bed, stretching when he smelled something cooking upstairs and elbowing Cass in the face. She wacked him in the face with a pillow. “I know I’m trying to pay my loans off,” she said, “but maybe we should get a bigger bed first.”

He sat up, looking around the small room they’d made out of the basement after getting a dehumidifier. Because they separated it from the larger room with the bulging wall, Danny could probably lie down at the edge of their bed and touch the other wall with his head. It was kind of like their own space, he thought. Almost. “Where would we put it.”

“What do you mean? Where the bed already is.”

“Where would we walk in here?”

“We don’t need to walk, just sleep.”

“Just sleep?” he said, nuzzling her.

“Yes, we have to maintain the purity of this Christian household.”

“I haven’t been to mass since I was like fourteen,” Danny said. “I’m pretty sure after a decade your membership expires.”

“Depends. Are you confirmed?”

“You’re talking to the one and only Daniel Patrick Patrick Kaczmarek.”

“Isn’t confirmation like, a lifetime membership or something?”

Danny shrugged as he slipped into his pajama pants. “You’ll have to ask my mom about that one.” This is, he thought, exactly what he wanted when he got out of Pinkerville. Sure, he had to laugh that he was literally living in his parents’ basement with his girlfriend, working thirty hours a week at a dead end job that could have killed him, but he was happy to have this: to help his mom out because she took every burden as her own; to talk to his dad about how dumb being a “man” was; to help Jesse catch up on all the math he half-learned and to see him mend things with Mark as friends; to wake up every day to Cass, who, despite their first meeting after he got out of Pinkerville, wound up understanding how he’d felt.

He felt like he had a niche, at least for the moment. In the future, he could figure out a better job, have his own place, all the things he’d imagined back when he was a senior in high school. But on that morning, he was content not with the world at large, but with the world that he could affect. He stretched towards the ceiling, standing on his tiptoes and pulling his shoulders as high as they would go, his left almost as mobile now as his right again. He tested a

few pushups, stopping when he felt an impingement in his rotator cuff. If he kept doing this every morning, stretching and trying its strength, he hoped one day it could be as good as it ever was.

WHAT ELSE ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH THEM?

Back in the locker room after a P.E. period spent playing dodgeball, the ultimate school sanctioned pissing contest for boys who still couldn't drive, Josh kept his eyes trained on his locker. He kept his head down even though the boy before him had B.O. that, two hours later, still wafted from the metal box. It was always embarrassing, he thought, that the ball never seemed to go where he wanted, flying lazily off into the bleachers, and that instead of trying to catch the ball he swatted at it feebly with his hands. He knew he was a pussy. His friend Zach, who would even dive to catch a ball flung at someone else, knew it too, but he would always be nice about it. *You're, like, smart and stuff. You've got that.* The locker was particularly bad, like taco meat with something sour to it. Sometimes he thought he could smell it on his backpack.

As he folded the same purple short shorts he'd been forced to wear for the last two years, he heard Zach's friend Tyler's voice behind him. "You got your fish yet?" A small group of boys including Josh had talked for several weeks about fighting betta fish after hearing that two males in close proximity will fight to the death, and they finally decided that night was the best time to do it, since Tyler's parents were out of town. There might even be booze if someone could convince an older sibling to buy it for them. *They do it in Thailand* Tyler had said. *They don't give a fuck over there.*

"I'm going after school." He really was, he just didn't want his parents to see him with it. One less thing to explain.

"Aight." He looked Josh over, his pupils nearly disappeared into the blue of his irises, bright and empty. He smiled, a cruel curling of his mouth devoid of joy or kindness, and said "I'll see you there," as he walked away.

Josh pulled his pants up and tightened his belt. What the fuck did Tyler even feel like he had to prove to a manlet like him anyway? Outside of spending time in athletic P.E. together and being neighbors, what did Zach even see in Tyler, who Josh knows stole twenty dollars from Zach last year for Xanax? Tyler had watched the movie *Fight Club* a couple months ago and, thinking Tyler Durden was a badass, his only takeaway as far as Josh could tell was that he found he could use the "first rule of fight club" bit to make himself look like a total dipshit. Still, Josh was going to his house tonight, wasn't he?

After school, he rode his bike to the pet store closest to his house. He said hi to Karim, the owner, and Hasah, his grey cockatiel he kept perched on his shoulder. He walked to the back of the store, where the fishy smell of fish food reminded him that fish eat fish, and found the wall of bettas brightly lit in their small cups under fluorescent lights. Running a finger over one of the cups, he realized that they were pent-up rage, darting from one wall to the other, slapping their tails against the sides, posturing to protect their small territory.

One stood out to Josh: a white crowntail with deep blue fins and purple crests so cape-like he could hardly tell they were spines sticking out of its back and belly. He grabbed the cup. The fish was a firework of pure anger gliding in his hand, and when he held it, he felt it was a talisman he could wield for its power. This was his fish.

At the counter, Karim said he didn't realize Josh had any fish. When Josh said he didn't Karim explained everything he needed to take care of it. "It is very common people think," he said, "that they can live in a container such as this one, but it is not true," he said, starting a spiel that he probably gave to everyone who bought a betta. Josh didn't have an excuse ready, but he couldn't let Karim know he was fighting it. Karim, who just months ago had taught Josh everything he needed to take care of Lucy, the dog he'd saved up to rescue from a shelter.

He blurted out that it was a gift for his girlfriend whose fish had just died, so she should have everything it needed. Luckily, Karim didn't ask any questions about his nonexistent girlfriend. He practically jogged to the door, texting Zach when he was outside that he was on his way to Tyler's.

Tyler's house was tucked away in an older subdivision of ranch houses that overlooked the wooded hills above the high school. As Josh wound his way through the streets, quiet now that everyone had returned from work, the same feeling he had after dodgeball crept into his stomach. He told himself that fighting a fish wasn't the same as fighting Lucy or anything. She made facial expressions and greeted him at the door, and what would a fish do? Swim? Still, it felt like he was betraying Karim. Surely, his dad would have a platitude about this—something dumb like *if you have to hide what you're doing, should you be doing it at all*—but he also felt like it was too late to turn back. If he brought the fish to Karim and explained what he was doing, he would have to work up his trust again, but if he just never spoke of it again after this, wouldn't that be better?

When he rang the doorbell, Zach led him downstairs, where half a dozen other boys stood around a ping pong table in the unfinished basement, each holding a plastic cup. In each was a fish ready to fight. He didn't see Zach around the table, and no booze either. He wanted to leave then, but when he saw Tyler holding his fish, a black betta that he'd creatively named Big Black, up to the light, all of the doubt about fighting flushed from his mind. He thought *My fish is going to kick his fish's ass*. Josh would have bet going into the night that Tyler would want to fight his fish first, because Josh knew Tyler only tolerated him, if he could call it that.

Tyler looked at Josh's fish. "He's aight, but Big Black's gonna whoop his ass." Josh looked at Big Black, who shimmered blueish in the dim light. Tyler asked what Josh's betta was named, and when he said he didn't have a name Tyler said he couldn't fight without one. Josh hadn't wanted to name it, had hoped to have as little to do with it as he could, and so just blurted out "Gimli." When Tyler said that was a terrible name for a fish, he couldn't disagree.

On the count of three, they dumped their fish into a glass planter full of water. At first, they swam slowly, their small fins whirring, but after a moment, they squared up like wrestlers, heads pressed together, gills flared. Like this, they swam slow circles lunging at one another until Big Black grabbed Gimli, biting off a piece of his crown that waved like a purple flag around them as they fought. Josh couldn't lose to Tyler. Fuck that guy. Gimli strafed and lunged, pushing Big Black into a corner where they tore scales and chunks of flesh from each other.

After another minute, Gimli continued slapping the other fish with his tail and biting, but the other fish had stopped moving. As Tyler scooped Big Black from the water, Josh noticed that Gimli's left fin could hardly move. Still, Gimli faced two more fish and won. They were less aggressive, and when they tried to run away there was nowhere to go. The other boys cheered, but Josh could see in the frantic movements of the other fish away from Gimli that they were done. Still, they weren't taken from the planter as long as they were moving. "What else are we going to do with them?" one boy said.

Two other boys that Josh didn't really know decided not to fight theirs. One wanted to see if he could return his, and the other wanted to take his home as a pet. Josh scooped Gimli out of the pot and put him back in his jar. "Picked a fucking killer," Tyler said shortly, his eyes hard and icy. Josh could tell he was pissed to lose in the first round. Typical. He made an excuse to leave, tucking Gimli in his backpack.

The lights were off when he got home, his parents gone on one of their monthly dates. He pushed past Lucy, who sniffed aggressively at his backpack, into the bathroom, locking the door behind him. Holding Gimli up to the light, he could see that the left fin was immobile. Patches of scales were missing. His crown was ragged with strips of skin ripped away to reveal the white spines. He swam slowly now, drooping.

He snapped the cup's lid open. When he tipped the cup over, Gimli plopped into the water, hitting the bottom of the toilet bowl, although his right fin still struggled. Josh pressed the lever, flushing the toilet, and Gimli slid passively down the drain, unable to fight any longer. The water filling the tank hissed louder, now, than Josh could bear to hear.

GASH

There's nothing to remember in the moment. Only before. Adam was at his brother's and sister in law's, visiting for the holidays. They were on the back porch looking out at the rice paddy, tearing feathers and down from coots and teals, their breasts pale and bloodless in the winter sunset. It had been his first time hunting and butchering. Hunting had been a chore with Jerry ribbing him for everything he didn't know, as if both brothers hadn't grown up with the same parents who were adamantly afraid of having guns in the house, while Angie tried to play peacemaker,

In the yard, finding the cuts of meat, feeling the bird shot pock marks around the lumps of muscle as the birds' heads dangled came naturally to Adam, pressing the boning knife through the tough skin and winter fat of birds that made their living in cold water. The meat, too, was familiar, though new: darker red, a gamier smell, the muscles less tremendous than those he saw at the grocer. There were eighteen, maybe two dozen birds in a heap on the ground, each slit down the breastbone, the exposed ribcage marbled purple and white.

When they were done they threw a carcass to each of the two dogs, who gnawed at the heads as they pranced, dragging the birds' webbed feet across the ground. The rest they bagged up. Adam and Jerry walked a quarter mile down the road and dumped the bag in a drainage ditch, Jerry bitching the whole time about the flat tire on his ATV while Adam thought about the fact that he'd turned down a holiday with his partner Laura to be here because, as he put it *I feel like siblings are supposed to feel close or something.*

When they got to the ditch, Adam asked if that was a good place to dump the birds and Jerry told him not to worry about it. They'd be gone by morning. He remembered a time when, as a teenager driving aimlessly along the backroads, he and some friends pulled off to smoke pot in the woods. They found, floating at the edge of a creek, the badly decomposed body of a deer, maggots squirming over each other on its barge of skin and bones.

After, too, exists. Adam concedes this. How could he forget, early the next morning, sitting on the porch with Jerry who was still woozy from hydrocodone and blood loss? Adam was so damn tired he could feel his head lolling about, but he wanted to keep watch over Jerry just in case. In case what, he couldn't say, or dared not to. Jerry ran his fingers along the handle

of the knife that just barely missed his femoral artery, returning from the drainage ditch to find one more coot under a bench, he sliced carelessly across the bird's breast and into his own leg.

Adam had made the knife as a gift for his brother. He'd spent hours carving into the handle an owl with its wings tucked tight, no longer ivory but reddish brown with dirt and dried blood. They listened to the wind scrape along the frost-scoured ground and waited for sunrise. The stars were brighter, more bountiful than where he lived, and Jerry stirred periodically to point out some constellation or another, or to voice his concern about missing work, occasionally announcing that he was going to drive to Van Buren right that minute so he could make it in time but not stirring otherwise.

They had both tried to go to bed, but Jerry was too jittery from the drive to the emergency clinic: a rare show of vulnerability in front of Adam since they were children. Angie went right to bed when they got home, pecking Jerry on the forehead and reminding the brothers that *some of us have work in the morning*.

The rim of the sky lightening, Adam decided to bring his drooling brother inside when, from the corner of his eye, he saw shadows shifting down the road—the way black moves liquid-swift on dark grey—then he heard the snarl and slap of teeth hitting together. Coyotes swarmed the ditch where the birds had been dumped. He could see one clear in the moonlight, its eyes reflecting against the light of the porch, the ghost-white beak of a coot hanging from its jaws. He positioned himself under Jerry's armpit, hoisting both of them up while Jerry slurred *Thank God, you can drive me*. Adam nodded along *Sure, you'll be at work in no time* as he guided his brother to the couch where he tucked him in.

This is what Adam remembers most years after the fact: the time around the moment. The coyote, but before that the coot, and before that not shooting the bird but deciding to pull the trigger, assessing the shot, and before that the cold water pressing against his waders without seeping in, and before that the car ride with Jerry and Angie, newly married and already arguing in an endearing way about things like furniture (which, to this day, Adam couldn't care less about, but what they're arguing about is hardly the point), and before that going back to, eventually, the deer carcass, the maggots floating in the creek, and before that what? And after? What then?

The only thing that resulted, he thinks, from the cut in his brother's thigh was the addition of a workbench, a red-tinted piece of particle board sitting on two saw horses back by the shed which his brother would lean over, resting the coot's head in a hook that kept the body still for cutting. This also provided an efficient way to kill rabbits by placing their necks in the hook and pulling quickly, disarticulating neck from head, an almost instant death.

It's the moment of the cutting itself that seems the least important. The downward swing as Jerry's knife sliced through the thick skin it was caught on, the second or so where he paused, considering, as he would explain, the wetness running down his leg in disbelief until, through his jeans, a red-brown patch spread across his leg. What does Adam remember of the accident? This moment of pause, Jerry huffing *are you fucking kidding me* as he walked to the car, wiping his hands on his pants and saying *come on* (so unlike the time that, as kids, Adam accidentally hit him with a bat while practicing his swing, unaware Jerry was behind him).

There was the paleness that spread over Jerry's face as he and Angie talked, still fifteen minutes from the clinic, bouncing down the chat roads. Adam remembers seeing through the rear-view mirror that she held his head to her chest, cooing that they were almost there. He remembers seeing these things through an adrenaline skein, which is to say most of what he remembers is whiteknuckling the steering wheel on the way to the clinic and flashes, here and there, of road signs.

He finds that he has little access to the events as accounted by the other two, but he's inclined to believe Angie's account that it was her who jumped into action, Jerry too busy fussing *Angie help me find a goddamn rag or something* and Adam himself pacing circles around the kitchen looking for the keys until she took them off the rack and handed them to him, patting him hard but kindly on the shoulder, meaning he was the opposite of calm, a pacing, jittering body, nervous, a busy body, as the other two liked to laugh about when they remembered the cutting whenever they met, which became less frequent over the years. Who was Adam to deny this version?

In the waiting room, before the doctor brought Jerry back, pale and deflated, Angie nodded along to the doctor's instructions. As Adam sat, the only sounds were his leg tapping like a piston, the loud exhale of the oxygen tank the old man next to him with a liver spot on his head

roughly the shape of Maine was using, and Jay Leno reading poorly worded headlines, followed by uniform laughter. The old man exhaled loudly—a laugh, as much as he could manage it—and placed a device up to his neck that helped him talk. *Who the hell writes this stuff?* he said, his deepening crow’s-feet showing laughter at the headline *Funeral Home Gives Prize Meats to Children*. Adam nodded in agreement although he wasn’t sure what about.

The old man brought the device up to his throat again. *Name’s Leroy. You with the other two came in at the same time?* They chatted, Leroy’s voice croaking with the electrolarynx, something Adam’s own grandfather had used, although the older models sounded more like a jaw harp than a human voice. Adam found it almost soothing as Leroy asked him questions about duck season and the weather, which required him to parrot things that Jerry had told him earlier, and he almost forgot for a moment the earlier feeling of fright as he recounted the story of Jerry cutting his leg, to which Leroy’s only response was to chuckle and say *Thank god for a woman with a good head on her shoulders*.

Shortly after, the door of the clinic burst open. A woman maybe five three came in holding a limp child over her shoulder like a sack of rice, the receptionist’s tired face snapping to attention as she realized what she was looking at, jumping out of her seat to take them to the back. After a moment, the woman returned to the waiting room, and it was as if all motion stopped, everyone frozen in place save for the woman, her jaw clenched and her hands fidgeting with something, the heart’s tendon taut in waiting. When, only a few minutes later, the doctor who had been helping Jerry emerged from the back and pulled her to the side, she made a noise that stripped away all meaning like meat from the bone. Adam and Leroy kept their heads bowed towards the ground while the receptionist, who must have known the woman in such a small town, asked if there was any family the woman could call.

This is what Adam remembers years later, long after the story of his brother’s leg starts to become funny, slapstick in his and Jerry’s ineptitude—how he walked around the kitchen feeling the same pockets over and over again for his keys, how Jerry spat curses at everything that moved, how Angie herded them like ducklings into the car—and then, after that, became a story that he could bore his own kids with, having heard it the umpteenth time, so everyday, so free of consequence, divorced even from a real sense of who Jerry and Angie were since they had become, to the children, the grumpy uncle and the aunt who was too nice for him. Sometimes,

Adam even talked about Leroy, how he'd never taken so much comfort in someone using an electric voice box before, and the kids found this exciting in the cruel way that children do, remembering Leroy as a novelty: the guy with the voice thing. But Adam never talked about the woman with the child. Not even with Jerry and Angie. No one ever talked about the scream, the moment just before, just after, the heart's tendon snaps.

DON'T YOU HAVE A NAME?

Zach takes a sip from his TGIF mug, checking the time on his work terminal. 2:30, and he's already nearing his 400th review of the day. Well on track to hit 500, if he can stay in the zone. On the screen, there's a video of several men in, based on the text that scrolled across the video, Syria. Three men in white garb lead a man, maybe in his late teens, who was dressed in orange robes to a road and made him kneel with his hands behind his back and his legs shackled. The men in white ran off the road, leaving the lone man among the dunes and scrub until, the camera cutting to a different angle, Zach could see a tank coming up behind the man. As the vehicle approached the man, the camera did not cut away again. It happened fast, but Zach could see the body sort of pop, as the treads made their way along it. Zach feels a tap on his shoulder. He takes off his headphones and looks back to see his boss, Derrick, adjusting his round wireframe glasses.

"Oof, that one's a doozy. It's like a damn cherry tomato," Derrick says in reference to the man's head, scratching at his scraggly goatee.

"Yeah, it's been making the rounds lately. Must be the third time I've seen it this week." To say that Zach watches people die for a living is only a little reductive. As a content moderator for a social media company, most of what he sees every day is hate speech—or borderline hate speech, rather—that he can't do anything about, which is trickier to deal with. As it turns out, saying something along the lines of "it should be illegal for these fucking autists to breed," doesn't violate the terms of service, but telling an autistic person not to have children does. Of course, after two years Zach's has memorized all of the nooks and crannies of the TOS. When he's really focused, he visualizes his mind like a cartoonishly long file cabinet that he sorts through effortlessly. He flags the video he just watched and leaves a note: *violates community guidelines on graphic depictions of violence and intent to distribute propaganda for an organization recognized by the United States government as terroristic in nature. Video should be removed and account disabled.*

"So, what's going on," Zach asks again, knowing that Derrick isn't one for small talk.

"Well, Carol just put in her two weeks, and now we gotta find someone who can do her job," Derrick says, raising his eyebrows and putting his arms out as if to say *what do you think of that?*

“If you’re offering me the job, I’ll do it,” Zach says, unsure why Derrick would ask him out on the floor, which had an open plan, each person’s workstation separated only by a short divider that any of them could easily have looked over, instead of his private office.

“Fantastic. This is what happens,” Derrick says more to the room, although most people still have their headphones in, and the ones who don’t are probably just getting ready for a smoke break. “We’ll have you start training as an auditor in two weeks once she’s gone. And of course, you’ll make the new hourly wage during your training.”

“Great,” Zach says, considering the dollar an hour raise he’d be getting as an auditor. It was modest, but no one who worked there could complain about \$40 a week, given that everyone on the floor made \$10.50 an hour.

“Unfortunately,” Derrick says, stepping back from Zach’s work station and raising his voice, “with a new initiative to filter more content using algorithms, we’re going to have to let go of some people. We will be making those decisions over the next week based on the most recent biannual reviews of your statistics.” Unceremoniously, Derrick slumps back into his office without another word.

This isn’t a concern for Zach. He hardly ever makes a decision that an auditor disagrees with anymore, after having learned to read the TOS not necessarily how he would interpret them, but how he imagined the auditors would, which was a long process. In one case shortly after he’d been hired, Derrick had cornered him at his desk to grill him about flagging a picture of an action figure covered in vaginal discharge (according to the image’s caption) as sexual content. At the time, bodily fluids only violated the TOS *if there was a human in the photo, excluding semen, which was always flagged*. Derrick waved a physical copy of the manual around, telling Zach “We pride ourselves here in accurately following the guidelines given to us by our clients. We don’t need you to interpret them based on what you believe.”

“Okay,” Zach said, “but isn’t it kind of a dildo at that point, which would violate—”

“Whether it’s a dildo or an action figure—that’s an interpretation. Get with it, Zach.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Zach said, not too concerned about it and wanting to keep his quota. It was his first time being written up, and also how he learned that every mistake would be catalogued: evidence to be used in semiannual reviews, or in the case of a wrongful termination suit. And if you tried to fight back against an accusation—well, the evidence is right there, isn’t

it? And after all, how do you remember the specific instance when all of the content just blurs together?

Not many people in the room seem to care too much, Zach notices. The average person can only stomach the job for a few months before they had to move on, and those that stay longer tend to self-medicate. Most people sneak pinch hitters in the parking lot or pop Adderall during lunch, which the management is willing to overlook as long as it keeps people productive enough to keep from getting a backlog of reviews. One of the new guys has started going through a family size bag of chocolates every day, just letting them melt on his tongue one after the other. Janine, another old timer (she's almost been there a year), takes yoga breaks. Zach doesn't do anything to get through the day, though, other than drink one cup of coffee in the morning and one at lunch. He's never felt the need for more.

As Zach finishes scanning the room, rubbing his eyes that are dry from all the screen time, he sees Nat, who went through orientation with him, with her hands in her head. Although she's been there just as long, she doesn't seem to leave everything at the door like Zach does. She's always making passing remarks during lunch about her psychiatrist, and seems to vacillate wildly between disgust with the office humor and eager participation in it.

She looks up before he can look away. "Congrats on the promotion," she says.

"Yeah," Zach doesn't know what to say. He knows she's on the chopping block for being fired. Most days, she can't reach her 400 review quota. "I'm really moving on up."

"Yeah," she says.

"You doing okay?"

Nat just shrugs. "Meet for a drink after work?"

"Of course," he says. He texts his wife Aimee that he'll be home an hour or so later than normal. *Just grabbing a beer with some coworkers, I'll be home for dinner.*

Have fun! Might be held up at the hospital a little longer anyway, she texts back. Zach turns back to his screen, cracking his knuckles and bringing up his next item for review: a video of a teen hitting a bong in an inground pool and mouthing the lyrics to some trap music. Flagged, easy peasy. *Violates community guidelines on use of illegal drugs and related paraphernalia. Video should be removed and account suspended.*

Across the street from the office is an Applebee's they both like because it lacks any real character, like a therapist's office in its plainness but full of cheap booze and nachos. It could be any Applebee's anywhere, and for that reason Zach and Nat think it feels like it exists more or less as a world unto itself.

Zach slides his beer back and forth between his hands across the smooth bar after drinking a quarter of it in one gulp. "What's up, Nat?" She looks tired and shaky. He knows she hasn't been eating lunch, and he wonders how she's been sleeping.

"I'm hanging in there."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I'm fine, just tired."

"You know," he says, taking an exaggerated gulp of his beer, "what the hell does that even mean in this context, to 'hang in there'? Hang in until what? When?"

Nat scoffs, "How does Aimee deal with you when you go full robo?" People at work call Zach a robot a lot. He tries to take it as a compliment. "She fucking loves my pedantry." Most of the time, this is true.

"I'm sure she does."

"Either way, you're changing the subject."

Nat lifts her glass, then lowers it before she takes a drink. "Till something changes I guess." Zach and Nat had a lot of overlap in their lives. They both graduated college at the same time, although they went to different schools, both struggled to find jobs in their fields with bachelor's degrees (History and English Lit, respectively), and both started as content moderators at the same time. Outside of going to the bar occasionally, their paths never really cross outside of work, but given the circumstances Zach likes to think of them as comrades.

"What's gonna change if you don't make it?"

"What's up with this corny shit?"

"Deflection, deflection. Can I be upfront?"

"Whatever you have to do."

"Lately you've seemed kinda fucked up."

"You don't say?"

Normally Nat's snarky, but Zach wants to pull his own hair out. "I do. You're fucking miserable and you know it, otherwise you wouldn't have asked me to come here at all. You think you're gonna get fired."

She looks down at the bar. "I'm a pretty obvious pick for it."

"You just have to remember that the people you see on the screen aren't even people anymore. They're just a bunch of pixels, Nat," he says. He remembers their orientation. The final task was, to watch a random video in front of the trainers, to describe what was happening, whether or not it violated the terms of service, how it was violating them, and how they would categorize the content. Zach went first and, as if reporting the weather, he turned to the trainers and said, *There's three kids and they're beating this older guy's head in with a cinder block. This clearly violates the policy on posting graphic violence. The video should be removed and the account disabled.* The lead trainer, a tall woman who wore, on both days of the orientation, an eraser pink skirt and top set and sat with perfect posture, broke the silence by clearing her throat. *That's right, Zachary,* she said. She was like a schoolteacher, he thought.

Nat didn't take her review as well. Clearly shaken by the video that Zach had just reviewed, she made her way slowly up to the front of the room, staring awkwardly back at the group of people while she waited for the video to start. Her review was trickier: a speech claiming that Jewish people were driving mass immigration to Europe in order to "dilute the blood of these nations," but not specifically calling for violent action. She made the right decision (not to remove the content) but when asked why, she didn't seem to hear the question, then mumbled an answer that the reviewers corrected her on.

When Nat finally responds after a long silence, she says, "You know, I've got a therapist that's pretty good. You might want to get that whole 'they're not people' thing checked out."

"Hey, I'm handling my shit," He says. "You just gotta tell yourself whatever lets you stomach it. Tell yourself it's all fake—I mean, plenty of it is, I'm sure."

"Doesn't that bother you at home? That you can look at some of the shit we see knowing it's real and lie to yourself?"

She's still sipping at her beer, while Zach slams back the last of his. "I don't bring it home, Nat. It's just a job."

"I can't do it, Zach."

"Then why are you still doing it?"

She laughs as she says, “Maybe it’s Stockholm syndrome. It’s killing me, but it’s kind of the only interesting thing going on in my life right now. Other than your... interesting internal monologue, what keeps you going?”

Zach blinks blankly a few times as he searches for an answer. He’s never bothered to ask himself. “I mean, I’m good at it, so I keep doing it.”

Even though half of her beer is left, Nat puts her coat on. “I’ll say it again, you might want to get that motherboard checked out, robo.”

It’s dark when Zach pulls into the driveway. As he gets out of his car, he can see the reflective eyes of his neighbor’s new dog: a brindle pit mix that’s lived its whole life in a six-foot by six foot cage. The dog makes a wheezing sound as it presses its nose against the chain link, recognizing Zach as the guy who sometimes throws him food when he looks hungry (this was Aimee’s idea, but she’s afraid of dogs, so he’s the one who goes to feed him). “Down, Goober,” he says, and although it’s a name that he made up for the dog, Goober sits patiently on its concrete pad, its tail kicking up dust like a broom. He wonders if the dog’s heard Goober more than his actual name, whatever that is.

When Zach tells Aimee about his promotion, she gives a slight smile and says “Well, that’s something isn’t it?”

“Look, I know you aren’t happy about it, but—”

“I’m sorry, I think your job is awful.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Have you thought about the fact that you’re the only person who’s ever said that about your job?”

He had not thought about it until his conversation earlier with Nat, he thinks it’s condescending that she would imply there must be something wrong with him because he’s good at his job. “I just leave it all at work.”

Aimee throws her hands into the air, “You said you’d try to find something else.”

He had said this, and he had looked. A little bit, anyway. But he doesn’t know why she thought he had changed so much since taking the job. Sure, maybe he’s been more tired on weekends than he had been, but he was older now—almost thirty, even. And maybe it’s been a while since they’ve gone hiking, or since he’s been able to watch a horror movie without feeling

like he was at work (she describes his look as “glazed over”) even though they’d met in a horror film club in college. And maybe it’s been a while since he’s been interested in sex, but they’d been together for years now, that’s normal. All it means is that he’s just getting older.

He looks at Aimee wringing her hands. It’s a tick when she’s agitated, but he doesn’t really know what to say. He thought he had good news. He decides to ask her outright. “What do you want me to say?” She looks at him the way you’d look at a strange bug you’ve never seen if you find it in the shower, he thinks.

That night, they decide to watch a movie. She insists on something lighthearted, and they settle on *Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind*, and they snuggle up on the couch. Zach isn’t the kind of guy, he tells himself, who normally has problems with chick flicks, but as the two main characters eyeball each other on a train like two eighth graders his focus starts to drift. He finds himself scrolling through Twitter, and Aimee asks him to turn his phone brightness down. He does, deciding he can deal with the eye strain, but soon after he finds a video of a police standoff that had happened that day, which ended in several civilian deaths.

Other people at work had mentioned it over lunch, but he hadn’t come across it yet and his heart starts racing as he realizes what it is. After a minute of standoff, one cop shoots and the whole semicircle lights up. There’s a shower of glass and muzzle flashes and Zach says “Holy shit,” out loud. Aimee looks towards him and he says, “You have to see this. It’s like the wild west.”

When he turns the screen to her she wrinkles her nose. “I don’t want to see that. What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s current events. This is the kind of shit going on in the world right now.”

“I know it’s happening. I read the news. That doesn’t mean I have to see it.” She pushes herself to the other end of the couch. “I think it’s kind of sick to search that stuff out.”

“I just scrolled past it,” Zach says, defensive now. He’s getting chastised for trying to stay informed?

“You could have kept scrolling. Or you could have respected me when I didn’t want to see it.”

“You can’t even *see* anything terrible.”

“But you know those are real people, right? You know you’re watching people die.”

“It’s just a video,” Zach says, the same thing he instructed Nat to think when she was at work. Aimee turns the TV off and goes up to their room, leaving him alone on the couch.

The next Monday after a tense two days, Zach pretends to be asleep when he feels the bed shift as Aimee sits next to him and scratches her fingernails lightly across his back. “C’mon babe,” she says softly then, with dramatic vigor, “the day awaits!” Sometimes he waits in bed just so she’ll do this (he’s certain she knows this, too), but today he lays motionless, his face buried in a pillow. He feels like she’s overcompensating.

“Don’t make me draw the blinds.”

He looks over at her from the sides of his eyes. She’s at the window with the string in both hands like she’s getting ready to hoist a mast. Although he feels like he could call her bluff—here’s no way she’d open the blinds in her underwear—he decides to acquiesce. “Alright, alright,” he says, sitting up, scratching his head and stretching. “Seems like I just got to sleep.”

“I think they’ve been making the hours shorter on the weekends,” she says. “Maybe you should write the time people about it.”

Rummaging through the dresser, Zach looks up. “Why can’t I find two matching goddam socks?” His head feels fuzzy distant, like he’s watching a TV show he’s not particularly interested in. He’s not quite dreading going to work, he tells himself, but ever since Friday he can help but ask himself if there *is* something wrong with him.

Aimee lets go of the cord that opens the blinds and sighs. “You okay today?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he says, bunching up two socks that are a close enough shade of blue to wear together.

“You’re totally in outer space.”

“No, you said the thing about time, and the people. It was funny.”

“You just seem out of it.”

He feels his face grow red. “You don’t need to worry about me,” he says. There’s a small part of him that hates her concern, a voice that tells him she could never *really* know what it’s like. In part he fears judgement. Some people, when they find out what he does, are disgusted that he could deal with looking at violence and hate speech all day, as if just being exposed to it was enough to taint him. Other people tell him how hard his job must be. Bullshit. They don’t know him. “I’ve been able to handle myself so far,” he tells her.

“Well, I’m always here if you can’t.”

“I know.” Over the weekend, he’s thought about how he might describe this feeling. It’s a distinct lack of feeling, almost as if he’s observing someone else’s life. When she asks him how his day is, it’s almost like the blue screen of death; Zachary.exe has stopped working, so he normally just gives a canned response. She’s stopped asking as much lately. Over breakfast, he tries to be better about asking Aimee questions, but she responds in short, clipped sentences. The kinds of answers that he gives, anymore.

Zach arrives early to the office, his ironic Garfield mug declaring his hatred of Mondays to what he hopes is an empty room. Normally, it’s just him and Derrick who show up on time. He sips coffee and walks towards his desk (no one actually gets their own desk, which is part of the “open and flexible” office setting, but he makes sure to pick the same one every day) in the room just starting to fill with sunlight when he sees a silhouette sitting in his chair. When he squints, he realizes Nat must have showed up early just to mess with him. She’s sitting sloppily in his seat, sprawled out at an angle and pushing the chair in half circles with her feet.

She takes the pen she’s chewing on out of her mouth (a habit she has when she’s taking uppers) and laughs theatrically. “Looks like Robocop’s finally been outdone.”

He chuckles, hoping that she’ll move once she’s done with the joke, although he notices that she’s making no effort to. She looks like hell, and he wonders how much she slept over the weekend.

Still waiting for her to move, Zach puts his hands up in the air. “Well, first come first serve.”

“That’s right,” she says, this time keeping the pen in her mouth and mumbling the words. It makes him think of those long, fancy cigarette holders he sees in old movies.

“But there’s a problem,” he says. “You can’t have a pen in here.” He adopts Derrick’s overloud affect in a mocking tone. “You might write down someone’s info, and buddy, let me tell you, that’s a big no no in the company manual.”

Nat groans dramatically, “Come on, I’m not moving.”

“The rules are the rules.”

Halfway standing, she pauses, smiling mischievously, and throws the pen onto a random desk. She looks at him and shrugs as if to say *what pen, I haven’t seen a pen.*

Zach takes a sip of his coffee. “You hanging in there?”

“Yeah, it’s no big deal. Just kinda waiting on the bad news this week. But maybe I’ll try what you were talking about Friday.”

She was cracking up. Zach had seen this happen to a lot of people, although it normally happens quicker than it did to Nat. When it starts, it looks like a nasty case of decision paralysis. Either they take way too long, or they make dumb decisions. Bad decisions are generally considered worse than not meeting a quota, although most people get written up periodically since the community content guidelines provided by the social media site are always changing.

“You know,” Zach says to Nat, “it might help you to take a few days off.”

Nat’s face goes blank. “Pretty sure we make the same money—or we used to. The psychiatrist isn’t free, and god knows I need it to keep on track here.”

Conceding the desk, he sits close by, boots up his terminal, puts on his headphones, cracks his knuckles, and gets to work. He got new noise cancelling headphones over the weekend (although, given his raise, he does the math and it will take fifty hours at the new pay rate to make up the cost, at \$75 for the pair), but he can’t get comfortable. He decides to take a piss.

When he opens the bathroom door, two of the new people (he didn’t even know their names) were fucking, leaned over the sink. Without stopping, they look at Zach, not surprised or even angry, but like he’s a noise they heard in the night that turned out to be nothing. Unsure what to do, he decides to finish using the bathroom, taking up the urinal at the furthest corner of the room. He tries to ignore the dull slapping sound, even attempts to whistle a little, but ultimately he gets self-conscious and leaves without even washing his hands.

It’s not unheard of for people to fuck at work, although it normally happens later in the week when they’re so worn out from content moderation that they look for any dopamine hit they can get their hands on. Still, the rest of the morning, he can’t stop thinking about their zonked out faces when he walked into the room.

By lunch, word had gotten out about the two people in the bathroom (he wonders how long they must have been at it, because he didn’t say anything), and he chuckles to himself listening to Rhonda and Pat gossip about it. Rhonda, in her voice too big for a whisper, says “Shit, I’m like, what’s wrong with y’all. But on the other hand, I get it.” They both giggle, feigning an attempt to keep quiet.

“Like nobody’s gonna be going in there,” Pat tisks, looking at Zach. They both know he gets there early. “Like they’re trying to get caught.”

“You know they is though,” Rhonda says, laughing again. They’re both getting behind on their quotas. Zach thinks they have to be most days. They might get nixed with Nat. He’ll miss their gossip, which is both one of the healthier coping mechanisms for working in content moderation and one that’s more likely to get you fired, since it could be seen as a distraction to others. At least pot, Adderall, and Klonopin only hinder the productivity of the user, if they don’t help by combatting anxiety.

Of course, Zach isn’t completely without a morbid distraction. He, Nat, and more recently Logan, a promising new guy, had spent the last week arguing about a chart they’re making that measures, on its x axis, how likely everyone is to “rope” themselves, and on the y axis, how likely they are to kill someone else if they snap. They had done most of the other employees so far. Some people were easy to figure out: Rhonda and Pat, since they have a semblance of a healthy human relationship, are lower left. They’re not killing anyone. Neither is Janine, the yoga lady. Derrick is a tossup, though. Either he’ll off himself or be one of those white guys who murder-suicides his family because he’s having an affair or because the holiday season isn’t hitting right.

Nobody argues with Logan’s placement on the chart in the top left a little below Derrick, but when Logan puts Nat’s name in the lower right of the graph and she scoffs. “Oh, come on. Like there isn’t anyone I’d take out.”

Logan shrugs, “You’ve used the same crusty *Daria* mug since you started here. You’re not killing anyone.”

“Well why not just put me over by Rhonda?”

“You’re too quiet. Besides, you’re thirty and always covered in cat hair. Things’ll eat your face off when you’re dead,” Logan jokes.

“You don’t know how fucking old I am.”

Zach butts in, “Christ, you hitting up braincells when you’re off the clock?” If Logan’s going to be a dipshit, Zach thinks, he might as well learn to take it, too.

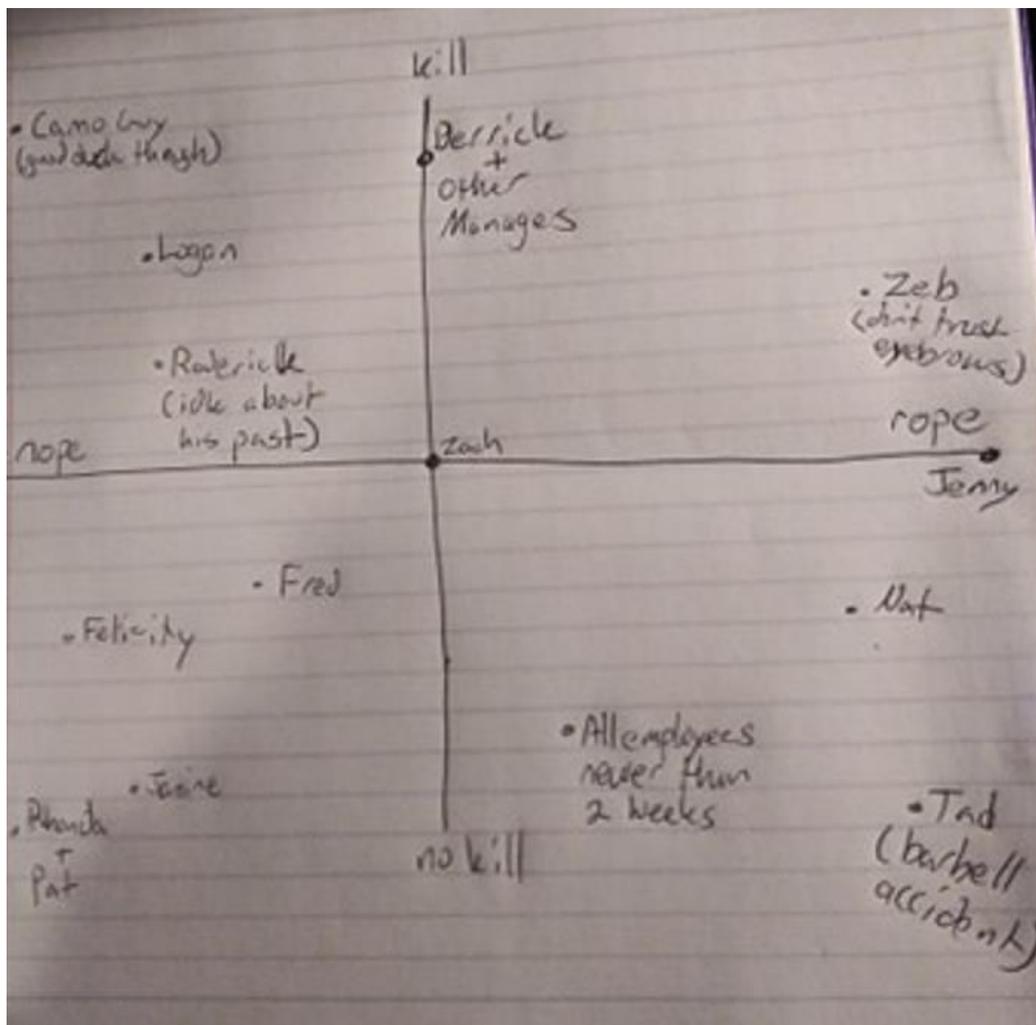
“Braincells,” Logan says, ham falling out of his mouth. “We get enough of that shit here, man.”

“Look, it’s fine if you can’t get laid, but have some dignity.”

“Fuck you.”

They are, it seems to Zach, performing the same sort of surveillance and behavioral bean counting that their supervisors do to them. On the surface what they’re doing is less empirical, and towards less of an end, but in reality it’s probably about as accurate, which is to say as much as a coin toss. Zach, Logan, Nat and everyone eavesdropping in the lunch room know it’s all just a way to pass the time, to push through the sick feeling you get sometimes wading through the cesspool that they’re supposed to protect the average person from. Logan asks him to weigh in on Nat’s placement.

Zach studies the chart in mock thought:



“You seeing anyone, Nat?”

“That doesn’t—no.”

“How long’s it been?”

She looks up at the ceiling. “Two, three years.”

“Yeah, we’ve got you pinned.”

“Fuck you guys,” She says, still eating the sandwich she’d brought. “At least I’m not right in the middle like you,” she points at Zach.

“Yeah, what does that even mean, practically?” he asks. “Like, does that make me immune from this place or something?”

Logan smirks. “Come on, I Robot. No one knows what you’ll do when your processor fucks up.”

“Wouldn’t that make me more like an AI than a robot?”

“That answer is pretty robotic if you ask me,” Nat says.

Zach shrugs. He can’t argue with that. Looking around the break room, he suddenly feels that everything is very far away from him. It’s like looking through an old television screen. It’s the same way he felt this morning, although now he would describe it is like the scene in *Robocop* where Murphy, the main character, is being turned into Robocop after being killed by a street gang.

There’s a scanline filter placed over the scene, and the camera remains stationary as Murphy loses his identity literally piece by piece. His functional limbs are removed, then the robotic limbs and eyes are calibrated. He is observed, talked about, celebrated as the project comes to fruition and then, when he walks into the precinct he used to work in, you can tell that everyone, even the people that are impressed, are also a little disgusted by him. He’s a strange *thing* to them now. And he doesn’t care. He couldn’t even begin to care, and the fucked-up part is that none of it is his fault. The whole thing happens to him.

Zach thinks about Robocop a lot when he was going about his day. He’s been there so long and seen so many of the videos that people share on the social media site that he’s built a visual lexicon of snuff films, a mental catalogue that made him better at his job. Within seconds, he could scan an image, and a lot of the time he already knows what the video is and how it violates the terms of service. Some people try to let things like police shootings stay up, but they never stick around long. There are, after all, no exceptions for *news or awareness related content*.

“Hey man, you’re looking a little down and out,” Nat says. “You want some smarties to get you through this shit?” She pulls a tic tac container full of Adderall from her pocket. The offer is the nicest thing anyone has done since he’d started working there. Not that no one had ever offered him drugs before, but in two years it was the first time they were offered not as a way to maintain productivity but because she seemed to care about how he was doing. He’s straight-edge on the clock, though. Another thing that makes him weird, robotic. “I’m alright, thanks.” As he picks at the rest of his lunch, he thinks about the 200 videos waiting for him to review that afternoon.

On the way home, traffic stops on the interstate. Zach could see the exit he needed to take and, beyond that, the flash of ambulance lights. He shifts his car into park, noticing the smell of gasoline coming from the car in front of him. He thinks about what’ll say to Aimee when he gets home. He needs someone to talk to, and he’s not sure she could be that person. He feels anxious in a way that reminds him of acid reflux. He could throw up. He likes the thought of it. Nothing he’d seen that day had been too awful, and what was still bad was nothing new. He finds himself using the traffic jam to browse Liveleak, a website that hosts pretty much whatever videos people put up, scrolling through videos of street fights with one eye on the road.

Looking for this kind of content outside of work was a recent development, one that started with the video he’d found of Saddam Hussain’s execution just on YouTube, although the last time he looked it had been removed. He could still remember that video in particular. It wasn’t a flashy video, all things considered, being taken on a cellphone in 2006, but that made it more tantalizing to Zach, then and now. The first time he saw the video, he was unable to make out the grainy footage of a scaffold and ropes, and he almost assumed it was just clickbait until a figure with a black hood over his head was brought onto the stage.

Even imagining it now Zach feels a tingle at the reveal: the removal of the hood and the camera’s eventual focus on the face of Saddam Husain that was familiar to Zach from the New York Post covers of his youth, like the one that showed him in dingy tighty-whiteys that read “The Butcher of Saghdad.” He loves that the video was shaky and distorted, that there was an awkwardly long wait for the hanging to actually happen and that, when Saddam dropped, the camera lost focus amid the roar of the audience that became too loud for the phone’s speakers, a distorted roar.

It was like the death of the dictator was too much for the camera to take in until, focusing in, Zach could make out in pixelated detail the bulging cheeks, the twisted brow and neck, the lips drawn open with a trail of saliva, the moment of blackness and then, as if for dramatic effect, a profile of the hanged body from the shoulders up for a fraction of a second as a camera flashed, exposed long enough to determine the strange twist of the broken neck and cocked angle of the head. He slides his sweaty fingers along his steering wheel, his heart pounding. He's not a robot, he's a fucking deviant.

As the honking and groan of breaks hit at the last minute die down, Zach hears screaming in the car next to him, a high pitched wail. Then, the gravel sound of "Shut you're goddam mouth," through gritted teeth. The man in the truck next to him is grabbing his daughter by the hair at the back of her neck, his knuckles on his right hand white. Her head is drawn back and she is squealing something he can't understand. If he were at work, this would be a borderline case. Leaving it up would no doubt create a small outrage, but whether or not it's abuse according to the law was unclear, so he wouldn't know if it violated the TOS, he might literally toss a coin to make the decision.

But he's not at work. Is he really such a voyeuristic piece of shit that he's just going to sit there? They're right there—she's right there. He unbuckles his seatbelt and opens his car door, stepping out onto the hot pavement. The glare of sunlight on all of the cars is giving him a headache. At the sound of his door closing, the man in the car looks over. Still holding his daughter's neck, he rolls down the passenger window. "Get back in your car, asshole."

"Sir, I'm going to call the police."

"How about you mind your own fucking business?" When Zach takes his phone out of his pocket, the man lets go of his daughter. "What are the cops going to do?" He gestures at the traffic jam. "If you call them, they won't be able to get here fast enough, buddy."

Zach stops. His confidence dissolves into an ocean of images that flickered through his head. Road rage incidents are something he sees a lot of in his job, he's seen fender benders end in gunshots. The man could have a gun for all he knows, or he could be bluffing. Still, Zach puts his phone back in his pocket, opens his door, and sits down again. He steels a glance over at the SUV, trying not to be obvious. The man has both hands on the wheel, gripping hard. The girl is looking at something past his car on the side of the road. A couple of turkeys that always seem to be there look back at her. Zach looks straight ahead, choking on a scream.

The way Aimee coos *oh, babe* at him when he tells her about what he did and didn't do makes him think this: he doesn't know how to act like a human being. She thinks he should have called the cops anyway, although she tells him that she understands his reasoning. She's probably right, but all he can do is look down at the Mediterranean salad and flounder they're eating for dinner because Aimee's worried about his heart health and stab a cherry tomato and shrug. "I don't know what you want from me. If anything he let her go when he was yelling at me. That's something, isn't it?"

"It is," she sighs. She had always been, as long as Zach had known her, somebody who needs to *do* something when she sees injustice, and no matter what she does she feels a sense of righteousness about it. Last year, their neighbors used to have a different dog, a Rottweiler that they kept on the six-foot chain between their house and a car that, as long as Zach could remember, had never moved. Since the dog paced the same ground all day and had worn the grass down, there was always mud stuck in its fur, and the only time the neighbors interacted with it was to feed it every other day. Aimee had dug out an old camcorder to verify this, setting the tripod to look at the neighbor's yard. Sure enough, she fast forwarded through forty-eight hours of footage, only seeing the younger guy come out twice *for a total of fifty-three seconds*. She likes to recount the exact number as if it lends more credibility to her efforts.

After this, she'd left a letter on the door, detailing that, unless she saw that the dog was being exercised and given attention, she would have to call animal control. Being the kind person she was, she also left several pamphlets on taking care of the psychological wellbeing of dogs. Unfortunately, they didn't do anything. Zach imagines the younger guy going to open the front door and, finding the letters held to the knob by a rubber band like any solicitor might leave, tossing them into the trash without reading them. And so, two weeks later, she called animal control after the neighbors went to work. The dog was taken and, the last Zach heard, the neighbors had had to pay fines and do community service to avoid jail. This all seemed a little extreme to him at the time, but she assured him that he was just jaded from his job.

"You know," he says, "considering the bystander effect, my behavior is only unusual in that I actually *started* to do anything." He sees this enough during his work. One of his coworkers who didn't last too long in the job told him about a video he flagged: three teenagers pointing and laughing as a man drowns in a lake outside of a neighborhood. When Zach went to

the bathroom, he saw the guy washing his face. He was shaken up, a queasy green. He didn't know how three people could just sit there and watch someone die. When Zach told him that's what most people did, the guy just shook his head.

"But babe, that's not you," Aimee says. "You're not just some asshole on the street, or looking at this through a screen." She picks nervously at her salad. She fidgets like this when there's something that she doesn't know how to say. They're both letting the tilapia get cold. Isn't he just some asshole, though?

"When's the last time you had some guy threaten to kill you in a traffic jam, Aimee?"

She stands up. "Really?" It wasn't a good card for him to play. As a receptionist for a social work agency in the past, she had had to deal on occasion with belligerent clients, some of which were violent but the worst of which talked about what they wanted to do with her after a date, most of the time even after she casually brought her hand up to her mouth to bring attention to her wedding ring.

Zach knows he's in the wrong, but as she stands over him scolding like a parent, he feels a noise grinding its way up into his mouth, the same noise he heard earlier from the man on the highway. "Nobody's going to kill the lady who hands out the fucking buss tickets."

Quiet now, she stares at him, her mouth agape. "Are you serious right now?"

"I'm sorry."

"I don't care."

"It's just fresh, you know?" At the table, he feels the jolt of panic return, his tongue tingling like he'd just licked a car battery. He can try to rationalize it. Waiting in traffic, he'd tried to do just that, looking up statistics on the number of road rage murders. Between 2013 and 2017, it wasn't even 140 people. What were the chances that the man in the other car was armed? Even if he was, what were the chances that he'd pull a weapon? And if he did, would he shoot? With every question, the likelihood of what he feared diminished, and as it diminished, he was forced to face the reality that, failing to rationalize himself out of his fear, he was just a coward. He knew it. Now Aimee did, too.

"Babe," she says, behind him now, drawing his head to her stomach. "We all have our shit we need to learn to deal with." She's still tense, angry or afraid. He's unsure.

Zach looks up the copay for a real therapist and, balking at the price, decides to see the free therapist on staff at his job. When he calls, they tell him he has to wait ten business days before the next open appointment, and in the meantime he misses his quota for the first time in over a year. The day after the incident, he logs onto his terminal. He does fine until he comes across his first borderline case for the day: a comment in which someone refers to another commenter as a “dindu.” He knows it’s a slur, but does the auditor? And if the auditor reports him, does Derrick? Will they pick up on the context? After several minutes—almost ten reviews worth of time—he decides to let it go.

The rest of the day goes like this, and by lunch Derrick wants to talk to him. Zach watches him power walk in his direction, doing an exaggerated wave and, with every bit of demented camp counselor energy in his body, ask, “Zach, you seem down in the dumps. You’ve only reviewed,” he looks down at a chart, “fifty items today.”

“I know, just a long week.”

“Well, on top of the fact that we take our production very seriously here, I just wonder if you’re alright.”

Zach wonders what the hell they produce. Relative comfort for the average user of the social media platform? “I have an appointment with Gale,” he assures Derrick.

“When?”

“Two weeks.”

“Well, are your numbers going to look like this for two weeks?” It took Derrick all of a few sentences to go full mask off with his intentions, Zach thinks.

“I don’t think so. I just had a weird thing happen yesterday, and—”

“Look, why don’t you go talk to Gale right now?”

“I’m kinda on lunch right now.”

“Right, so you’ve got time. And he’s got a free block.”

“I just want to eat and decompress.”

Derrick’s eyes crinkle just a little with the condescending smile he puts on. “Zach, I know that’s what you *want* to do. Eating lunch is easy. But I’m looking out for your health. We care about you here.”

Zach was skeptical of this, but he got the message. “Fine, I’ll go.”

“Great. We all want you to feel tiptop around here.”

Gale's office is covered in paraphernalia for his college football team, the bright orange assaulting Zach's eyes while he waits for the counselor to get in. From the window, he could see the food trucks lined up in the parking lot shared by the big office complex he works in, the people in their dress casual clothes lined up like children. Except, not quite like children, standing as they were with the greatest sense of obligation, checking their watches and hoping to be back at their desk in time, or at least before anyone notices they're late.

He's checking his own watch when Gale walks into the office. Noticing the gesture, the man waves his hand that had previously been resting on his pot belly in the air, as if trying to dissipate a bad odor. "Don't worry about the time. Derrick tells me you're feeling a little blue today."

Zach settles in, distrustful of the counselor's directive not to worry. "That's—that's one way of putting it I guess."

"Well, tell me what's going on." Gale's smile is ear to ear, and he's dressed like he's about to go golfing. They do this to disarm people.

"I was driving home yesterday when I got caught in a traffic jam," Zach started.

"So, this isn't due to a workplace event?"

"That's a complicated question. See, there was this girl—"

"But the instigating event, that happened outside of the office."

"Yeah, but—" Zach notices Gale writing something in his notebook. "Does that matter?"

"Not necessarily," he says, smiling again.

He tells Gale the story, still jittery as he relives the event for the third time in twenty-four hours. Gale seems to listen intently, scribbling along, but when Zach is done he looks up and says, "And you feel like this is what's affecting your work?"

"It seems like the other way around, doesn't it?" Zach says, and Gale waits for him to explain further. "You know what we go through here. I average what, 4,500 reviews a week?" "That must take its toll."

"4,500 decisions I have to make," Gale says.

Zach tells Gale about Robocop, how he imagines having his ability to scan a situation, how he could watch a decapitation without wincing anymore. It was just one more review. Some bytes of information in front of him. But the girl wasn't that. At work, he would have considered

it “mildly inappropriate,” but sitting next to their car it was the most disgusting thing he could imagine. He couldn’t help but to imagine it again and again since.

“So,” Gale says when Zach is done, “one thing you point out that’s positive, that helps put everything into perspective, is that what’s happening here at work isn’t the same as what you experienced yesterday, right?”

“I suppose so,” Zach says, but he feels trapped by the answer. He realizes that he’s tapping his leg up and down—a nervous habit that earned him the nickname Thumper in middle school. He thinks, at first, that Gale is just missing the point. He can’t separate his job from reality anymore because he remembered that his job is someone else’s reality. His job is killing him. It kills him to think that he’s so afraid of the world, that he’s putting his mental health on the line like some Promethean moron to maintain the image of the corporation.

Still smiling, Gale leans back in his chair. “You know, I really think this is a minor hiccup, in the grand scheme of things. We all have hiccups. Bad days. Days where we might be frustrated with the world. That’s understandable. But I think in a couple days, you’ll be back, good as new.” *Good as new.* It’s the kind of thing you say when you fix a car. “So, why don’t you take off until Monday?”

“Yeah, sure,” Zach says, not even asking if he’ll have to use PTO but he doesn’t really care. Gale sends him off with a few pamphlets about mindfulness meditation, and he goes to collect the things from his desk since they aren’t allowed to keep anything in the office.

As he’s leaving the office, Nat waves him down. “Headed out for the day?” He stutters in agreement and she chuckles but her lips are drawn tight in concern. “Well,” she says, “take care. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Monday,” he says. “Taking the rest of the week off.”

“Any big plans?”

“God no. I’m gonna sit on my ass all day.”

“Well, see you around,” she says, holding her hand up in a meek wave.

When he gets home, Aimee talks him out of giving his two-week notice—they really don’t deserve it, and he’d be about the only person to ever actually do it in the first place. Instead, he’ll take his paid time for the rest of the week while he looks for other jobs and call in on Monday. Aimee says she’s proud of him, and for the most part he feels a weight lifted from his shoulders. Before he goes to bed, though, he sends a message to Nat. *Hey, you gotta leave.*

Don't tell Derrick, but I'm not coming back. She sends him a thumbs up emoji, and he drifts off to sleep, ready for the day tomorrow.