

Fall 2009

Ideodyssey

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IDEODYSSSEY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Vincent Bergado

December 2009

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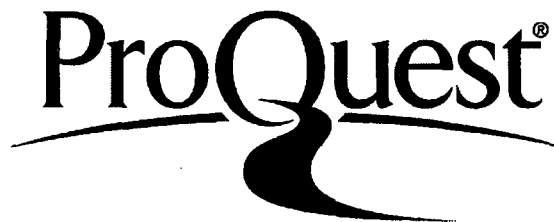
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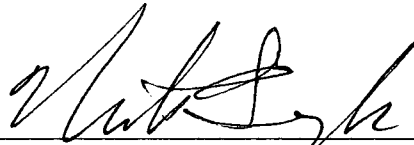
SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

IDEODYSSSEY

By
Vincent Bergado


APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE



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12/14/09

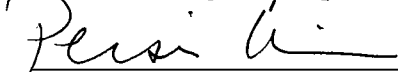
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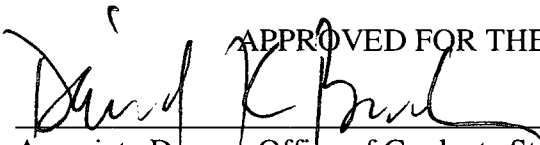
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Date

ABSTRACT

IDEODYSSIEY

by Vincent Bergado

This novel begins during Gabe's junior year at Harbor High School, in a time of his adolescence that is challenging in unexpected ways. Two girls suddenly vie for his attention in surprisingly forward manner, straining his long-standing friendship with Mo. In the foothills outside Oak Bend, a new neighbor antagonizes him, and a new student, the first at Harbor high with Indian heritage, brings a radical shift in perspective to the small town. Gabe is perplexed by the mixed heritage of his own family, and his loneliness deepens as the color line divide in the community grows. As racial tensions escalate at the end of the year, Gabe remains apathetic. When violence breaks out, Gabe is forced to choose a side, and although nothing is proven, a later investigation raises new questions. To escape prosecution, he kidnaps Mo and takes to the road, fleeing the town of Oak Bend. They must confront their tarnished friendship and forge an uneasy alliance if they are to both make it home unscathed.

Acknowledgments

The success of this thesis can be largely attributed to a number of faculty members and graduate students at San José State University whose encouragement and assistance sustained me at various times throughout the writing process. For his invaluable guidance and insight, special thanks are due to advisor and mentor Nicholas Taylor.

This book is dedicated to Amanda. Her heroic support has been nothing less than life-changing.

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INTRODUCTION

IDEODY SSEY

by
Vincent Bergado

Thesis project: The novel *Ideody ssey* is a coming of age story set in the outskirts of a small town in California.

Synopsis

The end of Gabe's junior year at Harbor High School challenges him in unexpected ways. Two girls suddenly vie for his attention in surprisingly forward manner, straining his long-standing friendship with Mo. In the foothills outside Oak Bend, a new neighbor antagonizes him, and a new student, the first at Harbor High with Indian heritage, brings a radical shift in perspective to the small town. Gabe is perplexed by the mixed heritage of his own family, and his loneliness deepens as the color line divide in the community grows. As racial tensions escalate at the end of the year, Gabe remains apathetic. When violence breaks out, Gabe is forced to choose a side, and although nothing is proven, a later investigation raises new questions about his involvement. To escape prosecution, he kidnaps Mo and takes to the road, fleeing the town of Oak Bend. They must confront their tarnished friendship and forge an uneasy alliance if they are to both make it home unscathed.

Structure

The narrative primarily follows the developments in Gabe's daily adolescent life. Occasional outside prospective on his family and its past is provided by his maternal grandfather, a white man from North Carolina. Through his first-person narration, the novel benefits from a voice that is fixed in perspective as well as historical context, while the rest of the novel is in flux. He speaks from the position of Eurocentric hegemony, voicing opinions for many of the feelings that are developed by the white youth in the community of Oak Bend. Grandpa's view on race is complicated by the exceptions he has made for Gabe's father and for Gabe himself. These contradictions exacerbate Gabe's inability to reconcile the different sides of his heritage. These sections are narrated directly to Gabe, emphasizing the impact that family narrative has on identity formation. Later in the novel, a similar structure is used to explore the story of Gabe's paternal grandfather, a Filipino immigrant.

In the first half of the book, the third person narration moves to different characters, shifting with the goal of bringing a communal perspective to the tensions around the school and town. These changes only occur in closely examining the characters that impact Gabe directly, in robust ways. This is the case with Kayleigh, a girl with whom he finds himself completely enamored, but unprepared to deal with those feelings. Beyond that omniscient shift, the narration also follows Rowen, a recent émigré from the Bay Area to the peripheries of Oak Bend. Born of immigrant parents from India, he is received as a standout in the community at Harbor, both due to his ethnicity as well as for his metropolitan perspective that he expresses through poetry.

Influences

One of the goals of my novel is to integrate multiple points of view and allow for different perspectives to be expressed. A notable model for this approach is Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*. Díaz successfully narrates in third person for a significant portion in the first section of the novel. As the story continues, the first person narrator (who made few previous appearances) finishes telling the story, though Díaz allows himself digressions via the protagonist's family members and their recounting of the immigrant family's history. In my novel, the immigrant story takes shape in a similar fashion, incorporating a multitude of voices to build a personal and cultural history that is a part of Gabe. Furthermore, this shift allows me to utilize diverse narrative elements, including poetry and clippings from local newspapers. The former will allow for more in depth character analysis, while the latter provides incisive views on the community itself.

Another useful model for the shifting perspective is *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron, another story of a young man who is entering adulthood and trying to handle complex relationships and the burden of personal history. Throughout the novel, there are long sections of narration from Sophie about her experience of Nazi rule and the Auschwitz concentration camp. These scenes develop through flashbacks, which I will also employ in epistolary form to reveal the details of the Harbor high school riot, Gabe's involvement, and the reasons for the fractiousness of his friendship with Mo. In conjunction with the present action, the continued tenuousness between Gabe and Mo

and the dramatic tension around the question of what really happened that day drives the second half of the book towards the story's conclusion.

In the exchanges of dialogue, I have taken lessons from Ernest Hemingway's measured style. Well-known for writing terse conversations with complex undercurrents, Hemingway is able to convey a great deal of the story, the characters, and their immediate circumstances through the speech of the characters, the exemplar of this technique being *Hills Like White Elephants*. It is a matter of balance, being imprecise without losing the meaning, like the pronoun usage in the following:

"You've got to realize," he said. "I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I am perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you."

"Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along."

"Of course it does. But I don't want anyone but you. I don't want anyone else. And I know it's perfectly simple."

The pronoun "it" in this passage refers both to the "operation," the abortion that they are struggling to circumnavigate, and it also refers to the baby itself. This continued purposeful avoidance adds gravity to the conversation, the ambiguity promulgating a dramatic question that hangs throughout the story.

I parlayed into my thesis this ability to subvert meaning or obscure raw truths in conversation. The desire to soften the meaning and be tactful to a fault, sacrificing honesty, is something I employ between my young characters. This is amplified by the mere fact that young people in new emotional situations rarely have the words to express themselves – the result being that the thoughts comes out wrong, or not at all. It is because Gabe cannot find this ability to speak sincerely about his feelings that the nascent relationships with the two girls ultimately fall apart, and his friendship with Mo ebbs.

This desire to gloss over the difficult details, often in an effort to save face, surfaces distinctly in the adult characters as well; conflicts between Gabe's parents are readily subverted by predominantly indirect discourse.

Because this novel is in part an examination of a family history -- an exploration of how past conflicts can affect the present -- my thesis is informed by Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. The journey of the novel's protagonist, Milkman, is largely one of self-discovery, in which he must discover the past to define himself and his place in the world. Similar to Gabe, some of these challenges arise from gender conflict and misunderstanding in relationships. Milkman, searching for gold, retraces the journey of his ancestors in the American Black Diaspora, but Gabe's journey is more about the returning to Oak Bend with a new perspective.

I must also acknowledge the influence of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. It is a blueprint for the road trip narrative and the often impulsive desires that come with the freedom of movement. While Gabe's primary motivation is to escape the law, the existential ponderings of Kerouac's narrator Sal as he ventures from coast to coast are relevant undercurrents; he is searching for a space in which he belongs. "We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one true and noble function of the time, *move*" (134). For Sal, the movement is enough, but for Gabe, the trip is an opportunity, a starting point from which change radiates. Like Kerouac's protagonist, Gabe returns home in a different state of mind, ready to settle the debts of those relationships he had discarded and neglected.

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I.

SOMEWHERE IN CALIFORNIA, SOMETIME BEFORE

I'll tell you, because you may not know. Your mom was seventeen when she started dating your dad. I remember that first time that she brought him to the house. I was sitting on the patio — this was at our Barkley Way house, with the nice little veranda out front — trying to unwind after work. My Canadian Club in one hand, the paper in the other, and here she comes in her sister's little MG Sprite. I don't know where your aunt Sue was at the time, but every once in a while, she let your mom zip around in that little car. 'Course I didn't like it, but I couldn't stop them. Pray to God you don't grow up and have three girls. You could love them to death, like I did, and it wasn't easy with your grandma already years gone, rest her soul, but it don't make no difference. They're going to do what they're going to do.

The breeze was blowing, like it always does down the valley, enough to fold my paper over and just aggravating me. It got under my skin — an easy thing when you work a physical job like I did, getting up at four-thirty every day — you know, makes you real touchy when you get home. Some days I could go off like gunpowder. So I was already cursing when they came along. Now, that's no excuse, mind you, no excuse at all, but I say that so you have a sense, that sometimes I ain't got no sense. And when they got out of the car, my teeth just about fell right out of my head.

I never expected to see my youngest with someone like your dad. I've known and worked with a lot of Mexican guys, and they're good people. Hard working guys. I know your daddy's not Mexican, but, you know, things were different thirty years ago. I just never would have thought it would happen. They come up to the porch and your mom formally introduces us, very politely. If there's one thing I taught all my girls it's manners, and as nervous as she was, her voice shaky, she remembers that, bless her. He looks real sharp, hair combed perfectly, and fit as a fiddle. He was real calm, like he always has been. Your dad reaches out to shake my hand, and I just nodded – that's all, just like I had tipped my hat. I set down my drink and paper, and got up and went into the house. Are you with me?

I went into the house, it was a small house, so it just took a second to go to the bedroom, and came back out to the patio. I had a belt that my daddy gave me, with a real special buckle made out of old buffalo nickels. It was just about as big as my fist, and I had it wrapped around just there across my hand. Your dad's not a small man. In fact he could have done me in right there, I'm sure, but he just let go of your mom's hand and quietly stepped back off the porch. I told your mom to come into the house, and eventually she did.

I know you've heard me calling people names out of anger, but I didn't do that. I just stood there. They said goodbye, and I waited 'til she came in, and shut the door. Your dad turned around and started to walk home.

But that's not the end of the story, now, are you still with me?

I didn't let your dad in the house for a long time. Eventually, we talked a bit on the veranda, and after a while, I let him in. I got to know him. When he asked me if he could marry your mom, I was excited for them. I said yes, of course. And on their wedding day, I gave your dad a small box, all wrapped up with a bow and everything. And inside the box was an envelope with some money in it, not much, but every penny that I could afford to give them. And just underneath that was my daddy's buffalo nickel belt buckle.

Now, I know you don't believe that I would ever threaten your dad, but that's exactly what happened. I don't feel good about it, but that's the God's honest truth. Ask your dad someday, he'll show you the nickels.

THE VIDEO WORLD

The noise of the bus trailed off down the road behind him, winding its way down the hill and out of earshot. The canine chorus rose in the quiet left behind. One thing that Oak Bend would never be short on was barking dogs. Gabe was enjoying the warmth of the afternoon on his winter-worn caramel tan. It was a rare day without an ocean breeze. While it would have been nice to soak in a still afternoon of quiet perfection, there was a certain comfort in the familiar throaty chop of the neighbor's husky, Skylar. The bellow was like an inland fog horn calling him to home.

It had been a good day, leading up to this pleasant stroll up the road to home — the video project screening day a senior rite of passage at Harbor High. Gabe had received the assignment weeks before and could not seem to get it out of his mind — it would be a final opportunity to show his peers exactly who he was. The stress of the assignment was preceded by the anxiety-inducing partner lottery. You could be condemned to weeks of conflict, or the luck of the draw could cushion the creative process for your opus of self-expression. When Gabe drew the slip of paper with Jack Martin's name on it, he breathed a sigh of relief. Known to most as Marty or *tall guy*, the long-time acquaintance and near-term friend would bring no objection. Marty had a small and unobtrusive way about him, despite his size. They knew each other as acquaintances, as nearly everyone does in Oak Bend, and neither had a reason to protest the pairing. In fact, Marty was brighter than he liked to let on with that lumbering gait.

The pieces were falling into place, and Gabe was in a good position to make the project count. Through it, he could correct all the misconceptions, convince everyone that he really was a great guy, a worthy friend, and perhaps even someone to *envy*. So much could be traced back to that bleak and covetous desire — it greeted him in the mirror, made him stand up straight, made him feel the jealous ache of a beautiful girl striding by and into the arms of her immaculate and vacant boyfriend, and it made him pine after all the things he was ready to list, should anyone ever ask. It went beyond the hormones and into the material, as well. It was difficult to go anywhere in the foothills without a car, the joys of life limited to what was on hand. It forced him to creativity, which, while not as good as a new car, would at least help him to bring his hopes for the project to fruition. For “The Real Me” project, he produced a five to ten minute video to demonstrate all the best and true things about him, control his message, win some hearts, and maybe dole out some envy of his own.

Typical for student projects, the vision is perfection while the actual product is embarrassingly blemished. The videos were hewn by snowy static and blue screens, the frequency of the empty airtime growing into a choppy extended metaphor for teenage uncertainty. Gabe tried to overcome this pitfall — which he was certain would damage his ability to put himself *out there* — by being the most strikingly impressive and truthful character to appear on screening day. He plotted out his answers carefully, crafted a space in the house, a set, where he could record it, and performed practice takes. What he produced, with Marty’s help, was the most frightening thing he could imagine. His hand quaked as he delicately pushed the VHS tape into the dusty VCR.

It had been a long and empty three years. No girlfriends or interest from hardly any people whatsoever – meandering became his understated way of getting along, always headed downstream. Here was a pinnacle, a moment of raw anticipation and an opportunity, a place to make landfall and discover what he could not see from the water's edge.

Gabe appeared on the screen like a still life awaiting the breath of animation. Then a sudden course of nervousness ran through him. He ran a hand through his mop of dark brown hair to make sure it was well-placed. On a folding chair in front of the fireplace in the living room, he blended into a palette of earthen strata, a background of the brownstone of the hearth. A basket in the corner, dyed green and stacked full of split dried oak, provided the only splash of color.

My name is Gabriel Cruz and this is the real me.

There was an awkward pause before Marty took up his cue.

[Marty]: Where are you from?

I was born in Oak Bend, but I moved out to the foothills about three years ago. I like it out here — it's quiet, the air is good, there's trees and open space. I can even see the ocean from my room on a clear day.

As he talked, his hands gestured conspicuously before falling and coming to rest on his thighs. *That and we don't get any people selling magazines or Jehovah's Witnesses knocking at the door. So yeah, it's a nice place.*

[Marty]: Tell us about your family.

I have two older sisters, both out of the house, one married, the other in college in San Diego. Pan over here — these old timers over here are my parents.

In the kitchen, Janet and Jacob sat drinking coffee and reading the paper. His mom's curly auburn hair was tied beneath a pink handkerchief, and his dad's comb-over of black was perfectly arranged and newly cut. Just like every other Saturday. They smiled for the camera, but said nothing. *Come on, I'm just kidding. Fine wine these parents, look at them. They're great, really. Thanks guys, I won't bother you anymore.*

My dad's family is Filipino, my mom's is French, English, and German. Most people think my family is from Mexico, especially because of my last name. But actually, we are all from right here in Oak Bend, all born in the county hospital and raised on the Back Forty. So yeah, we're a little mixed up, but there it is.

[Marty]: What are some of your favorite things?

First I would have to say music. Everyone in my family plays an instrument, and I play guitar. I'll just play you a little something.

From off-screen he pulled out a green electric guitar, which hummed to life when Marty plugged it in. He deliberately plucked out a short riff. *That's what a decade of lax practice can get you. I am also a big football guy, but not big enough to play seriously,*

according to most people. I like to go to the movies, I like hot chocolate, and I like to hang out with friends.

[Marty]: Since you've come to Harbor, what is one thing that has changed you?

Well, I'm reading more because I want to. Reading some of the American classics has really gotten me hooked on books. Those, and car magazines.

[Marty]: The ones with models in skimpy clothes?

That's not one of the questions, Marty.

[Marty]: Right. Where do you see yourself in ten years?

I don't think I'll be ready for a family in ten years. Hopefully I'll have a college degree and a good job, and just enough, you know, to have fun. He made the well-known gesture of playing the world's smallest violin between his thumb and forefinger. And a nice house and a fast car. And someone to enjoy it all with.

[Marty]: In Oak Bend?

No, probably not. But I don't know where. Maybe Carmel.

[Marty]: What would you like to be your career path?

I'm not a doctor and I'm not a lawyer, although I could see myself doing either – and not enjoying it. Right now, I'm thinking of going into computer programming.

[Marty]: What else would you like to tell us about yourself?

Well, I'll introduce you to my dog Sandy. Hey pup.

The black Lab appears on command, front paws on his lap, stretching to try and lick his face. *She sheds and licks like crazy, but she is a good dog. Raised her since she was three months old. And she must be about eight now.*

[Marty]: Would you like to read your poem now?

Sure.

I am Gabriel Cruz.

I am a music nut and guitar player

I am an introvert and thinker

And I like it when it rains.

When I look out the window,

I see the private beach I'll someday own,

The fast cars in the driveway

And the 2.5 kids playing in the yard.

I am a music nut and guitar player

I am an introvert and thinker

And I like it when it rains.

I think about the world every day,

Wishing it were a more peaceful place

Where landfills and pesticides and exhaust

Would not ruin the landscape.

I am a music nut and guitar player

I am an introvert and thinker

And I like it when it rains.

Then the screen went black. He felt no relief — even the clapping could hardly slack the tension. Ending with the poem was probably not the best call - too bad the poem was required at all.

Gabe had chanced a couple glances around in the room. So large in his mind were the revelations that he expected instant change, instant recognition. Attention. Fawning. He had, after all, revealed some important areas that girls should notice — he could be a rock star and he loves animals. He had shown a nurturing, sensitive side. His potential as an athlete, despite his less than herculean physique, had been explained, and through it all he was modest and nearly confident. The quiet continuity of the status quo

had chilled him, and it chilled him again as he walked up the hill, away from the lingering diesel fumes from the bus.

All had gone as planned, except for the reception. Patience would be the key, he guessed. There was no other way to go. At least he had not been humiliated.

He kicked a large rock among the gravel and dirt, took a few steps, and kicked another. It was the perfect afternoon to saunter and sigh on up the road. Then the canine chorus was eclipsed by the sound of an angry buzzsaw, piercing his ears and cutting across the hillside. An engine howling at brush-trimmer pitch from the opposite side of the hill, straight ahead, made Gabe stop in his tracks.

An orange go-kart hit the crest at a good clip and launched weightless above the horizon. The heat emanating from the road appeared to keep it in flight, also masking the figure astride the tube frame. Gabe could only see that the driver was not wearing a shirt. The trailing dust cloud grew with the engine noise, the backdrop of the painted valley disappearing in its wake. Gabe sensed the driver's eyes upon him. The throttle reached higher. It was charging straight at him.

Gabe wavered, slightly shifting his weight. Only a fool would hold his ground, but there was no shortage of those in Oak Bend, either. Fools and their dogs by the boatload. Sweat gathered on his temple and his breath shortened, his muscles petrified.

The hum was almost deafening when he could finally make out the rugged lines of the face, angular features shielded by the reflective lenses of wraparound sunglasses. There was a good twenty feet of road to his right before the upward slope of the shoulder, but the go-kart held the fence-line, rushing straight at him. Gabe's knees bent slightly,

instinctively. It was fifty yards out. The taut muscles in his legs jolted again, jeans clinging heavy on his moist skin. His thoughts ended in a surge of adrenaline.

Then the engine cut. He saw it in slow motion, the cart turning hard and bringing the trailing column of dust and gravel around like a whip. The tearing noise was felt as much as heard, as if the ground and sky were flaying at the seam. The siren-song of spinning tires. He braced. The engine penetrated and raged inside his head, acrid fumes mixing into a nebulous plume of dry dust.

Gabe refused to cough or paw at the thick air — he wouldn't and he couldn't. The more his senses came back from the edge of flight, the more pain he felt in his tightly wound legs and clenched fists. He held his breath entirely so as not to gasp in the hanging haze.

The small engine settled. The spout of exhaust cleared the air around the shiny metal block. In front of it, in a small plastic seat, a boy was looking over his shoulder to meet Gabe's gaze. His face and bare chest were blotched red from the sun and streaked with dust.

"Hey" the boy said.

Gabe took a short, hitched breath, his lungs burning. "Hey." He looked over the rig, but didn't want to say anything.

"You live around here?"

Gabe pointed. "Yeah, right over there. 17039. You just move in?"

"Yeah. Checking out the neighborhood in my kart."

"Nice."

“Yeah. It’s cool. We’ll see how long it lasts. Wrecked two already.” He smiled.

Gabe wasn’t sure if the comment was supposed to make him feel lucky. It certainly didn’t seem like an opportune moment to make a quip, though it would have done good for his sullied ego. The boy, should he have stood, seemed a good bit taller, though they probably weighed about the same. Better to stay conversational. “You gonna go to school?”

“Yeah, going to Harbor next week.”

“That’s where I go.” It was a pointless round of questioning. There was only one high school within fifteen miles. There was another set to break ground that summer, on the north end of town, but for now, aging Harbor was the only choice. Gabe spit to clear the grit from his mouth, and because it seemed like the one thing he could do without looking soft.

“Alright. I’ll see you around then.” With that, the boy laid on the throttle, spraying a new cloud of dust and disappearing down the hill.

Gabe relaxed enough to breathe and started a bout of coughing. He fought to control the fit, hurried up to his driveway and past his grandfather’s pickup and inside the house. He gulped a glass of juice and hacked and snorted and blew to clear the last of the grit from his mouth and lungs and anywhere else it stuck. With one final wrenching cough, he spit and took a deep breath.

“Bastard.”

Didn't even know his name yet. Slouching under the nagging regret of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, he couldn't buck that sinking feeling, the hunch that he'd be in the wrong place for some time to come.

He could smell cigarettes and Brylcreem as his grandfather's slow footsteps approached.

"You alright, junior?" he asked, stiffly patting Gabe's back.

"Yeah, thanks Grandpa," he replied, trying not to shrink away from hard claps across his shoulders that were too late to be of much use. The angry buzz pierced the window and froze him again. He snapped out of it when the kart pulled into the driveway.

"Bastard."

He leapt down the stairs to the entryway and made the door in two steps, trying to cut the kid off and avoid having to ask him in. Gabe's stomach grumbled as the machine squeaked to a stop. Three long hours since he ate.

"This your house?" the bastard chirped.

The boy's smile was so menacing that Gabe gave the obvious answer with a reserved nod.

"Wow. Nice. Can I come in?"

Before an excuse could be made, before a lie materialized, the boy went on.

"I never been in a Mexican house."

"Me either," Gabe said. "Ours is in the Spanish style, actually."

The bastard's flat, slightly confused face didn't register much. "Are you Mexican?"

"I'm not Mexican." The kid wasn't the first to make the mistake, not even the tenth or twelfth. But Gabe wouldn't volunteer anything else.

"Oh. Okay."

"But there are quite a few at Harbor."

The new kid looked around as if casing a jeweler's, but said nothing.

"Anyway, I don't think my parents want anybody over when they aren't home."

"Well, you can come to my house. My mom is home."

Gabe was cornered — to say no would be poking the hornet's nest, even though he'd already been stung. So he shrugged and agreed.

"Last driveway on the left." Then, cranking the wheel, he said "See ya there," before jamming down the throttle. The tires peeled, leaving about twelve feet of chicken scratch on the smooth cement of the driveway as the kart pulled away.

"Dad's going to love that," he said, walking back to the house. "Bastard."

His mother's old man was still in the kitchen, standing right about where Gabe had left him. "What brings you over this afternoon, Grandpa?"

"Nothing in particular, just thought I'd check in. See if you need anything."

Gabe knew it was an opportunity to ask for anything that he wanted — whatever struck his fancy. He sighed. The indulgence of his grandfather was tempting. "I guess not, not today. Thanks though. I'm going down to see our new neighbors."

“That boy on the kart? He looks like trouble, if I’ve ever seen it. With a capital T.” He watched Gabe carefully.

“You think so, huh?”

“You just be careful. You never know what kind of jokers you get moving out here.”

The evening breeze picked up and began to sniff at his clothes as he trudged to the barn. The small wooden structure, more a shed than a barn, creaked as he dialed in the combination on the lock. People in the country can be a suspicious lot.

Inside, about six paces would get you to the rear wall, where the silver bike was leaning. Gabe had to step carefully around lawn mowers and assorted tools, breathing shallowly against the smell of gas cans, molasses-rolled grain, and musty alfalfa, with just a hint of rodent. It took some maneuvering, but he freed the bike and kicked the door closed behind him. No need to lock it — the bike was the most valuable thing in there, and not much could be said for its slightly rusted frame, dulled rims, and balding tires.

It had been completely irrational to stand there in the middle of the road and wait to see if the Bastard would, in fact, run him down with that kart. Even though they were nearly driving age, there was a conspicuous superiority about him and the kart. Gabe would have convinced himself that the boy was nothing without it, that he must have some other deficiencies in his life if that kart was his prize. There was some imbalance in the bastard – that seemed undeniable, and that made it even less rational to willingly go to this guy’s house. But the commitment had been made.

The last time he had made the trip down the eastern side of the hill was to visit his best friend Mo, before Mo and his family moved into town several months before. Remembering back to the first time he went to Mo's house was more cause for discomfort, the kind of memory that made you aware of every hair on your neck and the blood in your cheeks. Gabe was only ten years old at the time, still trying to figure out how to be sociable to new people. He experienced clammy hands for the first time, and it took some effort to talk to Mo's mom, who always wore makeup and always exuded a blonde bombshell attitude that was nothing if not uncomfortable to awkward young boys. She wasn't there that first day, though, and they had made plans to get together as they walked from the bus stop.

What had really been embarrassing was their first shooting expedition. Mo had a very realistic looking and heavy pellet gun, a revolver modeled after a .357 magnum. Gabe was in awe of it, standing in the garage and feeling the strange mixture of fear and attraction. Admiring its sleek and hard-edged metal cast, his breath came up short, his faced was transfixed. When Mo went to hand it to him, the cold metal hit his finger tips like an arc of high voltage, and his hand jerked away in sudden uncertainty. The pistol fell to the concrete and clacked to rest on its side. Mo swore up and down, using colorful word combinations Gabe had never imagined. In the Cruz household, expletives were rare and in sharp, short bursts for stubbed toes. Gabe's dexterous verbal display, and the knowledge of being the cause of it, made him shrink back even more. There was a gash in the black gunmetal, revealing the silver of a composite aluminum beneath the finish.

“Shit, look what you did.” Gabe took a step back. “Alright, fine, don’t touch the damn thing. Guess you don’t want to anyway.” Mo fingered the rough scratch. “Let’s just go out and I’ll show you what it can do.”

They went rustling through the low oaks and shot into tree trunks, rusted cans, and spiders with legs as long as your fingers. Of course, it was Mo on the trigger in every case. Gabe just watched, adding awestruck gaping sound effects and saying few actual words. Popping the last clip of pellets into the gun, Mo announced that they should head back. As they emerged from the outgrowth and onto the small lawn area behind the house, Mo froze. Gabe followed his eyes and watched as a squirrel nosed through the grass about thirty feet away, right beneath the kitchen window. The seeds of those black eyes never left them, the animal completely still, alert, concerned, but not frightened.

Mo raised the gun with both hands. Gabe felt like he should protest, warn him about hitting the house or making a mess. What he could not express was why he didn’t want the animal to be killed. That fear for the squirrel kept him from saying anything at all. Before he could recognize this desire to change the course of events, it was too late. The first shot slammed the rodent against the house, where it bounced off and scrambled towards the garage with the speed of survival instinct. Mo ran after. Gabe followed, slowed by the smear of blood, brushed by hair as if painted there on the side of the house. Mo called him.

When Gabe got to the other side of the garage, he saw Mo leaning over and looking at the small animal. The afternoon became so quiet that he could hear the rapid

wheezing of the wounded animal. There was a trail of blood where the tree squirrel had managed to drag itself the last couple feet to where it lay, exhausted in defeat.

“Got the little shithead. Did you see that shot? That was the best shot of my life. Man, my mom would have killed me if I’d missed. What a shot, huh? I must have got that from my dad – he was a crack shot. And I’m getting better all the time.” He looked down. “Didn’t kill it though.”

To ensure that his reputation as a hunter was not besmirched, he took aim at the beady eye that had recorded their every move and pulled the trigger. The wheeze halted. The next sound Gabe heard was the guttural choke of his lunch in reverse. He threw up on the bloodied dirt. The look of excitement left Mo’s face as Gabe wiped his chin.

“Come on inside. You can have some water.”

They didn’t talk about the squirrel, but Gabe couldn’t shake the sour taste.

“You look pretty bad,” Mo said. “You should head home.” They made the trip and kept the unspoken agreement to not mention the dead animal. Mo walked Gabe’s bike up the hill, and they talked about school, how they should explore the property at Gabe’s sometime, and what they would do if they were millionaires. Mo would buy ATV’s and a huge truck to haul them around. Gabe would travel the world. Eventually they agreed that they could do both, trekking great distances of the globe with a flick of the wrist. They could do it in a few weeks, if they planned it right.

Heading for the Bastard’s house, recalling his impulses and failures, a fresh wave of unease came over Gabe. The trees flanking the lane narrowed, streaking by as the rough pavement became gravel and dirt. He didn’t notice the changes, nor did he

anticipate the sharp angle of the turn into the driveway where Shady Lane ended. He turned hard and the bike slid sideways. He hurriedly put his foot down as he skidded to a stop in the grass beside the driveway. Even though no one had seen the slip-up, he flushed. Embarrassed over something no one saw, resolutely on his way to some house he didn't want to go to, he pedaled on.

The driveway turned gently back up the hill before reaching the plateau of the house's foundation. The close canopy of the oaks and the aging wood shingle siding made for a shadowy façade. A hermit's retreat. It seemed to have had better light when Mo lived there with his mom. Now it was shadowy dead wood. Even though curtains and blinds covered all the windows, he felt like someone was looking out, watching him. The screen door flung open and Gabe laid his bike down with a start. The new kid stood in the doorway, sucking down red Gatorade, skinny torso still bare.

Before he could say anything, the garage door rumbled and angled up. A decades old white Ford truck began to back out. He was baffled — a bigger vehicle on four wheels he had never seen, and around those parts that is quite a compliment. He continued to gawk as it made an astonishing three-point turn and headed down the drive, knobby tire treads humming on the pavement. A pale and flabby arm popped out the window and waved backwards.

“Bye Wade!”

The breaks were quickly applied and the truck jerked to a halt. A woman's leaned her head out the window, her dense, curly, blonde hair unaffected by gravity. She looked at Gabe, then to Wade.

“Who’s that?” she asked, genuinely suspicious.

“A neighbor from up the road,” he said. He turned and went inside, and the truck pulled away without another word spoken.

Gabe followed hesitantly, not expecting an invitation but hoping that Wade would say something. Of course, nothing was said.

Inside, the furniture was neatly arranged in the small living room and the projection big-screen looked like it had always been there. There were no boxes or piles of crumpled newspaper, no bubble wrap. No evidence of the move was anywhere to be found. Everything was neat and in place. Even the collection of Dallas Cowboys bobbleheads were properly lined up and kept away from the fragile keepsake figurines. It wasn’t as bad as he would have thought, judging from the outside. Still, he waited just inside the door.

“Come on, come on in.” He upended the last of the drink, let out a satisfied exhale, and chucked the bottle in the direction of the narrow galley kitchen. “It always this hot here? I mean, I’m used to the heat down the valley, but I thought it s’posed to be cooler here.”

“It’s hottest in September, like Indian Summer. But it’s not usually like this in March.” He waited for his host to say something. When no response came, looked farther into the room, peered briefly down the hall. Near the television, he saw a framed and matted bank note that he didn’t recognize. Looking closer, he saw that it was one hundred dollars issued by the Confederate States of America. The artwork in the center of the bill featured a monochrome depiction of two men working in a field. Their skin

was the darkest shade in the rendering; they were slaves. Beneath the crinkled and aging bill was a print of an old Jefferson Davis portrait.

“Lot of times it’s still raining in June,” Gabe said in the silence.

Wade seemed overall just a little slow to respond – an indication of why the other go-karts had been wrecked, perhaps.

“So where’d you move from?”

“Out in the valley.”

Gabe nodded. He’d already said that. “What town?”

Wade thought about it for a moment, cocking his head to the side. “I guess our address was Dry Lake.”

“Way out there? Wow.”

“My dad’s a sheriff. Job pays better and there are more services and doctors over here. And really, there is a lot more freedom and a lot less bureaucracy.” He stood.

“Want to see my room?”

Wade was the first boy Gabe had ever met that had his own TV. On top of that, it looked like he had every video game ever made. They were stacked everywhere, on his dresser, next to the bed. Wade could charge admission, if he ever thought to.

“Want to play something? I beat almost all of them already, but you can play.”

Gabe shrugged. “Nah. That’s quite a collection but I should get going. I got homework and a test tomorrow.”

“Oh, you’re a schoolboy, huh?”

He should have thought of a better excuse. Wade's grin, which had been pretty dumbstruck to that point, took on a sinister twist at the edges. His teeth were stained red from the Gatorade. It seemed to Gabe to be the perfect time to get back on his bike.

Before Gabe reached the screen door, Wade called.

"Wait."

Gabe turned, still grasping the handle.

"There anyone else around here to mess around with?"

"Uh, there's Bubba Bruce, down the road another mile. On Bridgewell, I mean."

He paused, already sensing that this, too, was a mistake. For a moment, he felt sly and vengeful. Bubba Bruce was a super-senior, a larger than life football player, so big and notorious that one name just would not do.

"Well alright, I'll take the go-kart then. You said his name is Bubba Bruce? Shit, I guess we're still in the country, after all." Wade leapt up, pushed by Gabe and through the door. The pale, shirtless new kid was back to his kart and directing it down the driveway by manpower before his bewildered neighbor got to the prostrate bike.

"See you, schoolboy." he called over his shoulder. Then, as if an afterthought, "What's your name again?"

"Gabe."

"Alright then, Gabe." With that, he ripped the cord starter and tore out of the driveway.

The hill was longer going up, much longer than coming down. Wade was long gone, his trail of dust already carried off by the growing breeze. He never could quite

make the ascent without stopping. Past half way, he dismounted and walked, heaving and watching the grasshoppers jump and flutter across the road ahead of him. Breathing heavy through an open mouth was likely to give a guy something to chew on. He spit at the thought of it.

His introduction to the new neighbor could have been worse – nothing had to die for their amusement – but it wasn't exactly what he had hoped for. To hope for a replacement for Mo would have been a lot to ask, and too difficult even when one has choices. And of course, he didn't, and never really had. Even the friends that are not the greatest of friends were hard to come by. In many ways, the vast open spaces in the foothills of Oak Bend ensured that no friend would be really close. To end up with a great pal right down the road would be like winning the lottery – far too much to expect for someone so average, so uneasy with himself.

Gabe came to the rutted chip-seal lane and once again sat astride the bike. Riding along between rusted strands of barbed wire on either side of the road, the perpetual hum of insects lulled him, persistent even as the quail skittered and flushed from the brush. He finally came to the corner of the white buckboard fence that marked the edge of the Cruz family property, and was relieved to see his grandpa's pickup was still in front of the single-story stucco house.

The fence on the other side didn't break for another hundred yards, over into Mr. Garrett's field of chest-high grass that still held on to the late-spring green near the ground. The crest obscured the aluminum frame gate, the same kind that barred Gabe's own driveway from stray animals but couldn't keep out anyone smart enough to find that

the latch had no lock. The strange stubby palm tree at the corner of the family property was not yet in view. Nor could he see the arches of the front entry and courtyard. The weathered terra cotta tile roof nearly blended into the eucalyptus trunks behind it, the rusting rooster weather vane at the apex steady in the wind. The Mediterranean peach hue of the house, set off by the vaguely Tudor stone and mortar wall of the courtyard, flew in the face of aesthetic unity. In the eight years they had lived there, the changes made only added to this disarray – the additions of a storage shed, a chicken pen, and a rough shelter for the firewood just took up space. Big, broad beams connected into a trellised arbor, supported the loose vines of the Opo vine, an old plant native to the Philippines that bore long green gourd with white flesh. It was the last gift from his grandparents before they disappeared to their mountain retreat years ago, leaving Oak Bend with no intent to return. The rest of the plants scattered about the yard projected a tropical atmosphere more appropriate for the Hawaiian Islands than in the windy and cool coastal foothills of California.

If Gabe had ever considered at length the relationships between things, like his mother's two prized rose bushes not far from the misshapen palm, he would not have thought it particularly strange. For this part of Oak Bend, the home was in good order. It lacked the rusted and overgrown junk cars or piles of scrap metal and rotting wood. Many places up the road were trailers, rooted to the earth over the years, so much a part of the landscape of earthen shades and collections of natural debris that the mobility of these homes questionable. But their homeliness was not – the features coalesced into an

effortless order, like the streaks of violet in the pastel of wild thistle and lupin on a canvas of drying grass.

Bubba Bruce was later seen sporting a nice shiner and a cut on his cheek. He and Wade had a tough go of their introduction, far more challenging than Gabe's. While Gabe was thankful for that, he was not thankful for the result of that fight – a draw and a conciliatory handshake – a new alliance. Wade was half the size, it seemed, and yet he had won the admiration of the big bruiser. And so he'd be seeing more of Bubba Bruce, often flying up the lane outside his house, outsized atop the orange go-kart, turning doughnuts and twisting the quiet neighborhood with his deviant grin.

Since Mo moved back into town, the neighborhood was dull in every other way – Mo wasn't a particularly bright and entertaining neighborhood friend, but they could usually find something to occupy themselves. Now it was all reruns and homework, a can of chili, a glass of OJ. The sun felt hot on his wintry light skin. He looked forward to the summer tan, discarding all long sleeves for short ones and putting some life back into his caramel skin through good old hard work in the outdoors. Perhaps this year they would put in the pavers in the back that his dad had been hemming and hawing about for so long. Mom wanted a fountain in the middle, but all Dad wanted was a little less space for the gophers to tear up, a little less lawn to mow. Who needs friends when you've got work to do?

WINDOW SHOPPING

After taking in an oversexed and occasionally funny film, an attempt to make Gabe feel better about the afternoon, Mo suggested they walk the semi-lit plaza at the mall. The first bright department store window caught their attention.

Mo paused. “Man, who wears this shit?”

“Seriously. The colors and patterns are like rotting flesh.” Gabe looked around as soon as he said it, as if the person who had made them might be standing within earshot.

Mo whistled at the next window. “I know one thing,” he said, motioning to a large poster with a posed and gleaming model stretched across a park bench. She was an image of the glamorously sedate, as foreign in Oak Bend as a \$300 handbag. “If I saw that girl, or any chick, in that skirt, I would follow her forever. Into infinity.” He seemed to picture it at length. “Though I guess I’m practically on the next bus anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Soon as I can, I’m out of this dump. Never coming back.” He smirked self-consciously.

Gabe said, “Really? Never? What about your family?”

“That’s not much for me. I mean, I love my mom and all, but my family, they are not my future. This place isn’t either. I don’t know what is, but I sure as shit got to get out of dodge to find it.”

That kind of rootlessness was a comfortable idea for someone who never seemed to be exactly what people are looking for, someone who didn’t fit the neat categories that

people are so anxious to use. They didn't share much else in the way of perspective, but this is one thing Gabe and Mo understood about each other, without question. Some things just didn't fit. Gabe, though, wasn't so sure about never coming back.

“Yeah, it would be nice to see the world, but all my connections are here.”

“So few, though. Imagine how many you can make out there. With women like her, even.”

Oak Bend suddenly closed around them, the yoke of generations of hopeful farmers and small town life that they optimistically accepted. Gabe absently kicked at the heavy brick below the window display.

Mo kept talking, which was the way it was done, the way people killed time. “I heard once that Big D had tied a mirror to his shoelaces, you know. Walked around like that for weeks and no one ever caught him.”

“Yeah, right. Anyone ever did that – you or I ever did that – we'd get slapped six ways from Sunday and two weeks back again.”

Gabe couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to meet that model or even hold her hand. He imagined what that touch would mean, the euphoria in his fingertips. He had seen what that touch could mean, in movies and on TV, and knew that there was more to it than he could envision. And oh, to introduce her to his friends. It was the kind of calamity that single-season sitcoms and dreams were made of.

“I'm just telling you what I heard.” It was one of the many stories of Big D's infamy that was constantly retold, casting a constant shadow on his younger brother, who was known ignominiously as Little D. Yet he managed to wear it pretty well.

They began walking towards the opposite end of the mall, towards the massive three-tiered fountain that, in their lifetime, had never worked. The grass leading up to it was dying, littered with cigarette butts and gum wrappers. The mesh that once held sod, remnants of an attempt to revive and cover the barren dirt, was showing through.

“Yeah, just like you heard that Big D stole Principal MacDougal’s car and spun doughnuts on the football field before painting a huge shlong on the hood.”

“Little D said he has pictures. I believe him.”

“You always believe what you want to.”

ROUND AND ROUND, UP THEN DOWN

From out of the clanks and creaks of the weary bus came the leaping chatter of a couple girls, brash in contrast to the others who, like Gabe, were brooding silently over the qualities of their nascent adult lives. He watched the fallow fields and ragged fences fly by as the bus careened from narrow miss to narrow miss in the twists and turns.

Gabe's video, an opportunity lost, had drifted in amongst all the others who, out to accomplish similar goals, had jockeyed their horse into the pack. No one ever stopped sizing up people around them or quit looking back to see how they stacked up in comparison. Guile was the fastest way to get a leg up on all the others, or leverage a helping hand from above. That was the civil path, though. Adolescence tends to be more combative. He had watched others claw up through their youth, and for the most part the view from the outside was satisfactory.

Though Gabe desired that primacy too — to be the one that stands out above the rest. It required total self-assurance, knowledge guaranteed and backed by gold, that one could in fact get above the fray. Yet much still eluded him, growing the resentment for his naïveté and shrinking his sense of self. What was he, anyway? That was the kind question he usually got from the likes of Wade. The answer was always out of reach.

His ruminations were severed by a rush of air and the unsettling squeaky friction of the vinyl seat next to him. Annabelle said hello and gave her name, auburn curls bouncing from the potholes and from her generally spritely personality.

He took a breath and struggled to regain his composed self, if he had one. Where normal, mature, and sociable people would have introduced themselves, maybe shaken hands, and said a few words to ease into conversation, he avoided eye contact while trying not to come across as disinterested.

The first thing she did was compliment his video. The second thing she did was ask him to go to the dance. “The Spring Swing, next Friday. I’m on the planning committee. It should be fun, she said. “We’re going to have cages.”

Cages and their use suddenly overran him, pressing with questions and images – were there going to be animals? Why? What animals were associated with Spring? Newborn Chicks were messy. Who would clean up after them? Wouldn’t the loud music frighten them? Aware that he had become dumbstruck and probably looked it, he glanced at his shoes briefly to make sure that they were still there.

She kindly clarified. “You know, for dancing.”

“Oh, people in the cages. Of course.” It was the most substantial thing he said in the whole conversation. He agreed to go with her just as the bus arrived at her stop. He watched her walk down the narrow aisle and clung to the sweet fragrance she left behind. Finally, he exhaled. His knee began to bounce.

It was official though — he had a date. He would be dancing with her, holding her hand and waist, moving together. Would she dance close? It made him high, or what he imagined that felt like. At his stop, he stood tall and walked off the bus, lost in high school dance fantasies of gyrating hips and thinly-veiled sexual advances. It would be life in an hours-long music video. Deep in his reverie, he didn’t hear the door re-open as

he approached the tail of the bus and looked to cross the street. Nor did he hear the uncanny man-voice of Bubba Bruce talking to the driver and getting off behind him.

When Gabe heard rapid footfalls, it was too late to turn or dodge. He was caught blindsided by a meaty shoulder driven into his ribs. The pavement came up fast, catching his face.

Bubba Bruce snickered. “You’re no footballer? You’ve obviously never learned to take hits, pussy.” He chuckled heartily, the sound bubbling up in deep haw haws that drifted away with diesel exhaust. “Good luck with your little girlfriend, schoolboy,” he called over his shoulder.

CAGE MATCH

The Autumn Swing conjured images of gamboling ladies and gents twirling across the floor in front of a twenty-piece band whose cream tuxes were half-concealed by sparkling brass instruments and sequined podiums. Gabe couldn't get that image out of his mind, even though he had heard from other students that dances are hosted by DJ's. Nevertheless, at every opportunity his mind wandered to the supper club scene with his date dolled up to perfection like a golden era starlet in a shimmering gown. Her modest Capri pants and sleeveless top still managed to excite him. He would go early and stay late to help, a caveat to which he readily agreed – he was willing to walk there and carry Annabelle on his back, if necessary.

The brightly lit auditorium looked like it did any other day until they hung some of the decorations. Slowly it transformed into a glittering if somewhat industrial Copa Cabana, the glitzy blues and greens bordering on garish. The strobe and some other swirling colored lights were poor substitutes for the stage presence of live performers. He tried not to let his mind wander while tediously stringing the balloon arches, which were finished in time to observe the arrival of the cages. Two men carefully leaned the simple frames of fabricated steel tubing against the riser and pushed them up until each cage was upright. Once erect, each cage had the appearance of a shining hoosegow with ladder rungs on the corners. The committee members let out a cheer — it was just like an old-timey barn-raising.

The students began pouring in just as the doors opened, and it was quickly evident that the cages would be the highlight of the event. The novelties shifted atop the creaking wooden platforms and swayed with the writhing mass of sweaty pubescent bodies, inspiring more fear than awe. At any moment, it looked like the house of queens and their suicide jacks would come tumbling down. Yet it stayed vertical, despite the voracious thrusting and grinding that seemed certain to send it over. They were held upright, perhaps, by pure sexual energy. It was scary and exciting to watch.

The distraction proved to be an advantage – Gabe was easily swept into the rhythm and the experience, his movements less muddled by self-consciousness. He moved easily with the music and was comfortable in a large group that included Annabelle and others. Compared to the people in the cage, Gabe might as well have been at a church hall dance. He kept himself restrained enough to avoid humping something, which seemed to be more than most of the students could do. The night passed in a haze of uptempo bass, peppered with the enduring unease of slow songs that brought his sweaty body closer to hers. Each time, he would put his hands on her waist, and each time she pulled him closer, clasping her hands behind his neck, sending a bright bolt down his spine that he would forever associate with vanilla perfume.

About half way through the evening, the music cut out and an asynchronous and deep thrumming drumbeat came from drums that had been setup on the stage. Gabe hadn't noticed them in the dark, nor had he heard the jingling bells of the leg decorations or headdresses of the dancers forming on the stage. The DJ introduced them as Harbor Dance Azteca, a name Gabe had not heard before. They danced to the drum rhythm and

occasional chants for a good five minutes as the surprised students looked on. Then, as suddenly as they had begun, they stopped and exited to the stage to smatterings of applause. The DJ thanked them for their performance, and the amplified beat and music busted out again. Everyone seemed to look at the person next to them, shrug, and go back to dancing, the unexpected interruption of the cultural display quickly forgotten.

At the end of the night, with the balloons popped and floor swept, Gabe's legs were more tired than the time that he spent an entire afternoon catching Mr. Garrett's goats.

A chill went through Annabelle as soon as they sat on a bench. Gabe wavered a moment, and having no jacket to offer, put his arm around her shoulder. She leaned into him. The stars slipped in and out of the cloudcover.

"I had fun tonight," she said.

"Me too." Not knowing what else to say, he added, "Seemed like a good turnout."

"Yeah, but the DJ played too many slow songs."

"Oh, good. So it wasn't just me."

With an easy laugh, she looked up from his shoulder, drawing his eyes. She kissed him gently and quickly on the lips. They could do nothing but smile at each other.

She asked, "Haven't you wanted to kiss me at all tonight?"

"Well, sure. I mean, yeah." That was the last question he would have expected.

"Really? I thought for sure by the third or fourth slow dance you would have made a move."

“Naw, I’m not that kind of guy, I guess.”

“What kind of guy are you then?” Her tone continued to be playful, her head snug back on his shoulder. But the question had chilled him.

She continued. “Look, Gabe, it’s alright. I like you.”

“I like you too.”

“Will you go with me then? I mean, go out or whatever?”

“Yeah, sure.”

He couldn’t bring himself to kiss her again. He looked out to the west over the rolling broccoli fields and tried to think back to the minutes before, clinging to that brief delight, and already feeling that something good had begun to slip away.

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When he got home, Gabe was surprised to find his mom still awake.

“I just got back from our new neighbor’s house. They invited us over for dessert. Nice people. I’m going to Denise’s knitting circle on Wednesday.”

It was an awkward moment – everything that Gabe had been ready to say about the family had become inappropriate.

“I was down there the other day. Their house is very nice, very clean for having just moved.”

“Yeah. They’re just great neighbors. I was so worried for a while there, wondering what kind of family would move in. Oh! And I found out their son Wade is

going to be getting his unrestricted license next week. You won't have to ride the bus to Harbor anymore."

[[—]]

Sitting out on the plank fence the next day, Mo and Gabe watched Mr. Garrett's nephews, both in their twenties, wrangle one of their three heifers. The crack of the rifle clipped short his last moo. Using a tow wench and a pulley on the driveway gate, they had strung up a lifeless cow and began to skin it.

"I don't understand." Mo said.

"That way, the blood drains out—"

"No, dude. I mean I can't believe you kissed her." Mo's natural cynicism threw a pipe wrench into Gabe's confused emotional plumbing. "I can't believe she is your girlfriend. She's kind of a dog, don't you think?"

"Fuck off. She's not."

"Okay, fine, but I still think you can do better. I mean, if it didn't occur to you to kiss her, maybe it's not a good match."

"Maybe, but maybe not. I don't know what to think – she's the first girl that has ever really been interested in me. But we're official now, so I guess I'll find out soon."

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, dinner and a movie, or what?"

“Yeah, sure. I just need to gas up the Benz.” Gabe’s newest vision played out. He couldn’t drive, so a black limo pulled up to a red carpet outside a restaurant somewhere — it was definitely not in Oak Bend, because limos were rarely seen and there was no place worthy of a red carpet. The image was dispelled by not too distant laughter and swearing. Now the Garrett boys were chasing each other with entrails and throwing bloody clumps of discarded flesh at one another.

“See, if I’d have gone to the dance with a girl like Kayleigh Roberts, I would have kissed her, first chance I got. She’s no kitten. You can tell by looking at her – girl like that you have to handle. I bet she’d give it up. A night alone with her would be mmm,” he mockingly slapped his knee, “hot damn!”

“Right, okay. You’re a real player.”

“Kiss my ass. You wouldn’t even think to kiss a girl. I’m just tellin’ it straight, for real.”

Gabe mocked, with a pistol pointer for emphasis, “Don’t go cappin’ any bitches before I get my game on.”

“Seriously man, you didn’t even want to kiss her. That ain’t normal. Don’t you think that’s saying something? She’s not enough for you.”

“Right, I’ll just take the next hottie in line, then.”

“Well, you should hit it first.”

Gabe’s reply was so low Mo never heard it. “I ain’t going to be like that.” He was partially drowned out by the reciprocating saw that one of the Garrett boys fired up to cut through the bones on the rapidly shrinking cow.

“What was the deal with the rain dancers or whatever?”

“It was actually an Aztec cultural club on campus.”

“Whatever. It wasn’t a talent show, so why were they there? I hear that they weren’t invited.”

“I didn’t hear anything about it. I thought their performance was interesting. Something different.”

Mo jumped off the fence. “That’s fucking disgusting, man. I don’t know what those boys are doing, blood all over the place. But I don’t want any more to do with it.”

Learning from the New Flow

Per Wade's instructions, Gabe was waiting at the end of his driveway when the yellow Ford sedan came to a halt. Early morning fog, the notorious *marine layer*, made the color droop like a dying banana. He was careful to walk around behind the car to the passenger side. The loud latch of the door and the sense of enclosure were underlined by his slow and steady sink into cold vinyl.

"Hey, good morning." Gabe said.

"Yup. Buckle up." Without waiting for the belt to click, he goosed the accelerator and gravel attacked the wheel wells.

"So my mom gave me some gas money," Gabe said, trying to get secure.

"Yeah, I'll get it later," Wade said, whipping the sedan out onto the road, tires skipping on the uneven pothole patches. "This is a pretty good car. Wanted a truck, but we haven't found a good one yet."

He ran the engine to go-kart pitch before shifting with a jerk. They were quickly approaching freeway speeds on the small two-lane country road.

Gabe quickly tossed his backpack from his lap to the floor so as to get a better grip on the seat cushion.

Wade laughed deeply and let out a quick cowboy whoop. "Yeah, she'll pony up good - there's an 'oh shit' bar there above the door if you need to hold on - she's no truck, but still pretty good!"

As they careened through the first bend, Gabe prayed that there were no potholes big enough to throw them off course. Just one of the many things he did not want to hit.

Wade was casually using both lanes to flatten-out the turns and dodge inconvenient ruts.

“Can you drive stick?”

Gabe sucked in his breath as he was thrown towards the door in a long left sweeper. He shifted back. “Uh, kinda.”

“Shit, boy, you can’t kinda drive stick! Either you can, or you can’t.”

The oaks lining the shoulder were stolid sentries, quietly challenging speeding cars to test their decades of firmly rooted purchase.

“I don’t have my license yet.”

“That don’t mean nothing. It’s skills you need to drive, not some card in your wallet.” Wade hit the crest into the straightaway leading to town. After a brief moment of weightlessness, he pushed his body back into the seat, flooring the pedal.

Gabe’s eyes fluttered back and forth between the speedometer and the onrushing highway intersection. Ninety came fast.

“Buck ten, baby, I know you can do it!”

Driveways grew closer together, flitting by with a tick in the cottony and loud current of air over the windows. The engine strained.

“Come on, come on...”

The needle hit triple digits just as they hit the first city block.

“Shit...” As if by voice command, the brakes threw them against their restraints and the world began to relax.

Gabe had to say something, but he could barely breathe. He shook out his white knuckles and realized nothing he could say, no snarky cussed up comment, could save him from this boyish display. But something stumbled out.

“I think you hit fifth too soon.” The Taurus came to a halt at the stoplight.

“The hell you know about it? Over there scared like a little bitch.”

Gabe hissed dismissal between his teeth, but couldn't muster anything else. He knew little about the functionality of cars, though he could tell you how much horsepower the latest Italian sports car produced and how much the sexy fiberglass body weighed. He had never been a passenger in a car moving that fast, but he had seen enough car wrecks on TV. Sighing, but not too emphatically, he shook his head and forced a smile.

“That's the fastest I've ever gone before, that's for sure.”

Not only was he unseasoned in the ways of the speeding automobile, the American icon that outranks apple pie or baseball, he wasn't able to confront the experience without belittling himself. The vast catalog of teenage life that he was just beginning to thumb through had been rolled up so he could be slapped with it. And Wade was going to be the one doing the swatting.

Wade chuckled. “Just you wait. Tomorrow I'll get one-ten. I'll bet you. I'll bet you that gas money. If I don't hit it tomorrow, you can keep it.”

“All twenty bucks?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re on.”

Gabe quickly shook Wade’s outstretched hand in hopes that he would quickly return his attention to the task of driving. Instead, he fished into his pocket for a cigarette and lighter. With the filter resting loosely on his lips, he thought out loud.

“That twenty bucks should get me somewhere this weekend. Just need to find a girl who wants to go out for a ride.”

Swinging into the driveway of Harbor, Wade hit the brakes hard, causing a number of students to turn and look. Annabelle was among them. Gabe was thrown back in his seat before he could get his hand up to wave.

The elbow and the chuckle, the *I’ll be damned* and the insult, were Wade’s unwelcome reactions to Gabe’s new girlfriend on their brief walk from the parking lot. It’s not as if he’d never been insulted before — Mo made sure of that, for character building, he would no doubt say — but this was different. The horizon line had shifted, the division between terra firma and the infinite gray not quite visible. The most disconcerting this about it was that somehow, he had gone from being uncertain to being completely adrift. It is a part of teenage life, and adult life for that matter, that is best relieved by finding the anchor, the secure space of self. Gabe didn’t even know where to look.

Annabelle seemed to have figured it out. Maybe she was born with it, or born with the ability to grasp inherently that which is grounding, in that new-age sense. She certainly didn’t look at Gabe long before grabbing hold of him. As he thought about her

family, he imagined a secure home with confident and professional parents, transplanted Easterners, perhaps, a well-starched home life that was brimming with sunshine from every window. It was probably just her overall perkiness and easy smile that seemed to say “*Questions? What questions? All I have is answers.*”

Her voice rang a clear greeting through the uneven morning chatter and parking lot buzz. She looked askance at Wade’s tall figure, tight-jeaned with broad shoulders beneath a fading black hooded sweatshirt.

“Annabelle, this is Wade. He’s my new neighbor.”

“Hey Wade.”

Wade observed her length. “If every girl here looks as good as you, I can tell I’m going to have fun at this school.”

Gabe couldn’t read her response, a pitched giggle that he wasn’t yet familiar with. She didn’t blush, didn’t withdraw or shrink in confidence. Instinctively, he grabbed her hand — what he really wanted was to cover her close-fitting sweater with his coat. The reaction was surprising even to him, making his own face heat up as they walked away. The idea of her still excited him, but in practice, it was hard to imagine that things could be much worse.

He replayed the image of her walking away, briefly smiling over her shoulder, and relived that delicious rush of effervescence that faded in the first few minutes of class. The departure and the pleasure were brief, both things hard for him to be excited about. He snapped into the present only after Mr. Wright had been talking for some time.

“And I’d like to introduce a new student to you. This is Rowen. He has come to Harbor from up in the San Jose area. Now I know you all have already screened your Real Me projects, but I had a chance to speak with Rowen last week and we both thought it would be a good way to introduce him. So I’ll give this over to him.”

Rowen stood in front of the class, slightly taller than Gabe and a bit awkward. He was wearing a yellow Ralph Loren Polo shirt, a color that Gabe always felt was a bad idea for people with brown skin. But Rowen pulled it off – perhaps it was the curly black mop of hair and sharp jawline that made it work.

“Hi. I’m Rowen, and, I guess, this is my Real Me video.” He quickly jammed the tape in and went back to his seat.

From the opening credits, Gabe could tell that this production was on a completely different level – the credits appeared in clean type that faded in and out as a hip-hop beat grew in the background. The black screen gave way to a scene inside a home with sparse white walls and plain brown couches. Over the fireplace there were two candles and an antique-looking painting of Krishna with gilt highlights. Sitting on a stool in the center was Rowen.

My name is Rowen Ashdiri. I just moved here from the South Bay two weeks ago, and as you can see we haven’t really settled into our house yet.

He looks away from the camera to the operator.

No, it’s alright, it’s alright. Here, I’ll introduce you to our dog since she is so interested in being in the middle of everything. This here is our Pekingese, Kiki. But

before I introduce you to anyone else, I'll show you a little about how we got to Oak Bend.

The screen fell back to black and the music stopped. The video faded back in on a display board of photos resting on an easel, a forty-something Indian man whose likeness reflected Rowen. It was surrounded by flowers. The text read “This is dedicated to my father. R.I.P. Mohinder Ashdiri.”

The next scene is nearly overwhelmed by the percussion of rain on a metal moving truck. Though the light is low, we can see Rowen resting on a couch, wet patches on the shoulders of his shirt, enjoying a hard-earned rest on the last item placed into a very full cargo hold. A woman’s voice calls to him.

Come on, we need to get on the road. Let's go.

The rain is quieter as the camera cuts to inside the cab, and the dreary afternoon is lit by hundreds of brake lights arrayed below the high cab of the truck, stretching out on the freeway for miles.

This is just too much fun, Rowen says. He pans over to the driver of the truck, a woman in her late thirties.

Oh, come now, Rowen. At least we are dry. Just a spring shower, anyway. It's just going to take a little longer than expected.

Rowen turns the camera back to the stopped traffic. *This sucks.*

His mother clucks and begins to reprimand him, just as the video cuts to their arrival. The hip-hop track comes back up as he opens the front door to a room not unlike the one the video began in, but completely bare of furniture. He gives a quick video tour.

This isn't so bad. Not bad at all, for us.

The camera, set on the ledge inside the cargo space of the truck, captures the movement of the two people unloading every last piece of furniture, box, and bag in rapid time-lapse video. Their clothes get darker and darker with rainwater, and in the last shot, they stand outside, completely soaked, as he pulls the rolling door down and latches it to the bumper.

The music fades as we get a dark view of a bedroom cluttered with boxes.

After three hours of loading, three hours in traffic because somebody rolled a lettuce truck, and five hours of unloading, I'm ready to crash. This is my bed for my first night in Oak Bend. As you can see, there is just enough room between the boxes for my sleeping bag and blankets. God forbid I roll over, I might get ten boxes tumbling down on me. But this is my new home. I'm not sure what to think yet, but hopefully, the rain will have stopped by tomorrow, and we'll see then.

The video fades out, then comes back to the living room where the tape started, a smooth transition with no snow or blue screen or audio burps or screeches. Just Rowen, calm and composed, looking like he has spent every day of his life in front of a camera.

That lovely lady you saw driving that big truck and carrying couches with me, that's my mom. Come over here real quick.

She stepped around the camera, looking composed and far more collected than she was in the other footage. He put his arm around her shoulder.

While things haven't worked out as we would have liked, life goes on. The last few days have given me a better idea of what it will be like to live here, and though it could be worse, it could be better. So far, the reception hasn't been exactly warm.

His mother stepped back towards the camera.

Maybe we just haven't talked to the right people, she says.

Maybe so. If the right people are out there, it's to them, and to you mom, that I read these verses:

I'm a voice for the shadow, silhouetted on darkness.

And my face never rises from below your unconscious.

Just a stand in, I'm jammed in, to a box with a label

But I am able to break out, using words as my gauntlets

In a blind society, you say you don't see color,

I'm just a category you point to as somethin' or other

Don't assume that I'm weak or have a feminine streak,

Or that I'm some RPG wizard, a super- computer geek

When you see me on the street, don't keep lookin' at your feet

You could always say hello and shake hands when we meet.

I'm a voice for the shadow, but I don't like darkness.

Just speak to me, I promise that my English is flawless.

Take the time, get to know me, and this I'll guarantee:

You'll understand why I demand equality.

As the class began to clap, Gabe could sense the genuine appreciation and the immediate impression the new student had made. There was no question, no guessing game ambiguity that he had felt when the end credits rolled on his own video project. The applause died down and whispers bounced around the room, everyone chiming in on this performance. The spectacle quickly overshadowed Gabe's sense of accomplishment, even with Annabelle so fresh in his mind. The generous reception seemed to have no impact on Rowen, who sat calmly in his seat at the back of the class, watching the teacher with a flat expression, looking confident that very soon the world would take notice.

It didn't happen instantaneously. He ate lunch by himself, appearing rather ostentatious reading a book of poetry, and walked home by himself. Gabe catalogued these things without much thought, watching him disappear outside the fence as he waited for Wade to show up. Gabe didn't feel like going home and waiting by himself for someone to come home. He decided to show up at Mo's to tell him about the new

guy and see what he thought. Nearly thirty minutes later, Wade finally walked out to the parking lot, shaking his head, angry.

“All that talk and no goddamn number.”

Gabe didn't know what to say. He shrugged, “Well, there's always tomorrow.”

It wasn't too far out of the way to have Wade drop him at Mo's house, and Wade seemed ready to take any opportunity to get in more driving time, to rocket down the windy roads outside of town. He was disappointed by the arrival in the flatlands on the edge of town. It wasn't the clean cut and the straight lanes of the suburbs, but it was close.

As Wade sped away, Gabe hoisted himself onto the porch railing by Mo's front door. He figured he would let himself in using the hidden spare key. It would make for a better surprise to just barge right in, maybe even pretend to be the ops or something. He retrieved it from the magnetic case that was perched on the angle of the downspout, threw the deadbolt, and charged in the door. Across the living room, Mo looked up from doing homework on the dining table, shock turning into a smile.

“What the hell? What are you doing here?”

Gabe noticed Mo's hand coming to a rest on the table near an opened box the size of a dictionary. Resting atop the hinge of the lid, a silver revolver was perched with the cylinder out, loaded. Gabe paused in the door.

“Well, just visiting, I guess. What's with that?”

Mo looked to the gun. “Oh, you know. We’ve gotten some weird phone calls lately, not like heavy breathing or anything, but just silence and then a hang-up. It weirds me out when I’m here by myself. This makes me feel a lot better.”

Even after having grown up in the country and having seen his share of firepower, Gabe was uncomfortable with it resting out in the open with no particular purpose. It was not for hunting.

“Well, alone no longer.”

“I’m already sick of this homework anyway. Let’s go toss a football.”

“When was the last time you heard about someone busting into a house while there were people home?” Gabe asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Is that what you’re afraid of?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t want to hear any shit from a guy who is afraid of his girlfriend.”

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Maybe it was just his age, but Gabe could not resign himself to the awkwardness of the nightly dinner table conversations. He walked in the door just as the table was set. It began with his mom’s appraisal of her new co-worker.

“I swear if I were fifteen years younger and single, I’d be looking to marry him. We just click. We were laughing and sharing stories today, I don’t know. We just work together real well. Isn’t that called chemistry?”

No one responded. Gabe looked at his plate for a long time, not wanting to think that his mom had committed some unforgivable offense, and wondering if his dad would react. Gabe couldn’t bring himself to look at his silent father, as wooden as the table he rested his elbows on. He was either unmovable or too rooted to the comfort of his detachment - either way, his indifference was unsettling. The conversation soon turned to Gabe.

“How was your day at school?” his mom asked.

“Alright. Today there was another new student. I guess early spring is the time to transfer.”

She nodded. “Is he nice?”

“I don’t know. He seems really smart, but I don’t know much else about him.”

“Maybe he could be your friend. You could use another friend.”

“I don’t know. He seems more, like, too good for me.”

“No one’s too good for you, honey.” She let the conversation settle, and started again.

“Did you see that pretty little girl today?”

“Yes. Her name is Annabelle.” He felt the blood in his cheeks and could not stop it. He began to focus on his food, taking bigger bites and trying to clear his plate. For a moment, Gabe considered changing the topic to Wade and the dust-ups, but the story

could send him back down to wait for the bus in the cool mornings and cost him a half hour of sleep. Plus, she seemed to like the neighbors a good deal, and to besmirch them might put her in a troubling place. Dad came to the rescue, in his own way.

“High school sure is different these days. No one I knew dated the way you do now, and we didn’t have these crazy dances. No, they had the rulers out for us.” Then he went back to eating. He slowly worked his way through a massive pile of rice and gravy, surprisingly in little hurry despite looking like he also would have preferred their dinner table antics came to an end.

“It’s probably a good thing, overall. Things are just different. Of course, when I was in High School, my parents made me learn tinikling.”

Gabe made a blank face.

“You remember, don’t you? At Easter three years ago, I think. There was a group at the church doing the dance. They clap two long bamboo poles together to a beat, and the dancers dance in and out of them.”

“Was that only three years ago?” Gabe asked. “I can almost remember.”

“It’s cool stuff,” his dad said. “Maybe there will be another chance for you to see it soon, or even try it.”

For Mom, the subject of Annabelle had not been suitably covered. Gabe could tell by the way she held her head at a slight angle, looking carefully at the food she stacked onto her fork. She was obviously rustling some thoughts that had meandered out to pasture.

“Well, I didn’t get to talk to her much. She seems like a nice girl – she must be if you’re interested in her. Just remember to treat her right. Girls are very sensitive. Don’t do anything, you know, that you’ll regret.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Be considerate.”

“I know.”

“And be safe.”

“Mom, I know.” He dismissed it quickly, not willing to explore that suggestive topic any further with them. It was bad enough getting all the talk from Mo. He finished the last of his food and excused himself to get to his studies.

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Wade was already in an excited state when Gabe got in the car. “Get ready. I took out the spare and everything else that was in the trunk to cut the weight down. We’ll hit it for sure – I stole a bit of trick gas from my dad to give it a little something extra.”

The twists and turns towards the city felt the same as the day before, but as they approached the straightaway each bump and skip of the tires, each squawk, added to the knot of acid burn in his gut.

They hit the last crest at unbelievable speed, and the sedan got airborne. Gabe shut his eyes against the lifting force that threatened his breakfast. The landing was hard.

The back end flipped left and right. The unhinged rear tires yelped angrily. Wade let out a tense and guttural growl. By luck or skill or feral tenacity, he recovered and got the car back on track, again stomping the accelerator.

“Yeah, baby, come on! Come on!”

Gabe glanced over — they were just at 103. The sedan howled to the red line.

“Get it! 105, 106....”

With the speed and the many patches of rubber left behind already, or from the recent flight and fall, the car began to rattle all over.

“She’s gettin’ wobbly! Come on!”

Gabe could hardly breathe enough to get a few words out. “Shit. Slow down.”

“We got it... we got it... 110!” Again, he applied the brakes hard, and the car again lost balance. Back and forth with small adjustments at the wheel, Wade guided the car to a crawl at sixty. Once again they hit the highway, freshly returned from the brink.

“Don’t think I’m gonna do that again. Got squirrely all over the place. Guess now I know the limit. Gonna have to get me a better car.”

They pulled into school feeling as if the entire world had slowed in the wake of their speed test. Gabe felt relieved to hand him the twenty. No more bets.

By midday he was alarmed by the absence of Annabelle. No call last night and no morning greeting today. He found Mo eating a microwaved burrito at a picnic table. Gabe waved and waited for his friend finish the bite.

“Hey man. Where’s your attachment?” He grabbed Gabe’s shoulders and spun him as if someone was hiding behind him.

“You could use her name. Anyway, I can’t find her. And she was supposed to call me last night, but never did.”

“That doesn’t sound too good.”

“Thanks for pointing out the obvious,” Gabe said, taking a seat.

They saw Little D walking come out of the Crawford Hall. His stout figure looked particularly confident, walking tall in his outsized and faded gym shirt and baggy jeans with tattered cuffs. He was definitely pleased with himself. For what reason, Gabe and Mo were about to find out.

“Look at this guy. Think he got laid?” Mo asked while Little D was still out of earshot. Gabe didn’t even have time to respond.

“What’s up guys?” Little D was a jolly sort to begin with. He wore it well, even if one knew that he bore his family’s troubles beneath an easy grin. But this air was unexpected for an overweight geeky kid living in the shadow of his brother’s legend.

“We were going to ask you that. You’re looking, well. Happy, even.” Gabe felt strange saying it so plainly.

“Yeah, I guess I am. This weekend’s my birthday.”

Mo gave the birthday boy a punch to the shoulder. “Hey, congratulations, Little D. You survived another year.”

“Yeah, and I’m having a party this weekend. And you guys are invited.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Mo jumped in. “Like a party,” he asked, twirling his finger like a little flag and then covering his yawning mouth, “or like a party?” he continued, throwing his head back and pantomiming a drink.

“Yeah, man, this is for real. I got my brother to hook up this party. Friday night. You guys should come.”

“Hell yes we’ll be there.” Mo’s eyes flashed.

Gabe pulled back. “I don’t know.”

At first, this response was met with quiet astonishment.

“Gabe, I’m only going to turn eighteen once.

Then Mo pounced. “Come on, this will be awesome. A party by Big D! This is just what you need.”

“Yeah, just what I need – a huge party that’s going to get busted up by the cops. I’ll get arrested, kicked out of school, and have my license withheld until I’m 21. I’d never have a real date until after college. I don’t want to get mixed up with the cops. Can you imagine what my parents would do? Shit, your mom would blow a gasket.”

“We’re not going to get caught.” Mo prepared his rebuttal carefully. “I’m telling you, we can come up with a plan. You can take a night to drink and relax and forget all about Annabelle. She’s just bringing you down.”

“Whatever. Have fun with your little plan. I’m going to go back to trying to find her.”

When he got home he tried to call her. There was no answer. The only girl that had ever liked him had fallen from the face of the earth.

It was enough to distract him from all other questions, worries, and unsettled business – with the exception of the question of college. Even though he would gladly let his parents decide through the most pragmatic evaluations, the questions were asked so often they were inescapable. The latest enquirer was Principal MacDougal, whom he ran into as he was leaving campus. Gabe gave him the usual rundown of choices and ultimately, an answer of indecision. The evasion was a brief reprieve from his concern for Annabelle, which quickly clouded his mind again as he walked into town to catch the city bus out to Mo’s.

When he changed buses at the Timberwood Crossroads shopping center, he stopped to grab a taco at the Taco Shanty. Mo could not be relied on for food. Gabe started down the slope towards the bright orange shingles of the taco stand. It was not the finest dining establishment around – the only seating at rickety outdoor tables. Taco Shanty was not the real name, but it was most appropriate. The shack could not have been more than twenty feet square, just enough room for a fryer, a grill, a fridge and one employee. Gabe rested his elbows on the worn shelf below the window and looked over the menu. A taco wouldn’t set him back much. The diabolical hot sauce and the low prices were what this little joint was known for, not the quality.

“Hey Gabe!”

Before he could turn his breath caught and his heart jumped with the thought of Annabelle. She would be there right behind him. She sounded happy to see him, happy to explain, tell him nothing was wrong. He spun and was met instead by the gray eyes of Kayleigh Roberts. She sat at a table behind the salsa pump and bucket of pickled jalapeños and carrots. His eyes darted from hers in nervousness, down to her low-cut tank top, over to her vacant plate, her braceleted hand on her pink plaid handbag. There was another girl with her, one he did not recognize from school. Not Annabelle.

“Gabe, how’s it going?”

“Just getting a taco,” he said. In the pause, he realized that didn’t answer the question. “So, fine, I guess.”

She laughed in a way that pulled him, languid and liquor-smooth, a sound almost as startling as it was delicious to his ears.

“Nice. This is my Aunt Clara.”

He was already stunned and confused, and this bit of information made things worse. Kayleigh read it instantly.

“She’s my mom’s youngest sister, so she is only five years older than us. But anyway. I heard that you’re going to be at the party Friday.”

“Yeah, actually.” If only Mo were here to witness this.

Having never given any indication that he was going to go didn’t seem like a good reason to say no, to spoil the moment. He couldn’t help himself. Whatever might happen later in life, he would come to understand his place as a member of what is often referred to as the weaker sex, and for good reason.

“Great. We’ll be there later, too.” She ran her hand across her collarbone and absently beneath the strap of her tank. Gabe lost track of everything, even his own thoughts. Then she focused even more intently on him. “I never figured you to be the type.”

He chuckled uneasily until he realized she was waiting for his answer.

“Yeah, I guess I am.” His order was called, saving him from elaborating. “That’s me. Guess I’ll see you later, then?”

The girls got up and cleared their trays.

“Yeah, you will.” Kayleigh said. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Gabe sat down and ate his taco, absently watching the filling fall out the back with each bite. There was a raw current surging through his legs, a vibrant red rising to the surface. It was hard to comprehend how he had suddenly caught fire, lighting the hills and the parked cars and the roofline of the drugstore brighter than the midday sun. The Taco Shanty was consumed in the glow. Kayleigh had struck a match.

He got off the bus a half-mile from Mo’s and walked down the dusty sidewalk of old suburbia. The lawns seemed to surrender all of their green in the wake of his blistering excitement. There was a well of energy that he came to recognize as earnest desire, burning despite the rational improbability, the intractable and unknowing situation with Annabelle. Kayleigh had an advantage: the sensuality that the “it” girl carries, the girl that inspires bated breath, the confidence that comes off her like explosions that knock boys back on their feet. Lost in recalling the moment, he had to backtrack half of a block to Mo’s.

The knocker on the front door was cool to the touch. A better choice than busting in. Gabe wiped sweat from his brow and felt the searing rush of air conditioning as his friend welcomed him inside.

“You okay?” Mo asked.

“Yeah, good, actually.”

“Why do you look like you just threw up your guts?”

“Fortunately, no. I just talked to Kayleigh Roberts.”

“What? No way.”

“Yeah. She said she heard we were going to be at the party, and that she was looking forward to seeing me there.”

“To you? She said that?”

“Scout’s honor.”

“Put your hand down, freak. Man, you’re getting all the breaks.”

“We definitely need to get to this party.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying! Wait, how is she getting there?”

“Hell if I know.”

“You didn’t want to ask, in case she could give us a lift?”

Gabe thought about it. Though it had never actually occurred to him – virtually nothing was occurring to him at the time other than her every word and movement, and the afternoon light lending her its glow – the question sounded off. Even the memory was dumbfounding. But he had to say something. Mo glared at him.

He finally said, “Wouldn’t that seem a bit pathetic?”

“What’s pathetic is that we might not go at all. Why didn’t you just ask, dumbass?”

Gabe gladly took himself back to his now favorite moment at the Taco Shanty, absent mindedly agreeing to go out back and toss a football. He relished a snapshot of each moment that he could remember. There was a soft-focus quality about it now that made her virtuous, of all things, an idol. He played it back, the girlish goodbye and her standing to full height, raising his impression of her to beyond life-size, the sultry locking of eyes, and back to that first moment, just after he ordered. The sweet singing ring of her calling his name. A voice that he had confused with Annabelle’s.

Outside, he was surprised how quickly the deepening dark blue was descending.

THE CONVERSATION, PART 1

Another day passed without seeing Annabelle. Maybe it was a good thing. In the kitchen, before dinner, Gabe said sat at the table behind his mom as she worked on chopping vegetables.

“Hey mister. Did you see that girl today, the one you’re sweet on?” She had the tendency to begin conversations as if she was somewhere in the middle and you just didn’t know it yet. Maybe she had worked out all the answers to the questions that came before it, or maybe she just liked to catch him off guard, but he was used to it. What he was not used to was dodging questions about girls. “Annabelle, was it?”

“Yes, Annabelle. And no, I haven’t talked to her in a couple days now.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she must be sick or something.”

“Have you called her?”

“No, I don’t know if her parents would like it.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I mean, what business do I have, getting into their personal life?”

“Oh. Well, it would be nice for you to show some concern. I’m sure she would appreciate that.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Guess nothing. Your mom knows best. I’m glad you’re at least trying to think about what’s best. You’re getting old enough to where you really have to be concerned

about these things and really think about all of the impact of your actions. Especially with girls.”

“I know.” His knee bounced rapidly beneath the table.

“You’re a smart boy. And sensitive, too. Just remember to use your noodle – your head, I mean.”

“Hey mom, can I spend the night at Mo’s tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure. What are you guys going to do?”

“Play video games, maybe rent a movie. I’m not sure yet.”

“Sounds like fun. You boys have fun doing just about anything, though. That’s a sign of a good friend.”

Gabe got up from the chair quickly. He had the answer he wanted. “Yeah, we do know how to have fun. Tomorrow won’t be any different.”

Before she was aware the conversation had ended, he was gone.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, he looked at the phone in his hand and thought about all of the times he had seen on TV or in the movies where it rang at just the right time, with just the right person on the other end. He waited, and nothing happened. That was always the way it was, in real life.

He looked away, searching the room for something to distract him, and felt a degree of relief. Maybe she was in fact sick — it should have occurred to him before. It would have to be bad for him to not hear from her at all. If she was not sick then she had cut all contact, avoided him very effectively and was giving him the frosty no-show. The questions, the humiliation would be public. But not for long, with Kayleigh on her heels.

Certainly he had admired her from afar, as many did. She attracted attention everywhere she went, her walk of a particular brand, like her clothes, tightly tailored to her own rolling style. She had just enough of a figure to flaunt, enough to wish for. The possibilities for each scenario were not the difficult part – he could sit and think up variations all night. He could valorize himself in the way of bad romance novels, making the difficult decision that would be best for everyone. They would see. He would make it work out somehow, not by choosing wisely, but by discovering the hidden path. He would make it work, make the switch for Kayleigh. He would make it work.

CARNIVAL: THE PARTY SCENE

Alone on the bench outside the administration office, Gabe ate his peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He didn't see Mo walk up.

"Looking bad, huh? Still no word?"

"Nope."

"I'm telling you, man. Forget about it. There are bigger fish – party fish."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Did you talk to your mom?"

"Yeah, I'm cleared. She thinks we'll be at your house. But what happens if your mom calls my house, thinking you're there?"

"When has she ever done that?"

He shrugged. "Murphy's law."

This gave Mo something to chew on, temporarily occupying his mouth and his thoughts. Not for long — he became even more matter-of-fact. "Well, if it is true that something will go wrong no matter what, then all you can do is handle it the best you can. We can still control the outcome if we have plans and act accordingly."

"Okay, mastermind. What is the plan, for, say, how we are going to get to the party?"

"Little D will hook us up. He knows plenty of people who can drive."

When they caught up with Little D, no arrangements could be made. There just weren't enough people around with cars — so they came to the Timberwood Crossroads

shopping center, getting off at the last bus stop to wait outside the grocery store for a blue pickup.

“This doesn’t seem like the best plan.” Gabe took a seat on the curb.

“Until you come up with something better, I don’t want to hear it.”

Gabe had tried, but this seemed like the best they could do. The only other possibility was to get Wade to drive them, and inviting him along was asking for it. So they were left to loiter outside the lone grocer of the foothills and hope that no one decided to enforce the signs strictly prohibiting their presence that were posted every two feet on the wall above them. A cousin that Mo had met once several years back, driving three hours from the valley somewhere, had become plan A.

“We’re just going to wait for Little D’s cousin, and even if he doesn’t come, we will walk. I don’t think it’s that far. We can walk a couple miles in no time.”

“Right. No time.”

A late-afternoon breeze blew through the parking lot and kicked up some dust. They squinted against it. When it had passed, Mo shot Gabe a look that brooked no further objections.

Gabe went into the store to get a sandwich. Exiting the store he came upon Mo watching the wind whip leaves and trash around in a little twister. A sudden gust came around the corner and blew the mess right into him, sending him into a fit, brushing out bits from his hair and off of his clothes. Gabe tried not to get his attention by laughing, but couldn’t stifle it all. Mo raged.

“Fuck! Fucking leaves and shit all over me.”

“You’re clean, you’re good, don’t worry.”

He flagrantly cleared his mouth of spit and hacked out a second wad just to be sure. “Tastes like ass. This place sucks. The asshole of Oak Bend. You didn’t buy any soda or anything?”

“No, sorry.”

The truth was that he had decided to not come back with anything in hand, because Mo would entitle himself to a share of it, or all of it. Whether it was splitting something rather impossible, like a jawbreaker, or something impolite like the last piece of a birthday cake, Mo always worked the angle to get a cut. Perhaps being an only child had done it.

“You should have asked Kayleigh.”

“Whatever, man.”

His face soured. He kicked at one of the bricks at the edge of the walkway. “That was our ticket, idiot! We could be there right now, or with her. At least on our way. And instead, we’re sitting in this stinkhole, covered with shit, and it’s getting darker by the minute.”

The brick began to shift with each blow. Mo paused, seeing the tiny gap in the mortar that he created. With a bigger wind-up, he kicked more vigorously. It seemed like it should hurt his foot through his thin running shoes, but he kept on. The gray filler fell away on one side, and in a few more strikes, Mo got the gratifying pop he was waiting for. He picked up the red block and tossed it from hand to hand, admiring its

heft. He glanced around, through the massive windows into the supermarket and across the cars parked throughout the lot.

Gabe took a shallow breath. "You should put that back before someone sees us."

Mo didn't even look over. "That douchebag was supposed to be here an hour ago." He continued to scan the landscape, perhaps looking for a blue pickup that needed some body work. Or another target.

"Maybe we should start walking. It will get dark soon."

Mo tossed the brick straight up and catches it in the same hand. Then he dropped it to the ground and kicked it back to the hole it left behind. "I am not going to miss this party."

"All right, let's go."

They descended the steep ramp and turned away from Oak Bend, and in a matter of steps they reached the end of the narrow sidewalk, the very edge of the town. A small but well-worn path continued on through the grass and weeds along the shoulder of Mule Valley Road. Several minutes of walking left them with only a view of the road and the surrounding hillsides. Behind them, only a broad beacon of ambient light from the Timberwood Crossroads could be seen. Gabe listened for traffic but had not yet heard any.

"We should move over to the other side of the road, walk in the trees a little ways, maybe," he thought aloud.

"Why?" Mo asked.

"Other people driving to the party might recognize us."

Mo said nothing, but looked both ways along the two lane road and stepped onto the pavement. Gabe followed, hustling despite the complete quiet. They trudged into the high grass and weeds, stepping carefully on the brambles of small branches, down the drainage trench and up the other side. Mo snickered, but before he could make his snide remark about Gabe's bright idea, a small path appeared. It wandered through the trees, less predictable and narrower than the other side of the road.

"Weird." They both stopped and looked. "Is it a deer path? It's so narrow. This better go where we're going."

"It's parallel to the road, how could it not?" Gabe stepped around him and led the way, deeper into the trees.

It would dip down before crossing a rutted driveway or ascend a knot of tree roots that raised the ground. To Gabe, it looked like whoever blazed this trail was looking for a challenge, choosing rough and uneven stretches over seemingly flat stretches of grass. Through all the twists and drops, the path was never wider than a shoe. A ride would have been nice – and all he would have had to do was ask – but to ask of Kayleigh Roberts seemed simply out of the question. Even speaking to her, especially outside of school, seemed beyond his comprehension. She wasn't just any girl, she was the biggest fish, a slender and flashy catch. That chat at the Taco Shanty might just be the tip of the iceberg, a hint at what's underneath it all. What was underneath it all? The curvature of the whole planet narrowed in his mind into a swinging hip and a snug waist, a sea of skin. He could think of nothing else, an intrepid and salacious explorer, he wanted to know the mysteries of the deep. Her figure derailed his thoughts again.

“How much further, you think?” Mo asked.

“I don’t know. This was your idea.”

They stopped and looked around. The road seemed far away, far enough that no traffic noise would reach them. There had not been any cars, anyhow. There was just enough daylight left to see that the slope of the shopping center was too far behind them to appear above the canopy.

“We got another twenty minutes, at least.” Mo ventured.

“We’re losing light. We better pick it up.”

He got two steps before a sound stopped him. First up ahead, then everywhere in the trees like it was all around them. It was a ticking, like a watch, but faster and more persistent above their breathing. Listening, they fixed their eyes where their first heard it, watching the path ahead and waiting for what might come around the bend not thirty feet out.

There, a man appeared wearing a dusty blue workshirt and jeans that had seen better days – there were at least four tattered holes in the legs, legs that sat astride a unicycle that was itself improbably spotless. He was older in features while at the same time younger in expression. The man wore no shoes.

Seeing them, the unicyclist paused in the path, meeting their curious gaze as evenly as he could while rocking forward and back to keep his balance. No one seemed to know what to say, the surprise nature of the meeting evident in the halting silence and awkward looks. Then the stranger smiled, his mouth changing suddenly, like he could no longer hold it back.

“Hey boys!”

They said hello and gave stuttering half-waves.

“Wasn’t expecting to see anybody along here, especially with night coming on. Or, maybe I was.” He seemed genuinely convinced of both points, guileless.

For once, Mo was without retort. Instead, he just stood awkwardly with both hands behind his back, elbows pointed out like he had hooked his thumbs in the beltloops over his ass.

“My name’s Jackrabbit Hoss, at least that’s what everybody calls me.”

“I’m Gabe. This is Mo.”

Jackrabbit adjusted a courier bag slung over his shoulder, the canvas impeccably white, gleaming and unnatural in the dim greens and browns that were fading into evening gray. He lifted the flap and revealed a yellow daisy that was almost as big as the bag itself, before finding a small leather-cased flask to nip on.

“Good to meet you,” he said after a hearty swallow. “You guys must be headed to the party up a ways.”

“Yeah, how’d you know?” Mo asked.

“Oh, just a guess. Passed not too far from there a bit ago. I’d have stopped in if I didn’t have other callings just now.”

“Yeah, we’re looking forward to it,” Gabe said for lack of another comment.

“You should. You’ve got quite a night in store.” He took another quick drink before tucking it back into the courier bag and settling it back over his hip. The swaying

rhythm never varied, keeping him steady but apparently requiring no thought. “Well, you keep an eye out for them wild dogs.”

“Dogs?”

“Yeah. You’ll know they are wild when you see ‘em. Just use your heads. You can out-think them, or you can outrun them.” This seemed to make him ponder, expectant that they too should consider it seriously.

No one responded. Jackrabbit took another drink. “Hope you’re both quick on your feet. I got a bit of a limp, myself, and that’s why I got this cycle. Well, you don’t have too much further, you’d better get going.”

“Yeah, sure. See you.” Gabe gave another slight wave while Mo just watched Jackrabbit work his way around trees until he was out of sight.

“You believe that?” Mo asked.

“I wouldn’t if I hadn’t seen it.”

Gabe had heard stories of cannibal hobos and shadowy hitchhikers living in the hills, but a gap-toothed, whiskey-drinking unicyclist with bare feet probably takes the cake.

“Strange people around here.”

“But in a nice sort of way, don’t you think?”

Mo snickered, and hustled up the trail. “What was with the wild dogs BS? It’s not like there is a pack roaming the hills in search of prey. This ain’t animal planet.”

“He was probably just being neighborly.”

“Dude probably has the IQ of the comb in his back pocket.”

“He probably keeps that in his bag.”

“Purse you mean. That thing was sweet – and sassy.”

“How hard do you think the little girl cried when he jacked it?”

Their laughter was interrupted by sharp barks and two long howls. The noise was to their right and up the hill, off in the distance. Both heard it, and neither acknowledged it, until the chorus erupted into a riotous dog fight. It was getting closer.

The two boys broke into a run, cursing under their breath and focusing on not tripping over the features in the path. There was a crash in the trees not far behind, and the loud baby cries and cackling growls felt hot on their heels.

The trees seemed to disappear into a blur, the low light that had left crisp impressions were now fast moving shadows. Gabe couldn't keep up – Mo was pulling away with his longer stride, hurdling obstacles that slowed the shorter boy. In moments Mo was ten paces ahead and periodically disappearing into the new night.

Gabe tried to ignore the clench of his chest, a sinking in his gut. He continued to run but was falling back. It was pointless. He would never make it to the party; wild dog kibble was to be his fate. The rest wasn't meant to be. Kayleigh was just a carrot dangled on a string to lead on the foolish donkey. Everything was out of reach. All that was near was the pack of dogs, ready to divide him up and take their piece of him.

He couldn't call out, short of breath and will. He would go out silent and strong, standing more firm than he had in the face of Wade's careening go-kart. There would be no coughing, spitting, screaming, or crying. It would be a decisive act in the face of terror, a warrior submitting to a superior opponent. Or he could cut into the brush to

reach the road. There were no other trails, no breaks — he would have to make his own. He reached a slight crest and turned on his heel towards where he thought the pavement should be. Without being able to see ahead of him he waited for his foot to strike the hard surface. It was much farther than he had thought. He couldn't hear the dogs behind him, but he sensed them closing in.

He tripped and stumbled onto the dirt shoulder of the road, one hand on the pavement. Over his shoulder he saw his first attacker arrive and dive at his leg. Gabe heard the first report and recoiled from the second before he turned. There was just enough light to see Mo about twenty feet up the road and the glint of a revolver still pointed in Gabe's direction. No other dogs emerged from the trees, but Gabe quickly scooted away from the felled animal and out of the firing line.

“Jesus! Fuck!”

Mo let one rip into the treeline.

“Stop! Stop fucking shooting!” On his feet, he walked towards Mo, charging the last ten feet as his friend reached back to put the gun back in his waistband. Mo was so pleased with the display that he didn't recognize the anger boiling, and he hardly saw Gabe thrust his arms out and shove him backwards.

“You could've shot me!”

“But I didn't. I saved your ass.”

“From that distance... we were both goddamn lucky.”

“I two-handed it. Any man worth shit could make that shot. That dog was just as big as you.”

“I ever see that pointed at me again...” Gabe trailed off. There was no threat to make. No recourse against a loaded revolver. “Fuck off.” He turned and continued walking, passing him and heading down the road to their darkening destination.

“Fine. Next time I won’t bother!” Mo yelled, throwing his hands up.

Gabe tried to walk out the jitters, spit to rid his mouth of the silvery adrenaline, and slow his breathing. It took some time for his mind to settle enough to backpedal, to think about the presence of the gun. Mo had not been home since the morning – he had carried the piece all day at school and was planning to have it at the party. It was unclear if he had brought it for one or the other, or both. He knew Mo was behind him, could hear the occasional step out of beat with his own, but he didn’t know just how pleased Mo was with his proven marksmanship.

Behind, but not at all down, he walked straight, not a legging gait but a calm solid stride.

They found the driveway with the black mailbox at the end, open all the way with the flag up to signal those in the know. It was less conspicuous than balloons or a sign made from a paper plate. At the same moment, they heard music, the low and steady thump of a loud bass beat.

No one greeted them as Mo just charged through the door. It was an awkward moment standing just inside the dim house, as neither knew where to go or what to do to announce themselves. Inside the small living area, the gathering was more chaotic than Gabe could have imagined. There were at least forty people there already, leaning into each other to chat over the music or bouncing to the beat near the fireplace and speakers.

Gabe used his sleeve to wipe his brow. Not the first impression he would want to make. He hoped that Kayleigh wasn't there yet. The oppressive air reacted with his clammy skin, still cold from the long walk and brief run. He wiped it again and looked at his shoes. The white laces were glowing from an ultraviolet black light that he couldn't see.

Between the entry and the dance party was an oblong dining table covered with bottles. Knowing very little about anything the bottles contained, the boys gaped.

“Need a cup?”

Little D appeared behind them, looking rosy and disheveled, but pretty snappy in a polo shirt.

“Would you look at this guy?” Mo said. “It's his birthday, so he thinks he's going to get laid.”

Little D waved him off. “Pay up, bitches! Five bucks a cup!”

A crowd seemed to gather around them, offering up every drink imaginable, recommendations for taste and mixes to get them drunk fast. No matter what it was, Mo took it and slammed it.

“Gotta take it like a man!” Then he would clear his throat of fire and let out a whoop.

Gabe was far more conservative, sampling and sipping, in the end avoiding anything that came from sour mash – leaning on mixed vodka instead. He wandered out onto the deck, a homespun affair suspended over the descending hillside, seemingly unattached to the small slab patio that abutted it. It sloped out at an awkward angle that

made it seem like it might not support the fifteen people and their cigarette and booze-bloated egos. Gabe just needed air. He looked back into the house through the open door to see Mo, hands up and eyes big and beaming. He yelled over the music.

“Alright ladies, I’m ready!”

To Gabe’s surprise, the declaration was met with laughter and a raucous cheer. A couple girls pulled him into the dancing throng. Gabe sipped.

The next hour passed by watching the shadowy figures moving to the music, freaking and grinding wildly, whatever meager inhibitions people arrived with has evaporated. As newcomers arrived he was pushed further and further back on the deck, shifting along the rail to be more obscure and even less conspicuous. Some noticed him, giving the occasional nod. Every conversation included a remark about the fact that it really was a surprise to see him there. No one ever said it was a particularly good surprise.

Just as the weight of the drinks and the dark corner were closing in on him, he saw her. Kayleigh was gleaming even more than before, no longer in jeans and a tank but now in a short skirt and low cut halter, showing even more of her glimmering skin than before. Instantly transfixed, he felt attraction and fear, and fear for her. His sisters had often said that an outfit like that was asking for trouble – and even those girls had not stopped traffic like Kayleigh. Yet despite all his fear he couldn’t look away, couldn’t stop lusting to the point of pain. It was a sensation that he could never explain, even if he had tried to tell Mo or anyone else.

A rough hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. Just like that, Mo was there, grinning like he had discovered a life-changing secret.

“There she is, man. Are you going to go fucking get that, or what?”

Gabe didn't respond. He was surprised at the rubbery face and limbs, the scorching breath, the slurred sounds. Whatever he had discovered, he would pay the price for later.

“Cause shit, if you don't, I'm gonna. Fucking wide open and damn, that girl is hot.” Excited and pleased with himself, Mo tried to slap his thigh and quickly crumpled down to his knees, groaning.

“What the hell?”

A moan tangled with twisted laughter. “Fucking hit myself in the balls!”

“Nice, real smooth.”

He recovered from the fit and stood, wobbly. “Seriously. This is a party. You've got to cut loose. Whatever you want to do, you should do it. Look. I'll show you how easy it is.”

Gabe watched as his friend made his way back into the house and onto the dance floor. He bounced around for a moment, out of sync with the fast-moving crowd, until he caught up to a particular girl. He leaned to her ear to say something. Then he took her by the hand. She sidled up to him for a long, slow, full-body grind, and pulled him out the other side of the dance floor. They disappeared into the recesses of the house.

No sooner had Gabe stepped in the door than she found him.

“Goddamn it is hot in there.” Kayleigh stepped to the door and expertly flung the contents of her cup over the side of the deck. “And that tasted like shit. Maybe I’m done.”

Gabe put on a cavalier smile. “So soon? But the night is young.”

“Yeah, I guess. Would you like to make me a drink?”

“I could. Don’t bet on it being any better.”

“Try me.”

She took his hand and led him back over to the table. At her encouragement, he picked a couple of the best looking bottles and a tropical fruit juice blend, and made her what he thought looked like a drink. Uncertain, he shrugged and handed it over. He watched as she sipped, and did her own shrug.

“I didn’t gag. Not bad. How about you dance with me instead?” She drained the contents and pounded down her empty cup. “It’s good when you drink it fast.”

She took his hand again, pulling him into the mass of people crowded near the fireplace. Instantly, he felt fresh heat, burning with the prospect of dancing with her, flushed to a boiling point with the dancing body mass. Instantly they were pushed together, moving to the beat in any way the tight space would allow, hips rocking off of other hips until the rhythm brought them all into sync. Gabe felt his heartbeat rise above the driving bass, faster and louder in his ears. Kayleigh leaned into his shoulder to speak.

“Goddamn it’s hot.”

“Really fucking hot” he said back.

She grinned and all of the world slowed with the exception of the mechanical movement of his feet. He watched as she pulled the loose fabric of her top above her midriff, pulling it tight behind her and tucking it beneath the low cut collar line on her back. She must have seen him go wobbly and hugged him close.

“Easy, now, boy. You good?”

He shook his head gently. “Better than ever.”

“I thought so. Just keep dancing.”

The floor opened behind her and she pulled him with her, deeper into the shifting dark, where he became even less aware of the people, the furniture, or the sense that his head could not keep up with his body. She reeled him in close and he put his arms around her, sensing that that was what was expected. Every time he was blown away by the slick heat of her skin, until it was all he could think about. On they danced, Gabe drinking up every moment, every touch, every wild movement that pushed him beyond his visions of the fantastic. This close, this tactile, with Kayleigh. His legs stiffened with fatigue and he sweated more than he thought possible, but never took his eyes off her.

Just when he thought he might not be able to keep it up, she threw her arms around his neck and leaned in again. “I need water.”

She parted the crowd and Gabe allowed himself a moment of luxurious stillness, watching the easy swing of her departing hips, the throb in his legs confusing the in the bass beat. He started to follow as the crowd began folding across Kayleigh’s wake. And that is when he saw another face in the crowd. In a streak of colored light he registered a pink cable-knit sweater and long curly auburn tresses spilling from a ponytail.

His gut twisted itself into a knot he couldn't bear, and his chest felt yoked with the weight of a keg. He spun and stumbled in the other direction, towards the back of the house, stretching an arm across and between shoulders to make room to pass. He saw Mo ahead in the hallway, talking to a girl.

Just as Gabe made his way within shouting distance, Mo went in on the girl with the most rabid wide-mouthed kiss he had ever seen. There was no regret in breaking that up. Gabe grabbed his shoulder.

“Mo. Mo!”

“Shit, man, what?”

“I just saw her.”

“Yeah, I was watching. You saw a lot of her.” Mo laughed and the girl giggled. He suggestively hooked his finger in her belt loop to make sure she stayed close.

“No, I mean Annabelle. I think I just saw her. I got to get out of here. What if she saw us dancing?”

“What would she be doing here? You think she would actually party?”

Gabe considered it for a moment, and then recoiled from the numerous comments of the like that had been said to him. Then a fact swung through his mind like a wrecking ball — he hadn't thought of her at all for some time.

“I don't know. God I fucked this up. Do you see her? I don't want to turn around.”

Mo rolled his eyes at his kissing companion, a girl Gabe had never seen before. Then Mo craned his neck to look out over the dancers and the people at the drink table.

“I don’t see her.”

“Are you sure?”

“Look, man. As you can see, I’m a little busy. She and I need to find a quiet spot, you know? I’ll keep my eye out, though.”

With a wink to his coy companion, he turned and ventured further down the hallway. They disappeared into the last doorway.

This was the worst possible scenario, standing and sweating profusely, anxiously scanning across the long dim room and watching the bobbing heads for Annabelle. The drinks no longer helped him, instead threatening to uncork his already unstable body. Again, in the dark, he saw the same ponytail of tight curls, and in an instant, every organ seemed to rebel. He stepped towards the bathroom, finding a locked door. He knocked and knocked, hearing nothing from inside. Then as he was about to try the handle again it flew open and a girl pushed her way past.

The drinks couldn’t come out fast enough. He was again wracked with a bolt of anxiety and he swallowed hard against his rising stomach. Everything seemed to be prepared for a rapid exit. Before he could let that happen, he finished his piss and zipped up. He took two deep breaths and went to the sink to splash water on his face. He was stuck. It had all backfired. He was fucked.

Jaw set, he stared hard into the mirror. As things settled over him, his stomach quieted, his bowels resigned to this harsh reality. He had to get out, but he had nowhere to go. There was no way he could find his way back to the shopping center in the total darkness outside, and then what would he do, call a cab? To go where? He had to stay,

stick it out. It would be a long while before the party ended, so he would have to face her.

There was a knock at the door, a voice pleading over the music, and another knock. Time was up. He opened the door and Little D charged in, not even bothering to let Gabe out first.

“Sorry, gotta, yeah.”

Back out in the main living area of the house, he skirted the group entranced by the music and kept his head on a swivel. He didn't see Annabelle. He desperately wanted to find someone else he knew, to join a conversation and blend in. The room took on a new depth of darkness. He couldn't even find Kayleigh.

The commotion seemed subdued at first. It was difficult to hear anyone over the dance track. Gabe watched frantic faces charge through the room and people scatter. Then the voices reached him, clearly pitched as a warning.

“FIVE-OH! COPS! COPS ARE HERE!”

Gabe was certain he would vomit. It was unimaginable news that in fact, the night could get worse. The corrosive fear mixed with the realization that his life was taking ten steps back for the one step forward he had taken at the party. He would not get his driver's license. He would not begin his adult life untarnished, unhindered by John Law. Of course, it wouldn't be long before he had a police record anyway.

That was when an unseen hand grasped his, yanking, breaking the stone sober but emotionally wasted transfixion. It was Kayliegh, pulling him yet again.

She quickly led him out the back sliding door and to the incline of the hill that continued up from the lot. He heard dozens of people crashing into the undergrowth and escaping into the shadowy cover of the trees.

She swung him forward and sent him ahead. “Go! Run! I’ll follow.”

He took his first few steps into the incline and realized that it was too steep for a direct ascent. He cut his path to an angle, advancing with high steps over fallen branches and unseen bushes. The noise was all around him, but dropping back. Others were settling in to hide. A cool hand still gripped his tightly.

“A little further,” she encouraged him.

Red and blue lights sliced through the trees. In another ten feet they were at the trunk of an oak with a low canopy that drooped to near the ground. Gabe ducked in and Kayleigh stopped right behind.

His eyes adjusted to the dim shadows of the woods, and as he fell flat to the uneven ground he was reminded how little she was wearing. She fell in close to him. He instinctively put his arm out to catch some of her weight, and it curled around her bare back. As she quietly shifted in to his body, she shivered, and he tightened his hold. She welcomed him as he did her. But he could hardly keep still with a branch digging into the soft place at the small of his back.

Then, in a low and clear voice, the paltry seductive act that he was only beginning to grasp fell away. She asked, “Are you okay?”

He nodded and whispered yes, shifting his hips to get the weight off of the end of the stick. “Are you?”

“Yeah. Cold, though.”

Her breath caught in a chill, and she somehow got even closer, the whole length of her body searching for heat, her head coming to rest on his shoulder. One of her bare legs settled atop his. He felt the softness of her chest and her low breathing, each breath slower as they calmed, shallower, making her feel even closer. Her soft, straight hair rested on his cheek, and amid the dank chaw of the oak detritus, he found a different smell, flowery and citrus and sweet, and underscored by something alive, the wanton warmth of her skin that he and the night stole by the lung-full. The slow inhale awoke him and carried him beyond the excitement of the simple fact of the touch.

The chaos below came back to him as voices drifted up from the lights below. One conversation rose above the general babble of many voices. How many officers had arrived in those cars?

“Get your shit in your truck and be thankful we don’t run you in right now.”

“The speakers are heavy.”

“Get going.”

A third came in. “Bunch of kids up in the hills.”

“Let them wait up there. No need for us to go on some goose chase. They’ll learn their lesson. Start dumping those bottles, Deputy.”

They waited and listened as someone got into a car and drove away, and a loud truck was right behind it. The flashing lights ceased, but someone was going in and out of the house. The soft thud and clink of empty bottles bumping each other as they were

cast onto the lawn rang loudly up the hill. After some time, he must have finished the task. Then he yelled up the hill.

“Well, I feel like I just wasted a whole lot of my time. My time, that *you* wasted. I’m going nowhere ‘til one of you goes with me. I’m not going back empty handed, not for all this trouble.”

The voice lost volume, and Gabe assumed the deputy was walking around the side of the house, away from them.

“Now, somebody can come out and make it easy for the rest of you, or I’m coming up there to grab someone myself. Let me tell you, nobody wants it that way.” The voice got louder again. “That’s the hard way.”

Kayleigh tensed. They both contracted to complete stillness, holding their breath.

“Uh huh. Well, I don’t got all night.” The clarity of the voice brought it closer.

“So that’s the way it has to be.” The ground beneath his heavy boot crackled as he stepped into the trees not thirty feet below them.

Then there was an explosion of snapping branches and compressed leaves as a hundred feet to their left, two boys made a run for it.

“Oh no you don’t!” The deputy broke out after them, the duty belt jangling keys and flashlight and holstered gun. Gabe sat up just in time to see the tall figure in drab green and khaki disappear around the corner of the house and down the hill. Several whoops hollered down from the trees, yelling encouragement like it was a day at the races.

Kayleigh arched against him. “Should we go now?”

Gabe didn't want to. Others had run out on the heels of this distraction. He didn't want to leave their forest bed, didn't want to stop warming her with his own body. He would keep breathing and feeling her until he died, if he could.

"No. We should wait it out. He's only taking one. Then we can leave when the coast is clear." The matter of where they would go quickly plagued him. He struggled against it, clinging to the sensations. The brightness of paradise was fading into the unknown night.

They heard a struggle and the voice of the deputy below. Gabe pulled her back down, this time not hesitating to bring her close, to take one more breath.

The voices came around the house into the open again.

"Ah, the cuffs... ow."

"You made me run. You're lucky the cuffs are the only thing you're getting. And now my boots are all dirty. Come here."

"Man, come on, those are new pants."

The voice had the ring of familiarity, but Gabe couldn't place it.

"You shouldn't have gotten them so dirty running through the field like that. Now get in the car. Sit."

Doors slammed and the interceptor rumbled to life. As it pulled down the driveway, it left the night heavy with the air of a martyr's sacrifice. They sat up.

"I wonder who that was," Kayleigh whispered.

Gabe shrugged. "Where are we going to go? My house is miles from here. And I'm supposed to be at Mo's house. That's at least five miles too."

He looked her in the eyes and immediately felt bad for being so flippant. The fear he saw there crushed his conceit and cynicism.

“I live in town,” she said, trailing off.

He put his arm around her again. “Hey, it’s not like going back to either of our houses is a good idea anyhow. We’ll come up with a new plan. Let’s go down the hill and see if we can get a ride with someone.”

They emerged from the oak canopy cautiously, looking for any other signs of movement. There were sounds of others walking through the darkness, but they couldn’t see anyone. Those who were left were skirting the house and the light it cast for fear of discovery. Kayleigh hesitated at the edge of the trees. Gabe squeezed her hand and realized how clammy his fingers were.

“Come on, it’s alright. No one is here.” Unless it was Little D that had been carted off, there should have been someone home. Their voices were bold and clangorous in the still space. “A lot of people parked at the bottom of the driveway. Let’s walk down.”

Because they couldn’t see, they walked with small steps, Gabe with his arm around her shoulder.

“Thanks for finding a good place to hide,” she said.

“Oh, sure. Well, I should be thanking you for getting me out of there. I was already freaked out...” His mind returned to the first crisis, the possible appearance of Annabelle. Convincing himself that she couldn’t possibly have been there, he shook his head. Then he began to worry about whether Annabelle was out in the trees somewhere,

or getting lost in the woods. He would be to blame – had he faced her, he could have helped her when the place got busted up. But she wasn't there now. Kayleigh was there now. Kayleigh, the fantastic dancer. Kayleigh, the girl who had saved him, the girl with a walk all her own, her hips, her breasts, her hair, all of which he now knew. He knew, also, her attraction to him. And it was hard to see how anything else mattered.

There were only two cars remaining at the bottom of the rocky driveway. One was a white truck he didn't recognize, and the other was a yellow sedan, unmistakable for Wade's car. Gabe had not even seen him, though with all the distractions this was hardly a surprise. He looked both ways down the street, still practically expecting a cop to come roaring around the bend with sirens assaulting the quiet.

Wade's car was still and no lights were on. When Gabe walked up to the door, he couldn't see anything inside. Then Wade appeared from the murky nothingness, his face ghastly and injured. He was normally not the friendliest of faces. Gabe and Kayleigh jumped back, startled by his macabre smile. There was a long cut low on Wade's chin and down onto his neck, and the white of his t-shirt was spotted in nearly perfect horizontal stripes of blood-ringed punctures and cuts. Despite it all, he grinned.

“Holy shit. What the hell Wade?”

Wade opened the door, forcing them back.

“Boy, I'm glad it is just you. I heard footsteps and thought it was the man. I've been hiding in here for a while.”

“What happened to you?” Gabe asked. Kayleigh groped for his hand again.

“Shit. I just barely had down my fifth shot, not fifteen minutes after I got here, when those idiots came in screaming. I ran for the back door and headed out east, over this field here, straight for the car. I didn’t see no fence, and I wasn’t expecting barbed wire. But that’s what I got. All hung up on it, scratching me to hell.”

“Jesus. Are you alright?” It was almost irrelevant to ask, given his enthusiasm and pride for his injuries.

Wade looked at Kayleigh. “Getting better by the minute. I was just waiting ‘til I could drive, but now you’re here.”

“I’m not exactly stone sober,” Gabe cut in.

“Whatever, you pussy. Don’t give me no shit.” He held up his hands. “This is the worst of it right here, otherwise I would have gone myself already. Took me ten minutes just to untangle my clothes in the dark.”

Gabe wavered. He wanted to say no, but he had already been called out. His last drink had been hours ago, but he couldn’t be sure, and no one could call him an expert driver even completely fresh. The only certain thing was that he was afraid to try it and afraid to do nothing. The latter eventually won out.

“But where are we going to go?” he asked, holding his hand out for the keys.

“My house is good. My parents are in Vegas.”

“Really?”

“Shit, like every other weekend.” He adjusted his cap to cover the lonesome note.

“Isn’t your dad a Sheriff?”

“Yeah, but he’s got some seniority. He almost never works weekends.” He beamed again. “So who is this? You going to introduce me?” Wade eyed Kayleigh as she got into the back seat. Gabe rankled as his neighbor’s penetrating eyes devoured her. Gabe made sure the introduction was brief.

Wade said, “I’d shake your hand or something, but, you know.”

She recoiled from the display of his raw flesh, giving a half wave. “You sure you don’t want to go to the hospital or something?”

“Nah, no, nothing like that. This is nothing, a few scratches.” He pawed at his shirt and the drying crimson. “Kinda funny, really.”

He watched Gabe carefully as they pulled out onto the road. “You see, it’s not so hard, right?” He seemed satisfied with his chauffeur. Then he nodded to the back.

“Where’s she going?”

“Still hadn’t figured that out. She lives in town.”

“Is someone expecting you?” Wade asked her.

“No, I have an excuse until morning.”

“You can stay at my house.” Wade said.

The car lurched against the clutch, throwing everyone against their seatbelts. The tires yelped.

“Shit, boy. Easy, now.”

“Sorry. The light turned red and gave me a scare. I’m not used to your brakes.”

They looked around the intersection and up the incline into the shopping center. All the other lanes were empty. They waited for a phantom car. Gabe glanced into the

mirror and Kayleigh met him, smiling lightly and then quickly looking away before he could read her face. When the signal turned green, he was extra cautious on the accelerator.

“You sure you’re not too drunk?”

“No.”

“You must be weak in the blood. I’ve heard some people say that, you know, we hold our liquor better.”

“I’m not sure that has much to do with it.”

“Just watch what you’re doing there. Don’t look at me. I’m still here, still bleeding.” He grinned back at Kayleigh. “You both can stay over. I’m guessing Gabe’s mom might not like him coming home just yet.”

FROM TREES TO SHINGLES

When they got to Wade's he spent a minute in the bathroom cleaning up and came out in a new white shirt with a towel wrapped around his hand.

"I just need a little more to top me off for the night." Bottle in hand, he sat on the sofa opposite Gabe and Kayleigh. They shared the loveseat. When Wade sat down, he gave them a sidelong look.

"Okay then. You want a nip?"

They both refused and sat in awkward silence. Then Wade turned on the TV.

Kayleigh said, "I need some air."

Gabe followed her outside. "You alright?" he asked.

"I guess I am. Some night."

"Yeah."

Sudden discomfort hit him so hard he had to sit on the step. The rest of the night had been easy – loud, rambunctious, solved by action. But now he searched for words and could find none. The silence beat down on him. It could have been the come-down, or Wade's put-downs still searing, or it could have been the stab of his ineptness. He watched Kayleigh sit and concluded that she would be over him. It was a nice fling, but there was no way he could make things alright, get over this silence, address whatever it was that had washed over and kept her hidden. They watched the stillness of the shadows, aimlessly registering any small noise but not marking much in the passing night.

“I hope Mo made it alright.” After he said it, he wasn’t sure why he had. He was still upset – one doesn’t brush off an incident in which a friend shoots at you – and Mo seemed like less of a friend than ever. Yet there was still concern in his curiosity.

“Yeah, I wonder who got nabbed. I’m glad we ran into Wade, though.”

“Yeah, right. More or less. I’d be happier if he talked less.”

She laughed, and then eased into the silence. Gabe tried to relax, but wasn’t doing too well. Then she said, “I’m mixed too, you know.”

“Really?”

“At least I think. Some days my mom says I look Latina, and others she says I look like an island girl. My aunt swears I look Chinese. But no one really knows.”

Gabe was puzzled.

“I’m adopted,” she said.

“Really?” He hated himself for responding that way again. He stumbled.

Incoherent sounds tumbled out.

She smiled and put her head on his shoulder.

“It’s okay. No one ever knows what to say to that. That’s why I stopped telling people. Then they spend all of their time trying to figure me out.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re not supposed to apologize. It’s not so bad.”

“No, I mean, I’m sorry I didn’t know what to say. I never know what to say.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind the quiet, it feels nice with you. Like you don’t have to say anything at all.”

He considered her compliment, was ready to dismiss it, but then allowed himself to feel something. It made his hands feel shaky.

She exhaled. “Damn this fog. It would be such a nice night, otherwise.”

“It’s not so bad,” he said. “It’s still warm. A rare night, you could say.” He looked down to face her, finally taking a moment to admire her unabashedly. He turned away sheepishly.

“My family, at least on my dad’s side, is Filipino.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. No one ever thinks that, but it’s the truth.”

“It must be nice to know your history. What’s it like – I mean, what do you think it means to you to have that?”

He shrugged. “I guess it means I’m different. The food is good.” They listened to the sounds of the night. Even though it was getting cold fast, everything around them practically vibrated with life, frogs and insects supplying the soundtrack.

“I guess it also means that people have the wrong idea about me. But I don’t know how to change that.”

“I think I know the feeling,” she said with a sympathetic smile. Gabe wanted to never leave that moment. “Can we go inside and get cozy?”

“I guess we’d better.”

Wade was asleep on the couch with the bottle tucked in the crook of his arm. Kayleigh and Gabe settled back into the loveseat. He took the throw blanket from behind them and spread it on her. She lifted his arm, leaning into him, finding just enough room

on the other end of the chair to tuck her legs up and lay down. Stretching, she kissed him before curling up and holding his hand tightly.

He didn't want to sleep, sending the night off with such quiet resignation, ending the flashy barrage of the day with a quiet fizzle. He sighed, not wanting to think about the morning or what came after. An attempt at not thinking failed and night began to trickle away. He still didn't know what to do, what to say to Annabelle when he saw her. It's possible that she wasn't there, or that she didn't see him. But she would probably find out somehow, because that's the way things worked. They only go well for so long. He fought off sleep as long as he could.

WORKING THE LINES

You know, I remember being young and coming home in the morning looking like you did just today. It's good that you got cleaned up. It's good that your parents are out back working, too.

No, don't give me that. I don't know everything but I know enough. E-N-U-F-F. You laugh 'cause it's funny, but it ain't all fun and games. You need to be out having a good time, that's alright. Just be careful. I tell you, boys can get into a heap of trouble.

Back in Durham, I used to know some who'd steel beer right off the truck. Of course, it's not like it is now. There were just barrels with spigots right on the front. That was fine until I started working as a truck driver, driving the old beer truck. I must have been your age, younger probably. The license part didn't matter as much then, as long as you could drive the truck, and I learned how when I was twelve. Three or four or eight of those kids would come around, and I couldn't fend them off. I had to make deliveries, and anytime I left the truck spelled trouble. It got to where I carried a baseball bat. I never used it except to throw my weight around, but I could look real mean with it. That beer was my responsibility, and I wasn't going to let some stupid kids cost me my job. So I did what I had to. Believe me, I didn't make many friends that way.

When I came out here and started driving the lettuce trucks, I did the same thing. It was quiet then, but I got used to having that ash stick with me. Whenever we'd have an afternoon break while waiting for the harvesters to come in, we'd pull it out and play a

little stickball, me and the other drivers. Good old entertainment, because we didn't have much money to gamble back then.

Of course, trouble came around again. It never stays away long. A little before your aunt was born, the strikers started getting up, picketing and blocking the roads. Not much was getting picked because they weren't working, so the boxes we got were it — they were real valuable. They got it in their heads that my load was what they were really after. It got so we could hardly leave the boxing plant. There were a few times when, you know, those people, they just up and stood in the way. We couldn't run over 'em, but that was the point, you see. So that slugger came in handy again. Some of those truckers used to carry a blackjack, but there's no nice way to use a sap. I never really hurt nobody, but it's no different than any other time. That was my job, my responsibility. But it could get ugly, and you got to protect you and your own.

But you don't have that kind of trouble just yet. You're worried about girls and dances, and getting your license. You're going nowhere without that, right? But girl trouble, that can be just as bad. You mess around and start something you can't finish, or that ain't never going to be finished, you're up a creek. You're lucky your parents can do so much for you, but they can't do everything. You catch my meaning?

[[—]]

On Monday Gabe, Mo, and little D decided to walk from Harbor into town and ride the city bus back out to the foothills later that night. Little D had lived to tell the tale

— untouched by the law, he reveled in his victory over the man, and in the way he told it, there was a lot more to it than the fact that he knew where to hide to avoid getting nabbed. He was a defiant hero, chin up like he had single-handedly repelled the deputies or talked them into leaving by some act of guile.

“I told you,” he said to Gabe. “You had nothing to worry about. We had our fun, and there was no real trouble.”

“What? Of course there was. The cops came and busted it up. And somebody got hauled off. It just so happened that it wasn’t one of us.”

Little D shrugged. “So we’re cool, right? No worries.”

“Who was it, anyway? Do you know who got caught?”

“It was just the new guy, Rowen. Poor sucker. He’s probably never seen a deputy before. He doesn’t know the country well enough to use it to his advantage, and he doesn’t know how to outsmart ‘em. All he had to do was stay put.”

“Besides,” Mo told Gabe, “I don’t see how you can complain. You got hooked up with Kayleigh. Tell him about your exploits.”

“Nah, nothing to tell.”

“What?” Mo practically screamed, incredulous. “You know you got some sleepover action. Tell the man. Out with it!”

“Fuck off. You’re the one out to conquer. We didn’t do anything. And I prefer it that way, for now.”

“Don’t get all gun-shy. You can tell us. I’ll tell you about my night.”

“I don’t want to hear about you bumping uglies anymore than I want to tell you more about my night.”

“What is your problem?”

“I’m tired of you acting like an ass. My problem is that I’d be perfectly happy to go at least one day without hearing about your dick and the places you’d like to put it.”

Little D stepped between them. “Alright, boys. Suffice it to say we all had fun. Except maybe Rowen. But it was a good night, right?” He looked at Gabe.

“Yeah, it was. A great night. And this guy’s trying to ruin it for me.”

“You want to whine like a little bitch because you didn’t get any, go ahead. I’ll let you. I won’t say a thing.” Mo kept walking.

They wandered into Oak Bend’s only bookstore and perused magazines and the small rack of comic books. From there, they sidled to Mike’s pizza parlor and dropped a few quarters playing pinball and an old top-view fighter plane game. Gabe managed to play the longest game on both, putting up 248,000 on pinball, high enough to put his initials in. He was lost in focus, feeling the physics of the steel sphere and noticing only remotely the sweat cool his palms and itch on his forehead. He tried to ignore it, this competitive nervousness. He always had to wipe his face apologetically and smear his hands on his pants. He quit long before he ran out of change. As dark approached, they stood watching Mo play his last ball on Sahara Nights.

Gabe said, “We should get going.”

“Just a minute. I’m only eighty thousand off your score. I can totally beat that.”

“We’ll miss our bus in another few minutes.”

“I’m almost there. Fifty thousand.”

Bells rang and the mechanical collisions were like fists slamming a table in defiance.

“What does it matter? Let’s go.” Gabe turned to the door. As he opened it, he looked to Little D.

“Catch up with us Mo?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

The ball was in play for a matter of seconds after they had left. It dropped and the machine powered down, flashing his score, mocking. He was still twelve thousand short. Outside the window, he could see his two friends jogging down the block. He stared at the light board of a woman leaning seductively against a camel, clad in a metallic brassier with wispy tendrils of sheer blowing in the desert wind. She stared at him from behind a veil. He waited. Then he ran out the door to catch up.

Gabe looked back and saw him making long strides in a half-sprint to catch them. He thought about how nice it was to be ahead, for once. Mo called out.

“Two sixty-two. I beat it!”

“Good for you,” Gabe said. “Hurry up.”

The bus turned the corner right as they approached the bench. No one said anything as they took their seats and caught their breath.

“You don’t believe me?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Don’t get all hurt. It’s just a game,” Mo said.

“No, really, I’m happy for you. Thrilled. You get to have your initials on a pinball machine too.”

“Mo, isn’t this your stop?”

“Next one.”

They sat in silence again. When the bus made the next stop, Mo shuffled out and said “see you guys tomorrow.”

Little D watched him go, then asked, “What is with you guys, anyway?”

“I don’t know. We just had a difference of opinions. And he doesn’t make anything better by trying to be number one all the time.”

“Yeah, well, I guess you’ve got priorities.”

Gabe rocked back. “Really? Even so, no different than him. He’s more interested in getting laid than anything. There is nothing that he thinks about more. I’ve just gotten tired of it.”

“Well, hopefully you guys will get it squared away. I’m out up here.”

As little D stepped off the bus, Gabe watched a shadowy figure get on and walk right up to the seat in front of him. Flipping back the hood his black sweater, Rowen sat down and arranged a grocery bag on the seat next to him. Then he turned to Gabe.

“What’s up. You’re Gabe, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Rowen.” He held out his hand and Gabe shook it. “I saw you at the party but didn’t have a chance to say hi.”

“Yeah. What a night, huh?”

“You don’t know half of it, man. I got run out by the cops, cuffed and the whole bit.”

Gabe waivered. He could play it either way – pretend he didn’t know, or say that he had heard the embarrassing story. The latter seemed most natural. “Yeah, I heard something about that.”

“Well, they can say all they want. I was clean. Hadn’t even had a drink. But they insisted on holding me there and making a scene over picking me up.” He smiled, revealing even rows of off-white teeth. “I think it just pissed them off that I ran. On flat ground that deputy would never have had a chance. It’s the hills and the holes and all that. They still refused to let me go that night, made me sleep it off in the clink. Sleep off the running, I guess.”

“Can they do that?” Gabe asked.

“They pretty much do whatever they want, right?” He shook his head. “The law. Probably didn’t help that I’m brown.”

The words pushed on Gabe, forcing him lower into his seat. It suddenly felt like there was a boot bearing down on his chest.

“You know what I mean, right?” Rowen continued.

Gabe managed a nod but was at a loss for words, never before so on the spot. It was almost as if he had been asked “what are you?” and had no sufficient answer. He could only feel outside of himself, looking at the situation as if someone had pulled a camera out of his mind and began filming. All he could see was two shadowy figures, nearly indistinguishable, bumping along the roads outside of Oak Bend.

“What was the name of that girl you were with, at the party?”

Gabe’s tongue kicked around for the means to speak. “Oh, that’s Kayleigh. Kayleigh Roberts.”

“Quite a catch you made there.”

“I guess.”

“That all you’re going to say about it?”

Gabe shrugged. “I don’t much feel like talking about it. My friend, well, Mo-you know him?- he just busts my balls every chance he gets. So I keep my mouth shut.”

“That’s too bad. Doesn’t make it easy to be friends.”

“Nope. But, we go way back. It’s just lately, I guess, with these girls.”

“So, you’re in my English class. Right?” Rowen asked abruptly. “ I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

With that, Rowen put his hood back up, and his figure slinked out the bus door and into the gathering night.

Dinner and a Show: The Conversation Part II

Gabe took a seat at the table with his parents and began to eat quietly. They tumbled through the usual questions about his day. He left out the conversation with Mo and the ridiculous question of the high score on Sahara Nights. But he did talk about meeting Rowen.

“I think he said he is from up North somewhere in the bay. He seems like a pretty sharp guy. Answers a lot of questions, and that video he did was something else. Totally clean, like professionally edited.”

“That’s interesting. He must have connections,” his mother said.

“Sure, I guess. But he just moved here.”

“You never know. They have strong communities, you know.”

“What does that mean?”

“You know, like your dad’s family used to be so connected, knew so many people and kept everyone in on everyone else’s business. That was one thing that I had a hard time with when we first got together.” Forks clinked and the guys at the table occupied themselves chewing. “Yeah, you know, I had to meet all these people, and act all nice, and I tell you I stood out in that crowd. But your dad was worth hanging around for.” She leaned over to him and rubbed the arm that rested on the table as he ate. “Even still, he’s so strong. He’s got that warrior blood, you know? You can still see it in his arms, and I could see it then too. It’s the jungle in his veins. It’s in his eyes.”

She leaned in close and his dad huffed and shook his head. He was almost resigned to letting it pass when he decided to say, “It has nothing to do with the jungle. It’s just who I am.”

“It’s your heritage, isn’t it? Don’t you think it’s in your ancestors and passed along to you?”

“Some things are, and maybe muscle is one of them. But really, Hon,” he shook his head.

“Well, that’s how I always thought of it. Maybe if you’re lucky,” she said to Gabe, “You’ll still have some of that in you. You got your dad’s eyes anyhow. You’ll get some muscle I’m sure. Maybe that’s why those girls are so attracted to you.”

“I wouldn’t know, mom. I honestly don’t know. Can we talk about something else?”

“Well, sure. You weren’t answering my questions so I just started talking. What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, see.” She looked to his father. “Going in circles about nothing. I don’t know why we can’t just talk anymore.”

It was at Mike's Pizza that he ran into Annabelle. He was particularly wound up in Sahara Nights, completely attuned to the timing and the motions, his shirt clinging from the sweat, when she tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey."

Gabe instantly went cold at the sound of her voice. He turned to meet a familiar smile, transfixed by the image of what he had given over to memory. No one else had seen her at the party and he felt certain that it must have been his imagination. Now, he wasn't sure what to think and he found himself stuttering at the thought of her name. It had been almost two weeks without even a word. He never expected to see her again. Her appearance made him conscious of the sweat in his clothes and the heavy warm air of the ovens. He began to sweat some more.

"I'm so sorry that I haven't been here, or called or anything. My uncle suddenly got very sick. My whole family flew to Iowa on standby and he was comatose when we got there and I never saw him speak again because he died a few days ago. We just got back into town today. I'm sorry, I would have called, but things were hectic and there was so much family around and my parents don't know about you."

Gabe glanced around the faces at the restaurant. There was only a young woman at the counter and a very old couple sharing a pizza on the other side of the room.

"It's okay," she said. "I'm here with my sister to pick up our food."

He exhaled, unsure if he had been holding his breath the whole time or if somewhere in here rattling off the story he got lost and forgot. His head spun, and words,

all he was able to speak, were swirling with it, too fast to be caught and spoken. Seconds elapsed.

“Wow. I’m really sorry to hear about your uncle,” he said. The stiff and practiced line saved him.

“It’s weird, I guess. I’ve just been so sad, and now I’m back here, and things are just supposed to keep going.”

“Yeah, I can only imagine.” Again, a canned response. There were so many things he needed to tell her and no easy way through the tangled words. He was completely unprepared to even find a place to start. He couldn’t tell her about the party without really compromising something. And this hardly seemed the time. Was it wrong to be relieved by her state of mourning?

“How have things been with you?” she asked.

“Crazy, just, well, crazy. Good, though, I guess. Just hanging out, doing school.”

Finally getting the words out gave only a moment’s relief. He realized the moment had passed, that in that beat before her response, all of his desire to tell her anything sunk into guilt, and the chance was gone.

“I’m not looking forward to getting my hands on all the make-up work from my classes.”

“It won’t be a big deal, I’m sure.” He chuckled awkwardly and nearly choked on his escape line. “You’ll be ahead of the game again in no time.”

She smiled with her usual grace, and he couldn’t remember having ever felt more like an ingrate.

“I have to go, but I guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said.

“Yeah, sure.”

“I’m really glad I ran into you.”

“Yeah, me too,” he stammered. “Good to know that you’re back.”

As he waved, he could not help but think that it was the most honest thing he had said in some time. That didn’t keep him from wanting to vomit all over the smudged glass of the Sahara Nights, which had, very early on in their conversation, gone through his last ball.

The situation eclipsed his thoughts. He didn’t consider how dark it was outside, but just wandered to the bus stop, taking a seat without looking to see if any birds had left something to ruin his shirt. When he thought about Annabelle, and seeing her the next day, a pinpoint of anxiety exploded into a hazy blanket of plasma-tube static, so dim and colorless that it was troublesome to pick out thoughts. He wanted desperately to never return to school, but that was not practical. He would have to finish. He was supposed to go to college.

The laughing and yelling had reached his ears, but he was only somewhat conscious of the rowdy boys in the parking lot behind him. They came out of the drugstore and were gathered around a car making cracks as one of them unwrapped something they had just bought. Gabe heard the unmistakable tenor and twang of Wade’s chuckle, and he turned to see his neighbor taking another boy in a headlock and carelessly bouncing off the cars around them.

Two others were now affixing something to one of the rear doors, a small plastic tube with a flag hanging off of it. They stepped back to admire the personalized touch – the stars and bars flag of the confederacy that quavered in the breeze.

“That’s the shit,” one said.

“Now you represent,” said another, clapping his hand on the back of the proud owner of the Old South emblem.

The bus came and Gabe left them behind. The Civil War came to mind, and he thought perhaps it was Lee’s birthday or something. It didn’t take long for his thoughts to steal away from him, back to the pizza joint, back to Annabelle. The people getting on and off the bus were unremarkable in the current state of crisis. He didn’t see Rowen until he was seated across the aisle.

“Hey man.” Rowen waved to snap Gabe out of his trance. “You ride this line a lot, huh?”

“Every now and then.”

“You look like you’ve just seen someone murdered.”

Gabe sat up straight and cleared his throat. “No, nothing like that.” He wasn’t at all prepared for a serious inquiry into his thoughts. He appreciated the concern, and that made it even harder to respond.

“Uh, just girl trouble.”

“Oh, Kayleigh? Already?”

“Yeah, well, that’s part of it.” The conversation dangled. “The other part is this girl Annabelle.”

“Double trouble.”

“Yeah, you see, Annabelle left town unannounced, and I didn’t hear from her for two weeks. Then this thing with Kayleigh at the party happened. And I just saw Annabelle, who is now back after a family emergency in Colorado. I don’t know what to tell her.”

“That’s rough. I can’t say I’m envious. I mean, for Kayleigh, sure. But I guess this is a situation where two is not actually better than one. I don’t know much about you and your affairs, but I’ll say this – things always work out best when you’re honest.”

“Yeah, I hear you, but I don’t like imagining how it’s going to play out.”

“But she’s going to find out, right? It’s better that you tell her.”

“You’re right, but I don’t know if I can do it.”

“Man up, dude.” As soon as he said it, Rowen resettled in his seat and backed off, trying to let the topic drop. “Were you over at Mike’s?”

“Yeah. I’ve gotten into the pinball machine they have there, Sahara Nights.”

“Yeah, it’s nice. Not too many of those left around these days. Before I moved down here I got into this one called Time Gap that was really perplexing – there would be random ball drops and things would just come out of nowhere. It made for quite a challenge. You have to expect the unexpected.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, so you learn to play it by rhythm, and you can actually play a lot of machines that way. My dad and I used to do stuff like that on the weekends. Go get a roll of quarters at the bank and make an afternoon of it.”

“That sounds like a lot of fun.”

“It was.” It was evident by the sincere and distant smile that it was an important memory.

Gabe pictured the glowing skin of the desert dancer, leaning provocatively against a big hairy animal. All he knew about camels was that they could store water and that they spit. He imagined it lumbering awkwardly on long legs. Was it her dance partner? She slipped into life and climbed the animal with ease, as natural as climbing a ladder, then swaying and hanging off its back at dangerous and suggestive angles. A camel for a dance partner. He thought about his own awkward moments, how Annabelle had danced with him but left some distance between them, respectful, soft in approaching him, not clinging and clamoring like in the cages. Then there was Kayleigh, so straightforward and so clearly playing a part that he was lucky enough to see behind. He sweated with memories. He wanted to be honest.

When he saw Kayleigh the next day, her signature hip sway and languid arms worked their mind control. He could do nothing but respond to her smile with his own. He quickly agreed to meet her at Mike’s after class. There was a part of him that wanted to wait and get things straightened out with Annabelle first. He just couldn’t say no to her. So Gabe kept right on grinning like he’d been set loose in a euphoric dream, nodding his head when a part of him wanted reasonable distance. He was beyond reasoning.

There are few distractions when walking alone, quite unlike driving and the demands that operating two tons of cold steel death places on a person. That, unfortunately for Gabe, meant making his way on foot and brooding and wishing and hoping for the impossible – or at least the highly improbable. He had not done anything to seek out Annabelle, and had in fact rationalized some strategic moves to avoid her. All of these things and what he was beginning to recognize as real guilt were getting to be pretty heavy in his thoughts as he walked away from the cluster of buildings at Harbor High.

Gabe almost made it to the gate. He was about ten paces from the fence, twenty paces from where the sidewalk began. He swore, and perhaps just from his desire for the familiar, the memory of scent, that he could smell the tang of dough and marinara from Mike's. Little D and Mo were somewhere behind him. He didn't care to wait for them. He would get a crack at the mysterious crystal ball magic without them distracting him. And the fury he sought to avoid would be behind him. Another meeting (or could you say date?) with Kayleigh coming up fast. She would be at a club meeting of some sort until later and catch a ride to Mike's. It seemed like the perfect refuge, with the exception of that one unfortunate run-in with Annabelle there.

He almost got to the campus gate.

“Gabe!”

He turned to see a cherubic face, twisting and dark at the corners, framed in chiaroscuro by impossibly vibrant tight curls. Something was creeping over Annabelle, something not too hard to read.

“We need to talk.”

Gabe was no less shocked by her approach at the edge of Harbor than he was by her sudden appearance at Mike’s. There was a void of otherworldly dimension, something he couldn’t begin to grasp, a vacuum that was closing and gaining intensity as she came upon him. He was breathless.

“I heard something today, something about a party.”

Unseen hands closed on his throat. He tried to swallow and choke out some words.

“I’m sorry.” He got most of it out before his voice was lost.

“What the hell happened?”

Gabe shrugged. She waited, sighed, and looked away from him, trying to clear her eyes.

“Look, I’m sorry that I was gone. There’s nothing I can do about that. But you’ve had two days to say something.” She bent into the last words, failing to raise her voice. “Two days.”

He could only repeat himself. “I’m sorry.” Before he could gather what came after, she broke in again.

“Who do you think you are?” It wasn’t a dagger that he felt twisting into his gut, but something much larger.

“You are a fucking coward. Don’t you have anything to say? Am I not worthy of talking to anymore?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know what to say. I didn’t want this.”

“Whatever this is, I don’t need it.” Her voice broke off, glancing to the side, and then she straightened to get it back. Her eyes were hot. “Fucking coward.”

She heaved a sob and walked away, leaving him to watch his first fling turn her back on him. Gabe felt like everyone had been watching, that a thousand eyes were upon him, but he was very much alone.

Annabelle made her way back towards the parking lot. She was about fifty yards away before Gabe regained his awareness of the present. Every time he tried to reason his way to a sense of acceptance, a deluge of emotion crashed across him, pounding the shores and destroying the calm beach he wished to remove himself to. This happened several times before he realized that she was now running away from him. Or more accurately, she was running towards a rather large group that had gathered in the parking lot. Clearly it was some sort of fight, judging by the size and shape of the crowd. As Gabe took his first step towards the scuffle, she wedged her way into the group, moving with a sense of determination. She was going to break up the fight. Gabe sprinted after her.

The murmur of sanguine incantations hardly registered. Ten paces away and closing, he heard a sound. His already unstable stomach recoiled at the sound of a bare fist meeting a soft, unprepared face. He wedged his way through the group and into the

clearing, where he saw one girl standing, taunting, and the other on all fours near where Annabelle found herself sitting awkwardly.

“Come on bitch, get up.”

Gabe took advantage of the pause to help Annabelle to her feet. The sound of a shoe meeting a chest and a squealing, forced exhale. Gabe turned to see the aggressor drop her weight onto her match. A tear-strained yelp escaped.

“Think you can call me that to my face?”

A nearly immobilized head shook side to side until it was held tight, a fistful of blond hair pulling it back to an awkward angle. But just for an instant. The fist brought her face down to the pavement. A cry thick with fear and mucous and blood. Up again, down again.

Gabe could not process images fast enough to understand. All he could hear were the strains from the reeling girl. He stepped forward and reached for the attacker's shoulder. Suddenly the world was off kilter, smashed to the side. He stumbled and nearly fell over Annabelle, but both were propped up by the ring of onlookers. Then he heard more shouts, big male voices deep with authority. The crowd fell away like oil slick dashed with suds.

Domby, the campus sheriff, restrained the prevailing girl, while the other was attended to by someone Gabe didn't know. An ambulance arrived quickly. Gabe and Annabelle sat on a nearby parking berm.

“How could someone be so violent?” Without warning, she cried, and he lent his shoulder awkwardly.

Gabe was quiet. Too much had happened in the preceding twenty minutes for him to have much to say. “Pride,” he said. “Superiority? Anger. Just anger, I guess.”

The words bounced around in his head and things crumbled around the edge. It put him off balance. Anger seemed vibrant. He couldn’t feel his legs, but anger was alive, seething, pulsing in corners of his mind that he never looked into. There was nowhere else to look. He would have jumped up and ran straight into a wall had one been nearby. Futility, ineptness, and despair were finding their way to the surface, quaking the concrete beneath him as he sank slowly lower and deeper into the torrent of what he had just witnessed.

“I am more angry at you than I have ever been at anyone else,” Annabelle said.

“I know. I’m sorry.” The words hardly seemed to come from his mouth.

“Yeah. But my point is, we’re this close right now. And I could hit you, if I wanted.”

Gabe tensed reflexively. She was a strong girl, bull-headed, commanding. Had she taken a swing, it would have relieved the pressure. Instead, he remained distant and unreasoned, taut and shadowy.

She sniffed. “But I don’t want to.”

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The Vice Principal came over and asked them a few questions. They stood and did their best to answer them. He was curt – officious even, and as shocked as anyone else. When he went back to his office, they were left in silence again.

“I should go down there and use his phone to call my mom. She might wonder where I am at when she gets home.”

“Yeah, I should go too.”

Her eyes were red and still wet. She brushed back her curls. “I’ll see you, Gabe.”

By the time he got to Mike’s, he had little hope that Kayleigh would be waiting. There was a couple ordering a pizza at the counter and a guy he didn’t know mesmerized by Sahara Nights. Kayleigh was not there. He waited, in case she was in the bathroom, but eventually he walked to the bus stop and waited to get home.

The Divide

He thought about calling Mo, then decided against it. Part of him felt like calling Rowen, but he didn't have his number, and it would be awkward. Calling a guy was unnerving and strange in a way that was not as straightforward as a girl. The same delicate performance, a completely different and indescribable attempt to relate — like trying to act cool while making up excuses for why you aren't cool. So he just swallowed everything, the heartburn and confusion, and tried to keep himself at bay.

The next day, he saw Kayleigh before class and set another date with apologies. She heard about the fight and wasn't all that surprised to hear he had been there. Gabe wasn't sure how to feel about that. He felt no less lost as he made his way to Mike's one more time.

Between the town of Oak Bend and Harbor High were sprawling fields that rolled through the low marshes and over crests, sharp rows of green thistle waist high. The long stretch of Oak Boulevard was flanked by a deep gulch with stagnant water, parallel to the farmer's access road, which was dusty and dry and full of ruts. Gabe found himself walking on the shoulder and between traffic, between speeding cars headed for town and the bouncing trucks out to inspect and care for the acres of artichokes.

The emotional shock of a confrontation, especially a vengeful one, it stays with you. He watched the ground at his feet pass with each step. Gabe often thought that the longest days were when nothing much happened, but he had been corrected. One afternoon, one hour, stretched into ages, the conversation with Annabelle ever present.

He was curious about how she had found out, but it was insignificant in the end who had mentioned it to her. Youth had not completely blinded him — he recognized the situation had been his own making. He had hoed the row and planted the seeds, and the garden had grown out of control.

He turned onto Merritt Street and was happy to put more distance between himself and the dusty and coniferous smell of thistle pitch. Being so close, it almost bothered him as much as the smell of the manure – together, though, they could drive a skunk to tears. He was fortunate that they had not recently used fertilizer in that field, because the shit smell gets into your clothes – not good for a date scenario. Before he knew it, he relished another smell, the sharp yeast of fresh dough and tomato tang of Mike's Pizza.

Gabe turned the corner of Main, following his nose towards the restaurant. He came around the corner of the credit union and just about smashed into the wide nose of a roan colt, ambling smoothly but with intent. He sidestepped and the horse took little note of him. Neither did Bubba Bruce, who sat atop the sixteen hands of shining, rippling muscle, his arm aloft like a French waiter, pizza box carefully balanced atop his palm. Gabe watched as he rode straight across Main, halting a few cars who perhaps unhappily, but not angrily, stopped to indulge the delivery boy for the rarity of the spectacle. Gabe smiled and shook his head. The bullish lineman had meaty arms, but they were bound to tire, and it was another 3 miles out to the foothills. It did not seem out of the question, though, that Bubba Bruce might stop along the way and finish that pie without any help.

Gabe had tried to avoid Bubba Bruce after their last run in, but the hulking cowboy seemed to have lost interest. Perhaps he had even seen Gabe as he rode by, but the fact that no insults were spat and not even a sign of taunting could only be good. Gabe took it as an omen because he knew of no other way to take it. Maybe things would turn around.

The first thing he noticed when he walked in was that it was busier than normal. It took several scans of the restaurant to find Kayleigh, because he wasn't expecting to see her talking to another guy. Immediately he felt his fears confirmed: his luck was out, omen or not. She wasn't really attracted to him. How could she be? It was a fluke. He had read something into the situation that wasn't really there. But how could those dances, and the kisses, been about friendship? And if they were, what kind of friends does she have? Maybe he missed a lesson somewhere, the one about friends that act like a couple. Maybe she just talked to a lot of guys. As Gabe approached, he could see that it was not just some guy, it was Rowen.

Before they saw Gabe, he overheard Rowen say "see, you are pretty unique too. I'd like to hear more about that sometime."

Kayleigh stood with a hip resting on the table, twirling a straw paper around her finger. She spotted Gabe and her smile connected with him, not changing, not surprised, just as ready to greet him as ever. His heart was beating so hard that he thought he might fall over, but he walked steadily up. He didn't know what look might have been on his face, but she responded by stepping towards him and throwing her arms around him as if it had been practiced hundreds of times. Given the circumstances, it felt unnatural, but he

hugged her back anyway, because he knew it was what he was supposed to do. It didn't have the same electricity as it did the night of the party. He was more concerned about Rowen, aware that he was watching them, aware that he had been temporarily shut out from the scene. That part was just fine.

He turned to face the town's newest arrival. Rowen kept an easy demeanor, completely comfortable and smiling as he said hello.

"Hey. Didn't expect to see you here."

"Just stopped in for a drink. Headed over to the library again."

The cool in his voice was aggravating. Gabe was wound tight, an unfathomable and foreign blue streak buzzing in his limbs. Angry torment pushed his reflexes to the brink of reaction. Not from the gunshots, nor the go-kart, never before had he been so ready to come uncorked.

When Gabe didn't respond, Kayleigh spoke up. "Well, happy reading, then."

"Yeah, okay. See you guys later. Maybe on the bus, huh?" Again, Gabe didn't answer.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

Eating was, if nothing else, something to occupy his hands. As long as he could get them to stop shaking.

"A bit. I think I'll get some breadsticks. Want anything?"

"If you'll share..."

"Sure. Be right back."

He took a deep breath as he waited in line. A rare thing, maybe not an inconceivable thing, occurred to him. He wanted to do something, to attack this thing with Rowen, but there was no easy way to do it. Getting too carried away would give an overbearing impression, look possessive even. That was the last thing you would want with a strong girl like her — she's just as likely to slap you as drop you like a hot rock. Confronting Rowen didn't seem like the wisest choice either — the new guy could be a fierce fighter, a black belt for all anyone knew.

She seemed ready to let it drop. Maybe it should be meaningless, since it could have been a meaningless conversation. No introduction was meaningless, though, not between a guy like Rowen and a girl like Kayleigh. But it could have been. And since she was ready to let it drop, how welcoming would she be if he were to bring it up again? Again, he was outmatched by the unknown. He would let it drop. The resignation to the course of inaction, however, did not put him at ease the way it so often did. Things had already turned too dark. He returned to the table just as wound up and lost in his thoughts.

“So what's new? No more fights?” she asked.

He gave a stuttering and quickly fading laugh. “No, not today.”

“I heard about other incidences today. It sounds crazy, but I guess there have been more shoving matches and things getting broken up just in the last couple days.”

“Yeah. A lot of tension.”

“Doesn't it make you worry?”

They called his number and he got up to get his food. When he came back, he had forgotten she asked a question.

“I worry. Don’t you?” she asked. “I mean, people get confused about you all the time.”

He shrugged. “I’m a confusing guy.”

Her smile and reflexive backhand on his shoulder relieved his sudden worry that she might not find it funny. The joke was a little bit cheap, but it managed to relax him a little.

“Really, though. Have you seen those guys with the Stars and Bars flags? They aren’t just dicking around.”

“I have seen them, but it does seem mostly like dicking around. They confuse easily. Maybe that will work to my advantage.”

He dug into his breadsticks and handed one to her. They focused on the food. Annabelle and the violent fight kept his impressions distant. They wouldn’t let go. The silence got to him, and since he wasn’t ready to come clean, the hothead’s voice got louder. He would say anything to keep things steady, to push it all back deeper and further. He sputtered, “They’re going to make assumptions about me no matter what. I can’t change that.”

“You know, Tina asked me to go to the meeting of the student acceptance coalition. They are going to have some sort of silent protest about the confederate flags and the fighting.”

He nodded and chewed on another breadstick.

“I think they are right, that we should do something. They want everyone to bring a flag from another country.”

“You know, Wade and those idiots will eventually calm down. I don’t think we need to do anything. Take Bubba Bruce. I just saw him more concerned about the pizza he was carrying than anything else in the world. Short attention span.”

“Don’t you think it’s wrong to celebrate slavery and the idea of white supremacy?”

“Well, yeah. But I don’t think that having everybody else bring in their own flags from Mexico or Ecuador or the Philippines or anywhere else is going to help.”

Kayleigh shifted, pulled her shirt down on her waist, and was uncomfortably quiet. She was drifting away, and perhaps might drift over to the library.

“Have you ever played Sahara Nights?”

“Nope.”

“Well, you don’t know what you’re missing. Come on.”

He stepped up beside the machine and took on a pedantic tone. “The sweet spot, for points anyway, is this left ramp here. The third time you hit it, you get a multi-ball. That’s when you can really hit it. You have to watch out for the bumpers on the right, because they tend to angle the ball back between the flippers. Then you’re screwed.” He stopped, searched for something to add, and then said, “I’ve spent my fair share of quarters on this machine. I’ve dominated it, you might even say.” He drew it out, hoping for a chance to show off his high scores as the digital display ran through the idle screens.

Finally, the numbers came up. Just as he had expected and hoped, his initials GSC came up at number one. Mo was full of shit, and he knew it. He pointed quickly.

“That’s me.”

“Oh, look at you. And what’s your middle name?”

He smiled. “A guy has to have some sense of mystery.”

She laughed at his line and waved him off. “Whatever. So let’s see the wizard in action.”

He dropped the quarters and immediately set himself to the task, relaxed at not having to make conversation but afraid of not performing. He hit the first bonus level and she gave him some friendly cheers of encouragement. But when the first ball dropped, he had nowhere near his high score. She didn’t seem to care. On ball two, he picked it up, feeling the sweat starting to gather in his palms, focused as he hit the ramp to work his way to the next level. When he got it on the heels of a few close calls, she clapped him on the shoulder, oohing and ahing as the multi-ball built a cacophony of noise. She brushed up against him and her hand fell to his waist. She leaned over his shoulder, and he could hardly focus with her body against his. He hit the bonus level three and the machine lit up and rang out and the infamous camel squawk indicated he was closing in on his own record. She laughed in amazement and he couldn’t help but laugh with her. And that is when he lost the ball. The third ball was no use at all, straight up from the right bumper, off the ramp, and right into the return.

He collapsed onto the glass and she laughed at his mock desperation. It didn't feel that exaggerated to him. Kayleigh pulled him up by the shoulder, and as he came up he met her lips. Gently and briefly, they kissed.

"Good try. You'll get it next time, maybe." She looked at her watch. "My bus will be here in a few minutes."

He could barely speak. "Yeah, alright."

"But I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, you bet."

She lingered a moment, and he wondered if there would be another. He couldn't bring himself to move, either. So she smiled, hugged him again, and was out the door with a wave. She made it hard to be angry, but not impossible.

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Rowen waited at the bus stop with two books of poetry tightly held at his side. He could not help but feel like it would be best if no one was able to read the titles. Not that someone would recognize the names of modern poets and take him to task for it. His concern was just that no questions be asked, no eyebrows raised, no comments he couldn't hear but would maybe feel. It would have been more ideal if the county library was away from the only shopping center in the foothills, but Rowen was nonetheless thankful for the fact that it was there at all. Few people used it, which made it feel even

more like it was his private collection, his universe of volumes, biography, fiction, histories, and poetry, which he read more of than anything else. It was always waiting for his arrival, welcoming him to pull down from the shelves, the old cloth bindings like a familiar handshake. He never took more than the books he could easily carry and conceal in one hand.

The smell of Mike's pizzas made an echo in his stomach, but he was anxious to get home. He looked that way to see Kayleigh walking towards him, looking like she had just been handed a million dollars. She took a seat on the bench next to him, saying hello so as not to be rudely ignorant.

"Hey," he replied, shifting the books on the seat next to him, trying to keep them out of view.

Not unexpectedly, they both waited for the other to say something, then struggled to find something else to interject into the silence. Rowen decided to ask about Gabe, simply because nothing even remotely better came to mind.

"Yeah, Gabe and I are together, I guess."

"Guess that was a bit awkward back there, huh?"

"Don't worry about it. I don't think it was a big deal."

An old beaten coupe turned hard into the driveway not thirty feet away, tires chirping, confederate flag snapping in the air from the aerial. Laughter and whoops echoed from within, and a pale arm against the dark paint thumped a palm against the door. The car torqued and made two more rapid turns to a parking space.

“Idiots,” Kayleigh said. “A word of advice: you should definitely stay away from those guys. They don’t get along with...” she struggled to be delicate.

“With people like me. I could have guessed.”

“Not just you. With other people in general. They’ve never acted like anything but pigs towards me, and it probably would be a lot worse if I wasn’t a girl.”

“I can handle it.”

“Well, the less you have to do with them, the better.” She looked back at the boys as they filed into the supermarket, then turned to look up the street. “There’s my bus. See you, Rowen.”

He waved. “Thanks for the tip.”

Looking back over his shoulder, suddenly uncomfortable waiting by himself, he hoped his bus would arrive early. Until moving to the foothills, he had believed in the advice his father had given him, that to be quiet and unassuming was the way in which to avoid trouble. In Oak Bend, though, he felt eyes upon him everywhere he went, the glare of the town itself somehow challenging his right to be there. The tension mocked his self-assurance and pressed him down to be smaller, less conspicuous. Shoulders slumped, shrinking as he sat, his arms secured the books ever closer. When he looked back towards Mike’s he saw Gabe walking over, eyed fixed on Rowen as Kayleigh disappeared into the bus. Rowen had never looked forward to getting on the bus more.

He straightened his back, calling upon the confidence he could gather. No challenge was too great to attempt, no opportunity too stultifying to meet – it just took some study, some careful thinking. There was no time for that now, but it turned out that

he had nothing to worry about. They talked briefly about their video projects, how Rowen had edited his on his computer, and the weather. The backdrop of the boys carousing struck a chord, a tense clamor that took a long time to fade.

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Administrators Ban Flags

Wingspan – The Harbor Gulls Weekly, Vol.29: May 31.

The principal said in the morning announcements that displaying any flag except the stars and stripes on campus is now banned. Any other flags will be taken away.

“Expression is an important part of being a young adult, but we have to draw a line when violence results,” said Principal McKay.

He is of course talking about the two fights earlier in the week between the rebels carrying the stars and bars flag of the Old South and the Mexican majority that began to show their national flag around campus. The clashes have resulted in a total of ten suspensions and some minor injuries.

“It’s just escalating, and we need to protect the safety of all our students,” McKay noted.

Many students feel that it is a violation of first amendment rights, but the Principal’s office is standing strong. Hand-drawn and printed paper flags of all sizes have been taken down across campus. Cars flying any flags are not allowed entry in to the parking lot unless they are taken down.

Tensions remain high across campus as the groups seek ways to express themselves and feel camaraderie with others like them. The newly established Rebel Cowboy Club and the Latino/Chicano Coalition are both meeting this Friday during the free period.

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It seemed significant that Gabe met Kayleigh at Mike's for a third time, though he wasn't sure why. It was the longest go he'd had at the dating thing, but there was an unusual crackle in the air. At first, it was only alertness for another awkward run-in with Rowen, but he was nowhere to be found. The hair on Gabe's legs and neck stood up and stayed that way, though, and he had the feeling that he couldn't get warm no matter where he was. Even inside Mike's with the ovens churning out pizzas, the chills were getting to him. At first it just seemed like excitement. Kayleigh was as stunning as she could be in her white hooded sweatshirt with a low cut v-neck and the perfect pair of jeans. It occurred to him that it was undue excitement, though, and he wanted to rule it out. She was not in party attire. But every quip, every laugh, every sip of his drink, every pause was accompanied by this rattling from his jaw and down his spine. The desperation he felt when he realized that she might notice it only made it worse, yet he pretended it wasn't happening as much as he could, that maybe it was his imagination, that if he ignored it that it might go away on its own.

After a while, it did. He settled into their conversation about the relative merits of mushrooms, which Kayleigh insisted were good on pizzas but nowhere else. By the time they were discussing their views about, and the relative merits of, being a pizza delivery person, it was clear that the conversation would reach drought stage soon. That was when Bubba Bruce rode up. They watched him through the big window above their booth as he casually wrapped the reins around the oversized side-view mirror of a truck that happened to be by the door. They laughed and made cracks about his shit-stained boots and wondered how many times a year he had to change the oil on his ride. They each admired the horse in their own way, and they felt a little sorry for it as the mare tested the length of its tether to reach for a small patch of grass and found that it was too short.

As they looked on, the wind caught a square of fabric that was tied to the horn on the far side of the saddle, flipping it into view. Another chill shot through him, like a tightly coiled spring rung by a pipe.

“Jesus,” she said. “Those flags are everywhere now.”

He let a little of the shaking feeling through. “Yeah, it’s, well, uncomfortable to see it around.”

“Not only that, but those fights pop up all over the place. I feel like I’m looking over my shoulder a lot. You saw one. It’s not like a boxing match. Those idiots really want to hurt people.”

“Yeah. I’m trying to steer clear of it.”

“I’m glad they’re finally starting to do something about it.”

“The flag ban seems lame.”

“I didn’t mean that. I meant other students, like the Latino/Chicano Coalition. They’re trying to get anyone together for a big demonstration, anyone who isn’t, well, white. I think I’m going to go next Friday.”

“Really? I don’t think I’d feel right there. It’s bad enough that people assume that my family is from Mexico, and I don’t want to make myself a fake on top of that.”

“But this is a little more than that, don’t you think?” In her voice a certain clarity broke through that made him sit up despite the occasional rattling of his bones. “This is a time when we could be a part of something good and do something about these idiots who, for some reason, feel themselves superior to us.”

“Who is us?”

“Anyone that is not them.”

“What would we do? People like that have always been around. It’s not going to do anything. We’re not going to change their minds.”

The bells on the door rang as Bubba went outside. He unhitched his horse and lithely mounted with one hand on the horn and one holding the pizza aloft. Gabe sipped his soda. Kayleigh stared out the window and sighed.

He went on. “I just don’t think this is the right time. I mean, we’ll be out of school in a month or so, and then we do the cap and gown thing, and then we’re out. We can go as far away from here as we want.”

She played with the zipper on her sweatshirt and then looked at the clock. “I gotta go. My bus will be here soon.”

The conversation crashed to a halt like a flaming airplane falling to earth. He was suddenly aware of the crater it left. Impulsively, his hand darted out, reaching for her hand and catching it as she was getting up from the booth.

“See you tomorrow?”

She squeezed his hand, nodded, and let go.

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The timing of the call to the front office was impeccable. Gabe had listened with quickened heart as Mr. Rothern walked on eggshells, using the home block to approach the turmoil bubbling on the campus. He sidestepped the fight he had attempted to stop, mentioning that *other faculty* had been concerned about the violence they had witnessed firsthand, the roiling anger that forgot passion altogether in favor of reciprocating hate. As soon as the *minority groups* came up, acid dread pooled in Gabe’s gut.

Tires had been slashed. Windshields were given the ash wood slugger treatment, or closer to town, the brick. No parking lot was safe, especially not at Harbor. The addition of two more campus outreach deputies only added to the intensity, not security. *Violent tendencies* exist in both cultures (only two?) and in some more than others. The mention of *the gangs* can only provide one image, one visceral response.

Who does Mr. Rothern picture in his mind's eye as he brings down his rhetorical wrath on these factions? Gabe squirmed in his seat. Others around the room, members of the coalition and others, did the same. No one wished to answer his question.

What can we do to improve this situation?

In a long moment of silence that followed, they glanced anxiously around the room, stared at their hands or the rough laminate of the old desks. Everyone jumped when the phone rang. Gabe was to report to the principal, to go from a large airless void to a small one with an intently focused man.

Principal Bart MacDougal was a very familiar face to Gabe, one from years of Sundays in his adolescence. The stout Catholic practiced a stern devotion, the unsmiling temperament of a pious man who cannot solve his own problems, so he takes on the ones in the world around him instead. He was a principal in the game to change the youth of the world, to clear the road of the lazy rabble and pave the road to success for the achievers. He had spoken to the students on a number of occasions, especially around national testing days, to encourage them, to tell them all that he would like to see their effort, and like to see them all succeed. The sermonic tempo and passionate façade may have heartened some, but most just dismissed him as a zealot. You couldn't exactly see through him, but it was easy to see that there was something just below the surface. Something very much like anger. Gabe had also heard him say, to a much smaller audience, that many were just not meant to do anything important with their lives.

And so it was no surprise that when Gabe sat down opposite the hair-knuckled principal, he was not greeted particularly warmly, but with a cool pretense of congeniality.

“Good morning, Principal MacDougal.”

“Gabriel, good to see you.”

MacDougal waited to speak, out of habit more than anything else, knowing well the advantage of the pressure that silence creates in conversations with students. Even when he remembered that Gabe had not committed any particular offense, he still hung on. He needed the advantage to ask a favor.

“As you are aware, things have become tense regarding this cowboy pride and brown pride division. We’re looking for some people to help us take action, to improve things.”

Gabe felt the heat of weighty expectations. “I don’t think I’m in any position to get involved.”

“You saw the fighting first hand. You know where all of this is coming from. You are in the exact position to get involved and have some impact.”

“What do you mean?” Gabe asked.

MacDougal sat back in his chair. “I’ve known your family for a long time, and I’ve known you since long before you were enrolled here. Your parents are good, churchgoing people, and they understood a long time ago that race should not come between people. They bridged that divide, and you are the result. That puts you in a unique position to speak to both groups.”

“But they’ll be the first to tell you that I don’t belong in either one.”

“Why not?”

“Well, my dad’s family is not Chicano, for one thing.”

“Right, of course. I knew that.”

“It’s always just been understood. I’ve grown up knowing that when it came to culture, I don’t really fit anywhere.”

“But you have friends on both sides.”

Gabe couldn’t see the relevance. “What are you asking me to do?”

MacDougal calculated. “We’re having an end of the year rally in a week. I want you to give a short speech about how important it is to be accepting, how it is that cultures can come together.”

“I don’t know the answer to that. And no one would listen to me anyway.”

“Even if only a few people took it to heart, it could make a difference. This is your chance to step up and take action. I’m sure it would make you parents very proud.”

MacDougal sat very still and let the silence go to work.

Gabe didn’t wait very long. He forced the friendly tone back into his voice. “Can I get back to you on this?”

“I’d like to hear from you soon, so we can have some time to talk through what you’d say.”

“Right. Of course.”

“Thank you for stopping in, Gabriel. Go ahead and go back to class.”

Gabe knew that MacDougal wouldn't let him off the hook, no matter what argument he gave. The long and the short of it was that he didn't want to be a part of it. He had never been a part of these communities, this crystalline self-identification, before, and it seemed like the worst possible time to get involved. The physical aspects of it weighted most heavily in his mind – he would always be perceived as Chicano, regardless of the truth. Who was he supposed to talk to, and who was he supposed to convince? And what was he supposed to convince them of? That everything was going to turn out if they all just took the time to love one another? The only thing his existence proved was that some people, very few people, don't let skin color differentiate people in a meaningful way.

It was a useless argument. The cowboys were not going to listen to him, and neither would the others. The groups were choosing to make that distinction and vehemently display it. These country boys started this whole flag thing, and they had the desire to see it finished, whatever that meant. Certainly the possibility of physical harm was not out of the question – Wade had already come close to that for no reason at all. Things were bound to get worse no matter what he did. It didn't take long for him to decide that the easiest thing to do, as always, was to wait it out. He would have to dodge MacDougal on Sunday to avoid a showdown at the JC corral. There were only two weeks of school left to get through.

It was not an opportunity to get out of the choice between sides. To dodge the question altogether would be a miracle, though he knew that for the most part the side was chosen for him. No argument would be stronger than the one that people saw with

their very own eyes. Yet Gabe could only think of himself as the individual, a unique character that could overcome anything by the force of charisma, goodwill, and kindness. This reliance on the strength of his character bypassed his need to have another identity. He willed himself past that distinction with the aim of carrying others with him beyond it. In the least, he had convinced himself that being like everyone else was the answer.

What he failed to consider was the measure of complicity required on the other side. He would smile, make jokes, and laugh easily at the jokes of others to reassure them, finding ways to be interested in them, be a conversational force. This worked really well in controlled environments where he didn't have to establish himself as an individual: among the worshippers at church functions, dinner parties, and within the circle of friends and family. Those people were all willing to be taken, looking, in fact, to go along with his performance. But now he could see very clearly that there were many people he had not closely encountered who were not ready to move one inch with him.

PEOPLE OF ACTION

The intercom system chattered to life for the morning's announcements with Dave and Dan. There was the usual litany of weekly and upcoming events, followed by announcement of the two newest clubs and their scheduled meeting times. The twittering of unconcerned students continued in the background. And then, something unusual happened, something so rare, perhaps, that it has never since been recorded in the annals of the public school system. Rowen, the school's newest student, read a poem. When he spoke up, his became the only voice.

"So I realize that there isn't much hip-hop culture here, but I hope these rhymes will catch you if the rhythm doesn't, or vice versa. Either way, I hope you feel this.

We're walking through our lives, the young and uninspired

Repeating what we hear until it all sounds tired

We're only taught to see by looking one direction,

With thought blinders on to keep up the misconception

All you straight-line thinkers stand tall and stand stout,

I'm swinging crooked verbal punches for a heavyweight bout.

Though my platform's underrated, I got an edge that's serrated

And I'm here to mince words and cut down all this hatred.

So don't think about the format but consider my plan

As I present my rap in this sacrificial jam.

*I know for a fact that what I'm about to say
It won't make me a star or get me any play.
So you can try to bring me down by calling me gay,
You're not insulting me but someone swinging the other way
Even if you're small-minded, I wouldn't advertise,
That you don't grasp sexuality - why do you care where the bone hides?
Really what you're doing is making yourself look stupid
Who just screamed "I'm a homophobe!"
That's right, you did.
So don't open your mouth until you think about that slam
And take a listen to the rest of this sacrificial jam.*

*To all the ladies out there, you ain't left out of this rap,
I know you catch a lot of flak for things all over the map.
Like the problem with kids these days, blame it on the mother,
Forget about the little bastards he always calls "brother."
And the problem with them is that they're just oversexed,
From the bad women selling themselves to get away from their ex
None of them are "bitches" or slaves to some male order
Man's dominance is false power, like imposing a border.
So if you're down from the man, take heart as I stand
And add my voice to yours with this sacrificial jam.*

*Let's get right on to the beef of the day
and talk about racism – let's not call a spade a spade.
Flag waving and group hazing and this craziness for what?
So we can all feel special? That's as special as my butt.
It's time to face the fact that we're pretty much the same
And the differences you claim – like this rhyme – they're pretty lame.
Truth is, I don't know how to make you see differently,
Or think right or feel right or know just how to be
So many have tried and failed to plant those seeds,
But it comes down to this - if you're hit by some prick, do you not bleed?*

*You see your plan is pretty weak when you insult how I speak
You want to laugh at an accent, put some chaw in your cheek.
Now, pledge allegiance to your flag,
And tell everybody out there why you get so mad.
I'll be the first one to listen if you can reason logically
Why it is you think you're so much better than me.
Until you can make sense I'll stay where I am,
And tell you why I wrote this little sacrificial jam.*

To find a place in this world is no simple thing

*But we must be true to the character we bring,
 Call me out and take a swing or you can step in my ring,
 But beware all the power of a martyred king.
 I'll go down for the cause if in the middle you'll pause,
 To shake hands, be civil and make a peace to applaud.
 I'm not a liar nor a lamb but a hard-headed ram
 When times are dire I'll quell the fire with this sacrificial jam.*

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The awestruck response was almost universal, though the factions quickly gave way to their various interests and biases. Speculating about his sexuality, aspersions were thrown that would have been no more vigorous had he read from a satanic bible. Homophobes seem to rally around poetic expression as effeminate, the medium of the most malevolently chauvinistic musical genre readily overlooked. Perhaps the mention helped in some immeasurable sense. There was no way he would be allowed to play on all sides, and the students of color seemed to be the only ones willing to embrace him, though with sidelong looks that suggested that even they were ready to consider the more slanderous rumors that were buzzing about. There were no hi-fives or congratulations, there was no attempt to recognize the strong move that no one else had been willing to make. The tenor of the rhymes, the challenging tone, could only move the sides to

opposing extremes. His conciliatory ending, conscious of the majority and the minority, was too little and too late. The uproar had already begun to drown out single voices.

Little of this chatter reached Rowen directly. Arriving in class shortly after, he entered upon a discussion of the issue of freedom of speech. A student he didn't know raised his hand and turned to face the now infamous poet-lyricist.

"I heard that hip-hop will be the death of American culture, and I think it's true. It's a threat to our way of life, and it should be stopped."

Rowen said nothing. The teacher gave a half-hearted response about protected speech and the intent of the constitutional amendment. Even those not willing to offer such scathing criticism directed incendiary stares at the pariah.

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When he found Mo at the tables, Wade was there, chatting him up. His baby-faced neighbor had begun to dress more of the part, adding a wrangler shirt to his jeans and wearing a spotless cowboy hat. Wade looked like a giant with it on his head, especially standing next to Gabe. The topic of conversation was choosing sides.

Mo dismissed him. "Seriously, man, I'm not interested in your shitty little scrap. We can all sit at the same table, for all I care. Right Gabe?"

Gabe took a seat. "Of course."

Wade took a long look at Gabe. "Oh, he don't count, anyway."

"Right. Thanks."

“It’s better for you that way, believe me. You’re lucky.”

Gabe shook his head coolly. “Never feels that way.”

“I can give you a ride home today, if you want.”

Mo cut in. “What, no lynchings scheduled for the afternoon?”

If Mo had said that to anyone else on the planet, he would have gotten a different reaction. Maybe it was that Wade wasn’t really buying what everyone was selling, or maybe he just didn’t understand. But even Gabe was surprised by the lack of reaction. It was as if the question didn’t register.

“Actually,” Gabe said quickly, “could you give me a ride into town?”

“Yeah, whatever. See you in the lot then.”

Mo watched Wade walk away stiffly. “What do you have scheduled this afternoon that you would risk your neck for?”

“For your information, I got invited to study at Kayleigh’s for the Chem final.”

“Oh? Will this study session be supervised?”

“I hope not. I’m nervous enough as it is.”

“Fuck yeah, man. I hope you have all your gear because you’re going on a man’s mission! You’ll be a different guy tomorrow.”

“Maybe.”

Gabe wanted to refute, the challenge the usual assumptions of some lascivious goings-on. But fuck it. He was tired of it. Why say anything more. Keeping his mouth shut was the new policy. Not like he had much to say before, but really, he was going to

choke off everything. He definitely was not going to bring up the pow-wow with the front office. Anyway, it wasn't any of Mo's concern.

“Have you seen Rowen?”

“I haven't seen him around at all since that poetry stunt. I guess he's in hiding.”

“I would be too.”

TRANSFORMATIONAL TRANSCENDENCE

When Gabe arrived he got out his books and they took a seat at the table. Kayleigh made a classic move: she dropped the pencil, which Gabe courteously reached down to grab. On his way back up, her face met his, close. Closer than even their moment beneath the trees. Her features were more striking in that single instant, not different, but carved more deeply into his mind. Then she kissed him. It was long and hard and passionate. Then he forced himself to slow down to give them time to breathe.

“I forgot to give you the tour.” She took his hand and led him out of the living area. “This is the hallway. Pictures of me as a baby. And this is my bedroom. Last stop.”

She pulled him in and onto the bed. They tangled and kissed. He began to think about the act itself, all of the waiting to get to this moment and onto this bed, aside from what they were beginning to do. He had to force it from his mind to connect to the moment. He became more aware of her body than his own, a supplicant at her temple, prostrate in worship. Clothes were cast to the floor, a black foil wrapper. He desperately wanted to remember every touch, every feature he found, to take that warmth and sear it all into memory. But it was ungraspable, like the awkward geometry that slowly transformed to enraptured symmetry.

Afterward, she kept him in her arms, kissing any skin she could find. Luck couldn't be this fortunate. He felt clarity on the scale of the universe. He understood where love could come from, where they came from. Not from sex, but from two bodies

finding singular knowledge. When she released her hold and he settled beside her, the world returned to its arched posture. The hard edges moved into the place her soft kisses.

“We should go back to studying.”

“And pretend that never happened?”

“It’s going to be hard, isn’t it?”

When they emerged from behind the closed door, he wasn’t sure if the house looked different or if he simply hadn’t paid much attention before. She paused to look at herself in the long mirror by the entry. He checked his clothes before admiring her. As she pulled her hair into a ponytail, he stood behind and kissed her neck, and for a moment swore that he could see into his future. That path was mythical in his mind, an odyssey. And then it was swept away.

“Are you going to the coalition meeting tomorrow?”

“Probably not. I don’t feel like getting involved.”

“Neither do I, but it’s not exactly easy to do nothing, either. Look at what Rowen did. That took a lot of guts. I respect that he’s willing to stand up.”

At the time that he heard it, Gabe shared those feelings. It really was a courageous move. Now, the outspoken performance fueled resentment. There was nothing left to say about it that wouldn’t sag with sarcasm or envy. It was best to avoid Rowen and his valiant and poetic actions altogether, as he had made things uncomfortable enough as it was. “MacDougal actually asked me to speak at the rally next week. He thinks people would listen to me.”

“They might. Are you going to do it?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think I could. I don’t have anything to say.”

She shook her head. “How can you pretend nothing is happening?”

“I’m still going to think about it.”

“We haven’t been together very long, but I know you well enough to know that thinking is all you’ll do.”

Gabe was doing it at that very moment – retreating into his thoughts, not to figure out how to respond, but because it was easier to say nothing, just think. The ponderous ponderer at work. He kicked about for an answer, but didn’t really try hard.

“What is it that you’re waiting for?” she asked.

“I just don’t want to get into it. There’s no place for me.”

“So make one. Use this speech to do it.”

“Maybe.”

It was a regrettable retreat. She rolled her eyes. Hearing her sigh, he knew that the ambiguity and uncertainty they had shared had disappeared. She knew more than him, and she could answer questions for herself. He reached for her hand, but she pulled it away to flip open the textbook.

“So: identify the element by the atomic weight.”

“We shouldn’t let it ruin our afternoon,” he pleaded.

“Of course not. Could you find the periodic table in the book?”

KEEP LISTENING, EVEN WHEN I STOP TALKING.

You know, I never tell you stories just to blow smoke. Sure, I'm an old timer with nothing better to do, but I got a lot of years that give me perspective. You remember what I tell you. I've lived to see a lot of things in this world, good and bad. All of them important in one way or another. You might not see it just then, when it happens, but at some point you might look back on it with a different view. It might change you, help you to learn. Yes sir, I've had my share of that. If there's one thing I want you to remember, it's to not forget.

Sounds funny, sure. But it's no joke. When I turned your daddy away at the door, when I did things as a truck driver, I guess in one way I was lucky. I'll never claim to be smart, but I am a little lucky. Nothing I did couldn't be undone, talked out. Nothing so serious that I couldn't smooth it over if I needed to. Yeah, well, someday you'll know what I mean. You can't always make the right decision and be spot on every time. But try not to make a choice that is so wrong, that everything will be different afterward.

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GETTING TO KNOW YOUR PLACE

By the day of the year-end rally, Gabe had successfully avoided contact with MacDougal and he had been mercifully spared another call from the classroom. No answer was the best answer he could come up with. It would be another boring rally where people cheered half-heartedly for the baseball team's third-place finish and waved goodbye and good riddance to those graduating. Off to menial jobs or trade school, or the truly rare university-bound, numbering in single digits, the elite. Walking the hundred or so yards to the football field, he could imagine the number of students requiring further study for a GED, swiftly listing a dozen with no effort.

There were many things that were out of sync. It didn't even feel like summer was coming. The days had been damp and cold throughout. Leaving for school, he had paused to look at the old gourd vine on the arbor. The broad leaves had been seduced by fleeting days of sun, and were open to the saturating morning dew and evening fog. Everything was shriveled and limp like as never before. There was one small squash, no more than six inches long, that was already losing its color near the vine. With foliage that thin and withered, it did not look like it would survive.

At midday, there were still traces of dew on the school grounds. He had tracked through most of the distance to the stadium when he saw Mo walking with Marty, the easiest guy to spot in any crowd.

"Long time no see," he said to Mo.

“Yeah, well, many a good guy has been left in the dust when a pair of tits shows up.” Marty lumbered along quietly, pretending to observe the throng of students.

“Hey man, ease off,” Gabe said. “Summer is almost here, we’ll have plenty of time to get ourselves into all kinds of shit.”

“We’ll see. I’ll cut you slack for now, assuming your chase has been worth it thus far.”

“I won’t say anything,” Gabe replied, “other than she’s great.”

“Oh shit! You are in there! You dog!”

“Fuck off. Keep it down, man. Jesus.” It was never easy to make good with someone who doesn’t reserve judgment, and Mo was no exception. He was a take it or leave it guy. How else could you explain the fact that he shot at Gabe and they still speak? Gabe was the one trying to smooth things out.

Everyone filed down into the stadium bowl and settled into a dull din of conversation, punctuated by the squeaks and groans and wooden echoes of the old bleachers. Gabe could see distinguishing pockets of cowboy hats around the crowd. MacDougal approached the podium and tapped the microphone.

“Check.” He found it was on, and cleared his throat. The crowd quieted as they faced his stern visage. “Before we get started with the baseball team awards and recognition for the coaches, there is another issue I would like to address. I’m sure you are all aware of the ugliness that has been going on around campus and the divisions that are rallying against one another. In some ways, I’m happy that students are becoming aware of certain issues and using those issues to form communities. Violence, however,

should never be a part of that growing awareness. We do our best here to make sure that everyone is safe, and these groups and clubs need to be civil and address differences in a proper manner. That is why I am planning a two-day symposium over the summer, staffed by volunteers, to have a constructive discussion with students about diversity. In the meantime, we have added community resource officers from the sheriff's department for the last week of the year, which I'm sure will be useful for preventing pranks if nothing else. I hope that these fine folks will not be called upon for any reason.

“In a moment, I'm going to introduce someone who will be a student leader at the symposium. But before I do, I want to ask you if there are any questions that you have for me.”

Glancing round the stands, eyes met other eyes as everyone searched to see if anyone was brave enough to speak. Then a hand went up, stiff and strident, above a white cowboy hat. Gabe couldn't see his face, as the hat was below him. MacDougal pointed and asked the questioner to stand and speak.

“I don't understand why you come down on us,” the boy said. “It's not us, it's the Mexicans. They cause all the problems.”

As the cacophony of protests erupted, the boy looked to either side calmly, securely within his pack, then back to the man at the podium, who was using his arms to lower the noise.

“Now wait. Everyone, quiet. Now wait. That is exactly the kind of thing we need to address. Comments like that are not a part of the constructive dialogue. Until we have that dialogue, the careful monitoring and the flag ban will continue. Perhaps it

would be best to hear directly from one of your peers. Let me introduce the symposium's student leader, Kayleigh Roberts."

Kayleigh stepped from behind the school banner and took the steps up onto the platform, her hips swaying in her signature walk beneath an unusually formal black skirt. She stepped up to the podium.

Gabe could hardly process what his eyes and ears revealed to him. The position that he had feared, she embraced. She had vaulted into his stead, cutting him down a notch. It was raw and nervy, and in that moment he hated her assurance at the microphone. But it was a very brief moment.

It took quite some time for the later investigation to determine who started the skirmish. Gabe didn't find out until years later, in an intriguingly candid conversation with Principal MacDougal himself. Gabe heard the first volley before he saw it.

"Fuck you, whitey!"

Turning his head toward the noise behind and to his left, he saw the dull silver of corrugated steel in flight, trailing a drift of browned and weathered paper waste. There was an impact and several screams. When the second launch took place, much closer, people reacted on instinct, scattering like rodents from a fire, heading back towards their classrooms without being instructed to do so.

He and Mo were near the top of the bleachers when they realized Marty was gone. They both turned back to see if they had left him behind, looking into the riotous mass. Whoever threw the next garbage can got a two-for, striking them both on the head and shoulders. Mo was spared by his height. Gabe felt warmth trickling onto his neck and a

bruising sear down his back. They cursed and steadied themselves, Gabe assuring his friend that he was alright, then heading back towards the rim of the bowl. Emerging from the exodus ahead was a stocky figure, one of the cowboy crowd, looking like a gambler eager to spend his winnings, pushing his way through the throngs, moving against the flow until he found what he was looking for. He was the driver of the rusty muscle car Gabe had seen around Mike's, and as they neared ground level, the young man was picking up another trashcan. About thirty feet away, beneath the press box, there was a massive scrum, a couple dozen guys out to prove something. There was shouting and concussive crack impacts of flesh-and-bone.

It became difficult to think. Gabe was overcome by an empty coldness that passed in waves through his chest, his belly. Weakness gave way to rage. Those brief seconds, like the bleak wash out with Kayleigh after their incredible sexual high, had split him head to toe, right down that dividing line. And there was only one way he could think of to get himself back together again.

The fall had been a long one, with each dismissive shrug and each evasion turning to a leaden burden, adding mass for gravity to pull on as he plummeted down to some unknown end. He had to balance the equation, take action, use force. The solution was to be everything he had not been. Be rash. Be reactive. Be virile. Be vicious. As the lumbering cowboy hoisted the can over his head and took two steps towards the big brawl, Gabe called out to him in a stranger's voice. With one step, the freefall was violently arrested, the terrible momentum a power at his command. He charged in, fists clenched, and let it out.

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Kayleigh stood at the podium and watched the steel trashcan careen down in a long arc. She was stunned into silence. Pandemonium bloomed and spread like a noxious gas. Long after the time for gasping had passed, she heard a woman calling to her from the side of the stage. Kayleigh ran down quickly and followed other administrators towards the tunnel that led to the locker rooms. They were all scared, too afraid to try to intervene in the brawls. Everyone was on a cell phone – they were willing to do at least that much. She passed abandoned high-heeled shoes and was thankful for her flat soles. She wondered about Gabe but felt assured that he would be among the first to flee. There wasn't enough fight in him.

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Gabe played his part in the lengthy investigation – he had no choice for the two days he was in the hospital. Answering all the questions made the days seem longer than they really were. The hospital stay itself was ludicrous, all for 16 stitches, a concussion, and bruised ribs. He'd known guys who had walked away from car accidents with worse injuries. The insurance was paying and the hospital was probably keen on that. What did he have to complain about, other than the food, and the smell, and the nurses. Perhaps

they had a reason to be rude, small town connections being as they are. And the investigation went on and on.

He did what he could to stay out of trouble – just enough of the truth, answering questions in ways that he hoped would increase his chances of graduating and getting off the hook. Finally a formal charge was brought on the day after he finally went home, a misdemeanor for intent to do bodily harm. In all that chaos, most people seemed to think that self-defense was the only explanation, the easier route for plausibility. Perhaps all those meaningless pleasantries and the amorphous small talk had worked in his favor after all. The other witnesses had been generous, and he was not altogether certain who to thank, though he was fairly certain that Mo had a hand in it. Gabe never had a chance to relay any message to him, though his friend had been just four doors down the hall. Gabe was not allowed to see him, by Mo's choice.

With a signed court order in hand, relegating him to 25 hours of community service every week through the summer (and coincidentally, ordering him to enroll in community college in the fall), he decided to stop by the hospital to try one more time. The smell of the hospital sent the memory of pain through his soft skull. The godforsaken headaches had subsided, but from time to time the pounding came around again. Gabe wished he knew the name of the guy who had so deftly beat his ass, someone who he could say for certain had a hand in this. It was not important for the investigation, but he wanted to know it now, to have something to say. As he stepped off the elevator, he had nothing ready, no further inclination than a simple hello.

Marty, at the foot of Mo's bed, saw him in the hall and stepped in front of the open door.

"He doesn't want to see you, Gabe." He said it perfunctorily.

Gabe peered around him and saw Mo, hazy eyed, looking towards the door with little recognition. Then, as best he could within the system of levers and pulleys and various hardware, he turned his head.

"Is he drugged up?"

"Yes, but he's been saying that he doesn't want to see you since day one."

"Why is he being medicated?"

"You must have heard that his injuries were pretty bad. He came out of surgery just a little while ago, two pins in his wrist and two above his ankle."

Gabe sighed. His head hurt, and he felt guilty for even noticing it. "Not even hello?"

"Cut him some slack, okay?" The even tone in his voice was sliding.

"I wouldn't mind getting a little myself," Gabe said.

"I'm just doing what he asked. I'm being the loyal friend. There ain't too many people anxious to see you. For good reasons, too."

Gabe had been doing his best not to think about what those were. The less he thought about it, the less he was weighed down by the guilt, and it seemed that much less real — easier to answer questions that way. Then it was not lying about what he had done, but a convenient ignorance of the truth. And then he could sidestep, turn the tables.

"You disappeared before I did, Marty."

“The crowd took me. I didn’t choose. You made a choice.” He pushed his glasses up on his forehead and rubbed his eyes.

The scene came back easily, wrapped in a dusty haze of memory and deceit. There was the taunt, the instant of rejection and disintegration. Just what had he rejected? What had he been so angry about? There was Kayleigh, her brightness and raw warmth, what he could only hope had been love. He couldn’t fool himself and say that he had done it for her. It was not heroic. It was a sole act, something he wished had remained in a vacuum, in his little own world. Wishes aside, there were many impacts, asteroid debris that had crashed all around as a result from his explosion. In every case, whether it was Mo and his pals, or Kayleigh, or the conflict that came to a head at the rally, he was still on the outside.

She hadn’t called him or returned his calls, so it was pretty clear where she stood on their relationship. With Mo, it looked just as grim. The last week of school, Gabe was friendless, so he only went to campus to take his exams. His goodbyes were limited to a couple instructors. It was not the way he wished to depart into the vastness of life after adolescence. The trip to the hospital was the last volley.

Marty stood in the door, waiting, as he often did, for things to happen around him. He shook his head. “Gabe,” he said. “You chose, now deal with it.”

Then he shut the door.

When Gabe got home, he couldn’t stop thinking about that first fight, right after having it out with Annabelle. Something had fallen off the dusty shelf, broken bits of

things on the floor. There was an imbalance. He rationalized, thought around it in circles. There was no one left to hash it out with. So he sat down and wrote a letter.

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Dear Kayleigh,

I don't know why it has taken me so long to say something to you. Writing at least is a start, right? Writing a letter is a somewhat dated way to go about it, but at this moment in time, it's all I've got. Maybe a letter is best, anyway. You can make a choice about what you want to read or when you want to read it, if at all.

I guess I want to try to explain some things. Even things that in themselves seem so unexplainable. I'm not sure what I'm going to say about that day, or the time that preceded it (still the best days of my life that I can remember). I set out to write this to figure things out, and maybe ask for forgiveness. I don't know what to say or what I should ask forgiveness for. And honestly, this is the best I could come up with, the farthest I've gotten thinking about all this. I still think about you often.

Before I get to that day, I should explain some things. That night at Wade's- I'll never forget how easy it was to talk to you, how you made me feel important. This is all clumsy, but it's true. I remember the sound of the frogs and the quiet and steady light from the moon. I probably remember it being more perfect than it actually was, but it did seem special, and I guess that's why we could talk. And when you told me that you didn't

know your background, I understood. In a lot of ways, even though I know mine, I might as well know nothing. My family has these dysfunctional stories that don't make any sense, and people have hardly ever been around, and the only thing about me I can associate with any of that background is my skin. So it shouldn't surprise me that everyone thinks I am something I'm not.

When things started getting crazy with the fights and these things I never expected (like you), I couldn't stop thinking and worrying about what I was supposed to do. Nothing ever seemed right. With you, though, I was less anxious about how to do things just the right way. At least, until this division got bigger and bigger to make people choose sides. I just couldn't make all the pieces fit.

Our afternoon alone together, that was really, I mean, I can't say enough about how much that meant. Things felt right for just a little while. I could stop worrying, until the questions came up again. They come around so often that I wonder why I don't have answers. I had not intended it to be a one-time and out situation. It really did mean a lot to me. Things don't always work out, I guess. I can't hold it against you that you took the part that was originally offered to me. I admire it, actually. Like Rowen, you're stronger than I am. I wish there had been a right and wrong decision – even now I wonder what I should have done differently. And I wonder if it would have made a difference.

Obviously I've had some time to think about it, between the hospital and my banishment. I shouldn't have felt betrayed, but I did. Of course it would have been nice for you to tell me, but it's not your fault that I went off the rails. Things weren't quite

right with me, and those things are still there in some way. My broken bones are all set and healed, but things aren't quite right. I shouldn't blather like this – it sounds fake. I owe you an explanation, or at least as much as I can offer, and I'll start by saying that I wish I had known you earlier, had more time to have you rub off on me. Maybe things would have been different then. But the truth is, I wasn't ready for the choices I had to make.

I'll stop beating around the bush. When I saw you take the stage that day, a lot of things bubbled to the surface. Sure, I was embittered and felt like you had done something you shouldn't have. I still feel like you may have put yourself at a good deal of risk by going up there, but you weren't hurt, so maybe I shouldn't complain. More than anything, the choice to act, for you to step up where I didn't have what it took do it, it's just painful. I've just felt stuck, like there are no options. It's like everyone knows something that I don't. Maybe they do – my skin is brown and I want to think that doesn't matter. People see me a certain way no matter what, and then I'm even more stuck, and I can't handle that. I would have taken on anyone in that moment. If MacDougal had gotten in my face, I would have taken some swings at him. I guess I was trying to prove something about myself. Anything really. Unfortunately, Rowen tried to stop me, and he took a hit he didn't deserve.

So there it is. These are the things I've done, the things I lied about, the things I got away with. The misdemeanor, the community service, it's all whitewash. Not the most elaborate cover-up, but certainly a convenient one. I wish that none of it had ever happened, though of course that is a ridiculous wish. It can't be undone. There will

always be certain things that Rowen will not remember. I took those parts of his life. I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry that I never called. I often wonder what would have happened if I just would have listened to you, and to Rowen, too. I'm sorry for that. I hope you don't feel like you could never speak to me again, though I guess I could understand that. But please accept my apology. That, and the truth, are about all I have to offer. Being with you gave me one thing to feel good about despite all the rest of this, and I would hope that it's not all said and done. I certainly have more to say (surprising, right?), but I want to be sure that the timing is good. Until then, I'm thinking of you.

Regards,

Gabe

II.

Community college was a rough-shod horse a few finishes away from running a title race. Everyone Gabe had been close to made the big leap, gone without a word to him. It was to be expected, and he saw it coming, accepting and saying nothing. He had drifted out of context, a car washed out to sea by a turbulent flood. College was not what he had hoped for.

Because there were fewer time restraints, one could easily let it run amok, only occasionally changing course when there was imminent danger. Gabe tried to run his experience there in much the same way, showing up only when he had to, for the most part, taking midterms, turning in projects, and cramming his way through finals. He never considered that it took some effort to make as little effort as possible and still get by. He had to schedule his time carefully to fully procrastinate. He had to budget extra at the end to get a decent grade. Nothing was enough of a motivation – not bright and talented instructors, not the subjects he used to take interest in, and certainly not the drinking. Sure, he looked forward to getting through things with time left to waste away. His addictive capacities only increased by his determination to dodge difficult decisions, avoiding anything challenging. None of those things were an issue when you back into graduation, barely pulling your weight, and you are ordered by the court to be a full time college student while living at home. Getting drunk is an attractive alternative to mandated productivity, to the rigor of growing into someone bigger and better than before. If he had taken the time to think it out, maybe he would have come to a different

conclusion than apathy. More likely, though, he would have decided to do nothing, knowing that some end, some solution, was two years down the road regardless of whether or not he gave it his all or simply got by.

Home was a haven of TV and videogames, the multifarious joys of the internet, and a brimming and unused liquor cabinet. The satellite dish – a revelation in the foothills, where homes were too far from the city grids to make cable cost-effective – was his new best friend. In the nine months after the school riot, Gabe had got along with those characters better than anyone else. The only person he reconnected with after the summer was Annabelle, who despite nearly winning the valedictorian race, settled for the pat economic choice before heading out to a university. She was in his composition class that first semester, where they said a few awkward hellos over a span of weeks before having a real conversation. They talked about the papers they were writing, compared notes and agreed to help each other out. Then, in the spring semester, she called him to meet for coffee.

Aside from the initial shock, Gabe perhaps already understood. He had been kind in turn, and brightened up to see that she had any interest in talking to him. They were friendly, and he was ready for any opportunity that could afford that.

Inside the warm coffeehouse in the center of town, the chatter unsettled him as he looked around the tables. She wasn't there yet, that he could see. He began to flush as he stood there, so he hurried to the counter. She came up behind him as he was looking over the menu.

“Were you here already? I couldn’t see you when I came in,” Gabe said. “I hope you weren’t waiting.”

“No, don’t worry, I just got here.”

Gabe thought about different ways to start – he could ask her what she usually ordered, comment on the cold and windy day, or just go straight into the stinking pit that was their high school fling. He was in no hurry to get to the that last topic, but he knew they would have to say something. Annabelle wouldn’t let him get off that easily – though she was the one who proposed that they meet.

“So how is your semester going?” She asked.

He decided to go with the safe answer, fairly certain that she knew how he approached the college experience. “It’s fine, you know, nothing much going on there.”

“Yeah. I’ve got enough to keep me busy. Are you working?”

“No, not right now.” The lie came naturally, and he didn’t feel like discussing collecting garbage and cleaning toilets. It went back to the soft spot, and he didn’t want to poke it, not just yet.

“I’m working at this law office part time, just as office help. It’s pretty good though, flexible.”

“Right on.” Fortunately, just as the conversation ran out of gas, Gabe had made it to the front of the line. He insisted that she order first, and that he would pay. She demurred and smiled deliberately.

At the table, things got even more awkward. It was hard to not look at her across from him, and to look away for too long would broadcast indifference. The coffee was too hot to drink right away. They both fondled the steaming mugs.

“I was surprised that you didn’t go away to school.” He said it as if silence was a mortal danger. It was clipped and crass. “I mean, you were practically the valedictorian.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes things just don’t work out as planned. A lot of things changed at the end of our senior year. I had been accepted, but financing the university straight out of the gate seemed less viable than doing the two year plan first.”

He nodded. “I had always planned on going to college, but not like this. I think the only reason I’m there now is because of a court order.”

“Really? That was a part of your sentence?”

“Yeah. And I’ll say that it feels like a severe punishment.”

“What exactly did you do, Gabe? What is the punishment for?”

“Nothing I really want to talk about. I’d rather talk about how big of a jackass I was when we were going out.” From low point to low point.

“Oh, you would?” She laughed.

Gabe felt more awake and present than he had in months. It wasn’t the coffee – that was still too hot to drink. There was a release in laughing with her. There was anxiety in the idea of rehashing any of those old feelings, but it felt much more alive than the present. As soon as he realized it, it became harder to laugh. He watched her face,

the trace of the smile that still remained, and managed to feel alright – this was a mature thing to do, like doing the dishes even when you want to go to bed.

“Seriously. I want to apologize.”

“That’s big of you. You did it back then, too, I guess. I appreciate it. Honestly though, I figured out that it’s not that you don’t want to be truthful, it’s just that sometimes you don’t have it in you.”

He tried not to think about her comment. “It was a really dumb move. It didn’t work out, anyway – I guess nothing really did. Like you said, a lot of things changed.”

She smiled to herself and paused long enough to make him worry. Then she said, “Like what? What changed?”

He desperately brought the cup to his lips. The stimulating effects didn’t make him feel sharp. He drank, and no answer came. He scalded his tongue and traced it to the burning in his insides. Digging through recent memories only afforded an anxious pause, an expectant stare. Surely things had changed, like the heavy sensation of getting up in the morning (often from hangover) and the last thoughts before going to sleep. The course had changed. The target had moved – or vanished, altogether. Life was just going through the motions. The punishment hadn’t challenged him to do anything different, but quite the opposite. Stagnation.

“Not much, I guess. Things just feel different. I don’t necessarily want everything to be the same as it was then, but, you know.”

There were many things that hadn’t changed. He still couldn’t even decide how he was going to phrase it or what the best example to illustrate this point would be. He

still didn't have the capacity to meet her expectations – he was almost sure of it – and he still would not make a good partner in a relationship. He still got crazy thinking about the two girls he got close to and the one he feared he had loved, still masturbated thinking about them. He'd rather smash the mug against his head than speak those words. So he sighed, shrugged, and settled back into his chair.

“Still don't say much, eh?”

“Never had much to say, I guess.”

“I don't believe that for one second, Gabriel.”

She sounded like his mom — clash and clang of fantasy with reality. He still wasn't quite off the hook. What else could he say?

“What else have you been up to?”

Annabelle began to talk about movies, which was a nice comfortable topic. He mostly listened and chimed in when the time was right and there was something really remarkable to say. Of course nothing he said was in fact, remarkable. At least, he couldn't remember a word of it later.

As he was walking her to her car, she paused on the grassy island strip in the middle of the parking lot. The breeze had mostly died down, but it jostled the trees now and again. She hugged him.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

“Of course.”

When she pulled back, she watched him carefully, and waited. She could read him, that he had something to say.

“Do you think we can be friends?” he asked.

“I’d like that. See you soon then?”

“I’d like that.”

UNCLEAR FOR TAKEOFF

He plodded through the week until he saw her again, surprising himself even that he had been looking forward to it so much. They met at the same coffee shop. Again, she hugged him. He hesitated to pull back for just a moment.

“Have you heard about Mo?”

“The last I heard about Mo,” Gabe said, “was that he was as happy as a pig in shit, going to school up at Chico.”

“Well, he had a little too much fun, I guess. Was on academic probation and then didn’t even make it half way through spring. He’s back in Oak Bend.”

It was no surprise. After Little D had his blowout, made infamous by tales of escapes, close calls, and one unfortunate capture, Mo rode the drunken cajoling bandwagon that creaked and swerved its way around the hills and houses in the foothills. Maybe the habit proved to be too much. Or maybe he got into another round of gunplay. The real question was what would he do now? Gabe was almost unconcerned. Unlike the twinge of jealousy when everyone departed for college, Gabe felt even a little proud. He had at least managed to stay out of trouble. Even Little D had outdone his older brother, finally escaping to the college life in San Francisco, the urban environs so unlike Oak Bend. It seemed like a rough fit, but he was a round peg jumping between square holes all his life. Not fitting in was his trademark, while Mo worked the crowd, tried to make a place or let the place make him. And he was the one that got sent back.

“Have you talked to him?” Gabe asked.

“No. I haven’t seen him. We’ve never called to chat just for fun.”

At least Mo would continue to make plans — he was probably cooking up another way out of Oak Bend at that moment. He had always stayed a step ahead, that day of the riots excepted. This particular trait he enforced with snide remarks and cutting comments, glowing proof that he didn’t have to prove himself, but rather, that you had to demonstrate worthiness. Superiority was his entitlement, and he never once took another position. This was true early on in their friendship. Mo had given Gabe a board game as a gift. When they played, and Mo inevitably won, he remarked afterwards, in a moment of shining benevolence, that he would give Gabe more time to practice before asking to play again.

Mo’s absence that year did nothing for the fondness lost. Bigger and better things, as Mo had said — things for him. Stuck in Oak Bend, watching and waiting, *bigger and better* was an axiom beyond Gabe. Even though it may have been Mo’s true perspective on their friendship, a suitable fit until a better one came along, they had been friends.

Annabelle claimed that the whispers going around suggested that Mo got the boot for an incident with drugs. Gabe wasn’t in any whispering circles, so he had to take her on her word. He didn’t put too much stock in those kinds of rumors, but there was some grain of truth: it must have been an egregious offense for him to be sent packing. They could speculate more, try to find a whisperer, but he didn’t feel like chasing. The bottom line was that somewhere, Mo had made some dumb moves. Even though the

rationalizations and arguments seemed to make sense, Gabe couldn't quite bring himself to not care.

"Are you going to call him?" she asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure he would want to talk to me."

"Never know until you try. Would you have thought a few months ago that you'd be out having coffee with me?"

"Fair enough. But this seems different. I tried a couple times before the summer, and he wasn't having it."

"After all of that, can you blame him?"

The answer to that was a resounding no, though it didn't help make sense of any of it. Annabelle tried to move the conversation on.

"I can't imagine what it would be like to come back home like that – his mom probably wishes he wasn't sent packing in disgrace. It's bad enough to be in this town as it is."

"No one would mistake it for paradise."

She probably didn't know he could see it, but she was working her tongue across the inside of her teeth. It made him smile. Then she paused, and he could tell a question was coming.

"So where are you headed? Where do you want to go?"

Gabe shrugged. "Don't know. Never been very far, and I try to never think very far."

“You should get out, you know. Even if it’s just for a few days. Get a fresh view.”

“Where would I go?”

“Even if you don’t have a specific place, you should try just going. Just go, just for the journey.” She waited. When he didn’t say anything, she cocked her head to the side crinkled her brow. “Do you really need me to tell you? You can’t even figure out how to go out and enjoy yourself?” She laughed. “Do you need me to tell you how to get home?”

He twisted, feeling perfectly vapid and innocuous, and laughed uneasily.

“Seriously. So you take your coffee black, I noticed. Why is that?”

“When I ordered it, that’s just the way it came.”

“But in fact, many people take it with cream or sugar.”

“It’s bitter no matter what. I never really thought about it, but I guess why go through all that trouble?”

“I know you’ve seen your share of trouble, but really, it isn’t quite trouble, is it?”

Gabe shrugged.

“I think the word you were looking for is effort.”

“I put effort into things. I made an effort to get here on time and have a nice conversation with you. I put effort into our class.” She waited and watched as he tried to come up with one more. Then he just stared into his coffee.

“Sometimes I think that you and I aren’t that different. I mean, obviously we are in a lot of ways, but I think we can be too picky about what we throw ourselves into.

Right now, school is it for me, a ticket out if nothing else. I could be doing lots of other things. But coming out for coffee with you has really been the first thing I've done away from campus and home."

"Me too." He was almost happy in the shared revelation.

"And see?" She brushed the spindly curls from her face, gently smiling. "See what good comes out of it?"

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The next day he got a call from the county sheriff's office. The investigator from the school fights, deputy Chuck Chamberlin, left a message on the home phone asking to get in touch.

"What do you think he wants?" his mom asked.

"Not sure. But I guess I'll have to call him back to find out." There was no hurry, though. He needed to think about it, prepare some answers, try to remember enough so that he knew what not to say. It was straining, and the more he contemplated and plotted, the more nervous he became. Then it was bound to show through when this conversation took place. He had been so thankful to leave it all behind him that he had let his guard down. By luck, he wasn't at home to take the initial call. Chuck could wait a day or two. The investigation was already finished, so there was nothing to fear. Nothing to fear.

The fear of a phone call to Mo was more easily recognizable. The number was the same as it had always been and he had it memorized. The conversation wouldn't be like old times. Too much had happened, the way that a fallen rock arch, like the ones you see on postcards, is never reconstructed. There is too much effort involved, and it just wouldn't seem right. His friendship with Mo had not been natural, though, more like a confluence of circumstance. Maybe they were lucky to have gotten away with it as they had — it was unimaginable to think that Wade could have moved there instead of Mo, way back in the sixth grade. Who could say how different things would be with that arrival, not a slow erosion of rock but a cataclysmic asteroid landing.

He could think of no excuses for not calling Mo on a rare Saturday off. As relaxing as it always was to have an unscheduled day, it always felt too long. An empty day was long and insignificant — the perfect time to call and catch up with an old friend. The idea was paralyzing. He found it much easier to call Annabelle, another inconceivable feat just weeks before. It didn't matter, though, she couldn't talk. Out with family. It was just as well — he felt her on the verge of giving a lecture about the right thing to do. It may have been completely inappropriate for two people trying to get to know one another again (or for the first time), but he wouldn't have pointed that out and the sparring that would have followed would have put him down without a fight.

Gabe used to do things with his family on Saturdays. A day to go out for a hike, a picnic at the beach, all of those charmingly painful family excursions were in the past. Those kinds of obligations are the ones that you miss or desire only when they are long gone. When he moved past it years ago, insisting instead on inane hang-outs with fading

friends, they moved on too. Dad had a weekly foursome at a local duffers club and mom used the day to do everything she couldn't do during the work week. Gabe was not inclined to follow her around Wal-mart or the linens department of the other two department stores in town. A long mass on Sunday really set back the rest of the day, and they were usually too lazy on Sundays to do much. Besides, Gabe worked on almost all of those days as well. The church of public service. He had not told Annabelle that his community service sentence had segued into a decent job. He got a four-dollar an hour surplus on minimum wage to clean toilets and empty garbage cans and perform other menial labor and maintenance at the two county parks around Oak Bend.

However long it felt, the day was not going to improve by itself. The liquor supply was dwindling and the rightful drinkers might notice. How bad could it be? Mo probably wasn't in any mood to be greeted with old conflicts, but was there ever a good time? No time like the present.

There was a long series of rings before Mo finally picked up. Gabe awkwardly identified himself.

"Hey. How's it going?" Mo was friendly in a tired way. It was like time had folded, like the months between this conversation and the last were removed, erased from the tape, spliced back together with a skip and drag in the audio track.

"No complaints just now. I heard you were back in town."

"Yeah, that's indisputable, at this point. I was going to give you a call, but I have just been getting settled, you know."

There was an apologetic note in his voice that Gabe had not expected from Mo.

“Cool, yeah, sure. You want to hang out, get some lunch or something?”

“Why don’t you just come on over. There’s a pizza in the freezer. Just like old times, huh?”

And for the most part, it was. The house hadn’t changed at all, the suburban Oak Bend timewarp still intact — new and old always appearing the same. The clutter of a transplanted country homestead, painted and carved wood and hand-sewn things, was like a wall-to-wall patchwork quilt. Mo managed to appear both at home among the things and an anachronism of trend print shirts and designer jeans. School loan money put to good use. He was slightly dimmed, as if he had run out of the bounciness that always made him the most energetic person in a room. There wasn’t anyone in the house to impress or attract, though Gabe was sure Mo would have a line on some young girls in the neighborhood, if he dared to ask. Instead, Gabe quietly followed the subdued shuffle-step, the biggest difference even though the face was the same.

They settled onto the couches with the TV on low and talked about how things had remained the same around town. The weather was cold, but not as cold as Chico, according to Mo. There hadn’t been much rain yet, and it looked like another drought year. Nevertheless, there was plenty of runoff collecting in the cesspool, the drainage trench they had themselves dug back in high school behind Gabe’s house. They talked about the other people they knew in haltingly honest and insulting tones — Mo was doing most of the talking, since Gabe had not kept in touch with many people, but he was happy to report seeing Annabelle. They skirted the topic of the last time they had seen

each other for so long that Gabe thought that they might successfully avoid it altogether. Eventually, it could not be ignored.

Mo took the pizza out of the oven. “One nice thing about being home is the variety of food available, and space to cook it.”

Gabe tried to push back at the inevitable. “I’m not sure that I would call that cooking, even for you.”

“You know what I mean.”

Gabe nodded as Mo brought him a steaming slice.

“There aren’t too many things,” Mo said, “that are good about being back home. I have to remind myself of them.”

In the intervening silence Gabe was not sure if Mo actually wanted to be asked about the return. He made one last attempt at aversion.

“Yeah, I haven’t been all that happy to be hanging around myself. I understand.” When Mo didn’t say anything, he finally asked. “So what happened? Why are you back?”

“Got popped in the dorms for alcohol last semester and got off with a stern warning and some service. Then a couple weeks ago I got busted for pills. I think my roommate was the snitch. Sniveling little fucker. I came home from a party one night and he just glared at me with righteous indignation. He just looked like trouble.”

“He probably said the same thing about you.”

There was no retort, no violent reflex. Mo was sallow and stern.

“You look like shit, man. Let’s go out, get some air,” Gabe said.

“I’m not really supposed to leave the house.” Mo replied. “I can’t believe I’m back. On top of that, I’m stuck. Going nowhere.”

“Well, you got farther from here than I did.” Gabe said.

In the corner, the grandfather clock chimed. Gabe wanted to leave but to have gone then would have been like abandoning a dog caught in a bear trap. Except this trap was of the dog’s making. Gabe resisted the urge to preach, but not by much – his own righteous indignation was welling up just being back in Mo’s presence. He always did let things go too far — even pushed them there willingly — but it can’t go on forever. The body and the rules governing it eventually throw down the gauntlet, and you take it up at your own risk. I guess drinking until he was comatose seemed too average, resorting to pills to tiptoe to the edge instead. Surviving one turn doesn’t mean that it won’t be the wall for you in the next. Gabe could have said some or all of these things, but he said none.

Mo sat silently, watching the clock tick, resigned to a pitiable state, maybe even wanting pity. Of course he would. Now starved for the attention he got from partying hard, no longer beefing up to slam the most beers and fuck the most girls, he had to work some kind of angle.

“Shit, you made your own bed too, man.” He said finally. “I think I will get some air.”

Mo got up and slid open the heavy glass door to the patio. He walked to the edge of the deck and sat. Gabe joined him.

The small lawn was feeble compared to the grassy expanse of the acreage they used to roam when they were still neighbors. Less than ten feet from the edge of the deck was a tall privacy fence that shielded their property from the other suburban settlers. A couple of tall potted plants, looking wind-beaten and thin, managed to break up the geometric confines.

“Not much of a view, is it?” Mo asked.

“Nothing much to see out there anyway.”

There was no view but houses. No squirrels to shoot at, no dogs barking in the street. Occasionally, you could hear the yap of some small house pup that snuck outside, but there were no bellowing brutes roaming about. There was a time, of course, when the city boundary was miles away, and the suburbs here looked much like the foothills, flanked by farm land and dusty chaparral. Gabe could picture it.

Mo just didn't care. “Whatever, man. Fuck the foothills. Fuck all of it. Ain't nothing good in this town.”

“Well, you have friends at least, right?” It was a bit presumptuous, but there was nothing else to say.

“The record there ain't too great either.”

“I guess not.”

“Want any more pizza?”

“Not really.”

“I guess I'll kill it, then.”

Gabe hesitated, waiting on the porch for something more to happen. The wind blew as always, but he thought something else might move, something to capture him the way that afternoons on the deck had at his own home. There was nothing to amaze him, not even a ubiquitous finch. Mo was not looking to be amazed or even remotely entertained by the things outside his house. Not only that, he seemed to forget that Gabe was there to see him. The conversation appeared to be over as Mo cleaned up the pizza mess and went back to the couch.

It was not the friendly reunion that Gabe had in mind, despite the amiable phone call. The only comfort on his return home was that he had not neglected his friend, if he could still call him that. He wasn't even sure that he wanted to, or if he wanted to keep company with such a rotten gaseous fart. It was a small comfort to see Mo, but he was learning to appreciate the finer bits.

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When he next saw Annabelle at the coffeehouse, he couldn't help but think about the awkwardness of it all. No matter how much he was able to forget himself and enjoy the time, there would always be a sense that their friendship was strange and unexpected. The only way their former relationship could have ended worse would have involved teenage pregnancy and a shotgun toting dad – neither being particularly rare in Oak Bend. He found himself rather convincing when he reasoned that they in fact were never meant to have any kind of contact, as evidenced by that long-ago blow up and the rather

violent events that followed hot on its heels. Then again, at that time, explosions of violence were not uncommon either. He wondered why he was doubting and trying to talk himself out of it. Perhaps it was that issue of truth, the slippery and slithering never-quite-clung-to truth. There were things she didn't know then, when she reappeared out of the blue, and there were things she didn't know now. He knew she hadn't talked to Mo, but people — Annabelle especially — seem to find out things that you least want them to find out.

There was no reason to think that the other shoe would hang at his convenience, perhaps never dropping. In fact, he was sure that it would be sometime soon. As far as he was concerned, he'd had the worst run of luck in history, his secrets practically printed in the paper, though no one would read it if they had made the front page. He had escaped that one disservice, but who is to say it wouldn't happen in the near future? Investigations were opening just like old wounds.

Gabe drank his coffee from thirst, his tongue like a dishrag.

After a moment of silence, in which the white noise of the coffee shop deadened the room, she finally asked, "Are you alright? You seem edgy."

An industrial grinder tore into hopper-fed beans and Gabe about leapt from his seat.

"Yeah, I guess I am."

"Is everything alright?"

"As alright as I would expect, I expect."

No smile. The look of concern didn't leave her face. "I got a call from a sheriff's deputy, an investigator. He asked about you."

"He did? Because we've been so tight, I guess."

Again she didn't react. He downed the remaining coffee and thought about getting more.

"Really, though, he was asking about you and about the rally incident at Harbor. I told him that I didn't know anything, really. I mean, I didn't see most of what happened because I was in the first group to get back to the classrooms. But he gave me a really bad feeling."

"Nothing to worry about. It's all done and gone."

"I feel like I missed something. What happened to you then?"

Gabe took the time to choose his words carefully. "Nothing I really want to talk about. I'm sure by now you know everything there is to know."

"You got hurt pretty badly."

"Yeah, but like I said, it's done with. I'm fine."

She could have pushed him more. In part, he was expecting it. Her tone was assertive, but it was something in her approach to everything, a vibe that he tried to keep tabs on. It was contrary to everything he considered normal – the driven ones had left to become a part of the fabric in a bigger and better place, beyond the horsecarts in the foothills and the creeks and wild dogs. And yet, here they were.

"If everything was really fine, why do you seem so lost? Like you've got nothing ahead of you?"

He relished a goodbye hug, the best thing he could take away from the evening.

Back at home, he was happy to see his parents on the couch and engrossed in a movie. He said goodnight, despite the early hour, and went down the hall, stepping into the spare room that was an office and a storage space that also had a bed pushed into a corner. Next to the desk was a stack of banker's boxes, tax documents and receipts and other files. His mom didn't know that he knew about the stash of news clippings. He needed the household income and other financial stats to enroll in school, and at the back in an unlabeled folder were several clippings from the Oak Bend Daily. The first was a brief, reductionist in form and content.

School Violence Escalates

Tensions between rival gangs have boiled over at Harbor high school, where three fights in the past week have produced serious injuries. Principal Bart MacDougal will be meeting with the school board on Tuesday to propose policy changes to address the recent outbursts. The display of flags other than the official US banner has been banned at the campus, but the problem has not yet been resolved. With the school year coming to a close, MacDougal needs only to keep the peace for another three weeks.

He pulled out the longest article in the file, which was a front-page feature plus a continued column from page four that had been stapled to the bottom. The headline read *No Gunshots, but 23 injured in Harbor Riot*. Gabe thought it was generous – he was

nearly certain that there were guns around, but no one had decided to use them. It was a brawl, not a shootout. It was a burning in his stomach, a fiery wound within.

Recent isolated incidents of violence at Harbor High School boiled over on Tuesday, creating a mob scene at the school's end of the year rally. Recent tension between ethnic groups on campus had turned ugly, with a dozen fights over the past month.

With all of the school assembled in the bleachers of the football field, those fistcuffs led to a riot when someone began throwing steel-banded garbage cans down onto the students seated in the bleachers.

At least ten students were injured by the thrown wastebins. Another thirteen were injured when they became involved in retaliation and hand-to-hand fighting. The fighting spread throughout the bleachers and spilled out onto the field itself, where school officials, faculty, and the baseball team were assembled for the presentation of awards.

The two community relations officers assigned to the campus had their hands full trying to quell the rioters until additional officers arrived at the scene nearly ten minutes after the fighting began. Teachers and other administrators did what they could to stop the violent outburst, but many feared for their personal safety. It was approximately twenty minutes before the situation was under police control, with 42 arrests on the scene. None of the suspected assailants have been identified because all are minors.

Sixteen students and three school employees were taken to the County Memorial Hospital. Two are listed in critical condition, one with a serious head trauma and the other with numerous internal injuries. Another ten were treated on the scene and released into police custody until statements could be obtained.

Principal Bart MacDougal was among those taken to County Memorial, though only as a precaution. Despite being stable and conscious, doctors were concerned about a head wound he had received in the fracas and kept him overnight for observation.

“My injuries are not serious, but I’m taking this event very seriously and will be responding in an appropriate manner,” MacDougal said. “Vice Principal Green and I will be taking a hard look at this and how it came about, and who is responsible. I imagine we will have a lot of help from the Sheriff’s officers, who should be commended for their brave and rapid response to the situation.”

Vanessa Garza, a senior who fled from the scene without injuries, said she feared for her life. “One of the garbage cans landed a few rows in front of me. People were bleeding and I was just so scared. It was like, crazy, and so I just ran.”

District Superintendant Sam Harrison said that the district will also be monitoring the investigation.

“We all have an interest in seeing that this is handled appropriately, and we will take steps to ensure that it doesn’t happen again. The safety of all our students is our top priority.”

The sheriff's department has no comment on the ongoing investigation. No findings are expected for several weeks, according to department spokesman Angelo Bruce.

The findings of the investigation determined that those taken into custody at the scene were responsible and that they would all be subject to misdemeanor charges because no single person could be identified as the cause in the two serious cases of injury. His mom had clipped some soft reporting that filled column space about the aftermath and the relative success of the summer workshop series. It was all there, all of the reported buzz. Things could have been reported in conversation with the twist of personal spin, but the facts, as printed, didn't seem like they would hurt him. If this is what Annabelle knew, he would be safe.

Back, Around, Out and Beyond: A Wayward Wandering

Returning home from class, he bumbled down the road at the slow pace required by the rain-driven ruts and holes. The shocks on his hand-me-down SUV were shot, but he had no reason to complain – the generosity of his favorite uncle, who made the trip down from Seattle just to deliver it.

Out in the open spaces in the foothills, it was relatively easy to spot things that were out of place. This was especially the case with strange cars, folks who were lost or rather industrious solicitors. He saw the gray sedan in his driveway, suspicious in its purposefully inconspicuous blandness, and knew it was not someone wanting to sell him his favorite magazine. Gabe just kept on driving, right by the house. The problem, then, was the dead end about three houses down. He could park and wait, looking rather conspicuous himself and attracting the curious neighbors, or he could drive by again and hope that the officer was not just then walking to his car or looking intently out the window.

It should be a short visit, or he at least hoped so. His clothes felt tight and he began to sweat despite the chilly day. Sitting tight was out of the question. He would pass at a reasonable speed but fast enough that perhaps it wouldn't be determinable that it was him, should he be seen. The car could be a giveaway, but he didn't know that for sure. As he passed by the white corral fence in front, he chanced a glance to the side. The car wasn't even there anymore. He had timed it perfectly, or at least he hoped. He looked down the road and checked his mirrors, but the gray sedan had made an exit.

He had not even shut the door when his mom began to talk.

"Why haven't you returned the call to the sheriff? You're lucky you just missed them. I'm a law-abiding citizen and my son is too. I got rid of them. But there's nothing I need to protect you from, right?"

"No mom."

"So why haven't you called them?"

“Just haven’t gotten around to it.”

“Well, get around to it. I don’t want those guys coming here looking for you all the time. We’re going to have to eat dinner late, now. If you didn’t do anything wrong, then you don’t have anything to worry about.”

With that, she went back to the thawed chicken on the counter and continued to crack and cut and separate the bones and legs and wings to get them ready to fry. He didn’t feel like prolonging the charade, so he left her to her cooking. The sounds were still just under the surface, remnants of the moments he felt compelled to keep to himself. To say anything more would flirt with the truth. He didn’t even want to do that.

The duffle bag was packed in minutes, leaving him to stare at the nearly blank walls where posters of Willie Mays and Marvel Comics superheroes once hung. He had taken down nearly everything, tossing the Say Hey Kid into a mail tube and casting the only personal photos – one from the dance with Annabelle and one with Kayleigh at Mike’s – into a bin that was now buried in his closet beneath stacks of books and carefully concealed empty bottles. Loose ends that would eventually have to be wrapped up.

There were some things in the garage he would need, so he made a list to make for a fast exit. The last thing to decide was where to go. He wasn’t escaping forever. He knew better, now. The appearance of a clean getaway was just a delay. Nine months in which he had acquiesced to rationalizations, the easiest manifestations of guilt and denial, just fought against the oncoming reality like sand castle walls in rising tide. This time he

needed to figure things out. Really understand how it was going to go down. Take some control in the situation. He wanted to go somewhere.

Annabelle wouldn't go along with his shenanigans. He couldn't see how she had it in her to even want to be friends with him, and to skip town would be out of the question, too Bonnie and Clyde for someone who has real plans. She was making preparations of her own, trying to get out on her terms. It would be tough – she is too tough, too smart for this foolish plan. Gabe couldn't stop himself, but he knew that she could. For just a moment, he relished her power over him. Kayleigh had been mesmerizing, a dream, but Annabelle was the flesh and blood, not an exception but the reality where all the rules applied. It would have been comforting if he were not a wanted man. No, Annabelle would not go with him.

Sure, he could be the lone wolf, a rebel in need of no one. A bottle for his friend. That was a long road with little promise – even in his state of semi-panic, he could see that a travel companion was necessary, one that could talk and take the wheel if needed. Loneliness and guilt and self-loathing are not the best travel companions.

It would have to be Mo. No doubt it would be the toughest sales pitch he had ever made — not that he made many. Giving his testimony to the sheriff's department was the only other humdinger, and, well, the jury was still out. They were just in recess for the past nine months. This performance would have to be much better, to get his altogether stolid and rightly embittered former best pal to pack his bags and go for a ride. Then again, what did Mo have to stick around for? He made no mention of a job, or plans at all. Summer was around the corner, and who knew if the school would re-open

the halls of academia to such a dedicated misfit come autumn. But he would want to know why, and Gabe would have to give him an answer.

There were other preparations. He wrote a note to his parents and left it on the table, nothing earth-shattering, but basically what would be expected: that he needed to get away for a few days and that he would be back after clearing his head. He collected the items on the list from the garage and was on his way, leaving mom and dad oblivious on the couch.

At Mo's house he found the door unlocked – unusual given the recent string of home-invasion robberies in the suburbs. There was music playing somewhere, the kind of unimaginative college rock that sounded like it was recorded in a garage. As soon as Gabe stepped inside the ominous memory leapt to mind of his last unannounced visit, which was met by loaded firearms. He didn't want to take any chances. He called out to ask if anyone was home, but there was no answer. He made his way upstairs to Mo's room, the source of the music. He knocked on the door, which was ajar. "Mo, it's me, Gabe."

The door swung open and the crunch of sloppy guitar and overloaded bass slapped him in the face. It was almost inconceivable that the room could be so still with so much noise careening around inside it. There were piles of clothes and loose shoes on the floor amassed around an open suitcase still vomiting its contents. He walked around to the far side of the bed, gentling shuffling and kicking things to the side. He found Mo lying in the open door to the hallway. The contents of his stomach had mostly made it into the toilet, with the exception of an aftershock of bile that was slowly changing the

color of the blue rug on the floor. He'd been there a while, sleeping off an overly ambitious attack on a bottle of vodka.

Gabe rolled him to his back to make sure he was breathing and that his heartbeat was regular. Good on both accounts, he leaned the dead weight against the wall with some effort. On the counter was the remainder of the Swedish spirits, about a shot at the bottom. The level had been marked well below the neck, by an anxious mother in advance of her addled child returning in shame, Gabe assumed. He guessed about 12 shots had gone missing, some of which was stinking up the room and eating a hole in the looped shag beneath his feet.

Gabe took a towel and wiped the goo from Mo's cheek and neck. A new shirt would have been good, but impossible to manage in that state. It was a stroke of luck, really — all he had to do was drag him to the car, no explanation needed, just yet. Of course, he would be in a bad place when he came to, but that would be dealt with when it could be dealt with. Gabe left him there and went down to open the garage. He pulled his car in and shut the large scrolling door behind him. He pulled a bottle of disinfectant from the shelf by the door and some paper towels, which was handy to clean up the undigested carnage in the bathroom. It would cut down the panic factor when Mom and Pop found him gone.

The vile duty was familiar and not as bad as he would have imagined. He had awoken in a similar state a couple times. The most disconcerting thing is that the smell lingers, often inside the nasal passages and in the chunky mucous that takes some effort to be rid of. The aftermath was like a coup d'état perpetrated by his own body, his senses

tortured by deprivation and exposure as prisoners of this seemingly intractable force. It was often a violent and distasteful recovery, but eventually order is eventually restored. Gabe often awoke with a fighting feeling, like he had made his way back from the brink. Maybe it was true. Regardless he had created a bullshit rationalization, a romantic spin on a self-inflicted injury and the struggle to survive in the face of his own idiocy. That reflection would at least give him a place to start a conversation with the boozed-up body that would be stinking up his car.

The backpack against the wall spilled some notebooks and pens when upended. Then he took some things from the suitcase that looked clean and stuffed them inside before slinging the straps over his shoulders. Grabbing Mo beneath his arms, he angled the warm heap out the door and dragged him out of the room. Approaching the stairs, he had to think. He could continue to drag Mo if he was careful, but he would have to keep the downhill momentum in check. Slowly but surely, he picked his way down the slope.

He made the halfway landing, taking one step at a time, the hard thump of hips and feet telling him how far he had come. After making the turn, he lost his balance and took the last five steps too quickly, falling backwards with his feet trapped beneath the fleshy backside of the drunken meatsack. His road companion. The back of the couch broke his fall, and the luck is that that was all that was broken. The collision of a lolling head with his shins sent a shock of unexpected pain almost as bad as from where he hit his head on the couch.

To get Mo into the passenger seat of the car, he had to lean him against the sill and go to the other side to pull him up and in. Gabe was sweating. He was not at all

prepared for Mo to wake, but he was surprised that Mo had not regained consciousness. After all the struggle, grunting and swearing, falling, and pulling awkwardly on limbs, he still dozed away. Gabe again checked his pulse and breathing, apparently unchanged. He backed the car out and retraced his steps, closing the garage and then locking the doorknob lock and slamming the front door shut. It was not real secure, but someone would be home shortly anyway.

With such surreptitious beginnings, such a mission, beginning under the cover of night, could go wrong. Ambiguity permeated everything. The car may or may not be able to take the miles. He chose to go North without any reason. The majority of the state lay below, the famed sandy beaches and even more arid deserts, but the mountains were calling. Heading north and to the interior, he still was not sure about the Sierras. Perhaps he would change his mind. The thought of Annabelle increased both the desire and the uncertainty of moving forward — of going anywhere. Whether or not they would ever have a relationship was among the many questions that he could not be rid of. She had the same appeal as the mountains — clear vision, a refreshing shock of crystalline air that dissipates the most cluttered quagmire in his mind. Whatever it was that he was looking for, maybe he would find it, or maybe he wouldn't. He would look and see. It would be a journey.

The road vanished behind them and out ahead of them too. There was no need to turn on the radio. He wanted to be beyond, beyond reach, beyond questions, at a distance to everything, even himself. Mo was there, so he would be grounded. Perhaps, in a less than gratifying way, though. Even if he did come undone, it would be better than being

lost in the foothills, lost in the scramble of everyday nonsense. He chose north, he chose up. He chose to take his passed out friend. He chose to slip by the authorities, in every way they appear. He chose speed over deliberateness. He chose anything but school and work. He chose evasion, despite the consequences, and despite it all, he felt good.

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The overarching canopy of gnarled tree trunks shrunk from the shoulder. The hills descended into the fringe of the Central Valley, tumbling down over miles, down to a dry bed that was inhospitable and bland during the day and a vast dark expanse at night. The world fell away into a featureless black void, taillights and nearby headlights the only things he could track and recognize. Far to the east, the Sierras hulked, shadowy even in the night in Gabe's mind. He was driven to find out what he did not yet know, like many other explorers and mountaineers. Of course, the land had already been explored, every square foot no doubt squashed at least once in history by the rubber sole of a boot. But it didn't matter, there were new spaces, things to discover for himself. Or for themselves, rather.

He reached over and grabbed Mo's wrist. The pulse was there, though it took him a minute to find it. The challenge of holding the limp weight like a string of sausages had not made it any easier to search out. He tossed it gently back and Mo stirred. He rolled to the side, but did not wake. Gabe watched him as carefully as he could without diverting too much attention from the road.

The signs, cities, and numbers were his only entertainment. Sometimes he watched other cars and tried to imagine where they were going or where they had come from. That green hatchback was from another of the ubiquitous small towns smattered across the state, the driver and passenger the kind of people who would depart from them. The unstable, the undecided, the seekers of outside things. In a white pickup truck, a leathery woman had one hand on the wheel while the other snapped a cigarette. No doubt she was escaping a marriage gone cold, or perhaps one that got too red hot. She wanted to see the world beyond meatloaf Mondays, and she wanted to learn Italian. They all took their direction, the road North, and watched the horizon.

HEADED OUT WEST

My family had been in the Carolinas since the colony days. Your aunt Sue was the first Fletcher born in California. You know Gabe, I was just a teenager myself when I left. Had driven the milk truck about since I could reach the pedals, and there was only so much money in that game. I set out with fifty dollars in my pocket, money I'd saved for a couple years delivering milk. The reasons I left were the same as many other people reasons. More opportunity, the California life, mild weather. I didn't want to work in the tobacco fields, breaking my back, and besides, the drivers who made the real dough all belonged to families in the business. I couldn't just elbow my way in. You know, those folks owned farms or companies. So I decided to bring my trade out here. It was a long trip. I couldn't just get on an airplane. I had to stop in Kansas when I run out of money. So I drove a corn truck for a while.

It was good money, and I could have stayed there. But there ain't nothing in Kansas but corn and farmers. So after a few months, I hit the road again, hitching and riding trains. Got all the way to Reno when I went broke again. I tried to gamble to raise the money, spending my last dollar at a blackjack table. Never did have much luck that way, though. So I drove an ice truck for a while, which seemed kind of dumb in the winter, with snow on the ground. But it was good money and I had enough to live on and a little to save. Then I caught a break. The war was really getting out of hand in Europe, and the Japanese were starting to look real mean. I heard that there was going to be army coast watch stations set up all along the Pacific, so I went down and signed myself up.

Things weren't so bad yet that I would have to get sent overseas, so that was my ticket for the last leg to the coast. Before I knew it, I was at Fort Ord, getting my training.

I had finally arrived on the coast. I didn't think it would be so cold. All the pictures and stories were about the California sun. But I guess it's not so bad after you learn to get used to it. Oak Bend wasn't very big back then, maybe ten thousand people. All the Jap-anese, all the ones in the fields and on the farms, were all getting rounded up down at the Armory building and put on trains. Then the town got even smaller. That was around the first time I ran into your grandfather.

I had just come off of my watch shift. I stopped at the market, you know, right there off of Main Street. It wasn't a supermarket back then, just a regular old market. I probably only needed some bread and bologna and a bottle of whiskey. That was a lot of what I ate back then. When I came out, your dad's dad was on his way in with a woman. I stopped right in front of the door, that's how much it struck me. I froze right where I was, and for a second I think they were shocked too. But they couldn't get by. And maybe I thought it was my duty, or what it was, I don't know. He must have known what I was thinking, because he had a very hardened look on his face.

"How come you weren't rounded up with the rest?" I asked.

And he said, "We're not Japanese."

My suspicion was fading, because their accent was so thick and it didn't seem Japanese, but I was real perplexed. "You sure look Japanese." And he just repeated again that they weren't. When I looked again at the woman, I was almost sure that she was. So I stepped to the side and let them pass. They both kept their heads down, like

they were guilty. Then, she turned her head to look at me, and looked away so quickly that I got more suspicious. So I stepped in after them. I called for them to wait, and they stopped, hardly turning around.

“I believe you,” I said to him. “You don’t sound like a Jap. But what about her? You marry one of their women?”

“We are Filipino. Please, let us go.”

They tried to walk away, but I wasn’t done talking yet. So I grabbed her by the arm.

“You sure do look like one of them to me.” I looked at her real close.

Then your grandfather took his hands from the cart. “She is my sister. Let her go.” Real slow, he grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her away. I let go of her arm. Then I noticed that everyone on the store was watching. I knew that they were feeling suspicious too. As they walked away, everyone kept on looking. But I didn’t feel like bothering with it anymore, and I just wanted to get home and have my lunch.

The next time I saw him was after your parents had announced that they were getting married. I didn’t place him for a long time. But I could tell when he shook my hand that he remembered me. He was as nice as nice ever was, and it kind of disarmed me. The woman who was introduced as your grandmother was not the same woman I had seen him with before. It was months later, when I saw a Japanese couple at the grocery store, that I remembered where I had seen him. Of course, I wanted to apologize, but I couldn’t. He was just so nice and I couldn’t do anything about it. To this day we’ve never spoken about it. And now he isn’t around town anymore.

AROUND THE HORN

The Foothills were long gone when Gabe became too tired to drive. He pulled into a hotel, the Wagon Wheel Inn, and fished into his backpack for a bottle of water. Mo stirred in the neon haze of a red cowboy boot and a spoke wheel and woke up.

“What the fuck?”

“Hey man.”

“Gabe, what the fuck? Where are we?”

He twisted and turned in the seat, trying to get his bearings.

“Relax, man. We’re outside Sacramento.”

“What the fuck are we doing outside Sacramento?”

“Taking a little trip. I thought you’d enjoy some time in the mountains, you know, get away from shitstain central.”

Mo was crimson in the light and seemed to be getting redder by the second. His eyes were dark obsidian pits in the fiery glow. “Why? What the Fuck, Gabe? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Nothing, man. Just relax. I grabbed some clothes for you, I’ve got food and drinks, we’re good to go.”

“This is insane. You kidnapped me. I just wanted to pass out in peace. I wasn’t your friend yesterday and I sure as shit am not your road-trip buddy today. What is this all about?”

It was a relevant question, but not one for which Gabe had prepared an answer. He sidestepped. “I cleaned up your vomit and got rid of what was left of that vodka. Didn’t leave a trace – I even cleaned your toilet so no one would be the wiser. You think you’d be better off if I had left you there laying in your own puke?”

“I’m going to have to call my parents. They’ll flip their shit.”

“Yeah, but not as badly as if I would have left you there.”

“You couldn’t have just put me in bed?”

“Trust me, this is going to be just what we need.” Gabe didn’t sound wholly convinced himself.

“So this is some reconciliation. We’re going to hash things out and make it all better?”

“I don’t want to hash anything out. I just thought we could take a trip, be pals.”

“Where the fuck are we going, anyway?”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re getting away.”

That was a better answer than the truth – he didn’t have any sort of plan, not yet. He was just driving the way that made sense. It would be like a coin toss. Anywhere but Oak Bend.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t call the cops. Or in the least, have my parents come pick me up.”

“First of all, it’s after midnight and it’ll take them hours to get here. Second, it’s like you always said – there’s bigger and better things. Let’s go find out where they are.”

“Right.”

“Come on, it’s going to be great, like old times. Maybe this way, we can patch things up.”

“Right. Of course. Just patch things up. The first thing I would have thought of would have been kidnapping, too.”

Gabe ignored him. “Who doesn’t want to go on a road trip and see the mountains? It’s almost spring, the air is clear. Just get away. Bigger and better, right?”

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Mo was still as obstinate as ever. His silence was acceptance that could be relied upon for the time being.

The small motel was well lit, which only served to highlight the dingy features and dusty corners. The lobby door had a handle secured with duct tape and it didn’t close all the way, letting in the icy valley draft. Gabe rang the bell on the scratched faux wood countertop and waited patiently. It seemed better than the second option: a ‘take a number’ sign with a numbered tag attached to the pin of a hand grenade. The poster on the closed office door, a print of an oil painting of a camouflaged hunter dragging a bleeding carcass by rope through a snowy landscape, was not a subtle cautionary tale. He looked at Mo and stepped away from the grenade, ringing the bell again.

A gruff-looking woman in pajamas and a robe came from behind the macabre poster, which despite being marked “office” appeared to lead to a small bedroom. They

conducted their business curtly, but only after she eyed the two young men for a time with either suspicious or only semi-conscious eyes. It could have been both.

Gabe paid in full and said nothing to Mo. The woman handed over a key as she went to the register. "Room 319. Do you see it on the map there?"

Gabe examined the beaten and stained paper taped at the corners on the counter. The hotel only had two floors. "Uh, 319?"

"No, I said 219. It's just around the corner about 15 rooms down."

"Right, got it. Thanks."

Gabe returned to the car for the duffle bag. "I just had this really creepy image in my head of that woman with a bottle of bourbon in the pocket of her robe, a shotgun in one hand and the rope tied to my bleeding carcass in the other. Being loaded into a rusty pickup or something."

Mo trailed behind, and after yawning asked, "Does it scare you that she knows where we're sleeping?"

They got to the room and examined the laminate furniture and faded green carpet. The colors and textures reminded him of fake plants, which there also happened to be an arrangement of on the small 4-drawer dresser. There was only one bed.

"I totally asked her for a double room. She must have been too busy figuring out how to kill us in our sleep."

"Whatever. Give me your phone so I can call home."

"I don't have a phone. Use yours."

"Okay, give it to me."

“I don’t have it.”

“You grabbed fucking underwear and socks but you didn’t grab my phone?”

“How was I supposed to know. Wouldn’t it be in your pocket?”

“On the charger. Must be. You don’t have a phone? What are you, in the dark ages or some shit?”

“We probably shouldn’t use the hotel phone. We’ll find a payphone in the morning.”

“Right. Good plan, captain. Find a pay phone.”

“Look, I’ll have some ideas in the morning. I think this could be a really great trip.”

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“Whatever. Let’s just go to sleep.” Mo rolled onto the bed.

He’d been sleeping for hours in the car in his own dreamy detox slumber. Head pounding, he really did want to sleep and forget for just a little while this mess he was in. The long afternoon that he had wanted to just bomb out of was turning into a nightmare, and Gabe, some idiotic friend, or once-friend, was fueling the fire. But it would never have happened if he hadn’t gone for the day-killers. He tossed, wishing he had enough to put him down again.

Mo was wide awake. “It’s ironic, really, that I would take sleeping pills and get drunk to pass out. And now, I really, really just want to fucking sleep, and I can’t.”

“Well, one of us has to drive tomorrow, so at least one of us should sleep.”

“Right. Go nuts.” Then he added, “You seem to be pretty good at that.”

It really did go back to that infamous birthday bash at Little D’s. A wild time, but only the beginning. Nabbing a snappy screw with a girl he can’t really remember. That was about the highlight. He wondered what Gabe would say if he asked him about that night. It wasn’t important, in the scheme of things. There was a long walk, a wacko on a unicycle, shooting dogs, drinking and dancing and sex, there was an overeager deputy, and at least one or two other images floating in the ether. What did it matter what Gabe remembered. It wasn’t important. There was only one question he wanted to ask about another time, when their supposed friendship would have really mattered: How could he turn his back on a best friend in real need of help?

Mo wanted to get out. Leave the snoring lunatic kidnapper. Gabe could drive home by himself tomorrow.

He turned the knob slowly, and did the same to close the door quietly behind him. In the hallway he waited for Gabe to stir behind him, but there was no noise. He walked carefully down the stairs and looked around – the impish manager was nowhere he could see, which was almost as bad as having to look at her again.

The Wagon Wheel was still on the fringe of the city. There were lights in the distance, but a good couple miles off. There was a run-down and rusted up gas station across the street, dark, dead, and vacant. It was just like the old Beacon Hill station out on Black Creek Road, the same cross-hatched soapy windows with missing panes and the pumps with rolling counters that looked like ancient robots. Everything was the color of

iron and dirt except where white paint held on around the edges. Just like the one they drove by in the beat up old caddy even before Mo got his license.

They only took the Caddy like that once – his grandma was in the hospital for an operation, something that that no one wanted to talk about because it would be indelicate. It wouldn't have mattered if they had - he wouldn't have remembered anyway. She died a couple years later. Stiff and stodgy, uninterested in her family, lost in a world of romance novels and powder scents. Maybe she tried, but it was hard to tell if she had. Maybe she sent a couple birthday cards, but not recent enough to be remembered. She made Oak Bend seem like the biggest little town there was, a drive across its length and out to the foothills too long to be bothered for a visit to her daughter and grandson.

She didn't have much to give, obviously, but the keys were there to take. Miles of backcountry roads beckoned, winnowing their way out of Oak Bend to destinations beyond. It took a lot of convincing to get Gabe in the passenger seat, and once he was there he wouldn't shut up about the trouble they'd be in. It was tiring trying to talk him down, get him to enjoy himself. One of many similar conversations they'd had - Gabe was always uptight like that. He had to be told to shut the fuck up, in the end. But he was getting the high – it was all over his face. Even the most reserved prick out there can't help but grin when you're taking a V-8 out on some twisty road in the mountains.

Mo slowed to pass the Beacon Point station, swerving towards the driveway at the last second to send a rooster tail of gravel from the rear wheels. The tires howled as they took back to the asphalt, and in minutes they were at the peak, a deserted dirt parking lot

that was only visited after dark by teenagers out to screw around and fog up the windows on the bone wagon. Mo spun the wheel and goosed it, tearing the dirt dangerously close to the unguarded edge of the lot, which tumbled down some distance before reaching a gentler slope. Then he stopped to let the dust settle. It wasn't that close – he was in complete control of the pushrod beast. No question.

Gabe let out a breath he seemed to have held the whole time. “Nothing like a brush with death to liven things up.”

Mo was already in another place, beyond the tree-lined dirt patch.

“You know, they're playing down granny's condition. No big thing, they said. ‘Course, that's what everyone said when pops went in. And he didn't come back out. Fucker laid up right there, and just vanished.”

The dust settled and the view of the foothills and the flat of the valley below came into focus. Below, dirt driveways traced their way around the uneven topography, veins leading to capillaries that varied in size from an Airstream trailer to five bedroom ranch houses.

“How old is she?”

“I don't know. Seventy-five, at least.”

“She's had a good long run.”

“Yeah. All her friends have already met their end. She goes after younger and younger ones every day.”

“Hopefully she's ready. It's a morbid thing, but better than being lonely, I guess.”

“She’s lived here all her life. My mom has been here all her life. That in itself sounds a bit lonely.”

The wind picked up, the harbinger of a cold night. The open window let in dust and leaves and just a hint of the ocean, a reminder that it was not far off. Gabe shifted in his seat.

“They say your friends choose you, not the other way around. You think it’s true?” Gabe asked.

“Guess it’s made easier around here. It’s a small town.”

Gabe pounced, smiling. “I mean, look at me. Why else would I be friends with you?” He barely got it out before he started laughing.

“Harsh, man. Some kinda friend, giving me shit right now. You want to walk home?”

The laughter fell off quickly. Leaves careened off the car and over the hillside as night came on. Gabe was quiet, trying to respect the moment. Mo could only take so much silence.

“How old do you think you’ll be when you kick off?”

Gabe tipped his head from side to side, wavering. “Maybe seventy-five. Though my dad says Filipinos can get pretty up there. His parents are almost ninety and still going. So maybe seventy-seven. What do you think?”

“That sounds good. Not too old. They say the good die young, so I could go any minute. Better than making an exit without friends.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that.”

It had been the first driving experience for both – Gabe took the Caddy back down the mountain to the Beacon Hill station. It was actually the last time they had driven anywhere, just the two of them. Neither ever got their own car and the limits on their licenses didn't allow for passengers anyway. Camped out in some rat hole, under the watchful eyes of some crazy as bat-shit night lady, he found himself outside of Sacramento, feeling as if he had never wanted a drink or a hit more in his life. It would take some of the bitter cold out of the night. Perhaps Gabe had been turned on to something and become even more drug addled than Mo himself had ever been. It was ridiculous, really, to think that such a straight-shooter would be into the psychotropic. Gabe was the only person he had ever known who made sure to keep all the bills facing the same way in his wallet.

What was more ridiculous – that he had yet to call the cops to his rescue, or that he would actually get back in the car tomorrow and go along with the road trip? The former would complicate things more than he was sure he could imagine, with formal charges, filings, statements, and testimony, all of which was less than exciting. The opportunity to get a more exacting revenge lay in the latter option. Going along for the ride might present unexpected opportunities. Gabe was in an unknown state, a place where he conceived of this as a good idea. Waiting could make for a big payoff — and besides, he had already called the Sheriff's department earlier in the week with an anonymous tip on the school riot investigation. Even though it had been over and done with, he had apparently called the right man, a deputy interested in the facts of the case.

That was enough of that – this ride would be a different scenario altogether. First, he would have to get through the night.

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The Central Valley was teeming with thunderheads that reached upwards for miles. The air carried a charge, an impending collision of a moist, vanilla spring and a balmy, distemperate summer.

Gabe had tried to engage a conversation, lighten the atmosphere. It was a lightness that would never come, as far as Mo was concerned. Talk of the weather had no effect. The long silences gave him time to plan, time to maximize the potential of this excursion. Even if they were to turn around and go home, it would not be wasted. He would make sure.

The first move was to put Gabe in a tight spot, see him squirm. In the driver's seat, Gabe was calling the shots, even when he asked what burger joint would be best for lunch. Mo gave little input. He would have to get Gabe into a corner.

“So you've been talking to Annabelle?” Mo asked.

“Yeah.” Gabe was clearly relieved to see his friend ready to engage. “We've had coffee a few times. It's been nice.”

“What about Kayleigh?”

“No I haven't seen her recently.”

“When did you see her last?”

“I dunno. Graduation, I guess.”

Mo let the memories of the dramatic collapse rise to the curdling surface. He, of course, had missed the cap and gown formalities while his bones were setting and he was recovering from surgery. He knew from other accounts that Gabe had not really been spoken to or spoken of, and he had no invitations to the post-graduation party scene. He also knew that Gabe was not around for the winter break reunion gatherings when everyone came home from college – which was the last time Mo had seen Kayleigh. She had on her best socialite game-face, but she had a shadow quality that made her a step too slow in conversation, the last one to laugh at a joke. She wasn't any more inebriated than anyone else there, and she wasn't high as far as he could recall. But she was different. She asked Mo about Gabe but he promptly and dismissed it with a snicker.

“I saw her just before Christmas. She asked about you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I had nothing to say, really, because I hadn't seen you.” He kept on with other questions he already knew the answers to. “Have you tried to get in touch with her?”

“No.”

“Too awkward?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Would you even want to? I mean, it's a surprise that Annabelle will still talk to you. Do you think she would?”

“It was all fucked up. The whole damn thing. But you never can tell, I guess.”

Mo knew that the answer was behind the words. Where Gabe’s face had merely been expressionless before, a cold concentration, he was drawn and clearly raw at the end of the questions. It was a good start.

“Have you heard from anyone else from back in the day?”

“Nah. You can imagine how many people want to talk to me.”

“Yeah, I can. You still think people are angry?”

“What do you think?” Gabe glared for at his passenger for as long as he reasonably could without endangering them both.

The sound of the engine filled the cab and the road interjected blips and bumps. Mo wasn’t particularly thrilled to be going through these motions, trying to coax Gabe and push him to the edge. Nevertheless, he felt himself inching closer to what he wanted. It was a part of his favorite game. It was almost as good as the chase, almost as good as getting what he wanted from a girl. What that was varied – part of the fun – but this time he felt himself working a different challenge, an information game. Coaxing from an unwilling companion an uncomfortable truth.

“You should talk to her. You know, try and get things going. It worked with Annabelle, anyway. I wouldn’t recommend a kidnapping for that one, either.”

Gabe kept quiet.

“You never know. She did ask about you. What got her so pissed off, anyway?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Not with Mo, and not anyone else. He had never even mustered to courage to send the letter to Kayleigh.

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They continued north. Gabe had just been going, running on his minimal knowledge of this part of the state and working mostly on intuition. Sacramento passed in a blur, unremarkable except for the capitol dome. It's hard to be impressed with state politics. The local discourse was even worse – he recalled the vitriol after the rally incident. The more conservative groups thought that if the school could afford to keep more officers on campus, that everything would be fine. It was a shock and awe approach that called for the arrest of everyone possibly linked to any kind of violence on campus. Others didn't even think the ban on flags was a good idea, rather that people needed to be grouped and represented as they chose and the only way to confront the conflict was to address it head on, flags flying. Both sides yelled at the public meetings. Both sides threatened their opposition and broke car windows. Who knows whether the most damage was done by the raucous students in question or one of their egotistical parents. And then there was the venom directed at Gabe.

For the most part, it was a stone-cold silent ostracizing. He could feel the icy looks and even tried to confront some of them with a smile or a simple hello. But it didn't change anything. There were boos at graduation for many of the people involved, mostly drowned out by the yelling and hooting of proud and forgiving families, but it was undeniably there. He also received notes, folded pieces of paper left on his desk before he arrived in class or anonymous emails. There was a lot of hate.

You fucking shitbrained smartass spic stuck in his head because of the way the words rolled together with the slippery sounds. Not all of the insults were that direct, nor racial. He liked to think it was because some people knew that he was, in fact, not Latino or Chicano, but more likely it was the gauche nature of racial slurs. To call him a homosexual was much more trendy. Maybe it was just more fun to tell someone *I'll cut off your dick and feed it to you*. In either case, those remarks stuck out in his mind.

Mo had been one of the few people to commit Gabe's ethnic heritage to memory. It wasn't mentioned often, but when it was, at least Mo got it right. Even after the apparent success of the video project, Gabe had been reduced. Skin color: brown. No further thought needed.

What Gabe would have said to represent himself otherwise? That was even less clear. He could tell people that he was half Filipino, but why say that? Which half? Was it half his cells? Half his brain? Was it possible to not be wholly racialized? It stood to reason that someone could be many things, all at once. Complex. But complexity breeds questions. French, German, English, Filipino. The panoply is not received as intricate — simplification is much preferred.

Skin color: brown.

The apparent surprise and the moment of confusion when the curtain was raised had not bothered him for a long time. The shock of the truth was a function of the lack of those measurable qualities, the inverse relationship between the meaning of the physical markers and the truth.

The more he tried to reason things out, the less it made sense. People believe what they want to, but he couldn't help wanting to make his real life truer, more rooted. Nevertheless, it seemed simpler to be so basic in determinations, to just accept and let the currents of the world move around him without resistance.

They had passed through Sacramento and continued northeast, towards the mountains. Towards the serene hillsides and the unquestionable perfection of life in the open country, and finally, they were headed towards answers. Towards Strawberry, to the house of his grandparents.

He looked over to Mo, who was completely absorbed in the vast blankness in the scenery that was flowing by all around them. "Ever been to Strawberry?"

"What the hell is in Strawberry? Wait – is it strawberries?" Mo asked.

"No. My grandparents live there."

"Oh. Time for a family reunion?"

"You could say that."

"These are your mom's parents?"

Gabe nodded. It would be hard for him to explain that he had not conceived of the family homestead as their ultimate destination, so he said nothing else. It was going to be awkward enough, since Mo's sensitivities were not well-tuned to cultural difference. He could only hope that fish heads were not on the menu for the day.

The narrow highway slowed to forty-five miles per hour. It was an unnecessary precaution for the town outpost, a small general store that did its best business in the winter — the ski and snowboard crowd stopped en route to Tahoe to make use of the way

station for snacks and the toilet. The least prepared among them paid a premium for snow chains, and the same suckers usually paid the extra forty dollars for installation. As the more intrepid summertime drivers passed by in better weather and conditions, the only items to sell were cold drinks, which even in the highest temperatures were not a necessity on the same level. Gabe and Mo turned and watched the lonely square building and its empty parking lot pass. The only things moving were the two fans on the outsized air conditioning units.

The highway snaked through the trees and into the shade of the high canopy. Cabin-style homes with steeply raked rooftops appeared here and there between the massive redwood trunks and the dense and thin lodge-pole pines. Gabe picked a driveway that looked about right, just where he thought the boundary of the town might be nearing. It looked slightly different than he could remember, the undergrowth piling against the sides of the dirt tire ruts and the encroaching high-grass line making everything smaller. It could be that he himself saw the place larger at the last visit over ten years ago. There was no mistaking the mailbox, though, a boxy steel receptacle painted army green atop a stack of halved coconut shells staked on a post.

The house was much like the others they had passed, though it was not visible from the highway. The wood siding looked fresh. The natural finish was weatherized to maintain that classic cabin look. The roof was corrugated, and like the siding, it looked to have been cared for recently. The green sloping cant was just bright enough to stand out amongst the trees. The porch was screened in, but the door was left open, as if

someone was expected. As Gabe shut off the engine, his grandfather slowly made his way down the three steps and walked out to meet him.

He smiled. "Gabriel, it's good to see you." No questions asked.

Old Jacob walked like his joints were bound by string, but he still managed to make himself appear solid. When he stepped up to shake his grandson's hand, his grip was firm, his stance unwavering. His smile may not have been too healthy, but everything else was. The nearest dentist probably wasn't near enough.

"Good to see you, grandpa. I hope you don't mind us stopping by."

"Not at all. You're always welcome. Come in, your grandma is making lunch."

"You remember my friend Mo? You must have met."

"I think so, I think so. Hello." They shook hands and Mo was visibly taken back by the force of Jacob's much-maligned hands. From the days when he worked as a field hand, broken joints had healed incorrectly and grew more crooked with age. That didn't stop him from wringing your hand like a dishrag.

"Come in, come in." Jacob said, gesturing up the steps. His voice was so familiar yet so out of place.

Inside, everything was just where he remembered it. A long plastic runner on the carpet at the entryway, clear and hard like an office chair mat, led the way. The piano was on the left in the living room, topped with bowling trophies from their days in Oak Bend. The cast plastic and metallic paint must have been thirty years old, though they were polished like new. Behind the upright were three high-backed conversation chairs and two end tables precariously supporting large potted plants. Though probably used

occasionally, a sewing table with a mounted modern machine rested in the corner.

Grandma was humming away in the kitchen, just beyond a false wall that was cut in a floral pattern like a decorative screen.

“Hello,” she called out. “Company?”

“Yes dear, Gabriel and his friend Mo.”

“So good to see you.” She came out wiping her hands on a towel that was draped over her shoulder. She hugged them both, but kissed only Gabe on the cheek. Her perfume was as heady as the mountain musk.

“Sit down. Let me make you sandwiches. You like ham?”

She busied herself setting sodas out from the fridge before getting to work with the bread and meat. When they sat at the table, Gabe and Mo waited for the most obvious question. They looked at each other in awkward anticipation, but neither of the hosts asked why it was that they had come all this way. It was as natural as if they had simply driven from down the street. Mo raised his eyebrows.

The senior Jacob cleared his throat. “How about this weather? We could have lunch on the porch if it were about ten degrees warmer. That is just life, I guess.”

Inside, Gabe told them all about going to community college, ate everything his grandmother offered – sandwich, chips, cookies, candies, popsicles, sodas, a never ending parade of items from the cabinets and fridge – and let Mo talk about whatever he wanted. That wasn’t much. For the most part he commented on the cabin and made himself insignificant. After all, his only interest was in Gabe, finding ways to loosen him up, and the sentimental reunion could only help. When the conversation and all the life

had been drawn out of the room by silence, he almost lost control of his tongue, making a crack about how he thought they would talk for forever. But then Jacob was just getting fired up.

“How’s life in Oak Bend?”

“Nothing much ever changes,” Gabe replied.

“Not even the weather,” Mo added. “Always partly cloudy and windy.”

“It changes,” Jacob replied. “You’re just too young. You can’t see it until you’re old like me. But in the big picture, you’re probably right. Things don’t change much. I remember the army training just like yesterday. It was hard to imagine such a place after living in the Philippines, where you either live in a very small town or a huge city like Manila. On the coast and around Oak Bend, it wasn’t like that at all. Small cities, each a little different. But there were only a few of us Filipinos around. Sure, there were others in Watsonville, even though it hadn’t been that long since lynchings and fire raids had happened there. The community was everywhere but where we were. When I say we, I mean my sister and me. I petitioned to bring her here, since my parents had passed away two years before I joined the army. We got a lot of looks everywhere we went, especially Carmelita. That was her name.

“I know you never met her. But her face shape and the light color of her skin, and the fact that she never spoke much, made her very suspicious. They had just finished rounding up the Japanese when she arrived. We lived in a tiny house just outside of the base, and she kept to the house as much as she could. But everyone has to go out sometime, eh ma? You stay inside too much.

“Anyway, she couldn’t go out without me, otherwise it would have been even worse. But we managed for a long while. Then it got to be too much, for your auntie Carmelita. She moved back home, even though it would be hard for her to get by. She thought it would be better there. But she never made it back. Caught a fever on the boat and it was a week before they made it to shore. God bless her soul, she didn’t make it.

“It may not have been that good for her, anyway. Your grandma and I, God has been good to us in our old age. But in Oak Bend, at times everything was a challenge. Your parents almost couldn’t get married. When they dated, they would be out walking down the street and people would call out. Your dad, though, Junior’s not easily shaken. And it’s a good thing, because who could tell what would have happened. You wouldn’t even be here. Things may not be quite like that now, but you know, when we left, you could still feel it. But that is just life. Times were always hard, until we made our way here. Even still, the deer eat our beans and the raccoons scatter our garbage. We put bricks on the lids and bungee cords and they still get in. Oh boy, what can you do. Life is like that sometimes. You just do the best that you can.”

Gabe waited to be sure that Jacob had nothing else to add, no more additions to the family history that would shake Gabe even more.

“Thank you for lunch and the snacks.”

“Sure, sure.” Grandma and grandpa made light of it in unison. Jacob spoke up.

“You boys need a place to stay tonight?”

Gabe didn’t wait for Mo to weigh in. “That would be great, if there’s room. I brought sleeping bags, so we can sleep on the floor, even.”

“No, no, that won’t be a problem. There is a guest bed. One of you can sleep on the floor if you like.”

Gabe stepped through the door to the guest room and found that it had a slightly different smell than the rest of the house. The pine furniture, even though it was finished and darkened by a patina of age, still kept some of the coniferous odor. A faint hint of potpourri was either in the linens or tucked away in old sachets at the back of unopened drawers. There were old photos in frames on top of the dresser, resting atop a delicate white lace runner. The photos were full of people he didn’t recognize, friends from another era and a community that Jacob and Gloria had left behind years ago. One photo was of Junior and his sister when they were in grade school, their missing teeth not quite hidden behind conservative smiles. He remembered the photo, the vines of tarnished silver surrounding it. He remembered the first time he came into this room.

It had been a long trip for someone so young, patient for the first couple hours but then slowly digressing into a needy kid requiring songs and games and constant conversation. Neither of his sisters came along – they had found friends to stay with for the weekend. Grandpa welcomed him in with a handshake and guided him back to the guest room to drop off his things. His parents were outside looking at the home and chatting with grandma about her garden. He was alone with his grandfather for the first time that he could recall. Perhaps Jacob had said something to make him comfortable or to be inviting, but Gabe didn’t understand through the thick accent and the new set of false teeth. He watched the old man carefully, trying to read his face and draw out some meaning, but Jacob’s face gave nothing but an unfamiliar smile. Gabe had never known

a misunderstanding to be so uncomfortable, so distancing. He desperately didn't want to be alone in the room with him, panicking and shifting from foot to foot.

“Come on, come on, let's go see the garden with your mommy and daddy.” Jacob did his best to usher him from the room, but Gabe stood there, waiting for his grandfather to exit first. Then he took a step back, bumping the dresser and knocking over one of the framed photos. When he righted it nervously, he turned to see Jacob's back as he made his way into the hall and back outside. Gabe was relieved to find out that there was only one guest room, and that his parents would be sleeping in there with him.

He had only visited two other times since then, and neither time did he go into the guest room, opting instead to sleep on the couch in the living room beneath a wood panel relief carving of several women wearing large gourd hats working in a rice paddy. Grandpa left the stove light on to keep him from being afraid, but the room was full of shadows.

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Gabe sat down at the kitchen table with pen and paper. Mo watched a baseball game with Grandpa. Grandma was doing the dishes that she refused to let anyone else touch. Gabe sat and listened to her hum while she worked, considering the best way to start the letter.

Dear Annabelle,

I know that when you asked me about the day of the fights that you weren't trying to pry. I appreciate that you care, but I just, well, I haven't trusted anyone with much. I made the mistake of not being up front with you before, and I'm trying to avoid that same mistake again. I guess whether or not you have to tell the deputy anything is up to you. Hopefully, you'll still want to see me after you read this.

There's no easy way to start. I didn't exactly have things together then, as you know. So when the fighting broke out, I was just as confused and disoriented as everyone else. Mo and I made a break for the end of the bleachers and the path back to campus. We didn't make it out of the bleachers before we were both struck by one of the big garbage cans. I got the worst of it and was bleeding from the back of my head. Since Mo is taller, he took most of the force in his shoulder and neck, and managed not to get cut. By the time we made the crest of the bleacher bowl, there were several skirmishes right there. Someone tried to come at us again, and in trying to face this guy, I lost track of Mo.

There was a lot of yelling, by both students and the administrators. Some had taken action immediately, while other staff had tried to command the unruly group through the microphone. I think MacDougal was talking into the damn thing for a good minute or so before someone either cut the power or pulled him off. His voice was easy to distinguish amongst the others, his baritone amplified across the field, then things suddenly went quiet. That was about the time that this guy came at me with another garbage can.

I dodged the throw pretty easily. It landed behind me, and that was when I heard him shouting my name. I scanned the chaos until I saw Mo. The first punch was almost directly to the back of his head, and the second was a complete sucker punch, right across his cheek. He fell backwards, and disappeared into a mob that was only partly interested in him. The next time I saw him, he was in a hospital bed with pins in his leg and arm.

I still don't really understand how it happened as quickly as it did. I don't remember thinking that I should just forget about Mo. I just ran at that cowboy and swung wildly. I guess I must have landed a couple lucky shots. He stumbled backwards and I toppled him over. I hit him a couple times on the ground, but then Rowen tried to stop me. He had every right to – I'd gone out of my mind. I had blood on my hands, probably a mixture of that guy's and my own. But it didn't register in my head that it was Rowen. I didn't really look. I only had my eyes on him long enough to know where my fist was going.

I saw him falling backwards awkwardly, limp with his eyes out of whack. But I couldn't catch him. It would have been impossible to make up that distance before he hit his head on the bottom edge of the steel garbage can. I'm sure when they found him they assumed that it had been thrown at him – that must be it, otherwise I wouldn't have gotten off with some misdemeanor charge. I wanted to go help him, but before I could, someone else had thrown punches my way, most of them connecting with various parts of my head. Next thing I know, Wade is pulling me out across the field towards the parking lot. He's got his hands under my arms, and he's dragging my feet. I can barely see

because my eyes were swelling, but I saw him clear enough as he left me out of harm's way and went back to the fray.

So that's how things got twisted. Wade, of all people, pulled me out so I didn't end up with injuries as bad as Mo's. Of course, it's clear who deserved to get the brunt of it. I'm not sure what is worse – what I let happen to Mo or what I did to Rowen. In both cases, I know I need to do something, but I'm not yet sure what. You've helped me get things on track with Mo, but I think I may have already botched that too. You'll know soon enough. I'm sorry for disappearing on you. I hope that when I get back, you won't go back to ignoring me. I have made many mistakes recently, and I count our bad break as one of them. Maybe you can give me another shot. It's something I hope you'll think about, anyway. I'll stop rambling now. I hope to talk to you soon.

Regards,

Gabe

He signed it quickly and sealed it before he could change his mind. On the way back to the bedroom, he could hear Mo fall in behind him. When he got to his backpack, he tried to stash the letter quickly, deep enough that it wouldn't be found by accident.

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Mo awoke before Gabe. Seeing that his kidnapper still snoozing, he had a couple options — look through the bag now, or wait for a more opportune time. He chose the latter, not knowing how deeply Gabe slept. Instead, he crashed onto the bed with all the violent force he could muster, smiling at Gabe as if it were their first slumber party.

“I bet this room’s full of memories, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“How long has it been since you’ve been here?”

“Years. Too long.”

“Your grandparents are great. Different than I remember my grandparents, but the same in some ways too. They didn’t have bags of shrimp paste in the freezer, though.”

Gabe didn’t respond.

“I smell breakfast. Shall we?”

Grandma cooked everything she could think of for the first meal of the day, as she seemed to do for every meal. Little was said as they ate, the sounds of the mountains streaming in from the open screen door and filling in for the still-slumbering conversation. Gabe got up to clear his dishes, and Mo followed him, tracing his steps back to the bedroom again.

“Last night your grandpa was telling me about a trail that runs by the house. Want to get some air?”

“Are you unarmed?” There was suspicion in his voice, even though he knew the answer to that question.

“Unless you packed it for me. Though I’d much rather have my phone.” Mo added some darkness, some culpability, to keep Gabe off balance.

“Let me clean up a little and then we can head out,” Gabe said.

It was as good a time as any to try and make some hay. As soon as Gabe shut the bathroom door, Mo unzipped the duffle bag and began checking the pockets to see what had been stashed the night before. At the very bottom of the bag, lying flat and inconspicuous, were two envelopes. One was wrinkled and battered like it had been shuffled around inside for a long to, and it had Kayleigh’s name on it. The other was crisp and new, addressed to Annabelle. It was a good find, some good evidence (of something) that he could lift for later use. He had no bag of his own, so he folded them and shoved them into his back pocket. He had just concealed them when Gabe came back.

“Let’s go see some nature.”

From the porch, it didn’t look like a very steep ascent, but it was enough to get them winded. The trail wound amongst the trees until a large granite outcropping rose improbably high above the town. Mo kept quiet, leading the way as the sun sank lower and disappeared over valley wall behind them. After about a half of a mile, they passed the rounded base of the tall escarpment. Mo stopped and tried to crane his neck to see the top. A greater than vertical incline up the craggy face of the cliff kept him from seeing the top.

He turned to Gabe. “It’s called Lover’s Leap, according to your grandpa. Some couple – a forbidden love, I assume – sealed their fates together by taking the fast way down the mountain.”

“Think it’s true?”

“I don’t know. It could be. Sounds pretty stupid, if you ask me.”

Gabe looked around at the small clearing that spread from the base of the granite cliff. The ground was uneven. Chunks of granite rustled underfoot, and some pieces that may have fallen from somewhere up high filled spaces between trees. Many were so big that they could not possibly be moved. Mo found a low stone and sat on it. Immediately he began to rub his knee, continuously kneading with both hands.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve hiked anywhere. That just made your grandpa insist even more that we come up here.”

Gabe sat up and joined the conversation. “What did you tell him?”

“Relax. Nothing about you. I just said that I haven’t been getting out much.”

Gabe looked off into the trees again, evasive.

“Five pins, Gabe. Three in my leg, two in my elbow. The fucking things still hurt. I did physical therapy for months – just finished up not too long ago.” He watched and waited for a reaction.

“What could I have done?”

Mo stood and came at him. “Something. Anything. You were in such a goddamn hurry to run to the aide of some dumb broad, but not for your best friend. I was your best friend, and you just didn’t care.”

“That’s not true. I did.”

“Then why? You just bitched out on me?”

Gabe got to his feet and stood his ground. “See that’s exactly it. That’s the shit I was sick of. I was tired of being called a coward and a bitch.”

“So what? You went out to prove yourself by throwing me under the bus?”

“No. Obviously I wasn’t thinking that. Things happened, faster than I could think them out.”

“Was it some brown pride thing, then? You wanted to beat down a cowboy to be more ethnic? You wanted to feel more Filipino?”

“You don’t fucking know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh really? How’s that?”

Mo was zeroing in. Patient and poised like a predator, he could taste it, a raw juicy steak about to be served up to him.

Gabe wandered away a few steps. “It’s getting dark. We should head back.”

He made his way back down the trail the way they had come.

Mo fell in a few steps behind. “I guess if you don’t want to talk, that’s alright. I thought we could patch things up, like you said.” He couldn’t get that sweet truth, couldn’t even get an apology. Perhaps he hadn’t wanted one anyways. It would have been like melted ice cream. The time had passed and he had no appetite for it. “If you don’t want to talk to me, that’s okay. I told that deputy that you might want to share a few things with him.”

Gabe kept walking, the words and the trees and things unseen waiting, rising into the falling twilight.

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When they got back to the cabin, each accepted a glass of iced tea from grandma and sat on the porch. Gabe snuck a glance at Mo, trying to read things in the silence. He looked almost contented, tired from the hike but satisfied with the day's work.

The anger of the betrayal had passed into rapid contemplation, the vetting of scenarios. It was revenge, after all, and he almost understood it. The call would have seemed perfectly natural if he was someone who had much desire for revenge, but he was fairly certain that he never would have thought to do it.

Honesty was a slippery slope that Gabe felt himself sliding down, whether he wanted to or not. Behind all the rationalizations, plots and escapist fantasies, he knew that when he got home, he would see the deputy and give the whole story. Talking to Rowen would be much more difficult and it remained an open question. What more could be said, other than sorry? What else could he say that would matter? There was a force compelling him, driving him to reach for that moment of action, step forward and do something. To tell the truth felt just as reckless as anything had ever been, maybe even more so. There would be consequences.

Once he got that momentum moving forward, it was hard to slow the urge to exorcise everything. Maybe he should have trusted Kayleigh more, but what would he

have told her? She had tried and with that effort found some success, after the initial disaster. Before that, it was as if they had shared it all. The afternoon had whiled away in rapture and distracted attempts at studying, and dropped off so quickly he almost ran out the door. He could have called, and he could have gone to her in the summer. He could have told her the story of his parents and grandparents. They could have shared the disconnectedness and loss that seemed to define them. They were intimates with very little knowledge, and there was nothing to prevent the rift from growing as each post-love second passed, hewn by one moment in which the disassociation was so strong that neither could bear to be so intertwined.

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When dinner was ready, they gathered around the table and mumbled a prayer in thanks for the food, the Last Supper portrait above the table a constant reminder of the model meal. It was an awkward remembrance of religious days past, another fixture that had faded away. That side of his family was a staunchly religious as anything else, and he never understood why. Programmed that way, he supposed. It was practice, repetition. What had the rewards been, he wondered. It was too ridiculous a question to approach them with, partly because he could already guess what some of the answers might be, but also partly because it just didn't seem right to flat out ask a question like that. There were other things on his mind.

He had been weaving stories together, grandpa Norm's memory with what he had found out about his great aunt. The untold elements, the gaps where strong and deep emotions must have meant something, glared out at him. What one controls or doesn't control is clear in the retelling – Jacob had probably left out much of his own feelings at the time – or were there really none?

He had finished his second lumpia when he decided to ask. "I didn't tell you before, but grandpa Norm had told me that story about seeing you and auntie Carmelita. His version, at least. They are very similar, of course. He didn't say what had happened to her, but I've been wondering since you told me – would you do anything differently?"

"It's easiest to regret inaction. You can never tell what would have been. That was life at the time. I was happy to go to the grocery store and buy food, and leave. It wasn't always easy, but that is what we did to get by. When she left, I never saw her again. God was ready for her."

"You're not angry?"

"Oh, no, not now. It's been so long. I was angry then, but it wasn't going to change anything." He ran his hand through his thin silver hair. "If I had been angry all this time, boy oh boy, I would have gone to heaven a long time ago."

"How did you let it go?"

"It's not just letting go. I will always remember it. But I had to be honest with myself. Did I do the best I could? I think so. Could I have done more, done it differently? Yes, but I accept that what didn't happen would not necessarily have been better. This is my life. We do the best we can with what we're given."

Mo looked at Gabe, then at Jacob, who still seemed to be finishing his thought. Forks scraped plates and Grandma hummed to herself as she got the dessert from the fridge. No one said anything. Outside the kitchen window, dusk was coming on fast as the sun dipped below the rim of the rocky valley wall. The birds didn't seem to care, still flitting about to finish off their day. Soon, the bats would be out, taking their place as hunters and gatherers. There was a natural transition — as some settled in to a quiet night in the forest, others awoke, using the dark to their advantage. Crickets and cicadas began their percussive melodies, reminders that in the mountains, no one is ever alone in the dark.

Sitting at the table, the world was in focus. The presence of everything outside bled into the moment, which had wound its way backward, slipping into the past. The shadows in the carvings on the wall were in twilight relief, and the hand-painted lampshade, a garden scene with winding gourd vines and bean bushes, kept him grounded despite erstwhile longings and the pull of memories. The colors converged and the night expanded, and a deep, long exhale fixed his mind in the present. He looked to Jacob.

“I think you should go home tomorrow,” his grandpa said. “But not before you get dessert, your grandma’s apple crisp. And maybe you guys could drive up to Stateline, see the sights. Maybe catch a movie.”

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The valley got smaller in the dark. The car was like a meteor, a massive force moving through space with unknown force. Gabe and Mo had not said much since dinner, and it would be another thirty minutes before they reached the city of Stateline. As far as either could tell, they were going there simply because Jacob had told them to.

“Your grandparents are great,” Mo said. It was an apparently genuine comment. “It must be good to feel connected to them.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’ve never felt all that connected, though. Everything always seems so far away. It certainly would have been nicer to have them around more, earlier.”

“Do you really think it is possible for us to live our lives without regrets?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like it.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Things could have been a lot different in the past year.”

Gabe looked over to see if there was an expression he couldn’t hear, some anger hiding behind the comment. The dark profile in the seat next to him was impossible to read.

“I’m sorry for what happened. There’s no way to explain what happened. But I am sorry.”

“Yeah. I know. I believe you.” Mo said.

“I just went crazy. You weren’t the only one who paid for it. I was working over that cowboy when someone pulled my shoulder. I spun and decked him. Just once, but really hard. It was Rowen. He didn’t take it well. He fell backwards, out cold, his head

landing on the steel garbage can that had been thrown at me. What happened to him was my fault, too. Then someone else punched me, and before I could defend myself, I went down for the count.”

“Yeah, right. A couple broken ribs and a concussion. You had it real bad.”

The conversation was over. Gabe couldn't help but add something, try again. “I do wish things had been different.”

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Mo woke up the next morning feeling refreshed and calm. The disquiet of the night was gone. The day was bright, even though there was no direct sunlight, and the birds were at it again, early, to Gabe's dismay. They emerged from the guest room to the smell of bacon, wishing as they took their seats at the table that they weren't still so full from dinner the night before.

Each thanked their hosts for the hospitality and got back on the road early. Gabe got a long hug from his grandma and a lengthy handshake from his grandpa, the kind that seemed to convey that next time it would be a more familial visit.

They would try and make it a one day shot back to Oak Bend. He could trust Mo to take the wheel, their destination agreed upon, which should have been helpful — but Mo was so erratic and aggressive on the freeways that the jerking often woke Gabe. He also had this unsettling half-smile that was just noticeable.

“What’re you so happy about? Going home to face your parents? Finally selling me out after all this time?”

Mo’s face slacked in a purposeful way. He considered it. “I’m just tired of not being able to say anything. You’ve just been dragging me around. Yeah, I’m happy to go home. I think I’ve done most of the damage that can be done on the home front. This excursion is nothing in comparison.”

Gabe couldn’t take the dismissive tone. He felt like arguing, but he asked no more questions. He was done with questions. A long ways off on the horizon, the fringes of civilization loomed. There was a haze in the air and currents of heat rising from the blacktop.

“What are you going to tell them?” Mo asked.

“The cops? The whole story, I guess.”

“What do you think they are going to say?”

“I don’t know. I just want to make sure that Rowen hears it from me first.”

“That won’t be easy. Isn’t he in Davis?”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t we stop by there? It’s not too far out of the way.”

Gabe reacted instinctively, protectively. “No.”

“Come on, wouldn’t it be better with a wingman?”

There was no question about that. He didn’t want to face him at all, and alone would just be that much more intense. Besides, Mo knew the score, and he had managed not to kill Gabe. Rowen didn’t seem like the violent type, but you never know what

could happen. Gabe had taken something that could never be retrieved. Then again, Mo could be interested in seeing him squirm, might be trying to ensure that he doesn't change the story or sell it short. Mo could just make it worse – he had a knack for that.

It would be good to clean the slate, keep moving in the right direction. Of course, his direction seemed like more of a crash than a purposeful path, but there was something to it. The sense of doom was a constant but ignorable factor, like the wind blowing on a beach. With that, he could see no way around it – his stated goal. He would not say no or find an alternative.

“How are we going to find him?”

“I partied with him when he first moved here. I know where he lives.”

Gabe sighed. Mo knew enough to make things look bad if he didn't do the right thing. The thing to do had never been so clear before, and knowing that, he couldn't bring himself to think of any other alternatives – besides jumping from the car and ending the whole circus then and there.

They dropped into the city like a rollercoaster set into motion, irreversible. Sacramento was not one of his favorite cities. They trailed through residential areas and blocks of low business offices, passing auto repair shops and buildings that looked like they might fall over. Soon, everything he could think about ran together into a streaking and continuous torrent that ran by him, a stone in the river. Before he could was himself again, they pulled into a parking lot scattered with carports around the edges. They were outside the city again. Blocky apartments stood out in an odd custard yellow, stacked in between trees and giving an overly dense and false sense of nature. The mountains had

been more inviting and more challenging at the same time, a scale constantly shifting in the conflict between the known and the unknown. Gabe had found the balance there, and it steadied him.

Mo knocked on a door on the ground level and looked to Gabe, shrugging.

Rowen opened the door, disheveled and looking like he needed a tall glass of water. When he looked at Gabe there was a pause. Not a usual greeting for a surprise passing-through of an old friend. Still, he smiled, and showed his genuine surprise.

“Holy shit, man. Guys, come in!” He shook their hands vigorously and clapped Gabe on the back as he came through the door. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Passing through,” Mo said. “On a little field trip.”

“Great, awesome. Let me get you guys a drink.” Rowen disappeared around the corner to what appeared to be the kitchen. On the wall next to the pantry cupboard was a full size poster of Bob Marley walking with a guitar across his back. The mismatched sofas and the chipped coffee table gave the place a feel of quintessential bachelor pad without the blatantly dirty side. That’s why Gabe was so surprised to hear a woman’s voice.

“Who is here?”

She walked out of the dark hallway and into the living room and stopped in her tracks. Gabe stopped breathing when he recognized Kayleigh.

Rowen emerged from the kitchen. “Look, it’s an Oak Bend reunion.” He set the glasses on the table and went to get a couple more. “Want something to drink, babe?”

Kayleigh came out of her daze. “Yeah, just some water.”

She took a seat and adjusted the short and tank top that passed for pajamas. She looked at no one and nothing in particular. It was too much to try and speak without Rowen's energy and innocence in the room. He came back smiling and unconcerned by the silence. He sat next to Kayleigh and absently put his hand on her leg.

"So you're passing through, but where from? Or to?"

"We just had a visit with my grandparents. They're up in Strawberry, close to Tahoe. We were on our way back and Mo brought up a time he had stopped by here. He thought it would be fun to come by, unannounced. And here we are."

"Have you guys eaten lunch yet?"

"No."

"Well, there's a great little diner not too far from here. We could go get some food and catch up. I don't have anything going on until later tonight."

"Sounds good," Mo said.

The couple got up to get changed into more appropriate lunch attire. Gabe glared at Mo and kept his voice to an emphatic whisper despite his anger.

"What the fuck? Did you know about this?"

Mo shrugged ingenuously.

"You motherfucker. You set me up. You knew they were together."

"Yeah, but I didn't know she was going to be here."

"That's just a nice little bonus, huh?"

Kayleigh came back out. "Rowen wanted to take a shower real quick, so he'll be just a few minutes."

She cleared the empty glasses from the coffee table. She came back in, cautiously, and leaned against the wall next to the picture of the iconic Rastafarian. She sighed and pulled her hair back with one hand. “Gabe, can I talk to you for a minute?”

They walked outside and took a seat on a long bench beside some awkwardly sagging rose bushes that probably didn’t get enough sun beneath the dense pine canopy and the shadow of the angular rooflines. He took a deep breath, ignoring the knots in his stomach, and avoided looking at her.

“Long time, huh?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’ve been getting that a lot lately.”

“I’m sorry if that was awkward for you back there. I mean, I could tell by the look on your face.”

“Was it bad?”

She raised her shoulders in indifference. Her hair fell in front of her face as she looked down. For a moment she appeared just as serene and knowing as when they had made love. He could see a hint of green in her eyes that shocked the gray of his memory and the desire to lock it in his own gaze endlessly. Some things hurt more than imaginable without actually hurting at all.

“You shouldn’t apologize,” Gabe said. “I have that less fortunate Midas touch that just turns everything to shit.”

She laughed and he tried to smile with her. The time that had passed grew larger by the second, knowing that she had found his replacement. It made sense — they were like-minded and passionate people — but the logic of it hardly seemed important. The

sensation of losing something before he could really grasp it was a slow bore clearing through his head, revealing emptiness and unknowing. Yet it had once felt so close. She had once felt so close, closer than anyone had ever been. He steadied himself. It was just a warm-up for the act that would follow.

“I have so many questions, but none of them sound right in my head.”

Gabe nodded. “If I could answer them all, I would. But I have a feeling I wouldn’t know how to answer most of them. I will tell you that I’m really sorry about everything that happened. About not calling, and I guess I’m sorry about not recognizing good advice when I get it.” The rest of what he had to say hit a block. He was working it, pulling it, pounding it, trying to find the right mold for the words that would make sense and get the job done without side effects.

She quietly accepted the apologies. He could tell from her expression as she sat back against the bench that she was forgiving. “I bet you’re wondering what happened with me and Rowen.”

“I wasn’t going to ask, if I could avoid it.”

“I just want to say that I waited a long time for you to call. I saw Rowen at a party before summer was over and things just happened. After my first semester, I decided I didn’t like Santa Barbara very much, so I moved up here. Things have been going good.”

“Good. Excellent.” He felt like an agent of chaos, his purpose only to disturb things, introduce the ugly truth of the past to make himself feel better.

“Anyway, I don’t want things to be any more awkward than they already are.”

Awkward was a good way to obfuscate all of the other things he was feeling. With that, he let it go.

At lunch, they talked about school at length, and Mo was surprisingly candid, bragging at times about his raucous few months of meteoric, full-burn partying. It was striking how he could at once lament the outcome and promote his ability to hold liquor and perform various tricks while completely intoxicated. Memories turned back to the birthday party for Little D, circling around the most potentially uncomfortable details like the hillside hovel where Gabe first felt Kayleigh's body against his. Gabe didn't say much – nearly everything he thought of during the course of lunch would fall under that awkward category, his memories so raw and aggravating even to him, that he couldn't long enough to subject anyone else to them.

Returning to the apartment, Gabe knew he was out of time. How he could best present an opportunity to even say the things he had not yet completely formulated stumped him. In the end, he just sat Rowen on the bench and presented the facts in a pragmatic way. Clearly apologizing for hitting him, for the resulting injury and memory loss. He talked about the cowboy and how serious things had become in the days after the fights. Rowen remained calm through the whole thing and said nothing until Gabe was finished.

Finally, he looked at Gabe. "What an incredibly stupid thing to do. I realize it was an impulse, and probably not on purpose, but damn."

"I'm really sorry."

"I guess that's why you disappeared."

“Pretty much. I couldn’t tell the truth to anyone. It was a lie by omission, and I kept it up by lying to myself.”

“So here’s the thing. I remember how things were leading up to all that. I don’t blame you for having been angry. You pulled some stupid shit, but I’m not into revenge. So I’m going to shake your hand, tell you that we are not enemies, and say thanks. Now I know what really happened, I know that you can be one cold bastard when you’re in a certain mood, and I know that you’re at least an honest guy.”

It would be a more delicate conversation with Annabelle, whom he hoped he would not have to drive away from without an idea of when he would see her again. As daunting as it sounded, he could already breathe more deeply. Desire and compassion welled in him again. The lofty energy that had been absent, the force that made it so hard to be cautious, would take him back to her to lay it all down.

Gabe behind the wheel, they once again headed home. Mo was anxious to be back in the passenger seat, merely a rider once again.

“That went well, I guess?” Mo asked.

“Yeah. No fistfight. Maybe you’re sorry to hear that.”

“No, I’m not. I’m glad things worked out.”

“Well, you seem to have them all worked out already.”

“No, not really. I’m just helping you come clean. That’s what you want, right?”

With the letters still in his pocket, Mo was assured that if Gabe decided to stray from the mission to make amends, the story would nevertheless come out.

Gabe shook his head and smiled. “I’m glad to see that after all this, we can still pretend to be friends.”

Oak Bend was patiently waiting in the fog, the foothills sitting quietly and waiting for change to arrive. The ruts in the road felt stiffer, the family plot narrower, but everything was in proper disarray. The place he had always called home tucked itself lower into the hill and watched.