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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jesse W. Goolsby entitled “The Other Half of California.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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Carolyn R. Hodges, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
The Other Half of California

A Thesis Presented for
the Master of Arts Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jesse W. Goolsby
May 2008
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Sarah: your patience and love have made this collection possible.

To Ella: thank you for sleeping through the night.

To Allen, Michael, and Marilyn: I appreciate your time, efforts, and positive attitudes in helping me improve as a writer and poet.
ABSTRACT

In _The Other Half of California_, a Creative Writing Graduate Thesis for the University of Tennessee, Jesse W. Goolsby has collected a series of short stories that examines how different modes of power influence relationships. He has chosen Northern California as his setting, and the geography of the region plays a key role as the characters endeavor to find their way in, out, and through the landscape, often colliding with each other along the way.
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INTRODUCTION

Bachelor of Science in English

A friend came to dinner the other night and told a story about her two sisters. One of the sisters had tied bed sheets together, and climbed down the side of the home in order to meet up at the park with her shady boyfriend. She was picked up by the cops for a variety of reasons, and the police called her parents. It was early in the morning, and before going to pick the sister up at the station, her mother went upstairs to let the other daughter know that they would be gone for awhile. When the mom opened the door, she found her other daughter’s bed empty with sheets hanging out the window.

Two things came to my mind as we laughed through the description of events. One, my infant daughter could possibly have locks on her windows in the future; two, that this would make a great short story. The second reaction I’ve had countless times over the duration of my graduate work. It’s reinforced the notion that we are our stories. They are how people know us, and, maybe more importantly, how we know ourselves. For what are memories, but creative retellings of history?
The Other Half of California is filled with altered slices of my experience. I have allowed my emotional and physical memories to invade the lives of my characters. The geneses of the six stories vary considerably, but they all originated from real events, many of them in Northern California.

When I look at these stories side by side I see a common subject: the intermixing of power and relationship. This fusion is highlighted through the elements of gender, violence, sex, secrets, and, interestingly, geography. I anticipated the other elements. I didn’t know geography would play such a large role. In “Top of the World,” “Nature Calls,” “In Bloom,” and “Derrin of the North,” the characters interact intensely with their geographical surroundings.

Northern California is the primary setting for The Other Half of California. This helped me incorporate a setting that I am familiar with as well as vent the questions I get from people when I tell them I’m from California: How is the ocean? Or if I specify Northern California: Near San Francisco? I tell them no, three hundred miles north, and I can tell they’re trying to fill in the map in their heads. They look at me wide eyed when I describe snow drifts up to my shoulders, or mention that my county has one stop light, an hour away from my town.
For some reason, I feel proud that people don’t know where I’m from. I get a small spark in my chest when the closest city they know is more than two hours away. Maybe I’m maintaining the exact contradiction of the place where I was raised: we want to keep the town small, but need more people (business) to keep the town alive. And yet, when I return, I’m relieved that I made it out, that I have been blessed with perspective that comes from interacting with different cultures. I am sure there will be a time when I want to invent settings from scratch, but in this collection I felt a catharsis in writing about a geographical region that helped shape me.

I don’t know how “Shooting an Elephant” by George Orwell appeared in front of my face at the age of twelve. I probably thought it would be about hunting, which, in a way, it is. It was the first time I remember being stunned by literature: literally having the words and images seep into my body and live. An example:

I was groomed for hunting from a young age. I fished the banks of the local rivers and drank straight from the streams. I shot archery with my father as a seven–year-old. I can recall the hay bales and my compound bow, a miniature version of my father’s. The legal hunting age was twelve, and I waited patiently, having to make do with my father’s stories and gifts when he’d return from a
hunting trip. I recall an electric pencil sharpener and a yo-yo that lit up. I passed the hunter’s safety course a couple weeks before my thirteenth birthday, and, soon after, carried a beat up .243 Winchester through the woods by the dump. It was bone chilling cold, and I was trying my best not to complain. My thoughts, however, were on the elephant in the Orwell story. I was worried that whatever I shot would struggle up to its feet, time and time again, that it would refuse to die. Without any warning, the story had entered my moral consciousness. It allowed me to experience an event through words, and the result was a new perspective. It didn’t alter my goal that day in the cold, but it did make me think about the consequences. One of the reasons I chose to attend the Air Force Academy was because of the campus: eighteen thousand acres straddling the front range of the Rocky Mountains filled with trees and wildlife. It reminded me of home. Often, I’d walk the forested trails and think of Northern California, of my family, and the hikes we’d taken together. It calmed me.

During my time at the Academy, a cadet had to declare his or her major by the end of the first year. I had my sights set on Astrophysics or Aeronautical Engineering. They were two of the prized majors. The recently added “light departments”: English, History, Management, and Languages were still fighting off reputations as majors for people that couldn’t hack the real stuff. The Air
Force Academy still doesn’t award Bachelor of Arts degrees. In Freshman English three stories changed my life, and I am indebted to them more than words allow. “Killings” by Andre Dubus, “The Fourth Alarm” by John Cheever, and “Bullet in the Brain” by Tobias Wolff were handed to my class as extra readings by the lone creative writer on staff. I still have the photocopied pages of these stories from my 1998 Spring semester. Each of these stories transported me directly its scenes. The rich language and creative storylines lured me in through my senses. I wasn’t just reading, I was overhearing the characters: I was in the car with Matt and Willis as they drove Stroud into the woods in “Killings.” I couldn’t explain how it felt. I told my roommate that the stories felt true. It was the only word I could come up with. He replied, accurately, that I was reading fiction. I was confused. I don’t know what I meant by true – emotional truth? – it’s hard, even now. Accompanying my visceral reaction was a pang of envy and the desire to learn more about the craft of reading and writing. This is why my diploma reads Bachelor’s of Science in English.

The past seven years I have worked as an Aeronautical Engineer in England and New Mexico. During the day my mind focused on the co-efficiency of drag, the strength of different materials, pilots’ attitudes, a young troop’s mistake, etc. I’d often come home needing an escape. One of my favorite
escapes was literature. It was during this time that I realized that reading had become integral to my life, not just my education. When the opportunity came to interview for a job at the Air Force Academy I jumped at it.

My time at the University of Tennessee has been remarkable. I’ve had the opportunity to take a variety of classes, and the breadth of those subjects has impacted me positively. For example, when I arrived here, I knew almost nothing of St. Augustine, Michel Foucault, George Saunders, Robert Penn Warren, Yasunari Kawabata, and Arthur Rimbaud. There are many others as well, and learning more about all of them has added perspective to my thinking about the world.

Many authors influence me as a writer, and a few have had a direct impact on this thesis. While I create with my own voice, I certainly learn from the technique and style of great storywriters. “Cathedral” and many other stories by Raymond Carver affected this entire thesis. In Carver, I discovered that the heart and mystery of a story may reside in common acts and that metaphors should be used sparingly and only when appropriate. “Testimony of Pilot,” by Barry Hannah, mirrored many of the subjects I found myself exploring: friendship, puberty, and war. Rereading Hannah’s story assisted me in writing both “Derrin of the North” and “Top of the World.” “Men Under Water,” by
Ralph Lombreglia, and “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” by Joyce Carol Oates, are shining examples of how to build and sustain intensity. They have fantastic energy, and I have tried in some instances to replicate the feeling I had reading them. For example, in “Safety,” I mirror Oates’s piece by presenting a benign opening scene, with only a hint of danger, before the intensity builds and continues at an unrelenting pace to the end.

Poetry remained on the periphery of my literary studies before my time at the University of Tennessee. Recently, I’ve reread many poems that, earlier in my life, I did not comprehend, or that I simply ignored. In the past year-and-a-half, poems by William Wordsworth, John Keats, Walt Whitman, A.E. Housman, Dylan Thomas, and Kenneth Rexroth have recharged my appreciation for the versatility of the English language and the genius of phrasing. Both my poetry and fiction have been shaped by their influences, most notably, the subjects of mortality and man’s connectivity to nature. A poem about both of these subjects is Dylan Thomas’s “The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower.” Here is the brilliant first stanza:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower

Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees

Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever

I feel this force. It stays with me, and while it counts down my days, it also fills me with life. Kenneth Rexroth’s “The Signature of All Things” is a poem I’ve reflected upon often since reading it for the first time a year ago. It also highlights the connectivity of all things and, in its breathtaking final five lines, infuses the inanimate with life.

The relationships in these stories are defined by their characters’ power ratios. Rarely in relationships is the power split evenly among the participants, and the characters in The Other Half of California mirror this fact. I have attempted to investigate this relationship by mixing up the traditional roles of power with certain characters: gender in “Nine Six Zero Two Zero” and “In Bloom,” distance in “Safety,” and self-esteem in “Nature Calls” and “Top of the World.”

The collection is a work in progress, but it has an end. For me, that end is a fully realized collection of stories that meets the rigorous demands I have made for myself. My efforts at the University of Tennessee have enabled me to establish personal quality standards that demand my uncompromised best. In
this collection I am most proud of “Derrin of the North” and “Top of the World.” They need work, but the themes they present are extremely important to me, and I am thankful I have found characters and settings to highlight them. “In Bloom” has proved my biggest challenge. It is an ambitious story, and the sex, violence, and recovery motifs change in intensity with each draft. The story has come a long way, and I am pleased with its progress, even while I understand it has further to go.

I feel my best writing occurs when I avoid outlines and prebuilt structure. I’ve tried the outline approach multiple times, and I end up writing to the outline, not for the characters. This takes away the beautiful surprise that comes when a character does or says something unexpected.

I struggle with my role as an officer in the military while attempting to internally promote unconstrained writing. I have debated limiting my characters’ behavior and comments due to the off chance that a story gets published, and my characters’ views are taken as my own. I realize this is blasphemy for a writer, but I also understand that I must balance my role as an officer (thus subject to the stringent Uniform Code of Military Justice) and a freethinking – and sometimes angry - writer. Subtlety can be just as powerful as
the overt. Searching for this equilibrium has influenced me to a degree that I have a difficult time understanding.

I also became a father during the writing of these stories. Emotions from that amazing process can be found in “Safety” and “Nine Six Zero Two Zero.” I had the joy and frustration of typing with my beautiful daughter chewing at my toes and the bottom of my chair. The remedy was late night writing with headphones and Rachmaninov’s Piano Concertos.

I considered two things when ordering the stories: similar subject matter and length. The stories group well together and many of the same subjects arise from one to the next. I enjoy it when an author of a collection of stories considers the length of the pieces. By varying the length of the stories next to one another, it helps keep the rhythm of the entire collection fresh. Overall, I am pleased with the transition from story to story. I open with “Derrin of the North” because it is the one I most enjoy reading.

“Derrin of the North” comes from a swimming experience I had with a friend who had Cystic Fibrosis, and the absolute joy in his countenance after girls decided to come in. It also comes from watching him remove his shirt for the “skins” side of a pick-up basketball game. He had pleaded with me to keep the
shirt on, but I didn’t have the maturity to understand that removing it would
humiliate him.

“Safety” began as some thoughts on the trials of being married to
someone who is on the road all the time, and exploded into a monstrous fear that
I didn’t know I possessed.

“Top of the World” is a meditation on my hometown: Chester, California.
It’s beautiful with trees and water and Main Street, but there is always the cloud
from the mill. In high school I honestly thought that kids from big cities used
different textbooks that made them smarter; it’s a sad belief and one,
unfortunately, that ninety-nine percent of the kids back home don’t question.
The places in the story are real. I did work at a soda fountain in high school, and
wore a shirt with a banana split sundae on the front. I can laugh now.

I wrote “Nature Calls” with immature, drug-fueled characters as seen in
Denis Johnson’s “Emergency.” At Boy Scout Camp two men in their mid
twenties taught us how to shoot black powder guns and throw hatchets. They
dressed in frontier costumes, grew their hair long, and smelled of marijuana.
One night, they had to respond to a bear in my troop’s campsite. We were in the
process of leaving the area when one of them ran past me with a rifle in his hand. He looked scared, and I wondered if he’d ever fired it before.

“Nine Six Zero Two Zero” began with six pounds of ground beef on the counter and me pushing it a little too far with animal sounds. This story was largely influenced by Carol Bly’s “Talk of Heroes.” In that story, the main character tells a story within the story (and what an amazing story it is). I tried to let Jonas and Mishna tell their own stories to one another, and I made them human, so it doesn’t go as planned. Also, stress is an odd monster, and I’ve found people deal with it in a variety of ways, some of which I find compelling.

“In Bloom” began as a reflection on my mother’s death, and how every action I took, I felt I was being watched, and, most of the time, judged. I was seventeen, and for a while it seemed like there would be no rest until I could somehow replace each memory with a new one that didn’t include her. This story changed dramatically when I decided to investigate Lori’s sexual needs in relationship to her interrupted recovery.

The stories of *The Other Half of California* are about people and how they deal with each other and their environment. I am proud of the collection, and
pleased that my characters inhabit many of the spaces I have walked. I am
happy to tell people that there’s another half of California. It’s where I’m from.
DERRIN OF THE NORTH

I’m thinking about my lungs, how they open and close and open and close, and the closest thing I can imagine are two little paper bags stuck deep in my chest. While I know it’s not a perfect image, I think about the bags and how they have my name imprinted on them, right on the front in black ink; they both read property of Thomas Kelvin. My lungs are twenty-nine years old, a healthy pale pink with the possibility of a gentle smudge from a poorly smoked cigar or the pneumonia I hacked through in middle school. I expect my lungs to work for me for the rest of my life and except for tonight, I haven’t given them much thought; but like most things that make us remember we’re a collection of well placed matter, there’s a good reason for my introspection. And yes, pondering the inevitability of death is a part of it, but that’s not all; there are also five cartons of eggs.

* 

Derrin Dune would do anything for me because I had sworn to keep his secret safe. The secret wasn’t much of one because everyone knew he was sick. All you had to do was glance at his frame, how I towered over him, how his blonde head bobbed wide and heavy on those frail shoulders; he looked two
grades behind by the time we entered high school. I still remember the eyes of my mother when he first said his age at our dining table. How many times had he seen those eyes? Derrin was brilliant and shy, but socially oblivious, and as fourteen year olds, he told me he had a secret for me, one I could never share.

It was Halloween, at dusk, and we were in my backyard with five cartons of eggs. I’d hid them underneath a hollowed out part of our wood stack. We had to space out the purchase of each carton because the stores got suspicious if you showed up at the register with them within two weeks of Halloween. The last orange was flicking at the clouds and we sat there dressed in black waiting for the sky to follow. We’d discussed our plan for the evening: meeting with the crew, a couple teachers’ houses and cars across town, escape routes, what to do if we ran into other groups, cops. Derrin was into it big time, his hands wringing together. There was silence as we psyched ourselves up and then, suddenly, he prepared me for his secret, because, as he said, he wanted me to understand it. He didn’t know why he had to tell me just then on the grass by the stacked pine chunks, but according to him there was no alternative. It was “imperative,” he said with his well developed vocabulary, that this stay between us as it could cause “irreparable damage.”  With his transition I was expecting something
heavy: he was into drugs, his parents hit each other, he was running away, something, actually anything, but what came from his mouth.

“I’ll make this short,” he said. “I’m sick.”

I would’ve laughed but I could still see him, even if it was getting more difficult. He couldn’t actually believe that people didn’t know, and yet there he was, in earnest. I didn’t know what to say; of course he was sick.

“The doctor says I’ll live until thirty if I’m lucky, so I’m marking the date. I’m telling you this because you are my best friend and I want you to know what it means.”

And then he told me the name of his disease, and I wondered how many times he’d said it before that time because as it rolled out into the gray air it seemed new and uncertain, as if diagnosed for the very first time.

But how could I ever begin to appreciate the secret? Derrin wasn’t one of my best friends, even if I was his. Ours was a friendship based on proximity: he lived four houses down and my city councilman father instigated our relationship, no doubt hearing the secret from Derrin’s parents as he gave them a hand moving in. My father has been trying to be proud of me since I was born. Derrin was his deepest investment in creating an honorable son, and I must have
sensed this somehow and wanted to do something about it because although he embarrassed me, I allowed Derrin to tag along with my group of friends as long as he kept quiet. I called him “kid,” and turned to him only in times of assignment due dates. Occasionally my father would set something up with Derrin and his father, and even more rarely Derrin and I would do something, just the two of us, and I made sure my father knew about it. But I did use his loyalty as an advantage: when I really wanted to look good or powerful or popular through my teen years I’d show up with him and it’d do the trick straight away.

After he told me his secret that night we got back to the business of eggs. I allowed his confession to stay with me only a moment before it lifted and moved away. It had nothing to do with me and meant less than the shape of the eggs and how I would hold them in my hand to get maximum distance. But he never guessed and because I took a minute before I said anything and stared right back at him, he felt I’d understood what he wanted me to and considered the promised forged. He would, from that moment on, be under my control.

Later that night we met up with the rest of my buddies and went out on our mission. We’d forgotten about the street lights on Mr. Tuck’s avenue and had to stay back because no one had the gumption to walk right up to the front.
A couple bushes a strong throw away provided our cover and when I mouthed “go” we stood up and chucked those eggs as hard as we could at the defenseless house and parked car. Our bodies flooded with adrenaline as the eggs disappeared from our surging arms. It was impossible to tell where they landed in the dark and we squinted and each knew we’d been the first the hit the house, the very window to Mr. Tuck’s room. Under the streetlight, ten yards short of the target, three eggs lay splattered. I knew who it was and I didn’t spare him, not even that night as we jogged away in the dark; I wanted all of them to hear it.

“Don’t take the damn eggs if you can’t hack it, kid.”

Even then I thought of stopping the group to make Derrin return and go up to the front walk to throw one at the door. I’d been imbued with power and it mixed into me quickly.

* 

I started off small, getting a feel for command. Initially, there was resistance. When I made him take off his shirt – the first time we saw his pure white ribs - for the skins side in basketball, he considered leaving until I whispered our secret in his ear. When I made him touch Jenny Smith’s ass, the first girl to develop breasts, he made me repeat my threat three times before
walking up to her with his head lowered. In history class I had to say “secret” and tap my temple before he asked if John Hancock’s uncle was Don Keydick. I was lazy and indifferent in school, but I was dedicated to Derrin’s tasks; they were something I was good at, and I pushed him harder and harder: dumping lawn shavings into unlocked cars, stealing a sixer of Coors from the corner store, phoning in a bomb threat the morning of the Algebra final. There were many more dares, each one more creative than the last, and as we progressed through them over our high school years his resistance turned into acceptance and unexpectedly, thankfulness. He eventually found a niche in our group: the one that would do anything and it gave him a subtle reputation independent of us. Pity was always a part of it and people wondered how the kid that dominated academics could be the focus of so many rumors. The wise cracks in class, the unparalleled nerve to talk to anyone, including Jenny Smith, brought him recognition which he digested into happiness. It got to a point where he’d ask me what he should do next.

* 

About the time my impatience with his social ascent peaked, my father planned a deer hunting trip with Derrin and his father. My dad tried this father-son link with Darrin’s family about twice a year and if it hadn’t been the fall of
our senior year I’d have protested more vehemently, but the end was near. My
dad knew my feelings for Derrin, but pacified me, trying his hardest to make me
think of the days after high school, how the labels and groups would dissipate
and form afresh with strangers, and wouldn’t it feel great if I could look back at
my youth and smile with memories of kindness? I am an only child and my dad
spoke to me like we were in a movie, and besides, talking to a high schooler
about anything past the next Friday night is pointless. But I respected my father
and even in my most deplorable angst I secretly wanted to please him, which I
tried the only way I knew how: angering him. Thus I pouted about our hunting
trip, but only long enough for him to notice my superiority over the company we
would keep, until he added, “You just don’t understand how much it means to
Derrin.”

I hate the cold and during those three days it was freezing and miserable.
The second morning Derrin and I struck out on our own in ski masks. We knew
the area well and the rifles slung over our shoulders pointing at the weak sun. It
was too cold to talk and too cold to look up, but a pack of deer strutted right in
front of us and settled in the sun fifty yards out. I didn’t care much for hunting
and thought of working in the cold, gutting the deer, the blood freezing to my
gloves, having to take off the gloves and my fingers smoking frozen. I glanced
back at Derrin, hoping he had the same thoughts; we could simply say we didn’t see anything and avoid hours of work. All it would take was a nod to each other. But his gun was up without asking me and it seemed huge on him; I reminded myself it was only a .243 Winchester, a baby’s gun. He glared into the scope, and when he shot it popped short like a toy, but it was massive against his shoulder. He’d become fierce clandestinely, and I was scrambling to place the fact on the invisible link between us. He pulled the gun down and gave me a thumbs-up as his breath punched out in tiny white puffs. I shook away and ran down the pine filled embankment to the bottom of the gulley where the deer had folded up twitching the nerves away. I didn’t wait for Derrin and when he came wheezing up from behind me I already knew what he would do next. It had just come to me, from where in my consciousness I still don’t know. I kicked the deer to see if I had it in me and the resulting jolt made me shudder. Derrin said something about the horns, but I was studying the thin face below them. The eyeball was uncovered and murky brown. I gave him an out when I suggested we radio the dads, but he was already on his knees with his blade near the belly. The long gash released a plume of stench that clouded up around us. I helped hold it open while he worked feverishly disemboweling the animal, making off comments when he ran into something he thought was interesting. “I think they
call this chyme,” he said showing me his glove smeared in greenish brown goop, and holding up the bladder full of piss before tossing it to the side, “He had to go.” I felt the cold every second of that morning and the corners of my ski mask holes were caked with spit and mucus. It’d taken a half hour for my plan to reach my lips and when it did it took the form of a question.

“Will you eat the eyeball?” I asked. The form surprised me because I was not in the habit of asking Derrin for anything, and I felt the rise in my tone at the end of the question. There in the freezing shallow I’d asked him like he had a choice. Trying to recover, I told him the secret was safe, but he seemed to ignore this as he pulled the buck’s horns around to his kneeling position. He dipped his shoulder hard as he dug and I had to look above it. He held it aloft, inches from his mouth, the tentacles of wet ligaments spiraling down. He waited until my eyes met his. “To us,” he said.

*

I dated Samantha Tiller my last semester at Chico High School and she thought Derrin was cute to have around so she’d ask him to come along if we were going out with her sister who was a couple years younger. I could tell it made her feel even more Christian – her term for moral - to befriend him though
she never said as much; she was always motherly to him, asking if he was okay, did he need something, what were his plans. And while she did this, she’d squeeze my hand in the front seat like we were married talking to a child, but she had a body that rerouted my entire vascular system so I let it fly as long as she let me in when I wanted. And she did. Often, I’d simply lie there as she exploded up and down over me becoming another person, a woman on fire, and she’d fix on a space over her head and she would preach to it and she would bound on me and rejoice and use me. I had no idea what I was doing, so I’d look through the dim lamp light up at her breasts and bare throat half terrified that my firewoman would break me; sometimes it was like I wasn’t even there and that’s when I liked it best, just watching and feeling helpless. When she’d finish, she’d tell me how wonderful I was, how good I was, how I satisfied her more than anyone could ever, and then slowly she’d shrink back into Samantha with each layer of clothing. Once, while my parents were away she came over and we showered together. The water was hot on us and I wanted it cooler, but she said no; she let me keep the main lights on and we washed each other with Ivory soap. She washed me from behind with her hands. She moved the suds across my stomach and her breasts pressed against my back and the smell was clean.

*
I never saw Derrin make a move for her sister and early on in our relationship that may have even been a dare, but by that point I’d stopped provoking him altogether. I’d tried ignoring him after our hunting trip didn’t beat the “best friend” stuff out of him, but between my dad’s urging and Samantha’s Christian good-deed tally, I found myself resigned to wait for graduation. There were times when Samantha was over and we’d be watching television or preparing to fool around upstairs and I’d see Derrin walking up and down the street – a dead end – and could tell he was trying to hide the fact that he was looking inside, that he was hoping we’d see and invite him in. She did notice him one time that spring and used the word *meek* – who uses that word? - as in, *the meek will inherit the earth*. Yes, I told her, we will all sit in judgment, kneeled at the feet of Derrin Dune, and may he be forgiving.

“Jesus appeared as a humble carpenter,” she said. “And he was thin.”

My parents were honest and fair and prepared me for the reception that awaited my poor grades post graduation. I’d thought about joining the service after I realized I had no desire to become anything; I’d let the Air Force pick my career for me. Three months out of high school I left my neighborhood and trained as a fuel cell maintainer on KC-135 tankers. I learned how to bend my body into holes no bigger than a basketball and deal with jet fuel on my skin and
hair, how it never really leaves. I was eighteen, stationed in Southwest England, in the farmlands above Cambridge, supposedly the driest place in the UK, and yet it rained most days and readied the others. I stayed on base, avoiding fights and awaiting paychecks to blow on local British girls that didn’t know the difference between the ranks.

My father had not given up on Derrin and thankfully had at least refused to give him my number, but he’d give me updates: Derrin says hi, saw Derrin the other day. My father told me that his health was steadily declining, that he had stayed around and took a year of community college before relenting to his body and going to work for his dad at the pharmacy. His parents let him live alone, but he was on a special machine three times a week so his parents stopped by his apartment every other day. He sent me letters that I didn’t read, and e-mail I didn’t open. What my father didn’t tell me at the time was Derrin was calling my parent’s house three times a week for updates on me, and that my father refused to let my mother do anything about it.

I embellished my role in the service to my father. How could I not? And he was excited at how I was saving the world filling up aircraft at twenty thousand feet. Unfortunately, his visions were wrong and the longer we spoke the truth came out; I never left the ground. Instead, I worked at patching up the
massive fuel bladders inside the narrow wings or on the floor of the shop. He gradually stopped asking about my job and focused our discussions on what I was seeing in Europe. He pleaded with me to get out, to find something that interested me. What about the cathedrals? The battle grounds? There’s so much history, he said. After seeing a pamphlet on base about cathedrals I went down to London – the farthest out I went - and saw St. Peter’s, but felt no connection; the cathedrals local to the base - in Cambridge, Ely, Bury St. Edmunds, and Norwich - merged into one another, each cold rock building highlighting itself more than any belief. I couldn’t help but hear Samantha’s words, a humble carpenter, when confronted with another spiral monstrosity. It’s not that I believed her or thought about Jesus at all, but I still imagined he’d get a kick out of some of the dizzying stained glass. I feigned interest when I spoke to my father about it and I could tell by his voice that he wanted to be proud, but what the hell was I going to do with cathedrals?

I didn’t realize it then, but I was searching for something I wanted to be good at: anything to define myself besides my memories of my hometown, my childhood bedroom and now, black fuel containers. I was beginning to comprehend the fact that the past is all there is: you are what you were, not what you want to be, and I was a repairman for rubber fuel cells for aircraft that took
off and flew circles in the sky. There wasn’t a war on, and when my time was up
I decided to return to California. I arrived from England on a Thursday and
Derrin was there at my front door as I put my large bag down. He looked the
same, maybe a little taller, and even though I knew I shouldn’t I let him hug me;
I’d remained his best friend although the sentiment was never reciprocated.

It took me two months to get out of the house. My parents, so excited
upon my arrival back home, turned on me a month into my stay. My empty
statement: “who ever knows what they want?” was met with distain and
sarcasm: “people with jobs.” I overheard my father on the phone say that the
service didn’t turn them out like they used to. I’d learned discipline all right, but
not motivation, because that can’t be taught no matter what they say.

During my time in my parent’s house Derrin began a series of bizarre
events that began with him keeping his apartment, but sleeping at his parent’s
place. At first, we thought it was due to his health, but then he started coming
around every day, calling on the days we didn’t meet up, and barraging me with
messages. Even my father admitted enough was enough. He called up Derrin’s
father and they had a talk about it. It sounds funny to me now because Derrin
and I were in our twenties and still our fathers were clearing things up. But
things didn’t clear up. Derrin continued his assault on me and the phone rang
and he’d show up at restaurants where we went to eat and movies that we saw, so that finally my mother yelled at my father and gave it to him good and he took it right there in our living room as our caller ID flashed “Derrin Dune.”

My father went over to their house the next day and stayed an hour. When he returned he looked defeated, a look that can only be detected as a whole stance, and in a way, he really was, and deserved to be. The project of healing Derrin with friendship had backfired, and I learned later that my father and Mr. Dune got into it heavy and words were said that took back years of loyalty. But my father didn’t talk about any of that when he arrived. With a slight nod to my mother he sat down on the sofa. He told us that Derrin wouldn’t be calling us anymore, and that he hoped we were happy with ourselves. He told us Derrin needed a lung transplant and that he was against the ropes and fighting a losing battle. Derrin was twenty-first in line and it could be years before a donor was found; they gave him until he was thirty. I thought, at least the doctors are consistent.

*

I enrolled in a dental assistant program down in San Jose and passed the two years away just getting by. It wasn’t anything I’d ever dreamt about but my
father had a connection in the school and the starting pay wasn’t bad. After school I settled in Vacaville assisting in a little office. I made new friends that couldn’t decide what they wanted to be and we spent some time in Napa and I dated and bought a condo. I had a little Honda that got good gas mileage and before I knew it I had a life; it may have been typical and boring, but it was mine. The job was fine even if people came in with the disgusting mouths; I could suction well enough, handed the correct tools when required, and showed up on time.

Derrin still wrote me and he’d call and leave messages. Every day I’d get home and have at least two, three on the weekends, and sometimes if I was curious I’d skip the delete button once his voice arose and I’d listen to him drone on about what had become disjointed blather: his favorite elements on the periodic table, the next eclipse, his favorite pair of shoes. This went on for about three years, and when I visited home he’d walk the street in front of our house, back and forth and back and forth, and he’d still not look at it. His arms thinned out and his hair gradually turned white. His limbs hung from him, and it seemed as though the stretched ligaments were the only thing holding them on. His upper back arched noticeably right underneath the base of his neck and he’d
cough on his walks. It broke my father’s heart, but what could I do? I could not save him and live my own life.

Then one day, having returned to the condo from an especially trying day – four root canals – I found the message machine empty. I stood beside it with an outstretched finger over the delete button, but there was nothing more to delete. It had become such a part of my routine that I was thrown off. I waited and thought of calling home; I tried to remain calm, tried to convince myself that this was the state of living I’d always wanted, peace finally, and yet the line of reasoning failed me and I dialed my parents. They knew nothing. That night I waited. I waited for the phone call that I knew was coming. He had just wanted to talk to me directly, and yet as I rested on my bed the phone stayed silent. The next day the same thing happened. After the third day I had to know. I dialed his number and as I did I knew that the course of abstinence I’d worked so hard for had vanished and could never be recovered. I left a message: just call me and let me know you’re okay.

He got the message and called me back that evening. The first thing he said was, “It feels good to be wanted doesn’t it?”
We talked for a week straight; he was number ten on the list for new lungs, writing a science fiction screenplay, and down to a hundred pounds. But he didn’t sound like he was dying, and that wasn’t as exciting to me because I couldn’t feel sorry for him unless he was on the edge; his diatribes on prepositions and meteors had me convinced that he was losing his mind, and the last night I told him not to call again, ever, that I’d made a huge mistake. He told me I’d call him again, he knew I would. His confidence scared me. I changed my number and started the process all over again. It lasted a year.

*

The ringing snapped my dream in half. I stole a glance at the clock before picking up. Midnight. I grabbed the receiver and closed my eyes.

“Somebody better be dying.” I said.

“Tom?”

“Derrin? Is that you? How did you get this number?”

“Yeah Tom, well you got it right.”

“What? What’s that? Hold on.”

“You’re right. I’m dying.”
I sat up and flicked on the reading lamp on the side table. The light struck my eyes hard and bright. There was no one to wake up.

“Wait. Derrin, where are you? What’s going on?”

“I’m at home,” he said.

“Okay, what else? Are you having an emergency?”

“Oh no, I feel… I feel, ok buddy.”

“To hell with you.”

“No, no, no. How dare you. What I mean is that I am dying, but we’re all dying aren’t we? We are.”

“So you’re fine?”

“Sure. I even got moved up to number two on the list.”

This was the chance to end it; I’d always been cordial, and my mind raced to say something definite.

“Screw you, Derrin. I mean that. This is a bullshit prank, and I don’t know how you found me but you have to stop for good.” And instead of hanging up I caught myself stalling. “Have I not been clear enough?”
“Hey hey hey. Hold on buddy. Buddy, let’s talk. T-man, I called you okay. There’s a reason. I wouldn’t call without a reason.”

“You’re not funny. I have to get up in the morning. I have a life!”

“But listen. Since I’m dying and going to be dying before you I thought we could talk. I’m on the clock man. I know we can talk during daylight hours, but there’s something special about tonight. Electricity in the air. Wouldn’t you agree? Makes us feel human.”

“Sure Derrin. Now it’s crazy time.”

“Well, I was lying here hooked up to the machine thinking about Little Chico Creek. The two have nothing to do with one another except the machine kind of makes the sound of a creek, maybe a perfectly timed never ending creek, but anyway. The time we took the Tiller sisters out there. You remember that? Damn Tommy, I would’ve never thought to crouch down in the middle like it was deep. There was no way they’d have come in if they knew, and the bodies on em. Damn Tommy.”

There was sadness in his voice and it sounded as if he might cry. I wondered if it was a ploy to keep me on, but with all the crap we’d been though he’d never cried in front of me. I wiped at my eyes knowing it wouldn’t help.
And I remembered that night with the Tiller sisters again, looking at Derrin’s thin arms as we entered the water first, at how they helped me. The girls emerged from the trees and we watched their toned bodies tighten as they walked out to the middle of the cool river. The faint moonlight covered the water and we squinted and saw them rushing in, trying to submerge themselves as quick as possible. When they reached us and realized we were sitting on our butts faking treading water they ran out, and we howled and splashed and called to them to return. The girls changed into their underwear and came to the bank and threw rocks near us before walking away. Derrin and I stayed in for a little while, and after a minute we calmed down and listened to the sound of the water. Downstream, the girls’ voices reached us as a whisper. “Tommy,” Derrin had said with wet hair, “I need to tell you something.” He looked somber and I knew he would ruin the moment, but he shot up to his feet with arms outstretched to the sky screaming, “I am Derrin of the North, Lord of Shallow Rivers and Naked Women! Thank you Jesus!”

“Yes. That was a nice night Derrin. One of my best as well, but what’s going on here? There’s something you’re not telling me and if you don’t tell me I’m hanging up on your ass.”
“I want to tell you something embarrassing.” He waited a moment. “I remember the colors of their bras and panties. You know why? You know, it’s because it the only time I’ve seen some. How’s that? Did you know that?” His pace picked up and I could tell he was going somewhere else.

“Yes?” I questioned. “What else? So you’ve only seen a couple gals before. You’re not the only one, but if you want me to say sorry, then sorry. Enough?”

I was two hours away from Derrin in a one bedroom condo next to the outlet mall of Vacaville and had no intention of doing a thing about it.

“We’re in our late twenties Tommy. What does that tell you?”

“It tells me nothing Derrin. It tells me nothing. It tells me that you’re lonely and that you have no friends because you keep on calling me and not someone else and we’re not even that close anymore. It’s been years since high school. As I’ve told you since then, it’s time to move on. Now please, leave me alone. It should be implied in my tone that I don’t want to talk to you. And if you’re throwing yourself a pity party, then you deserve it. You got screwed. I’m sorry, my family is sorry. Everyone is sorry. And I’m sorry to say it, but they know. They’ve always known. Your secret, all that bullshit, it’s nothing, it’s no
secret. Everyone knows you’re sick, that you were sick in school, and will be sick
till you die. They feel sorry for you and pity you and want to make you happy,
but the fact is no one knows how to make a person whose lungs are folding up
happy. And to be perfectly honest, we don’t care if you’re happy because it takes
too much out of us. It takes too much out of me. I should’ve been this direct
with you and I deserve your psycho attention because I treated you badly in
school but hear me now. It doesn’t matter. It’s over.”

“But you always pick up and talk to me. You tell me not to call and yet
here we are once again talking like old friends. I don’t call that often anymore.
You told me to cut it down and what did I do?”

“Are you listening to me? I’m done here. Good night.”

Silence filled the line and while I couldn’t hear his breathing, the rhythmic
turn and puff of his machine played into my ear. I was sweating and my chest
felt cold. It stayed this way for a minute and I knew I was losing a chance to
make a point, to slam the receiver down and cut the connection.

“Derrin? Do you understand?”

“Just know one thing,” Derrin said. “I went and bought a gun and it’s in
my dresser.”
I didn’t believe him. He was desperate. I thought about saying *use it*. I thought of saying *good*. Those were my first thoughts and I wondered if I said them aloud right then would he follow the direction; but I said, “Derrin.”

“It’s black. The smell of it reminds me of hunting and gunpowder. It’s as if all the decisions in my life have been made for me when I hold it. Do you know what I mean? Maybe you don’t, but I do. I thank God for the simple things, blood and shit and water. Now there’s something to celebrate. Something you know will be there no matter what.”

“You’re talking nonsense. Please. What are you trying to do here? What can I possibly do?”

“You? You can do nothing. You’ve done nothing. I’m going to die anyway Tommy, probably tomorrow. It’s my birthday today. Yeah, I’ve reached my maximum age. I’d like to see you.”

The shift caught me by surprise and I was still digesting the birthday comment. Was it really today? I went over the route to him in my head.

“You just told me there’s nothing I can do.”

“I’m still in Chico, at the same apartment.”
“I have to come tonight or you’re shooting yourself? Is this what you are saying? Jesus, Derrin. I’m calling the cops. This is the easy answer. I’m tired and I don’t know if I even believe you.”

“Do you want me to read you the serial number?”

“Yes,” I said.

He gave me some letters and numbers and I used the time to consider my options. If he were telling the truth, could I live with it?

*

It was foggy and dark and the orange glow from the dash bothered me. I-5 at four thirty A.M. was straight as ever, and I drove home past the city limit signs that hadn’t been altered in years; I passed though Williams, turned off at Orland on Highway 32 with its flanking orchards, and passed over the Sacramento River.

On the drive I thought of saving Derrin and calling my father and telling him what I’d done, how I’d entered his apartment and soothed his nerves and removed the gun because I’d dared him to. How I’d stroked him calm reliving the Tiller sisters, and the father-son camp outs. I’d give my dad some credit for
keeping after me and he’d say, “This is what I was talking about all those years son. This is when you show your true colors as a man.” He’d tell me he loved me, and as I sat there in the car alight from the speedometer, I wondered if I lived for my father’s accepting voice, and how it would be okay if it were true.

The street lights spaced out evenly along his busy street and all the spots on the road were taken. I considered blocking someone in but I thought I could be in there for awhile. I circled around like normal, but it was the middle of the night and no one was moving any time soon. I parked two blocks away at the park and got out. I’d forgotten a coat and thought of jogging, but walked instead, feeling the cold. The night exuded a surreal energy and the clouds were still a blanket around the sky, reflecting the shine of the city. The sidewalk was crumbling in parts and for the first time it felt real.

A black seventeen hung from the red door. I decided to knock instead of pushing the doorbell. The door opened an inch and stopped. I spoke his name, and he called to me to come in.

Derrin stood on a silver rug in the middle of the floor. There was no furniture save an overstuffed chair and his machine. As I took my first steps in I looked for the gun. In his hand? On the chair? And I asked him where it was. I
had a plan, rehearsed for the last half hour of the drive and it required a command presence.

“Where’s the gun, Derrin?”

He was dressed in all white and his skin and hair were white, as bright as the clothes that enveloped him. I closed the door behind me, but I didn’t take my eyes off him.

“You’re here,” he said shakily. “I knew it would happen when you decided to come.” I was scanning for the gun, but saw nothing and there were no hiding places. I could tell he was scared of me because he trembled. When I took a step toward him, he took one step back, staggering on his legs.

“Where’s the gun?”

He shook his head as if it were the dumbest question I could ask.

“Are you listening to me?” he questioned. “I knew it would happen when you decided to come.”

“You haven’t told me a thing. But listen, I’m here to help. And while I meant what I said on the phone, I never said I wanted you to die.”

“Are you listening to me? I got the call.”
“You got the call? What does that even mean?”

“It means you saved me. It means that someone has died tonight that I might live. I got the call while you were on your way. I want you to take me to the hospital.”

I couldn’t move my mind and when I finally came to Derrin was standing there on his rug in white and he cried and he shook and he sung a whispering version of Happy Birthday to himself. It was eerie and I asked about his parents, shouldn’t they be the ones to take him? No, he’d phoned them already. They would meet us there. His bags were packed.

On the way I asked him about his new lungs and what they would do: they’ll take the disease away from me. And what would he do now that he didn’t have the disease: I’ll gain weight and run and tan in the sun. But he cut me off five minutes into it. He burst forth with energy, and he reached out and touched my glove compartment, the fabric on the roof, the door arm rest and the shifter. He was going to live and the joy was too much.

“Tell me about England,” he said. “I want to know all about your time there. What did you see? What did you do?”
“Derrin, my god, you’re getting new lungs in an hour and you want to know about my time in England? What about you? Holy shit, I can’t even think straight.”

“Please Tommy. What did you do? Well, I know you repaired fuel cells, your dad told me that. He said it was the toughest job out there and that must have been hard on you.”

“It was okay. I did have to squeeze into some tight places.”

His face remained lit as I talked about England and the base and the few cathedrals I’d seen. He wanted to know everything: what was my place like? Was base housing nice? Did we have a BX? Did people watch the planes land from beyond the fences? Did it rain? And on and on he went, the most banal questions, one after another, and he hung on my every response. His enthusiasm drove me hard into memory and when that failed I made things up: my co-workers locked me in the wing for twenty-four hours, yeah it was tough, but I knew I could get through it; I slept with the Major in charge of the squadron, she wanted me from day one so it was no surprise when she showed up at my dorm room with a bottle of scotch; I saved two people from choking to death in the cafeteria because of my training, thank god I was there. As I made them up they
sounded convincing coming out and I realized that I’d thought of them long before this, and now they were becoming my history. Derrin would never know the difference and the truth would never matter. To him, I lived that life, and so I did.

My stories lifted us right up to the hospital entrance in Davis, and as I put the car in park I wondered if this was all he ever wanted. We were men now and he would be made anew, just inside the doors, with someone else’s lungs tied to his body.

I accompanied him to the front desk and his parents stood up and greeted me coldly, so I waited by the entrance. I didn’t know if I should stay or go, but Derrin looked over and gave me a signal to wait as he and his parents listened to the receptionist who was pointing to a red piece of paper. After they broke away Derrin came over and apologized for his parents. He thanked me for the trip and wrapped his arms around me and I held his head to my chest with one hand and pulled at his back with the other. I felt the bony vertebrae and I thought I might crush him, but he held on and the guilt rushed at me there in the white lobby and overtook me.

As he let go he said, “I’ll see you on the other side.”
He disappeared behind the double doors with his parents, and I bent over to my knees in exhaustion. I stayed for an hour and fell asleep on the padded chairs. He hadn’t asked me to stay, and when I woke up I felt that it would be inappropriate for me to be there when he woke up. Family would be flying in from everywhere to greet him.

I drove back to my parents’ place, and when I walked through the door I felt like a child again. My father and mother were finishing up their breakfast and rushed to me at the entrance. I told them the story the best I could and I must have hit the right notes because they were both in tears by the end. They asked me to stay for a day or two so I called my work and lied. When I woke up, my father told me he’d called Mr. Dune and that Derrin was having some complications, that they wouldn’t know for another twelve hours.

*

I sit on my childhood bed thinking about my lungs. I think of my name imprinted on them and I think of Derrin and wonder what name is on his lungs. I recall five cartons of eggs and Samantha Tiller at eighteen. I remember her saying meek as Derrin paced up and down our street, waiting patiently.
If he does inherit the earth will he pardon me there at his feet, hands together weeping for forgiveness? Does he will himself his very own firewoman? Will he live in the moment amazed at his life and the beautiful chance he gets to be good at something? And will he take a royal name, one reserved for a blessed king wading in two feet of water?
SAFETY

I’m not a drinker, haven’t been for some time, and yet here in the early afternoon I crouch low into the mini bar, fascinated by the little bottles of rum and vodka with their small red rimmed caps, holding them up to my face and nose - not a hint of alcohol through the glass - and up to the sunlight through the hotel room window.

My briefcase sits by the door and I’m already thinking of ditching the afternoon lecture – there will be plenty of others – for a nap. Three days into this conference I haven’t learned a thing and my military uniform feels heavy. A bottle of Smirnoff fits snug in my right hand. When the phone rings, I don’t answer. It’s probably one of my fellow officers telling me where to meet up so we can all sit together. I let it ring and sit on the bed wiping sweat off my face. The room is stale, and a cylinder of light from between the curtains illuminates millions of floating dust particles. I breathe them in. It can’t be good for me, and I think of where they go inside my body as the phone continues to ring. I’m not going to be able to nap if this continues. I decide to fake food poisoning; it will buy me twelve hours. I pick up the receiver.
It’s my wife talking fast. She says there are two men, one at the front door, another standing on the side of the house. The baby is asleep. She tried to ignore them, but the man at the front door has stopped knocking and peers into the window.

“Are they in uniform?” I ask.

“No,” she says, “They’re not in uniform. Why? Do you know them?” But she doesn’t let me answer. “Because it’s been far too long, they’ve been here five minutes.” She tells me that she can see him glancing around, not into the house, but around and at the other houses in the neighborhood.

We picked the house in part because of the land, almost an acre. We loved the separation from neighbors.

“The man on the side has moved into the back yard,” she says. I picture it, the towering ponderosa and medium dogwoods. It’s 1:15 my time, 2:15 there.

“Call 911,” I say.

She says, “Stay on damn it. Stay on. You should have left the damn truck in the driveway.”

“Go get the baby.”
She’s breathing heavy into the phone and she says “my god” like she thought she’d let the baby sleep.

“I’m back in our room,” she says. “Emma’s here.”

“Open a window. Make noise. They just want the stuff. Open the window and shout out.”

The room she’s in is upstairs, over the entrance. I don’t hear the window open, but she screams out “hello” and then “hi” and then “hello,” each louder than before.

“He’s just looking at me,” she says. “He’s laughing.”

“He isn’t saying anything?”

“No,” she says. “He’s laughing.”

“They’re in,” she says, “The other one is in the screened porch and the man at the front door, he’s knocking again. He’s says to let him in.”

It’s sunny outside, a Wednesday. I’m wearing my uniform and my insides expand.

“Call 911,” I say. “Do it now.”
“Don’t hang up, damn you.”

“I don’t hear Emma.”

“She’s here.”

It was twenty bucks a month for the alarm whose wires dangle unconnected. I picture its white box under the stairs, then, the blue safe under our bed.

“Get the gun,” I say.

“Adam.” She says my name like I’ve told her a secret. “I’m putting the phone on the bed.”

Over the line I can hear my daughter’s breathing. It’s labored. I wonder if she’s trying to put it in her mouth. I say the combination numbers into the receiver.

“I have it,” she says. “Okay, I have it. He’s kicked in the back door.”

“Like we practiced. Put the magazine in. It should have rounds in it. The bottom rim has an arc that faces forward.” As I say the words I realize that it’s daytime, that she can see the direction of the ammunition, but she says “okay.”
“They’re both in. Hurry. I can hear them downstairs.”

“Pull the hammer back,” I say.

“What? What’s the hammer?”

“I mean the slide. Shit, the slide. We’ve practiced this. The top part, throw the slide back.”

“It’s sticking. Adam, they’re coming up the stairs.”

“Yell out to them, ‘I have a gun.’” She does. “And again,” I say. She says it again. “And I will shoot you.” I hear her say it, and she says “motherfuckers.” The baby is crying and “it’s sticking” is all she says to me.

“Do you remember?”

“Yes,” she says. “I know what to do but it’s sticking.” Her pitch is higher now. No one is on their way to them. I’m standing, and in my hand I’m holding the little Smirnoff bottle horizontally and trying to slide it open for her.

“Got it,” she says. Then, “They’re talking on the stairs. They said conference. They know about us, my god, they know you.”

“Say it again.”
“What?”

“The gun,” I say.

“I’ve got a gun,” she yells.

No one is on their way to help and the gun is loaded.

“If they open the door you shoot until the gun stops firing and then load the next one.”

There is finality in my voice and she says “no.” I hear it right before I hang up and dial 911. I sling information as fast as I can to the operator, but in the middle of giving our address I picture the safety on the gun, turned down, hiding the red eye. I hang up, call home and the metallic tone pulses on and off until the answering machine engages. It’s her morning voice: “You’ve reached Laura and Adam Bailey,” and my voice in the background, “and Emma” – she’s laughing – “we’re not in right now, but please leave a message and we’ll get back with you. Thank you.”

I listen to the entire thing and hang up and call back. When I get the message again I hang up immediately and call back. This time I let the whole message play again and sit with the phone in my hand, the beam of light from
the window now in my eyes. She can’t hear me even if I were to talk into the phone – the machine is downstairs - so I just listen, praying that the silence will somehow open up a direct line into the house, to her and her shaking aim. The silence in the line isn’t clear, it’s muffled. The machine is recording me listening, and I think there’s a chance, if I’m loud enough, she might be able to hear one word. I inhale deeply and scream out the word “safety,” over and over.
A select few know all the logging roads to the Top of the World. From that height, the view is magnificent: the land falls off steep to the lake and staring out over the water Wintric sees mature cottonwood and cedar mix with the town’s structures. He puts down his soda and continues cleaning his gun. Some of his classmates are on their way.

The Top of the World is cut into a hill outside the mountain town and a column of white smoke pushes out hard from the center and expands into a huge bowl. It can be seen for miles inside the rimmed dimensions of the forested basin and nearby lake. Inside, small town men strip and cut trees into boards. The work is tough, and as a reminder of their place in the world, unrelenting vapor billows from their building. Some of the workers tell their young children they’re making clouds – just as Wintric’s father had told him years ago - but from the Top of the World he watches the plume dissolve into the air well below the clouds.

The bet is up to thirty dollars, and the thirty-eight special feels just right in Wintric’s calloused hands. He’s gathered his long hair behind him in a band. A toe on his left foot claws at a fresh hole in his shoe from a nail he caught working
construction. He kicks some of construction paycheck to his parents for bills, but this betting windfall he keeps.

Young men dressed in flannel shirts shout obscenities as Wintric takes aim at a target the instigators squint to see. There are rules: they can shout and move about, anything, except touch him. Tall trucks with gnarly tires line up at their backs. In one of them Kristin sits, singing to country music. She’s seen him do this plenty of times, and she may even get a milkshake out of it if there’s any change left over. A tiny smile rounds at the corners of Wintric’s mouth; he knows it’s already over, but lets the boys go at him for a little longer. He’s got to play it up or people will stop wagering. He drops the gun to his side and shakes his head; he wipes his brow even though there’s no sweat. At last, he lifts the handgun and pictures the new shoes he’ll buy. They’re black steel-toe boots. The advertisement says you can drop a thousand pounds on them without as much as a dent.

He keeps both eyes open and sees the bullet’s trajectory all the way to the target. He’s been able to do this for as long as he can remember. One of the boys calls Wintric’s mother a name he’d normally fight over. It gets to Wintric enough for him to say, “Through the capital P.” The boy replies, “make it forty and when I win, I’ll give half to your ma for services rendered.”
Wintric has cocked the gun, so the trigger pull is light. A Pepsi can falls in the distance and he’s wearing new boots.

* 

Marcus messes up another black and white sundae. A little chocolate sauce on the bottom of the glass, a fat scoop of vanilla, marshmallow sauce, a scoop of vanilla, chocolate sauce, whipped cream, nuts, and a cherry. It’s not hard, but Marcus flusters easily and the gray haired woman in front of him is shaking her head, trying to talk above the crowd and spinning shake machines.

“No. Marshmallow in the middle son. Not the bottom. The middle.”

It’s Marcus’s fourth mistake and it’s not even the lunch rush, but it’s hot out and the line for the old fashioned soda fountain is out the door. It’s only like this in the summer. The lake brings them up from the valley to their second homes, and the main-street town awakens.

Marcus stands tall and awkward behind the counter in a white shirt with a banana split patch sewn onto the front. It’s his only shirt that isn’t black, and it has the splatter of an exploded strawberry shake. He doesn’t yet realize his eyebrow houses a sliver of banana as two female co-workers shoot around him filling orders for milkshakes, ice cream sodas, and cones. He dumps the ruined
sundae into the sink and grabs another glass beneath a “no outside food” sign. As he turns back around to face the crowd he notices Kristin. She’s just inside the door touching one of the cheap ceramic bowls. Wintric is there.

Marcus is seventeen and at the moment, completely aware of his attire. She has seen him working before and even says hello when they cross paths, but her presence still punctures him, and now, as she plants a cheek kiss on her boyfriend, the noises in the store lower and he can hear his insides working. His vision blurs for a moment, and when he comes to he sees the marshmallow ladle at the bottom of the new sundae glass. He wants to throw the whole thing, wants to take off his shirt and burn it. He wants to last longer than three months at a job. The gray haired woman turns to her companion and says “moron.” More people squeeze into the store. Some of them wear shirts with his town’s name on it like it’s a destination. Marcus has the ladle in his hand and marshmallow at the bottom of the glass.

He reaches back for another glass, stealing a glimpse at Kristin in a large mirror. She’s fixed on something, as are the other reflected faces. A few of them point. Over his left shoulder a woman turns olive colored and her eyes bulge. Her hands are at her throat and her female friend is banging at her lower back with a closed fist. Like the others, Marcus freezes. The choking woman goes
from olive to maroon. Her forehead veins appear as a maze. Something flashes by Marcus and one of his co-workers joins the woman’s friend beating at her back. He knows what do to, as do many of the people in the shop, but something silences their feet. The beating isn’t working and he’s holding a sundae glass in his hand. A few people huddle closer and Kristin takes a step in as well. Marcus looks at her and she looks frightened, but she bounds the last ten feet, pushes the swinging women away, and reaches around the choker. As Kristin vices down, Marcus notices the long muscles in her tanned forearms before they disappear into the woman’s midsection. A thick pretzel segment explodes out in a guttural sigh and rolls into the vanilla ice cream bucket.

Many of the customers have lost their appetites and leave before finishing. Playing into Marcus’s fear, Kristin and Wintric get seats right in front of him and Wintric says hi. Marcus says hello, but Kristin is already looking at the menu.

“That’s why we have the policy about outside food,” Marcus says, pointing to the sign above the glasses. “We only sell ice cream. Can’t choke on ice cream.” Kristin looks up at him with a fake smile before returning to the listings. Marcus would tear his tongue out if he could. Wintric orders a chocolate malt and she gets a banana split. The malt is easy, but at the store they have a policy on the order of the strawberry, vanilla and chocolate ice cream in
the split – each has a specific position - and he can’t remember it, so before he scoops it out he tilts his shirt up and looks at the patch. Marcus places their orders in front of them, but before turning away Kristin reaches over and touches him on the arm and fingers him closer. Marcus is confused and looks at Wintric, but he’s already into the malt. He can smell her perfume from three feet. He advances ear first, but she repositions his head straight on. His world is swirling as she stares just above his eyes and swipes at his lower forehead twice.

“There,” she says, leaning back. “A little banana”

*

Wintric and Kristin swim naked in the lake and the truck’s radio plays out the open windows. It’s just after midnight, and they drive right up to the shore and hop in. The water appears silver and dense like mercury. They tread out and slithery plants rub at their feet and calves. The level is down a bit and random stumps poke up from the beach. The moon blooms full and to the west a cloud of smoke from the mill marks the town’s center.

They laugh about a teacher who always has coffee breath, and Wintric tells Kristin he’s enlisted in the Army. He leaves two weeks after graduation. He’ll get a bonus for signing up. She’s guessed it for some time – he said he’d
never work the lumber - but she plays it for all it’s worth, splashing at the water and retreating quickly to the shore. She wants to cry – the moment deserves a scene – and she wants the tears. She needs him to see them run down her cheeks, but they don’t come to her. For some reason she can’t capture, the news isn’t troubling her. She knows the town sends lots of people into the military, and her father has commented on how it has saved many of the local kids.

The lake recedes down her body as she reemerges into gravity, and the mud hardens to pebbles. Her skin throbs under a slight sunburn and the soft air evaporates the moisture away. She poses in front of Wintric’s lifted Ford disappointed that she doesn’t know the song playing. It’s a perfect moment to sing. After a minute the rocks dig at her bare feet so she steps onto a nearby stump and stands on it.

She calls out over the radio, “How much is the bonus?”

Wintric has stayed in, letting her go about her business. He’s seen her productions before, and is a little surprised he didn’t get any crying. He swims in to where he can touch.

“Thirty thousand.”

“You’re going to the war.”
“Is there anything else?”

Something swims between his legs and he instinctively grabs his genitals. He doesn’t know much about the Army, but he knows he’ll get out of the pine-filled valleys that cut him off from what he calls “civilization.” There are other lakes in the world like the one he stands in. He can’t name one, but he’s sure there are cities with lakes right in the middle of them, and when you’re done swimming you walk a block to your apartment or to other city things that await your beck and call. And the sun shines warmer. And he doesn’t just want a taste, he wants to stay. He wants strangers surrounding him, people that don’t know about his family’s crumbling house or his father’s bad back or him repeating sixth grade. He needs the separation, even if it means aiming a weapon for real. It’s what he’s good at. It’s not ambition, it’s out of here.

Kristin balances on the stump. Her hips are filling out. Wintric knows she’ll never leave. They don’t tell each other that they’re in love. Even so, he’ll miss her when he departs. She’s all he’s known of romance and trust. He’d want her to get the folded flag if it ever came to that, and he wonders if that’s the definition of love.
Wintric hobbles out of the lake and gingerly walks to her. She smells like fish.

“You’ll have to cut your hair,” she says, and reaches down fingering the top of his head. “You’ll look bad with short hair.” She pauses, but doesn’t consider his feelings. “Do they charge for haircuts in the Army? Stupid if they did.”

“You kidding? It’s thirty grand a cut.”

*

Marcus prays his erection will go down before the bells rings. He has about ten minutes and he’s sure he’ll be fine, but Kristin is sitting two rows ahead to the right and every time she leans over to talk to her friend he catches a flash of her breasts covered in white cotton. He untucks his black shirt. A female voice trickles down through the air; something about lawyers.

The results of the career questionnaire rest on Marcus’s desk. He darts his eyes back to the top of it: (1) Doctor, (2) Teacher, (3) Accountant, (4) Lawyer, (5) Services. He had marked all of the questions to the far right. Even after glancing at it multiple times, seeing his name above “Doctor” sends a warm surge through him, but when he closes his eyes he can’t picture himself in the white
coat, can’t feel anything but the word and the sound of it from Kristin’s mouth.

It’s the same mouth he fantasizes about. Most nights he dreams her up in his doorway, has her take back the covers and go down on him.

As the lecture ends, the counselor weaves up and down the rows helping anyone with his or her hand raised. Marcus’s hands are in his lap, but Miss Sheroll stops beside him. She looks tired.

“They don’t have an ice cream question so you blow it off? Keep the paper, Marcus. Keep it and think of what you won’t be. When you wake up, we can talk.” The bell rings, and she leans in with bad coffee breath. “Not everyone has to go to the mill.” Then, with a smirk: “I wouldn’t assume they’ll be hiring.”

Marcus stays put, waiting, and Kristin walks up his row, books at her chest. He leans in just enough to get a whiff of her vanilla perfume.

*

Wintric and Kristin are in Reno for his flight to Texas. The slot machines near the casino buffet bang out their calls. The carpet underneath them is a dated turquoise, pink and black stew. He wears a gray shirt with Army across it and his hair reaches the middle of his back. He has taken four platefuls.
Wintric has never been on a plane before. His buddy told him to beware of the turbulence, but he doesn’t know what that means. When he pictures the inside of the plane, the images are from the movies and the seats are large and the stewardesses wear tight uniforms. They’re thin and smiling and carrying pillows.

“Are you going back for more?” Kristin asks.

“No, I’m good.”

“Is it time?”

“You want me out of here?” Wintric peeks up to make sure she feels the joke, but he already knows she’s his equal.

“As soon as possible.” Kristin wears his favorite outfit, but she hasn’t caught him glancing at the plunging neckline. It has her on edge. “Will you send me the hair?”

“You want me to overnight it?”

“They’re gonna wonder where the heck you came from with your hair.”

“The Army has to have people like us. That’s the point. Big-city people don’t enlist.”
“It saves the youth of our town.”

“What does?”

“The Army saves. That’s what my dad says.”

“I’m going on an airplane today.”

At the airport, Wintric checks his bag, and they walk together through the departure wing. A band from the local school plays a poor version of the William Tell Overture in the lobby and they stop to listen. The clarinets are especially awful, a squeak emanates every third bar, and the trumpets fail to keep the momentum from an already slowed version. Neither Wintric nor Kristin imagined a soundtrack to their goodbye, but here it is. There is another fifty feet to the metal detectors, but this is the spot. They’ve decided to write often, but that’s the only promise. They hug, and as he pulls away he looks down her shirt.

“I have a window seat,” he says. “I’ll be able to see it all.”

Wintric walks away, his pony tail bouncing in step. He doesn’t wave, and when he passes through the metal detector he lifts his hands up.

*
Marcus has twenty minutes before he enters stage left on a summer community play. He’s knows everyone is worried about him even though the cast is mostly people from the retirement home and other high school kids that don’t mind a horrible paying summer gig. The director told him it would be okay to sit out until he was more comfortable. Julian, an ostentatious seventy year old with a bad hip, knows Marcus’s lines and could cover for him, but Marcus refused. It’s not that he doesn’t know the words, it’s his demeanor. His character is fiery and impassioned – a man fighting for his land - and Marcus is none of these things. He has played his character poorly in rehearsals, but this is community theater in a small town, so they let him keep the part because he knows the lines and helped paint the backdrops.

The auditorium is half-filled, and his mother sits somewhere in the darkness. He wonders if she brought a fifth of Beam. It’s her perfume now that his father took off. Marcus has begun to like the scent, and in the end she’s there in the uncomfortable folding chair. Other parents are not.

The actors are sweating under the lights. There are three pages before he is on. Marcus wears thin overalls and his hat is too large for him, but he’s ready. He doesn’t think about Kristin until one of the other actors backstage says her name. Suddenly, Marcus invents her in the back row of the auditorium, in the
dark. He imagines she has sneaked in alone to watch him perform, and she’s
leaning forward, mouth slightly open. She has not told him she was coming and
there’s no proof that she’s there, but Marcus doesn’t care. A hand pats him on
the back and he’s on.

The stage is larger than he remembers, and as he takes the long walk to
the aged railroad man, his mother shouts his name. There’s laughter. He’s
supposed to look at the railroad man, introduce himself as the farmer and owner
of the land they’re considering throwing tracks on, but he stares out to the black
back row as he nails his lines. The conversation lasts six minutes and Marcus
doesn’t move his focus. The railroad man ad-libs “look at me” twice and then
gives in and gazes at the back of the room as well. The background actors
follow.

Marcus doesn’t know that Kristin actually watches from the fourth row
where the cusp of light fades out. She sees the farmer and railroad man talk
about one another, but they don’t look at each other, and quickly, the play has
changed in a way no one quite understands. The audience leans forward. They
want to know what they’re missing. They want to know why no one looks at
one another. The railroad man gets mad, demands the five thousand acres, but
the farmer is in a trance, almost as if he doesn’t hear him. The farmer’s hat keeps
on sliding down, and his voice has taken on a rhythm; it’s a desperate rhythm and it fills the room as nothing in the previous twenty minutes have.

Marcus is in the middle of his speech. He stands with his arms at his side, slightly hunched over. He’s talking to Kristin in the seat he can’t see. He’s placed her there and he’s put her in a white cotton shirt. He hurls his lines out with each breath. The door opens at the back of the auditorium – a late arrival - and the hallway sheds enough light to illuminate the empty back rows. Marcus hesitates long enough for the director to whisper his next line. His hat has slouched down again, and he grabs it and flings it into the crowd. He glances around at the railroad man and the other background actors as they all stare at the back of the room.

Kristin watches the farmer’s hat fly up and float down into the ambient light. The air is silent and the entire cast focuses on a far off point as the farmer takes in their faces for the first time. The farmer appears confused and talks with absolute heartbreak. His hair is crazy. The farmer speaks of his land as one would of a lover. His pace is faster and his voice cracks back and forth. His eyes scan the auditorium sporadically and the audience feels included and they reach out to meet him. Kristin breathes. The play has become an interaction, and her feet tingle. The farmer appears lost on stage and he delivers his final words
exiting, what appears to be too soon, so that he is off-stage when his voice comes out of the ruffled curtain: “and my heart in the wheat.” There is no scene break in the play, but the actors remain silent, as does the audience. Backstage, everyone hears Marcus stamp his feet on the floor and call out the word “moron.”

He hits himself on the side of his head before leaving the building. He has more dialogue in Act III, but he doesn’t return. When the farmer’s lines arrive a confident Julian limps out to center stage, but before he reaches his mark, the crowd buzzes and Marcus’s mother screams out “Bullshit!”

* 

Above Kristin’s old prom dress, on the top shelf of her closet, sits a box holding two feet of hair. She knows it’s there, but hasn’t moved it in four months. On the far right of the closet hang four white shirts and three pairs of brown pants. They are her work clothes. The supermarket – the only one in town- loans them the logoed apron for each shift. It has a picture of a smiling deer family on the front.

She thought about college, but never completed the applications, so she took the checkout job after graduation. She doesn’t love it or hate it, it’s just her
life and already she cannot think of doing anything else. If she keeps out of trouble, she can get a dollar raise every six months.

After work one evening, Kristin grabs her sleeping bag and drives out to a campsite at the lake. When she pulls up, her two girlfriends are finishing setting up the tent near a solitary dead tree and one of them holds up a bottle of rum and shakes it. Kristin knows about the outdoors, and realizes her friends have picked the worst possible September location. There is no protection from the breeze, the bathrooms are upwind and the lake is a good fifty yards away. But Kristin doesn’t care; this is how she relaxes. It’s only fifteen minutes from town, but it’s far enough.

Marcus drives his ugly green Forest Service truck up to the payment box at the campground. He opens each numbered slot and marks his camp sheet. His uniform almost matches the truck. He drives ten miles an hour through the one way maze of campsites, each with a rusting barbeque grill and picnic table. Some of the campers haven’t paid, but he strolls along with the window open, returning waves. He likes it out here. He doesn’t know most people, and they treat him with respect.
He sees Kristin’s car and the three girls sitting around a fire too large for the pit. The truck stops itself, and before he can convince himself otherwise he is halfway to them, kicking at the fading grass. One of the girls tosses the bottle at the tent only to have it slide back down the zipped-up screen entrance. He knows all of them and expects them to call his name in relief, but it’s too dark and all they see is his uniform.

Kristin, not quite drunk, stands quickly. She has to focus hard to see it’s Marcus, but when she does, she says his name and watches as his shoulders relax. The girls invite him to sit down. Kristin fetches the bottle and Marcus accepts. He says nothing about their payment, nothing about the fire so close to the tree, but he does talk, sparingly at first and then more openly. Yes, he’s a ranger. He patrols campgrounds throughout the area. He’s self-deprecating and thin, and he’s chugging the bottle. He avoids her eyes, and for the first time she cares about it. They all laugh and talk about high school and Kristin tells a story she thinks is new to him, but halfway through remembers that Marcus was there. She asks him why he didn’t interrupt her and he nods. She talks to the other two girls. She tells them about the play; she says the words breathless and stunning. She describes the details, the silence, the tension, the craziness in Act III. Marcus smiles into the fire.
It’s eleven-thirty when one of the drunken girls asks Marcus if he has to report back. He’s an hour late. They’ll think he fell asleep. When he gets to the truck the fuel gauge is on empty and the light is on. He’s excited and overwhelmed. He coasts into the station lot and asks a co-worker for a ride. Marcus tries to stand up straight, but his knees feel like they’ve disappeared.

*

It’s March and the Forest Service Supervisor tells Marcus they’re letting him go. He’s been on for eight months. He’s not arguing, but she’s listing the reasons besides over-manning: sleeping on the job, the lone tree fire last fall, attitude. She tells him that she thinks the mill has just started hiring again. Marcus can’t help but smile. It’s been two months since he lost his virginity to Kristin, and although there were no promises, they’ve met up a few more times and agreed to get together later that night.

The station is two miles from town, but Marcus walks back in the dirty snow because he hasn’t saved up for a car, but a motorcycle for sale sits in his neighbor’s yard. He stays just off the shoulder of the road – the last level inches before the small berm – and passes the airport. There’s a couple single prop jobs
tied to the tarmac and a fire bomber that’s about to take off and hit an early blaze in the valley. Marcus has heard about it, but there’s no smoke to prove it’s real.

He passes a worn down storage shed, the decent Mexican restaurant – the sixth restaurant in the haunted location – and the car wash. He raises his arm to slap the green city limit sign and takes in the familiar “POP 2200” and “ELEV 4525.” A couple years before rumors floated that the sign would change, that they were taking a new census, but nothing happened and people eventually forgot about it. Then, without notice, the sign was altered. The town lost twenty-four people. No one knew who they were. They didn’t repaint the altitude and the last “5” has almost faded away completely.

Marcus is smoking a cigarette by the time he gets to the gas station. It’s a recent habit, and he loves it. He can’t get enough of the smell on his clothes and in his apartment. He doesn’t cough at all. Kristin won’t touch them, but she doesn’t say anything when she’s over. Marcus walks past the entrance of the mill, past a bank and pauses in front of the ice cream shop. Two teenage girls dust empty bar stools. He passes the old theater that’s now a church, the park with bent basketball rims, and stops on a bridge. He pauses on the railing and surveys the cold water. It’s not a big river, but it’s constant, and he wonders how the lake can sit low in the summer with all the water running underneath him.
His apartment is cold. The ice on the roof is thawing slowly. He turns the thermostat up to eighty hoping it will hit sixty-five. Pasta sits out on the table for the dinner he was going to prepare quickly after work. The living room calls to him and he lights another cigarette. Marcus stares out the window, over to the post office. It’s an old building with two flights of stairs and they’re just now constructing a path for the handicapped. Marcus has never been in a wheelchair and wonders if anyone in the town will use the ramp. It’ll be a longer route, but easier on the legs.

At dinner, Kristin gives him a red shirt. He hates it, but promises her he’ll think about it. Later, she asks him if he wants her to do anything special, and he says yes. Marcus gives her detailed instructions on his fantasy, explains its history and how it’s to be carried out. He undresses, positions himself in bed under all the blankets, closes his eyes and waits. The streetlight shines in just enough that when he opens his eyelids and sees her in the doorway he knows it’s really her.

* 

Kristen wanted to see Wintric in his uniform, but he’s in sweatpants. She nudges him with her elbow. They’re on her couch. She’s curled her hair and
squeezed into her best jeans. It’s been just under a year since Reno. Under normal circumstances she would palm the back of his head feeling the sharp tension of a size one haircut, but she’s not thinking about hair. She hasn’t even mentioned his package in the closet.

Wintric’s protective boot is parked on the coffee table. It still hurts him if it dips below his heart too long. She wants to see it, but he tells her he doesn’t think it’s a good idea, at least not yet. Thirty minutes later he pulls at the Velcro on the top of the foot. He slides the boot off, then the black sock and finally, the nylon. It’s the left one. A quarter of his biggest toe is the only thing that remains of the digits, and half of his foot is missing on an arc, creating a crescent from the base of the ankle to the truncated toe. Kristen asks to touch it and Wintric tells her yes, but she doesn’t move. She wants to know how it happened. He hasn’t told anyone.

“It doesn’t matter,” Wintric says. “If I say someone shot it off I’m a hero, but if I stepped on my own knife I’m a fool. Either way, I got a third of a foot. A scythe foot.”

“A scythe foot?”
“Doc told me it’s used to cut wheat down. Got a big curved blade on it. Grim reaper carries one.” He lifts his foot and swings it left. “Knocks ’em down for harvest.”

She’s not looking at the foot. Her eyes swing up to his, and he sees it. It’s the pity he despises. He’s seen it from everyone.

“Sometimes I think about chopping the whole thing off. Maybe then I’ll deserve the fucking sympathy.”

He’s surprised her, and she leans back.

“Don’t do this,” he says. “Don’t look at me like I’ve changed.”

“You have half a foot. I’m not supposed to feel anything? It’s enough that you’re back.”

“You think I’m back?”

Wintric grabs his gear and hurriedly puts on the nylon and sock and fastens the boot up. He stands up and the spiked blood rushes down his leg. He can’t hold it in. The sound he makes brings Kristin’s hand to her mouth. She doesn’t know what to do so she locks the door and blocks it.

“Sit down,” she says.
She feeds him two of his pain pills, and his face flushes out. It’s against the label, but he asks for a beer and she gets him one. They talk about what he saw in Texas and in the desert. He tells her he’s looking into work down south in manufacturing, but she knows he’s lying. She kisses him on the hand and he leans in. He can’t move his leg, so she undresses herself and pulls his sweatpants down to his knees.

After, Wintric grabs a packet of cigarettes and says “I know” before lighting one. The drugs take their effect, and he leans his head on the back of the couch. It’s a small place and Kristin takes the five steps to the refrigerator. She hasn’t put her pants back on, and Wintric wonders where they’ll live. There’s talk of twenty new homes out by the airport, and he sees himself on his hands and knees, his back bending at awkward angles as he nails roofing in the sun.

“Can I get you anything?” she asks.

“Naw.”

“Are you sure?”

He still has her taste in his mouth, and he knows she’ll always ask him if he’s sure. She’ll offer to carry things. His foot is back up on the coffee table. He
feels as good as he possibly can, but he thinks of cutting off the rest, making it clean to the ankle.

* 

Marcus’s coworkers have a bet on when the Bumble Bee will blow something up. Some of them have known him since grade school and as long as they can remember he has worn black. This, they say, is a sign; of what, no one knows, but they figure it can’t be good. And he rides his bright yellow motorcycle to and from work. They know he has broken up with Kristin, the one thing he had going for him – it’s been four weeks now – and they wonder if he should be removed from the heavy machinery. He’s become clumsy around the saw, and it’s just a matter of time. But today, people up and down the line notice his eagerness. He works fast, and he has all of his safety gear on.

Marcus lets the excitement brew in him. Kristin told him their breakup had nothing to do with Wintric’s return, but Marcus knows differently. He’s followed them to the Top of the World while they parked. He’s watched her take him into her place, watched the lights go out. But some nights they leave them on and he can see their shadows on the thin blinds. Last night he went right up
to the window. They were arguing. After Wintric left, Marcus sat underneath a
tree in the dark for two hours.

After work, Marcus stops by his apartment and changes into the red shirt.
He checks for Wintric’s Jeep before approaching Kristin’s door. She answers in a
torn shirt and her eyes are red from crying. Marcus asks where Wintric is and
she tells him.

After Marcus leaves, Kristin calms herself down. She doesn’t know if
Marcus can figure out all of the roads to get there. She thinks of letting it all play
out, but decides to call Wintric on his cell phone and warn him. She tells him she
doesn’t know what to do, but that Marcus looked like he could blow something
up. She hangs up, waits ten minutes, and calls the cops.

*  

A lit plume of smoke pours upward from the mill, dissipating into the
stars. Wintric has been coming to the Top of the World for years, but lately he’s
come alone. He doesn’t make a fire. He rests in a cheap nylon folding chair and
steadies his bad foot on a block of wood.

The night is cool and he’s sipping at a fifteen year scotch his neighbor
gave him when he came home in the boot. The streetlights on Main Street line
up like a runway. It’s been fifteen minutes since Kristin’s call, and a lone motorcycle speeds across the dark expanse well below him, and although he knows there is a causeway underneath the tires, it seems as though the bike zips along the top of the water. The velocity is amazing, the oval headlight beaming the black away full throttle. The bugs are out and Wintric wonders if Marcus’s helmet is covered with flattened bodies.

Wintric hears the bike. The throttle sound changes like a song depending on the ridge, the turn, and the grade. Soon, the bike’s gravely throat is on him, the light making the final turn.

Marcus has brought a bow, slung across his chest, and without saying anything he unfurls the weapon over his head. Wintric remains seated, and lifts the bottle to his lips. He’s not used to the scotch and coughs at its warmth. Marcus fumbles badly in his attempt to place an arrow on the string, and Wintric knows he’s never shot before. Finally, Marcus gets a full draw on Wintric from twenty yards.

“Hey, can you take the other half of this foot off for me?”

“I’ll kill you here.”

“Lower. I’ll shake it for you. There, I know it’s dark.”
“Don’t believe me, you son of a bitch?”

“I believe you, Marcus. But right now, tonight, it doesn’t matter. You want Kristin? Go buddy. Take the town. You like scotch? Take it, cause it don’t like me none.”

Wintric squints. “Hey, you wearing red?”

The sharp whipping sound of the arrow cuts the air above Wintric’s head.

“There we go. Come on. Yeah Marcus.” Wintric’s voice is mad. He drops his leg off the log and yells out and tumbles off his chair to the ground. He rolls clutching his foot, stops on his back, and pulls his left knee to his chest.

“Come on!”

But Marcus has frozen in place, holding the bow away from his body. Wintric braces himself up on his elbows, breathing hard.

“You brought one arrow?” Wintric says.

Marcus lowers himself to the ground.

“Her shirt is torn,” he says.

“Not me old buddy.”
On the causeway below, three patrol cars scream out. The reds and blues of their lights play in the dim landscape like colored insects.

“We got ten minutes,” Wintric says. “What you want to do?”

“You came back.”

“You’re the only one surprised.”

Marcus jumps to his feet and rushes to the bike, but before he gets there he stops and lifts his bow. In one fluid motion he spins and hurls the bow toward town, launching it high in the air with a savage grunt. Immediately, he slouches like he regrets the act.

The cops have disappeared, now negotiating the forty three switchbacks, five road changes, and two navigable streams. Wintric pulls himself back into his seat. The town lights flicker, and then darken completely.

Wintric and Marcus stare at their invisible city from the Top of the World.

“It’s funny,” Wintric says. “I know it’s still there,”

Marcus passes his bike and starts down the steep hill. He stumbles a few moments later, kicking up a small landslide of rocks. Wintric hears him in the dark, searching for something Wintric knows he’ll never find.
NATURE CALLS

We work the Boy Scout camp because of the psychedelic mushrooms. The area around the compound is ripe with them. My friend Dax learned to pick the good ones from his cousin, and since he, Randy, and I are holed up in a remote campsite to oversee the archery range, we eat them freely.

We teach the boys – and two girls - how to shoot bows and throw hatchets under the guise of survival skills. We’re supposed to respond to any animal threats to campsites with a rifle the head supervisor loaned us, but there’s nothing. We blatantly lied about our training, and why not, it’s throwing a hand axe. The pay is horrible, and the frontier costumes we wear smell like fresh kill, but the mushrooms make up for it.

Above us the Northern California sun burns in the mid eighties as the pine needles and dust stain our ridiculous buckskin chaps.

Camps run Monday through Friday afternoon, and two of the three of us always have a class or chaperone responsibilities going on, but we break the time up evenly. Some weekends we take Randy’s car into the small town nearby, and hope to run into some girls, but for the most part we’re at camp, continuing to shed our families’ university expectations.
We’ve made our campsite our own, fashioning a rock pit for fires, and a bench that leans towards the lake.

I wake from an early afternoon nap as Randy busts into the tent. He’s massive, and his entrance shakes the corners of the world. His sweaty fat fingers dig and rub at his crotch.

“Randy.” I confirm, through the aching throb that is my vision.

“Burning me. Burning. Firecrackers on my dick. Damn things blowing up.”

Our tent filters the light around his large back. I feel for my face then glance at my fingers to check my state. We’ve been at it hard recently, but I think I’m clean at the moment, and decide to be clever.

“Some would interpret this situation as divine, with that halo surrounding you.” He doesn’t react. “Nothing there buddy. You better not have eaten the last two or I’ll kick your ass,” I say, not finding his trip amusing. I reach behind the water bottles. The bag is empty.

“I heard her calling for me. I saw stars in the trees but the trees were her legs and the stars were filling up her pussy and exploding all over.” Then, as if
surprised: “Snake, snake, blue snake. I gave her my blue snake,” he says laughing.

“You sweaty bastard, we have a schedule. You have a class going on? Randy, where’s Dax?”

He crouches down on the flimsy nylon floor, and removes his wide brimmed hat, his red hair all mashed down. Randy’s face has fattened up over the past few years. His cheeks maintain a meaty dangle over their bones.

“I’m okay if we’re in a shuttle. Shuttlin up to the sun.”

“Don’t throw up.” I groan, even though I know he will. I lace up my dirty clothes. “You better thank God I love you.” I pause to grab his hat even though it’s too big. “Say it before I leave. You never know. Randy, I love you.”

“I love you too,” he says, now on his back, pawing at the space above his eyes.

Before I get to the range I see arrows flying above the tree tops. The boys are launching them straight up in the air. They yell to one another as I arrive and posture innocence.

“Dax?” I yell out scanning the area.
“Grand Fox,” says a skinny scout.

“Yes?”

“Grand Fox. Swift Beaver went to look for wood to make more arrows.”

“Of course he did. Keep it up boys. You’re doing great. You,” I say pointing to the tallest. “You’re in charge while I go get Swift Beaver.”

“Is Lightning Man okay?” asks the appointed scout, trying to keep a straight face. “He said something about stars and pussy.”

“Just fine,” I say, already happily strolling out from the range to the last place we scouted. It isn’t far: a hundred yards or so through thick manzanita brush near a crest at the boundary of the park, out by the cliffs where scouts are forbidden. Dax is there gathering on his hands and knees, his little legs tuck underneath. On the horizon rests Mount Lassen and its slithering fingers of ice.

“Randy’s jacked back at the tent.”

“Figured,” he says, reaching down past the needles into the beautiful dark soil beneath a sugar pine. “Just you?”

“Yeah.”
Shouts from our group of scouts arrive followed by an arrow crashing through branches just behind us. Another skims through the very tops of the trees.

Dax says, “Little bastards.”

“That’s quite a pull from the range.”

“They didn’t have a scoutmaster so screw em.”

“They should know better.”

We have about a half a bag full of the mushrooms when a bear, and what appears to be its cub, stroll across our view, then away from us. My eyes adjust to the shadows. The bears are red. I wait a minute and they’re still red.

“I’ve never heard of a red bear,” I say, and immediately start thinking of all the bears I know. “Grizzly bears, Black bears, Brown bears, Kodiak bears.”

Dax says, “Look at that. Never seen a bear before.”

“You’ve never been to the zoo?”

“I’ve seen a Polar bear.”

“That’s a bear.”
“Not a real one. It was swimming.”

The red bears carry on without noticing us. They look fragile against the towering trees. As they crest a slight rise in the distance they merge with the land, and I lose them.

“Not the slightest bit interested,” I say.

“It was playing with a ball in the water.”

On our way back to the tent we pass the abandoned archery range where bows lie scattered about. The targets are still up on the hay bales, untouched. Dax and I start cleaning up the area, and a flushed Randy joins us with his hands raised.


“You stink,” Dax replies.

“Yeah, maybe had little too much. The ole stomach fought me, but it was well worth it. Incredible, best sex I ever had.” Randy grabs his crotch, and it reminds me of an opportunity. “How’d class go?” he asks mockingly.

“Our best one yet,” I say. “Little Robin Hood bastards, all of them. But listen, I’m calling the girls. They’ll be up tonight.”
“Look who’s taking the lead. Damn right, buddy,” Randy says, pleased.

“You must be dying for it. I thought you were doing me a favor with yours, being the good wingman. But hell, she ain’t bad at all.” He glances sideways at Dax. “He could ask em to bring a friend.”

“A fat one,” says Dax.

“Got it,” I say. “I’ll ask them what they can do.”

“Two hundred plus,” Randy says. “He deserves nothing less.”

The two of them start play fighting. Randy slaps Dax on the face. Suddenly, we are interrupted by four high pitched screeches from the alarm. There is a speaker at our campsite as well. Every Friday evening we have a test alarm, simulating a dangerous animal in camp. We’ve forgotten, and it isn’t the first time. One of us has to be to the center of the camp within the allotted five minutes with the rifle. It is a hell of a run, and we take turns making the dreaded sprint only to be met by the camp manager, stopwatch in hand, dry smirk at the ready.

“Ignore it,” Dax says in my direction. “He’ll forgive us.” Then with a higher pitch: “He always does.”
“Let’s not lose this gig,” says Randy, still smiling, now at me.

“You like this?” I say condescendingly. It’s my turn to run, but I have an out. “Your tough life? You owe me for this afternoon.”

“You went and picked, you bastard.”

“Go,” I say. “We had a schedule and you screwed me.”

I have him, and wait for the foot stomp and the drawn out obscenity. It comes. Randy tells us he loves us, and takes off.

He returns a half hour later gesturing wildly with his hands, getting into character, holding an imaginary stopwatch in the air: “He says to me, ‘Six minutes eighteen seconds! What the fuck is that? Randy, you want to see some kids killed out here cause it’ll happen. A bear will wander in, snatch a kid up and start chewin on him and it ain’t pretty. You think that’s funny? Keep on laughin cause they’ll be blood and guts and shit all over the place and these bears, they’re the shit holes from Yosemite, they’ll eat em up. Eat em up whole.’”

He performs this with an exaggerated wipe of his mouth, and forces a belch. “You know what?” he continues, as himself. “I don’t care at all, because gentlemen, nature’s pussy erupted this afternoon.” Randy extends his arms as if
this occurrence is measureable. “Now, how many did you guys get out there? I didn’t check before my workout.”

“Enough for the ladies,” I say.

“Good, they’re going to need em.”

*

Later that night, two local girls Randy and I met in between camps arrive at the tent. I told them to bring a third if it was convenient. Apparently, it was not. We built a small fire in the pit. They are like all decent looking small town girls: overconfident of their beauty and afraid of competition. They bring some pot with them, and I can tell Dax is trying his best to deal, telling jokes, and whipping out rants on how we are the enlightened ones. He tries to get it all in before the stuff kicks in. I can tell if he’s trying to impress the girls, but they show no interest. I start to bitch about the food when Randy’s girl, a hefty blonde clearly not nineteen years old, tells us that if we want some good eats we should kill ourselves a fawn. She says there are tons of black tails running around this time of year, and the babies are just right for picking.
“You just chase them a little bit. Their only defense is lying down and hiding. You get one scared and bedded down and you can slit its throat no problem.”

“I’d do it in a second,” Randy says. “I’ve always wanted to mount something.”

“It’s a baby deer, you dumb shit,” I say. “You’re going to mount a little baby deer head?”

“I ain’t scared of nothing.”

“Smoke it over the fire,” Randy’s girl says. “It’ll change your life.”

The weed is working and we transition to the mushrooms. They are so fresh the smell alone intoxicates. Slowly, we break up into three groups, slightly edging away from each other. Randy and his girl are at it pretty good, and I wonder if they will continue right there, in front of us. They do. The other girl sits by me. She’s slim and shy with dark make-up over her eyes, and is quietly staring at the fire, or perhaps past it; I consider that she might want Dax, sitting alone, silent as well. Dax has never stolen a girl from me before, but he was laying it on pretty thick. Something breaks inside of me – I hear it - while picturing them together. I wonder if she will sleep with him or just sit in his
arms. Randy’s girl moans loudly. I act quickly, and feed the girl at my side a mushroom. I feel her tongue slide over the tip of my thumb. I brush her cheek as softly as I can, but still she says “be gentle.”

“Just relax,” I say, and kiss her mouth. She smiles like she knows what’s going to happen. “Oh, you’ve done this before,” I whisper.

“No.” There are no answers from her body.

“Just relax and enjoy the colors. They’re coming. And if you feel sick, just let me know, but there’s little I can do.”

“Messed up already,” she says.

“Nice. You didn’t come up here for the weed. No one’s in the tent.”

Her head bobs loosely. She says, “Shit, look at the fire. The fire’s on fire.”

A mosquito buzzes my ear, but it’s the size of a falcon.

Inside, the tent smells of sweat, and the loose clothes catch our feet. I push her down on one of the bags, and follow with a dramatic fall. She slams her tongue into my mouth, and pulls the back of my neck as if she wants to draw me in whole; it hurts. She smells like campfire smoke, and we clumsily tear at each other; our arms fling wildly reaching for one another’s face in the dark. She
catches me in the neck with her fingernails. My hearing fails, but the colors: reds and oranges and yellows spin into one another and speed by. My body tries to keep up with their astonishing pace. Her clothes fit her snug, but come off smooth and fly away. I come as soon as I enter her. I let my body jolt and flail and finally, exhale. Slowly, I hear my breathing and, once regulated, nothing else. It’s dark again, and somewhere below me in that great expanse she moves, but only slightly. My hands feel for her stomach, but I am standing; then, putting on my pants I hear her.

“It’s cold,” she calls.

“Yes it is.”

A wind picks up around the tent. I slide a shirt on.

“Help me find my clothes.”

“It’s dark.”

“Please, I don’t feel well.”

“It’ll pass, trust me.” I drop to my hands and knees and feel around.

“Use the flashlight.” It’s Randy’s voice.

“Dax’s got it.”

“Well, he took off. Can’t blame him. But he told me he loved me so everything’s cool. Hey, just come out here. It’s all good.”

I leave my girl some clothes, and walk out to the log bench we’d fashioned earlier in the summer. It took us a week to do because we used a live tree. Randy and his girl sit by each other smoking more weed. His girl blows her smoke up into the air above; her throat has new welts forming. She asks about her friend.

“She’s coming,” I say.

“Had to wait until you left huh,” laughs Randy.

“Screw you.”

“Love you, bro.”

“Love you, too.”

“That’s weird,” Randy’s girl says, with an annoyed pitch. “You guys telling each other that shit. You said it before.”
“Who the hell are you?” shouts Randy.

She leans as far away as she can, teetering with her balance. Randy’s skin is crimson, even in the firelight. I guess he’s going to hit her, in the past he’s done similar for less, but he gives it to her verbally, and when it’s over she sits silent. He whispers to her. I can’t hear, but I know he’s explaining how we’d lost Jeff, our fourth, in a car accident, and how we’ve promised each other certain things that from the outside may seem odd, but were, in fact, imbued in our relationship. He was lecturing her about how we would do anything for each other, like a brotherhood. But when he stops whispering she laughs and calls him a bad boy and bumps him with her shoulder.

“Enough of that,” he says evenly. “Round two. It’s a little early but what the hell. Let’s get this going again. These ladies drove all the way up here to have a good time and a good time they shall have. Go get her and bring her out.”

I don’t move; the buzz is still going, but fading gently as I try to focus on what just happened. Sparks jump up, some of them undoubtedly real. Randy and his girl are whispering again and she smiles and takes a peek at me. Toads belch out from the pond, and a burning log falls flat.
The zipper from the tent moves, and my girl steps out in Dax’s buckskin pants and Randy’s shirt from earlier in the afternoon. The pants she’s rolled up to her calves, but the shirt sleeves run past her hands. Randy and his girl chuckle. She is much younger than I remember.

“You might want to change that shirt, honey,” Randy offers. “It’s had a rough day.”

“It’s what you gave me,” she says, looking at me. “I can’t find anything in there.”

“Fire’s heating up, give it a minute,” I say.

“Fine.”

I watch her walk around the fire to her friend and touch her head before circling to the bench and squatting next to me. She smells rancid. I don’t acknowledge her presence and still she tilts in and puts her head on my shoulder, rubbing her cheek back and forth. Her hand pushes to the inside of my thigh and rests there, bright yellow nail polish on her small fingers.

“Looks like you made a friend there,” Randy’s girl says. “Good for you guys.”
When Dax staggers back into camp Randy and his girl have stepped into the tent well into their second trip. My girl is asleep on a pile of blankets Randy threw out for us. Her mouth is open and she snores. Dax sits across the fire. He lets his hair fall about his temples.

“I think I saw Ishi out there,” he says with a thin smile. “Finding your way back while tripping, let’s just say I could’ve used a compass.” Then looking at the girl asleep: “A keeper,” he says.

“Yeah, I guess you should know, I’m in love,” I say. “We have it all worked out. Two kids, she’ll work at the bank and, oh well, it felt good for ten seconds.”

One of the tent walls jars out and bounces back. Randy lets out a roar. He wants us to know.

“Randy trying to set a record?” Dax asks.

“His girl said something about our parting words.”

“Oh,” he says knowingly. “So he’s making her pay.”

“As only he can.”

A light whistle sounds from the tree branches.
“I was thinking while trekking through the woods. We’re probably heroes for someone. We do what we want.”

“Throw me the bag. I need another.”

Randy comes out of the tent naked and sits down on the bench with an arm around me. Ants huddle at my feet.

“Time to become monsters,” I say, directly at the ants. I can tell Randy wants to share some details of his tryst.

He says, “I got a crazy one guys, but she’s out. Chicks can’t handle the stuff. Can you believe that little deer story?” He shook his arm. “My arm is green. I’m just saying that. I know it’s not, but it’s green.”

“So you’re not afraid of anything, huh?” Dax says.

“It worked didn’t it? She won’t walk tomorrow, believe me.” He gives my neck a pat. I’m tired and worn out, and I wonder if my dreams will haunt me. When I don’t respond, Randy pats me again. “Hey, you out of it or what?” he asks.

“He’s in love,” says Dax.

“Nice,” says Randy. “She’s got a tight body. Bet it felt tight.”
“Yes,” I mumble. The segmented bodies on the ants puff up into balloons.

*

Well into the early morning, my head hurts from the last trip. Nature calls lull us along. I don’t want to sleep with my girl. Randy is still naked and he talks with Dax.

“Are they staying the night?” Dax asks.

Randy gets up and pisses in the first grouping of brush.

“He can only hope so,” Randy notes, nodding over to me as he slaps his bare butt. “What do you think of this body huh? Sexy. But seriously, I’m pissing light waves over here. I know it’s not light waves, but I’m pissing white light.”

The alarm comes like a thunderclap; its energy shocks us to our feet. My girl, almost having rolled into the fire draws up on her knees afraid. There’s a ten second silence as a heartbeat floods my head. Again it comes, four violent shrieks. Both girls are up hugging each other. How many times has it sounded? The girls yell in ten second intervals. I sit down, feeling weak, realize I am sitting, and jump back up; Randy has his hands in the air saying something drowned out by the piercing sound. Is he laughing? Dax hasn’t changed
positions yet he holds the rifle; it looks as though he might cry as he smacks the stock. The alarm stops. Someone is waiting. I bring my hands off my ears.

“I’ve never shot before,” Dax says as if talking to himself. But he stares at me and holds the gun with both hands like it’s slippery. Randy is clapping his hands. “If they’re fucking with us,” he says. But Dax keeps his eyes on me and I know he fears me. He shakes the gun. “Here,” he cries. “Here.” But he doesn’t move toward me; he bends oddly at the waist, feet together. He screams, “I’ve never shot!”

I stand motionless and mute, holding my breath, taking in his eyes. From the distance they look like narrow slits in his head, but I know they’re dark green like the needles of trees.

Dax takes a step sideways and runs into the darkness.

Randy and his girl sit down on the blankets, my girl, with me on the bench.

“He didn’t say it,” Randy says, pumping both of his hands in and out.

“I would’ve gone,” offers Randy’s girl.

“Yeah,” Randy says. “Should have.”
She plants a wet kiss on him. As he wipes his mouth I recall his earlier performance, after the test alarm, as the camp manager. I picture a bear eating a scout, but it’s animated like a cartoon no matter how hard I try. My girl nuzzles me, and I let her touch my hair and body.

“We might hear it when it happens,” Randy’s girl says.

We sit hushed, awaiting an echo. The sky begins to light. A piercing thud finally arrives, reflecting hard off the pond. I stroke my girl’s hair. Another shot rings out, and another. Then comes the silence, just long enough for the air to clear, before another shot sounds. I don’t know how many bullets the gun holds, and I’m about to ask.

“Got to be a Black bear,” Randy’s girl says. “They’ll eat you. Griz just knocks you around.”

“We saw two bears,” I say. All of them turn their faces to me.

Someone asks, “Black bears?”

I don’t know how to respond. I should just say yes, but I recall their beautiful red coats, and wonder if they were real.
Jonas barely feels the idling car underneath him. He lingers in the driver’s seat with his hands on the wheel, listening to the engine noise filter through fiberglass, aluminum, plastic and leather. It mixes with the pulsing heartbeat in his fingers. He’s decided to take a minute to breathe because Jonas knows if he exits the sanctuary of the garage he’ll drive all night or at least long enough to make his wife worry. That’s his real goal. The timed light on the garage opener goes dark, and all Jonas can see are his naked hands folded over the wheel. He pushes the radio on and turns it up. He searches for a hard rock song, but it’s late and the six programmed stations are playing slow songs. Jonas senses his clothes shrinking and he pulls at his shirt sleeves. His dad told him there would be nights like this in a marriage.

“There’ll be disagreements and heartache and ego. Be a man and deal. “

Jonas thinks about the word and the emphasis his father had placed on it. What does it mean, deal? He pictures playing cards. There are pictures of babies on them. He gazes out at his neighbor’s solar landscape lights. He doesn’t know the neighbors in the tan house well; occasionally, they wash their new car in the driveway, an act expressly forbidden by neighborhood covenants and the well-
built man takes off his shirt and flexes at passing cars. Jonas is skinny, but content. About six months ago he put on a muscle man show for his wife while she waited in her bathrobe. He’d given her the dual biceps pose, the hands-behind-the-head abs crunch, and, for the finale, a squat and point full-body action stance. She had whistled.

Jonas and Mishna have been married two years; they dated a full year before that. Two months ago Mishna went off the pill and turned into the renegade copulation machine. On their bed are books and charts and testing strips. Jonas has felt uneasy about the whole thing because all of his sexual decisions have been made for him. There’s no initiation, no romance. Mishna pees on a stick and it tells her it’s time to have sex. Earlier today the stick said, “Have sex.” But tonight, as Mishna ovulates, Jonas sits in his car listening to slow songs.

Jonas knows you never stop learning about people. Just the other day Mishna spent two hundred dollars on pregnancy clothes. She’s been wound up with baby mania so he let it slide. He tries to be fair, and understands that when Mishna married him she probably didn’t expect the teasing. He knows it’s juvenile, but it’s just harmless fun. And there’s a difference between fun and harmless fun.
Jonas knows Mishna doesn’t like to touch raw meat, or talk its origins, but when they eat hamburgers – as they did earlier this evening – he lets out a moo moo moo that drives her wild. He does the same thing with bacon, but with oinks.

“Stop. It was strolling around and eating and being alive and lazy. It’s disgusting.” She shivered.

“You have to wonder what part it is. Is there a ground beef section of the cow?” He held his finger out as a knife and put it on his ass. “Cut here for ground beef.”

“Stop.”

“It’s only hamburger,” he said. “It’s stopped walking.” Jonas couldn’t stop. He overheard himself as if outside his body, “You’ve probably eaten an entire herd.”

She pushed her plate away, and when he apologized, she was turned from him.

Turning back around, she said, “Who the hell are you?” Jonas watched her shaking irises, and felt the tag of his shirt rub against his neck. Mishna left
the room and walked toward the bedroom, but before entering she stopped at the bedroom door and looked at the floor. Something was keeping her from the room, and Jonas didn’t know if he should speak so he kept quiet. She said something to the floor, but he only heard the word you. He held his plate in his hand as she crossed the threshold. He had two burgers and some sweet potato fries that were going cold.

Jonas was hungry, but knew he shouldn’t eat. He put two fries in his mouth and set the plate on top of the counter where she’d find it. He gave her ten minutes before going in and sitting in the chair next to their bed, watching Mishna go through her pre-sleep grooming. Her reading light was on. She brushed her teeth without looking over; a dab of light toothpaste landed on her pajamas. His stomach moaned through his shirt. She dabbed a point of perfume on her collar bone.

“You want to know who I am,” he said. “I’m the type of guy that doesn’t say anything about blowing two hundred dollars on clothes that don’t fit. That’s the type of guy I am. I joke with you for two minutes and you freak out.”

Mishna washed her face.

“I’m talking. Look at me,” Jonas said.
Mishna dried her face.

“Mishna.”

Without looking up, she walked to the bed and climbed in. Jonas thought of cussing, but it wouldn’t accomplish anything.

He said, “Sometimes I don’t think you have the mental capacity to understand me.”

Mishna stared at her feet like she’d just discovered them. She moved them together.

“You’re upset. You’re ovulating.” Her feet stopped vertically and she looked past them to the far wall.

“Am I on the couch?” He reached out and touched the comforter.

“Because I don’t think I’m on the couch. I think you’ll let me in this bed. You need me tonight and for the next two days. The dramatic pause in the hallway, I know what’s going through your mind. You don’t even have to say it. I’ll say it for you: ‘Come here baby. Come and give me what I need. I may not like you right now, but you got what I need.’”
On Mishna’s nightstand two vanilla candles burned fumes into the room. She reached up and turned off her light. Her voice came low in the shifting glow, and Jonas missed the first few words.

“They let you take a shower. I’d always thought that they sprayed you down with a fire hose, after they threw white powder over you for germs and lice and whatever. I must’ve got that from the movies. It’s not like that at all. They do take your stuff and put it in a box for later, but then they show you to a room where you shower and change. You meet with a counselor and get a tour before they take you to your cell. It gets worse from there, but the first couple hours aren’t so bad.”

“Okay, I deserve this. Go for it.”

This would make them even. He’d let her mess with him for a bit, then all would be well. He was smiling and scrutinizing her shadowed face for the signal to laugh, but she was locked onto something on the far wall. She talked at it, slower than normal.

“The outfit wasn’t even orange. It wasn’t striped. It was white, and it had little blousing strips on the side I could tighten it up to show off my figure. It fit great and the girls let me know it. I liked the way they let me know.”
She paused.

“And my number. Why can’t they just give you your social security number? It would make it much easier. That damn number. Nine, Six, Zero, Two, Zero. Nine, Six, Zero, Two, Zero. Over and over. Whenever we’d come in from the yard they’d yell down the row. They’d yell out each cell number and we’d respond with our number. They must’ve had a sheet they’d check off because if someone said the wrong number they’d rush to that cell and give them hell.”

Nine, Six, Zero, Two, Zero was their banking password. She’d chosen it. Jonas was growing impatient with his penance. He was still hungry.

“But the best time was just before going to bed.”

“Mishna, I get it. You hate that I hold the baby thing over you. Can you look at me? I’m trying to apologize.”

“Our cell block was allowed to watch half an hour of television and we’d normally have to watch news, and it was always Clinton and Lewinski, Clinton and Lewinski, but, occasionally, they’d flip the channel and let us watch cartoons.”
“Okay. When was that ‘97, ‘98?” He paused. A warm current spun through his chest. “You’ve pushed your luck. You were in Africa at the time, so thanks for playing. We all right? Look over here. I’m hungry. I love you but I’m going to eat.”

Jonas stood. He waved his hand, but when it didn’t break her concentration he sat back down.

“The cartoons cheered us up. We talked about them as if they were real. We said, ‘Did you see what Bugs did the other day?’ or something like, oh which one was it?”

“There are photos of you with Africans.”

“The one with the road runner? Was it called the road runner? That was my favorite. But it was hit or miss. The nights that I saw that one I always slept well. Something about that blue bird. And I always had the top bunk. Always the top. I don’t know what it was. I felt safer even though it’s a longer fall.”

“Photos of you with Africans.”

The two photos he’d seen were almost identical. Mishna’s eyes were closed in one. There were black people surrounding her. Some had their shirts
off, but there was no background, just people. What did he want to see in the pictures? Huts? Oversized jewelry? Bare feet? Would that make it Africa? Mishna and black people. She was doing volunteer work. This is what he knows. Two years. There were wars and famine and disease. She has a scar on her hip. She’d played soccer with them and fallen on glass.

“There are photos,” he repeated, this time to himself. He stood up quickly, and her face leveled over to his.

“After I was released I had to do two hundred and forty hours of community service. In Sacramento.”

“In Sacramento?”

Mishna paused and let his question fill the room.

“That’s in California,” she said.

Jonas left the room, opened the garage door, opened the car door, and turned the vehicle on.

He sits at the wheel and thinks about a pack of cards and his neighbor’s bare chest. Jonas turns off the radio, puts the car in gear, and turns right onto the street. He drives around the block and stops in front of his house. He left the
garage door open, and is mildly surprised that she hasn’t closed it. He would have.

Jonas considers possible destinations for his drive and decides his block will suffice. It’s a compromise. As he circles his block again, he wonders what Mishna did, but before he can run down the list a memory conceives itself. They were in the corner of a bar just after they’d met, talking about his childhood, how he loved a particular cartoon show and she said, I hate them. On the corner of Clay and 2nd, Jonas reinvents his world around those words.

He takes two more right hand turns and pulls into the garage nose first. He enters their bedroom and the candles are out. He takes his clothes off before climbing into bed beside her and feels for her body. He leans over, smells her collar bone, and slides her pajama bottoms down just a little, searching for the scar with his fingers. It takes him awhile to find it, and just as he does she rolls over, slowly peeling her knees apart.
IN BLOOM

Lori stepped into her room and pulled out her vibrator, left the light on and stretched her long thin frame out on her bed, exhaling deeply. She let her dark hair remain on her cheek. The comforter felt cool on her body, and she took an excited breath before closing her eyes.

Her sexual fantasies always began outside and she filtered through the catalogue of scenes, chose a yellow sundress, a blanket nestled in the shadows and orange fragrance of trees lined up as far as she could see. In the distance a faceless man emerged at the end of a row. Lori knew his body, his gait, and as he closed in she saw him carrying a lit candle and she understood she was no longer in control of this place. She thought of ending the fantasy, but decided to keep it alive. Her emotions had swept in and she relented. She almost said his name – Tony - as her body electrifies; when he knelt beside her, she knew just what he’d do.

*

Her boyfriend Jack was on the way to her apartment for dinner, and she put the vibrator back into its drawer -- he had found it in the same drawer, months ago, and had lifted it up like a sword, stabbing the air and swinging it
over his head. It had a white base with three buttons and a pink penis with small
pearl-like balls inside. Protruding from the base of the penis was a forked clitoris
extension that resembled a pair of bunny ears. She was surprised at Jack’s
humor and antics, and when he asked how long it took to satisfy herself she
answered without hesitation, “oh a minute or so, sometimes quicker.”

“Great,” he’d said, half-smiling, shaking his head. “Nice to know
something can get you there in under twenty minutes.” He placed it just above
his groin on top of his jeans and flicked at the ears of the vibrator. “Great. So
this is my competition. Can I have these extensions attached somehow? What’s
with the balls inside? How many prototypes does an inventor have to have of
something like this? Did someone just sit around and think, ‘You know what a
vibrator needs? It needs ears. That’s the ticket. Ears.’ I can’t believe it works.”

“Sometimes it’s too much, and I have to stop.”

Jack clicked one of the buttons. The fake penis started up in circles, the
balls rolling on each other in rhythm to the churning.

“This turns you on?”

“You idiot, you think I watch it?”
Jack held it in his right hand, and gazed through the translucent pink shaft backlit by the bedroom light. Lori couldn’t help but giggle as the penis spun around. His confidence relaxed her, and she briefly considered if she was falling in love. She remembered her father’s lectures: “Would you live in a shack with him? If he lost his legs and you had to provide for him, would you be okay with that? Could you move on?” She tried to picture Jack without legs, just the torso up, but the image wouldn’t materialize. Jack continued to fumble with her sex toy. He glanced over to her on the bed, and they held the look as their smiles evaporated into the moment.

“Great,” said Jack pushing the wrong button. “Now how the hell do I turn this off?”

“Come here,” Lori said pushing herself up off her elbows. “Now.”

Jack showed up ten minutes late, but had called earlier from the road and left a message. Lori let the phone ring during her fantasy and was in the process of answering his question about her whereabouts.

“I was in the shower. I had a quick jog and wanted to be clean for you. You like that.”
Across the table from her, Jack forked up more burnt enchiladas, careful to finish swallowing before explaining how a partner at the firm had messed up in front of the judge that morning. He’d missed a spot shaving that morning and Lori focused on it, up along his narrow jaw below his left ear. It mattered to her that he was a lawyer, that he was tall and driven. He was positive and good to her, but he was slowly losing confidence due to his inability to orgasm, and she was concerned that this inconvenience could morph into something greater if not corrected. He was already on edge.

Lori was twenty-eight and not immune to the ticking of her self-imposed timeline, but at this moment she shifted her attention to his red tie. She had picked it out for him to wear the day of a big case some time ago. She had also used it to tie him to his bedpost. He’d resisted at first, but she begged him to try something new, for her. It wasn’t the only tie she’d used but she remembered this particular one because she had given it to him as a present and it was that same night that she had suggested breaking it in. Lori recalled tying it around both wrists above his head, looping it around the post tight. She had considered choking him or taking a slice of flesh. He could break away from it if he wanted, but he let her have her way and afterward they took small bites on each other’s
skin, seeing who could bite harder without leaving a bruise. She’d drawn a little blood.

“Are you listening honey?”

“I’m sorry,” Lori said, realizing she held her fork upright over her plate motionless.

“I had to remind him of the judge’s name,” Jack said laughing at her. “He had forgotten the judge’s name. Can you believe it? What a jackass.”

“Oh, no,” she said as if awaking. “Really?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess it’s not that exciting. Sorry, I can get carried away.” He took another bite and spoke first. “What do you want to talk about? How about our trip? We’ve been yapping about it for a while, and I have some time coming up. It could be perfect. I mean, really perfect.” This line he stressed with a nice big pause before the end. They had spoken about getting married, and she knew it was just a matter of time. It was not if, but when and how, and Lori dropped hints when appropriate. Jack was trying to be cool about it, but she noticed his eyes couldn’t stay on hers for long; he fumbled with his drink. She started.
“How about San Francisco?”

“Isn’t it cold this time of year? Besides you’re from there. I was hoping to take you somewhere new. Somewhere you hadn’t been. Maybe some place you’ve always dreamed about.”

“But I haven’t been there with you, hanging off the trolley, down by the wharf, wrapped up as the sun sets. God, it’s romantic. And the Conservatory of Flowers. I’ve told you about it before.”

“How it’s one of your favorite places.”

“How it’s my favorite place on earth, favorite romantic place on earth.”

“The North Pole can be romantic if you have a good experience. Why not somewhere warm? Mexico or Florida?”

“You asked me. I want to go to San Francisco.”

San Francisco meant a lot of things to Lori, but the foremost was her high school boyfriend, Tony, and how they’d sneak into expensive hotels’ pools and walk by the wharf listening to the sounds of sea lions. She was shy then and he was three years older. Lori thought they were meant for each other and they lived with passion, learning how to make love without boundaries. He
introduced her to blindfolds, candle wax and rope. He filmed them. After graduation he told her they were through – she wondered if he was bored - and he left heading south. Heartbroken, Lori heard rumors about him: an arrest, drugs, even pornography, but she refused to believe it. When he finally called her a year after leaving, it was to say goodbye. He told her what he was going to do as she pleaded hysterically, screaming into the receiver. The gunshot sounded far off in the distance. Her parents found her sputtering his name over and over into the phone.

Lori thought she had recovered after a couple of months – there was counseling and a family trip, her choice, to Mexico – but Tony began visiting her in dreams and fantasies; she soon realized that there wasn’t a sense that he couldn’t penetrate. And nothing had changed. Even a decade later, the sound of saying it, *San Francisco*, energized and frightened her; the landmarks of the city were haunted with his voice.

One thing Lori and Jack had agreed upon early was not to talk about old relationships, so Lori always gave her San Francisco details in a matter-of-fact tone. It was Jack’s idea not to talk about exes after she had plainly stated one evening that she thought she hadn’t dated any losers. She could see the reaction in his eyes – a rushing jealously – and although he stated the same, Lori agreed
to the deal and thought it wonderful; she would just have to lie about how they all ended anyway. This trip was her chance, and she hoped that if they could leave their own mark on the city, it could drown out everything that had come before.

*

After dinner and an extra glass of wine, they sat on her couch and watched television. Lori leaned in and kissed Jack’s neck.

“I feel great,” Lori said. “Why don’t we put the movie on?”

Lori had suggested a porn film to help Jack. She thought watching other people have sex might warm him up. Jack excitedly dug the DVD from his briefcase.

“This is supposed to be great,” he said.

“Why don’t we get naked? When the mood strikes, we can as well.”

They placed their clothes in a pile on the floor and sat down. Jack crossed, then uncrossed his legs.

The high quality of the film surprised Lori. The opening scene showed a young woman driving along a country road in an old Ford. The scene had a
detail surrounding all of the color where everything, people, plants, the air, looked new, with a glow.

“It’s like they’re in heaven,” she said.

The truck broke down on the side of the road, smoke gently wafting from under the tan hood as a man costumed in overalls drove a tractor in circles in the background.

Lori could tell Jack was as interested in her reaction as in the events of the film. In her periphery she could see him glancing back and forth from the screen to her. He placed his arm around her, but tilted forward, as if something unusual could happen at any moment.

The actress eyed the tractor man in the distance and started towards him, cracking a branch just off the road. It startled the woman and Lori could tell that the actress thought about turning around and starting over, but continued on, the camera focusing on her tiny jean shorts. Lori wondered if they had set up the area at all for this scene; it would only have been used for this walk, a ten second useless shot to tie two people together. Did they think about her walk and the importance to the story? Why not just skip this and show her by the tractor chatting up her hero? Did the actress have a choice? For a brief moment did she
consider the monumental gift of free will? The next shot was from the tractor man’s perspective, looking down from his vehicle at the woman and her bulging breasts. Jack repositioned himself.

“Here we go,” Jack said, and peeked over. Lori smiled. As the camera cut to the tractor man, Lori’s face suddenly swelled. Tightness gripped her lungs and released.

The man in the film was Tony Harris, the boy she had loved so completely in high school. It was him as he had left her, there was no doubt; he was locked in time at eighteen with his handsome face and light hair and a cluster of freckles above his left eye. Tony smiled on camera and Lori saw his upper left cuspid, sharp like a vampire, just as she remembered. She felt the couch leave her bare buttocks as she stood; her hands shot out in front of her.

“Have you seen this?” Jack asked.

“Nothing,” Lori said, and sat back down.

Tony and the girl were already on the ground. Somewhere a blanket appeared in front of the tractor. The actress was on top, riding him wildly. She placed her hands behind her head, fake breasts flopping and yelled up at the sky, “oh yes, yes, oh God, harder!” They didn’t kiss and barely looked at one
another. His chiseled arms reached up to both of her breasts and squeezed them hard.

“Guess they skipped the blow job,” said Jack, laughing anxiously.

Lori was almost in tears, but she knew she had to hold it together. Jack wouldn’t be able to handle the truth about Tony and her, and she knew a single shudder would trigger questions. The room gathered in around her, the walls and ceiling slowly squeezing. She breathed through her mouth.

As the scene progressed, Lori tried to calm herself. An ebbing desire replaced her shock as Tony moved on top of the girl. He covered her eyes with his right hand. Lori knew what was coming because he had done the same thing to her many times. Tony took bites on the girl, starting at her left shoulder, moving across the upper torso to the right shoulder, up to the neck, and down to the stomach. He’d called it Tony’s Cross. Lori used her index finger to trace the pattern on her body. She envied the blinded actress, how she felt the sudden pain of teeth on her skin. She glanced at Jack, who had stopped watching the television altogether.

“Please don’t stop,” he said. “I want to watch you watch the movie.”
Lori wanted to reply, but there wasn’t a word she knew the meaning to. She nodded even as her mind told her no.

Tony called the actress a whore and Lori turned her attention back to the movie. She felt Jack’s stare on her, attached to her. She resolved to touch herself periodically, and she ran her hands down her legs.

On screen, Tony’s eyes were closed and his head bent forward. Lori placed a prayer in him. Tony was religious and used to spout scripture passages because he knew it ticked her off. One afternoon, as they chiseled dry wax from their chests, he tried to lecture her. They used the bottom of toothbrushes.

“Did you know that God is the only permanent thing in the universe?” he asked. “That’s how He can know everything. He’s always been around and always will be.”

“God knows everything? He knows the next word out of my mouth?”

“Of course He does. He knows all.”

“That makes free will tricky doesn’t it? Choice to you then must be a delusion.”

“Let’s just say at least we get to surprise ourselves.”
“So He knows all the evil that is going to happen in the world and is either incapable of stopping it or chooses not to.”

“You get so mad.”

“You like it.”

“The path to salvation is through love and prayer,” he said. “And if I were you I’d start praying soon as possible.”

“Is He going to punish me for biting you?”

“Probably, but no more than me.”

On screen, Tony had the actress leaning up against one of the large tractor tires as he swayed back and forth into her.

Lori felt Jack inch closer. He brushed his hand down her side.

“Not yet,” Lori said.

Rows of cherry trees flanked Tony and his partner as they finished. They stood up and Lori noticed for the first time that the entire orchard was in bloom. White and pink blossoms shot out from the trees like stationary fireworks. Birds pecked in the background, nibbling along the trunks. The camera swung around
to the back of the actors, and Lori could see the amazing depth of the orchard rows that seemed to stretch forever.

The last frames of the movie captured Tony in slow motion, carrying the girl in his arms back into the grove, through the late afternoon shadows before cutting to black. During the split moment of surrounding darkness the cracking branch sounded in Lori’s ears, bringing forth the momentary indecision of the actress walking into the orchard. Lori sank backward in time at the sound, reliving the feel of her comforter, the yellow sundress, the man gliding toward her, his face filling in with Tony’s as he reached her with the first ripple of his fingertip, branches exploding out over the sky as he breathed down on her.

Coming to, whiteness and motion appeared on the screen. Jack flicked off the television as three tall nurses stepped into view.

“Okay my love, I’m ready,” he said.

*

Later that night their naked bodies twisted individually on her green comforter. It was dark inside the room save for the tiny orange glow of her alarm clock. The remnant scent of the enchilada sauce refused to dissipate from the apartment. Outside, the neighbor’s dogs yipped every three seconds, and
even though muffled, drowned out the sound of Lori’s breathing. She thought, tomorrow I will kill those fucking dogs, and sighed.

“How do you think I feel?” Jack’s voice filled the room. “I’m the one that can’t come and you’re complaining? You came, at least that’s what you made me believe. And you scratched the shit out of me.”

“Jack. I don’t lie about that, you know. And you earned those.”

“Bull.”

“I’m pissed at the damn dogs next door.”

“You can’t be on top.”

“What?”

“You can’t be on top. It never happens when you’re on top. I’ve told you this and yet you continue to do it every time.”

“Every time? Come on, give me a break here. You’ve never said that.”

“If you’d pay attention.”

“Now you’re being an asshole.” She wished she’d dug into him harder.

“I’m trying to help here. You used to love me being on top and now I can’t be on
top at all? Now that you say that, okay, but don’t act like it was something I should know.”

They remained motionless, taking in the darkness, letting it surround them. The barks ended and Lori could now hear the clock in the bathroom ticking away. It sounded like the dogs. She didn’t know if he was pretending to be asleep.

“When I was a kid, I was pretty stupid,” he said loudly in case she was asleep, but in a weak enough tone to signal a shift. He slid onto his right side to face her. “I thought that there was only one person for each person, sexually. I believed that only one person could literally fit into another. I don’t remember how I thought it worked, probably fate, or you just tried until you found where you fit perfectly and bam, there you are. That’s the one.” Lori didn’t laugh, she closed her eyes listening to his voice, hearing it wobble every now and then. “I thought this until I was twelve or so, when I saw my first porn magazine. It was a picture story and I can still see it like it was yesterday. A girl was riding her bike on a dirt road in a white dress. A muscled-up guy in a convertible pulls up beside her and they look at each other. On the next page she was bent over the top of the windshield and he stood on the hood without his pants on leaning over her. It showed it up close. I remember thinking how lucky it was for these
two people to find their one true partner in the middle of nowhere on a dirt road.”

Lori pictured Jack’s face, scrunched and panting below her as it had been ten minutes earlier. She imaged his penis, too large for her, bumping cumbersome along her vagina.

“You can hit me,” she said evenly. “In the middle of it, if it helps. You can let go and hit me. You won’t hurt me.”

“It has nothing to do with you.”

“You can swing hard if you want, just nothing above the neck. Deal?”

“Jesus,” he said, with a nervous laugh.

“I’m not joking. Yell at me. Call me what you want. It doesn’t bother me and if you want me to be honest, I like it. Sometimes I feel like I need it.”

“I always want you to be honest. And I’m sorry, but I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You always want me to be honest? That’s bullshit. No one wants that. People want the dream. I want it too. I don’t want to hear that your last
girlfriend fucked you better than me. I don’t want to hear a bunch of shit and you don’t either.”

“You better be honest with me. We’re going nowhere if I can’t trust you and you tell me you want me to beat the shit out of you? What the hell is that?”

“I’m trying to help you!”

“You just said you liked it.”

“Fine,” she said. Her head felt heavy, and she knew she had a choice of what to say to end the argument. She felt the name Tony on her tongue but decided against it. “When you called me earlier on the road I was fucking myself right here as dinner burned.”

*

It was hot at the airport and the multiple lines behind Lori and Jack pulsed like serpents. Jack lifted his bag onto the scale and watched the red numbers jump above the allowable fifty pounds. He raised his hand to the ticket agent before she could tell him and said he would fix it. Overt sighs emanated from the crowd. The attendant motioned for the next in line but they were blocking the space. When Jack had both his and her bag open he began to
transfer items guessing fractions of pounds. A pair of shoes, pairs of pants. She stood over him, hands on hips, trying to conceal her disappointment. Kneeled on the tiled white floor, his eyes darted to her legs, smooth and brown. On the car ride over she told him that she’d shaved as she bounced her eyebrows. Anything that can help set the mood, she thought. In mid transfer of a red sweater he felt it hard in the fold of the fabric. He waited a moment when he set it down to make sure there was no hum. She was watching him closely and he reacted as she anticipated, with a flushed shake of his head.

As they sat by the gate in an unoccupied corner she waited for it. “You brought it,” he stated face down so it appeared from a distance like he was talking to his chest. “This trip is about you and me, about getting on track. You don’t even need that thing. I’m the one with the issue. How do you think that makes me feel? Every time I think I have an idea on what’s going on in your head I’m proved wrong.”

“I thought you might use it on me. Something different you know.”

“You don’t get it.”

“I didn’t know it would be such a big deal. It wasn’t before. Either way, I guess I’m sorry, I thought it would be fun.”
“Fine, but you know it doesn’t give me great hope.”

During the flight out Lori let Jack make up for the scene at the airport terminal. The aisle seat was unoccupied. She knew she had nothing to be sorry about, but Jack reached for her hand and held it tight, smiling his straight teeth. He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“It’s okay,” he said.

“I know it’s okay,” she said quickly.

“No, I mean bringing it.” The words jumped at her. She knew what this trip meant, knew that Jack hadn’t heard a word she’d said, and yet, in some strange way she accepted it just as it was. Getting on the plane with Jack that morning was an answer to all of the questions that would follow: “yes, I will marry you; yes, I will care for you no matter what; yes, I will always let you be on top,” and she wondered if it wasn’t somewhere else that the word yes had become inscribed upon her.

“No, I meant bringing it in the first place,” he repeated. “We both know I have a problem, and I can’t help but think that you need it. I don’t understand. I thought you were okay.”
“Everything’s fine. I understand your concern. I don’t want to ruin this, so let’s forget it and push on strong. Okay?”

“But you understand why I am telling you this.”

“Yes.”

Lori wondered if the ring rested in his carry-on luggage. He told her he loved her and as the words left his mouth she wondered where he would ask her to marry him that weekend. She knew he was looking at her body so she arched her back pushing her chest out. Her shirt curved open revealing the middle tops of her breasts. He reached over and she let him brush the backs of his fingertips against them. A moment later he glanced around before forcing a full hand down her shirt; he cupped her right breast and flicked at her nipple with his thumbnail.

“God I’m lucky,” he said.

He was stretching her shirt out, but Lori stared out the window, her body reacting to his enthusiasm. Clouds surrounded the plane, lit up bright and soft.
Later, the intercom buzzed over their heads and one of the pilots told them that it was forty-nine degrees and overcast, and they’d be landing in about an hour.

“Should I tell them to take a left to Puerto Vallarta?” she joked. “It’s going to be cool.”

He sat up straight and unfolded the in-flight magazine, speaking to page thirty-two: “But evidently very romantic.”

* 

After checking in at their hotel they strolled out to the pier in a fog so Lori could watch the sea lions. The lazy animals yelped out and staggered over one another slippery, positioning for unseen advantages. She loved the noise; it called out to the boats passing by, out to the bay and sea. It was bawdy, not precise or tuned. It called to her directly, a welcoming home. The fog lowered on them, and what had begun as a comforting scene turned strange. Though they were close, the blanket of fog wrapped and unwrapped the animals, producing at moments, just their invisible barks. Lori felt the bones in her body and realized it wouldn’t work: retracing the places she had been before, attempting to replace one memory with another. Her skin felt itchy and a
billowing nausea began in her stomach. She dreaded returning to the hotel, the same one she and Tony had snuck into long ago. The wind was growing and the smell of fish shrouded them.

The crowd thickened and two children climbed the railing leaning dangerously over the edge. Lori whispered, “That’ll never happen with ours.”

The words came to her mouth quickly before she could filter them away. She tucked her head into his chest searching for refuge and thought of the night ahead; she would escape this madness and they would make love perfectly. She’d take out the vibrator and he would laugh at it like he had before, and later, he would ask for her hand in marriage. From that moment on San Francisco would be the city where he proposed. He would save her. Jack held her on the pier, and brushed the back of her hair toward the ground. He allowed his hand to dip to her neck where he scratched and squeezed until she jerked away.

Lori suggested they catch a cab over to the Golden Gate Bridge; she thought a change of scenery might calm her down. They held hands, and strolled languidly across bridge; it was cold and the fog was thicker than at the pier. Lori continued to struggle; in all her years living in San Francisco she’d never walked across the bridge, and yet it seemed as though she had, and she wondered if she would ever be able to escape the feeling of repetition. It
appeared to her that they were suspended in mid air, the fog acting as the support for the massive structure. Jack said the bridge looked orange, not golden, and he’d seen a special on television that said the painters of the bridge have a job for life because once they finish with one side, it’s time to start again. Lori told him that it sounded like the worst job on earth, the same brush strokes every day, knowing that you would repeat it again and again.

“Working next to Sisyphus,” he said.

“Camus can go to hell.”

“Impressive. I said that just to seem smart. I thought you’d ask me about it.”

“That seems crazy, knowing everything that’s going to ever happen to you.”

“I don’t know if that’s the point.”

“That’s God. That’s exactly the point,” Lori said, ratcheting up the volume of her voice. “The hill is God, without it he pushes the damn boulder wherever he wants.”

“You’re defensive about this.”
Up ahead a figure moved hurriedly across their path as a blur of black clothing. The fog was thick and the image confused her, this perpendicular course; there was just the railing and the dense air and it was then she felt it inside. When they reached the scene, Lori let go of Jack’s hand; a woman was stuck trying to hurdle the short gate that separated the pathway from the final ledge of the bridge. The lady, in a black coat too large for her body, frantically squirmed on the top. Lori saw the lady’s determination, and the woman finally lunged hard off the apex to the other side with just a small foothold keeping her on. No one was coming along the walkway and the wind took the sound out of the air.

Lori felt full to the brim. She began to shake, and knew the result would not be physical. After a few seconds Lori felt Jack’s weight shift to the balls of his feet.

“Wait,” she said and reached for his arm. But Jack shook her off in place, his face had changed.

“What? Do you know what’s going on here? She’s going to jump.”

Lori saw his body stiffen, the height of his countenance now concentrating on her as if seeking permission.
“Let her.”

Jack leaned backward as if on command, fighting for balance.

“Let her,” she repeated louder, drawing his eyes to hers. “This isn’t about you.”

Silently, the lady on the edge began to take her coat off, first the buttons, and then, as she slipped her bare arms out, they watched as she folded it over her left forearm and pressed it to her stomach. The woman turned away and a gentle force moved her out. Lori barely caught the woman’s indentation upon the fog before it disappeared.

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They’d reserved a King size bedroom at their hotel and from the window overlooking the indoor atrium Lori stared down into the pool. A family of five splashed around joyously, yelling out to one another. She’d been in the pool with Tony years before. She thought that they’d probably been loud as well. Was there someone standing in her place looking down at them, watching their hands under the water?
Jack came up from behind her and lifted her shirt over her head. When he entered her, she felt her body stretch in pain trying to wrap around him, larger than ever before. On the bed she forced her way on top. Her body pulsed, and she peered down at him, his familiar face losing concentration then changing afresh. Her vibrator rested on the nightstand where she’d left it. She wondered if he would reach for it.

“You bitch,” he whispered, and then repeated it, his face growing hot. Jack grabbed her thighs in his large hands and clamped down. She wouldn’t cry, but she felt like it. Another glow began in her, more powerful than the last. He shifted his weight once more. The air around her body pressurized and a faint cry from the pool below squeezed through. Jack cocked his fist back as Lori smiled wide.
VITA

Jesse W. Goolsby met his wife, Sarah, in Cambridge, England, and quickly penned a series of poems entitled, “The Whisperings of an American.” It worked. Their beautiful daughter, Ella, is learning how to walk. Jesse enjoys the music of Keane and Rachmaninov, the colors of Aspen trees in autumn, the food at El Pinto in Albuquerque, and traditional saunas. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in English at the United States Air Force Academy, and is returning to his Alma Mater as a professor of English in the summer of 2008.