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Some Sunny Day & Banshee Sunrise

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Some Sunny Day
&
Banshee Sunrise

Matt Muehring

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requirements of the Master of Fine Arts
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2017

Matt Muehring
Draft 3

Banshee Sunrise

“Want another?” I pointed my almost empty Corona at Mike. We’d snagged a corner table at a roof deck saloon in an alley across the street from the Hall of Fame. Three story colonials with tiled roofs blocked the rest of the street. Crowds ten rows deep applauded alumni inductees rolling down the street on the back of pick-ups.

“Who?” Mike was hunched over, elbows pressed to the table, and racking his Iphone against his knuckles. He’d had the same “huh-what?” look pasted on his face like a newspaper in a puddle for most of the four hour drive up to Cooperstown.

“Another beer.” I repeated. “Hey, ground control to Major Tom.” I snapped my fingers under Mike’s nose. He jerked back and blinked himself into a grin.

“Don’t bring up Bowie. I don’t wanna hear about fuckin’ Bowie.” He chugged what was left of his IPA. The label he’d peeled away left sticky remnants on the bottle.

“What’s up?” I asked. I kept my tone mild, partially to be nice and partially because I knew it was something to do with Gemma and I didn’t want rain on my parade. Being happy is a choice.

“Nothing’s up. Sorry.” Mike shook his head.

“You good?” I asked in a tone approximate to a cop directing traffic.

“All good, yeah.” Mike straightened the collar on his Pedro jersey and drummed his hands on the plywood-table. “One more beer and let’s head down.”

I looked around for the waitress. The deck was packed with a well over fire-capacity crowd that was getting steadily drunker and rowdier. We got lucky though, some red-faced bro-

hammer in a Craig Biggio jersey sparked up a Marlboro next to us and the waitress elbowed her way through the crowds to kick him out before he even exhaled.

“We’re outta IPA’s.” She informed Mike. Her face was coated with sweat. We barely heard her over the drunk-chatter and Aerosmith spewing out of the speakers.

“Corona’s fine. Thanks.” Mike stuffed his phone into his pocket and glanced up the alley. Press vans and cameramen formed a phalanx around the red carpet that led up to the Hall of Fame’s brick and glass front entrance. He craned his neck as the crowds cheered Greg Maddux stepping off the back of a pick-up truck.

“How can one guy be so boring and so talented?” I asked Mike.

“That’s how you get “The Accountant” for a nickname.” Mike laughed and turned contemplative. “Shit, you know who he actually looks like? He looks like – ”

Mike’s hand stabbed into his pocket and shot up with his phone. I glimpsed the flashing incoming-call screen: that selfie of him and Gemma at the beach where she’s planting a kiss on his cheek and throwing bunny ears behind his head. Mike rocketed off his seat and cut through the crowds like a battering ram. I gave the waitress fifty bucks and told her to keep the change when she arrived with the coronas. By the time I drank Mike’s, all the beer had me thinking that Lana and I should have taken more beach selfies.

Mike worked in this coffee shop named Chucks one town over from where we grew up. The office I work in gets its coffee delivered from there. I actually got Mike the job. I saw a help-wanted sign in the door and asked an employee with a tattoo of a green rose underneath the word ‘mother’ printed in red on her upper arm about it. Turns out this was Gemma. I don’t

mean to be reductive here, but she was head turning, traffic stopping, drop fucking dead beautiful. All coiled intensity and poised, ice-queen cool. In another world she would have broken suspects into quivering pieces during interrogations.

And I got that in five minutes from across the counter from her.

Gemma was in charge of training Mike since the (mid-twenties) manager was busy hitting on high school girls, one employee was this weasel named Jake who got the job 'cause he and the manager were buds, and the other two were part time and thoroughly indifferent. At first Mike thought it was irate (white) customers and long lines that made him nervous – “These suburbanites go fucking mental without their lattes,” – but then he noticed that his stomach would turn to stone whenever Gemma snapped at him if he made a macchiato for somebody who asked for a mochaccino – real life and death stuff, right?

Then he noticed that his stomach melted whenever Gemma threw him a thumbs up for getting something right. He noticed that she sometimes wore a black *Unknown Pleasures* T-Shirt. He very quickly wanted to talk to her and only her. You don't fit in here either, Mike thought. I think maybe you're the same as me.

She expressed shock that he'd even heard of Joy Division.

“You don't seem the type.” She told him with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh yeah, *Transmission* is a great song. Ian Curtis, who'da thought a Manc could have a voice that deep, you know?” Mike replied casually. Like me, he thought to himself. Please, like me.

Gemma parsed her lips and nodded. Mike's normal response to that would have been 'fuck you, hipster'; but instead he just thought again: like me, please like me.

One day, Mike successfully mixed four iced drinks of great complexity in record time. Gemma high fived him and Mike felt a rush from his palm to his shoulders. Eventually, he worked up the courage to plug his Ipod into the store's speakers. He put on *Transformer* and Gemma full on hugged him.

"It's those eyes of hers, man." Mike had told me at our buddy Rob's Christmas party. I guess if you're willing to say something that lame then it must be genuine. "I could see – like something was rising up outta them right before she hugged me."

"You mean she can shoot lasers?" I'd deadpanned. "You don't wanna hook up with a coworker, bud. Nothing happened between me and Lana till I started the new job." I suppose this was a bad example, since Lana and I weren't talking at the time, nor were we on strictly good terms by the time Mike and I were in Cooperstown, but you work with what you have.

"Who said anything about hooking up? I'm glad I made a friend." Mike said with the conviction of somebody saying they wanted to grow up to be Vice-President.

I found Mike burning through a cigarette where the alley curved up towards the main street. Hundreds of Dominicans who'd been bussed in all the way from Jamaica Plain had set up barbeques and dance parties in the post office parking lot next to the alley. Mike was still on the phone with Gemma, I caught his eye and gestured for a cigarette.

"You said you'd called your mom." Mike duck-stepped away from me. I took the hint and sparked up. I hadn't had a cigarette since September 16, 2011, I'd even stayed quit when Lana and I were together. Mike had quit too but Gemma smokes like a chimney so he started bumming cigarettes from her after they got together.

I'd seen Mike exactly like this back in April. It was a Friday and I'd gotten out of work early so I went up to visit him. He was smoking against an inset stone wall whose shrub planted slope rose up to the train tracks. We shot the shit for a while. Then Gemma texted him.

"I'm falling into a dark place. I want to drink. I want to fuck. I want to hurt myself."

He was so shell shocked he just showed me the phone. I watched the text messages roll in like a conveyer belt of The Fucked Up.

"I called my dealer. I'm going to get high... It's too late... I'm not afraid that you'll tell my mother I want to get high, I'm afraid that you'll tell my mother that I WILL GET HIGH."

Mike ducked behind one of those tank sized red Chevy suburbans that come standard in the 'burbs. I heard him plead with her.

"Just pull over... sponsor... calm..."

After he hung up he said that he had to go be a hero. He said it casually but he had a strangled look on his face. Go he did, burning rubber out of the parking lot with an hour still left on his shift.

A few hours later Mike and I grabbed beers and he cheerfully explained that everything was cool. No big deal. He and Gemma watched *Peep Show* – turns out they shared a favorite show – until she went to an NA meeting. He had a confidential edge in his voice, like he was privy to the Deep Truth.

He revealed in so many words that Gemma had been in and out of detox and rehab facilities for years. Something about a methadone clinic. Suspended sentence. Overdoses. Robberies. Crack houses. A probation officer. She was in a documentary about mental health that a dude from *The Sopranos* made. Darkness endured in her past, strung out desolation that

Mike could only imagine from within the pleasant confines of his life. The void lived out by her, touched on from a distance by him.

I suspected then and know now that Mike conceived of himself as her savior.

“But hey, I got into grad school.” He’d added. “My mom told me when I got home.”

In the alley in Cooperstown it occurred to me that I’d been proud of Mike back in the bar in April. He planned to study mechanical engineering, a subject which he explained in terms of how one programs the guidance system on an ICBM.

He appeared in front of me and stubbed out his cigarette. I took another drag and rubbed a knuckle against my eye.

“Sorry.” Mike took his Sox hat off and ran a hand through his hair. It was jet black, short on the sides and thick in the middle. I would cut it that way but I’m going bald. Lucky Mike, if he didn’t have horrible acne in high school he’d have gotten laid more and had enough confidence to know that he didn’t need to be a savior to make women stay. Then again, I never once thought of myself as Lana’s savior, nor did she think that of me, and she still didn’t stay.

“The world isn’t ending is it?” I asked. Mike stuck his hat back on backwards and gestured for his pack and lighter. He lit up with the controlled movements of somebody forcing a door shut against a roaring hurricane. He grinned like ‘nothing to see here, officer.’

“Nope. Hey, what’re we here for? We’re here for Pedro, I’m not leaving without an autograph. My mom has a photo of her and grandma with the Pope, I’m getting a photo with Pedro.” Mike put on his aviators and made for the street. I flipped my Oaklies back from where they were resting on the brim of my own Sox hat and followed. “Why you gotta be on the phone the whole time anyway?”

Mike and Gemma started doing the New York Times cross-word together in the lull between the morning rush and the lunch crowd.

“Chester A. Arthur’s vice-president. Four down.” Gemma frowned and pushed the cross-word around on the top of the refrigerator to Mike.

“Trick question. He didn’t have one. Literally. ‘None’” Mike wrote it in pencil and pushed the crossword back to her. She leaned in, a curl of blonde hair dangled above her lips. She tucked it behind her ear.

“Wow. I have never fucking heard heard of Chester A. Arthur.”

“Name of David Bowie’s first band, seven down.” Mike asked.

“Konrads.” Gemma wrote it in perfect block lettering. She was obsessed with Bowie. She showed Mike a picture of her on Halloween with her hair swept back in a red mullet, a lightning bolt painted over her face *Aladdin Sane* style. In the photo she’s perched on a beige corduroy recliner in a room with peeling walls and dusty floors. Slouched in the recliner is a wafer-thin guy with swollen lips and a narrow, greasy face staring vacantly at the camera.

“Whose that?” Mike had asked, knowing the two possible answers.

“My ex.” She replied briskly. Mike saw out of the corner of his eye that she was watching him. He therefore handed her phone back to her without a reaction.

One morning, ten minutes before the store opened, Mike was grinding out the back-up coffee filters while, outside the frost-tinged floor to ceiling windows, a pink-orange strip broke behind skeletal trees. Gemma’s silver Honda civic, it’s hood duct taped and passenger door dented, whipped into the parking lot. Gemma emerged, clad in a fleecy dark hoodie and Lennon style shades. She flicked her cigarette away as she weaved around her car, shoulders

squared back with an ex-dancer's posture. As she swung through the door the rising sun flashed in the glass behind her. Mike cranked up *Combat Rock*. Gemma halted, registered the tune, and shot him a wildly playful look. She unzipped the hoodie and threw it dramatically to the floor. She snatched a metallic scoop from between the coffee jars on the counter and bee-lined toward Mike.

*"This is a public service announcement! – "*Joe Strummer bellowed. Topper Headon's snare drum thumped like a fist on a trash can over the speakers.

" – With Guitar! Know yerrrr rights!" Gemma lip synced into her scoop microphone and bumped her hips against Mike's. Avalanched by exhilaration he seized the broom from under the register. She back tracked in a two step like an electrocuted marionette. Mike mimicked her spastic movements, strumming his new guitar. They lurched into the middle of the empty store, now their own stage. Gemma thumped her scoop-mic to the beat. Mike twisted and stomped his feet. She threw herself hips first at him, and, shoulder to shoulder, they both roared:

"Get off the streets! Run! GET OFF THE STREETS!"

And then, as the song faded, Mike spun and heaved the broom-guitar over his head and made to smash it against the air-pot counter Paul Simonon style. He halted an inch above the bronze counter-top and spun back to Gemma. She jumped and clapped, her normally composed face ablaze with joy.

From then on whenever he talked about her he had the aura of a True Believer. His smile was everything that he was, will be, and wanted to be. Lana had that effect on me, I think. But she'd moved to D.C. by then and we'd decided that a distance thing, even in the form of

drunk 1 A.M. sexting, was inadvisable.

“Gemma walks through the door and it’s my sunrise.” Mike told me. For a guy obsessed with math and the logic of rationality, he wanted to stare at the sun and go blind. It’s weird, one of Lana’s favorite problems with me was that I could be distant, which coming from her is just south of hypocritical. But I’m not, I just don’t want to make anybody responsible for me.

The thing with Mike is he saw love as logic. Binary code, an equation. It was the root of his insecurity, this conviction that without someone else he was fundamentally incomplete. Which made him vulnerable to Gemma’s bad days. She’d march into the store without looking at him. Hours would pass and she wouldn’t speak to him. When the store got slow she’d sit on a stool by the window and stare vacantly at the street or text ferociously in the back hallway. Her days were fueled entirely by coffee and cigarettes.

By March the snowbanks turned to slushy, oil streaked mounds of dirt and a constant grey-slatted drizzle ruled the skies. It was spring training somewhere, and one day Mike was chatting about the Sox odds of making the play-offs with the store’s regulars. After they filed out Mike realized Gemma was glaring at him from the register.

“Do you ever talk about *anything* else? I mean, Jesus Christ. Why do I have to keep hearing about it? Seriously.” She snapped. “I just hear it *all* the time. I’m so tired of hearing about it. It’s boring. Who gives a fuck?”

Mike stood glued to the floor. Stunned by her contemptuous sneer. As he drove home he felt small. Inconsequential. He knew she could destroy him. He was ashamed of his vulnerability, of his Too-Big-To-Fail emotional architecture. His recurring fantasy of how and when and where he’d tell Gemma that he loved her seemed pathetic.

“That’s a harsh reaction.” I’d said when he came over to play Halo. Lana was driving up from D.C. to collect some clothes, and she’d told me she’d come over if there was time. I’d also gotten a promotion, and part of me felt like Mike’s self-pity would infect my good fortune.

“Yeah, well. Clearly I – man, it’s...” Mike trailed off. He rocked his heel on top of his toe on my coffee table. “You get it.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s not like I have real problems, I’d just like this to work. But if she’s this shitty then I’m being weak just taking it, right?”

“Hey, I’m rooting for you. Just, take the long view.”

Mike contemplated this long view as a non-linear equation and attempted to work back to himself. Oh, fuck that he eventually concluded. Nothing felt as good as when she liked him back. When she insisted he try a custom tea that she’d just brewed. When she side stepped him to get to the espresso machine and her hand stayed on his shoulder longer than it had to.

He couldn’t reconcile that with the person who treated him as if she had no idea who he was or what he wanted or why she should care. The details of her troubles that he was privy to were warning signs. The correct worldview was that he was the equation, not an element. Grow up, move on, no big deal. He tried to will himself into believing this.

Then one night, as he checked on his grad school applications, Gemma texted him.

“I’m at my brother’s birthday with my family. This sounds weird but I wish you were here.”

Mike slouched. He waited for *I Wanna Be Adored* to end before texting her back.

“It’s not weird. I wish I was too.” He put his phone down. Pretended to focus on the ‘

'status pending' message on his computer. His phone vibrated.

"Do you want to come over in a bit and watch *Almost Famous*?"

Later, he was sitting next to Gemma on her couch, sitting upright, palms flat on his knees. Floating, disembodied in the silver-blue glow of the TV. Gemma's legs were pulled up to her chest. Her cheek rested on her knee. Six inches of carefully empty space lay between them.

PSH advised Patrick Fugit that "you gotta make your reputation on being honest and unmerciful." Then, as Gemma unfolded her legs and propped them on her coffee table, her shoulder grazed Mike's. He pulled his arm out of the way and she leaned against him and his arm curled over her shoulder. Her free hand closed around his. Her palms were coarse and he could feel her skin beneath her pajamas where her thighs rested on his.

Mike and I hovered between the crowd lining the street and the Dominicans barbequing and dancing in the parking lot. The air was so humid it was like wearing wool in a sauna.

"Hey, look." Mike pointed at an elderly Dominican with a grey flecked goatee in a plastic lawn chair in front of a bus. He held a poster of Pedro, rendered in the Obama '08 Hope and Change colors, in his '04 Jheri-Curls above the caption 'Pedro es Grande'. "That is awesome. I'm getting a picture with that dude."

I followed Mike as he strode past the Dominicans clustered around barbeque stands. The air became thick with spices and marinated chicken, turning my stomach raw with hunger. Merengue and bachata music boomed. I wanted to kick back here the rest of the day. Mike crouched in front of the old man. The old man smiled and shook his hand. Mike pointed at me and mimed taking a photo. The old man nodded. My phone buzzed and as I swiped across the

cracked screen I glimpsed a text from Lana.

The crowds erupted in thunderous applause and messianic chants. We bolted for the street and got sandwiched between the surge of Dominicans and the crowd. People pressed in from all sides until I was stuck in an incredibly sweaty mosh pit. Over everyone's heads, standing a-top a pick-up truck in the middle of the street, was Pedro.

A maroon sports jacket hung loose on him. He waved to the masses like a conquering hero. The truck stopped in front of the hall at a portable staircase. Pedro took his wife by the hand, halted, and shot his arm to the sky and twirled it. Everyone roared and called his name. I saw Mike slip through the cluster ahead of me.

Pedro sauntered over, soaking it in, grinning deviously. I tried to raise my phone but I was jammed against at least six jostling bodies. So, I just stood there, one arm straight-jacketed into my pocket, my forehead grinding into somebody's shoulder-blade while an elbow dug into my back. Pedro made his way down the line, signing autographs and posing for photos. He was shorter than I'd remembered, but then I'd only ever seen him in uniform on the mound from the stands. Now he was maybe ten feet away, glad-handing the crowds with the air of a guy who knows he's the greatest. The person behind me stumbled enough for me free my arm.

I swung my phone aloft like Arthur pulling the sword from the rock. Somebody had thrust a cylindrical sugar tin under Pedro's nose. He cackled like a mad-man and sharpied his signature onto it. Then he took his wife's hand, and strode towards the Hall. At the top of the steps Pedro spun around and waved. A final roar erupted and he vanished through the doors.

I made my way to the top of the alley and checked the photos. Every single one a perfect angle on Pedro except for one problem. A fucking sugar tin where his face was

supposed to be. Go figure. I checked Lana's text. "I'd enjoy this wedding a lot more if I was at the induction instead with you and Mike. How is it?" I sent her the shot of sugar-tin Pedro. Mike turned up in front of me, hands in his pockets, frowning.

"No autograph?" I asked. He shook his head. "No photo?"

"I got *a* photo of him. By the time I got close enough there was this guy with a kid on his shoulders. So I let them go ahead of me." Mike took off his aviators, huffed into the lens, and wiped them with his jersey.

"Hey, that was nice of you." I said.

"Hey, I'm a nice guy." He lit a cigarette. "Fuckers."

We wandered up the street towards a grill-house with a fenced in patio near Double-Day field. After a twenty minute wait we were ushered to a low aluminum table near the bar. We ordered beers and quesadillas.

"And some shots, some shots as well." Mike glanced at me. "Yeah?" I shrug-nodded.

"D'you have Titos vodka?" The waiter said yes. "Two. Each."

"Can we get some fries and water with that?" I flipped my oaklies onto my hat. Mike was jiggling his knee and had a friendly look.

"Since when do you do Titos over Jamo?"

"I dunno. Send me that picture." I obliged him. He examined it and laughed. "I like that one. I'm gonna send it to Gemma." The waiter returned, his tray laden with the holy trinity of pace-yourself drinks. Mike raised his shot glass to me.

"I'm sorry for being mopey all day. Glad we're here." We knocked back our shots and I experienced that ten-second taste delay you get with vodka. Mike slugged his second shot like

he was taking swings in a batting cage.

“No apologies necessary, bud.” I said.

“Yeah, but I bet if I hadn’t apologized, then you would have considered an apology necessary, right?” Mike leaned forward, animated, eager to unpack this theory. “The apology only becomes unnecessary once it’s actually made.”

I finished my second shot and felt a liquid normality settle in.

“You sure you’re a mechanical engineer? You sound like a philosopher.”

Mike went onto explain the underlying mathematical logic to what he was saying. As he eased into his usual self I stopped feeling like I was dragging an anchor around. We agreed that all life came down to a basic tension between rationality and spirituality. We further agreed that this best expressed itself in sports. This was definitely complex.

“Gemma tried to kill me last night.” Mike announced. I stutter laughed, then I registered his abrupt matter of fact tone and found myself chilled.

“What?”

“Or. Well, before she did that,” Mike paused. “Remember when you popped up to the store, and I had to go sit with her ‘till she went to a meeting? That was a lie.”

Mike palmed the wheel as Chuck’s parking lot receded behind him. The panic he’d boxed into a compartment deep in his stomach churned. Since the *Almost Famous* night he and Gemma had been inseparable. Long drives through the countryside, ice cream after work, double-bill movie nights. And sex. A lot of sex. She confessed that she’d liked him from the moment he’d walked into the store.

"I'm sorry I was so mean." They were naked on her bed, limbs intertwined. Mike feeling like he'd been tossed up on the shore by a storm. "Usually I never feel bad when I'm mean. But I hated that I was mean to you. I won't be mean again. If I am then tell me to go fuck myself."

"I'd rather not do that."

She kissed his chest. "You're too nice. I can't believe how nice you are."

With her he felt a confirmation that what he wanted was acceptable. They were absolutely meant to be together. Yet he couldn't fight the nagging doubt that she wasn't going to meetings. Sometimes she made him wait on the couch while she changed in her bedroom with the door locked. She would emerge, slightly glass-eyed, tick tacks on her breath. But she couldn't be that obvious, Mike thought, he would have smelled *something*.

As he came to the light at the four-way intersection at the hill a mile from Chuck's he replayed the phone call he'd just had with her.

"What do you want?" She'd sighed.

"I want you to pull over and call your sponsor."

"No."

"Why?"

"I'm actually laughing right now. Isn't that sad? Don't you think that's sad?"

"Just pull over, ok? I'll come meet you, no big deal, ok?"

"Now *that's* sad." Then she hung up.

The light turned green, Mike banked a right and followed route 108 out of town. He had only a vague idea of where she was or what he would do if he found her. His phone rattled in the cup-holder. Chuck calling. Mike killed it. Too complicated. Explain later. Will require lies. He

could make this ok. The phone rattled again. Gemma. Mike picked up. Her voice was calm.

“I pulled over. I talked to my sponsor.”

“That’s good.” Mike felt himself go into a holding pattern.

“I’m sorry to scare you.”

“That’s ok. I just want you to be ok.”

“I’m going back to my apartment. You can come over if you want.”

She was resting against the arm of her couch, one long leg stretched across the cushion, the other dangling on the floor. Her head was tilted up at the ceiling. The graceful curve of her neck pink in the spring light floating through white curtains knitted with elephant patterns. She wore an ankle length accordion dress and a tight grey-white camo T-shirt. She seemed tired.

“Hey.” Gemma retrieved her cigarettes from the glass coffee table. Mike thought about asking her how she was feeling. She lit up. The ‘pfft’ of the bic-lighter seemed to echo against the high V-shaped ceiling. The lighter clattered back to the coffee table.

Gemma looked at him. Her eyes were muggy.

“I’m high right now. Can you tell?”

Whatever Mike thought he was feeling evaporated.

“I guess not.”

She stared out the windows, an elbow on her knee, her thumb pressed above her eyebrow, grey-blue smoke twirling from the cigarette between her fingers. Mike felt that she was somehow bigger than he was.

“I need to look up a shrink that my insurance will cover. Can you help me with that?”

“Ok.” He retrieved her laptop, a battered black IBM monolith, from under the couch.

"I need your password."

"4788." She closed her eyes. "That's my birthday."

"I know." Mike typed it in. Gemma spasmed as ash onto her lap.

"Fuckk." She swept the ashes away, suddenly alert and interested. She stared bug-eyed at the screen. "Look, department of social services, yeah. This stupid fucking computer. I need a new one. It was my ex's. No wonder it doesn't work."

For twenty minutes they navigated the social services psychiatric page. Mike heard himself suggest psychiatrists listed on the drop down tab. Gemma retreated back against the couch, her fingers spider-walking the ridges of Mike's spine.

"The itsy-bitsy spider..." She giggled.

"Do you have your insurance card?" Mike thought she was kind of over-doing it.

"Uppp the water-spout..."

"Gemma. Do you have your insurance card?"

She sat bolt upright. Her body rigid and tense like a window had just shattered.

"I'm going to do the rest of my drugs now." She announced and stood up. Mike felt divorced from the helplessness shaking inside his own stomach.

"Can we do this first?"

"No, I don't think so." She replied firmly. She picked up her hand-bag and held it to her chest. Mike looked up at her. She was totally at peace with herself.

"Please don't."

"You can't stop me." She side-stepped the coffee table, confident with purpose.

"Yes, I can." Mike tossed her laptop aside and started to rise. He realized that he was

angry. The look on Gemma's face pole-axed him and he froze. Her eyes were utterly flat and indifferent to him. She spoke like her decision was final, thank you very much.

"Mike. I'm going to do these drugs if you're here. I'm going to do them if you're not here. But wouldn't you rather be here in case something happens to me?"

She skipped happily into the hallway and vanished into the bathroom. The door shut. Mike sat down. He considered the vertical thrust ratios on ICBMS and a forty megaton detonation annihilating millions in one apocalyptic flash. He took a cigarette from Gemma's pack, then remembered that she took the lighter. He put the cigarette back. The sticky coffee and multiple-flavors aroma from the store sank with his sweat into his pores.

Mike's phone buzzed. An email alert from Cornell. He pulled up the email. A decision had been made regarding his application. Congratulations, Michael J. Campbell...

He walked to the bathroom door, which was painted white with thin oak planes bisected by heavier maple.

"Hey." He knocked like he needed to use the toilet or something. This was ridiculous. He twisted the brass handle and shouldered the door open.

Gemma was slouched against the wall. Her upper body neatly perpendicular from where her legs stretched across the white and black ceramic tiles. Red toenails brushing against the porcelain bathtub. Her right arm was crossed over her waist. The left drooped. Black rubber tubing was wrapped tight above the elbow. On the floor at her hip: A plastic syringe. Two empty wax folds. The lighter. Silver spoon curled and browned in it's center like an Iris in a robot's eyeball.

Mike sat on the edge of the bathtub. The porcelain was cold against his palms. The walls

muffled all sound as if this bathroom was at the bottom of the ocean. Gemma's chin was sunk into her collarbone, her choppy blonde bangs swept over her face. Mike sought a feeling but something told him that this wasn't the time or place. Even if it was, he felt separated from everything that had led up to where he was now.

"Gemma." He reached for her wrist to take her pulse. She mumbled sleepily. Her eyelids rose to half mast. Her face was distorted, like her own wax museum caricature.

"I'm sorry." Her eyelids shut like automated garage doors. "I won't do this again."

Mike squeezed her hands. Suddenly his heart broke for the pitiful broken thing on the floor. Eventually he cajoled her to her feet. She had a slack smile as he walked her to her bedroom and eased her onto the bed. She lay curled on her side.

"Lie down with me." She whispered.

"Mike, what the *fuck*?" I said. The sun had dipped behind the Pine-Tree coated hills that surround Cooperstown. Mike's voice had been steady as he told his story but by the time he was done his eyes were twitching. His hand shook as he drank.

"I don't know how to talk about this without seeming melodramatic."

"Why didn't you – why are you still with her?"

"Because I'm scared of her." It spilled out as if he'd just realized that it was true.

"Do you want to walk and talk or something?"

"I don't actually want to get up right now."

"Ok." I swigged more beer. "I thought you said she tried to kill you."

Mike frowned like he was embarrassed. "I'm not doing a good job telling this story."

"The fuck? I'm not grading you."

"It's confusing because I can't – I'm trying to frame things, ok? And I don't understand how – like I play this part in it, so I'm on the inside looking out and..." Mike made a box motion with his palms and stared hard into the invisibility between them. He shrugged at the impossibility of the whole thing. "It's just *fucked* up, you know?"

"It's definitely not not fucked up." I said cautiously.

"I told her that I loved her." He said timidly.

"Jeez, Mike. Keep your hand out of the buzz-saw."

"She loves me back. So, I mean, there's that."

Mike rattled out a pitiful laugh. His shoulders slumped. He had the paralyzed look of a guy who just realized he wandered into an active minefield.

He decided that he couldn't tell anyone. He couldn't treat her any different in the store because it would provoke complicated questions. He believed her when she said that he was the best thing to ever happen to her. He told himself that he was being strong. The possibility that he was in denial hovered over him like a bird of prey. He resented it.

Then for two or three weeks she seemed to shake the spike. She went back to NA and AA, sometimes Mike accompanied her. She cooked him surprise dinners and asked him to do yoga with her. One weekend she made a picnic lunch and they went to the beach. She bought a wiffle ball and bat and insisted that she show him how to hit after they went for a swim.

This is it, Mike thought as she wiggled her hips, the corn-cob yellow bat quivering in the air above her shoulders. This is what I want, he knew it for a fact as he tossed the ball at her

and she blew a kiss at him as she swung.

So it really sucked when Mike brought Chinese food over to Gemma's and her hello-kiss was saturated with vodka. She wore heeled brown leather knee high boots, a tight desert print skirt that normally would have turned Mike on, and a black halter top that contrasted her chalk-white collar-bone. Her eyes shone like wet glass.

"Whatever." Gemma 'fuck-it' shrugged and stumble-walked to her bedroom.

"What are you doing?" Mike got no answer. He followed her. She painted her lips Marlboro red and applied make-up with slow, delicate strokes. Her silence tormented him. She capped her lipstick and strode for the door.

"Wait." He reached for her.

"Get your fucking hands off of me." She leveled him with a disgusted, steel-barricade glare and marched out. When Mike caught her in the driveway she threw her arms around him and beamed happily, "Everything is going to be ok."

At the bar she shook with wide-eyed fear as she stared into her martini. Then she broke into hysterical tears and rushed out, the martini untouched. Mike found her sobbing on a bench. When he joined her she begged his forgiveness. Then she stood, utterly calm, and insisted that she wanted to go back inside. Mike politely suggested that they return to her apartment instead.

"Walk in front of me, Mike. I don't want you staring at my ass." She slurred, trembling head to toe like a one-woman earthquake.

"I wasn't." He actually wasn't.

"Bullshit. I know you were. Of course you were. Fuck you, admit it." She smacked her ass

with both hands, glaring at him until he moved in front of her. "I hate walking in skirts and heels."

It took thirty minutes to reach her apartment, which was a quarter mile from the bar. In that time she screamed fuck you at strangers leaving restaurants, flipped off a car, and hit Mike with her purse when he tried to guide her by the hand.

"If you fucking touch me again I'll throw myself in front of a truck."

In the apartment stairwell she seemed amused as she crashed against the walls and slipped on the stairs, yanking Mike by the collar with each soar and plunge motion.

He forced her apartment's door open, she went limp, and they tumbled onto the white linoleum kitchen floor. She ground her waist into his, wrapped her thighs around him, and forced her lips onto his. He froze, paralyzed by her vodka-breath, turned to stone by Medusa herself.

"C'mon, c'mon." Gemma drawled and hiked her skirt to her hips. "You better fuck me right now. C'mon, do it. Do it now. I know you want to."

"No."

She grabbed angrily at his belt. "You know how big a deal it is for me to want to fuck a guy? You better fuck me right now or I'm calling somebody over to tie me up and fuck me."

"Stop."

She jumped off, careened into the hallway and bounced into the bathroom. Mike rose to his feet, Gemma's strangled retches ringing in his ears. As he went to close the door to the apartment he quite naturally found himself walking through it, then he was descending the stairs, then he was running for his car, and then he was driving into the night, filled with the

blissful conviction that he would never, ever go back there.

Gemma texted him a photo of her hip, zig-zagged with jagged cuts oozing blood like she'd been swiped by Freddy Krueger.

"If you don't come back I'll do this to my neck." She typed. And so he went back.

"I'd find little packs of razors all over her place. Doubt I found all of them. I tried." Mike told me. We were walking up the street in the aqua blue dusk. Past mom and pop souvenir shops overflowing with chattering customers.

"Hey, seriously." I grabbed his shoulder. "Why are you with this person?"

"Because I'm scared that she will kill herself if I leave and I am in love with her."

His there-it-is confessional certainty disintegrated into self-conscious twitching.

I got a rush of impatience, what do they say about the definition of insanity?

"Mike, look, you might be, I don't know, but let's say you are, and she loves you back too. There is still no happy outcome here. She needs to be in –"

"She can't afford rehab. If she goes to detox then that's a state facility and her probation officer has the authority to either fine her or recommend, you know..." He trailed off.

"How is *any* of what you just said a reason to be with her?"

"Fuck." He kicked at the air. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." The sky had turned velvet-black by the time we reached my car, a swamp-green '08 Station Wagon I'd bought from my parents and only recently finished paying off. Humidity still hung in the air, cars rolled past us, their engines a rumbling guitar tune-up over a backing track of chattering insects.

"Mike, what do you mean she tried to kill you last night?" Which was a question I never

thought I'd ask. It was so absurd in theory as to be funny.

In the forty-three days since the Chinese food night Gemma had managed eight days of sobriety. Day twenty-four to day thirty-one. Day thirty-two returned them to the death-bound roller coaster. Gemma a Fun-house Jekyll and Hyde armed with vodka miniatures and razors. Mike eventually made a rule. He would take her car keys and all the razors he could find, shut his phone off, and drive home. He returned in the morning to make sure she made it to the methadone clinic. Sometimes she was waiting outside, dressed and showered and pretty looking. She'd take her keys, say "thanks", and bring him breakfast when she got to work; where Mike pretended that everything was ok.

On the nights in between, he lay awake, mind and soul fragmented. He felt like was plunging down a bottomless pit, forever looking up at the Island within himself where he loved this person. His rule, his island-gesture of strength, was comically inadequate and sank beneath a rising tide of routine.

The night before Cooperstown he caught Gemma buying a bottle after work and went home after she refused to give it to him. "This is fucked up," she'd said, like it was happening to someone else. As Mike carefully laid out his Pedro Jersey and packed an overnight bag, he vowed that under no circumstances would he rush to her side when she inevitably called him for help. She'd had her chance and she blew it.

At ten thirty he entered her tomb-dark kitchen, his failure of resolve more dead weight in his stomach. He opened the bedroom door on a Plato's cave of darkness cleaved in two by a shaft of silver-blue moonlight. The miniature disco-ball he and Gemma bought for her nieces'

birthday spun a crystal rainbow glow from a corner.

A mountain of empty Tito's miniatures glistened on the floor, the clear-glass reflecting the disco ball's dancing lights. She set it all up, Mike thought. Prepared it like a gift. Self-conscious destruction. Gemma was a motionless shadow on the edge of her bed. The red tip of her cigarette glowing one-eyed in the dark above where her bare legs dipped in the moonlight.

Mike flicked the light on. The room abruptly turned mundane with amber light and Gemma was just a shell-shocked alcoholic quivering in a tight black cocktail dress on her bed. Mike leaned against her dresser, arms folded. His resolve to take no shit strengthened by his disgust for the fuck-up thousand-yard staring at her bottles piled on the floor in between them.

"You need to get the booze out of your system. Make yourself throw up and I'll get you some water." Mike told her in his best cold-hearted tone.

"Please be nice to me." She looked at him. Doe-eyed. Nope, won't work, not this time, Mike thought. The hell is she wearing a dress for anyway?

"I am being nice to you." Mike stood in front of her and offered his hand. All at once she was on the floor, sobbing, clinging to his knees.

"Please be nice to me. Please be nice to me. Please be nice to me." She wailed.

"Gemma. Go and make yourself throw up. I will make you toast and get you water." The tortured death-rattle pain in her voice shook Mike to his core.

"Y-you have – I can't walk. I can't go in there alone."

Mike waited. She labored to her feet and stumbled into the bathroom. Mike got a trash bag from the kitchen. He scooped the bottles into the bag and, with each clink of glass, realized that the iron block of strength he'd felt seconds ago was gone. He attempted to recall the

feeling as he stood in the hallway with a tall glass of water, fending off Gemma's retches.

"Are you there?" Gemma called feebly.

"Yep." Then raw anger found him and spread through his veins, as if synced to the hack-and-spill sound of Gemma's vomiting. He was just a prop to her, it was clear now. He'd even just gone from janitor to butler. Could be him, could be anyone else. He knew it, had always known it, pretended not to because why? Love? No, because he needed the attention. He accepted her game. "I'll get sober, I promise." "I'll leave if you don't." Then quell-fucking-surprise she didn't get sober and he didn't leave. Now is different though, the thought taking off in Mike like a rocket as he heard the toilet flush. Tonight I'm done.

"Thanks." Gemma appeared and took the glass. She lumbered into her kitchen and eased into a spindle-backed beach-wood chair at the round-drop table in the corner. "I thought you were making toast."

"You don't have any bread." Mike replied in a 'fuck you' tone. She was viper still, eyes narrowed and jaw tight. Mike caught the predator-in-waiting vibe emanating from her. Violence was imminent. But he refused to be scared, he would not permit her to win.

"Sit down. Have some water." She said. Mike did, the chair creaking under his weight. Gemma's eyes tracked his arm as he tipped the tap-warm liquid down his throat. She cocked her head, as if waiting for him to speak. Mike just stared back, trying to laser-beam his raw hatred into the center of her skull.

"Is this a staring contest?" She asked, the switchblade in her voice accompanied by a bored sneer. Mike felt his clarity of hatred bail on him just like the strength did. All that remained was the fear of losing to her. He finished the water.

"If it is you just blinked." Mike let the empty glass hit the table with a thud. Gemma snorted a derisive laugh that overtook her entire body. Her shoulders heaved as she laughed and laughed, denying Mike his victory. Her laughter died into staccato hiccups and she leaned forward, eyes blazing with contemptuous joy.

"Don't think that just 'cause you got all my razors I can't hurt myself."

"Who are you threatening, me or you?"

Victory at last. Mike smiled. Then Gemma lunged for the counter. For some auto-pilot reason Mike tried to block her. She drove her shoulder into his chest, the back of his head slammed into the cabinet. He staggered away, technicolor stars bursting in his vision. When he turned around Gemma held a purple eight inch Cuisinart stainless steel knife in her hand.

Words died in Mike's throat. Gemma stared down at the knife curiously, her breath ragged. She looked up at Mike and her lips curled with childish menace. Mike spun and made a decisive exit. Just like last time and the time before. He was halfway down the stairs when something crashed in Gemma's apartment. Mike stopped. He thought about the neighbors, and then, abruptly, that knife. Something different in Gemma's eyes. Something bad.

He followed streaks of ruby red blood, some thick, some thin, from the kitchen to the bedroom. He stepped over the drawer, upturned in the doorway. Gemma was sprawled on her knees, her face buried in her bed, blood water-falling from a jagged gash above her ankle into a thick, expanding pool. The purple knife lying there like a compass pointing handle first at Mike.

"Gemma." Mike said, not quite believing what she had done. She twisted to regard him, her face contorted into a chattering mad hatter smile, pale and sweaty, triumphant. Look what I did! She jabbed a cigarette between her teeth, fired it up.

“Yeahhh.” She growled and gestured erratically through a puff of smoke.

Mike found hand towels in the bathroom, but Gemma angrily protested – “those are my *mother’s*, no! Put them back, and *fold* them!” – so he used pillow cases. The cut was much deeper than Mike thought. Her blood seeped through the case and the warm stickiness coated his own hands. His stomach suddenly queasy, throat and cheeks burning. Salty bile tingling on his tongue, cold sweat on his forehead – no – he fought it back.

“I’m calling an ambulance.” He pulled the knot tight.

“That *hurts!*” Gemma jerked her ankle away. Mike’s knee slid in the blood, it’s edges congealing but it’s center still wet and dewy. “No ambulance, no. I can’t afford one.”

“Then we’re going to the hospital. Gemma. Let’s go. We have to go now. Ok?”

“Just be nice to me.” She repeated her favorite line. Her cigarette fell into the smeared brush stroke of blood on her floor. “Oh, no. Look at this mess.”

“Gemma.” Mike was fading. “This is not a discussion, we are going to the hospital.”

“Hey, Mike, c’mon. Be nice to me, ok?” She took his bloodstained hand and dragged it up her thigh. He tugged it away, the horror jolting him back but fueling the urge to throw up.

“Gemma, *please.*”

“Ok. Fine.” He had to help her out of the dress and she made a playful grab for his belt as he did. She allowed Mike to bring her loose acid washed jeans and a purple Bowie shirt. During the ride to the emergency room she criticized the lack of music and protested Mike’s refusal to allow her to smoke in his car.

They waited for an hour in the joined rows of plastic bucket chairs beneath the sickly in-set fluorescent lights in the ER waiting room. Mike slouched, staring past everything, registering

nothing, dried sweat, blood and exhaustion a thin film layer under his skin.

“Do you ever think about us getting married?” Gemma nuzzled his shoulder and hooked her arm under his. “I do all the time.”

“What?” Mike pulled away, unable to look at her. She sat upright, appalled.

“If you’re not going to be nice to me I’m going to leave.”

An orderly brought Gemma a wheelchair and ushered them through the labyrinth corridors into a ward lined by blue tarp-enshrined beds, occupied by patients conscious and unconscious, to a gurney in the corner. A twenty-something nurse with horn-rim glasses and green scrubs pulled the tarp around the three of them and helped Gemma to her bed. The nurse unwrapped the blood soaked pillow-case bandage.

“How’d this happen?” She asked like she was observing a dent in a car door.

“I was getting out of the bath and slipped on a glass of water.” Gemma explained mildly. She smiled at Mike and took his hand. “My boyfriend drove me here.”

The nurse pulled a gown from a tray mounted in gurney and dropped it on Gemma’s lap. Her back already to them as she said over her shoulder:

“Doctor Moore will be here soon.”

“I’ve already changed twice tonight. This sucks.” Gemma unrolled the gown. Mike cupped his chin in palms and stared at the medical equipment he’d seen on TV and tried to think of their names. In the peripherals of his eyes, Gemma changed into her robe. Her naked body disturbed him and he turned away.

Doctor Moore barreled through the tarp. He was stocky with linebacker shoulders that made his white-doctor’s coat billow like a cape. He tilted Gemma’s slashed up ankle to him.

"How'd this happen?" His gaze and tone neutral.

"I was getting out of the bath and I'd left a glass on the floor and I stepped on it."

Mike's ears burned again at the lie. That she somehow thought anyone could be so stupid as to believe a word she said. He noticed a dried splotch of her blood on his knee.

Fuck this, Mike thought. Fuck this and every version of it.

"This is a deep cut." Doctor Moore said, waiting for Gemma to respond. Gemma didn't.

"Doctor." Mike returned to himself on the power of his own voice. "Obviously that's a self-inflicted wound."

Gemma's eyes teared up and went wide at the betrayal. Mike felt a pang of guilt. Doctor Moore glanced at him without interest. The nurse reappeared with a trolley. Doctor Moore addressed Gemma with authoritative clarity. Mike envied his power.

"I'm going to stitch this up. You missed an artery by three quarters of an inch – "

" – *Jesus Christ.*" Mike rasped. Doctor Moore continued as if he hadn't heard Mike.

" – And you're going to be kept overnight on suicide watch." Gemma crossed her arms. Her chin thrust out, jaw clenched. Whites of her eyes like cue balls in their sockets.

Mike counted twenty forest green squares on the white non-slip vinyl floor as Dr. Moore went to work. The staple gun clicked and the squares went blurry. Less than an inch. His brain registered the purple knife in Gemma's hand. She had *threatened* him. The blood on the floor. Bottles. Blood and ash. Thoughts and potential decisions in Mike's head went nowhere like back-firing cars. He replayed Gemma screaming, her voice like a scythe hooking him tooth to throat. The back and forth draining him. The ugliness and cruelty of his own thoughts horrified him. How could he have thought such things?

He re-imagined the blade, comically purple, slashing *him* open. Mocking him. A phantom cut tinged like a fault line at the top of his ankle, Mike's fingers shot to it and traced smooth unbroken skin. The room of blood and ash. Tomorrow, he would be in Cooperstown. Yes. Go. Just go. She wasn't safe on her own. He was scared. Go. Just go. Go where you are yourself.

"Done." Doctor Moore stood, snapped off the rubber gloves and dropped them in a silver bowl on the cart. "Take a minute to say good-bye."

"Ok. Thanks." Mike offered his hand but Doctor Moore was already through the tarp. Gemma had pulled her knees to her chest. Triple rolled cotton bandages were taped over her ankle. She poked the bandages as if they were wrapping paper and a present was inside.

"I'm going to Cooperstown tomorrow." Mike announced, his voice shaky. How could he be so selfish? Just leaving her like this. He had to tell someone. What, make it someone else's problem? No, he had saved her life. Go, just go. It's ok to go.

"Oh, yeah." She frowned. "No. I don't remember you telling me that."

"I did tell you." He felt hollowed out, carved to the bone.

"That's cool." She was vulnerable in that thin hospital gown. Mike longed to protect her. Say or do something to impart her with strength to last two days so he could get the fuck away from this fucking maniac.

He took her hand and squeezed. She squeezed back. Smiled bravely at him.

"I'm going to call your mom so that she can get you tomorrow." She wrenched her hand away and jackknifed up in the bed, all taut rage again. Mike flashed on the purple knife and internally tumbled back down a hill towards The Fear.

"No. Don't you dare. No." Tears poured and made a drop-drop sound in her lap. Mike

held her. She clung to him. Her tears soaked into his chest. He shook with her. It felt like they would both plunge through the bed, the floor, and the earth itself.

Gemma pushed herself off of him and gripped his shoulders. Fixed him with a ferocious, yet unsteady gaze. Everything suddenly elevating, Mike totally alive to the melodrama. Give me a sign that I can leave, Mike thought, the desperation exploding in his stare.

“I will call her. Ok? If you do – it’s, no. Just let me take care of it.” Mike knew full well that she would not call her mother. Yet, the other voice demanded: Get out. Go. Now.

The nurse swept the tarp aside. Two burly orderlies in matching whites flanked her.

“Time to go.” The nurse announced. One orderly tied a red plastic bracelet around Gemma’s wrist. The other pushed Mike aside and hauled the gurney sideways. Mike side-stepped, then weaved forward like he was making a lay-up. He managed to kiss Gemma on the cheek, his body screaming at him to get out now. And then it rushed out of him:

“I love you.”

Gemma recoiled and twisted in the bed. Regarded Mike in escalating shock, then her face softened into something resembling the Real Gemma. Mike clocked an orderly smirking. Gemma nodding rapidly, fearful. Her lips wobbled around the words, Mike knowing what she was trying to say. She reached for him, fingertips glancing his bare arm.

“Yeah, I’ll call you tomorrow.” Gemma told him. The orderly made a wide arc of the gurney and pushed it through double swinging doors. The doors made a thwap noise as they closed and in that instant an adrenaline colossus materialized on Mike’s shoulders like a depersonalized thousand-pound fact of life and it’s all consuming power turned his knees to rubber and roared through his body until he collapsed cross-legged and sobbing on the floor.

“Make a right at the desk, go down the hall to your second left, reception will show you the exit.” The nurse told Mike and moved on before he could ask her which desk since there was one at both ends of the ward.

Mike finished the story halfway through the drive back to the motel. Farmhouses were lit up at the tops of fields that were gel-black in the night. The countryside carried a pre-Industrial feeling, like the Red-Coats still lingered in the woods. I left-to-right tapped my hand on the steering wheel. Too much of Mike and Gemma covered me, like I’d just been through a car wash with the windows open.

“So, technically, she didn’t quite try to kill you.” I ventured. Mike was slouched against the passenger door, the human equivalent of a carry-on bag stuffed into the overhead bin.

“She brandished a fucking knife at me. I’d say that’s close, your honor.” Mike replied vacantly. He shifted his weight, palmed his knee. “Maybe I suck at telling stories.”

“Like I said, I’m not grading you.”

“I feel so full of shit.”

“Everybody’s full of shit. Who cares?” I got angry with that and let the rush dictate everything else. “You wanna be happy? Don’t think about anything you’re doing. Be a fucking ape skull-fucking your way through the caves, man.”

“Now you sound full of shit.”

“Yeah, but I don’t care.”

“Everyone cares.”

“Well, I try not to.” I flashed my brights at an oncoming pick-up, blasting towards us in

the opposite lane, it's headlights merging into a solid blinding wall like the light at the end of the tunnel. "Hey, fuck you, Cletis. Turn the brights off."

Then the pick-up passed with a rise-and-fade wash sound and the dark countryside reformed in my eyes, the sting lingering in my iris as trees and houses came into focus.

"Self-awareness is a fucking cock-tease." I proclaimed. Mike grimaced.

"Did you and Rust Cohle go to the same Freshman 101 Philosophy class?" Mike smirked, passably resembling normality as he did.

"Look, Mike lives again."

"She said a taxi took her home." Mike checked his phone, that now-cruel home-screen selfie of him and Gemma stared back at him. "I knew she wouldn't call her mom."

"I can't believe the junkie lied to you, Mike."

"Hey."

"What are you – ok, look. Everything you have just been put through and everything you know about what she did before you – she's still alive. She'll be alive when you get back."

"That's not the point."

"What is the point?"

"You're pissed."

"I'm not pissed. I just don't know what I'm supposed to do. I'm not trying to be a dick, just – Mike, you're being abused. Look, Lana worked with a lot of, and I don't mean this to sound insulting, but when she did social work she –"

"I get it." Mike scowled into the dark and expelled a guttural sigh. "God dammit I am so fucking sick of this entire fucking thing. It's just humiliating. I'm her punching bag. I think she

enjoys this. I figure she's lying half the time, for all I know her dealer picked her up and she blew him for a crack rock. And if that's what she's doing, then do I even want to know? And I never think of what to say or do in the moment, I only see it afterwards. I'm gonna say all of this and I'll wilt when the time comes to do something about it. The worst part is she's the only person in her useless fucking family that can hold a conversation, the rest of them would have to make a quantum leap to qualify as retarded. That's her fucking support system? I literally have no idea which version of her is gonna turn up. It's like we have one good day and after that she makes a conscious decision to turn into The Exorcist. And she somehow thinks she's smarter than me? I'm the one with a college degree, I'm the one going to grad school. What's she got? A fucking criminal record and three years probation she's violated God knows how many times? And she thinks she can put me through this? Like I owe her something? Fuck her. I'm the reason she's still breathing, literally. I mean, she missed by less than an *inch*. Why would somebody, it, the – less than an inch. I could see ..." The scorched earth rage in his voice rattled off into shakiness and he sat up, fist to mouth, the other palm flat on his stomach.

"Are you about to –" I asked, my foot switching to the brake, the jeep slowing as I made a tentative right-ward drift into the emergency lane. Mike squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head furiously, then exhaled, crisis averted.

"I'm good." He said. I banked back onto the road. Mike barked a laugh. "Tell you what, war on drugs? It's fucked either way. Treat it like a public health problem, send 'em to rehab? Yeah, sure. Let's give junkies money and a second chance. What could go wrong?"

"Slam Dunk, Mission A-fucking-complished." I seconded as Mike made a plane-wobble motion with his hand and crashed it. He visibly lightened, he'd gotten a taste of revenge. Then

he fell silent, contemplative.

“It’s tough when – ” He coughed again. “It’s confusing when you think this person knows your truth. That they’ve read what’s written on the inside of your soul.”

“That’s a little excessive.”

“Yeah.” Mike shrug-yawned. “Wish I’d gotten a photo with Pedro.”

I opened the mini-fridge and finger-walked over miniatures of JD, Gin, and Tequila. Behind me in the dark, Mike was spread-eagled face down across his bed. I thought better of the miniatures, kicked the fridge shut, and filled a glass with water from the bathroom sink. I tried to imagine what it would feel like to not be able to kick that mini-fridge shut. To be a slave to the urge. From one to a thousand, Slim Pickens riding the bomb.

The attempt at empathy had me agitated, I stepped outside onto the walkway, which ran the length of the single-story motel. Insects gathered on sodium-vapor lamps mounted next to the doors. I dug my phone from my pocket and impulse-dialed Lana, thinking vaguely that it would have been more prudent to call before I’d stepped outside, that way if she didn’t pick up I wouldn’t be just standing out here.

“Hey, Robert Capa, what’s got you up this late?” Lana chortled after the second ring.

“Funny, I’ll tell you why I’m up if you tell me why you’re up.”

“A gentleman just left.” She said matter of factly. Then, like she heard the catch in my voice, she snorted. “Just kidding. We have these lobbyists coming back in on Wednesday and I’m reviewing an ad-buy proposal they sent my boss.”

“They don’t care you’re at your sister’s wedding?”

"I don't care that I'm at my sister's wedding."

"Who're your clients?"

"I no-shit legally can't actually tell you, suffice that they are bad people. How are you?"

"Wanna hear a funny story?"

"No, I prefer depressing stories." Lana replied. A statement that in and of itself, was actually pretty funny. By the time I relayed the spark-notes version to her, she thought so too.

"That's fucked up." There was sympathy in her voice. "I feel sorry for both of them."

"I mean – " I lowered my voice even though I knew Mike was asleep. "He's making a choice to stay."

"He's just confused. Why's it matter so much to you?"

"He's my friend. What if she gets him hooked or something?"

"Ah. I never considered that." She yawned. "That *is* kinda scary."

"Well, *yeah*." I said impatiently.

"What am I supposed to do? It's like two in the morning and I'm here, you're there, he's there, she's ... somewhere. I dunno, keep him away from that Banshee or whatever. Let's talk about something else."

"Yes ma'ame. How's that wedding?"

"Cathy is making a mistake, my parents think so too but they're resigned. I feel guilty for being judgmental, then I think, Cathy, honey, you're marrying a guy who took out a credit card in your name and maxed it out without telling you. God, I'm glad I was the boring sister. I miss my cats." I pictured her coiled in her chair, one leg propped up to her chest, the phone between her shoulder and ear. "Come to think of it, let's move on from this too."

“Did you get to wear a nice dress?”

“Oh, that’s all you care about?”

“What else is there to care about?” I shot back, hoping the irony showed in my voice.

“It certainly looked great on me. *Because of me.*” She yawned again. “You’d look pretty good in a Tux, I bet.”

“Course I would. Hey, how come it didn’t work between me and you?”

“Oh God, don’t be melodramatic.” Her tone was light but I heard her tense ever so slightly. “Work out isn’t a good phrase, makes me think of a gym, you know?”

“... Right.”

Lana was silent, for a second I thought she was pissed or bored, but then I heard shuffling and a huff of breath.

“Hangon, I’m fixing my chair.” She explained, her voice dropping in and out. “Ok. I’m back.” She paused again. “Anyway, yeah, I can’t be objective about that thing, you can’t either so I don’t think there’s a real answer.”

Something in her friendly just-shy-of melancholic tone unsettled me, like I’d ventured onto unsafe ground. I racked my brains for a one liner to wrap things up, the effort coming to nothing when Lana spoke again.

“I am glad you called me though. I wouldn’t mind if you were here.”

“Oh yeah? You need a plus one?”

“Sure, you’re a competent dancer, right?”

“Probably not.” I admitted truthfully. “But I’d learn.”

“Nothing to it. Remember, like Patti Smith says? *I’m Dancing Barefoot, headin for a spin.*”

Wedding starts in eight hours, pick up a tux along the way.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Great. I’ll see you soon. Until then, I’m going to bed.”

“Sweet dreams.”

“Go take care of your friend.”

It took me three tries with the key-card to get back into the room. I cat-walked for my bed in the semi-dark, Mike sleep-muttering beneath a thin plane of light spilling from below the plastic pull-down shade.

I’d toed one sneaker free when Mike’s phone buzzed on the floor between the beds. A pixelated glow-blue tower sprang up, I looked down, ‘Gemma Incoming’ flashing across the screen. Across the glow, I glimpsed the back of Mike’s head and the ridge-line of his shoulders. He was on his side, back to me and to the incoming call. I picked up the phone, it’s vibrations massaging my palm. I felt at once giddy and utterly calm. I looked closer, Gemma’s call-photo was also part of that beach collection. It was a close-up, she and Mike on their stomachs, lips locked, their heads blocking out the sun. She’s holding her sunglasses on her forehead, you can see them both smiling as they kiss. I imagined answering the call. Crafting some sort of all encompassing masculine-moral put-down that would – do what?

The phone went still and the glow vanished before I could come up with anything, only then did I think that maybe I should have woken Mike up. An after-shock vibration rattled the phone, voicemail and missed call from Gemma. I held the phone for another second, feeling something similar to when my parents semi-caught me looking at porn in the ninth grade. I dropped the phone and lay down, forgetting that I still had one shoe on.

Later, in some immeasurable dream-time, I was sitting cross-legged on the motel bed. My arms were wrapped around somebody who I couldn't see and their arms were wrapped around me. Their cheek was damp and cold against mine, their chin was pressed just above my shoulder. The amber glow of the bedside lamp haloed this person's head like a solar-eclipse. I knew this person was Lana and I was shaking with grief.

"I'm sorry, I have to go." Lana whispered. Yet she was speaking in a voice that I knew was Gemma's.

"Please don't go." I pleaded. I clung to her. Her fingers brushed my hair.

"I have to. It'll be ok. You will be ok." Her voice was fucking angelic, soft with mourning and the purity of love itself. I was crying. So was she. She eased off of me. I felt a spinning, helplessness emptiness in me in me where Lana with Gemma's voice had just been.

"I don't want you to go." I knew that she was going into the bathroom. I couldn't turn around. I could only see her body. Her head remained somehow out of sight. I kept crying.

"You will be ok. I love you. I love you and only you. But now I have to go." She kissed my cheek and she was gone. I heard the bathroom door close behind me. Only then could I move.

I jerked awake and thought I heard myself shout. The grey light of morning crept at the corners of the curtain. Mike was motionless with sleep in his bed. Panic from the dream lingered in me like bad-sushi. I ran for the bathroom.

Nothing in there. Mounted sink with chipped plastic, a square block of mirror. Wallpaper the color of frozen corn. Plastic shower-curtain with hoop rings. Spotless bathtub. All my blood rushed back into me, returning to the space the dream had blasted its way into.

“Hey.” Mike tapped me on the shoulder. I jumped, hitting my knee against the door-frame. I was too shaken to register the pain. Mike frowned. “What’s up with you?”

“Nothing.” The cliché brought me back to earth, acted as a cold-wind on everything. Mike just nodded.

“Great, I gotta get in there.” I stood aside, Mike shut the door behind him. I went back to my bed and rolled onto my side. I was overwhelmed with exhaustion as if I’d never gotten any sleep in my entire life. As I drifted off I imagined how Mike must have felt, sitting on Gemma’s sofa the day he found out that he’d gotten into grad school. I imagined what I would have done, if I were him walking to that bathroom door. If I’d opened it and seen Gemma doped to the gills, skin-vacant and dead to everything but the fix, what would I have felt? Would my heart have broken for the broken thing on the floor?

The end

Mal's flight was delayed on the runway so Witt idled in a Hudson News and tried to force the voicemail out of his mind. He popped another Nicorette and browsed the magazines for a distraction. Terrorism, imminent economic collapse, and beautiful (sometimes naked) celebrities were suddenly monumentally interesting.

For ten seconds. Then depressing and utterly futile. He moved on and thumbed the neck pillows. Christmas music piped through the speakers. All I want for Christmas is you, Mariah dragging out the "you" at the end. Witt discerned the terminal speakers in the background. Now arriving ... if you see something, say something.

That voicemail. Somebody had to have given his number out. Or, can't you just look up numbers? No. You need to be a cop to do that. So, somebody gave out his number. His mother didn't, said she didn't, when Witt asked her after hearing the first ten seconds of the voicemail driving home from the restaurant. He'd seen the Boston area code and thought, Jeremy? Instead, *that* voice: "Hello, Witt, this is—" Witt had slammed the phone down.

Think about something else. What? Mal. A year and change since he saw her. Since they went to Game 2 of the '13 ALCS with Jeremy and Jess. Papi's game tying grand slam like an act of God. Later at two A.M., booze whacked and adrenaline giddy with Fenway ringing in his ears, they were zonked out on Jeremy's couch. Mal's chin on his shoulder, her breath on his neck. She'd kissed him. He'd frozen. No way that had actually happened. Too confusing.

That voicemail. Fuck. Witt grabbed a bag of trail mix and a Poland spring with the blue flip-cap and waited in line behind a stocky guy in a Men's Wear House suit with a pick-up sign under his arm. Limo driver. Witt considered asking how he got the gig, d'you have to pass a test? Any weird shit ever go down in the back?

Witt paid and wandered into the terminal. Travelers spilled out of baggage claim gates, he spit the Nicorette into a trash can and chewed fistfuls of trail-mix. It was part of staying healthy, same with working out. That was his life, working off and jerking out as Jeremy would say. A cacophony of voices hummed beneath the wood and steel acoustic ceiling.

He drifted along the peripherals of the crowds towards the wood veneer wall near the exits. Cold air wafted in as the automatic glass doors slid open and shut. Somebody'd Fredoed him giving his number out. Don't think about it. Obviously that's impossible.

He caught his reflection in a wall mounted steel plate. At least he looked good. A haircut, nice shirt, dark pea-coat. Beard trimmed to manly stubble. Yeah, move on. What voicemail? No big deal. Yeah. Not the worst thing that's happened. Doesn't mean anything you don't want it to. Chuck gave you the time off work, you gonna waste it sulking?

No. Day drinking around Christmas time in Boston with Mal? Witt got a genuine burst of the giddy-ups. Nevermind the, what? He couldn't even remember what he was agitated about.

If the voicemail is no big deal, then listen to it.

Emerging from the frosted panel that shielded the arrival gates, through the crowds, a shock of dark hair falling in curls onto a puffy insulated blue parka. Stooped under that boulder-sized backpack, dragging a two-wheel roller case. Witt side-stepped travelers with muttered "s'cuse me's", as Mal clocked him and arced a big wave with her free hand.

If you're not gonna listen to the voicemail then delete it.

Mal dropped the roller, shrugged off the backpack, and slammed into him with a vice-grip hug. On impact he felt that special kind of special and mumbled hello into her head.

"Huh?" She seesawed off of him.

“I said, hey stranger.”

“What stranger? Hey friend.” She coughed into the back of her hand and cleared her throat. “Sorry, I’m fighting off a cold.”

“What? Get away, I don’t want your plague.”

Mal mimed a death-cough and smirked.

“How’s work?” Mal asked as they exited the terminal. Passenger jets boomed in a slate grey sky that promised snow. Honks echoed off the terminal’s cement and steel façade. Witt, going for chivalrous, had volunteered to carry Mal’s backpack, convinced that since he’d been working out it’d feel like a pillow. It didn’t. It felt like a thousand-pound anvil.

“At least twice a day I think about burning the place down.”

Mal looked up from the cigarette she was about to light, eyebrow raised, a scuffed silver zippo in her hand.

“I’m kidding.” Witt said. Sweet, cleansing fire. Not *actually* thinking about it, just thinking about thinking about it. King of the ashes. He jerked his chin at her cigarette. “That’s not gonna help you fight off your cold.”

“I haven’t had one in fourteen hours.” She sparked up and smacked the zippo shut. Her exhale of smoke evaporated in the air. “Plus, I got a story about this. You’re still quit, right?”

Witt nodded.

“Healthy, healthy.” She squinted at him, cigarette burning between her fingers. “You’ve been working out too.”

“Impressed?”

“Depends. You got a six pack yet?”

“Yeah. It’s in the car, hope you like bud-light.”

She cringed as they entered the monolithic five story garage, the thick cement walls and industrial lighting making everything feel tomb-like. His ’09 jeep Cherokee that he’d bought off Chuck’s nephew was parked on the third level. He double tapped the lock on his keys, the lego block, restaurant and house keys, and a dual Sox-Pats keychain making a nice metallic jingle.

“What’s the story with that zippo?”

“Hangon. I got a voicemail.” Mal put her phone to her ear. Witt fiddled with his keys, his stomach tightening. Fuck. That voicemail. If he deleted it, he’d still think about it because he’d wonder. If he just listened to it, then he’d *know* what it said. No room for – call it what it is, kiddo: self-deception. His mind forming an existential judge of self-examination that condemned his life choices and called him a dick.

Why did he have to call?

“Nice ride.” Mal said as she slipped her phone back into her pocket. Witt deposited the backpack in the backseat, his body going wobbly with the loss of the weight, and helped her lug the roller case into the trunk.

“Who was that?”

“My step-mom.” Witt detected a tight tremor in her voice. “Ok, what’s our plan?”

Classy lunch in the North-End. Mike’s pastry. Full touristy at Faneuil hall. Classy bar crawl on Boylston. Dinner at Top of the Hub. Lowball glasses and melancholic romance.

“Whatever you want, man.”

“Allston it is.” She snapped her fingers and pointed them at Witt. Witt pulled a

theatrical grimace. Even if Allston was what he could afford and the classy fantasy was not.

Mal stamped out her cigarette and pressed the point of her boot into the remains.

“Ok, ‘cause I was gonna say.” She cleared her throat. “My dad is doing a Christmas dinner thing at his place with my step-mom and her family. You ever meet my uncle Tim?”

“He’s in *The Departed* right?”

“Funny. He’ll be there, my brother, I think Tim’s wife. You wanna go? It’s at eight thirty.”

“Yeah absolutely. Yeah.” Witt’s insides lit up like a personal Christmas tree. “You’re staying with the old fella?”

She circled the jeep to the front passenger side.

“Yep. Leave the car outside his place and we’ll train it back into town.”

Holiday traffic and the threat of snow turned the fifteen-minute drive into forty. The smell of cigarettes wafting off of Mal fired Witt’s veins with desire. For nicotine. She’d directed him, haphazardly, off I-90 down route 145 into a secluded corner of Winthrop.

“Are you sure I can leave my car here?” Witt asked as he three point parked behind a pick-up with a front mounted snowplow.

“Yeah.” Mal said, her eyes bouncing off the colonial revival triple deckers. Witt resigned himself to panicking the rest of the afternoon that his car had been stolen or towed and got out. Slushy mounds zig-zagged with black exhaust coated parked cars and chain-link fences.

Witt opened the rear side door as Mal stepped out and fired up another cigarette.

“Where am I taking these bags?” Chauffer or doorman, Witt thought, more career options. Mal shimmied between the jeep and the pick-up, frowning behind a puff of smoke. She

jutted her chin at an American brick Victorian with a Mansard roof on the corner of the street.

“Up there.” She hesitated and gazed at the Victorian, hands in her pockets. She spun back to Witt, one hand in her pocket and the other waving the cigarette. “Actually, leave ‘em in the car. Nobody’s home anyway. I’m hungry and I want drinks.”

Witt looked to the Victorian. It was the only brick building on the block, dark windows punctuated the faded red façade. Sitting alone like it had been placed there by mistake. The brick made it look stubborn, an especially strong Noreaster could blast every other house to flattened sticks, but the Victorian would remain standing. Alone.

“Want your present?” Mal shouldered past him, unzipped the backpack, and routed through. Witt jammed his hands into his pockets, cold damp seeping between his toes despite his wool socks and waterproof timberlands.

“How are you not wiped out from that flight?” Witt asked.

She popped her head out. “What company would I be if I slept the whole time?”

“Shame you’re getting sick then.”

“I am *not*.” She coughed again. “That was a fake cough. Ok. Close your eyes.”

Witt did.

“Open ‘em.”

She held a thin, green camo-fatigue army jacket in her outstretched arms. A patch with “New Left Army” stitched in black lettering was pinned to the shoulder.

“I got it in a thrift store my cousin works in. C’mon, try it on and let’s go.” She jingled the lapels. Witt slid out of the peacoat and Mal sprung the jacket onto him, her cigarette floating past his cheek close enough he felt a microdot of heat below his eyeball.

“Watch that thing.” Witt flexed and smoothed the lapels. The jacket was tight over his sweater. He turned to Mal, smiling through the onset of self-consciousness.

“How do I look?”

“Super-cool, soldier boy.”

“Why’d you get this?”

“Some movie a while back, somebody had this kinda jacket and you said you wanted it. So, you’re welcome. Ok, let’s go, go.” Mal twirled her hand in a helicopter motion.

Witt retrieved his peacoat and checked his reflection. His mind did a rapid self-conscious tremor. What are you, white trash? Hipster? What happened to classy? Fuck it, I’m down with this. And then he had a mini aftershock of giddiness that *Mal* got *him* a present.

They made a right at the top of the street, Witt shooting a final glance at the Victorian, that solid red brick like a fortress against the slate grey sky. Mal nudged him.

“Hey, lemme borrow five bucks.”

“Why?”

“Buy you a drink.” She winked.

Flurries trickled from the sky as the blue line passed Suffolk Downs. Warehouses, church steeples, and fenced in baseball fields zoomed past the windows. Mal swayed with the motion of the half empty tram car, her hands just below Witt’s on aluminum floor to ceiling hand rail. She was taller than he remembered and her face had gone from pale to tan.

Her actual physical presence emphasized to Witt that she’d been gone while somehow making him feel like she’d never left. Moments of silence sent compartmentalized parts of

himself into anxious tail-spins that she was bored already. An aching muscle memory in his stomach recalled her body passed out on top of his. He hadn't wanted to move. Even though her belt buckle had pressed into his love handles and the zipper on Jeremy's stupid throw pillow dug into his neck. He hadn't wanted to move.

"How's the favela?" Witt asked. His hand absently glancing over his much reduced love handles. Stop drinking beer and they'll be all the way gone. Ha. Stop drinking beer.

"It's great. Except I don't live in a favela. I live on the edge of one. White boy."

"You can't call me white boy. One half of you is Brazilian but the other half is Boston Irish. One half wants to drink and dance and the other half wants to drink and feel bad about it the next day."

"Boston Irish doesn't make me Irish catholic, no guilt there. Mr. All American." She plonked the zippo in his hand. "Wanna hear about this? What happened was, I got mugged waiting for my bus after work."

"Come again?" Witt thumbed the zippo. Mal tossed her hair over her shoulder.

"Yeah, you know there's all these protests 'cause the government robbed money from social service stuff to fund the Olympics?"

"You mentioned something." Also, I watch the news.

"My mom and I went to a few. Which is a big deal for her 'cause she grew up under Geisel and Figueredo. Back then if you sneezed in the wrong direction you were dead to rights. I got hit by a rubber bullet at one – " She pointed at her left shoulder. Witt remembered Jeremy shooting him with a paintball gun at Ian Pulido's birthday party in high school but decided the comparison wasn't worth mentioning.

“Which fucking *hurt*.” Mal continued. Her tone between breezy and matter of fact. “Anyway, a few months ago I stayed late to do a final edit for the TV station I worked for. My bus-stop is at the end of this plaza outside my office, but the routes got switched ‘cause of the protests so I gotta go across the main avenue on the other side of my building and up two blocks. And there’s a protest going on, I have my camera with me so I get some good shots and go up the hill. I’m putting the camera in my bag and *woosh*, this fucking guy, wearing a Hawaiian shirt for some reason, comes outta nowhere and grabs my bag. He looked kinda like —” Mal snapped her fingers. “Matt Damon. He looked like Brazilian Matt Damon. That was literally the first thing I thought. But, we’re playing tug of war with the bag and he fucking *kicks* me in the stomach. Knocks the wind out of me. He takes off up the hill, but there’s people at the bus stop, so he runs back down. And I can barely move, but I mean – my *life* is in that bag.”

Which we left in my car, Witt thought, deciding to let that one slide too. A protective urge had shot through him when she had said “he fucking kicks me”. The fact that she didn’t seem all that troubled that she’d been shot and mugged, that his protection wasn’t needed, twisted the urge into an envy-desire hybrid.

“So I chase him. I’ve never run that hard before in my entire life. I’m screaming up a storm ‘cause there’s people around and, somebody stop him, you know? He’s fast too, and he goes back through the protest. Those crowds are shoulder to shoulder, and I’m jumping up and down, shouting “the guy in the Hawaiian shirt!” I wasn’t even scared or angry, I was just on a rush. It never occurred to me that I wasn’t gonna get my bag back. I see commotion ahead, and Hawaiian shirt pops out. He sees me, and runs to the plaza outside my office. And then a bunch of people from the protest chased after him with me. Everyone’s shouting at this guy, “Ladrao! Ladrao!”

“Which means?”

“Robber, basically.” Mal peeled two cough drops out of a wrapper and popped them between her teeth. Witt turned the zippo over in his hand. His phone buzzed in his pocket.

“Whose that?” Mal asked, the tip of her nose pink through the tan.

“Jeremy.” Witt glanced at the text.

“What’s he want?” Mal peered at his phone. “Is he around?”

“Get back to —” She snatched his phone. Her head tilted back as she read Jeremy’s text.

“ “I’m gonna stick my head in the oven, Jeremy for Christmas dinner. Extra crispy”. I assume that’s about Jess?”

“Yeah. I texted him this morning to check in on him. That’s him getting back to me.”

“He’s not ...” Mal put two fingers to her temple and mimed splatter bursting.

“No.” Witt said. Knowing that visiting Jeremy was now unavoidable.

“Let’s buy him a beer. Cheer him up. Where is he?”

“Finish your story!” Witt stabbed ‘where are you’ and sent it. Mal coughed into her fist.

“Don’t look at me like that, I’m not getting sick. Right, we’re chasing Hawaiian shirt, and some security guards outside my building see what’s going on, so Hawaiian shirt veers towards this statue at the end of the plaza. And somebody overtakes me and pile drives him into the statue. I’m freaking out because I *heard* my bag hit the ground. Just as I get there, Hawaiian shirt breaks free. So, I tackle him, like I slam right into his legs. And, I, uh —”

She trailed off, eyes downcast and her lips curled up at the corner.

“What?”

She looked back up at him with a sheepish half-smile. Her voice was low and tentative.

“I hit him as hard as I could. Didn’t think about it, I just – it happened. Bam, right in the jaw.” Mal sent a knuckle-first love tap across Witt’s cheek. “It doesn’t even make the punch sound movies do. It just, you do it and it goes like “thump”, it’s muffled. You ever hit anybody?”

“No.” Emasculation reared its head. Mal aimed her thumbs at herself.

“First and only time. So, I get my bag and the crowd circles us. Two dudes grab Hawaiian shirt and the guy who tackled him socks him in the stomach. And the crowd is *cheering* like their team scored. They want to rip him to pieces. I check my laptop, not a scratch. The camera though? Busted to shit. The teleconverter was cracked, lens was split. And I just –” Mal fanned her hands on either side of her head, mouth open, eyes bug-wide. “I look at Hawaiian shirt. He’s a kid, looks like he hasn’t started shaving yet. I just want to go home. I tell them whatever, let him go. So, they shove him on his way. I sit down and try and have a cigarette. But I can’t find my lighter. Go figure. Then the guy who tackled Hawaiian shirt hands me *this* –” She took the zippo and waved it next to her face. “And goes, “you drop this honey?” I’m like no, guess it was his. He goes, “it’s yours now.” So, I light up, and then he sits next to me and puts his fucking hand on my leg. I swear I almost put the cigarette out on his arm. I tell him to fuck off, he goes “you’re welcome” and stalks off. Best part is, my laptop picks up the wifi from my office and I see an email from my boss asking me to cut thirty seconds out of the edit I sent. I went back and did another edit, slept in the office.”

Mal flicked the zippo open and snapped it shut. Nodding aimlessly. Clack. Clack. The zippo reminded Witt of GIs in black and white WWII movies he watched with his dad on Saturday afternoons when he was a kid. Clack. Clack. His dad had a silver zippo. In the summer he would sit on the porch in his blue wicker chair, that zippo would go clack, a tiny pall of flame

would swell and Witt would watch grey ribbons of cigar smoke trail into the sky.

Clack. Clack. That voicemail. Witt's phone buzzed. It was Jeremy.

"He's shopping at Prudential. Wanna meet him on Huntington or something?"

"Huntington? We'll wind up doing yaeger bombs with a Northeastern frat."

"Please, they're all in the Caymans with their parents. Or in Connecticut." In which case they'd be at my restaurant, Witt didn't say. His phone buzzed again. "He found a bar."

Mal threw him a thumbs up. Silence returned, underpinned by wheels screeching under the tram. This would be fun, that pseudo romantic fantasy had too many flaws, Witt decided. Jeremy was good company. Unless seeing Witt with Mal reminded him of Jess. Except a teapot reminded Jeremy of Jess at this point. Be a good friend. Drink. It's Christmas time.

"Your camera is really busted?" Witt asked.

"Yep. I brought it with me, my dad's got a ton of camera equipment so he should be able to fix it for free." She shrugged. Witt again thought he caught a tremor in her voice.

"I gotta say, if it was me, I wouldn'ta let that guy go." Witt stood up a little, half believing what he was saying and half putting it on for the sake of conversation. "Like Sonny in *The Godfather*, I'd have flipped out."

"Doesn't Sonny die?" Mal frowned at him like she was wise to his game.

"Well." Shit. "On the causeway, yeah. But. I mean when he beats up Carlo."

"Violence solves nothing." Mal tut tutted.

"You're the one whose actually hit somebody."

"And my camera is still broken." She snapped the zippo shut and stuffed it in her pocket.

They stepped out of a full on blizzard into a tavern in Back Bay. Witt spotted Jeremy sprawled in a red button tufted booth beyond a raucous crowd of TB12 and Gronk jerseys roaring at the Pats-Jets game. Mal gripped his shoulders and steered him through the ruckus. The low ceiling and exposed wood beams trapped the chatter into a blender of noise.

Jeremy waved them over, a half-full tumbler in hand, an empty one on the black veneer table. A red letter faculty jacket hung on his stocky frame. A circle of guys in khakis and girls in jean skirts hovered around the booth. Jeremy grinned at Witt and pointed at the ringleader, whose broad shoulders made his thin face look too small for his body.

"I fended them off like Gandalf. You. Shall. Not. Pass!" Witt saw that a hug wasn't forthcoming and settled for a fist bump.

"Where's – that's Mal behind you, right?" Jeremy asked, his grey-green eyes glassy.

Mal sprang out from behind Witt like a jack-in-the-box, arms outstretched.

"King Jeremy the wicked..." She sing-songed Eddie Vedder style. Jeremy hauled himself up, bumping the table aside, and wrapped her in a big bear hug.

Witt moved Jeremy's shopping bags to the booth. His keys clattered across the pine floorboards as he dropped his pea-coat on the chair next to him. He fumbled under the table, found his keys, and tucked them back into the buttoned pocket of his pea-coat.

"Are you using cigarettes for perfume?" Jeremy made room for Mal in his booth. She obliged, Witt getting a snap-flash not of jealousy but of emptiness. His back was to the big TVs, elbows and backs kept bumping into him. He needed a drink.

"Did you cologne instead of showering?" Mal tossed her parka on the bags and rolled up the sleeves on her dark U-Neck sweater. Jeremy thrust his armpit at her. She batted him away.

“How was the semester, Jezza? Tom Yawkey rolling in his grave yet?” Witt asked.

Jeremy considered the endowment his school received from the Yawkey foundation ironic given that the school’s minority outreach would not have been with popular Tom – didn’t-allow-black-players-on-the-Red-Sox-until-1959 – Yawkey.

Jeremy gave a derisive snort and leaned forward, ready with a story.

“Wait!” Mal flagged down an overwhelmed waitress with square-rimmed glasses. Her brown-plastic tray cuffed Witt’s ear as she pulled an order-pad.

“Three shots of Jameson. And a pitcher of, of...” Mal trailed off. Jeremy palmed her a drinks menu from between the salt and pepper shakers. “Enlightenment.”

“Can we get a food menu?” Witt asked, feeling bad about it. The waitress dropped a laminated sheet in his lap and vanished. A groan rolled over the crowd. Witt craned to check a TV mounted where the exposed brick wall met the wood paneled hallway for the bathrooms.

“Gonna finish that?” Mal nodded at Jeremy’s drink. He looked her in the eye, drained the whiskey, and knocked the empty glass on the table. Mal faked taking a swing at him.

“Hey, be careful. She can throw a punch.” Witt said.

“I punched a guy who tried to mug me.” Mal explained to Jeremy.

“God damn. Good for you.”

“*Good?* That’s what you tell your students if they punch someone?”

“Nobody’s punched anybody since my first year. This kid Bob swung a pool cue at a kid who said that a comic book is just a comic book, not a graphic novel. I mean, he also called Bob the fag-word. Actually that kid was a real shit. He’d wait till kids he didn’t like were asleep and super glue their doors and windows shut and pull the fire alarm. Things like that. So, I think Bob

picked up the cue as like a joke and then just realized, “fuck it, I might as well.””

“At least nobody gets mugged.”

“Yeah, well, unless a *Lord of the Flies* situation happens boarding schools in this area aren’t a hotbed of crime. Which I have to teach if I’m around next semester.”

“If?” Witt asked, grateful for a way into the conversation. He’d been looking from Jeremy and Mal to his food menu until either went swimmy in his vision. Inexplicably feeling unwanted, very acutely feeling the “waiting-my-turn” smile freezing onto his face.

Jeremy scowled. “I haven’t been sleeping since – you know. But my buddy Steve who teaches history came down with the Hiroshima of stomach bugs, so I take over one of his classes. They’re just presenting on changes in American politics since 1900 and this one kid, Adam, launches into this diatribe about the moral necessity of voting third party. And I couldn’t help it, I just sorta –”

“Punched him?” Mal ventured.

“No. I snapped: “Christ alive, you fucking halfwit.” It just slipped out, one of those, “oh, did I say that out loud?” things. So, I’ve got an administrative review pending.”

Jeremy shrugged. Witt just nodded at him, lips pressed into a supportive smile. The waitress returned and deposited a pitcher, three shot glasses, and three pint glasses.

“Whaddya want?” She asked. It took Witt a second to realize she was talking to him.

“Mozzeralla sticks and pulled pork quesadillas. Bowl sized.” Jeremy interjected with militaristic decisiveness. “You must never hesitate, Witt.” He added in a Sean Connery voice.

The waitress plucked the menu and was gone. Mal pushed a shot glass to Witt, then to Jeremy, and held hers aloft.

“A toast.” She announced.

“Cliché.” Jeremy muttered. Mal smacked his leg.

“To...” She frowned at the shot glass, then at Witt and Jeremy. “Any ideas?”

Witt, a proverbial lightbulb going off, interrupted Jeremy before he could answer.

“To Adam’s political career.”

Jeremy groaned. Mal hooted. They tossed back the shots. The whiskey roiled Witt’s stomach and sent hints of liquid confidence through his veins. He tipped beer into his glass and reached for Jeremy’s empty one. Jeremy simply pulled the glass Witt had filled towards him.

“Holy shit, Jez, is that —” Mal, earnest-faced, pointed to Jeremy’s left. Jeremy looked. Mal snagged his glass and drank as Witt filled the second one. Jeremy spluttered. Mal cackled. Witt set the pitcher down, cupped his full glass, and pushed the empty one at Jeremy.

“Witt, I will fuck you where you breathe if you don’t give me that beer.” The three of them howled. Witt slid Jeremy the glass and filled the third one, finally relaxing into a happy vibe despite the noise and stifled air.

“Another toast.” Mal insisted, thrusting her glass upwards.

“You can’t toast if you just drank, you fucking foreigner.” Jeremy said.

“I can hit you if you keep interrupting.” Mal beamed at Witt. I’m so happy to have friends, Witt thought. If I could feel like this for the rest of my life I’d never be alone.

“Violence doesn’t solve anything.” Witt reminded Mal.

“Whose side are you on, mine or his? Oh, perfect. To violence!”

“To where Adam breathes!” Witt added.

They’d racked through another shot each and were almost done with the second pitcher

by the time the waitress cleared their plates at half-time. The mozzarella sticks tasted like cardboard filled with boiled cheese. Jeremy and Mal had torn through the quesadillas while Witt was dousing his burned tongue with beer. Carb placated hunger slumbered in his stomach. The bar's speakers took over. Axl doing that cat-shriek of *Sweet Child of Mine* which Jeremy, drunk and still wearing that jacket, promptly mimed along to, contorting his lips to "mi-yi-iiii—iii-nngg". Mal was red with laughter. Witt couldn't help but get jealous.

"Hangon." Jeremy stopped, his eyes focusing on Witt like he'd just noticed him. "What's with the jacket? When's your unit shipping out? Why are you wearing that?"

" 'Cause I look cool in it?" Witt said, coming off more prissy than he meant to.

"I got it for him." Mal coughed and flattened her hand over her chest. Her eyes were slightly bloodshot, and when she coughed Witt heard something phlegmy gurgle in her throat.

"Can you not cough so close to me?" Jeremy snapped. Mal huffed into her palm and thrust it at Jeremy's face. He squirmed away, his knee hitting the table and upending his glass.

"God *dammit*." Jeremy gripped his knee, a thin film of beer drip-drip spilling to the floor.

"See, that's karma for trashing my Christmas present." Mal threw him some napkins.

"Witt, you look super cool, don't take it off."

"Yeah, Witt, you're so cool." Jeremy wiped up the mess. His face doubly red. At least he was in good spirits, not a hint of a 'head in the oven' vibe. Still, Witt kind of wanted an abrupt 'here's-why-she-left' from him. If for no other reason than maybe it'd confirm that Jeremy still considered him a best friend. Petty? No, needy. Petty was Jeremy passing Witt over for best man in favor of Ian fucking Pulido. So maybe it was was karma. Go with that ass-kissing weasel for best man? No wedding. Make fun of my new jacket? Spill your drink.

How cool would it be if the wedding happened and Witt went with Mal?

“Lemme get that.” Witt took the rest of the napkins and mopped up the floor. He dropped the soiled napkins on the empty plate, wedding bells ringing in his head. Mal was frowning at her phone, the screen haze making her eyes seem twice as bloodshot. Jeremy had gone stone faced staring into his empty pint glass.

“You’re gonna pass out if you keep that jacket on.” Witt told him. Jeremy blinked like he was confused, then shrugged out of the jacket. Witt registered the sudden sadness on his face, then saw his T-shirt and spat an involuntary laugh. The shirt was jet black and printed with a blow-up of Jeremy’s senior yearbook photo, twenty pounds heavier with a bullfrog chin, below white block letters that read: Dead Sexy. Mal took one look and threw a palm over her mouth to keep from spewing beer.

“You know about this.” Jeremy said to Witt, then added in a lower, vulnerable tone. “Jess made it for me. I’ve been sleeping in it since the, the split. I don’t even wanna say break-up. I hate that phrase. That’s for bands. I didn’t even fully *realize* till just before you guys got here that I’ve been sleeping in it. Like, I was about to take the jacket off and it hit me: I’m getting drunk at eleven thirty in the morning, my ex fiancée got me this shirt, and I hate my job. So I just got scared. Fuck, I *was* sweating balls in that thing, though.”

Jeremy scratched the back of his neck, lips pressed together like he’d tasted something unpleasant. Witt and Mal exchanged a ‘what now?’ glance.

“I mean, it’s not the first time you’ve been drunk at eleven thirty in the morning.” Witt tried for a joke. The looks he got told him comradely understanding would have been better. He made up for it by refilling Jeremy’s glass.

“It’s good that you made it out. Seriously. Better that you’re out here instead of alone in the house. That shirt is funny as fuck, I remember that one.” Mal patted Jeremy’s shoulder.

“One time I just took the day off and her mom walked in while I was playing Halo. Came over to get more of Jess’s clothes. I literally asked her if she wanted to play Halo with me.” Jeremy coughed into his fist, then snatched his refilled glass like it was running away.

“Jez, what actually – why’d she leave?” Witt asked, more afraid going into that question than into the day-drinking joke. Jeremy guzzled more beer and cradled the glass. His eyes swept over Witt like a broom. His voice became press-secretary formal.

“Honestly, it’s hard to explain. A few months ago a patient she really liked died on her shift. Guy was a burn victim, got an infection in his lungs or something. After that, I dunno, it was like she was there but not there. She would get super controlling and OCD about things. She cut her hair short and washed it constantly. To be fair she looked great with short hair. She would clean the apartment over and over again. Then she basically wouldn’t let me cook. And you know I like to cook.”

“You’re a great cook.” Witt agreed. Jeremy’s voice was getting lower even as a tremor in it became more pronounced. Witt and Mal had to lean in to hear as people filed back into the tavern from smoke breaks and NESN’s half-time reporters droned through the speakers.

“Eventually I got her to just let me cook when she wasn’t there because it’s cheaper, and honey, *you* like when *I* cook you dinner. But she wouldn’t talk about the guy who died whenever I asked. Even when I went to the funeral with her. She sat with the widow, asked me to hang out with the nephews. I played roller hockey with them in the driveway during the wake. And little Timmy Grief-Stricken hit a slapshot into my balls. Jess came running out, gave

me a kiss, and took the stick and played with 'em for another hour. Fuck." Jeremy's glass hit the table. He shut his eyes and pinched the corners of his eye-sockets. Ok, it was flat out petty to dwell on getting shafted for best man. Witt just wished it hadn't taken *this* for him to accept it. Thank God he never told anybody he'd been angry. Score one for keeping things bottled up.

"Sorry." Jeremy's eyes glistened when he opened them. "I'm doing a bad job telling this. There's – there's so much to order and I don't know how. No wonder I can't write. I shoulda kept playing music. Remember the band, Witt? Fuck, I need to piss like a race-horse."

"Me too." Witt said. His need to know more about his friend's pain evaporating under the weight of his need to urinate and the sense that he'd crossed a line asking Jeremy about it.

"I could use a cigarette." Mal said, draining the rest of her beer.

"Aren't you fighting a cold?" Jeremy asked. Mal shrugged, peeled off two more cough drops and popped them between her lips.

"I'll go first." Witt jumped up, his back and legs sore. His left knee especially was tight as he half-hopped between circular four person tables to reach the hallway for the bathroom. His foot caught the strap of a metal-buttoned handbag lying next to a chair, the owner a peroxide blonde who glared up at him from her margarita.

"What the fuck?" She snatched up her bag, the margarita glass tipping dangerously. Witt recognized her from the group that Jeremy had fended off. The guys regarded him with vague amusement, indifference set deep in their identical jaw-lines.

"Sorry."

"Why'd you kick my fucking bag?" She screeched, Witt instantly reading her as shitfaced but was so self-conscious being put on the spot that he just moved on.

“Why’d you kick her bag?” A thin faced guy in khakis and a navy blue fleece fest was suddenly in front of Witt. Arms folded and cheeks puffed out. From the smirk and the fact that he was wobbling, Witt figured this was a joke. But why? Who does this?

“I didn’t.” He needed to take a leak, badly.

“C’mon, I saw it.” The guy drawled, hands in his pockets. Witt tried to side step him, but the guy blocked him. Drunken chuckles emanated from his friends. Was this meant to be ironic?

“Hey.” That drawl again, he leaned into Witt. His gelled hair glistened under the monorail track lighting. He tossed a smirk at his friends, who kept cracking up.

“Seriously, you do look *cool* in that jacket.” Jeremy’s voice huffing into his ear followed by a big arm over his shoulder. “Nice of her to get it for you. What a friend.”

Jeremy laid eyes on the still motionless drawling guy and did a pronounced double-take.

“Are you the monitor, can you fucking move?” Jeremy pushed on, arm anchored over Witt’s shoulder. Slate tiled floors and wood paneling decorated with framed photos of locally famous natives made up the hallway. Witt pushed open the wood laminated bathroom door.

“That’s the other thing I thought about when I was with Jess.” Jeremy ducked into the toilet stall. Witt tensed up at the wall-unit. Beyond the dark grey aluminum partition, Jeremy promptly unleashed Niagra falls.

“Like, some of the patients she had, it was life and death. And I so respected that. I wanted to write about them, I tried to take notes, but it just, I couldn’t connect to it. I’m not fucked up enough. That’s the problem.” Jeremy flushed and stepped out, fiddling with his zipper. Witt darted into the stall, kicking the door shut behind him.

“You’re fucked up now.” Witt suggested, relief commencing.

“No, I’m really fucking upset.” Jeremy continued as Witt relieved himself. He flushed and made for the sink. Jeremy leaned against the wall, chin bobbing into his clavicle.

“By fucked up I mean, when the foundation of your very self is cracked. Or you don’t have any foundation at all.” Jeremy’s reflection made spinning wheel motions in the mirror. Witt washed his hands, suddenly wanting more than anything to be alone with Mal somewhere warm. “Every great writer, artist, whoever, they’ve always been fucked up. You gotta have that, you know? I don’t have that. I know it. Always known it.” His voice choked. “I’m a nice person.”

Witt looked at Jeremy. His eyes were bubbly with tears and he was staring at the floor like every failure of his life was contained in the cracked dark green tiles.

“Jez.” Witt managed. He kind of wanted to give him a hug and a pat on the back. Just not in the men’s room. Mostly he wanted to be with Mal. There were things in his life that made him sad. That made him scared. Things he didn’t know how to handle. And he wanted her to hold him and say ‘you’re a nice person’.

“Yeah.” Jeremy washed his hands and followed Witt into the hallway. He burped and rambled into Witt’s back. “I proposed ‘cause I thought, I mean, I’m in love with her. But I didn’t want to wait for her grief thing to end, I thought if I proposed that would end it. Which reminds me, I was gonna tell you something earlier.”

They emerged into the main floor of the tavern and Witt registered that their table was empty save for Jeremy’s shopping bags and Mal’s parka. His phone rang. The incoming call was – *no*, why was *he* calling? Then something slammed into his back, hinging him at the waist. His body was no longer his own but he still got his arms down before he hit the floor.

Whoever had just tackled him bounded away. People jumped out of their chairs or leapt

over tables. Chaos was exploding behind him. His cheek was wet. Not blood. Snow from the muddy footprints on the floor. His insides roller-coastered from scared-rubbery to nothing-stone. He snatched his phone from under a table and scrambled to his feet.

Drawling guy and Jeremy were thrashing against the wall in a mutual headlock. Drawling guy's buddies were hopping around, one hit Jeremy in the ribs and was kicked into a table. Witt dimly thought 'wow, bar fight'. Then he was adrenaline made flesh and flew into the melee. He got his arms under drawling guy's armpits and pulled. A palm clawed his mouth. Shitty cologne filled his lungs. Somebody kept hitting his back. A handbag bounced repeatedly off his head.

"My bag, my bag!" The blonde screamed. Witt slipped in a pool of beer and the handbag clipped drawling guy's eye. As Witt staggered free of the collapsing pile Jeremy's fist flew seemingly right at him. He ducked. Thud. The punch caught drawling guy square in the jaw. Jeremy tumbled into Witt on the momentum of the punch.

Witt drove him back, forearms to his chest. His ears were pounding. For some reason he could only hear NESN's play-by-play of the Pats game. Beer splattered floorboards and upended tables lay between him and a stunned crowd. A few people took videos on their phones.

Two bouncers with shiny shaved heads and muscles bulging beneath tight black under-armor shirts rushed forward. Witt flinched, expecting another tackle. Instead the bouncer wordlessly steered him and Jeremy through the parting-like-the-red-sea crowd. What about Mal? Witt was suddenly alarmed for her safety. The blood rushing back into his head made him him dizzy. He hadn't even gotten a punch in. Where was Mal?

The bouncer released them onto a shoveled patch of sidewalk dotted with melting salt. Thick snowflakes fell in the grey afternoon. A plow-truck rumbled across the street. Jeremy

bent over and cupped his nose. Blood seeped through his fingers.

“My bags are in there.” Jeremy muttered, his voice coming out like Donald Duck.

“Can’t let you back in, bud.”

“Fuck you, I bought a snow-globe!” Jeremy sprang up. For a second Witt thought he was going to throw a punch. The bouncer just cocked his head. Then broke out laughing.

“Is that you on the shirt, dude?” The bouncer pointed at Jeremy’s chest.

Jeremy froze, his bloody face pole-axed.

“Yeah.” He stammered. And then started laughing like it was the funniest thing in the world. He wiped his face with the back of his hand, fresh ruby red blood poured from his nose over the pink smears. Witt stood between them, trying to catch the good vibes.

“Lemme see that.” The bouncer tilted Jeremy’s chin up and examined his nose with a professional eye. “It’s not broken.”

“Can’t we pay?” Witt asked. Then bile churned through his throat and he threw up into a snowbank. He held his jiggling knees, palms clammy on his kneecaps, the god-awful aftertaste lingering in his now-dry throat and sinuses.

“Uh, what’d I miss?”

Mal stood at the corner, Witt’s pea-coat draped over her shoulders. Cigarette in one hand, a CVS bag in the other. Snowflakes in her hair.

“Where’d you go?” Witt asked, throbbing with need for her and searing humiliation.

“Dayquil.” She held up the CVS bag. “Your ear is bleeding.”

“Hon, can you get this gentleman’s bags and ask the bartender for some towels. Tell them AJ sent you.”

Mal stiffened at “hon”. Witt immediately felt guilty for ruining her day. Why couldn’t he be the one with the bloody nose and Jeremy be the one spewing lunch into the snow? Mal handed Witt the CVS bag as she marched for the door.

“There’s a water bottle in there.” Her hand lingered on his shoulder.

“My wallet’s in –” Witt started.

“I’ll pay.” She went inside. Witt pulled the Poland spring bottle from the bag and rinsed his mouth. He kicked snow over his mess. The faint wind and falling snow felt gentle on his neck. His head cleared with each swig of water.

“Cool lady to pay.” The bouncer said to Jeremy.

“Yeah, my buddy there is in love with her.” The bouncer nodded sagely and rubbed his goatee.

“Not really like that.” Witt hating the cliché as he said it.

“Who was it said that you have to be in love with a woman to be friends with her?”

Jeremy smirked at Witt through his bloody nose.

“Hemingway.” The bouncer answered as he thumbed his phone.

“Shit, I should have known that.” Jeremy wiped away a fresh glob of blood and flung it into the snow. “I am *extremely* cold.”

Mal returned cradling the jackets and white hand towels. She pressed the towels into Jeremy’s hands and draped the letter jacket over him.

“Where’s my bags?” Jeremy said to the sky, his head back, towel to his nose.

“Fuck’s sake.” Mal shot back into the tavern. It wasn’t fair to send her in there. She looked good in his pea-coat. It looked like armor on her. The phone call. He’d called again.

Witt's spine felt like a tuning fork and his knees went wobbly again. Somehow in all the time he'd spent in Boston, that was his first bar fight. But the phone call. Yeah, so what?

"Rudolf the red nosed reindeer, had a very shiny nose. Get it? That's me." Jeremy stood next to Witt, flashed a loopy smile and pointed at his nose. He leaned into a mailbox. "Oh man, I do not feel good."

Witt thought of Christmas music and pine trees. Egg-nog, wood burning in the fire-place.

"You could trek it to Mass General. Jess is probably there. Who knows. Show up like the heroic wounded. Lay it all on the line. It's Christmas, baby please come home."

Jeremy came back up, slightly cross-eyed. He glanced up the street, a red traffic light turned to green behind the falling snow. Gently sloping strings of white Christmas lights crowned residential brownstones. The air carried was heavy with snow-induced silence below which the wash-wash of the nearby Mass turnpike was slightly audible.

"I don't think showing up at her place of work covered in blood 'cause I was in a bar fight would be an incentive for her to come back." Jeremy said, but Witt saw in the far-away look in his eyes that Jeremy wanted to do exactly that.

Mal led them to the CVS where Jeremy blundered around the aisles until he found ice packs, pain-killers, and gauze. Witt bought another water bottle and dumped half a tic-tack box into his mouth and paid for everything at the only functioning self-checkout scanner.

The streets were a Christmas time picture book. Street-lamps shone above plowed red-brick sidewalks as the grey afternoon darkened in steadily falling snow. Church bells rang out near the common. Toddlers bobbed on their parent's shoulders. Christmas villages sat in display windows rung with white lights. The smell of cinnamon and pine trees wafted from

cafes. If Witt hadn't been washing the vomity after-taste from his mouth while Mal guided them to a Dunkin Donuts so Jeremy could clean the blood off his face then it would have felt positively Dickensian.

Witt found an orange banquette near the bathroom. Jeremy dropped his shopping bags on the pink laminate table. Teenagers slurping frappuccinos near the floor to ceiling window gawked. Mal made to follow him to the bathroom.

"I'm flattered but I don't wanna fuck in there." Jeremy dead-panned, drawing glances from two city workers in orange day-glo vests and carpenter jeans at the counter.

"I'm not that desperate and you're not that lucky." Mal flipped him off and slid into the booth next to Witt. Witt pulled his hand away just before she landed on it. He discretely huffed into his palm and took a whiff. The tic-tacks had done their minty magic.

"I leave for a second, look what happens." She rested her arm on him, her lips behind her wrist.

"I didn't get a punch in." Witt said, genuinely bitter. It hadn't even occurred to him to try and punch anybody. In truth, he'd been driving with the break on, self-conscious that he would look stupid. He'd basically settled for trying to break it up. It was mostly that he didn't want to just stand there. The second he'd gotten his arms under drawling guy a lump got caught in his throat at the thought that he was going too far. Maybe if he'd drank more? He was embarrassed twice over then. Firstly, for not even being able to throw a punch, secondly for being in the fight in the first place. And throwing up. So, three times over.

With that he was suddenly hungry and sober.

"Wanna hunt them down, go for round two?" Mal wriggled away and leaned on the

table. "Sorry I borrowed your coat. I got up, I couldn't reach my coat so I just took yours."

"No worries." Energy was seeping from his body like air from a balloon. That phone call. He'd called again. Why? It didn't compute. It made him feel like his body was a hard-drive and a magnet was being run over it. It made him sad.

Block the number and delete the voicemail.

Or. Listen to the voicemail and call him back. It's a simple decision.

No, it's not.

All decisions are simple. It's just the emotions that are complicated.

You know who said that, right?

Yes. One of the last things he said. He told me not to be afraid of decisions.

"Hello?" Mal waved a hand in front of him.

"Is there anybody in there?" Witt quoted, smiled at her.

"What's on your mind?" Concern in her voice.

"Nothing. What's on *your* mind?" Maybe she was thinking about when she kissed him.

Or she was thinking that he was thinking that. He should do something. Do what? I don't know.

Listen to that voicemail. What? Get out.

"We still got time to kill. What do you wanna do?" Those espresso eyes flashing behind the bangs.

"I'm hungry but, we probably shouldn't drink more 'cause, we can't turn up at your old fellas drunk looking like this, can we?"

"Don't worry about *that*." She snorted. "What about Harrys?"

Across the street, through the window splattered with plastic gingerbread men, Witt

saw Him. Him. The bottom fell out of Witt's stomach. Him. No. Yes, definitely. Him. Walking towards the Dunkin Donuts. Wearing a crisp grey car coat that matched the grey of his swept-back hair and finely trimmed beard. He strode across the intersection like it belonged to him. A woman held his hand. She wore square rimmed glasses that matched the ear muffs clomped in her highlighted blonde hair. And a kid. A kid. Maybe ten. Maybe –

Witt slouched low and dove headfirst into Mal's neck.

"Uh. What are you doing?" Mal laughed. Not even awkwardly. Her skin was damp against his forehead. It was definitely Him. He didn't see Witt though, no way.

"Saw somebody I don't want to see." He suddenly felt very foolish.

"Who?" The muscles in her shoulder-blade shifted against his cheek-bones.

Her fingers coiled behind his ear. Feels very nice. They'd watched a movie after the game. It was still playing when they passed out on Jeremy's couch. What was the movie?

"Should I be hiding too?" Her voice was light. "Are you looking down my shirt?"

"No." Tangles of her hair stuck in his mouth. "I promise you I'm not."

"Aw, you guys are cute." Jeremy's voice. "Witt, are you looking down her shirt?"

"He's hiding." Mal said.

"From... the scary part? What?" Then Jeremy's voice tensed. "Oh."

Witt felt the raised line of her bra strap against his cheek. He lifted his head slightly.

"He just got into a limo." Jeremy said. Witt sat up, felt himself blush. Mal tucked her hair back, a perplexed half smile on her face. Jeremy took the ice-pack off his face, his nose and upper lip swollen. He stared at Witt, a faltering, halted look in his eyes.

"What?" Witt asked.

“I didn’t think this mattered but now I guess it does.” Jeremy opened then closed his mouth. Then it dawned on Witt: Jess. Nurse at Mass General. Doctor Peter Gardner. Physician in residence at Mass General.

I know it was you, Fredo.

“Ran into your dad two months ago at the hospital. I was looking for Jess. Wound up in the elevator with him, Jess wasn’t answering her phone. He recognized me, said hello first. I figured he might know where Jess was. So, I asked him – Ok, stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re hacking me to pieces with a machete in your mind right now.” Jeremy’s voice became firm, like Witt had provoked him. “But, he must have known that Jess and I were split, ‘cause he, I mean, this pissed me off, the way he said it, forgot that he was a dick –”

“Get to the fucking point.” His insides were a tornado.

“He said “I can’t have you making a scene with one of my nurses, Jeremy.””

““One of *his* nurses.”” Mal bit into her knuckle.

“So, I told him if he told me where Jess was I’d give him your number.” The words flew out of Jeremy, but he had a defensive, ‘what do you want from me?’ stare.

This wasn’t what he wanted to do today.

Get angry. I am angry.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Angrier.

“I had other shit on my mind.” There it was. That ‘like-it’s-obvious’ jerk of the chin.

“Well, it worked. You and Jess are back together now. Congrats. Oh, wait.” Witt relished what he imagined was his icy glare. “No, you’re not.”

Jeremy tensed. A tremor rippled in his jaw.

“You’re over-reacting.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Witt was on his feet so fast he had to grab the table to steady himself. He had a good three inches on his friend. Jeremy shook his head, exasperated.

“I don’t understand. What’s the worst thing that would happen if you talked to him?”

Witt grabbed his arm. Jeremy went shadow-faced.

“Guys.” Mal said but didn’t move.

“Are you gonna try and punch me?” Jeremy sneered, mockery heavy in his voice.

“You say that like I couldn’t.” This anger is mine. I own it. It says destroy you.

“Let go of my arm, Witt.”

“Say please.”

“Fuck you?”

Witt tightened his grip. Jeremy didn’t move. Can’t back down now. Hit him. Would end the friendship. No more inside jokes. So? You’re taking too long. Hit him.

Buzzing vibrations broke the silence. Witt instinctively shot his hand from Jeremy’s arm to his pocket. His phone was inert. Jeremy palmed himself, extracted his phone from his jacket.

“It’s Jess.” He showed them the phone like he needed proof that he wasn’t hallucinating. Witt stood there, crisscrossed with inertia. Jeremy rushed outside, plowing past incoming customers at the door.

“Hey.” Mal poked a finger into Witt’s hand. “Are you ok?”

He wanted to cry.

“Let’s go to Harrys.”

Gusts of wind whipped arcing sheets of snow into drifts as they crossed Copley Square. Voicemail. Phone call. Jeremy. Fight. Mal. Kiss. Dinner. Dad. All spinning through Witt's insides like an internal snowstorm. A total white out. Zero visibility. For now. Storms end and snow melts. Push through. Whatever.

Choir bells rang in Trinity Church. The granite façade, dark Romanesque arches, and pyramidal tower-tops reminded Witt of Mal's father's house. Both of them alone. Permanent and indifferent. Mal's father's brick Victorian amongst the wood triple deckers, Trinity amongst the designer outlets on Boylston and the glass monolith of the John Hancock tower.

A block or two after Columbus Avenue they turned down a wide cobblestone alley amongst five story bow fronted row houses at the northern tip of SOWA. Settled in the middle of the alley was Harrys. The name was printed in green block lettering on a black awning above a fenced in patio. Amber light carried hazy classic rock out of redwood paneled windows.

"Allow me." Mal held the door. Witt stamped his feet on the rubber welcome mat. A redone staircase rose from the narrow interior vestibule, to the right was a black door with a green mottled glass window-pane.

"Oh, but allow me." Witt pushed that door open as *Dream On* faded out.

Deep light that was a warm embrace. The copper bar of Witt's memory had been replaced with a mahogany one. A skyline of liquor bottles flanked a vintage cash register, it's silver sparkling under recessed ceiling lights. Christmas lights and tinsel crowned the walls.

"Hey!" Courtney, Witt's favorite bartender from way back when, swung off a stool next to Sully the bouncer and two waitresses working through lobster and mac and cheese. Her hug

came heavy with perfume and vodka breath as she squeezed Witt and Mal together.

“Where’ve you guys been?” A lopsided Santa hat dangled on her head.

“I moved back to Brazil.” Mal said with a smile.

“Here and there.” Witt dodged. “Can we get some wings and fries?”

“Sure. Still drink your usual?” They bobbed their heads. “Drinks are half off ‘till eight.

There’s a band playing downstairs at six.”

Witt and Mal found their familiar glass topped elevated table in a corner beneath the fresco-style mural of Bobby Kennedy and his big brother, Larry Legend, Papi, Bobby Orr, and Tom Terrific among other pastel caricatures of Boston heroes.

“Shoulda been here all day.” Mal flopped into her stool and tossed her parka onto a chair across the table. Witt’s car keys clattered to the floor as he hung his pea-coat over the back of his stool. “I’ll get it.”

“It’s ok.” Their foreheads just missing as he grabbed the keys. “That keeps happening.”

Witt eased into his seat, their knees inches apart. He waggled in the chair, one leg shorter than the others. Mal looked around. Harry’s was mercifully half-empty. Dour civil servants in rumpled suits guzzled miller hi-lifes near the windows. Afternoon drinkers still in Pats jerseys frowned boozily at the just starting Bruins game on a new plasma TV hanging in the corner. Hipsters with symmetrical haircuts and cardigans poured hot sauce onto tacos at high backed booths near the kitchen.

“Where’d the Eagle statues go?” Mal scanned the LP sleeve covered walls.

“They’re Falcons.”

“What’s the difference?”

“There they are.” Witt pointed to a dozen Falcon totems, the largest of which was rainbow painted, arranged on a shelf beneath neon beer signs above a descending staircase.

“Remember when she brought Jeremy whole pitchers with straws taped together?” Mal nodded at Courtney filling pints at the taps beneath a blue and yellow Boston strong banner.

“Whose Jeremy?” Dead to me, that’s who.

Mal threw him a ‘simmer down’ look. Courtney appeared with their drinks. Witt initially got hesitant seeing the shot-glasses, then Jeremy said “are you gonna try and punch me?” in his mind and he figured he could use at least one more shot.

“Shots are on the house.” Courtney said.

Or, maybe not. He didn’t want to turn up to Christmas dinner at Mal’s fathers wrecked.

“Merry Christmas.” She said, raising her glass, apparently not sharing his concern.

“Merry Christmas.” Witt said. Years ago, when they first met, so many drinks, a dad sighting, an inconclusive bar fight, and an almost fight with a best friend would have left him bed-ridden. Now they left him feeling bottlenecked. He took this as progress.

“So.” Her lips pressed to her glass. Now that it was just the two of them he wanted to touch her. Her to touch him. “That was your dad back there?”

But mostly he wanted to not talk about that. Virtually anything but that.

“Yes.” Maybe he could come off as the stoic tough guy.

“And?” Mal did a slow ‘continue’ zig-zag with her pint.

“I don’t...” Witt held his glass, the beer cooling his palm as he curled a fist under his arm. Bottlenecked again. Stoic tough guy? Nowhere to be found. Maybe it was the booze defeating him. He drank. Nope. Wasn’t the booze. It was the first sight of his father in eight years.

"I'm sorry I hid behind you." He drank some more. "And I didn't look down your shirt."

"I trust you." She folded one knee over the other. Her boot tip brushed Witt's shoe.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and yawned.

"I'm almost outta power. Can I send you Brooke's number in case I need to reach her?"

"Whose Brooke?"

"Step-mom. I call her Babbling Brooke." Witt didn't even know his step-mom's name.

Maybe Susan? Isn't that what his mother told him? "Wanna play Big Buck hunter?"

It was actually Zombie Hunter now. The arcade machine had gone from bright orange with deer painted on the side to gothic black slathered with Romero style zombies. The plastic pump action shotguns were now handguns, still attached to the machine via a rubber coil.

"How pissed are you at Jeremy?" Mal slouched, pistol pointed lazily at the pendant flags thumbtacked to the ceiling, beer in her other hand curled under the elbow.

Witt set his beer on the shelf. Zombie moans and seizure inducing strobe lighting flashed from the machine. Jeremy's smirk leapt into his mind like a one man middle finger.

"Pissed." He cut down a one armed zombie in a bloody three-piece suit stumbling out of a church. Everything rendered in late nineties block-graphics, shapes drifting against shapes.

"He gave your dad your number, and your dad called you?" Mal blasted away one handed, twisted around Witt to put her beer on the shelf.

"Yes." Witt fired the pistol off-screen to reload. Severed heads sailed through the digital sky at him and Mal. The screen flashed red if they landed. Five points for shooting the heads, ten for hitting the zombies who popped out from rows of trees to throw them.

"You talk to him? Oh, God, this is gross. You shoot the zombies, I'll get the heads."

Morphine rumbled out of the bar's speakers. Baritone sax and Mark Sandman drowning out the apocalyptic death rattle and gun splattering mayhem blaring from the arcade.

"You set me up for a give head joke but I'll let it pass."

"What a gentleman you are." She coughed into the crux of her arm. "So, did you?"

Bam-bam-bam. Witt's heart beat faster. That lingering voicemail was now attached to a real person who'd been crossing the street with his new wife and kid.

"Top right, top right! He left a message." He fumbled for his beer with one hand, blasted digital zombies with the other. Drank. Bam-bam-bam. Change the subject. Ask her why she kissed you. He chanced a look at her. She was beautiful.

"Nervous about going to your dads?" He asked. Swing and a miss. He swigged more beer. Hoping a second wind would catch his sails. Onscreen they were barricaded inside the church. Hordes of the undead were clawing through the windows. His and Mal's high scores climbing higher. Bam-bam-bam.

"Kinda funny isn't it, you asking me about my dad?" She nudged him with her elbow. Bam-bam-bam. She glared at her pistol. "I don't think these things are accurate."

A figure in black slacks, shirt, and trench-coat careened into the ATM behind Witt and Mal. They leaned forward, knees against the coin slots, while the guy jammed his credit card into the ATM, wheezing and cursing incoherently.

"Where's my beer?" Mal asked. Their arms rubbing. Bam-bam-bam.

"Take mine." Witt handed it to her.

"This *is* mine." She waggled the glass in front of Witt, a smudgy U of lipstick on the rim.

"Me eyes began to dazzle and we're off to see tha races." The man mumbled.

“God, we’re going to die.” Mal drained half the glass, jabbing the pistol as she fired.

“Thas the spirit!” The man shot his head between them. Crooked, yellowing teeth protruded from his gums. Deep rings under beady eyes in sallow skin and bowl shaped ears.

“Fuck!” Mal jumped. Beer flew from her glass and splattered over them. The man stumbled back to the bar, cackling merrily with twenties in his hands. “I’ll get some napkins.”

The screen was all zombies, then strobe-flashed ‘game over’ with a final un-dead groan. Witt crossed the floor back to their table, beer seeping through his sweater to the shirt underneath. He pulled at the sweater as Morphine bled into *Sympathy for The Devil*. He’d somehow forgotten that he’d been wearing the camo jacket.

“Careful or you’ll flash everyone.” Mal held his shirt down. “You might look good stripping to this though.”

“Get a twenty from that dude and let’s find out.” Witt tossed his sweater into a chair next to Mal’s parka and slipped the camo jacket back on.

“Sorry about that.” She wiped down her arm and blew her nose. “Hangon.”

She retrieved Witt’s beer from the shelf by the zombie hunter machine and signaled Courtney for two more. As she returned Witt looked past her to the corner of the bar.

The toothless man was flanked by a skinny man in dark jeans and a leather jacket. Thick black hair retreating in a pompadour above a high forehead. The other man wore a loose, dark suit and a loose tie. He had high cheekbones and wild long hair tucked behind his ears that gave him a regal, authoritative air. Witt hadn’t seen them when he and Mal walked in but it seemed like they’d been there for eternity.

“I’m gonna get sick.” Witt took the glass, grateful as he drank that it was still half full.

“No, you won’t.” She cleared her throat. Witt decided against joking about them kissing.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?” She eyed his beer hungrily, elbows propped on the table. Fuck it, Witt thought. He slid his beer to her. “Hey, thanks.”

“You nervous about going to your dads?” The second wind hit him. He felt smooth, like he could glide. A happy wind carrying him over a morose ocean.

“It’s not about nervous.” She drank, her eyes darting to the Boston Hero fresco. Still staring at Ted Landsmark and Judge Garrity she said, “I have this recurring dream where I’m drowning. That’s how I feel around my family. I mean, not around my mom, she’s been in Brazil for years. Shit, maybe that’s not quite right.”

“What do you mean not right?”

“I dunno.” She sat up-right, pulling back from him. She turned the zippo over in her palm. “I haven’t really seen my dad or the rest of them enough the last few years to say “around my family.” I only saw him twice in the three years before I moved back to Brazil.”

Witt half-wondered if he and Mal would have gotten close if their families hadn’t been fucked up.

“Like graduation?” On graduation day Mal had ushered her drunk father into a taxi outside Hynes Convention center. He’d knocked the mortarboard off her head. Her gown had even gotten caught in the taxi’s door.

“Once before that, like around Easter. Brooke’s idea. Devout Christian that she is.”

“D’you think we’d have become friends if our families weren’t fucked up?”

She effected a contemplative frown.

“Probably not. I think you’re kind of a dick to be honest.”

“At least I’m good looking.”

“Witt, honey. You’re dead sexy.” She pinched his cheek. Her thumb and forefinger cold to his flesh. “I need a cigarette. I’ll be right back.”

“You’re too sick to smoke cigarettes. C’mon.” He took her hand. Her fingers curled around his. She shook his hand like it was a jammed doorknob.

“Last one of the night. Don’t worry. I’m gonna call Brooke while I still have power left. Check in. Whatever. Make sure nobody roofies us.”

She clapped his knees as she bounced off her seat. Leaning into him. Her mouth open.

He kissed her. The atomic urge roared through him so instantaneously he could have sworn he only felt it after they kissed. It felt like any kiss, except better because it was her.

Her hands still on his knees. Lips on his. Soft. Beer cold on her tongue. Her. Her.

Then she stepped back and exhaled a low whistle. Witt hovering in the clouds, breath held, skin tingling.

She reached over the table for her parka. Her head tilted low. Witt started to think ‘oh shit’ and picked up his beer. She threw her parka on and pulled her hair back. Then she looked him up and down and chuckled.

“You look so cool in that jacket.”

She spun on her heel and marched outside. Witt craned his neck to look out the windows. Mal sparked up beneath a street lamp, the snow falling less heavy around the orange phosphorescent cone descending from the lamp. A plume of smoke floating from her lips.

“Here’s to you, Jackie kid.” Witt raised his glass to JFK watching over him from the

Fresco and slugged more beer. Feeling like he could walk on water and not even care. Harry's read his mind because 'What A Wonderful World' at that moment drifted out of the speakers. Louis coming out all slow tempo and jazz gravely, music to Witt's soul.

Listen to the voicemail.

Witt took his phone out, pure adrenaline tapping his password, pulling up the voicemail.

He was unafraid now. He was immortal. He would be free. He –

Couldn't do it.

Nope.

The weight of his total and sudden immobility gathered behind his eyesockets. The phone. There in his hand. Voicemail on the call screen. Right there. In his hand. The voicemail. One minute and fifty-three seconds. Listen to it.

Can't.

His father crossing the street. Looking superior and disinterested.

He checked the window. Mal was on her phone, sweeping her boot left to right across the snow. You're so cool. What was that from? It was gonna drive him insane.

He finished the rest of his beer, the bar getting a little drifty. Witt settled on the white plaster bust of Elvis in a corner shelf where the liquor bottles met the exposed brick wall. Aviators and a pompadour wig hanging on him. Elvis.

True Romance.

That was it. You're so cool. Jeremy and Jess had put it on the night the four of them stumbled back from game two. Witt remembered Uzi's and shotguns blasting a hotel room to pieces as he passed out with Mal slumbering on his shoulder. But Clarence lived at the end. Yes.

“Sorry for the delay.” Courtney set a tray down. Deposited a basket of fries, a plate of wings, and two more beers. Witt rumbling with hunger and feeling bloated all at once.

“You’re the best.” Witt said. She smiled and returned to the bar as a column of extremely well groomed middle aged men strolled in, Mal on their heels. She did a one eighty and saddled up to Witt.

“Don’t you love it when you get back to your table and your food’s ready?” She paraphrased, cigarettes and cold emanating off her.

“Hold that thought. I gotta take a leak.”

“How poetic.” She piled fries into her mouth.

Witt hustled to the staircase next to the Zombie Hunter Machine, now occupied by two students in grey B.F.I.T. hoodies. As he reached the staircase he heard the toothless man hiss:

“They’re murdering me fuckin songs!”

Exposed brick walls and dim lighting formed the spacious basement. At the bottom of the stairs Witt swerved around a tower of T-Shirts and CD’s stacked on a white plastic folding table. He vaguely clocked a few musicians fiddling with amps on a makeshift stage as he scuttled up a ramp, down a narrow hall and shouldered through a wood partition.

Graffiti urging a mass uprising or, alternatively, advertising an ex’s phone number riddled the walls. Witt relieved himself and moved to the sink. Examined his reflection in the chipped mirror.

Why can’t you listen to that voicemail?

I just can’t.

You look good though.

Somebody had recently scribbled in black ink on the corner of the mirror:

Always In it. Always On it. Always want it?

Witt knew exactly what that meant. He smoothed the camo jacket's collar and turned back into the hallway. Onstage against the far wall, a waif-like woman with inky black hair parted into straight curtains sat poised atop a stool. Ring-wrapped fingers clasped in her lap. Chalk-white shoulders protruding from a black halter top.

"Come fill up your glasses with brandy and wine, I'm a man you don't meet everyday."

Her voice was an ethereal whisper from the ghost world that reached floating into Witt's soul.

A piercing blast of distortion shot between his ears as a spectacled hipster plugged his guitar into an amp. The waify-singer jumped ten feet off her stool and screamed:

"God damn you, Tanner!"

Spell broken, Witt paused at the table with the T-Shirts and CD's. Another hipster, this one with artfully sculpted red hair and nerve agent B.O., hovered behind Witt.

"2 for 1 if you buy the CD. I'll autograph it, too. Twenty bucks." The hipster drawled.

"I'll take a medium." Witt forked over a twenty. The Hipster John Hancocked the CD-case and eyeballed Witt.

"Cool jacket, where'd you get it?"

"Alabama." Witt snatched the sharpie and ran back to the men's room. In the flickering light he wrote in clear letters on the mirror:

Clarence Lives at the End!

Back upstairs Sully had manned a stool by the door and was checking ID's with his pen-light. At the bar Witt overhead the man in the leather jacket bark at the other two:

“You don’t write slogans, you write truths!” His palm karate chopping for emphasis.

Witt tapped Mal on her right shoulder as he approached, ducking left as she looked.

“Gotcha.” Witt said, leaning against the table in front of her, T-Shirt behind his back.

“You did.” She tore meat off a chicken wing, deposited the bones atop the others on a side-plate. “What’ve you got there?”

“Christmas Present. Close your eyes.”

She swallowed a gulp of beer and paused, her arm cocked at a right angle against the table, fixed him with a sardonic raised eyebrow.

“Witt, nobody ever came back from the bathroom with a present worth giving, or receiving.”

“Well, you can just have it then.” Witt dropped the T-Shirt and CD into her lap. Mal set her beer down. Witt took a sip of his and sat down. Bit into a wing.

She unfolded the shirt. Four grungy hipsters pouted in black and white. Printed horizontally in 70’s bubble lettering were the words “Less Than Elephant.”

“Wow, we’re in on the ground floor.” She deadpanned. Witt blanched, heart-racing like ‘Jesus Christ, I’m doing my best’. Maybe it was the kiss, bad move. Elephant in the room now.

Mal stood and pulled the shirt on, tugging it left to right down to her waist. She fanned her hair back and tied it into a hasty pony-tail. “How do I look?”

“Super-cool. No, even better. Dead sexy.” No, you idiot, she’s beautiful. Tell her.

“Damn right.” She pulled her seat closer to Witt. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. Brooke was being shitty over the phone. She fucking screamed at me! “Mallory, you could have been here sooner, why are you leaving this to me?” She’s never, ever come close to being

directly hostile to me. Like, ever. Usually she does that born again thing where they judge you with that lifeless smile, you know?”

“Sure.” Witt didn’t. His interactions with self-identified Christians were limited to overhearing the country club set in his restaurant preach low taxes and better golf courses.

“I didn’t even know she could yell. She sounded like a cat. Maybe it’s the pressure, I dunno, she doesn’t handle pressure well. Phone died when she was still yelling.” Mal swigged more beer and keyed the glass with her fingernails. Witt dug into the chicken wings. “She set this up, you know. Emailed me a few months ago, “would you consider visiting for Christmas?” Spur of the moment, I said yes. Wasn’t really thinking. My mom thought it was a good idea too and, ah, I didn’t tell you this.”

“What?” Witt leaned in. She jerked back and coughed violently into her hand. Witt grimaced. He was definitely going to get sick.

“I’m between jobs right now.” She said after clearing her throat. “Back in October the TV station got bought out. I’ve been waiting tables at this place my cousin Maria works at while I’m looking for production gigs. But there’s some things up here I was gonna look into.”

“You mean you’re coming back?” Wow, it must be Christmas.

“If I find something good. I dunno, it depends. I got alotta friends in Rio, and my mom. That’s you know, important. But work is work.”

“You got friends up here.” Witt hating his neediness even as he wanted more than anything for her to move back. “Me for example.”

“You for example.” She waved her beer at him. “But, I live near a beach. I *like* it down there, I know it. It’s *me*. On the other hand, I don’t like getting mugged and shot by rubber

bullets. You think my mugging was bad? My friend Rebecca and her boyfriend Andre got mugged by an entire *busload* of gang-bangers. Literally, what'll happen sometimes is gangs will commandeer a bus and just swarm people on the street. They pay off the cops so nothing ever gets done. It's so fucked up, Rebecca and Andre got put in the hospital, cops came by and said "sorry, we couldn't find 'em", Rebecca swears one of the cops was wearing Andre's watch."

The regulars cheered as the Bruins scored. Courtney rang a bell above the register. The toothless guy bellowed shut-up and fell to the floor. The leather jacketed man hauled him up by his collar, wild-haired man uprighted the stool and he and leather jacket forced toothless man back into it. They were a trio to themselves, gloriously out of place. More so as predatory looking fresh-off-the-T financial district twenty somethings strode through the door and sidled up to the bar as if they'd just bought the place.

"Remember when you kept insisting that I come visit you?" Witt poked her knee and dug into some fries to keep himself from leaving his hand on her leg.

"They won't mug a tourist." Mal wiped her lips. "Actually, they would. Tourists have money."

"What? I'm poor." Witt protested. Which was true depending on whose definition of poor was being used.

"So poor you couldn't have visited me?" Mal teased, aiming a chicken wing at him.

Witt took it from her and chewed.

"I hate flying. Plus, I don't think I have a good beach body."

"Oh, bullshit, like I do?"

"I know you do." That atomic physical need for her roared through his muscles again. An

honest to God *physical* need. She grinned at him, chewing silently, half a wing between her sauce splattered fingers. "You're really selling me on this dinner."

"It'll be fine. I'm excited, food'll be great. You're welcome to stay with me if you want."

Physical. A fucking physical fucking need. She had to feel it too.

"Great, I'll be fucked if I'm staying with Jeremy."

"Oh, Christ, Witt." She groaned, rocked back in her chair, eyes to the ceiling. Palms on the edge of the table. Her head swiveled back to him like it was automated. Her eyes were wide with frustration. Yet she was smiling. She clasped his cheeks with both hands.

"Have you *not* heard of forgiveness?" Her eyes blazing.

Like a thousand megatons atomic. Psychic waves filling the space between them.

"I really missed you." Witt told her.

She jumped onto him. Crashing into him so hard the chair scraping across the floor almost tipped over. Her lips driving into his, tongue deep into his mouth, hips heavy straddling him. He grasped the small of her back, pulled her to him. Could care less who saw.

He heard her boots hit the floor. Her legs sliding off him. She pulled back, arms over his shoulders, fingers in his hair. He left his hands on the small of her back, his pinky on her belt.

Head spinning way too fast to be embarrassed or self-conscious or to ask questions.

"You're gonna get sick." The most seductive smile he'd ever seen.

"I'll forgive you."

They staggered arm in arm down freshly swept sidewalks. Neatly vertical mini-canyons of blown snow lining the pavement. The snow having stopped, leaving a rapidly clearing gray

sky above the sodium vapor haze of street lamps and office buildings. They bought a water bottle in a Tedeschi and shared it as they maneuvered through gaggles of smokers shivering outside bar after bar.

“Fuck it, gimme one.” Witt told Mal after she smacked a cigarette from her pack.

“I’m your enabler.” She handed him one.

“Yeah, you’re bad for me.”

He cupped his hands around her zippo as she lit his cigarette. Harsher than he expected tobacco smoke hitting the back of his throat.

She took his hand and they continued hand in hand all the way to Back Bay. Witt kept waiting for a sign that this was a bad idea. That her hand would leave his, that she’d look away, an awkward slump of the shoulders, a hesitant look. Anything.

Nothing. She didn’t wanna slow down so neither did he. No way.

A trio of buskers in identical beige dusters were covering *Fairytale of New York* in the middle of the Orange Line platform. Crooning between bill and coin filled guitar cases and spray-paint covered MTA posters.

Mal swayed in front of Witt as they passed the buskers, her hips weaving. Witt thinking vaguely wrong city but loving the vibe all the same. Still holding his hand, she did a pirouette, spinning on her toe under his arm then falling back into him. He kissed her cheek and held her, going electric calm at the feel of her weight against him.

They transferred at State Street. Briefly getting trapped in a solid mass of shitfaced Suffolk U kids and no-time-for-this city hall workers. They fought through the throng to get to the Blue-line, Mal elbowing Bro-Santas and half naked elves aside, Witt humming “I built my

dreams around you” as they leapt onto the Blue Line just before the doors sealed shut.

“I saw *way* too much scattered ass back there.” Mal said, slurping from the water bottle as the tram hurtled down the East Boston tunnel. She slouched against Witt. His arm curled over her stomach. He stretched his left leg out, swaths of slush and mud splattered across the grey-rubber non-slip floor of the subway car.

“Should I have brought a present? Maybe changed for dinner?” Witt asked.

“Hell no.” She coughed again. “Unless you wanna bring like, a sermon video for Brooke.”

“Can’t wait to meet her.”

She ran her thumb across the top of his hand, pressing down on the veins.

“She has fake tits. You can’t be a born again Christian and have fake tits.”

“Did she have fake tits before or after she became born again?”

Mal sat up and stretched, drank more water.

“You know something, Witt, I don’t know. Feel free to ask her. She collects rocks too.”

She traced figure eights over the back of his hand. “I’m being too hard on her. I don’t even care about the Christian thing, if that’s what got my dad sober than fine, it’s just – wait, you’re not bugging out about coming to this thing, are you?”

“Not at all.” He was so flattered he’d have followed her into a pit of his ten worst fears.

“It’ll be a good time. Tim’s a cool dude. And you and my dad can talk about sportball or whatever. He’ll like that.”

Witt got a surge of wanting to impress. Aside from watching Mal shove her dad into the Taxi on graduation day, he’d never actually met him. From her stories he’d basically imagined her father as an honest to God manifestation of every done-to-death Boston myth.

Which had made him feel guilty that, by design, he had no stories about his own father. He knew that his father had moved to Cambridge after the divorce and worked at Mass General. That was it.

An empty house was better than a burning house.

Mal took out her zippo and ground it back up her leg, the top flipping open, then slid it back down her leg, the wheel catching and a flame rising.

“When was the last time you talked to your dad?” Clack. She snapped the zippo shut.

“I feel like we’ve talked about this before.” Empty houses can’t hurt you.

He took the zippo. A warm circle faint within the cold stainless steel.

“Right, yeah. Of course.” Mal tapped the heel of her hand against her temple and sat up. One foot on the floor, the other crossed on the banquette. She picked strands of hair off Witt’s coat, keyed his arm like there was a piano. “You really haven’t listened to that voice-mail yet?”

Witt shook his head.

“Want me to listen to it first?”

“Yeah, sure.” Witt dug his phone out and offered it to her.

“Really?” She reached for it.

“Nope.” Witt tucked the phone back into his pocket. “I’ll get to it when I get to it.”

Mal laughed and swiveled again so that she was sitting next to Witt. She hooked her arm under his and rested her head on his shoulder.

The Blue Line emerged from beneath the I-90 Interchange. Through the windows Witt saw his and Mal’s reflection receding against dark, light beaded squares of industrial lots and warehouses. Parking garages gave way to snow-capped trees and plowed streets. The tree-lines

occasionally solid enough to make their reflections so defined it seemed like they were floating within the glass itself.

“Is this a guy thing?” She asked.

“What?” Witt having spaced out, thinking mostly how awful it’d be if his car was gone when they reached Winthrop.

“You know, the whole –” She brandished her palms in circles, as if Witt’s base definition could be conjured via wax on-wax off. “Stoic guy who doesn’t talk about it, is that what this is?”

“If by that you mean I’m John McClane, then yes.” But mostly now he felt petty. Weak. She was the one confronting her issues, albeit late, drunk, and sick. And he was what?

Treading water in a job you hate, living in a reconverted attic above your mother’s garage. Work, jerk-off, work out. Scrolling through Netflix ques full of shit that you do not watch and never will. Life smothered by routine. Disinterested in the world except for bursts of rage at a Facebook status you glimpsed before you swiped left on the dating app you finally worked up the courage to download. Beneath the static monotony grows the certainty that you have no capacity to live a life remotely comparable to the interesting people whose selfies leave you sick with envy.

“After the accident.” Witt said, his voice as even-keeled as the T gliding over the tracks past Orient Heights. “Eight years ago. Drove down to see me in the hospital. Told me what I should ask the doctors and nurses, second guessed their decisions, I think it was his way of –”

Witt stopped. In his mind a Zapruder film reel fired images of faces drowning in dive-bombing headlights. A mighty and indifferent crash. That Witt only heard later when he tried to sit up in the hospital bed. Smiling. A numb block throbbing below his knee. Hospital gown fuzzy

against his chest hairs. Human sized shadow puppets murmuring behind the aero-blue tarp. Yanked aside. Rungs screeching. There he was. Oh, hey there dear dad, you're losing your hair.

No. No.

His and Mal's reflections swam against the curving expanse of Constitution Beach. The interior lights dimmed, and their reflections vanished into the frozen sea between the snowy beach and the mountainous moonscape glow of Logan's runways.

Then the lights flicked back on and their reflections became a solid block behind which the airport, beach, and sea wobbled like a fake green-screen background.

Mal snaked in front of him, gripping the hand rail mounted in the partition by the door, her waist coiled against legs, her face vibrating inches from his.

Desire rumbling in him. He wanted to press his lips to her neck.

"I feel like you were going somewhere with that."

"No, that was it."

Don't think less of me. What if she does? Do you think less of you?

Her face was so close to his he could see red veins in her eyes.

"Can I make a suggestion? Just *one*?"

"If it's just one." Witt dimly hoping she'd suggest that they find a way to fuck before dinner.

"Listen to that voice-mail before the night is out."

Doing so was only marginally less depressing to him than the thought that the aftermath of the best thirty seconds of his life (please God let him make it to a minute) would make returning to a normal friendship impossible.

Witt put his hand on her forehead.

“You’re burning up.” He told her.

She closed her eyes and leaned into him.

“Your hand is cold. It feels amazing.” She held his wrist, eyes still closed.

She was solid. So was he. He slid his hand across her forehead, down through her hair to her neck. Denying the lust demanding that his hand touch more. Cared too much. It felt nice to care. It felt amazing.

His jeep was the only car on the block that wasn’t piled under a foot of snow. That was the first thing he noticed. The second was that it had been keyed.

“What the fuck?” Witt gawked at the wavy white streak carved into his car from wheel to wheel. He wrenched open the driver side door. A piece of paper and twenty dollar bill was taped to the steering wheel.

Dear driver,

My older brother and his friends tried to steal your car tonight. I made him change his mind because I don’t want him to get into trouble. We didn’t take your bags but we almost did. He didn’t key your car. His friend did. The twenty dollars is to pay for it. Sorry. Merry Christmas.

Mal read the note over his shoulder.

“That was nice of him.”

Witt scanned the flat roofed triple deckers, feeling like they were being watched. Like the insurgent car thieves were giggling in the alleys or on one of the porches festooned with red and white Christmas lights. Maybe beneath one of the tarps in the tiny lawns between the low

chain link fences and vinyl sided houses.

“Shall we?” Mal asked, shifting on her feet in the cold.

“Yeah.” He ran his thumb along the key-line. “That’ll be worth more than twenty bucks.”

She led him up the street towards the Victorian. As they stepped onto a crooked porch with a gabled awning Witt tucked the note into his pocket. Mal squinted at a post box and pressed a button marked for Heller. She curled her fingers into and out of her palms.

A buzzer rang before Witt could think of something reassuring to say. He felt a certainty of purpose as he followed her up the non-slip pad covered staircase. He was living his life, not observing it. Christmas dinner with the family, all gathered around a maple table with a white cloth and glittering china. “Everyone, this is Witt.” Mal would say to strangers who would smile at him. She would hold his hand under the table. In the living room she would rest her head on his shoulder. Her father would approve of him.

He’d listen to the voicemail too. Failing that, he’d call Jeremy and say “you’re forgiven.”

Tomorrow probably.

The door at the top of the stairs flew open. A stocky man with a bullet shaped head and a green flannel shirt partially tucked into loose khakis stood majestically in the doorway.

“There she is!” Mal’s father exclaimed.

“Sorry we’re late.” Mal answered with a pronounced smile as she reached the landing.

“Don’t worry about it. Come in here. Gimme a hug. Wow, when was the last I saw you?”

Witt hovered as Mal acquiesced to her father’s embrace, chin and shoulders stiff.

“Merry Christmas, dad.” She detached herself not unkindly. “Hey, I want you to meet a friend of mine, he’s gonna stay tonight if that’s cool. This is Witt.”

“Nice to meet you.” Witt extended his hand. Mal’s father suddenly appeared confused, his eyes widened and his wrinkles seemed to freeze. Just as suddenly he smiled and seized Witt’s hand.

“Ok, great. Nice to meet you, Witt, right? Call me Don. Ok, come on in.” He ushered them inside. “You can hang up your jackets or I can take ‘em. You can leave your shoes on too, you know, we’re not into taking your shoes off or any of that.”

Witt hung his coat up next to Mal’s, acutely aware of Don lingering in the entry way.

“What’s with the outfits?” Don asked, his grin trained entirely on Mal. Witt noticed a wad of gum wedged in his teeth. Had he not been slightly hunched over he’d be the same height as Witt.

“Witt got me this shirt and I got him the jacket.” She said breezily. “Where is everyone?”

“Brooke had to pick up Colin up from from rehearsal. Tim’s shift ran late, they’ll be back soon. Foods almost ready –” Don shook his head apologetically. He had a fearful look. “It’s great to see you, Mallory.”

Witt suddenly longed to be invisible. There was a lot of water under this bridge. He tried to picture a conversation with his own father. It’d be more formal. His father would probably sweep over to him and talk like nothing had happened.

“Thanks, dad.” Mal patted his arm. She had the poise of a ballerina about to perform a careful dance. “It’s great to see you too.”

Don chewed his gum absentmindedly, then nodded and led them through a small office with a L-shaped desk and yellow plaster walls decorated with bird figurines, into a narrow hallway to the living room.

“Here, sit down, come sit down.” He grabbed a baby blue mug from the coffee table and pointed eagerly at a feeble plaid sofa below a large crucifix.

Mal hesitated long enough that Witt sat down first. Don eased into a beige corduroy recliner and swiveled to face them. He took a swig of hot chocolate, ‘Endicott Capital’ was printed on the mug. Mal folded one knee over the other and took a gingerbread man from a plate on the coffee table.

“Didja have a good flight? I’d picked you up but I didn’t know when your flight was.” Don cradled the mug. His cheekbones were sharply defined but the skin was swollen. There was something distorted about him, Witt thought, like decayed hickory.

Mal bit the head off the gingerbread man and cleared her throat. “Yeah, I slept the whole time. Didn’t want to trouble you. Don’t worry about it.”

Don stared at her.

“What’s wrong with you, you ok?”

“I’m catching a cold.” Her voice was clipped and formal, like there was only so much oxygen in the room and words were precious.

“Do you want some Tylenol? I’ll get you some cough drops, some water or tea maybe?” Don jumped up and beelined into the kitchen like he’d found his calling.

“I’ll take some hot chocolate.” Mal called, then added: “Witt will have one too.”

Mal rubbed her throat and sank into Witt’s arm.

“I don’t think I can make it through dinner. They fucking better get back soon.”

“Hang tough, kid, don’t leave me.” Witt kissed her forehead, his attention caught by a bullfight in a fifties movie playing on the muted TV. A fake Christmas tree sat next to the TV.

Nativity figures and birds hung on the tree, whose plastic bristles reminded Witt of Don's hair.

Don reappeared, one cup between his elbow and torso, the other two in his hands.

"I got it, just take this, ok, yeah."

Witt took the one from his elbow. Mal took the other. The hot chocolate was lukewarm to the touch. Don sat back down, his mug full. Mal took one sip and set her cup down.

"Coaster." Don snapped. Then, in a seamlessly gentle tone, "Please, honey should be in the drawer, yeah." Mal found two cork coasters, one imprinted with a hummingbird, the other with 'God is Love'.

"Sorry, I don't keep any Dayquil around." Don turned to Witt. "Sleeping on a plane, dunno how she does it. Don't like flying. No way. I used to live on Neptune road, planes landing and taking off. Engines shook the whole house. Couldn't sleep a wink."

"I thought you grew up in Charlestown." Witt said with what he thought was smooth, knowledgeable confidence. Don blanched, regarded Witt with something like suspicion.

"I was born there. Moved between there and around here, yeah. I lived on Neptune —" He suddenly broke out in gravely laughter. He set his mug down, his face beet red. "I lived on Neptune". Get it?"

"I thought you lived on Saturn." Mal said, grinning to mask her 'I've-heard-this-before' tone. Don cracked up harder, the pangs of laughter sharp and guttural.

Witt just sat there, a lump in the cushion beneath him. His father wouldn't bother with bad jokes, which made him like Don more. There was nobility in Don's bad jokes, Witt was convinced that behind them lay pain. Which became another reason to win Don's approval.

"That used to be our joke." Don picked his mug back up. "Didn't think you'd remember."

“Course I did.” Mal said, her voice getting raspier.

“Neptune road. Don’t miss it. Bad enough being an Irishman in a guinea part of town.”

“Dad. Don’t say ‘guinea’.” Mal suggested pleasantly.

Don squinted at Witt like he was trying to decide what to do with him. Maybe he knew that Witt and Mal had been drinking all day. Witt tried to match the eager, hunchbacked Don of the recliner with the thrashing madman Mal had forced into a taxi.

“I think I’ve seen you before, you wenta that game with her, right?”

A light flipped on in Witt’s brain. Familiar territory.

“Yeah. Game 2 of the ’13 ALCS.” Witt smiled.

“That’s it! I saw a photo of you guys on Brooke’s facebook.” Don took another sip and cradled the mug.

“I forgot Brooke had a facebook.” Mal examined her fingernails.

“Oh, yeah. She told me seeing that photo made her email you.” Don was almost breathless with joy. Witt was sure Mal was thinking ‘privacy settings’.

“This photo?” Witt thumbed his phone’s lock button and showed Don the screen.

“Yeah!” Don took the phone, almost going cross-eyed holding it so close. Apparently transfixed by Witt, Mal, Jeremy, and Jess sitting against the Ted Williams statue.

Witt often stared at the photo too. Sometimes he wanted to live inside how he’d felt when it was taken, or what he thought, every time he looked at it, he’d felt like. His and Jeremy’s solidarity beards. Mal beaming next to him, wearing his Sox hat. Her arm around him. Jess sideways on Jeremy’s knee, his arms wrapped around her like a seatbelt.

Witt had worn the Pedro jersey his father had sent him for his birthday that night.

“What a game that was, huh?” Don smiled. Witt had never worn the jersey before or since.

“Papi is a God.” Witt said, thinking not for the first time that he needed to do more with his life. Where’d he put that jersey anyway?

Don’s face clouded and his eyes narrowed.

“There’s only one God.” Don pointed at a porcelain totem of solemn JC adorning a low book-case stacked with Tom Clancy books and AA manuals. JC was not alone. Framed photos and watercolor paintings of birds hung on the walls among angel figurines. A wood-cut carved with the words “The Four Agreements” hung prominently behind the TV. Witt absorbed the birds and angels in the Holy Shine and looked back to he who resided within it, Don, whose deadened face was without humor. The high-backed recliner enveloped him like a throne.

“Right. Sorry.” Witt managed. Mal put her hand on Witt’s back.

“Hey, it’s ok. Don’t worry. No problem at all. I hadda get two cavities removed last week and there’s only so many pain-killers they can give me. Never trusted Doctors.”

“Pain-killers?” Mal asked.

“They gotta be careful about what they give me. Just have-ta ride out the pain for a while.” Don reassured her. “What, are you worried about me?”

“Just want you to be ok, that’s all.” Mal said like she was a teacher talking to a favorite student. “What time is everybody getting back?”

Don seemed overcome with relief, even joy. He looked from Witt to Mal, his toothy smile like an exposed fault line. Still holding Witt’s cellphone, he tapped him on the knee, apparently not hearing Mal’s question.

“How about this one, huh? “God gives us children so we can have roses in December.””

He looked back to his daughter. “You know I was worried you wouldn’t wanna come up here.”

“Well, I’m here now.” Mal said. Witt couldn’t help but think: give the guy a break. Then again, he was in no position to judge somebody fending off their father’s olive branches.

Witt’s phone buzzed in Don’s fist. Don didn’t notice, he had a glazed over look as he continued to stare at Mal.

“Sorry, I need my –” Witt reached for his phone. Don just looked down at the screen and read a text aloud.

“ “I understand that you might feel hesitant to respond to my calls. Maybe it’s a coincidence but I saw somebody who looked like you today. Please call me when you are able to do so. Dad.” ”

Witt froze. Comically hinged at the waist, his shins against the coffee table, arms extended like a hunchbacked zombie. Blood rushing into his cheeks. Don staring up at him, curious, almost child-like.

“Can I have that?” Witt asked. His father’s words in Don’s voice utterly bizarre.

“What’s that about?” Don surrendered the phone, Witt disciplined enough not to snatch it from him. He pocketed the phone without looking at it as he sat down. An acute need to keep up appearances stifling him. All the booze and bar food turning to cement in his stomach.

Change the subject. Lighten the mood. Get a laugh. Something.

“Between us friends here?” Witt heard himself say with a c’est la vie shrug. “Some complicated shit, sir.”

Necessity really was the mother of invention. The words and attitude a jack-in-the-box

persona Witt just sprung out. Himself but not. Mal discharged a throaty laugh that became a hacking cough, her body almost convulsing into a seizure.

“Dad, d’you have some tissues?” Mal stood, wobbling as she turned for the hallway.

“I can get ‘em.” Don on his feet, scampering to the kitchen. Mal stopped next to the couch, exhaustion plainly hitting her. Witt aching to bring her tea in bed, to cook soup and bring a blanket.

Don returned with a roll of paper towels, odd shadows thrown onto his face by the lamp next to the couch on Witt’s left. Mal, sneezing, reached for the towels. They fell onto Witt’s lap and bounced under the coffee table.

“Butter fingers!” Don laughed. Witt picked them up, handed them to Mal. She blew her nose as Don, glancing into his mug, darted back into the hallway. A door closed. Mal crumpled up the paper towels, glancing around for a waste basket.

“This’ll be you in a day or two.” She found one under a side table.

“I’ve got some sick days saved up.” Witt said.

Mal remained standing, gazing at the pictures on the walls.

“I forgot he got into birdwatching a while ago.” She dug her fingers into a pile of ocean-smoothed rocks in a bowl on the side table. “I get the birds. I don’t get the rocks.”

Witt stood next to her. Webbed his fingers between hers. Raked their hands over the stones. Coarse yet smooth. Cold. Rounded sides. Slate grey. None longer than his pinky. Thin like molded dough. Crackling and scratching quietly. His fingers over hers. Flesh and rock.

Mal exhaled. Wind over rock.

He wanted to skip stones across the sea with her. Stand in wet sand as waves washed

over his shins. Coconut shrimp and bottled beers at a crab shack. Rubbing grains of sand from the wet stones. Flick of the wrist. How many skips was that? Seven. Bet I can do eight.

She removed her hand from the bowl.

"I'm gonna get my bag. Are your keys in your coat?"

"Yeah."

"It would suck if you weren't here." She kissed his cheek and went into the hallway, saying over her shoulder. "Try one of those gingerbread men."

He picked one up from the plate on the coffee table. It felt identical to the rocks and clanged when he dropped it back to the plate. On the wall just above the lamp he noticed a black and white photo. A dozen men, six seated, six standing, posing in front of a bar. Don was one of them, standing in the top right. Or, rather, it had to be Don's father. A wide, pearly smile flashing teeth as white as his collar. But, seated in the middle, Witt realized, was JFK.

"Where'd she go?" Don, statue still, asked from Witt's left. Standing half in the dark of the hallway, half in the light of the living room.

"To get her bag."

"She's going out to smoke isn't she? I know she is." It took Witt a second to register how harsh Don's voice was. It was like a growl. "Stupid thing to do. You don't smoke do you?"

"I quit." Witt said. He pointed at the photo. "Is that Kennedy?"

"Yeah. With my dad. Old Sully's in '58." Don lumbered back to the recliner. His groan blended into the creak of the gears as the foot rest came up. He stared at the muted TV, motionless. Radiating an all consuming silence. Witt didn't know what else to do and just sat back down on the sofa. Don kicked the foot rest back into the recliner and swiveled to him.

His smile was regal and sweeping.

“You remember Pedro’s 17 strike outs against the Yankees in ’99?”

“Oh yeah.” Witt nodded.

“That was the last game I watched with my old man. I went to see him when he was laid up in Mass General, sat with him by the bed. See by then I’d started making real money, I got him a room with a TV. Just sat there and watched it with him. He went a couple of days later.”

“I’m sor —” Witt began but Don barreled over him.

“I passed out at the funeral. No shit. I did. Totally loaded. Hit my head on a gravestone, that’s how I got this, see?” Don pointed at a pink U-shaped scar just below his hairline. Witt didn’t ask if Mal was there to see that.

“She told you about my problem, right?” Don asked like he was sizing Witt up. “It’s ok, you can be honest. Should talk about it before everyone gets back for dinner. She told you?”

“Yes.”

Don adopted a proud tone and sat up straighter.

“I don’t make excuses for myself. People hadda endure a lot when I was sick. Booze. That stuff. Well, shit, nobody tells you that sometimes its fun. One time, night before the ’78 blizzard, I was drinking down by Old Colony Avenue with some buddies, I woke up the next day and it’s just white outside the windows. Literally. Just a wall of white. Never saw anything like that before. Had no idea a blizzard was coming. Didn’t know what else to do so we just kept drinking. Imagine, looking out these windows, and it’s just white. Nothing else. Just white. That’s what drinking is. It’s just a wall of white nothing.”

Don gazed happily at the aluminum window-blinds behind the TV. Lost in the memory as

if it wasn't a memory at all, as if he were living it at that moment.

At that point Witt thought, to his horror, that Don had been drinking.

Where was everybody anyway?

"My dad took me to the all-star game in '99." Witt said, the words one big key unlocking a very heavy door. "First time I'd ever been to Fenway."

Tell him more. Tell him your dad sends you season tickets every year and you never use them. You could have sat four rows behind the home dug out anytime you wanted. For free.

Don cackled like he hadn't heard a word. "You remember that dance thing Pedro used to do? I love that. You remember that?"

He wiggled in the recliner, cocked his elbows and aimed his fingers at Witt like they were pistols. Thumbs back and "fired". Rocking so hard he accidentally released the foot rest into the coffee table.

"Dammit. This thing." Don pushed the footrest back down with his heels, that annoyed growl back in his voice. "I'm two years, four months, eighteen days sober just so you know. But when I wasn't, I didn't understand myself. Didn't understand my relationship to God."

"Now you do?" Witt doubting him, but it's not like he could ask.

"He that lives in love lives in God. And God in him. He's with me everyday. Yeah. See, for a while I had alotta money. My dad owned a grocery store, his dad was off the boat. Me? I'm the first to go to college. Mallory there, where is she, you sure she's not smoking?" Don stopped abruptly, the thought of Mal having a cigarette sending his jaw into tight ripples.

"I don't think so." He decided not to ask Don how he met Mal's mother.

"She grew up in Brookline, that's where we lived for a while. When I was still with her

mother. When I was growing up, if I'd told my dad that I'd make enough to live in Brookline he'da laughed at me. And I tell ya, I tell ya, those snobs on Summer street and Atlantic ave, believe me they didn't like a guy from Charlestown making their kinda money. But I still did."

Veins rose in Don's neck. His teeth bared. Witt convinced now something was off. Flattered at first that Don was so open with him, flattered, vindicated. Then, realizing that Don was basically talking past him, like a searchlight panning across the dark.

"2008 wiped me out." Don waved his hand. "Hence, this place here. But God stayed with me. That's why I'm alive. God stayed with me and I stay with him."

Witt had been in the hospital when the bail outs were passed and his knowledge of the financial crisis had been mostly defined by that fact. Until, the night of Obama's re-election, his mother, well into her third glass of champagne and clutching a Yes-We-Can poster, told him that his father had paid for his hospital bills.

Something else he'd ignored. And something else which now existed in close proximity to Don. Everything in fact now existed in proximity to Don.

Witt didn't like it.

"D'you mind if I use your bathroom?"

"Yeah, sure. Yeah. Go into the hallway. First on the left."

Witt stood, contemplating simply running for the door.

"Hey, I used to be a magician, you know why?" Don rose to his feet, a king leaving the throne. "Used to be every-time I walked down the street, I turned into a bar or a liquor store." Don laughed so hard he didn't notice that Witt didn't bother to crack a smile.

Cold ribbons of water poured over Witt's hands in the bathroom. Bird themed wallpaper

covered the walls, keeping with the House of Don's bird theme. Witt left his hands under the tap, wrestling with the suspicion that Don was drunk and its implications. Brooke and the extended family's absence was ominous. His mind pinballed into a brief absurd fear that Don had killed them.

He was trapped in a wait and see. That's what it came down to. He shut the tap off. There wasn't any soap on the sink. The front door opened, he heard Mal cough and wondered if she actually had gone out for a cigarette.

He crouched and opened the cabinet under the sink. Empty plastic bags, spare toilet paper, detergent. Dove hand-soap behind and shampoo.

Behind that and the U-shaped drain-pipe, a brown paper bag. Witt felt the neck of a bottle as soon as he touched the bag. Still crouching, he pulled out a fat, quarter full bottle of Titos vodka. A clear disc of liquid wobbling in the glass beneath the pasted label.

Well, no wait and see now. A phone rang, Witt shudder-jumped, almost dropped the bottle. Footsteps. Mal answered.

"Hello?"

Then.

"I got it. I got it." Don's voice became cheery. "Hey, honey are you on your way?" More footsteps, shadow under the bathroom door, Don's voice becoming indistinct in the kitchen.

The guy wanted to get caught, why else would he have Irished up his hot chocolate and drank it right in front of them. And the gum? In high school Witt's friends would fill water bottles with vodka and mask their breath with dentyne ice. Usually cinnamon. The game became seeing if the bottle would be empty by sixth period, then after lunch, then before

lunch. Then Chris Campbell wallpapered the biology lab with the contents of his stomach and suspensions were handed down. His mom had been so pissed.

Indecision skipped around his veins. He had to tell Mal. No Christmas dinner.

He put the bottle back where he found it and opened the door.

Don's face right in front of him so red his ears were practically steaming. Sending a panicked jolt up his throat.

"Lemme get in there."

The door literally hit Witt in the ass. The cabinet under the sink creaked open. Subtlety pretty much dead and gone for the evening. Witt thought of just kicking the door down. Instead, he went into the living room, where Mal was poking the wings on a plastic angel figurine on the Christmas tree, her backpack at her feet.

"Who do you think could fly further, an angel or a bird?" She asked Witt.

He didn't smell any cigarettes on her, for some reason he was surprised by that. On his silence she turned to him. "What?"

"There's a bottle of vodka under the sink in the bathroom."

"What?"

"Yeah, there's —" Witt jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards the bathroom. "A bottle of titos, under the sink."

"What the fuck?" Her arms fell to her sides. Eyes bulging with exasperation. She drew a sharp inhale of breath. "Don't tell me that, man."

"What, what do you mean don't tell you?" Why did she look pissed at him?

"Fuck, he's in there now." She ran her hands threw her hair, leaving them cupped on her

neck, elbows aligned pointed at Witt's chest.

"Yeah."

"I fucking hate Christmas."

They fell silent. Indeed the house itself was silent. They stood in the silence within silence, looking at the closed bathroom door. Witt expecting it to explode, or Don to just punch through the lumber, bottle in hand, roaring for a fight.

"Ok, well, we gotta go." Mal said.

"Shouldn't we —"

"I don't want to see this movie, and trust me you don't either. Let's go." They stooped to pick up her back-pack and promptly butted foreheads.

"God *Dammit*." Mal stamped her foot. Witt got one arm through the straps, feeling thoroughly stupid when:

"What're you doing?" Don, larger than life, loomed in the doorway.

Witt couldn't find anything resembling words. Mal didn't seem to have any either.

"Are you trying to leave?" Don's voice heavy and accusatory like a prison warden.

"Well." Mal began. Then she put her hand on Witt's elbow. "No. But, we're hungry, so can we just start dinner now?"

"You're trying to leave." Don seemed to grow even though he hadn't moved. His flat monotone voice made Witt think of dull axes in empty barns.

"Not at all." Mal smiled cheerfully at her father. It was a game now, Witt realized. A Mexican stand-off. He also realized that he was the only person without a plan. Mal's smile and Don's waking-giant vibe were driving the train.

“Well. Come and eat then. How hard can it be?” Don shook his head and wandered down the hallway. Mal’s head tracked the sound of his footsteps, the rest of her completely still as a chair creaked in the dining room and, after another second of silence, Don shouted: “What are you waiting for?”

“What are you doing?” Witt whispered, half scared but half something else. Not excited, not giddy, more like party to a rebellion. Ride the tiger. In over his head? Maybe. That was the point.

Mal ground her teeth, words living and dying before she finally managed to hiss.

“I get on a plane and come up for this? I’m not leaving without getting the last word.” She steered Witt to the hallway and pointed him to the mudroom. “Leave the backpack there.”

Witt retrieved the backpack from the living room floor and parked it in the mudroom. Mal popped out of the bathroom, the now empty bottle in her fist like it was a grenade. Witt very acutely wanted her. She deposited the bottle on the floor outside the dining room and entered.

Don was seated regally in an upholstered, high backed chair at the head of the table. Sleeves rolled up, staring blankly at his empty mug next to a snow-white plate in front of him. The polished brown wood table was neatly set with plates, mottled glasses, glittering silverware. Serving trays and platters and red-wax candles and folded napkins.

But no food. Empty chairs.

Smells drifted in from the adjacent walk-in kitchen, Witt’s stomach woke to hunger, biological needs apparently untouched by wherever this was going.

Don just sitting there. He had to know that they knew. Maybe? Emptiness.

“What did Brooke say?” Mal asked.

“What?” Don squinted up at her like she’d interrupted a conversation he’d been having.

“On the phone, when she called. Is she on the way?” Mal should have been a cop.

“Of course she is.” Don laughed, the brooding giant vibe vanishing instantly. “They’re gonna be fifteen minutes. Tim’s with them. She’s real excited to see you. Maybe we can lay the food out for ‘em. You wanna lay the food out?”

It was downright scary how convincingly normal Don was. Jekyll and Hyde via Mr. Rogers and Hannibal Lector. That brief ‘ok, let’s do this’ urge Witt felt minutes earlier with Mal in the living room evaporated. He did not want to sit down at that table. Sharks in the water.

“Oh, sure.” Mal’s tone nice and chipper. “Witt, gimme a hand?”

“No.” Don abruptly transformed back into the slow-burn fiend. “I wanna talk to him some more.”

If Witt had called his dad back would any of this be happening?

“What?” Mal took a step forward.

“I wanna ask him some questions. So, you bring the food. And I’m gonna talk to him. That’s what we’re gonna do.”

Don’s mouth was a slash mark. There was self-conscious malevolence to him, like he was pushing to see what would happen. He’d clearly done this sort of thing before. Witt intuited that more than anything Mal wanted to for once kick his ass at it.

“Do I look like a maid? Witt can help me.” Mal retorted.

“He and you can do what I’m telling you to do.” Don looked at Witt directly. “Sit down.”

“I really don’t mind helping.” Witt moved for the kitchen. A plan was necessary for

survival, and he didn't have one. Then again, he felt the challenge in his gut. Don the monster lurking beneath his angels and birds. Witt the hero. Maybe.

"Sit down." Don repeated. Witt, heroically, shot Mal a 'what do I do?' glance. She shrugged. Ok, hero it is. She pushed two fingers into his back as she side stepped him. Witt took a seat at one of the tan farmhouse Windsor backed chairs on Don's left.

Witt the hero.

"What're you looking so nervous for? It's just Christmas dinner." Don all happy-smiles again. Determined to put Witt at ease.

"Don't wanna eat before people get here, that's all." Witt replied, deciding to play along with this for as long as it took. He remembered Mal advising him to listen to his father's voicemail by the end of the night, he'd do one better. He would call his father.

Don went dark again.

"If they can't be bothered to show up on time why should we suffer?"

Mal returned with the turkey on a bronze platter and set it ever so gently into the middle of the table.

"This is overcooked." She went back into the kitchen. Witt thoroughly wishing there wasn't an enormous carving knife next to the turkey, well within Don's reach. A spasm of laughter broke in the kitchen and Mal strode back into the dining room, shaking her head.

"What's so funny?" Don asked. Which was a legitimate question, Witt thought.

"I dunno who was in charge of the gravy and greens and potatoes, all that, but they aren't finished. And I'm done pretending—" She gripped the back of the chair. "What happened?"

Don shrugged self-consciously. Like he smelled that he was being cornered and enjoyed it. Everyone was lying. The reality of it struck Witt like a thunderbolt. Lying to each other surrounded by the remains of an aborted Christmas dinner, a pitifully overcooked turkey as their witness.

“Me N’ Brooke worked all day on it, she took off to get Colin, said everything could just sit ‘till she got back. Don turned to Witt, oozing helpless exasperation. “How am I supposed to do everything on my own?”

“I could put in a take out order at my restaurant. We do a great turkey special this time of year.” Witt volunteered, embracing the let’s-all-make believe vibe.

“Where’s your restaurant?” Don asked, fascinated.

“Three hours away.” Mal answered as she circled behind her father and sat next to Witt.

“What fucking good is that?” Don barked, glaring at both of them. Crack in the façade. Breaking character. How much longer was this supposed to go on? Witt glanced at Mal, trying to communicate that. Why was she going on with this?

“What do you mean *your* restaurant?” Don leaned across the table, muscles in his forearm twitching. “Like, you own a restaurant?”

“He manages one.” Why was she answering questions for him? Witt felt more and more like collateral damage.

She wanted Don to admit it. That’s what it was. She wanted a confession.

“That’s what Brooke was doing when I met her.” Don said.

“Didn’t she get fired?”

“You don’t need to talk about her in that tone. Aren’t you a little old to be carrying on

like that? You think Colin talks about *your* mother like that?"

"I'll ask him when he gets here." Mal coughed, rocking in her chair as she did.

"Are your parents still together?" Don shot the question at Witt like an archer firing an arrow.

"No." Witt suddenly felt the total accumulated weight of the effort he'd put into refusing to talk to or even think deeply about his father for most of his life. "They split when I was ten."

He feared nothing about this table. About this place. Staring at the lackluster, overcooked turkey, he thought: welcome brother I'm just like you. Mal straightened in the corner of his eye. Witt became convinced that his future with her was now dependent on him opening up. Yes. It would be like an avalanche.

So he continued.

"He left my mom for a nurse in his ward. One day I was playing *Goldeneye* after school with my friend Jeremy and this guy came to the door. He had an envelope. Says "give this to your mom," gives me the envelope and goes "sorry, kid," and leaves. At first I thought it was my report card or something so I opened it up. And there were these pictures. These black and white, printed out pictures. Of my dad. And this woman. In restaurants together, driving, at the hospital. Sometimes they were kissing. Holding hands. You know. And I didn't get it' cause, I recognized my dad but, I didn't get that the woman wasn't my mom so why is my dad doing that? There was one, where, you know the Colonnade on Huntington? When my dad took me to Fenway in '99 to see Pedro at the all-star game, we stayed there. One of the photos, my dad and this woman were getting out of a limo walking into the Colonnade, I remember the sign."

His throat tightened and his face burned beneath his skin. He felt dizzy. Memories bottlenecking as he tried to order them. Things had gone from performative to way too real to something else entirely and his body went numb at the core, tingly at the edges, like he was atop a very tall building on a windy day.

Mal's hand the back of his neck, a soft squeeze. No building. No wind. Just the dining room. Don watching him, frowning, dead eyed fascination. Hadn't he and Jeremy come home after baseball practice? Couldn't have been after school because he remember that it was dark outside. Or was that because it was about to rain? Had to be because it was raining when his mom drove him to Jeremy's. And his dad had been home. He'd been upstairs. Yeah. But he was the one who drove Witt and Jeremy to Jeremy's house.

"Did you act out when he split? Make a scene? Alotta people do that." Don threw a sideways glance at Mal.

"Jesus Christ, dad." She grimaced.

"Do not, do not swear like that in front of me." Don shook with rage. Memories spun flashing in Witt's mind, a carousel cleaving him from the performance unfolding in the dining room. Spectator to both. Memory movie and present stage.

Like fuck he was calling his father.

Don dragged the turkey platter towards him, the platter scraping comically on the wood.

"I guess I'm supposed to cut this myself?"

Mal stared at him, making no move to help. Don's jaw twitched. He picked up the carving knife and speared the turkey with the two-pronged fork. Sawing a leg. Knife hand

steady as he stood tall and carved the only surviving portion of his charade.

Mal leaned into Witt and whispered:

“Hey, you’re so cool.” She kissed his cheek.

Chain-linked memories of Daddy walking out blasted away by a technicolor future with her. Not a what-if day dream or idle fantasy. If she went back to Brazil, fuck it, he’d go with her. He’d saved enough working for Chuck. Nothing was keeping him in a rut except him.

Well. Your student loans. And where are you guys gonna stay tonight?

Fuck off, I’ll call Jeremy.

The light at the end of the tunnel brought his memories to focus.

“A nurse, huh?” Don asked, still sawing that leg.

“Yeah. Her husband hired a private detective to follow her and my dad. You know that photo you liked? I’m wearing a Pedro jersey he sent me one Christmas. Only time I ever wore it. Every year he sends me season tickets, I’ve never used ‘em. Not even in ‘04.”

Don hacked through the leg, his fist hit the table and the platter slid away. Plates and glasses rattled. Don picked up the turkey leg with his bare hands, plopped it onto his plate, and fell back into his chair hard enough he should have fell through the floor itself.

“That’s stupid, that’s so stupid.” His face contorted with incredulity. “You know what I’d give to still have season tickets, or what my old man woulda – I used to have them. He never did. That’s such a waste. what are you, proud of that? You think that’s responsible?”

Witt laughed. Heard himself laugh first, then felt it. And when he felt it he kept laughing.

“Why are you laughing?” Mal rubbed his back, registering the gathering thunder in Don that Witt felt immune from.

“Sorry, I wasn’t laughing at you.” Witt said to Don. “My friend Jeremy, back in ’13 I told him that instead of paying five hundred bucks for the four of us to be stuck up by the message board we coulda been seven rows behind the Sox dug-out for free. He was almost as pissed as you are.”

Witt chuckled some more. It’s not a fucking blood diamond! Jeremy had shouted.

“What if you or him died tonight? How’d you feel never having made things right?” Don was coiled in his chair, emitting a possessed menace darker than everything that had come before. “He’s reaching out to you.”

Witt had a nightmare vision then in which Don wound up in the Mass General ER with Doctor Peter Gardner, MD, as the physician on call. What if he and Mal had to drive him there? Witt looked at Mal, again searching for a sign that she would grab the bottle and announce the gig was up.

“People go at their own pace, right, dad?” Mal said, disappointment plain in her eyes. Witt saw for the first time that she was holding back tears.

“Life doesn’t care about your own pace.” Don sneered. His dome-like head making him resemble a snapping turtle. “People blaming their parents is foolish. Not something I did. Never woulda. And I didn’t have it easy.”

“I didn’t either.” Mal said.

“Didn’t what?”

“Blame you.”

“That’s not what you meant.” Don said accusingly. He was like a pinball bouncing into one complete performance after another. Juggler, dancing clown, tormentor. He locked a wide

eyed gaze that was almost benign onto his daughter. "What did you mean?"

Mal swallowed, her breath catching in her throat. Falling back into herself.

"Don't sit there like a god-damned funeral, answer my question!" Don pounded the table. Plates, glasses, and silverware rattling. His shout like a canon blast.

Mal flattened her hands on the table and spoke with robotic calm.

"Dad, you're out of control."

Don pushed his plate aside and leaned towards them.

"Out of control? This is in control. You have no idea how in control I am."

Witt had never heard anybody speak so calmly.

Fear.

Mal pushed her chair back and marched into the hallway. She returned and placed the empty Titos bottle on the table right in front of Don with a show me your cards finality.

"I'd say I have some idea." She nodded at the bottle. "This isn't ok, and I don't have to pretend that it is."

Don regarded the bottle, slack-jawed, a low gust of air escaping his nostrils. The empty bottle next to the leg-less overcooked turkey, inches from where his hands were flat on the table.

"Did Brooke and Colin leave because they found you with this?" Mal asked. Don resembled a deactivated robot. He continued to stare unblinking at the bottle. "When did this start?"

"Are you threatening me?" Don came back to life, his head springing back up like it was hinged, his eyes bulging with outrage. "You carry on here acting like you want to have dinner.

You think it's ok to lie to me? You don't care. If you cared you wouldn't lie."

"I found it." Witt said.

Don recoiled back into his chair, budging it sideways so that he was facing Witt.

Bubbling with what Witt thought at first was rage but quickly saw instead to be betrayal. A punch was imminent and Witt wanted it.

"We're leaving." Mal tugged the camo-jacket's collar. Witt stood up, deciding that he could do without a fight.

"You're the one smoking. It's killing you. You're gonna die of cancer. Don't expect me to come to your funeral 'cause I told you so. Show me some courtesy." Don spat, his face trapped in it's sneer-to-leer -and-everything-in-between spinning wheel.

Mal shook, tears sliding down her cheeks.

"Courtesy?" She pulled a camel pack from her pocket, tipped the last cigarette into her hand, and dropped the empty pack onto the table. Then she raised the silver zippo – clack – and lit up. A light grey jet of smoke ballooned from her lips over the silvery ribbons curling from the cigarette.

Witt couldn't even find the words.

Don exploded out of his chair. Witt, standing in the middle, saw the body hurtling towards him and Mal. Table and chairs slammed aside. She screamed. He instinctively swung an elbow. Felt it hit flesh. Don grunted and went down. Witt stumbled backwards, his feet corkscrewing. Mal yanked him. Her cigarette flying and he planted his feet.

Then he was double time weaving it down the hallway after Mal. Marching through Don's home office to the mudroom. She threw her coat on and wrenched the door open in one

motion. Witt grabbing the monstrous backpack, jackets and hats and scarves falling to the floor as he lifted his pea-coat from the rack. Don yelled from the dining room. Mal crashed down the staircase two at a time, head down and out the door.

Witt just behind her, adrenaline jackhammering so hard he barely felt the ice cold air when he rocketed onto the sidewalk, pea-coat bundled in his arms. Ahead of him, Mal rounded the corner, slipped; and went elbow first into a parked station wagon.

“Fuck!” She slid around the wagon and ran for Witt’s jeep parked down and across the street. Witt struggled after her, the backpack crushing his spine. Mal bounced off the driver side door and tugged the handle. Spun as Witt reached her. He dropped the backpack, the pea-coat billowing as he shimmied his arms free and fumbled for his keys.

“Tell me you did not leave those keys in the fucking house.” Mal said, breath-clouds fluttering.

“That’d be kinda funny if I did, wouldn’t it?” Witt waved them to emphasize the point and unlocked the jeep. Mal threw open the rear door and heaved her backpack in by the straps.

Then a crash up the street, like a door hitting a wall.

Mal groaned. Witt thinking that Don couldn’t possibly follow them. But also knowing, yes, yes he could. Mal dove into the passenger seat, slamming head first into the window. Witt hopped in right after her, but his keys were in his left hand which was the door side and so they fell onto the pavement just as Don careened into view at the top of the street.

“Are you *kidding* me?” Mal whispered.

Witt slid low in his seat and pulled the door against the frame so that the interior light dimmed. His thighs below the steering wheel, feet and legs curled under the dash.

“Sorry.” Witt managed. His love handles drooping over his belt.

“This is so fucked.”

Witt inched up until he was peeking above the side vents. Through the dusty slant of the windshield he saw Don turn listlessly in a circle on the corner of the street. Gazing up at the starry sky then, gradually, looking down the street.

Witt’s left knee, still jammed against the dash, began to throb.

“I mean, if I just grabbed the keys, yeah, he’ll see us. But we’d be outta here like *Bullit*, so, what’s he gonna do?”

Throbbing harder. The pain sharp.

Mal said nothing. She was utterly motionless, sunk low in the dark under the orange-yellow phosphorous plane from the street lamp arcing through the windshield. Face buried in her palms. He feared then that she was lost to him.

Her spider-webbed fingers white in the swirls of her hair. Interior apocalypse collapsing within her curled up self. She made no sound.

Witt replayed Don shouting, that voice a hammer smashing through his consciousness. Smashing. Smashing like the box-crunch pop of the car crash. Witt couldn’t help it, let himself be there. Sean Madison blasting through the windshield, dead before he hit the pavement. Rob Davis broke both legs and three ribs. Emma Clark never walked again.

The whiplash feeling returned to him as he reached for Mal. The hook-shaped gravitational yank that ricocheted down his throat. The pain now mimicked by the burning Witt’s knee. That and the adrenaline bleeding out of him sent him dreaming of walking a boardwalk with Mal in the summer somewhere. Salty ocean air filling his lungs. Skin warmed by

the sun. By then he'd have a pretty cool tattoo sleeve. Their daughter Zoe Jane, with her mother's soul and father's eyes, swinging between them. Her mini-mouse sunglasses sliding from her nose as mom and dad swung her to and fro-

"There's a man, going 'round! Takin names!" Don crooned happily. Witt saw him amble, bandy legged, down the sidewalk. He slipped and grabbed onto a chain-link fence. His face reddened with concentration as he steadied himself.

Witt had never seen such magnificent concentration.

"And he decides who to free, and who to blame!" Don continued his march down the sidewalk. A miracle beast walking tall. Mal raised her head, dark curves of her eyes shining.

"Hey, Mal." Witt whispered.

Her face was a lock-down bunker. A silhouette Mal detached from the real thing hiding somewhere deep within herself. Witt reached for her hand. She let him take it.

"You're so cool." Witt said.

Her fingers closed around his.

"That was my last cigarette."

The pain in his knee was unbearable. Witt sat up peaked over the window.

Don was staring directly at him from behind a pick-up truck across the street. He swayed like a plastic bag caught in the breeze. He had a dazed leer, punch-drunk in the aftermath of his glory.

He stared at Witt.

Witt stared back.

Don cocked his elbows and aimed both hands at Witt, thumbs back like they were

pistols, and fired. Pedro style. Witt blinked. In that moment Witt understood what Don had seen when he looked out the windows during the blizzard of '78.

Don holstered his pistols and stumbled up the street. Whistling as he staggered in and out sight beneath the street lamps and disappeared around the corner.

The night air wafted against the windshield. Mal sat up and pushed her hair back. The detached mask melting away as color returned to her face.

Her hand stayed in his.

"Yeah." She said. "It would have been funny if you left the keys in there."

