

## Introduction To One Morning Fair

*Elias Stuhr*

I would like to start with a quote. In "Writing Material" Laura Micciche tells us: Writing isn't a private activity, one that happens only in classrooms, heads, a room of one's own, or at kitchen tables, nor is it a set of linear tasks or a unimodal endeavor. It is elliptical, immersive in diverse environments, dispersed, ordinary (not rarified), mediated, ongoing, and coexistent with other activities.

This quote justifies, I think, the need for the acknowledgments section in the beginning of every piece of writing, and indeed makes me question why more authors don't spend more time on their acknowledgments, or work to credit their sources more clearly. Today, more so than before, it has become clear to me that there is no such thing as authorship, or at least not in the sense we are familiar with.

In an essay for my other class with Professor Mullready, I have been researching the idea of collaborative authorship in writing from the early modern period, and the impression this research made on me has broken out of the bounds of our Shakespeare seminar as I suspect was always Cyrus's intention. We degrade an author's work should we find that every idea was not their own, though who among us can claim, with certainty, that they have had a truly original, solitary thought? More to the point, who would even want to?

This theme rings true in my Composition course as well, where I have spent hours each semester belaboring the point that citation is not only about integrity, but also a sound rhetorical strategy. In academic writing we celebrate the idea that an

author is working within a living body of learning, which is proudly known to be a communal project.

So why has the idea of authorship, and all its incumbent vanities, remained so rigid in our talk about fiction writing?

I am here to tell you that the project I have for you today is not my own. It is owned not by me, or anyone else, but by the myriad of teachings, learnings, readings, and lessons that have been so graciously lent to me in the last five years.

In the Prospectus I wrote for Professor George on this project, I said that: "I think of creative writing as some kind of endurance sport, the final purpose of which is to let you out of your bird cage and into the garden." And that it is an "enriching opportunity to fail—catastrophically fail—as many times as is necessary until you have created some art that you can live with. Whatever it is that you do with your manuscript afterwards is besides the point." As is probably clear, I was woefully unprepared for what lay ahead.

What stands out to me the most in these lines is the neat and tidy trajectory that I had envisioned, that a writing project would have an enriching beginning, an arduous middle passage, and a fulfilling end when you might lay down your pen and push the chair back knowing well that your trial is over. I'm not sure how else to say it: this has not happened. So in the terms of my Prospectus, I have failed this assignment. I think that expecting a feeling of closure was naive on my part, because as we all know well, there is rarely any such thing. Instead I am leaving this project with a sense of growth and expectancy, for the next, and the next, and the one after that.

What I have written is hopefully a relatable story about anyone. Myself and everyone else I know spend a lot of time inside our own heads, and that's kind of what this one's about. I hope that what I have done here is not strange or surreal and I hope

that it is not disturbing, because that would be against the point. What I hope this story does for the reader is just the feeling that they have been understood, if just for a brief moment.

By way of introduction, this is a story about two people—Ruth and Jed—and their attempts at trying to get along with one another. In the story I also mention Arthel, Mallory, Dalton, Leslie, and Gary and Geraldine. They are important too. So are Mandy and Jenna. That's just about everybody.

I would like to say clearly that I am completely indebted to Abbey Gallagher, for the peerless editorial help they have offered me, and for supporting me to do something that is both grueling and bizarre. In addition, I am grateful to Cyrus Mullready for his brilliant reading, his thoughtful advice, and for the privilege of having an exemplary role model. I would also like to thank the sterling faculty in the English Department, the likes of which I have the utmost admiration for, and to whom I will be grateful for the rest of my life. I would like to thank my fellow TA's, my colleagues and friends, and my students, all of whom I have enjoyed the company, camaraderie and friendship of for the duration of this program.

This is when I will read a little something from the book.

# *One Morning Fair*

Elias Stuhr

This book is for Savanna and Wyatt, so that you might  
have something to read one day should you need it.

## 1: Rathbone

The Green New World lies over the ridge amidst hill and pasture tomorrow, and the day after that. It's there now, in your mind and in mine. One morning the sun rose on The Green New World early, early as it always was before. Ruth woke up early to see the sun today again in the window, shining, shining in from The Green New World into ours.

The sun was hard and jarring. Ruth stood from the bed and walked over to the bathroom, washed her face, stood, staring in the mirror for a minute and looking at the whites around her eyes, the pores on the end of her nose. Once in the kitchen, kettle on and there it was, the waste of the night before. Food lay scattered around, the room across too. She walked around the island and surveyed. Callow satisfaction.

Wine stained the slatted wood of the island, drained across in little ponds and tributaries before falling in an impressive spire to the floor below where it formed a great muggy lake, dripping through the floorboards to the cellar below. The floors were dark brown anyway. Here and there a pillow lay, a fork. Quite an impressive mess for a party of one night.

The bookshelf lay against the wall, all the books were stacked on the table and a board laid atop them flat, the dance floor. Some memory of screaming, standing atop and screaming and throwing—there, another bottle in the bathroom, shattered on the blue tiles. Satisfaction. Still, this was wrong. Something had to be done, Jed gets here today. Jed's bus gets in at noon. The kettle began to sing and she pulled it off. The coffee wasn't ground. Ruth looked around for the filters for the coffee cone, but nothing was in its home.

The kettle whistled again. She forgot the burner was still on. Over to the cupboard with the mugs and the ceramic plates. The old french press would be fine. Something now was more important. This all had to get in order. The kitchen opened to the room over, the living room, separated by a doorframe of heavy beams, eight by eight beams. The living room was ruined. The potted plants that Jed had bought at the yard sale, they had walked home holding one each, they were both on the ground split open. Ruth grimaced at them and sat them up, satisfying still. The dirt filled the cracks in the floorboards but no matter that now. So many explanations for that. There would have to be some mopping.

This was happening faster than it should. She stopped and held the edge of the table and put a hand to her forehead, the headache was intense now. The kettle whistled. Just a second for composure, she thought, then we can clean this up after a second.

The coffee grinder was in the fridge. The coffee was ground. The press was filled. Ruth set the french press on the edge of the counter and started to clear off the island. Her father had made this island when she and Jed bought the house. She could see the spots where his tools had left a knick, or a little bump. Funny too to be able to picture the tool he had used, the exact one, and where he kept it.

The wood was walnut, and now it was stained with wine. She held it palms down and looked at the ripples in the grain. The tree had stood in the yard behind her parents house till something happened, did it fall? Ruth strained for a moment but looked around and leapt up. She stacked the dishes and waded around the table to get the rag. The table was wiped clean all on one corner and the chef's knife lay there next to Mallorys bag. She grabbed the broom from the closet.

The plates stacked in the sink. There were broken plates on the ground around the island. Something was wrong with all of this who's plates were these anyway? When ceramic falls from four feet high onto a wooden floor it shatters like ice. Along the beam there were little nails for hanging herbs and plants to dry, all were stripped now, their respectives lay on the ground and under the couch cushions, all of which were on the floor too. Ruth walked over the back of the couch. The sun came through the window and broke on the tiles in the bathroom. She spun and grabbed the towel again. There was water on the ground around the sink. She stood then and when it happened it happened all at once: the broom handle connected with the coffee pot, with the french press that sat on the edge of the counter, Ruth watched it fall standing above it with eyes half closed before it shattered apart on the wood floor. She threw the towel at the ground. The broom was a fighting spear, a weapon. It sailed over the couch and crashed into the wall. She kneeled and swiped the broken glass with a bare hand. Little cuts. The glass skittered along the floor. Hateful. Terrible. Why won't this house and all of its things burn down and leave ashes. Mallory was still asleep at least, he hadn't seen the fighting spear. She put a hand out and leaned into the counter for a moment, it was only a moment but it seemed forever. Sometimes only one moment is forever.



Mallory Price had worn a stiff jacket like a grin, he was at the door now. Ruth stood in the doorway, there, in the light filtering through. Night time, night and day, a long pregnant moment. Mallory looked down at her shoes, then quickly off to the side. He cleared his throat.

Where's Jed then?

He gets back tomorrow, they have him in Baltimore this weekend for something.



Then Mallory smiled. You don't know though? He thought she had on jeans, nice jeans and a belt with a chrome buckle. She had on long earrings.

No I don't. I don't keep up with that anymore, he's working too hard but he said this one was important. Mallory noticed she said the last part to herself, as if to hear herself say it.

So he's in Baltimore? They were in Detroit last week, right?

They work in New Orleans and Philadelphia too, I don't know what they're doing in Baltimore. Do you want to come in? You could stand out here all night if you like.

Mallory held the side of the door with his right hand and craned his neck around like he was checking the place out. He had been here twice a week for five years. He looked inside and Ruth was across the island pouring wine into two glasses. The house was cleaned and bright. Ruth passed around the island with her eyes on him. The house smelled like seasoned wood. Now his eyes adjusted again. He reached around for something to lean on. The speakers were playing.

He reached the couch. Ruth had the wine on the table before them while she sat to his left with both legs pulled underneath her. Then they were talking and Mallory felt spirited. Hands, fingers—laced on his right knee crossed over his left with his head back. She talked with both hands now, though Mallory thought it might be for the first time in a while.

I wake up every morning—no stop it you don't understand! I wake up every morning and he's there looking at me in the face standing on the covers—no he doesn't do it to Jed—he looks at me it's the first thing I see every day.

Her hands up in her hair now running it back while she looked down with wide eyes, though Mallory played on of course.

He would do that, well, it's your fault for naming him Birdie. I would probably act the same.

Mallory wondered if that was too little to work with but Ruth played anyway. She was talking and Mallory felt himself looking at her teeth while she talked, at the little crooked one off to the bottom left. It was so small, Ruth had the small bottom teeth trait. She had light brown hair to her shoulders. He thought that Ruth knew about eye contact, and spent it sparingly, now she kept her eyes down at her hands.

But Mallory felt a little sick now, like he was pathetic. The light in the kitchen showed around the corner into the dark living room. They knew each other too well, too long. For a little while they could play like this but now it was getting compulsory. So Mallory wanted to be drunk.

There was Birdie walking over the back of the couch. And Ruth was talking and she saw him again and remembered who she was talking to but didn't pause. Her audience was starting to falter and she was exasperated that he faded off. She looked at him and threw a leg off the couch to stand up and Mallory remembered he wanted to have sex and he jumped to play along again as Ruth walked to the kitchen, just a few steps behind, and they made it to the island for more wine but Ruth was starting to get irritable. He was being eager, she thought he must have remembered he wanted to have sex. He just jumped so quick and now he is going to be embarrassed and talk about the hand made wooden counter. He might touch it lavishly. He might remark, he will remark, he will say something about the make and texture of the grain, and the potency of the lacquer, but only just to fill a second of time, he is too embarrassed. He realized he followed me up here like that and now he'll be cold for a second. He just remembered that a man wouldn't do that, he would stay seated over there and she would walk around

and then come back to him—the other man would. So Mallory would be cold for a second now, and Ruth poured heavily. Ruth looked down and remembered Jed will be home tomorrow. Then Jed would be here.



They were in the car together, she was, and so was he. The car was new, the seats were clean and it wasn't theirs. Jed's parents lent them the car for the weekend so they could get out of the city. Now the city was behind them, and the car had suitcases in the back. The sky was clear and the fields were evergreen.

Ruth was smiling and pointing things out on the side like red barns and blueberry patches just because. Jed had eyes forwards and half closed in smile now, his head a little down and to the left. He was listening but only mostly, and there was something there that neither of them spoke aloud. There were cows in the field to the right of the car so he slowed down and they talked to them together, and said how sweet they were.

They had their eyes that people like to remark about. Just for a second both of them forgot how this day felt, that this was here for a moment, and that nothing about this should be so special. So Jed sped up again, and both of them thought about how they were still an hour away and the sun was hot in their eyes again.



She pictured Mallory waking up in the bed and looking at the ceiling for a long time. He didn't want to get up. If he got up there would be shame. He looked at the wall, painted over floral paper. He could hear Ruth in the kitchen now. Banging around in some rush. If he walked in she would stop and feel like she had to bother with him, but she wouldn't want to, she knew there was no time now. Something will be done, they

had to make this right. If he helped her clean she would be overly gracious and Mallory knew she would rather he was gone.

He had a bus in two hours anyway. He couldn't stick around even if he had wanted to. Somehow she had to correct and fix, to straighten and prim, and none of that would happen in the kitchen or with him in the house at all. He had to leave for her to clean him away. He had to leave and then something else could happen for a little while, she could listen to music, and she could stop in town for a few things. She could invite over an old friend, they could be here together. Then she could clean some things away, though wasn't that the point in the first place. Because sometimes the cleaning, the restoration of intent anyway, that is the reason for the mess in the first place, because sometimes you can't bring yourself to make something better if it's not terribly wrong—then it's an imperative, then, where for years there has been nothing, now again there is inspiration.

On the table there were two little ceramic birds, one with salt and one with pepper. Now both were lying on their side. Salt and pepper mixed to sand on the table. Ruth swept the floor. The birds had spirits inside. The air was dusty and acrid with the drying wine spilt over the counter. Each bit of space under the counter and around the side was soaked in sticky thick wine filled with dead bugs, a scodge of dust and bavvel soaking into the floor and over the edge of the chairs.

Maybe Mallory could have done better than to just tramps off when the morning came. That is what someone else would have said, Ruth thought. Those were expectations that wanted company, and commitment, both of which Mallory would bring by in tow with a bottle of something and a new friend in the next coming weeks. Then he would come inside and raise both hands. Jed would clap him on the back and

host his friend. He would come over to her and give her a particular kind of embrace. Later in the evening, she would walk to the mantel to find something. He could find her there and just for that moment she would look at him just right, just a touch north of customary, and for just a moment she would like it too.

And there would be company, and with it some kind of love for communion. Jed would stand before the room and pronounce affectionately what good people he was privileged to spend his life with, to which she would glow! Oh she would glow and hold his hand and beam up to him from her seat all the while there is Mallory, toasting his friends health, and both of them broaching some medieval timbre—neither of them having read the bible—but now he uses the phrase “good providence” and worse “kinship” but where these phrases are born from and why they sometimes resurface in toast and gesture is anyone's guess.

But frustratingly there was no more dish soap and the mop was too dirty from cleaning out the garage to scrub the dirt with and today there was a market downtown, which is only ever something to do, so Ruth turned on the spot and held the salt and pepper birds up together and flew them around the room over the couch and up out of the door outside.



Mallory sat in the window seat on the bus every time, but this time he was given an aisle. There was an old couple sitting there in the first two seats by the window. He had important work to do—he was sure that if he took the window seat he would be out of their way for the remainder of the trip. But they resisted. So Mallory went to the conductor, which is what the bus driver liked to be called, and protested, claiming motion sickness, that he should be allowed to sit in the window despite the seating

arrangements. Seat numbers on bus tickets can be overlooked, and the conductor took it upon himself to see to it that the old couple heard Mallory's take on the situation.

But they resisted.

So today Mallory was kind and allowed the older couple to sit by the window. This trip he had business in the city. Today he had to meet an old friend, recently divorced, said he needed company and maybe a new job too so Mallory should come down for lunch one of these days and catch up. He should leave town anyway. He had trouble staying put for longer than a few weeks, things would always start to unravel.

White and blue houses passed the bus window. Cable wires jumped along. In the sunlight now, it was hot against his face and his head began to pulse. Probably have high blood pressure.

There next to him sat somebody old wearing dressy clothes that fit well. If he noticed Mallory looking sideways at him from the window he didn't let on. He stayed in his magazine. Bothered Mallory for a moment because the man appeared so content reading his economics tabloid and the prick of guilt swelled in him that he should like to appear so content. Clean, present, everything looked intentional about him. But then before another moment passed Mallory reminded himself that he was better than this old man, whoever he was. Him and his high profile job, and his rich kids he takes on expensive vacations.

He thought some more. Him and his wife share a king bed—she's home now, happy to see him off in the city for a few days. They don't talk over dinner. That's fine with both of them. Twenty years ago maybe they worked hard to remain central to each other's lives but not anymore.

But Mallory paused and reminded himself that he didn't judge other people, because judgment is a sign of envy and dissatisfaction, and he wasn't those things. Head throbbing again. The short deviation into this man's world took him away from his high blood pressure but now it was back.

Then Mallory was a young man on the bus to the city again, and he looked out the window, giving himself a knowing grin in the reflection of the green hills. The old man switched bottom crossed leg to top and sniffed lightly into his nose. What a stuffy old grouch, Mallory thought. Everyone he knows probably fears him or thinks he's insecure. And Mallory remembered he had a novel with him and grimaced in guilt that he didn't want to read it.

The bus was on the highway, the sky overhead. Mallory went into the city again to go fishing and drinking. The town would remain while he was gone, and he would relish in the big world feeling. But he would begin to feel lonely and envious and misunderstood. He would pine for long slow evenings in the country, having never really enjoyed one himself. He would think about the field next to town, and Ruth and Jed. He would forget and he would return and the world would spin slowly.

Cracks like root systems spread across the face of the wooden painted siding along the house clear through the white paint. Along the bottom boards close to the ground the cracks become less defined and mesh into rot and splintered molded siding pressed into the soil. Weeds trim the house. Each flower bed sits against the house long since colonized by an amorphous snarl of woven plants and swollen bushes. Thick as a ball of yarn.

The steps are overgrown and sagging between the railings. White chips of paint speckle the dank ground under the stairs. Outside laying around are old projects and spent objects. A refrigerator lying open on its back filled with compost soil once a garden bed, though now also overgrown, plants falling over the side reach the ground. Several cars, little pickup trucks, once driven now disposed along with the motor boat. Old debt consolations.

A long and large sheet metal sided barn filled with a sailboat and cord wood and a tool bench piled with duplicates and mismatches. Many generations of cats. All contributing to the air of itinerance.

This mess lay across the yard from Ruth and Jed's house, owned and lived in by one Arthel Gingham Powell. They had lived in the house for more than a year before seeing a sign of life across the yard, and for a long time had entertained the idea that it was owned and abandoned by the young ginger haired man who sometimes came to fuss around things in the yard and steal the cats.

This was Arthel's nephew Dylan and only living relative who came by the house once or twice a month to make sure that things were in order and that Arthel had not



fallen over and died. Arthel's sister had raised Dylan herself after the father made off till she was killed in a car accident when he was sixteen which Dylan survived.

Life with Arthel was difficult for Dylan. He never had a bad temper but just an enduring quietness—only thinking and acting on clear instruction. He could be found in between directions sitting still, wanly. The state told Arthel to oversee the rest of Dylan's childhood, though because Arthel had not known Dylan very well before the accident it was tricky for him to parse out the adaptations from the original text.

Sometimes Dylan would be sitting in the living room on a wooden chair looking out the window for what seemed an unendurable eternity and Arthel would begin to agonize over whether to break the spell and relieve his tension, or allow the spectacle to persist, to break some unspoken record he was keeping behind Dylan's back.

Because it was not Arthel's nature to interrupt people, Dylan would stay seated. Arthel would continue to tend to his chores. It was rare for them to interact at all.

Dylan was now thirty four and Arthel had resumed the life of solitude that is his custom. He had bought the white painted house when he was twenty two years old and had been it's only proprietor save Dylan and one brief affair with Mandy Hoscomb, the school science teacher, that finished Arthel's romantic career forever.

It had happened over the summer when Arthel was twenty four and both of them were slated to start at the school in the fall. He was eager to find love, but try as he might dates remained fruitless, until Mandy showed up one day canvassing for the Green Party candidate in the upcoming local election. She was forward and brash, so Arthel swooned easily, and before the afternoon was over they were both through the screen door ripping their clothes off in the living room where Mandy stripped Arthel of his virginity like an old rusted bolt.

Arthel supported the Green Party, so he relished Mandy's unexpected visits, and for a short time, she did too. She did not mind that he was hired to be the janitor, and they both agreed he could move up some day soon after getting his foot in. She never rang the phone to make plans or knocked on the door. Arthel would be in the living room in the afternoon repairing a floor lamp before turning to find her standing there watching from the doorway. This game had an initial charm.

A short while later they would rise from the floor and Arthel would make them both chicken salad to eat on the porch and talk about the public school before Mandy would leave, and Arthel would begin to wait again and wonder if he was bleak or forgettable.

The years alone since Dylan had been long for Arthel. No one there to attend to or even observe. He did not like going out much. One hundred days is one hundred years when you're lying on the floor. He had books and stereo equipment. Sometimes he would mix a cocktail in a tall water glass and take it to the front porch in the evening. His greatest love in life was the stage. He dreamed of lights and crowded seats, of costumes and gasps of surprise from the audience. He loved music. He had marionettes and stage props in storage. No one would have known if they saw him at work, that was the fun of it.

Sometimes, oftentimes, he would pass whole weeks absorbed in his world without leaving or talking to anyone. Enjoying canned beer, reciting long passages of books aloud, remarking to himself privately. He was a strong conversationalist. He could sustain long and loping dialogue between himself, pontificating upon each point, careful to never leave stray ends. His responses were never curt, or short on depth and

careful consideration. When Jed met Arthel this was a first impression, and a point of respect he carried through the years of their long and loving friendship.

Any night he could, Jed crossed the yard to sit with Arthel, normally in the semi dark in the living room. There the two would share sustained ponderous conversation till the small hours of the morning. Occasionally neither of them would speak for several minutes. Suddenly Arthel would respond to a thought left hanging between them. Several more minutes would pass.

On occasion they had nothing to discuss and would sit in silence.

Tonight though Jed was on the edge of his seat, talking with abandon. He looked younger today, sitting ebulliently on the stool low to the ground. Arthel disposed, sunken, holding in mind the future that Jed couldn't see as he chattered, holding his knees. He was talking about himself. He was talking about his plans. He was talking to himself too.

I moved around lots as a kid. I feel like I'm beginning to feel it again. Moving that is. Ruth talks about moving too, sometimes I don't think either of us would mind the change. A change of pace right? No response but he bore on.

Something here has us both on edge. I feel as if my time is spent before I know it's there. You've lived here your whole life which is fine...really it is a nice place but I think we need something different.

I could see us in the south, no actually maybe down to Texas, Ruth loves the desert. Arizona. I went down there once when I was younger for a week to camp... Arizona.

His face lightened and he cupped his chin in one hand. Nothing quite like the desert they got down there. Red and white rocks everywhere and dry, not like up here.

You can see the tracks in the sand where the lizards and snakes and stuff crawl past because it doesn't rain much.

Shrouded, mulelike. I have never been to Arizona, Arthel said.

It's great. They don't have daylight savings time. It's always summer. I guess the actual summer is probably hot. I don't need to live here anyway.

Arthel watched him grip one hand with the other like to rub something on them and begin to sound agitated.

People have to move all the time for work. I can't drive the truck for the rest of my life and Ruth knows that. 'Sides, this ain't forever. They need car mechanics in Texas, I do not love driving that truck that's for sure, not right now at least.

Arthel looked at Jed, standing now against the screen window and talking to the yard. Arthel knew something was up. Jed didn't talk about work. Jed didn't talk about dreams of a little shop. He rarely even talked freely without being interrogated. Arthel didn't really know what Jed did when he left, just that he drove for a week and then came home and wouldn't elaborate. Arthel knew not to ask.

How does Ruth feel about leaving? Do you talk about it?

They have restaurants in Texas too, she can work there. I don't really know why either of us are still here.

But it's a long ways away.

That'll be fine. Then his voice lost its vinegar. I jus think that we need some kind of excitement, moving in together out of highschool was so exciting, we had it made. It was just fun to own things and pick out a lamp and whatever but that was seven years ago.

You're scared now it's losing its charm?

Arthel you ain't never been married or whatever, it's not always loving and happy and all that. I know it lost its charm years ago but I think we both need something different before we turn thirty and then we're Greg and Elma.

I like Greg and Elma. They're very pleasant people.

They have never ever said anything to me besides how you doing bub, and my goodness, and you kids are just so young, and ain't she just the sweetest thing.

That all sounds like a compliment.

But we're at the ice cream social and it's just me and Ruth and Greg and Elma and maybe Bool and were in the front yard of the church with the Gremmens just watching us and Geraldine hovering and waiting with the trash bin like I'm going to throw my styrofoam bowl in the garden or something.

You don't have to go to those kinds of things if you don't like them.

I DO have to go Arthel because Ruth wants to go every single time. It's all like some sort of requirement for her, like it's written in stone somewhere that if you live in a place you have to go to the ice cream social there or you will be shot. And every time something like that happens, they have the fourth of July parade or something, the god damn pumpkin carving thing, we always go and Greg and Elma are always there. I can't live here anymore Arthel, there's nothing to do.

Well you could go to Corning. They have things to do there. There's that glass museum.

Don't even, you know the glass museum sucks.

That's not true they have the really big squiggly green one.

He was pacing around in circles and Arthel was still sitting far away in the dark. He stopped against the screen again and looked at the dark for a long moment.

I just hate feeling so unsure. Don't you know the story about the two villages cross the river from one another?

Jed had his hand round the screen now holding the doorway and pressing his head into the screen, staring into the yard.

Every year they tried build a bridge, and every year the water rose too high and knocked the bridge out fore it was finished. It was a big river. So they tried every year and it didn't work so one year they dammed the river upstream and started the bridge but months later it began to rain—because this one takes place in the tropics—the dam filled and broke and flooded both of 'em. I don't remember what they did about that.

Now his forehead was numb. Arthel's face was in the dark and Jed could not see him.

I'm afraid I'm trading one set of problems for another is all I'm saying right now.

It's happened before.

I know I've done it.

Do you want to do it again?



Jed opened the back door slowly so to make sure it didn't creak. All the lights were off. Just soft ochre yellow diffused from the streetlamp outside the kitchen window. All the lights were off.

Again Jed walked slowly from room to room and found little things lying out of place. Socks and cups and plates. Neither of them had much time to clean up since he'd been back. She worked late every night this week. That was okay. He could pick up a few

things right now so they could both wake up fresh tomorrow and have clean counters first thing in the morning.

It was not very much.

Jed fell into bed next to her and turned to look at her face sleeping. Surprised to see furrowed brows. He didn't want to wake her. She looked concentrated, pained and something... Jed thought then that he never saw this face unless she was asleep. Disturbing. Here she was in body and mind together. There was not a single sound in the house. Jed realized he wasn't breathing.

## 3

Jed left the next morning again, before the sun had risen. This time was not to plan. Silver frost coated the surface of the hood of the car, soon to melt with the heat of the engine. There was barely any plan. Dalton had called early.

The phone rang in the kitchen for minutes before Jed got to it and Dalton was angry. Jed heard sleeplessness in his voice. The worse his tone became the less Jed felt till he was returning the phone to its hook and lacing his boots completely numb. He saw into the future.

He felt like he was already driving in the car. He was already in the cab of the truck with Dalton. Dalton was smoking cigarettes and driving and saving his words for directions later. The rifle was cold and heavy in both hands while the boys loaded the truck in the faceless gray warehouse with the blue forklift in Cleveland or Minneapolis or Louisville or Chicago.

Ruth woke up to a letter written on the chalkboard in the kitchen:

*Gone early. Phone call from Dalton, be in Pittsburg in four hours. Leaving from there. Not sure where to.*

Her face betrayed nothing, just a moment's hesitation wondering why it was so sudden. Dalton gave Jed jobs regularly. One week home, one week off. Calling at five in the morning was unusual. She stood and set down the glass of water on the counter. Little flecks of dust spiraling in the light from the kitchen window.

When Jed left before it was off schedule by two days. Annoyed that she didn't have a better explanation. Slowly the details began to take shape. Fear like a still pool of dubious water formed but there was something wrong. There was no familiar wound to



the fragile marital routine, no cold and unwelcomed bead of guilt at the pleasure of the empty house. Just a soft sense of dread.

Eyes stared blankly out the window into the yard. In the tree between their house and Arthel's perched one great oily vulture on the highest branches with both waxy disheveled wings open to dry in the sunlight preening, evidently filthy.

In the seven years Jed worked for Dalton he had done different jobs at strange hours, once leaving for five weeks before returning from Juno, bones still frozen cold a week later. Ruth could not know where he went beforehand, that was the nature of the work.

The vulture stood and dropped several feet before, impossibly, the wet leathery wings caught the air and loose feathers fell away as it arced towards the ground.

Ruth traced the outline of her eyebrow with one finger while staring out the window, then, trembling lightly, it went down to her lip and she bit her nail off of her index finger.

In the distance she began to envision driving a car, speeding on a dirt road. The engine was thrashing and crying but relentlessly she crunched the pedals down into the floorboards. Then she bit the nail off the next finger, little bites ending with a quiet snap. It was night time. Deer rushed across the road in the headlights while the heavy engine choked and jumped.

She spit the nails one by one on the floor. The remaining portion showed a saw-blade ragged edge. She went over it again. Little snap. Spit. A turn was ahead. Other hand was holding the wrist of the bitten hand. Now agitated, ripping the nails off. The tires sprayed and lost traction, sending the car sidelong towards the ditch.

The kettle whistled behind her, but too fast her hand went for the burner knob touching the pot before – OH. She jerked her hand from the pot. Maddening. Wrenched the kettle off the burner and smashed it against the floor where it bounced and fell down the stairs to the cellar. Ruth grabbed a worn coat from the hook by the door and left through the back.

Down the road a half mile the town stops suddenly and gives way to a spacious and impressive field. The road just ends at the last house and appears to have been swallowed by the tall golden grasses and scattered bushes. The land pockmarks across the top of the grass like a hand sewn quilt, dimpling here, rising there. At points the fur coat across the top of the uniform dried grasses is punctured by a coarse towering stand of Phragmites.

Today the wind was blowing. The rustle of the dead grass was deafening. It could almost be water, but it doesn't quite have the appeal. We must have evolved to know the sound of water well, to want it and to pick it out from anything else. The same is not true for the coarse smokers sigh of dead grass. It could be the hissing of a fire.

Ruth walked through the middle of the field with her hands out to touch the tops of the grass at shoulder height, to let it brush her fingers one by one. Deafened to everything by the rush of the grass. What sets a field apart is how much there is to see. Dead and golden brown the field stretched impossibly far to the north and south-west, lusterless and inviting.

Birds flitted out from the surface and fell back under cover like jumping fish. Ruth watched the tops of the grass and watched the wind change directions suddenly, violently without any warning.

There is no way we can fly in planes, how could they possibly stay afloat?

The winds surged and died. Something under the surface was moving back and forth with each change in the wind, slipping in and out of sight, a sunken boat hidden beneath the waves. Ruth watched, eyes squinting in the bright sun, something was moving beneath the grass but it could just have been the swirling of the choppy water.

On the other side of the field stood a dark wood of red pine, douglas fir and hemlock. Ninety-two and ten years before, the wood had covered all of western New York from Olean to Ithaca. This pocket outside Rathbone was a rare natural survivor, unreserved by documents and admission fees. Then the field was logged, and the pines were made into houses and fence posts and, later, telephone poles and dining room tables.

Tall straight pine trees like bristles of coarse hair. The pine forest doesn't receive the credit it deserves because it does not feel like life inside. Everything is dark and muted by the insulation of needles cushioning the ground. Few plants can grow in the acidic, sap filled soil, leaving the understory a barren wasteland.

And there, the ominous stalking sense of dread fashioned by the long line of sight through the forest, the fear that someone could see you, or possibly that you might see someone else.

The cushion of needles in this forest was deep. Shoes seemed to sink interminably into the soil. It feels like you could sink up to your waist, past your head, and down underground if you stood in the same place for too long. Anyone buried underground in the pine forest would likely never be found.

Ruth read a story once that reminded her of this forest, it was about the pine people of New Jersey. The pine people are a suspicious and storied people. The legend of the Jersey Devil did not bother Ruth. She did not fear the evil spirit known to raid

chicken coops and burn houses. Plundering is only desparations last resort. It was the story of the black dog that continued to come to mind when she walked in the pine forest. The black dog came off a pirate ship docked on the coast after surviving its owner in a shipwreck. It was not violent, and it was not supposed to hurt you, but it walked behind you in the forest and often Ruth would hear its padded footsteps rushing over pine needles behind her back.

She took a stick from the ground and began to draw spirals in the mud on the forest floor. Then she knew she had to talk to Mallory though the moment she thought it she grimaced inside to think that he would be helpful, that she was in a predicament in which Mallory would be helpful, which was degrading and pride stung again but this time it was probably more serious than Jed could realize and this time there was a chance Mallory knew about it.

He was going to be hard to find. But the walk was not doing the job and Ruth was still agitated. It is irritating to be beholden to Mallory, and to need his help. But that is because he would relish it, he would grin and draw it out. She would have to entertain it, to give him all the grist he could need to put on his show.

Horrible to have to spend a life suffering such pathetic people.

He is constantly looking for a good moment to define and reiterate himself. The mud was silken like expensive yogurt, squatting next to the pool with the stick she muttered.

I can not stand people like that. Useless for anything but a laugh. Funny. Too insistent on their own method. Fucking unreliable.

But she thought she did need to find Mallory soon, and this time it might be worth it to suffer his old game. He has been gone about a week now. Jed is too close to the cliff to see the edge. I do care, I know that I do care. Hard to sometimes.

Two nights ago she got home from the restaurant early and sat in the car in their driveway, condensation covered the windshield. It had been almost half an hour now. She didn't want to move yet. There was a little something in the bag in the seat, she had something in there.

One of the real tragedies of life is remembering a thing you want to do sometime in the distant future, over and over again, pendulum, distant.

She played the headlights, off again, on again. Jed'll come out to the porch soon, he'll see the lights. What are you doing, he'd say. He'd have the light tone on. The one that's: hey silly, what do you think you're doing? His smile, hey it's all going to be fine. Flick. Why'd you buy this? Don't they close at six today? Flick. Turn off the motor you're wasting gas. Flick.

She thought about pulling away and going into town. There's music somewhere, there's a crowd there. Play me in pool? Flick. Who's the dancer, did you teach him or? Flick. Instead she went inside.

He wanted to come with her when she left in the morning to go climb the hill behind town. She left him sleeping when she got up but when she rose he woke too and rushed to join her. He was so excited to go so she smiled and said she did not care that they were leaving late because of course it will be fun to go together and the day was now already going to be a different kind of day so that was fine they could leave a little later.

And all the while she tasted the little drop of poison not in the front but shoved off to the side. The poison that felt annoyed and encroached upon, but is also doubt and

blame because shouldn't you be more grateful to spend a day with someone *that you love*. You should feel less attached to your own plans. Once you read something about Buddhism that sort of sounded like that so shouldn't you be like that? All the happy people that you know, the old ones who live in perfect harmony, they aren't so demanding, they aren't obsessed with their little plans. They are all accommodating.

When he touches your arm to ask if you are ready why do you feel as if you are standing twenty feet behind your head watching. Guilty. And he does not know.

He does know, so far as he feels stumbling and twelve feet tall, like someone has placed one hundred tiny saucers of water on the ground. Every step a catastrophe. He is afraid. Somewhere off to the left he can see something grainy and out of focus but fear makes things difficult to see.

So he tries harder to keep things up, to right the car headed for the sea cliff, in Ireland, where they have those very dangerous looking sea cliffs that are flat on the top, where the lunatic was said to live.

The harder he pulls on the wheel the straighter the car goes because this is not mechanical and he does not know.

The mud was beginning to resemble a bird's nest so she sighed and returned again: Jed was in a bad spot so she would need to find Mallory, even if it would be in service of pity. He had left a little less than a week ago. There was never any way to contact him when he was gone, which was typically fine until now. Bastards proly shacked up somewhere. Fucking unreliable.

Late one night a week later, Mallory Price and his date Jenna left the Blue Idle by the side door per their custom. The Idle is the regionally renowned bar outside of town – the gem of Rathbone—owned by generous and formidable Gary Gremmen. Its regulars live as much as twenty miles from the door, and return, faithfully, several times a week as if compelled by devotion. Mallory amused Jenna by driving dangerously on the way to her house in Corning. On the way Mallory parked road side off the highway so they could fuck before going home. They had her house, but fucking in the car while the radio played was more fun than before bed at the house. After, they laid drunk and panting with the doors open for a few minutes to catch their breath. There was gin in the glovebox.

Pass it here, will you dear?

One second I haven't had a sip yet. It's late now, we should be headed back.

Yeah, in a second let's have another sip and then I'll pull out, but Mallory didn't mean it.

I don't think so, I think you've had enough.

Jenna I'm fine, let me see that. Don't ruin the evening.

Damnit Mallory, I'm tired and I won't wait for you all night, let's go home.

I wasn't the one making this take longer, why're you bent on spoiling our time together? We get one night a week together—all I do's work—we get one night a week and you want to spend it fighting.

Jenna turned and put her right shoulder into the car seat. She looked at the dark.

Let me drive Mal, you're drunk.

That's out of the question.

I'm not asking you, I'm telling you, you let me drive or you can walk but you're not driving this car anywhere.

Maybe I should walk? It's a nice night out, maybe I would like the air?

You drive me insane, I hate when you're like this. But fine, walk. I don't care what you do.

Mallory leaned over and leered at her with a taunting grin. I think you do care. I think if I got out of this car right now you wouldn't leave me. I think you would drive off and come back five minutes later out of guilt because you love me and you don't have the guts to leave me like that. Do it Jenna, prove me wrong.

When Jenna pulled away Mallory lay down on the rocks and looked at the night sky. The sky was brown and blue with light pollution. The city was behind him, past the top of his head. Jenna left him with the gin bottle. He put it to his lips. The light down at the bottom of his vision was inky blue.

He laid on the gravel pull off and wondered if he could get a little closer to freezing to death this time. The ground was cold enough. He pulled from the gin bottle. The sky was growing darker. The lights must be going off, he thought. People were getting to bed. Mallory wondered about light pollution. It isn't the same as plastic bottles and mercury in tuna fish. If all of the lights went off at the same time, all at once in a sufficient sized area, would the pollution disappear, and how dark would it be? The lights were going off now. Each quadrant of the sky was a different color. Bottom right was greenish now. Top left had static electricity in it. Mallory mumbled something about



The Blue Idle. The ground was coarse and pebbly. Over past his head Mallory could hear the slap of the river that was choppy and full and monotonous.

When Billy dropped the car off the highway into the gravel pull off next to the lake he came in a little too fast. The headlights washed over Mallory—lying on his side in the middle. Gravel sprayed as Billy stood on the brake pedal. He rolled down the window and stuck his head out. The engine was still running. Mallory was not moving, laying in the wash of the headlight. Billy thought for a second that he should turn and leave before he was involved. Curiosity won.

Mallory's body was long and limp and stretched across the gravel as though having fallen there from some height. Both of his palms faced up and his fingers curled to his palms. All of this was unsettling but maybe the hands more so than anything else. Billy left the engine running and stepped out of the car. He stood five feet away from the body and looked for a long time.

There was no other sound, there was no other light, just the headlights and the humming of the engine.

Billy stepped forwards and gave Mallory a kick with the toe of his shoe. Mallory grunted and rolled onto his side and Billy tripped back and yelped. He coughed and looked over at the road and stuffed his hands in his pockets. Newly bolstered he got the tire jack from the trunk, killed the engine, walked over. He looked like he was dead. Billy saw for a moment touching him and feeling his cold bloodless skin and his slumped weight. He shuddered. He was not dead he just moved. There was a fifth of gin lying in the dirt a few feet off to the left. Billy bent and put the bottle to his lips. There was still a good sip left, Billy drank it and looked at the man. He yelled over to him:

Hey, you damn drunk huh? Can you hear me?

The only sound was the lake. Billy hucked the bottle down the hill and heard it smash on rocks below. The man was wearing expensive clothing for someone laying drunk off the highway. His jacket fit well. His hair was cut recently, he did not look poor nor decrepit. A thought, as small and quick as a hummingbird, flitted through Billy's mind. It was just a thought. He yelled again:

I won't wake your ass up, I'll leave you here to get runned over. Don't make me use this iron on you.

It was late at night now. Billy felt a flush of warmth as the thought went through him again, harmless as summer rain. He really was asleep. Besides, who was this guy? He was wealthy, at least he looked wealthy. He didn't look like he slept outside. He had a ring on his right pinky finger. Billy took a step closer, careful not to make a noise.

You in there buddy? You sleep?

Billy kneeled next to the man and put his ear down near his face. The breathing dragged through his pipes from deep within him, barely audible at all but there was something there. Billy slipped his hand into the man's right pants pocket. The pockets were lined with silk. He felt along the inside of the jacket. The gravel was cutting into his knees. He reached over the man and tried to pull at something bulky in his right side pocket. Billy felt folds of leather and pieces of paper.

Billy started to tip the man onto his back—he was breathing from the bottom of a well. Billy looked down into his face. Someone was in there. The right thing to do was walk away. Billy wrapped his fingers around the wallet. He paused again. The wallet was thick and intoxicating. He gripped harder, he balled his fist up inside the pocket. He looked down again. The man's face was a blanched white, he could see it even in the light from his headlights. That was enough.

Billy made it back to the car. The roar of the water was louder now. He felt claustrophobic. He tried to find his keys in his pockets but his body shook and his hands trembled with the keys. He didn't look back at the man, just ahead at the door, tense with his shoulders bunched together. The keys could not find the keyhole. He heard the water again. The keys made it home. Billy left the pull off and drove back to the Blue Idle at two hundred miles an hour, boiling over, white hot, breathless.

Back in the Blue Idle Gary Gremmen polished glassware affectionately and listened to a long and sordid tale from the young drunk man seated. He wore tan pants and a down and flannel insulated jacket that was zipped to his chin though inside. He wore running shoes. He had no hat.

Well we ended up getting on the train, but Mike and I don't speak great Italian so turns out we gets off at the wrong spot and now we're nowhere near the ski hill. I mean we could have walked but it was far and we had like all our shit with us, so we just called a car and then they got us there. So yeah, basically kind of a crazy trip.

But Gremmen had not heard a word anyone had said for more than a decade. It wouldn't matter because after he noticed that there was no more talking he would turn and smile through his bristles with his eyes shut and reply:

That really sounds like something else, how's about another round?

Sure, so this year my parents want to go to Aspen again but I'm not that tight with Mike anymore so it's gonna be me and Jared again. Like fucking Aspen is actually a really sick town...

Oblivion.

Gremmen is most at ease when someone near him is talking about something and he is deeply inside his own head off somewhere else in the warm saturated fuzz of performing absent minded chores he has been repeating for thirty years.

The other people were having fun with Crab Meat but he didn't notice because he thought they were just pushy rude people to begin with. Each time they came to the bar they would get him another until Crab Meat was deep inside his jacket and couldn't reach out far enough to grab his glass.

Gremmen thought this too fun to intervene, and before long he was getting along much better.

He spent the cash he had and passed out the keys to the German sports car parker in the front, it was faster than they thought it would be. Randy was a better driver than the others. The tires were new and sticky and the roads were cold and clear.

My turn now great let's do this all night. Each wanted another lap. No one looked at the speedometer. No one noticed the time.

Randy wanted to show the others he was the better driver so he pushed it a little faster each time he popped over the hill and came heavy into the turn in front of the Idle. The tires squawked and the car stayed right side up by chance.

Crab Meat recalled his last love affair as Gremmen watched the show outside. In the window Gremmen watched the driveway and saw in the light from the porch that it was beginning to rain. Heavy wet earnest drops. The ground was wet now but maybe it might start to freeze soon. The boys were jumping in the rain and yelling at the driver. The car was spinning its wheels and sloshing through turns. They screamed and howled. Somewhere behind Gremmen's head Crab Meat bubbled and started in again about a girl named Katie long gone away and unfaithful.

The rain fell faster in sheets and ribbons while the car spun like a top in the middle of the drive and the headlights flashed in circles lighting up the figures running around the outside. It was hard to make out how far they were—it looked like they were too close. It was hard to see the trees across the road. It was hard to see the figures, flashing back and forth in the grind and scream of engine noise and gravel rocks under tires gnashing teeth on the metal bit in its mouth at the start line. Gremmen gave it his best guess and Crab Meat, his blessing. The whole road was shambles now but the lights were still on in everyone's face like a burning torch, poised to fall gratefully into the pyre.

The appeal of the Idle is easy enough to understand.

The Idle inhabits the first floor of a white farmhouse, though now gutted to make room for the Black Walnut bar counter. Ruth works in the Idle waiting tables and tending the bar. The Idle is in disrepair. The front porch is trodden and broken through. Gremmen replaced the flooring boards with plywood sheets and reinforced the porch with concrete blocks. The paint yellowed and peeled more than two decades ago, and now is only a mixture of patchy buttermilk-white and large swathes of green lichen and tangled dead vines climbing the brick chimney and traversing over the banister.

The ground outside all along the porch is primarily broken glass and bar glasses and broken brown and green beer bottles. In the three warmer seasons Gremmen leaves the windows open without a care for the swarms of flies and nocturnal insects that swarm in. In the winter he shuttered them with a lattice of old boards and bar towels.

The flooring inside is warped and distended from the generations of slopped beer and other fluid till now resembling a washboard, and even broken through at points,

covered by a chair nailed down over the hole. Ruth loves the disrepair because she thinks it's honest.

Gremmen is often the subject of talk at the Idle. He does not touch drink. His energy never falters and his hands don't seem to stop moving. He hides his face behind an inordinate and storied ruff of bristles. People want to know why he doesn't talk to customers and he will reliably say that he don't need to. In truth Gremmen has often pined for conversation but the bar patrons don't usually lend what he is looking for.

They come from all over, they like the Idle because it is always the same. They walk through the door and they let themselves act naturally, uninhibited. They don't look over their shoulders. They sit and talk with jaw and tongue unbridled, immoderate and coltish—a slurry of sounds and ideas. So Gremmen don't need to. They come each with a story in their pocket, something from the week that happened. Working most likely. They wait for their moment. They draw it out. They laugh louder and then they lose at pool.

And at the end of the night, every night of the year, Gremmen will remove the stained smock and wipe his brow with the bar rag, leave the sleeping customers where they sit, and leave through the back to drive home where he resumes loving his wife Geraldine with his whole heart and soul before he returns again to the Idle.

He wakes in the morning to draw her a bath of hot sudsy water mixed with a slurry of sand and silts and clay so she can rub her skin with a coarse rag. Geraldine treats Gary kindly too, but always at arms length. She finishes bathing and they will walk slowly and talk sparingly. Sometimes she will become animated and begin to talk in bounding silver sentences and punctuate each phrase with her hands. Gary doesn't do that. He will savor each phrase silently. She is talking to herself anyway. She knows a lot

about the moneyed people in the cities and about politics. She knows about local happenings. Sometimes she forgets he is there for a day at a time, but life is long and someday soon she remembers again.

Once when Mallory was twenty-two he had walked home drunk and fallen asleep in the grass on the side of the road. It was November and when Gremmen found him an hour and a half later he was frozen stiff as a fish. He heaved him up and slapped him awake enough to get him up the stairs. The Gremmens laid him in the bathtub and poured hot water over him till he started to thaw out. The burning was horrible. He fought and screamed to be let go. Geraldine held him down and soaked him over. Mallory didn't weigh more than a hundred twenty pounds in those days. He stayed in the tub. So did most of his skin. The Gremmens were worried about how blue his lips were and how stiff his limbs felt. The hot water washed his first layer of skin off like paint till Mallory was pink as a salmon. The Gremmens wrapped Mallory in wool blankets and fed him corn chowder and chopped up pieces of ham. Geraldine rubbed his toes with oven mitts warmed on the heater. Gary spooned the chowder and talked in a low and lilting tone about how he would be alright.

Pretty soon Gary was telling him about federal construction contracts and the state of affairs in politics, the primacy of half and half for chowders, and the color of tap water in Binghamton. Geraldine told him about her grandfather's preference for Canadian cheese over Vermont cheddar. Geraldine's great aunt had been a Orange farmer in Tallahassee Florida and stayed behind to pursue fortune while the rest of the family moved to North Dakota. As it happens, Gary's family had also immigrated to North Dakota for greener pastures a half generation behind Geraldines.

During the day Geraldine leaves and drives over to work at the chapel. The chapel is at the top of a short hill, surrounded by Maple trees, and painted white and jade green. Sometimes she teaches bible study, sometimes fixes and tunes the organ. She does love the chapel and its little people come up from the village, but she won't say so, instead pointing out that someone should climb up and clean the gutters. And then she will do it, to outrage, because Geraldine looks a lot older than she feels. In her opinion she is still forty-two, and ladders and gutters shouldn't be too much. The other people will rush over after she starts to climb the ladder, but only after. Hard to get what you want without a threat sometimes.

Geraldine is tight-lipped and thin, and wears her hair wrench-tight in a knot behind her head. She is sixty-eight years old, two years older than Gary, and has never been sick once.

The little people run in and out of the doors in the yard and climb the Maple trees and swing from the low bent branches, trying to climb up higher to sit at the top. They make paintings and sit and sing to themselves while they fuss with the grass. They grab the old tom cat named Hank by the tail and get scratched on the arm, and run over crying, which Geraldine treats as a lesson saying now you know.

Today Geraldine is holding a pair of sheers and standing on the top rung of a wooden folding ladder reaching up to prune the apple tree that stands in the back behind the church and went neglected for a decade or more in suspense, waiting to bare fruit though unable, from overgrowth and bad pruning till Geraldine came to mold and shape it and pluck its loose feathers, willing it, without a kind word but careful hands.

There's a snake, look, a snake it's a garter snake.

I don't like snakes you should pick it up, I don't want to touch it.



I won't do it. Get Fred. Fred come look.

Snip.

Oh. No look how big it is, is it dangerous?

No it's a guard-ner snake. They bite but they don't have the poison.

I don't want to get bit.

But she couldn't hear them because they were yelling. She could not hear anything over the smell of the apple blossoms and the grinding snap of the sheers. Filthy, covered in sap and insects. Must be some blight. She stepped again to the top step of the ladder.

Snip.

Who wants to see me touch it?

No Fred it's a rat snake, they have teeth.

Eyes squinting in the sun, and both shoulders beginning to ache from holding her arms up for so long using the sheers, hearing them snap and pluck each time. Deaf to the world below, ten feet below her feet. Head suspended by the reeking toxin of the apple blossoms.

No Fred, it's scared. Oh. Look how long it is, ahh put it down put it down.

Snip.

No I don't want to *touch it*. Gerry make him put it down, Fred stop it.

Snip.

Look it's just like a belt.

That is *not* a belt.

It is a belt, look I'll make him be a belt.

But finally when the overwhelming scent of the apple blossoms lapsed for just a moment she saw the scene below and in two bounding steps came off the ladder and lifted Fred away from his assignment by the collar to smite him sharply across the ear without a word lifting him off the dead snake and running across the yard in disgrace. Not a saint. Not a pacifist. Not a sinner.

## 5

Blinding light from directly above coupled with a pulsing burn from deep within his head inside the brain—Mallory woke up on the side of the highway all at once. Utter bewilderment. Cars sped by with a fading zip. Nothing lay around to help assemble the story from the night before. Jenna left. She had the car. It was rented anyway. He felt a little rented too. Up and off the dry gravel, he began to smack the dust out of the suit and talk and sing a little to himself laying on a drawl that was not his own—

*I went up on the mountain*

*I 'lowed I'd have some fun*

*I waited all day, I waited all night*

*Cindy never come*

Every night seems ter end sleeping on the ground, well. Put a little pep in the step boy it's been worse b'fore. Yep.

*I made a little banj-er*

*I made it out of pine*

*The only tune that hit would play*

*I wish that you'd be mine.*

Damn but I'm tired. Looks to me like she paid herself for her troubles. 'Spose that's more than she deserves. Jesus above but I shore can make a mess.

*Get along home Cindy Cindy get along home.*

*Get along home Cindy Cindy I'm gon leave you now.*

But the fun of the moment wore away quickly when the reality of the walk settled in. Twenty miles to Rathbone at the very least. So the accent faded away again, and so

did the grin. He was wearing new leather loafers, loose fitting. The spirit began to leave the moment and was replaced by sullen pity.

Jenna, damn you. All I ever do is work and I get one night off to take her on a nice date at my favorite place and she robs me blind. Leave me sleep in the gutters damn you. Steal my damn car DAMN YOU. Walk on the side of the road like a bum. Not even a dollar left to hitch a ride. No second chances for poor Mallory, always got to learn the hard way. Born a curse on my name I reckon, always find the bad luck. If it wasn't for bad luck I'd have no luck at all.

Damnation that bar, that Gremmen. I could get him good ohh boy when I get back...Could've known we would have hit the skids. Well, how. No yes should've even, specially last week, so suspicious and then the nerves kicked in oh man.

Harder to lie like that than they make it look. God, all mighty. Should've fucking known. Miracle I'm still alive.

And he settled into the walk. A figure contorted in the heat and dust rising off the shoulder of the hot asphalt. Gradually thoughts slowed with dehydration and fatigue till each thought was a drop of syrup sliding off the table to the floor below, one at a time. Each landed and stuck without splatter.

Just a few every minute. Then less.

Soon one thought at a time followed by four minutes of inactivity. Just static without broadcast.

Then another, down the tracks like a handcar, moving leisurely till it passed quietly with little event. And again flies stuck between the screen window and the glass. Cars passed every twenty minutes or so indifferent to the limp and heartless thumb stuck out just before.

After a short while he sat in the shade. Defeated by the heat. One hand mopped the brow out of habit, finding his forehead dry and hot to the touch. Mouth tasted like paper. Both eyes bulged and stared into the dirt while the mouth worked to try and moisten. Silence. Another handcar rounded the bend in the tracks and came into sight. I wonder if I could die out here, could it be possible to lie down and die of...what. Dehydration most likely. Squeak Squeak. Squeak Squeak. Another.

When I was a boy me and some friends would jump from the top of a roadbridge below into a pool of bright blue frigid water that flowed out of the national forest. Clean and crisp like frosted maple leaves. I could stand on my toes to reach up and eat the frost off of each leaf with my whole mouth. Loam and Bobby couldn't jump from the top because they couldn't stand on their toes to reach up and lick the frost that flowed under the bridge in the summertime. Cool and crisp even in summer. Later on, when Loam and Bobby and I were in Matthew G. Bradley, we could leave class in the middle of the day to drink bottled cider stolen from the down by the mill on the bridge over the water and throw the bottles into the rocks below to watch them smash and shatter like maple leaves. Freezing cold in your mouth in the morning just before winter when days started and ended in the dark. All before one day when we stole from the mill and went up on the bridge only to be seen crossing by the science teacher Mandy Hoscomb, who was disappointed but it was her who had expectations and fingers like icicles, pointed sharp from sucking on one end till it was a dagger, holding the back of my neck with her dagger which was heavenly gripping on my collar to march me and Loam straight in to see Mr. Ogden who expelled us at once without a second's hesitation which was fine because the first thing we did was walk back to find Bobby at the bridge who was expelled a month before for bringing ice into the school to sit in the back and suck on

each cube and let the frigid water pool under his tongue until his head began to swim and the fuzzy hot little particles that swarm in your eyes when you feel sick start to fizz –

Mallory keeled over and wretched passionately onto the grass beside the roadway until there was nothing but muggy air to expel. So he sat on the edge and watched above where two birds circled one another around the bright blue sky. The sun was overhead and punishing. The dirt from the road was cracked and dry. Every step left an imprint in the loose silt, soft as an earlobe.

Mallory cast another long look up the road to the east and turned to continue walking. Each footstep laborious, his breathing ragged. He resembled a corpse. His suit now only dust gray and stained with sweat. His jacket was tied around his head to keep the sun off his neck and the sweat from his eye. Still a day's walk at the least.

Another car approached from the east. Mallory turned and stood in the middle of the road and waved both hands. The car rolled up, an old two seater pickup, and stopped fifteen feet from him. The window cranked down.

Barely saw you there. Dusty road windshield was covered up.

Got room for one more? Terrible walking in the heat. He rasped when he spoke, his voice all air and no vocal chords.

We do, gonna have to ride in the bed though. I ain't going farther than five miles up the road. House is there.

S'fine, happy for any help I can get. Had a rough one last night.

Looks like you've had a rough one this year. Get in the back, hows we set you up with some water and bath up at the house?

The driveway to the farm house climbed several hundred feet up the hill that bordered the right side of the road till it crested, revealing a handsome white washed

house and several smaller outbuildings spread over a field cut overlooking the valley. Leslie Dunn drove the pickup up the gravel hill with no regard for her passenger. Long about half way the gravel turned to dirt and potholes. She parked abruptly and got out and walked over to the house without looking at Mallory. He saw her cross the house from through the windows, still sitting in the bed. She disappeared into the back, and came back to the kitchen again. She came out and stood on the porch with a rag and plastic five gallon bucket in hand.

Do you want to clean up any?

Without a word he stepped out of the truck and came over to the porch. With the bucket of water between his knees he sat on the edge of the worn porch slats and wrung the rag over his head to drain it down his neck. The water ran down his chin and he tasted the salt. Leslie was back inside again.

He looked up and jumped. An old man had appeared fifteen feet in front of him with both hands in his pockets, leaning forward slightly on the balls of his feet. He was more than twenty years older than Leslie. He wore worn soft jeans and a maroon flannel shirt. Everything was covered save his wrists, neck, and face which betrayed blue, blown out, baggy veins under paper thin skin. On his head he wore an orange baseball cap and he could not have been more than one hundred and ten pounds. His mouth was withered to a slit in his face, which was gnarled with a wash of wrinkles. The hair was cut over both long and prominent ears. When he spoke no teeth showed, just a black hole in the middle of his face.

Where comin from bud? Looks like you been on the road a while, Les said she found you half dead from the heat. Well, it's hot out an all that.

It's a pleasure sir. Comin from Corning. Been gone a week or more been out to Rochester and back. I aint homeless despite my looks right now, I've got folks in Rathbone.

Oh up by the Idle then? Yup. That's Gremmen's spot. You know Gary Gremmen? His eyes softened at the mention, like recounting a good night's sleep. He began to talk from a time long past.

Younger days I knew Gremmen. Did a good run with him and Gerry goin up north past Savona to the cabin they got up in Sugar Hill. Good hunting. Shot deer, ducks. Gremmen used to close the Idle for a week or two in the summertime and one in the fall so we could all get up to Sugar Hill.

Mallory blinked at the name and did not hear anything the man said afterwards. Gremmen, again the dogging tenacious Gremmen. He knew the Idle of course.

Younger days we would go up all the way to Canadee, take the boat up and fish in them big lakes. Big lakes they got up there, can't even see all the way cross we thought we were out to sea and all that. Geraldine liked it, said she always wanted t'go to the ocean but not me, I'm happy on land myself. Ground underfoot's what I like.

And then he walked past Mallory up the steps and into the house without another look at him. Leslie came back over the porch and put down a pitcher of water and a mug and a bowl of melon slices and another rag. Mallory felt his limp body come to life as he bit into the sweet yellow melon and tasted the juice. The sugar from the melon livened his spirit and he drank heartily right from the pitcher. Then Leslie came back out to the porch with a tall glass of iced tea for herself and sat in the rocking swing behind him and let him tell her everything he knew. She prompted him to start at the beginning and he began in Rathbone.



I left by bus long about ten days now. Took the bus to Rochester, have to go to Rochester for work sometimes and I usually make a week or so out of it. Cities stranger than I remember, and I couldn't find my way around or get out of the stench of the tailpipes. Rochester's made out of tailpipes. It's a northern city so I think it feels like it has to define that for the rest of them. It ain't no east coast city. Cleveland and next comes Columbus. Met a friend, well a coworker I guess you could say, Bernie. She hurt her leg once when she was a kid and now she walks different. She got in with me ten years ago when we were was bettin on horse races in Detroit. Also a different kind of city. Detroit might be its own kind. Chicago is the most midwest of the midwest. And I go to Pittsburg regular but it's more like Buffalo. Bernie took me around this time and we met with some people I wanted to talk to. She's real connected there right now.

Leslie was rocking and watching him lean on the column of the porch and watching his hands move as he stared with his head back and his eyes level at the horizon on the hill past her left. But she didn't hear much of what he said.

Anyhow I left the city early because it was wet and rainy and I wasn't making money as much as I thought because Bernie was playing stiff with me so I left and drove back to Corning because I've got a girl there. Jenna. Well Jenna ended up driving us home last night which was for the better I suppose but this morning I woke up and the car was gone because I suppose Jenna took it to work without asking so I decided I'd go on foot to Rathbone before you were kind enough to bring me up here.

Tough one you're Jenna.

Yes ma'am.

When she asked you the night before you didn't remember?

She didn't—well I don't know if she did see, it was late last night we got home and she drove us because I had had a drink.

You said you got folks in Rathbone?

Yes ma'am.

Few friends of mine live near Rathbone or thereabouts. You don't know Lonnie and Marge?

Sure thing. Friends of my folks. Friend of mine named Ruth tends bar at the Idle with their daughter Angie.

I do love that Angie. Such a sweetheart, and beautiful too my gosh. You said you don't know her personally? And she looked Mallory dead in the eye for the first time with a scowl.

No ma'am I don't.

Well, that's alright. And she settled into the chair a little more.

Mallory had snuck into Angie Carter's house through the back window late at night several times a month for all four years of highschool to creep through the hall past where the family dog lay sleep on the rug and tiptoe to her room on the first floor where the two rolled in the hay like fevered desperate animals until four or five in the morning when Mallory would jump from her window into the bed of Lonnie's pickup and get back on his bike parked by the mailbox. If Lonnie had ever found Mallory out he would have shot him dead without a moment's hesitation and buried his body behind the house in the potato patch.

Tell me again, what is it that you do?

It's a bit unusual. I don't want to bore you with the details.

I won't be.

Well I take care of financial services for clients.

Yes.

And I do financial consulting.

Yes.

But my work is not very reliable.

How come someone who spends so much time with money comes to be walking on Cedar Hill road without a shirt on?

Well that's the thing ma'am, right now work is not so good.

Yes.

Well. That's about it.

You can take the quad in the barn if you leave it at Marge's house. I'll get it next time I make it over. Tell Marge it was Leslie that sent you. And Mallory?

Yes?

I want Angie Carter to marry a nice boy from the town over who works hard and has his mind set on starting a big family and owning dad's farm, wouldn't you agree?

That sounds about right to me.

Alright then. Keys are in the rack. So long now.

## 6

Jed lay awake on a shoulder-height shelf in the back corner of a warehouse building in Minneapolis. He had his sleeping bag out and a wool cap on. All day he was hot in the truck without air conditioning. All day the sun beat through the windshield like a spotlight. Now on the hard wooden shelf suspended in air he was cold.

In the warehouse there was no sound. Just the rustle of the sleeping bag when he turned over, frightening against the deafening silence. Out past his head he could hear the drone of the highway. A reminder. Then he checked his watch and counted again. If he fell asleep right now he would get six hours of sleep. When he woke in the morning the sun would be just up and he would go straight to the truck and count and get on the road which should only take ten minutes, give or take.

Last October he had made the same drive out to Denver in a little less than twelve hours. It shouldn't take more than that. Maybe he could set the alarm back another thirty minutes. No. Something could happen on the road. Meeting time was set two months ago, he said. Have to be there by eight. Dalton would be there by eight. Maybe he should leave even earlier. No, there would be no point. Down to Des Moines. Over to Omaha. No time for stopping. Just gas stations if he needed them.

If he fell asleep right now he could get five hours and fifty-two minutes of sleep.

A light flicked on in the office across the building. A beacon in the dark. It was so far away it was a rectangle of light the size of a fingernail. Someone crossed, their shadow bloomed across the ground quickly. It was past midnight. But that doesn't matter to this person. He does not care. He has a clipboard that has an item listed on it,

and soon he will go and retrieve it. He will not look at Jed if he sees him, because Jed is doing his work too. They had nothing to say to each other because right now they were not involved in the same task. If they were, he would be direct. He would say pass the clipboard. He would drive the speed limit and not talk much. He would never betray a moment's hesitation to staying up all night, or getting up early. He does not need to sleep, or so it would seem. If he died of exhaustion, it would be like a battery—suddenly with no gradual decline.

He does not need to ask you about yourself, because it seems he does not care who you are. If you told him about yourself, it is unclear if he would understand. And if he had to zip-tie your hands behind your back and hold your head underwater, he could do that too.

If Jed fell asleep at this very moment, he would get five hours and thirty-two minutes of sleep. But the metal shelving was too rigid.

The light changed and the door to the office swung open and shut. The man walked over to the forklift, sitting next to the office door, and turned the key. The warehouse hummed with the low engine noises, melded with the squealing hydraulic whine. The fluorescent lights spanned the aisles and filtered in and out of the slats of the shelving. The noise was intolerable, the light tore over the ceiling like a fan blade while the hydraulics screamed and began to lift pallets from the shelving three aisles over from Jed's.

The door slammed and Jed lay down across the front bench with knees bent and curled aside him resting on the cupholder. The highway was louder now. If he fell asleep at this moment he would get four hours and forty minutes of sleep. The cold blue lights

out front the warehouse shone through the windshield. If he moved the truck he might as well start driving.

He rolled onto his back and lay one arm bent up behind his head and looked at the fabric upholstery above the driver's seat. For a moment he thought about calling home. If Ruth was awake she wouldn't answer. But it would be nice to hear her voice if she did answer. It would be nice to tell her he wasn't asleep. That he had to drive for twelve hours tomorrow. He would never do that. He could call home just to see if she was there.

The phone on the wall rang loud through the silent house. Ruth rose from the table slowly and stood in front of it and studied the number. It rang again. She turned and leaned against the wall. It rang again a few more times.

And then it stopped. He put the phone back on the floor of the cab. She was asleep. It is good that she is asleep. I am sure she is asleep. Time began to pass. The lights flashed from the highway. Could it be from the highway? Where are they all coming from? There is a place far in the distance where they are going and while none of them are there yet they all will be soon enough. The cab was cold as a granite tomb. They will be there soon, and so will I.



She woke up with her head in the crook of her arm at the dining room table. Some hours had passed. Nothing in the house moved. If she closed her eyes she could be in Siberia or a hospital waiting room or deep under water in a submarine and nothing would be different. But she was not in any of those places. She rose and put the kettle on for tea. It was after four in the morning. Soon she should sleep again but first, tea.

Did the phone ring tonight? Was the number the same one as two nights before? Nothing was luminous. The only time for that sort of thing is when you wake up early, knowing you are on your way outside to go have a moment, in the sunlight, by yourself. And then of course it feels like the new day and you're warm and the future is appealing. But if you don't go outside in the morning, if you stay inside late at night with the lights off save one over there, then no, nothing is luminous or sacred.

There are plenty of other people doing this too. If we were all part of some kind of group, say: *'regional miserable people bored at three am,'* then perhaps we could do some icebreaker exercises and before long one of us could snap and melt down in front of the rest. Then afterwards a few of us would talk about how invigorating these meetings are. It would take place at a church. After the meeting most of the members would go for lunch. I wish I was the kind of person who could stay later—despite the fact that I have less to do than anyone in the history of humankind has ever had to do—I can't go for lunch later, sorry! I better get home, yeah. Things to do and all that.

Why? But more to the point: *how* can they? After sitting in *'regional miserable people bored at three am'* for two hours having coffee out of the brown plastic tall thing and eating gummy oatmeal cookies, *how* do they go out afterwards to lunch, at a diner, and sit together in the same group but now in a different context?

But I do love the people. I do love them and appreciate them. They are lovely, I envy that they can go together to the diner after *'regional miserable people bored at three am'* on a Tuesday at one in the afternoon.

I have less to do than anyone in the history of humankind. Every descendant of my entire lineage, down to whatever one's first invented clothes, has lived a more difficult, challenging, painful, and more draining life. They suffered much more. They

had more to do every day, like getting water for example. With a bucket, that they walked one and a half miles with *each way*, to fill at some creek where they might have been just eaten or killed. And after they survived getting water they went back home, to their log cabin in the far distant woods, or to their one room house that they shared with every surviving relative they had. And this was probably only a hundred odd years ago for me, and probably yesterday for someone else. I have nothing to do.

What were their lives like in four hundred and ten? Or twelve hundred and thirty? Was every single day defined by death and violence and suffering? Was something as simple as a fresh piece of fruit enough to change their mood, for days on end? Were they emotionally affected by anything like that? Or, if I went and talked to them—the four hundred and tenners—would it be just like talking with anyone else? Would I be awestruck, that they too are complex, funny and weary and despondent? That they would be so human to me like Bool and Mallory and Geraldine and anyone else?

She leaned against the counter and looked at the gray light on the floorboards. Is there anything better to do right now than sit and think? At least it's free. Slowly again a memory formed and the kitchen dissolved.



At eleven in the morning she sat next to her on barstools. Both of them were here for the same reason so they didn't have to talk about it. But she wanted to talk anyway it seemed. She looked the type to talk. She had all sorts of things with her, bags and stuff. Ruth didn't bring anything to the Idle today because this wasn't her shift.

Do you work everyday?



I do, yeah. I work every day.

That's nice, do you love work? I love my work.

You love it?

I think of it as my hobby.

That's nice. It's good to have a hobby. Ruth turned and faced forward but it was no use.

Me too, I think it is great to do something that you love doing, that's what keeps me going.

Really?

You have to, unless you're rich. Do you choose to go?

No I guess I don't.

So you have to go, and I go every day on purpose. I believe that I want to go, and I tell myself that I do all the time.

Sounds like a lot of work. Do you do anything else?

Yes. For sure. I go twice a week to the museum and take art classes. I didn't do any art growing up so it's all new to me and I love it. It's relaxing, especially if I had a tough day at work, or if my boyfriend is mad at me or something like that.

Ruth blinked and saw the carrier bag hanging next to her chair with a small dog in it.

Mad? Mad at you?

Well sometimes he gets jealous when I talk to other guys at work or something like that.

Like people that you work with?

Yeah I work in an office.

Ruth took a long sip from the glass.

But he gets jealous about that and sometimes he doesn't let me go out either but that's okay because I partied a lot in undergrad and I'm living a better life now, it's like I'm a grandma!

What are you doing here? Not a lot of people come to Rathbone just for fun?

We live in Corning, but I come out here in the morning sometimes. I like the peace and quiet and also nobody from work is here.

No, probably not.

She fiddled with her straw a moment and Ruth saw her resist asking something else.

So where do you work?

Me? Oh, here. At the Idle.

Really? What's it like?

Kind of like this most of the time.

You mean you just get to talk to new people every day?

Well they don't all want to talk so much.

Well I love meeting new people, I'm an extrovert so I need to meet new people all the time. I like talking more than sitting in silence, I can talk about just about anything.

Yep, that's what working here is like, maybe you should do it too.

Did you go to college? I went to SUNY Fredonia and I majored in business analytics with a minor in industrial psych.

That's nice, I know where Fredonia is.

I loved it there, I really don't think everyone has to go though because if someone is happy without school doing like some other kind of work then I think that's great for them.

Mhm.

Like I have an uncle that's like a carpenter, and he actually makes so much money it's crazy.

People need houses to live in.

Right? I totally agree.

Ruth took a longer sip from the glass. But what the hell, why not. She was going to sit here anyway. She turned and looked at her.

Can you tell me something?

Sure, what is it?

Where'd you grow up?

Oh, in Corning. I moved back in with my folks after undergrad for a little bit because...

Me too, I grew up right here. Don't you ever feel like it might be nice to live somewhere else?

I mean I love traveling?

No, I mean to move somewhere else. To live there, every day. To meet a whole new host of people and work there and buy a house there.

What do you mean like in Binghamton?

Sure, but I was thinking more like Arizona.

My grandfather's from there, that's so random.

Great, yeah like to move there. You don't ever think about stuff like that?

I'm happy here, I have a good job and me and my boyfriend want to move soon to buy a house. We rent right now and rent is so expensive it's crazy.

Yeah it is.

She blinked, it was three months later. She was behind the counter staring at the flickering cheap neon lights in the window. It was hard to see the window through all the people. It was crowded in the Idle. People returned to the counter and she felt herself smiling and talking to them and fixing drinks. They were drinking heavily. It was a weekend.

A car pulled up out front and the girl got out with other friends and they ran through the cold to the door. She was wearing different clothes, but her hair was the same. She didn't look the same though. She ran through the door and right to the counter with a scream.

Oh my god you're here! I told them you would be I said I met this girl and she works at this cute little bar in Rathbone and we have to go to see her.

She ran around the counter and hugged Ruth with her whole body. When she leaned on her she could tell—too much to drink. Her body was limp and she smelled like alcohol.

Are these your friends?

Yes, aren't they the best? We got to go out tonight were having so much fun! It was a whisper and a laugh. Ruth's head felt like pencil shavings. The shavings were mixed with molasses.

They bought drinks and went to play pool somewhere. She didn't have anything to say to Gremmen. Her mouth tasted like vinegar but her head felt stiff. She didn't have anything she wanted to say. She felt herself smiling and taking orders and fixing drinks.

Loud talk. Piano music. Her head walked around, unleashed off her body and not interested in anything. Everyone's hands look different just like their faces. If I had someone else's hands I would look different too. If I had big hairy hands I would spend my whole life holding my belt loops to show them off. If I had one hundred dollars I would spend it all at once at a nice restaurant and just fucking sit there and not talk or think.

In an hour she found her in the snow outside.

She was sitting on the side of the building and her hands were blue. Next to her there was sick in the snow.

Ruth?

Hi, let's go inside right now. It's cold out here.

She weighed so much. She was weak and floppy feeling.

Ruth?

Mhm. We're going inside right now.

She put her on the couch in the office. She covered her with a blanket from the closet and sat and stared at her for a long time. For the first time she wasn't talking. Inside her head there was something happening but she couldn't know what because now she was silent. Her eyes were tracing back and forth and she was mumbling but nothing was making sense. The streetlights cast a gray glare through the window, it was just enough to see her face. And inside her own head Ruth felt absolutely nothing at all.

She snapped suddenly to the scream from the kettle. Only a minute or two had passed. In her eyes and mind was a mist, just a suspended blank. The floor was ten feet away. She poured tea. Better to be asleep than doing this. It was pink outside, the night

was almost over again. Better to be asleep than see a day like this. Green new day, the birds were asleep on the counter. She began to talk to the house.

As I woke up one morning fair

To talk a walk all in the air

I thought I heard my true love say

Damn to you 'fore you come my way

Ring true, delirium I win again!

## 5

Down in the valley, low between the hills, there was a wedding party assembled out front the big red barn surrounded by tall grass and thistles. More than one hundred people came in cars, parked the length of the road, and walked up the sloping gravel drive to the where the barn stood. In the field there were boards cut at twenty feet and layed on buckets and crates to make benches arranged in a semi circle around the altar in front of the pond. Everyone wore beautiful clothing. There were bottled drinks spread on a table near the barn. Some walked around and gave a gentle embrace and asked how the other was doing. They all said fine thank you. They opened wine. The food was prepared and laid out under tin foil inside the barn. They opened whiskey. The food was delicious, they said. The cocktail was delicious. And someone had started a fire with old pallets in the back.

The people had finally had enough to drink. They began to talk loudly. Does it matter that we don't know each other? The air was filled with a din of voices. In the center of the crowd there was a cake, which they said was delicious.

In the light people's faces began to lose their color. The drink stained their chins. A couple of them began to leave, and the younger people stayed on longer. The fire grew to the size of a tent, then a car. The fire was the size of a woodshed. Off to the side one man stood with the ax and swung and split logs and threw them in one toss into the fire. Then he threw whole logs in, as big around as a dinner plate. Some almost two feet long. He had spent all day above the house on the hill felling old trees and slicing them to pieces with his chainsaw, and loading the logs one by one into the back of the trailer.

The fire had waited all day. It grew again. The dancers around the fire had to step back. It's too hot, they said. It's burning me, they said. It was getting dark. The wedding party decided to go to the barn and watch a carnival man someone had hired for the evening.

Inside the man had built a little purple and gold stage with his assistant. The assistant was a pale man with ears that poked out on the sides, tiny eyes, and head round as a melon. Now the man stood atop the stage with his back to the people and the assistant showed them where to sit. The barn was dark and drafty, many people sat over the floor on rugs that smelled of mildew and engine grease. The man wore a rough black wool suit with gold accents. His hands were clasped in front of him and he did not move. The crowd was drunk. They were talking to one another and the assistant went around the outside and hushed them one by one. The man was patient. Then they noticed it was quiet in the barn. The assistant went to the back and turned off the lights, leaving only the lamp on the stage atop a thin table. It was silent, and they began to worry. The man turned to the crowd.

In his right hand he held a marionette. His left was raised in the air facing the crowd. The marionette was moving absently it seemed. The marionette waved to the crowd and stretched but the man never looked at him. Then suddenly he held a lit match. He put the fire in his mouth and pulled it from his left ear. The assistant clapped theatrically so the crowd did too. He had lots of tricks. His act was born from another, more sinister, time long past and sustained only in practice by a select few. He had a long knife and a tambourine. He had a snake that lived in a bottle that could talk and look you in the eye. He never spoke a word or made a face. His eyes, half closed and staring ahead, his mouth small and a tight bottom lip to make a small frown. The marionette stayed to his right for the first half of the show. It clapped and waved its



hands and put them over its mouth when the knife went into the man's throat and back out but he never looked at the marionette. It moved independently of him, it looked like he and his right hand were no longer connected and the marionette had a mind of its own. It smiled silently and waved at the crowd. Its smile was painted on with thick glossy paint that gave it a wide and leering grin.

Half way through the show he put away his other props, and the marionette walked out to the middle of the stage. The audience was silent now, like they had been waiting for this. It came up and waved and they were talking to a puppet. It stretched both of its arms to show he was wearing a trim little costume like a clown. He put both arms out and bowed deeply before turning and beginning to skip around the stage. The audience clapped. They laughed and called for him to do a trick which he did. They loved him and forgot who he was. They were lost in his glossy cherry red cheeks and graceful limbs and no one looked up to see the man's face, hidden out of light above them and clouded in a livid gray. He was grimacing and looking at the puppet like a pest while he danced and cartwheeled and shook hands in the front row. It was the most beautiful thing. Light in the air caught flecks of dust here and there from the straw bales which filled the room with a filtered gold haze. They loved the puppet and he was elated at their cheers, he smiled his painted smile and waved and bowed and trotted proudly over the stage. Again he came to the middle and produced a little violin to play a light little jig, and kick both feet and skipped across again. A few people in the back started swinging each other by the arm and everyone clapped but the man was hidden by the light and no one could see his face.

The puppet stepped up and sat on the stage edge to play a long slow waltz. It was strikingly sad. The audience shivered and wished he would take up the jig again.

Someone mocked weeping over a broken heart. They all moaned in anguish for the puppet. Then the man stepped forwards into the light from the lamp to speak –

Your new friends don't like that song.

He stopped playing and looked over his shoulder up at the man leaning over him. The man's voice sounded like silver and poison. The puppet dropped his fiddle with a glare over his shoulder and began moping around the stage drinking from a little wooden jug as the man walked around behind him, his eyes dark and patronizing him.

What do you want now? Do you want to dance for them again? They liked that, yes everyone thinks you're such a funny puppet. That's all you are isn't it?

The crowd had started to stir and stand up now. The man grabbed his right wrist with the other hand and began to tremble. The puppet walked over and climbed up the table to stand on top. They looked at each other face to face.

You don't want to dance? I am the boss. If I say dance, you dance. If I say play, then you play.

The puppet turned from him and crossed both arms.

Hey, leave him be, we liked the slow song.

You are my toy, you work for me and you will do as I say.

The puppet turned away again to cover both ears with his hands.

I will cut your strings then, you will be dead without me. You'd be better off dead since you can't earn a living anymore.

The puppet turned and looked him in the face with his hands on his hips. He jumped down from the table and sat on the edge of the stage to take up the little wooden jug again and tip it back to drink. He stood and threw the jug on the ground and

staggered drunkenly back to the fiddle. The tune was a rocky and slow Bo Lampkin and he played it like a guitar. The man stood above him and sneered with pleasure.

No one likes you when you're drunk, you can't even play anymore. Come here I'm cutting your strings tonight.

He began to run. The puppet sprinted and wailed its arms above its head. Every face in the crowd was blanched in fear and confusion. A few people stood up and yelled again. The man's feet kicked behind him as he made tight closed turns over the stage. All the time the puppet was screaming again Ahh! Ahh! Ahh! He spat, he kicked and hurled himself around the stage. He was kicking the puppet. He was driving him faster. All the time hands—whirling while the puppet screamed and his hands flailed above him before they stopped. They looked at each other. The man's grin slowly stretched across his face while the puppet dropped both hands and hung his head down to the ground. He began to climb a ladder propped up in the rafters. One leg wrapped around the outside holding the other arm. The crowd was comatose. Every single breath was audible. The man was suspended, tense as a cable. Each hand movement a labored jerk as the puppet climbed and climbed. His eyes were set on the puppet, his mouth hung open, his face was four inches from the puppet squirming up the pole. His progress was labored now. Each extended arm slipped before catching him again. The man was delighted. This moment was only his—his greatest joy. His mouth gaped in disgusting glee. The puppet reached the wooden rafters above the man's head. The crowd began to stand. Some children were grabbed from the front row. The man could not be stopped. Someone began to yell. Another.

Stop it, what do you think this is?

The tone was trying hard to be a command.

Freak! You freak! Stop it!

They knew what he would do. He kept talking.

You wake up every morning and you are nothing without me. You lie there, slack, waiting for me, do you understand? Climb faster. I am your owner and my hand gives you life, it is mine. This hand is mine.

The man's screaming rattled the front row so badly they began to stand and step back. The people in the back wanted to come forward. The crowd began to jostle as voices rose over the deafening laugh coming from the man. The puppet's hands were hanging from the rafters. His painted face was grinning. Someone screamed over the man.

Stop it right now, these are children! Freak! Freak!

Someone started to climb on the stage.

With a shivering laugh the man sliced the strings with his knife and the puppet dropped from the rafters to the floor.

The crowd surged and died as the onlookers yelled and fled without a look over their shoulders to huddle in the field by the fire and leave the wedding one by one, horrified but nonetheless stirred and working to talk it over. They tried harder but no one could provide the right answers so they poured more wine and sat together and then they went home to sleep soundly. In the morning they would tell their friends what happened. They would tell one another too. In five years it would still come up.

Oh, like the time when...horrifying...what a cruel trick. They worked it out and everyone had their own version. Someone thought he was a magician. Other people thought the show went off script. He was deranged, they were sure he was deranged. So

some people felt sorry for him. And before long it was expected to feel sorry for him, because he was deranged.

He should get help. You shouldn't make fun like that, he's probably so miserable. How would you feel if you had lost your mind in front of a crowd? I can't imagine how lonely he must be.

Did we ever hear where they found him? It was at the fair, he was there with the puppet and they thought he was incredible. He is incredible. But they asked him to come and I wonder what changed. No one knows where he came from.

He's a freak.

Stop he is not. He's probably from Europe.

It felt like he didn't even know we were there.

~

Arthel Powell lay down atop his bedspread after a long and tiresome day. The rafters overhead were draped with cobwebs and quilts and old sleeves of wrapping paper. In his right hand he held the can of beer and as usual the house was dark and quiet. Light from across the yard filtered into his room that faced the back.

Across the yard the porchlight was on, though right now no one was home. At least Jed was not. Arthel hadn't seen Ruth in four days but then again she hadn't seen him either.

The keys were in his back pocket so he reached and threw them onto the side table. The marionette was sitting in the chair across the room watching him with both glossy and newly painted eyes. The strings were repaired again. The little costume was resewn. Now that it was over his mind was far and away on other things before returning absently to the show. Here and there a shadow passed slowly produced by car

headlights a long ways away passing on the roadway behind the house. Time dripped past.

Another beer?

Are you waiting for something?

Aren't I always.

They held their breath tonight. Yes, never have I seen them hold their breath before like tonight, right at the penultimate pause before we climb the ladder. But I agree they were partial to the waltz. They were easier to get in a group that big. The first thing that happens is they become uncomfortable. Here they are confronted by something odd and unusual but no one has said anything yet and they do not know whether this is funny or cruel. They are uncomfortable and silent. Somewhere around when I speak to him someone decides for the crowd that this is not okay. And other people are there so they retort. They make a point to retort. They stand up and make a fuss.

I think if they were alone they would not say anything. If they were sitting alone in their house one night reading a story of the same events would they raise their fist in outrage at the injustice against him? I think the only reason they do care is to show the crowd who they are. Otherwise the show would be a failure, no one would scream.

Is that what I measure success with? I better not. But why not, if there is no one here to know that what I am invested in is how loudly they yell in anger –if they cry– when I do cut the strings. There is no one here. There is no one here.

The light rose and fell again on the wall as a car passed on the road in the front. Somewhere in the house something creaked, and Arthel remembered mouse traps and that fall was coming soon. A long time coming. Summer was pitiless. Endless hours

spent wilting in the shade under the porch. Endless hours spent in sleepless nights running from something and waking in a sweat.

Arthel had been plagued by a recurring dream of running from a storm of angry bees since June when he stepped in a ground hornets nest in the backyard and went tearing over the junk piled around dodging and yelping in pain but too afraid of hiding in the house lest they follow him in. Every night since he would find them somewhere hiding, a cabinet, the tea pot, the book deposit box, and they would swarm out angry and much faster than life to cover him and sting and bite and cackle and most of the time he was in the bus station or somewhere public which lent humiliation as everyone jeered as he fell and rolled over and bellowed.

Recently the dream had evolved. Three nights ago the swarm took on the body of a large dog that jumped and barked before dissipating and moving through walls to come round the corner again as Mr. Ogden who held, as always, a large bound leather book and a pencil that was constantly in hand, recording everything you said while you explained that cleaning the hallways takes longer than he should expect, that there is no running water in the nurse's office, and that you cannot clean the science room out of respect for Mrs. Hoscomb whom you should not make a habit of lurking around. To which dreaded Ogden would write, pausing to listen and never looking up, and circle, and underline if you used names or dates.

Dreaded Ogden would respond sometimes with a small guttural hmm, or sometimes a come again? Ohh, I see. Right right. Hmm, whatever will we do about that. Waiting with the patience of a gravestone for you to finish when he would be silent before snapping the book shut and walking away without a word.

The bees knew Arthel's home address and phone number. They knew Arthel's banking information and his tax records. The bees knew Arthel's own mother's sense of dread when he was a child that nothing would come of him, that he was a purebred dog, that his body was weaker than table cloth. The bees knew that Arthel held a secret fantasy that a woman might one day approach him, knowing well that he was the man in the wool suit who had such admirable control over the marionette, and kiss him on the mouth and take him to bed because she knew too that he was much better than the best of the frenchiest best in Paris in any decade. She had a marionette of her own, and amazing command of it. The bees thought this too much to leave out.

The most appealing part of the show is probably how quickly the crowd will fall in love with the puppet, and defend him against the cruelty of his evil master. The most appealing part of the show is how terribly angry they become because they do not understand that this is a show that has been rehearsed by one person hundreds of times, that it is convincing because it is fake, that this is a rote reaction that has been produced, hundreds of times, now seemingly without fail.

They do not understand anything about the painstaking hours spent perfecting every moment, as if such a choreography could just *happen* before them, whimsically and without hiccup.

They do not understand the *complexity* of imitating life and customary gestures with his feeble flimsy limbs, how many times I have walked him up and over every feature of the house and acted out every scene of every movie in my collection, tirelessly, all for them. It must be perfect and everytime it is, so what happens? They fall easily, they are swindled like cowards. They are cattle in a stockade. Cattle. No one wonders if it is all a show because it is *perfect*.



Light washed over the room and a car pulled into the drive behind the house as Arthel stood and looked into the backyard with one hand against the glass pane. Could it be Jed, he wondered. He missed him by now, it had been more than three weeks. But it was Ruth, returning from the restaurant. She closed the car door quietly, walked up the stairs, and hitched the paper bag to her hip to unlock the front door with her right hand. Arthel watched as each light turned on. First the mudroom, then the kitchen, and finally the living room as she went through the house. Arthel stood up and knew what to do.

She opened the door after the third knock and looked sullen and angry before recognizing him and jumping back arms out and smiling with all her face in sudden surprise.

You're not who I was expecting! What on earth got you out of bed this late? It's past ten.

I can tell, hope I'm a pleasant surprise. I need a little help tonight get the devil off my back, keep my mind right. You're not doing anything? I figured you weren't home haven't seen life over here in bout a week.

Good to know someone's watching the yard, Ruth said with a hug and let him in. I've been here but that don't mean there's been life around. I've been hiding. And she smiled like it was a secret.

Would you mind the company then? It looks a little like you might need it.

The house was strewn with garbage but now that he was inside it was their secret together and she didn't have the interest in pretending like it was embarrassing. She went to the counter and started knocking bottles and empty food packaging into the can next to her foot, and Arthel decided not to bother asking and went over to the island and

stacked plates and brought them to the sink and began to run the hot soapy water to fill it.

Ruth turned away for a moment and regretted letting him in but some spirit of greater will had other plans for now and she would need to let this happen despite the dread of company and guests that was tightening and her hands that were gripping the beer bottles when she placed them into the bin.

But Arthel didn't look at her for a long moment. He tidied the island and spun around to place two glasses and the whiskey on the counter. He turned on more lamps. The broom was in the standing cabinet next to the cellar stairs. Ruth looked at the lamp light and remembered that she had chosen these lights because she liked them.

Arthel was agile and the floor was swept clean. The rest of the house was a disaster but that could wait another day. The island was clean again, but now seated neither of them were thinking about the room anymore, only the person missing from it.

How long gone then?

It's been almost two weeks.

How are you doing?

I'm fine.

What have you been doing in here?

Well mostly just sitting and thinking. She put both hands under her chin and leaned forwards. Arthel sat back and crossed his arms.

Thinking? What for?

Well it's free.

Right.

I don't have any other way to say it.

Maybe start with the mess?

I'm rotting here Arthel.

It looks like it. Can I be direct?

If you like.

Well this doesn't look good. I'm afraid for you, I don't want to sound too concerned but you seem distraught.

Well I don't want to tell you all this but if you like I guess. I hate this house and I can't find any way to stay here like this. I feel so pent up and stranded. I go and I work at the Idle. God I hate work. What life is this, I leave and return from that restaurant. I work and then I come back here. It's even worse when Jed is here. When he's gone I feel lighter, and also so guilty. He is a nice person, I haven't forgotten that. That's why there's guilt. To live in the first world is to be your own very worst enemy. But when he is here I can't stand to even look at him.

Because you are upset?

It doesn't feel like that. It feels like I can't—I don't know—like if I look him in the face for too long something is itching and tearing at me and I have to drive very fast or...

Drink?

Stop that, you don't have to do that I know it's too much.

You look at him and you feel irritated, like angry?

I feel repulsed.

Because you don't want to look?

I don't want to see him. That's the better way of saying it.

You are guilty and you know you could hurt him.

Which makes me angry. Because I am not the one who leaves to go work for Dalton for weeks on end doing god knows what. I am not the one who comes home terrified and shivering and need four days of help every week. That is what I do. But yes, guilty.

Because of that chap in the jacket that comes over?

Ruth folded her hands, one on the other and sat back.

Who is Dalton?

You don't know about Dalton?

Jed doesn't talk about work.

You don't have to pretend right now I'm telling the truth too.

Well I have put together a few things.

Dalton is Jed's boss. And he also owns this house. And he is a motherfucker and a piece of work. He drives the red Ford and he comes here sometimes.

Well then, I have to ask: what does Jed do for him besides the driving?

Jed just drives trucks. It's usually some kind of import tax evasion, save ten percent here or there, like nothing fancy. At least that's what Jed says.

What makes him a piece of work?

The way he talks. He knows that we have to do everything he wants, he strings Jed along. I don't know why Jed still works for him. Once he threatened to break his legs.

Who's Dalton work for?

That's a great question.

But why now? This has been happening for four years?

Dalton called him in in the middle of his week off, and he hasn't been back since.

Has Jed called here?

Yeah.

What did he say?

I didn't answer.

That's too bad.

Yeah.

You are afraid?

Yes, but it's weird I don't feel like I'm part of it this time. When he went to Alaska for a month I was worried that he would come back early. I was afraid we would not see eye to eye when he came back. I didn't like being in the house much because it felt haunted, like he was here watching me.

And now you feel like you don't care?

Right now it feels like I am only concerned about Jed like for his health I guess. Like my mind made up. I just think he's in danger.

What does his friend think? The one in the jacket?

Mallory's been gone a long time. He just got back with some made-up story and no money.

But he knows more about Jed's business?

What makes you say so?

It's a guess.

Yeah. Lots more.

~

Time passed overnight. She woke the next day and the sky was pink and orange and the golden light from the sun illuminated the fog suspended in the field. Two birds flitted from the small oak tree next to the wood and flew low across the dew laden grass.

In the morning there is no wind in the field to rustle the dried grass or stir the tops of trees in the pine woods across the way.

In the morning there are only birds back and forth over the frost covered grass, and vultures and crows overhead, vultures drying their rotten leather wings in the sunlight circling in an updraft. The light in the morning is silent. The goldenrod was flowering again. Soon the field would be coarse brown and ragged. Now the stands of goldenrod and phragmites swirl and blow roughly but lightly, green and supple. The phragmites were over twelve feet tall. Below the ground amid the snarl of frozen roots and grasses their roots are all one connected web.

Ruth broke one off and waved it over the canopy of goldenrod like a flag. It swished and whipped back and forth. She left it on the ground and walked into the field. The ground was hard to walk over—all tussocks and broken grass grabbing her ankles.

She walked further.

Here and there were towering rose bushes, taller than the grass and too dense to omit light from the other side. Ruth had slept little. Her eyes traced things moving over the field slowly. Under the jacket she wore a sweater and a long sleeve. Her breath billowed out like smoke from under the hood. She walked to a rose bush and bit off a frozen rose bud to chew it with her front teeth. She spit the seeds into her glove and looked at them before they dropped to the ground. Small circular yellow seeds, hard to chew.

The bush was frozen with a silver veneer of frost covering the leaves just turning red on the edges in places. Further into the field. Just sunlight. Eyes closed for a moment for the light. Under the hood a wool hat, hair knotted on her shoulder and

cracked hands deep within pockets: she stood. Only standing, and watching, and faintly now and again just for a second—wishing.

Wishing that all at once something would turn the world over and she and everything else in it would fall peacefully into space, deeply and quietly. What a cold cruel thing to think. What a wicked person I must be to think that it would be best if we fell into space. Because no one else feels this way. They look pleasant, they listen to music when they drive to work and come home glad for a slow evening.

But I am wishing, that a bomb from a plane much greater than any conceived before could come silently from above and land softly here on Rathbone and ravage the land in a lovely ebullient orange and red. Heartless. When they come home at night do they relish their hours together? Do they cook food with love and affection? Or even just with a care for the process? Do they listen to music while they sit together? And if they do not, then how do they get up early the morning after and get in their cars again and go to work? Is it compelling? If not, do they care?

Maybe they are too afraid. Maybe money is pointless. Maybe they are but maybe I am wrong. Maybe it isn't wrong to wish, that there was anything in this world that could be as sweet as a cold and tranquil rest in the family plot.

Time passed overhead. There was no time. They were sitting next to each other in the back seat of the station wagon while Mallory drove for hours on end talking about something or another to the passenger who was listening attentively because they had just met and the windows were open. The wind was brisk and fragrant. It smelled like the coast. Music was playing, but where was it from?

They were sitting across the table from one another and Jed was standing up to raise his voice at brother who was accused again of drinking though both of them had

agreed before that he didn't need a confrontation, that time at home was better than that but they stood and yelling began and Jed made an ultimatum and brother stormed out. They were sitting, two thousand miles apart, leaning into the receiver late one night and trying to keep up conversation. He confessed again that this was too much on her. If he said it again first then it was absolved. When he said it again first she blunted her tone and nurtured. When he said it again she ground her teeth till they bled and spit on the floor.

They were sitting in front of the church on a wrought iron bench after his father's second wedding watching as each person left side by side holding onto each other's arms and smoking gratefully and one by one they were gone until it was clear that neither of them had anything to say so they left and drove back home.



## 4

Dalton does not double check and he does not ask twice. He lives only by intuition. If it is done wrong he does not notice. When he talks he uses quick words and pauses for a long period of time before responding curtly and if he has nothing to say he will not say anything.

Most days he will wake up at four in the morning, stand outside smoking, and watch the sky turn pink.

He does not ever drink. His arms are round with long muscles and his frame is the shape of an oil drum. In any weather he will wear a blue collared shirt and would never think to be warm or cold.

And if he decided to walk across northern Canada barefoot in the middle of winter Jed and Ruth are pretty sure that he could do it.

Sometimes Dalton will tell Jed to drive to Denver, and when he is halfway across Kansas he will radio and tell him to turn around and be in Baltimore by the following morning. It is possible to drive from Kansas to Baltimore. It takes around twenty hours. So that is what Jed did. When he got to Baltimore Dalton told him to go immediately to sleep. Four hours later he awoke and drove express to Minneapolis. The road blurred and swirled. He developed a fever. Each hour bent and contorted in the gallows of despair before the clouds parted and a troubled aching euphoria took hold.

And he arrived in Minneapolis. Dalton told him to go back to New York for a week off.

Dalton owns a few small planes however Jed cannot fly planes. Jed drives trucks.

And strangely most of the time everything on board is certified Grade A constitutional. Two hundred plastic pipes for instance. A container of cheap wooden cabinets and kitchen sinks. Kerosene. Propane. Four hundred pounds gravel rock. Electronics. A person or two who need transportation ride in the cab with him. They have a couple of duffle bags. The bags go in the back.

He arrives to drop off the pipes. A man close to eighty years old comes over in the golf cart. He looks it over. A couple guys come over too. No one talks to him and he does not need to talk to them. They unload and he is told to leave. Someone paid for them somewhere he assumes.

But if Jed ever found out what happened behind the scenes he is sure he would be killed, because Jed can not be fired now. At some point in the years he realized that this was a job from which you can not quit. You are not allowed to walk off even if you didn't tell anyone what you knew. The other guys know who you are and where you live. The other guys will come and find you and ask you where Dalton's warehouse is. And you will tell them. They are sure of that.

When they ask you things you don't want to answer, they hold a pair of bolt cutters around your little pinky, and then ask slowly and kindly like they are talking to their dearest oldest relative. They smile, and they ask if you're sure you don't have anything more to say?

Jed cannot quit.

When a surgeon cuts into your abdomen with a silver scalpel to remove part of your gray shriveled liver they do not balk in fear at the blood that streams out over their hands. They do not tremble. It is a procedure that must happen. They have done it before. Hundreds of times.

They will cut your fingers off like a chef chops celery carrots and onions into a silver pot to sauté mirepoix.

Dalton knows that Jed knows that he can not quit. He asks him to do things that he does not want to do. He knows he will do them. They do not talk about it.



The gravel in the pull-off next to the highway pressed deeply into his forehead as he lay face first bound by the hands breathing into the ground. There was nothing to see. Face first into the gravel as behind and somewhere the contents of the truck were discussed and gone over one at a time. Someone stood behind him. They moved their feet every so often and the gravel shifted and made a soft crunching noise. They were talking. If he did not move they would not step on the back of his head and press his forehead into the gravel. It was cold. The ground was frozen, or so it seemed. They were rushing. The truck was full and they could not find what they wanted. Every so often a car passed on the highway and the headlights washed over the side of the white truck and every man working on the truck turned and hid their face. They began to argue. Everyone present knew at some point soon the police were going to drive past and see a truck surrounded by people all laboring over something inside and slow down to turn and drive down the gravel bank. They began to grow impatient. The rocks next to the highway tasted like salt and engine oil. Someone wanted to leave.

We can't leave him behind, they said.

No? Where could he go we're forty miles from town, said another.

He's one of Dalton's, remember?

He should ride in the truck, they said.

Yes, he will ride in the truck, they said.

We can't get rid of him, they said, because of Dalton.

Seems like we have already done enough?

But not that, let's ask Antolin what we will do with him, they said. Dalton will want him back in one piece.

He sat in the back of the box truck. Then the men got back into their cars and two of them got into the cab of the truck and the truck pulled onto the highway and drove west at three in the morning.

Hours passed in the freezing dark. The whining of the tires became a grinding scream. The tape over his mouth began to burn. The only light came from headlights that passed and broke through the tiny slit at the bottom of the door. It was colder than the ground had been. Jed tried to sleep. Then he tried to break the zip ties. He slipped into sleep for a number of hours. He awoke and watched the light appear under the door and drove on for hours more.

They had left the highway long about day break. The road they drove now was smaller and potholed. At intervals the truck stopped. Once for gas, once it just stopped. But the door remained closed. Jed forgot to count the hours.

He woke suddenly as the door flew up and blinding overhead light broke the darkness of the box truck. They were in a warehouse. Men were standing and working and lifting something here and there. It was only the size of a small airplane hanger. The ceiling was hardly thirty feet high. There were fifteen people or so in sight. They were using a forklift. One came over and cut his hands free and dragged him off the bed. They rebound his hands and cut his ankles free to walk.

He was walked over to a low office and sat down inside in a small room with folding chairs and a coffee machine and two card tables. They cut his hands and mouth

free and gave him bottled water and cheddar cheese flavored crackers and locked the door behind them.

Unnecessary because there was nowhere for Jed to go should he leave the room.

The clock on the wall above the door said it was five o'clock.

Three hours later someone opened the door and put their head inside.

Do you need anything, they asked.

No, Jed said. His voice felt coarse and distant.

The door locked behind them. It was nine o'clock. It was eleven o'clock. Jed was out of water. The room was big enough to walk in but he did not walk. He could have tried to stretch but he did not stretch. He sat still and closed his eyes and did not think. It was two o'clock. The door opened again. Two men walked in and stood over him. One of them was very tall, over seven feet.

Your boss is paying a pretty price to get you back, they said.

Jed said nothing.

I wouldn't do the same for my guys. He's better to you than I would be. We can't let you off till we straighten some things out, do you know where you are?

No.

You are in Detroit, do you hear me?

Yes.

This is Detroit. When he asks where you were, you were in Detroit.

Yes.

When he asks who you talked to, you will say you don't remember. When he asks how long the drive was you will say you were asleep.

Yes.

We are going to move you to Rochester. You are lucky. You are very lucky. Nobody else would pay this much to get you back and I really don't see what it's worth.

Yes.

When he asks who you talked to, what do you say?

I don't remember.

Don't stutter next time. When he asks what they looked like, what do you say?

I don't remember.

Your name is Jed. You live in Rathbone, New York. You work for Dalton and you are no one. You are not a criminal and you don't even know what it's like. You live in one of Dalton's properties. If we need to find you it will be easy.

Yes.

Alright. That's what I wanted to see.

~~

Already the light from the sunset was pink. The street lights went on together, but no one noticed it when it happened. The houses drew curtains so they could turn on the lights in the family room and watch TV. This was all happening in the suburbs of Buffalo. A couple cars were driving on the road tonight. People back late from work. A blue sedan rolled aimlessly up one street and down another before stopping in Hamburg Beach town park with the white gazebo and tennis courts on the edge of Erie. The car sat for ten minutes or so before anyone moved. The driver window was down.

The smell of the lake hung suspended in the cold humid air and washed back and forth over the park. It smelled like fish and seaweed and oil. It smelled like trains and highways. It smelled like styrofoam coffee cups and early mornings. It smelled like an ashtray and a slaughterhouse and runoff from farms. It smelled like the tarmac at the

airport and landfills and trailer hitches and fast food and billboards for bible study and pro-life advertisements. It smelled like soda machines, gray dead grass, gas station motels, lot lizards, Walmart, scratch off tickets, Cruise America Winnebagos, diner maple syrup, cow manure, porn, and truck exhaust.

Someone opened the driver door and stood up to wave a hand at Someone Else sitting near the lake on a bench. Someone Else walked over and sat next to Someone. Someone Else talked first for a long time.

He held his head in his hands and looked out the window. He couldn't get something right. He was trying to get it right.

Someone had one arm out the door hanging next to the side smoking.

Someone spoke and looked at Someone Else directly. Then they both looked at the lake.

Someone Else was upset. Someone looked out at the lake and let him work it out.

Seagulls pecked and waddled and screamed at one another. Someone grinned and thought they are just like you and I. Someone Else was looking over his shoulder and out the back of the car, but Someone knew already there was no one else here.

The trains in the yard down the lake began to scream at one another and grind back and forth in their tracks. Great big languid oil drums. Practical square boxes. Haughty bright locomotives. Cattle in the yard. Cars in traffic. Links in the chain.

The trains ground around to form a line and filed out like kindergarteners holding the rope with plastic hoops tied to it.

And Someone Else finally conceded. Someone knew he would the whole time, it was the only choice, but Someone Else needed to feel like he had come to this conclusion on his own. He had weighed the odds. He agreed that this was the best choice. Someone

Else took out a piece of paper that already had the home address in Cleveland written on it. He had known he would concede. He had played struggle and surrender to see if Someone would change his course. Someone knew he would do this too. Someone is very good at his job. He did not change his course. Someone Else would do what he wanted, or he would suffer. They both knew that.

Someone smiled and reached out a hand to close the deal. Someone Else left it hanging and got out of the car. He walked back over and sat on a bench and looked at the lake again.



It was blue-cold at six the following morning. Dalton sat in the car with the engine running a block up from the white house with the porch collapsing over into the sidewalk. The light was barely there. The only sound was the engine humming. He checked the rearview mirror and saw the foaming exhaust pouring from the tailpipe into the freezing air. But this was a moment when he did not know or care the time, no procedural thought of moment and day and what was next. Only the white dilapidated house and the second when the front door would open.

He had just looked at the kids sleeping inside when he passed the open bedroom with coat in hand pausing, left hand holding the door frame, right hand the coat. One large hairy hand held the grain of the door frame wood as if to steady it, or maybe himself.

Downstairs he had bent in creaky leather boots to stock the woodstove again, coat draped over the right arm while both hands filled the cold gaping maw. Hunched, like a mechanic over the engine. Soot on the back and on his fingers, ink black. Now over to the kitchen, hands under the warm tap and only then, a soft tremble.



Silence in the house, the clock had been loud 'bove the kitchen door. He had looked again at the woodstove and saw the infantile ruby glow beginning to crawl from beneath the logs. Then he was ready.

The man walked out slowly and was careful to shut the door softly behind him. Little bend in his back to close it fully, lovingly. Tall, taller than the frame. Down the steps one at a time, heavily placing each boot and pulling on gloves. He was over thirty yards away. He turned at the step and began to walk towards him down the sidewalk. Nothing betrayed him, not even a quiver in the step. Heart like a granite tomb. Now he was twenty yards. Now he was eighteen.

He fell in earnest, expectantly, like a load of laundry. And nothing moved. Dalton lifted him by the jacket into the trunk and the car left a moment later slowly. He gained the highway and began to drive faster.

Then the ringing subsided.

Dalton turned right, left, right again. He drove an hour or so. He parked at a roadside diner and went inside. Ate ham, eggs, toast, coffee. Went outside again. The trunk of the blue sedan hung down like a see-saw. He sat on the hood to smoke and wait a while.

He drove on. The day warmed and he turned on the radio. He went past a patrol car in a gravel pull-off and the car came out after him. Lights went on and Dalton pulled off to the shoulder.

Morning officer.

Morning Sir, do you know how fast you were going back there?

I'd say about ten over?

That's about what I got yeah. Any reason you were driving so fast? It's a small town you're in right now. Where you headed to?

And Dalton looked up and smiled warmly.

No, no reason, guess I liked the song on the radio's all. I'm headed over Corning way to watch my grandson play in the little league game this afternoon. Little guy's pitching already even though it's only his second season. I'm gonna catch the game with my daughter and we'll have cook out in the backyard at theirs after. I live in Buffalo now. Don't actually get to come up much see the family. Hard on me living so far away actually.

Back on the road, he drove on another hour. The day was bright and the air was warm for November. If there was anything on his mind he didn't let on. On either side of the road stretched fields of crops across a low and rolling countryside. It could have been Nebraska or South Dakota. The world was flat here. Every hill and ripple was clear cut, parallel lines carved deep, crops planted over in the dirt between far in the distance where stands of trees crowded on the edge like reeds on the shore of the lake.

The highway crossed into Native American land where next to the road stood towering glossy casinos surrounded by billboards, parking lots, and stadium lights. Across the road from the casinos were two dozen or so trailer houses—crooked in poor repair. Broken cars and bikes and plastic toys in the front yards. Even Dalton grimaced.

The highway crossed through another town. Two stop lights. McDonalds. Two gas stations. Sunoco and Gulf. One trailer park along the side of the road. More corn fields. Dairy cows.

But in Fredonia, a golf course and a vineyard on the lake. Local farmers market. Two grocery stores. State parks and cafes. Vintage clothes. Hospital and Taqueria Mexicana.

He got into Rochester an hour later. Jed was in the warehouse in the office and Dalton stood in the doorway for a long moment and grinned down at him sitting in the rolling chair.

Been in here a while then?

Two days.

How'd they treat you in Cleveland?

I was in Detroit. But then Jed knew that was not the right thing to do.

Don't be an idiot I know where you were. I was just there this afternoon.

They said it was Detroit.

Yeah? What else they say? You didn't see our faces? You don't know how long you were in the truck for? They knocked you out? You're a little shit. You think I ain't done this before?

They said they knew where I lived.

And? I know where you live too. They're done anyway.

What's done? Jed's stomach turned to used coffee grounds. Dalton's voice was fifty feet away. His face lowered down over him and he felt his hand in his hair. He grabbed him by the hair on the back of the head and shook him with his face five inches from him.

You can't hear right now? What, it's too much? This is your job Jed. Do you know what a job is? Did you decide to go on vacation? This is part of your job, and plenty of people have to do things they don't like. If you worked for the cops you would do this

kind of thing all the time, but they'd give you a little metal badge each time. Is that it? Do you need me to make you a plaque? Tell you what I'll name this warehouse after you, just for you. Built on this spot in honor of Jed, for doing what his boss told him too for the very first time. If you worked for the fucking finance people you might as well be burying bodies. Them fucking people lie and kill and steal and don't have to do clean up. But you don't, do you? You work for me right now. And I said. Get in the blue car. Take it back east on your way home. And do your job.

## 3

The first snow of the season had fallen last night. It was a wet, heavy snow. It was built up on everything in rounded globs and mounds. It stuck together and hung improbably off roof edges and fences and tree limbs. The wood shed was thirty feet or so from the front door down a laid stone walkway, covered now under the snow. Nothing had marred it yet. No wind had blown the snow off of tree limbs to leave pockmarks on the silken face below. But the fire would go out soon. Arthel opened the front door with a shovel in hand and started on the steps. He used the shovel like a broom on the steps, swinging it back and forth and pushing the snow off the side. It was a flat nosed gravel shovel, but he hadn't another inside the house.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs he began to shovel the laid stone pathway to the woodshed. The progress was not fast. One scoop at a time he crossed the yard. The snow was three or four inches deep. The metal shovel scraped the rocks below each scoop with a screech. There was no other noise save his heavy breathing.

In time he reached the woodshed and struggled to pull the door open. Inside stood a wooden cart next to the stacks of cord wood. The cart slipped and resisted as he pulled it back to the house, now loaded down with logs. He left the cart at the base of the stairs and made many trips inside with armloads of wood. Then he shut the door.

Arthel remembered other days shoveling snow. He sat inside in an armchair: finally there was nothing to do. He remembered other days in town in the park. He remembered other times distorted as if he was telling someone about a memory he had and now the memory itself is not real but a story. He told about little events in a day

three weeks past. And thirty years past. He settled an old argument. He corrected a few loose ends.

The chair was close to the fire and before long it was hot. On top of the wood stove were three heavy iron objects. With a gloved hand he reached over and wrapped one of the pieces in a hand towel and laid it at his feet to rest them on top. No matter the temperature Arthel kept the cats outside because he finds them repulsive, and they are animals, and animals live outside. He poured another ladle of water from the five gallon next to the hearth into the metal pot on top. He reached the shelf and added pine needles to the pot.

In his hands he holds a fabric doll made from burlap and different colored cloth cut from his clothes. His hands were too numb to continue work. The doll needed beads sewn on for eyes. His hands shook lightly and he could not warm them enough. It is hard to hold a needle so small and fit it through each bead before pulling it into and back out of puppet's head one at a time. The thread came out the other side and Arthel left a loop that would be hair. His man wore a trim pair of pants and brogans. He needed a jacket. One day Arthel will make enough pairs of dresses and pants and enough brogans to dress every little guy in the audience that will sit and watch from the bleachers while his marionette spins and turns and dances and sings.

They will be the perfect audience. They will chant and cry. They will not fall for dumb tricks. They will need convincing. It will be hard to win them over. When he does they will know in their hearts that they have heard the melody of a lovely song. They will adore the show because it will remind them of music, and the gauzy flitting warmth of love, and the faith they have in each other, and how much they miss their home. They will love the show, or maybe they will hate the show, but it would not matter so long as

none of them ever turn to ask someone next to them what is going on? Why is he doing that? Is this weird? Do you think this is okay?

Nothing could be worse. It would be best to never see a live audience again. He is not some doe-eyed truckler, desperate for a stranger to pet him like a lap dog. He can see them again, their mouths agape, their eyes blank. Rather hoard piles of filthy piggy money, it would be the same as preening for them.

There is nothing more disheartening than knowing in your heart that even in front of a crowd of people you are still utterly alone. His hands worked quickly now after warming a little. The beads fell into place.

You will be perfect, he said. You will love the show, and then you will leave, and you will sit at home and know that it was time well spent. You will not wonder who I am because you will know. You will laugh freely and easily. You will tell your friends you have seen a master, and that is all there is to it. You will have seen one hundred shows just as good, and that will not matter. You will love artwork because it is beautiful. You will *never, ever*, consider for even a second that it would be nice to record this show and take pictures and show them around like a gaudy taxidermied head of an animal that you have stalked and killed and paid to be stuffed. You will know that to do so would be so embarrassing. That to do so would be the same as bandying around pictures of yourself plastered on billboards near the center of town for people to admire.

Thank god that you exist. We would be so lonely without you. It feels good to share with other people when you know well that they are just like you. That they don't care who the hell you might be. That you will sit with their eyes closed and savor something, and drink it with reverence, and then let it pass without struggle. Thank god

that you are real. I can not wait to sew your new dress. You will all sit in rows. No one will have priority seats because there will be none.

I admire you. You wake up every morning and sit in the garden for two hours. You work hard and your children are pleasant to talk to. You are not optimistic and you do not court despair. You have a soul. You eat good nourishing foods. We will know each other for years before you think to mention that you went to Japan once. And when I ask you will tell me about climbing mountains in the Alps, and if I didn't ask you would not.

The wind howled outside and Arthel did not notice. Snow piled up higher and he paid it no mind. Inside it is warm and the frigid heartless world outside can not come through the door.



A knock came late at night. The fire was low, Arthel had been asleep for hours under his quilt in the rocking chair. It came again.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

He opened his eyes and sat up. Two voices were on the porch.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Slippers on, and a coat. He peered behind the curtain from the kitchen window. Ruth and the man who wears the jacket were standing in the snow. He rushed over to the front door, forgetting his disheveled looks.

Come in, oh it's you, come in please it's catch-your-death outside. Quickly, shut that door. Let me get the fire up again, what are you doing over here so late? Ruth hugged him gratefully and he felt that there was something terribly out of place. He turned and shook the man's hand.



I'm Mallory, it's a pleasure. I've seen you in the yard before. Lots to look at, yep. Thank you for letting us in.

Arthel decided then that this was the only situation in which he and Mallory would have to be friends.

Take your boots off. It's catch-your-death out there. How about tea? Ruth can you put some more wood in there for us, I'm going to fix tea. Whiskey too, it's catch-your-death out there.

They were settled in the dark living room. Ruth was looking at the fire and neither of them seemed to want to talk now. Mallory looked nervous and kept glancing at the pile of audience members next to the chair. She looked at Arthel.

It's been three weeks and he hasn't called since we last talked. Mallory hasn't heard anything either.

That is not good news.

We tried to find some way to call Dalton but as you could guess that isn't very easy. We drove over to Corning yesterday to look around but that was sort of pointless but it was something to do. Were snowed in now. I don't even know who to call.

This is troubling. Have you thought about the police?

They would be terrible to him if they found out. We could be putting him in more danger. Or they might hurt us. Or the police would arrest him.

Let's not call the police.

But then what else? We can't drive to find him because he could be anywhere. I'm starting to feel like he left for some other reason. I wish he would call again.

Mallory spoke softly: he used to drive a weekly shipment, so this is something new it seems. Something went against the plan. Dalton is very hard to predict.

That's not true. He is easy to predict but it is hard to believe anyone could be so heartless. I think that if we find Jed again we will have to move away and hide from him.

Mallory, do you know more about Jed's work than I do? Asked Arthel.

He drives trucks. The people that Dalton works with are buying things under the table or something. It's not all illegal stuff. Like once I saw the truck and it was just a couple pallets of kitchen appliances and some overhead LED lights. Like nothing strange.

But you know more than that.

I don't know what you mean.

You do.

He talks sometimes about the other guys. Like how they're very cold and they put him on edge. He talks about the cops all of the time. If he gets pulled over he isn't sure he can claim that he didn't know. He also thinks he couldn't rat out Dalton even if he wanted to because he only knows where one warehouse is and if he went into a police station that warehouse would probably disappear. Or he would be killed first.

And what else.

I don't know anything else.

Then stop looking at the floor.

Okay. I was gone for a while last week and there's a lot going on in Cleveland right now.

You don't like to speak frankly do you.

You're making this hard for me, what are all these puppets?

Tell the truth.

Somebody hit somebody, that's all I know. Like they intercepted something.

I knew what you meant.

Sorry, god. They are all talking because apparently there was a lot of money involved or something. I'm sure Jed knows about it. If I found out then Jed knows about it.

There you go. Ruth, do you want to go to Cleveland then?

I don't think so. If we show up Dalton will know, and if there's something going on it will look pretty bad. I think that wouldn't help anyone.

The fire crackled and spit. They all had a sip from their mug. Ruth looked gravely into the glass window on the wood stove and did not look up when she spoke.

I'm not willing to live on in limbo like this forever. I don't know what else to do but it won't be this.

I know, Arthel said before Mallory could talk. You shouldn't have to either. If nothing changes in a week I'll help you go somewhere else. It is winter, you should not be stranded in that house.

I have not made it an issue before now but I think that I should have. I feel trapped. All I do right now is walk in the field, it's the only place I like to go. If I had money I don't think anything would be all that different but at least I could leave to be somewhere else till this is over, I'm not sure it's even safe to be in the house right now but I don't have any other options.

Arthel watched as she spoke and saw long lines in her face and dark shadows under her eyes. She was not heartbroken, she did not look particularly scared, but he had never seen another person look so tired before.

The light from the fire covered their faces as all three looked into the orange glowing window in the front door of the stove and each saw something different dancing

in the flame under the logs. Arthel saw a figure flickering repetitively, Mallory saw a forest swaying back and forth, and Ruth saw only fire, leaping from the ground, higher than herself in the frigid night air.

## 2

On the coldest night of the year in the smallest hours of the morning Jed drove through the snow on a gravel road with the headlights off. Cardboard was duct taped over the taillights. The engine was the only tell but there was no other choice. At five miles per hour Jed drove down the snow covered road, approaching the pine forest from twenty miles north on the logging trail.

Already the pines on either side of the road were towering above, seventy feet high, ninety-five feet high, and impossibly dark. The forest was true black. Each mile was agony. His breath came in pants and fogged the windshield till he rolled the windows down on either side and let in the rustle and snap of the forest and the tense crunching of snow beneath the tires.

Every single mile was agony. Fifteen to go. The hair on his body was quivering. He breathed heavily in through his nose, out through his mouth. Trying to only listen to his breath and nothing else. Breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

Then from somewhere behind him there came a muffled bumping noise, softer than a drop of rain in a still pond.

The car rolled to a stop gently.

It happened again.

Jed realized it was coming from the trunk.

He pulled the E-brake and waited. It came again. A soft pounding knocking noise. In his hand he held the pistol as tight as a ladder rung, in the other the flashlight, a long heavy metal flashlight. He got out and stood before the trunk and listened. Now there

was nothing. Both arms were shaking. The light was quivering and casting shadows. The light was dancing back and forth in the steam from his breath, shallow and fast and almost a sob.

The only noise was his breath and the car engine. He realized the pistol would be too loud. He would have to use the pistol. With the flashlight held up and locked against his right arm to steady the pistol Jed breathed heavily once more and his left leg rose to kick the latch and the trunk door swung up.

Nothing moved.

Jed breathed ragged and fast. He could not be alive. But he was moving. He must be alive. There was a noise. He was still alive and he was going to leap out of the trunk. He fell to his knees sobbing. He needed to move now. He was still alive. The man's face was white and chalky and his eyes hung open blankly. He was sobbing. The tailpipe poured smoke. He was gritting his teeth together so hard they might crack.

Back in the car. Both hands holding the wheel and eyes fixated on the road ahead, he continued the crawl. The snow was falling in fat wet flakes now. It was piling on the ground. Jed wondered vaguely if he would get stuck in the snow and die of hypothermia. He wondered if the ground would be too covered. He would have to bury himself too, better than to see Dalton again. He would lie in the grave, and the man in the trunk would stand up and cover him over and it would be warm underground where nothing would move and he could lie silently for as long as he pleased.

Numbness had begun to overtake his mind from the beginning of the drive. Now he struggled to string more than a minute of coherent thought together. There was no future right now, there was no past. There was only a dull and distant ringing like the sound of an electric drill boring a hole in metal a half mile or so away. He was not a

person. There was no one else in the world who knew him or where he was. He was a set of hands which were told to drive this car and take it out into the woods and bury the man in the trunk six feet deep where he can take his rest. He would do that. He would do that because if he did not, they would take him back again and skin him like an animal. Jed is only an animal.

The animal breathed clouds of hot steam into the car and moved its fingers to change the dial on the rotating heat and air conditioning knob. Moving limbs and breathing are still online. The animal strained its eyes to see through the snow piled high on the hood of the car. It pushed its foot forcefully into the accelerator pedal to stimulate the car to move faster through the piles of wet slick snow on the road. It did not notice when twenty minutes went by. It does not know what twenty minutes is. The only sound it hears with its dull and rounded ears is the whining of a mechanical drill boring into the metal roof of its house. And quietly from the depths of its plastic insentient mind, another thought balloons up: a picture of Ruth, looking and smiling and touching his face in warm sunlight years past in the summertime.

In the pine forest in the dark in the blue cold Jed removed a spade from the back of the car and pushed it heavily into the frozen snow covered soil. The work made no impression. His mind was absent. The soil moved easily one shovel at a time. He worked for over an hour. The soil below two feet was wet and filled with clay. He heaved it easily. His hands blistered and split and he covered them with a cloth. His hands were covered with mud. His clothing was covered in wet clay. He did not notice the soil, only the light that was just beginning to show over the very tops of the trees over an hour in.

It was time. He pulled him from the trunk and he fell to the ground like cord wood. He held him below both arms and pulled him next to the hole in the ground. In one motion he flipped him over into the hole and he fell face first with a dull thud.

Nothing moved.

Then for a moment he looked down at him. Slowly he began to see him again. He was lying face down. Hard to remember what he was doing. It was not right for him to lay face first, something was cruel about that. He stepped down and pulled his arms to heave him over. Now he lay on his back with his eyes closed. From above again Jed looked down at him but this time he looked at him in envy.

The light from above the trees was pink. He lay as still as the ground beneath him. There were no rocks to line the grave with. There was no headstone. Jed sighed and leaned against a tree and watched as each speck of light glittered on the snow laden ground like silver, like coy fish in a garden pond, like a necklace—a crystal necklace worn loosely under golden lights in a stately hall in the capital hundreds of miles away. He sat on the snow. Slowly, one at a time, like the lit windows of an apartment building overnight, each of Jed's lights went out.



It was just after mid morning when the car gained the road again and he gratefully accelerated on the freshly cleared and salted pavement. He marveled at how much snow had fallen overnight, almost six inches it looked like, piled along the road now by the highway care and maintenance authority. Other cars passed on their way to work but today Jed looked forward to a day off. He couldn't recall the last time he had one! It was a treat to drive slowly home in mid morning on freshly salted roads and listen to the radio while looking forwards to a long slow day with his family. What a



month of work it had been, though the paycheck would be well worth it. How happy they will be to see me home after my long journey.

The blue sedan pulled into the driveway of Jed and Ruth's house and pushed through the unplowed snow to come to a stop in front of the house with a little skid. Jed jumped from the driver's seat and went around to the back to collect his bags. The front door of the house swung open and Ruth looked out into the yard from the dark interior of the house.

Hey Ruthie! Boy has it been a while. Hope I didn't keep you waiting, how are you doing honey?

Ruth squinted in the blinding light of the snow and gripped the door frame with a cold hand. She stared, but it was not right. Something was not right. She must be going blind, the light was reflecting off the snow and her eyes were lying. It was not Jed. It had Jed's body, and it was wearing Jed's clothes. It even had Jed's curly short hair. But there where his face should have been was a featureless flesh and skin colored oval, entirely blank.

Well don't look so surprised to see me, it's not like I died is it?

How was it talking. Where had the suitcases come from?

Jed kicked the door of the car shut with a foot and came up the stairs in three bounding steps. He dropped his bags and put both arms out.

Ruth had stopped breathing. It pulled her in and both arms went around her.

Jed?

Hey, don't you remember me?

Jed.

Ruth I'm so glad to be home with you again.

She was hallucinating. She must be hallucinating.

Let's get inside where it's warm. What a storm we had huh? I drove through the night to be here this morning. What a night it was, I thought I was going to have to get a room a few times, boy was I tired!

Jed, give me those bags. I will take them for you. Why don't you sit down and I'll fix us some coffee.

She walked into the bedroom and put both suitcases on the ground. She opened one and then the other. Empty. Nothing inside.

Well honey why don't you tell me about how life's been here? I've missed home oh so much since I've been traveling.

Ruth walked back into the kitchen and looked at it seated at the table. Where its face should have been was flesh colored and smooth, not a wrinkle or stray hair. It looked like the moon. It sat leaned back now in the chair with both hands clasped behind its head. She was hallucinating. She could not let him know, but what should she do? What was happening?

She pulled a smile on and walked past it quickly to get to the stove. She put water on to boil and turned to look at the back of its head. It had turned its chair and was leaning back again with both arms up.

Well anyway I rode with the other guys for most of the trip. Great to have company in the cab, almost kept my mind off how much I missed you.

Ruth put one of her hands on the kettle to burn her skin but nothing changed. She held a fork in her hand behind her back and ground it into her skin and it hurt.

One guy, Dave, you would have loved him, what a riot! We laughed about everything. You met him last year at the Halloween party do you remember?

*Yes. How was it talking?*

Well anyway he and I spent two weeks together in the cab and boy we got around to talking about just about everything. It feels really good to have a friend like that, you know? I really trust him now.

The kettle whistled for fifteen seconds before Ruth heard it and she turned suddenly to fix the coffee.

How are you feeling now Jed?

Well I got to say I am quite tired, I might pass on that coffee actually. It might be a good idea for me to lie down soon, I don't want to derail your day.

That's alright. I don't have any plans, she said. She could not look at it again.

What have you been up to then? It's been about a month since I left now hasn't it?

I have been working.

Yeah how's the old place doing these days?

It's the same.

That's nice, my ol' hound dog Mallory still prowling around?

I haven't seen him. Jed do you remember when you left?

I can recall, yes. Why do you ask? Is something the matter Ruth? You seem nervous to me.

What happened when you left?

I'm pretty sure you were still asleep. I was with Arthel the night before I believe and Dalton called here early. What a guy that Dalton is, he really grew on me this time.

What did you say? She turned from the coffee pot and stole a look at it again. The pot dropped from her hand and shattered on the tile, the face was back where it should have been.

Dalton, my boss. I really started to admire him.

Her eyes bulged as she stared at him. But still something was off. His eyes were unfocused and gray and slack looking. His mouth was only forming words, like he was learning to make sounds again. Had he had a stroke? The room was beginning to spin.

You hate Dalton, don't you remember?

Yes, I used to hate Dalton. I used to spend my time hating a lot of things, but now I've decided that I don't want to spend energy on that kind of thing anymore. I don't need to hate anyone. I'm happy and I live a fortunate life.

The room was spinning in earnest. She bent to start picking up pieces of the coffee pot but she could not stay here another second.

Why don't you go and lie down Jed? I think I will go outside right now and get some things done while you rest.

That's a great idea. I don't want to derail your day. Why don't you go outside and I will lay down for a little while.

He stood shakily and turned around completely before starting to walk across the floor to their room. At the doorway he stopped and turned around.

Be safe dear, I love you.

Yes love you, sleep well.

The door shut.

Ruth fell into her coat and out the front door. Her eyes were wild. She could not see the path through the snow. Her feet skidded as she lunged down the stairs to get

away from the house and whoever this was, there would be no time to stop and wait to see if he came around, there was no time to breathe.

She walked down the driveway and onto the road. She would not go far, just a ways down for an hour or so. The snow was piled on the roadside. Her feet were moving automatically. She began to walk faster. This was a hallucination, a strange and complex trick of the mind. Stranger things have happened.

Was it her? Something so wrong had happened to him. It was not her. Was there any way to make sense out of this or will she just return to the house unarmed and hope he is gone?

The wind whistled through the trees above and knocked snow off the top branches. Already the day was warming. The snow would be gone in two days or so. It was melting and draining in rivulets off the road into the culvert.

It was just fear, simple fear. It made her see things that were not true. He was acting so unusual that her brain had created his faceless image to make sense of something impossible. There was no reason to be afraid anymore.

Snowy roads passed under her feet.

Should she return with a weapon? He did not seem dangerous but there was no way to know for sure. Should she call Mallory or Arthel? It would be safer, but what if they did not see anything wrong... And what if they also came to the door without a face. If it is Jed here now, he is not in condition to see other people.

Should she take him to the hospital? Could Dalton find out about that? Was he even with Dalton this whole time?

Ruth realized she was running.

The sun was well past overhead when she rounded the corner and saw the house still standing on the side of the road. The day had grown hot. The snow had melted to a layer of grainy slush that just covered the grassy fields across their street. No lights were on inside but the blue sedan was still parked out front. Till now she had secretly wished it wouldn't be.

Up the steps slowly and she listened at the door before pulling it open. The house was dark, and somewhere water was running. She crossed to the bathroom next to their bedroom.

Jed? Jed are you in there?

Ruth? The voice was that of a child, of an infant child. It was hollow and light as fallen snow.

She opened the door slowly. He was sitting on the ground wrapped in a towel. His hair was wet, and his skin was pale and greenish-blue. The shower was still on.

Oh what are you doing? How long have you been in here like this?

I don't know, I don't know what time it is.

I left hours ago, she said.

When did I get here? He looked up at her and in his eyes she saw Jed again, restored somehow, or at least present.

You got here this morning. Jed what happened to you, when you were here earlier there was something so wrong. I couldn't look at you, it was terrifying.

I've been here all day? His body was shaking. She realized he would need to be fortified a little more before they could answer questions.

In the kitchen she started soup. She sat him at the table in a blanket and gave him warm tea. His eyes were going in and out—one moment staring at her terrified, the next numbly watching the candle on the table.

She realized for the first time that the house was in decrepit shape again but that was now neither here nor there. She stoked the fire in the woodstove and turned on more lights. His face was beginning to show pink. She gave him warm broth to drink from a mug. In the sink she peeled potatoes and carrots. The morning was ten days in the past. It had not happened. She remembered that she was tired.

Ruth?

Yes?

I'm really sorry about this. I don't know what happened to me.

Let's worry about getting you back in shape before we decide what happened alright? You look terrible, when was the last time you ate anything?

I don't know. I don't know where I was.

Were you with Dalton?

Once.

Once? One day?

They said it was Detroit but I shouldn't have lied. I knew they were lying he said I lied and it would earn me a plaque. We are in danger here I think.

Jed slow down.

Ruth, they know where we are they know who I am. They said they know, Antolin looked at me and said your name is Jed you live in Dalton's houses.

Who said that?

He's dead.

Wait Dalton is dead?

No Antolin. Dalton knows too though, because we live here he knows also but they might be here soon. He was starting to get agitated and turn to look out the darkening windows. He went to stand.

Jed sit down. She spoke like a mother. Jed sat.

You have to slow down, you're getting yourself worked up. I don't want to hear about it yet. I want you to eat lentil soup and sleep this off and we can sort it out in the morning. No one is coming here tonight alright?

He began sobbing. She poured him another cup of broth.

Right now we're gonna sort out the basics. You can't cope with anything else yet.

You're right, he cried. You are right. I am such an idiot.

You are sick right now that's all.

You must have been worried, I was gone for so long. You must have been afraid and here alone. I tried to call but you weren't here.

I was worried, yes. Here, eat.

And she turned after placing the bowl in front of him and grabbed the whiskey from the top shelf to pour thoroughly into her own cup with her back turned.

Dalton will be here in the morning. I know he will. He will say he wanted to get the car but it will be to remind me he is in charge. He knows I can't quit. I wish I could so badly I cannot, they know who we are. He started to cry again.

Ruth looked at him and said nothing. She poured again. Gradually he finished eating. She helped him to his feet and walked him to bed where he fell fast asleep before the light went out.

Ruth went back out to the table for a while.



In the morning Ruth was sitting at the table when a tall figure appeared at the end of the driveway. It was wearing jeans and boots and a cotton sweatshirt for a sports team and no hat. It was Dalton. She pulled her coat on and went out the door to meet him.

Outside it was bright. The air was warm again and the snow was nearly gone. Too warm for November. The birds were aloft again, maybe mistaking this weather for spring time. Ruth wished quickly that she had the memory of a bird. She stood halfway down the drive with her arms folded and waited for him to meet her.

Goodmorning Ruth, it's early I didn't expect anyone up yet. And he smiled a tooth-filled smile like a priest inviting you through double oaken doors.

So you were planning to just walk in? she said. She felt the words bite more than she meant, but this was cruel of him too. Always hard to know with him how cutting to be or if it would be easier to play nice.

Well I have come to retrieve my car so I was hoping the keys were inside or on the wheels or something. Everything that Dalton said was delivered with a lude smile. But Ruth wanted the upper hand.

You would have walked inside. It's alright to say it, I know you would have just gone right in.

He clasped both hands in front of him and looked down at her.

Jed's not in great shape now is he? Something tells me he's been laid up a few days.

She looked at him in the eyes again for a moment before narrowing them and looking at the field off and right.

Well our boy really isn't cut out for this kind of thing now is he. And then he looked at her for a long moment and began to grin. She looked up at him again and quickly looked away at the field and the road behind him. She began to feel stuffy in the coat.

But maybe you could do a little better?

She took the car keys out and dropped them on the hood of the blue sedan and turned around to walk inside. He spoke behind her, twelve feet behind but it felt like two.

You go on nurse up our little man in there, and tell him I'm sorry I forgot the flowers. Tell him, from me... get well soon buddy work starts again before you know it. So long Ruth.

She slammed the door behind her and kicked off both boots before falling heavily with her shoulder in the wall with her hands balled up in her hair.

## 1

Jed faced the room seated on the couch. A dog barked outside. It was dark out. The dog barked at something, or nothing, but Jed didn't know which. The room was dark too, the lamp next to the couch was on but that was the only light save the one in the kitchen he could not see because it was behind his head. In front of him sat three people he knew. Mallory and Ruth sat on the floor, and Arthel sat in a chair next to them. Each of them was glancing at him periodically, but Jed was just sitting.

He had sat like that for days. Sometimes he would get up to use the bathroom, and sometimes he would lie down on the couch. She did not know what to do. Today she left and walked and called Mallory and Arthel. Both of them had been to see him already but she asked them to come back to see it again, it was hard to believe. He would not talk. He could not speak other than to answer a simple direct question like do you want water?

Can you hear me? Jed? Jed can you hear me?

Hi Ruth I can hear you.

The room swam and focused again. In front of him sat three people he knew. Now they all looked at him.

Arthel asked you a question Jed.

He turned his head to direct his vision on Arthel, seated and frowning.

I was just wondering if you wanted to go with me to the glass museum tomorrow, Jed. It's not very far and we could get out of the house for a little while. You've been inside more than a few days now.

Oh, that's okay. I do like the glass museum, but I think I should get my rest instead. I would like to go another time?

The dog barked outside again. He was standing above a pine needle covered forest floor. Under his boots the ground felt like a sponge. Below his feet something was trembling. He knelt and pressed his palm into the soil. It was a knocking pounding thump. It was coming from below the soil. Jed ? Jed. JED.

Hi Ruth I can hear you.

What are you thinking about right now, you're awfully quiet.

Oh I was just thinking about the glass museum again. But it was no use, he was under so quickly.

The pine needles were trembling. Some sound like a hollow wooden drum was pounding. Thu-thump. Thu-thump. It was a heartbeat. Under the ground there was a heartbeat. JED.

Have you tried getting outside the house much at all? Maybe you want to come down to the property tomorrow and we can see about fixing the car I'm working on?

He blinked and bulged his eyes to the surface and saw Mallory talking in front of him and Ruth patting his knee with a tsk sound to say that was not the right thing to say to him and strained to breathe again.

Oh that sounds nice, but I think I should get my rest instead.

He was panting. His hands ached and he saw them gripping the hem of the couch like a cliff edge. He was holding a shovel. He would die under there if he couldn't get him out. He drove the shovel down with his whole weight and it sank in two inches before connecting with something solid with a hollow metal ring that reverberated down his spine and shattered his teeth. Down on his hands and knees, he was sobbing again.

The soil cleared to reveal the trunk of the blue sedan, the car was underground and he was still in the trunk. JED GODDAMMIT.

Hi Ruth I can hear you.

You can *not* hear me, I've been yelling at you for a whole minute.

He was still in there, he was banging on the inside with a metal wrench. The ground was sinking. He stood up fast. The ground was heaving and sighing as the sedan drifted lower in the needles. Back down on his knees he fell into the needles, clawing them aside to get to the latch to let him out of the trunk where he was inside banging and crying to be freed. He was pleading. He could not get to the latch. The needles were sinking before he could get there.

JED I CAN'T STAND THIS.

Ruth, maybe you should take him in for real help.

What the fuck is real help? What will they do?

He gasped and stood up too fast and realized too late that he could not find his foot where it should have been before and fell forwards into the rug where to his surprise six hands caught him and lowered him gently before the woodstove gratefully where he could take his rest.

His eyes closed as soon as they laid him back onto the couch. His eyes were fluttering. Something inside him was very wrong. A piece had come out of place, or maybe new pieces were in place where they weren't before. Some piece was wrong now. He had slept only for hours at a time, waking screaming. She hadn't been able to force anything out of him. He hadn't said where he was yet. He could not answer any questions. There were so many questions, but Ruth slowly wanted answers less and less.

The longer this persisted, the more of a challenge it became to care. Now he was both here and gone, together at once.



The air around him was cold and clammy. It was humid, it felt like early morning right before the sun rose. The ground crunched with frost, the needles were stiff and flexible on the surface like a sheet of leather. On his hands he wore gloves and held the flashlight, he carried the spade. Each step forward he was closer to his destination. The spade was traveling through space now, destined for one luminous moment when it would dive deeply and securely into the frozen ground.

The soil felt light as saw dust. He flung frozen earth and pine needles behind him effortlessly. The moon had set hours before, it was dark in the woods. It was hard to see the hole, growing larger now with each shovelful. In his mind—nothing again. A suspended agitation and infrequent shallow breaths with a wash of steam in the freezing air in the light from the flashlight laid on the ground next to the hole. You have to do this. You will, he said. He said it again. You will. Faster, and then it will be done.

He cut an oblong shape into the ground, just over six feet long and shoulder width. It was too shallow still and he began removing shovelfuls from the center of the hole. The soil cut in clean square chunks because of the frozen clay, and he lobbed them behind him over the shoulder. Grunting now. The work was taxing, he pulled ragged breaths through his teeth.

He drove the shovel down into the clay again but this time it met something else. It felt like a tree root. Down to his hands and knees. The moon had set, it was dark under the blanket of pine needles layered six feet deep over head covering every surface like jungle moss or frozen snow banks and slabs of ice frozen to the roof of houses

passed on the highway which he would point out and say bad roofing—GOD why would he? Teeth tighter than a vice grip, he spit through them, why would she care if he pointed to the house and made her aware the roof was not made well? Both hands dove in the clay now, he should focus on the task at hand but both gloves were covered now and clumsy, coated in frozen clay and pine needles. Off they came and were thrown next to the hole so he could lean into the bottom, almost up to his shoulders grunting nearly sobbing with both hands bare to claw and pull at tree roots in clay, to find the root that stopped the spade.

The edge of the hole gave way under his knees as the clay and pine needles slipped into the ground and he with it till now lying on his belly, flashlight in his teeth, he pulled clay from the hole and pushed it with his palms up to the edge and one handful more dove into the wet soil to find a face.

He stopped moving. The face was blue and slate gray. It was cold and hard to the touch as if carved from granite. In the light it looked pained. One trembling hand went and brushed wet clay from its cheek. The flashlight shook. The skin did not move when touched, it remained, like a wooden visage, like a piece of marble two thousand years old.

Could he be two thousand years old? How many years have passed since another has lain in this ground with him? Jed realized it was silent. Nothing was moving around him in the warmth of the clay below the ground, it felt soft and tranquil. It was pleasant and he was warmer than it should have been but again it was dark, when just before he could see but where had his light gone amidst the warmth of these soft blankets of pine needles and sheets in the silence, his hands were covered in clay they would get on the blankets.

Jed sat up in bed. The house was silent. No one was here. Next to him was cold and the lights were all off. Ruth was nowhere to be seen.



Silent in the car. Soft lights drifted along the road far away and blurred in sight. Paper bag on the seat next to her. She thought about playing music but it was not right. Something stopped her, she did not think it would feel different. The song would not touch her. That was fine. She had been parked here for more than two hours now. Time had evaporated, unregistered. For the first time in so long, time made no impression.

Right now she held in her hands the coveted grief. There was nothing that could replace it, and she would not if she could. She held in her hand and mind the sickening clarity, the adored and lethal conviction that finally her toil had bore fruit, that this was a moment when she could finally see below the troubled water. A grim satisfaction.

There is nothing more pragmatic than this idea. At least it feels that way. It is as if you have finally found the answer to some constant and pressing question, one that you and everyone you know are all wondering. And you begin to think that everything that you do every day is all for the purpose of secretly and unwittingly hiding from this question. And procrastination always feels like secret dread. But you do not want to look below the water. If you look below the water you might not be able to go to work again, or call a friend to hear what they did over the weekend, or read trite little books about family and love and aging gracefully, or choose your favorite clothes, or talk to people you do not know, or make your bed, or keep pathetic house plants, or learn new stuff because you will be convinced with your entire heart that these sort of things are completely pointless.



Something is following you, and has been for a long time. You can hear its footsteps on pine needles, distant at first. At some point it will win again, and you will be too tired, and you will sit again on the ground, and it will catch up. You don't want to sit at first, but another quiet, infectious part of you does. You have spent weeks making this little garden. You have put your love into it, you have raised it from the soil but there is a small part that wants to burn it again to the ground and trample the plants and spit in its ashes. After the garden is burned amidst the twisted vines and wood ash you see clearly again, below the water, into the ground.

The headlights flicked on. The car peeled suddenly out of the gravel pull-off and Ruth drove with abandon, as fast as the roads would allow. She was only five minutes away. In the distance she could see it play out clear as if it had already happened. She pictured where everything was. It was all here in the car like she had planned it, as if she was surprised that she had planned it this way, that this was a fortuitous coincidence. And she began to laugh a little bit. The car screamed under her boot and she pressed the ball of her shoe through the floorboard into the engine. Metal gnashed and squalled. The tires stayed on the road. One more turn and she would be there. One more and then it would happen. The anticipation was sickening.

The car pulled up next to the field and the headlights turned off. The field was dark. The sky was clear. The night was silent.

Minutes later, slowly, from the middle, an orange glow appeared. A long finger of smoke climbed above the field into the night sky. At first it was silent. Then the fire caught the gasoline poured in long languid spirals over the ground.

Thunderous billowing waves of fire poured from the grass and raced over the ground as fast as sunlight. Blinding. The roar was a hundred shoes on a wooden

staircase, a fighter jet, a landslide. The sky turned red. The sky was ink black. The flames turned blue and green and solid gold. The flames were double overhead. The grass was dry and bracken snapped and sputtered as the flames consumed the field with unquenchable greed.

~

## o: Rathbone

The Green New World is yours too. Sometimes we worry and that is okay, and sometimes our troubles are a real thing. Today is the same as the day before though and this is the same moment as the last.

Ruth blinked hard twice and looked around again. The moment was endless, it felt like an entirely different day. She looked at the floor below her feet and watched the steam rise from the coffee, splattered now amidst the broken glass from the french press. She sighed an ageless worldly sigh of defeat and her head pulsed with ache. She bent to her knees to pick the broken pieces of glass spilt on the floor.

Jed would be here in two hours. Mallory and Jenna still lay asleep in the guest room and they could help tidy. If she were to clean now would be the time. If this was going to happen now is when it should. Jed was in the city again, as was often. He worked in the city in buildings and offices. He worked with paper and money. Everyone, everywhere, doggedly marching after money. He was tired every day, because of it. Ruth worked in the city when it was called for, but only for conferences and got out quick. It was better out here, without another neighbor for a mile down the road. Without anyone in their yard.

Sometimes Ruth wished for neighbors and friends closer to the house who would come over unprompted and ask questions and talk to you because they had nothing else to do. She wished for strange and cryptic people who hated town and company. Sometimes she thought she had a friend who talked at length with her late in the night because he was the perfect listener. He understood everything she said completely, and even most of what she did not. He was a much better listener than Jed, so she pictured talking to them when no one else would do. She closed her eyes. Fields. Open fields. Tall

generous grass. Blue day. Lifted face. Melancholia. First breath of cold air. The end of summer. Ill-founded fears. Birds and dogs swirling together. Water breaking off shore. The wind. The new day. Insomnia.

But music, yes music will make this all more pleasant, music is what we need.

So she turned to the stereo and played her favorite song loud and before long the song did its job and this was only another day. This was just a day like all the rest. She spun across the house and things began to take shape and order as she did. The song swelled and died and the next took over.

Mallory and Jenna woke and helped too. The floor was cleaned and mopped again. The house took shape in stages, then all at once. Before long, food was made and plates were dirty and shortly washed again. Mallory and Jenna left to leave Ruth time for a walk outside in the air.

In The Green New World there are answers to all of your little questions. In The Green New World they planted a garden and you can lie there and watch the day expire like royalty. There are gazebos, and you can sit on a swinging cushioned bench and eat bits of bread dipped in golden honey while someone else's children soil all their clothes playing in the river.

In her steps she became lost in thought for an uncountable period of time. Before long she returned, invigorated, to fall into a moment of true gold, with light behind and ahead, watching the birds and the clouds distant and close, so close she lifted a hand to reach and cup one to see it closer and brush its feathers down again. The sky overhead was beautiful, the world did spin under foot just like before, and this time without pain and suffering she looked at herself standing on the edge of the road and saw a person there just like anyone else.

Everyday you sit and wonder questions with the same answers, and you cry and pray, but you don't leave your house and you don't bother listening to anyone anymore, so why should you expect anything to come of it? Sometimes we look for something to fixate on and find nothing. There are days we cannot remember. Likewise there are those we cannot forget. Every day of your life is both and the same, together, and if we were anything else you would be bored. Sometimes the day may last forever, and hold inside it a year of history that never happened. Other times, the day is over faster than you realize and before a moment passes you are asleep again, tranquil and forgetful as grandparents. So it is pleasant to think, that a footprint on a pine needle forest floor will stay for a moment, or for a day, and before long it will fade too, surely, and without struggle, to be as barren again as the day before you were there.