

GREEN COUNTRY

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55,000 Words

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DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

I drove under a night sky washed out by stoplights with my seatbelt unfastened, all four windows cranked down, radio off.

I pulled the car onto the shoulder, cut onto a field where a subdivision would be built one day. The car bumped over grooves in the grass, eventually rolled to a stop in the center of the field where I turned the engine off and let the lights go out. Then everything went quiet except for the crickets and the creatures of the night that sang and gibbered in the moonlight.

A photograph, taped to the dash, waved in the wind. I ripped it off like a bandage and squinted at its image: the kids, in their pajamas, crawling on the front lawn, collecting chocolates in their Easter baskets. I was behind them, wearing bunny ears, telling them where to look. I thumbed the edges of the picture and leaned in for a kiss goodnight, tasting only dried chemicals.

Another breeze rolled in as I pulled the key out of the ignition. It dangled in my hand, where it made wind chime noises with the other keys on the keychain. I tossed them over my shoulder and onto the back seats.

“That’s it, then,” I thought. “Better call it a night.”

I creaked the driver’s seat back till it was fully reclined and then closed my eyes. They welled with warm water.

I kept my eyes pressed shut and imagined those concrete dams that hold lakes back from canyons. How the pressure generates electricity. I pondered this while absorbing power, pure raw electricity, into my body as it lay there with the insects in the dark.

I woke up at six-thirty in the morning. A hornet circled my headrest, buzzed like a chainsaw in the air. I swatted around my ears, swore, opened the car door, got out, spat on the dew-soaked grass, and then swore again. The familiar weight of car keys was absent from my jacket pocket. Pocket check: *wallet, phone, mints. Wallet, phone, mints.* No keys.

Then I remembered. Through the glare of a rear window, I saw the keychain bathing in the sun, laying star-shaped on the back seats.

I drove to Shoppers to freshen up for work. Inside, I stashed a bottle of mouthwash and a box of cologne in my jacket and walked out without paying. One of them set off the shoplifting gates which whooped like air raid sirens. I spun around with my arms raised. Like it was all a big joke.

“Go ahead, happens all the time that old thing,” said a younger woman wearing black. She stood behind a table covered with makeup. Pink, violet, and red.

“Come on—sure you don’t want to strip me down?”

Back behind the wheel I twisted the cap off the mouthwash and pierced the seal with my house key. The mouthwash fumes hit like a gavel.

The scent rose from the bottle’s opening. I held it to my nose, relishing in the bitter, sugary mouthwash smell. With it, I felt hopeful about the future, and how Lisa and I would split for good this time, and how I was only forty-two, and how I would meet younger women. Women that sold makeup. From the vantage of an empty parking lot the world took on a rosier tint. There was a better life waiting for me, all I had to do now was show up.

I sipped from the bottle, swirled it one, two, three times. When the sting burnt out I swallowed it whole. Then I did it again, and then again, and then a fourth time.

“I thought we talked about this,” I said silently to myself. I heard the voice of a younger, wiser me reminding myself of the thousand times I had hoped everything would be different.

“Remember what it’s like to hope.” This disembodied wisdom took possession as I flicked on the A/C and ran my fingers over my scalp, staring at the hairless man in the visor mirror. Piece by piece, I fingered the last golden strands at the base of my skull. They looked old

and frayed, following no directional logic, like burnt remnants of grass. I laughed with my mouth wide open at a joke nobody told.

I leaned the chair back and stretched out, feeling the liquid and its false warmth churn through my stomach as the side of my face pushed into the headrest—the softest and most perfect headrest to ever exist. The cool A/C blew against my cheeks. For a moment I felt like a boy again, transported back home, sinking into my pillowy twin mattress. It was midnight on Christmas Eve, and a breeze rolled through the bedroom window that Momma had left open. It was Christmas Eve and I couldn't sleep, my feet restless under the blankets.

I sat up and took a big sip of mouthwash and then an even bigger sip and swallowed them both down at once and then gagged it up but swallowed it back down again, bile and all. My eyes pinched shut and I bunched everything up tight on my face, toward one central point, making myself look horrible. Seconds passed and the muscles in my face slowly slackened, releasing into a long smile that said everything that needed to be said, though nothing was.

I watched the parking lot fill, storefronts illuminate, and the town come alive. I flicked tears out from under my eyes. I smiled an animal's smile, delighted in killing the boy that hoped.

Car tires thudded off the curb and screeched right, accelerating southbound on a four-lane highway toward Morningstar Technology's regional field office. It was in the middle of a brown industrial park, surrounded by unmarked buildings that, at one time, I thought, might've produced something. I rolled up slowly and parked next to René, who was still sitting in his car. My windows were rolled down and so were his.

“Hey, baby,” I said. He returned an unamused stare.

I got out and grabbed my messenger bag, slung it around my right shoulder and left the doors unlocked. René, busy with his phone, waited until I was almost inside before he stepped out of his car. My head reeled as I neared the office doors, my aching forehead coated with dried sweat.

“Aren’t you just a hot mess this morning,” said René, behind me.

In the lobby, Emily, the phone girl, smiled up at us from behind her monitor. An unwritten rule among the male office staff held that a solicitation from Emily ended conversation between men—you had to indulge, as if all else was a long-running prelude. I slapped René on the back and strut over to Emily’s desk with the certainty of a man flirting with death.

“Look who it is,” she said, still smiling.

“Well would you look at you.”

“Get up to anything exciting this weekend?”

“Actually, yes. Quite the adventure.”

“Yeah, and what might that be?”

“Well, I passed out in my car and threw up on my jacket and, ugh, I swallowed mouthwash for breakfast.” I polished a molar with my thumb, reaching as far back as it could go.

“Not to mention showered with dollar store body spray.” I gagged and wiped my hands on my jeans.

“You kill me, Kevin,” she laughed nervously. “You and your little adventures.”

“Silly me and my adventures.”

“Do I still have you down for that ten o’clock with Bain Ventures?”

“Put me down for it. What is it, nine already?”

“Eight fifty-five, Kev.” Her smile washed away.

“You know I’m only playing around, right?” I nodded and leaned in, guilty like a magician revealing his trick.

I usually shared a long sectional desk with René, who is a paralegal, and two other lawyers on retainer, Wayne and Ramy. Wayne was an older man a few years shy of retirement. He’d served as a Crown prosecutor for thirty some years. Ramy, a thickset Arab man in glasses, I knew little of besides that he had only recently arrived in the country. The four of us sat around an oblong table. What would normally be our morning debrief was, today, only silence. We stayed quiet, hunched over laptops, until nine-fifty.

“Alright,” René said, breaking the peace. “It’s time we move.”

We tucked casebinders and manila envelopes under our twill-sleeved arms. Plucked up laptops with their tops open and travel mugs gone cold. The adjacent room had a round table lined by eleven swivel chairs, an unrolled white projector screen, and a utility shelf holding a glass water carafe and a stack of plastic cups. At the center of the table sat a wired telephone and receiver, its cord run through a small hole drilled in the wood.

I fell into my chair, wiped my forehead, and felt how I wished I never would. A searing cranial pressure pointed inward to the backs of my bloodshot eyes.

Wayne held the phone receiver in his hand and dialed the client’s number with his meaty arthritic fingers trembling. Zz zz zz, the phone rang through. Wayne hung up and tried again.

“Welcome to Jupiter Teleconferencing,” said a machine’s cheap impression of a woman’s voice. “Please Press 1 for rec—Recordings selected. To start a new recording, please Press 2; to review your—”

“She sure does like to chat, doesn’t she?”

“Kev, shut it, we’re almost live,” Wayne muttered, focused on pressing the correct buttons on the device.

“New recording initiated. Please, stand by... *bzzztk.*”

A green light illuminated on the phone receiver. Ramy sat to my right with his legs crossed and played snake on his flip phone. René perched upright in his chair, hands folded on a yellow legal pad in his lap. Wayne, to my left, leaned into the phone, questioned whether it was ringing or if it was only his tinnitus.

A human’s voice emerged.

“H-hello... Wayne, did you get through?”

“Lauren, hello there. My apologies for the delay. You know how finicky these things can get.” My head sank into my hands, now physically hot, burning hotter by the word.

“A little housekeeping, if I may. As you know, this call is being recorded by Jupiter Teleconferencing. Today is Monday, April 30th, 2010, at ten-oh-one in the morning. Today I’m joined in the room by three of my colleagues who together represent Morningstar as legal counsel. On the other end of the line I have Lauren Rowbotham of Bain Ventures alongside her colleagues in finance—let me get these straight—Salaamed Attar and Dipon Vthu, is that correct?”

“Vuh-doo. It’s pronounced vuh-doo,” someone said.

“My apologies, Dipon. Now, before we start discussion on how we can protect Bain’s newly acquired industrial IP, I’d like to start off this recording by going around the room and having each of us state our name and the capacity in which they’re here, starting on my left.”

Wayne motioned toward Ramy.

“Right—my name’s Ramy Al-Ajab, and I’m associate general counsel here at Morningstar.”

Wayne nodded to René.

“Hi everyone, it’s René Belmonte speaking. Associate counsel at Morningstar.” Having finished, René smiled in my direction. His smile was contrived and pointed, pleading with me to lighten up, to take a breath.

“H—”

Before I could get a word in, the office door creaked open and Roberto entered holding a briefcase and a ceramic coffee mug. Roberto was chief counsel and about fifty pounds overweight with lobs of meat bulging around the neck, wrists, and ankles. He wasn’t much older than I was and already had his own reserved parking space at the front of the building for a new Jaguar he paid for in cash, or so he told us. I leaned back in my seat, stared Roberto between his eyes, tracked his movement as he waddled across the room and plopped into a chair across the table next to Wayne. He ran his fingers through his greased-back hair. He mouthed the word “*Sorry*” and smiled. He held up a finger as if to say he would only be around for a second.

“Apologies for the hold up.” I cleared my throat and thought about what little time I had. “We had a little interruption here in the room. As you know, my name’s Kevin Little and I’m a junior associate with Morningstar, working under Wayne and Ramy for the past, what, fifteen months? In my time here, I’ve seen our relationship with Bain take off as we’ve worked together on two major M&As in under a year—truly a standout achievement that I think attests to the tenacity of the team at Bain in securing more diverse revenue streams and long-term positions to help drive the kind of expected growth over the lifespan of the BV Strategic Roadmap. Without the help of some—

“Couldn’t agree more, Kev. For the sake of the recording why don’t we move onto—”

“No, no, Wayne, please, just give me a moment here to finish. I want this on the record before we start.” Wayne rolled his eyes and pinched his bushy white eyebrows. “It’ll be worth it Wayne, trust me. It’ll be worth it. Where was I...right, the opening remarks. Looking around the table now and listening to your lovely voices through the speaker I realize how far we’ve come in establishing a mutually gratifying partnership between Bain and Morningstar. Like I said, it hasn’t been a year and we’ve already seen our quarterly targets surpassed on all three counts by nearly double. We’ve taken Bain from hardly more than a regional brokerage to a firm of multinational stature. That’s special, if you ask me. To be frank with you all, I couldn’t be happier to call myself a part of this team. I think there are bright days ahead for us all. Through the ingenuity of René’s team here at MS to Lauren’s squad in Ottawa, I can see us really disrupting real estate capital markets on a global scale, not just in our own backyards. Because that’s what we do so well, the two of us. We turn money into more money. Isn’t that what we’re bred to do, after all? Born and raised to crank the money machine. Spin the money wheel. It’s in our DNA. Looking across the table here, I see Wayne’s looking more like a tomato than he normally does so I might have to wrap it up in a second but not before first—”

“Kevin, thanks. But, would you mind?” Wayne said.

“Not before first acknowledging the elephant in the room,” I said. “The man seated before me right now, the great Roberto Cσίαςinni, something needs to be said about the role he’s had to play in getting us where we are today. A technologist turned chief of litigation at Morningstar. He truly is the brains of the operation in this place. I mean, the guy went to Waterloo and, shit, does it ever show. Since I’ve arrived, I’ve witnessed him hire, what, a dozen or more interns to work on our software architecture. Not even one was paid a dime. Not one.

That’s the kind of ingenuity and, frankly, character, that we need steering the ship of a such an esteemed enterprise. The title ‘thought leader’ gets thrown around a lot these days, but this is a man who personifies the word. Right now, we have eleven salaried software developers and engineers, each of them brilliant engineers and alumni of over-priced tech institutes, toiling away behind the scenes for thirteen hours a day to ensure we meet our financial objectives and secure the strategic partnerships we need to stay afloat. If that isn’t the hallmark of a burgeoning enterprise, then I don’t know what is. This is capitalism, baby, and we’re just playing by the rules.”

“Kevin—” René attempted to interject.

“Now, before wrapping up my introductory remarks, I’d like to make one last comment about the four stunning receptionists that Robby’s brought on the team since I got here. Buddy, do you know how to pick ‘em or what? We’re talking bombshells, each of them, and not one more than twenty years old. Isn’t that a pleasant coincidence? Three-to-one ratio of blondes to brunettes too. Tall, gorgeous young women that last about two months on average before turning over. Does your wife know you’re turning them over like this, Robby? You know, you got an eye for—

“That’s enough, you prick. I’m calling security,” barked Roberto, using his shoulder to hold his cellphone against his ear.

“Hey, hey, hey, let’s not get too reactive. You didn’t even let me finish. If you wouldn’t mi—”

“Should we call you back another time?” Lauren asked through the intercom.

“Hold on there, stay on the line, Lauren. We apologize for this slight mishap, we’re on top of it,” said Wayne.

Roberto was speaking into his shoulder: “Yes, Darlene, we need a few hands to conference room C to escort Kevin Little out of the building immediately. Make sure he collects his belongings on his way out.”

Ramy leaned back, stared at me in disbelief from overtop his glasses. René leaned in close and asked if I had lost my goddamn mind.

“Get away from me, René, you don’t want any part of this.” I muttered, staring blankly through the room before continuing slowly and precisely as if my words were a spell: “My life is hell, René. Do you understand what that means? It’s time someone was held responsible for it.”

The door to the office swung open and four men in white uniforms and black ties barged in. At the front of the pack was a six-and-a-half-foot tall olive-skinned man whose name was unknown to anyone except Roberto and who was suspected by all to be ex-Mafia and a reformed convict. Or mostly reformed. He was bald, built like an ogre, and spoke only the wordless language of violence.

The bald security guard walked up to my chair.

“Up,” he grunted.

I refused.

“Cooperate with the gentlemen and make this easy on yourself.” Roberto stood with arms crossed.

I rose, voluntarily, to my feet and took in the four pairs of watchful eyes circling the table. These were my teammates, the men in my corner, the men who, I had decided, would cost me everything. I now stood before them a man without a family; a man with an estranged wife, separated from his children. A man whose pay cheques were being direct deposited into someone

else's account. Someone I hardly knew. A man who drinks mouthwash and shoplifts for sport. A man whose ruin was still unfinished, whose deathward slide had not yet bottomed.

Turning toward the door, with the security guard standing close behind, I caught a glimpse of the smug, self-satisfied expression on Roberto's face. I decided to do what I'd wished so many days before: I spun back to face the table and grabbed the glass carafe, smashed it against the rim of the table in one frenzied motion, and watched it shatter into a hundred jagged pieces. Liquid and glass flung in all directions, soaring across the table and splattering its contents. The smashing of glass was met by gasps from mouths held agape.

I held the remaining shard of glass in my hands, yelling like some scared animal, and pointed it like a spear aimed at Roberto's chest. I pushed my eyes wide open, looking bewildered, desperate and confused, undecided between fight or flight.

Roberto's security grabbed my wrists and squeezed to the bone, forcing me to drop the glass onto the floor where, again, it broke. My last memory of the scene is that image: the shard breaking one final time. As it fell, another of Roberto's guards speared me at the waist, his shoulder ramming into my ribs like a bolt from a ballista. The air purged from my lungs, and then I hit the floor. A layer of dust lifted from the carpet.

René, in his one voicemail sent since the incident, relayed that I'd taken a right hook to the jaw, and then a stiffer one to the other side; three security guards had circled me, punted my ribs, and stomped me with combat boots. It may have been a dream, although some part of me remembers having heard a woman's cries over the intercom in those final moments, followed by the sound of an off-hook tone, Zz zz zz zz, humming as the scene faded out.

I waited through the emergency room triage, holding my ribs and taking only shallow breaths. The walls were scuffed and creamy and there was no one there to see me except two police officers whose squad cars were parked in a fire route outside. I peeled the ice pack off my forehead, allowing the reddish welt to breathe. I scanned the room from end to end. There were rows of linked seats reminiscent of an airport terminal. Babies cried in the arms of their mothers and old folks on the doorsteps of death slept with their mouths open, necks craned back.

Four hours passed before I had my wrist stitched back together, and another three hours before I got X-rays. (Bruises, no breaks).

Three pairs of cops rotated out to oversee my stay at the hospital. “Sorry,” I told them. “I’m so sorry. I’m not usually like this.” In repeating these statements, I felt, over and over, the redemptive power of the truth.

The attending nurse gave me a shot in my arm and then went over the results of my X-rays. She told me to avoid strenuous physical activity for at least a couple of weeks and forbid me from balling a fist with my right hand for forty-eight hours to let the stitches properly embed.

“You can expect post-concussion symptoms, too,” she said with a sarcastic cheer. “I advise against looking directly into light sources.” The hospital room was lit up like a runway, with sterile white lights beaming down in rows. I decided not to call her bluff and returned my gaze to the cold checkerboard floor.

In the hallway, the officers put me back in cuffs and grabbed me by the arms and escorted me out of the hospital. The next two nights were spent in a holding cell until my hearing.

When she arrived at the bail hearing, Lisa wailed in front of the officers present and refused to look at me, even after I called out to her and apologized. I told her I was ashamed and

that it was nobody's fault but my own. She posted my bail (five grand pulled from her RRSP) and left, dodging any interaction with me before speeding off the lot and out of my sight.

On my first day in court, the room was loaded with bright lights that swung softly overhead. My head rang with the pangs of sobriety and post-concussion sensitivities. I elected to wear a three-piece suit with a navy vest underneath and even shaved the last of my hair for my appearance in court—revealing a smooth, complete scalp—and, surprisingly, it worked to some avail. I defended myself, pled guilty, and made it clear that I was committed to reform—to something new. In some ways, starting over; though I couldn't bring myself to look Roberto in the eye while he took the stand. The Crown Attorney didn't buy it, but the Justice of the Peace ended up knocking the aggravated assault charge down to assault with a weapon.

As the verdict was read, I sealed my eyes and kept them closed until the dream was over and I could go home, to be warm and safe again. I wanted my children in my arms. I wanted to apologize for everything I had put them through. I wanted to explain to them that their father was a sick man but, as with any sickness, there's no antidote like time; that there's nothing that forgiveness cannot heal; that in the meantime, this was the grace that our family needed; that I'd order Chinese for supper and we would rent a movie—Shelby's choice; that things would be over before we knew it. We would fall asleep together on the couch in the glow of the DVD menu screen as it looped over and over forever.

The first five nights out of jail were spent in withdrawal in a movie theatre parking lot, sleeping in a car whose floor was scattered with empty takeout boxes and greased receipts. There was a payphone in the plaza which I'd call home from every few hours, most of the time only for it to ring through. Occasionally the fluttering pang of excitement would come and go as the

sound of the receiver lifted on the other end, before being smothered by the staticky noise of it slamming back down on its holster. I liked to imagine that it was Shelby or Dylan's hands picking up the phone, optimistic that we might hear each other's voices again; that they hung up frantically, only in fear of what abuse their mother might inflict if they were caught answering it.

On the sixth day, unshaven and unwashed, I drove to the house, arriving at Lisa's doorstep to confess everything and to start the long march of reconstruction. It wasn't yet fully dark and, if it were summertime, the crows would've been cawing, the crickets chattering in the grass. But this was the dead of winter and nothing moved. The cherry trees on the front lawn were still, the air lifeless. I rang the doorbell, which made organ sounds that reverberated through the foyer, followed by the sound of pattering footsteps and inaudible voices calling to one another inside. My mind clicked on at the sound of life humming away behind the door, which made my own demise seem momentarily less imminent. I reached into my pocket, popped a loose breath mint under my tongue, and said a quiet little prayer. One of the jail prayers.

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the—"

"Kevin, you have five seconds to get the fuck off our property or I'm calling the police— do not *fuck* with us Kev, you don't want that." Lisa was shouting from deep behind the door. "You're not supposed to be here. You want to get locked back up, Kevin? That's what's going to happen if you don't turn back around this goddamn instant and get your drunk ass back to wherever you crawled out of."

What words I couldn't make out I had to substitute with my own, though I knew this voice like a song. In sixteen years of marriage I learned to filter it into a sweet tune, so there was nothing harsh about it, rendering it blunt, empathetic, ineffective, disallowing it to register. I pounded my fist against the door.

“I want to apologize.”

For a moment there was silence.

“That’s why I’m here, to talk. That’s it. I promise, Lisa, I will leave after I’ve said my peace. How does that sound?”

“Kevin, I am dead serious,” she said through the door. A hurried conversation was being held on the other side, discernible only in fragments.

“Is that you, Dylan? Dyl’, if you’re back there, unlock the door for me for me, eh?”

A larger body stomped up to the door and pulled the deadbolt back. The door crept open and the hollow interior of the home revealed itself. Dylan, taller and fatter than the last I’d seen him, was front and center, with Shelby and Lisa, willowy and unaged, hovering behind.

“Dylan, buddy, your dad’s missed you.”

“Dad, step back. Get back in your car and drive away.”

“Dylan, kiddo, please.” I stepped up into the doorway only to be reflexively shoved back down with a one-handed push to the chest.

“You’re either going to drive your ass off that driveway, or your head’s going to roll down it.”

“Dylan, no—”

The smell of disinfectant waded out from the kitchen, along with cherrywood, and a combination of domestic scents that, together, recalled the enchanting, irretrievable warmth of home. Dylan lunged at me with palms out, stiff-arming me below the throat. The world, as it unraveled around me, began to ring. Only the sound of Shelby’s screams made it through, arriving between my ears with a hideous intensity.

Dylan's hand gripped my throat, forcing me further from the entrance to the house. "Do you understand? We don't fucking want you here."

I backpedaled down the cobble steps and stumbled onto my ass and sat there looking up at the shadow of my son towering above me. He tumbled down with all his new bodyweight that he did not yet know how to command. Dylan mounted me. Beneath him, I flailed helplessly on the dirt where I belonged. I tried to form words, to tell him the answer to some mystery that would make him stop, surrender, and sit next to me in silence, but there was no mystery.

The old Christmas lights hung above the entranceway, lining the top of the garage, casting the side of Dylan's face in a multicolor glow. I could see that he was scared, hesitant of where to go from here. He slowly let up, both of us exhausted, and lifted his hands from my neck.

"Have you lost your goddamn mind, kid?" I wheezed.

That's when Dylan wound up, pulling his shoulder back and tilting his head to the side.

He landed a hard right square to my left temple. He followed it up with a flurry of lefts and rights; he grabbed me by the collar of my jacket and shook me up and down so my head bobbed and cracked against the cold hard earth. This was the first time I had cried in front of my son. I covered my face and pleaded for pity.

When I opened my eyes, Dylan had disappeared. I sat up, using my elbows to prop my aching body off the ground, feeling everything twinge as a hot, numbing pain radiated from the top of my spine in one downrushing shot.

I rolled onto my side and asked Lisa what I had done. She hadn't heard me. She had her hands clasped behind her head while she paced back and forth like a mad person.

I climbed to my feet and stumbled toward her, arms outstretched, offering her a big hug and a busted-up smile.

“Come here, Lis’. Let me say something.”

She backed up onto the patio, desperate to keep distance between us.

“Get the fuck away from me before I scream. I’ll fucking scream, Kevin—I’m serious.”

Her hands shielded her face.

“Alright then.” I turned to go inside.

As I walked through the doorway, I heard a wrenching scream from behind me.

“Stop—Kevin, stop!”

An antique, mercury-backed mirror hung above the bench where we stored our shoes by the door. Carved from nineteenth-century wood; a vestige of the old world. We had bought it together with money raised from our wedding. “Oh, why the hell not,” we had thought, turning it from side to side in our hands, sixteen years earlier. I switched the lights on and now, in the mirror’s reflection, I could see everything. Drying blood pooled in my hair, and a stream leaked from an eyebrow, running down my cheek, onto my neck, and under my shirt. A droplet fell onto the welcome rug. I smiled, examining the blood between my teeth.

I studied the art on the living room walls—each of them old birthday gifts, auction pickups, or pay day splurges. I parted the curtains on the bay window overlooking the driveway, revealing Lisa frantically dialing a number on her phone and, behind me, I could hear Dylan thundering in from the kitchen. He rounded the corner with a serrated knife in his hand.

“Shelby—*Shelb*, come down. Tell the police what’s going on. Dad got inside.” Dylan called into the hall.

A creaking sound came from above. It was sweet Shelby, opening the door to her room. She shouted down to Dylan, telling him that she was already on the line with the operators.

Dylan held the little knife with his outstretched arm and sidestepped closer and closer, not saying a word but with eyes that said it all. His lips were pursed, and he had a violent look about him. The knife point arrived a foot from my bloodied face, suspended in place. We stood there, motionless; a blade separating father from son, man from child. Christmas music played on the television in the basement, the noise lingering through the floorboards.

I looked around the tip of the blade to see the face of the boy who held it. He was crying, making a tight face, fighting to keep it all together. Sucking in breathes between sobs, he broke down piece by piece, letting his arms fall to his waist and his head slump down chin to chest.

“Why didn’t you listen to us?”

Dylan looked up at me with tearful eyes and then closed them tight. He swore, exhaled slowly, and then threw the knife behind his shoulder, landing on the hallway floor. He used his hands to cover his face, pressing his thumb and forefinger into his eyelids.

I stepped forward to embrace him. To wrap my bloody, mauled body around his.

He backed away.

I stepped forward.

He backed away.

“Stop.”

“Dylan,” I said. “Stop this. This nonsense. We’re all we’ve got.”

“No.”

“Please, Dylan,” I said with arms stretched wide.

“Get him away from me,” Dylan called.

There was a moment of pause as I did not realize who he was speaking to. Then a red glow flickered against the wall, coming from behind me.

“Just go with them.”

Spinning police lights shone through the window, splashing the walls blue and red. Dylan wiped the tears from his face and blinked rapidly. He looked me levelly in the eye and said “Go away, Dad.”

I turned around to find two cops behind me. A third was outside speaking to a frantic Lisa and taking notes.

“Do we have a problem here?”

I smiled a bloody smile and let out a small, exasperated laugh. I put my wrists behind my back, tapping them together, as if to say, “Take me away.” The officers wore salty leather boots.

“Why don’t you take a step outside with us?” said the taller of the two cops who looked at me as if I was not a person at all, but rather some rabid animal or maimed dog or some dying, whimpering, unhuman thing. They walked me to the back of their cruiser, pressed me up against its side and squeezed me into handcuffs so tight they turned my wrists purple.

Lisa watched from the top of the driveway, sobbing and wailing between statements she gave to the third officer. Shelby, wearing pink pajamas, a fuzzy fleece blanket, and purple headphones shaped like cat ears, stood with her arms latched around her mother’s waist. The red and blue cruiser lights swirled around and around their faces.

The officers finished questioning them and got in the cruiser. I watched my family weep as we backed out of the driveway, their faces telling of some great betrayal. As we drove away, Dylan came out and sat on the front steps with a placid, relieved look about him. Shelby and Lisa

turned to go inside, walking shoulder to shoulder, and motioned for Dylan to join them. The house was at peace again, and, for a fleeting moment, it looked like home.

We passed the dog park we used to take our terrier and throw a tennis ball; we passed the swing set where I used to give the kids under-doggies, watching them rise higher and higher and laugh; we passed the school where I would walk them every morning and quiz them on their spelling tests until they were perfect. We left the neighborhood I knew so well and entered a new one that I didn't, lined by industrial lots and old brick factories with shattered windows.

"Lisa," I screamed through the window. I pressed my face up against it and used my head like a pathetic battering ram. I screamed again through the bleeding window, and then another time, then shouted out for my children.

There were many weekends when the kids were young where Lisa and I took the family camping. The campground was in a trailer park up north, but we didn't stay in the trailers with the drunks, illiterates, homeless, or pill heads. We would park at our rental site, grab our tent, mattresses, and food for the day, and then hike through the forest until we hit the riverbank upstream where we would set up for the day.

Like clockwork, Shelby would yank at my pant leg once we made it to the mouth of the watershed. I would hoist her up on my shoulders and carry her the rest of the way through the dark tree canopy where, from up above, she could see it all. Dylan's little hand would be held in Lisa's, resolute in showing the world he could hike on his own two feet like his daddy. I'd keep focused on carving out the footpath and kicking away the sticks and the leaves for the two of them trailing behind, while Shelb was on flyswatter duty. At least once a hike she smacked me in

the forehead or eyeball trying to bat away a horse fly. Occasionally she would spit in my hair trying not to swallow a mosquito.

At the halfway point there was a rockface cliff overlooking a waterfall. We would stop here and peer over the edge on our way to the camp site, stopping to watch the white-water rush into the river. Lisa would hold a tearful Dylan away from the edge of the cliff while Shelb and I would look down at the thirty-foot death-drop into the rocky water. We would call Dylan a chicken and hop on the spot to scare him, pretending to leap over the edge, and make him hide behind his mother's legs.

When we arrived at the campsite, Lisa kept the kids distracted while I made a clearing in the grass, propped the tent, and blew up the mattresses. One for us and a skinny one next to it for the kids to sleep head-to-foot. Once Lisa's spell wore off, Dylan wandered over to help me get the site ready. He held up the loose tent poles over his head and swung them in circles. But he looked like he was helping, and that was all either of us could ask for.

"You're the best," I said.

"No, you're the best," he said.

"You're the best."

"No, you're the best."

"You're the best."

"You're the best."

"You're the best."

"You're the best."

"You're the best."

"You're the best."

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“You’re the best.”

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DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“You’re the best.”

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They held me in an overnight detention room at the police station. I shared a cell with drunks and barefoot drifters. I was let go from the holding center around noon the next day after having gotten my wounds sterilized, a few questions answered to determine whether I was a threat to public safety, and a couple hours of sleep on an unpadded wooden bench. They gave me back my shoe laces, wallet, and cell phone and relayed a message from Lisa saying that she had moved my car to the hotel parking lot on Davis Avenue, and that the keys were on top of the rear tire.

“She wanted me to inform you that this will be the final communication you receive from her,” one guard said.

I got a cab from the station to my hotel. The keys were where Lisa said she’d left them, so I crawled inside and fired up the engine. The sun’s glare caught the glint of the windshield, and I saw, for a passing second, the outline of my reflection in the glass. The smooth shape of my head, the shallow shoulders, the sunken cheeks. I flicked on the A/C and reeled the windows down, because I stunk and my breath stunk and the car stunk and the whole world stunk like its insides had turned rotten, died, and were forgotten.

Before I could move into my first apartment after getting kicked out of the house, I spent two and half weeks surviving either in my car or on Joe Kokomo’s basement futon.

I met Kokomo during my undergrad while working nights stocking shelves at a grocery store. A farcically tall and lanky kid. He had a hairline crawling further up his forehead by the

day, circular thick-rimmed glasses, and a squeaky voice like an ungreased machine. He had grown up on a broccoli farm which, at one time, supplied half the province, he told us.

Kokomo eventually got a place with his wife way out in the country and had themselves a couple of daughters. Out in bumpkin country, in a hamlet with nothing but a wooden, two-lane bridge arched over a stream where the children hunt for frogs. On the weekends, I drove over to clean up and take a break from the job search. Kokomo's wife, Wanda, was a round, angry woman who was only a few nanograms of cortisol away from staging a Greek tragedy on the day I showed up in her driveway.

"Joe, you *fucking* pushover. Get this sad sack of shit off my property and tell him he's not allowed within a hundred meters—you got that?" Wanda shrieked at her husband through the screen door. "It's that or I'm taking the kids."

"Wan', please, let me handle this. Kevin's all right." Kokomo whispered back at her, careful not to let their daughters overhear.

"You're forty years old and you're letting kids from the grocery store come over and walk all over you, Joseph—you're still doing that? When are you going to grow a pair and tell your buddies that enough's enough?" Those were the words she said, about twenty feet across the room from me, when she came downstairs and found me laid out on the couch on the first morning after I arrived.

Her daughters were sitting behind her, doomed on the staircase. In their lifetime, they will hear their mother complain about cold salads to a hundred restaurant managers. A million hairdressers get cussed out for overdoing their highlights. But these girls, still so young, had long, correctable lives ahead of them.

I had dinner with Kokomo and his family on five reluctant occasions and did two loads of laundry. On the first night he slapped me on the shoulder and said, “You know, it’s going to be fine. You ain’t the first one I’ve seen go through this and fuck if you’ll be the last. Old Paul was on that same couch not two years ago. It happens, buddy. It ain’t your fault.”

“Yep.” I nodded, hoping he would take his hand off me.

“The universe happens this way, big guy. You into spirituality or what?”

“No,” I said.

“How come—nothing about the cosmos, or amethyst or whatever?”

“Nothing, Kokomo,” I said.

He patted me on the shoulder, and slid his hand off me.

“Kev, hang in there. Dylan and Shelby need you strong right now.”

That’s when the levy broke. What started as a fluttering of the eyes flooded into a fit of sobs, right then and there with his arm around me, as I sucked in big breaths without speaking a word.

I swallowed bitter saline tears long into the night while the crickets buzzed in the knee-high grass outside the basement window. In the morning, the futon pillows were covered with crusty tear and snot stains and I felt like a beaten down piece of meat, ready to be thrown to the wolves.

The next night, I drove back into town for my first recovery meeting out of jail. I picked up my white keychain, bought the Basic Text, and locked both in my glove compartment when I got in the car.

So foggy and diluted was my mind in those days after my release that I cannot remember much of that evening. But there was a black man, another ex-con, named Jermain, who sat next

to me. During speaking circle, I told the group that my name was Kevin and that I was an alcoholic. I confessed about all that I had done to my family. I would admit my shame. I cried and, between sobs, told them that I felt the sun had set on me at age forty-three.

Jermain spoke next, and with the cadence of a dying robot, its batteries starved. “What’s up, I’m Jermain, and I’m an alcoholic,” he said. “Now, listen boy,” he said, looking down at me. “The sun don’t set for no one—it just keep going round.”

“You have one new voice message. To review your voice messages press—”

Beep

“Hi Kevin, it’s Steph from Glen Cedar Properties to give you a heads up about your keys. We’ll have them available for pickup today at the Leslie Street office by noon. I’ll be on duty today until six this evening, so ask the desk for Steph and I’ll be able to help you. Transferring the keys should only take a couple minutes so feel free to pull up out front and we can get it out of the way in no time. If you have any questions or if you can’t make it tonight, feel free to give me a shout at nine o’ fi—”

I pulled the phone from my ear and squinted at the little digital clock in the upper corner of the screen and discovered that it was already ten past noon. Everything that had sat on my lap overnight I stuffed under the passenger seat: the blanket, the newspaper, and an empty bottle of Merlot with the words LAST CALL scrawled on the label in permanent marker. Then I took off to get the keys.

When I arrived at the desk and asked for Steph, the man behind the counter studied my face before picking up the phone and dialing an extension. He did not break his gaze until he put the receiver back down.

A minute passed until a short blonde woman of maybe fifty entered the lobby from a side corridor, asking the receptionist where I was. He nodded toward me, sitting by the entrance, and she started over toward me wearing a wide, artificial smile.

“Kevin, we meet at last,” she said cheerily.

“At long last,” I said, nervously.

“You’re probably itching to get this over with and start moving in, aren’t you?”

She laid a stack of paper down on the counter and spread them out like a hand of cards, pointing to each that I was to sign and where. I hunched over the counter, took the pen, and marked my initials inside boxes. I could smell the wine and lunch meat emanate from my clothes and wade out across the counter.

“Now let me flip to the next page for you,” she said, revealing a fresh new slate of empty boxes. I smiled falsely and wrote my initials wherever she pointed.

KL

KL

She turned the page over.

KL

KL

KL

She flipped to the next page.

KL

KL

Once more, her hand wavering.

KL

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

KL

Kevin Little

I took the keys from her hands, apologized, and drove away.

The key rattled into the keyhole and fell to the right, shooting the bolt free. The oak door screeched and drifted open, the scent of fresh mahogany and Lysol meeting me on my first step inside. I saw the light of the early afternoon shine into the room through thin, papery curtains. I threw my bags on the cherry floor and walked inside and saw the bay windows I had read about in the classified. I saw how they stretched from the ceiling down to my knees, glowing like portals to someplace cold and inhospitable and invisible through the white.

I unloaded the pots and pans from a box in my trunk and laid them piece by piece on the kitchen counter. I flipped the saucepan over, letting Lisa's old silverware crash into the sliding drawer next to the sink.

There was no furniture on the floor, only boxes piled on top of each other and a broom and dustpan leaning against the corner of the room. I laid a beach towel on the empty living room floor, my bed for the night. In the morning I woke up across the room, having rolled to the still-darkened windows, flailing and crying out to someone faceless in my dreams.

I met with Frida, my probation officer. During those first few months we would meet for coffee on Mondays to talk about any conversation I could hold down: football, weather, the cost of food, the cost of rent, political unrest in southeast Asia, job prospects, travel, her kids and how they've gotten older.

On the fourth week we sat across from each other at the library, talking about Kenya and how the justice system works in her parents' village. She leaned into the table and spoke softly,

with a tender African lilt, explaining how violent criminals, like rapists and assailants, are corrected through restorative healing. The whole community gets together in a circle and speaks, chants, sings, touches, feels with the palms of their hands. We both agreed that this was a preferential administration of justice.

“The only recourse,” she said, “if the healing circle fails to rehabilitate the convict back into the community, is to exile the man into the wild and to execute them if they return.”

We laughed about this, and she smiled her big smile. In that moment I felt like I was finally somebody worth helping. That help, if such a thing existed, led somewhere. I thought about my return, my execution.

I picked the phone receiver off the kitchen wall and dialed the numbers of the last phone call I promised I would ever make. It rang five endless rings and then stopped, and I was asked to record a message for Shelby. She was the only one left who hadn't blocked my number in her phone.

“Hi Shelb, it's Grumpy. I'm calling to check in on you and let you know I'm doing alright today. Can you guess why? That's right, I got called in for an interview. It's looking like I've got a job lined up. You know the old golf course we used to park at and watch the airplanes take off from? That's the one. I'll be the grunt running around collecting errant balls from the woods, maintaining the grass—all that menial crap no one else wants to do. You'll find out all about that first-hand when you start working, won't you? Believe me, you will. Alright, well, I'm about to leave for this interview now. I'm going to go drive up to the club and park where we used to watch the planes go by. Wish me luck.”

I hung up the receiver and it rattled, then clicked shut. A lone key dangled from a nail jutting out of the wall. I grabbed it, left the apartment, and walked down a single flight of stairs into the main lobby of the building, a large foyer bombarded by milky sunlight beaming in through flanking windows.

The golf course was to close within an hour. Through the unwashed windshield I saw nothing in the sky but a dimming blue. An arched sign overhead welcomed me to Rosethorn Country Club.

I walked quickly toward the clubhouse, a brilliant white brick building ahead, led by a strip of pavement that gave way to cobblestone. A greeter met me at the doors. She wore a black button-up blouse, a red turtleneck underneath, and a dimpled smile.

“Are you a member, sir?”

“Not yet, I’m not.”

I took a brochure from her hand and told her I had arrived to interview with the groundskeeper.

“Yes, Michel, that’s who you want. He should still be in his office,” she said, her cheery smile having grown wide. “Best you head down and give his door a knock before he takes off—you never know with him.”

Inside were two greeters in white golf shirts, both teenaged boys, who asked if I needed any assistance today.

“I’m looking for Michel’s office.”

“Right, you’ll take the staircase just ahead, go down and then left at the bottom and make your way to the end of the hall. There’s an elevator there, take it down to 2G. If the elevator’s

out of commission, there's a stairwell on your right. Once you're out of the elevator you'll see room 2G1. That's his."

The stairs were made of restored pine, a relic of the original farmhouse construction. At the bottom, a sign read CLUB LOCKERS, PRO SHOP, BANQUET B, MINI LINKS under a red arrow pointing left. I started down the opposite wing, wandering through a hallway lit by long, spotless windows that stretched from ceiling to feet. I continued to the end, passing no one, and found the elevator door with a lone orange pylon knocked over in front of it.

Ding. The elevator arrived. Its panel had five buttons illuminated by a yellow light: 2, 1, G, 2G, B3. I let out a long exhalation and wondered why I had been told to take an elevator down a single floor.

The doors peeled open, revealing a new, wider hall floodlit by old tiered chandeliers that looked like upside-down wedding cakes. Rows of cherrywood double doors lined both sides of the hall until its end, where it turned off to the left.

I spun around slowly, making a full circle, and laughed before pushing through the nearest set of doors. On the other side was another hallway, this one lined with single doors.

"What the *fuck* is going on?" I asked aloud, hoping some white-shirted greeter would pop out through a door. I proceeded down the hall and, to my surprise, room 2G1 was the last on the left, its door propped open with a folding chair. I tapped on the door and poked my head in.

"Who's that?" A man's voice carried from a closet somewhere.

The room was cavernous, too large for a standard office and visibly repurposed from its original state as a conference space or banquet chamber. There were large sets of doors on the opposite end of the room. It occurred to me, then, that I had come through a back entrance.

"It's Kevin, here to speak with Michel Brodeur."

Walking out of the broom closet, the man carried two sets of green coveralls draped from clothes hangers.

“Calvin?”

“Kevin.”

“Kevin, Michel. Pleased to meet you.” He held out a hand so big it could be a magician’s prop. The pale bearded man, with receding ginger hair and standing at a broad six feet, clasped hands with me and whipped my arm like a strand of string.

“You’re dressed sharp, Kevin, only problem is your shoes are too shiny.” He laughed, and I laughed with him. “Good man, you can riff on yourself. That’s what we like to see here—you passed the first test.”

“Rather my shoes than my head, at least.” I rubbed the top of my bare head with a closed fist and grinned. Michel smiled and gazed down at the carpet.

“Listen, Kevin. I’ll be honest, this slipped my mind today. I swear, it’s not usually like this down here. As you can see, they put me up here on a whim last week thanks to the renos. Can you believe it?” He looked side to side at a room appearing too pristine to be his own. “This is what I’ll call home for the better part of a year. They might even put up dividers and partition the room into multiple units, I’ve been told. Who the hell knows with this place. This is the kind of thing they let you know about by sliding a sheet of paper under your door, you know. Anyway, enough of that—have a seat, buddy.”

With one hand, Michel clutched the chair propped against the door and unfolded it in the center of the room. The door slammed behind him.

Michel meandered into the broom closet and snagged another folding chair. He snapped it open and set it down across from the other. The two chairs sat in the middle of a velvety white carpet

that sprawled from one edge of the floor to the other, sitting perfectly alone in a gigantic, barren underground banquet room. I took a seat and crossed my legs, matting down the knee creases with my hands.

Michel, a French man of maybe fifty, perked up his eyebrows. “A little intimate for a first date, but it’ll have to do,” he said, laughed. I exhaled audibly and screwed up the side of my mouth. “Looking at your file, obviously the first standout is your legal background. Called to the bar in ninety-nine, articulated on Bay Street, jumped into mergers. So, tell me—why the hell are you here?”

“Well...” I ran my hand over my scalp. “I did my first two summers during law school at Rupie’s as a clerk. Sat in on two or three big signings per quarter. We were representing commodities at that time, so naturally I absorbed a good deal of information about mining operations and best practices in precious metals acquisitions.”

I read carefully off the interior script I had written and refined so many nights before.

“I was the work horse. The grunt wrangling overseas clients on the phone at one in the morning back when none of the older guys knew how to work an email. I kept my grades competitive, received a couple of awards within the Faculty—one, you’ll see there on my CV, for a case brief on the regulatory barriers to IP harmonization across the Eurozone, you might appreciate that—and impressed a couple big wigs at my senior moot. Next thing you know I’ve got an offer to study for the bar exam at their offices in Toronto and things moved quickly from there. A year of articles followed by another three as an associate. Worked on a good thirty, forty commodities mergers, including several Fortune 500 firms. Bounced me around to Chile, Nicaragua, Morocco—where else—Buenos Aires. I missed a good many family suppers because

I had to work the phone in the hallway. The kids would hear me yelling and complaining about disclosures or trial dates through the walls, you know. They were right there with me.”

“Is that right, you got kids?”

“Two. They were with me the whole way.”

“Law school and all that?”

“The whole nine yards.”

“Your classmates must have thought you were the old man on campus, huh?”

I laughed.

“I figure my seniority worked in my favor. The moot judges, interview panels, even the professors saw something more in me because of it. I wasn’t the snot-nosed kid fresh out of undergrad with a trust fund to catch my fall, you know. I was a survivalist of sorts.”

“You make a compelling case.”

I nodded, uncrossing my legs and then crossing them again with the opposite knee on top.

“Now,” he said, in his polyglot English. “That’s all well and good. But can you steer a lawnmower?” I gave him the self-pitying laugh he wanted to hear, which quietly veered into the genuine. “Of course, I’m riffing with you. It’s all in good fun. But remind me again why you’re interviewing to be a groundskeeper at a suburban country club. I was about to toss your resume in the rubbish, thinking it was a mistake, until I saw you had dismissed yourself from the bar.”

“Well, you’ll see there in my cover letter that—”

“I know your application mentioned it, but this is something I need to hear in person,”

Michel said, noticeably straighter in his seat.

“There isn’t much more to it aside from what’s written on the paper,” I said. “I got sick. In August 2009 doctors found a T2 tumor on my prostate, about the size of a pea, stage II, and

surgery followed eleven days later, and then radiation in September. At first, they were all smiles at Rupie's. You know, leaving cards and flowers on your desk and whatnot. By October it was clear that I would have to take leave until the end of the year. That's when the tone changed."

Michel nodded along sternly.

"My second round of radiation ended in December, and right off the hop they were trying to drag me back into the office to help with yearend. I told them no. I was in no condition for that. I was bedridden. I had to call my twelve-year-old to help me get up to use the washroom for god's sake. I was a mess. But the round of radiation proved successful. Since I was in complete remission, I wouldn't need chemo. That was my little Christmas present from the gods of fortune."

"No kidding," Michel said.

"To cut a long story short, I wasn't ready to work again until almost February. By that point, they had been down my throat for nearly two months. When I gave them a call to let them know I'd be in the next morning, they redirected me to global headquarters where I sat on hold for an hour just for them to tell me they were putting together a severance package. They were laying me off and letting a twenty-year-old intern in New York tell me about it. I disputed the grounds of the dismissal, since I thought my contract was clear on the matter, so that spring it went all the way up to the tribunal-level at the law society. The tribunal sided with me, they appealed, and the appellate tribunal overturned the ruling on a procedural error. I went home with my severance in hand."

I cleared my throat, buying myself the space to consider how I should blend truth with fiction.

“That’s not where it ends though. The cancer had taken its toll on the family, and my wife and I separated that May. She has full custody of the kids now. At first I was still on the job market, looking for senior legal counsel positions. I made it to a few interviews, but the economy was down, way down. I considered switching careers. Suddenly my mother got sick. I got a phone call from her telling me that she had come down with bronchitis and it was getting worse. Turns out it was pneumonia. I went up to Muskoka to visit her, and she passed away two days later in her sleep. That was hard. On the kids, myself, all of us. That day I abandoned the legal profession. Frankly, I was already jaded by the law society, and this set me over the edge. I took my share of the inheritance, tucked it away, withdrew my admission from the bar, and now I’m looking to rebuild from scratch. This is the scratch.”

Michel sat, eyebrows cocked, in outward disbelief of what he had just been told. “I don’t, exactly, know how to follow that up gracefully. Does this mean that I can trust you to stick around if I decide to take you on?”

“Absolutely.”

“Do I have your word?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good.” There was a momentary pause. “You will be working in a variety of roles. The title ‘groundskeeper’ doesn’t quite do the job justice. On day one we might have you mowing lawns and raking the sand traps, yes, but on the next you might be stuck stocking fridges, storing and renting out equipment, supervising the racquet courts, we might have you fill in in the clubhouse for a while.”

“So, I’m a mule.”

“A workhorse, more like it.”

“I like mule.”

“Fine, mule it is.”

“I’m your mule.”

I walked out onto the back greens a new man. One with a place to be the next morning. There was a home waiting for me in the days ahead, somewhere expecting me. A new family to build. The papers were signed.

I stood alone, without words, looking out onto the empty second hole fairway where a freshly mown clearing ran through sycamore trees. A dim, carroty sun sank beneath the haze behind them, and I watched as it plunged further on the horizon.

At home, a message was blinking on the answering machine. I ran to the wall and grabbed the phone from the receiver with my boots dragging mud and shaven grass onto the hardwoods. I pressed # on the dial pad and listened to the sound of my daughter’s voice with the speaker held to one ear and my palm cupped over the other.

“Hi Grumpy, thanks for the call, sorry I missed it. Whenever you call I always think it’s, like, going to be about something depressing, but this one made me really happy. It’s going to be so awesome now that you’re working again. Plus, I always loved that golf course and watching the planes take off with you there. Anyway, I’m so glad you’ll be working there from now on. Maybe one day we’ll come down and, like, shoot some golf balls together—is that how you say it...*shoot* golf balls? Or we could just chill or whatever. But, yeah, good luck at your job and let me know how you like it. I hope you make lots of money and maybe send a few bucks to your favorite daughter,” she laughed into the microphone which freed up some hidden, pent-up tension in my chest that I didn’t know existed.

“But we’re enjoying life out west right now,” she continued. “School is great, and Edmonton is nice, but it’s so far away from my old friends and everyone. And obviously you too. Plus, it’s, like, so fricking cold up here. Wait...mom’s asking me to get off the phone—you know how she is about this. Anyway, talk soon. Hop on one of those jets that fly over your head and come see me out west, so we can catch up. Okay, I have to go, love you.”

I slid the phone back into its holster, paused, and then took it back out. Holding it to my ear again, I pressed #, turned my back to the wall, and slid onto the floor where I sat and listened again and again until the morning came.

In the morning there was rain, and the range and links were closed. Michel met me outside the club doors at eight and walked me to the wet room where he handed me a pair of orange-stripped coveralls and a pair of yellow landscaping boots that went up to my knees.

He led me to the driving range and said, “Now’s the best time to get the balls, before they muck up,” which I did not fully understand. There were net walls, thirty feet tall or higher, flanking both sides of the driving range, peppered with signposts across the field reading 100, 150, 200, 250, and 300. Lumpy mounds of earth made the fairway look like an old battlefield. The pouring rain didn’t help.

Michel handed me a mesh sack. “Come back when it’s full.”

I walked out onto the muck and headed for the nearest mound of mud. I placed my hands on the mushy earth, knelt, and started plucking balls from the sludge as the clouds began to part.

We wrung our soiled coveralls over a drain in the wet room. “How about we warm up a little,” said Michel.

“Two steaming cups of hot chocolate,” Michel said, upstairs at the bar. The bar was in the corner of a restaurant full of wooden alpine decor. “And don’t slip no whisky in those mugs either,” said Michel, laughing nervously to the burly man that took our order. A paper notice at the end of the bar read SOLARIUM CLOSED.

We sipped our drinks as regulars started dripping in. The first was named John, a giddy retired man in an argyle vest.

“A pleasure meeting you,” said John, hand outstretched. “Always good to see new bones walk through those doors. In my fifteen years here you’d think I’d have seen enough of you fellas come and go, but no, we hardly ever see anyone new show up nowadays. Maybe it’s not in the budget.” He grinned from dimple to dimple and shoved me playfully on the shoulder. “If you think you have your work cut out for you now, wait until you meet my granddaughter. Little bugger’s always running where she doesn’t belong. She’ll be up in your hair, just wait.”

I smiled and asked him what brought him to the club on a shitty day like this.

“It’s nice to have company on days like these,” he said. I scanned the room as he said this. The three of us were the only ones in the whole restaurant. Even the server had disappeared somewhere.

“And where’s all this company hiding?”

“They’re hunkering down in the mess lounge,” he said, glassy eyed. “What do you say, are you too busy? You should come introduce yourself to the old boys. They’d love to have someone new to shoot the breeze with, you know. It’s good to have fresh blood around.” He got up off his stool and clasped Michel and I by the shoulder.

Michel’s subdued expression counted him out. We exchanged nods. “Be back by noon,” Michel said, blowing into his mug.

The lighting in the elevator revealed that John was a man of seventy, maybe seventy-five. His pale, combed hair and mustache sat at the foot of a tall, drooping nose, though the light wrinkles in his face still looked fresh from middle age. He looked the part of a country clubber, from the beige khakis to the blue vest layered over a collared shirt of a darker shade.

“What do you shoot out here, son?”

“Huh?”

“What do you shoot?”

“Sorry?”

“I take it you play this course often?”

“Never,” I said, realizing his question. “I mean, I would love to. But I’ve never teed off at this course, believe it or not. I’ve been driving past for years, too.”

“Oh, we’ll change that,” he said, veneers on display.

The elevator doors opened, and John led me down the carpeted hallway where we were met by a pair of greeters whose names I had forgotten. They held open two wooden doors and said something about the weather as we passed through them. On the other side, the smell of burnt tobacco and cologne permeated the air. We passed rows of tables without tablecloths, flat screen TVs hanging from wall mounts, and a small wet bar manned by a woman no older than thirty whose fire red hair was held back by a yellow bandana.

The woman wore a red plaid shirt underneath tight overalls that tapered around her curved waist. She leaned against the faux wooden bar and made heart-shaped eyes at John as we approached.

“Who’d you drag in from the cold today, John?”

“I made a friend, Abby.”

I held on to the side of the bar, assuming we would stop to chat, but John kept toddling ahead.

“Ahem,” she said, “John, aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

John stopped and turned to face her. “What’s that? Oh right, yes, sorry, I wasn’t thinking. The boys are playing canasta there, I think, in the back, and you know how I get antsy.”

“I sure do, John.” Abby turned to face me. “He’s brought you up for an interrogation, has he?”

“Honestly, I don’t quite know what he’s doing.” John was staring up at one of the TVs above the bar, watching someone on the pro circuit line up a putt.

Abby leaned all the way over the bar, resting her freckled face on the palms of her hands. “Isn’t he just adorable? John’s one of our day-ones. Been coming here as long as I’ve been alive.”

“Well, that can’t be very long, can it?”

Her wince retreated into a smile.

“Now that’s a putt,” John interjected. He then started off again toward the rear of the mess hall.

“And off he goes,” Abby followed him with her eyes. “Anyway, my name’s Abby. I hold it down in the mess lounge on weekdays.”

We shook hands over the counter, where I noticed the absence of a ring on her fingers.

“My name’s Kevin, I’m the guy who washes the mud off the golf balls in the range, I guess. Presumably other things too, but I’m not getting my hopes up.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “You’re precious. You and John will get along nicely, I think,” she said slyly. “Better catch up before you lose him, he’s an elusive one.”

I rapt the counter with my knuckles and then headed off to find John. Weaving between rows of tables, I found him entering a glass-encased section of the room at the very back. A sign plastered above the entrance door read SOLARIUM. Treading carefully so as not to startle him, I crept up beside John. As he reached for the door handle, I grabbed it and held it open, insisting he enter before me.

“A gentleman true and true,” he said.

I followed him inside and was met by a wave of humidity and the pungent rank of cigarette smoke. The transparent walls of the solarium dripped with condensation, the false runoff of smoke circulating through the air. The solarium was filled with commotion, nervous urgency, noise percolating from the roundtable in the center of the room. In the nearest corner was a green patterned sofa, a glass coffee table, and two empty armchairs. A glass ceiling above looked out onto dim, overcast skies stirring above us. I shut the door behind me and approached the roundtable where five men were seated playing cards.

“Is this the poor lad who was out there pulling balls from the mud this morning? Don’t tell me they worked you like that in this weather.”

“On day one, no less,” I said, meeting eyes with the players at the table. The youngest was no less than sixty, and the eldest was asleep with his head knocked back.

“Excuse Fernando, the pressure knocks him out, you know. Like the atmosphere,” said the youngest. “The air pressure gets to him.”

Fernando’s head bobbed down, flung back up. For a moment he choked audibly, and then resumed snoring.

“Pull up a seat, why don’t you?” one of them said.

I pulled an armchair from the wall to the table and sat down, legs crossed. “Kevin Little,” I said, with a short wave.

Four pairs of eyes glanced up from their cards, staring into me.

“Kevin,” one said, reaching to shake my hand. “I’m Richard.”

Hands were shaken all around: Richard, Ralph, Lorne, Ron, and Fernando, who had been shaken from his sleep. They wore rings on their fingers, rosaries from their necks, polished leather loafers with horsebit detail. None of them dressed for golf.

Their cards were put on hold while we traced dual histories: of the club and its origin as a poultry farmhouse, and of the players and their lowly urban beginnings. The conversation quickly steered toward myself and where I’d come from, something all ears at the table seemed eager to hear.

“Hold on,” said Richard, “you practiced at Rupie’s? I made partner at Rupie’s. I was a specialist in litigation for thirty years, Kevin—only a few bad dice rolls away from chief litigation counsel.”

“Were you? I’m more a generalist myself,” I said. “I was likely a year or two shy of deputy counsel before we parted ways. They were considering me for more senior roles, but there were complications—”

“Who was considering you?” Richard blurted out. “Andrea Moorhouse—or was it Roger?” He shifted his large frame to the front of his seat, leaning in closer on the table. His thick grey mustache scrunched up under his nose as he spoke.

“I had met Andrea, but nothing more than Christmas party banter and hallway handshakes. I never had the pleasure to work with Roger, though his reputation preceded him in

the office. Up until the end, our team worked on M&As and would have Roger's case work dropped on our desks. There were several cases where his judgment was gospel."

"Kevin, I worked with Roger for decades. We argued in front of the Superior Court of Justice seven times and the Court of Appeal another ten or so occasions. We were at the top of the totem in litigation. We called him 'ironman' in those days." There was a pause, and Richard looked off through the smoke toward the windows, where the overcast was beginning to lighten. "How long were you with them?"

"Nine years with Rupie's."

"Good man. Look at you," Richard said, "one of the boys."

"One of the boys," said a smiling Ralph, visibly older, his eyelids sagging under his brow.

"We'll catch up about Rupie's, Kevin—there will be some pints over that. But in the meantime, why don't you deal the man in, John."

John reached over the table and collected the hands from each player. He slotted them into a deck and shuffled them while I scanned from head to head. All were cleanly shaven, except for Richard, whose silvery goatee matched the scruffy white strands at the back of his bald head. Except for John, who wore a blue wool pullover, they all donned sport jackets and pocket squares and smug, straitlaced expressions.

John dealt us into the game, throwing two facedown cards in front of each player.

"No chips?"

"Cash only," said Richard, warming the tip of a cigar with a zippo.

"I'm afraid I haven't brought any," I said.

Richard let out the first mouthful of smoke, balancing the cigar between his teeth. He fished through his coat pocket before pulling out a money clip, snapping it open, and thumbing three hundred dollars onto the table in an assortment of ones, fives, tens, twenties, and fifties. “That should do you,” he said, pushing the bills toward me.

I looked curiously at the mass of money laying on the table. I did not know if it was now mine or his. “Thank you,” I said.

Ralph tapped his knuckles on the table, putting down a dollar bill. He nodded toward me as if to alert me to something I should already know.

“Big blind, Kevin,” Ralph croaked out.

I raised my eyebrows and put down two dollar bills, collecting the rest of the cash in a neat fold beside my cards. I swallowed and felt my throat close and then release as I turned over my cards. Queen of spades, three of hearts. I swallowed again, leaving my throat even drier.

Richard tapped the table.

John tapped the table.

Ron folded.

Fernando tapped the table.

Lorne tapped the table.

John burned the top card and laid it face down, then turned over three cards, face up, next to each other. Two of diamonds, four of hearts, five of hearts.

Richard tapped the table.

John tapped the table.

Fernando tapped the table.

Lorne tapped the table.

I looked at the money scattered around the table, listening to the pull of smoke through tobacco and the clinking of ice cubes in lowball glasses. I blinked, blinked again, coated an itch in my throat with saliva, and then slid fifteen dollars into the middle of the table.

Richard smirked and matched my bet.

John folded.

Fernando folded.

Lorne called.

John burned a card and then flipped a jack of clubs, adding it to the river.

The table was quiet, with all eyes anticipating my reaction. I put on a nervous grin and peeled back my hand again: queen of spades, three of hearts. In the river was a two, four, five, and jack—one lucky flip shy of a low straight.

I tapped the table, checking.

“Getting tired of holding that three, are you?” Richard laughed through pinched teeth. He flipped through his money clip, pulling out two bills and throwing them on the table, raising by thirty.

Lorne muttered something profane then let down his cards and folded. He turned to me and said, “What’s it going to be, boy?”

A chill ran inch by inch down my back. I thumbed through the money lying on the table. I plucked two bills from my pile and added them to the pot, calling Richard’s bet.

“Here we go then, lads,” said John, burning a card. His hand, streaked with wrinkles, hovered over the deck.

“For God’s sake John, flip the fucking card,” said Fernando.

John turned over the last card with two fingers. Queen of spades.

Richard burst into deep, red-faced laughter, joined first by Lorne and then followed by Ron, Ralph, and Fernando.

“Manners, boys, manners,” said John, accosting them.

Although they laughed, I heard nothing. I fingered the cash spread out in my hands, pulled out two fifties and slid them on the table.

A stillness fell on the room as they considered my raise. The brief lull was interrupted by a lone snicker before the room erupted once again into low, thunderous laughter around the table, with everyone taking part save for John, whose voice cut through.

“So, is this how we treat our guests now?”

“Please, we’re only having fun. Besides, Kevin’s no guest in this house,” said Richard, holding back his glee in snorts. He laid two hundred dollars on the table. “Ante up.”

I flung two hundred dollars on the table.

“You can’t be serious,” said Fernando, amused.

“Wait and see,” I said, impulsively.

Taking my play in earnest cast the game in a new light. The table hushed. Richard glanced around the room, confirming he held everyone’s attention, before he reached for his cards. He slid his thumb underneath them, ready for the showdown, before he was interrupted by a frail tapping at the door.

A girl, no older than ten, was waving on the other side of the glass solarium door. She wore a white headband that kept her long brown ponytail tucked back and a grey sweater that draped over her hands, blanketing her small frame.

Having removed his hand from the cards, Richard motioned the girl inside. She rattled the doorknob as if to say, “It’s locked.” Ron got up and opened the door before kneeling and leaning in for a hug, allowing the girl to swing her arms around his narrow neck.

“Look who it is,” Richard said, inching his chair out from under the table.

She ran to Richard and hopped onto his lap, nearly winding him. Waving her hand in front of her, she fanned the smoke away from her face.

“I know, I know,” Richard said, regaining his breath. “Daddy shouldn’t smoke around you.” I winced at the thought of Richard having fathered such a young girl, a man who would be the same age as my own father, if he were still alive.

A chain necklace hung over the girl’s black t-shirt which had the words SORRY, I DONT DO QUIET printed onto the fabric in graffiti lettering. She whispered in Richard’s ear, and he looked her in the eyes, shaking his head no.

“Who’s that?” she said, pointing to me.

“That’s Kevin, an old colleague.”

“What’s a colleague?”

“A friend, from business—a business friend. I think you will be seeing more of him around the club from now on.”

She whispered into her father’s ear again.

“You want to watch us play?”

She nodded.

“Why don’t you ask your new friend Kevin if he’d like to reveal his cards then,” said Richard, “I’m sure he’d be happy to.”

“Can you, um, show us your cards?”

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“Remember sweetie, he needs a three if he wants to win the hand.”

“Well—do you have it?” The girl put her hands on the table and craned over its glass surface to see my cards as they turned. I peeled back the lip of the card, slowly and then not, to reveal the three of hearts.

The girl said “Uh-oh” and smacked her hand over her mouth.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” said Richard, though I was unsure of whom he was speaking to.

Faster, I turned over the queen of spades.

A slow laughter unraveled around the table. The young girl cheered, knowing implicitly, or not, that her father had beaten my hand.

Richard cracked a smile, letting out a mouthful of cigar smoke. “Called that bluff a mile away, didn’t I?” he said, met by his daughter’s nod.

“You lost,” the girl shouted.

“I lost.”

“You bet like a rookie,” said Richard. “We don’t gamble in this house. If you go in with a drawing hand, hoping for a lucky straight, you will lose,” he shouted. “You will lose.”

His expression, already stern, turned ugly. “You’re lucky we’re not playing for keeps. We like to keep the stakes high here. Games where you can burn if you pull stunts. From now on, you either play wisely, or you don’t come to the table. Am I understood?”

I could only smile. Another bluff.

“Haven’t played in a while,” I said.

John came up behind me and collected the money from my stack, returning it to Richard.

“It’s all in good fun,” said John.

“Right.”

We heard another knock on the door. This time it was Michel, pointing to his wrist. I looked at my own and saw the hour hand creeping over the twelve. *Shit.*

I pulled out my chair from the table and shoved the remaining money in front of Richard. “Thanks for the buy-in. Next time’s for keeps.”

“Good man,” said Richard. “Come back for that pint, Kevin. We have to chat about Rupie’s. Just be ready to bet like a man.”

“Pleasure meeting you all,” I said to the group. I gave the table a knuckle tap before heading out. A chorus of parting jeers and goodbyes broke out from men whose voices were deep and towering, elated with the highs of many lifetimes spent waiting to avenge whatever part of them had died so long ago.

In the shadow of my tenement building, I imagined a young Dylan and Shelby running through the halls of the country club, exploring every crack and corner. They asked me silently to show them around, and to tell them ghost stories, tales from the past life. I had none to share, and to ponder this made me feel supremely, imperially alone. As if whatever connection I had left to my last true friends had been severed and forgotten.

There was a small landing between the first and second floors on the way up to my unit where the building manager would leave flyers and unclaimed mail. Today there was a yellow phonebook, wrapped in plastic, sitting on top of expired grocery store leaflets. I clutched the phonebook under my arm and carried it into my room, throwing it on the barren dining room table that had gone unused since I moved in four nights ago.

The glow from the refrigerator door tinted its contents in a dim yellow as I peered in the dark at a half rack of lamb, a couple sweet potato, and a bag of frozen carrots melting in a pool of water spilling onto the floor. I closed the door, scavenged the overhead cupboards, and then opened the fridge door again. This time I collected everything in my arms.

I tinkered with the nozzles on the oven, put the lamb in a deep rimmed baking sheet, and sprinkled rosemary and a dusting of powdered garlic on the meat. The oven glowed red, and I slid the spiced roast inside. The kitchen, with its stickered cutlery and dinner plates wrapped in tea towels, felt gutted. As if it would be less empty with the things removed.

In the light of the dining room I collected the phonebook and tore it from its plastic wrap. The chocolatey smell of fresh print rose from the pages. I scanned the rear sections for Joe Kokomo's number and found WHYTEs and WILSONs and WATSONs and XIAOs and XINGs.

What was his name again?

I flipped the book upside down and opened to the classifieds at the back. I read square-inch advertisements for the services of street workers. Escorts and hustlers by the name of ALLCOCK and SCARLOT and DEVINE and HARDCASTLE and PUNISHER.

I grabbed the phone from off the wall and dialed the number for Jazmine Cox. I twirled the phone cord like I was playing jump rope with the wall. When she answered the phone, she spoke with a smoker's voice.

"It's Jaz, baby," she said, barely audible over the sound of blowing wind and traffic in the background.

"Do have any work tonight?"

"Nothing I can't raincheck."

"Then how about you come pay me a visit."

“Boy, you got a funny way of talking.”

“I’ve been told. Listen, just show up hungry.”

“I’m gone need cash up front for that.”

Within minutes I was cooking dinner for Jazmine Cox. She arrived an hour and fifteen minutes after answering my phone call. When I met her in the doorway I looked up, mouth agape, at twice the woman I’d expected. I handed her an envelope with one hundred and fifty dollars stuffed inside.

“How you doing, baby boy,” she said, slithering past me in a black tank top too short for her six-foot frame and bulging blue jeans, envelope now snatched in hand. Her gas station perfume rushed through the doorway and invaded the room. Dangling from her wrist were several gold bands that were interlocked like a chain and clinked together like cheap aluminum. On her nails were pure white slabs of acrylic that looked like sticks of gum. Her top was cut low, exposing a cursive script tattoo above her breast that was indecipherable, her russet brown skin having washed it out.

She threw her handbag on the couch and then spun around with her arms outstretched.

“Ain’t it really something in here.”

I looked at the bare floors, empty walls, and secondhand furniture.

“What makes you say that?”

“I like the exposed brick.”

A gap in the brick wall made way for sliding glass doors and a balcony that overlooked a quiet intersection, a carwash, and a patch of dead grass.

“The brick feels somewhat industrial, doesn’t it?”

“It symbolizes strength. Keeps the soul inside,” she said.

“That’s why I put them there.”

“Boy...” She leaned over the kitchen table, eyes fluttering. “You’re funny.”

“You walk here from downtown?”

“Yes, daddy.”

“Don’t call me daddy.”

“Yes, sir.”

I cleared my throat.

“Have you worked up an appetite, then?”

“Yes, sir.”

An onslaught of aromatic garlic, onions, and rosemary overrode Jazmine’s perfume smog. I told her to have a seat as I disappeared into the kitchen to get the roast.

“So, what should I call you?” I shouted from the kitchen, removing the roast from the blood-red range.

“Jaz—just Jaz, is fine. Smells real nice, by the way.”

I grabbed the glazed carrots from the microwave and slid the sautéed yams from the frying pan onto two porcelain plates. I squeezed a bottle of sparkling juice fit under my arm as I carried the dishes to the table. Jaz sat there twiddling on her phone.

She looked the plate over with judicious eyes. “You know I’m vegan, right?”

“No, as a matter of fact, I did not.”

“Take my lamb, and the carrots too.”

“You aren’t allowed carrots?”

“There’s honey on them, no?” she said. “Made by the bees, for the bees.”

“Never thought of it that way.”

“I’ll only have a nibble on the yams, I think,” said Jaz.

“Are you serious?” I poured us two tall glasses of pomegranate juice, feeling deflated and unsure of what to serve her. “Can I get you something else?”

She entered the kitchen uninvited and started rummaging through the cupboards, eventually settling for a bag of chips.

“You smoke?” she propositioned, holding up a pack of reds.

“No, but have at it. Open the window first.”

She sat down to eat, joining me.

We sat at opposite ends of the round wooden table, me with a full rack of roast rosemary lamb and her with a cigarette and a family-sized bag of salt and vinegar chips.

“You know, when you told me to come hungry, I thought you were into some weird fetish type of shit.” She laughed. “I figured, maybe you was a cannibal or some shit.”

I laughed a self-conscious laugh.

Over our meals we talked about our futures and our pasts and our prospects in life. We talked about our horoscopes. Our conversation volleyed between enchantments and delusions, whatever our lives had given us that night. We talked about how we got here. Every story felt like a ghost story. I told her that I wished a pill existed that could make me invisible forever. She told me that she wished a pill existed that could make her forget what shooting heroin feels like.

Needle tracks ran under the makeup on her arms, looking like black strings running along the surface. “Old family heirlooms,” she said. She pressed her arms together and showed me generations of scars. I pushed my half-finished meal away from me, untucked the serviette from my shirt and tossed it onto the plate. She poured herself another glass of pomegranate juice.

“Do you ever surprise clients when you show up at their door?”

“Sometimes,” she teased with a crooked smile. “I was born a man after all.”

“Were you really?”

She smiled. Her hand brushed against her long, defined jaw; her eyes beamed like hazel globes across the table. “Honey, I’m full of surprises,” she said.

“Then tell me—do you play chess?” I asked. I gestured to the set on the mantle.

She shook her head and ashed her smoke. We sat in a long and sustained silence as the sun, visible through the balcony door, dipped under the horizon.

“Tell me about your scars,” I asked.

“It starts with my family,” she said. “I have problems with my sister. She’s on these extra disability cheques and always stealing from me because I’m a working girl. She’s caused a lot of problems in me, let’s put it that way.”

“Extra disability cheques?”

“Some kind of new welfare for mental patients,” she said. She lit another cigarette. “A year almost that she’s been on it. Had to go to the hospital and pretend she was insane so she could get carded. I watched it all, her screaming and crying and rolling around, acting like a goddamn fool.”

I asked her what getting carded meant.

“It’s like a diagnosis or something. Once you get your card, you can collect special disability benefits that only real fucked up people and psychos can get. It’s extra money, is all I know.”

I pondered this quietly for insight.

I imagined a 53-year-old black woman lying on a hospital bed flailing around, pretending to have lost her mind, desperate to trick doctors into thinking she’s ruined. The sequence of

events that led her to that moment, those lapses in her soul, occurred to me as a strip of old film. I thought of her, both the woman and the girl. I saw her as a child, what she looked like with braids and a backpack. What her report card looked like on the fridge door. What her smile looked like when she found out she would be a big sister to a little baby boy. How she looked in photographs, in polaroids taken at sleepovers or birthday parties. How the candles on the cake would light up her face, casting a glow on all the little things about her. How her mother smiled behind the camera, taking the picture, knowing the quiet joy of motherhood. How she felt it beat somewhere in her soul, the passed-down soul of the woman and the girl that sticks around forever. I imagined her acting crazy on a hospital bed, pretending to be insane for free money. I imaged a time when potential in her was a promise and not a regret.

From my jeans pocket I pulled out a mess of bills and coins. I thumbed two hundred dollars down on the table and thanked Jaz for coming, and then crawled into bed.

Three hundred grade school children flooded into the plaza of Rosethorn Racquet and Country Club on the next day.

“The school board passed some new sports curriculum,” said Michel. “Now every year a class needs at least one community field trip to an ice rink or golf course or what have you. Leave it to the school board to cram every class in today.”

I nodded and tucked my coveralls into the bottoms of my boots.

Michel was stuck in the office, getting files organized in the new space. Earlier he had handed me the weedwhacker and said, “Get busy cleaning up links one through nine.”

Outside, in the pouring sunshine, two boys ran up to me to ask where they could find the mess hall. They wandered off and separated from Ms. Goodman's class, and the mess hall was the designated find-your-teacher site.

"Go back inside, take the stairs up a floor and ask the guys in black vests standing at the glass doors," I said. "They'll let you in." They stared at me, silently, before running off in the wrong direction.

At the first green I held the weedwhacker over my shoulder like a rifle and stopped where the fringe meets the putting surface. There were packs of idle middle schoolers everywhere, and none were interested in playing golf. One group, swarming around the hole, surrounded a boy riding his eight iron like a witch on a broomstick. The other boys were trying to pelt him with golf balls.

"Hey," I shouted. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Quidditch," they yelled back.

"Don't be a jackass," I told myself, then revved up the weedwhacker. It rattled like a little jackhammer, and I felt the power of all twenty-five cc's spinning the flywheel, turning the pistons, rattling my bones. I strapped fogged goggles over my eyes and traced the outline of the sod, slowly circling around the fringe. Arid blades of grass sprayed from the hopper onto the green while gasoline vapors putted out of the exhaust pipe.

Having buzzed a half-crescent around the fringe line, I let go the trigger and put the weedwhacker down to give my arm a rest. I wiped the sliding beads of sweat from my neck with my ungloved hand. Then a golf ball rolled by my feet, and a boy with cherry red hair ran over to grab it. He knelt, clutching it in his hands, and then glanced up at me.

"Sorry."

“Going to be hard to hit it from here.”

“Wait,” he said. “Aren’t you Mr. Little?”

“Depends who’s asking,” I said, realized what I said wasn’t funny, and then backtracked.

“Yes, I’m Mr. Little, and you must be one of Shelby’s classmates?”

“Not anymore—but yeah,” said the red head. He ran back to his friends who were now trying to bombard a fatter boy who was deflecting the golf ball attack with the shaft of a putter.

“You boys want to cut that out?” I yelled.

Their heads spun around to face me, their eyes wide and loaded with false confidence.

The round boy with the putter dropped the club and put his hands in the air.

“We’re just having fun,” he said. “Golf sucks balls.”

“Nobody’s even playing,” said another. “Wait—you’re Shelby’s dad.”

I shook my head and picked the weedwhacker up off the ground.

“That’s Mr. Little,” said the cherry hair boy.

The five of them ran over to me to get a closer view.

“You look older,” one said.

“You got bald.”

“If Shelby moved away, why are you still here?”

“He’s divorced, you idiot. Be quiet.”

“Did you really get divorced?”

“Don’t ask him if he’s gotten divorced. You don’t just go up to someone and ask that, retard.”

“Hey,” I interrupted. “Can you guys just go do something else—maybe at the next hole over? I just want to get this trim done in peace. Quit goofing off and move along, alright.” I slid

the choke lever all the way down with my thumb, depressed the throttle lock, and pulled the starter rope. The kids walked off muttering something that I could not hear over the sound of the engine rumbling. I popped my goggles back on, put my head down, and got back to work on the second half of the putting circle. The string crackled as it cut the tops of the fern green sod, blowing the freshly cut blades aside, spraying like a blood splatter.

Another ball flew past my feet. I turned my head in time to see a second ball hurtling toward me. It smacked under my hip. I released the choke on the trimmer, letting it hush down so I could hear what they were laughing about.

“Shelby’s a slut! Shelby’s a fat slut!”

“I had sex with Shelby!”

“Yeah, we had sex with Shelby!”

I whipped my goggles on the ground and pulled the starter rope. The weedwhacker sprang to life, revving up, buzzing like a chainsaw. I pointed the end of the trimmer in the boys’ direction and strode toward them, making long, quick footsteps, waving it around like a madman.

“Say it again! Say it again!”

The boys disappeared. I cut the gas and smeared a trail of sweat across my forehead with the rear of my glove.

Dylan clung to the fourth rung of the jungle gym ladder, fighting for his life and dignity. Whichever he’d lose first.

“Grumpy, help.”

“Not happening.”

“Grumpy!”

“The ground is made of rubber, you goof.”

“Hard rubber.”

“If you fall, you fall.”

“Please, daddy, I need down,” he cried. “I need down.”

I stood next to the metal playground structure, waiting for him to settle down and realize his fate.

“Do you hear me, dad? Do you hear what I’m saying?” He wept and clutched the yellow-painted rung as his knuckles paled. I pretended to check my watch.

“Listen buddy, you’re almost there.”

“So.”

“So, why would you give up?”

A frigid October breeze threw leaves into the air.

Having understood his fate, he resumed weeping. I looked from side to side, cautious not to turn a teachable rite into an invitation for other parents to intervene. A pacifying compromise suddenly came to mind.

“Hey, buddy, you’re five rungs from the top. You make it five more steps and we’ll go rent *Land Before Time*.” He glanced up at me, his expression crooked, caught between relief and confusion.

“W-why?”

“What do you mean *why*—just climb.”

“Why.” He doubled down, dangling four feet from the ground.

“*Land. Before. Time.*”

A siren sounded in the distance, and then faded. I looked down at my watch, this time not pretending. Then I heard a gasp. With his eyes shut, Dylan peeled one hand off the rung. His face flinched; his shoulders bunched. As if he were bracing for a plunge to his death. He reached for the next support beam and missed.

“Do you want to watch Land Before Time or not, you big wus?” I took his hand in mine and placed it on the next rung. “There’s a sharptooth under you,” I said. “Watch out, he’s hungry.”

Dylan started crying again.

“For fuck’s sake, Dylan, you have four more steps.”

He wiped the snot from his chin with the sleeve of his sweater. “What’s it going to be. Are you going to get gobbled up by the sharptooth, or be brave like Littlefoot and escape?”

He cried harder.

“God damn,” I muttered. “Here.” I took Dylan’s lower hand and placed it beside his upper. I then grabbed the bottoms of his shoes, raising both onto the next rung. Dylan hushed, his wails now reduced to deep inhalations through a stuffed nose.

“That’s it, Dyl. Keep it going.”

I backed off as Dylan flung his left hand up to the next rung. Then his right.

“I can’t get my feet,” he stated matter of factly.

I grabbed his shoes and raised them onto the rung above.

“Try your feet first this time.”

“Please, Kevin, save your apologies,” Michel said, pacing before me in his office. “I get it, you were screwing with them. Is it above board? No, it isn’t. But do I blame you? Fuck no,

not necessarily. You didn't do any harm and those little shits knew what kind of hole they were digging—I wouldn't even sweat it."

"It was a regrettable joke," I said. "Kids today have no shame, that's the problem. When we were their age, did we ever stoop so low? Honestly, I don't think so. I really don't."

"You're better off asking your mother."

"It boggles the mind to think of the kind of stuff that kids today think is acceptable, you know what I mean?"

"They lack decent parenting, is what it is," said Michel. "Parents aren't present no more. Or maybe it's the opposite—there's too much parenting and now they think they're untouchable or something. *Supérieur à.*"

"Thank you."

"Consider this a disciplinary hearing. If anyone asks, I mean. We need to cover our asses."

"Got it," I smirked.

"We call these learning conversations, by the way, if you want to talk inside baseball. It's important you know the correct terms in case you run into any of the big wigs upstairs."

"Like who?"

"You know what, don't sweat it. You're a good man, Kevin. I can see that in you. I mean, I hardly know you, but I see it. You ever just get that—how do you say it—*impression*? That you can see through someone?"

Sunbeams met my face as I walked through the orange fire doors leading from the pro shop to the west racquet courtyard. The east courts saw four doubles matches taking place side-

by-side, with spectators shoulder-to-shoulder along the fence separating the playing surface from the footpath. The sound of hollow rubber against racquet whished through the wind.

On the other side of the walkway were the west courts—one squash court after the next—of which half were occupied by regular retirees, boat clubbers, inheritors of guest privileges passed down through patriline. On the tennis courts adjacent, a youth co-ed tennis tournament was underway, and for every parent in attendance there were two or more children. I caught small glimpses of the games as I walked past, following the little green ball as it soared from one side of the net to the other and then back again. A tall, visored woman bounced a ball against the acrylic playing surface, wiped her forehead with her palm, and lined up her serve.

In the next court, about a dozen kids were throwing tennis balls over a net, trying to hit the boy on the other side. The boy took a couple to the chest, spread-eagled, and played dead. He almost got me.

A dire late June breeze rolled in as I looked ahead to the parking lot gate and noticed how unusually absent—

“Hey mister, can you help us?”

I spun around to meet the shrill voice behind me. It was a kid, maybe nine, holding onto the grey tennis court fence from the inside. His freckled face pressed up against the chain link.

“Help with what?”

“We’re lost”

“Who’s lost?”

“All of us. We don’t know where we are.”

“This is Rosethorn Racquet, part of the country club. Where are your parents?”

“Oh,” he muttered. “They’re at home.”

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“Go inside and talk to one of the adults in black, they’ll help you find your class. Okay?”

He went silent, so I walked on ahead to the parking lot entrance.

“Wait,” he shouted, rattling on the fence. “I don’t have a class.”

“What do you mean you don’t have a class?”

“I don’t have a class. I don’t know where I am.”

The boy snorted through snot-clogged nostrils and fought back sobs. I glanced up at the beaming sun, still high in the sky. I approached the boy reluctantly, who up close appeared younger than I had first believed.

“What do you mean you don’t have a class?”

I held my hand against the fence separating mine from his.

“I came here by myself. Now I’m lost.”

“And who are they?” I nodded toward the other kids, still pelting each other on the court.

“Don’t know,” he shrugged.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Jackson.”

“Alright, Jackson, here’s what you should—”

Behind Jackson, a pair of boys emerged. They ran up to see what was going on. They both looked several years older than him, with long, curly hair draped in front of their round prepubescent cheeks.

“Jackson, get away from this creepo,” said the blonde one. He tugged on the sleeve of Jackson’s shirt.

“Excuse me?”

“Come on,” the other boy said.

“What school are you here with?” I asked, having realized that I had changed into plain clothes. “I’m a groundskeeper here at Rosethorn.”

They kept quiet.

“We’re lost,” said Jackson, again.

“You’re not lost,” the older boys chimed in. “You’re here to see grandpa, remember? Come wait with the rest of us. Get away from this guy.”

They pulled Jackson off the fence and walked away together. I shook my head and carried on. In the parking lot, rows of yellow buses idled parallel to the club plaza, letting on long lines of schoolkids to be taken home.

One Christmas Lisa and I took the kids to a skating rink. Rupie’s had posted a deficit of more than a few million. Their first fiscal quarter loss in almost a decade. The acquisitions department was officially in the company’s crosshairs. An empty bottle of merlot rolled under the driver’s seat of our old stickered-up minivan.

“That tight enough for you?”

“Too tight.”

I untied the knot on Shelby’s skate, letting out some slack in her forefoot.

“Better,” she said.

Shelby waddled off through the gate and stepped onto the ice surface, wobbling as she balanced on the blades. She turned around and pounded on the plexiglass with her gloved hands.

“Bet you can’t catch me.”

Dylan unclipped the plastic skate guard from his blades and whipped them at the glass, letting a crack ring through the arena. I rummaged through my jeans pocket for a loose breath

mint. I wanted to go home and lay in front of the living room fireplace. Drink up its warmth. Smell the maple logs burn. Wrap the fumes around me like a throw blanket.

White Christmas lights draped from the shadowy rafters. They mimicked stars against a night sky. Retro music played through the loudspeakers. An electric scoreboard on the wall said that the VISITORS were up by two.

“I’m going to run out to the car for a minute,” said Lisa. “Keep an eye on the kids for a sec.”

My breath smelled like a sour rose against the back of my hand.

“What for?”

I looked up and asked her again, but Lisa was gone.

I double-knotted my skate laces and then dropped them to the rubber arena floor. The breath mint on my tongue fell to the back and slid down my throat. I wobbled onto the ice.

“—Kevin Little.”

I turned at the gate. Lisa stood behind me, holding up a recorked bottle of red wine in her hand. She was crying. I spun back around and stepped onto the glossy, snow white ice. The skate blades carved against the surface, gliding, scraping, like a knife sharpening on a whetstone, shaving layers off the top and spraying them in the air. I took the corner fast; foot over foot.

“Boo,” I shouted behind Shelby and Dylan. I clutched them at their sides and almost tumbled onto the ice. We wobbled and caught each other. We laughed.

I coasted back to the gate to find Lisa, bleary and red, still with the wine bottle in her hand. She stared through me as if I had committed some final betrayal. I hopped off the ice and stutter-stepped onto a rubber mat, brushing Lisa aside.

“I think it’s time we get a divorce, Kevin.”

“You’re being hysterical.”

“No, Kevin. You’re a lying drunk. You’re pathetic is what you are,” Lisa said. I sat down on a bench, loosened my skates, and yanked them off my aching feet. “You’re a real piece of shit, Kevin. Just look at what you’ve done to this family.” I looked up from the bench to find that Lisa had slid the half-empty wine bottle under her coat.

“You know what, Lisa? Give me that shit. Give me the bottle, Lisa. I’m done playing these games,” I raised my voice so she could hear me loud and clear. “You’ve done enough damage tonight, I think.”

Lisa evaded my reach.

“We’re done, Kevin,” she said, backstepping. “Don’t speak to me again. I’m taking the kids and we’re getting the fuck out of here. Do you understand? This will be the last Christmas we ever have. You got that you ugly...*short* little man?”

“You’re a real cocksucker, Lisa.”

A woman, watching her children learn how to skate from behind the glass, turned to face us. “Excuse me, there are children around. Can you take *this*,” she twiddled her fingers at Lisa and I, “somewhere else?” I looked at Lisa and then back to the woman at the glass before making off for the exit.

Outside, cool gusts of wind mixed with furnace exhaust seeping out of the vents in the wall. The humid air was unsettling for December. Eighties tunes droned through the arena doors.

A pair of smokers idled by the entrance, under light posts washing them in a heavy gold. They moved onto the sidewalk as we stormed out.

“So, what’s it going to be, Kevin?” Lisa spat with her back turned away. “You’re a liar. And you’re a drunk. And you’ve destroyed our family. Where do you go from here? Whose lives are you going to ruin next?”

I’ve got hungry eyes; I feel the magic between you and I.

“Where’d you find that bottle?”

“Under the driver’s seat. Obviously.”

“That’s an old bottle.”

“Kevin, don’t act stupid. You fuck with me and I will be on the phone with Rupie’s tomorrow. Do you get that? You will be out of a job before you can snap your fucking fingers.”

“And you will be out of a place to live.”

“I just can’t believe you would do this.” Lisa turned around again and put her hands on her head. “We’re finished, Kevin. This is it. You said you would change, and yet here we are.”

“Lisa—”

“—Don’t you fucking talk to me!”

The silence was interrupted by the rumble of a cab drifting through the parking lot.

“Mom, what are you doing out here?”

I spun to face the doors. Dylan leaned out of the arena vestibule, careful not to step his blades onto the concrete outside. Shelby ran out from behind him, grinding her skates carelessly against the pavement.

“Sweetie,” I said. “You’re ruining your edges.”

Shelby grabbed her mother around the waist, staring up at the back of her head.

“Mommy, can we please go home?”

I dug through my pocket for a breath mint and found none.

“What do you mean *go home*, I thought you loved skating?” I asked.

“Mom...mommy, can we please go home right now?” Shelby tugged on her mother’s coat.

Lisa turned with one arm cradling the bottle under her coat and crouched until level with Shelby. Her cheeks were wet and her mascara curved down to the edges of her lips. “Shelby, listen to me: This will be the last Christmas we have as a family. Do you understand, sweetie?”

Shelby flung her hands into the air and then pulled the sides of her winter toque, a fuzzy pink hat with a pompom, over her eyes. She cried “No, no, no, no, no,” over and over in the shrieking voice of a panicked child. She fell to her hands and knees. She sobbed, she screamed. “No, no, no, no, no.” She clutched at her mother’s ankles. Ropes of snot dangled from the child’s scared, sobbing face. It demanded everything of me not to crumble to the ground beside her. To grab the other ankle. To plead for mercy. To turn it all around.

“Let’s go inside and get you a hot chocolate,” I said.

“I don’t want a hot chocolate. I want my parents.”

I went to pick her up off the ground.

“Get away from her,” Lisa shrieked. She shoved me back with both hands across my chest. I stumbled backward. Then I heard the bottle fall from under her coat. It shattered on the ground.

Shelby screamed and pulled her hat back over her eyes.

Dylan ran outside, skates and all, and threw his arms between Lisa and I. “Stop, stop, stop!”

“It’s okay, Dylan,” I said, spitting on a frozen flowerbed.

Lisa put her hand on Dylan's cheek. "Sweetie, Dylan, look. I'm sorry. It wasn't supposed to end like this."

"Oh, shut the hell up, Lisa. Kids, get your shoes—"

"No, you shut the fuck up, Kevin. Take your drunk ass home and stay the hell away from my children."

A man got out of the backseat of the cab, slung a duffel bag around his shoulder, and slammed the door behind him. "Merry Christmas," he said as he side-stepped past us and disappeared through the arena doors.

Lisa picked Shelby up off the ground, brushed the knees of her snow pants, grabbed her hand, and pulled her back into the arena. Dylan looked at me with an open mouth, as if he had something to say, before tearing away and darting off behind them. The doors swung open, letting the music escape.

And I need you more than ever, and if you only hold me tight, we'll be holding on forev—

"How are you this morning, stranger?"

John stood in the parking space next to mine and leaned against the trunk of a milk white SUV too old to be his own.

"Not too bad," I said. "This your ride?"

"This old thing? Sure is, nine years running." He slapped it on the hood, then came up to shake my hand. He wore an argyle vest with a button-down shirt and bowtie underneath. I removed the sunglasses from my eyes and took his hand.

"You need help in with that bag?" I asked.

“Oh no—no thank you, it’s about time I put these muscles to use.” He bowed under the weight of the golf bag slung over his shoulder.

“I insist,” I said. “Let me take that off you, I’ll bring it into the shop.” John pushed my hand away from his bag before I could offer him the courtesy.

“No, no.” John shifted the bag up his shoulder, regained himself, and then made off for the doors. “Thank you, Kevin, but I insist.”

We walked out of the parking lot without speaking and entered the clubhouse through the pro shop entrance. On entering the shop, we were met by a pair of swinging saloon doors with country-style cursive writing painted on: IF YOU DRINK, DON’T DRIVE. DON’T EVEN PUTT.

John walked behind the check-in counter and dropped his bag, leaving it for the lanky young attendant who he rubbed on the back.

“Have a minute for tea with the boys?” John asked me over the counter. I glanced at the clock on the wall, placed above a shelf covered with trophies that had little golden figurines on them.

“You know what, sure.”

We took the elevator up to the mess lounge and found it empty save for Abby behind the bar and a young couple sharing breakfast by the windows.

Abby had her back turned to us, watching the TV wedged between two rows of cabinets above the bar. On the screen, a man in a white visor took a club from a caddy’s hands and levelled his eye to it, staring it down like a gun barrel, weighing it out. He lined up on the tee box and took a practice swing.

“Think he can get there with a three wood?” Abby asked, noticing us in the mirror.

“Eventually,” John laughed. “He’s got that ball teed up high.”

“That’s how he likes it,” said Abby, smiling.

The man in the visor swung on the ball and chipped it right into a sand hazard two-thirds up the fairway. The audience gasped as the man flipped his club into the air, forcing his caddie to duck with his hands at the sides of his head. John snickered at the sight.

“They’ll let just about anyone do a pro tour these days,” he said.

“Fluke,” Abby called, turning to face us. “Thomson’s still my man—oh, Kevin! I didn’t notice you come in.”

“Lured in once again.” I nodded to John, now transfixed by the action on the screen.

“With promises of breakfast and good company.”

“All I can help you with is breakfast, honey,” she said coyly.

“Shame I’m not hungry,” I said.

Abby craned an eyebrow and smirked without saying anything.

I rapt the counter with my knuckles. “Where’s the crowd? I was told the boys would be up here.”

Abby stretched her arms above her head, yawned, and adjusted the straps of the overalls on top of her red and black plaid shirt. “If you want to survive around here, you need to learn that whatever John says cannot be trusted,” she said, sneaking in a wink at the end. “It’s quarter to eight, so Richard and the gang should be here any minute now.”

We ordered espressos; John sipped his patiently, I downed mine in one burning mouthful. Quietly, we watched drug commercials air on the screen above the bar.

“Knock, knock.”

Richard and Fernando stood behind us, Fernando in a blue wool pullover and Richard in a mint green tie and sportscoat.

I sprung up in my seat at their announcement and, embarrassed, I laughed and stuttered something that was not heard by anyone. Hands were shaken all around.

“Where have you been hiding, son?” Richard draped his arm over my shoulders.

“Here and there—they’ve been working me like a dog, you know.”

“Oh, I know. I see you out on the grounds. Mowing, trimming, and whatnot.”

“Someone’s got to do it.”

“Didn’t think it’d be a boy from Rupie’s, though.” Richard turned to get Abby’s attention at the bar. “Double Americano, love.” Abby slid a steaming cup his way as if it had already been prepared, jet black with rust-colored froth at the top.

Richard put his hand on the cap of my shoulder. “Do you have time for a talk, son?”

I looked at the time on the TV. Seven forty-four. “Sure, I have a minute.”

“Good man,” he said. He stepped down from his barstool and grabbed the teacup from off the bar, cradling it with the saucer in his other hand. “Come with me.”

I followed him to the row of windows at the far side of the mess lounge that overlooked the second and third greens split by a small oval pond and a wooden garden bridge that adjoined them. The bridge was an original installment on the grounds, built more than one hundred years ago. Thick clouds shaded the pond water in a pencilly gray.

“You know, I didn’t retire until from full-time practice until I was sixty-eight.”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“That was two summers ago, after nine years with Dentons and another thirty-seven at Rupie’s before that.” Richard’s gaze was fixed on something out the window. The obscured light shining through the clouds illuminated one side of his face.

“Thirty-seven years. And you know what I get now? Birthday cards.” Richard raised the saucer to his mouth and sipped from the cup. “It’s cold out there,” he said. “That’s what I like about you.”

“How do you mean that?”

“Look at you—you got out of that game. You bowed out with grace. You rode off quietly and, believe me, you’re better for it. Your soul won’t go fully cold.”

“I wouldn’t say gracefully, I don’t think.”

“Let me tell you a personal story,” Richard said. “And promise me you’ll listen good.”

I leaned my back against the window and nodded.

“There are no innocent men,” he said. “Not unless you get out. If you get out early enough then you can spare yourself such that you’re only an accomplice. An accessory. In my old age I realize that leaving anything is an honorable decision. Because too few people have the courage to know when to quit. They just let it kill them, and in so doing also kill whatever it is they’re hanging onto. Like a parasite. But you let go. That’s what I like about you, Kevin. You spared yourself in leaving.”

“Did I?”

“Yes,” he said. “Let me tell you about my father, if I may—and listen to me good, because I don’t speak a word about my father to no one, you understand?”

I nodded.

“My father came to the States during the depression. Landed in the dustbowl. Met a girl the next farm over, had me, forged his social security papers, and ran off to join the Marine Corps in the middle of the war. Brutal stuff, pure barbarism, you know, in Palermo and the Adriatic and that. During his service, my mother ran off and I was left with his parents. Between them and the Corps, they put him through college, where he studied theoretical particle physics, quantum mechanics. He started off working on hydrogen isotopes and within a few years went on to be instrumental in the creation of the supercollider. Do you know what that is, Kevin?”

I nodded.

He sipped his tea, still looking at something outside the window.

“My dad worked down south, at Berkeley, when his parents died. Then moved to NASA, Texas A&M, Fermilab, CERN, and ended his career doing industrial designs for SNOLAB. The man slept four hours a night, waking up at three or four in the morning—always three or four, precisely—to start cleaning the house, the entire house from top to bottom. No gram of dust unswept, no strand of lint unpicked from the dryer. Then he would run the same five-mile loop with his huskies. If we moved, he would reroute a new five-mile loop. He would return home by six or seven in the morning. Then he would then get in his little Cessna 172 and would fly off to wherever he was working that day. In those days, we lived in pilot communities, with hangars and runways out back, you see. The man lived all over Europe and North America—New York, Houston, Manchester, Berlin, Turin. I tagged along, of course. A man of remarkable accomplishment he was. But he sacrificed his happiness, Kevin. And this is all a roundabout way of expressing a singular moral: that he sacrificed the love of his family. He never remarried, he never cracked nor lightened up for a moment. Not for me or anyone. The man was a tyrant, his own and mine. When I was a boy, he’d storm into my bedroom in the mornings after I’d cleaned

it and he had returned from his run. He would inspect it inch by inch with a surgical glove and a flashlight. Forgetting to clear any patch of dust, whether on a door ledge or behind a dresser, would be penalized by the whip of a belt. My skin would break on the first strike. It was light, really, in comparison. At Berkeley, he adopted my younger brother, who he'd beat so bad that he wound up in the hospital on several occasions. But he had close ties, that's the thing. Close ties wherever you looked. You can bet he'd have those charges dropped, you see. He would rub elbows with the DA, he would know the judge from college, he would be chummy with the politicians. And you know what happened, after all that struggle during our childhood—after every drop of blood? My brother became a criminal, Kevin. He's got his own blood on his hands. Locked up, and always will be.

“And it's not like I'm my father's boy. He despised lawyers. As good as crooks they were to him.” He put the saucer and teacup down on the windowsill before continuing with a hush that implied some looming pair of ears. “My point is that he did great things—a one in a million man, truly—but he paid the price for it. He died with dirty hands, Kevin. But I look at yours,” he poked his finger into my chest. “And I see you've put them down. Kept them clean.”

I rolled out a strip of sod linking the tenth and eleventh greens. I tore circles in the turf with a carpet knife and cut around the irrigation heads so they could poke through like prairie dogs. The sprinklers lined up in neat columns down the walkway like pins in a big green pegboard, or antennas, little feelers of the earth, reaching out to see what's there.

I returned to the wet room where I met Michel.

“Finished?”

“All done.” I jerked the muddy boots from my feet and threw my gloves in the hamper in the corner of the room. “You know where Richard might be at this time of day, by chance? We talked this morning, but I never got the chance to ask him something.”

“The older guy with the moustache, always wearing a suit? The one whose granddaughter is always running around the place—that’s who you’re talking about?”

“I believe that’s the guy.”

“No clue. You can try the solarium, though. That seems to be where they meet when they’re not on the greens.”

The solarium was empty, but smelled of tobacco. Condensation lingered on the insides of the windows. A deck of playing cards lay on the table in the center of the room. I crept up to the table to find a half-spent cigar burning out on the ash tray.

A door gasped open, breaking the airtight seal in the room, and I felt a sudden presence at my back.

“You’re off early, aren’t you?”

John caught me off guard, his head poking through the doorway. I glanced at my watch.

“Four o’clock, or thereabouts,” I said. “Same as ever.”

“Is it that time already?” John strode into the room and let down the blinds.

“Where’d the boys run off to?” I asked.

“Headed home. We’ll resume our game in the morning—usual time.”

“When’s that?”

“Tomorrow’s Friday, so seven.”

“Would you mind dealing me in?”

“Our pleasure, Kevin. It’s usually us that have to do the luring, you know.” He smirked, scratched his chin. “If you want to play with the big boys you have to play for keeps,” said John, almost in a singsong tune. “Minimum two hundred dollar buy-in. That won’t last, though, so be wise about it.”

Shelby leaned over the kitchen table and stuck her face in front of the candles on her thirteenth birthday cake, so their glow touched her cheek. In the flicker of the candlelight I noticed the braids in her wiry brown hair tucked behind her ears, how they were adorned with little blue butterfly earrings, how they made her face flush red, her hands pinken; how her freckles spread out like a map, her eyes a legend. When she blew the candles only wavered, staying alit, leaning over and springing upright again. A camera flashed and, like a photograph, I saw the girl frozen in a flood of light. She blew a third time and extinguished the flames with a spray of saliva, leaving a long string of drool stretched between her chin and the icing edge.

“You blew your AIDS on it,” Dylan sneered. “Way to go, Shelb. Now it’s an AIDS cake.”

“Yeah, sure, and you get the first piece,” said Shelby, cutting him a slice. She heaved a slab of birthday cake on a plate and slid it across the table to Dylan. “Dig in,” she said, giggling.

“Are you serious?” shouted Dylan.

“Dylan, she didn’t spit on that piece,” Lisa said. She stood next to Shelby, holding a camera to her eye. “I watched her, and she barely touched it.”

“Then you eat it.”

“Quit being a baby, kiddo. Eat the goddamn cake,” I said.

“Screw all of you—you always side with her on everything and it’s fucked.”

I shot Lisa a slanted glare.

“Fine, if you’re going to be a brat, no cake for Dylan,” I said with a smile.

I corralled the dessert plate with both arms and slid it over to my seat at the table. A raveled napkin produced a fork which cut deep into the cake and delivered a thick, gushy bite. I chewed with my mouth slack, eyes wide, feigning ecstasy, fishing for a laugh from Shelby across the table.

Dylan’s face turned ripe red. “You’re an asshole, dad.”

I flapped my mouth and some chewed-up mush spilled out onto the table. “It’s delicious, really,” I mumbled. “Try some.”

I palmed the bottom of the plate, sprawled my body across the table, and jammed the half-eaten piece of birthday cake into Dylan’s face. Glaze smeared between his eyes, up his nostrils, and dripped down his cheeks when I pulled away the plate. A wet clump of batter hung from the bridge of his nose; white globs of cake stuck like glue to his lips. He sat motionless as a mass of icing tore away and fell onto his lap. Nobody moved.

I looked over at Shelby, fishing for a smile. But her mouth was covered with her hands. Dylan stood up. He smeared frosting off his lip with the back of his shirt sleeve and locked eyes with mine.

“It’s only a joke, Dylan,” I laughed. “Shelb, why not cut your brother another slice—”

Dylan lunged through the air and grabbed me by the throat. The image of his leaping body lagged an instant out of step. Both his hands clasped around my throat, tightened, then wrenched. It happened fast. I imagined a bloodied knife at my throat, then there was nothing to imagine.

Dylan's dense, teenaged body pinned my shoulders to the back of my chair, causing us to topple backward into the barrier between the kitchen and dining room, tearing a tire-sized fissure in the drywall. Lisa shrieked; Shelby fled to her bedroom. We tipped over onto the ground, and as we fell Dylan's head slammed on the tile floor. Then everything stopped.

After the incident, after we heard the sonic boom that was his skull meeting the floor, Lisa and I held Dylan up against the kitchen counter. A thin stream of blood ran down the back of his neck. Lisa wiped the icing off her son's face with a towelette damp with her own tears. She pressed a bag of frozen cauliflower to the wound.

In the emergency room we told the triage nurse that there had been a baseball-related incident. Dylan described the sensation of being struck in the back of the head as a lightshow. The way tendrils of color peel over your vision and then disappear. Leaving nothing but empty, uninhabited space.

The two hundred and twenty-five dollars that I showed up with changed hands on the table. I cashed out with someone else's forty-four bucks and watched old Ron hobble away on his aluminum walker three hundred and seventy-seven dollars richer.

"You haven't learned a thing, have you?" John said after the game.

"I'm undisciplined—how do you think I winded up in this place."

"Once you see money on the table, you see red," John sneered. "We have a name for players like you. Fish. We can smell you a mile away."

I pushed open the solarium door and walked into the mess lounge with John in tow. Abby waved us down.

"Hey strangers—can I get you anything? You look like you could use a pick-me-up."

“And what do you suppose that means?” John grinned.

“When Ron comes out the smoke room whistling you know he’s up to something. I knew he had some money in his pocket.”

“He’s got money alright. But it ain’t mine.”

John knocked on the wooden bar counter, and then Richard squeezed between us.

“Don’t you boys go weaseling off for a drink without me, now,” Richard said. “Three Americanos, dear.”

Abby grabbed three teacups off hooks above the bar and scooped espresso grounds in the portafilter. The machine stirred, full of hums and purrs as it came to life. Then the spigots spat out boiling hot streams into the ceramic below.

“You know, you’re a good man to have around, Kevin,” Richard said.

“Is that so?”

“Because you’re reckless at the table. You play like an Indian. You know what I mean by that right, playing like an Indian? Brash, negligent. You make us old men look sane at the table. Like we’re downright sensible people.”

“It’s a game, Richard. If the man wants to play fast, let it be,” said John. “One day he’ll burn you with it, knowing your luck.”

“John, I’m not chastising the boy.” Richard slapped me lightly across the shoulders.

“What I’m saying is that if he wants to run with the wolves, he’s got to catch the scent. He’s got to learn how to sense vulnerability, play the long game. All that. You’ll come around, won’t you, Kevin?”

I tilted my head sideways in a half-shrug, half-nod.

“Cheers, lads,” said Richard.

We clinked glasses.

“Brighten up, Kevin.” John caught me with downcast eyes. “A little shortfall here and there, well, that’s bound to happen. After all, between us we have a couple hundred years of accumulated wisdom on you.”

“One of these days we’ll take you out for a drink and show you a thing or two. A real drink, I mean, after hours.” Richard said.

“Maybe.”

“Here, just to lighten you up—Abby, dear, why don’t you go ahead and toss a little Irish whiskey in our friend’s cup here.”

Abby nodded slyly.

“Oh, no, please, Richard. I have to head to work in a few and honestly—”

“Stop that, Kevin. When an Irishman offers you a sunrise you do not refuse,” Richard said with a wink. “It’s bad form. And remember, a wolf is an opportunist.” Abby poured a shot glass of dark amber whiskey in my cup, stirring it in with a thin, foamy spoon, smiling in the corner of my eye.

That afternoon I found two girls, in skirts and braids, running down the basement corridor with muddy boots.

“Hold it—what are you two doing down here?”

“I don’t know, sorry. We’re bored,” one of them said to her feet.

“How’d you get down here? It’s off limits to club guests.”

“We went through the big door, the red one.”

“What door?”

“Under the shop, we thought it would lead somewhere spooky.”

“I’m the only spook down here.” They stared blankly. “Boo!” I pretended to lunge forward, sticking my hands out like claws.

The girls flinched, gasped.

“I’m just playing,” I said. “Isn’t it like two o’clock, anyway—you two should be in school right now, shouldn’t you?”

“We’re signed out.”

“By who?”

“Granddad.”

“You’re sisters, then?”

“Cousins.”

“And who’s your granddad?”

“Jacque,” one said.

“Belanger,” said the other.

I had never heard of him.

“Well, run along back where you came from, this section of the club is barred to guests. Next time read the sign on the door.”

They nodded.

“If I see you down here again, Jacque’s getting a phone call. You understand?”

They spun to face me, nodded, and then continued scurrying toward the stairwell.

In the wet room, Michel washed the blades of the fairway mower by hand. Behind him a rough mower, roller, bunker rake, push mower, tee mower, and a box of powered hand tools lined up in a row, all their blades removed. He looked up from his wash basin, a gob of soap

dangling from his beard, to find me standing in the doorway. He turned off the faucet and the room went quiet.

“Kevin, just the man I need. Would you mind taking over here? I have to check up on the sod before the three o’clock tee times.”

“Sure thing.”

I scanned the long line of tools and mowers and crank-powered equipment scattered behind him.

“Did you see those girls out there, running around?” I finally asked.

“The who?”

“The girls.”

“About yea high?” He held his hand to what would be breast-height if he were standing.

“Yeah, them.”

“I heard them running down the hall, sure. That’s nothing new. I’ve seen them around here before, walking around exploring and whatnot.”

“Have you?”

“Yeah, they come with their grandparents. They’re only having some fun. As long as they stay out of the shop or the shed, I don’t pay no mind.”

“I thought you said that it’s off-limits under—”

“Let it go, Kevin. Imagine your folks drag your ass to the country club twice a week while your friends are hanging out doing god knows what. We’re no stranger to having kids around, Kevin. They’ll be fine.”

Ten feet of silence separated us.

“Fine,” I said. “Whatever. All I’m saying is that I swore it was you who told me t—”

“You know what, Kev. Come scrub the grass clippings off the mower deck,” Michel said, standing its big orange base on its side. “They’re caked on real tough.” He handed me a garden house and a foam-covered sponge. “I’ll be on the greens if anyone needs to find me. Walkie’s off.”

By three-forty I had polished every blade, mower, and tool in the wet room and tipped them upside down to drip dry. By three forty-five I was in the mess lounge, alone at the bar with Abby. We were caught up in a conversation about what to expect when the course freezes over in the winter and the clubhouse hollows into an empty fortress.

“Every year by November fifteenth, I shit you not,” said Abby. “There hasn’t been a single year I’ve been here where the course wasn’t closed by the fifteenth. Maybe it’s because we’re at the foot of a valley or what, but after Halloween this place gets frigid as all hell. The funny thing is, once you hightail it back up highway nine into town you get over the hill and there’s not a morsel of snow on the ground. Your tires quit sliding. And all is right with the world again. Maybe that sounds dramatic.”

I shook my head, squinted.

“You know, now you got me thinking about this place,” she continued.

“How so?”

“It feels like death sometimes.”

“Now you sound dramatic.” I sipped, nose down, from my glass of diet coke.

“Imagine being twenty-five years old and you’ve got not a care in the world about what’s going to come up tomorrow. Or—no— imagine yourself as an eighty-year-old. A creepy, boney old man in a sport jacket who’s, let’s say, oh, I don’t know, *moved on*? You know, ready for the

next life. Well, wouldn't you know it, he meets someone like you and suddenly there's life in his eyes again. He's at the bar every night, hoping to see you; he's out on the greens, hoping to catch you. Then he goes home and he's alone. But in the morning the cycle of optimism restarts.

Because the possibility of you resumes.”

I checked my watch.

“For me it's the opposite,” she continued. “The clock hits nine and I'm out the door and can't wait to get in my car and see what's next for me that night. It's only when I'm here behind this goddamn counter that I'm checking the time and standing in one place.”

“You could've fooled me.”

“You know, sometimes it feels like I'm sliding down the highway. Gliding on ice.”

“No traction.”

“None.”

Murky liquid swirled around the rim of my glass, bubbled near the edge.

“It's worse, even,” she went on. “This place feels like a goddamn sewer sometimes.” She scanned the room for snooping ears. “I mean, it looks pretty to the untrained eye, but there are kids and retired folks walking around here at all hours of the day. I used to work in a motel and, trust me, I'd rather sterilize those rooms than deal with some of the shit here. Let's put it this way: if it comes out the human body, I've had to clean it. Period. And guess who's always the one to get called to bring the mop or the bleach bucket.” She pointed a finger at her screwed-up face.

I took a sip and wiped my lips with the back of my shirt sleeve. Happy to let the girl vent, and that maybe she would return the courtesy. “That hasn't been my experience,” I said.

“Lucky you.”

Abby took drink orders from a couple of retirees at the bar while I worked on my coke, looking out through the windows on the far side of the lounge. Outside, two groups were riding between the third and fourth holes with fully-loaded carts and a caddie hanging off the back.

I turned to face the conversation between the retirees, clad in flat caps.

“The gentleman’s standing by my golf bag and isn’t moving an inch. So, I wait and I wait and I can barely keep my composure. Because the man is simply *not* cluing in. At this point I’m thinking, ‘This fella is a moron,’ you know? And then I turn to the gentleman and I say...”

“What did you say?” asked Abby, scratching her arm.

“Taking your sweet time, aren’t you pal?”

Abby smirked and grunted. The man cracked a smile, his dentures on full display. He held a finger up in front of his face as if you say he wasn’t finished.

“The guy looks real miffed now and shouts back ‘Do you need a club?’ That’s when I say back to him...that’s when I say...‘Well, I’m not going to hit it with my cock, am I?’”

Abby ducked under the bar and let out a squeal laugh. I spat my beer back into the glass and covered up the sight with my shirt sleeve. Abby stood back up with tears running.

The key jammed inside the ignition, screaming like the sound of rust. I threw my bag in the back and then shuffled onto the driver’s seat.

“Kevin!”

A small voice was calling me from somewhere in the parking lot. I checked the rear-view mirror and saw nothing but a light post and the backs of other vehicles staring me down.

“Kevin!”

I got out of the car and walked out of the parking space to get a closer look at whatever it was that was calling my name.

A little girl in blue, maybe ten, half-ran toward me with a man trailing behind her, walking. I recognized her sweater from ten parking spaces away. It was the same sweater worn by the girl on Richard's lap on the night we met, the one who walked in on the poker game. This time, it was zipped up all the way and her hair was splayed, crashing on her shoulders.

She ran into me without slowing down and wrapped her stubby arms around my waist and said my name for a third time.

Confused, I winced and looked up to see John coming up behind her, shaking his head and smiling. I looked down to find the girl smiling back.

"Excuse me, have we met?"

She craned her head to the side and dropped an eyebrow. "Don't you remember? I saw you at the poker game where you lost and daddy won. You needed a three, remember?"

"No, as a matter of fact I don't."

"You're my daddy's business colleague, remember?"

"That I do remember."

"See."

John finally caught up behind her, faintly breathless.

"Haley," he said. "Haley, leave the poor man alone, we need to get you home. We're running late." He looked up at me and winked, inviting me to egg her on. "Don't mind her," he continued. "She's just antsy. She wants to go home, having been here all day now. Isn't that right, Hales?" Haley curved her gaze and then spun on her heels to face John. "That's right," John continued. "Get in the car." He patted the top of her head. "That's a good girl."

Haley ran off to get in the back of a blue minivan the next row over, yanking open the rear door with both hands. She slid in next to other kids in the back and wedged herself between them on the backseat.

“That’s a sweet girl, there,” said John, the sun beating down on his wrinkled brow. He pinched the ends of his lips together, washing the smirk from his face.

“Is she your granddaughter or something—wait, I thought she was Richard’s?”

“Yes, she’s Richard’s daughter.”

“Isn’t she a little young to be Richard’s?” I glanced back over at the minivan, leaning now on the back of my car.

“You do know Richard’s only seventy, don’t you?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. He told me. And what’s she—ten?”

“Nine,” he said, the word sliding off his tongue. “But who am I to judge the man for what he does with his second marriage. Hell, it took me three to get what I’d always wanted.” He slapped the tailgate of the pickup he was leaning on. “I struck gold, after all those years.”

I nodded.

“Anyway,” he sighed. “I’ll be getting a phone call if these tots aren’t dropped off at Richard’s in a half hour, so I better get a move on. For some odd reason Richard and Maggie think it’s a good idea to get an old man like me to chase the dang kids around like a chauffeur whenever they can’t make it to the club.”

“They’re quite trusting of you, John.”

“They can’t be that old, then,” John laughed. “Not wise anyway.”

I crawled back inside the car I’d forgotten I had left running. I pulled out of the lot and followed John’s minivan onto the highway, mine heading north and his south. Behind tinted

windows three children bounced on the backseat, fighting for possession of something unseen as they peeled away.

In bed I recounted an episode from years ago when the kids were still young and would shout *I love you* over and over from their bedroom, persistent until I shouted it back. After law school there was a number of years when this exchange was necessary for them to fall asleep. One evening Dylan and Shelby called to me in hushed voices from their shared bedroom doorway, standing in matching pajamas.

“Come help,” Dylan said.

A stack of case briefs weighed down on the dining room table. I removed them one by one, carefully peeling back their covers and thumbing through their front matter.

“Grumpy, please,” they said.

Only the most dire circumstances would have the kids calling for me before their mother, such as a spider on the dresser, or a shadow in the closet, so I slapped the casebook closed and walked to the bottom of the stairs. There they were, at the opposite end, standing in striped pajama shirts, underwear, and Lion King slippers. Dylan was crying, and Shelby, appearing confused, looked up at her older brother as if to check whether it was appropriate for her to continue crying too.

At the top of the stairs I crouched low and asked them what was wrong.

“Why did mommy steal the car?” Dylan said. His voice was unsteady.

“Excuse me, what?”

“Why did mom steal the car?” Dylan stuttered.

“What are you talking about, Dylan? The car’s in the driveway.” I walked up to the top of the top of the stairs.

“Mommy said she stole it.”

“No, no,” I said, hugging them both. Dylan broke down in sobs, joined by Shelby. “She didn’t steal the car. I don’t know what she was talking about. Sometimes when she’s angry she makes things up.

“It’s all a joke.” I held them closer, my head inserted between theirs. “Sometimes jokes aren’t funny.”

On the way to their dentist appointment, the kids had sat patiently while their mother slammed her fists into the steering wheel, raging at the windshield. Lisa ranted about the family’s personal finances and the many high-interest loans and credit products they had taken out to finance their home, vehicles, educations.

Their van sat between two tractor trailers. They needed off the highway if they wanted to make it to their appointment. The exit lane was blocked by three rows of slow rush-hour traffic. Lisa smacked the steering wheel with the butt of her hand and screamed. Dylan wept in the backseat, pleaded with his mother, told her to calm down and focus on the road. Shelby too started wailing in long, drawn-out moans. She wished for a strong firefighter, maybe a policeman, to come and rescue her, give her coloring books, hold her tight. She closed her eyes and wished for this.

“You see this car?” Lisa screamed at no one. “We stole it.”

Dylan yelled something indecipherable, then ran out of breath. Shelby banged on the only window she could reach from her booster seat, hoping someone in an opposite lane would notice, see her, send help.

“We never paid for it,” Lisa muttered. “We stole it.”

Later, in the elevator, Dylan asked for the time.

“Twelve fifty-seven,” Lisa said. The dental clinic was on the sixth floor of a downtown high-rise, and Dylan counted each floor as they ascended in silence.

“That means we have three minutes left,” Dylan said, smiling nervously. “I think we’re going to make it.”

“Yes,” Lisa said, with a stunned, expressionless look about her. She took the children’s hands and told them that she was sorry for what they had to see. They hugged her around her waist and she crouched low and covered their ears, then they watched in mute as the elevator doors spread apart.

“No,” I told the kids, their feet dangling off their beds. “I don’t know what your mother was thinking. Sometimes she loses it.” They wiped the tears from their cheeks, leaving gooey streaks caked onto their faces. “She, uh, goes a little cocoo.” I twirled a finger beside my ear and made my eyes big and screwed up my face and the kids smiled. “Did you change the channel like I told you to?”

I had taught them to change the channel in their heads whenever they want to stop feeling sad. I taught them that their minds were blue as the country sky, like an untuned TV, and they could use their imagination to flip between thoughts: scary, sad, happy, excited.

“No,” Dylan said. “It didn’t work.”

“I changed it,” said Shelby, smiling proudly. I gave her a big hug and said, “I’m proud of you, Shelby.”

I told them I had a surprise.

“What?”

“Do you want to know?”

“Yes!”

“Do you really want to know?”

They nodded in silence, their cheeks dry.

“Tomorrow I’ll take you swimming.”

They threw their arms up and cheered and told me how much they loved me and how much they loved their mom and how much they loved their fish, a little bloodfin on the dresser, circling a bowl as a spider crawled across it.

“Thanks for making it in early, Kevin.”

“Not a problem,” I yawned, batted my eyes.

“I’ve been speaking to management about you—Rod, Gail and them. They’ve taken a liking to you, they have,” said Michel, leaning over his desk chair.

“So soon?” I laughed.

“We had a talk last night and they want to migrate me to account management in the pro shop while Percy’s away.” Michel shuffled his fingertips on the back of the chair. “In the meantime, you’ll be responsible for groundskeeping and a handful of other duties including some bar work and front-facing jobs in the clubhouse.”

I tossed my orange hi-vis vest onto the bench next to me.

“In other words,” he said, “they need an everyman to help keep the clubhouse glued together, especially with the colder weather coming.” Michel cast his gaze down onto the ground, as if he were reading something written at his feet. “You can think of yourself as an

assistant superintendent if you want a fancy title. Should anything come up, you bring it to me. But you report directly to Gail and ownership from now on, understood?”

I nodded once, then twice, then again. I let a smile break through.

“In the meantime, put your goddamn vest back on,” he said. “You’ve got a parking lot to paint.”

Twenty minutes later I stood out front of the building with a bucket of yellow paint and a push-powered striping machine. A trolley supported the striping paint, giving me a wheeled platform with which to push it along the asphalt. Every yellow line that was chipped or faded around the edges I retraced with the trolley. The heat was sweltering for September, the greens were brighter than ever, and caravans of guests were pulling up by the busload, more and more by the day, to get their last-minute fix before the impending autumn freeze.

I heard a thin, faraway noise. I released the handle on the trolley and the spray can went quiet. In the reflection of an adjacent minivan I saw a shadow move behind me. I turned around to find Abby staring back at me.

“I said hey stranger,” she said. A smirk wiped over her freckled face, standing only a putter’s-length away from mine. Abby had her regular white bandana tied in a knot on top of her head, holding a long red ponytail tucked behind it. “What’s up with the trolley?”

“Repainting.” I motioned to the duffel bag filled with empty yellow paint cannisters sitting in the next parking space over.

“Isn’t that Michel’s job?”

“He handed over the keys today, as a matter of fact.” I jingled the keychain on my belt.

Abby held up her hand, covering her slack-jawed mouth. “Look at you,” she said. She grinned playfully. “Big man.”

She leaned in at an angle so that I saw half of everything—one eye, one brow, one half of a crooked smile—before stepping forward coy and slow. She put a foot behind me and a foot in front. She reached for my beltloop and fingered the keychain at my waist. Our eyes met. She kept playing with the keys.

“Excuse me,” I said. I put my hand on top of hers and moved it away. She forced an awkward laugh. Her soft eyes saw instantly that something inside me was hurrying away from her.

Abby pushed me gently on the cheek and stepped back. “I was just checking. Jeez.” She kept her hands busy, pulling her ponytail to the side, letting it run down her collar. The vacant expression on my face rebuffed Abby’s ploy to get me talking. “I was checking to see if you had my key,” she finished.

I knelt and pretended to fiddle with the cannister in the trolley, swallowing nervously. “You know what, Abby. I think you should get out of here. I’ve got a job to finish.” I pointed with my head to the long lineup of parking spaces behind me, all marked by paint that was washed out or nicked.

“Well *excuse* me,” she said, drawing out her vowels. “Didn’t know a girl can’t look for her keys.” I squinted up at her. “I mean, what if you had my keys on you and, I don’t know, started accidentally wandering into the back of the bar during my late shift, *huh?* We wouldn’t want that to happen.”

“We sure wouldn’t.”

“Can’t blame me for doing something about it, then.”

“Sure.” I stood up and fought back a grin.

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“Good,” Abby said. She flipped her hair back behind her shoulder and readied her bag to go. “All is forgiven, then?”

“Y—” I hesitated. “You know, I don’t know about you.”

Abby smiled and then walked away, making a show of it with her hips. Suddenly, she turned around, a couple parking spaces away. “Oh, and I think you might’ve pissed on your boots.” I checked my feet. They were speckled with bright yellow.

“That’s paint. You mean paint, right?”

She continued across the lot. I went back to work rolling the trolley. Abby’s keys started chiming again on my beltloop, but by then she was too far to hear them.

The cupboards above the wash basin were unpainted, wooden, and layered with dust. On the inside was a clipboard, suspended by a thumbtack in the wood. The first page of the clipboard was titled *COURSE MAINTENANCE TO A TEE!*, which was spread across the top third of the page in a comically oversized font. My thumb traced the tasks listed in the column below it:

Mow greens.

Change pins.

Fix ball marks.

Change tee blocks.

Green rolling.

Mow tees.

Mow approaches.

Mow fringes.

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

Mow fairways.

Mow rough (AR2 Machine).

Mow sidewinder.

Course check (Garbage, Benches, Bunkers, Bathrooms).

Cooler water.

Add divot mix to tees.

Rake traps.

Various jobs (Trimming, etc.).

I slid my thumb over to the next column:

Twice Monday.

Twice Tuesday.

Twice Wednesday.

Twice Thursday.

Twice Friday

Three times Saturday.

I added a tally to the Sunday column, the standard ritual before I left for check-up. I swiped the torn-up gardening gloves from off the bench and pushed open the red exit doors, leading onto the back of the fourth green. Rain drops dripped from the awning above the doors and fell onto mown grass that smelled like dead plants. It was September, blood warm, and soon the ground would be frozen.

Check trash one by the lamp post; check trash two by the men's washrooms; wipe the mud from my boots before entering the men's washrooms; replace trash three in the men's washrooms; unlock the supply closet behind the men's washrooms; grab the bag of potash.

I poured the contents of the bag into a brown wheelbarrow with a hopper poking out the front. “Fucking potash.”

From down the way a group of middle-aged men were heading up the fourth green, so I pushed the wheelbarrow down to the third. As I approached the tee box on the vacant third green, my phone vibrated in my rear pocket. I pulled off my glove, pulled it out, flipped it open and shielded it from the rain with my free hand.

“Rosethorn maintenance,” I said.

“Your fans are wondering where you’ve been running off to.”

“Abby?”

“Don’t worry, silly—I’m calling on John’s request. He’s here with me at the bar asking where you’ve been. I grabbed your number off the schedule,” she said with the confidence of someone who had never been turned down, rejected, abandoned, or forgotten about. “Hope that’s alright.”

“Tell him I got a promotion.”

“He says he got a promotion,” Abby said to John, only barely within earshot. “John is asking where they’ve got you working now, with your big promotion,” she said, stretching her words.

“Third green tee box, actually. I’m laying down conditioner as a matter of fact, getting it ready for the cold.”

“Already?”

“It’s technically autumn.”

“You’re no fun to talk to, you know that?”

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“Why don’t you come down here and do these greens for me then, if you want something to talk about.”

“Can’t.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“John’s grandkids are coming after school—he wants us to meet them.”

I paused and looked down into the wheelbarrow by my feet, searching through the rocky swirl of grey and brown salt rocks leading into the hopper.

“I’ll swing by the lounge when I’m off,” I said. “But if they’re feeling up for it just bring them down to the greens. I shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

I started toward the bandstand with Kokomo behind me. The banquet pavilion was covered by a tall, oversized gazebo whose creamy white tarpaulin covered the glittering night sky.

Hugh, my second groomsman, unfastened the mesh door and pulled it aside for us to duck under. We walked out from the main reception hall and stumbled onto a cobble walkway lit overhead by lanterns pumpkin-shaped and the color of beer.

We stopped to share one of Hugh’s cigarettes. The smoke rotated between us; we took drags and laughed about how my wedding was being held at the same chapel Hugh watched my baptism in thirty-one years earlier.

“Circle of life,” Hugh said.

“Circle of wife,” Kokomo shot back. We laughed, though unsure.

Having sucked the smoke down to the filter, I threw the butt in the garden and jumped onto the wooden steps leading up to the bandstand which rumbled with music and the chatter of

dancing feet. The crowd cheered as the emcee cut the song and announced our arrival. The announcement went unacknowledged by me: I walked across the floor to where Lisa was standing in her gown, her hands clasped against her cheeks, her beauty like a fantasy.

In one moment I approached her from across the stage and in the next my arms were coiled around her, my forehead pressed against hers, my mouth slurring words she could not make out. Kokomo watched from the opposite end of the bandstand, a crowd building around him. Seconds passed in twos, then threes. A string of white glowing ornaments draped behind us, framing our embrace in a soft, distinctive light. We stood still, hardly visible, producing only a silhouette in the dusk. I whispered mute words into her ear, and she smiled softly, running her hand down my chest. She looked down at her feet before kicking away her flats, letting them roll to center stage. I hunched over and scooped Lisa into my arms like a ragdoll and carried her down off the bandstand, both of us laughing inexplicably, racing onto the cobble and carrying ourselves away into the cool, grassy June, into a life still to be lived and still to be corrected.

From my knees I reached into the bed of flowers lining the south tennis courts and pulled out two empty potato chip bags wrinkled in the weeds. I shook them upside down, knocking out the dirt and the bugs living inside. One of the bags felt heavier, so I held it up to my eye, squinting for a better view. I extracted a writhing earthworm, fat and ribbed, from the bottom of the bag, dangled it between two fingers, and threw it back into the garden. The worms had been specially placed there in the summer to loosen up the soil. "If the dirt gets too hard before the autumn freeze then we'll lose the carnations," Michel had warned. I tossed the empty chip bags in my coverall pockets and rose to my feet.

My watch said it was four forty-five; the sky said it was almost dark. The sun had already sank low, though it was obscured by layers of gobby, unbroken clouds. I peeled off my gloves and slapped them against the chainlink fence to knock off the dirt.

Through the fence I noticed a father walking with his son. They were on the opposite side of the south courts, heading up the walkway toward the parking lots. The boy was ten or eleven, a bit old to be clutching his father's hand. I recognized neither the boy nor his father.

I tossed the garden tools onto the passenger seat of my golf cart, hopped into the driver's seat and flicked on the engine with a three-toothed key.

Behind the purr of the engine was the sound of someone struggling in the distance. They called for help. I cranked the wheel hand-over-hand and turned the cart to face the father and son who were now shouting in each other's faces. The son wiped snot from his nose and tears from his eyes and pulled his father back toward the club by the arm. I cut the engine, got out, tucked my gloves in my pocket with the chip bags, and started toward them.

"Hey!"

I yelled through the fence as I rounded it.

"What's going on here?"

The father yanked on the child's arm. The child stumbled backward.

"Hey! What's the matter with you?"

The father let go of the boy upon seeing me, then looked away and shaded his eyes with his palm. The boy stepped aside as I moved in. I got in the man's face.

"Is this your son? You know you can't just put your hands on him like that, right?"

"H—"

“Do you understand?” I shouted back, grabbing him by the shoulders, looking him dead on.

He attempted to divert his gaze away from mine. I juked back in front of his face once, then twice.

“Huh?” I said.

I shoved his chest back, knocking him off his guard. Toying with him. The man stutter-stepped a few paces back and struggled to regain his footing.

“Daddy—” The boy ran in from behind me and waved his outstretched arms, separating us like a referee. “Please don’t,” the boy said to his father. “*Stop.*”

I drew in one cold lungful of air after another. I took a moment to collect myself. I tried to change the channel in my mind.

Somewhere in the boy’s frightened, jumpy expression I noticed that he couldn’t have been as old as ten—more likely seven or eight, though tall for his age. His father, a man older than I had assumed, charged toward me.

“Come here,” he slurred and took a swing at me. I swatted it away. He wound up for another right swing before he was cut off but a loud cry emanating from the mouth of the walkway, calling from near the pro shop doors. The father put his fists down.

“What’s gotten into you boys?”

It was John. He marched over in a striped suit and an alabaster white bowtie around his neck. “Settle down lads, I’m sure we can keep things civil here, don’t you think,” he said, laughing nervously. He waved his hands as if to call the whole thing off.

“Do you know this guest, John?” I pointed my chin at the father. Careful not to dignify him with a glance.

John smiled, his mouth hanging open. “Kenneth,” he said, “what have you gotten yourself into now?” John laughed. “This is my son, Ken,” John said. “And this is my grandson, Lucas.” He gestured to the boy. John took Lucas in his arms and asked him if he’d like to go back in while the grown-ups talked in private. The boy nodded a sleepy nod and started walking back toward the entrance doors. Ken kept silent, holding his forehead in his palms.

“What’s gotten into you?” I asked Ken.

“Too much to drink is the problem,” John chimed in. He investigated his son’s pale, expressionless face. But I knew enough drunks in my day to know that John was lying. He wasn’t one of us.

“You sure about that?” I moved in closer.

“Oh, I’m afraid so,” John said. “Ken’s had a problem for some time now. I’ll take care of him, don’t you worry.”

“What do you mean—do you want me to call him an ambulance?”

“Don’t be a fool, Kevin. The man just tried to get behind the wheel of a car and almost put his son in the back seat—you don’t want to get anyone involved in this. Let me drive him home and get him sobered up.”

I gave them both a curious look. Ken recoiled like he was going to throw up, but only heaved up a cough. He rattled his head back and forth. His distress appeared to be belonging to someone more than drunk. I reached for Ken’s forehead to check his temperature. John quickly swatted away my hand.

“Please,” he snapped. “This is family business, okay? You can respect that, can you not? You’re a family man, aren’t you?”

“Then tell me what you want me to do, John.”

“Why don’t you go see Abby, she wanted you to meet Lucas. He’s probably with her now—how about you go check up on him and see if he’s doing alright. You would be a real help, Kevin, if you did that.”

I stormed off for the doors in search of the boy.

“Kevin—thank you,” John called back to me. “Thank you, Kevin,” he repeated as he walked his son to the parking lot.

Lucas wasn’t in the lobby. There was a new usher in a black vest standing by the doors, looking younger and more aloof than the others. It seemed that the clubhouse ushers were in constant rotation; once I had met one and learned their name, they would be transferred to another wing of the club or I’d find out that they had been replaced. This kid, maybe eighteen years old, had the look of a last-minute replacement. I asked him if he’d seen a boy walk through these doors unaccompanied.

“Lucas?” He asked.

“That’s the one,” I said.

He pointed up the stairwell, then looked back down at his wristwatch, doing his best to appear as though he belonged.

Before heading up the stairs I looked through the windows of the entrance doors, seeing if John and his Ken were still in sight. They had disappeared, now lost somewhere among the cars and the trucks and the concrete in the distance.

At the lounge bar I found Lucas sitting with Abby. There were couples scattered throughout the room, sipping cocktails or house pilsners at tables, watching the sun sink low on the other side of the window. Abby pointed to me as I approached, letting Lucas know I was coming up from behind.

“Hey there,” I said, resting my hand on his shoulder. “My name’s Kevin, I do groundskeeping here at the club.” The boy looked up at me, appearing ashamed and in no mood to talk. “Listen—I’m sorry you had to see that, that scuffle outside. I’m a friend of your grandfather’s, and I want to make sure you’re alright, that’s all I want.”

The boy gave Abby a timid look, as if to ask her silently what to say. She smiled back at him. “I think,” she said, “our friend Lucas here has had a long day. He was all gung-ho on meeting you when he got here after school, but he’s seen enough action for one day, huh Lucas?” Lucas nodded, adding in a flurry of blinks, trying to keep composure in front of all these adults.

“Does your dad always drink like that—”

“Kevin!” Abby cried.

“I came from a drinking family, I know what it’s like. I have every right to ask.”

“No, no, as a matter of fact you—”

“My dad hardly ever drinks,” the boy said. “He’s never like this.”

The boy sat huddled over the bar, looking at Abby, or the hanging TV over her shoulder, staring blankly while the screen’s reflection flickered across his disaffected face. He slouched over on his stool, wearing an oversized blue hoodie that made him look larger and rounder than he was. I searched through my jacket pocket for my wallet, and then dug through the back of it for my contact card.

“Here,” I said, sliding it down the bar. “This is my card, give me a shout if your dad’s been drinking and you need help, all right?”

“Kevin,” Abby said with a hushed voice. “Are you nuts? You can’t just give a kid your phone number. He’s perfectly fine. Plus, he has John if he needs help.”

“Abby, I’m trying to—”

“Save it, Kevin,” she said, passing the business card back to me. “Stay out of other people’s personal business, okay. This is a family matter—you’re a landscaper; let this be.”

Leaving the card on the table, I stood up and said goodbye Lucas. “I hope you come around here more often, Lucas, we can show you the greens sometime. Maybe you’ve got a better short game than your granddad.”

“Kevin, go,” Abby mouthed from behind the bar.

I gave Lucas a firm pat on the shoulder and waved to Abby, who called out to someone as soon as I turned my back to her.

“Sarah!”

A woman of about thirty, wearing plain clothes with her brown hair tied back, hurried across the lounge. She joined Abby at the counter who untied her white apron and handed it to the woman. Abby took her by her shoulders, mouthed something inaudible, hugged her, then came out front of the bar.

“Lucas,” Abby said. “Come on, buddy. It’s time to go home.” She took the boy by the hand and hurried out of the room with him in tow. On her way out the door she brushed my arm as if to apologize silently.

“Ready, Shelby?”

“Uh huh.”

“Here it comes,” I said, pointing above the treetops on the horizon. From behind the woods came an onrushing sound, rumbling louder the nearer it approached.

“Sounds like a big one,” she said, stretching her arms as far as they could reach on either side.

“A little bigger than that, I’d say.”

Shelby stood up on the hood of the car and hopped in place, glancing at me sitting next to her in the corners of her eyes, waiting for me to laugh, to tell her to stop and get down.

“Look,” she shouted, hopping higher. With her finger, she traced a small single-engine aircraft as it rose above the woods lying next to the putting greens and soared upward across the stale clouded sky. “Look it—look it’s got red on it.” The plane’s propeller was audible from the parking space on which we sat, making whirrs and rattling noises as it ripped through the morning air. No larger than a two-seater was the red-bellied turboprop shooting out of reach toward a sun obscured.

“That’s it?” Shelby said.

“Looks like it,” I said, knocking the ash off the end of my cigarette.

“Now what?”

“What do you mean, smart ass, what more could you possibly want? You just watched, what, five Cessnas take off in twenty minutes.” I smiled at her, hoping to tame any doubt in her mind. I flicked the cigarette butt onto the cracked pavement, got up off the hood of the car and stomped on it, extinguishing and smearing its streaky black guts on the ground.

“What do you say then, kiddo. McDonald’s?”

Shelby jumped down from the hood of the car and did her happy dance. “McDonald’s, McDonald’s, McDonald’s,” she sang.

Behind the wheel, I popped another breath mint.

“You buckled in back there?”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes.”

“Should we go grab your brother from home first?”

“No.”

“Alright then,” I chuckled.

We arrived, from one empty parking lot to another.

“You sure you don’t want drive-thru?”

“I’m sure.”

Tall front-facing windows teased an enormous play place inside, colored with blue, yellow, red, green, and purple plastic tubing. A spiral slide, net bridges, bubble windows, and monkey bars. The pipes and tubes jutted into each other like a tangled rainbow of doom.

“Of course you are,” I said to Shelby as we stepped out of the car.

On our way inside I looked down at Shelby and found her staring back from below, smiling wildly, buzzing behind the eyes. The satisfaction of not being home with her, where her mother and I had screamed at one another from across the dinner table for weeks, was immediate and total. Here she was safe.

“Next?” Called a lady in a visor behind the counter.

“Hi,” I said.

“Yup, what can I get you?”

I ordered two one-dollar sandwiches and then looked behind me to ask Shelby if she wanted an orange soda with hers. She wasn’t there. Left, right, between my legs—she was gone.

“*Shelb?*”

The sound of a thousand plastic balls smashing under the weight of a seven-year-old girl seeped through the windows separating the play place from the restaurant. Not a moment later I heard Shelby laugh her crackly laugh.

“She’s playing in the ball pit. I don’t know what she wants. How about a happy meal? Any happy meal.”

Balancing a tray of bagged up food in my arms, I called to Shelby somewhere lost in the play structure. “Food’s ready!”

Shelby shot up from underneath the surface layer of stained, snot-coated balls in the pit. She threw a couple of red ones into the air on her way up. “But I didn’t even tell you what I wanted.”

“I had to guess,” I said. “Now come eat.”

“But I want to see what’s upstairs.”

“Upstairs?”

“Yeah, up there.” She pointed to the network of traversable red, blue, and yellow tubes, roughly child-height, that meandered above her head. “But it’s blocked.”

“It’s blocked?”

“Yeah, I can’t go up.”

“Hold on.” I put the food tray down at a booth and went back into the play place to investigate. “Show me,” I said. Shelby ran up to the entrance of the structure, a wide blue tube that sloped upward, barely tall enough for a child to walk through with their head down.

“Look,” she said, pointing to a small puddle at the mouth of the tube.

“Oh,” I said.

“I think somebody spilled their drink,” Shelby said.

“You know what, sweetie—go grab Grumpy napkins. A bunch of napkins.” An ammoniac scent wafted off the piss puddle, rank and revolting.

She ran off and came back carrying a pillowy stack of napkins in her arms, some flying off and scattering throughout the room. I grabbed a few off the top and laid them on the plastic, foul floor of the tube. It absorbed the urine. The rest of the napkins made a napkin bridge over the puddle, drying up the liquid but radiating its smell.

“There you go, Shelby,” I said with a nasally, backed-up voice. She hugged me around the neck and then ran through the tube, mashing her hands and feet into the napkins on her way up. She disappeared somewhere inside, found only by her laughter, as I watched from the bottom with my every sense rushing to love.

Home was quiet in the evenings. I bought a bed frame to separate my mattress from the floor. A furred rug splayed under its feet. All surface-level pieces of my life were beginning to fit back together in their shallow slots.

The contents of my coffee mug swirled around the rim as I sat at the dining room table with a pen and paper in hand. “Shelby and Dylan,” I began before crossing it out. “Kids,” I tried again and crossed out. I flipped the page over and then dove into it, at a loss for what to say.

Your dad hasn't forgotten about you kids. Every day I'm thinking about Christmas and getting the chance to see your faces. Even you, Dyl! Haha. But enough about the sentimental shit—your dad's ready to have some fun too. After spending all summer at the country club, I'm virtually a pro now. Just kidding! They don't let me goof off on the job, although I'd like to take a swing on some of the fools around here (LOL!). The place is run like a zoo. Only that I'm the captive animal. There for all the suited-up high ballers to oogle over, chat up and whatnot. “Fresh blood” as they say. Anyway, a job's a job. I didn't think I'd last a month at Rosethorn, but it's home now. If you could make it down next Spring, we could spend an afternoon on the

putting course—I think you'd like that, Shelb. Remember how you used to hit the glow in the dark balls at the drive-in? You'd hit that thing so hard mom would joke about how if you would've let go we'd be paying for someone's windshield. Dylan, you could shoot too, kiddo. Now that you've got me thinking about it, I say we should make a date—next Spring, maybe? Let me know. You can either fly down here and I'll give you the tour of Rosethorn, introduce you to the crazies and all. There's always kids running around here anyway. Or I can see if your mother will let me take you guys somewhere around Edmonton. Whatever works. Spring's a busy season around the club, but I might be able to pull some strings. Who knows. Anyway—how's school? I'm sure you're itching to get the hell out of there, Dylan. Can't blame you. But Shelby, how are you liking high school? If you're having a hard time adjusting, just know that high school is all about having a hard time. That's the whole point. To struggle and adjust. You'll be better off for it, knowing who you are and what kind of people you want to surround yourself with. Even if it sucks (which it does), high school is about finding your values. Becoming yourself, as it were. Enough of that talk, though. You'll realize all this as you go along. Just have fun kids, that's all that really matters. Be your big, incredible selves. That's all we can hope for as parents. I mean, if you're your father's kids then you won't have any trouble showing your true selves. Speaking of which, don't tell your mother, but I'm already known as the geek around the club. The quiet, estranged man of letters who threw it all away to tend to the garden at the old run-down country club. A story as old as time, right? I don't mesh well with the high rollers or the old drunks or the trust funders. Although I've been playing cards with some of them. They're always trying to get me drinking, too. I tell them I'm sober but they don't see what the fuss is about. Why I bother. They mean well, they're just a different generation with a different set of concerns and scars. Well, enough of that. That's the update on my life. Time to hear about

your busy, budding lives. Give me a shout sometime, won't you? Just don't tell your mother, she'll probably chop your hands off. LOL. That's it from me—your dad's hand is cramping. Sayonara. All the love—Signed, Grumpy.

I read over the letter, weighed every word. The back of the page, the front of the page. The handwriting was smushed together, unparagraphed, the assembly of letters babbled out. The whole page was forced, gushy, anxious—like a love letter shoved in a sweetheart's locker.

How would Lisa feel?

I scratched out the words, balled it up, started over.

“What's this about?” I asked Michel, who was busy scanning a clipboard. I handed him an envelope addressed to ‘Groundskeeping’.

“Oh, the Founder's party.”

“A what party?”

“It's like a reception. Think Christmas party. They book out the banquet hall on a Saturday evening, bring out everyone from the interns to the ex-presidents and beneficiaries. Five courses, plus a drink ticket. It's not a bad time—very traditional.”

“I'll take it. ‘Not a bad time’ sounds a lot better than the Christmas parties I'm used to.”

“The real party gets started after the reception, when they lock out the banquet hall,” he said, smirking from behind his clipboard.

“Oh yeah—and does that invitation come in a separate envelope?”

“You'll have to wait and see if Richard taps you. It's his thing, he organizes it every year.” Whether Michel was joking seemed inconsequential. He looked up from the clipboard,

still smirking, before adding that I should count myself in. “Richard’s got a fucking hardon for you, you know that.”

“The guy’s lonely,” I laughed, almost convincingly.

“No argument there. You mind taking care of irrigation today?” Michel asked, eager to change the subject. “Just make sure the drainage is clear, no signs of frosting and all that,” he said, handing me the clipboard. “I’ve got to get back to the shop.” Michel grabbed his jacket off the edge of the door and disappeared, hurrying through the corridor toward the west wing stairwell.

Outside, I wound a green garden hose around its receptacle. I tapped the nozzle against the metal spindle, knocking the last drops of water from its lip before tucking it away. I took a pen from behind my ear, pink from the cold, and crossed off the last southeast lawn from the checklist: Watered, drained, dried. I whistled a tune, lost in time.

“Boo!”

I spun around to find a woman, clasping her hands together, delighted in having frightened me. It was Abby, bundled in her long, red winter coat.

“Kev,” she laughed. “I brought you a friend.” She stepped to the side. Lucas was standing behind her, hiding himself with her coat. “He’s a little shy, but he wanted to come surprise you outside. Didn’t you, Lucas?”

“Yeah,” he grunted.

“See.” Abby smiled warmly.

“You’re a minute too late,” I said. “If you’d have caught me a moment ago you would’ve seen how we water the lawn around here.”

“You mean with that hose?” Lucas said, pointing to the receptacle. “Isn’t it too cold?”

“Hey, you’re pretty smart, huh,” I teased. “In a few years you might end up taking Michel’s job.”

Lucas made a squeaky noise that, I supposed, substituted for nervous laughter.

“Yeah don’t worry, I wouldn’t want his job either.”

He feigned a smile and looked up at Abby, who took over for him. “Lucas wanted to get to know you a bit after the other night,” she said. “Obviously, it was a bit emotional for us, seeing his dad like that and all, but everything’s better now. We wanted you to know that. While his dad is getting looked after, Lucas will be spending a bit more time around the club with us and granddad. Is that right, Lucas?”

He nodded, grabbing onto the end of her coat.

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “Well then—how about I show you around the shop. I’m sure we have some neat mowers and stuff you can look at.”

I slung my utility bag over my shoulder. Abby and the boy trailed behind me as I led them through the orange exit doors and into the basement maintenance hall. “You ever been down here before?” I asked Lucas, letting the door creep shut behind us.

“Lots.”

“Wait, what?”

“I’ve been down here a lot,” he said, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his grey hoodie. We approached the twin doors to the equipment room, which was adorned with bright sterile lights that floodlit our faces and exposed our maturity or youth.

“Who brought you down here before?” I asked Lucas as he scanned the racks of garden chemicals and boxed up tools, scratching the sides of his face. “Only maintenance is allowed in the basement.”

“We used to come down here all the time. The grownups would show us around and let us play with the equipment and stuff.”

“Is that true?” I glanced at Abby, who was studying the labels on the drawers of the filing cabinets. “Abby?” She turned and shrugged, indifferent to what I’d asked her.

“You know—” Lucas started with a newfound confidence, running his fingers along the rolls of sod in the corner of the room. “You know, this place wasn’t so strict until you got here. Granddad always took us down here. He always let us play games. Whatever we wanted, really.”

“Did Gail know that you were playing in her basement?”

“Yeah,” the boy sneered. “Gail lets granddad do what he wants.”

“This is John that he’s talking about?” I asked Abby. She nodded.

Lucas walked over to a blue maintenance golf cart and hopped on the back seat. “My family owns this place—we can do whatever we want.”

Abby and I met with inquisitive glances; mine a squint, hers detecting my suspicion. “Not actually,” she chimed in, laughing lowly. “Your granddad’s a little too busy for that, what with talking my ear off all day in the lounge and all.

“No,” Lucas blurted back, disinclined to accept her story. “My dad owns this place and so does my granddad, and we do what we want here. Granddad said there’s no rules at the club, so there’s no rules. That’s what makes it special—what makes this place fun.” The boy stood up and grabbed the plastic edge of the golf cart roof and readied his knees as if he were about to jump up and pull himself onto it.

“No, no, no, no,” Abby muttered, grabbing Lucas by the waist and guiding him down to the ground. “They’re donors,” she mouthed to me, referring to Lucas’s family. In silence I questioned what this meant.

“You suck,” Lucas said under his breath. “Watch, I’m going to get grandad and he’ll prove it. He owns this place. We can do anything we want.” He dashed over to the door to the hallway, with Abby chasing behind him. I held back, watching the two exhaust themselves from behind the golf cart. Lucas reached for the door handle, but it swung open before he could grab it. The boy staggered backward, stunned and dazed. Richard rushed through the door, dressed in his usual pressed jacket and bowtie. Behind him was Hailey, sheepishly tagging along, holding onto his pant leg.

“Don’t mind if I scared you there, Lucas. We were only dropping in to see where you’d run off to,” laughed Richard. “Plus, Hailey wanted to say hi,” he said in a hushed voice, pointing behind his back.

Hailey sprung out from behind his legs and put her fingers on her temples. “No, Uncle Richard!” She dragged out the vowels like they were clinging onto her tongue, resisting expression. “I just wanted to see who was down here,” Hailey said in a shrill drawl.

“*Right,*” said Richard, flashing a wink at Abby, who stood on the opposite side of Lucas. Embarrassed, Lucas marched behind a storage shelf and peeked through a gap in the boxes of spray bottles, air cartridges, hydraulic filters and stacks of duct tape to find Hailey, slouched and pink in the face, staring at the ground on the other side.

“Who told you we were down here?” Abby asked Richard.

“John said you and the boy had wandered off looking for Kevin. It’s a slow day on the greens anyway, isn’t it? We shouldn’t cause too much trouble.” He winked again, although this one was contrived. Like a tick or force of habit. “Now, where did you run off to, Lucas? Lucas!” The boy stepped out from his hiding place behind the shelves. Richard grinned, stooping down to

the boy's level and wrapped his arms around both Hailey and Lucas. He smiled widely at one and then the other. "How about Uncle Richard takes you home, hmm? It's getting that time."

"Lucas and I were just introducing ourselves, actually," I said, stepping out from behind the golf cart and making my presence known to Richard.

"Kevin," he said. "I wondered where you'd gone. Figured you were on the greens." He stood up quickly, a hand cupping his downcast chin.

"Let's go play with Kevin," Lucas said, pulling at Hailey's shirt sleeve. She started behind Lucas before Richard grabbed the opposite arm.

"Now, now, not so fast. We can't be running off disturbing Mr. Little like that. He's got a job to do. Instead, let's find something else to do, no? Maybe put our coats on and take a walk—wouldn't you like that?"

"No," said Lucas.

"Yeah," said Hailey, at the same time.

"Yeah," said Lucas, louder.

"Off we go, then," Richard said, gently pushing their backs toward the door. "Let's leave the grownups to their business." He looked back at Abby with a harsh expression written on his face. He ushered the children into the hallway and closed the door behind them, slowly enough to hear the bolt lock.

"Even in my dreams, Jaz."

"Yup," she said. Jazmine Cox flicked her cigarette filter over the balcony railing.

“I drink in my dreams. I get drunk in my dreams. It’s not that I’m imagining this. I mean I feel a real, physical warmth. I feel drunk. But at a distance, like a third-person experience. Totally removed from it. It’s a tease, if anything.”

I held up the end of my cigarette in my fingers, thanking her for the gift. Her long dark hands wrapped around the end of the smoke to block out the wind while I lit it.

“So—” I paused for a moment to force a big phlegmy cough. “Then I wake up after these dreams and the world starts rebuilding around me at a thousand clicks a second and, like that, I’m in withdrawal, from the moment my eyes open. Sometimes tears will have glued my cheeks to the pillow. Other times I’m shaking, just shaking. And I haven’t had a drop of liquor, not nothing. It was only a dream. But I wake up to real-life withdrawals.”

“Wake and shake,” she said. “Been there.”

“See, you know what I’m talking about.” I took another drag and coughed before handing the smoke back to Jaz.

“Baby, you don’t know the half of it.”

“Nothing’s as bad as those first nights, though. That first week or two after going cold.”

“Nothing.”

“I’ve had this problem at night.”

“What’s that?” Jaz asked.

“Can’t sleep. The past couple weeks I’ve had it bad. But it’s not only that. Laying and sweating through the sheets for hours. When I close my eyes, I see this continuous scroll, kind of like a Facebook wall, but it’s all black and white videos, one after the next. All of them depicting war scenes, beheadings, you name it. It’s all war and death. There are kids in there too, I can see

their faces. They have names. And it goes on endlessly. It's the worst thing I've ever seen. It's horrible. It never ends."

"Oh *hell* no."

"It's a mad man's bargain, this thing."

"Little man let me tell you something," she said, zipping her jacket up over her long, sunken collar bones. "I've smoked crack for nine years and seven months. That shit will change you. It changes your whole wiring up for good. There's no coming back from it. You never go back to how you used to be." She ashed her smoke on the cold metal railing and tossed it overboard. "Using crack makes you feel like you can do anything, but all you actually do is smoke more crack. I mean, there ain't anything else to it. You feel invincible, like you could uproot an oak tree or whatever the fuck. But, in reality, you're sitting in a bathroom stall with an aluminum can in your hand trying to light another hit without the girl in the next stall hearing it. By the time you pack it a third or fourth time you don't give a fuck who hears, you just keep hitting until you either run out, tweak out, or someone pulls you out." She cleared her throat and brushed her feet in circles on the ground. "I've been a junky. And all a junky has are dreams, Kevin. They're like our money, like our gold. We trade in it. You trade your dreams for your fix, trade your fix for your dreams. You dream of your fix, and you dream of your life without it. You end up not having one without the other. They become their own cancellation."

She looked down over the balcony, staring at the lawn washed out by the moonlight. "I thought I was a singer for a little bit," she continued. "When I was eighteen I thought my name was going to be in lights—you know what I'm saying? My name in neon, motherfucker. Jazmine Cox," she smiled a big, stained smile as she exhaled her smoke. "I sang in school, you know. I did weddings and birthdays too. The blow was going to help me get there, and the crack, later,

was just a hang-up. It was a little flair, you understand? Everyone at the time did a little blow in showbiz. It felt like part of the natural progression of one's, you know, artistry. From apprentice to marquee. That was the path I thought I was on. I was fine with that, because I saw the whole scheme right up to the end. I was a dreamer. I knew that I'd be alright, that I'd make it, or at least I'd have found out I wasn't cut out for the job. I was cool with either fate."

"Right."

"But really, Kevin, I was homeless. Within weeks. I was penniless, emaciated. I was raped, repeatedly. I was raped for a fix. I contracted HIV at nineteen." She started choking up, waving her hands. "I transitioned to female at twenty and was beaten by drug dealers and pimps, over and over. I became a faggot and a freak.

"*To hell with them,*" she cried. Runny gobs of mascara streaked down her cheeks. "The whole world fell apart underneath my feet and I blamed no one for it but myself. What a clueless bitch I was, being seventeen years old and thinking I was ready to start making moves like that, like I was someone who could carve a clear path in life, you know? Without no one behind me to tell me what's good. The reality of the situation is that I never had a spiritual guide or nothing, just a whole lot of leeches waiting to prey on me the minute they knew I had a dream and a dependency. Those are both weaknesses, Kevin, in the eyes of snakes."

"Mind if we take this inside?"

Sprawled on the couch, she took out her purse and dug through its contents, pulling out envelopes, tissues, hair elastics, bottles of lotion, a clump of five and ten dollar bills. She put them down on the cushion next to her. "There we go," she said, retrieving something from the bottom. She drew a closed fist from the bag, and then unfurled it to reveal a small piece of glass.

"Do you mind?" she asked.

“What’s that?” I stood up from my armchair to get a closer view. It was a short glass tube with a bulb on the end. “What are you doing with that, Jaz? I thought you’d been through the program.”

“I have, enough times to know better.”

“Oh, for fucks sake, Jaz.”

“Would you rather I do this out in the cold? I mean, you can’t just get an addict talking about their war stories. Got me feeling tight.”

“Can I hold it?” I asked, interrupting the silence.

“You’re a real weirdo, Kev.” She handed me the glass, guiding it carefully with both hands cupped. “I like that about you.”

I took the pipe in my hands and turned it from one charred side to the other. The bowl was black along the bottom and had liquid remnants pooling at the base. At the end of the mouthpiece was a copper mesh filter stuffed inside, though to filter what I did not know. From edge to black edge it rang hollow, presenting in my hands like a magician’s prop. I held the tainted pipe to my eye and smelled the burnt chemical fumes and saw through the glass to see the distorted woman sitting upright behind it, her slanted head appearing jagged on her shoulders, reaching to take it from my hands. From up close it felt less unreal.

“Does it ever go away?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “It waits.”

Jaz laid back with the pipe in her lap. She packed it with grey-white chunks from a tiny vial in her purse, tapping her finger as the rocks fell into the bowl. She flipped her hair back behind her neck and cleared her throat, then she held the glass to her mouth and lit the bottom with a zippo. She released a small mouthful of smoke into the room. One hit.

Unphased, she put the pipe on the ottoman and then laid back on the couch again with a grin.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” She teased her hair, running it down over her broad shoulders, twirling it in her fingers. Nonchalantly, Jaz stood up and strolled confidently into the kitchen, carrying no visible burden. She appeared weightless. I smiled, baffled, not knowing what muscles to use in my face.

“Why’d you lie to me, Jaz?” I called to the woman now disappeared in the kitchen. “Why’d you have to lie about this.”

She came back into the room with two glasses of juice and wide eyes, fuller than I’d ever seen them. I watched as the Christmas lights splayed across the floor lit up her pattering feet. She clinked the glasses together, handed me one, and then sat back on the couch, this time closer than before. Her big green eyes sparkled in the remnants of the moonlight leaking through the blinds as she told me about what dreams she still held for the future. She shuffled to the arm of the couch, inching closer to my chair with some sudden urgency; she took my hand in hers and thanked me for inviting her into my home, welcoming her into my life like this. She asked if what she had told me on the balcony was too much for someone as reformed as myself; she wondered if she had struck some hidden nerve. I told her that she had not and that it was okay who she had become. That people, like dreams, are fluid. Though I did not say anything about her dreams. I told her that she was loved and thanked her for coming back. The moonlight shone in her eyes and she cried like a song.

Saturday mornings, my refuge. Every weekend Dylan and I would get up at five, six, or seven in the morning, depending on when the puck dropped. I'd barge into his bedroom and shake him from his sleep.

"Wake up, kiddo," I said, and ruffled his bedhead.

The boy batted his eyes open and popped out of bed like a man possessed, running straight to the basement where I had his equipment laid out. He was too nervous to dress in front of his team, so he'd suit up at home while watching last night's hockey highlights on TV. I threw bagels in the toaster and my hands started to tremor.

First, something to drink. I jiggled the handle of the basement door until I heard the lock engage, making sure it was shut tight so I could hear Dylan if he ran upstairs. Then, I tiptoed over to the hutch where we kept the china and boxsets of silverware. The cabinet doors creaked open like a treasure chest. That's when the butterflies in my stomach would hatch. I'd open the cabinet door just enough to reach behind the stacks of dinner plates and matchboxes. That's where I hid the water bottle. I pulled it out and smelled the vapors off the cap. The butterflies would soar.

I took the bottle into the kitchen, bounced lightly on the floorboards like a giddy child. I took the orange juice bottle from the fridge, transferred sweat from palm to plastic, and removed the cap. I took a big swig.

"Here we go," I said to no one. I wiped my lip.

The water bottle cap came off next. Then I'd fake a sneeze, maybe yawn loudly, anything to cover the sound of pouring liquor. Half the bottle of vodka into the orange juice bottle. I couldn't taste the difference.

I put the booze back in its hiding spot. The bagels popped. I took two swigs of the OJ liquor, buttered the bagels, popped a mint, and called Dylan to the table. He wasn't bouncing around anymore. He sat at the table in his hockey gear and ate his bagel quietly.

Dylan tossed his hockey bag in the back of the van and waited in the backseat. He had learned to give me time. I snuck in a sip in the foyer, then another, then rushed out the door. The sun wasn't up and I felt very much alive. I blasted the radio, I blasted the heat. There was a glowing optimism in driving to the rink on those empty morning roads. I felt easy and the world felt possible. There was nothing that could not be put away or cast aside. I realized that the only one holding me back was stupid, humiliating, nervous, lifeless, doubting, angry, silent, sober me.

"Quit playing that game," I said as we pulled into the arena parking lot. Dylan looked up from his Gameboy and fidgeted in his seat. "Remember what we talked about: I want to see you go hard in the corners, play a full two hundred feet, backcheck, forecheck, get the pucks in deep. Don't get lazy. Do whatever you got to do. Give them hell, fuck 'em up."

Dylan was iron-faced and stared at the empty parking spaces. He nodded, always nodding. When we stopped, he got out, grabbed his gear from the trunk and started across the parking lot.

"Huh? Were you listening?" I said, rattling his shoulders. He didn't push back. That's when I knew that he would lose. He didn't have the fight in him. "No heart, that kid," I thought to myself.

I tied Dylan's skates and said my hellos and mornings to the other dads in the room that would rather be doing anything other than looking at their own breath in a house league hockey dressing room at six in the morning.

After leaving the dressing room, I was off to the races. It was the same challenge every week: I would drive to the liquor store and try to make it back before the Zamboni finished flooding the ice. I'd drive back, every time, with a loaded bottle of juice and a black grocery bag under the passenger seat. I'd get back inside the arena and smell the popcorn butter simmer and the voices reverberate around the cold, thin air. But this game was too early in the morning for the liquor store, so I had to plan accordingly. The night prior, I hid two tallboys—honey lagers, both—in a black trash bag in the trunk of the car along with old stuffed animals and t-shirts bought on long ago vacations and tiny scented candles in glass jars that have never been opened, all of it destined for the donation bin at the arena. I grabbed the bag from the car, swung it around my shoulder, and started for the clothing donation bin on the far side of the parking lot. The sky was dim and cast in an emerald hue. The sun began to break somewhere still far under the horizon. It took a few seconds of hesitation for me to realize that the bag had suddenly gotten lighter.

“Oh shit,” I said aloud. “It tore.” One of the candle jars broke inside the bag and a shard ripped through the polyethylene. A ten-foot line of junk and used clothing spread out on the pavement behind me through an empty section of parking lot. The donation bin was maybe fifty feet away. I sighed and grabbed the two beers rolling on the ground cracked both. They foamed over and soaked my hands. The first beer went down without a fight, and I took a piss behind the bin. Then I drank the other beer. I threw both crushed beer cans in a cardboard box full of donated junk next to the bin and walked back across the lot to the arena doors, leaving our old household possessions scattered across three parking spaces and feeling perfectly content in contemplating the everythings and nothings of the world as they existed at six o'clock that morning.

“Oh, shit,” I said once inside. “The game’s already on.”

I liked watching the game from the glass, pressed right up against it. I’d let the other parents watch from the stands. I searched for Dylan’s numbers. There he was, hopping off the bench. I slapped the glass to remind him what he was there for. Dylan would always search for me along the glass. Once he found me, he never looked back. “Go to war, Dylan” I mumbled.

I put the orange juice bottle down between my feet and slapped the glass with both hands, the sound booming around the rink. “Go to war, Dylan.” I heard grumbling behind me. I turned around and looked at the rows of tired parents slouched over in their seats. “Fuck em,” I thought, and turned back to the game. For an hour I quarterbacked every play from the plexiglass, kicking the sideboards or yelling at the referee through the cracks between the panels.

The car ride home was silent. I drove slow as not to arouse suspicion and kept the heat on full blast, creeping from street to street.

“Can I get out?”

“Can you get what?” I asked.

“Can I get out of the car.”

“No.”

I pulled up to a red light and signaled a left turn into the subdivisions and cul-de-sacs. Left mirror, right mirror, check. The car rocked to a standstill. I heard noises from the backseat. The whip of a seatbelt unfastening. A door opening, then closing. Dylan ran across the street, ran home with his hockey pads still on. The butterflies died in the mouths of the roaches and the wasps.

With the Founder's party six days away, the club groundskeepers were up late into the night for renovations. There were two plenary rooms needing to be cordoned off to the club members in the meantime: the First Banquet Hall, upstairs, and the spillover room where tables were already set for the afterparty. Save for a custodian, Casey, mopping the front foyer, I was the only one left in the building. The halls were dark and deep, and the mess lounge was lit softly by white string lights fixed to the crown molding. I leaned across the bar and surveyed the room in search of anything left to do. Seats were stacked on tables and the carpets were freshly steamed.

"Hey, Casey," I called into the hallway. "Casey, I need to grab the banquet keys off you." There was silence. "He must have left for the basement," I thought. Michel had taken my set of keys earlier that day to check the furnace room and had gone home early with them absentmindedly.

"Don't sweat it," Michel had said through the phone, three hours earlier. "Casey will take care of you till you're out of there."

It was fast approaching midnight and I wanted to get out of the clubhouse. "Fuck it," I thought. I figured there must be keys hanging up in the broom closet. I flicked the lights on in the kitchen behind the bar. They flickered and then hummed, projecting a clinical light onto the tile floor. The barren kitchen counters and boxes on the floor brought on a sudden sensitivity to my aloneness. There were printed sheets of paper hanging on the closet door with jpeg photographs of Abby posing with her daughter, others with her parents.

I swung the door open, not expecting it to be so weightless as it crashed against the wall. There was a drawstring lightbulb hung from the ceiling of the closet that glowed bright and golden. The back wall of the closet housed a broom, mop, step ladder, and mop bucket. The right

and left sides were lined with shelving units, canned food on the right, maintenance gear on the left. On the bottom left-hand shelf were rubber bins filled with plastic-wrapped mop heads, sanding screens, and fluorescent orange rolls of duct tape. Above them were white boxes taped shut and above those were white plastic jugs with the names of chemicals inked on the labels.

“Where the fuck are the keys?”

I pulled the shelf an inch from the wall to see if they had fallen to the floor behind. As the shelf edged across the ground, I heard a windchime noise from above. There they were. The keyring was dangling from a hook on the top corner of the shelf. I quickly shoved the shelf back in place against the wall which caused one of the white jugs to tip onto the floor. I picked it up and heard a rattling noise from within it, as if a few grains of rice were bouncing around inside. I flipped open the cap and held the bottleneck under the overhead lightbulb, squinting to see inside. The rim of the jug smelled like a swimming pool. I turned the jug upside down and poured small white pellets inside the palm of my hand. They were pills, snowy and odorless. There were no more than a few dozen in number, all the size of gelatin capsules. I thumbed their round surface like lost treasure. Curious, I slipped two pills into my jeans pocket and cupped my hand to funnel the rest back into the jug, placing it back on the shelf with the other chemical containers.

The closet shook from the sound of a slamming door outside. Somebody had stormed into the kitchen.

“Casey?” My call was answered only by footsteps inching closer. “Casey?” I shouted.

“What’s going on in here,” a voice said from outside the closet door. The door swung open to bleach white light blinding my view.

“John?”

“What on earth are you doing, Kevin?” John asked me, laughing, standing in the entranceway with his arm propping open the door.

“I was looking for the keys to get into the banquet hall. I figured I’d check up on the lighting, electrical and all that.”

“What are you talking so fast for, boy?” said John, smiling and waving me out of the closet.

“You know what, I’m exhausted. I need to get the hell home, John—wait, what are *you* doing here so late?”

“Picking up Casey,” he said matter of factly.

Feet pattered outside of the kitchen, approaching quickly.

“Casey, I found the bugger. Snooping around in Abby’s closet, no less.” John winked at me, his grin wrinkling the skin around his bright and tender eyes. Casey stormed into the kitchen and threw his hands on his head when he saw John and I standing together.

“Kev, buddy, we got to go home,” he said. “What are you running away for? Let me lock this thing up. Then we got to bounce, alright? It’s late.” He snapped the bolt on the closet door in place and jostled the knob, making sure it was inaccessible.

John grabbed my shoulder. “The man’s right. Let’s get out of here.”

“But I still have to check up on the banquet hall, there’s a checklist Michel gave me,” I said, pointing to the note in my hand.

“Kevin, where do you think we just were. B Hall is checked. It’s about time we get out of here.” Casey jingled the keys around his belt and stormed out of the kitchen, flicking the lights off on his way out.

“I guess that’s our cue to leave,” said John. “You know, son,” he squeezed my shoulder. “It just occurred to me that this’ll be your first Founder’s party, isn’t that right?”

“It sure will be,” I said, closing the kitchen door behind us.

“You’re in for a treat, you know that? I mean, how could you not when I’m hosting it?”

“Wait, you’re hosting the Founder’s party?”

“Yes, sir. Nine years running.”

“That’s news to me.”

We scanned the hallway for Casey.

“Looks like the kid’s already taken off.”

“Probably having a smoke,” said John.

“You know…” He grabbed me by the arm as I went for the door. “You can tell me why you were in Abby’s broom closet, you know. I’m not one to run my mouth.”

I looked John over from the feet up; his signature smirk, offhand and sheepish, fixed as ever on his face.

“John,” I laughed, shaking my head. “Listen, I told you I was looking for keys. Nothing else.”

John shrugged. “You know I lost my wife too, Kevin. I know how you must be feeling.” He reached again for my shoulder, but I showed away his hand. John recoiled and the grin on his face turned plaintive.

“John, I respect you. So I’ll make this perfectly clear: I didn’t lose a goddamn thing. Do you understand me? I haven’t lost a thing. No—no, no, look at me, John. My family’s my family. Nothing’s changed, okay? I need you to remember that for me, John.” I pressed my

hands on his shoulders. “Nothing’s changed. Look me in the eyes, John. You need to understand that.” I patted his shoulder and smiled. “I trust you take what I’m saying seriously.”

John smirked and blinked nervously as his eyes turned red and watery. “Deathly,” he said. He cleared his throat and waved his hands as if this were all some misunderstanding, lost in the communication of feeling. “No, no, I’m terribly sorry, Kevin. That wasn’t what I meant,” he stuttered. “I meant to ask whether you’re coping with the loss of your, ahem, marriage, is all—I’ve assumed nothing, Kevin, really.”

“Look, I’m sorry, John.” I sighed a long and waning sigh. “Let’s get some air.” Before I could shove the exit doors open, John grabbed at my shirt sleeve and towed me back.

“Kevin, wait.”

The man, appearing old and weathered in his grief, wiped a tear curving down his cheek.

“What’s the matter?”

“Now’s not the time, likely. But, you see...” His thought appeared to fade after a flash of hesitation, it then immediately returned in the form of a singular burst. “I’m an orphan.” He sucked a deep lungful of air and restarted. “I’ve been an orphan my whole life. My wife’s been gone twenty years. You’ll have to excuse me if I come across a pinch terse in matters of love and intimacy. My heart aches for you, Kevin. I want nothing more than to see a man like you, so young still, to find peace and to enjoy the tenderness of the world while it’s still there. I’m not some bumbling old man, Kevin. I know what it’s like to suffer loss. If you hold on to anything then loss will always come to you. To see this happen to a good man like you, Kevin, it eats at me. But I can tell you one thing...” John stiffened his voice and gently rounded his mouth, feigning a smile. “That if you stay with us, here, you won’t lose us. The club is always here,

evergreen in its history and traditions. We're a wolf pack, remember. The lot of us. Once you hang around long enough you find that brotherhood is all you can count on to last."

Casey tapped on the door's window panel from the outside. He pulled on the handle, cracking it open. "Let's get a move on. What do you say, John?" he said. The coppery scent of nicotine flew into the lobby and faded among the pine and the alcohols drying on the floor.

"Michel!"

He turned off his trimmer and pulled his ear covers down so they hung from his neck. "What?" he called back.

"Hold on," I said, running over. "Why don't you keep your walkie on your anymore? It took forever to track you down."

"Keep forgetting it—I hardly go in the equipment room these days."

"Anyway, Michel, I just wanted to run it by you that we're all clear for the Founder's party. Everything's checked off, from the mess lounge to the B hall to the kitchen."

"And room 2G1?"

"Locked up."

"Good man. Well, I think you've earned yourself a break, wouldn't you say. Why don't you take off early today?"

Expecting him to have said this, I was already reaching for the keys on my beltloop to hand over to Michel. That's when I remembered the pills.

"Oh, that reminds me." I said, running a hand over my shaven head. "I was looking through the kitchen broom closet last night and I found—"

“Why were you going through Abby’s closet, Kevin?”

“Sorry, what?”

“You shouldn’t be in the kitchen anyway.”

“What’s the matter, Michel?” I asked, baffled.

“This close to Founder’s you really shouldn’t be meddling with another colleague’s work. I don’t believe I included the kitchen anywhere on the checklist I gave you.”

“No, you didn’t. But I needed keys to the banquet hall.”

“Next time just ask Casey or whoever’s on duty.”

“I couldn’t find him—anyway, forget it. I’ll keep out.”

“Good.” He said, starting up his trimmer again.

“Wait, hold on.” I shouted over the buzz. “There’s something I wanted to ask you. About something I found.” I felt the need to shout, even after the trimmer motor died down again. “Can you tell me what’s inside those white containers in the closet?”

“What are you talking about.”

“I found white jugs in the closet. One of them tipped over and I found little clear capsules inside them, like pellets or something.”

“Kevin, why are you asking me about this? I have no idea.”

“I just thought it strange that these pills were in the kitchen closet.”

“They must be fertilizer. Spillover that we threw in years ago.”

“Didn’t look like it.”

“Kevin—I’m telling you, they’ve got to be fertilizer. Old gardening stuff.” He raised the head of the trimmer off the ground, agitated by my interruption. “Hydrogel, that’s probably what it is. Hydrogel. I don’t know. Ask Abby if you’re so concerned.”

I turned my back to Michel as the motor on the trimmer revved back up. The hallways were decorated with bushy green garlands wrapped around the bannisters and flaring out the edges of the ceiling. On my way out, I stopped into the lounge to follow up about the fertilizer with Abby, but she wasn't there. Instead there was the same young woman behind the bar who stood in for Abby when she drove Lucas home. Typing on her phone's slide out keyboard, she shifted the weight of her slender body from one hip to the other and then back again, like a nervous dance. The bar was empty save for a single man in a beret with his back turned, hunched over a crossword puzzle. The bartender furled her lips as she typed, fidgeted her feet on the floor.

"Your girlfriend's not here today," said the man in the hat.

"My who?"

"Abigail. She's skipped town or something."

"What's this about?" I asked the bartender,

"Sorry, what?" she said. Her eyes darted up from the screen instantly, blinking and bewildered.

"Abby—she sick or something?"

"She took a personal day," she said with a lacy voice. "Probably just needs a bit of downtime before the party. It's always stressful this time of year. You know how it is, I'm sure."

"Actually, this'll be his first one," said the man. As he turned to face me on his stool, I recognized that it was Ron who was speaking to me, one of Richard's associates who I had played cards with back in the spring. His wide eyes looked younger than I remembered, but his speech croaked and rounded off breathlessly at the ends of his sentences. "The boy's a new hire. If you can still call him that. Virgin blood, at least." He winked at the girl, smiling friskily.

"I'm not sure I'd go that far," I said.

The bartender's eyes beamed at the news that this would be my first Founder's party, switching her demeanor on prompt. "Oh, you're in for something special. We all remember our first." I paused to question what these words meant from the lips of a woman hardly old enough to bartend.

Having excused myself from the conversation, I threw my coat over my shoulders, flipped the hood over my head and started into the parking lot. I let the car heat up while I rummaged through my pockets for my phone. Flipping it open, I tried to remember the number I could reach the kids at. I closed my eyes and imagined what the numbers looked like on the chalkboard above the kitchen sink, and then typed them in. Accounting for the time difference, I hoped to catch them on their school lunch break. The ringer dialed only once.

"Hi?"

"Hello?" I returned. I wasn't expecting the voice of a man. "Is this Dylan?"

"Yeah. Who's calling?"

"Dylan, it's dad."

"Stop," he sighed, and then hung up.

Lisa picked Shelby up in her arms. She clung to her mother's neck, little fingertips digging into her nape.

"Do you know why Mommy and Daddy are moving away?"

"Because he's addicted to *beeugh*," Shelby said with tears streaming down her face.

"It's pronounced 'beer', dumbass," said Dylan.

"Dyl, stop that. I'm being serious." Lisa wiped snot from Shelby's nose with her shirt sleeve.

A thud crashed from above the floorboards upstairs. Dust and plaster rained lightly from the ceiling.

“What’s dad doing up there?” Dylan asked.

“Don’t worry about your father, he’s just in a mood. We’ll be okay, just stay with me and don’t go with him. No matter what he tells you.” Lisa crouched level with Dylan and held her hand against his cheek, using her thumb to graze his lips.

“Lisa!” I shouted down the stairs. “Lisa—don’t do this, Lisa, not now.”

“Kevin, if you come down here while the kids are with me, I swear to God I’ll call the police.” Lisa shrieked. “Don’t make me do it.”

I lumbered down the stairs to the basement and heard all their voices shriek.

“What’s the matter?” I asked them. “Kids, let mom and dad talk. Go upstairs, please.”

They clutched tight to their mother’s leg, their feet dancing on the carpet. “Now!” I shouted. They ran off to their bedroom and slammed the door behind them.

“Lisa, talk to me.”

“We’re not talking, Kevin. I’m calling the police if you say another word.”

“No you’re not. Listen to me, just listen. I’m sorry. I mean that—I’m sorry. But if this is about bounced cheques then you’re out of your mind, woman.”

“Cheques? Kevin, if you think this is about money then you’re even more clueless than your parents. This is about you failing, miserably, to live up to the basic responsibilities of being a father.”

“Please, Lisa, for the sake of the kids just hear me out.”

“Are you kidding me! You’re fucking drunk, Kevin.”

“Buzzed.”

“Drunk! Who the fuck, except an alcoholic, stows a half-empty liquor bottle under the car seat that their *own fucking child* is sitting on. Have you lost your mind!”

“That was from yesterday. I promise you, I can explain.”

“It’s been three fucking years of explanations, Kevin. I’m getting a divorce.”

“No you’re not.”

I reached for her cheek. I wanted to feel the coldness reverberate from her flesh to mine.

“Creep!” she said, slapping my hand away like a flea. “Kids, come with mommy, we’re going to go see Baba and Gigi.” She called. “Do you want to go see Baba and Gigi?”

Lisa flung open the kids’ bedroom door and I followed behind her. The room was barren except for a kicked-over Lego set scattered across the rug; the only sign of human life. “Guys?” Silence. “Guys!” She repeated.

The kids were huddled inside the closet, behind a row of hanging t-shirts. Lisa parted them like curtains, revealing her sniveling, panicked children hugging each other and crying at the moment the outside world and all its immediate danger broke through their fortress. Lisa dragged the two out of the closet by their arms and demanded they tie their shoes and put on their jackets and collect their toys for the night. I watched from the bottom of the staircase and told them that everything would be fine and that life would be back to normal soon.

Before she left, Lisa got on the phone with her parents in the kitchen and I took the opportunity to hug the kids goodbye. At the front door, they sat on the wooden bench I’d made from the cherry tree in the backyard during the summer that Shelby was born. They had dried their tears and their faces had flushed out the feverish color it once had. I felt the need to offer some grand apology to them, some promise that the family would stay together and that divorce was something that happened to other families and not ours, never ours, though I couldn’t find

the words. I reached into my back pocket and pulled out a fistful of change the woman at the liquor store checkout had handed me. I counted out seven dollars in loonies and quarters and gave them to Dylan. “Tell your mom to stop in at Blockbuster on the way to Gigi’s, alright? Go rent a movie, and don’t fight over it.” I said, looking them both in the eye. They both nodded. I held my hands open for a high-five. Dylan slapped first, then Shelby. “Good.”

Lisa stormed down the stairs, escorted the kids to the backseat of the minivan, buckled them in, cranked the heat, and then marched back up to the front door to say her peace one last time. “Listen,” she said, a finger’s length from my face. “If you pull that shit with my children in the backseat one more time, I will end you. I don’t fucking care who you are, I am ending you. Do you got that?” She spoke with a disturbing calm in her voice, her words almost whispers. “Don’t come for us. I’ll bring them back when it’s safe to do that. When exactly that will be is up to you. But this,” she wagged her finger between her face and mine, “*this*, is finished.”

Lisa screeched out of the driveway with the kids in the back and my liquor bottle tucked under the passenger seat. I blew them a kiss goodbye from the foyer and watched them sputter down the street then disappear behind rows of happy homes with families huddled inside. I turned back to the dining room and used my pant sleeves to dry my sweating hands. The old wooden hutch groaned as I opened it, yawning like the mouth of a beast. The glasses inside glittered like teeth. I reached into the back, behind the porcelain plates.

The Founder’s party landed on the warmest day in months. On this late November morning the greens had thawed, and the sun had sucked every drop of dew off the grass. For a golf course that had seen many lonely weeks, today there were crowds lined up behind the tee boxes. Men dressed in short sleeve shirts and women ordered mojitos on the patio.

“Couldn’t have pictured a better day, could you?” said a lady seated at a table outside the rear exit doors, sitting cross-legged in jeans and open-toed shoes.

“I’ve seen better,” I laughed while dragging the leaf blower outside, guiding an orange extension cord with my spare hand through the door. “But not in winter.”

“Richard was telling me,” she leaned forward over the pages of a book spread open on the table and gazed over the rims of her glasses. “That you’re a guest of honor at tonight’s banquet—is that true?”

I yanked on the end of the power cord, trying to force a knot through the crack in the door. “You know what, I couldn’t tell you. I haven’t seen Richard around here in weeks.”

“Oh, he still hasn’t shut up about you.”

“Seriously?”

The woman wore a gossip’s grin.

“Would I lie?” She leaned back in her chair. “Richard thinks you’re just the best thing to show up here since senior’s parking. He’s going to make your night special, you can bet.”

The machine in my arms threw the fallen leaves from the cement onto the flowerbeds, blanketing the naked soil. I pondered what this meant, that Richard had kept quiet to me for so long.

The sound of a man’s voice cut through the mufflers on the sides of my skull. I stood up in a patch of turfgrass wedged between two soggy dirt plots where petunias hadn’t bloomed for weeks.

John and another man were approaching from the cobble walkway, mouthing words I couldn’t make out. I cut the leaf blower and pulled my muffs around my neck, letting the world scream back into immediacy.

“What’s that?” I called.

“If it isn’t the man of the hour,” said John. “We’ve been asking about you, trying to figure out where the hell you’d gone.”

“John hunting me down while I’m out in the gardens? That doesn’t sound right,” I said with gleaming teeth, shoving sweat-coated gloves into my back pockets.

“He’s a funny one,” John said to the man to his right.

“The reason we tracked you down is so we could have a word with you in private.”

“It’s the last week of November and we’re standing between the seventh and eighth green—I think you’ve got that accomplished, John.”

“Right.” He looked over at his partner and cocked an eyebrow. “You see, Kevin, this is Scott, our former superintendent. He’s since moved onto management at St. Thomas, but he’s a regular fixture at Founder’s every year. Thought I’d introduce you to one another, seeing as you’ll be sitting across from each other tonight.”

We shook hands, exchanging names and titles. The man was small, skittish, and economical with his words. He wore polarized shades with thick lenses that rendered the blue sky a mute grey in their reflection.

“One last thing, Kevin,” said John. He leaned in closer. “We have a seat for you at the after party. Not much to it, only an old boy’s smoking room, really. But I trust you’ll be there, won’t you?”

“This is the first I’m hearing of such a thing.”

“Of course it is. It’s not meant to be spoken about in the open. It’s been rather exclusive, you see, for some fifty-five years now. It’s all fun and games but we’d rather not have attention

drawn to some of what tends to go on there, you know? It wouldn't reflect well on the institution."

"Is Gail aware?"

"Gail! Oh yes, yes, of course. How couldn't she?"

I looked at both men with titled eyes, scanned their closed posture. John's feet moved at a slow dance rhythm.

"Let's have a walk about it then," said John, detecting apprehension. We started back toward the clubhouse, taking the cobblestone footpath that sprawls from the ninth hole, past the bubbling algae pond, to the east entrance adjacent to the pro shop. "You won't hear us speak of it tonight. Once the women start cycling out of the hall and heading home, you'll see us boys start to trickle out and set up in the basement. All you've got to do is slip in behind one of us. There's no secret password, nothing like that. At that point in the night everyone's a little too crooked to notice what's going on anyway. Slide in with us, or tap on the door and Richard will come fetch you—understood?"

"I sense some sort of initiation going on here. Should I bring my hooded cloak along?" I joked.

"Not quite. The point, you see, is to leave the mask at home. This is about revisiting the, you know, more uninhibited aspects of life. Play with the wolves for a night. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Quite the cryptic club you've set up for yourselves, I'll tell you that much."

"Don't think much of it," Scott chimed in as we approached the orange east entrance doors. "The boys like to make a bigger deal of it than is deserved. You'll see tonight. Just keep tight-lipped about it until then."

We slipped inside the club to the sound of a chamber opera echoing down the hall, emanating from the heart of the building where the banquet hall was being loaded by aproned servants carrying covered trays of fresh pastries and skewered triangle sandwiches. “All right,” said John. “We’ve still got a few hours on our hands until the reception. It’s best I go find Richard and the boys and start suiting up.” John and Scott peeled off to the lounge as I watched server after server, each dressed in a white shirt, black apron and a bowtie, rush in and out of the hall to the sound of music.

“Do you know the time and location where he was last seen, ma’am?” A stone-faced police officer sat on an ottoman across from Lisa who sobbed on the couch, folded over as if she were boneless.

Shelby scurried up the stairs to check on her mother, but Dylan caught her by the leg before she reached the landing. He shoved his palm over her mouth and shot her wide eyes that told her to shut up, that things were serious this time. She could not squirm free. “Mom!” she squeaked out after a struggle, then Dylan ran back into the basement and locked himself in the bathroom. Lisa jumped off the couch and hurried to where the lobby looked down onto the landing.

“Oh, sweetie, stay downstairs.” She wrapped her daughter in her arms. “Gigi and Baba are on their way. Do you want to see Gigi and Baba?” Shelby buried her face in her mother’s abdomen, wailing harder than before, pounding her leg with her closed fist.

“Here,” Lisa said. She scooped Shelby up from under her arms and carried her into the living room where the police were waiting with vinyl clipboards and tapping feet. Lisa plopped down on the couch for questioning with her daughter nestled, head down, in her arms.

“Do you know the name of the person who last saw Kevin Little?”

“Adel Bisset, senior partner at Jones and Rupie’s LLP.”

Questions answered in short succession: style and color of shirt; style and color of pants; type of glasses; type of footwear; handicaps or disabilities; psychological problems; medications and addictions; does he chew gum; does he smoke; what direction was he travelling in when last seen?

When Baba and Gigi arrived, they lumbered through the front door without knocking. Shelby would not go easily; she had to be torn from her mother. Any other day would have seen Shelby run into her grandmother’s waiting arms but today two cops had to help Lisa loosen her daughter’s grip on her ankles.

“Your dad’s gone missing,” Gigi told Shelby, though she already knew. “We think he might’ve gotten lost after work. The police are going to find him and bring him back to us, okay sweetie?”

Dylan sat quietly on the floor and flipped through the pages of a book he was pretending to read. “Be on your best behavior for me,” Lisa told him. “Family’s coming.” He nodded, but his eyes questioned the point of it.

By nightfall, the house, usually animated only by the sound of the TV on a school night, was swarming with cousins and great-aunts and distant relatives whose names were unknown to the children. The mood settled as the night progressed, and the news finally broke. minutes before ten o’clock when the kids were dozing off on the carpet watching a VHS tape. “They found your dad,” an older cousin shouted down the stairs, jolting them back to life. “He was sleeping!”

They found me passed out in my own vomit on a picnic table two blocks from the office I'd been locked out of the evening prior. I slept in the shadow of the company tower until two officers, weapons drawn, beamed a tactical flashlight in my eyes. Hands up, on my knees. They slapped my wrists with handcuffs and yanked out my shoelaces, then they locked me in a cell for the night. In a cage with the drunks and the homeless and the pill heads.

I taxied home the next day with flushed cheeks and scrunched tissues in my jacket pockets. My briefcase was empty, save for a bottle of mouthwash and a few sheets of loose ruled paper. As I ascended the driveway, I caught my reflection in the windows of the cars. Lisa's minivan, Gigi's SUV, Uncle Andy's pickup truck. Each window cast my reflection differently. Fatter, taller, older. In each of them I looked like a dead man. A ghost in a dress shirt. A wilting bag of bones. I carried myself to the door.

“Grumpy!”

I hugged Shelby and Dylan with the force of a million beating hearts before Lisa's father grabbed them by the wrists and herded them back into the basement. Lisa wanted me alone. She stared through me, through the bones and the flesh, and into the sad, dissolved existence underneath. I had kissed her goodbye the morning prior wearing a dry-cleaned shirt and clip-tie, pomade in my slicked-back hair, fragrances of pine and rosewood. In the foyer mirror I saw the reflection of my own undoing. I looked like a man who had taken a thousand punches, but I was still bracing for the first to land. Lisa's stonewall expression fell apart into restrained tears that broke into blubbering pale-faced sobs. I reached forward to wipe the tears from her chin.

“No!” She screamed and stepped back. “How could you do this?”

I raised my arms to my sides and then let them back down in defeat, letting gravity do the talking. “I'm a sad sack of shit, Lisa. I deserve nothing.”

“Don’t tell me what you deserve!”

“What?”

Her face soured, turned a ruddy red, smoldering with rage.

“In front of my family?” She crept forward, pointed a finger in my face and jabbed it like a knife.

“There was no one there.”

“Oh, shut up.” She snarled. “I’ve never been so humiliated in my whole life. What, you’re laughing now? Go ahead, laugh. You understand that you made your children cry—my *parents* cry? Do you understand what you’ve done?” She threw a punch toward me but recoiled, instead smacking the wall with an open palm. Again and again she pounded. “For fuck’s sake Kevin, listen to me!” Each word synched to a slap on the wall that rocked the bones of the house.

“Lisa, please.”

“Don’t give me that *please* shit, Kevin.”

“Sit down and listen to me for two seconds, Lisa.” I followed her into the kitchen and reached for her shoulder.

“We’re going to lose this fucking house thanks to you!” Her voice reverberated through the walls. Through the kitchen window I saw that everyone had gathered in the backyard. The kids were sitting on the grass, the adults smoking or sitting on the patio, pretending not to listen to the yelling and the thudding and the screams.

“Listen to me, goddamn it Lisa.” I took both her shoulders in my hands and shoved my face in hers. She chopped her arm free and ran to the counter, grabbing a dirty fork off a dinner plate and brandishing it in front of her like a trident.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you, Kevin? You get your ass fired from Rupie’s and now you come home wanting to talk about how you’ve been wronged? You were a mistake, Kevin.”

“What! If you would actually take a minute to listen to me—”

“I’m done with the listening! Seven years of listening gave me a life of hell. Now look what you’ve done.”

I stepped forward and she stabbed at me with the fork, coming within inches.

“Have you lost your mind? Lisa, put that down.”

“I’m at my ropes, Kevin. You’ve tried to take me down for so long. You could’ve fooled a younger me, but I’ve wizened up to you Kev, and I won’t let you take down this family without a fight.”

“Don’t underestimate me, Lisa.”

“You’re impossible to underestimate.”

“Fuck you.”

She lunged at me with the fork. I grabbed her. We fell to the floor, tossed and rolled. I pried the work from her hand, and it clattered on the tile. I reached for it and flung it against the wall on the opposite side of the room. Lisa gripped my thinning hair with both hands and pulled and screamed, erupting with adrenaline.

An unexpected noise rang through the room. Lisa let go of me. On one knee I glanced over my shoulder to find Shelby sniveling behind us in the doorway. She had a stuffed bunny in her hand that was missing an eye. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

“Shelby, sweetie—”

Lisa's father shuffled up slowly from the basement and appeared behind Shelby in the doorway. He stopped and stared down at his daughter sitting up on the floor. Her hair was tattered and she held her forehead. She was blinking away tears from her eyes.

"What have you done?" He thundered.

I popped to my feet, waving my hands between us. "No, George, you don't understand. We tripped."

"You pathetic little weasel."

His meaty, wrinkled hands reached out to grab me by the throat. I smacked his hands away and then pushed him backward, causing him to stumble against the kitchen table.

"No, Baba!" Shelby ran into my stomach, shooting the breath out of me. She buffeted my stomach with punches, little blows, crying out to nobody, begging for the world to stop.

"I'm calling the police!" George said, pointing a finger at my face.

"No, you won't," said Lisa. She grabbed her father and daughter by their wrists and tried to pull them out of the kitchen. "Come on, we're leaving."

"Lisa," I shouted over the chaos. "Stop this. That's your daughter." I tried to take Shelby from Lisa. I crouched low and tried to say something to stop her tears, but all I could do was stutter.

"Boy, get away from her—"

George hoisted me by the back of my head, every tendril searing at my scalp. He pulled me to my feet and I looked the man in his eyes. In his fury his age reversed; color was restored to his grey face; his creased and spotted skin washed a pure rose pigment, every machination of his mind alive. His face was close enough for me to feel the heat of the blood pooling behind its surface. The man lunged at my throat and grabbed it with both hands, screwing every feature of

his face toward its center. I studied him, the braided passions of the boy, the man, and the father all released in a single outpour, a last stand.

Through his clench I drew a faint breath and then threw the man backward. I watched him as he fell on his ass and sprawled flat on the ground. Lisa and Shelby let out shrieking sounds that ripped through the air. They were the ugliest noises I'd ever heard. The moment held still in my mind as I looked down at Lisa's father clutching the small of his back with labored breath.

"Baba!" said Dylan, appearing in the doorway. He tossed his Gameboy on the carpet and ran to help his grandfather.

It was time to get some air. I pushed my way outside and into the garage, where I sat on a milk crate with the door open. I pressed the top of the clock radio and let staticky music play, masking the sound of Dylan weeping through the walls. Lisa shouted around the house, stomped around, asked where I had gone. Pure pandemonium inside. I grabbed a beer from the minifridge and cracked it.

Summertime had arrived and the bugs were out making noises that made my head ache. I put my beer down beside the milk crate and reached into a stack of winter tires piled in the corner of the garage. I pulled a plastic mickey bottle of vodka out from the inner rim of the second tire from the top. I swigged it. The liquid felt warm and velvety against my cheeks and I gulped it down and then swallowed again, feeling the nerves in my throat freeze and twinge and then go dry.

"Daddy," said Dylan, sobbing at the top of the driveway, standing underneath the suspended garage doors. "Mommy's crying—we need help."

"How's Baba?"

“I don’t know, he’s hurt.”

“Let me see,” I slurred.

George was laid out on the couch, pressing a bag of frozen beans on the side of his hip. His eyes were closed, and he was taking long, audible breaths that wavered on the way out.

“George,” I said. Those big beady eyes shot open.

“Get out of my daughter’s house, Kevin.”

“I want to make sure you’re alright. Let me see that bruise.” I checked the spot that he was icing. There was a dark patch of skin around his waist that looked like it had been stained with purple ink. It crept up his hip.

“Get the fuck out of here, Kevin.” He sighed and shut his eyes.

The kids were hopping around on the carpet, making noises, desperate for the world to stop and go back to normal. “I didn’t mean for this to happen,” I told everyone. I grabbed Shelby and wiped her tears with the sleeve of my shirt. “I’ll make things better—I promise you,” I told her. “You know Grumpy loves you, right?”

“Mommy’s on the phone,” Dylan shouted from the kitchen doorway.

Lisa stomped into the room, stretching the corded phone in the kitchen as door as it could reach. “Dad, it could be a hip fracture—” She was on the line with her sister, a nurse in Winnipeg. “Wait, hold on, Laura, Kevin’s back in the house. Let me call you back.” Lisa disappeared into the kitchen and the room went silent save for the sound of the phone slapping down on the receiver. “Kevin,” she said, stomping back in. “Get out. Get out now.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered to the kids before springing to my feet and turning to Lisa. Without warning, one after the other, a barrage of open-palmed hands swatted at me, cracking

against my face. The white gold wedding band on her ring finger scratched my cheek, drawing a thin red slit from my orbital bone down to the jaw.

“Get the fuck out of my face,” she said. I stiff-armed her out of the way and stumbled out the front door and onto the driveway. Before I could register that she had followed me, another two blows rained down on me and I fell backward, letting my hands burn on the sun-soaked driveway. “Stay away from my children, stay away from my family. We’re finished.”

There were no words left to say. I crawled to my feet and dug for the keys in my coat pocket. I fell into the driver’s seat of the car and turned on the ignition. I jammed the stick into reverse and backed out, swerving around George’s car parked behind me and leaving tire tracks on the front lawn. Lisa, arms crossed, stood watching as I hopped off the curb and onto the street. Shelby and Dylan were visible behind the screen door, holding each other while holding onto something else.

“Thank you, thank you, everyone. Please, be seated. Tonight marks the seventh year in a row that I’ve stood behind this podium to welcome you all to the Founder’s Anniversary Gala. Thank you, thank you. As always, tonight simply couldn’t be without the coordination lead provided by the Club President herself, Gail Silverstein, as well as Rodrigo Nunes, who’s proven time and again just how instrumental he is in gluing everything together right till showtime. And how about the wait staff tonight, another fabulous job—let’s have a round of applause for the caterers, the cooks, and the servers this evening. What a wonderful service they’ve put on for us tonight. You know, as is traditional around here, now is usually the occasion when I invite the great John Redford on stage to wow us with another of his famed monologues. But it appears that in his old age he has forgotten the responsibility of writing one. Settle down, John—I see

you back there. Anyhow, I'm only joking. I thought I'd shake things up this year and tell perhaps my favorite of the many Mr. Redford stories we've collected over these years.

This would've been a few years back now, in the days when you'd still see us on the greens more than once in a summer. You see, we used to have this sort of annual competition between us, a showdown as it were, for bragging rights heading into the next season. I had the honors off the eighteenth tee. We're dead even. I line it up down the fairway and it goes fifty some yards. John drives deep into the rough. So, there we are for a good five minutes searching for his ball, but we can't find that darn thing. Fed up, John turns to me and says, 'Richie, why don't you head over and take your second shot and if I can't find this son of a gun I'll head back and tee up again. I go and take my second shot and, boy, the thing's perfect: it lands a few feet from the pin. As I watch it descend onto the green, I hear John shout 'Found it!' I look over and see his ball flying toward the green and fall maybe a foot from the pin for a gimmie. So, here I am with a dilemma: Do I take the cheating bastard's ball from my pocket and confront him with it, or do I keep my bloody mouth shut? You younger fellas, don't be fooled. Always mark your balls.

Now, I would like you all to know that the prevailing theme of tonight's celebrations is that of friendship and common vision—despite what you might hear from John in the back. This is one of the only evenings where we all come together to achieve what cannot be done on our own: toast to the future, with optimism and generosity in our hearts. As some of you may know, we've raised over twenty-two thousand dollars through ticket sales and donations tonight, all of which will be put toward capital expenditures for the coming year. With that, let us raise a toast to the brilliant success of this evening and to let the 2012 Rosethorn Founder's Anniversary Gala be an example of what is possible in 2013. Thank you, each of you, in your sterling work to this

end. Let this be a year of thinking big, transgressing boundaries, and renewing the spirit of this respected club.”

I yawned into my cloth napkin and took a swig of sparkling apple juice disguised as champagne. Across the table was Michel, who smiled and ruffled his mustache, enrapt by Richard’s speech only a few meters away. An aproned woman moved in over my shoulder and gestured to pour me a glass of actual champagne, which I waved away.

“As we reflect on the year ahead it’s important to remember how far we’ve come in such little time. From the completion of the west basement restoration project to the new sodding of the first through sixth greens and the long-awaited resurfacing of the squash courts. And with that I’ve finally lost my final excuse as to why I can’t take so much as a game away from even John anymore. Damn you, whoever thought it wise to do that. I suppose no ball in hand will save me now.”

I spooned vanilla ice cream onto the apple crumb tart on my dessert plate. The mixture combined with the caramel sauce zig-zagged across the porcelain. The seat across the table, where Abby sat during dinner, had been vacated. My watch read seven thirty-three.

“Tradition would dictate that now we announce the recipient of this year’s Rosethorn Community Builder’s Award. This award recognizes the special contribution to the club by one outstanding member of our community who has demonstrated extraordinary leadership and fostered an inclusive club culture for all in the last year. Builder’s Award recipients exemplify forward-thinking, hard work, and a dedication to the mission and values of the club. Now, without further ado, I’d like to call Kevin Little to the stage to receive this prestigious award.”

I shot Michel a cock-eyed look in disbelief. “Me?” I asked. He handed me his folded napkin, which I used to wipe the icing from my lips before getting up from my seat to the sound

of deafening applause. The tips of my shoes clapped against the wooden platform steps, slowly, one at a time, and I ascended the stage and approached the podium. What words does one say in receipt of an award they never knew existed? Richard delivered some final words to the audience, abating the passage of time, as I stepped next to him. I rubbed sweat from my hands onto my pants before shaking his hand. A flurry of camera flashes went off in the first row, blinding me until my vision returned to the sea of clothed tables, one hundred or more, sprawling out to the back wall. Each of them encircled by faces both familiar and not.

When the applause died down, Richard stepped away from the gooseneck microphone and patted me on the back. “You’ve earned this one, Kev,” he spoke in my ear. The room settled, the cameras stopped, and the noise disappeared. All was still and sudden and it was only me. I cleared my throat and weighed the framed certificate in my hands.

“I suppose you’re all just as surprised as I am, really.” A few laughs broke out in the front of the room, then another silence. “Well, I have a few individuals to thank for this honor—first, Michel, for your faith in me from the start. I can’t imagine your thought process, hiring the washed up lawyer to deweed garden beds. But you took a chance on me and it paid off for the both of us, it would appear.” I glanced behind my shoulder to where Richard was standing and shot him a puzzled look as if to suggest there was nothing left to say. I tried again. “This year has been a sort of renewal for me. Those who know my background and where I’ve come from understand that things have been a bit chaotic in my life as of late—I’ve left a former life for this one. It’s been quite the ride so far, here, at the club. But with complete honesty I can tell you all that I’ve found a true home here, with all of you. For the past seven months these walls have renewed some faith I had in myself I didn’t think I had left. Rosethorn has given proof of the good still in me and has reminded me that there’s some work left for me to do in this world. You

know, in corporate law, you're never sure you're working for the good guys. Often, you're working for the neutral-at-best guys. Rosethorn has been my redemption, in a way. I'll admit, I'm somewhat beside myself to learn that I'll be receiving this community award after spending such little time with the club. It hasn't yet been a year. However, it's with great honor and humility that I accept it."

The pauses between my sentences grew longer, more hesitant as I searched for the next line to slot in the sequence. Time passed in seconds stretched out like lush lawns and hilltops on a green country drive. I scanned those visible faces: the old, the young, the nameless. The past and the present together. In the back, children no older than seven or eight ran between tables, playing keep-away with something.

"I wish everyone in this building tonight," I continued. "I wish everyone in this room tonight to carry on the rich tradition of service that Rosethorn Racquet and Country Club has held for so many years. Without the guidance and fraternity provided by great men such as Richard Telford, the man who I share the stage with this evening. Likewise goes for Fernando, Rodrigo, Paul, Freddy, Gail, Lorne, Abby, and, of course, John Redford, who have served as my family, neighbors, and peers since the spring. With that, I wish everyone a good evening, and to shake this man's hand on your way out tonight—to Richard goes the glory for what's been done today."

I raised Richard's arm by the wrist to the roar of cheering, clapping hands, and whistling, before letting it go and shuffling down the stage steps to ground level. To my surprise, Abby stood waiting at the base of the steps, her hand outstretched and limp.

“Where have you been hiding all night?” I asked her from the bottom step. She rolled her eyes sheepishly. Her curled scarlet hair fell over her shoulder, flirting with the silky aquamarine straps of her dress, low-cut and befit for a bridesmaid.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said. She leaned in closer, whispering in my ear over the rumble of a hundred conversations throughout the hall. “Why don’t you come downstairs with us?”

“And who, exactly, is ‘us’?”

“Why don’t you come down and find out?”

“How much money does you make?”

“Excuse me?”

“How much money do you make?”

“I beg your pardon, Shelby?”

“What’s the matter?”

“You shouldn’t ask people how much money they make. It’s none of your business.”

“It is too my business. You’re my mom.”

“My business is my business; my family is my family. Let’s keep them separate.”

“You said you couldn’t afford my ballet, so your business *is* my business.”

“Stop it. When you’re an adult, you’ll understand.”

“How much do you make?”

“A million bucks an hour.”

“Uh huh. Take me to ballet, then.”

“Do you want to get sent to your room, young woman?”

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“Dad said he doesn’t make anything an hour.”

“He’s not worth anything an hour anyway.”

“He said he makes a salary.”

“So do I.”

“A salary is when you’re paid all at once, right?”

“Not exactly. But I don’t make anything an hour.”

“Then how do you afford food, or our house.”

“They pay me every month. The same amount, no matter how many hours I work.”

“Okay, so how much?”

“What’s gotten into you? Did your father say something to you?”

“No. He never talks about you.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Promise. Now tell me.”

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Fine. I make fifty bucks an hour. I mean, not exactly, but if you did the math.”

“Fifty—that’s nothing!”

“Hey!”

“That’s not what I meant. I have fifty. I have it saved up.”

“Fifty what?”

“Fifty bucks! I have that.”

“Where did you find fifty dollars?”

“Allowance.”

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“Since when?”

“Months and months.”

“Uh huh.”

“Tell me where you got the money from.”

“Dad gives me an allowance.”

“How much?”

“You shouldn’t ask people how much.”

“Oh, *come on.*”

“I saved it up. For a long time. I have a lot of money now.”

“Okay, and what are you going to do with it?”

“Hire you. Or maybe hire Grumpy. Depends how much he costs.”

“Hire me?”

“*Mhmm.* For fifty bucks.”

“And to do what?”

“Dance lessons.”

“Wait, I don’t understand.”

“Teach me.”

“But Shelby, I don’t know the first thing.”

“We’ll learn together. Just be with me. For an hour, okay?”

There was a pause.

“You’re silly, sweetie. I can’t. You know—”

“Mommy, what’s wrong?”

“Don’t worry about me, Shelby You’ll understand one day.”

“Did I say something to make you sad? I didn’t mean to, I swear.”

“No, Shelby, it’s fine. Really. It’s just—”

“What!”

“Put your money away. Seriously.”

“No—take it, fifty bucks an hour. Please, take it. Maybe it’ll make you feel better.”

“Shelb, I couldn’t even teach you if I wanted to. I don’t know the first thing about dancing.”

“That’s okay, let’s learn together.”

Shelby got down on her knees and heaved an armchair inch by snagging inch across the carpet to line it up flush against the wall. She kicked Dylan’s toy cars out of the room, and they rolled down the hallway; she threw the couch cushions in the corner, piling them up, and almost knocked the lamp off the side table; she cleared away a ten-foot by ten-foot studio in the middle of the living room floor.

Lisa stood like a statuette, covered her mouth.

“Wait, wait,” Shelby said, buzzing around the room. “I need the final touch.” She ran into the hall and into her room. She slammed her bedroom door shut one moment and then opened it the next with a portable stereo in her arms. “Now let me go get the music, one sec.” Her words tapered off into the distance as she scurried out the screen door and into the garage. She came back with a CD jewel case in her hand, breathing hard.

“George Strait?” Lisa gave her a slanted look, smiled, and removed the disc from its case.

“Grumpy’s music,” Shelby gleamed. “Let me put it on.” She pressed the disc into the top-folding boombox tray. It clicked when it shut, then she pressed play. It made a whirling noise.

“Positions!”

Lisa and Shelby stood facing each other on the carpet as a steel guitar and fiddle started playing a slow, sunset melody. Shelby held out her hands with a soft, giddy smile and waited for her mother to take them. And then she did.

“Back your feet up like this,” said Shelby. “Now sway them side to side.”

Lisa gasped, then laughed.

“The student becomes the master.”

“Spin.”

“You mean like this?”

“Now do it with your legs shuffling—keep them loose.”

“Like—”

“Good, just like that. Now speed it up. Swipe your feet.”

The fiddle whined on.

“Kind of a slow song, don’t you think?”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, just didn’t quite expect this.”

“Sink your heel in—one of them—and bend on the other leg. Yup, there you go—now hop. Don’t step back onto your foot, hop.”

“Shelby, who taught you to do this?”

“Practice.”

“Is that it?”

“Follow me. Right foot across left foot, left foot back and to the side, step to the right with your right foot—yup, like that—then close your left foot to the left side of your right foot—okay, now speed it up, make it faster, faster.”

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“Shelby!” Lisa cried, tripping over her feet and stumbling chest-first onto the couch.

“Shelby, you’re going too fast,” she said. “How about you try some of your momma’s moves?”

Lisa stood up on the couch and shook her hips, crouching low and popping back up, swaying her tall, rounded body back and forth.

“Oh yeah?” Shelby said, climbing onto the couch to join her. “Look it.” Shelby mimicked her mother’s swing, cheating the music’s bluesy rhythm.

“Not half bad.”

Shelby rocked faster, exaggerating the movements with a little flair.

“I think you need some lessons,” Lisa laughed. She started demonstrating the smooth method of the movement, bobbing down and crossing her feet in one motion. As Lisa stood back up, Shelby bumped hip-to-hip with her mother, knocking her off balance.

“Shelby!” Lisa screamed as she fell over the arm of the couch. She caught herself before she hit the ground by grabbing hold of the arm of the recliner opposite it. Her body spread out between the two pieces of furniture, outstretched like a bridge.

“Mom!”

Lisa laughed, shrieked, and then laughed again.

Shelby hopped down onto the carpet and put her arms under her mother’s body, sprawled out in a superman pose, and tried heaving her back onto the couch. Unable to move, Lisa flopped onto the floor.

“Oh mom,” Shelby laughed. “I told you I need lessons.”

They both laughed, laid out on the floor, while the fiddle played on.

“You little brat,” Lisa said as she rose to her feet, smiling.

Lisa popped back onto the couch and mimicked Shelby's box dance, only faster than before.

"Hey, you got it," Shelby said.

"Uh huh, that's right."

Lisa swung her hair behind her shoulders and leapt onto the arm of the couch. She swung her right foot across to the recliner. She kept one foot planted on the arm of the couch and the other on the arm of the chair.

"Mom, mom, careful."

Shelby jumped in place with her hands raised high. Lisa pulled her daughter from the floor and into her arms, cradling her in a bear hug, suspended above the living room, dangling between the furniture while the fiddle played to an end.

"Lisa?" I called.

I laid my briefcase down in the front hallway. Lisa and Shelby both dropped to the floor and Shelby scurried over to greet me. "Oh, Shelby, didn't expect to see you. Home early, are we?"

"Last day of school, we leave at lunch."

"Ah that's right," I said, contemplating the months ahead. "And your mother?"

"Never far behind," Lisa said as she walked into the hallway.

I kissed Shelby's cheek, then she pulled me into the living room and hit the play button while a fistful of coins rattled in her pocket.

Richard took back the microphone and corralled the audience to attention. They quieted to a dim murmur. The charm in Abby's eyes belayed my hesitation; she led me by the wrist

behind the podium stage and out of the audience's view, slipping through the exit doors and into the main hallway thoroughfare filled with caterers wheeling carts of desserts between the kitchen and the banquet hall. Before she could lead me any further, I grabbed her shoulder and spun her around to face me.

“What’s going on, Abby?” I laughed while thumbing an eyebrow, unsure of what to make of the night. She fingered the skin under my jaw, tickling it slightly for a second before ripping away her fingers and leaving me with a sly glance.

“That’s for you to find out.”

“No, no, come on—”

Abby had already taken off down the hall, prowling between cooks and busboys and waitresses. I trailed behind her, making sure not to lose sight of the woman in blue. Further she led me through the noise: dinner plates clanged together, hurried voices shouted over heads, the sound of muffled laughter rang through the walls. In the lobby, parents and grandparents stood posing for pictures with their children. String lights draped over the scene from above. Abby waited for me to catch up to her, then took my hand and led me down the front stairwell and into the basement

Abby shut the door behind us and then finally relented. “Oh, Kevin,” she said. “It’s about time we had a little fun around here, isn’t it?” She took my hand and strode down the hall before I could formulate a response. Lights overhead broke against the chestnut colored walls, steeping the basement halls in a ruby red glow that Abby’s dress cut through the middle of.

Footsteps clamored above, evidence of commotion in the grand hall. “Hold on,” I shouted. “Where are we going?”

She glanced over her strapless shoulder and shushed me with a finger over her lips. “Right here,” she said, and pulled me around a corner into a narrower hallway. As we rounded the corner, Abby nearly collided with a man walking the opposite way.

“John!” She said.

“Abby! There you are. I was worried you hadn’t found him.”

“John?” I asked. “What are you doing down here?”

John, dressed in a cream-white suit, blinked and laughed nervously in the manner of a man unable to speak the truth. “Oh, nothing, Kevin. We’re just waiting on you, is all.” He spoke with a clarity and speed that belied his daytime languor.

“No—stop and tell me what’s going on. Tell me now or I’m getting the fuck out of here.” I grabbed John by his shoulder, turning him to face me.

“You see that certificate you have in your hand?” John gestured to the framed award I had forgotten I was carrying. “That’s your ticket to the afterparty, Kevin. I’d cancel your evening’s plans—we’ve been waiting for this. Come along.” Abby and John started for the end of the hall, where the sound of distant voices echoed through an old mahogany door.

“Kevin, believe me, you’ll want to see what we have for you,” Abby said, waiting. The menacing smiles on their faces unlocked some inhibited, inward curiosity in me. I took one step forward, and then another, unsure of what to do but knowing that there was a home ahead that they had made for me. I felt helpless to their homeward pull.

“Good man,” John said. “Now get in here.” He held open the door at the end of the hall which, since I had been hired in the spring, had remained padlocked. It led to an old custodian’s break room with a small sign reading ROOM 2G1 above the doorway.

The room was deeper and wider than I had remembered, stripped down to its original wood floors. There was a long oval table in the center with six men seated around it, all donning white suits and suspenders. Their jackets hung on hooks along the wall. Whisking clouds of cigar smoke obscured the faces of the men at the table. There was a wet bar along the far wall, with mini fridges under the counter. The bar was semi-detached from the rest of the room by a partial wall with a window cut into its center. Vacant barstools lined the bar and the surrounding divider. A chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling, emitting a dim gold glow on the table and diffusing rays of light through the smoke.

“Can I get you a drink, Kevin?” Abby asked.

“Perhaps a glass of water,” I said, coughing.

“Oh, you baby. I’ll fix you something.”

“You’ll fix me a water.”

“As you wish.”

“Don’t be shy. Have a seat, Kevin.” John pulled a chair out from under the table, letting it screech over top of the dark, dusty floorboards.

“Wait, what about the party upstairs?”

John and an older man at the table laughed quietly at one another. “Kevin, the party’s over. We’re the party now.”

“Is that so?”

“It is. Sit, please. Welcome to the afterparty.”

As I resigned myself to the seat John selected for me, I scanned the table to discover something in equal parts disturbing and curious: each man wore a masquerade mask, a *bauta cera*, small and pale, mouthless with a distended chin and a square jaw. Abby, returning from the

bar, was now wearing a silver white *colombina* mask just wide enough to cover her eyes, leaving her red lips exposed, the rest hidden like a mistress. She leaned over the table, exposing more skin than dress, and slid a glass of water to my hand. Then she turned around slowly and strode back to the bar. My heartbeat matched the click and clack of her heels against the wooden floor.

John grabbed my framed award from where I'd placed it on the table and hung it on a nail in a blank section of wall. "Alright then, boys," he said, turning to face the table. "You all have your masks on, now?" The tone of the man's voice had no pretense of ominousness or foreboding. He spoke with a joyful, quickened sort of inflection, the kind belonging to an elder happy to invoke tradition. This, finally, put me closer to ease.

"Don't be worried now, Kevin," John said as he sat down across from me. "You'll get your mask shortly." Abby circled the table to where John sat and placed an object in a folded cloth on his lap. John licked one thumb and then the other before he ran them through his thin grey hair, slicking it back and patting it down neatly on his scalp. He then reached for the item on his lap, which he removed from its wrapping and placed on the table. It was a half mask with a long hook nose, resembling a beak, with narrow slanted holes for eyes. The other men at the table, seven in number, watched attentively as John strapped the mask to his face, becoming something else.

"Well," he said, taking a moment to clear his throat. "He should begin any minute now. But, in the meantime, I suppose I'll begin by welcoming everyone to tonight's commencement. On this night, it is our honor to welcome our sixty-third member to the society: Kevin Little."

After John spoke my name the table raised their glasses in unison, clinked them together, thumped them back down, clicked them back together, and then slammed them back down on the table one last time, having spilt their drinks on the table without a care. Together, they

shouted the same word each time their glasses touched the surface of the table, a slurred monosyllabic cheer that sounded like it could've been old Norse or some private language yet to be revealed to the world.

“John—can I call a timeout for a second and ask you to explain what the fuck’s going on right now?”

“What would you like to know, Kevin? You’ve just been inducted into some of the oldest and most prestigious underground societies in this country. If you’d like to know more, you’d better be willing to stick around and find out.”

The door flung open before I could open my mouth to answer him. It was Richard, who stormed in and took a seat next to John. “I apologize for the delay,” Richard offered to the table. “It’s a zoo up there, you know. Had to shed the charity officers, collectors, and whatnot. In any event, I’m ready to start now.”

“I’m afraid you missed the inaugural rites, Richard.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Abby, the only woman in the room, crouched next to Richard, resting her free hand on his shoulder, while she slid him his *bauta cera*. Richard grinned faintly and mouthed the words “Good girl” to her through cigar smoke before he strapped the mask to his face.

“Now,” said John, taking a puff from a cigar being passed down the table. “Let’s get on with this. Who’s ready for a little fun tonight?”

A roar, louder and more contagious than expected, erupted around the room and rattled the legs of the table. I rode the energy of the room into my own cheer. We cheered together, though I was unsure why. A masked man across the table caught me cheering and laughed, then we laughed together and cheered in unison. Ritual became its own contagion. Abby bent her

long, languid body over the edge of the table and folded her hands in anticipation of what John was about to announce.

“Well then, let’s get underway,” John said. The noise died down quickly with John’s commencement, as if snapped from a spell. He nodded to Abby, who reached for a thin metal briefcase by her feet. She blew a thin layer of dust off its top and then propped it open on the table. From the case she removed a deck of playing cards held together by a gold money clip and a tray of striped chips of various colors, each of them heavy and wooden, evincing a mark of craftsmanship long dead. Commotion resumed around the room as everyone broke off into competing conversations, shouting over one another to be heard.

“How much do you have on the opening hand, Bill?”

“Scott, you dirty bastard, this’ll be the third year in a row you’ve skipped out on the society rites.”

“Believe me, you wouldn’t catch me dead with her. She’s got her hands full as it is with her granddaughters running around, those little beasts.”

Abby cut off the disjointed laughter as she centered the deck of cards in the middle of the table. “Alright boys, I’ll fetch you another round of drinks and then we’ll start play. As I’m sure you already know by now, tonight’s pot totals \$175,450. No limit hold ‘em. There’s a lot at stake, gentlemen, so let’s be on our best behavior.” She winked to the lot of us and strut to the bar, where she grabbed a tray of premade cocktail glasses laid out on a tray. I cracked the joints in my sweat-soaked hands and focused on the snapping sounds. The collective intensity of the room combined with my own awestruck confusion reawakened the childlike fear and speculation that lies dormant in every man.

I took two deep inhalations and a swig of water before Abby returned to the table with the cocktails. She made a round of the table, handing a glass to each of us. “It’s only a tonic,” she said as she placed the final glass in my hand. The liquid, as clear as the glass that held it, bubbled like a cauldron. I held it to my nose and detected nothing before emptying it into my mouth. It tasted harsh and flavorless, save for a fading sweetness at the bottom of the cup. I held the glass up to the chandelier’s light—the base of the glass was speckled with tiny granules, which I felt, with my tongue, against the sides of my cheeks.

Through the glass I made out Richard’s masked face, the image translucent and refracting like an absurdist portrait. “How does it feel eating with the wolves now?” he asked.

“With who?” I shot back. I put the glass down and saw once again with clarity.

“With *us*. Kevin, you’re one of us now.”

“Am I?”

Richard’s smiling face was equal part conniving and magnetic. “Listen to me, boy,” he said. “Don’t get jumpy at the table tonight. Remember, play the long game. Be a wolf. Don’t retreat.” I questioned what it must be that he wanted me to remember, and what game he thought I should be playing.

Abby opened her mouth to speak but I heard nothing and felt only a throbbing reverberation, ringing violently, suddenly, in my head. I held onto the edge of the table with both hands for support, noticing for the first time its solid oaken frame, how its edges were blackened in spots, as if charred, and how splinters have sprouted and been torn off over the years of its life.

“Are you listening, Kevin?”

I raised my head and looked up, mustering all the strength I had. The ringing in my ears slowly subsided, erasing the barrier between myself and the rest of the table, returning me to the

oddity of the ritual of which I was a part. I nodded and smiled, feeling everything inside me loosen and become slack, as my thoughts unbound and sprouted out of my mouth as if being spoken through me by someone else, from someplace else. “Yes, ma’am,” I said. “Ready as ever.”

Seven stacks of playing chips appeared in front of me, each of them towering high. The big and little blinds slid down the table, slowing to a halt in front of John and a masked man to his left. Abby dealt two face-down cards to each player before breaking the deck and resting it in the center of the table, the game set.

Hands moved slowly: Richard opened with six thousand dollars to call, Lorne called, Scott called, and the third, Sorel, a younger man, raised to thirteen thousand. Ralph followed with a three-bet and we all folded save for John, who called, followed by Ralph again. Ralph’s check prompted Abby to burn a card and then turn the river: the first two cards were threes and the third a ten. I did not know the suit to which they belonged. They all were off-color, as if a blend of red and black together. I could not discern whether their discoloration was the doing of my own sleepy hallucination or if the cards were warped themselves.

I hadn’t yet checked my own cards, despite having folded and thrown them back to Abby whose mask now draped from her long, suntanned neck. “I won’t forget this time,” I thought, as Abby slid two more back to me: six-deuce off-suit. The cards were emblazoned with maroon patterning throughout, their suit color distinguished by the black and cherry outline of the numbering in the corners.

I checked Lorne at eleven thousand one hundred.

Richard tapped.

John tapped.

Scott folded.

My eyelids fluttered, washing the scene in and out of view. I heard the tapping of a man's knuckles rap against the table, and then another, and then another, before I slid away. Then I was gone.

Waking to the warmth of a woman's arms around my shoulders was not enough to pull me back to earth gracefully. The flesh behind my temples sang as I dabbed my palms on my forehead, looking for blood and finding none.

"What's going on, Abby?" I grumbled.

"You won, Kevin."

"Wait, what—I won what?" In sitting upright, I realized that I had been laying down, or had been laid down. Wherever I was, there were windows in the corners of the room. I'd been moved from the basement to higher ground.

"You won the game, Kevin."

"Where are we?"

"You won your inauguration rite, Kev. We're so proud of you." She smiled wide, flashing glittering teeth. "Full house over full house. You won it on the river. You've made yourself rich tonight. Your family would be proud of you."

I rubbed my forehead and swept the hardened crust from the corners of my eyes. Abby rose to her feet and extended her hand. She beamed like a bright summer's day. I struggled to my knees and held onto the backs of Abby's knees as a crutch. Her face, glowing literally, from the vantage point of her knees looked unlike the girlish face I'd known for so long. It was older and rounder, creased and troughed with age. On my knees I studied the woman's face as it shifted

from object to subject, into and out of focus, from someone with whom life was meant to be channeled through to one with whom it must be shared. I took my hands in hers and stood up to face the woman who no longer resembled the woman I knew; her age, only twenty-five this morning, had doubled; her blue-green dress into jeans; her scarlet hair turned blonde.

“Lisa?”

“Yes, Kevin?”

These words dropped like a brick in my chest, filling everything hollow with weight. They bit like an animal through my flesh, breaking my bones in pieces. Warm tears rolled down my cheeks.

“Where have you been, Lisa?”

“Don’t ask. I forgive you.”

My bleeding heart peeled from my chest, fell to my feet, bruised like a rotten harvest.

“Lisa,” I said. I took her face in my hands. There it was, the smoothness of the skin behind her neck. The familiar spots on her skin resembled a checkerboard, her birthmark a knight’s move under her collar. I found the constellation of freckles above her eyebrows, above those eyes that I had met in a past life.

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Tell me,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I wept. “I broke myself for you.”

“I forgave you. That’s what love is. Remember, we’re in love. We’ve grown old together.”

“Together?” I said, at a loss.

Lisa took my hands and rubbed the spaces between my fingers with her thumbs, smoothing out the wrinkles. My own skin appeared worn and weathered, its pigment faded like an old photograph. Discolored splotches dotted my arms; they looked as if they had been exposed to a lifetime of sun.

“What have you done?”

“We made it, Kevin. We made a family together. Everything we always wanted, together.”

“Where are our children?”

“What are you talking about, Kevin?”

“Dylan, Shelby—where are they?”

“Kevin?”

“Tell me, Lisa—tell me where they are.”

“No, Kevin.” She covered her mouth. “Don’t be like this. Not here.”

“Where are they! What have you done to them!”

I felt as cold as the ice caked against the seams of the windows; weightless as if was plummeting from them.

“Let it go, Kevin. There are some things you’ve got to live with, that you must go on living with. Didn’t you say those words to me, wasn’t it you? You made a decision, Kevin—live with it.”

“With what?” I rattled the woman in my hands, shaking her as if the words could spill from her mouth. “Speak! Where are my children?”

“Kevin,” she said, calm as the night was dark. “You killed them.”

“No! You’re a liar! You’re a fucking liar, Lisa! You always wanted to destroy our family, but you won’t take them away from me.”

I let go of my hold on the woman and cupped my weeping face in my hands. Cold, confused, and lost, I wailed.

A sudden thud shook the floor beneath me. I buckled at the knees. Lisa, the girl and the old woman embodied as one, fell limp on the ground. She was pale and lifeless like a doll, frigid, not like someone whose life departed but who had been dead all along. As Lisa collapsed, I fell with her; dropping to my knees, air left my lungs. Gasping for air proved useless as there was none left to breath. All was gone and all was lost and there was nothing left but a dying oblivion, arrived by a doomed way ahead, to the end, across bridges built to break.

I eased off the accelerator, slowly stepped on the brake, and moved the stick into neutral until the car rocked to a stop in front of the hospital doors.

“So, when am I seeing you again?”

“Maybe Friday after I’m off—you’re going to want to ring my place between seven and nine in the morning. That way you know I’ll be up,” Lisa said.

“Why not at noon, like a normal person?”

“I have plans at noon.”

“Give me a break.”

“What can I say, I’m in high demand.”

“You’re highly demanding is what you are.”

She slid her hand on my leg and smiled before she swung the car door open, stepped out, blew a kiss, and said goodbye.

We met at two thirty-nine the next day. Her plans must have fallen through. She sat across from me at a table in the hospital cafeteria, her mint-colored scrubs pulled over a white turtleneck.

“You said two-fifteen.”

“I know, I know, I’m a sack of shit,” she said.

“For once you’re honest,” I laughed.

Lisa pulled a thermos from her purse and put it on the table before reaching back in for a plastic spoon. She unscrewed the lid without saying a word and started shoveling leftover ravioli into her mouth, hunched way over the table, her free hand covering the pasta mush dripping back into the bowl.

“It’s two forty-one,” I said. “You got time.”

“You don’t know what it’s like working in this god forsaken hospital.”

I shrugged like they did in the movies, high and theatrical.

“And thank God for that.”

A greying man screamed madly while being wheeled down the hall on a stretcher headed by two nurses and a surgeon. The man had a dialysis machine hooked up on a roller next to him that blip, blip, blipped like an IV. His leg was casted and elevated. “

“You know what? This was a bad idea,” she said. “It’s a madhouse here, Kevin.”

“And I’m not helping matters, am I?”

“Well, what’s another chicken in the coop?” She winked, stood up, and spun the lid back on her thermos. “Listen, this isn’t the best time. They have me in the maternity ward for a double. If I see another delivery room after today, I’m going to get my stuff tied up.” She gestured to her crotch.

“How about you give me a call when you’re off—I have some news to share.”

“Oh yeah, and what’s that?”

“Apparently now’s not a good time,” I said, getting up from my seat. “Just finish your double and give me a call after. I’ll be up, I swear.”

“You’re such a tease, Kev.”

“Do it,” I said, squeezing her shoulder on the way out.

The phone rang at eight nineteen in the morning. I rolled over and snatched it off the bedside table.

“Eh?” I rubbed my eyes.

“You said you’d be up.”

“I am.”

“Uh huh.”

“How was your shift?”

“Two sets of twins and a failed epidural. Don’t ask.”

“I won’t.”

“So?”

“So?”

“What’s the big news?”

“I’m in,” I said. “I got into law school.”

Lisa shrieked through the phone.

“Where! Where’d you get in?”

“Eastern.”

“No way! Oh my God, Kevin, this is perfect.”

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“I know, I know.” I yawned into my elbow.

“You’ll be what, a half-hour away?”

“Forty-five, give or take.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Thought you would.”

“So...”

“What?”

“What are you doing now?”

“Right this instant? Making coffee, still kind of naked.”

“That’s perfect, stay right there. I’ll be right over.”

“Wait, after a double shift?”

“You said you’re making coffee, right?”

“Yeah, sure, let’s have ourselves a party.”

Lisa arrived an hour and three minutes later with a bottle of sparkling Shiraz tucked under her arm. “Had to wait for the liquor store to open,” she said. She took her coat off, revealing a robe underneath; she took off the robe, revealing a purple lace bra and panties. “You said your roommate’s not home today, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t. But, no, he’s not.” I said, wide-eyed.

She walked me into the living room and tackled me, jumping up into my arms and wrapping herself around me. We fell onto the couch. She mounted me, pinning my arms to the couch cushions with her bare legs. She twisted the top off the bottle. Wine fizzed over and fell onto my naked chest. She leaned over slowly and lapped it up with her tongue.

“So much for the coffee, huh?”

“You’re such a dork.”

She took a swig straight from the bottle and then shifted her body down to my hips, allowing me to sit upright. I grabbed the bottle from her hands, smelled the florid, sugary scent rise from its neck, and downed a mouthful. Then another.

“Not bad, eh?”

“Not at all,” I said, squinting. When I opened my eyes, hers were a finger-length from mine, shut tight and inching closer. I kissed her and pulled back before our lips could seal.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m feeling a little nauseated.”

I took another sip from the wine bottle and put it down on the carpet. She swung her leg over me and sat on the opposite end of the couch, looking defeated.

“I think it’s too early, that’s the problem.” I got up and grabbed a dirty pair of jeans off the floor, shoving one leg into them and then the other. “Here,” I said, “let me get dressed and let’s go for a drive. Get some air. Maybe that’ll do the trick.”

“Yes, Mr. Prosecutor.”

“That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Whatever,” she said, taking a drink from the bottle. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand and put it back on the ground. “You’re going to be a lawyer, Kevin. I’m so proud of you.”

“I guess so.”

“You guess what?” She threw her robe over her shoulders and slid her arms through the sleeves.

“I’ve miles still to go before I earn my applause.”

DRAFT MANUSCRIPT

“Lovely.”

“I mean, in a way it is. No more stocking shelves at Foodland. That counts for something.”

“This is true.”

“How about that drive?”

“Where to?” Lisa checked her hair in the hallway mirror, turning from cheek to cheek.

“Does it matter?”

“I guess not,” she said, sticking the wine bottle in her robe.

In the driveway, we let the AC blow for a minute. From the passenger seat, Lisa checked her eye makeup in the visor mirror, touching it up with a long black pencil brush.

“So, does this make me a lawyer’s wife?”

“If you play your cards right, I guess.”

“Look at you, acting coy. Since when...”

I threw on the aviator sunglasses sitting in the driver’s ashtray. “I mean, you already look the part—so you’ve got that going for you.”

I let my foot off the clutch as I looked out the back window. The car’s rear tires rolled quietly off the lip of the asphalt and onto the road. Long strands of sunlight dropped into view as we pulled out of the shade of the oak tree in the yard and careened into the middle of the street. The last image in my mind was of Lisa, seated next to me in a pudgy grey coat overtop her bathrobe, looking into the lenses of my glasses and smiling as if she saw in its reflection precisely what she always wanted. I held onto this image as I looked down at the gear shift and threw it in drive. In the next instant we heard something like a foghorn booming from behind us. Then it hit. The impact. We hurtled down the road and onto our neighbor’s lawn three doors

down. The car nearly tipped over onto its hood before it fell back down onto all four wheels. An eggshell blue Ford Mercury had slammed dead center between our taillights at seventy-seven kilometers an hour. Lisa screamed, I gasped for air, and the car alarm rang endlessly through the sunny street. My vision swirled, as if everything outside the shattered windshield revolved around the two of us. I wiped the sweat from my eyes and held my arm across Lisa's chest.

“Are you...”

“I'm okay.”

I cut the gas and a deep, engulfing silence brought the impact to a conclusion.

“Kevin!” She shrieked. “The bottle.” She pulled the half-empty wine bottle from under her robe, its blood-red contents unscathed, and stared at it before launching it onto the back seats and covering it up with an old t-shirt that laid on the floormat.

“No, no, no,” I said, unbuckling my seat belt and reaching into the back. I tucked it under the driver's seat and stuffed the shirt in behind it so it wouldn't roll out. I sat back in place and put the seatbelt back on. “There,” I said. “Leave it. If they find it, say it's old.” Lisa grabbed my hand and held it against her lips as a stranger's face came into view behind me, peering through the cracked window.

“You're up, Kevin.”

“I'm what?” I shook my head and scanned the room. I was surrounded by eight men in white suits, seated at the same table I had vaguely remembered from hours, or perhaps days, before.

John sneered at my question and broke into a slow laugh. As I met eyes with John, I realized his mask had been removed, as had everyone else's. I began to doubt whether they were ever wearing them.

"We're only joking, boy," said one of them.

"The rookie couldn't handle it, could he?" said another.

I hadn't finished processing what had been said when two men, neither of whom I recognized from the country club, grabbed under my arms and hoisted me up out of the chair. Supporting my bodyweight proved impossible; I held onto the back of the seat to regain my balance. I drew deep diaphragmic breaths and fought down vomit. I scanned the room: cast in a reddish light, smelling of rich tobacco. Everything appeared as if in a familiar dream.

"Where's Abby?"

"Don't you worry your little heart, Kevin. She's coming back."

"She's coming back all right," John cracked.

"Let me fetch the man some water," said Richard.

"Can't say Rich doesn't like to pick favorites," one man ribbed to another.

"Doesn't he? Anything for a Rupie's man."

All seven white-donned men surrounded the table, their fraternization more manic than congenial. "Kevin, you need to stiffen up a little, I'd say. You're looking a bit frail," said a taller man wearing glasses. Through heavy haze, I heard John's shrill laugh.

"Anyone home?" the man in glasses taunted. I looked up and found his face reconstructing before my eyes, assembling itself like many jeweled strands of DNA organizing into a molecular form. Like order from chaos, solid from liquid. His image gradually came together. It was Scott, the man who I'd met on the greens with John earlier that day. He reached

over the table and grabbed a cigar from out of John's lips. "You want a puff off this thing?" He waved the corona in front of my face like a hypnotist's watch. I shook my head slowly. "You know it's an import, right? Come on, open up."

I tried to push the man backward into the table, but he hardly budged. My arms went limp. Scott laughed a small petty laugh and nudged another man on the arm, who then then slid behind me and hooked his arms under mine like a wrestler's submission hold. My body folded under his vice grip. I could no longer formulate words. Scott lined up the cigar with my trembling lips and I caught the fumes off its burning end. It did not smell like tobacco alone.

"Scott, Wayne—quit fucking with the boy," said Richard, brandishing a glass of water from the bar. The man dropped me, as if to prove to Richard that it was all in good fun. Richard groaned, sat me upright, and held the highball glass to my mouth. "Easy does it," he said.

My pursed lips rejected his offering. The watery scent of Richard's glass met my nose, which triggered a chain reaction beginning in the pit of my stomach, rising to my chest, and then my throat: I had to retreat, I had to eject. Above all was the paramount urge to vomit. Without thinking I swatted away the glass with the back of my hand. It flew from Richard's hand and crashed into a hundred jagged pieces onto the hardwoods below. Suddenly I found my legs. I hobbled to the bar, stumbling and jostling for support on the backs of chairs and edges of tables. In an instant, a hot outpouring of vomit dumped from my mouth into the sink, canvassing the metal basin with variegated orange and yellow bile. I heaved out another dumping, took a long burning breath, and then did it again.

Above the wet bar was a row of cabinets with clasps on the doors that held unlatched padlocks. There was a scattering of more unbolted locks on the counter surface, their copper casing lustrous in the low light. I opened the cabinet doors, searching for anything that might

settle my stomach. They were all barren, aside from two clear bottles with their lids removed. I pulled both bottles down. Their contents could have been mistaken for water, only that they were more viscous and sloshed through the bottles like syrup. The exposed solution, held under my nose, was scentless and didn't invoke an effusive reaction. Instead, I found it strangely settling. I felt weight return to my legs and feet.

The labels of both bottles were barely legible under the glow of a shaded lightbulb above the sink. Someone had tried to scratch them off. The letters on the bottles pulsed and shifted like blood cells under a microscope. I shut one eye and squinted slightly with the other to make them out. "y-Hydro...y-Hydroxybutyric..."

"Snooping, are we?"

"What do you mean?" I said, fumbling the bottle on the counter, picking it back up, and hiding it behind my back. John had returned to the bar with a broom and a dustpan containing glittering shards of glass.

"I'm only playing with you. I take it you're feeling a bit better. You don't seem so flush."

"I think I'm getting my legs back now."

"Glad to hear it. You're up for more, then, I reckon?" He placed the dustpan on the counter and leaned the broom against the fridge.

"More of what?"

"Oh, you know," he said with a wink.

"I should be heading home soon, actually."

"What on earth for? Don't be a fool, Kevin. There's no home more than fraternity." He paused. "Listen, Kevin, we've all been struck by loss. We have all lost something or someone. Perhaps even ourselves. But we've come together to undo that. To find that lost something. It's

why we're here." John's speech slurred and stuttered as if it were recorded on scratched film.

"You know," he continued. "You can have your family back, but you have to give them the chance to return to you. For that you must be reformed, Kevin. After all, they left you. You never left. They did. They left the man you were. What you need, then, is a fresh start. Turn the page, restart your story, let life renew. With us."

"Lisa...wait, how do you know about Lisa? Who told you about the kids? What..."

"We like to keep an eye on our prospects, Kevin. Richard alone has been watching you since Rupie's, right from the start. He's always seen something in you. He didn't want to see you lose yourself like he did himself. How do you think you lost your job at Rupie's? Don't you suspect there might have been some politicking backstage, some whispers into ears, some empty bottles placed under desks? You can thank Richard for outing you. This might come as a shock, I'm sure, but by now I trust you see that he saved you."

My legs wavered and I held onto the bar for balance, putting the bottle back onto the counter. I shuttered my eyes, squeezed them tightly, hoping that the darkness might help me see. My head reeled, thoughts raced, memories replayed. I could no longer discern truth from lie. I wept, mourning myself. Mourning my own sanity.

"How dare you, Kevin," John said. I opened my eyes to find John grabbing the chemical bottle from the counter. He opened the cabinet overhead and found the other. "How dare you steal from us!" John grabbed a long shard of glass from the dustpan and held it against the flesh under my chin. It burned against my freshly shaven skin.

"John...stop."

“You will do as we say,” the old man said. John switched hands; choking me against the wall with his right and wielding the glass like a blade in his left. I had no strength with which to resist. My face crimsoned, sweat fell from my cheeks to the glass.

“Please,” I gasped.

I sealed my eyes and then opened them, sealed them and opened them, revealing a fainter image each time. My muscles relaxed and let go as I slowly slipped into a fever dream. I opened my eyes a final time to find Richard pulling John away from me. Then my legs gave out and I collapsed, folding limb by limb, grasping at my bleeding throat.

Lisa shouted over the sound of rush hour traffic and car horns in the distance.

“Kevin, it’s too late for that now.” A streetcar hurdled past, raining sparks from the trolley wire overhead. “Way too late.”

“Cabbie!” I shouted through the rain, waving a leather briefcase containing the last fifteen months’ bank statements, four years’ tax returns, and an affidavit for divorce. A taxi rolled ahead and continued through the intersection, its roof light shining. “For fuck’s sake.”

Lisa scowled through the hood of her raincoat. “At this point, to hell with it, I’m getting on the next car.” Makeup streaked down her face, black water snaking from eyes to jaw. “The hell if I’m going to be late to my own divorce filing thanks to you.”

Another streetcar came, arriving from nowhere as if through a time warp; it sped along the curb and came to a screaming standstill. We both boarded at the back, forgetting to pay.

“You couldn’t even call up Kokomo and ask him to watch over the kids, could you?”

“Lis, keep your voice down,” I said.

We clutched the plastic straps hung from the ceiling of the car. Our bodies were thrown at each start, our feet stumbling at every stop. The gin swirled in my gut. We stared through the windows in silence, soaking in memories. Rainwater sprayed from the streetcar tracks onto the curb, dousing busy feet, pooling in tiny puddles on sidewalk slabs in which the reflections of shop lights and storefronts glimmered.

I looked back at my wife staring whitely out the window. She was lined on both sides by seated passengers. Every couple of blocks a wet autumn wind rushed through the car as the doors opened and closed, opened and closed. On the eleventh stop we disembarked for a new car, rode another four stops, and then arrived at the courthouse at four fifty-seven.

The lobby was brightly lit, populated equally by suits and vagrants lined in two queues fronting a single desk. Lisa strode ahead and joined one of them, finding her place behind a man a foot taller, wearing a ponytail and a pair of cheetah print tights.

“If you’re getting a divorce, are you supposed to go in separate lines?” I joked.

Lisa looked back at me, her eyebrows raised and eyelids aflutter. To stifle her smile, she pretended to yawn. With that, I felt a final victory. I queued up quietly beside her and waited, step by step, as we approached the desk. We were next to see the clerk when Lisa peeled back the sleeves of her jacket to check the time. She read it, blinked, looked up at the towering porcelain ceiling, then blinked again, as if to expunge emotion. Then she stood up straight, cleared her throat, and walked up to the desk. All I could do was watch as she slipped away, transfixed by the will with which she carried herself into this final resolution. It made me think she knew a little something about life and death that I did not. That she might have seen farther into the future than I ever did. That she knew the panic of lost love long before it ever snuck up on me.

A chandelier overhead beamed a yellow, sunny light against my closed eyes. They shot open and I blinked away sweat.

“Hello?”

“Oh, good, you’re up.”

The voice was Richard’s, sitting up next to me on the floor. My head was separated from the cold ground by a seat cushion, placed there to stabilize my aching neck.

“Feeling alright there, are we?”

I patted my forehead with the back of my haggard shirt sleeve, daubing the fabric with half-dried perspiration. I clutched at my throat but found no sign of scarring. The skin felt fresh and new. A small, red brick room materialized around us as my eyes adjusted to the light. The room was empty aside from three aluminum filing cabinets, each featuring a thick layer of chalky dust coating their sides, and an old wooden desk with a bronze-necked table lamp on top.

Behind me was a tall window that looked out onto a clear blue sky, the sun radiant, as bright as noon. The melting ice at the top of the window frame fell drop by drop onto the bottom.

“What happened?” I grumbled, grasping again at my throat.

“Oh, nothing serious—you may have overheated during the party, blacked out. I came up here to keep an eye on you.”

“And Abby?”

“What about her?”

“Where is she?”

“She’s coming back. As a matter of fact, she’ll be here any moment. She went to get your folks.”

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“Wait—to get *who*?”

“Your family, Kevin, she went to find them and let them know you’ll be okay. They were worried sick about you.”

“Hold on,” I said, stumbling to my feet. I grabbed Richard by the collar of his shirt.

“What do you know about my family?”

“Relax, please, Kevin. I don’t know anything regarding their whereabouts—you will have to ask Abby when she arrives. All I know is that you’ve caused them quite the scare.”

Richard spoke with a grandfatherly tone, his voice low and gravelly, with a cadence that waned at the end of every sentence. I let go of Richard. All I could want was for him to continue, to carry on, to talk me down. To let me know that everyone is safe, that what is done is done, and that the sun will keep burning regardless. I wanted him to say something that I had never heard.

A burning pain took hold of me again, singeing worse than before. I squeezed the sides of my throbbing head, fell back down onto my knees, and then onto the floor. I screamed inaudibly through grinding teeth, feeling my body sink into the ground. I bit down hard on my tongue, dry as dirt, and tasted blood leaking from the inside of my cheek. I opened my eyes at the sound of a door creaking open. The pain suddenly subsided.

Abby entered the room and waved to Richard, who was now seated peacefully at the desk with his legs crossed. She was alone, wearing a white floral gown and sandals. She examined me closely as I lay on the floor, head in my hands.

“Kevin, you’re awake.”

“Where are they?” I groaned.

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“They’re coming. But first,” she said, kneeling. “Sit up.” I did as she said, using whatever strength was left in my arms to wrest my body from the ground. “You’re sick, Kevin. You need to relax, and to bring down this fever of yours.”

I moaned in compliance.

“Take these,” she said. In her cupped palm were two transparent pill capsules containing tiny white beads. I opened my mouth as if under a spell, shocked by my own obsequiousness. She placed the capsules on my tongue and then closed my mouth with her hand. I forced them down my parched throat. She smiled a plastic smile. “Good.”

“Where are they?”

“They’re on their way. In the meantime, lay down and close your eyes.”

I did as she said. I lay back and met her almond eyes hovering above. They shone a bright blue, gleamed in the sunlight pouring through the window. Slowly her eyes softened, effacing the deceit from her smile. From below I watched Abby age decades in a span of seconds. Skin sagged around her cheeks and her complexion dulled and dried, losing its dewy youth. Fine lines wrapped around her eyes, pores pocked her nose, sunspots dotted her neckline.

A rush of footsteps outside the door snatched me from my trance.

“Where am I?” I asked an empty room. Like that, Abby and Richard were gone.

I wedged my back off a floor as stiff as an anvil. The walls spun in gentle circles. Outside the windows, a pale red sky was marbled by feathery clouds spread out across the horizon. My memory was blank and my bones ached as if they were hollow, careening under my weight. My mouth felt dry. I checked my pockets for a mint but found them empty. The footsteps grew louder.

Two children swung open the door and ran into the room. They leapt into me, bounced off my stomach, shouting and hopping frantically.

“Grumpy,” they cried. “We missed you.”

My heart rattled in my chest like an animal in a cage. The children, a young girl and an older boy, were dressed in fine clothes, as if they had been groomed for the occasion. I knelt and scooped them in my arms, kissed their cheeks, held them against mine. “We’ve missed you so much,” they said.

Richard and Abby, dressed in a white suit and gown, strode into the room and shut the door behind them. “How lovely,” Richard laughed. “It’s been so long since you’ve been together, hasn’t it?” Abby stood shoulder to shoulder with Richard and looked around the room dreamily, as if the children weren’t there and there was nothing to see.

I placed a hand on the children’s shoulders and gazed into their eyes.

“These aren’t my children.” I stood up.

“They aren’t *what?*” said Richard.

“These aren’t my children,” I said. “I don’t know who they are.”

“You’ve been away so long, perhaps you’re starting to forget.”

“They aren’t mine, Richard. I don’t know them.”

As I spoke, my failing legs buckled and caved in. I brought myself back down to a knee, level with the children. The boy, whose expression had turned solemn and suspecting, studied my face as I did his. The younger girl stood at the boy’s shoulders and wiped away quiet tears. I ran my thumbs along their cheeks. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

Both children broke into deep, piercing wails. They wept and howled. The noise reverberated in and through my trembling heart. In this room, surrounded by strangers, there was

now nothing, not even myself, as I felt the ghost contained within me, the sovereign force that commands every breath and every movement, from birth until death, depart for someplace else, where it might, in another life, try again.

“What have you done to me?”

I crawled to Abby in the corner of the room. She appeared as a ghost, colorless and clear. I grabbed hold of her ankles, clutched at her knee.

“What did you do...where have I gone...”

“Richard, please,” she said, her voice cold, inviting him to interject.

“What have I done...”

“Yes, Kevin.”

“I wish I never had anything to lose.”

I wept like a baby at Abby’s feet.

“They aren’t yours,” she said. “Dylan and Shelby are safe, far away from here. These two,” she gestured to the two children standing behind me. “They’re ours.”

On cue, a group of men in white and silver suits stormed into the room. John, the first among them, cradled a small, thin object, wrapped in a dish towel in his arms. Those who trailed him were Michel, Scott, Ron, Lorne, and Fernando. With Richard, they formed a crescent around the center of the room, encircling the children, Abby, and myself.

Abby took the wrapped object in John’s arms, unraveled it, and then pulled it from its cloth sheath. She revealed a crystalline shard of glass and held it up like a blade. It caught the glint of the sunset through the window and reverted it into thin splinters of light around the room. She motioned with her chin for me to take it. The glass was smooth on one end and broken on

the other, taking the form of a jagged dagger. The children sniveled behind me. The three of us were fully surrounded.

I held the glass like the barrel of a shotgun, examining its curvature and its barbed teeth running along the edge. In its reflection I saw my own face shining back, refracted into a thousand strands of light, forking and splitting into spears that ran off the surface of the glass. The mirrored image, fractal and replicating as it turned it, exposed every side of me I had never seen. The young, the old; the flesh, the bone; the scars and sinew; the grey, the green; the husband, the drunk; the man, the child; the wounds open and healed. I saw my every self reflected in the weapon.

I turned to face the children. They kept their hands to their sides as if weighed to the ground; their faces limp and slack, their eyes deserted. They were silent with dried, expressionless faces.

As I stepped toward them the crowd stepped forward too, enclosing the three of us in a tighter circle. A dark orange sky draped the scene, visible through the window behind us, and framed us together like a family portrait. I felt propelled by a motor, as if I were observing my approach and not ensnared in the present of it.

“Do you want them back?” Abby asked.

“Yes.”

I held the blade under the boy’s chin. He offered no resistance. I ran it along the girl’s cheek. She stood in silence. My hand unwavering, I pressed the glass against the boy’s throat one more time. I pressed the blade closer so that it made a deep imprint on his throat.

I shut my eyes. Breathed.

“Grumpy?” said a choking voice.

“Dylan?”

There they were, dressed in their pajamas. They wore red, teary expressions, searching in me for shelter, lost in a torrent of languageless fear. On his cheeks were the same freckles, in her hair was the same butterfly bow. Yet they were faces I hardly knew.

“Shelby?” I wept.

A wasp buzzed by my ear. It hovered between us, then fell and died.

“Dylan?”

The children averted my stares, looking through me to Abby, who stood watch above. I looked back at her. With her eyes, she motioned to the glass blade in my hand. I pressed the blade to Dylan’s throat, readied, and then wound it back. I closed my eyes one last time. The edge of the glass shook in my trembling hands as I flooded with visions of the past, until there was more memory than present.

Golden sunrays beamed through the blinds. A breeze rolled in from the balcony, rattling the leaves of the potted plants on the coffee table. I reached for the phone book on the floor and turned to the back, dialed the first number from the top of the page and let it ring through to the answering machine.

I flicked through TV channels. On the seventh channel a gorilla and her trainer were shown in a doctor’s office. She was hunched over a cardboard box with a newborn kitten in it. The gorilla reached into the box, trying to scoop the tiny kitten into her cupped hands. Her trainer overstated a scowl that puffed out his cheeks and flared his nostrils as he shook his hands and motioned no. The animal rubbed her cheeks with wooly fists. They both could sign to one another. Subtitles in a green box flashed at the bottom of the screen.

The clock, hanging on the wall, said it was quarter after five. This time, I flipped the phone book to dead center, to a section printed on grey pages with the names of restaurants and takeout spots around town. I picked up the phone, stared for a moment at its digital screen, and then put it back down. On TV, the gorilla had buried her head into the box and was fishing for the kitten with her hands and mouth together. “Bad girl,” said the trainer’s waving arms. “Bad, bad.”

The phone rang and I watched the name LISA L scroll letter by letter across the amber screen. I put the bottle down on the floor, letting it topple over and sputter onto the white carpet, leaving a golden stain. I thumbed a big circular button in the center of the keypad, held it to my ear, and said hello.

“Baby, happy, happy,” the animal signed.

The trainer smiled.

“Mine, mine, mine.”

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