

ABSTRACT

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The following stories sew together parts and characters of Pennsylvania that can be neighbor to any, and with that, the reminder that family is the one thing everybody has to deal with and adapt to in order to survive.

THE LONG SHOT

by

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The Lake Hole

The lake looks biggest when it's done frozen over. The water colors almost gray of sorts, reaching out past the shore with dead aim on the rock piles. Those guidebooks though'll tell you that it's really the best kind of frozen when it looks blue, *tried and true*.

The sand pills together when the cold blows around hard and the lake gets that solid. When the temperature drops that low the trees look just as frozen, not even moving in the wind. If the wind picks up like that, mists of snow going with it, the air becomes visible and physical. In that same heart of winter, sometimes you can't hear it. It's like that cold has made the eardrum freeze up and become useless like wiper blades stuck to the windshield after an ice storm. Not even the strongest of us can break through that type of ice and make things functional.

Or maybe sometimes it makes more sense to say that the eardrum can't hear anything because the rest of the world has been drowned out. As if we're all underwater, there's a kind of weightlessness to the winters. Though that would be the opposite of the season. Winter is when the water becomes a solid. So then it makes sense that everything is so frozen and heavy that anything that can actually move is just so light incapable of making sound like feathers. All the snow kind of creates the season's largest sound proof barrier, or coating, blanketed over the land. I can't even hear a car pulling down the road. The tires barely making marks.

I just bought a new set of my own Goodyear Ultra Grip Ice WRT LT studdable tires for the snow coming. There's all that talk of the world warming up, but winter has been coming earlier and earlier up in the Poconos the past few years. There's such a full force behind it that even the weather-people on the local news can't catch. 2 inches becomes a foot before the next morning starts. I load up the Ford with salt bins and my tool box to keep it weighted down. 4-wheel drive only goes so far when the bed can seem to float up and slip you into a ditch.

Every year when me and Horvath go and try ice fishing again, my ride is smooth, all because its filled to the top of the rear cab with what my lady calls *shit*. Well you need it all and that ain't my fault.

There's the tackle box, cleats, lights, heater, auger, anchors, bait, batteries, electric tape, the ice picks, skimmer, hole cover, and sled, the license, knife and hooks and sharpeners, reels, mouth spreaders, leaders, line, clippers, 5-gallon bucket, bobbers, jigs, spoons, nets, pliers, cases, sinkers, swivels, the rods themselves, whatever clothes we need like boots, gloves, some long underwear and anything else that might be insulated, good to have some rope, first-aid, flashlights, cameras, life jackets, stools, cutting boards, markers, cooking oil, utensils, measuring tape, paper plates, plastic bags, a scale, a skillet, the lighter, and some skates just in case or if we want to goof around. It's endless, right?

When we park on the Lake Harmony that sits at the top of the otherside of the Blue Mountains we'll draw everything out of the back, digging for what feels like longer than spinning open a circle on the ice to fish through. I haven't been able to afford one of those power drills yet.

Two weeks. Us two have never gone that long or even thought about attempting it until now. For Christmas this year my wife gave me a divorce, and Horvath was about to have himself his first kid and knew from that point on, the rest of the world would seem to stop existing.

When we arrive in on the first morning, we start breakfast with a Yeungling. The drive up was empty and Horvath started cracking open the cans on the turnpike. They're kinda frozen, we set them out overnight on my porch so they kinda tastes like crystals or parts of the glass breaking away, sloshing in my mouth.

Horvath says his is nothing but head, pouring the after a couple sips that stick to his moustache into the hole. I drove out far on the ice to the very center of the lake. We didn't bother checking to see if the truck would be held up.

We could tell just by the way the air was moving it was cold enough. We've been building up a seventh sense for that sort of thing. We just keep going out on the lake seeing if we won't crack through. And when it has broken before, that's when we made a note about what everything else looked like. Except most of the time, the whole of animals and plants stretch around making this and that noise just like any other day. In any other weather. So we just have to guess. We've also been building up a sixth sense, but that is just about feeling things in general. Like when I started crying in my sleep after my wife left.

After a few beers, we pull the beginnings of the cabin boards and place them in their roundabout blueprint. It ends up looking like a thin wooden tent, each piece of lumber once nailed together gets held down on the ice with a string and pick hammered in the water.

Horvath kicks each side of the building once in place, as if his foot is wind, making sure the unit won't fall apart. He grabs his pole and winds it up placing a fresh piece of a worm on the end while I keep drawing out the rest of my truck, setting up the cots and the battery radio, find a place for the gas stove, making sure we might use it to keep warm without burning the place down or making the ice below us start melting until we sink on through.

With his fresh pole he drills the first hole of the trip and pours his beer in. He starts sinking the reel into the hole through the foamy film. Some of the bubbles fizzle out and he starts swirling the rod around in the hole like he's cooking.

There's the sun still not all the way past the mountain. Everything on the lake still feels sleepy. Like the fish aren't out. The birds aren't singing or talking. Even what's left of the overnight snow isn't being blown around by that wind that hasn't stopped up until now. I barely slept last night before leaving, afraid for the first time that maybe the wind would make the lake somehow crack and we would fall in. We'd fall in and there'd be nowhere to go. Touching the water would turn us instantly to ice. I've been feeling off balance and heavy since my apartment went empty.

My wife didn't add much to my life and where we lived. She didn't decorate, just smoked in each room like the rest of us grew up doing. Her clothes didn't have their own drawer. Everything had always been just mine and I thought she liked it that way. The rooms started looking really grey once she left her lighter in the kitchen. I kept calling her to pick it up.

The plastic was painted like the American flag, but I didn't want to see it and keep talking to myself about how familiar it was. I even had to take down the flag on

the porch because it was all the same. I took off the comforter too that she bought for our bed with a bald eagle stitched on it. Some woman was selling them that she made herself at an auction to show support for veterans and all those other people fighting. I stuffed the bedding into a plastic bin and sent that over to the storage unit that happened to be across the street from the diner she used to wait at.

I'd been sleeping cold ever since, I wanted to show I was over her leaving while at the same time still showing some sort of solitude for the lady who made the blanket in the first place. It wasn't anybody's fault other than my own to think that sheets would be enough in December. So not only has sleep been harder because I'm stubborn but I've been suffering for the lack of whatever body heat I can't collect now, unable to seemingly stay warm on the ice with the fish. I just rub my chest a whole bunch when outside and Horvath calls me a gorilla for doing it while he starts slurping through the end of another can. I waddle over to my own pole but grab the drill instead to start my own first hole of the trip.

I go off just a few feet away from the one he drilled with the beer in it. I feel more centered on the whole of the lake. Horvath said we was going to invest in one of those fancy water GPS things but I don't know how that works. He said it can calculate how deep the fish are and where to make a hole. That seems to me to take away the whole point of sporting. I know that people have been fishing before that stuff ever came about and that's just fine with me.

I drill and place the tool back inside the cabin so I can grab my tin of dip and a spit cup. I take out my knife and poke two holes in the plastic cup then go to my toolbox still in the truck and cut off a piece of twine I have wrapped up. I loop the rope and the

cup together and string the necklace around my neck for easy access. It's always been important to me to have my hands free. I wad some tobacco up and start sucking on more for another course of breakfast. I take my pole, wire it up, kick away some of the ice shavings around my hole, grab my stool, finally sitting and placing the rod down its clean hole.

“Why you got that cup” Horvath is asking still stirring his beer foam. “Gimme what you got, it won't hurt nothing.”

He likes to experiment with whatever measures he's got to see what can't be learned about these fish. He's right when he says a lot of people think they already know everything that seems to be. We're out here still figuring out the world on our own. We barely got our own lives in order, so how can the whole thing beyond us be so set in stone? Just because it's written doesn't make it true. I heard that in a song once, and it sounds so right.

15 minutes and nothing bites, the sun still sitting there on the cusp of breaking over the Blues. The sky is pretty much pink now. Horvath already lit up his first cigar, deciding to throw his ashes in the lake hole too. I'm ready for the radio.

Horvath likes the traffic reports but I like it when people call in to request a song. But that doesn't happen for a few more hours once people wake up and start listening along with us. Not until about lunch. Not until people can call in and earn a free vacation to the Bahamas promoted by some resort company no one has heard of outside the radio station. And yet everyday people call in and they win. They make the right phone call and their future looks good. There's not a catch to it at all. And

they sound so seriously happy. It's not hard to wonder what that's like. Being happy for good. They make it seem so easy.

So for three days we don't catch any fish. The iron skillet we got is so cold and dry from not being used. It makes us look stupid for thinking of bringing it in the first place. Horvath is sick of the jerky for once in his life and wants to go into town. I say that I'll drive if he wants but I got used to the taste of energy bars, Vitamin C tablets and dry Ramen pouches. We drink the last bottle of water instead of using it to cook. So I consider, if anything, I'd go and spend a few bucks on some more plastic bottles. They're good to have. The whole cabin is filled with the leftover bottles, reused for some place to relieve. I pee in Horvath's hole one time though to see if that'd help him catch any fish, because he was still stuck believing anything would work by now. That, however, is his last hope. Not a single bite in that fish cocktail. He drills three more holes thinking his new strategy is mobility.

On Friday the wind is blowing the strongest I think I've ever felt. Not just within our first week being on the ice. But I mean ever. It's whistling just like a bird all day long. But it isn't like a cold rush or nothing. It feels warmer. Like as if it goes, picking up the rays of the sun and whipping them around like ribbons. Actually, my wife did that when she was kid. There are pictures somewhere in photo albums in our basement, I'm sure, from when she was in college. She even looked the sun in one of them with a yellow jumpsuit on and orange ribbons twirled up in the air and tangled around her leg. I think about that now and again. And when I was that age I looked more like a werewolf. The hair on my arms was as thick as the beard starting on my

face as I wore flannel propped up against an old barn door we were using at the time as a makeshift nightclub and I was the bouncer, you betcha.

Even Horvath remembers how I used to look. He's got the window rolled down on our way, finally in to town howling out when I tell him to remember. And like I say, he does. He rubs his hands all over his oily hair making it stand up from the static, adjusting it in the side mirror. He keeps howling even when we settle into the parking lot at Thurman's Market. The truck door flies open with the wind and shuts just as hard going back without Horvath even touching it.

Making his way to the entrance he starts picking up his feet like he's prancing and bending over with his arms hunched, looking more like a T-Rex doing stuff like that. There's a mother holding her daughters arm as they walk over the crosswalk and the girl gets so scared, the mother puts down her bag of food and picks up the girl instead.

I walk over to them and the girl covers both her own face and her mothers. It's only the three of us in the parking lot. The rest of the strip mall is bare like the ice. What's gotta be her car is parked close to my truck. There aren't any shopping carts in the stall collectors spread across the pavement. I hear one cart with a whobbly wheel crank its way across the parking lot. It moves almost like a ghost but I know it's the wind. Then up in the sky I notice some birds flying around, drifting in circles. They're white and blend in with the clouds. I look down to the girl and back to the birds and move out of the families way just a little bit so that maybe she'll look at them too. They're seagulls. I want her to see how weird it is that seagulls are in the parking lot with us at Thurman's Market. How that's weirder than Horvath walking around like a

T-Rex scaring little girls and their mothers. We don't live anywhere close to the beach, so why would that be?

I open my mouth before I look even more suspicious telling the woman I'm apologizing. Then I grab the bag of food and take it to her car, even waving when they pull out. The seagulls starts flying behind them leaving too.

Inside the store there's a very old lady propped up on a stool leaning against a music stand where she pulls off a coupon flyer. She raises her arm with the paper and I grab it because I don't know what the store has to offer.

"Those are good for a week." Her voice is very brittle. I feel like I should tell her to go home and get some rest before she keels over and dies. She looks colder on that stool that I've probably ever felt. I find Horvath in the chip aisle already opening a bag of pretzels. There's a half empty 2 liter of Coke under his armpit too.

At the start of our second week it gets cold again. The ice turns gray on Monday and when the snow starts up on that afternoon it sticks to the ice and makes the lake look big again. We are still the only ones out on the water. Horvath finally catches a fish in his 11th hole. He plays the radio and has been relaying to me that there was a bad accident on the turnpike because of exactly what's going on with the weather switching back and forth between winter and not. That's when he gets the bite. Hollering about what might possibly make the clouds start to snow and then in the next minute heat everything up as if snow never existed before in the world. And that's when he starts mumbling back the news and weather alerts on a 2 second delay, thinking that is the luck and lure he's needed.

We fry the smallmouth for lunch and I take my turn picking at the head. I even down the eyeballs because why not. Horvath has a full mouth and doesn't bother to swallow when he talks. He does that in restaurants to and somehow everyone can manage to hear what he says.

He says he wants to stay out here forever. "It's just like we were kids, or like we imagined."

"Pretty similar" I reasoned. We would hang out if school ever got cancelled and play around with the idea that we were hunters and fisherman catching sharks on the open cold water or shooting down Elk as if they belonged to Santa or something.

Our parents were friends themselves as far as we knew. That's how it always went. We knew just what others had told us and believed it to be true. I can see Horvath getting a little softer in the voice, even with all that food. Like he's feeling things. Sensing it coming. It does feel good to catch the fish. It does feel good to be out on the water.

"What do you think our parents were really like?" I don't know if I've ever thought about that myself. Whatever the truth might actually be. What the reality of it all was.

"Do you have anything to say? I've got tons of something inside me ready to tell." Horvath stuffs in another bite of fish and white bread.

"What are you looking for?" I ask and poke around the fish bones searching for more meat.

“Something to make our dad’s proud. Something magical.” I don’t know if that means that they’d be proud of us, or if I am supposed to make our parents look like idols. When he says magical, I think he means nostalgic.

So I tell the story how it goes: that my father brought out his skates during this big ice storm as a young kid. His friends came over when school cancelled early that morning. The boys, in their leather black jackets and plastered hair like Elvis, met in the back barn, reclining on tractors, smoking and drinking coffee as the ice came down like a sheet of glass. When the weather lightened, the boys and my young father moved under the wide oak tree to get a better look at the road. No cars. My father touched the road and said it was glossy-slick. He punched at the layer with his skate blade and, without a break, said it was stable to ride. Everyone then moved to the front porch and laced in. They tiptoed through the breaking grass onto the pavement and collected by a guardrail, looking like penguins packing to keep warm. They dug in their tips and sailed off down the empty track. They started off and buzzed, bombing like an American patrol off to fight. They believed in their fathers’ stories of what the war had been like. Something to be proud of, colorful, never in danger, easy.

Up ahead, past the delicatessen and gas station, they stopped at a red light of the intersecting highway and looked far down the ten mile stretch that opens up to the nearby town that stood tall with a crane and quarter built office. One boy claimed he could see the school. They looked both ways as the light turned green. No cars. They flew in a line. My father-leader weaved in the lanes backwards like he does, even now, on the lake. The boys skated in procession all the way to school. The windows of every house they passed were dipped in ice.

They sat in front of the school entrance and lit more Parliaments, no fear of getting caught. One boy said he wished they had coffee again, nagging about at least bringing a thermos. Everyone laughed a shared puff of smoke. They pretended to drink from imaginary cups, holding a saucer for effect. And when they stopped, the butts collected in the corner like a mound of firewood ready to light again. Maybe they thought about growing up, when their shoes wouldn't fit, out of school and off to get a job. Maybe one day they would learn about their own fathers and have different stories to tell, learning about what really happens when we live.

The street light in front of the school, by the parking lot, spread out its faded green over the glazes. The boys and my father sat up from their skates, found their balance and soared back to the barn. Like legends, they shook off their crystallized jackets before going off somewhere: over train tracks, down the street, properly across a pond, parting ways. Somewhere they went chipping away at black ice, eager to carve in a frozen fossil of their futures.

“That one's a bummer, friend.” Horvath only calls me friend when he feels something. I don't think he really means I brought him down. I think he doesn't know how else to realize that me and him aren't in any place better than where our parents would have hoped we'd be. We're the ones being a bummer, not that story itself. And now I've gone and felt something too.

“Do you want to catch another?” He asks wiping his hands on his pants and rubbing out his moustache. He gets up and burps like it's some ancient mating call and leaves with the cabin door open. A breeze comes in not too cold and makes the fish bones dance on the plate.

I follow him out and the sun's right on top of us. Like it's only directing light onto our spot in the world. I take off my Carhartt and my vest, scratching through my beard, letting it breathe. I put my hands up in a salute so I can see what might be going on around the lake.

But there's nothing. No one else's out fishing. Still. No trucks on the shore either. Just us looking like idiots. There's one guy though, off where there's sand in the cove walking his dog. He puts his hand up like he's waving.

Horvath drills four more holes and I try out going on back to his old ones. I sit out at the furthest hole from the cabin and my truck. He's over there getting impatient because he can't think of a new strategy. The radio has stopped working for him. He throws it out as far as he can on the ice just after lunch and it breaks through the ice. I tell him that wasn't good.

"It's just a fucking radio. Can't catch fish for shit."

"I'm talking about that ice." He looks at me like he didn't see for himself what just happened. The radio made its own hole, pretty wide from breaking out some apparently thin ice.

"Those forecasts didn't say anything about the ice breaking any time soon, so."

Horvath can't even go and trust himself to see what was happening. I myself can't say exactly what was happening though. All I do know is that it isn't good. We've got about 4 more days until we can pack up and head for home. I'll just go and count down the days faster.

He still wants to hear the traffic reports, but with the broken radio he runs over to my hole and asks for the keys to the truck. I think maybe he's going to leave for

town and go out to try some new bait, but he doesn't actually know the way into town. He's never really been any good with directions, thinking West is always to the left of him, no matter where he stands.

Horvath goes to the truck and turns it on, still standing outside of the cab. He spins up the car's volume before he searches through the static that's making the trees seem to dance like they do in the wind. The ice is better than I thought, not moving at all with how much the truck seems to shake on its own for how loud Horvath makes the radio go.

Some Led Zeppelin starts playing but I don't know which riff it is. All those songs they sing sound the same to me, but Horvath is rubbing his moustache with the beat, kicking out his feet, slipping on the ice, making dancing look easy.

He starts sliding over to his hole, jumping some steps on the ice to see if it continues to hold. Then he starts running as fast as his shoes can hold, waiting until he gets comfortable sliding on the ice.

"You know we've got the skates for that?" He waved his hand saying he heard me but didn't mind any different. When he slides it looks like he's going off somewhere forever down the same straight line. Like the ice could take him for the rest of his life.

When he made it to his hole he picked up his line and started swinging it in the air like one of those medieval chain weapons. The type of weapon where the word "bludgeon" is only used. Horvath looked like he was trying to find fish flying in the sky like a bird, and he was ready to bludgeon them for dinner. His moustache made him look like one pathetic warrior.

After ten minutes of that he was finally dipping into the hole like I've been. The traffic report came and went. Weather follows up after that and they say it was gonna get warm again. They were bringing out the word "hot" which no one liked to hear at the end of January.

Then the music starts again and I almost catch what might've been a rainbow trout for all I know. I never know what I'll get until I hold it in my hand.

A new choppy guitar riff started rumbling and I see the truck shake a little from the bass drum kicking. Maybe piano is showing up too.

Horvath starts singing over the music, which must mean he's screaming.

"You're as cold as ice!" He really kills that line. I start mouthing the words to myself. I like that song.

"You would think this song is about us." Horvath calls again about to rip out his lungs straining so much. Some geese were flying overhead in a V. I think about maybe seeing those seagulls again.

I wave showing I heard him, with nothing else to say.

"That's what they call coincidence. Cause here we are. On the ice, you know?" Horvath must be feeling something again. I think I know what he means, too.

We stand in our spots waiting for more fish the rest of the day. At one point a squirrel scurries across the lake. It jumps and slides just like Horvath. It runs the full distance of the lake. The wind blowing seems to help push it along. If it jumps any higher I bet it could fly.

Horvath catches a brown trout. He pulls it out of the water but can't hold it right to cut the hook good. The fish bounces on the ice, flopping around while Horvath

tries chasing it around. He gets his hands on it couple times. But the thing, wet as it is, keeps slipping out of his hands. With as many holes as we had drilled, it isn't long before the fish finds its place back in the water. It splashes up pretty good, even getting some in Horvath's face.

“When are we calling it a day?” He's waving at me, hoping I see. But his arm looks more like it was being blown around by the wind. I don't know how something can be that strong. I always want to call that magic, except it's really just how the world is.

I point to the cabin and walk myself in, leaving the door open. It hammers against the walls, the wind still keeping up. It's not even cold any more. That song isn't even relevant. It's warm. Hot, even. Just like the radio said. Turns out the weather-people can be right. Even if it's rare, it still happens.

Horvath comes in patting down his moustache as if it required CPR.

“Let's call it a day.” He says looking around the room for maybe a lighter. His chest moves heavy and fast. Like he's out of breath.

“You want to head into town for something?” I went to my pocket and gave him a light, holding the plastic American flag in my hand. I held the lighter tight in my hand, cupping the flame in such a way that he wasn't going to see I was using the lighter I was. I don't know if he ever connected anything to the lighter like I did when my wife left. But I don't want to risk having to talk about more than I want to.

Horvath is still looking around for something to smoke when I hold up the tiny light. Now I get to thinking about drinking a beer. We could go and sit at the bar off the little two lane highway where no one else was, where no one else even thought

people went, and ask the bartender to put on some hockey. I don't even know if anyone's playing tonight.

"Town? Sure. But going home for good would be more like it." He nods, agreeing with himself. The sun starts to turn into something like a blood orange. Kind of pink, kind of dark. It comes in hard through the windows, making the whole cabin its color.

"We still have a couple days left, don't we?" I know we do. Most of the time I don't know what Horvath wants. Cause most of the time he doesn't know what options are left.

"I mean so what," he finds a used cigar in his back pocket and starts sucking, "let's just get in the truck and head somewhere other than this. The fish are done for."

I know he's right. I reach out my hand asking for him to puff. We sit there in silence until we can't pass the cigar back and forth any longer. The room goes gray with the smoke coming visible when the sun stops setting.

I open the door and the wind's stopped. It's quiet again. No geese in a V, no drips of fish coming to any of our holes. The trees are green and standing strong. Even the engine and radio seem quiet. Like the broadcast has been shut down, and the truck ran out of gas. But I still see the truck shake, so I know it's running.

Horvath brings with him a bag when we leave. So I guess we'll be coming back. I open my door and step in. I rub the steering wheel to warm it up. I look around for Horvath who's finally making his way around the truck bed. He opens his door and jumps in, rolling down his window. Even he's saying it's warm.

I rev. I pull her into drive and my wheels start slipping on the ice. It's not long til we're moving. The radio is so loud it doesn't sound like anything at all. It's just a wash of nothing in my ears. I start wheeling toward the beach where I saw the guy with his dog. That's the best place to drive out and head somewhere. I can see us going this way for a while. I don't go fast, but Horvath tells me to speed up.

I think about it. I start pushing on the gas just a little more. Creeping with each rotation just a little bit more. I can feel the truck shake.

And then I feel a sunken feeling. Like we're bouncing. The truck starts revving but I can feel we've stopped moving. I close my eyes cause the sound of nothing from the radio starts to make my head hurt. Plus I'm confused and I like to think closing my eyes make the world stop just a minute. Just a minute.

When I open them Horvath isn't in the car anymore. He's waving and I see him, like I always have.

He's got his bag and he's standing far away from the truck. I look forward and it's a blue sky. Pretty pale, about to go grey into the night. No trees. No birds. They're all gone and I think this must be what dying is.

Then I feel the first real cold of the whole trip. Water starts creeping up my back and I realize I'm floating in the cab of the truck. I kick off the driver's seat and lay my body on the dash. I can feel the truck sinking so slow. I close my eyes again, but I know time hasn't actually stopped. The front wheels are still on ice. I head into the cold again, trying to time it right so I can slip on through Horvath's open window. I do this fast and it feels like the wind is behind me, helping me along.

Horvath is running around to where I swim out. We're both waving at each other, knowing I'm in need of help. I stay calm, breathing soft. I know he's gonna help me. I slip a few times, as if I'm a fish that can't be caught. But I find a piece of ice that isn't breaking with the fall of the truck and step out. It's like I'm getting out of a pool. I turn over and sit there dripping. The way my clothes are wet I fell like I've gained 200 pounds. Now my breath starts getting heavy just the same and I accept feeling exhausted.

"Well what in the fuck now?" Horvath is laughing. And I start too, it didn't make any sense. We were in the middle of the lake, some of our holes still visible. The ice has cracked so much from the truck that our cabin goes tipping into the water. Some of our bags and pots and pans, whatever other gear there is, floats through the door. I don't know how we go about getting that all back.

I ask Horvath what he's got with him. He opens his bag. There's a wet cigar. The American flag lighter, almost dead. A half bag of jerky. There's an old nudie magazine and a pair of skates.

I ask him why he brought those. What's he gonna do with skates?

"Well I thought we'd get drunk."

"And so what about the skates?"

"We'll we'd have some drinks and then I was probably gonna give up and say we just come back here."

"On the skates?"

"Well you'd drive on the lake, like always. And I wanted to race. I imagined getting drunk enough that I thought I'd be pretty fast." I don't know what to do with

my hands. I'm still dripping wet. I try rubbing some of the water off my body as if I had just gotten out of the shower. But I'm so soaked.

“So you thought you'd be lucky? Drunk enough to take a chance and go as fast as you can.”

“That doesn't make any sense,” he says, sitting down himself, taking off his shoes. “We can still make it to the road. Might as well try walking it all until someone might be willing to pick us up.” He places the skates on his feet in that moment and ties them up to the very top. He uses my shoulder for balance when getting up.

“I'll see you when you get there.” And he goes off pushing against the light ice that remained on the lake.

I sit there with the drips slowing down. But my clothes are still heavy. I put my hands on the ice and it doesn't feel like any cold. I push up and off, watching at the same time as the headlights of my truck start to touch the water.

The wind picks up as it always had been. At the same time Horvath is waving. Except he doesn't look back at me to see if I see. And there isn't anyone in front of us on the shore there to see either. It looks so far away.

The ice is probably about to break in all these directions. It isn't so frozen anymore. Over the wind I can hear what might be his skates chipping away at the ice. Now all I'm thinking about is how we might go telling this story to everyone we know so that it sounds magically real enough.

And then I blink. Or it's like I close my eyes but I don't keep them that way very long. Then it's more like time has skipped ahead instead of pausing.

Horvath's made it, all the way to the shore. He sits down, untying the skates, pulling hard to pry them off. There he is, all the way at the end of the lake.

The Breakout

Overture:

I was getting good at popping my pimples with the steam of a shower warming up and a needle, and could stop the blood pretty fast before leaving for school with no more than two balled up tissues. I couldn't see anything other than the red highlights of my circumstance. When I used to tell my dermatologist this, she got mad saying my face was going to get scarred. And it is. There are little brown dots on my face that are probably worse than that acne.

Recently I've been told that make-up might help. Someone said this when the whole family of me, my brother, my mother and my father were crammed in our El Camino on the road to check out colleges down the East Coast that I might try to get into. But we started our search in Pennsylvania because they've got the most ever colleges in the whole country it seems, and paying in-state tuition would really be a good thing, says my dad. And that's ignoring the supposed scholarship I'm going to be earning.

So we were in the car on our way to the western chunks of PA that feel like a completely different state. After we made it out past Harrisburg everything started to get dryer. Like the grass was dying and the people looked older, even those that I noticed driving their cars next to ours when we passed. There were less and less clouds, but I'm not the best on reading up on how weather works. Something about the all the movement and motion and my paying attention to things outside the car window causes me to have to go. I always have to pee on the road and that causes a lot of stops.

We go to this one Sunoco that's off the turnpike at like 3 in the morning and it's empty. It's so late and so dark I can't tell where we are anymore in the state. My brother stays in the back of the car sleeping, half hanging out the window cause it's hotter than any other Summer we've known. I took a year off after I just graduated to work with dad at his carpet cleaning business for a year to make some money and get the start of a real-life education before I go back to school for some college. I was never really good at speaking up for myself and saying what I wanted.

I can't just pee when I go inside. I have to bring something back too. Mom wants me to grab her some pistachios after I pulled up my pants. Dad wants a SLUSHEE to keep him going for the next couple hours 'til we hit a diner and he could fill up on some black scrapple.

"Pick something up for your poor brother too." My dad takes an imaginary glass and draws it to his lips for a couple sips. I do the same motion back and head for the door after memorizing our pump number to pay for some gas inside along with the treats.

There didn't seem to be anyone in the store, but I still feel like everyone in the world can see me underneath the lights clearer than daylight.

Then a girl pops up from the cash register who has these really thick eye-lines, almost connecting up to her eyebrows. I can't tell if she's pretty or not. Or if she found me pretty either. I ask for the bathroom and she points to what looks like the pretzel machine. I walk over and open the door to smell the circling bread that's salty and glistened with butter. I have to remember to buy one of those.

The bathroom's actually around the corner, next to the fire extinguisher and this big yellow bucket and another yellow sign that says the floor is slippery in Spanish.

I must take a lot more longer in the bathroom than I think because the girl is gone again when I come out to actually buy some stuff. I couldn't get the automated paper towel dispenser to dispense any paper towels. By the time I actually could pull off a sheet my hands were basically already dry.

I walk over to the counter and look out the window to see my parents sleeping beside my brother in the car. When I look back to the counter to see where she might've gone, the girl with the eye-liner pops back again. She kind of looks at me with a dead face but all the attention is still drawn to her eyes, which I guess is the point with how dark they are.

But she's the one recommending the make-up for my own face before she tells me how much I owe for a half tank of gas and Giga-Bux-Lotto scratch off. I won \$5 on the ticket. I scratched it off in the corner for privacy by the rotating pretzels just using my fingernail. I take it back over to the eye-liner girl and ask for my winnings. She gives it to me in 3 ones and 8 quarters. That doesn't feel like winning at all. I put the money in my pocket and think a little bit more about what winning is actually supposed to feel like. So I think about spending the money on treating myself for once. Then the eye-liner girl asks me if I was going to leave to counter.

So I walk over to the neon-bright coolers standing in a tall row at the back of the convenience store. I can have my pick at anything from BuzzBuzz Koffee packed with 900 mg of caffeine. Or I could try the new pink flavor of Mountain Lightning that

won the recent advertising contest where it made national news when a little 5 year old girl won who actually lives in Alaska. She knows what it really feels like to win.

So I didn't pick that drink. I breeze over some sports drinks and 8 different flavors of chocolate milk. I realize maybe I'm not that thirsty and go to buy a small donut. It's cut in the shape of a star and has custard in the middle. I walk over to the counter again and the eye-liner girl doesn't have to pop out cause I see her picking at her nails and itching her scalp like she's got dandruff. That's like the acne of the hair in my opinion.

She rings up the donut and whatever else I've grabbed for the car. I give her one of bills and all of my quarters.

"You know I used to buy these all the time when I was in school." She looks out the window ignoring me. There aren't any other cars getting gas or even passing by.

"I'd eat one of these before each of my performances in the musicals I was in."

She turns around to the cigarettes behind her and starts pushing them back the slots seeing if any needed to be restocked I guess. "That donut? This exact kind?" She said not turning around to me.

"Well," I thought it was clear I meant donuts in general.

"You know you don't look much like an actor. Seems like then you should already know about makeup and your face."

"I'm not anymore, so you're not wrong." She stops touching the cigarettes.

"With a face like that, I don't mean ever." And she walks away from the counter to where there are these big floppy doors and she pushes them both open and disappears

into parts of the convenience store I wasn't sure existed. Then I realize that the eye-liner girl isn't so pretty after all. But I don't blame her, instead it's probably just the fluorescent lights.

*

Act 1:

I'd argue that it took far too long for me to outgrow my acne. I didn't start out thinking my skin was as bad as it was, but the pictures my mom still hasn't burned show enough evidence in retrospect. I should have taken it more seriously outright when my dad, every night at dinner said:

“You're looking better since before.”

or

“Your face looks worse today.”

He was always poking at my face with his fork dripping wet with gravy. Or maybe he'd shove a green bean into my cheeks, like that was going to somehow help the problem. I couldn't say enough that it wasn't my fault. I washed my hands, stopped with the chocolate, wasn't touching myself or my face. But they said it wasn't enough effort. Try harder and what not.

Exercise was next – they bought a treadmill just for me. When that failed, they bought a punching bag just for me. They hung it in the car garage in a place bad enough that my older brother once ran into it, pulling in to park from a night out or something. But instead of griping at him, they turned to me and complained about having to buy a new one. There was sand leaking out of the bag real fast, pooling like oil on the concrete.

I knew my dad had some money somewhere to spend, all this cash piled up in empty gun cases that he stuffed into an antique safe that alone was worth a couple thousand dollars. I don't know where he got that stuff. I don't know how much there was that he piled. Thought some of it was for me and my face. Everything else must've been just in case, as far as I could tell. But nothing bad ever happened to us. Now dad won't say where the money is, if we even have it at all. We never ran into a worse-case scenario as a family, except for whatever kept revealing itself on my chin. That was supposed to be my own problem, and yet everyone still tried to take control as if they were helping.

I was the first in the history of my family, genetic or otherwise, to even have the acne problem. My grandmother was intent on discovering some ancestor, somewhere out there, that was the cause of my problem, as she studied her genealogy. For me the only source I know was just one morning, back maybe around Middle School, I caught it and it spread. I'm not sure if it is something you actually catch or if it is chemically something that spreads, but it did move and bought up a lot property on my face. Monopoly levels of property.

By Junior year of High School, I had decided to go to a dermatologist because my parents told me so. It wasn't covered by insurance, but my parents thought the money was worth it, at least for a time. Get my face cleared up. Fast, *please*. I was going to be the male lead in the Spring musical again and my picture in the program shouldn't be as embarrassing as the years before. It used to look like I had a million white eyes. Every day back then when I looked in the mirror I didn't feel all too bad

about myself, but I always got stuck trying to figure out what it must be like to see me as someone else.

We were given a pretty large free sample of a medication but an actual prescription cost much more than what my parents promised they would give to continue helping out something that they saw as a problem. They already wasted up some funds on the exercise equipment. Wasted: their word. So I went and rationed the cream. I put on less than the minimum amount across my face of the cream that burned. I don't think it was supposed to do that. Especially near my eyes. It always stung my eyes and I would squint to try and make it not hurt so much. The tube instructions said in small letters not to put it near your eyes, but I had acne there.

The cream was working when a couple months in a row my dad said at dinner that my face was looking decent. I had always been talking with girls thinking in the back of my mind that I had a chance. Only with a cleaner face could I actually ask someone to Senior prom the following school year. But any time I tried talking to the pretty girls or the ones that I knew from class that would talk to me about other things other than class, like prom, I would start to sweat and then that caused me to break out, and then the cream wouldn't work as much because it was being rationed, so then the speed of the acne stretched faster, and/or stronger, than the capability of the cream I was using and then whatever girls I was talking to couldn't find me attractive any longer, if they even had to begin with. That's the first step in allowing yourself to know someone intimately in high school; if a guy/girl doesn't look like what the opposite party dreams about, then what's the point of ending up touching their face with some lips?

By the time my Senior year started I got to wondering about what it might have been like for my dad when he was in school. Or what about my mom and the things she saw? All the faces that must've been contaminating other faces. Mom and dad had to figure out at some point, like me, what it was like to get close to someone else. Feel their skin, no matter how oily or unexpected.

Oh, the humanity! I looked in the mirror and called out the line over and over again to someone I didn't think I should look like. So I picked at my acne like I wasn't supposed to. Like the directions said not to. Like the directions said not to put the cream near my eyes. *Oh, the humanity!* Again and again.

I would do my warm ups and then belt "Oh, The Humanity!" in the bathroom mirror. The title song of the Spring musical acted conveniently as an outlet for my own life and then my mom knocked on the bathroom door asking if everything was alright. Practice was making perfect, like the saying supposedly goes.

The musical was written by the choir teacher of the school, who was also the musical director. He decided to write his own musicals because the budget came out of his pocket anyway and he was apparently bored. But he had actually been writing his own musicals ever since a failed production of "Fiddler on the Roof" in 1998. That's obvious. In that production there was no roof. The school lost all kinds of money, but the director still argues that no roof was a conscious decision. That he was trying to be abstract.

So with all the lost money they had to settle for something homemade I guess. And the director started doing it on his own. When I was a freshman he had put together a show about orphan children in Philadelphia who started their own gangs. It was like

a mix of *Annie* and *West Side Story*. Except no characters died. Instead they were all adopted into some kind of Government approved child-labor force that apparently was capable of saving the United States from another economic disaster. He called it, “Brotherly Love.” Tickets sold pretty well based on what the parent volunteers were saying. But apparently the audience members were expecting something else when they bought their tickets.

Sophomore year and the director did something a little smaller. There didn’t have to be a whole lot of sets to build. That one was called “Star Trek: The Musical.” No one came around for a lawsuit, I don’t think. Must have been too embarrassing to fight or something. There wasn’t even any plot or characters with the same name from that TV show. Everybody wore astronaut costumes and we had to pretend we were lost in space, spinning in circles standing on stage acting as if we were floating. Each person got to sing their own song to explain who they were as a character. The director talked about at length during each practice about how he stole the idea from *Cats*.

I kept trying out each year because I wanted to be good. Well I thought I was good enough to be a lead, but never got the chance. My parents always told me I could be something. Anything I wanted. Parents always say things like that, but my parents believed it. I don’t know why I wanted to be an actor. Maybe it had something to do with fame. Like if I was so good maybe it would be enough to distract everyone away from what was going on with my face. And everyone would really have given me a chance if I got the lead. They’d actually be forced to. I’d be taken seriously, they’d have to take me for serious. People would have to watch what they said around me for once. Don’t mess with this face. This face can act.

I still didn't get the part when I was a Junior. I thought I'd have a real good chance since I felt good going to the dermatologist at the time. But my mom said I didn't fit the part anyway. The director wrote a musical that year using the songs of Tom Waits instead of writing his own. Again, no lawsuits that I'm aware of. Maybe that's because no one had ever heard of Tom Waits before. All the songs sounded new to everyone, and still no one really enjoyed them.

That year the director called the musical, "Baby, There's Mold Outside." The main character just walked around to different bars getting more and more drunk because he claimed that the world was being infected with airborne mold and the only way to survive was drinking all kinds of alcohol. No lawsuits for the music, and no complaints about censorship from the school either. The musical ended with the lead singing until he passed out. As far as I know the guy who got the part was actually drinking alcohol live on stage. The one night on stage I got to pat his back at the bar, I was playing the one bartender at the third bar of the musical. The lead turned around and his breath smelled really weird, like sour and brown. He had also submitted to the part in a way that made the director so proud since the lead decided he wasn't going to shower once during the entire course of his part. He stopped bathing once practices officially started.

Apparently the ending was supposed to be ambiguous as to whether or not the guy passed out due to the alcohol or the airborne mold. No one I know of really talked about what they thought happened. Not even the cast seemed interested. I do remember that right before passing out the lead had to recite a monologue that sounded

pretty similar to the one from *The Iceman Cometh*. All this and that talk about pipe dreams.

My mom said I didn't fit the part because I wasn't dirty enough for the role. She told this to me over dinner on the couch with a shared plate of mozzarella sticks that were burnt onto the no longer non-stick pan on the cushion between us. We were sitting in room upstairs with the couch that had what my dad claimed to be a literal ton of solid gold pocket watches underneath. Sometimes late at night I would go in the room and pull out one of the shoeboxes that had the watches inside and feel the etched gold and how heavy they felt in my hands. They felt heavy but I never understood how weight equated to worth. If that was true I liked to think all that acne I had was actually a good thing, but that doesn't make any sense.

So there I was with my mom on the gold pocket watches couch watching a DVD recording of my very first appearance in "Brotherly Love." There was a piece of cheese stringing down her chin that she slurped up after she said I wasn't dirty. That should've been a compliment. Except my face was still bad. It wasn't any closer to being less oily. I always felt dirty because that.

My Senior year was it though, my time to breakout. I had been singing the title song of the musical to practice as soon as the sheet music was hot from the printing room in the school library. I couldn't not get the lead.

"Oh, The Humanity" was about animals. We had to dress like animals and spend all this time in front of a mirror applying our own makeup to look like tigers and peacocks. This one kid was even a whale, but he just painted his face gray. The director

said, however, there needed to be more flubber in his face. The kid just added a couple more layers of different gray colors. He wanted to call it protesting.

The plot of the “Oh, The Humanity!” wasn’t that memorable. The main thing I remember was having to dress up in animal drag so that I could enter the zoo that was described as a prison to be with the one that my character loved. In the show the zoo-prison system was actually where the animals wanted to be. And only the animal elite could enter into it. They had to know someone to get in. It was like privilege.

The director was trying to make a political statement on privilege and animal rights and beauty or something. But I thought it was weird that he thought animals were beautiful. It was like he was saying he loved animals more than people. But he never made an argument one way or another. He was just saying things to say them and he had the outlet to do what he wanted. It seemed like he was the one taking advantage of something. Something like influence. Or pulling strings to make whatever he wanted seem real. I was the lead apparently, but no one took what I was saying on stage like anything was serious. Like they knew I wasn’t really a tiger dressed like a pelican nurse to help my sick peacock lover feel better in the zoo-prison.

Back in school, in class, somehow my rationed serving size kicked in again at good timing so I could feel proud enough when my picture in the program in the theater of the High School was passed out during the opening-weekend Overture and I only had two eyes. Everyone was going to see. If anyone was going to talk to me, they would’ve only been able to say, “Wow, that kid can act.”

I even got to kiss the pretty girl lead, opposite me in our scene, without her making a face, and I didn’t sweat that much on stage either. Even beneath the hot sun

of the lights. I felt good and not sticky. I was sure cool and belted “Oh, The Humanity!” committed to our duet before the curtain closed and there was some good applause.

*

Intermission:

When the first act of a musical ends the lights are supposed to go on and last for 15 minutes. School moms and other parent volunteers held a bake sale in the gymnasium like a snack stand. The money went to supporting the musical program like the sale of the price of the tickets was supposed to. I never knew how much we earned each year but it did always seem like the kids whose parents were doing the selling got a cut. Even the director got a cut to do with whatever he pleased. And since he wrote “Oh, The Humanity!” he was going to get as much as he wanted. And he was a big smoker.

Somenights leaving the lights on went longer if our director stayed outside doing all that smoking and gagging and coughing. He was also the orchestra conductor, so we actually needed him. I once found him in the back where the loading dock was and all the kids in the musical liked to make out, feeling up the weird parts of fat on their back really fast as they breathed on each other’s cheeks. They did this on the cement stairs and the director was smoking right above them. I had a Diet Yoohoo in my hand and offered it to him when he first started making gross noises with his mouth.

“Like, you want a sip?” I raised the can and some of the drink spilled out because I just opened it. The liquid got on my hands so I started licking them.

He looked at me and started laughing like I was a stranger he'd never see again. "You see how gross that is?" I thought he was talking about everyone around us having a dry orgy. I nodded with pride thinking I understood. He kept laughing and I started too, but then he stopped and I kept going until the rest of the cast was done moving their lips cause of something I did. I was still laughing and tasting my fingers. They just wouldn't stop tasting like something I could almost recognize as sweet.

*

Act 2:

When the show started up again for the conclusion of the story the audience was pretty much done. Luckily the second act is supposed to move a lot faster than the first. No one wasn't really laughing at the jokes, they just felt guilty if the theater had turned empty after the music stopped and the stage lights lit up again. They didn't think it was all that funny when the zoo leader turned out to be a baboon who had somehow managed to lie his way into integrating with the humans of the zoo. But his pink butt was a giveaway and he was always talking about his butt. There was a hole in the boy's costume for his real butt to poke through and when it was revealed everyone kept silent. But the boy's butt was actually just as pink as a real baboon's. And that was really funny I thought.

The musical was meant to conclude with me in my tiger-pelican drag going to save my sick peacock lover, only to have myself get poisoned because my cover was blown since I wasn't the smartest tiger-pelican in drag.

Instead of ending happily ever after I was going to die on this animal-hospital-type-metal bed singing the title song with my peacock lover coming in at the last second

to realize that I was actually trying to get to her. It was so close to being Shakespearean, that's what the director was always saying. My tiger-pelican self couldn't get what he wanted and that was really sad.

Everyone in the audience was quiet when the last note of the final song was over and the curtain closed just before the peacock girl came over about to kiss me. She was really going to kiss me again, looking the way I was. It felt really powerful, like the director was actually saying something in the script. But he couldn't say anything at all if I wasn't there to act the part.

The curtain wiped over and the director held out the final note and then cut it off too and the silence seemed to echo in the auditorium. It was pretty neat, I couldn't tell the difference between being seriously silent or still bored. They might've actually believed what happened. Then when I was still laying there on the metal bed pretending to be dead I heard some lady out in the audience ask pretty loud if the show was finally over.

"So are we done?" she asked and no one was caring to answer. People were starting to leave through the emergency exits which opened directly to the parking lot. The air coming in and out of the doors reached its way up to the stage making it feel cold.

Through the curtain I raised my voice hoping it wouldn't be too muffled to hear. "It's all over." And then the peacock came over and held my hand like what I did was brave. So brave. But it was really just a courtesy. Maybe the lady had somewhere to be, maybe she really need to get home.

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Curtain Call:

I forget her name though. I forget who it was on stage with me in those lights of the musical, my playtime co-love peacock interest. Maybe I ended up asking her to prom? I do remember she did give me a hug behind the curtain and a kiss on the cheek as congratulations on our last show together after the matinee that first weekend in April around Easter. As if somehow the character that I was playing showed her who I really was behind all the sets and the extras and the costumes. I wasn't just a tiger in pelican drag. I was actually a boy beneath all the makeup that made me look like a tiger. My skin wasn't really orange with black stripes painted on. It was pink. It was just as pink as anybody for once. As pink as the baboon's butt, really.

When the curtain opened again some people were actually clapping. My parents said they liked the show and it went well. They even promised to contribute to buying the next prescription of my face cream after I graduated. That was my first feeling of success, like I won something. But I think they just meant the musical wasn't as bad as it was supposed to be. As it had been the previous years. How it was actually looking better than before. That I was a pretty good actor or something.

When the stage manager called my name and I took a bow the claps really sounded louder. It was like ten more people started putting their hands together. I smiled and my makeup was dry under the lights and I felt it crack on my face. I looked around in the black and then down to the director in the pit who was playing the medley to the title song. I mouthed the words to the director and he saw and was nodding like he agreed we finally did well. Or that we were finally done again.

I looked around at the rest of the cast on stage standing in a line together. People had their arms around everyone's shoulders. There were wings mixed with fins, paws with other paws and even hooves found their way linking up. We took a collective bow and the curtain was ordered shut again, this time hitting some people on the way in. It got the biggest laugh of all. The peacock girl looked really good behind the curtain. She came in and kissed my cheek one last time. It made her lips turn orange. And I just thought wow. Look at that. Look at her orange lips. That's because of me.

I might have asked her to prom. She was already willing to put her lips/beak up on my face a lot. But I feel I took someone different than who I think I might remember asking. Even though it's been just a little over a year since then, I still can't figure it out.

I plan on asking everyone else in the car before we leave if maybe they have a better idea about what the heck happened with prom. I go back out to the car with my bag of drinks and stuff with the donut in my mouth that's probably going to be responsible for smearing across my face and causing 10x more acne than I have ever known.

First they have to ask, "What took so long." But I'm sure if telling them that I didn't know what I wanted was enough of an answer.

I open the backseat door and pop in, buckling up. The crinkling of the plastic bag somehow wakes up my brother. I throw a PB Jammer on his lap and he tears in. I pass my dad the SLUSHEE he asked for and hand mom a plastic bottle of water and the pistachio nuts. She twists open the cap and takes a pretty long sip. I don't finish

chewing my bite of donut before my dad reminds that I have to actually fill up the tank with gas before we can go.

So I don't actually ask anyone what they think about prom. They don't care anyway as far as I'm coming to realize. I know dad wouldn't have a clue anymore anyway, probably saying I'm making things up. Exaggerating: his word. And I might be. Mom would want to believe what I say, but knows that dad is almost always right when I go and get confused. And my brother, waking up as he is in a slouch with long straight hair and a face that has always looked forever clean, well he'd say I got nothing to worry about, as if that's always been the case.

Spud After All

Concluding the lesson, the Archer reached into his deep pocket and pulled out a handful of tiny little chocolates. His pocket warmed them up to the textured point of gummy. The boy they called Spud was going to walk over and grab one from the palm of his hand, unwrap the plastic and suck on a soft square until it melted between his teeth. But the problem was that his mom would somehow find out. And then she would go on to tell the doctors who would set up a meeting just to look at Spud, put him on the scale again, only say he gained 5 pounds and record his heavy breathing. They would play the wheeze back to the boy whose fat was rounder and harder than a marble saying how stupid he is and how the chocolate doesn't taste as good as living. Instead, leaving the chocolate out in the Archer's palm under the sun, Spud kicked a rock around beneath the only tree in the field under the little shade there was. His neck was burning and baking. Spud, along with the rest of the troop, was going to the swimming pool next. He never felt as cooled off after jumping in as he should when he's forced to leave his shirt on. But Spud actually always willingly forces himself to leave on the wet cotton so then, that way, no one doesn't make fun of him as much as they already do. He is so big that no one can physically take him down when they play football during the afternoons. The smaller boys, however, can tackle harder when they play a joke or call him names even worse than Spud. Sure, his brother says to *suck it up* when he feels down in the dumps, but when he's really trying and no change happens and still looks the same and girls begin to claim he smells, it's hard to not feel any of the negativity. Spud continues being nice, regardless, thinking it's not hard to

be living with other people in mind. It's almost as if he believes in Karma, or at least something.

Spud's shoes were worn down with the rubber soles going thin. He's told people like his brother that he's started running, but he'll stay up late at night taking the shoes to the carpet, rubbing them back and forth, wearing them down. Down again and some more. When he goes then to kick at a bigger rock from under the shade of the tree, by the third punt Spud has stubbed his toe. He limped over to the rest of the Scouts as most of them had grabbed a piece of chocolate and began sucking away while beginning to pack up their things for the pool. The brown goo dripped from their lips and they didn't bother to wipe with their sleeves. The Archer called out one last time if everyone had had a piece. Spud looked out at the Archer's palm and saw the metallic wrapper twinkle in the hot sun. The pieces must have been soft in the Archer's hand. If he threw them back into his pocket, the Archer was going to have to wash his jeans before the next group played with arrows. Spud reasoned enough to grab one and relieve him of any future problems, putting the Archer ahead of his personal doubts.

Spud reached out his sweaty hand and went for a piece with peanuts. Down with a stinging whip, the Archer used an arrow from his sheath to bat Spud's hand away. There was instantly a red line worse than his sunburnt neck. The Archer wagged the arrow in Spud's face as he tried to back away, rubbing up into the other Scouts.

"Boy, you already took one," the Archer stabbed at Spud's boob with the blade and the other boys started to laugh. "What makes you think you get another?"

"Mister, sir, I haven't had a piece myself. I took your last offer."

"I can tell just looking at you, Spud."

“What sir?”

“You’re too fat to eat just one,” he poked him one last time before putting the arrow away.

“Right sir,” Spud wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and sat down in a pile of dirt and rocks to look like he meant to go there all along. The other boys were still giggling, not even trying to hide it.

When they all got to the pool, Spud didn’t go for a swim. He was all set to keep on his shirt, anticipating the feeling of the cotton suctioning onto his oily skin, collecting into his folds even. That wasn’t how he wanted the day to go. With all his might he tried to move the day into a new direction. Somewhere else obviously. Though not too much away from everything. A kid can only go so far.

On the spot just before they crossed the fence that did its best to keep the pool safe, Spud came up with a plan. It was a fast plan, but enough. Believable was all he needed. He told his den master he felt sick and, from there, was then allowed to lie down in his cot back at the camp site. Unsupervision! A first. There might even be a merit badge for something like that.

The camp site felt a mile away. The distances were calculated in camp by trees marked with different colored painted diamonds, depending on what particular road/path you were on. It was like hiking. Though Spud had just as equally never been hiking on his own before. But camp was just straight down the main road that if he somehow got lost would simply take him to the entrance of the camp and he could just back track from there. For 16 orange diamonds Spud walked on down the road until he saw the camp flag his troop had sewn together, made of old sheets and underwear,

blowing through the trees. The sound of it flapping stuck out just like the prominent call of a Blue Jay, except that Spud could actually see the flag. He had never actually seen a Blue Jay before. And that seemed strange. He had been taught that Blue Jays were everywhere and almost everything in the woods where they lived. He had also been taught that Blue Jays, though considered pretty or handsome, depending on the sex of the bird perhaps, they were actually a very mean bird. They were the bird-jerks. They bossed other birds around trying to get on top and seem like the best bird. And Spud could see why that would be from his own perspective, not being actually a bird. He thought it was pretty mean that he was never given the chance to see one for himself.

In camp he went to his tent and rolled around on his cot thinking about to do with the time he was given. Maybe he could just sleep the whole time. Or there was always a chance to do some reading. He fingered for the paintball magazine stuffed in his pillow case. But that wasn't really much to look at. He was a Scout after all. He could do something for himself. Anything if he really wanted. He had to keep reminding himself that he was a Scout, unsupervised. So then why wasn't he already out building a fire? He was Spud after all

Spud had gone out and collected as much wood as his puffy hands could hold in about two trips before he was having a time breathing. His forehead was getting wet from the sweat ending up getting soaked by his bangs. He built to the best of his knowledge a teepee structure for set up. He gathered up some leaves that he saw just around his tent and stuffed them at the base of the teepee like he should. What Spud forgot to do was bring a pair of matches. He didn't even have a lighter. But he remembered smelling something green and smokey coming out of his den leaders tent

at night and even in the mornings. He crept over to that tent, managing to make all the noise in the world between the leaves and his thin shoes. The first place he checked was the pillow case.

The fire struck up nice and good and smelled like someone was cooking. Spud's stomach started turning. He didn't know how much time had passed. He looked up to his sun and put up his hand to the sky to try and balance out how much time might be left until it all set. But the sun was so bright he couldn't ever really find it right in the sky, only using his hand to stop feeling now both fat and blind. So he stuck by the fire and tried to think about if there was anything else that he could accomplish on his own.

He went off out into the trees again to find another piece of wood for the fire to keep it going. A lot of the wood was still living on the trees. Not too many branches were dead, lying around broken and homeless for lack of a better word. Nothing was big enough to add to the fire. So he gathered up some more handfuls of leaves behind his tent and now others and sprinkled them over top the flames. They crinkled and disappeared so easily. Spud couldn't tell any longer if he was sweating from the heat of the summer or now because he was so close to the fire.

He was standing so close to the fire he felt like he was sweating again from the Archer. As if the whole time accusations were being pointed right in his face, maybe the Archer himself was just a fire inside. Spud knew that on the inside he wasn't much else than collections of cellulose. But the kids all say he's just stuffed to the brim full of mashed potatoes. And there's where you get such a name. Of course Spud had the

biology merit badge, so he knew all of that couldn't be true. No one could actually be made of fire on the inside.

It got to the point where Spud still didn't know how much time was going by, getting so bored to the point that he thought it was best to practice his knife skills. That was something he was told he needed to work on the last time he went for in a rank advancement meeting. He really wanted to make it and become an Eagle Scout. But his whole career being around different troops across the country he had never met one, even seen an Eagle. He didn't know what it took.

Back out to the woods, again, and he came back whittling away a little twig only to throw it into the bon fire pit still to himself. He went more searching for other bigger sticks, the kind still out there lost and alone from past storms. If he couldn't find one he was sure he could step on a tree and make a branch fall under his weight. This felt like the first time he had thought of something to be improvised. And he was proud of that. Improvising was always hard to him. He was always aware if he was going to try and do something off the cuff. But Spud forgot he had already been successful at it earlier in the day. He tried talking back to the Archer. He went and got away from the pool. Those things add up to all kinds of achievement. That's something that can be brought up at the next rank advancement meeting, if he ever got there again.

Spud went off again and again, having lost track of the actual time, he had also lost count of how much he'd gone off into the trees. At one point he found a staff of wood the size of his arm from tip to shoulder and lugged it back to the camp site, held in his arms like he imagined he should a baby. He whittled at it until the fire started

turning in on itself making coals. And the sun was easy to see going down. The air was cooling off too. Still no other scouts. That felt good.

Spud filed the wood-baby tip to a point, as sharp as his Swiss Army Knife could make. He held it with both hands and swung the weapon around in the air like a rocket. He poked at the tip again with his finger and drew a little blood. Then, mimicking the Archer, Spud held the arrow out in front of his breasts. He poked at himself. To try and avoid his own poking, Spud walked backwards deeper into dirt and rocks. He kept walking further and further into the woods, still struck by the branch held before him. If he took any step forward he was sure that he would be self-impaled and bloody. Spud could only walk backwards and deeper. The campsite was hard to see and the dark greens of the tents blended in with the evergreens. The wooden arrow kept showing the way. It all felt unreal, literally like magic, except Spud knew that wasn't a thing. Magic isn't real, it's all in his head. The power of that arrow was all in his head but whatever his head was saying only pointed to magic being logical for the first time ever. There's a first time for everything. And Spud was finally starting to understand what that has meant.

There he was, a bit helpless like everyone had made him out to always be. Spud kept going back into the woods not knowing where he would end up. He stopped moving after he couldn't see the camp any longer and tried to catch his breath. The flag couldn't be heard any more either. In his head he tried making sense of how far he'd gone, but he didn't have much luck doing that sort of thing even back at the camp when he was beside the fire plain as day. He estimated that he moved about 187 orange

diamonds from the camp site. The whittled arrow was still strong, held out in front, waiting to puncture his fat.

Spud didn't know how he would get back. He could walk forward and stab himself through the heart, or he could walk backwards and hope one day he found something on the otherside. Maybe it would take so long that he would starve, and he'd come out and no one would recognize him, his skin flapping from how it had overstretched at such a young age. Maybe he'd drip wetter with sweat than he ever had coming out of the pool. Spud kept his hands up and let the wooden arrow guide him more. He couldn't see anything else to do. It was so so hard to know what options there might have been.

Sure, Spud was eventually found. Almost two weeks after camp had ended and his disappearance was about to equally vanish from the local evening news cycle. A family of three was a part of the search party that found him underneath a pile of leaves that had looked to be sprinkled on top of his body. And they found the arrow too. The wood was splintered through Spud's heart, visibly exiting the fat of his back. An autopsy was eventually ordered which found that Spud had tried puncturing his arms first to die, but taking too long to drip empty with blood, he figured out a fearless way to use a rock as hammer to pound the arrow through his chest and end it so fast. Everyone called it suicide. But to Spud it had to have been an attempt to escape. Not the world necessarily. Just a way to finally move in his own direction, controlling which way he would go next. Simply put, that's called improvising.

The family of three that found Spud was interviewed by various news stations. Some broadcasts even referred to them as heroes for finding the boy. More than

anything the family found themselves disturbed by something. They said they didn't feel that helpful. They said that Spud, just a boy, looked sad out there in the woods. They said that the blood that pooled around him, drying up in the dirt turning into mud, looked as if it had melted out of his body, like chocolates in the palm of a hand held out to eat on a normal summer day.

Fox Tale Stud

“She’s not coming no more,” and the guest entering, looked at his watch and scuffed. His wet hair reflected overhead lights.

“Susan just phoned, she sounded fine to me George.”

“Well that was before, then, Barry.” George twisted open the wine that he had brought as a gift and started to drink from it like a canteen.

Barry had to tend to the chicken almost burning but yelled from the kitchen. “Did you top yourself this time?” The chicken seared and oil cackled out of the pan. “Or?” The vacuumed silence from the apartment building hallway followed in right behind George before the door finished closing.

George rested on a beam where the living room started, “Does it matter? You know likely I did.”

“Well I’d *like* to know how then,” Barry turned around clipping the tongs George’s way.

Out from the hall, Barry’s wife came in her black dress struggling with an earring. She slipped over to the fridge in her stockings. “Susan just called to confirm. Think’s you’re a piece of shit.” She headed on to George with a carrot between her fingers like a cigarette and branded his cheek with a kiss. “Says hi to you, though, Barry.” She smiled with full cheeks and did a little dip with the tilt of an imaginary hat.

“When’d this happen, dear?” Barry now snipped the tongs toward his wife.

“I said just a minute ago when I was bathing. Said to tell you sorry she’s not coming. Sad, though. More for us.”

George was half in the bottle when Barry’s wife took it for a glass of her own. She pulled from the hutch, “I’ll pour you some, you know.”

“It’s not my fault, really,” George held his glass while it filled, “I just said she’s boring. She likes me to be honest and today I was. Finally, I said, ‘I come home and you are in bed where I left you. You are boring.’ Just like that. Then she took that as me saying our relationship is boring and then that’s when she kicked my shin like she had on cleats. Then I left in a cab. Stopped for this bottle on the way heading straight to here.”

“She’s just –” Barry started, but his wife bruised him in the arm.

“When she says be honest, she actually wants you to lie. Dismiss the idea.” Barry’s wife filled another glass and toasted with George to a single life. “You won’t be getting her back,” she whispered.

“Dinner’s almost ready, so how about we accompany the table.” Barry brought out a salad and George moaned from his seat.

They ate the salad slippery with dressing. This was followed by roasted chicken with, what they agreed was too much rosemary and smushed garlic spooned through. They kept their glasses full, down three more bottles of wine.

Then it was off to dessert and coffee where the talk started up again.

“Can we teach you one thing?” Barry grabbed at a fig tart from the center platter.

“I’ll listen.”

“Think,” Barry’s wife suggested with a fresh cup of coffee.

“About?” Barry and George both responded.

“I’m saying, ‘Think’ is the thing you should learn.” She looked hard over at Barry, “Why, what were you going to say?”

Barry coughed on a crumb and pounded at his chest. “Nope, that’s it. That’s what I was going for, correct.”

“That next girl, whoever, she’ll want you to think and try. And by that, do whatever she wants no matter how lazy that may make her.”

“Last night Susan asked me to run out and get her a candy bar and movie theater popcorn.”

“Did you do it?”

“Well yeah, cause she would’ve been mad.”

“Don’t give in so easily. Maybe it’s a test.” Barry was on to his third lemon curd tart and another cup of coffee. He started spiking it with the oldest whiskey he could find.

“Or maybe she’s pregnant.” Standards tuned through the public radio broadcast. Barry chewed on crumbs from his shirt.

“Not possible. We haven’t done it in a year,” George looked at his watch. “Give or take.”

“Well since you’re starting to think,” Barry’s wife leaned over the table pointing and looking around the room with her big eyes as if she didn’t want to be heard by someone else, “has anything else happened this year? Something that stands out to the two of you?”

George started to sweat. It was a bad combination of the wine, the lights, and the fact that the air conditioning unit hadn't been replaced at the end of last summer. He closed his eyes real tight so they wrinkled. He was really trying to think hard. He clenched his teeth and made a little bit of a moan that made Barry started to laugh with his mouth full.

Barry's wife turned and started pointed her finger on her husband's nose. "Stop." Barry had to focus away from the hand in his face blinking until he saw his wife, both pretty and calm in her force.

His entire head clenched George started clicking his tongue as if he had a memory almost prepared.

"I think we went to this horse farm."

"Over on Longacre?" Barry was looking over the tarts again.

"No. No, it was a horse farm. But when we went we didn't see any horses."

"Yeah the one over on Longacre. The one where the family's dad committed suicide. Wasn't that from carbon monoxide? Boy when they showed that in the paper I thought 'Yea, makes sense.' That father was always telling me he was bored."

"We didn't see any horses, and I remember Susan brought the dog along because the farm was basically like a really big park. You could bring your pets and throw them in the different fenced sections, where the horses were, if there were any, and they'd all run around and play. Supposedly. We thought it would've been nice to have something for the dog to do. But when we got there and there weren't any horses Susan was all sad like it was my fault. Like I said, 'You better not have any horses there by the time we visit.'"

George opened his eyes and lowered his shoulders. He leaned back in his chair and stared right into Barry's wife's big eyes like a mirror. She tilted her head and waited to listen some more.

“And we had this whole big day planned where we would ride the horses and let our dog play and I think they even have wine you can drink. We were planning on drinking more between the two of us than whatever we've done tonight. Can you believe that? That's because it was a Saturday. That's right, and I remember telling her we would go again on Sunday to actually see the horses. When we got there at the start of the weekend no one seemed in charge. It wasn't abandoned, but I didn't see anyone who looked in charge either. No one at all. No horses. No people. I remember Susan had been reading about Fox Tale Stud for awhile – ”

“See George I told you that was off on Longacre.”

“She really liked the sign, of all things, and she had been talking about it ever since they started construction on that massive stable. She said it looked like they were building a horse stadium. Like football big. And she loved that. So I thought I'd take her, you know, see the horses and maybe figure out as to why they called it such a thing. Fox Tale Stud. It's like something out of an old nursery rhyme.

“So we packed up and took the dog and that got her going. She was finally out of bed, you know? And it was hot. I remember it was hot that I even brought an ice pack to put on my neck in the car. And we got there and it was so hot the horses were gone. The people too. The heat must've been the thing. Just bad timing on our part. On my part she'll say. But she didn't say anything otherwise about waiting. She wanted to go.

“When we got there and took the dog out we could tell right away no one and no horse was around. It was dry and still so hot. There was maybe one cloud in the sky, but it was going away from the sun. We took the dog out and started walking around. And it was getting closer to dark.

“Susan doesn’t drink in the day, or really ever anymore, you know, so we went more toward night and it was still hot. Even when the sun went away and it got dark and the seemingly hundreds of spotlights turned on automatically it was still hot out like the black didn’t do anything. We entered into the fences because they weren’t really locked like I would think and we just let the dog go and run.

“We didn’t take him for a walk that day. That’s right. And he had to still play somehow. I held Susan’s hand and we walked off within the fences too but that didn’t last long. We kept walking but our hands got sweaty. We kept going in the direction of the dog who was heading more and more away from the last spotlight. We heard him keep running off and he crinkled across the loud grass because of how dry it was. That grass was so dead. Then all we heard was the sound of our own feet walking in the hard grass. It was like our dog just wanted to stop playing. It was quiet and the spotlights now behind us really made the place feel like a football field lighting up just some parts of the dark in front of us.

“I could make out the shadow of what had to have been our dog. He was just standing there it seemed. We kept walking closer. Then the shadow was moving toward us really slow. I remember how slow it was. It was moving so slow it didn’t make any noise in the grass. But then it came running right at us. I blinked and it was

headed for the stable, under the lights and visible. But it wasn't our dog. It was red. It was a fox, that's right. And Susan said 'Look, that's a fox.'"

George was adjusting his belt and rutching around in his seat. It was obvious he wasn't going to be getting comfortable anytime soon. "Have you ever seen a fox before?" he asked still moving.

"Yea, a fox? Not except on TV or pictures." Barry's wife said it educationally as if she were a school teacher. Soft enough for George to take it all in.

"A fox in real person. Have you seen it?" The question now appeared to be directed toward himself. Like no one else was in the room.

Barry and his wife just looked more at George. His eyes were bigger than Barry's wife at this point. Not dilated or wide, but they looked under the dim lights of the cheap chandelier as if they took up more of the space of his face than say, something like his forehead or mouth.

"Foxes are big. Bigger than you think. When I say 'fox,' what do you think? Thin! I think they're thin and pretty tiny. Or at least both pretty and tiny. Right? Well I can say that this was bigger than our dog. When this thing ran by me it was close. I felt like it was as tall as my waist."

George stood up and placed his hand on his belt and wiggled it for measurement.

"That big. I swear it was that big. But it was so stunning. I don't know if it was because of how big it was or because of the way it moved so fast and yet still with so much quiet. It bounced all around when it ran, almost looking like it was out of control. Then it stopped under the lights just before it was out of sight behind the great

stable. And that had to be a couple acres away from where we were by then. Yet with all that distance the fox still looked so big. I can't say it enough. Susan looked at me and then the fox and I was just looking at her the whole time because I knew I'd remember the fox.

“She kept looking at the fox and I started moving loud in the grass again, wondering where the dog was. If the shadow wasn't our dog originally then where was he? I left Susan looking at the fox and found our dog over by where I first saw the shadow of the fox. It was like the two animals traded places. And our dog was dead. Or at least he was real bloody and I knew I couldn't help. I just looked at the little guy. Compared to the fox he looked so small. His legs felt like they could break easier than branches. He was bloody and he wasn't looking at me. I wanted to cry but it was still so hot. I just sweated some more. I didn't want to pick him up and hurt him. I felt so bad for our dog. For my Susan. For the horse farm. You know? Here they had a dead dog to deal with and it was my fault. It was my fault. All because there weren't any horses in the first place. I said to Susan what happened to our dog and she saw for herself then and didn't say much else after. She just breathed really hard because our dog was dead and it was hot. Maybe that has something to do with it. But I didn't think she'd hold a grudge like that. Am I really that bad?”

The three of them were quiet. The story ended and there wasn't much anyone could say. No one could even grab for another piece of dessert at first. George looked at his watch, seeing the second hand move fast. It kept going around and around in circles. Then he started thinking if time really could go backwards. That if a watch could go around in one direction making everything move forward, why couldn't the

opposite be true. He kept looking at his watch wondering if Susan was looking at the time back where she was. He wanted to know if she was looking to see if he'd be home soon.

Barry's wife stopped looking at George. He looked pathetic to her after telling the story. His clothes looked loose as if he hadn't bought them for himself. Like a bad gift. What type of person would give a gift of suit though? She was getting bothered. Didn't help that her stomach was speaking up, making this and that noise since they couldn't stop eating for the night. Then she thought about if maybe her husband was the type of person that would give a gift. And she was right. Barry would have loved to give someone a suit if the timing called for it. He had already given gifts like ascots and cuff links, cherry wood shoe trees, paid for someone to go to a cobbler, there had been belts and antique buttons, though watches were the easiest thing to give. Even the watch on George's wrist was a gift. The only thing left to give was the suit itself. Barry's wife tried to think and hope for never seeing the day it was finally unwrapped.

"Just let her go, then." Barry said like he had figured out that the whole event at the horse farm was actually Susan's fault.

"Not ever," George shook his head. "I'd like a glass of water now."

"All that's left is wine."

"I'll get it from the tap, then." George went around to the other side of the table to rest a shoulder on Barry. "Shouldn't I go back to her?"

"You said she kicked-in your shin?" Barry's wife crossed her legs and stole the last bite of her husband's fifth French apple tart. "She'll probably do it again. Anyone

would.” She stuck out a finger and held it to her own face. She pursed her lips and smirked with her eyes saying that she was the type of girl that would do the kicking.

Barry started nodding along, flip-flopping into agreement, “You really killed your dog.”

“How do I show her I care? I didn’t mean to say what I did with such offense, both now or ever. Where’s my jacket? I want to take her back to the horse farm. At least get that drink.” His jacket was setting on the couch and George nabbed it to put on forgetting about the glass of water. Barry and his wife stood up and led him to the door.

“Whatever you want is not up to us.”

“Then I’ll go and see where that gets me. Maybe we’ll see the fox again?” He patted for his wallet and keys, then kissed the couple goodbye. “I don’t know if that’d be a good or bad thing.” George made his way waving down the hall until he reached the elevator where he pressed the call button and rested his head on wallpaper while he waited.

Trying to end the night, Barry started on the dishes while his wife took to towel drying before the alcohol took them to bed.

“Shouldn’t we have said there was going to be a baby? Would that have helped? Told him it wasn’t his? That it wasn’t ever really his fault?” Barry heated up the sink, wading his arm in bubbles. He felt constructive with his suggestion.

“Shouldn’t you have told me it was yours?” His wife pointed to the door. She pursed her lips still, but the smirking stopped. Barry grabbed his wallet and he didn’t argue when she said to leave the keys. He kept his mouth shut as he struggled to open

the door, entering onto argyle carpet in the muted hallway. George was still at the elevator, now rubbing his heart expecting Susan and him to love again. Then Barry came and joined with soapy hands.

Loving Marlene

October starts as warm as a spotlight. This one, on Marlene staying late after school cleaning erasers. She coughs through the clouds of chalk, like when she tries to smoke. She finishes clapping early and walks the blocks back home. Everyone's out. Mom is pressing at the rubberband factory. Dad is napping before the next job at the Citizen's Voice. Brothers are at practice. A note in the kitchen has a list of groceries for the butcher. Almost every day, Marlene takes this note to the top of Union Street. She hands the note over the butcher's counter. He passes her a bag of meats. She swings the bag out the door. Bells ring goodbye as she waves.

Marlene's heels click against the sidewalk. Her white shoes sound as bright as they shine. She gets all kinds of looks. Down at her feet. Up to her smiles and short hair. Before bed, one night, Marlene tries to file down her heels. Make them softer. She asks for her brother's tape to dampen the clicks. But the taps keep up.

Sometimes she cuts through the River Commons to get back to the village apartments. Her feet fit snug between the slats and grass. No one hears her shoes walking. Only homeless are down there. All the cars are rusted over and quiet. Piled in rows like some kind of after-school detention.

Marlene comes home through the back door. She swings her bag again and hops up the steps.

She goes inside to wash up with everyone else around the table waiting for something to bring them together. Plates are passed around, and she is served last, only a small corner of the casserole was left, crusted and burnt. They all have mouths full

of gravy dripping down their chin. Dishes are tossed in the sink for Marlene to clean, as brothers elbow her in the gut suggesting it is her turn. But her belly is sore in the spot from last night.

With eight brothers in the house Marlene has to search for her space. She could read by a window, ignoring the static of the television and the boys screaming at the football game. They all root for the Eagles. They poke at her pages and laugh at her attempts to focus. They crowd around their dad on the recliner and ask for change to head to the candy store. He throws out his pockets and gives what he has to each boy. Enough for some popcorn to share. But when they bring it back Marlene only touches the unpopped kernels in the bag that they give her to put in the trash. But if she ever complains, the boys yell over to their dad and point to Marlene. Her father then brims down his glasses until she apologizes with a kiss on each cheek, before heading to the bathroom.

Marlene lathers her legs like she should shave. Three of her brothers come in without a knock and ask, “what you up to?” but they laugh at her trying to grow up in front of the mirror with the blade getting hot under the water running and filling in the sink. She slams the door on their backs. They run up and down the stairs, searching for their dad somewhere, but he’s out in the garage changing the oil, and he stomps back inside and jams the door of the bathroom open harder than Marlene closed it on her brothers, and he shuts off the water, throws the razor in the trash and wipes the cream off her legs with the embroidered seashell towel. He stares over his glasses with embarrassment, leaving Marlene to wash her face and off to read, only flipping through the pages, trying for pictures.

*

Welksberry isn't home to much else but families. The whole small city sits on top of a mountain with the complexes and town houses packed denser than the forest over in Kirby Park. Everybody wants to get some real work outside but all they can manage is more struggle. Popping out more kids, losing more money. The Pocono Downs Casino stands the highest on the other side of the highway with the horse track on the top most peak. At night it lights up and can be seen the same way Marlene stands under a dying out streetlight making her way across the river from Eagle Ride where she goes to try and get the most privacy. That's where the poorest of all the neighborhoods are. So poor that they don't even leave their house. Marlene can't hear nothing except quiet. If she has to lie and say where she's been it's just brief mention of another detention after school smacking erasers.

Coming back to home, and another list is on the counter. Marlene goes up the hill. Again and again. Down past the General Hospital. Through the back empty alley of the Forty Fort apartments. Between the stalling garbage trucks and warehouses storing coiled springs. The cobbler. And wedding cakes. Their white displays and layers towered bigger than Union Street on the river shore. She reaches the bell curve and waves to an old man next to a dented and bruised Oldsmobile with cracked lights on every corner, putting change into the meter as a meter maid walked up, he tips his hat, looking at Marlene's eyes as she passes into the shop. She comes out of the butcher with a plastic bag heavy with a beef shoulder. She clacks down the hill and the old man is still there waving and looking at her eyes. She stops smiling back when he walks alongside.

“How about some help?” Reaching out for the small of her back.

Marlene walks ahead faster. Shakes no.

“I can give a ride home.”

With the start of a run, she looks back over her shoulder.

He stops and waves.

She hugs the meat against her chest and jaywalks at intersections, getting home before mom comes in from the rubberband factory. Marlene, out of breath, with scuffed shoes, and a shirt stained in pink slime, keeps watch out the front windows. Waiting with an open book and cup of milk, to see the car with the broken taillight might pull up front with a wave and tip of the brown hat hiding. Some other brothers pass the hall and see her perched. They poke her arms and try to get milk on her shirt. Her eyes stay on lights outside and the cold street. She looks at the car passing with the convertible top. She tells them to hush. The boys look at one another and hope they think the same thing. They run off back down the hall to get their dad who can get Marlene to spill. And she does, with milk all on her and a confession in the air that floats higher than the smoke of the burning oven and the pitching buzzer of the next starting horse race.

*

Sitting with a photo of Marlene taken on the street and his pants down by the gas pedal, his eyes are tight. Looking up at the carpeted ceiling, stained with the smoke of the cigarette burning down in the ash tray on the dashboard, next to a bottle of beer and a map that marked all the spots Marlene had visited.

He wants that skirt hemmed shorter, the thin thighs popping out more, bare without a shave, smooth and pale and snug. He wants to lift it up and show everything underneath. Bring her in closer. Closer. But if he held her hand? Maybe it would burn and make him hurt and hard. But he'll let her pass on the sidewalk to the Chinese market, coming closer to the car. Passenger side. Coming closer. And coming. And there she goes, and he's made a mess under the broken street light at the entrance of another Eagle Ride trailer park. He cleans it up with his handkerchief, wetter than a sneeze.

*

Playing solitaire next to a glass of milk and rum, her father's oil stained hands deal out cards for another set. He creaks out the back door and heads onto someone's porch to bet and lose in hands of five card and blackjack. Then the night escalates with trip over to the Pocono Downs. Up that high it's possible to see every home in Welksberry, making it easy to reconsider making another bet on the roulette table before the next blue drink is placed to the lips of someone who has already lost everything. Marlene leaves the doors unlocked for her father's late night, slippers waiting.

The next morning at breakfast, under the table when the syrup gets poured and mother is distracted by cackling oil and the eggs in a cast iron over the stove, her father would hand over a pile of 20 one dollar bills he cashed out from the night.

Soon the sausage gravy finishes up, cement on the plate, plastering biscuits. Then father sits around in his undershirts, reading the paper, starting a crossword, and a phone call from work, hanging up with a fist, dresses in the coveralls heading into

work with the canteen of coffee, clocking out late for overtime, and comes back home with street lights on, a cold pot roast on the cutting board.

*

On weekends, Marlene asks to go to Kathy's house for sleepovers. She lives over on the other side of Kirby Park. Her bedroom window looks out to the backyard of the thinning trees. Together they put curlers in their hair and sing in hairbrushes to the tune of records, rubbing up against the wall covered in posters, like it is a photo shoot and they know how to kiss. With tongue.

Kathy look in the mirror and apply balm and eye shadow and pick at her braces saying she isn't beautiful and no one wants her, or don't want her anytime soon. She licks her teeth trying to suck them off and see all the whites. Kathy asks for a piece of gum.

They fall asleep to the Pips with the light on. But Kathy's mother comes around 2 in a night gown. She wakes up Marlene and leads her downstairs. She hands her a glass of milk to go when she opens the front door and her father is underneath the porch light in his undershirt, rubbing eyes, running the car on the curb.

"Now you're going to point him out. You see that car. That hat. You tell me."

Between his legs is a baseball bat. He dreams of hitting a homerun. And then he'd run the bases and land in jail before the home plate. Marlene rolls down the window and shuts her mouth at stop lights or brakes. The night was clear and the moon was blooming out yellow. They didn't find no one.

*

Folding the bills down his pocket, hoping that just thinking about luck would make him lucky, closing the door to the pawn shop, across and into the parking lot puddle to unlock the door and slide across the bench seat, turning on the radio and pulling out the handkerchief. Above the Motown, her clicks vibrated louder than bass. Turning around to catch her sight with a glare of sun in his frames, turning down the music and rolls down the window to watch her breath. But he's not looking at the rise of her new breasts. Those make his throat tight and sore, and make him think about going to the doctor or church. She breaths through the mouth. And her lips look smooth.

Marlene holds her little brother's hand. They walk through the graveled parking lot. A diner is across the street. No one is sitting in the window booths. They wait at a crosswalk where a light turned red. He calls over, whistling and waving and smiling with awful teeth. The little brother waves. Marlene tugs her little brother's arm as she starts to cross, heading for the bridge to stand over the river water rushing anywhere away from Welksberry.

"Mick, we gotta keep walking."

Calling out with the repeat of her name, he blew a kiss as soft as the fantasy of lips.

*

By now, Marlene's mom called for police and the doorbell rings with a black hatted man in a trench coat and aviators bending down on the porch asking Marlene a few questions when she comes to the door. They start searching for the old man like

they know he is out searching for Marlene. Flashing lights of red and blue string across the curb, down the drains and into sewers. Cops are in and out of the kitchen, a pot of coffee always steaming up the windows. They sketch on pads and point at maps with their pencil tips. The blue jackets disperse with a fresh cup to go. Patrolling, off and on in the squad, by the river, and the homeless, Kirby Park, the evening news shoot, the pawn shop, convenient store, diner, candy shop, Forty Fort laundromat, Chinese takeout, titty bar, abandoned gas station on Creamer Ave., vacant motels, school, even the classroom with chalkboard erasers.

The black hatted detective, with ears like Sgt. Friday, hands a glass of milk to Marlene with a plate of cookies. He passes alongside a pad and pencil.

“You’re gonna keep going to the butcher, now.” He blows his nose and looks right in her eyes.

She’s focused on the raisins in the oatmeal. She tries picking them out. But the cookie breaks in dry pieces across the floor.

“You’re gonna keep going to the butcher, and I want you to look for your boy,” he crosses his arms and grabs a piece of the broken cookie. “You’re gonna write down his license plate. And then you’re gonna run right home.”

*

Grabbing the list with a nervous hand that shook with each sigh. Walking up the hill to the butcher shop in a brown sun setting. Her shoes keep clicking and landing on the sidewalk cracks. Union Street has never felt taller. She looks up at each stranger with anticipation of being touched and grabbed and thrown in a trunk.

Up and up the hill, until the crest. At the peak she can see the rest of the valleys down out below Welksberry where the people supposedly have enough jobs and don't have to worry about anything like when the police are called.

Rumbling with park lights on, his car is found. Motown trumpets in the wind. She stumbles for the pencil, drops it on the walk as it starts rolling back down the hill. She runs after and brings attention to herself. She moves with just as much movement and motivation as the river below. Old women in shawls point their fingers and laugh. His car turns its wheels, attempting to come down the street toward her. She grabs the pencil, stopped by a cigarette butt and writes down the letters she can while running. She throws the pencil out to the street and lets the weight of the hill pull her down faster, almost falling over herself and rolling down the rest of the way.

Through the River Commons she can hear a horn honking like a scream, telling her to stop and wait and let him catch up. She keeps after the sidewalks that lead to the back alleys of the poor houses, the village apartments where cats scratch in heat and tenants keep their own trash piles that burn in oil barrels by the holed chain link. Then in with the crack of the springing storm door, with an empty-handed crumpled paper with unsure letters.

Mom wipes her hands on her apron, peaking down the hall, hugging her daughter when the front door knocks quick and loud, and a muddled face peeks through the stained glass ornaments. Marlene screams and covers her head. But even as she screams, "it's him," her mother answers the door. Marlene runs into the kitchen and from the island drawer grabs at the bread knife and places it behind her back and creeps to her mother's side with a tight and ready fist. She holds to the apron long.

*

Dragging feet up to the curb with his hands cuffed, led by two officers in polished shoes chewing gum and spitting in the gutters. Presenting him at the foot of the cement steps to the porch where Marlene shivers in her Catholic dress, knees easy and bare. He licks his lips. She covers her eyes with those thin fingers and digs deeper into mom's apron. The officer's yank him back to the rear of the car and open the door. Unblinking, he can see Marlene growing up, with the long brown hair and shy smile covered in makeup, perfectly lit from the left like all the girls in the pictures. He waits, cold, hoping to hold a picture for the nights when he'd be asleep in a cell looking at the ceiling and holding a pillow to his chest like he'd hold a young girl. The officers knock his knees from behind, hit his head on the roof, stuffing him in, closing the door, pulling away and down the hill with Marlene crying in the mirrors.

*

Gavels and shuddering bodies move down into court pews harder than the ones at St. Mike's. Marlene testifies with the point of her finger. She waits with her parents outside the courtroom, kicking her patent leather heels against themselves. The eared detective pokes out, takes off his black hat and combs his hair back with his fingers and bad news. Says the man's getting off easy. Claims to have been sightseeing. Taking pictures. He's got grandkids. And a wife who gives tickets for the horses. He had a name like George. And something Greek.

There he is, walking to his car. Drives away, told to avoid Union Street. Smiling like nothing happens, reaching in his back pocket for more.

*

With the next fall, new seasons start and the game is back on. The Eagles losing. Her brothers holler at bad passes and calls, they root for and believe that the one they love can do no wrong. That love happens to be directed toward a group of 53 men in green and white spandex and of course Buck Shaw. Marlene is on the window sill like a pet. Reading with big eyes to the street. She blinks long and doesn't go to the page. Some brothers creep up again. They prepare to poke and she is quiet. Wind knocks on the window and whistles through fences looking for attention. Some rain rivers down into a sewer. The road looks almost green. A car passes with a headlight out. There's a man in a brown coat passing with a cigarette. Stopping in front of the house to rub it dead on concrete. He walks by and waves to the window. The same car with the headlight passes back on the other side of the street. It goes slower than speed limit. The brothers watch and hold her shoulders. The wind finally gets recognized and makes Marlene shiver through the glass. There she is. Looking to the book and its closed mid page. Tucking the book under her arm. Drawing away from the window as the curtain falls over and the lights dim into dark.

The Short Haul

The boys are coming for the weekend. We saw them about a month ago on their mother's birthday but with this Christmas break they say they want to spend some time with us. They know they'll be spoiled.

Carol's got the first night all planned out. Take them to dinner. Probably for something covered in gravy with an orange cream to drink. And they'll want seconds. And dessert. Then they'll want to go through the mock-gift store to buy some more candy or something else. I'll convince one of them to buy a model Ford to build and paint. We can piece it together the following morning over breakfast of chipped beef and pancakes. I should ask for poached eggs too. Make note to buy scrapple.

That first night we will come home stuffed having listened to classic rock on the way home with guitar riffs in our head we will change into pajamas and Carol will have a secret cigarette while I help the boys shower and choose a movie. Maybe a western. But they always go for mystery. Something always too dark and adult for their age but they love it. They eat it up. The oldest says he is going to be a detective. I can see the headline now when they've found him dead in some investigation gone wrong. Kid, don't. At least they are getting some education from a movie they can't watch at home cause their mother is so strict. I remind them over and over they can't tell their mom we watched it. She'll have my dick with a set of pliers. Or worse, she won't appear at a thanksgiving dinner again. Anything to get back at her ol' man.

Before all this can take place I need to finish my ride. But my boss man has given me a bigger route than usual for the short hauls I pull. Up into some place called

Medway, in Maine. It's gonna be a tight fit. It's a straight shot out of the city catching onto I-95, but no one knows how to drive, ain't no brotherly love out on the road. But every driver acts like I'm the problem seated so high in the sky on all my wheels.

I've been coming home for dinner now for 10 years. It wasn't long ago that I bought my own truck and worked the cross country trips as a young kid trying to make the most money. After the family happened I needed some stability in company work. I warn Carol the night before the boys arrive but she doesn't seem worried. I warn her again and she listens a bit through her game of solitaire.

At the warehouse early Friday when the other drivers I can tolerate are still sleeping, who don't have to show up until after the sun is in the sky and warmed up, Jules has started yapping about his new tail pipe he got polished for free. He keeps wiping it with a sterilized rag and making sure no one else touches the other recently chromed out touches he has on his truck. From the grill and side mirrors, the door steps, door handles, even his hitch and the bulldog emblem on the hood. He's such a waste of gas.

He waves his rag in my face as I walk by with my time clock paper. "Hey naw Pidgeon, you don't even look your eyes over at my sparkly new kit. Them's for God to see his reflection in. Look down when I'm driving, say 'hey now is that Me coming out from under Jules' tires. I do bless him safety, and a raise!" He laughs like he does, his nose bubbling full of snot. I keep walking and look at my watch hoping I don't hit traffic.

But there's an accident the dispatcher forgot to service and now I'm on the interstate looking at brake lights popping like drowned embers at the end of a drunken

campfire. I know that if I see the sun rise before I cross the state border then I know that I will not make it home. I assure to call Carol from a pay phone when that happens. I sing along to the radio to ignore even the smallest idea of the boys' disappointment forming.

*

The last time this happened was almost 30 years ago. It wasn't anyone else's fault except my own. Not even that, the truck ruined everything on me. Even that can come back to holding me responsible. Back then was when I pulling independently. I didn't have the nice big warehouses and loading docks that looked like where the space ships are stored like in Star Wars. Had to buy my own truck. Had to have a bed in it too. If I really wanted to make some money I couldn't waste it on the truck stops with all the women and rooms. Not with my life. Not with Carol back home.

And when it last happened she was pregnant. That's really what ruined it all. I shut down just outside Old Newtown, Indiana. I still had over 1,000 miles until I made it to the farm with all my cows I was hauling. I don't remember where it was I was taking them. It felt as if I never even made it. I broke down and had to walk to the next town.

I was smart enough to leave a bag in my truck so I could pack it up with my sunflower seeds and whatever else I had treated myself to just in case.

We didn't have phones then of course. So when I finally made it to the first place that had something civilized, a place hosting hospitality, I had to find a pay phone.

But the first place I found a self service car wash. And it was empty. Didn't even look functional. The neon sign never turned on when I stayed there the night. I

had only walked straight down the road where I left the truck and the cows but I couldn't remember how far away that was. I couldn't even fall asleep because I kept retracing my steps and wondering if the cows were going to die due to starvation. But I convinced myself on the next morning's walk that cows should have to be able to survive a long time without food. Otherwise I don't see the point in them weighing so much.

So I was broke down sleeping in the car wash and start making away from it. Then it's like something beautiful opened up in the sky just over the hill I was walking up. The sun seemingly started to rise right over me. My whole body was covered in white. And it looked just like a star in the sky. I've been told the sun is also actually a star but this seemed different, like small, refined, pin pointed through the clouds. Then the light moved fast, darting past me when I smelled exhaust.

I could've believed it was an illusion if I hadn't already had water. I see its brake lights keep pressing down the hill. I start running after it, jerky falling out of my pockets I was bouncing so much in my boots on the uneven pavement.

The car slowed down more and I saw it turn into the place I was just sleeping in in the soapy water. But if I kept running as fast as I was they would've went and sped off without me talking, already considering and concluding for themselves that I was the Zodiac killer. In flesh. I just needed a chance to open my mouth and speak first.

I went to walking, but faster still. Their brake lights were shimmering off the water that there was and it was showing through the whole car wash portals like a

funneled laser tube or something. All the red looked so contained. I feel like I could hear the cows mooing in pain when the wind picked up.

I waved my hands from across the road in a ditch that was all muddy stuck up to my boots. I was hoping they'd see me and give it a chance.

They got the power washer running and its like the world went and disappeared on them. Like I was a ghost, more than I already believed I was becoming, stranded and all, outside of Old Newtown.

I walked closer and closer and closer more until I'm standing at the front of the headlight stars. The engine's warm against my thighs. There's a woman in the passenger seat with her feet on the dad. She had a magazine covering her face. Something about women's fitness with a nice looking woman in a wonderfully red onepiece. The magazine was close to her face so much that I couldn't tell if she had bad eyes for reading and couldn't see, or she was using it to sleep.

The washer hose stalled out and jerked like a sprinkler spraying the trunk of the SUV.

Tzt! Tzt! Tztt! Sppppppch!

"God damns it," the man said.

The rest of their vehicle was stuffed full with nothing more than looking like trash. Coke cans were pressed against the glass like a dog licking for a bird that can't be caught through the glass.

The man was hitting the washer hose and I met him at the brake lights where he was still struggling. I was waving and trying to smile to that I'm friendly. That's just what people do.

But here now, this guy let out a loud fuck and the hose started up just like that, blowing all in my face. I was just breathing up water, trying to say fuck back.

He kept walking closer with the hose to my face, pushing me out of the car stall until he was able to move to bang on the window with the woman passenger. It must've taken one tap, because then in what must've been a seamless passing of the hose to the woman passenger, the hose kept spraying at me, all while I get tackled. I don't really remember much after this point. He brought me down in such a way that I imagine my head hit where the brick of the building and the floor of the concrete and soap all met. Then blood adds to the mix. I don't think I felt nothing more than a headache. Then all three of us are yelling out a choral fuck. The last thing I remember was hearing the engine start and the brake lights warm and stain my face in more red than the blood. I feel like by now I should know what I did wrong, except the problem is I still don't.

In the moment that I woke up there are plenty of faces looking down on me. It felt like heaven maybe. Crowded, but I could still breathe. They were kneeling down, one had a flashlight in my eyes. He was waving the light about, asking me to follow it. I had to put my hands over my eyes because it hurt so much, a little more than a headache definitely.

They started to stand, maybe 4 of them were there, blurring together, like a wet windshield that can't be wiped.

Someone grabbed my shoulder and then another one by another person. They sat me up and the world seemed to wobble for a long time when the voices started coming through. I opened my mouth but could only pant like a dog.

The car wash balanced out and cleared up and I could see all the people. They were all cops, a couple dozen or so. A bunch of cars parked in an arch around the wash stalls.

They asked me what happened but I told them they should give me my phone call.

“I want my phone call, please now.” I held out my hand hoping to be stood up.

They went and asked me what happened again. One of them said I wasn’t going to be arrested once I told them about my broke down truck and the cows in the trailer and the jerky falling out of my pocket when I saw the those people, the ones in the SUV that got me wet and red.

“Well gotdamn.” One of the officers over my shoulder spit and wiped his mouth on the arm that was holding me up.

Another one in front of me, the one with the flashlight, putting it away, shook his head and made a grunt not too far off from one of my cows.

“So what are you gonna do?” His face looked a little swollen, and his eyes looked like bloodshot or maybe even pink eye. Something looked wrong with him enough to be the one we all should actually have been worried about.

An ambulance pulled up and in the time they came over with a gurney I hollered out that I wasn’t going to be affording anything.

“You don’t have to go to a hospital. But we can check you regardless. It’s on the house.”

The cop with the flashlight came by after walking around as if to look for clues, I asked him again about my phonecall. I was wondering about Carol at the time too.

“Once the owner of this here place shows up he’ll let you in that tiny office and you can call however much you want.”

I just needed one call. “Does this happen often?” I asked buttoning up my shirt and feeling the bandage freshly pressed on my head. It was soft and frayed into my hair. It stung just thinking about it.

“Usually we don’t have to wait for the owner to show up.” The cop started laughing as if the joke was obvious.

I didn’t know what that meant. Still don’t. I wanted to ask if that meant this place, the car wash, was always getting bad, or if he was referring to a different kind of general owner at other places where crime happens. I never thought Indiana to be so wasted. But in the middle of nowhere, with or without some cows, it might be possible to lose a little sanity I’m sure.

The officer threw his hands up in the air saying he was done for the day. He started shaking his arms in just a way that reminded me of those Olympians who win gold and wave around their nation’s flag. He got in his car and sped off turning on his sirens. The beeping blurred in with the wind that picked up again and it sounded like I could still hear the cows out there too.

The other office left soon after that. The ambulance drove off in the direction of the sun finishing up its morning rise. I could see the grass move like waves. I sat against the front tiny office door wait for the owner to show.

The last office that left quick washed his car. He pulled out with soap flying off making the wind look real and touchable.

I only made the one call to get my truck repaired. Made sure I was picked up at the car wash so I could take the repairmen back to the truck somewhere back on down the road. The repairman did it all and done with in about a little less than 12 hours. He worked straight through until I had to tell him to put the charges on to the cow farmers and that I'd deal with the payment with them at another time.

I dropped off the cows and the farmers yelled at me but I said I'd take care it somehow. I watched the cows march off in a line to the shoots where they branded. I didn't know how long it'd be until they hit the slaughter. Maybe some were kept for milk and died on their own. Just one day gone. They never told me if the milk cows could also be the same as the meat cows. All I knew about the cows was driving them around to the different farms while I listened to them breathe and talk and stomp around the rustling hay beds. Sometimes they'd collectively moo so deep, almost together in pain if the I hit the right bumps. I hated being responsible for them like that. To hurt them by accident before they were killed. They were good each time and didn't really deserve stuff like that. The farmers have to remind me that they are just cows.

When I got back home from Indiana with an empty load it had been over a week from when I got unstuck. I just kept driving as long as I could. But the stops always have to be made. The bathrooms. I have to eat. Sometimes if I'm lucky I can make a small haul or two to some other contracting warehouses. And I have to sleep. It just happens. Time and again I'd wake up and not know where I was on the road. It was like my body went into automatic. That's when I would always have to pull over. I don't know how long I'd have been driving for if I felt automatic. After that then I could fall asleep in the back of my cab and sleep on and on. For all I know I didn't get

back home in two weeks. Maybe even more. I just can't say. I never used to mind the time or what day of the week it was. Back then it was all about just getting a job and making money. The kid was on the way. I had to support for the family however I could, which wasn't much.

I remember breaking through the Pennsylvania border, Pittsburgh side, but down through West Virginia. It was sometime in the middle of the night, the stars were out and I couldn't say much more about them than that. I could see all of them. No clouds, I know that much. They were sprinkled about and looked bright because they were stars. I wanted to make the whole ride back to my home and Carol and my kid-to-be all before the sun rose and the stars went away. I wanted the night to be a part of my arrival.

But by the time I pulled up to our trailer park with every parking spot taken the sky got covered with clouds. It was maybe 4 in the morning, the night moving away from black and purple to a lighter grey. The sun must've been moving in behind the clouds. So I didn't really make it back the way I wanted. I was going to park my truck off by the playground where I pictured our kid to play on the tire chips. But every spot was full. The other truckers had pulled in for the night already and they were with their families sleeping all warm. I took my cab and went as close to my trailer as I could on the curb. It rumbled loud and shut off pretty smooth, going quiet into the rest of night, the clouds looking a brighter gray. It felt good to be home as it always does. Everyone feels that. I got out of the truck and left my driver door open in case the shutting sound of it would be the thing that finally woke up Carol. I pinched open the storm door and twisted open the bolted lock, but it turned loose. It was left open. The kitchen smelled

like coffee with a pot still steaming on the stove. There was a piece of paper on the counter with the name Farrah on it. The handwriting looked close to Carol's tight scrawl. Then I heard the radio playing soft coming from the back bedroom. No one was in it. The covers were shuffled and smelled dirty. I could hear Steve Perry singing softly about the lights going down in the city. I started to cry or at least well up moving to the jumbled bed to lay down. I fell asleep again for I don't know how long. I was woken up by my wife. I remember she was standing over me and her face looked more tired than I had ever felt driving. Like she was running automatic. She was holding a ball of pink blankets in her arms. She set the pile on my chest and moved my arms to wrap around it. It was very soft and I could feel something squirm within it. I held the pile tight realizing I was holding something real while I tried to adjust and sit up against the headboard.

“That is your daughter.” Carol crossed her arms and had already found a cigarette.

“Is she fat?” I asked. The baby was heavier than I ever imagined.

“Her name is Farrah.” A lighter sparked and Carol walked out the room into the kitchen. I heard her pour a cup of coffee and move open a chair on the linoleum. “She's been waiting some time for you to talk. How about we all hear your voice.” So I started talking on the bed rubbing my daughter's cheek with the back of my thumb. I told her and Carol about what it was like driving trucks. Then I started talking about what I knew about cows and how I believed them to be good listeners. Then I started explaining what it felt like going automatic and how I hoped that I would never ever be late again.

The Long Shot

My shoes are tied so tight they hurt. I jump up and down, wiggle my legs loose, stretch my arms. I lick my hand and wipe the full of my soles. My dad passes me the ball to where I stand past the 3-point line. I shoot against the wind. The ball curves a bit too long, only hits the backboard. These shots have to be exact. I adjust. More spin, head straight, flexed fingers. Lighter on my feet when I land. They start banking in harder and harder.

Dad puts his hands on his knees, hunched and breathing deep, the thin of his hair blowing in the breeze. Standing next to the crab apple tree with its bark peeling back like a scab that won't heal, his glasses fog while he sucks his lips of sweat.

“I think I have to stop for the night now.”

I bounce the ball and shoot it up. Dad tells me he's sorry he's stopping again. As if I haven't noticed the slower small steps he takes in his clothes that have started going baggy. The ball comes down and banks from the top right of the shot box into the net. I go in for the rebound and spin for a layup. Dad fixes his flossy hair, wipes off his glasses and heads inside. As the garage door folds down, he hollers that I should keep playing.

I stand over where the three point line used to be on the driveway, now faded like sidewalk chalk. I bounce the ball to myself, grabbing it quick in the air, as if Dad had just passed to me. I shoot it clean and it hangs up there. Held in the wind. Its arcing on target. Beneath the branches. Yet in the sky it's high enough for my firm belief that the shot will be clean.

*

Every day this week he's stopped playing early. He gets tired after only a couple shots. A couple months ago, when he first got real tired, he just passed to me and let me try and shoot. I used to see him dribble and run, box out with the slight squeak of his sneakers against the blacktop. But now he goes inside and watches game shows. I don't see him again until dinner.

I want Dad's help more than ever so I'll be valuable for the travel team. It's my first year to be eligible, and I want to start at point guard. All the other twelve year olds I know live and practice together in their development. Wayward Green. It's over close to school, just down the road you can see the massive roofs collecting like clouds. All the kids that live there have dads that play with them. In class, I hear them say they have enough people for a full friendly most nights. Since I live out by milk farms and the abandoned baseball field on the other side of town 30 minutes away, I'm too far away. Not like I'm invited.

After dinner, I make sure to go out and practice some more. I'm getting good at 3-point shots. No one else is as consistent as I am. But Kyle Hartford shot one once and made it. In scrimmage. Because he hogged the ball. And I swear the whole gym went crazy when it was just luck. He didn't set his feet right so that he'd feel the arc of the ball before it happened. Instead he jumped up moving forward in the air so that he was using his body to get the ball to go the distance. There wasn't any patience in that shot. I got so hot. Then in next possession he threw a bad pass to me, and I was forced to travel with the ball and my coach got ticked and subbed me out at the next foul. I didn't go in for the rest of the game. And it was only the first quarter. When

the scoreboard shut off, they passed around Gatorades. Coach Joe called Kyle the “Star of the Game,” then handed him an extra red flavor. I remember wanting to go home like an instant, but I had to wait for my dad. And he drove slow saying he thinks it saves gas. I sat on the curb where the buses drop us off and watched every other kid from the gym hop up to their waxed SUVs and roll down the windows listening to hip hop on satellite. Then dad eventually pulled in with a cold gust of wind whipping my gym bag against my back. He locked the child-safety windows, leaving on the community public-radio classic rock station that played the 60s, 70s, and 80s on WXVT Eagle North. My dad donates \$10/month in membership to that place for a bumper sticker in return.

*

On Saturday, when my dad barely makes it out to work, I’m up and shoot by nine. I tell my mom I need new shoes before the season starts if I’m really going to be much a priority player. Everyone else I’ve overheard plans on getting those new KOBE Nikes. Kyle has even said he’s going to get the new Jordan’s. But Payless is having a sale. My black and purple LA Techs make my feet look small and I’m sure the whole team points it out when they’re at Kyle’s house playing video games after school.

They’re all allowed to walk over to his place along the side of the road even the parts that go 45 mph. I know they don’t even call their parents first to ask if it’s okay that they have some fun. They do what they desire and it is given. They cross into other neighbors’ property, rinsing off their sweaty, sock-pilled feet into the various identical pools they have to choose from. There are sports cars in every drive way, sharing the same color red. Those boys aren’t even amused enough to look in through

the driver window because they can sit in one, on their own driveway, by the end of each day. Then they pile toward the development front yards where paid landscapers are mowing away the sod into stripped patterns as if they were on a baseball field. I don't even know what sod is. I'm sure Kyle doesn't technically either, but that doesn't matter when he bursts through his front door, friends behind him, as his hot mom leads the way with those frozen buffalo chicken snacks and those taquitos that cost a whole lot at the grocery store.

When I'm out to try and practice in the morning, Danny from next door comes over on his scooter and wants to shoot with me by nine thirty. He honks his bright horn asking, "How about PIG? I bet I'll win this time!"

Danny jumbles down my driveway, with his shoelaces undone. His belly quaking like my dad's foot massager he has me use on him before dinner. I have a hard time eating Jell-O thanks to this kid. Danny has to catch his breath. I bounce the ball in place waiting for him to speak.

He blows his bowl cut out of his forehead, "You've got a water? Boy, it's warm isn't it." His eyes clinch tight into a pile of wrinkles and he starts smacking his lips together trying to make enough saliva to quench his thirst. He looks like a pathetic, blind puppy. I grab a cold one from the second fridge and he pours more than half on his head. I can't tell if the wet marks between his coned boobs are sweat or water.

Soon PIG becomes one on one when Danny starts boxing me out and rubbing all over me. His soft, wet back stains my practice shirt. He doesn't go away until I come up with this week's lie, saying I need to go to the mall with my mom. He waves goodbye and honks the horn and says he will see me when I get back home.

It takes mom another two hours until I convince her to go out. We drive for fifteen minutes until she realizes she forgot her purse. It feels like we sit at the stop signs for an hour before moving again. When we get back I tell her I'm too tired now. We idle in the car together, the A/C bursting on my face like a shower.

I crinkle my eyes and put a hand over the vent trying to stop the cold that somehow feels painful. My mom says the face I'm making looks ridiculous. She peppers up her voice, tickling her fingers in the air aiming for my armpits, "Who's a pathetic little puppy? Huh? Who's my little puppy boy."

*

At the end of the month, formal practices start. Since school has settled in, Coach Joe says every practice is mandatory. He sighs with the clap of his hands, rubbing them together like he's plotting.

Coach Joe is really wide. He has to be taller than my uncle, ducking down to enter through the classroom door where we have the first meeting. His beard is thick and looks heavy. And his voice is a boom. I sit in the chairs like the rest of the kids, with my dad standing behind me like everyone else's parents. He starts rubbing my shoulders and whispering in my ear how excited he is. Then he hushes up and laughs to himself as if he would get in trouble for talking. He needs to get his hands off me.

Kyle's dad leans on the air conditioner and looks at his watch instead of the overhead clock. His hair burns blacker than oil. He has on a leather jacket too, like he's cold. Kyle's friends sit around and try to get Mr. Hartford to tell stories about when he played basketball.

On the board, Coach Joe writes out his name and his phone number. My dad doesn't have a pen on him. Coach Joe passes out paperwork too. Forms about transportation, and photos, and important equipment, and the schedule of events, inspirational quotes, contracts, emergency information. Coach Joe reads over each paper, while my dad folds them up and puts them in his back pocket for later. He fixes his glasses and looks down at how I'm tapping my feet. He smiles big like Danny, whispering again that he's so excited. He opens his eyes real wide to try and get me to smile and admit the same thing. But I want the real practice to start so he can wait out in the car and let me have at the court.

Coach Joe invites all the parents to stay and watch and see how practices will operate. Dad starts jangling his keys from his coat pocket as we walk out of the room. I tell him he doesn't need to stay.

"Now don't be silly. Your Coach Joe just offered."

I tell him I'm trying to get good.

"Well, that's exactly the point. I like the determination."

I tell him I wouldn't do well if he was around.

"That doesn't make sense." He is still smiling at me like it's a joke. "Come on, I'm sorry about playing at home. Let me see what you do." He pats my back and opens the gym door.

I walk slowly over to the water fountain in the corner, take a drink and throw my warm up pants back at his feet. He rolls them up and starts clapping as I go into the line that starts a passing drill. All the other parents look his way as he echoes

throughout the gym bouncing off and through the rafters like an amplifier gone haywire with static.

*

Wednesday afternoon, when I get home from school, after I've taken my weekly math quiz, the house is empty. Mom was with dad at the chiropractor. That's the one who stretches everything. She says since dad was getting old he couldn't do as much. She usually leaves a note about the lunchmeat in the fridge so I don't starve for dinner –

Step 1: Pull bread from freezer

Step 2(a): Toast

Step 2(b): Pull mayo and mustard from fridge

Step 3: Apply condiments

Step 4: Grab Turkey (cheese if applicable)

Step 5: Enjoy, with plate!

They don't get back until later when I have to turn on the lights. Dad looks pale. His beard is prickling and his jaw is lean. His pants look looser. What's with the sunglasses? The ones with the purple lenses. And his steps are the smallest I've seen as he shuffles in the room. He laughs when he sees me watching the game highlights on the news. But the noise he makes sounds hollow. As if he's got nothing inside him anymore. I start to realize how bad of a place he might be in.

He finds a seat down on the couch next to me. He pats my leg and I stand up grabbing for his arm saying *Box out! Box out!* as if we're playing one on one in the house. When I get a hold of his bicep my hand goes straight to bone. Everything else

under his skin feels like its melted away. All I can think about is that I'm glad I stopped eating Jell-O already.

I let go of him half way through picking him up off the couch and the pleather makes a suction sound when he lands. His body adjusts and moves so he can lay down. I change my seat over to the recliner and take the controller with me. I change the channel to the game shows he likes. He calls out what he thinks the correct answer is. It's the only time he's quick. I've never seen him be wrong before.

*

The next Saturday, I sleep in and Danny is still over by nine thirty. My mom comes in my room and tells me that he's rung the front door. I tell her I'm not home. "Please say I'm at a sleepover."

She shakes her head no and threatens to pour a cup of water on my head. She knows that he sits alone at lunch.

I get out of bed and tie my shoes extra tight and go through the garage grabbing the oldest ball we have so that my new Spalding I paid with my own money doesn't get ruined. Danny is in the driveway rolling around on his scooter. He hops off and lets the scooter roll on the pavement until it almost hits the garage. He comes in for a high five, and I try and act cool like I don't see it. I shoot the ball up toward the branches. Danny chases after it. He stomps his feet flat when he runs, trying to get the rebound. He tries for the quick shot but the ball goes straight into the air, doesn't even hit the backboard, comes down toward the top of his head, but he ducks out of the way with his arms covering his face and one leg raised up. The ball bounces once and lands

in the grass. Danny chases it and does his best to chest pass it over to me on the free throw line. He wipes the sweat from his forehead and asks if I'm bored.

“Could we go play the new baseball game I got? I could let you be the Phillies.” He asks if we have any soda. He says he wants cream, but we've never bought cream soda before. “Or, you know, I always have Hot Wheels.”

I go inside to search for what soda there is. I yell inside up to mom that I might head to Danny's house. She doesn't answer. I search upstairs. The kitchen. The dining room. I catch my reflection in the mirror that placed at the back of the hutch. I look all red and somehow guilty. I find her in the bathroom. She's throwing up in a trash can saying she's got a migraine. I ask if there's any cold soda while hoping for the first time that dad is the only one sick in this family right now.

*

After winning our first travel game at home, Dad stops going into work on weekends completely. It's gotten that bad. He doesn't even know what “it” is. He's been seeing more and more doctors, no longer the chiropractor. He complains about all the tests, so much blood work he says. But nothing comes back positive. Most of them say that he's just losing his mind. I don't think anyone but my dad has ever wanted to be diagnosed so badly before. Usually “positive” is the bad word in medicine.

He's at the point where he's started staying in his bed and napping all the time. All day. He lays in bed with his socks on. He's watching his game shows. He's drinking these protein shakes now, hot water, and that god forsaken pudding. He's left his sunglasses on the side table. And he's always asking where he's put them. I use

the massager after I've eaten my own lunch, unable to enjoy like Step 5 wants. I ask him why he hasn't gone in.

He starts rubbing his neck as if to massage away denial or something.

I ask if he'll get in trouble. "No," he starts. "The customers understand that life happens when you're self-employed."

He asks for a hug before I go out and shoot. He smells like sour milk that even his dredging of baby powder can't cover. He kisses me on the head. And he holds me there a while longer throughout the commercial break.

*

Kyle's locker is near mine, by the library display cases that showcase different award winning books and old pictures of the school before it was renovated. Me and him even have social studies together. I try and walk with him to class if I can time it right, seeing his reflection bouncing off the plexi-glass between bells when he's about to pass. I don't say anything because he never really talks and probably thinks I don't either. Yet all the girls think he is just the funniest. He does this smirk thing that they think is real cute.

When I raise my hand in class and ask to go to the bathroom, Mr. Marshal signs my agenda for permission. I step on every other colored tile in the hall when I walk. I don't see any feet poking out beneath the stalls. So in front of the mirror I try and practice my own shy, tough, silent nod-smile thing. The other guys on the team do it all the time to each other too in the halls. Maybe they raise a hand for a high five, but they never really talk. Just this little twitch that shows they recognize their friends and reputation. But it looks so good. They all wear Polos and the kind of cologne that

sprays like air-freshener my dad doesn't let me buy. The more they smell like *Dragon's Kiss* or *Chocolate Leather* the more it brings the girls in like a fly trap. At dances the girls always want to slow dance with Kyle and company.

I tried once to say "Hey guys, what's up." They didn't even do the nod my way.

I go to the bathroom again in science class and Ms. Sanchez gives me a permission slip, and I think how boring their meet ups must be at Kyle's. They probably just nod whenever Kyle's hot mom brings down another batch of those same frozen buffalo chicken snacks and pricy taquitos, ignoring her when she asks how their day has been. I turn on the faucet and splash water on my face thinking that I'll be refreshed like they show on TV. The water just leaks down my cheeks and makes my collar wet and heavy. There weren't enough paper towels in the dispenser to dry off my face good. When I try and use my sleeve it doesn't pick up the water, but moves it around my face like a squeegee. I realize I'm bad at convincing myself that things aren't the way they really are.

*

Mom gets up early with me at the start of Monday to make breakfast. While I shower, she cooks out an egg white sandwich to make the new week seem to be a bit more pleasant than the other's we've come to know. There's even cheese and extra pepper. Now that the season's been going on, she's back to sleep when I take my first bite until I get on the bus. I start to make my lunch and follow the instructions through my head. I want some cheese, but I think mom used it all for breakfast. I go in to their

bedroom at the back of the house where the sun's barely showing up. She squints hard, in the gray of drawn shades, trying to make me out in the doorway without glasses.

She tells me she isn't sure when I ask, but I could slap on some cream cheese if I'm desperate. And if I grab a clean knife I have to be sure to put in the dishwasher when I leave.

“Don't forget the mayo. You like mayo.”

I look around for something to put my sandwich in. I hope we have tinfoil, but that's never the case. Tinfoil is something Kyle's hot mom uses to make his lunch, those rare times he packs. Usually I see him standing in the lunch line with a fat \$10 bill. And here I stand in front of the pantry somehow surprised we don't have potato chips.

I go back to mom and whisper in that I'm leaving for school. She says she didn't know it's that time already, how tired she is. She doesn't ask for coffee. She doesn't have her arm around dad. He's hung half off the bed breathing through a stuffy nose. She asks if I can turn down the air conditioning. She forgets to say I love you before I leave. I close the door and don't touch the thermostat.

*

For our first away game, my dad signs on to chaperone. When he tells me this, right as he drops me off, stepping out of the car along with me, I know something bad will come of it. He gets on the bus before me and taps the hard leather cushion. His mouth opens slower than a yawn expecting a cough coming. He's starting to look as skinny as I am. He moves down the aisle and his hips barely touch the seats. The bus

driver looks at him through the rear view mirror, looking at him as if there's no way that man is in the right place.

After choosing a spot he calls my name. He's picked the emergency exit seat. He doesn't want to talk cars or sports or politics with the other dads up front. Yet any other time he sees parents he's away wanting to talk cars or sports or politics. If we're out to dinner, he spends some extra time getting to know the waitress and even the cashier. He likes to know people. But not these parents, not today. He says because he's been coughing a lot he doesn't want to bother them. But the cough is loud against the metal roof. He's been doing that for a while now. I can hear it in my sleep. I can hear it over the tractor when he mows. He doesn't try to cover his mouth with his arm.

Dad turns around and sees Kyle in the back of the bus. He thinks we're good friends. The same way he likes to talk to adults, he tries to talk to my friends. He scootches over and corners Kyle and his friends. I put my head between my legs to hide and start shaking my head, plugging my ears. They start to laugh as if it's a joke. I wish I got that set of headphones I asked for my birthday.

Dad tells Kyle to stick out his hands flat. "It's a magic trick." My dad straddles the aisle and creeps closer to their corner. My dad goes in his back pocket for something, then adjusts Kyle's hands to where he says they should be. He tells Kyle to clutch his hands into fists. My dad goes again to his back pockets and begins sprinkling what he calls imaginary dust over Kyle's hands. My dad says Kyle can open his hands, and then there is a white spot on Kyle's hands as if baby powder had passed through his skin. Kyle looks at his hands and says neat, then turns around to his friends and starts singing along to a rap song.

My dad claps his hands on his jeans, wiping off the white. Puffs of the faint dust collect in the air like chalk near a blackboard. Behind him, Kyle pretends to dust over his friends' hands and they laugh over the beat of a kick drum.

My dad repositions forward, still wiping at his pants. He pats my knee and smiles wide before the next tinny cough hits.

*

The next day in gym class, during dodgeball, Kyle's buddy Jake gets a concussion from a ball-to-the-head, thrown by Maggie Thompson. He hits the court hard with a bloody nose and looks numb. His eyes get baggy, and he doesn't respond right away when the instructor snaps his fingers.

At practice Kyle breaks the news to Coach Joe, who gets red. He blows his whistle and calls for a huddle. He wants to know how Jake got hurt. I speak up and tell him it's probably because Maggie Thompson has a crush on Jake, but Kyle looks at me like I've taken his chocolate milk or pizza at lunch. Coach Joe tells me to practice in place of Jake for the night.

I start breaking through on defensive drills, hitting a layup, my shoes holding on good, instructing everything into place like I want. Coach Joe starts clapping after each time I follow through. I smile big. I throw the tough bounce passes. Sweat is dripping from my hair, and my hands get clammy. I hold off behind the 3-point line. Breathing comes easy and makes the shot clock tick long. I'm ready for the long shot if it comes my way.

By the end of scrimmage, the rest of the kids on the team foul me on purpose. Coach Joe only blows the whistle once. I make my free throws and Kyle shakes his head. He doesn't get any happier when Coach Joe says I'm starting the next game.

*

I take the late bus home. I'm the only one on it. The bus driver pulls right in front of my driveway. I say thanks and run down the steps and stop when I see one of those red, freshly washed cars in the driveway. A car that only shows up in Wayward Green. This one's even got a sunroof.

I head inside through the springy storm door and hang up my backpack, calling hello. I think about how I might tell my parents the good news. They will come to the game. We might go out for dinner even.

They are at the kitchen table talking to a man in a suit. They have out a plate of cookies. They are nodding over a pile of folders and cookies. The man stops talking when he hears my feet creak the steps. My mom turns around and tells me to work on my homework. She apologizes to the man.

He nods like it's alright while swallowing a bite of his cookie. He waves me over to his seat. I stay right where I am. I suddenly feel cold and start breathing through my nose for what feels like the first time on purpose.

"Do you know who I am?" His voice is much higher than I expected. "Has your dad told you who I am?"

I'm still standing waiting for him to talk, trying to figure him out.

"Come over here and feel my suit. Come on," He's petting his sleeve for reference. I'm still right where I've been. "Feel it, how expensive it is."

“It looks it,” I say, thinking that’s enough to satisfy him. He stops petting himself to take another bite of his cookie. It crumbles onto his lapel. For someone who cares so much about me feeling his expensive suit he leaves the crumbs where they lay.

“I’m the guy who handles all of your dad’s finances. Do you know what that is? Finances? Kid, that’s your dad’s money.”

“He knows what that word means,” my mom says now bringing the plate of cookies my way. “He’s good at math.”

“Well good,” the suit speaks up licking his lips. “I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again real soon when all that money becomes yours.” I grab a cookie before I leave, smiling at the man because I feel like I’m supposed to. Dad’s in his chair across the table looking like he’s fallen asleep sitting up.

In my room I refresh on long division for this week’s upcoming quiz. I cramp up against my desk and switch the lamp on. The rest of my room gets black as the day closes in on dinner. The sun sets, and the man in the suit leaves. His engine turns over so clean and loud that my room feels like it shakes along with it.

Mom knocks on my door when I can’t hear the car anymore. She peeks it open and sticks her head in. I turn over my shoulder then head back into math. She asks if everything is alright. I tell her I have a quiz. She asks about practice. This isn’t the place to say anything else. I tell her I need to work harder. She says she’ll finally make some food, “I bought instant mashed potatoes.” I say sure and ask if she can grab me a water. She comes up behind me, and I get wrapped in a hug. Her hands are cold and cracked. Her eyes are red and her nose looks wet. It must be she loves me.

*

I have to tie my shoes a couple different ways on Saturday morning. Even when I finish and head out to the court to warm up for my first ever real game performance I still feel my feet loose. Over and over again before the ref whistles, I get nervous, anxiously tying my shoes.

There are a couple people ready to watch, mainly parents, like Kyle's dad up on the highest seat clapping and calling out inspirational quotes like he made them up. He echoes and everyone turns their head laughing and smiling like he's a good-luck prophet, guaranteeing our win.

And we do. I make a couple shots, miss some too, but so does everyone else, even Kyle. For four quarters it seems like everyone on my team just lets me play. Coach pats me on my back when the scoreboard buzzes off its last great tone. The game ends and I grab my backpack full of its long-sleeves and warm-up pants. I watch as everyone leaves, some saying bye to me as I stand on the curb waiting for my ride, steam breathing off my head into the air that must be cold. I can't really feel anything like the weather, still hot from running around inside.

*

Danny comes over late after the game. He didn't come on his scooter. His hair is combed and he's wearing a pink button up. The collar's popped for some ridiculous reason. He's got on a pleated pair of shorts that are too short and a new pair of white sneakers. The socks he's got are stretching to his knees.

"How was your game?" He waves and walks slowly. He kicks at a stone, almost missing it.

“You heard? It was good. We won.”

“That’s good,” he says, still kicking around the rock.

“Do you want to play PIG?” I ask passing him the ball.

He doesn’t see and it hits him in the belly. He laughs a little saying ouch. He scratches at his blonde part. He mumbles, “What are you doing today?”

The balls rolls my way. I shoot it and tell him just practicing.

He lets out a sigh, standing next to the garage. “You want to come over?” We make eye contact for what might be the first time. I think about an excuse. But he’s looking at me like he knows I’m about to lie.

“Why are you all dressed up?” I pass the ball back to him.

“Oh,” he bounces. “Yeah, it’s my birthday.”

“Happy birthday, Danny.”

He shows off that big smile. “I’m having a party. I thought you might want to come.” He passes the ball back to me and I shoot.

I miss. I tell him I have to ask my mom. I run inside while Danny’s looking for a drink. I go to the kitchen where my mom is making two cups of tea. I explain I’m going to Danny’s. She doesn’t look up from the steam in her face. She says it’s a nice idea. She tells me I should change. I put on some jeans and a bright blue Polo. Then I yell out saying I’ll be back later.

I walk to Danny’s down the street alongside him. A car passes going under the speed limit. Danny waves. This is as close as I’ll get to feeling like how Kyle must be after school. Except the grass we walk over is dry and brown. No one in our neighborhood has a pool.

And in Danny's driveway, not a single car. No balloons on the mailbox. Inside, the house is empty. There's a movie playing with a pizza on the island.

"Where is everybody?" I ask looking around for even his parents.

"They 're coming back with the cake." He chews on a slice of cheese and asks me if I want to watch something else.

*

Danny's got a large basement all to himself. His bedroom is down there. His parents gave him a big screen for getting good grades. They even gave him a drum set that's over in the corner next to his wall of Hot Wheels. He's got two couches and a ping pong table. He says his parents will be back any minute. "They're getting an ice cream cake. With extra cookies in the middle."

Putting on some rerun cartoons, he asks me if I want anything to eat. I say I'm fine while he shrugs his shoulders and heads upstairs. A whole commercial break goes by before Danny comes back with two bags of chips, a six pack of cream soda, some hot dog buns, ketchup, and a bag of candy like they give out on Halloween, all presented and balanced on the box of pizza.

"Where are the hot dogs?" I ask.

"I just like dipping bread in ketchup," he says tearing away the plastic and snapping open the white cap. "You should stay for when I make dinner."

"And what's that?"

"More of this," he laughs, coughing through a stuffed mouth of bread that he's balled up and sucked on like a jawbreaker.

He flips through the channels and goes right past two college basketball games.

“Got any homework this weekend?” he asks, unwrapping his third miniature candy bar.

“I’m not sure,” I ask him to pass the candy my way. “I won’t worry about that until tomorrow. You?”

“No,” he opens up the box of cold pizza now. “I finished that stuff last night.”

We sit and watch some more cartoons, before I ask to play videogames. I play a few innings of the baseball game he’s talked about. Then he asks to join. We keep playing. And I keep pitching. Then it’s my turn to hit. We go into extra innings.

We finish a doubleheader of the AL and NL All-Star squad when I realize it’s about eight. The night’s moved slower than any other I’ve been a part of. But it’s a good kind of slow, some kind of intentional. Like stepping up to the line. The ball in my hands again and I’m breathing. My eyes stay on the orange rim the whole time. The whole time while I press off and anticipate the arc. The whole time when I hit the peak of my jump and let go watching the ball pops its way in, as if magnetized.

I tell Danny I will stick around and that then maybe we’ll play a different game. “I need to tell my mom that I’ll be staying later.”

He asks me to pass him the last cream soda and I ask to use his scooter.

*

I wheel inside my house through the garage and I hear the phone ringing. It buzzes for what feels like an hour, never making it all the way to voicemail. All the lights are out. Mom’s car isn’t parked. There’s no note on the kitchen table with instructions or a smiley face. I keep hollering for mom. For dad. The coughing’s gone

along with them. I turn the lights on, but no one shows up. The whole house is quiet enough to hear the resounding force of electrical currents.

I go out to search the backyard. Where we live, the stars are out each night and you can see everything. But right now I can't find nothing. Around the pool. In the shed. If I look up to the night, I can see the clouds actually float along. They're transparent and I can almost see the moon trapped in the sky.

I track over by the side yard, near the magnolia tree and forsythia, finding no one. Not even a rustle of squirrels.

Now the frontyard. I stand by the crab apple tree thinking if I was my dad, where would I be?

I move again, down to the ditches. A car passes along the curb. Its headlights blur together looking more like the moon than the one I've been thinking about.

I take the deepest breath like everything is okay. This breath is through my nose again and I make the world stop spinning in space for a moment. I adjust my feet. I'll take my shot at some point. One long breath in and I hold it. My stomach starts rumbling with slow fear. I always think I know that I'll make the shot. I rub my arms trying to feel warm and awake, still holding my breath. The shot won't make itself. But here, outside, I'm losing my balance. It's not going to end well. The shot clock has finally run out. I think about going back to Danny's. I hope he's ready to be there for me when I actually need him to be. I breathe, again. I go back inside and turn the lights all off.