

ABSTRACT

TITLE OF THESIS:

MODEL MINORITY

David Kim, Master of Fine Arts, 2013

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The stories in my thesis explore race politics, the American Dream, the influence of hip-hop in suburban society, and the role of academia in identity formation. The stories feature a Korean-American narrator whose speech undergoes significant transformations, which mirror the constantly shifting circumstances of his life. Change is the overarching theme of my thesis – the kind of change that transpires unconsciously – and the narrator’s primary conflict is the struggle to reconcile the multiple identities that have been created as a result.

Model Minority

by

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1. The Lesson

I woke up to a slap, and it felt like a hot iron against my cheek. When I opened my eyes, I realized it was only my mom, but she had me by the shoulders, and she was shaking me. I tried to wriggle free, but the thing is my mom's got strong hands, probably from working all those years at the Laundromat, before we got the store.

"What are you doing?" I yelled, pushing her away.

That pissed her off, but it wasn't my fault. I didn't even know what was happening right now. You can't shake someone and then get mad about a little push. She was pissed, though. I could hear her breathing loudly through her nose. Her eyes looked like they were on fire.

"Are you going to hit me now? Is that what comes next?" she asked in Korean.

"No," I said, feeling bad. "I just ... what's going on?"

I was pretty sure the school had called. The other day, I'd erased the message off of the answering machine, but that stupid guy – my guidance counselor – would not stop calling the house. My mom didn't speak good English, but she'd probably figured whatever the white man was saying, it was bad news.

"Eugene!"

"What?"

"I just talked to Adam's mother," she said, like I was supposed to understand what she was talking about without her explaining anything. I really didn't know what that had to do with me, anyhow, and for a second, I couldn't even remember who Adam was. It'd been that long since I'd thought about that kid.

"So?" I asked. "Who cares if Adam's mom called?"

“Hey!” she screamed. “You’re doing drugs with Isaac again, aren’t you? Where is it? Tell me where it is,” she said.

“Where is what?” I yelled. “What are you talking about?”

She grabbed the blanket and threw it to the ground, like she expected to find the weed just lying there on top of my bed. I jumped onto my feet and stared at her like she was crazy, and usually that got me hit, but she wasn’t paying any attention to me.

She started opening up all of the drawers in my room, throwing my stuff to the floor. All of a sudden, she dropped to the ground, pulling out the shoeboxes where I’d put all my old basketball cards. I was scared she’d actually find it – which was crazy because I’d been taping the weed, which was in a rolled up Ziploc bag, against my mattress for months without any problems. To be honest, I’d been a lot more careful when I first started hiding it there, making sure the bag was taped flat against the mattress, but you know how it is. I got lazy, thinking she’d never find it anyhow, and now I wasn’t sure if the tape had even stayed. I’d been re-using the same strip of masking tape for a while now, so the sticky stuff could have come off. I really didn’t know.

“Mom, I don’t have any weed, shit!” I yelled, knowing it would piss her off. Korean parents don’t stand for that kind of mouthing off. “What are you doing?” I asked. “You’re acting like a crazy woman, you know that?”

“Shut up!” she yelled, tossing the shoebox at me with both hands.

The lid ended up coming off as it slammed against the wall, and some of my old cards went flying. I didn’t think that would even bother me, but to be honest, it actually made me mad. I’d spent a lot of time organizing all of those cards, even though it’d been years since I’d looked at them. There was a Magic Johnson rookie card in there, which wasn’t as valuable as I had

thought as a kid because it wasn't the right kind or something like that, but I still didn't want the corners to get bent out of shape. It might not have been worth any money or whatever, but I still liked the card.

"Mom," I pleaded. "You don't know what you're doing."

She opened another drawer, where I kept my bowl hidden inside of one of my socks, but she slammed the drawer just as quickly as she'd opened it, and I exhaled a little bit, quietly. I was relieved and thinking everything was going to be alright now, but then my mom's still looking at me like maybe she might take a swing.

"*You scumbag,*" she said. "*Don't lie to me. Where is the marijuana?*"

"Fucking shit," I muttered, sitting down on the bed.

This time I saw it coming – like she was moving in slow motion – but I still couldn't get my hands up in time for some reason. She slapped me across the face on the same cheek as before, and the pain echoed across my face. It felt like I was about to cry, which was embarrassing because I thought I was past all that. I turned my back and wiped the tear off with my finger, groaning loudly like she'd poked me in the eye.

"What the fuck, mom?" I said, thinking she better not call me a woman again. She always said that whenever she caught me crying, and it made me so mad. I really don't know what I would have done if she'd called me a woman because the last time she'd said it, I'd sworn that if she ever said it again, I would do something about it, even if she was my mom.

"*I'm going to tell your dad.*"

"No!" I screamed, waving my hands. "Seriously, Mom, don't do that. Please!"

If my dad found out I'd started smoking again, he would kill me, and that's no joke. The last time he'd caught me smoking, he'd made me get all of his golf clubs from the garage. It took

three weeks for the bruises on my arms and legs to go away. I couldn't walk right because my bones hurt so much, and then there was this thing at school, which was my fault because I'd been dumb and decided not to hide any of my bruises, thinking it looked cool. My old guidance counselor, Mrs. Weir, had sat me down and asked me straight up if my dad had done that to me.

"Then where is it?" she asked in a calm voice. *"Tell me where it is, and I won't tell Dad."*

"Mom, I don't have anything," I said in my best Korean. "I swear."

"If you don't tell me right now," she began.

"What do you want me to say?" I yelled. "I told you I really don't have anything. The last time was the last time, I swear. I don't have anything. You have to believe me."

"Then why did Adam's mom say those things? Is she lying to me?"

"I really don't know why," I said, putting my palms together in front of my face, pleading with her to stop. "Adam ... I don't know, he doesn't like me, you know that. Maybe it was him that lied. He's always saying junk about me, anyhow, all because I don't say, "Hi," to him in the halls anymore. What a pussy. I know it sounds stupid, but Adam's like that ... Mom, you don't even know. Adam's just like her. He can't keep his mouth shut."

I could tell she was thinking it over because she got silent. She took off her red glasses, the ones she uses when she reads the bible and rubbed her eyes for a second. She knew exactly what I was talking about. Every single person knew Adam's mom was the biggest gossip at church, always starting rumors about other people and their children.

You know the type – the woman at church who's crying during service because she's so in love with God, just drunk off of the holy spirit, but when everyone's getting food afterwards in the cafeteria downstairs, she's pointing at people, whispering things about them behind their backs like, *You know, Dr. Lee's son? Yes, the boy who attends Harvard! Well, Mrs. Park told me*

that he's dating a black girl? Oh, she'd say then, smiling in this fake-humble way. It's very interesting, isn't it?

I never even talked to Adam anymore, but the truth is he's not really like his mom. He's a nerd and everything – a straight up suck ass – but he never really said things about people. Being the son of such a big gossip probably makes you that way, and whenever his mom would start gossiping about people, trying to get him to join in, I remember he'd just shake his head and walk away. Then she'd be standing there, all offended, going, *What? What did I say? Adam, come and talk to your mother! Do you have a problem with me?*

Adam's such a good boy, my mom had been telling me for years. Why don't you go be his friend again? He's such a nice boy. Why do you instead choose to spend all of your time with Isaac? When she said his name, it sounded like her mouth was full of spit. I really don't know why she hated Isaac so much. It wasn't like he'd ever done anything to her.

I kept looking my mom in the eyes, trying to convince her that Adam was the one who'd lied, that I was telling the truth. I'd already told her a bunch of times how Adam acted all superior just because the teachers at school were on his jock, when really he wanted to be like me, and I thought maybe if I just looked at my mom long enough, she'd believe me. Then everything would be all good, and I could finally get started with my day. It was the weekend for, damn it. I wasn't supposed to be dealing with bullshit like this on a Saturday morning.

She sighed, blowing the hair out of her face. Then she shook her head and waved once at me, like she was saying, "Whatever, forget you." In the back of my mind, I wanted her to apologize because it wasn't right, but I wasn't going to push it. I'd take disappointment over my dad beating my ass any day.

"Adam isn't such a good kid, you know that," I said. "He's a little snitch."

All of a sudden, she came over and sat down on the edge of my bed. I moved my feet away from her, half-thinking that maybe she'd slap me again – she probably heard that word, “snitch,” all the time in the city, and she hated it when I reminded her of the black kids always hanging around in the store, never buying anything – but she didn't. She just looked tired, and I felt bad for her. Shit, it's not like I don't love my mom. When I was little, we'd been mad tight – much tighter than I ever was with my dad – but now even she was whatever.

She turned away from me, maybe sensing that I was uncomfortable, and I only saw the side of her face, but it looked like she was thinking about something. I sat there on the bed with my back against the wall, waiting for her to speak, and I started to get annoyed that it was taking her so long to open her mouth, but I couldn't do anything but wait now that she'd calmed down.

“Do you know what happens if you're caught with marijuana in Korea?” she finally asked me.

“What?” I asked, clearing my throat. How was I supposed to know that? “What happens?” I asked her.

“You go to jail.”

I was sure there was more to it, like something about God coming down from the sky to punish me, but she didn't end up talking about God or my dad or his brother in Korea, who was this crazy ass drunk who had left my aunt to raise four kids by herself. My parents always sent that aunt money, even though I'd never met her before. Anyhow, they were always talking about my dad's brother, sometimes comparing him to me, saying we had the same *aura* or *ambience*. I knew why they said that, but I wasn't ever going to leave my family. That was messed up.

All she said was that you go to jail if you get caught with weed, like that was supposed to scare me. Obviously, I didn't want to go to jail, but what she didn't get was that we didn't live in

Korea. I'd been born in America, and over here, you don't even go to jail for possession, especially if you aren't eighteen yet. Isaac had gotten busted once, and he just had to go some class and pee in a cup every week for only a few months.

"Okay," I said. "Alright."

"If you keep living like this, that's where you're going," she said. "Do you understand what I'm trying to tell you, Eugene? You're going to go to jail, I just know it. You're going to be one of those people – it's something I never imagined – and what you don't understand is that we're not going to be there for you when that happens. Tell me, Eugene. What did I do wrong? Didn't we raise you better than this?"

Her voice was getting all shaky, and I could tell she was about to cry, which made me feel something in my heart, you know. My mom is a tough ass lady, and I'd never seen her cry, but before I could even say or do anything to make her feel better, she just left the room, closing the door softly behind her. A few minutes later, I heard the front door shut. Then I heard the engine of our station wagon start. I was sure that she was going to the store to tell my dad, and damn – I was in big trouble when he got home later.

I started to clean up the mess in my room, but then I ran to the kitchen, picked up the phone and started to dial Isaac's number. But then I hung up the phone because I realized he might be going through the same thing right now with his parents, even though it was probably happening at the store, since they were there twenty-four seven. He was always saying that money was all they cared about. They got antsy if they were at home during the day because that meant they weren't making money.

I guess I didn't really care what happened to Peanut, since I didn't even think about calling him, but I knew Adam's mom had probably called both of their houses. She'd probably

told everyone at church by now, and then the rumors would start again. There were enough of them flying around about us already, how we were troubled kids. I didn't care what anyone at church thought, but my parents did. They were serious about their church-going. They went every Sunday, and sometimes my mom went to early-morning worships, which started at five o'clock or something.

I started thinking about Adam, how he was such a little bitch to talk about me to his mom. I just didn't understand why he would do something like that. I knew it was weird between us, ever since we'd stopped hanging out, but that had happened a long time ago. The next time I saw him, though, I swore that I was going to make him pay for what he'd said to his mom. I wasn't going to let him off. Sometimes people just need to be taught a lesson.

On Monday, I went to school for the first time in weeks. I called Isaac and Peanut up the night before. They were both pissed, and we all agreed to meet up at school in the morning. My mom didn't end up saying anything to my dad, which was surprising, but I didn't care because it didn't take away the fact that he was a snitch. He had to learn that being snitch got you beat.

I parked the station wagon by the cemetery because I knew Adam always did that. I guess he liked to walk to school a little bit, probably getting mentally prepared for class – he was taking all honors classes, trying to get into Harvard now that we were juniors. I went down the hill, looking for the green minivan he drove around. I checked three times for the car, but it looked like he wasn't at school, which was crazy. Adam was the type of kid who'd want to go to school even if it was cancelled, just to show he was a real go-getter. That's the type of kid Adam was. There were a few white kids running ahead of me a little bit, their backpacks almost coming off, trying to make it inside before first period started. I looked over at the side entrance – at the

blue doors – thinking there’s no way they were going to make it. I swear one kid’s hand was on the door handle when the bell went off. I watched him shake his head. He kind of just sauntered in.

Isaac and Peanut were waiting for me in the parking lot. They were sitting on the hood of his Civic, which was double-parked – Isaac wearing the clothes he’d shoplifted last month from the mall: a black Rocawear button-up, Boss jeans, and some Timberland boots. Peanut had on a Maryland sweatshirt like always. He was staring at the ground, rubbing the back of his head, looking really depressed. That’s the way Peanut was, though, at least since his dad had left. He never talked about it, but back when I went to church, I heard that his dad had a woman on the side. To be totally honest with you, sometimes I wanted to punch Peanut in the face. He was one of those guys who always felt sorry for himself, like he thought the whole world was against him.

“We need to fuck that kid up,” Isaac said, spitting out his toothpick.

“Word,” I said.

“No, really,” he said. “I’m serious.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said.

I tried to get shotgun, but Peanut pulled rank on me. They were both a year older than me, even though Isaac was a drop-out and Peanut had been talking for months about how a GED was just as good as a high school diploma. They weren’t even a full year older than me, but you know how Korean kids are. Even if you’re only eleven months younger than somebody, you’re supposed to act like you’re their younger brother by three or maybe four years. You could be a hundred times smarter than the kid, but they would still think they were more mature or something, like they had more life experience. Isaac and Peanut weren’t usually like that, but

whenever I tried to sit shotgun, at least one of them would say, “Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

Isaac started driving, and we all started talking at the same time, interrupting each other because we were so heated. Even Peanut was saying stuff, and he was the only one of us that still hung out with Adam here and there. It’s not like they hung out all the time, but I knew Peanut still said, “Hi,” to him sometimes in the hallways. You would have thought Adam at least wouldn’t have said anything about Peanut to his mom. It was some shady ass shit.

Isaac lit a blunt, and we passed it around. Peanut was calling Adam a snitch, except I didn’t like the way it sounded coming out of his mouth. When he said words like that, he didn’t really sound legit, if you know what I mean. We drove around the neighborhood behind the cemetery, and Isaac turned the music down low – an Eminem song – as we passed the police car parked in front of one of the houses. When we got away, they started talking some about what had happened, and it seemed like I’d gotten it the worst. Isaac’s parents didn’t even really care, but they didn’t go to church, though. My parents said they were bad people. Most people closed up shop on Sunday, but their meat store was always open. I guess they stopped going when Isaac’s older brother, Joe, started getting in trouble. Joe was in California now, and Isaac was always bragging to us about he was going to go see him, but I doubt he’ll ever go.

Peanut told us his mom had locked herself in her room and cried for hours. Adam’s mom had left a message on his answering machine, saying that we didn’t ever go to school anymore and spent all of our time at the pool hall with drug addicts. Then she said that we smoked weed and accused of us using other drugs, which was ridiculous. Adam had no idea what drugs we did or didn’t do. I was pretty sure he hadn’t seen a drug in his life. We’d stopped chilling with Adam in the seventh grade, and so everything he “knew” about us was just repeating gossip. The kids at

church and school were always talking about us – a lot of them thought we were “bad” or whatever, which was something I usually liked hearing, but it’d never gotten back to my parents before.

I could just see Adam and his mom in their big kitchen, sitting around the table, talking about us. She thought we were *scumbags*, that her children were so good, just because Sarah had gotten into Princeton and was going to be a doctor, with her big bug-eyed face. I swear, she had the biggest eyes for a Korean. They looked like they might pop out her damn sockets if she laughed too hard. Everyone else was trash to Adam’s mom – even good kids like Sarah’s ex-boyfriend, Jason Lee, who is the nicest kid you will ever meet but dumb as a fucking rock. I could just go on and on about Adam’s mom all day, how she wore too much make-up and had this fake-ass laugh. Just because you go to church doesn’t make you some kind of saint.

“Did you know Adam said we try to act black?” Isaac asked, puffing on the blunt.

“No, he didn’t,” I said.

I didn’t believe that, but Isaac nodded at me like he was sure.

“How do you know that he said that?”

“How do you think?” he asked.

That pissed me off. I knew what Adam was trying to say, that we were a bunch of fake gangsters. I was surprised he even had the balls to say something like that. His best friend, David Bach, who is one of the biggest nerds you’ll ever meet but thought he was one of the cool kids just because he was third-string on the JV basketball team – he’d called Isaac a fake gangster in gym class, and Isaac had straight laid him out. I hadn’t been there or anything, but I’d heard from this black kid, Frankie, that Isaac had punched him just one time in the gut, and David had dropped to the floor like a sack of bricks.

“Turn the music off,” Peanut said.

“Why?” Isaac said, forgetting Peanut didn’t like this song.

“Because I can’t hear what you guys are saying,” he said.

The song was getting to that line Peanut hated, when one of the other guys in D12 talks about getting head from his grandmother. Whenever that part came up, Peanut would freak out, covering his ears like a little kid. Isaac always laughed at the part, and I didn’t even notice the line until Peanut said something.

“What do you want to do then?” I asked Isaac, getting serious. “Adam’s probably in school right now. We can get him after school, but I didn’t see his car.”

“That’s true,” Isaac said, turning up the music.

I was feeling the weed all of a sudden, and the song was getting crucial. Eminem was the shit, better than most black rappers. Peanut liked Eminem’s verse. I mean, we all did, and I realized it was the first time in a while since I’d really listened to that song. God, it was so crucial. Isaac handed me the blunt, and for some reason, I started thinking about this one time, a while back, when my place got robbed.

It happened back when Adam still lived down the street from me. Our neighborhood is a pretty normal place, kids riding their bikes, running around and all that. It’s actually pretty close to my old middle school. Anyhow, in the fifth grade, one day my house got robbed. I’d just came home from school, got some chips from the kitchen because I’d been craving some Ruffles after I saw some kid eating them during lunch, but when I sat down to watch some cartoons in the living room, I looked up and the TV was gone. It just wasn’t there, like it’d just up and vanished into the thin air. I’d never been so freaked out, and when I called my parents, they went crazy.

They ended up installing all types of shit, even though we really didn't have the money back then to afford it.

A few months after that, Adam's family moved to the big house, which was closer to Kirkwood, where all the rich kids lived. I don't think it's related or anything, but I remember thinking Adam was lucky because nothing like that ever happened over there. I'd never even said anything about to Isaac about the TV. My parents didn't really want to get out, otherwise the people at church would start talking, but I'd told Adam one day about it, how I got scared I was getting going home sometimes, thinking someone might be there waiting for me. It's crazy because someone had been in my house, some stranger, and just walked out with my TV, but I'd been a little kid when it happened. You can't let that kind of stuff bother you.

"I got an idea," I said, and then we came up with a plan.

The phone rang five times, and the answering machine picked it up. I heard it while I was in the shower and ran out of the bathroom, thinking it was Isaac because today was the day we were going to go over to Adam's place. When I realized it was a white person's voice, though, I got a soda. I sat on the counter, drinking my soda and listened to Mr. Nugent talk to the answering machine, not even knowing that I was just sitting here.

I'd gone to school that entire week, even though I was scared that I might run into Adam. The good thing was we weren't in any of the same classes anymore. I talked to all of my teachers, too, explaining that the reason I hadn't been going to school recently was because of problems at home. I told them I knew I was behind and everything but would work really hard for the rest of the quarter. I'd make up any quizzes or tests that I'd missed and get notes from one of my classmates. A few of them asked me what exactly was going on at home, and without getting

into the details, I convinced each of them that it was something really bad – something I didn't want to talk about but that it was nothing to call the cops about, either. A few of my teachers were dicks, but I was able to get most of them on my side. You'd be surprised how many people will believe what you say if you're smart. People were always talking about my potential and everything like that.

“Hello, mister and misses Kang. This is Mr. Nugent again from Eugene's high school. I've left several messages on your phone already, but I just thought I'd try again. It would be really great if you could call me back, though. I'd just like to meet and talk to you about your son. I'd rather not explain over the phone, but in case you're worried, it isn't all bad news. So, if you could just call me back, I would really appreciate it. I look forward to meeting with the both of you. Thanks.”

I deleted the message and got back into bed. The guy was really starting to annoy me. I'd met him only one time, at the beginning of the year. I'd heard he tried to meet up with all of the juniors, which was crazy because there were over three hundred people in my grade.

When we met, we hadn't even talked about school. He just talked about being an Irish-American and asked me if I was Korean. I was like, “Yeah, my last name is Kang.” The weird thing was he tried to convince me that Irish and Koreans had a lot in common, which I found funny. He said he'd taught English in Korea for a while, and I started laughing because I imagined a bunch of little Korean kids with Irish accents, even though he didn't have a strong one. You could just barely hear it when he said certain words. Anyhow, he said that the histories of our countries were very similar, and after a while, I got tired of disagreeing with him. “Yeah,” I said. “Sure. I can see that.”

I turned on the fan next to my window and lit one of my dad's cigarettes – the Korean ones I didn't feel like because I never got anything. No matter how hard I pulled on the cigarette, it just felt like I was sucking in air. They're probably ultra-lights or something like that, even though there's nothing about it written on the pack. I started playing with the cigarette, throwing it into the air and then catching it. Then the ash started to get all over the place, and I had to clean it up.

All that week, I'd tried not to think about it, but on the morning we broke into Adam's house, I'd woken up with a sharp pain in my back near where my hips were. It felt like someone was trying to stretch this one muscle in my back, like a rubber band, stretching it right up until the moment it finally snapped and would go flying around in the room. I needed to get one of those heating pads my parents were always using at the store.

At ten o'clock, I finally got my clothes together, which included the ski mask I'd found in the closet. My dad kept some of the clothing from our store in the storage closet, and I knew he wouldn't be able to tell if I only took one. I cut the eye holes out of them, threw away the extra cloth, stuffed the thing in my pocket, and headed out. It wasn't like I could back out now, even if I wanted to because I'd been the one who had come up with the plan in the first place. If I backed out now, I knew Isaac would say something.

When I got to his apartment building, Isaac was sitting on the hood of his car, smoking a cigarette, but he wasn't wearing black like he was supposed to. Instead, he was wearing a bright blue shirt, the Timberland boots, and a thick chain around his neck. The chain was the only thing he hadn't shoplifted, and it was just like the way he always dressed, which I thought was straight-up retarded.

“What are you wearing?” I asked.

“I was thinking about it,” he said, “and I don’t think it make any sense.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not like anyone’s going to be home. If someone even sees us, it’s going to be that much more suspicious, you know what I mean?”

“Why didn’t you say that before? What am I supposed to do now?”

I pointed at my clothing. I was dressed like a ninja.

“Here,” he said, giving me his keys. “Peanut isn’t even here yet, anyway.”

I tossed the keys back at him. I didn’t want to go inside his apartment. I didn’t want to go anywhere. I just wanted to get this done with, and I didn’t understand how Isaac was so chill about this. I’m not saying I was scared or anything, but you know, you could get into trouble for breaking into someone’s house. What my mom had said about me going to jail, that had been on my mind the last couple of days, even though I knew you couldn’t go to jail if you weren’t eighteen.

“Whatever,” Isaac said, yawning.

It felt like we waited hours for Peanut, but when I checked my watch, only thirty minutes had gone by. Isaac had gone back inside his apartment to put on some different clothes after I’d finally convinced him to take off the chain at least. The sun was out now, and you could see everything, the birds flying in the sky, license plate numbers from thirty feet away. For a little bit, I wondered what he would say if I just left and went back to my place.

“He still not here yet?” Isaac asked when he came back out.

He’d put on a black tee-shirt, sneakers, and some jeans I hadn’t seen him wear for a long time. They were his old Levi’s. I had an old pair lying around somewhere, too, but it was weird to see him wearing them. I started thinking about back in the day when our moms made us wear

all those corny clothes. Isaac used to wear this one outfit: red suspenders, a yellow dress shirt, and khakis. His black hair would be slicked to the side, and we'd make fun of him so bad. Actually, when we were kids, Adam had kind of been the mean one in the group. Even though he was younger than Isaac, he was the kind of kid who wasn't afraid to say things to older people.

"What's so funny?" Isaac asked.

"Nothing," I said. "I just remembered something."

He nodded. "Where this kid at?" He looked a lot more serious than before.

"I don't know," I said. "We can't do this without him, though."

"Why?"

"We just can't," I said.

"Don't tell me you're punkin' out," he said.

"What the fuck?" I asked, all offended. "I'm the one who came up with the plan."

"Then why you saying we can't do this?"

"I'm just saying," I said. "Peanut's supposed to be the look-out."

"Don't worry about that," he said, popping open a pack of cigarettes. "We're not going to get caught. You don't have to worry about that. Where's Peanut, though, really? You think he's punking out?"

"How am I supposed to know? Maybe he is."

"Get in," he said, unlocking the car. "Let's go get him."

We couldn't find Peanut, though. We tried his house, but his car wasn't there. Then we went to school and looked for his car over there. Then the pool hall and the café, but he wasn't in any of those places. I really didn't know where else he could be.

“Where is he?” Isaac asked.

We drove past Peanut’s apartment building one more time. He drove the Corolla, which was this red beat-up thing, but sometimes his parents left him the keys to the white van. His dad used to be an exterminator or something, and that white van was the only thing he’d left them. Either way, we didn’t see any of their cars, and Isaac was getting worked up. He was speeding like crazy and kept calling Peanut a punk.

“Forget him,” I said. “He isn’t here.”

“Shit,” he said. “I really didn’t think Peanut would do us like that.”

I grabbed a baseball bat from the back seat and put it in my lap. It was an aluminum bat, the one he used back when we were in little league. Isaac was pretty bad at sports. He just didn’t have the hand and eye coordination, but I’d been good. I played shortstop, and my favorite thing was going to my left to scoop up a ground ball, then jump and throw the ball across my body to first base. A lot of kids at school still remembered that about me, how good I was at fielding ground balls, and this kid, Michael Sell, had tried to get me to join the baseball team my freshman year. I’d gone to one of the games last year. Michael had gotten pretty good.

“What the hell is this?” I asked, staring at the bat. It looked a lot smaller than I remembered.

“It’s a bat.”

“Yeah, I know that,” I said, “but why is it in the car?”

“I thought it’d be good to have,” Isaac said, getting back onto the main road.

“We don’t need it.”

“What if someone sees us?” he said, pointing at his head. “You got to use your brain, kid. We might need it for back up.”

Sometimes I call it an apartment, but Adam lives in a big house. It's got three stories, including the basement, and there's a full-length swimming pool out back. Back in seventh grade, Isaac convinced Adam to throw a party at his house, which made all the sense in the world because Adam's parents didn't come home until at least one or two every night. We were still friends with the white kids then, and let me say, it got pretty wild. Isaac always had some liquor in the house since that was what his parents did for a living, and some of the kids got drunk to the point that they puked in the swimming pool.

I remember Isaac, Michael Sell, and I had been lying down on the beach chairs on the patio, just laughing at everyone. Michael had gotten wasted lots of times with his dad so he drank like a champ, but everyone else was weak sauce. Adam flipped out about the puke, though, and spent the whole rest of the night trying to fish it out of the swimming pool, even though we said that the cleaning thing they had would take care of it. He wouldn't listen to us, and we got into a big fight, saying we were "irresponsible," which was a word I'd never heard him use before. A couple of days later all of our moms found out, and my parents forced to apologize by myself at church, in front of all the adults. None of us had been back to his house since then.

Isaac parked the Civic, and we cut across the field. He dragged the bat across the ground, and I told him to cut it out, saying someone might hear us, even though I knew that probably wasn't possible. Adam's house was near the woods, just like the other developments in that area. There were a couple more houses now, and a lot of the trees had been cleared out, but it was still pretty quiet. There were still a lot of deer hanging around. We came up on about ten of them, and they stared at us for a while before running away all at once.

We walked around the pond and stopped at the hill, where we got a look at the driveway. Adam's family had three cars: the green minivan Adam drove around, a white Volkswagen Jetta his parents had gotten his older sister as a graduation present, and a blue BMW, which I used to see all the time at church. They always parked the cars in the driveway because of all of the stuff in the garage. Today, the driveway was empty. Next door there was a Pathfinder, but it belonged to a white couple in their eighties who never came outside.

“Should we go now?” Isaac asked.

“Let's go through the woods,” I said.

“Good idea.”

We went into the opening. There were a lot of branches everywhere, and Isaac got in front, swinging the baseball bat. The branches snapping sounded just like those fireworks you throw at the ground. I couldn't really see the sun above because of the trees, but the air was wet, and my thighs were sweating underneath my sweatpants. I remembered the mask in my pocket, and I kept playing with it, spinning it around. Some birds started squawking, and I stopped all of a sudden, looking up. It was sparser here. The trees didn't have as many leaves, and I caught a school of birds flying in a V-shape. They were just cruising about a hundred feet up above, and I watched them until I couldn't see them anymore. I always thought birds looked cool when they flew in packs like that.

Adam's house was just a little bit up ahead, and we walked carefully through the last of the woods, stepping over fallen branches and looking out for thorns. We opened the gate, and I stepped onto the patio, walking gingerly. I swear I thought someone was watching us, and as we walked around the pool, I was thinking about the last time we'd been here, the vomit floating across that water, Adam getting all mad.

Right before we got up to the door that led into the basement, I felt something hard hit up against my foot. We both looked down and saw cigarettes on the ground, a glass ash tray next to it. I knew Adam was the only person who used the basement in the house. His room was in there and everything, but I just couldn't believe that the cigarettes were his. It actually pissed me off for some reason, maybe because then it would have made him a hypocrite.

"You think that's his?" Isaac asked.

"Can't be," I said. "No way."

All of the windows up above were black, and there was no way I could see inside of them, but I was still feeling like someone was watching us, just knowing we weren't supposed to be there. I tried to listen for noises, but all I could hear was my own breath. It was so heavy-sounding, and I tried to control it, but it was like I couldn't control my body. What do they call it? An out of body experience? It was like I was watching us standing there, two kids dressed in black, scared out of our minds. Isaac put his hand on the knob, grabbing it before turning it, and I almost said something, like "let's go back." Then I was hoping that it was locked, but it wasn't. Korean people never lock their doors. I don't know why.

The basement was dark, and for a second, I couldn't see anything. Isaac flicked the light switch, and it was kind of amazing seeing all of the furniture. It must have been different for the guy who'd robbed our house, since he'd never been inside until that day, but maybe it was the same, I don't know.

Adam had changed some things around, but as we walked around the basement, I started to understand that I'd come this far, there was nothing I could do but be a man about it. We had our reasons for coming here and doing this, anyhow. If Adam hadn't said anything to his mom,

we wouldn't have even come here. It's just the way life is. Either you get got and do nothing about it or you do something. It's as simple as that.

The floor was made out of a really smooth stone. Adam and I used to glide around the floor in my socks, and this one time, we'd spent an entire night trying to learn the moonwalk. The walls were also still that light brown color, which I'd forgotten all about. It was like I could feel Adam's *aura* in those walls, imagine him sitting in the basement, watching TV and thinking about stuff.

I put on the mask over my face.

"What is that?" Isaac asked. "What are you doing?"

"You brought a bat," I said. "I brought a mask."

"You should have told me," he said. "It looks hard."

In front of us was the TV, and I tried to lift it off of the ground, but it was way too heavy. It was new and probably bigger than any TV I'd ever seen before. It must have been at least sixty-inches, and I just stared at it for a little, wondering what we should do. If the TV in the basement was this big, then the TV upstairs might be even bigger. I hadn't thought this thing through.

"Fuck," I said, smacking the TV. "This is too big."

"Yeah," Isaac said, putting the bat on his shoulder.

"Damn," I said, wiping off a dusty spot. "It's probably expensive, too."

I heard Isaac groan but didn't think anything of it.

"Watch out," he said, like he was warning me.

I turned around and at the last second, I saw him swivel his shoulders. I barely saw it coming, but still everything happened so slowly. He cocked the bat, holding it there next to his

ears like he was eyeing a fastball, and then he swung hard, not turning his hips like you were supposed to, but it didn't matter. There was a loud crack, and when he backed off like he was reloading a gun, there was a huge crack right in the middle of the screen. You'd think the glass would have shattered, but maybe it was made out of a different, more expensive kind of glass.

"What are you doing?" I screamed, but he didn't say anything.

He just put the bat on his shoulder again and took another swing.

"Stop," I said, gritting my teeth.

Before he could take another swing, I grabbed the bat from his hands, and Isaac – that kid – he tried to take it back from me. When I finally got it out of his hands, he was mugging me, and for a second I thought I was going to have to fight him.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy? What are you thinking?"

"Give it back to me," he said quietly.

"What?" I asked, hugging the bat.

"Eugene, seriously," he said. "Give it back."

"Isaac," I said. "You never said you were going to do this."

"So? Who cares?"

"I care," I said, pointing at one of the huge cracks. "What are you trying to do? We never said we were going to break anything. We were supposed to just take the TV."

"It's too big, though," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Then we take something else!" I screamed. "What the fuck!"

"*Hey*," he screamed, lunging for the bat.

I don't know why he said, "*Hey*!" Isaac never spoke Korean, and anyhow, parents are the only kind of people who use a word like that. As soon as he tried to get it with his hands, I raised

the bat and swung, turning at the waist and everything. I swear if he hadn't tripped, things would have turned out a lot different that day.

I'm still not sure if people can die from that, but I guess it's possible. I really don't know what Isaac was thinking that day. He never told me. He didn't even have that good a reason to be that mad at Adam because Isaac's parents apparently didn't care what he did. We both just stared at the TV for a while, at the two big cracks. There was one in the middle and another right below it.

"What should we do now?" he asked after a while.

"What do you mean?" I said. "I think it's fucking broken."

"I know that," he said, "but I don't know, should we take something? It's probably going to be weird if they come home and just see a busted-up television. You think they'll think it was us?"

"Fuck!" I said, feeling like my life was over.

"Let's go upstairs and look around," he said, grabbing me by the shirt and pulling me up off of the floor. "Come on, get up."

I heard the garage door opening and quickly dumped the ash into the trash. I set the fan to the highest setting, and then I ran around the room, flapping my arms around like crazy, but I couldn't tell if it smelled or not. I heard the door shut, and the sound was heavy, like my parents were pissed about something.

I slipped into the bathroom, locking the door. I put in some drops and started brushing my teeth. My eyes weren't red, but they were chinky as hell. I knew my parents would be suspicious

because they saw people high all the time at the store. Then again, if they'd found out what Isaac and I had did, none of that even mattered.

There was a knock at the door.

"What?" I said. "I'm using the bathroom."

"*Okay*," my dad said in his deep Korean voice. "Come outside when done."

I turned on the fan and stared at the mirror, opening my eyes as big as it got, but the rings above them wouldn't come back. My eyes looked tiny on my face, like two little dots, and I was scared to leave the bathroom I thought I was having a panic attack. I thought a lot of crazy things, like maybe they'd talked to Adam's mom, and maybe they'd called the cops. I swore they were going to send me to juvie.

"Eugene!" my mom said through the door. "What are you doing?"

I was praying for the first time in years, something I hadn't done since I'd stopped going to church, but I was just that scared. I whispered, "Please, let me go this one time. I promise that I'll never do anything like this again. Just this one time, please, God, please!"

I heard my dad call for me again, and so finally I turned off the fan. This was how everything was going to end. At least I was high. If my dad didn't kill me himself, I was going to get arrested and everything, sit me down in some room with handcuffs on. I decided right then that if they didn't already know about Isaac, I wasn't going to snitch on him.

The hallway was dark, and I walked slowly, trying to rip out my hair because the pain felt good, but then I heard my mom moving around in the kitchen. It sounded like she was making food, which was crazy. I was thinking, "Why would she be making food right now?" It was so sick that they could eat at a time like this, but when I saw my dad sitting at the table, I quickly did my hair right. He cleared his throat and pulled out a chair for me. There was some mail on

the table, and my mom was standing in front of the stove with her back turned to me – the rice cooker making that sucking sound, hot air shooting through the holes on top.

My dad smiled at me – a big, goofy kind of a smile – and I flinched when he patted my shoulder with his hand. The thing is I never saw him smile, unless he and mom were watching one of their variety shows in the living room, and even then he'd only be smirking, never a big smile like this one. Then my mom comes and sets down a big tray of food on the table in front of me. She wasn't smiling, but I could tell she didn't know anything. She was only mad at me about the whole weed thing.

“What's going on?” I asked.

“*Haven't you seen?*” my dad said.

“What? What are you talking about?”

He put his palm flat on the mail and then started shuffling them in his hand, like he was playing poker. They looked like magazines, a big stack of them, and I saw the word, “Apply,” in all capital letters above a picture of some kids in a chemistry lab. I still didn't get what was going on, though. I thought maybe he'd picked them up from somewhere and was going to lecture me again about trying harder in school. Then maybe he'd talk about how he'd led the demonstrations against the government and all that, but how he'd still been able to study.

“*Do you really not know what this is?*” he asked.

He turned to my mother. She'd sat down across from me and had her hands folded on the table. She gave him a little smile and looked at the magazines.

“*These are from colleges,*” he said. “*They want you to go there. That's why they sent this mail to you, as a way of introducing their programs to you. Some of these colleges are very good,*

Eugene. Look at this: Emory, University of Chicago, and Harvard! This means that it isn't too late for you. Isn't that right, Eugene's mother?"

I felt my lips curling upwards. I couldn't stop smiling.

"Harvard?"

"That's right," he said. "Harvard."

He took a sip of his beer, making a sound like it was the best thing he'd ever tasted.

"Listen to what your dad is saying, Eugene," she said. *"We've all gone through our trials and tribulations recently, but this is a blessing, and you need to take advantage of it."*

"Okay," I said, nodding.

"Do you want a drink?" my dad asked.

"What?" I asked.

He pointed at his beer. His eyes were big, and deep lines formed across his forehead. He'd been losing his hair for a few years, and now it was almost all gone, except for a little bit on the sides of his head.

"Yeah," I said, laughing.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" my mom cut in.

I knew she was being this way because of what Adam's mom had told her because she never cared before.

"Why?" he asked, sounding offended. *"He already drinks with his friends. These kids aren't like the way we were, Eugene's mother. Let me just celebrate with my son."*

I went to school the next day and stopped by the guidance counselors' office during lunch. The secretary wasn't at her desk, but there were a bunch of kids sitting around, doing their

homework. I figured it was a special day or something because I'd never so many people in the guidance counselors' office before. There was one guidance counselor for each grade, and so the little office was shared by four people. I quickly walked past my guidance counselor from sophomore year, Mrs. Weir, a nice lady who'd always quoted famous people, trying to inspire me. I'd lied to her so many times.

Mr. Nugent's door was cracked open, and I pushed it open a little bit.

"Eugene! Just the person I was looking for," he said, smiling.

He was in there with another student, and I was just about to apologize to him, when I saw Adam sitting in the chair on the other side of the desk. All of a sudden, my chest got tight, and when I tried to say something, I started coughing. Adam turned around to see what was going on, and we looked at each other. You'd think I would have stared him down, made some kind of sign that I'd hurt him if he said anything, but that wasn't even on my mind. I felt so guilty about what I'd done. I just kept looking down at my feet.

"Hey, Mr. Nugent," I said.

"Eugene, would you mind waiting outside for a little bit. We're just about done here."

I didn't say anything, but I nodded. Then I closed the door and when I sat down on the chair outside of his office, the secretary came back into the room. She was the one all the guys always talked about. She was hot but in that nice, girl-next-door kind of a way. I didn't know her name, but she was smiling at me. Lots of white people smiled at me all the time. That's just the way Denton is sometimes.

"Are you waiting for Mr. Nugent?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I said.

The door opened, and Adam came out. I got up from the chair really quickly, and he stopped right in front of me. When I tried to get around him – he was wearing a blue Le Tigre shirt, which we used to sell at the store – he shuffled his feet and blocked my path again. He started to say something, and I finally looked up. He had a look of pain on his face, like maybe he was sorry for something, which completely threw me. Then he put his hand on my shoulder, and I shrugged it off, stepping around him. When I looked back for a second, the secretary was staring at me, like she was trying to figure out what had just happened.

“Eugene, sit down,” Mr. Nugent said, standing at his desk. “How are you?”

“Good,” I said.

“Well, Eugene,” he said, exhaling. “There are a few things I need to talk to you about.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry for not calling you back.”

“So, you got the messages I left,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Where are your parents then?”

“Oh,” I said. “They work during the week. We have a store, and they don’t get home until nine or ten.”

“I see,” he said, nodding. “Well, would you like the good news or the bad news first?”

I don’t understand why people even ask this question. If I was him, I wouldn’t even think to say something like that. I’d just say everything at once, without thinking about what order to put the things in. It’s kind of messed up because no matter what you pick first, you’re going to get the bad news eventually.

“Give me the good news first,” I said.

He smiled and opened the drawer, picking out a manila folder.

“Do you know what this is?” he asked, showing me a busy piece of paper.

I tried to read what was on it, but there were so many different colors and pictures on the thing, I didn’t know what to look at first. Anyhow, he turned over before I got a good look at it. He just let it fall onto his desk.

“This is your PSAT score,” he said. “You haven’t received it yet, though.”

“Okay ...” I said. “What’d I get?”

“You did very, very well,” he said, “better than almost anyone in school.”

I’d be lying to you if I said I wasn’t a little proud. I was really fucking proud. I’d taken that test earlier in the year and remembered everyone making a big deal about it, but I hadn’t even thought it was that hard. I didn’t know some of the words in the sentence completions, but back when I went to hagwon, which is this tutoring place that my parents used to make me go to, one of my teachers had taught me Latin because she said there was nothing else she could teach me. Everything else had been too easy for me. I speak pretty good English if I really want to, and I finished each of the math sections with time left on the clock.

“That’s cool,” I said.

“I don’t know if you understand, Eugene,” he said forcefully. “There’s a good chance that you’re going to be nominated for the National Merit Scholarship. The thing is ... there’s no way you’re going to get very far because of your grades, which leads me to the bad news. Eugene, do you know how many days of school you’ve missed?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Twenty-five days!” he said. “We’ve only been in school for three-and-a-half months! Eugene, what’s going on? Every single year, your grades have gotten worse and worse. You

might be the first high school drop-out to ever get such a high score on the PSATs. It's really frustrating for me ... as your guidance counselor to see you just throw your life away."

"A drop-out?" I asked, getting mad.

"Yes, Eugene!" he said, his face turning red. "Do you think that you're going to be able to graduate at the rate you're going? I've already talked to all of your teachers and the principal about you."

All of a sudden, I was worried. I'd never thought about not being able to graduate from high school. I knew that I was messing up and everything, but I always figured I'd be okay in the long run. Now, he was telling me that he'd talked to the principal and my teachers.

"Damn," I said, thinking I was glad that I'd asked for the good news first.

"So, what are you going to do, Eugene?" he sighed. "How are you going to fix this?"

"I guess I just need to start showing up to class."

"That's a start," he said, "but you're going to have to apply yourself, too."

"Okay, Mr. Nugent, I will," I said, meaning it. "I'm going to try."

He said a bunch of other things, but I wasn't listening. I just kept thinking about that TV, how we should have just beat on Adam a little bit. That was stupid. I didn't even feel any better after doing it. I'd just been worried about getting caught.

"So, have you started getting any mail from colleges?" he asked after a while.

It all made sense now. I'd been wondering why a school like Harvard would send me information, when I was failing most of my classes. They'd probably gotten hold of my test scores and thought I had good potential. As soon as they got my grades, they'd drop me like I was a bad habit.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I have."

“Any good schools? You don’t have to tell me. I’m just curious.”

“Harvard,” I said, shrugging.

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” he laughed.

When I walked out into the hallway, Adam was waiting for me.

“Oh,” I said.

“Eugene, listen,” he said, grabbing my arm. “I just want to talk to you.”

“What about?” I groaned. “Get off me.”

I swung my arm and started walking as quickly as I could away from him.

“Eugene, I’m sorry,” he said.

I turned around. “What?”

“I told her not to call you guys, but she wouldn’t listen,” he said. “I’m really sorry that I even said anything to her. That was wrong of me, but I just ... I just ...”

“What, man? What are you trying to say?” I asked, trying to process it all.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“What?” I asked, sounding like I was annoyed.

“If you want me to talk to your mom, I can do that. I’ll call her today after school or maybe I can show up if she’s at your apartment. I just feel bad. My mom is just like that sometimes.”

“You shouldn’t have said anything to begin with.”

“I know,” he said.

Now it was him who was looking at the ground.

“Yeah,” I said. “As long as you know.”

I nodded at him and walked away, my heart beating inside of my chest at like two beats-per-second. I was scared he was going to say he'd gotten robbed, but he just let me go. I guess he didn't think we could do something like that, and I kind of wanted to tell him I'd done that, just so that he knew what we were about. I didn't, though. That would have been really stupid.

I've been going to school every single day since then. After school, I just go straight home. I don't even go to the pool hall anymore. I hang out with Peanut and Isaac sometimes, but I don't even smoke that much anymore. It's boring and everything, but it feels like the right thing to do. My parents are so happy right now, like they're on the roof, you know what I mean?

I don't think about what we did that day anymore. I did for a while, but I don't anymore. I know it was stupid, but I still kind of feel like it had to be done. I might be going to school every day, catching up on my work, but I'm never going to be like Adam.

2. Threesome

I never said anything to anyone, but when we were kids, I didn't really like Isaac too much. He was that kid in bible study who was always getting everyone else in trouble, and if you were friends with him, sometimes you'd get it even worse than him. Because they were supposed to be cousins, that happened to Peanut all the time. They'd both get sent into the hall, and if I didn't do something to join them, Isaac would accuse me of not having his back.

This one time, our bible study teacher really got heated because Isaac was popping his gum when he told him not to. I don't remember the teacher's name, but he was new and from Korea. He had these thick glasses and a really fobby accent, which means he sounded like our parents. We'd always laugh about it after class, but Isaac didn't talk behind people's backs. He made fun of the teacher right to his face. Thinking about it now, the teacher was probably only twenty-five or something, but back then he seemed a lot older.

Anyhow, the teacher warned Isaac that if he didn't throw out his gum something bad was going to happen. He'd already told him to stop a few times, and I was thinking in my head that telling Isaac to do anything was the wrong move. After he said that, Isaac just smiled all sinister. Then he made the biggest bubble – it was dark pink, covered his entire mouth, and all you could see were those little smiling eyes of his. The teacher lost his shit. He went over and tried to pop the bubble with his finger. Then Isaac goes and bites his finger. That made the guy really go crazy. He started saying Korean words I'd never heard before. Then he pointed at the wall and told Isaac to go put his hands against it. Peanut started laughing, and so he had to do it, too.

The guy started with Isaac and smacked him pretty fucking hard three times, but then again Isaac wasn't your ordinary kid. He kept a straight face through all of it. Adam and I could

see his face from where we were sitting, and I swear Isaac didn't even blink. He was either eleven or twelve, but the kid didn't blink once, and the last smack was really loud. The other kids made a loud, gasping sound when they heard that. I closed my eyes, thinking it would hurt a lot and that Isaac would start bawling or something, but when I opened my eyes, he was smiling at me, like it was funny getting hit by the teacher. He was only a year older than me, but he seemed like he was maybe five or six years older than me right then. When he sat back down, he started chewing his gum, too, but at least he was doing it quietly this time.

When it was Peanut's turn to get hit, he put his hands on the wall and tried to put on a tough-looking face, but after the first slap to his backside, the kid started sobbing. He was sucking in air, the tears getting all in his mouth. The crazy thing was that the teacher thought he was actually laughing, and that made him hit Peanut even harder. Smack! Smack! Smack! He must have hit Peanut five more times, and then everyone in class started getting loud as hell, but the teacher just wouldn't quit until finally Peanut fell to the floor and started wailing in pain.

Those cries were the loudest things I've ever heard, and a teacher from another class busted into the room. She started yelling at our teacher, scolding him for getting physical with us, and eventually all of our parents got involved. It was this big thing because even though most of the congregation thought it was a terrible thing to do, especially in church, there were still a lot of older people who said it was okay to punish kids like that. My parents didn't like Isaac, and so my dad kept saying that if he'd been there, he would have done the same thing.

That would have stopped most kids from being bad or whatever or at least would have put a thought into their minds, but Isaac just got worse. It seemed like every single year he'd try to push the envelope a little bit more. In high school, after he'd stopped going to church, Isaac would show up to get me and Peanut. This one time, after we'd finished eating lunch, he took us

to the place where we'd listened to the sermon earlier and pulled out a crumpled-up ball of paper. He opened it up, and that's the day I saw weed for the first time. Peanut must have known what it was because he started hyperventilating all over the place. I didn't know what the hell was going on. Anyhow, Isaac rolled a joint, and we went out in the back. That's when Peanut just took off. I remember the whole time Peanut was running, Isaac yelled, "Pussy! You're a fucking pussy!"

Isaac had been away in California, so I'd been hanging out with Peanut for the last two weeks. I never just hung out with Peanut – it was always the three of us – and he was really starting to stress me out. I'd tried ducking him, hanging out with Moses Lee and his boys, but every time I was out somewhere, Peanut would hit me up on the cell. I must have felt bad because even when I didn't pick up at first, I'd always end up calling him back and telling him where I was. There weren't many places to go in Denton, anyhow, and so if he couldn't get a hold of me, he just showed up to the pool hall.

Today, we were over there again, playing a game of nine-ball. We'd just smoked behind the place, deep in the woods, and I was high as a motherfucker. Everyone had just started playing nine-ball, and I didn't really like the game. It was a lot tougher than eight-ball, since you couldn't just hit any ball you wanted. You had to hit them in order, "playing position," like everyone was always saying. I'd gotten okay, but the weed had messed me up, and I just felt like hitting the balls without thinking. Peanut didn't seem like he was really feeling the weed. That was one of the things that made me want to ditch him. He wasn't any fun to blaze with. He never even acted like he was high. He'd just bitch about people he didn't like, which was pretty much everyone we knew, and if he didn't take his medication, he'd be even worse.

"Isaac's spoiled," Peanut said, after he'd scratched on the nine.

“Why?” I asked.

He made a sucking noise with his teeth and looked at me all surprised, like I was stupid not to know what he was talking about. I raised the stick, pretending like I was going to hit him or something, and he put his hands up, telling me to stop.

“I just can’t believe his parents got him another car,” he said.

“That’s not true. His parents aren’t getting him the car,” I said, slamming the cue ball back onto the table. “I heard Joe was. Isaac says he’s making mad dough out in Cali.”

“I know that,” Peanut said angrily, “but he’s still spoiled.”

Before he’d gone to California, Isaac had been talking about how his brother was going to buy him a car. I didn’t believe it, and so I kept saying, “Yeah, whatever.” I just didn’t get how Joe, even if he was making all this money selling weed, was going to buy him a car. To be honest, Joe’s a dumbass – I’d grown up with him, and he’s older than me and everything, but I always thought he was kind of slow. He had this fobby accent like he’d grown up in Korea, but he’d been born in Denton just like the rest of us – but Isaac was like, “Naw, Joe’s doing big things out in Cali,” and then he wouldn’t say anything else about it when I asked what big things exactly. Anyhow, Isaac had called me on the road and said he was driving back to Denton in his new ride. I’d tried to get him to tell me what he’d gotten, but he’d only say I was going to be hella’ jealous when I saw it. It took me a second to figure out what “hella’” even meant.

“Did he tell you what he got?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Peanut said. “He was saying a WRX.”

The WRX was sweet. That kid, Moses Lee, had gotten a red one a few months back, and he drove that thing around everywhere. I never really know too much about cars, but I rode with him a few times, and it was quick as hell. He told me that up until a year ago, the car had only

been sold in Japan but now everyone and their mothers were trying to cop an import. Moses kept saying, “It’s got three-hundred horses,” that it could go a hundred MPH in under six seconds, but I didn’t care about all that. I just like the way the ride looked.

“Don’t act jealous,” I said to Peanut, racking the balls.

“I’m not jealous. I’m just – it’s not fair.”

“Whatever.”

I wanted Peanut to stop talking so much because he was ruining my high, but I listened to him bitch about Isaac for the next hour. It was all Isaac this and Isaac that, so finally after my high went away, I told Peanut to shut the hell up. That was the difference between Peanut and Isaac. If I’d said something like that to Isaac, he would have tried to fight me, but Peanut just got down. Even after I said I was sorry, he just moped around the pool hall, and so I ended up ignoring him. Around three, some other people showed up, and so I played nine-ball with them.

By eleven, the pool hall was bursting with heads, and I was in a good mood. The jukebox was playing “In Da Club,” and even though Peanut said he hated that song when it came on, I wasn’t about to let his negativity get to me. Jimmy – the Viet – was working the bar. I convinced him to sell me a couple of beers when the old man who owned the place went outside for a smoke, which took some doing. That was the only rule the old man followed, and the only reason was he’d gotten in trouble with the police a few months back. For an entire week, all of us had to drive all the way to Kirkwood to shoot pool, and the scene over there was different. They didn’t even play music, and mostly it was white kids who showed up. The people who worked the desk even checked IDs, saying you had to be eighteen to smoke.

Peanut and I were sitting at the bar, waiting on Jimmy, when we saw Isaac through the window. I hadn't even known he was back. He'd gotten his hair dyed yellow, and it was parted in the middle, the long bangs framing his face. That was the way those California Koreans did their hair. They were way fobbier than us. I waved back at him, not understanding what he was trying to tell us. He was making some sign with his hands.

"I think he wants us to come out," Peanut said. "He probably got the car."

I opened the door and saw a crowd of people hanging around a shiny blue car parked in the front. Everyone was shouting, and Isaac was at the center, just loving the attention. It took me a second to know that the car was the Volkswagen GTI because people didn't talk about that car. It was a four-door sedan with a little spoiler in the back, nice as hell.

"280 horses, 240 to the wheels, 17-inch rims, obviously manual," Isaac was saying to Moses Lee, who was looking the car up and down, like it was some hot girl.

"That's nice," I said, punching Isaac in the back.

"Bra, it's more than nice," he said. "This shit is hella' nice."

"Yeah, that's what I meant," I said.

Even the old man was looking at the car. He looked all tough and everything, but when it came down to it, the old man was a straight up lunchbox – silly as fuck. I didn't even notice it at first, but one day, I'd been high at the pool and listened to what he was actually saying behind the bar. I couldn't stop cracking up.

"Ahjussi," I said in Korean. "*Do you want to drive the car?*"

I can't really explain what "Ahjussi" even means. I guess in English it would be something like, "Sir" or "Mister," but that's not what it really means. I guess it all depends on

how you say it, like if it's someone you don't know, it's more like "Sir," but if you know the guy, it's more like "Uncle" or something friendly like that.

"Yeah," he said, smiling like he was all embarrassed.

"Get in, Ahjussi," Isaac said, handing him the keys.

"*Really?*" he asked, but he didn't mean like a question.

He flicked his cigarette into the parking lot and got into the driver's seat, like he owned the joint. Then the old man put the car in neutral and hit the gas a few times, making the engine roar. He knew what he was doing. I don't know what I thought he'd do, but I guess I thought he'd look more awkward behind the wheel. I'd never learned how to drive stick shift. Isaac had tried to teach me with the Civic, but I'd stalled out bad.

Everyone except Peanut was laughing, just going crazy, and having a good time. The girl Isaac was seeing, her name was Grace – she sat on the hood of the GTI and made all of her friends take pictures. She was posing like some busted import model. Sike, she wasn't ugly, but when she smiled, she had to show her busted-up teeth, looking like she was Japanese or something. Anyhow, I would have had a better time if it wasn't for Peanut. I could feel him standing behind me, getting all angry.

"Are you really going to be like that?" I whispered.

"Be like what?" he asked all innocent.

"Don't act like you don't know," I said.

Then Isaac put his hands in the air, dancing over to us. You could still hear the Fifty Cent song playing inside through the windows. I laughed and we bumped fists. He started clowning Peanut, dancing all up on him, but Peanut wasn't having it. He just pushed him away.

"What do you think?" Isaac asked, slapping him on the back.

“It’s cool,” Peanut said, stomping his cigarette.

“It’s just cool?” Isaac asked, bending at the knees and pointing at the car. “This is hella’ nice. You never seen anything this nice before.”

Grace and her friends had gotten into the car with the old man. The radio came on, and the music blasted from the speakers, the bass shaking the windows. It was the same Fifty Cent song, except it was starting at the beginning, where it was only the beat. The old man covered his ears with his hands, while Grace and her girls pumped their fists and shouted.

“Nice hair,” Peanut finally said.

“Oh, this?” Isaac said, combing the yellow hair back with both hands.

“You look like the sixth member of H.O.T.”

I seriously thought Isaac was going to hit him, but he just started cracking up, like what Peanut had said was the funniest thing ever. He said, “That’s a good one. I never even thought of that,” and it seemed like Peanut was surprised, too, the way he was looking at him. We all started laughing, though. Fifty was saying, “Go,” over and over again. I was imagining big things for the summer, now that Isaac was back. We were going to do things like we’d never done before.

That weekend, Isaac and I called Peanut, but he wasn’t picking up. Isaac was confused, saying Peanut was always down to party. I didn’t know where he’d got that. I thought Peanut would have probably stood in the corner all night, waiting for one of us to come over, so he could talk shit about everyone he hated at the party. I didn’t say anything, though, since there was this big birthday party Grace was throwing at her house. Her parents were away for the weekend – Isaac told me her parents had gone to the casino – and Grace was saying that she’d invited two hundred people. I thought if Peanut was going to be all negative about everything, it

was probably better that he wasn't around. Besides, I'd just copped the new Fifty Cent album, and I didn't feel like listening to Peanut bitch about it when I played the CD at the party.

"Bra," Isaac said. "You're going to love NorCal. There's something to do all the fucking time, man, and don't even get me started on the weather. I can tell you one thing. It doesn't get all hot like it is over here. It's like in the seventies all the time, and man, there beaches everywhere. Imagine my ride in that weather. That shit would look hella' nice."

"Is California really all that?" I asked skeptically.

"Hell, yeah," he said, putting the car into third gear. "Cali hella' nice."

Isaac was driving all carefully, which was news to me. When I asked him about it, he said he was just trying to ease the car in, since it was new. Joe had told him not to drive it too quickly in the beginning because otherwise, he might mess up the transmission. The kid didn't even have insurance for the car. I got all that, but it was still weird to see him driving the car barely over thirty miles-per-hour. I was used to getting jerked around all over the place.

"This shit right here, bra," he said, looking at the blunt in his hand. "It don't even compare to the shit that got in NorCal. They got weed over there that's purple. You believe that? It's purple, son, and got all these crystals that you can see with your eyes. Joe got himself a medical marijuana card, and I couldn't go into the place with him, but when he brought it out, I was like, "Damn." It was so sticky, bra. We need to smoke shit like that."

"What does Joe even do? I mean, how did he buy you this ride?" I asked.

"Joe?" Isaac asked, looking surprised by the question. "He pushes."

"Then why does he need a medical marijuana license or whatever?"

"I don't know, bra," he said, looking at me. "I don't know. He probably don't want to smoke his own stash. You know how that is. Anyways, I'm going to take you out to NorCal

when I go back. Bra, his house is out on the beach, and all the honeys so fly. Joe's girl – man, she's sexy. I wasn't going to say it to his face or anything, but yeah, she's sexy. I'm going to get me a girl like that one of these days.”

“What about Grace?” I asked, laughing.

“What do you mean?” he asked, spitting out the window.

“Aren't you guys together?”

“Hell no,” he said, a bunch of lines on his forehead. “That's disgusting.”

“You better not say that when we get there,” I warned him.

He laughed and said, “Yeah, probably not. You got a point.”

“Did you even sleep with Grace yet?” I asked.

I'd wanted to ask him that for a little bit, ever since he'd start bringing Grace out. The thing was she didn't look the normal girl he usually went for. His last girlfriend, Isabelle, was skanky as hell. I knew three other guys that had been with her, and there was a rumor going around that she'd lost her virginity when she was twelve. Grace, on the other hand, was your typical good girl. The first time Isaac had brought her to the pool hall, I'd asked her if she wanted to smoke with us, and she'd told me that she didn't smoke cigarettes. I was like, I'm talking about weed, girl, and she flipped out, telling me how it was illegal, how I could get in a big trouble if anyone ever found out. Ever since then, she'd didn't even call me by my name. She just said, “Pothead,” all white and like it was a dirty word or something.

“No,” he said, rolling his eyes. “All she ever wants to do is make out. She's waiting for marriage. Her parents got her on lock.”

“Why you even with her then?” I asked.

“I don't know,” he said, becoming quiet. “She's cute, though, ain't she?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “She’s cute.”

There really were a lot of people who’d showed up at Grace’s party. Her house was actually kind of close to Adam’s place, and even though Isaac didn’t say anything about it, I could tell he was thinking about that, too. My mom had told me that Adam was going to get into Harvard, even though he hadn’t even applied yet. He probably was going to get in, too. That kid was at the top of our class.

Anyhow, we parked behind the Mercedes I saw Grace, and once we got inside, it was on. There were like fifteen bottles of all different kinds of stuff in the kitchen – Johnny Walker for the guys and different kinds of cognac for the girls, which was no doubt Grace’s idea. She might have thought that weed was bad, but she loved getting her drink on. Whenever I saw her out, she’d have a bottle of Alizé in the trunk. That was her thing, and just like Adam’s parents, her parents had a liquor store in the city.

She saw us in the kitchen and ran up to Isaac, jumping into his arms. She was wearing a shiny tiara on her head with her hair up. Her face was red and sweaty-looking, but Isaac didn’t care because the next second, they’re making out. Everyone started yelling for them to stop, and Isaac was smiling as he kissed her. The music playing on the big speakers in the living room was wack, though. I didn’t feel like hearing that Drunken Tiger CD again, and so I snaked my way through the dark room, avoiding all of the sweaty, dancing people. I knew some of them, but there were a lot of Kirkwood heads, too. I turned off the stereo in the middle of the song, and everyone stopped dancing all of a sudden, looking at me, trying to understand what had happened.

“What the fuck?” someone yelled. “Turn it back on.”

I put my hand up, put the CD into the slot, and put it to track five.

“Shout-out to the birthday girl!” I said, jumping onto the table.

I touched the ceiling to keep myself from falling. There was a huge roar as the song came on. Grace and Isaac came into the living room, both pointing at me. Someone handed me a bottle, and I tipped my head back, finishing half of it. This one girl climbed onto the table and started dancing next to me. It was dark in the house, so I couldn't really see her, but she looked good from the back. Her jeans were damn near painted on, and then she had the spaghetti strap, which I like. We danced on the table for a while, me grinding up against her, and I did alright. You're going to laugh, but I'd been practicing in my room, in front of the mirror.

“What's your name?” she asked me.

“Eugene,” I said. “What's yours?”

“Gina,” she said.

“How do you know Grace?” I asked her.

“Oh, she's my cousin.”

“Grace is your cousin?” I asked. “Are you sure about that?”

She laughed, all offended.

“Naw,” I said. “It's just that you don't look alike. I mean, at all.”

While Isaac was in California, this one night Peanut and I had gone to the bowling alley on Route Sixty. It started out like any other night. Peanut didn't want to bowl, and so we'd sat in the parking lot, getting high, while Peanut tried to figure out what was wrong with his car. It was making this screeching sound whenever he started the engine, and I told Peanut to stop worrying about it, that the car was old, but then all of a sudden, it wouldn't start. I went inside the bowling

alley and got a few people who knew stuff about cars to come outside with me. Then Moses, the kid who drove the WRX, showed up/

I just stood behind them, watching as Moses drove his WRX next to Peanut's car. He got out of the car, popped open the hood of his car, and connected the engines with some jumper cables. Then everyone started arguing about pluses and minuses, and I got tired of just standing there, so I sat on the curb, smoking a cigarette. I was just about to light another one, when I heard a loud bang somewhere behind me. A group of people spilled out onto the parking lot, and this one older guy I knew, whose name was Chris but we called him Fob King, punches some kid in the face. Fob King was the only fob I was cool with because he was a bad dude. I heard he'd once scrapped with five big black dudes and had come out of it even.

Everyone stopped working on Peanut's car, and we all started running towards, pushing the crowd through the circle of people that always magically forms when there's a fight. I saw the top of Peanut's head on the other side of the circle. Fob King was on top of the kid, pounding him with lefts and rights. He was a bigger than the kid, who was a kid with dark skin and spiky hair. The kid put up his hands, pleading for him to stop, and that's when Fob King really got angry. He reached into his pocket and out came a butterfly knife. The kid started screaming, his eyes damn near popping out of its sockets, and I looked around, waiting for someone to pull Fob King off of the kid. They didn't do a thing, though. They just stared at what was going on, not even caring about the kid's screaming. They were all Fob King's boys, older guys, and he grabbed one of the spiky hair kid's wrists, slamming it to the cement. The guy I was standing next to – he was wearing a doo rag and had a long scar running down the side of his arm –the guy grabbed the kid's other hand and put a knee into his chest.

“Open your mouth,” Fob King said in a low voice.

He snapped his wrist, and the blade was next to his ear, pointed to the sky.

“No,” said the kid with the spiky hair, trying to get free. “Are you crazy?”

“Do it, motherfucker,” the other kid said.

All of a sudden, Fob King brought the blade down in one quick motion, slicing the sky, and stopping an inch short of the kid’s face. You couldn’t call it a scream. You could barely hear it over all of the yelling, but for a second, his eyes were bigger than any white boy’s. It was like he’d changed races. Then Fob King started laughing, like he hadn’t even been that angry. When he stood up, he did a few more tricks with the butterfly knife before closing it and sliding it into his back pocket.

“Don’t fuck with me again,” he said to the kid, whose eyes were back to normal.

“Yeah, nigga’,” Doo Rag said, stomping on his hand. “Don’t fuck with my boy.”

After we finally got his car working, Peanut and I got into an argument. He was saying that it was messed up what Fob King did that to the kid because all he’d done was bump into him and not apologize. At least that’s what people were saying. My thing was sometimes you just had to do stuff like that, to get respect and everything, but Peanut was so mad. He kept hitting his steering wheel as we drove away. I didn’t understand why he was taking it personally, and when I asked, he just ignored me. He kept saying it was messed up, that Fob King was the bitch.

“You wouldn’t say that to his face, though,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, I would.”

“Are you serious?” I said. “Peanut, you’re a pussy.”

That set him off and he started shaking the steering wheel like he was having a seizure.

“Chill out, man,” I said, getting scared. “The hell is wrong with you?”

“Eugene,” he said, his teeth clenched. “I swear ...”

“You swear what?” I asked.

“Don’t call me a pussy,” he said.

“Okay, Peanut, you’re not a pussy, but just admit you wouldn’t do anything.”

He got quiet, like he was picturing it.

“I’d call the cops,” he said.

“Man!” I said, sighing. “Don’t say stuff like that. Talking about snitching, what the hell is wrong with you?”

“Okay, maybe I wouldn’t call the cops, but ...” he said, pausing. “You don’t say what I can do and not do because you don’t even know. I wouldn’t puss out. I’d do something about it.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Just – stop it.”

“What would you do if someone messed with you, Peanut?” I asked. “What would you do? You wouldn’t do anything. I know you, Peanut.”

“I don’t know,” Peanut said, “but I’d do something.”

What had happened to Douglas was kind of the same thing. I didn’t know who he was before that night, and I hadn’t seen him while I was up there dancing with Gina, but it turned out they had something going on, and when the Fifty Cent album was over, I jumped back down onto the floor, thinking I’d get a drink. The kid came out of nowhere, nudging my forehead and then getting in my face. The kid even spit into my eye – it was thick, smoker’s spit, and I just lost it. I raised my fist and aimed for his teeth, but before I could let a punch go, Isaac came out of nowhere and separated us, which was surprised the hell out of me. I told him to get out of the way, but Isaac kept pushing me back, and said, “Cool it, bra. That’s his girl.”

“Who is? What?” I asked, looking for Gina.

Douglas pushed Isaac into me, making me take a few steps back. All of a sudden a bunch of kids pushing each other. The strobe light was flashing, and when I finally found Douglas, I ran towards him, taking off low like a sprinter. I crashed into him, pushing through the resistance, until I started to feel my feet fall. I wrapped my arms around his stomach, and his head bounced off the floor. I raised my hand, making a fist, and threw it down with everything I had, connecting with my elbow. He pushed his palm into my neck, and I tried to get it off of me, but he had a strong grip for a little guy. I grabbed his arm with both hands, digging my fingernails into his skin. He let go and snapped his hand back, so I hit him with another elbow, this time connecting with his stomach.

I felt his body get loose, and that’s when I was finally able to get a clean punch in. It was a good punch, and even though the music was loud – all of these other noises I heard that sounded like they were faraway – I heard him groan as I connected. The strobe lights were flashing, and every other second, I saw his face. He was heated, but I knew I had him. Actually, I was surprised by how easy it was to get off the next few swings, like I was fighting a little kid, but every time the light would flash and then I’d see that look on his face – full of anger and hate – it kept me from taking pity on the kid.

I was just about to hit him again, when the lights came on, and I saw everyone in a circle around me, staring at us. All of a sudden, girls were shrieking, and my right arm looked like it’d been painted in a really thin layer of blood. I was sitting on Douglas’ chest, and I got to my feet. He wasn’t knocked out, but he was covering his eyes with his arm, throwing the white flag. Blood was streaming from his nose, and a little bit of it had gotten into his teeth. There were red drops on the carpet next to him, and he rolled over onto his stomach, all dramatic.

“I’m calling the cops!” someone screamed.

Everyone started running at the same time, and the house was filled with heavy pounding. I felt a hand grab me by the shirt, and I whipped around, but it was only Isaac. I ran after him, passing a couple of kids who for some reason were capping the bottles of liquor. He opened the glass door in the kitchen, and we came out onto the balcony, which wasn’t very high off the ground. I still twisted my ankle a little bit landing on the grass. He looked back, waving me towards him, and I got up, following the yellow heels of his boots. When we turned the corner to the front of the house, there were all of these flashing lights, and I stopped, thinking it was the police.

Isaac turned around and yelled, “What are you doing?” He was still running.

It wasn’t the cops. It was just everyone was getting into their cars.

“Eugene!” a voice yelled.

That’s when I saw the car, and even with how crazy everything was, I was stunned by the beauty of the thing. The headlights were the brightest in the entire street.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Isaac yelled from the car. “Get in!”

The interior looked even better than it had before with all its dials and blinking lights. It was almost hypnotizing. Isaac spun the car around, and I saw a few cars race away, but most of the cars stayed stuck, the red brake lights making me think we were waiting for a street light. Isaac stomped the gas pedal, and we took off down the street, passing all of the other big ass houses, whose lights were coming on like it had been all planned out beforehand. He shifted once, twice, and then we were flying. We made a sharp left turn, and I got jerked around, the window cold against my ear. Lights flashed behind us, and all of a sudden, Isaac took another

sharp left, then a right. I grabbed the seatbelt, yanking it across my body, just barely buckling in. Isaac shifted one more time, and once I saw the woods, I knew we weren't going to get in trouble.

“Damn!” I screamed, punching the air. “Damn!”

Isaac was shaking his head at me.

“What?” I said. “What?”

“Bra, you shouldn't do shit like that,” Isaac said, parking in front of my house.

“Why?” I asked.

Isaac's phone was ringing again. He looked at it again and then put it away.

“Grace?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “She hella' angry.”

He was starting to piss me off with all the hella' this, hella' that. He'd only been in California for three weeks, but he was acting like he was from there. To be honest, the yellow hair didn't look right on him at all. His eyebrows had always been thick, and he hadn't dyed them. He reminded me of Rufio from that movie, “Hook,” or one of those characters from “Dragon Ball Z” or something.

“What are you saying? You think it's my fault?”

“I'm just saying. It was his girl and everything, so ...”

I didn't know how to respond to that.

“How was I supposed to know that?”

“I know,” he said. “I know. I'm just saying, just chill next time.”

“Man, what's wrong with you?” I said. “You sound like a different person.”

He didn't like hearing that, and I was pretty sure we were going to have to get out of the car, but all he did was laugh again. He was acting like I was ignorant or something, the way he covered his face and shook his head again and again.

"Why'd you try to stop the fight?" I asked.

"In NorCal, we don't –"

"Man," I said, opening the door.

"What? Where are you going?"

"Don't get started with all that NorCal shit again," I said, closing the door. "I'm tired of hearing about Cali, how the weed over there is hella' nice and bra, the weather is hella' dry, all that shit. What are you even saying? Do you even listen to yourself?"

He finally looked angry. "Why don't you just go inside," he said.

"Alright, bra," I said. "I'll do that, bra. Whatever you say, bra."

The next day, I decided to go to the PC room, which isn't actually what we call it, but I hate the way everyone always writes it down as a "PC bang" because then all of the white boys start pronouncing it that way. It actually sounds more like "PC bong," like the "ong" in "Congo," but whatever, Moses and Peanut were there playing Counterstrike and eating ramen noodles when I got inside.

There was a bigger place in Kirkwood, but I'd grown up going to this one. To be honest, it's a waste of money. It's not like most of us don't already have games installed on our home computers, and it was pretty easy to share CD keys, but I'd spent hours playing Starcraft and Counter-Strike on these here computers. If you didn't feel like playing games, you could buy beef jerky or ramen noodles and eat in front of the computers, as long as you were careful. Also,

there were three big shelves of Korean comic books that you could read if you liked that sort of thing. I didn't read Korean too well, but I'd still look at them from time to time.

"Peanut," I said, sitting down at the seat next to him. "Where you been?"

"What do you mean?" he said, concentrating on the screen.

His left hand was hovering over the keyboard, his right hand controlling the mouse. Counter-Strike was a first-person shooter, where you either joined the terrorist team or the counter-terrorist teams, and they were both playing on the terrorist side. I looked around the room and realized it was all one big LAN game. Peanut wasn't very good – his Kill Death Ratio was never above one – which was why I'd gotten used to being a counter-terrorist.

"What's the name?" I asked. "I'll help you guys."

"Yeah, we're almost done," Moses said.

"What, already?" I asked. "It's not even one o'clock."

"We've been here since last night," Peanut said.

He didn't even look that tired. He actually looked wide awake, but Counter-Strike could do that to you. This one time, I'd played for eighteen hours straight, getting up only to use the bathroom a couple of times. You could get obsessed killing people, especially if you ran into someone who talked a lot of shit.

"Yeah, his mom has been hitting my phone up all morning," Moses said.

I checked my phone and realized I'd had it on silent mode. Peanut's mom had called me, too – once at six-thirty and another time at nine. She must have been going out of her mind. Peanut was usually the type to call home if he was going to be late.

"You better call her," I said. "She's probably worried about you."

“She’ll be fine,” Peanut said, throwing a flash grenade, except he’d forgotten to turn away.

The screen turned white. When it turned back to normal, we saw a guy right up in his face, and before Peanut could do anything, the guy slashed his neck with his knife. Someone behind us, one of the FOBs started laughing. Peanut turned around and gave him the finger.

“Damn it, Peanut,” Moses said. “Be careful.”

“I’m done,” Peanut said, removing his headset. “I can’t play this game anymore.”

About an hour later, we all got up and finally went outside for a smoke. Peanut and Moses covered their eyes, acting like they were seeing the sun for the first time in their lives. In the light, I could see how tired they looked, especially Peanut. There were dark rings around his eyes and a bunch of little red pimples popping up on his forehead.

“How about we smoke up instead?” I joked.

“Alright,” Peanut said. “You holding?”

“Me?” I said, laughing. “No, but I thought you might.”

“God, Eugene,” he groaned.

“Don’t even act,” I said. “Don’t even act like I never smoked you up before.”

“When’s the last time?” Peanut asked.

I tried to remember, but it had been a long time. I didn’t want to let Peanut think he was right, though, and so I told him that he just couldn’t remember the last time because he was tired. I couldn’t convince him.

“Okay,” I said, ignoring Moses, who was laughing at me. “If you smoke me up today, I promise I’ll get you back tomorrow. Isaac’s supposed to pick up.”

We got into Peanut's Corolla, which looked even more broken-down during the day. One of the door handles was broken, so you had to open it from the inside, and the rearview mirror was duct-taped on. It wasn't completely the car's fault. Peanut treated it like shit. I can't tell you how many times I'd seen him dent the car. He was just mad because his mom wouldn't let him drive the Accord she'd gotten. She didn't trust him behind the wheel.

He circled the parking lot, acting like we were leaving, just in case one of the workers was watching us. They really didn't like it when we came in high. Then he parked in the back and pulled out a bag from under the mat. It was the worst hiding place because everyone knew that's where Peanut kept his weed. It wasn't even that hard to break into the Corolla. Isaac had showed us with a coat hanger.

Peanut handed Moses the bowl first, and I watched him take a hit. I could tell he was pissed at me, but I didn't know why. It wasn't like we hadn't invited him to Grace's party. Isaac and I had both called him about ten times, even though I hadn't wanted to.

"You hear what happened at Grace's?" I asked Moses.

He handed me the bowl, and before I could light it, Peanut took the bowl from my hands.

"What the hell?"

"It's my weed," he said. "Shouldn't I get a hit before you?"

"Alright, that's true," I said, turning back to talk to Moses. "You heard, right?"

"No," he said, curling his bottom lip.

"What? You didn't hear? You know that kid Douglas, right?"

He nodded.

"I don't want to go into the details," I said, "but let's just say, I laid him out."

"What?" he said. "Really?"

Moses was a year younger than me, and he'd just started chilling with all of us a couple months back. It was fun to tell him things because of how excited he got about everything. He pretty much believed anything I said, and probably if he wasn't so tired, he would have gone crazy.

"Yeah," I said.

"Why?" Peanut asked. "What'd he do?"

"I don't know," I said. "He just came at me."

"He must have done that for a reason, though," Peanut said.

"Well," I said. "I was dancing with his girl, Gina, and everything, but I didn't even know that was his girl. If I knew that, I wouldn't have danced with her, but that kid didn't even let me explain."

All of a sudden, it got quiet in the car. Peanut put the bowl in his lap and just started sighing a lot. It wasn't like Peanut or Moses was friends with Douglas, so I didn't get why he was having a hernia about it. I looked over at Moses, and he was shaking his head really subtle, like I shouldn't have said that.

"What?" I asked. "What's going on?"

"I don't know if I should be even telling you this," Peanut began.

"What is it?" I asked Peanut.

"You know Grace, right?"

"What kind of question is that? Yeah, I know Grace," I said.

"Yeah, well, did you know I used to see her?" Peanut demanded.

"What?" I asked.

Moses was sitting up in his seat now and nodding with this serious expression on his face.

“No way,” I said.

“I’m not lying,” Peanut said.

“When were you seeing her?” I asked. “That makes no sense.”

“Eugene, I’m not lying!” he almost was crying. “I swear.”

Moses kept nodding like it was true.

“Okay,” I said. “Then why didn’t you ever say anything to me?”

He explained that he’d started seeing Grace last year. They’d met at church of all places. Grace had started going to our church with her cousin, who I guessed had been that girl Gina I’d danced with. He didn’t say her name, but I’m pretty sure he was talking about Gina. I actually almost laughed when he told me he’d been interested in the cousin first, but she’d told him that she was seeing somebody, and then I started thinking about Douglas, him on the floor with his hands covering his face. So, after a while, Peanut started to go after Grace, because she was actually a lot prettier than her cousin, now that he’d gotten rejected.

Anyhow, the youth group would go to places after church, like fast-food restaurants or the movie theater. Peanut tried to be with Grace every chance he got, making up excuses to sit next to her. I knew for a fact Peanut could be really persistent. He was one of those kids who wasn’t cool around girls, but it wasn’t for a lack of trying. According to Peanut, it was Grace who flirted with him first, saying that they should go see a movie alone together. They didn’t end up doing that, but he said they started getting coffee a lot at the Starbucks in Kirkwood out by her house. Sometimes, she’d hook her arm inside of his as they would go to the parking lot to leave, and they talked almost every night on the phone. He’d make hints about how he felt, telling her that there was this girl he was interested in, like it was a big secret, but no matter what he said, she’d pretend like she didn’t know what he was getting at.

She wouldn't say if she liked him or not for a while, and it was killing him because he was sure he loved her now. He thought she was probably just being shy, the way girls are, and so one day he drove to her house. He said he'd been crazy nervous and had even thought about leaving before he finally just went through with it. He'd left her a message on her computer, asking her to come outside in fifteen minutes, which was the time it took to get from Denton to Kirkwood.

After a while, she finally came out through the front door. She was wearing pajamas without any make-up on, but Peanut said she was even more beautiful than he remembered, and all I could think about were her busted-up teeth. They got into his car because her parents were sleeping. She said they'd get mad if they caught her talking to some boy that late at night. Before they'd left her neighborhood, he came right out and said it, "I love you, Grace," and she'd looked surprised, but after about ten seconds, a big smile came on her face. She said she loved him, too, and for the next month he'd been happier than he'd ever been before.

The only thing was they had to keep it a secret because she didn't want her parents finding out. She wasn't allowed to date boys yet, and so even though Peanut wanted to tell all of us, he agreed to keep it a secret. He was just happy that she liked him and that she was now his girlfriend. Everything had been going really well. They talked even more on the phone now, and at church, they'd hold hands when people weren't looking. He'd really wanted to tell me, Peanut said. He'd been close so many times, but he just couldn't break Grace's trust like that. She was sure that as soon as he told one person, it would get around, and then her parents wouldn't let her out of the house, not even to go to church.

He'd been surprised when Isaac showed up one Sunday. He hadn't seen Isaac at church for a long time. "After you stopped going," he told me. According to Peanut, this had been about

a month before Isaac went off to California. Anyhow, Grace had been running late that day, and so since they were just sitting around with nothing to say, Peanut decided to tell Isaac that he had a girlfriend.

Isaac had made a big deal about it, telling him that it was good to know that Peanut wasn't a faggot, which was the kind of thing Isaac was always saying. Isaac wanted to meet her, and Peanut told him to wait, that she'd get to church any second. Eventually, he got tired of waiting, though, and Peanut had gone all the way to Isaac's old Civic, when they finally saw Grace pull up in her parents' silver Mercedes. She'd gotten out of the car and started waving at Peanut. She was dressed nice that day, he told me, wearing a shiny blue dress and a little bit of make-up above her eyes that matched the color of her dress. He remembered Isaac saying something like, "Damn, is that your girl? That's her?"

He introduced Grace to Isaac, and he didn't even think anything of it. Isaac had been smiling the whole time, but he was always like that when he saw pretty girls, and all Grace had done was shake his hand. They ended up going to the Mexican fast-food place next to church, and Isaac got to know her and everything. Isaac was talking differently that day, Peanut said. He wasn't cursing or saying stupid shit, like he normally did. He kept asking about Grace's life, where she went to school and what she liked to do, all that. Peanut had thought it was weird when he asked to use her phone, but it made sense since Peanut didn't have a cell phone. Isaac had said he didn't have his phone on him and needed to make a call.

I interrupted Peanut at that point and asked Moses, "Is this true?"

"Yeah," he said, sucking on the bowl. "He's not lying."

"How do you know, though?" I asked, acting like Peanut wasn't in the car with us.

"Eugene, I swear," Peanut said. "I'm not lying."

“How am I supposed to believe that?”

“Eugene,” he said, tears in his eyes. “He fucked her. I just know it. He did.”

“Did you?” I asked.

“No,” he said, getting red.

“Then why do you think Isaac did?”

“You know Isaac,” he said quietly.

“Well, he didn’t,” I said. “And I know that for sure,” I added.

He didn’t even pay attention to what I said. “He’s going to ruin her life,” is all Peanut kept saying. “He’s going to ruin her life, and if she comes crying back to me, I’m going to tell her that it was her fault in the first place,” he said, grabbing the bowl from Moses. I just couldn’t believe it, though. Before he’d gone to California, Isaac was a lot of things, but I knew for sure he wasn’t shady, that he wouldn’t do one of his boys like that.

“Did you talk to him?” I asked Peanut.

“No,” he said, and it looked his whole body was clenching from the inside.

“Never mind,” I said. “Never mind.”

We went to the place was on the Glendale side of Route 26 because everyone was going to be there. I was worried that Peanut would show up, but as Isaac drove past the cars on the street, I didn’t see the Corolla. Isaac was looking at all of the cars, too. He swore Douglas was going to be there. He’d been calling Grace nonstop that entire week, saying he was going to kill me and Isaac, too, if he ever saw us again. Isaac was stressing for no reason, I thought. What was Douglas going to do? I wasn’t even worried about Douglas.

“It’s good,” I said. “He’s not here.”

“What? Oh, yeah,” he said, clearing his throat. “Yeah.”

“You’re looking for him, right?”

“Bra,” he said. “Why are there so many people here?”

I decided not to think about it. I’d been thinking about it too much already, and I wasn’t going to know anything just sitting here, wondering what had happened. The thing is I didn’t talk to Isaac about stuff like that. Even if I’d asked him, I knew him. He would have just denied it whether Peanut was lying or not. Some people are just like that, you know?

“Isaac,” I said.

“What?” he said.

He drove past the cars one more time, acting like was looking for a better spot. I really didn’t know what to think about him being so shook and all. Something must have happened in California. In fact, he reminded me a little of Peanut, just the way he couldn’t keep himself in check. It annoyed the fuck out of me. Fob King’s boys – they’d just stood there, looking at that kid like they’d seen it all. That was what you needed in a friend, not some shook little wannabe gangster, who dyed his hair yellow and said, “Bra.”

“Nothing,” I said. “He isn’t here. Stop thinking about it.”

“I know,” he said, narrowing his eyes at me.

“Okay,” I said. “Then park.”

There were some kids smoking in front of the door, yelling about some bullshit. The last time I’d come here, that girl, Isabelle – Isaac’s ex – had smashed this other girl’s head into the stop sign, leaving a gash on her forehead as long as my middle finger, forty guys outside cupping their mouths and yelling, “Oh, shit!” It was still early. Usually none of the fights happened until people had gotten some liquor in them, but when we went inside, all I heard was this laughing,

just this carefree, busy laughter. It sounded like people were having a good time, and on the second floor – the place had two floors – some of them were dancing.

The bar was on the first floor. It was long – there were about fifteen chairs lined up – and it went all the way out to the kitchen where the old lady who owned the joint made all different kinds of mixed drinks, using Soju. If you're familiar with it, I apologize. It's the worst-tasting shit I've ever heard. I've never had rubbing alcohol before, but I'm guessing the taste isn't that far off. I don't know how people were always drinking that stuff. I think she just do it because they've seen their dads drink it, and so they kind of copy without even knowing.

Behind the bar three small tables pushed up against a four-foot high wall. There was a girl, Sasha, standing next to that wall, who was just barely taller than it. Her eyes were closed, and she was just swaying, feeling the music, which was one of those Korean ballads people are always singing at the karaoke. A small set of stairs led to the second floor with the projector screen on the wall where the Korean music videos played. Then there were the glass tables, and a little bit of space where people could dance if they wanted to.

Isaac said, "I'm going upstairs. I think I see Moses."

I looked up and saw him sitting there, but no Peanut.

"Alright," I said. "I'll get us some beers."

I parked my ass on one of the stools in front of the bar and waited for the bartender to finish mixing a drink for somebody else. He was this fob guy with yellow hair, but it wasn't like Isaac's H.O.T. haircut. It was long and curly, kind of like Mufasa from Lion King. On any other day, I would have laughed. Anyhow, I was just staring at the guy's big mane bouncing against his back as he shook the container, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and saw a girl with really close-together eyes staring at me.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” I said slowly, trying to remember if I’d ever seen her before.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” she asked, acting like she was offended.

“No, I don’t,” I said, squinting my eyes, like maybe that’d help me remember.

Her eyes were really close together.

“I’ll give you a hint,” she said and started punching the air.

“Oh,” I said. “Oh!”

“I thought it was you,” she said. “It’s Isaac, right?”

“No, Eugene,” I said. “About the other night ...”

“Don’t even worry about it,” she said.

“What? I thought he was your boyfriend.”

“Who? Douglas?” she said, making a face like she’d tasted something bad.

“He’s not your boyfriend?” I said.

“No way,” she said.

I nodded my head, wondering then who the hell Douglas was then and why he’d tried to fight me. People are crazy, I swear. They stir up all this drama, and in the end, you just find out that they weren’t the boyfriend. People lie, just to get attention or something. I don’t even know.

All I know is people are crazy.

“Aren’t you going to buy me a drink?” she asked all of a sudden.

“Oh,” I said. “My bad, do you want a drink?”

“Uh, yeah,” she said, smiling.

“Hey,” I yelled to the bartender. “Do you guys have Alizé?”

Around one o'clock, somebody burst through the door and shouted for us to come outside. I stumbled through the door, feeling like I weighed three-hundred pounds but at the same light on my feet. I was done, smashed, wasted, fucking drunk. It was like that point in the night where everything is feeling so good, but later you remember that was it – the exact moment that you knew you shouldn't have any more liquor – the limit, you know?

Everyone was on the street in front of the bar, yelling when they saw what had happened to their cars. It was stupid. Some fool had walked down the street, lifting all of the windshield wipers. It was a joke – nothing to get heated about – until Isaac started screaming, “That fucking piece of shit. I'm going to kill him!”

We all went over and saw what he was screaming about. The GTI was messed up. The headlights were smashed. The windshield was cracked in about three places and caved in. The tires were slashed and the tailpipe bent to one side, but still people were overreacting like always, hollering like they'd all gotten hit. You might think I'm crazy, but it felt good to see Isaac's car like that, totaled, because I knew how mad it would make him. He'd needed a kick to the stomach.

“Jesus Christ,” Isaac muttered, licking his finger and rubbing a small scratch on the side of the car.

“Bra,” I said, putting my arm on his shoulder. “Fucking ... fuck.”

“What are you doing? Get off me,” he said, shoving me hard. “This is your fault.”

I probably didn't even know why I thought it was funny right then. I was just flopping around like I had wings or like I had no bones in my arms. I bumped into somebody and bounced off of him. I started cracking up.

“What the fuck you do that for?” I said.

I remember laughing like I was crazy.

“Fuck you, Eugene,” he said.

“What?” I said.

I couldn't stop smiling. I was geeking out, and part of it was the drink, most definitely, but really, it was good to see him like that. He just looked different or maybe you could say he looked the same, like he was about to kick my ass. I was loving it.

I started walking towards him, flapping my wings.

“You're mad, aren't you?” I said. “That's what you supposed to feel.”

“Man,” he said. “Get out of my face.”

“That's what I'm saying,” I said, jabbing my finger in his eye. “Get pissed, nigga'!”

When I got hit, Moses grabbed my neck, and I thought he was trying to strangle me, but instead he was whispering, “Cool it, Eugene,” and then everyone was grabbing at me, trying to pull me away. I kept telling saying it wasn't like the way they thought it was – I didn't care – but they wouldn't listen. They just kept pulling me back, telling me to give Isaac space, but I wasn't mad, I swear. Yeah, I was drunk, but I knew exactly what I was feeling. I was so happy.

Back in the bar, I heard them talk about different body shops, while Grace sat with me and made me drink water. People were standing around in a circle, just so I wouldn't try to get up and go outside. Later, Gina told me that I'd been rambling about how people didn't understand and how everyone was crazy. I'd even gone outside when nobody was looking, and she'd chased after me, but by then, Isaac had left with a couple of guys to go to a body shop in the middle of the damn night.

I called him later that night to apologize. He sounded tired.

“What you doing?” I asked.

“Back at the crib,” he said.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “That’s cool.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Isaac,” he began. “My bad about earlier, I just —”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Seriously, don’t worry about it.”

“We cool, then?”

“Yeah,” he said. “We cool.”

“You get your car fixed?”

“Naw,” he said. “Nothing’s open, but I talked to Joe about it, and he told me not to worry about it. He said he going to wire me some dough. I got to go to some place called Western Union tomorrow. I don’t know. I think it’s going to be alright.”

“That’s good,” I said.

“You think you can come with me, though. I’m looking for some back up.”

“Back up?” I asked. “For what?”

“To pay that nigga’, Douglas, back,” he said. “I’m going to teach that motherfucker a lesson is what I’m about to do. If I knew where he was at right now, I’d do it tonight.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m in.”

Around six o’clock the next day, I went over to Isaac’s place, and we drove all the way out to Kirkwood, parking about three houses down from where Douglas lived. Isaac had gotten his address from Grace, after telling her that he just wanted to go over there and talk to him in

person. Once we got there, we saw the green beamer in the driveway, and Isaac was trying to get out of the car.

I told him we should be careful because in that kind of neighborhood, people probably sat around, looking for people to take their stuff. Do you believe me when I tell you that I'd forgotten all about Peanut and what he'd said to me? I didn't see it coming at all. The news blindsided me, but after I talked to Grace, who said she'd never even been to our church and had met Peanut once, *once*, it just made me believe even more that people are crazy.

I got the call, and I answered the phone, without thinking.

It wasn't Peanut on the phone, though.

"Eugene!" his mom screamed into the phone. *"Peanut's in the hospital! He crashed his car, and the doctor's saying it's really bad. You need to come over here. Do you know where Isaac is?"*

She said a couple of other things I couldn't make out between the sobs.

I finally hung up the phone, feeling woozy.

"Who was that?" Isaac asked.

"Peanut's in the hospital," I said. "He tried to kill himself."

3. Black Eye

I swear he was going to kill me.

“Are you crazy?” he asked.

“I swear it isn’t mine,” I said.

“Now you’re carrying around guns? You ... You’ve done everything there is to do. I don’t know what else I can do to make you see what you’re doing with your life. I really don’t know if I can say anything else. No matter how many times I do, you just go out and do something even worse.”

“Dad, I swear it isn’t mine.”

“You,” he pointed at me. *“Are you really my son?”*

“Dad –”

“Enough! You want to be a gangster. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

He’d beaten me up before but never this bad, and I didn’t even see the kick coming. The last time I’d gotten kicked, I was eleven-years-old, and I’d worn pads. It wasn’t like I didn’t know he’d been an instructor in the army, before he got all political and led those demonstrations against the government, which basically was the reason he’d moved to America. His foot struck the side of my head – the temple – and I dropped to the floor. When I opened my eyes, I seriously saw stars for the first time ever.

You always hear people talking about how they see stars, but it’s crazy when it’s you who’s actually seeing them, like all of a sudden you’re somewhere else, staring at the night sky, and these little white lights are sparking wherever you look. Anyhow, it didn’t stop there. He started stomping me just the same way I did, teeing off on me like my side was a two-hundred-

pound soccer ball. I covered the spot where he was kicking me. He slowly walked in a circle around me. I tried to get up, but he knocked me down with another roundhouse. The lights went out.

By then, I'd been working at the meat market for three weeks. On Saturdays, my shift started early as fuck, and Isaac always came to get me, but he was late this morning. I'd already been waiting for about half an hour or so outside my house. The kid just wasn't picking up his phone. I could hear the water running in the kitchen. I wished she would just stop doing the dishes and just go to her damn room or at least to the store or something. I wanted to be alone. It was too early to deal with this bullshit, and I was starting to wonder why I'd agreed to help out Isaac's parents in the first place. They only paid eight bucks an hour, and I would spend half my week over there, when I sure as hell had other things to do.

Up in the sky the birds were squawking, and the cold air opened up my nose like it was laced with menthol. My cheekbone throbbed like a broken finger. It hurt, but it did look worse than it actually was. Anyhow, my left eye was swollen shut, and I could barely see through it. Damn, my dad had fucked me up. I looked back at the house, that yellow piece of shit I'd lived in all my life – my parents are still paying off the mortgage – and all I knew was I needed to get out. That would make them understand that I wasn't some kid they could just control.

He was saying I had it coming, but I knew if I called Social Services, they would have a different idea about the whole thing. I was pretty sure I could get his ass locked up. No way he'd tell them he'd found a gun in my room, and even if he did, that wouldn't change the fact he'd beat my ass, and white people took that shit seriously. I knew that much. Anyhow, I told the man I was going to do it, too, and shoot, I've never seen his eyes get so big. It was almost scarier than

getting hit. Next thing I knew I was on the ground, and he's kicking my stomach, stomping on my chest. I'm just laying there, taking it. My mom's begging him to stop, but he didn't listen to her, and I'm thinking, you don't have the right to tell him to stop. You're the reason.

At seven-fifteen, Isaac finally pulled up to the curb. I loved that GTI almost as much as he did, the way he'd souped it up was tight. The windows were tinted. He had these gun-metal rims installed, said he'd spent fifteen-hundred on them shits. Ever since he'd gotten that car, he was only about the money. It was why he was pushing, why he'd made me work at the store with him, so I could distract his parents. One thing I learned was they didn't ever check the books, so he was lifting cash from the register whenever he got the chance. In the few weeks I'd been working there, I'd seen him take five-hundred bucks. You wouldn't think it, but meat stores made a lot of dough.

Just before I got into the car, I took one last look at the house, at the shit-colored shutters, the siding coming off in places. It was a mess, man. Nobody had cut the grass in like five months, and I knew my mom was *still* in the kitchen. The blinds were drawn, but I thought I saw one of them flicker. So I just stood there, waiting for something to happen, but nothing did. It was just still, and I thought to myself, *damn, that's different*.

"Fuck, we're late," Isaac said as soon as I opened the door.

"It's your fault, man," I said, just knowing he was about to go crazy.

I got into the car. My body sunk into the leather seat. I didn't even realize – it hurt places that I didn't even think about it. The car was warm already, the radio playing some of that house music Isaac loved. I knew there was no point in covering my face with my hand. He was going to see it, so I just kind of turned in my seat and gave him this look like, "Don't."

"Damn!" Isaac yelled, pointing that long, skeletal finger of his.

I laughed it off, man, but for real, he just kept looking at me, like I was some side show exhibit. I didn't even care as much as I thought would because I couldn't stop thinking about my mom, how she just going to let me leave like this. I understood how much she hated Isaac – both my parents did – but I'm only her kid.

They blamed Isaac for everything, the way I talked, the way I dressed, the gun, everything. He'd tried to keep me from going to work, saying I was seeing some bad shit over there, like it was any different where he worked. "*It's those drug dealers over there,*" I'd heard him tell my mom once. "*I don't know why he wants to work there.*" Only reason I wasn't over at Gina's place, like she'd asked me to do last night, was because I wanted to piss my old man off by going back to work, doing what he didn't want me to do.

"Damn," Isaac kept saying. "Damn."

"Can we go now? I'm tired of sitting here."

"Did your dad do that?" he asked, kind of laughing.

"Fuck," I said. "I don't know. Just go, man! What the fuck?"

He laughed, shaking his head.

"Don't get mad at me. I didn't do that shit to you."

"That's true," I said, coughing into my hand.

He drove fast down the road, scattering the leaves my next-door neighbor was always gathering in a giant ass pile in front of his mailbox. I knew he was going to be pissed when he saw that. He'd probably write us a letter or something. He was always writing letters and saying it was from Anonymous, like we didn't know.

Halloween was coming up. My neighbors went crazy with the decorations. When I was a kid, I wasn't even allowed to go trick-or-treating with Isaac and everyone – and ten years ago,

the neighborhood would have been crawling with costume, plastic bags full of candy, and kids biking. You didn't see that anymore. There were a few kids out, but by eleven or definitely midnight, the neighborhood was a ghost town. A couple of B&Es and people start tripping.

“So, you want to smoke?” Isaac asked.

“What?” I said. “Stop playing.”

“I'm serious!”

“What about your dad?” I asked.

“My dad?” he said. “Shit, I'm high every damn day, and that fool acts like he don't know what it is, why my eyes so chinky. He knows, but there's only one thing that motherfucker cares about, and it's ...”

“Money,” I said, thinking that's all he got cared about it, too.

“Smoke,” he said. “You'll feel better for it.”

He pointed at the glove compartment. The bowl was in this little black plastic case that looked like a body bag. The bowl was one of them one-hitters, the kind you got to repack every time you want a hit. I didn't know why he even bought it, probably thought it looked cool. He tossed a Ziploc bag onto the dashboard, and I could smell it all of a sudden. I could feel it in my nostrils, up near my eyes, and the stuff made me hungry. I took a nugget, stuffed it into the bell of the one-hitter, and took a rip, if you can call it that. Smoke felt damn good swirling inside of my mouth, and I held it in as long as I could before my lungs felt exploded. I remember when I first started smoking, people were always saying, “You got to hold it in, boy.”

“Nothing better than a wake and bake,” Isaac said in his pretend white boy voice. “I'm picking up some more from Odd Job, like a lot more, you know what I mean? I just need to get

myself a prepaid, but I don't got enough money for both. That's why I got to take some money today, when they ain't looking. I'm a get you a pre-paid, too, after we done working tonight."

"Odd Job pushes?" I asked.

"Man, they got some crazy shit up in Vermont."

"He goes to school in Maine," I said. "Ignorant."

"Whatever," he said. "Maine, Vermont, what the fuck's the difference?"

We passed our old elementary school. Last time I'd been there, we'd almost gotten busted. Cops were always checking the playgrounds and shit. Anyhow, I'd never been so scared in my life. I was probably fifteen then. Isaac ate the fucking joint, and we tried to take off, but – I know we were all thinking it – Ramona was a big girl back then, before she went bulimic on our asses. Turned out we knew the cop, though. He was Josh Han's uncle, and he knew we'd been doing something shady, but he thought that instead of smoking that we were in that park, fucking – disgusting motherfucker, that Josh Han's uncle. He didn't even know what he'd done to Ramona. She was scarred for life and had the stretch marks to prove it.

We got onto the freeway. There were only a few other cars, but this part right here never got packed, like not enough weed or some shit, you know what I mean? Anyhow, I knew we were going to hit traffic once we got closer to the city, and then Isaac would start his bitching. I don't even think he even got that angry. He was just saying things.

What I didn't know was if he'd do that thing. I mean, I'm saying his car is quick, zero to sixty in the blink of the eye, and sometimes when the freeway got backed up, he'd do some crazy Frogger-type shit. He'd weave in and out of traffic, cutting in front of cars the second he got the tiniest bit of daylight. Other times, he'd just get onto the shoulder, hit the gas pedal hard, and we'd laugh like hyenas. To be honest, it scared the hell out of me at first, but the next time I was

ready, palms getting sweaty like I was the one driving. See, that's what I'm about. I learn from my experiences. What's that thing? Don't let history repeat itself? That's what I'm about.

"You know what?" I said, passing him the bowl. "I think I'm going to move out."

"Where you going to go?" he asked.

"I was talking to Gina last night," I said. "I don't know."

"Her parents aren't going to let you in," he said. "Grace's parents don't even let me go onto their driveway, shit. You think her parents are just going to let stay at their house?"

"I don't know. They're supposed to be cool."

He lit a cigarette and slowed the car down. We were getting close to our exit. The cars were backed up, man. On my right, there was some white dude in a black SUV reading a newspaper, like everyone saying you're not supposed to do. I opened my window and wagged my finger at him, Dikembe-style. He stared at me for a little bit, too, before he got uncomfortable and started looking at his newspaper again. On Isaac's left, I saw some squinting-ass Chinese boy with these crazy thick lenses, fucking Chinese. Funny as hell. All of sudden, the sun was shining into my right eye, and I remembered that I'd put my sunglasses on the desk in my room. I looked into the rearview mirror on my side, at my left eye. It looked even worse.

"Shit," Isaac said, turning around to get a look behind us. "Where they going?"

"Same place as us, I guess."

"Alright," he said and lit a cigarette.

He switched lanes and rumbled onto the shoulder. The white guy in the black truck had put his newspaper away and was mugging us. I swear I could hear him thinking, *don't you do dare, don't you fucking dare, creeps*, but that's the worst thing to say if you want to keep someone from doing something. Isaac raised his foot, held it there like a boss, and just as I felt

this sharp pain enter my neck, the car lurched forward. I slammed back into the seat, and it was just like staring down the ledge of a building, you know what I mean? Because for a split second, you might hear a little voice, saying, *Why are you even doing this?*

But then the car goes so fast, man, and your blood is pumping, while all of these fools can't do anything but look at you, just pissed off. They hate you so much right then, but the thing is, they all want to be where we are in that moment, cruising down the shoulder, free as a school of bird streaking through the sky.

We parked behind the market next to his parents' van. The sun was out in full force now, beating down on my neck like a heating lamp was following me. Next to the back door, which was the only one we used, a bum was sleeping on a sheet of cardboard. I'd never seen such a fat ass bum, and Isaac got all excited. He ran up to the guy, jumping over him like he was a puddle of water. Usually I knew all the bums that lived in front of the store, but this guy was new.

"You see this?" Isaac said.

He crouched next to the guy and read the sign at his feet.

"What's it say?" I asked.

I flicked my cigarette and bent down to get a look, but my eyes were killing me.

"Ninjas killed my family. Need money for Kung-Fu lessons," Isaac said loudly.

I would have laughed, but Isaac was being too rowdy.

"Shit," he said. "I never seen anything like that before."

The meat store was in a big open space, where there were other businesses like the fried chicken stand, which was owned by two Italian brothers. There was the place that sold fish,

where Jose's sister worked. Down by the bathrooms, a jewelry stand owned by a Vietnamese and his wife, the sub shop where we got our food during break, and some other stuff.

We all kind of knew each other – the people who owned the stores, the customers, everybody but the plain clothes. Isaac had been working there since he was twelve. His brother, Joe, was supposed to take over the store, but he'd left. Man, Isaac was always trying to get the Italian brothers to come out and blaze with us. They'd laugh it off, saying they were too old to smoke weed. Some people had been working in this building for more than twenty years. Isaac's parents used to own a liquor store on South Street, but they got rid of the place after Isaac's dad had taken a bullet in his shoulder. That was like the only thing that Isaac was proud of, but his dad – that man was afraid, twenty-four hours a day, seven times a week. He wasn't no G, not by a long shot, but Isaac liked talking about it, especially since he'd never gotten removed.

When we got in, Isaac's mom was arguing with some huge guy in her husky, bombed-out English. It was bad even for a Korean woman, and she'd been in America forever, longer than Isaac's dad. They were arguing about money, what else. She had a bag of pig feet in her hand, holding it away from the guy, as he tried to get it from her. He was this big, old dude, probably in his fifties, but dressed fresh to death. He was wearing a cross the size of a small child, the Bluetooth in his ear, black leather jacket. Plainclothes was somewhere, and I looked around for him. It was a little game I played. The huge guy must have caught her jacking up the price or maybe he was trying to work it down, trying to play games.

"You're late!" she shouted at us and then went back to shouting at the guy.

Isaac's dad was standing at the long table, hacking at short ribs with a cleaver like Freddy from Friday the Thirteenth. He looked mad as hell. All he needed was some needles in his

forehead. He was a small guy, eyes sunk into his face and this rug on his head that looked like it'd get blown off in the wind, but I bowed at him because that's what you got to do.

“Eugene!” Isaac's mother shouted.

Then she saw my face and just froze. She just stared at me, like she'd never seen a black eye before. You know -- Isaac's real mom is in Korea, and even though I never met her, she was cool. He'd told me that when we were drinking this one night, and it was like my Ace in the hole. I swore if she ever went too far, I wouldn't be too scared to bring it up.

“*Hello,*” I said in this funny voice.

“*Come on,*” she said tenderly. “*Get to work.*”

There were a few customers behind the fat black guy, and they looked annoyed. Isaac went up and started talking to Donna, this skinny lady with red glasses and ashy, Diana Ross-type skin. She was a weird lady but cool. She was always wearing tracksuits and ordered three pounds of pig feet every single morning. They were laughing about something, and for a second, I thought it was about me. I was high as fuck. I put on some plastic gloves and looked at the people, but no one was trying to make eye contact with me

“Excuse me! Excuse me!” a voice finally yelled.

I turned to see a woman snapping her fingers at me, her head on a swivel, you know, real ghetto fabulous. She had these fake gold fingernails that looked like falcon claws – they were sharp enough. If she wasn't yelling at me like that, I would have probably thought she was cute.

“Thank you,” she said sarcastically. “Can I get five pounds of ham hocks ... uh ... a pound of ground beef, one pig stomach, and yeah, get me some chitlin,' why don't you?”

She didn't say anything about my eye, didn't even know I existed. She backed away from the display window, looking down towards one of the other shops, and that's when I saw the two

little boys circling her, clowning around the way kids do. They were running fast with their little arms and legs. I was seeing something in my head: a cartoon tornado. I thought, What was that from again? Right, I thought, The Tasmanian devil. I loved that cartoon, and they looked just like him. The way I used to be, I'd wake up before even my parents would to watch them cartoons. Their hands were so small. It was like watching a couple of toys coming to life right in front of your eyes.

Then the older one slapped his brother in the face.

“Oh, shit,” I said, laughing.

“Marcus!” the woman said, grabbing the kid by the collar and swinging him around.

“What I tell you? What I tell you before?”

The crazy kid didn't even look scared, but I could tell the woman was about to lay him out. Her fist was clenched, even though she couldn't close it because of her nails.

“Lady, what was the order again?” I asked.

I couldn't remember a thing. The woman let go of the kid and turned to me.

“What?”

“What was the order, ma'am? I can't remember.”

She scratched her forehead, them gold fingernails poking through her weave.

“Never mind,” I said. “I got it, I think ...”

“Damn, boy. What happened to your face?” she asked.

That was the end of the good times because I didn't like the way she was looking at me. She kind of looked like she was taking pity on me. I don't know it was. It just didn't make me feel good.

“I fell down,” I said. “It was stupid.”

“Damn, boy. Who did that to you?” she asked. “He fucked you up!”

“What you want again?” I asked.

She sighed and went through the list, emphasizing every syllable, like I was a FOB. She’d calmed down, though. Her kids weren’t going to get beat, and fuck me, I started thinking about my dad. The store was on the other side, next to a Red Cross and a news station. It was quieter over there, not like Denton-quiet but quiet. He was probably smoking a cigarette. The store didn’t open yet. The thing was I’d fucked up. I should have hid the thing better. I just got cocky.

I bent down, opened the display case, and began bagging the meat. I gave her a big with the pig stomach, and I was getting the ham hocks into another one, when I saw the younger boy kick his older brother through the glass. He started running for it, people in line getting out of the way. He had balls. The other kid was crazy.

“Are you serious?” the woman screamed. “I already told you, Marcus!”

She dropped the bag to the floor and grabbed each of them boys by their shirt collars. I don’t know how she did it, but she closed her fist with those fingernails and started swinging, hitting Marcus hard on the face. This other lady behind her just out of the way, even as the woman continued to thump them kids, and they were dancing around, trying to get away from her, like the skin of their feet had been sliced off.

“I told you to stop! Didn’t I?”

I turned around to see if they were even looking. Isaac was standing at the other end of the counter, smirking at me as he shoved a ball of crumpled bills into his back pocket, and Isaac’s parents were just watching, like it was a fair fight. I slammed the ham hocks onto the counter and started yelling. I don’t know why I got so mad, but I did.

“Hey,” I said to the woman. “Can you stop that shit?”

The woman whipped around, pushing them.

“What you just say right now, boy? You telling me to stop?”

“I told you to relax. Don’t hit your kids, lady,” I said, smoothing my voice. “It ain’t right to do that sort of thing.”

She started breathing all heavy. “You,” she said, her lips tightening. “You’re saying something to me. You, with a black eye? I can’t believe this right now.”

“I get it, I know,” I said. “I’m just saying.”

“Who are you, huh? Who the fuck you think you are?” she asked me. “You don’t know shit about me, how hard I work every damn day. How old are you!”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m seventeen.”

“You know he can’t talk to me this,” she said, pointing at Isaac’s dad, I thought, but he was back hacking at the spare ribs. “He can’t talk to me this way! I’m the customer right here.”

“Whatever,” I said.

“Answer my question,” she said.

I had no idea what question she was even asking anymore.

“You know what,” I said. “Get the fuck out.”

“What’s that?”

“I said, ‘Get the fuck out,’” I yelled, spit flying from my face. “Get out!”

“What?”

“Are you fucking deaf, lady?” I screamed.

That’s when she lost it, man. She reached over the counter, hit me in my mouth. Then all of a sudden, she’s climbing over the counter. I’m getting spun around, and I see Isaac running.

His dad's got his head turned, the blade over his head, and the bloody slab of meat in front of him. People were scattering, and then the plainclothes comes flying out of nowhere, grabbing the woman, putting her to the ground right in front of me. Them kids were going crazy.

Isaac was always saying he got my back, but when his parents told me I had to go, he didn't say nothing. He wouldn't even give me a ride back home because when it was down to me and the money – he was going to pick the money every single time – and so here I was outside the market, smoking a cigarette and watching people waiting for the bus. A couple of girls walking past took one look at me and laughed. I spat some blood. Then some other guys told me to smile, and when I looked up at him, with my eye and all, they just started cracking up.

“What you looking at?” the kid with cornrows said.

“Man, fuck you,” I said. “Don't tell me to smile.”

The kid with cornrows stopped, not smiling now. There were three of them, and we were all probably around the same age. Maybe they were a few years older than me. I'd seen them hanging out in front of the Food Mart, shouting things at girls who walked by. It's not like people go around advertising, but you just knew they weren't representing a lifestyle, that they were living it. Maybe I'd seen their body language or the way others looked at them, and I'm not saying they were running things, just that they were cold, heartless.

“Did this nigga' just tell me to fuck myself?” he asked his boys.

The kid with the cornrows was walking towards me now, his boys following behind him. He was a short motherfucker. I'm not tall. I'm average height, and even I was at least three inches taller than this kid, but that didn't matter. I was still scared of the kid – his presence. These kids right here – the light had gone out in their eyes – but all of a sudden I just stopped

caring. I'd gone everywhere there was to go, and no one was scaring me now. What do you even have to be scared of in this life? You live, you die, whatever.

"What'd you say to me?" the kid said, talking to me now.

I don't know what I would have done if the tables were turned because it's a lot easier to take than it is to receive. If I've learned anything, it's that. I probably would have just pointed the gun at him, just knowing I could never pull the trigger.

"Nothing," I said.

I don't know why I said that. I must have still been a little scared, but not in my mind or nothing, just a reaction coming from a place that I can't even name. Your breath just gets a little quicker, you start cowering, and it's not so easy to stand tall.

"Didn't sound like nothing to me," he said, rubbing his hands together. "What you say?" he said a little louder, pushing me into the wall.

"Come on and hit me," is all I had to say.

The last thing I remember are the sounds of the worn-out soles of sneakers dragging against the sidewalk, the cold cement on my face – I remember feeling good lying on the ground, nothing left to do but just lie there, as the world around you spins into action. It wasn't a black thing, like the way some of the cops made it out to be. I'd brought it onto myself. It was what I really wanted.

If you don't believe me, and you might not, then let me tell you something. I never pressed charges and not because I got a policy against snitching. You see, I was loving it when my dad come into that hospital room, doing everything but look at me. Even with my eyes all busted up and all them drugs shooting through my veins, I swear to God I smiled when he came in. I knew they couldn't ever make me feel bad again, and he knew it, too.

4. Under the Table

Every Friday night, Odd Job hosts a game at his townhouse in Columbia. I used to come here a lot before I moved out to AC, but it's been a while, and I'm back now. There are nine of us at the table and a lot of money being exchanged. We're also getting drunk, everyone except for the white guy. They say his name is Mark and that he works with Odd Job in the city. To be honest, he looks kind out of place, and you can tell that he's uncomfortable. The bill of his cap is curled like a rolled-up magazine. I see his eyes only when he looks up to study the table or say something into Odd Job's ear. I've seen plenty of guys like him before at the casinos. He's the kind of dude who's read all of the instructional books, and he's probably made good money off of poker, especially when the government wasn't fucking around with the online casinos. Man, this home game isn't even serious, but you can't tell any of these fools that.

On one of the first hands I play, I pick up a pair of jacks, and I'm on the button. Mark's the small blind, and Cheese is the big blind. Cheese thinks he knows what he's doing, but man, talk about clueless. Everyone's always ragged on him for being stupid, and now that he's older it looks like he's finally getting bothered by it. He wants to be smart, which is hilarious. To be honest, I never met anyone as dumb as Cheese, but he's cool to chill with. He makes people laugh, and what's really important is you can trust him.

Everyone folds before me, which is surprising, considering all the big bets in the earlier hands. I raise three times the big blind, and Mark calls. Cheese calls, too, but yeah, like I said, not a surprise. I tell him, "Get that shit out of here, you stupid son of a bitch," and he pretends not to hear me. Classic Cheese. He's going to call himself to a slow death, I just know it. The flop gets dealt, and there's no paint, meaning no high cards, which is good. There are a couple

hearts out there, few straight draws, but it's not anything to be concerned about. If the white boy's got a gut-shot and hits, I can't do anything about that, but anything else, I swear I'll sniff it out. In fact, I don't even know why Odd Job called me out to play. He doesn't even like me, and everybody knows that I'm a serious player.

So I bet sixty bucks, and I'm looking at the way Mark's shuffling his chips while he's thinking about my bet. The guy has these bony, female fingers, and it kind of makes me feel disgusted, if you know what I mean. I don't play that. But he's confident, so I don't know. A lot of these guys, their hands shake when they play. Even their lips will start to tremble or they'll forget to breathe. They got no table presence.

"What do you have?" Mark asks in a low voice.

"Call and find out," I say.

He laughs and throws a couple of chips into the middle, so it's possible that he got a little something I should be afraid of. It's that kind of a flop, one with lots of possibilities, kind of the way life is. If he's got big cards, he would have re-raised me. So he's got to have two small connectors, which is the kind of hand that these college boys like to play.

Tony deals the turn, and it's another heart. I sneak a look at Mark, and I got to say, I don't know what I'm looking at. His hands are pressed together, half his nose hidden between his fingers, and his eyes are shut. I mean, I've seen people pray this way, but it's an odd move at the poker table. I'm not sure he's even looked at the turn. I bet a hundred, and then shoot, I realize that I should have bet two hundred, but then would that look like too much of an over-play? Even though it shouldn't really mean anything, my heart's beating a little quicker, that good old feeling. No matter how many times you done it before, it always return, but I got it under control.

I lean back in my chair, slow down my breathing, and let my hands fall to the sides. He's studying me. They all are, but the thing is they have no idea what's coming.

After an hour, I'm up three hundred, but I'm kicking myself because really I should have six. A new round of cards gets dealt, and I take a look at Cheese, whose eyes get big for a second looking at his cards. I swear if I could, I'd bet my entire stack that he has an ace in the hole and a big kicker. I'm guessing a queen. Meanwhile, I get a nine-five, two diamonds, which aren't very good cards, but poker is about more than just what cards you get dealt. It's how you play them. I'm telling you Mark knows all about that.

I shouldn't be getting in a hand with Cheese, though. He got fired from his job at the liquor store last week, and he's got bills to pay. It's all piling up, and it's not like his parents got loads of cash to just give him, but you can't be getting all sentimental when you're trying to take another man's money. Shoot, I remember the last time I played this hand I was at the Borgata. I made like three grand off it after I hit a full house on the turn. Some people get embarrassed to show shit cards but not me.

A couple guys I used to play with, they always talked about nine-five. Said it reminded them of everyone back at home working dead-end jobs, and here we were living large on how well we could basically lie. Those guys, man, they're still there. I don't know what happened to them, but as soon as I get another bankroll going, I'm going back to the Borgata, going to make me millions.

I'm facing a raise under the gun, and like I said, I know Cheese got something good, something *real* good, but I'm pretty sure I can get him off it eventually. The flop comes, and what the fuck do you know, there are two *diamonds* on the board. I check it all slick-like, and

Cheese bets two-hundred behind me. The turn's a blank, but it's still good because I know all he's got an Ace-high. If he bets anything, I'm going to come over the top with a big bet.

Thing is he calls out five-hundred-and-fifty, and then he shoves all his chips into the middle. Everyone gasps. That's all-in. I look over at him, and he's got his head down with his arms crossed. He's just staring at the table. Man, no way he's got an over-pair. Shit, how much have I committed? Two-eighty? He really thinks I'm going to fold. Where does this fool get off, doing something like that? Thinking he's Gus Hansen or some shit. I just laugh.

I know I shouldn't do it, but I push all my chips forward. Don't ask me what I'm thinking. Tony looks at both of us, like he thinks friends shouldn't be acting this way, and then he hides the river for a few seconds. If this had been a few months ago, I would have been praying, "Please let me make my flush. Give me a diamond, and I swear I won't ever play this damn game again." Finally Tony takes his hand away, and it's a diamond, the three of diamonds, and you know what? I can't believe it, so I look again, and the three of diamonds is still there. Something roars inside of my body, and then just this calm feeling turning over in my mind.

"You're such a faggot," Cheese says, slamming his fist against the table, and one of his cards flip. Like I thought, it's an ace, and I wait for him to turn the other card over, but he just shoves it into the pile. There's no way he had aces. *No way*. He smacks the table again, and this time three stacks of chips fall over. Everyone starts shouting, and Odd Job is looking all angry. Tony's laughing. Everyone's laughing. He's really not as stupid as everyone thinks he is. You got to be careful because people can be surprising. He might even have a future as an actor one day. He's a good-looking kid. I remember this one scout really took to him.

"That's the game," I say in a voice that would make Cheese lose it.

"Keep playing like that," Cheese says.

“Don’t get mad.”

“Are you fucking with me? You show nine-five and say, ‘don’t get mad?’”

His ears look like they’ve been dipped in some red paint, and everyone’s looking back and forth between us. He kicks his chair across the room, makes it slam into the wall. Did I say Cheese is a big dude? He looks like he could go into body-building. I remember once these two white boys at the gym told him they’d never seen such a big Asian. I was working out then, and I was like, *what about me?*

“I’m getting my money back,” he mutters, and a few of the guys snicker.

“Get out of here, you dumb fuck,” I say.

To my surprise, he actually gets up.

Everyone’s laughing, drunk as hell, and we look at each other. He nods. He’s going to call Isaac.

Gina walks over to the table, carrying a tray of Korean food. The chicken looks good, and I take a plate. I decide to sit out for a while, but I tell everyone that it’s only temporary. Actually what I say is, *I’m coming back*. I got to say that. Otherwise, people get anxious, then they get desperate, and when they get desperate, they start getting suspicious. I give Gina a five-dollar chip, which are house rules. It’s stupid, all of them pretending she’s a waitress.

I finish eating and get up from the table. I got to hand it to her because not many girls know how to cook Korean. I know it isn’t easy because I’ve lived on my own. I swear, when I’m ready to settle down, that’s going to be one of the first things I ask. Can you cook Korean food?

Black Jeff’s gone all-in, and Odd Job calls his bet. Black Jeff is a four-to-one underdog. They’re both standing up, and there are those damn pit stains again on Black Jeff’s armpits, nasty

motherfucker. That's all I got to say. Man doesn't understand personal hygiene. Cheese's mom thinks it's because he's black, but no, it is not because he's black. He's just nasty. Parents need to stop tripping about him being black. He's been saying for a while that it isn't good for his confidence, but I think that's got to do more with him being fat. Couple of days ago, we got smacked at his uncle's place by Hampton, and he's saying how he's going to Afghanistan. Cheese, Tony, and me – we all looked at each other and just lost it. We were like, bitch, aren't you like thirty-five? I mean, he's twenty-seven, but I've never heard of anyone even that old going to war.

Tony hides the river again, which is getting annoying. Everyone starts smacking the table, and then he takes his hand away. Ryan, who's like fifteen, says, "Oh, shit!" Black Jeff pumps his fist, that gold watch of his too big for his damn wrist. We all look at Odd Job. His face goes white, like he ate some bad fish – I know the feeling. The money's getting transferred all weird tonight, not the way we thought it would happen, but I guess it doesn't really matter.

I go into the kitchen, grab a beer from the fridge, and ask Gina if I can have a cigarette. She's got menthol cigarettes, but I tell her I don't mind. I mean, if I had a choice, I'd rather smoke a light, but beggars can't be choosers. She smiles because the same words used to pass between us all the time, *I don't mind*, and it's been a long ass time. To be honest, it's only been seven or eight months. Damn, it's weird being with someone that long and all of sudden, you're supposed to just be friends. Man, I shouldn't have had so much of the Johnny. It makes you too emotional.

I put the cigarette to my mouth, and it tastes like a mint. That's the good shit, I tell Gina, and she laughs and starts peeling another onion. Hot air shoots out the holes of the rice cooker,

and there are cut-up carrots, onions, garlic, and uncooked meat on the countertop. All of a sudden I want to wrap my arms around her. Nothing sexual, I just want to touch her.

“What are you making?” I ask.

I tap the ash into a cup, away from the food.

“You know what I’m making,” she says.

In high school, I used to go over to her house all the time. At first Tony didn’t want his baby sister smoking with us, but there was no stopping her. Besides, I always liked having her around, and he always knew that, probably the real reason he didn’t want her there with us. When we’d get the munchies, he’d always tell Gina to go make some food, and for hours, the house would smell like meat, kimchi and weed. We’d open up all the windows in the house and just walk around the living room sniffing the air.

“I got some,” I say, putting out my cigarette. “You interested?”

She grabs a paper towel and looks me square in the eyes. I heard you can’t really look at someone in the eyes. Either you got to pick one eye or look at the nose or something like that. I try to test it out on her, but I don’t know. It certainly feels like I can see both of her eyes at once.

“Is that even a question?” she asks.

“Let’s do it then,” I say.

Tonight’s shaping up to be a good night. I know we aren’t together anymore, but damn, there’s still some feelings between us. You can’t ignore that.

“I got to finish this first,” she says. “We can smoke in Danny’s room.”

“Odd Job, you mean?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Danny.”

“Alright, fifteen minutes,” I say.

I get back to the table, and I take a look at my stack. It's all there. Another big hand's going on, and this time it's Ryan up in his seat. I swear, I never seen such an old-looking fifteen year-old. He looks old enough to be married with three kids, which isn't the kind of thing you see everyday with a Korean dude. Tony's waiting for Mark to act. Odd Job's sitting next to him, acting all interested in what's going on. You can tell that they're close, even though I doubt they've known each other for that long. There's this thing about these two. They act like they're better than everybody at the table. Odd Job's always acted that way, saying things like, *I'm not fond of you*. I can't even guess what kind of a girl would fall for that act.

Suddenly Mark pushes his entire stack into the middle. I noticed Cheese isn't at his seat. I don't know what that dumbass is doing outside. He doesn't even smoke. He just gets dramatic sometimes. The table shakes, and Mark's out of his seat. He yells, "Nice! Nice!" Ryan looks like he's just found out his sister is really his mother. I mean, He can't believe it. Everybody knows Ryan doesn't have money. The kid is a leech, always hitting people up for just twenty dollars. That's what he always says, *just twenty dollars*, like he's asking for a nickel. He sits down like his ass weighs fifty pounds, and out of nowhere, Cheese behind him, massaging his shoulders, some classic Cheese shit right there. Ryan's shaking his head, dumbfounded, and he's probably feeling like his life is over. I want to say, the way it is right now, you're never going to feel more alive. He looks down at his phone. Odd Job's games usually end tomorrow morning, so he's got some time. Everybody know you can't go home even.

"You think you can spot me two?" Ryan asks Odd Job.

"Are you good for it?" asks the ugly motherfucker.

He's all pock-marked and ugly. He's like five-foot-two. No way in hell any girl going to go for him, no matter how much money he got or education or whatever. He probably got a baby

dick, too. Shit, I laugh just thinking about it. They should call him, Baby Dick, instead of Odd Job. Now, that shit funny.

“Yeah,” Ryan says. “I swear I’ll pay you back.”

“Are you sure?” Odd Job says carefully.

“Yeah, I am. I’ll pay you back tomorrow. I swear.”

“Okay,” he says.

He’s never going to see that money again, and he knows that, too. I don’t know why he’s giving any money to Ryan then. I look around the table, and I know that they’re all thinking the same thing, except for Mark. In two hours, Ryan is going to lose that money, and Odd Job is going to ask him for it. Then some shit is going down, I’m telling you.

Finally Gina comes back to the table. So I tell everyone I’m going to sit out a few more rounds to smoke, and Cheese, who’s in his seat now, gets mad. “You just said that. You better come back, you hear?” he says desperately. I tell him I’ll think about it, and before he can say anything back, I run up the stairs like I’m five-years-old.

“You better,” I think I hear him mutter.

Gina sits on Odd Job’s bed, Indian-style, and I break out the bag on his desk. I leave the door open. No sense in closing it. She sees me looking for papers and opens the drawer of the end table next to his bed. She tosses a pack of e-z wider into my hand.

“You know where it is like that?” I ask.

She shrugs her shoulders. “We smoke sometimes.”

I don’t know what’s going on, but I know I don’t like it.

“Who’s that?” I ask, pinching a paper and pulling it from the pack. She knows I’m talking about the picture on the end table, a pretty girl in pink posing next to some tree.

“That’s Jessica,” she says, looking at a spot on the wall above my head.

“That Odd Job’s sister?” I ask, sensing that something isn’t right. “She’s pretty.”

“That was his girlfriend. She died last year.”

“Oh, what?” I say, like it doesn’t make me happy.

Still, it’s kind of shocking to see that his girl was so pretty. She’s a lot prettier than any girl I’ve seen around Denton.

“Yeah,” she says, nodding.

“What’d she die of?” I ask in a low voice.

“I don’t know.”

“What?” I ask. “What do you mean, you don’t know? Did she die of cancer or not?”

“Yes, Eugene. She died of cancer. God,” she says.

“Then why the fuck didn’t you say that to begin with?” I ask. “What’s so hard about saying that? It’s not like she’s your ex-girlfriend.”

She doesn’t say anything for a while, but she doesn’t need to. I know what’s going on, and I kind of saw it coming, even way back when. I know she waited, and that’s cool. I thank her for that, but damn, Odd Job? Really? That guy? I don’t know what exactly I did to her that was so wrong. I never cheated on her. I didn’t hit her. I cared for her. I didn’t always pay as much attention to her as she wanted, but I was trying to make a career out of cards. That is not an easy thing to do. Didn’t you know that I didn’t even want to go up there? I wasn’t even twenty-one, so I was always looking behind my back, afraid that the pit boss was going to ask for my ID, and then I wouldn’t be allowed back ever again. Couldn’t you tell that it wasn’t all fun and games?

All that junk about it being the easy life, while everyone else suffered? That was bullshit.

Making money isn't ever easy. Making money, day in and day out, is the hardest thing any of us ever has to do, but I guess it's my fault because I never told you. I guess I was supposed to tell you how I felt all the time.

I roll the joint, and she turns on the television. Outside, the talk is getting louder. It sounds like they're fighting about something. I dry the saliva on the joint by holding the flame just under it. "Done," I say and sit next to her on the bed. She moves away a little, and I get awkward myself. *Damn*, she's probably slept with Odd Job by now. She probably thinks his ugly ass face is cute by now. Of course she's slept with him. They probably have been together for months now.

I hand her the joint, and she smokes it. Then I ask how long she's been seeing Odd Job.

"Danny," she corrects me.

"Okay," I say, taking a deep breath. "How long have you and *Danny* been seeing each other then?"

"Let me think," she says. "It's been about four months."

I don't know how she can think it doesn't hurt to hear that.

"How'd it happen?" I ask and hold my breath.

I can't stop looking at my hands, all of those lines crisscrossing at weird angles, a wine glass below where my middle finger starts.

"I don't know. It just happened. Eugene, don't you get it? I just couldn't deal with you, anymore. My parents, they hated you. Even my sister. They all thought you were a loser, and for the longest time, I kept telling them, no. That you were trying to do something different, but then you went away to AC of all places."

“I was trying to be something!”

“And how did that work out, huh? You’re back here. What are you even doing? Working at a liquor store and probably stealing when the owner isn’t looking. That’s right, isn’t it? See, that’s what I thought? You know, I’m not your mom, but one day, you’re going to have to ask yourself: What am I doing with my life? It’s not poker, Eugene. What is it going to be?”

“I’m figuring things out.”

“That’s what you always said, I’m figuring things out.”

“Okay, I’m going,” I say. “I don’t need to listen to this.”

“Eugene,” she says in that whiny voice.

“What?” I ask.

Don’t say, “Nothing.” Don’t say, “Nothing.”

“Nothing,” she says.

“Oh, my God,” I whisper, closing the door. “What are you doing? Mooching off Odd Job? Making people food, pretending that this game is something it’s not. Do you know how fucking pathetic that shit is? You need a uniform? Because I can get you one, if you want. I met a couple waitresses over at the Borgata, and let me tell you something, they’re a lot hotter than you are, you ugly ass bitch!”

“I don’t need a job,” she smirks. “My man makes enough money for both of us.”

All I can do is laugh. “Did you just say, ‘your man’?” Everyone wants to doubt me. They say I’m going to end up just like them, just like everybody. I swear to God, I’m going to show all of you. If I didn’t have a reason before, I do now, and it starts tonight.

“Where are you going?” she asks as I open the door.

“I’m going to go make some money.”

“Good luck,” she sneers.

“Just, you wait,” I said. “One day, I’m going to do big things.”

5. Relevant Work Experience

I found the listing for the job in mid-August. The Asian American Studies Department at the University of Maryland was looking for a grant writer, and I knew that without an assistantship, I would be unable to pay for my tuition. The most banal things were extremely hard for me to do then, and just looking at my resume, I felt a sense of panic expand inside of my chest, threatening to unravel me. It was only a page-long, but it appeared chock-full of errors. In the end, I made a few adjustments to the formatting. It took me all of five minutes, and yet as I closed the document, never to look at it again, the muscles in my back felt stretched thin, as though any sudden movement could cause serious damage.

On Monday, I received an e-mail from Ying, who was the administrative assistant of the Asian American Studies Department. We e-mailed each other a few times and agreed to meet on Thursday at noon for an interview. She sounded very eager, friendly and excessively optimistic, yet I couldn't help but feel encouraged by the tone of each of her e-mails. I was really quite happy to get an interview, as I hadn't expected to hear back from them.

On Thursday morning, I realized that I'd thrown away my last pair of contact lenses the night before, and I frantically searched my apartment, turning over shelves and emptying the linen closet. I had a terribly warped, gold-rimmed pair of glasses that I'd worn only a handful of times. The thought of being forced to wear them embarrassed me deeply, and as I put them on, I gazed at the reflection in my mirror, again failing to truly recognize the image looking out at me.

My apartment was a ten-minute drive to campus, I sat in the parking lot for nearly twenty minutes, until I summoned the energy to turn on the ignition. At eleven-fifty-nine, I called the number I'd written down on a slip of paper and a woman's voice was on the other end. I sucked

on my cigarette hungrily. I explained that I'd hit some traffic, and the woman assured me in a kind voice that I had nothing to worry about. In fact, I had many things to worry about. My entire resume was a lie, and for months, I'd been unable to endure the presence of other people.

Inside of the building, a pack of men in army-style fatigues were running towards me from thirty feet away, their arms and legs pumping in unison. In a few months, I would become so familiar with the sounds and rhythms of this strange building, calmed by the sight of the ROTC exercising. I found the room, and a group of eyes peered at me. With my glasses lying crushed on the floor of my bedroom, I couldn't see any of their faces clearly. A smiling, porcelain-skinned woman with short reddish hair emerged from my left and extended her hand to me. I recognized her voice from the phone.

“Hi,” she said. “You must be Eugene. My name is Ying.”

She led me into the next room, where a short, owlsh man was sitting around a table that was too large for the cramped room. He introduced himself as the chair. I apologized to the both of them for being late, and we exchanged pleasantries, for which I'd been prepared. I'd spent the past few days imagining the smile I'd wear, thinking of the muscles that would be involved, wondering how such things came so naturally for most people.

It was those large, sad eyes that I hadn't prepared for.

Dr. Morioka dominated the conversation, uttering each syllable with such force, as though in an attempt to prove his existence. As painful as it was, I stared back at his serious, unflinching eyes. If I had worn my glasses, I know it would have been too much, that I would have looked away. It was clear that he was not a normal man.

He explained that the Asian American Studies Department operated primarily through the money it received from a governmental grant. He'd written the grant application the year earlier,

and the department had received nearly two million dollars. The pitch was very good, though I suppose it wasn't such a difficult pitch to make, when you could throw around such a big figure without a hint of deception.

"Well, I think I'm perfectly positioned to handle the job," I finally spoke.

"Have you done any kind of this writing before?" Dr. Morioka asked.

"Yes, of course," I said, "at my previous job, and I've taken classes as well."

"Was that at Harvard?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, sure that he'd finally see through me.

I knew that this was why they'd called, why Ying had sounded so enthusiastic in each of her e-mails. It was likely that they'd ignored all of the other lies I'd perpetrated on my resume, which I'd spent hours upon hours crafting – the summer abroad in Shanghai, my volunteer work with a boys and girl club in Dorchester, the year spent at Ernst and Young.

"Okay," he said, nodding at the single sheet of paper. "I also understand that you'll be beginning your graduate work in Economics."

"Yes," I said, mimicking his nod. I stared into his large, sad eyes. "That's right. I was accepted as a Master of Arts candidate, which is of course certainly a step down from Harvard, but I'm looking forward to making the most of my time here, Dr. Morioka."

When I told my parents the news, my mother had wept on the phone. "*My son,*" she said, "*a graduate student. So, in the end, you've made it.*" I'd been moved to tears, wishing that I could reach my hand into the receiver. "*Where is it? Where are you going?*" she'd asked, and I'd been unable to control the sound leaving my mouth. "*Harvard,*" I'd said. "*Your son is going to Harvard for graduate school.*"

“Have you read Murakami?” he asked, interlocking his fingers and fixing his gaze on me, as though the way I answered the question was of great import.

“Yes,” I said excitedly.

“If there’s one man in this world that understands me,” he said, beaming. “It is Haruki Murakami.”

I did not know the first thing about this Murakami, though I ascertained that he was of Japanese descent, possibly a sociologist, as I knew that Dr. Morioka was a leading expert on intermarriage. According to his CV, he’d written quite extensively on the subject.

“He is a great man,” I said.

“What is your favorite novel of his?”

“Oh,” I said, filling my lungs with air. “Where do I start?”

I had read everyone but not this Murakami. How had I missed him?

“My God,” he said. “He has truly a beautiful soul. In fact, I have tried to pattern my entire life according to his novels. I’ve actually taken up running, recently,” he said, smiling in such a way that deeply embarrassed me.

“Running is good,” I said.

“I knew you were a fan of Murakami’s,” he beamed. “I read people very well, you’ll learn.”

“Yes,” I said. “I can already tell that about you.”

I heard my voice – the hesitance of my words. How do I properly explain such a feeling? It is as if I can see through my voice, deconstruct it to its bare elements, until what I hear so disgusts me that I want nothing more than to never speak again. It is not the lying that distresses me. It is the not knowing. I do not feel close to anything, to anyone. I have no home besides the

world I have created for myself. I am sorry if it sounds like I am begging for your mercy, but I do not know what has happened to me. What have I done to deserve this?

“Okay, Eugene,” Dr. Morioka said, extending his hand. “I’m very impressed.”

I shook hands with the man, and I was led out of the next room by sweet, smiling Ying. As I left the building, I was filled with an immense joy, and it was only a brief reprieve, but for the moment, I shook off my constraint, sat down on a bench, and watched the sun beat in the sky.

6. Pre-Paid

I stopped by the café one day in July to finish some work I was doing that summer. I'd been helping another graduate assistant in the Asian American Studies Department, a PhD candidate in Sociology, who was writing his dissertation on Korean military brides. He hoped one day to publish the dissertation in book form, and I simply didn't have the heart to tell him that his level of English did not match his ambition. I was worried he wouldn't be able to graduate, as he was such a nice person. I'd met both his wife and three-year-old son, Charles. They'd taken me to the Korean noodle restaurant next to campus a few times and regularly checked up on me. I wanted to help the man as much as I could.

It was painstaking work. Every sentence he wrote contained a number of grammatical errors, and often I'd stare at entire paragraphs, unable to decipher their meanings. When I did understand what he was trying to say, I still struggled to translate in a way that stayed true to the original meaning he'd intended, and I was also not, by any stretch of the imagination, qualified to help Mr. Park, but I could never admit that to him. My having gone to Harvard was source of great pride to the man. I could not bear to see any more disappointment.

The café had changed dramatically since the last time I'd been there. It'd once been a favorite hangout among my friends, a place to grab a coffee and dessert after a night of drinking, but the only people left who spoke English were baristas and the occasional American. You see, Mr. Park used a great deal of technical lingo to describe the Korean-American community. People like myself were considered second-generation. My parents were first-generation, and those caught in the middle, like Mr. Park and his wife, they were referred to as the 1.5 generation. It had been very interesting at first to hear him break us down in that way, to learn of the various

motivations of my people, who had among a host of other reasons immigrated here mostly for political and economic gains.

I returned to this particular café for two reasons. Firstly, I'd developed an aversion for places where I thought I might see people from the past. I tried my best to avoid them as much as I could, though I'd run into someone I knew every once in a while, often when I least expected it. The other reason was that I'd become enamored with the Korean language. Spending as much as time I had with Mr. Park and his wife had made me appreciate this language that I'd grown up hearing but had never bothered to pay much attention to. I still didn't speak the language very fluently, but I understood much more than I had in the past.

Apparently, that was what a common theme among second-generation kids, but I was determined to get better. It would be nice to speak to the Parks in our native language, and so I'd sit in the café, remarking privately on the effortlessness with which the language just rolled off their tongues. It had been brought to my attention that many 1.5 were jealous of the ease with which I spoke English – Mr. Park was always complimenting me on how well I spoke, no doubt hinting at my educational attainment – but I wasn't so sure if I qualified. After all, I'd spent half of my life practicing a bad imitation of the streets. The few times I'd run into old friends, I'd nearly died of embarrassment.

That day, I sat down on one of the stools next to the window, where I could look out at the street, while listening to the people talk. I took out the first draft of Mr. Park's dissertation, which I'd printed out weeks before, and I fully intended to finally get started, except that I was so tired. Ever since I'd begun my graduate work, I had been so tired, and the few solutions that occurred to me were detrimental to my health. I leaned back in the stool and concentrated my ears on a group of Korean boys sitting behind me. They were wearing their extremely tight pants

and those thick-rimmed glasses that were emblematic of the new Korea – the one that my parents were now so familiar with. Every other word was a curse.

Because of the way I looked, they never bothered to whisper in my presence, as though they believed I was Filipino or Vietnamese. Even Mr. Park, who was as respectful as any person I'd ever met, had been unable to mask his surprise upon hearing me say, "*Hello.*" Most of the time the conversation in the café was light and unimportant, but sometimes these people unknowingly shared the most intimate details of their lives with me. I heard them speak about love, marriage, God, and many other things they'd be otherwise too embarrassed to share with a stranger.

Finally, I decided that what I needed was a little caffeine, so I got into line to buy a cup of tea but ended up drinking a couple of strong espressos, and I still didn't feel ready. A few minutes later, I went outside and smoked a cigarette, the one habit that I'd been unable to break after all of these years. I watched the cars race past me, wondering if I knew anybody in those cars, if they'd even recognize me now. My clothes were different. The way I spoke was different, the company I kept was vastly different, but when I did see people in my past, it was as if all of these new enhancements fell away, and I'd catch myself feeling like I was eighteen-years-old.

Upon returning inside, I saw that a white man with a gray beard had sat down on the stool next to my work. He was a well-dressed man and typing on a tablet device. Though his hands were large, his fingers moved assuredly across the screen. I had never seen a tablet device before, though I'd heard that they'd caught on Korea, which was years ahead of America, at least as it pertained to technological advancements, and so as I watched him type, I wondered if he had bought it while on a vacation there. In the past few years, I'd noticed that many Americans had

developed a sudden interest in my country. Many of the restaurants now were full of Americans, and I'd even seen a few commercials that had referenced our barbecue dish.

I realized that in fact the man was typing in Korean. It was absurd and wonderful – this completely bald, middle-aged white guy with a gray beard and huge hands writing an e-mail in what I could only assume was fluent Korean. It certainly appeared fluent. There were large blocks of text – the consonants and vowels juxtaposed in a way that even I knew conformed to the rules of the written language – but it was really the confidence with which this man tapped the keys that signaled fluency. He glanced at me, apparently aware that I was watching him, and as I sat down, diverting my attention back to the large stack of papers in front of me, I saw the slightest hint of amusement take hold on his face. It was probably not the first time he'd caught someone gawking at his tablet. The first generation was far more brazen. It wouldn't be surprising for a first-generation person to ask, without a hint of self-consciousness, if he was a soldier.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said after a while. “I hope I'm not bothering you, but I couldn't help noticing that you're writing in Korean.”

He stopped typing for a moment, laid the tablet flat on the table, and nodded proudly.

“Yeah,” he said, scratching his beard. His voice was very masculine.

“I have to say, it's amazing,” I said, laughing. “I can't do that.”

“Well,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I've spent a lot of time in Korea, probably much more than you have. I actually just got back from Seoul not too long ago.”

I rested my elbow on the stack of papers and faced him. Obviously, I was interested in what he had to say, in his story, but also I was glad to have an excuse not to do my work. I'd never met an American who could speak Korean, let alone one who had mastered the written

language. As a child, I'd seen a couple of older white men who went to church with their Korean wives, sitting in the pews, nodding their heads solemnly, but they'd relied on translating devices, headphones that marked a certain kind of distance.

"Is that right?" I said. "Do you work in Seoul?"

"Yeah, well, my wife is Korean, so we went to visit her family's house."

"Oh," I said in a soft voice. "Okay."

The first thought I had: he was in fact a soldier and had met his wife while stationed at a military base in Itaewon or Yongsan, which made him quite possibly ignorant or a sexual deviant. I'd read all about those relationships in Mr. Park's dissertation. He'd interviewed over a hundred women, and it was not the kindest intellectual path to take. Many of those military brides had been disowned by their families and hadn't had an easy time of it in the United States. There were many terrible stories in Mr. Park's dissertation.

"I do work with the Korean government," he continued. "For the Defense Department. My expertise is in North and South relations."

"Oh," I said, recalibrating his position in said paradigm.

I was impressed and tried to think of something to say about North Korea, but nothing came to mind. All I could really picture was Kim Jung-Il's fat face and those thick-rimmed glasses, the strange irony that those glasses were all the rage in South Korea. I knew if he had had the chance that Mr. Park would have contributed something interesting to the conversation. His English was lacking, but his understanding of Korean politics was unparalleled.

"Have we met before?" the man asked suddenly.

"Excuse me?" I responded, surprised by the curtness in his voice. "No, I don't think so."

"Are you sure? I feel like I've seen you before," he said.

“I really don’t think so.”

“Okay,” he said, unable to hide his skepticism.

I had no idea where I could have met this man. The only Americans that I knew in Denton were teachers, but still his insistence and the tone of his voice distressed me. There was no way I knew this man, and I couldn’t think of any explanation as to why he thought we did.

“Are your parents from around here?” he continued.

“Yes,” I said, “but they’re in Korea right now.”

“Do they go to church?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Do you go to church?”

“Yes, I do, in fact,” he said. “I used to go to KPCD, but I just recently began attending Antioch.”

My parents hadn’t ever been to either of those two churches, and unless, he’d done his clothes shopping in the city, which was highly doubtful looking at the way he dressed, but he kept looking at me, though, like he was so sure that he’d seen me somewhere.”

“My son is probably about your age,” he said. “He’s in Korea now, teaching English.”

I knew a couple of people who had gone to Korea to teach English, and both of them had been friends of mine at one time or another. It was common knowledge that if you had nothing to do, you could join the army or you could go to Korea to teach English, and unless you were trying to get a tutoring job with the government, you probably didn’t even need to be in college to do that. Those companies hardly asked for any documentation, since they were so desperate for Korean-American tutors. Pretty much all you had to do was show them your birth certificate. It was something I’d considered before I’d started working for the Asian American Studies

Department, as it was an easy life. They only paid you a little bit, but it was enough to make ends meet, and Korea was very fun, by all accounts.

“Richard,” he said. “That’s my son’s name.”

I freaked.

I saw Rich the night I turned twenty-one. He’d called me on my pre-paid just as I was leaving one of the bars in Kirkwood. I couldn’t really understand what he was saying. He was mumbling like he was on smack, which was a reasonable explanation, but I knew what he was saying. Grace was in trouble. Isaac asked who it was on the phone, and I said it was my connect, which was mostly true. He didn’t ask anything else because business was business.

Grace had made it clear that she didn’t want anything to do with him, but I knew Isaac. I knew that he was calling her every single night, and I was proud to hear that she wasn’t giving in, but why she was with Rich was beyond me. I didn’t have anything against the kid. He was nice, but he was a junkie, and we all knew that one day he’d overdose and die. Rich made the rest of us look like we only dabbled in drugs, and I knew if I told Isaac that I was going to see her, that there was no way I could stop him from following me. There was no doubt about that in my mind.

The front door was unlocked when I got there. They rented an old ranch house next to the community college I’d been going to. Sometimes, I’d drop by to check in on them and to pick-up the coke, which I sold here and there to people on campus. I hadn’t been by for more than a month, though, and the house was in bad shape when I got there. There was trash strewn everywhere on the ground, little white mounds of ash and half-smoked cigarette butts just sitting on a pile on the couch. All of the furniture had been pushed around, like a tornado had swept

through the living room. There was a funky smell coming from the kitchen and the sound of a fan going. I hooked a left and found the two of them in the bathroom, Rich slumped against the wall, his feet splayed on either side of the toilet. Grace was in the tub.

“What the fuck, Rich?” I said, kneeling to the floor next to him.

I slapped him across the face, and he moaned, caressing his cheek with his hand. He was breathing but either unable or unwilling to move on his own, so I grabbed a handful of his shirt and lifted him into the hallway. He was lighter than any human being should ever be. He sat up and looked at me for a second. Deep rings circled his eyes, and I thought he was going to say something, but he just fell back onto the floor. Then I turned my attention to the tub, and at the sight of Grace lying inside of it, a jolt of panic climbed up my spine. I could feel how tired my body was from all of the smoking and drinking I’d done that entire week.

“Grace, can you hear me?” I asked, kneeling beside her.

For whatever reason, she’d decided to take a bath with all of her clothes still on. There wasn’t much water in the tub, but she could have still drowned had she fallen asleep on her side. I stepped into the water and hooked my hands underneath her armpits. I lifted her onto my shoulder, the water getting inside of my shirt, but I lost my balance. Her head slammed into the wall, and hearing that thud, I almost dropped her.

It seemed like a dozen voices were whispering into my ear, like rush-hour traffic had overtaken my mind. I took one very long but faint breath and focused on what I needed to do. I laid her body onto the couch in the living room, stepping over Rich, and began dialing reflexively. As I hit the send button, my heart began to pound frantically. I almost hung up the phone – my right hand was wavering in the air indecisively – but a voice pierced the receiver.

“911, state your emergency.”

“Oh, shit,” was all I could say. “Oh, shit.”

I couldn't believe that I was on the phone with '911.'

“Sir, what's the problem?”

“There two people over here, and I think they OD'ed.”

“What's your location?”

“Location?”

“The address, sir,” she said.

“Hold on a sec.”

I put the phone on the couch and ran outside but found that the number wasn't written on the door anywhere.

“Shit, I don't know,” I said. “It's not on the door. It's not there. What should I do?”

“Calm down,” she said patiently. “I can –”

“Oh, mailbox,” I said and ran back outside, this time with the phone in my hand.

As I ran, I realized how dark it was outside. It felt like I was running with my eyes closed, and for a second, I was afraid that I'd run into something. I didn't remember if they had put something on their lawns, like the gnomes that my old neighbors used to love. I got to the mailbox and strained my eyes to make out the number. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten.

“Two-forty-two Fosters,” I said between breaths. “Two-forty-two Foster.”

“Okay, sir. Please try to stay calm. Do you know what drugs they took?”

“I don't know,” I said. “It could be anything. When are the ambulances getting here?”

“They're on their way. You said there are two people in the house who have overdosed. Are they still breathing? What have they taken?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I mean, they were when I checked. Wait.”

I ran back into the house, holding the phone tight in my fist. I had no idea if Grace was breathing or not. Rich was definitely breathing, but she hadn't made a sound, even when I'd accidentally hit her head against the wall.

"Sir!" the operator yelled.

"What? I'm here. I'm here," I said. "She's not breathing. What did I do?"

"Do you know CPR?"

"What? No!"

"That's fine. I can walk you through it."

I pushed the coffee table next to the couch and with the phone pressed against my neck, I carefully followed the instructions the operator gave me. Putting my lips against her, I knew she wasn't going to make it, that maybe she had never had a chance. But I breathed into her mouth, anyway, forcing the unclean air in my lungs into hers, tasting the cigarettes and whisky. I found the groove underneath her chest and pressed down at least a hundred times, but it wasn't working. She was going to die.

"Nothing's happening," I said.

"Sir, the ambulance is going to be there very soon. Just keep trying."

"No," I said. "No."

"Sir –"

The ambulances were on their way. That's what the woman kept saying. The ambulances were on their way. I couldn't get caught. That's all I kept thinking. I couldn't get caught because I was doing well now. It just wasn't fair. I didn't have anything to do with this shit, but this girl was going to fucking die on me.

Do you blame me for leaving? What else could I do for her? It's not like I knew anything about the human body. I was studying Economics. The ambulances were on their way, that's all I knew, and when I found out that she died that night, I just had to tell myself that there was nothing I could have done.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't know who you were."

"You knew Grace?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," I said. "Kind of."

He turned away from me and faced the window. Two middle-aged Korean women had sat down on the stools to my left and were talking about how it had been His will to bring them to this country, to Denton, so they could shine a light on the sinners. Behind us, a group of young girls were trying to figure out how to spend the rest of the afternoon. One of them was clapping her hands and laughing loudly at the various suggestions. She looked pretty until about the point her mouth opened. Her teeth were grotesquely large, and I knew that God was speaking to me then because Grace's teeth had been just like that. It had been five years now since she'd died.

"Mr. Kuhn," I said, grabbing Mr. Park's dissertation. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder and pressing down on it gently. "It's not your fault."

"How do you even remember me?" I asked, laying the dissertation back onto the table.

"Eugene," he said. "It's my job to remember faces."

He said it kindly, but the words shook me to my core. He didn't know that I'd been there that night. It was impossible. Only God knew, but for a while, I'd been so scared, convinced

they'd trace the call somehow back to me, and then Isaac would find out that I'd seen her before she died. But Isaac didn't know, and neither did this man.

"Are you a spy?"

"A spy?" he said, laughing heartily. "No, I'm not a spy."

"Then are you a cop?" I asked.

He furrowed his eyebrows. "No," he said. "I just remember seeing you with Rich a few times."

"Oh," I said.

"Listen, Eugene," he said. "I think you're getting the wrong idea. Rich is doing well. He's clean. The only reason I know you is because Rich explained everything to me, including how if it wasn't for you that he might not be with us today."

"Oh, God," I said.

"It's okay, Eugene," he said, grabbing my hand. "I have no reason to be angry with you, do you understand that? I'm also thankful that it seems you've turned your life around, too," he said, nodding at the dissertation.

"Yeah," I said, still holding his hand. "I've done okay."

"Would you mind if we prayed?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, and he grabbed my other hand.

I watched him close his eyes and bow his head. He didn't speak loudly, but the entire café fell silent, as if entranced by the sight of us. I put my head down and closed my eyes, too. The words that came out of his mouth, the effortlessness of his Korean – every single syllable sounded like a miracle. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever been a part of.

7. Native Speaker

I was preparing my lecture the Chang-Rae Lee novel, when Dr. Morioka popped his round, smiling face into the conference room and asked if I had time to meet.

“It’ll only be for a minute,” he said, checking his watch, slightly out of breath. “I want to talk to you about a few things.”

“Okay,” I said, reluctantly meeting his hungry eyes. “I’ll be right there.”

“Take your time,” he said. “Really, take your time.”

He lingered in the doorway for a moment longer, while I lowered my eyes and read over the few lecture points I’d managed to come up with that morning. I was subbing in for Lawrence Liu’s literature class as he was away at a conference in Minnesota. He’d sent over lecture points, but I’d never followed up with him, believing that I understood the book better than he ever would. I’d planned to start preparing for the class a month in advance, but it hadn’t worked out that way.

As Dr. Morioka walked towards his office, I believed that I knew everything there was to know about the man, that I could somehow feel all of the pathetic emotions coursing through his body. Though I couldn’t see him, I was certain that he would smile meaningfully at each of his employees. His strides would small and measured, able to accommodate the need to suddenly stop, should anyone feel in the mood to chat. He was like a child desperate for attention. At Ronald’s desk, which was located just outside of his office, he struck up a conversation with that awkward boy about electronics, of which he knew very little. He starved for even the most basic human contact, yet he so badly wanted all of us to think of him as a father figure.

I stared at my worn-out copy of “Native Speaker,” flipping through the first half of the book, and then I set it aside. I’d read the novel once before, but with only an hour and a half left before class was to start, it was as if I had never read the book. It had dawned on me, finally, that I would not be sufficiently prepared for the lecture and that most likely I would stand up in front of a class full of expectant eyes with nothing to say. They would see right through me. There simply were too many words to parse, scenes that I was able to remember but that made no sense next to each other. It was always in these moments that I regretted changing stations in my life.

I did very little at the office, and so there was too much time to watch the others. It was a nightmare. I’d never seen so many weak people, whose wounds had been perpetrated by the white man, as Dr. Morioka might have put it, had he the confidence to. Please understand it is not the foreign-born graduate assistants my hate and pity is directed towards. It is the second generation, those who felt they had been slighted by white society – they were the second-generation Asian-American boys who I could not stand, and Dr. Morioka was the saddest of them all.

As I entered Dr. Morioka’s office, he shook my hand firmly, though we’d just seen each other, and he asked me to sit down. It is a strange phenomenon to feel both comfortable and distressed around someone, but in his presence, it had become normal. I was comfortable in the sense that I could say anything I wanted to him without fear of being judged by the rules of mainstream society, as though I had a free pass, if you will.

On his desk lay a copy of Gary Shteyngart’s new novel, “Super Sad True Love Story.” The book was positioned on the desk, right side up, so that I could read the title, I thought, without having to strain myself. Obviously he’d done this for my benefit and that he’d run the play-by-play in his mind beforehand. He wanted so desperately for me to like him.

“I haven’t read it yet,” he said, grabbing the book with his brown hand. “Have you heard of it? I’m so excited to read it.”

“The cover looks familiar,” I said, appraising the five rows of colorful circles, which contained the words: “super,” “sad,” “true,” “love,” and “story.”

“I don’t know much about it, but the ‘Lolita’ character in the book is apparently a Korean-American. Isn’t that exciting? *That’s* why I want to read it.”

He’d developed this habit of looking straight at me and then in the next instant avoiding my eyes like they were plague, but at the word, “Korean-American,” his face brightened like a thousand-watt bulb, and I knew it was difficult for him, but he maintained his gaze, as though it were a test of his character.

“A Korean-American, I see,” I said.

I looked around the office, as I always did, at the articles lining the walls and the shelf full of Asian-American literature. Every one of the books had been written by an Asian man, these heroes of his, “soul-mates,” as he’d once put it.

He claimed to be a voracious reader, and it was clear that he knew each of Murakami’s words by heart, but it was hard to imagine that he actually he had time to read. He spent all of his time with the two female graduate assistants he’d hired from Japan. He’d told me a number of times that they were beautiful, elegant creatures, and then in the next sentence, his hands would shake at the mere mention of a white man.

There were rumblings in the office about the carelessness with which he spent the grant money. The administrative assistant accused him of making frivolous purchases. He’d spent nearly a hundred-thousand dollars on equipment for the office, all of the newest products from Apple. I’d seen the receipts of his other expenditures. In fact, I had become obsessed. There were

hundreds of receipts from cafes and restaurants. He'd spent thousands of dollars on those two women.

"I'm sure it's top-notch," he added. "I've heard good things about Shteyngart."

Today, Dr. Morioka was to be undeterred by his discomfort. At times, I found it alternately unbelievable, pathetic, and deeply moving that he still tried to engage me – to impress me – when it was so clear that I hated him.

"How's the preparation for the class?"

I shrugged. "Okay."

He nodded thoughtfully, as though he understood exactly how I felt – that our experiences lined up perfectly and had led us to this exact moment. His eyes bore into mine like a drill. Today, he insisted on maintaining this eye contact, and I knew if I looked away the conversation might last into tomorrow. Earlier that week, he'd sat us all down in the conference and had preached at great length about the rise of China, how optimistic he was about their power, but you see, he only cared because to him, the rise of China signified the rise of the Asian-American male.

"Do you know of Floyd Mayweather?" he asked.

"The boxer," I said.

"Did you hear what he said about Manny Pacquiao? This is what's wrong with America. We continue to allow these types of people to spread ignorance because of the monetary gains that can be made by doing so."

"Sure," I said coldly.

Manny Pacquiao was another of Dr. Morioka's heroes, an Asian male – though he was of small stature – who was seen by the world as physically powerful. Dr. Morioka hadn't known anything about boxing until the moment that Manny Pacquiao had knocked out Ricky Patton. You see the symbolism there, don't you? An Asian man knocking a white man to the floor.

“Do you want to see it?”

“Okay.”

“Good,” he said, standing and nodding at a spot on the floor next to me.

I grabbed my chair, hoping that Floyd Mayweather's rant would inspire some sort of effortless and agreeable reaction, something that would give him the strength to leave me be. The internet connection had been spotty, however, and no matter what Dr. Morioka tried, the computer would simply not comply. Looking helpless, he sighed and ran his left hand through his wavy hair.

“Ronald!” he called out suddenly.

“Yeah?” I heard Ronald say.

“Will you come in here? Something's wrong.”

Ronald walked into the office, his eyes fixed in that perpetual squint, his face long and skinny, greasy hair parted in the middle. He looked like a rat and acted as though I was not in the room because he hated me. I had not shaken his hand once, and that was reason enough to hold a grudge for two years.

“The internet's down,” Ronald said. “We're all having the same problem.”

“Isn't there something you can do?” Dr. Morioka pleaded.

“I can call the Help Desk?”

“Great! I would appreciate that so much, Ronald,” he said. “Well, Eugene, it seems like I can’t show you the clip, but I recommend that you watch it. You may not be aware of what Asians have to go through, but this Mayweather, the way he talks our culture is disgraceful. He even accused us of eating cats and dogs, things of that nature. It’s people like him who need to suffer.

I nodded, pursing my lips. “Yes,” I said.

“But it’s the people who continue to support and sponsor him who are equally as responsible,” he yelled, “but I didn’t bring you in to discuss Floyd Mayweather now, did I?”

“Why did you call me in?” I asked.

“Eugene,” he said, grabbing his cellphone. “What are your intentions?”

“My intentions,” I said, confused.

“What do you intend to do after you’ve gotten your masters?”

He was shaking the cellphone in his hand, like an alcoholic going through withdrawal.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I still have some more coursework to finish.”

He nodded his head slowly, as he leaned back into his chair. He was about to fire me, though he’d have to wait until my contract expired. He’d claimed that he was unhappy with my work, but it was all a lie. Dr. Morioka had wanted me to be one of his soul-mates, someone to hold his hand as he cried about all of the terrible things that the white man had done to him. He wanted me to sit there and be angry that his mother had re-married a soldier in the 1950s. It was all he ever wanted to talk about – he’d once told me that every one of his female family members, twenty-seven of them, had married white men.

“Dr. Morika, is something bothering you?” I asked.

“No,” he said, nearly falling out of his seat. “Why do you say that?”

“You look very tired,” I said, knowing that he would spend the rest of the day worrying if he looked tired, checking every single reflective surface he passed. “How have you been sleeping?”

“Okay,” he said, sneaking a look at his computer screen. “Do I really look that tired?”

“Dr. Morioka, do you know what book I’m lecturing on today?”

“No, I don’t,” he said. “What is it?”

“Native Speaker by Chang-Rae Lee,” I said. “Have you ever read it?”

“I haven’t,” he said impatiently, “but I know all about it.”

“I really don’t think you do, Dr. Morioka,” I said. “For example, did you know that the main character in the book, Henry Park, is married to a white woman, Lelia? She took his last name, Dr. Morioka. They had a child together, who dies in the novel.”

That was all I needed to do. That was the kind of man he was.

After class, I noticed that the girl I recognized wasn’t moving to get up and leave. Meanwhile a gangly, wild-haired boy named Peter Tanaka wanted to chat with me a bit more about “Native Speaker.” Everyone else had gotten their things together quickly and left. Peter told me that he was writing a novel, perhaps because I’d made the mistake of divulging that Chang-Rae Lee had written much of “Native Speaker” while still in college. I found it difficult to listen to him because he reminded me so much of Dr. Morioka. He did not want my advice. He wanted my confirmation.

“What you said about the three-part structure of the novel, that was great,” he said, resting his pack on the table. “But I feel as if we weren’t talking enough about the themes. The story about being someone of color, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” I asked.

“Yes, it is,” he said. “Oh, what did you think of the list that Henry makes, or is it Henry’s wife, you know, the list that appears at the end of Chapter 1? I feel like that’s so important, like it’s what the rest of the novel hinges on. Henry’s all those things, isn’t he? Or is he?”

I caught the girl staring at Peter. Where had I seen her before?

“Hey,” I said. “I have to go. Why don’t you e-mail Lawrence?”

“Okay,” he said, “but one more question?”

“Peter,” I said, smiling. “E-mail Lawrence, okay?”

“Alright ...”

He slung his backpack around one of his shoulders. For a second, he appeared as though on the verge of saying something nasty to me, before nodding again and walking slowly towards the door.

“What?” I said, sighing. “What, Peter, what the fuck do you want?”

“Excuse me?”

“You obviously want to say something, Peter. What is it?”

“I was just going to say that I enjoyed the class.”

“No, you weren’t. Peter, go home,” I said, laughing. “Go home and find a quiet room to sit in. Close your eyes, and think about the way you’re acting. Can you do that for me?”

He didn’t know what to think, and I knew that I was going to hear something about it from Lawrence, at the least. Maybe Dr. Morioka would sit me in his room, but you know what? I didn’t care anymore. I could not stand to be in that office any longer, watching them make fools of themselves and the rest of us by extension. What the hell was wrong with these Asian people?

It wasn't so much a smile, but my lips parted as I acknowledged her presence. She was standing now, her eyes smiling, shaking that round head of hers ever so slightly.

"Wow," she said, laughing. "Bad day?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Oh," she said, smacking her gum. "So, you remember me, right?"

"I know that I've seen you before," I said.

The look on her face was very playful. It reminded me of someone.

"I'm Sam's cousin," she said. "Eugene, did you really forget about me?"

"Sam?"

"*You know*," she said, leaning into me. "Peanut!"

"Oh my God," I said, almost hugging her. "Emily?"

"Yeah!" she said, and soon we were outside, walking in that brisk autumn air.

Our arms rubbed as we walked, and we reminisced about all of the places we'd been: the pool halls, the karaoke bars, and the clubs. She was a few years younger than me, but little about Denton had changed. The last time I'd seen Emily, she'd been maybe ten or eleven years old – I remembered that she always went to church. She'd always come up to us, wanting to play with us, but here in front of me now was a dangerous girl, just a little fucked up in the most perfect way.

"What is Peanut even doing now?" I asked.

"He's in Afghanistan," she said. "Fighting in the war."

"That's great," I said. "Fucking great, man."

8. Identification

I finally got into UMBC after working my ass off at community college. Maybe I hadn't worked that hard, but for the first time since seventh grade, I'd been good about keeping up with the work, knowing when the tests were and even taking notes from time to time. You probably think that's what people are supposed to, like it's no big deal, but for me, it was pure torture. Not to mention, my friends were always trying to get me to come out with them and all that.

It wasn't some magic moment when I finally decided I needed to start going to school. I was just tired, I think. My parents had surprised me by packing it all in and moving back to Korea, but I only made the decision to take community classes months after they were gone. My dad left me with ten-thousand dollars, though, and instead of blowing it, I started taking classes at CC.

UMBC was different. The classes required a lot more work, and I wasn't surrounded anymore by a bunch of idiots that made me look good. The campus was also depressing as hell. I don't know what it was, but the thing about UMBC is it never seems like the sun is out, and for such a big school, there were never any people out, which was why I'd started going back to Denton on the weekends. I was also running out of money. By second semester, I only had a few hundred dollars left, and calling my parents was not an option. I didn't even know why they'd gone back to Korea. My dad was working as a parking garage attendant somewhere in Seoul.

So eventually I got a job at a liquor store near campus. I worked the night shift, selling liquor and beer to usually drunk college kids until closing time. The owners, who were a Korean couple in their late-sixties, had hired me after getting a bunch of citations for selling alcohol to

underage students. Apparently, for years the liquor store had been that place for freshmen and sophomores to go if they wanted to buy alcohol and didn't know anyone older who could get them it. I was under strict orders to check every single ID, but obviously, people didn't always appreciate that.

One Saturday, a young black guy wearing our school's yellow sweatshirt came in with his girlfriend. It had been a pretty quiet night, just a few people here and there; and with only fifteen minutes left to close, I was catching up on some work, reading a textbook for my engineering class. I'd just declared my major, and I was worried that if I didn't start studying soon that they'd try to kick me out. I'd managed to get a few A's last fall, but this semester wasn't going well at all. I'd fallen back onto my bad habits – sleeping late, smoking dope, doing a little of cocaine if I had an exam coming up. It probably didn't help that I worked at a liquor store. The owners were always telling me to take whatever I wanted. I hated myself for messing up again, but most of the time, I felt like there was nothing I could do. Going to school wasn't easy.

“Hey,” the young guy said, lifting the case of beer onto the counter. “Let me get some cigarettes.”

“Which ones?” I asked, putting the textbook down.

“Newports,” he said, scratching his ear.

“Okay, can I get an ID?”

As soon as I said that, he got extremely annoyed. His face scrunched up in a mock-pained expression, like I was being ridiculous for asking a question like that. I looked at his girlfriend, who wasn't saying anything, probably because he wasn't twenty-one. To be completely honest, he probably looked old enough. He was a short, stocky guy with wide shoulders. He looked like

a man. I wouldn't have batted an eye if I saw him on the street with a couple of young children. Looking closely, though, there was some acne on the sides of his face, and the green sweatshirt also made him look younger.

“Are you serious?” he asked loudly, reaching back towards the pocket of his jeans.

“I'm sorry, man. I got to ask for ID.”

He shook his head and made that spitting noise. He probably thought I was some straight-edge or power-tripping, but it didn't matter to me what he thought. I had to ask for ID. That was the rule, and it was the one rule at the liquor store that I was supposed to follow. I did feel kind of ridiculous, though. I knew this guy hadn't been sent in here by the police. It wouldn't make sense for him then to show up with his girl, but you couldn't be too careful. The owners were scared of getting any more fines, and they didn't want to work at night anymore, either.

“Damn,” the guy said, staring into his wallet. “I forgot my ID.”

He must have known that only an idiot would fall for that, especially with the way he shielded the wallet away from me. I was sure his ID was in there. I threw my hands up and told him there was nothing I could do. If he came back with it, I could sell him the beer. Otherwise, my hands were tied. Just to be nice, I told him that I could wait around a little after closing if he really needed the beer.

“I live like twenty minutes from here,” he said angrily. “I can't do that.”

“What do you want me to say?” I asked.

He shook his head again, putting the wallet back into his pocket. Then he put his arms on the counter and leaned closer to me, suddenly smiling, like we went way back.

“Come on, dude. I swear I'm twenty-one. I just had my party last week. Ask her,” he said, nodding at his girlfriend, who tried to convince me he was twenty-one with her eyes.

“He is,” she insisted. “He’s twenty-once.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I can’t sell you anything without an ID.”

“What the fuck?” he said. “So, I got to go back all the way to my apartment just for my damn ID. That what you want me to do?”

Just as he said that, the bell on the door chimed, and two Asian girls walked in. I looked past the black couple and saw them looking towards us, trying to figure out what all the yelling was about. I nodded, my way of telling them nothing to see here. They went towards the back of the store and disappeared.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s what you got to do. I need proof.”

“This is some bullshit,” the girl said. “He looks thirty-five.”

“He does not look thirty-five,” I said.

“At least thirty,” she countered.

I wasn’t going to stand there and call them liars, and I knew they were seriously angry, but I couldn’t help but crack a smile when she said that. They must have heard from somebody that this was the liquor store to go to if you weren’t twenty-one, but what they didn’t know was that there was a change of culture going on, and here I was at the center of it.

“Can I at least get my Newports?” he asked.

“No, man,” I sighed. “You don’t have ID.”

“What? Now you don’t believe I’m eighteen. You’re crazy.”

I sighed again and looked up at the ceiling, which was very bright from the fluorescent bulbs. It hurt my eyes, and I blinked a few times. When I looked back down, they were still there, and even they were mad as hell, they looked so young all of a sudden – I don’t know why. If we’d met on the street somewhere, in this state of things, I was sure that they’d try to fight me.

I'd probably get knocked out. At this point, it wasn't even about the alcohol or cigarettes. They just wanted me to say that they weren't lying.

"I'm not saying you aren't twenty-one," I said. "Things are just tightening up around here. My boss got into a bunch of shit like you wouldn't believe because they were selling to underage kids. I mean, the cops were in here about a month ago, threatening to send the old lady to jail. We're just trying to keep that from happening again."

Either they didn't care or they didn't believe me, but finally the girl touched her boyfriend on the arm, and the two of them walked out of the store. Someone must have said something about me because they exploded into laughter, but I let it go because I knew it came with the territory. I knew they were just mad and that at least they wouldn't try to come in here again. It wasn't important what they thought of me, just as long as they understood that they needed ID.

I sat back down on the chair behind the register, grabbed my textbook from the counter and tried to find the spot where I'd left off. I checked my watch. It was ten minutes to closing time, and I called out to the girls in the back, just to let them know. I heard a car turn on outside and drive away. I was glad that I hadn't budged on the cigarettes. He was definitely at least eighteen, but the rule was I couldn't sell anything without proof.

"Eugene," I heard a girl's voice say, and my heart sank into my stomach.

I looked up from the textbook and saw them approaching the counter with a bottle of cognac. They were wearing sweats, each looking like they'd rolled out of bed. One of the girls was smiling at me, twirling the bottle in front of her for some reason. It took a second for me to identify her, but then I knew. It was Veronica, one of Gina's best friends from high school. I hadn't seen her for at least seven or eight years.

“Oh, my God,” I said. “V.”

“I thought that was you,” she said, placing the bottle on the counter.

She leaned over the counter and came in for a hug. I didn’t expect it and went in too strong. The side of her head collided with my shoulder. We both stepped back and started cracking up. It was true she looked older – her face was a lot sharper-looking – but she was still the same girl I remembered. People used to point out all the time how happy she always looked, and Gina used to say that it was all an act. I knew things about Veronica that probably only a few people knew, but it went both ways.

“How are you?” I asked. “It’s been a long time.”

“I know,” she said. “So long.”

Her friend was smiling but a little uncomfortable, I guess. Her hair was tied up and sitting on top of her head, the way some girls do when they haven’t showered for a while. She was wearing a big, red sweatshirt with the name of a college I hadn’t really heard of on the front. The thick-framed glasses on her face made her look a little nerdy, but I could tell that she was really cute when she made herself up and everything.

“Oh, Eugene,” Veronica said. “This is my friend, Candace.”

I stuck up my hand out, and she shook it weakly.

“Hi,” she said.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, thinking it was weird that a Korean girl was named Candace. It wasn’t something you heard every day. I couldn’t imagine Korean parents even knowing that name now, let alone twenty or thirty years ago.

It was just about to get awkward between the three of us, and I started to say something, but Veronica cut in. She explained they were celebrating. Apparently they’d both just finished

writing twenty-page papers, and she'd learned that Candace had never had cognac before, so they'd come here, and then she'd seen me fighting with that black couple. I hadn't even known that she was at UMBC, and I tried to ask her about it, but the girl still didn't let you say anything until she was done saying what she had to say.

“What was that all about?” she asked. “We heard the yelling from outside. He sounded pretty angry, and so did you. I thought something really bad was going down, and then they just left.”

“It was nothing,” I said.

“What did he want, though? He seemed pretty mad. It sounded like he was going to reach over and smack you in the face.”

“He wanted beer,” I said, grinning at her.

“Why didn't you give to him?” she said, looking confused.

“He wasn't twenty-one,” I said. “At least, I don't think he was. He didn't have ID.”

“Oh, figures,” she said, shaking her head. “You must get that all the time from them, working at a liquor store. God, it must be bad. I can't even imagine.”

“No,” I said, surprised. “It's not that bad. I mean, it's just college kids, mostly. This place used to, you know, it's nothing I can't handle.”

She wasn't listening to anything I was saying. “But the black people, though,” she said without bothering to finish her sentence.

We both looked at Candace, as she let out an exasperated sigh.

“It's not that bad,” I assured her. “So, you're going to UMBC now?”

“Yeah,” she said. “This is my first year.”

“Congratulations. How are you liking it?”

“It’s okay. It’s UMBC,” she said. “I tried applying to about ten other graduate schools, but they all rejected. Still, there’s a lot of work to do, and the people are all really nice. I like my professors. Me being here just means that I have to work that much harder to get respect.”

“That’s cool,” I said, wondering what the hell she was talking about.

If I was her, I would have been psyched to be in graduate school. It wasn’t like everyone could get into Harvard, like Adam Lee. Those people were special and had worked hard their entire lives. You just had to know who to compare yourself to.

“Yeah, what are you ... uh ... so, are you working here full-time?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “I mean, I kind of am, but I go to school here, too.”

“Wow,” she said, slapping my arm. “Good for you, Eugene! Wow!”

She looked surprised to hear that I was in college, and suddenly I remembered how much I used to hate Veronica. The whole time I’d dated Gina, she’d been telling her that she should break up with me because I wasn’t going anywhere. I’d been pissed off when I heard that, especially since it wasn’t like Gina was doing anything differently from me.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s alright. I’ve been here for a little bit now, so I’m used to it.”

“Oh, did you hear about Gina?”

“Gina? Oh, her? No, I haven’t seen her in years.”

“She’s going to be a doctor,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘she’s going to be a doctor’?” I asked.

“She just got into medical school!”

I couldn’t keep a straight face.

“Stop lying,” I said. “That’s funny, Gina in medical school? Get out of here.”

“I’m serious,” she said plainly. “She just started.”

I stopped grinning when it became obvious that she didn't mean it as a joke. I mean, she was really serious, but in my mind, there was just no way Gina could have gotten into medical school. I didn't even know she'd gone back to school, and now she was trying to be a doctor? It'd been a long time since we'd seen each other, but I just couldn't imagine how something like that could have happened. She wasn't stupid or anything, but medical school?

"So, why are you working here?" she asked.

"Is something wrong with working here?"

"No," she said, blushing.

"Okay, well. I guess you want this bagged up," I said, grabbing the bottle of cognac from the counter and ringing it up. She grabbed a lighter and started playing with it. Candace watched her, smirking a little and, then noticing me, smiled.

"It's fifty-one seventy-four," I said.

"Oh," Veronica said, sliding the lighter into the pocket of her jeans. "Credit card?"

"Yeah."

"Here you go," she said cheerily, handing it over.

I slid the card through, waited for the receipt, tore it off, and gave it to her along with the plastic. I placed the bottle into a stiff paper bag and put it on the counter.

"Alright, V," I said. "It was nice seeing you."

"Yeah, definitely," she said. "We should meet up sometime."

"Yeah, okay," I said.

"Do you want to ... Here, take my number," she said awkwardly.

"Okay, what is it?" I said.

She told me the number, and I pretended to memorize it. I told her I was going to be busy for a while, but that I'd call when I got the chance, thinking in my mind there was no way I was ever going to do that. After they left, I sat back down on the stool and opened up the textbook again. Then I checked my watch. It was two o'clock already. I read one more paragraph before getting up to close the store. On my way out, I grabbed a bottle of Johnny Walker and a thing of blue cups, thinking they probably wouldn't mind.

I ran a search on the internet for Gina and saw it immediately. She was a first-year student at a medical school in the city. The last time I talked to her, she'd been a damn waitress. I wasn't a member of any social networking sites, and so if I ever tried to find someone online, it was a nuisance, but all of Gina's information was easy to find. There it all was on her online resume. She was in her first year of medical school. I even found a picture of her smiling in a white lab coat, a stethoscope around her neck.

I probably should have been happy for her, but to be honest, I was pissed. I couldn't believe this girl, Gina, had gotten her shit together. The whole time I knew her, I'd always thought I was a lot smarter than her. She was always saying that school wasn't for everyone. I mean, she was way more interested in going out or talking shit about other people. When we first started going out, she'd been the kind of girl who was always wearing big, baggy clothing and a pair of Timberland boots. Not a lab coat with her hair all done and smiling like that.

Veronica's got problems, Gina would say. She thinks she's better than everyone else, but she's really not. Just because her parents buy her all of those nice clothes, she thinks she's special. You know she's using all of those big words now that she's gone to college. I hate her, she would tell me, and like it was some big secret. I'd tell her to stop hanging with Veronica then,

but she'd always go see her during summer vacation, then talk all of this shit about her afterwards.

After a few more minutes of looking around, I'd figured out she was volunteering at an after-school program in the city, next to Isaac's meat store. Here was a girl who once snorted an entire eight-ball of coke in a weekend, and now she was trying to become a doctor.

I tried to stop thinking about it. I told myself I didn't care. I was a college boy now, and for the next few days, I studied harder than I ever had in my entire life. I had a lot to catch up on. Even at the liquor store, all I did was read, especially since there wasn't a lot of business during the weekdays. The kids went crazy during the weekend, but I knew they studied hard when they had to. I was at a good college now. I had to pull my weight.

On Friday afternoon, I got a call from the owner of the liquor store, who told me to come in a little early. He didn't sound too good, so I started to worry. His wife never came by the store anymore, and I'd been thinking she was sick, but he wouldn't say why he wanted me to come in early, and I didn't feel like pressing him. If he said it was important, I believed him. He was just that kind of guy.

It was a sunny afternoon, and it took a while for my eyes to adjust to the light. I was used to living in the dark, especially since I went to sleep so late every night and woke up by the time the sun had gone down. I knew I should wake up early, like everyone else. People were always saying how great it felt to wake up and have the whole day in front of you, but no matter what I did, I couldn't fall asleep before five or six in the morning.

When I got to the store, he was waiting for me. He looked lanky behind the counter because you couldn't see his gut. He was pretty tall for a Korean man of that age, and if his wife

were here, he would have towered over. Most old Korean couples were the same height, and so every time I saw them together, I'd always notice how much taller he was than her.

"Eugene," the owner said solemnly. *"Do you smoke cigarettes?"*

"Yes," I said.

"Do you want to go outside for a smoke?"

"Yes," I said, checking my pockets.

"It's okay. I have some."

I followed him through the back door into the parking lot he always used. He had this big set of keys, and as he walked, I heard them bounce inside of his slacks. We stood in the shade, and he handed me a cigarette with a brown filter. I hadn't known he smoked Newports – I'd never met a Korean guy who did. The smell was different, one that was pleasing in the same way as gasoline, but I didn't like the taste of them. I couldn't refuse a cigarette, though. He would have been all offended.

"Are your studies going okay?" he asked me.

"Yes," I said. *"It's okay."*

He nodded thoughtfully and sucked the cigarette thoughtfully, too.

"What about your Mom and Dad? How's their health?"

"It seems like they're doing well."

I'd never said anything to him about my parents, but he had a habit of asking about them. I knew it was just something Korean people did, but whenever he asked, I'd start thinking about my parents. The thing is, for a while, I'd felt like they abandoned me. I don't see it that way anymore, but at the time, I got touchy about it.

"Good."

“Eugene,” he sighed. “This is hard for me to say, but there are things in life that we simply must do. I saw the tapes.”

“Videotape?” I asked.

“That’s right. I saw you stealing.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t lie to me. In this situation, you have to tell me the truth.”

“What did I steal? I ... what did I ... What did I steal?”

“You stole liquor,” he said, like it was a fact that couldn’t be denied.

“Sir,” I said, flicking the cigarette. “Your wife told me to. She did.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, completely surprised by it.

“She really did,” I said.

I couldn’t believe what was going on. What the hell was this guy saying to me? I hadn’t stolen anything. His wife had told me so many times that it was fine if I took a bottle of liquor for my friends. She’d practically begged me to take it.

“If I call her right now,” he said then, “is she going to something, something, something?”

He started using all of these big words I’d never heard before. He must have known that I couldn’t understand what he was saying.

“Call her,” I said, slapping my thigh for some reason.

“I’m really going to do it,” he said, like I was afraid.

The owner put the phone next to his face and put his hand up, the one with cigarette, to let me know that I needed to stay quiet. Like I didn’t know already. It was pure torture, waiting for his wife to pick up. I was really offended. I mean, I’d done everything right, and I was getting

punished. Still, I was confident that as soon as the old man talked to his wife, everything would be cleared up, and then he would apologize, calling it a big misunderstanding.

It didn't turn out that way. I didn't hear the conversation the old man had with his wife because he'd gone over by where his car was parked, whispering for probably less than a minute, but when he came back, he told I was lying. Apparently, his wife had told him that she'd never told me that it was okay to take the liquor. I kept telling him that wasn't true – it just simply wasn't true, but he shook his head at me, acting like a disappointed parent.

“Eugene,” he said. “I trusted you. You shouldn't have done that.”

“Sir,” I said. “I don't know why she said that, but I am not lying to you.”

He just kept shaking his head.

“I'm sorry, Eugene, but I have to let you go. It's the right thing to do.”