

ABSTRACT

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THE SCIENCE OF BLEEDING

Christopher White, Master of Fine Arts 2007

Thesis Directed By:

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This thesis represents my work in the Creative Writing department at the University of Maryland from 2003 until 2007. This thesis contains four stories and one uncompleted novella. My work is imaginative and at the same time realistic and evocative. The first three stories are interested in the bizarre and the macabre, while the other two sections find their focus in sports and the consequences of sports on sons and fathers during different times in American life.

THE SCIENCE OF BLEEDING

By

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Eat, Drink, and Be Merry

Part 1: Eat.

They first noticed the change in Jebediah's appetite after the harvest. He was a shy, wispy boy with arms and legs as thin and fragile as dead corn stalks. His three older brothers, on the other hand, were large and gregarious, like overfed farm dogs. Luke, David, and Peter played football in the winters on fields frozen solid as stone, and during the spring and summer they took on their chores with the same manic affection with which they played football. Jebediah never shirked his duty, it was never said that he wasn't a good and loyal son, but he hadn't the same gusto for work and play as his brothers. At the dinner table, while either a winter wind howled against the window panes, or a light spring breeze trickled through the screen door, Luke, David, and Peter's plates would be piled high with fresh picked corn smothered in butter, sliced tomatoes, potatoes, fried chicken and pork sausage, while Jebediah would just pick and nibble, pinching off a piece of buttermilk biscuit and nibbling it between two white teeth.

It was during the father and son football game at the End of the Harvest Feast, while Mrs. Lancaster and the other wives packed and divided the leftovers, that she noticed something strange. Jebediah, who usually perched with the younger children on the big hay bales cheering on their fathers and brothers, was not there. Instead he sat at the end of the long wooden picnic table, elbows planted in the checkered tablecloth, munching cheerily on an ear of corn. Mrs. Lancaster was overjoyed to see her youngest with yellow butter streaked on his sallow cheeks and no less than four ears picked clean

lying on the plate in front of him. He finished his ear, leaned back and let out a long and deep belch, giving Mrs. Lancaster a little surge of joy.

And at breakfast the next day, while Mr. Lancaster thumbed through his dog-eared farmers almanac sipping coffee, and Peter, David, and Luke mopped up runny egg yolk with slices of toast, Mrs. Lancaster found herself putting four more links of country sausage into the frying pan and melting a slice of cheese on the Beaumont's apple pie for a hungry Jebediah. Mr. Lancaster peered over his spectacles and watched as his boy devoured the four sausage links and pie. He glanced at his wife with a knowing smile on his face. Maybe it was time for Jebediah to do some catching up with his brothers.

Winter came on strong, and as the snow grew outside of the windows so did Jebediah's appetite. He rivaled and then outdid his brothers at every meal, staying at the table long after the other members of the family were sated and gone, whining like a hungry bird when there was no food left. He snatched food from his brothers plates when he thought they weren't looking, and sometimes when he knew they were, shoving bacon, fried chicken, and bits of steak into his mouth before they could try and get it back. He cleaned his plates with a loaf of bread every day. He even ate the leavings from everyone's meals, chewing contentedly on fat and gristle while his eyes searched the kitchen for something else to eat.

The Lancaster's were pleased that the boy's appetite had improved, but there was a problem. Despite all that Jebediah ate he didn't seem to be gaining any weight. Quite the contrary, if anything it appeared that Jebediah were actually *losing* weight. The spaces between his ribs grew more prominent, the skin across his chest looked thin and stretched. His cheeks sunk into his face, his pale blue eyes bulged from their sockets, and

his arms undulated from his body like pendulums. He grew steadily weaker and Mr. Lancaster no longer expected him to help with chores. Instead Jebediah wandered around the farm like an apparition, appearing in the kitchen like a boy returned from the grave to steal the cookie jar, or grab great handfuls of dough from Mrs. Lancaster's mixing bowl, sucking greedily on his fingers.

It was two days to Christmas when Jebediah failed to rise from bed one morning. He called to his mother from his bedroom, a high pitched insistent whine like an animal in a trap. Mrs. Lancaster hurried up the stairs, her husband's boots clomping on the steps behind her. Jebediah lay half in and half out of his bed, crumpled to the floor like a puppet without strings. His spine showed through the translucent skin on his back, knobbed and ridged like a row of rocks at low tide. He writhed on the floor, mewling and howling and clutching his stomach, wrapped inside of his bed sheets but lacking the strength to remove himself. The only part of him that still seemed animated and alive were his eyes, still blue, still searching and hungry.

Mr. and Mrs. Lancaster knew their son needed a doctor, but there was a problem. Doctor Sanders was a nervous, unkempt man with a bad stutter who inspired no one in the town with confidence and was only called when there was no hope. There was, however, another option, a doctor who's medicine and tonic bottles claimed they were derived using nothing but, "Good, Clean, Mother Earth." and professed to be an expert on home remedies. Doctor Brown was considered a wild mountain man, a witch doctor, but Jebediah lay dying in his room, so Mr. Lancaster ordered Peter and David into town to find Doctor Brown. The boys lit out while Luke, and Mrs. and Mrs. Lancaster helped their youngest back into the parlor, doing their best to feed him rich chicken broths and

heavy soups, which at first Jebediah slurped up hungrily, but eventually pushed away begging his mother, begging all of them, for something to chew on, something to *eat*.

The next morning they heard the sound of a car coming down the road. A large black truck with a wooden cab kicked and backfired its way toward the house, bald tires slipping and sliding in the dirty brown snow. Mr. Lancaster peeped through the window shades and saw his two boys riding in front, clutching the top of the cab, with Doctor Brown in the drivers seat grasping the steering wheel in both hands. The rear wheels spun wildly in the driveway and for a moment Mr. Lancaster thought they might tip over, but the car hitched, belched black smoke from the tremendous tailpipe, then righted itself and shuddered to a stop.

Paul and David spilled out of the cab and ran to their mother and father standing on the front porch. Doctor Brown stepped from the truck, knee high leather boots crunching in the snow. He was a tall man, made even taller by the stovepipe hat that he wore. A long white beard hid his terrible hatchet face. The wispy ends of the beard were tucked into his belt buckle. His eyes were as cold and hard as granite so he hid them beneath a pair of dark glasses. Doctor Brown was a physician of desperation, a last holdover of primitive faith in a Christian land. His family came from high up in the hills and any healing that you may receive from him would not be a good, medical healing. Instead of a scientifically proven tonic or formula you were more likely to eat a strange mushroom or drink a pungent tea mixed from herbs, roots, and animal parts.

He strode across the snow-covered driveway, black canvas bag in hand, and stepped up to the porch steps. He tipped his glasses down, revealing his flinty eyes. Mrs. Lancaster took a step behind her husband. Mr. Lancaster opened his mouth to speak

when suddenly a gut wrenching shriek came from the parlor. The Lancaster family jumped. Doctor Brown's eyes drifted up to the house. They stood on the porch and listened to Jebediah's screams. Doctor Brown removed his stovepipe hat revealing a pink skinned bald head. He mounted the porch, his heavy boots clomp, clomp, clomping up the steps, and stepped into the parlor. From the porch the Lancaster's could hear the screams; Jebediah begging, cajoling, foul mouthed and cursing, begging for Doctor Brown to bring him some morsel of food, some scrap, anything.

Doctor Brown returned a few moments later, hat back on his head, cleaning his glasses on a shirtsleeve. Without a word to the family he went to his truck and came back with a long length of rope. Resting on one knee he tied the heavy rope, fingers working quickly, and raised a noose above his head. Mrs. Lancaster felt her husband's strong biceps tighten under his shirt. He opened his mouth to protest, but Mrs. Lancaster gripped his arm and silenced him. Doctor Brown threw the noose to Paul, the oldest son, and motioned him to the Elm tree behind the house. Paul looked to his father, who stared coldly, but finally nodded. Doctor Brown then told Mrs. Lancaster to go into her kitchen and cook the biggest, juiciest steak they had left in their icebox. He stopped, scratched his chin, and then told her to also prepare a baked potato, a side of greens, and cut a huge wedge of pie for dessert, and bring it out by the Elm when she was done.

Mr. Lancaster leaned against the porch railing, arms still folded across his chest, glaring at the Mountain Witch. Doctor Brown mounted the stairs and pulled out two sloppy hand rolled cigarettes from his coat pocket. Doctor Brown lit them with the same match and handed one to Mr. Lancaster. Inside the parlor, Luke sat by the window, trying to ignore the screams of his brother and listen to his father and this strange man

whisper to one another on the porch. They conferred in low voices, nodding to each other, then came inside the parlor, grim faced and determined. They stepped to the couch and hoisted Jebediah into the air. As they left with Jebediah in their arms, almost as an afterthought, Mr. Lancaster motioned towards the fireplace with his chin, and Luke grabbed the shotgun from the mantle.

The Lancaster Family fields were a winter wasteland and the single Elm stood naked and lonely on the hill. Paul and David sat next to the tree, the noose swinging back and forth in the wind. Mrs. Lancaster followed behind with her hasty dinner set out on a plate and a glass of milk in hand. Jebediah craned his neck towards the food, his mouth snapping open and shut. They laid Jebediah down in the snow under the noose and pulled away the heavy quilts. The family cringed. Doctor Brown raised an eyebrow. Jebediah's sweater hung limply, his short pants clung to nothing. The knobs of his knees stuck out like tree knots, his arms and legs were just bone sheathed in skin. His body had eaten away all of its muscle, only his stomach remained round and thick, almost glossy; pregnant.

Doctor Brown took the plate of steaming food from a trembling Mrs. Lancaster. He wanted to try and calm the poor woman with something, perhaps a word of encouragement, or a pair of steady eyes. But he knew that his severe and terrible features would only add to her horror and anxiety. So instead he took the plate from her and placed it before the dying boy. Jebediah snuffled and mewed like a blind and suffering animal. He could no longer see the food, his eyes would not open, so the smell compelled him to push and wriggle through the snow. Mrs. Lancaster stifled a sob as Jebediah's tongue lolled from his mouth, probing outward, searching for sustenance.

Doctor Brown took hold of the noose and Paul took the end slung around the tree limb. Doctor Brown reached for Jebediah, grabbed both of his feet, and slipped the noose around his ankles. Doctor Brown jerked his thumb upwards and Paul pulled, too hard, and Jebediah shot six feet into the air. Doctor Brown took the rope away from Paul and steadied it, lowering Jebediah slowly to the ground and closer to the succulent meal.

The steak, the roasted potatoes, the juicy greens, all getting closer and closer to Jebediah's mouth, until he was just a few inches away, and the rope stopped. Jebediah screamed and cried, eyes shut tight, his mouth open like a baby bird. Mrs. Lancaster wrung her hands on her apron, tried to close her eyes and plug her ears with her fingertips, but in her mind she could still picture Jebediah, wriggling like a worm on a hook. All he wanted to do was eat, she started to scream at Doctor Brown, Stop for the love of God, stop torturing my baby, when Mr. Lancaster took his wife's arm and pointed, eyes wild with disbelief.

At first Mrs. Lancaster thought that it was her son's tongue that had been lolling gently from his mouth. But the longer she stared the more it appeared that Jebediah's tongue was growing longer, creeping farther and farther out of his body. And it was not the healthy, reddish pink color a tongue should be, instead what lolled out her sons mouth was a dead gray, the color of wet cement. Mrs. Lancaster dug her nails into her husband's forearm as slowly, methodically, something alien and slimy crawled from her son's mouth. The boy's neck stretched and his cries were suddenly cut off as at least six or eight inches of glistening gray mass undulated from Jebediah's mouth like a caterpillar, twisting this way and that. Doctor Brown raised the rope still higher, and this time it wasn't Jebediah who cried out, but something high pitched and piercing, primal.

Jebediah's throat swelled and Doctor Brown raised the rope just a little higher until, with a wet sucking sound, like pulling a boot from the mud, a three foot long slug, it was all that Mrs. Lancaster could think to describe it, lay on the cold and frozen earth, wriggling and mewling like a newborn.

Without uttering a word Mr. Lancaster took the shotgun from Luke's hands, cocked both barrels, and fired as the tapeworm began searching for the food with a long proboscis. It shuddered a few times, its appendage standing straight and stiff in the air, then slowly sagging. Doctor Brown lowered Jebediah to the ground, his narrow chest racked, trying to call for his mother but instead coughing up huge clots of blood. Mrs. Lancaster ran to her youngest son and took him in her arms. She carried the shadow of Jebediah back into the house with Luke, David and Peter following behind.

On the hill, Doctor Brown produced two more cigarettes and he and Mr. Lancaster smoked over the remains of the giant tapeworm. They nodded, eyes drifting from the impossible thing at their feet, then back out into the dead, empty fields covered in snow. After a few moments they nodded to one another and shook hands like two men who had struck a deal. Mr. Lancaster walked back towards the house, shotgun tucked under one arm, trailing smoke behind him. Doctor Brown retucked the wispy ends of his beard into his belt and kneeled down into the snow. He took Jebediah's sick blanket, wrapped it around the corpse, and carried it back to his truck, wondering if the poor thing had felt any pain before it died.

Part 2: Drink

“What’s the most horrible thing you’ve ever done, you know, the worst thing.”

“I don’t know. Spit Mrs. Davis’s coffee before class, I guess.”

“God man, everybody’s done that. No, what’s the ultimate, just most worst thing you’ve ever done, in your whole life.”

“This is a stupid game. Why would I even tell you that?”

“Because I asked, that’s why, and it’s a good game. Hey, watch my kite or I’ll punch you in the nose. So anyway, spill it, what is it.”

“I’m not telling you.”

“What you mean your not telling me? That means there is something. Oh that’s it, your fucking telling me now or I *am* going to punch you in the nose.”

“I think it’s getting too windy to fly kites.....”

“Too windy to fly kites? What the hell is wrong with you? Just hold on to the spool--no asshole, *hold* onto the spool, yeah, there you go. So I’ll bet you. You go first, and I’ll go second, and then we can see who wins.”

“What do we win?”

“Uhhmmm, well, you don’t really *win* anything. Let’s say the loser has to drink out of the creek.”

“Uh-uh. No way. I’m not drinking that water.”

“Don’t be a baby.”

“That’s not even a creek. That’s just sewage water and---whoa!”

“Jesus Christ! Hold onto the goddamn kite! I really am going to punch you in the face and kick you in the stomach. God, I can’t believe nobody else was home and I was forced to hang out with you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean.”

“Everybody else is at their damn grandparents or whatever else for Thanksgiving. You were the only kid home. Should have just flown the thing on my own.....”

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for? Why are you always so sorry? Whatever, forget I said anything..... So the bet is that one of us has to drink out of the creek, right?”

“It’s not a creek, it’s a sewer.”

“Sewer, creek, whatever. If you loose you’ve gotta drink and that’s the bet. Only your going first, okay? You tell your story first.”

“I don’t know, I can’t even think of anything.....”

“Come on, everybody’s done something. Everybody’s done one thing. Well, maybe except for you, but everybody else.”

“Okay. Sure. I guess. One time I watched my mom getting naked in the mirror.”

“Oh my god! Are you fucking serious? You watched your mom get naked?

That’s the sickest thing I’ve ever heard! What a scream!”

“It was in a department store.....”

“Your own mother, man.”

“She was trying something on in the dressing room and I could see her in a mirror though a hole in the curtain.”

“Naked. Your own mother. Naked. That’s so sick. Did you see everything?”

“I don’t remember. That was like five years ago. I was like four years old or something.”

“Man. I said the worst thing, not the grossest thing. Oh man, I need a minute to recover from that.”

“Hey, it’s your turn. Now you’ve gotta tell.”

“Alright, alright. I know it’s my turn, don’t get your panties in a bunch. Here, take the kite back..... Okay, I’m going to tell you, but you have to promise never to tell anyone else about this. Alright. Promise me.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I said promise asshole! Do you fucking promise or what? Huh?”

“Yeah, I promise. Sure, I promise.”

“Okay then..... You know that dog that Mrs. Sherman used to walk around at night? You know, the little fat one with the smooshed up face and the big eyes? You know the one I’m talking about?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Sure you do. Mrs. Sherman. That little dog with the curly tail, and those bug eyes that made it look like an alien. You know, the little goddamn dog she was always walking at night.”

“Oh, right. That dog with the uh, the little curly tail and stuff. What about it?”

“I killed it.”

“Shut up.”

“I did. Me and my brother. We were out here by the creek with his BB gun shooting bottles and stuff and we heard it barking. It must’ve got out somehow because

it was just wandering around out back here, but it was all dirty and shivering and stuff and it was limping around like it hurt its foot or something.”

“So you just killed it?”

“Not at first. My brother grabbed it. It tried to run away but it couldn’t really run because it’s foot was so fucked up. It was just trying to limp away, and before I knew it I heard my brother pulling the stock back on the gun, and he shot it in it’s back leg.”

“Gross.”

“Not really. There wasn’t any blood or anything. It just yelped real loud and my brother handed me the gun and I shot it in the stomach. We shot it a few more times until it’s started breathing real hard and wasn’t really moving at all, just kind of twitching. It started drooling, and every once in a while it would twitch around like it should be alive again, then it just stopped moving, so my brother ran back to the house and we wrapped it up in a trash bag and threw it away.”

“Away where?”

“Down in the creek.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t give a fuck if you believe me or not..... Anyway, you lost, so I guess you’ll be drinking sewer water.”

“I didn’t lose. Why is what you did worst than what I did?”

“Are you kidding me. The dog is worst than your mom. Anybody would tell you that. Don’t be a baby. You lost the bet and that’s all there is to it. Gimme the kite and come on..... I said come on!”

“That water looks dirty. It’s brown.”

“It’s not dirty. That’s what creek water is supposed to look like. Look, its not really that bad. I drank some before. Come on. Drink before I make you drink.”

“Where’d you throw Mrs. Sherman’s dog?”

“Somewhere over there, way deep out. I just swung it around my head and threw it. It floated for a little while but I guess it sank or something..... Look, are you going to drink or not? Jesus, no wonder everybody in class says your such a wuss. Do you want a shot in the jaw?”

“I think what I did was worst. I think we should both have to do it.”

“Is that what it’s going to take you baby? Fine, I’ll take a little sip but you better dunk your damn head in if this is what it’s going to take.”

“Yeah. Just take a little sip.....”

“I will if you’d back off me. Give me some space. Such a baby. It’s just a little sip of creek water, it’s not going to kill you. Hey, wait, I said get away from--”

“Just take a sip.”

“-----”

“Just a little drink.”

“-----”

“Just take a drink.”

“----”

“Good boy.”

Part 3: Mirth

The dance floor is crowded tonight and the animals are getting wild. A gopher is on the drum riser with two crates full of records, spinning something hard and industrial, banging his head to the beat. A zebra roams in the corner, drink in one hoof, throwing her head back and whinnying at a flamingo's dirty joke. Silently, a pride of lions circles. A couple of tigers (there are a lot of tigers) slink into the corner to smoke cigarettes by the stand up ash-tray, pointing at a group of bears bursting into the ball room, laughing and slapping each other on the back with their big paws. A flock of colorful birds flit in and out of the hallway, and a couple of what look to be swans sway back and forth tentatively on the dance floor, but they're nervous, sensing a crocodile floating patiently next to the punch, marble green eyes watching and unmoving. There's even a stately elephant or two, but most of the other animals just try and stay out of their way.

Jason stands in the corner taking it all in, sipping a gin and tonic through a hole in his wolf mask with a bendy straw. Jason has seen this all before. It's his eighth, no, make that ninth convention and the initial feeling of strangeness and displacement, like the hotel employees in their burgundy blazers and black slacks who pretend to stare at the hounds tooth carpet instead of all the grown men and women in animal costumes, like being the only customer at a theme park, is gone. He is usually comfortable here with his people, but something is different at this convention. Maybe it is because he is feeling older, maybe the convention feels a little less like a game this time, but there is something else there too.

The three hour drives from the city to a hotel in the middle of nowhere, taking off a shirt and tie and slipping into a wolf suit, used to feel as refreshing and liberating as paying off a credit card debt, used to be like vacations from the his “real“ world of florescent lit office buildings and white drywall one bedroom apartments. The conventions were about freedom and anonymity, where masks never had to come off, and the only thing exchanged at the end of the weekend were e-mail addresses. No faces, no names, nothing to remember anyone by except maybe finding some of their fur on your suit, like finding long strands of hair inside your blanket.

But sometime ago, Jason couldn't really say when exactly, sometime between the first convention and tonight, everything changed. Not changed exactly, more like slipped away. At first he felt maybe the novelty had worn off, but Jason still got the same fluttery feeling in his thighs and in his stomach when slipped on his fur lined wolf costume. No, there was something else. When Jason looks out on the dance floor and sees his fellow Furrries in their costumes, some with just tails and ears and others like Jason with full replica heads and suits hiding all of their features, packed haunch to wing at the bars, the sense of camaraderie feels diluted, like there is a piece of glass between himself and the crowd. Jason can't tell if it's the alcohol, or the smoke drifting from the machine by the drum riser, but the dance floor looks hazy and undefined. The more he squints and stares at the crowd, the more out of focus they become, like everything is just a mirage, a dream, a glimmer from his subconscious. Jason wants to reach out and run his fingers over the surface of the crowd, do something to destroy the illusion, like dipping a finger into the reflecting pool. Instead he thinks about the conversation he had earlier with one of the tailors from the dealers room earlier in the day, a man from

Oregon with a studded dog collar and so much fluffy white chest hair that he didn't need an animal suit.

“The head,” The tailor had said, fingering his collar, standing next to his selection of full-length animal suits, draped over a coat rack like African pelts. “The head is very important, the real key to being a true Furry. The mask lets you truly become whatever animal it is you want to be, shuts you off from the outside world and lets you experience the part, without any judgments.”

Jason growled underneath his wolf mask.

“Exactly.” The tailor said.

The tailor was right, that *is* what it used to be about, but Jason has had that feeling of floating through the convention all weekend, and around midnight on Saturday, as the species begin to mingle on the dance floor, nothing has changed. The gopher throws on a new record (Jason had been checking him out until he removed his head to wipe sweat from his brow, ruining the effect), flips a switch, and a strobe light is thrown on the Herd of Furies. All of them, the whole zoo, moves now, flipping their manes, throwing their heads back and roaring, swishing their tails and flapping their gills. Jason watches from the corner, brooding as The Wolf. The Wolf doesn't dance, but The Wolf is getting a little bored. He's also a little light headed and sick to his stomach from four oversweet gin and tonics. The alcohol is not making him feel better, instead, as the music thumps in his ear, the strobe light illuminates everyone in their costumes, the glass wall between himself and the crowd is as tangible as the fur on his body.

Jason is considering just going back to his room and passing out when he sees her, hiding amidst all of the gyrating fur. Just a little thing, white tail flitting in and out of the

crowd, doing her best to stay hidden. She's wearing a full rabbit suit, and not one of those hokey cartoon suits that some of the older Furies wear that make them look like Bugs Bunny, but an actual rabbit suit. Her body is a soft, downy gray and tufts of white fur poke between the toes of her big feet. Jason watches her hop through the crowd, shying away from the bigger animals that are trying to eat her up, and his heart skips a beat when he sees her set of long bunny ears flop down on either side of her head like a pair of braids.

Jason is hooked. He licks his chops underneath his wolf mask, finishes the rest of his gin and tonic, and creeps onto the dance floor. She's disappeared into the mass of fur somewhere, but that's okay, Jason is the wolf now, and he has her in his sights. He raises his snout to the air, catches a scent, and turns his head in time to see a fluffy rabbit bouncing out the door into the hallway.

The prey is on the move and all of the wolf's senses are opening up, except for a sense of balance, which Jason is having trouble with after the four gin and tonics. He slips and slides his way out of the ballroom on furry feet, almost knocking over a giraffe gently swaying to a Girls Against Boys song. The wolf stalks into the hallway, imagining the feel of that soft tawny fur under his teeth, plucking the delicate whiskers with his fingertips. He spots her at the end of the hallway, trying to hide by burying her head deep into a set of curtains, but he can see her trembling behind the burgundy felt.

Jason adjusts his head, wipes away condensation from inside the mouthpiece, and closes the distance to his prey. The rabbit spots him and her muscles tense in the face of danger. She turns, searching for an exit, but to her left are three mangy looking hound dogs waiting for scraps from the dance floor, and to her right is the black curtain that

leads to the outside world. She burrows her head deeper into the curtain, now only her fluffy white tail stuck in the air like a cotton ball. The wolf takes hold of her and he can feel her trembling underneath his big paws.

“Got you.” Jason whispers, coaxing her out of hiding, stroking her back and scratching the soft fur behind her floppy ears.

She backs out slowly, still trembling, and Jason leads her past the black curtains and towards the elevators. The hotel lobby is empty except for two desk receptionists pretending not to watch the wolf and his prey. They eye him suspiciously and Jason growls like an animal hunched over a kill. Together they ride the elevator to the eighth floor. Outside his hotel room door Jason lets go of his prey to search the pockets of his suit for his room key, and she bolts down the hallway, floppy ears bouncing this way and that. It’s a halfhearted attempt, just part of the game, and the wolf tracks her down easily.

“Come on little bunny, its time to get eaten up.”

The inside of Jason’s hotel room is dark, illuminated only by the red neon glow of the hotel sign outside the window. He reaches for the light switch and then feels her paw on top of his. She’s no longer trembling now, instead the prey has come to the moment of realization, the instant of placidity before the kill. Jason Wolf takes her in his arms, stroking her ears, and plunges his plastic snout into her velvety neck.

“Your all ate up now little bunny.” He says, snuffling and growling.

They stumble over to the bed, finding their way with help from the soft crimson glow of the Ramada Inn sign, groping for openings and air holes to get through all of that fake fur and find some real flesh. Jason wants to get out of his suit which suddenly feels very hot and confining. The fur still feels good underneath his fingers, that protective

layer between his skin and hers, but now he wants very much to touch something tangible, something real.

“Let me turn the lights on.” He says, but she grabs his arms and brings him back to the bed and he can feel hear her long whiskers rubbing against his wolf snout, shaking her head no. They roll around on the stiff linens, groping at one another. The rabbit unzips the crotch of his suit and takes hold of him, guiding him through her fur. Jason rocks slowly in unison with the rabbit, lamenting the fact there can’t be a lot of movement and wildness inside of a giant wolf suit. He runs his fingers through her fur, and he can actually feel the flesh underneath of her suit, feel a pulse pounding, blood flowing, a heartbeat under her chest. His mask is beginning to suffocate him and he reaches to take it off, coming to his climax now, afraid that he might asphyxiate himself, but she places her paws on his wrists and holds him down until he’s finished.

“Oh my God.” Jason says, all of the wolf spilled out of him. “That was..... I’m not sure, but wow.”

The rabbit hums contentedly and lies beside him. Jason can still feel her heart underneath her suit, pounding rapidly. She nuzzles her snout into his chest. Jason rubs the fur behind her ears, wondering, what kind of hair is underneath that fur, underneath his fingers? Long or short, blonde or brunette? Is there a man or a woman underneath that suit, not that it mattered before, and not that it matters now, he just wants to know. Black or white? For the first time in a long time he wants to take off his mask and actually feel a pair of lips.

“Do you mind if I take off this head?” Jason asks. The Rabbit doesn’t respond, she’s still sprawled out languidly on the bed, big back paws dangling over the edge,

forefeet tucked under her chin. “I mean, that was pretty hot, I mean, it’s getting hot under this thing. You know what I mean.”

Jason removes the Velcro straps underneath his chin and lets the wolf fall away to the floor. It’s cold in the room without his mask. Sweat runs down the crown of his head, back of his neck, into his eyes. Both of them are quiet for a long time. He listens to the quick little breaths she takes, rapid, in and out, and feels her heart beat, quick and insistent.

“Do you want to take your mask off too?” Jason asks. “The lights are still off. You must be hot under that thing. You’ve probably had it on for hours, right? Please. I would really like to see your face. I’ll bet you’re really beautiful.”

Abruptly she rolls on top of Jason and straddles him. He stares into the comically happy rabbit mask, the eyes cold and black, reflecting Jason’s naked face back to him. He removes the straps from his gloves and tosses them beside the bed. He could feel her fur underneath his fingertips before, but now he can make out his own hands in the neon glow from the hotel sign outside the window. Human hands. Good, fleshy hands, with fingernails instead of claws, and an essential opposable thumb. He runs those hands up and down the fur on her legs, leans forward a little and searches for a zipper. Instead he feels something like ridges of her spine running up and down the middle of her back. He feels the tawny fur of her belly and chest, looking for cold metal, or a row of buttons, or the stiff bristles of Velcro, anything that might be holding the suit together.

“Jesus, your suit is so tight. Does it button up or is the zipper on the inside?”

She doesn’t answer, but in the faint light she reaches up with her paws and begins to remove the overgrown rabbit head.

Suddenly, the Ramada Inn sign crackles, pops a few times, and then shorts out completely. In the darkness Jason can hear the sound of Velcro straps, followed by a hollow thump as the rabbit's head falls to the floor. Jason's hands are all over her body now, searching for something, anything, to let him inside of that costume, what he knows must be a costume. She leans in and Jason can feel short, rapid little breaths on his sweaty cheek like an animal investigating something good to eat. Then, light and ticklish, brushing gently across his nose and tickling his lips like strands of fishing line, he feels whiskers and the twitching of a soft little nose.

"I was right," Jason says, as the rabbit leans in to kiss him and he lets his hands fall away. "You are beautiful."

Ligaments

The first basketball player I ever knew was a kid named Julius Miles. Well, I had known lots of guys who *played* basketball, but Julius was the first person I knew who got *paid* for it, which was everyone's dream at the time. I was just a grade schooler when I first saw him play, although I had been hearing about him way before that. He was a local celebrity in D.C., and he played the Sunday morning games on the South Capitol Street courts with my father. I had begged my father for weeks to take me to one of these Sunday morning games, but my mother always had a litany of excuses she recycled for why I couldn't go: It was *too* early, *too* violent, *too* hot, *too* cold, anything to keep me away from that court. Then, one Sunday morning in July, right after the fourth, my father woke me up with a smile on his face. I opened my eyes and saw the bulge of a basketball packed into his gym bag. He put a finger to his lips and motioned over his shoulder. I could hear my mother stomping around in the kitchen, banging pots and pans, slamming cabinet doors.

"Your mother said you could come with me this morning," He said. "But we got to be back by ten thirty to get you to afternoon Sunday School, so get dressed and let's go."

We were the first ones to arrive that morning and I sat quietly and watched as all of the men straggled onto the court, up at eight o'clock, earlier than most of them had to be at work, eating granola bars and washing them down with Gatorades for breakfast,

sleep gunk still stuck into the corners of their eyes. The older men were always there first, ready to go with their elbow guards and ankle braces, and the younger guys showed up a little later, looking to me taller than the trees around the park, rattling the chain link fence with their fingers, confident with an affected swagger, t-shirts tied onto their heads like turbans, and their shorts slung low over their asses. They were all scary and fascinating to me, but Julius was the one I was waiting for. I watched him stride in that morning, ducking his glinting, clean shaven head to get through the gate. Right away you could tell there was something different, something special about him. While all the other young guys seemed to be fighting puberty, still growing and developing, waiting for their bodies to oblige their desires by getting leaner, or taller, or bigger, waiting to bloom like a flower, Julius was crystalline.

I remember little of that game, the first basketball game I had ever seen where I was close enough to hear the sound of the men grunting as they fought one another for position, but Julius remains clear in my mind. He was seventeen at the time and already six foot nine, but graceful and fluid. He had a smooth, natural jump shot that made my father shake his head and say “mmmm-mmmm-mmmm” like savoring something rare and buttery in his mouth. He was easily the best dribbler of all the players there, but could still muscle in and crack heads with the biggest guy on the court. He always wore a brand new pair of Nikes, always Michael Jordan brand, and you knew that college boosters bought him those shoes, just as we all knew that his father only worked part time because of booster checks. Julius had been dunking basketballs since the age of thirteen and started playing in the local Kenner leagues on his fourteenth birthday. He created a scandal by refusing to play for Coach Wooten at Dematha High School, instead heading

to cross-town rival Georgetown Prep. He was a brilliant, flashy player. A court assassin with a virtuoso flow. A deadly shooter, a ferocious rebounder, a smooth trash talker, and a magician with the ball who made it all seem breezy and effortless. He was, in short, Superman.

A few years later I was thirteen and just learning to dribble behind my back when Julius tore his knee to shreds in a college game against Syracuse. It was the first round of the NCAA playoffs and St. Johns had suffered an up and down year, but Julius was still their leading scorer and rebounder. It happened how injuries like that always happen, not with a thunderous dunk, or a last second miracle play, but just a routine missed shot with ten minutes still to go in the first half. Julius didn't even have the ball in his hands. One second the rest of the team was heading down court and Julius just stayed under the basket lying on his back, his big hands covering his face. His legs were stretched out in front of him, the toes of his Jordans--white with blue trim-- pointed towards the Madison Square Garden ceiling. There was a time out and the trainers rushed onto the court. The television camera tried to zoom in over their backs to get a good close up of Julius's face, but they got bored when the trainers wouldn't get out of the way and quickly cut to commercial. The game went on and, bad news they said at halftime. Julius Miles, star forward for the St. Johns Red Storm, suffered a complete tear of his anterior cruciate ligament, the most difficult injury for an athlete to recover from. Gone for the game, gone for the rest of the playoffs, gone for at least half of next season, just gone. They showed the replay later in slow motion, Julius cutting in front of a defender, his face focused and hungry like I remembered from bright Sunday mornings in D.C. He was getting ready to jump for a rebound when he just planted something wrong. He didn't get

tripped or hit. It wasn't a dirty play. Just those ligaments, those crucial ligaments that hold bone to muscle, joint to joint, couldn't take the strain from that six foot nine body any longer, and finally just let Julius down. For a split second on the replay I could see his eyes grow big as his knee went loose and right then, at that moment, I could have told the coaches, the trainers, the prognosticators, the announcers, the crowd, just by looking at the fear on his face, not the pain but the fear, what had happened to his strong, delicate knee. It just couldn't hold up. Nobody's fault. Ligament tear, gone. Season over, gone. Maybe a come back next year.

The worst news for Julius was that St. John's came back after the half and won the game.

Julius wouldn't enter my life until years later when, sitting on the bench during basketball practice, my Junior year at Gonzaga High School, Randy Dodson leaned down a few seats away from me and whispered in my ear, "I heard Julius is playing today on South Capitol Street."

Randy and I weren't supposed to be talking. Coach Grizzard had left to take a phone call and told the team to practice free throws while he was gone, but instead Randy and I had decided to show off our trick shots. Coach Grizzard walked back into the gym just as I was throwing the ball from half-court, with Randy screaming "THREE, TWO, ONE." Coach was not happy, sending both of us to the bench for the rest of practice.

"I don't wanna' hear it, man." I said, glaring at the rest of the team on the court. "Leave me alone." It wasn't being on the bench that was pissing me off. I was starting to

get used to it as a daily routine during practice, and it wasn't enough to get me upset anymore. But on the court, getting special attention from Coach Grizzard, was a new kid that The Coach had started picking up from *Virginia* in his *own* car. This new kid, coincidentally enough, played my exact position on the team, and it had become painfully obvious to everyone that it was just a matter of time before he took my starting job. Apparently, I didn't have enough hustle, Coach Grizzard would often scream into the air during games, at no one in particular. He said I lacked that "Certain Something", although none of us could pinpoint what that Certain Something was. Passion, heart, determination; all of the sentimental bullshit that you read about in magazines and newspapers and see in movies like *Rudy* and *Rocky* where heart eventually trumps talent.

"I'm telling you man, it's true." Randy persisted. "I heard it from my dad." Randy's dad was the East Coast scout for the Atlanta Hawks, and former NBA great Bruce Dodson, who passed along the DNA for long legs and arms to his son, but none of his basketball genes. Randy was a plodding, clumsy, uncreative kid who never got passed the ball and usually dropped it if he did. Randy didn't really care though. He knew the only reason he was on the team was because he was sixteen and already six foot eight. He accepted his lack of athleticism with a good natured stoical fortitude that I have never again seen in a kid that age.

"Shut up Randy. You're full of shit. Hey, look at that new kid out there. That fucking kid should be going to Thomas Stone High, not coming to school here. I hate that shit. You think he's better'n me?"

“No way.” Randy said. “Probably not. I don’t think so. I mean, he’s pretty big, Kevin. He must have some kind of game, why else would Coach Grizzly Gut drive all the way to Virginia to bring him here?”

“Fuck that.” I fumed, sinking lower into my seat. “He’s not getting my spot on the team. Soon as Grizzly lets us back into practice I’m bust that kid’s ass. No way. Uh-uh.”

I had to admit to myself, the kid did look good. Smooth release and long arms. I had been trying hard to get back into Coach Grizzard’s good graces, if not for myself than for my parents, who had been so proud when their only son received an athletic scholarship to one of the best private schools in the city. It was, however, contingent on me actually playing on the team, and I was slowly watching all of that disappear. I wanted to be a good player, knew that I *had* to be good, but each game was getting worse than the last. At night, or during class, when I imagined myself playing, everything was perfect. I would rise from the floor in solid form, my jump shots smooth and effortless. I blazed past defenders with my quickness, all of my passes were right on target. Even my misses and mistakes just added a sense of drama and anticipation, and ebb and flow in my talent. But in reality, my jump shot was flat and weak, coming off my fingers awkwardly, not at all how I intended. My cross-over dribble was stilted and obvious. I couldn’t catch anything, and pretty soon during the course of a game I would be so scared to handle the ball I would just mix in with the rest of the team to guarantee that I wouldn’t receive a pass. After a few bad plays I just couldn’t focus, and whoever I was guarding ended up grabbing loose balls, diving to the floor and pushing me out of position, out hustling me.

So I tried to teach myself hustle, going to the playground after school and working on my skills: Two hundred jump shots, rebounding drills, wind sprints, and dribbling routines. But it was always so boring with no one around to play with, so I usually just ended up practicing my trick shots, or playing games with the elementary school kids, who were trying to get some fun in before the big boys came and scared them away like crows shooing off smaller birds.

“Hold on,” I said to Randy, what he said beginning to sink in. “Your dad told you Julius is supposed to be playing’ *today?*”

“Yeah. My dad. There’s some kind of scouting combine over at George Washington and after that him and a bunch of the other scouts are going down to watch a game around three o’clock. It’s a big game, like twenty scouts there or something like that. He said Julius was definitely going to be there.”

I had heard rumors that Julius was back in town and back on the courts, but no one I knew had actually seen him. A friend of a friend said they saw him at Sligo Creek Park last Sunday morning, looking better than ever. The same silky smooth jump shot, the same wrap around no look passes, same ease driving to the basket. Said if anything the only difference in his game was that he actually seemed to be faster, and a little bit more ruthless than before. That, and the two big scars that ran down the sides of his knee.

“You think your dad’s gonna give Julius a contract?” I said.

“Sure.” Randy said, “Proably. I mean, why else would he be here?”

“Hell yeah. NBA scouts? That’s big time. That’s a *huge* game, Randy, shit. Julius is going to the N-B-A. Who needs that college shit anyway? Hey.” I leaned over

to Randy, surveying the gym to make sure no one was within earshot. “You trying to go watch him play? If we leave now we can--”

“What in the hell are you two doing talking?” Coach Grizzard yelled from the court. He stomped over, leaving his star pupil on the court. The new kid watched Coach Grizzard scream at me with wide, unflinching eyes, holding the basketball at his side. “Is that you Dyson? Didn’t I say no talking for the rest of practice?”

“No sir, Coach Grizzard.” I said. “Wasn’t me talking.”

“Uh-huh. Don’t give me that crap.” He stared at us, his nostrils flaring. Grizzard was a large, ogre of a man who had spent his own youth at Gonzaga, back when, he liked to remind us, when getting a smack in the face from the teachers was an acceptable and effective form of discipline. “Kevin, why don’t you let Randy alone so at least one of you can get back into practice today. What was that? Huh? Did you say something else Kevin? Do you want windsprints instead of sitting there doing nothing?”

“No sir.”

“Then I want quiet on that bench.”

“Man, I hate Grizzly Gut.” I whispered down the bench. Randy just stared at the laces on his shoes. “One time it was just me and him in the gym and he pulled that ‘You want windsprints’ shit on me, and I said, ‘Let’s go one-on-one then old man’, and he just looks at me and says ‘Whenever your ready punk.’ So I pick up the ball and he looks all scared, so I just throw the ball right at him and he says--”

“Kevin man, please.” Randy said. “I want to get back into practice today. I at least want to *touch* a basketball. Quit talking.”

I glanced around the gym. Grizzard conferred with the new kid, snapping his wrist in the air, pointing at the tips of his fingers. The new kid nodded serenely, as if they were accepting some ancient and sagely wisdom.

“What about going to see Julius?” I asked again.

“It’s already two thirty.” Randy said shaking his head, tucking his long legs in and folding his hands into his lap, looking like a choirboy. “Practice isn’t even over for another forty-five minutes. Coach’ll miss us.”

“Who gives a fuck?” I said. “Grizzly Gut said we couldn’t even get on the floor today. The fuck am I doing here watching *this* kid practice his stupid-ass turn around jumper. Come on. Let’s go watch Julius play. He’s gonna be in the NBA soon and you’ll miss his last game here. Besides, your dad’s gonna’ be there, idn’t he?”

“My dad might tell my mom.....”

“Oh jeez. Look, I’m going. You can sit around here and wait for Coach to even let you pick up a basketball or you can go with me and watch Julius bust somebody’s ass again.”

Randy was still shaking his head, but it was a firm shake, proving the rock steady stoical sixteen year old’s mind was made up for good.

“Naw. I’mma wait here and see if Coach puts me in during drills.”

I knew that Grizzard would eventually put Randy back in but I wasn’t so sure about myself. He would put Randy back in even if it was only to have the other kids practice dunking the basketball over his head. But what value did I have now that the golden boy from Virginia was here?

“Fine. See ya. Have fun at practice. If you get to play that is.” I took a quick look around to make sure the coast was clear. I didn’t need to worry. Grizzard and the assistant coaches were milling around, joking and laughing, twirling whistles around their fingers, clipboards tucked under their arms, while the team sweated through pick-and-roll drills, running each side of the court fifty times until the play was tattooed on their brains.

“Wait, Kevin. Hold up. Don’t go man. Coach’ll kick you off the team this time. Seriously. He’s practically bussing kids in now. You can see Julius play on the weekend or something.”

I pulled my backpack out from underneath my seat and zipped it up, making sure my school uniform was inside. I knew Randy was right, I wasn’t giving Grizzard any other choice but to kick me off the team, but at the time, in dull abstentious rage, that felt like the point. I knew I was never going to be able to get my spot back from that kid on the court, practicing his fucking turnaround. It was almost tangible, the way things were slipping away for me, like the proverbial man on the cliff, holding on by his fingertips. There was that same feeling in my stomach, that fluttery, panicked feeling as I watched my minutes on the team slowly dwindle. During practice and games I would sometimes just feel sick and dizzy, a loss of perspective caused from peering behind me at that long drop, and that terrifying feeling that it would so much easier to just give up and let go, enjoy the freedom of plummeting, even though I knew there was a very real and very hard bottom.

“We never get to do anything over the weekend.” I said. “We’re always just practice, practice, practice. Julius is the best player we ever seen, Randy. This is gonna’

be better than practice. We can say we saw Julius's last game before he went into the league. Now get up of your lanky ass and let's go."

Randy looked down at his big shoes, socks pulled up to his knees, and shook his head again.

"Fine. Good. I'm out."

I slung my backpack over my shoulder and headed for the door. It was as easy as that. At my back I could hear the sounds of the team practicing, the rubber from their sneakers squeaking on the polished hardwood and the hard, steady sound of dribbling. My former teammates called back and forth to one another, their voices high pitched and unsteady, the voices of little boys. I opened the frosted glass doors of the gym, and just before they closed behind me I heard Grizzard blowing on his whistle. I knew it wasn't for me. Even if he had seen me leave I knew he wasn't going to call me back. My hands hit the metal bar and I was the door, heading down North Capitol Street, towards Union Station and the Metro, to watch Julius play.

It was almost two thirty by the time I stepped out of the metro and walked to South Capitol Street. It was still early June, but the hottest day of the year so far. The air that day was flat and still, no breeze, just the bright sun pinning everything down, making all movement sluggish and lazy. Despite the sunlight the sky had a dull yellow tint, a jaundiced quality. There was an odor of wood smoke in the air as well, coming from where I couldn't tell, probably from one of the roadside trailers that someone had

converted into a barbecue stand, but it was a distinct flavor, the smell of ash and fire. I could hear the court before I actually saw it. In between the off-rhythm (inconsistent but steady, like machine gun fire) sound of basketballs dribbling I could hear shoes scraping against black top, a much different sound than the hardwood of an indoor gym, and men with husky voices calling back and forth to one another. I rounded the corner as both teams were just finishing their warm-ups and toweling off the light sweat they had broken during the shoot-around.

Standing in loose circles around the court were fifteen or twenty older and impossibly tall men in suits. Their sports jackets were spread all over the metal bleachers. Even so, most of the scouts had sweated through their sleek, expensive dress shirts. They conferred and whispered like bachelors at a cotillion, pretending not to watch the players on the court, sipping from plastic water bottles and shuffling their big feet.

No one gave me a second look as I stepped through the metal gate. I threw my backpack onto the top of the bleachers, as far away from the nearest sport coat as I could. I didn't see Julius, who normally would have stood out, but I recognized a few other local guys. They were all good players, most of whom had played four unremarkable years in college, still chasing the professional dream. They all looked nervous, tying and retying their shoes to make sure they were tight and ready to go before the game. Under the chairs that made up the team benches I could see dirty work uniforms, street clothes, dress shoes, and ties poking from gym bags. "Part-time" jobs they had called in sick to, or just not bothered to show up to at all, just for the game.

I noticed Randy's Dad by the picnic tables talking into his cell phone. I recognized him from a picture Randy had shown me of the two of them at a Lakers game, but somehow he looked exactly like all the others, like the other scouts and even Coach Grizzard. They all appeared so old compared to the young men on the court, desperately old, past any kind of prime of anything, even middle age. Their stomachs poked over their belts, eyes watery but still taking everything in, making notes on vertical leap, ball release, ball control, ball management, court awareness. Watching and pretending not to watch.

I realized that was how everyone must scrutinize me. The coaches watched to see if I was growing any, getting taller or filling out with muscle. The teachers at school saw me the same way, evaluating my grading curves in wins and losses. Even my parents saw me in terms of basketball, they certainly couldn't think of any other topics to talk about. The whole thing made me sick. All the scouts looked to me like goddamn sycophants, overgrown mosquitoes gorging themselves on basketball, fucking ghouls sent to drink on the talent of the living. They would watch the game today and then reach down like Adam and name somebody a basketball player with just a touch. Somebody on that court was going to get the call because somebody else they've never heard of, had the bad luck of breaking something or tearing something and now we need you, yes you son, all of the numbers on my little piece of paper here add up (great intangibles) and now you've got the opportunity (don't blow it).

I sneered at them, promising myself that I wouldn't talk to anyone, let them wonder who that kid in the sneakers and the Gonzaga High School jersey is, maybe a

promising young player, maybe a project to take advantage of, well, let them wonder, I wouldn't give them the satisfaction, when I saw Julius suddenly appear out of the crowd.

I almost called to him, see if he recognized the kid who used to hang out on the playground and watch him play, but my hand fell back to my side in mid-greeting. He had gained a little weight around his chest and stomach giving him a paunchy look, but I had expected that. It was his face that jarred me. A face I remembered being so fresh, energetic and confident was now ashy and transparent. His cheek were pronounced and awkward, abrupt formations of bone on his face like underwater sandbars. His head was still shaved clean but that smooth polish was gone. Now it looked ridged and bony. His legs were still powerful and lithe, but the rest of him seemed to be fading, as if he were growing old downward.

I watched Julius head to mid-court and stretch. Even from the bleachers I could see the scars on his knee. The flesh on either side was a pinkish color, thick and calloused. Anterior cruciate ligament tear. Complete tear. That's up to a year and a half rehab just to be able to walk and run, and then there's no guarantee that you'll ever be the same athlete. Some guys just never trust that knee again and everything they do on the court is touched with a tentativeness, a wary knowledge in the back of your head that the next time that thing tears it's the last time. I wondered how long it had taken Julius to rehab that knee, how long he had sat on the couch watching other people play the game while he waited patiently for his ligaments to knit. How long before he got his shooting touch back, how long before he got his conditioning returned? I pictured myself on my living room couch, knee wrapped in a tight bandage, growing old watching basketball instead of playing, brooding about how I had missed my chance. It was a fantasy that I

cultivated a lot back then. Being irrevocably injured and watching that athletic window of opportunity pass me by, so I wouldn't have to chase it all the time. Then I could look down at my traitorousness knee and hate it forever, wonder why in the hell had it let me down, why hadn't it been able to hold up just a little longer until I could learn the hustle Coach was talking about. My parents could focus their hate and disappointment on that knee too, blaming it for all of the misfortune and missed opportunities, then tell me everything was alright even though I hadn't made it, all because of the goddamn knee.

Instead I was sturdy and healthy, a fine physical specimen. My body was ready to go even if the rest of me was not.

The referee waited for the scouts to be seated like royalty before blowing the whistle for tip-off. Julius was right there in the center for the opening tap against a guy that looked to be at least seven feet tall. The whistle blew, the ball shot straight into the air and Julius went after it, getting off the ground faster than the seven footer, tipping the ball to his point guard.

The first few minutes of the game were ragged and unorganized. Both sides looked tentative, hurrying their shots and turning the ball over. A couple of guys took quick three pointers as soon as they pushed the ball up the court with no rebounders under the basket. There were some ill-advised wrap around passes, some cross-over dribbles picked clean.

The scouts were restless, the giant men rocking back and forth on their feet and massaging their aching knees and hips. They looked bored and chatted with one another. A few talked on their cell phones, stared at their watches and flipped through their schedule books. The more ragged the play on the court the more bored the scouts grew.

There was visible yawning and a few even laughed as the point guard for Julius's team tried to dribble between someone's legs. And it was dead silent on the court, unheard of for a playground game. All ten players' collective brows were furrowed, as if they were taking a math test instead of playing basketball.

"This is some bullshit." Randy's Dad whispered. "Amateur night."

Worst of all, Julius looked slow and rusty. There was no flash, no fluidity in his game. All of his moves were jerky and telegraphed. He got the ball on the perimeter and went up for a jump shot, but only got a few inches off the ground and ended up shooting an air ball. The tentativeness was evident, it looked like he was concentrating way too hard on everything, especially which knee it was that he came down after a rebound or a jump shot. I winced watching him come down particularly hard on his bad knee. It was just so small a thing to depend on for so much support.

I looked over at Mr. Dodson and he had actually fallen asleep on his feet. His eyes were closed and his chin was drooped to his chest, when suddenly Julius took the ball on the wing, pump faked on his man, drove the lane and instead of trying to dunk over two guys and show off for the coaches, passed the ball softly for the center who finished with a dunk. Randy's dad's head popped up at the sound of the metal rim shaking back and forth. On the next possession, Julius stole a pass into the post and took off down the court, dribbling through a couple of defenders and laying the ball in high off the backboard.

"That's Julius Miles," Randy's dad said as the other scouts shut their cell phones and began to flip through their notes and charts to look up number twenty-five, try and

piece together Julius's fragmented athletic history. "I was tellin' ya'll about him. Saw him play back when he was in high school. I saw him first fella's."

Both teams began feeding off of Julius's energy up and down the court. The man Julius had stolen the ball from got the ball back in the post and hit a turn around jump shot. The point guard for Julius's team drove into the lane and kicked it back out to the shooting guard for a three pointer. A quick pass down the court and there was an alley oop dunk on the other end. The pace was turning frantic but controlled, like the brains and muscles of the players were being thawed out in the summer sun and both teams played with a smooth finesse. The all of the scouts, the old veterans with water in their knees, fed off the energy too, laughing and slapping one another on the back,

I ignored them all and watched Julius. The rumors were true. He looked just as fast and silky as I remembered him, like he were sliding on ice skates instead of sneakers. The ball slipped from his fingers effortlessly, and just before half-time he took a three pointer from the corner, elbow tucked in, fingers extended, perfect form, and one of the scouts "mmm-mmm-mmmmm"ed as the ball snapped through the bottom of the net.

During the halftime break Randy's dad started eyeballing me. He scrutinized me with none of the bashfulness with which he had been watching the players, staring at my purple Gonzaga jersey. I leaned forward and crossed my arms over my chest, wishing I had thought to change clothes.

He shuffled over to the bleachers, stuffing the ends of his light blue dress shirt into his pants and loosening his tie. His face was round, chubby, but hard. You could still sharp cheekbones and a rock hard chin. He was six foot eleven and looked to be at least three hundred and fifty, maybe more. He must have been imposing when he played.

“How you doing today son?” He asked, a touch of kinetic, Atlanta drawl in his voice. He leaned in on one knee in front of me as if he were about to give a pep talk.

“Fine, sir.” I said, trying not to make eye contact. For a crazy second I thought he may have mistaken me for Randy. I knew he hadn’t seen his son in person in almost a year and a half and I was afraid this giant ex-pro was about to lay out his heart for me.

“I see you play for Gonzaga. That right son?” I nodded. “Well, you must know my boy Randy. He’s a tall boy, I imagine he must be very tall by now, a little lanky and thin though.”

“I know him.”

“Well,” He said, smiling broadly. “It’s a small world idn’t it? I haven’t been able to see much of Randy lately. Been on the road scouting and such you know. I don’t know if Randy told you but I work for the--”

“Atlanta Hawks. Yeah, Randy told me.”

“Oh. Well. Yes. It’s a lot of long hours and road trips to towns that no one’s ever heard of to see a lot of kids play ball. I’m only in the city for the afternoon and I wanted to at least come down to one of ya’ll’s practices, but *this* damn game got in the way.”

He jerked his thumb behind him and chuckled.

“Actually, shouldn’t you be in practice right now son?”

“Oh yeah, sure.” I said, still clutching my arms around me despite the heat. “We were going to cut out a little early today anyway, but Coach let me go so I could come watch the game. I don’t really practice much.”

“Oh, why’s that.” He said, eyeing me again. “If you’re working for playing time the Coach should be getting you as much practice as you need.”

“It’s not that sir. I’m not working for any playing time. If anything I wish Coach Grizzard wouldn’t play me so much.” I nodded while I talked, confirming my lie to myself. “I’ve been leading the team in scoring and minutes played so much, Coach Grizzard thought it would be better if, you know, someone else got a chance. They want to mix some other guys in so they don’t depend on me so often.”

“Really now.” Randy’s father said, nodding with me. “Sounds like things are going pretty well for you. How ‘bout my boy? He getting bigger,” He put his huge arms out to his side and flexed, “Filling out any?”

“Oh, Randy’s Randy,” I said, leaning back, feeling more relaxed now that the lie had a minute to take. “He’s still tall and all that. He really could probably stand to bulk up some, but maybe that’ll come when he starts to get some hand eye coordination.”

“Still clumsy?” Mr. Dodson said, disappointed.

“Yeah, yeah, you could say that. Still growing into his body, I guess.”

“Is he at least helping you have a good season, son? A boy that size should at least be able to *rebound* for god’s sake..... But you’re leading Gonzaga in scoring, that’s quite an accomplishment.”

“Thank you sir. I’ve been working hard. I mean, it’s a long season. I’m just trying to keep playing and see what happens.”

“Got any schools in mind after you graduate? You’re a senior, right?”

“Junior actually, but I don’t--”

“Junior! Leading Gonzaga in scoring! Aren’t you boys are working towards that state championship? Junior, huh, that’s something else! What’s your name son?”

“Kevin.” I said, swallowing hard, goose bumps all over my arms. “So, you like the game so far? Number twenty-five looks good. Think he might--”

“What’s your last name.” Mr. Dodson said, taking out a notebook and pen from hip pocket.

“Uhhh, Dyson. Spell that? Sure. D-Y-S-O-N.”

“I’ve got friends at some colleges.” He said. “They might want to be giving you a call soon. I’m sure you’ve heard from at least a dozen schools, but these guys might be ready to give you a better offer, Kevin. You like watching the ACC?”

“Oh sure, sure.”

“Well, maybe you’ll be playing there soon.” He winked and closed his book. “You work out son? Because it’s never too late to start. I was always trying to get Randy to work out when he was younger but that lazy-ass boy..... Anyway, you should start a program over the summer, *before* all those coaches come crashing down your door your senior season, know what I mean? Let me tell you, there’s nothing like playing basketball in college son. It’s the closest thing a lot of guys get to being a celebrity.”

“Right, right.” I said, nodding solemnly. I tried to look confident but my stomach was tied in knots. All I could think about was Coach Grizzard and how he would laugh his head off when he got the call from some college coach about his “leading scorer”.

“So,” Mr. Dodson said. “You enjoying the game? I can’t believe your coach let you out early just to watch *these* guys.”

“What’s wrong with these guys?”

“Oh no, there’s nothing *wrong* with them. But it’s just a pick up game. You know, for a lot of guys who’ve missed their window.”

“But I thought you were a scout. I thought you were looking to sign guys.”

“Oh, I am, I am it’s just..... Well..... To tell you the truth a lot of the scouts here think this is a waste of their time.”

I glanced at the two benches. Both teams were still flying high after the performance they gave towards the end of the half. They were talking quickly, sipping water so they wouldn’t cramp up, slapping each other on the back. Julius stood tall in the huddle, the sun glinting off the sweat on his bald head, just like I remembered from before. He was smiling, feeling good, rocking back and forth from heel to heel, anxious to get started again.

“You’re not going to sign any of these guys?”

“Chances are slim. But hey, Kevin, that doesn’t mean they shouldn’t stop trying, right? Hell, why stop now? They’ve gone this far. You don’t have to worry about any of that though, son. I’m gonna make some calls for you. As long as you keep working hard you won’t ever have to play in a game like this. Now I can see why your coach may have wanted to you come down here and see this. What are you, seventeen? That’s a good an age as any.”

“I’m a’ tell you something Kevin, most of these guys thought they were great while they were playing in high school or the local courts, and then you step it up to a higher level and they just hit a ceiling. That’s not a bad thing Kevin, that’s just part of life, especially a part of basketball life. Hey, there’s always hope. Maybe one or two of

these guys'll get signed. But there's only so many spots on so many teams and a lot of talented players out there."

He paused as everyone started to take the court again. He looked over his shoulder as Julius in-bounded the ball to the point guard and play resumed.

"You know," Mr. Dodson stood up straight and tall, his full, imposing six eleven, and leaned over me and blocking the sun with his giant body and covering me in shadow. "A lot of guys just don't know when to give up that dream." I peered over his shoulder and could see Julius sail through the lane, scoring with a left-handed running hook shot. Randy's dad continued.

"I know that might be hard thing to swallow, a young guy like you, but look around on your own team. There are kids at Gonzaga who just aren't as good as you I'm sure."

"Right. Thanks Mister Dodson."

"Don't take that the wrong way, son. It's just the way things go."

"Right, thank you."

"I'ma make those calls for you though, don't worry. You've got your whole future ahead of you. Like I said, work hard and I won't be coming to watch you at one of these games. I'll be watching you at the NCAA championship."

He chuckled, that broad grin back again, and almost as an afterthought, winked at me. Behind him Julius blocked a shot and raced back up court with the ball, gliding across the pavement, eyes searching until he found someone with a bounce pass in the lane. Mr. Dodson joined his fellow scouts. He slapped someone on the back and pointed

over to me. I could make out the words “leading scorer” on his lips, and the other scout nodding his head, impressed.

The rest of the game slipped by in a fog, some kind of strange haze in my head where I understood nothing that went during the slow parts, and was only half-interested in everything else. I couldn't concentrate, all I could think about was Coach Grizzard and what would happen when he talked to Mr. Dodson. One way or another everyone would know that I lied, whether from Randy, or if his dad kept his promise from Coach Grizzard. Somewhere in the course of the game Julius eventually cooled off. He was still head and shoulders above everyone else on the court, but he looked winded towards end. He finished the game quietly, stepping back and letting his teammates have a chance with the ball for awhile.

After it was over the players and the scouts mingled for a little while, the scouts checking their watches like bored prom dates, tapping their wrists and shaking their heads. Planes to catch, you know how it is son. The scouts shuffled off but the players lingered; talking, dribbling, some of them putting their work uniforms back on. Garage overalls with oil stains on the knees or polyester shirts with food stains and their names over the breast pocket. Julius was animated, joking and laughing while he slipped on a pair of black slacks and toweling himself off before putting on a white button down shirt. A green blazer hung over the back of his chair, emblazoned with the name of some downtown hotel. They all joked about docked pay, faked time cards, and excuses to their bosses. They showed each other the array of business cards collected from scouts, spreading them out with their fingers like a poker hand. Two guys separated themselves, slipping away to lie in shade of a big tree. One of them took a buck knife from his bag

and sliced a cigar down the middle, pushing out the guts with his thumb and replacing it with marijuana.

I thought about going over to Julius and saying something, letting him know that I remembered watching him play in the neighborhood, remembered wanting to be like him, had tried to emulate his game so that someday people would envy me. I wanted to tell him that I was watching the day that he ripped his knee up. I wanted to tell him what Randy's dad had said about him, about all of them, and that they should just throw all of those business cards in the garbage, that they had no chance, that they were just kidding themselves, but they didn't need them anyway, fuck em, who cared anyway. But they were all so happy, laughing and smiling, joking about who had collected the most cards and from which teams, pretending to trade them like baseball cards.

Instead I stayed on the bleachers and watched them all leave one by one, and there was that smell in the air again, that barbecue smell of smoldering pine needles and wood smoked meat pulled off the grill. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, but it only lasted a second then was gone, evaporated in the summer light. The two stoners wandered away to find somewhere more private to smoke. Julius was one of the last to leave, waiting at the corner until a bus came and picked him up, his stiff green blazer slung over his shoulder.

As I left, my useless Catholic school uniform stuffed into my bag, running my fingers along the chain link fence surrounding the court, a young kid, no more than seven or eight years old, brushed past me at the gate with a half-flat ball in his hands. He had waited patiently for the big boys to finish their game, and now he shuffled awkwardly onto the court, scraping his feet against the blacktop and his big pants drooping around

his ass. He ran confidently towards the hoop, but when he got underneath the basket he stopped abruptly, eyes wide. I knew how he felt. Everything seemed so much higher when you got close and stood right there underneath, staring up at the goal.

The Science of Bleeding

-The world ought not to be a harmonious place.

-D.H. Lawrence

Round 1:

Twelve year old Elias Rhodes was, in his imagination at least, Gentleman Jim Corbett, 1902 Heavy Weight Champion of the World, six feet two inches tall and two hundred pounds of solid, efficient muscle that bulged and roped its way under his gleaming white skin. Elias paced back and forth on his side of the ring, arms hanging against his sides, feeling like Gentlemen Jim must before a fight; oily, savage, brutal. His fists were as big around as the head of a sledgehammer, and he would occasionally break stones with them too, but only when some folks recognized him and only then if they were cordial and asked kindly. Gentlemen Jim was no brute. His sense of civilization and manners were too refined for that. And it wasn't proper to wield such tremendous strength casually. Someone could be hurt, and it wasn't in Gentleman Jim Corbett's nature to hurt nobody, unduly of course. But there were other times, like right now for instance, when matters got out of hand, that words became useless and only fists could settle things. That was when Gentlemen Jim Corbett, heavyweight champion, had the upper hand.

His opponent on the other side of the ring, four foot two inches tall, perhaps a hundred pounds in all his church clothes, stood apart from Jim with both fists up, circling them around and around in the air and bobbing his head first left, then right, then up and down like a Jack-in-the-Box. His freckled face, as round and perfect as a full moon, was scrunched in a tiny grimace. His shock of red hair stood off his head, thick and bristly.

His little fists jabbed the air as he worked closer and closer to Jim. The crowd grew impatient and began to kick up dust and clap their hands together. Jim tried to ignore them and focus on his opponent, but in the background he could still see their blurred faces, features stretched and twisted into ugly grimaces and hideous grins as they screamed for the fighting to begin. Big Jim strode forward and faced-up, trying to remember everything he had been taught: keep up those hands, watch the waist, pivot from the hip, work the jab, slip punches. Jim began moving and wheeling, elbows tight against his body, throwing random punches in a spastic, severe sort of way. He spied an opening and stepped in, winding up to throw a punch to his opponents face, and before he could throw was caught flat with a counter punch, crashing into his left eye. Jim fell back, hands clutching at the side of his face, when his opponent landed another savage blow under his chin. Jim's teeth crashed together, rattling inside his head, incisors nipping the tip of his tongue. Gentleman Jim staggered for a moment, wondering whether he should try and stay on his feet, then crumpled to the ground in a heap.

The crowd whooped and whistled and stomped their flat feet. Jim could hear them, a distant, crashing sound like being inside of a seashell, and curled himself into a ball, covering his hands with his head. The left side of his face was beginning to throb and swell now, and it felt as if his cheek was stuffed with cotton. The tip of his tongue stung badly. The inside of his mouth was torn, he could feel ragged flesh between his lip and gum, slick with blood. His opponent let out a high pitched scream of anger and leaped onto Jim's back, grabbing the back of his hair and throwing savage haymakers at the side of his face, slamming tiny fists between his shoulder blades and into first one, then the other, of Jim's kidneys. He tried to defend himself, covering his face and the

back of his neck, but every time he protected one part of his body another was exposed, the punches landing over and over again, until Gentleman Jim, heavyweight champion, curled himself into a ball and began to cry.

The boy stood over Jim, thin chest heaving under his piss yellow undershirt “Tuh,” He began taking in big gulps of air. “Tuh-told you--told you you was ah low down---huh--a low down yellow dog! Told you you was nothing but backwoods white trash!”

The crowd cheered and rushed their champion, patting him on the back, congratulating him on the quick victory, the defense and honor of the town intact for yet another day, thanks to the undeniable evidence, bleeding there in the dirt. A few of the young boys stood apart and reenacted the scene with one another in slow motion, while the others screamed they were missing important details, that it had been more like this, or that, until one boy would stand as still as stone, his feet spread apart, fists up in front of him, with a look of dazed stupidity on his face, while another would crouch down to their knees and slowly throw an upper cut while the other boy jumped into the air and spun around, lying face down in the dirt. The rest laughed, made suggestions as to the overall look and believability of the performance, then tried the reenactment all over again.

Gentleman Jim Corbett, knees curled into his chest, floored with the first punch of the fight, was Little Elias Rhodes again, dust and tears stinging his eyes, his bottom lip already beginning to swell and throb. Instead of the thick, magnificent muscle and rock hard fists, Elias pictured himself as the crowd of young boys must see him, curled there like a beaten dog, whimpering, blood, already turning a deep black, streaked across his shirt.

“Whatchu doin down there in the dirt? Watchu doin down there in the dirt?”

Somebody screamed from behind, until it was taken up by another, and another, until there was a chorus of teasing, falsetto voices behind Elias, jeering him and forcing him down with the weight of their collective voices “He’s nothing but a dirt eating sonofabitch. You nothing but a bunch of nigger loving dirt farmers! Eat some dirt, you yellow coon! Go back to your nigger neighborhood! Run on home to your dirt farming daddy! Cry baby nigger lover dirt farmer poorwhitetrash!”

Elias shut his eyes tight and tried to stem the flow of tears--*Shut up with that goddamn crying boy. You are a shameful, blubbering mess, that’s for goddamn sure. Did you hear me? I said stop that crying right now--* but he only cried harder, until his entire, bruised body was hitching up and down with angry, impotent sobs.

“Hey! Hey! You boys! What’s going on over here! Hey!” A short, plump man called out. He teetered carefully down the hill where the boys were fighting, fanning himself with a straw hat. He came to stop between Elias and the crowd of young boys, wiping sweat from his brow with the bunched up sleeves of his shirt. His face was all soft, tanned flesh, drooping features that made him look like a wax sculpture left out in the sun. “What’s goin on over here. You boys, what’s all this about. Speak up now.”

The crowd grew quiet, restlessly toeing the loose dirt in front of them, looking at one another and smiling, poking each other in the ribs.

“Boy, didn’t you hear me talking to you? I asked you a question. You want me to get your daddy, have him ask you some questions?”

The boys all quieted and stopped their fidgeting, shooting glances first at their feet, then at their little champion. As if he could sense their expectations of him, the boy

stepped apart from the crowd; his thumbs still hooked into the loops of his short pants, his little potbelly sweeping over the tops of his pants.

“Wadn’t nothing, sir. We were just having a scrap, that’s all.”

“We told him to keep away from town! Told him what we’d do if we caught him here again, that’s all sir!”

The fat man, still slowly fanning his face, gleaming with sweat, glanced down at Elias there in the dirt, sidestepping a little as if he were a pile of horse shit. He surveyed the boy, leaning down to get a better look.

“You alright there, boy?”

Little Elias wiped his tender face with both hands and glanced up at the fat man hovering over him. “Yessir.”

“Well get the hell out of the dirt boy. Look at you down there.” The fat man’s hand shot out like a flash, so quickly the group of boys all flinched in the shared memory of their father’s quick hands, and grabbed Elias by his shirt collar, hauling him onto his feet. “Look at you.” He sneered and took a step back, wiping his hand on his pants. Then he turned back to the little champion, nodding and looking the young boy up and down. “Looks like somebody knotted your tail up real good.”

A smile crossed the little champions face, and the crowd started up again, nudging each other, grinning, punching each other in the arm and back. The fat man only let this go on for a moment before he shooed the boys away with a few waves of his hat, scattering them back into town like leaves in the wind. “Go on now. Get outta here before one of your mothers sees this and we all catch it. And don’t be fighting in town anymore. Ain’t respectable.”

Elias stood and turned to go, but the fat man laid one of his thick, sweaty hands on his shoulder and spun him back around to face him.

“Elias Rhodes, what are you doing fighting them boys like that? You crazy? Huh? Next time they libel to split your head open like a melon, how’d you like that, huh?” The man’s face was only a few inches from Elias, deep folds of wrinkled skin set along his cheeks and neck, a flat, veiny nose that looked to Elias like a squash left to rot in the compost, hooked down until it only a few inches from his upper lip. As he talked, Elias shot quick glances, watching his loose skin shake like a turkey neck. The shameful feeling he had felt before returned, worse now that he was in front of an adult. The left side of his face hummed with a dull pain, his tongue and the inside of his mouth were still stung, and now that he was on his feet he could see a rip in his pants running all the way to the cuff. That, along with the blood stained shirt, started him crying again, a deep, heavy sob hitched his small shoulders and stung his eyes as he tried to hold back the tears.

“Where’s your daddy?” The fat man asked, perching the hat on top of his head. “He in town today? I ain’t seen hide nor hair of him in almost two months. Just your bony behind getting those good boys into trouble.”

Elias shook his head back and forth quickly, “No sir, I don’t think so sir.”

“Well, you tell him I don’t get payment by next week, he can go find some other son of a bitch to take advantage of, cause he’ll never work land for me again, you got that?”

Elias nodded, still staring at the tear along the leg of his pants, trying to think of a good story. A stray dog. A pack of stray dogs. A robber. A whole gang of villains. A negro. A whole pack of wild negroes, trying to rob him of his pants and shoes.

“Well, go on now boy. And stay outta the way of them other young kids. Probably best if you stay outta town altogether. For a little while anyways. Just until things are straight with your daddy and all. Go on now, git.”

Elias turned and ran along the road leading out of town, the fat man’s words already out of his head, he could only pass along so many messages to his daddy before they just didn’t mean anything anymore, concentrating instead on the rip in his pants, the streaks of crimson blood on his shirt that were baking to a black in the Mississippi sun, and what that pack of wild niggers looked like that did this to him.

Round 2:

Three white men lounged in the shaded porch of the Jesse Moyer’s hardware store. Two of them rested on a bench, their shirts streaked with dirt and grease, lazing away the mid-afternoon heat, hands folded on top of their bulbous stomachs, while the third lay stretched out on the floorboards, arms over his eyes to protect them from the bright sun. Two hound dogs lay side by side under the porch, their eyes occasionally perking up when a horse and buckler or a pedestrian went by, but never moving their chins from their folded paws.

Jesse Moyer, out of breath and irritable from walking uphill, looked briefly left then right before he crossed the road. He reached the porch of his hardware store, and

nudged Lyman Newcastle out of his spot on the bench with the tip of his boot. Lyman opened one eye, took a look at Jesse Moyer, then elbowed the snoring James Cobb in the ribs next to him. James Cobb snorted, shook his head violently and shot Lyman a confused look, before sliding to the end of the bench.

“What’s all that fussing about, Jesse?” Lyman Newcastle asked.

“Oh nothing.” Jesse said, groaning as he took his seat. “Just your son whupping the hell outta that Rhodes boy, that’s all.”

Lyman’s eyes jerked open and his head came off the bench. He scanned the empty road, then shrugged and rested his head again. Lyman shared the same dense, carrot red hair as his son, and the same potbelly, out of proportion to his dainty arms and legs.

“Rhodes?” Lyman said. “Why didn’t you say something? That bastard owes me five dollars going on three weeks already. Where’s his boy at now?”

“You ain’t the only one got beef with that man over finances.” Jesse said. “I do believe we may have to wait awhile to get square; least till after he pays God back the fifty cents he owes him.”

“I loaned him a planter one time.” Dan Deerport said from his back, one eye peering between his arms. “My extra one, the one I stopped using cause it had a crack along the shaft. Anyways, I was afraid to use the thing in case I caught a good size rock and the thing would just crack right in half, but Rhodes took it all the same. Never did get it back from him.”

“Well, you just have to wait in the back of the line.” Jesse said. “If he don’t come up with my money before harvest, there won’t be nothing left of that corpse to pick after I’m through with him.”

At that, the four men slipped back into silence, bodies cooling in the shade. The July heat had emptied the street, chasing most folks indoors, pinning the animals under any shade they could find. The only movement came from three colored men building Harv Greenleaf a new porch across the street, and the only sound was the rhythmic pounding of their hammers against the long plank, thudding in unison, a slow cadence like the ticking of a clock.

Harv’s Dry Goods and Jesse’s Hardware were the last two buildings on Farmer’s Row, whose real name was Farmer Road, but most folks who lived in Issequana County just ignored the name along with the two wooden signs, leaning crookedly at either end of the road. It wouldn’t officially become Farmer Road for another thirty years, when the Postal Service would arrive with a bushel of county officials and surveyors, who would pave the road and rip down rickety signs and replace them with posts made of sturdy steel. Store fronts faced each other up and down the Row, falling in line as they shadowed the river. Here and there other white men sat under their porches, hiding from the sticky, insistent heat, pipes drooping from open mouths, cold and unsmoked, whittling abandoned at their feet, games of checkers left unfinished. At the extreme south end of the Row, the two largest and oldest buildings in Issequana sat facing each other, the courthouse and First Independent Baptists Church, with only a large elm between the two to hold them back. The courthouse had grown from a simple one floor building that housed the deeds and records of the town charter in a series of large steamer

trunks, to its current size of three stories, all brick, with four smooth columns that stood away from the courthouse steps like bared teeth. First Independent Baptist had begun with similarly humble beginnings, not much more than a converted barn when it first began, but over the years, as the delta was tamed and cultivated, the church grew taller, wider, the steeple a needle point that scratched the sky, and the church steps lolling out into the road like the tongue of a famished dog.

The black men continued to hammer on the Harv's new porch, working steadily despite the heat, pausing intermittently only to wipe sweat from their brow, or arch their back, or flex their sore fingers. Harv himself was nowhere to be seen, the sign in his front window turned to CLOSED, probably asleep in the back of his store. Six pairs of eyes lazily considered them from Jesse's porch, watching as they worked and pounded and sawed and sweated to rebuild Harv's porch.

"It's a damn shame." Lyman said.

"What would that be?" Jesse said.

"That boy. That Rhodes boy. Small boy like him living the way he does. It's his father's fault. Making him live like that. Sharecropping ain't no kind of respectable living for a white man like that."

Jesse's small, bright eyes focused on Lyman for a moment--then let the comment pass.

"I mean is a man's gotta eat." Lyman said, see-sawing his shoulders between the portly Jesse and the steadily snoring Dan. "A man's got to get work where he can find it, and your a fine man to give it to him Jesse. But comes a time he's gotta stand up and try and better himself, for his family sake at least. But I swear Rhodes is just as hopeless as

those niggers he calls his neighbors. I suspect he ain't all white; nobody have that little regard for themselves if they were white. His son gonna end up the same way. Always the same story with all of them: I ain't got this, I ain't got that, I need this, I need that."

"Well, industry and thrift are not characteristics one associates with the colored races of the world." Jesse said, reaching into his shirt pocket for the remains of a half-smoked cigar. He lit the end and puffed in time with the hammering from across the street, sending thick clouds into the air like smoke signals.

"They work all day long in that sun though." Dan said from floor, both arms up over his face now. "Work all damn day long."

"That's just in the nature." Lyman countered. "Gotta be that way ifn' you live in Africa. White man'd die after a few days in that heat. Colored boy sit out all day long tied to a stake and never break or a sweat nor ask for a sip of water.

"Huh." Jesse said, smoke curling from under his nose. "That a fact."

"Oh yeah. Scientific fact. We was reading in McClure's how they measured a bunch of nigger heads and compared 'em to white folks head, and found out white people just naturally smarter."

"What's that got to do with them working when it's hot?" Dan said.

"Nature's got to compensate. Can't give a whole race of people brains and not give the others something, too."

"So you saying white people smarter, but colored people, what, stronger or something?"

"I'm not a damn scientist Dan, I'm just telling you what I read. Go argue with the fella wrote the story. But anybody should know it's me; I gotta work with them all the

time. Seems make sense to me, considering how hard they work and still ain't got nothing to show for it. See, didn't need to ask no scientist 'bout it. Coulda' just come to Mississippi and took a look around. Wouldn't have to measure one head."

"Well, you so concerned about Tom Rhodes, you should be careful none of that niggardliness rub off on you." Jesse said, ashing the tip of his cigar along the bench. Lyman turned to the face the street and leaned against the porch railing, watching the black men across the street continue to work on the half-completed porch. "Bet there ain't a straight angle in that whole porch." Lyman grumbled.

The white men fell silent again, Jesse gently puffing on his cigar, Lyman staring across the road and chewing his bottom lip. Dan Deerport and James Cobb were still, their eyes closed, apparently sleeping soundly. The hammering continued, each THUD was followed by another, THUD, until Lyman could feel himself blinking in time with each hammer stroke, the inside of his stomach jumping in unison with each THUD, that continued, loud like a thunderclap, or the ticking of a the ticking of a grandfather clock in an empty room. The pounding continued, THUD-THUD-THUD-THUD-THUD, until James Cobb, snoring not five seconds before, suddenly sprung from his place at the end of the bench.

"Knock it off!" He screamed, hair standing on end, bloodshot eyes bulging in their sockets. "You hear me, knock it off you coons or I swear to god I'll shoot every one of you! Knock it off with that racket Goddamnit! Knock it off! Knock it off knock it off knock it off!"

The three black men all froze, their hammers still cocked back by their ears, frozen in mid-stroke, looking first across the street, then at one another. An older looking

man with a bushy, white beard and a head of hair to match said something to the other two and they slowly lowered their hammers. The taller of the three looked up into the sky, then pointed at the half-completed porch and the stacks of cedar wood piled around the frame, saying something to the man with the white hair.

Lyman grinned, watching them argue for a few more moments before the white haired man pointed furiously in the taller one's face, before turning to gather their hats and meager tools. James stood next to Lyman, hanging over the porch railing and glaring at the black men until he was sure they had left, his chest heaving, a thick, blue vein running under the pale skin on his forehead from his hairline down to the bridge of his nose.

“Jesus Christ James.” Lyman said, giggling. “Think you got their attention?” James ran a hand through his hair and his eyes had a crazy, dizzy look. He turned and collapsed back on the bench, settling into the same position as before with a wiggle of his generous hips, hands tucked behind his head, fingers interlocked and resting comfortably on his belly.

“Niggers won't let a man have a moment's rest.” he said, and quickly fell back asleep.

Round 3:

With a grand, sweeping gesture that reminded the two boys of a stage magician, Hugh “Huge Deal” McArthur dropped a bright, shining new buffalo nickel into their outstretched hands. As soon as the coin fell into their palms, their grubby fingers snapped shut over the money like a bear trap. They turned and commiserated with each

other, debating whether this man in the shiny top hat, the brass buttoned waistcoat under his stiff doublet, and the long, swinging watch chain wasn't trying to take them for suckers.

Hugh smiled at their skepticism. It was healthy, and he appreciated such a healthy wariness, even with two young boys, not yet even teenagers. It was true that a sucker was born every minute, and Hugh appreciated them too, but the folks that had to be converted were the ones that kept him sharp.

“Now boys, make sure you get *everywhere* in town. Every shop you can think of. One for every shop, two for the really big stores, you got it?”

“Ain't but six stores in town.” The taller boy said, taking off his cap and stuffing the nickel into a rip along the brim, as casually as a woman dropping change into her purse. “You got too many posters.”

“Well, then, you'll just have to get creative young man, and do your best to find the best advertising space available. Advertising is the most important part of business, especially show business.” Hugh McArthur paused for a moment, then leaned down, flipping the tails of his coat and tipping back his hat with a flick of the brim. “Do either of you boys want to be in show business?”

The two boys stood with their mouths open, staring at Ben with a mixture of ignorance and irritation, as if not only had he asked the most ludicrous question, but were insulted by the insinuation. Ben wasn't sure there was a full head of teeth between the two of them.

“Hm. Well. Show business isn’t for everyone these days, lads. It takes a willingness to take chances to make it big these days. There’s money to be had,” Ben nodded, indicating the new nickels he had passed out, now safely tucked away into pockets and secret compartments. “If you are willing to work hard for it. And follow “Hugh’s Steps to Significance.” And the first step to significance is to get a buzz going. Which those posters will provide. Go on now, let’s get to work, no putting off today what will be a bird in the hand tomorrow.”

The two boys divided the stack of poster boards. The younger boy, when he had finally managed to get them into his grip, was completely obscured by the advertisements. He wobbled back and forth as he tried to gain control of the poster boards that were taller than he was, only his bare feet visible poking out of the bottom. Ben grinned, his polished whiskers rising on either side of his face. He reached out and took hold of the painted poster, steadying it so he could admire it one more time.

You Guess.....
 Who Will Be the Winner
 In the Coming
 Pugilistic Contest!
 Between People’s Champion
Gentleman Jim Corbett
 and the “MYSTERY NEGRO CHALLENGER”
 A Scientific Exhibition
 In Which the Roots of Man
 Will be Laid Bare
 For the World to Witness
 Prizes Awarded! All Bets Taken! Come be a Winner!

“Well I do believe that is fine, just fine. What do you think boys?”

The taller boy stepped in front of the sign, pulling it towards him, “Hold still Jake!”, balancing the younger boy who was beginning to lean backwards at an angle under the awkward sandwich board. The boy stared, moving his lips while he read, fingers rubbing the tip of his chin, contemplating the sign for almost a full minute, before Hugh bent beside him, clearing his throat.

“It says: Gentleman Jim Corbett will be fighting tomorrow night, in McGreeley Alfalfa farm, 4223 Wellmington road, just after twelve O’Clock. Whadda think of that!”

“I knew that. I was almost done with it, before you even started in. You serious? You gonna have a real fight here?” The taller boy asked, squinting into Hugh’s broad, smiling face.

“Course I’m serious! Hugh “Huge Deal” McArthur don’t make a row for nothing! And you heard that straight from the horse’s mouth. And this is not just a “fight”. Bleh. Heathens fight my young friend; pugilism is a finer, rarer thing. This is science, lads. This is a demonstration of survival of the fittest at it’s most primal. Yes, tomorrow evening, Jim Corbett will defend his crown against a negro challenger, and you can take that to the bank. Make sure you tell that to everybody you give one of them fliers. To the bank. Make sure everybody knows that Ben Stuart is on the up and up. You got me?”

The tall boy nodded, so did the sandwich board with feet.

“Good. And I’ll tell you what..... You boys do a good job with this, and I’ll let you in to see the fight half off, what you think of that?”

A gap-toothed smile stretched across the taller boys sunburned face, and he patted the nickel that was safely tucked away in his front pocket. Hugh thought he could see the

poster board sway back and forth slightly, and took it as a sign that the younger boy was happy with the prospect as well.

“Alright then, off you go boys, no need to keep wasting time here with me. Go on, get.”

The taller boy grabbed up his posters, tucking them under his arm, and began down the road, followed by the wobbling youngster. Hugh watched them move down the road, one boy on either side of the deep and dusty wheel ruts in the road. After a few paces the older boy reached out and took his friends load, letting the smaller boy carry the fliers while he carried the posters under each arm.

Hugh turned back towards the harbor, strolling along the riverbank, whistling from under his oiled whiskers while he walked. The day was turning out to be just fine after all. The heat of the day was beginning to abate a little, and even the mosquitoes that raged along the riverbanks seemed to be taking the rest of the day off. Hugh took off his top hat, tucked the frayed and worn lining back into the band, and knocked off some of the dust. He inspected the shoe polish smeared along the faded felt just under the brim, spitting into his hand and polishing the grit before he plopped it back onto his head. The sun was just beginning to graze the tops of the trees along the opposite bank. Tomorrow, there would be plenty of work to do, but for now Hugh's only thought was of the bottle tucked away in his room aboard the steamer, and a hot meal.

Once on board Hugh headed straight for his cabin, knocking before he unlocked the door. The room was the biggest the mid-sized steamer, only big enough to contain a round table in the corner, which was still covered in multi-colored chips and a deck of scattered cards, along with a few chairs, but other than that it was simply a bunk bed

bolted to the wall, a bench, and a dresser. A large, immobile shape lay under a sheet in the top bunk, knees drawn up, slowly turning the pages of the newest issue of Harpers Bazzarre. The blinds were open beside the shirtless man in the bed, and he was leaning on his side to catch the shifting light.

“Everything’s all set.” Hugh said, turning and locking the door behind him. “I got a couple of kids out there handing out fliers right now. Nothing left to do now but wait till tomorrow night. I don’t know what kind of crowd we’ll get. Lot’s of hayseeds I’d imagine.....You hearing me up there George?”

George Crane, who tomorrow night would be Gentleman Jim Corbett, heavyweight champion, kept his back to Ben, peered over the top of his shoulder. “I hear you.” He said, and rolled back onto his side to continue reading.

Hugh took a seat at the table, pushed the chips and the scattered cards into a pile with a sweep of his arm, making room for two glasses and a bottle of whiskey. He poured himself a glass, smoothed his whiskers back, and drank quickly, wincing as the liquor went down. He waited a moment then poured himself another, sipping this one for a moment, enjoying the flavor, then reached back irritably to undo the pin holding his waistcoat in place.

“What you reading?” Hugh asked, sipping the whiskey.

“Nothin.” Came the response from the top bunk.

“Sounds interesting.”

“New magazine.”

“Huh..... Want to eat?”

George rolled over in his bed and faced Hugh. Outside of the ring, without his hair oiled and a red and green sash around his waist, Hugh had to admit that George looked nothing like Jim Corbett. Here in the cabin he looked exactly like what he was; a former merchant shipman Hugh found outside a whorehouse in Baltimore, lying in a pile garbage, half-drunk and bleeding from one eye, not a penny in his pocket.

“Whatever. Sure.” George said.

Round 4:

Colored Folk Road (as it was called by some, Nigger Highway by others) ran parallel to Farmer’s Row, diverging sharply to the left as it left town and not turning north again until it touched the banks of the river, leaving three hundred yards of elms and cedar trees between the two thoroughfares. The road itself was not as wide or as well maintained as Farmer’s Row, but it was cooler in the Spring and Summer months, and offered the chance to stop and try your luck at a catfish or a croaker for supper, and was especially nice when the sun, as it was doing now, began to set behind the trees and the soft, dusky orange light of evening spilled onto the placid waters of the river.

Floyd McVeigh didn’t notice any of this; the setting sun, the glassy river reflecting the sky like a mirror, the steady hum of crickets, the throaty cry of a blue heron somewhere along the bank; these were insignificant details, nothing he hadn’t seen a hundred times before and was sure he would see a hundred times again. All Floyd knew was that it took twice as long to get home walking along Colored Folk Road than it did to take Farmer’s Row, that the sky would be purple before he even began to wash for supper and pitch black before he could meet up with his friends. Floyd marched steadily,

shoulders squared, eyes firmly on the ground under his feet, swinging a hammer in each hand, one eye on the rapidly setting sun, feeling another day slip through his fingers, feeling cheated. A cloud of mosquitoes swarmed around his head and landed in his ears, filling them with their high pitched buzzing; the uneven and bumpy road hurt his sore feet and grabbed at his broken soles.

Floyd glanced behind him, making sure he hadn't gotten too far away from his younger brother and his father. They were lagging a hundred or so paces behind, walking so close together it looked like they were commiserating, William's shoulder rubbed against their Daddy's hip as they strolled down the path. Floyd sighed deeply, felt his nostrils flare. For a moment he considered just keep walking, but Daddy liked for them to stay in sight of each other, no matter how long the walk home took, no matter that Floyd was almost seventeen years old and William twelve. "Too many things in this world we caint' do nothing about," his daddy would say, whenever he or William would want to race ahead to meet their friends, or linger by the river to cast out a line, "Let's least control what we can." But for the past year their walk home from town was stretching out longer and longer, until most days it was almost dark by the time they got back to their house along the west end side of the delta. Sam McVeigh walking slowly, sometimes stopping both boys altogether while he caught his breath. On these days, eyes sunken and glassy, the skin on his cheek bones turning ashy, a sound like a kettle whistle, came from his chest, and Floyd would leave William on the road and tramp down to the riverside to skip stones.

Floyd dropped the hammers and sat down to wait. He swatted at mosquitoes swarming his head, landing on his cheeks, the back of his neck, behind his ears. He

grunted and growled, and in frustration threw haymakers at the eddying swarm in front of him. The swings broke the swarm apart and enough of them drifted away on the breeze that he could enjoy a moment of peace. Squinting his eyes he threw a few more punches in the air, enjoying the weight and heft of his fists, the momentum he could feel developing with each punch. Pugilism, as the white folks called it, Floyd and his friends just called it fighting, helped him to concentrate, to relax. He and his friends sparred with each other and fought with boys from other towns whenever they got the chance. If Floyd had time at the end of the day's chores he would ask William to help him set up a few hay bales and spend the rest of the evening punching and sliding, throwing uppercuts and stiff jabs until his knuckles wailing on the stiff hay until his knuckles were cut and bruised. William would watch him and call the fight from his perch atop the hen house "Uppercut to the face of Sullivan! Right hook! Body Blow! John Sullivan's going down, the Boston Strong Boy is out for the count! Whew baby!" If William got too loud, Floyd would smack William on the back of the head, or rabbit punch him in the arm to shut him up, turning and lashing out at him so quickly and ferociously, he surprised himself. He hated doing it but he had to; he couldn't afford to have his Daddy catch him practicing. His father was already suspicious enough, wondering where Floyd disappeared to on Saturday nights, why he came home so late, or sometimes not at all. He didn't need to know Floyd was fighting on top of it all, he simply couldn't have that, so William would catch a few smacks and crawl in between the hay bales where Floyd couldn't reach him to shut him up.

After a few minutes William and Daddy caught up, their walk absentminded, oblivious, like two philosophers lost in a debate. They leaned close to one another,

William practically leaning on Daddy's hip, their voices low whispers caught and then dispersed on the breeze. William's face boyish face was hidden underneath the shadow cast by his oversized derby, the only feature Floyd could make out were William's ears, bent downwards against the brim of the old hat that used to belong to their Daddy. It was much too big for the boy, it looked like a mixing bowl on top of his head, but William wore it to work everyday.

"Ya'll ready?" Floyd said, jumping up and dusting off the back of his pants. "S'almost supper time. Gonna' take all night to get home at this pace."

"We'll be home when we get home." Sam McVeigh said, his voice deep and gravelly. "Nobody here in any hurry."

"Cept' me." Floyd said, into his chest, but loud enough for his father to hear. If Sam McVeigh did hear, he took no notice.

"From there to town ain't any farther than it ever was. Still the same distance, that ain't never gonna change. Only thing different about it is you."

Floyd rolled his eyes and shook his head, snatching the hammers up out of the tall grass.

"Let me just catch me breath here a minute." Sam McVeigh said, pulling at the legs of his pants and easing himself down into the grass. He reached into his shirt pocket, got out his tobacco and papers, rolling himself a cigarette.

"Come on, daddy. We're never gonna be home at this rate."

Sam struck a match with on his thumbnail and only managed a few, short puffs before he began coughing, his upper body convulsing violently. William stood next to his father and put a hand on his shoulder until the fit passed.

“Why don’t you leave him alone?” William said to his older brother. “We’ll be home when we get there.”

“What you say to me? You better watch your mouth and check who you talking to like that.”

“I’m talking to you, *Floyd*.”

“What I tell you about calling me that?” Floyd said, taking a few, measured steps towards William, clinking the heads of the hammers together. “My name is Pistol. You only call me Floyd when we in church.

“Daddy named you Floyd and I’m gonna call you Floyd until he say different.”

“You are asking for it. Oh yeah, you are asking for it.”

“Shut up and leave me alone, Floyd.”

“Oh yeah, that’s it, you dead boy--”

“Stop it! The both of you, stop it right now!” Both boys froze and turned to their father. Sam McVeigh’s voice had changed in the past two years. It could no longer fill a church the way it once did, it couldn’t travel across five acres of farmland and find you no matter where you tried to hide, but despite this it still had the power to turn both of his sons back into little boys. “You stop this foolishness right now before both of you catch a whupping. Don’t make me go cut me a switch for the two of you.”

Floyd cursed under his breath and turned his back. Sam shook his head and took another, brief drag from his cigarette. If this had been just a few years ago, that child would never have dared cursed in his presence, whether under his breath or any other way. But both father and son had grown older, and it was becoming more difficult every day to keep track of the boy. Floyd hated going to work, just plain refused some days so

that Sam had to follow him into town with a switch in one hand and his tools in the other. He snuck out all hours of the night and got into God knew what kind of trouble with his friends. He terrorized his little brother. Sam knew the boy was growing wild. Floyd had some kind of anger inside of him that Sam couldn't account for. Sam knew about the fighting; saw the pulverized hay bales and the deep cuts along his son's knuckles, the busted lips and black eyes. He also knew there was nothing he could do about it, that if you told a young boy not to do something it was more likely to strengthen any notions than dissuade. The change had just been so sudden and dramatic he hadn't been ready for it. If their momma was alive then maybe things had been different. But that was the past, and the fact was the boy was going wild and there was nothing Sam could do about it.

“Why don't you go on ahead?” Sam whispered, smoke curling from his nose.

“Head home and I'll catch up later”

Floyd turned and looked at his father, squinting his eyes.

“You serious?”

“Course I'm serious. Go on ahead and I'll be there when I can catch up.”

“Alright.” Floyd said, smiling now. “Promise I'll go straight home. Go straight home and start the stove. I'll put the chickens away too, okay?”

“Alright. I know you will..... We need to get home early and get some rest. We got a big day ahead of us tomorrow. Behind on that porch now, because of all that nonsense, and it's got to be finished before this Tuesday.”

Floyd stopped and turned to his daddy, remembering now that pink, sweaty face that had screamed at them from across the street to shut up and stop working, all those other crackers behind him sitting on their fat asses, laughing with him.

“Tomorrow’s Saturday.” Floyd said, nodding his head, as if the decision were already made. “I got work with Hambone and Squirt tomorrow. We’re heading to Buxie County tomorrow morning to work on that lady’s fence.”

“Well, we ain’t got the time for that now.” Sam McVeigh shook his head and took a few more short puffs from his cigarette before he let it fall to the ground. He stared at the smoldering butt and asked God to let him enjoy one last cigarette before he died; at least smoke one without coughing so much he tasted blood in the back of his throat. “We don’t have that porch finished before next Wednesday we don’t get that bonus. I got someone working the fields while we gone, but I can’t keep paying them if we’re not working on something else.”

“You can do without me for one day.” Floyd said. “I’ll even give you half the pay we got coming to us for this fence mending. Come on daddy. You can get Curtis to help--”

“Curtis...don’t live here..... don’t live here no more.” Sam growled. “Curtis moved to Chicago with his wife and their family. There ain’t nobody else. Now I need you to finish that porch with me tomorrow Floyd..... come hell or highwater.”

Sam paused after this last bit and stared into his son’s eyes. He was waiting for something, he wasn’t sure what exactly. Floyd’s chest heaved under his shirt, his nostrils flared, and he could feel sweat forming along his brow. The hammers, hanging down at his sides, bumping rhythmically against his thighs. They felt good in his hands,

reminding him of the way his fists felt when he fought; heavy and substantive, essential tools, dangerous. He began to feel savage and better. He couldn't imagine fighting his father; circling him, jabbing, bobbing and weaving and throwing well timed, precise punches. What he could imagine, what he imagined every time his father dragged him out of bed to work under the stares of those white men, was lasing out, and making his daddy bleed, smash his mouth so he would stop talking, stomp him into the ground so Floyd could finally walk home at his own pace.

“Alright.” Floyd said, feeling a terrible, defeated sensation; his shoulders slumping and the fire that started in his stomach turned on him instead and began burning his cheeks and forehead. “Alright. But I'm still going home now.”

“Alright. I'll see you at home. Don't forget to take William.”

“What? I ain't taking that peanut head with me, he's too damn slow.”

William turned to his father, the oversized hat sliding down to his eyebrows. “I ain't slow like that, Daddy, I can keep up.”

“You slow like a drunk on Sunday morning, you slow like a--”

“Goddamnit, didn't I say enough? Didn't I sat to stop with all this back talk!”

Sam stooped to cough again, covering his mouth with his hand, swallowing a heavy mixture of phlegm and blood that tasted, and felt, disturbingly like stale, lumpy oatmeal. “I sah..... I said take your brother with you..... After what happened today I don't want either of you walking alone by yourself, not with those white folks acting strange like that.”

“Alright then. Better keep up with me, though.” He turned and started jogging north along the road, before William even had a chance to stand up.

“Go on. Go with your brother.” Sam nudged William in the back, and right away the boys legs began pumping to catch up with his older brother, one hand holding the bowler down on his head. William rolled another cigarette and sat smoking as he watched his two boys, keeping an eye on them until the road began to dip, and the trees swallowed them up.

Round 5:

The Rhodes Farm began where Colored Folks Road ended, the last in the long line of Farms that encompassed all of the Welch plantation, almost four hundred acres of dark, rich soil, partitioned out in neat amounts of one hundred acres each to the four families that worked the land. Although they were all related in that they all sat on the same bit of land, and were owned by the same man, the Rhodes farm sat slightly up hill from the other's, on an almost imperceptible slope away from the river, and if you reached down and put your fingers into the soft soil of the Washington farm, the first of the five, and felt the richness of the dark, sweet earth and smelled the dank aroma of mulch and top soil, and then compared it to the clumpy, dry, shit colored ground of the Rhodes farm, the difference became obvious. When it rained, the soil of the Rhodes farm seemed to reject it, letting the rain bead and collect along the surface until the entire farm became mud, sluicing off all the nutrient rich top soil and sending it slowly down hill to feed and cultivate the farms of other men, fortunate enough to have chosen their land slightly downhill.

Elias Rhodes always took time on his way home from town to visit his four neighbors, whether it be to steal a few tomatoes or yams, or to rip up a new bit of planting, or to cut holes in the chicken wire so the foxes, raccoons, and wild dogs could

get in, he always made time for a visit. He hit each farm quickly and silently, swiping a few eggs or a fresh tomato and moving on to the next farm, where he would put his buck knife to use slashing the tether around a pig pen. The other farmers knew it was him, and this pleased Elias, because he also knew there was nothing they could do to him because he was white. If he wanted to steal a few chickens or pelt their dogs with rocks, there was nothing they could do about it. He understood this fact of life as inherent and inevitable, like the fact that the Washington's would always make their quota for harvest, and at Christmas there would be a bonus from Jesse Welch for getting the crop in on time, and all the nigger kids down the road would have new shoes and new pants and maybe even new fishing gear, while Elias and his father would have to sell the little bit of alfalfa they managed to grow and half of their potato crop just to pay off the interest from the year before.

Lately, he had been fantasizing about bigger, more elaborate things he could get away with. He imagined what it would take to poison their crop, fantasized about somehow catching a whole mess of boll weevils and setting them loose on their cotton plants just before harvest, or, what captured his imagination the most, setting fire to one of their hay lofts. The fantasy had become tantalizingly real in his mind, and at night, while his father snored and kicked the sheets beside him in bed, he would imagine creeping into the hay loft with just a set of matches, then running while the whole structure went up in flames behind him, lighting up the night, and he watched from the woods while those niggers jumped and danced around the flames with their hands on their heads and their barn burning to the ground.

At first, Little Elias hadn't been in the mood to stop at all. Fantasies of Jim Corbett were gone, but not forgotten. There would come another time for that. He came to the Washington farm, leaned against the fence that marked off their property, and gently touched his swollen lip with the tip of his fingers and dabbed at his eye. The bleeding had stopped but it still throbbed, and when he ran his tongue along the inside of his mouth he could still feel the open wound. Then he looked down at the blood on his shirt, thought about the whipping he would most likely catch from his daddy when he got home, and slipped his thin body through the fence. He started out small, just grabbing a few yams from a wheelbarrow filled mostly with potatoes. But as he stuffed his treasure into the front pocket of his pants, he noticed a small bag of feed lying next to the backdoor of the house, and sneaked his way up to the back porch.

There was a colored woman in the window, mixing something in the kitchen, her rounded shoulders moving rhythmically back and forth, but besides that Elias couldn't see a soul. The Washington's fields stretched much farther back towards the river, so they could take advantage of the rich soil coughed up by the river, and Elias guessed everyone else must be out picking. He crept up slowly and got close enough to hear humming coming from the open window, then grabbed the bag of feed, slung it over his shoulder, and ran fast as he could towards the road. He didn't think the woman saw him, and didn't look back until he reached the road and was out of breath. He wasn't sure how much a bag of feed cost exactly, but he was pretty sure that it must at least offset the price of a shirt.

Happier and overburdened, Elias slung the bag of feed over his shoulder and started walking. Past the Jefferson farm, the Franklin place, and then the Lincoln's, the

size of the homes and the quality of the fences diminishing, until finally he had reached home. Their own fence was only up in patches now. Where the wood hadn't rotted away it had just fallen down and no one had taken an interest in putting it back up, since no one had any particular interest in their land anyway. The color's seemed to change as well, from the rich, dark browns and vibrant greens of the other farms, fading as the life and vitality of the land slowly seeped away, until the only thing left of the Rhodes place was dirt and some thin, hard scabble trees that didn't need much water to grow, just space enough to drink up the rain that did manage to penetrate the hard soil. The house was so small that from the road it seemed on the other end of a telescope.

Evening had come on slow, the sun was just beginning its steady descent behind the tree line. Elias paused beside their rusted gate and scanned the fields. They were still--the hired hands had most likely left long ago to try and find some room and board with the measly nickel Tom Rhodes begrudgingly handed out to the wandering help, and there was no smoke coming from the chimney of their house. Elias guessed his father was either still out putting away farm equipment, or he had already left for the evening, buddies up with a few of the hired hands to see if they could rustle up a bottle.

Elias nudged the front gate open with his leg, careful not to bruise the yams in his front pocket or drop the bag of feed, and sprinted the last twenty yards to his house. He stumbled up the sagging porch steps and tossed the bag off his shoulder into the rocking chair on the porch. Hopefully, there would be something to eat when he got inside. Maybe there would still be some oatmeal left in the pot from breakfast, if his father hadn't already eaten that, or a stew, usually cooked by one of the hired hands. If not, Elias had his yams, and could always go back to the Jefferson place for some eggs if he

got too hungry. His stomach rumbling, Elias opened the front door, and froze before he took his first step. A soft, steady snore was coming from the bed. The curtain was only half-closed, and Elias could see his daddy's bony shins stretched out on the bed, his hairy feet pointing to the roof. Elias winced, and before he could slip out and close the door behind him, the snoring abruptly ceased, replaced with a snort and a series of ugly, retching sounds.

"Agh. HUUUCH. Nggh. Hfssh." With the sound of bed springs, Tom Rhodes' big, white feet swung out of bed and hit the dusty floor boards. Elias closed the door behind him. It was better to stay. Running would only make things harder later on.

Elias went to the stove and peeked inside the black, cast iron pot; nothing there but the leavings from breakfast and a dried up biscuit, lying half-eaten at the bottom. Things quiet for a moment behind the curtain, then the hairy white feet pounding to the head of the bed, and the hollow, metallic sound of a steady stream of piss hitting the bottom of the chamber pot. Elias sat down and laid his yams out in front of him on the kitchen table.

Tom Rhodes, dressed only in his undershirt and a pair of short underwear, pushed the curtain aside and stumbled to the kitchen table, taking the seat opposite his son. His face and forearms were burned brown from the sun, the color of tobacco, but the rest of his body was bone white, and covered in short, curly black hairs.

"Mmboy." He mumbled. He took the bottle from the kitchen table and drank deeply, eyes shut tight. He finished and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then took another deep draught before he set the bottle back down on the table. He stayed that way for a long while, his eyes closed, chin resting on his chest, before he sprang back up

again, his blue eyes darting around the room, before they settled on Elias. “Missed you today.”

“I know.”

“You get those coops cleaned out like I told ya?”

“Yes.”

“Good boy.” His big hands closed around the bottle. Elias could see a black line of dirt and grime under his fingernails. Tom Rhodes took another drink, closing his eyes as the booze slid through his chest and settled in his stomach, before he finally noticed Elias’s face.

“What in the hell happened to you?” He said, reaching out and grabbing Elias’s small chin in his big hands, turning it back and forth while surveyed his face. “That’s a shiner. A big old shiner if I ever saw one. And your goddamn lips all puffed out..... Jesus boy, who whalloped you? Huhn?”

“I got jumped.” Elias said through his father’s fingers. They smelled of dried mud and grease, and Elias could feel some of the grit smearing across his chin. They gripped him along the bruise, and stung. Elias could feel tears forming in his eyes, could feel his stomach and chest beginning to tighten up.

“Who? Who’d you let jump you boy. Answer me right now or I’ll dot your other eyeball. Who?”

“A bunch of niggers.”

“Well I’ll be goddamned. It wadn’t any of them tramps I been taking on this week is it? If it was by God I swear to Jesus I’ll shoot ‘em right in the goddamn face.” Elias shook his chin, still lodged in his father’s hands. Tom Rhodes pulled his son’s chin

closer, and squinted into his face. “You want to answer me right away when I’m talking to you.” His breath was mixed with whiskey, and the earthy, fragrant smell of tobacco, some of which was still lodged between Tom Rhodes teeth.

“It was all those niggers live down the road. I was walking past where they was playing in the river, and all the sudden they started asking me for my yams, and saying..... Saying all kinds of things. Calling me names, calling me low and yellow..... and talking about you and some other such nonsense..... I can’t recall all of it.”

Elias stared into his father’s tobacco brown face. He held Elias’s chin for a moment longer, his grip against the bruises along his chin, then suddenly pushed him away, so hard Elias almost fell back in his chair.

“Goddamn bullshit.” Tom Rhodes said, taking another quick drink. “My boy getting jumped by a group a’ shines--on his way home no less.” His blue eyes rolled to the ceiling. “Why’s it gotta be so hard. So I ain’t got enough indignities in the world, my son’s gotta get beat but a bunch a shines? I ain’t taught nothing, have I? Nope. Not a goddamn thing.” The bottle went to his lips again, and Elias recognized the stormy look coming over his father’s face, the way his eyes rolled in their sockets and refused to focus. Elias had come to know this as a “middle time” just after his daddy got his gander up with a drink, about some slight, or some misfortune laid yet again at his tired feet, and just before he was too drunk to care. Tom Rhodes sneered and shook his head.

“Ain’t this a beautiful world? Ain’t this just the grandest goddamn thing?” He pushed himself away from the table, drew aside the curtain, and commenced to piss again in the dented chamber pot. “There ain’t nothing a man can feel proud about no more, not even his own son. Not even his own goddamn blood. I’ll be goddamned.”

Elias pursed his lips and continued to fidget with his shirt. Somewhere, somehow, his father's words were penetrating, or building up like the steady accumulation of brick and mortar for a foundation. He had heard this all before, none of it was new. Better to keep his mouth shut and wait for the old man to stumble out of the house drunk, looking for someone else to fight with.

"You going into town tonight, daddy. Reason I ask is 'cause Mr. Welch say he looking for ya'."

"Naw." Tom Rhodes said, tucking himself back into his drawers. "I'ma stay home with you tonight. In fact, you wait right here. Don't move from that table before I get back boy, or I'll whup your behind worse than any pack of colored boys."

Elias watched his father go outside and waited obediently at the table. He could hear his father crashing around in the small shed beside their house, hear him shouting curses, to no one in particular, as if the earth and sky could somehow absorb it all. When he came back in, slamming the screen door hard enough to loosen the hinges, he walked slowly to the kitchen table, with one hand grabbing his chair and setting it closer to Elias, the other hidden behind his back.

Tom Rhodes swung a leg over the top of his chair and sat down. He smiled, his free hand resting palm down on the table.

"Now. What are we gonna do the next time something like this happens? We gonna take another lickin'?"

Elias shrugged his small, round shoulders. The next moment, Tom Rhodes heavy, farm worn hand shot out and smacked his son in the face, on the uninjured side. Elias rocked back in his chair, then covered his face with his arms.

“You want to answer me when I’m talking to you, boy. Try to remember whose house your in. Now, what are we gonna do next time you get jumped by those jigs down the road?”

“I’m gonna get ’em.” Elias sniffed, tears stinging his eyes.

Tom Rhodes faced beamed. “That’s goddamn right. That’s goddamn right you’re gonna’ get ’em. And how we plan on doing that?”

Elias opened his mouth to answer, but he couldn’t think of an answer. He looked into his daddy’s face. His daddy smiled back. The other arm was still hidden behind his back. Elias squirmed in his seat, he could feel the side of his face beginning to tingle and throb, the blood hot under his skin, his right eye still blurred.

“I guess I don’t know daddy.”

Tom Rhodes’s left arm flew out suddenly, arching above his head, and Elias could see something in his hand, something long and metallic, and he almost fell out of his chair and into the stove, hands flying to his face, his knees bumping the bottom of the table as he drew them towards his chest. There was a great boom and the sound of the bottle rocking back and forth on the table, before it settled again. When Elias took his hands away and opened his eyes, there was a grain sickle lying there in the middle of the table, the small one they sometimes used to slice through the heavier hay bales and sometimes used to slaughter pigs, the wood handle short and worn away, the blade curved in a wicked looking hook, like a crescent moon. The blade was dull looking, they had the blade for as long as Elias could remember, for cutting through hay bales and to slaughter pigs, and patched with rust along the base, but Elias knew it was still keenly sharp.

“What you think of that! Huhn.”

The blade lay there on the table. The blade had dulled and rusted a bit over the years, but it was still sharp, curving into a point like a crescent moon. The wooden handle had worn away most of its varnish, but it was hard as a rock and stained a strange, purplish color from the blood when Tom Rhodes used it to slaughter pigs. Elias had seen what it could do to the flesh of a pig, ripping their gullet out from jowl to jowl.

“Go on, take it! Take it you son of a bitch, and don’t run away from nobody no more. I don’t give a goddamn how many of them there are--you dig a few of them with that, ain’t nobody gonna bother you anymore. Hit ’em with it, hit ’em first, hit ’em hard. You come home crying to me again and I’ll beat the shit outta’ you worse then you got from any of them. You hearing me boy?”

The tears dried quickly as Elias stared at the blade. Tom picked up the bottle and took a few more drinks, smiling, and nodding while he drank.

“See?” He said, and winked at his son. “You ain’t crying no more.”