

ABSTRACT

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AT MY KITCHEN TABLE

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Shane Richards is fifty years old and living in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He narrates his life story, reflecting upon the cooking jobs he has had, the food he has eaten, the people he has met, and the cities he has lived in. The following chapters occur in San Diego, Argentina, and Madison, Wisconsin.

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By

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Prologue

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A hollow knock on an apartment door. Inside the walls are badly in need of a fresh coat of paint. Small balls of dust have collected in the corners. The light outside from the setting sun is strong as it reflects off the surrounding buildings and through the glass windows, abruptly stopping at the bottom of a long line of copper pans that hang above the kitchen island in the middle of the room. Though they have not been used in some time, each pan shows years of wear, the bases thick rims of brown and muted bronze. Beyond them is the expansive kitchen, a stretch of cupboards, and above an empty sink a thin sheet of metal nailed into the wall, a barren knife rack.

Glass windows rise from the parquet floor to the ceiling. There are two couches, a small television set, and a dining table bare of place settings. A summer jacket, a thin black number made for the heavy heat of January in Buenos Aires, hangs from the back of a chair.

Manuel, the building superintendent, lets himself in. He calls out, as if he's required to, knowing though, it will be met only by a faint echo. In his arms he cradles a stack of mail, which he puts on the dining table and flips through. He stops at one. It is from the son the American spoke so often about. The return address reads *Marco Richards, 4760 Del Mar Ave, San Diego, CA, USA*. He takes the letter from the pile and examines it. The envelope is not thick, the contents only a couple of pages. A crimson stain covers one corner. Manuel pats the envelope against his palm and surveys the room again, for the first time feeling the oppressive staleness.

Facing the wall, in the corner of the room, is a desk. It is a simple desk, without any drawers. Four legs and a plank of stained wood nailed on top. Cookbooks and literature line the back against the wall. Manuel recognizes only Borges and Hemingway, but there are hundreds more. A large stack of papers stands on one side. Written in the middle of the cover page are a few words in bold type, the title. A rubber band wrapped tightly around it all. Manuel lays the letter on top of the manuscript, apart from the rest of the mail, and leaves the apartment without calling out again. The door slams behind him.

Outside the apartment the sun has fallen behind the line of silver and white buildings, and the sky is flush with red and purple. Across the street a young woman pins shirts onto a clothesline. A light wind moves through and the line swings beneath the weight of damp clothes. Dark clouds on the horizon drift through the sky towards the city.

It hasn't rained in days and the city is dirty, even for Buenos Aires. Trash stands ankle-deep in the streets against the curbsides. The coming summer rain will be harsh and unforgiving. It will bring up loose stones and bricks in the sidewalks and carry them away. Large unavoidable ponds of dirty water will submerge whole portions of busy streets. Trash that has been tossed on the ground will flow away with the rushing rivers of rain water towards the sewage drains. The drains will clog and back up until the downpour ceases, and by the following morning most of the water will have seeped into the ground or down through the sewers and the trash will be swept away with it. Everything will go back to the way it was, the way it has been for so long. The streets will be clean again, and people will drop their wrappers and

bottles onto sidewalks and broken cement drying in the thick heat of summer. The shirtless unemployed will gather in packs in the plazas and smoke and drink and leave their refuse for the underpaid city workers to pick over. And Manuel will be downstairs in the lobby sitting at his desk, signing for packages, opening the front door for residents. At one o'clock he will take out a pouch of maté and spoon a mound of the herb into his favorite gourd. After letting it steep in hot water for twenty minutes he'll rise from his desk and go outside and sit on the steps. Sipping his tea through the bombilla, he will think about the American who used to join him on his break and drank maté from his own gourd, and wonder where the man has gone off to, and if he will ever return.

Chapter 1: Las Olas

1975

The summer my father left, my mother insisted I spend my days as I normally would. She did not want me to lose my vacation holed up in the house looking after her. Though I think her husband's leaving came finally as a relief, that the lying and drinking and fighting was over once and for all, I know it was tough on her, and that she did not want me to see her struggle through it. I'm not sure how she occupied herself for most of the day, but every night when I came home at dusk, dinner was ready and she and I, and then later on Larry and Eric, would sit down at the table as a family and eat together.

Our house was in mainland La Jolla, near University Town Center. In those days, though, Highway 52 had yet to be built, and the divide between the beach communities of La Jolla and the canyons of the mainland on the other side of Highway 5 was much greater. In order to get to the beach, Larry and I would drive through the base of the canyon below my house and then up the highway for a few miles to Claremont. We then backtracked down through the hills that overlooked the ocean. The houses there, great luxurious ones with white stucco and clay-tiled roofs made to absorb the heat and resemble Spanish villas, were extraordinary to us even then.

Early in the morning, when the fog still reached miles inland, the final blocks before you hit the beach were often enveloped in a haze so thick that we drove through the streets, stopping at lights and taking wide turns, as if controlled by memory alone. Larry and I rarely spoke. The radio didn't work and there were few

other cars on the roads. With the windows down I could smell the salt of the ocean creeping up the hills, feel it increase as we approached the beach.

A few of the usual suspects always arrived before us. The particular morning I'm thinking of now, there were five or six. They stood on the boardwalk looking out into the gray ocean and listened to the crashing of the waves beyond the expanse of the fog. Larry and I got out and stood with them. We could not see far enough down the beach to see the pier, where the waves were bigger because of their proximity to the point, but the shore break there in front of the empty parking lot and the shuttered lifeguard station was indicative of what we'd find farther down. We listened to the thunderous crash of the waves and then the rush of the whitewater advancing the beach. The waves themselves were nothing more than subtle variations forming within the fog and rising in the distance until the face was barely visible and then breaking suddenly, the smoothness of it all exploding wonderfully into powerful thick billows of gray.

We dressed beside my car, wriggling into our cold wetsuits, that first touch of the neoprene never failing to jumpstart my heart, and then headed down the beach. The distance between the boardwalk and the shore was only fifty yards or so, but the visibility changed drastically, and when we got to the pier, we saw that there was a big swell. There were a handful of other surfers out and no one fought for waves. We waited for a set to finish and then paddled out through the foam and fronds of kelp and straggling smaller waves, gliding smoothly over the cold water.

Outside the ocean was calm. I sat up on my board just south of the pier. I ran my hands alongside my legs, kicking in the water, to counter the tide. The initial

shock of the cold was over and I felt alive. My father had just left and my mother was in bed after another sleepless night wondering how she could ever survive, and Larry and I were floating in the water watching the horizon for any small humps moving towards us from deep within the Pacific and there was nowhere else I wanted to be.

Two surfers to our left lay down flat and began to paddle east towards the parking lot and we watched as one backed off and then the second got a nice wave. A set came rolling in and we got in position. The waves rose like knolls made of oil, slick and black. Whiting fish broke through and jumped in and out of the faces as they climbed towards us. The third wave arrived and I swung my board towards the beach. I didn't rush it, paddling slowly at first. The force of the wave propelled me from behind and doubled my speed and I took four or five strong strokes and jumped up into a crouch on my board and veered left towards the pier. The crest broke behind me. I switched my weight and slowed my movement along the face of the wave. The lip came overhead and it flowed up beautifully on my back side and broke in front of me. I was inside the wave, jetting down towards the hole at the end and the pier in front of me. It was surprisingly quiet, considering the amount of water flowing and crashing all around me, like the inside of a seashell. The kind of eerie hollowness found only at the sea.

I felt the wave suck me in deeper and deeper. I pumped once and crouched lower and was spit out, my board shooting out of the dark hole and away from the immense clouds of whitewater. At the base I made a bottom turn and rose back up the face and flew up off the lip and was airborne, the deep blue green ocean beneath

me. When I landed I was already back on my stomach and paddling outside to join Larry.

We surfed the pier until the sun had risen overhead and the fog was gone. The water became crowded with other surfers. The swell calmed as the tide moved in. Mexicans lined each side of the pier, their fishing lures bobbing in the water below. Larry and I had had a good morning and were hungry. It was some time after ten when we got out. Couples hand in hand and groups of girls in thin bikinis sauntered through the whitewash, up and down the beach.

Back at my car we unzipped our wetsuits and tied towels around our waists to undress. "Let's go get some food," said Larry.

"Sure. Las Olas?" I said, and motioned to my mouth with one cupped hand.

"Beer?"

"It was a good morning. You got some good rides. We both did."

Las Olas was a little spot on one of the streets leading down to the beach. It doesn't exist anymore, like most of the ragtag shops that dotted the coast then. It's probably now a Coldwell Banker, or a high-priced yoga studio, catering to the Coldwell Banker wives.

We walked up barefoot and shirtless, the pebbles and rocks and hot cement scratching our calloused feet. Inside there were a few chairs and tables by the window and a counter at the other end with some stools. Mexicans came there in the morning and then again before dinner and sold their catch. The restaurant smelled stale, like some people had been in there late the night before. But this was not

uncommon and the owner was a friend and a surfer and never seemed to mind who came and who drank, just as long as there was some money in the till at the end of the day.

Larry and I sat on the stools and glanced up at the menu written in chalk on the wall. The bartender came up and took our orders, a couple of beers and some sandwiches. When he brought the plastic cups with the cheap, foamy beer, I took a long pull. Larry looked over at me and then drank some of his.

“How are things with your mom?” he asked.

“You know,” I said and shrugged.

“You talk to your father?”

“He’s gone,” I said, and drank some more. My mother would have killed herself if she’d seen me at that moment.

“Where’d he go, a hotel?”

“Nope.”

“Shit. He moved in with that secretary. Son of a bitch.”

The sandwiches came and neither of us talked while we ate. I finished and pushed my plate across the counter. The owner walked in from the kitchen with another man. They stood at the end of the counter, two buckets of oysters placed between them. Each man held a short, stubby knife in one hand and they took the oysters out and forced the knife into one end, their tan forearms with bleached white hair moving quickly. The bivalves popped from the pressure and the men slid the knives inside and shimmied them around. The owner, a burly man with hair sprouting from the neck of his t-shirt, tilted his head back and sucked his oyster down

and tossed the shells into the empty bucket. He smacked his lips and slapped the counter, and spoke briefly to himself. “That’s the stuff!”

“Hey Jack, what do you got there?” I asked.

“Oysters,” he said, smiling, and then it disappeared from his face. “Beer already?”

“His father just moved out,” said Larry.

Jack looked down at the two of us and didn’t respond. The bartender walked outside through the front door and stood against the rough spine of a palm tree. Jack took a handful of the oysters and put them on the counter. He popped each one open and slid the knife deep within the cavernous hole and moved his hand back and forth with the knife still in it. He put four on a plate and walked over to us.

“You boys ever had one of these before?”

We shook our heads.

“Try these then. You’ll love it. Can’t get much better a breakfast after a session than beer and oysters.”

I took one of the shucked shells in my hand and looked at the oyster. It had a shimmering quality from the clear liquid in which it sat. The pale meat glistened as it moved, swimming in the palm of my hand. I looked over at Larry who had yet to touch his own. Jack laughed and told us it was easy and slurped one down and tossed the shell onto the counter and went behind the bar to draw himself a beer.

“I don’t want to chicken out here, Jack, but—”

“Shane, how many times have we surfed the pier together? Have I ever dropped in on you or bailed when you were little and needed a little guidance? Hell

no, never. Shit, it was me that showed you the line to take through the pier, and that worked out fine. So trust me on this on this one. You'll thank me later."

I was still hesitant. Though I'd seen oysters before, we didn't eat a lot of fish in my house, and downing the creature straight from the shell didn't seem wise. But it was Jack's place and he'd gone out of his way for me before, and so I closed my eyes and tilted my head back. The oyster water hit first. I chewed once on the meat and then swallowed gingerly. I'd expected to be sick. Instead, what lingered was the salt of the ocean exploding in my mouth. It was the taste of paddling out into a set and diving beneath an oncoming wave, surfacing outside with the entire ocean there in front of me and a day's worth of waves rolling in. Larry hadn't touched his, so I took his too. Salt and flesh swam down my throat and into my stomach. Jack grasped my shoulder and gave it a tight squeeze and I felt the earth shift beneath my feet. The future I'd imagined disintegrated and a fresh new life rose from that oyster like a budding pearl—and on the horizon, a single black knoll formed and swept east across the span of the Pacific

Chapter 2: Wind and Sea

February 2007

In the late afternoon, when the sun begins its descent over the boarding houses and tough projects spread for miles to the west of Palermo, a light breeze moves in from the harbor down through the capital and follows the cascade of shade darkening Buenos Aires. The heat dissipates as the blanket covers the streets and I rise from my desk and leave the apartment and walk the three blocks to my local market.

It is an unremarkable shop. Outside a man guards the front door. He is no older than twenty-five and his black and white uniform wears him, wrinkled and stained. He regards me with disdain and chews on a toothpick as I file past him into the cool, stale air of the store. Three slim aisles occupy most of the space inside, each lined with the customary canned goods; beans, soup, bland cooked vegetables, pasta, and that omnipresent reminder of the States, Chef-Boyardee. Against the back wall is a glass display case. Long uncut beef tenderloins, entire shoulder blades, and fat glassy livers lie against each other on a cold metal sheet tray.

The butcher stands to the side. He is an elderly bald man with a boxer's nose. Music plays behind him from a small stereo, the sounds barely reaching beyond the counter. He continues whistling to himself as if I am not there and he is alone with the dead he presides over.

“Three fingers,” I say and motion to the strip loin. “From the rear.”

He stops his whistling but does not speak. I watch him take a thirty pound piece of meat out from the case and place it gently against his cutting board. The store sells only a handful of fresh vegetables and its canned goods are unappealing,

but this man refuses to butcher any meat before it is ordered. It is the reason I go there. The belligerent pride he takes in the meat and his deft care have made me a loyal customer.

He runs his pudgy hand over the top side of the meat, the creamy fat aged almost to the point of mold. The knife slides through without resistance and he tosses a cut exactly three fingers deep onto the scale. He wraps up the steak and hands me the package and puts the remaining meat back on the metal sheet tray. His whistling commences as I walk to the front of the store and the register, the loin nestled in my palm.

The lamplight across the street has been lit. It is an orange ball, fluorescent, and long ago lost of its sheen, barely illuminating the ground beneath. I take the long way home, back passed the park. During the day young couples crowd the grass banks of the manmade pond and lie in the sun. Joggers, bicyclists, roller skaters, old couples exercising their atrophied limbs, circle the pond. There is a stand where bikes are rented by the hour, and bottled water can be bought before you work out, and gelatos for afterwards. These people have all dispersed. In their place are young women with fake breasts and skin-tight mini skirts. Boys dressed like women, some fixed to become women, stand aside them. Their pimps lean into the shaded windows of parked taxis, exchanging money. The pond, which during the day is a sharp clear blue and emanates life, is now dark and murky. Thin streams of light waver slightly at the edge as the last remnants of the waves created by the withdrawn paddleboats lap against the banks.

By the time I am home the sun has set over the city. Lights are on in all of the apartments in the building across the street. I open the shades and sliding glass door to the balcony and let in the thinned air. I fire up the broiler and unwrap the steak. The walk home around the lake has taken thirty minutes, enough to let the city heat and the warmth of my hands bring the meat to temperature. Its beautiful marbled streaks of fat that run through it are not hard and sinuous, but feel more like butter.

Next to my desk is a bamboo wine rack. Thirty bottles are set in three vertical rows and I flip through them until I come to the one I was looking for. Bodega Lagarde, a nicely aged Malbec. I uncork it and pour some into a bulbous wine glass and put both glass and bottle out on the balcony table. The broiler is at full blast and I take a copper pan down from the rack above the stove and place the steak in it. I dust the meat with a fine layer of salt and pepper and drizzle on oil and slide the pan just beneath the high flame.

My balcony is fifteen floors above the street and from here I can see a dozen apartment buildings just as high scattered throughout my barrio. The view of each divulges the different existences within them. There is one that flanks the park and pond, far off enough that I cannot glimpse inside the windows. It has a long cantilevered roof which, during the day, is fully congregated. At midday I watch bodies moving quickly along it, people distinguishable only as small dark dots jumping in and out of sight. I imagine there is a pool on top of the building and that the children on summer vacation from the private schools they attend during the fall and winter spend hours each day in the clean air above the streets, dashing about in the cool water.

The steak sizzles on my plate, the natural sugars of the meat caramelized from the high heat. It's large, close to a pound and a half, and fat and blood run over the plate's lip onto the placemat. The wine is smooth and velvety and I pour myself another glass. The cheap wooden balcony table is where I eat most of my dinners. It is too quiet inside my apartment, too stuffy from the filtered air conditioning unit that runs throughout the day. I never have company over and here, though the noise from the streets, the incessant honks and yells from trucks and busses and taxis, diminishes as it climbs the glass windows of my building, it is a comfort to know that I am not alone.

In between bites of rare meat, I survey the lit windows of the building directly across from me. It is not nearly as upscale as the one near the park. The enormous vents at its base spit dirt and grime almost halfway to the top. I face its back side and on many of the balconies are clotheslines held taut by nails and rusted spikes driven into the stone wall. Green plastic pots hold small plants. On one is a blow-up wading pool next to a stroller.

Ten or so flights up, lives a couple and an elderly mother. The mother removes herself to the balcony long after dusk and sits in her chair for hours and knits. I think she works on the same blanket every night. Inside the apartment the couple quickly washes dishes and then turns on the television. At some point the man moves over on the couch just beyond the glass door and fondles his wife. If she's lucky, he'll spread her legs and kneel between them for three or four minutes before leading her to the bathroom where they continue with the window open to the night air and the water at full blast. On particularly muggy nights, when there hasn't been

rain for days and the air is thick and sounds carry over space with increased clarity, I can hear her yells and moans. The mother doesn't hesitate in her knitting, never knocks on the wall or window, and the husband and wife carry on as if she's not there. Each additional moan or grunt leads me to believe, or hope, she is deaf. Yet, I derive some pleasure from these moments. It has been a long time since I made a woman cry out like that. Towards the end of our marriage, Maria and I rarely had sex, and when we did, it was not with such passion and abandon.

Three stories above them is another family. It is a young family, a husband and wife, and three small children of various ages. They eat earlier than most, at seven or eight o'clock. The children are all old enough to feed themselves and have good manners. Each night they gather around a small table pushed close to the window, the father at the head and the mother next to the youngest one, and take each other's hands and say grace. The two boys do not peek up while they pray, do not reach for the bowls of food scattered before them until their parents have raised their heads. They dine with the balcony door shut so I'm unable to hear them. But if I too am eating at the moment they bow their heads, I stop what I am doing and mouth my own prayer.

Loving Mother of the Redeemer,
Gate of heaven, star of the sea
Assist your people
Who have fallen yet strive to rise again.
To the wonderment of nature you bore your Creator,
Yet remained a virgin after as before.
You who received Gabriel's joyful greeting,
Have pity on us, poor sinners.

For the blessings you've bestowed upon this home and on this family,
For the joys and sorrows that bind us ever closer,
For the trials we've overcome,

And for teaching us that we can do no great things,
Only small things with great love,
Lord, we thank you.

It is the prayer my mother used to say before dinner. I am no longer a believer. I have not been to a church service in over thirty years, since just after my father left, but watching the family eat together, taking time out of whatever it is they do during the day to sit down together and enjoy each other's company over food, I often think of my mother. The first rule she made upon losing her husband was that every night we would eat together as a family. No matter what I was doing and where I was, if the surf was tremendous or if Larry had swung two girls my way, dinner was on the table at seven and I was to be there.

And it was not just I that joined her. My best two friends, Larry and Eric, were often there as well. Both boys came from households where they were either unwanted or would rather not have been. Larry's step-father was a bad drunk and his mother complicit in his behavior, and when, after the first night Larry ate with us, he continued showing up a half hour before dinner was served to help my mother with anything that she needed done, we did not have to ask why he no longer ate with his real family.

Eric lived four blocks from our house towards University Town Center. He was a kind boy with a soft look to him which made him seem mysterious, an unassuming quality only heightening his good looks. Girls adored him, as did my mother, who, in light of the hatred Eric's father held for him, thought his perpetual politeness encouraging. Mr. Shaw had returned a year before, in the spring of 1975, from his third tour in Vietnam and had immediately taken offense to the surf culture

predominating San Diego. “You look like a sissy,” I heard him yell to Eric once. “Long hair is for girls and gooks. Which are you, you shit?”

My mother had kept her own opinion of Mr. Shaw to herself until one afternoon she drove by the Shaw household and witnessed the two having it out on the front yard. That night she asked Larry and me to extend a dinner invitation to Eric whenever he felt like coming. “That’s not what you boys need,” she said to us, shaking her head with doubt as she passed Larry a bowl of coleslaw. “That’s just not how it ought to be done.”

She didn’t offer more of what she’d seen than her response, but I didn’t need to ask what the scene had looked like. It was old news to Eric’s friends. He never let on to us that his father beat him, but each of us had stories where Mr. Shaw’s violent temper amplified our suspicions.

The worst outbreak I can remember occurred maybe a year after Mr. Shaw’s arrival stateside. Eric and I had met a couple friends for a session up the coast at Leucadia. The swell had been shoulder high and the lineup was bare, only a few locals and the four of us surfing until noon. It had been a good morning. I’d always enjoyed that break, the thrill of swinging my board around and shooting down the line towards the cove and the high rugged cliffs spotted with cacti and dead brush towering over the expanse.

Mr. Shaw saw us pull up curbside and stormed out the front door. Neither of us knew what to expect—though now, I think Eric must have guessed what he’d do. Eric’s father wore crisp slacks and a tight-fitting white t-shirt. Without uttering a sound he reached into the back of my car and grabbed Eric’s nine-foot, single fin

G&S. The board caught on the back seat of the car and Mr. Shaw ripped it out viciously. Walking away from us, I was struck by how hobbled his gait looked. At first I considered it must have been the result of a war injury that I hadn't noticed before, but as the gait became more pronounced I realized it wasn't an injury at all. An immense anger consumed Mr. Shaw and his body vibrated and shook from within, causing him to jerk back and forth, almost in a gallop, over the trim grass of the front yard to the foot of the date palm that stood, solitary, as a single marker of freely growing life amid the manicured grass, covering half the yard in shade. He fondled the board, securing his grip around the tail end and the fin and smashed it against the tree trunk. A loud crack sounded and Mr. Shaw swung again. The fiberglass splintered and the board broke in two and the nose fell to the ground. Mr. Shaw dropped the half he held beside it and retreated inside the house.

It took Eric a minute to leave the car, but he did, finally, and I watched him lurch across the same stretch of grass his father's feet had pounded upon. His shoulders were hunched and he seemed physically defeated. The two halves of the board, before a brilliant yellow, were muddled in Eric's hands, clumps of dead leaves and dirt stuck to the thick layers of wax. Eric carried each broken piece away and disappeared around the side of the house. The date palm stood as if untouched, the rough modulations of its leaves intact, a grim presage of what lay ahead.

And so it came to be that my father's role in the house was replaced by two seventeen-year-old boys. Neither my mother nor I wanted any more contact with him than was absolutely necessary, and it was difficult getting him to give more than the

measly alimony they'd agreed upon so that general maintenance around the house could be properly done. It was in these chores that Eric and Larry earned their keep.

Larry, though only seventeen, looked closer to twenty-five, and his hulking muscles and rough-hewn jaw were built for the gridiron and the defensive back position he played with ferocious intensity on our school team. The position and its implicit violence suited Larry, who might have had a mean streak otherwise. But with my mother, he was nothing but helpful and giving. If there was heavy lifting to be done, a busted fridge replaced or a tree stump uprooted, Larry set himself to the job immediately. While Eric and I were by no means helpless, we'd grunt and struggle through these labors as Larry calmly carried the brunt of the weight.

Near dusk my mother would come outside to where we were raking the ground for a small, tight flower patch and tell us to come in and wash up—dinner was on the table. Once we crossed the threshold we were greeted by the familiar warmth of my mother's food and the soothing aroma of roasted meats, their bloody juices and fat already running.

Dinner was never fancy. My mother did not have a taste for the more eclectic foods that enamor me now. Everything, though, was made by hand and from scratch. No frozen dinners emerged from her oven. It wasn't until I had my own family did it dawn on me why this was the case. She could have easily bought TV dinners and pre-cooked meals and we never would have objected. Instead she spent the better part of her afternoons preparing supper for three boys, and it was because she genuinely loved each of us, and thought, for different reasons, we deserved, at the very least, as much love and company as she could grant.

And so, what we found spread on the table was pork loin with apples, roasted chicken with snap beans, broiled steaks with mashed potatoes and gravy—always a meat, a starch, and a vegetable. A well-balanced meal, she'd have told you, was how you were supposed to feed growing boys.

Though she was aware that she was the only observing Christian at the table, she'd take the hand of each boy sitting beside her, close her eyes, and tilt her head forward. We followed suit and listened to her steady voice as she recited the prayer I'd heard so many times before when it had been just she and I, waiting, always waiting, for my father to appear. She blessed the food, blessed us, and asked for His forgiveness and His watchful eye.

The routine changed one night during my senior year. It was April, 1976, and we were graduating from high school in less than two months. The previous winter, we'd planted a small lemon tree in the backyard overlooking the canyon and it had begun to bear fruit. Dinner was a pair of roasted chickens with peas and bacon and new potatoes. Two lemon meringue pies awaited us in the refrigerator.

“And teaching us that we can do not great things, only small things, with great love. Lord, we thank you. Amen.”

The split chickens lay in a pool of viscous liquid. I sliced off a breast for my mother and the rest of us took half a bird each and spooned potatoes and peas to the side. Larry stood up and circled the table, pouring the leftover juices from the empty platter over each of our plates.

“Eric,” my mother began, “I ran into your mother today at the store.”

“Yes,” he said, with customary politeness.

“She and I got to talking. I understand that you have some news. Have you told the others?”

Larry grabbed a leg from his plate in one hand and chewed off the dark meat at the knuckle, peering at Eric out of the corner of his eye. Eric continued to cut his chicken into bite-sized pieces.

“I thought so,” said my mother. “Do you want me to do it for you?”

“No,” said Eric.

“Well then.”

“My father went down to the harbor last week and met up with a few buddies from Nam. One of them’s a big shot on a destroyer. They got to talking and end of story, my father signed me up for one of the ships.”

“Did he ask you about this beforehand?” I asked. Eric didn’t answer. “Why would he do that?”

“Who knows? It doesn’t matter now, does it? He says that I can’t live under his roof anymore once school’s out and since I’m not going to college it’s the right thing to do.”

“Fuck him,” said Larry. My mother immediately gave him a stern look.

“I don’t know. You’re probably right, Larry. But I can’t do anything about it. I’ve got no place to live come July. Might as well. Go see something new.”

“Doesn’t your dad know the war’s over?” Larry asked.

Eric chuckled and forked a couple chunks of potato. “Not to my dad it’s not.”

“I’m sure you’ll visit interesting places,” said my mother, smiling unconvincingly as she pushed some peas around her plate with her fork.

I turned from my mother to Eric. Nothing in his demeanor had changed. Pale blonde hair swept beneath his brow and covered half his face. His head was tilted towards the table, eyes down, just as my mother had been moments before. It occurred to me I had seen that same dispassionate impression upon his face before, when he'd carried the broken halves of his yellow G&S to the trash behind his house.

After a while, Eric spoke. "I'll sure miss this food, though, Ms. Richards. I can't imagine I'm going to get a square meal like this every night on some ship. That dried potato stuff's gonna run right through me."

We all laughed. We boys laughed because we were too young and naïve to emit any other emotion. My mother laughed to hide her fear for the boy and for herself. Quite soon she would be losing two of her boys. Until that night, of the three of us, only Larry had made any plans for the coming fall. San Diego Mesa College had given him some money to play football. Practice started the first of July, about the same time Eric was due to ship off. I would be the only one left.

At the request of my mother, I'd secured a part-time job. It was as a deliveryman for an upscale flower shop in La Jolla called Adelaide's. Even then I knew it didn't hold much of a future. But the future was something I hadn't given much thought to. I'd assumed that Eric would find similar work and we'd still get together daily. As far as I knew, I was going to be able to get in a session in the morning and be at work by ten. When it was over I'd pick up Eric at whatever job he'd scrounged up and my mother would cook us dinner. Time would pass and money would be earned and the routine of life would remain the same.

What I didn't know was that Eric would never set foot on that destroyer, and that as a circuitous result of his fate, I would leave San Diego behind for university in Madison. The rush of waves overhead, the ocean and the salt, and the buoyancy afforded to those of us who cohabited with the seals and the sharks and otters and dolphins, it would all be replaced by a bitter chill and massive banks of white snow and a furious wind rushing up through the streets of the capital, bearing with it ice and sleet from the frozen lakes that encircled the town. And that by the end of the school year I would be a line cook at *The Ovens of Brittany*.

* * * * *

This I remember. Adelaide's flower shop. Late June, 1976. An ornate arrangement of trimmed yellow daisies spouted up from a bed of bear grass, as if held up by a gentle wind. An innocent silence broken by the clamor of a phone in the back room. The boss called my name.

"Larry," I said, "they don't like it when you call me here."

"Cool it, Shane. They're not going to fire you for using the phone. Anyways, I've got something that's gonna make your day. Chuck's having a party on his boat tonight."

"You sure?"

"Called me himself. Said a bunch of the dancers from his dad's club are going to be there. You know how those parties get." I could hear Larry's breathing through the receiver, his excitement barely contained.

"Come pick me up after work and we'll grab dinner with your mom and then head over. I'll call Eric, so he knows what to expect."

“What about Chuck’s cousin? Is he going to be there?”

“No worries there, Shane. Chuck said it’s all good. That’s why I’m calling Eric, to tell him everything’s smooth.”

My boss reentered, carrying an oblong wooden crate filled with purple lilies. His arms and upper body strained from the weight of the crate and blood left his usually ruddy cheeks like a fading rose. He put the crate in front of me and raised his eyebrows at the phone in my hand. Looking over the arrangement of daisies, he ran his fingers gingerly across the bear grass and smiled. The daisies were much lighter in his arms as he left.

“Sounds good, Larry. I’ve gotta run.”

I hung up the phone and gazed at the breadth of purple lilies before me, the white base of the petals barely visible.

Dinner that night was fried chicken and creamed corn. I still see it clearly because of how the night ended. For years I wished that my mother had seen through our tranquil façade and had asked us to remain in the house, had given us some chore to occupy ourselves for the night. But instead we helped her clear the table and when the door shut behind us she was sitting down to watch one of her TV shows.

Chuck’s boat was docked at Shelter Island in Point Loma. The city and its brimming high-rises flanked the opposite side of the harbor. His father ran a strip club on the south side of town called *Little Darlings* and had done well since opening it up when we were in junior high. None of us believed the money that had bought

the boat and paid for the lavish parties both father and son threw was legit, but it was the seventies and cocaine and heroin had already arrived at the beaches.

We parked my car a couple hundred yards down from the boat in the lot that stretched to the point and beyond. The air was cool and still at night by the water and as we walked through the parking lot we could hear the ripples lap against the shore. Larry had gotten a hair cut that afternoon in preparation for the girls and spoke grandly.

“You know what you should do, Eric. Take that ship for all it’s worth. You should ride that ship across the Pacific and the first exotic place you anchor, someplace like Tahiti or Fiji or some shit like that, you should jump ship. I don’t care if you have to dive overboard, you jump ship and swim to the beach. Find some island girl and drink beers in the sun and surf. That’d be the life, right? Just surfing a no-name break in the middle of god-knows-where with your bunny waiting at your place on the beach ready to hound you once you’re done.”

“For sure,” said Eric.

“Hell, even Australia’d be okay. Or Hawaii.”

Eric didn’t respond and Larry continued talking himself through Eric’s future desertion. I wondered if a similar plan had already arisen within Eric. The slim beach gave way to a rocky landing and we arrived at the boat. The party was in full swing. Fluorescent lights dangled over the stern, highlighting the stenciled *Venus di Milo*. Fifteen or twenty people congregated on the gangway and the deck was packed tight. Chuck was leaning over the side with one arm wrapped around an attractive

brunette, grasping a bottle of champagne with the other. When he saw us board, he called out.

“Boys! There you are. I wasn’t sure if you’d make it.”

“Wouldn’t miss this,” said Larry, careening his head back and forth at the scantily dressed bodies displaced, as if picked out from some pubescent fantasy, from the baby oil and beer soaked hardwood stage of *Little Darlings* and dropped within our reach.

“Hey,” said Larry, pointing at a thin girl with wide hips and a fire-red bandana sash pulling back her hair. “Isn’t that Elizabeth—Elizabeth Cutter?”

“Sure is. She came up to me at graduation saying she needed money. But you’ll see more of her later. Let’s get you guys something to drink.”

We followed him past a collection of shirtless men, hair bustling about on their chests and girls tracing circles in the follicles’ foliage with pointed purple nails. The doorway was blocked by a redhead wearing only her bikini bottom. Her back was to us, and when Chuck caressed her from behind she turned and gave him a wicked smile. In her arms she carried a silver platter, much like those that would be carried at fine restaurants. This one, though, was fake, and what it held were twenty lines of coke. Approaching Eric she chomped on a piece of gum and let him see her tongue, and held out the coke for him to take. Chuck passed him a rolled up bill and Eric lowered his head next to her small, firm breasts, and blew two lines. Our host asked if Larry and I wanted some, but we both declined. Larry had practice soon and wasn’t sure if he’d be tested and I, well, I hadn’t yet gained a taste for cocaine.

The interior of the cabin was the epitome of what one would expect a stripper and drug dealer's boat to look like. This was before Hollywood glamorized the lifestyle, but Chuck and his father were certainly taking cues from someone. It was exactly as we'd imagined, and just as surreal and fantastic. A long, plush couch decked out entirely in red velour ran the length of the perimeter. Above the top of the couch was a mirror that not only covered what portion of the walls that were not red velour, but also covered the ceiling as well. Silver balls, like those of a vanity, outlined each glass section of the mirrors, so that the effect was dazzling, almost blindingly so, to your eyes. The reflection of the red of the couch and the white and silver of the mirror continued on in perpetuity. I wish I could say that it was the most tasteless and gaudy scene I have ever laid eyes on, but that would be a lie. It was, though, at that time, certainly a far cry from any of the house and beach parties I had previously attended.

From beneath one of the sections of couch Chuck slid out a drawer and withdrew a bottle of champagne, a few beers, and a bottle of tequila. "What'll you boys have. Anything you want. Cherry!" he yelled out the door to the deck. "Cherry, come on in here. And bring your friends."

"What's that, honey?"

"Get your ass in here!"

Cherry was wearing purple high-heels and had a tattoo of a teddy bear on her left ass cheek that danced as she sauntered across the room. She glanced at each of us and then sat down between Eric and Chuck and massaged Eric's chest through his shirt. Chuck passed Larry and me beers and got up to go find some more girls. He

hadn't been gone but a minute or two when four Chicanos bowed down underneath the doorway and entered.

“Go suck some other homes dick, Cherry,” said the one in front, Chocho. “Sit down, Larry, or I'll cut you like I'm gonna cut your friend here.” Chocho's three friends flanked him and kept their eyes on Larry and myself.

“What did I tell you, Eric, about staying away from our women. I told you they were off limits to fucking gringos. So what do you do?” asked Chocho as he approached Eric, who was reclined on the plush couch in the corner, his eyes blank and subdued, almost lifeless. Chocho pulled from his back pocket a silver butterfly knife, flung it open, and pointed the blade at Eric. “You go and fuck Maria, and in her poor mother's house too! I tell now what's going to happen. I'm gonna slice your little pinto blanco off and toss it in the harbor. Then next time you won't have no pinto to stick inside sus chicas Mexicanas.”

Though I'd seen Larry sizing the four men up from his seat, I didn't know when he was going to strike, and he did it so quickly that it both shocked and stunned me. He leapt up and smashed the beer bottle into the side of Chocho's head and as the Chicano fell to the floor. Blood oozed from a gash beneath Chocho's hair, and Larry began pounding away at two of the remaining men. The third threw a wild punch that caught my jaw flush and I heard it crack and then the sound of shattering glass as my head crashed into the mirror behind me. Before Eric got to my help, I glimpsed the grit in the Chicano's face as he broke my nose. He would have done worse but Eric dashed across the room and, grabbing him by the back and shoulders, shoved him face first into the mirror. Shards lacerated his cheek and large ones stuck

out from his brow and when he fell to the floor I kicked him once in the head and watched a tooth scuttle across the carpet.

Chocho rose to his feet and steadied himself. The knife was still in his hand and he charged Eric. Amid their scuffle I heard Eric cry out and stumble backwards. He grabbed at his left bicep and blood broke through the gaps between his fingers. I jumped towards them and tackled Chocho. The knife fell and I cuffed him twice to keep him down before Eric pulled me off. Standing over him, Eric looked down at Chocho for a moment. I watched Eric intensely as all his sensitivity and compassion and genuine kindness—all the attributes my mother loved so dearly—dispersed into the room, flew from him and into the violence-soaked couches and the broken vanity mirrors. Eric bent over and held up Chocho's bobbing head by the shirt collar. Eric beat Chocho until the Chicano's head lay limp and I could barely see the true color of his skin and Eric's hand was almost black.

Larry had dealt with the other two handily, though he'd been hit in the eye and it was already starting to swell. We exited the room, weary of any other friends Chocho could have had around. Larry grabbed a couple cold beers for our faces and hands. Chuck was nowhere to be found, though we didn't look very hard. The party on the deck stopped the moment we reemerged, blood-soaked and shirts tattered and torn. As I tread down the gangway, Eric found the cocktail waitress and obliged himself more lines. The last I saw of the *Venus di Milo*, before Larry and I jogged down the parking lot to my car, was the bony bare backs of a half dozen second-rate strippers peeking into the orgy room at the devastation we'd left.

The bug sputtered at first and then we picked up speed and flew down Rosecrans away from Point Loma and towards home. Larry spun in his seat and gave Eric's arm a look. "You sure you don't want us to take you to the hospital? That doesn't look too serious, but it's deep enough."

"I'll be fine," said Eric. "If I need anything, my father can take care of it."

The rest of the ride was a blur. I navigated Highway 5 with the concentration of a drunk, swerving from lane to lane as the pounding in my head rose. For a moment, though, I remember feeling the inside of Larry's thumb and forefinger kindly trace the length of my nose, caressing the bone, testing to see that I had set it right. Then the memory spins loose.

We dropped Eric off at his father's place that night. I know this because my mother woke me up the following afternoon asking if I'd been out with Eric the night before. Still in a daze, I told her we'd dropped him off. Later, though, I never did regain the memory of seeing him exit my car, maybe shaking my hand or giving us a sly wink, some small indication that he valued us as much as we did him. I've conjured that image over time, as I refuse to remember Eric as a fiend standing over Chocho, allowing his purity to seep out, or as I saw him for the final time, laid out as a beautiful and unmarked boy, bound only by the soft white interior of his coffin.

Different stories traveled through the beach communities. News of the fight emerged quickly and a lot of people thought Eric's drowning at Wind 'N Sea was retribution for the drubbing we'd given Chocho. But when I strode by Eric's father at the funeral, sitting beside Eric's mourning mother, I glimpsed the truth within his immaculate posture and pressed suit, bleeding forth from his precious bravado. The

beating Eric had received wasn't a result of the wave that struck him down nor those that crashed over him relentlessly until morning when the first pack of Wind 'N Sea locals spied his board in the shallows wedged between the rocks.

I've always hoped Eric had been too high to feel the pounding pressure of the salt water flood his throat and lungs; that he was already unconscious, dead even, by the time his wave threw him face first into the cold black mass of ocean water. The real question, though, the one I was asked constantly that summer—as no one but myself was convinced of his father's guilty role—was whether or not he'd jumped. Anybody in the county could have told you that surfing Wind 'N Sea in the dark was suicide, and as a skilled surfer, Eric knew that more than most.

Did it matter then whether or not he bit it on purpose, if, in reality, there was little chance he'd survive any wave he caught? There were countless other breaks for him to have surfed that night, ones not nearly as epic and famous for double-overheads and furious tides either sucking you out to sea or dashing you against the maze of jagged rocks and boulders at the foot of the cliffs. He picked Wind 'N Sea, and because he did, his fate was sealed the minute he jumped over my fence to borrow my board, while I lay dead to the world under my covers on the other side of the glass pane. So, did it matter if he'd taken a dive on purpose or had merely succumbed to forces unseen?

I asked myself this each time I went surfing that summer. Larry had already left for school and football and I surfed alone. Getting outside was the toughest. Approaching an oncoming wave, I'd grab the sides of my board and turn turtle and let whitewater run over the slick bottom of my board. For moments my back was turned

to the ground below and I was laid out in full beneath the board, its length striking out any view I might have had. It was during these brief respites in darkness that I felt closest to Eric and let the thunder and roar of the ocean engulf me. My mouth flooded with water and I closed my eyes and tasted the salt and seaweed and dirt and grime and the oysters and I tasted the cold of bereavement. The wave passed and I flipped over and was back looking out at the gray gloss of the ocean receding in the horizon and the gray haze immersing the sun. I shook the water from my hair and spit out the dregs of death.

This link between surfing and Eric, even the oysters, nagged at me, and I couldn't rid myself of the guilt and failure I felt as his friend for inadequately helping him. I went as far as to write as such. After Eric's death my mother had convinced me to take summer school at University of San Diego, hoping I might be persuaded to enroll in junior college in the fall. The class I signed up for was English, and some time in late July, my professor asked us to write a couple thousand words about San Diego and what it meant to us as a place. I hadn't put much effort into any of the previous assignments, but each night that week after dinner, I'd clear the table and take out my pen and pad of paper and start to write. It wasn't until the third night of crossing out entire pages of worthless descriptions of the canyons and surfing and Eric that I realized what hampered my vision of San Diego was not my grip on the story but the perspective. I'd internalized so much that *I* was the problem. I began afresh and four days later walked into the classroom and placed a handwritten, twenty-two page short story, "Turning Turtle," on my professor's desk.

The following week, as my classmates were packing up and making their way out the door, the professor called me over to his desk. I watched as the final students filed out and Lee, as I came to know him, snapped the latch on his satchel.

“I’m walking over to the pool and hoped you’d walk a minute with me.”

“Sure,” I said.

“Good.” Lee Gerlach was tall with broad shoulders and a trim graying mustache. Instead of making him look older, the deep lines already set on his tanned brow and cheeks gave him an air of elegance and aristocracy. He was a handsome, middle-aged man and he smiled broadly at me and, putting his hand on my shoulder, said, “Follow me.”

We exited the building and turned down the path towards the white stucco gymnasium.

“Have you swam in the pool here before, Shane?”

“No, sir. I haven’t.”

“It’s an Olympic-sized pool, and just as good as any of those they’re using in Montreal right now.” Lee paused to greet another professor and I waited by his side until their brief conversation was over, wondering what I had done to pique his interest.

“I only ask,” he began, once we’d resumed our walk, “because of the story you wrote last week. You took some liberties with the assignment, in writing a piece of fiction instead of something more journalistic, like your classmates did.”

“If what I wrote was wrong. I—”

Lee laughed. “It wasn’t wrong at all. In fact, I very much enjoyed the conceit. More importantly, you told a good story. I wouldn’t have asked you to walk with me if I thought otherwise. I take it you are Danny, though, yes?” When I didn’t answer he continued. “Your friend who died, Samuel, I read about his drowning in the paper last month. I was sorry to hear about it then, and even more so now. But that’s not why I wanted to talk to you.”

“Why is it then, sir?”

“When I was your age I was living in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. I missed the end of the war by a couple of years, but lost a brother to it. Growing up we were both strong swimmers and he was swimming at University of Wisconsin when he signed up and left. The coach had become close with my family and after Luke was killed and it was time for me to go to college, Coach Niebold gave me a scholarship to swim on the same team my brother had. It meant a lot to me to swim laps in the same pool Luke had. Pity might have been a factor at the outset, but I’d earned that scholarship by the time I was done. And being there to swim gave me an opportunity I might not have taken up if it had not been for Coach.”

We arrived at the pool, a luminous turquoise reflection bordered by terracotta tiles and sandstone. It was the largest pool I’d ever seen before and those swimming laps looked majestic within its light. Lee stopped by a chair and put down his bag and removed his shoes. The sun burned down on the stone and tile and the shirtless lifeguard at one end and looking at it all I wished I’d known about the pool before and had brought trunks.

“What I’m getting at, Shane, is this: The way you treated the ocean in your story intrigued me. For me, water always signified a kind of movement, a place where I could bend time, even if only fleetingly. There’s the natural flow of water which we all adhere to, physically moving us from place to place, and then for some of us, anyone with an intimate personal connection, there’s another temporal function. It has the power of carrying us back and forth through time. And I think you approached that with more skill than I’d previously thought you capable of. What you wrote shows a significant amount of promise. It needs work, though, but so do most things you read nowadays. But the work it requires reaches beyond what you and I could do together over the course of the summer. I’m going to assume that you, like Danny, do not have plans for college?”

“I hadn’t given it a lot of thought,” I said, and then hesitated before continuing. “My mother had me take this class hoping that I would go to school. Maybe junior college in the valley. See how it goes.”

Lee pulled off his slacks, revealing a pair of red trunks. He took off his shirt and arched his back and closed his eyes, letting the sun bear down on him. The hairs on his chest were white and bleached.

“Well, you should think about it,” he said suddenly, opening his eyes and peering at me. “Because that’s what I’m offering. I don’t hold a lot of sway here, and I’m not even sure if staying in San Diego is what you really want or need. Of course, I don’t know you from Adam and this might all be me being too forthcoming and rude or maybe I’ve read you incorrectly and you are right; college is not a place for you. But I’m willing to bet that given the chance, you’d work for it as I did.”

“Sorry, but I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“Here’s my offer. You work hard in my class for the rest of the summer, and you work on your story on the side, and I might be willing to send a good word to some people I know in Wisconsin and you could enroll there in the fall. I still have a lot of ties to some people at the university who could get someone in, if need be.”

“Wisconsin?”

“Indeed. The cheese state.”

“Why would I go to Wisconsin?”

“That,” Lee said and chuckled, “is for you to decide.” The professor stretched his arms over his head and to the side. He was still fit and the muscles of his back defined, and had I seen him at the Shores I would’ve taken him for a lifelong surfer rather than a swimmer from Oshkosh.

“That’s it, Shane. Think about it. Even if you decide against taking my offer, I hope you’ll come and see me about your story.” Lee bent down and pulled my story from his satchel and handed it to me. Red slashes, crosses, and circles lit the top page. Notes were scribbled over the entirety of the script. “Now, I’ve got to get my hundred laps in. I’ll see you next week.” Before he dove in the water he turned to me from afar and yelled, “Don’t take the markings to heart.”

Though I did work with Lee for the remainder of the summer and finally asked him to use whatever connections he had in Wisconsin to secure a spot for me in the fall, it wasn’t until the day I left that I truly thought I would go through with the move. Early that morning I drove to La Jolla Shores and sat on the boardwalk wall

and listened to the surf break beyond the barrier of fog and then, when a faint glow emerged, watched the fog burn. My feet rested beneath the sand and I picked up two handfuls and, making a fist, let the grains fall in a long smooth stream from the opening at the base and catch the wind and carry away.

The sun rose overhead and the waves died down. Surfers paddled in, dried off, and stowed their wetsuits and boards. Families arrived with beach blankets and Styrofoam coolers. Children dragged body boards over the sand and tossed footballs to one another. Beach bunnies sauntered along the edge of the water and every so often peered out at the remaining surfers. The air smelt of salt and seaweed and the way the sun warmed the layer of sand over my feet tickled the tips of my toes. Beneath my soles, the ground was cold.

I watched a husband and wife take their young child to the water. He was a couple of years old and wore only a diaper and a round sailor's cap. Each parent held one of the boy's hands and steadied him on the wet bank. A wave rolled in and they enthusiastically pointed out the oncoming whitewater and as it approached told the child to watch out, watch out, and then swung him up over the thin sheet that ran up the beach. Floating two feet off the ground the boy stared down at the tide sucking the water out from under him and giggled and laughed. The parents let him down and the father took a knee and pointed once again out into the ocean and explained to him the perpetuating force of blue and white and gray.

What it must have been like for those first Americans who arrived at the Pacific. They'd rushed west for something better and new, and even if California had delivered on that promise, they must've realized they'd come as far as they could go.

It was as if the Pacific itself—its waves and rocks and fog and jetties and currents—was turning them back. The ocean allowed us to play at its feet and to point out into the deep, but nothing more. It was a flat, grim vision of the rest of an unattainable planet.

I thought of my father and couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him at the beach. He must have seen so little in me and my life. We of boundless youth identified with the ocean and tried to cascade along it, while those like my father and Eric's, hating us so, condemned our behavior as childish and ignorant. They looked out at the sea and envisioned their ends, the brink over which they could not propel themselves, while we saw a chance for greatness; a greatness which had somehow disappeared within me, and I was left solely with the desire to head out, to break free of this grip that San Diego and the ocean and Eric had on me. Since there was nowhere to travel to the west, I would travel east, to Wisconsin—and why not? To that point my only forays from California were to the casinos of Nevada and campsites in Arizona. Why did Wisconsin hold such a bitter taste in my mouth, as if I could tell the difference between it and Northern California? Or New York or Boston, for that matter?

And so I fled from La Jolla Shores, fled in my Bug already packed with clothes and wares, to my mother's house on the edge of our canyon, to say my farewell before sentiment and, maybe, better judgment could take hold. By hour's end I was inland, already through the first gorge and driving amid a terribly arid landscape. The ocean and the cities dotting the coast were to my back, and all of the rest of that unimaginable country—the prairies, deserts, metropolises, mountain

ranges, great lakes, the Atlantic—was glimpsed through my window like some mythic razing wildfire, just waiting for my arrival.

Chapter 3: Butter

March 2007

I wake in the dark, though I immediately know where I am. This is not always the case. I am in a large, cold apartment in Palermo, lying in my king size bed on the second floor of a duplex. The monotonous drone of the air conditioner, the first thing I hear upon awakening, helps, its rattle filling the space that I cannot see. My blanket has soaked up my night's sweat and stiffened and is frigid against my naked body, chills coursing through me.

I rouse myself from bed and walk downstairs and draw open the tall curtains to the balcony. Dim light reflects off the glass and metal of the surrounding buildings. Out on the horizon a blue and purple line of fire, like embers fed fresh kindling, creeps up into the wide expanse of black. Watching dawn slowly break, and the blue widen its reach over the whole of the city, I consider myself lucky for this sight, for bearing witness to the struggle of light reversing the order of things, enshrouding the dark.

The parquet floor in my living room is cold under my feet and I slip into my drawers and a pair of socks. I fill the bottom of the metal espresso pot with water, spoon two large mounds of dark coffee into the filter, and put it over a low flame. From the refrigerator I remove two pint jars of heavy cream and put them on the counter. The joints in my legs crack loudly as I bend down, the tendons pulling against each other from my hip all the way to my ankle, and the pressure does not cease until I've lifted the heavy electronic mixer from beneath the sink and put it

aside the cream. I wash the metal bowl out with water from the tap and slide it into place and plug the contraption into the wall socket. Cream gradually flows from the glass jars and emptying them both takes close to a minute. It is incredibly rich and thick, and when I stick my finger into one jar for a taste of what's left behind, the cream coats the finger completely.

I bought the cream yesterday from a Marinuella at the market in the Plaza Serrano. She does not sell cream or milk but instead homemade alfajores and dulce de leche. Her stall is a small table with a red cloth draped over the sides. On top are rounds of the alfajores, two sweet biscuits with a layer of dulce de leche sandwiched between them. There are dozens of them, each wrapped tightly in wax paper. The rest of the small table is filled with unmarked jars of the sweetened, reduced milk, the unctuous caramel glowing from within the glass jars. I carry a spoon with me on my trips to the market on Saturdays and eat through half a jar as I make my way back home through the one-way, pedestrian streets of Palermo.

Marinuella is very short and dark, with skin the color and texture of jerky. She is not originally from the city, but from out in the provinces, from the land. At barely eighteen, she married a neighboring farmer. But before the decade was out, her husband moved her into the city, the money he'd made from selling his stake in the family farm fresh and reeking of promise. This was over twenty years ago. But what he'd not already lost beneath the weight and lights of Buenos Aires, disappeared overnight just after the millennium when the country's economy crashed, and Marinuella now supports him. Her brother still resides on the farm and raises cattle and goats. Once every week he drives in to give her meat and milk so she has

something to cook and the husband has money to buy Quilmes. I've never seen him before at the market, the husband, but I see his type on every street, in every barrio, and he could be any of them.

I learned all this bit by bit in the months since I arrived. Marinuella is kind and shy and indigenous to the plains and many of the Portenos here are rude and indignant to her kind. But, I tell her every week, she makes the best alfajores in the city and dulce de leche that makes me want to sing to every passing young woman. She always smiles at this. Her tan cheeks redden and I look away while the pride swells gently within her.

A month ago I told her I greatly missed having fresh milk and cream, and asked if her brother would be willing to spare some of his own, that I would pay him for the trouble. At her stall yesterday she reached beneath the table, from within the shade of the cloth, and took out the two glass jars fitted tightly with plastic lids. *Crema*, she said, and handed them to me. Each one held two cups of immaculately white liquid. I tilted them in my hands and the contents circled the inside rim, slowly, like molasses. Her skin was crisp and golden in the strong glare of the afternoon and I bent forward across the table and gave her a kiss on each cheek. She blushed, unable to hide herself, and began to move things around on the table and stuff my regular order into a plastic bag.

Now there is a pool of fresh cream in a mixing bowl. It is only a couple of days old, and I have not had anything like it in the year since I left Italy. I lower the machine's whisk attachment and turn the lever on. It needs to be coaxed at first, caressed as one would a lover, and the whisk makes its revolutions slowly, so slow

that I can see each of the steady ripples and waves form and break around the crater in the center. The water sounds on the espresso pot, the steam rising up through the filter and into the second chamber. I take it off before the sputtering ceases and let it sit.

The cream gains in volume and raises to soft peaks, the point which Maria always preferred for her zabaglione. And now it is stiff, at which time my mother would stop the beating and spoon great dollops onto her lemon pies. I keep the machine on. The cream is still thick and glossy and I stick my finger in the bowl beside the quickly revolving whisk and beneath the fat of the unpasteurized cream there is a faint echo, a certain tanginess, which always makes me wonder if this is what milk tasted like when I was a baby, fed directly from the source.

The angular peaks break and the whole thing collapses in on itself. What was just moments ago clean and beautiful is gone, the crisp sheen crumbled. I turn up the speed and cover the top of the bowl with a layer of plastic wrap and wait for the moment when it will all separate, when the fat and liquid are beat out of each other. There is never any real warning. At one moment it is an ugly mess of pale yellow cream that looks like it has curdled in the heat, and then the next, it's solidified and a hundred lumps of golden butter dance in the wake. Buttermilk laps against the metal interior and sprays the plastic ceiling with its liquid. This is what I wait for. When it occurs I finish my espresso and turn off the mixer.

I put the bowl on the counter and with both my hands form the butter into a ball while it's still chilled. The warmth of my hands melts the outside layer as I squeeze it to rid the excess liquid. The ball is the size of a baseball and I roll it on the

cutting board, moving my hands along it, kneading it quickly. A small puddle forms beneath it as the butter firms and a layer of fat coats my hands and glistens.

I've cheated by using the mixer, I know, but this last part has to be done with my hands. Only they know when the liquid is all gone. When I've finished I divide the butter into two. I sprinkle coarse sea salt onto one and knead it again briefly. I place each ball on the corner of two layers of plastic and roll them up until I have two logs of butter, one for bread and one for cooking. I pour the buttermilk into a container and put them all in the fridge. Standing in the early gray light of morning, the sun not yet up over the city, but the gray blue of the sky foreshadowing its arrival, the light inside the refrigerator is almost blinding and peering at its contents, I feel a familiar and particular rush of heat moving within my sore and pulsating hands and arms, up through my shoulders and neck and throat and into my face, the whole of it reddening my cheeks.

Chapter 4: Madison

Fall 1976

My apartment was on the south side of campus in an old Victorian house overlooking Lake Monona. The exterior of the house had lost whatever charm it originally held to the elements years before, its white shingles oxidized and covered with grime. Moss and ivy spread uncontrollably in the summer and early fall, and in winter snow and rain water flooded the basement. The rooms inside had been cut off from one another with thin plaster walls and wooden doors so that what remained was a series of apartments rather than a house with an overlying sense of flow to its design. But I'd never lived on my own before and even though the apartment was nothing more than a single room with a pair of windows overlooking the driveway, it was as if a jolt of electricity shocked me each time I fit the key into the door and heard the lock turn over and my own, new home exposed.

The other residents were students at Wisconsin as well. All of them were from the Midwest and looked upon my tan skin and California tags in what I took to be jealousy when I first arrived. This changed, though, when Arctic chills descended in late October and I discovered the jacket my mother had bought me was not as suitable I'd hoped.

One day I arrived back from class and rushed to shut the house door behind me. I stamped my feet furiously against the floorboards of the foyer and blew into my hands for close to a minute, trying to regain their circulation so I could manage to fish the keys from my jacket. I felt like I was being watched, though, and turned to

find a young man standing behind me. He was about my age, with pale white skin and a thick brown beard speckled with red. In his right hand he held a hammer.

“I figured we could hang some things up here for you to use when you need them. We’ve all got extra coats lying around someplace and it’s going to get a lot colder than this when winter sets in.”

“This isn’t winter?” I asked.

“No,” he said and laughed before realizing that I was serious. Though I’d seen him many times before he’d always kept to himself during the week and was never around on the weekends when the rest of us in the house gathered in one or another’s room and drank beer and smoked dope. It was the first time we’d spoken more than a cursory hello, and I was taken aback.

“I’m Chris,” he said, and lay down the hammer along with a heavy looking piece of brass and stuck out his hand.

“Shane.”

“You’re the one with the Volkswagen convertible out there.”

“That’s right. That’s me.”

“Well, we’ll have to do something about that too. No way that’ll last the winter with the top as it is.”

He was, of course, right. It was not the first time somebody had pointed out the fact that a leaking, patched roof was not the ideal cover for the wind and snow of the Midwest.

“While you’re there, tell me if this is straight.” He set the piece of brass against the wall at eye level I saw it clearly for the first time. It was a small sculpture

of a bull's head, about the size of my fist. The piece was hand-wrought, the sharp linear angles of the skull clearly defined. A ring suspended from the tendon between the bull's nostrils. Its horns were thick and pointed at the tip and extended to the left and right far beyond the menacing and glaring eyes. It occurred to me then that the horns were to be the rungs from which the proposed jackets would hang.

"That's really something," I said. "Where'd you find it?"

"I made it," he said and pulled a nail out from behind his ear. At the base of the neck, where the spine would've begun had there been an entire brass cow, was a small hump with a hole bore out from it. Chris stuck the nail through the hole and hammered it into the wall. He did the same with another nail, punching it through a small slit at the bottom of cow's jugular. The cheap plaster and faded paint on the wall cracked as the bull's head pressed up securely against it.

"There," he said and took a few steps back, cocking his head to the side to make sure it was straight. "Now you just need a coat so we don't find you collapsed on some snow bank." He reached down to the floor and picked up a heavy wool jacket and hung it from one of the horns, tugging down on it a few times to gauge his work's functionality.

"Not bad. And you can still see the bull's face, too."

"Sure can. Thing's going to give me nightmares," I said, and then, afraid that I'd offended him, "but in a good way."

"Some dreams."

We stood there admiring the bull and how the light refracted through the front door window panes and caught each of the sharp angles of the jaw and cheek bones. I

liked it so much that I momentarily forgot about how nice it was going to be to feel warm once again.

“Is this what you do?” I asked.

“Some of it. Little trinkets like these I can weld from odds and ends I find on the farm. But mostly it’s bigger pieces. Not really stuff you’d hang a winter coat from.”

“You’re from a farm?”

“About thirty miles north of here.” He paused and looked me over. “I actually just got back from my parents’ spread a few minutes before you did. They always give me enough food to last the week. Nothing much really, just some milk and jerky and cheese, but if you’re hungry I’ll break it out.”

I ran through the list of canned soups and cheap bagged breads that lay in a pile in the corner of my room and quickly followed him down the under the staircase at the end of the foyer to his room. There was an insulated bag lying beside the door. He turned the key and picked up the bag. As we walked in, he asked, “I don’t suppose you’ve spent much time on a farm before, have you?”

“Chris, all of this is new to me,” I said and shut the door behind us.

Chapter 5: A Morning Walk

April 2007

This morning I walked down to the main thoroughfare, Avenida Santa Fe, and stood on the corner waiting for the light to change. The throng that congregates there never dissipates. There are buyers and sellers, hawkers and shoppers, homeless men, beggars, and thieves; families, generations of them, workers, and miscreants all waiting to cross the street, to sell you something, or to board any one of the countless busses that storm by all day long. Plastic bags from the shops that flank each side of the street, heavy and filled tight, strangle their arms and the shoulders of children—children of all ages, none of whom are where they really ought to be. Some of those around me are impatient to the busses and instead seem to wait for the day to end and turn over or maybe their wish is as simple as the desire for someone like me, an aged gringo, to come along.

I can taste the smell of exhaust, like corrosive metal to the tongue. It's thick and black and hangs about, great plumes of it hacked up by idling busses covering my summer shirt with a fine layer of grime. When the light finally turns red we all make our way quickly across the eight lanes. No one wants to be left behind, facing the lineup of cars already lurching at the crosswalks.

On the other side of the street I joined another rush of people along the sidewalk. Men and women—both—bumped into me as they scurried by. Bald spots of people half my size bounced beneath me as I was jostled out of the way with jagged elbows and round shoulders. Earlier on, unused to this abuse, I thought I was

being mugged by a gang from all sides. I learned quickly, though, it is just the Porteno way.

And besides, that is why I went to Avenida Santa Fe this morning. To be touched. To feel the physical touch of other human beings, to get their dirt and smell all over me. Their distaste for my Anglo blood, their impatience with the time of day, the heat, their lives, their inhospitably crude pushing and shoving, it all rubs off on me as I bound down the street like an oversized pinball, willingly letting them have their way with me. It's not how it always happens. Sometimes I retaliate with nudges, which are usually more than enough, or I take less frequented roads, but more often, it is the mere physicality, the sensuous feel of other people, of a society, I yearn for, and all the aggravated and excited passion she encompasses. It makes the thin stifled air cooling my apartment, the long line of books on my desk and their sad, worn bindings, the ruffled bedspread on the second floor overlooking the living room, and the well-worn lump on one side of the bed in which I, and only I, lay, it makes it all bearable.

I made it four blocks down towards the Palermo Gardens. Hundreds of stray cats congregate there in packs, terrorizing the birds that take sanctuary high up in the trees. A pair of nannies, each pushing a stroller, and followed by three toddlers in tow, walked underneath the bougainvillea draped entrance. One of the children carried a bag of crumbled bread and immediately broke from the pack and ran into the canopy of greenery to find animals to feed.

At the end of the block I spun on my heel and turned around. A man no older than myself, who'd been walking right on my tail, cursed my indecisiveness as we

brushed up against each other. The coarse hair on his arm, matted against his skin from the sweltering heat, lathered my open palm and its five extended fingers with such an agreeable amount of sweat. I smiled to myself, my curled lips clearing his eyes by a foot, and made my way back, letting myself be molested again by the crowd. .

Through the apartment door I could hear the phone ringing, its loud echo bouncing through the still open space. I put the key in my door and turned it, unlocking the latch. Inside I tossed the two papers down on the coffee table and went to the fridge and poured myself some of the grapefruit juice that I squeeze fresh each night before bed. On the tenth ring I picked up the phone.

“Si?” I said, expecting an automated female voice, preaching to me in Spanish the virtues of an up and coming politician.

“Shane, it’s Maria.”

I set the glass of juice on the dining table and sat in one of the chairs.

“Maria,” I said, and stopped. “Maria.”

“Are you there, Shane?”

Chapter 6: The Importance of Rabbits

March 2007

He saddled into the driver's bucket seat of the truck he'd bought at the beginning of the year from his uncle and we drove down between the lakes and onto the highway, out from Madison and into the heart of Wisconsin. For the first ten minutes we shared the road with plenty of other cars and then we turned off the interstate and onto Route 151 and they disappeared. Chris took the roads carefully for the sake of the truck. He'd warned me that the heating system was broken and we each were bundled up with blankets against the chill of spring. At the top of hills he shifted into neutral and let the truck glide down. The countryside seemed as if frozen in those moments, the vast prairies of farmland, yellow and brown from another long winter under the snow, lifted directly from Brueghel. Cows congregated, chewing on freshly delivered bales of hay. Large slender silos grew up as if from the within the earth against the backdrop of the sky and hillsides far beyond them, their metal exteriors bright against the glare of the sun and the gleam of the last remnants of frost covering the ground.

We drove on 151 northeast the entire way past Columbus and Sun Prairie and Beaver Dam and barely spoke. We'd become good friends and keeping to ourselves wasn't in any way hostile. It was my first time out of Madison since I'd arrived and I think Chris saw how it was affecting me.

Just before Fond du Lac, at the southern tip of Lake Winnebago, Chris exited off the two-lane highway. Minutes later we were bouncing over a dirt and gravel road. The sun had already set and we could see only as far as the truck's dim lights

allowed. At a rise in the road three deer stood beside a large oak tree and watched us. In the distance, situated in the middle of the black night, was a house, its glare, like a lighthouse, guiding us along. Chris hummed softly to himself but did not pick up speed. The smell of manure enveloped the cab as we passed within arm's length of the fields and barns where the cows grazed and slept.

Chris pulled the truck alongside the house and cut the engine. We got out and grabbed our bags from the trunk. The door to the brown barn at the end of the drive opened and three men walked out. Each was wearing overall jeans, the straps hidden by their large tan jackets. Two walked much quicker than the third, and I took them for Chris' older brothers. When the first approached he stuck out his hand.

“You must be the city boy that talks art and shit with Chris.”

“City boy?” I said, and glanced at Chris, who was lugging some scrap metal from his studio at school up the porch stairs, and not paying any attention to my conversation with his brother.

The brother kept his hand tight around mine and pulled once, gaining my full attention. “You ever been on a farm before?”

“No. But that doesn't make me a city boy.”

“You ever killed something?”

I brought my shoulders back. “Sure. Plenty of times. Squirrels, rabbits, hedgehogs, all the critters living in the canyon in back of my mom's place.” I released my grip on his hand and let it swing down to my side.

“You kill any *real* animals before?” he said, seriously. The other men were standing on the porch, waiting for us to move inside.

“You mean—” I began, before he cut me off.

“*Real* animals.”

“No, I suppose not.”

Chris’ brother slapped me roughly on the shoulder and took my bag up towards the house. He stopped before the front door and waited for me to catch up. “Well, I suppose we’ll have to get you one then,” he said and laughed. “I’m Teodozjusz, but don’t worry about that. No one can pronounce that Polish crap. Everybody just calls me TJ. My parents learned their lesson nice by the time they got around to Michael and Chris.”

My bed for the weekend was the couch in the living room, which Chris’ mother had set up with clean sheets, blankets, and two pillows. Birch wood logs lay against the clay tile trim of the fireplace, and to the side a bundle of newspaper and a small box of matches. I threw on a clean shirt and drew water over my long hair in the bathroom and went to the dining room where everyone was already seated.

“Shane,” said Chris, “you already met TJ. This is the rest of the family.” I went from chair to chair and shook hands with his other older brother Michael, who looked almost identical to Chris, except for the bright red scar that ran down the left side of his face just above his jaw line, and his mother and father, who sat at opposite ends of the table. Chris’ father said hello and then motioned with a nod of his head that I should sit. I took the empty place next to Mrs. Ryzinski and followed suit when everyone bowed their heads.

At the end of the blessing, Papa, as I was instructed to call Chris' father, said a few words in Polish, took a long, rasp breath and then instructed his wife in Polish to serve herself from the dish of roasted potatoes.

"Papa doesn't speak a whole lot of English, so don't take it to heart if he don't talk to you much," said Michael, pouring himself beer from one of the two brown growlers on the table. "Here, take some of this," and poured me a full pint as well.

"You make this here?" I asked Chris, as he passed me a platter with meat and plump juniper berries.

"No. A family down the road does. The Massey's. They give us a handful of those every month and a couple jugs of whiskey and when Papa bags a deer or elk, we give them a pretty hefty cut."

"Deer," I said and turned to Michael, "we saw three of them on the road up to your house this evening. They just sat there and watched us drive on by."

"Really?" he said and laughed. TJ grinned as he poured the blood and juice from the platter over his meat and vegetables. "You know, Shane, there were four of them yesterday morning."

"Stop teasing Shane, boys," said Chris' mother. "He's our guest and Chris' friend. Act accordingly."

Mrs. Ryzinski was a large, handsome woman and when she smiled at me then all the skin in her face bunched up in her cheeks and the hardness that was there earlier left and she looked quite kind.

“Make sure you have that venison with the berries. They’re picked just out back and they’re the same ones that the deer eat in the mornings once they’ve thawed.”

“What brings you out here, Shane?” asked TJ, helping himself to a second helping of the rare meat.

“Shane’s getting interested in food and cooking,” said Chris. “It’s gotten to the point where I think he’s stalking me Monday mornings. Every time I step into the house he’s conveniently on his way out to do some errand, asking if I want any help carrying the food and milk that Ma gives me.”

“That’s all just luck.”

“I thought I’d bring him up here and show him around the farm,” Chris said, and then to his mother, “is there anything that Odessa wants me to bring back for the restaurant?”

“She called yesterday and asked if we had any rabbits that we could spare. I was going to ask your father if we could give her a dozen or so.”

“What about it Papa?” asked Chris.

Until then I’d almost forgot that their father was at the table as he hadn’t spoken since the prayer. Thinking it over he peered down the table at me. The ruddy complexion of his cheeks matched the juice remaining on his plate. The growler of beer sat in front of him and he filled his glass.

“You want to see rabbits?” he asked me.

“Yes. Yes, I would,” I said.

Though I'd hoped all along that my trip to Chris' farm would bear some light on where the meat and dairy he brought with him to Madison came from, it had not occurred to me up until that moment that I would be involved in any killing, that blood would possibly, literally, cover my hands and I wondered if they could smell the fear that seeped from every pore of my body and hear the dubious jolt of certainty in my voice.

Chris' father nodded his head and drew from his glass.

When dinner was finished we carried our plates into the kitchen and I helped Chris' mother with the dishes while her sons cleared. Chris got the fire in the living room started and when I came in we had a glass a whiskey together and watched the logs burn. The smoke billowed up through the vent and the heat and smell of oak moved through the room. When our whiskey was done Chris rose from his chair.

"You'd better get some sleep. Morning comes pretty quickly here."

He shut off the lamp on his way out. My eyes were heavy from the liquor and I lay in the darkening room with the blanket tight around my body, watching the light from the fire cast shadows that danced and sauntered across the ceiling and then disappeared, and before I knew it I was asleep.

I woke up to the smell of ash. The fire had burnt out in the middle of the night and the room was bitterly cold. Frost colored the windowpanes and intensified the morning light. The entire room blue and white. My feet hit the floor with a thud that reverberated along the slabs of treated pine and sent clouds of ash from the gray

cremated remains of the wood up the chimney and out into the open air of the living room.

The kitchen was empty and I moved quietly through the first floor of the house looking for any of the Ryzinskis. The screen door to the backyard swung shut and Mrs. Ryzinski strode in carrying a small carton of eggs.

“Morning, Shane.”

“Morning, ma’am.”

“The boys are all out back helping their father with a fence. Seems something big got scared last night and trampled over part of our fence. Don’t worry about that. Come on in and I’ll fix you some breakfast. I think they left you a few bacon.”

I followed her and sat down where she pointed and watched her move about the kitchen. The bacon that had been left was cold and hard and she put them in the oven while she fried up three eggs and a few sausage links and poured me a glass of the milk Chris brought every week to our house in Madison.

“Here,” she said and handed me a plate loaded with food. “There’s some bread in the pantry if you want some. I’ve got to go into town and get a few things at the store. If the boys don’t come in before you’re done, clean up after yourself and go outside and follow the side of the barn.” Looking down at me she smiled. “You’ll see them sooner or later.”

The food was hot and set me right for what I thought lay ahead. With my belly full and the kitchen as it was before I ate I pulled on a jacket Chris had left out for me to use while on their farm and went searching for the Ryzinski men.

Because we'd arrived at night I hadn't yet been able to appreciate the size of their plot of land. From the porch I could see that the gravel road, effectively their driveway, was close to a mile long, and it snaked through a dozen acres of rolling yellow and brown hills and vast stretches of flat farmland, disappearing for lengths behind dense thickets of chestnut and oak trees.

Fog had lifted earlier clear to the ridge of the hill beside the Ryzinski farm. In its wake a layer of dew and frost had set over the land. The sun was high in the sky and I walked to the barn beside Chris' car and followed along the path flanking it. In the distance I heard the echo of a hammer breaking the silence of the cold morning air. The vicious boom of the hammer cascaded far off into the countryside. I continued on past the barn and towards a pasture of frozen yellow grass bordered by a wire and log-post fence.

The thunder from over the next hill ceased and I walked alongside the fence with more timidity than before, with no guide to my direct me. My feet felt the hard terrain more distinctly, rough at the base of my boots. Four men appeared at the ridge walking side by side. Each was large and shadowed, their features eclipsed by the white glare of the sun and the white of the horizon. One carried a sledgehammer slung carelessly over his shoulder.

"City boy, good morning," said TJ, as he approached me. "I was getting to think you weren't going to join us before lunch."

"You should have woke me up," I said to Chris. He grinned at me in return, his eyes wide and bright.

“Nothing to fret over, Shane. You didn’t miss much. We just had to put in a few posts again.”

“Ground’s harder than a bitch,” said TJ. “I don’t know, Chris, maybe he’s stronger than he looks and we could of used him.”

That I had three inches on TJ didn’t matter. Years of surfing had built me tall and lean, while a lifetime of throwing a sledgehammer around, boring down whittled ends of logs into frozen spring ground, had shaped TJ into something massive and I didn’t doubt for a second that he could’ve just as easily and swung me back and forth at the top of each log.

Papa Ryzinski said only one word, “rabbits”, and he shuffled past me.

The delight TJ got from this was maniacal. He ventured close enough to me that I thought the butt of the sledgehammer would smash into my face.

“You hear that, Shane? Rabbits.”

The cool air fell sharply on my face as we walked back along the path that I had just arrived upon and the red barn in the distance, next to the white, shingled house, intensified as if engulfed in flames as we approached.

Inside it smelled of hay and woodchips from the bales lining the attic and the neat piles of firewood in one corner, of metal and corrugated spilt oil, from the tractor at the far end. TJ lay the sledgehammer against a row of pitchforks and hoes and scythes. Each of the men prepared for the slaughter. Chris cut a long length of rope into four pieces and attached each piece to a hook nailed into the four corners of a doorway. Michael washed out two metal buckets with a hose and carried them over to where Chris stood, pulling each rope towards the center of the doorway, gauging

their lengths. The horsehair scraped roughly against the rusted hooks. TJ and his father went off into the far corner and emerged a minute later with the cages and placed them near my feet and went back to get more. The cages multiplied quickly and soon I was staring at sixteen rabbits.

The rattle in the cages was relentless, the ring of the rabbits' fruitless scampering rising towards the arched barn ceiling. I knelt down in a crouch to get a better look at them. There were white rabbits, brown rabbits, rabbits that looked as if long ago they had been dyed with a wash of pink. Some were dotted with gray and some had four or five colors running through their thick coats. When they were still they tucked their little feet in under their plump bellies and sniffed innocently at the edge of the cage, eyes as dark and smooth as the magnificent black stones coating the shallows at Black's Beach in San Diego.

"You want to say something?" asked TJ.

"How do you do it?"

"It's pretty easy as long as you do it right," said Chris.

Papa Ryzinski unhooked the latch to one of the cages and thrust in his hand. The rabbit jumped about furiously but Papa caught it. He gripped it by the neck, a large clump of fat and skin and fur tight within his fingers. Standing over a layer of freshly strewn hay he turned the rabbit over so that it dangled upside down. The animal continued to fight, its head and body swinging in the air. Michael handed his father a piece of firewood just over a foot long and two or three inches across. When the rabbit relented, if only to momentarily catch its breath, Papa swiftly brought the wood down onto its neck. The sound of the neck shattering was sudden and succinct

and the rabbit let out one faint sigh and lay still and weightless, dangling from the man's hand. Papa handed the rabbit to Chris who strung up the rabbit in the doorway. Its feet and arms were pulled taut at the corners and formed an "X" and its limp head pointed south towards the metal bucket directly beneath. Chris made two slits in the skin around the ankles and pulled on both and the rabbit's coat slid off at once, like a dress would, all the way down to the head. He tossed the pelt in the bucket and made an incision down the length of the belly and stretched the cavity wide. Wet crimson entrails fell on top of the pelt and the metal bucket sang from the weight. Wafts of steam flowed from the void and Chris untied the knots at each end and tossed the gutted animal into the second pail.

Another hollow thud and a single whimper. Papa handed a second rabbit to Chris who looked at its plump belly once and nodded and then strung it up in the empty doorway. The light came in through a pane window at the archway of the barn and lit the rabbit from behind, a thin veil of yellow light outlining the blood-splattered fur.

"What do you think?" asked TJ. Chris turned around and looked at me inquisitively. The dress hung about the rabbit's ears. "You want to give it a try?"

I had lied before to TJ, to myself. Sure, I had killed a rabbit once. With an air gun when I was eleven. I'd been fooling about in the canyon with Larry one afternoon during the summer, trying to fill the day, and we'd gone hunting for something to shoot when we stumbled upon a young rabbit licking a cactus leaf. The rabbit fled and we chased it for fifteen minutes, enjoying the rush of running through the ice grass and dead brown weeds that covered the canyon bed. At last, I landed a

good shot as it was in mid-air, and sent it to the ground. Larry and I strolled over to where it lay, congratulating each other. When we reached the rabbit I was sickened. Its brains oozed out of its head onto a sun-bleached rock, and its body was broken and badly contorted. We poked at it with a stick and left it for the foxes and coyotes. I hadn't seen it die, and shooting aimlessly at it from thirty feet away was hardly personal. And there'd never been any hedgehogs or squirrels—a couple snakes that my mom listlessly had me kill, and lots of trout, but I'd never thought anything of that. They didn't emit emotion or pain. Rabbits did.

“Okay.”

“All right, city boy,” said TJ, and then, when his hand was in the cage, “these fuckers bite, don't they, Pa.”

Chris came over and stood next to me. “The trick,” he said close to my ear, “is to kill it on your first swing. It's a fragile animal and if you hit it right the first time it dies instantly. If you don't, you're going to hear it, and you've got to hit it again until it's dead.”

TJ held out a rabbit by the neck. I grabbed it with both hands by the soft, bunched up fur below TJ's hand. Its skin was plush with fat and its coat smooth. Turning it over its weight shifted suddenly and hung away from its foot. The rabbit swung constantly and my first inclination was to beg it to stop. Papa Ryzinski gave me the piece of wood, the butt end a mosaic of blood. Except for the rabbit, everyone was still. Finally, it came to a rest and I held my breath as I swung the wood down on its neck.

I can still remember the horrendous scream it let out, the way it pierced my ears then and continues to now. “Again,” Chris said. He didn’t yell at me, but was stern and spoke with a reservation indicative of his pity for the animal. The next swing broke the rabbit’s neck and as it lay there limp, I suddenly felt its entire weight move up through its body and into my hand. A curious numbness increased in me suddenly. It was as if time relaxed its grip and I drifted out from my body and looked down upon the three Ryzinski men performing their duties, and me, motionless in the center of the barn. Colors blurred and passed around and into the calm of the morning. I was struck by the serenity and innocuousness of it all, and no longer saw the gore and carnage. Chris strung up my rabbit, dressed and gutted it, and then tossed the entrails and pelt on top of the others. Great swashes of red and purple topped one another as on some impressionist canvass. TJ and his father removed two more rabbits. The animals danced so slowly in the air before their clubbing, and small twigs of birch wood and sawdust floated down from their beautiful yellow and white fur. Papa Ryzinski retired them too and Michael took three dead rabbits by the hind legs, their pink and peach flesh almost erotic amid the four men, and carried them to the house, where his mother was waiting.

In time I followed the men from the barn to the table and found myself grasping a fork and bent over a plate of spaetzle. Papa Ryzinski finished the prayer and the family commenced eating. I was still in a haze and unsure of my ability to speak and move. Chris stared at me from across the table.

“It’s a bit much, the first time, I know,” he said. “You okay?”

“I’m just—” I began.

“Eat,” said Chris. “It’ll do you good. My mom’s been cooking this dish since we’ve been raising rabbits. She gets the chestnuts and mushrooms from the glen at the base of the mountain. Trust me, just eat and you’ll be fine.”

The rabbit looked nothing like it had just a couple of hours before. It’d been de-boned and simmered with the brown porcinis and the pale chestnuts and the meat had fallen apart. The room was hot from the fresh-lit fire and everyone around me was eating. The heat rose from the plate and as I ate I emerged from my haze and regained the ability to feel my body wholly. I tasted the earth, the woodsy porcinis, robust chestnuts, and the soft rendered flesh of the rabbits. A certain joviality increased at the table, the kind of eagerness I suppose can only arise from such a slaughter. I’d seen and experienced death first hand and now could eat the benefit. The room and my vision of it was fresh and clear, and I began to see things as they were, as they never had been before, but as they ought to be, and this soothed and invigorated me to the core.

* * * * *

Call it mother’s intuition, call it a woman’s deeper sense of psyche, call it what you wish, but the following morning when Chris and I said our goodbyes in the driveway, I had the feeling that Mrs. Ryzinski understood something, more than any of the others, including myself, about what had occurred on her farm. The new day was young and she watched me standing tall beside Chris’ beaten and grime-covered truck, shaking her husband’s hand, the entire land, the slopes and hills, the flat plains of corn and oats and cows, the dense forest at the foot of the mountain in the horizon

with its mushrooms, deer, and elk, and the light bearing down on it all like an enormous plane of crystal floating over the countryside, and maybe she knew that I would never see my mother again, and that something had sparked in me there in the red barn and again supping at her table, that when, motherless, I would begin to search out, spend a lifetime seeking, trying to fill the void it'd left in me as an amputee does his missing limb, and all that at the expense of everyone who came close to me, tossed aside because of that singular search, and she came over to me and let go what distance we'd had before then and, silent, embraced me, longingly and with a tenderness reserved for bittersweet farewells, the essence of smoke and bacon and fried eggs on the collar of her shirt, and when Chris and I began slowly making our way over the rough dirt path out towards the county road I saw her in my mirror standing alone in front of the house, staring at the back end of the truck bouncing away in and out of the dips and potholes, her arms wrapped tight around her chest, her body growing dimmer by the second, and finally we took a turn and she disappeared altogether.

We arrived back in Madison nearing lunch and went directly to the Ovens of Brittany to deliver the rabbits. Chris parked the truck out back and we opened the flatbed and each took with us a box, the dead laying side by side, curled up against each other like a line of blush-hued crescent moons. Their black eyes protruded from their taut skulls like miniature opal gems.

Chris rang the bell beneath a laminated handwritten sign that read "Deliveries" and opened the door. The entrance was slim and made even more so due

to the metal shelving units that reached from floor to ceiling on both sides, and ran the length of the hallway. Five-gallon plastic containers lined the top shelves, all labeled neatly in black pen on masking tape: barley, oats, couscous, Israeli couscous, cornmeal, quinoa, flour, corn flour, wheat flour, sugar, cocoa, Mexican cocoa. On the second shelf were two-gallon tubs of various oils: olive, extra virgin, sunflower, corn, and sesame; vinegars ranging from balsamic and red wine to a handful of small dark green bottles of Banyuls; cerignola and Provencal olives; homemade jars of lemon confit and roasted red peppers; *saucisson avec huile*; pickled cukes, beets, and beans. They went on and on. I recognized so few of the labels—hadn't even the slightest idea what *fromage de chevre a l'huile* was—and wanted to pull Chris aside and ask, though I had the feeling things such as were before us weren't altogether known to him either.

We passed through the dry closet, as I later would come to know it as, a formidable gauntlet of prepared and housemade dry goods that the crew at Brittany spent long hours keeping up, and turned a corner and, had we not heard him before we got there, would have bumped directly into an enormous, robust man, blocking the doorway to the kitchen. He was yelling fiercely into the phone, haranguing some poor soul on the other end who'd apparently promised him a few dozen trout.

“I don't care, Jim, you said that you'd get them to me today. I'm sitting here looking at a case of potatoes and spring beans. Now they look like nice spuds and I can use the beans, but they're sure as hell not trout.”

Through the base of the phone I heard Jim trying to explain himself. Even second-hand I could tell that he was worried. I'd have been, too. The cook did not

look like the kind of guy I'd want to piss off. Though not as tall as I was, he outweighed me by thirty pounds or so, most of which he carried in his upper body. His girth was impressive and the sleeves to his white chef's jacket were rolled up to his elbows, tattoos prominently displayed upon each thick forearm. Stitched into his jacket above his heart was his name in blue, *Jamie*.

"Jim, stop. Just stop. Answer me one question, will you?" Jamie paused and repositioned the phone in front of his mouth so that every decibel of his speech would be heard clearly. "Do they swim? No, just answer the question. Do they swim? Huh? Can these fucking spuds grow fins and swim? Are these magical beans that I've never seen before that are going to suddenly sprout scales and flesh so that I can sell them to customers and call them trout? No, I didn't think so. Now," he said, pausing to catch his breath, "I'm going to buy these off you and I'll keep them because they look good and I can use them. But next time don't try and screw me by dropping off a box of produce at our back door and running away like some scared little girl scout when what you said were going to be bringing was fucking trout. Okay? Got it Jimbo?"

Jamie hung up the phone and sighed. When he turned to Chris and me he put his hands on his hips and grinned.

"Let me guess," he said, and covered his eyes with one hand. "Easter's coming up, so those must be *chocolate* rabbits I can give to parents to bring home to little darling Susie-Q. "

"See for yourself," said Chris.

“Bring them over,” he said, and we followed him into the kitchen and put the boxes down on a metal table. There were two cooks standing nearby in front of a long set of cutting boards. Each of them looked up briefly, glanced us over, and continued on with their work. They moved like machines, the ease with which they ran through piles of vegetables, the quick repetitive knock of their knives against the hard boards, all stunning me. They were dressed as Jamie was, black pants and clogs, a white apron tied neatly around at the small of the back, and a clean white jacket tucked into their waistline. Neither of them, though, had their name printed on their breast.

I remember being surprised at how young they both seemed to me. Neither of them seemed more than a year or two older than myself. And one of them was a female, something which, for no particular reason, as this was my first time in the back of a restaurant, struck me as odd. I stared at her as she worked. She was slim and the heat from the kitchen had stuck stray strands of hair against her forehead, the color rise in her cheeks. Her skin on her forearms was almost opaque, and I could see fine veins strung taut as she rocked her knife back and forth. Finished with an enormous pile of onions, she carried the board over and slid its contents into a vat on the stove. The onions hit with a hiss and she stuck a wooden spoon deep into the opening and stirred. The noise subsided and she returned the board to the line and, without smiling, looked up and caught me watching her. She stopped working and stared at me, clearly annoyed at my interest, without flinching until I had turned my attention back towards Chris and Jamie.

Jamie's displeasure over the missing trout couldn't have been further from how he reacted with Chris. He'd taken the rabbits out of the two boxes and placed them in rows inside long, shallow metal trays, and was smelling them. His nose was no more than an inch from their flesh, his brittle facial hair the same tone as their fantastic eyes. Without raising his mug, I heard him say, "Fantastic, Chris. Fucking fantastic. Tell your mother how much I love these. No, better yet, next time you see her, give her a big kiss on the lips for me."

He straightened his back and faced us both, his enormous shoulders barely nothing more than an elongation of the tree-trunk of a neck. I wondered if he would have even needed the stick we'd used to kill the rabbits, or a fierce swing with one closed fist would have done the trick. Maybe he'd have just snapped their necks with a couple of his fingers, a maniacally carnivorous grin covering his face.

The two men shook hands and, for the first time thus far, Jamie looked at me. "Who's this tall drink of water?"

"This is a friend of mine from school, Shane. He helped with the rabbits yesterday." And turning to me, "Jamie's the sous chef here."

I stuck out my hand and spoke all that I could muster. "Hey, Jamie."

"Shane," he said, engulfing my hand within his, "like the cowboy. You look like you're from out west, too. Where are you from?"

"San Diego."

"What the hell you doing in the middle of this snowstorm of a town?"

"School."

Jamie laughed and finally released my hand. “Look,” he said to Chris, “Odessa’s out right now so I can’t give you any money for these, but come back sometime tomorrow or the next day and I’ll have had time to get her to write the check. Okay?”

“That’s fine with me, Jamie. If I can’t make it, I’ll have Shane here come in.”

“Good then. Thanks again.”

Jamie picked up the tray and carried it over to where the two cooks were still working. He took a knife down from a shelf and honed it quickly on a thin steel rod. The sharp metallic scraping echoed off the kitchen walls. We walked out the way we came in and before door shut behind us, I heard Jamie crying out, “Come back, Shane. Shane, come back!” and then the ensuing laughter abruptly end as the backdoor slammed shut.

Chapter 7: Up Above the World

April 2007

“What’s it been,” I say, “three, four months?”

“Something like that, Shane,” Maria says. Her voice is thin and distant and in the pause I sense the weight of our entire relationship resting on the invisible plane dividing us, something intractable and intangible floating alongside each and every one of the thousands of miles separating my sparse condominium and the two bedroom bungalow in Ocean Beach where she and my son live.

Neither of us speaks for a couple of minutes and then I hear her begin to cry. She does not bother to muffle her whimpers with the cusp of her hand on the base of the phone and instead lets me listen.

“What’s the matter, Maria?” I say finally.

“It’s Marco.”

“Marco?” I say, a quick succession of horrors wreaking havoc inside my mind. “What’s happened?”

“He got his acceptance letter from Berkeley yesterday,” she says. “Your son, Shane, our son, is going to Berkeley in the fall.”

“Jesus,” I say and stop. I want to be angry with her for leading me on, if only momentarily, and allowing me to fear the worst. But how can I, when the truth is I am overjoyed. We did not fail Marco. My actions, my sheer existence in his life, and then my subsequent absence, has not derailed and permanently altered his future to such an extent that college is not beyond him—and a school such as Berkeley, to boot. Maria weeps to me because I took so much from her and brought something

into the world which railed against my influence and has not let the scars I inflicted dictate his life.

I lay my head against the smooth oak wood of the dining table and listen to her breath filter through the earpiece and the soothing repetition of my heart beat against my rib cage.

“That’s tremendous, Maria. Marco must be ecstatic.”

“Yes,” she says softly. “He is. At least as much as he can be, I think.”

“What does that mean?”

“That he misses his father and doesn’t understand it all. He can’t wrap his head around why you’re not here. I’ve tried to tell him, but I don’t get far. Maybe I don’t really know why. That’s funny, isn’t it? All those years and even I can’t articulate it.”

“Then let’s not try,” I say.

“We deserved better,” she says.

“Maria,” I say, knowing where the conversation is heading, “this isn’t the time.”

“When is the time, Shane? This is one of those moments that parents remember for the rest of their lives. If you’re not going to be around for him, and I’m going to be the one explaining to him when he graduates from college and gets married and has his first kid, why his nomadic father isn’t there to congratulate him, then I think I can vent against the position you’ve put me in.”

“We ought to just be happy that Marco has done so well, Maria. Not dwell again on how I let you both down.”

“You want to talk about Marco? Fine.” Maria pauses and I hear her run the tap in the kitchen. The faucet shuts off and she gulps down her water. “Yesterday, I offer to take him out to celebrate. But he says that he’d rather invite some friends over for a nice dinner in our backyard. We walk to the street market near the pier. He’s got an eye for the produce and the farmers like him because he can talk to them about soil conditions and rainfall and *terroir*. They’re all very impressed.

“We spent an hour shopping for the ingredients and afterwards went to the wine shop. I wanted the night to be special and told him to buy whatever he’d like. This is what really got to me. Do you know what he bought, Shane? Not a Gaja or some Amarone that you’d once given him a teaspoon of while whispering the delicate virtues of dessication into his ear, or an extravagant Lafite or Y’Quem. No, he bought a half case of Lambrusco. I didn’t even know they carried Lambrusco in the States!” she says, almost yelling into the phone. “Can you believe it? Marco gets into Berkeley and I tell him he can break the bank and he buys the fizzy red plonk we had for lunch every day in Bardi. The strangest part,” she says, calming down, “was that it took him all of five minutes to pick out, as if he already knew they carried it. What do you think of that?”

“It’s not my fault.”

“Yes it is, Shane. And you can’t bear to realize it.”

“How is my teaching him a skill, giving him a little perspective on the world such a terrible thing? Yes, I moved you both to Italy and it didn’t work out. I can’t apologize anymore for that, Maria. But maybe Marco’s showing an interest and an aptitude for cooking isn’t as bad as you think.”

“You infected him! The minute you left us it ceased being an education and it morphed into some virus that will afflict him his entire life.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’re hysterical and this isn’t going anywhere. Please give my best to Marco and congratulate let for me.”

“Last night, Shane—and you listen to this—last night,” says Maria, “his friends came over and we sat outside and ate. Marco uncorked the Lambrusco and we passed around the plates of food which Marco had cooked entirely by himself. Spring asparagus and fried eggs, braised chicken, raw artichoke salad, grilled radicchio, a platter of sardines and anchovies. Remind you of anyone? But you know what the worst of it was? It wasn’t the food. It was feeling required, in your absence, to toast him for the both of us. “It was dark and I’m looking down the table at the communal setting and then, next to me, at the head, is Marco. His sweet girlfriend, Caroline, sitting on his lap. I stood up and all the kids were quiet and stared up at me. I tried to begin but couldn’t get further than, ‘Marco,’ before I stopped. I was frozen in their gaze, all these young kids about to head off to school and make their own lives. Suddenly I just started speaking without thinking and said something I shouldn’t have.

“What I said was, ‘When Marco and I were living in Italy with his father, we ran a small restaurant attached to our home. People would come from all over the region to eat there. Our dining room was made up of two round tables that sat six or eight people and then two long wooden benches, very much like this one here. Many celebrations took place in that room. There were weddings, anniversaries, baptisms, births, reunions, and even deaths. We raised all of our own animals there, and

slaughtered them, too. We'd take them from the land into our kitchen and we'd invest entire days prepping and catering these events. We dedicated our lives to it. And the reason for that dedication of life was what I see before me now. A long table of empty plates. Raucous laughter and cheer and excited conversation between friends. The celebration of life at the table. His father would have appreciated this. But you are all Marco's family now and I am infinitely glad that you could share with me this moment and I will never forget any of you for it. These are the ones that you should all remember.' I looked around at each of their darkened faces and then at Marco sitting beside me and at the table with the Lambrusco and the remnants of *your* recipes, Shane, for sardines and artichokes and peaches and everything else that we'd eaten and made an abrupt exit.

"I left and turned my back on all of them and when I thought about it later that night and again this morning, it wasn't Marco that I was fixed on. It was sweet, petite, blindingly innocent, Caroline seated on his lap with her arm around his neck. Who knows, maybe she loves Marco, maybe she'll get into Berkeley or a school near there or just follow him up north. Or quite possibly they'll fizzle out with summer. It's whatever makes them each happy, right? That's how it's got to be. Right? Even with people so young and naïve. But seeing her last night I wondered if when they look back on their time together, from any point down the road, if they'll look on it and understand when it was that they were happy and when exactly it was that all changed and it all became nothing more than a mask worn over a face. And on whose face was it worn more true."

Maria's voice slows to the point that I'm not sure if she remembers I'm still listening. Her deflation hurts me for the pity it contains. The pity that, I know, is meant for me.

A long silence.

"Would you please tell Marco how happy I am for him? I will write him this weekend."

"Are you happy, Shane?"

"For Marco, of course."

"That's not what I asked."

I've always expected her to ask me this question. It is, though, just the first time I've heard it from her. "Not especially, Maria," I said. "No."

"I wonder if I should take some perverse pleasure in that."

"Most would, given our situation. So I'd never hold it against you if you did."

"Why aren't you?"

"What, happy or unable to hold it against you?"

"The first one. After everything that's happened, why aren't you satisfied? Why can't you be satiated?"

"I'm not sure, Maria. There'll always be something missing, something that I cannot have and will never reach. There's always something more."

"You're going to die a very lonely man, Shane."

"I know."

Maria turns the faucet on again and fills her cup and drinks from it. I hear the gentle thud of her shoes against the kitchen floor and then the faint scrape of a chair

as she sits back down. Her breathing is controlled and light. I finish my grapefruit juice and walk outside onto the balcony. The sun is high in the sky and the light cascades down against the sides of the buildings all around me. Clotheslines everywhere. People walk along Calle Baez below me, looking so very small. Hidden beneath his tarp is Pablo, the newspaper man who sells the daily for a quarter a piece. Further along, Las Canitas and the polo grounds where immaculately groomed men sit astride immaculately groomed horses. They jockey back and forth across the field, smacking a rock-hard ball, stopping on a dime to reverse their course. On the edge of the field are spectators. Ladies dressed in white, hidden beneath billowing formidable hats. Bronzed old men next to them with their silver hair and hand-stitched gray suits and red handkerchiefs folded neatly into the breast pocket. With one hand they smoke Cuban cigars and with the other drink vintage Bollinger. Small fortunes are paid to just get through the gate, though I'm sure they find ways to make it interesting, to juggle their possessions.

I put my feet up against the railing, lean back in my chair towards the lifeless living room and the hanging copper pans and the knives set against the wall above the counter, and think about the polo grounds and what an inconceivable waste of money it all sounds like to me. After half an hour I hear a click on the other end and my phone goes dead.

Chapter 8: Terrine

March 1977

I was reading Steinbeck for my American Literature class when Chris knocked on my door. The book was *Travels With Charley* and I was about sixty pages in. I remember where I was on the writer's journey because looking back on that day later on, I knew it was no coincidence I'd just been introduced to the Spanish word *vacilando* when Chris sent me back to *Brittany*.

“Shane, you in there?” Chris said.

I opened the door holding the book in my hands.

“I'm going to be stuck in the studio the rest of the day and was hoping that you'd run over to the restaurant at some point and pick up the money from Jamie. You don't mind, do you?”

“Of course not.”

“Great.” Chris smirked at me, the beard crinkling on his face. “And in case you get caught staring, her name's Isabel.”

“Whose name is Isabel?”

“Whose name is Isabel,” he said and slapped me on the shoulder and laughed loudly as he left.

It was early in the afternoon and I lay back on my bed and tried to read. The words blurred and my concentration lagged. So I grabbed my jacket and headed outside.

The cold had not yet left Madison. I had gotten used to it by then and while I was constantly reassured that Madison was beautiful and warm in the summer, my

first winter had dragged on eternally. There were days when the snow and ice would melt down to the cement and caked mud and dead grass and summer seemed around the corner. The next morning, though, we'd be wading through another half-foot of frozen snow. Digging my car out of the snow had become such a irksome job that I'd left it in a lot three blocks from the house and hitched rides around town.

The walk up to the State House was short but when I reached the crest and circled around the mammoth marble edifice to the other side, a fierce gust of wind blew up the hill from Lake Monona. I braced myself and pulled the collar of my jacket tight around my neck and struggled against the force of the shrill, icy wind. I cursed Chris for sending me out of my warm apartment and the bed and the blankets, and I cursed myself more thoroughly for having thought so much of this little errand.

I walked at a distinct slant for five minutes and then cut through an alleyway devoid of the cold and emerged beside the restaurant. The lights were all out in the front and I put my face up to the window. The interior was smaller than I'd imagined. Not small but, as they say now, intimate. A dozen tables with chairs upended upon them and a bar lining the back end of the room. Soft colors on all the walls.

My head was firm against the window pane and the heat from my breath fogged the window. I was suddenly very embarrassed and felt like a child outside of a toy store staring at the GI Joe figurine I wanted for Christmas. Hoping no one had seen me I ducked around the corner of the restaurant and towards the delivery entrance and was about to open the door when someone spoke to me.

“Cowboy Shane, right?”

It was the female cook, Isabel. She sat on an inverted milk crate next to the dumpster. In her thin bony hands was a half-smoked cigarette.

“That’s me, yes.”

“What were you doing back there? Looked like you were hiding from someone the way you kept looking over your shoulder.”

“I’m just doing a favor for Chris. And that, that was nothing. Just a little cold. Is Jamie in?”

“Yeah.” She dragged on the cigarette and her eyes tightened. I didn’t move and thought about asking her for a smoke.

“You can head in,” she said. “You’ll find Jamie no problem.”

I turned tail and entered the restaurant quickly. Something about Isabel had me acting strange, as if her coldness, in our brief two meetings, had some unmistakable hold over me. I wasn’t normally so apprehensive or caught off-guard around women. In fact, being dropped into the barren and pale Midwest from Southern California had worked out in my favor up to that point. Among my classmates I looked different, my accent had none of the drawl typical of the area, and it hadn’t been hard to find company when I wanted it. But Isabel’s unabashed confidence and my overwhelming timidity in this new world run and operated by people like TJ and Jamie had me slinking around corners watching my back and stammering out monosyllabic responses like someone who’d never been laid before.

When I entered the kitchen Jamie was standing at the stove before a large vat. He reached into a pan with a pair of tongs and dragged from it a hefty animal leg

coated in a golden brown crust. Jamie turned the leg over, examining the end where the bone jutted out and marrow was running red and dripping down into the pan. Satisfied with what he saw, he gently returned the leg to the pan and began to move his gyrate his hips slightly and nod his head in tune with the Creedence song playing on the kitchen radio. Before I could say anything to catch his attention, Isabel brushed by me and began to wash her hands in the double-wide sink in the corner of the room.

“Jamie, Shane’s here for you.”

Jamie turned to me and I thought I was in for it. He grabbed a plastic container with chopped green, orange, and white vegetables and he dumped the contents into the pan and then spoke. “So you’re Chris’ errand boy now?”

“I’m just doing him a favor since he’s busy at school.”

“Sure,” Jamie said and walked over to me and stuck out his hand. “Come with me.”

I followed him out of the kitchen and down a narrow flight of stairs into the basement. At the bottom of the staircase Jamie opened a thick metal door and even from a few feet away I felt the frigid gush of the walk-in refrigerator. The humming noise it made sounded like ten air-conditioners placed side by side. Fat plastic flaps were draped over the entrance and Jamie flung a few to the side and disappeared. A few moments later he came out holding a ceramic terrine and shut the door loudly and I trailed him upstairs.

“Jamie,” Isabel said when we’d re-entered the kitchen, “you want me to put the cider in?”

“Three bottles of the cider and the same amount stock. But not the chicken stock. Use the rest of the veal.”

Jamie inverted the terrine onto a cutting board and tapped along the base with his fist. He raised it slightly and took a peek underneath. Before he removed the ceramic entirely he looked up at me.

“Chris said yesterday that you’ve got some small interest in food, right?”

“I like it enough, I think. At least I’m starting to.”

“Well what the hell does that mean? Shit, I was going to let you try this. But people who ‘like it enough,’ they piss me off. That shows you don’t care, that you’ve got no passion— you’ve got no love, man. And what can’t you cook without? Isabel?”

“Love, Jamie,” she replied wearily with her back to us and shook her head.

“See, she’s got it. Or some fucked up version of love, don’t you Izzy?”

Isabel didn’t bother. “So, I’ll ask you again,” said Jamie, “do you have an interest—”

“Yes, I do. That doesn’t mean I have any idea what you have underneath there or an inkling of a guess at whatever the hell it was you pulled out of that pot, but I’m intrigued. I’m—I’m intrigued because it smells damn good in here and I want to know.” It all flew from my mouth in a burst and when I finished my demeanor took me by surprise. I’d stood up to Jamie, though in the process, had made an ignorant fool of myself.

Jamie arched his back and put his hands on his waist. I could see he was amused, a characteristic I’d yet to see in him and I didn’t know if what I’d said in interrupting him had made him more frustrated with me or had fixed my increasingly

precarious situation. I couldn't help but think about that leg that he'd pulled out of the pot on the stove.

“Okay then. That's better. This here,” he said and began to gently lift up the ceramic, “is a rabbit and foie gras terrine.” At that he held up one hand towards me, motioning me to hold it. “Before you ask what foie gras is or any other question that might pop into your head, let me just say this. Chris' mother and father give us the best rabbits. While I use them in a number of ways, this is hands down the best. And it's because I mate these rabbits with the best the goose has to offer. This is your litmus test, Shane. If you like this you're allowed to be interested. No, you *should* be interested. If you don't, well, I'll give you Chris' money and a ten second head start.”

How could I begin to respond to that and how off his rocker was this guy? The only food that I'd ever had out of a terrine before was my mother's meatloaf. Surely, no one had ever before threatened me based on my approval of those dry, brown dinners. And what did it say about me that I actually found myself enjoying, even if only masochistically, the verbal abuse he doled out? Yes, he was a fury, but if it'd been a football coach in high school, I wouldn't have thought twice about following him.

Jamie reached above the line and pulled down a long knife with a thin, glimmering blade. He ran it under a hot tap and dried it briefly against his apron. The terrine was rectangular and the color of milk with streaks of peach and pink coursing through its exterior and Jamie slowly sliced through the terrine and lay one thin piece onto a small plate and handed it to me before cutting one for himself.

“Go on,” he said to me. “Eat it.”

In the middle of the slice of terrine were three small squares of pink flesh, drastically different than the white which surrounded it. Jamie gave me a fork and then picked up his piece with his hands and waited. I cut off a good sized portion and brought it to my mouth.

I have eaten hundreds of slices of terrines since that afternoon, but I still remember that first bite of foie gras. Never before had I tasted something so gluttonous. As the oyster had linked me with the ocean and my past, and the rabbit at the Ryzinksi's had done so with the earth and the land, with life and death, this piece of foie gras was everything else that I'd never tasted. It was pure luxuriousness wrapped within the coarse and gamey rabbit. Unctuous layers of animal fat melted onto my tongue and granules of salt crystals popped when I chewed. With the next bite I didn't bother chewing and instead rolled it around with my tongue, massaging it against the roof of my mouth, letting each of the different rendered meats simply disintegrate, and those miniscule grains of salt.

"You going to tell him what it is?" asked Isabel, breaking the silence.

"Jesus, let the guy enjoy it for a minute," said Jamie and ate his own slice and covered the rest of the terrine with plastic wrap and lay it aside.

I was still working on the last layer of remnants with my tongue and watching Isabel carry two empty metal vats to the dishwasher when I heard a tray of glasses shatter and the sharp crunch of broken metal.

"Shit," said Isabel. "Jamie, the dishwasher broke again."

Jamie rushed by me to help Isabel who was lying on her back on the counter so she could see up into the malfunctioning dishwasher. Shards of glass were strewn

on the floor and at Isabel's feet was a tray of mutilated silverware. Both of their heads were inside the dishwasher's skirt and I could hear one of them banging on the hollow metal flap trying to fix the problem. Finally, just as I was sure no more of the terrine remained in my mouth, Jamie pulled his head back out into the open and let out a curse that echoed off each and every one of the metal objects in the kitchen and stormed out.

Feeling in their debt, and hoping to at least make an impression on Isabel, I walked over to ask her if I could help. She was still lying on her back and I could see only her torso. Even though her chef's jacket and apron were both loose fitting, with her in a horizontal position I finally got a better look at the flat of her stomach and the curved outline of each of her small breasts.

"Is there anything that I can do?" I asked.

"Not unless you're a plumber and a mechanic."

She contorted her body out of the large machine and stood up quickly. Light scarlet freckles dotted her forehead. I had not seen them before and she seemed flushed. Smiling dispassionately she walked back to the line and grabbed her knife.

"That's the third time this month that thing has broken, so Jamie's going to be in a bad mood when he gets back here. I'd watch out if I were you. Just get your money and go home."

She said all this without looking up and I increasingly felt I was the only person in the kitchen. The thud of her knife and hiss and sizzle of the stove sounded, but it was like being in a forest at night. Living things surround you, but in the dark they unite with nature against your imagination. Isabel—her movements and

sounds—had merged with the kitchen walls and floors and everything there coalesced, except me.

Soon she too walked out and I listened as her footsteps faded on her way downstairs.

In time Jamie returned and, as promised, was in a foul mood. He didn't acknowledge my presence either and fiddled with the inside of the dishwasher for a minute before giving up.

“Here,” he said, handing me an envelope with a few twenty dollar bills. “Make sure Chris gets that. Lesson's over. I've got way too much shit to do now.”

I put the envelope in my back pocket and made to leave. Next to the doorframe leading out of the kitchen I stopped and turned back towards him. He was muttering to himself, cursing the dishwasher and the prep he needed to finish before service began.

“I could stay and help out,” I said, before thinking it through.

“Shane, don't be a cowboy. It doesn't suit you.”

“What's the worst that could happen?”

“You could do something stupid and hurt yourself. Or worse, you could do something stupid and screw up and then I'd have to hurt you.” Jamie knelt down beneath his side of the work station and grunted as he picked up a tray full of sauté pans. The bottom of the tray sagged from the weight and he carried them past me and threw them into the sink. When he turned around I was still standing there.

“All right. Fine. You ever work in a kitchen before?”

“No.”

“You cook much at home? Know how to wield a knife?” He leaned back against the counter and raised his eyebrows at me emphatically.

“I don’t cook a whole lot, no. But I can use a knife.”

“No you can’t. They don’t make training wheel knives for the kitchen, man. And I sure as hell don’t have the time to teach you and make sure you don’t cut off all your virgin fingers. So, go back to your place and have a beer and be thankful you don’t have to cook sixty covers and do all the dishes too because God forbid one of the waiters gets pruney hands.”

Jamie turned both of the faucets on high and poured a liberal amount of soap into the sink and watched the suds rise over the rims of pans and then turned off the water. He attacked the pans with a metal scrub pad, scratching and tearing at the caked surfaces. Water splashed out of the sink and onto the floor and counter each time he dunked a pan back into the suds.

I figured I’d annoyed him this much and if my last attempt at retribution didn’t work than I would simply never return. “Jamie,” I yelled, trying to reach him over the music and his cleaning. He threw the pan he was holding back into the water and took three steps towards me, his fists sopped in a layer of foam like boxing gloves. Between the gloves and his rolled up jacket sleeves was nothing but ink.

“What! What about I’m fucking busy was not clear?”

“All I was going to say,” I said with my hands up and palms facing Jamie, “was that it looks like you don’t have a dishwasher and it also looks like you don’t seem too thrilled washing dishes as I’m sure you have more important things to do.”

Clumps of soap fell from his fists to the floor but Jamie didn't relinquish his stance.

"And I'd be willing to do that if you wanted me to. If not, then I'm gone. I don't want to bother you any more than I already have. I'm just throwing it out there."

Jamie wiped his hands off on his apron and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I'm not going to pay you."

"That's fine," I said. "Maybe you can give me some dinner instead."

A quick smile rose to his lips. "There's an apron on the hook. Get a stack of towels from the dry closet and three bottles of white wine—*vin de table*. The pad's in the sink. We'll see how you do with the dishes before I promise any more food. That slice of terrine goes for nine bucks a pop, so you owe me two hours of work before I have to feed you again."

That was how it began. Washing dishes at *The Ovens of Brittany*. For the first two hours it was just Jamie, Isabel, and me. I was kept busy, though. There was already a large pile of plates and silverware which had been left the night before by the wait staff and it amazed me the amount of pans only two people could go through in such a short period of time. Not only the sheer amount of pans but their various sizes and shapes. In my mother's house we had four pans: a roasting pan for the oven, a sauté pan for eggs and bacon and whatever else we cooked in fat, a saucepan for soups and boiled vegetables, and then a bigger one if we were boiling a lot of vegetables. That was it. At *Brittany* they were five or six different sized sauté pans, from just smaller than the palm of my hand to close to two feet wide, a dozen or so

kinds of stockpots and vats, and nearly the same amount of roasting pans. Jamie and Isabel made sure I was thoroughly introduced to each one of them.

With my back to the rest of the kitchen time didn't exist. There were only piles of dirty dishes to soak, piles of soaking dishes to scrape and wash, and then piles of clean dishes to dry. Each time that I thought I had cleared my slate and all that was left was a neat pile of clean, dry pots, pans, and dishes, Isabel would turn the corner with another bucketful and slide them down the counter at me. I felt like Sisyphus', though I'd already indulged in the silky flesh of my reward.

Until then I'd considered myself in good shape. An entire day of surfing had never fazed me. But after a couple of hours bent over the sink scrubbing ferociously at the grime and caked remnants of caramelized meats and vegetables, my back stiffened up. I turned off the faucet and stretched out the small of my back, twisting to each side and craning backwards, marveling as the tight joints popped.

"Can't take it anymore?" asked Isabel as she appeared beside me.

She looked me over plainly and went back to the line and took a bowl off the metal shelf and forked in a mound of spaghetti. Over the noodles Isabel spooned the sauce, globules of fat glistening in the rich red ragu. She slid the dish along the metal counter and fixed herself a bowl. Isabel grabbed a dark green bottle by the neck and took it with her out of the kitchen. At the doorway, she abruptly spun on her heel, as if she'd heard an errant coin drop onto the tile floor. I was standing in the corner at the opposite end of the kitchen, my back to the wall. "We're having family meal before service starts," she said. "If you're going to stay the shift come and sit with us

at the table.” I cradled my hot dinner and followed her down the dark hallway leading into the dining room.

The dining room was dark. All of the lights were still off. It had begun to snow outside and a clean layer of white powder covered the ground and fell from above and shone through the windows, bringing life to the room’s silence and darkness.

A dozen tables split on both sides of the room like pews, and the marble countered bar in the back. Chairs hung upside down on all of them but one. Jamie sat at its head, a bowl and two glasses at his ready. The light cascading from the street and the snow outlined his frame and shrouded his body. Long, loose hairs stuck out from the mane pulled back along his scalp. Jamie slouched as he ate, and the immense girth of his rounded torso seemed constricted within the chef’s jacket. The array of colors, those fierce oranges and violets and crimsons, which I knew covered his forearms, merged into a sinister black mass, and from afar all I saw were two black trunks extending from his body.

I sat down across from Isabel and Jamie poured us each a glass of wine before refilling his own. Isabel put her thumb over the top of a green bottle and drizzled oil over her pasta.

“Hit me with some of that, will you?” said Jamie. “And give some to the kid too.”

She obliged and I took two forks from the pile of silverware in the middle and slid one across the table towards her bowl. As I mixed it around and wafts of pepper and fat and flesh and simmered tomatoes drifted up from the pasta, I took a sip of

wine and it went right to my head. Weight and anxiety lifted from my shoulders and back. I wiped my mouth with a napkin and it left a crimson stain on the white cloth. Before I ate I snuck a quick glance at my companions, still unsure how to proceed. Jamie was hunched over a final string of spaghetti as Isabel ate with patience, gradually twisting the pasta around her fork until she'd formed a tight ring.

The wine had hit me hard and fast, but now the pasta beat a vein of warmth. Eating it I felt instantly nourished—in a way at once familiar and then again wholly alien. I was worn-out and starving, and the food satiated me. *But it also raised questions previously of no concern. (this isn't staying, but is only here to remind me of something)*

Surveying the room—the plush dark cover of the three banquettes, the single framed photograph above each table along the wall, the ceramic vase with last night's flowers drooping on the hostess stand by the door, the fresh wash of the expansive windows illuminating the snow outside—I felt out of place. It was a long way from the rickety oak dining table and framed family photographs, the drab, commercial carpet and small tablets of scripture nailed overhead at the walls of my mother's house.

Eating out was something we did not do in our family, especially at restaurants as elegant and expensive as *Brittany*. It wasn't only the money, though it was far more reasonable for my mother to feed us on her own. I think the gaudiness, the smell of the leather and varnished wood, the polish of the female diners and their suited companions, the eventual gluttony, it all reminded her too much of the many office parties which she'd reluctantly attended with my father. Entering

establishments like this, all she envisioned was inebriated men engaging secretaries and married women alike. To her the excessive food and drink at those gatherings held the ruin of her family life.

At home, comfort reigned over our family table. Her boys, Larry and myself and whoever else was joining us on any given night, provided the care and intimacy she desperately needed. We didn't require more than meat and a vegetable for nourishment, and the our presence sufficed for her. The only times that I could remember my mother taking us out was for my birthday, when she'd drive us to Chubby Checkers for greasy burgers and milkshakes. Even then, I could see her hesitation when the front door swung open and the hostess approached us.

But I was not eating my pasta surrounded by diners with blue blazers and women wrapped in silk scarves. To my left was a heavily tattooed man with a three-day growth. Across the table sat a woman who barely thought me worthy of polite, innocuous conversation. The white rim of my bowl was as bright as anything in the room. And yet with every bite and drink from my glass my mouth and mind experienced new and invigorating tastes and begged for more.

Jamie and Isabel ate quietly for some time and seeing that neither seemed poised for conversation, and not wanting to seem ungrateful, I broke the silence.

"This is great sauce, Jamie," I said, nodding enthusiastically at my bowl.

Jamie put down his fork and leaned towards me. "Sauce? It's not *sauce*, kid. Dammit, you're more hopeless than I thought. I'm not sure you deserve to be the

dishwasher. It's pasta *Bolognese*," he said in sharp Italian, running the "gn" together emphatically. We don't serve meat sauce here."

"Technically," said Isabel, "we don't serve pasta Bolognese either."

"You're lucky I like staring at your ass, Isabel, otherwise I wouldn't put up with that."

"I'm right though. When was the last time we served pasta?"

Jamie gnawed his bottom lip. Isabel's expression had not changed. It was as if no one had spoke and we were still eating in complete silence. One elbow was curled on the edge of the table and her left hand hung near her lap. With the other she continued to twirl pasta around her fork.

I was stunned with fear for Isabel. I wanted to succumb to Jamie's glare on her behalf, envisioning his wrath as more than she could possibly endure. Jamie scrutinized her for a long time and finally sighed.

"Fine, yes, she's right," he said to me. "We don't serve pasta here. It's a French joint and the French don't eat a whole lot of pasta, especially up in the North. But Isabel's missing the point. It's not 'sauce.' That shit your mom slops out of a metal tin, that's 'sauce.' This is onions and garlic and carrots and tomatoes and oil and wine and thyme and pork and veal and *that's* pasta Bolognese. Big difference. Got it?" he said, stabbing his dirty fork tines in my face. Jamie shook his head in exasperation and huffed noisily and put both hands out as if to push the table and its occupants away. "Just eat the food."

As belittling as Jamie was, he had a point. There was something tangible to his argument which I couldn't comprehend. It was pasta and vegetables and meat. It

was warm and when stirred, red. But the texture and taste were dissimilar to the few red sauces I'd seen growing up. Those had been thin and artificially colored, and the meat miniscule and dry. Thinking about it then, I realized how much it had resembled ketchup. In contrast, the Bolognese was rich and dense, with fat pieces of meat that I chewed just as much as I did the pasta. Slivers of garlic and chunks of carrots studded the sauce. The oil which Isabel had poured on was pungent and peppery and gave it bite.

Jamie began to write down a list on scratch paper of ingredients the kitchen needed for the upcoming weekend. Isabel finished her dinner and took out a pack of Lucky Strikes and lit one and flicked the ash into her empty bowl. I tried to pay attention to what they were saying, but they spoke in a culinary code which would take me weeks to pick up. Instead, I reached for Isabel's cigarettes. She nodded and slid the matches my way.

The restaurant front door opened and two males ran in and stomped their boots and shook the layer of snow onto the mat. They walked between the tables towards us and took off their wool caps. Standing side by side they couldn't have looked more different. One was tall and gaunt and beneath his horn-rimmed glasses was the only hair on his head, a trimmed goatee. The other one was a half foot shorter and I recognized him from my art history class that Chris had convinced me to enroll in. The course was a survey on European Art and three times a week two hundred students crowded an auditorium for lecture. We'd just spent an entire class looking at Caravaggio slides one afternoon when the lights came on and I noticed a student a few rows in front of me stand up. I was struck by the effeminate quality of

his face, the soft cheekbones and the blush which covered them and made him seem perpetually tipsy. His long, wavy hair flowed down to his shoulders and was the same auburn color as one of Caravaggio's subjects. Though he looked like he'd never shaved before, he carried himself with the swagger of someone much older.

They strode over and the shorter one put his hand on Jamie's shoulder.

"Tell me you left us some grub, Jamie," he said and picked up the bottle of wine and shook it.

"It's out back. And stay away from the wine. I don't know how many times I have to tell you that it's not for you."

"It's freezing outside. Wine warms my body. It energizes me."

"Don't touch it."

"Why do you and Izzy get to have some? And who's this guy?"

"Nobody. Just a temp dishwasher."

"How does one temp dishwashing, Jamie? It seems pretty easy. You wash dishes and then you dry them."

"You have scrub to my liking. It's like your first time with a whore, Max. You know what I'm talking about. You test her, see if she knows the basic routine and can repeat at will. If so, you give her some money. If she's slow and can't perform, give her the boot. Even you can understand that."

The taller one lay his coat over the back of a chair and left through the swinging doors to the kitchen. Max searched the room for a glass and returned with two small coffee cups.

"Come on, one glass. What do you have there, pasta?"

“Bolognese,” said Jamie.

“See! Pasta Bolognese,” said Max, pronouncing it with a flourish matching Jamie’s. “It’s begging for some red wine.”

“You touch that bottle and I’ll cut your hand off and wear it as a souvenir around my neck.”

“Jesus, Jamie,” said Max, pulling back his arm. “I’m just playing. You two already have a bottle open.”

“That’s because we’ve been here for half the day. While you were home jerking Jill, Isabel and I’ve been working. Shit, cowboy Shane here’s done more today than you have.” Jamie swiped the bottle from the middle of the table and poured out the rest of the contents into my glass. “Get your food and stay out of the booze. I’m serious.”

Max slunk away and Isabel lit up another cigarette and started to laugh.

“You’ll wear his hand for a souvenir? Shit, Jamie.”

“Can’t help it. Got the best of me.”

“You know you’re going to give him some.”

“Yeah. I know.”

Isabel took a drag and tilted her head back and blew a thin stream of smoke towards the ceiling. “How many covers we got tonight?”

“Fifty-six.”

The two waiters emerged from the kitchen and one flipped the light switch to the dining room and they sat down at the table. Isabel passed the oil and they began to eat.

“I don’t know how you guys eat in the dark like that,” said Max, and then, through a mouthful of food, “good Bolognese, chef.”

“You swipe a bottle?”

“You told me not to.”

Jamie pushed back his chair and left. A minute later he returned with a bottle and an opener. A loud pop rang when he uncorked it. “You want any more?” he asked me. I indicated that I was fine and Jamie reached down the table and filled the two empty cups to the rim.

“Who are you again?” asked the bald waiter.

“This is Shane. He’s Chris Ryzinski’s pal and he’s helping out tonight.”

“I’m Ricky,” he said and stuck out his hand. “And this is Max.” Max raised his glass my way and then paused and furrowed his brow. “Do I know you, man?”

“I think we have art history together.”

Everyone at the table emitted simultaneous melodic groans. Jamie slipped a Lucky out from the pack and struck a match. “I knew you were like that but, Art History, Max?”

Max dismissed them all with a wave of one hand but kept his attention on me, examining my face. “No, that’s not it. Wait, are you in that class?”

“Back row.”

“That’s great. You do well? I mean, do you pass?”

“I do well, sure.”

“Even better. Now I have someone to cheat off of. This girl I sit next to is fine and all but not too bright. But still, that’s not it.” Max snapped his fingers and

pointed accusingly at me. “You’re that guy who’s always playing pool at The Whaler. Always playing the locals for money.”

“We just play for spare change and beers,” I said, which was for the most part the truth.

The Whaler was a watering hole frequented primarily by ice fisherman, truckers, and construction workers. I’d gone for a stroll around the lake early on in the fall semester. Minona had seemed smaller on the map. A couple of hours later and still not half way around I spotted a line of trucks beside a beaten brick building with a small blue and black placard of a whale nailed above the door. It didn’t seem much, one floor, one window, and paint which had withered away years ago. But I was thirsty.

The regulars were a rough looking bunch, most of them coarsely bearded and carrying burly torsos. Five or six men seated at the bar eyed me when I entered. They didn’t strike me as altogether different than the locals at Pacific Beach or Ocean Beach and I ordered a beer and, noticing the pool table in the corner, asked if anyone wanted to shoot a rack. Not one of them, including the bartender who stuck up a single finger to indicate the bottle’s price, spoke a word to me for over an hour.

I hadn’t shot pool in months and though the company disapproved of me, I didn’t mind. Skynard and Sabbath beat out of the jukebox and the beer was cheap. I racked game after game by myself and shot through each, regaining my stroke. After an hour one of the men at the bar got up and grabbed the rack off the plastic light fixture above the felt. He put a five dollar bill down on the rail and slung each ball

tight in the triangle. When I pocketed the eight ball on my second turn he jammed his hand into the back of his jeans and stacked another bill on top of the five.

“Mister,” I’d said to him, “I don’t especially want to play for cash. I’d just as well play for rounds of beer if you wanted.” The men at the Whaler liked that. Later I had the feeling they’d been testing me. Town gown tension was still rife in Madison, and I didn’t appear the least bit local. I imagine if I’d taken the winnings that afternoon they would have beat it out of me, and if I’d lost they would have just thought I was a rich, college-boy sucker and taken their pound of flesh regardless. That I still frequented the bar, and had gradually gained their approval, was no small feat. In all my time spent there, though, I had never seen Max.

“You know the Whaler?” I asked him.

“Sure I do. I buy dope from one of the guys there every so often. Seth, the guy with the bushy red beard.”

“Seth, yeah. Doesn’t surprise me.”

“All right boys,” said Jamie. “Enough small talk. Finish up and get to work.” Ricky and Max mopped up the last remnants of Bolognese with bread and emptied the bottle of wine into their glasses.

“Jamie,” I said, seeing that he didn’t seem ready to leave the table. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“Shoot.”

“That food you gave me earlier, when I first came in today. Isabel said I’d want to know what it was.”

“No, the question is did you enjoy it.”

“I’ve never had anything like it before.”

“If I told you what it was would that change?”

I thought this over for a moment, imagining a gruesome carcass exhumed and somehow made not only palatable but delicious. Each member of the crew at *Brittany* was staring at me, awaiting my answer. “No, I suppose not.”

“Okay then. A couple thousand years ago the Egyptians found that if they overfed geese and ducks before slaughter their livers grew to immense proportions. It was a delicacy for the Pharaohs. Among the booty the knights from the Crusades brought back with them was this bit of agricultural info. The French’ve been fattening up fowl ever since. What they do is, three weeks before slaughter they start force-feeding the animals three times a day. The liver grows from the excess food and when they are butchered it weighs, depending on the animal, somewhere around a pound. What you ate was a rabbit and foie gras terrine. Really it’s a mixture of the fattened goose liver and braised rabbit from Chris’ farm. That’s it.”

“How do they force feed the animals?” I asked.

Jamie curled his huge hand around an imaginary neck in the air. “You take the animal and stick a tube down its esophagus and pump the feed down the tube.”

“All that just to fatten the liver?”

“It’s a beautiful thing, Shane. That terrine is a thing of beauty.” Max rose from his chair and Jamie held out his plate for him. “Take this,” he said, and Max took the plate. It was bone white, as if Jamie had licked it clean, and illuminated from the burning bulb above us. Jamie leaned back in his chair and brought his hands together in his lap. Finishing my meal it suddenly dawned on me exactly how long it

had been since I had turned my head to the side as seen a man sitting at the head of my table.

Chapter 9: Family Heirloom

May 2007

Sometimes I wonder how I arrived here, how I reached middle age to find myself living alone in a foreign city, thousands of miles away from anyone I consider family. I look around the apartment and see nothing that attests to the fact I have lived for fifty years, have made and lost friendships, have loved a handful of women, even married one, and that I have a son.

No pictures of any of these people scattered on desks or framed on the wall. Instead, inanimate objects—furniture, clothes, books, cookware—things that I can part with at a moment's notice and replace easily. Sure, I see some books I would miss, some that I have lugged around from city to city. But I know if I was to strike out again tomorrow morning with only the empty black duffel bag that lies on the floor of the closet next to the front door, I would select only a few of the hundreds of books gathered around the living room, clothes to last a few days, and then head directly to the magnetic rack above the sink and take down each of the knives that hang there. Those I could never part with.

Each knife has its own place in the hard plastic knife case. The slaughtering knife, with its grotesque-looking blade, has not been touched in years now, but I still find daily uses for my old Wusthofs and the handmade sushi knives.

The bone handles of these knives fit snugly into the palm of my hand, and when I take one down from the rack, I feel the sense of companionship. We know one another, and will move together in step. We've butchered thousands of animals and prepped tons of fruits and vegetables. Though I no longer cook twelve hours a

day, and the wear on them is not as great as it once was, I still take time each night after I've washed and put away the dishes to work each knife across the oiled whetstone. The rough grain of one side is audible and harsh as the blade moves over its surface. The fine stone of the flipside smooth to the edge of the knife like miniscule white grains of sand beneath my feet. I take my time. It is pleasing to see my hands work the knife and stone well, and to hear the high pitched ting when the sharpened knife is returned to its place on the metal rack.

The only knife missing from the rack is the one that I gave Marco when I parted finally with him and his mother. It was the first knife I ever owned, the one I used daily for all the years I cooked professionally, and the one I taught him to cut with.

He was eight or nine, and we were still living in Boston. I had written all that I could earlier that morning, which was probably very little as all I could think about was Marco returning home from school. Maria was not going to be around until later and I was to cook dinner that night for the three of us. I'd decided that it was time to teach Marco to wield a knife.

We went very slowly at first. I stood behind him so that I could see each hair on his head distinctly and took his small, cream colored right hand in mine. How soft and unmarked, how pure it was compared to my own. He was so excited. He'd been after me for a long time, begging me when his mother was gone, to handle a knife. A zucchini lay on the cutting board—something easy to begin with and wouldn't make him cry like an onion would. I wrapped our hands around the knife so his thumb and the knuckle of his index finger grasped the base of the blade and not the handle. It

couldn't have been later than five in the afternoon, but in my memory the sun is setting right outside our window, golden light shining down upon the two of us. We were standing together in the middle of the kitchen. With our left hand we held the zucchini, our knuckles resting against the knife. The knife moved up and down in a perfect rocking motion, the edge of the blade slicing through the ripe vegetable. It took us a couple of minutes to get through our first zucchini, and when we were done and twenty or so even circles lined up against each other like a set of fallen dominoes, I turned Marco around so I could see his face. He was smiling and his boyish enthusiasm overwhelmed me. I think that that must have been how I looked, or at least how I felt inside, the first time I was given a compliment by the first chef I ever worked for. When Maria arrived home before dinner, almost all of the vegetables we'd had in the refrigerator had been sliced and were piled high on the kitchen counter.

The boyish grin, the sense of wonderment that had filled his face that afternoon, was gone years later when I handed him the same knife wrapped inside an undershirt I'd pulled from the side of my bag. We were at the foot of the Ponte Rialto, in Venice. It was February, and mist and fog blanketed the city. Marco's jacket collar was turned up against his neck and jawbone and his thick wavy hair matted down onto his forehead. He'd grown so much in the six years we'd lived in Italy. By then he was fifteen or sixteen and nearing my height. He'd packed on weight, a layer of muscle acquired from six years of farm work. He stood tall and proud in front of me and did not waver once as we said goodbye. Over his shoulder was his mother, standing beneath the awning of one of those horrible trattorias

abutting the canal. Her eyes met mine and turned upwards towards the gray sky when I handed Marco the rolled up shirt.

“I want you to have this, Marco,” I said to him.

He made to pull off one of the rubber bands I’d secured the package with, but I reached out and took his hand in mine. It’d hardened, and as slick and cold as it was from the winter weather, I could still feel the strength within it.

“You ought to get going,” I said. “Your mother’s getting cold and you two have a long trip back to the States.” I looked down at my present in his hands. “I hope you find some use for it. It’s meant a great deal to me over the years.” I motioned to his mother and as she approached I hugged Marco firmly against my chest. I gave Maria a light kiss on each cheek and wished her well, and then they were gone, walking down the old stone street alongside the waterway. By noon they were on a train to Florence and their plane flight to California, and I was sitting alone in a cramped apartment, watching the tide rise in the lagoon, the water seep up the canal walls and flood the sidewalks and then the passersby splash through the gray brown *alta acqua*, rushing to their warm dry homes.

I spent the night inside a barren hotel bar replaying the image of Marco and his mother walking away from me, of a father and a son parting ways. What worried me most about it was how similar it was to the morning my own father left, and I couldn’t help but wonder what Marco had seen in me earlier that afternoon, if when he saw me sweat and stare into his eyes, he’d realized that I *did* care, that I did not resent him in any way, but that the predicament we had been left with was inevitable.

This worry was brought on primarily because it was precisely the opposite way I had felt more than thirty years before.

It was the summer before my senior year in high school. Eric was still alive, and in three weeks I was to turn seventeen. Larry, Eric, and I had gone to La Jolla Shores for a few hours that morning but had left by nine because the waves were small and choppy, blown out by a strong onshore wind. I dropped off my friends at their houses and then drove home. I was driving an old and rusted VW bug convertible then. At one time it had been bright yellow, but the color had been bleached out of it by the sun and by then it was all but white. But it ran, which was enough, and since the roof retracted we could store our boards in the back. After years of being driven to the beach in the morning by my mother, and then picked up at night by her as well, it made us feel old and proud to have our own wheels. We could with dignity and air.

I pulled up to the curb outside our one-story track house as my father shut the trunk to his Chevy parked in the driveway. He was tall and handsome, not as tall as I would become, but he had some height on me then. Years of idleness, sitting behind a desk in his suit at the firm he worked at, had left him with something of a pouch, and his collared shirt was taut against his stomach.

I suppose I'd known for some time that he would eventually leave. There'd been years of arguments in the house, many of which I was there for. Many of them concerned me. I knew, as did my mother, what he occurred when he went out alone at night. Even so, the sight of him standing in our driveway, waiting for me, made it hard to approach him. He'd never waited for me before. I used to believe that he

resented me, that all I was to him was a hindrance, the ammunition my mother used when they fought—a physical reminder of why he was unable to live the way he wished.

It could not have taken me more than a couple of minutes to exit my car and take the board from the back, but by the time I walked up to him he was clearly exasperated.

“Shane,” he said to me. “Go deal with your mother.”

“Where are you going?” I said, looking through the rear window of his car at the boxes and suitcases crowding the back seat.

Sweat ran from the bridge of his nose down one side towards his cheek. He glared at me for a moment before he spoke. That he looked me in the eyes and that he sweated would for most people have indicated he was nervous or understood the gravity of his actions. But this was not the case with my father and especially not so at that moment. He’d never cared for me. And I’m sure that when the two or three beads of sweat appeared on his lip and he washed it down into his mouth with his tongue, it tasted faintly of juniper.

“I’m leaving.” His eyes moved from my face up to my hair, straw yellow and thick and tangled from the morning in the ocean. My hair was very long then, pulled back behind my ears to the base of my neck. He bit his lip, shook his head and walked away from me, and got into his car. The engine turned and then purred—he always had expensive cars—and I walked passed him towards the front door without looking back. I put my board down on a stretch of dry grass and heard him say over the noise of the car, “See you around, Shane.” I went inside to find my mother.

She was standing at the kitchen sink, gazing at a line of bottles on the countertop. Whiskey, tequila, vodka, gin, and a half dozen bottles of beer. I watched her from just inside the doorway. The window at the sink was brilliant with light. It hit the side of her face and I marveled at the dried streaks on her cheek, where the tears had stopped running down her olive skin. She was very beautiful, even in that moment. Especially at that moment. She had long wavy black hair, the color of the crows that came in the morning and sat along our back fence and watched over the entire canyon. Her hair flowed down and as she lifted two bottles up in the air and drained their contents down into the sink it swayed between her shoulder blades.

It took her a good time to empty all the bottles and I let her have that to herself. She'd known I was standing there, though, because when it was all done, and the last of my father's belongings out of the house, she grasped the counter firmly and sighed once and turned her head to look at me across the room. Her voice was steady, almost regal. I have never been quite sure if her initial composure was for my benefit or for hers.

"Well. That's that, isn't it?" she said to me.

At the kitchen sink I held my mother and let her rest her head against my chest. Through the window I could see over the cropped picket fence that ran alongside our house and into our neighbor's backyard. The Tallisker kids were swimming in their pool. There were three of them, I remember. Two boys and a girl, all just a year or two apart, the oldest, Susie, about my age. I heard the water explode each time one of them jumped into the pool and then their laughs and cries of joy. Their parents had installed the pool earlier in the spring and that summer I often

snuck out of the window in my room at night and climbed over the fence and swam with Susie in the dark. The stars lit the black night sky, crowding over us. We swam noiselessly, so our parents wouldn't hear us, shivering in the chill of the canyon air hanging above the water, and then we'd embrace to keep warm.

 Holding my mother in our empty kitchen, all I could do was look through the film on our window and across into their backyard and wonder at how someone could be so selfish as to leave a family fatherless.