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Author

Blankenship, Joseph Scott

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Searching the Roadside: Stories

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Joseph Scott Blankenship

September 2012

Thesis Committee:

Professor Robert Roberge, Co-Chairperson

Professor Andrew Winer, Co-Chairperson

Professor Mary Yukari Waters

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The Thesis of Joseph Scott Blankenship is approved:

Committee Co-Chairperson

Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Waterdog

The three of us sat in the loose gravel on the bank of the quarry pond. Jeff tied a crappie killer on the end of his line, then bit down on a split-shot a foot up. I rummaged through my green, two-tray Plano tackle box, grabbed the waterdog, and started to tie it on my line.

“You think you’re gonna catch something with that?” Jeff said. He and Fernie busted out laughing. Jeff wasn’t so cool when other people were around. He thought he was, though.

“What do you call that thing?” asked Fernie.

I knew better than to say, but, somehow, it just slipped out. “A waterdog.”

“A water-dawg?” said Fernie, “Look Jethro, he’s got him a water-dawg!” Jeff and Fernie laughed so hard they flopped back and rolled around on the gravel.

I even had to laugh, a little. I set the bail on my reel and went to cast my lure across the pond—way across the pond. The only thing good about being big-for-my-age was that I could cast the farthest. Line resting on my index finger, I reached back and flung the lure as hard as I could. The waterdog sailed through the warm summer air, high above the pond. Then suddenly, halfway to the lucky spot I was aiming for, the waterdog’s flight came to a sudden stop. It dropped into the water. I looked down at my reel to see the biggest bird’s nest ever.

“He backlashed his reel!” screamed Jeff, who never backlashed his reel. It was another round of laughs and gravel rolling for him and Fernie. I wasn’t embarrassed anymore, just mad.

“Fuck you guys!” I said. I saved the F-word for special occasions. Dad would knock the crap out of me, if he ever heard.

“Ooooh,” said Jeff and Fernie.

I ignored them and started untangling the bird’s nest. It wasn’t really knotted up, it was just a matter of stripping off the line, and then carefully reeling it back in. I had just gotten all of the slack line back on my reel, and BAM! Something hit the waterdog! I yanked back on my Fenwick to set the hook.

I yelled, “Fish on!” as I scrambled to my feet. Jeff and Fernie jumped up and stood right behind me, one on each shoulder. I could feel the weight on the end of my line; this was no bluegill. I fought the fish; cranking my reel, feeling a solid steady pull. I ignored Jeff’s coaching (play him . . . play him), and within two minutes yanked in a five—maybe even six-pound bass. I carried it way up on shore. This baby wasn’t getting away. I laid the flopping fish on the gravel. Fernie and Jeff rushed up to admire it.

“Look at that sucker, ese. I didn’t think there were fish like that in here,” said Fernie.

“It’s a big-mouth bass. You should have played him, man,” complained Jeff. “You reeled him in as fast as you could.” He was just mad because, for once, he didn’t catch the big one.

“I’m going home to show my dad,” I said as I unhooked the waterdog from the fish’s mouth and secured it to an eye on my fishing pole.

“You’re kidding?” Jeff whined. “That was your first cast!”

Fernie said, “He’s gotta go show his daaaad”.

I went to my tackle box and dug out a stringer, then rushed back to my flipping-flopping trophy. I was so excited that my hands shook as I threaded the green nylon cord through the gill and out of the fish's gaping mouth. I put the pointed metal end through the ring and pulled it tight. The bass continued the quick, strong flicks of its tail, but this time, the prize was mine.

From up the street, I could see the old Galaxy 500 was in the driveway. I dropped my pole and tackle box on the front lawn, and carried my fish into the house. Dad wasn't in his recliner watching TV, so I stuck my head in the garage. "Dad?" Where the heck was he? I opened the back door and there he was, painting the back porch.

I burst through the door holding up the bass to show him. "Look what I caught with the waterdog!"

"Well, look at that. I told you my old waterdog would catch you one."

Dad then looked over my fish and frowned, "That son-of-a-gun's all head—must be four pounds, though. Where'd you catch it?"

"Down at the gravel pit," I said, "On the first . . ."

"Probably washed out of a farm pond upstream during a heavy rain," Dad said, "It was starving; see how big the head is compared with the body? Can't eat it. It'll taste like mud." Dad pushed his glasses up on his nose, dipped his brush in the can, "You should be doing some of these chores."

I walked past my Dad, down the steps and onto the narrow patch of grass between the house and the fence. Without saying a word, I went alongside the house toward the garbage can.

Dad yelled, “Where’re you going?”

I lifted the lid of our old dented garbage can. Surrounded by the smell of rotting food and coffee grounds, I dropped the bass in. It was all head anyway . . . I took one last look. My trophy was now all bent and stiff. I suddenly felt bad for taking it from the pond. I pushed the lid back onto the can and went through the gate that led to the front yard.

Escape

My boy has a rash. It was two little red spots yesterday, each about the size of a quarter, now the two spots have merged into one fist-sized oval. The rash is centered on his waist and seems to be heading south toward his ass cheek. Jan noticed the change as she wiped the dirt off him with a t-shirt sacrificed for such purposes. The birdy-bath was their little late afternoon ritual before we made him settle down for the night. Poor kid must’ve picked up a deer tick pretty soon after we abandoned the car—probably while we were scrambling through that brushy stretch before we found the trail. Damn deer ticks are impossible to see. He doesn’t know the implication, and his mother and I aren’t going to tell him.

I never thought civil society would end this way. I didn’t think it would end at all, really...not in my lifetime. A protest turned to riot. Then, the rioting spread. I didn’t disagree with the issues. All the wealth controlled by too few, too many in despair. We all saw the cracks after the housing bust. When the rioting hadn’t subsided after a week I had a bad feeling in my gut—a really bad feeling. I packed Jan and Benji in the car, and headed west. It fell apart so fast.

If I can make it into a town, I'll try to get Benji some antibiotics. This close to the city, all the medicine has probably been looted by now, anyway the Lyme won't kill him tonight or even in a month. It's the least of our worries. We can't smell the smoke, anymore. The wind must have shifted.

"I'm hungry, Dad."

"Nothing till morning, Champ."

We've been in the woods for nearly a week. Jan and I haven't eaten much in a couple of days, just some hickory nuts and wild blueberries I foraged, but we still have a few packaged peanut butter crackers for Benji. There should be plenty of edible plants along the creek. I'll go gathering tomorrow. Finding the forest road, and the little creek that runs along side of it, was a godsend. I tell Jan and Benji about the rule of threes. A person can survive three minutes without air; three days without water, and three weeks without food. Jan smooths Benji's hair, trying to distract him from his empty belly. He's a good boy. He tries his best not to complain, but he's hungry. Eventually he drifts off to sleep.

In a low voice, so not to disturb Benji, Jan says, "We've got to get him to a doctor."

"You know that's not possible, right now."

"I don't know. Maybe things have calmed down." After a pause she says, "We should have listened to those soldiers."

"They'd lost control. It was obvious," I say.

Jan slides Benji's head off her lap and scoots closer to me. "Obvious to you. This isn't your decision to make. I'm taking Benji to town...to a doctor. I'm sure the National Guard's in control by now."

"There is no control," I say.

Jan points to the valley below. From the rise we're camped on, we can see town lights in the distance. "Look at that. If no one's in control, why hasn't the power gone out? It's been a week."

The uprisings hadn't been brought under control. Not this fast. Maybe some rogue band of troops were able to get some lights on—fire up some big diesel generators. Maybe some parts of the electrical system hadn't failed yet, who knows? But the East Coast hadn't gone from chaos back to roasting chestnuts and white picket fences in a week. That much I know.

She says, "We shouldn't have left the car. I don't know why I listened to you."

"We're vulnerable on the..."

"Yeah, yeah," she says. "We're vulnerable on the roads. It's Mad Max out there, right, Dan?"

"Mock me all you want," I say. "Martial Law is always the beginning of the end."

"Says who? You're a fucking actuary, not some military expert." Her low voice had become a hiss. "This isn't some third-world country that's going to collapse because of some rioting."

"Not a third-world country? This isn't the America of our youth," I say.

"This country has had riots and destruction before. Look at the Civil Rights Movement. It's almost like you want everything to collapse."

"That's ridiculous," I say.

Jan just shakes her head.

"I haven't given up hope," I say. "We shouldn't give up hope. We'll survive."

Jan stands up and leans toward me, putting her mouth to my ear, angry. "I want more for Benji than survival. We're fucking hiking to that town. You can stay up here with your paranoid fantasies, if you want."

"You'll be killed," I say.

Jan stands up and takes a step back. "Maybe, but not by your stupid survivalist fantasy, and not by your fucking relentless paranoia and despair. I can't believe I've let it go this far."

Jan walks away from the fire. I stare at my boy. He's so full of life. They're so full of life at this age. He's sleeping so deeply—right through our angry accusations. Drool pools on the tarp beneath his chin. Jan thinks she's won. Used the mom veto on my plan.

"Let's sleep on it, and talk about the in the morning," I say. She has no intention of striking off on her own. She thinks she can guilt me into hiking to town...and she thinks I'm delusional.

From fringes of the firelight, back to me, hands on her hips, Jan says, "We're going to that town tomorrow."

When I wake they're gone. The sun hasn't been up long, so they couldn't be far ahead of me. My limbs feel heavy, but I have to get moving. As I pull myself up, I realize

the backpack isn't where I left it. I search the campsite. She took it. I hope she hasn't looked inside, yet. Felt the extra weight in the pack. When Benji asks for those crackers, the gig is up. I look for water to rinse my dry mouth, but she's taken all that we boiled last night. Both gallon jugs are gone. Shit! She had to put one in pack. I quickly lace up my boots, cinch my belt, and start in a half jog down the rutted dirt road. She's lost all trust in me, that's clear. I'm the enemy.

Stalking them down this isolated old road, I feel like the enemy, and I don't like it. I don't know if you'd call our relationship love, but I never had anything but the greatest respect for Jan. I know she loves our son deeply and completely. I know she's basically a good person. It would be nice if she had that kind of faith in me.

I'm amazed how far they've gotten. She must have hit the road at the first hint of dawn. They're moving at a pretty good pace, but of course, Benji's short strides and lack of stamina limit their progress. She's forced to pull him along behind her. She does a quick glance over her shoulder and pretends not to see me, but I know she does because she quickens her pace. After a few more steps she says, "Don't try to stop us."

"You're making a mistake. There's nothing for you in that town...what you're hoping for is long gone."

From under her windbreaker she produces my gun. "Get away from us! You've fucking lost it." Thrusting it toward me, she says, "How long have you had this?"

"We need protection," I say.

Benji blurts out, "Leave us alone, Dad." He's trembling.

“Come on, Dude,” I say to him, “What’s going on? This is me, Dad.” I fold my arms and stand in place as they start to back away from me. “Don’t make me the villain, Jan. None of this is my fault.”

“Let’s go,” she says to Benji. I can tell she doesn’t want to take her eyes off me. Tears streak his face, now. He seems younger than his eight years.

When Jan felt she was a safe distance away, they turned and hurried down the road. She kept turning back to check on me, gun in hand. I was running out of options. They were only a couple of miles from the pavement, and they’d be sitting ducks there. As soon as they were out of site, I started after them. I had to find a way to get the gun from Jan, and stop her from getting our son killed. The road clings to the side of low, brushy hill and follows the small creek down slope. The vegetation wasn’t as dense in the streambed as it was up the hillside, but I couldn’t launch an effective attack from down there.

Attack. That sounded terrible. It’s not really an attack. It’s an intervention. I expected neighbor on neighbor conflicts when the end came, but I never thought Jan would turn on me...become my adversary. Through all our ups and downs, I had always been her protector. The loss of that is bitter. I flash back on a summer camping trip in Vermont. How she held on to me in that swift, icy stream. It made me feel powerful and important in a wonderful way. She needed me. She depended on me. I thought that was one thing I’d have in these times--the thing that would hold me together. I still have my boy to protect.

Jan will be wary of an ambush...intervention, but she knows jack about guns. I can't imagine she'll be very effective at getting off a shot. I scan the embankment for an animal trail heading up the slope. I follow a decent deer trail through a tangle of milkweed and baneberry bushes that grow between small beech and maple trees. The trail splits and peters out, but after a couple hundred feet, the thick undergrowth slows my pace.

I have a sinking feeling that this is a terribly flawed tactic—that my bad choice will cost Benji his life, but then a feral mix of panic and frustration drive me up the hill and, at the ridgeline, I emerged from the thicket. From above I have a pretty good vantage point from which to see the road. I'm way above them. I can just make out Jan; she's pushing Benji ahead of her, and looking back to see if I'm following. They soon round a bend that obscures them from my site.

They can't be far from the paved road, I caught glimpses of it alongside what must be the Delaware River, and I don't know if I can force my burning legs to carry me fast enough to intercept them. I don't have a real plan. I guess I'll try to get close enough to do a bull rush at Jan before they see me. I figure the dirt road they're on must intersect the paved road at the confluence of the little creek and the River. If I go straight down the toe of the ridge, I might be able to intercept them just as they hit the pavement. The ridgeline has some brush, but not nearly as much as the slope I came up, and I make good time. After about twenty minutes, I come down through the trees, the paved road now visible below.

The last thirty feet of the slope is nearly vertical so I sit on the forest litter and slide down. I crash into the rocky drainage at the bottom and manage to give my right ankle a good tweak, I can't hear any traffic coming, but I do hear our little stream dumping into the river. Not far. The dirt road is likely between me and that stream. As I limp toward the stream I hear...

"Whoo-hoo! We made it!" Jan's voice.

"How much farther?" Benji's voice. I can barely make out his voice over the sound of the brook, but I'm pretty familiar with the cadence of that particular question.

I sneak down the road in their direction. Around a slight bend in the road I see them. They're maybe twenty yards past the dirt road. They're walking hand in hand, and they haven't thought to look behind them. I don't know if I can catch them with my ankle the way it is.

I hear Benji say, "Can I get a frozen custard?"

"After you go to the doctor," Jan says. "If the town we're going to even has frozen custard."

This isn't going to be pretty, but I have to do the best I can for my son. I owe him that. Ignoring the pain in my ankle and silently close the distance between us. I'm only ten feet behind her. Everything is in slow motion. She turns and screams. Pushing Benji away with one hand, she turns to steel herself against my assault.

"Run Benji. Stay on the road!"

I tackle her. Her head hits the pavement with such force she convulses in pain for a second, but she recovers quickly and with a fury. She's squirming and trying to get away. I don't feel the gun. She doesn't have the gun.

"Get off of her!" I don't see Benji, but he sounds close. "Get off of her, Dad!" A horn blasts. In the background I hear the rumbling of a large truck. Her adrenaline pumping, Jan is a handful. I hear footfalls behind me, but our battle is all consuming.

When I come to, I'm riding in the back of a large vehicle. We're in a windowless steel box. This must be some kind of an armored personnel carrier. There are two soldiers....they aren't in proper uniform. They might be a paramilitary outfit. Looking past the soldiers, I see Jan and Benji sit huddled together on the other end of the steel bench that encircles the compartment. Benji's face is buried in her chest. Jan just stares at small rectangular window in the hatch, which seems to be the only way out of this big metal breadbox.

"Jan...I'm sorry."

"Quiet," says the soldier nearest me. Benji glances my direction, but then curls back into his mother's embrace. Jan kisses Benji on the top of the head. She doesn't acknowledge my presence.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Stroudsburg." The soldier nearest me says. He looks to be in his early twenties. He's thin, dark skinned, and definitely military. He's wearing fatigue pants and a wife-beater undershirt. His boots could be military issue. His partner is a thin but muscular white guy in his mid-thirties. He has a buzz cut and tribal tats.

“What’s in Stroudsburg?”

“Commander Pirithous,” the black kid answers.

“Pirithous? Is he regular army?”

The soldier seems to ignore my question, but after a few seconds, he speaks, though not really to me, “Ain’t nothing regular no more.” Jan just keeps hugging Beni and staring out the little window.

Stroudsburg’s high school is now a fortified compound. Concertina wire encircles the gym and athletic fields and a tent city has been erected. Armed soldiers are stationed around the perimeter. From my childhood, I remember Stroudsburg as a quaint little Pocono town, but I’ve never seen this school. Towns in the Catskills and Poconos have suffered years of decline. So many have lost their jobs, there’s nothing to vacation from and no money to vacation with. A few of the moneyed elite probably maintain expansive summer homes, but this area has been economically depressed for years. These little tourist towns are dying on the vine.

The young soldier guarding me says his name is Cueto. I don’t know if it’s his first name or last. I can’t see through the windows of the personnel carrier, they’re heavily tinted, but I assume there is a driver sitting in the cab. Jan and Benji stand next to the other soldier. He says, “I’m gonna take these two to see a medic.” and leads Jan and Benji across the compound. Benji looks back at me, still confused and angry. Jan, head down, drags Benji along, never looking my direction. It’s hot, and humid as hell. We’re fifty yards from the tents, but I can see its civilian inhabitants going about their daily

activities. I see men and women carrying Jerry Cans of water from a tank in the center of the compound. Everyone seems calm and civil, there are children playing ball in the open spaces, but I notice that the water supply is heavily guarded.

I want to see my wife and son. I want to tell Jan I made a mistake. I wish she'd shot me. Cueto brings me to Pirithous' headquarters. I don't know how long we'd been standing in the shade of the personnel carrier, but it felt like at least an hour. The Iraq War era tent is maybe sixty feet long and its desert camouflage exterior stands in stark contrast to the lush green foliage in the neighborhood surrounding the school. The tent is stuffy, humid, and only marginally cooler than outdoors. A group of people are hunched over a large folding table. We are greeted by a female officer, I assume she's Pirithous' assistant.

"Commander Pirithous will be with you shortly." She motions to a bench. "Have a seat."

Cueto sits next to me. He's more relaxed, but he still has his weapon at the ready. A tall woman in her early forties excuses herself from the table and walks over to us.

"Eleanor Pirithous. I run this little operation."

"What's going on? Are you regular army...part of the US government?"

"There's been a reorganization of government. The president and his cabinet have stepped down. There is a civilian/military governing committee in place until we can organize elections. There's some work to do first..." Pirithous looks back at the group she just left. They are still busy doing whatever they're doing. "Your wife and son are going

to Scranton--they have better medical facilities. We have control of a route between here and there. The risk of an encounter is minimal. You'll have a chance to say goodbye."

"Goodbye? Encounter with whom?"

"Insurgents, bandits. Whatever's left out there."

"Why can't I go?"

"Why can't you go? For starters, you're under arrest."

"Arrest?"

"My patrol had to pry you off of you wife. You attacked her while your little boy watched."

"I was trying to save him."

"So was your wife. She was trying to... no." Pirithous jabbed an accusing finger toward me. "She did save him from you."

Jan and Benji are sitting under a pop-up tent near the motor pool when Cueto and I walk up. Benji head is hanging but he looks up toward me. Jan is staring off into space. Her head is bandaged. Jesus.

Jan says, "Give your father a hug and say goodbye."

Benji starts to cry.

"I'm sorry Jan."

"Apologize to your son."

She's nothing if not consistent. Always making Benji the center of everything.

“Pull your head out of you ass and listen for once. I’m sorry for everything. I was trying to protect my family.”

“I never asked for your protection. Never wanted your protection. But I sure as hell never thought I’d need protection from you. I honestly would have never believed you’d abuse me.” Jan and Benji are both crying now. Benji walks over and hugs my legs. I feel bad, really bad, but I wasn’t wrong. Shit is seriously fucked up. The life we knew is gone.

“Can’t you understand why I did what I did,” I ask.

“Sure. I understand,” she says, wiping her eyes “That’s the problem.”

“I only wanted what was best for you guys.”

“What you thought was best.” Jan says. It’s obvious that the fight has gone out of her. She just looks sad. “This life promised more than it could deliver, but if we can’t be civil...kind, what it all for?.”

Head hanging, Benji releases me and returns to his mother. Cueto puts his hand on my shoulder, “Time to go, Bro.”

Billy’s Way

I was going in for a bag of mini donuts and some rolling papers, when I passed Joey Ramirez coming out. I knew Joey from Continuation.

“Hey Sanderson, Did you hear about Billy O’Neil?”

“What about him?” I made a u-turn and followed Joey back out into the parking lot.

“He’s dead, ese.”

“What? Billy?”

“Your homeboy’s dead, bro. He was over at that cabrón Flaco’s place and he went into like convulsions or some shit. They put him in the back of a pickup and brung him to the hospital, but that fool already checked out before he checked in, holmes. I heard his mom was working in the fucking emergency when they brung him over there.”

“Who? Flaco? I don’t... I don’t think I know him. Fuck, man.”

“You’ve seen him. He’s a skinny metsican thinks he’s biker. My cousin married his sister.”

“Do they know what happened to him?”

“ Flaco probably got hold of some extra strength. Fucking junkies”

I got into my car and cruised my some of Billy’s old hangout spots. I wanted to talk to someone. When I think about it now, it seems callous. I guess I wasn’t thinking about Billy as Billy, but Billy as an event. When I couldn’t find anyone, I went home. My mom was propped up on her bed, reading.

“Billy died.”

“Billy O’Neil? Wha...” She started to speak, but then she just put her hand over her mouth—tears welling up in her eyes. When she got her composure, she said, “Poor Ruth. What happened, Sam?”

“I’m not sure. He went into convulsions. He was out at some biker guy’s house. Joey Ramirez said he’d started hanging around with junkies. It might have been heroin.”

She lowered her eyes and slowly shook her head, “My word.” I knew what her next question would be, “You haven’t done any heroin, have you? I know you do cocaine.”

“No mother.”

“You remember Michael Reed. He died of a heroin overdose. I went to church with his mother. He was just a teenager.” Her worry was replaced by sorrow. She took a deep breath and dabbed her eyes with a tissue that she’d produced from somewhere and wadded into a tight little ball, “How old was Billy? Twenty?”

“Nineteen.”

“His poor mother?” She turned her back to me, sliding off her pillows, and assumed an almost fetal position on her bed. “You kids are such a hurry to escape reality. What’s so tough about your life that you need to escape? You haven’t worked a day in your life. Not at a job, not at school, nothing. Bunch of selfish jerks, if you ask me.” My mother wept quietly and didn’t say anything more. I wasn’t sure if she was crying for Billy, or me.

Not even a year before, Billy and I had been sitting in his tiny, cluttered room on another memorable day. I’ll never forget that room. The walls decorated with band posters and flea market tapestries and Billy had covered his window with a tie-dyed sheet, so his room was always dark and claustrophobic. He was rolling a couple of doobies for the hike we were about to take. Well, they weren’t exactly hikes, but that’s what we called them. We didn’t have hiking boots or packs. A walk in the woods was

just another pretext for getting stoned. We were just getting ready to go when someone knocked lightly on the door.

Scrambling to stash the weed, he yelled, “Who is it?”

“Cathy.”

Billy grinned and raised an eyebrow, “Well, come on in.” Cathy was a tall,, tomboy with short blond hair. Her pale skin was covered with freckles.

“You two know each other, right?”

Cathy and I nodded, and smiled. At nineteen, Cathy already had a three year-old son. They lived down the street from Billy. Cathy was the only güera (light-skinned girl) in the neighborhood.

“What’s up?” asked Billy.

Cathy seemed like she didn’t want to answer in front of me, “Can I get some weed?”

“You got some cash?”

She blushed a little and stared down at her feet.

“Just kidding.” Billy sat up straight and smiled, smoothing his scraggly red beard. He reached under his bed and pulled out the cigar box that held his personal stash. He grabbed a handful of weed and put it in a baggy.

“Here you go, sugar.”

“My mom’s got Donny, you want to hang out?”

“I gotta go,” I said, “I’ll catch you guys later.” Billy found the joints he rolled for our hike and tossed them toward me. I caught one and picked the other one up off the grimy carpet. I felt like a kid stuck at the kiddie table for Christmas dinner.

“Bye, Sammy.” Cathy called out sweetly. I could hear their voices go low and sexy as I let myself out of Billy’s tiny flat-topped house.

Billy was a purveyor of utility dope--weed, coke, and rarely hallucinogenics. He was the guy you went to when you wanted to get high and couldn’t get the good shit. Billy always called his Mexican weed Oaxacan, though he had absolutely no way of knowing what part of Mexico it came from. I saw the bricks, and they weren’t marked Hecho en Oaxaca. His connections were Chicano guys from the neighborhood. Sometimes he would front me a quarter pound so I could make an ounce profit. If he couldn’t do that, he’d usually let me have a quarter ounce until I could weasel the cash out of my mother.

I lit one of Billy’s joints and drove to a county park just outside of town. The trail was slightly cool and damp in the shade of the redwoods; the decomposing needles soft and spongy under my converse low tops. After about twenty minutes, I reached a familiar warm and sunny meadow where the trail emerged from the forest canopy. Sitting on a mossy rock outcrop, I smoked another joint and daydreamed of a world where Sammy wasn’t the fifth wheel—a world that didn’t suck. This joint was the last of my good green bud, not Billy’s dusty Mexican weed. I sat on that rock until I heard the siren call of my parent’s refrigerator.

My beater VW Fastback rattled its way onto our street. I saw all the emergency vehicles, but it took a second before it registered that they were in front of my house. Two fire trucks, a ladder truck and one of the smaller utility trucks. An ambulance was there too, with its back doors wide open. I parked my across the street and ran toward the house. Mr. Adams, the retired teacher next door, stood on the sidewalk in front looking distressed, “I think it’s your dad, Sammy.”

When I got inside they were loading my old man on a gurney, the EMTs were working on him, but I knew he was dead. He looked shriveled and gray. Not like himself at all.

My mom was calm, businesslike. “I’m riding in the ambulance with your father. Follow us to the hospital.” As I followed the gurney across the yard, I could see all the neighbors gathered around like vultures—just staring at us. When I got to the hospital, Mom was sitting in the emergency room waiting room. She sat erect and dignified, like she always did. When she saw me her face softened and she motioned me into the seat next to her. “Are you all right, Sammy?”

“No.”

“He was having his coffee.”

An ER doctor in blue scrubs approached my mother, “Mrs. Sanderson?”

“Yes.” We stood up.

Though I could never acknowledge it, deep down inside I knew his days were numbered. Dad couldn’t work anymore and he was always going up to the VA in Palo Alto for appointments. He mostly listened to the Giants on the radio, leaning forward in

his recliner with his head in his hands. Mom put out a cupful of pills every morning, and he carried those little pills in his shirt pocket that he sometimes put under his tongue. We constantly fought about my drug use and drinking, but we both still remembered the good times and that kept a tenuous connection between us—going to Giants games, watching the Forty-niners loose to Dallas, foggy and fruitless surfcasting trips to Sunset Beach. I was sorry he didn't make to Thanksgiving. He loved Thanksgiving.

Billy was the only one of my so-called friends to show up after my father died. He had on a long sleeve flannel shirt, buttoned up to the neck. You could just see a trace of his tats creeping out of his cuffs and collars. He had clean, pressed blue jeans cuffed above his Doc Martins. His shoulder length, reddish blond hair was washed and combed.

"Sorry about Mr. Sanderson, Mrs. Sanderson." Billy was struggling for something to say.

"He was a cool old dude. I liked it when he told those war stories."

"They got better every year," Mom said, "You'd have thought he whipped Hitler single-handedly."

"He didn't?" Billy grinned his big easy grin and followed me into my room. I turned on my stereo, and moved the tonearm over my song du jour, Frank Zappa's "Zomby Woof." Billy threw my dirty clothes on the floor and sat in my only chair. I sat on the edge of my bed.

"Zaaappaaa," Billy said. He really didn't like Zappa, he was more of a Johnny Winter or Buddy Guy kind of guy, but Billy took live-and-let-live to regions never before explored. I doubt he have complained if I'd put on a recording of Narwhals mating.

“Naarwhaaaals.” he would have said with a head bob. Billy handed me an eight-ball sized bindle. “Chaaup it up.”

“I probably shouldn’t. Dad’s funeral is tomorrow, and my mom might need some help.”

“So help her, but in the mean time, Chaaup it up!”

I pulled my pewter dragonhead mirror from under the bed and chopped two massive lines. Thick as my pinky and twice as long, the lines made us both do the shudder and half-gag.

“Chaaup up another, brother.”

“Okay. Last one.” We snorted two more massive lines.

“I gotta get,” Billy said, “Cathy’s got a babysitter.”

“A lot of good she’ll do you now. All this fucking marching powder, you probably couldn’t get it up with a crane.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I’ll have fun trying, though.” Billy tossed me the eight-ball, “One for the road?”

After Billy left, I lay on my bed with my hands covering my face. Zappa had long since finished playing, and I was glad. I wanted silence. I knew I shouldn’t have done all that blow. I’m sure my mother suspected something, but on the day before we buried her husband, she needed to believe that I was the son they’d hoped for.

Billy and his mom Ruth were at the funeral. Lots of people were at the funeral. Most were people who never visited my dad as he descended into illness and despair, but who now seemed to remember him so fondly—guys who worked with him at the tomato

cannery, before he went on disability. People from the church he and my mother used to attend.

I saw Billy less in the months following Dad's death. I went and hung out with him from time to time, but our lives just went in different directions. Billy bought a Harley, and began to develop a biker persona. Around the same time, my mother said I had to go to school, get a full-time job and start paying rent, or move out. I opted for Art History and Political Science at the local JC.

One afternoon after lying to my mother about needing a book for school, I headed to Billy's.

"Sammy, the disappearing man."

"Hey, Billy, what's up?"

"Getting' ready to take a putt on the scooter. Want any smoke?"

"I've got some. You got any blow?"

"I can get some." Billy rubbed his fingers together, "You got any cash?"

"I got forty."

"Sammy's got some cash. Aaaaaazing. I know where I can get an eight-ball for \$200.00. I'll let you pitch in. Give me a ride over there.". Billy directed me to a vacant commercial building on the outskirts of town. "Her name is Louise," he said as led me up a rickety wooden staircase that went up to a second floor apartment. It looked like an add-on; the building didn't really have a second story, just this apartment at one end.

"What's up, Billy," Louise said. She looked at me suspiciously, "Who's you friend?"

“This is my buddy, Sam.”

“What have I said about friends?”

“I know, but I’ve known Sammy my whole life,” Billy lied.

Louise looked me up and down and seemed satisfied. “Don’t do it again, Billy. What can I do for you guys? I assume you didn’t just come to visit.”

“Just an eight-ball.”

Louise was an attractive “older” woman. She was slender, but not emaciated and had long dirty blonde hair. She was wearing jeans and a loose linen shirt. She was working that gracefully aging hippy look pretty well. There was definitely a connection between Billy and Louise, beyond someone to buy her blow. I smiled to myself—fucking Billy. Louise weighed up our eight-ball, and lined up a couple of small samples for us. The coke had a slight petroleum smell, but it did the trick.

A few days after Billy introduced me to Louise, I went back on my own. I had a way turn a little profit. I offered a discount for up front money. I sold grams for eighty, and half for forty-five. A free gram and five bucks for gas each time I did it. More important than the little bit of blow I got was that Louise was now my connection, too. I didn’t need Billy to score. I guess I was no longer satisfied in being a sidekick. I know Louise told him I was showing up on my own, but he never mentioned it. Live and let live was the Billy way.

My new side gig didn’t do much for my academic career, but it did wonders for my social life. I played pool in the student union, and collected money from guys who didn’t have a clue how to score any other way.

“Hey Sam, can you...you know, get us something for tonight. There’s a party. Drop by man.”

One afternoon, I was talking to a girl from my art history class. She was at least two years older than me and way out of my league. I saw Billy from across the parking lot, about the time he saw me. He shot across the parking lot toward us, his Harley emitting an earsplitting roar. My classmate stepped behind me for protection.

“Sammy! Schooolboy. What’s up?”

“Hey Dude. Just getting out of class.”

“Who’s your friend?” Billy asked, raising his eyebrows.

I wasn’t sure of her name, and when I hesitated she spoke up. “Dawn.”

“Hey Darlin’. How do you know Sammy.”

“We have a class together.”

Billy looked at me and said, “Man. I might have to take me some of these classes. What class is it?”

“Art history,” Dawn and I said in unison.

“Art hist-or-ee,” Billy repeated with a grin. He gave Dawn leering look over that made her blush. “Well got to putt. Nice meetin’ you Darlin’. Later Sammy.” Billy gave me an approving nod and revved up his hog. Windows must have been rattling for blocks.

“How do you know that guy?” Dawn asked as she watched him ride away. She seemed to be repulsed by him and attracted to him at the same time.

“From around.”

I dropped political science, got a B minus in art history, and told my mother that I'd do better next semester. Billy and I were drifting apart anyway, but no longer needing him to be the safety net protecting me from sobriety hastened the end of our hangout phase. Scoring formed the spine of that relationship, but we never lost our connection. Every time we ran into each other, there was never any awkwardness or uneasy small talk, just jokes and easy laughter. When I'd see Billy around town, he'd always free one hand from the ape-hanger handlebars of his hard-tail Harley and give me a peace sign...or was it a victory sign.

They had a Rosary for Billy on a Friday night and his funeral mass was on Saturday. My mother went to the funeral. I didn't go to either service. She said lots of people were there. His oldest brother had asked that people not remember Billy as a victim of his personal demons, but as a kind and loving son, brother, and friend. I said I had my own service, up in the redwoods. Mom just shook her head.

That night, I went to Louise's. There were a couple of Harleys parked outside, and when she answered the door, she said "I knew you'd be over here tonight. We gotta give Billy the kind of send-off he'd want. I went to the Rosary. What a bunch of mumbo-jumbo."

"I didn't go to any of his services. I went up to the redwoods."

"Well, good for you," she handed me a big piece of a broken mirror covered with lines and a big pile, "have one for Billy." One of the bikers was sickly skinny, covered with tats, many of them the jailhouse variety. The other guy was a heavysset, white dude with an extremely receded hairline. They introduced themselves as Flaco and Dave. I

remember thinking that Dave should get a nickname. Both had leather vests emblazoned with the name of some motorcycle gang whose name I can't remember. We did loud, clapping bro-shakes, nodded, and grunted at each other. I felt like a traitor. The bikers weren't there very long. They powered down as much of Louise's blow as they could handle, and left.

"So those were the guys Billy was with when he died?"

Louise frowned and gave me a little nod, "I wish I'd never introduced them." She sat on her worn out sofa, grabbed the broken mirror off the coffee table, and handed it to me "Do the honors, would you?" She froze for a second, like she'd forgotten something, and then said, "Oh well, Billy was a big boy. He made his own decisions." She fidgeted, her eyes darting about the room, constantly sniffing and rubbing her nose. After a minute or two, uncomfortable with the silence, she said offhandedly, "He had a small cock, but that boy could fuck all night."

I pretended to concentrate on chopping the blow. Billy didn't have a prayer with friends like us. We were all too fucked up. We were trying to siphon gas out of each other's empty tanks.

We snorted piles of coke, then drank wine and smoked weed to mellow out. Once we'd mellowed out a little, we snorted more big piles of coke. Toward dawn, we ran out of things to talk about. We both just stared at the floor in exhausted silence. I could have sworn something was crawling beneath her shabby carpet. The fist-sized lumps would appear then would sort of skitter across the floor. I wasn't prone to hallucination. I though rats had take up residence under her nasty rug.

“What are looking at Sammy?

“It looks like something’s moving around under your carpet. What the hell is that?”

“A sign that you’ve had enough blow for one night,”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” I stopped looking at the floor. Rats, no rats, it didn’t matter. I felt terrible and it was time to go. It was years before I quit doing blow, but I never returned to Louise’s apartment.

I entered the Catholic cemetery the way Billy and I always entered it when we used to go there to get high—through a leafy gap where a small section of fence along the alley had gone missing. It was early in the morning and not a soul was around. It was easy to find Billy’s plot—all the flowers. I walked over, avoiding stepping on the graves, something Billy always found amusing.

“I don’t think they’re too worried about it, Sammy.”

The ornate wrought iron fence was green and corroded— slowly going back to nature, quietly, along with all the old bones. New bones. The stoic old oaks shading the graveyard dispassionately observed the process. It was weird to think that Billy’s bones were in that grave. I tried to picture his bones, after all the flesh had withered; the trace of old fractures from his nineteen years of going pedal to the metal. I went to the cemetery to grieve, to pay some kind of penance, but going there made me feel better. The bones weren’t Billy. The bones were an empty bottle, after the booze had been drunk... chugged.

I went home. It was still early Sunday morning and I hoped my mother would be sleeping. She wasn't.

"You look like a vampire."

"I feel like a vampire. Could you wake me up around noon? I want to go see Mrs. O'Neil."

"You should have gone to the funeral, Sammy. You and Billy were good friends. Getting high might make you forget your responsibilities, but it doesn't make them disappear."

"I never thought it did. It's not really about that. Can you wake me up at noon?"

"Ask Ruth if she needs anything. I hate to send food over. People brought so much when your father died. I had to throw half of it away."

Birthright

Erika arrived at the restaurant twenty minutes early. She was worried that she wouldn't find parking, but being a weeknight, it wasn't a problem. She had this terrible feeling that she'd come to the wrong restaurant, and when Capra and Will weren't there at precisely seven-thirty, it was all Erika could do to keep from texting them. Fortunately, a minute or two later they walked up.

"Hey there, nice to see you again." Erika had only met Capra's husband once, and she wouldn't have recognized him had they not been arm and arm. Erika was certain he didn't have a chin beard the last time they met. She hated chin beards. Erika did remember those beautiful eyes, though. They were pale topaz; she had never seen eyes

that color. And there was something else about them—she couldn't put her finger on it, but those eyes made Will look feral.

“Hey, Erika. What's up?” Will acted as if they were old friends. “Been here long?”

Erika lied, “No, just got here.”

Capra was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, black polyester preggo pants, pink converse high-tops, no make-up, and she still looked great.

“Let's eat. I'm starving” Capra said, “I've been wanting to try this restaurant forever.”

Erika looked up at the sign over the restaurant's stained glass door. “Cool name, Amalthea.”

“Some Greek mythology thing, I think.” Capra said.

The restaurant had wicker fans, hanging plants, and maybe twelve tables surrounding a small fountain. “So Will, Capra tells me that you work for an export company,” Erika said as they looked over the hand-written menus.

“Yeah, they mainly do business with the Middle East—The Emirates. Electronics, sneakers—you know, all the good stuff. One of my dad's friends hooked me up.”

“Do you like it?”

“It's alright. If it was fun, I guess I'd pay them.”

Laughing, Erika said, “Yeah, I guess so.”

“He gets to telecommute,” Capra said. “Big whiner. He makes pretty good dough for very little, as far as I can tell. When the baby comes, having daddy at home will come

in pretty handy.” Capra gave Will a look indicating that his future househusband role was nonnegotiable.

Though Erika was a committed vegan, the food was a little hardcore. Her salad appeared to consist of whatever weeds the chef could find growing behind the restaurant. Fortunately, Erika found the main course, grilled portabellas, a little more palatable. The one thing she hated about veganism was having to deny herself really good desserts. Vegan desserts were usually crap, and Amalthea’s were about what she expected. They shared a dry cake-like thing, flavored with saffron, and sticky vegan rice pudding with raisins and too much cinnamon. Capra and Will seemed to really enjoy their food, so Erika pushed thoughts of the unwashed kitchen staff out of her head and politely pretended to be enthusiastic.

“What are you up to this weekend, sweetie?” Capra served herself a spoonful of pudding. “Got a hot date?”

“Nope. Probably just gonna get caught up on some housework. My apartment is pretty disgusting.” Erika’s apartment was actually spotless. If she wasn’t lying in bed, worrying, she was cleaning.

“Ah, screw that,” Capra said, “We just move when our apartment gets too gross to live in,”

“Yeah, life’s way too short for excessive housework,” Will agreed. “We’re going rock climbing. You’re welcome to come with, if you want.”

“Rock climbing, really? You can’t rock climb in your condition, can you Capra?”

. “No,” Capra patted her belly, “this is kind of in the way. I’m just watching, this time.”

“Wow, you two are like an online dating profile come to life. Rock climbing and Capra tells me you both surf. I’m such a slug. You’re way out of my league.”

Will said, “You’re in a league? Cool! What league is that? Is ‘no rock climbing’ one of the bylaws, or something. What are the benefits of this league?”

“My league doesn’t seem to have many benefits. Mouth breathing guys, boring weekends, and a shitty job.”

Capra gently patted Erika’s wrist. “A shitty job with a really nice coworker, right? No pressure from us, but if you’d like to come climbing, you’re more than welcome. Will’s a great rock climbing instructor—among other things.” She reached over, pinched his cheek, and held on—moving his head from side to side. “So patient.”

“But I don’t have any gear or anything.”

“I’m not a big fan of a lot of gear,” said Will. “I even ride my bike without an ass pad.”

“Will’s a free soloist,” Capra said, “which is Latin for nutcase. No ropes; nothing but climbing shoes and chalk. I only let him climb little rocks, now that we’re in a family way.”

“Yeah. We’re just going bouldering. All you can hurt is your pride. What size shoe do you wear?”

Erika felt a little apprehensive about going. Capra and Will had mostly convinced her that she wasn’t going to fall to her death, but she hadn’t really engaged in any social

activities since she moved down to San Diego. Though crawling around on a rock might not be her first choice of ways to spend her day off, she felt comfortable with Cap and Will, and Dr. Huo thought it was a good opportunity to start getting out amongst people again.

“What a beautiful place. ‘Jumbo Rocks’ doesn’t quite capture it,” Erika said.

“I never really thought about it, but now that you mention it . . .” Capra agreed.

Will said, “I think Jumbo is an underused word.”

Will helped Cap up and over a boulder and on to a lightly used trail leading between, around, and over the jumble of huge granite rocks. He carried a big rolled up mat on his back like it was nothing. Erika followed along, taking in the scenery as she went. “This place is incredible! I’d always heard Joshua Tree was a great place, but I never imagined this. I would’ve loved this place as a kid.”

“Yeah, this is our second home, and it doesn’t come with a mortgage,” Will said as he pointed to a large boulder sitting among a thousand other large boulders, “That’s our rock.”

Will laid out the mat and gave Erika a brief demonstration. “I don’t want to give you too many instructions. Everybody knows how to climb. It’s in our DNA.”

“We’ll see,” Erika said.

“Go for it, girl,” rooted Capra, “You can do this.”

Within a few minutes, it was obvious to Erika that she wasn't a natural at this sport. I knew I'd suck at this. If it's in my DNA, it must be a recessive gene.

"I suck at this!" Erika screamed the fourth time she landed hard on the mat.

Will laughed, "Everybody sucks at first. You gotta pay your dues to the boulder god." Will helped Erika up off the pad and she absent-mindedly adjusted her clothing. "You're doing fine. Do you want some water? You need to stay hydrated."

"No. I'm fine. This is just a lot harder than it looks." It was getting pretty warm and Erika felt a trickle of sweat down her back. She set her jaw and tried the rock once more.

"Don't battle the boulder. Work with it. Take what it gives you, Will coached. Capra sat patiently on a shaded rock. She smiled warmly, but kept her kibitzing to a minimum, leaving the lesson to Will.

Thump. Erika fell back against the pad. This time she just lay there in frustration. "Shit. I'm fucking horrible at this." So much for this friendship, they think I'm lame. The rock seemed easy to climb for the first few moves, but it jutted out slightly requiring Erika to depend on her upper body strength, and she kept losing her grip and tumbling onto the mat.

"Have some water and take a breather. I've got an idea."

"You're rushing her Will," said Capra, "It's her first time, for god's sake."

"I know, I know, but she's so close. The athleticism is there—she just has to discover her bouldering nature."

“I don’t have a bouldering nature,” complained Erika.

“Everybody has a bouldering nature. You just have to let it emerge. Forgetting she had chalk on her hands, she tried to dust herself off. “Shit. Look at me. I’m making a terrible hash of this. I’ll bet you’re sorry you ever invited me.”

“Don’t be silly,” Capra said. “You’re doing fine. You should have seen me on my first day.”

“Yeah, Capra was major Gumby.”

“Excuse me?” Capra protested. “I might have been a Gumby, but not a major Gumby.”

Will laughed, winked at Erika, and mouthed, “Major.” Will sat next to Capra and squeezed her knee. “Let’s take a little lunch break. All this coaching is making me muy hambre.”

Capra said, “Will made lunch. If you thought climbing a granite boulder was adventurous, just wait.”

“Shut the fuck up. I made a great lunch: peanut butter and pomegranate preserve sandwiches, raw almonds, peanut butter filled pretzels, and for desert, rolled dates.”

“Okay,” Cap said, “I’ve seen a lot worse. One time he brought leftover brown rice mixed with peanut butter. Just in his pack. No ice. No nothing. Can you imagine?”

“Almond butter. It was only a couple of hours. I thought it would be fine.”

“Seriously, Will, in the desert heat? Luckily it smelled funny. He might have killed us.”

As Erika and Cap finished lunch, Will went to the boulder and started climbing. When he got to the section that was giving Erika trouble, he stopped climbing and dangled from one arm. Erika wouldn't have believed a person could do that.

"Your trying to negotiate this section using your upper body strength. It's possible, but you don't need to. Look around." Will exaggerated his survey of the rock, and then pointed. "See, you're skipping a good toe-hold." His foot found a small ledge and he was able to thrust himself upward. This gave Will much better leverage and he easily got past the challenging section of protruding granite. He scampered down the backside of the boulder and within seconds was standing next to Erika.

"Man, what are you, half mountain goat?" Erika asked.

"Okay," Will said, "your turn."

Erika started her ascent up the boulder. She felt sluggish after her lunch break and it was getting quite warm.

"Okay, Erika. Just take it nice and slow. You're not doing battle."

"Yes, I am," Erika said, sweat stinging her eyes.

"No, you're not!" Cap and Will said in harmony. Everyone started laughing, and then laughed harder when Erika crashed to the mat.

Clinging to the boulder face, foot securely in the toehold, Erika was starting to push herself upward when Will said, "Move your left hand first." She hesitated for a second and just as her left hand started to find a solid grip, she slipped off the rock. In the instant before she fell, Erika had felt the leverage that would get her past the tough spot. She scrambled back up, and confidently leading with her left hand, she was finally able to

get around the big bump in the rock. The rest of the way up was, as Will would say, cake.

“Whoo-hoo!”

“Whoo-hoo!” Capra echoed, “You did it! Fabulous job.”

The hot desert breeze blew in her face as she surveyed the jumble of rocks around her. This felt bigger than just climbing a ten-foot boulder. She was stoked. Will followed her up the rock. He stood behind her, letting her enjoy the moment. Erika stood for second, catching her breath and letting her sweat evaporate in the dry air, and then turned to face her coach. Will embraced her, which she didn’t expect and, being covered in covered in dirt, chalk and sweat, didn’t really want. The embrace seemed to go on a bit too long, so she tried to disengage, but Will held firm. She realized that Capra couldn’t see them from where she sat.

Erika said “ Okay, Will. It’s hot...,” but her own pent-up desire was getting the better of her. She went through the motions of trying to squirm free, but that only aroused her more. She inhaled his warm breath as he moved to kiss her. His hand slid down to squeeze her ass, and she could feel his hard-on straining against his thick climbing shorts.

“I’m going to the toilette at the campground. The pregnant lady needs a flusher,” Cap yelled from below. “I’ll be back in a few.”

Will took a step back, but still stood close. Winking at Erika, Will yelled down to Capra, “Take you time, sweetheart, We’ll be here practicing.”

Erika caught a brief glimpse of Capra between the rocks as she made for the campground. When she turned to face Will, something happened. It was as if she had tumbled off a cliff, and there was no way to regain her footing. Erika locked gazes with

Will, and there was instant, unspoken agreement. Will kissed her hard and when he was done, Erika took a step back and undid her shorts. Will stood in silence, save his heavy, audible breathing, as she pulled off her shorts and spread them on the rock. She stripped of her panties and got on all fours, putting her knees on the shorts. This probably wasn't her most flattering angle, and doggie-style had never been her favorite position, but it seemed natural...what the situation demanded. Anyway, she really didn't want to look at Will. She lowered herself onto her forearms as Will knelt behind her with a steady hand on her hip.

"Stop reveling in your glory and get down here. I'm hungry," Capra called. Erika and Will had been dressed for for several minutes--panic following on the heels of passion.

"Me too," Will yelled back. He bounded down the rock as if nothing had happened. The buyers remorse had set in on Erika with a vengeance. She couldn't believe she let him raw dog her. At least he pulled out. She steeled herself and tried to focus on the rock climbing. This would be the acting job of the century.

Erika could hardly look at Will during dinner. Her face felt flushed the whole time, and she just pushed her food around the plate. Though, if Capra noticed that something was bothering Erika, she kept it to herself.

Capra drove home, and Erika sat behind her, squeezing herself against the door. Cap looked at Erika in the rearview. "Your pretty quiet back there. Everything okay?"

“Yeah. I’m just a little tired.”

“A hard day of bouldering will do that to you,” Will said.

The sound of his voice made Erika’s face heat up. She blamed Will. She knew she had no right to, but she did.

Near the town of Beaumont, Capra took an exit.

Erika thought, Jesus fucking Christ, just get me back to San Diego.

“Why you turning off here?” Will asked.

“Sorry...I’ve got a pain.” She winced and put her hand on her belly, as she maneuvered down the off ramp.

Will turned toward her. “Are you okay, Cap?”

Capra pulled onto the wide shoulder and stopped the car. “It’s really...bad. Fuck.” With one hand pushing against her belly, she held the other to her forehead she took a deep breath and held it.

“Do we need to go to the hospital or what?” Will almost seemed annoyed with her.

Capra blew out the breath and inhaled deeply again. “No...I don’t think so. It’s letting up now.” Capra ran her arm across her brow. “Whew, that was something.” Capra leaned back in the seat and put her hands over her face. “Give me a minute.”

“I think we should take her somewhere,” Erika said to Will.

“No really,” Capra said, “I’m sure I’m going to be fine. I just had a cramp. We expectant mothers are always a little paranoid. Can you drive, Willie?”

Once Capra was in the passenger seat, Erika said to Will, “I think you should take her to get checked out.”

“Cap’s a big girl. She said she doesn’t want to go,” Will said. “I can’t force her.”

“I’m fine,” Cap said.

Erika moved behind Capra and tried to soothe her by smoothing her hair. Capra reached back and laid her hand on Erika’s, “You’re the first person I’ve let mess with my hair since I was a kid.”

“Really? I’m sorry. Do you want me to stop?”

“No. It feels good. I just used to get teased because I’ve got two freaky bumps on my head. The other girls used to say I was growing horns.” Capra guided her hand while Erika gently ran her fingertips across Capra’s scalp. Sure enough there were two solid bumps on either side of her head, about an inch and a half inside her hairline. Though only slightly raised, the bumps seemed perfectly circular and located symmetrically on either side of Capra’s head. They were maybe three-quarters of an inch wide. “Wow. What are those?”

“The doctors always say they’re just benign, bony growths,” Capra said. “At least they’re not too obvious.”

“They’re not obvious at all,” Erika said. “Even if your head was shaved, I doubt they’d be noticeable.”

Capra chuckled. “Will, honey, I’m good for the bald head option.”

“No, you aren’t,” Will said.

The rest of the drive home was uneventful, except for Erika compulsively asking Cap how she was feeling.

“I’m sorry you’re not feeling well.” Erika said as they pulled up to her apartment, “I hope everything’s okay.”

“Oh, I’m fine, sweetheart. I hope I didn’t rain on your accomplishment. ”

“Not at all.” Erika said.

Will smiled, “See ya, Erika. Great job on the rock.”

Fuck you, Erika thought.

Capra wasn’t at work first thing Monday, but she stopped by Erika’s cubicle in the early afternoon. “I decided to see Elsa, my OB/GYN.”

“What did she say? Is everything okay?” Erika’s concern helped her wall off her tryst with Will.

“She said the baby seemed fine, but I might have to have a Caesarean.”

“Oh my god, why?”

“She’s not happy with his position. He might come out feet first.”

“A breech? Is everything okay with the baby?”

“Yep. I have both a tilt and an odd shaped uterus, as it turns out. Lucky me, huh? Elsa said she’d noticed my weird uterus before, but didn’t think it was an issue,”

“Is the baby’s position what caused the pain?”

“She thinks so. Honestly, she seemed a lot more concerned with the baby than me,” Capra said. “I was a little insulted—more than a little, actually. Anyway the pain

hasn't returned and the baby's fine. I'm not too happy about having to be gutted like a fish, though."

"Capra, don't talk that way! The doctor only said, 'you might have to have a Caesarian,' and even if you have to, doctors perform those all the time. Hey, you said 'he.' I thought you and Will didn't want to know?"

"Well, when Elsa was showing me the baby's position on the ultrasound, and she slipped."

"I'm not judging you." Dr Huo said. "I'm just trying to understand. That was a very risky, destructive behavior. She didn't suspect anything?"

"Didn't seem to."

"How long was she gone?" Dr. Huo seemed to have a little more than a professional interest.

"I don't know. Twenty, twenty-five minutes."

Dr Huo held her hands in front of her, like she was holding an invisible ball, and said, "Wow."

"Should I tell Capra?"

"That's a decision you'll have to make. Is telling her for her benefit or yours? She'll probably either blame you or claim you're lying. I'm sure this isn't the first time he's done this. She's probably in denial."

"I've been really worried about her health. Her pregnancy."

“Odds are she’ll have a healthy baby. But whether she does or doesn’t is beyond your control. Worrying doesn’t help, and it doesn’t diminish your culpability. We’ve talked about this, right? You’re obsessed with Capra. You slept with her husband during your second social engagement outside of work. It’s pretty unlikely that you two are going to become lifelong friends.

“It’s not a vegetable.” Erika smiled and patted Capra’s hand.

“My mom thinks it’s good for the baby,” Capra said.

“It was squeezed from a goat—so disgusting,” Erika said.

“You’ve really become annoying with this vegan thing. It’s just a little goat’s milk. Gandhi even drank it,” Capra said.

“Yeah, well, he wore a loin cloth too. You gonna take that up?”

“Don’t think so. I might get mistaken for a Sumo.”

Erika laughed.

Capra took her cell from her purse and checked the time. “We’d better get back to work.”

“You sure you don’t want to order a big greasy slab of goat meat.”

“I could never do that, honey. I love goats,” Capra said.

When they got back from lunch, Capra sauntered off to charm her boss, Sayed Baalim, MyoGen’s CEO. Cap had Sayed wrapped around her finger. Erika’s boss was a dweeb, and not even a nice dweeb. Jacob Wethers was the CFO of the little biotech start-

up, and he was very well pleased with himself and his new position. Thirty seconds after Erika's butt hit the chair; Jacob was sticking his pointy head into her cubicle.

"Erika, did you finish that update on the cash-flow statement?"

"Just about, Jacob, I just got back from lunch. I'm finishing it up now."

"Well, hurry. I need it on my desk in fifteen minutes. I have to review it and Sayed expects it by this afternoon."

"No problem," Erika said without looking up from her work. Jacob was always using Sayed as a hammer. Capra told her that Sayed didn't give a shit about Wethers' weekly reports. He couldn't stand the way he went over the minutia of the accounting process. "If Sayed wanted to go over that crap every day, he wouldn't have hired Jacob," Capra had confided. "And if we weren't going through this IPO process, Jacob would be history." After finishing the report, suffering through Jacob's "review," and making his valueless changes, Erika found Capra at her desk.

"Wanna come watch me grab a drink after work?"

"Can't tonight, honey. Will and I are spending some quality time. Wink, wink."

Erika looked away. "Aren't you too far along to have sex?" she whispered. "Seem like it would be uncomfortable."

"Well, sweetie, where there's a Will there's a way. How 'bout dinner with me and Will tomorrow night?"

"No, thanks. You and Will must be getting sick of me."

"No way! Will thinks you're great."

"Maybe some other time. I don't want to wear out my welcome."

“What’s going on Erika?”

“Nothing.”

“Spit it out. You never want to hang out when Will’s around. You think he’s annoying, right?”

“No, not at all.”

“Not at all, but…”

“The day we went to Joshua Tree.”

“Yeah?”

“Will and I had sex,” Erika said.

“That’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry, Capra.”

Capra’s face went slack. “What the hell are you talking about? I was there, remember?”

Erika turned bright red. “On top of the boulder. You couldn’t see.”

Capra looked at Erika incredulously, while absent-mindedly rubbing her belly.

“You were out of my site for like fifteen minutes. Why are you saying this?”

“I’m sorry. It’s the truth. I thought you should know.”

Capra stood up and grabbed her cell phone off her desk. “I’m calling him.” After a few seconds, hand on her hip, Capra spoke into the phone. “Did you fuck Erika? She says you two fucked at Joshua Tree.” Capra wasn’t trying to be quiet and Erika was sure everyone in the cubicle farm was listening intently. Capra screamed into the phone,

“You’re a fucking liar!” Capra began to hyperventilate. She tried to pass the phone to Erika, “Here, talk to your lover!”

Erika shook her head. Capra threw the phone across the room.

“I’m so sorry.”

“You’re fucking sick! Now I know why you’re in the shrink’s office every fucking week. I should have known better than to try to nice to you. Jesus.”

“Cap...”

Capra jabbed a finger at Erika. “Stay the fuck away from me.”

When Erika got home, she dropped her purse on the floor and flopped onto her futon. She replayed what happened at the office over and over. Capra was right. She was sick...and she couldn’t even keep quiet about it. She was double-sick. Dr. Huo had warned her. Why can’t I ever shut up? Erika had betrayed her friend. Were they friends? Coworkers and lunch-buddies, but still, how could she have sex with that poor woman’s husband. My god, she’s pregnant! Fuck!

Erika knew she had to quit, but she needed a couple more paychecks. She just came in, head down, did her job and went home. When she saw Capra at the office, she could barely resist the compulsion to try to set things right. It had been less than a month since they’d gone to Joshua Tree, but Capra had gone from huge to really huge—her baby-bump, anyway. She looked like a thin woman who’d swallowed a medicine ball.

“Capra, I. I just wanted you to know that.”

“Leave me alone, Erika, or I’ll have to go to Sayed.”

“I’m so sorry this happened.”

“Yeah, well...” Capra walked away.

She should have just avoided her. That’s what a normal person would have done, right?

About an hour before quitting time, Erika saw Cap heading to the ladies room. Capra looked a little distressed, but Erika figured it was just the pregnant-lady-having-to-pee-thing. Wethers was demanding another useless report, and Erika didn’t want to stay late, so she was busy writing summaries and formatting charts. About twenty minutes later, when she’d finished, Erika cruised by Cap’s cubicle. She wasn’t there. Had she ever come back out of the ladies’ room? Mind your own business. That woman hates you. You’re stalking her. Erika had to check. She’d probably come out and gone back in while Erika was busy with her report. The bathroom that Erika and Capra used was the executive type, rather than a typical office restroom. It was a nicely decorated room with only one commode. When Erika tried the door, it was locked.

“Anyone in there??” Erika heard a sob. “Capra? Is that you?” Erika heard a faint moan. “Hello? Are you okay?”

“I can’t...get...up.” The words were barely audible.

Erika hurled herself at the door, but it wouldn’t budge. “Help! Somebody help me!” Erika screamed, “Help!” Wethers ran up.

“What’s wrong?”

“We’ve got to get this door open. Capra needs help.”

Wethers put a shoulder to the door. The jam splintered, but the door did not open. Having heard the commotion, the maintenance guy Majid showed up a second later. Majid kicked the door, just to the right of the knob, and it finally gave way. They all looked in to see Cap lying on her side next to the toilet in a puddle of blood. Her pants were down around her ankles. Erika shouted, "Call an ambulance," and went in to help Capra as the two stunned men backed away from the door. In that first second, Erika could have sworn she saw something hanging between Capra's bare legs, but the apparition almost instantly evaporated. There was only blood. Erika knelt beside Capra and cradled her head. Capra was too weak to resist. Delirious from blood loss she kept softly mumbling, "I thought we were destined."

Erika sat in Dr. Huo's waiting room thumbing through a Healthy San Diego magazine. It was foggy outside, and the waiting room was dimly lit. When Erika went in to her office, Dr. Huo was sitting upright on her large chair with hands folded in her lap. She looked like a seven year-old pretending to be a grown up. "How are you, Erika?"

"I'm having a little bit of a rough stretch."

"Still having the dreams?" Dr. Huo asked.

"Uh-huh." In her dreams, Erika would see hoofed legs dangling between Capra's. She would stare at Erika tearfully repeating, "I thought we were destined." Her eyes weren't normal. Her pupils were horizontal slits. From her head sprouted two small curved horns, but she didn't look monstrous. She was still Capra. Will, Sayed, Wethers, and Majid would enter the room and stand around her. They all had a sorrowful look,

except Will. He looked distracted—like he would have rather been somewhere else. The men would start gently nudging Capra with their feet, as if they wanted her to stand. As Erika looked on, their feet, transformed into hooves.

Dr. Huo picked up the manila folder and stared into it for a few seconds. “All of us have brief hallucinations, Erika. Sometimes our eyes play little tricks on us.” Dr. Huo put the folder on the arm of the chair and scooted forward. “In that stressful situation, your mind clung to that disturbing image.”

“They’re just dreams,” said Erika.

“Well, maybe not. This is symptomatic of your condition. You know these thoughts aren’t rational, so you try to repress them. Your subconscious won’t let you.” Dr. Huo put her hands on her knees and, almost imperceptibly, shook her head.

“You can’t blame yourself, Erika. Mental illness is just like any other illness. Do you blame yourself when you get the flu?”

“Yes.”

They both laughed.

“Well you shouldn’t. All of us get sick at one time or another. It just happens.” Dr. Huo took a pen from her jacket pocket and began to take notes. “Are you engaging in any repetitive behaviors? Hand washing? Stove checking?”

“Maybe a few. My new job has a lot of calculating—I’m probably doing some extra checking...I’m definitely doing some extra checking. I’ve gone back to make sure I turned off the coffee pot, even though I bought one that’s supposed to turn itself off

before it burns down the apartment complex. You know, I go back to make sure I've locked the door...two or three times."

Dr. Huo leaned forward and looked Erika in the eye, "Are you really okay, kiddo?"

Erika started to cry. "Why did I fuck Will?"

"Capra had complications related to a difficult pregnancy. What you did was wrong, but it had nothing to do with her death. Like I've said, I'll wager her husband has slept with other women."

"It wasn't my place to tell her."

"Perhaps not. But you didn't do it maliciously. You're catastrophizing."

"I feel terrible about this"

"You've got to forgive yourself."

"I can't forgive myself. I can't stop replaying what I did on that rock. I keep trying to rationalize. It's fucking exhausting." Erika took a tissue from her purse as she and dabbed at her eyes. "On top of everything else, I've opened the worry door."

"Well, you'll just have to close it," Dr. Huo said sternly.

"Before bed I write down everything I've worried about during the day—everything I can remember, anyway. The list always has at least fifteen or twenty things on it."

Dr. Huo slid off her chair and turned toward the window, Erika could have sworn she saw matching bumps on each leg a couple of inches above the doctor's heels--like

dewclaws. But it was just a glimpse out of the corner of her eye. When she positioned herself to see more clearly, she didn't see them. Must have been a trick of the light.

Dr. Huo was saying, "You're going to be fine. We just have to figure out a way to deal with all this anxiety. It's the root of all this. Have you been doing your breathing exercises?"

"Yeah. Well, sometimes.

Dr. Huo walked toward the door. "We're out of time, Erika. We'll have to continue next week."

Erika hauled herself off the sofa. "Okay."

Dr. Huo gave her a warm smile. "Making a list is a pretty good idea," she said. "You're making progress."

Café Americano

Michelle looked at the image in her full length mirror and wept. Gabe was always talking about consuming the vitality of their young victims, but looking at the recent droop of her breasts and the deepening creases in her face, it was clear that the murders had done little to preserve her youth. She was only thirty-four and already starting to look like a transsexual version of her father. Like crack cocaine or meth, Michelle was convinced that the torrent of adrenaline that coursed through her veins during the abductions had taken a physical toll. With her finger, she traced the lines around her mouth. It just wasn't worth it anymore. She was tired of the life and she was tired of Gabe--really tired of Gabe.

When the phone rang, Michelle let it go to message. It rang again. It was after midnight and she knew it was Gabe on the other end.

“Come pick me up,” Gabe said. “We’ve had a little change in plans.”

“Do you know what time it is?”

“Yeah, it’s time for you to get your ass over here and pick me up.”

“All right, all right. I have to get ready. I’ll be here as soon as I can.”

“Not as soon as you can,” Gabe snapped. “Now! Throw a couple blankets in the back of your truck.”

“Fine.”

Gabe wasn’t aging well either. He was getting really short tempered. Shorter-tempered. Michelle jammed a bookmark into the novel she reading, Yates’ Revolutionary Road, and slammed it on the coffee table. She thrust her feet into some flip-flops, grabbed a jacket, and stomped down to the garage.

She picked up Gabe at Polk and O’Farrell at the edge of the Tenderloin. “What’s wrong?” she asked as he hauled himself into the passenger seat of her Suburban. Gabe had gained a ton of weight over the last few years, and was now every bit of three hundred pounds.

“Nothing you need to worry about—just a little change in timing,” he huffed.

Something was wrong, but Michelle knew it was futile to question the surly old fuck. He’d just glower at her and refuse to acknowledge the question. At Gabe’s direction, Michelle drove toward the Bayview District, an area that had avoided gentrification and comprised housing projects and decaying industrial sites. These days, it

was probably San Francisco's toughest neighborhood, and it was the last place on earth she felt like going.

In the light, late-night traffic, it only took a few minutes to reach the Bayview. They pulled up to a little bayside park nestled between abandoned manufacturing sites. Michelle had been there before. Gabe demanded a seemingly pointless daytime visit earlier that week. From what she remembered, the neglected park sat on a small shoreline promontory at the end of the street. Graffiti covered benches and tables were situated beside a paved path that encircled the park. Assorted trash, including a rusted out old shopping cart, poked out of the weeds. The park's view of the bay was partially obscured by the looming smokestacks of a nearby power plant. She could see none of this now because the fog had crept in low and thick and the park had no working street lamps.

"Should I pull around and back in?"

"Yeah," Gabe said. He was distracted—surveying their surroundings.

"Turn off your lights and leave it running," he said, "If anyone comes down the street, drive away and call me." Gabe and his protégé Ryan would soon be shepherding some drugged teenager into her Suburban. Ryan had been in the picture for a couple of years. Despite Michelle's vigorous protests at the time, Gabe had transformed Ryan from potential victim to right hand man. Michele had long harbored the notion that Gabe's desire for male bonding would be his downfall.

This was really fucked up. Until recently, they nabbed their quarry from isolated beaches or wooded areas--places they'd been lured with the promise of booze and drugs. Grabbing them in the city seemed sloppy. Gabe was getting complacent, or maybe

just fat and lazy. After ten minutes, she was really tempted to leave and claim a car had approached.

Though Michelle sometimes felt safe in the darkness, tonight wasn't one of those times. Chin against the steering wheel, she squinted into the mist, struggling to discern barely perceptible shapes on the street. She focused on a roughly rectangular shape twenty or thirty feet away, but just couldn't make it out. As she turned her attention to another shape in the distance, something thumped against her window. Choking back a scream, she wheeled around. Gabe's fat bearded face stared back at her.

She cracked her window. "Shit. You scared the hell out of me. I can't see a thing."

He said, "Unlock the back," and then disappeared. Michelle hit the switch, and after what seemed like a really long time, there was a thump as something heavy was dropped into the rear compartment. Michelle didn't have to guess what what was put in her truck. She knew it was body. For a brief second, she hoped it was Ryan's, but she could see skinny silhouette in the rearview mirror, alongside Gabe. Two new passengers in tow, Michelle started the Suburban and headed away from the park.

"Where are we going—the cabin?" Michelle asked.

"No, to your Marina house." Gabe glanced around to make sure no one had spotted them.

"My house—seriously? Is that a good idea? Why aren't we going to the cabin?"

Gabe said, "Shut up and drive."

Gabe twisted around toward Ryan, "How the hell did she get out of the shack?"

“Dude, th-that chick tore out of there like a . . . like a fucking maniac, bro,” Ryan stammered.

“You’re as useful as tits on a boar hog. I swear to god.”

Ryan kept talking. “I was standing outside having a smoke when all the sudden she runs right past me and out into the bay . . . it was fucking crazy dude...”

Gabe rubbed his forehead like a frustrated parent. “Just shut the fuck up.”

Trying to stay away from traffic, Michelle maneuvered down back streets toward the Marina. “I don’t think this is a good idea, Gabe,” she said, “I don’t see why . . .”

“I told you to keep your mouth shut. We can’t risk driving all the way down to the cabin with no preparation. Not at this time of night. Too many cops looking for drunk drivers.”

Michelle had managed to keep her Marina house as a sanctuary. Gabe had the run of her Grampa’s cabin, and anyway, the Marina place was way too fancy for Gabe’s taste. Too fancy and not isolated enough.

Gabriel turned back to Ryan, “Think anyone could have seen you?”

Ryan’s voice started to quaver. “No way. The place was deserted, dude. You seen it yourself.”

“I didn’t see anyone, but that doesn’t mean no one was there.” Gabe said.

Pointing her thumb toward the back of the Suburban, Michelle asked, “Is she out for a while?”

“Yeah,” answered Gabe. “A long fucking while.”

Ryan snickered and Michelle saw the silhouette of his bobbing head in her mirror. It was all she could to keep from reaching back and smacking him. Twenty stressful minutes later, Michelle pulled into her driveway. “I hope no one sees me with you two.”

“What’s wrong with us?” Ryan asked.

As he surveyed the neighborhood, Gabe muttered, “You aren’t properly attired.”

Michelle pressed a remote clipped to her visor and opened the garage door. Once they were safely inside with the door closed, Gabe and Ryan got out and went to work. For San Francisco, Michelle’s Neutra-designed house had a huge garage. The Suburban fit easily with a big open space between it and the laundry area. Esperanza, the housekeeper, kept some of her supplies in the garage. Michelle kept her bike and snowboard in there, along with electric piano and small drum kit. I better get Esperanza to dust that stuff.

Gabe grunted, “Where’s the visqueen?”

“It’s over in the corner.” Michelle couldn’t believe that Gabe made her drag home some dead runaway. This shit was not okay. Ryan grabbed the six-foot tall roll of plastic sheeting and started rolling it out. Michelle crept upstairs and distracted herself by making a bed for her uninvited guest—the one that was still breathing. She put some linen on the sofa in the sitting room, and then poured a vodka tonic.

When they came upstairs, Gabe asked Michelle to set an alarm for four AM.

“So we’re taking her to the cabin, first thing in the morning?” asked Michelle.

“No. Not till tomorrow night or the next morning.” said Gabe. “We’ve gotta go back and get her stuff before someone else finds it. I didn’t want to hang around and look for it in the dark.”

“When I let you use the cabin...I thought we’d keep the play there.”

“Let me use it?” Gabe gave her the dismissive sneer. “Ryan and I will walk back to shack and come back late tomorrow night, when your neighbors are asleep.”

“Shack?” Michelle asked.

“Down below the power plant. Just a little lean-to. It’s a good place for our boys and girls to nap until we’re ready.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” she chided.

Michelle got Ryan settled, then she and Gabe went up to her room. Gabe went to sleep without saying a word. After six years, he rarely wanted sex with her, which was okay because she never wanted sex with him. Michelle couldn’t sleep. She didn’t trust that skeeze Ryan alone downstairs. She tried to listen for him moving around, but couldn’t hear anything over Gabe’s snoring. To make matters worse, when Gabe’s head flopped over in her direction, his breath literally made her sick. After what seemed an eternity, the alarm went off. Gabe sat up and gave Michelle’s shoulder an unnecessarily firm shove.

“Wake up.”

“I’m awake.”

“Stay here until we get back. Don’t even go outside.”

“Yeah. Whatever you say.”

Gabe and his little protégé Ryan left about four-fifteen. It didn't take them long to perfect their look in the morning. Appearing to be scummy homeless people came easily to them. Especially Ryan, who actually was a scummy homeless person. When Michelle was sure they were gone, she pulled her comforter up around her shoulders and went back to sleep.

By the time Michelle dragged herself out of bed, it was late morning. She went downstairs, stripped the sheets off the sofa, and put them in a trash bag. She stashed the bag behind the big overstuffed chair in the corner of her sitting room--she planned to haul it down to the trash bin later. Michelle would have Esperanza do a deep cleaning next time she came in. She fixed herself a café Americano, plopped onto a dining room chair, and tried to distract herself by looking at the local news on her iPad. She was so pissed at Gabe, she just couldn't focus. She tossed the iPad aside and started pacing around the apartment. We're taking her to your Marina house—bullshit! She told him Ryan couldn't be trusted...thump, thump, thump.

Before Gabe decided to bring that punk in...thump, thump, thump. What the hell was that noise? It sounded like it was coming from the garage. When Michelle opened the door and went down a few steps, she could hear it clearly. Thump, thump, thump.

Michelle crept quickly to the bottom of the stairs and peered around the short wall that separated the bottom five steps from the garage. The plastic wrapped body was on her garage floor writhing and twisting like a giant larva. Their victim was just in front of the Suburban with her feet thumping against the garage wall. Those idiots just left her where she was after they wrapped her up. Michelle ran over and tried to pull the plastic

pupae away from the wall. The girl inside began to plead for help. Her voice was muffled by the plastic, “Hyep-muh, Hyep-muh!”

“It’s okay, honey. I’m going to help you.”

“Hyep!!! Gi-me-ou-ha!” She started getting louder.

“Just hold on. I’ve got to figure out how to get you unwrapped. Try to relax, I’ll go get some help!”

“Gi-me-ou!”

Michelle had to keep her quiet. “Hold on, honey. I’ll get something to cut the plastic.”

“Huwwy!” the girl squealed and then started to sob.

“Calm down. You’re going to suffocate yourself.” Knockout serum. Michelle had stashed a couple syringes for Gabe. “I’ll be right back . . . promise.” She ran up the stairs, and into the bedroom. She grabbed a syringe from beneath the false bottom of her dresser drawer and rushed back downstairs. Michelle had seen Gabe drug plenty of people with this stuff. She just had to stick the needle into her butt or shoulder. Gabe said the serum was similar to the stuff they used to anesthetize wild animals. Michelle really wasn’t necessarily trying kill her, which could easily happen with this concoction, but she had to make her be quiet.

Just as Michelle opened the door leading to the garage, the runaway screamed, “HAAEEEEELLP!”

The neighbors were going to hear. “I’m coming, honey. Hold on.”

When Michelle got to her, the girl stopped struggling and lay softly whimpering in her cocoon. Apparently, she was falling for the little ruse. There were too many layers of the plastic to jab the needle through, and Michelle was worried that if the young street kid was completely unwrapped, she might not be able to control her. She decided to continue her act, and just unwrap her enough to make sure the needle would hit its mark.

“I called the police. They’re on their way,” Michelle lied. Let’s get you out of there.” The girl’s mewling stopped and she offered what Michelle thought was a thank you. “I couldn’t find anything to cut with, so I’m going to have to unroll you. Just lie still, sweetie.” Michelle rolled her twice and then gently pushed her back to make more room. “Just a couple more minutes and we’ll have you out of there. The police should be here any time now.”

With only a couple of layers of plastic still around her, the runaway really started to squirm again. Michelle was poised to jam the needle into the girl’s bottom, but she suddenly thought better of it. I’m not cleaning up your fucking mess. Not this time.

“Easy now, Ryan might still be outside.”

The girl stopped moving. Michelle freed her from the plastic. Ryan had really messed the girl up. Her hair was matted with blood, and her unclothed body was bruised and battered from head to toe.

The girl looked around and whispered, “Where am I?”

“This is my garage. They brought you here last night. My boyfriend’s a friend of Ryan’s. We thought you were dead.”

“I...the skinny kid...we were partying. I must’ve passed out.”

“Ryan. He drugged you. Loser can’t get laid any other way...he’s a complete asshole. He accidentally gave you too much.” Michelle said matter-of-factly.

“When I woke up...”

“I know...stay quiet now, let me make sure they’re gone.”

It was obvious that the girl was too badly beaten to make an escape. She seemed to struggle just to stay conscious.

“What’s your name?” asked Michelle.

“Jennifer...Jen. Are the cops coming? Didn’t you call the cops?”

“I was about to...I wanted to get you out of that plastic.”

“I thought you...,” Jen said woozily. “Where are my clothes?” She then slumped to the concrete and passed out.

Michelle shook Jen to keep her awake. She probably had the mother of all concussions. Jen’s eyes popped open and she immediately vomited a yellow dollop of bile and mucous onto the concrete floor.

Adrenaline waning, Jen started breathing heavily. “Fuck...I need to go to the hospital!”

“I know sweetie, I know. You’ve got to try to stand.” Michelle hauled her up into a sitting position. This caused Jen to vomit a thin string of bile onto her chest.”

“Shit.” Michelle took her phone out of her pocket and poked at the screen twice. “Could I speak to Esperanza?” Michelle chewed a fingernail and watched Jen sway, trying to maintain her sitting position. “Esperanza! Como esta? Can you come over? I have a little emergency. I’ll pay double--cash.” Jen swayed forward and wretched.

“Wait. I ask mi esposo.

“Yeah, ask your husband.” Michelle held the phone from her ear as Esperanza shouted her request. “Okay. I come in twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes is perfect. Let yourself in and come down to the garage.”

Michelle turned her attention back to Jen, nude, beaten and bruised. She had some work to do. She couldn’t let Esperanza see the girl in this condition.

“Hang in there, sweetie, I’ll be right back.” She sprinted up the stairs and into her bedroom, grabbing some panties and a t-shirt. She swung by the bathroom and wet a towel. She was back in ninety seconds, and Jen hadn’t moved. Michelle quickly cleaned up the girl. She had the knockout serum handy in case girlfriend has an unexpected recovery. Michelle was experiencing a strange mixture of terror and exhilaration. She wasn’t sure what her plan was, but what was certain, she’d live or die by her own abilities.

Esperanza yelled down as she descended the stairs. “Mi-Chell?”

Michelle called back, “Down here sweetie.”

Esperanza clopped down the stairs, but came to a sudden stop when she saw Michelle tending to Jen. Esperanza pinched her bottom lip and twisted. “Oh my god. Wha happing?”

“She’s my cousin. She showed up here strung out on drugs. She fell down the stairs. I just need you to help me clean her up, then we’ll take her to the hospital if she needs to go.”

"I don't want no trouble."

"This could be very embarrassing for my family."

"Chee prolly got HIV."

"No. No. She's very safe that way. I can give you cash, today. Two hundred."

I get my gloves. "Drogas son muy malas." Michelle knew Esperanza wasn't buying her story, but she was buying enough of it to collect the money. She was undocumented, and when it came to supporting her family, life for her was not strictly confined by what was legal, just what she could safely get away with.

They dragged Jen upstairs and got her into the shower. She winced in pain with every step but the gash on her head had crusted over.

"Is this your fucking housekeeper?" mumbled Jen.

Michelle looked apologetically at Esperanza and in her best Spanish accent said, "Drogas."

Esperanza yanked down Jen's panties with the same steel-eyed determination she'd shown while doing hundreds of unpleasant tasks over the years. The two women then struggled to get Jen's t-shirt off. Esperanza turned out to be perfect person to help Michelle clean up the runaway, ignoring, and probably often not even understanding, Jen's protestations. They didn't let the water run on her injured head. They just gave her a light rinse to get most of the blood and bile off. Michelle pulled her phone out of her pocket and checked the time--it was nearly one-thirty. Gabe was unpredictable, he could call or show up at any time. She needed to give herself as much of a head start as necessary.

“Go get some stuff out of my closet that might fit her,” Michelle instructed.

“No...wait. Get it out of the bag going to goodwill.”

Aside from the swollen head, Jen looked pretty good in Michelle’s cast-offs. Michelle and Esperanza wrestled her down the stairs and into Michelle’s SUV. The exertion required to stay upright while she was showered and dressed drained Jen of any remaining will to resist. Michelle folded up the visqueen and put it in the back of the Suburban.

“Watch her for a minute.” Michelle trotted purposefully up the stairs. She went into the bedroom and flopped onto her bed. She was breathless and her body tingled from head to toe. Once in Maui, when she was sixteen or so, some local boys talked her into jumping off a thirty-foot waterfall into the turquoise pond at its base. She had never forgotten the way she felt when she jumped--that very moment when her feet left the rock. She had the same feeling when Gabe killed that first girl back in Tahoe, before they took their victims to the cabin her grandfather left her. She had that feeling again.

Michelle went back to the dresser drawer, and took the other syringe she’d stashed for Gabe, along with two thick wads of fifties she’d stashed the last time she’d gotten some money from the trust. After replacing the false bottom and quickly, but methodically, returning the clothes to the drawer, Michelle located a large shoulder bag and loaded in it a change of clothes, the syringes--including the one she still had in the back pocket of her jeans--and the cash. She was headed to the bathroom for some toiletries when her phone rang. It was Gabe.

“Out of bed yet?” asked Gabe.

“Yeah...just finished cleaning up after the boy blunder.”

“What’s wrong? Everything quiet?”

Michelle turned the phone away and took a deep breath to gain some composure, “Everything’s fine. I’m just anxious about...you know.” She could hear Esperanza stomping up the stairs.

Gabe was relaying some instructions, “Another little change in....”

“I’ve got to go,” Michelle said, but before she could end the call, Esperanza’s voice rang out. “Mee-chell, Mee-chell. Ju cousing no look too good. Chee pass out!” Michelle poked furiously at her phone.

“Shit! Go back and stay with her. I’ll be right there!” Michelle screamed. “And please keep quiet!” Michelle’s phone rang again.

“Was that your fucking housekeeper?” Gabe asked.

“She’s got her own key.” Michelle whispered. “She didn’t go into the garage. She’s waiting in the foyer. I forgot. It’s payday.”

“Get rid of her and the come back down to the park to pick us up.”

“What’s going on?”

“Get rid of your fucking maid and get over here. We’re hungry”

Michelle loped down the stairs and met Esperanza on her way up?”

“I thought I told...”

“I’n going home. I don’t want no more funny businesses.”

Michelle grabbed the wad of cash out of her bag and started peeling off fifties.

“I’m sorry I was so mean. My uncle was on the phone. He’s blaming me for everything.”

Esperanza's eyes locked on the cash. "Okay. You got to get ju cousing to el hospital." She ran her hand along her own scalp indicating the gash on Jen's. "Her head...es muy malo."

"I'm taking her to the hospital. Clean up a little down here and in the bathroom, then call yourself a cab." Michelle stripped off a couple more fifties.

Esperanza reached hesitantly for the money. "My husband gonna come. It's okay?"

Michelle pushed the money into he her hand. "Yeah...whatever. Call him now, you'll be done in twenty minutes."

Michelle climbed into the Suburban and looked at her passenger. Jen was slumped to one side in the back seat, mouth agape, but her tummy was rising and falling in a steady rhythm. Michelle took a deep breath, started the truck, and clicked the remote on her visor. The garage door creaked and squeaked its way upward, and she backed out without even looking at Esperanza.

She pulled up out front and ran into the emergency room at Saint Francis Memorial on Bush..

"I found this girl on Hyde, lying in the gutter."

A short, chubby Filipina nurse in her early thirties and a large white, tattooed orderly, who had a distinct military demeanor, came out to her vehicle.

The Nurse peered into the car suspiciously. "Why didn't you call 911?"

“I was so close.”

“You put her in the car by yourself?” the nurse asked.

“Adrenaline.”

The nurse rolled her eyes and shrugged at the orderly. “Go get Mac and a gurney.” To Michelle she said, “So, no idea what happened to her?”

The phone rang. “No idea.” Without waiting for Gabe to speak, Michelle barked, “On my way!” and hung up. As the orderlies loaded Jen onto the gurney, the nurse took down Michelle’s license number.

“Leave your name and a number at the front desk, in case the police have any questions.”

Michelle wasn’t about to leave her information, which probably wouldn’t surprise the ER nurse. She knew the cops could track her down from her license number, but she needed some time. “I hope she’s okay,” Michelle said sweetly. The nurse looked over her shoulder at Michelle as she started to follow the gurney into the hospital.

“If you’re going to stay, you gotta park somewhere else.”

Michelle switched off her ringing phone as she took Highway 1 southward over Devil’s slide. The hour-long drive along the rugged, misty coastline gave her time to make her mental list. The cops will going over everything with a fine toothed comb. She couldn’t erase her complicity with the crimes, but she could muddy the water by removing some of the worst evidence against her. The early video tapes, in which she’d been conspicuously enthusiastic, had to go.

Turning onto the road leading up into the redwoods toward her cabin, she couldn't help thinking about all the cop cars and news trucks that would be heading this way soon. The neighbors are going to be pissed. She wondered how her parents would react. They'd never believe she could be involved. They wouldn't want to believe. No one would.

At the end of a steep dirt drive stood a large, rustic, redwood gate. A thick chain fastened with a heavy padlock kept it closed. Michelle's Grampa never wanted this place to be fancy. This is where he got away from fancy. She pulled the gate open and left it that way after she drove through. She didn't plan to be there long.

The cabin was actually a 1930s Craftsmen that Michelle's grandfather had renovated extensively in the late seventies. She love its broad porch--the short, thick columns resting on exquisitely crafted river rock pedestals. The cabin was stable, solid, and definitely not fancy. Sort of like Gabe. But Gabe lacked the cabin's timeless grace. His foundations had begun to crumble. His outer appearance of strength and brutal integrity now seemed just a cheap facade.

As she stepped inside, she was overwhelmed by the task in front of her. She had to accept that she couldn't get erase herself from the cabin. She went into the kitchen and got a large trash bag. I'm filling one bag. That's it! Halfway through her second bag, she remembered the tapes. She'd taken all the leather she'd bought for herself, some of her books--Stock's *The Romance of Chastisement* and Mirbeau's *The Torture Garden*, among others, and the old laptop she kept there. These were things that would scream, "willing participant." She grabbed the tapes, the one's before Gabe and Ryan did all the torturing, and then calmly looked around, picking up what she could. She had her story

down, and she would never deviate. She was a victim. If she hurt anybody, it was because those sadistic monsters forced her too. It was true in a way. Michelle never initiated the killing. In the beginning she might have encouraged Gabe, but he did all the planning. After Tahoe, she had no choice but to cooperate. That's what was important. That's what was true. She would never deviate.

She loaded the bags in her car, and then immediately saw the folly of that decision. She pulled out the laptop, and then hauled the bags over to the fire pit. Michelle went across the clearing and into Grampa's old Quonset hut In search of charcoal lighter fluid or gasoline. The Quonset hut stood across a weedy clearing at the edge of the redwoods. He'd put it up there to store tools and keep the firewood dry in winter. Gabe had converted part of it into his "playroom." Michelle found a half-full gas can in the shed with an oily shop rag stuffed in the handle. There was also some split oak and madrone. Gabe had taught her that if you were trying to burn evidence, you needed easy burning fuel beneath to ensure that everything was consumed by the fire. The gas alone would burn out too quickly. She grabbed an armload of the smallest logs and some kindling.

Michelle doused the bags and wood thoroughly, only then remembering she didn't have any matches. As she walked toward the house, she powered up her phone. She checked her missed calls, nothing in the last forty minutes. He knows something's happened. She found some matches in the kitchen and returned to the fire pit--

flicking matches from five feet away. On the fifth or sixth try, a roiling red fireball rose from the pit with a whoosh.

After the flames died down bit, Michelle got a stick and poked at the fire to make sure everything burned. As a girl, she's seen her Grampa's workmen throw debris on a burn pile not far from where she stood--her grandfather in a flannel shirt and work boots yelling instructions in an incomprehensible blend of bad Spanish and English. She'd accompanied her grandfather more than once while he presided over the preparation of the cabin for summer. The one time she could remember her father coming along, he wore slacks and tasseled loafers.

Michelle had to keep splashing gas on the fire to reduce everything to ash. It was a pretty sketchy operation with the flames leaping toward the gas can. She'd been at the cabin for more than two hours. The process took a lot longer than she'd counted on. She checked her phone again. Still no calls.

In the lengthening shadows, Michelle became intensely paranoid. Twilight was approaching, and the cabin wasn't the cabin of her childhood anymore. It was Gabe's graveyard. Gabe wouldn't be paralyzed by Michelle's defection--by now he surely knew that's what had happened. Quite the opposite. He would do anything he could to reestablish his control over Michelle, even if that meant killing her. She didn't think he'd come directly to the cabin, even if he and that idiot Ryan could find a way, but it was unhealthy to underestimate Gabe. She couldn't bear not knowing what Gabe was up to. As her fire was winding down, she called him.

He didn't pick up. She called again. Someone picked up, but said nothing.

"Gabe?" No response.

"Gabe? Are you there?"

Gabe finally answered. "What's up?" He sounded distant and cautious.

"It's been an interesting day." Michelle said.

"What's up?" he repeated.

Michelle hesitated, "...I'm leaving."

"Yeah?" Gabe said. He was unnervingly cordial. Before Michelle could force an answer around the lump in her throat, he hung up.

Michelle stirred the fire pit, if some CSI genius found something among the ashes, more power to her. She took one last look around the cabin. There was surely something she was missing. Whatever they found, she'd have to explain away. They'd have plenty on Gabe and Ryan. When she got to the car, she saw the laptop. She put it on the ground and drove over it. That ought to do it, she thought as she threw the smashed computer back into the Suburban, Some teenage Best Buy clerk would happily recycle it. "My stupid boyfriend managed to run over my computer," she'd say, and they'd share a flirty, conspiratorial laugh.

As she sped down Highway 1, she dialed Gabe again. She wasn't sure what she'd say, if he answered. He didn't. She felt oddly alone...isolated. Michelle's adrenaline waning, the enormity of her separation from Gabe really hit her. Her breathing became shallow and rapid and her palms started to sweat. What will they give me, worse case? Five years? Ten? They'd need her to testify, wouldn't they? She had difficulty

swallowing. She wanted them caught or killed. That's how she needed this to go down. She hooked up with Gabe because he was so different from her parents. Now she wanted to be free of him...completely. She dialed Gabe, again. No answer. He can't get to you. She pulled into the next coastal overlook and did some deep breathing to calm herself. She'd have to get the cops involved soon. What if they fucking get away? Soon she was dialing the phone again. I need a good lawyer.

"Mom? Hi...Yeah, it has been a long time."

The Ride

The ground was spongy soft and the large mausoleum made a perfect windbreak. When Dean spread out his bedroll, it had been foggy, but not cold. Despite the nausea that had lately become his constant companion, Dean had drifted off and slept soundly. Apparently a little too soundly. He was now waking to the sound of someone yelling. Angry and yelling and the fog was already mostly burned off. He sat up and twisted his stiff body around to see who was making all the fuss. Out of nowhere, a boot struck the back of his head. It wasn't a vicious blow, but it was a really shitty way to start the day.

"What the hell," Dean said. The kick had caused Dean to wrench his wrist, so He flopped back onto his tarp and pulled his injured arm against his body.

"This ain't no campground, fool," the angry voice said.

"I didn't do nothin..." Just as Dean was able to get a look at his attacker, nausea overtook him and hot saliva filled his mouth. It was all he could do not to puke.

The guy was quite a bit younger than Dean, but not a kid. His hair was freshly buzzed, the black stubble outlining a receding hairline. Dean could see the prison tats

peaking over the collar of his coveralls. Dean hauled himself up and started to gather up his bedroll. He caught a glimpse of the little green maintenance vehicle. It was like a golf cart with knobby wheels and rakes sticking out of the back. The angry groundskeeper kicked Dean again, hard in the ribs, and sent him sprawling. The kick knocked the wind out of him, but Dean managed to pull himself up without making a sound or looking at his tormenter. Dean grabbed his stuff and started pushing his bike toward the cemetery exit. Dean had gone maybe ten steps when the groundskeeper kicked him in the ass and sent him crashing down on top of his bike and all his stuff. The rolling junk pile broke Dean's fall, but his injured wrist got bent backwards and his front teeth tore into his bottom lip. Retching, blood and bile mixing with the in mouth, Dean got back on his feet and continued toward the street, knowing better than to turn around.

“Fucking bum. You got no fucking respect,” the groundskeeper said.

Dean rode away from the cemetery as fast as he could, which wasn't very fast. He had an eight foot surfboard mounted on the side of his bike, and even without an ass-whipping, Dean never rode very fast. He doggedly pushed on the pedals until he was back beside the beach, maybe a quarter mile from the cemetery. By that time, the bile was burning his throat and he desperately needed to lay down. He pushed his bike out onto the beach and collapsed in the sand.

The best thing Father Matthew ever did for Dean was to give him that old Schwinn. It beat all of the beds, meals, winter coats, and appointments down at the clinic all to hell. Like the Christmas gift he never got as a kid, it was something he wanted—not something he needed. Someone dropped it off at the church, and Father Matthew gave it

to Dean. The previous owner had fashioned a surfboard rack on one side. Luke, a kid who volunteered at the shelter sometimes, had offered to take it off for him, but Dean told him to leave it on. “I’m gonna get me a surfboard,” Dean told him.

Dean wished he never opened his mouth, cause damned if that stupid kid didn’t bring him an old eight-foot Mini-Mal. Dean wouldn’t think of turning it down, that’s bad karma for a guy who depends on the generosity of others, but now he had to drag that old board four hundred fucking miles. Dean looked up the distance on the computer at the library. Google said it should take a total of forty-one hours by bicycle—five days of hard riding—but even goddamn goofy Luke didn’t believe that one. He said give it ten days or so. Dean guessed it would take him three weeks, give or take.

A couple hours south of Carmel, Dean stopped to rest near a road sign.

Big Sur 23 mi.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean said. He hungered for civilization. He liked scenery as much as the next guy, but come on. Enough was enough. Everyone was always bragging about the scenery in Santa Cruz, too. Fucking hick town. If it hadn’t been for the young toughs who showed up in the Tenderloin when Seattle passed that sit and lie law, Dean would have stayed in San Francisco.

Dean looked at the fires scattered around the campground and wished he had one. He couldn’t afford to draw attention to himself, in case the ranger came around. Instead Dean sat in the dark, on a battered picnic table, and listened to the folks talking and

drinking—low music playing politely in the background. All he'd had to keep him company on the way down from Monterey was the squeak that had developed in his left pedal. Sometimes Dean pretended it was his bad hip that was making all the noise.

As much as he wanted a little conversation, Dean knew better than to approach anyone. Judging from the cars, these were some pretty well to do campers. Young couples mostly, some with a kid or two—no one desiring Dean's company. He rolled out his bedding and stretched out. The camp noise was soothing and pleasant, and as he was with most people, Dean was invisible to the campers. Worn out from the thirty-mile ride, he drifted off to sleep.

Startled awake, Dean heard someone messing with his bike. Heart pounding, he listening without moving a muscle. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could make out the bike, but couldn't see anyone around it. Dean figured they were on the far side, crouched down behind the surfboard. Dean tried to gather enough courage to confront the thief, but he couldn't move. Something moved again. It was small--an animal. He tried to pop up out of his bedroll before it came close, but his body wouldn't exactly cooperate. His hip was still sore and his sciatica was always bad when he hadn't moved for a while, so he staggered out of his bedroll, one hand thrust forward the other grasping his lower back. Three small shapes darted from behind his bike and scurried across the campground. Goddamn raccoons. Dean was too sore to lie down, so he put his blanket around his shoulders and sat at the picnic table until the first hint of dawn. Dean packed up and pushed his bike back up to road.

The raccoons hadn't found the last of his food, some peanut butter crackers and a couple dried apple rings. If they'd caused any damage at all, Dean couldn't see it. Little bastards. Some old boy told Dean that the Aztec word for thief and raccoon were the same. He didn't know if it was more bullshit like all the other bullshit he'd heard, but it should be true if it wasn't. Even though this time Dean's little scare hadn't amounted to much, he needed a way to protect himself. Searching around the roadside, he found a scrap of half-inch angle iron that came to a nice point. It was only about three inches long, so Dean fashioned a shiv with a short stick he found and some twine he brought with him. Dean was proud of his handiwork. The shiv was small enough to hide, but substantial enough to put a hurtin' on anybody or anything that decided to fuck with him.

Dean was sitting on his bike in front of the Big Sur Deli when a large, ragged woman approached. She smelled like baked beans, but with a hint of urine. Dean had smelled this smell many times; folks living rough often have this smell. Hell, he probably smelled like that and just couldn't tell. Her hair was long and full—light brown with streaks of gray. She'd been beautiful once. Now, her face was yellow and puffy—she had a bit of that wild-eyed look, the one Dean knew to avoid. She wasn't huge, but she probably had fifty pounds on Dean. She wore a big knitted hippy tent that came down to about mid-thigh with overstretched black tights underneath. She said her name was Kassia, but Dean doubted that was the name she was born with. She probably started life as Judy, or Debbie, or Donna. She'd probably gone to the Lutheran church in Salinas and been in Future Farmers.

Kassia asked, "Got anything to get high on?"

“I’ve been kinda staying sober lately,” said Dean.

“What the hell for?” Kassia asked.

“Been sleeping at a shelter. Tired of being outdoors.”

“Shelters are dangerous,” Kassia said. “Full of rapists.”

Uh oh. The place where I’ve been staying is pretty good,” Dean said. “St. Ignatius up in Santa Cruz. The men and women are in different buildings.”

“Doesn’t matter if they’re separated or not,” Kassia said. “Women get raped.” Her demeanor suddenly changed as she nodded toward Dean’s bike. “You didn’t ride that thing all the way down here?”

Dean couldn’t conceal his pride. “Yep. I’ve been on the road for four days now.”

Kassia shook her head. “You’re an idiot. You got any cash? Let’s get some wine.”

It wasn’t how Dean planned to spend his twenty, he knew it was a long stretch to the next decent-sized town, but he needed some company and Kassia didn’t seem as crazy as some he’d met.. “Well, why don’t you go get us some wine and a sandwich or something?”

“I’m not allowed in that store,” Kassia said.

“You live around here?” Dean asked.

“For the time being. Don’t worry. I’ll watch your rolling trash heap. Go get us some wine.”

Dean positioned Kassia and his bike where he could keep an eye on them.

“Like I’d want to steal this junk. If I was gonna rob you, I woulda just taken the cash and split, you idiot.”

The had pretty fancy wine in that little store, but Dean was able to get the two cheapest bottles of red and a cheese sandwich for them to share. Kassia made him go back and trade the bottles for two big jugs of table wine. They were on the bottom shelf and Dean hadn't seen them. He got enough change back to buy a couple of Snickers for dessert. No place to panhandle for a hundred miles, and Dean was dead broke.

Kassia carried the picnic and Dean tagged along, pushing his bike. They followed a little dirt path off the road and down towards a creek where she had a camp. She'd staked an old tarp into the bank and tied the other end to two trees. One side was tied with an old half-rotted yellow nylon rope and the other with several lengths of twine. This was a summer place; her little lean-to wouldn't last five minutes in a winter storm.

Beneath the tarp, the ground was covered with some dirty plastic sheeting and there was an old kid's sleeping bag and some ratty coats scattered about. Kassia had found herself a nice spot. From her lean-to you could see the creek through a stand of redwoods.

Dean sat next to her and handed her half the sandwich. She set aside and went for the wine. Dean wondered how she kept that much weight on--considering her "lifestyle." The wine helped Dean ignore the pain in his side. No matter what was ailing him, Dean always felt better after a few drinks. The first bottle two-thirds empty, Kassia gave Dean a hard stare. "You wouldn't try to rape me, would you?"

"Nooooo. That's not my thing," Dean said.

Kassia relaxed again. "What is your thing?"

Dean laughed, "I don't think I have a thing anymore. I guess this was my thing."

Dean motioned around the camp. "Hanging out. Getting drunk. Now, my belly sticks way out on one side and I get some pretty sharp pains in my side if drink too hard. Kinda takes the wind out of the sails."

"Probably cirrhosis," Kassia said.

Dean nodded. "Yeah, that and a bunch other shit."

Kassia shrugged. "I'm a singer," she said.

"Well, hell. Sing me something."

Kassia sang a few lines of an old folk song from the Sixties. All that old hippy shit all sounded the same to Dean. He'd take the Dead Kennedys or Black Flag any day. Her voice didn't seem to have much behind it, but he had to admit it was kind of pretty. It reminded him of the old women who sang at church when he was a boy.

"Were you ever in a band?" Dean asked.

"Lots of 'em over the years. I was in a pretty good one down in Santa Barbara in the seventies. We almost got a record contract. Damn bass player dropped out to get married. We just never really jelled after he left."

"What was the band called?"

Kassia thought for a second. "You know, I can't remember."

When they'd finished the wine, Kassia rolled onto the plastic tarp that served as the floor of her little lean-to and pulled the little sleeping bag around her shoulders.

"You'd better grab a blanket or something off your bicycle. I'll need all mine." Dean grabbed his blanket and laid down on the edge of the plastic sheeting.

Rolling on her side to face Dean, Kassia asked, “What the hell ever made you decide to ride that old bicycle all the way down here?”

“I ain’t getting any younger. I thought I’d go back to where I grew up.”

“You grew up Big Sur?”

“Nah, Redondo Beach,” said Dean, “That’s where I’m headed.”

“Are you serious?” Suddenly wide-eyed, Kassia she heaved herself up and hugged her knees. “That’s a long fucking way, man. Still got family or friends or anything down there?”

“Not anymore. My Dad died when I was seventeen. My mom died when I was just a kid.”

“What the hell you think your gonna find?” Kassia said.

“I don’t know,” said Dean. I was just happy there...you know, as a kid.”

“How bad is your liver?”

“Hepatocellular Carcinoma.”

“Ooh, shit...liver cancer. You’ve got one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel,” Kassia said

Dean suddenly looked stricken. “That’s what they tell me” That old white haired doctor at the clinic had said, without batting an eye, that Dean could expect live three to six months. “Sorry it wasn’t better news,” the doctor had said--without batting an eye.

Kassia sat quietly for a few moments and then smiled.. “Oh well, you’re here now. Same as everybody else.”

Dean nodded. "Last time I was really happy was down there." Dean said.

"Redondo. Sometimes when the sun hits my face just right, I flash back to when I was a kid, I get this feeling--a good feeling"

"You weren't happy. It's just a trick of memory." Kassia flopped back onto the plastic. "Come over here, I need a warm body." She peeled off her old tights.

Dean said, "I haven't got a rubber or anything."

"I've already got Hep C. and I'm post menopausal. What are you protecting me from?"

Dean shrugged and crawled up next to her.

The shadows were retreating from the redwood stand when Dean awoke. Kassia was sitting up on the opposite side of the lean-to from him, staring down toward the creek. She had Dean's blanket clinched between her thighs.

"You got anything left to eat?" she said.

"A pack of those old peanut butter crackers," Dean said

"Well give 'em over."

Dean fished out the crackers and tossed him to her.

"I not going to play nurse maid," Kassia said, "but you can hang around here for a while, if you want."

"I think I'm going to head on down." Dean nodded toward his blanket, "Go ahead and keep that."

"You're an idiot," Kassia said with a smile. "You're going to give me your only blanket?" She tossed the blanket toward Dean.

Dean's bladder was about to burst. He'd been too drunk to get up and drain it during the night. Dean pulled on his shoes, cinched his belt, and hopped up as quickly as his sore hip and sciatica would let him. He didn't want Kassia to see him piss.

"See you later," Dean said.

"Probably not," Kassia said. As Dean pushed his bike up the trail, Kassia yelled after him. "Good luck, Deanie. You're not going to make it, but good luck."

When he far enough away from Kassia's camp, he leaned his bike against a tree and tried to piss, but it only came out in short painful squirts.

Dean was just past Plaskett when a new red SUV with surfboards strapped on top pulled across the dirt pullout in front of him. Three guys in their late teens or early twenties jumped out. They looked similar to each other, though one was a little shorter and stockier than the other two. The driver was a couple of steps ahead of the others when he approached Dean. Pointing to Dean's surfboard he said, "Locals only, bitch. You can't surf here." His chest was puffed out, but there wasn't a lot of confidence in his voice.

"I don't want to surf here, I'm just passing through. I'm on my way to Redondo."

The boys looked at each other and busted out laughing. The short, stocky boy stepped up and took the lead. "You're riding that shit heap all the way to L.A.? Look at that old board. It must weigh fifty fucking pounds."

Dean stared straight ahead and said nothing. The third boy pulled the hood of his sweatshirt up over his head and after jamming his hands in his pockets, looked at the

ground. The driver took another turn, taking a step closer, "I hate you fucking bums. Trashing up our spots." He turned back to the short stocky one, "We ought to teach him a fuckin' lesson."

"Leave him alone," said the kid in the hoodie, "he said he's moving on."

The short guy stepped forward and gave Dean a little shove on the shoulder, "Got to take out the trash, man."

Dean nonchalantly put one hand on his hip. He could feel his shiv beneath the flannel of his shirt. He glanced off the road's edge. This wasn't an area of sheer 300 foot cliffs like he'd passed a couple hours back, but there was a steep hundred-foot embankment down to the rocky shore. Dean knew the stocky kid was trouble. He was angry...angry all the time. You didn't survive on the street as long as Dean without good instincts. Dean couldn't take another beating.

"Let's go." The kid in the hoodie said. "Someone's gonna come down the road."

Losing his nerve, the driver said, "Fuck this bum. Let's get out of here." The driver and Jared started back for the car.

Timmy lunged at Dean, slugging him in his bloated belly. Dean hunched over. He struggled for breath, black spots pulsing in his eyes.

Looking back over his shoulder, kid in the hoodie said, "You're an asshole, Timmy. Leave him alone." Dean never looked up.

"You fucking piece of shit," Timmy said as he grabbed Dean by the shoulders and threw him down. Dean landed on his bad hip and the pain shot down his leg. He didn't fight back. It wouldn't do him any good.

Timmy turned his attention to the bike. With his friends yelling at him to get to the car or be left behind, he grabbed Dean's bike and went to shove it down the embankment.

You dirty little bastard. Dean hauled himself up and limped after the boy. "Get your hands off my bike, motherfucker!"

"You want a piece of me, bitch?" Timmy threw down the bike and charged Dean. It was all in slow motion. Dean reached under his shirt and gripped his shiv with only the sharp metal end protruding from his fist. Timmy led with a haymaker, but Dean ducked and the blow glanced off the back of his head. The wild punch threw Timmy off balance, and without really looking up, Dean half-heatedly pushed the shiv toward him. He was shocked when he felt the shiv go into the boy. It was like a fork going into a raw steak. Dean didn't think the stab had done much, thought it hit the kid's shoulder, but when he pulled his head up, he saw the shiv slide out of Timmy's neck. Timmy stopped in his tracks and reached for his throat, "You fucking stabbed me." He acted like Dean had broken the rules.

When thick, reddish brown blood began to pump past Timmy's fingers, he pulled his hand away from his neck and stared blankly at his bloody hand. Dean watched panic grip the boy as the extent of his injury began to sink in. He put his hand on his neck, trying to stem the bleeding. Forgetting about Dean, Timmy turned and staggered toward the SUV.

The other two boys were yelling something, but Dean couldn't focus on what they were saying. When Timmy went down, the others jumped out of the SUV and ran toward

them. Dean looked at the blood pooling beneath Timmy's neck. Lying there, he seemed so young. Dean staggered past the boy and retrieved his bike, pedaling out to the road as the other guys ran to their friend. Dean had seen a puddle of that thick brown blood before--back in the Tenderloin.

Dean headed south in a daze. Several minutes later the SUV roared past him. The driver laid on the horn, but didn't slow or try to swerve toward him. Kassia was right; Dean wouldn't be making it to Redondo. What the hell would I have done when got there anyway.

He would have never paddled out on that Mini-Mal. It was getting late in the afternoon and a cool sea breeze was blowing across the road. The choppy Pacific still sparkled in the afternoon sun, but a gray curtain of fog waited just offshore. Dean had to piss.

The Supes

There were three that went missing, so the other guy's not far from here. All that's left of these two are skeletons adorned with a little desiccated skin and some disintegrating denim. I'm not getting any closer. The summer sun seems to have cleaned up the bones, but I'll leave the poking around to the Sheriff's Department and the coroner—after all, as my wife likes to say, I'm just a Forest Service cop. Anyway, I'm glad the mystery's solved. Well, it wasn't exactly a mystery; everyone knew they were out here somewhere. These morons thought they were going to find the Dutchman's gold.

The bones seem to fit the landscape. I know it sounds a little ghoulish, but it's true. The Supes, the Superstition Mountains, are like a big desert garden. This is the look

the xeriscapers in Scottsdale are shooting for, and these two skeletons look like they belong. They don't belong, but they sure as hell look like they do. If I could take the five hundred square feet surrounding these remains and magically transport them to the side-yard of some Scottsdale mansion, there's no telling how much they'd pay me.

Every few years some nut-job comes up here thinking he's gonna strike it rich. We can usually rescue them. We cite 'em for messing with the desert ecology—picks and shovels can play hell with some of our fragile ecosystems. Then we send them home to their families.

It's getting on toward three o'clock, so I better get back to my rig and call this in. For the life of me, I don't know how we missed these guys. It's pretty embarrassing. They were long dead before we even knew to look, but somebody had to come right past here. I'm surprised nobody smelled them. I shake my canteen. It's over half full, so I take a long drink. Plenty of water—this is a pretty easy hike on a relatively cool day like today.

Turns out one of the three came looking for the Lost Dutchman Mine a couple of years ago. That time, the rescue team got to him before it was too late—while he still had some meat on him. I guess he was able to talk a couple of his buddies into joining him for another try. We'll never get the whole story. One thing's for sure, these guys weren't terribly bright.

Becky is sitting in front of the tube when I get home. As usual, she doesn't acknowledge my arrival.

“I found some human remains up in the Supes. Figure it’s those guys that went missing last summer.”

“Wow,” Becky sits up and actually looks toward me, “They had everybody out looking for those guys. They were looking for that stupid mine, weren’t they?”

“Yeah, I think so. I only found two of the three, but the other one has got to be around there somewhere. I the radioed the sheriff, those guys had an ongoing investigation, so it’s their baby, now.”

“Stupid Californians. That place is an idiot factory,” Becky says.

“They were from Colorado.”

“Wherever,” says Becky, “Are you going to be interviewed on the news, or anything?”

“The Sheriff’s Department spokesperson will handle the press. I’m walking a couple deputies out to the site in the morning.”

“You never get any credit with this goddamn Forest Service job. The sheriff’s deputies don’t even treat you like a real cop. You should have never left Mesa.”

“I wasn’t happy there.” Every conversation with Becky eventually comes around to her dissatisfaction with my career choices. “Where are the kids?”

“Mom’s got ‘em. She’s taking to them to Chuck E Cheese and a movie”

“Gross,” I say, “Jake hates Chuck E Cheese.”

“No he doesn’t. He’s nine. As long as Grandma’s paying for video games, he’s happy. You’re the one that hates Chuck E Cheese.”

I want to say, I hate you, your trailer trash mother, and Chuck E Cheese, but instead I blow her off and head toward the garage.

Before I can close the door, Becky yells, “Besides, Maude still loves it,”

I stow my service weapon, a Glock 9mm, in the safe and then take the iPod out of my shirt pocket and plug it into the dock. Droning Noise Rock comes on and fills the garage. I’ve been downloading some indie stuff. I don’t like all of it, but at least it sounds fresh. Becky doesn’t listen to music anymore. It’s just as well; she used to love Matchbox Twenty and Faith Hill. I hope the music keeps Becky from coming out to continue her defense of giant rats and bad pizza.

Becky was in love with that fucking Mesa PD job. She doesn’t know shit about what it’s like being a cop. The first thing you learn on the job is that you’re not a hero; you’re a garbage man. The average Joe or Jane are rarely victims of a serious crime. I know that’s not what you hear on CNN, but it’s the truth. Sure, some unlucky bastard winds up at the wrong place at the wrong time once in a while, but the vast majority of people involved in a crime, whether they’re the perps or the victims, are human refuse. A cop’s primary job is to keep that refuse out of the nice neighborhoods.

I applied to the Forest Service for a ranger position, but because of my so-called law enforcement background, I ended up being hired as an LEO—a Law Enforcement Officer. Now, I check use permits and deal with drunken boaters bouncing their way home from the reservoirs on the Apache trail. You get the occasional armed, redneck poacher, but at least there are no drug-deals-gone-bad or drive-bys.

When the kids get home, Becky sends them into the garage to say goodnight.

“Yeah, it was okay.” Jake’s trying to be neutral, not wanting to betray me or be unappreciative of his grandmother kindness.

“Grandma let you play every game in the place?”

“Yeah,” the kids answer in unison. Maude chirps, “I won Jakey in Jelly Canon,” and Jake shrugs like he has no idea what she’s talking about.

“Better get on in and go to bed. Love you.” I know Becky will stay upstairs once she puts the kids to bed, so I wait an hour and go into the family room to crash on the couch.

I’m early, it’s not even seven-thirty, but the deputies are already at the trailhead when I pull up. We were supposed to meet at eight. Old Jimmy Parsons, along with two young deputies I’ve never met, take the hike with me. The young guys are anxious to get to the site, but we have to hang back with Jimmy. He’s cussing and complaining the whole way. If not for those high-profile bones, not in a million years would he drag his paunchy, fifty-eight year-old ass up this trail.

There is no excuse for not finding these guys sooner. Truth is, it was hot, we knew they were dead, and we just couldn’t be bothered to look that hard. When we get to the site, the deputies, neither of whom was involved in the initial search, are trying to politely ignore the elephant in the room, or the bones in the wash, as it were. We find the third guy, maybe a mile up the little arroyo. Unlike the other two, his remains were scattered. He died in an exposed area and something bigger than a bug got to him before he dried up. Coyotes. Buzzards. He must have been the first one to drop out.

In summer, a young, healthy person can survive two days up here without water—tops. If you get seriously lost, you're fucked. The critters can scare up a little water, but sixty-five-year-old assholes with gold fever don't stand a chance. I head back to my truck, leaving the deputies to wait for the mounted recovery team. By the time I get back to the trailhead, the team has the horses out of the trailers and are busy saddling them up.

I'm the opposite of most people. My blood pressure actually goes down when I'm at work. When I'm on the job, I try not to think about my domestic problems, especially on a beautiful day like today. In October my job just kicks ass. There's less to do, more time to do it, and much better weather to do it in. I'm going to stop by the maintenance yard and pick up some free coolant.

Charlie's been trying to give away the coolant for weeks. Now that the Forest Service only allows the stuff that's been spiked with Bitrex, he's stuck with a fifty-five gallon drum he can't use. Ethylene glycol is a major component of coolant. It's sweet so the wildlife laps it up, if they find it. These days, the manufacturers add Bitrex to make the glycol bitter and unpalatable. With the old stuff, if anything leaks out of your vehicle, the critters are right on it. Twenty four to thirty-six hours later, it's goodbye endangered, red squirrel. Ol' Becky's always had a bit of a sweet tooth. I grin at the thought.

When I pull into the maintenance yard, Charlie comes out carrying two five-gallon Jerry Cans of coolant. Charlie is skinny and leathery with unruly white hair and he always has a red shop rag in the back pocket of his greasy khakis. I can't believe he carrying both cans at once. He looks like he's ready to slip a nut. I don't have the heart to

tell him that I won't use most of it. Charlie and I wrestle the coolant into my Expedition. When I tell him that I'm going to see Xochi, he raises an eyebrow and grins.

I feel like some love-struck adolescent when I spot Xochi's truck in the district office parking lot. We've become friends, but part of me would like it to be more. A big part, maybe. Xochi's one of the District Rangers. District Rangers are more important than they sound. Xochi is essentially in charge of the Mesa District. There's a Lost Dutchmen State Park, that's where the kooks usually start searching for the mine, but our federal wilderness area surrounds it. The Superstition Wilderness Area is part of Tonto National Forest—and it's in Xochi's district. The old boys whose bones I found were on federal land. LEOs have their own command structure, but the District Rangers are all-powerful within their jurisdiction. Xochi likes to being kept in the loop.

"You guys located the third man?" Xochi says as she comes out of her office and into the visitor's area to greet me. The volunteers have gone for the day, so it's just her and me. Xochi's no glamour queen in her khaki shorts, asexual Park Service shirt, and big clunky hiking boots, but something about her just does it for me. Maybe it's because she's the opposite of Becky—ambitious and enthusiastic. Xochi's got her black hair pulled back in a long braid and her Smokey Bear hat sits atop her head like she used a level to straighten it.

She looks down and shakes her head, "Such a sad thing. No matter how much we try to warn...how far in are the remains?"

“They were about seven or eight miles from the trailhead. Once they got dehydrated, they were probably really disoriented.”

“Jesus. What the hell were they thinking?”

“They thought the Lost Dutchman Mine was just over the next rise. We think they only had one small bottle of water each. You know the little twelve-ouncers. We didn’t find any canteens.”

“Poor cabesones,” Xochi says.

“The sheriff’s department brought up a recovery team on horseback. My guess is, these guys were scouting up the wash, went too far and took a couple wrong turns. They eventually headed back in the right direction, we heard from a family member that one guy had a bad ticker; he probably got in trouble. I’ll bet they waited around to see if he would recover, and by the time they realized he wouldn’t, it was too late for everybody.”

Xochi says, “I don’t know what we can do. We post signs all over,” she sighs and shakes her head again, “How long do you think they were out there? You know...alive.”

“The rule of threes doesn’t apply around here in summer. Considering their age and questionable health, they would have probably been incapacitated by early the second day. Walking down those rocky washes is challenging in the best of conditions. A twenty year-old might have made it.”

“I’d like to go out there with you tomorrow, if that’s okay,” Xochi says, “I want a better sense of what happened.”

“No problem, I’m sure the recovery team has it all mopped up. We can meet at the trailhead. You want to hike, or should we pick up the horses?”

“We can hike.” Xochi doesn’t care much for horses.

“We should get up there early. It took me about two and a half hours to reach them. Nothing any of us could have done, Xochi. The old guys were nuts. Their own fantasies did them in.”

“Yeah, I know. But they were guests of the Park Service. Our customers. See you tomorrow, Matt.” Xochi spins around, whipping her braid as she does, and heads back into her office.

I’m realistic about my relationship with Xochi. Even if I leave Becky, I can’t be positive she’ll date me. I know some of our coworkers are curious about our relationship, but at this point, we’re just lunch buddies.

As usual, Becky’s on the couch when I get home. Just the site of her puts me in a foul mood, “Where are the kids?”

“Upstairs, I guess.”

“What the hell do you do here all day?” This isn’t fair; she’s actually a pretty good homemaker. I am worried she’s become a closet drinker. That’s where I found the booze—in the closet. I’ve never come home to find her drunk, so I haven’t confronted her about it. She’ll deny that there’s a problem and it will just start another pointless argument, anyway. I’m keeping a close eye on the situation, for the kid’s sake.

“I clean your goddamn house and take care of your goddamn kids. What do you think?” Becky looks confused and a little shocked, but not hurt.

“I want a divorce,” I say, “I’ve had enough.” Now, she looks hurt and I feel twinge of regret. Five years ago, the look on her face might have gotten to me.

“Fine,” Becky says, “But don’t think you’re setting up house with your little tamale and our kids. I don’t care what you do, but nothing’s changing for the kids and me. We’re staying in this house and you’re still supporting us. I’m not going to make them change schools.”

Who the hell told her about Xochi? Some loudmouth sheriff’s deputies must have said something to a Mesa cop. Probably gossiping on a slow karaoke night down at Bad Ass Barbeque. Not to generalize about my brothers and sisters in blue, but most have the emotional maturity of middle-schoolers. “You shouldn’t believe everything you hear from those Mesa cops.”

“Shouldn’t I? You haven’t touched me in months,” Becky says.

“You must be joking,” I say, “We haven’t had a decent sex life in years.”

“That’s not fair. Try living with migraines and endometriosis.”

She’s full of shit, and I’m not going on this guilt trip again. “Whatever. You’re a fucking hypochondriac. When were you ever diagnosed with endometriosis?”

Becky’s shouting now, “Look it up on the internet. I have all the symptoms. You’re a fucking insensitive ass-hole.”

I head upstairs Jake and Maude are at the top. I’m supposed to take them to get their Halloween costumes tonight. Maude’s crying and Jake has his arm around her shoulders. They’ve heard something in our voices that lets them know this is serious.

I say, “You two ready to get your costumes?”

Maude says, “Are you leaving us, Daddy?”

“I’ll never leave you, pumpkin. I’ll always be here for you--you too, Jakester.

Now let’s hit the road. We’re going in daddy’s work truck.” It’s a government issue Expedition, which I really shouldn’t use as a personal vehicle, but if I tried to take the Tahoe, Becky might turn vindictive and claim she needed it. I load them up and we’re off to Target to pick out costumes. Jake loves riding in the police truck. Maude doesn’t care. I hope Jake avoids police vehicles, as either driver or unwilling passenger.

In Target, Jake takes forever deciding between Ironman and Zombie Ninja. Maude grabs her costume within thirty seconds of our arrival. It’s a genie costume, and I wonder why she likes it so much. I don’t remember any of her books or DVDs that having girl genies. Jake finally decides on Ironman.

As we put the costumes in the back of the Expedition, Jake sees the two five-gallon Jerry Cans of coolant. “What’s that? Gas?”

“It’s coolant for the Tahoe. They were giving it away at work. I forgot to put it in the garage.”

“Is it dangerous?” Jake asks. I’m always on him about safety.

“Only if you drink it.”

Xochi’s raring to go when I meet her at the trailhead. She’s always dressed for a hike, but I don’t think she gets out in the desert as much as she’d like. The deputies have the trailhead parking area secured, but Xochi has moved one of the barricades so I can

pull in. On the ride in, I got confirmation from the Sheriff's Department that the last of the remains were removed late yesterday.

"Had your coffee yet?" Xochi asks. "I brought you one in case you didn't."
"That was nice, thanks. You'll never see a cop turn down a cup of coffee. Did you remember the donuts?"

"Sorry, I forgot. I don't hang with cops much. I've got a couple of Luna bars, though."

I tell myself not to discuss my troubles with Becky., but we're only a quarter-mile down the trail when I start to tell her about last night's argument. "She thinks I'm cheating on her."

"You?" says Xochi in a tone I find mildly insulting, "with who?"

"Uh...she doesn't know." I shouldn't have mentioned that part. I hope she doesn't notice me blushing—I don't want to scare her off. I change the subject and tell her what Becky said about her and the kids staying in the house.

Xochi says, "I think she has a bit of a fantasy going about what life after divorce will be like. My sister went through it. You'll pay child support, get Maude and Jake every other weekend, and maybe a week or two during summer vacation. Becky and the kids will probably have to move into a condo. You'll have a little apartment, somewhere. That's what it'll be. It's not like this is uncharted territory."

"I don't know if I can handle being separated from the kids."

"Becky is basically a good mom, so you have zero chance of getting custody of the kids. Even if she was less than perfect, the nature of your job and your hours would

be brought into it.” Xochi, probably without realizing it, shakes her head pessimistically. We’re at the site in just under two hours. Xochi is a hardcore hiker and my male ego has forced me to keep up.

Xochi scans the terrain, “They were only right here? Oh my god. How did we miss them?”

“It’s hard to conduct a thorough search in the summer heat. We couldn’t know where they left the trail, and you got to remember, it was two days before the families even suspected anything was wrong, and another day before the we identified the car at the trailhead. Everybody assumed they started from the state park. By the time we got it was recovery. It was never a rescue.”

“I’m not blaming you guys.” Xochi puts her hands on her hips and gazes over the rugged landscape.

Xochi’s back to the district office, and I’m patrolling the Apache Trail. I don’t know why the guidebooks encourage people to take this route. It’s a narrow dirt track with few guardrails, but plenty of three hundred foot drops and washboard. Every so often we get some retiree that panics on Fish Creek Grade and just sits there in his Buick blocking the road. The seniors would be better off going to the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix.

I’ve been thinking about Bitrex, or the lack of it in the coolant Charlie gave me. I heard it takes about a cup of ethylene glycol-based coolant to kill an average sized person. Becky might take a cup and a quarter. That baby weight’s been pretty stubborn

since Maude. Since Maude and the new Ben and Jerry's shop at the mall. Pretty goddamn stubborn. It's all on the Internet, the dosing information. If I was really going to off someone, there's no way I'd leave a trail like that. I stop the truck at an overlook and survey the canyon below. Rugged and remote. You could put a body down there and no one would ever fucking find it. That's a fact.

People poisoned with it get sick as hell. Ethylene glycol, that is. They start vomiting and eventually go into convulsions. After that it's coma, organ failure, and adios muchachita. Takes a while, though. On the upside, glycols don't hang out in the environment very long. If I got Becky, for example, to swallow one big dose and hid her out in this desert, by the time anyone found her, there would be no evidence. Not without soft tissue to analyze. Even if there were fancy forensics that could be done, no one would think of it. The forensic pathologist would look at those bones, sanitized by the desert, shrug her shoulders and say she died of exposure. I get to the pavement near Roosevelt Dam and turn around. I haven't seen another vehicle the whole trip.

I couldn't do it at home. I couldn't have Becky puking and flopping around in front of the kids. I think it takes a while. It's not instantaneous. Days maybe. I'd have to get her to go camping with me and then say she got lost. I could falsely identify the search area and play the concerned husband. I pull into another overlook, this one above Apache Lake and mull over this scenario. No good. Camping to her is an RV by the lake with a bunch of Mesa cops. I could never get Becky to come out in the desert--just me and her.

I get out of the truck and walk down the steep canyon a little ways. I've walked down here many times. There's a little outcrop of smooth limestone, which is pretty rare in these parts. It's mostly volcanic rock around here, dacite, andesite, rhyolite, and basalt—rough, rugged rock. This spot is not as cruel and unforgiving as the rest of this canyon. There must be what passes for a spring somewhere near. Palo verde and ironwood trees contrast the ocotillo, cholla, and barrel cactus further down slope. The saguaro, are really hearty here. They look like they're raising their arms in celebration of this little oasis.

The only way the glycol would work is if I gave it to her in small doses and poisoned her over time. The slow ethylene glycol poisoning has been done. I saw it on Forensic Files. They had a hell of a time proving that case. Prove it or not, everyone would know it was me. Her parents would get custody of the kids. Instead of going to college, Jake would get a trucker hat, a sleeveless t-shirt emblazoned with a confederate flag, and become a regular at dirt track races and Toby Keith concerts. Maude would have a meth-baby at seventeen. She'd have a gold front tooth, a bad complexion, and an abusive, ex-con boyfriend with initials J.D for a name. Not good.

We're all about appearances, Becky and me. She looks like a good wife and I look like someone to be trusted—a nice policeman. I hike up to the overlook and get in the truck. I'll be off-duty by the time I get to Apache Junction. I start the Expedition and it comes to me. Appearances... There's that bottle of Jack in the closet. No one knows about it but Becky and me, and she doesn't know I know. If they found glycol in her system, I'd be screwed, but they'd never look. She'd never tell anyone about the hidden

whisky bottle. Our shitty doctor would claim it's a virus and the HMO wouldn't approve any sophisticated tests. They'd be my unwitting coconspirators. I could have her cremated and scatter her ashes up here in the Supes.

The streets are wet from a brief thundershower. The monsoon is long over, but the odd afternoon storm still passes over leaving Mesa muggy and warm. The rain never lasts more than a few minutes, but it knocks down the dust and, at least for a little while, gives our cul-de-sac a tropical feel. I'm anxious, as I pull into the driveway. I don't feel like going in, but I do.

Becky kneels in front of Maude and Jake on the family room floor. They're in full costume, make up and all for Maude, even though it's still three days before Halloween.

"Look Daddy, we've got a genie and Ironman right here in our family room!" Becky says with a weak smile.

"Well look at that. Aren't you guys a little early for Halloween?"

"We're practicing, Daddy," Maude says and gives me an exasperated look for not knowing, "This way when it's Halloween we'll know how to get ready."

"I see," Jake's too into his Ironman persona to join the conversation.

"Cute, huh?" says Becky.

"Yep. Pretty cute."

"I grilled some burgers, if you're interested, " Becky's a little distant now, the Kodak moment having faded, but still cordial, "Liz and I were gonna have a girls' night out, if you don't mind looking after Maude and Jakey."

Liz is the wife of a Mesa cop. “Knock yourself out.” I knew she wanted something. It’s still Becky. She’s never nice without a reason.

“I’ll get the kids out of their costumes, but then I have to get ready.”

I walk into the kitchen to grab a bite to eat and Becky follows me.

I say, “We’ll have to sit down and talk at some point.”

She says, “Let’s let the kids enjoy Halloween, then we’ll figure it out. Cuchi, or whatever her name is, can hold on until then.”

Becky suddenly looks sad. Tired and sad. “Xochi? We’re just friends. I’ve never slept around on you, Becky.”

“But you have feelings for her.” Becky is back to her old self—angry and confrontational.

I say, “I don’t know. I do know what we have isn’t working.”

“What you expect after ten years of marriage and two kids—some torrid romance? Aren’t you a little young for a mid-life crisis?”

“I’m also a little young to give up on happiness. We don’t owe it to anyone to stay in a bad situation, Beck.”

“What about your children’s happiness?” She stomps back into the family room.

I follow her, “Don’t ever question my commitment to the kids,” I say, “Stop laying on the fucking guilt. This is about us—not them.”

Becky goes upstairs to get ready, and I return to the kitchen. I’m too pissed off to eat. I grab a beer out of the refrigerator, but then put it back. I’m watching the kids tonight and I want to maintain the moral high ground.

Sitting at the kitchen table, I try to think back to a time when Becky and I were happy. I guess it was when Maude was a baby. It felt like a new start. Everything good in our lives had come from Jake, and we were kind of like drunks trying to extend a perfect buzz. You know, if one was good, two must be better. And it was better for a while.

The kids have been acting up all night. When they're not fighting with each other, they're conspiring to do something I've asked them not to. Jake spills Dr. Pepper on the new carpet in the living room after I've just told him to drink it in the kitchen. I spent twenty-three bucks a yard for this fucking Berber carpet that Becky had to have.

"Jake, I told you not to bring that soda in here!"

"Sorry," he says in a snotty tone that reminds me of his mother.

I grab his arm. Too hard.

"Ow, ow, you're hurting me!" Tears well up in Jake's eyes, more of shock and frustration than from any pain I caused him.

I let him go, and calm myself. He's getting to be a big boy, but not that big. Maude peers around the corner, not wanting to miss the action. The reality of having sole responsibility for these guys is setting in like the heartburn after a three-pound apple fritter and a half a pot of Forest Service coffee. It's nothing I can't handle, but it's in stark contrast to my fantasy over the past few days. I have to admit that I let Becky do a lot of the dirty work. Jake and I clean up his mess, and then he and Maude run off to find more opportunities for mischief.

The kids are finally asleep. I go out in the garage and look at the Jerry Cans full of coolant. I go back into the house and look at Becky's stash of booze. Just like the last time I checked, there's about a half a bottle of Jack Daniels. She doesn't seem to be drinking it very fast, or maybe she is and this is a new bottle. Becky used to only drink Jack when she was really partying. I guess she feels like she needs a party once in a while after riding herd on Maude and Jake.

It's 11:30 and Becky will be home soon. I'm rifling around in the kitchen cupboards and drawers looking for a measuring cup. I just want to see what a cup of liquid looks like. I come across a turkey baster and set it next to the sink. I go upstairs and check on the kids. They're both sleeping peacefully. I go back downstairs and out on the front porch. The hair stands up on my neck as I look up and down the street for signs of Liz's faded old Mercedes bringing Becky home. I feel like a teenager getting ready to take his sleeping parent's car for a late night joy ride. I grab the baster on my way into the garage. My heart's pounding a little. Listening for Liz's car pulling into the driveway, I try to remove the cap from one of the Jerry Cans. It won't budge. I consider just going back in the house, but decide to try the other one. I twist hard on the cap and it resists, but then there is slight movement and the cap begins to loosen.

The baster holds nearly half a cup. It looks like it's filled with Mountain Dew. A Jack Dew. Becky use to drink those in college. I wipe off the baster with a red shop rag then wrap the baster with it. Back in the kitchen, I put the baster on the counter next to the sink. I go into the hallway and grab the bottle of Jack out of the closet and take it back to the sink. I can hear my own heartbeat as I empty the contents of the syringe into the

whiskey bottle. I watch to see how much the coolant changes the appearance of the whisky.

I hear something behind me. I whip around to see Maude looking up at me.

“Daddy, I want a drink of water,”

“Okay, honey.” My hands are shaking as I get put down the baster and bottle to get a glass from the cabinet. I fill it from the tap. “Here you go.” I start nonchalantly pouring the whiskey down the drain.

“I don’t like that water. I want it from the fridgerator.”

I put down the bottle and take her glass, pouring it out in the sink. I go to the fridge and refill her glass.

“Here you go, plum.”

Becky turns her key in the lock. Shit! I never heard Liz’s old car rattle into the driveway. When Maude starts toward the door, I open the cabinet door beneath the sink and jam the baster into the wastebasket. I quickly empty the Jack Daniels bottle, as I glance out the kitchen window. The car pulling into the street isn’t Liz’s. It’s a sporty new Mazda I don’t recognize.

I hear Becky say, “What are you doing up, Maude?” She walks in with Maude on her hip.

“She wanted a drink. They went to bed around nine,” I say defensively.

Becky edges closer to the sink and spies the Jack Daniels bottle. She shoots me a puzzled look and takes Maude up to bed without commenting. I know she’ll be back so I stay at the sink, taking the opportunity to rinse the bottle. When she gets back, I hold up

the empty bottle, “I found this in the closet. Gettin’ hammered when you’re supposed to be watching the kids?”

“I take one little shot every once in a while. I never get hammered. You drink at home, why shouldn’t I?” Becky says.

“I don’t stash a bottle.”

“Don’t get all high and mighty with me, you self-righteous asshole. You’re the one abandoning your family.” Becky’s buzzed and doesn’t seem interested in making this a long conversation.

I ask, “Who dropped you off?” Becky cocks her head and gives me a dismissive sneer. She turns around and stomps back upstairs. I listen as she goes into the bathroom. As soon as the bathroom door closes, I fish the baster out of the trash and sneak out to the garage. I stash it in my roll-around toolbox. Back in the kitchen, I rinse the Jack bottle ten or twelve more times with hot water and put it in the recycling. Becky never comes back down, and I spend a sleepless on the couch.

It’s Friday morning and the Commander doesn’t have any special tasks for me. I tell him I’m gonna go up the wash where we recovered the bodies. Clear up a few things for my report. The boss is fine with me going; he just tells me to make sure I’ve got my radio with me, in case anything comes up. Xochi might make the hike with me if she wasn’t too busy, but I don’t want to see her. Tomorrow, I’ll use the baster to top off the Tahoe’s coolant reservoir, and then take the two Jerry Cans down to the Household Hazardous Waste drop-off at the dump.

It's almost Halloween, but when I get to the trailhead, the day is quite warm. As I trudge up the trail, a pair of Great-tailed Grackles fly ahead of me. They land and look back to screech their accusations. I get to the spot where I found the first two fortune hunters, and I realize that I've lost two hours. I don't remember anything about the hike, except the grackles. I don't even remember getting off the trail.

The only trace of the old-timers is a little disturbed soil where the coroner removed the remains. I try hard to feel bad for these guys, but it's just not there. Sitting on my haunches near where I found them, I take a long draw from my canteen and think about how desert purifies everything--how the flesh, the desire, the need, are all eventually burned away. The grackles fly over, no longer interested, and when I stretch out in the shallow depression left by the coroner, it seems like a perfect fit.

Momentary Friends

Sweeney's was dark and dingy; walking across the floor was like walking on flypaper. The Irish pub hadn't seen a serious upgrade since the '80s, except for the touch-screen cash register and a couple 50-inch flat screens, but it was a second home to Dana. She was officially a bartender, but she saw herself as more of a goodwill ambassador.

Charlie, one of Dana's regulars bellied up to the bar.

Dana stood on her toes and leaned toward Charlie. "Hi sweetie, what'll it be?"

"Seven and Seven. You're looking fine tonight darlin'. Got a hot date?"

"Nah, just thought I'd put on a little make-up for a change," Dana always wore make-up, but she had put in a little more effort than usual.

Dana's last boyfriend left her for the newer model—some 22-year-old who understood him or made him laugh or fill in the blank. Dana was thirty-four. She'd been depressed for a few weeks, but she was way over it now. It would have been harder, if she'd actually loved him.

"What are you doing in this dive, Dana? If I were a beautiful woman like you, I think I'd marry a banker," Charlie said.

"I'm not going to fuck some clown for his money."

"You wouldn't have to. Well, maybe a little at the beginning. Just ask my wife."

Dana rolled her eyes and shook her head, "Charlie, Charlie Charlie. Such the romantic."

Dana called these guys her momentary friends. They came in and out of her life as easy and natural as the tide. Most of the customers were men who watched sports on the big screens while doing some serious drinking. Dana could count on one hand the single women she'd see in a week. Once in a while, women came in with their partners or friends. When they came in to check up on their men, the girlfriends and wives of the regulars played huggy-kissy with Dana—she happily played along. Her girlfriends came into the bar from time to time. But that could be a little uncomfortable.

"Why don't you try working in your field?" they would ask. "You have a degree."

"What the hell do you do with a bachelor's degree in Anthropology?" Dana would ask back.

"Why don't you go to grad school?"

“I don’t think so,” Dana would say, “Anyway, I am doing something in my field. Anthropology is the study of man, and I’ll tell you honey, there’s no better place to study men than in a bar.” She wanted to believe her friends had good intentions. She wouldn’t trade places with any of them.

“When are you going to start dating again?” At least her girlfriends never ask her about getting married and having kids anymore. She’d known some of them since grammar school, and it had taken them years to finally develop a kind of mutual acceptance. No more forced girls-nights-out—just a call or a lunch or an invitation to one of their kids’ birthday parties. Last year, one of Dana’s friends invited her up to Santa Rosa for Thanksgiving, but she had to take a rain check. Dana had responsibilities at Sweeney’s: Jack asked her to take 75 dollars out of the till and decorate the bar.

Working nights was perfect for her. Dana’s days could be spent walking down the waterfront observing the tourists and flocks of shorebirds with equal interest. She loved spotting the sea lions behind the breakers and watching the waves lap up against rocks or crash on the beach. Life slowed down when you worked hours like hers.

Her best friend at work was Emilio. He was her favorite barback. Emilio, in his mid-twenties, was married with two kids. He was straightforward and a hard worker who always had the ice bin full, the soda gun flowing, and clean glasses lined up and ready. It was important to Dana that her bar glasses were properly organized: shot, hi-ball, lo-ball, Martini, cocktail, wine, and pint. All in orderly lines like crystal soldiers waiting for battle.

Emilio was perpetually happy. Dana admired him. He had what she imagined must be a very difficult life.

“Busy today, eh, amiga.”

“Yeah, thank God for the NFL. Gotta keep that old tip jar full.”

“Yeah, mucho dinero! Those hombres like you, eh?”

“Can I get some ice, Emilio?”

“Sí señorita, pronto.”

Dana always split the tips evenly with Emilio. Even though Jack, the owner, never dictated how much the bartenders gave the barbacks, Dana figured he needed the money more than she did.

One busy evening a guy, who’d taken a seat at the bar unnoticed, waved timidly to get Dana’s attention.

“I’m sorry sweetie, I didn’t see you come in. What can I get you?”

“Crown over, please.”

Dana smiled and turned to grab the bottle off the top shelf. Crown Royal was easily top shelf at Sweeney’s. The guy was a little overweight and wore a button down shirt with the long sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. He wasn’t good looking or bad looking. Like many of Sweeney’s customers, he was pleasantly indistinguishable.

“There you go, sweetie.” Dana’s new patron looked down her low cut top and then blushed when he got caught. “Haven’t seen you in here before. Just visiting?” Dana asked, as she wiped down the bar for her new customer.

“No. No, I live in the neighborhood. I just don’t go out for drinks much.”

“Well, welcome to Sweeney’s.” Dana always felt a little goofy welcoming new patrons, but Jack liked her to do it.

The customer hesitantly offered his hand. “My name’s Andrew . . . Andy.” Dana looked at the pale indent on his ring finger of his other hand. Andy pulled it off the bar.

“Recently separated.”

“I’m Dana, nice to meet you.” Usually Dana would just say ‘nice to meet you’, and not give her name unless asked. Dana returned to her cluster of regulars at the other end of the bar.

A few minutes later, Charlie motioned toward the other end of the bar. “I think that guy wants something, Dana.” She looked over to see Andy timidly waving again. Almost apologetically he said, “Another Crown, please.”

“Speak up, Andy. We’re usually not quite so polite here at Sweeney’s.” Dana put down his drink and patted his hand. She looked down the bar at her regulars and said in a voice they’d be sure to hear, “Though some of us could use a lesson in manners.” Whether she liked it or not—and she could never decide if she liked it or not—Dana had been appointed den mother.

Andy slammed his drink and laid a twenty on the bar. There were mirrors behind the bar, but Sweeney’s customers seldom consulted them. When Andy turned up his drink, he looked like a pig with a glass nose.

“That’ll be fourteen dollars, sir.”

“I’m good, Dana. Thank you.”

“Thank you sweetie, hope to see you again.”

“See ya,” Andy said, then slid off his stool and headed for the door without acknowledging anyone else.

A few times over the next several weeks, Andy came in early in Dana’s shift—she started at five. He was always quiet and polite. Dana thought he seemed sad.

Then one evening, later than usual, Andy came in and sat at the bar.

“Hey, Andy, Crown over?”

“Sure, Dana.”

Dana placed his drink on the bar and smiled. Andy seemed a little nervous, fidgety.

“Would you like to have dinner with me sometime?”

“Sorry, Andy, I don’t date customers. Thanks, though.”

“Guess I’m pretty bad at this,” Andy said.

Poor guy. Half her regulars had hit on her at one time or another. You just had to let them down easy. She tried not to act differently after unwanted advances; she just pretended they never happened. Most of the guys got over any ill feelings or embarrassment pretty quickly. You could never tell a guy you just wanted to be friends, but a pro like Dana could make it easy for him to go back to being friends.

“Are you sure?” Andy said blushing. “Just dinner, no strings attached.”

“No, thanks. Sorry.” Dana reached across the bar and gave Andy a friendly punch to the shoulder. “Never date a bartender, Andy. We know you guys too well.” She winked and started arranging glasses behind the bar.

Still blushing, Andy smiled. “Fair enough,” and downed his drink. “One more for the road?”

“You’ve got it, sweetie.”

Dana was pleased when Andy came and took his place at the bar the next week. She knew he’d sit at his stool until he didn’t, and things would be okay between them.

“Hello there, Andy. Would you care for a Crown Royal?”

“Yes, my dear,” Andy said—hands folded politely on the bar; smiling face cocked to one side. “I believe I would.” Dana poured the drink, and slid it to her new her pal.

Sometimes Dana would stop by work on her days off. She just liked to check on things, especially on the days Emilio was working—she was kind of protective of her barbacks. She’d say hello to everybody, but she’d never stay long. Dana would let one of the guys buy her a shot of Jäger during her shift, but she rarely drank on her own time. After leaving Sweeney’s, she’d usually stop at her favorite Polk Street coffee house on her way down to the waterfront. If she was going to pay San Francisco rent, she owed it to herself to enjoy the beautiful scenery as often as possible.

Dana knew she wouldn’t stay at Sweeney’s forever, but right now it was what she needed. Why was everyone so obsessed with permanence when life itself is so impermanent?

On one of her walks along the Marina, she happened upon Andy. He was unloading a little girl of five or six out of a Volvo station wagon. A tall, thin, severe woman in black yoga pants stood on the sidewalk supervising.

“Don’t forget her sweater, Andy. It’s getting a little chilly for her.” The woman hiked up her backpack, put her hands on her hips—looking around like a soldier surveying a battlefield.

“Okay, dear,” Andy briefly made eye contact with Dana, then turned and pretended to fuss with the girl’s sweater.

Dana smiled and continued on her way. She wondered if he’d have the guts to show his face in Sweeney’s. If he did, she’d be tempted to ask, “How’s the family?” But she wouldn’t. She was a pro. Tossing back her hair, she quickened her pace. At the end of the parking lot, Dana paused, and started to look back toward Andy, but then thought better of it, and continued on her way.

A week or two went by before Dana saw Andy again. It was about a quarter after five, and the bar was mostly empty. He took his regular spot at the bar.

“What’ll it be.” Dana said.

Andy said, “The usual”

“What’s the usual? I’m not a mindreader.” Dana wasn’t going to go out of her way to be nice to this guy.

“Crown.”

Dana pushed Andy’s drink toward him. He picked up the glass, looked at it, and put it down without drinking. It was half as much as she usually poured. Dana walked to the opposite end of the bar. Andy tossed down the drink and spun his glass on the bar. Dana didn’t look his way.

“Could I get another?”

Dana took her time breaking off her conversation with another patron, but eventually sauntered over to Andy. She picked up the bottle of Crown and dribbled a finger of booze into his glass. He picked up the glass and laughed at the minuscule serving.

“You want a double?” Dana said.

“Yeah, sure. Make it a double.”

Dana added a tiny splash.

“Look, I’m sorry about before. My wife and were separated and I wanted some company.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know, when I asked you out. I know you saw me with my wife and kid afterward. I thought I was going to be single. ”

“Thought you were going to be?” Dana laughed.

“Thought I was...whatever. We decided to try to work things out. You turned me down, anyway.”

Dana said. “Good luck with that. This job provides great insight into the futility of relationships.”

“Yeah, I guess it would.” As Andy stared at his glass, Dana filled it to the rim.

“You were never separated,” she said.

“No...we talked about it. You seemed nice...different from her.”

“Well I’m not,” Dana said.

Andy slurped down half the Crown, “Not nice or not different from her?”

“Neither.”

Andy put a twenty on the bar. “Thanks for the good cheer.”

Dana forced a smile and gave the bar a couple of sharp wraps. “Anytime.”

The Job

He comes into the park right on cue. We’re dressed almost alike. White athletic shoes, tan shorts, tan short-sleeved cotton shirt. The only difference is that under my shirt, tucked into my shorts, is a gun with an expensive silencer. My timing is almost perfect. I’ll intersect him steps from my escape route. I don’t think he’s even seen me yet. I walk casually down the paved trail. There’s a golf course on one side and open desert preserve on the other. Nice neighborhood. The spot where we’ll cross paths is not in the sight line of any houses. If somebody does see, it’s no big deal. They won’t be able to describe me in any useful way. “A guy who looks a lot like the victim” won’t be much help.

My heart is starting to pound, and my face feels flush. The temperature no longer seems perfect. He’s fifty feet away and now aware of my presence. I put on a big smile. Everything goes into slow motion these last few steps. When I first started, this sensation would come on as soon as I saw the target. Now it’s just the last few steps.

“Evening,” he says.

“Evening,” I say. “Beautiful weather, isn’t it?” That’s all I have time for. I reach for my waist nonchalantly. Like I’m going to scratch my belly. We’re only three feet apart. The gun, despite its extra long barrel, comes out in an easy fluid motion. I don’t think it even registers for him. Thwap. The bullet enters his forehead, an inch above the

bridge of his nose. His face is expressionless, his brain scrambled, and he makes a barely audible sound, the huff of a short, quick exhale as he drops to his knees and then topples over. His little dog stares at his master, then looks up at me, confused. Like his master, he's quiet. Thwap, thwap. I shoot my doppelganger twice more in the side of the head. I have to make sure he doesn't have a miraculous recovery. If he lives now, they'll revoke his Mensa membership. I leave the dog sniffing around.

I cut off the trail and walk down into the little wash. It takes me only thirty seconds to find my gym bag. I pull off my shirt as I walk and stuff it and the gun into the bag. I put the cap in there too. I stop for five seconds to pull on a shirt I had in the bag. I zip up the bag and walk out into the desert—still no sirens. If I'm going to get caught, this is where it will be. The first few times I did this job, this part was such a rush. Now, it's like an out-of-body experience, and I'm much more analytical. Once I get to the car, I'm clear. I walk through the desert at nice slow pace. I can't be huffing, puffing and sweaty when I get to the parking lot.

"It's just a job," the old man said. "Think of it like any other job." I slipped the knife into the fish's anus and pulled steadily toward its head. The sound was muffled...hollow. Splitting the fish was like cutting a drumhead. I was seven or eight. "Now stick your finger in and pull out the guts," he said. "Go ahead. It's just a job like any other job. You know how your mother loves trout."

My car is parked 0.86 miles away, on the other side of the little preserve. It's in a strip mall with a Whole Foods, a pet store called Passionate About Puppies, and some cheap, storefront day spa. My car is a 2006 Scion xA. It looks like a metallic baby shoe. I bought it from a college student for cash, and I'll sell it for cash before I leave. Good little car. Dependable.

When the cute girl at the coffee shop, the one with the spiked red Mohawk and impossible facial piercings, asks what I do for a living, I say I'm semi-retired—that I do investing work from home. She says it must be nice. That's close to the truth, I guess. It's the way I live. I have a nice little apartment, but not too nice. I eat well and drink well, but I'm not a regular at any place except the coffee shop. I do invest the money the old man left me. I lost a bit in the downturn, but I've always been a pretty conservative investor. I can still show “visible means” to support my apparently modest lifestyle.

I'm basically a very well paid process server. That's how I roll. I walk up to the person, big friendly smile on my face, and then I complete my job and get the hell out of there. Unlike a process server, the people being served don't complain much.

I drive home without incident. I have to laugh at what a terrible, difficult job the cops have. What does a Phoenix detective make? Seventy-five grand tops. They do a pretty good job. The taxpayers get their money's worth. They'll catch about thirty percent of gang bangers that off a rival. They do pretty well on the domestic stuff, too. But a hit like this? They might luck into one every few years, but they're hitting way, way below the Mendoza line.

I carry my bag into the apartment and throw it in the closet. I'll deal with it in the morning. I grab a beer to drink while I take a cool shower. Lying in bed, it's hard not go over the details. I'm positive no one saw me. And I remind myself that it probably wouldn't matter if they did.

The light streams into my apartment, waking me up. Phoenix doesn't have much, but sunlight it has. I drag myself out of bed and turn on the computer. I bring up the local paper's website. The headline reads, **Local Businessman Found Dead on Scottsdale Jogging Path**. I skim the story. The police don't release much information. Found dead on the path by a worried wife. Apparent gun shot victim. What I'm able glean from this story is: No witnesses. No motive. No clue.

I have to field strip the gun. It's a Ruger Mark III, 22/45—I've used this model twice before. I pop out the bolt stop pin, pull out the bolt, pop off the barrel—even though I haven't stripped one in two or three years, it takes me only five minutes. I take a tungsten carbide drill bit from my little tool kit and scar the inside of the barrel, just for good measure. The gun breaks down into six pieces (including the silencer and clip). I wipe down each piece and drop them into six small, generic, brown paper bags. Bags that I've made sure not to put my prints on. I'll drop the bags in random trashcans along my circuitous round trip to Globe. It's a six and a half hour drive through five counties, and five different law enforcement jurisdictions. Easy. The three shells I used to do the job were all I had. I got rid of the rest of the box weeks ago.

The silencer, more accurately referred to as a sound suppressor, changes the gun's "bang" to a quieter but still fairly loud "thwap"—a good bit louder than in James Bond

movies. It's useful because witnesses don't think gunshot when they hear the "thwap," and city gunshot locator systems can't pick up the sound. The silencer made the Ruger kind of long and unwieldy, but its benefits outweighed the inconvenience. When the cops saw the .22 long rifle casings next to the body, they probably figured some ghetto kid from the Southside tried to rob the guy.

It's late April and Phoenix is supposed to hit ninety-five degrees. It won't stay this hot through the spring, but everybody knows the nice weather is coming to an end. I'll be happy to get out of this hillbilly hotbox. The job will be buttoned up in two or three days, but, exercising an abundance of caution, I'll hang around to till the lease runs out in the fall. I rarely do more than one job a year, so I'm not in any big hurry. I'm not greedy. Once the brutal heat starts, probably mid-May, I'll spend as much time as I can in San Diego or up in Sedona.

I walk down to the coffee shop. The red Mohawk girl sees me, she asks if I want my usual—an iced coffee. I nod.

"My name's Hillary, by the way." She reaches to shake.

"John," I say as I grasp her delicate, long fingered hand.

The young woman from the escort service has milky white skin. I want to ask her how she stays so white in this climate, but she'd probably take it the wrong way. She's pretty and very thin. Pleasant enough to look at, but I'm not overly attracted to her, which is good. She says her name is Ruth, not Satin or Jasmine or Diamond, which is also good, though I'm not sure why. Ruth says I seem tense. She looks at my room service Irish

coffee and says that maybe I need to cut down on my caffeine and alcohol consumption. I ask her what the point of this life is without caffeine and alcohol consumption. She thinks I'm joking and I don't bother to correct her. She thinks I should get a hobby. I tell her that alcohol and caffeine consumption is my hobby. Then I tell that I used to fish, but I don't like cleaning them. I tell her what my old man used to say, about it just being a job, and there is an awkward silence between us.

“Just throw ‘em back.” Ruth says quietly.

It's been more than a week, and the story has faded from the headlines. Yesterday, there was a plea from the cops, you know, call the Police Department or the Silent Witness program at 555-WITNESS. I'm planning to drive out to San Diego in a couple days. The only thing left to do on this job is to pick up the cash and close out my account at the mailbox place. The money will come in two shoebox sized packages, mixed denominations, twenties, fifties, and hundreds—a hundred and twenty-five grand. I head out for my iced coffee.

Hillary greets me as I enter the shop. “Hi Robert...ugh...sorry, I mean John. Iced coffee?”

“Sounds good,” I say. She seems to feel bad about calling me by the wrong name. Funny thing. Robert is my real name. Not that much of a coincidence. They're both very common names. It made me think of my mother. She called me, Robbie most of the time, but when she was mad she said, “Robert!” The last time she spoke to me, she said, “Robbie, I'm just not having any fun.” She told me to take care of myself. I love you, she

said. I was eleven when she killed herself. The old man said she didn't love us. He did everything, he said, but nothing would make her happy. The old man said if she loved me, she wouldn't have left me.

The mole on Ruth's back is a little island in a vast, white sea. I'm lying on the bed, and she's draped across my waist, trying to get a condom on my stubbornly flaccid penis.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Can we just talk, tonight?" I ask.

"You want a fifteen hundred dollar conversation?"

"I guess I do."

"It's your money," Ruth says. "You're not getting weird on me, are you? Not falling in love."

"No," I say.

"I have a boyfriend," she says.

"I'm not in love with you. I just want to talk."

Ruth sits up and tosses the condom across the room. "So talk," she says.

I get dressed and sit on the edge of the bed. I'm having a hard time thinking of anything to say. Ruth gets dressed too. She stands next to the bed with her arms crossed.

"Are you happy? Do you enjoy your life?"

"I think I better go," Ruth says.

"No...I'm not judging."

“My life’s okay,” Ruth says. “Day jobs don’t work for me. I’m not an early riser. How ‘bout you? Do you enjoy your life?”

“No,” I say, “I’m bored.” I lie back onto the bed with my legs still dangling off the edge.

“What do you do for a living, anyway?”

I stare at the ceiling. Finally, I say, “I kill people.”

“Yeah, right.” Ruth laughs. “You’re probably an accountant.”

“I’m not an early riser.”

I lift my head to look at Ruth. She’s no longer laughing. I tell her not to worry. She can leave if she wants. She stays. I haven’t paid her yet.

“You’re like a mob hit man or something?” Ruth asks.

“I’m an independent contractor. I have a guy. You can think of him as an agent. He doesn’t even know me—just how to get in touch with me. The guy before him knew who I was. He died. Natural causes. Set me up with the new guy before he checked out.”

“That was nice of him...I guess,” Ruth says. She gives me that, Whatever, you’re a freak, look. It makes her look like a snotty teenager.

“Yeah,” I say ignoring the attitude. “Do you believe in fate?” I ask.

“I don’t believe in shit. Wow. Do you have any weed?”

“My mom didn’t like trout that much,” I say. “She pretended to like it because it pleased the old man.”

“What? Look, this is all none of my...”

“I told you. You know, about how my old man made me clean the fish.”

“Oh yeah, the fishing thing.” Ruth looks at her watch and then sits on the opposite end of the bed from me. “I have to leave by eleven. I’m still getting the fifteen hundred, right?”

“Do you know where the Majestic Coffee Shop is?” I ask.

“Downtown? Yeah, I know where it is,” Ruth says.

“I don’t believe in fate either,” I say, “but people do get lucky sometimes.”

Ruth shrugs. “Some people do, I guess.”

“How would you like to make sixty grand for a couple of hour’s work?” I ask.

“Doing what?” she asks.

“It’s for a delivery.” I say.

“Drugs?” she asks.

“Money.” I say.

“I don’t know. Sounds sketchy,” Ruth says. “Why don’t you deliver it yourself and save sixty grand?”

“I need a hobby.”

“You’re still going to pay me for tonight, right?”

I type a single page confession.

My name is Robert Lawrence Morton. I was born in 1963 in Sacramento California. I’m an assassin. I’m currently going by the name John Brooks, but I’ve gone by many others. My first victim was Dr. Kyle Thompson. I killed him the summer of 1987 in San Francisco. My last victim was Mark Bodner of Scottsdale. I killed him on

April 24th. Mr. Bodner got one shot to the forehead, two to the temple from a .22 caliber Ruger pistol. I left his little dog unharmed. I don't know who hired me or why they wanted him dead. I was pretty busy between Dr. Thompson and Mr. Bodner, but someone will have to figure all that out. Good luck.

Ruth is sitting in the bar when I walk in. She seems nervous, but smiles when I sit next to her. I order a Crown over. I give her Google directions to Mail Ego in Chandler and the mailbox key. I tell her to give one package to Hillary, along with my car keys, and keep the other. She's to tell Hillary the package and the car are a gift from Iced Coffee John. Before going to the bar, I filled out the title for the car that looks like a baby shoe, put the title and an envelope marked POLICE in the glove box, and parked it near the coffee shop. I'm excited for the first time in years. I feel like I'm going on vacation.

"Why are you doing this?" Ruth asks.

"I told you, I need a hobby."

"Do you feel guilty about...you know?"

"No."

Ruth whispers into her club soda, "They deserved it, right?"

"Beats me," I say. "Odds are some of them didn't deserve it."

"Why'd you pick me?"

"I didn't really. The escort service sent you."

"I mean to tell about your life, and to make the delivery."

“You were there when I got the idea and I know you’re not averse to making a little illicit cash,” I say.

“Makes sense,” Ruth says. She glances at her watch signaling that she’s ready to go. “Do you even like me?”

“To be honest, I never really thought about it,” I say.

“You must like me a little.” Ruth nudges me with her elbow, “What about the coffee girl? Why you giving her the cash? You fancy her?”

“She treats me like a regular.” I down the whiskey. “She might be silly enough to take the money to the cops, but that’s her cross to bear. Oh, and if you run off with her share...well, you know what I do for a living.”

Ruth looks away and takes a deep breath. “You’re a lonely guy, John.”

“My name’s Robbie, and I’m way past being lonely. I’m a ghost...Robbie the Ghost.” Talking about ghosts makes me notice how white Ruth is.

I pick up the Amtrak shuttle a few blocks from the bar. The Southwest Chief from Chicago to Los Angeles stops in Flagstaff. That tells you something about Phoenix—there isn’t even a proper train station. I sit next to a skinny, surly, old drunk with impossibly bad breath for two and a half hours and when we get there, Flagstaff’s cool, pine-scented air is like heaven. I’m a little on edge. I’ve relinquished control for the first time in decades. In all likelihood, Ruth and Hillary will screw something up. The ticket agent says the train should only be a half hour late tonight. I’ve got a few hours to wait.

Yellow Iron

Gary snarls at the car speeding toward him. A BMW...they're the worst. "Stop! Stop! Stop the goddamn car!" Gary yells as he frantically waves his sign. As the car screeches to a stop, Gary watches the middle-aged woman put down her phone. "You're gonna kill someone!" She gives Gary a deer-in-the-headlights stare. When the skiploader moves out of the road, Gary flips the sign from stop to slow and angrily waves her on. "Idiots just won't slow down. It's like they're driving around in a trance." Cody just stands there and smiles. He's taking a smoke break from shooting elevations with the laser.

"Texting. You believe that shit?" Gary's asks. "People can't put down the damn phone long enough to drive. I don't get it. What's so goddamn important that they can't wait till they get where they're going? My daughter's the same way—can't put it down. I tell her she's gonna wear out her thumbs."

Cody just shrugs. "Why are you flagging anyway, Pal? What did you do to piss off Les this time?"

"I didn't do a thing. This is bullshit. I've been a journeyman operator for over twenty years. He keeps this shit up, I'm calling the shop steward."

Cody shakes his head, "Not a good time to be making waves, bud. Lots of guys are sittin' on their asses down at the hall. Les isn't so bad. Why don't you try to get along?"

“I don’t get paid to be Les’s buddy. If he needs a friend, he can buy himself a fucking puppy.”

“He could have sent you home and had a laborer do this,” Cody says. “I’m surprised he didn’t. If old man Hennig finds out Les is paying an operator to flag, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“Are you kidding? Les isn’t doing me any favors. Prick just wants to humiliate me. I think he figures if he pisses me off enough to make me quit, he can give his kid more work,”

Gary walks in from work just as his wife, Emma, is walking out. “I’m off to school. We saved you some pizza. It’s on the counter.” Emma says, as she rushes toward the door. “See ya.”

“See ya. Drive carefully. There’re all kinds of crazy drivers out there. Some lady in a beamer damn near t-boned a front loader, today. Texting, can you believe it?”

Emma is walking out for good when Ashley goes to college next fall. Emma doesn’t want to tell Ashley now. Doesn’t want to ruin this special time. It will be easier when she’s away, Emma says. She tells Gary it’s nobody’s fault. They’ve grown apart. Gary knows that it’s Emma who’s grown apart.

Gary goes upstairs and knocks on Ashley’s door. Of course there’s no answer. The girl is never home anymore. Gary pushes the door open, but he doesn’t go in. He just stands there looking in. It’s still seems like a little girl’s room. So much like it’s always been. Tacked on her walls are pictures of the three of them at Disneyland, pictures of her

friends, an eight by ten glossy of her soccer team, signed by all the girls. There's a picture, printed from a computer, of Ashley with her arm around some boy with a hole in his earlobe you could run a half-inch rope through. Emma will know his name and say he and Ashley are "just friends." He's a nice kid, she'll say. Gary remembers when Ashley's bed was home to a bunch of stuffed animals. Now there are just some fancy pillows that she and her mom picked out scattered on top. The skateboard she doesn't ride anymore is propped up against her open closet door. Gary can see a soccer ball inside, a field hockey stick, that saxophone she tried to play in eighth grade. She won't take this stuff with her to the dorms. She'll leave it all here, thinking she'll get it later. Feeling sentimental about her childhood. But most of it will end up at the Goodwill. She's practical, like her mom, she'll be sad to see all the old stuff go, but she'll realize it has to.

Cody and his helper buzz up in his little cart and get out. "Gotta recheck some of these elevations before these guys start moving dirt," Cody says. The helper, who looks fourteen to Gary, grabs a grade rod off the cart and walks over to a stake. "How was your weekend, Dude? Do anything?" Cody asks.

"Nothin' much—finished puttin' some pavers down in the back yard. I'm trying to get rid of the lawn. No one goes back there anymore. Ashley will be off to college next fall."

"It goes by fast, don't it?" Cody says as he pulls a tripod and a suitcase-sized yellow case out of his cart. "They say when you're young, the days go by fast and the years go by slow. When you get old, the days go by slow, and the years go by fast."

“Especially when you’re a fucking 45 year-old flagman.”

Cody pulls a transit from the case and attaches it to the tripod. “Don’t let it get to you, man. Maybe ol’ Les will retire before to long.”

“That prick will never leave this job. I guess it doesn’t matter, five more years and I can draw my retirement. I’ll just get some little part-time job. Maybe I’ll do a little handyman work for cash.”

“That’ll be cool. Enjoy life a little. Well, I’d better shoot these elevations before Les jumps my ass.” Cody says.

Gary watches Les’s kid pushing the dirt around. He’s doing alright. Kinda slow and sloppy, but he’ll be competent on that front-loader in a year or two.

Gary just finishes loading up his thermos with coffee when his cell goes off. It’s Les.

“I’m not going to need you today.”

Motherfucker. “You couldn’t have let me know yesterday?” Gary asks.

“Sorry...found out late,” Les says.

Gary pulls the phone away from his ear for a second to keep from laying into Les. “How ‘bout tomorrow?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll call you tonight and let you know,” Les says. “I’m trying to keep everyone going, but the damn customer won’t approve any change orders. Wants everything for nothing. We’re losing our ass on this job.”

This motherless prick ain’t fooling anyone. “Your kid working?”

“Don’t start with me Gary. Jimmy’s making apprentice wages. I’m not paying journeyman wages for you to lean on a shovel. We’d get along a whole lot better if you had a little less attitude.”

“My attitude is my goddamn business. I’m always on time and do whatever you tell me—you sayin’ any different? You gotta a problem with my work, fine. Anything else, we’ll go discuss it with my union rep.” Gary snapped his phone closed.

“God, Dad. Was that your boss?” a sleepy Ashley says. She drags herself into the kitchen in an oversized football jersey. “You’re gonna get fired.”

“He can’t fire me. I haven’t done anything to be fired for. He knows he can’t do anything to me. He’s just trying to harass me into quitting, and that ain’t gonna happen.”

“Are you off today?”

“Looks like it. What are you doing eavesdropping on my calls?” Gary smiles.

“Everyone on the block can hear your call. You don’t have to yell into your phone like it was your walkie-talkie at work, Dad. I’m surprised you don’t say over and out.”

“Yeah, yeah. I wasn’t raised attached to a cell phone or a computer every second of the day. I actually interact with the physical world once in a while.”

“By watching animal planet in HD?” Ashley slaps her Dad on the shoulder on the way to the fridge. She opens the door and stares inside, and then closes it without taking anything out.

“Why are you up so early?”

“The Yearbook Committee’s meeting before school.”

It's six-fifteen in the morning and, for the first time in years, Gary feels like having a drink. He feels like going down to the Lucky Seven, he's sure it still opens at six for the morning crowd, and just tying one on. Gary hasn't been really drunk since Ashley was eight. He came home hammered one night when Ashley was having a sleepover in the family room. Emma herded him into the bedroom before any damage was done, but she'd given him an ultimatum the next morning. Be a dad and stay, or be a drunk and leave. Gary's kept himself on a short leash ever since. Before she got pregnant, Em liked to party. She was never a big drinker, but she liked her weed. Weed made her horny. They'd lie in bed on Saturday and smoke a joint. She was so beautiful and funny. They'd laugh and fuck and fall asleep again, waking up to raid the kitchen, naked and ravenous. Gary never regretted having Ashley, not for a second, but he wondered where that part of their life went. It just wasn't a part of Emma's plan, once Ashley came.

Gary nixes the bar idea and thinks about going back to bed. He and Emma have slept in different rooms since Ashley was twelve. Emma said she couldn't handle his snoring and 5:00 AM alarm. Gary figures that was the beginning of the end. His back gives him problems if he stays in bed too long, so he decides to take a shower. Morning showers are a luxury usually reserved for weekends.

After his shower, Gary drives to the Lucky Seven. He sits in his truck and stares at the entrance. The place looks run-down and sad. Maybe I'll grab a margarita and a couple of tacos down at Casa Flores later. Gary drives down to Home Depot to order some more pavers for the backyard.

He approaches a clerk in the garden department and wonders if this kid is even out of high school. "I'd like to order some Decorastone pavers."

"Would you like to take advantage of one of our installation deals?"

"No thanks, I'm installing them myself."

"Have you ever . . ."

"Yeah, I've done it before." Gary starts to regret not ordering the stone online. Handing the kid a sheet of paper with the product part number, he says, "I'll take 200 square feet. Make sure you order the two and 3/8th inch."

The kid punches some keys on his computer and says, "Including tax, that'll be seven hundred ten dollars and thirteen cents."

"How much?" Gary asks.

The kid moves his finger across the screen, pretending to double-check. "Seven hundred ten..."

"You know, on second thought, I'm gonna hold off on ordering the pavers," Gary says.

"Something else I can help you with?"

"I guess not." It's not like there are going to be any more backyard barbeques. The house won't even be his for much longer. Home improvement projects are what he's always done.

"You okay, sir?" asks the young clerk.

"Yeah, fine," Gary says, "Just thinking."

Gary is sitting at the kitchen table staring down at a cup of coffee when Emma gets home.

“Jesus Christ, get your head out of your hands,” Emma says. “I swear you’re suffering from clinical depression.”

He looks up Emma. “Maybe life’s just hard.”

Emma ignores him and sets her bag on the table. “Everyman for himself in the dinner department. I’ve got to meet with my study group tonight.”

Gary drops his head back into his hands.

“There’s nothing here to be sad about. This is just a transition,” Emma says.

“I build things.” Gary spreads his arms. “We built this together. I can’t believe it means nothing to you.”

Emma’s looks away, “We were kids when we got together...we’re just different people now.”

“Better get to your study group.”

The bucket on the excavator is like Gary’s own curled hand digging in the dirt. The boom and the dipper stick are like his arm. Gary’s riding a Cat 325c. It’s a new, nimble machine and it makes Gary feel new again. Sometimes, when Gary’s on an older machine, it’ll creak and moan right along with Gary’s old bones. Today, Gary’s yellow-iron arm is working like the flesh did when he was back in his twenties. Les has him digging next to a wall. Gary’s nimble with this excavator. He’s the best operator and Les knows it. Em hasn’t seen him work in years. Maybe she’d like him better, if she saw him

do this job . . . saw how much he was respected. Gary knows she only sees the hardhat and lime green safety vest.

“Back in the saddle!” says Cody who’s yelling up at the cab from his little cart full of laser level gear. “Everything peachy?”

Gary parks the bucket in the trench, slides open the door, and spins his seat around to face Cody. “Everything’s a long way from peachy. Fuck this outfit. It’s straight eight and out the gate from now on. Should’ve quit the day old man Hennig hired Les over me. I was stupid to think I’d ever get anywhere doing this job.” Les’s kid, Jimmy, is doing Gary’s shovel work, but he doesn’t care if he hears. Cody stares up at him, grinning. “We’re slaves building the pyramids,” Gary says. “You’ll never see our names on any of these so-called monuments to progress.”

Cody says, “I can always count on you to cheer me up, dude.”

“Twenty years of this shit and what do I have to show for it?” Gary snaps his seat back into the forward position and grabs the joystick.

“Same as everyone. A bad back and a beer gut.” Cody yells up to him. “Who ever told you you’d have something to show for this shit?”

Gary spins back around and looks down at Cody, again. “You’re right. It just seems like somewhere along the way this job stopped being my choice.”

“That’s family life, buddy. We should have stayed single.”

Gary laughs, “Haven’t you been married like five times?”

“Four. That’s why I’m an expert,” Cody says.

“You’re an expert, all right.” Gary just shakes his head. “I better get this trench dug.” Cody shrugs at Jimmy and drives off.

Gary doesn’t give two shits about Les and his schedule, but his reputation is important to him. He knows how to do this this fucking job better than anybody. The site is heavy, too much dirt, so he loads his spoils into the big dump trucks that pull along side the Cat as he digs. Les’s kid, Jimmy, is spotting for him, and doing some clean up against the wall. He’s okay when his old man isn’t around. Hell, he isn’t too much older than Ashley. It’s an hour before quitting time, and Gary’s bucket hits some thing solid--rock or concrete. Goddamn it. Gary told Les he’d finish the trench before the end of the day.

Gary calls down, “Do I need to get the hammer?”

Jimmy pokes around with his shovel. “It’s an old hunk of slab. I think you can pull it up.”

“Where’s the end? If I hit that wall, your old man will have our asses.”

“Yeah, he’s about a mean son of a bitch ever since he and my step-mom split up. They argue over every fucking nickel.” Jimmy sinks his shovel to show Gary the extent of the slab. “Right here. It’s about eighteen inches thick.”

Gary says. “Dig around the front edge. I’m gonna pull it toward me.”

Once Jimmy digs out the front edge, Gary cautiously extends the excavator arm and drags the giant chunk of concrete away from the wall. When he makes enough room, he’ll stand it on end and flip it out of his way. It’s not a maneuver for rookies, but Gary’s done it many times before. They’ll get the trench done on time. He can break up slab,

tomorrow. “It’s close, but I think I can get a bite. Can you clear out some of that dirt so I can see how much room I’ve got?”

Jimmy starts digging around the slab. The kid’s a hard worker, no doubt about it. He doesn’t have an ounce of fat on him. Gary looked like that when he started this job. Nowadays, he could probably work at Jimmy’s pace for all of two minutes.

“Okay, Jim. Get on out of there. I’ll try to yank ‘er up.” The powerful yellow arm slowly reaches for the uncovered edge of the abandoned concrete. Gary isn’t even conscious of gently easing the joystick forward. He’s as much a part of the machine as any lever or piston. As gently and carefully as a father picking up his daughter for the first time, he hooks the bucket under the lip of the old slab.

Trench Hill

Daniel James Rhodes
Prunedale, California. Daniel was a longtime San Jose resident.

Daniel J. Rhodes died June 5, 2011 in Salinas, California. Out of respect for Daniel's wishes, he will be cremated and no services are planned. He was born March 17, 1963 in San Jose, California to Rose and Vincent Rhodes. A son, Jacob Rhodes, 24, of Livermore, California, survives him.

Danny didn’t die of cancer or a drug overdose. When I see the obituary, I figure one of those is the most likely cause. Then I find out that he actually ran a poorly grounded Skilsaw over an electrical cord while working on the roof of the Salinas Valley Baptist Church. I ran into Terry Yasuda at Safeway—I was picking up a carton of cigs for my girlfriend, Shannon—and he had all the details. Danny and I were best friends from sixth grade until we were fifteen.

“Why are you so obsessed with this Danny guy?” Shannon wants to know.

“I’m not. It’s just weird when someone you know dies.”

“If it makes you feel weird,” Shannon says, “maybe you shouldn’t go straight to the obituaries as soon as you pick up the paper.”

“Not weird in a bad way,” I say.

“I’m canceling that stupid paper. You need to get off your ass,” Shannon says, “You can’t just sit around smoking weed all day.”

“I’ve got six weeks left on my unemployment claim. I’ll start looking in a week or so.”

“Start looking now,” Shannon says.

Sounds like she means it. I fire up her computer and look at Craigslist. Seeing me cruise the job boards puts her in a good mood. When she goes out to get some beers and something to barbecue, I go to mercurynews.com/obituaries. Free access. I’ll tell Shannon to go ahead and cancel the paper. I’ll tell her she’s right. She loves that.

The Danny I remember from 1978 had freckles and messy blond hair. He was sort of gangly and always had a grin on his face, but maybe the grin is just a trick of memory. Danny seemed to have an excess supply of saliva. You could ring out the roach when you were smoking weed with Danny. I’m not sure why, but when I think of Danny, I flash back to this time we tried to sneak some bong hits when his mom was home. Danny rolled up a towel and shoved it into the crack under the door. He opened the window and fired up the bong—I couldn’t stop thinking about how much of that bong water was actually spit. Danny’s towel trick wasn’t very effective, and twenty seconds after the bong started gurgling, Mrs. Rhodes was screaming at us and throwing herself against the

locked door. We took the screen off his window and ran down the street. Man, how we laughed. I never laugh like that anymore.

Our friendship ended because of a couple four-way hits of acid. Well, that and the fact that I was an asshole. The guy who sold them to us, an older kid named Jesus Bettencourt, called it Windowpane. They were quarter-inch squares made up of four translucent gel tabs—like a windowpane. Jesus said to take only one of the little windows at a time, but when we were ready to drop the acid, I said, “Let’s down the whole thing.” I’d already torn mine in quarters when Danny wasn’t watching, and when I brought one gel tab out of my pocket in a cupped hand and threw it into my mouth, Danny, thinking I took the whole thing, gulped his down. He did it so fast. I wasn’t about to take the remaining three tabs, so I didn’t tell him they were still in my pocket.

That shit was potent. We hung out till we started really coming on, and then I told Danny I was going home. He was already so spun that he didn’t try to argue. Lucky for me, my mother was already in bed when I got there. I lay on her ugly plaid couch all night and swore that if I got my sanity back, I’d never take acid again. I got up once to take a piss and made the mistake of looking at myself in the bathroom mirror. I remember worrying that if my mother saw me with those giant, bulbous, insect eyes, she’d know I was on acid. I hunkered back onto the couch, and six or seven hours later when I was no longer afraid to go into the bathroom, I flushed the three remaining gel tabs. Of course a few of months later I was back to see Jesus for more.

As I lay freaking out on my mother’s couch, Danny walked naked into a 7-Eleven store on Snell Avenue. He sat on the floor of the candy aisle eating powdered sugar

covered mini-donuts, and probably thought he was having a deeply meaningful conversation with the Pakistani clerk, but the guy barely spoke English and was just trying to get him to leave. The police showed up, and Danny was eventually taken to county hospital and given drugs to counteract what they assumed was LSD—back in the late 70s, it was usually liberal doses of Thorazine.

Mrs. Rhodes called in a panic a day later. “What did you boys take, Sammy? Danny said you two were together. Please! You won’t get in trouble, I promise. The doctor needs to know.”

I said, “LSD, I think.”

She pressed me for answers. “Where’d you get it?”

“Just some guy. I never saw him before.”

“Some stranger hands you something and you just pop it in your mouth and swallow it? What is wrong with you two?”

“Is Danny going to be okay?”

“They think so. They’re giving him medication. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I think Danny had a bad reaction.”

“That was so dangerous. Pot is one thing, but you boys are messing with hard drugs.” Mrs. Rhodes, beside herself with worry and searching for anything that would help the doctors treat Danny, filled me in on some of the gory details. I should never have betrayed her trust...but damn, what a great story. I had inside information, and I just couldn’t keep myself from sharing it. I felt like a celebrity.

“Naked, dude. Eating fucking donuts! They pumped him full of all kinds of crazy drugs at County Hospital. Man, he’s probably fried.”

“Why didn’t you freak out? You took four tabs too, right?” They’d ask.

“For some reason I can just handle it better than most people.” I’d brag.

I guess I started to believe my own stories about Danny being fried, but when he got home from the hospital, he was just plain ol’ Danny.

“How’s it going, man?” I asked.

“I’m okay. I was fine after a couple days, but the doctors convinced my mom I needed more treatment,” Danny said. “How are you? Where’d you go that night?”

“I just freaked out on my mom’s couch, dude. When she got up, I pretended to be asleep till she went to work. I thought I was gonna die,” I said.

“Yeah, I hear you,” Danny said. “Jason and Terry came by earlier.”

“Yeah? What were they up to?”

“Not much. They thought I shaved off all my body hair.”

My mouth went dry. “What? Where’d they hear that?”

“They said they heard it from you.” Danny jumped up from the edge of his bed and pulled up his shirt, exposing his pale, hairless chest. “See, dude? No pentagram.”

That one wasn’t mine, but I was in no position to argue. He informed me that he hadn’t tried to wash the dishes in the washing machine and he hadn’t tried to turn his shower into an aquarium.

“What the fuck, man? Why’d you say all that shit?”

My heart pounded and my face felt hot. I thought he might throw a punch—I almost wished he would. Instead, confused and hurt, he just stared at me, waiting for me to offer some kind of explanation.

I rocked on a wobbly chair we'd ruined roughhousing months before. "I don't know man. I was freaked out...your mom said you..."

"She trusted you." Disgusted, Danny turned away from me and stared out the window. "It was fucking bad enough." He went quiet, and I sat there, unsure of what to do. After a minute or two, or maybe it just seemed that long, I tried to break the silence.

"I just..."

He turned to face me. His eyes were red and watery and a string of drool hung from his lower lip. "I was naked in 7-Eleven, man."

I got off the little chair and let myself out. Facing the flesh-and-blood Danny, I didn't have a story to tell. There was no way to make things cool between us.

Shannon is at work when the UPS man delivers Danny's urn. Good thing, she'd be pissed if she knew I spent \$39.95 plus shipping on it. It's supposed to be for pets—I wanted a small one. I know the real, adult Danny is probably in a bigger urn at his tweaker girlfriend's house in Prunedale, but that was the Danny that Terry Yasuda told me about. I didn't really know that Danny. I'm paying respects to the Danny I knew.

I drive to Danny's old house. There is a big American flag on a wooden pole extending from the front porch railing and a welcome sign on the door. Just below the ornate welcome sign is a cheap plastic one that says, "No Soliciting." I ring the doorbell

and knock loudly, but there is no answer. The occupants are probably at work. The latch on the back gate doesn't have a lock on it so I casually let myself into the backyard. I pull a plastic Safeway bag from my pocket and scoop some dirt from beneath Danny's old window. I try to look into his old room, but the shades are drawn.

Back at Shannon's condo, I pinch a little bud out of her good stash—skunky Indica that she one-hits and never shares. I'm treading on dangerous ground, but it feels right. I rummage through my nightstand drawer and find the fossil shark tooth that Danny and I found up on Trench Hill. He saw it first, but I grabbed it first. I go to the closet and tear some rubber off a pair of my rotted out Vans, then on to the medicine cabinet for one of Shannon's Lexapros and one of my Zolofts. Hidden behind a box of her Rosacea medicine is a small bottle of Promethazine/Codeine cough syrup. I grab that too. I close the cabinet door, catching a glimpse of my stubbled, sagging face. I suddenly feel like downing all the drugs, so I quickly turn my back on the mirror and march off to finish assembling Danny.

I take everything out to Shannon's patio and put it on the glass tabletop of her Sears' five-piece patio set. Shannon's got a little plant in a miniature ceramic pot sitting on the table...a perfect crucible. Everything is falling into place. I dump her plant on the table and start constructing fifteen year-old Danny. I put in some of the special dirt, the weed, the shoe rubber, the anti-depressants, the tooth, and a few drops of the cough syrup into the little pot and fire up the barbecue. I wish I had something more to put in the mix, but Shannon wouldn't let me bring much when I moved in. Slivers of Led Zeppelin and

Black Sabbath vinyl would have been a nice touch. I run back inside and grab my iPod. I queue up Zep's In My Time of Dying and put in the earbuds.

I stare into the crucible, but nothing much is happening. I figure I'll grind everything together when the process is complete, or when the song ends, whichever comes first. That's what they do after they cremate someone--I saw it on the Discovery Channel. The crucible seems to be heating up very slowly. This going to be a longer process than I imagined, so I decide to go down to the 7-Eleven on Snell--7-Eleven's never die--and see if they have any powdered sugar mini-donuts. It's only a few minutes away, and by the time I get back, things will probably be starting to heat up.

When I enter the 7-Eleven I realize it's gone through a lot of changes since I was last here. It has a huge coffee area, hot dogs and taquitos rolling in place on one those warming machines--nothing looks the same. Not a big bag of powdered sugar mini-donuts to be found. After much searching, I do, however find a little six-pack of powdered sugar mini-donuts lying behind a box of Twizzlers. They're two months out of date and kind of flattened on one end, but it's the only package in the store. The very last pack of mini-donuts. I take this as an omen.

The trip to the store takes a bit longer than I estimated and I'm relieved not to encounter flames or emergency service personnel as I pull up to Shannon's condo. I rush through the house toward the sliding glass door. Through it, I can see that the crucible is now smokin' hot. Fifteen year-old Danny would love the word crucible. Once on the patio, I see that the rubber is bubbling and the pills are turning brown. I put in my

earbuds and queue up In My Time of Dying again. I take a mini-donut from the unflattened end of the package and bend down close to carefully crumble some of the mini-donut into the crucible. Gray puffs of smoke emerge each time I drop a pinch of donut in. The music is right. The donut smoke is cool. And Shannon thinks I can't do anything right.

There is a flash and loud bang. When I'm able to focus, I see a smoking disk surrounded by a short jagged rim--that's all that remains of Danny's crucible. The tooth, ash, ceramic chips, and some dirt rest on top. I'm bleeding from painful little cuts on the cheek, forehead, and tongue; I have a bad habit of sticking out my tongue when I'm concentrating. By some miracle, my eyes have been spared. Most of Danny has fallen through the grill and is coating the greasy lava rocks. I quickly turn off the grill. As I survey the damage and try to figure out how to recover the balance of Danny's cremains, an angry female vocalist joins Robert Plant, "Oh my Jes-us," sings Robert.

"Stupid bas-tard," sings the new vocalist.

"Oh my Je-sus," repeats Robert.

"Take out those fucking earbuds," sings the...I pull out my earbuds.

"What was that explosion?" Shannon looks at her barbecue grill, broken pot, shark tooth, her little plant dying on the table, my bleeding face, and shakes her head. "What the?" Shannon covers her face with her hands for a second, then moves them to her hips. "You know what, I don't even want to know." On her way back inside, she slams the slider so hard that it bounces back open.

I go inside to find something to pulverize Danny's cremains in--to prepare them for the urn. I dig an empty mango salsa jar out of the recycling. We didn't have mango salsa in the seventies, but I think fifteen year-old Danny would have liked it. Plus, the squat, wide mouthed jar is made of really thick glass. I find a solid stainless steel ice cream scoop in Shannon's utensil drawer. Its handle should make a pretty effective pestle. Shannon clutches a tissue and stares in silence at the TV. She never even looks my direction. I'll try to make amends once I deal with Danny. When the grill cools, I recover as much of Danny as I can. I scrape him off the lava rocks; it's okay, Danny loved barbecues. The shark tooth still feels pretty solid, so I hit with a hammer and then put the fragments in the jar with the rest of Danny.

I leave my car by Mom's old house and take the route Danny and I always took to the woods. The undeveloped land we called Trench Hill is now part of an open space preserve with signs, benches, and marked trails, but once I start trudging up the path, it feels just like old times—except the climb is a lot steeper. It doesn't take me long to realize that flip-flops are an extremely bad footwear choice. I can feel a raw spot developing between my toes, and upon inspection I see a mixture of blood and dirt starting to form little ridges along the toe straps. Not only that, the thin rubber soles offer no protection from the rocks, so my feet are really starting to hurt. My bloody, dusty feet look like they should belong to some crazy penitent dragging a cross up a hill, and it dawns on me that this is completely appropriate.

Unexpectedly, Shannon enters my thoughts and I feel a twinge of guilt. I try to put her out of my mind and summon memories of Danny. I focus on the familiar sights and smells, but the memories are slow to come. Random flashes creep into my consciousness. Danny and I saw a bull mount a cow on this hill, the impact driving them the over the edge of an embankment. The two-headed six-legged beast lumbered down the hill before crashing into a stand of thick brush. With that special cruelty reserved for teenage boys, we laughed maniacally and threw rocks at the poor creatures--so unlucky in love--as they struggled to free themselves from the brambles.

My lungs are burning and my feet are really in bad shape, so I stop to take a breather. Across a narrow ravine I recognize a brushy hill where Danny and I once saw a bobcat and her two kittens. Danny had frozen in his tracks and pointed like a skilled tracker. We watched them for several minutes before they snuck up the slope and disappeared into the chaparral. Unlike the poor cattle, we felt a deep reverence for these ghosts from an unspoiled, wild world.

I get to Trench Hill of with plenty of daylight left. A familiar old oak, unchanged by the passage of time, is standing guard over the place. The rock outcropping beside it has been tagged, but otherwise Trench Hill is as I remembered it. Though Danny and I were definitely thoughtless, destructive, little shits, I feel real anger toward the kids who painted these rocks.

I climb to the top of the outcrop and look toward the bay. I'm not sure why I haven't been up here since high school. It's such a beautiful place, and I live only minutes away. I stand up straight, adjust my clothing, clear my throat, and begin my

eulogy. “Danny, I’m here to commit your fifteen year-old self to Trench Hill. Before I do, I want to come clean. Besides the windowpane incident, one time I cut the coke I scored for you with my mom’s hormone replacement pills. I was just gonna a take a little taste and, well...you know.” As I shake the pretend cremains out of the little urn. The bigger pieces scatter at my feet, and the rest of Danny floats down onto the brown summer grass.

End