

Breaking Kayfabe & Other Stories

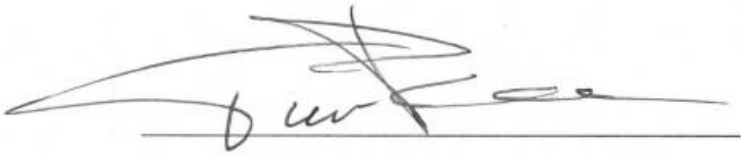
by
Andy Geels

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Tim Poland

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Dr. Tim Poland
Thesis Advisor

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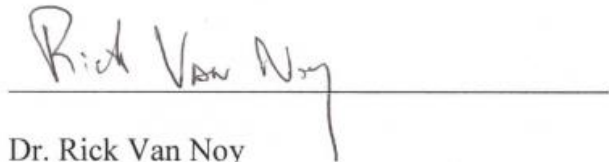
Date



Dr. Amanda Kellogg
Committee Member

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Date



Dr. Rick Van Noy
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For the players

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Rimshot

Please call me.

God she's needy, like *please call me* has ever worked. She's manipulative and needy and I'm busy, *please call me*, good fucking god.

"You're on in like 30 seconds," says Vanessa as she rushes behind me with a tray of empty glasses.

"Yep," I say, gulping down the last of my drink with a shudder and a rattle of the remaining ice.

Ya know what? I'm gonna respond. Something real pointed, ya know? Something pithy, and shitty, and perfect. Let's see:

Stop being manipulative and needy. It makes you unattractive.

Yikes. That's good. Send. Hilarious.

"Alright folks, please give a warm welcome to our resident fuck-up and FunnyBone regular, the very funny Cole Johnston!"

That's Larry's voice, nasally and condescending and stupid. Phone in pocket, mount the stairs, pop the mic. Action.

"Thanks Larry! Joke all you want, but only one of us pays child support!"

A couple chuckles. Larry waves me off from the bar.

"I usually just skip town, ya know?"

A few more. There's only like twelve people really listening.

"Actually Larry, can you bring me another triple? I gotta drive later and I wanna make sure it's super dangerous!"

Larry waves again and turns to the bar.

“*Resident fuck-up*, wow, what a title though, right? It’s not too far off I suppose, I’m kinda immature. For example, I spend way too much time in toy stores. Not to bang kids or anything!”

Not many laughs. Give them a chance.

“I just like looking at all the stuff I missed out on, ya know? Like Nerf guns or involved fathers!”

That went over pretty well; maybe they just don’t think pedophilia is funny. They’re gonna hate this set.

“The problem is I have no one to share my enthusiasm for toys with. All my friends spend their money on stupid shit like going on dates, or paying off debt, or having insurance!”

Chuckles.

“They don’t really make *adult toys*. Well, they do, but that generally means one of two very different things, right? If I tell someone I’m an *adult toy collector* they’ll either think I’m a billionaire who collects sports cars and yachts, right, or that I have a gun-safe in my basement filled with gas-powered dildos!”

Most people checked out back at *bang kids*. I hate Tuesday nights. I need to stop doing this.

“And look at me, right? It’s pretty clear which category I’m leaning towards!”

Few more laughs that time. People love self-deprecation.

“So I have to stick to kids’ toys, and there’s really only one type of person that plays with kids’ toys.”

Dude in the back bursts out laughing. He probably knows what’s coming. Maybe the only person in the room who likes what I’m doing. Or he’s just drunk. I hate Tuesdays.

“So there I am in the LEGO section of a Toys R Us, eyeing this eight-year-old boy, just waiting for my chance to get in good with him, ya know? We’ve all been here, right? He’s looking...”

Larry interrupts me with my drink. Fucking amateur. Right in the middle of a bit? Jesus, I hate that guy.

“Everybody give Larry a hand.”

I give a little golf clap on the side of the glass.

“He’s a much better waiter than comedian. Anyways, where was I? Oh yeah, hitting on kids at the store.”

I take a sip. A couple people clap for the drinking. Or maybe for Larry. People think he’s funny because he does impressions and plays guitar. Fucking Larry.

“Right, so he’s staring at the box with the new X-Wing set, and I slither up next to him in my long dark coat and sunglasses and I’m like, *hey kid.*”

I pantomime it like a shady drug deal. Look over both shoulders. That dude in the back is loving this. No one else.

“I’ve got the original X-Wing LEGO set back home, it’s sweet.”

Take a pause, do the pantomime.

“It’s in the basement, right next to my gun-safe!”

A few people laugh. Dude in the back is dying. At least three-fourths of the crowd is dead silent. Fuck me. I can’t wait for this to be over. Fucking Larry interrupting my bit.

“Yeah, I’ve always heard that women are really attracted to guys who are good with kids, but all the chicks in Toys R Us get super weird when I talk to theirs!”

Mostly blank stares. Dude in the back must be catching his breath.

“Fuck it, let’s move on.”

One new guy laughs. Probably being ironic, that’s popular now. He’s not even looking at me. His face is lit up by the phone in his lap. Prick. I take another sip from my glass. It’s almost empty. They must’ve skimped.

“No, but seriously, there are some real creeps out there. It seems like every other day there’s a new scandal or new outrage over some dude diddling kids, it’s crazy. I feel like kids today understand the danger too, ya know? They understand pedophiles on a level that I never did as a kid. When I was a kid, my mom used to pull me aside and say vague shit like, *if a stranger offers you a ride, say no, or he’ll take you away from your family*. Anybody else’s mom say anything like that?”

Couple people clap. Audience participation.

“I thought that idea was amazing! I’d go around *begging* strangers to take me away! No one would take me, so I thought I wasn’t good enough. Like, I thought there was some dude in an unmarked white van with binoculars, scouting little kids on the playground like college football recruits!”

Ironic guy won’t stop tweeting. Or texting. I shouldn’t have sent that last text. It was uncalled for. I should’ve just called her.

“Like the dude would see some kid who’s super good at kickball, who doesn’t stutter, eats nothing but apples and kale for lunch, and offer him a full-ride scholarship to a new family!”

Handful of laughs. She really didn’t deserve that text.

“With a signing bonus of puppies and candy, ya know? And I was the kid throwing rocks at cars and eating my M&Ms off the ground, so I’d go undrafted.”

Few more laughs. No, she *did* deserve that text. We're not married. She takes herself too seriously. Fuck. No wonder she's got high blood pressure. She'll get over it. She always gets over it.

"I was oblivious as a kid, ya know? I had no idea anyone wanted to ass-bang me and dump my little corpse in a river. No clue!"

Dead. This is pulling teeth.

"Or wherever the psychos dumped their bodies where you're from, right? Maybe a lake? Or deep in the woods?"

I'm grasping at straws. Dude in the back starts examining a particularly loaded nacho. Ironic guy keeps typing. I'm tired of seeing his shitty face light up. Asshole. Whatever he's typing is probably right.

"Or maybe under, like, an old rickety bridge, ya know? And it takes the dogs and volunteers with their giant flashlights and reflective vests, like, three days to find the bodies? Does that work for you guys?"

I'm tired. Ironic guy chuckles with the dude in the back. I'm bombing. I'm never coming back here again. I need more alcohol. I take a little sip to nurse the drink. I shouldn't have said what I said. Shit, what did I say? Something about her being ugly I think. That's usually my go-to. She was fat in high school and has a weird complex about that stuff. Easy target. I was fat in high school too, but I guess it's different for guys. She acts weird, I say something to shut her up, she cries, I apologize, we rinse and repeat. Whatever. I should just dump her. She should just dump me. We don't go together. She dated a pediatrician before she dated me. Sometimes I tell her that she should've married that guy while she had the chance, because if she went from him to me I'd hate to know who she'll wind up with after I leave or kill myself. Maybe the trashman.

She doesn't laugh at that joke anymore, but she's not very funny.

"How many of you guys are in relationships?"

Some people clap.

"Relationships suck, man."

People laugh. More clapping. Predictable. Cheap.

"I get in fights with my girlfriend all the time. Especially now that we live together. She likes to hound me for being immature, or lazy, or whatever, which is all true, but she doesn't need to throw it in my face, ya know?"

Laughs. Am I dizzy? I must be drunker than I thought. Or it's these lights, they're brighter than usual. I'm not even telling jokes. Maybe I should sit on the stool.

"Maybe mature and motivated people don't spend eleven straight hours on Netflix watching *Law & Order*, but I feel like that level of commitment is respectable in its own right."

Laughs.

I'm tired.

It rolls around my head like something small in your trunk when you take sharp turns. Ya know when you forget that something was in the trunk? And then you turn and THUMP, there it fucking is again. That's not a bad bit, pretty relatable. Not the tired thing, the THUMP thing. I'll stomp on the stage at that part, give it a little something tangible.

I'm tired.

"I'm tired, people. Ya know when you're so tired you can't help but repeat it in your head over and over? Obviously you know you're tired, but your subconscious is like *just wanted to shoot you a quick reminder here; you're tired*. My subconscious is that super annoying old

cat-lady virgin stereotype who cleans other people's cubicles when they're sick, how 'bout yours?"

Chuckles. I'm gonna sit on the stool.

"I am tired though. Probably not as tired as you guys, because you have real jobs and wake up at six and inject coffee enemas so you can make it to lunch break."

Laughs.

"But I'm still pretty tired. And lazy too, I'm the worst. I tried working out yesterday for like the first time in maybe five years. Honestly. My girlfriend insisted it would make me feel better. It was a nightmare."

Laughs.

"I discovered some things about myself though. When you go that long without exercising and then all of a sudden put your body through it, it's what I imagine crashing a plane onto the island from *LOST* is like."

Laughs.

"Right? You go through some self-discovery. Live out all your mistakes from the life you knew before this incident. Really gain some perspective, ya know? For instance, I discovered that I really can't work out in any sort of uncontrolled environment, so running outdoors is not an option."

A girl in the back is checking her phone now. I don't care.

"If it's humid? Nope, can't do it. If I can see my breath? Get the fuck out, no way. I need to be in an air conditioned, environmentally controlled building if I'm going to better myself."

I really don't care.

“But, and here’s the fucking kicker, I hate the gym. I think we all fucking hate the gym. It’s the worst place on Earth. It smells like shit, people all look like professional wrestlers, and I’m in there in basketball shorts I’ve never once used to play basketball, an old AC/DC shirt with holes in the pits, and \$300 shoes I bought on a whim to feel better about myself.”

Laughs.

“Plus, of course, this FitBit bracelet thing.”

I flash it to the crowd.

“Three guesses on who bought me this. It’s like one of those house-arrest things people have to wear on their ankle, except mine hates me if I nap.”

Laughs.

“Lately it’s been telling me that I don’t sleep well. I sleep like sixteen hours a day; if that’s not sleeping well, I don’t know how I’m supposed to improve.”

Laughs.

“I don’t know. I’m too self-conscious to work out in front of people. Working out, for me, is like masturbating. I need to be alone, preferably in a dark room. Maybe I’ll put on a video to get started, but the truth is I’ll never make it through the whole thing, so I skip around to the good parts, right? I don’t need to do jumping-jacks. I don’t need to see the hand-job portion of the video. I don’t need those things, ya know? Get to the good stuff.”

Laughs. She’s still going back there.

“So I skip around. I hit the high spots. I avoid mirrors at all costs, it’s over in about seven minutes, and I hit the showers in shame.”

Laughs.

“That’s how we all are, right? Am I projecting? Maybe. Who cares, I’ve got the mic, I’m allowed to project.”

Chuckles.

“I just hate exercising. My girlfriend, man, she runs all the time. She’s always going on fucking runs. And she talks about *runner’s high*, do you guys know about this? *Runner’s high*? It’s bullshit. The closest thing to a high I’ve gotten running is an asthma attack.”

Laughs.

“But she can’t get enough. She’s got these Nikes now with built-in microchips that automatically post to Facebook every time she goes for a run. Isn’t that the stupidest thing you’ve ever heard? *So and so ran 7.6 miles, would you like to comment?* No! I’d like to burn her space-age shoes in a dumpster, but *commenting* is not on my fucking agenda.”

Laughs.

“*So and so ran 7.6 miles*, who fucking cares? I just played X-Box for 7.6 hours and started drinking before lunch, but they don’t make Nike shoes that post that to Facebook.”

Chuckles.

“I don’t know. I’m just tired. Tired of being managed, ya know? So I piss her off on purpose sometimes. It’s my little rebellion, I guess.”

Where am I going?

“Then we’ll get in these vicious texting fights, where we’ll write some of the worst stuff in the world about each other and just hit send without proof-reading. Without thinking. I’m sure we’ve all been there.”

Clapping. A couple cheers.

“I mean, they’re awful, but at least they’re honest, right? They’re genuine. The worst part about them though is that I’m *way* better at being mean than her. All I do is tell jokes and drink for a living; she’s not going to beat me in a contest of belligerence.”

Harder laughs.

“My dad is one of the most belligerent people I know, and I got to watch him from birth. You know how the Chinese Olympic gymnastics team takes little three-year-old kids and trains them to be super humans? I was trained like that, but instead of gymnastics, my sport is being absolutely terrible to people I love.”

Laughs. I’m just getting lucky.

“I’m like Michael Phelps, and she’s like a sack of kittens, right? But she can’t help herself. She’s constantly starting these text fights with me, and I’m here working the phone like Mike Tyson, just throwing haymakers.”

I throw a weak punch. People like this stuff. I scan the crowd. Drain the last of my drink.

“You know what, fuck it, I’ll read some of this shit to you. Maybe you’ll like that.”

The crowd perks up. I shouldn’t do this. I pull out my phone. Ironic guy isn’t laughing, but he’s paying attention. I’m sure he’s been attacking me on Twitter or something and I’ll respond drunk off my ass later tonight. Just classic.

“Let’s see, let me scroll up to the beginning of this one. Oh shit, yeah, this is a good one; this is from tonight.”

I really shouldn’t... no, fuck that, nothing is off-limits. This is funny, they’re into it. This is why people came. I’m delivering.

“Kate starts off... oh shit! I wasn’t supposed to say her name. Fuck. Oh well, now you know her name is Kate. There are a million Kates, fuck it. So Kate starts off with:”

Hey.

“Which, as we all know, is the worst fucking way to start a conversation! Nothing good ever comes from *hey*, right? No one has ever texted *hey* and then followed it up with, *I’m in the mood to give you endless blow-jobs*, right?”

People are really digging this. Is this a train wreck?

“Okay, so I text back:”

Yo gurl wats shakin’

Laughs.

“What? That’s how I text. You guys don’t know me! I was raised on the streets. I can text like that; it’s cool. Also, I know she hates it, so it’s like a win-win. Anyways, she texts back:”

I think we should talk, when are you coming home?

“Which, again, is never followed by *I’m in the mood to give you endless blow-jobs!*”

Laughs. Dude in the back is really losing his mind now.

“So I say:”

Never, I’m leaving you for your sister.

Couple of *ohs*.

“Guys, don’t worry about it; she doesn’t have a sister.”

Pause.

“That’s a lie. She totally does, but she’s a cow. I’d never fuck her!”

Laughs. This is going over way too well. It’ll end. It’ll end. I’ve gotta keep going or it’ll end. This is comedy. This is theater. This is the real thing. Is ironic guy videoing this?

“She responds:”

Can you be serious for one second?

“So I say:”

No

I flash a grin to the crowd. They eat it up. They probably think this is all fake. Ironic guy is definitely videoing this. Fuck it. Let him.

“She says:”

Cole, we really need to talk.

“So now she’s using my name, which is generally a bad thing, right? It means I’ve done something wrong. Like forgetting to take out the trash, or forgetting to feed the cat, or forgetting to pay the rent!”

Laughs.

“Quick side-note, I’m not sure what it is about her wanting to *fix* me. What’s that about? There’s the fitness stuff, but it’s just everything else too. Kate’s always talking about how I should *get serious* or some shit. Look at me. I think she just likes projects. Like I’m some kind of do-it-yourself Prince Charming. Except she’s missing like 80% of the pieces, right? She’s looking at the pile on the floor like, *how the fuck does this go together?*”

Laughs.

“We’ve been together like three years now, and she’s still convinced I’m gonna walk in one day looking like Jon Hamm from *Mad Men*. Actually, I’m not far off from that. I’ve got the smoking and day-drinking down. I just need money and a successful career.”

Laughs.

“Anyways, she says *we really need to talk*, and I say:”

But you’re so pretty when you don’t.

Laughs.

“She says:”

Stop being an asshole, when are you coming home?

“I say:”

When all the hookers in St. Louis know me by name.

Couple people give a little *woo* and clap. Hometown pandering is an easy clap. It shouldn't even count.

“She says:”

Please call me.

Silence. Anticipation. I'm in the Coliseum. The lions are circling and the spotlight burns, but I'm putting on a show. They want blood. It's all I've got to give.

“And finally I say:”

Stop being manipulative and needy. It makes you unattractive.

“...and then I walked on stage!”

They love it. I do my best announcer voice:

“And the winner, by knock-out... COLE JOHNSTON!”

I hold my hands above my head like Rocky Balboa, eyes closed. They're screaming. Melting. I feel it wash over me. It takes me a moment to realize that she'd texted me back at some point.

“Well, well, well folks, looks like we've got a response.”

They're on the edge of their seats. I shouldn't do this. I'm drunk. I shouldn't do this.

“Keep in mind, we're reading this together! You all are a part of this now. Like my sister-wives.”

A couple chuckles. Pause.

“She says:”

I'm leaving. I moved my stuff over to Tori's. You've got problems I can't help you with and I don't know if you want help at all. Honestly I've thought about it for a long time. I'm just really confused. I think we need space. I love you Cole, but you need help. I'll be by the apartment this weekend for the rest of my furniture.

Total stillness.

I look up at the crowd. There aren't so many as I thought. Like the room shrunk or some of them evaporated. I'm sweating under the light, suddenly brighter and hotter. But not them. They're frozen, those few remaining. Baby birds begging for a punchline. They wanna feast. They wanna get off. They wanna finish. I think my jaw might be hanging open. My first agent said I needed acting lessons.

Idiot.

“Looks like I'll be needing a new roommate!”

They explode and I yell over them:

“I'll be accepting applications at the bar, right over there! Just be prepared to clean puke off the toilet and pay the lion's share of the rent! You guys have been great, thank you very much, goodnight!”

I wave and walk off-stage to the bathroom. I turn the hot water on in the sink and run it over my hands. The right one stings. I think I punched the bathroom stall on the way in. A little blood mixes with water in the bowl. I definitely punched the stall. Why did I do that? Someone walks in after me.

“Goddamn, Cole, that's the best I've seen you.”

It's Larry. Condescending douche-bag.

“Thanks.”

“Seriously, that last part? The text conversation thing? Brilliant.”

“Yeah.”

“Was that new? For a minute, me and Vanessa thought it was real. Especially when you used Kate’s name and everything, Jesus man.”

“It’s just a joke, Larry. Fuck, you’re annoying. And the next time you interrupt one of my sets I’ll fucking lose it, man.”

Larry recoils a bit. I stare him down in the mirror.

“Uh, yeah, sorry man.”

I think he mumbled *ass-hole* on the way out the door. I hate that guy.

It was just a joke. He’s heard a million.

Inanimate Objects

The dominant thought in her head was how much Gerald would have hated this whole ordeal. She almost heard him grumbling at the crowd of twenty-some assorted family and church-folk smushed inside the sterilized bedroom. He'd probably make a gravelly sort of guttural noise in the back of his throat and adjust his meaty shoulders uncomfortably in an attempt to shrug off any sympathies, well-wishes, or goodbyes. He'd probably strain his thick neck left and right, dramatically signaling his dismissal of the unwanted attention and his growing interest in the television. Yes, she was sure he'd make a big show out of his discomfort, and she was sure that he would be doing it mostly for her. And somewhere between him fiddling with the controls on his bed and his next verbal outburst (no doubt directed at one of his children), he'd roll his eyes before winking at his wife.

For a brief moment, nearly fifty years of marriage conquered three minutes of mortality, and she saw her husband as clearly as she ever had, rolling his eyes before winking. The moment passed, as all moments do, and while others wept on either shoulder, Joyce, the statue, stood firm.

Jenny left late that morning after a week of reassurance from her mother. Joyce was not a child, nor was she shattered to pieces, so she simply didn't need another body hovering through her home, leaving lights on in vacated rooms and loading the dishwasher haphazardly.

She dug through the refrigerator, packed tight with odd-shaped containers from neighboring kitchens, scanning the back wall for any sign of her pulpless orange juice. She didn't need lasagna, or green bean casserole, or whatever it was that Betty had sent in a series of Zip-Lock bags within a larger, soggying paper one. Attaining the small white carton became an

exercise in space management, unloading in some kind of extraction mission the stainless-steel behemoth her husband had insisted on splurging for years prior. It reminded her of that boxy puzzle game her kids used to play on that little grey game system. She decided against the juice halfway in and repacked it all again, cursing the cruelty of inanimate objects. Like hospital elevators that stop on every floor or the tricky lock on the driver's side of his truck. Truthfully, she hadn't touched a bite of borrowed food and she knew she probably wouldn't ever, but the idea of tossing it all at once made her feel guilty. Not enough time had passed.

The phone on the wall of her kitchen had a little red light that flashed aggressively with new messages, and she knew that she'd need to manage that at some point, but there simply wasn't enough time in the day. It was the pastor, no doubt, doing his job. Or his receptionist, no doubt, doing hers. She knew he'd be by at some point in the day; Mondays were his visiting blocks.

She folded up the pile of blankets on the couch, returning them to their decorative location on the seat-back, and tossed her own, personal pillow into the side room, creating a space for the nicer ones to reoccupy. Once the living room was again in order, she set herself into her faded pleather recliner. It didn't take much disuse for the television to develop a layer of dust, and as the morning sun glittered off the dead screen, she could make out the particles floating between it and her chair. She studied her bent reflection in the black frame. Her own frame was all right angles, straight and narrow. She wasn't tall, or dark, and her silver hair was trim and easy to manage, though admittedly it was a bit disheveled, a product of restless sleep. Her pale eyes were often piercing over her half-rimmed glasses, so her son would say, but to her they felt less striking these days. Less bright. More sunken. Worn, if she was being honest. She

saw some of this in the screen and filled in the rest like a paint-by-number picture. She knew the colors well enough.

Joyce allowed herself to slouch, a rare luxury, and soaked herself in the stillness of an empty home. Her door had practically been off its hinges, a steady stream of rubbernecking townsfolk assessing the damage. Jenny did her best to keep them at bay, thank them for their contributions to the ever-growing stockpile of home-cooked goods, and shepherd them back to their cars. But Joyce heard them. She felt their voyeuristic pity linger in the rooms they'd survey. It clung to the walls like cigarette smoke. Perhaps the flocking co-mourners were genuine, and perhaps they meant well, and perhaps they really were kneeling at home praying for her every night, righteous and solemn and true. But Joyce didn't bother interpreting their intentions. She wished to reject them, as her husband had. Instead she had thanked them when cornered, smiling closed-mouthed and nodding politely.

Joyce woke up again to the slow whining of the mailman's brakes as he came to a stop in front of her driveway. She yawned and adjusted her hair, if only for herself.

The August heat radiated off every exposed surface, and Joyce felt the sweat bead as soon as she stepped out from under the protection of her shaded porch and onto the stairs, headed towards the mailbox. As she walked down the driveway, she made note of the overgrown yard that had run rampant over the course of the past few weeks. It looked dreadful, but there were other things to worry about.

Bill.

Credit card advertisement.

Coupon book.

Bill.

Letter from a cousin.

Latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*. She'd have to cancel that one at some point, God knows she'd never read it.

Another bill.

A baseball peeking out from the overgrown grass next to the driveway. Joyce scanned the yard of her across-the-street neighbor, searching for the usual suspects, but there were no little Smith boys to be found. She bent down, picked it up, and rolled the ball over in her right hand. She tried to think about the last time she had even held a baseball. Decades, probably. It had to have been. She rubbed her thumb over the faded and frayed red stitches. It seemed ancient and filthy; multiple coats of caked dirt covered it, a deep gash ran along one side, and it was indented with a pattern suspiciously reminiscent of a dog bite. It might've been Jonah's, if she didn't know better, the bite mark from Sugar or Buddy depending on the decade. She looked around again, expecting to find a gaggle of kids with mitts jogging towards her. The street was still. She walked back onto the porch and set the ball on the railing, hopefully in plain enough view for its owner to arrive and reclaim it at some point.

Joyce's porch only had two chairs on it, hers and his. Hers was an antique rocking chair that he had refurbished for their fortieth anniversary. It was beautiful, and by all accounts it had taken him forever to finish. She had been banned from the garage for at least a month while he slaved away. She loved that chair. Truthfully, it wasn't all that comfortable and it didn't at all rock smoothly over the uneven boards of their old porch. But he made it, and perhaps more importantly, he talked about it constantly. How many hours it took, how many coats of finish, how many replacement pieces he'd forged in the wee hours of the night. And, of course, how he put the finishing touches on the night before, their initials in a heart on the backside of the

headrest. He made it, and she loved it. His own chair, however, lacked the same refinement. His throne was an old, rusted folding chair, sun-bleached and bent precariously at the legs. The kind of chair people take to fireworks shows or to the beach. And he did. Hell, everywhere he went it seemed like he brought that chair with him. It was his little sidekick.

The two seats made for an odd pair, juxtaposed just off to the right of the front door like they were. Only a small plastic table sat between them. On the table lay a bright yellow ashtray next to a plain white lighter. He always wound up peeling off the colored plastic coating.

Joyce took her usual seat, setting the mail down on the side table, and gazed over at the ridiculous lawn chair. For a moment she thought about sitting in it herself, just to see what all the fuss was about, but she feared that the next person to put weight on it would plummet straight through. The ashtray was loaded with half-smoked cigarettes, the last vestiges of his attempts to quit. Half a cigarette, he would say, was the first step towards none. She picked up one of the partial butts and examined it between her thumb and forefinger. She'd never smoked one herself. In fact, she'd spent the better part of fifty years trying to get him to quit, but something about holding one made her miss the smell. The smell. The worst part about them, arguably. But she felt like it should be here, floating on the air intrusively like a hornet. So she took up the lighter, and with a half dozen flicks finally got it to catch. She held the lit end near her face and let the faint scent of it hold her. The little vaporous grey trail folding out of the end dissipated above her head, and she fixed her eyes on the white burning edges, flashing bright orange before succumbing to ash. She gently touched the filter to her lips and took a drag, just enough to keep it burning.

She could've sat staring at that dirty cigarette for hours, but the arrival of a flashy silver convertible in her driveway stole her attention.

“Good morning, Joy! Well I don’t know if it’s morning anymore, but it was a good morning anyways,” said Pastor Phil, gingerly closing the driver’s side door and making his way up the porch steps.

“Mornin’ Pastor.”

“Now Joy, I didn’t know you smoked.”

Joyce glanced at the cigarette in her hand and extinguished it quickly, embarrassed to have been caught red handed.

“No judgments on my part, of course,” he added.

“Come on in, Phil, let’s get out of this heat.”

Joyce could tell that he was relieved they’d be having this conversation indoors, as he had already wiped his brow twice before making it to the shade. She herself was relieved that the pastor wouldn’t be risking the rusted folding chair. After the pair exchanged a few more weather-based anecdotal pleasantries, Joyce asked if he’d like a bite to eat. After all, she had plenty.

“Yes, that’d be great actually,” he said, though Joyce had a hunch he was expecting to be fed before he had even stepped inside. She pulled out a few of the different containers at random, fixed him a plate, and hit two on the microwave.

“I have more food than I know what to do with.”

“Well, I’m glad you’ve got people lookin’ out for you.”

“Mhm.”

He sat in his chair, hands folded over the table comfortably in semi-silence, pretending to ponder the soft electric buzz. She glared intently at the rotating plate, counting down the seconds with the digital clock. She pulled the plate out just before the ringer, and set it on the table in front of him with a fork planted firmly in some potatoes.

“Thank you kindly, Joy. I appreciate it.”

She sat in her chair, crossed her legs, and eyed him as he ate. His plump face and round glasses made him look overly circular, and she found him to be rather cartoonish. When he was first brought into the church a few years ago she thought he looked boyish, but now his hair was leaving him and the rosiness of his cheeks seemed to have mellowed. He chewed loudly.

“Joy,” he said dramatically, wiping his face, “how’re you doin’?”

“Oh, I’m fine.”

He tilted his head a bit. “Come now, Joy. We missed you yesterday morning. Merna was worried sick about you.”

“Well, Jenny was in town until today, so we were just taking care of business. Mostly cleaning and everything.”

“Well Joy, you know in times like these, there is just no substitute for community.”

“Mhm.”

He was staring at her like an out-of-touch teacher might stare at a child too old to be patronized in that way. He had a way of tucking the left corner of his mouth into a sort of twisted expression he thought was a smile. He took a few more bites and looked up again, still chewing.

“Jerry is with Him now, you know.”

“Of course.”

“And one day you will be too.”

She blinked.

“And me. And everybody else too for that matter,” he continued, “that’s just how it goes I’m afraid.”

He moved a pile of tuna casserole around his plate, settling on a large piece of pot-roast hidden behind it and packing the morsel into his mouth. He chewed for seconds before laying his fork down with an air of finality.

“Death isn’t scary, Joy.”

“Would you like coffee?” she asked, taking his plate and walking over to the sink.

“I-- well, sure. I’d love a cup, thank you, with creamer if you’ve got it.”

She opened the cabinet above the coffee pot and saw the mug. Jenny had made it for Father’s Day years and years ago, about a pound’s worth of ceramic. It was lumpy around the edges, and he complained that it caused him to spill on himself, but he always used it anyway. He’d never admit it, but he always used it. It made a booming thud when she set it on the counter, and Pastor Phil coughed a bit to hide being startled. She poured it full from the morning’s pot, forgot the creamer, closed the cabinet, and returned to the table.

“Creamer?”

“Oh yes,” said Joyce, fetching it for him.

“Thank you kindly.”

He mixed in a healthy dose of creamer, filling to the rim, and mixed it softly with the handle of the fork Joyce had forgotten to take up. The pastor blew gently over the cup, though it was unnecessary, and cautiously brought it up for a drink. Despite his efforts, coffee dribbled down the corner of his mouth and the cup slammed down on the table when the pastor tried to set it down. He squirmed at its crudeness.

“You see, Joy, it’s important to talk during times like these. Talk to your neighbors. Talk to me. And Joy,” he paused again, “you’ve got to talk to Him.”

Her throat twitched.

“Good ‘ol Jerry is up there right now, singin’ and dancin’ around like a loon, you know he is. The book says so, Joy, I’m not makin’ it up,” he said with a little laugh. He’d used that joke before. “Promise me I’ll see you this Sunday?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll hold you to it, Joy, you know I will,” he laughed to himself again.

She walked him out and waved at his silver two-door as it pulled out of the driveway. She took a few aspirin and sat back down at the table. The mug sat like a centerpiece, its tannish, faded finish almost matte now, and the handle only fit two of his fingers, if she remembered right. The place across from her looked better empty. Not best empty, but better. Now that the pastor had left, she could peer out the window. She again noticed the neglected yard, long and wild. She’d need to pay one of the neighbor boys to cut it. Or maybe she’d do it herself one of these days. Why not?

She lifted the mug to carry it to the sink, but found herself moving out of the kitchen and into the living room instead. She set it on his side table, next to the pile of miscellaneous remotes, and, hesitating briefly, placed herself in his molded chair. It engulfed her and smelled like that suit jacket of his. He only wore it on special occasions. She shivered and took up the mug again, moving into the hallway.

Jenny’s room was relatively clear of junk, but the bed was still unmade from her visit. Joyce had a passing image of her daughter lying on her stomach, feet kicking behind her, giant headphones over her ears, and eyes closed in faux-reflectiveness. She couldn’t remember the age, or the moment exactly, but the picture was there. She thought about washing the sheets. Across the hall she entered Jonah’s room the best she could, but when he moved out who-knows-how-long ago, the room became storage. He hadn’t slept in it since some college Christmas,

probably. Boxes and boxes of forgotten relics; she didn't need any of it. It should've gone in the attic, but she never could get him to do it. Another task left to a neighbor boy. Or her. Why not?

The door at the end of the hall looked strange completely closed, like she hadn't really ever seen it that way. She inched towards it, mug in hand, and pushed gently. The bed was made up still, and the sun shone through the curtains in a way that highlighted the cascading dust falling like a snowfall on the old patched quilt passed from his mother. The space for Joyce's pillow was empty, but his remained fixed. Planted there like it was sewn in. She circled to his side and almost tripped over big navy slippers, tucked a little under the bed side-by-side. She sat where he sat, feeling the sinking indent of his memory on the mattress. The heat from the window bathed her eyes shut. Her hands closed tight around the mug. *Joy, you've got to talk to him. You've got to talk...*

Where are you? Hmm? You're late, and I'm alone out in the yard like an idiot. You're late and Mom was right, you were always gonna be late. This is the hill where I get your jacket, right? The one with your name? Where it finally happens? Or are you scared? You look terrified, so I'll act for you. I'll move for you. I'll be brave for you. I'll kiss and hold and love for you. That night, after work, the stars like fireflies and hands like lightning bolts. Of course I will, yes. Yes, yes, yes, of course I will. You've got that stupid hair, and my dress got caught during the dance, and you stepped on it but won't admit it until it's just us. No one but us. You're gonna be a dad, G. And again. You can cry, dummy. Just do it. He's growing up. He's gonna be stupid. We were stupid too. Do you want to be your father, hmm? We aren't them. God rest them. I'm sorry, I know. I can see it in your eyes, like always. You're scared. I won't be though, G. It's scary, G. I won't be, but it is. I won't be. I'm stone. I'm marble.

She tightened her hold.

The funeral home director walks us into that room before anyone else, just Jenny, Jonah, and me. There you are. Center stage. You flat refused to pick a coffin for yourself, so Jonah did it for you at some point last week. It's nice, I guess. He also took care of all the paperwork, his way of mourning. The legalese and dotted lines were more familiar, maybe. I feel Jenny's hand squeeze mine and I'm uncomfortable. It hurts. Her makeup is running over bright red, puffy cheeks. Jonah won't blink. The carpet is that thin stuff they only seem to use in office spaces or churches that can't afford hardwood. It's maroon with black speckles and it almost hides stains. I'm avoiding everything else and focusing on how much I despise this carpet. Our children march me forward, one on either arm like executioners.

It's not fair, but that's how it was, G. That's how it felt. The lid was open and I felt like it would snap shut on me if I leaned in. They'd throw the switch and it would drop. I don't know what they put in that coffin, but it wasn't you. It had makeup on. And that suit jacket. And some stupid, ugly tie one of the kids bought you at a school fair however many years ago. It wasn't you. It didn't half smoke cigarettes or yell at the TV. It didn't fix leaky faucets or play catch or anything. And they'll plant it, G. They'll plant it by your parents. In a spot we picked out when we picked theirs. So people can come by to drop off their decorative wreaths and their emotional baggage. But where will you be?

And then I'm screaming, "It's not him, it's not him," but they close in on me and smother me until I can't breathe. I'm crying, G. Can you believe it? You might have laughed at me, but I'm crying. I'm a mess and I'm ashamed. I'm sobbing and thrashing and I just want to run back to that hospital and find the real you. This thing can live in a hole, I don't care, but it wasn't you. This is something you would have mocked. Scoffed at. You would roll in your... It's... it's wearing blush, G. And it's smiling. Not a full smile, but a kind of stock smirk. A general, pleasant

look. It's fake. It's a stand-in or a body double or a mannequin. It never learned how to grin or scowl like you.

It's a show. It's a show and half the town came to see it. To look at me and it next to each other. To talk about you, yes, briefly, but mostly to talk about it. They came in black with greeting cards about it. They came with enough flowers to fill every square inch of your truck, the bed and the cab combined, no room to even drive the thing. You think they were for you? For me? No. For it. And I feel it like a thick comforter draping over my shoulders; slowly getting heavier and heavier until my knees give and I buckle. For a moment I don't think they'll put me together again and I'm embarrassed. Our kids can't even mourn because they're carrying me out of the room.

But it wasn't you.

Her hands squeezed the mug, trying desperately to crush it. To pulverize it or grind it away into nothing. Every ounce of power left in her body flowed through her arms, and down into her hands, but it refused to crack. With a shout she reeled back, pitched it into the wall with all her might, and collapsed on the floor by the slippers. She gingerly rolled to her back and stared up at the crater in the dry-wall, about the size of his fist, and watched in silence as stale coffee rolled down from the scar. She screamed at it. Everything she never said and all the words she never used. She hated and prayed to it with that same breath. There was nothing but her and it, and not him.

After a minute or an hour, she became aware of her slowing breath and the grandfather clock, tolling in the side room. She climbed back onto the side of the bed, brushing herself off and fumbling to unfog her glasses. Coffee marred the off-white carpet by the floorboards, but the

mug sat whole. She lifted it, tenderly wiping its lumpy edges on the leg of her pants, and walked away.

The hot water scalded her palms, and the heat woke her up again. You couldn't dishwash this mug anyways; she never had. She placed it softly on a little face-down monogrammed towel by the sink, carried the trashcan over to the fridge, and unloaded everything at once.

The Driver's Seat

The heavy door slammed harder than intended, and the accidental fury of its sudden stop against the frame echoed off the concrete walls of the hallway. Sam sighed deep and rolled his eyes, more annoyed at the door's outburst than his own carelessness. He was getting that box fan, dammit. It was a million goddamn degrees and it was past due. How she could even stand to stay in that apartment, let alone in bed, under that thick padded comforter, was beyond him, but she wasn't moving, so it wasn't moving, and something had to change. The soft rabble of the television went on behind the door, and after checking down the hall both ways to ensure he wouldn't need to apologize to some half-conscious tenant, Sam made his way down the stairs and to the street.

The jaundiced street lamps painted auburn circles on the sidewalk and one of them slightly covered the paint-chipped hood of his rusted gray coupe, parallel parked by the curb. The driver's side door creaked loudly when he opened it, temporarily drowning out the ever-present sound of sirens droning in the city distance, and the tiny car seemed to tilt his direction as he lowered himself into it, ducking his head. The door slammed shut again with a quicker, sharper creak.

That was the problem with living downtown, anytime you wanted anything specific you had to drive forever. This was the city, wasn't everything supposed to be walking distance? Everything but frickin' Wal-Mart, apparently. Sam fiddled with his keys in the orange-tinted darkness, finally finding the little plastic base of the ignition key and insert--

“RUNNING ON EMPTY... RUNNIN' ON... RUNNING BLIIIIIIIND...”

Sam quickly spun down the volume wheel of his stereo, heart beating a bit faster than before, and peeled out into the street without checking the rear-view. There was something

therapeutic about exploring the empty streets of the city at night. Like the hollowed-out termite mound he had seen at a museum once. Like a toy city. Totally depopulated. His little gray car rolled through a red light and onto the freeway ramp.

The Wal-Mart parking lot was similarly desolated, with only a light smattering of assorted vehicles scattered throughout the concrete field. Despite the availability of closer spots, Sam parked closer to the middle of the lot. He only ever parked up front for her. In isolation he didn't mind the longer walk down the row. And he was mad. Mad at his situation. At the box fan he hadn't even bought yet. At the choking humidity of that glorified barracks his landlord called an apartment building. He'd tried to ignore it gnawing at him for the whole ride here, but it was creeping up again. He wanted to punch his steering wheel or something, but that would be ridiculous. Juvenile. Really, he'd been trying to ignore everything, not just that, unconsciously choosing to have one of those car rides that just sort of skips to the end. Like driving drunk, you get where you're going and wonder how you made it at all.

Sliding glass doors let Sam in without him having to ask, and the wave of fluorescent lighting radiating through the store temporarily blinded him. He had to squint to adjust to the change. The store was in a transition state, and weary-eyed employees in blue vests pushed dollies full of boxes with purchased purpose across the white reflective floors in preparation of a new day. The McDonald's tucked into the corner of the building was still awake, and all at once Sam had a craving. A childish, almost vindictive, craving. How long had it been since he'd had a milkshake? A real one, that is, not one made from soy substitutes, or some other bullshit. A year? Two years, at least, maybe more by now. How long had they been dating? But he could taste it already. He deserved it.

The dude in the red visor didn't even say hello to him; he just stood slouching behind the register, waiting for a task to break up the monotony. There was a giddiness building in Sam's stomach, an adolescent anticipation that he'd forgotten how to trigger. He and the dude stood reflected over the counter while he weighed his options and relished the opportunity for rebellion.

"Lemme just get a vanilla shake," Sam said, keeping his gaze locked on the menu and avoiding eye contact for the same reasons a robber might. Like identifying him would ruin the treat.

"Size?"

"Medium, I guess."

"Large is only 30 cents more."

"Sure."

"Large then?"

"Sure."

The dude pulled a cup from a sleeve under the counter, filled it from a rumbling stainless steel machine behind him, snapped on a lid, and slid it over the counter to Sam with a straw. He paid whatever it cost, took his change in coins, and hesitated a moment before picking up the cup. He owed her that much. The frozen sweat on the paper cup wet his hand, and he popped the straw out of its paper casing and into the lid with a plastic-on-plastic screech. That first sip was like the first pull from a cigarette, the one that involuntarily closes your eyes and runs down your body like lava. He held it on his tongue before letting it slide down his throat and into his chest. Alright, onto the task at hand.

But what's the rush? He'd come all the way here.

Sam wandered into the building proper and into the grocery half of the store. He walked past the familiar misted vegetable aisle, past the fruit stands and bakery, and stopped short at the butcher's. The lights were off behind the glass counter, and Sam supposed that being a deli worker must have its perks after all. Some days he missed it, he supposed. Meat, that is. Other days the slabs of flesh bleeding through soggy paper towels were exactly that, and he couldn't quite separate the pre-formed patties from the thing he knew died, cooped and crowded in a death factory. Those were her words, and he'd learned them well. Some days they were his too, he supposed. Sam remembered a particularly gruesome documentary about conditions on factory dairy farms, and a picture of some doe-eyed cows packed shoulder to shoulder drifted into his mind. The guilt melting in his left hand didn't taste quite as sweet.

He took a sip anyways, hoping he'd move past it, and drifted over towards the snack section. He peered over the chips, the candy, the cookies, and all that other junk. But man, they made that stuff look good, didn't they? Bright packaging and neon-colored characters eyeing him down. The shake was enough, he told himself, and quickly left the food section entirely.

He turned down towards the synchronized TVs on the back wall of the store. They had some kind of nature video rolling, and the greens turning red turning orange turning purple looked better and brighter the bigger the screens became. A yellow savannah scene, he guessed someplace in Africa, showed a cheetah chase down a gazelle in flawless high definition. They cut away just before the kill to a bluish scene involving some waddling baby penguins. Sam walked from the tiny screens down to the massive ones, then paced back down the row again to analyze the progression with fresh perspective. He watched until the video looped.

"Need any help?" somebody said.

Sam shook his head, took a long drag from his shake, and meandered towards the toy aisles. He skipped the rows colored pink, just as he had in his youth, and scanned until he found his section. Action figures. A flashbulb memory of hiding a particularly enticing Superman figure on the bottom shelf, way back behind the others, to preserve it for later purchase. Perhaps when his mother was feeling more generous. He slowly made his way down the row, stopping frequently to pick something up and examine it more closely. He would've loved this stuff when he was younger. Hypothetical Christmas lists began building in his head: some of these, a few of those, definitely that. A plastic ninja that delivered stiff right hooks with the squeeze of his waist. Squeeze and punch. Squeeze and punch. A fierce looking purple alien with bright red light-up laser eyes came complete with a pistol that lit up similarly. A little wrestling ring came with built-in springs to catapult figures out and away, just like on TV.

He picked each of them up, studied them meticulously, then set them back down softly where they belonged. And he was happy. Or content, at least. Or maybe just distracted. He took another deep drag from the straw and looked through a few more of the shelves before stopping himself.

Afraid of looking creepy, and a little embarrassed to find himself here at all, Sam moved away from the aisle and began his search for the box fans. He'd wasted enough time. Probably up near the front, right? That time of year. He worked his way towards the registers and scanned through the appliances. Then through the clothes. Then through the yard supplies. Back through appliances. Through office supplies. Back through appliances again.

When he finally grew bored, they were indeed up near the front. Sam pretended to compare one slightly larger fan to another slightly smaller fan, a brief attempt to offer them the same consideration he'd given some of the other items in the store, but it seemed he'd spent his

enthusiasm. He opted for the larger one-- what's an extra three bucks anyways-- and headed for checkout slightly dejected.

“Find what you're looking for?”

It took a second for Sam to process the question, but he shook his head finally, swiped his card, and drained the last of his shake.

He made sure to toss the empty cup in a trashcan by the doors before making it to the car, as he had no need for damning evidence. Honestly, she probably wouldn't say a word. She hadn't forced him into anything. He chose to be vegan himself and, sure, it was mostly for the sake of convenience, to share grocery bills, and avoid arguments, but he chose it. He hadn't been forced into anything. But she'd see it and she'd know and she'd think whatever she thought and it was for the best she didn't do any of those things. Easiest for everyone to just throw it out now.

Sam made his way back through the automatic doors and down the empty row towards his car. He needed this, he thought. A little break. Fresh air. Indulgence. Something different, right? A change of scenery. The driver's side door creaked open, he tossed the fan unceremoniously over towards the passenger side, and followed it into the car.

Things hadn't always been like that. He hadn't always needed breaks, or indulgences, or changes in scenery, but these days were different. These days, apparently, he did. And it exhausted him, nearly as much as it frustrated and angered him. And the exhaustion, while more justified, was harder to express. Frustration and anger manifest in bursts. Explosions. Exhaustion was a bruise he'd find the next morning, or realize during the middle of a run. And he hadn't always slammed apartment doors, or binged on vanilla milkshakes, but he felt like those were symptoms of that exhaustion he'd struggled so hard to express. Life was hard enough without

extra burdens. No, it's not fair to call her that. A burden. That's the word he'd use when he was being honest, or cruel, but it wasn't a fair one. It wasn't the one he'd use to her face.

The highway was his, and no one else's. Utterly vacated.

But honestly, how much longer could he do this? He was prepared to be her boyfriend, hell, maybe even her husband, but these days he was wearing too many hats. These days he was a therapist, or a brother, or a father, or an ambulance driver. God, that one pushed him. Driving her to the emergency room because she had dismantled one of his razors. He thought hiding the knives would be enough, but she could get crafty when she wanted to. Sam never understood what she did that for, or what it accomplished, and it drove him insane. It killed him bit by bit and he just wanted to get it, because if he could get it, understand it, he could fix it. And she said *sorry, sorry, sorry* the entire ride there, like that was what he wanted to hear, but it wasn't. He didn't want her to be sorry. She didn't need to be. She just needed to be better, and he couldn't say that because it wasn't fair, and he knew it wasn't fair, but it wasn't fair for him either.

Weren't the pills supposed to work? Or that therapist? Or him, shouldn't he have counted for something? But she wouldn't, couldn't, leave that bed. Sure, she'd go to class occasionally, if he really pestered her, but the panic attacks paralyzed and the sleeping bouts disabled and she was petrified. Frozen solid in that burning room. And he knew that night in the emergency room that things were different now, but they sat, drowning and surrounded by the other broken people, avoiding eye contact and holding hands so hard their knuckles turned white. It was the first time he thought about doing it himself. To get it. To understand it. To fix it.

The box fan sat in the passenger seat, wobbling forward precariously on every bump.

Sam pressed the gas a little harder, leaning into his steering wheel and squeezing it tight. The limit was sixty, but honestly, who would know otherwise? Who would care if he pushed it to

eighty? The road was empty, he was alone out here. Not like the old piece of shit two-door could go much faster than that anyways, could it? Eighty-five? The plastic pieces of the interior began to rattle, and the noise alone would've overpowered the radio he'd neutered at the beginning of his ride. He could still see that shirt they wrapped her arm in, soaking red. Ninety and the steering wheel was vibrating through his hands, down his arms, through his shoulders. They didn't even kiss anymore. He was driving with his spine at this point, and his heart was thudding, and his eyes were watering, and his right foot was down as far as it cou-- ninety-five-- and if he could just get it to one hundred, just push it a little harder, and he had this fleeting image of his car flying through the steel barricade and disappearing into the trees. No, not an image. An idea. A possibility. And maybe he'd be better off if he did it. Or she did. Ninety-eight and it's so--

Eyes. Eyes in the road, reflecting his headlights.

Sam slammed the brakes and cut the wheel hard to the right to miss them, then hard to the left to compensate, then harder right, and the car spun a full hundred and eighty degrees before stopping.

Stopping.

Stopped.

He couldn't tell, but he thought he might've clipped it anyways-- whatever it was-- despite his violent attempts to maneuver around it. The car was pointed the wrong way, still facing the little dark lump in the road but from the opposite side. Sam couldn't breathe. His chest was pumping and air was moving but he couldn't seem to force it into his lungs. The lump sat. He finally gasped and gulped and panted.

He let off the brakes and rolled the wrong way down the road slowly, pulling carefully off to the shoulder before parking to collect himself. For a while after cutting the ignition, Sam

couldn't peel his fingers off the wheel. He sat, still buckled, fists clenched, gazing absently forward. Finally, he unbuckled, opened his door with a slow creak, and vomited an off-white puddle of vanilla milkshake into the gravel by the pavement. He wiped his mouth, carefully stepped out and around the mess, and slowly moved towards the front of his car. The coupe hadn't sustained any damage that he could see, but it was dark and some of the smaller scratches wouldn't appear until morning anyways.

Sam turned his eyes towards the little lump again, still motionless in the middle of the road. He looked back down the highway, scared of seeing headlights himself, but it remained empty. He circled in a wide arc to try and get a better look at the thing, and as he got closer it began to finally look like what it was. A rabbit. Jesus, he'd almost killed himself over a goddamn rabbit. Jesus. He looked back down the road. Nothing. Sam looked back down expecting to find gore, but the rabbit mostly remained whole. Actually, it looked fine, there under the veil of night. At first. He took a step towards it and its front legs began frantically dragging limp back legs behind it, perhaps afraid that Sam had returned to finish the job. A dark shimmering fluid trailed behind it on the asphalt. Sam stopped in his tracks and so did it. He looked back down the road. Then back behind him. Still nothing. Whether it was for morbid curiosity or guilt, he slowly lowered himself to his knees for a closer look. Upon closer examination, his tire had clearly crushed the back half of the rabbit, and Sam began to feel his stomach turning over again. He choked it down. It deserved that much.

Any sudden movement from Sam sparked a frenzy of movement from the rabbit, and he was worried that, if it moved any more, it would tear itself in two. He didn't think he could bear seeing that and maintain any kind of dignity, so he held his breath and sat cross-legged across from the rabbit there in the darkness. Crickets and cicadas and whatever else lived in the trees by

the highway went about their business, not noticing Sam or their neighbor in mutual silent mourning, and the city lights twinkled through the branches somewhere further on. What else could he do? He played with the idea of killing it. Euthanizing it. Putting it out of its misery. Showing mercy. But none of those rewordings could convince him to do it. It truly was the least he could do for the poor thing. To give it some kind of release. But he didn't have a gun, or a brick, or a shovel, and besides, by the time he closed the gap between himself and the rabbit, it would have probably killed itself trying to escape. That image didn't feel like mercy to Sam. The rabbit would die because of him, yes, but not like that.

After a few minutes, he made out distant headlights coming towards them down the road a ways. Sam rose to his feet slowly to avoid startling the rabbit, and walked backwards over to his car. He prayed that the oncoming driver would just hit the poor thing. Quickly. Right in the front half. Painless. He waited for the car to arrive and held his breath, but the stranger was in the wrong lane and passed between the pair without notice. Sam squinted down the road again, hoping for a new set of headlights. For a motorcade of headlights. For an eighteen-wheeler or a steamroller or a freight train, anything to relieve him of the responsibility. And he was responsible, or at least he felt that he was. He had done this, and he owed it to that rabbit to finish it. He could picture himself doing it, as clearly as the real image of the rabbit's tiny chest heaving there in the road, but picturing and doing were two entirely different animals. Sam stared down at the little lump in the road one last time, desperately running through all the options for fixing the situation that he could invent. Nothing.

The car righted itself and obeyed the speed limit all the way back to its parking spot in front of his building.

Sam quietly climbed the stairs back up to his floor, turned the corner down the hall, box fan in tow, and stopped at his apartment. He paused. His hand hadn't yet moved towards the handle or the lock or even towards the keys in his pocket. He didn't feel like he had gotten there yet, like he hadn't quite caught up. He was still somewhere else, spinning out on the highway. Still puking from the driver's seat. Still inching towards the little lump in the road. Still sitting on the pavement, watching it breathe heavy in the night. And the rabbit was still there too, unable to escape. Unable to inch its way closer towards the path of oncoming tires. Unable to convince the monster hovering over its body for release. In Sam's mind it was still lying there, half-crushed in a pool of itself perpetually dying on the asphalt, and maybe it would forever. He gently set the fan down, turned to face the concrete wall opposite his door, and punched it. The blow sent a dull thud down the hall.

Again. Not hard enough to break anything.

Again. Just hard enough to hurt.

Again. It was medicine, or some version of it.

Again. A little blood spotted the eye-level brick he'd chosen.

Again. And there it was. That fierce, familiar pain tracing through his fingers, down his wrist and through his arm. The sting of fresh cuts, the ache of new bruises, the natural morphine drip oozing through his veins. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, savoring it like he had savored the first sip of that shake, but when he finally opened them again nothing had changed and instantly it all felt so foolish. The punching, and the milkshake, and the accident, and that stupid box fan at his feet. The smear of blood on the wall wiped right off, like it was never even there. He turned around, leaned back against the wall softly, and let gravity pull him to the floor.

Sam sat motionless in the hall, mulling over the sour taste of spoiled vanilla on his tongue and staring through the door, wondering how long it would take to open on its own.

Less Like Terrell

Her doorbell rings that long, haunting doorbell song that some people have. The one that seems to last thirty whole seconds, like an entire bell choir is waiting in the side room for someone to hit the button and then they're like, *finally, showtime*. I shiver and listen. Even when it ends, it echoes on behind the door.

Come over Sunday! she yelled, straining over the back of her bus seat to catch me in the back row by the emergency door. Then, after receiving my nod, she disappeared with a smirk back into the adolescent Friday afternoon chatter.

So here I am. I hold my breath a little.

Her dad answers, towering in a Steelers jersey.

"Hi Mr. Mariotti," I say.

"Alexandra, right?"

"Just Alex."

"Just Alex."

"Uh huh."

"Here to see Kat?"

"Uh huh, can she play?"

"Yep, she should be around here somewhere."

And then I see her, just under his arm a little ways back in the hallway, gripping a steaming cup of something and grinning like she was holding some secret instead. Her long dark hair is loosely tied back and matted at the top where a hat had flattened it, and her normally olive skin is still pink at the cheeks. She must have just come in from the cold herself. Her dark eyes are fixed on mine and as the two of us stand there, ten feet apart with only a giant between us, I

feel that word they said on TV when two people stare at each other long enough. For an instant, anyways. Then it retreats and I'm a bundled-up little fourth grader again, freezing her butt off on the doormat.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey. Sorry I couldn't come over earlier, my mom made me eat dinner first."

"Eating is good."

"Uh huh. We had ham."

"Cool."

"What did you eat?"

"Sunday is pizza day."

"Lucky."

"Wanna come inside?"

"Sure."

Football's on and Mr. Mariotti takes what looks to be his regular seat, a plump black leather recliner, reentering the game and not really paying us any attention. Kat plops down on the couch, so after fumbling and stumbling out of my oversized snow gear, handed down from my older brother, I follow her lead and plop down next to her. Not too close, though.

"Do you like football?" she says, noticing my blue and orange Terrell Davis jersey.

Did I like football? It was all I did. Some people had cartoons, or dolls, or video games, and I had some of those things too, but football was something else entirely. I loved football. People who like football have a favorite team, but I'd been reading *Sports Illustrated* since I could read. I wrote down all the league's trades that happened in the previous week in a notebook I kept by the couch, so that when SportsCenter got to the point where it repeated itself,

I could go upstairs, turn on the PlayStation 2, and make all the real-life roster changes in my brother's Madden game. I watched ESPN Classic after school. I'd seen Super Bowls that happened when my parents were kids.

"Uh huh, I like the Broncos," I say, pointing at my jersey.

"*Broncos?* Go Steelers!" says Mr. Mariotti, noticing us again.

"I met Jerome Bettis once," I say. I'm proud of this story and very excited that it came up naturally. Normally I have to force it.

"*The Bus?* No way," he says, perking up in his chair.

"Uh huh, I was in the Omaha airport and I recognized him. My dad said that it wasn't him, and I said that it was, so he bet me 20 dollars to go ask."

"What did he say?"

"Well, I asked if he was Jerome Bettis first, because one time I thought I saw Brett Favre at a Saint Patty's day parade, but it wasn't him. So I asked if it was *really* him, and he said yeah, and I said I liked him, and he asked if I wanted a Snickers, and I said no, and then he asked if I was stupid."

"Stupid?"

"Uh huh, he said it like a joke though. He laughed. He said he was in Omaha for a charity softball thing. I met his manager too. Then he ate the Snickers and signed my ticket. It's on the tack-board in my room."

"Huh. That's pretty crazy."

"Uh huh."

Kat isn't into this conversation, but I don't immediately notice. I'm getting in good with the adult, a trait my own parents valued highly. Plus it's my best story, how could it be boring?

We watch the game and I try my hardest to impress them both with football knowledge. I study the TV, sometimes noting that the defensive backs were playing too far off the line and that the offense, if they were any good, should throw a slant to beat the coverage. The linebackers were playing too conservatively; they needed to run Ladaian Tomlinson down their throats until they stepped up to stop him, ya know? Get a fullback in there and pound it between the tackles until those backers cheat, then hit somebody over the middle; Antonio Gates is having a heck of a year. Sometimes I sneak a glance over at her, just to make sure she's still there, and then I go right back to my place in the announcer's booth.

"Your dad must watch a lot of football," says Mr. Mariotti.

"Uh huh, sometimes," I say.

He didn't, really, but I had grown used to this assumption. I mean, he'd watch if it was on, which was often if me or my brother asserted control over the remote early enough on Sundays (or Monday nights), but Dad could take or leave football. Wasn't his game. He'd always say *baseball is America's sport* or *there's just nothing like college basketball when the tournament is swinging*. He even tried to get me to play basketball one season, but it didn't do anything for me. I shot down softball before any binding contracts were signed, but either game would've been better than the gymnastics class Mom signed me up for the previous summer. They could keep their pastimes, and I'd keep mine.

At halftime, Kat grabs my sleeve and pulls me off the couch, announcing to her father that we'd be upstairs. Mr. Mariotti doesn't seem to care and Kat doesn't wait for him to. I'm secretly hoping we'll be back by second half kickoff, but she's almost holding my hand and I'm at her mercy.

The door to her room is plastered with sticky notes and photos of older kids I don't know that she had extracted from magazines I don't read. It takes effort for her to push open the door (a pile of dirty clothes had clogged the hinges on the floor behind it), but with a definitive shove we're in. The walls are an extension of the door, a chaotic explosion of strangers' faces. Some cut out, some on posters. A full-sized cardboard cutout of what might be Justin Timberlake is lying face down in front of her open-drawer dresser. She makes a show out of jumping onto her bed, leaping and suspending herself in a Superman pose before crashing onto the balled-up magenta comforter. I climb onto the bed gingerly, ignoring the precedent and attempting to avoid any further disturbance.

"I *hate* football," Kat groans.

"Why?" I ask, genuinely incredulous. She *hates* football? How? It was perfect. It was drama and action and strategy and all the best things. There were heroes and villains and...

"It's *so* boring." She rolls her eyes.

"Sometimes," I lie.

"Anyways, guess what I got," Kat says, grinning.

"What?"

"Guess!"

"Um... I don't know."

"Come on, guess. Guess anything."

"Just tell me."

Kat pulls out a little pink Barbie diary and quickly fits the key, conveniently tethered to the diary itself, into a small plastic lock. It pops open. Pages are ripped, dog-eared, and otherwise maimed. Sheets of paper from other notebooks or journals have been added, in addition to even

more magazine cut outs. She flips through pages quickly, unceremoniously dropping loose leaves off the edge of the bed and onto the floor, where they join a litany of clothes, toys, and other pieces of paper, all similarly discarded. She finally settles on a little folded piece of lined blue notebook paper that has been crudely quartered, clearly torn without folding.

“Guess who gave this to me,” she says. She liked this game; we’d played it before. It was her way of savoring every second of insider knowledge, extending the moments of *I know something you don’t know* and squeezing them for every drop.

“Dunno.”

“Come on, you’re no fun.”

“Freddy?”

She wrinkles her nose and flops dramatically back onto a stack of pillows, “Ew, gross! *Freddy?*”

“I dunno.”

“Brad!”

“Bradley Yates?”

“Duh.”

“What is it?”

She pulls herself out of her pillow sandbank and drops her jaw at me. Like I was the one being unreasonable.

“What?” I repeat.

She smiles a kind of smile that leaves her teeth hidden and her lips tucked in. It makes her cheeks look big and her eyes look small, simultaneously making her look big and me feel small. “He wants me to be his girlfriend.”

Girlfriend?

“Girlfriend?”

What does that even mean?

“What does that even mean?”

She rolls her eyes again and sets the note in my lap, facedown like poor Justin. I don’t want to read it. I’m curious, yeah, but this feels intrusive. Bradley Yates wrote this for Kat, not for me. It didn’t feel right to come in between the sanctity of wide ruled paper romance contracts. She reaches and flips it over for me anyway, ethical dilemmas be damned.

Bradley Yates’ note is stark. Simple. Direct. Masculine.

*Dear Katrina,
I think your cool. I hope you think Im cool to. I think you should be my gf. Circle your answer.
Yes No Maybe
Love Bradley*

Spelling errors aside, full names aside, *love* aside (*LOVE?*), and everything else aside, the most noticeable feature of the note is what it’s missing. Namely, a circle. No *yes*, no *no*, no *maybe*. It’s unfinished, incomplete. Bradley Yates had given Kat homework. She had been procrastinating.

Kat’s impatient. “So?”

“Bradley is kind of nice,” I lie. I’d seen Bradley Yates spit on Taylor Williamson’s shoes a week or two earlier because he accidentally cut him in line at lunch.

“He’s cute too,” she says.

“Uh huh,” I lie again.

She reclaims the note and reads it aloud, emphasizing the *love* at the end.

I'm slow to respond because, honestly, I want to tell her whatever she'd like to hear best. Nine is not the age to rock boats. I had my opinions and preferences (whether I was aware of them or not), but more than anything I wanted her to like me. I craved it.

"What are you gonna circle?" I ask.

"I don't know!" She giggles. "What do you think?"

"If you circle *maybe* you won't have to really answer it."

"So boring," she says. It burns a little.

"Then what are you gonna do?"

"I mean, I like him," she continues, "But I don't know if I *like* him. You know?"

"Uh huh."

She looks at me seriously, "Who do *you* like?"

"Dunno. Nobody."

"Liar."

"Dunno."

"Come on!" She drags the *on* musically, singing it.

"I dunno."

"Well, I know who likes you."

More suspense. A little knot forms in my throat before dropping into my stomach.

"Who?"

"Guess."

"Stop, Kat, tell me!"

"Kenny. Grubiak."

And I deflate. It wasn't Kenny's fault; she could've said any name. It could've been Todd or Marcel or James or any of the boys from class. I wanted so badly to match her enthusiasm, to meet her on common ground, to stand with her in shared awe, marveling at these new romantic possibilities. But I couldn't quite muster it. What should've been some kind of internal fireworks display was an uneventful dud. A vague misfiring.

"How do you know?" I say.

"Mary told me."

"How does Mary know?"

"She heard it because Kyle Hawkins told her. I guess Kenny told him? I don't know exactly, but it's legit."

"Huh."

"That's all? *Huh?* Come on, Alex!"

"I just..."

"Do you like him?"

"I dunno."

She rolls her eyes. "You don't know?"

"I don't..."

"Listen, this is big. Like, *big.*"

I stare over her shoulder at the frilly purple lamp shade on her night stand.

"*Big big, Alex.*"

"Uh huh."

She could sense it wasn't *big big* to me and she took it personally. Like she had risked everything to get me this information. *007* stuff.

“Alex. A boy *likes* you. He might even ask you out.”

My eyes flick back to hers. I hadn't thought about that. Of course, it was an adolescent inevitability. *Like* leads to *love* *note* leads to *boyfriend-girlfriend*. She recognizes my revelation.

“Yeah, get it now?” she says.

I nod.

“And, no offense or anything, but this might be kind of rare. Boys don't like tomboys.”

Tomboy. I heard that term twice before that night. The first time was when Grandma saw me unwrap the Terrell Davis jersey and she asked Mom if I was *turning into a little tomboy*. Mom said *well I don't know about that*. I overheard them, but didn't think much of it at the time. Terrell was my hero and now I had a piece of him. It was like owning a Batman costume. Even better. Terrell was real. The second time was when I made a spectacular catch in a backyard football game. A long post route, right through the middle of the field. My brother launched it high and deep, and I had to completely stretch out and dive to haul it in. An older neighbor, Quinn, yelled *let's go, tomboy!* in celebration. I'd never been prouder; it was my little slice of neighborhood sports mythology. My brother and his friends still talk about it sometimes. So until that night with Kat, I was under the impression that tomboy was a specific football term that only applied to girls, but there weren't any girl football players on TV, so I never had confirmation. But it wasn't football specific. It was *me* specific.

“But it's okay, we'll fix you up!” she says.

I stare.

“Do you have makeup?”

No, I didn't have makeup. Mom always told me it was the sort of thing only adults wore, and it was my impression from Dad that it was the source of my mother's constant tardiness.

Plus it seemed like a ton of work, layers of face paint carefully applied with a mixed bag of implements. I have a clear memory of squirming in her lap as she applied her mascara in the mirror. I must've been three or four.

"I don't think so," I say, a little ashamed.

"It's okay, I've got some."

Kat moves over to her dresser and digs through one of the overflowing top drawers until she finds a little zippered bag. It has bright red lining, but the outer surface is this plasticked glittery silver. It's the kind of bag you can't lose. She jumps back onto the bed, crisscross applesauce across from me. So close that our knees are almost touching.

"Come closer," she says.

I cross my legs like hers and scootch closer until our knees both touch. My mouth is dry.

"Where did you get it?" I ask.

"Stole most of it from my sister, but I think she steals it from mom. It's the good stuff," she says, as if either of us could've told the difference.

"You gotta put this all over your face first," she says, holding an open squeeze bottle of moisturizer over our laps. I put my hands out under it and she pushes a little into my right palm. It smells like peach cobbler. Like Thanksgiving. A little like Great-Grandma. I use it like suntan lotion, rubbing it into my palms before applying it to my face. I'm careful to make sure I'm not leaving any areas uncovered. She does the same to hers, consulting a little mirror hidden in the lid of the glittery bag.

"Next we use this stuff for the cheeks," she says.

"Kinda like eye black," I say.

"What?"

“Eye black.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s the stuff football players put under their eyes. It’s made out of tar or something. My brother says they use it to look scary.”

“Ew, gross,” she says, scrunching her nose like she could smell it. “No, not like that.”

“Oh,” I say.

She reveals a fat little brush with a black handle. The bristles are clear at the base and fade into a tannish color at the tips. She unscrews the lid off of a little container and swirls the brush around inside.

“I’ll do you,” she says, “That’s how my sister showed me.”

She leans in close and gently runs the brush across my cheeks. I try not to move, but it tickles and I shrug a little.

“Sit still!” she says, placing her hand on my thigh to hold me in place.

I notice that Kat is wearing perfume. It smells a little like Fruity Pebbles.

When she finishes, she checks the mirror and brushes herself. It’s uneven, but I’d never think to tell her. She’s the expert.

“Lipstick next?” I ask, trying to be helpful.

“That’s always the last thing,” she says, “It’s the most fun.”

She pulls out this little black tube, twisting it open to reveal a thin black brush.

“Mascara,” she says, “There’s some other stuff we could do too, but I ran out of a bunch of supplies.”

She leans in and brings the brush up to my eye, but I flinch and recoil.

“It goes on your eyelashes, dummy!”

“What for?”

“Makes your eyes pop.” She uses her other hand to emulate a little explosion, like my eyes were not only going to pop, but pop out completely. I’m nervous about this step.

“What’s that mean?”

“Like, people will see them easier. Come here.”

I lean in and squeeze my eyes shut.

She lets out a sigh. “They’ve gotta be open for it to work.”

I open my eyes and she’s smiling. Genuinely. It’s not the same smile she wore for secret keeping, or for being coy. This was the one that snuck through when she wasn’t paying attention. And instantly I’m ready for whatever brush-based torture she has planned. If I went blind in the coming moments, I was okay. I’d seen that smile.

“Here,” she says, “I’ll do myself first.”

She applies the mascara to each of her eyes like a surgeon, struggling not to squint. Her eyes are a little watery when she’s finished from being overexposed to air.

“Your turn!” she says, blinking hard once or twice and leaving behind tiny wet smudges under her eyes.

I do my best not to blink or breathe. I focus on her teeth, gently biting her tongue as she concentrates on moving the tiny brush precisely where it needs to be moved. I had a poster in my room of John Elway making the exact same face, laser focused on some unseen receiver downfield. Left eye. Right eye. When she finishes, they both feel heavy. A little impeded.

“See? Pops!” she says, doing the hand motion again and giggling. I giggle too.

She screws the brush back into the little black tube and tosses it back into the bag. She digs around a bit before pulling out a thicker, golden cylinder.

“I used to have a bunch of colors, but I’ve only got this one left.”

“What color is it?”

She doesn’t know off the top of her head, so she pulls off the cap and twists the bottom just enough for the bright red tip to protrude.

“Red!”

Like Snow White. Like ladybugs. Like the Kansas City Chiefs’ home jerseys.

She checks the bottom, “...it’s called *Marilyn*. Fancy!”

“I think red’s better than pink or something,” I say.

“I like pink best, but like I said, I’m out,” she says. “Me first or you?”

“You first.”

She twists the bottom of the cylinder a bit more, and puckers her lips like a kiss. She focuses on herself in the mirror and slowly runs the lipstick left to right over her top lip. Right to left over the bottom. She smacks them together a couple of times before grinning at me.

“So?” she says, turning her head a little to model the finished product.

“Perfect,” I say. Looking back, I’m sure she looked ridiculous. Clownish. Totally and completely childish. But even now I can’t bring myself to remember it that way. She was perfect.

“Your turn. Want to do it yourself?”

“Could you do it? I don’t want to mess up.”

She leans in close. I pucker my lips, just like her, but I close my eyes. She places her left hand on my shoulder to keep me steady, and with her right she runs the stick slowly over my top lip. We’re so close. Just a thin layer of bright red lipstick between us. And I don’t want her to stop, I want her to just keep running the cool wax over my lips until the tube runs dry and she’s

out of yet another color. I squeeze my eyes harder to savor it, but she finishes and leans back to survey her work.

“Perfect,” she says.

Chills.

“Kenny won’t know what hit him,” she adds with a wink.

And it’s over. The gravity of the moment crashes down around me and the Kenny shaped cloud reenters the room. This wasn’t about me and Kat; it was about Kenny Grubiak and Bradley Yates. About theoretical boyfriends and unanswered love notes. I had forgotten.

“Uh huh,” I say.

“*Hey Kat, time for your friend to go home, getting close to bedtime!*” calls Mr. Mariotti.

“Ugh,” she says, rolling off her bed and towards the door.

For a second, I’m planted. I want to soak here for just a second more. But Kat kicks over a pile of clothes and pulls her bedroom door open again.

We walk downstairs to the foyer and Mr. Mariotti is right where we left him in his chair. He strains to look over his shoulder, “I know you’re just down the street, but do you want a lift?”

“That’s okay, thanks,” I say.

“Are you sure? It’s freezing.”

“I’ll be okay.”

Kat’s waiting by the door.

“Next time we’ll do your nails,” she says.

“Uh huh.”

I pull on my snow pants and hat, slip back into my boots, zip my brother’s old jacket over my jersey, and walk out the door.

“See ya in school,” she says, waving from the doorway.

“Uh huh, bye.”

She retreats back into the house, and I’m alone. The nighttime chill settles over the street, and the snow piles under each street light glow orange. A fresh layer of powder had fallen in the time since I had made the trip there, and the road no longer showed any sign of tire tracks. Like the neighborhood had hit reset while I was gone.

I’m only a few steps down her driveway before I realize that I didn’t even get the chance to look at myself in the mirror. What’s changed? I start shuffling down the sidewalk back home, just a few dozen houses down, eager to escape the cold and see Kat’s handiwork. Would I even recognize myself? I start picking up my feet a bit. Running in boots requires more effort and the air is sharp in my lungs, but I’m just a few houses away now. I imagine that I’m Terrell Davis, like I always do, running down the sideline in open field towards the end zone. Under that thick jacket, I might’ve been. No, I *was*. I had the jersey. I break into a sprint, cradling an invisible football in the crook of my right arm. There are a million eyes on me, cheers echoing through the arena, defenders at my heel--

Davis with the ball now, bouncing towards the outside and she’s got space...

She breaks one tackle! Two tackles! She’s down the sideline!

She’s at the fifteen! The ten! The five...

I cut sharply up the curb with a spin move and onto my driveway, but I plant my right foot on a patch of black ice and slip hard. It’s not the kind of fall that comes in slow motion, the kind defined by a great whirling of arms and legs before the eventual crash. This is instantaneous, so quick it takes more time to process than to happen. My face is suddenly freezing and I’m belly-down on the frozen concrete. My gloves are too thick to get the snow out

of my eyes and nose, so I peel them off with my teeth before attempting to scrape off the ice. I feel my lower lip swelling already, and there's a sharp stinging under my left eye. I brush myself off, more than a little embarrassed, and rush inside to assess the damage.

I don't bother taking off any of my winter clothes, I just sprint into the downstairs bathroom to get a better look at my face. I flip the light and it takes a moment to recognize the girl in the mirror. Her lower lip is bleeding, a trail of red runs from her mouth to her chin, and twin trails of black streak her cheeks. A cut runs just under her left eye. All her hard-earned makeup was spoiled.

It was me, I guess, but whatever Kat called *perfect* was gone. Ruined by bad footwork. By touchdown fantasies. By Terrell Davis. Tarnished by the girl who couldn't just walk like a normal person. By the tomboy.

I notice the first tear roll down to the cut on my cheekbone and it stings. Then another. And another. And I'm full blown sobbing. My stocking cap is on crooked over my rat's nest of thick, uncombed, strawberry blonde hair. My dark navy jacket is soaking from the rapidly melting snow, my knees are scraped up, and my face hurts all over. But more importantly, nothing matches. There was the face that Kat had worked so hard to create, what Kenny Grubiak apparently cared so much about, now ruined with blood and ice and tears. Then there was the hand-me-down snow gear and that stupid jersey, both so clearly at odds with the girl I could've been had I just been more careful. Had I been less like Terrell Davis and more like Katrina Mariotti. And I'm shaking. The mirror is an amalgam of Alexes, like a ball of different-colored Play-Doh. One part girl. One part tomboy. One part wounded.

Mom rushes in, investigating the cries. It takes a second to adjust to the sight of her daughter in pain and in makeup, but she shushes me and holds me and begins to patch me up.

When all wounds are appropriately treated, she attempts to remove some of the makeup so I can finally get to bed.

“You girls really caked it on thick, huh? It doesn’t want to come off,” she says.

She tries to wipe off a thick mascara tear with a bunched-up paper towel, but it stains a horizontal line over my right cheekbone instead. A solid streak of black.

“Uh huh.”

White Lighters

From my place in the booth nearest the little stage, I hummed a flat harmony to “Brown Eyed Girl” on autopilot. When you’ve heard a song enough times, following the melody is monotonous. The strings of Ted’s matte-black Martin buzzed a little through the speakers whenever he changed chords, and he couldn’t help but kiss the mic like a dog that was near-positive it was filled with peanut butter. He had this way of cleaning the silver parts with his lips. He’d sway on that rickety bar stool like he was drunk, and he was, at least a little. He’d carry the sway with him out the door after last call.

It was a slow night, probably, and I say probably because those nights tended to be, but the list Kerri handed me was full. If you wanted to play on Tuesdays, you had to call in and request a time before it filled up, which was rare, but happened on occasion. It always bred drama. The breakfast staff kept a little cocktail napkin by the phone and whoever answered would mark down the names by whichever 30-minute time slot they requested with this gaudy purple glitter pen reserved for all the unprofessional jobs that the establishment required. It wasn’t used to take people’s orders or anything, and they wouldn’t dare hand it to a customer.

Ted always called in first. I heard a hostess claim once that he called so early because he was always awake. Looking at Ted, I would’ve guessed he was always *half-awake*, and I doubted seriously that he had ever been awake entirely. Maybe that was the trick; he never committed one way or the other. He slurred out the last *la-dee-da* and we golf clapped him into “Tequila Sunrise.”

I didn’t always run that thing. A lady named Brenda carried it before me, but if you show up often enough, and own enough of your own gear, they eventually just put you in charge. Those days I was waiting for someone with nicer speakers to show up. They paid me a couple

hundred, cash, in a little unsealed envelope to haul everything from my folks' garage, set it all up, and play through the empty time slots. An easy gig, and easier on the nights I didn't have to play. The best gigs always seemed to be the ones where other people played. Or there were people actually listening, one or the other.

Ted wrapped up, said his thank yous, and swaggered off-stage without unplugging his guitar. He did that sometimes. We sorted out the cord situation, I plugged in Beth, and returned to my booth. I didn't really introduce anybody anymore; we all knew each other and it was rare to get a fresh face. Beth had this wannabe Janis Joplin thing she'd do, and she was really a great singer, but her original songs always seemed to be too vaguely-about-her-father or too specifically-about-her-boyfriends. She was normally late to the start of her set, as she had developed a habit of warming up in the bathroom. Better acoustics, she'd say. I guess that night she was on top of things. She began with a loose cover of "Me and Bobby McGee" and I was relieved she was in a karaoke mood instead of an artist mood.

Right after Bobby thumbed his diesel down, Dylan Geoffrey walked in. He was probably younger than he looked, but he looked about a thousand, so it was hard to be sure exactly how young that meant. His too-small round-faced glasses sat directly on top of his massive white beard, and the cane he gripped in his right hand bowed whenever he leaned his massive frame on it. The guitar case in his left hand was coated in worn-out peeling stickers. His rainbow suspenders stretched over an ancient Rolling Stones t-shirt, and his smile, barely visible through his scruff, had to be worn in the corners of his eyes. His real name was Geoffrey Dylan, but he didn't want to leech off of the other guy with that last name, so he flipped it around.

"I bought a new truck, Mike," he said, lowering himself into the seat across from me with a thud.

“Yeah?”

“Yep, brand spankin’ new. Not even fifty miles on her. Brand spankin’ new.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Still gettin’ used to her.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep, had to park across three spaces.” He let out a massive laugh that started with a ‘B’.

Kerri brought Dylan an ice-water and a small bowl full of lemon slices, his usual, without him ever ordering anything, and gave him a little side hug before walking back to the kitchen. He used to make his own lemonade right there at the table, crushing the slices one-by-one with his thick fingers before stirring in the Splenda. Crafting came natural to him.

“You playing tonight, Mike?”

“Nope, we’re all full.”

“Oh no, that’s too bad.”

“They’ve heard enough of me.”

“No, not enough. Not enough, Mike.”

We clapped Beth into “Piece Of My Heart” and I sipped my beer. Dylan had been here longer than me, maybe longer than anyone. He had become a part of the establishment’s aesthetic, like the stained glass bar lights, or the ripped up pool table scarred by cigarette burns. He was practically curated. Everybody loved Dylan, and he had this way of passing off somewhat taxing or almost annoying behaviors as endearing. Whimsical, even.

“Who’s all played so far?” he asked, still crushing lemons.

“Ted just finished before you walked in. Carly, Clyde, and Wayne all played before him. So it’s Beth, then you.”

“I saw Ted walking in. Carly bolt?”

“Yeah. She finished and went down the street for another set.”

“Froggy’s?”

“Yeah.”

“Well she’s young, she can work like that.”

“I guess.”

“They’re too busy over there for my taste.”

“Yeah?”

“Too loud and too busy. ‘Specially during damn tourist season.”

“Yeah.”

“You should be out playing those places too. Bouncing around the boardwalk, partying. You’re too young to be hanging out with us old folks.” He laughed heavy again. It was the kind of laugh that forced you to smile along with him. I did.

“Gotta pay the bills somehow, right?” I said.

“I suppose you do.”

Not that that gig paid the bills, really. I was still living with my parents at the time. I moved back into my childhood bedroom after a semester and a half of college and never went back. That used to eat at me, at first, sitting in the bar with those washed up singers three times my age while all my friends were off doing keg-stands at frat parties. They’d pop up on my phone unexpectedly, on Facebook or some other feed. The boys in button-downs, the girls in miniskirts, all clinging to red plastic cups and grinning through various levels of intoxication. I’d scroll past without lingering most of the time, but I suppose it must’ve added up after a while. Eventually they all graduated and moved on to other endeavors, but some accumulation of that

stale regret remained, a dirty snowbank of self-imposed expectations frozen solid against the back wall of my brain.

Dylan was taking longer than usual to make his lemonade. It was his meticulousness; he was like that. He'd mess up a section of a song and restart the whole thing from the beginning. I mean, it was his 30 minutes to do with as he pleased, and if he wanted to get it right that was his prerogative, but no one in the crowd would've noticed if he'd just played through the flubs. His fingers fumbled with the lemons and by the fifth or sixth one he had set them down to watch the stage instead.

He looked at me quickly, like he was responding to something I'd said.

"Did I tell you about my brother yet?"

"Nope," I said.

"White lighters, Mike. Bad luck."

White lighters, his favorite folklore. Legend has it Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, and Kurt Cobain all died at twenty-seven with white lighters in their pockets, and although a quick Google search disproves this theory in all four cases, old curses die hard. The lighters were bad luck. Evil. And yeah, it was probably nonsense, but it was serious business to him. I'll admit, there was a kind of morbid allure to the theory.

I shook my head knowingly.

"I told him, I said them white lighters is bad luck, but did he listen? Never once," he said.

"What happened?"

"Wife trashed his trailer and ran off with a salesman."

"What?"

“Yup. Wife, mean old lady I always knew, she hooked up his trailer to that salesman’s truck and pulled the sumbitch right off the blocks and down the road.”

“No way.”

“Yup. Right off them blocks and down the road. Pulled it until the damn thing basically disintegrated.”

“But why?”

He looked at me like I hadn’t been listening.

“White lighters, Mike.”

“Right.”

Dylan shook his head sadly, “All his life.”

By this point I was just playing along, but if Dylan knew he didn’t care. It was real to him. As real as black cats or karma or miracles, it didn’t matter whether or not I believed. It was gospel. It was divine retribution. It was why good things happened to bad people. It was as good an explanation as any.

“He didn’t listen to you?” I asked.

“Oh, never. I’d say, *Doug, them white lighters will do you in, brother*. But, ya know, I think he used them just to spite me. I’d feel pretty vindicated if I wasn’t so damn sad for him.”

“Where was he when she did it? Not in the trailer, right?”

“Oh no, he was at some other woman’s place.”

It seemed to me that this was the information, and not the color of his lighter, that mattered. That it wasn’t the supernatural retribution of inanimate objects, but infidelity that damned Doug’s trailer. But I could already hear Dylan’s voice: *well, what the hell do you think made him cheat, Mike?*

This wasn't the first white lighter story Dylan had told me. There was a war buddy, I think, who had gambled away his '59 Stratocaster, *lost to a pair of goddamn sixes*. A small-town cop who drove not one, but two squad cars *into the same river, at the same bend*. An ex-wife whose son drowned in a boating accident, *high school swimming star*. It seemed like every other month he had a new one. *Heard about a gal in Oklahoma who got her jacket sleeve caught in a woodchipper, guess what they found in her pocket...*

Despite these overt warnings, I'd slipped into the habit of exclusively buying white lighters after his second or third story. Not spitefully, like Doug, but nonetheless. The first time it was out of necessity; there were no other colors left and I wanted a smoke, but after that first tempting of fate I guess I'd gotten a taste for it. I don't know why, exactly. Maybe I saw them as music magic. Good or bad, they were conduits to the legendary, the mythic. Something like standing at Robert Johnson's crossroads, waiting for the devil. Maybe those cigarettes tasted a little sweeter burning hellfire. I don't know. Maybe I just thought they looked cool. In any case, I hid this secret from him.

Dylan gingerly flexed his fingers and began work on his lemonade again, squeezing one or two more into his water before faux-sweetening to taste. I checked my watch and signaled Beth to play her last tune.

"You're about up, man," I told Dylan.

"Yeah, yeah, right," he said, sipping his drink before stirring a bit more. He didn't look up at me. "Wish you were playing tonight, Mike. I sure was looking forward to hearing you. You don't play enough."

All at once I felt the familiar mixture of bashfulness, embarrassment, and incredulity that comes with receiving praise. I didn't like to think of Dylan as a *fan* or anything. It didn't feel like

an appropriate label for our relationship, and I always struggled to accept his earnestness. I'd deflect. A joke, or a *sure*, or some kind of self-deprecating transition into more comfortable waters. But his praise was genuine, and his sincerity baffled me.

"That-- well, thanks," I said.

"Well, I mean it! You're good, son. Good."

I sipped my beer.

"No way you can play tonight?" he asked.

"All full," I said, attempting to mask my relief with a little head shake.

He squinted at the stage.

"You should take my slot."

"I don't--"

"Oh, I insist. Take my slot. I've played just about every damn week far as I remember.

You play tonight, what do they pay you for anyways?" He laughed deep.

"That's--"

"Nope, that's it. You're playing."

And that was that. It was another of Dylan's more grating, winsome qualities: once he'd decided, things were settled. I was playing.

"Fine," I said, "but you pick the setlist. Call out a name and I'll play one of theirs."

He laughed, "Hope you like playin' all that old stuff I like."

"You know I do."

"Alright. Then that's the deal."

I drained the last of my beer, clapped Beth off-stage, and pulled my guitar off the rack behind the stool. The initial view from the stage was always laced with wonder, a brief moment

of transitioning from one side of the painting to the other. The stage lights, alternating between white, pink, and green, blinded and tinted everything, and it took a second or two before I could take in the new angle. To the far left was the bar, seating only a couple of folks by that hour, each sitting individually, their backs to the stage, eyes focused on a TV or their phones or their drinks. Then Ted in his booth, who'd just finished his own drink and was signaling Kerri for another. Then Beth, who was still repacking her guitar into its case, neatly laid across her table. Then the hostess stand over by the door, with a newer waitress I hadn't met yet, rolling silverware into napkins and sealing them shut with banded stickers. And closest to the stage, off to the right, was Dylan.

I plugged in my guitar, strummed a quick E chord to make sure I was tuned, and looked his way.

“Well,” I said, into the mic, “what am I playing?”

“*Springsteen!*” he yelled.

“Alright, “Atlantic City”.”

We got into a groove like that; he'd yell a name and I'd play a song.

“*James Taylor!*”; “Something in the Way She Moves”

“*Pink Floyd!*”; “Wish You Were Here”

“*Zeppelin!*”; “Hey, Hey, What Can I Do”

“*Neil Young!*”; “The Needle and the Damage Done”

And it was nice. Hell, it was even fun, and by that point those nights were never fun. The tiny moments of adrenaline-packed panic trying to remember chords and lyrics made the minutes fly, and between each song I'd look over at him, grinning, daring him for some new challenge. If

there were still other people in the building, they didn't matter and I didn't see them. This was Dylan's concert or my trial. One or the other.

"Alright, last one. Make it count," I said.

He hesitated, thinking. Or maybe he knew, but hesitated speaking.

"Come on," I prompted.

"Play something of yours," he said, finally.

"Huh?"

"Play an original!"

"Come on, nobody wants that."

"Just play it."

I noodled around on the frets of my guitar and glanced around the room. Most everyone was where I'd left them, lost in a screen or a glass, maybe listening, maybe not. But I looked back at Dylan Geoffrey and there wasn't any doubt. He was listening.

"Alright man, alright."

I thought hard for a second, shifting on the stool uncomfortably in the static silence of the softly buzzing mic. Then I started playing this little blues progression in G, slow and steady and solemn, with little minor turns and sevenths and Jimi-style riffs. And, eventually, I sang:

*Sometime past midnight
She crawls through my door
No, this ain't nothin'
We ain't done before
So when the sun rises
I already know
I'll wake up alone*

Dylan had his eyes closed, sitting sideways in the booth with his legs swung out into the aisle. Both hands gripped his cane, lying lengthwise across his lap. He was swaying.

*The smell of her perfume
 Stained to my bed
 The taste of her brandy
 This ache in my head
 All too familiar
 Whenever I'm stoned
 I wake up alone*

I couldn't see his mouth under that beard, so to this day I can only guess at what face he was making. I like to think it was a big, wide smile. An ear-to-ear split. But looking back, I don't know. It might've been blank, an extra layer of deception, a default alignment of features to camouflage whatever gears or thoughts or memories were churning behind his eyes.

*Maybe it's hopeless
 Takin' those calls
 Maybe it's foolish
 Tryin' at all
 But I can't help rushin'
 To pick up that phone
 And wake up alone*

I replayed the turn at the end of the verse and let the last chord sustain. Dylan clapped enthusiastically and let out a little woot. I said my boilerplate thank yous, unplugged myself, and quickly began packing up my equipment. I unplugged the mic, and the mixer, and the speakers, wrapped all the cords, and collapsed all the stands without lifting my head. Specifically without catching Dylan's eyes. At some point in the process Kerri brought me my envelope. "See you next week, Mike." But other than that brief transaction, I was focused on packing up and carrying everything out to my car. On my last trip, Dylan held the door for me.

"Need a smoke, I think," he said.

"Yeah, gimme a sec and I'll join you."

The summer air had a humid clinginess to it, but the night had cooled it back down. The blended droning of traffic in one ear and the ocean in the other was always best heard at night, in that coolness. When you could almost believe you were alone in it. I finished packing my trunk and joined Dylan by his truck. He had been right; it was indeed massive and he had indeed taken up three spaces, one of which was a handicap spot.

“I’ve got the sticker now so it’s fine,” he said, noticing my gaze.

The truck was a pitch black, chromed behemoth, with bulging back wheel wells that stuck out wide like hips. It was lifted at least an extra foot, and had a little step-ladder leading to the driver’s side. The blue hanger on his rear-window matched the wheelchair sticker on his license plates, justifying at least one third of his parking job. We stood eying it silently for a moment, unlit cigarettes hanging from our lips, Dylan leaning hard on his cane, his guitar case on the ground at his feet like a loyal dog.

“So why’d you get it?” I asked.

He shrugged and lit his smoke on the third try. “Who knows? Just wanted a new toy. Can’t take it with you.”

“Yeah,” I said, pulling out my lighter to do the same.

I thought about it as soon as the flame struck.

“Oh come on,” he groaned, staring at my hands.

I tried to chuckle. “They were out of every other color!” I held my hands up, pretending to be incredulous. Dylan wordlessly tossed me his own lighter and sighed with relief, as if he’d swatted away a wasp or yanked me out of the way of an oncoming train. I pocketed my white lighter and lit the cigarette with his, examining it a bit. It was a BIC lighter, same as mine, but it

had this peeling plastic sleeve on it depicting an airbrushed wolf howling at the moon. I tried to hand it back to him, but he wouldn't take it.

"You keep it," he said.

"Thanks," I said. And I was guilty. It was a ridiculous, caught red-handed by your mom kind of guilt that lingered in the air for a while in the silence. I wanted to say something, anything, to distract from it.

"God, it's nice out," I said.

"It's Parkinson's," he said. That, too, lingered in the air for a while before he continued. "That's why I've got the stickers now, or what have you. I probably shouldn't drive at all, but..."

"Yeah," I said. It was all I could think to say, he'd broached the subject so abruptly. Like it had been our topic of discussion all night. Like he was wearing a Parkinson's shirt, instead of a Stones' one. But that was how he spoke, all at once about whatever he needed to talk about.

"Dunno how much longer I'll be able to play, I guess. The fingers are already going and everything." He was still looking at the truck.

The vocal cords would go too. I had a great-uncle who had it.

"Shit," I said.

"Well, it is what it is," he said.

A siren cut through somewhere a few blocks away, then faded into the distance.

"Thanks for playing tonight, Mike. I know you don't like playing here and all, but it was nice. Real nice."

"Yeah, well--"

"That last one you played. Mmhmm. That's good stuff, I could listen to that one all night I bet."

“Thanks,” I said, shifting my weight. He stared off silently.

“Bein’ the shiniest fish in the bowl don’t mean a damn,” he said, finally. “Still in a bowl.”

“Never heard that one.” I had some guesses on what he meant by it though.

“This ain’t the place for you, son.”

“Pays--”

“Hanging around us old folks, taking home, what? Couple hundred a week?”

I took a drag and watched my shoes shuffle a little.

“What are you, twenty-two? Twenty-three?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Same difference. You’re better than that. I mean, we all come to this thing for different reasons, you know? And it’s great, don’t get me wrong. Beth and Carly and Ted and everybody. They’ve all got their reasons. Fun or stress relief or whatever, but it don’t seem like you got a very good reason.”

“I--”

“And I’m not saying ya gotta move to New York or something crazy. Just-- I dunno. I dunno, Mike, I’m sorry.”

“No, man, I--”

“You’re good, son.”

“Thanks, man. That-- that means-- yeah. Thanks.”

“Yeah,” he said, finishing his cigarette and stomping it out on the asphalt with his cane. He laughed hard, “Alright, you gotta help me up into this sumbitch.”

He reached up and opened the driver's side door as I tossed my own cigarette away, and I held his arm as he struggled up the tiny ladder and into the wide seat of the truck. For a split second I selfishly worried he'd fall back on me, all 300 some pounds, and I wouldn't be able to catch him, but he made it in without too much trouble. I retrieved his guitar from the ground and laid the case flat on the back seat.

"Good stuff. Thank you, Mike."

"Of course, man."

"Now you gotta help me back outta this damn place." He laughed heavy again.

"I got you," I said, backing up a ways from the truck and checking around the parking lot. Mine and Kerri's were the only other cars in the lot, but the truck was so long I didn't dare risk him backing out on his own. I signaled him with my arms, shouting a direction to turn the wheel now and then for extra help. When he was finally all straightened, he waved out his window and rolled into the street.

As I watched his tail-lights turn down the road, I unconsciously began picking at the frayed sleeve of Dylan's lighter in my pocket. Little by little, tiny pieces of thin plastic peeled away until the rest finally came off in one big piece all at once. Annoyed at my own destructiveness, I extracted the fresh plastic trash and tossed all evidence of the now segmented wolf into a garbage can under a nearby light post. I walked back to my car and removed both lighters from my pocket to examine them for myself; to finally understand, if I could, the divinity of their differences as Dylan did. But there in that parking lot, under the streetlights, one in each hand, they were indistinguishable. Gently scuffed, half-empty, arsenic white.

Breaking Kayfabe

So it's 1979. Hulk Hogan and The Wild Samoans are driving from Florida to New York. They'd all been recruited by Vince Sr. and, as Hulk tells it, this is what really kick-started their careers. Anyway, they got to a point in New Jersey where the signs were confusing so Hulk had to pull the car off to the side of the highway in order to figure out exactly where the hell they were going. Just then, a state trooper rolls up. Now, Hulk's car wasn't only transporting three enormous professional wrestlers, right? It was packed full of boxes, all their gear and moving stuff, so it looked a little suspicious. On top of that, Hogan had a Florida driver's license but the car had Tennessee tags (I think he bought it when he was wrestling for Jerry Lawler, maybe? I think I'm remembering that right).

So anyway, this cop gets suspicious and tells them all to get out of the car, and they do it, totally comply and everything. Then the cop asks for his registration, so Hulk goes around to the passenger side to get at the glove box, but when he opens it, a gun falls out on the floor.

Now, Hulk had never fired a gun in his life, but when he told his buddies in Florida he was gonna wrestle in New York, they all told him he'd need one. He needed it to protect himself from New York fans. New York fans were crazy then, I mean they're still crazy, but they were crazy then, too, and if you were a heel they might try and kill you. They catch you in a parking lot after the show or something, man, they'd try and take you out. Need the gun to scare them off, right? So Hulk has this gun in the glovebox and it falls on the floor and the cop freaks out.

"Get on the fucking ground!"

You know how it is. Anyway, what Hogan didn't know was that having an unregistered firearm in New York or Jersey was an automatic one-year sentence at the time. His Florida buddies forgot to mention that, I guess. So, they're handcuffed, face-down in the snow on the side

of the road, and Hulk's trying to explain it all to this trooper. Trying to explain his job, and why he had the gun, and the license and everything. And he looks over at the Samoans and he's like, "Help me out, guys, come on."

Can't you just hear Hulk's voice?

"Help me out, brother."

But the Samoans were serious, man. You gotta remember, right, at the time they were doing that gimmick with Lou Albano where he'd translate for them. Afa and Sika Anoa'i spoke perfect English of course, but they were serious. They'd never done anything on TV besides grunt and eat raw fish and shit. They were supposed to be total savages, no civilization whatsoever. They were primitives. It was bad enough they'd been caught in jeans, and now Hogan's over there spilling his guts to this trooper about the business. These two wouldn't do it. So they just laid there in the snow, handcuffed, didn't say a single word. They could've corroborated Hulk's story, explained everything to the cop, and been on their merry way. But they wouldn't break kayfabe.

So Hulk Hogan gets arrested and The Wild Samoans just sit there on the jailhouse steps like gargoyles until Vince Sr. or Gorilla Monsoon or somebody called down to Jersey and finally bailed him out.

I first saw him perform in a dusty old middle school gymnasium, just outside Charlotte. The Drifter. He bugged me right away, and I don't know if that's a byproduct of an attitude I couldn't shake at the time, or if I had any legitimate reason to dislike him. He was Hispanic and small, couldn't have been bigger than 5'8", and must've weighed about a buck sixty, soaking wet. And he looked older than me too, by at least five years. He'd attached a hobo bindle to a

kendo stick, and he'd rest it over his shoulder like he was in the color guard. It was a good prop, half for show and half for beating people senseless. He wrestled in torn jeans and an old flannel shirt, but he came out to the ring wearing three different coats, all layered over each other, with the hood of one of them up over his head. And he went by that moniker of course, The Drifter, abandoning his Christian name in favor of something a little more mysterious. Or tacky. The announcer said he was from *Parts Unknown*. Definitely tacky. "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone" would echo off the concrete walls and hardwood floors of the gymnasium, and he'd step slowly to the ring, head down, hood up, bindle slung over his shoulder like he just walked in off the street.

Maybe that was it. Hell, I'd never walk out to a damn Temptations song. Who was he anyway? This scrawny Latino dude, dressed like a homeless guy and marching to a funk tune like he was some kind of badass. But that crowd, man. That crowd loved him, they ate it up. His music would hit and they'd pop like nothing I'd seen, not around here anyway, and he was only getting more popular. The local crowds had formed a habit of getting restless and chanting his name during other people's matches if they knew he was in the building:

WE WANT DRIFTER! Clap. Clap. Clapclapclap.

WE WANT DRIFTER! Clap. Clap. Clapclapclap.

So maybe it was as simple as professional jealousy, a kind of *why didn't I think of it first* feeling. They never popped like that for me.

I was a heel at the time and Queen City Heavyweight Champion. It was a local belt, nothing huge, but Yvonne was practicing law in Charlotte at the time and it was a nice territory to bounce around in before our daughter was born. I had this suave, almost devilish, millionaire character going. One part Jay-Z, another part Bond villain. One part Samuel L. Jackson, another

part Scrooge McDuck. I'd come out to the ring in a partly unbuttoned suit and designer shades, knocking the crowd for their t-shirts and cheap beers. My tights looked like they were made out of black velvet, and they had my stage name, Zeke LaFontaine, stitched in gold cursive across the ass. During one title defense I hit my opponent with a briefcase full of fake money while the referee had his back turned, and the contents exploded in a shower of bills over the front row. In a different match, I won by spraying champagne in my opponent's eyes. I even had some henchmen for a while, can you believe that? They'd run around at ringside mocking fans, distracting referees, and pretending to take important business calls on their hands-free earpieces while I wrestled. But they had both gone off to do their own thing by that point.

Not that it bothered me, my act was on its last legs. In the beginning I had heat like nobody's business. I'd come out to a chorus of boos, hotdog trash and half empty plastic cups raining down over me as the crowd expressed their distaste for my lavish lifestyle and villainous ways. But, as is the nature of these things, I'd overstayed my welcome. What had started as a passion in the crowd to see me dethroned had become a lethargic groan in every contest. I had finally become familiar. Management had already started looking for the right person for me to drop the belt to and, besides, I was ready to retire. Yvonne was probably seven months along by then, and I was genuinely excited about the prospect of becoming a stay-at-home dad for a while. At least, partly. The other part of me was proud of that little belt, insignificant as it was in the grander scheme of professional wrestling and life as a whole. But I had earned it. Blood, sweat, and tears. It was mine, and it had been for over a year. I wasn't going to drop it to just anybody.

So when Tommy Trainwreck, the promoter, told me to check out this Drifter guy and tell him what I thought, I'll admit I was predisposed to not liking him. Particularly because when Tommy sent me to look at somebody, it meant that he'd already made his decision.

Selfish suspicions aside, I settled in to watch the match from the back row and boy, let me tell you, he could move. It was ballet. Even his headlocks were graceful. He never lost his step, never made a mistake, and never once broke character. He *was* The Drifter. His movements carried the same deliberate motion displayed in his entrance, a nonchalance in his character work that bled into his athleticism. His arms and legs and eyes were in character, and that was a level of performance I'd never seen in person before. It didn't matter that he was small; he was everywhere at once and he was captivating. The crowd would interrupt their own chants (*HERE WE GO, DRIFTER, HERE WE GO! Clap-Clap*) to *ooh* and *ahh* and gasp at whatever death defying move he attempted next. When he finally finished off his opponent, some skinny kid from downtown, he did so by executing this silky smooth double-backflip splash from the top rope. Effortless arc, perfect trajectory, right on target.

1, 2, 3. Ring the bell.

The ref tried to raise his hand in victory after the match, but he ignored him, picked up his kendo stick bundle, and drifted back behind the curtain again.

I waited around outside the locker room after the show to chat with him. To feel him out. To find a voice or a personality behind the character that I could scrutinize to feel more secure about my own abilities. When he finally emerged from the back, he was still dressed in the shoddy jeans and flannel from his match, though he only wore one coat instead of three. His bundle remained in his left hand leaning over his shoulder, and he carried a small duffle bag in his right that presumably housed his other coats.

“Great match, brother. That double moonsault is something else,” I said.

He looked at me, expressionless. Up close, I could make out more of his features. He was even smaller, and older, than I had assessed. I stood about a full foot over him, and probably

outweighed him by a good eighty pounds. His hair was buzzed close to the scalp, and he kept a light five o'clock shadow that only grew on his chin and upper lip. He had crow's feet creeping into the corners of his eyes, which were a light tannish color, speckled with gold. I suspected that they were too light to be natural, and that he wore colored contacts.

"I'm Zeke," I continued, "Zeke LaFontaine." I held out my hand for him to shake, despite seeing his hands full. "Trainwreck sent me to check you out. You're killer."

He looked at my outstretched hand for a second before setting his duffle down and shaking it. We both squeezed hard. Another chance to size each other up.

"Zeke. Good to finally meet you," he said. His voice was low, soft, and controlled. There was no way to tell if he meant what he'd just said. "I'm The Drifter."

I might have laughed, but he didn't. He was The Drifter, alright.

"Yeah. Right. Well, I'm looking forward to working with you, brother. We'll put on a show," I said.

He picked up his bag, looked up at me, nodded, and walked out the door to the parking lot. I casually followed him out the door and began walking towards my car, stopping just short to peer over the rows and maybe catch a glance at what he was driving. I don't know why, exactly. Maybe just for a glimpse of something besides The Drifter. A Louis or a John or a Matthew. A person. But, swear to God, he walked right out of the parking lot, down an alley, and faded into the night without looking back.

There was that plane crash, you know the one I'm sure. What, 1975? October something, 1975? Don't ask me how I remember. Flight outta Charlotte, actually. Charlotte to Wilmington. Who all was on that plane besides Tim Woods? Let's see. Johnny Valentine, of course. He was

U.S. Heavyweight Champion at the time. David Crockett, the promoter. A real young Ric Flair. Some other wrestler I'm forgetting. Who else? I'm forgetting some-- the pilot! The pilot. Right. The pilot died in the hospital later, I think.

So the plane flies out from Charlotte for Wilmington; they're supposed to wrestle that night. The plane is coming down to land and all of a sudden they're out of gas. Plane runs out of freakin' gas. Plus they had all these big guys in that little plane, and the pilot didn't spread them out. That's why they spread out the weight on those planes. He didn't, so that was the first mistake. Then they had trouble taking off so the pilot dumped fuel without telling anybody. Second mistake right there. They almost made it, too, maybe a hundred yards short? They hit a couple trees before the runway and that's what did them in. Pilot stalled the plane out, but they were still going about a hundred by the time they hit the ground. They say the sudden stop dislodged all the seats and everybody flew forward with the momentum. Seats tore right out of the floor.

So the pilot died in the hospital later, but everybody else on the plane was pretty messed up too. Tim Woods broke his back. The other wrestler I can't-- Bruggers! That's his name. Something Bruggers. Yeah, Bruggers broke his back, too, and decided to retire. And Johnny Valentine ended up paralyzed for life, so he was done too, of course. Here's the kicker though. Valentine switched seats with Ric Flair mid-flight. Flair was up in the cockpit by the pilot, but it made him nervous, so Valentine switched with him. I mean, Flair still broke his back in three places, but can you imagine if they hadn't switched? This business without Ric Flair? Crockett got banged up too, but not as bad I don't think. So you've got this plane full of workers that crashes. Bruggers and Valentine retired, Flair being told by doctors he'll never wrestle again, and Tim Woods with a broken back too.

Of course, Woods wasn't going by that name at the time; he was going by Mr. Wrestling and wearing a mask. Now, Mr. Wrestling was a babyface. Not only that, but he was supposed to be feuding with Valentine and Flair, who were both heels.

You see the problem, right?

The crash put a good guy on the same plane as the bad guys. They were traveling together. Kayfabe broken. But Woods saved it, he saved all of it, and when the papers ran the story, Tim Woods wasn't on that plane. They reported that a promoter called George Burrell Woodin was on the plane instead. Woods, lying in a hospital bed, having just survived a goddamn catastrophe, told the nurses his name was George Burrell Woodin (which was his real name), and that he was a promoter. He lied about his job, lied about his name, and he didn't even know if anybody else had survived the crash.

But that's not the end of it, no sir.

You see, after the crash there were rumors going around that Mr. Wrestling was indeed on that plane. That the face was buddy-buddy with the heels. So what's Woods do? He straps on that mask, two weeks after breaking his back in a plane crash, and he wrestles a whole goddamn match just to prove he could. To prove there was no way in hell he could've been there. Flair said later that Woods saved wrestling that day. Could've died right then and there, but Mr. Wrestling saved it. Apparently the WWE was scheduled to interview Woods about everything in the early 2000s, but he died before they got him on camera.

I wonder what he would've told them. I wonder if he would've told those folks he wasn't there at all. That despite all evidence, all testimony to the opposite, he'd never even seen that damn plane, and that they might as well go interview somebody off the street. Mr. Wrestling was

on a bus. Or sleeping-in late at some Wilmington motel. He certainly never broke his back in that plane crash.

We started building the feud a few weeks later to great fanfare.

I'd just won a match, planting some local talent definitively with a spinebuster (after first blinding him with a handful of glitter and nailing him with a low-blow, of course) and I was left taunting the crowd. I snatched my belt from the referee and held it over my head like a fresh kill, turning to each side of the surrounded ring. *There's nobody left to beat*, I yelled, *nobody left!* Then his ridiculous music hits and my jaw drops in surprise. I turn to face the curtains down the entrance way, belt clutched tight to my chest like a baby. The crowd is molten, but he doesn't walk out. This was his idea. Tease them first, then deliver. So we all stand anxious, me paranoid in the ring and the crowd buzzing in their seats, all waiting for The Drifter.

The chants begin to die out to murmuring. The music stops. Was he even here? Then, out of the crowd behind me, a hooded figure hops the railing and hits the ring at full speed. I turn to face him and catch a punch to the face, then another, then a third, and I'm on my back, rolling under the ropes to retreat to the curtain with my tail between my legs. Just before I head backstage I look back at the ring. I'd left the belt. Drifter takes off his hood and stares me down, then eyes the championship, then the crowd.

YES! YES! YES! they chant.

He slowly bends down, picks it up, and raises it above his head. The crowd explodes.

YES! YES! YES!

We planned it all out with Tommy beforehand, with Drifter coming up with most of the ideas. At this point we still called him that, ridiculous as it was, because he wouldn't give us the

option of another name. He was The Drifter, and we had to work with what we were given. Despite his eccentricities, he knew how to work a crowd. He knew his first appearance had to seem spontaneous, totally out of the blue, in order to maximize that initial crowd reaction. He knew that coming out of the crowd was more than just a surprise tactic, in that it put him right where he belonged: with the people. And he knew that in order to sell them on his ability to believably beat me (me being so much bigger), he'd need to rely on speed and guile.

For the next two shows he'd pull the same thing. I'd come out to gloat, he'd chase me off. I'd come out to complain, he'd chase me off. He'd stand tall, I'd run away fuming. So by the time Tommy finally came out to the ring to announce The Drifter as my opponent in the main event of our big Christmas show (Merry X-treme-Mas), the crowd was so desperate to see us fight that we nearly sold out the event that same night. It was to be a no-holds-barred street fight for the Queen City Championship, my swansong and The Drifter's crowning achievement. The climactic moment.

Now, during this whole build I had tried little by little to get to know him. I hated calling him Drifter, so I started calling him Dee, which he didn't outwardly seem to mind. This became my entry point to the real man, like starting at the corner of a tightly wrapped present. But Dee was tough to crack, and he rarely talked about anything besides the business. He'd talk about wrestlers he admired, he'd talk about the towns he'd performed in (during one such conversation I learned he was from El Paso like Eddie Guerrero, one of his idols), and he'd constantly talk about our match on the horizon. He never missed a chance to show up to the gym when Tommy was running trainings, and although he rarely spoke up, he'd watch the new crop of students like a hawk. Not to scrutinize, I don't think, but to savor. If he had any other job he refused to mention it, though I know for a fact he couldn't have afforded rent on what he made wrestling

around Charlotte. If he had a family he didn't talk about them, and if he had friends outside the business he didn't bring them around. He never revealed his age, where he trained, or how long he'd been doing this. He didn't seem to work out, at least he didn't lift with me or the other guys, though he ran ring drills more than the students. He spent as much time as possible between the ropes, running, rolling, and flipping like he was breaking-in the ring by himself. Like it was an old baseball glove he'd just gotten. He wanted to know how tight the ropes were bound, how much give the mat had in the center versus the edges, how many feet across it was, how padded the turnbuckles were, and how old the canvas was. He was a connoisseur of all things wrestling, and it was the only way to get him talking.

I had learned, for instance, that he despised lucha gimmicks. He said the last guy who suggested he wear a mask got punched out. *Wanted me to go by some racist bullshit name and wear a Mexican flag as a cape. I ain't even been to Mexico.* I understood where he was coming from, having grown up watching Virgil, man-servant to "The Million Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase. I wanted to be a DiBiase, not a Virgil. He wanted to be The Drifter.

Dee was proud of his gimmick for good reason, and he played it to a tee. For example, while most of us older guys had merchandise to sell at the table, he refused to order shirts or mugs or anything. No merch at all. *Doesn't fit the image,* he'd say. So his fans had resorted to wearing torn up flannels and ripped jeans they made themselves, a do-it-yourself option to show him support. I told him once he could get a bunch of those shirts from the Salvation Army, rip them up himself, and just sell those at the table. He could have made a killing. But he flat refused, and I never brought it up again. I'll admit, this dedication of his inspired me to do the same. I was committed to finding new and improved ways of being vile, of being malicious. I'd get on the mic and be positively vitriolic. *You people deserve this Drifter guy, he's dirty and*

poor like all of you! In creating such a compelling act, Dee forced me to reexamine my own. To rise to his hero. I was determined to be the Lex Luthor he needed.

In all this time together, over a month by the time the actual match came around, I had yet to catch him getting into a car. Not for lack of trying, mind you. I'd follow him to the parking lot, offer to drive him home, or even just to his spot (*where'd you park, brother?*). He'd finish the night, refuse my offer, say his goodbyes, then saunter off into the night with his little bindle. He'd disappear. I even followed him a ways to try and sneak a peek one night, but I never could figure out where he went. He made a quick turn and, snap, he was gone.

The night of the show was the first time I thought he might've been nervous. The first time he looked like a character and not an actual drifter, in off the street to hide from the cold and beg for change. He was pacing in the locker room, a new and surprising trait to see in an older performer, let alone him. He was fiddling with the tape on his knuckles and staring at the locker room door.

"We're gonna kill it, brother," I said.

He nodded without speaking.

We sold out the little gym, but Tommy, never one to let a dollar slip him, continued to let people in until it was standing room only. Folks were packed shoulder to shoulder along the back walls, a total violation of whatever fire codes we were supposed to follow, but the air was electric with anticipation. On three separate occasions before the main event the crowd broke into unprompted Drifter chants, and although this was poor etiquette and rude to the performers in the ring, I couldn't help but feel some pride. They were tired of appetizers and we'd worked hard to prepare them a stellar entrée.

WE WANT DRIFTER! Clap. Clap. Clapclapclap.

For my entrance, Tommy and I went all out. My music hit, “POWER” by Kanye West, but the song was almost instantly drowned out by jeers from the crowd. We got four trainees to dress in suits and carry me on their shoulders, riding on this little platform like a pharaoh or something. I was dressed in a gaudy black and green robe, studded with rhinestones and plastic emeralds, and underneath I wore matching tights and boots. I laid on the little platform, floating over the crowd, soaking in their boos and shouts and *YOU SUCK!* chants. I had printed more fake money (this time with my grinning face on the bills) and made it rain into the crowd as I rode around the ring. And on my waist, bright shining black leather with a massive new silver faceplate that Tommy had insisted on splurging for, was my title. I stepped off the platform and into the ring, relishing the reverberation of their hatred one last time.

My song faded out and the crowd rose to their feet. It was time. The chant was simple, just a rhythmic *DRIFTER! DRIFTER! DRIFTER!* until his music hit and the roof blew off the place. A hundred and fifty plus, roaring at the top of their lungs, packed airtight in that tiny gym, all there for him. After ten or fifteen seconds of delayed suspense, The Drifter parted the curtain and strode out to his chorus. Whatever nervousness I had seen in Dee backstage was now absent entirely, and his gold-speckled eyes bore straight through mine. He marched toward the ring, a gladiator to battle, hood up, kendo stick bundle in hand, and stepped between the ropes to stand in the corner opposite me. His eyes never left mine, his mouth never twitched, and he betrayed no emotion.

Tommy stepped into the ring with a mic to introduce us:

“The following contest is a no holds barred street fight scheduled for ONE FALL! And it is for... the Queen City Heavyweight Championship!”

Crowd cheers.

“Introducing first, the champion... from Athens, Georgia... weighing in this evening at two hundred fifty-four pounds... he is your Queen City Heavyweight Champion...

ZEEEEEEEEKE... LaFONTAAAAAAAAAAINE!”

Massive boos, empty cups, and other trash flew into the ring and the referee had to start kicking it out onto the floor. I raised the title over my head and stared down Dee in the opposite corner.

“And introducing the challenger... from Parts Unknown... weighing in this evening at one hundred sixty-three pounds... THE DRIFTEEEEEER!”

Dee didn't raise his hand, he didn't nod, he didn't even move. He didn't need to. The crowd erupts again, vehemently behind their man. He shed his three coats, gently placed his bundle on the mat under his corner, and returned to his place. I dropped my robe over the ropes to the floor and handed the belt to Tommy, who raised it over his head one last time before exiting the ring.

As soon as the bell rang I pounced and started hammering him. I threw all my weight at him, picked him up, and took him down hard. I straddled his body and laid into him, left, right, left, right, just brutal. This was, of course, another of his ideas. I was supposed to beat him senseless for ten minutes. In a business filled with audience members who consider themselves in-on-it, we wanted to deliver a shocker. A genuine moment for people to think to themselves *Jesus, he might actually kill this guy.* A ten-minute snuff film.

So I sold it. I mean, this was supposed to be a freakin' street fight, right? So I tossed him into turnbuckles headfirst. I threw him over the ropes and onto the floor. I bashed him into the steel guardrails, I dumped a kid's popcorn on him, I whipped him with a belt, and that was all in the first couple minutes. We were going to exhaust this crowd of all hope before handing it back

for the finish, but we had a long way to go. They were still chanting his name. So I slapped him, hard as I could, right in the face. I took that kendo stick bindle and I cracked it over his back, *snap*. And again, *snap*. Again, *snap*. To the point where his shirt began to soak up a little bit of blood from where I'd split him open. One more time, *snap*, and then I broke the thing in half over my knee. The crowd booed the loss of such an iconic item, something they'd specifically hoped to see Dee use on me. We deprived them of it, and I tossed its corpse aside. I set up a table in the corner, rolled him into the ring and literally threw him by his neck through it. I mean I threw the dude a full ten feet I bet, and he just eviscerated that table like a cannonball. I picked up some of the fragmented wood and handed it to a particularly distraught looking boy in the front row: *here kid, take a souvenir*.

None of this would have worked if Dee wasn't so masterful at selling. Every bit of torture and every bit of agony I put him through, he sold. He had a knack for making every fresh wound feel devastating. Every insult stung. But his real talent was making all of that tangible and remaining The Drifter. He refused to cry out. Refused to show agony. He grit his teeth, lowered his eyes, and remained steadfast. He was supernatural. He could make a plane crash look beautiful. Orchestrated. There was rhythm to his victimization, like every movement, forced on him or not, was executed to his exact specifications. A car wreck set to Mozart. Even laying in the ruins of that folding table, army crawling towards my boots planted at the center of the ring, he oozed invulnerability. Determination. Fearlessness. He pawed at my tights, fighting to get back to his knees, but I backhanded him back to the mat. The crowd was almost silent now. I shouted out at them: *Here we go Drifter, right? Let's go Drifter!* They booed.

I rolled out of the ring to grab a steel chair. More boos. I tossed it into the ring and turned to the crowd, savoring their hate. This was supposed to be the turn, right? I had my back to Dee,

and I'd just tossed him a chair on accident. So I go to step between the ropes and into the ring and he's up with the chair. The crowd hits their feet and roars again. I put my hands up, *be reasonable*. I've got those wide eyes, like a spooked horse. He looks at me. Looks at the chair. Then at the crowd. I hit my knees, begging him not to. And, hesitating only a second, he clocks me square in the head with it. Now, we weren't supposed to do headshots anymore because of all the concussion scares, but this was my last match. I insisted. And the crowd ate it up, just totally lost it. It was catharsis. The beginning of the payoff they'd been desperate for.

So I'm flat on my back, out cold, middle of the ring. Crowd is molten. This is his chance, right here. He could put me away. He drags himself to the top rope, still selling the beatdown I'd been giving him, and when he gets to the top he hesitates. I peek out from the corner of my eye, watching him take it all in for a second. And I swear I see him break. It's easy to say that now, looking back on it and everything, but I swear I could see him relax for just a split second. For a split second some other guy was on the ropes, a fan maybe. And suddenly, finally, I was a fan too. A fan of The Drifter, as excited as the crowd was to witness his victory. I had to clench my teeth to hide my giddiness, but it was as if we'd snuck into a wrestling match and now slipped into something surreal. And it mattered, that shared momentary lapse. Because when he came off the top rope for that double moonsault his left foot slipped. He still took off, but all his grace dissipated and in the air I could see his panic, the wheeling arms trying to find balance, the legs stiff in preparation for an evacuated landing. He over-rotated the second backflip and tried to land on his feet, maybe a foot behind me, but he couldn't stick it and came down hard on his heels.

We both heard the pop before it hit him, a sharp sound like opening a soda can, so when the pain finally bulldozed its way through his leg and into the rest of his body he was already

face-down, wordlessly screaming into the sweat stained mat. The place was deadly silent aside from that scream, which ricocheted off the walls for seconds before it finally melted into the concrete. He tried to bite his tongue, to muffle his crying and clumsily push himself back to his feet, but he couldn't. He toppled down on his shoulder and screamed into the mat again. All I could do was lay there next to him, just a few inches from his face, and try, and fail, to move. I just laid there, helplessly witnessing the man who was once The Drifter, now some other thing, sobbing into the canvas, clutching his busted knee with both hands like he could put it back together himself.

Ever heard of Santo? Or El Santo, if we're being particular. Rudolfo Guzmán Huerta, ultra-star in Mexico, maybe the most famous luchador of all time. I mean, this guy was a mega-star in Mexico at a time when U.S. wrestling was still happening under tents at county fairs. Vince McMahon could only dream of finding a guy like this today. Sure, The Rock seems to be in every movie Hollywood can make, but Santo was a wrestling icon before icons. A real life folk hero. He had this trademark silver mask with teardrop eye holes and, for whatever reason, something about him captivated people.

He wrestled for almost fifty years, can you imagine? Fifty years of this shit? How his body took it I'll never know. But he didn't just wrestle, no, that wasn't enough. He starred in these action movies too. Tons and tons of them. He'd fight vampires and solve crimes and all sorts of stuff; I'm sure you could find them on YouTube or something, they're a riot. Cult classics. But they were popular, man, he was majorly over. Then they made him into a comic book. He was literally a superhero. It was like if Superman could tour, you could actually go see him for yourself. And he played right into it. By all accounts he never stopped being a superhero.

I mean he'd sign autographs and kiss babies and tell you to eat your damn vitamins and all sorts of stuff.

But it was all in the mask, right? That was the trick. If he lost the mask the whole image would be ruined. Connect the hero to the everyman and the illusion is shattered, so Santo found a solution: he never took the son-of-a-bitch off.

Now, did he take the mask off to shower or something? Probably. But apparently the guy wouldn't leave the house without it, had to get the mask adjusted so he could eat. He'd throw it on to get the paper from the driveway. He wore it every time he went on TV, and in every movie, and at every event. Grocery store? Mask. He was Santo. He had to be. I heard once that he refused to fly with the crew of a show because he knew he'd have to take the mask off to get through customs. Driving through the border into Texas? Made everyone in the car get out, walk ten paces and turn their backs before he'd take off the mask to show the border agent.

Commitment. Full commitment, that's what that is.

So for fifty years he wore that mask. He practically gave up being Rudolfo Guzmán Huerta. Who was that anyways? Who'd choose to be Clark Kent? He got to step outside every day and play Superman, so he did. And even though people insisted that Santo would walk the streets of Mexico City maskless, blending seamlessly into the crowd, there was this hunch people had that they would know him if they saw him. I mean, how could you not? He was this legendary figure; how could you not recognize him? He won his final match having never revealed his face and retired gracefully. Image intact.

Then, on some talk show a few years later, without prompting or warning, he took off his mask. Just for a second. Out of the blue. Just took it off, looked at the camera, and slid it back on. Live on television. And here's the kicker: he really was just some guy in the crowd. He was

bald, with wrinkles and dark circles under his eyes, and he looked less like a saint and more like a factory worker or a dock hand or somebody's grandpa. He wasn't handsome or distinguished, but humble and homely. Just a man. He died a week later.

El Santo was buried in his mask, entombed behind an engraved plaque and a silver bust, because some things are worth preserving.

Rudolfo Guzmán Huerta evaporated, just vanished into thin air.

That was the last time I saw him for years. Last anybody saw him. Tommy had some of the boys carry him to the locker room, but by the time I'd gotten back there he'd already split. Tommy decided to just sort of hit reset on the whole thing, had me relinquish the belt and held a tournament the next week to crown somebody else. I mean, in the eyes of the audience, I'd beaten their hero senseless, and then, just when they were supposed to get their payback, he goes and blows his MCL. At least, that's what we thought it must've been. He wasn't around long enough for us to find out. But they all heard him scream, all watched him cry, all watched me walk out on my own, belt in tow. Better to just forget either of us existed. Anyway, Ali was born the week after, I think, so it was good timing.

Like four or five years later, I guess it had to have been, I heard from him again. Kept getting calls from a number I didn't know; he wouldn't leave messages. Finally I picked up and he said *It's Hector, Hector Ruiz*, and I'm like, *I don't know a Hector, you've got the wrong number*, but finally he says, *It's Dee*. Even that name took me a second to process. I mean we only knew each other for like a month and even then, it's not a very distinct name, Dee. But then his accent sort of clicked and I put everything together. It was strange talking to him on the phone, you know? I never really pictured him using one. Anyway, he said he was working with

some sales company or something and he wanted to come by so I said sure, mostly out of curiosity. I hadn't kept up with many of the guys after I started staying home with Ali and all. Wanted to see how The Drifter had aged, I guess.

So a few days later I get a ring at the doorbell and I let him in and, shit, I barely recognized him. He had this bushy mustache, so that was what my eyes went to first. This giant, thick mustache. Like Groucho Marx. He was wearing wrinkled khakis and scuffed up black dress shoes, and this faded maroonish polo shirt tucked into his pants. He wasn't wearing a belt. Oh, and he had these glasses, big rimmed glasses. He carried this little leather sack in one hand and a small red binder in the other. He looked ridiculous to me, but I'm sure I must've been a sight too. Four years of ring rust. I had a potbelly and slippers on and the whole nine yards, right? Full time dad and I looked it.

Well, I let him in and we sat down at the table and he sort of just jumped right into this little presentation. No small talk, no hellos or whatever. Just jumped in. He pulled out a couple of kitchen knives from that leather bag and he starts talking about steel. *Same steel they built the Golden Gate Bridge with.* He tells me all about these knives, about how they're supposed to be God's gift to cutlery. *Cut straight through a penny. They did that in training. Straight through.* He cut up some bread he brought, and a carrot, and a section of rope. He gave a nice little presentation, all things considered, but it was bizarre and I couldn't help thinking it. How bizarre it was seeing him like that. And, although he was well rehearsed, the whole pitch was lifeless. Soulless. Deflated. So that by the end when he asked if I'd be interested in buying anything, it didn't seem like he cared either way. Like it wasn't a matter of whether or not he'd make a sale, but a matter of making it through the script. He could've been one of those telemarketer robots, just riding the rails to the end of the tape. I told him that Yvonne and I had these fancy Japanese

knives we got as a wedding present, and that we weren't really in the market. I bought a can-opener though, so he thanked me and started filling out the paperwork. Don't know why I bought anything, really. It just felt like what I had to do by the end.

The whole time he's doing that paperwork he doesn't say a word. Stone cold silent, just writing away. But curiosity got the better of me, so I asked flat out:

"Where you been, man?"

He didn't look up, just kept writing. "Around."

"In town? Still wrestling at all?"

He stopped writing for a second. "Nope." Then he kept going.

"Yeah, I've been out since Ali was born. She's napping upstairs."

"Saw the picture on the fridge. Cute."

"Yeah she's something, brother. Pain in the ass, but they're all supposed to be."

"Yeah."

"You got any?"

"Nope."

He finished the paperwork, had me sign, then told me that the can-opener should come in the mail. Couple days or something. He started packing up, but hesitated. Still wouldn't look at me.

"I'm supposed to ask you for leads, but I don't like doin' it."

"Yeah, I don't--"

"I don't like doin' it," he reiterated, and then continued to pack up.

"I could probably come up with a couple names. You could give them a try anyway."

"If you don't mind."

“Naw, lemme get the church directory.”

I gave him a dozen names or so, mostly old folks with too much time and too much money on their hands, and he wrote their information in the little red binder. Then he packed up the rest of his leather sack and I walked him to the door. But seeing him after all these years, you know, I wanted more time. I wanted to peel back these new, unfamiliar layers to find that guy I'd been so captivated by before. Or maybe this was the version of him that had already been peeled. Maybe Hector was under The Drifter, and not the other way around. But I wanted to know one way or the other, so I told him I'd walk him out to his car. He almost looked like he was going to stop me, but I insisted and he didn't press the issue.

There, parked by the curb, was this old 1980-something Ford four-door. Chipped silver paint, and two different hubcaps on the side I could see. The backseat was packed so tight with boxes and shit you could barely look in, and even the passenger seat had a stack of a few different sized bags resting on it. Once my eyes adjusted to being outside, I started to make out some specifics: a pallet of water bottles, piles of clothes, maybe a suitcase, and some duffle bags. A blanket or two. He tossed his leather sack and binder into the trunk and slammed it. As he came around to the driver's side where I was standing, I noticed the limp. It was profound, a deep lilt in his gate. So obvious that I don't know how I missed it initially, but he was clearly limping, overusing his right leg and favoring the left. Then I finally spotted his eyes. Matte brown.

“Huh,” I must've said.

“What?”

“Nothing I-- It's-- you used to wear colored contacts.”

He smirked a little.

“I thought you did,” I said, smirking too.

“Yeah, blew a paycheck on ‘em.”

“They were cool, brother. Very cool.”

“Yeah.” He leaned on his hood and looked back over the house. “Got a real nice place.”

I turned to look too. “Yeah, we like it.”

“It’s nice.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Huh?”

“Do you miss it?”

“Wrestling?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, I don’t-- yeah, probably. I probably do. Some days. But most days I’m happy the concussions haven’t given me Alzheimer’s or something, right? Got out at the right time, I think.

It’s been nice. How about you? Miss it?”

He stared at the house.

“Could always go back.” I said. I faked a little laugh.

“Yeah.” His smile started to erode, and he wouldn’t blink. Like he was tracking something with his eyes.

“So, how long you been doing this knife gig?”

He snapped out of his stare. “Not too long.”

“Gotta say, I never pictured you selling shit.”

“Yeah.” He studied his shoes.

“Not that it’s a bad thing, or whatever-- I didn’t mean it like that, I just-- You know. You never even sold merch, you know?”

“Yeah. The way things go.”

“Yeah.” I watched him watch the house again, and decided to lean on his car too. It was then that it struck me that maybe he hadn’t come just to sell me a can-opener. That he hadn’t picked my name at random from a list of contacts on his cell phone, if he even owned one. We weren’t close, it had been years, and no one I knew had heard of him since that night. Honestly, I don’t know how many people even thought about him after that night. And suddenly I was guilty of it too, that forgetfulness, because up until that moment, leaning up against his car in front of my house, I hadn’t thought about him either. I was there in that ring when it happened, flat on my back and ready to catch him. I was there, inches from his face. I witnessed. And still I’d forgotten.

“You know, Tommy and I always wondered where you went after that match.”

“How’s Tommy?” he said, ignoring my implied question.

“He’s good, still running the school out of that gym. I don’t get over there much. You should go see him, I bet he’d love to catch up.”

“Yeah. Might do that.”

“Do you--” I stopped myself. I wanted to ask him if he had a place to stay, but it felt out of place. Like acknowledging or even attempting to discover the state of his current situation was an affront to the man I once knew. Leaning there next to him all I wanted was to catch a glimpse of The Drifter again, and by offering him anything more than the money for a can-opener I was lessening my chances of seeing him. It was the fan in me, and it was selfish, but that’s what I wanted. I’d spent so much time all those years ago trying to find a Louis or a John or a Matthew.

A Hector. But now that he'd offered it to me, that peek behind the curtain, I was ashamed that I'd ever wanted it at all. Ashamed that I'd wanted anything other than what he'd so meticulously crafted for me.

"Where'd you go?" I asked. "After the match. I didn't get to catch you, we were pretty worried to be honest."

"Emergency room."

"Right. Of course. But after?"

"Dunno. Here and there. Home for a bit. Came back here though."

"Right."

"We coulda had one hell of a match."

"Yeah. We really could've." I didn't know what else to say. So we stood there for what had to be minutes, listening to the robins and the tires of occasional rolling cars on the road behind us.

After a while, he pushed himself up from the hood. "Well I better--"

"Right, Ali should be waking up in a bit and she'll want lunch." I pushed myself up too.

"Yeah. Nice seeing you, man." He reached out his hand, and I shook it, remembering the last and only time we'd done so. He held on a moment more.

"I really appreciate you buying something. Should get here in a week or so."

"Of course. Thanks for coming over, brother. It was good seeing you."

"Yeah," he said. He let go of my hand and climbed gingerly into his car, taking care not to put too much weight on his left leg, but didn't close the door.

"If you're ever in town again you should hit me up," I said. "And go see Tommy."

"Thanks, I might do that," he paused. "You know, you mentioned those contact lenses."

“Yeah? They were something else.”

“Yeah. Did you know...” he trailed off. “You know, I used to park my car like a mile from Tommy’s place every night?”

“No shit?”

“Or any venue. At least a mile. So people wouldn’t see me drive away.”

“Shit, man. You know, I always wondered.”

“Yeah. Well, now you know.”

“Yeah.”

He looked over my shoulder at the house again. “I’ll catch you later, Zeke.”

“See you around, Dee. Hit me up some time, I mean it.”

He closed his door, nodded, and drove off down the street. Never saw him again.

It’s built into the nature of the business, I think, to tell these stories. To preserve wrestling mythology, a blend of history and legend. Something to pass down to the kids who show up at the door of some trainer with their dreams of being the next “Stone Cold” Steve Austin or John Cena or whoever. It’s stories like these that unify our narratives. They link the story we tell our ring to the stories they tell between the ropes the next city over. They link tonight’s story to the story we told yesterday, to the story we’ll tell tomorrow. It’s a shared reality that those kids step into, and without a working knowledge of it, or an appreciation of why people like us have worked so hard to protect it, they miss the point of why we do this stuff at all. That’s kayfabe, that reality, and to break it isn’t just to break character, but to break everything.

I've probably heard dozens of these stories over the years. Every wrestler has, I imagine. James Myers spending his summers away from teaching gym in Michigan to play George "The Animal" Steele in New York. Nelson Scott Simpson legally changing his name to Nikita Koloff, learning Russian, and refusing to speak English for a year without the use of a fake translator. The famous Letterman segment where Jerry Lawler slapped the taste out of Andy Kaufman's mouth for making fun of the business, then refused to admit it was all a work until after Kaufman died years later.

It's fake, but not to us, and sometimes not at all.

I've thought about it a lot, that day. About the polo shirt, and the limp, and the car. Matte brown eyes. The Groucho mustache. Thought a lot about Hector Ruiz. The Drifter. Dee. About the shades of him I'd seen. I wondered if anybody else got to see all three, or if somebody in some other town got to see some other version of him. A fourth or a fifth shade. I wondered what color his eyes were, really. Were they matte brown, like today? Or were they a light tannish color, speckled with gold? I wondered if he was living out of that car the whole time, or if he'd stolen it earlier that week, fabricated the blankets and the boxes and the bottles, dressed it all up just to accompany this new character he'd been working on. This new gimmick, selling can-openers to people he barely knew from a past life he'd failed out of. I wondered if he really limped like that all the time, or if it was just for me and he was still selling that botched move from a match he knew I'd seen. If it, too, was fabricated. Or if it was the lingering evidence of an untreated trauma, the war wound of an uninsured veteran. I wondered if there really was a Hector Ruiz from El Paso, who drifted all the way to Charlotte, only to blow out his knee in front of a hundred people in that shitty gymnasium. I wondered if that match was the last he ever

wrestled, or the last he ever would. I wondered if he would've been better off staying in Parts Unknown. Or, ultimately, if he'd ever even left.

Afterword

I used to frequent an open mic night at an oceanfront bar called Abbey Road in my hometown of Virginia Beach, Virginia, and though it lacked the prestige of its namesake, it was nevertheless a second home to me. It was there that I first performed my own original songs, with lyrics written in embarrassing earnestness and melodies delivered with anxious fervor, for the willing (or unwilling) diners and drinkers. It was there that I had some of my first band rehearsals. My first blind date. My first bout of professional jealousy. My first free drink from a stranger. My first time processing the death of a friend. It was a place for reflection, experimentation, embarrassment, jubilation, and discovery. It was prone to cockroaches, but also to characters.

One such character was a man called Gordon Christopher, who had a name he'd chosen himself. He was boisterous, generous, and open. All, at times, to a fault. He was one of those conversationalists who skipped small-talk, opting instead to discuss that which he wished to discuss and nothing less. He sang in a deceptively high tenor for such a large man and could whistle the melody to Bob Seger's "Mainstreet" with perfect, unwavering pitch. One night he asked me, suddenly and abruptly as was his way, who my favorite artist was. As a young singer-songwriter desperate to appear complicated, I had several well-rehearsed answers. I deeply admired Jackson Browne, Bruce Springsteen, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, and I was forthright in my praise of them. They *got it*, while the popular stuff on the radio today *didn't*. However, I could not help but harbor a special love for 90s bands: Hootie & The Blowfish, Counting Crows, Ben Folds Five, Blues Traveler. My own music, I testified, drew from the songwriting complexity of the former list and the arrangements of the latter. At the time, my other, less impressive or less obvious influences were kept private. Without missing a beat, he said that I

was *wrong*. Alas, I had stepped into his trap. *You should be your own favorite artist*, he continued, *you're the only one you have any control over*.

When I first set out to write this collection of stories, Gordon's words would float into my head now and then, an unshakable echo, like the sticky lyrics of those pop songs that I outwardly detested and internally hummed along to. Gordon's message was often reassuring but sometimes haunting, as my largest and most constant anxiety in writing this collection was that I would not even like it myself. I was also afraid of creating, as Toni Morrison names it, writing that is "too self-conscious" (Step 23). In other words, I feared writing stories that overtly preached or postured or beat over the head, stories more interested in being literary than being good. So in my moments of doubt or discontent, I would keep the course by asking whether or not this project was something I would want to read. My answer varied day to day, if I am being honest, and still does, but overall this finished collection of stories meets my own requirements. The characters are the people I wanted to talk to, witness, and understand. The settings are the places I wanted to go, with the sights, smells, sounds, and touches I wanted to sense. The situations are those that I wished to experience for the first time, or, in some cases, the second time.

The first story that I finished was "Rimshot," and although Cole is not necessarily a pleasant character, the story itself was a fulfilling challenge. It is also the clearest example of a performer's attempt at writing a short story. At the time, the easiest way for me to conceptualize plot was to have it driven by one character, one microphone, one stage, one scene. The reader pops into Cole's head in the beginning, follows the story from his perspective, however skewed, and then pops back out again without any kind of narrative summary in between. Every moment Cole experiences, the reader experiences also: the on-stage performance, the internal self-

beratement, the text exchange, and the final blow-out. I wanted the reader to bomb as Cole bombs, and succeed as he succeeds. I wanted the reader, in part, to perform *with* him, as opposed to being allowed to watch safely from the audience. This sensation is meant to cause teeth gritting, awkward tension at times, insofar as experiencing Cole's failures as both his witness *and* his conscience breeds dissonance. The type of dissonance that comes from experiencing a failed performance.

The plot is structured using a series of what George Saunders calls "little gas stations." Saunders writes that "a story is made up of things that fling our little car forward," and gives an analogy relating plot points in a story to the motorized devices (sometimes disguised as gas stations) created by Hot Wheels to propel their toy cars around a track. He writes, "A story can be thought of as a series of these little gas stations. The main point is to get the reader around the track; that is, to the end of the story. Any other pleasures a story may offer [...] are dependent on this" (Saunders 33-34). Our first launching point, or little gas station, is the opening line: an out-of-context text message. Then Cole is on stage, bombing. Then he's on stage, being earnest. Then his earnestness transitions into over-sharing. Then he reads the last text message, and suddenly he's punching bathroom stalls, cursing at a fellow comic. My aim was to set the reader inside Cole's car, then fling them down the track. Crucial to this escalation is Cole's unreliability and progressive intoxication.

Despite this motorcycle sidecar narrative style, attaching the reader to the main character from the start, Cole is not a reliable source of information. For example, the reader does not get the context of the opening text message until much later in the story, at a totally inappropriate time to receive said context. Subsequently, the reader does not know which aspects of Cole's

performance are just that: a performance. Cole's untrustworthiness creates a new set of questions. When does his performance start? When does it end? Can such distinctions be made?

These questions led me into my second story, "Inanimate Objects." I wanted to explore the everyday performances, the pedestrian performances. Now, I do not mean pedestrian in a derogatory or belittling way, but in a universal way. Because if Cole's 'real life' and his performance are indistinguishable, naturally bleeding into each other, then it seemed to me that the phenomenon might not be exclusive to him. In "Inanimate Objects," Joyce is decidedly not a performer, at least not in a professional or traditional sense. She is an ordinary, older woman suffering a tragic loss. Nevertheless, the manner in which she presents herself to those gathered in the hospital room in the opening scene, to the visiting pastor, and even to herself, is deliberate. She has crafted a disguise for her grief, a stoic, inexpressive, hardened mask, and she is meticulous in her presentation of it.

The function of everyone else, and *everything* else, in the story is to either confirm or disrupt Joyce's presentation. For example, the half-smoked cigarettes in the ashtray on the porch are a literal, tangible connection to the husband she has lost, and in a moment of breaking character, she relights one and puts it to her lips. It is a small gesture, an innocent one, but she is ashamed of being caught by Pastor Phil. Not only is smoking an act out of place for her, but nostalgic reflection admits a loss that she is not yet prepared to confront. These small triggers lead to the climax of the story, a vivid traumatic memory of seeing Gerald's body in the coffin. Gerald's body is in itself performing. His transition from person to object is unbearable for Joyce; the deliberate presentation of his body becomes transparent to her. He's wearing makeup. In this moment, Joyce is unable to perform stoicism, both in the memory she is recalling and in the narrative present. By slamming the ceramic mug into the wall, the frustration, realization, and

devastation manifest physically. This moment, paired with the ending of “Rimshot,” inadvertently begins a recurring pattern in the collection of emotional or psychological stress materializing through destructive action.

In contrast with the intellectual task presented in “Rimshot,” that is to say the blending together of performance and reality, my task in “Inanimate Objects” was to pry them apart again. To separate Joyce the statue from Joyce the person. Consequently, the narration in “Inanimate Objects” stands in stark contrast to most of the stories in the collection (the sole exception being “The Driver’s Seat”) in that it is told using a third person narrator in free indirect discourse. Joyce’s name is, of course, a not-so-subtle tip of the hat to my stylistic inspiration for the story. The beauty of *Dubliners* is in James Joyce’s ability to provide detail, context, and meaning through absence. A *Dubliners* reader learns more about Chandler in “A Little Cloud” or Maria in “Clay” from what the narrators choose to omit, or let slip, than they do from what the narrators overtly tell us about the characters. Colson Whitehead gives this writing advice: “What isn’t said is as important as what is said. In many classic short stories, the real action occurs in the silences” (“How To Write”). “Inanimate Objects” was my first attempt at this narrative style.

My second attempt took form in “The Driver’s Seat.” This story was written as a response to another piece of advice from Whitehead, who writes, “Simply let this thought guide your every word and gesture: *Something is wrong, can you guess what it is?*” (“How To Write”). Something is wrong with Sam; he’s just slammed his door, he’s disgruntled, he’s frustrated. My intent in the story was to reveal pieces of evidence bit by bit so that the reader might make gradually more informed guesses as to *why* exactly that might be. At first the problem seems simple: Sam’s apartment is insufferably hot and he has no fan. However, it is also revealed in the

first paragraph that Sam lives with an unnamed female roommate who, for whatever reason, will not leave bed. Something is wrong.

“The Driver’s Seat” was also an experiment in the use of a story circle, specifically a technique adopted from Dan Harmon. Harmon asks the writer to draw a circle, divided into fourths with crossed lines. The circle is then labeled, starting at the 12 o’clock position and moving clockwise, 1 to 8. The points where the crossed lines meet the circle are labeled 1, 3, 5, and 7; the remaining spaces between them are then labeled 2, 4, 6, and 8. He then gives these sections meaning:

1. A character is in a zone of comfort,
2. But they want something.
3. They enter an unfamiliar situation,
4. Adapt to it,
5. Get what they wanted,
6. Pay a heavy price for it,
7. Then return to their familiar situation,
8. Having changed.

The value in structuring a story after Harmon’s model is that, generally speaking, many narratives are already structured like this. As he puts it, “If you were hired to write a script for a race of super-evolved spiders, you might find that they prefer a more linear model. In the spider version of Jack and the Beanstalk, Jack might build his own beanstalk, find a sandwich at the top of it, eat some and save some for later. The End.” Humans, he argues, prefer circles because they reflect our reality. We prefer it that Jack climbs to the top, finds treasure, and then returns,

because “if our heroes just climbed beanstalks and never came down, we wouldn’t have survived our first ice age” (Harmon, “Story Structure 101”).

However, not everyone who sets out on a hero’s journey succeeds in accomplishing the change they intended to make. Sam is attempting, unwittingly, to perform as the hero. At the beginning of the story he is, presumably, in a zone of relative comfort. But he wants a change; he wants it to be cooler in his apartment. So he gets in his car to go to Wal-Mart alone, an unfamiliar situation that he savors. He adapts to this new situation by spending a lot of time there, roaming the rows with his milkshake, perusing leisurely. Until, eventually, he gets the box fan that he wanted. But he pays a heavy price for it, hitting a rabbit on the freeway and witnessing its agony. He returns to his familiar situation, yet this is where Sam begins to realize that the change he wanted was not, in fact, for it to be cooler in his apartment, but something much more complicated. The story circle is intentionally broken.

Sam has accidentally solved the wrong problem, and thus his hero’s journey is not only futile, but depressing. Furthermore, he is now stuck in the story circle unfulfilled. Just as Sam imagines that the rabbit he hit is still lying in the road, perpetually dying and never dead, Sam is, to the reader, still sitting outside his apartment door at the end of the story, perpetually wanting and never satisfied. The story ends where it begins and, in that sense, it parallels “Rimshot.” We pop into the scene, ride along for a while, then pop back out again with very little narrative summary in between; the reader follows Sam from doorstep to doorstep, just as one follows Cole on and off stage. Yet while the reader cannot ever fully know if Cole has changed or not, his performance being too closely linked to his reality, for Sam it is fairly clear. By the end of “The Driver’s Seat,” Sam knows, at the very least, that the box fan he has acquired will not solve his most pressing problem; he still has a self-harming significant other on the other side of the door.

Furthermore, he knows that his problem will not and *cannot* be solved through a conventional hero's journey.

Cultivating this feeling of desolate hopelessness in Sam (and the reader) became, perhaps cruelly, one of my driving motivations in finishing the story. I wanted to convey a very specific feeling, and the narrative was built to that end. This is partly why Sam's partner is not named and why the reader is not allowed inside the apartment. The purpose of the story is not to generate pity for Sam's girlfriend, or to fully understand his situation so that we might be better prepared to prescribe a list of actions he could take in order to improve his lot in life. Instead, it is simply to feel gravity as Sam feels it, to be pulled to the ground as he is. In this way, "The Driver's Seat" and "Inanimate Objects" are thought experiments. Both characters are masking their emotions and their situations, covering them up and hiding behind a veil. Or a curtain, for any Wizard of Oz fans. But what happens when people with well-developed covers have that layer exposed? What happens when the performance is revealed? What does it take for Joyce to break character? What does it take for Sam?

This line of questioning led me to another: when do we *start* performing? That new, crucial question became the inspiration for "Less Like Terrell." The basic premise of the story is autobiographical; when I was in late elementary school I had my first 'date', and when I ran back home, high on budding romance, I did indeed slip and fall face first into the driveway. This experience, though comical now and innocent enough, was distinctly heteronormative; my experience was that of a little boy attracted to a little girl. This was certainly not a fully realized sexual attraction, as I had barely any conception of what that might entail, but an attraction nonetheless, a gravitation towards another person whom I admired. It was an important moment for me, as it became one of the earliest times I began to question growing up and what exactly

that might mean. I became aware that I was a *boy*, and at some point I would be a *man*. Now, finding a sense of identity was simple enough for me, I was a boy who liked ‘boy stuff’; I liked football and video games, and eventually, girls. These gender expectations, though problematic, never became restrictive for me, as I genuinely liked most of the things I was expected to like.

Thus, “Less Like Terrell” became yet another thought experiment. I created Alex, an eight-year-old girl who liked all the same things I liked when I was her age, who had all the same hopes, dreams, and heroes, all the same anxieties and fears. The only real difference between the two of us was that I was born male, and identified as such, whereas she was born female. Then I took Alex and tried, to the best of my ability, to relive that specific experience as if I had been her instead; I wanted to take a formative heterosocial moment in my life and reimagine it as homosocial. Simone de Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” My challenge with Alex, then, was to see if I could witness some of this formation in action.

Gender is, as Judith Butler puts it, “an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*.” She goes on to say that “if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler 519-520). In other words, gender identity is constructed through acts repeated long enough for the actor, and audience, to believe. These performative acts are not inherent in biology, instead, they are passed socially. At the beginning of “Less Like Terrell,” Alex has not yet learned these acts, though she is at least partially aware that some of the acts that she had been performing were, in the eyes of her “mundane social audience,” suspicious. This manifests in the word

“tomboy.” Her love of the Terrell Davis jersey is met by a grandmother who labels her with the term, and her moment of excellence in a backyard football game similarly brands her. While she does not understand the meaning of the word at the time, there is little doubt of its negative connotations by the time Kat uses it. Alex must then *learn* how to perform as a girl from Kat, who has learned from her sister, and so on. When Kat tells Alex that her supply of makeup was stolen from her older sister, who Kat assumes has stolen it from their mother, the reader can see a matrilineal line of inheritance, from Kat’s mother, to Kat’s sister, to Kat, to Alex, and one can safely assume that the line extends beyond the originator given in the story.

The construction of a “girly” Alex is complicated. On the one hand, Alex relishes her connection to Kat in that childish, romantic sense. She cherishes their time together, and her makeup mask is representative of, in part, that magnetism that draws her in to begin with. On the other hand, “girly” Alex is at odds with Alex as she knows herself. Furthermore, the construction of this new identity is not, in the end, for Kat’s benefit; it is for the boys in their class whom Kat wishes to impress. Although the makeup is passed down woman to woman, the presentation exists to serve a patriarchal audience, a male gaze. A gaze that Alex could not care less about.

This conflict culminates in front of Alex’s bathroom mirror, as she is left attempting to reconcile her Terrell Davis jersey, emblematic of her archetypal masculine hero and representative of the Self she has already constructed, with her makeup, emblematic of her newfound feminine idol and representative of a newer sense of Self. By attempting to emulate her hero, she slips on the ice and inadvertently tarnishes the Self that Kat values; one Self is now at odds with the other, and Alex exists in a state of “double-consciousness.” W. E. B. Du Bois coined this term as a way of conceptualizing the effects of living in the United States as a black man in a nation with a dominant white gaze. In his words, double-consciousness is “this sense of

always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois 3). What Du Bois describes, the sensation of dissonance when attempting to reconcile the person you know yourself to be and the person you are being told to be, or being told you *are*, by a dominant gaze, is what Alex begins to feel at the end of the story.

Stylistically, “Less Like Terrell” was a return to first person narration, and although it is predominantly told in the present tense like “Rimshot,” I meant the narrator in the story to feel like an older, introspective Alex, perhaps looking back on a memory. I intended the story to read like a memoir, I suppose partly because some of the plot was nonfiction and adopting that narrative voice made the story easier to write. “White Lighters” was written in the same vein, an adoption of semi-autobiographical detail with a more focused presentation, though the task of the story itself is perhaps less ambitious than “Less Like Terrell.”

“White Lighters” is, on the surface, a bar story-- *two guys walk into a bar*. Though, technically speaking, one is already there, one walks in, and then they both walk back out. The story is dialog driven, conversational, and purposely a bit mundane. I wanted to further experiment with narration, in that I wanted Mike to be a narrative witness, or recorder, to the events happening in Dylan's life and in the bar as a whole. Subsequently, Mike is fairly nondescript while Dylan is vibrant. However, despite my intentions, the story really became about both of them, less about Mike being a passive observer at an open mic and more about how this particular night with Dylan impacts his life.

Central to the story is the folklore of white lighters, particularly what that folklore means to the two central characters and how it functions in the story. For Dylan, the lighters are an existential answer, an ordering of the cosmos into something manageable; misfortune is easily explained and attached to a specific, avoidable item, and therefore the universe is ordered. For Mike, the lighters are a conduit, a connection to the tragic greatness of the musicians who supposedly died carrying them; they are quasi-religious artifacts. For both men the lighters are almost occult, in that Dylan believes them supernatural and Mike carries them ritually.

The ending of the story is meant to disrupt the function of the lighters in both senses. After all, if both lighters are white at the core, does it mean that Dylan is necessarily wrong? Could it be that misfortune is inevitable? Is the answer important to Dylan who, as Mike notes in the story, is adept at finding ways to fold new data points into his cosmology? If all lighters are white, does it mean that Mike's connection to the musicians of the past is nonexistent? Imagined, as opposed to affirmed? One lighter is obviously white, and the other is in disguise; what do we make of that? The purpose of the story is not necessarily to answer these questions, but to pose them and let the readers answer for themselves. The lighters are important because they are *adopted* aspects of the Self both men have constructed, and though they function differently in each case, their significance is derived from the meaning the characters ascribe them.

An unintended result of writing about an open mic night was that I became interested in exploring communities of performers, as opposed to just isolated cases, and while I knew from the outset of the project that I eventually wanted to write a story about professional wrestling, I did not know what shape it would take until the completion of "White Lighters."

As "Breaking Kayfabe" is indeed a story about wrestling, a performance industry that might be less conventional than some of the others featured, I will first discuss some of the

particulars of the genre. Roland Barthes' essay "The World of Wrestling" provides a useful reading of wrestling as theatre, especially in its earlier forms, though some particulars have changed since his writing. Barthes begins by debunking comparisons of wrestling to Greco-Roman wrestling and to boxing, which are both contests designed to showcase excellence in sport and argues that the audience knows the difference between them well. He goes on to assert that a wrestling match is a "sum of spectacles," meaning that the role of a wrestler is "not to win; it is to go through the motions which are expected of him." Wrestling, as Barthes reads it, must also clearly offer up to an audience who is the hero and who is the villain; "[a]s soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed by the obviousness of their roles." He goes on to argue, "Wrestling is like diacritic writing: [...] the wrestler arranges comments which are episodic but always opportune, and constantly help the reading of the fight by means of gestures, attitudes and mimicry which make the intention utterly obvious" (Barthes 16-18).

Barthes' emphasis on the importance of wrestlers providing the audience with "obvious" cues is important; in order for the performance to maximize its effectiveness, polarized roles must be clearly outlined, and although there are exceptions to this dichotomy, they are outliers. Wrestling is built on heroes and villains, babyfaces and heels. Barthes describes an ideal wrestling match as a "performance of Suffering," wherein the villain inflicts pain upon the hero until the hero can, eventually, overcome. He relates a wrestling match to a passion play, with a crucial distinction: "What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself" (15, 18). This is of paramount importance to the effectiveness of a match, the *image* of passion but not passion itself. Thus, when The Drifter botches his finishing maneuver and injures himself to the point of not being able to continue, his audience is deflated.

While Barthes' assessment of wrestling is insightful, there is one section that is not exactly accurate, though it may be either a reflection of the times or simply his variable experience watching wrestling in France. At the end of the essay he writes, "When the hero or the villain of the drama, the man who was seen a few minutes earlier possessed by moral rage, magnified into a sort of metaphysical sign, leaves the wrestling hall, impassive, anonymous, carrying a small suitcase and arm-in-arm with his wife, no one can doubt that wrestling holds that power of transmutation" (Barthes 25). As shown by the anecdotal interludes in "Breaking Kayfabe," all of which are stylized depictions of actual historical occurrences, the wrestler does *not* in fact transmutate upon leaving the ring. Or if they do, an audience is not meant to be privy to it. Professional wrestling is a unique performance culture; while actors on stage are no longer in character upon leaving it, wrestlers *must* continue the performance. Although some of the more vigilant aspects of this lifestyle have been lost due to modern audiences and access to performers via social media, some threads of kayfabe remain.

This word, kayfabe, is central to this project, and although I do not define it outright in the story itself, it is important to understand the concept here before proceeding. At face value, kayfabe (/ˈkeɪfəb/) refers to the portrayal of staged events as real or true. If a wrestler "breaks kayfabe," he or she is in essence breaking character, and if a wrestler is "kayfabling" or "keeping kayfabe," he or she is presenting characters or predetermined storylines as unscripted reality. But critical to understanding the term is understanding that kayfabe is not limited to one performer; if one wrestler breaks, the entire show becomes harder for an audience to believe. Indeed, *any* professional wrestling performance becomes harder to believe. So kayfabe is a shared burden among a community of performers, a responsibility to the artform and a constant reality that

must be upkept in order to preserve, what Coleridge calls, an audience's "willing suspension of disbelief."

When Hector injures himself, he is not just inadvertently ruining that one spectacle within a sum, or even just that one match, but, in his eyes, the *entirety* of the business he loves. The Drifter, as a character, becomes inaccessible to him; just as the gimmick is dead to the audience who watched the passion, so too is it dead to Hector. What's more, The Drifter was, as Zeke witnesses first hand, a more natural character for Hector to perform as. Losing the character clearly damages Hector in more than just a physical sense, as his whole construction of Self was wrapped up in the beloved hero he had forged for himself.

When Gordon told me that I should be my own favorite artist, he might have meant it as a call to creativity, *make the art you'd like to consume*. Or he might have meant it philosophically, *make yourself the person you'd like to be*, a little twist on the ancient philosopher Plotinus's words: "Never stop sculpting your own statue." At the heart of this collection is a menagerie of characters in variable states of self-creation through performance; they *act* in an attempt to *be*. Some of them are successful, if only momentarily, and some of them are not, just as some of us are successful at the task and some of us are not.

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