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THE HILL FIRE AND OTHER STORIES

by

MICHAEL PUTNAM

Under the Direction of John Holman, PhD

ABSTRACT

The Hill Fire is a collection of standalone and loosely-connected short stories on a variety of themes. Absurdist situations and ridiculous characters work to create a reality similar but distinctly not our own.

INDEX WORDS: Fiction, Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Absurdist

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by

MICHAEL PUTNAM

A Thesis/Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts, Fiction

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2018

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2018

THE HILL FIRE AND OTHER STORIES

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Georgia State University

May 2018

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife, Abby. Without you, this would not exist in any form.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee and my peers in workshop.

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1 INTRODUCTION TO THE HILL FIRE AND OTHER STORIES

I've learned a lot about my writing throughout my time at Georgia State University and have had the opportunity to reflect while compiling and editing this thesis. Workshops especially have provided not only wonderful feedback from my instructors and my peers but have helped me determine how to best use and respond to that feedback. The stories in this collection range from as old as to have been included (in now what would be considered an unrecognizable form) in my master's thesis from Cleveland State University to having been written the first couple weeks of April 2018. The path to *The Hill Fire* has been paved with rewrites and abandoned stories, as I'm sure the route to most collections have been as well. Along the way, and through my time spent in the Creative Writing program at Georgia State, I have found my personal approach to writing short stories and learned more about who I want to be as a writer. It may sound cliché, but I've found my writer's self on my way to completing *The Hill Fire* for my MFA thesis. This is not to suggest I have all the answers about myself or my work, just that I have a better understanding of my process and how I can use my particular quirks, talents, and faults to be the best writer I can be in the moment.

I usually start a story from an image or start it with a line I would previously have saved for the last line of a story. I started this technique while pursuing my master's degree, and I have continued it during my time at Georgia State University in their MFA program. During undergrad, I would typically rush to the end of the story to drop a surprising line for a twist ending. I find my current technique of beginning with a central image, one that places the reader directly into the action, has allowed me to tell a more interesting story all the way through to the end. In the past, my writing was bookended by promising ideas with a dull middle section. Telling a coherent, entertaining, and (hopefully) surprising story all the way has been my focus

while pursuing my MFA here in Atlanta. I will never claim to be a person whose characters just act on their own on the page (I actually think those who write that way may be Martians), but I hope that I have at least grown as a writer in terms of no longer trying to rush every story to a conclusion so I can have that little gut-punch at the end. Or starting with a gut-punch and floundering around until one character does something outrageous enough to warrant the end of a scene (or story). Focusing on an interesting first line, one I may have previously saved as an “out there” last line has also helped my stories get weirder. When before I was building to something absurd (and usually stopping the story once I got there), now I’m starting with something absurd and running from there.

Many of the stories in *The Hill Fire* started with an arresting opening image, or at least started with a first sentence I think has plenty of “meaty bits” included in it. I like packing my first sentences with as much odd imagery as possible and then hitting “Go.” I see myself as a conceit-driven writer and probably a conceit-driven writer to a fault. This conceit-driven approach, along with my love of first sentences, usually leads to first drafts that work as a skeleton which I must later go back and fill out in certain areas. Where I typically hit a snag in this expansion from the skeleton is with my protagonists and use of interiority. Until I reach a completed (albeit rough) skeleton of a story, however, I usually have very little indication of where a story will end up or how I will get it there.

Two examples of my conceit-driven stories are “We Move Nude” and the title story “The Hill Fire.” The latter story, especially, took quite a few turns along the way to its current iteration. Back in 2014, I knew I wanted to write a story about a large statue of Jesus that caught fire one night. In the subsequent four years, not only have I rewritten drafts of this story from scratch multiple times, I tried one with a first-person plural narrator, another that followed the

Reverend exclusively, and even a version that followed someone who was standing on the hill. I'm already hearing some of my peers telling me those are three different stories that I just listed but, to me, they're not. And that's my conceit-driven approach. I knew I wanted to write a story about that statue burning, and I love the name "The Hill Fire" (if that wasn't obvious). It required me going down several paths before the right skeleton materialized. I felt the same way regarding the premise to "We Move Nude."

During a previous workshop, I wrote a piece of flash fiction that described a nude moving service in the city of Atlanta. I got the idea from the Hunks Moving Junk moving service I see signs for around Decatur. The original flash piece centered around the business itself, but I was also working with this washed-up porn star (Tommy Fingers) and got the image of three naked men in a moving truck waiting at a red light Clairemont and North Decatur Road. I didn't know much else, except I loved the idea of a nude moving company and knew that this was now a short story and no longer a piece of flash fiction. This, too, could be argued by some to be two different stories. And maybe they are, one has no characters and is just exposition, while the other is a story, but that's not how I view them. I view them as stories trying to find their vehicle, much like I view compiling my thesis as a whole to be a search for the perfect combination and ordering of my stories to achieve a specific feeling or tone to the overall collection. I know what I want it to look like in my head, similar to with some of my stories, I know the little nugget of an idea I want to pursue.

Over the course of crafting *The Hill Fire*, both during my master's program and during my MFA, I have found many authors who helped shaped my writing, or my outlook on the process, or with whom I have merely felt like a kindred spirit. Reading these authors has not only helped me with my own work, it's helped me in intangible "writer ways" in terms of swagger

and worldview and understanding what's possible with fiction. There are too many to include them all. However, a few authors have been especially influential.

Alissa Nutting's conceit-driven first short story collection is set up as stories about jobs (or labels) in a loose sense. For example, the first story, "Dinner", is about a group of people waiting in a pot to be eaten. While being eaten might not be a "job", it is a role that must be played by the characters sitting around this pot together. From there, Nutting takes her readers on one of the wildest rides I've experienced in a short-story collection. I have returned to *Unclean Jobs for Women and Girls* several times since my first read. Every time I come back, I am left in awe that Nutting can take an absurd situation and do more than shake it in front of our faces and ask us to recognize its absurdity. Nutting manages to fill her stories with life and create an impression lasting long after you put the collection down. Specifically, her first sentences are what keep drawing me back to this collection. As mentioned above, I try to take a line that in my undergrad years would have been the twist ending and use that as the first line of a story. I can't suggest Nutting does the same thing, but *Unclean Jobs for Women and Girls* manages to validate my current strategy for coming up with story ideas. I find immense pleasure and generate better work by starting somewhere that jolts the reader and makes them wonder how the story will play out. Nutting's "Dinner" begins with the line "I am boiling inside a kettle with five other people." Her story "Porn Star" begins "I'm expected to have anal sex with the winning contestant on the moon." But even at her most outrageous, especially in her new novel *Made for Love*, Nutting manages to achieve authenticity and humanity in her work, much like another of my favorite authors.

While "Sea Oak" from his collection *Pastoralia* was the first George Saunders story I read, *In Persuasion Nation* was the first Saunders collection I read. With that collection, his

third, Saunders has managed to load up the absurdity while also providing heart and insight. Saunders' ability to weave in and out of the absurd and the sentimental changed the course of my fiction writing during my master's program. Even in 2018, a few years on, I still feel an attraction to Saunders' take of the absurdist short-story genre. He has had a profound impact on my work. He has taught me to keep the heart in my writing and not simply depend on the absurdity alone. I hope some of that heart has managed to reach the page through subsequent drafts of this thesis.

While not absurd, another author I read for the first time recently packs a lot of heart into her work, especially her novel in stories, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Many of the thirteen chapters that make up Jennifer Egan's 2010 book were published separately as short stories in various well-known publications. The over-arching story of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* swirls around the character of Bennie Salazar and jumps across decades and continents to tell that story. Side characters become main characters of their own stories, and the reader looks in on these characters throughout their lives. This strategy benefits Egan in a few ways. Fashioning these chapters to serve as stories, she's able to get more use out of them in terms of publishing. But writing about that group of characters from different perspectives helps Egan make them three-dimensional.

I am currently working on stories involving the previously-mentioned Tommy Fingers, a porn star past his prime, and I am taking cues from *A Visit from the Good Squad*. Egan gave me the blueprint for working on recurring characters in my short fiction as well as an in-progress novella. At the very least, she taught me I can zoom-in and pull-out the focus on these characters and not give them all the same amount of stage time in every story. I believe this has helped me not only with character management but world-building as well. As I continue to work on the

collection with the aim for publication later this summer, I plan to continue pursuing that cohesiveness with Egan's guidance, taking a cue from *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by including Tommy in the periphery of some stories and bringing more characters together. I've mentioned I view all of these stories as taking place in the same world as each other, just at different times and in different locations, which is how Egan wrote and compiled *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

This world-building technique and "shifting camera focus" is used to great effect in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. Morrison gives us the story of her eponymous character, and that of Nel Wright, but she also gives us the story of Medallion, Ohio, specifically a part of town called The Bottom. Nel and Sula are the crux of the novel, but we get to see the other members of their family and various members of the town as well thanks to Morrison's roaming narrative style. This roaming narration helps to build the town and its residents for the reader, making it feel "lived-in" and inhabited by a wide cast of characters. But it isn't just the world-building I want to steal from Morrison.

To me, it's in the language of *Sula* where the novel really shines and ventures into the fabulist genre. Chapters open with lines like "Except for World War II, nothing ever interfered with the celebration of National Suicide Day" and "Accompanied by a plague of robins, Sula came back to Medallion." These openers allow Morrison to get away with scenes that build to someone lighting their dress on fire and another character jumping out an upstairs window to try and save individual on fire. Morrison knows how to shock us but never in a way that feels out of place for the novel. Balancing the flow of the novel with some of its wilder events makes this book deceptively absurd. Absurdity isn't bursting at the seams here, and Morrison doesn't obfuscate the more poignant moments of *Sula*. This is something I aim to emulate in my work, by trying to provide the reader with a world they recognize but with the volume turned up in

some areas. I also want to try and balance that with moments that feel genuine to my readers. I have attempted to implement this in stories such as “A Road Story” and “But Only for a Week.” I believe “Nosedive” is my best execution of this style, mixing the genuine and (hopefully) poignant with the absurd and outrageous.

David Mitchell takes six novella-length stories, shakes them up, then shakes them up some more. Five of the six sections are split in half, with the sixth section placed uninterrupted in the middle of *Cloud Atlas*. We move chronologically through the five stories, then reverse chronologically through them again after reading the sixth section. Mitchell manages to not only create six distinct voices but six distinct worlds in *Cloud Atlas*. His genre-jumping and untraditional narrative feels effortless in this novel. Since reading it for the first time in the spring of 2017, I have tried to play with voice and genre in some of the pieces in my thesis as well. Voice, specifically, I have focused on with many of the short shorts included in the manuscript. I have taken a more nebulas approach to the genre elements, thinking about how to mix elements of genre into my stories, not necessarily picking a genre for each one. The strong voice comes out best in my flash fiction, and I believe I execute voice most effectively in the stories “Sharing Space” and “Into the Lake.”

The Hill Fire and Other Stories is a collection of twenty stories, ranging in length from a paragraph to around twenty pages. Characters in the manuscript range from a male porn star, to a town surrounding a burning statue of Jesus (featured in the title story), to a pop star attempting her Vegas comeback, to a couple of thieves breaking into million-dollar properties in western North Carolina. While overlap is minimal now, my goal is to fashion a universe within *The Hill Fire* that could contain all the stories I have included in the collection. I like knowing that all of these stories could be taking place around each other, and I am interested in how one builds rules

and norms for a world that's similar but not the same as our own. I'm not there yet, and I know this is something I will need to continue as I work to publish my thesis as a collection of short stories.

I have thematic cohesion throughout the collection: technology, social media, pornography and the industry that surrounds the medium (those working in the cam business, or selling videos online, or just getting paid to Skype with someone for ten minutes). I've also situated the flash pieces throughout the collection as brief, often absurd, interludes. With my themes and structure of the collection, I welcome readers to take a more comprehensive view of the work. I hope that doesn't sound like I don't stand by my stories, I absolutely do. What I'm trying to say is that I'm interested in the idea that a short story collection is just that, a collection. Not merely the next group of stories an author wrote.

There are other elements I used to pull some of these stories together, specifically the setting. During undergrad and in my first master's program, I had trouble building a believable and compelling setting in my writing. It was as if my stories all took place in a dark room or on an unlit street in an empty town. As I generated content for workshops at Georgia State, I found it easiest to place stories in the little neighborhood and other areas around my current apartment to bring a little more setting into my work. By placing stories in a location I know well, I can not only make the settings more convincing, but I am less likely to confuse readers with the geography of a town or city becoming convoluted or contradictory. While some stories in the collection take place in locations other than metro Atlanta, I believe Atlanta provided my work a better sense of taking place in a world and not on a stage. I have hopefully applied a slightly more grounded location into the stories that take place outside of Atlanta as well but, at the very

least, being more aware of my settings and remembering to add details throughout that also remind the reader of where the story is happening.

In an attempt to give some variety to the reading experience, the stories and the short shorts are mixed throughout the collection. The two stories pertaining to Tommy Fingers, however, have been intentionally included out of chronological order. I attempted to culminate my collection with a novella, but the more I wrote, the more I realized it was not cohesive with the rest of the collection and will be better served as a stand-alone piece. I currently feel more comfortable with shorter pieces. The longer a piece becomes, the more I worry I'm not reaching the ending quickly enough and that I'm wasting my readers' time. However, I feel confident about the pieces included in this collection, even the longer ones. My process and my conceit-driven method of storytelling is nearly always the same, regardless of where a story ends up length-wise.

As I work through that "final pass" of the collection after submission, my focus will be to further massage the stories, but with a twofold goal behind that focus. First, I will be working to further expand the skeletons of each story where they may still be underdeveloped. To further the metaphor, I want to make sure all of the limbs look good in proportion to their partners as well as the rest of the body. This will include further work on settings, trying not only to situate the reader better but by attempting to "lighten up" my scenes (only in the literal, illumination sense, of course). This continued development will also take the form of working with not only my protagonists but my secondary characters as well. With all of my focus on conceit, my almost total insistence on plot-first writing, I have given all of my characters short shrift. I will need to do some serious thinking about this lack of interiority with my characters and how I would be able to correct that missing element of interiority.

The second goal with continuing work on my thesis will be to further pull the stories together, in terms of the whole collection. I want to be clear, I have no intention of turning my collection into a novel in stories. But I absolutely want to further-connect my stories to each other and build the “world” of the collection. For instance, I use a character named Dan in “Bear Country” and “We Move Nude.” I can add a line and make them the same Dan, easy enough. But as I continue working on the collection, I want to consider whether to further expand on the connections already present and whether I’ll want to add more along the way as I consider the world of this collection.

The Hill Fire means a lot to me, as I’m sure every first collection or first novel means a lot to every writer. It also means a lot that a story like “Packer #19”, my very first publication, holds up and still warrants a place in this collection. There’s validation in being told, not only does that story hold up, but that something like “Packer #19” feels connected with other pieces in this collection. Looking back on that story while compiling *The Hill Fire* has helped build my confidence in my storytelling and confidence in my style and overall aesthetic. I may not be the best at describing that aesthetic, but it appears that I at least possess one. My next steps will be to try to further nurture that aesthetic and consciously consider where it can take my writing in the future.

2 MAN IN THE HALL

The man in the hall uses the faux-silver knocker on my apartment door instead of his knuckles. I don't know if this is the first time he knocks, and I don't know it is a man until he speaks from the other side of the door shortly after using the knocker. The knocking as well as his speaking have the sound of someone repeating their actions, although I am unable to articulate how that sounds. The sound of someone first going unheard and therefore becoming a little more insistent. That sound, both the physical knock as well as the speaking part. Being half-asleep and a little drunk due to my wife and our dog both currently up at her mother's in North Carolina, I open the door.

"Hey, my man, my man," the man in the hall says, pulling both sets of "my man" together into one longer word.

My wife and our dog, Remy, are gone for a week to see a solar eclipse up in the mountains. Remy is small but good for an explosion of deeper-than-expected barking when someone is anywhere near our apartment door. Would that have been enough to make this guy decide to try another apartment instead of ours?

I'm too slow to react and his foot slides between the frame and the door before I can get it closed.

"Hey, my man, my man," he repeats in the exact manner as before, as if the words are from a recording. "That's not very nice, my man."

The spiked mass of grotesquely- bright orange hair coming from his head suggests the strands were growing toward one of the hallway's lighting fixtures above us. He has so many freckles the same color as his hair, it's just a blur of orange from his chin up. Thanks to equally

uncontrolled chest hair, the same orange explodes out of the halfway-zipped jacket of the bright green tracksuit he wears.

The clocks on the microwave and the oven read 2:37 and 2:38, respectively.

Not seeing another option, I back away from the door and the man in the hall pushes it open. He's taking up most of the door frame now, illuminated by the harsh bulb above our door, all-white sneakers planted perfectly on our "Hey Bear" welcome mat.

Backing up, I knock over one of the stools in front of the island with a few days' worth of mail, waiting for my wife's return.

"My man, let me converse with you a moment," he says, taking a step inside the apartment. He looks to his left and finds the switch that controls the overhead lights in our kitchen. Suddenly, we're both in glaring light. The hair on his chest pulses at me.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I can help you," I say, picking up the stool and placing it between us. I keep my eyes locked on that chest hair. "It's late, man. I'm not really looking to hang out right now, I'm sorry."

"No, hey, you know me, right?" he says. He lets the door close behind him. "You know me, my man."

The man reaches behind his back, and I hear two dead bolts slide into place.

"No, I don't think I do. I'm sorry," I say. "There should be a security officer around somewhere if you need any help. Do you want me to call the police or an ambulance for you? Is there somebody hurt?"

"Hey, so, my man. I moved in here a week ago, just down the hall," he says. "No need for the police, right?"

“Down the hall? They only moved out today,” I say. The first time I interacted with either of those neighbors was last night when one came asking for a wine opener. “Everyone else on this side of the elevator has been here at least a few months.”

“Oh, no, I mean downstairs. Fourth floor. This the fifth,” he says. “I moved in downstairs a week ago. Just down the hall, but downstairs, you know?”

“Look, if you need me to make a phone call, I would be happy to do that for you. Is someone hurt? Are you hurt?”

“Hey, no, everyone’s good. It’s just me, your neighbor,” he says, looking around the kitchen and over to the dining room table covered with my laptop, mechanical keyboard, and a few small mountains of paper. “Thinking you would be awake is all. Did I wake you, my man? I didn’t wake you, right? We can hang out for a while,” he says, rubbing a finger across the stove top like someone checking for dust. Except he never checks his fingertip afterward, he just does it one more time to the cupboard next to the oven. “We’re young, we’re naked. I mean, what? I didn’t wake you up, right?”

“If everyone is fine,” I snap, “I’m going to get back to bed now. Maybe some other time, alright?”

I stay where I’m standing, though. My eyes go to the pepper spray we keep on the key hook next to the door to the man’s right.

Where was my wife? Where was my dog right now?

He turns and sees the pepper spray. He takes the few steps around the island over to the key hook and pulls the pepper spray from the key hooks.

“You know me, right, I’ve held the elevator for you and that dog,” he says, analyzing the pepper spray in his hands. “Your dog. I’m your friend, man.

“I don’t own a dog,” I lie. “My wife and I don’t own a dog.”

“No, yeah, I think it was you and your dog,” he says. “No need to lie to me, my man. We’re buddies. It’s me, your friend.”

He rolls up the sleeves of his tracksuit. The man doesn’t have any freckles on either arm, just pale skin that glows with the harsh overhead kitchen lights. He looks down at the pepper spray once more then points it directly into my face. His thumb flicks to one side signaling the pepper spray is open.

“I think you maybe fibbed to me a little just now, didn’t you?” he asks. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Excuse me?” I ask. I back up until I bump into the chair in front of my computer, still pulled out from earlier.

“Kidding, my man,” he says, cracking an ear-to-ear smile to show a clean set of bright gold teeth. He lowers the pepper spray and clicks it closed. “I’ll hold on to this, though. I like this,” he says, dropping the pepper spray into his tracksuit pocket.

“Sir, what can I do for you?” I ask.

“No, my man. Let’s just hang out, like two dudes,” he says. He walks over to our refrigerator and opens the door. “Aww, here we go. We’re talking now. Let’s crack open a few of these brewskies, my man. What do you say? Can we crack open a few of these brewskies and hang out like two dudes?”

“Look, I need to get back to bed, I’m sorry I can’t help you. I’ve got work in the morning.” I look at the clocks, 2:41 and 2:42. “I need to be up in four hours.”

“Today’s Saturday, my man,” he says. He’s pulls two bottles out of the refrigerator and places them on the counter. “Everybody’s working for the weekend, my man? Is that what you’re saying? No rest for the wicked?”

“I work Saturdays.”

“You don’t work Saturdays, my man.” He pauses. “Hey, I think you maybe fibbed again.”

“Sir, look,” I say. “I’m going to ask you to leave now if there’s nothing I can do to help you.”

“My man, my man. What about these beers?” he asks. “You wanna see something cool?”

Before I can answer, he raises both bottles up to his mouth, locks them into the bottom row of gold teeth, and, with the help of the top row of teeth, pulls the caps off, spitting them on the floor. Then, he raises the bottles to his mouth and drinks from both. Lowering them, he says, “Now that’s some good beer, my man.”

“Sir-”

“Woah, hey, no no. There’s nothing to worry about,” he says. “We’re just going to drink these beers. You want one?” he asks. He takes two more long sips from the bottles then goes to hand me one. “These IPAs?”

“Look, it’s late, I don’t know you,” I say. “I’m not trying to be rude, but I don’t think I can help you. I don’t want to drink with you right now. We should both just go back to bed.”

“Hey, now, come on, my man. I’m not trying to take all your booze,” he says, drinking from only one of the bottles and motioning with the other for me to take it. “We can just have a little nightcap. I’m not ready to go to bed, my man. Not yet.” His voice is not pleading, or

forceful, it's steady, while still managing to bleed words together. This pattern makes much of what he is saying sound more otherworldly than intoxicated.

"Gotta rest my legs, gotta pop a squat, plant the keister," he says. He walks around the island, kicking one of Remy's tennis balls into the bathroom where it thumps against the bathtub. He drags one of the bar stools across the floor back around the island and sits down between me and the refrigerator.

I start to shuffle over to the door.

"Hey, look, you gotta get to know me," he says. "No problem. Today's Saturday, right, we got all night, right, my man? Hey, my man, stop. Just stop moving."

I stop my shuffling.

"There you go. Yeah, just stay away from that door, my man," he says. He takes another sip from both the beers and tries to offer me one again. "There will be football on today, right? Everybody loves football. I sure love Saturday football. How about, you and I, you and I we toast to how great football is?"

I can't seem to move any closer to the door, the only opening is back around the island toward him. He smiles his big gold smile and hands me one of the beers, which I take and put to my lips, taking a long swallow.

"My man," he says.

The man in my apartment raises the bottle he's still holding and starts drinking and I do the same. We continue drinking until we're both finished, and I put my bottle down next to his after he has already placed his down on the island. He turns to the refrigerator and opens the door to grab two more.

"Look, I'm sure you're a nice guy," I say.

“Oh yeah, my man. That’s what we both are, my man,” he says from the refrigerator.

“Just a couple of nice guys drinking some beer.”

“But it’s kind of late, and, to be honest, I probably don’t need to drink any more tonight,”

I say as he pulls off another bottle cap with his teeth, spits the cap on the floor, and hands me another beer.

He raises a new bottle in his hand to cheers.

I keep my bottle in hand but don’t raise it.

“My man?” he asks, keeping his bottle held up. “We’re friends, my man. We’re two friends having a few beers together. We’re cheers-ing. Cheers-ing to good times between good friends, my man.”

He smiles his gold smile, his chest hair appearing to reach out toward me, requesting our brotherhood just as much as their master.

“What about this?” he asks. He reaches into his pocket and pulls the pepper spray back out, clicking to top back into the Open position. “What about we do this?”

I step back, placing my beer on the island. I contemplate whether my laptop or the keyboard would be sturdy enough to get a quick hit in and then make a dash for the door. Any hopes of suppressing the man in my apartment, however, are dashed by his next action. The man points the pepper spray at his face and presses down. Orange liquid, not totally unlike the man’s hair and freckles, streams into the man’s face. The man sprays his eyes, then his nose, then opens wide and thoroughly sprays the interior of his mouth. Then, he sprays the orange liquid into first his left ear, then his right ear, then the man in my apartment goes back to spraying his face.

Even from my distance of a few feet, the fumes force my eyes closed. I step back and try to find the chair to sit down and collect myself. I hear the spray stop and soon I feel the empty container bounce off my head.

“There, all better?” the man asks. “You look like shit, man. We may need some air.”

“I can’t fucking see,” I shout. “How can you fucking see right now?”

“Oh yeah, my man. You might want to stand back,” he says. “Maybe we should open a window or something.”

I miss the chair and fall to the floor, kicking one of my dog’s bones across the apartment, spitting and dripping mucus from my nose, furiously rubbing my eyes.

“Thought we needed to get that out of the way,” the man in my apartment says. “It was like an albatross in my tracksuit, right? My man?” He must have crossed the kitchen because I feel both hands grab my shoulders. “Maybe we should go out on the porch or something to finish these brewskis? You don’t look so hot, my man.”

He pulls me from the ground, hands gripping my armpits and leads me to the door.

“Lemme get that for you,” he says. “Nice night out here. I bet you and your wife eat out here all the time, right?” he asks, helping me with the door. “I bet that dog of yours, Remy, the little dude, I bet he just sits out there and barks while you eat and it’s so hilarious. Why don’t you tell me all about it, my man.”

And he’s right. My wife and I would have absolutely eaten dinner on the balcony that night if she were in town.

3 TO: ADMIN@MTSUDISH.COM

Subject: Missing Profile Question

Wednesday, September 17, 2014

To Whom It May Concern,

I'm not sure you can help me or if this is even going to the right place. The Contact section points me to this address for any questions or concerns. I'm inquiring about the missing profile of Jessica Turner, Middletown State University sophomore, McIntyre Business School, I think she is also a member of the business fraternity on campus as well, but I'm not certain. Maybe I am not looking for the profile in the right place, or maybe there is a glitch on my end, or even one on yours. I don't know. I only ask because, as of last week, she not only had a profile but was an active user on MTSUdish, both in the threads and also in terms of ratings and comments on other users' profiles. She had quite the footprint, is what I mean.

Anyway, maybe you can help.

Hope this finds you well,

Colin Herman

To: admin@MTSUDish.com

Subject: Follow-Up to my Previous Email

Saturday, September 20, 2014

To the Admin (right?),

I still can't seem to find Jessica Turner's profile anywhere on MTSUDish. Specifically, I'm wondering if maybe the "Refute" option is now in a different location? I guess I was wondering if I'm looking in the wrong place, or maybe she changed the name related to her profile, although I can't imagine people are allowed to do that. Just start over. If you could point me in the right direction, or possibly even re-make the entry for Jessica, it would be greatly appreciated. Or maybe it's a matter of re-activating the account or something. I'm not sure how it all works on your end. I'm just spitballing here. I'm curious what could have happened, and I'm looking for a little information is all. Like I said in the first email, she had been quite active up to around the time of her profile's disappearance. Anyway, I'm rambling. I'll end this email here, and I anticipate your response. I'm sure you've got more than enough emails to sift through, so I didn't want to make this one any longer than it had to be. Although, I guess that's exactly what I'm doing now, right?

Thanks,

Colin Herman

To: admin@MTSUDish.com

Subject: I Hope My First Email Found the Proper Recipient.

Monday, September 22, 2014

Hello again,

Just wanted to check in and ask if there had been any developments in regard to Jessica Turner's entry, or lack thereof. I ran the numbers, and there is a profile for 98.7% of all non-commuting students at Middletown State University. That's currently. Maybe the number of current profiles has nothing to do with the disappearance of one, but it's odd, right? Nearly one-hundred percent of the students at a school have a profile, and one just disappears and no one thinks anything is up? Like, crazier still, that her review is still up on my profile. Her checked boxes of "Left me wanting" and "Too eager for their own good" are still checked on said review, along with Jessica's breakdown of everything that went down, including a few things I would have perhaps described a little differently, given the opportunity. Maybe you don't even need to re-activate her profile, or whatever. You could probably go into your tools and turn the "Refute" button back on and let me submit my side in terms of at least some of the things she mentioned in that, frankly, inaccurate review.

Anyways, Thanks,

Colin Herman

To: admin@MTSUDish.com

Subject: But Seriously

Tuesday, September 23, 2014

But anyway, I wanted to know if there was a submission form or something of the sort that could be filled out to get that “Refute” option to show up under her review. Maybe something happened that resulted in Jessica no longer wanting to be on MTSUDish. But, based on her past reviews, the many I’ve sifted through, it definitely wouldn’t have been the night with me that became the last straw. Please let me know if there is anything you might need from me to help get the ball rolling on that, getting that “Refute” option available for me again. I would be more than willing to donate my time to the effort, although I must admit I have no coding experience. But if there is legwork to be done outside of that, I offer my assistance in any way that would be useful to you (whoever you are).

Colin

To: admin@MTSUDish.com

Subject: Are My Emails Reaching the Right Mailbox?

Thursday, September 25, 2014

Admin?

I must be doing this wrong, or maybe your emails haven't been sending, or maybe mine haven't been sending (or maybe you aren't sending any back at all). I've checked my junk mail, I even made admin@MTSUDish.com a Preferred Recipient for my Inbox. If perhaps an in-person meeting would work better, perhaps if it would be more productive, I can certainly come to your location, wherever that might be. Are you on campus? Off campus? Are you located in the Middletown area? Even if this is all being run out of a room somewhere, a quick stop in is totally alright with me. Or if you would rather keep things digital, I totally understand that as well. I'm sure my persistent emailing is not exactly helping my case in your eyes. At this point, I am more curious as to how someone without a profile in the system (still!) is able to have their posts remain up on MTSUDish. When I click on "Jessica Turner" on her review of our night together, the little link taking you to her profile, an error message comes up when I click it, and then I am redirected back to the MTSUDish homepage. Am I crazy for thinking if a profile no longer exists then their comments should disappear too? Like, ok, the "Refute" thing might be impossible by now but come on.

Colin

To: admin@MTSUDish.com

Subject: There is No Way this is a Functioning Email Address (EOM)

Friday, September 26, 2014

To: admin@MTSUDish.com

Subject: If you're Human you'll Have Mercy

Friday, September 26, 2014

Three years. Three years of positive (or at the very least in some cases, average) ratings from women on MTSUDish. Then one person, someone who no longer even has a profile in this database, can destroy my reputation? How can someone without a page even have a comment on other people's profiles? Let alone have a *rating* on another person's profile? It doesn't make any sense, and it's more than a little shady on your part, whoever *you* even are. I got the job done for her. I just ran into some issues when it came time for me to show up. And then I got all stressed out, and well, it just didn't happen. But then, when I pulled out, it did happen, and like, how could I have expected that? Or how could I have expected it'd be so powerful which led to her guffawing (that's the only descriptor that fits) in my face. It's not like she was shattering anyone's reality that night either. But she's going to describe (in detail) my "sub-six-inch penis?" None of those other two- and three-star reviews, let alone the four-star review I received early last year, mean anything anymore? That's unfair, it's unfair and, frankly, it is cruel. You run this server from the seclusion of wherever the hell you are and just dictate who gets to make it in this world and who gets to have their fragile legacies torn asunder by one cruel person. But now there are two cruel people, it would appear.

To: admin@MTSUDish.com

Subject: I Don't Even Know What to Say Anymore

Saturday, September 27, 2014

So why me? Why can't I get a little justice? Maybe I was more fish than stallion that night, but as I think I mentioned last time (for the record, I totally did), she was no knockout punch either. Why can't a guy respond to his critics? In what world is it right to let this person, in less than a paragraph, tear down years of effort? Putting in the time, working with what I've got. Sure, I got lucky, she's out of my league, and it isn't like I was going to get any more girls like her even without the play-by-play she provided. But where's my mulligan? Why can't that one get scratched from my record, then I can continue with my life? I'm not even asking you to make a profile for her, or for you to let me "Refute" the post anymore. I'm just looking for a freebie. That's it. You wouldn't even need to create, all you'd have to do is delete.

It's like I'm shouting at a brick wall.

You've obviously having a fun time with this, and you should know that you are all (there are probably many of you laughing at this) terrible people. I also think one thing should be made abundantly clear, just to set the record straight: I'm not calling her a liar.

To: admin@MTSUDish.com

Subject: I'm Over It

Saturday, October 4, 2014

I have concluded that none of this matters. I have come to terms with all of it, and I'm totally cool with everything (even my "sub-six-inch penis"). This was an existential crisis, a test of my true character, and I've passed. Maybe you're secretly working for Jessica, maybe she's the one behind this all and she runs not just MTSUDish but the whole database, for every university.

Whatever it is, I'm cool with it. I don't need to worry about any of it. You've made me realize the frivolity of all of this. Why even care? Why are these ratings and reviews and check boxes and number of stars out of five important to any of us? Anyway, if anything, I want to thank you. You've actually done me a favor.

Reborn,

Colin Herman

4 CAMPUS COED COPULATION PARTY #450

Tommy Fingers bounced the white cue ball against one of the green side cushions and prepared himself for livestreamed intercourse with one or more coeds. Hopefully more. If they were too short to get a leg up, Tommy would risk tweaking the agitated nerve in his back even further holding the coeds aloft during intercourse. His back would give out, the doctor told him, unless he started taking better care and not holding eighteen to twenty-two-year-old women aloft for minutes at a time. During intercourse.

The director of this shoot, Jimmy Mortimer, had already racked the balls on the table, albeit incorrectly. Before leaving the room, Jimmy told Tommy and the camera guy to “leave the fucking table alone while I go find some strange at the bar.” Cue ball aside, Tommy and Sean had done just that. Until recently, Tommy would have been out at the bar with Jimmy finding the “strange”, buying drinks, and owning the space inside the approximate circumference of thirty feet around wherever he happened to be standing. Until recently, Jimmy wouldn’t have worried about the state of a pool table in the room where they were filming.

But the show must go on, and tonight, the show was Campus Coed Copulation Party #450. They were filming at a liberal arts university in southwestern Ohio. It was their fifth trip to this school for the Porn Factory-funded series now in its third year. Five visits was a lot for one school, but the audience loved the coeds there, even better than the ones at UD or UC or even Ohio State with its sixty-thousand plus students. They were perceived as being more affluent than the average coed, which came with it the assumption that they were stuck up, which came with that a heightened desire to witness these coeds having sex. If the crew was in Ohio, they’d always find themselves at Middletown State University. Porn Factory still gave them complete

autonomy over their destinations, even after their viewer count dropped from the multi-millions down into the hundreds of thousands, all three men knew would never come back.

“Streaming numbers displayed yet?” Sean asked, not bothering to turn around and look for himself. He fiddled with the shade covering one of the three lamps they traveled with.

Tommy turned to the LED sign plugged into their shared laptop, which read 345,672. “They’re up. Healthier than usual,” he said. “Smart move advertising our coming here nearly a week out.”

Sean bowed, back still turned, hands still fiddling with the lamp.

Tommy sent the ball into the green felt once more. Jimmy would be annoyed if he messed up the already-incorrectly set up table, and that would make for a long night in their shared hotel room; as in all three of them splitting a queen bed and a pull-out couch. Tommy knew the hotel well. He knew the suites on the higher floors once comped for him by the bars where they filmed. Back in the first and second year and first couple visits to this university, even knowing they were funded, bars would do anything they could for a leg up on their competitors. Tommy had worked in two bars on this campus, mainly. Now it was just this one that would host the stream.

Campus Coed Copulation Party had been Jimmy and Tommy’s brain child. The two had worked with and around each other for a few years before Jimmy suggested they head out on the road together. He wanted to travel, see what women there were living outside the West Coast. Once the road theme was established, a conversation at a party one night led to both men revealing their loathing of the college pornography genre. Specifically, they disliked the men who either submitted to the big contests or got roped into submitting to the big contests held by various porn providers and tube sites. These men were boring, their attempts at collegiate

masculinity were laughable, and, when it came down to it, they weren't very good at the most important part of porn: the sex. Jimmy and Tommy would breathe new life into a stagnant genre of the porn industry.

Fifteen percent of all female students at four-year universities earned at least five thousand dollars a year being a cam model. College campuses were a gold mine in terms of willing participants. With a "living legend" director of the adult entertainment industry, along with the most-recognized male actor in the business, and a fat budget from Porn Factory, the new venture was guaranteed viewers. At least to start. A side effect to the rise of camming was that traditional guy/girl porn managed to be niche. The guys were bolstered by their desire to remove the domination and humiliation angles from their work and get back to honest-to-goodness fucking.

With their idea scooped up by Porn Factory and the subsequent funding, they rented a few vans, gathered a crew from their various contacts and associates, and set out for glory. After the first few schools, the crew made the bold choice to live-stream the videos with a guaranteed tape delay of under five seconds. By downloading the Porn Factory app and choosing the College Coed Copulation Party channel, the audience could chat with other viewers, set up trivia to be played during down-time, even link into to other social media and give the coeds Hearts or Thumbs Up or Check Marks, depending on the social media platform.

Sean turned from responding to some of the viewers already waiting on their channel. "Think we'll hit five hundred thou by the time you've gotten down to business?" he asked. Sean went back to the lampshade once he finished responding.

"Maybe," Tommy said, tossing the cue ball again. "Anyone complaining we haven't launched a feed yet?"

“You let me handle that. Stay positive. Think: hard.”

The college tour started strong. Campus bars loved them since they never filmed any of the pre-shoot drinking and never mentioned drinking once the coeds were on camera, in the event of filming an eighteen-to-twenty year old. The bars had a layer of subversive cool for hosting at first, which attracted big crowds. In the early days, it would take only a round or two of drinks before they found girls willing to go back and film something at least remotely sexual. And typically, once one got into it, the rest felt awkward being on camera and not getting involved as well. The bars offered backrooms, offices, whatever they had that was semi-private. In a pinch, the crew could sneak some people into a hotel room for a more intimate shoot. After a year of College Coed Copulation Party, those who made it to the point of signing the waiver at the bar knew what they were getting into leaving with Jimmy and THE Tommy Fingers. That first year of filming for Campus Coed Copulation Party, there was always a school within a few hours with women ready to make a few thousand bucks for about an hour’s work.

There was a knock at the door across the dim but evenly-lit room. Jimmy Mortimer’s head appeared in the doorway.

“Ten minutes, Boo Boo. Tops,” Jimmy said. “Oh good, you left the table.” He looked at the viewer count. “Jesus, even here we can’t catch a break,” he said. Jimmy flashed a quick, concerned smile.

“Something wrong?” Tommy asked.

“Wrong? Boo Boo, what’s gotten into you lately?” Jimmy asked. “Everything’s gravy, baby. And those numbers are gonna shoot on up there as soon as I send this message out to the chat saying ten minutes to showtime.”

“Am I tearing down all this shit down?” Sean asked. He made a show of hovering his hand over the camera he was about to set up but not touching it.

“Look. You two need to relax. Tommy, get the goods ready for prime time,” Jimmy Mortimer said. His head disappeared, and the door closed. From the hallway he yelled, “Ten minutes, tops.”

Tommy and Sean exchanged looks.

“I’m taking down these lights, aren’t I?” Sean asked.

Tommy squeezed the cue ball and slid it down the table at the perfect triangle of billiard balls. The balls scattered, some dropping into the pockets down at that end of the table. Tommy felt a pinch in his back from even that slight exertion.

Sean turned from one of the lights and elongated his saying of the word “dude” in Tommy’s direction.

“I’ll fix them,” Tommy said.

“No, you won’t. I’ll fix them. You need to get that big thing ready.”

Tommy walked to the front of the table to find the wooden triangle to re-rack the balls.

“Just stop,” Sean said. “I’ll fix it. Get in the zone.”

Tommy did need to get in the zone, assuming Jimmy would be returning with a few female patrons from the bar in the not-to-distant future. Before the back and before Jimmy’s more frequent check-ins, there was a time when Tommy Arnold, aka Tommy Fingers, aka The Digits, was the most-followed, most-streamed, even most-downloaded man, woman, or gender nonconformer in the online porn business. Those days, Tommy never needed to get into the zone. His partners on shoots, all known actresses in the industry, never needed to get into the zone. Tommy was comfortable and made his partners comfortable, even around twenty other

people (back in the days of house shoots in the valley), most of them strangers. Didn't matter the gender of his partner or how attracted he found himself to the person, Tommy Fingers was able to achieve an erection. He could even finish on demand as well, a hot commodity in a business that hinged on the male orgasm or no one got paid.

Tommy tossed striped balls and solid balls into pockets around the table until Sean craned his neck around the camera he had attached to a tripod across the room. The camera sat by an old unused black bar. The bars' finish was once glossy, but now there were scuffs and years of unwashed finger print residue covering its surface.

There were now less than 340,000 people waiting for the stream to start. The drop was troubling, given that many viewers kept the app open and either hung out in the chat or went about whatever it was they were doing while waiting for the stream to start. When filming started, Jimmy sent messages to the chat as well as push notifications for those who had them turned on. They would receive a viewer bump when the stream started, but in their third year traveling around campuses, that bump would be minimal. This close to filming, or at least the intended start time, the bulk of their audience was already queued up if they were planning to watch.

Despite a healthy relationship with their contact, Reggie, over at Porn Factory, the numbers signaled a bleak future for College Coed Copulation Party. In their cramped hotel rooms at night, when it was only the three of them, they figured maybe that was a blessing. It was hard for them to determine whether their passion for the project or the viewers had started declining first, but, by episode #450, they didn't care which it was. They tried to come up with new gimmicks when the viewers first started to leave: highlighter raves, costume themes, party games. Nothing stuck, and it all cost money.

Tommy looked down at the table. He knelt and collected the balls he'd just slid into various pockets. He put them two at a time back onto the table from the return. He put the solid yellow 1-ball at the very top of the rack followed by two random balls, one striped one solid in the other two corners. Tommy filled in the rest of the rack around the spot where the 8-ball and another stripe and another solid make up the smallest inner triangle. He finished by putting the 8-ball into the center and uncentering then re-centering the rack on the black and white bulls-eye shaped foot spot stuck to the green felt.

“Are you putting those in the right order?” Sean asked, leaning against the old bar. He pressed buttons on the handheld 4K camera he used for filming alongside the one already mounted on the tripod.

“It sort of doesn't matter,” Tommy said.

“Morose much?” Sean looked up from the camera. “What happened to your authenticity?” He tried to smile at the end which, as tended to happen when people force a smile, ended in a grimace instead.

“No, like, in the game it doesn't matter. Never mind. They're set up and ready to be broken again.”

“But not until we're rolling, buckaroo.”

“Not until we're rolling.”

Sean had been with the College Coed Copulation Party crew since the beginning. New to the industry, he'd started as a gopher, mostly handling the various unlabeled plastic bottles of clear gels and liquids required on set. Part of his job was providing the correct gel or liquid when requested. The other part of his job was to know these nearly-always clear gels and liquids apart and ensure no one used the wrong bottle on the wrong body part. Some gels were meant to

mimic cum, others were used to clean genitals, some were expensive body lotions. Sean was promoted to boom operator around the time Porn Factory made them ditch one of their vans along with the equipment and crew typically inside of it. He became the lead camera operator when the crew lost the second van and could suddenly afford only one camera operator. Along the way, he picked up the new makeup techniques required for high-definition camerawork. The crew lost two highly-skilled makeup artists the same time they gave up the second van to another traveling team pulling in more viewers and using younger actors and less-demanding directors.

Back when they drove three vans and employed a whole crew, they could roll up on a college town with a student body of under a thousand any night between Thursday and Sunday and find a gaggle of coeds. Any school over ten thousand, they could show up on a Tuesday and have no problems whatsoever. Currently, however, the three men were lucky to get a good night of filming out of a weekend on a campus of twenty- thousand plus. They used to park their vans right in front on the main nightlife street on campus and bars would fight to comp them whatever they could: rooms, drinks, meals. Now, Jimmy argued with bar owners about getting their parking validated for the night, and with their decreased funding and lack of bidding wars, drive-thru windows were their main source of sustenance.

Another knock at the door and Jimmy Mortimer's head appeared again, this time all smiles. He managed to keep his face upon seeing the LED sign read 325,876. Then changed to 325,850.

“Everyone decent?” he joked “The message is out to the world. We’ve found our starlet. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Singular?” Sean grunted.

“We’re decent, Jimmy,” Tommy said.

“Boo Boo, how’s that for an introduction?” Jimmy asked. “Let’s give us a little more razzle dazzle.”

The door opened further to reveal the rest of the director: faded jean jacket, wrinkled band t-shirt, vintage destroyed blue jeans, and high-top Velcro sneakers. A woman’s head peered around him to see into the backroom where Tommy and Sean were waiting. She stepped out from behind Jimmy. She wore a sundress and flats. Her muted sundress juxtaposed her tow-colored hair. Jimmy and the coed stood another moment in the doorway before Jimmy Mortimer gestured for her to enter the room.

“Meet Anna,” Jimmy Mortimer said, his smile taking up most of his face.

“Andi,” the woman said.

“Nice to meet you, Andi,” Tommy said. He walked around the pool table to shake her hand.

“This, Andi, is Tommy Fingers,” Jimmy said, adding a slight inflection on her name.

“Tommy,” Tommy said.

“Sean,” Sean said. He waved from the corner with their cameras.

Andi nodded at Sean and walked over to the pool table. Jimmy tensed up from the doorway and quickly entered the room.

“Andi, you said you’re a sophomore?” Jimmy asked. He reached for the small of her back, which caused her to flinch, leading her away from the table.

“Yes,” Andi said. She looked at the barstools around a small table, placed between the pool table and the unused bar. Then, she looked at a stained, yellow couch near where he was working on the cameras. The couch rounded out the room in terms of furniture. She remained standing in front of the pool table.

“Best time of your life,” Jimmy said to no one. “Shall we get started?”

“That’s what they say,” Andi said.

Jimmy smiled to the room. “Sean, how we doin’?”

“We’re ready.”

“Andi, like I mentioned out there, we typically start with the interview section. A little get-to-know you to peak the viewers’ interest. Let them know you’re full of depth and insight, that sort of thing,” Jimmy said.

“I’m not sitting on that couch.”

Jimmy looked around the room as if for the first time. He pointed to the barstools with the round table in between.

“Sure,” Andi said. She walked over and hopped up on one of the stools, fixing her dress and crossing her legs. “Isn’t this, like, a little high up?”

Sean shrugged. Jimmy frowned.

“You could lean against the table,” Tommy suggested.

“You could absolutely lean against the table,” Jimmy said.

Andi hopped down from the chair and tried leaning against it. Her eyes flashed surprise as it began to move, and she grabbed the table for support.

Jimmy reached for her arm but did not actually grab it. “Careful now,” he said.

Tommy retreated to the pool table again, hand immediately seeking the cue ball to toss against the felt side cushion.

“Boo Boo, could you leave the table alone?” Jimmy asked. “Sean, camera. Now, Andi, let’s hear a little bit about yourself.”

Sean moved the tripod in front of Andi, checked the lens, and fixed the zoom. He stepped back from the device.

They were finally live: 324,261 viewers.

“Well, I’m from right here in town, actually. Graduated Middletown High back in ‘18. Go Panthers.”

Tommy and Sean looked at each other. Townie. Nearly thirty. But she was all they had, and they were grateful for Andi’s presence.

“Stayed home for school,” Jimmy said. “Keeping it local at thee Middletown State University. Well, what better way than to-”

“MTSU? Get out, wouldn’t have gotten in there. MTCC for me. Late start to higher education, I suppose. Go Otters.”

Jimmy twitched. If Andi noticed, she played it off. She smiled into the camera, even provided enthusiasm at the celebrating of her mascots.

“Any boyfriend in the picture? You’re a beautiful girl, you must have a boyfriend.”

“No boyfriend,” Andi said.

Jimmy coughed.

“No serious boyfriend, I mean,” Andi said.

Jimmy sniffed this time, signaling they should try that again.

318,515 viewers.

“Any boyfriend, Andi? You’re so hot, you must have a boyfriend, right?”

Andy stared and smiled into the camera.

“An-”

Andi pouted. She even looked around as if she wanted to make sure this conversation was still private.

“He’d kill me, if he found out,” Andi said. Her face shifted from faux-fear to conspiratorial, eyes locked onto the lens of the camera. “He’s so jealous of you Tommy, he won’t even watch College Coed Copulation Party with me.”

“We won’t tell if you won’t,” Jimmy said. He matched his tone to hers.

Jimmy continued with the questions. The viewer count dipped below 315,000 as the interview went on longer than usual. Then, it reached 310,00 as Andi fumbled with a few more questions. It dropped under 305,000 when Jimmy snapped at her to remember what they talked about during their off-camera interview (something never discussed on-camera). Soon, less than 300,000 people were watching the livestream.

“Andi, that’s great. Really great stuff,” Jimmy said after a painful ten minutes. “Now, would you mind joining Tommy over at the pool table.”

“Sure,” Andi said. She walked over and stood in front of Tommy, waiting for instructions. “Hi,” she said.

Oral first was a standard of the industry. It was filmed even before the girl(s) stripped in front of the camera.

Sean moved the tripod, lowered it, and grabbed the handheld camera as well. For the next five minutes, everything would be from Tommy’s waist down, regardless of the camera.

Andi knelt and went for Tommy’s belt, then his button, then his zipper. She flashed a smile and said, “AndiGurl420 on all the major platforms. Eh, en, dee, eye, gee, you, ar, el, then the number 420.”

Jimmy audibly groaned as the LED screen showed 289,367 viewers. The girls were told to wait till the end of the shoots before giving away their social media usernames.

Jimmy walked over to the laptop to type the username for the chat anyway, pinning his comment to the top of the chat. Not that he needed to. Aside from the sporadic eggplant and water drop emojis, many of them meant to be ironic and not indicative of the stream, there wasn't much popping up in the chat box.

Tommy focused while Andi got started.

284,200 viewers. They were leaving en masse.

Tommy turned away from the numbers and increased concentration on his genitals. Andi noticed it too. He could feel her attempts to make him interested in what she was doing down there. She was practiced; she knew what she was doing. Tommy managed, just barely, to keep his erection and keep his face from appearing too concerned.

268,983 viewers.

"Fuck these people," Tommy whispered.

Jimmy stood up from watching the stream on the laptop. "What was that Boo Boo?" he asked. "Sean, let's get a new angle."

Sean raised the tripod legs so the camera was filming Andi from above. Then, he got on his knees, then on all fours, and he crawled between the two of them with the handheld camera. On his back, Sean positioned the handheld until he found an angle he liked then gave Jimmy a thumbs-up from the floor.

Andi continued.

Tommy reached for the cue ball behind him on the pool table. He gripped the cue ball managing to maintain interest down where Andi was still trying so hard with her mouth. But he couldn't avoid the numbers, and he certainly couldn't control the numbers.

262,003 viewers.

Jimmy did the best he could to tell Tommy with his eyes to put the cue ball down.

258,431 viewers. The hemorrhaging of viewers continued.

Tommy squeezed the cue ball tighter, losing his tumescence. The viewers could tell immediately, Andi became noticeably more frustrated, leading to rougher maneuvers on Tommy's penis. It didn't work.

"I'm sorry, Sean," Tommy said in preparation.

"What?" Sean whispered, trying to keep the shot he had.

Tommy threw the cue ball backward. It contacted balls at the other end of the table and the noise surprised Andi, who bit down slightly. Tommy produced a yelp and kicked out his right foot, which caught Sean on the side of the nose.

"Jesus fuck," Sean yelled. "What the fuck, Tommy?" he yelled, dropping the camera and grabbing his already-bleeding nose.

"Fucking Christ," Jimmy said, jumping up from the laptop and tripping over the cord of the LED sign. He fell to the floor and the sign landed next to him. Still working, the sign read 252,641 viewers.

"Oh, shit. I'm so sorry," Andi said. She pulled away from Tommy and crab-walked a few feet back from the men, trying to provide space for the variously-injured men.

Tommy squatted. He tried to help Sean with the bleeding, his genitals hovering inches from the injured cameraman's face. Andi's bite had been minor; the kick Tommy gave was significantly more forceful.

Jimmy scrambled with the LED sign, setting it back upright reading 245,723 viewers. He lumbered over to Andi, attempting to gauge her willingness to shift gears and strip out of her clothes.

"Sean, could you slide to the other side of the table for me?" Jimmy asked. "And could you whimper a little quieter, perhaps?"

No one but Tommy noticing their viewer count had not only levelled off, but jumped back to over 250,000 active viewers. Those remaining when Andi bit Tommy must have put the word out that mayhem was ensuing on the set. This was a short-lived bump, getting them back up to over 385,000 viewers.

"I'll flag down someone to call a paramedic," she said. She hovered in the doorway, staring at Tommy, still naked from the waist down, and Sean, holding his nose and still bleeding profusely. "AndiGurl420," she yelled before letting the door close and heading out back out into the bar.

Tommy stood up, watching the LED sign tick back down as viewers left. Even a broken nose couldn't sustain viewers. Tommy stepped over Sean, still on the floor, and grabbed the tripod. He stepped past Jimmy, leaning against the wall with his head in his hands, grabbing one of the stools with his other hand. He turned the laptop so he could see what the tripod saw. The handheld's screen showed the off-white wall and nothing else; viewers could decide which feed to watch, or whether they wanted to watch both.

Tommy unplugged the LED screen showing the viewer count.

The bar's managers, two broad-shouldered ex-hockey players, entered the room. One carried a plastic first-aid kit.

Tommy positioned the tripod so he would be in-frame standing in front of the supine Sean and kneeling managers. If they noticed, neither manager commented on what Tommy was doing as they administered basic first aid to Sean. Jimmy had not moved from his spot against the wall, had not even looked up from his hands. Without the LED sign, there was no way for Tommy to see how many people were still logged into the stream. Regardless of his current viewer count, Tommy Fingers continued tugging on his member standing in front of the tripod, every second coming closer to finishing the stream for College Coed Copulation Party #450.

5 THE HILL FIRE

Jesus caught fire sometime before midnight. One of the late-shift police officers called Police Chief James Reynolds who, while on his way to the church, called Reverend Albert Henry. By the time their two vehicles reached the bottom of the hill leading to the back entrance of Bryce United Methodist Church, Jesus' whole left arm had nearly burned away. The hillside already had residents setting up their lawn chairs and carefully wheeling stocked coolers through the grass, down from the main parking lot overlooking the church and its immolating savior.

Jesus was thirty-five feet tall and made entirely out of wood. He wore his traditional robe and sandal getup, arms outstretched, palms pointed heavenward over His head. Jesus stood next to the church's entrance in the center of the drop-off turn-around. He wasn't facing the church or the hillside; he faced Interstate 70, where, separated by a gnarly line of brush and overgrowth, He kept watch over both the east and westbound lanes between two exits. Much of the stretch between those exits was lined with billboards: restaurants, car dealerships, an RV-friendly motel, the strip club a few exits West. There were even two billboards advertising the other church in Catersburg (Grovewood Lutheran), these billboards being closest in proximity to Jesus.

The fire had already caused a few cars to pull off and delay their travels to watch Him burn for a little while. Unseen from the hillside, or even the turn-around, a few white LED headlights glowed from where these cars were parked, the drivers instinctually angling their vehicles to illuminate Jesus. Some people sat in their cars, some on their hoods, most of them kids feverishly trying to get the best picture on their cellphones to post on social media.

Police and firefighters already on the scene were milling around the church entrance with orange cones, trying to decide the best method for blocking off the turn-around. Heat from Jesus warmed the already mild July air. Mrs. Henry used the lift in their van to lower her husband, the

Reverend, out of the side door then kissed his cheek. Following her husband's instructions before he gave them, she drove back up the long driveway to the parking lot to keep an eye on things from up there. The church's main parking lot was quickly filling with cars belonging to members of both the Bryce United and Grovewood Lutheran congregations. Even the agnostics were showing up on the hill. For one summer night only, Jesus would bring Cartersburg's population together. Jesus on fire was an event not to be missed.

As Police Chief Reynolds and Reverend Henry stared up at their burning messiah, a mechanical roar both men recognized came from the top of the hill. A red pickup with oversized wheels and vanity exhaust pipes on either side of the cab drove down the driveway from the parking lot above. Instead of waiting for one of the police officers to move it, the truck drove over a few of the orange cones used for the first blockade. It was the Fire Chief, whose truck turned with erratic precision over the curb of the turn-around and onto the grass at the bottom of the hill. The Fire Chief turned his truck completely around and got it facing the bottom of the driveway.

"Jesus Christ," Reverend Henry said, flicking the joystick on his wheelchair forward to roll toward the truck.

Police Chief Reynolds walked behind the Reverend. Fire Chief Donald Abernathy Jr. rolled up his tinted, driver's-side window, waited for the last few bars of a rock song to end, then killed the engine. He threw open the door and jumped down onto the grass, not bothering with the metal step under the door. He pulled up his jeans, squinted at the Police Chief and the Reverend, then turned to Jesus, whose whole left arm was ablaze. The fire was starting to creep up His shoulder and into His armpit. He had already started to illuminate the turnaround and hillside, even the parking lot above.

“Shit, Jim, that arm’s a fire hazard,” the Fire Chief said to his police counterpart. “I know you folks been losin’ cheeks in the seats lately, but I have to say this is an irresponsible way to try and drum up enthusiasm.”

“Thanks, Donny,” Chief Reynolds said.

“And Reverend, put that damn mouthpiece on, you’re gonna kill yourself,” the Fire Chief said, looking down at the Reverend.

Reverend Henry, plastic oxygen mask around his neck, reached for it, scanned the hillside in vain for a glimpse of his wife, and let the mask drop back down to just below his collarbone.

“Glad you could join us, Junior,” Reverend Henry said. He flicked the joystick on his chair and turned to face the fire.

“Kind of my wheelhouse, aint it? Even if you are the competition, religiously speaking, of course.”

“Then let’s get it out and get these people on their way,” Police Chief Reynolds said.

“Well, now, hold on,” Reverend Henry said. He coughed, conceded defeat by the smoke, and pulled the respirator to his face.

“Reverend don’t tell me,” Police Chief Reynolds started.

“Let him talk, Jimmy,” the Fire Chief said.

“Chief Abernathy, what is your opinion with this?” Reverend Henry asked, his breath fogging up the respirator.

“Reverend, all due respect, we’re talkin’ gravity. You keep Him burning and you risk the whole hill catching fire once pieces start raining down. Not to mention if a wind picks up. Plus there’s potential to, you know, reach the church.”

“He’s right,” Chief Reynolds said.

“No shit, I’m right. They didn’t make me Fire Chief for my good looks alone, Jimbo.”

The fire crawled in a weird straight line across Jesus’ chest, turning toward His neck. It would soon spread down his stomach to where His belly-bottom would have been, had the sculptor decided Jesus had a belly-bottom. Maybe there was one under the carved folds of His robe.

A white van reached the bottom of the hill, its side door rolling open before the vehicle was put in park. As soon as the van stopped, the BUMC elder council gingerly stepped out the rear and walked over to the three men.

The last member of the council, driver as well as owner of the van, Ruby Shoemaker, closed her door and joined the group with a bundle of foil in her hands.

“They got food trucks up there. They’re coming up with new food stuffs.”

The vendors and the local news van were parked beside each other near the back of the almost-full parking lot. A news crew from the city half an hour east pulled up in a van much newer than that of their regional counterpart. The crews nodded to each other and, both ready to shoot, walked to opposite sides of the hilltop to begin conducting interviews.

Once the smell from the food trucks reached the people on the hill, families sent emissaries up to the parking lot with cash in hand. It didn’t take long for the hotdog vendor to create the Messy Messiah chili dog and the pizza vendor to take the first order for a Devil’s Own Three Meat Pizza. Both were hits with not only the hill crowd but the news crews as well, the

latter able to add a little fun onto the end of their report on the Cartersburg Hill Fire. That title was misleading in terms of the current situation on the hill, since the hill was not on fire, just crowded with onlookers, but it made for good television and a great tag for those discussing the story online.

The excitement on the hill could be partially attributed to Buck Hyde bringing some of the big halogen lights he usually lent to the youth soccer fields from his hardware store. The illumination gave validation to the crowd on the hillside, as if no longer sitting in darkness was reason alone.

When they weren't lining up to be interviewed, the more social-conscious members of the Cartersburg community made a point of getting around the hill. Based on their affiliations and friendships, pockets coalesced around charcoal grills and tables of light beer and boxed wine. Side-eyed glances made it clear that, while Cartersburg could come together to watch a thirty-five-foot-tall burning Jesus, they would not fully assimilate. There were still rivalries. Each group needed to have the loudest laughter, or cite the most scripture involving fire, or represent the city better than anyone else in front of the television cameras making the rounds on the hillside. Jesus had been burning for more than an hour. The more He burned, the higher the stakes. Members of Grovewood Lutheran saw themselves as the less-showy (more righteous) faithful in town, but they had to balance that superiority with compassion and concern now that the cameras were here. The Bryce congregation still had to decide what, exactly, a thirty-five-foot tall burning Jesus meant for their church and their congregation, preferably before He came raining down on the church and lower part of the hillside.

The fire progressed as the crowd continued to grow. To people in the parking lot at the top, the hillside was a mass of people moving between groups and sharing their food and drinks. Both groups, those above and below, mostly ignored the presence of the other.

The various turn-around, hillside, and parking-lot conversations halted as a crack came from the statue and Jesus' flaming head fell to the turn-around, bursting into cinders. There was a gasp from the crowd, who then went back to their mingling. Now He was headless, and both arms were ablaze. Really, everything from the waist up was on fire or had broken off the statue already.

"That's it, I'm heading for the hydrants," the Fire Chief said.

"Stop him," Ruby Shoemaker said.

The firefighters stationed around the hydrant near the church's entrance deferred to their elders and made way as the group surrounded the water source.

"Junior, get your guys," Chief Reynolds said.

"Jimberino, hold your tongue," the Fire Chief said.

"Now, Ruby, hasn't this gotten out of hand?" the Reverend asked, rolling slowly over to the where the council stood.

The small group closed ranks around the hydrant as the Reverend stopped his wheelchair in front of them.

"Ruby Shoemaker, you get the hell away from there," the Fire Chief said.

"Junior," Ruby squawked.

The Reverend flicked the joystick and the wheelchair spun to face the Fire Chief.

"Junior, please," Reverend Henry said.

“Whaterya gonna do, Junior?” the Police Chief said.

“I’m gonna knock you out, Jimmy. Just like senior year, just like when we were kids, just like I’ve always done. This is my show. There’s a fire and the Cartersville Fire Department is going to put it out.”

“I’d like to see that,” the Police Chief said. “Any of that. The knocking out part or the putting out part. Either one.”

The Reverend’s wheelchair backed up so he could face both Chiefs. He took a long pull from the respirator.

“Christ, boys, stop it,” the Reverend said.

“Reverend,” Ruby Shoemaker said.

The wheelchair turned to Ruby and the council.

“Ruby, you aren’t helping,” Reverend Henry said.

“I don’t right care, Reverend. I’m sorry. If God intended to sacrifice His son one more time, then that’s what’s going to happen. You’ve made your barricade, now let Him burn. It’s only right.”

“Reverend, you’ve got a tight window to sort all these out, I’m gonna go have a smoke,” the Fire Chief said. “Don’t let the opportunity for publicity get in the way of your obligations to keep your flock safe.”

“Those things’ll kill you,” Reverend Henry yelled from behind the respirator.

“Same as this fire would,” the Fire Chief said.

The hill continued to pack in with visitors from towns over, families from cities away. Near dawn, a van pulled up a few blocks from the hill, the closest it could park. The van differed from Ruby Shoemaker's in a variety of ways, as it differed from those of the news crew: it was much longer, it was windowless, the seats had been removed, there was an armor-clad knight with a flaming sword impaling a grizzly bear painted across both sides. The van belonged to Our Greatest Sacrifice ministry, a non-denominational church from rural Illinois, which welcomed controversy and violence in the name of God.

The twenty-three members living on the church's compound had loaded up their van as soon as the first videos were shared online. The church was known for "taking their ministry on the road" at a moment's notice as well as "driving faster than their angels could fly" if they saw an opportunity to get their message on television or, better yet, into the unwilling ears of real flesh-and-blood sinners. They sped over at 80 miles per hour to reach Jesus before He was engulfed or extinguished. Reaching Him before one of those two outcomes was imperative to their image and their media attention. They lived for any opportunity to profess their unique view of God to the masses.

Barnabas Atwood threw open the driver's door and stepped down from the van. He adjusted his fire-engine red robes, snorted, snorted harder, and launched a wad of spit onto the street. He pulled open the door and took in the twenty-two members of his congregation, squatting or sitting on the floor in the back of the van.

"How we doin' back here?" he sneered.

"Remy cracked his head pretty bad on one of those bumps. He ain't responding," one of the men said.

"Leave the door open for him to get some air, we'll deal with it later."

The twenty-one conscious members of the OGS congregation exited the van two at a time until they were all standing around Barnabas Atwood.

“Which way?” Barnabas asked.

“That way, the way we came in,” one of the women said, face illuminated by her cellphone.

She pointed up the road.

“Then that way it is,” Barnabas said.

The members of Our Greatest Sacrifice followed their leader into the night toward the hill fire.

At the bottom of the hill, Atwood’s megaphone couldn’t be heard until Barnabas and his congregation had passed through the parking lot and reached the top of the hill. The OGS members brought a crowd of anger behind them as Atwood and his acolytes faced what was now only a pair of tall burning legs. The OGS members were already being shoved and verbally abused by the crowd around them. They welcomed the abuse and egged on those Cartersburg residents already infuriated by their presence. Down by the turn-around and the flaming half of the savior, the bickering stopped as they heard the first screeches of the megaphone.

At first, it was mostly a shrill mess of sound. Deciphering the message of the newcomers was further obfuscated by the hill people. Their resistance to the twenty-two new arrivals created a cacophony flowing down the hillside like a banner at a football game. As the sound grew and changed, the sun began to rise over Cartersburg. Daylight, however, would not stop what the OGS congregation had set into motion.

“Residents of Cartersburg, viewers across the country and those streaming these events across God’s kingdom.” The words from the megaphone were coming from the center of the

hillside as the news crews converged on the little circle formed by Barnabas Atwood's faithful around their leader. "How much clearer a sign do you need? He's more than mad, He would not immolate His only son if you had not angered Him in a way like never before."

The crowd on the hill pushed against the OGS circle.

"He sacrificed his son once, can you imagine what you must have done for Him to do it again?"

"Stop him," Ruby Shoemaker said, pushing both Chiefs toward the hill.

Police Chief Reynolds sent his officers into the crowd. He turned to the Fire Chief who made a show of sighing then told a few of his fire fighters to help as well.

"See," Barnabas said. "They're sending in their thugs to put a stop to us. They don't want the truth set free. His truth."

The OGS circle closed tighter as members of the hillside threw punches to break their ranks.

"Faithful, witness this madness. They're afraid. They know our faith and it's a mirror for their own hypocrisy. Hold strong."

"Stop him, do something." Ruby continued to push at the Chiefs.

"Ruby, calm down, Jesus." The Fire Chief shook the woman off.

"The world is watching. The world can see you assault our non-violent, peace-loving family," Atwood screeched.

"No." Ruby looked to the Reverend, then to the council. "No, no, no."

Ruby Shoemaker stumbled off toward the statue.

"Ruby, no," Reverend Henry spun his wheelchair and rolled after her.

"Albert, no." Mrs. Henry came running from her car.

“Meredith, what are you-” the Reverend turned but never stopped rolling after Ruby Shoemaker.

Meredith Henry reached her husband. She dug in her shoes as the chair dragged her across the asphalt.

“Aww, come on,” the Fire Chief said. He ran to his truck and threw the vehicle into drive.

The truck roared past the Reverend dragging his wife and then past Ruby, who was trancelike, heading toward what was left of Jesus. The Fire Chief pushed the accelerator down farther and gripped the steering wheel as his truck climbed onto the small platform the statue stood on. His grill cut Jesus off at the kneecaps. The flaming thighs of their Lord and Savior landed on the windshield, blinding the Fire Chief, and the truck disappeared into the brush, speeding toward the highway. A second impact with a tree stump sent the Fire Chief’s head into the steering wheel, knocking him unconscious as his truck tore through the guardrail. Entering onto the freeway, the truck smashed into a mid-sized sedan and pushed it across both west-bound lanes. The Fire Chief’s truck rolled until it reached the bottom of the grassy median, where it finally came to a rest.

Ruby and the other members of Bryce United’s elder council stopped talking.

The Reverend stopped rolling, and his wife stumbled from no longer moving forward.

“The dumb son of a bitch. Just can’t help himself,” the Police Chief said. He ran across the turn-around, followed the truck’s hole through the brush, and slid down the embankment to the freeway.

“Look there,” the megaphone screeched. “Someone decided to finish the job themselves. Heathens, you’re all heathens. You lack faith, you lack deeds to prove your faith. You lack conviction to-”

The megaphone blared feedback then went silent as the circle of OGS members broke apart and the crowd on the hill converged on Barnabas Atwood. Even those at the bottom didn’t immediately notice the fire reaching the grass. Some Cartersville residents did notice and forgot their anger enough to scramble up the hillside. Those farther up, near the battle with Our Greatest Sacrifice and points higher, finally took notice and many, but not all, joined those running uphill away from the flames. The megaphone screeched as Barnabas screamed under the mass of bodies on top of him.

Firefighters and police officers broke off from trying to contain the crowd to rush back down to get a hose hooked up. The firefighters at the top of the hill screamed into their walkie-talkies for those below to keep a clear path for the water line. Putting out the hill fire was met with a further complication as the water flowing through the hoses, along with the precarious footing caused by incline of the hill, met with the general confusion of an all-out brawl and caused several people to lose their balance and roll down into the flames. The fire fighters at the bottom turned their hoses on those unfortunate people caught in the flames, until more broke off from the fight, lost their balance, and started rolling down the hillside. Bodies rolled through the flames, some were put out, some reached the scorched remnants of Jesus in the turn-around with their clothes still lit. Others ran down the hill, either to save the ones on fire or prove they were just as devoted as someone they incorrectly thought was willing to toss themselves into the warm embrace of their savior.

As Chief Reynolds tried to pull the Fire Chief out of his wrecked truck, he saw various friends and neighbors break through the brush, burning and wailing and running like their salvation depended on it. Those people on the highway who hadn't fled were filming from the safety of their vehicles, headlights illuminating the scene.

6 SHARING SPACE

Since the blindfold outside of Maude's Crab Castle, everything had been darkness and pain. In the parking lot, a brusque hand forced him into a trunk followed shortly by the sound of a car door closing.

The pain came from the zip tie around his wrists, along with the driver's lack of concern with preserving the suspension of the car. Was suspension right? In terms of driving over uneven terrain? Was the word chassis involved? And then there were shocks, the little plastic accordion things. What did the workings of a car matter to him, though? Every mental tangent ended just as suddenly as it started, and there he was back in the trunk, being banged against the lid.

Every bump sent something else to remind him of his plight. Sometimes he got lucky when the car sent him airborne and he landed on top of something hard or dull instead of being smacked with it. Mostly it was the shovels (to him, two shovels clearly denoted two men involved in his kidnapping), playing a game of which one made contact with his head or his knee. The owner of the car had shoes in the trunk too, running shoes he determined after rolling over to push the shovels away. Those felt clean, smelled clean too, like the shovels. The laces were stiff in his mouth, the plastic tips free from fray. But he wasn't concerned with running shoes.

He wasn't concerned with the pungent mixture of solids and liquids expelled from his body he was rolling around in either. What concerned him was his fate once the car came to a stop. He went back and forth on whether death by the hands of these men or finding a way to do it himself in the confines of this trunk was the preferable option. Say he decided to let the car reach its destination: should he hope for an execution-style bullet to the brain, or was digging his

own grave a situation in which he could plead for his life? No, he couldn't shake the notion that dying there in the trunk would be less traumatic than whatever waited at the end of that car ride.

Now, if he managed to suffocate before reaching their destination, the plan once the car was parked mattered little. But there was the issue of actually suffocating himself. Not necessarily the having enough gumption to do it part, but the literal act of successful suffocation. Would it be enough even to go halfway and just knock himself unconscious for a while? Hold his breath long enough to pass out? Maybe he would luck out and not start breathing again before they had gotten around to killing him.

A roll of toilet paper found its way to his face. Until it disappeared again, he considered how to wrap it around his mouth and nose using only his forehead and his lips, maneuvering his neck in circles. Probably for the best it disappeared back into the trunk, the plan proved convoluted. Then a drill rolled his way again. Wouldn't forcing a drill into one's temple result in being killed instantly? Most drill bits were only a few inches long. Were they even that long? The drill was battery-powered, he knew that from the first time it bounced his way. Assuming he had the wherewithal to go through with suicide, driving his head directly into the drill bit was presumably less complicated than trying to turn the drill on and do it that way.

So how to get the drill in place. Then, how to find the mental fortitude and kinesis required to drive it into his skull. It needed to work on the first try or not at all. But he wasn't convinced his first attempt would produce favorable results. In fact, the bit would probably go in a little then there'd be no way to drive it in any further. A direct hit to the temple sounded painful, whether it broke the skin or not. How would his abductors react if they found him rolling around in a trunk full of vomit and urine and probably a lot of blood? All of that mixing with their personal belongings? Wait, fuck them.

He either had to kill himself or do nothing at all. There was no middle ground when zip-tied and blindfolded in a trunk. It was the drill or nothing, and he needed to find a way to get it fixed in one place. Then he would be able to – and, there it went, back into the ether with the tennis shoes and the toilet paper. Waiting it out and discovering his fate on the other end of the ride suddenly didn't sound so bad. They must be getting close. And whatever reason for the abduction, the men in the front of the car might be reasoned with to some degree. Assuming they spoke English. Would they be more or less intimidating if he understood what they were saying to him after reaching their destination?

Maybe he had something they wanted. Doubtful, but not impossible. Maybe he was the wrong guy and they'd let him go with sincere apologies. Or he was the right guy, but they let him go upon discovering a pathetic shell of a man covered in a variety of his own fluids. He assumed they were driving into the woods, the town was surrounded by forest. If they buried him, or he dug his own grave, it wouldn't be near the road. So they needed to walk. Maybe that was what the tennis shoes were for, because they would be walking for a long while. That would be when he would plead with his fellow man to choose another night to take a life. Or if it absolutely had to be that night, why his life? Not to condemn someone else to his fate, or anything. But honestly, there were other people, not just members of his own family, who considered him valuable. Couldn't he be valuable to the man or men in the front seat?

What if some world existed where people kidnapped each other as a game, and he had somehow entered that world? The car would park and they'd let him out and there would be one of those portable, pressurized showers waiting. He could clean himself up, there would be a change of clothes, something nice, and then he would follow a path of paper lanterns deep into the woods. There, inside a large canvas tent would be all his friends, everyone he'd ever known,

his parents and his sisters, little league teammates, even anonymous women he had passed on the subway and found especially beautiful. And they would all be there just for him, saying things like, “Good job, we’ve been watching the whole time. You did exactly what any of us would have done in your situation.” And, “All of these beautiful women from the train find you exceptionally brave and attractive.” Even the men who abducted him would approach the head table sometime later that evening and say he was by far their favorite kidnapping. No contest.

7 THROUGH PROCESS OF ELIMINATION

Eight women went home the first night. In terms of those deemed unworthy of Anthony's love then or ever, Kelly was too opinionated and Im'Uni's hair was too long. Jennifer and Susie L. were too thin in places despite being "well-proportioned," while Molly and Cindy were too tall. The viewing audience went ballistic over the last two, as neither woman was taller than Anthony. Anna and Karri started arguing three drinks in and Anna received thirteen stitches from one of the onsite nurses. Due to the "No Physical Altercations" stipulation, both women got the boot by a group of security and show producers.

The next morning, one was sent home due to concern about an alcohol abuse problem. There's always one. Jordan S. wasn't much of a drinker on the outside, but in every group there's one hopeful who swims naked or constantly interrupts during the first night. As it typically went, the interrupting one got the boot, Jordan S. refusing to let any of the other women have more than a few moments alone with Anthony. The naked ones get pegged to be ready for anything, qualities very rarely resulting in being sent home so early in the season.

After two days, there were twenty women. Macy was awarded the first solo date, a trip to a grass-fed beef farm north of the city. She kissed Anthony in a helicopter and was safe for a few episodes. Later, he had drinks with four of the other women and there were tears and slut-shaming comments among them. During a group date downtown, Katelyn made a particularly brutal but undeniably accurate comment toward one of the other women with teeth which were larger than average, a juggler by profession. Anthony reprimanded her on the spot, but the words led to her elimination, despite a valiant filibuster during the elimination ceremony. At one point she hiked her skirt up and crawled across the floor leopard-style, then mimicked standing up on

hind legs and used her mouth to retrieve one of the remaining Keepsakes handed out each week from the faux-marble pedestal. Anthony told her she was mixing her metaphors.

Lauren was too adventurous of an eater, Sasha talked too much about her son, Sarah B. considered the entire process a hoax and attempted to sabotage a group date by releasing her bowels midway through a whiskey tasting. Elise missed her family, and Kimberly had a pill addiction. Amy couldn't cope with the implication of someone having a pill addiction. Mary, once extremely promising in Anthony's eyes, acted strangely after a night spent locked in a bell tower in Florence. Heather knew too much about primates. Pam and Susie B. were determined to be incompatible with Anthony after the show brought in a palm reader for one of the group dates. Regarding the latter two, Anthony admitted he wasn't looking for an "exotic" woman, and he asked that the palm reader not be held accountable for his choice (he also wanted it made clear he did not associate the palm reader's profession with the exotic vibe he received from Pam and Susie B). Macy made a faux pas at a restaurant in Paris admitting she was interested in deep-tissue scarification. Anthony found no mention of the practice upon searching the internet. A few left bawling their eyes out in the limo, proclaiming the love they found those first weeks while also cursing the show and everyone involved.

Jordan R. wandered off in Pensacola, requiring the involvement of state troopers and cadaver dogs. She was found a couple days later unharmed in Big Lagoon State Park, but anyone with such a poor luck or sense of direction could not be allowed to continue competing on the show. With Jordan C. it all came down to a rumor of a boyfriend back home. The rumor wasn't true, according to reputable sources on social media close to the show, and the audience found itself in a quandary. She received a second chance at finding love on television and chose from a coterie of mostly-Caucasian male suitors the following season. After the exodus of the remaining

Jordans, it was Emily, Kristen, and Sharon who remained. This meant it was time for the Dream Suite dates.

Emily went to Vegas, the date went well, but Anthony found her boring when it came to intimate encounters (involving multiple points of penetration). Kristen went to Seattle and, despite being a freak in the bedroom, was sent packing for failing to mention a prior manslaughter conviction from back when she was a minor. This left Sharon, who went to Miami, got along with Anthony's family, could put both legs behind her head due to abnormal joints, and was open to the concept of returning to television periodically to comment on the status of their relationship. The season finale saw the two married in Cabo, with many of the show's previous contestants in attendance seated in front of the bride and groom's friends and family.

8 NOSEDIVE

The knock at the bathroom door reminded her that her time prepping in front of the mirror had exceeded her allotment for the evening. She continued to look at herself, dabbing spots on her face to even out the makeup she applied. She imagined, as she always did during her pre-concert preparation, what her face had looked like after she took the pair of thinning shears from her hair-and-makeup assistant and carved tiny hearts into it. Aghast, her hair-and-makeup assistant fled the room, and ran out into the hallway. The pop star had carved a pretty decent heart onto her forehead and was working on her cheek when a whole gaggle of people employed by her came into the room and engulfed her.

Her carved face wasn't the only thing she imagined now. The whole scene she'd managed to etch into her brain, and it was a more permanent memory than the fading scars she now covered with makeup. The suite's bathroom suddenly expanded into the previous makeup rooms provided to her in the massive arenas where she had performed. Again, she had the scissors in her hand and the room filled with clothes and bottles and sprays, and she was working on that second heart when the door blew open and that whole mass of people started attacking her with their hands.

The night with the scissors they had been running behind schedule. The pop star's flight had landed late, and the tour bus everyone else took had arrived even later, so everyone was rushing everywhere except for the pop star. The pop star had come to the arena with her plastic cup full of frozen coffee and whip cream and a shitload of chocolate syrup totally relaxed. She became even more relaxed, nearly Zenlike, once she took the sheers. This was the feeling that kept the night so clear in her memory. The calm. So, where a knock signaling for her to hurry up

had once led to slight panic, all it did now was flood her with a feeling that all was right, and she was exactly where she needed to be.

Despite her newfound peace that night, she had a bleeding heart from her hairline down to the bridge of her nose, and the show was cancelled. So was the tour soon after, once it was clear the pop star had not, in fact, had a lone manic episode but was, more accurately, experiencing something quite profound. Apparently, fans didn't want a bleeding pop star, and you really didn't want an unrepentant and bleeding pop star. It suggested something wasn't right and wouldn't be for a very long time. Hence, the cancellation of the show, then the cancellation of the tour, then the cancellation of a forthcoming two-month recording session meant to result in the release of another album and, subsequently, the start of another tour.

Tonight, she was only able to squeeze in half an hour of prep due to an earlier interview which had run long and now an approaching group meet-and-greet the knock was most likely signaling. There was a Girl Scout troop on their way to see her. The pop star had no idea how many were in a troop, but the thought of a meet-and-greet with any number of people was overwhelming. These days, usually one or two people, typically grown women nearly her own age, came to see her before a show. Very rarely were there more than a few and rarer still a group of young girls appearing at the door to her semi-permanent suite.

The suite was forty floors above the casino where she performed five nights a week. This would be her suite at least until her most recent contract ran out, maybe longer if she could keep packing the seats. But part of that contract was never saying no to anyone anymore. She was ambivalent about meeting fans, or in this case winners of some contest, before or after her shows now. On the one hand, they wanted to see her, or at least most of them did. Some of the younger ones were openly ambivalent about meeting the pop star. On the other hand, the dwindling

number of these people made a definitive statement on her place and importance within the entertainment industry. Plus, meeting people downstairs was one thing. Sharing her personal space with strangers was another. The suite was hers, four floors removed from the rest of the world. She did not like meeting people there.

The pop star brushed a part of her right cheekbone and evened out the makeup over the M-shaped scar on her other cheek, then exited the bathroom.

Her assistant, Ashley, sat in the same chair she always did while waiting for the pop star to exit the bathroom. Ashley waited just off the bathroom door, distancing herself from the fruits and cheeses and pastries that were always on the table to the right of the bathroom along one of the walls. Between the food table and the door leading out of the suite, Stephen, her bodyguard, stood. Stephen never stared at the food. He always focused a few feet above the table at a painting the pop star had purchased to exert some force on the status on her permanence in this suite. The painting, a seascape at dusk, was the only artwork on the walls. She wondered why the designers of the space had kept it so clean of art.

Ashley and Stephen had seen everything since the scissors, coming on a year after the cancelled tour during the “rebuilding phase.” The rebuilding phase had come after a prolonged, management enforced, mental detoxification stage. She couldn’t be sure when exactly they had first appeared. Everything was liquid from that time, a dark, thick kind of liquid. Even after the darkest months, where she had convalesced and confessed in a California rehabilitation center, things were still hard to peg down. The assistant and the bodyguard had appeared behind her father, either un-phased or unconcerned with the events of the previous year of her life starting with the heart on her forehead. The previous assistant and the previous bodyguard were asked to leave once the lawyers got involved and the money shifted to tighter hands. The pop star had

never asked whether that was to clean house or the two had quit like the rest of her staff, overwhelmed with the degree of stink attached to a downfall like hers. She formed the opinion most of her staff had left due to a lack of desire to try and stop that downfall.

There was a brief time before Ashley and Stephen, when she was just starting to get back on her feet, when no one waited outside the bathroom for the pop star on the nights she performed. Those performances were scattered across a nearly-empty calendar, the longest distance being over two months between performances. Only the pop star remembered the empty “dressing rooms” she changed inside of during that time. Some of them had been pungent locker rooms located off high school auditoriums. There had been different food on the tables then, junkier food, and she was the only one there to eat. Sometimes, there wasn’t any food. But now, with this second chance, she had a dedicated assistant and a dedicated bodyguard, both of whom looked at her and smiled, genuinely smiled, when she exited the bathroom. They would smile even on those days when the suite was silent before she headed down the glass elevator to perform. They were rooting for her, and the pop star wanted to believe that extended beyond their job security. She had clawed her way back up to having people waiting outside her door but not yet back to people helping her get ready. She may never get back to the point of having someone do her stage makeup before performances. She could not decide if that bothered her. She told herself that it showed a frugal sense of trust in their talent on the part of her employers.

“Fourteen currently outside,” Ashley said. Her face glowed as she considered a tablet resting in her lap.

“Any apples left?” the pop star asked.

“Two. A Girl Scout troop,” Ashley said.

The pop star walked to the table and grabbed an apple. She took an expert bite without smudging her lipstick, a nightly ritual just to prove she could still do it. Then, she hacked at the fruit with a plastic knife trying to get it into slices. The skin fought back but soon gave way to a satisfying scraping sound. Ashley once asked about the apples, said the pop star could have sliced apples if she just asked. The pop star wanted whole, unblemished apples at her tables. She wanted apples and a knife, so she could personally open the apples to get at what was inside. The pop star did not want someone else slicing her apples, even if the plastic knives were difficult to cut with. She was not allowed metal knives yet. Maybe in a year, her manager told her.

Stephen turned and stepped toward the suite's exit, reaching to open the door. The knob clicked down and the door opened, and the bodyguard shifted with a practiced grace to avoid the flood of girls entering the suite. There was a giddy adult in the back of the group, seeming far more excited than any of the scouts coming through the doorway. The girls huddled around the pop star who was mid-slice, dull plastic knife supporting the thin piece of fruit inches from her gaping mouth. It took until she had chewed and swallowed for her to bring herself into the moment.

"You caught me snacking before the show," she said through a full-faced mask of exaggerated embarrassment. "Who is everyone?"

"Cadettes," the troop leader said. "What are our names?"

They all spoke at once. The pop star put on a look of concentration and let the soup of names settle somewhere irretrievable in her brain. She put the plastic knife down. "Y'all are so kind to come to my show."

“We won a contest,” one of the girls said. The pop star debated asking the girl to repeat her name but figured that would lead to all of them repeating their names. She decided for now to name her Anne.

“What kind of contest?” the pop star asked.

Stephen had resumed his post and his stare, which lined up with the singer’s current position and gave her a moment of discomfort. He rarely blinked, she had noticed early on after joining her, and his resting face was always equal parts boredom, alertness, and a despondency she was unable to place. She could not understand his infatuation with the seascape, despite his best efforts to explain the amorphous dread the scene caused to build up inside him. The pop star had offered to change the painting on more than one occasion, only to be told by the bodyguard that it made him mentally tough. He had said the painting “was like another reality, a worse one that we will never be a part of, no matter what happens.”

“We sold a shitload of cookies,” another said. She would be Margaret, the pop star determined. “Our moms picked this for the prize. We all wanted the waterski weekend at lake, but they said no.”

“Susan,” the troop leader snapped. “I’m so sorry.”

“Susan, I’m so happy y’all sold so many cookies,” the pop star said.

The girl faded to the back of the group after being chastised for her language, but the pop star couldn’t help returning to her face every time she remembered to scan the crowd of girls to show she was paying attention to all of them. Susan/Margaret was replaced by the one the pop star called Anne, who thrust the singer’s first album in her face. It was a dusty CD case, but void of cracks or scratches. The pop star opened it and saw the bright pink disc inside, which surprised her a bit, that the disc had not been lost.

“Sign, please,” maybe Anne said.

“Did you know this was my first album? I wasn’t much older than you young ladies when it came out,” the pop star said.

“My mom said she was in elementary school, isn’t that neat?” Maybe-But-Almost-Certainly-Not Anne beamed. “Cuz you’re what, like fifty?”

“That’s so neat,” the pop star said and signed. “Not quite fifty, no. Not even forty yet,” she said, realizing only the troop leader was still paying attention, albeit actively.

Her sixteen-year old face stared up from the weathered CD case. She wore a jean jacket and a pleated skirt that covered just enough of her thighs to suggest but not be suggestive. “Is this the one she bought?” The photo had been taken in the basement of a ranch house down the road from where she grew up. All the houses in her coal-country neighborhood had been ranch houses, and all of them had been rundown. Just outside of the camera lens’ sight there had been (and maybe there still was) a washer/dryer rattling through the whole shoot and a heavily stained farmhouse-style sink, dripping with a hollow and constant *thunk*. Next to those, a crowded workbench covered in tools, and spilled screws and nails on the concrete floor. To get the lighting right, her father and the neighbor had used sheets to cover the smudged windows on either side of the basement.

The photographer sent by the record label had seemed terrified the entire length of the shoot. The label had to send a different photographer a week later when reshoots were required, and she had to wear a skirt that was a half-inch shorter than the original. The pop star’s father had insisted on a local shoot. He never told her why, or much of anything else related to “the singing thing” as he called it. She had asked why the photo had not been taken somewhere in Hollywood or New York, but he had only snorted a laugh like that was the dumbest question

anyone had ever asked. By the time the shoot for the second album came around, management had wrung all control from her father and the pop star had flown out to Los Angeles. Trips to L.A. and NYC already being old hat for her by then.

“Our parents had this stuff,” Susan/Margaret said from the back of the group.

“Susan,” the troop leader hissed.

“I bet you download music now.” The pop star smiled at the troop leader to show no ill-will. She turned to another girl to deny Susan/Margaret the opportunity to respond. “Do you have one too?” She struggled and settled on Nina as the name for this one.

The girl shook her head. “I have a backpack.” She pulled at a strap and slid a backpack off her back. The pop star once again saw her face, the image from the cover of her second album, the L.A. shoot, behind warped, yellow plastic covering the front of the backpack. “You sure do,” the pop star said.

She signed and handed the backpack back to the girl. Someone (hopefully not Nina) had poked holes in the plastic where the singer’s eyes were and inked around them with pen or Sharpie, so they were two bottomless holes of black. Someone had also scratched into the plastic to make her appear to be missing teeth. The image still held a level of wholesomeness despite the defacement. There was the smallest whisper of cleavage from a silky white shirt, tied into a knot and showing off her bellybutton. The image cut off just south of her bellybutton, suggestive. Just eighteen, and to the surprise of her manager and the label, her father had said they could start the transition from pop star to sex symbol. “Whole lot of perverts out there wondering what other pictures might be on the inside pages,” he had said, possibly attempting one last grasp at control. That was before everything of her was so easily accessible on the web, even the fake stuff, pictures that usually looked like a scene from the most demented pornography she could

imagine, with even her facial expressions being warped on computers to look downright menacing attached to a stranger's nude body.

Her father had told her in front of a room-full of people she didn't understand "the business" when she asked about all the perverts. One of the two other women in the room, no doubt already hearing a great deal from the other men during her time at the label, audibly gulped at what her father had said. Her boyfriend at the time had fumed for days after she told him and refused to speak to her father for the duration of their relationship. The pop star had thought the boyfriend a little overdramatic, given that he was another teenage heartthrob and in "the business" just as long as her.

It turned out, the boyfriends' representatives were not saying those things about him. His life, she learned, was kept relatively private and that privacy was, mostly, respected by fans and the media. Hers, she quickly learned, was considered an open book to not just her fans but to anyone who cared to know it. Not that that access provided any benefits for her, of course.

The ex-boyfriend was now one of the most streamed solo recording artists in the world. He had broken it off with the pop star years before the scissors. They had dated from the time she wrapped up touring for her first album until just before the release of her third album. That third album had been the peak of her happiness, and it was the penultimate release with her first record label. The cover image dropped any semblance of wholesomeness; this was no longer the good girl who had made it out of some valley in West Virginia. A dress with a slit up the side and a neckline that disappeared into a belt of matching color and material. She had been unable to confirm whether the slit went higher than the neckline or the neckline lower than the top of the slit. She had spent much of the shoot worrying about this. If her father had still been coming to

her various appointments by then, he would probably have told her she needed to knock off the facial expressions, they made her look overly-complicated and unhappy.

“A few more, girls, then we need to let her get ready for her show tonight,” the troop leader said, pulling the backpack girl to the rear of the group.

“Ashley?” the pop star turned to the assistant, still seated, the tablet’s screen only slightly farther from her face than when she had exited the bathroom in search of an apple.

“Five, maybe ten,” Ashley said, squinting and pulling the screen closer to her face.

Her fourth album had been released out of pity by the head of the label who was on his way out the door to better things at a bigger label. It would also be the last album she released for the next half a decade, after a run of four albums in just over four years. She had found herself in a hotel room in Seattle while touring for the third album with another member of her ex’s boy band. There ended up being three members of her ex’s boy band in that room by the end of the night, and the tabloids were waiting for her in the lobby the next morning. Someone at the front desk must have made some phone calls. No one seemed to care it was the boys doing more with each other than with her. She had spent the night with three men, all of them at the time touring with her relatively recent ex-boyfriend.

What would have been different if she had never decided to follow those boys into that hotel room? They had led her there under the guise of discussing a musical collaboration. They plied her with what she still contended to be spiked drinks. She had enjoyed herself, enjoyed what they did to her and each other. Her manager had arranged for her and the boys to tour together. He had even suggested they stay in the same hotels along the way, hadn’t he?

The pop star scanned the group of girls, “Whose next? What else do we have?” Her words were earnest. These girls were the most unruly and ambivalent time capsule of her career.

They were children, and they had no clear idea of who she was. They made no attempt to mask their yawns or constant fidgeting. She supposed her father's behavior had at least prepared her for situations like this: annoyance bordering on hostility.

Another shuffled to the front. "You made pencils." The girl thrust one of these pencils into the singer's face. She could not come up with a name for this one.

"I'm not sure how to sign a pencil, sweetie."

The girl was nonplussed. She looked to the troop leader to no avail, then down at her hands, then exited back into the throng.

The next girl handed the pop star a t-shirt from the tour that promoted no album. Cursive lettering on the back documented her whereabouts between June and January, with a two-week interval at the end of September and early October for a transition to the European leg of the tour. The tour had been the haphazard attempt of an interim manager, also on the outs with various labels including hers, trying to prove his worth by putting on a successful tour for an already-falling star. It had been her first time out of the US, and she had visited ten countries during those winter months traveling through a Europe that didn't care about her anymore. So much for a good first impression. In an interview for a now-defunct teen magazine she was quoted saying, "We have fire now." This line would be included in some part of nearly every headline about the tour. It was never used to suggest how exciting the tour would be for fans, but to suggest a level of naiveté on the part of the pop star.

The tour, named The Tiny Pretty Pieces Tour, was the reinvention attempt that even her own audience had not been ready for at the time. The name was intended to suggest the pop star was more than just her poor decisions and more than just a virgin deflowered and sent down a few rungs, fame-wise. Her costumes suggested a society that had rid itself of the word "sex" or

the phrase “making love” in favor of merely the word “fucking.” She could see the disappointment in the faces of parents as she signed merchandise for their children before and after the concerts. She could even see the disappointment in the fans who were aging out of her music already and knew this was their one, cheap chance to see the pop star perform. The tickets for her previous tours before The Tiny Pretty Pieces Tour had been out of reach even for the “birthday and Christmas put together” sort of gift. The Tiny Pretty Pieces tickets were at rock bottom prices in cities she had sometimes heard of for the first time upon arrival in them early the same day as her performance.

“Thank you,” the girl with the shirt said, conceding her position.

Yet another girl replaced the one with the t-shirt. This one had a coffee mug, the image looked to have been sliced with a straight razor, creating a prismatic effect. The intricately-placed three-toed sloth wrapped around her nearly naked body were the only clue she had as to which album this cup had been produced to support. The failed album after the failed Tiny Pieces tour that had been meant to mark her return. Everything on the cup looked cubist. She scratched at one of the sloths’ bodies, trying to match the distortion with that of her own body on the cup. Paint flecked under her perfect nails, but she didn’t care. The scratching was cathartic.

“Don’t do that,” the girl snapped.

The pop star flinched and looked up from her scratching. She turned the cup around, looking for a place to sign with the silver Sharpie the girl provided. She settled on the side opposite the image, so as not to upset the girl any further. “Been through the wash a few times, this one.”

“Sure,” the girl said. She took her cup and walked backward, bumping the arms and shoulders of her fellow Girl Scouts until she reached the back to stand next to Susan/Margaret, silent and brooding near the troop leader.

The pop star regained her composure and scanned the group once more, finding another girl with the sloth CD. It was from a time in her life she pretended had been brief when she was so out of her gourd and abandoned by proper counsel, save for situations involving her estate. Those decisions had resulted in her receiving an allowance and speaking to her father only through the lawyers. Even after the rebirth of her career she was not trusted with her money, and it wasn't called her money any more. Even the illusion of control had been stripped away, like her clothing on the album covers.

Her persona during that time of aloof stardom suggested a transcendence of the temporal realm to a place no one could access, not even the boyfriend who would briefly become her husband she found herself sleeping next to most nights. This particular album cover had the pop star set against floor-to-ceiling red drapes. There was a solid gold chair to her right, which she rested one arm on for the photo. Everything about the cover screamed regal, except for her being nude and the sloth strategically covering up her nipples and pelvis.

She signed the CD and another Girl Scout approached. A quick glance over to Ashley suggested they were nearing the end of the meet-and-greet. Susan/Margaret never missed an opportunity to lock eyes with the pop star and glower. The next girl held a stuffed doll of the singer, one arm torn off and then sewn back and the tiny cotton dress stained down the front. Another held, a multi-colored mass of chewing gum the size of a baseball she didn't want signed but merely for the pop star to recognize as existing. The girl ignored the singer's insistence that she very rarely chewed gum, couldn't even remember the last time she'd popped a piece into her

mouth. One of the Girl Scouts presented her with a lock of hair, blonde hair, hair the color of her own around the time of the shearing scissors.

“Honey, what’s this?” she asked. She didn’t want to believe she was holding human hair, her own or otherwise.

“It’s hair. I know you can’t sign hair. I’m not stupid,” the girl said. Before the pop star could respond, the girl disappeared back into the group to be replaced by yet another. The pop star had lost track of how many girls commanded her attention or how long it had been since the last time she asked Ashley how much longer before they left. The pop star imagined the fourteen Girl Scouts were now forty. The part of her she had coined her “Safe Self” told her it was time to go.

She needed a small glass of water before her performance. She couldn’t hit the stage without a few minutes of lotus position. Things needed to take place and they were not taking place. The pop star knew Ashley wouldn’t allow her to leave the room without the proper preparation, but she also believed these girls had already been in her suite far too long. She’d spent years listening to her fellow pop idols tell her about their eccentricities and pre-show regimens and what happened when those regimes were not conducted to their exact specifications. Most of these conversations occurred back when journalists still called her a “National Institution” and an “American Royal.” That other artists required certain rituals too had assured her she wasn’t so odd needing her routine.

Then Susan/Margaret pushed one of the girls to the front and the girl raised a picture to her face. “I need your John Hancock on this artifact.”

“Excuse me?” the pop star asked. She looked around, wondering if Stephen or Ashley were aware of what was in front of her. Ashley’s face was aglow with tablet light, and Stephen looked lost in his painting.

The fake photo was of her, naked, legs and arms out like a starfish while she lay on an unmade bed. A smile was on the singer’s face, a genuine smile. She had been immensely happy when this photo was taken. She couldn’t remember a time when she had been so utterly bare in the presence of a camera. Even the pictures that had been turned into Polaroid’s for the “My Polaroids” box were not as clear as this photo. The girl waved it a couple times. She wanted it signed.

“Where did you—”

“Sign it,” Susan/Margaret said from the back.

She did, on the pearl-white back. Then she flipped it over and again analyzed the fake photo once more. It was her head, certainly, and the body looked remarkably similar. She stared hard at the neck, looking for signs that her head had been placed over the head of someone else, creating a “celebrity nude.” This was unlike anything she had ever seen before. Its existence fascinated her, her brain’s difficulty discerning whether the image was a gross invasion of privacy or the perverted fantasy of a particularly adept photo editor, despite knowing it to be the latter.

“Did you—” she looked at the troop leader.

“Huh?” The troop leader grabbed Susan/Margaret’s hand to remove a finger buried deep in her nose, but she didn’t look up from the effort to look at the photograph in the singer’s hand.

“What’s that she gave you?”

The neck looked so clean, and the body was so similar. The pop star had never been allowed to tattoo her body, and the photo did not show her oval-shaped birthmark on her left butt cheek, which along with the rest of her back was the only part of the body not on display in this picture. Could this have been her? Could this photo have come from that dark period in her life? Or the hazy period which occurred before the dark period? No, it was a fake. It was a meticulous fake. That neck. The lines were so clean, and the skin tone of her face matched perfectly with the skin tone of the body.

“Excuse me,” the Girl Scout said, still holding her end of the picture. Once the signature was on the back, the girl had gripped one corner, searching for the moment to pull it away from the pop star.

At one point the pop star had been obsessed with finding fake nudes of herself on the Internet. While in bed together, one of her brief boyfriends would masturbate to their late-night finds. At no point had this image surfaced in their searching. The happiness on her face, matched with the absurd pose of the body; she couldn't imagine really posing for this picture, what's more not remembering it being taken in the first place. Her then boyfriend would have been utterly in love with the picture. It was the most perfect fake nude she had ever seen. It made her question reality like she had so long ago when she was driven to use the scissors.

What did it matter if the picture was just another manufactured artifact? Someone had clearly taken the time not only to create it but to create it with a precision that caused her to seriously question its authenticity. It wasn't as if when people searched her name on the Internet this is what came up on their screens. There would probably be some extra effort required to find this picture, she learned that from her previous searches. So, what was one more manufactured image of her floating through the internet? If anything, was it not possible that it would result in

the sale of one more ticket? Some husband sees it and then two years later he and his wife are in Vegas, and he knows she's been a fan of the pop star for quite some time, so he springs for some tickets. What does it matter if that thought popped into his head because he saw a billboard then thought of the image then decided he wouldn't mind seeing the flesh and blood, albeit more covered, version of that image?

Her thoughts were interrupted.

"It's time," Ashley said, not looking up from her tablet.

Stephen suggested motion but remained glued to the seascape on the wall. Neither Stephen nor Ashley made any indication of the scene playing out in the suite, so it was as if the pop star were alone with this girl, this one Girl Scout in a group of fourteen. They had formed their own island that could never be but somehow was. Stephen and Ashley and the rest of the room seemed frozen in place. But shouldn't she be used to that?

Still the Girl Scout gripped the picture. It bent a little as the girl tried to loosen it from the pop star's hand. She must have wanted that picture intact, the nearly pristine condition in which it currently existed, whether she thought it real or a fake. Protect the picture, protect the signature. The Girl Scout tugged until the pop star gave it up and harrumphed about the effort.

In the moments before the girl turned away, the pop star contemplated reaching for the photograph one more time. She could probably have caught the girl off guard and retrieved the glossy print without too much trouble. But she made no attempt. Her life was about control, and even if the picture was a fake, it represented an alternate reality where, even at her vulnerable, the pop star was radiant. In this photograph, there had been no downfall, there was no need for a comeback. That smile held a life completely controlled by the owner. There was no breakdown in that person's past or present, no tiny heart carved into her forehead and no two humps of

another heart on her left cheek. So, she let the idea of that person go, and she hoped there was still a happier life possible for her outside of that image. By not controlling that photograph, and not destroying it before she went on stage that night, she was allowing another, radiant and explicit version of herself to survive out in the wild somewhere. The photo belonged in another reality, a worse one, one she would never be a part of no matter what happened.

She rebuilt her smile and looked around, noticing Stephen and Ashley return from their inanimate states to be her bodyguard and assistant once more. Had they seen the picture?

“But I have a poster,” one of the Girl Scouts said from the crowd.

Ashley stood, “Unfortunately, that’s all for tonight. We hope you enjoy the show. I hear you all have front row seats.”

As they were ushered out by both the troop leader and Stephen, the pop star turned away from the girls. She walked across the room and stood by the window, which looked out over the illuminated city below. She heard Susan/Margaret raving, “But we found other things. We each found something. Just wait until you get to Sheila’s item. It’ll make you scream.” The city moved below, immune and unconcerned. Lights shone from every available outlet and formed a sea of illumination ready to swallow whole her and everyone else in this world without a thought. But not in this reality. Her reality, this reality, was much better.

9 BEAR COUNTRY

Rodney checked the side-view mirror for headlights before opening his door, then stepped out of his truck and slammed the door closed. Gravel crunched under his boots as he walked back to the bed of the truck. Rodney dropped the tailgate with a thud, the elastic cord going taut then snapping back. The tailgate bounced. He pulled a baseball bat and an empty duffle bag down the truck bed. A few weeks ago, the truck bed would have been filled with all sorts of other robbery-related items.

“Why you didn’ just throw those in the backseat?” Dan asked from the passenger’s seat. He put out his cigarette in the ashtray and exited the truck.

Rodney ignored the question. “You bought a new mallet, right?”

The two men crossed their local state route, NC-64, which rambled southwest through their county. They hustled up the driveway of the house they had chosen past an ornamental bear holding a fishing pole and a sign that read “Bear Country.” Hugging the edges of the drive, they avoided the motion sensor above the garage, forever careful when it came to their entrances during jobs.

If Dan’s wife, Amy, wasn’t misinformed, no one would be at the house that night. There was a couple arriving on their honeymoon in a few days, and the homeowners would return from their other home at the end of the month to escape the heat of another Florida summer.

Rodney and Dan had known Amy since elementary school. She’d always had a way of hearing things about people in their town, regardless of their level of affluence. Amy had texted Dan about the house earlier that evening in between her shifts at the convenient store located on the way to I-26. Rodney and Dan had semi-stable jobs with one of the many contractors in the area. They built or fixed up or added absurd additions onto the many behemoths in the many

gated communities nestled into the Blue Ridge Mountains. They knew all the layouts from memory. But the men made it a point never to rob from a house where they were working a job. Dan sneered when Rodney suggested they might give one a shot.

“Think we’re clear,” Rodney said when they reached the top of the wooden stairs leading to a wrap-around porch.

The moonlight gave a blue-grey illumination to the mountains. The porch, as with many of the nicer homes in the area, provided a view just above the tree line. Rodney and Dan knew guys whose job it was to trim the tops of trees to keep these views for the owners. At their first few robberies, both men stopped to take in the mountains. Down in the valleys in their modified mobile homes with lattice wrapped around the bottoms, the men could only look up at the mountains. For a time, looking at them from so high up provided a momentary sense of achieving an elevated social status.

“Don’t muck it up,” Dan said, handing him the mallet, which gave off the thick scent of fresh plastic and rubber.

“Cuz you’d do so much better with those catcher’s mitts.”

“Reckon we start doing these in the daytime then?” Dan asked.

“Reckon you buy yourself another flashlight.”

“This is kind of your thing, Rodney Baby. Hate to say it,” Dan said. “And you should have bought that mallet.”

“You lost our first one,” Rodney said, hands frozen over the lock while they argued.

“Again, this is all kind of your thing.”

Rodney stuck the dummy key into the deadbolt lock and then carefully pulled it out one groove. He tapped the key with the mallet a few times until the remaining grooves forced the

tumblers inside the lock up and back down again. Once the key and tumblers were aligned, he twisted the lock, turned the door knob, and pushed the door open. Silence met the initial push. No alarm. Rodney gave the door one more push and it opened till it found the stopper on the opposite wall and bounced back slightly.

“Hello?” Dan called.

“Every goddamn time with you,” Rodney said, walking past him and into the empty house. Rodney made attempts to subdue his usual clomping thanks to months of repeated lightness mantras. His current girlfriend hated the clomping. Or, at least, she was the most vocal partner he’d had on the matter. Dan had commented on the clomping while robbing their first few houses as well, usually wrapping those comments in conspicuous suggestions to stick to the carpeted areas of the dwellings.

There was a flat-screen television mounted to the wall on their right. That was no good, would take too long to unmount, but the shelves below the television showed promise. Rodney placed a small flashlight between his teeth and illuminated a Blu-ray player, a gaming console, and a high-end record player. He dropped the duffle near the door and placed the former two boxes of black plastic into it, leaving the record player for further discussion once they cased the rest of the house. Space was precious inside the duffle, so they made a game out of it. Rodney made a game out of it, at least. Dan never asked to keep anything from a job, he also convinced Rodney to bring only one duffle along by arguing that a more discerning robbery significantly reduced the chances of getting caught. But then he convinced Rodney to lose the crowbar, and the prybar, and the lifting straps too. Rodney knew Dan didn’t want to be there on the jobs anymore but couldn’t leave his friend. Or, worse, he pitied Rodney and thought Rodney needed their break-ins for reasons other than financial gain.

Dan disappeared upstairs to search the bedrooms with the flashlight from his cell phone. Instead of replacing his broken one, he'd spent nearly a month using the phone with no visible desire to change. Rodney considered the vague illumination originating from Dan's phone another sign of his attitude toward the whole operation. A tepid approach to thievery when compared to the precise beam of a flashlight.

Rodney leaned his head into the bedroom downstairs off the kitchen, then nearly fell to the floor missing the step down into the room. He swore, kicked the foot of a dresser just inside the doorway, swore again, and retrieved the flashlight on the other side of the room where it had rolled after the fall.

"You all right?" Dan called down.

Rodney ignored the question.

He found a DVD player and what he thought was an expensive combination cell phone and smart watch charger sitting on a nightstand. Rodney rotated the charger a few times in his hand, determining its worth compared to its weight, before taking it along with the DVD player. He searched the dresser drawers and searched the closet, then he entered the kitchen again, stopping first to deposit his most recent finds into the duffle bag. He could hear his partner upstairs, the sounds made clearer thanks to the open-air design of the second floor.

"Have we determined if TVs are worth takin'?" Dan asked from the darkness.

"I'm wott suh the neighbuhs eard yat. Qwuit yewin," Rodney said, the flashlight between his teeth.

Rodney found an unopened box of cookies in a kitchen cabinet while checking for expensive electric cooking appliances. He tore the cellophane on one of the cookie sleeves and put one in his mouth.

The first few nights robbing houses, they moved quickly and focused only on what they could take while maximizing bag space. At the time, both men considered what they did a form of vigilante justice for their whole community. Now all they did was try to fill the lone duffle, Dan sometimes not even committing to that. Dan said they were in a robbery funk. Rodney, however, thought Dan was the only one in a funk and had been for a while. Rodney feigned ignorance and told himself it was related to bedroom issues with Amy. That was easier for him to imagine than the idea that their friendship was fracturing.

Rodney finished his third cookie as footsteps started up the wooden steps outside the house. He clicked off the flashlight and turned toward the open front door. Two figures appeared on the porch outside as he reached the living room, then they filled the doorway. He held the cookie sleeve as one of the figures stepped from the darkness outside into the darkness of the house. This person looked massive. The bulges coming off the body confused Rodney.

The figure lowered the bulges slowly to the floor, two stuffed luggage bags, next to Rodney's and Dan's moderately-full duffle bag. "Hello?" the figure, a male, called into the darkness.

"For the love of-" Dan said from upstairs. He walked over to the second-floor balcony. "Rodney, I get it-"

A scream came from the figure still outside. The scream was a higher, more feminine, octave.

"Joseph," she hissed to her companion from outside. "Joseph, come here now."

Joseph remained still.

Dan walked down the stairs. To Rodney's surprise, he grabbed the baseball bat leaning against the railing near the bottom step. Rodney joined his partner, their duffle bag between them. Dan rested the bat against his shoulder.

"Are you—?" the man asked.

"Owners?" Rodney asked.

"I don't think these are the Hallagans," Dan said.

"No," Rodney said. "Never mind."

"We rented this place online," the woman said from the darkness of the porch. "We're on our honeymoon."

"Is that—?" Joseph asked.

"Finish your thought. He always like this?" Rodney called to the woman outside.

"Joseph, are you always like this?"

"It drives me nuts," she said then gasped. "Shit. I'm sorry, Joseph." Then to Rodney and Dan, "It's been a long day, we're tired. We're cranky."

"Great, Sara, now they know my name," Joseph said. "Shit," he said, realizing what he just said.

"You weren't coming for another few days." Dan said.

"What's in the bag?" Joseph asked.

"Electronics," Rodney said. "We're robbers, dude, not psychopaths. I don't give a shit what your name is, and I don't want your social. We're not going to look up your home address."

"The TV yet?" Joseph asked.

"What about the stick?" the woman called. "Like, you'll leave with the stuff you've got, hopefully sans stick, and we'll never see you again?"

“Stick, ma’am?” Rodney called.

“Could you leave the stick? If you got all the players, the stick’s all that’s left to watch stuff on. Unless you took the router too,” she said.

“We didn’ take no router or stick or TV,” Dan said, indignant.

“What the hell is this stick?” Rodney asked.

Rodney put the cookies on the table next to him. It was easy to make out the general shape of the man in front of them. The woman on the porch was more of an idea, more voice than form. The man, Joseph, was smaller than Dan, much smaller than Rodney.

“Odd choice for a honeymoon locale, I’d think,” Dan said. “You got the Biltmore to see, I suppose. And you can go into the city for the breweries, but they’s both a ways away. All we got here are the gem mines.”

“We’ve never been to the mountains,” the woman said. “Those aren’t my cookies, are they?”

“These?” Rodney asked. He picked up the cellophane sleeve and examined it. “You’re both kinda weird, aren’t you?”

The woman shrugged. “We asked the homeowner if they could stock some essentials to get us started,” she said.

Rodney reached out to Joseph who flinched but took the cookies. Joseph backed up, not turning around but handing the cookies to his wife like a reverse baton pass. Cellophane crinkled when she pulled one out of the sleeve.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ve been dreaming of those cookies since we missed our connection at Hartsfield-Jackson.”

“Welcome,” Rodney said. “Look, we have this duffle. We left that stick. We’ll leave now. You folks enjoy your honeymoon.”

“Wait. You can’t just take this stuff,” Joseph said.

“Josuff, pwease,” the woman said, chewing a cookie.

“They’re robbing the Hallagans.”

“You don’t even know the Hallagans,” Dan said. He shifted the baseball bat from his left to his right shoulder.

“You’re-,” Joseph said.

“Yes, thieves. I feel your pain, Sara.” Rodney said. “And we’re leaving. Here’s a story to tell friends and family.”

Rodney crouched, zipped up the duffle bag and slid the strap over his shoulder. He stood, holding the side of the bag to keep the contents from shuffling around. He made a move toward the door, but Joseph shifted his position to block him. Rodney sidestepped to the left. There was a sound of plastic electronics brushing against other plastic electronics. The two men nearly touched.

“He gave your wife cookies,” Dan warned from behind.

“And I appreciate it, but I can’t let you leave with that stuff.”

Dan pulled the bat from his shoulder and entered a swinging stance.

Rodney held up his hand.

“Joseph,” Rodney said. “This is valiant of you. Really. The Hallagans would appreciate whatcha did here today. But my friend has a baseball bat, and he appears ready to swing. Look at him, look at his form. I remind you of what my friend holds to reinforce this next statement. You will move aside, or we will hurt you. Severely.”

Joseph's wife stepped into the house.

"Sara, don't."

Sara stepped in front of her husband, inches from Rodney. "I don't give a shit about the stuff. And, right now, I don't give a shit if you're psychos either. We've had a long-ass day, and I want to lay down. You will leave, and my husband and I are going to start our honeymoon."

"I can't handle this right now," Dan said. "I spent my honeymoon in a motel fifteen miles away. We're leavin', lady, we're just leavin' with a bag of stuff."

"I can't change where you spent your honeymoon," Sara said.

"We don't want to kill you," Dan said.

"Woah. Jesus, Dan. Who said anything about murder? Let's slow this down," Rodney said, turning to his partner. "Severely don't mean irreparably, last I checked."

"Look. Let's. Ok," Joseph said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. "Here. Here's a hundred bucks, can you please?"

"With or without the bag?" Dan asked.

"Dan, let's just—"

"No, Rodney. You wanted it, you've got it," Dan said. He lowered the bat and reached around his friend and yanked the duffle off Rodney's shoulder. He slid it over his left shoulder, the sounds coming from inside suggesting broken plastic.

"Who's to say I didn't think your car was suspicious when we pulled up so I texted the details to my sister?" Sara said. "And now we know your names. Your first names at least."

"We'll take the money and the bag, and we'll take our chances," Dan said. "Why wouldn't you text the Hallagans, though?"

“Dan, that’s my truck,” Rodney said. “He don’t speak for the both of us, lady. I’m my own man. Keep the money, seriously.”

“Maybe I texted the Hallagans, too, about your truck, but my sister is already on the phone with the police,” Sara said.

“Jesus, I can’t believe what I’m hearing,” Dan said. “And not to beat a dead horse, but what if we are psychopaths. He dropped the bag. There were more sounds of crunching plastic. He grabbed the bill from Joseph and stuck it into his pocket.

“Dan, seriously?” Rodney said.

“Yeah, Rodney. Seriously,” Dan said.

Dan walked over to the television, pulled back, and shattered the screen with the baseball bat. He dropped the bat on the table where it bounced once, rolled off and then across the room.

“Dan, what the hell?” Sara asked.

Dan walked out the front door and stomped down the wooden steps to the driveway. Rodney apologized to the couple while he collected the baseball bat resting against a stocked drinking cart. He grabbed a bottle of bourbon then put it back down, but he missed the cart in the darkness and the bottle shattered on the floor. He apologized again, knelt for the duffle, then squeezed by Joseph and Sara onto the porch.

The mountains greeted him, spectral now thanks to a cloud passing over the moon and the artificial light from the flood light below. Rodney took in the sight, figuring it would be the last time he got to see the mountains from this height for quite some time. Unsurprisingly, they were beautiful. And from where he stood, they were endless, stretching off into places he had never been and would probably never go.

Dan stepped out of the bright yellow light pool and walked off into the night. Joseph and Sara moved around the house in their own darkness. Rodney adjusted the duffle strap and clomped down the stairs. Flood light illuminated the first part of his walk down the driveway. At his truck, he closed the tailgate before putting the duffle bag and the baseball bat into the backseat. He started the engine and watched the rear-view mirror, as if he would be able to see his friend or the cherry from his cigarette in the darkness. Rodney put the truck in Drive, figuring Dan would prefer to be alone in bear country right now and maybe for awhile longer too.

10 CHILD REARING

Sarah finally got around to eating the rest of her son, Andy—the scourge of the third grade girls and most athletic of the third grade boys (however athletic a kid can be at eight years old, although I guess some of them are nine in the third grade)—anyway, she finally finished Andy off, his feet being the only parts left, after like a week getting the rest of his body down, but in her defense she tried everything: baking, braising, battering, broiling; she even tried to sous vide portions of him, whatever it took, though, clearly, it took a while, but eventually, she got him down, and that was that: his classmates were happy, the teachers were happy, the parents were happy, even Sarah was a little happy; she had two other children (another son, four-year old Justin, and an eleven-year old daughter, Emily) and she finally stopped receiving all those phone calls about what Andy did on the playground or what Andy hid in the back of his desk or what Andy said to the substitute teacher; also, once a kid got eaten, that was it, everyone came up with a solution if the family had another one causing trouble (although, very few kids caused a fuss after their parent(s) ate a sibling). Those who ate their children were a tight-knit group; they met at the diner over on Clairemont every Wednesday.

11 PROGENITORS

Our grandparents always found us. For years, my wife and I packed up our possessions and moved to another city. Then they would find us again. Our grandparents were cordial in the beginning, said they just needed proximity. They'd rent a condo or a townhouse in our new neighborhood or the next one over. But then we'd move again and so would they, despite keeping our information unlisted and out of the hands of certain loose-lipped family members. We could never even register to vote or sign up for a grocery-store loyalty program without fear of a paper trail.

We'd let our guard down, and they would pounce. They arrived always at dinner time, crock pots in hand and wine for the grownups. There was an incident in Madison, Wisconsin involving the destruction of our front door and tire marks on the carpet. They were cycle heads, Gram and Gramp, and when they moved they moved light. My wife offered them Brian, our oldest, after they found us in Indiana near the place EST became CST. They refused our offer, said it was the whole family or nothing.

We transitioned to hotels, staying a week at a time. Our children enrolled in online school. Still they found us. Gramp and I exchanged black eyes at a movie theatre in Charleston, South Carolina. My wife's parents did all they could, up to and including buying us a remote blueberry island on a lake in northern Maine. We changed our names, sold our possessions, and burned our clothing with the boat we rode in on. The kids were gone by that point, unable to cut it on the road.

But our grandparents burned their boat too when they landed on shore. One violent month ensued: hand-made traps, make-shift weaponry, deplorable acts committed by both sides. Until it was just me and Grams, both too bruised and shell-shocked to care. So, she taught me to

fish, and how to plant a blueberry bush. Turns out she grew up Down East and summered near that lake every year 'til college.

12 A ROAD STORY

I'm driving down Interstate 70 in a rolled-up ragtop convertible, sunglasses on, with my dead wife in the passenger's seat. Cigarette stench has long-since soaked into the fabric, which will help considering we still have entire states ahead of us before our destination. Since absconding with her from the hospital, I've managed to be careful with her fragile form, but an abrupt stop for an accident up the highway sends her into the dashboard around Terr Haute, Indiana. She never wore a seatbelt, and she isn't wearing one today. But that's one on me this time, I suppose. Now stopped on the freeway in our ragtop, an anniversary present to each other, I decide it might be time to finally click her in, even if it's against her wishes.

Before reaching, I ask if she's all right, if she thinks it's safe to touch her. There had been a crunch when she hit the dashboard. I realize I've been asking her questions like that, if she is comfortable, should we turn the air down some more, for the entire trip. I should stop, but I know that I won't. At least, I would not be ending our little parade anywhere in the state of Indiana, that was for sure. Since the hospital back in Columbus and our midnight escape, I've been asking my wife questions about her mental and physical condition, how she's holding up, to avoid allowing anything too specific about my wife to travel through her while we're driving. So, of course, I ask my wife if she is all right one more time.

The traffic jam continues ahead of us and into the horizon on this particularly straight and flat part of the Midwest. The man sitting in his car to our left is screaming into his cellphone and looking everywhere but the direction of my car. I watch him over the L-shaped form of my dead wife, still against the dashboard, wondering if specks of spittle are misting his windshield. Then, I think about the word "spittle" and whether that would apply in this circumstance. Has he been

yelling at the person on the other end for very long? Has this phone call been the majority of his drive to wherever he is headed?

I pull my wife back into an upright position. What now? In my darkest premonitions involving death, movies played out in my head, particularly ones about the death of my wife, we're never in a car. I put a pin in the idea to ask someone else how often is too often for someone to have these premonitions. Anyways, given my wife's recent medical issues, many of those premonitions shifted to taking place in or around a hospital. Almost always the hospital she was being treated inside but not always. Before the hospital-specific phase of the premonitions, many of them involved finding my wife in some state of non-living arriving home from work. Sometimes she'd be dead after when I finished in the bathroom after a shower, but when I arrive home from work tended to be where my brain went. Food could be waiting, or sometimes food would be burning, sometimes there wouldn't be food at all. But we were never in a car. I have never once imagined my dead wife and I in a car. I certainly never imagined removing my wife's body from a hospital bed post death-discovery, let alone take it across state lines with the intention to cross even more state lines.

We're still stopped. I lean over, pull my wife's seatbelt across her decomposing chest and click it into the buckle near the center console. She's safer with the seatbelt. Yes, she's dead, but what's left of her, i.e. her body, will, in fact, be safer wearing a seatbelt.

We reach the wreck. I stare at two mangled vehicles and two police officers waving the traffic through. I don't see anyone else on the shoulder or in the vehicles. If this wreck had happened at nighttime would they be waving us through have flares in their hands? Would they have a flashlight, maybe, to signal yes, drivers can pass the scene of the accident, but we should do so with caution? As if the crumpled cars weren't warning enough. Can someone hold a lit

flare? That scene might go along better with the one playing out in our car with a dead wife in the passenger's seat. Despite the wreck, the absolute ocean of cloudless blue sky isn't fitting the circumstances one bit, either.

Thankfully, officer or no, sea of sky or no, I put my wife's Ray Ban's on at the beginning of the ride. Despite the collision with the dashboard, they still cover her eyes, although for all I know her eyes have closed since her initial passing. The frames have bent and one of the lens is cracked in one place, but, overall, the sunglasses are fine enough. Most telling is, and has been, her smell. I'm still banking on the smell remaining contained within the barrier of our vehicle. Smoking, I also hope, is actually doing me a favor for once. In the event these officers, or one down the road, might be able to smell something, given their proximity to my vehicle, cigarettes are my most powerful tool currently. I have no idea when bodies start to smell, and I don't plan on asking the Internet any time soon. Down the road I know, if a situation involves being completely stopped with my window rolled down, or worse, hers, neither Ray Ban's nor cigarettes would save me.

But maybe that's preferable: getting caught. There's this whole issue of a letter for us to talk about at some point, and I don't want to talk about it. We'd always planned to visit Denver, and I was hoping somewhere along the way I'd be able to bring that latter up. It shouldn't have been so hard, given my wife's inability to respond.

I should pull over. I should call the police. But what about the abrasion on her forehead? Can they tell how fresh abrasions are if the person is dead when they get them? Do wounds and

bruises form differently on the dead than on the living? The fact she has been dead awhile, I imagine, is important. Would a responding officer, a state trooper, not a dead-body expert or scientists, think the injury came from a domestic dispute? If he sees blood and flecks of skin on the dash, this state trooper might assume I became so fed up with my wife, I slammed her head against the dashboard. Does any of this matter though, at least immediately, given that, again, she has been already dead for hours?

I squint and stare at the dashboard as long as I can handle before turning back to the road. Then I do it again, and then a few more times after that. Do dead people bleed? The black, leather dashboard looks clean from my seat. Starting to crack a little in places and a few smudges, but overall, the dashboard is clear of any potentially-incriminating residue. She's cold. I know that without touching her. She's been cold. They have tests galore these days. There's no way I could argue she died on the road and it just took me awhile to notice. Even without measuring decomposition levels, like they probably do, some death expert would get a reading of that body temp and assure his colleagues this one had been dead long before the border of Indiana and Illinois.

And, yeah, what about me crossing a state line? From Ohio into Indiana or even when it becomes Ohio to Indiana to *Illinois* here soon enough. Then Missouri. Then Kansas. Then Colorado, all the way on to Denver. What does it mean if someone takes a dead body across not one, not two, but five state lines? Maybe that's a conspiracy. Not one but two felonies. Five felonies, most likely, right? A person gets that far from where the death took place, they must be involved in a conspiracy on some level.

Can I Google something like that? My phone has GPS. Every app I've ever downloaded has asked to know my location. I said no to most, why does a recipes app need to know where I

am? But what about the rest? What about Bluetooth? Friend Finder? All the various forms of social media. My cell phone is always Silent, but it's always on, even during movies. I can be triangulated by satellite, maybe multiple satellites. A Google search, along with a body in the passenger's seat, plus me crossing so many state lines, thanks to the GPS on the my phone. That's an entire world of conspiracy-related business right there. That many details, along with the body: an open and shut case probably no matter what state you're in at the time. No matter how many lines you've crossed. There's a body, and I'm driving it around. That has to be a problem in the eyes of the law.

I can't take my Love to the police, then.

A green sign in the grass on the side of the highway informs me of the last rest stop before Illinois; I resign myself to reaching Denver. A two-state conspiracy before we even stop for gas. I'm sitting here racking up complications every tenth of a mile.

Then my dead wife speaks. "Next rest stop, you think?"

I am somehow able to stay on the road after she says this.

Then she speaks again and says, "Did you hear me, babe?"

"We can make a pit stop in the next city, stop at a McDonald's, get gas," I answer.

"The rest stop is in a few miles. Who knows when we'll find the optimal McDonald's/Gas setup. I don't know if you can hold it that long. It's been since, what, like noon? Since the hospital, that's for sure."

"You're right. Rest stop it is, beautiful."

I pull into a parking spot in the section where the trucks park. People are milling around, dogs are chasing brightly-colored, loudly-squeaking toys. This must be an example of the phrase

“milling around”. I turn off the car and look at my wife. “Do you, uh, need to go? Do you need help-” I stutter. “Is there a way I can help you?”

“I’ll be fine, I think, thanks.” Her mouth doesn’t move. Her voice hums out from her lips.

“But, I could probably, I don’t know. Something.”

“Go on ahead. I’ll hold down the fort.”

I can’t see any motion in the rest of her face as we go back and forth.

I turn the car off and exit the vehicle. I watch her in the passenger’s seat as I walk backward to the bathroom. When I come back out, she’s still there, of course. Her shoulders slump a little more, but she’s still there. I try to set her upright, but her body won’t respond. How long does it take for full rigor to set in? Was this rigor mortis already beginning to set in? Were there stages of rigor mortis and she’d get progressively stiffer? Is that the term, rigor mortis? Her body makes indescribable sounds as I try to shape it into a straighter posture. I check the trunk for a blanket, maybe covering her would help something, and come up empty. She will be my co-captain the entire way in all her decomposing glory. Denver or bust, she’s riding shotgun with a busted-up pair of sunglasses and without a blanket.

Across the Illinois border sometime later, we pull into a McDonald’s after I fill the car up with gas and pick up some air fresheners.

She says, “Double cheese, medium fry. I’ll have a little of whatever you’re getting to drink, as long as it isn’t lemonade.”

I look at her, as if she could give me a look to suggest whether she was joking or not.

“Never mind. Just having a laugh,” she says. “Sort of.”

I try to remember the last time I stopped to consider the two of us sharing a straw. Is there a protocol for giving the dead refreshment? I suppose I can put the straw up to her lips, stick it between her lips. I probably will have to part her lips. Will her throat start moving during this process? Will her lips suck, draw in Coke from the waxed-paper cup? Will there actually be any liquid missing when she’s done? I switch two new air fresheners to Max Scent and head toward the entrance with as much confidence and casual demeanor as I can muster. Then I get McDonald’s for my dead wife and me on the eastern edge of Illinois.

While inside, I keep thinking I’ll come back to a crowd surrounding the car. That I forgot and left the windows open by accident, and a family in an SUV has pulled up next to us. No, I wouldn’t leave them open, but before I turned the car off, my elbow might have rested on the button for her window. The parents wouldn’t notice, of course. They would be halfway inside before their kids calls finally get them to turn back. They would try to get their kids to stop staring at the lady in the car and come inside for a cheeseburger. They would be embarrassed. Then, unable to believe how infatuated their children are, they’d decide the little ones must be forcibly dragged into the fast-food establishment. This would, in my mind, lead to a confrontation involving myself and the husband/father outside of this McDonald’s. This mostly verbal, but also awkwardly physical confrontation will be followed, quickly, by the arrival of the police while the father has me pinned to the ground in the now-crowded parking lot.

But that does not end up happening. Back outside, it’s just her, right where she was when I walked inside. No cars are parked anywhere near us. No one is peering inside or standing anywhere near our car.

“How did we expect to do this?” she asks once I’m back in the car.

“I could open your mouth and stick some in? I thought we were trying the straw for the drink, and we’d take it from there.”

“I’m not even hungry. I appreciate you getting a straw for me, though. I just don’t know how this would work. I appreciate your trying to feed me. I really do, babe.”

“I can pretend I’m really hungry and all this food is for me,” I say. “I’ll eat while I drive. Ready? Then it’s not like we thought, or I thought, or you persuaded me. You know, not as embarrassing, I guess.”

“Ready,” she says. “No one’s embarrassed.”

Would the air fresheners be enough once she started smelling? If I ever tried to sell the car, the buyer would say something like, “Ho, buddy, what died in here?” and give me a look. I’ll probably end up having to torch it in a field or something. Speaking of fields, that might have to be where my wife ends up before too long as well. Would she sit in the passenger’s while I dig, and not mention the letter? I’d never be able to dig the full six feet they do for coffins. There’s no way I could dig a six-foot hole. Regardless of how deep to bury my wife, there’s no way she’s going to sit there while I dig and not bring up the letter.

Sometime later, she asks, “How long until we reach St. Louis?” “I haven’t paid attention to any of the signs.”

“Aren’t even halfway through Illinois yet.”

“It’s on the border, right?”

“Yep. Like Kansas City, stuck between two states. We’ll see another sign for it soon enough, I’m sure.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then she asks, “How long will you wait to marry?”

“What?”

“To re-marry. How long?”

“I, hadn’t really-”

“Of course you have, we both have. Everyone in every relationship ever has thought about what they would do if something happened to their spouse or significant other. Maybe it isn’t this specific situation, but they’ve thought about it. I would have had this conversation before the embolism,” she says. “Or were you planning to bring up that letter some other way?”

“Embolism?” I asked, responding to what I had the strength to respond to at that time.

“Better than calling it a gas bubble,” she says. “Gas bubble sounds a lot less heroic, don’t you think?”

“Something popped in your head? What are the odds of that happening?”

“I’m not connected to the Internet. I just know it happened. I guess everyone gets that luxury at least. No hive mind in here, though. No great artists or intellectuals or all my past relatives in here sharing the thoughts they’ve had for the last who knows how many years. Sorry, bubba.”

“What about, you know?”

“What about what?”

Without removing my hand from the steering wheel, I lift my index finger and point it to the roof of the rag-top.

“I know, but I can’t tell you.”

“How’s that fair?”

“That’s something you know not to say,” my wife says. “You’ll hate to hear this, but some things everyone needs to find out on their own. And plus, who’s really saying all of this stuff anyway?”

“What stuff?”

“My stuff,” she says.

At least she’s not falling apart. Not yet. The smell is terrible, but nothing is falling off of her body just yet. Will it? At some point the skins has got to give, right? I imagine I still have a significant amount of time before that happens. Or do I only hope that I do? But the hair and nails keep growing, and at some point, the skin must give. How are those two events related? Not for a while, though, right? The skin is probably good for quite some time. It protects us, after all. There’s just no new cells being made in her anymore. Is there a way to drain her blood and slow the process down? If I pull hard enough on her arm, would it tear off and blood and muscle come spilling out?

Is taxidermy something that can be learned overnight? Isn’t taxidermy an art form? Is there a way to preserve her until it’s my turn to die?

“Should I bury you?” I ask. This suggests I will be able to. “Do you want to be buried? I don’t know if you want to be buried or cremated.”

“Relax, babe, relax. You can’t take me to a funeral parlor, or bring me to the police. Send me back to the Earth. I’m an organ donor at least. Let me give back to our planet. Dust to dust and all that, right?”

“I could drop you off at a university. At their science center?”

“It’s summer vacation.”

The conversation lapses for a bit. But still, even while I can dictate the conversation, there’s a topic I cannot broach. I won’t bring it up, and I won’t have her do it either. Accepting it’s me filling in the blanks for my wife’s responses, does she know about the letter by now? She must. She said she isn’t “tapped in” or connected to the Internet or whatever. But she’s kind of filling in the thoughts I’d think for her. Not kind of, she is. I am speaking for my dead wife in these conversations. By proxy, then, she would know about the letter. She probably knew before. So why isn’t she bringing it up now? Women know these things. They either really know, or they basically know. That, right there, is the Hive Mind.

Now, it’s too much to even turn the radio on. Music, the news, everything marks time. Albums are forty minutes give or take. News/podcasts twenty-eight to thirty-minute segments. With more time comes more opportunities to come clean. So why keep a record of those half-hour spans where we avoid the topic? She could know every word of that letter, then that would be the end. I could also make that be the end, but I won’t broach the topic, and I can’t bring myself to turn on the radio.

“Something wrong?” she asks.

“Thinking.”

“You’re lying.” She pauses, I make her pause. “What are we going to do with me? What are you going to do with me?”

“Don’t want to see Denver?”

“Not Denver. Tonight, when we get to the hotel.”

“I could wrap you in a blanket, or a rug, take you through a back door?”

“What kind?” she asks. “How many flights of stairs?”

“Shag? For comfort? Six flights? Four?”

“Probably heavier than other kinds. Someone sees you with a body-sized rug on the back stairs?”

“No one is supposed to see you.”

“Then what’s the rug for?”

What about burying her in a corn field? Or near a corn field. There must be a spot secluded enough. Are there woods around here? Sprinkled among all the corn and highway? But even where there are woods, there are not really woods. Not dense woods you could wander through and really get lost in. Only woods that, when you are at the edge, you can see through to the other side. Welcome to the highways through the Midwest. The soil is probably hard too. I’m pretty sure it’s called soil, not simply “ground” or “dirt.” All these corn fields; the only spot without any corn is the road. Most of the roads are paved by now, I imagine. How long to dig, though, right? Even being conservative and going for a solid three-foot hole. How long would that take me? Realistically. Do farmers patrol their land? Don’t they bring along hunting dogs when they do? Aren’t they always hunting in the woods when they’re not working? If I was a farmer, and I lived out here, I would hunt when I wasn’t working. I might as well leave her on a bench in some town, with her sunglasses and a newspaper gripped in her hands. No wonder there’s premeditated murder. Crimes of passion are always solved. I envy serial killers, who can

deal with a dead body not once, but multiple times. The ones that write letters to Heralds or Tribunes or the police chief himself? The ones that dare people to find them? Fuck those guys.

At the very least, then, I need to buy a shovel.

We almost flew to Denver. She told me in March she wanted to go to Denver. And then she decides that we haven't been on a road trip for a long time, not since the music festival in Delaware. She Googled "cool places along I-70" and "memorable pit stops Ohio to Colorado" in an attempt to liven up the drive. So, it was decided we would drive. If she had died on an airplane, utterly crushing for me still, I would be able to handle that a little better. If she had died on an airplane, we would have passengers across from us to attest that I never touched her. Another passenger would have seen us get on the plane together, joking about my choice of boots and talking about the altitude in Colorado. As if the whole state was just a mile above the rest of the states around it.

On a plane and not in a car, there would be protocols to follow, there would be distractions. I wouldn't have to fill her mouth with words other than ones about the letter. My wife was less inclined to talk openly on plains. Why talk about private matters when you had like five people within three feet of you? Worst case, I could panic in public and there would be so much going on, so many people consoling me, telling how to handle the situation or how they were going to handle the situation, nothing else would come to mind for us to talk about. Yeah, worst case, fake a panic attack on the plane.

"Wasn't this all wilderness?" I ask.

“Probably,” she says. “Not all of it, I’d bet. Some of it grassland, or plains. Were these the wide-open plains?”

“Once not so orderly.”

I pull some cologne from the center console and spray the car and her a few times. I turn the air vents with the scented clips her direction. I light cigarette. Why stop in Denver? I-70 goes farther, and there are other highways that connect to it. Highways to take us farther West that then loop around and head back East. “What about California, to the coast?” I ask.

“You are not going to put off dealing with me until California.”

“But Denver’s all right?”

“Denver’s more reasonable, I want to see Denver. We already have a hotel.”

If we had been born in a different time, she would be buried already. There would have been time even for a small, but poignant, funeral. In previous generations, I bet farmers had tons of land that wasn’t so hard and tightly-packed and they weren’t able to get to that often, even when they found the time to hunt.

What did the time-period have to do with how tightly the soil was packed?

I could have grieved a little, then found a phone and called her parents. I would have handled this properly. Instead, we’re in the present day and not sometime in the past, and we’re still heading to Denver.

“Maybe we can find a Home Depot and get a shovel,” I say. “At least try? What if a farmer’s shotgun is the answer to my problem?”

“It’s not.”

“It’s not?”

“It’s not.”

We stop near Columbia, Missouri, a little after seven o'clock. There's a motel with only one floor that stretches out in both directions away from the front desk in the center. All the rooms face the road, and even before turning in, you can feel the neglect suffocating a place that used to be used. I ask the lady at the counter for a room towards one end, to be considerate of the guests about my smoking.

"Smoking's fine," she says, indicating her ashtray.

"Just the same," I say.

She shrugs and gets me a key. "All the way on the end, for the considerate man." Then, she lights up a cigarette and sits back down. Before I turn around, she is turning the volume on her TV back up.

I carry my wife into the room like she's sleeping, or like a macabre version of a couple crossing the threshold on their wedding night. Navigating the doorway takes all of my effort. There are twin beds and I put her down on the one near the window. I push the bed against the wall and open the window. Unless someone takes the trash out tonight and looks through our window, no one should find her. We can be out by morning. I imagine with these types of places, this level of place, only one lady cleans the rooms, and she probably starts cleaning closest to the office. In the movies, come morning her son peeks in the window all wide-eyed. He drops the trash bags he's holding, maybe they weren't properly tied, bottles clink on the ground and roll away from him. As per the script, the wife and I make a speedy getaway, tossing the room keys over my shoulder, remembering I paid with a credit card and what's done is done. Then we'd

really be fugitives, or, more accurately, I would really be a fugitive. There would be no time for reflection, internal monologues sure, but certainly no reflection.

“TV or no TV?” I ask.

“TV,” she says. “I don’t care what it is.”

I turn on the TV but not the lights and stand in the blurry glow of standard definition cable channels. Channels with numbers in the hundreds and not the thousands, like we’re used to at home. Then I light up a cigarette and search on my phone for a place to buy candles. Will the smell get worryingly strong before I get back? Does a Do Not Disturb sign make any difference in this scenario?

“I’ll be back,” I say.

“You just sat down.”

“I know, but I’ll be restless while-”

“Go get your candle,” she says.

I go get my candle, along with a shovel, and fertilizer. The guy at the register at Home Depot barely looks at me, as he’s busy flirting with the girl running the register behind where I’m standing. While they talk, it sounds work related, which is admirable on their part. But listening to the actual words, it’s clear this conversation is about what’s going to happen between these two after work that night. They both sound incredibly excited for whatever is going to take place after work.

I pay with cash. A room at a motel on a credit card is one thing. A room at a motel and the purchases I’ve made at this hardware store together is a whole other story when dissecting a man’s actions to attempt to determine his guilt.

Back in our room, a reality show about Hippos is on: *Hippopotamus: Lake Demon*. The show is graphic for its TV-PG rating. These animals are vicious, toward each other, toward other animals, people too, we are told. They have no problem capsizing a boat full of people, seemingly without any reason. The hosts of the show are still keen on getting right up alongside these animals, however. None seem concerned a hippo could eat them, or tear their limbs off, or simply drown them in the muddy water with their weight.

“You’ve got to believe these hippos have their reasons,” she says. “They’re saying ‘unprovoked attacks’ but wouldn’t us being in the water where they live be considered provocation? The candle smells nice, by the way.”

“I thought it was all right. I got a shovel and fertilizer too.”

“And you thought the boy at the register was really talking about sex with his co-worker,” she says. “Why fertilizer?”

“Aren’t you turning into a tree, or something?”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I got a shovel and fertilizer.”

We lie in our beds through two more episodes of the Hippo show. Can I hide her in the trunk? Do a driving tour of Denver and make the trip back, would she keep that long? Is there a refrigerator that fits in my trunk? If I try to fit her inside a refrigerator, will she be stuck in that shape forever? What about a stand-up freezer, one that drags behind the car on wheels. Would her limbs fall off? Why do I keep assuming her limbs are just going to spontaneously detach from her body at some not-too-distant point in our adventure? What will her insides turn into? What will the blood be like, or the other stuff? Even if I do find a stand-up freezer and a hitch to pull it, it’s not like we can talk during the ride, with her sealed away. She might as well not even

come then; pulled along in a freezer. There is no way she would keep, anyway. She's already gone bad, she won't get any better. Only an idiot wouldn't see this. I'm not an idiot. I'm a coward certainly, but not an idiot.

After another episode about the hippos I ask, "Like to go for a drive?"

"Can we ride with the top down?"

"Sure can, you'd be Miss Kansas."

"At this point, can't I just be Miss America?" my wife asks.

We drive with the top down for a while, and even with open air the smell my wife produces is too much for me to stomach for much longer. I comment on the store fronts and how quaint the town looks with no one around. It could be any town. I'm not really paying attention. She agrees, but it isn't the same. Something changed after I picked up her rigid corpse from that twin bed and buckled it into the passenger's seat. She knows I cannot keep her, I know I cannot keep her. So with that, what more is there to say?

The letter might as well be folded in the cup holder between us.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"I know you are, you really are," she says.

"But I'm terrible. What I did, that was terrible. Or what I wanted to do, or almost did. It never should have started, let alone gone anywhere. It never should have crossed my mind in the first place. There should have been no situation where I would be in possession of a letter or anything else from anyone else but you."

“We’re all terrible, babe. In various ways, everyone is terrible. You manage the terrible, and that’s what marks a person good or bad. Handling the terrible.”

“Is this me or you?”

“Does it matter if it’s the truth?”

I make it out of the tiny downtown onto roads where the speed limit postings are farther apart. I let my foot rest heavier on the accelerator, our hair is blowing in the wind. Her hair is the same as mine, not rigid like the rest of her. The wind makes us equal. Unless scientists and grave robbers are mistaken, her hair is still growing too. Why shouldn’t it be? Even when we’re cremated aren’t we still something, or at least nearly something? Don’t we attach ourselves to something else somewhere along the way and change along with it?

I’d like to believe at the very least we don’t disappear entirely from this world. Not our memories, but our actual material presence. No matter how minute and microscopic those pieces became, I choose to believe that they’re never truly vanish. I choose to believe that will always be a part of something.

The field where I finally stop is nothing like I imagined. I’m not sure how I imagined the field to look, and I’m also not sure how it’s different from that image. But it’s different, or it feels different. I can certainly confirm that it feels different. There are no cars passing, and there’s no farmer inexplicably plowing at this hour. It’s just us in the moonlight.

I raise the shovel, expect the worst, and thrust it into the soil at my feet. To my surprise, the dirt is soft. It’s soft like it would be in the movies. Like it would be in one of my premonitions, had

any of them gotten this far in their consideration. I dig and dig and dig. Then, I dig some more because, unlike premonitions or movies, even a shallow grave takes a long time to dig. Once finished, I place her in the ground. Before I toss the first shovelful on top of my wife, I promise to be a better person. I promise that other woman didn't mean as much to me as the letter suggests, and that my wife is the only person to ever truly mean anything to me. And I mean it. Despite what the letter would suggest. Despite what I may have been feeling at the time the letter was written. It's me, and my wife, and no one else. Here in this field. Then I keep tossing dirt on top of her until I fill the hole back in again.

13 BUT ONLY FOR A WEEK

Nick Hocking sat beside his wife at a table in a chair next to a pool that did not belong to him. The pool belonged to the Roberts, who lived across the fairway from the Hockings. Nick could see his own back porch from where he sat. Unlike most homes of his neighbors, there was no foliage blocking the view. Just last summer they had planted a row of saplings to match the row of houses on their side of the fairway, but they were still too short to mask the house. Behind their sliding glass door, his children, Terry and Laura, would be watching something on television, most likely chosen by the babysitter. He'd hear about it all later, before bedtime and during bedtime. For now, his only concern was the graduation party of Tanner Roberts, a boy Nick had become somewhat acquainted with, albeit from afar, over the previous five days.

Tanner had attended Walnut City North, the same high school Terry and Laura would attend, but not the one either Nick or his wife had attended. Current and future students would reap the ultra-fast computers available to a school built post Y2K, ready to connect the youth to almost every inch of the world. He had read about the facility, but Nick had never asked Tanner about the school, never talked to Tanner at all really. There was an occasional wave between them as Tanner headed to school via the Hockings' street in the mornings, Nick at the door seeing his wife off to the clinic she ran in her economically-priced fire-engine red sedan.

Nick worked remotely, as of the beginning of the year. He had left his previous job to work for himself, taking freelance work from companies with too much money to spend. He wrote web content for sites that didn't want to hire someone fulltime. It was easy work, typically projects that required little effort on Nick's part and paid an absurd amount of money. This led to Nick staring out the window sometimes, watching the golfers that ended up on his slice of fairway. Since the summer began, Nick had found himself unable to daydream, a seven and a

nine year-old in constant search of entertainment. But Monday thru Friday that week, five days only, his kids were away at the Fairfield United Methodist Church Little Leaders day camp.

“They’re bored, they’re fine,” Carol said, following his gaze.

“Something else, actually.”

“Do tell.”

“Work stuff,” Nick said.

“I bet.” Carol drained the rest of her beer. She stood up and shook the bottle at Nick.

Nick nodded. “We need food?”

“Mhm, big plate?”

Nick headed in the opposite direction of his wife, along the pool, toward the food table.

The party was currently empty. The Hockings arrived early which allowed them to be noticed by their hosts as being in attendance. It also gave them a fair shake at the food, and enough beers to make the walk back across the fairway a little looser. Nick was accustomed to the pool, able to see it every day from the second floor office window of his house. It was as if he had also spent the last five afternoons lounging on a reclined deck chair beside it. This was in part due to the binoculars he had found in the downstairs mudroom, high up on the shoe shelf, encased in black leather.

Nick scooped potatoes onto a plate. Half of the pile he covered in ketchup. He loaded up two cheeseburgers and stuck a hotdog on top of it all. Tanner’s dad saw him at the table and, as Tad Roberts was wont to do, gave him an exaggerated thumbs up then a dramatic wipe of the forehead, indicating the grill he was working over at the other end of the food table. Nick smiled back, always unsure with Tad how to respond but especially now that they were up close.

Tad Roberts walked over.

“Nick, I know I’ve said this already, but we’re glad you came,” Tad said, giving Nick a sidearm hug that could collapse a lung.

“Carol and I wanted to stop by early, movie night later with the kids. They hate the babysitter.”

“Which one’s that?” Tad asked, waving to someone walking out back from the sliding doors off the pool.

“Muldunes girl? Matsanoff? Something long. Lives down near the entrance off 204.”

“Anyways, how’s work? Hear you moved to the home shift, how’d you swing that one?”

“Freelance work. But freshly vacationed children don’t necessarily lead to productivity, I’ve found.”

Tad laughed with his whole belly, not because he found it funny, but because that’s what Tad did. It was one of those laughs Nick always expected to end with a pat on the back. Nick didn’t know where the Roberts had grown up. If he had to guess, it would be somewhere in the South. The phrase “Coastal Carolinas” rolled around his brain as he watched Tad belly laugh.

“Tanner’s been, I guarantee you, waking up around one, two o’clock, sittin’ in his underwear playing that heist game, jerkin’ off until I don’t know, then these two babes just come over and lounge by the pool with him.”

The time frame within which this all occurred wasn’t one hundred percent accurate, but Nick was surprised by the accuracy of Tad’s timeline of events.

Tad grabbed a handful of barbeque chips, and poured himself a Coke from one of the open two-liters. “Almighty, he’s got it good. One of these girls, I’m telling you, a little firecracker. The things I’d do if it weren’t, you know.”

“I know what?”

“If we weren’t,” Tad said, pausing. “Never mind.”

Amanda was the girl Tad was referring to. Nick wasn’t sure of the other girl’s name. Amanda enjoyed people knowing she was present, that things were going on in her life. So by Tuesday, Nick was already certain her name was Amanda. The binoculars might as well have a tiny microphone inside tuned specifically to her frequency.

Tad chugged his Coke and poured another, looking over toward the grill. There was nothing on it at moment, already too much food for the amount of people here, and Tad Roberts did not serve cold meat. It must have made him feel more at peace just to look at the grill, ponder its intricacies.

“Not one little lady but *two*. Two babes come over and get into bikinis with you. I mean, the boy’s got his father’s body, at least the one I had in high school, but *two* bikini-clad hotties, oiling themselves up, tight butts.”

The bathing suits Amanda and her friend wore fascinated Nick. The top and the bottom were always an assorted color, but not just on one girl, on both. Not once was a color repeated. Nick wondered how the distribution of these suits was handled, if one kept the tops and the other kept the bottoms. Maybe Amanda had all the tops and all the bottoms, and she dictated the colors of the day. The other girl didn’t look like the one who held the bathing suits in that relationship.

“It’s hard to believe,” Nick said. He turned back to the pool to check on Carol, who was back in her chair with a fresh beer.

Tad waved to her, and she waved back. “Glad to see you, Carol.”

“Good to see you too, Tad,” she called.

Nick walked back to the umbrella he shared with his wife. The same umbrella the girls had sat under all week. The other girl, he was nearly positive her name was Molly, stuck mostly

to her seat in the shade, and she never engaged the golfers in conversation like Amanda did. In the last five days, Nick saw more golfers roaming his stretch of the fairway than he'd seen all year. Nick found their conversations with the girls more than a little disgusting, despite being unable to hear what the men were saying. He wasn't sure who was to blame in that scenario. He wanted to assume it was the golfers, given their age, given their unnecessary proximity to the girls, given the bikinis. Girls should be allowed to sun bath in a friend's backyard without being openly leered at by a bunch of middle-aged men.

"How was Tad?" Carol asked.

"Tad was Tad."

"Was man stuff discussed?"

"Man stuff was not discussed, surprisingly," Nick said, certain that any attempt to describe their conversation would lead to trouble.

"I haven't seen Susan yet."

"Didn't Tad say her parents flew in yesterday? They're probably still in the house. The place has food on every surface and Susan's screaming at all of it." Nick said. He put the plate between them and sat down, new beer already tabbed for him. "Thanks, love."

"Thank you," she said. Carol grabbed a fork and went straight for her side of the potatoes. "So, what should I do when I go in there?"

"Say hello?" Nick thought that was the wrong answer.

"A man can nod and keep walking. I'd need to say something."

"I'd start with the neighbor thing and see where that takes you."

"Maybe I'll just wait," Carol said.

"Till we get home?"

“Till they come outside.”

Tanner Roberts walked out the sliding door wearing frayed khakis and a wrinkled polo.

“Can I toss your plate? Still a little light out here people-wise, I see.”

“That would be wonderful,” Carol said.

“Any more beers?” he asked. He dropped the plate into the trashcan by the coolers.

“I think we’re both still nursing,” Nick said.

Tanner nodded, seeming, to Nick’s disappointment clearly unconcerned with his answer, the conversation in general. He walked back over to Nick and Carol with a can of orange soda and stood over them, blocking their view across the fairway. “Thanks for coming Mrs. Hocking, Mr. Hocking.”

“Thank you for inviting us,” Carol said.

“How’s your summer going?” Nick asked. He took a large swig, then wishing he had asked for another beer.

“Just lounging around, nothing spectacular.”

Nick would disagree, as Tad would disagree. Given Tanner’s schedule, Nick was surprised not to find Zen energy radiating off the boy already.

“Nothing exciting?” Nick asked.

“Nope, not that I can think of. I spend a lot of time out here by the pool.”

“You sure do. Who wouldn’t, right?”

“Oh yeah, a couple friends usually stop by.”

On Thursday, Tanner had been out getting everyone lunch, as he had done every day that week. Lunch time for the golfers as well, and Nick had his ready to eat, but waited for Tanner to

return. Before that, Amanda sat in the sun, along the edge of the pool, hand in the water. She stood up and took her top off. Nick couldn't hear the conversation that the two were having. He saw Amanda point at the other girl, then shake her head. Then she waved her hands toward the golf course, then over to the houses on Nick's side of the course. The other girl looked, first at the houses next to his with foliage, then at Nick's, with baby foliage, probably straight to the second floor window he sat behind, binoculars raised.

Nick believed the other girl probably looked at a few windows across the fairway from Tanner's house, but his brain told him it was his she focused on. She had bit her lip, and then she pulled the strings behind her back and lifted the top over her head. And for the next five minutes until a car door slammed around the front of the house, Molly joined in something Amanda did every day. As soon as the car door sounded, Molly scrambled to get her top back on. Amanda sauntered over to the table and put her the top back on after sitting down next to Tanner. He'd seen it before, what did it matter?

"Nicky when's our tree line going to come in?" Carol asked, the first signs of alcohol in her voice.

"We'll just have to be patient."

"You can see us out here, can't you?" Tanner asked, losing interest.

"Not with my bare eyes," Nick said.

"Bear eyes?" Carol asked.

"I better make my rounds once while the crowds light, it'll be impossible soon." Tanner smiled at the two of them, took a sip of his drink and walked along the pool toward the food table, his father, and some people Nick didn't recognize.

“Another beer?” Carol asked, standing up, a flash of imbalance corrected with a grace that came from years of being a dancer.

“Want me to get it?”

“Stay here,” she said. Nick watched her bend over, screech open the cooler lid, and grab two more light beers for the two of them.

Nick looked back over to their house. Carol returned and placed the beer down next to him. “Appreciated,” he said.

“Think they’re bored to tears yet?” Carol asked.

“It’s only been half an hour.”

“It’s been an hour.”

“What do you think she has them watching?” he asked, took a sip.

“Something terrible, something I would love.” She looked around the pool then back at their home. “Receive any requests for the movie later?”

“There were rumblings of Ichabod Crane from Andy.”

“We need to place an October-only rule on that.”

“Laura likes it, too.”

“Laura likes it because her older brother likes it,” Carol said.

“So, you’re going to be the one to tell him?”

“Ha! That’s Dad’s job.”

Nick wondered where Tanner’s party was on the graduation party tour the other seniors were on that day. Nick’s graduation party had been one of the early stops, with only a few close friends sticking around after eating a few plates of food. The Roberts were going to have a blowout later that evening, they had a blowout three times a summer already, but despite this

night also including a bunch of underage kids, Tad would still ensure a blowout occurred. Tad's portable liquor cabinet would not be restricted to the adults for very long tonight, Nick assumed.

Nick wondered when Amanda and the other girl would show up.

"I can't believe they haven't come out here yet," Carol said.

"The girls? You mean Susan and her family?"

"I'm starting to get to wiggle-level."

"I'll go with you if you'd like."

"It wouldn't matter, you'd still be able to nod and pee. Then on the way out you wouldn't even have to nod again. I'll introduce on my way in, then I'll have to say *something* on the way out. What if more have joined them?"

"You'd have to introduce yourself again?"

"And I would have just gone to the restroom, and everyone that was inside initially would know that."

"But you just washed your hands."

She gave him the pitying look. "That's not what they're thinking."

"I don't think they would be thinking about anything. Half of them would have probably forgotten your name," Nick said.

"I'll have forgotten theirs as well."

"They won't care."

"They'll care," Carol said. "I'm going to wait. A little longer, maybe it'll be time to save the kids. I've thought about it enough that going in there while I know they are in the living room, the house even, is not possible for me to handle right now."

“I’m sorry it shook out this way.” It seemed irrational, but Nick did irrational things too. He wanted to believe when Molly took off her top as well for those five minutes, she had been doing something irrational as well. Nick should not have seen this second unveiling. Amanda was obviously feeding off the thrill; Molly must have been feeding off of Amanda.

“Would it be weird if we went for a *second* plate?” Carol asked, halfway through her beer, as was he.

“I’ll head up there,” he said. Nick gulped a few times to finish the bottle. “Should we top off, eat again, then hit the fairway?”

“If Susan doesn’t come out before then, I can at least blame the babysitter for an unreasonably short conversation with her.”

“She’ll be hurt,” Nick teased.

“She’ll get over it.”

They both stood up and parted ways. Nick needed to get his bearings once he turned to start walking. He stood by the pool’s edge a moment, wanting to sink to the bottom.

There were more people getting food by that point and Nick observed Tad at the grill in the middle of an elaborate, certainly embellished, story about one of his employees at the synthetics factory. The employee was “plain plum-brained” according to Tad, although he said it with a good nature that came from enjoying giving your employees a hard time, “especially the twenty-somethings.”

Nick felt just as distant from the people that were laughing with Tad just a few feet away as he did the ones Tanner digitally robbed banks with. They were as far to him as London, or

Tennessee, places the rest of Tanner's crew might live. Nick wondered if any of them were older, not much older, but closer to his age. He wondered if Tanner considered them his friends.

He turned around, and there they were, the girls, where he and Carol had sat. They were each in a sundress, tan legs crossed, sipping from cans of soda. Nick stopped with his plate at the table in front of them. He wanted to believe it to be because the table had been the designated meeting point with his wife last he checked. He could have stood by the coolers, where his wife was supposed to be grabbing drinks, but he didn't. Nick looked from the coolers to the girls, hoping he could all of a sudden turn invisible.

"Hello," Amanda said.

"Hello, sorry, my wife."

"Were these your seats? We can move," the other girl said.

"No, we were probably leaving."

"Road food?" Amanda teased.

Nick laughed harder than necessary. "No, I guess we were going to eat, or take it with us. The kids won't have eaten."

"Don't you want to cover it?" the other girl asked.

"Oh no, we're right across the fairway."

"Oh, so he can probably see us too, can't he, Molly?"

"What?" Nick asked. "Oh, no."

"That's weird," Molly said.

Carol walked outside from the living room, a look of triumph on her face. Carol stood next to him, gave a quick fist pump. "I ducked where they dived, I made it out alive. Who are your friends?"

“This is Molly and this is Amanda,” Nick said. “They don’t want to talk to us.”

“Nick, their Tanner’s friends, don’t be rude,” Carol said.

“Sure we do,” Amanda said. “We want to hear all about you.”

“Yeah, tell us about what you do all day,” Molly said.

“What?” Nick dropped his beer.

“Like, as in a job.” Molly said. “Tell us about your work.”

A few people by the coolers were looking their way. The buffet table hadn’t seemed to notice. He watched his beer, spilling gold liquid as it rolled along the cement and into the pool. Breaking the water, the bottle drained the rest of its contents into the pool and floated along the top, bobbing under the surface occasionally. Nick watched as it started drifting from their side of the pool.

“Nicky, what is wrong with you?” Amanda said coquettishly.

“Nick, why didn’t you get that?” Carol asked.

“Molly, I’m sorry,” Nick said, handed the plate of food to Molly instead of his wife, who dropped it.

“Oh, no-“

Nick knelt by the water, a bun-less hotdog rolling past him and into the pool. He grabbed the bottle, sleeves down, with his watch-wearing hand. For a moment he again debated letting himself fall in. Once underwater, he could spend a few seconds collecting himself, staring up at the various bits of party food floating on the surface. Then he would swim across the pool, climb out, and walk across the fairway without speaking to anyone. But he didn’t, he stood up and faced the women with a dripping arm, his light beer now filled with pool water.

“At least you didn’t fall over.”

“What?” Nick nearly dropped the bottle again.

“At least you didn’t fall over. Into the water. Are you alright?” Molly asked.

“Molly, I’m sorry.”

“Nick, why do you keep apologizing to her?” Carol asked.

“Yeah Nick, what’s going on?” Amanda asked.

Molly couldn’t decide who to look at: Amanda, Carol or Nick.

All three of them then turned and started at Nick, people at the coolers were talking and looking at Nick as well. In a few short strides, Tad Roberts reached their table. “Something wrong?”

“I just can’t seem to get a grip, on this bottle.” Nick said.

“He’s quite clumsy, it seems,” Amanda said.

“Little early for that. Maybe you should take your husband home, Carol,” Tad said.

“I certainly should.”

“Wonderful party, we’ll have to do this again sometime.” Nick said. He took a large sip from his bottle then put it down between the girls. He gulped down the pool water and turned to leave. He paused, standing just short of the pool’s edge. Should he jump? He wouldn’t need long, and he could just swim to the other side, pull himself out, and start his walk back home. Carol pulled Nick along the pool to the fairway before he could act on his impulse. Would he have acted? Nick couldn’t look back at the party, instead he circulated saliva and chlorine around his mouth in silence.

Later that night, through the screen door leading out to their porch then the fairway, Nick heard Tanner and his friends by the pool. Carol had gone to bed, confused by his behavior but not suspicious. Nick confused himself with his behavior. He had a life, a good life. There were

down days, sure, but enough to warrant the blatant escapism he allowed himself for five days? No, certainly not. Or was that just what people did? The kids had been there, he had the time, and he had the binoculars. He wished he had them now, looking across the fairway at the glowing pool surrounded by so much youth.

All the adults must have been gone. He heard cursing and shrieks of delight, boys grabbing the taut, bare stomachs of girls and tossing them into the water. He imagined walking over there, across the fairway, bare feet on cold grass. He imagined standing on the diving board dressed only in his underwear and cape. Would Tanner and his friends all pause and look his way, would they wait with anticipation for him to dive gracefully into the water? Water calm now that all had stopped their horseplay to watch Nick on the board. Or would he stand elevated above the crowd, the glow of the pool lights reflecting off his chest and legs, and wait for an opening to dive into the crowded pool? Would there even be one?

14 MAKING BABIES

If we add three points to Athleticism, we have three left to spend. We already have 8 points to Intelligence. Virtue is a 7, Athleticism at 8 if we add those last three. We have his currently Luck at 7. But Affinity to Religion is only a 5. Her mother planned to take our son to church. None of that, “But there’s a preacher right there on tv” my father always tried. With a two-week retainer period, should we just divvy up the points and sleep on it? What did they say about Affinity to Religion? At 5 points, would they go when they’re young but lapse in college? Would that be enough for her mother? But if we’ve only got 45 points to spend on this kid, why blow more than we need to on Religion? What about those three points toward Athleticism? We have the Gold Plan. What about Gold Plus? That’s 50 points. Imagine what those extra five could buy us. Then who cares about more Religion? I’d be alright with more Religion with Gold Plus. My wife probably would be too. Her mom would be all right with anything if it meant more Religion; maybe she should be chipping in for some of this. There’s Platinum and Platinum Premium too, though. Hell, but we probably can’t even swing Gold Plus, with or without my mother-in-law’s help. So then, if we’re sticking to the Gold Plan, is 45 points enough for our child? The doctor assures us we have great numbers, but he probably says that to everyone. Even the Bronze Plan families. He said we could even think about giving our son more than a 10 in one of the categories but I figure, why bother? Then you’re just arguing degrees of genius, right? Were there degrees of Religion? Would more like 12 points in Religion help our son reach a higher plane? Would they automatically be a Buddhist? I guess I’m really wondering if these numbers are our child? Are we capable of raising a child with these numbers? Should we be raising one with better numbers?

15 THE VERY SHORT LIFE OF ANDREW NORTON

The child never stood a chance, born in a thunderstorm in the back seat of a mid-sized sedan. He was born with little fanfare other than a police officer and the well-wishes of the six bystanders surrounding the parked car. They were parked just short of the exit, but it wasn't as if their destination was located right off the freeway. The hospital was about half a mile farther down the road, with the emergency entrance inexplicably located down its own winding driveway behind the main building. Not that being born in a hospital compared to the side of the road would have made any difference for Andrew Norton.

The first time his father threw a baseball with him in the backyard he spent the following hour afraid to look in the mirror, convinced his nose would be stuck flat like a pig's. It wasn't, but when Little League started, even with the machine set to "Slow Pitch," he curled up in terror and threw the small metal bat toward the dugout his first time at plate during practice. He quit after missing three consecutive pop flies and that night informed his parents that organized sports were not, and would never be, for him. They never pushed the subject, instead suggesting maybe he was meant for the arts.

Elementary school wasn't much better. He had friends, sure, but not ones who would stick up for him when Paxton Reynolds made his rounds during recess. Paxton was one large third-grader who daily pointed to his next victim whom he then led to what he called The Rumble-Punch Pit. Andrew was one of Paxton's favorites when it came to Rumble-Punch, round and silent during school-yard beatings. His stoicism never giving Paxton even a moment's pause to reflect.

After school he would come home to an empty house because both parents worked and neither felt the child needed a babysitter after teaching him how to work the microwave and the

home phone as well as turn on the television and the cable box. The boy would have argued otherwise, but he was afraid of appearing weak at home as well as on the schoolyard. And it wasn't as if his parents never warned him about the dangers of outlets. They had, more than once in fact. But the power went out one afternoon, and he assumed that something must be stuck inside the outlet the microwave was plugged into, since he was using that when the power went out. Unfortunately, it was a 240v socket instead of 120v and it killed him immediately after inserting a fork into the two parallel slots. So that was his life.

For the next three days, the local news (Channel 4, unaffiliated) focused on the dangers of electrical sockets, the dangers of unattended children, the dangers of bad parenting, anything that could be tied back to a little boy being in a situation where he could fatally electrocute himself. There was even a segment on the dangers of a one-child household in the twenty-first century which argued more multi-family homes would save countless child lives in the future. The following year, and for a few years after that, an Andrew Norton Day for Electrical Safety was held at his elementary school. There were workshops set up in the morning, and lectures near lunch time. Made-up games on the playground and basketball courts helped to teach the importance of staying away from outlets. There was even a mascot who shouted safety mantras to the children.

Andrew's parents were quite young at the time of the boy's death, merely in their twenties. They gave birth to another child about six months after finishing their year-long court-mandated testimonials around the tri-county school districts. The baby was a girl, Marcy, and while they didn't turn into parents that hovered over every aspect of her life, they had learned from their mistakes. It was clear they had needed to work on a few things to ensure the survival of their offspring.

After Marcy came a boy named Tucker, and after Tucker came the twins, Bella and Matthew. Andrew's father received a vasectomy after that; four children proved stressful for both parents. These children knew of their brother Andrew. They learned about his desire to pursue the arts and his friend Paxton. But the parents didn't let the loss of their first child overshadow the lives of their healthy brood of little ones. The latent effects of child-loss manifested, but not in a manner most would commonly view as problematic. Marcy, the only one to move away, grew up to be a pediatrician, Tucker became a kindergarten teacher (later the elementary school principal). Bella and Matthew both went into coaching, collegiate softball and high-school football respectively. Matthew was the winningest coach in school history, and after he retired the library prominently displayed a copper bust of his likeness just past the book-theft detectors.

When the parents retired they were soon after graced with grand-children. Andrew's mother even lived long enough to see the birth of her first great-grandchild. The patriarch had died a few years earlier at the age of eighty-two, peacefully while watching Sunday Night Football. Eventually, both parents were buried next to Andrew, and Marcy bought up the surrounding plots for herself and her siblings. The family plot was well tended by Matthew and his wife. There wasn't enough room for the grandchildren, but by that point, there was no real attachment to the original family occupant. And many of them moved away like their aunt, or in some cases great-aunt, Marcy before them. One member of this third generation, upon turning eighteen, did get a tattoo of an electrical outlet on his right bicep, but that was related to something other than Andrew's tragic demise. It was a protesting commentary on the harvesting of kinetic energy from the human body to enable the nefarious doings of the government. Or something meaningful like that.

16 PACKER #19

First, I tested the waters. I pulled hair from my beard and shipped it with boxes of holiday stationary to places like Crow Creek, South Dakota and Woodstock, Vermont. Needing the job, I pulled hair when I could, when nobody was looking. And never more than a few strands at a time. I couldn't raise suspicion, so, while objectively turning into a problem as the months stretched on, everything started in an innocuous enough way.

Paw Paw, Michigan. Greenville, South Carolina. New Milford, Connecticut. Patchogue, New York. Bulb-like follicles at the ends, strands colored brown, black, blonde, even red. The oily strands were dropped into a box, tape-gunned shut, and thrown onto the conveyor belt. The scanner tossed the orders onto wooden pallets at the end. Boxes Overnight to Great Falls, Montana or Next-Day Air to Winslow, Arizona arrived at their destinations before we returned to work the next morning. Our sprawling country – pieces of me sent to every part. We even did international.

Winnetka, Illinois. Voorhees, New Jersey. Santee, California. Batesville, Arkansas. Henniker, New Hampshire. Cheek hair, chin hair, neck hair. The harder the angle the more worthwhile the prize once I finally got a good pull on a strand. Pulling nose hair stung and made my eyes filled with tears, so those became a rarity. Edmond, Oklahoma and Houlton, Maine got nose hair.

Grinnell, Iowa. Vancleave, Mississippi. Edina, Minnesota. Vienna, Virginia. Dagsboro, Delaware. The beard became patchy and sparse; I ran out facial hair around Shirley, Massachusetts. I started clipping chunks from my scalp. My bangs went to Wasilla, Alaska. I crumpled brown paper torn from large rolls mounted to our stations and sent a lock of hair from

the back of my head to Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Concern for my appearance was long gone by Pinedale, Wyoming.

Wyomissing, Pennsylvania. Whiting, Indiana. Mercer Island, Washington. Socorro, New Mexico. Dodge City, Kansas. I spit into a box headed for Luvern, Alabama. Tips of finger nails went to Geneva, Ohio. I bled onto a twenty-five-pound statue of a dancing frog on its way to Sarasota, Florida.

Flower Mound, Texas. Harrogate, Tennessee. Brevard, North Carolina. Parker, Colorado. Aimwell, Louisiana. Chapmanville, West Virginia. Winnemucca, Nevada. I started wearing condoms with Amy, the girl from the jewelry room, in her car in the parking lot on our lunch breaks. Anything I could ship. Mark, the returns guy, hid stacks of complaint letters the museum's online store received, as we had long-before become blood brothers over something unrelated to my shipping fetish. Larry, riding wire-frame carts around the warehouse to bring us the orders for packing, suggested I stop flushing when I used the urinal. It was temporary warehouse work, and it was my number going on the packing slip; none of them cared what went out along with a stained-glass Frank Lloyd Wright sun-catcher headed for Velva, North Dakota or a Lichtenstein print out to Valley, Nebraska.

Mexico, Missouri. Albany, Oregon. Bowie, Maryland. Price, Utah. Cumming, Georgia. Burley, Idaho. Science Hill, Kentucky. The morning I was fired, my boss found me in the break room with a fifth of whiskey and a small hatchet I brought from home (my hand was meant for Kingston, Rhode Island). He had a meltdown, said he saw this coming, said my productivity bottomed out in November. Said he'd heard about a box sent to Waimanalo Beach, Hawaii even the returns guy couldn't cover up. He asked if I enjoyed stealing time from the company and,

therefore, money right out of its pockets. He called my lazy, irresponsible, and ungrateful of the opportunity to work under him. He told me packing boxes was bigger than us, that I was selfish.

17 WE MOVE NUDE

Three nude men waited in a moving truck for the stoplight to change. The moving truck idled in the turn lane, preparing to turn left onto North Decatur and then on to a house over by Emory University. They would be moving in an incoming professor, highly sought after in her field, the men were told earlier at the morning meeting. Over there, they were all professors. The men had rolled down the truck's windows, a rough series of cranks and squeals. August Atlanta spilled into the truck, in one side, across the truck's cab, and back out again, passing across the movers, who were sticking to each other thigh-to-thigh in the front seat in the truck. Each attempted to ignore their sweating backsides, shoulder to thigh, which all together provided a nearly total coverage of the rough fabric seat in the moving truck.

Despite his previous work in the adult entertainment industry, Tommy Arnolds, aka Tommy Fingers, aka The Digits, was not accustomed to profusely sweating in such proximity to other people. One of many things he would need to figure out if this job with We Move Nude moving (and party) company was going to work out. He already wasn't sure he wanted it to, given tense dynamic not unlike the weight of the ninety-five percent humidity.

The light changed and Stu, the driver, let off the brake slightly as the cars in front of the truck pulled into the intersection and made the turn off Clairmont Avenue and onto North Decatur Road. Stu made the turn with one hand while taking a sip from his coffee cup. He tilted the cup nearly vertical with this most recent sip.

"Shit, might as well" he said. He put the cup down, taking his hand off the wheel as the turn finished and the wheel rolled back to the right on its own. He slapped his left hand down on the turn signal to alert that the truck would be immediately turning left again into the parking lot of a McDonald's.

“Really?” Dan said from the passenger side.

“What, really? We won’t be done till, like, three. I need something to sip on. Don’t start, Dan. Not today.”

The truck sat at another light, ready to make another turn. Tommy, in between Stu and Dan, watched drivers pass. The ones who recognized their bright pink truck, despite the truck’s height off the ground, always craned their necks to try to see into the cab. Just a few years into the relaxed decency national decency laws, and all sorts of businesses were popping up and quickly gaining notoriety.

“They always do that?” Tommy asked.

“Get used to it. Shouldn’t you like the attention, Mr. Fingers?” Stu said, emphasizing the end of his statement and snorting. “Just wait till some lifted truck passes, they get a money shot for free.”

“Ah,” was all Tommy could come up with. He reached for his cell phone in the space under the cup holders and started checking the various social media platforms he still kept up with, the ones the public and his remaining fans still used to contact him on. He had five notifications; two women were asking if he did bachelorette parties still, another unstable man asking to perform abhorrent acts on Tommy’s body, and two fans sincerely asking when he was going to get back into the business, or at least post a new video for them to enjoy. Last year, maybe two years ago now, Tommy could have five hundred notifications on a slow day. For a time, Tommy was the most sought-after guy/girl or guy/guy actor in the industry, an industry where men had to find their lane or get pushed out, as cam models and live, donation-based pornography had taken over. While he was ambivalent about his current station in life, Tommy liked the idea of being noticed again working for the moving company.

The light changed and Stu cranked the wheel to make the turn into the McDonald's parking lot then roughly pulled the wheel the other way to line up with the drive-thru lane. The car at the order kiosk pulled forward and the moving truck squeezed into the order lane, adding another slit scratch to the roof as it passed under the drive-thru overhang.

"Welcome to McDonald's, would you like to try-"

"Coke, large. You jagoffs need something?" Stu said. He turned to Dan and raised his hand in an "ok" gesture, bringing it down quickly near Dan's genitals, separating index finger and thumb at the last second, attempting to flick his co-worker's penis. Dan reacted in time to knock the hand away before contact was made.

"Dick," Dan said.

"Aww, common, little man. It's just the tip," Stu said. "You can handle a quick flick to the tip, can't you? Last I checked, you could handle a quick flick to the dick tip."

"Why would you call him Little Man?" Tommy asked.

"Oh, we've got a ball buster he-"

"Sir, would you like anything else beside the Coke?" the intercom asked.

"Let's go, ladies," Stu said.

"Coke as well," Dan said, leaning across the truck cab over Tommy. Before leaning back, he did a sneaky flick, catching Stu perfectly with the release of his index finger from the thumb. "Also large, please."

Stu howled. His whole body twitched, and he bumped the trucks horn trying to recover. "That's all," he squeaked.

"Two dollars. Second window. Thank you," the intercom said.

Stu pulled the truck up to the second window and waited. The female voice from the intercom was waiting in person to take their money. She saw the truck, closed the window, and put their cash into the register. She waited as a machine made their Cokes. She talked to another female employee who kept looking out the drive-thru window. Stu gave the women a thumb up gesture and they laughed, the second woman disappearing back into the kitchen behind the registers inside. Stu snorted at the response.

Opening the window and handing out the drinks, the woman who took the money said, "I thought you guys were fake, like an urban legend or something."

"The men, the myth, the legend," Stu said, taking the drinks.

"Sure," the woman said, closing the window.

"Thank you," Tommy said, barely audible.

"Christ, Stu. Drive," Dan said.

"All potential customers," Stu said.

"Not if you're weird," Dan said.

"Dan, relax. New day, my man. Let's not have a lover's quarrel in front of the new guy, eh? Can we try that?"

In response, Dan sipped the rest of Stu's coffee and threw the empty cup into Stu's wheel well and put both Coke's into cup holders. Stu let off the brake, pulled around the parking lot, through a traffic light that was already green, and turned left back onto North Decatur heading toward the southern part of Emory's main campus.

“Ugh, every road is North East something,” Stu said. “Be more specific, Dan. You’re killing me. I can’t see any of these house numbers either.”

The truck idled at a stop sign in a residential neighborhood just past campus and the little commercial downtown area with restaurants west of it. Trees lined the sidewalk and million-dollar homes sat behind the trees with yards free of weeds or children’s toys or dog poop. Home security system signs dotted the walks leading up to most of the houses they had driven past; blues reds and greens letting would-be thieves know they would be better off choosing another street to cruise down slowly in their cars or on their bicycles. This was one of the areas in the city of the academic elite, which had turned out to be one of We Move Nude’s best customer bases in its first few years of operation in the Atlanta area. This applied in some of their other markets too, in terms of areas of cities or towns near colleges. The professors were bringing in more business than the sororities.

“You mean the road name itself isn’t specific enough? Or the house number? Help me out here, Stu. Help me help you,” Dan said.

“Well, odds are on that side and evens on the other,” Tommy said.

“Did they teach you that in film school, Mr. Fingers?” Stu said. “Dan, seriously, just put it into your phone.”

“Don’t take it out on him,” Dan said. He grabbed his phone from under the drinks and started tapping on the screen. “Here,” he said. “Straight through this, then halfway down on the right. I don’t know why you suddenly decided to give up at this particular intersection.”

“Fucking finally,” Stu said. He let off the brake and pulled through the stop sign.

“Oh, maybe that’s her,” Dan said, pointing to a lady standing in a driveway watching their approach.

“I’ll say that’s a strong ten-four, little man,” Stu said.

Stu pulled the truck over. The woman walked up to Dan’s side with a hand over her eyes. She was wearing bright shorts and a loose-hanging shirt. Her burgundy hair went down to her shoulders, and every inch of visible skin was evenly tanned. The tan was light, didn’t jump out and force you to comment on it, and suggested to Tommy she spent most of her time outside instead of in a tanning salon. She did not get spray tanned, he could tell even from a good distance away thanks to years of being surrounded daily by those who had been. Prior to the cam model takeover, even prior to his days driving around the country having sex with college coeds before that, Tommy was still working with professional porn actresses. These actresses, as if it was a rule, were always fried to a barbeque sauce brown or bright orange and leaving stains on everything they touched.

“Afternoon, ma’am. Mrs. Turner?” Dan asked. “Dr. Turner?”

“You boys sure are punctual. Call me Cindy,” Cindy Turner said.

“We do our best, ma’am. We’ll back it in if you don’t have anywhere you need to be. Or you can pull your car out now, too,” Dan said.

“Nope, you go ahead and back it right in. I’ll be with you all afternoon,” Cindy Turner said motioning open-palmed to the driveway. “Isn’t that kind of the point? Someone else new in my department said it was.”

“Sure is, no point in hiring the best movers if you don’t enjoy the fact that they’re also nekkid,” Stu said. He winked but neither Cindy nor Dan noticed.

Stu put the vehicle in reverse and leaned out the driver’s side window to back into the driveway. Cindy Turner stepped off the driveway and into the grass of her front yard, waiting by

Stu's door as he backed nearly to the garage door. He put the truck in park and shut off the engine.

"Do they all do this?" Tommy asked Dan. "Stick around?"

"We're movers, bud," Dan said. "People stuck around before we became naked ones." He makes the same open-palm gesture Cindy had just made in the direction of their truck, then down to Tommy's genitals. "But boss-man thinks you're gonna be our golden goose. He added the "and party" in parenthesis on all the trucks when you officially came on board."

Stu opened the door and stepped out of the truck. Cindy Turner gave him a once over and peered her head around the front of the cab to try and get a view of Dan or Tommy. Stu gave his member a quick pull while she wasn't looking, but it was clear she had moved on, temporary length added by the tug or no.

Before stepping out on his side of the truck, Dan said, "Make sure to give her a good look before we put the shorts on. They complain about stuff like that, sometimes."

"But the shorts-"

"I know," Dan said, stepping down.

Dan walked around the front of the truck and received a more lingering look of appraisal from Mrs. Turner. Stu snorted and walked to the back of the truck, pulling his penis again, but only for himself. Tommy jumped out the passenger's side and closed the door. Rounding the front of the truck, Cindy Turner's eyes grew wide. He started to cover himself, but Dan smacked his hand away.

"The guy on the phone wasn't kidding," Cindy Turner said, not bothering to look Tommy in the eyes while she spoke. "You did movies out in California, I heard?"

"Once upon a time, ma'am."

“Oh, lighten up,” Stu said from behind the truck. “Like a month ago he was doing movies.”

“What brought you to Atlanta?” Cindy asked.

“Left the industry, family up in Roswell,” Tommy said.

Stu rejoined the group with a pair of clear boxer-briefs. “Suit up, boys,” he said.

“Could have brought ours too,” Dan said.

Tommy and Dan walked to the back of the truck to find their pre-packaged, one-time-use boxer briefs all We Move Nude employees wore when in the process of actually moving customer’s various possessions either in or out of dwellings. Pre-move, post-move, or during customer-requested breaks, employees were required to go briefless. If the customer requested the movers go briefless at any point before the whole move was finished, movers were required to put on a new pair of the pre-packaged boxer briefs. There was concern the briefs lost some of their form-fitting shape after even one removal. The one-time-use stipulation was no joke; suspensions had been issued in the past, Tommy had been told earlier that day by a mover in another group at the morning meeting.

“How’s everything look in there?” Cindy asked from the front of the truck.

“Looking good, ma’am. I understand we have another container’s worth to deliver tomorrow. Where’s this stuff going?” Stu asked from the front, stretching as nonchalantly as he could in front of Cindy Turner.

“If it’s from the red container, that’ll mostly be the living room and my husband’s stuff for the basement. Any of the miscellaneous boxes should be labeled already, and I can show you where to toss those.”

“Great, let’s say we get started?”

They were stuck in a corner. Or, more specifically, Tommy and Dan were stuck in a corner of the staircase leading down into the basement. One of those corners that changed the direction of the stairs a full ninety degrees and the bane of all movers, both professional and amateur. Stu waited at the bottom of the stairs with Cindy Turner. Both were facing Tommy's strained gluteal muscles from a direct angle. Cindy, no longer concerned with the formalities, and embracing the We Move Nude philosophy, had been crouching for the past few minutes since the boys had initially found themselves stuck on the stairway.

"Part of me wishes they'd never figure it out," Cindy said.

"I know the feeling, ma'am," Stu said. "Why don't you try turning it?" Stu asked his struggling, nude partners on the stairs.

"Stu, we have turned it. We've tilted it, we've turned it, we've even tried slightly bending it," Dan said.

"But what if you tried turning it now?" Stu asked.

"Stu," Dan said, managing to bite into his side of the couch without anyone below him noticing. His saliva wet the leather and the material crumbled slightly with the force of his clenched jaw.

"Now, little man, let's just think about this. How can we get that couch down those stairs and into this room," Stu said.

Stu pushed his hips forward, something he did when standing next to customers instead of face-to-face. Cindy Turner continued to watch Tommy's butt as Tommy shifted his feet to

better support the couch. Stu put his hands on his hips and snorted once, twice, his genitals eye level with Cindy as she knelt. But Cindy kept her eyes trained on Tommy. Stu focused on his penis. He attempted to direct more blood flow without directing too much. This was something some of the employees were told to practice in their spare time.

Cindy walked across the basement to the sink and filled the empty glass in her hand back up with water from behind the bar. Stu snorted, giving up and putting one hand on his chin, using the other to hold his elbow. Their boss insisted this positioning suggested there was problem-solving taking place inside the head of the person doing it. For a group of decently- to well-hung twenty somethings spending their days on full display, their boss said it was important to emphasize their intellectual capacity. Even if that emphasis ended up being far more theatrical than their boss intended.

“Try bending,” Stu said.

“Bending what?” Tommy asked.

“He doesn’t know. He’s just saying words,” Dan said.

“Everything alright?” Cindy asked.

“Wonderful, Mrs. Turner,” Stu said. “Dr. Turner?”

“Please, Cindy,” Cindy said, sipping from her water.

“Of course,” Stu said.

The basement was already finished. It was cooler than the rest of the house and thickly-carpeted. Framed movie posters rested against a few of the walls and an unplugged popcorn machine sat off from the wet-bar. A few beer taps poked up above the bar’s top. Recessed lighting illuminated the half of the basement they were all currently standing in, with the section

where the couch would go in front of an empty entertainment center next to the bar currently in darkness.

“What if I were to swap places with you, Dan?” Stu asked.

“Wait, what?” Tommy asked, face buried in his end of the couch.

“How would that look, Stu?” Dan asked.

“Oh, no need to be ashamed, Dan-”

“No, literally how would that look. Unless there’s a door down there leading outside, there’s a couch and a person between the two of us. That suggestion makes absolutely no sense, Stu.”

“Just brainstorming, little man.” Stu turned to Cindy. “Trying to think outside the box, you know.” He pushed his hips out one more time to no avail, Cindy would not look his way. “We’re working on his temper,” Stu said to Cindy Turner.

Dan and Tommy continued to wrestle with the couch while Stu vocalized every word remotely related to the process of moving objects through tight spaces. Cindy sipped her water, squatting again and occasionally tilting her head and sometimes even her shoulders down for a better view whenever Tommy bent over or shifted his weight for a better hold on the couch. The two nude men on the stairs finally freed the couch from the corner and placed it in front of the entertainment center a few feet from the stairs.

“You did it,” Cindy said. She clapped emphatically.

“We did it,” Stu said. “Let’s see what’s left.”

Stu, pausing for another moment then letting out another snort, walked up the stairs once it was clear Cindy Turner would not be following him. Cindy opened her hand palm up to let Dan and Tommy walk up the stairs in front of her. She followed the three nude men through the

maze of boxes in the living room, through an empty kitchen, save for some cups and cutlery sitting out on the counter, and out into the garage.

Outside, Dan and Tommy walked up to the truck and unloaded the remaining boxes. The few remaining boxes were in the very back of the truck. Stu stood off from the moving truck next to Cindy Turner. Stu and Cindy watched Dan and Tommy clomp up the steel grate leading into the vehicle then watched as they carefully slide-stepped their way back down the grate with one of the remaining boxes in their arms. Both men avoided looking over at Stu or Cindy and made sure to keep the boxes held above their waists, regardless of the weight.

With Stu outside and visible from the street and Dan and Tommy going back and forth, cars slowed on their way down the street. Cindy waved to a few, and before long a few of the other female professors on the block had made their way down to the Turner's and congregated near the truck next to Stu. Cindy Turner walked inside the house.

“Looking good, guys,” Stu said, hands on his hips, hips pointed forward, no longer concerned about the amount of blood he was sending southward through his body. “Almost done here. Just a few more.”

“One more thing,” Dan said, passing Tommy. “If he says one more thing goddamn thing to me.”

“What?” Tommy asked, walking up the ramp as Dan headed into the garage. “What did you say?”

“It's not much,” Cindy Turner said. She reappeared from the house with a silver tray topped with drinks and started handing out previously-prepared mojitos to the ladies, and now a few men, currently in her yard.

“Cindy, it’s wonderful. Welcome to the neighborhood,” a woman who introduced herself as Pam Reynolds said, sipping from her glass.

“Absolutely. Welcome to the neighborhood. I’m Rhonda Cozart, we met while I was walking Oscar yesterday afternoon” another woman said, taking her mojito from the now-empty silver tray. “The terrier.”

“What wonderful hospitality. I forgot drinks when my movers arrived a few months ago, you planned ahead,” another woman said. “Shelly Howard.”

“I’ll take that, ma’am,” Stu said. He took the tray and walked through the garage into the kitchen where Dan was by the sink drinking water from a glass.

“Nearly there,” Stu said.

“Yep,” Dan said.

“Look, Danny, we’ve got an issue. Let’s rap about it. Maybe not now, but later, yeah? We had a good thing, and suddenly there’s this, new thing. Is this from yesterday? I thought we had squashed the other thing already.”

“Sure,” Dan said, putting down the glass. He walked past Stu and back outside.

“Danny, baby,” Stu said. He followed him outside but went back to the group of women instead of attempting to continue the conversation. “Ladies, anyone here got a move in their future? Maybe a daughter about to start school at that illustrious institution right down the road there or even elsewhere in this great city of ours? I remember you, Dr. Howard. We’ve done a few of your houses, I know that.”

The women laughed over their mojitos.

“You’ve got the three best movers in town, right here,” Stu said. “Don’t let Danny Boy’s being a Grumpy Gus make you doubt our expertise. I know we certainly can’t hide the perks we provide our-”

Dan dropped the box he was holding, still in the back of the truck.

“Daniel,” Stu said. “I’m so sorry ma’am.”

Dan jumped down from the truck.

“What’s the matter, Dan?” Cindy asked.

Dan walked up to Stu and punched him in the face, sending Stu to the ground. The women screamed, some dropped their glasses into the grass. Dan stood over Stu for a moment then knelt and punched him three more times in the face. Sharp, quick punches. Then Dan stood up, pulled his foot back, and kicked Stu in the groin. He walked back up the grate into the truck. He tore open the box he had dropped while Stu puked sideways into the grass, narrowly avoiding the toes of a woman wearing open-toed sandals.

“Just pillows, ma’am,” Dan said. He squatted, picked up the box, and walked down the grate and into the house.

“That’s a relief,” Stu groaned. “Let me clean this up.”

The women thanked Cindy for the drinks and departed her front yard. With the truck empty, Tommy lifted the grate and pushed it back into the truck. Stepping onto the back bumper, Tommy pulled the door down and threw the latch into the locked position. He walked over to where the glasses were, picked up a few in each hand, and took them inside. Stu puked one more time then rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself onto his knees. Tommy helped Stu to his feet and into the passenger’s side of the truck.

“How about that for a first day, Mr. Fingers?” Stu squeaked.

“See you tomorrow, same time?” Dan asked, stepping out of his clear boxer-briefs before shaking Cindy Turner’s hand. “We have a heavy-duty wet/dry vacuum in the back seat. I’ll go grab that.”

Cindy only nodded, eyes dipping momentarily below Dan’s waist, back to his face, then down to the large pile of vomit mixed with mint leaves and ice cubes in her new, immaculately-cut front yard.

18 INTO THE LAKE

The dock collapsed and Mary disappeared under the water for a sec, then she came back hollerin' and thrashin' and I was on the shore, screamin' and pacin' and didn't know what to do or how to do it, and she was still in the water hollerin' and thrashin' and I walked up to the shore, right to the edge, and stopped, couldn't go no further, and the dog was racin' back and forth and barkin' and nippin' at me to do something, but what was I gonna do, I couldn't swim, she knew I couldn't swim, even the dog knew I couldn't swim, and I told her not to go on that dock, and she never listened to me, not ever, so I just kept pacin' and tellin' her to swim closer swim closer, as she kept thrashin' and hollerin' and splashin', the dock all over the place like a bunch of wooden icebergs, and her head dropped below the surface again, and the dog started howlin' and really biting my ankles, then just went for it and jumped into the water and dropped below the surface, then both of them were below, and the lake was quiet for a minute, even the ripples stopped, and dammit why didn't she ever listen, even once, even when we were kids and before everything, but still I walked to the water and stepped in up to my ankles, to my knees, to my waist, to my shoulders, then I was under, the water too murky to see anything so I closed my eyes and just kept moving, feet sinking into the bottom like it was the thickest shag carpet in the whole world.