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It Wasn't That Fun But It Was Better Than Being Dead

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It Wasn't That Fun But It Was Better Than Being Dead

Thomas Martin

Thesis submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in
Creative Writing - Fiction

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ABSTRACT

It Wasn't That Fun But It Was Better Than Being Dead

Thomas Martin

*It Wasn't That Fun But It Was Better Than Being Dead* is a collection of stories chronicling the antics of a small whitewater rafting company located in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee. The primary perspective comes from Toemas, a younger guide who falls into the job after a felony drug record hinders employment elsewhere.
Dedication

for Anna
Acknowledgements

The following stories have been previously published, in slightly different forms:

“Squirrels” as “On Logic and Squirrels” in *The Ashe County Line*, “Anna Poem #4” in *The Santa Ana River Review*. 
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A SHOWCASE OF LEARNING

Path

After abandoning my initially declared business degree, my approach to undergrad became a directionless one. I decided to sample the options and signed up for classes in a variety of unrelated fields of study. My plan was not to plan. I would take what interested me. And figured, after about six semesters, I would assess my transcript and a clear concentration would have formed organically.

I took wilderness classes, history classes, and anthropology classes. I took psychology. I took philosophy. I took avant-garde film studies, dark room photography, and American literature courses. By the end of my junior year, when it came time to mold the chaos, I had already secured a minor in technical photography. I considered that as a major. But because the film studies courses doubled as English credits, I leaned into literature. I had always been a reader. Growing up in a town where a signed permission slip was needed to take high school biology, reading something other than the Bible felt like a rebellious act. I never considered attempting to participate in the creation of a story, though. The process seemed so mysterious, so daunting.

Then I read Raymond Carver’s “Cathedral.” And everything seemed like an option after that. I remember thinking: If this is what a story can be—in the ‘80s no less—then by god I might be able to write one myself.

I graduated. But the seeds were planted. I read everything Carver wrote, including the poetry, and sought out any writer who cited him as an influence. I tore through multiple books a week, studying the different ways writers composed sentences, how they used punctuation, what came off the page as believable speech.
I started writing stories. But after I had a few under my belt, I was at a loss of what to do next.

My mom was a big stand-up comedy fan. As a kid, she would rent Bill Cosby and Smothers Brothers specials on VHS from the county library. And during the rare times we had cable, after telemarketers called and offered free trials, my mom would sit me down to watch more edgy acts like: Eddie Murphy, Bill Hicks, and Dennis Leary. With no real direction on what to do with my completed attempts at fiction, I took the advice I had heard repeated from so many comedians over the years: find a stage and test the material.

I did a Google search for open mics. I found what was described as a Writers Salon held every two months at the Arts Council in the next county over. I went. I read a story. And I kept coming back. I now had motivation. I had deadlines. I had an audience of mostly women in the age range of 50 to 75.

The 5-minute slot shaped the way I wrote. Length was confined to a strict 900-1100 word count. And because the stories were all read aloud, I focused on fast-paced summary and voice driven narration.

When I came to this MFA program it felt like a re-set button had been hit. The way I had taught myself how to write all of the sudden seemed completely inadequate. And after experiencing the workshop model for the first time, I was left skeptical of how exactly I was supposed to learn, much less improve.

But that’s been the most exciting aspect of compiling this thesis. Whether it had to do with the workshop, my peers, my instructors, or it was simply due to the deadlines and the time spent in the chair, after three years I can confidently say: Yes, I have learned. I have improved.
And I’m going to leave this MFA program with the conviction, patience, and motivation needed to continue my path as a writer.

Themes

Harry Crews claimed that fiction is always about morality—about who’s right and who’s wrong, about who slapped who when they were down, or who didn’t slap them but instead offered a moment of grace.

And while I agree with Crews, beyond morality my writing focuses more specifically on boundaries—not only who chooses to adhere or violate societal boundaries—but who, at the risk of confrontation, is capable of setting and sticking to their own personal boundaries.

Confrontation itself is a primary theme in these stories. The fear of confrontation. The desire for confrontation. And the consequences that come as a result of both of those things.

I am also interested in thought vs action and how that relates to an individual’s good/evil ratio. The narrator in many of these stories often thinks he wants to do something, usually a violent something, but ends up not acting on that urge. Does this make him bad? Good? Flawed? Human?

In our current reality the acknowledgment of a thought can have repercussions as disastrous as those that would result from carrying out the act. If thought is judged as harshly as action, at what point are we trading awareness of the human condition for the illusion of human perfection? At what point do we erode any possibility for collective empathy?

When I started writing, and when I started this MFA program, both my prose and my take on the world was a very cynical one. I was convinced compassion was irresponsible. That
people, when given the chance, would exploit any weakness shown for their own self-
advancement.

Cynicism only leads to stomach ulcers and suicide. It’s much more radical to have hope
in the face of tragedy, to be sincere and vulnerable without pretension or expectation. While I
haven’t reached such a Zen-like state yet, my stories—especially those written in the last year—
show signs of evolving towards a more optimistic outlook, which is exactly where I want them to
go.
SQUIRRELS

This was back when we were transcontinental drug dealers and living in Fleetwood Falls, and there was a leak in the bead board ceiling of the downstairs bathroom. A dark brown liquid had pooled and grown and started to drip down—*splash splash*—on the white tile floor. I assumed it was a plumbing issue. The bathrooms were stacked on top of one another, and I figured, due to odor and coloration, a slow trickle of our own sewage was to blame.

I called a plumber and waited on him while Anna went to work her regular job that kept suspicion at bay.

He arrived late. And when he did, he took one look at the leak and said: “Nothing I can do with that. I ain’t no carpenter.”

He showed me a point in the wall where he needed access and told me to cut a hole there and then left and said he would be back in the morning.

I, also not being a carpenter, grabbed a hammer from the limited selection of tools I owned and smashed a hole in the faux-wood trailer paneling.

The next morning, the plumber returned and tinkered around in the 3-swing access point I had created.

“Well,” he said. “It’s not your pipes.”

“Really?” I said, thinking that was a good thing. “What is it then?”

He pulled a clinched fist from out of the hole and opened his palm and rubbed dried black pellets around with his thumb.

“Looks like critters.”

“Critters?!” I said. “Goddamn. What do you do about critters?”
“I don’t do anything,” he said. “I aint no exterminator.” He handed me a bill, which was surprising, and then he walked out of the door.

When the exterminator came, I showed him the leak. I showed him the droppings. I asked what he thought. And he said squirrels.

My eyes got wide.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Flying squirrels actually.”

There are two types of flying squirrels in North Carolina—the southern flying squirrel, found statewide, and the Carolina northern flying squirrel that occupies higher elevations and is listed as an endangered species by the federal government.

The exterminator was going to exterminate regardless of species. He claimed that once an animal entered your house, it fell under a nuisance clause and could be killed regardless of government designations.

This stand-your-ground-approach-animal-edition seemed suspicious to me. But if there were squirrels, I wanted them gone. And if it turned out to be illegal to kill them, I assumed the exterminator, not me, would go to jail for the body count.

Complicity has never been a concern of mine.

The exterminator explained the plan. He would lay out glue traps and come back each morning for about two weeks, check the traps, toss the bodies, and set new ones. But before he could do anything he needed access into the ceiling, close to the source of the leak.

“You’ll have to cut about a 12x12 section out yourself.” He paused, took a breath, and as if anticipating protest, said: “Carpentry aint in my job description.”

I texted Anna and asked her to pick up a pack of hypoallergenic masks on her way home from work. A pile of squirrel droppings big enough to soak through bead board seemed like an
awful lot of turds. And huffing concentrated rodent-sourced fecal fumes seemed like something that could cause long-term side effects.

Anna texted back: Okay. No problem.

When she came home, she had no masks. She said: “Couldn’t find them.” And then held out a three pack of colored bandannas and said: “I got these instead.”

I came real close to losing it with something like: Are you fucking kidding me? Bandanas? Are you a goddamn idiot? Do you want to me to die of a lung infection?

But yelling wasn’t going to protect my respiratory system so just sighed and said: “I guess I’ll take the pink one.”

I tied the fabric in a square knot behind my head, bandit style, covering my mouth and nose.

I picked up the hammer. I decided to be gentler this time. Instead of just slamming holes in the ceiling, I pried the molding loose from the wall and jammed the claw of the hammer in the crack created by the missing molding. The ceiling was all one piece. I applied pressure slowly. I felt the board flex. There were cracks. I gave more pressure. Pulled down. And then snap. The breaking point was in the center of the ceiling, and as the bead board gave way, pounds of wet squirrel turds fell on top of my head.

I screamed.

Anna laughed.

That night we heard them in the walls. The squirrels. Running and scratching franticly, as if nervous and fully aware we were on the hunt.

The next day, the exterminator came and laid down glue traps with peanut butter bait. After he left, I went upstairs and was working with the vacuum sealer and the digital scales
when the house started to shake. It started slowly at first. A rumbling. Framed photos began to
clatter against the walls. Loose change bounced on the dresser. Then vibrations amplified. For
about fifteen seconds the house felt as if it was moving from side to side like a tree in the wind,
and all I could think was: Oh my god. There has to be two, maybe three million flying squirrels
in these walls! The compound is compromised. This is squirrel territory now.

Logic—if A is true, then B must also be true—is a flawed and subjective process that
suffers due to personal experience or a lack thereof.

I knew there were squirrels in the walls. I knew the house was shaking. So therefore,
based on that and all other knowledge gained from over a quarter century of existence, I knew a
six-figure squirrel count had awoken, ready to violently defend the habitat I had disturbed.

I decided to flee. I started packing bags with frantic urgency, gathering only the essentials
and abandoning the things we could do without. I was heading for the door, car keys in hand,
with two duffle bags slung over my shoulders full of untaxed paper currency when my phone
buzzed, a text from Anna. It said: Did you feel the earthquake?? So Crazy!

Earthquake? I thought. That wasn’t even on my radar as a possible option. My idea of an
earthquake involved California and streets cracked open exposing lava and releasing fanged
demons from the underworld. I thought about it again. An earthquake, huh? A minor trimmer.
Plate tectonics and what have you. Appalachian Mountains. It made sense.
I went back inside. Unpacked the bags. Put the cash back into the hiding places. As I pulled out
my phone to text a reply I heard scampering coming from the walls near the bathroom. I turned.
And the scampering stopped. Then: high-pitched chirps. Distress calls. I walked over to the
radio, turned WNCW up loud, and let the fiddle music drown out the slow sounds of death in the
bathroom.
picks?

Calm the fuck down.
It aint like this shit is
new.
Not even them Titanic ppl
mated before sending
nudes.
THE SNAIL

Jordan Vance had TV for exactly one month of his entire childhood. It was a free trial offered by a telemarketer and included HBO. Jordan lived in a singlewide out in the county and there were two beds. His mother slept in one, his gay brother slept in the other, and he slept on the couch in the living room and during that one month stayed up late ingesting as much televised content as he possibly could.

Comedy specials aired in the a.m. hours and one night Jordan came across two Australian men standing on stage with no pants contorting their genitals into animals and shapes like a clown would balloons.

Jordan was mesmerized. He pulled and tugged and turned and twisted and with time became a master of Penis Puppetry and all its techniques.

High school brought opportunity to showcase these honed skills and Jordan quickly became notorious for utilizing the Bird and the Wristwatch and the Hamburger as distraction methods at parties to mess with opponents on the other side of the beer pong table. It was great fun and everyone enjoyed it and eventually people had favorites, shouting out requests—Show em the Wedding Ring!—at crucial moments in close competitive play.

After acquiring an LG flip phone, Jordan began filming his genital origami and sent mass 15-second video texts to his friends who then forwarded those messages to their friends until everyone in the school had seen the steps needed to create the Pelican and the Windsurfer and the G-String.

Jordan embraced the cultivated reputation and never passed on an opportunity to present his manipulated scrotum to a live audience in the lunch room or the parking lot or outside the
movie theater where kids waited for rides from parents and smoked cigarettes and gargled Listerine.

Jordan turned sixteen. He received his driver’s license. His gay brother finally moved to Asheville. And his mom, free from the responsibility of chauffeuring her son around, started spending nights at her boyfriend’s house down in Hickory. Those two or so nights a week turned into three nights in a row and those three nights turned into four until the only time Jordan saw his mother was at the Sagebrush parking lot off exit 83.

They would meet there because it was on her way to work and when they did meet she would give him some money and ask how he was doing and he would tell her: “I’m doing fine, Mom.” And that was their routine.

This lasted six months. And then Jordan never heard from her again and started to lose weight. His diet was rationed down to one ham and cheese Hot Pocket a day, and in order to fill his gas tank he now insisted on collecting cash donations whenever requested to perform a public act of Penis Puppetry.

Eventually it became obvious that he was going to have to get a job so he applied at several tanning beds and a few restaurants but the only place that called him back was the Pizza Hut by the movies so he started working nights part-time.

His manager was Tammy Riddle, a woman who wasn’t old but wasn’t young either and had a daughter named Nikki who went to school with Jordan but was in the grade below.

Tammy and Jordan enjoyed each other’s company. They worked well together and their interactions were playful, but over time, increasingly based more and more on touch. When Jordan would make a joke, even some heinous joke about dead babies or retarded kids, Tammy would laugh and put her hand on Jordan’s arm. After shifts, when the night’s money was to be
deposited into the bank, the two would hug each other before going their separate ways and Tammy would say: “You give such good hugs.” And Jordan would smile and feel good about himself in an unfamiliar way.

The summer before his senior year, Jordan had friends over at the trailer regularly to smoke weed and drink Mad Dog and have sex in what used to be his gay brother’s bed. His friends all envied his unsupervised existence and said things like: “Jordan, man. You pretty much got it made.”

But by the end of the summer the power went off and the water went off and the Internet stopped working and the trailer itself was starting to decompose. The floor sank in several places and threatened to cave at any time and when someone finally stepped on the weakest point in the linoleum, Jordan just covered the hole with a towel and shared the house with the various species of wildlife that came and went as they pleased.

He started attending school less. He started working more. One night he called in and Tammy answered and Jordan said: “Do you have any extra uniforms? I can’t find any of my work shirts. It’s dark in here and there’s possums in the house and I think they may have taken my clothes to use as bedding.”

That was the last night Jordan slept in his trailer. After his shift ended Tammy looked at him with pity and said: “Why don’t you just come and stay with me for a while.” And Jordan figured that wasn’t too bad of an idea.

Her house was nothing special. A one-story ranch with two bedrooms and a back porch and when they pulled into the driveway Tammy said: “This is my house.” And then she said: “Try and be quiet. My kids are sleeping.”
Jordan was confused by the pluralization. He knew about Nikki. But couldn’t remember Tammy ever mentioning anything about another child.

She unlocked the door, careful to make as little noise as possible. The house was dark and Jordan could hear labored breathing. Following as close as he could behind Tammy, Jordan tried to watch his steps but his shin clipped the edge of a coffee table and a glass ash tray fell to the floor with a crash and Jordan said: “Shit.” And then came a loud and long moan from the shadows.

Tammy quickly turned on the lights which revealed her youngest child, a handicapped boy, strapped into one of those chairs handicapped boys are always strapped into. His eyes were wide but unaccustomed to the bright light and his head jolted back as he let out more exaggerated moans.

“Jordan. This is my son Charlie,” Tammy said and Jordan just stood there instantly aware of all the retarded kid jokes he had made and began to feel ashamed. He started to say something about it but Tammy sensed his unease and stopped him. “Don’t worry,” she said. “You didn’t know.”

Tammy retrieved a drool rag from a drawer and blotted the edges around Charlie’s face and said: “Shhhhh. It’s okay, Charlie. It’s okay.”

Charlie calmed down but he still breathed hard and his wide eyes never left Jordan.

Tammy brought out sheets and blankets and pillows for the couch and Charlie made a harsh sound and Jordan said: “I was thinking maybe I could just sleep with you.”

That night the relationship turned sexual and in the morning Tammy suggested they try their best to keep it all as quiet as they possibly could. She scrambled eggs and fried bacon and made coffee and when she set the plate of food down in front of Jordan she offered him a
proposition. Tammy suggested Jordan quit school and quit Pizza Hut and stay around the house, looking after Charlie. With the money she would save from no longer having to pay a caretaker, Tammy could afford to support Jordan physically, financially, and emotionally. Those were her words: physically, financially, and emotionally.

It was a new life for Jordan. One that consisted of watching gameshows with Charlie, spooning him food, and keeping drool rags clean and close. Charlie’s favorite show was *Wheel of Fortune* and he would emit happy moans each time a contestant walked up to spin.

But one morning just as a large and giddy black man was reaching up to grip the wheel, lightning struck followed quickly by thunder and the TV screen went blank.

Charlie started screaming.

He started shaking. He waved wrists, frozen in acute angles, as violently as he could and Jordan desperately squeaked squeak toys because it was the only thing he could think to do.

Tammy’s daughter Nikki skipped a lot of school. She was home that day and came out from her bedroom to investigate the noise and when Jordan saw her he pleaded and said: “I don’t know what to do!” And Nikki smiled and said: “I got a trick.” She pulled her Samsung from where it sat folded over the waistband of her Soffe shorts. She flipped it open, punched buttons, and held the phone towards her brother.

Charlie’s eyes focused on the small screen. And when Jordan leaned over to see what was playing he was shocked. He blushed. He was oddly embarrassed.

He saw his own hands in the video inverting his own testicles and pulling back and forth on the tip of his own penis, mimicking the movements and motions of a snail. He looked at Nikki. She was smiling. But Charlie was still engaged in a fit and Nikki said: “I dunno what’s going on. This usually works.”
It was then that Jordan judged the moment and began to do what he assumed was appropriate. He unzipped his pants, exposed himself, and proceeded to perform the act live. Charlie’s attention was immediately captured. He relaxed his arms, became tranquil and grinned.

Jordan, still as a snail, looked up expecting approval from Nikki but her face said something different. Her eyebrows were raised and her mouth was open and after a half-laugh that came through her nose she shook her head and said: “What the fuck?”

Jordan felt awkward in the house after that. He did his best to avoid Nikki and was always worried about what she might tell her mom. He entertained the idea of just leaving without saying a word but he didn’t know where he would go. He hadn’t kept in touch with any of his old friends from the trailer days and felt pretty invested in the current arrangement.

There was a party one night. Nikki went. Jordan stayed in and had a nice dinner with Tammy and afterwards Tammy went to bed and Jordan sat with Charlie in the living room watching TV. It was the wee hours of the morning when Nikki made her way home, highly intoxicated from the excessive consumption of Everclear punch. She came in through the back door trying not to make much noise but was stumbling a little and Jordan woke up on the couch after hearing a crash from her bedroom.

He looked at Charlie who didn’t stir. He listened for Tammy and heard nothing. He walked down the hall to find the bedroom door open and the light on and Nikki sprawled out on the floor with no shirt, half out of her jeans.

She had been in the middle of undressing but was drunk and lost her balance trying to step out of the too-tight legs of her pants. She had hit her head on the corner of a pulled-out drawer but Jordan saw the rise and fall of her chest and wasn’t too concerned.
He bent down and peeled her pants the rest of the way off. He scooped her up off the ground, cradling her, and gently sat her on top of her unmade bed.

He stared for a moment, noticing a mole like her mother’s, positioned on the underwear line of her inner thigh.

The plan was to cover her with a blanket, turn out the lights, and go back to watching TV but Jordan had an urge. He reached into his pocket and found his phone. He pulled it out. And flipped it open. He pressed the camera icon and waited for the screen to come into focus. When Nikki’s limp body was sharply rendered in the 1.3 megapixel display, Jordan moved his thumb over the OK button and pushed down to capture the image but the flash was set to auto and the volume was up high and for multiple seconds, blinding florescent light shot across Nikki’s eyes and the loud fake shutter sound cut through the silence of the house.

Nikki blinked a few times. Her head moved. Her body turned. She groaned and when the sight of Jordan hunched over her holding a phone registered, it was startling.

So she screamed.

And Jordan jumped. But before anything could be said, before any explanation could be made, Tammy had bolted out of bed yelling: “What’s wrong?! What’s wrong?!?” And now stood in the doorway before them both.

Nikki covered herself with a sheet. Jordan was still at the foot of the bed. In the living room, Charlie stirred, making noises, but the three ignored him, frantically moving their eyes back and forth from one to another, all quiet and all unsure of how exactly to proceed on from there.
JOB HUNT

I was out on a suspended sentence after getting caught and pleading guilty in Superior Court to possession of a personal sack of psychedelic mushrooms. I had been kicked out of college, blacklisted from every other North Carolina state supported university, and was now expected to pay back the few institutions I’d accepted scholarship money from. I had nowhere to live. Each lease I filled out got denied after the background check so I was staying off campus with my cousin on her couch.

I needed a job.

So I was driving south down 321 heading towards Blowing Rock looking for places to apply for work. It was morning—about 10:15. The Chili’s and the Outbacks and the Olive Gardens were closed but when I saw the Tanger Outlets in all their glory I pulled over knowing the high concentration of businesses there would make it a great place to dedicate the entire day.

I parked my truck on the far side of the lot and got out feeling motivated. I walked up to the closest store:

An Osh Kosh B’Gosh.

And at the time I didn’t really know what went on inside an Osh Kosh B’Gosh but I figured I was capable of handling whatever low level retail responsibilities they required.

As soon as I opened the door I was greeted by a bunch of child mannequins rocking overalls and little pastel-colored caps and I thought—Goddammit, this is a baby store.

But I went up to the counter anyway where a heavyset older woman wearing a floral top and too much jewelry sat behind the barrier. Her nametag read: Phillis or Rhonda or maybe it was Loraine. She had a pretty prominent birth mark on her upper lip caked over with a heavy
layer of dark foundation and accented by a thin mustache that shimmered in the overhead light of
the store.

She said: “Can I help you,” in a tone that let me know right up front just how low the
probability of employment was going to be.

“Yeah,” I said. “You can. I was just wondering if yall were hiring or maybe at least
taking applications.”

I smiled. Because I’d been able to smile my way into good fortune before. But for
whatever reason that trick was not working on this woman. She didn’t even respond. She just
turned and bent over and shuffled some shit under the desk and then emerged with a packet of
papers and held the packet out towards me.

I reached to grab it. And as I extended my arm I watched that woman’s eyes drift down
and felt damn stupid for not remembering to wear sleeves.

Her face had this less-than-impressed look about it and I said: “Thanks,” and her eyes
moved back up from the big tittied pin-up girls that decorated my skin. As she let go of her side
of the papers she gave me a quick half-smirk and said: “You’re welcome,” before shifting her
attention away from me.

I wanted to leave.

But I didn’t. I helped myself to a pen by the register and sat down against the front glass
in the one chair reserved for bored husbands. I filled out employment history:

- Sonic Drive-In/Marion, NC/Carhop/2 years
- Premier Cheer and Tumble Gym/Forest City, NC/Instructor/6 months
- Myra’s Restaurant/Valdese, NC/Caterer/3 months
- Sugar Mountain Ski Resort/Banner Elk, NC/Lift Operator/1 season
I filled out education history too.

I filled out descriptions of work ethic and leadership qualities and other nonsense that seemed trivial to me. I filled out all the sections and answered all the questions on every page until I got to the backside of the final sheet.

And then there it was: *Have you ever been convicted of a felony?*

There were two boxes. One for Yes. One for No. There were instructions: *Check only one.* No follow up questions. No further lines for explanation. No opportunity to say: *I’m just a felon for now. It’s temporary! Part of the plea deal for first time drug offenders. A 90-96, that’s the technical term. Look it up if you want! And after two years of supervised probation and a shitload of community service, I’ll be a regular person again!*

Honesty will get you nowhere and I was so damn tempted to lie. But when I read the fine print—*Failure to answer truthfully could result in immediate termination and further prosecution*—I thought about prison and those three suspended years hanging over my head. I thought about my mean lesbian probation officer who was always wearing mean lesbian pantsuits and a pistol on her hip, threatening no mercy if I was ever to make the slightest mistake. I thought about how I just wanted to be back in school writing papers and doing homework instead of applying for shitty retail jobs. And I thought about my mom and how I never again wanted to call her from jail.

So I checked yes. I handed the packet back to the woman and I smiled again and told her thank you and she didn’t say shit so I told her that I hoped to hear from her soon. I walked outside. The Gap was next door. I checked yes there too. I went to Pac Sun and checked yes. I went to the Kitchen Collection and checked yes. I went to the Nike Outlet and the Levi’s Store and the goddamn Banana Republic and I checked yes. I checked yes for hours on like thirty
applications and when I got back in my truck I was exhausted and pissed and all I could think was—Sonofabitch. What an entire fucking waste.

I cranked the engine and rolled the windows down. It was warm for early spring. The radio was set on low volume to WNCW and Doc Watson was singing about deep water blues. I just sat there for a second with my elbows against the steering wheel and my face in my hands and I listened. It was late afternoon but the sun was still out and the air was a good temperature and there were birds making noises that blended nicely with the music and the sounds of families and children talking and laughing as they walked from store to store.

I hate feeling shitty when it’s nice outside. But goddamn if I wasn’t feeling shitty. I thought about my life and how unnecessarily difficult I had made it. I took a big breath and exhaled into my hands and rubbed my eyelids with the warm air.

“Alright,” I said to myself as I unburied my face and looked up just in time to see damn Rhonda from Osh Kosh B’Gosh stick a flier under my windshield wiper that advertised their upcoming store wide 40% off Memorial Day sale.

Motherfucker.

I turned the wipers on but the dry blade clung to the flier and just smeared the image of a well-dressed grinning curly headed mixed child back and forth against the glass.

I reached out of the window, leaned forward and pulled the ad from the wiper. While I was still hanging half way out of the vehicle, Phillis turned back and looked at me. I stared into her eyes and there didn’t seem to be an ounce of recognition. I crumpled the ad one-handed and tossed the wad in the passenger side floor board even though I wanted to throw it on the ground as a showcase of disrespect.
I proceeded to leave the Tanger Outlets. At the exit I sat at the light waiting to turn left so I could head back towards Boone on 321. While I waited I started mumbling to myself. I started saying shit out loud like: “I don’t even wanna work at Osh Kosh B’Gosh. Or the goddamn Gap. Or any of those motherfucking places. Inside all day? Behind a register? Folding clothes? Jesus Christ. I’m better than all that bullshit.”

I imagined a scenario in alternate universe where Loraine called me back for an interview. I imagined the nice clothes I would wear and the clean shave I would have and then I imagined that instead of sitting down for the interview I would just walk in and start urinating all over the floor.

The light turned green and I started visualizing how Phillis might react to such a scene. Would she scream and waddle about the store frantically with all that jewelry clanging around as she moved? Would she wave her arms back and forth, jingling, and yell in vain: “Stop it! Please stop it! Stop peeing on my floor!”

Or would it be something else entirely? Something positive? Something motivating for her, maybe? When, finally, Loraine could give a raised middle finger to a shit job taken in desperation, a job that stole her focus away from true dreams.

I drove slow, absorbed by thoughts of Rhonda and I urinating in tandem all over Osh Kosh B’Gosh merchandise—grinning and smiling and high-fiving midstream, when canoes like beacons caught my eye on the right side of the road.

They were red Old Town Discoveries stacked four high and two wide on a trailer parked amongst busted up 16-passenger vans in front of a two-story green cinderblock building.

Oh shit, I thought. I’ve got experience with this.
The summer after my senior year of high school my parents sent me on an Outward Bound trip to Montana. Like literally sent me. Didn’t ask if I was in anyway interested. Just told me the night before that I was going to Montana. It was ten days of paddling on the Yellowstone River and twenty days of backpacking through the Beartooth Wilderness. They claimed it was a graduation present but I knew it was really just to get me out of Marion and away from my crazy girlfriend who made me wear a male promise ring and would show up outside my house in the middle of the night after reading some shit on Myspace and smash framed photos of us in the street.

I put the turn signal on and pulled over and parked underneath a big faded vinyl sign with the image of some neoprene wearing Burt Reynolds-looking motherfucker steering a raft full of people through whitewater. Above the photo read: Wahoo’s Adventures. And below was the phrase: For A Good Time Call with an 800 number listed underneath.

The building itself looked rough. There was a rotted-out deck on the second floor and off to the side was a hose coming from a spigot draped across overflowing trashcans sending water down a wooden trough. Leaned up against the trough secured by two 5-gallon buckets full of rocks was a scrap piece of plywood with the words GEM MINE spray painted in orange lettering.

I walked up to the front door and turned the knob but the frame was swollen and it took some shoulder force to open. When it did I stepped inside and the first thing to hit me was hot air coming from a stand-alone propane heater. Then: the smell of mothballs and urinal cakes. Even with the heater going the place was damp with dark wood floors and flimsy trailer paneling. A vinyl van seat sat parallel to the entryway facing a TV that played the Weather Channel on mute.
The TV sat on a series of shelves housing hunks of quartz and books of mica and a partially decomposed wasp’s nest still attached to the branch it was built on.

There was an unmanned office area separated from the main lobby by an L-shaped counter and hanging above the counter were LED nametags with the message—*HOW CAN WE GET YOU WET*—scrolling in red digital lettering from right to left. The price was handwritten on scrap paper posted by the display. *Regular $179* was marked through with an X. *On sale $19.99* was scribbled underneath.

Another handwritten sign was taped above the cash register. The words were uppercase bubble lettering—*ABSOLUTELY NO REFUNDS*—outlined in black Sharpie and colored-in red.

There was a bell on the counter next to a collection of off-brand travel sized tubes of SPF 30 and a pyramid of waterproof disposable cameras. I rang the bell. Waited. And heard no movement or signs of employees. I turned around. On the back wall were t-shirts hanging from a pegboard. I walked over and thumbed through the options. Most were bright colors, decorated with maps of rivers, and tagged with slogans like: *I Survived* or *Paddle Faster I Hear Banjo Music.*

With no sign of human life I was about ready to call this one a bust. But when I turned around, right at chin level and only inches away from my body stood a plump middle-aged Asian woman who said very calmly and in a heavy accent: “Welcome to Wahoo.”

It was a surprising sight I was not prepared for. I screamed a little. And jumped back against the wall knocking several t-shirts from the pegboard to the ground.

“Ayee. Be careful,” she said with a harsher tone. And I apologized, bent down, and started picking up the shirts, hanging them back up where they were supposed to go.

“You make reservation,” she said.
“No I was—”

“Credit card,” she said.

“Huh?”

“You give me credit card.”

“I don’t wanna give you a credit card,” I said. “I was just stopping in to see—”

“What you want then?”

“—to see if you guys were hiring. Or maybe taking applications?”

The woman nodded. She was wearing one of the company tourist souvenir shirts tucked into jeans. This one was brown with the caption: _I ENJOY A GOOD DUMP_ above the graphic of people dangling from a raft on its side moments before flipping.

“You want job,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m interested in working here. I actually have a little bit of experience doing—”

“Where you want work?”

“Um. I dunno. I don’t really know what the deal is here.”

Her face was smooth. And I couldn’t help but stare at her eyebrows. They looked hairless but still there and stained in an old-school prison-ink green.

“You work Watauga?” she said. “Maybe New River?”

“I’ll work anywhere,” I said.

“Anywhere?”

“Anywhere.”

There was no paperwork to fill out. No application. No inquiry into my criminal past. No one wanted to hear anything about my Outward Bound experience or swift water rescue training. I was not quizzed on terminology or the difference between a J-stroke and a draw stroke and pry stroke. The Asian woman simply looked at me and said: “You come tomorrow morning for train. 6:30. No pay.”

And although that seemed a bit suspicious, I was more than stoked. I said Thanks with a big smile and was damn near skipping when I heard a deep voice bellow from somewhere in the back: “Goddammit Lilly. Where is my stir-fry?!?”

I stopped. Looked at the woman. Her face showed panic. She took off past me muttering: “No gooūd. No gooūd. No gooūd.” And disappeared behind a door labeled: Employees Only. There was commotion. I heard the sound of pots and pans clanging against each other. I heard a plate drop and shatter. I smelled something burning. And when the smoke alarm started screeching I figured it was time to leave. Besides, it’d been a long day. I would need my rest if I was going to make back here on time so early.
FIRST AID

I had been working for Wahoo’s Adventures for three weeks and so far in my raft guide career, I had built a deck, painted that deck, painted a house, installed a couple of toilets, dug up a septic tank, and laid tile in both a kitchen and a bathroom—all for $5.15 an hour and all under the supervision of a schizophrenic bald man named Pops.

Pops had a real name: Frankie Irvin. And he apparently at one time had been a really talented whitewater guide out in California. But since coming to the East Coast, Pops had lost his shit and now referred to himself in the third person and showed up every morning wearing a fresh pair of Dollar Store sweatpants and a matching hoodie—tags on.

This was the High Country. Even in summer the mornings are cold. So Pops carried a boxcutter, kept it wedged in his waistband, and used the blade for trimming those clothes slowly as it got hotter throughout the day. By the time the sun set, his sweatpants would be cropped six inches above the knee, and the hoodie—a sleeveless 80s half-shirt equipped with a very deep V.

I thought about quitting.

My probation officer had even recommended it. “A lot of suspicious things are rumored to go on around that place,” she said. “You might want to consider working somewhere else.”

But she was hard to read. She was young. And attractive. But stern and claimed to be a lesbian. She did this thing, not every time but more often than I wanted, where she would reach over and pinch my dong during the supervised drug screenings. She claimed it was to make sure I wasn’t packing a prosthetic penis and trying to smuggle in clean piss. “Protocol,” she would say. “Standard protocol.” And then she’d wash her hands and crack a joke about turtlenecks or anteaters and make a comment about how all men were worthless, sub-human beings.
Even if I wanted to take her advice, where else was I going to work? None of the retail shops at the Tanger Outlets had called back. And I had already invested over $200 in a flip line, a throw bag, and a PFD. I was set on being a raft guide. But every night when I called in, I was always scheduled for light construction work on the Bed and Breakfast renovation at the office upstairs.

I wanted to be on the water. I decided to confront Jeff about it.

Jeff Stanley owned Wahoo’s along with his Indonesian wife Lilly who he claimed to have rescued from a life of indentured servitude at a Chinese Buffet in Clearwater, Florida. During the off-season, that’s where they lived—Florida. But from March till late September, they stayed in a bedroom by the timeclock on the first floor of the Wahoo’s main office.

Jeff had been a whitewater guide in North Carolina back in the day during the initial commercial boom inspired by a government surplus of military grade rubber rafts and the film adaptation of Deliverance. His company had been around since 1978, but he was still a short-sighted businessman—always looking for the cheapest possible solution, solving a problem only for today.

His wife was no different. She barely spoke English and had tattooed eyebrows but was in charge of answering phones and booking trips. After the first week of wielding a nail gun in sandals, I asked Lilly what day the pay period ended and she pulled two decorative wooden snow skis off the office wall and offered them to me in lieu of a check.

I almost accepted them.

But Jeff did have an odd streak of compassion to him. Take Pops for instance. When no one else would let that dude guide on any stretch of creek, Jeff made sure he had work installing plumbing and let him live upstairs in the in-progress B&B.
The Weather Channel was playing as usual, and as I walked into the office Jeff was sitting behind the desk in front of the phones with his elbows up on the counter. He was rubbing his fat jowls and his grey beard and wearing a sun-bleached Wahoo’s souvenir shirt that was on display in the window yesterday. I walked past a naked mannequin.

Jeff finished his face rub and looked up at me. He looked stressed. “Hey Bud,” he said.

He was always calling me Bud. I had the feeling he still didn’t know my name.

I wasn’t going to lose focus. I had a spiel. It was all planned out, and I had rehearsed it on the drive over. I would start by clarifying that while I appreciated the opportunity to renovate the upstairs of the office with a crazy man, what I really had expected was to guide boats. I would remind Jeff that I had trained and checked out on the Watauga River weeks ago, and after all the hard work doing skilled labor I had no qualifications for, I think I’d earned an opportunity at guiding a paid trip with guests.

But before I could even get the Hey Jeff I was wondering if I could talk to you out of my mouth, the door beside the timeclock, their bedroom door, opened just wide enough for Lilly to slide through.

If Jeff didn’t know my name, Lilly definitely did.

“Ayee,” she said. “Toe Mas.”

“Yep,” I said. And confirmed that I was indeed Toe Mas. I asked how she was doing, and then noticed her arm—bent at a 90 degree angle, held close against her body, and secured in place by a sling made of brown plastic grocery bags.

“What happened to Lilly,” I said derailing my own pitch.
Jeff didn’t answer for a second. He sighed. Put his hand in his face. He said: “Last night.”

He paused. Then: “Lilly fell, and she broke her humerus.” He took a big breath. Let it out.

Looked down. Then up. Shaking his head the whole time. “And between you and me,” he said.

“It was not very humorous.”

“Bad,” Lilly said. “Very bad.”

“Jesus.”

“Which reminds me,” Jeff said. “Pops isn’t feeling well. You’ll be working with Lilly today.”

“Great but I really wanted to ask—”

“Don’t forget about CPR training tonight.” He pointed at the dry erase board where the schedule was written. Above the three columns (New, Watauga, Nolichucky) was a note with asterisks—*CPR and First Aid Tuesday 6pm*

“Once you get the med certs we can get you out there as a paid Watauga guide and you might even be able start training on the Nolichucky.”

There is nothing better than not having to follow through with something that was making you nervous. I found my timecard, wrote Office, lined the date under the machine, punched it, and put it away.

In addition to answering phones Lilly was in charge of prepping the river lunch. The Wahoo’s Executive Chef—Jeff called her. The full day rafting trips included a riverside deli buffet and Lilly went to Food Lion each afternoon to buy supplies, but with a faulty humerus she could no longer drive.
Even though there were plenty of company vans in the parking lot Jeff insisted that I take Lilly in my own personal vehicle. “Why would you need to take a van,” he said. “Everything’s very close.”

I opened the passenger door for Lilly and she climbed in, shielding her wounded humerus. I helped her with the seatbelt and once she got settled she said: “Dîs wääñ very nice.” I told her thanks and she leaned down and smelled the glove compartment.

The first stop was Food Lion. And when we walked in, it was clear that Lilly was a known customer. There was a low but audible grown from the checkout staff as we walked towards the produce where Lilly thumped watermelons and fingered heads of lettuce with her good hand.

She commanded me about the place. “You take dîs wääñ,” she’d say. And I would lift up a watermelon and put in our cart. She would point at two heads of lettuce. “You take dîs wääñ. And dât wääñ.” And I would pick up both heads. “No no no!” she’d say before using hand motions to convey that she wanted those ripped in halves in order to form a superior head of lettuce.

“I’m not sure that’s legal,” I said. But of course did it anyway.

At the register Lilly tried to use out of date coupons and was so hard to communicate with that the cashier just gave her a 10% discount on the whole order. She requested extra bags before leaving and asked me to reinforce her plastic sling.

The bank was next on Lilly’s list of errands but on the way we stopped at the Merita Bread discount store on the bypass where Lilly picked the oldest, stalest, and cheapest loaves of white bread.
At Wachovia I walked inside with Lilly to enjoy the a/c. There was no line and after a male teller waved us over Lilly unsheathed a fat white envelope and said: “Dis Wahoo.” And the man took the money, counted it, and gave her a receipt.

Outside it was hot and about three sleeves past noon. I thought about Pops and wondered if he trimmed clothes on his day off. Surely not. That’d be waste. But then again, it did get toasty up there in his room.

I asked Lilly if we were finished running errands and she told me No. “Wääñ more,” she said but wouldn’t tell me where it was we were going or what we were doing once we got there. We got in my truck and she just kept barking directions—You take a left! And when we got to where it was she wanted to go, we were clear on the other side of town in the parking lot of a different bank. A small local branch—High Country Savings.

I turned off the ignition and looked over at Lilly. Her humerus looked absurd now that I had braided the blue and white Food Lion bags into the standard brown edition that originally made up her sling. Before I could even ask what we were doing, she said: “You no tell Jeff.”

“How?”

“Jeff,” she said. “He ask. You no tell.”

“Yeah. Sure. Fine.” I reached to open my door.

“You stay!” she said. So I did. And Lilly walked off towards the bank clutching her purse to her chest with her good hand.

I waited on her for what had to be an hour. I had the windows down in the truck. My seat was leaned back and I was listening to bluegrass music on WNCW thinking: Goddamn. This is so much better than installing plumbing with Pops.
When she came out of the bank she was smiling. She walked over to my truck, opened the door, and said: “Okay. Very good.” I sat up in my seat, cranked the truck, and drove back to the Wahoo’s World Headquarters.

“What took you so long, Bud,” Jeff said as I walked in, arms full of grocery bags, holding the door open with my foot for Lilly and her humerus.

“We go Merita Bread,” she said. “And bank.” She turned her head and gave me some harsh eyes, and I said: “Yeah. We went to Merita Bread and Food Lion and the bank.” Lilly handed Jeff receipts.

“Come come,” she said to me and I followed her into the kitchen.

The kitchen at the Wahoo’s Office had two refrigerators. One had a note written in pen on scratch paper—Jeff and Lilly Fridge You No Take. Yellow fly tape dangled from the ceiling, dotted with dead flies. Half the space was a traditional kitchen—counters, sink, electric stove, microwave. And the rest was junk storage. There were old generators and air compressors. Old wetsuits and aerosol cans. Loose nails were scattered about the floor and various tools hung from a peg board drilled into the far wall. Red Rubbermaid coolers were stacked open and upside down in the corner with a puddle of stagnant water that had gathered underneath.

Lilly shut the door behind us. On the backside was a handwritten note in all caps—MAKE NO MISSTAKE. It was signed by Lilly.

The place smelled like mildew and spray paint, and Lilly handed me a butter knife to scrape the mold off the discount Merita bread. I got to work hovering over a trash can flicking off suspicious portions of white flakes. Lilly was transferring the deli meat from the Food Lion bags into plastic Tupperware containers that had been left drying in the sink. She opened the
fridge that had *River Lunch* written across the front in Sharpie and loaded the shelves with Tupperwares.

After everything was put away Lilly asked me to crack eggs so she could make brownies. Once the eggs were in the bowl she claimed she could handle it one arm style from there. It was 4pm. Jeff told me to clock out and come back for CPR at 6.

I didn’t want to go back to my cousins apartment. Her roommates were probably home and I had felt awkward ever since walking in the other morning and finding Alyssa in the kitchen, flipping pancakes, ear buds in, and singing topless with only sheer white underwear on.

I wasn’t having any more luck finding my own place.

I drove out to the Parkway to kill time and pulled over at the first northbound overlook. I backed my truck up to the view. I got out, let the tailgate down, and climbed into the bed. I laid back and stared up at the clouds. There was a light breeze.

It’d be nice to say that it was here, in this moment, that I started to have concerns about where life was taking me. That I was self-aware enough to be suspicious about the secret bank trip, the broken humerus, the mold bread, Pops, the attempt to pay me in wooden skis. But I wasn’t. I just wanted to be back in school.

A red Corolla rolled up beside me and three girls got out with a patch quilt. I sat up. They were all wearing App State shirts and spread the blanket out on the grass. We were the only cars at the overlook. And once they got situated they pulled out a glass pipe and a label-less pill bottle from the front pocket of a Jan Sport bag. I tried to give them their privacy. I kept my gaze forward, tracing the ridge lines of the mountains with my eyes trying to remember their names. Short-Off, Hawksbill, Table Rock. Fuck—what I wouldn’t give to smoke weed. Laying around in the grass without a goddamn care in the world. What I wouldn’t give for a meal plan and a
dorm room and sex in a cramped twin bed. A couple of papers to write instead of getting shocked from ripping wires out of a wall with man who trimmed his sleeves.

I heard a lighter flick. Some coughing. An exhale. I hopped off the tailgate.

“Hey,” one of the girls said. “You wanna join us?” She was holding the pipe and the lighter out towards me in her left hand. A stream of smoke was dancing up from the cherried bowl pack. She had pale green eyes that were already starting to gloss over. She was smiling. There were dimples on her cheeks.


When I parked my truck at Wahoo’s, a mini-van came rumbling in fast and screeched to a halt blasting rap music in front of the office door. The car stayed idling and the music kept playing and people with duffle bags full of gear and open containers stumbled out of the vehicle. There was a squeak from the spring in the office screen door and then the sound of it retracting back, slapping shut.

Jeff was now outside.

He threw his arms up and said: “Who the hell thinks they can treat my van like that?” He sounded angry. But he was smiling. Almost as if he was secretly proud of the behavior.

The driver door to minivan opened and a stout dude with a ponytail looking to be in his late-thirties stepped out with a thick aluminum clipboard and also holding a beer.

“We miss the CPR?” the ponytail man said.

“Pat,” Jeff said walking closer and shaking his head. He was still smiling. “You gotta go easy on my vans.”
“I was just testing the brakes.” Patrick handed Jeff the clipboard, took a swig of beer, and said: “Sold two pairs of Croakies, a sunscreen, and three t-shirts. Cash is in there.”

Jeff opened the clipboard and thumbed through the money. He took out a ten dollar bill and handed it to Patrick. “Here’s a little something for you, Bud.” And I thought: Damn. The Bud thing is universal.

“You want a beer, Jeff?” Patrick said. “We’ve got plenty. Ole Statutory Dan had to buy two cases of swim beer after his performance today.”

“He swam at Second Drop and couldn’t get himself back in the boat,” a blond girl said.

“One of his gimps had to pull him in and then they dropped over Murphy’s dead sideways,” a skinny younger kid said.

Jeff was laughing.

“Oh yeah,” Patrick said. “He got side surfed bigger than shit for twenty minutes before Kersey roped him out.”

A man who was obviously Statutory Dan walked slowly with his head down and opened the back hatch of the van. “Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Laugh it up,” he said. And pulled out two Rubbermaid coolers and carried them inside the store.

“You guys hurry up. Clean the dishes and get this stuff put away,” Jeff said. “The lady teaching your CPR class is already set up inside.”

“Who’s that?” the blond girl said pointing at me.

“That’s Tommy,” Jeff said.

“It’s Thomas,” I told her.

“I’m Kersey,” she said. We shook hands. No one else introduced themselves to me.
The woman who led the CPR training looked like a high school PE teacher circa 1995. Her hair was shoulder length and frizzy, tightly curled and pulled back half up. She wore a white polo shirt tucked into khakis hiked well above the navel. And she was more than unimpressed with the Nolichucky staff who continued to drink the rest of Statutory Dan’s swim beer while giving rescue breathes to rubber mannequins.

Kersey was sitting beside me on the floor so close our knees were touching. She was giving me beer. Not my own personal can. Just occasionally offered sips from hers. I didn’t mind. Whatever chapstick she was wearing made the Busch Light taste better.

CPR training lasts about three hours and at the half-way point the instructor asked if we wanted to break or plow through. “Break! Break! Break!” everyone chanted before getting up and walking to the bathroom or going outside to pee. Patrick disappeared off into the kitchen and came back with handful of pretzels and a brownie and Lilly right behind him, swatting his head with an oven mitt yelling: “Aye! You no gooūd!” over and over again.

With a huge grin and a mouth full of brownie Patrick said: “Holy shit. Look at Lilly. Have you guys seen this sling?!?”

He looked over at the PE teacher, pointed at Lilly’s grocery bag arm and said: “Are you gonna teach us this technique?” Patrick laughed at his own joke.

“She broke her humerus,” I said.

Patrick stopped laughing. His face got serious. He looked over at me as if it was the first time he had noticed my existence. “Who the fuck are you?” he said.

“My names Tho—”

“Nobody gives a damn what your name is,” he said and threw the handful of pretzels in my face.
“Aye!” Lilly said. “You crazy man!”

I sat back down in my spot. Kersey said: “Patrick is an asshole. Don’t let it get to you.”

She handed me another lip balm coated half beer.

The PE teacher continued on with her instruction. We practiced chest compressions. We swabbed mouths. We opened airwaves. But only for about fifteen minutes and then the screen door opened. It was Pops, coming down from upstairs in an untrimmed sweatsuit with streaks of dried blood covering his entire face.

“Holy shit,” Patrick said. “What in the hell is going on in this place.”

Pops stood in the doorway.

“Pops wants First Aid,” he said. And then let out a long laugh like a dolphin.

He took a step inside.

“Pops wants First Aid.”

“The First Aid class will be held after CPR,” the woman said. Everyone else was silent.

Pops reached down into the front of his sweatpants. The instructor took a step back and held her hands over her chest.

“What kind of TripAdvisor review are we getting from this?” Patrick said.

Pops pulled his hand out of his waistband and held the boxcutter out in front of his crusty blood coated face. He flicked open the blade.

The CPR woman gave a nervous squeal.

Pops took the knife and traced the width of his free arm. The sleeve was severed just below the elbow and Pops tossed the ring of cloth at the instructor. It landed at her feet.

The screen door opened again. It was Jeff. “Hey I’ve got—” Pops turned and Jeff saw his bloody face. “Jesus Christ Frankie. Get back upstairs!”
I didn’t want to be out of line or do anything I wasn’t supposed to do, but I kept looking at that discarded sleeve thought about how it didn’t seem like that big of a deal to squirt a little Bactine on that fabric and wipe the man down a bit.

“Pops wants First Aid,” he said again.

Jeff grabbed him by hood and yanked him outside. Pops made a choking noise. Nobody spoke.

Jeff stuck his head back in. “Sorry about that,” he told the instructor. He looked at us.

“I’ve got pizza and beer out here on the picnic table whenever you guys finish up.”

Everybody cheered and walked outside. I followed.

Pops had slunk back to the upstairs. Patrick had Jeff pulled off in the shadows by the corner of the building. They stood in front a steel cylinder that was used as an ash tray. I could hear them talking about Pops. The blood. About some kind of scuffle last night. And Lilly. The accident. Her arm. I heard Patrick say: “This is your place of business, Jeff. You can’t have that man lurking around here.”

But then Kersey came up and handed me my own beer. Jeff had bought two cases of Old Milwaukee and three Papa John’s cheese pizzas. I drank the beer pretty quickly and cracked another. I ate a slice.

The CPR woman opened the screen door. “We have to finish the class!” she said. But nobody cared. Everyone ignored her and kept drinking. When she insisted again that we go back inside, someone lobbed a full beer at the woman and it hit the ground, busted, and sprayed all over her khaki pants.

“That’s it!” she said. Then reached into a tote bag and pulled out a stack of tests. “Fill these out. Pay me. And your certifications will be in the mail.”
She went back inside and started packing up her mannequins. We all filled out the tests, consulting with each other over answers. The woman, damp from the spray, loaded her equipment in her sedan. She grabbed the stack of papers and Jeff handed her a wad of cash. He thanked her. She left.

People drank more. Kersey was still hanging around me.

“That was crazy as hell,” I said.

“You think?” She took a powerful swig. Wiped her mouth with the backside of her forearm. “Seemed pretty standard to me.”


Kersey finished the Old Milwaukee and tossed the empty towards the overflowing trash cans on the side of the building next to Gem Mine water trough.

“It’s a great job if you can hang,” she said. She grabbed two beers from the box on the picnic table and put them in the pockets of the light fleece she was wearing. She looked into my eyes, tilted her head a little and smiled. “Come train on the Nolichucky,” she said. And then reached down and gave me a quick over the pants probation officer pinch. She winked. Turned. Grabbed her duffle bag full of wet equipment and walked away towards her car cracking open a fresh beer.
GIMPS

The water had dropped dramatically and the gimps\(^1\) arrived early in cars with tags from pale and flat places like Ohio and Iowa and other states people wanted to leave. The outpost was dark and the gimps walked about aimlessly, appearing confused, as they smeared sunscreen across faces unsure of what else to do.

The guides wouldn’t be there for another ten minutes because they weren’t supposed to be there for another fifteen. And when they did get there, goddamn if they weren’t pissed. The early gimps with their haggard complexions and two-decade-old Honda Accords were unfortunate indicators of a low tipping day.

Within the crowd were Fossil Fuels\(^2\) and Cannon Balls\(^3\) and Sahibs\(^4\) who did not know how to swim. There were Mennonites\(^5\) with no intention of changing out of floor length denim skirts and Lemon Heads\(^6\) far below the age required for this section of creek. All were gimps and all were there an hour before they should have been and because of that, the hungover guides

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1 Paying customers of the whitewater industry
2 Elderly gimps with brittle bones and paper thin skin prone to some of the worst injuries in commercial whitewater. Also known as Bucket Listers, Fossil Fuels are notorious for an astonishing lack of physical strength and renting wetsuits in July. Boats crews consisting of this type of gimp are powered exclusively by nonrenewable resources and therefore leave their guide at an inherit disadvantage.
3 Obese gimps. Often referred to by the more discrete term: CBs, Cannon Balls refuse to wear their safety equipment properly. Forever complaining about the tightness of their staff issued PFDs, Cannon Balls loosen their floatation—favoring comfort over safety. When these gimps find themselves violently ejected from the boat, they sink. Their floatation does not. This transforms the Cannon Ball into what is then known as: a Headless Horseman. The gimp’s floatation rises up, covering their mouth and face, making it difficult for them to see, swim, and breathe. Worse, because the lapels of a PFD are used as handles in an effort not to dislocate gimp arm and shoulder sockets, the physical effort required by a guide to pull in a Headless Horseman Cannon Ball is beyond taxing, and often renders the gimp pant-less.
4 Named after the much frequented all-you-can-eat Indian buffet in Johnson City, these low to non-tippin gimps traditionally hail from the Research Triangle area of eastern North Carolina.
5 A concentration of Mennonite communities can be found dotting the landscape of eastern Tennessee. The Mennonites enjoy whitewater rafting and regularly patron the Nolichucky river gorge. But, in an effort to practice continued modesty, stay donned in the traditional garb of bonnet and long denim skirt—a less than ideal clothing choice for water-based recreation.
6 Very small children who have no business being on a section of class IV whitewater. Wahoo’s Adventures has the lowest age requirement of any permitted company on the Nolichucky. For NOC, it’s twelve. For USA Raft and High Mountain: nine. Wahoo’s advertises as young as seven, but if a four year old has $91.10 in cash—the office staff will instruct their guardian to lie on the waiver form. In an attempt to illustrate the dangers of this, Patrick informed the owner, Jeff, that, in the case of an unintentional swim, effective cranial protection capable of remaining on such a small human simply does not exist. Two days later a special ordered shipment of twenty tiny yellow “youth” helmets arrived at the Nolichucky outpost with a note from Jeff declaring there would be no reason to complain any further.
could not prepare themselves. They could not smoke cigarettes. They could not smoke weed. They could not talk openly about the absurd conditions of the previous evening where a casual staff outing to the Fuzzy Holes ended in a $15 cage dance, lasting two songs, for Bert Stirton’s false teeth.

So while the guides unloaded their cars and carried their moldy, wet gear into the outpost, they kept their gaze toward the ground and avoided eye contact with the gimps. It was too early for questions about GoPro mounts and towels and water temperature.

A few guides headed into the kitchen to pack lunch and cut tomatoes. A few went around back to load boats. Those who had guided for a while stood around avoiding work, packing throw bags and surveying the gimps, hoping to discover just one family normal enough to tolerate for today’s ten mile low water rafting trip.

Patrick, the Nolichucky River Manager, who was also the Trip Leader and Bus Driver, unlocked the t-shirt shop and began checking in the gimps. He collected $91.10 a head and instructed the gimps to fill out waiver forms—one waiver per person.

“She kids don’t have to have waivers, do they?”

“Is your kid a person?” Patrick asked while taking sips from a coffee mug filled with mostly just Kahlua. “Oh he is? Okay then. One waiver per person.”

The gimps were then told what to bring and what not to bring. They were told if they didn’t want to lose it or didn’t want to get it wet, they should leave it in their cars. The keys to those cars were then to be placed in a key basket, which would be locked inside the store.

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7 The only strip club left in Johnson City after the fully nude Mouse’s Ear burned down twice.
8 A basic piece of swift water rescue equipment. The throw bag is made up of 75 feet of high tension rope stuffed into a bag that floats. Packing it properly takes time. The rope must be placed inch by inch into the bag to prevent snags when the bag is thrown and uncoils in the air. While a throw bag can be an effective rescue tool, it can just as easily become a hazard if it becomes wrapped around a gimp appendage or is left behind in the river—snagged on a rock, strainer, or piece of underwater debris.
9 An anglicized version of an ancient Cherokee Indian term that when loosely translated is said to mean: river of death.
But because the gimps were gimps, they assumed they knew better and began tying car keys to the drawstrings of swim shorts. They slid iPhones into Ziploc bags and left wedding rings on fingers. And when all those items sank to the bottom of the river, the gimps were always somehow astonished that such a thing could ever occur.

Before the gimps could lose their valuables, they were issued two pieces of equipment: a helmet and a PFD\(^\text{10}\).

By this time, most of the guides had already left in the Gear Van, headed for the Put-In, where they would unload boats, smoke weed, talk shit, drink 5-Hour Energys, and wait for the gimps. But Toemas\(^\text{11}\) stayed behind, as he usually did, to gear-up the gimps, touch them, and explain the equipment.

He told the gimps about the helmet and how it adjusted like a baseball cap with the adjustment going in the back. He told them the PFDs were all adult universals with four buckles and instructed them to buckle all four buckles so he could personally and properly cinch them down.

But the gimps only buckled three buckles. They wore their helmets Compton style, and several gimps, mainly Cannon Balls, would not even attempt putting on the PFDs. They demanded larger sizes but instead received only a vocabulary lesson as Toemas politely ridiculed them for lacking an understanding of the word *universal*.

After the gearing up process was complete, the gimps loaded onto the bus where Toemas delivered an informative and educational Safety Talk,\(^\text{12}\) directing expressions such as *come in your face* and *facedown in the river*\(^\text{13}\) towards female gimps as many times as he possibly could.

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\(^\text{10}\) Personal Floatation Device. Never to be referred to as a lifejacket. If a gimp is struck by lightning or hit by a train, a PFD will not save their life—it will only float their remains.

\(^\text{11}\) An anglicized version of an ancient Cherokee Indian term that when loosely translated is said to mean: more toes.

\(^\text{12}\) Part stand-up comedy, part liability measure, the Safety Talk varies from company to company, river to river—with content depending on the current mental stability of the guide delivering it.
The Safety Talk was designed to last the bus ride, and as Toemas concluded reiterating the basic rules of rafting—1. Equipment on, buckled, and securely fastened 2. Hands on the T-Grip\textsuperscript{14} at all times 3. No standing in moving whitewater—Patrick was pulling into the Put-In. He drove to the far end of the parking lot and entered the roundabout but refused to exit the circle, driving fast and making laps as several gimps voiced complaints of carsickness and being from Indiana.

The gimps cries were ignored, as they often tended to be, and Patrick continued, stopping only to shift the bus into reverse and do it all over again backwards.

Once satisfied, Patrick parked in a manner than made it difficult for all other rafting companies to enter and then began breaking the gimps up into the groups they would be rafting with. He assigned them guides, giving the worst groups to the employees he liked the least, and directed the gimps down an obvious and well-maintained Forest Service path leading to the river where the guides and their rafts were waiting.

Most headed down immediately, saying things like: “We’re looking for Big Bert!” or “We’re riding with the Machine!” But some gimps remained in the parking lot, yet again unable to comprehend simple instruction. And when Patrick finished discussing the Take-Out location with Shuttle Drivers: Mean Gene and Fat Claire, he noticed the straggling gimps and became enraged, yelling loud enough for even those by the river to hear: “Did you people pay for a

\textsuperscript{13} In context: “The most important rule to remember out here is: No standing in moving whitewater. The bottom of this river is comprised of hundreds of thousands of boulders and rocks mixed in with water heaters, refrigerators, and chunks of railroad track that all make great holds for your foot to get lodged in. Worst case scenario: your foot becomes entrapped, and all that strong current coming from upstream is going to push you—facedown in the river.” *points at a gimp* “Do you want to be facedown?” *points at another gimp* “Do you want to be facedown?” *points to a guide sitting in the doorway of the bus* “Meegan here enjoys being facedown, but that usually happens off the clock and on land! So repeat after me: I won’t stand up in the river!”

\textsuperscript{14} Formed in the shape of a T and made of hard composite plastic, the handle of a rafting paddle has magnetic properties attracted to eye sockets, nose bones, and teeth enamel. Bert Stirton has been known to remove the partial from his mouth and wave it at the gimps in an effort to showcase the dangers of an uncovered T-Grip even though his dental issues came from years of methamphetamine abuse and have nothing to do with a whitewater injury.
rafting trip? Or did you pay to stand around mouth-breathing in an empty parking lot? It’s your vacation. Do what you want. But I’m going rafting. And if that’s something you think you might have interest in, then I’d head down that path, right there, like everyone else did, and like I already fucking told you.”

Gene pulled out slowly in the school bus. Fat Claire followed in the Gear Van. As the empty trailer bounced over the railroad tracks, a Lemonhead in a Buckeyes jersey began to cry. His mother reached into the cleavage created by her buckled PFD. She dug deep. And produced a Ziploc bagged iPhone that she then handed to the child. The tears ceased.
TEETH

It was a high-water season and even though we were getting off the creek before noon, I hadn’t taken a shower, changed clothes, or been back to North Carolina in over two pay periods. I was drinking, on average, 20 beers a night and applying thick pastes of zinc oxide as often as possible to my irritated and diaper rash inflicted backside. It was mid-July and we were taking the white company van to the Fuzzy Holes in Johnson City because it was hot out and everyone had already bought a lot of beer.

The Fuzzy Holes is a BYOB strip club. And the novelty of hauling booze you already own into a private establishment was extremely appealing to me.

Red Rubbermaid lunch coolers we used for trips with WAHOO’S written across the lids were crammed full of ice and Busch Light and cheap whiskey. We loaded them in the van and Patrick, the Trip Leader and River Manager, took a couple pieces of white duct tape and transformed the middle number 4 in 1-800-444-RAFT to a 1 on both sides of the vehicle.

Me, Meegan, Bert Stirton, Kristin Mosely, and a handful of first year trainees who wouldn’t make it through the season all piled in with open containers. Patrick hoisted himself into the driver’s seat. He cracked a beer. A chorus of crushed empties hit the floor before we made it to the interstate. And as we pulled onto i26, more beers were opened and pounded as if it were a race to drink as much as possible during the twenty-minute drive to Johnson City.

“I gotta fucking piss,” Meegan said about ten minutes into the drive and everyone ignored her. Meegan had showed up at the Nolichucky that summer. She was raised by raft guides starting at the age of fifteen when her mom dropped her off on the banks of the Shenandoah and said: “You live here now.” She was originally from Harpers Ferry, West
Virginia and had braces and a deep cig voice and the two state mottos tattooed on her rib cage.

On the left side: *Wild and Wonderful*. On the right: *Open For Business*.

“I’m fucking serious,” she said. “Pull the fuck over.”

“We’re not pulling over. We’re almost there.”

“I’m a grown-ass woman and I wanna fucking piss. Pull over.”

The call came from somewhere in the back: *Send her to the pee trough!* Which quickly transformed into a chant—*Pee trough! Pee trough! Pee trough!*

“What the fuck is a pee trough?” Meegan said. And I pointed at the side doors where the floor dipped down into a step and she said: “Fuck it,” and exposed herself with urgency, squatted, and took a high pressure woman pee inside the vehicle. Everyone cheered. A couple of people snapped photos. *That’ll be good for the Meet the Guide Page!* And after a quick booty shake and a few seconds for drip drying, Meegan pulled herself up by an armrest and I used the dregs of my Busch Light to flush residual urine down the opening where the two doors didn’t quite meet.

The parking lot was empty except for six fresh and identical Ford F350 mega trucks parked in row, making the place look like a poorly stocked dealership. Patrick pulled behind the one farthest from the door, and we got out, careful to step over the pee trough and trying to minimize the amount of empties knocked out into the world. It was hot. And I could feel the heat reflecting off the asphalt as we unloaded coolers and paired off to lug them past the trucks and towards the entrance.

The building itself looked the same as any other low rent strip club—industrial, windowless—but the front door was pink. And I guess pink doors are supposed to make people
think about titties, or cancer, or titty cancer, but all it made me think about were pigs, which made me think about pork barbeque, which made me realize I hadn’t had much to eat.

When we walked in, darkness greeted us along with a thirty degree drop in temperature. Neon splatter glowed on the black walls and a man with a goatee and a self-made tank top sat behind plexiglass and asked for ten dollars. There is no dress code at the Fuzzy Holes. We were all wearing shorts and hats and open toed shoes and one of the trainees, whose name I refused to learn, offered me a half hit of acid which I took—not because I necessarily wanted it, but because it was an option and I have trouble declining anything.

We could hear the bass from where we were, muffled but pounding in the main room, and when everyone had paid and put on their wrist bands, the man with no sleeves hit a buzzer and access was granted. We made a line of greasy raft guides and carried coolers in an elephant chain through smoke machine smoke and red lights that pulsed to the beat of what was now identifiable as a tune from Linkin Park’s *The Hybrid Theory*—an album, up until that point, I would have bet money no one had heard by choice, much less stripped to, since 2003.

Strip clubs fascinate me. The fact they exist—especially in this country—is astonishing. And the first step into a new one is always a bit nerve racking. The etiquette varies so much from place to place. I’ve seen people get away with a lot at strip clubs. And I’ve also seen people tased with an audience for far lesser infractions. I thought about what it would be like to get my ass kicked to Linkin Park as I took a seat stage left with a buffer row in front of me, for safety.

The rest of the crew followed suit and sat down around me, cracking beers and propping legs up on coolers. There was no telling what day it was, but it couldn’t have been the weekend because the place was empty except for a legless man in an electric wheelchair and a squad of Corona sipping Mexicans lurking in the shadows. The corners of the room were decorated in
cotton cobwebs while life sized and out of season mannequins dressed in capes and wolf masks and Frankenstein neck bolts stood guard near a cage.

It all seemed very odd to me and I wanted to say something about it but the music was loud and I wasn’t sure how much of what I was seeing and feeling was a side effect of the wee bit of hallucinogen I had taken.

So I just sat back and took a deep breath and drank a Busch Light as fast as I could. Over the PA system came a voice: “Please welcome Midnight to the stage.” The one Evanescence song I knew from the shitty Ben Affleck Dare Devil movie started playing and a large black woman wearing neon orange nipple stickers took the stage. She stomped out in six-inch transparent plastic heels. And when no one made the move I decided to get up and get in there. I stood. And when I did, bumped one of the little round tables where empties had been stashed. About ten Busch Light cans fell to the black and white checkered tile floor and everyone cheered at my clumsiness.

Ah shit, I said to myself. And before I could pick them up, out of nowhere, a skinny white blonde girl weighing no more than 80 lbs appeared wearing a lime green string bikini and bent over and started putting the cans in a trash bag. Goddamn, I thought. And swigged the last of my beer. When she finished, I squeezed and creased the Busch Light in my hand and threw that now empty can on the ground beside her. She didn’t miss a beat. She angled her ass towards me, kind of grinded it on my leg, bent back down, and picked up the can. She put it in the trash bag, stood up, ran her hand across my chest, smiled, and walked away. Jesus, I thought. And proceeded on towards the stage.

The stage was small and circular and Midnight was slamming those plastic heels down hard against the scuffed pink FH emblem that marked the middle. There were four poles and she
was working them all, switching from one to another without touching the ground. I looked back at the group and made a face while nodding my head, trying to convey that I thought the acrobatics were impressive.

My prior strip club training had taught me to stand close to the stage and bait the women with a couple of singles. I dropped three out casually as Midnight transferred to the pole closest to me. She locked her heels in and slowly slid to the ground, landing on her back gracefully. She rolled over and started crawling on all fours, heading my way. I straightened up. Put my arms behind me (another piece of previously acquired strip club knowledge).

But then speeding out of the darkness, the goddamn legless man came flying at what had to be 11 miles an hour and slammed his electric wheelchair right into the stage beside me. Midnight changed directions. I was no longer of interest. From the crawl, she went into a front roll, spread her legs and landed off the stage. She anchored one of the plastic heels on the side of the wheelchair and started thrusting herself on him. The legless man nodded his head continuously in approval. No bait necessary.

“Motherfucker,” I said. And reached my arm out on the stage and helped myself to a refund. I walked back to my group and took a new seat beside Kristin Mosely. “Better luck next time,” she said and we watched the legless man enjoy himself for the remainder of the Evanescence song. When the music stopped, Midnight kicked out a hip and pulled at the waistband of her blacklight compatible underwear, and the legless man deposited a single Pall Mall for her effort.

“Jesus,” I said. “Is that how it works here?” I finished a Busch Light and put the empty on the nearest table but then remembered where I was and smacked the can to the floor.
I do know, or at least I’m pretty sure, it’s always a good move to have women in your posse at the strip club. And, yeah, Meegan was a woman but not really so that’s why we had Kristin Mosely with us. Mosely neither worked for Wahoo’s or guided on the Nolichucky. She had a master’s degree in psychology but liked the lifestyle and kept coming back every season to work the office for USA Raft. She was also Patrick’s on again off again summer-season penetration pal and he always got pissed whenever I talked to her which made me want to talk to her all the time.

Patrick is a huge dude. Like 6’5’’ 240 with long woman hair that goes down to his knees. He’s older. In his forties. And a damn good raft guide but insecure about a lot of things. He’s mean, that’s what it really comes down to, and he runs the Nolichucky outpost through fear and humiliation. He has made a lot of people break down and cry, including me, at end-of-the-day debriefings. But a few weeks before, I saved his life when he flipped in Quarter Mile after the Forest Service had shut down commercial trips due to high water and we all went out for a fun run at flood stage. So I now felt I had the right to fuck with him. I could see him scowling a few coolers over and I leaned back, stretched, and put an arm around Mosely’s chair.

She laughed because she knew what I was doing and then leaned over and whispered in my ear: “You know you don’t have to be like him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Patrick. The Nolichucky. You’re better than all this.”

“I’m not actually,” I said. “But thank you.”

We both smiled. And tapped our Busch Light cans together and Patrick was up from his seat and walking over. I scanned the room. Some new strippers were on the stage and I noticed
Bert Stirton asleep, arms crossed and facedown at a cocktail table. Before Patrick could complain about me trying to take his woman, I shifted his focus with: “Dude. Check out Bert.”

Bert is even older than Patrick and has a history of premature public pass outs. He once fell asleep in a 32oz Dos Equis around closing time at a Mexican restaurant in Erwin, Tennessee. We left him there. Came back at 7am the next morning and found him unconscious amongst potted plants on the patio. We honked the horn. Bert got up. Rubbed his face. And then pulled a reserve 20oz plastic bottle Mountain Dew from his urban cammo cargo shorts, pounded it, got in the van and worked his trip with flawless lines and no swimmers.

Patrick took out his phone, something I assumed would have been strictly prohibited at a strip club, and started taking pictures of an unconscious Bert. None of the nipple stickered staff said anything though as the whole group gathered around and posed for photos with Bert, made faces, and plopped nutsacks on his head.

Then over the PA came an announcement: “We hope yall are having a good time here at the Fuzzy Holes and just a reminder, tonight’s special—two for one cage dances. That’s right. Two for one cage dances. Just come talk to Barbra in the booth.”

“We gotta talk to Barbra in the booth,” I said to Patrick.

“Who’s getting a cage dance? Meegan?”

I looked around and spotted Meegan sitting and yelling with her fist in the air as a stripper pulled a front handspring and slammed her crotch into Meegan’s exposed braces.

“I think Meegan is good,” I said. And then I looked at Bert, fully asleep.

Bert had had a rough go if that year. During the off-season, he was in and out of court for back child support and several unresolved DUIs. A chimney fire took half his house. And then,
one of his pit bulls, Kitty-Kitty, had to be put down after ripping two neighborhood toy dogs into multiple pieces. But in the midst of all that misfortune, he had finally gotten new teeth.

“We should send Bert in there,” I said. “He needs it.”

Patrick’s eyes got big and his face got bright.

“No,” he said. “His teeth.”

We approached Barbra in the booth. She was smoking a cig and looked to be about two hundred thirty years old. Patrick said: “Got a question for you.” He couldn’t help but smile.

“You see our friend over there?” Patrick pointed back at Bert. “The one passed out wearing the Miami hat?”

Barbra said: “Yep.” And looked unimpressed. She continued taking casual puffs from her indoor cig.

“Well he’s a bit dentally challenged and he wears a partial and he’s kinda sensitive about it, so we just wanted to know if it would be possible to get a dance for his teeth.”

Barbra’s eyebrows shot up.

“Just the teeth?” she said.

“Yes.”

“No him.”

“No.”

Barbra took a long pull from her cig. Exhaled. And said: “Son. I’ve seen some fucked up shit in my day. But this here just might’ve topped it all.” She paused again and looked up like she was thinking. “I guess we could do it for fifteen bucks.”

“I got five on it,” Patrick said.

“I guess I got ten.”
Barbra turned around in her swivel chair. “Candi, you want this one?” she asked. Candi was in the booth with Barbra along with two other members of the reserve fleet. Candi said: “Teeth?” and made a face. And then said: “Yeah sure I’ll do it.”

Barba spun a laptop around towards us and said we could pick the jams. The music was in alphabetical order by artist and Patrick scrolled down to the bottom and chose two 14-minute Widespread Panic songs.

We ran back to our group, telling everyone to pay attention, making sure they all knew things were about to get good. Then over the PA: “Alright yall. We’ve got a special request. We need Bert. Stirton’s. Teeth. To the cage. That’s right. Calling Bert. Stirton’s. Teeth. To the cage.”

Bert popped up looking confused after hearing his name. He groaned and frantically turned his head from left to right as if where he was hadn’t registered yet.

Bert is a 49-year-old divorced man with a big gut who smokes two packs a day, and until recently, had no teeth. His encounters with women are rare and short lived. So when Candi came walking up with blue nipple stickers, carrying a small stack of brown paper bathroom towels like a goddamn restaurant serving tray, Bert stood up, reenergized, threw both arms in the air, and screamed, “Arrrhghhaayyyyyeeeee!” And everyone in our group responded with the same noise and a couple of beers were thrown to the ground.

The cage was over by the Mexicans and mannequins and Bert started walking towards it but Candi stopped him. “Nope,” she said. And pointed down at the paper towel. “I need your teeth.”

Bert shrugged. And didn’t think much of it. He reached in his mouth, removed the teeth and plopped them down on the brown paper towel stack, spit soaking through the first layer.
Candi grabbed Bert with her free hand and led him to the cage where a black folding chair waited pre-set with more brown paper towels.

Bert was excited and grinning a big ole toothless grin and as Candi took the first few stairs leading up to the cage, Bert followed, only to be denied entry at the last second. Candi put a hand on Bert’s chest, shook her head, and pushed him away. She shut the door and sat the stack down in the chair and locked herself in with the teeth.

We all pulled up seats, surrounding the cage, cheering and drinking beers. The Widespread Panic hippie music started and Candi began her pantomime lap dance and Bert sat sideways with his knees together awkwardly on the stairs. I don’t know if it was the drugs or what but after about nine minutes of watching the spectacle I started to feel sad. I looked around at all the cheering, degenerate assholes I had I spent every summer of my adult life with. I looked at Candi, sweating, exhausted, and now gripping the bars of the cage to support herself. I looked at Bert, a grown man with a daughter back home, completely miserable and being made a mockery of by the people he considered friends. I looked at the teeth, gnarled and gross and with wires jetting out the sides.

I didn’t want to be sad. So I did the only thing I knew how to do and popped the tab on a fresh Busch Light and drained the thing like water. I decided against throwing the empty on the ground though and spotted a trash can by the Mexicans who were completely unfazed by what was going on. I got up to throw away my empty and heard Candi yell: “Goddammit. How much longer is this song!?”

When I got back to my seat, Candi was wadding up the teeth in the stack of paper towels and Patrick yelled: “Give me the teeth!” She handed the wad to him through the bars of the cage. Widespread Panic was still playing but Candi was panting and catching her breath, bent over
with her hands on her knees. Patrick removed the teeth and gripped them barehanded and rubbed the teeth up and down on the dirty bars of the cage. He passed them around and everyone else did the same except for Meegan who shoved them down her pants.

Finally the teeth made it back to Bert and he slid them in his mouth, not caring at all about the unsanitary condition they were in, and then Candi opened the door. She grabbed Bert by his sun-bleached button-up Hawaiian shirt and then he was in the cage with her and the door was locked and everyone cheered. Bert was smiling big and Candi danced on him for the last eight minutes of the second song and my mood shifted and I forgot all about being sad.

Then I blacked out.

I came to on the floor by the stage after several people poured Busch Light all over my face. I got up drenched and a stripper walked by me.

“Hey,” I said. “Sorry if we were being crazy.”

And she said: “Oh you’re fine, honey. We just want yall to have a good time.”

We were out of beer so it was time to leave. We went to the parking lot. I checked my phone as we got in the van. It was 9:21pm. Patrick drove everyone back to Erwin. I set up my hammock under the magnolia tree on River Road. Covered my rashes with a fresh coat of Boudreaux’s Butt Paste. Slept like a rock. And was up with the sun before 7.

We worked our trip. After, when the boats were put up and the dishes were washed and the PFDs were dipped, we drank beers while debriefing. It was hot outside but then it wasn’t. The sky turned grey. A clap of thunder shook the building. Rain came down hard and sideways. Tomorrow, the gorge would peak at 14,000 CFS. USA Raft would have the first commercial fatality in over a decade. There would be much deliberation between other companies on
whether or not to brave the high-water. But for now, we all stood in a line under the outpost awning, sipping Busch Light, watching the flood begin.
PIRATE TRIP

The Nolichucky was killing me and there was nothing I could do about it. I was tired. Tired of the fungal infections associated with working forty day streaks. Tired of riding to the river in Bert Stirton’s filthy CRV. Tired of the gimps, the shoulder pain, the rashes, and I was tired of what it took to stay on the schedule—playing therapist to Patrick, entertaining his misogynistic tales of infidelity.

But fuck. I was a decade deep in the raft guiding game and severely underqualified for any conventional line of work. Even if I had marketable skills, employment that didn’t encourage substance abuse seemed so far removed from any life I could possibly live.

Limited choices lead to quick decisions. I drained my bank account. Borrowed some money from Anna. And sunk the total into a used 2-thwart Wahoo’s raft, helmets, and a couple extra ratty PFDs.

People were all the time asking me to take them rafting. Friends. Family. Strangers I met at bars. I anticipated a very profitable personal customer base. I could still work for Wahoo’s but just cut back my days and supplement with unpermitted pirate trips, making more money than I would commercially and preserving what little bit of sanity I had left.

It turned out not to be so easy. Once I had the raft, plenty of people still wanted to go, they just wanted me to take them for free.

Weeks went by after the purchase and I still hadn’t booked a pirate trip. It was getting warmer and I was preparing to sell my soul for another full-time season when Hunter Kale called. His birthday was coming up, and he wanted to know what it would take to get out on the creek.
“Dude. I have my own raft now,” I told him. “We can be out on the water alone, drinking beer and taking our time. It’ll be sweet.”

Hunter was stoked. And plans were set for Saturday. The crew would be me, Hunter, and our other friend Joe. Both of them were a little younger, in their early twenties, and worked down the mountain at one of the last remaining furniture factories in Hickory, NC.

Hunter is one of the nicest people I’ve ever known. He’s easy going, soft-spoken, and genuinely kind.

Joe has some issues.

He drinks. A lot. And never wears shoes. But he is my friend, and I’ve always felt bad for him, especially here recently after he tried hanging himself in his parent’s garage with an orange extension cord.

His recounting of the incident is brutal. He didn’t do it gallows-style. No noose from the rafters with a chair kicked out for a neck snap or anything. He went the way of a slow strangulation. Wrapped the cord around his throat and tied it off tight on the garage door handle. Used the remote from the car visor to make the door rise. Said it was uncomfortable at first. But then, after a few minutes, said the lack of oxygen felt euphoric. His vision blurred. His eyes got heavy. But just before losing consciousness, he realized he didn’t want to die.

Here’s where it gets fucked though. He’d lost all control of his limbs. No matter how bad he wanted to reach up to try and loosen the cord, all signals sent from his brain were not received by his body.

Then everything went black.
His dad had found him. Heard grunts and the garage door. Joe woke up strapped down. He stayed in the psych ward for three weeks. When he got out he seemed fine. I guess. Or, at least, as fine as a person can be.

With Joe in mind, I gave Hunter some rules:

1. *Show up on time.*
2. *Wear something that can get wet.*
3. *Bring a dry change of clothes and a towel.*
4. *Buy beer and ice. No glass, only cans.*
5. *Don’t let Joe drink on the drive up.*
6. *Make that sonofabitch wear shoes.*

Around 9am that Saturday I got a phone call. It was Hunter, apologizing for being late. “We just woke up,” he said. “Can we still go?”

I had told Hunter to be in Boone at 8am sharp, knowing damn well there was no chance those two would make it before 10. Leaving at 10 would give ample time for driving to Tennessee, setting shuttle, gearing up the boat, and having sun in the canyon for the whole trip.

“You’re fine,” I said. “I figured yall would be late. If you leave now, we’ll be perfect.” I hung up the phone. I started to load up the Jeep.

By the time it got to be 10:30 I called them back.

“Ya’ll left or what?”

“Dude. I don’t think we’re gonna make it. Joe got drunk last night and stayed over at my house and at some point he got up and clogged the toilet and kept flushing and there’s just water everywhere and I gotta go borrow a shop-vac from my dad so I can suck up these turds.”
This was the first of many warning signs I would actively ignore. Pushing back the trip was going to complicate things. Not seriously, but it would add a level of pressure I didn’t want to deal with. I should have backed out right then. But I really wanted the hundred and fifty dollars these guys had promised to pay me. And if there is anything that blinds me from obvious trouble, it’s money.

“Jesus Christ dude. Do what you gotta do. We can still go. Just try and chopchop as much as possible.”

I got off the phone and stared out the kitchen window of our very small King St apartment. Across the street was the courthouse, and there were men on ladders hanging the final gold mega T of IN GOD WE TRUST above the entrance. Amendment 1 had just passed. Same-sex marriage was already illegal in North Carolina. But Amendment 1 had added that ban to the state constitution. This new courthouse construction felt related.

I was sensitive to the god things. As a kid in middle school, watching the Jesus People burn Harry Potter books and various other forms of demonic literature, I held out hope that by the time I could legally buy alcohol the South would see through this bullshit and there would be no chance anyone would still be going to church, much less listening to the church’s take on morality.

Youthful optimism, I guess.

Anna was spending her Saturday morning off work in the living room the way she always did—sipping a stout liquor drink, puffing on a vape bag full of chronic, and catching up on whatever version of The Real Housewives that had aired that week.

“Are they coming?” she said before exhaling and taking another pull from the bag.

“I dunno,” I said. “Hopefully.”
Anna held the breath, extended her arm, and offered the bag to me. I walked over and took it, sat down, and watched women with what looked to be bee-stung faces scream at each other and flex their well-won divorce money.

It was 1:30 when my phone rang again. Hunter and Joe were pulling into our building’s gravel lot. I walked downstairs and outside just in time to see Joe stepping out of the passenger seat with an open glass bottle Bud Light Platinum and no shoes on.

“Goddammit,” I mumbled as I watched Joe take small and cautious steps across the sharp gravel terrain. When Hunter walked over, I did little to hide my disapproval. “Motherfucker,” I said. “I told you not to let him drink.”

Hunter was as carefree and easy going as always. “I know man,” he said. “But it’s Joe. I can’t tell him anything.”

I was just about to keep cussing Hunter when the back door of his Scion opened, and a gangly girl stumbled out sloshing a 32oz plastic Bojangles cup. She was wearing a Jurassic Park t-shirt and light blue Soffe shorts with the waist band rolled down two times. She was pale. And her hair was jet black but damaged. Fried, and dry as hay.

“Who the hell is that?” I said. And before anyone could answer, the girl had taken off towards me in a half sprint. She jumped a few inches off the ground and embraced me with one leg kicked back.

“Jesus Christ,” I said. My arms stayed by their sides. “Who is this?”

Joe and Hunter told me they had found this woman at the Waffle House the night before. She had stayed with them at Hunter’s. She had witnessed the toilet overflowing and was around for all the shop-vac-ing that took place. She told me her name. But I refused to commit it to long-
term memory, and instead watched the Bud Light Platinum in her Bojangles cup foam up around the lid and slowly leak out the top of the straw.

Joe had finally inched his shoeless ass across the gravel and now joined the other two. I was pissed. This girl looked like a teenager. She was obviously drunk. So was Joe. And I had only packed enough equipment for 2 people and left the rest of my gear in the storage unit across town.

I looked at Joe and saw that the band of discoloration around his neck hadn’t faded at all since the last time I saw him. My frustration turned to sadness. And I thought: Well. Fuck it. I’ll take these poor bastards rafting.

I went back upstairs to tell Anna I was leaving. She was now fully horizontal with a fresh liquor drink resting on her chest. Real Housewives continued to play on the screen.

“They brought another person,” I said.

“Ugh. That’s annoying. Who is it?”

“I dunno. Some really young girl.”

“How young?”

“I’m not gonna ask.”

“Do you have to get more gear?”

“Yeah I’m gonna run by the storage unit. I dunno though. Keep your phone close. I think Joe and this girl have been drinking. I’m not sure what’s gonna happen.”

Anna sat up to put more chronic in the vaporizer. “Okay,” she said. “Be careful.” I walked back out the door.
Our storage unit was a weird one. It was owned by Jesus People who lived on the property and only allowed tenant access from 7am to 7pm, Monday through Saturday. Their office was littered with Support the Troops signs and anti-gay propaganda. When Anna and I sat down to inquire about a unit, the woman in charge asked me if we had been Saved. I told her: “Of course we have.” She offered our unit at a lower rate.

Anna had not been too excited about the amount of decorative hate speech inside that office. We both have gay members in our family and Anna felt we should take our money elsewhere in some attempt at solidarity. “Are you fucking kidding me?” I told her. “We’re getting the Jesus discount. And besides. You still eat at Chik-Fil-a.”

We rented the unit. And had no real issues. But I knew if those people hated the gays, they probably were not going to be fans of whatever performance shoeless Joe Matty and this drunk woman had in store. I was nervous as I pulled in the gate. Joe was in the front seat. Hunter and the girl were in the back. I gave my usual no look wave as I passed the office and pulled into my unit’s row.

“Please stay in the car and keep the beer out of sight,” I told everyone as I put the Jeep into park and got out the key.

The drunk girl said something about wanting to smoke a cigarette and I wanted to snap back with: *Are you even old enough to smoke a cigarette?* But instead just told her to calm down and be patient and then lied and said: “You’ll be able to smoke cigs in a sec.”

It was a crisp day. The kind I like. The sun was out but it wasn’t hot. Birds were active. There was a light breeze. I got the lock undone and pulled the door up and open. Inside the unit it was dark but I didn’t have to venture too deep to pull out the extra paddles, helmet, and PFD.
When I stepped back into the light Joe was outside of the vehicle smoking a cig with a new Bud Light Platinum in his hand. The drunk girl was outside too, mumbling a bunch of nonsense and trying to light her cigarette backwards.

“Goddammit,” I said. I looked around hoping the Jesus People weren’t seeing any of this. “Please get the fuck in the car.”

I popped the back glass of the Jeep and shoved the extra helmet and PFD in with all the rest of the gear. I opened the passenger door and wedged the extra paddle, shaft first, in the crevasse between the door frame and the seat.

When I got back in the car, I turned around and Hunter was sitting quietly in the middle. “What the hell, Hunter?” I said. And he said: “What?” And I told him he needed to control these goddamn people.

With the storage unit mission out of the way I was feeling better about the trip. We were behind on time but I figured the drive could give them a moment to sober up and we would just bust ass once we got on the creek.

I had pre-rolled a joint for the river. Planned to smoke it in the sun on one of the sandy beaches in the gorge. But my anxiety was building.

I pulled the joint from out of my breast pocket, cracked the window, and lit the thing. Before I could even enjoy the calming effects of smoke in my lungs, the drunk girl started asking about cigarettes again.

“There is no smoking in this car,” I said. “It’s not even my car. So I don’t make the rules. This is Anna’s car. And I don’t disrespect her things.”

I exhaled, enjoyed the contradiction, and ashed out the crack of the window.
In the time it took to smoke the joint, I had started to relax, and we were closing in on the Tennessee line. Things had been quiet behind me for a while so I looked back to check on my passengers. I expected them to be asleep, burning off their morning buzz, but when I turned around I saw the girl sprawled out with her head in Hunter’s lap. She had her hands gripped around his right wrist and was aggressively deep throating his pointer and middle finger.

“My god,” I said. “What the hell is going on back there?”

“It keeps her calm,” Hunter said.


And as if my concern had challenged her pride, the girl removed the fingers from her mouth, sat up, and confidently declared: “I have no gag reflex.”

Joe was intrigued. He turned around quickly and said: “You mean. Like. For wieners?”

The girl did not specify whether she meant for wieners or not. She was back at the sucking, knuckle deep.

Joe unbuckled his seatbelt and made the move to the back.

“Aye,” I said, looking behind me, doing quick-takes, trying to keep my eyes on the road. “What the hell are you doing?”

Joe was now grinding his dirty bare toes into my cloth seats and jamming his fingers in the drunk girl’s mouth. I only caught glimpses, but this girl had both Hunter and Joe’s wrists in her hands, inhaling five total fingers.

And then I heard it. The first dry heave. “Yep,” I said, shaking my head. There were two quick violent gags after that. Then: the unmistakable wet sounds of a vomit.
The smell of regurgitated blue bottle beer immediately filled the Jeep. I held down all four window buttons and the thumping sound of clean air started and I looked back to check the on brutality of the scene. The girl was teary eyed and visibly sweating, holding the hem of her Jurassic Park shirt, making a cloth bowl that corralled the majority of the vomit. But the cotton sieve did little to regulate the less viscous portions of the puke. A slow drip of thin liquid fell steadily into the crotch of her shorts.

“Jesus Christ,” I said. And turned back around to watch the road. Joe and Hunter lifted the back of her shirt, peeling it slowly over her head, securing the puke in a ball.

“You want us to throw this out the window?”

I looked up into the rearview mirror and saw the girl shirtless, eyeliner smeared with her head hanging down, pale flesh contrasted against a black lace bra.

“No dude just wait. I’m gonna pull over.”

The drive from Boone to Erwin is one I know very well. But out of the probably 2000 times I’ve been on this stretch of road, maybe once had I been there in the middle of the day. It’s always either early in the morning suffocated by Camel Light smoke in Bert Stirton’s CRV or late in the afternoon—drunk—with empties in the floorboard and a tall can between my knees.

At those hours, no one is really out and about in this part of the world. Which combined with the manic nature of summer made us raft guides feel invincible.

But at 3pm on a Saturday, as I pulled into the parking lot of the Little Doe Baptist Church—sober—with a half-nude potentially underage vomit girl in the backseat, invincibility was not what I was experiencing.

I drove behind the church. Parked beside the a/c units. The Little Doe river cut through the bank on my right side. A few wispy clouds moved steadily across the sky. I put the car into
park. Turned off the engine. On the hills all around us were houses and trailers and people on riding lawn mowers enjoying the day.

I opened my door. “Keep her in the car,” I said. Hunter got out and Joe got out and the vomit sack was tossed behind the a/c units.

I was running it all through my head: Okay. From here it’s thirty more minutes to Erwin. We’ll go straight to the hostel, pay one of the thru-hiker drop-outs to run our shuttle. We’ll be geared up and on the creek by 4…ehhh… maybe 4:15. It doesn’t get dark till like 8 now. Yeah. We can still do this.

I turned around to get back in the car and there was a banging on the driver’s side back window. The vomit girl was tugging on the door handle but the child locks were on—had been since Anna and I bought the car at a government auction.

“Let me out!” she said. “I need to pee!”

“You can suck it the hell up and wait till we get to the creek,” I said. But then Hunter walked over all calm as usual. “Come on man. Just let her pee.”

“Goddammit dude,” I said. I looked around at the people on lawn mowers and figured they were too far away to see anything. “Alright. Whatever. But we gotta be quick.”

I walked over to her and she was still pulling at the handle like a madman and when I went to let her out, she was in the process of shoulder checking the door. The timing was unfortunate. All her force met nothing but air. She fell. Hard. And crumpled on the pavement.

At that point, I didn’t really have much left in me to do anything other than let out a big sigh with my hands covering my face.

“Can someone get her a fucking shirt,” I said.

Joe came over with exposed nipples holding the 2xl stained white tee he’d been wearing.
“Does she not have her own clothes?”

“We didn’t bring any other clothes,” Hunter said.

“What do you mean you didn’t bring other clothes?”

“We just figured if our clothes got wet, we’d wear em till they dried.”

“Oh my god dude I’m going to kill all of you.”

We helped her up and put the foul Joe Matty shirt on her, and I looked around to try and spot a safe place for her to pee. On top of the vomit shirt in-between the church and the a/c units seemed to offer the most privacy. But when I turned around to deliver this information, the girl had already assumed a wide stance with Soffe shorts down, waist band resting right above the knees.

“Good god,” I said. And turned my back to be polite. For about four seconds I listened to the hiss of her urine splatter on the pavement—then came the distinct hollow thud of skull on concrete. I spun around quick to find the girl ass-up and facedown, urine still pulsing from her body, soaking the Soffe shorts now wrapped around her shins.

She was laughing. “I fell,” she said. “I fell.” And all I could do was stare until her urine slowed to a trickle. I thought about the Nolichucky. And the springtime water levels. And how the worst rapids with highest body counts came immediately after the Put-In. These people didn’t stand a chance.

“We’re done,” I said. “Get her in the fucking car. It’s over. We’re going back to Boone.”

Hunter lifted her up by the armpits and as she stood, she stepped out of the saturated Soffe shorts, giving us the first frontal glance of a prominent winter bush.

I have to say, I was impressed. I’d been well into my twenties before I met a woman with that level of confidence. And the sight of what this girl was rocking gave me hope that the next
generation might be bucking conventional beauty standards. But then Joe said: “Gross. Pubic hair.” And pulled his phone from his pocket and started to frame up a photo. “Goddammit Joe,” I said. And smacked the phone out of his hands. “We’re getting the fuck outta here.”

Everyone was in the car. I walked around to the back hatch and popped the glass. Stuck a hand in my gear bag and rummaged through the contents. I found a spare pair of river shorts balled up in the bottom. Held them up to my nose. They smelled fresh. My apartment had no laundry machine. I wanted to start the season rash-free. I felt bad for the girl, but not that bad. I left the shorts and grabbed a helmet instead.

Then I heard a slurred scream.

The pee pants girl had escaped the vehicle and was army crawling across the parking lot, heading for the foot-wide stretch of the Little Doe river.

“Hunter. Please. Contain your goddamn friends.”

The pale flesh of her lower half glowed in the sun light as she inched closer to the stream.

“I wanna go to the river,” she said. “I wanna go to the river.”

It was almost like my ears popped. There was a stillness. And all the sudden I could hear everything: the moving water, the birds, the highway behind me. I looked around and realized all the lawn mower engines had stopped. The riders had dismounted and now stood on the ridges beside their machines.

“Yo,” I said. “I got a feeling cops are getting called. Put that woman in the car.”

Hunter and Joe scooped her up and she was thrashing and screaming, looking wild with a dirty man’s shirt on and no pants. I put the helmet on her head. Tightened the chin strap. And with some effort, she was finally stuffed in the back seat of the car. Joe got in the front. I got in on the driver’s side and cranked the engine. I drove around to the entrance and was about to pull
out onto the road when I saw the church’s sign that I hadn’t noticed on the way in. Above all the shit about the sermon times and the resident preacher, it read: _GOD SAYS HOMOSEXUALITY IS SIN._

I thought about Anna and our storage unit and the Jesus discount I had lied to get. I thought about our gay uncles and Chik-fil-a and how passive I’d always been.

I turned towards Hunter and told him: “Seriously. Hold on to her. Don’t let her get out of the car.” Hunter gripped her bear-hug-style with both arms. I jumped out and ran to the church sign. Flipped open the glass from the bottom. Reached down to the word _SIN_ and grabbed the vinyl letter S. I stood, admired the new phrase and smiled. High-stepped it back to the car. Tossed the S on the floorboard by Joe’s bare feet. Nobody said anything. We were clear to leave.

It was about an hour drive back to Boone, and after maybe fifteen minutes on the road: a ding. I looked down at the dash. The gas light was on. 50 miles till empty.

_Goddammit._

I couldn’t pull over again. That was absolutely out of the question. There was no telling what these people were capable of at a populated gas station. I took a breath. Sighed. And decided to risk it.

“Do we need gas?” Joe said. And as soon as he did, the girl perked up in the back and started slurring: “Gas? We need gas? Pull over. I need cigarettes.”

“Dude oh my god. Not this shit again.”

“Cigarettes,” she said. “I need cigarettes.” I heard her tugging on the door handles and was thankful child locks were a thing.

“Let me out,” she said. “Let me out!”

“I’m about to throw you out if you don’t calm the hell down.”
That’s when she made her move. She broke free from Hunter’s grasp and started climbing up over the passenger seat. Joe kept still. He just sat there, grinning, as the winter bush brushed across his cheek. His hands were by his side and her knees were in his lap when she reached for the passenger door handle at 65mph. The dome light turned on. The door opened. And she went out face first, helmet on, hunched over the fan of paddle blades that kept her bottom half inside.

“Grab her goddammit!” I said. And with no real urgency, Joe pulled her in by the hips.

“I just want a cigarette,” she said after the door was shut and the dome light went off.

“What part of your performance today makes you think you’ve earned a cigarette?” She looked sad. I didn’t care. I told her to get the fuck in the backseat.

The rest of the drive home was silent. Joe was quick to pass out, looking foul—suicide band on this throat, gut out, head back, mouth open, and snoring. The girl was also asleep—still pant-less but covered thanks to the bagginess of Joe’s shirt. She was sitting on Hunter’s lap. Hunter was awake, enjoying his birthday. I kept looking back at them in the rearview mirror, thinking about how close that girl was to dying. And wondering what in the hell I would have done if that had been the case. An intoxicated girl with winter bush out smeared across the highway is not a good look. No one’s coming away clean from that. I knew at first sight this was gonna be trouble. I knew it. And I pressed on anyway, risking everything for a hundred and fifty bucks minus shuttle and gas, which is pretty damn sweet.

When I saw the Welcome to the Town of Boone sign, I had never been more relieved. I called Anna.

“Are you off the water?” she said.
“Uhh, yeah. Kinda. Shit got a little weird,” I said. “We never made it to the river. I’m back in Boone and about to be at the house. Can you come outside? I’m gonna need help with some things.”

We pulled into the gravel lot. I parked the car and turned off the engine. Hunter said: “I didn’t want to bother you while you were driving because you seemed pretty angry but I think you should know that she peed again.”

I shook my head.

“I tried to absorb most of it with my jeans.”

“Sweet, dude. I appreciate it.” I looked back at Hunter’s lap. It was soaked, and the car seats showed a nice new hue of discoloration. “Well,” I said. “Happy birthday, man.”

Hunter shimmied out from under the weight of the girl. I reached back and unbuckled the helmet. Joe was still snoring. I just wanted to be done with the day.

“You down to help me move these goddamn people into your car?”

Hunter agreed and we had the girl half out of the backseat when Anna came running over and said: “What are you doing? Why does she not have pants?”

“It’s a long story,” I said. “And I’m over it. I don’t want to deal with this shit anymore.”

“You can’t move her here.”

“Why not?”

“The courthouse is right across the street.”

“It’s Saturday. No one’s over there.”

“We fucking live here, Thomas. You can’t be moving lifeless bodies in our parking lot.”

She had a point. So we slid the girl back in the Jeep. Anna got in Hunter’s car. I told them to follow me.
At the time I had some good friends that had moved out to northern California and had become well-versed in the particulars of selling weed. I thought about trunk-to-trunk hand-offs—criminality in plain sight. I looked in the rearview. Saw Anna in Hunter’s car, waving her arms and cussing him from his passenger seat. There was an Ingles up ahead. I flicked on the turn signal.

The dashboard flashed five miles to empty as I pulled into a spot towards the back of the lot.

“Ignes?” Anna said after she and Hunter parked beside me. “Why did you think Ingles would be good idea?”

“I dunno. It’s as good a place as any.” But then I realized a nude girl was different than a duffle bag full of weed.

“We’re going to the old high school,” she said. Which was actually brilliant. It was up on a hill, abandoned, with no houses in sight and nothing but homeless people.

By the time we were at the top of High School Hill, the Jeep was reading 1 mile till empty. I cut off the engine and smacked Joe on his bare gut. The sound it made was satisfying.


He groaned but woke and got out of the car.

Before I could even ask what the plan was for the girl, Anna was walking over with a stern look on her face and a Bojangles cup from Hunter’s car in her hand. She opened the back door of the Jeep and doused the girl’s face with lukewarm Bud Light Platinum.

The girl made a pathetic whining noise but still wouldn’t move. Anna grabbed her by the feet and then there were screams and the girl was out of the car and standing and Anna looked
her up and down and said: “Get the fuck out of this town.” And the girl said: “I need my cigarettes.”

I rolled my eyes.

Anna said: “Where are her cigarettes?” And I said: “No damn clue. She’s been talking about those goddamn cigarettes all day.”

Anna leaned into the backseat and started searching the floorboards. “It smells like piss in here,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. ‘I’m sure it does.”

Anna stuck her hand underneath the driver’s seat and jerked out a purse I had never known was there. She opened it and found a pack of Marlboro menthols and then I watched her dig some more. She pulled out a wallet. Opened it. Checked for bills and pocketed every bit of paper currency.

Damn, I thought.

“Are these them?” Anna said holding out the cigs. The girl said yes and started walking towards Anna. When she got close enough to reach out for the pack, Anna threw the cigs over towards Hunter’s car and did the same with the purse. The contents of both went everywhere.

Anna said: “Leave.”

Joe and Hunter and the girl with no pants all picked up the items and loaded into Hunter’s Scion. Anna and I stood there and watched them back up, turn around, and drive down the hill. No one waved.

Anna got in the driver’s side of the Jeep. I got in the passenger’s seat. I handed over the keys and Anna stuck them in the ignition and turned. The engine strained and didn’t catch.

“Ah shit,” I said. “We might be out of gas.”
Anna said nothing. The look she gave me said everything.

“Alright. I’m walking.” I got out of the car. The abandoned high school was covered in spray paint—poorly drawn dongs and weed leaf graffiti. The trees on the hills that surrounded us were still bare from winter. I turned to head down the road. Started walking. It was colder now in the late afternoon. I folded my arms and held them tight against my body and decided to buy a tall can when I got to the gas station to drink on the hike back up the hill.
Partner Grooming

Plucking your nipple hair
(consensually) is fun

in the morning

with the blinds pulled open
welcoming eyes

of early citizens

who walk dogs by first light.
END OF THE SEASON

I had worked so hard for the #2 spot on the schedule—proving to Patrick I had what it took to listen to him complain day after day about the stressful nature of juggling the Tinder woman, the West Virginia woman, the Hammer Toe woman, the Kentuckian, the Canadian, the Tennessee Flat Foot, the woman with the mismatched A-cups, and—of course—the locally sourced Kristin Mosley who, season after season, put up with all this bullshit until recently when she heisted the dog she and Patrick shared and fled to her parents’ house in Knoxville for mental reprieve. “Another broken woman,” Patrick said. He was more upset about the dog, I think.

Commercial whitewater trips, regardless of guest count, must have at least two boats on the creek for safety purposes. If you’re #2 in the rotation, you work every single trip. Which is great, money-wise. But motherfucker if working 109 days straight won’t take a toll on you.

It was taking a toll on me.

The coveted spot came with a curse. Everyone who gets it breaks after one season. Sometimes it’s the body. Sometimes it’s the mind. But it always has to do with Patrick. And then that’s it. The end of a Nolichucky career.

Before me, it was Methadone Adam aka the Bird Man, who was always wearing hats because he was insecure about going bald like an eagle and enjoyed chasing heroin with 5-Hour Energys. Last year, around this same time, the crew was drinking 32oz Dos Equis at Jalapeños, the only place in Unicoi county serving draft beer. As we left the restaurant, Patrick pulled out his phone. He flicked Adam’s hat off from the snaps in the back and tried to take a picture of the thin struggling locks still left on his head. Adam reacted fast. He spun. And with his left hand slapped the phone from Patrick’s grasp and followed quick with a righthanded jab. Patrick
dodged it. The phone hit the pavement. Bounced. They grappled up. And were both on the ground—grown adults, wrestling in broad daylight.

Patrick is big. Adam is not. It took about six seconds for Patrick to have him pinned, grinding his bald head into the hot asphalt to add insult to injury. But the display of dominance did not end there. In some sort of updated version of *Say Uncle*, Patrick refused to release the man until he declared himself a transsexual in front of all of us who knew better than to intervene.

So yeah. Adam didn’t work another season after that. He married an overweight group-of-one who came down the river in his boat a few weeks after that. They live in Charlotte now. He works landscaping. And utilizes his new teenage Mexican stepson as a personal DD.

The point being: I knew what I was in for. I signed on anyway.

It was a low water season. The lowest I’d ever seen. And for whatever reason, when the water drops the gimps just get heinous. The target market—attractive, athletic, fun loving, Cadillac driving Cuban tourists from Miami—disappear. In their place: translucent, obese, Croc wearing stepdads driving dented Civics with Indiana plates.

I could feel myself getting meaner. Watching those haggard bastards limp out of their cars in the morning just made me cringe. I started snapping at the gimps—*Fine. Bring your fucking iPad. I don’t give a damn*—forgoing gratuity before even getting on the creek. I dreaded having to spend ten miles in a raft with those creatures.

Some days I didn’t speak.
My skin was in horrible shape. I was getting less and less resistant to upstream urban runoff and unwashed laundry. I was buying so much diaper rash ointment that the girl at the Walgreens started asking me about my nonexistent children.

“And how old are your youngins?” she’d say. And I’d be like: “Uh. I dunno. Three?”

And then there was Patrick, and the stories he told over and over in graphic detail about all the unprotected anal sex he was having that resulted in blown out O-rings.

But the season was done. Thank god. With no rain in the forecast, Patrick had finally gotten over his ego and made the call to shut down the outpost and stop booking Nolichucky trips.

It was early August, and a few of us were meeting up in Boone to celebrate. Me, Bert, Patrick, First Year Lukas, and Mcilwain.

The night started at First Year Lukas’s apartment where we watched whitewater carnage videos on Youtube, drank Busch Light, and did a bunch of Lukas’s blowcaine. Everyone except Mcilwain, anyway, who was fundamentally opposed to hard drugs even though he was prescribed Adderall and snorted it daily for medicinal purposes.

From there we were off to Murphy’s—an Irish pub notorious for a working class clientele and the bathroom-based distribution of methamphetamine. But they have cheap pitchers there and the best porch in town. So it’s a great spot to drink in the summer. We were charging beer to First Year Lukas’s tab because he was a rookie and hazing is alive and well in the commercial whitewater industry.

“Man I’ve been buying yall beer all season.”

“And you’ve been flipping boats and swimming yourself all season too,” Patrick said. He slung some foam from his near empty pint glass onto Lukas’s face.
Lukas sighed and wiped the foam off his forehead with the back of his hand. He poured a fresh pint from his pitcher into Patrick’s glass.

Lukas had worked a few years for Wahoo’s on the Watauga—the Class II dam controlled section in Elizabethton, Tennessee. He checked out in early June on the Nolichucky. He wasn’t a terrible guide but he wasn’t good either. He’d had a rough season. The Nolichucky is a very rocky steep river gorge. And with low water, it gets extremely technical. The multitude of navigational options dry up. There becomes only one line, everything else is a pin hazard. As a rookie, you learn by messing up. But Lukas wasn’t learning at all. With First Year pay and all the swim beer he had to buy, I’m positive he lost money on the season.

“Lukas, you’re such a bitch,” Mcilwain said. He was drunk. And had had none of the blowcaine to balance out all the booze. His eyes were glossed over. He was slurring words. And his head bobbled around as he leaned against the wall trying not to sway. Mciliwain was in his 2nd year of grad school for physical therapy but had come back that summer to work the Noli and relive his raft guide glory days. Mcilwain is one of the nicest, most even tempered people I’ve ever known. But he has the propensity to drink 40 beers in a sitting and turn into a complete mad man. Last Fuzzy Holes trip we made, Mcilwain got us kicked out after lobbing full and unopened Busch Lights like goddamn grenades onto the stage. The cans hit and busted and spun around spraying lite beer all over the place. When asked what the fuck he was thinking, he said: “Look at em sweat. They gotta be thirsty.”

As a group, we were pretty accustomed with being asked to leave an establishment. And I could see the bartender side-eyeing us already. I looked up to make sure no one was doing anything stupid.

“Aye where’s Bert?” I said.
And as if right on cue, a bouncer came in from the porch behind us and said: “Yall got a friend outside?”

“Big beard? Swim trunks? Hawaiian shirt?”

“Yep that’s him.”

“Everything good?”

“He’s asleep. We can’t have that. Yall gotta get him outta here.”

“Ha!” Patrick said, smiling big. “Perfect.”

I told the bouncer we’d get Bert out no problem. “Just let me close my tab,” I said out of habit.

The barstools were filled by tough looking men with dirty faces wearing neon Method Construction Co tee shirts and drinking bottled Bud Lights. There was one stool empty and I wedged myself in to wait on the bartender. She was pouring a row of bright blue shots.

Aside from the potentially violent and criminal clientele, part of Murphy’s notoriety revolved around the sheer filth of the place. The light wood floor was permanently sticky and splattered by what some swore were blood stains. Thick dust tentacles dangled from the cig stained ceiling and there was always a slight scent of vomit in the air. But the most prevailing piece of upkeep critique involved the draft lines. The claim was they hadn’t been cleaned since 1989 and that’s why everything on tap was so cheap. I glanced down the bar and realized we were the only ones drinking pitchers. I thought about mold and the Salem Witch Trails and the hypothesis that all that hysteria was the result of a wet season and hallucinogenic spores growing on wheat. I considered the possibility that I was poisoning myself. But then realized mold beers were probably far less toxic than whatever laundry detergent laced blowcaine I’d been railing every day for the past three weeks.
The bartender seemed to be ignoring me. She was leaned over and smiling, exposing her cleavage to a wiry Puerto Rican. She had an elbow propped up on the bar and was twirling her hair with her finger. I watched the two interact. She held out her free palm. And the Puerto Rican lifted his arm from under the bar to meet hers. But there was no arm. He had only a nub sticking out from his t-shirt short sleeve. The woman cradled the nub. She leaned down slowly and then kissed the thing.

It was one of the wilder moments I’d accidently seen. I didn’t want to keep staring. I turned away. And looked down. There was a folded one dollar bill by my feet. I bent over and acted like I was tying my shoes even though I was wearing open toed sandals. I scooped up the cash and it felt a little thick. I slid my fingers to fan out the corners and saw a five nestled under some singles.

Damn, I thought. Could be like ten bucks. Sweet. I slipped the money in my pants pocket on my way up and when I stood, the bartender was right in my face.

“Whatdaya need?” she said.

“Uh. I just need to pay you.”

“You don’t have a tab.”

Oh yeah, I thought. We made Lukas pay for everything.

When I got outside on the porch, sure enough, there was Bert on a bench completely horizontal and unconscious. Patrick and Lukas and Mcilwain all had their bare asses out surrounding the man.
“Toemas! Get in here,” Patrick said. And I joined the group and exposed my chaffed and irritated backside. A stray woman smoking a cig was holding Patrick’s phone. “Say cheese,” she said with raspy voice and the flash went off and everyone cheered.

We all gathered around to review the photo. “Oh this is great,” Patrick said. “Definitely going on the Meet the Guide page.”

The woman who took the photo was still staring hard at Bert. She was wearing all black and had thin greasy hair, tanning bed skin, and a sunken face.

“Well is that man?” she said taking long pensive drags from her cig.

“Uh just a 50 year old adult we work with who insists on sleeping in public places,” Patrick said.

“Wellmmhhmm,” the woman said. Her cigarette was down to the filter. She flicked to it the floor and pulled a spare from behind her ear. She lit it without taking her eyes off Bert.

“I bet that man smells real nice,” she said.

Patrick squinched up his brow. “If by nice you mean like unpaid child support and nicotine, then yeah. He smells real nice.”

The woman made another sound that bordered on a growl. “What’s his name?” she said.

“Bert.”

Her eyes perked up. “You mean like Burt Reynolds?”

“I guess.”

She took a final drag, exhaled through her nose. She flicked the cigarette off the side of the porch and stomped off toward Bert.
She slung a thin leg over his waist, keeping the other on the floor. With her left hand she cupped his crotch. Squeezed. And yanked upward. Then leaned her face into his throat. It looked like she was eating him.

“Jesus Christ,” I said. And Patrick was already taking pictures with his phone.

Bert stayed unconscious for about 14 more seconds while this woman hip thrusted and continued to gnaw on his trachea like some sort of beast.

When he came to, it was a beautiful sight. His eyes blinked. He looked around, quick glances from left to right. There was a little panic in his face at first. But then: recognition. A smile grew. And Bert reached back with both hands, letting out his standard celebratory roar and gripped the small sinewy backside of this woman so hard his knuckles cracked.

Lip-to-lip contact occurred. And Patrick and I cheered. I turned to see what Mcilwain had to say about it but he and Lukas were nowhere to be found. Our cheers and the guttural sound of Bert brought the bouncer outside.

“Aye! I told you to get him outta here.”

“He’s awake now. It’s fine,” Patrick said pointing over at Bert.

“I don’t give one good-god-damn if he is awake, I want all yall gone!”

“Alright. Alright,” Patrick said and held his hands up surrender style. We kicked at Bert’s feet to get his attention, careful not to get too close, nervous about whatever airborne herpes his suitor could be carrying.

The four of us took it down the steps, off the porch, back behind the bar where there was an alley and a gravel parking lot. As soon as Bert and the woman reached the gravel, they dropped to their knees and continued what they started, grabbing and groping and rolling about the ground.
Before I could even comment about how absurd it all was, I spotted Lukas and Mcilwain engaged in a similar but less romantic performance off in the alley. I don’t know what had prompted it. Lukas had probably just taken too much shit all day, all year. But the two of them were full-on wrestling. Angry and grunting.

“Yo. We gotta go handle this,” I said. “Bert’ll be fine.”

But before we could do anything, a car came rumbling up in the gravel lot. The headlights illuminated Bert and he froze like a possum, hands still locked in a double-palm booty grip. The driver door opened. A man stepped out. “Goddammit Krystal! What the fuck is this?!”

I heard the woman say something about a boyfriend before grabbing Bert’s hand and scampering away with a quickness, leading him off down the alley.

The boyfriend screamed a series of obscenities that ended with: “Gonna fucking kill you.” Then got back into the car, slinging gravel and I assume trying to head after them.

Patrick and I agreed that Bert was on his own and turned our attention back to Lukas and Mcilwain who were now surrounded by a group of giggling girls filming the mass of locked limbs.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” I said. “Easy easy. Put that shit away. These are our friends. They’re just working something out.”


“They’re not fighting,” I said. “They’re bonding. It’s fine.”

One of Lukas’s shoes had come off during the scuffle and Patrick had it in his hand.

“What’s your name?” the girl said.
“Toemas.”

She laughed. Patrick was repeatedly smacking Lukas in the ass with the loose shoe.

“Well Toemas.” She held out her hand. Her nails were done up in French tips. “In that case, my name is Ser-Rah.”

I smiled. Shook her hand. And said: “Well Ser-Rah it was nice meeting you but I gotta take care of my friends.”

Patrick stopped smacking Lukas. He looked up and heaved the shoe onto the roof of the building in front of us.

“Jesus dude.”

“Can I give you my number, Toemas?”

“Huh?” I said. And looked back at Ser-Rah. She was grinning a heavy mischievous grin. Her friends were waiting behind her.

“I got like a live-in girlfriend and shit,” I said.

“So?”

Jesus, I thought. Women are scandalous. I ignored her.

“Dude why’d you throw his shoe?” I said to Patrick. And he didn’t have an answer.

Mcilwain was overpowering Lukas. They were sealed in a modified spooning position, both kicking their feet just hard enough to gain the traction needed to slowly rotate counterclockwise in-place. I glanced over at Ser-Rah and she was still smiling—hip cocked out, hand on her waist.

“Well,” she said. “I’m waiting.”

Flaw: doing anything someone wants just to get them out of your face.

“Yeah whatever. Here.” I handed her my phone.
Mcilwain had his arm wrapped around Lukas’s neck. Ser-Rah passed back my phone. She turned towards her friends and they all started to walk away. Three steps in, Ser-Rah looked back over her shoulder. She winked. “Call me when your girlfriend’s out of town,” she said.

And of course Patrick was eating that shit up. I know what he really wanted in his #2 employee was not only someone who would tolerate his behavior but someone who would participate in it as well. I was not that person. For now anyway. Later, I would be. And it wouldn’t be Patrick or the Nolichucky or Ser-Rah that would break me. Or Slamber or Tugboat or NOC Jordan or any of the girls who lived at Ewok Village after showing up to work the river with nothing but a tent and a Santa Claus sized trash bag full of condoms. It would happen once I got out of this place. When I finally had options in life. Options that I would ruin. But fuck. That’s an entirely different story.

Back on the ground the chokehold scenario had reversed. Lukas was behind Mcilwain now who was down on his knees. Mcilwain’s face was turning blue. He was wheezing.

“Yo you got him Lukas! Let go!” I jumped over to him. “You won dude. Stop!” I put a hand on his shoulder. His expression lightened. And I could feel the muscles in his arms relax.

He took a breath. He unwrapped his arm from around Mcilwain’s neck. And goddamn if Mcilwain didn’t turn around, lift that kid up by the rib cage, and drop him to the ground like he had just finished deadlifting weights.

The back of Lukas’s head hit the pavement and the sound of his skull cracking bounced off the walls of the alley. He immediately started to bleed.

Patrick got between them and grabbed Mcilwain who was too fucked up to realize what he had done was cheap and wrong.

I just stood there. Mouth open. Not knowing what to do.
Lukas got to his feet. His eyes were watering. He touched the back of his head and when he brought his hand around, his palm was dripping red. He burst into tears.

“Fuck you Mcilwain,” he said. “Fuck you man. I fucking looked up to you dude. You’re a fucking asshole. I hate you man.” In between hiccups of tears, Lukas started backing away from us but kept screaming his fuck yous to Mcilwain who just looked confused. The grey tee shirt Lukas was wearing was dirty and ripped from the wrestling and when he turned his back to take off into the street, the blood was visible and had already soaked into his collar.

“Fuck you Mcilwain!” he howled, now crying harder, walking slightly bowlegged with only one shoe.

Up from the Murphy’s porch was a voice: “You guys need to leave or I’m calling the cops!” It was the bartender.

“We did leave,” I said. “We’re not on your property. There’s no need for police.”

“I don’t care if you’re not on my property. I’m calling the fucking cops.”

I just wanted a moment to process the night. Mcilwain didn’t mean to hurt Lukas but he did. And now Lukas was off hobbling about in the darkness. His apartment was miles away on the other side of town. He needed medical attention. He needed another shoe. And this fucking woman had the audacity to threaten the police on me? Hell no.

“Go the fuck back inside and mind your own goddamn business,” I screamed.

I could see the neon shirts rushing out of the bar and onto the porch. The bartender was leaning on the railing, pointing down on us like she was commanding an army. The construction workers. The regulars. They were taking the stairs two at a time and coming towards us. Fast.

“Ahh dammit,” I said. And looked at Patrick who still trying to talk sense into Mcilwain.

“Get ready dude.”
There were four men in total. Three white dudes—good ole boy looking motherfuckers. And the one-armed Puerto Rican was out front leading the charge.

I am not a fighter. Never have been, never will be. I may look like a fighter, but the bad attitude and the complete coverage of my upper body in tattoos was a defensive strategy adopted in early adulthood after years of physical harassment in high school. The hope was, that if I looked the part, people would not fuck with me.

These people wanted to fuck with me.

I went with my standard diplomatic routine: “Dude we’re leaving. Back the fuck off. We’ve got a friend who’s hurt. We’re just trying to get him help.”

The Puerto Rican man was not having that. He started screaming a list of threats, punctuating each one with soft-A racial slurs and beating his chest with his only hand. I looked over at Patrick, trying to get guidance. Some nonverbal cues for what we were going to do. He was stone cold, though. I watched him clench his fists.

Oh fuck, I thought. This is about happen. Oh fuck.

That’s when Mcilwain stumbled over. “Hey man,” he said pointing at the Puerto Rican. He looked back at us. Then back at them. “Everyone here is white.”

Then: blue lights. And those construction dudes scattered like vampires at dawn, all sprinting for cover in different directions.

I turned around toward the street. A cop car was idling. The lights were still going. I squinted my eyes and Lukas was in the back seat. He was bare-chested. Holding his shirt up to catch the blood leaking from his head.

Patrick said he would take care of it and walked up to the cop as he got out of the driver’s seat.
I looked at a Mcilwain. “How you doing dude?”

“How’s it goin?” he said. But he could barely stand. He was swaying drastically from side to side trying to keep in one place.

Lukas was out of the cop car now and Patrick was still talking, using a lot of hand gestures. It looked like everything was going to be fine. But then again, maybe it wasn’t. I thought about arrests and jail and lesbian probation officers. I thought about doin pinches and drug tests, holding cells and lawyer bills. I felt nauseas and dizzy.

That’s when I ran.

My apartment was on King St, only about a block and a half away. I was there in under two minutes. And when I reached into my pocket to get out my keys, I felt the folded cash I had found on the floor of the bar. I pulled it out. Started thumbing through the bills. Single. Single. Single. Five. Twenty. Twenty. Oh shit. Hundred. Hundred. Hundred. Hundred. Hundred.

When it was all said and done I was standing in the hallway of my building holding over 1200 dollars in cash. I shoved the money back into my pockets. Got out the keys and unlocked the door. Anna was sitting on the couch just about to torch the end of a joint that was hanging from her mouth. I shut the door and locked the deadbolt.

“How was your night with everybody?” she said blowing a big cloud of weed smoke out into the apartment. *Watch What Happens Live With Andy Cohen* was playing on the TV. “Uneventful,” I said. And dropped the cash on the coffee table in front of her. The notes separated on impact. We both stared in silence at the glow of the blue bills while a siren screamed by outside on the street.
HOW TO SELL WEED IN 2012

Receiving

Wake up to the sounds of Beyoncé blasting from Anna’s phone at 6am. Watch Anna pace around the room trying on multiple outfits and throwing clean clothes to the floor. After she leaves go back to sleep for two maybe three more hours. Suffer through stressful dreams about police raids and shoot outs and robberies. Wake up more tired than you were before she left.

Get out of bed. Put on clothes. Make coffee. Roll a spliff. Select a documentary to watch. Any documentary will do. But it must be a documentary. Otherwise, risk feeling bad about wasting time in front of the TV. Continue getting high and finish the pot of coffee. Turn on the prepaid TracFone. Roll another spliff for roasting while having a long soak in the hot tub. Sit in the hot tub for too long. Take a cold shower to recover from the heat. Lay down on the daybed in the loft and fall asleep while waiting for Ralf to call about the package.

Wake up sometime post-noon and become stressed about not having received the call. Think about Ralf going to jail. Assume he will snitch and formulate an escape plan for you and Anna. Pack a small duffle of go-cash and clothes, and then unpack that duffle when Ralf does call to inform you that everything went okay. Enjoy the feeling of relief.

Smoke another spliff while waiting for Ralf and Cooley to show up. Prepare the basement for work. Plug in vacuum sealers. Place a pair of scissors and a small trashcan at each station. Zero-out digital scales. Open fresh boxes of Ziploc bags, FoodSaver bags, and medical gloves. Turn on WNCW.

When Cooley and Ralf arrive, open the cardboard box with care. There will be five double-vacuum sealed pounds of chronic because after the first attempt through the mail you were like: If it works with one then why not do as many as you can?
Start opening the bags.

Even though you don’t have neighbors—light three Big Lots brand scented candles to mask the smell. Cinnamon or Frasier Fir work best. Once everything is open select the best strain by judging: color, odor, density, and shape. Set that pound aside for personal consumption. Toss a nugget to Cooley and tell him: Twist us up a sample.

Get to work. Put on gloves. Start breaking down the pounds into individually bagged ounces weighing .1 to .2 grams over. Cut sheets three feet long from the FoodSaver roll. Heat seal each end. Assemble new packages, stuffing the Ziploc bagged ounces into the FoodSaver bags. Amounts and qualities will vary depending on who is scheduled for resupply. Add a separate sample sack of about three grams to each package as a show of kindness. Vacuum seal everything, but leave enough air so the product isn’t crushed. Wipe down the bags in case of fingerprints. Blow out the candles. Turn off the scales.

Consult Ralf on who gets what at what price. Trust him to make the drop-offs throughout the High Country area. Schedule a time for cash pick-up. Show gratitude, but never too much.

Shipping

Wake up to the sounds of Beyoncé blasting from Anna’s phone at 6am. Watch Anna pace around the room trying on multiple outfits and throwing clean clothes to the floor. After she leaves make some coffee. Put the coffee in a travel mug and head into town. Stop at Goodwill. Buy a pair of size 13 ratty used sneakers. If there are multiple pairs, stock up. If there are no used shoes, browse the board game section and buy a used edition of Monopoly or Clue, something with cards and crevasses.
Take the shoes back to the house. Get out the drill and unscrew the wall paneling in the basement. Remove insulation and withdraw $10,000 in hundreds because hundreds take up less space. Underneath the insoles of the size 13 Goodwill sneakers, place the money: 5gs in each shoe. Reinsert the insoles. Put the shoes in a medium size USPS flat rate shipping box. Stuff all free space with tissue paper or old t-shirts to reduced movement. Tape up the box with high-test clear packing tape. Write the address as cleanly as possible. Double-check the destination. Make sure San Francisco is spelled correctly. Label with a fake return in the top left corner.

Consult the online database for under-performing Post Offices slated for closure in the surrounding rural areas. Select one that isn’t too far away, one you haven’t used recently. Take a shower. Dress nice, but nothing fancy. Aim for inconspicuous and unmemorable attire. Do not smoke pot or drink beer. Wear long sleeves.

Write down directions if you don’t already know them by heart. Leave all phones. If the weather is nice pack a fly rod and plan to stop at a few tributaries on the way home. Drive the backroads at a leisurely pace with the windows down and radio set to WNCW. Enjoy the day.

When walking into the Post Office, smile at the woman working behind the counter. She will be underpaid and irritable, concerned about her future. Be polite. Pay the extra $35 for overnight shipping.

Say: Please.

Say: Thank you.

Say: Have a nice day.

Drive home. There will be no rush. Crack a beer from the car cooler. Stop and fish for a while. After getting back to the house turn on the prepaid TracFone. Call San Francisco. Let those who need to know: the bird is in the air.
Hanging Out at the Buffet

I am a motherfucking dragon.  
Or so the placemat tells me.

The fortune cookie though reads: Love all, trust none.  
And I don’t even wanna do either.

Instead—Let’s just go get more  
goddamn lo mein. Eat for something

other than hunger, hand in hand  
with jeans unbuttoned,

content on the same side  
of this red vinyl booth.
ROAD RAGE

I had just resupplied Ralf and Lukas and Cooley and Rory and picked up all the money they owed me from sales that week and was driving back out to Fleetwood Falls, taking the backroads by the hospital, when this busted up Oldsmobile blew through a stop sign on the left and damn near slammed right into me.

The driver swerved. I braked. We were parallel, facing opposite directions. He had his window down and was wearing a white sleeveless stained tee shirt and was dogcussing the hell out of me so hard his face was red and I could see spit and old bits of food flying from his mouth.

My windows were rolled up. Both our vehicles were at a complete stop. And all the chronic I had smoked that morning had killed any possible motivation to further engage in such a confrontational exchange. Even though I knew he was in the wrong, I just mouthed a series of apologies and gave an openhand wave before pulling back onto the road and carrying on with my day.

I considered it over.

I zoned back out and was driving for a few minutes, probably like ten miles under the speed limit, enjoying the curves and the cows in the fields, when the sound of a car horn hammered down started growing louder and louder and in my rearview mirror high beams flashing caught my eye and that goddamn Oldsmobile was coming up quick.

There was a fat ugly woman in the passenger seat and she had a hand on the steering wheel while the driver had half his body hanging out the window and when they got close enough she handed him a Wendy’s cup and he threw an iceless Mountain Dew at me.
For whatever reason the sound of the cup smacking against my back glass wasn’t enough of an indicator. Because I still came to a complete stop at the next intersection.

That’s when he got out of the car.

The man walked with purpose and flipflops on and wore light wash jean shorts and had matching barbwire tattoos wrapping around both calves. He looked pissed and I looked back to study his woman who was pointing a flabby arm in my direction, screaming the same series of cuss words I’d already heard out of her man.

I turned and faced forward, monitored traffic coming from either direction, but kept an eye on the man’s advance with my side mirror. When he was flush with my tailgate I was clear to turn. I floored it, taking a left onto Bamboo Road, heading for 421. He scrambled back to the Oldsmobile in my rearview.

I should have just risked it and blasted through the neighborhood at damn 80 miles an hour but that brown paper Earth Fare bag sitting in the floorboard stuffed with 25gs was reminding me that I didn’t want anything to do with the police. So I gunned it on the straightaways and slowed down on the curves until I could see far enough ahead to know I wasn’t about to fly through a speed trap.

The Oldsmobile had none of the same concerns though and kept pace and was on my tail the whole way. I knew if I could just make it to the highway I would be free. 421 was my salvation.

But when I rounded that final curve, a line of cars three light cycles deep forced me to lock up my brakes and I almost rear-ended a truck.

*Shit.*
To the left there was a gas station with an exit to the highway on the far side of the pumps. I checked my mirrors and shifted into reverse and as I turned the wheel to make the move, there was the Oldsmobile screeching to a halt, diagonally blocking the entrance and leaving me nowhere to go.

The man was quicker out of his car this time and left the driver side door open. He wasn’t running but he was coming fast with his chest pushed forward and fists clinched and I was fucking scared and averted my eyes as if refusing to acknowledge the threat would make it nonexistent.

When he got up to my door he went straight for the handle and tugged twice and said with an eerie calmness: “Open the fucking door.”

“I’m not opening the fucking door,” was what I told him and then the light turned green and the first cars in line drove on but the cars blocking my escape were not going anywhere. The drivers and passengers had all taken notice and were turned around in their seats. People at the gas station had stopped pumping gas. With phones out, they patiently watched the scene.

The man kept at the door handle a couple more times and when he realized there was no way in hell I was going to unlock my car, he started double palm shoving the side of the vehicle.

“Get the fuck out,” he said. And then he said it again, “Get the fuck out!” And all I could think to do was mumble some shit back, all panicked like fool: “Jesus dude! I told you I was sorry. I’m sorry man. What the fuck is your problem!?”

The man was now fully red faced and huffing and still shoving the side of my truck when he said: “My problem?!”

He pushed the car again.

“My fucking problem!?”
He pointed towards his car.

“I got a goddamn baby in there,” he said. “A goddamn baby!”

I looked over at the Oldsmobile. Sure enough, behind his gross woman, who was still yelling in the front but now smoking a cigarette, was one of those little yellow baby-on-board diamond signs suctioned to the backseat passenger window.

I wanted to say so many things. I wanted to call that man: a moron, a fucking idiot, a dumb sonofabitch. I wanted to say: A baby? Really? A fucking baby? You’re the one who almost hit me!

But I didn’t say any of that shit because he had already started punching.

The window flexed with the first few strikes and it wasn’t long before a crack appeared and the glass shattered into pellets that crumbled inside the cab and onto my lap.

The initial blow came to the side of my head and whatever high I still held onto was instantly gone. His knuckles were bleeding and his punches felt heavy and wet even after I shielded my face with both arms and dampened the impact of his next several hits.

The seatbelt had me trapped. I had jolted so quickly when the glass broke that its grip had tightened and I was pinned in place.

My thought process was this: If I could get out from under the seatbelt then I could roll over to the passenger side, grab the money, leave the car, and get the fuck out of there. Maybe wait in the woods for a bit until it was safe before going back to retrieve the truck. It seemed farfetched but worth a try so I moved my right arm from where it was protecting the top of my head and tried to feel around for the red release button and that’s when he grabbed me by the hair.
He slammed my head against the door frame and I could feel remaining bits of glass pierce my cheek each time my face connected with the rubber seal.

After about three of those I lost control of my neck muscles and couldn’t tense up to resist. He kept on with full force and when satisfied, reached an arm in and opened the door from the inside. I fell out onto the ground in a crumpled heap. He kicked me a couple of times in the ribs before sticking his hands in my pockets and taking my wallet and phone.

He stomped away proud. His woman was cheering and smiling and congratulating him. She was out of the car now but not leaving the barrier of her door. “That’ll teach that faggot,” she said. And then she pointed her cig hand at me. “You hear that you fucking faggot. That’ll teach you!”

The baby was crying.

The two of them got back in the Oldsmobile and drove away. No one stopped them. No one walked up to check on me either. The light was green again and somewhere from behind, a car honked its horn. I was slow to get moving but eventually pulled myself back into the car, threw it in drive, and got out of everyone’s way.

The journey home was filled with pain and thoughts of violence. I wished for a gun and imagined how different things would have been. I thought about that man backing away in terror, tripping on flipflops as I flashed a pistol and tapped its barrel against my window. I imagined getting out of the car and firing several rounds. I wouldn’t kill him. I would aim for the legs and he would fall to the ground and be scared and maybe start crying. I thought about that big woman and how I would drag her from the Oldsmobile by her thin bleached hair, take that
cigarette and put it out in her eye. Singular. Because I would need her to watch as I exposed myself and urinated all over her baby in the backseat.

It was an anger I had never felt before and similar scenarios kept running through my head, each one more sadistic than the last, and when I turned off 421 and crossed into Ashe County, the sky darkened and I could smell rain. By the time I made it past the Mathis family Christmas tree farm it was coming down so hard the windshield wipers weren’t doing a thing. I pulled over on the shoulder by the power grid and waited for the storm to pass. The blood on the glass fragments still lodged in the window frame diluted and washed away.

The left side of my body was soaked as I pulled into the neighborhood. It took another ten minutes or so to get up the mountain through the groves of rhododendrons and foreclosed vacation homes. When I got to our house on Bear Ridge Road, Anna was outside in a raincoat waiting on me.

We lived in a three-story A-frame cabin purchased in full with cash for cheap from the bank earlier that year. We had a hot tub and a quarter million in rubber banded blue bills vacuum sealed and stashed in the walls of the basement. Our names were nowhere on the deed, same went for the titles to our cars, and every day I listened to rap music, counted money, and felt like a goddamn king.

“Jesus are you okay?” she said as I walked from the truck onto the deck carrying the Earth Fare bag full of money.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m fine. I just got fucking attacked at a goddamn stoplight.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s all over the Internet.”
We went inside and while Anna worked with a tweezer at removing slivers of glass from my face, I relived my assault through the eyes of strangers under the locally trending hashtag: #bamboobeatdown.

“I want to fucking kill those people,” I said. And Anna said: “I know.” And then said: “I do too.”

At first Anna was worried that it had been a targeted attack. She thought someone had been watching us, followed me on my route, and was out to get the money or at least send a message.

She was dabbing my face with a peroxide soaked cotton ball and I assured her that wasn’t the case. I told her that man and his woman were just a couple of low rent trailer park assholes who didn’t know shit because if they did they would have come for the cash and all they took was my wallet and phone.

“Your phone?” she said. She stopped the dabbing, leaned up and waited for my response.

“Yeah,” I said. And then Anna pulled out her own phone, handed it over and said: “Sign in with your Apple ID.”

I wasn’t even supposed to of had my iPhone on me. We used prepaid Tracphones to communicate, especially when transporting money or drugs, but those GPS location services we always worried about were going to work in our favor. It was simple. I signed into the Find My Phone app and we watched a blinking dot travel around Boone and down King Street and then out towards Meat Camp, settling at an address on the North Fork of the New River.

“I don’t care if it was just random,” she said. “Somethings got be done about it.”

That night we ordered tasers from Amazon, the projectile kind, and I iced my ribs and the knots on my face. We rested for the two days it took for the weapons to arrive.
Meat Camp was an area with a cultivated reputation, part earned and part embellished, in an attempt to prevent the construction of Floridian vacation homes during their initial invasion of this area back in the ‘70s. And for the most part it had worked. Talk of murders and disappearances left the North Fork of the New the only stretch still untouched by sprawling A-Frame developments. That holler was still occupied almost exclusively by the original families that had lived there for generations.

I thought about this while the river flashed by. I was riding in the backseat with Ralf and Cooley in their car just as it was getting dark. Our destination was off Mud Cut Road and after we made the turn we drove slow. I loaded my new taser.

The Oldsmobile was nowhere to be seen at the address we tracked but a rim of light shined through the edges of an aluminum foil covered window in the front room of the trailer. We drove past it and parked the car a little ways up the gravel road behind cover from a couple of broke down Chevys.

I always thought it was best to keep a low profile. That’s how we made so much money. That’s how we never got caught. Yeah I was mad I had gotten the shit beat out of me but what mattered was the cash and they hadn’t taken it. And more so than that was not going to jail. What good was money if you weren’t around to spend it?

But there was the video. And there were reputations to uphold. And Anna thought the people that worked for us, especially those who owed us money, might start getting ideas. They might start thinking we were weak.

“You know the plan?” I said. And Cooley and Ralf both said they did.

“Repeat it then.”
Ralf said once we knew the people were there he was to knock on the door. Cooley said he and I would stay crouched on either side and when it opened that’s when we would pop out and tase whoever had answered. Ralf was then to move inside while Cooley and I reloaded with fresh charges. We would then find the woman and whoever else was in there, neutralize them, distribute a beating, get my phone and wallet back, and then steal anything of value. The car was to be left running in case anything went wrong.

We pulled ski masks over our faces just as headlights lit the road.

It was the Oldsmobile. It rolled up slow and pulled into the freestanding aluminum carport beside the trailer we’d been watching.

The man got out of the car first. His fat woman was out not long after. She threw a cig to the ground and opened the door to the back seat and picked up the baby by the handle of its carrier.

“Damn there’s a baby,” Cooley said. And I told him not to worry about it.

We watched the three of them make their way toward the house. Just as they stepped up to the front porch, the door opened and two equally rough looking individuals walked out helping the woman with the baby. They talked to the man for second before turning around to go back inside and when they did I could see the pistol grips sticking out from the ass crack of their jeans.

“Did you see that?” Ralf said.

“Yeah I saw it.”

“Who are these people?” Cooley asked and when no one answered he said: “Are we still doing this?”

My Tracphone buzzed. It was a text from Anna—Done?
I texted back—*Yeah*. And held the phone for a second. I thought about getting dragged from my car. The way those fists felt. I thought about the pain. The humiliation. The embarrassment of the whole thing. How scared I was when he was chasing me. My anger. The people watching. And how in that moment, on the drive home, I felt capable of anything.

I kept staring at the phone. I took a breath. I pulled my ski mask off and tossed it in the floorboard and ran my free hand across my face.

I dialed 911. I pressed send. When the operator answered, I told her it wasn’t an emergency. I told her to just connect me to the Sheriff’s Office and when the deputy asked how he could help, I said: “I’d like to report a theft.” Then paused. Ralf and Cooley ripped their masks off revealing looks of shock and disbelief. They stared at me. “Actually,” I said. “I want to report an assault as well. I’m outside the house of the assailant.”

I gave the address. Everyone slid the tasers underneath their seats. I looked back up at the trailer. The naked lightbulb beside the front door flickered. No one spoke. We waited for the police.
REUNION

Other than selling the staff personal chronic satchels at a ridiculous mark-up, I didn’t need rafting, Wahoo’s, or the goddamn Nolichucky anymore. It was late April. Trips were growing. The gimps were coming. And I had already told Patrick I was bowing out this season, but it was the morning of the annual Blues, Brews, BBQs, and Canoes at the New River Outpost and he had been harassing me to go because the Nolichucky staff was in-route from Erwin and I lived in Fleetwood Falls—just a few miles downstream.

“Are you really gonna go down there?” Anna said. She clicked the two halves of a metal grinder together. A pile of weed fell onto the glossy cover of a Martha Stewart Living magazine resting in her lap. We were sitting in the third story loft of our A-frame cabin. Below Deck was playing on the TV. A brown haired stewardess was having difficulty reining in an unruly yacht guest who refused to wear a life jacket before speeding off on a jet ski.

“Man I’m real glad Jeff never took those offers for a Wahoo’s reality show,” I said. Anna dumped the weed into a king sized rice paper she held in her left hand. The show cut to a confessional. A different woman, blonde and either South African or Australian, stared into the camera and discussed the bunk bed penetrations she was catching from multiple male crew members. “Yeah. Definitely glad,” I said and shook my head. “This shit is embarrassing.”

Anna licked the gummy strip and twisted the paper into a cone. “It’s not like you’re required to hang out with those people. You don’t work there. Patrick can’t take you off the schedule anymore if you’re not willing to sit around and drink beer with him.”

“Yeah I know.”

“And all you do is whine about how much you hate everybody there.”

“I don’t hate them.”
Anna rolled her eyes and bounced the joint off the magazine on her knees.

“And that’s July talk anyway,” I said. “I haven’t seen anybody all winter. And I’m not gonna work this season. So, I dunno. I kinda miss em.”

That’s the thing about rafting. You’re with the same six motherfuckers for 110 days straight. Frustrations ensue. But then the offseason hits. And by the time Spring rolls around you’ve forgotten all the monotonous moments and annoyances that made you want to die the previous year.

“I could do without ever seeing any of those people again,” Anna said. She fired up the joint and smoked it down damn near the crutch before offering it to me.

I was excited to see the New River Outpost. Jeff had renovated it over the winter. Before I was given the privilege to train on the Nolichucky I worked a lot of long, filthy hours out there. The New River is not a guiding position. It is a driving and manual labor job. You run shuttles in dented and previously wrecked 16-passenger vans, tie innertubes to the roofs of those vans, and load canoe trailers by yourself.

When I worked there the outpost was a joke. It was a slab of riverside property with no running water, no bathrooms, no cell phone signal, and no dumpster or trash collection. There was a gravel takeout and nothing but two prefab wooden sheds and a chicken wire enclosure housing all the tubes. The ceiling of the tube corral was a tarp strapped to the chicken wire with bungie cords.

During the winter, when Jeff fled the cold and migrated with Lilly back to Florida, the place was left unattended and a lot of tubes would go missing. I always got enlisted for the preseason repossession missions. Jeff would issue me an axe handle he called The Enforcer and
pay me a $25 finder’s fee for each tube I recovered. I was told to drive a company vehicle up and down River Rd looking for tubes with Wahoo’s scribbled on the sides in Indonesian cursive. I was told to get out of the van and look menacing—Jeff’s words—swing the axe handle around and threaten physical violence on the residents unless they relinquished the stolen tubes. The problem was, that more often than not, Jeff would have sold old tubes to the neighbors at the end of the previous season and forgotten about it over the winter. Knowing that, I just kept the axe handle in the van and when I saw a Wahoo’s tube in someone’s yard, I politely offered to buy it back for twenty bucks—grateful for the $5 profit margin.

The New was nice on slow days. You could read books, get high, and lay around in a tube—dong out—getting a full body tan while waiting for people float back to the outpost where their cars were parked.

On busy days, it could be hell. The morning would start with picking up a van, the outpost keys, and a clipboard at the main office in Boone. On the clipboard was a handwritten list of the groups signed up for the day followed with more specific information including the last name on the reservation, how many people were in the party, the time they were scheduled for, and their chosen medium for river navigation: canoe, tube, or kayak.

The list would quickly become irrelevant as the office staff continued to book people throughout the day. Not only that, but random groups would show up who hadn’t checked in at the office and therefore had not paid. There was no cash register or credit card machine at the New River Outpost and absolutely no oversight. So depending on who ran the show, a culture of theft could develop.
Jeff would always ask when you got back to the shop to clock-out: “Any walk-ins?” And if you said yes and handed over money, he would count it out and always give you a cut. Usually around 20%—a method I would later emulate as a drug dealer.

This was practiced in an attempt to keep people honest. But when paychecks were consistently short due to Lilly slashing hours from timecards for a lunchbreak never taken, people started to feel like a 20% cut from walk-ins just wasn’t enough.

I respect hierarchy. And I understand the importance of adhering to a chain-of-command. Because of this, I never stole money on the New. But for the same reasons, I never declined stolen money given to me by a senior manager.

Mike Carpenter was the most shameless when it came to pocketing money. He was bitter, and for good reason, after Jeff talked him into giving up $10,000 to start a guided hiking and overnight backpacking portion of Wahoo’s Adventures that never took off. Mike’s rationale was rooted in the sheer number of tourists that came through the Wahoo doors. What he didn’t anticipate was the inherit laziness and unfit nature of American clientele. No obese family from the middle of Florida comes to the mountains for true physical activity and a lack of indoor plumbing. There is a big difference between plopping a fat ass down on the side of a rubber raft and slinging a thirty pound backpack over your shoulders. The gimps are gimps for a reason. And anyone visiting who is genuinely interested in Blue Ridge backcountry camping already has their own gear and can Google where to go.

Mike was in his late twenties, pissed, broke, and looking for short-cuts to offset his bad business decisions. Every car off the books that pulled into the New River Outpost he approached and gave them the spiel—"Do you guys have your hand-drawn Indonesian map that proves you paid at our office? No. Okay then. I’ll tell you what. Canoe rental is usually $35 a
head. As long as you don’t go back to my boss, we can take care of this right here for twenty bucks each.

Mike robbed the hell out of Jeff over the season I worked with him.

Jeff eventually suspected that something was up. And it wasn’t long before all of us who worked under Mike were called into the back office individually.

“Sit down Tommy,” was how Jeff started the conversation with me. He was sitting in his blown-out leather swivel chair behind a desk littered with scrap paper made from old waiver forms.

I took the seat across from him. My back was to the door.

“You’ve been working on the New for a while now, right?”

“Yep. Two seasons. I’d actually like to start putting in some serious training on the Nolichucky if that’s—”

“Let me ask you this Tommy. When someone comes in, on the New, who hasn’t paid or wants a shuttle or tries to park on our property—what do you do?”

“I tell em how much money those things cost, collect the money, and bring it to you.”

“And when you bring the money to me from walk-ins, what do I do?”

“You throw me a little cash for the effort.”

“Have I ever not given you money for being honest?”

“No. You always give me money. I appreciate it.”

“I know you do Tommy.” He rubbed his right hand over the grey stubble on his face. I watched stray beard hairs get caught in the gold rings on his fingers. “I know you do.”

He went on: “When you’re working with Mike, have you ever seen him interact with any of these walk-ins?”
I could see where this was going. But I didn’t know how much evidence Jeff had on him. And I didn’t want to snitch on a friend. Or be the reason someone went down. I was nervous. Because I also didn’t want to fuck myself. But I’d been to jail and interrogated enough times to know to just stay vigilant, pay attention, and keep cool.

“When I’m working with Mike it’s usually pretty busy out there,” I said. “I’m not really paying attention to what he’s doing.”

Jeff slowly nodded his head.

“Does Mike ever give you extra money at the end of the day?”

“He divvies out the tips and breaks it all down depending on who was there when. I don’t really ask questions, man. I just take the money I’m given.”

Jeff took a big breath. He leaned forward propping his elbows on the desk. He put his hands together, interlocking his fingers. His rings clinked when they touched.

“Listen,” he said. “I know Mike has been stealing. I’ve been sending mystery shoppers out to the New and they’ve come back and reported to me that Mike has been offering them a deal.”

Oh shit, I thought.

“I know you are friends with Mike. I know you two spend time together outside of work. But if he was taking money from me and keeping it from you, don’t you think that’s pretty fucking greedy?”

I felt that Jeff was trying to corner me into something. I started to sweat.

“Yeah I mean I guess it’s probably pretty greedy.”

“So you never saw him take any money?”

“I told you man. I don’t really pay attention to that kinda stuff.”
“And he never gave you a cut of what he was taking?”

He was definitely setting me up. But I figured I was too deep at this point.

“No,” I said. “Not that I was aware of anyway.”

Jeff stared me down for an uncomfortable and lengthy thirty seconds.

“I’ve let Mike go,” he finally said. “There’s no reason for you to defend him.”

“I’m not defending him,” I said. “And yeah. I assumed he wasn’t gonna work here anymore.”

There was another silence. I bounced my knee.

“I’ve talked to some of the other New River employees,” Jeff said. “From what they tell me, Mike was giving all of you a portion of the walk-in money.”

I thought, again: Oh shit.

“So not only did you know about him stealing. You lied to me about accepting money from him.”

It was then that Jeff gave me what would become the most lasting lesson on loyalty I would ever receive. He said: “I’ll be straight with you. The other New River staff I talked to—they’re fired. It was disgusting how quick they were to turn on Mike. I could never trust them not to turn on me. I like you, Tommy. I respect you. You were willing to go down for your friend, for you manager. It shows loyalty. And an understanding of how things work around here.” He smiled. Unlockeed his hands. Relaxed his shoulders. And leaned back. The chair squeaked. “Go ahead and get out of here,” he said.

I stood up. And as I turned to walk away, Jeff said: “And check the whiteboard before you leave. I talked to Patrick. Tomorrow you start training on the Nolichucky.”
I was driving upstream on Railroad Grade Road parallel to the river drinking a cold Pabst and heading towards the town of Todd where the New River Outpost was. I had a small cooler of beer in the floorboard and a sack of weed in my pocket figuring Bert Stirton would probably want to buy it off me.

It was a grey overcast day and the New was up from rain that week. Debris piles had formed on the upstream side of the low water bridges—mostly sticks mixed with Styrofoam chunks and red plastic gas jugs.

The drive took longer than it should because I wasn’t in hurry. I drove slow on the narrow roads that wound through Christmas tree farms. And by the time I got to the outpost gate I was on my third beer with two empties crumpled in the floorboard. The gate was open, but a stocky white kid wearing a sweat stained staff shirt stood guard at the entrance. Jeff liked to hire App State football players for the New. This dude looked like a Tight End. He held a clipboard. Behind his ear was a pen.

The Blues, Brews, BBQs, and Canoes is a gathering of all the local High Country tourist industries. Jeff puts it on every year in hopes of forming alliances with all the businesses he’s previously pissed off. Restaurants set up tents and give out food. There’s drinking. A bad cover band or two. And Jeff offers free canoeing and shuttles all day.

At Wahoo’s, Nolichucky guides are at the top of the food chain and there’s an attitude that comes along with that. As this kid puffed out his chest and walked towards my car, that attitude kicked in. I rolled down my window but kept the car moving with my eyes forward and held a middle finger up beside my face.

I sped up. Looked into my side mirror. The light trail of gravel dust from my back tires coated the clipboard kid. He waved his guest list in the air and ran after me.
Then I saw the new outpost.

It was huge. A compound. Two stories. Top floor complete with wrap around deck and solar panels. The bottom floor was a tall cement foundation with garage door openings on either end. I watched a 16-passenger van pull through and exit loaded down with tubes on the roof. There were vendor tents set up on the deck and around the building’s parameter. People were walking around with red solo cups in their hands. There was a volleyball pit. Disc golf baskets. On-site camping plots. And I could hear music playing from exterior speakers mounted in the corners of the outpost.

I kept cruising to the farthest side of the parking lot and found a space near the new volleyball net where I spotted Bert Stirton holding a Coors Light and playing with a bunch of small children. I parked. Cut the engine. And got out holding my half-full Pabst. Bert saw me.

“Look who it is,” he said. “Toemas.” He tossed the volleyball to one of the children surrounding him and walked my way.

“Long time no see, brother,” he said. We hugged. Some Coors Light sloshed out of his can during the embrace and I felt wet spots forming on the back of my shirt.

“How you been man,” I said. And he told me he’d been good. Bert had a piece of property about a mile upstream off River Rd. He had a trailer he’d modified with some additions and a camper where he let this boozehound mechanic named Deadbeat Doug stay. I had heard that over the winter Doug hadn’t walked down the hill to bum beer for a couple of weeks and when Bert finally went up to check on him he found the man dead on the couch—rigored-up and frozen. I wanted to ask about that. Finding bodies was something that fascinated me. But I figured it wasn’t the time. Instead I said: “This the family?” And pointed over at all the munchkins digging around in the volleyball sand.
“Nieces and nephews,” he said. “Got my sisters in town. Mom and Dad are up there with Jeff and Lilly.” He pointed to the wrap around deck. I looked and saw the four of them talking. There was no way in hell I’d ever allow family members to involve themselves in any of this.

I asked Bert about his daughter. And he said it was the ex-wife’s weekend. Out of principle she wasn’t one to ever give up her days.

“Even with all the cousins in town?”

“Nope,” he said. And took a big swig of Coors Light while shaking his head.

“Damn dude. That sucks.”

“I heard you aren’t coming back this season,” he said.

“I’m kinda over it, man. The #2 curse, ya know?”

There was yelling. Bert and I both turned and saw the clipboard kid coming.

I laughed and looked at Bert. “I didn’t stop to get checked in at the gate.”

He laughed and waved his arms in an X. “Turn around Brad,” he said. And pointed back towards the entrance. “Go back, Brad. Go back.”

Brad was now in front of us—out of breath. He held up his clipboard. Looked at me. Said between gasps: “You. Gotta be. On the list.”

“Goddammit Brad,” Bert said. “This man is a Nolichucky guide. He’s been working for Wahoo’s for longer than you’ve been alive” Not a true statement. “Now get back up to the gate and do your job.”

Poor Brad just hung his head, turned around, and walked back across the parking lot. There was something about his humiliation I enjoyed, though. It was troubling. “I miss that,” I said to Bert. He laughed. Then told me to follow him. He wanted to show me around the new outpost.
Because Bert lived so close he oversaw a lot of the construction that had gone on over the winter. He told me about all the corners Jeff had tried to cut with building permits and regulations. About how the outdoor showers kept having to be moved back because of the potential grey water runoff into the river.

“There’s showers here now?” I said. “With hot water?”

“Yep. Indoor and outdoor so the campers can use them at night when the building’s locked up.”

“Damn.” The idea of running water of any kind impressed me. I remember being so thirsty working long days in July out here. Having to bum beers off of customers just to try and stay hydrated.

There were free standing changing rooms now too.

“Those were needed,” I said. So many water-logged dongs were out when kids would drop trou behind the kayak shed.

For customers not wanting to participate in open air nudity, the only option for a changing room in the past was one of the two sheds. And in order for the doors of those sheds to stay closed, you had to shut the latch and thread a padlock through it. Not only did people have to change in complete darkness on dirty plywood floors with wasps, it was a pretty regular occurrence on busy days that guests got left in there, remembered only after they beat on the door and screamed to get someone’s attention.

Bert walked me up in the woods, away from the crowd, where there was a new 9-hole disc golf course. He asked if I had any weed and I told him I did. Reached in my pocket and pulled out the sack. “You can pay me later,” I said.
We sat on a bench at hole 5. It was made out of flat slabs of river rock pressed into the
dugout side of a hill. “This bench was my idea,” he said. “Every course needs a smoking spot.”

Bert pulled out a tiny glass straight pipe and lighter from the cargo pocket of his
Hawaiian board shorts. Picked up a twig off the ground and jammed it in through the mouth
piece to clear out residue and debris. He grabbed a nugget from the satchel and pressed the bud
into the bowl without breaking it up. He handed the pipe and lighter to me. While we smoked
Bert kept talking about the construction mishaps. He said when they cleared the land for the disc
golf course they got tired of hauling out brush so they just set fire to the side of the hill but the
fire got out of hand and Bert ended up having to call 911. There was write-up in the paper.

I passed the pipe back and Bert pointed out some tree houses in the woods behind us. He
said that Jeff had found some construction management majors at the community college and
paid them a flat rate to build them without a permit. “They’re technically condemned,” Bert said.
“But Jeff is still renting em.”

After the bowl was cashed I shook my near empty beer and then poured out the last warm
sip. I stood up. Creased the can and slid it into the back pocket of my jeans. “Let’s head down to
main building,” I said. “I’m trying to drink some of this keg beer.”

More people had showed up and were mingling around the booths and tents. A few
restaurants had grills going and the smell of meat was wafting through the air. We made our way
up to the wrap around porch, stopping to grab pork sliders and exotic sausage samples from the
Gamekeeper tent.

There were local breweries giving 2 oz tastings but Jeff had arranged an additional four
kegs of Natural Light. Each keg was in a trash can filled with ice placed on the corners of the
porch. Sleeves of red solo cups were stuffed into the sides of the cans. I waited in line behind some people I didn’t know and who didn’t know me.

I followed Bert into the interior of the new outpost’s top floor. It was essentially just one large open room but as soon as we walked in I felt a significant drop in temperature.

“Damn,” I said. “This place has a/c?” The main floor was filled exclusively with t-shirt displays—brightly colored and overpriced cotton souvenirs with all the classic cheesy phrases like: Tube Naked. It Adds Color to Your Cheeks.

On the back wall was an L-shaped counter reminiscent of the main office in Boone. Behind the counter was a cash register. An electronic credit card machine. A full size fridge with a clear door full of water and Gatorade. A landline. Even a freezer stocked with ice cream. I opened up the freezer.

“I feel like it used to be a punishment to work out here but goddamn,” I said. “This place is nice.”

I picked up an orange push-pop and peeled it open. “Real nice.” I said and slid the ice cream up and took a lick from the top.

“Ayee! Toe-mas!” I looked over and saw Lilly fast-walking from the small hallway that housed two more sets of showers and bathrooms. She was looking rounder. Nothing significant. Just the standard gain of winter-time hoodie weight. Her skin was still flawless though. And it seemed that her tattooed eyebrows had gotten a little touch up as of late.

“Lilly,” I said. “What’s happening.”


She reached for my push-pop and I held it above my head, out of her reach.

“Put it on my tab Lilly.” I turned. Took a lick. And walked away.
Bert was back outside on the deck talking to his parents and Jeff. I couldn’t help but notice how Bert’s father looked a good twenty years younger than Bert. I didn’t feel any need to get involved so I went for the keg in the opposite direction.

For so long I had needed people like Bert, and Patrick. They were confirmation that it would be no-thng for someone as young as me to press on living like this for just one more season.

But I was closing in on thirty and starting to realize how little of my adult life I remembered. Recollection came in fragments. Fragments existing independently of linear time. When, where, and with who—all irrelevant. Instead, only blurred images of monotony: lite beer, gimps, and the daily commutes back and forth from Tennessee.

These people, this life—it all raised me. But I still didn’t know into what. For years, there had been an unsettling sense of worthlessness growing inside me. Even now with Anna, a house, and a quarter million stored in the walls, that feeling was not only unphased—it was stronger. I don’t want to say I was suicidal or whatever, but it was hard to shake the idea that there might be no point in anything.

Per usual, these were thoughts I did not enjoy having. I tossed the half eaten push-pop. Downed the contents of my solo cup, shook my head, pumped the tap, and refilled. I stared out off the deck, sipping the foamy beer and wondering where the Erwin squad was, hoping they would get here soon to serve as a more potent distraction.

After about my third or fourth keg refill, the white van came rumbling down the gravel driveway. Behind it: Clipboard Brad—running and waving and showing he had not learned anything.
Patrick pulled the van into a parking spot—nose first, facing the river. He got out holding a glass bottle beer. The passenger and side doors swung open. Jamie McKay stepped from the front seat, also gripping a beer. Meegan got out of the back followed a man I had never seen.

Brad jogged up as Patrick was fluffing his woman hair and adjusting his sunglasses.

Brad wasn’t small. But next to Patrick he looked it. He held out the clipboard saying something, I assume, about the guest list. Patrick leaned down to consult the sheet. Brad angled it towards him for a better view. And Patrick ripped the thing right out of his hands.

In the same motion Patrick sent the clipboard flying towards the river with a frisbee-like flick of the wrist. There was a splash.

Patrick turned his back away from Brad. He ducked into the cab. And emerged with a fresh beer that he opened with a key chain.

I walked off the porch.

As I headed towards the parking lot, I crossed paths with Brad.

“Sup Brad,” I said. And he did not look pleased.

I kept walking. I could see the white van. I could see McKay and Meegan and other guy. But no sign of Patrick. I scanned down the rows of cars. I looked up toward the entrance. Then down to where my old Subaru sat. And sure enough, there was Patrick—hands cupped around his eyes and face pressed up against the glass. He walked around to the passenger side. Tried the handle. Of course, I had left it unlocked. He opened the door and started rummaging around in the floor board.

I watched him take two Pabst from my cooler.

By the time I got to him, he had already finished one of the beers, crushed it, and thrown the empty on top of my roof.
“You know that Jeff’s got beer for free up there,” I said.

“A beer that came from Toemas’s wallet always tastes better.”

“Nice dude. I’m taking all of whatever you brought in the white van.”

“Help yourself. McKay paid for it.”

Jamie McKay and I had a bond. Or at least that’s how I saw it. We had trained together on the Nolichucky and checked-out around the same time—actually she checked-out about week before me because things tend to click faster for female guides. While I was trying to use brute force to control the boat and the gimps, McKay was making the river work for her—setting angles early, looking further downstream. As 1st year guides, though, we both took shit from Patrick constantly. The bar was high. After us, the next least experienced guide in the rotation was probably the Bird Man coming in at nine seasons. Not only were we the least experienced, but because we were the lowest on the totem poll, Patrick would give us the worst of the gimps. An Acura with a trash bag covering the black glass—they’d be riding with us. A 7-load of Cannon Balls—us. Amputees, adults with Downs syndrome, local Erwinites wearing jeans and steel toe boots—all us. We were destined to fail. And always the ones fucking up—flipping boats, swimming gimps, getting pinned. And then we’d be screamed at and demeaned publicly by Patrick in the Grease Room after the trip.

I looked over and saw McKay by the takeout, squatting in the tall grass taking an open air riparian urine.

“Damn. Look at McKay,” I said.

“She’s gotta discharge all the leakage from the O-ring blow out I gave her last night.”

“Jesus dude.”
About half-way through the summer of our first fulltime Nolichucky season, McKay made the move on Patrick, or maybe it was the other way around. Either way, she rose to the top of the rotation immediately, getting trips over me for sure but also working in place of guides who were far more qualified. Rafting works on a pecking order. Experience, talent, loyalty—all those things matter when it comes to the schedule. And people were not happy seeing a First Year get trips that weren’t deserved. Some people wouldn’t talk to her. The nickname EZ Lay McKay started gaining traction. John Jerka aka The Machine would throw coffee on her every morning while we were blowing up boats. She took it in stride though. Besides, she was the one getting all the work.

Patrick and I walked back toward the white van where everyone was still lingering.

“Who’s the dude?” I asked.

“Rich,” he said. “Trainee for USA Raft. Claims to have worked a couple places out West.”

“Ah,” I said.

“He lives at the hostel. Hangs out with Meegan. He was there when I picked her up this morning.”

Rich was one of those raft guides who had burned bridges and ruined lives on other sections of creek in other parts of the world and ended up at the Nolichucky sober and ready to start new and do good. No one works this kind of job to be around that type of person. He looked like the lead singer from Train.

When we got to the van I introduced myself to him and told him there was free keg beer up on the porch. He told me he didn’t drink.
McKay and I hugged. I said hello to Meegan. I didn’t really want to be around her that much. The last time I saw her she kept smacking me in the face in front of three companies worth of Noli guides and calling me a pussy for not hitting her back. “What are you just gonna let me keep smacking you?” whapp “Because what? I’m a girl?” whapp. She even alternated hands to keep her palms from getting sore. I ended up walking off with clenched fists after about 8 more smacks. I paced in the middle of River Rd and punched a hole in the fence at the hostel while she laughed in the distance and people chanted: *Toemas is a bitch.*

So yeah. I was good with not really talking to her.

Patrick went up to grab keg beer and see the new outpost. And while he was gone, McKay and I caught up. She had moved to Johnson City at the end of last season and was teaching art at a middle school.

“They let you teach? What about the DUls?”

“They were all in North Carolina,” she said. “Tennessee doesn’t care.”

“Damn. You like it? How are the kids?”

“They’re morons. But. My classroom has a walk-in closet for art supplies. During my free period I lock myself in there and drink Busch Lights. Makes the last half of the day tolerable.”

I laughed. “That’s awesome. So you working the Noli this season?”

“I don’t really need to,” she said. “But if Patrick needs me maybe I’ll pick up some trips.”

“Nice.”

“Heard you weren’t coming back.”

“Yeah.”

“Patrick is bummed, even though he’d never admit it.”
“I dunno. I think I’ve had enough.”

“I know what you mean.”

Patrick was back dragging three green crib tubes with his right hand and gripping two cups of keg beer with his left.

“Yall wanna lawn tube?” he said.

“Ah. The crib tubes,” I said.

“They make the best seats.”

Crib tubes were tubes with bottoms that Jeff marketed to families with newborns because that was an untapped market apparently.

He rolled one to Meegan and rolled one to McKay. Then plopped down in the third tube after sipping from each beer.

“Rich,” he said. “I wasn’t sure if you were checked-out of Lawn Tubing so I didn’t bring anything for you.”

He looked over at me. “Toemas—you can get your own goddamn tube.” He laughed.

“Thanks man,” I said.

“Toemas, come sit in here with me,” McKay said. And slapped a hand on the side of her tube.

I smiled at Patrick. Walked over. Wedged myself in and put an arm around McKay.

Patrick grumbled an under-the-breath: “Goddammit.”

I crossed my legs and the cuffs of my pants rose up exposing colorful stegosaurus print socks.

“Why are you wearing McKay’s pants, Toemas?” Patrick said.

I shook my head and didn’t respond.
“Isn’t it too hot for emo jeans?”

“They’re not emo jeans,” I said. “They’re Levi’s.”

“Ole feminine Toemas they call him.”

“The man’s got on good looking jeans,” McKay said. “Look at him. Good looking jeans, good looking boots, good looking socks—good looking man!”

“Ugh,” Patrick said.

McKay and I both laughed.

From there it was boring for a while. Patrick got up and brought more crib tubes so I would get out of McKay’s lap. Bert Stirton joined us. He and Patrick commandeered one of the kegs, hauled it to our lawn tubing circle where we sat river front and drank in self-imposed exile. Patrick held court, telling the same stories I had both lived and heard over a hundred times.

Jeff came by. Asked me why I wasn’t working this year. Then asked me if I was expecting a child.

“What makes you think I’d be having kids?”

“Well, I don’t know. That girlfriend of yours does have some exceptional birthing hips.”

I reached over for the keg hose and refilled my cup without getting up from the tube.

The ice shifted in the trashcan. The keg started to float.

I took a big swig of the beer that was mostly foam. Wiped my mouth and beard with the back of my forearm. Put the cup down. Stood up.

“Whelp,” I said. “I’m gonna go piss on the floor of one these new bathrooms you’ve installed here Jeff.”

People laughed. Jeff didn’t say anything. I patted him on the shoulder as I walked away.
As I headed to the building to relieve myself on the ground, I noticed all the vendors were stowing brochures and breaking down tables. Lilly was squawking orders to the New River staff telling them to move vans and lock up canoes.

When I got to the bathroom, as much as I wanted to distribute some fuck you urine all over the floor, I knew it wouldn’t be Jeff on his hands and knees cleaning that shit up. It sure as hell wouldn’t be Patrick. That kind of work would fall on the kids Lilly was screaming at in the background. I thought about the years I had spent in their positions, all the Wahoo’s deck painting and bathroom detailing I had done. I took a deep breath, relaxed, exhaled, and peed a twenty second strong stream into the toilet.

I did want to drink more of Jeff’s beer though. But the kegs were not in their corners. They were nowhere to be found.

That’s pretty on-brand for Wahoo’s, I thought. And then imagined Jeff and Lilly draining the kegs into recycled lemonade mix containers and handing them out to today’s staff in lieu of cash pay.

I walked back down to the river toward the white van. The lawn tubes were gone. But then there were the kegs. Patrick was heaving them through the open side doors of the van.

“Jeff wants us out,” he said. “We’re taking it to Fleetwood.”

Meegan, Rich, and McKay were already strapped into their seats. Bert was just kind of chuckling to himself off to the side.

“Fleetwood?” I said. “No you’re not. Anna doesn’t want yall over.” To be fair, I didn’t want them over either but it’s always easier to deflect blame.

“We wanna see the house.”

“You’re not gonna see the house.”
“We wanna go hot tubbing.”

“You’re not gonna go hot tubbing.”

“Come on, Toemas. You’re always bragging about the tub. We wanna check it out.”

“Yeah we wanna get in the hot tub!” Meegan said from the back of the van.

“Shut the fuck up Meegan,” I said quietly and not nearly loud enough for her to hear.

“Tell Anna we’re bringing beer,” Patrick said. “She’ll be fine.”

“No dude. She won’t be fine. She didn’t even want me coming here.”

“Anna loves us,” McKay said.

I shook my head. “She really doesn’t.”

“What’s the address, Toemas?”

“You think I’m gonna tell you?”

“Fine,” Patrick said. He walked around to the driver’s side of the white van and hoisted himself in. He cranked the engine. Then rolled down the passenger window.

“Toemas won’t let us come to his house. Everybody say: Boooo Toemas.”

And everyone did. Patrick let out a loud cackle. He reversed the van. Backed up. And pulled away.

I still had a few beers in my cooler. I grabbed two and gave one to Bert.

“Enjoy the #2 spot,” I said. “I’m stoked to be done with that dude’s bullshit.”

It was late afternoon but there was still plenty of daylight left. The overcast skies from earlier had burned off and small mouth were surfacing on the water looking for food. After we finished the beer Bert and I walked back up in the woods to the new disc golf course and puffed on another bowl.
While we got high I listened to Bert ramble on about how his older sister had transitioned from Mary Kay beauty products to selling green smoothie powder that he had started drinking in an attempt to lose weight.

He said he wanted to be healthier.

So on top of the smoothies he had switched from potato chips to pork rinds. “They got zero carbs, those pork rinds.” He was off the Mountain Dew. Cutting back on sweets. And he was reducing his Camel Light intake by puffing an e-cig vaporizer with refillable juice.

“That all sounds great man,” I told him.

And then he said: “The mango flavor is actually pretty good.”

I spent a lot of time with Bert over the years on the back and forth Boone to Erwin commute. Each season by August, all his redneck morning radio show listening and constant talking could wear on me for sure. But when it came down to it, Bert was a nice person. And a genuinely happy guy. And that was something that always baffled me. Life had dealt Bert way more bullshit than it had me. And I was far from happy. While Bert sat here just smiling—eager for another year on the Nolichucky.

I offered Bert my last beer but he said he needed to get back across the river to the family.

“Mom and Dad are already over there starting dinner. I need to go keep those youngins entertained.”

We said good bye and I told him I’d still be around to do a fun run down the gorge when the water was right and he didn’t have a trip.

I disposed of the empties in my floorboard. Cracked my last Pabst and cranked the engine on the Subaru. I took a few sips while the car warmed up. Some of the New River staff were still
putting things away, picking up discarded solo cups and running cable locks through the bow of each canoe on the trailers.

The RPM needle settled on my dash. I shoved the beer between my legs. Pushed in the clutch, reversed, shifted into first, and slowly drove away.

All in all, I was lucky to have had rafting. Being able to push 1200 pounds of Floridian gimp down class IV whitewater is a unique skill to master. And one I expected to be pretty useful once I had kids. While I was driving slow in fourth gear I thought about how cool it would be to take my future children and their friends down the river for birthday parties—or just in place of church on Sundays even. I thought about Anna and how she put up with so much—the weeks spent away hunkered down in Erwin, Patrick, the drinking, our outlaw existence.

I downshifted and started the climb up Big Hill Rd. Frasier Fur farms boxed me in on either side. Rows of trees at various stages of development dotted the hills like dollar signs. And I thought: Maybe that’s what we’ll put all this weed money into—a Christmas tree farm.

I took a pull from my beer. At the top of the hill, on the right, was a driveway entrance and an ornately painted wooden sign: Shady Rest Family Tree Farm. I couldn’t help but think about how enticing the phrase *family farm* sounded. And how nice it would be to build something tangible like that to pass on. I slid the beer back between my legs and was just about to crest to top of the hill when I noticed exhaust pumping from the back of that sign. I could see the edges of tires not quite hidden by the support posts.

Unmarked backroads in North Carolina are by law 55mph. I checked my speedometer anyway even though I knew I was going slow. The beer in my lap was less than half full. I creased the can in the middle so it wouldn’t spill too much if I had to stash it under my seat. I kept my eyes forward as I drove by—playing it cool. But as soon as I cleared the width of that
driveway I heard tires spin on the gravel and when I looked up in the rearview—it wasn’t a cop at all. It was the goddamn white van with Patrick at the wheel.

He kept tight on my bumper. And at first I tried to outrun him but once we got to Railroad Grade the road narrows dramatically. Of course, I’d been drinking a little. And Floridan tourists are notorious for riding their bikes with absolutely no awareness right in the middle of the goddamn street. The last thing I needed was a Floridian manslaughter charge. So I slowed down. Convinced I could lose him in the complicated curves of the neighborhood.

I called Anna to give a heads up just in case.

“Hey,” I said. “I’m on the way back. But. Uh. Just a heads up, Patrick and McKay and them are behind me in the white van.”

“Oh my god. I told you not to bring them here here.”

“I know I know.”

“Then what made you think you could invite them?”

“I didn’t invite them! That motherfucker was hiding for half an hour in a goddamn Christmas Tree farm so he could follow me!”

“I hate him,” she said.

“I’m gonna try and lose em in the neighborhood. But be prepared if I don’t.”

“Ugh. Well just be safe,” she said. Then hung up the phone.

The paved entrance to Fleetwood Falls was a hill coming up on the left. I let my foot off the gas. Coasted. I downshifted into fourth. The engine whined. And at the last moment, I punched the clutch and dropped it into second and yanked the wheel left.
I checked the rearview mirror. Patrick was close behind. The Wahoo’s vans have power. Most are V12s. I figured I could gain distance in the curves though. And once I was out of sight there’d be no way Patrick could navigate this maze of one-way streets and vacation homes.

I kept the RPMs high, shifting between second and third, and hugging corners so tight my side mirrors were clipping rhododendron shrubs. The white van was close enough to see me on the first fork. But by the time it came to turn off on another road, I had put some significant distance in the gap between us. I was sure there was no way Patrick was going to keep up.

But just as I turned onto our street, a woman in a bathrobe appeared, holding a tiny dog against her chest, right in the middle of the road.

I downshifted all the way into first and locked up the tires to avoid slamming into this woman. And she didn’t even budge.

I knew who she was. Or at least, I had seen her. She was one of the only other full time residents on the mountain. She lived alone in a rundown A-frame on Bear Ridge Rd. There was a lot of trash in her yard. And I don’t pretend to know the particulars of anyone’s sexuality, but she did have the haircut of an assistant volleyball coach.

She wore yellowed white New Balances. And I just had the feeling there was nothing under that bathrobe. Her little dog had a leash hanging from its collar and in the woman’s free hand was a clenched grocery bag full of turds.

She didn’t move but started screaming. There was a skeletal nature to her face.

I rolled down the window and could hear the white van in the distance.

“I see you!” she said. “Flying around all these roads! Every damn day you’re out here driving too fast. You’re gonna kill someone driving like that. By god, you almost just killed me!”

She was standing in front of my car, inches from the grill.
“I’m sorry ma’am,” I said leaning out my window. “I apologize.” The white van’s engine was getting louder, closer.

“You better slow the hell down out here,” she said. “Do you hear me? You better slow. The. Hell. Down!” Each word was punctuated by a slap to my hood from her bag of turds. The sound was moist. I was not pleased.

I wanted to call this woman a dirty tweaker and tell her I knew all about those dusty motherfuckers smoking meth at her place. I wanted to drop the clutch and run her down and tase her crumpled body with the projectile stun gun I kept under my passenger seat. I wanted to punt her toy dog. Burn down her house. Beat her with that sack of feces. I wanted to do a lot of things. But none of them were going to solve my problems. I looked back and the white van was pulling up behind me.

“I’m gonna be more respectful ma’am,” I said. “I promise. I’ll drive slower.”

The dog in her arms yipped a tiny dog bark. In my rearview mirror I could see Patrick waving two celebratory fists in the air as the woman gave a final wet turd smack to my car before throwing the bag at my windshield and walking away.

There was no point in trying to speed off.

I texted Anna the warning.

“Help me with the kegs Toemas,” Patrick said. And I told him to help his own goddamn self and walked in the house to check in with Anna.

The air was thick with haze and I smelled weed as soon as I stepped in. I could hear the TV going in the loft upstairs.

I called out.
“Up here,” Anna said.

I climbed the stairs and found Anna laid out on the daybed with lit joint between her fingers. The Travel Channel was playing. Andrew Zimmern’s bald head was glistening on the screen.

“No Bravo?”

“They’re playing some bullshit real estate show marathon. So I’m watching this guy eat fried insect larva.”

“What do you think about that dude?”

“Better than the guy with the spikey hair.”

“True.”

There was a loud thud that came from outside. Anna made a face.

“They brought kegs,” I said.

“Jesus. I don’t want them here all night!”

“They won’t be. And I’ll keep them outside. We’ll probably just go in the hot tub.”

Anna sat up. Took a puff and exhaled.

“I guess I’ll go down and say hello,” she said. Then mashed out the joint in the ashtray.

If there is one skill Anna is best at, it’s what she calls turning it on. And it’s always been what I’ve both admired and envied about her most. If I’m in a situation I don’t want to be in, or if I’m around people I don’t like—I make damn sure everyone in the room is aware of that. This happens most often at weddings and other various ceremonies I get dragged to where people I never plan to see again ask me over and over shit like: “What do you do for a living?” And I stare back blankly and respond with: “Why the fuck would you even care?”
But Anna is a charmer. I’ve watched her be so nice to sworn enemies that by the end of the evening the poor soul has opened up and revealed enough information for her to initiate a slow silent takedown that will never be seen coming. I’m too prideful for that. If I hate someone, I want them to know it.

When we got outside two kegs were on our middle deck and the third was being dragged down the stairs towards the hot tub by Meegan and McKay.

“Nice place you got,” Patrick said.

“Thanks,” Anna said. “Glad you like it.”

Patrick bent over and fished through the red Rubbermaid Nolichucky lunch cooler that sat at our feet. He pulled out a bottled IPA and offered it to Anna. She took it. Pulled a lighter from her pocket. Popped the cap off. And took a swig.

“Anna I think you know everybody except for Rich,” I said. And pointed a thumb over at Rich. He was standing stoically with a Nalgene of water. Anna said hello. “Rich doesn’t drink,” I said. And Anna offered to refill his bottle.

“You getting in the hot tub with us?” Patrick said.

“I’m gonna drink some of these beers and watch more TV.”

“You’re not gonna hang out?” he said.

“You guys are way ahead of me. I’m too sober to hang out right now.” She leaned down and grabbed two more bottled beers from the cooler and said: “But yall enjoy yourself.” She turned and went back inside the house.

“See,” Patrick said. “She doesn’t mind us being here.”
McKay and Meegan came back up from the bottom deck, walked out to the van, and came back holding bikinis. I told them where the bathroom was if they wanted to go inside and change.

But Meegan said: “Yall’ve seen bodies, right?” And pulled her shorts to her ankles right there on the deck.

“Goddamn,” I said.

Patrick cheered with a fist in the air.

Rich blushed but stared straight at Meegan’s winter bush, holding his water bottle with two hands against his chest.

“So where’s the bathroom?” McKay asked.

“Here. Follow me,” I said. And went inside to change.

I came out the basement exit with towels and heard the hot tub jets bubbling. Meegan was sitting on the edge of the tub with her feet dipped in.

“How hot do you keep this thing?”

It was weird to see Meegan in a bathing suit. She always wore board shorts and a sports bra to guide in. In a bikini, though, she looked like a woman. Weird, I thought. And noticed for the first time how blue her eyes were.

Rich was sitting on the porch swing pushing himself back and forth slowly with his heels.

“Not getting in, Rich?” I said.

And he said: “No I’m good.”

I asked where Patrick was and Meegan told me he was still upstairs with McKay.

I put the towels down and pumped a cup of keg beer. Then walked upstairs to see if everything was okay.
When I got there Patrick and McKay were sitting in chairs and McKay was slurring her words and looked to be crying. Patrick looked up and gave me a hand signal that I took to mean: Give me a sec. So I backed off thinking I was being polite. I stood off around the corner, finished my beer, and pumped another from the middle deck keg. I eavesdropped. And from what I could tell McKay was pleading with Patrick to start a real relationship. I never understood what his appeal was. And how he could be so openly promiscuous yet women still wanted to lock him down. Before Patrick started mining the ranks of his own staff, he had a longtime girlfriend named Eleanor who he cheated on regularly with dirty women around the gorge. Ellie was an intelligent person. And went off to New York to get a mathematics PhD. She offered to pay Patrick a 30k a year salary just so he would move there with her and start a new life away from the Nolichucky. He refused.

I heard the sound of a moving chair and Patrick rounded the corner.

“Everything good?” I said.

“Mosely and the Kentuckian are starting to hang around again. McKay isn’t happy about the preseason juggle.”

“She gonna be aight?”

I heard the other chair scrape against the floor. McKay walked around the corner. Her eyes were red and wet. She wiped them with the backs of her hands and leaned up against the keg. As she pumped she swayed slightly where she stood. When her cup was full, she looked up. Took a deep breath. And as her eyes started to water again, she smiled. Exhaled. Then said: “So we getting in the hot tub or what?”
Rich was still fully clothed and emotionless, drinking water on the swing. I waited for Patrick and McKay to join Meegan before I peeled off my shirt.

The water was hot. I kept it at 105 degrees because that was as high as it would go and that’s the way I do things. Meegan had beads of sweat forming on her forehead. I watched one take off and roll, ramping off an eyebrow and dropping into the turbulent waters of the tub. I thought about the combined marination of various filth in progress and knew there would need to be an intense cleaning session in the morning.

As I slung my legs over the side and slowly submerged into the heat, Patrick said: “How much Boudreaux’s you got on those thighs?”

“No Boudreaux’s,” I said.

“No Pizza Leg?”

“Na man. I’m rash free.”

“Ugh. You do have the most sensitive skin in whitewater.”

“That’s why I can’t work anymore.”

“You gotta give me July, Toemas.”

“Na dude. Can’t do it.”

“Come on. You can sell weed to Bert.”

“I can sell weed to Bert without working July. Get McKay to pick up trips.”

McKay was leaning over the tub edge, pumping the tap of the keg.

“McKay’s done. She doesn’t want it. She’s too busy throwing it around at the principal.”

She settled back into the water with a full cup of beer and nodded. “He’s a pretty hott principal.”

“McKay!” Patrick said.
Meegan high-fived her.

Patrick was across from me. Meegen was to my right. McKay was beside Patrick and the keg was beside McKay. Rich was on the swing.

“How’s it going Rich?” Patrick said and Meegan told him to get in. Rich said no. The jets were loud but you could still hear the squeak from the chains on the swing.

Looking out from beyond the deck where the hot tub sat, the land sloped down. There were houses and a road below but the spring growth blocked all visibility.

I don’t remember what brought about the conversation. It’s highly likely that there was no transition and Patrick initiated it unprovoked. He and McKay were being flirty and touchy. And everyone was drinking and refilling their cups.

Patrick said: “Show em the piece, McKay.” *Piece* was Patrick’s gender-neutral term for sexual organs.

“What? No,” she said.

He looked at us. “McKay’s got a bulbous and multicolored piece. There’s no other like it.” He looked back at McKay. “You gotta show it to them, McKay.”

This was information I had heard before. Whether it was stubby toes, mismatched A-cups, or a multicolored piece, Patrick liked his women to all have some slight physical abnormality. And he liked sharing those abnormalities verbally with me.

“They don’t want to see my multicolored piece.”

“I wanna see it,” Meegan said. And in some sort of persuasive effort slipped out of her bikini top and tossed it toward the keg.

“Jesus,” I said.

Patrick cheered.
I looked around. Rich was unimpressed.

“Strip Down Sunday!” Meegan said. “…on a Saturday!”

There is a rapid on the Nolichucky called Rock Garden. And at low water, it can’t be navigated with a full boat. So the gimps have to walk around it. The guides take the boats down alone. There is a slow moving pool before the pick-up beach. On Sundays, it was always customary take off all clothing during that pool and float by your boat in the nude.

“I need more beer,” I said. And moved diagonally across the tub with my body still submerged. As I leaned over the edge and held the nozzle to the side of my cup, I felt hands run the length of my leg under the water. I turned my head looked at Meegan and she was giving me a raised eyebrow grin and I didn’t know what to do so just turned back around and monitored the progress of my pour.

Then I heard: “Hey! What’s going on?” It was Anna leaning over the railing of the middle floor deck. Meegan’s hands stopped. She sunk down a little lower to make sure her chest was under the water.

“McKay’s about to show us her multicolored piece,” Patrick said. “You’re gonna wanna see this, Anna.”

Anna rolled her eyes and walked away.

And as soon as she did, McKay let out a quick squeak of a scream and Patrick’s hand emerged from the water holding McKay’s untied string bikini bottoms. Patrick swirled the bathing suit around his head in a Petey Pablo commemorative fashion. He looked over his shoulder and slung the wet bottoms as far as he could off the deck and into the woods

“You’re gonna have to show em now!”
“Goddamn dude,” I said. And got out of the hot tub. I walked past Rich on the swing who was quiet but clearly disapproved. I opened the latch on the gate and started walking down the hill into the woods barefoot. The ground was mostly soggy leaves. There were a few saplings and twigs but I took my time and watched where I put my feet.

The bottoms sat atop a patch of Mountain Laurel. And when I pried them out, they were decorated by stray white pedals and leaves. As I was cleaning off the vegetation, I heard laughter and Patrick’s loud voice. I looked but couldn’t see anything. I slapped the bathing suit against my leg to clear off the last of the floral debris.

When I got to the stairs that led to the bottom deck, Anna was waiting there.

“What the hell are you doing?” she said. And I told her: “I’m getting these goddamn bathing suit bottoms that Patrick threw into the woods!”

“Meegan is topless. And I think she’s masturbating McKay.”

I walked up the stairs. Meegan had McKay pulled onto her lap. Patrick was refilling a beer.

Anna grabbed my arm from behind. She squeezed tight and I could feel her fingernails breaking skin.

“You need to go inside,” she said.

“Inside? Are you fucking kidding me? These people can’t be left unsupervised! Look what happened while I was still here!”

I held up the bikini bottoms.

Anna reached for the bathing suit and took it out of my hand. “Go. The fuck. Inside,” she said. And I listened.
I heard the cussing begin just as I was about to open the door. Anna was screaming and I didn’t stick around to hear any of it. I walked to the top floor of our house. Took off my wet shorts. And as I started the shower I heard footsteps on the walkway leading out to the road. An engine cranked. I peeked through the blinds in time to see the sun disappear over the ridgeline, the white van pulling away.

The next day the water in the hot tub would be brown. I would drain it. I would scrub the layer of film that had developed on the inside walls. Patrick would call. I would answer. I would ask about the journey back to Tennessee. He would tell me that he took the backroads, followed the New upstream until he got into Boone. How it was dark. And how somewhere around Roby Greene Rd, Rich confronted him about driving drunk. “Said I’d been out of line all day!” He would go on to say that he slammed on the breaks. Asked Rich if he had any idea where he was. When Rich said no he was told to shut the fuck up, told to stay quiet if he wanted to get back to Erwin.

Patrick would tell me about how Rich did stay quiet. How Meegan fell asleep in the back seat. How he and McKay argued about their lives, their relationship, their future. Then Patrick would end our conversation with: “Oh and Jeff wants those kegs returned to Peabody’s.”

“Fuck Jeff. I’m not taking those kegs back.”

“Jeff has been calling me all morning. He’s going to lose his deposit if those kegs aren’t back today.”

“I don’t care.”

“What do you mean you don’t care?”

“I mean that I don’t work for Jeff and those kegs are not my responsibility.”
“So you expect me to drive from Erwin, all the way to Fleetwood, then to Blowing Rock, then back to Erwin because you are too fucking lazy to do something nice for someone? Someone who gave you work all these years? That sounds about like you, Toemas. Never fucking grateful.”

But before any of that would happen—before I hauled three kegs to the front of my house, before I loaded them into my Subaru, before I drove across two counties and found out that Peabody’s had not expected those shells back at all—I took a shower. Anna made dinner. We ate in the loft. Smoked weed. Laid down together on the daybed. And while Andrew Zimmern sampled fried crickets in China on the TV, we held each other, her head on my chest, and both fell asleep.
COMMERCIAL GUIDING
ON THE
NOLICHUCKY RIVER GORGE: SEASON #16

You got off the water around two.

You were done with work about three.

By six you were kind of hammered and the bachelorette party you took down the river is staying at the Mountain Inn & Suites off i26 where there’s a hot tub and cocaine and a few delivery pizzas.

So of course you’re there. And you’re there for a while. And when the lights go out and it’s late and some the girls start snoring, you tell yourself like you always tell yourself that this is just a place to stay. Some air conditioning and a continental breakfast with a coffee and a waffle but the girl in bed beside you moves closer. She backs in and arches her back and her body fits so well against yours so you put a hand on her waist before sliding it forward and you feel a stomach that feels a lot different than the stomach you feel at home.

She turns. And tries to kiss you. But you pull away at first because there are goddamn people in this room and she says with much disgruntlement: Why are you being weird?

So you think about that. And you think about your wife. And you think about how she called today and how she put your daughter on the phone and how your daughter cried when, again, you told her: I’m staying in Tennessee.

But you have to stay because there’s a trip tomorrow and you’ve been drinking beers and these girls wanted to hang out and it would be a waste of money for you to drive back home.

That’s something you say a lot in the summer. You say: It’d be a waste of money for me to drive back home.
The girl sits up. She gets out of bed and takes your hand and leads you outside, down the hall, to the room with the ice and the laundry and the vending machines.

There’s a chair. And she pushes you down and straddles you and you look around, nervous about the security cameras mounted on the ceiling, wondering if whoever controls the footage will somehow use it against you.

But it all keeps happening. The grinding. The kissing. Her hands in your hair.

And then it’s morning. You wake up and she is now drooling and gross in the daylight and wearing nothing but a fleece she dug out of your gear bag and it’s a nice fleece and you want it back but it doesn’t seem right to take it off her so you don’t.

You get your coffee.

You get your waffle.

You drive to the outpost and you work your trip and when the trip is done you call your wife and for a second there, consider making some shit up on the spot about that fleece. But since she just gave it to you, and she gave it to you for Father’s Day, that’s probably a lie you need to figure out a little more so instead you ask about work and you ask about the kid and your wife says something about summer camp starting before you let her know what she already knows is coming, and you stay another night in Tennessee.
FRIENDS

They met every morning before school at the Hardees and wore pink shirts and gelled hair and shot spit wads from straws at old people drinking senior coffees. They were friends. But friends who always found a reason not to like each other and as Jimmy Hensley rolled up to the party grinding gears in that new Mustang of his, those friends were pissed.

Over what, it didn’t matter because Jimmy was completely unaware and parked his car at the bottom of the hill to avoid making a fool out of himself on the incline. He got out and admired the vehicle and wiped a smudge off the hood before walking up towards the house where his friends already were, and when he got inside he found a few of them in the bathroom sliding vomit covered clothes off of passed out Dusty McNealy and heating up a bent wire coat hanger with a Bic lighter. The coat hanger had been shaped into the crude outline of a dick and balls and when the wire was visibly hot, Jimmy took a few cell phone photos as the brand was lowered and then took a video of Dusty’s bare white ass-flesh sizzling.

After that, Jimmy walked around and drank Everclear punch and felt good and then tried convincing a few girls to flash him but the girls just giggled and kept their shirts on even when he brought up rides in the Mustang.

So he went downstairs where there was talking and music and a handful of people crowded around a door frame holding phones, watching drunkass Nikki Riddle and the two guys who stood beside her, zippers down. Nikki had just received a photo message of her boyfriend tongue deep and grinding on another girl at a different party so she grabbed the first boys she saw, got on her knees, and left the door open, knowing it would all be documented. Knowing it would all instantly get back to him.
Once Jimmy realized that was what was going on he got his phone out too and while his friends seemed uninterested and went outside, he stood on his tippy toes trying to get a good shot but still didn't have one when his friends came back in, whispering loud enough for everyone to hear: “Dude. Someone egged your fucking Mustang.”

People stopped what they were doing. They turned away from Nikki. They watched him and waited for a reaction and when Jimmy walked out the door, an eager crowd followed and when they got to the bottom of the hill, shells were everywhere and yolk dripped from all four panels of the car.

The people murmured and kind of chuckled and Jimmy kept yelling, “Who the fuck did this?!” but no one had seen shit and no one knew what to say until this redneck kid Jeffery O’Dell just happened to drive by and then it seemed obvious. To the crowd, anyway.

And because it was obvious to them, it was obvious to Jimmy and when people started asking, “What are you gonna do?” Jimmy responded in the only way he could and said: “I’m gonna fuck his ass up goddammit!” And because of that, it was arranged.

On Monday, Jimmy waited with his friends for O’Dell in an unfinished housing development out by the lake.

Here’s the thing, though. Jimmy was no fighter. Because Jimmy had a regulation size baseball field at his house and jet skis and shit and he really hadn’t planned on becoming a fighter and that’s why everyone there had convinced him he wouldn’t have to.

They had his back. They had a plan. When O’Dell showed up they were going to paintball his car and that would make it even and that’s what they told Jimmy who was nervous as all hell and standing by himself while the rest of them chewed straws and talked shit and leaned up against nice cars they didn’t buy.
O’Dell came solo. He even called and asked for directions, ready to clear this misunderstanding, but as soon as he pulled up in that gravel lot all of Jimmy’s friends popped up out of nowhere and colored that shitty Geo Tracker neon before it got put into park.

There were pinks and greens and yellows and oranges and each thud echoed through the hills until someone took aim at the back vinyl windows and when the ammo ran out and the guns got put down, nothing was left but tattered strips of clouded plastic and there was going to be no even.

Jimmy waited with his hands in his pockets trying to think of what to say because there had to be something he could say to avoid what he knew was coming but Jimmy stood no chance and was already backing away when the driver side door opened and O’Dell got out yelling, “Who the fuck is gonna pay for this?!” pointing at his ripped vinyl windows and all Jimmy could manage was, “You, you egged my Mustang man. Now we’re even. We’re even man. We’re even,” but of course, that didn’t matter and when O’Dell cracked Jimmy in the face no one moved and Jimmy couldn’t get his hands out of his pockets so O’Dell had clear shots again and again and again and Jimmy dropped to his knees and there were no sounds from the crowd and every smack was heard as O’Dell kept at him with the right fist, leaving the left hand to hold Jimmy by the hair and after each swing connected Jimmy wondered if that would be the punch to make it all even—*are we even now? are we even now?*

Just before he collapsed, before his eyes rolled back into their sockets, Jimmy saw the last thing he saw that afternoon. His friends. And the sunlight. Bright and blinding. Reflected off the chrome coating of several open Motorola RAZRs.
Anna Poem #4

Goddamn you for taking
all the blue bills we stashed
in the Fleetwood House back
when the packages were coming
in weekly from San Francisco.

I know I fucked up. I know what I
did was wrong. But that girl didn’t
mean anything and I was really counting
on having at least some of that money
and my life is a lot harder now that I don’t.
MY PLACE IN THE LIVERMUSH LINE

I was trying to be a writer—crashing on couches in Brooklyn because that’s what I thought a writer should do. I had penned a handful of sappy poems and was now focusing on violent short stories inspired by people from my high school.

I was staying with this girl I met at an off-site AWP reading. She wrote a pop-culture column for a feminist blog and was always offering to share her bed in what she described as: platonically. It sounded suspect. I wasn’t over Anna. “I’m cool with the futon,” I said.

Some mornings I’d wake up and that girl would be hovering over me in a towel, still wet from the shower, saying some weird shit like: “You look so innocent when you sleep.” And even though she got handsy when we drank cheap wine from the corner store, I enjoyed the company. I would ask about writing. I would show her my drafts. I would listen intently when she rambled on about how short stories were dead, how nonfiction was the future of literature. “You need to be writing essays,” she’d say.

But I didn’t know how to write an essay. Nor did I want to. The word itself was off-putting: essay. It sounded so academic. It sounded like it needed a works cited page.

The idea came late-night when I was up watching old Bizarre Foods episodes on YouTube, thinking about Anna and the global culinary tour we would never take. Maybe I was homesick, maybe it was brand recognition, but I clicked on the Appalachia episode. And on the screen before me, Andrew Zimmern began discussing livermush, a childhood staple of mine, alongside other micro-regional Appalachian cuisines.

Livermush is a North Carolina pork product made from a blend of liver and head parts bound by cornmeal into a bricklike loaf. It is seasoned with sage and pepper. Cooked in slices.
Fried in grease. And traditionally dressed with either mustard or grape jelly. Though I’ve always eaten it plain.

Zimmern went to Shelby, where my parents are from, to profile in a four minute segment the livermush festival held there every October. After sampling a livermush sandwich with then mayor Ted Alexander, Zimmern declared the micro-regional delicacy “fantastic” but was quick to add that it’s “definitely not for everyone.”

For whatever reason, that annoyed me. And it shouldn’t have. Because it’s true. Livermush, like coffee or blue cheese or anal sex, is not for everyone. Nothing is. But listening to the Zimmern tasting verdict, especially after he had just praised the smooth texture of racoon brains in a previous segment, was an eyerolling moment for sure. At best, it seemed fake. Faux-sincerity made for TV. And at worst, it just felt like unearned outsider condescension.

But because of stumbling across Zimmern’s Appalachia episode—inspiration occurred. Shelby wasn’t the only town to celebrate that culinary accomplishment. And after some quick Googling to check dates, I decided to leave Brooklyn armed with a camera bag and a pocket-sized Moleskin notebook, making the 12 year overdue homecoming mission, intent on authentically yet irreverently covering the Livermush Festival in my less than progressive birthplace of Marion, NC.

I have a complicated relationship with Marion. But I was born there. So unlike Zimmern, and anyone else for that matter, I felt as though I had the right to document the town’s terribleness through the novelty of a livermush lens.

It seemed like a story that would write itself. And with the right photos, maybe even something The Bitter Southerner would publish. I would visit all the classic parking lots and graveyards where I used to drink Steel Reserve tall cans and have upright sex and watch people
get brutally beaten over altercations involving low-rent women and property damage. I would reflect a little bit. Have some feelings. Then attend the Livermush Festival. I would come up with some snarky and slightly disrespectful commentary about the average girth of, not only the livermush eating contest participates, but the general population of the festival as well. I would snap photos of haggard and interesting looking citizens as they waited in line like the homeless and huffed down their free livermush sandwiches. At some point, I would undoubtedly run into one of my old friends. Maybe even my oldest friend, Ben Cross, recently released from a manslaughter stint, who would invite me to snort bad coke in some trailer with two Mexicans and at least one tweaker white woman who would agree to hang out topless all night if supplied with enough key bumps and cigs.

It was going to be great.

I was convinced.

It was a damn near twelve hour drive but I left in the middle of the night hopped up on borrowed Adderall and missed most of the traffic. I got to town early, with a lot of time to spare, and needed gas so I pulled into CJ’s off the Five Lane and cut the engine at a pump in the middle bay. There were two other cars. One on either side of me. To my left: a skinny white dude with a faded green neck tat that resembled no distinct shape. He kept a firm grip on the pump handle and focused intently at the numbers spinning on the digital screen. He wore a sweat stained wife beater tucked into khaki carpenter shorts spotted with paint splatter and cinched tight by a long braided belt. As I got out of my car his gaze drifted my way. We locked eyes for a moment. I gave a nod. He did nothing.
To my right was a woman sitting in a Camry talking on her phone. Her windows were up and the engine was running and she was rocking floral hospital scrub, periodically giving a no look reach-back smack to the restless children behind her.

I locked my door and shut it. Oh it’s already looking good, I thought as I walked towards the store.

As I kid, I would ride my bike on the backroads to CJ’s with leftover lunch money and buy packs of glass bottle stink bombs for smashing on the floors of the movies or by the rec pool or at football games under the bleachers.

When I stepped inside CJ’s and looked towards the cash register on my right, the first thing I noticed were the packs of stink bombs. Still for sale. Still stocked on the counter as an impulse buy and leaned up in front of a locked display case full of trucker speed, crack pipes, and weed bowls.

“Can I help you?” the cashier said. She was young. I think. But pregnant for sure. And smoking an indoor cig like it was damn 1975.

“I’ll do twenty on—” I looked outside to see where I was parked and noticed the woman in scrubs out of her car twirling her hair and getting chatted up by a dude dressed in baby blue cargo sweatpants. “—pump 4,” I said still staring out the window. A pack of over twenty Harleys sped past up the Five Lane. The deafening sounds of their engines shook the front glass of the store. The cashier punched buttons, activating the pump. When I turned I noticed the stink bombs again. I picked up a pack. Slid them forward on the counter. “I’ll take some of these too.”

I was fishing around in my wallet, waiting for the total, when she said: “You aint from around here are you?” I took it as a compliment. I’ve always had this insecurity that the Marion stench of Republican voting ballots, tent revivals, and burned Harry Potter books just oozed
from my pores. But here was a thin haired, lip ring having, pregnant, cig smoking local woman that couldn’t sense it on me.

“It’s just that I aint never seen you,” she said. “You from Asheville or something?”

In the years since I’ve left Marion and my parents have left Marion, Asheville has been my default response for people who ask where I’m from. I looked down at my cuffed skinny jeans, Redwing boots, and visible avocado-print socks. I said: “Na I’m from Boone,” as if that was any better.

“Oh,” she said. “You passing through?”

“I’m going to the Livermush Festival,” I said.

She looked confused and took a drag from her cig.

Then: “That’ll be $22.59.”

I paid the woman. Got my change. Pocketed the stink bomb pack. And left.

I lived in Marion during the George W days. I had blue hair and black fingernails and was against anything that had to do with the church, our government, or the Iraq War. Which in Marion, just happened to be pretty much everything. I was very vocal with my disagreements. I argued with everyone. But I enjoyed standing out. I enjoyed being different.

As a sixteen year old, my truck was decorated with a large scale upside down American flag magnet on the tailgate. On the back glass: an official oval W in 04 campaign sticker customized by a thick painted diagonal black line. I made myself a target. And I got in a decent amount of trouble as a result. Before I turned 18, I had been jailed and processed over five times with charges ranging from disorderly conduct to felony drug possession. Because of that, I had a
hard time getting into college. And I had a hard time finding jobs. I never blamed myself for any of it though. I always blamed the town.

But as I left CJ’s and started driving, I wasn’t filled with any of the rage or disdain I had anticipated. If anything, it was the opposite. I couldn’t believe how beautiful Marion was. How full and lush the mountains were on the horizon. I had never noticed any of that as a kid. I had been too busy being pissed.

I had an hour or so left before the Livermush Festival started. I decided to make the rounds and visit some personal local landmarks I was sure would stir up some sort of emotional reaction. I went to the Social Services building at the bottom of my old street where I would climb up on the roof at night when I was depressed, sit in the top turret with the weather vane, and look out at the town and think. I went to the church off Airport Rd where Ben and I took a beating from a full family, father and mother included, after I bragged on MySpace about receiving low resolution flip phone tittie texts from the older brother’s girlfriend. I went to McDowell High, up on the hill, and stood in the portion of the parking lot where the rednecks hung mutilated possum corpses from our cars because one guy in our friend group didn’t eat meat.

I took pictures. And I guess I expected to feel like some sort of survivor returning for closure to a combat zone. But none of these places felt like the battlefields I remembered them to be. They felt like what they were: parking lots, churches, buildings—structures in a town existing independent of my exaggerated trauma and sentimentality.

I was sad about not being sad. Maybe I didn’t hate this place. The whole premise for my essay was starting to erode. I questioned whether there was any point in being here. But since I had made the drive, it seemed silly not to carry the plan through.
I headed downtown towards Main St. Parked at the bank by the funeral home where I used to cut through parking lot to pick up my crazy ex-girlfriend who made me wear a male promise ring. I followed a procession of old people and couples carrying lawn chairs. I had my camera hanging from my neck and my backpack on and I was snapping random photos as I maneuvered through the crowd. Already, there was a good sampling of humanity. Groupings of obesities moved slowly in packs past two inflatable bounce houses for the kids. Men pushed women in wheelchairs outfitted with oxygen tanks up to a portable aluminum stage where a local cover band played bad music under a sponsor banner that advertised an opioid recovery center.

Alright, I thought. Now we’re getting back on track. This is the level of hopelessness I expected to see.

I kept taking photos. And was starting to get a lot of annoyed looks from the crowd which made me feel like I didn’t belong and that was exactly how I wanted it to be.

A flattop grill was setup surrounded by coolers full of livermush, whitebread, grape jelly, and mustard. A fat man in a purple tie-dye shirt and a braided grey ponytail was dealing out free sandwiches.

I love livermush. But I thought, for the essay’s sake, it would be a funny and telling detail if I attended the Livermush Festival and ate no livermush. Especially since, as an unconscious form of protest, I have never actually tasted the local Marion-made brand.

But as I walked around, expecting to run into someone I knew who would greet me as a prodigal son and suggest some sort of vice-based side quest we could embark on, there wasn’t really anything to do. The eating contest didn’t start for another hour, so I reluctantly filed in to the back of a long line and waited to be served some micro-regional cuisine.
As I waited, I took the time to look around. People had claimed Marion was a whole
different place these days. The Blue Laws had been repealed and it was no longer a dry town.
Asheville was expanding, pricing people out, and younger families were moving down this way.
There was a brewery in what used to be pawn shop. There was a bakery advertising artisan
doughnuts. There were several new restaurants selling liquor by the drink.

Those places all probably suck, I thought as I shuffled forward in line. I was getting
closer. About three people away from the flattop station when I felt a hand grip my shoulder.
Hard.

I was pulled from the line.

And when I turned around, my eyes were chest level on a stout dude wearing a patch
filled cutoff leather vest. On the left side, above his heart, was a label that read Vice President
and another one that said Jacktown underneath.

“Did you take my fucking picture?” he said.

Oh god, I thought. I stood there wide-eyed saying nothing but: “Ughhh…”

“You got a hearing problem, son?” he said. “I’m gonna ask you one more time—Did you.
Take. My fucking picture.”

I had definitely taken his picture. I had seen him in the crowd holding hands with rough
looking woman in a pink spaghetti strap top. I took several pictures of them walking down the
street from behind. But I wasn’t about to admit that.


“Oh yeah? Well I heard you been following me around, taking pictures of my club
patch.”
Goddammit, I thought. This dude thinks I’m a cop. I held my camera tight with both hands expecting him to rip it from my neck and smash the thing on the ground.

“Na man,” I said. “I’m just taking pictures.”

“And just what exactly are you taking pictures for?”

“I’m a writer, man! I’m taking pictures for an article,” I said. “I’m writing an article!” It was a sorry explanation that did nothing to reassure this man. He got even closer to me and went on with a series of: “What the fuck kind of article are you writing? Who are you writing it for? Why don’t you show me some goddamn credentials.”

I was stress sweating and about to panic. I could hear the flattop sizzling behind me. I smelled the livermush cooking. I felt the stares of all the people around me who had stopped their advancement in line, waiting for my camera-toting snobby ass to get put in place.

It wasn’t even a conscious decision. I just started talking fast, saying the first things that came to mind, the first things I thought would save me—“Dude I was born here man. I’m just trying to take photos. I grew up over on North Madison. I went to East McDowell Jr High. My mom worked at Baxter’s. I just think this is a cool event and I just wanted to cover it and show people how great Marion is.” Jesus Christ.

It was wild how immediately this man’s face softened.

“Ah hell,” he said. “Why didn’t you say so?” He held out his hand and asked my name. I told him and shook it.

“People call me Jacktown,” he said. “Sorry about that. My guys just saw you with the camera and got a little nervous.” He paused. Then said: “We’re really protective about our colors. It’s a big deal in the club culture.”

“All good man. I understand.”
“For your article, make sure you tell people about all the good we Ghost Riders do for the community. We try and raise money for good causes, organize charity events and stuff like that. We aint into that 1%-er outlaw bullshit. We just wanna give back, you know?”

I nodded my head, as if I did know. “Okay,” I said. “No problem.”

We shook hands again. Jacktown walked away. My place in the livermush line was gone.

I made a half-ass attempt at squeezing back in but the hungry patrons were holding their ground. I went in the opposite direction, embarrassed by the confrontation, and headed toward my car. As I walked, there were Ghost Rider members everywhere. Each one I passed glared me down.

I did not want to stand out anymore. I wanted to get the camera off me. I wanted to get the fuck out of there. I sat down on a curb and stashed the camera in my backpack. I pulled out my phone and Googled: marion nc ghost riders.

The first article was from the local paper, the McDowell News, dated the previous December. The headline read: Ghost Riders Motorcycle Club toy run raises $10,000.

As I put my phone back in my pocket, I felt the box of stink bombs I had bought at CJ’s. In the distance I heard the announcements for the livermush eating contest. A pack of kids walked by.

“Aye,” I said.

They turned.

I held up the box of stink bombs. “Yall want these?”

One kid wearing a faded Carolina Panthers tee walked up. He was holding a livermush sandwich wrapped in tin foil. As he got close I pulled the box back.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll trade you these stink bombs for that sandwich.”

The deal was made without hesitation. The kids walked away.
I unwrapped the sandwich. The crowd cheered for the competitors who had replaced the cover band on stage. I took a bite. It tasted great. I took a couple more. And after I finished the sandwich, when I stood up to head to my car, I saw those kids sprinting off into the distance. I hadn’t taken but about two steps when I heard groans from the crowd and then the splatter of vomit. The faint and familiar odor of sulfur hit my nostrils. I smiled. And watched people scatter. Some ran. Others just walked, defeated, shaking their heads and squinting their eyes, all holding the necks of their tee shirts like masks up over their faces.