Ride

Natalie Nicole Updike

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
Updike, Natalie Nicole, "Ride" (2018). Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports. 3956.
https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/etd/3956
RIDE

Natalie N. Updike

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

Mark Brazaitis, M.F.A., Chair
Glenn Taylor, M.F.A.
Kathleen Ryan, Ph.D.

Department of English

Morgantown, West Virginia
2018

Keywords: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, sexual violence, sexual abuse, memory, trauma, suicide, Iraq, Colombia, Tennessee, Indiana.

Copyright 2018 Natalie Updike
ABSTRACT

RIDE

Natalie N. Updike

RIDE is a two book, multi-voiced introspection into P.T.S.D., abuse, and the possibilities of recovery. The selection here, the first third of the two books, introduces the necessary background to understand the trauma of book one and the post-trauma of book two. Both books follow four main protagonists, whose overlapping storylines lead them to uncover a fatalistic reunion. First, Kru Blake, a carpenter from Knoxville, Tennessee, follows an Internet advertisement to seek familial healing. Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs, a Marine from Vincennes, Indiana, endures the confusing brutality of his Commanding Officer near Balad, Iraq, while coping with his own haunting past. Tin Jimenez, an eleven-year-old boy from Minca, Colombia, struggles to learn the limitations and uses of his healing ability to gain a deeper understanding of what it means to hurt and what it means to love. Lastly, Sara Blake, Kru Blake’s homeless daughter in Knoxville, Tennessee, must come to terms with her trauma-based delusions surrounding her involvement in a child prostitution ring. Through various trans-national, trans-lingual, and trans-genre episodes, the narrators must come to know how slowly devastating and lovely the world can be, leaving them either healed or utterly broken.
Table of Contents

Critical Preface...............................................................................................................1
Photographs of Storyboard Timeline..................................................................................6
Character List......................................................................................................................8

RIDE Draft (First Third of Two Novel Collection)

Ian’s Journal......................................................................................................................10
Kru Blake 1.........................................................................................................................14
Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs 1....................................................................................................29
Tin Jimenez 1......................................................................................................................43
Sara Blake 1.........................................................................................................................58
Kru Blake 2.........................................................................................................................80
Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs 2....................................................................................................98
Tin Jimenez 2......................................................................................................................121
Sara Blake 2.........................................................................................................................138
Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs 3....................................................................................................172
Tin Jimenez 3......................................................................................................................202
Sara Blake 3.........................................................................................................................234
Kru Blake 3.........................................................................................................................249
Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs 4....................................................................................................261
Tin Jimenez 4......................................................................................................................296
Sara Blake 4.........................................................................................................................316
Critical Preface

“If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”
Toni Morrison

“Now I know I’m somebody good. Somebody special. That’s what art has done for me.”
James Harold Jennings

“Write hard and clear about what hurts.”
Ernest Hemingway

Motivations

RIDE was born out of rage.

Six months before I started at West Virginia University, I had slept in nine beds, and none of them were mine. I had slept in this many beds because of my experience with cyclical abuse and how I have never had the ability to “go home.”

I don’t know what most people were doing on Thanksgiving Day 2014, but I was killing myself. No one would listen when I said my Peace Corps host dad’s sexual advances were beyond Colombian machismo and “cultural differences.” They didn’t even listen when I drank a half-bottle of vodka and cut my hands and knees open that November. They shipped me into bed one, a naked cot in a Colombian hospital where I left my blood. A hotel bed and a twenty-hour emergency evacuation marked beds two and three before they forcibly admitted me into a DC ER despite promises that I would convene at a hotel with my doctor. It was only after they wheeled me upstairs and I saw a HIPAA-violation patient clipboard sheet with listed mental illnesses did I realize where I was. Warehoused in Sibley Behavioral Health, I was doped with “experimental” PTSD medication in two beds before sleeping in an Indianapolis bus station until I got enough money to travel to my friend’s futon. Surrounded by Legos and Maleficent figures in his apartment, I then walked to the public library every December day, submitting 46 job applications in 3 weeks while spending Christmas alone or, rather, rushing to meet MFA deadlines. After working two part-time jobs and moving to my brother’s apartment floor, I remember the laryngitis January brought and the pathetic irony of being a new ESL Listening & Speaking Instructor. Finally, enough money came for a twin bed in a four-person apartment next to the pregnant realization that I had done all this for the simple fact that I can never go “home.”

This fact was cemented by my one visit “home” to see my mother before leaving for WVU. I had rules and my father followed them all: not being in the house when I would swing by for the hour, not idling nearby ready to explain his obsession with apologizing, not delivering any “love” letters, detailing how no therapy, no God, no one could save him but me. In the last seconds of the visit, however, my mother pointed to their kitchen whiteboard where a small, broken scribble resembled my father’s handwriting. “People change,” my pedophile father wrote. “People change.” These ghosts have made a home in me for the past three years, and I’m afraid I’ve performed an unfulfilled exorcism.
With those two words, Kelly Ross Updike became Kru. Sara Blake became a manifestation of my personal battles with literal and metaphorical homelessness as well as the rape I barely survived in McClafferty’s bathroom the Saturday of fall break 2015, my first semester at WVU. Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs became a hybrid of my brother’s stories from his two tours in Iraq as well as my own time in Sibley Behavioral Health. Ian Blake became the past-life of my various suicide attempts though Ian and I share significantly different struggles with “seeing our father’s faces in the bottom of every mug.” And Tin Jimenez was a reimagined remnant from a previous novel that had tried to answer a question from the 2009 film Brothers: “‘Only the dead have seen the end of war.’ I have seen the end of war. The question is can I live again?”

This question still lives in this novel draft as RIDE is about two main things: an introspection into PTSD and an inability to pan-away from the ride of life. At its core, RIDE argues that PTSD is not just a terrible result of military action—it is a haunt of the everyday. With the rise of social media and such movements like #MeToo and Time’s Up, childhood abuse victims, sexual assault survivors, and a number of other traumatized can now tell their tales harder and clearer than ever before. My goal with RIDE is not to flinch, not to pan the camera away, not to disservice the realities of those who have endured trauma and live everyday with post-trauma. Therefore, I wanted to write a novel that could embody my rage, my silence, every instance of molestation, sexual assault, microaggressions on people in this loud, violent world. I wanted to connect us in a way that was unrelenting and fierce and deeply personal.

**Influences & Research**
In the same way that I wanted to connect to the world, RIDE features my connections to so many novels, TV shows, musicians, poems, and movies. Much of the style of RIDE was influenced by high Modernism’s free indirect discourse and stream-of-consciousness, such as in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Faulkner’s *Benjy in The Sound and the Fury*, Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, and especially T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* and “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” In terms of context as opposed to style, modern works have influenced me more: David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*, Nikki Giovanni’s *Chasing Utopia*, Dan Chaon’s *Await Your Reply*, the formatting of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Chigozie Obioma’s “The Audacity of Prose,” the TV shows *Lost*, *Outlander*, *Mr. Robot*, and *Teen Wolf*, the music of Lana del Rey, Twenty-One Pilots, *Pan’s Labyrinth, A.I., Finding Neverland, The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and *Interstellar* as well as the movies *Interstellar, The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Cloud Atlas, The Tree of Life, Mysterious Skin*, and *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*. Though this is not a complete list, it demonstrates how wide-sweeping and multimodal my inspirations have been.

Likewise, much of the research involved in composing RIDE came from lived experiences. In addition to the lived emotional component, I know the bus systems, folklore, and arroyos of Barranquilla, Colombia. I know the smell of Tomato Head, the manholes of Clinch Avenue, and the commercialism of Kingston Pike in Knoxville, Tennesee. I know the harvested corn fields, bear sculpting contests, and desolation of Vincennes, Indiana. I didn’t know about the heat of Iraq, the whole production of “shit detail,” the militaristic lingo, the legal processes for medical evacuation and contract renegotiation, the legal timeline of CO Brukk’s trial later in the novel, the inner workings of Leavenworth, and, for Sara’s and Kru’s sections, the realities of child
prostitution rings. I then heavily employed my brother’s knowledge as a former Marine as well as conducting my own research into military code and medical journals, Leavenworth policies and even dress codes, Knoxville newspaper articles about ransacked motel rooms and all the fragments of robbing a childhood.

Not all the research was emotionally devastating though. I tried my hardest to be accurate to sound especially since I have hypervigilance (acute sensory sensitivity) as a result of my PTSD. I, therefore, watched many hours of YouTube videos, such as animal noises as I describe crocodile, elephant, and other animal calls, 1950s’ songs, and other, lighter subjects.

Challenges
My first major challenge was, simply, the monotony and discipline it took to get out of bed almost every morning and meet my quota of 500 words a day for the past two and a half years (since August 11, 2015). In the early stages of the novel, this proved easier as I was still fresh and ambitious to understand it all, all things. Once I started revisions and the complication of connecting threads piled on with coursework, teaching, working at the Writing Studio, volunteering at the Library’s Literacy Program and APBP, working a second job, and searching for a full-time job (as of late), this grew very difficult very quickly. Now that a full-draft is done (and has been rewritten in segments multiple times), I honestly don’t know how I made coffee and oatmeal all those mornings so consistently—I was possessed by something. A need to speak? My body’s call to its past? I’m not sure, but I don’t think I will ever have the will or work ethic to complete something this epic again in my lifetime.

Beyond the physical challenges, the biggest technical challenge I struggled with my first year (2015-2016) was diversifying the voices. I experimented a lot in workshops my first year, making Tin’s voice a broken English-Spanish mixture, Sara’s voice highly bejeweled, delusion, and decorated, Isaacs’ voice very romanticized and obsessed with the stars while Kru’s sections weren’t even a part of the original draft. I have stayed moderately true to their representations by taming all of my ambitions to allow a wider, less patient audience to access the still difficult material: Kru’s voice is “constructed,” shown through the way he thinks as a carpenter (similar to my own father’s former-business of Updike Builders); Isaacs’ romanticism is coupled with some militarist thinking in terms of perimeters and confinements of space because of his claustrophobia; Sara’s language has retained the bejeweled, decorated quality while paring down the theatrical descriptions it once held; and Tin’s voice retains its folkloric, oral storytelling vibe, mixing in his multilingual abilities. As for the latter, I also wanted to be constantly aware of my limits concerning representation of language and culture. My background in Spanish, my work with Saudi Arabian students when I taught at an Intensive English Program, and my work every day in the WVU Eberly Writing Studio helped me realistically represent the broken English Muhan and Tin speak. There is always a risk of making an English-language learner sound “dumb” because of this fracturing; however, to me, I only see progress, and I tried to mirror Tin’s growing mastery of verb forms from the beginning of the novel to the end because he consistently communicates with a native-English speaker in the second half of book one to the end of book two. Overall, I still struggle with writing “simple sentences” as Sara’s complex voice is my natural go-to—this voice is how my mind works by stringing together themes, patterns, meaning, often leading to a spiraling major depressive episode or, potentially, art. However, I knew with a multi-point-of-view work, it was imperative that I distinguish the voices.
As the work progressed, I struggled with connecting all of the characters and threads in a coherent and realistic way. Isaacs wasn’t originally connected to the group at all but would appear later to “save the day.” I ended up hating this white savior aspect of my work and had an epiphany about a year ago with Isaacs’ missing sister Eliza and Sara’s storyline. I realize in this draft that it is not until Tin’s chapter 8 that the reader discovers exactly how Isaacs fits into the story; however, I like this waiting game because it’s supposed to mirror Isaacs’ search (and, more largely, all of our searching) for connections along the way—it is but another form of PTSD. This searching model, referred to in television as a “puzzle show” (e.g., Lost, Mr. Robot), is how I framed the novel. It, therefore, requires readers to decipher colors (red vs. blue, purple, yellow), word choices and phrases (“change”; “red blinking lights”; “come by”; “violent place”; “rushed”; “no-good vs. good”; “through the grate”; “come with the pain,” etc.), and images/things (red Cotinga, heart-shaped key, yellow of the mind, fairy tales, folklore, etc.). I understand the risk of this approach, but I embrace it because, to me, anything that confuses or challenges me in a similar way to the “puzzle show” method, not only excites and inspires me but makes me respect it more for its ability to weave such intricate, unpredictable, and realistic threads. For those who are less interested in the “puzzle show” approach, I believe I have enough connected sections with Kru to Sara, Sara to Ian, Tin to Kru, etc. to sustain the attentive reader throughout the first book and into the second.

The connectedness of the points-of-view then created a new problem with the timeline. I did a LOT of math figuring out the exact months, weeks, days, down to the hour when characters overlap. Especially because these characters travel so much at the end of book one, I had to make sure even the logistics of driving to a specific airport and flying out of that country made sense with the timing as the whole climax of the novel intersects everyone’s storyline in Colombia. I’ve included photos of my storyboards as well as the Excel sheet I created to keep track of everyone’s overlap. These are only the final documents after four binders full of detailing notes.

Of all these challenges, however, the most difficult one was my sense of crushing doubt, isolation, and constant fragility. Because I was writing about something so traumatic to me and many others, I had to be more aware of how much and when to push myself. I have to be careful with myself and measure my days vigilantly. Because one of my life goals is never to have need for a mental hospital again, I don’t have the luxury of just waking up and living. Planning and organizing keeps me alive, and, as such, I planned Kru’s sections the most carefully. Again, Kru wasn’t originally one of the main characters—he wormed his way in when I realized he would be a smart way to weave Tin’s sections closer to Sara’s and Kru’s plot by focusing them through Kru’s point of view. I also wanted to inspect how a father could even molest his child, how anyone could not only think of something so disgusting but act upon it, what kind of sociopathic thought process is behind that. I feel I’ve done my best to understand my father while still keeping a safe distance from him through Kru. In fact, I had to limit each Kru section to under five thousand words because I couldn’t be in that mind frame for a longer duration.

**Next Steps**
Though I will no doubt receive excellent feedback from you, I already have a few revisions in mind. First, I’m toying with changing the beginning of Tin’s first chapter to make it less focused.
on his relationship with Mami and more focused on his dream of building a hospital. Most of the novel is about his relationship with Mami, but a scene where he’s picturing a future hospital might be “sexier” to readers? I also still need to pare down Tin’s chapter three (as well as other parts of the overall work even though I’ve already cut over 47,000 words), so I welcome more suggestions with this. Second, I’m unsure as to the placement of Isaacs’ memories of Rat. I want these memories to be jarring and explosive (as each character experiences PTSD triggers in different, specific ways), but I’m not sure if these moments are there yet. Third, I am also trying to be consistent with the presentation of thought; this is especially tricky as free indirect discourse welcomes character thought in third person, making the portrayal of first-person thought more difficult. I’ve tried to do this, though, in italics. Finally, one place where I’m purposefully inconsistent is when the narration occasionally slips into present tense. These instances are purposeful in an attempt to give the reader a grander, more immediate sense of something important (e.g., the universe singing and other cosmic episodes). I’ll revisit this (in)effectiveness if readers say this use is too jarring even though I think it works well as it is.

After making additional revisions upon receiving feedback on April 12 and after graduating, I plan on taking some time off! My pattern for the past seven years has been to marinate an idea for about two years and write the heck out of it in two to three years. So, with that pattern, I won’t start writing anything again for two years, giving me time to move, become stable in my first full-time, “adult” job, and make some much-needed money not only to start paying back my loans but, more so, to take care of myself better.

Once I’ve had enough time and need to write again, I plan to revisit RIDE and look at publishing opportunities. I honestly believe RIDE could be a “great anti-American novel” given my willingness to invest in it and invest in myself as a future author. The publishing industry terrifies me. But, with more time outside (being out of graduate school), I can hope to understand even a part of this fast-moving, always evolving world. Regardless of whether I publish a “great anti-American novel” or anything of value though, I have always entered this project, this program, and my personal survival with nothing but the courage to try, and I thank you all for being part of that ride.
Character List

Major Characters:
Kru Blake
Ian Blake
Ser
Espinoza
Talbot
Dim
Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs
Eliza Isaacs
Vivian Isaacs
Ricky Isaacs
CO David Brukk
XO Anders
Lance Corporeal Huntings
Private First Class Minx
Private Destin
Deserter
Rat
Fatimah
Talia
Muhan
Red Wing

Tin Jimenez
Mami (Maria Dante Jimenez)
Diego Jimenez
Abuelo Pedro
Emiliano
Tío Fernando
Hernan Hernández Montes (Hippoman)
Gisela
Carlos

Sara Blake
Johnny Juliano
Lynx
Aunt
Meriwether
Joan Jenkins
Alfonso
Carter McCalister
Mark McCalister
Clayton McCalister
Navy Seal / Pretty Big Red
Minor Characters:
Diane Blake
Dr. Chu
Ashur
Dr. Cantos
Salazar
Smith
Zolan
Mustafa
Aayun
Private First Class Arnold
Dawson
Killins
Private Ashburn
Mike
Taz Montgomery
Maddie Perkins
Jimmy Vicenzi
Mariposa
Abuelo Bruja
Del Real
Jorge
Amanda
Angelica
Roberto
Tinto
Pinto
Camila
Jamie
Karen
Luiciana
Marina
Diana
Katrina
Goodbar Girl / Bailey
Yellow Dress Girl
Rhonda
Elaine
Tina
Elyse
Abby
Timothy / Timmy
Caleb
Allison
Brendi
Jenny
Margaret
RIDE

“People are not good
And yet we go on
Until we stop
And I think
The only bravery available
To us
Is to Remember
Smell—
As we all know—
Is half the taste.”

—

“Terezin,” Nikki Giovanni

“[I]n real life you don’t get to turn the camera away when it’s happening…or during its aftermath.” — “Outlander’ Just Broke the Mold with Jamie’s Sexual Assault: Here’s Why,” Shaunna Murphy

“I wonder if there’s suffering in the fifth dimension.

There is a naked tree staring at me from my window.

Garage doors crush my chest at night. I’m smothered when I wake only 19 years out the womb.

What would time look like represented physically? Like how would fights work? Would you look into a new box every millimeter a fist travels? Could you take something back? Could I peer into my father’s life? Could the behavioral health people put me back? Back together?

Humpty. Why did they take me? Dumpty. Why won’t they let me go? I’m insignificant.

Because, of course, Humpty Dumpty never jumped.

Dr. Chu, I’m doing your little inpatient activity: “Write the scene and don’t add introspection. How might you have pulled yourself back from the bridge using response redirection?” Oh, I didn’t have to write the question? Well, it’s already there, isn’t it?
I hear my name on his lips, not my father’s but Johnny Juliano’s. That weird fire hair and those yellow bug-eye glasses are coming closer down Gay Street Bridge in Knoxville, Tennessee. He’s hiding himself from the world. He’s hiding himself from himself. Hide and seek is not a hard game. But, it can cause a hard on.

“Ian,” I hear.

“What? Johnny?” I ask. One hand is waiting for Sara to answer and my other flirts with the railing—wrap, release, wrap. It’s a four-laner with Kelly green lampposts. Entire state river below, 828 feet high, so said the plaque at the bridge head. This isn’t my first try. Three months have passed silent since Ashur cut me down from rafters. Now, I’m in a place where there are no rafters. No construction to break. Only my neck.

“What you be playing at on that side railing there?”

“I’m not playing anymore,” I say before hearing Sara’s “This voicemail box has not been….” I fling the phone into the water. It takes a while to hit.

“Ian, just—”

“Johnny, you remember it?” Maybe Sara told him once.

“I remember what?”

“What my mom said before she died.”

Johnny shook his head. “What you needing that for anyway?”

“Because it’s the last line.”

“Of what?”

“My book.” I nodded to its green cover on the car whiz side of the railing.

“You wrote a book?”

“A journal. I’m giving it to you today. For Sara. I just gotta get the ending right.” He
wincs when I rock and release. “I need that line, Johnny.”

“I have no clues to the line. We can search for her together. I got words to speak to her, too.”

“No. She can never know.” My hands sweat more in that June heat. “Not while I’m alive, at least.”

“Why not?”

“Because I kissed her.”

“Sara?”

“God no.”

“Who it be then? What’s with the cloak secrets?”

“I just need the line—”

“Why? What’s so big to end your life?”

“The big deal is I see his face in the bottom of my mugs. There’s this cycle in every child I see. I’m afraid, I’m afraid of these.” I shake a hand in the air and then slap my face with it.

“The noise, all the noise.” My hand returns to the railing.

“Ian, let’s just—”

“Damn apartment noise, shitty music bass, 4:47 a.m. screaming matches about snakes and pussy, a jumping jack comedy club with bowling ball claps, and what the hell are they doing, is everyone doing?” My chest’s caving with deep breaths.

“Come on, I don’t think—”

“Fireworks and shotguns on Highland and always the urge for noise, everyone has to vomit noise, nothing matters that much—your ‘Henry said macarooni today instead of macaroni’ and the following laughter—your ‘I almost lost the key, you can imagine what she’d think then’
and the following laughter—the ‘I’m drunk I could light the world on fire.’ The laughing heads follow me, they snack track back their mouths to guttural, primal noise, but when I’m telling the truth, I want rawness. I can’t take all this masking laughter. Where did anything real go? I feel like the Grinch, noise, noise, noise. Cause I can hear everything, like the tiles on the floor and the designs don’t match, they, uh, they grab me in the night, and he takes me and makes me make noise with gum squares all over me, and he smiles his two and—I kissed her.”

“You kissed who?”

“Doesn’t matter. She was smiling up at me. We had dated once. I was a junior and she was a freshman. And we met up and I kissed her. No, I didn’t kiss her. I destroyed her lips.”

“What are you saying? You hurt her?”

“No.” I release then stumble to grab the bar this time. “She said to kiss her. She smiled and kissed me back, but that’s not the problem.”

“What the problem be then? Let’s get off this bridge.”

“I’m nineteen. She’s sixteen. You know what the age of consent is in Tennessee?”

“You didn’t sex her up, no?”

“No. But, you’re missing the point. She’s a minor. She didn’t know what she was doing. I never knew what I was doing. I said no. I said no so much Sara said I sang it in my sleep.”

“What’s the point then?”

“My hair is thinning, and I’m nineteen years old now. Maybe it’s because I pluck one for every sin. Maybe it’s because I pluck one for every black shadow that corners my eyes. You ever see them? They’re there alright. They’re waiting for you not to see them so they can crawl into your brain and start brewing eggs. They fly like furies waiting. They infected me too when I kissed her because I’m becoming him. I knew the odds were high. I just thought thirty percent of
not becoming the monster would get me free of all I’ve done.” I cough and cough. “Water,” I hear myself say. “I need water.”

“I get ya some water, just come off the bridge with me.”

“No, no.” Water isn’t getting sunburnt below. “I need water now, lots and lots of water.”

“Okay, let’s get to Calhoun’s and fetch ya some water.”

“No, no, you’re a noisemaker, too. You made the wrong kind of noise. You have the ring’s stamp.”

“Ian, come on.” Johnny hesitates, and then his hand stretches toward me.

“That’s it.” I pause, perfectly still, looking out. “I remember the line.”

“Wait, what?” Johnny asks.

“The monsters win,” I say and then jump.

Kru Blake 1—June 19

Kru Blake was writing his son a love letter. The station wagon engine sputtered its old man rasp as Kru idled outside the warehouse. His hands matched the faded yellow dash, and he rolled a window down to tap his sweaty palm against the hot woody side. Like most everything in his life, the air conditioner broke again when he tripped 200,000 miles three months ago. He’d been hauling some used heartwood 6x6s for a deck job and pondering his son’s attempted suicide.

Kru’d walked into a strange apartment with hookahs and bed sheets on couches. Police said the place had been vacated immediately after authority showed up cause near everyone was illegal. That plus the condition of the second story water-stained steps, obvious termite damage, and a sloping floor could drive anyone out. He passed a kitchen full of undone dishes where he
watched his step. Dozens of broken mugs were scattered all over the linoleum onto the carpet.

Some of their handles pointed like nails out the floor next to a graveyard of wrecked sayings:

I hate
Mondays!
Wake me when t
Live Long
Green Tea is
Give me Liber
Hotboxx
weekend.
and Prosper
World’s Greatest
me Death
Dad

Someone had started what looked to be a thousand piece puzzle with just the border and an elbow done. A dog whined somewhere outside, abandoned, leftover. Everything foreign. And that was the house his son had chose rather than live with Kru.

He wandered all the way back to a hole in the ceiling. There a bed sheet noose dangled from three 2x10 rafters sloppily installed. If his son had been anything more than a thin, nineteen-year-old boy, those boards would of snapped. One officer had explained some Syrian roommate pulled him down and called 911, helped give CPR. But that didn’t stick with Kru now. Instead, he was looking at the view his son chose to try to die with. Just other houses. Open blinds and open curtains into other lives, sheltered only by thin siding, inches of insulation, and drywall. Unmowed lawns and a couple bunches of hoses and red solo cups and a plastic baby carriage and the like. Nothing beyond ordinary.

Kru now took out the letter the officer at the station had given him, saying they found it beside the boy. He rubbed his thumb over his son’s shaky writing “For The Monster That Won,” and still hadn’t explained to anyone that the note was meant for him. Since that day, Kru tried to visit his son, but every try got refused by a nurse. Even after Ian left the hospital, Kru tried to
find his son, but the note had made it clear.

The engine rattled again, and Kru unfolded those familiar creases. He could only read the note in bits and pieces since every word was a snake strike.

*I finally have a diagnosis for you. Dr. Cantos said it the other day. She described it, and you might as well have been in the room for a case study. Sociopath. Look it up. Do some research. You once told me that no God, no therapist, no one could save you but me. That’s not true. You’re sick. And you infected me.*

“The LGBTQ Center at the University of Knoxville, Tennessee—” The radio sparked on by itself. “—has again been vandalized. Surveillance captured images of a white, hooded male fleeing the Center—”

Kru switched it off and folded up the note. His nails were cracked, hands worn, scalp midlife-crisis thin. He dragged tough skin over his sagging cheeks. The two moles placed like dimples on either side of his mouth had started sprouting grey stubble now. He sighed and felt his body creak.

*Toot. Tooter,* he wrote then crossed it out and put Ian.

The letter was a pastor’s idea. Since leaving that termite house over three months ago, Kru’d done two things. First, he’d looked up “sociopath” on one of the homeowner’s computers during a spiral-stair installation. The couple had come home early from walking the dog and found him at their computer. He made excuses about needing to look up which way the starter board faces. One of the husbands asked why he didn’t Google it on his Iphone. Kru just pulled out empty pockets, a few nails falling to the floor, and explained he couldn’t afford a fancy Iphone. That was true. Then he clicked exit to the web definition “a mental health disorder characterized by a disregard for other people and a lack of conscience.” He nailed the starter board hard and pondered exactly what “a lack of conscience” would be.

The second thing he’d done since seeing that empty noose was something he couldn’t get...
round his mind yet. Something he couldn’t put down on paper or whisper even to himself out of fear it’d disappear if the universe knewed he could get joy. Cause he’d found a cure, a plan for a cure, at least.

He tapped his red carpentry pencil against a scalloped seashell on the dash. A remnant of Ian’s long-ago love. The pencil then touched the paper after his son’s name. He tried to write all the flying things in his head but the pencil made no loops, no notches, no marks.

I fix things. You say I’m sick. Well, sick can be fixed. 
There’s no way I can tell you. I just mean, I didn’t realize.
Why’d you go and do that to yourself?
Ian, after I get Ser’s money, I’m going away to get my mind together for you.
They say you keep refusing me. Three months is too long for a boy to go without talking to his dad.
Because you are my little boy. You will always be my little boy.

He’d written none of this down though. His hand began to shake. And the wagon seemed stuffy, filled up with ghosts.

~

The warehouse inside hadn’t hardly changed. Just a huge square with junk in all four corners. Some of the black milk crates in one crook had tumbled into a kind of station with gauze and bandages and pretty dresses. An old mustang with a jacked wheel rusted in another corner’s shadow right next to the office with blacked out windows. Someone could of mistaken all of it for a retired mechanic shop. There was one thing different though. In front of the stainless steel door Kru’d installed years ago was a giant, faded, purple 8 painted on the concrete floor.

Over that 8, two young guys sat in foldout chairs and pushed a girl no older than four back and forth between them. One in a white furry hat laughed when the girl stumbled into his arms to catch her balance. He wrapped his arm round her waist then fanned his bald head with that fur hat. The other guy, in saggy jean shorts how all the boys used to wear about a decade
ago, twisted round and stared at Kru.

“The hell are you?” The guy in the jean shorts bolted up so quick a long chain he was wearing got tangled in the seat. He paused. “How you get that sliding door open?”

“It slid open,” Kru said.

Metal made a racket against metal as the guy just shook the chain off the chair.

Kru paused. “Some of us are a little more gifted working with stuff.”

“Good, leave it open,” the other guy said, fanning himself. The girl wiped wet hair from her cheeks.

“But Ser said—”

“Fuck Ser. Too hot today.” The guy stopped fanning himself. “Right, sweet pea?” He plopped the hat on the girl and pulled it over her crying face. He shoved her into a blind trip toward the other guy. Then, he got chest to chest with Kru.

“Well, who the hell are you?”

“I’m a customer,” Kru said, stepping forward and seeing the man’s bloodshot eyes. Behind Kru, some thin news broadcaster’s voice was trapped in heat. That damn wagon radio had switched itself on again.

“Customers don’t come here.” The man stepped back then scratched a few holes in the crook of his elbow. “Try again.”

“Fine. Friend of Ser’s. Who are all ya’ll?”

“Smith,” the other guy said. The chain swung free from the chair now. The girl had thrown the hat on the faded 8. “And he’s—”

“Zolan,” the other guy said fast.

Smith eyed Zolan, not getting the message, the whole fake name game.
“Okay, Zolan,” Kru said. “You fellas hand me that girl there and—”

“She valuable merchandise.” Zolan grabbed her arm then whispered to her. “You throw my hat on the floor like it trash?”

She nodded.

“Well, it is.” He patted her shoulder. “But we can’t just be handing you over like you trash, can we?”

“Let’s just put her back,” Smith said. He thumbed behind himself at the stainless steel door.

“You guys not trading ‘em,” Kru said, piecing bits together. A bird flew from one of the milk crates. “You’re babysitting. You guys are dealers.”

“You a cop or something.” Zolan squinted then wiped sweat from his eyelid.

“I seen enough TV to know how that goes.” Kru took slow steps toward the blacked-out office door. “I say ‘no,’ you say I’m lying. I say ‘yes,’ and you get me. You got a new engineer?” He shook the handle. Locked.

“Get away from there.” Zolan shoved Kru, but Kru just scooched closer toward the office’s windows.

“You said it yourself.” Against one of the windows, Kru cupped his hands and tried to peer past the black. “To heck with Ser.”

“How you know about his engineers?” Zolan followed Kru as he pressed against each glass.

“I used to be one for Ser. Weren’t trained as an engineer though. Just his fancy title he used when he forced me into it.”

“You build the Maze?” Smith asked, guiding the girl to the steel door. “For the girls.”
“They still calling it that?” Kru asked surprised, digging round his pants pockets then shirt pockets for a paperclip. “You ever seen inside?”

“Yeah,” Zolan said, “how you think we get her?”

The girl was crying and trying not to cry. That sad shoulder heave. That air pushing up her lungs as sharp as nail gun blasts. Maybe one of the older girls had already told her that crying did no good. Some clients liked to see little girls cry. Others’d refuse to pay Ser if they did cry. She was still alive though. Still had water behind those eyes. Kru wanted those tears for himself. Her face hadn’t become a gargoyle, a creature, something entirely wild. It made sense now. In his note, Ian put down My face has grown all stone and ugly. I’ve crawled ocean floor. I’ve seen the apocalypse in my father’s eyes.

Kru circled back to the office door. “I tell you what.” He bent a paperclip open. “I’ll get you fellas some white powder from Ser’s office, and I’ll babysit for a while—”

“China White?” Smith asked.

Kru shrugged. “Can’t say I’m up-to-date with any the names. I just remember—if Ser hasn’t changed—he’s got some white powder and a bit of cash tucked inside his office. Probably got videos he uses to blackmail poor guys, too.”

“You ain’t getting no freebies,” Zolan said.

“I don’t want a girl or any powder.” He straightened out the other paperclip. “I’m just going in here one way or another and figured you fellas could take some benefits from it.”

Smith nodded to Zolan.

“We don’t do our shit,” Zolan said, “and we can get it any time—”

“Not China White, man,” Smith said.

Kru glanced at the needle holes in Zolan’s arm. “You say you don’t test it at all?”
“You don’t know shit.” Zolan folded his arms and glanced back at the girl.

“You’re right, there,” Kru said, “I don’t have a clue about tar. But, I do know Ser.” Kru rubbed the paperclips together. “Makes us all do things we don’t wanna.”

Zolan kicked his hat, sent it spinning in a white circle toward the steel door.

“Girls aren’t going anywhere,” Kru said, “and Ser keeping the best for himself—Don’t that sound like Ser?” Kru kneeled down slow then pushed the paperclips into the lock.

“Yeah.” Zolan plopped into a folding chair and spit at the steel door. “That’s the sack of shit.”

“You toss us some China, and we’ll leave you alone. Yeah, Zolan?” Smith’s mouth almost looked wet. Maybe heroin made people’s mouths water. Kru had never tried any.

“But, I’m going first,” Zolan said, “and I get five hundred dollars cash.” He sat up quick and pointed at Smith. “And I get the girl and you ain’t telling me what I can and can’t do with her this time.”

“Deal.” Smith pushed the girl into Zolan’s arms, and the lock clicked open.

“Give us a bag,” Smith said before Kru could turn the handle.

The office hadn’t changed either. The light shone harsh, trapped by three sides of painted black windows and an uninsulated, hot metal wall. Everything was tight, small, just the opposite of Ser and his two oversized coats that draped on the computer chair pushed perfectly under the oak desk drawer. Also locked. A bunch of bubbles popped on the computer screensaver next to a framed photo of a different girl at eight or nine, Ser’s girl, Joan. A general color of tan stretched round the room from all the stacks of manila envelopes and newspapers and old Polaroids. The papers almost stood tall enough to touch the bottoms of the corkboards. Photo after photo of unsmiling girls were pinned up. Some yarn dangled round thumb tacks like serial killer maps on
those crime shows. The yarn hung all the way down to a safe.

“The China,” Smith said again. On top of the safe, Kru unzipped a black bag. It had some hoses, a couple needles, spoon, and the white packets Smith was calling for. Kru tossed it out to Smith, and Zolan was pulling off the girl’s tank top.

The drawer lock broke easy. Kru shuffled through old receipts, Ser’s notes to himself like he was planning to write a book or something, and a purple origami thing flattened by time. The wagon radio had shut itself off again. This left nothing but the girl’s sniffling and Smith mumbling about water.

Kru lowered himself in front of the safe and spun the combination knob round. He looked all beside and under the safe, in a few manila envelopes, through the desk papers. The only thing with any numbers on it was 77755 that had the word “Garden” written next to it. That combo didn’t work neither. Every combo that came to his mind, he tried. His calloused fingers twisted round the notched knob again and again. The date when Ser’d first approached Kru. The day Ser got his first girl. The day he purchased the warehouse. Ser’s birthday. The day Kru built the girls’ rooms. The year Ser’s favorite TV show, Full House, went off the air. The year Fuller House came on the air.

“Damn it!” He banged his hand against the safe’s top. Then he rattled it, shook the grey box back and forth like he was wrestling something bigger. The girl’s breathing had become whines now, and they floated their way loud and clear into the office.

“This is what you get,” Kru mumbled. The bubbles on the screensaver kept popping, unfazed by anything. Maybe that’s why they kept separating into bubbles instead of being a whole. Each bubble like each board or nail or person can’t see the whole cause they’re part of the whole. And the whole is too terrible. They just keep being born to annihilate themselves.
Next to the screen, the light glared off the picture’s glass, smudging out Joan’s face. Quick, he grabbed the frame from Ser’s desk and dug out her photo. On the back was just her name and a date, numbers that still didn’t work. But that date had to be the day the photo was taken and not her birthday. Frantic, Kru rubbed his hands over the rows of photos pinned on the corkboards. They swung from his touch, and the girl outside screamed. All the way back, tucked behind a filing cabinet, Kru ripped Joan’s photo down and flipped to the date on the back. He turned each number slow, careful for each tick. Then with a click, he pulled the safe open.

Two of the bottom shelf bags were full of what he’d came for, cure money. The other bottom shelf bag had more China White. He pushed that back then scooted the top shelf contents forward. There sat a 9 mm next to Ser’s black client book.

Round and round, Kru untwined the book’s leather cord. His broken nails scrolled down the names of all the people who’d spent a night, a day, an hour, fifteen minutes with the girls. Five columns—client name, girl name, place, date & time, and amount. Unhackable, Ser used to say. Why he’d never put that book on the computer. Kru flipped back, and the years slipped. 2017, 2014, 2011, 2008, 2003. And there in front of him was his daughter’s name, Sara. She’d filled almost a whole column. Sara at some truck stop Kru’d never heard of. Sara in a room at Fantasy Casino. Sara at a Five Stars Massage Parlor. Sara somewhere in the Knox County Fair. Sara just “Chasing the Dragon.” Sara at that Inn off Kingston Pike. That Navy Seal guy. Kru closed the book.

He fell against the desk. Some of the girls’ pinned photos were still swinging slightly. It was like they were trying to wiggle free. Trying to crawl out of their own gardens, their own annihilations. Kru yanked them down. One by one, then two, then four. Handfuls of faces. Girls ripped from memories and time. He kicked over manila folders and emptied the filing cabinet.
He pulled the yarn until it unfurled into one straight line. He unplugged the computer then tipped it on its black face. It didn’t crack somehow, but Kru left it face down and littered by the girls’ Polaroids.

He tossed the client book into a money bag and shut off the light.

Smith and Zolan were lying unmoved over that purple 8. Smith’s eyes had rolled back into his head, and that girl was trapped naked under Zolan’s arm. She was tracing some freckles on her hand.

“He hurt you?” Kru set the heavy bags on the floor.

The girl nodded, not looking at Kru.

“The other girls here?”

The girl nodded again then poked at the spoon’s end.

“Don’t touch that,” Kru said, and the girl went back to connecting her freckles. Kru pat Zolan’s shoulder. He didn’t move, but the needle still sticking out his arm wobbled. He’d only half emptied it before passing out.

Kru stretched his back and caught an eyeful of blinding glint off the steel door. His eyes watered, and he dabbed sweat off his forehead. Everything was quiet as he folded up his hankie. No sirens. No radio newscaster. No birds making music in this heat. Behind the soundproof door though, Kru suspected the girls were whispering to one another. Telling each other what their dreams had been, what they still were. Confessing little fears and places they hurt. Maybe laughing at funny faces they’d try to outdo each other with.

The door wasn’t too hot under Kru’s hand. It wasn’t like wood. No grains or layered textures or different porousness. His hands almost felt softened by rubbing that metal. As if it could undo all the years, all the layers his skin had grown and died and hardened.
He rested his ear against the door’s middle. No heartbeat or breath or empty stomach gurgle. The door held no stains or colors or fingerprints. Like no one had touched this door ever. It was just smooth, perfect, a child’s body.

The electronic code next to the door had five dark boxes for the combo. Kru had wanted to install a heater even for the mild Tennessee winters and a fan if not a whole air conditioner for these damn hot summers. But, Ser hadn’t let him, saying the girls were clever. They’d find some way to rig an escape or set themselves on fire. Might as well been a fire in there today though.

Kru tried Joan’s birthday numbers again. The lock light still held its red glow. He tried every other combination he’d already spun to open the safe. None of them worked until he remembered some five numbers written down on a paper in Ser’s desk.

He ran back to the upturned office and pulled out the desk drawer. He clawed for the paper that had “Garden” written on it next to five numbers. Ser’d always been careful within the outside world seeing in but never too cautious with what was going on inside. This let Kru press that 7 three times and that 5 twice to hear the startling snap of the door unseal.

No one pulled the door in. No one rushed out. Kru glanced at the girl behind him. She stayed unfazed like this had happened too many times before. And then he pushed into the Maze.

Just as he’d built though, it wasn’t a maze at all. Just a straight hallway leading back to a single bathroom. Both sides of the hallway had six concrete, horseshoe arches. Dirty PVC strip curtains hung from each arch like the rooms were loading docks or walk-in coolers. Even with the door open, light caught hardly anything in that hallway but a giant silver paint stain on the floor. Must of had a paint day inside the Maze and out.

The first room on his left was empty. Looked like some prisoner of war bunk in an old movie. Ser must of stripped the carpet and taken out the extra chairs cause all that was left was
the worn yellow carpet adhesive and a thin twin bed with a thin twin mattress. Someone had sanded the back wall though as it was smooth when all the three others were still rough concrete.

The third and fourth rooms had girls. A few had huddled together, outgrown legs dangled off the beds. Some ignored him like the girl outside. Others turned their darkened eyes toward him. Until finally one of them asked what he wanted.

“It’s what you want,” he said, not getting too close.

“I can’t want anything,” she said back. She was older, hugging smaller girls against her thin, white dress.

“Listen.” Kru lowered himself slow. “I’m not gonna say I’m not gonna hurt you or that I’m different from the others. I’m just gonna say you can want something now.” He nodded to the open door. “I’m gonna leave that door there open. Now, I don’t have a clue when Ser’s coming back, but I pretty you find yourself gone. You got a responsibility to these girls. To get them out. And I expect you do the same for yourself.” He pushed himself up and then rubbed adhesive dust off his hands. He left slow, only hearing the plastic curtains hitting like wind chimes from other girls peeking out.

The girl outside had found and put on a man’s button up that she’d already started sweating through. Smith remained unmoved next to Zolan whose arm still held that needle.

“You think he’d die if I pushed in the rest?” Kru asked, pausing in front of the bodies. The girl stayed quiet. She just leaned against the open steel door.

“I think he would.” Kru leaned down and injected the full load into Zolan’s vein. He picked up the black bags, and nothing happened. Kru slid into the hot wagon expecting Zolan to sputter and choke, grasp air for an invisible tether back to life. But nothing like that happened. He probably went real peacefully, the body forgetting to breathe. The wagon radio didn’t turn
itself on. Kru didn’t breathe too loud. Everything was just so quiet as he sat and waited.

The girls still hadn’t come out. Kru grabbed the red carpentry pencil off the dash again and tapped it against the steering wheel. He tried to write something, anything that would get his son to talk to him again. Kru’d once explained to Sara how there are four things in this world that people can never tell anyone. He wasn’t exactly sure why four. That was just the number of memories he’d built up and saved for years and years now. He hadn’t gotten anymore unsayable things like how bones eventually stop growing.

“Like a secret,” Sara’d once said.

“No,” Kru corrected, “the four are different than ordinary secrets or bad things you’ve done or people done to you. They’re things you’re ashamed of cause they’re too beautiful. Like you don’t know how to say anything about them cause every word you chosen can never unbury what the beauty is in your mind. When you ponder on them, they stretch out limitless night sky. But when you shape words round them, they shrivel to nothing more than cardboard ideas. See, it’s a dance you can’t repeat. Some nostalgia you can’t rewind. A flower you pick and dies. And not being able to fit words to the experience is a worse torture than never collecting the four memories in the first place. You see? Cause now you know they’re alive but you can never share them with anyone. The second you try is the second they die cause words are only two pennies scratching together, and you will have just destroyed a part of your soul.” Something had come over him during the speech and, for a moment, he felt like college boy, a philosopher, a good man.

Sara had then demanded to know the four memories, and Kru’d just shook his head, saying, “You’ve just missed the point.”
Now, he knew the irony of writing a letter. Writing a letter when words would always fail.

Some click sounded, and his hand hovered over the radio knob, ready to turn that possessed thing off. But, the radio didn’t startle this time. In front of the station wagon, small fingers wrapped round the hot side of the open car entrance to the warehouse. The hand didn’t jerk back from the heat. It didn’t react at all, just slid slowly up the side of the entryway. Then one by one, silhouettes of different heights and different distances from Kru’s wagon crept slowly forward. Seven, ten, fourteen bodies shuffled scattered over the 8 like the shell-shocked pushing through no man’s land. Some of them clung hands, merging their shapes. Others seemed to float over the dealers’ bodies. All of them moved like in a mirage, their white dresses swaying unnervingly slow as they grew closer to Kru.

He dug through the cup holder to search for his keys. Receipts and spare change and some loose nails but no keys. He popped open the glove compartment and couldn’t find them there either. He fumbled through his cassette tape box in the backseat. Shifted round The Lion King and Puff the Magic Dragon soundtracks but no keys. He yanked down the visor but realized they were already in the ignition and the car had been on this whole time.

He flipped the visor back up, and a girl’s face glared in at him through the windshield. Her hand wrapped the inside groove where the window would sit if it were rolled up. She slid it slow across the length of the door before shifting her gaze from Kru to something beyond.

Then, all at once from some whistle or siren or call that Kru couldn’t hear, the girls ran. They stampeded, trampled, poured out of the warehouse. They made a river round his car. Just blurs of ghost white and different skin tones and messes of hair. None of them said anything. None of them made a sound until one started screaming then the next then the next. Their run
challenged wild horses. They ran like being nipped by lightening. They ran like they were chasing their lives.

The girls disappeared soon in his rear-view mirror, but their sound lingered. No matter how close or far away their screams got, there was no clear way to say what they were trying to communicate. They were just a creature chorus, each girl sounding off different. Even after Kru was sure they’d all gone, he could still hear their calls. Some trick of the mountains. Some promise maybe. He’d freed Ser’s girls. He’d freed them all.

Kru smoothed a fresh sheet of paper against his thigh and rotated the pencil. The girls wouldn’t be a fifth thing he could never tell anyone, but they had come closer than anything else to joining the other four memories. He picked up Ian’s scalloped seashell from the dash, twirled it between his fingers, and then fished it into his jeans pocket. In the June heat of that Tennessee sun, he scribbled something down. The radio clicked on again, but Kru didn’t care to fight with it anymore. He just leaned back and looked at the simple, black stain of “Ian, people change.”

Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs 1—May 5

No one believed Private Isaacs. The sand 370 kliks north of the Iraqi green zone all looked red. It didn’t matter the light because even under the mesh netting of the military Container Housing Units—CHUs he’d heard—the sand still held a deep red. He didn’t smoke cigarettes like the other men leaning outside of their CHUs and trying to catch some shade before the hump. He didn’t have his battle rattle packed. Everything seemed to move slower in this heat—that red sand skirting off dune tops in the distance—inviting mirage. It wasn’t the training deserts of Camp Pendleton. It didn’t hold the same bright shimmer of a planned vacation mom and dad could never afford. It couldn’t keep a body even if it tried. It could be a violent place,
the first violent place mom told him about as a kid. No matter what it was or wasn’t, it held some spice—something extra. Like the crystal dried remains of a once lake. Like fish fossils had disintegrated a top coat. Like a whole country had bled into it.

“Huntings,” Isaacs said as the Lance Corporeal stormed by, “you can see it today, right? Looks really red.”

“Where’s your shit?” He poked his freckled face into their shared CHU. Huntings’ flak jacket already clung tight to his chest, right under his A4 slung diagonal across his back. “You heard XO Anders, yeah? Or were you daydreaming?”

Isaacs shrugged. “Something about a new CO—”

“Desert Devil. The Desert Devil—”

“So what, he has a nickname?”

Huntings shook his head then glanced to the side at Marines distracted by each other’s stories. “You need help packing, Indiana?”

Isaacs looked down at the other Marines too and nodded. “Maybe.”

There was no boundary for sand. It blew inside their CHU all day, and no matter how much sweeping or dusting happened, it always made its way back in. Huntings tracked in a long trail as he passed his own full pack and went directly to the standardized plastic bins of uniform shit. Onto the bunk, he threw Isaacs’ M50 oxygen mask, an IFAK with a gauze tail hanging out, and a breaching kit. All BT, he’d learned how to disassemble, shake down, pull apart, and build back up. Like Drill Sergeants were supposed to do to the recruits. But Isaacs’ Sergeant hadn’t been some ultraloud Full Metal asshole to him. It might have been because the other guys called him “faggot” so much already. Or because he looked a half-step away from being albino with his blonde-white hair. Or maybe the Sergeant had somehow found out the newspaper headlines long
ago. The boy not taken after his sister was.

“There.” Huntings slung the A4 over his back. “That’ll get you started. Be right back.”

The CHU seemed more crowded after Huntings left—more claustrophobic. He didn’t take the careful steps of rolling and tucking gear. He packed now the same hasty, careless way he had before leaving mom and dad’s after the tornado forced him into the basement for the last time. Dad said he couldn’t survive one month “on the streets” and he’d been fucking right. His backpack had been stolen within three days—a police officer’d said he couldn’t sleep on Gregg Park benches—he’d woken up to some guy’s fingers in his hair one night. No one at school asked him why he smelled like dog piss even though their hands fanned and heads turned when Isaacs passed. Even the stone Sergeant recruiter in his crimson stripe outer seam who visited after a week of Isaacs’ runaway simply nodded at him despite the smell and went on with his speech about promises. “Free college,” “never see combat,” “movie militaries are an exaggeration,” and, most importantly, “to those of you who are not afraid of never seeing your family again and perhaps losing your sanity, I offer you a chance to be something more than anyone here could ever amount to.” The Sergeant had given him his business card to “earn the title of becoming my brother, bound in blood and born in fire. I’m not going to waste your time, so you better hope you don’t waste mine.” He’d just pocketed the card and went back to the park. It wasn’t until he’d gotten a knee to the face by a meth head and a “Hey, glow stick—where’re my pants?” that he crawled back to mom and dad. Mom had been happy, mumbling “my child, my child’s come back to me.” But, dad—dad didn’t say anything for two days, and on the third, he just muttered “quitter coward.” Isaacs had enlisted the next day.

Isaacs flung the box of A4 rounds and cursed when they thumped onto the sand floor. That damn broken latch. The ones under the desk rolled back to him easy. He scooped sand
when cupping rounds forward. Almost all sat in a nice pile at the bed’s side, but a few had rolled so far back under the head. He tried to scooch the bed, but everything was bolted down. Easier transport. He wriggled under the low-set frame, twisting his shoulder to fit just beyond the metal and between boxes of even more gear. His arms stretched long to grab the brass casings, but his shoulder caught against the frame when he tried to push out.

“Shit.” He couldn’t twist back how he’d twisted in. He bucked his back against the boxes. They were too close to him now. Everything grew too dark too soon. His chest against the floor—heart pulsed down like gravity and he was glass—breathing faster and faster he could smell the metal frame catching his body—smell of blood—smell of the sand filling up his lungs. He swore something scurried past him. “Huntings?” His lungs couldn’t reach their bottom—the rounds dug into his hand—he squeezed their imprint deep into his palm. “Can someone?” He didn’t live in an hour glass—he was one—red sand rising to take air. “One…two…three,” he started the count, his eyes closed. Already his arm let some tension go. “Stop it,” he said and his body went flat.

“Checking for monsters?” Huntings’ voice sounded. He had to be situating his fifty pound battle rattle, fastens and buckles clacking.

Slow, Isaacs lay flat and shimmied out. The two rounds rolled from his hands, which then curled into fists under his chin. A child holding a blanket.

“You alright, Indiana?”

“Fine.” Breathing started to steady, and out the CHU door, a whole expanse stretched its wilderness. “I’ll be right back.” He peeled himself limb by limb off the floor. He’d been dipped like one of mom’s powdered donuts in sand not sugar but didn’t slap any of it off.

“We got a raid in five.”
He just waved his hand at Huntings then felt the hot wind outside. It had to be over a hundred degrees today and had been every day of his one month there. But, Isaacs rubbed his shoulders, somehow freezing in the sandpit heat. Something was wrong. He was cold all through the Initial Strength Test, the Vocational Aptitude Battery Exam, the Qualification Test, the Fitness Training, and when he was lying to the psychologist. Even the day before he’d been deployed, mom had commented on his cold hands when he kissed her goodbye then visited Kazoos to find dad. Whiskey and smoke filled the dim bar next to an overpass and a dark green cornfield. Removing his cover, Isaacs entered in his desert digicams.

“Son, you lost?” the bartender asked. Only two men sat at the bar, smoking.

“No, I’m just here to talk to my dad,” Isaacs had said.

“Who be your dad?”

“Ricky Isaacs.”

“That’s me.” A man swiveled on a bar stool. Isaacs couldn’t see his eyes under the shadowed brim of the James River Coal Company hat. Light shone off a drool spot, pooling to the side of his open mouth. “What ya want?”

“Dad.”

“Gabriel?”

Isaacs smiled. “Yeah, dad. It’s me.”

His father smirked. “How ya get outta the fucking freezer?”

“Dad, don’t.” The bartender turned away from them.

“I will put ya in there.” His father swigged. “Or nah, nah, wait, I keep my promise. I keep my promise.”

“Ya not doin’ a damn thing like that.”

“Yes, I am. I signed a contract. I’m doing good for once. I broke a PFT record.” Isaacs swallowed. “Mom seemed—” His fingers traced the lining of his cover. “Worse?”

“Both her kids abandoned her—”

“I’m not abandoning. I’m going to help people.” He paused. “And Eliza never—”

“That’s right.” His father sloshed whiskey onto Isaacs’ digicams then poked a finger into his chest. “It was you.”

“I’m not doing this anymore.” He swatted his father’s hand away. “This was my celebration.”

“I’m celebratin’ ya!” He downed the rest of his whiskey. “Hero,” he cried out, “my son’s gonna be a hero.”

“Why are you still drinking that shit? Won’t you ever change?”

“Everybody can change they world,” he slurred.

“Dad,” Isaacs insisted, “why you still swallowing that shit?”

“Because,” he lowered to a whisper, “I want to.”

Isaacs exhaled and turned to the bartender. “How much’s he owe?”

“I just put it in his tab.”

“See.” His father poked Isaacs. “I can take care of things, watch after ‘em, not get ‘em gone.”

“I’m driving you home,” Isaacs said.

“Shit, ya are,” his father said before passing out onto the bar.

Before BT, Isaacs would not have been able to carry his father. But now, the man felt slightly heavier than battle rattle. He carried him in and out of the car, through the back screen
door of the kitchen as not to wake mom on the living room couch, and up the stairs to his bedroom. The humidity of Indiana heat wet his father’s brow the whole time. Isaacs clicked on the fan and drew a thin sheet over his father, hoping that he’d sweat out the night, sweat out all the poison, the memory of their conversation, his anger and blame and drinking. And, as Isaacs pulled the sheet under his father’s chin, he hoped the sweat would mix in and hide his father’s tears.

Isaacs nodded at nothing but the red sand. He rubbed where the two rounds had dug into his hand. He’d never done a raid before and didn’t know who this Desert Devil guy was. But, he realized today marked the second panic attack he’d had since arriving.

***

Isaacs counted to eight again and again. One AC Helmet suctioned to the regulation half-inch shave on the sides of his blonde head. Sweat stung his vision. Two elbows bumped against Isaacs—Huntings and the Terp, Minx. Three, four blurs of Iraqis kicking up dust on the way to the market. Five visible exits from the Humvee should it take fire. Six pockets he could see stuffed with canteens, 180 rounds, MREs. Seven, eight more months until he could get out of the sandpit. But, nothing waited for him at home. Maybe he could bunk with his friend from BT’s family for a little longer. Maybe that number was up. Maybe he could never escape.

Flies swarmed Isaacs and the men as they exited the Humvee. He unfastened his ACH from his head and clipped it around a pack strap. Rotting fruit and dog shit marred the path leading into the market. Left and right, vendors called out in Arabic. He couldn’t understand any of them but assumed they were calling out prices and deal for their stands holding coffee beans, dates, basmati, pomegranates, and ingredients for dolma. Some simply fanned themselves under the cloth awnings. Others laughed at what seemed to be the punch line of a joke.
Two boys in off-white loose clothes and cracked sandals ran up to Isaacs. “American, American,” they shouted, “buy, good deal.” They showed an assortment of unlabeled DVDs.

“What’s this?” Isaacs asked.

“Very good deal.”

“You don’t wanna buy that shit,” Huntings said, pushing the DVDs back into the boys’ chests. “Rips of Transformers and other bogie bullshit. We got a haji shop back at base with better stuff.”

The boys shrugged and approached the two other Marines behind Isaacs.

“You got an admirer, though.” Huntings nodded above Isaacs’ head.

Two small hands were stretching through the woven mat-roof of the market. Through the squares, Isaacs locked eyes with a girl, three or four years old. She lay on her belly, her brown hair falling through the squares. She reached farther and farther toward Isaacs’ shock of white blond hair just out of her reach.

“Her head’s not covered,” Isaacs said.

“She’s too young, hasn’t hit puberty yet. That seems to be the pattern, at least.”

Isaacs stretched his hand toward her wiggling fingers. Without hesitation, she wrapped her whole hand around his index finger. Her giggles caught wind—it was the same giggle, the same brown eyes of his sister, Eliza. For the first time since arriving in the sandpit a month ago, Isaacs laughed.

“Come on,” Huntings said, offering Isaacs a dried date. “Marsalam,” he mumbled to the vendor, and then to Isaacs, “put your hat back on.”

Murmurs of Arabic fused with Minx and XO Anders’s conversation behind Isaacs and Huntings. Language narrowed into the long tunnel of vendors—it became smaller—there was
less space to breathe—Isaacs walked faster—his pack bumped into the steady stream of people. Pomegranates tumbled from the slanted stand with the brush of his pack. He slid past Huntings, pushed past two women in black abayas, ran past the last compression of vendors until he broke into the open space.

His count to eight stopped at five, interrupted by giggles to his right. The girl had followed him, having managed to hop from the roof to the sand. Something was wrong though—she was limping.

“Did you sprain your ankle?” he asked.

Her smile faded into a grimace as she put pressure on her left heel.

“No, no, sit down,” Isaacs said, but the girl continued to walk toward him. “Um,” Isaacs sloughed off his battle rattle and pointed to the girl and then himself. “You, me, sit down.” He plopped into the sand next to her. She mirrored his action. “Good.” He smiled.

Sand crusted around the wound. A chunk no bigger than Isaacs’ thumb had been carved out of her small heel. It was impossible to tell how deep it was. With each slight movement, more sand fell out of the wound. This was no nail piercing, no animal mauling. It was a perfect circle to impede movement. Someone had done this to her.

“Here.” Isaacs unclipped his IFAK with the gauze tail from his thigh. “Put your foot on my knee.” Pointing and gesturing followed, but the girl did not move. Isaacs grabbed her foot, and she exploded into a scream. “I’m not gonna hurt you!” He let go of her foot. The sun’s heat on his back suddenly disappeared. “I’m not gonna hurt you. That’s the last thing I would do.” Without tears, without more screaming, the girl silently got up and ran, ran as fast as she could away from him. “I’m not gonna hurt you,” he yelled, but she was already halfway through the tunnel of vendors once more.
“What if she had an IED?”

Standing behind him was a blackened silhouette. A massive expanse of a man had consumed the sun. Isaacs had been impressed with his own muscles formed during BT, but this man looked like he could do that pointless, horizontal bucket-hold of his own piss for days.

“What if she was carrying messages for an Ali Baba? Or better yet, what if her father was a part of ISIS or their haji-sister group Red Wing?”

“I don’t see what that’d have to do with her.”

“What’s your name, Private?”

“Isaacs,” he said, straightening his Velcroed name badge on his flak jacket.

“No, your civilian name.”

“Gabriel Isaacs. And you—”

“Gabriel? Like the angel?”

“I guess. I don’t know what my parents thought when they named me.”

“Your parents religious?”

“Not particularly.”

“You religious?”

“Not that I know of.”

The figure laughed. It was almost contagious. “Listen, Gabriel Isaacs.” A line of spit dangled out of his lips and onto Isaacs’ battle rattle. “I already like you, so here we go: Don’t think you know shit here.” The line of spit glistened like slug slime.

“How long’ve you been in the sandpit?” Isaacs asked.

“Isaacs,” he heard XO Anders call from behind, “you building a fucking sand castle? Get up.”
He stumbled to his feet, the figure of the man coming to light. “Brukk” was now clearly displayed across his flak jacket, as in Commanding Officer Brukk, Washington’s Driver, hasn’t been home since Jesus was a corporeal, the only CO in Iraq to “get shit done,” Desert Devil. The Desert Devil. Shadows grew around his reputation—rumors, half-truths, half-lies, legends. No one really knew. They knew the story about Brukk’s single-handedly catching and killing Osama bin Laden was false as was the story about him speaking desert storms to life. But reality became more muddled. Maybe he’d stormed a burning bus to extract a young man from inside. Maybe he’d been the one who’d lit the bus fire. Maybe he’d turned off the projected video of another beheading during the Marines’ “free time” and gave a speech about “loyalty to the fallen.” Maybe he’d been the one filming the beheading. Maybe he’d shot a line of Iraqis in the night desert because he’d found their chlorine bombs. Maybe he’d followed protocol by arresting them. And maybe the rumors that he’d shot a Marine months ago were not altogether false. But then again, maybe the Marine had really “rushed” him.

No matter—there was always this charisma around him. People spoke about him as if coming out of hypnosis, out of a trance, out of being snake charmed and swindled. People were never quite sure how or why they hadn’t said “No” to him.

“Desert Devil,” XO started, smiling. “You’ve already met Private Isaacs. Private First Class Minx—our Interpreter, Lance Corporal Huntings, and Private Destin—our driver.” Isaacs performed a hasty and sloppy salute, ashamed he had sat during their whole conversation and wondering why a Commanding Officer would be a part of their five, now six-man fire team.

“Ya’ll,” XO continued, “should be fucking honored this man’s in our fire team today.”

“How’s Christine,” Brukk asked XO quietly.

“Fat as ever, God love her,” XO said, patting his A4 with a gloved hand.
“Alright.” Brukk turned toward the fire team. Isaacs guessed that was enough personal conversation for the year. “None of you’ve fled yet. Good.” He then turned back to XO like he was trying to control two conversations. “Speaking of that he’s at Mustafa’s Crystal Shop.”

“Fucker’s drinkin’ tea?” Destin asked.

“What?” Isaacs asked.

“What are your orders?” XO turned to Brukk.

“Apprehend him. He’ll be my PUC, and go from there.”

Mustafa’s Crystal Shop was less than a klik from the market. A few chickens scurried in front of the doorless entrance as half of the Marines waited and the other half closed the perimeter in back. Through the tall glass windows, Isaacs saw Brukk enter the shop. Two women sharing a small table paused their conversation. A man behind a counter, presumably the store owner, Mustafa, stopped rinsing tea grains out of a small glass. He placed it next to a stack of little black boxes, dainty, petite. They were smaller than a fist.

“My friend, black and one piece sugar, today? Drink in any crystal,” Mustafa said, motioning to the rows of crystal glasses wallpapering the shop.

“Not today, Mustafa. I’m just looking for,” Brukk paused, surveying the room, “him.” His eyes zeroed in on a pale-skinned man in civilian clothes.

“Shit,” the man yelled. He jumped up, glass shattering on the floor, and ran toward the shop’s back exit.

Brukk walked behind him, momentarily disappearing around a corner. His Barrett 9-mm was pressed to the man’s temple when they reappeared from the back exit. Brukk used his Barrett to direct the man like a horse, forcing him to the ground inside the shop. The man’s hands
landed in the broken glass from Brukk’s force. Blood began to pool in his palms. The two
two women got up and left.

“Clean up the mess you made,” Brukk said, pointing now with the Barrett to the radius of
broken crystal.

One-by-one the man plucked tiny fragments of glass from the floor.

“Instinctual, isn’t it?”

The man did not respond.

“Fight or flight. Most people have both. Some people only have flight, like you. Some
people only have fight, like me. And some people just freeze.”

The man pulled at the shards embedded in his own palms.

“Or it might just be a bunch of bullshit. Maybe it’s not biological at all. Maybe—” Brukk
leaned down to whisper in the man’s ear, inaudible to Isaacs.

The man did not make eye contact with Brukk.

“Or maybe I’m just fuckin’ with you,” Brukk called out. “Get up.” The ground was free
of glass, the shards still collected in the man’s hand. Brukk had the man dump them into Brukk’s
gloved hand like a child surrendering a toy. “Bind him to the inside of the Humvee. Wasted
enough time here today. Convoy’s waiting.”

Brukk remained inside until all of the men exited the shop. Then, he leaned in and
whispered an “I’m sorry” to Mustafa. He poured the broken shards into an open cloth Mustafa
held. Isaacs heard an unintelligible exchange of Arabic. Then, as if he were witnessing a private
moment, Brukk made eye contact with him. It was not angry or aggressive. It wasn’t guilt-ridden
or fearful. It was almost, in some way, vulnerable. He turned away from their conversation and
walked toward the Humvee.
“Isaacs,” XO yelled, “get over here. Watch this.” All of the men were facing an area stretched behind the market. A large truck slowly backed toward a black makeshift dumpster where a crowd of people were standing. “Watch this here.” Two men in the truck started shoveling and kicking boxes and bags of food into the dumpster. Black bags of meat split open like intestines. Brown clouds of flies swarmed left and right as the heat of the bare-bottomed metal dumpster began to cook the food.

A group of three men could not wait. They climbed the sides of the dumpster with white rags wrapped around their hands to prevent burns. They shifted through the food, tucking wanted items in sling-bags around their shoulders and tossing other food into the crowd. A woman yelled after one of the stray liquid bags smeared juices on her abaya.

Then Isaacs saw her—the little girl. She was sitting on the ground, a cloth under her to absorb the sand’s heat. Standing next to her was a boy about five, six, seven years older than she was. He rigorously swept up food from the men’s tossing and stuffed it into a bag wrapped around his small chest. An orange box landed near the boy. He grabbed it, shouted something, and waved it in the air. A few steps away, a woman turned toward him and nodded several times in a blue hijab. With a large, cracked melon, she approached the girl and boy. The boy reached for the melon, but the woman yanked it back from him. She then offered him the melon slowly. He reached forward again, but she pulled it back, wrapping it up in her abaya. He cocked his hip and folded his arms. Once more, she offered it to him. He hesitated, and then, like a cobra, the boy snatched the melon. The girl erupted in giggles, familiar giggles, and began clapping. She bounced up and down on the cloth, and the boy dug out a piece of melon and offered it to her. Huffing a full bag on her shoulders, the woman hugged the boy and scooped up the girl. Isaacs watched as the three of them disappeared in the distance.
The space between them was so quiet, so peaceful against the clanging of tossed plastic food containers and the yelling, almost auction-like, voices of the crowd. Only windy grit moved around their three bodies. He could hear the familiar buzz of silence—the same buzz of silence that haunted him after the forced weekly front-yard tea parties with the purple teapot and white-haired Eliza—after the two people in hoodies approached him and his sister that October 19th in Indiana—after the lady in the hoodie said Eliza had won a magnificent prize—after the hoodied man ushered Eliza into the rusted Oldsmobile—after he saw his sister disappear behind peeling horizontal lines of the back windshield—and after the wind had blown her empty, plastic teacup off the table’s edge.

“That was fucked up, XO,” Destin said, hopping into the driver’s seat of the Humvee.

“Embrace the suck,” Huntings said.

Next to the deserter was the last remaining seat. Isaacs reentered the claustrophobic space and hoped to leave.

Tin Jimenez 1—June 26

*Mami no tiene ojos, Mami doesn’t have eyes*. Eleven-year-old Tin practiced English inside he and Mami’s Mincan bamboo thatch near Santa Marta, Colombia. Early, before first bird call, he’d given her a pico, goodbye kiss. Then, he’d escaped her cuddling underarm chill. She’d snored like a hog. Tin had covered his mouth, catching laughs before they poked her awake. He’d noticed her eye’s bird foot lines then padded soft steps across the dirt and snuck out free.

World turned upside down in his paint room thatch. The cool, pre-dawn Minca wind rippled the portrait canvas with the no-eyed Mami. A tilt left then right, he danced with her
trying to understand. Mami was puzzle-box wonder. Her eyes held mysteries.

Multicolored rhythms filled his mind, a paint brush between his fingers. First, waterfall blues of his Mami’s hair, though he knew it was black. Then brown and white to catch a light of her dark moon skin, curve of her nose, the jiggly, extra love hanging under her chin. The shushing of horsehair bristles whispered a lullaby hypnotic, her song, one of them she used to sing.

Her blood underneath was like the strokes. He felt her heart though he’d never healed her—same rhythm always as pulse, beat, beat. Connections were just swimming in blood tunnels, bumping against each other, until they came to joints, and then it was all lock-roll of sockets into the fibrous gaps of bone. Not to mention the fat from Arequipe, her favorite caramel dessert. An old man clutching a breadbasket at a panadería had once asked Tin, “Cuál es tu color favorito?” He could have said blue was his favorite color. Or red. Or black. But he had paused and answered, “Mi Mami.”

The portrait would be finished, but no paint could catch her eyes. Perhaps it was variations. One day, she estaba planchando, was ironing her hair on the iron board, and Tin tasted burning skin seconds after the iron slipped. Anyone would have cried, but Mami just stared at her blistered hand with wide, wide open eyes. Another day, to Tin’s annoyance she’d started el juego de imitación by following him within and without their small bamboo thatch. She’d crept behind him then nonchalantly looked sideways when he whipped his head back. “Mami, deja de copiarme,” Tin commanded, hearing his Mami repeat “Stop copying me” in Spanish. Seeing she wouldn’t stop playing the game, he crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue. She stuck out her tongue too but couldn’t cross her eyes. They squinted and wobbled from strain. He had won, and she pulled him into a hug, later fattening him with Arequipe.
Still another time, many years ago while she still searched for Tin’s father, Diego, Mami let her deep collarbone cut heal without Tin’s help. Every day she rubbed fresh honey into her open wound and let bloody sap run onto her breast. Maybe because the blood honey tickled. Maybe she was hungry. Maybe she was painting herself. Maybe it was so she would forget what the Cartagena bus men did to her. Or maybe it was so she wouldn’t. Tin did not know. But he did know that this was the second time in eleven years he could remember her crying. He had seen her eyelashes close willowy when he came home from school early that day. The jar of honey was open. Her breast was bloody. And she cried alone.

He’d seen crinkle crusts of staying tears. He’d seen her eyes make beautiful wrinkles. He’d seen a perfect puzzle-box of human life grow in those browns. Every blink mundane, mysterious, and small in the world—that circle spinning giant void of mysteries. Altogether unimportant except to Tin as it was one of the last mysteries. His English tutor, Amanda, once unrolled a world map and explained how all the corners are inked in now. “Todo el mundo sabe todo de todos, y lo nuevo es imposible. Now, repeat that back,” she’d said. Tin had nodded translating, “Everyone know everything from everyone, and new is impossible.” Tin wet his brush, adding now a excepción de Mami, except for Mami.

Drips and drips of red water fell to the floor before Tin painted the heart key around her neck. The chain always slept on her collarbone scar. Even when he asked, Mami wouldn’t answer what the key unlocked. So, he created. Maybe it unlocked arepa or sticky caramel Arequipe recipes. Maybe it unlocked melodies and harmonies of the lullabies Mami’d stopped singing after the Cartagena bus men. Maybe it unlocked why Angelica and other church people repeated mully-mully, making crosses all over their bodies, especially when they came too close to Tin. Maybe it unlocked something dangerous like the fireworks he’d seen on Abuelo Pedro’s
TV. Maybe it was where he could find a gun. Maybe it could unlock a way to kill people. Maybe it was why his father’d left. Maybe it was why his heart beat alone. Or maybe it was just a necklace, and Mami wanted to play more games.

Wind rippled the canvas, drying all but the eyes. It shook shutters with violence. There was some growing violence in him, too. He had little clue as to why now, maybe because his voice was deeper or his body longer or maybe because the healing lines were everyday for the past two months. The healings had started to hurt. Some days he wanted to rip the chain off Mami’s neck and be done with the mystery of the mystery. He hadn’t told her, fearful she’d close the healing lines or she’d try, at least. Some days he wanted to push his bare palms into Tinto’s grizzling and biting dog. That would silence it forever. Some days he wanted to keep his hands both to himself when Angelica or some other church crosser scaled him up and down with gossiping eyes. Headaches nightmared his sleep for about a month now. Something was growing and changing, he had a feeling not even blood honey could fix.

He wet the brush to paint her eyes. But through gaps of bamboo, orange scratches in black-blue sky told him it was time to go. Lizards would be waking soon.

~

Tin ran to the waterfall. Tourists swarmed Costa Verde of Cienaga and Bahia Concha in Tayrona Park and Pozo Azul, but he knew a different place, the same place the lizards knew. Cascada Rosa, he called it, pink waterfall. It was without stamped name or flagman’s claim, a world map not inked in, too small, too quiet, a secret among lizards and Tin and his Mami.

Lizards already spotted green on the light pink, sparkling rock beds. Not one moved when Tin wrestled himself from a jungle leaf. Rock giants circled the waterfall base, jungle stretching up on all sides of the pink rock circle. Pink was always their color for some reason, not
the grey-brown slick of river rocks. These had a secret as old as time. Maybe they were earth’s
blush as a girl. Even Mother Nature had to start young. Maybe some traveler forgotten by history
books and oral legends promised his son, his love, his father to paint the earth, and pink was the
color of their love. Maybe it was hombre caimán’s first home, the alligator man. Maybe it was all
the years of dumped fish heads, the delight of the lizards. He didn’t know if lizards could lick
their lizardy lips, but he imagined. Or maybe they were slaughtering stones, blood stains from
cut flesh umbrelled out, fading over rocks and time. Amanda, his English tutor, had told him
such things existed.

Tin flattened himself on a wet, cool rock in between long-tailed lizards, staring in
anticipation. Mincan fishermen saved their fish bones and those sharp, bulbous triangles of fish
heads until the end of every two months. They then hauled them up and returned them to the
skinny, Mincan river, ending in Cascada Rosa. At least, that’s what Mami had told him, the
clearer, more logical answer than Tin’s proposed shark-fish battle or acid-water schemes.
Sometimes he was lonely with clear, logical answers. The extraordinary evaporated.

Blood always came first. Water crept under the triangle heads and flooded the dried
blood out. Then the bodies. One head, two tails, five, a cascade—the lizards jumped. They swam
and paddled with tiny, green arms to the center, diving under like hungry birds or fleeing turtles.
Diving farther and farther, they popped up one to the left, two on the right, all dragging spines to
the shore. The center bubbled like piranhas devouring a carcass, that frothing, churning sound.
Tin swallowed, his stomach upset and headache nightmared.

Rolling over to cool his back, Tin resituated the small pocketwatch-shaped container
around his waist and stared at the freshwater sky. The last time he’d dreamed on this rock was
over two months ago, before the healing lines, before the contract Mami’d made, before more
Mincans knew he could heal, before the healing had started to hurt.

He had heard his name through the trees, thinking it Mami. Instead, it had been Mariposa—his Tío Fernando’s second wife. She was not the mami of Emiliano, Tin’s cousin and the tallest and ugliest Mincan boy. Emiliano, the fourteen-year-old bully, was known as “Culicagao”—brat boy or literally “shit from an ass.” Mariposa had come to Tin over two months ago at Cascada Rosa, her chest bleeding from that Culicagao.

“Tin,” Mariposa’d said, “can you help me?” Shaking fingers pulled her red-stained blouse into a “V.” Her nipples remained covered, but she was careful not to scratch or touch the wound—a red-white inflamed burn in the perfect shape on an iron.

“Mariposa,” Tin’d said, “what happened?”

“I was very clumsy, Tin.”

“But,” Tin sat up on the rock, “what happened? You iron your hair like Mami?”

“Yes, of course. I was ironing my hair, and it slipped.” She wasn’t looking at him.

“You know I will see it when I heal you.” Tin paused. “You can tell my Mami if you don’t want me to see. Even she never lets me heal her, so I won’t see what hurts her.”

Sky broke clear, a line of sun between them.

“I can walk with you,” Tin said.

“No, Tin.” She pulled her shirt up. “I don’t want to say this, but you must not tell anyone.”

“Not even my Mami?”

“Especially not her.”

“Why not?”

“She’d kill Fernando.”
“Mami wouldn’t kill anyone. She loves.”


“Emiliano’s a Culicagao. He deserves his hurt.”

“Tin, he’s still human. He hurts cause he hurts.”

“He hurts me, and I don’t hurt.”

“If Fernando finds out Emiliano burned me, they’ll go to the palm field.”

“He would?” Tin sat forward. “Fernando would do that again?”

Tin remembered he’d been cloud watching alone. Emiliano came up like a mad donkey and kicked him in the ribs. Tin’d wrapped his ribs without telling Mami, knowing what Tío Fernando would do. But Mami found out, of course, her close tabs. The next day, Tío Fernando nailed Emiliano’s ear to a wax palm trunk. Those tall, skinny trees that sway and bend and move on windy days. There had been no wind that day. But Tin had brought Emiliano water and apologized. Emiliano had cried.

“I don’t want that to happen,” Tin said. “Why would he do that again? Fernando promised.”

“Because, Tin,” she sighed, “the world’s more complicated than you can understand.”

Birds called into the air. Earth and trees and lizards were waking.

“Of course, I will heal you,” Tin said, standing up. From his waist, he clicked the side of the pocketwatch-shaped container. Its lid flipped open. His fingers sank into the container’s cool mud as he gripped a handful. All round his palm lines and nail beds, he rubbed the mud. Under his white t-shirt, he smoothed mud on his belly, wiping horizontally back and forth like soothing gas pains.

Mariposa grabbed his shoulder. “Does that mean—”
“And,” Tin said, “I will keep your secret.” He’d said it to help Emiliano, some compulsion to protect half-orphan to half-orphan. He’d said it from a boy without a father to protect a boy with a loving-knuckle father.

“Sit on the rocks, please,” Tin’d said before placing his slippery hands almost in a rectangle around the iron mark.

“What else should I do?” Mariposa asked, sliding her skirt under her thighs.

“You don’t need to do anything,” he’d said, “just calm your heart.”

Her skin was soft brown like Mincan coffee beans. Healing always jumped into a telenovela like he’d seen at Abuelo Pedro’s Barranquilla home. Burning eggs, pungent throughout the bamboo thatch, Tin saw Mariposa flip them on the pan-fire with a “¡Qué pena!” An iron rested in the fiery rocks underneath the wire supporting pan-burnt eggs.

Emiliano entered, his pug nose poked high into the air. His eye was swollen black with a bleeding cut. “You burned my food again? What good are you, woman?”

“Stop that,” she’d said, resting the spoon over the pan. “Let me see that.” Her arms stretched toward his face.

“No, get off me, you hag.”

“Emiliano, do not call me that. It hurts like when people call you Culicagao.”

“No one calls me that.”

“Not to your face because you are a strong boy, have the reputation of a mean boy. But I believe—” She put her hand on his shoulder. He stepped back, toward the fire. “You can be good. I will talk to your padre again while I wrap his knuckles tonight.”

“You better not talk to him,” Emiliano said. “You’re not my mami. You’re not a mami. You’ll never be a mother. You better not talk to him. Even God knew you would be a bad
mother. You can have no babies!”

She slapped Emiliano, red already on his bruised cheek.

“Emiliano, I’m so—”

But, the iron from the fire was already on her chest. She fell to her knees. Burnt skin sizzled. Her chest now iron-wel ted and Emiliano’s fingers burned from the bare grip of the hot metal handle. He dropped it, a thud into dirt, and ran.

“Emili—” she’d said, sweating rivers off her skin before passing out.

It was darkness for a while, darkness with the wound. Surrounding, uninjured skin grew taut with the overflow of blood to the blistering infection. Milky pus stirred with wil ty, slow-crusting blood platelets. Water bubbles radiated heat, inflaming up then shrinking down as the infection scattered in porous dots through her body. Glacial cliffs of new skin moved around the iron-outline, pushing toward a center. Rings of the dead now piled in scabby chunks, a sealant preparing to unseal. Then, the scab, reduced to a coin-circle, flaked off, just another cluster of dead skin cells.

No more darkness, Tin blinked at the healthy pinking tissue. Mariposa’s hand hovered over her chest.

“You can touch it. I’m done,” Tin’d said. “I’m thirsty though.” Sitting on a pink rock, he scooped water.

“There’s no pain,” Mariposa’d said.

“Did it hurt real bad before?” Water washed the mud from his hands. He entered the spring, cleaning his belly.

“Yes, Tin. It hurt in many ways.” Both hands covered her chest, her heart. “Emiliano’s told me rumors, and I’ve heard the village, but, Tin, you are special. How did you do that?”
“I don’t know.” He rubbed his fingers together. “It just makes sense to me. I’ve been trying to understand with every person and animal, but it’s all the same. I see like a movie of how they’re hurt and then I feel it all scatter, run around the body in corners. It’s like with Hippoman—”

“Who?”

“Hernan Hernández Montes, the man with too much skin and teeth.”

“Who calls him ‘Hippoman’?”

“Mostly Mincan kids. He doesn’t mind.” Tin rang out the bottom of his shirt. “But with him, I take his fingers’ swell and move them to his calves, his butt, his belly, so his whole body’s bigger, but the water’s spread out. I shrink his tusks into his jaw, but they never fully hide. His skin, though, is always tough. I can soften it some, but not move all the skin. Where would it all go? So, no matter where he goes, his skin follows. His ‘Hippo mark,’ he calls it. He is special, too.”

“But he’s not like you, Tin,” she’d said, wide eyes.

“He is a little,” Tin whispered.

Someone shouted through the jungle, “Mariposa!”

“It’s Fernando. I have to go, Tin.”

“I know.” He blew bubbles in the water and watched her fade into jungle.

Later, that same day, Tin had napped on the warm rocks, dreaming the dream that started the healing lines. He’d dreamed about a hospital. Rows and rows of white sheet beds and hands reaching up to hold. Bright glass skies for the bedded patients to see. There were birds inside and out, their songs as soft whistles into sleep. Dust, dust clouded the air from an ongoing fútbol game, healed, young boys and girls kicking around in play. Dust floated and turned and changed
direction. White sheet patients watched light greet and kiss the dust, their rays reminding them of
days they’d stopped and studied feathers in the wind. But, some figure was huddled over a
patient, mud on his hands. Dream Tin had stumbled toward the person in the dream, saying “I’ve
felt so alone for so long and now you are here to help share the alone.” The person turned his
head, and it was himself. Gasping, he had woken up, the alone creeping in. But he then knew
how to push the alone back out, for a time—the lines, the healing lines.

He’d convinced Mami of the hospital starting in his paint room. She’d said it was better
than him riding into Santa Marta each day and loitering at a big hospital where everyone would
see him. The dream was coming true, and Tin vowed that in his hospital no lungs would be
buried. No hand would be unheld. No one would be suffering cold or allowed to die.

Now, over two months later, Tin heard the fed lizards scampering onto the pink rocks,
their scratching-shuffle of long toenails and the shushing of brushing tails. A few crowded at his
feet. One laid on its back, belly fat toward the sky and completely stuffed with fish heads. It
reminded him of his Abuelo Pedro, that potbelly. Another lizard was on its back, but it rolled
roly-poly on its belly, napping like a baby, its face all sleep smiles. Cascada Rosa formed a
lullaby, the place of dreams and dead things.

“Tin,” he heard. He sat up, the lizards unstimred. “Tin,” her voice said again.

“Mami?”

Her white dress, long, black hair, and smile emerged through jungle. “Mijo, the lizards
again?”

“Of course, Mami.”

She smirked, stepping over sleeping green bellies toward him.

“Be careful. They just got to sleep.”
“I wouldn’t dream of waking them up.” She held her hair from her face like two long drapes while tiptoeing to the pink rock.

“Do lizards dream?”

“I imagine so, miyo,” she whispered, coming closer.

“What do they dream about?”

At the rock, she pulled herself up, sitting on the edge. “Well—”

“Hey.” Tin poked a lizard next to him. “You have to move because this is my Mami’s spot.” The lizard woke up and rolled over. Tin sighed, scooping up the lizard under its tiny, green armpits and plopping it to his other side. “You can sleep here.” The lizard jutted out its tongue and scuttled off the rock.

“Attitude.” Mami grinned.

“He doesn’t have to be mad,” Tin said as Mami laid on her belly beside him.

“They’re always with this sass?”

“You should have seen them earlier. Water ran red.”

“All the fish—that’s probably their dreams,” Mami said.

“Fish heads? But they just got that? Why would they dream about something they have?”

“Maybe they want more of it. It might be such a good thing it can’t ever leave their minds. They might tell stories of food to themselves all night and all naps. The brain is, after all, a storyteller.”

“Mami, look at Gordo Verde,” Tin said, pointing to Fat Green, the most stuffed lizard.

“Mmm,” she cooed. On top of his head, he felt her hand, pushing and stroking back his cowlick.

“Mami.” He tilted his head from her touch. “I told you to stop that.”
“I know, mijo, but you’re about to go heal. You should look nice.”

“For the sick people who see me?”

“Yes, even for them.” She paused. “Hernan’s first today.”

“Good, Hippoman’s nice—”

“But Angelica and Roberto are second.”

“Mami!” Tin rolled on his back. “She’s such a hag.”

“Tin.” Mami poked him in the stomach. “Don’t use that word.”

“Fine.” Tin rolled back, closer to Mami. “She’s terrible.”

“Yes, yes, she is, but her husband is not.”

“I know,” Tin sighed, flipping up a lizard’s tail with his toes. The lizard stayed stuck in dreams. “Mami, Del Real called me ‘Devil Blood’ again. What does that mean?”

“Again?”

“Yeah, he and Jorge were hurting this stray dog—”

“Emiliano’s friends?”

“Yes.”

“Emiliano was with them?”

“No.”

“You’d tell me, right? Cause Fernando needs to know.”

“He wasn’t there.”

“What were they doing?”

“There were fireworks with them.”

“Oh, Tin—”

“I told them to stop, and they laughed at me. Then, when I went to touch the dog cause he
was bleeding, they both jumped up and started backing away. Del Real even tucked himself behind a palm, eyes still looking out. You’re not going to like the next part, Mami, but I took out my mud and healed the dog—"

“‘When was this?’"

“‘Two days ago.’”

“‘No, before or after the healing line?’”

“‘After.’”

“‘Mijo! That’s five heals that day. Too many—’”

“‘But, Mami, the dog would have died! And I feel fine.’”

She exhaled. “‘What did they do then?’”

“‘They watched me. They saw the blood stop and wounds close. They saw the dog open his eyes and stand up with wobbling legs like a new mule. They saw the dog lick my face and circle around me on the jungle floor. Then, Jorge spit on the ground. He said he knew the rumors were true—that I was full of devil blood, the thing to bring back the dying and dead. I tried to explain to him that I can’t bring back the dead, that it doesn’t work that way, but he and Del Real ran away calling back how they couldn’t wait to tell Emiliano. The dog chased after them. I saw Del Real rubbing his butt yesterday, like the dog caught up.’ Tin snickered.

“I like that dog,” Mami said, smirking.

“Me too. But what does ‘Devil Blood’ mean? And what rumors was he talking about?”

“‘Mijo.’” Mami scratched his back. “‘People fear what they don’t understand. It’s normally fear, fascination, then boredom. Everything’s new to most Mincans. Let’s just wait until they get bored. If they don’t get there, then we’ll have to change the healings—’”

“What does that mean?”
“Well, do the healings more secretly or not at all—”

“No, Mami. That wouldn’t be my fault. That wouldn’t be fair. That—”

“Calm down.” A nail dug into his back.

“Ow.”

“Sorry, mijo. I’m not saying that, but we need to be careful. You have to be careful. You’re not doing any other secret healings in the jungle, right? No secret second healing line here, right?”

He didn’t answer. She sat up. He felt her heat and her heart’s pulse beat beat out from her chest to his.

Mariposa. “No, Mami,” he lied.

“No what?”

“No, I haven’t had any secret healings here.”

“Okay, mijo.” She laid back on her belly, her arm’s chill brushing Tin’s shoulder. “You worry me sometimes—”

“All the time.” Tin grinned. “Your wrinkly forehead tells me the story.”

“Yes, because you are so special—”

“Mami.” Tin watched Fat Green crawl to the pool and slink in. “Is there anyone else like me?”

“I’m like you, mijo. You have my blood.”

“No, I mean.” He propped himself up on his elbows to clench and unclench his hands.

“Like me.”

“Don’t you think I would tell you?”

Her eyes contained brown-gold flakes. Unpaintable.
“Yes,” Tin paused, “I think you would.”

“Yes, I would. When I believe I would.” Mami pointed toward the waterfall. “Now, look. Do you see it?”

A tiny rainbow floated up from waterfall churn.

“It’s beautiful, Mami,” Tin said, unable to take his eyes off the colors. He studies the waterfall’s flow like her hair.

“Yes, mijo. It is.” She put her arm around him and leaned her head to his shoulder. “This is what I dream about.”

Sara Blake 1—June 19

Daddy couldn’t escape the ride like Sara Blake couldn’t escape Daddy. He lived in everything like some people see God. Now, God made habits of ignoring people. That’s why Madonna in paintings keeps her eyes up and her breasts out, pointing one finger to say, “You better come back, you fertile sonuvabitch.” Daddy’d have to come back even more now for their monthly lunches where he’d scoop out info on Ian even though she hadn’t talked to her brother in half a year. Daddy knew more about the suicide fake out three months ago than she did. Daddy’d have to come back to save her from Alfonso, the diner Brew boss or to give her a Franklin so she wouldn’t do a lick of business or to make sure “okay” slpped her lips. If Daddy would ever ask, she would keep some things secret—homelesshome in the Big Brothers Big Sisters attic, her hopscotch dance with new jobs and never friends, her nightmares and crave to huff, shoot, and blow herself down, how she missed the girls, sometimes the sweaty, crumbly smell of the Maze, the feel of being not a ghost. But, Daddy never asked. He’d just show up with those tender blue eyes and moles like dimples and make her feel not like a security guard was
watching her or a child was spectating at a zoo or KAT bus passengers judging cause she was holding up the damn line. Daddy’d have to come back for all those things; he’d have to come back to make her feel seen. Simply put, he’d have to come back to love her.

She’d never left Knoxville, Tennessee, and now her eyes spun dizzying circles in Market Square as she envied happy-faced kids riding the carousel. She had no inkling why she escaped there today after slicing up her ex-Brew boss. Maybe cause the gold-glittery-wavy-mustache-ripple top reminded her of Daddy. No moles for dimples speckled the mustaches’ sides, but soft blues of an unseen story decorated the rotating panoramas. Sara couldn’t see anything more than a fading ship. Distorted, pained yellow horses forever whinnied silence on their golden, swirly poles. Their blank plastic eyes held no stories, only chipped off paint. Overflowing potted flowers dipped and raised with the poles’ pulls. A yellow rose wilted closer to brick. A fairytale carriage held no child, bumping up and down was the money, not just going round in circles. Child calls punctured that crazy-house music for a time, but always the calliope steam organ, steam piano out-cried every voice. And light, Sara always saw those snake lights, shining out, even under that midday, July sun, the day she had cut Alfonso’s—her ex-boss’s—right, index finger off.

“It spurted so much,” she said, sitting at a table behind the carousel fence. “I was like ‘Holy God, have some restraint.’”

Sara laughed then stepped on a bread crumb inches from a pigeon’s beak.

“Are you listening?” she asked the pigeon. “Why don’t people listen?”

The blood looked cherry on her peach diner apron.

“You know, cherry sauce always slides down your hand if you’re gossiping about God when you’re trying to eat some.”
Blood had smeared from the peach cloth to her forearm.

“Bet it would need sugar,” she said. “Do you like sugar?”

The pigeon poked an outline round her rubber grip shoes.

“Here, you fat bastard.” She lifted up her shoe, and the pigeon’s head dove toward the crumbs.

“I could kill you, you know.” Her shoe pressed down a little. “I could really hurt you.”

The pigeon fluttered its wings, trying to backup.

“I could splat your head against these bricks. I could feel your little bird-bone skull crush under my rubber sole. I could make a little bird-blood river. I wonder how far it would go between brick cracks. How many ant cities it would destroy? You a mother or a father? Who was your mother or father? I wonder who would find you, how long it would take. It’d be a kid, some little boy with freckles eating a mint chocolate chip custard from Rita’s. The boy’s father would be murdered in that Market Square Parking Garage alley two days later, so he’d always associate your splat head omen with his father’s murder. I wouldn’t do it, of course.”

She pointed to her blood apron then kept her monologue’s momentum.

“But someone might. Your little bird death would help this boy understand that the world is not a gentle place for hollow bird brains or children with ice cream cones or little girls who play with sand or paper faces or jellyfish. He’d understand that sometimes you just have to cut off your boss’s finger when he fingers you in the dish room and then doesn’t pay. He’d understand that I’m not in that game anymore. He’d understand that sometimes you just have to cut off your boss’s finger when he twirls your hair in his fingery fingers during your shift and calls you things like ‘baby’ and ‘sweetcheeks’ and ‘pussycat.’ And then doesn’t pay. That’s against the rules.”
The pigeon’s head twitched under Sara’s weight.

“The boy who would find your little bird body would sprout into a man—either an Alfonso, the nine-fingered Brew boss or Daddy or some other prick dick. Either way, we’d find out the world is cruel and cares nothing for you, little bird, little boy, little girl.”

She moved her shoe, and the pigeon bolted away. It flapped a feather, a souvenir. She picked it up. “Or we’ll find out the world isn’t cruel at all, actually.” She twirled the feather between her bloody fingers.

Calliope steam organ, steam piano changed its tune as the giant sparkling cylinder slowed its whir to board new passengers. Mothers and fathers pinched under children’s arms and made whee-sounds upon jetting them off plastic horse backs. Always the smooth slick back of the children’s wind-wild hair followed. Then hands-in-hands, parents guided children between swirly sticks, down the steps, and into their own private lives.

All kids left but a fat boy groping a horse’s yellow chest. It was his third turn, his mother kept leaking dollar bills to the man who pulled a lever. Sara’d heard the pudge mother cry out, “Take as much time as you need, Timothy,” and Timmy snatched that time to get familiar with a horse.

Beside dear ol’ Timmy, two new patrons slid in the underwhelming fairytale carriage. The son, small enough to stand inside the carriage’s curling roof, kept hopping up and squirming. Leaning across the carriage, the father patted his son’s seat and untwirled a clear bag, blue cotton candy inside.

Music pumped its piano heart and organ veins faster. The carriagers disappeared before Sara could see the first bite. The enlarged diorama spun. A world encapsulated by wind-glass doors and children’s giggles and falling flowers. A cotton candy snow globe. An exchange with
each turn. Sara didn’t blink during the entire half-moon of the carriage running by.

Father tore free another blue blur and offered him more, but he shook his head no.

At eleven, Sara had shaken her head no when Daddy first pushed, “You gotta get going with Ser now, that’ll be alright.” Her head stayed stuck on no, and Daddy’s watering blue eyes made it clear he didn’t want her to go either—until Ser, the stranger with a smile like a toenail moon, plucked the cigarette out his mouth and burned an ashy circle into her arm. She’d never screamed so loud. Then, at fourteen, Daddy pulled her from the inn with that Navy Seal and took her to the hospital. Ser never came back to collect her, but his words of “remember what you took” always did. Push, pull, push, pull. She’d never managed to pull a reason out of Daddy during or after the ring other than “I was keeping you safe” which he proved with Navy Seal. But, it might have something to do with Ian. It always had something to do with Ian.

Carousel turn again, son munched on the rejected handful. Ian also cried no to Daddy, but he got to stay, never banished, sold, rejected.

Turn again, father tore another piece to shreds. Sometimes, Sara dreamed of ripping Ian to shreds, flaying him like Navy Seal flayed her. Ser, Daddy, and Juliano, Ser’s nephew, warned her against going with him. It was right after she encouraged other girls to run away when they were with clients or tattle on Ser. Daddy’d been doing a small job with the Maze plumbing:

“Okay, Sara, but Ser’s saying he don’t know this fella. He isn’t in the ring. He could really hurt you, understand?” Even Juliano, always with his yellow cyclist sunglasses and red dreadlock hair, bolted up from the warehouse milk crates and moaned low, “Don’t go. You’ll get scarred.” Like he knew the future in those crystal ball glasses cause she’d gone to be ripped up but then saved by Daddy that last time, Navy Seal, that last time.

Turn again, the last two shreds entered father’s throat like Grecian dripped grapes. Sara
felt the many bulges enter her eleven to fourteen year old throat. Now, twenty-five-year-old throat was dry. She’d gotten off the needles, the tar, all that scag shit that made her mumble yes and fall to her knees. She didn’t cut cold turkey for any dramatic reason other than she was shit poor and trying to chase her life.

Turn again, son stood up and grabbed the carriage roof’s curl. Sara swallowed, stood up, and leaned over the table.

Turn again, son had crawled out of the carriage, father’s hand extending toward him. Daddy hadn’t confirmed their monthly lunch for today yet.

Turn again, son skipped between spinning poles, and father chased after. Daddy always chased Ian, teacup spun Ian, hugged Ian, made sandcastles with Ian, kissed Ian and not her. She wished for Ian’s unexistence. If she could erase a life, she’d rub that pencil butt fast.

Turn again, father was draped against a pole, plugging his mouth with his hand. Daddy had ghosted since Ian tried to kill himself three months ago. Threw himself into some new project. Created another backyard deck in his image.

Turn again, son had reached the other side. And now he abandoned her again.

Turn again, he turned back to see no daddy. Daddy fled.

Then, son tripped. The carousel toppled him into metal bars.

Sara felt it growing inside her when the crowd groaned.

Timmy’s mother patted lever boy and pointed at crumpled son. The whir spun to a still.

Mothers and fathers collected their darlings. But, Timmy’s mother didn’t make her son dismount. She stood beside him and thumbed more dollars, more spins.

The father climbed to a stand hand-over-hand on the pole.

“Caleb,” he called, and Sara felt it pressing harder in her throat.
“He’s crying,” a fellow child horseman voiced.

“Yes, sweetie. He’s hurt,” his mother responded as one in the spectator circle.

“Caleb,” father said, breaking the circle and leaning toward him. Sara almost couldn’t contain it anymore.

“It hurts, daddy,” son cried, cradling his arm.

“Yes,” father managed to mutter before he waterfalled blue vomit.

Sara couldn’t hold it after that—she burst into giggles. She pounded her hands on the apron’s blood ink blot then beat the table with applause. She dug her bloody fingers between the black diamond patterns and shook it like rattling cage bars. All the while, her laughs had devolved to cackles, cackles that cackled as she made eye contact with everyone outside the safe cotton candy snow globe.

“Shit,” Sara said, waving her hand, “don’t mind me. It’s just, I think I peed a little. What a show!”

“I called an ambulance,” lever boy said to father. “Should I call the cops?” Heads turned toward Sara again.

“ Aren’t you listening?” Sara asked. “I complimented you, especially, Timmy, good God, Timmy. You’re the best. I don’t care what—”

“How do you know my son’s name?” Timmy’s mother said, cradling the plastic horse’s mane.

“Because, wench, you’ve been hollering it all day. But, that vomit, oh Lord!”

“You’re some kind of stalker weirdo,” Timmy’s mother said.

“I’m calling the cops,” lever boy said.

“No need,” Sara yelled, “the scene’s over.”
Father kneeled next to son. “Don’t move, honey. The doctors are coming to get you. They can make it not hurt.” He smoothed his hair.

“Nothing can make it not hurt,” Sara said then untied her apron, balled it up, and tossed it into a bush. As she walked toward Market Square’s Tomato Head restaurant, she called back to the snowglobers, “Nothing, nothing in the world, except maybe Daddy.”

~

For their monthly visits, Sara’d race Daddy to Tomato Head’s back left booth and order hummus and blue corn chips. Order up today, Sara crunched blue and crooked her neck, staring at non-Daddy faces trailing in. Today was even more special to celebrate with him, the day after Father’s Day. Walls held splattered local artists’ watercolor squiggles, all like jellyfish. Brickfired pizza wafts tricked up her nostrils as she eyed the personal-pan price of $8.99. Tin-embossed ceilings played shadow tag with ceiling fans’ slices of light. Some old man, not Daddy, pointed on frosted glass at the “Carry Out Order” station. Everywhere low murmurs of “He said that to you” sounded in between chatterboxes of “Nah, nah, no spoilers, man. I’m not caught up yet” and machine clicking noises of phone conversation, no eye contact. Clear milk carafes jostled in black milk crates with a busboy’s transfer. Against the booth cushion, her phone buzzed twice, some unknown flashing on screen. She punched the red “END” button and shoved the phone back into her pocket. Here still, three spots at her booth remained empty, and half an hour had passed.

“Refill again, Sara?” Elaine asked, propping a stainless steel carafe. Fancier than Brewery’s carafes, Alfonso’s cheap ass carafes.

“Hit me, again.” She scooted her cup forward.

“So, your Daddy coming today?”
“Yep, he’ll be here,” Sara said.

Elaine nodded. “What’s that on your hands?” She swiveled the carafe toward Alfonso’s blood residue.

“Cherry sauce.”

“I get you a wet rag for it—”

“No,” Sara said, “I want it there.”

Elaine shrugged. “Okay, hun.” She walked away.

Licking her finger, Sara dabbed blue chip crumbles until wax paper glistened with spit. Alfonso’s blood had smeared on wax paper, too. The same smear on her knuckles now dried and cracked like raspberry exfoliant, a peely mask.

No police. Alfonso wouldn’t dare display his bloody stub at a precinct. His repeated dish room fingering and hair tugging and ass-grabbing and name calling with Sara, Allison, Brendi, and Jenny, mostly Jenny, had provoked Sara to rotate that knife right and rock it down. She’d heard on a food show once you just have to let the weight of the knife do the work. Like slicing stubborn white chocolate pretzel rods. It just rolled over fry baskets’ crinkle wax paper and fell onto Brewery kitchen tile. Then, Alfonso’s screaming started, and the waitresses who didn’t quit that day all comforted the customers: “A giant stack of dishes almost leaned farther than Piza” or “Real nastay paper cut, nothing to alarm ya” or “That water can be scalding, scalding hot!” They knew Alfonso’s scum, too.

No police. Alfonso stalked Sara like biting nails, bad habit. He shitty stalked her, emphysemic huffs and puffs, but his walking overlapped her invisible steps. His eyes followed her from the Brewery, round an alley corner, through a moon-glossed window, and into the sleeping bag attic of Big Brothers Big Sisters. He never came inside, but there was only one way
to travel after entering that window—up. Not only had she seen his horrible stalking skills, but also he had popped off non-subtle comments during shifts: “I heard there be some big mouse living in downtown’s Big Brother / Big Sister’s attic. I heard they fumigate good with any tips of info” or “I wonder what it’d be like to live in a sleeping bag. Those slicky sides would rub heavy against my long, sweaty dick. If anyone didn’t want that sleeping bag but share my bed and my sweat, they could.” He’d grinned.

No police. This homelesshome had the best climate control, quietest workers below, break room leftovers, abundance of bar soap, a clean shower once she slid after hours toward the attached locker room, the most space, the least mice, least centipedes, least silverfish. But lots of spiders. She liked talking to the spiders.

Clearly, Alfonso knew of her homelesshome, and they had been trading unspoken secrecy for months. For months until he dug that finger into new girl, Jenny, Jenny beautiful like Joan, and the white chocolate split.

“Hey, hun,” Elaine said, breaking Sara’s trance, “maybe calling your Daddy’d be a good idea? Our later lunch rush’ll be coming round that mountain.” She nodded toward the front’s lengthening line. “My manager’ll tell me to kick you out soon if you’re not ordering anything else.”

“You’re a goddess, Elaine.” No blood on Elaine’s knuckles.

She laughed. “Been told that before.” Elaine nodded at a suit man edging the black server book closer and closer to table’s edge. “Call your Daddy,” she said then collected suit man’s money.

Sara rang her PAYGo phone again, again then checked the menu: Blue Corn Chips $6.25 + tax + tip. Not even five dollars rubbed between her faded blood hands. She’d eaten up almost
all Alfonso’s penny-pinched checks, money in homeless home, and he surely wouldn’t cut the last one. Twinkies and McDonald’s dollar food and cigarettes and a banana and a Bacardi bottle. She’d offer homeless home spiders some rum at night. But not scag. Never scag again. Scag made her itch. A jellyfish in the sky. Sloughing off skin and twirling loops for a buyer before popping both her knees on a shag bathroom mat. Never scag again and never having other holes plugged and filled. The past could survive in shadow, through rain, in labyrinths. It’d have to because of Ser’s “remember, I always have a record,” he’d raised his black book and said “and we both know what you took.” Never scag again and never work more. A part of her missed the work but a bigger part of her just wanted to bolt, wanted to turn nasty, wanted to start rhyming names and call on Lena.

“I’ll give you a tip,” Juliano, Ser’s nephew, once spoke after Sara’s second ever client.

One of the dealers had just patched her up in the first aid corner, and now she could rest, supervised, outside the Maze on a milk crate bed. A roof’s leak dipped and plopped lullabies to her, like the world stretched no bigger than her shaking body and that leak. But, Juliano, whose name was Italian but skin was black—Juliano, whose hair was thick dread but was curly—Juliano, whose eyes always somehow pierced beyond those slick lenses, even at fifteen, Juliano fractured her small-world delusion.

“I’ll give you a tip,” he said again. “I be seeing chicas crack, chip, crumble, and die cause of my uncle.”

Sara had bolted up on the crates, flipping one over. “Why do you always look at me?” She wiped her tears, hair caught wet.

“I just say it, dummy. Listen up hard.”

“I’m not a dummy.”
“You a dummy if you don’t survive.” Then, he spread his lips to show his crooked-teeth smile.

“What’s your name?”

“Teeter-Totter.” He caught a water drip leak and licked his hand.

“What’s your real name?” She sighed. Cheeks dry now.

“You ain’t listening hard. I teaching you how to survive.”

“How?”

Either thunder had rumbled or his belly. And leak poured more. “You split your soul.”

“I can’t do that. That’s dumb.”

He laughed.

“Take off your glasses,” Sara said.

“Nah.”

“Why not.”

“Cause I’m Teeter-Totter now.”

“What does that mean?”

“What’s your favorite food?” he asked.

“I don’t have one.”

“Fine. What’s your favorite color?”

“I don’t know. Red?”

“Nah. What’s your favorite animal?”

“Well.” Sara’d paused. “I like the hyenas from Lion King a lot.”

“Good. Now, what rhymes with that?”

“Yours isn’t an animal or color or food. Why Teeter-Totter?”
“Hyena, bobina, fi-fi-fo-fina, tina, rhena, lena, mena, katrina—”

“I liked that other one.”

“Which one?”

“Take off your glasses, and I’ll tell you.”

“I’m trying to help you.”

“I just wanna see what color your eyes are.”

“Lena.” He shook his dreads and started to walk away. “Lena’s you when you’re with them. Okay?”

“With them?”

“When you’re in the ring.”

“Daddy says I’m always in the ring now. He says he’s saving me.”

“Then, I guess you’ll be Lena for a while.”

Rustling, then someone scraped the warehouse’s big sliding door back. A black mustang had rolled forward, pausing and purring while a younger girl exited.

“What’s your name?” Sara asked him again.

Someone yelled across the warehouse’s empty belly, “Got something for ya.”

“It’s Johnny Juliano,” he said back, while walking toward the mustang. “But, you can call me Juli.”

She wanted to ask back, “Like Hulie Hooping?” but the black car sheen had already seduced him.

Lena, he’d invented her that day with that one tip, taught her to survive, maybe saved her life.

Screaming outside Tomato Head—no, wailing—no, sirens, through the giant front
windows, red and white ambulance lights flashed away from the carousel. The whole afternoon seemed light-years gone. *Probably a broken wrist*, Sara thought about blue cotton candy son. He seemed weeks ago in a life disoriented. *Probably something broken.*

She took out her PAYGo phone again and dialed.

“Daddy,” she said after one ring, surprised. “Where are you? Why aren’t you here?”

“Sara.” A hundred voices muffled together a blanket of background. Something cut through them, an intercom voice.

“Are you at an auction?” she asked. “You buying something for another deck?”

“No. I’m—”

“Where are you?”

“Miami airport. Leaving for a while.”

“Where are you going? Why aren’t you here?”

“It’s about Ian.”

Ian. The name silenced her.

“You there?” Daddy asked.

“I’m here, Daddy. I’m always here.” She paused then tested, “Until one day when I’m not.”

“Okay,” Daddy said. The intercom voice grew louder.

“You listening, Daddy? Until one day when—”

“I heard you.” Paper rustling next to the phone.

“Do you even miss me?”

“Why’d you call—”

“Lunch? Tomato Head? I’m waiting here.”
“Lunch?”

“Daddy,” Sara whispered, “our lunch—”

“I know all this. I’m not—”

“It’s okay. I just—”

“Couldn’t come today. Should of called, yeah.”

She kicked a table leg, stubbing her toe. “Ow. I just—”

“Sara,” he started, “what is it—”

“Don’t worry, Daddy. You need to go, then go. There is something though—you’re coming back, right? Because I kind of need—”

“I can’t promise—”

“You’d come back for Ian.” She knew it was a weapon. She wielded it happily.

“I—that’s different. You don’t know everything, Sara.” He sighed. “You don’t understand everything. But, you remember what he almost did to himself—”

“I try not to.”

“That note. He won’t talk to me. What if he never talks to me ag—” He paused. “Has he talked to you?”

“Listen, if someone hurt me again, would you come?”

“Has he said anything to you?”

“No. If someone hurt me again, you’d come, right?”

He signed, breath blocking crowd voices. He sounded real tired. “Hurt you?”

“The Navy Seal, the inn?”

The background intercom mumbled something about “Group Three” and “boarding.”

“Yes,” Daddy said. “I’ll come.”
“You promise?”

“What?” he said, “Yeah.”

“Good, Daddy. Good.” She smiled.

“Listen, I have to—”

“This is good—you remember the clown? He said I’m the moon, and you can’t stare too long into the moon. Like if you love it, let it go. That’s what he always told me. Do you remember me telling you about him? The clown, that weird, fat guy who made balloon animals for me right before and after? You remember, Daddy?”

“No. I just—”

“I remember his arms looked like a wiener dog. I asked him if I could pop them. We laughed at that for hours. And, Daddy, do you think I could have some money?”

“Sara.”

“Could I? Just a few twenties for now—”

“Listen, don’t call anymore. You won’t be able to get me.” Daddy paused. “I’m getting on the plane now, leaving the country.”

“What? No. Where are you going? You’ll come back, right? I could get hurt real soon—”

“Gotta go. Take care.”

Dial tone.

Elaine slid the black server book onto the table. “Whenever you’re ready, hun.”

Sara began imagining. Surely Daddy’s phone battery died, the airport gate tunnel sucked away service, a lightning storm struck the nearest cell tower, Miami’s city-wide, summer blackout sparked off, fully-automatic terrorists entered the airport, delivering their agenda in the overturning, a biological bomb burst and made everyone’s skin swell in boils. Somehow Ian
would be at the airport too, wearing boils and dying alone.

She opened the server book: $6.84 and $1.37, recommended tip.

“Elaine,” Sara said, catching her arm.

“Yeah, hun?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t pay for this. Daddy usually pays.”

Elaine paused. Condensation sweat down carafe’s side. “You know what, hun. You get your skinny butt out that seat, and I’ll spot you.”

“Elaine,” Sara started, unsticking her bare thighs from the leather seat and scooting out, “you really are a goddess.”

“Nah,” she said, topping off another booth’s water glasses, “I’m not a goddess. I ain’t a jerk neither though.”

Standing up, Sara rubbed her sticky thighs and pushed into crowdy chests and elbows. Then, from one of the bar TVs, a memory had jumped out. Not a jump scare or something as stupid as a boogie-woogie. It was creepy familiarity, a ghost haunt. How people can never prove their mirror’s reflection is not just staring back at them after they look away. How people can swear they heard their name called. How the sky turns a copper green sometimes and it feels like there will not be a tomorrow. How abandoned amphitheaters, football stadiums, zoos still hold the electrified spirits of a thousand once-people, animals. There, on the TV, was the Maze.

The screen read “Breaking News,” and under those slick, flashy words was an inset of shaky iPhone whatever footage of Ser’s empty warehouse. God. Horror. Someone had pulled warehouse’s mouth wide open for all to see. See Joan’s purple “8,” see the milk crates Juliano always sat on, see the Mustange’s power steering drippage, and see something, something black rest on the cement. Two people lifted it up. God. A body bag.
“The girls,” Sara whispered. “The girls.” Lunchers crowded too thick. Somebody set fire to her cheeks then yanked her limbs like a draw and quarter prep cause they knew taken things take. Her hands snaked through purse straps and arm pretzel pits and usually she’d gumball guess how many rich bitch bills she could cop right now. But, the girls had screamed out there, running around in the woody behind. They’d climb trees and live wild, eating their own hair. They’d wiggle skinny into sewer rounds and hug themselves again. They’d scratch words into dirt, forgetting their names or that parents existed. Or maybe they’d even talk. Pull a tiger by its tail. When she hollers, let her go.

The damn crowd finally released all their grips on Sara, and she always knew the way back to the warehouse. She looked at the crowd again, making sure Daddy hadn’t just fooled her and showed up anyway. Then, she saw something worse than that warehouse sprawled out and Daddy not coming. All round her no one else even blinked at the horror. No one else even noticed.

Anyone could get a pretty view enough of what had happened at the warehouse. Yet no one knew shit. Police line “Do Not Cross” wrapped round warehouse’s body, where people were kinda taking notice now. The steel door’s open mouth had poured out girls to scatter hidden in some alley like moonlight cats or brush babies, pushing deeper toward non-Garden dirt, or water creatures, falling into lakes, the river all Ophelia-pocked in death. Maybe it was because Sara stood stuck with onlookers from a far, but the Maze’s entrance looked smaller than it used to, but Joan’s purple 8 had stayed the same size. A camera shutter went mad beside her. Replicating suffering. Preserving it. Taking it through another metal portal into a black memory maze.

An open spot got her a smidge closer through dodging high-res cell cameras and NBC 5
booms. The body bag had been carted away by now. Two old, white guys yapped sports casters’ megaphone voices next to her. Said a team hauled out a dead guy first—guy, not girl—then reported a ransacked office. Filing cabinet emptied of boxes labeled September-October 2017, November-December 2017 for something they called terra—terabits—terasomething that’d been taken. The old guys knew too many details. Probably had a “buddy” on the force. Said the team questioned another guy higher than a kite. Dealers. That was clear. Said alive dealer managed to mumble out something about “the Maze man,” man in the moon, man behind the Maze. She almost spun one of the two potbellies round to demand repeat. “Maze” was not a term the news would use. She would know. She coined it long ago, and Ser’s dealers now, whoever they were, used that term. There was only one Maze builder. Only one person—one builder or whatever Ser called them—that Ser trusted enough to go back with the girls for repairs. Someone he knew wouldn’t mess with them. Daddy’d been there. Daddy’d been there and got out the girls and never said a word to her. It had to of been before his promise, his promise to return with the pain. To return if someone hurt her again.

She walked round back to the Garden. No police lines cropped this off yet. No headstones, no markers, not even a mound of upturned dirt told their secrets. It could of been easy to wave her arms and screech for shovels, for investigators with flipped-open notepads, for eyes on her, for a line of questions leading to cage bars, for Ser’s ugly, nodding head saying “I told you so.” No, the law doesn’t take women’s side, the law won’t listen, the law won’t take fear into account, the law won’t remember.

Past the Garden and into the woods behind, she stepped on roots and kicked rocks out of her way. The law didn’t give shits about the Goodbar girl, the girl she found shivering months ago under a bridge. It had been one of those narrow bridges in the back roads, maybe outside of
Knoxville now.

Someone’d tried to cover Goodbar girl in leaf detritus, gunky wet clumps, the kind of gommy gross from cereal sitting in milk for too long. A job not done with any care. Her shirt had been torn open. Its frayed edges lay gentle on her sweaty chest and stomach, like tiny fingers trying to hold her together. Pressed against her body to say something was with her. Something had witnessed. Her skirt was off. Underwear off. She lay a little Eve with leaves sloppy.

Sara had taken off her own button-up, dropped to her side, and laid it over the girl. Her fingers touched something cool, and her hand flicked it into view. A red six-sided die rolled to a stop before the girl’s hand grabbed Sara’s wrist.

“Hey,” Sara whispered. She wanted to smooth her hair but decided not to touch her. The girl just moved her hand down Sara’s wrist to her palm.

“I’m gonna ring the cops now, alright?” Sara said, digging in her pocket with her free hand.

“Three,” the girl said.

“Three what?” Sara asked.

“Them,” she said then rolled her head over and shut her eyes.

“Three on the die? What is that?”

The girl didn’t respond.

Ambulance zipped there quick. Sara hid behind trees while all those cops strutted round to load the girl up and out. Didn’t want them to see her, get her name, realize she was alive, homeless, the ring. Red and blue lights grew dim then disappeared altogether. What once was quick and busy with activity now lay a hollow half-moon holding apparitions, the weird red die gone too. Alone, under twilight bridge, Sara clucked and waited for echo. She called out

RIDE/NNUndike/ 77
categories of fruit, cars, countries, school supplies, places she’d never been, places she’ll never go, client names, books, drinks, Beanie Babies.

“India, the tiger.”

“Ger.”

“Eye of the tiger.”

“Ger.”

“Jaguar.”

“Uar.”

“India.”

“Dia.”

“Indiana.”

“Ana.”

At her feet, where the girl just lay, leaf gunk, washout gravel, and little ripped up wrappers made a body outline. This was where it’d happened, where she’d been taken. Decimated yellows of Goodbars, some brown slick of unnamed candies, Styrofoam cup rims, some pink paper corner, a rubber band.

“Eraser.”

“Her.”

“Erase.”

“Race.”

“Erase her.”

“Her.”

Sara nudged her sole against the leaf thigh.
“She’s alive.”

“I’ve.”

“I’m here still.”

“Ill.”

Then, Sara noticed it. Round the wide space where the rapist must have positioned her legs, shoved them open, blurred her body’s outline, round the half that ripped her shirt, her shallow breathing, round the oval-top of her head, that memory. Round everything, Sara saw the whole, the whole body outline, the whole body space.

And somehow, amidst everything, the girl had made angel wings.

Nothing came of it. Months later now, no one had been sentenced. There wasn’t even a trial. Sara’d swung by UT Med just after but realized she knew nothing as well. Not the girl’s name. Not the name of the bridge or road she was on. Not really what day it was. Nothing had come of it. Nothing but the girl’s mother, a beautiful black woman with mesmerizing chandelier earrings, asking for news on the news. The phone number to reach her and the police for information flashed so quick Sara never jotted it down. But, mostly, Ser’s reverend bullshit smile couldn’t let her speak. Because Sara in spotlight might lead to Ser and Ser to girls and girls to the Garden. So, after a while, nothing showed on the news of a girl raped under a bridge, no one was talking about it anymore. Only the echoes knew. Only they could speak.

Sara rounded back to the warehouse crowd. They must have gotten bored now cause they dispersed with the careless swank of people who’d stuffed themselves happy. Camera crews packed up. People passed by, coming from afar just to walk their dogs. A child yelled, saying how he wanted a bike and didn’t care about money. A couple held hands and shook their heads in conversation all the way to the other side of the road. Some reporter lady took the last of her
notes. Nearly every onlooker had disbursed. Then, through the last thin hairs of the crowd, Sara swore she saw a glint, a blur, one of red and the other of giant, insect yellow.

**Kru Blake 2—June 20**

Kru Blake had clung tight to the love letter the whole flight. He hadn’t put it down when he helped an old lady with her overhead bag. Or when he got his checked backpack from the turnstile, when he waved down a taxi outside the airport, when he showed the driver the Colombian contact’s emailed directions to meet at “calle 84 con carrera 46.” Or when he finally wiped a hankie cross his forehead. Tennessee had nothing on the heat of Barranquilla, Colombia.

The letter had started to wilt in the humidity and his sweaty hands. Didn’t seem to matter to the heat that the day was near dusk, near supper—it wasn’t following the rules of cooling off in the evening. He ironed the paper on his thigh but the creases shriveled back. Kinda like how his own voice had shriveled back during the police phone call to tip off the exact spot of Ser’s warehouse. He’d called from one of the last payphones in Knoxville after checking into a motel in Miami and kept the conversation short, tight, folded up in a way.

The driver spoke to him. Kru shook his head, saying “sorry” and “no Spanish.” He’d learned “dónde está baño” and “quiero la cuenta” and “mi nombro es Kru,” but his mind and tongue couldn’t twist the way they needed to twist in time. There was never enough time.

The driver swerved quick, hitting his horn and zipping past buses painted in bright colors. Kru pinned the letter, wind blowing too much through the windows, harder against his thigh where he felt the curve of Ian’s seashell from his pocket. In his backpack, he then double checked some note cards he’d brought with “inspirational” sayings on them like Bible verses and stuff from Gandhi. But, more importantly, he made sure an envelope, shoved thick with Ser’s
cash made into pesos at the airport exchange, hadn’t blown away. That money was one of the four things the Colombian contact had emailed him about—payment in pesos, the meeting place address, the meeting time, and the answer to a question he hadn’t been asked yet. Something about an elephant.

The taxi stopped. The driver draped his arm round the passenger seat and said “here.”

“We’re at 84 and 46?” Kru asked.

“Here,” he repeated, pointing at a street corner’s two white-painted cement posts with the numbers. Then, the driver said something else and rubbed his fingers together.

Kru fumbled with the pesos then handed him 60,000 pesos. The driver laughed and gave back some of the money before saying “a la orden” and speeding away. Other taxis rushed by, music hanging out their windows just like the drivers’ arms and sometimes heads if they were yelling at the cars and buses in front of them. Small, black motorcycles swerved beside those heads and passed pedestrian after pedestrian with boxes draped from their shoulders like popcorn and beer sellers at baseball games. They stopped almost everybody on the sidewalks and pointed at different things in their boxes. Most people waved them off and kept walking past pizza places and grills and Lubri Wash and Licores JK and Windsor Hotel Barranquilla and Hotel Standford Plaza, and the city sure had a lot more going on than his part of Knoxville.

No one had come up to him except for another taxi driver offering a ride. No one else had asked him a question yet. He spun his watch round. About two hours from the meeting time. Real late at night, past 10 now. Something suddenly pulled his backpack. A motorcycle brushed so close to him that the rider’s Velcro scratched Kru’s arm. He stumbled back as the motorcycle swerved away. Then, shoved against a building in a strange city with a river of foreigners passing him by, Kru realized maybe this was a complicated way to rob him. How much could he
even trust that todacura.com he’d researched at the Knox County library:

Doctors are rich from your sick, ignorance, and desperation.  
They want you to keep sick so they keep rich.  
AllCure says welcome to something real—  
a miracle man—a healer—a cure true for anything.  
Cancer—cured.  
Gout—cured.  
Heart diseases—cured.  
Stomach problems—cured.  
Disorders of the mind—cured.  
You have time. You have energy. You have money.  
If you are ready to stop the sick inside you, email by our secure servers.  
We are waiting for you to come.  
What are you waiting for?

That did sound more than fishy now that he thought about it without the contact’s 
constant promise that TodaCura was the real deal. That line, disorders of the mind, really got him 
though. The other websites only talked about curing people’s bodies. Kru had mentioned how his 
mind didn’t work right. But, the contact just emailed back that the disorder doesn’t matter. 
TodaCura could heal all. Kru hadn’t even needed to go into detail. Maybe the disorder didn’t 
matter because TodaCura just wanted him to bring all that bundled money to 84 and 46, a 
touristy place with a lot of hotels and English-named shops. Sure thing that tourists always got 
robbed on these corners. Maybe no one would even show up to ask him a question, to guide him 
to the cure. Maybe no healer existed at all.

Another motorcycle sped close to Kru, and behind him he spotted a Subway with 
“Abierto” lit in red. He entered quick, the moto speeding by, then ordered a sub by pointing to 
each ingredient. He tried to joke with the counter lady how he’d come all this way for a decent 
sandwich. She didn’t laugh. Just handed his change and turned back round to chat with her 
coworker.

Kru unfolded the letter and watched it like a TV while he ate. Hardly anyone else was in
the place. It was always be alone here or be alone there. Made no difference the space. Made no
difference the time. Just life. And now he couldn’t even hammer something instead of cry.

He’d had to reschedule a couple jobs for Blake Builders, and he’d lost one patio install
cause the client couldn’t wait. But Kru understood cause he couldn’t wait neither. Couldn’t wait
to take all Ser’s money. Couldn’t wait to get away from Sara’s need for attention or approval or
whatever she was playing at. Couldn’t wait for Ian maybe forgiving him, saying he understood
now, promising never to leave him again. It was a stupid plan. But praying hadn’t worked.
Therapy lasted only a few months—the therapist gave him a motto but that only pushed the
thoughts away, didn’t kill ‘em. It wasn’t a chocolate addiction or TV or picking scabs or alcohol
or even drugs. It was worse than all that. Cause, he wondered, how do you change who you love?
How do you know if you loved too much?

Kru took another bite and remembered Ian on the rafters. Kru and a few Amish fellas
were stuffing insulation between boards for a second-story install. Sara stretched her legs easily
over each gap to catch Ian’s shoulder. He wobbled, almost fell between the boards, through the
insulation, through the popcorn ceiling, and into the client’s living room below. Sara caught him
though, made sure he was stable. She was good like that. Then, she closed her eyes and started
counting. Ian didn’t use that head start very good. Just stood, thumb in mouth, and stared at his
big sister. Until finally he decided to hobble away. Sun rays were coming in warm and nice to
kiss each beam.

It was perfect until a stranger then pointed out, “She’s lovely, but too ferocious, don’t you
think?”

Kru didn’t look up immediately. Just laughed and shoved more insulation.

“And the boy’s cute.”
Kru stopped and turned to see a guy all dressed in a black suit.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m hoping you can.” Kru didn’t know how he could remain so unwobbly in those fancy-looking dress shoes. They probably had a slick no-grip bottom. But that didn’t affect the stranger when he crouched down next to Kru. The guy had to be levitating.

“Well,” Kru said, remembering his Blake Builders schedule wasn’t with him, “I gotta check my book back at home and then—”

“I know how much you love your son.” The stranger grabbed an edge of the Owens Corning pink insulation roll.

“What did you just say?”

“Got a knife?” The stranger held out his hand.

Kru glanced at his box cutter on the rafter beside him.

“That’ll do.” The stranger grabbed it and sliced a clean line so the insulation square fit snug.

“Who are you?”

“I actually have a video of it,” he said, brushing fiberglass strands off his ungloved hands.

“Shit’s itchy.” He laughed.

“Stop talking in circles.” Kru grabbed the stranger’s suit collar. The board dug into his knee. He was a few install jobs away from putting on knee pads.

“Brackbill Inn,” the stranger said, patting Kru’s hand before Kru pulled it back.

His breath wedged in his chest. The Amish guys were on the far side of the house already hanging drywall over stubs and insulation. Sara had caught Ian again.

“You a police detective or something?” Kru’d lowered his voice.
“Maybe in another life,” the stranger matched Kru’s volume. “One of my guys forgot to sweep the video after the clients took some of our girls out. He’s no longer with us, of course. I was lucky enough to go back and get the video before a maid or anyone else happened upon it. I don’t think they actually clean those rooms though—mold in the shower tubs, empty shampoo bottles, and no bed skirts. Savages.” He grinned. “Anyway, always do it and keep the tapes in case any of our clients get wise about the whole ring.” He paused. “Now, you look dumb as hell—you’re mouth’s hanging open. You see what I’m saying?”

Kru closed his mouth and shook his head. “Ring thing?”

“Thought I’d see some weird sex stuff on playback, but you can imagine my surprise to see that—man after my own heart. That little boy didn’t cry once. Is he your son? That’s why he’s here now? Or you get him from another ring? Is it nearby or here in Knoxville?”

Kru had zoned out. He couldn’t hear anything but his breathing and Ian’s far away giggles. Pink rivers were flowing in between the rafters. He once thought children bled lighter blood, pinker, more pleasant, not matured. But their blood was as red as any.

“How you know my name?”

“I’m not dumb as hell. Did my homework, of course. You’re a standup guy, real swell. Even go to church. You were a Steven Minister. What the hell’s a Steven Minister? You only minister to guys named Steven?” The stranger dug a Juicy Fruit stick from his suit pocket then offered Kru one. He didn’t accept. “Your kids are probably at your work site cause your wife just passed and—”

“That’s enough.”

“Tell me, what’s his name? Must be nice always having him on call—”

RIDE/NNUpdike/ 85
“He doesn’t exist to you.”

The stranger took off his jacket and draped it over his shoulder. Fanned himself a little.

“Maybe not. But he exists to this.” Out of his pants pocket, he pulled a skinny, black thing.

“Doesn’t hold much. 32 megabytes, I’m sure. But, it could take a man apart.”

“The hell is that. A painted Domino block?”

The stranger tossed it to him. It slipped past his gloves and onto the insulation bed. He plucked it up and turned it round in his hands.

“Copied it, sure.”

“This block don’t mean anything to me. Why don’t you just get out of here. I’ve got stuff to do.”

The stranger brushed his hands again, took the block back from Kru, and stood up. He slid on a board easily, shiny shoe after shiny shoe. Then he mumbled back, “Tell Tooter I’m really rooting for him.”

“Wait,” Kru called, and the stranger paused, turned round slow. “How have you heard that?”

He smirked and shook his head. “I watched the video, remember? Are you not getting it? You know what they do to people like you in prisons?”

“Why would I go to a prison?”

“God, your daddy beat your head in one too many times?” He shook the block in his fist like a reverend trying to reach his congregation. “I will do bad things with this. I—”

“What’re you here for?”

The stranger slumped like breathing out all his air. “Thank the Lord, took you long enough to ask. A horny bride waiting on a proposal.” He pocketed the block. “Here’s the thing. I
need a builder, a carpenter for a big project. Someone who’s got something to lose that’s a guy kind of like me. I’m tired of moving the ring around so much. Playing pockets full of posies with the law. I want girls to start coming to me. I need a place, a home where they can get lost. Lose themselves. You see what I’m getting at?”

“I hardly know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, you’re listening. So, that’s a start. You will though. Soon enough.”

A hand touched Kru’s shoulder. He jumped.

“Daddy, I’m bored,” Sara said, pushing hair from her eyes. “Ian’s not fast enough. I catch him every time.”

“How are you, sweetheart?” the stranger said.

“Don’t talk to her.”

“Mister can talk to me if he wants.”

“Ser,” the stranger said, “it’s Ser.”

“Ser can talk to me.” Sara cocked her hip.

Ser smiled and lifted a hand like he was gonna touch Sara’s hair but then pulled back.

“What you still here?” Kru asked.

Ser put his suit jacket back on and smoothed out the arms. “Like I said, she’s lovely.”

~

Subway didn’t care how long Kru sat there. He rubbed his fingers over the seashell’s ridges before pocketing it and then flipping through his note cards. He shuffled inspirational quotes, going through Emerson’s “We become what we think about all day long” and Psalm 119:71 “It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.” Every twenty flips or so, he’d uncover a 3x5 of Ian’s smiling face at three, four, five, six, smiles fading over years.
After he’d gone through all the cards too many times, he started a Sudoku and tried to listen in on the workers’ Spanish. Everything was stuffed in one fast sentence. Like they was swinging two jump ropes into a blur and he couldn’t hop in between them. Even if his high school had made him learn any language but English, his dad needed him more back when he was still alive. Those concrete drive ways weren’t gonna pour themselves. Those gutters weren’t gonna clean out on their own. Those people weren’t just gonna hand over fistfuls of money. He wasn’t like Ian who floated all these high thoughts in English and could chew on some French. Not like Sara neither who could whip a sentence like a tornado in English or Spanish so you didn’t know where you landed. Both his kids had already taken their lives and proven something.

His watch beeped, night had fallen, and Kru stood on the corner again. Paced round a little. Stayed away from motorcycles. Then, from behind, someone said in low, clear English, “A man tries to control other men. The seas overflow from a hot earth. And you are alone here with me. But, where is the elephant?”

Slow, Kru turned to see a boy, eighteen or nineteen with strands of hair falling into his dark-skinned face.

“The elephant is dead,” Kru said, not believing that someone was actually there.

The boy nodded then continued with what sounded like a script. “But, we can bring the elephant back to life now.” He turned round and ran clear into traffic. Dodged a bus, made a motorcycle swerve round him, then waved “come over” from the other side. Kru looked up and down the street. No crosswalks. He played chicken, not pausing to check his whites for scare stains, and breathed a heavy sigh when he made it in one piece. The boy laughed before hopping up some stairs to an open-air patio.

Shoved in the back, a bartender switched on two TVs, wall-mounted at either side of the
bar. He then went back to stocking glass shelves with foreign brands. A few people nodded a thanks, grabbing their drinks and heading to the dance floor. Looked like asphalt floor tiles, the kind Kru’d seen in church basements before, and they bowed under the couple’s twirls and steps. Had about a two-year life expectancy left. A giant fan on the dance floor edge felt good on his face before it continued its swivel round. He dabbed more sweat with his hankie. And everywhere along the dance-floor rectangle, men smoked at tables in the dark.

The kid spoke Spanish to a man with black shoulder-length hair. He had posture that would make a nun proud. Something draped out of his pocket, a necklace of some kind. Most tables had two, three guys, but one table had just a soul by himself. Kru started his way there but stopped when the good posture guy grabbed his shoulder.

“Kru, don’t sit by him,” he said, pointing his mouth to the alone guy. “Contagious rash. It’s no good. Sit there.” He flung his finger like throwing a fishing line. “I’ll come back, but first—” He rubbed his fingers together, basically saying, “Fork it over.”

“Right.” Kru dug in his backpack for the envelope. “What’s that exchange add up to?” He motioned for the whole envelope.

“No, I can do it. What do I owe you?”

The man pointed to the bills as Kru raised them until he’d taken about a third. Good thing the plane ticket was discounted. He’d be in the poor house sooner than not.

The man tucked the money into his wallet then turned round quick on his heel. He thumbed the necklace as he walked toward the street, toward the baseball-box vendors. Until, round a corner, he disappeared.

“That was Salazar, right?” he asked the kid.

“I’m Salazar. But he is my uncle, Espinoza. He is in the lead. Sit where he say.”
Kru shrugged and stepped over the beer caps, littering a trail back to the table. Some loud accordion music started playing. People danced faster. The fan caught Kru’s face again. And now splotches of disco light peppered the two strangers at the table. One was itching his crotch and not trying to hide it. The other was carving something into the wooden tabletop.

“I’m gonna charge admission, mister,” the one with the knife started, “unless you move it the fuck along.” He leaned back and flicked away the extra wood chips.

“Kru, not mister,” he said, sitting down then turned to the other guy. “You digging to China there? My dad always slapped me good if I dug around in public.”

“Leave him alone—he’s not right.” The guy tried to toss the knife into the table. It’s broadside bounced off and toppled to the floor. He didn’t pick it up.

“Hey, Talbot,” the other guy said, “they’re playing music!”

“Yes, they rattle that fucking noise everywhere in this backwards ass country.”

The lights strobed just enough for Kru to make out a smiley face carved into the table. The same smiley face that was carved into the guy, Talbot’s, forearm. The smiley scar tilted as he poured beer, drip by drip, into the wooden smiley’s mouth.

“Hey, Talbot, she’s having a drink,” the other guys said.

“This is a man’s face, Dim.” Talbot paused. “There’d be a cock in her mouth if it was a woman.” The beer overflowed the carved crescent and just stayed sticky on the table.

“How long you guys been here?” Kru asked.

Talbot sighed. “Long enough to know we chasing ghosts. Why? You fresh off the boat? Lil Salamander and Esplañola take your money yet?”

“That boy and that long-haired guy?”

Talbot nodded.
“Yes—”

“How much you got left?” Talbot scooched himself upright.

Kru squeezed his backpack between his shoes. “Enough.”

“What I thought. You came pre-brainwashed.”

“Hey,” Dim said, “they’re playing music.”

The lights strobed faster. The music didn’t seem to breathe. There was no slow dancing here. More people hopped to the floor. On the TVs, matching greens and yellows were kicking around a soccer ball. People on the street stopped and watched the game. The baseball-box vendors talked and quieted at intervals Kru didn’t understand. They erupted in cheers to match the music’s pace. And the entire thing felt like a racing heart. But, the men at the tables stayed silent. They were phantoms hovering in a land, not welcome to it.

“Where you fellas from?” Kru asked.

“Doesn’t matter.” Talbot sipped. “We all come to throw shit away, right? Why play knock-knock with the past?”

“You get prom king or something?” Kru asked.

“Why?”

“You’re just so friendly.”

Talbot kicked his feet up on the empty chair, rested a hand flat beside his carving, and smirked. “Probably because of my smiling face. Both of them.”

“Hey, they’re—”

“Dim, I swear to God.”

Dim quieted.

“Who has this?” Espinoza was back and holding Talbot’s knife from the floor.
Talbot turned, shrugged. “You got it now, Espiñola.”

Espinoza flung the knife into the table right between Talbot’s index and middle finger.

“What the hell!” Talbot yelled, curling his hand to his chest. “You psycho?”

He yanked the knife from the wood and shoved it against Talbot’s neck. Kru snapped his head around. No one seemed to notice or care about what was happening.

“Listen now,” Espinoza started, “you disrespect my name or my nephew Salazar again, and I will take more than your finger only.”

“I got it. I got it,” Talbot mumbled, eyeing the knife.

“No. Espinoza.” He pushed the knife harder against his neck. A little blood stained his white-shirt collar. “Say it.”

“Espinoza,” Talbot said.

“Louder.”

“Espinoza.”

“Louder.”

“Espinoza!”

From his pocket, Espinoza thumbed the necklace, clearer up close—a red and white rosary. Now, just his eyes did the commanding. Talbot repeated the name six, seven times like a grade school punishment of kids writing chalkboard lines or like someone studying a new language or like praying. He repeated until the knife left his neck. Espinoza turned the blade around and pushed the handle toward Talbot. “We understand?” he asked. Talbot just nodded, tucking the knife into his belt before touching his neck.

“Hey,” Dim started.

“Listen,” Espinoza said, pointing to the patio overhang. “This song’s about to end. Hear
the change. The rhythm will move a tip. There will have more or less accordion with Vallanato.”

From the floor, he lifted a cardboard box and dropped it on the table. Beer bottles wobbled, and some other men glanced toward them finally. It was all wild confusion.

The rhythm picked up just as Espinoza described. He opened the cardboard flaps and pulled out two cell phones.

“That’s how we’ll find him. Subtleties, searching, and listening.” He handed the phones to Kru and Talbot. “More went on buses this morning,” he said, “eighteen cities now have eyes. We need more in villages and towns.”

“These are old ass phones,” Talbot said, turning his on.

“They survive. Not new phones that break when you breathe.”

“Wait.” Kru paused. “What is all this for?”

“A la orden,” a street vendor said behind Kru. “¿Americano, quiere comprarlo?” She pushed her box of chocolate Jet bars over the railing toward him.

“Fuck off,” Talbot said.

She shrugged then asked Dim the same question.

“I said fuck off,” Talbot repeated. “Like fucking flies.” He waved his hand in the air.

The vendor tried with Espinoza.

“No,” he said calmly, “no queremos que ninguna de su vaina.”

The vendor left, crossed the street.

“Kru, pass these out to all the men. Tell them to turn them on. Make sure they have battery.”

“But, I don’t get it—”

“Already, I am thankful for your help.” Espinoza hopped down the patio steps and
crossed the street, catching up to the vendor. A few buses passed in front, letting Kru see only parts of Espinoza’s interaction with her. Looked like he was buying a chocolate bar after all. And he was buying it with Kru’s stack of money.

“Get to it, bub,” Talbot said, pushing the box toward Kru.

“What’d he mean by that?”

Talbot dug a cigarette from his t-shirt pocket and lit it. “The hell you saying?”

“What’re all these phones for?”

“Give ’em to group leaders here to give to natives. Cuts down on some of the work.”

“Work? Aren’t we going to a hospital or something? Or a house? Or even a traveling, I don’t know, healing mart?”

Talbot laughed. “Like CVS on wheels?” Everyone had left the dance floor, joined the crowd. “Oh, you think we found the healer.” Talbot pointed the cigarette’s ashy end toward Kru.

“You learned a bad trick. We haven’t found him. Probably never will.”

“You’re saying there’s no healing—”

“She on her way?” Dim asked.

“Not what I said.” Talbot paused. “And looks that way, Dim.”

“What’d you suppose I do?”

“Fuck if I know. I’m just sticking around case anything pops up. Got nothing else to do. You can do probably what Espinoza tells you to do.” Talbot rubbed his neck then flung his hand like batting more flies. “I was joking during all that, by the way. I just imagined if he had a whore wife moaning out his name. Espinoza! Espinoza—”

Someone in the crowd shushed him. The music had stopped.

“Really?” He looked for the shusher then turned back round. “Fuck it. He don’t own me.
No one does.” He puffed, then looked up, contemplating something. “Well, pass out your shit.” He nodded toward the box.

Kru put on his backpack then raised with his knees cause his spine was weaker than anything else. All those years of draping his body over rafters and under crawl spaces and round studs and through time. Each table let him know what number they needed, how many people in their group. They were small groups, five, six, seven, and some just grabbed from the box themselves. They switched on the phones before Kru could mention it and waved him away without a thank you.

He’d visited two tables by the time the crowd started whistling at the dance floor. A Colombian woman was twirling on the bowing tiles now in heels that sparkled so much under disco lights it was like staring at an aggressive sunrise. They made her foot curve unnatural, mutilated her small feet. Something pushed her boobs up too much and pulled her waist in too tight with strings hanging clear down to her black hose. Those hose blacked out her legs, hiding any freckles or moles or something natural. And her mouth. Her red mouth gaped open too big like a gummy Lifesaver you just wanted to swallow up and be done with.

He shuffled the box to another table. Men yelled behind him to get out of the way, and he almost did a dance himself trying to please everybody. Moon seemed to shine off her sequins but that was fake too. Just projected white light from the wall-mounted TVs. It leaked bright during a commercial then muted color more with its regular program—some Colombian man putting on a concert.

Everyone sweat like they was wearing sequins too. Even the box’s edge closest to Kru had taken in how hot it was with a wet line. The whistles changed into hums now. They became a buzz of different frequencies and pitches, puffing and groaning. Until they beat out the vendors
“a la ordens,” the toasting of beer bottles, the accordion Vaya-something that always seemed quicker and louder than the song before. Sound, light, vibrations in the air, everything moved faster. It was overwhelming and wonderful and hypnotizing.

Then, she did a big jump this time, and one of her breasts popped out the packaging. Some hums became cheers, and Kru looked back to see Dim digging hard. He was gonna injure himself if he kept that up. At first, she tried to tuck her breast back in. But, the crowd groaned so much, she left it alone, continuing to spin, even jump a little. Kru handed out five more phones and pictured a jump-rope in the woman’s hands. A smooth, shapeless chest. She jumped like a child on Christmas morning or a boy getting a new bike or when Ian had realized Kru bought him Spider-man light up sandals.

More light from the TVs washed over her body. The TVs showed a zoomed-out shot of the man’s concert. But this time, the man had brought a boy out on stage with him. No more than ten. The boy had a microphone too and danced alongside the man in their little, muted concert. The phone box was lighter now, and it bounced against Kru’s waist. It wasn’t until the box had touched him that he started to get stiff.

Guys dug out phones from the box’s bottom and switched them on. One elbowed another, showing him he was videoing the girl. He spun the front camera round and stuck out his tongue. A small red light blinked from the phone, letting him know it was recording it all, saving it all for later. Another guy flipped his open and starting saving the dancing girl too. Then another.

Then another.

The boy on TV hadn’t gone away. If anything, the camera had zoomed in closer. The black swoop of his gelled hair made him look older, but his smooth, perfect skin and his shining, dark brown eyes, too similar to Ian’s, had brought his age back. And then, there was no mistake.
Kru was hard.

They were everywhere, and they would always find him because everywhere he was, they were already there. Stomping round inside him.

_You're disgusting._
_You've stolen time._
_You murdered parts of me before they could form._
_It would be better if you had smothered me as a newborn then stuffed me in a drawer._

Kru shook his head, breaking up Ian’s note like smoke. Despite the humming, he whispered just enough so he could hear: “Monsters in men. Monsters can’t win.” The guys at the table were too busy already videoing to notice the motto a therapist had suggested once. It was, again, a Band-Aid. For he couldn’t yet work out how to rewire, how to unlove.

Being baptized again. Praying until his knees numbed. Going on a date with a fine lady. Hammering his palms bloody with beams cracked open. Snapping a rubber band. Not eating artificial sugar. Doing yoga or something. Tossing his computer over a third-story railing. Telling himself “it’s not your fault. It’s biology.” Visiting the home where his son had tried to die. Writing a love letter. Researching wackado medicine men but finding one that said something about patching up a mind. Finding the healer cause no matter where he was, they still found him. Kroger’s and Aldi’s and Walmarts, West Town Mall and Bath & Body Works, Gay Street Rivera 8, and Market Square farmer’s stands and eventually children puff out and start talking back.

He handed out the last of the phones, and he’d grown more desperate than ever since Ian’s attempted suicide three months ago. That note was the clearest and most disturbing thing he’d ever read. And Ian’s death would surely mean his own death. So, once he’d found that site and once he’d got up the gull to take Ser’s stash—the only way to get all that cash so soon—it was all clear he’d do whatever it took to get healed.
Kru stood toward the front of the crowd, his back to the TV boy. He made sure each table had their phones. Didn’t want to fail Espinoza’s first job. He closed his eyes, getting a little dizzy from the spinning lights, and he dared think about the future. An old vision, something he’d tucked away, something that bordered one of the four things he could never tell anyone.

Ian loved magnolia trees. Even as a child, he’d always find one on UTK’s campus or Tyson Park and read for hours under those white blooms. And somehow, after all this was over, he would still be sitting and reading and waiting on his dad. Like no time had passed. Like no tears had fell down. Like waiting on the mail. Ian would flip the scarce pages of another book almost done. Then, he’d notice when Kru’d returned the way someone knows when they’re being looked at. Those black-brown eyes would scan his new dad, recognizing all the sick, all things Ian hated had been wrung out. He’d meet his hug, not flinching or pulling away. He’d spoil all the book endings—*they were orphans all along or I just remembered we’ll all die someday or I’m sad they ended up getting married*. Kru wouldn’t even care. He’d just run his fingers through his son’s copper hair and watch a white petal fall against his shoulder.

He opened his eyes and didn’t see any magnolia trees. But, he pulled his backpack, the letter closer to him and looked out at the loud humming crowd. Almost everyone was recording the girl now. They had made a sea—a pulsing lull of red blinking lights.

**Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs 2—May 5**

There weren’t other convoys at the raid site like CO Brukk had said after the incident with the deserter in Mustafa’s Crystal Shop. There were barely any people. Piles of destroyed buildings lined the roads. Concrete rubble interwove with wet newspaper, empty bags with tomato logos, crushed cardboard boxes. Patches of ripped clothes fluttered like makeshift,
meaningless flags. Shell casings rolled in the wind like unorganized rows of unplanted seeds. Broken plastic baskets shifted, wafting up the chalkiness of unsettled dust and the pungent stench of urine. Protrusions of rebar exposed a bombed building’s gutted insides. Off one cylinder of the metal rebar, Isaacs saw some kind of animal skin with fur on one side and wet, raw flesh on the other. As he passed beside it, he noticed that it actually wasn’t fur at all. It was human hair.

They arrived at a row of silent houses, all with the same stone exterior. Most of the entryways contained a loosely hung curtain behind a chain link gate. The gate was turned on its side and propped up with dried driftwood for each entryway. The houses were leaning as if sinking into a quicksand pit over time. There was no room to breathe, talk, do laundry, cook. And yet, short lines weighted with drying clothes connected the houses. Rinds of melons rotted in the shade between the houses. They were lived spaces.

House-by-house the fire team formed a perimeter. Always, Brukk was at the front to kick the driftwood and rip away the gate and curtain. It was a raid, Isaacs’ first raid. Initially, he just watched the other men tear into the home. But after XO’s yell “Isaacs, you gonna paint a picture of us or help,” he joined the men but couldn’t match their ferocity. They kicked rugs into corners, flipped over thin mattresses, cracked open pottery. Isaacs gently tapped the butt of his A4 rifle into the stone walls for hollowed areas. The families did not fight back. The Terp Minx explained to them the military’s necessity for the raid. Some watched with angry self-restraint, others with bored indifference. Only when Brukk was pleased did the men move on.

The pattern monotonously repeated until the butt of Huntings’ A4 revealed a hollow in a wall six houses later.

“Sir,” Huntings said, “there’s a safe in here.”

“On their knees,” Brukk said, pointing to Minx.
Minx translated, but the two Iraqi men stood tall.

“Slowly bring out the safe.” Brukk took out his M4 carbine rifle. “Put it in front of them.”

“Yalla, tell them again,” Brukk said, cocking the M4.

Minx translated.

The men exchanged glances without yielding. Brukk grabbed the ear of one man and flung him to the floor. Brukk swept the knees of the other man with his M4 and jutted the butt of the rifle into his face. Blood poured out of the man’s nose, staining his white robes.

Huntings set the safe in front of them, huffing from its weight.

“Minx, listen up: Alright, boy,” Brukk said to the man who was cupping his ear. “Open this safe. I will kill your haji faggot.”

The words hit Isaacs hard, but Minx didn’t flinch.

“He says you’ll kill them both anyway,” Minx stated.

“Okay.” With his index and middle fingers, Brukk formed bunny ears which latched onto the man’s broken nose and twisted. A sickening crack issued, followed by screams. The other man yelled up at Brukk.

“What’d he just say?” Brukk asked.

“Lots of swear words,” Minx said.

“We don’t have time for this shit.” Brukk kneed the broken-nose man in the chest. He fell back into a curtain, his body a slope against the wall. Then Brukk fired a hole at point blank range into the man’s knee.

Screaming had filled the unplugged freezer. Wretches of noise fired from Isaacs’ twelve-year-old throat. They struck the ceiling, side, wall, corner, side, floor, corner, wall. They ricochet off every angle and, returning, hit him, struck his body back. A screaming match with himself.
They came in different tones—starting strong with breaking adolescent voice. Rising at the end like questions. Falling low like neighbor dog’s growls. Bubbling up like his father’s drunk gurgles. Pausing and breaking in between for air—panting and recovering—then issuing a machine gun puncture of voice. The floor would not absorb his screams like pillows or blankets or even earth, dirt, or sand. His jaw muscles cramped with the widening. But he only jerked open his mouth in the freezer, more violently, vomiting out sound, trying to hold his pee. He’d been there for—he’d lost count after forty minutes—forty days—forty months—more than forty screams. His clenched legs quivered and shook under the force of his pushing diaphragm. He’d tried to grab a handle on the ceiling, something, anything to clench, to dig his nails into other than his own skin. Nothing was there. He was kicking and then scratching, digging his way free, expectant light soon. The screams matched time with his scratches. But then his hands couldn’t keep up. They’d lost time, they’d lost motion, his arms too weak to prop his hands longer. One of his fingernails ripped from his cuticle bed and fell on his cheek. It was wet. He smacked it off, his hands slapping his face. Smacking, smacking his face, he grabbed his hair and pulled. Yanked his hair, almost cross-eyed with madness. Drool forming and more smacks across his face, his chest, the walls, those dark, omnipresent walls. And always the screaming. His hands fell to his sides. He kept screaming until his kicking legs gave out too. And all he could do was lie there unmoved, except for the violent bursts of air from his chest. He felt his jaw, vocal chords, and lungs still working, but there was not even sound anymore. Something warm pooled in his crotch—his bladder finally expired. Whiffs of urine catching in his mouth. And even then, the bursts of air didn’t stop. They didn’t even stop after he screamed and screamed and yelled himself deaf.

“Od is,” Brukk said, Isaacs hearing mud. The Iraqi man’s hands hovered over his
destroyed knee like a benediction, sinews snapped. He’d never walk again.

“Od th is,” Brukk repeated, pushing his M4 into Isaacs’ chest. Brukk’s lips moved, but Isaacs squinted for comprehension.

“What,” Isaacs yelled, beating fingers against his ear canal.

“Hold this, you fucking Private,” Brukk said, the M4 shoved against Isaacs’ chest. It was lighter than the standard A4s and unusual that a Commanding Officer would hand it to a Private. Brukk stood over the man in front of the safe and, without words, began hitting him.

Isaacs’ hearing snapped back too quickly. Arrhythmic drills into the man’s skull—beat, beating past the thin layers of flesh. His skin opened and stretched and sagged. Blood dripped off of the skin edges into the quickly forming pool beneath him. Brukk grabbed his hair to lift him up, and then beat him down again. His left eye socket was turning to mush. Isaacs could almost see the full roundness of his eye protruding forward. Both cheek bones were pulverized, unable to support the face’s frame much further. Yet, the man was still alive. Non-human, guttural sounds rose from his chest. And then Brukk fell into a rhythm. It increased like some sadistic slow clap. It was impossible to tell where the extension of Brukk’s fist ended and where the man’s face hung. One nauseating blur. Isaacs felt in himself something rising, something pushing the back of his throat, something scraping over his tongue, madness returning.

“Stop,” Isaacs screamed, “stop, this is messed up. This is—”

Brukk met him chest to chest. Sweat and blood dripped from Brukk’s nose into the small space between them. Hot breath brushed Isaacs’ cheeks.

“You want to voice an opinion, Private?”

“I—” he began.

“Don’t back down now. You got to commit!” Brukk kicked the man’s face, snapping his
head backward into the stone hollow.

“Well, Private?” Brukk grabbed the straps of Isaacs’ flak jacket and pushed him into a wall. “You wanna state your fucking opinion?”

Isaacs expected to smell whiskey or rum or something. But there was just sweat.

A small click sounded behind them. All of the Marines, momentarily distracted by Brukk and Isaacs, looked back at the safe. It was open. The Iraqi with the destroyed knee had crawled to the safe during the skirmish right before he passed out. Both men were still breathing for the moment.

“Huntings,” Brukk nodded toward the safe, Isaacs’ straps still in his hands. Huntings hesitated, eyeing Brukk’s hold on Isaacs. Brukk let go, wiped his hands down the front of Isaacs’ jacket, and snatched back his M4.

“There’s something here,” Huntings said. “Looks like old photographs, some dinar, and bottles of this.”

“Chlorine,” Minx read the label.

“I could smell it.” Brukk began laughing. “Not going start a pool business, are you fellas,” he yelled at the unconscious men.

“Okay, Marines, take it, take all of it. Anything you want,” Brukk said, “but our deserter friend gets nothing.” He laughed again.

Destin stuffed freshly rolled cigarettes into his cargo pockets. XO grabbed some coffee from the kitchen area. Outside, Huntings poured the chlorine into the sand. Isaacs adjusted his flak jacket straps. Eventually, all the men filed out, leaving Isaacs and Brukk alone. Isaacs licked his cracked lips before passing Brukk. From behind, he gripped Isaacs’ shoulder but then said nothing. His grip slowly tightened, digging into his collar bone beneath the gear. The grip
compressed more and more weight until Isaacs sharply inhaled, and Brukk let go. Soundlessly, Brukk passed Isaacs and stepped ahead of the men to lead them down the line of houses, the phantom grip lingering on Isaacs’ shoulder.

~

The next few houses were ransacked with no blood spilled. By the time they reached the final house, it was sunset. Brukk ripped open the makeshift entryway with no loss of enthusiasm despite the long day. Grunting issued from a backroom behind another curtain. With no warning, Brukk ripped the curtain from the entryway, revealing a man and woman having sex. A few of the men snickered as the woman furiously wrapped a sheet around her naked body and hair. The man came at Destin, the Marine closest to him. Destin pushed him to the ground. Minx translated while Isaacs grabbed the curtain from the ground and offered it to the woman. She spit on his hand.

Brukk kicked the man and began a repeat routine of brutalization. This time, though, he did not ask any questions, did not make any accusations, did not even hit with heat. Silently, Isaacs watched another face lose its features—moles disappeared under blood—eyelashes matted. He kept expecting Brukk to tell Minx to translate, but there were no words during this encounter. Brute force was the language now, and it was communicating a message. With each beat, Brukk did not look at the man he was hurting, the man he was killing, but he looked at Isaacs. And he did not break eye contact. *Is this the first violent place,* Isaacs thought. He began his count to eight.

The men exited only when Brukk had finished, and night came as relief. There were almost stars in the sky. Faint light glinted off of the open Humvee door.

“Fucking Houdini deserter,” Destin called to Brukk. XO picked up the cut zip tie, placed
it directly in the center of the seat where he had secured Brukk’s Person Under Custody. The desert was black, and in all directions in front of the raided houses, wind had destroyed any clues in the sand.

“Let him run,” Huntings said. “Someone will catch him, ship him back to the U.S. for prosecuting. He’s not being subtle.”

“Yeah,” Destin interjected, “I heard about someone being shipped to Honduras or Indonesia or Colombia or some shit. Not for deserting but for some injury.”

“Called combat to volunteer, motard,” Minx muttered.

“Man, fuck ya.”

“Whatever it is, let’s go back to base and drink.” Huntings sighed.

“No.” Brukk scanned an invisible, night horizon. “Get in the Humvee. I can smell him.”

“He smell like piss cause I bet that’s what he’s doing in his digis!” Destin laughed.

“Get in the fucking Humvee.”

With one click, Brukk changed night to day. The PAC4 side light on his M4 with the men’s night vision goggles lit the emptiness of desert. It was almost a reverse plague. Instead of God’s hand swiping away day, the devil had taken night. For fifty-seven minutes, Isaacs felt Destin’s twists and turns in response to Brukk’s unnecessary commands. It was a blank canvas, an insurmountable, swallowing space. Exhausted breaths filled the Humvee’s interior as the only source of sound except for the jabs of orders which mutated into multi-pitched hums—lower, short-pitched hums for right and higher, drawn out hums for left. It was almost a marching lull as if Isaacs were back in BT.

Finally, the sounds were interrupted by a rattle. Just outside the Humvee, Brukk’s PAC4 caught the eyes of the deserter.
“Stay in here. Don’t put your PAC4s in my face,” Brukk said, jumping out of the Humvee. “You don’t need to watch.”

Isaacs prepared himself to hear the repeated cracking of jaw and slap of flesh. But no sound issued from the unseeable Marines. He thought about substituting his night vision for the ATN thermal imaging goggles to see the motion of their heat signatures. He thought about throwing off both devices and shining his PAC4 toward the two. He thought about exiting the Humvee with no real plan. Instead, he decided to do nothing, just follow orders. Seconds after Destin popped his gum, a clap echoed through the darkness. The back latch of the Humvee opened. In dropped the deserter’s dead weight.

Isaacs and Huntings jumped in the back.

“Drive,” Brukk stated after entering the Humvee in front.

“He’s bleeding,” Huntings said.

Isaacs unclipped his IFAK from his thigh. Lap pads absorbed some of the blood issuing from his back. Huntings flipped him to see the entry wound in his chest, but there was nothing there. The bullet penetrated his back and lodged itself into his lungs or heart.

“Drive,” Brukk repeated. Unblinking, he looked ahead.

“There’s no pulse,” Huntings called to the front.

Wind swept the Humvee as they headed back to base.

“There’s no pulse,” Huntings repeated.

“What happened?” Isaacs asked.

Brukk was quiet.

“What happened?” Isaacs asked again.

“You can guess what happened, Private,” XO stated.
“No, I can’t,” Isaacs said.

“Fall in line, Private,” XO shouted.

“What?” Isaacs shook his head.

“He rushed me,” Brukk muttered.

“You shot him in the—” Isaacs started.

“He rushed me.”

“No, you shot him—”

“He rushed me.”

Blood dried in the cracks of Isaacs’ hands. He exchanged glances with Huntings.

“Besides,” Brukk said, “he’s our sacrificial lamb here and hero at home. I doubt anyone will need to question the guy on his six again.”

“There’re laws for this,” Huntings said.

“You want an extended tour, Huntings?” XO shouted.

“You’re just feeling responsible cause he got out of your shitty zip tie,” Huntings said.

“You got less than fifteen days left, you wanna go there?” XO yelled.

“Unbelievable,” Isaacs said, sinking into the darkness of the Humvee.

“Embrace the suck?” Destin offered, driving on.

From the rearview mirror, Brukk’s eyes did not leave Isaacs. Their animalistic reflectiveness burned into him the whole way back to base.

***

Flames stretched into the night like dancing arms of burning ghosts. The bonfire lit up the desert. It ate through peeling ping pong paddles, a rusted chair frame, jagged, wooden pallets, and papers, piles and piles of papers. Some Marines tried to light their cigarettes with the
creature flames. Some poured a little haji juice of whiskey or moonshine and backed away in surprise when the fire spat up. Some lit and shot long-rang fireworks into the distance. Still others threw in letters, perhaps the customary promises that they’d make a difference with their lives as one of the few, the proud.

Guitar strumming hummed in the cool night air from the Container Housing Units. It met Isaacs’ ears as he stared at the stars.

“Hey, Indiana,” Huntings slurred above the roar, “they gots those ss-stars in Indiana?”

“Yeah, they got stars.” Isaacs smirked. “More than you’ve ever seen.”

“They got all that corn in Indiana?” Huntings asked.

“Yep.” Isaacs nodded. “And that’s pretty much it.”

Huntings swigged then tossed the empty bottle into sand. “But, they got those rats in Indiana, too?”

Isaacs sat up. “What?”

“Rats, you talk to when you’re sleeping.” Huntings stumbled side to side then imitated someone sleep talking, “S-s-sorry rat. I’m sorry—”

“You’re drunk. Go away.”

“You keeping from my beauty sleep is my business. I throw my pillow at you sometimes.” Huntings grinned. “I’ll throw my boot next time.”

“Good.” Isaacs paused, wind-blown sand already sinking Huntings’ discarded bottle. “I’ll hide a scorpion in it.”

“Oorah,” Huntings yelled. He swatted at nothing and walked away, almost swapping places with another drunk Marine. Some kind of duck, duck hem haw.

“How come ya neva drink, farm boy.” Sloshes of whiskey speckled the sand as the other
Marine planted both boots in front of Isaacs.

“I’m four years sober,” Isaacs said.

“Ah, fuck, didn’t know I were talkin’ to an alcoholic.”


“Ah, shit, farm boy, you gots me good!”

From behind, the Marine wrapped his hand around Isaacs’ jaw and lifted the bottle to his lips.

“Just a sip, just a sip, you gotta like it.”

“Get off me,” Isaacs yelled, but the Marine squeezed tighter. He wasn’t sure if this was some weird macho initiation, but it all came sudden, violent.

The expanse disappeared. He couldn’t breathe. The rocking slosh of alcohol pressed against his cracked lips. It burned, and his teeth clenched. The smell, that smell of whiskey soaked his flesh. His clothes were not his own. And then his father’s hand wrapped around his skinny biceps. Down the stairs, down the basement stairs, and “Into the freezer you go!” Scratch marks for a ceiling and dried urine for a floor—he could only hear the scurrying, and he could hear nothing more. And meaning all lost its seconds and time is a dirty bore—mom only craved cupcakes and dad the bathroom floor. Eliza, Eliza! And then the white-bellied scurrying echoed louder, his only friend approached, the brick, the brick, my God, the brick.

“RAT,” Isaacs screamed and then head butted the Marine from behind.

“Shit, farm boy, you made me spill my licka,” he said, rubbing his head, “but I still share wit cha.”

“Don’t touch—”

“Get the fuck out of here,” a voice from behind interrupted.
“Yes, sir,” the drunk Marine said and stumbled toward the fire.

Isaacs dragged his hand over his lips. Blood wiped on the back of his hand from their raw cracking.

“Come to my CHU when you’re done making out with yourself.” Brukk turned his back to Isaacs and walked to his Containerized Housing Unit.

The endlessness of the day weighted Isaacs’ every step toward the CHU.

~

“Enter.” The differences between their CHUs were dramatic. A mini fridge, working TV, privacy curtain, private bathroom, weights. It was almost comfortable, homey, spacious.

“At ease,” Brukk said and sat in a folding chair at his desk. “You know why you’re here.”

“Are you asking, sir?”

Brukk smirked. “What happened with the haji juice?”

“Just some drunk Marine, sir.”

“Everyone’s drunk tonight. But you’re not.”

“Is that another question, sir?”

“No. I asked you a question.”

“Even Huntings is drunk.” Brukk rubbed his chin. “Maybe he’ll forget what he saw today. It’d be in his best interest, twelve days to go. XO Anders and Destin know the game. I already talked to Minx.”

A firework exploded outside.

“You forget what you saw today, too,” Brukk said, massaging his cleaned knuckles.

“Yes, sir. I’ll forget,” Isaacs said, already thinking which tent he could file a grievance in.

“Will you,” Brukk said, smiling.

“Of course, sir.”
“If you do go,” Brukk said, almost reading Isaacs’ mind, “they’ll have a lot of questions for me.”

“Go where, sir?”

Brukk laughed, folding his arms and leaning back in his chair. “Close the door.”

A firework whizzed into the air.

“I’d rather not, sir. Gets tight in these things.”

“Close the door.” Brukk’s eyes were almost reflective under the poor lighting.

“Remember who I am, Private.”

Isaacs closed the door.

“Now, let’s just be honest.” Brukk cleared his throat and leaned forward. “Were you wearing your thermal imaging or night vision in the desert today?”

“My night vision, sir.”

“Did you or any other Marine on the fire squad have his PAC4 on me?”

“Not that I believe, sir.”

“Yes or no, Private,” Brukk emphasized.

“No, sir, there were no lights on you in the desert.”

“And, are you, Gabriel Isaacs, able to see in the dark?”

“I don’t understand the question, sir.”

“Are you an animal? A fox or bat or rat or—”

“I,” Isaacs hesitated. His neck twitched. His fingers were going numb. “I’m not an animal.”

“We’re all animals, Private. We all want something. What do you want, Isaacs?”

“Sir?”
“Yes, what do you want?” Brukk repeated. “Huntings wants to serve twelve more days then go home to his girl and dog. Destin wants to collect as many porno mags, smoke as many cigs, and tell as many stupid stories as possible until he dies. XO Anders just wants to belong under the guise of following orders. And Minx, Minx was a little bit of a mystery, but I got it out of him.”

“What does Minx want?”

Brukk laughed. “That’s between me and Minx.”

“What do you want, sir?” Isaacs tested.

“Well, I’m pretty simple. I just want people to see reason.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’ve heard the rumors, that I’m a deserter killer,” Brukk provoked, “you’ve heard.”

“Yes, I’ve heard some things.”

“Right, well, let’s double those rumors because of tonight into what they call a ‘pattern of behavior.’” The loudest firework yet exploded. “Now, with these patterns, they put you on a type of probationary watch. A time where they look for reason. What they want is to confirm that every action of every Marine, especially a CO, is done with full and proper reason. But, my actions are always so goddamn mysterious because no one ever sees them. They’re just rumors.” Brukk grabbed a pencil and some paper from his desk. Isaacs watched as he shoved the pencil in the sharpener and twisted and twisted. He pulled out the pencil and blew, all the while Brukk’s eyes not breaking contact with Isaacs.

“I’ll tell you something I’ve never told anyone. Sit.” Brukk nodded toward his twin-size bunk just behind the drawn privacy curtain.

“I don’t think—”
“Sit,” Brukk repeated.

Something compelled Isaacs onto the bunk.

“What’s the first thing you remember when you arrived here?”

“Um, the sand, I guess. And the heat. It’s like dry heat, not Indiana humidity.”

“Me too, the sand and the heat, especially the heat off the sand.” Brukk paused. “Who’s the first person you met?”

“Uh, Huntings, I think.”

“Would you say Huntings is the Marine you’re closest to here?”

“I guess, I’ve only been here a month though.”

With the sharpened pencil, Brukk started sketching something. “Now, imagine Huntings, your fellow Marine, your friend, the guy on your six, imagine him being burned alive.”

“What?”

“Can you hear him screaming? His flesh melting off and falling into that hot sand.”

“No, that’s—” Isaacs shook his head. “What’s the point of this?”

“You want to understand, don’t you?” Brukk grinned. “You want the reason?”

Isaacs glanced at the closed door.

“See, we’re not so different. When I first saw the sandpit, I was like you. I’d watch the stars. I wouldn’t drink with the other Marines. I’d question my CO until he pistol whipped me near dead. I’d even tried to patch up a foot or two, haji or Marine, blood was blood.”

Isaacs’ chest caved. It was like Brukk had cameras recording all of his actions.

“I’d make coffee and tea for my superiors and anyone who’d want some—kids who played soccer in the streets, women who’d accept my gifts, market vendors—that’s how I met Mustafa. He showed me how to reuse grains. I studied Arabic with this boy, Tamim, a couple
hours was a bag of rice and some smokes for his father. I went on raids, too polite to knock in walls though. Until one day—” Brukk cracked his knuckles, pencil still in hand. “Until one day, I heard his screams and watched his skin drip into the sand.” He rotated the sketch, the outline of a face forming.

“It was November 26. This kid should of been home for Thanksgiving, but his tour got extended. Big fucking surprise, right? He was the youngest of the fire team that day, only a Private, raiding, house by house. He should never of even been out. He wasn’t ready.” Brukk glanced at Isaacs then looked back at the forming sketch. Isaacs wondered if story time happened when Huntings, Minx, and Destin were called to his CHU too.

“But the kid was at the raid. So, him and Private First Class Arnold and our CO at the time leapfrogged house scabs with two other on the fire team. They politely questioned hajis about any suspicious movements or actions or the protocol. I’ll never forget how shit hit the fan though. These two hajis weren’t talking. They just looked at each other again and again. I wasn’t paying attention. I didn’t move fast enough when one haji ripped out one of our Barrett 9-mm from his robes. He shot our CO in the head, then our Terp, then our driver. Three quick explosions. You know how loud that shit can be. How fire still stays in the air after.” Brukk’s eyes scanned Isaacs.

Isaacs almost nodded validation.

“The other man kicked me to my knees and took my A4 and Barrett. There were spatters of Arabic as five or six other armed hajis entered. ‘Shoot them,’ I yelled to the kid and Arnold, but they had already been stripped as well. They were sacking our shit and passing it out like some Arab Christmas. My Arabic wasn’t good enough to catch much, but something about going outside. Arnold, the kid, and me were pushed into the night by our own weapons. All of us on
our knees, a haji grabbed the kid’s collar and threw him into the sand not two feet in front of us. They were so damn quick with that tar. And then the fire.” Brukk swallowed. “You always hear sound-effect screaming in movies. I think if they ever played the real sound, the sound of someone’s cheeks melting off their bones, of someone’s bottom lip melting in hot fusion with their chin, of burning tar, that black river collecting skin. If they ever played that, no one would be whole again.” The pencil stopped in Brukk’s grip then started again with his words. “The worst part was Arnold jumped up—I thought to fight—but he turned tail and ran. Ran away as fast as he could until the bullet caught up with him. Behind me Arnold was bleeding in the sand, in front of me the kid had fallen face-forward, the last motion of his body was to stretch his hand toward me. I heard his last exhale, and then his hand went soft. The hajis pointed at me. Then they pointed at him. And I got the message loud and clear.”

The sketch was almost complete.

“What was the—”

“Everything started after that. I reported it all in vivid detail, of course. I told them what happened to the kid, what Arnold had done, but you know what they said?” Brukk exhaled. “They said they both died heroes—that’s the news their mothers and fathers and sisters and cousins and fucking dogs and neighbors and police officers and paperboys and everyone would receive. They’d never know about Arnold’s bloody back or how the kid died. They’d get to keep stupid, unaware. But I knew, I saw, I remember. When Arnold ran that day, he didn’t just abandon us—me and the kid. He abandoned any hope of me being able to talk to anyone about what I saw. He abandoned any hope of me getting whole again.”

Isaacs rubbed his fingers over brushed-off pencil char. “Would they have let you both live? Two messengers?”
“I don’t know, Gabriel. But it’s a strange thing being alone.”

The guitar had stopped playing a while ago.

“Because,” Brukk continued, “that’s when everything started. At first, it was an accident. This Marine, Dawson, had a habit for recklessness, dumbass shit, at least it wasn’t during combat. He and this other Marine, Killins, were cleaning M4s on a table in the weaponry tent when one M4 that Dawson’s was gripping just started firing. He threw it down on the table, and it swiveled from the backfire. Dawson dropped under the table, but Killins would of had time if Dawson hadn’t dropped the M4 on the table facing the exact place Killins was standing. No one can outrun a bullet three inches from your stomach. The first bullet caught him, slumping him against the tent side, so Dawson said later, then fired two more shots until it swiveled back and shot him in the chest. They got the bullets out, but he died of infection three days later, our next shipment of antibiotics delayed apparently. After I heard about Killins’ death, Dawson and I had a chat in the weaponry tent. He said he was sorry and that he’d be smarter about weapons going AWOL. I would of let it go had he not started laughing. He said he was the type of person who deals with tragedy by laughing. But to me he was laughing at Killins, at me, at this whole operation.

“The rage was a lit match. It started with a beat to the face, then a kick to the floor, then I grabbed him and threw him over the weapons table. I ripped open the back of his t-shirt and took off my belt. And I began hitting him with those belt rings, striking him, whipping him into the table. To this day, I don’t know why he didn’t fight me back. He only laid there, gripping the sides of the table, taking each strike with a flinch, no sound, not a word, until finally welts appeared. No skin had been broken, but I’d somehow managed to break something else. I never heard that Marine speak after that, not a word of grievance had been filed against me. What was
worse though is that Dawson never laughed again.

“It got worse from there. I found out that I could do things to men that they’d accept as reality. For some reason, people wouldn’t fight me back. People wouldn’t try to stop me. Then I got this Desert Devil reputation bullshit. And all of a sudden I became a hero, too. I hate it. There’s darkness inside me. There’s chaos. A cosmos I can’t contain. I have to reach out. I have to lash out. Otherwise, I’m alone. But I wish this darkness weren’t mine. I wish I could control madness. More than just control who I hit and who I hurt and who I love,” Brukk spun the completed sketch around to face Isaacs. “I want to come out again. I want to be whole. I want to see reason.” Brukk slid the sketch to the edge of the desk toward Isaacs. It bore a strange likeness to Isaacs—his wide eyes, his cracked lips, his hair an exaggerated white from the page, only slightly shadowed.

“Is this me?” he asked.

“Yes and no. It’s you. It’s the kid, the month ago deserter, the same blonde hair. It’s Killins, Arnold, Dawson, the other deserter, the same uncertainty, fear. It’s what we’ve got.”

“You wanna change?”

“Shit, Gabriel. I just told you all this, and that’s what you’ve got to say?”

Isaacs shrugged. “Well?”

Brukk leaned back. “I don’t know, might be too far gone.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Yeah?”

“The fact that you want to change says that you can. My dad—” Isaacs brushed the pencil shavings from his fingers. “My dad is an alcoholic. He won’t ever change, not because he can’t but because he doesn’t want to.”
“You think it’s possible.”

“Yeah.” Isaacs smiled. For the first time since arriving, he felt camaraderie—that burst of significant “Oorah”—that sense of “the few, the proud” at BT graduation—a hint of the recruiter’s speech.

“You think you can help me?” Brukk asked, handing over the sketch.

“If I can, yeah.” Isaacs accepted it.

“There’s relief.” Brukk exhaled and licked his lips. “Your lips are bleeding, Gabriel.”

“Yeah.” Isaacs wiped the blood on his hand. “Still adjusting.”

“Right. Well, the real reason I’m talking to you is not to tell you my life story, but to remind you about heroes.”

“What about them?”

“I just want to tell you that you were really heroic today.”

“What do you mean? With the girl?”

“No, fuck the girl. With me.” Another firework whined through the air until it exploded.

“With me and what you did during the raid today,” Brukk said, the trance disappearing.

“I don’t underst—”

“Very few people tell me to stop, remember?”

Isaacs’ eyes zigzagged across the floor, then he looked at Brukk again.

“Yes, but I don’t understand,” Isaacs said.

“Sir.”

Isaacs hesitated, taken aback, the formalities reinforced. “I don’t understand, sir.”

“It was very impressive—hero worthy—like our deserter friend, like Arnold.”

“But, I don’t get it.” He paused. “Sir.”
“Yes, but guess what?”

“What?”

“I have the luxury of not explaining shit to you, Private.”

“What? What just happened? Were those stories real?”

Brukk grinned. “Dismissed.”

“Sir, why did you bring me in here?”

“Get the fuck out of my CHU.”

Isaacs stood up, walked to the door, and opened it. Fire crackles filled night air.

“Private,” Brukk called, “you forgot to salute me.”

Isaacs stood at attention then cut the air with a quick salute.

Instead of returning the salute, Brukk stood up and walked to the doorway where he propped his arm as a block.

“Really?” Isaacs said, staring at the hairy arm.

Brukk’s grip was tight on Isaacs’ shoulder again. He bent him toward his lips: “Consider this adjustment training.”

Another firework exploded in the distance. This time it rendered a high, whining call.

Brukk and Isaacs both turned their attention past the drunken field of Marines, past the dying blaze, and farther into the darkness. Isaacs had never heard a camel scream before. But, that was the only explanation of the sound—the burning camel in the distance. They watched the fiery blur trample through the sand. It twisted and turned, standing still only momentarily enough to make out its one tall Arabian hump.

The Marines did not rush to it. In fact, no one moved. It was a circus nightmare. Isaacs started forward but was held back by Brukk’s grip still on his shoulder.
“Desert will eat you up. Enjoy the light show.” He let go of Isaacs and unblocked his arm from the doorway.

Isaacs ran. He jumped over the small dunes in front of the CHUville, kicked empty bottles, and slowed, slowed to a halt. It was then that the high, whining calls faded into a lowering whimper. The camel dropped to its front knees, and then with one final call, fell dead on its side, the fire still burning flesh.

Isaacs dropped to his knees, too, not making it in time. The chill of night gave him goose bumps. Spit hanged off of his lips. With the hand not holding Brukk’s sketch, he dug his fingers into the sand—the sand of the cinnamon maker.

“Use your imagination,” mom had told him and his sister once. The water was warm, and he learned today was called hooky. He liked it. The hotel pool was no beach, no beaches anywhere near Indiana, but it had sand—some kind of finagled walk-in slope. She was prepared with a green pail. “Let’s make your first sand castle,” she told them both. “Doesn’t it make you hungry?” She smiled. “It looks like cinnamon to me.” The sand was thin and didn’t pack well, but it was enough. His sister’s purple bathing suit was so small but her giggle so loud. Eliza kicked her feet. Sand landed in his eyes. He was far too excited to cry or complain or do anything to make the moment disappear. He washed sand off of Eliza’s white hair and away from her brown eyes. She continued to fling it without restraint or control or need for control. “Let it be, Gabriel,” mom said, patting his hand. But he couldn’t let it be—he could never let it be. He continued to wash the sand from her eyes, protecting her vision. He continued until hotel security asked for his mom’s room key and promptly escorted them from the premises as “non-guests.” He accidentally left the green pail, but he had a secret. He had escaped with a pocketful of sand, the cinnamon maker’s sand. If only sand would have been enough after the tea party. If
only sand could have stopped the two people in hoodies, stopped his mom’s eating, stopped his father’s drinking, stopped everything that happened in the basement, stopped the darkness from swallowing him like the forgotten green pail that only lives in memory.

*This cannot be the first violent place*, Isaacs thought. *She deserves better.* Pushing himself up and brushing sand from his digis, Isaacs ran to his CHU, tossed Brukk’s sketch under his desk, and wrote down everything he remembered about the injured girl in the market.

**Tin Jimenez 2—June 26**

The healing line outside Tin’s bamboo paint thatch was too many long. Tin had hurried away from the lizards to the growing line, but Mami took time like always. Sore-marked Roberto waited first with wife Angelica and her tapping toes, down-turned mouth. Some striped shirt teenager with a yellow Totto backpack wavered in line, side to side like the pee dance. Some old lady massaged her neck, staring up at the pregnant rain sky. A woman wrapped a baby in cloth. Two figures supported a middle blur. And the line continued out of sight.

“That’s a lot of hearts,” Tin said, his stomach growing more upset.

“Don’t worry, mijo,” Mami said, “I’ve already counted the first four. Hernan must be in the paint room already. And I must go to the market.”

“For what?”

“A surprise.” She kissed his head.

“Mami, not in front of everyone,” Tin whispered, glancing at the line.

“They don’t care.”

“You shouldn’t buy surprises. We’re very low on food.”

She laughed. “Have you ever gone hungry, Tin?”
He kicked dirt. “No, but—”

“That’s right. So, let me be Mami, and you be you. Be back later.” Dirt clouds outlined her steps’ echoes as she walked the short trail between his paint room and the main bamboo thatch. After grabbing her purse, she disappeared down the path. Tin popped into his bamboo thatch and wrapped twine for a lock.

Hippoman had taken his usual seat, a three-legged stool beside an easel and Mami’s canvas. Like every weekly visit, the man pinched his two remaining, unswollen fingers around his buttons and shed his shirt. His disease had taken skin and teeth and shape. It replaced human form with graying thick hide, cracked and marred by sunlight. The dull, rotten bottom teeth of the man resembled tusks. But his eyes, those watery, old blackberry globs were inset and spaced apart with a mouth and whiskers like a hippo’s. Tin could soften the skin’s taut, numb and shrink the growing teeth tusks, and wipe a tear from those watery eyes, but he hadn’t figured out how to heal him permanently—todavía, yet.

“Tin, my boy! This is a creepy painting you have.” Hippoman nodded up toward Mami’s no-eyed portrait. “Is she like La Llorona? Weeping woman who cried her eyes out?”

“What? No, Mami’s not a crier. I just can’t paint them right.”

“You tried painting them wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“Her hair is blue. Why do her eyes need to be real?”

“I don’t know. I see her eyes on the canvas already, brown and gold. But it’s like my hand won’t move what I want. My body’s not listening.”

“I understand.” Hippoman propped his swollen hand under his whiskered chin. “Well, how are those muscles coming?”
“What muscles?”

“Last week, before the healing? You wanted to impress all the Mincan ladies.”

Hippoman’s lips curled up, against his tusks.

“No way, Hippoman! I was talking about punching Emili—”

“Which you need muscles for and muscles impress ladies.”

“No, you’re wrong. You must be thinking about another—”

“Healer? No, it’s just you, Tin. Well,” Hippoman scratched his whiskered chin, “you and all the ladies.” He winked.

Tin rolled his eyes then looked around the paint room. “Where’s Camila today?” The thick pulse of Hippoman’s heart—his a thud, pound, pound—beat out invisible waves to Tin’s chest. Pulse being quicker than usual, Hippoman was scared or nervous or excited.

“She’s nursing Jamie outside. Seven, can you believe it, seven grandkids now.”

“That’s a lot of hearts.”

Hippoman smiled then coughed. “Yes, also a lot of teeth to lose and re-grow.”

“I hope they’re like you.” Tin smiled. “Kind, but—”

“A little loose above?” He tapped his temple.

Tin laughed. “A lot loose above.”

“Yes, I wish the same thing, like and unlike.” Hippoman rubbed his swollen fingers.

“What’s with the line today? You’re becoming famous. People wanting to sign your muscles?”

“I’m ignoring you.” Tin paused. “Did you talk to any of them?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do they know the four-rule? My Mami said she counted this morning.”

“She sure did. Tapped our shoulders, gave us those papers—oh, mine’s on the chair
behind you. She looked real deep into our eyes when talking about secrets—secrecy for a heal
and nothing more.”

“Do people five, six, seven…do they know about the four-rule?”

“I don’t know, Tin.” Hippoman coughed again. “I’m not sure it matters to them how
many you can heal per day.”

“How many I’m allowed to heal per day,” Tin corrected.

“Allowed, fine, fine,” Hippoman said. “Maybe they’ll just sleep here to be sure they’re
first tomorrow.”

Something panged in Tin’s stomach. With two fingers, he massaged the pain, a dull
throb.

“Okay, my boy?” Hippoman held Tin’s free hand.

“Fine.”

“We can wait a while—”

“I said I’m fine,” Tin pulled his hand back and walked to the high-set window, a gift his
father Diego carved before he’d left, so Mami had told him. So many hearts waited to be listened
to. Everyone needed his touch alone.

“Okay, you’re fine. Where’s your Mami today?”

“She’s getting me a surprise.”

“What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t know why she’s spending money when we need food.”

“And you know she’s not buying food?”

“Yes,” he clipped, “she’d just tell me. She’s never held up a bag of tomatoes and yelled
‘Surprise.’”
“You know, Tin. Many people would give food for a heal. She could change the paper.”

“She won’t.”

“Why not?”

“She’s said many times something about control or freedom. I don’t really know. And many Mincans don’t have food of their own to give.”

“True, true.”

“And I don’t want anything either. People come here because they are sick. They’re already down—why would I take more from them? They help me feel not so alone and that is a better gift than a tomato or mango.”

“I don’t know,” Hippoman said, “have you tasted a Mincan mango? Some of the sweetest savors in the world.”

“Have you traveled outside of Minca?”

“Of course, my boy, but—”

“Where did you go? Outside of Colombia? Were there more healing lines—”

“No, Tin, just coastal Colombia.” Hippoman paused. “And, I was joking. I just meant our mangos are very sweet, very good.”

“Oh.”

“Will your Mami be back soon?”

“I don’t know. I can do these healings on my own though. She can’t do anything while she’s here.”

“Well, I’m not sure that’s true.” Hippoman grinned.

From his waist, Tin sprung open the pocket-watch lid and scooped mud. All over his fingers, hands, and belly, he spread its coolness. He painted himself mud.
“It is true,” Tin said. “Ready?”

“Yes.” Hippoman closed his eyes. “I’m ready to kiss Jamie without these pokey teeth.”

Cool mud of Tin’s hands transferred to Hippoman’s hairy chest. Skin, cracked and tough, soaked the mud’s moisture.

Hippoman had been first to volunteer for experimenting. Mami had called out close friends, trusty people, people who knew about Tin’s healing. They gathered each new sun for six consecutive days in his bamboo paint room with a cough or a deep splinter or Hippoman’s chronic illness or one, having no other injury, even cut his hand, letting blood drip in the name of Tin’s healing. But, Mami, Mami never stepped into that line. She organized distant, unwilling to touch or hold him during the healing. Fear might have speckled behind her eyes.

Days one and two, he healed eight people without exhaustion. Days three, four, five, the number dropped to five heals. The last three days put a constant four before the thirst, exhaustion, and irritability clawed up. They’d experimented with time gaps between healings, nighttime healings, morning healings. The time gaps didn’t matter. The night healings didn’t matter. But, the morning, there was something about that crispness of dawn, dewiness on palms before the Colombian sun zapped it away, something that helped lessen Tin’s exhaustion. So, Mami ruled three conditions: Tin had to keep going to school, work harder with English tutor, Amanda, and only perform four morning heals a day, no more. Tin had smiled to this agreement: Already white sheet patients were lining up to be rearranged.

But three weeks after the experiments, after the dream, there was pain. The disease puzzle wasn’t rearranging anymore—it was leaving. Just like rags take all the spill from floors and just like the afternoon Colombian sun takes dew, the healing transferred the patients’ pain to himself. Never the disease, the cuts, the sickness themselves, but always the pain now, drawing it
out, poison. Now, white sheet patients’ cuts and bruises and burns healed immediately under his
mud, no more wounds spread out like pores. Now, it was always the body first, aligning himself
with the wound, feeling the damage, the heart normally pumping fresh blood to the injury, and
the faint, growing, overlapping pain transferring from the patient to Tin. He absorbed patients’
pain, big and small, coursing through his own body, wounds opening and gushing and pussing.
Horrific ooze of infection, cancerous lines in swimming lymph nodes, stretching birth pains of an
almost miscarriage, wilted, asthmatic lungs unable to reach the bottom alveoli. He took it all. For
some reason, cancer, arthritis, Hippoman’s disease, anything chronic, as Mami referred, flared up
less and less but never into obscurity, todavía, Tin always thought, yet.

He had told no one, not even Mami, for something else came with the transfer. He
couldn’t watch telenovelas of memories anymore. Now, the healing forced him behind the
patients’ eyes to feel their minds. With the pain transferred from body to body so did emotions
from mind to mind. Tin became the white sheet patient, only for a time, but the time sometimes
stretched too long. It made him exhausted, terrified, lonely, furious. Something in his mind was
changing with the healing evolution. Something violent and stirring.

Maybe this was the sangre del Diablo—devil blood—as Jorge and other Mincans called
it. They often made Catholic father-son-holy ghost crosses over their bodies any time they saw or
spoke of Tin. They called him unnatural because he could clap cuts closed, pull black poison
from red bite marks, swirl out infection of a lionfish sting. Sometimes father-son-holy ghost
crossers would appear in the healing line, a hooded head down. They’d made crosses and spread
whispers even after Tin had saved them. Sometimes, especially in these moments but only
sometimes, Tin’s hands itched to take their blood and run it cold.

Tin pushed harder against Hippoman’s chest.
Hippoman’s pain was a stretched bouncy ball, his body too big for his skin. It was all drippy, fluid-filled and full of water, not puss like an infection. Tin’s body didn’t change shape, but he felt the swell of ballooning. The skin stretched so it cracked, the raw rips of elliptical tear-aparts. The tusks were especially painful. The gums bled. The gaping pull-push and cinching of the gum loops around the shrinking tusks. Tin’s stomach pained him more then, but he took the pain, the pain being transferred.

And then Tin went even deeper with the way of new healing. Past the body’s limits, he connected with Hippoman’s mind, often only with particular moments of his pain, how it happened, who the patient saw. But sometimes it all spilled out into a kaleidoscope.

Tin saw Gisela’s basket stand and the long, swollen hand of Hippoman pointing to one with yellow flowers. Hippoman was joyful, knowing this would cheer pregnant Camila. Gisela, her fingers raw and scratched from pokey reeds, handed him the bundle for 5,000 pesos.

Tin felt the cut of the rock strike his and Hippoman’s skull. They turned to see Emiliano, Del Real, and Jorge laughing at the warm blood Tin felt running down Hippoman’s head.

The healing dipped into a different memory, something older. They always became more important. Tin saw the tombstone, imperfect, hand-chiseled. Hippoman cut his finger, clearing a dead palm from the name: Sofia Amaríña Hernández Montes. Despair, despair for grandchild number two, despair for her coughs and pneumonia breaths that cut too short. Death had taken her. Tin hadn’t even been born.

Then, patients’ bodies told Tin the ending process, the third step, the healing itself. Sometimes it was bones resetting and cracking into place, infections torn open and suctioned out like through a straw that yellow-green crusted inflammation, peeling each layer of burned skin back, exposing raw, healthy, wet skin. Hippoman was all about reduction, moving out the hippo
and moving in the man. The fluid, the ripped skin, the bleeding gum tusks, Tin fought with the body, with nature, with fate. And he pulled some tug-of-war with the earth, sky, wind. He willed all the swelling to come out, searching Hippoman’s body for the last bit of puffed-up gunk. With the last tug, he fell back, breaking connection.

Dirt blocked Tin’s vision. It clung to his eyelashes, matted with sweat and tears. He grabbed for a leg of the easel. His hand shook so much the canvas toppled off into the dirt. No-eyed Mami smiled up at thatch ceiling.

“Tin,” Hippoman said, gasping, “grab my hand.”

The fingers were regular sized, the hand no longer a four-fingered hoof.

“It worked?” he asked, sitting up with Hippoman’s help.

“Tin.” Hippoman’s fingers were eight and two thumbs. He touched his own face, the tusks tiny knobs in his mouth, the cracked cheek skin mended shut, the long whiskers gone, replaced by a five o’clock shadow. Tin saw what he had done.

“Tin,” Hippoman repeated, able to wipe his own tear, “my fingers are so small. And my teeth all fit in my mouth. This is different than all weeks before. Today,” Hippoman kicked off his sandal. He wiggled his toes, all separate, a man appearing a man. “Today, I could climb a tree!”

Hippoman squeezed Tin against his chest, their hearts just skin, blood, muscle, bone apart. “Thank you, Tin. Not just for taking the pain,” Hippoman said, releasing him, “but for talking to me like I’m human. Sometimes I just need someone to touch my skin without flinching. And you’ve given me that.”

Tin touched his arm. “You are my friend, and I hope you feel better.” His head pounded and stomach hurt like bleeding stomach, an ulcer, but a traveling ulcer, a blood glob swimming
up Tin’s track.

“Thank you, Tin. You are a wonderful, wonderful boy.”

“Hurry up,” a voice outside shouted.

“Cranky Angelica and Roberto are next?” Hippoman asked.

“Yes.” Tin drank from a glass.

“I cannot wait to show Camila. I cannot wait to kiss Jamie outside.”

“You don’t have to wait.” Tin walked with Hippoman’s help to the paint room exit. They pushed out together, and the moaning, chatting crowd of people then silenced.

Camila’s hand flew up to cover her mouth, almost dropping her baby. Correcting, she clung the nursing child closer to her breast, unable to remove her sight from Hippoman.

“How is this possible,” Angelica whispered, her gloved hand wrapped around husband Roberto’s arm, covered in bleeding sores.

“That’s not Hippoman,” said the teenager with the Totto backpack.

“It’s me,” Hippoman said, wiping the dried mud from his chest. “Look, mija.” He walked toward Camila, buttoning his shirt with five, six fingers, more than just two. “Did you see that?”

“Yes.” She was nodding, her shaking lip holding words. “Yes.”

And with that, he leaned down and kissed his grandchild.

“This is lovely,” Angelica said, rolling her eyes, “but what about my husband? We’re number two. We signed the damn paper. Now, heal him.”

“You are number two,” Tin said, rubbing his dried-mud hand over his stomach. The blood ulcer, blood glob was traveling up his system, through his esophagus, a thick bulge in his throat. It was denser than a mucus glob and burned like stomach acid. Tin fell to his knees, palms on the ground.
Murmurs broke out—“What’s happening?” “Is he okay?” “Sweat’s everywhere!”

Then it came, the blood glob, arching over his tongue, slimy against his palette, past his teeth, and onto the ground for all to see.

“Tin,” he heard Hippoman yell.

“It’s the devil blood!”

“Help him, someone.”

“Help my husband! He was supposed to be healed next.” Angelica’s scream echoed through the wax palms. “I just want to touch my husband again. Without these damn gloves!”

Thick lines of red spit dangled from Tin’s lips. It was like a chord attached to the blood glob, stretching up through his body to his belly.

“You’ve got to do it.” Angelica gripped Tin’s shoulders and shook him.

“Let him go,” Hippoman yelled.

Tin’s eyes rolled back. Sky was cloudless. Wax palms, curiously skinny and tall, swayed with gentle shush of wind. Angelica’s scream still playing tag between trunks. Flying over a palm, a red-crested Cotinga sang. He wondered what the view would be, a line of the dying and dead, another jungle on the earth. Sound was going as blackness curled its blanket in. But before it all came to sleep, he heard Mami.

“Get off him, you hag.”

“Roberto’s next. We’ve waited for days.”

“And you’ll have to wait tomorrow and the next day and the next if you’re lucky.”

“We signed the damn paper. You counted us! Even he said we’re next.”

“Things change.”

Someone slapped someone.
Wind blew silence around the Mincan village. And just before the jungle crumbled away, Tin heard Mami with the last, “I’ve dealt with worse than you.”

***

Mami always had a talent for flinging mud. From Tin’s earliest memory, she’d encouraged mud with three-year-old Tin and six-year-old Emiliano rolling in it. This memory was so early, Tin’s father, Diego, hadn’t left yet but it was the day he would. Tío Fernando and his mami—Abuela Bruja as all the children called her—yelled out with tired voices not to play in the rain muck. But Tin and Emiliano slipped in the sludge, ignoring instruction. Tío Fernando, with eight, nine, ten Aguila beer bottles around his boots, stomped off the bamboo thatch dirt porch. Emiliano had looked up while Tío Fernando’s fist came down, crunching his son’s jaw to the side. Abuela Bruja called something from the bamboo, something like “not here, Fernando, not here.”

But Mami and Diego, sipping something nearby, ran into the rain. With fist raised, Fernando had to pause—Mami stood between him and the muddy, crying, bleeding Emiliano. He screamed for her to move with curses Tin had never heard until then. Instead, Mami stooped down, picked up a fistful of mud, and threw it across Tío Fernando’s face. Over and over, she slung the mud, down his body, over his arms, even some across his legs. She painted a human canvas, the beautiful way it flew from her hands and speckled Tío Fernando into silence. He became a muddling. Aguila still in his hand. He did nothing but stare, stare into Mami then stare past at his brother.

And then the part Tin remembered best. Rain washed away Emiliano’s tears—his six-year-old hand hovered over his jaw. Tin had felt the break without the pain—some sort of switch, like how people know if a door is opened or closed. Tin knew his cousin’s jaw was
broken. Tin’s father’s face, big, next to him, held Emiliano’s hand. His father’s hands were muddy as were Emiliano’s. But then for some unknown reason, Tin unhooked his father’s hand from Emiliano’s and hugged his cousin. The hug pressed their small chests harder and harder together, until the hearts would have been touching if not for body and mud, all the mud all over them. Learning how to walk, learning how to eat, how to hold pee until pants are down, how to form syllables and accents, how to appreciate music, how to love—all these things were understood, forgotten, histories. In the same way, Tin learned how to heal, his first time with the mud puddle war. With their chests pressed together, Tin mended the jaw, the bones reconnecting like old friends, how wombs connect all human cloth from scraps and vitamins and minerals and time.

Emiliano had stopped crying, touching his healed jaw with wide eyes. The world stepped away from Tin—Emiliano ran to Tío Fernando who pushed his son behind him. Abuela Bruja spit on her dirt porch. Diego stood up, wiping mud on his jeans. And Mami, well, Mami had leaned toward Tin and kissed him. Her mouth was lipsticked mud as she grabbed his hand, pulling him toward the outside hose, the rain not hard enough. The mud puddle war was over. No one had won. He only looked back to see his father carrying Emiliano, Tío Fernando holding his porch door open for the two.

Later that day into night, Tin had woken up to Mami’s yells and his father’s shushes. A three-room bamboo thatch could only house so much sound. Peeking around a daub wall, Tin watched his father kiss Mami. Tin’d woken up too late. Their conversation was over. He only saw his father’s full backpack and only heard his father’s low voice tell her “Remember, you will know.”

And then, like that, he left. He left with no goodbye to Tin. Mami hadn’t stopped Diego
or woken Tin up. She just stood, staring out the door frame like her mind was tiptoeing in his footsteps. The heart-shaped necklace draped over her un-scarred collar bone, the first time Tin had ever seen the key. And that first time was the last time he’d seen his father.

Mud puddle wars was the only clear memory of his father’s face. Mami refused to tell him histories or show him his face through healing her. So, the face was the same in every pretend conversation when Diego left after the mud. From three-year-old Tin to nine-year-old Tin, he’d kept his father alive through conversations about razors and motos and Aguila, all the things he thought his father’d enjoy. He’d saved this face until nine-year-old Tin chose to forget it, the same year he promised to be more serious, to study the body more, never to threaten Mami, to forget Diego forever, to heal the world.

Blood rust taste still in his mouth from vomited blood glob, Tin lay half-memory, half-asleep. Mami’s thigh pressed into him, and she sighed, twirling heart-shaped key. Pretending sleep now, Tin’s eyes were a jungle of lashes. Mami scooped him in an arm-chill hug, and the chilly key imprinted in his neck like a soap bar. He wanted the whole memory of Mami and Diego’s clipped conversation. Metal pushed harder with her squeeze, and Tin widened his squint. Dried mud still caked on his hands and chest, maybe enough to reach her heart, follow the pulse beat beat blood roads to her mind. She’d never let him heal her because white sheet patients have no control over which memory they showed. Maybe he wouldn’t have to heal her. As an experiment, he might be able to touch Mami and take it from her. Maybe the mud would be enough to steal her mind’s piece before she even noticed he was awake.

But, a knock against bamboo hollows drew Mami off Tin and to the door.

“María,” said Gisela’s voice, the best Mincan basket weaver. “I brought water and bleach to stain out the words.”
“Now?” Mami asked. She glanced back at pretend-sleeping Tin.

“Yes, because I need to tell you something that Minca needs not to hear.”

“Okay.” Mami left the door open, fresh wind on hot days, and the two stepped around the house’s curve. Behind her room’s bamboo shoots, thatch, and reeds, Tin heard the water’s slosh with a bucket set down and heard sponges or rags dip into it.

“Know who did this yet?” Gisela asked, water dripping into water like ringing the rag above the bucket.

“No, but it doesn’t matter.”

“It makes you the attention though.”

With a slop of rag or sponge on the bamboo outside, drops flipped through the house’s gaps like sometimes with rain. Tin tipped his head back. Two upside-down figures moved with sun at their backs. They adopted a sway with their dresses.

“What do you mean? Tin’s been special almost all his life. Attention is hard to miss.”

“Yes, but yesterday there was a man wandering around market, asking questions about a healer.”

“What kind of questions?”

“What the healer can do, where he is, where he lives—he seems like a Barranquilleran from his street clothes, stink of moto oil and gasoline. His words were rushed, like city.”

“He asked you questions?”

“Yes, in market. I was weaving. He said there are some men, Americans. They were in Barranquilla, but he thinks some of them are going to Palomino. He said he’d get a special cut if the healer was in Minca or Palmor or Palomino, the other villages he’s planning to visit—”

“He’s still here?” Mami’s voice was raised.
“I don’t know. But we do know Minca is not quiet about the blood. You and Tin should leave.”

It had to be a little while since the blood glob for news to spread fire. It wasn’t clear how long, hours, maybe a day.

“My Papi’s in Barranquilla, but—”

“Then, go to Barranquilla.”

“But if they’re in Barranquilla—”

“It is wide.”

“Barranquilla is so big. But—” She paused, and Tin leaned closer. “The city will be too much for him.”

“My cousin says Santa Marta’s MarSol shuttle buses are smaller, safer. Then, you’ll just have to take Sobusa in Barranquilla to your Papi’s house.”

“I hate buses.” Mami’s shadow hand rose to her collarbone.

“I’ve never been on one.”

Mami’s hand dropped. “They smell.”

The washing stopped.

“There’s something else,” Gisela said.

“What else could there be?” Mami sounded exhausted.

“The man, he offered me money.” Gisela paused. “I, of course, said it was a good story he told about a magical healer, but no one existed in Minca like that. I cannot say that everyone will deny 100,000 pesos. How well do you trust?”

“It’s finally happening. I knew the healing lines were too much. Too much for him as he’s sleeping into his fourth day coma. Too much for this greedy world.”
Cuatro días, four days! Tin sat up. Four days of sleeping and not healing. Hippoman would need another weekly heal soon. Tin slipped the sheet off himself and slid his legs to the bedside.

“Go be with him. Make a plan in your mind. I will erase these words.”

“Devil blood.” Mami exhaled. “Devil never healed anyone.” The scrubbing became more vigorous as the bamboo tapped against the mattress with her force.

Tin walked dirt-padded steps to the door. Peeking left, right, he stepped out the thatch. Some soft mound under his barefoot, he stepped back. Two flattened, yellow roses were next to bunches and bundles of flowers like leftover rain. Folded construction paper with children’s writing “Sentirte Mejor Pronto, Tin” followed by a sickly boy holding a smiling balloon and “Te Amamos, Tin” complete with a giant heart surrounded by only half of his classmates’ signatures. A teddy bear with one eye stared up at him.

“María, go hold his hand. Go—”

“No, I need to be here, out of the house, away for a minute.” Tin looked back inside. “He is my son. We wash together.”

“Won’t be much longer. It’s coming off.”

Mami and Gisela were silent. Only the rhythmic ring rub rinse, ring rub rinse made sound. The two darkened figures moved their hands, rubbed vigorous the words from the outside wall. Tin knew they believed the words were bleaching out, fading and leaving. But, he stood in the doorframe, watching the women push water, bleach, and paint into the gaps, into the house. The red painted words ran down the bamboo. The wall turned red, for the house was bleeding.
The warehouse girls hid on purpose. There was no way cops failed this hard at finding one girlie, two, three, four. Two days had passed since the warehouse spewed open and none had been uncovered or herded from an alley like something feral or caught trying to sell themselves round South Knoxville cause that’s girls only value they knew. None in warehouse corners. None under skeletal Maze beds. None hiding behind lampposts. None under Gay Street scaffolding trying to score scag. None at the downtown soup kitchen. None in Mary Vestal Park scaring birds shitless. None at bus stations. None returning to their parents’ houses. They’d all pour at once. They’d all say ouch if cops caught them by their toes. They’d all grow tails for their tales and maybe stay together. They’d all play hide and seek in a world maze. They’d all stay fire ants somewhere underground, clinging to each other like a polymer.

Maybe, then, they went back to the men. The clients. They might know the way back to Brackbill. The scag could only stop so much to make forgetting. And even sometimes no scag was how they liked it. But then maybe all the girls went down to the river to drown themselves. Like they’d already formed a pack between Maze walls. That would be the kind of thing she would of done with the girls. A dozen tiny bodies bubbling up to Tennessee River surface one at a time. Maybe a group death would make everyone notice. Or maybe they’d spread out their bodies. One would drown in a pool. One would drown in a couple’s bathtub. One would find a bucket and bob for nothing.

Back again at the warehouse, Sara stood, the final girl. She slid her hand on the smooth inside of police tape but didn’t push through it. Hollow. Hallowed. Since the yellow warehouse lines had been drawn, she’d turned in two job applications, Alfonso hadn’t shown his bloody stub, and Daddy hadn’t called. People didn’t skirmish round all spectator anymore either. Outta
sight. Most everything was gone. Except a few inspectors strutting through in blue jackets and a crop duster buzzing in the distance, not getting close enough to pesticide the wild growth hiding away the now-earthed warehouse. The crop duster became a skywriter, and it should of puffed out what she could never say: “I’m sorry for not being strong enough, girls” and “It’s okay to come closer now.” But, it made no words. Outta mind. Nothing came close now. Some days were too full of people wanting money or jolly or a cotton candy kiss. Other days were too quiet, too mediocre, no one there to talk an ear off, no one there to make echoes.

She squinted hard to see past the warehouse door, past the steel door, and down the Maze throat. The best echoes sounded on the warehouse’s open side, the side where men once played cards on milk crates, the side where Sara’d seen Juliano collecting beer caps. The other side of the massive brick wall divider held more voices though. After punching numbers into a pad, Ser but mostly Juliano would crank back that steel door and put her back with the girls. The dim, urine-stained hallway connected each girls’ concrete room, plastic for doors. The end-of-the-hall bathroom puked out their air defresheners, and once, Meriwether had tried to rip the toilet from cement. She talked about crawling through gross, crawling through pee-pee, crawling back to her family. But, not even Rhonda, the biggest girl, could pluck their way back.

One day, after Juliano’d once again ignored Sara’s demand to see his eyes, he’d put in those numbers then closed her inside again. Two arms wrapped Sara’s fourteen-year-old waist, and she smelled lavender. She knew Meriwether’s skin, Runt’s skin anywhere. Before their hellos and arm punches, the door re-opened. Ser’s colossal outline stepped forward. He pulled Joan by the hand, a paint bucket handle clutched in his other. Red eyes, red lips on Joan, Sara already fluttered up ghost stories, Joan’s favorite ever since she was young, younger than eight. Something about the dead. Something about connection. About rebirth.
“Here.” Ser dropped the paint can to a terrible clatter. From his pocket, he fished out an opener, two sheets of sandpaper, a rag. He put them all in Joan’s hands. “Remember what we talked about.” Then, he released her and swung the steel shut.

“You did it,” Meriwether yelled, doing a summersault and then hugging Joan.

“We did,” Joan whispered.

“Did what?” Sara asked, glancing at the other girls’ peeking heads behind their plastic curtains.

“She got the paint,” Rhonda said, strutting down the hallway. “Is it even the right color?”

“It’s a color,” Joan said again, the rag and opener in one hand, the sandpaper in the other.

“You forgot the brushes, idiot,” Rhonda said, grabbing the rag.

“Don’t start shit,” Sara said.

“What? Your Daddy gonna ‘take you back any day now’ like you say?”

The girls hushed.

“Look.” Meriwether broke the silence. “We don’t need brushes.” Silver paint slid down her fingers.

“How’d you get that open so fast, Runt?” Sara asked, side eyeing Rhonda.

“I’m strong,” Meriwether said, flipping her long black ponytail over her shoulder.

“How we gonna paint this whole damn place with one paint can and no brushes?” Rhonda asked.

A girl down the hall coughed a fit.

“Is that Elyse?” Sara asked.

Joan nodded. “A man gave her something.”

“Don’t get sad, Joan,” Meriwether said, wiping two silver war stripes on her face. “We’re
decorating today!”

“This paint won’t even show up on concrete,” Rhonda said.

“But.” Meriwether smiled, flinging a handful of silver on Rhonda’s face. “It’ll show up on skin!”

“You bitch!”

Sandpaper in hand, Joan disappeared into a room while the other girls ran, ran between the plastic doorway strips. Strips clapped against themselves, and the wavering, dim light made the girls run faster, made their pupils dilate, made their eyes glow. They tripped, toppled, giggled, and changed, changed direction, zigzagging through rooms, through each other’s homes, through spaces and worlds. They became pinballs whizzing between moldy concrete walls. They became furious, roaring sphinxes, each housing a little labyrinth of riddles. They became Mozart, a cacophony, things to fill coffins. They dug out their own Requiems, their own warring, their own fetal memories. They touched each other’s raw wounds and cracks and remembered how to laugh. They breathed amniotic fluids and tugged each other’s braids. They screamed about Red Rovers and tree houses and cooties and secrets, a whole lifetime of buried treasure. And then, as Sara heard the paint can dump over and saw a silver, undisturbed pool, she realized that these girls, these ring girls treated every day like it’s not disposable.

The pool grew, and, in darkness, Meriwether started crying.

“Runt?” Sara asked. “It’s okay. It’s just paint.”

“No.” Meriwether came closer, trying to pull something from her black hair.

“It was an accident,” Rhonda said, laughing. “She’s exaggerating.”

“My ponytail,” Meriwether cried in darkness.

Gum. A web of gum connected the black strands.
“Rhonda,” Sara said, “you’re gonna get gutted some day.”

The other girls had slipped into their rooms, and Joan hadn’t come out.

“Yeah, well,” Rhonda said, slapping the plastic strips from her face, “won’t we all.”

Later, after the silver pool had dried, after Daddy’d forgotten about Sara again, and after Juliano had delivered the girls’ breakfast, Juliano had agreed to let Sara borrow some scissors.

“Chica, you ain’t offin’ yourself, are ya?” he asked before handing them over.

“No, it’s for Runt.”

“She ain’t offin’ herself either?”

“No,” Sara’d said, taking the scissors, “and why would you care anyway?”

He’d paused at that. “I care plenty,” he’d finally said before snapping the door shut then leaning against it. He took out a cig and held a lighter to it, but put it back at once and turned his head like not wanting to see the Maze.

Sara kneeled behind Meriwether. “Get that thumb out your mouth.”

“Why,” Meriwether mumbled, “why’s he here?”

“Ignore him,” she said, then pulled Meriwether’s thumb out.

“But, I’m scared. They always say my hair is why they like me.” She paused. “Is he gonna kill me now?”

“Who?”

“Ser? Abby went away after that guy broke her arm.” She sank to a whisper like Juliano couldn’t hear. “They’re gonna take Elyse away. I know it.”

“No one’s taking anyone away,” Sara said, almost believing her lie.

“Well, I hate Rhonda. She’s so mean.”

“That’s true,” Sara said, angling the ponytail between the blades. “But, you’re big girl
now. You gotta have some rules, okay?”

“I wanna kill her.”

“No, you don’t,” Sara said. “What you want is a different life. But you can’t have that, so have some rules and—”

“No one listens to me.”

“You make ‘em. You gotta become someone else for a while. You need to make up another you.”

“I can’t. I only have my first me, and I want my hair.”

“You can,” Sara said, “and you have to, to survive.” She cut a clean line across that thick, black hair. She kept cutting, shaping, curling until she had formed a black bob, framing Meriwether’s dried tears and her new smile.

“Here.” She shoved the scissors against Juliano’s chest. “All merchandise still alive.”

He sighed and knocked some pattern against the door before it spun open and he left.

“Look!” Meriwether ran down the hallway, swishing her new do while pushing back each plastic strip and modeling for the other girls. “Jealous?” They giggled, filling the morning hall with more echoes.

Sara had laughed and shaken her head. She swept the black hair over the silver pool and formed a hairy gum ball next to the paint can. Then, brushing the tickling hairs from her arms, she pushed back the strips where Joan had escaped to. Where Sara expected a Michelangelo ceiling or Da Vinci walls, she felt only concrete, smoothed, cool concrete. Almost like they contained reverence. Meaning. Calm. And Joan was gone.

Sara’s hand left the smooth backside of the police tape. Now, they were all gone, and finding the girls might be a hoax. Reports had come in the way people declare Nessie spat water
at them or Bigfoot lumbered through their backyard or a gremlin’s giggling in the vents. No one really knew what the girls looked like now, their faces older, damaged. Recognition software and age-progressions could not account for broken cheek bones and twisted arms and scarred lips and lost baby teeth. There were no fairies floating round all gay and generous to tap a wand against girls’ thin pillows and make coins. There was no use for silver or fairy wings. One girl, before Sara was sold, had even started a pile under her bed where every girl could lay down her baby teeth. By the time Sara’d put one of her own teeth in the pile though, all the teeth had been raked out the full length under the bed like a giant cookie sheet of white kernel corn. Calls would stop coming. People would stop looking. Girls might stay lost forever. Because, already, the town, which had just taken notice, was forgetting.

***

Girls’ bellies would soon rumble and arms even might start itching. Daddy, Alfonso, and Ser faces could hide their best, but seeking girls was the only play now. Ser’s threats about girls and other things, Daddy’s promises, and police’s shady exchanging hands with anonymous political poachers had always made seeking girls impossible, too risky, too much potential for cage bars. But, now girls were scattered, reanimated, memory-less dolls. A secret war. A look for a landmine. Parts of themselves blown away. Phantom tissue. No benefits. No veterans cause a war under bed sheets has no reparation. But, with all that, she knew just getting one safe could be her confession.

Only $1.50 budgeted for KAT bus today—Sara ate through travel money faster than real eating. She rang the bell nonstop at Brackbill before some emo teen boy told her the police had already taken the owner into custody. She asked about girls ambling round the establishment, and emo just shook his head no and traded a magazine cover for eye contact. “Shit for brains,”
she said before curving round back to the dumpster. That metal box, could-be coffin, and others behind the BB&T, the 7-Eleven, the Market Square Orange Leaf, the Kroger off Kingston Pike stank all the same shit. Busted open sacks of used tampons and a shredded mess of paper and more good food than belongs in a dumpster but not a single girl. In parking garages and beggers’ alleyways and trees lining an Ijams nature walk not a single girl. At river edges and South Knoxville streets and the sidewalks along Neyland Stadium not a single girl. Hide and seek always reigned their forte.

In a Tyson Park water fountain, she washed some dumpster broccoli then munched it under a tree. Something brushed her shoulder, and she slapped it away thinking it a hand, a bloody one. A white petal showed itself and blew down the park path toward the swing set. She gasped and dropped the broccoli. There, not twenty yards from her, sat a grown replica of Merriwether. She wore the same black bobbed hair as if Sara shaped it herself. Her proportions, her face profile, her hair dipping low against her jaw—Runt lived reincarnate in her.

Sara stood up. There’s no way it could be Runt though since Ser said she shaved her head before dropping a neckfull of pills. He said he’d put her in the Garden same way Joan’d run dead into traffic. The girl didn’t swing and that wasn’t like the summersaulting, cartwheeling Merriwether either. But, the Maze twisted girls in every contortionist snap. Sara stepped on the path, getting closer. This Merriwether look-alike dragged two enormous black shoes. Custom-made. The wind fluttered her skirt up a little, revealing pink-red splotchy skin stretched taut around a lumpy leg. Lymphedema—Sara’d seen it before in one of the client’s red-spotted arms. The client just requested she massage his lymphedema arms, that someone beautiful touch him without cringing. Sara had kept massaging his arms long after he’d fallen asleep.

A little boy screamed happy in the distance, and some joggers passed Sara on the path.
The girl’s hand tucked black hair from her bob haircut behind her miniature ears, revealing a small nose and upward slanting eyes and other facial features indicative of Down Syndrome. Maybe something else. “My God,” Sara said. No one seemed to be with this girl, but someone had cut, shaped, showed love through her hair, through those custom shoes. Then again, Ser could show love to. He could bring paint and a bicycle and some blankets and a black book.

Sara could almost touch the swing chain next to the girl. But, the girl rose up suddenly and started shuffling away. No one came toward her or called out if she was ready to go home, if she had a home, if she wanted ice cream or dinner.

Sara didn’t call to her either, just followed a good distance behind. The girl made it up the Tyson Park ramp and shuffled along Cumberland for so long that a blister popped against Sara’s flimsy flip flops. She passed lamppost after lamppost along the long Gay Street Bridge into South Knoxville. She scuffled by the initial batch of run-down, suburban detaches before eyeballing a rusted watertower in a vacant plot. She might as well kept moving to New Hopewell or Seymour or down into the Smoky Mountains where maybe the girls ran. Maybe they had raced into the mountains as high up as they could go. The cold wouldn’t bother them cause once living in a concrete Maze sarcophagus, everything else screams hot life. But, this girl turned down a long road of vinyl houses. At end of them, a grown woman opened a screen door and yanked the girl inside.

~

For two days after that, Sara returned to Tyson Park at the same time where the girl sat on the same swing but never swung. Every time Sara got close, the girl stood up the same way and walked home, never deviating from the same path and never pausing too long at anything. The girl’s peeking over her shoulder said she noticed Sara but didn’t care to ask. She never quickened
her pace like she was scared or slowed it like she wanted to talk. After three days of following, Sara couldn’t piecemeal right words for an introduction. “What’s your name” and “Do you know anything about the girls” and “Is that lady who pulled your arm hurting you” and “Isn’t your leg in pain” and “Why do you walk so far not to swing”—all seemed like words too late.

The girl sat not swung a fourth consecutive day. Sara didn’t follow as close today, almost branched away to check on her submitted job apps cause money supply drained real low. Dumpster held enough Kroger’s rejects to feed countries but not for shampoo or liquor or other things to make a life. The girl got up as usual and shuffled down Cumberland, over Gay Street Bridge, through South Knoxville to that rusted water tower, just a dot in the distance.

Sara’s off-brand Band-Aid slipped round her toe and exposed the raw blister. “Damn it,” she said then sat in the dead grass and started brushing dirt out her blister. A muffly voice traveled from the water tower, and beside the girl now was another figure, a guy. It was too hard to hear what he said, but his arm ushered her toward the water tower ladder up. She started to climb it.

“What the hell?” Sara squeezed the bandage round her toe and slipped her shoe on. “Hey,” she shouted and hobbled closer. They both had crawled a quarter way up when she got to the base. “Hey,” she yelled again.

The guy glanced over his shoulder. “Fuck off.” Then, he punched the girl’s swollen leg, making her keep climbing.

“What the fuck,” Sara yelled then grabbed the rungs. She scampered close enough to grab his frat-bro moccasin under his khakis and polo.

“Get off, bitch.” He tried kicking her face. But, Sara ducked against the rungs, taking his tiny moccasin.
The girl reached the top where an oval door opened. More. There were more of them. Maybe they were just playing a game. Or maybe they had a gun, a knife. Maybe they’d kill the girl before even the cops could get there or form a tricky hostage situation to get someone splat out the seventy-some rungs up. No, no police.

An arm helped the girl and the guy inside. Then, a knife showed up quick round the girl’s throat. The guy’s eyes were wild. “Get in,” he said, “and don’t drop my—”

Sara threw the moccasin down. It soft thudded against some rungs. A skinnier guy, identical thief of a Ken doll’s wardrobe and same dirty blonde hair, knelt to extend a hand.

“Like I trust that,” Sara said, brushing off the hand and gripping the outside railing then the metal portal frame. Heaving herself inside, a metal balcony area hugged a circle round the welded-square walls reeking of rust and flaky dregs. Dozens of beer cans and vodka bottles floated stagnant in tower belly with only three steep steps leading from the balcony in. Behind a crouched third frat, the biggest one yet in a red polo, sat a crying girl in a yellow dress.

Seventeen, eighteen, just been born. Wet mats of hair crowned her head. Feet muddy and scraped up knees told Sara the girl had fought. One of her hands gripped the metal grate of the balcony—the other draped in between her folded knees, a barrier. She might of been one of them, one of the girls—she was old now though, legal. But, that didn’t mean she wasn’t keeping her mouth shut about something. Her shut mouth had swelled purple, hard kissing, but she was faint, faint white. Sloppy. Sara knew rainbow mouths—purple, blue, green, yellow, red, and white. The girls’ lips always came back a different color, and she’d clean them to pink again. Swing-set, sunset pink.

“Clayton.” Red polo rose his full height and sipped from a half-downed vodka handle. He nodded to the portal door. The skinny Clayton cracked it just enough for light.
“Mark, who’re they?” Something clacked in red polo’s hand as he walked toward the girl. Mark’s knife left the girl’s neck. “Shoe-robbing, bitch.” He pointed the knife at Sara then wrestled a red apple from his pocket and sunk the knife into the skin.

Red polo glanced at Mark’s barefoot then kept clattering whatever was in his hand. His face got too close to Sara’s. “You a shoe-thief, sweetheart?” He swigged.

“Absolutely.” She jerked back from his distillery gape and stared past him at the yellow dress girl. No certainty what her injuries were. No certainty she wasn’t one of them. Getting the girl and yellow dress on those rungs before the three frats laddered it down with that knife and maybe even an easy-bought gun was not probable.

Red polo laughed and offered Mark the vodka handle. Mark shook his head, but Clayton stretched out his hand and starting gulping near the portal. “What’s wrong with her leg?” Clayton asked.

Mark shrugged. “She’s just always alone, so I figured—”

“Please,” the yellow dress girl called.

“Don’t interrupt.” Mark tossed a bruised apple part at the girl. It slipped through the grate. “Not as nice as the other girls, yeah, Carter?”

Red polo Carter nodded and looked the girl up and down.

Clayton peeked out the portal.

“Tell us your name, sweetheart.” Carter grinned.

“Lynx,” the girl said. The first words Sara’d ever heard from her.

“What was it?” Mark asked.

“Lynx,” she repeated.

“Lynn?” Carter smiled.
“No, Lynx.”

“Martha?” Mark asked.

“Please,” the yellow dress girl called.

“Lyn-nix.”

“Abenezer?” Clayton said. Mark glanced at him.

“Lyn-nix,” she yelled.

“Stop!” Sara said. “Inbred assholes.”

“You don’t have say here—”

“You one of them?” Sara blurted to the yellow dress girl.

“If we want you to talk, bitch,” Mark began, “we will—”

Carter held up his hand, and Mark scoffed. “One of what?” Carter asked.

“Girls on the news,” Sara said. She inspected the girl for any sign, any shoulder shrug, tilt of the head, something maybe she couldn’t say but show. “Ones from the warehouse.”

Carter shrugged. “Never heard of ‘em.”

The girl shook her head. “I’m just a freshman from Houston. I don’t even know anyone—”

“You’re about to know us,” Mark said. “We got an executive order to grab ‘em where we want ‘em. Quake ‘em a little.” He took a huge bite. “And I always follow orders—”

“Quake?” she asked.

“You know,” Mark said, “ladies like it.”

“Fuck off,” Sara said, “there’s an order for you.” Men had been nasty apple-biters to her before but never in the wild. Ser had always given an hour, an evening, a night, and girls had to come back a certain way or pay extra. There had also never been another girl. Maybe Daddy
would bust through the portal. Maybe this was all a set up for him to come back. Or maybe it was a coincidence. It wasn’t about her at all.

“We got a spitfire.” Mark hocked a loogie and shot it into the water. “You look like a whore.”

“I’m not,” she said, “now, fuck off—”

“Or you’re—”

“Guys, guys,” Carter called, and more “guys” rumbled round the echoey dome top. Quick, he yanked the yellow dress girl up and stood behind her, an arm bar across her stomach with the clenched fist still rattling something. The girl’s hands tried pushing his arm down, sliding higher toward her neck. “It’s called a crowsline.” His words slurred now. “Played defensive line at academy.”

“I bet you did, ape,” Sara said.

“Name’s Carter.”

“I bet you did, ape.”

“Let’s not fight.” He shook his hand. “We’ll make a deal instead. How much?”

“How much?” Sara repeated. Lynx’s shoulder was warm against hers.

“Yeah, how much you want to watch? Saw it on ganguponher the other day—”

“Go burn your fucking money—”

“Sweetheart, be smart—”

“I said go—”

“A grand should cover it?”

She hesitated. One thousand dollars. A whole dollarmart. As much Bacardi as she wanted. Maybe even some scag. No. No more embarrassing convos with Elaine about blue corn.
chips and no pennies between her fingers. Wouldn’t have to ask Daddy for some twenties. Maybe he’d like a monied Sara more. She could do stock market biz or some shit. Maybe even toy with putting down a month of rent. She shook her head. The food would taste like spunk and the apartment would always scream.

“I could go to the police.”

All three snickered.

“What? You think maximum security’s hilarious?”

“No, sweetheart. It’s just we got it covered.”

“Covered?”

“We know most of the force and—”

“That’s nice and vague—”

“We are nice,” Mark said, still snickering. “We’re giving you cash when—”

“Take every hundred and—”

“We won’t quake the other one,” Carter said. His clenched fist had opened slightly. She could see now that the clanking had been coming from red dice.

Sara paused. It hadn’t even been a possibility. There are some things unthinkable. The three had kept snickering a little when Sara realized that there were actually three of them. Three. Red dice. It might of been the girl’s yellow dress or everything with the warehouse and how it was taking cops so long to do anything, but Goodbar girl was holding her hand again.

Coincidence. Fate. No coincidence. She started to live her life backwards. Each moment leaned together into connective tissue. Joan always whispered about fate while Meriwether cartwheeled. Maybe Joan was right. Maybe lives intersect like concrete cracks or bookcase wood grains or invisible electricity sizzles or twisted thread houndstooth, floral, stripe patterns, golden
scarf tassels hanging alone in a black closet. Knocking windy against each other as we knock hard against ourselves. Maybe every moment of Sara’s twenty-five year life scab all led here, to save this Meriwether cause she couldn’t save the rest—every moment of her Brewery interviews, of her Sonic drive-in skating ‘til she twisted her ankle, of her sponging up dance club vomit cause some money cock could buy seven Sex on the Alcohol Poisonings, of her eighteen-year old sex-and-sell where her last client, some doctorman said her shaking, gasping, crying, and apologizing for her unprofessionalism was something PTS-something, of her making confetti out of Vanderbilt and UTK college brochures, of her feeling Ser’s threat breath on her face of you’ll go down with me if you say a word, of her ripping up forests of flowers when Ser explained how they both died, how Meriwether finally overdosed and Joan ran dead into traffic, of her client flipbook, a clown, motorcycle man, golfer guy, camper guy, the priest, Navy Seal, mostly a world of tired-creased eyes being born with child love, of her chewing a string from the too-big pullover, listening to Ser’s instructions, of her looking left and right before plucking up a gutter sandwich cause Daddy’d forgotten she had that annoyance of tummy, of her cutting paper stars, paper hearts, paper worlds to see the girls’ smiles before they were sold again, of her milk crate tears and Juliano’s creation of Lena, of her mother’s glossy casket and Daddy holding Ian’s thumb-sucking hand, of her fingers in cool sand, of her Wayside School Gets Weird collapsed piles, applesauce pages, of mother’s double heart beat, Ian growing inside, of her shuffling carpet circles, motion sounded like TV ocean, of her picking boogers and tasting their crunch or goo, of her yellow, sunset kitchen, the way she sat real still when Daddy and mother slept and she swore she could hear something more than wind, a collective breath, the cadence of air. Every moment that her concrete crack life chased had a rhythm, a pulse.

And maybe the world has a natural hum, and the universe is always singing.
Maybe. But, maybe, Sara wasn’t listening anymore. Maybe she was like dead Meriwether, rolling her eyes and cartwheeling in the face of all this dreamer bullshit. All the beautiful dreamers had been annihilated, stomped out, returned. Maybe Sara needed a sandwich, some Bacardi, some chaser, some scag, some shit. Maybe this was in the cards from the future. And maybe the three would turn that knife into her.

“You three are going to rape someone today,” Sara mumbled.

“We don’t rape,” Mark said. “We quake.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re going to do it no matter what.” She hadn’t needed Lena for years.

“Sweetheart, ever heard of blue balls?” Carter asked.

“Yes.”

“And this is the deal you’ve made.”

“Yes, help—”

“And this is who you are.”

“Yes, come on—”

“And this is what you want.”

“You finished?” Mark asked.

“Yes, save me—”

“And we do me,” Lena said. She moved toward them. Warm metal rubbed under her toes, not putting full weight on the raw one.

Carter laughed. “We don’t want you, sweetheart.”

“Why not?” Lena snapped.

“You look like you got AIDS or something,” Mark said.
“And what does that look like?”

“Point is.” Carter stood in front of the girl and rattled the dice one more time before dropping them into Clayton’s hands. “We got her because we want her. We own what we own.” He curved the girl’s hair round her ear. She didn’t move at all. No tears dripping into the grate. No screaming to rouse echoes. “So, we got a deal?”

“I could never make a deal with you fucks.”

Carter grabbed Lynx’s arm.

She slapped his hand away. “You can’t touch her.” She put an arm round Lynx’s waist.

“So, I guess we got a deal.” Carter let go of her to drag the back of his polo over his head.

“Please,” the girl said, “I’m a freshman. I moved here from Houston. I have a mom and a—”

Mark smacked her across the face. She hit the railing then fell onto the metal grate.

“Don’t squawk,” he said.

“What’s you major, yellow?” Carter asked.

She paused. “Why’s that matter?” She wiped blood from her mouth.

Carter crouched down to her. “Cause I want to know you.” He wrapped his hand in her hair and pulled.

“Lighting Design,” she yelled.

“Yeah?” He dropped the handful of hair. “How’s Clarence Brown center treating you?”

“I haven’t started yet. I’m a freshman. I—”

“You’re not a freshman anymore,” Carter said. “You’re yellow, and you’re leaving on a jet plane.”

He unzipped his khakis and tossed them to the grate.
“Lynx, I’m Sara,” she whispered, then she pointed through the crack in the portal door, facing away from the three. “I want you to watch the sunset. There’s a pretty, green light that winks right before bedtime. So many people never see the green wink. I want you to see it. So, watch for that green winking at you, okay?”

“Well,” Lynx said, before touching Sara’s hand.

“It’s okay, Lynx.” Sara touched her hair and held her hand. “Watch for that sunset, and maybe hum a little song to yourself.”

“Who are you this time?” Clayton asked Carter and offered the dice. Carter shook them away, and Clayton sipped more.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen!” Carter said. “Welcome onboard flight 917 to Atlanta. This is your captain speaking—”

“Carter, please,” the girl whimpered on her back, knees locked together.

“Miss, please wait until your captain has finished announcements. Thank you. Like I said, your captain this lovely evening is Carter McCalister alongside my two cabin mates Mark and Clayton McCalister—”

“I don’t wanna be in the script,” Clayton said.

“You’re ditching?” Mark said.

Clayton shrugged, vodka handle almost empty.

“Stop,” the girl cried.

“Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, we’ll only be joined by a crew of two. Oh, but our lovely assistant—what’s your name?” Carter asked Sara.

“Why the fuck do you need to know?”

“You want me not to touch ol’ Lynx there?”

RIDE/NNUpdike/ 156
“Lena,” she said, “my name’s Lena.”

“Lena, our lovely assistant—and don’t worry crew and people, this flight should be gentle enough as long as my co-pilot knucklehead doesn’t pull any tricks.”

“The fuck that supposed to mean?” Mark asked, standing next to the girl’s head. “And why can’t I be captain.”

“Sorry, ladies and gentlemen. It looks like our crew is still getting settled. We’re prepping for takeoff shortly. All carryon items should be stowed securely under the seat in front of you—”

“Yeah,” Mark said, “we know all this. Just say security blah, blah, blah, oxygen and shit.”

“Shut it, cabin mate,” Carter said.

“Help,” the girl started yelling. Freeze had subsided into fight.

Mark crouched, scooped up her head, and covered her mouth.

Then, Carter straddled himself over the girl’s stomach with ease despite her kicking. Her screams curved inside the tower. They looped around like inside a plane’s fuselage. “Carter,” she muffled, crying as he slid down his boxers.

“Looks like we’re just taxiing for takeoff,” Carter said, yanking up her hem.

Lynx’s hand shook in Sara’s. She leaned against her shoulder and felt vibrations radiating from her throat to her collar bone and to her shoulder. Humming, humming drowned out by screams.

Carter ripped the girl’s underwear down, and Sara gazed at her raw foot. Just days ago, Alfonso’s blood smeared across her waist like a belt. Fight.

Sara squeezed Lynx’s hand, leaned closer to her shoulder, feeling her hum. Then, jacked
force, Carter entered the screaming girl. “Takeoff,” he said.

Sara let go of Lynx’s hand. She jumped on Carter’s back. She started shredding the shit out of it—right, left, right—she scratched up blood and howled, a rabid baboon. Two hands wrapped round her shoulders. Then, her shoulders smacked against a metal wall. Her head thumped inside, and the girl’s screams had muffled with a ringing. Mark’s ugly face met hers, his chest jammed against hers. He slapped one cheek to a sting then the other. Carter called out something making him stop.

“Yeah,” Carter yelled with each pound. “Get it. Get.”

The girl became quiet again. Back to freeze. Frozen almost to death.

“I’m almost—”

Sara touched her head. No blood. Disoriented, she looked left too quick, and the water tower rushed like it was mid-ocean. Tears slipped over the girl’s cheek, slipped through the grate. Everything slipped through the grate. Even Sara. The Navy Seal’s blue snake tattoo slithered with each jut of his felicity. A toss onto the waterbed. They never did missionary or cowgirl or doggie or anything else. He never touched her like that. Juliano’d never touched her like that. Daddy’d and Ser’d never touched her like that. Navy Seal had taken off his belt. Oh, God, the inn’s sheets he’d rustled with his force. He was beating her—no—he was stripping her—Sara pushed against Mark now—he pushed back—whipping her into the sheets, bloody sheets—that rogue client ripping her hair—but Daddy, Daddy came, grabbing him off—pushing him away—saving her—Daddy’d return with the pain.

“I’m almost,” Carter yelled, “I’m so—”

“Daddy!” Sara screamed and head butted Mark.

“Fuck!” Mark let go of one of her wrists to touch his head.
She was almost free but the shock was not enough for Mark. He grabbed her wrists and shoved them into her chest.

“No, no, no,” Carter said, “yeah, call me Daddy. Yellow, call me Daddy.”

No one said anything.

And Carter finished.

Carter’s hands dug into Sara when Mark traded out. An elbow flung to his ribs. A nail scratched his nose. She twisted her leg round to aim for his balls. She screamed when the girl did not. Shouted about police and fire and universal karma. But nothing worked. They both had raped the girl.

By the time Mark was done, a diamond necklace of sweat beads had formed around the girl’s neck.

The swing-set turbulence stopped, and zippers aligned. Carter threw Sara to the grate, between Lynx and the girl.

“God, genius,” Carter said, licking sweat above his lip and staring at Lynx.

“Why?” Sara asked, watching blood slide off the girl’s thighs. Everything slipped through the grate. It could be a children’s song. Ring around.

“Why what?”

“Why?” Sara repeated.

“Why don’t you hand me my shirt?” Carter said.

“Get your own shit.”

Carter grabbed the shirt and wiped his sweat.

“Hold her arms, Mark,” Clayton said, looking at the girl and shaking out a rag. Bleach stained the air.
“She’s not even moving, man,” Mark said.

She blinked. Tears rolled into her face’s creases. Still alive.

Clayton sighed and crouched. He curled that rag round her stomach and between her thighs. He took the time to circle her bellybutton, stretching it, getting every drop out.

“Why didn’t you let me give her anything?” Clayton asked, quickly shoving the rag into a sandwich bag. “Now, she’s gonna remember.”

“I wanted to see what fighting was like,” Carter said, stepping out the door portal to leave. “But, she wasn’t even the one fighting the most.” He laughed.

“Yeah, and she’s not gonna tell,” Mark said then pat the side of her immobile face.

“It’s been real good, sweetheart,” Carter said.

“Money,” Sara said. The hospital wouldn’t care how it’d happened or that it did at all. Only language of cha-chings could rent a bed, run a kit, take a name, take a number, open again for all the tests and three months later do them again and an anniversary do them again and a five year, a ten year, a Bumble date or a Match made on matchsticks. A life could incinerate in an instance.

Sara tried to lace fingers with Lynx again, but Lynx pulled her hands to her chest.

“Don’t give her shit,” Mark said. “She’d didn’t—”

“Here.” Carter flipped through his wallet and handed some bills to Mark. “Give these bills to our friend.”

Mark shook his head and exhaled. “Here’s your fucking money.” He threw them fluttering into the water. Eight Franklin faces washed a darker green. He exited the portal backwards followed by Clayton.

“Wait,” Sara yelled, popping her head out the door, “Carter, don’t you forget.”
“What’s that?” he called up, somewhere below Clayton’s blonde head and the metal rungs.

“You touch her—I will burn you.”

“Great, sweetheart, gotta stay warm somehow.”

“I mean it,” she yelled, grabbing the portal’s sides and leaning out as far as possible.

“Yeah, I know,” Carter’s faint voice floated up. “I won’t touch her.”

They snickered until their noise, their laughter faded before disappearing altogether like they’d never even been there.

“Get up,” Sara said, but the girl stayed supine static with red wrists and panties at her ankles. Sara crouched beside the girl and dragged her yellow hem down. Already it stuck to her pouch of belly with the drying bleach.

“You have to get up,” Sara said. “You have an opportunity to do something. I’ll help you get to the police station. It’s close.”

“No,” the girl whispered.

“Yes, you have to try. You don’t get to just lie here and be dead. They need to go to fuck cages. Forever. So, get up.”

“No, I—”

“You what? You can’t get up?”

“I went.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ago.”

“You went where?”

“I went.” She sighed.
“I know you’re tired. I know you want to die here. I know you want slip into this grate, meld into metal, and become a walkway. But you can’t. You can’t lie here like you’re dead, like this will kill you. It will not kill you.” Sara wanted to smooth the girl’s hair back but didn’t touch her. “You have to pretend, make-believe, delusion, okay? You have to believe you will get your degree in whatever makes you happy, you’ll grow up, you’ll find a man or woman or friend to raise children with and beat back the loneliness. One day, you’ll step out of how they ripped you up and you’ll sit silent on a bus and look around and see light kiss all the beautiful faces and hair and skin of people in the world.” Her diaphragm seemed crippled, hard to breathe. “You’ll eat mall French fries with your daughter. You’ll tease your son by combing his hair left instead of right. You’ll bury your grandmother and smile because you once played badminton birdies and learned long division from her.” Sara paused, standing and extending her hand. “But you can’t do any of those things if you don’t first get up.”

The girl accepted Sara’s hand and curled up, cradling her back.

“No one believed me,” the girl said.

“What? Like no one would believe you?”

The girl shook her head.

“Wait.” Sara paused. “Like this has happened—”

“Don’t say it—”

“Before?”

“Whole life was before. I can’t have two befores or two afters.”

“Are you one of them?”

“What?”

“You can tell me.” Sara’s hand rest on top of the girl’s. “I won’t take you back there.”
She pulled her hand back. “I’m just a girl from Houston. I moved because I thought—I could start—” She stopped herself.

“You went to the police?” Sara asked.

“Evidence.” She sighed, leaning against the railing. Sara nodded.

“Your dress change colors,” Lynx said.

“Both of you wait up here. I’m gonna grab the money so we can get you to the hospital.”

The water was warm and empty cans moved against her legs in the murkiness.

“Cock-teaser,” the girl said as Sara fished out each bill. “Cock-teaser,” she started repeating.

From the water, Sara again peered up at the girl now edging toward the oval portal out. Seventy-some rungs and dead, hard ground for a drop. The girl didn’t turn around to descend—with shaking hands, she gripped the doorframe and leaned out.

“Don’t you dare,” Sara said, slicing through water and jumping up the steps. “Don’t you even—”

But, like a whisper, the girl flew. Flew beyond, out of Sara’s long fingers now extending toward distant Smokey Mountains. That momentary suspension, almost cartoonish, flying all superhero upward until gravity reminded itself that it can spare no one. And then the moment of curvature around the apex, the girl’s own summit, the jet plane, airplane passengers would be gasping and crying and cheering and wailing for another end. But the girl had peaked, and it’s all downhill from here, kid. There was no splat noise like a human blood sack on pavement. There was no scream trail all Doppler fading behind. There was no dramatic flutter of stained fabric up. A tree limb cracked, and then she thudded on dirt.

Daddy’s dial tone, that red-yellow blur, and ring girls’ ghost stories all converged upon
looking at the blurred tangle of bloody yellow dress. *Until one day when I’m not.* Sara had wondered on the day that Daddy followed his perpetual pattern of leaving her for Ian, Sara wondered if the girl’s father would attend his daughter’s funeral. She was not a ring girl, but she was a girl. And too many, at that. Sara conjured up a new future for the girl, one with a father’s hand resting gentle on a smooth, black casket. Flowers would droop weeks later in an empty house. And the father would mourn even after he dry heaved tears onto a toilet seat. Life would slice him so thin he’d blacken like burnt toast under summer skies causing him to stay indoors and become the sallow man on the corner of Willow Row. Dutiful, determined, and with a passion that eats up hearts, he’d pause his life and finally say “Goodnight, love” to his dead.

“We could of,” Sara said, sun gone behind the mountain now. “we could of changed it.”

No police for her, but the hospital could of ran something, done something, put pieces. Now, she’s gonna become a story, lose her person, be gossip when she cannot gossip. Thread when she cannot thread. She’ll be the butt of water tower jokes. She’ll be the echo, never escaping this tower’s rattle. This tower will rot and die, but this ground will be forever violent.

They’d all laughed when she threatened police, and they’d called themselves McCalisters. Tucking wet money in her pocket, she imagined those three in fuck cages, someone gripping their blonde hair and pulling back their tea spout necks. Imagined Alfonso stabbing her, jabbing her, uppercutting that kitchen knife between her ribs and rubbing that finger stump against her cheek. Imagined Daddy resuscitating the girl, bursting down a door, and coming back not for Ian but for her.

One more glance down. Wind breathed under the girl’s dress.

Lynx shook.

“Oh come on. Let’s get you home,” Sara said, tucking Lynx’s black bob behind her ears. In
the echo tower, sounds remained, bouncing around, trying to tell their stories, calling back to life. Sara thought it was air singing to her. She almost called back, telling them to shut up. But then, she realized where the noise came from.

Lynx was still humming.

***

No police—Sara’d called anonymously and waited in the woods with Lynx until an ambulance sirened its way through traffic. Connective tissue, patterns. Patterns were proof. Soon, the ambulance brought more cars, and Sara didn’t stay to see a suicide setup.

Few blocks away, they met a taxi driver, and she had trouble retracing Lynx’s house in the dark. The cabbie kept asking for an address, but Sara just kept pointing deeper into South Knoxville. He kept shrugging and just saying the meter’s on. Sara couldn’t extract anything from Lynx more than low grunts and sighs as answers to the litany—“Had you met them before?” “What did they say to you?” “Have you ever heard of a guy named Ser?” “How old are you?” “Who’s that lady you live with?” “Does she hurt you?” “Is that you natural hair color?” “Is that your real name?” “Have you even lived in a warehouse?” “Who cut your hair?” “Which house is yours?” “Will you be okay?” “You will be okay, okay?”

Popping the cab door open, Sara mumbled “wait here” to the cabbie and walked Lynx up the three crumbling porch steps. TV light for some Oxyclean, oxymoron, or screaming car commercial punctured the darkness. One roaring snore signaled life, housing some zoo animal. She knocked on the screen door then listened to a creaking Lay-Z-Boy collapsing its footrest. Taxi purring behind her, still clicking up red dollars, the zoo animal hobbled to the door.

“Ah,” said a squat chunker in a translucent nightgown, “you found her.” The lady brushed crumbs off her ledge of breasts. “And caught me in my skivvies.”
“Was she lost?”

The lady leaned her arm on the door frame. Anyone else would of had the decency to cover their saggy tits. “She wandered off today.”

“Today?”

The lady ignored the surprise in Sara’s voice and rotated a loose watch. “Well, it’s flirting with night but still today.”

It was clear now. Lynx was not a ring girl. Yellow dress wasn’t either. They were just two more added to a landfill of women. And those three, McCalisters they’d said, were not clients—too young and no concern when she’d brought up the warehouse, the news, Ser. Not all rapists could be confined to an inn or a warehouse. Girls were still unfound. How girls on missing posters could run round invisible? How every cop, investigator, sniffing dog could miss the breadcrumbs girls surely dropped? How those McCalisters could take two girls in daylight? How she could fight and not win? How she’d learned to watch like Ser? How taken things take.

“How else lives here?” Sara asked.

“Well, who are you?” the lady said, “and why’s your face all smacked up?”

“Aunt,” Lynx muttered.

“She’s your aunt, Lynx?”

“Aunt,” Lynx repeated.

“Aunt, I’m Sara. You need to look after—”

“Happens,” Aunt said then crouched over in a coughing spit.

“She could of been—” Sara paused. “Hit by a semi today.”

“That’s no good,” Aunt said. “Wanna come in? Wheel’s on.”

“No.” Sara thumbed behind her. “The meter’s running. But, could you give more damns
and watch where she goes—"

Aunt flung her hands up. “Now well, I can’t control the world, dear.”

“Not asking that, lowlife. Do you wanna go there cause I—”

“Come here, Lynn, Lynn,” Aunt said, baby voicing and pushing the screen door open.

“Come here, dearie.”

“I should come in and see if—”

“You ain’t invading my property. I call the police on you.” The screen door smacked the frame.

“No, no police, but you don’t have to be such—”

“Now, I appreciate the delivery, but kindly get your dirty dress off my porch.” She slammed the door and clicked the deadbolt. A light show crazed inside and chants of “Fortune” floated out the open window.

$783, $782, $781—counting down McCalister money. Sara slid back into the taxi, the cabbie pausing some bubble popping smart phone game and clicking the light off.

“Where to now?”

“Drive.”

“In what direction?”

“Anywhere. Get out of here. Over the river.”

He yanked the gear shift down and turned up the radio.

Her PAYGo phone vibrated. She imagined Daddy’s name in white. “Unknown.” Red “END” button zoomed the apps back to homescreen where she had seven missed calls and one voicemail.

“Jesus,” she said, scrolling through two different unknown numbers.
“Say something?” the cabbie’s eyes flitted to his rearview.

“No. Keep driving.”

He cruised, and she called, pushing her ear hard to hear the voicemail over radio tunes. It produced soft wisps of sound: “I know what we need to do now.” The male voice paused, unrecognizable to her. “In the flesh soon.” It sounded like he was chewing something. “I know what we need to do now. I know, Lena. I know.” Thirteen silent seconds before his voice started again. “I saw you. I know you in pain. So, I’m coming. I’m coming soon.”

She punched “*” to keep replaying. No clues fixed themselves between chews or sighing silence but Lena—he’d said Lena. Any client, anyone in the ring could say Lena, could know of her, could of gotten her number from Daddy. The whispers frantic but the words calm. She jerked sharp left as the cabbie swerved to avoid a night jogger.

“Exercise junkie,” cabbie shouted, turning toward the Tennessee River. “Seriously, girl, where you going?” He sped into a red light then slammed to a stop.

“Nowhere,” Sara said, seat belt catching her shoulder. She conjured up non-existent movie stills of homeless home. Sometimes Margaret, the Big Brothers / Big Sisters intern, would leave the kitchen light on. Its buzz sizzled the entire night and, to Sara, it lullabied generations. Like the whole of people swam in stinging currents before they were born and long after death. Sara knew the spiders heard the currents too and already missed her. She’d come home to their little spider tears spelling out, “We love u.” She’d kiss each one goodnight and apologize. Then, they’d jump up one at a time and squeak, speak out different lies: “Alfonso was here. He’s looking to finger” and “Ian was here. He needs to talk at you” and “McCalisters were here. They wanna quake” and “Ser was here. He needs your help again” but “Daddy, Daddy wasn’t here. He’ll come with death.” They’d all bounce and scurry, cartoon spring spiders, and she’d need to
put them to sleep. Not with a shoe or anything nasty but with her stories. And then she’d see all their wet spider eyes glistening like river sequins as cabbie sped toward the Tennessee River, living, breathing under Gay Street Bridge.

Sara never wiped their gooey eyes, but she’d try to smooth their black bristles by cleaning off those torn up Goodbar wrappers, that mushed-up leaf medley. She’d drag down yellow hems of little spider dresses and wonder how ripping open bodies could still exist, how watching girls die could be her punishment for life with Ser, punishment for her years of silence before and after Navy Seal, before and after Daddy proved her right, that Navy Seal would mash her and there could be no police.

But, Sara’d always extended her hand to girls and waited. She’d wait until they were done making heaven in angel wings or she’d wait until one of them had cracked her spine with a flutter landing or until she shaved off all her hair and swallowed pills to be wrapped in mummy gauze, in a dirt sarcophagus beside other young mummies. Ser’s Egyptian Garden always grew fresh calla lilies, the worms churning up good dirt from playing Ring around the Rosie with bodies rosie white, no rosy, tangled rosaries. She’d wait until Rhonda’d returned from priest’s fists and keep fighting while Sara dabbed Rhonda’s eyebrow or until Tina would tap Sara’s shoulder and request the one about the pigs staying locked inside their stone house, always asking for more animation because she favored the huff-puff wolf. Sara’d wait when Joan used to babble about stars and Oreo moons and spices. She’d kept waiting when Joan’s chatter lulled to whispers every time Ser tugged her away from the girls. Sara’d kept waiting still when Joan stopped talking for four years, and she’d been waiting when Joan finally started talking again, speaking in riddles and warming up to theories about fate. Joan had kept speaking low about maps of lives and a universe equation and each moment speaking to the next, a genealogy of
duration. Sara’d wait to understand this fatalism thing, but Joan had joined Ser’s Egyptian Garden before she could explain. Ser’d just gruffed one day, “She ran under car tires, into traffic. Stop asking.” So, Sara did. She didn’t wait for more answers, more stories. She just kept waiting to cry.

Soft globs tapped leather upholstery. Then, with a bump of her elbow, she opened the window a crack. It screamed in air, a vacuum suctioning her hand. She rolled the whole window down as the taxi bumped over the bridge’s merger.

“You can pay for this, right?” cabbie yelled back.

She didn’t answer but slid her fingers, hand, arm out the window and tried to catch air past each green lamppost. Air kissed her, and she remembered the girls again, their running, their echoes.

The girls, ferocious things, ran wild during the silver paint war. Sara had watched them zoom through catacombs. Then, noticing Joan had snuck away, Sara peeled back plastic curtains looking for her. She found her in the tomb farthest away from commotion. Joan sat cross-legged, facing the bare-back wall close. She never acknowledged Sara during the trance, and they never spoke of it after. Soundless, Joan’s hand touched the wall, gentle, greeting a lover’s face. She smoothed her hand down the rough concrete surface, trailing her fingers off toward the bottom. At her side, she scooped up the two sandpaper sheets and flattened them against the wall. Her shoulders rose with a deep inhale. Then, she started. Exhaling, she swayed her torso, keeping her arms locked and sandpaper flat. She formed two arches above her head, paper scratching away layers. She started rocking harder, her crossed legs rising higher from the floor each time. And each time just a little more concrete crumbles, concrete dust showered down. She leaned so far her butt came off the floor on each side. The gray-dust poured misty, fogged the room, a post-
rain, an after. Sara tasted grit and realized it wasn’t a shower. It was a storm, a sandstorm. Joan didn’t stop. Her breathing became more rhythmic and the trance took full effect. She moved, moved, and Sara could swear, for a second, she saw Joan levitate. The sandstorm whipped round her, covering everything white, everything baby powder, everything lifting her up like ghosts of these walls propelled this sand creature toward stars.

And Sara realized in that conjuring, in that accidental séance that Joan knew. She knew much more than any human could know, but she knew it. Joan knew something about the rhythm of this world and the universe singing. She put that knowledge in the walls. She tapped into a billion year old ritual, a worship occurring long before human life, something unkillable, something forever, a web, a storm, entrenched, enmapped, encapsulated in thoughts finer than sand grains, in returning to unfinished life, in love.

Sara had watched as long as she dared, and, now, she dared to scan the Tennessee River’s surface, a pool rippling up echoes. Something terrible had happened here.

Joan would of known. Joan had learned everything. Everything has a purpose. Everything is real. Everything can be lovely. Everything screens upon itself like universes trying to solve the same riddle some giggling star asked long ago, “And why are you here? And why are you now?”

“No police,” she said, but the cabbie didn’t look back this time.

She hardly ever used the .5 megabytes of data on her Walmart PAYGo phone, but it wouldn’t take much to Google that number flashed too quick across a screen not long ago. Three. Red dice. No coincidence. She scrolled for the video. A beautiful black mother with chandelier earrings. McCalisters, there was a name at least. For some reason, it always took an army of women for one name. Yellow dress had jumped. It’s uncertain how much Lynx could offer. But, Goodbar girl, her mother, Sara, maybe this could be enough to start a fire.
The cabbie reached the other side of the river now. He had been repeating a question apparently. “Girl, you can pay for this, right? You can pay—”

“Oh, I’ll pay,” she said, punching in the number from the video description. “We’ll all pay.”

Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs 3—May 11

The fence suffocated Isaacs. Every angle his eyes zigzagged proved no escape. Bits of barbed wire crawled out of the bottom like arms buried in the sand. Like the deserter but not. Three feet of concrete, a foot thick, sat on top of the arms. It crushed them into the sand and acted as a base for the metal fence. A magnificent, awful tapestry of thick metal rods sprouted vertically out of the concrete base. It connected the edges of the taut interwoven metal wall. Each irregular weave of the wall was hand wrapped; some formed quadrilaterals, some formed pentagons, one formed an almost equilateral triangle, by the looks of it. All were just closed spaces. At the top, the fence supported bushels of more barbed wire, drooping in some areas under the weight. Electricity no longer buzzed through the metal, but it still sent a message as Isaacs’ head tipped farther and farther back to see the fence top.

“No thinking about running, are you, Indiana?” Huntings approached him from the side as the fire team neared the village beyond the fence.

Six days had passed since the camel died—the men buried it in the desert, but it didn’t take. The sand kept blowing off to a bloodied carcass. Six days since the conversation with Brukk in his CHU. Six days since Brukk murdered the deserter in the dark. Five days since Isaacs had tried to file a grievance. Five days since they recorded his story about another Desert Devil incident. Five days of inactivity. Five days of Brukk still as their CO. Five days of
motionlessness, the Groundhog’s Day of sandpit life, the standby to standby, the hurry up and wait. Not one single Marine had talked about it. Isaacs would have declared it a fiction had Brukk’s phantom grip on his shoulder not still plagued him. There was almost too much space in the desert to relive that night, that threat, that haunting girl with the carved foot. Six days since he had seen her, too. But he swore he could hear her giggle sometimes at night, like a desert song that kept him cool under the stars.

The act was habitual, he remembered, picturing the smooth coolness of the boat he “borrowed” from his father’s friend Mike. He had asked mom to accompany him one time. Thick, gasping breaths from her swollen diaphragm rasped her response. “Now, Gabriel, ya know I cain’t do that.”

“Why, mom? It’s not stealing—I bring it right back. And dad doesn’t know. He shouldn’t know.” He had said the last part quick.

“I don’t care about that,” she had stated, waving a hand. He watched the fat swing under her arm like a surrender flag.

“Then why won’t you go with me?”

“Cause I’ll be eatin’ supper. You know that, kid.”

The sudden sharpness of the distant “kid” couldn’t register in his twelve-year-old mind. “Eating until when?” He sighed.

She looked confused like he didn’t understand her at all. “Until I forget, of course.”

Words could no long fill the space between them. “Okay, mom. I’ll check on you in a few hours,” he’d said, and the screen door creaked behind him.

His twelve-year-old muscles grew stronger every time he dragged the boat into the lake. Its triangular point cut over the gravel and dirt until he hopped inside and rowed to the water’s
middle. At first, he used to lie supine in the belly of the boat and stare up, but the sides of the freezer crept around him. He had to sit up and recline inside the triangle to see the stars. A lake in the middle of cornfields, horrible for flooding, was one of the world’s wonders when the expanse of stars burned into view. That cold, November night a shooting star moved across the sky so slowly it was blinking. His eyes traced the it into a lone cloud, and the wish came.

The wish was always the same with any fallen eyelash, any smoking birthday candles, any broken turkey bones, any of mom’s backward clasped necklaces she used to wear. Bring my sister home. Maybe then the five years, at that time, would not have been filled with his mother’s eating, plumping, filling up the couch, midnight KFC runs and the doctor’s visits to diagnose diabetes, high cholesterol, and so many things his nine, ten, eleven, twelve-year-old changing voice couldn’t pronounce. Maybe then the five years, at the time, would not have been filled with his father’s drinking, his father’s sudden rage that Isaacs, the big brother, had let Eliza leave with those pedolers, pedomiles, pedopiles, the title his father repeatedly said that always escaped Isaacs. Maybe then the five years would not have been filled with his father’s basement trips—his words always altering from “I don’t want ya to be kidnapped too” to “Let’s feel what it is to be her, locked away somewhere” to “Now, ya cain’t abandon us too.”

Bring my sister home, he wished, but then he noticed the shooting star came out of the cloud, still blinking, too slow. Airplane. The magic broke.

“Mom?” he had asked, returning on time a few hours later.

He assessed the damage—three Hostess wrappers, a Cheddar Cheese and Sour Cream & Onion Ruffles bag, some assortment of Taco Bell wrappers, and one and a half boxes of Dove caramels. The caramel foils held messages like “Be your own Valentine,” “Clear your mind and enjoy this moment,” and “You are exactly where you are supposed to be.”
“Mom?”

“Come give me a hug,” she said in her food coma.

He leaned into her chest, a melted chocolate piece sticking to his cheek. She stroked his blonde hair, the same white luminescence as his sister’s.

“Mom, you okay?”

“Of course, of course, I am. Of course, Eliza.” He didn’t gasp anymore or pull away from the pattern. He never corrected her. He never mentioned it at all actually.

“Gabriel,” his father’s hash voice entered and broke her trance. “Your mother said you stole Mike’s boat.”

His heart had started panicking—he could already see the freezer walls entrapping him.

“Mom, you told him?” He remembered being more confused than angry.

“Oh, Eliza,” she smirked and maybe fell asleep on the couch—he couldn’t be sure what was pretend anymore with the ex-cinnamon maker.

“Ya know where ya goin’.” The whiskey was thick. He gripped Isaacs’ shoulder, hard, pulled him to the top of the basement steps, and slammed the door behind them.

“Indiana, Indiana? Isaacs?” Huntings voice became louder in his ear.

“What?”

“Welcome back. Hopefully you were somewhere better than this sandbox.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing, I just asked if you were gonna run,” Huntings repeated.

“I—” Brukk’s phantom grip still clung to his shoulder. “No.” He half smiled.

“Good, but we gotta double time or XO will—”

“Isaacs,” XO shouted. “You two going on a date or huffing to the bilat?”
“I’d date Huntings,” Destin called, “strong jaw line.” He laughed, beating his A4 against his thigh.

“He always yells at me,” Isaacs grumbled.

Huntings grinned. “Cause you’re still adjusting, man.” Consider this adjustment training, Brukk’s words invaded.

“Huntings,” Isaacs said as they both jogged next to the fence toward the remaining fire team. “I filed a grievance.”

“Against CO?”

Isaacs nodded.

“What happened?”

“They recorded everything. They asked me all these questions. They thanked me for my time.”

“Seems about right,” Huntings said.

“What do you mean?”

“Look,” Huntings put his gloved hand against Isaacs’ flak jacket, stopping him. “A bit of advice, just don’t mess. I almost fucked up big time. They could have extended my tour or put me on MP probation or something else to punish me.”

“Why would they do that?”

“There’s a whole other system we know nothing about. They want results, and they’ll back the horse that gets results. He’s our CO, just don’t mess.”

“But,” Isaacs said, still jogging, “what if your CO is, like—”

“A fuck?”

“Just wrong?”
Huntings laughed. “The sandbox is about survival, Indiana. I wish I could believe in what we’re doing here, but that ship has sailed. Some Marines do, and you’ll find a few good ones, but look out for yourself. I’m not gonna be here much longer to keep your ass in check.” He punched Isaacs’ shoulder.

They caught up to the other men.

“What you two talking about?” Destin asked. The fire team formed outside the fence gate.

“Alright, the bilat meeting is less than a klik into the town,” XO reiterated. “As always, watch for unfriendlies overhead.”

“What’s the deal with the fence?” Isaacs asked.

“The fence? You’re worried about the damn fence? Fence ain’t gonna blow nobody up. Fence ain’t gonna shoot at ya. Keep your head in the game, Private,” XO said.

“Yes, sir.” Isaacs rolled his eyes as soon as XO looked away.

They began their march into town.

“There was a prison here,” Minx said, his head swiveling left and right, perhaps scanning the Arabic writing above the doorframes, “for the fence.”

“That’s all he needed to say,” Isaacs mumbled.

“Huntings, how’s it feel to be going home?” Minx asked.

“I’m not out the wire, yet,” Huntings said, “still in the sandpit with ya’ll.”

“I was in DFAC the other day,” Destin started, and the group groaned. “Now, hold on, hold on, this one’s better than the last.”

“You’re literally the worst storyteller I’ve ever heard,” Minx said.

“Way to boost a man’s confidence, Oorah,” Destin muttered. “So, I was in DFAC the
other day and some asshole in front of me in the food line just starts screaming. I mean, really fucking screaming. He’s like gripping a table behind him, flipping trays up, throwing forks, all kinds of crazy shit. He fell to the floor and started writhing around, his hand clamped over his eye. A medic jumped up and took off her own jacket to make a pillow or something, thinking he was having a seizure. We thought some desert brain maggot was chowing on his cauliflower. I checked my ears right quick. She tried to pull his hand away from his eye, see what was underneath, ya know? I was like, nah, nah, nah, just leave him, don’t want that maggot to crawl out and get all us. So, finally, she was like ‘What’s wrong, Marine, what’s wrong?’ People started mumbling like ‘What the hell’s going on’ and stuff. Finally, the Marine just went still. It was all quiet in DFAC. And then, silently, the Marine opened his mouth and whispered, ‘I got sriracha in my eye.’”

Isaacs couldn’t help but laugh.

“How was it silent if it was a whisper?” Minx asked.

“Man, I dunno,” Destin said, shaking his head.

“We have sriracha in DFAC?” Minx asked.

“Man, don’t question its inauthenticity,” Destin muttered.

“Probably some care package deal,” Huntings mentioned.

“I thought it was funny, Destin,” Isaacs said.

“Thanks, cornflake,” Destin said, mumbling something about “comedic gold, comedic gold.”

Inside the fence, the town had all the ruin of a nostalgic ghost village. Trash littered the streets, but it was cleaner than the place of the first raid. It, at least, pretended to be habitable. And there were people, so many more people, turkey peeking around corners, brushing moon
dust off laundry lines, playing soccer in the sandy-dirt streets, drinking something out of small, brown bottles. A boy waved at Isaacs, holding the soccer ball. When Isaacs waved back, his mother caught the boy’s arm and pulled him inside, nothing but her eyes showing. One old man spit dangerously close to XO’s boot.

“Then one time,” Destin started.

“You watching for unfriendlies?” XO spatted.

“Yeah, I do many things, XO. My Grandmama Eve once said that I could hang up the laundry, do my algebra homework, tell a joke, massage her feet, and walk the dog all at the same time. Granted I just wanted to tell a joke, but she made it into a competition. She told me, ‘Now, boy, if I do all your chores before you, then you can’t be telling none of them stupid jokes anymore.’ Well, that lady could massage her own feet so quickly, but the algebra part got her on account of they not having algebra in her day.”

“Algebra pre-dates Newton,” Minx said, scanning rooftops.

“Newton, that fella that got beat up by an apple and all?” Destin said.

“Yes, that’s the one,” Minx said.

“What a tool, am I right?” Destin said, laughing.

No one responded, and the men almost sighed as a collective.

But then, Isaacs heard it, her giggle, that same giggle. She’d haunted him for a week almost, but this time, he was sure it was real. He stopped in the middle of some kids’ soccer game, the rest of the fire team continuing forward. Left, left, right, left, he 360ed, a panoramic vision, searching. It sounded again, boomeranging toward his ears and then away, away, away.

Isaacs ran after it. Behind black hanging cloth, behind white plastic chairs, behind metal bars and bars, there were always so many bars, behind the brick entry to the house, up the stairs,
up the stairs.

“Girl, little girl,” he called out. “Eliza!”

He was moving so quickly he hadn’t noticed the smell of chlorine, the snap-swatch click of the broken trip wire, and the impact of bomb-blasted orange dust.

The first freezer visit wasn’t like the rest. Remnants of confusion lingered on his seven-year-old tongue as his father guided him down each step. The dips were almost too big for Isaacs to make the trip. The open back stairs, free for monster ankle-grabbing, had scared him before he knew what fear really was. He knew his father was mad at him, Eliza being only six months missing. But his father’s calm scared and confused him more than anything.

A week earlier, his mother had cleaned out the basement freezer. Turns out the seal was broken—too much air seeping in and out. All the meat defrosted and spoiled. She wanted to eat the tainted meat but ended up tossing it into the neighbor’s yard before unplugging the freezer and letting it melt. Now, he had understood his mom’s actions when his father opened the creaky lid with its cracked accordion seal.

“Here, get in,” his father said, grabbing Isaacs by the shoulder and pulling him toward the rectangle polygon, a new term his first-grade teacher had introduced that day.

“I don’t wanna go in ttthere,” he said, pushing more air out of his missing tooth space.

“You gotta.” His father wasn’t looking at him for some reason. “It’s like hide and seek.”

“But I don’t like hide and seek.”

“Gabriel! Get in the fucking freezer.”

He had heard that word only two other times, once from Taz Montgomery in kindergarten, an experimental testing with their teacher. She hadn’t given him a lollipop from the lollipop tree even though he answered the question correctly. It didn’t matter that Isaacs saw him
steal the answer from Maddie Perkins—Taz Montgomery just wound up and, with a burst of air, called the teacher “a fucker.” This stripped him of three weeks of recess, the harshest punishment Isaacs had ever witnessed. The only other time was one of his mom’s sexy shows he peeked around a corner to watch right after Eliza’s disappearance. Wrappers of Little Debbie brownies lined the couch as mom watched two unknown figures yelling at each other, the guy yelling that the girl was a “fucking cucksut” or “cockslit”—Isaacs couldn’t catch it. He just knew they started making out after this title, confused again about this word’s magic, one yielding punishment, the other a gross adult reward.

So, when his father had yelled it that day, he was terrified and amused that he could be a part of this mystery club. Isaacs gripped the accordion side of the freezer and tried to pull himself up, over the high boundary. He grunted and faltered, finally asking, “Dad, can you help me?”

“Of course, Gabriel,” he said low.

His father was not a strong man, but the readiness with which Isaacs felt his hands under his armpits startled him. Isaacs almost laughed—he was in a spaceship now, surrounded by the far planet of Saturn-ring scaffolding, silver paint bucket comets, and red brick meteors, the flashing satellite of the flickering lone light bulb, and the alien-life washer and dryer—they’d hum their white-noise song. He wanted to make a helmet out of foil.

“Ya gotta sit,” his father instructed.

Isaacs almost yelled “Roger that, captain” but, instead, sat down in silence.

Then the lid came, like a giant airlock to engulf light. The top of the plug door, just missed sealing his head, the sway of his white hair brushing against it as he looked all around the darkness. Only a sliver of light poured in the spaceship. His weak astronaut arms pushed against the top, but it didn’t move. At first, he heard something metal click, then heavy footsteps
slumped up the basement stairs.

“Captain,” he called out before the basement door closed and locked.

“Dad?” He asked the silence. And then he pushed harder against the top, against the sides, into the bottom. He stretched his small body not the length of the freezer and tried kicking the top. It hurt his feet. “Dad?” He called out again, more frantic. Inside the freezer, he heard nothing. He paused, frozen, deathly still. He closed his mouth, breathing heavily through his nose, eyes all rolling and trying to peer through that light sliver. The darkness offered no relief. And inside, he shivered, hearing nothing but the world’s silent buzz in between his gasps for air.

He realized he was locked inside, buried in darkness—Isaacs began coughing under the weight of bomb debris. Eyes unopened. He continued this coughing, coughing, lying supine. But sound was drowned out—pressure of underwater—air pocket movements—heavy ear canals. There was another sound. The familiar buzz of silence. But it was louder than the freezer. It was screaming. Someone’s screaming? Who’s screaming? But chlorine choked more into his mouth. Throat closing up. Tongue tasting chlorine dust. Blow, blow out, he coached himself. His tongue scraped against the back of his teeth. It wasn’t enough. Chemical burns began. Lips, pallet, tongue, esophagus, lungs, the worst part, lungs—his arm beside him instinctually clenched his flak jacket. Get this off me, get it off, he tried to yell. Only decibels less than whispers sounded. More chlorine dust slid in. His body jerked to the side. Vomit, metallic sting of blood vomit in open cuts.

Wheezing, wheezing, his hand searched all over his body. Right hand smacked left shoulder. Shit, he tried to say, a burst of pain radiating down his arm. Close your mouth, close your mouth. He felt his elbow, hand, all his fingers, he still had his fingers. But he dug into the pockets, more, so many fucking pockets. Finally, the plastic Cyclops eye and the Air Purifying
Respirator knobs of his gas mask. Unclipping his ACH, over his face, struggling with one arm, tightening the sides, sealing the edges. An instant burst of air. But his lungs, his lungs still burned. The weight of his flak jacket—thick tree trunks he rolled under in BT dropped against his chest. He began unclipping. *No, keep it on, the burning,* he thought. *Who’s still screaming?* Dust caked his eyes. His breathing quickened, each breath an inhalation of hot ash. The mask could only do so much. *Keep your eyes closed,* he thought, fearing another panic attack. More hot ash, like burping hydrochloric acid and drinking cigarettes.

“Keep yar eyes closed, Gabriel,” his father had said. Crisp scent of harvested corn husks surrounded him in the chilly, strong wind of October 19. October 19, a year before the two hoodies took her, kidnapping his parents as well. Husks crunched under his new Spider-Man light ups, a year six birthday gift.

“Okay, open yar eyes.” Isaacs remembered gasping. The red and gold kite was bigger than his father’s torso. He held it to his side where the kite glinted and winked at Isaacs against the cool blueness of the Indiana sky.

“It’s part two of yar birthday. Little late, but got a few extra shifts at the mine. Here,” his father put the spool in his small hands, “give him a try.” Isaacs had stared up in disbelief at his father. That familiar untrimmed mustache, the warm, insulated stitch of his plaid shirts, the ever stained blackened nails all urged him with nods to throw that kite into the damn sky. With as much force as possible, Isaacs threw that kite up. Immediately, it crashed down, joining the left over broken and stripped corn cobs.

“Gabriel, ya gotta run with it,” his father said, motioning toward the flat field expanse. “Here is yar runway.”

Spider-Man at his feet, he started to walk, jog, run, run farther on the runway, the kite
acting as a parachute until he turned it sideways, allowing him to go faster, supersonic, flying into liftoff.

Then he tripped and fell. It was possibly the worst place to have a runway with all the dips and broken arms of corn stalks. But his father was there, smiling at him, then looking to the sky, waiting for the launch.

The strategy was to look at the ground and not the sky. He just had to trust that the sky, the wind would do its work.

“Preparing for liftoff,” he called. With jumps and runs, he pulled the kite horizontal to his side to build up momentum. The movement was different, the wind against him, short bursts of speed continuous enough over the broken stalks to simulate flight. And with enough wind kissing his chapped cheeks, he forced himself to keep eyes on the ground for the release. It caught in the air, tugging of spool, string running wild. Spinning and spinning off the wood, he barely had enough time to catch the end before it would snap off and fly away forever.

He kept running. Finally, with a steady stream of wind, he stopped, turned back, and looked at his creation. The tiny diamond of blue and silver, it was like a superhero chest, flying to stop any southern Indiana villains. No more eraser thief, stealing from Mrs. Doyle’s kindergarten desk. No more dead car winters, electrocuting all their engines to life. No more screaming in the park at nights, somebody living a nightmare. No more house blow up fires, some drug like death stinking up the streets. He would save the world. Save the world he might, but save his sister he never would, for the next year his sister would be gone forever.

“Good job, Gabriel.” His father smiled. “Good job, son,” his father called out until Isaacs, again, fell full force from the husks of memory.

*Keep your eyes closed,* he refrained. The screaming under bomb blast was changing,
morphing, dying down. His burning breaths in the gas mask slowed and slowed with the dying scream until finally he noticed that the screaming wasn’t screaming at all. It was just ringing from the blast—ringing in his ears the whole time. No one’s here. Is anyone coming? He remembered stories of Marines who’d been “blowed up” by IEDs or RPGs or Agent Orange—that haunt of Vietnam resurfacing in noxious open-air burn pits. They’d wake up to find someone’s boot near their face only to discover that it was their own leg strewn across their chests. Or half their face had been burnt off only to discover that they could touch their tongue without opening their mouth—is anyone coming? These horror stories kept his eyes shut, but the damage needed to be assessed—shock was a wonder. If he was bleeding out—if he was on fire—if the floor were going to collapse—he needed to see. The panic was more threatening than the pain—he talked his breath down—the fire in his lungs painful enough to keep him awake.

One, he began his count to eight. Slow, flickering, he opened his eyes. Dust fell from his lashes into the side of the mask. Two. He could move his neck. He looked over his body. Everything was still connected. Nothing was on fire. Three, four. The ground was mostly solid beneath him. Through the orange smoke above, outlines of the sky appeared, the clay roof had ripped open. It was amoeba-shaped, like the God’s eye Supernova. Five. Sound reappearing, clay and brick pieces crumbled from the roof and pebbled the floor. Six, seven. There was a calmness in the hovering smoke, like a ghost dance, ethereal, almost musical. He could play shapes like cloud watching. A half-rainbow of chlorine formed, red, orange, yellow, and blue with the iris of the sky. Eight. “Isaacs,” someone yelled. Slow footsteps came up the stairs. Light shined through his mask eyehole, the figure coming closer through the dissipating orange. “Isaacs, an ew hear me?” The voice was muffled. He was met mask to mask. “Isaacs, respond.” Huntings’ voice.

Yes, Isaacs tried to call, but his throat-lining still muted.
“Isaacs, respond,” Huntings called again, the light of his rifle PAC4 deflected to the side.

With his good arm, Isaacs raised then rested it on Huntings’ bent knee.

“Good, that’s good, Isaacs. We’re getting you out.”

He squeezed Huntings’ knee then released.

“It’s okay.” His hand rested briefly against Isaacs’ head. “Glad you had your ACH on, you motard.” Huntings grinned, eyeing the unclipped helmet next to Isaacs’ ear.

It was unclear the time it took the medics to get him onto the stretcher and down the stairs. “Careful, careful,” he heard Huntings say to the medics. The stairway ceiling moved farther and farther away from Isaacs’ face, approaching the stair bottom. “Here’s the main wire, those bounding mines out there are attached to this one. Bomb tech said the upstairs wire had just one mine.”

Isaacs imagined the pointing green lasers illuminating the main wire apparently stretched across the bottom stair. He imagined the fire team with A4s cocked, sealing a perimeter around the house. He imagined the swarm of medics rushing him into a Humvee to hook up a hand-held, swaying IV bag. He imagined the bomb techs, the few that could be found out here, crouching in crawl spaces to deactivate the bounding mines. He imagined the crowd of Iraqis subjected to yet another blast, the chlorine smoke lingering for days, weeks in the town. He imagined all of these probabilities, but, as the medics loaded him into the Humvee, the only clear thing to him was the girl. She stood, uninjured, not giggling, outside of a clay house, staring at the scene. In the same clay doorway, sat the melon-snatching boy at the feet of presumably the same women from the dumpster. As the Humvee backed into the sand, U-turned, and pulled away, Isaacs lifted his head to see the girl limping toward him. Her limp turned into a run, barefoot, burning feet chasing after the Humvee. Through the gate they went, her body growing smaller in the distance. He
watched her as long as he could until his head became too heavy and he racked out.

***

It had been a long day. Maddie Perkins had shot down Isaacs’ proposal to the prom. It was unusual for fourteen year olds to go, but he thought she’d be interested. Turns out she was interested, just in another guy. Then, he’d gotten a D on his Econ test mainly because of the plague of nightmares three days before and the pointlessness of consumer goods. His teacher had encouraged him with the polite comment of “Try harder.” His bike even rejected his existence by blowing a tire one mile into his four mile venture home. And when he finally wheeled the damn thing onto the porch, his mother called out, “Help me.”

“What is it, mom?” He entered the house to see her permanent place on the couch. She was in the aftermath, made clear by the tornadoed debris of wrappers.

“I cain’t see the TV,” she sputtered. Breathing heavy, she was deep into a coma.

“Mom.” He sat next to her and grabbed her hand. “It’s okay. Where are your glasses?”

“I don’t know.”

Standing up, he searched the couch, dug under the wrappers on the coffee table, and then found them next to her feet on the floor.

“Here, mom.” He grabbed them and helped her situate them. The metal stems had angled out to compensate for her widening face.

“So good.” She pulled him into her chest, stroking his long, white hair. Someone had called him “emo Barbie” a few weeks before.

“Mom, my tire’s gonna need—”

“So good.” She stroked. “Such a good girl.”

“Vivian,” his father yelled from the kitchen.
“Rick, Ricky, I found her!” mom called out. “I found our girl.”

Isaacs sighed at the ritual.

“Dammit! I’m so sick of this shit,” his father said, entering the living room. He leaned against the doorframe, cradling his Jack Daniels. “Come ‘ere. Git in the kitchen.”

“Dad, I’m really tired today. I just want—”

“You want the basement instead?”

Isaacs tucked hair behind his ear. “No, I don’t want that.”

“Then, git in the kitchen and sit down.”

Following the orders, Isaacs sat on a green and yellow rooster seat. The buzzing came from behind him. Before he could react, his father had shoved him face-forward onto the table, his hand pressing heavy into his back. The sharp edge of the table jabbed his ribs.

“Don’t move.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Isaacs saw the electric razor inching closer toward his head.

“Dad, what are you doing?”

With the first buzzing rush, Isaacs had screamed. There was no pain, just shock. His cut hair fell onto the table, bushing against his nose. He blew it away and gripped his thighs, enduring the shave. Stroke after stroke, his father cut away his sister. He paused every few strips to sip his Daniels then resumed buzzing. With air chilling the newly shaved side, Isaacs felt his father’s grip on his chin, angling his head for another zip. Row by row, his father moved the razor faster over his skull. Isaacs screamed again after his father’s careless grip carved those teeth edges, carved a chunk out of his head. A warm line of blood ran over his lips. And Isaacs wasn’t sure if the blood was what made the shaved hair mat or his own tears.

Someone was touching his hair now too. Fingers caressed his cheek, lined his ear toward
the buzzed sides of his head. They brushed through the prickling edges to the curly, white top. Someone was rubbing their fingers around his curls, bunching up the hair and then letting it go. The hand smoothed down the shaved back of his head, curved over the healed scar of missing skin, then circled round to his lips. Someone traced the outline of his lips, and then the hand was gone.

Isaacs flicked open his eyes. Heavy curtain-like slopes of the medical tent billowed under the passing dust. A blue tarp to his left cut off his view of the other bunks, assuming there were even any more. He was in a corner, and some plastic window, half-covered, let in enough light for him to make out the face of Brukk.

“Wake, Gabriel?” he asked, standing in the corner and rubbing his hands together.

“What are yo—” Isaacs said, but felt the residual burn in his throat. He started coughing, his chest wracked with imaginary fracture limbs up his sternum.

“Here.” Brukk unclipped and uncapped his canteen. The warm grip of Brukk’s hand cupped the back of Isaacs’ head. The motion was unnecessary, annoyingly smooth and calming. Isaacs drank from the metal rim.

“Well,” Brukk said, capping his canteen and scanning Isaacs’ body, “looks like you’ve got some fractured ribs, had a dislocated shoulder, scrapes and bruises. Not too bad for being blowed up. There is, of course, the voice thing. Chlorine gets in there and hollows you out.”

“Why are you here?” Isaacs managed.

“I’m checking on one of my Marines, of course.”

“Why? You don’t care about me.”

“I don’t care about you?” Brukk exhaled. “Gabriel, I’ve told you things I’ve never shared with anyone.”
Melted tar flesh, the weaponry whipping, his sudden change of MO—flashes of Brukk’s last trick.

“Those stories weren’t real.” Isaacs coughed, clenching his chest.

Brukk let out a laugh. “I’ll tell you another story.”

“No, leave me alone. I’m tired.”

“Deserting does that to you.”

Isaacs did not break eye contact with Brukk. Past the throat fire, he swallowed. He alternated his gaze between Brukk’s fixed eyes like silver balance balls.

“Now I have your attention. You see, once upon a time in the fucked up land of Sandpit Hell, there was a Private and a CO—”

“Sir, I wasn’t deserting. I heard—”

“Shh, you’re interrupting the story, Gabriel. So, one day, a Private, Private Ashburn, huffs it to a routine car bomb detection with his fire team. Nervous little tick with hair about as white as yours. So, fire team’s ushering cars through the gate, looking for weight differences in the tires’ flatness or the back frame’s overhang because of what might be ticking in the trunk. Private Ashburn had one job—be a part of this fire team, be present like any Marine. He was fresh out of BT. He would of known that. It wasn’t like he was in charge of lives even though he ended up taking more than one.” Brukk uncapped his canteen and drank. “More water.”

“No. Sir, I wasn’t trying—”

“So, everything was status quo until XO Anders, yep, your XO, saw a trunk—definite car bomb suspicion. He signaled to the team, and the Terp started speaking instructions. The two men did not exit the car. XO yelled at the Marine driver with the satellite to radio for another fire team or a squad, whatever was the least kliks. But the haji sniper’s .50 caliber ripped through the
driver’s head before he could click on his speaker. Then it was really FUBAR. Rounds littering like metal piss and the car bomb speeding through the gate. The Terp shot at the trunk, trying to detonate the damn thing. Sniper found Terp too though, right through his ACH—XO later said the smoke from impact made a line up to heaven. He yelled and yelled at Private Ashburn to belly crawl and get that satellite, to radio the check point ahead about the bomb, to get a squad in here. There was no telling how set up the sniper was. He could play pinball all day. But Private Ashburn didn’t crawl, didn’t walk, didn’t do anything but run. He ran as fast as he could into the neighboring building, up the stairs, and out the back. XO later found his digi fabric on a window nail.”

“I’d never—” Isaacs choked.

“XO barely got out on his own, but not in time to stop the five Marines at the next CP from getting blowed up. One Marine went blind that day. It was a slow process. Took over three or four days after the initial shrapnel. Those days gave him just enough time to memorize his mother’s face in photographs before he went totally blind. Another Marine lost his left hand—he used to be a pianist, but he’d enlisted to honor his dead Oorah brother. The other three died, shipped back in American flags—tight triangles given to widows, daughters, sons. Purple Heart,” Brukk scoffed, “more like Purple Hole. One car bomb, one absent radio of warning, one Private in one moment of one day of one tour.” He paused. “Cosmic puzzle.”

Brukk took another sip from his canteen. He tilted it toward Isaacs’ face.

“No, but sir, I need to make it clear—”

“Couple days later, I found him—about a month ago now. He was in some haji shop, smoking a cig and watching ESPN. I took him out back, and then I shot him in the head.”

Isaacs’ eyes circled around the bunk, watching, scanning Brukk as he dragged his hand
over the dusty bunk sheets, tracing close to Isaacs’ side, down his leg, around his feet, up the other side, toward his slinged arm. He was body chalk drawing.

“I heard he rushed you,” Isaacs whispered, cradling his slinged arm away from Brukk’s waist.

“Oh, he did. In the report.” Brukk crouched down to Isaacs’ face. “Now, Gabriel.” Brukk wrapped his arm around Isaacs’ head and started stroking his white hair again.

Isaacs tilted his head away. “Sir, what’s your—”

“Why—” Brukk’s hand did not leave him. “Why did you abandon the fire team and enter that building without reinforcement.”

Breath came in short pants from Isaacs’ fire-wracked throat. Brukk’s finger pads were not sticky with sweat residue—they were smooth and gritty as they moved over Isaacs’ cheek.

“Sir, what are you—”

“Do you want to be a hero, Gabriel?”

“Not by your definition.” The fingers traced over his thin sideburns, edging closer and closer to his lips. Something was wet on his lips, a little cold.

“You still have my sketch.”

“You want it back?” Isaacs flipped the sheet off. “I’ll—I’ll get it for you. Let me go right now.”

“No.” Brukk’s thumb rubbed Isaacs’ bottom lip—the thumb nail slightly scratching against the edge of his teeth.

Isaacs closed his mouth and turned his head.

“Your lips are always bleeding, Gabriel.”

Isaacs glanced toward Brukk, examining the red smear on his thumb. And with a sucking
sound, Brukk engulfed his thumb and pulled it out like a popsicle.

Isaacs turned his head again.

Brukk smirked. “You need to relax, Gabriel, if you’re to survive.” He rubbed his wet thumb on Isaacs’ sling.

“At least, save your voice.” Then Brukk leaned in to say, “It’d be a tragedy if you couldn’t file any more grievances.” Isaacs gasped, but Brukk stood up quick and walked toward the blue tarp. He paused and returned someone’s salute before the last reflective blink as his eyes flashed silver.

“You okay, Indiana?” Huntings asked, taking off his cover. “How you feeling?”

“Not good.”

“What did CO want?”

“I don’t know,” Isaacs whispered.

“Damn, your voice. That chlorine’s not messing around.”

Isaacs shook his head.

“You remember what happened?”

“ Mostly,” Isaacs said.

“Anyone debriefed you yet?”

“No, not formally.”

“You’ve been asleep for two days, Indiana. I thought you were gonna miss my going away party.” Huntings grinned.

Isaacs forced a smile.

“But seriously, what happened? What’d you see in that house? Why didn’t you yell for me? I got your six, Indiana.”

“What’d it sound like?”

“I don’t know.”


Huntings paused. “Indiana, you sometimes hear things that aren’t exactly there?”

“What?”

“You know your rack’s in the same CHU as mine, right?”

“Of course—why?”

“You.” Huntings paused. “Maybe it’s not the time.”

“Huntings.” Isaacs reached from Huntings’ arm. “Tell me.”

“You mess with my beauty sleep sometimes with all your jabbering—”

“Yeah, you said that before—”

“Did I?”

“You were drunk. Said I talked in my sleep.”

“More than that though.”

“What is it?” Isaacs coughed, squeezed his eyes from pain.

“Who’s Rat?”

They were both silent. A Humvee passed outside. Some distant conversation. Cig smoke trailed into the tent. A dog barked nearby.

“Let’s not—”

“You talk this Rat in your sleep. A lot.” Huntings drummed a finger against the bunk.
“I’ve thrown my pillow and tried to wake you before but you always seem to quiet down after you—”

“What? After I what?”

“Apologetic.”

Six years had passed since Eliza’s face was trapped behind the horizontal Oldsmobile bars. Four years had passed since the “Have You Seen Me” flyers stopped fluttering under telephone-post staples. So many other things plastered over them with the years—piano concerto at George Rogers Clark Memorial, Bear Hollow Wood Carvers and their chainsaws like paintbrushes, Watermelon Drop New Year’s Eve Celebration in the cornfield off 41. People were telling them, forcing them to bury her, her face trapped and disappearing again.

On his bike one day, Isaacs saw the tattered edge of her foreign smile. The border was forever burned in his mind not because he insisted on the clipart sandcastles at age seven but because he remembered the fatigue of being dragged by his mom’s hand around Vincennes. All day, he stared at those sandcastles, mom tugging him from post to post and stapling more haunting smiles into the splintering wood. Isaacs had to have a hand on mom’s thigh at all times—“If ya let go, I’m gonna think someone got ya, too.”

Getting off his bike, he saw the sandcastle border tortured by wind. His hand smoothed over the edge and then brushed away all the paper debris covering her face. It was just a black and white picture, something he’d seen a thousand times on TV, on hallway cork boards, at bake sale fundraisers, and on every post he passed to get to school. But her giggle rang clear with memory. She’d laugh at almost anything. She hadn’t had time to learn restraint or sadness or depression. She’d laugh and clap when dad tripped over a power cord like it was a planned, circus act. She’d laugh and clap whenever Isaacs would play Mortal Kombat, agreeing and
encouraging her brother to “Finish Him.” Sometimes Isaacs would catch her staring out from the backyard green swing at the expanse of corn. She wasn’t swinging. And at that time, she wasn’t laughing. She was just staring as if she knew she’d never see the corn again. In that moment, she had turned to her big brother, reached out her hand, and said, “Sit here, bubby.” He had gone to her, wind swaying them with the corn. That sudden burst caught him off guard as she sang out giggles. He tried to see what she was laughing at, but then he realized laughter needed no justification. He started laughing at her laughing, and laughing so hard that the laughing stayed there and lived in the corn.

That’s why, standing next to his bike, when he saw the moustache on her picture, he hadn’t become furious or sad or confused. He just giggled as if she had come like a ghost and pranked herself. Digging out a mechanical pencil from his backpack, he wrote below the border, *Come by. We miss you.* That was the same day he met Rat and the very reason why.

The porch always smelled like mosquito bushes. He’d leaned his bike next to the screen door, low talking inside.

“Ya cain’t keep doin’ this, Vivian. You gonna eat us dead,” dad had said in the living room.

“I ain’t a cannibal, Rick,” mom responded.

“Ya sure know what’s in them Pilot Station dogs?”

“Meat, dammit.”

Dad snickered at this then sighed. A pause, silence between them. “Where the shit is he?”

Isaacs glanced at his Ninja Turtles watch—he was over thirty minutes late because of musing at the telephone post.

“I’m callin’ the police,” mom said. “Get me that phone.”
“Nah, couple more minutes.”

“He gone. I knew it. They bided their time to get the other one. And the doctor said we cain’t have no more. Oh—” her voice started to break. “Where Eliza? What they do with her? What they do with my girl?”

“Vivi, Eliza’s okay. Someone’s takin’ real good care o’ her.” Even Isaacs wasn’t convinced by the lie.

“Get me some Rally’s.” She was crying.

“Mom, dad.” Isaacs slowly pushed open the screen door. “I’m really sorry I’m late. I just—”

His father jumped up from the couch and gripped the back of Isaacs’ neck. “Ya see this?” He shoved his head in the direction of his crying mom. “This be yaur fault. Ya never be late again.” His father’s fingers wrapped his entire skinny bicep. He dragged him closer and closer to the basement door.

“Dad, I saw Eliza,” he blurted.

Mom screamed from the living room.

Dad’s grip left him. Wide eyed, dad stepped away from him like he was supposed to be quarantined.

“You. Saw—”

“On a poster, one of our posters, I mean. I—I passed it when I was coming home and I just—”

Dad had the same calm that possessed his body during Isaacs’ first spaceship launch, first freezer trap.

“Ya might never come out this time,” his father whispered. He grabbed Isaacs’ shoulder,
shoved him downstairs, this push-pull of motion, and slapped him into the freezer. Metal clinked as his father fumbled with the padlock. The familiar sound of shuffling steps were slower today as if he were clinging onto the railing for support with each climb up.

Instantly, he knew it was the stupidest thing he could have said. This burst of falsity stung against his cheek, warm with his father’s slap. He heard something else, like a scamper, a scurry. He’d felt a cockroach in here before, its antennas moving all over his arm. He’d even eaten a centipede, the hunger worse than the disgust, even after he felt the squirming legs on his lips. After screaming himself deaf not three months ago, he vowed to always carry a flashlight and crackers in his cargo pockets at all times. Any moment, he’d feel his father’s hands on his scruff. He’d have to be ready.

But today, the sound was too big to be an insect. Something warm moved against his leg. His hand slid into a cargo pocket to retrieve the keychain flashlight, a Secret Santa from his Mamaw last Christmas. She’d never know its use. With a quick turn, blue light washed the familiar six boundaries. It flashed against the scratch-mark ceiling, still a little bloody. In a corner, left of his shoes was the designated bathroom. Only once when he was seven did he go number two, somehow though the white wouldn’t let go of the brown. To his right, he heard it again. Light followed sound. And there, by his tennis shoes in the blue wave of light was a rat. It was standing on its hind legs, its front paws kept close to its white body. Its head was weaving side to side as if sizing up Isaacs.

“Rat,” he whispered.

It chattered back in conversation.

“Rat,” he panted.

Other than circling its mouth like it was grinding its teeth, it didn’t move.
“RAT,” Isaacs yelled. With his fist, he started knocking then punching the scarred freezer ceiling. Low grunts wracked from his chest with each punching motion. Sweat fell from his forehead into his ears. “Dad,” he called, now open-palm smacking the lid. “Dad, there’s a rat in here!” He looked back at the unmoved animal, the blue wash jostling with each jerk. Carelessly, his beating continued until he heard the crack and felt the ripped muscle of his pinkie finger. A suck of air between his teeth, he turned on his side, cradling his hand. At the time, the pain blocked out the noise, the scurrying of rat around his feet and up to his hand. The rat’s eyes glistened in the blue wash at Isaacs’ side. “Go away,” he yelled.

The rat just kept grinding its teeth. It tried to approach, but Isaacs hit it. The force shoved it to the bathroom corner. The tears weren’t from the pain or the ritual of freezer or his mom’s constant betrayal or Eliza’s buried face or his bathroom brown-bag lunches. It was in his invisibility, his hiddenness. His ability to smell like stale urine with no teacher concerns. His ability to steal gum and crackers right in front of the Pilot station cashier. His ability to try out for track and not even be put on the cut list. His ability to witness afterschool beatings of Taz Montgomery at the hands of Jimmy Vicenzi—his yells of “stop, stop” not even met with a threatening gaze.

So, when the two black eyes of the rat burned into him, he felt something for the first time since Eliza’s kidnapping. Not fault, not guilt. For the first time, he felt seen, present, not truly alone. The black eyes of the rat came closer. But this time, Isaacs did not react. Slowly, cautiously, the rat crawled until it was next to his injured pinkie. And then like a mother bandaging a wound, the rat wrapped its naked, narrow tail around his pinkie. Isaacs gasped, expecting it to worsen the pain. But nothing in his memory of injury had ever quite soothed him like that long, warm cylinder of bone and blood.
It chattered again as if to say, “Hello. We got off to a rough start, but nice to meet you.”

Rat was a mystery. She came and went in the freezer, somehow crawling up the slick sides, whenever she wanted. But somehow still she was always present when he needed her.

More than once he’d envisioned Rat as a reincarnation of Eliza as she crawled up and down his mind too—all their conversations, all those moments of blue light, all those spaces of presence he remembered. And to avert, to mask, to secret, to avoid the panic attacks, he tried to push away the memory of the brick, his father and the brick.

“Indiana?” Huntings asked, still standing beside Isaacs’ bunk. “Who’s Rat?”

“What?” Isaacs asked.

“What’s the deal with Rat?”

“Just a pet I had,” Isaacs murmured.

“You apologize to your pets?” Huntings smirked.

“Why are you here?” Isaacs asked, blinking dust out his eye.

“Brukk didn’t re-assign you yet?”

“To what?”

“Orders from Brukk to XO to me, apparently—latrine duty at base.”

Isaacs exhaled, pushing too much air over his raw throat, provoking a coughing fit.

“You want some water or something?” Huntings reached to unclip his canteen.

Isaacs shook his head, recovering. “All base?”

“Affirmative.” Huntings sighed.

“I’m gonna be stuck at base, burning multiple platoons’ worth of shit at Brukk’s orders?”

“I’m sorry, Indiana.”

Isaacs squeezed his eyes shut and pushed his head into the pillow. “Is this normal,
“What?”

“For there to be nothing. Like what do people do with their whole lives? Do we only get one?” Isaacs swallowed hard.

“Some people.” Huntings paused. “Think about it more than others, I guess? It affects everybody, but some people more than others, sure.” He picked at a frayed edge on his flak jacket. “Have you ever thought about a transfer, from combat to volunteer?”

“No way.”

“Isaacs, there’s no shame in it. Lots of guys are transferred. Just four or five months ago in Bravo Company, some Private a few months into his contract got blowed up, like you. He transferred to Belize. Everybody knows it’s a thing.”

“Exactly,” Isaacs whispered.

“You’re not more heroic by getting blowed up here. The hero stuff, it doesn’t exist anymore. Do the best you can, but maybe volunteer would be better for you?”

“No.”

“You won’t even consider it?” Huntings asked, brushing sand from the bunk.

“I’m supposed to embrace the suck, not abandon it. I can’t keep doing that,” Isaacs said.

“I can’t keep leaving.”

The dog had stopped barking. Wind disrupted the silence.

“Well, I just wanted to make sure you’re okay,” Huntings said, gently patting the side of the bunk. He nodded and walked to the blue tarp, almost gone.

“Huntings,” Isaacs called, suddenly remembering Brukk’s whispered threat. “I’m gonna miss you.”
Huntings grinned back at him. “You too, Indiana. Oorah,” he said and disappeared behind the blue-tarp exit.

Only two things kept him company under the suffocating curtain-tent of medical. The girl had run after him, limping and pacing and hurling into the sand. Her Eliza-brown eyes chasing him into sleep. He’d seen her family, and he’d heard the phantom giggle. One of the many phantoms blue-washing in the sandcastle, the grip on his shoulder, Brukk’s thumb against his bleeding lips. Nothing would leave him, especially the urge to find the girl, to return to the clay house, to make sure there was no sand, however cinnamony, in her eyes. But the last conversation with Brukk kept voicing in memory—talk of “You need to relax, Gabriel, if you’re to survive. At least, save your voice” and then the low whispering taunt “It’d be a tragedy if you couldn’t file any more grievances.” Brukk knew, and now Isaacs knew—there wasn’t enough space in the desert for anyone but the devil.

Tin Jimenez 3—June 30

Tin already felt the village hiss. If the blood Mami and Gisela cleaned off the bamboo thatch didn’t say hate, the looks surrounding Tin in the Mincan market did. He stepped farther into market toward Gisela’s basket and rug shop, El Tucán Restaurante, Tinto’s produce, and Carlos’ paint stand, all on the way to Hippoman’s thatch.

Two crossers called to the father-son-holy ghost when Tin looked at them. A girl with pigtails waved at Tin, but the mother pulled her daughter away. Someone hissed behind him “sangre del Diablo,” Devil blood. Then, Tin turned to see Jorge and Del Real both with rocks. Jorge’s grin almost matched Del Real’s attempt at a villain smirk. He tossed the rock up and down then dropped it. Tin snickered.
“For the love of God, people,” Tin heard, seeing Carlos rush past his paint stand into the crowd with a plastic jug in hand. Most of the crowd disbursed except for Jorge and Del Real. They spun their rocks and looked past Carlos at Tin. “Come here, boys. I’m gonna toss this bleach on you,” Carlos said. Jorge and Del Real didn’t move. Carlos unscrewed the cap, but before he got the cap all the way off, Jorge and Del Real dropped their rocks and ran back the path to the thatches.

“Yeah, bye,” Carlos said. He cocked his head. “That’s what I thought, Culicagao wannabes.”

“Were you really going to burn them, Carlos?”

He pressed the uncapped plastic jug to his lips and swigged.

“Carlos!”

“Do you believe everything you hear?” He wiped his mouth. “It’s my water jug. It’s hot out here all day.”

“You don’t work all day.”

Carlos grinned, and Tin followed him to his paint stand. He took back his seat behind the stand and kept cleaning brushes. The usual open luggage containers were wallpaper behind him. They piled three high and were filled with brushes, oil pastels, acrylic paints in rainbow rows. Carlos tipped the stool back and blotted a rag against his forehead. “They been roughing you up?”

Tin shrugged. “They’re scaredy pants.”

“About as scared as they come.” Carlos grinned. His fingers were stained green.

Tin laughed, drawing an eight around two blue paint tubes on the stand.

“How’s your mami?”
Tin’s hand paused his tracing. “Her eyes are sad.”

Carlos nodded then put down his paint brush and squeezed Tin’s shoulder. “You okay? From all the—”

“Has anything been weird in market?” Tin asked, Gisela’s warning to Mami very close on his mind.

Carlos laughed then patted Tin’s shoulder. “Sure, Tin. It’s market.”

“But more than the lady dragging her cat with a rope or Tinto telling his old man jokes.”

“Not that I can say.” Carlos swirled the brushes he worked on in a murky jar. “Then again, I could tell you anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re gullible and like stories—”

“I’m not gullible.” Tin dragged his thumb against a blue paint tube edge.

“La Novia del Puerto Colombia, heard of her?”

“Of course, she cries because of her lost love.”

“She’s not real, Tin.”

Tin folded his arms. “How do you know?”

“Don’t make something out of nothing, friend.” Oil floated above green water. “Besides I could tell you a rhino charged through market or a Hollywood sunglasses guy scouted market for a new movie—”

“Was there a man with a camera?”

Carlos leaned back on the stool and pushed a paint brush end to his chin. “Yeah, some guy was taking a lot of selfies, I remember.”

Tin leaned closer. “What’d he look like? Where’d he go?”

RIDE/NNUpdike/ 204
“That I can’t remember.” Carols pat dry his brushes now. “What’s with the interrogation?”

“I’m just scared for Mami. Her forehead is heavy.”

Carlos wiped his stained fingers on a rag then grabbed more wet bristles to dry. “Can you really heal?”

“What?”

“Are you the devil, Jesus, or a vampire?” Carlos flicked water from a brush. “My money’s on vampire.”

“None.” Tin’s hand pressed the warm belly of the blue paint tube.

“But the blood? These are theories.” Carlos swiveled too fast. His elbow caught the fluted brush tops he’d just cleaned. “Damn it!” He bent to pick all them up.

Tin pulled the blue paint tube off the stand. He slid it into his pocket.

“¡Qué pena!” Carlos retrieved the brushes in a frazzle.

Jorge and Del Real were still gone, hiding or tossing rocks at someone else.

“You know,” Carlos resituated all the brushes into a new jar, “Angelica is saying you are a devil. She is loud, too.”

“She’s still mad? I will heal Roberto soon.”

“You know it’ll die down though. I mean, the woman’s clearly damaged.”

“What do you mean?” Tin twirled the tube in his pocket.

“Imagine if you could never touch the only person you can stand in the world, maybe even love. What would that do to you?”

“If I could never hug Mami again? She already never lets me heal her.”

“Why can’t you heal her?”
“I can,” Tin emphasized, “she just keeps her mind away from mine.”

“You’ve never kept a secret from her?” Carlos asked. “Or anyone else?”

Tin didn’t answer.

“Like that blue paint in your pocket you haven’t paid for? You’re not a good thief, Tin.” Carlos extended his hand. “Or a good liar.”

“I’m sorry.” Tin raised his hand and slipped the paint from his pocket. A trail of ants formed up and around the wooden stand. He slammed the paint tube in the middle of the trail and watched them scatter. “I needed some for my Mami’s hair.”

“She’s not really a blue, maybe purple highlights?”

“No, for her portrait. I want to give it to her for my twelfth birthday.”

“Isn’t that the opposite of how birthdays work?”

“We have the same birthday.”

“What are the odds?”

“Do people really think I’m the devil?”

“Dunno about everyone.” Carlos sighed. “Couldn’t you just be a vampire though? I’ve always wanted an immortal friend.”

“They’re all immortal.”

“Fine, a vampire friend.”

“Can’t I just be a boy?”

“Sure, but where’s the fantastic in that?”

Laughter burst from Tinto’s Produce as two men clapped each other on the back.

“Have you ever thought about leaving Minca?”

“Would a vampire need to leave?”
“Be serious, Carlos. Have you?”

“Well, sometimes, but I’ve never actually considered it.”

“Not even after they painted those words on your shop?” “El Maricón” had been in pink, glittering letters across his stand. It took him weeks to bleach the words into a white, blurred reminder. Carlos hung a flag over the bleach spot.

“Nope. Not even then.”

“Why not? People were horrible to you.”

“Ignorant, but not horrible. Minca’s the most beautiful place I’ve found on earth. And I need beauty in my life.”

“In everywhere you’ve traveled, have you ever seen someone like me?”

“A vampire?” He grinned.

Tin wanted to yell out “let it go,” but, instead, he just said, “A healer.”

“I mean, there are many good doctors in Colombia and Panama and Peru, but I’ve never heard of the set-up you and your Mami have now that you’re doing these line things.”

“No one has.” Tin sighed.

Carlos tipped his stool back and grabbed a longer blue tube from the luggage. “How about this.” He handed him the tube. “You paint her, and I won’t tell your Mami about that sad attempt to steal from me. Deal?”

“I don’t understand.” Tin shook his head.

“Tin, accept it and go away. You’re holding back all my customers.”

Tin glanced at the near empty market. Gisela still hadn’t returned from the wash.

“Thank you,” Tin said. Carlos threw the oil water onto the dirt beside him. He rose, walked to the end of his stand, and dipped the glass jar into a water bucket. Just as Carlos’
stooped to refill the jar, Tin snatched the small blue tube and tucked both paint tubes into his pockets. He turned and started walking the trail to Hippoman’s thatch.

“Hey,” Carlos called.

Tin didn’t stop walking. He wiped sweat with his t-shirt.

“Make something beautiful, vampire. The world needs it.”

Fat leaves brushed over Tin’s head on the path to Hippoman’s thatch.

“I saw that, Devil Blood!” It was the craning, irking voice of Culicagao. With his calloused knuckles, Emiliano punched back a leaf. He stretched strong, tall, the perfect bully build, but his face was not scary because of his pocky puss acne, white dancing all over. Sometimes a pock would burst open when he yelled. This would send Tin into a fit of giggles. Emiliano would raise his fist and challenge, but sometimes Tin grabbed his sides, not sorry for laughter. Other times, when the fists came down, Tin would cry, cry like Mami with the honey. Today, Emiliano’s eye socket skin was a faint yellow and green and fists already red.

“Are you bleeding?” Tin asked.


“But, your hands—”

“Oh, this.” He pulled a red paint tube from his pocket. “You didn’t see my gift, Devil Blood?”

“Stop calling me that,” Tin said, resuming his walk.

“Why? Because you know it’s true? Everyone’s afraid of you—Minca, Carlos, Hippoman, your own Mami.” Emiliano tossed the tube in the air and caught it. “And I’m betting that you’re even afraid of yourself. Tell me that isn’t true.”
“Why are you so horrible?”

“I’m not the Devil blood here.”

“Where are your wannabes? I saw them earlier.”

“They’re not brave enough to come near you. You’re unnatural. The thought of touching your skin with their fists makes them cry like babies.”

“There’s no one to see your show, so go away.”

Emiliano grabbed Tin’s shoulder. “This isn’t a show. I’d be doing Minca a favor if I killed you,” he whispered. “My Papi says you and your family have been blots on our village for too long.”

“Get off me, Culicagao! I saw what you did to Mariposa!”

Emiliano released him. “I didn’t do shit to that hag.”

“You think my Mami would believe you or me?”

“Doesn’t matter—you haven’t told her, obviously. And I’m assuming your Devil blood erased the iron. So, I win.”

“My Mami would believe me.”

“Oh, because she tells you the truth about everything?”

“Yes.”

“She already tell you that she closed the healings?”

Tin took a step back. “You’re lying.”

Emiliano popped his knuckles. “These last three days, she’s been going around to different thatches explaining that the healings have to close. That’s why I gave you my gift, so it’d slow her visits down.”

“You did?”
Emiliano smirked.

“No.” Tin paused. “You don’t care about that.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I just didn’t want anyone to forget what happened, not even your Mami. She’s afraid of you, Tin. You’re a freak to her. That’s why your dad left, too.”

“Don’t talk about him—ever.”

“What can you do?”

It came like vertigo, the nightmare headache, the heat on his neck, that growing violence, that stirring. Tin imagined jumping on Emiliano’s chest, taking him down to the dirt, locking index and middle fingers in both sides of his mouth and pulling up, up in a forced, sadistic smile until the skin started tearing and blood filled his mouth to a gurgle. Tin’s thumbs would make perfect eye masks, dipping them slowly into the almond-sockets, pushing that jelly ball back, right into his grey matter. He’d be the village joke, not Tin. “Eyes on the back of his head,” Minca would say. “Put the round peg in the round hole,” they would laugh. “Making jam out of jellies.” Oh, he would push, he’d push until the blood gurgle took his air or pulpy blind eyes took his brain, whatever came first. Tin wasn’t picky. He’s say “self-defense,” following Mami’s excuse and her blood honey.

Instead, Tin gazed up at smiling Emiliano. “My Mami loves me. You iron-burn yours, even if she is a step-mami. You iron-burn her because maybe she doesn’t love you. Why else would she not stand up for you when Fernando’s knuckles come down on you. She only nurses his cuts and not yours—”

“I’m bringing the game soon.”

“I’m not going to play.”

“Oh, you’ll play.”
“I’m trying to help you, Emiliano.” Mound of scar tissue weighed his cousin’s ear. “I don’t want you to revisit wax palms or something worse.”

“I was born into something worse.”

Wind beat a leaf against Emiliano’s face. He ripped it from the trunk and began tearing it. Something rustled in the plants.

“Emiliano, I’m sorry.”

“Leave me alone.” His cousin threw the plant and headed back toward market.

Even at three years old, Emiliano’s mind was damaged. Tin hadn’t noticed it during the mud puddle wars, the first healing and having no referent. But, Emiliano’s other two healings, broken ankle and belted butt, showed Tin a consistent, mysterious, yellow cluster of wriggling wires, neurons from his black-and-white Los Sistemas Muscular y Esqueletico that Tin’d stolen from the Barranquilla library two years ago. There were no electrical clusters like this in other’s brains, just the occasional swimming lump of cancer or a bleed. But even then, Tin could not dissipate the yellow or draw it from brain tissue. It wasn’t painful. It only made Tin feverish and angry, like the world became thicker with this yellow clump. He’d seen violence in people, needing to curl his fists back, declining his impulse to join that violence. There was a place in the world, a violent place. He promised himself not to visit.

~

Around the last wing of trail, Hippoman’s thatch appeared, dirt porch filled with family. Hippoman and a few older women sat in white plastic chairs, three other adults standing with sweating glasses. The grandkids tagged each other over dirt and brown turf, crossing in and out of adjacent thatches, all Hippoman’s family’s homes. Kids sped by so quickly pinwheels clicked, chimes sang. Grandkids’ giggles sang up too as some ducked under heavy clothes lines. Tin
wondered why their hiding spots were so obvious and giggles so loud if they were trying to keep a secret. A bare-backed boy tagged another and then spun a circle into dirt, pumping arms to flee. One boy, the only one not tagging or tagged sat next to Hippoman’s legs and itched his own cheek, arms, chest, all over. He elbowed Hippoman’s leg then itched his elbow, arm, and hand, all the way down to the finger pointed at Tin. Conversations halted. A girl peeked from behind a long, clothes pinned, dripping dress, the rest poking out from hiding.

“¡Tin! ¿Qué más?” Hippoman called. He rose up, spry, no trouble. “Hug me, my boy.”

“You’re still healed?” Eyes followed Tin into Hippoman’s arms.

“Astonished?” Hippoman attempted to flex his saggy, grandpa muscles. “Me too!”

“How is this possible?” Tin asked.

Camila with newborn Jamie disappeared into the thatch.

“You’re the healer, my boy. You tell me.”

Small fingers brushed Tin’s back. He turned to see a granddaughter eating a mango.

“Want some?” she offered.

Tin shook his head.

Another grandkid poked his arm.

“Hey,” Tin said.

“He’s like us, Abuelo,” the kid said, still poking Tin’s arm.

“Yes,” Hippoman said, “and he’ll bruise like you too if you keep jabbing him.”

Hippoman slapped the poking fingers away.

“Are you Jesus or the devil?” a granddaughter asked.

“Or are you Jesus’ cousin?” the poky kid asked.

“Jesus didn’t have any cousins,” she said.
“How do you—”

“I’m just a boy,” Tin mumbled.

“That’s too boring.”

“Here, Tin.” Camila exited the thatch, offering him a glass. “It’s pineapple.”

“Thank you.” Tin drank.

“Does he eat too?” said the poky grandkid. “Are you the Devil then? He doesn’t look like
the Devil.” The kid at Hippoman’s feet itched his swollen face red.

“How would you know what the Devil looks like?” the girl challenged before biting more
mango.

“Aye,” Hippoman started, “you two, stop it. Tin’s no Devil. He’s a boy, a very special
one.”

“Am I special, Abuelo?” the poky grandkid asked.

“No.” Hippoman grinned. There was rustling in the jungle close by and more itching
from the boy.

“What happened to him?” Tin asked, staring at the blood dots bubbling under the boy’s
scraping nails. A collage of multi-sized blisters scattered up his arm, neck, to his face, eyes
almost swollen shut.

“Mango allergy,” Camila chided, “said he couldn’t resist.”

“Sucks, doesn’t it,” the granddaughter said, taking an even larger bite out of the mango
and smacking its juices loud.

“Karen, don’t be a brat,” said one of the standing adults.

Slurping juices more loudly, the girl skipped toward the jungle beside the thatch.

“I can help him,” Tin said. “I don’t think I can get rid of the allergy forever, but I can
take his eyes’ swell.”

“Do it! I want to see,” poky boy exclaimed.

“Tin, we can’t ask that. Especially, after what you’ve just been through for me,”

Hippoman said. “Your Mami has been devastated—”

“I know. I think she’s taking us to Barranquilla, but I’m fine! I don’t know what

happened, and I never will unless I try, unless I experiment.”

“Tin, what you did for me was more than a lifetime—”

“Abuelo, I can’t see.” The itching boy waved his hands in front of each swollen eye

socket. “I know my hands are there, but I can’t see them!”

“Papito, maybe you should let Tin try,” Camila said. “We don’t have money to run Pinto
to Santa Marta. It’s getting worse.” She paused. “Of course, Tin, it’s up to you.”

The pocket-watch lid sprang open. The familiar warmth of mud outlined cuticles and

sank into palm lines. He scraped his nails along the metal casing, revisiting an old friend. Under

his shirt, he rubbed mud then sat, legs folded, across from the boy. An aggressive jerk, Tin

grabbed the boy’s hands and fell into the wound.

Not much pain transferred from Pinto to Tin, only the uncomfortable stretch of flesh, the

broken skin, and the itch, the urge to scratch deep, meeting bone and scratching that, too. Inside

his mouth, tonsils were ballooning up, slow like erosion, they would have filled his throat, the

allergy taking his air.

Tin saw the mango on the tree. His and the boy’s hand reached up, then a quick pull
down, no mango. Up then down, the pattern continued, until Pinto had stared at the dirt trail,

walking away, no mango. Tin felt his hunger, the river of saliva under his tongue, that desire for

the sweet bitterness of orange mango insides. The fruit had won, of course, as Pinto plucked it
from the tree and ripped into the rind. Juices dripped off Tin and Pinto’s lips, cheeks, chin, the first parts to swell up. It was a slow allergy, taking days to reach his eyes and even more days to travel down his arm. Those red patches of hives formed watery ridges on the skin, ridges germy nails popped open and dirtied. Already infection had begun, Tin feeling his slight fever, too.

Then, Tin was pulling, slurping out the infection and hives. They didn’t spread like his old healing before the dream. The allergic reaction flowed out Pinto’s fingers and into Tin’s body. Tin searched Pinto’s skin, his forehead, his mouth, making sure he depleted every remain. And then, like waking up, Tin opened his eyes. Pinto’s two, large brown eyes stared at him, a boy, a normal boy, no furious scratching or face closed up.

“Tin,” Hippoman said, “how are you feeling?”

Dry mouth, tongue like burnt-dried chicken wing, Tin whispered, “Water.” Camila disappeared inside again.

“You taste any blood in your mouth?” Hippoman asked.

“No.” He poked muddy fingers on his tongue. “I’m just tired.”

Camila handed him a glass, and he drank it all.

“What happened?” Hippoman asked. “Why was this one different? Are you getting better?”

“I don’t know,” Tin whispered, wiping mud on his shirt. “But I need to lie down.”

“Of course,” Camila said. “I’m about to put Jamie down for his nap. Come inside.”

Tin grabbed Hippoman’s outstretched hand and stood up. But before he entered the house, behind him, he heard, “Who’s this?”

“Go away, little girl,” said a man in the jungle brush.

Mango granddaughter yanked the man out of the jungle, almost ripping his t-shirt. He
dropped something. It blinked a red light.

“The video,” he jumped to the ground, scooping up the phone. Mango granddaughter continued to pull his shirt until he stood up and smacked her across the face. From the porch, one of the men sprinted toward the man, but he jumped up and ran into the jungle. The man cradled mango granddaughter.

“Mija, you okay?” the man asked, inspecting the red hand mark on her face.

“My cheek stings, papi. Who was that?”

“I don’t know.” The papi lifted her chin.

“Papi, why did he hit me? Was I being bad?”

“No, mija. You’re not bad. You weren’t being bad. Go to your mami and stay there,” the man said before disappearing into the jungle.

“What does this mean?” Hippoman asked.

“I don’t know, but Tin can hardly stand,” Camila said. “Come on. You need rest.”

Tin hoped for more tag in the jungle. He feared what Mami would say, that red blinking light part of her steady nightmare. Abuelo Pedro had showed Tin some on his phone, videos to capture time. He’d seen Abuelo stick out his thick, flat tongue over fifty times all the same way. Abuelo’s other grandkid, Luiciana, played pattycake on his round belly. She’d stopped to say “Está pegajosa,” commenting on the stickiness of his clammy skin again and again with the same exclamatory intonation.

Dragging himself into Camila’s thatch, Tin wondered who chose to capture Pinto’s healing and why—who would see that video, how many times would they watch it, why would they film a poor, Mincan boy who paints his Mami.

Before passing out, Tin remembered Abuelo once hobbling around his back porch, trying
to film Mami. She was singing stop to him and laughing at that chasing camera, her hands wide, stretched open in front of her face. Then, Tin remembered one more thing. Abuelo had turned the camera on Tin, just laughing at the chase, until Mami smacked the phone out of Abuelo’s hand. The screen had cracked, and she’d stood tall over her hunched father and said slow and clear, “Nunca le filmar”—never film him.

***

Dream Tin saw his hospital in flames. Constructed dream deconstructed each supporting beam, rafter, insulation, pink-yellow curls into black ash, shingles like skateboards off cliffs. The east wing sagged. The nursery with tiny white sheet patients would not hold. Tin entered a sea of hands, speckled, sore-oozing, broken hands rushing over his body, catching his arms—people crying for help. He swam past them. A man coughed up blood on Tin’s white shirt, but Tin, slippery with mud, wiggled from his grip. Up cracked concrete steps to the east wing, he hopscotch over gaps in the flame rafters, licking the bottom of baby beds. He saw Mami, unshirred, humming, rocking twin babies in her arms. Whole wall was a window, flaming and burning around the edges, three story drop. He cried out to her, calling for her to give him the babies. He looked closer and saw one twin as a sleeping baby and the other was a giant swaddled key. She hummed and rocked both “yo no tengo ocito, no ocito para tu cama, pero siempre se duerme, se duerme en mi cabeza.” A chorus of babies cried behind him with fire’s ingesting roar. One cooed at the orange display, the blue flame roasting through its blanket. Smell of tiny hairs sizzling—Tin grabbed the baby out of the burning basket and approached Mami, each step over broken beams and melting hands reaching up from the level below. He yelled for her to give over the baby and the key, but Mami gazed down the burning edge, still singing “I have no teddy, no teddy for your bed, but always you’re sleeping, you’re sleeping in my head.” Her hair whipped

RIDE/NNUndike/ 217
wind wild. And then she tossed the baby. Both her arms enveloped the swaddled key. Her humming stayed on the wind, and the baby cried, all the way down, cried Tin awake.

Screaming, Tin sat up. Jamie’s cries, ghosts, became gurgles, lungs so small for noise so loud. Camila rushed in, scooped him up, and patted his back. She walked to the window and whistled a mimicked tune of the birds. Pushing himself up, Tin felt damp under his dried-mud palms. He dragged his shirt collar to wipe his forehead and then smelled something stinking up from the sheet. Not body odor, not sweat—urine, fresh. His shorts were wet.

“¿Todo bien, Tin?” Camila asked.

“I think I—” Tin looked up. “I think I had an accident.” He scooted off the bed, his eyes tracing the full misshapen stain circle.

Camila shrugged. “I’ve seen it all. There’s a towel and some of Pinto’s shorts in the chest next to you.”

In the bathroom, Tin dabbed and changed, tucking the paint tubes into his new pockets. His hot cheeks made him feel his mind’s fire. Last time he’d gone in the bed was before he could heal, before mud puddle wars. With one dream, all that came back—horrible, sticky feeling, bitter distinct stinging stench, the redress, the clean up.

Camila had already stripped the bed, wet sheets in a metal wash basin. She was soaping the mattress, Jamie back in his crib.

“Thank you, Camila,” Tin said, his clothes folded into a ball.

“Put those clothes in this basin. I’ll wash them and go to your Mami’s thatch this week.”

“I’m sorry,” Tin said, dumping the clothes.

“Nothing to be sorry about. It’s what parents do.” She smiled. “Karen’s Papi just got back. Go see what he has to say.”
Karen’s Papi told the story of the chase for the second time, the grandkids all seated now and listening. He made it fantastic. Decorations of wrestling an anaconda—its blank, glassy eye marked him for prey, and an alligator, but not hombre caimán or the alligator man, was still twitching between its stretched river green and black spotted scales. He’d apparently climbed a tree or two while fighting off fire ants each the size of his hand. A lake was involved somehow though there were no lakes in Minca. All this, finally, to say the man with the phone had a moto waiting nearby; he’d jumped on the bike and fled.

“If I would have had time to train an anaconda, I could have rode that thing like a bullet.” The grandkids all laughed.

“Why would you train an anaconda?” Tin asked. “Why not just get a moto?”

“You’re ruining the story,” Karen said.

“Karen, don’t be a brat,” her papi said.

“But this story is real,” Tin said. “It’s my life.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Hippoman said, breaking the silence. “I almost forgot.” Tucked into the back of his pants, Hippoman pulled out a ball-and-cup, a rubber string attaching the two, and handed it to Tin.

“What’s this?” Tin asked, the handle sweaty and stinky.

“It’s from a traveling toy market weeks ago. All the grandkids got something, and I thought of you, too. But, all these healings made me forget to bring it to you, my boy.”

Tin tested it out. The pink, rubber ball stretched high, up, up, then the rubber string bungeed it down, an oscillating pull between the two extremes.

“The ball’s supposed to go inside the cup, genius,” Karen explained

“Karen—” her papi started.
“I know, ‘don’t be a brat.’” She sulked off.

Tin tried a scooping motion, whipping the ball up in an arch. It always came down close to the cup’s wooden inside, but bounced off the rim instead.

“The seller told Camila that there’s a legend about these cups,” Hippoman began. “It states that each time a child catches the ball in the cup, something comes back to life.”

Tin stopped bouncing the string. “Like after death? How long after death?”

“He didn’t say.”

Tin bounced the ball again, trying to bring back life.

“But,” Hippoman continued, “he did say that each time a child doesn’t catch the ball in the cup, something dies.”

Tin stopped. “Like a bug? Or a tree?”

“He also didn’t say that.”

“But, what if I just,” Tin pinched the ball and guided it toward the cup.

“No,” Hippoman called, smacking the ball from Tin’s fingers.

“What?”

“Cheating is even worse.”

“What would happen?”

“I don’t know. But, nothing good ever came from cheating. I do know that once you get the ball in the cup, always try to keep the ball in the cup. Keep the life inside. Keep life alive, no matter what.”

“What do you mean?”

Hippoman waved a hand. “Keep people alive, no matter what, because dead people can’t change. Alive people can always change.”
“Always?”

“I believe it’s possible.”

“But, Hippoman, I don’t want to kill people when I try!”

“Tin.” Hippoman grinned, popping his knuckles. “It’s just a game.”

“Some games are real,” Tin said.

“Sun will be setting in a couple hours.” Karen’s papi said. “Going back?”

Tin scanned the jungle for blinking lights, Emiliano, or Jorge and Del Real with rocks. It was vacant, lonely.

“Yes. Bye, everyone. Bye, Hippoman, thank you for this.” He pocketed ball-and-cup opposite of the blue paint tubes.

They all gave side-side picos.

“Bye, family. Tell Camila I said see you later,” Tin called, walking toward the market trail. “And, Hippoman, come back to my healing lines,”

“But you’ve healed me good, my boy!”

“Just to chat. You’re my friend,” Tin said, then broke into a sprint, paint tubes and the ball-and-cup jostling. He ran all the way back to his thatch.

~

Gisela was gone. The bleached bamboo, where the paint had eaten through, still bore the outline of “Sangre del Diablo.” All Emiliano’s red paint had sunken into muddy footprints where the women had danced, bleached.

“Tin,” Mami yelled, stepping around the thatch then grabbing him into a hug. “Where have you been? Are you okay? Why are you sweating?”

“I just ran back from Hippoman’s thatch, and guess what, Mami?”
“Tin, you hurt me. I’ve been waiting here, conjuring up all ways something happened to you. Gisela’s still out looking for you.” Americanos, Barranquillen, Tin thought, remembering her and Gisela’s whispered conversation.

“What did you make up?” he asked.

“Doesn’t matter now, let’s get inside.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, Mami. I would never want that, but I needed to see Hippoman. He’s all fine now—”

“Get inside while dinner’s still warm.”

“Didn’t you hear me, Mami? Hippoman’s good!”

“I heard you. Go inside.”

“What about Gisela?”

“She’s supposed to be back when the sun sets, she said. She’ll see you when she comes. Tin, get inside.” Mami nudged him toward the entrance.

“Mami, I can walk,” Tin said, sidestepping her shove to the entrance. Yellow flowers, reburied, now poked up from the ground. All the classmate get-well cards were in a pile next to the one-eyed teddy, still staring up at Tin. Osito, he remembered the dream lullaby and the key, swaddled key.

Wind was blowing a storm to life. It whistled through small bamboo slits. Mami collected the cards and entered. But just before Tin closed the bamboo door, he stared into dark jungle, no lights recording, and then with a kick, he knocked over the teddy, face to the ground. He wrapped the door-lock closed.

Mami crossed herself and began prayers, lots of thanking and very little asking. She snapped a leg off fire-charred chicken and plated it with a scoop of rice. The coldness of her
silence came with the plated warm leg.

“Mami, why are you upset?” Tin asked, taking the plate. “I healed Hippoman real good this time! He might not need to come back to the healing lines.”

“Eat your rice and enjoy. We’re having soup the next few days.”

Gulps of pineapple juice down Mami’s throat and bamboo whistles filled the silence between them.

“I heard what you called Angelica,” Tin said, pushing grains in circles.

“What did I call her?”

“You told me not to use that word when we were watching Fat Green.”

“Which word? It’s okay to repeat it now.”

“No, you told me not to use it.”

“Tin, you can say it.”

“No, you said not to.”

“Okay, was it ‘son of a bitch’?” Mami grinned.

Rice fell out of Tin’s mouth. “Mami!”

“Or how about ‘bastard’?”

Tin smirked.

“No? Maybe ‘asshole’?”

Tin laughed, clutching his side. “Mami, I’ve never heard you say these—”

“Or how about ‘Culicagao’?”

Tin’s laughter died down. “No.” He squished chicken juices between his fork prongs.

“Right, that’s Emiliano. Was it—”

“Mami,” Tin started, no longer laughing, “he told me something today.”
“Emiliano?”

“Yes.”

“What’d he say?”

“He told me something about you.”

“Mm-hmm?” She bit into the other snapped off leg.

“He told me you were visiting thatches to close my healing lines.”

“Well, mio.” Mami put down the chicken and wiped her hands. “He’s not lying.”

Tin leaned away from her. “What do you mean?”

“Mijo, we need to talk about what happened. You’re keeping secrets from me. You—”

“You’re keeping secrets from me!”

“How so, mio?”

“Your necklace, Mami! I had another dream.”

“Another one? What—”

“Yes, but this one was horrible. You wouldn’t listen to me, and you killed a baby!”

“You think I would do something like that in real life?”

“I don’t know. Why’d you close my lines?”

“Tin, you need to understand what’s real and what’s not.” She scooted over and put her arm around his shoulders. “What you can do is very real but dreams are not. Now—”

“White sheet patient dream was real with my healing lines.”

“Until real life got in the way. What happened with Hernan four days ago? Have you been hurting, mio? Has anyone been hurting you—Emiliano, his friends? Has—”

“No.” Tin shrugged off her arm and stood up. “Why are you asking me all these things? Don’t you trust me?”

RIDE/NNUpdike/ 224
“I do trust you, Tin.” She stood up too. “But, can you tell me what it’s like to see a blood
glob drip from your child’s lips when a moment ago he swatted your hand from his cowlick?
Can you tell me what it’s like to see someone shake your child and scream at him? To hear your
child’s throat gutting itself, his body convulsing, then his eyes staring blank at the sky?”

“Mami, I get it—”

“No. Can you, Tin, tell me what it’s like to wake up when your child does not, to see his
eyes staying closed for endless days, to cross your shoulders, neck, head in prayers and a scream
up to God, saying ‘You had a son too. You should know better’? What is it like to receive
flowers and hugs, prayers and sympathetic ears, cards, and love but also paint smeared ‘Sangre
del Diablo,’ hisses at the market, pretend friends with cold shoulders, and a few ready to sell
your secret?”

“Mami,” Tin tried, but her momentum could not stop. She would not unwind easy. “I’m
sorry I—”

“What’s it like to share a secret, to have one that’s not entirely your own? To tell your
child he’s never alone in this life? From the moment he left the womb, he was never ignored
with his cries or his tears or any scrape or bruise or pain. He was never without at least one
person in the world who loves him.” She cleared her throat. “What it’s like to live this way, to
love your child this way because I can tell you.”

“I’m sorry, Mami. I’m sorry you had to go through all that.”

“Mijo, I want to understand, I do.”

“Healing helps me, Mami. You don’t know the bond I can make with white sheet
patients’ minds. I feel better then. Maybe if you let me heal you—”

“No, Tin. Were you not listening? That’s not an option.”
“Why not? You say you trust me and then you don’t.” He kicked the closed bamboo door.

“Because my thoughts are my own, mio.” She picked up her empty plate. “That should be a good enough answer.”

“It’s not,” he mumbled.

Plate clattered in the metal bucket sink. Mami scraped, force rocking her whole body. Tin scooped uneaten rice back into the bowl and wrapped chicken from ants and beetles.

“Hag,” Tin said.

“Excuse me?” Mami turned around, soap to her elbows.

“It was hag, what you called Angelica, hag.”

“Oh,” Mami said, exhaling. “Yes.”

“Did you slap her, Mami? Or did she slap you?”

“I’ve never slapped anyone. Almost forgot. Here,” she said after wiping her hands and pulling something from her apron pocket. She tossed it.

“What’s this?” He caught a blue paint tube. “Did Carlos talk to you?”

“No, it’s your surprise, early birthday gift. I saw you were painting again.”

He turned it round, then pocketed it with the other two tubes. The elastic around his waist slid over his hip bone on one side, heavy, the ball-and-cup on the other side. He pulled up Pinto’s shorts before walking to Mami.

He slid his arms around her waist into a hug. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, mio. I love you.” She kissed his cowlick.

“I love you too, Mami.”

~
Gisela came and went, sighing and then kissing Tin for his safe return. In the kitchen, she and Mami stood chatting about how Tinto from Tinto’s Produce is getting so fat, how curious it is that awful Angelica married sweet, kind Roberto, how the approaching storm might damage another thatch or the “in-between” peoples’ cloth houses from Barranquilla to Santa Marta, the poorest poor. They spoke not in the same low voices as before but in non-whispers, some laughing, some hand batting. Heart-shaped key glittered against Mami’s sweat. It held a mystery he wanted to steal out like he took pain. Then, he planned to take it. He planned to take it soon.

“Tin,” Mami said, Gisela gone now, “have you turned down the bed and wrapped the door lock?”

“Not yet, Mami.” He hurried the wrapping process, twisting strong twine in a circle from the door to the door frame like the back of a yellow envelope he’d once seen with Carlos. All main room candles blown-out smoke floated up and whipped around by gusty winds through the bamboo whistles. Mami was swapping day clothes for nightclothes in the bathroom while Tin turned down the sheets, hot summer, just sweat goes into the sheets. She emerged, white nightie on, key still around her neck.

“Tin, go change. You’re not sleeping in those filthy clothes,” she said. “Wait, are those your clothes?”

“They’re Pinto’s, grandson of Hippoman.”

“I know who Pinto is. Why are you wearing his clothes?”

“I—” Tin paused. Wetting the bed was for his one-year self, two-year self. He feared Mami would equate it with the healing lines, more cause to close them forever. “I had an accident, and Camila gave me these.”

“What kind of accident?”
“Nothing, Mami.” He hadn’t prepared a lie. “It’s not important.”

“Tin, what kind of accident.”

“I tripped and my knees got all bloody.”

“You didn’t have more blood cough-up, right?”

“No, that’s not what happened.”

“Sit on the bed. Let me see your knees. I’ll clean and bandage them.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Tin, come on. They need to be cleaned. Infections are easy to get.”

“There’s nothing there.” Tin sat and held his legs straight. “See?”

“Tin.” Mami bent closer, inspecting his smooth knees. “How’s this possible?”

Tin slid his hand toward the key. He’d never even touched its metal, always being with Mami.

“Can you,” Mami asked, crossing herself, “have you figured out a way to heal yourself?”

“What?”

Mami grabbed his shoulders. “Tin, tell me now. Have you healed yourself?”

“Mami, you’re squeezing me.” Her grip did not lessen.

“Did you mud and mend your knees today? Tell me now.”

“No, Mami. You’re bruising me.” His own blood rushed, rushed to the spot under her thumbs. Her pressure was pinching the skin, muscle, nerves—all the inbetweens—down to the bone, an impossible compression. Then, she let go.

“Okay, Tin.” She sat next to him. “You must tell me things.” She patted his knee. “No bloody knees and no cough up, so—”

“I spilled something on me, okay?”
“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“Why didn’t you just say that?”

“I don’t know, Mami. Can we go to bed?”

“Of course, mijo.” She blew out the last candle. Light shed through roof thatch creases and bamboo cylinders, light which danced reed patterns on Mami’s arms. She’d dragged the sheet up over her dress, over the key. Tucking it in. Still staring at the glisten, Tin changed clothes, nudging his heavy-pocket shorts under the bed. But, now, the key looked like a child swaddled to her breasts, the dream a reality.

Fast snores came like a hog’s, and Mami was asleep. Storm blew gusts, tugging away at the roof, tugging like it was trying to peek in. Tin’s hands itched. He propped himself on his elbow and stared past Mami’s long, black hair, tangled with the necklace. It rose and fell like a breathing thing. Over her shoulder, he reached, first fingertips making the journey then hand and arm. Her hog’s breaths shot hot against his slow-moving arm. Smooth metal met his fingertips, but her head laid heavy against the pillow. No slipping it off or yanking it forward. She’d know that he’d tried, and then she’d never let him have the mystery. She’d say he wasn’t ready or he needed to learn patience. But, Tin realized, she already knew it. All the mystery was locked in her mind, a memory he could steal. Mud or no mud, heal or no heal, wake or sleep—he’d never experimented like this before. No mud, he decided, because no heal, and he’d have to steal in sleep.

Cautious, careful, like he was touching a newborn, Tin hovered his palms over Mami. One curved over her wrinkly forehead, the other over her right ear. Before dipping in, he thought of when he’d wanted to pluck the key before. At nine, he and Mami were playing copycat game.
He’d hid under the bed, a cruel move because Mami could not fit. But, there key dangled and swung its taunt. He’d grabbed it but not off her neck. That act broke the game, for Mami’d stopped copying him and yanked the key from his grip. Game over—no questions answered. Or ten when he’d healed a chameleon with a broken leg and saw Mami burying the key in the jungle nearby. She’d placed pebbles on top of its grave, sitting a while and listening to birds until she unburied it and walked away, blowing dirt from the chain. Or when he was three after the mud puddle wars, he’d seen the key the next day, only memorable to him because the key first appeared the same day his father left. Mud puddle wars, something about that day, the first day he could heal.

His hands still hovered. Never had he experimented with bare palms. It was always the mud, he and the mud and the healings. She could wake up. He could get the wrong memory. Nothing could happen. It could be all colors or sounds or electrical balls of light—not memories at all. He could hurt himself again, cough up another blood glob. Or worse, he could even hurt her.

Bare fingers hovered for a moment more and then dropped. He went into her mind.

Fractured light waved. Mami and Tin stared under ocean’s surface. Bubbles left their mouth. More bubbles floated behind them, and Tin realized Mami farted under water. She laughed before breaking the surface into another memory.

Some pigtailed girl patted hands with Mami and Tin. They sang some song about Arequipa and boys before being chased out of a tienda with a broom. Mami kicked through the dirt pile on her way out, jumping straight into another past.

Hands, Tin’s and Mami’s hands were in her lap. Something fell—water. It was from her. She caught a tear.
“I’m your wife,” Mami and Tin said in the memory. “He’s your son. You can’t just leave us.” Mami and Tin jumped up and grabbed a few shirts out of the packed backpack. Diego was in front of her, his face, familiar, but a hundred different faces, too. Each frame showed Tin a new father.

“María,” Diego said, “you know I have to ask questions, get answers for him.”

“I know, but,” Mami sat back on the bed, his wrinkled t-shirt balled in her wet hands, “when will you be back?”

“When I have the answers,” Diego said. His warm hand met her cheek. He brushed one of her tears away and put it on his tongue. “I’ll remember your heart.”

“At least take this,” she said. Her hands searched under a dark bed, pulled forth a red box, not locked. She pulled out Polaroids and a baby shoe or two.

“How about one better,” Diego took the box and dumped it onto the bed, memories spilled. “I’ll keep those in here,” he pointed to his head, “and you keep this in the box.” From his pocket, he pulled a rolled paper.

“What is that?” Mami asked, receiving the paper.

“It’s for you and Tin. It’s everything I know—all that I’ve told you and things that I haven’t.”

“What do you want me to do with this?” Mami asked, starting to unroll it.

Diego put his hand over hers, stopping her from unrolling it. “Wait until I’m gone to read it.”

“But, what do you want me to do with this?” she repeated.

“Give it to him when he’s ready.” Diego pulled the drawstring backpack closed. “And here.” From the bed pile, he fished out heart-shaped key and handed it to her.
“How will I know when he’s ready?” She wiped her own tear, accepting the key. She strung it through her necklace. It chinked against the emerald pendant already on the chain.

“You’re the smartest person in the world, María.” He leaned down, kissing her mouth. “You will know.”

“I’ll walk with you.” She put the rolled paper in the red box. They kissed again at the thatch doorframe.

“Remember, you will know,” he said before leaving. She stared out, long past the point of seeing him, long past the imagination’s ability to create a figure in darkness, a figure that she hoped would return that night, that month, that year, when Tin started school, when Tin lost a tooth, when Tin asked about him, when Tin was bullied, when their son had dreams.

Mami screamed, awake. “Diego!” Tin landed on the floor. Blood, blood was cool on his shirt. He wiped under his nose, tasted his mouth. He wasn’t bleeding. Mami crawled over the bed. Her blood was running in moonlight down her face from the creases of her eyes.

“Diego!” she screamed again, scuttling off the edge of the bed toward Tin. She caught his legs and pulled him close. She grabbed his shoulders, thumbs digging deep, and shook him hard.

“Diego, what did you do?”

“Mami!” He leaned in, hugging her. “It’s me. It’s Tin!” Her blood tears wetted his cheek.

“Tin?” She pushed him away to see his face. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry, Mami. I didn’t know!”

“Tin, what did you do?” She released him and touched her eyes. “They burn.”

“I didn’t know, Mami! I took a memory.”

“What?”

“I saw you and Diego. Why did he leave us? It was because of me?”
“Tin, get out of here. Sleep in the main room tonight.” She rubbed her eyes.

“But, Mami. Did Diego go because I made him?”

“Tin.”

He leaned in closer. “I can heal your eyes, Mami.” He unclasped his mud lid.

“Tin.” She squeezed her eyes closed and beat a fist to her temple. “Get out! Get out of our room. Get out of our bed. Get out of my head.”

“Okay, Mami,” Tin grabbed his pillow and left the bedroom. She closed the bedroom door between them. The main room was darker, making him bump chair legs in search of a sheet. It billowed up and fell down in front of the thatch door. His cheek still carried her blood’s wetness when he placed it against the cool underside of his pillow. Tin’s fingertips traced dirt outlines of boot prints. He wondered how big his father’s boot print was when it left this very spot. He traced hearts around those boot prints and heard Mami shuffling in the room, splashing water. She’d looked like a creature, something unnatural. Black lines of blood had winged off her lashes and fallen down her cheeks like bad eye paint. Would it stain her face forever like “Sangre del Diablo” outside? Would she be able to see the same? Would she be able to see him the same? He’d hurt Mami. He’d stolen from her. All of it was intentional.

For the first time, Tin believed Emiliano was right, Minca was right, the crossers were right, the jungle whispers were right. He was no-good sangre del Diablo. His body worked to cough out devil blood but didn’t work fast enough. He remembered the jungle light, that flashing red light, the thing that recorded his devil blood. And then, like some unsoothing lullaby, he heard Mami start to wrap her bedroom door closed, locking him out. The lullaby came slow and built to crescendo with the red light pulsating blinks and the ugly jungle whispers: wrap, devil blood, blink—wrap, devil blood blink—wrap devil blood blink. All eyes were red.
Three days later and Daddy still hadn’t come. Nightmares had though. Always a water tower against a yellow sky, swaying though there was no wind, no ocean, no beach. Finally, the reason for the rocking became clear when the tower untwisted like a skull cap. Not water but blood sloshed out as if nine fingers crawled through that echo chamber. Making a teeter-totter of ring girl blood. They would never come back. The clients would never pay. Sara gasped to a hot morning.

Summer wind clapped the Big Brothers / Big Sisters’ attic window and rustled McCalister money. It hung dry and rippled now on a dental floss clothes line. They stayed strung above her, reminders of how yellow dress didn’t need hospital money. Like the warehouse, TV cameras had gobbled up that girl’s mother mumbling about her daughter’s “struggle with depression” and “not her first attempt” and “we were trying to afford getting the help that she needed, but therapy wasn’t covered with the new health care cuts—” One Franklin flipped off the floss and moseyed over leftover plastic wrap from dumpster broccoli and other veggies, over her red-banned diner dress, and over the slicky sleeping bag where Sara pinned the bill. She sat up, ducking her head round the rafters, and forced the bill to crease sharper on waxy mint. The line of Franklins sly smiled at her.

On a library copy of Mama Day, her PAYGo phone vibrated.

“I swear to God,” she whispered, hearing the Big Brothers / Big Sisters’ clockwork intern, Margaret, eager whistling while she started the coffeepots’ dribble. Number wasn’t Katrina’s, Goodbar girl’s mom, who initially didn’t believe that Sara’s call from the taxi three days ago was different than sick fucks trying to say they had info on the rapists. But, mention of
the red die and the white button up laid gently over top of the Goodbar girl made Katrina pause. Not all details let loose on the news. Deal was an in-person meeting days after the call cause Katrina’d been away on business and no, no police. Suspicion should of been on Sara’s horizon, but after the water tower, Alfonso, and the ring, going to some beautiful lady’s house to talk bore no threat. After all, Lynx would be with her too cause Katrina insisted, “anyone who’s seen anything should come.”

Phone buzzed again with the foreign number. Sara tapped ignore then clicked her log, hoping for Daddy’s name. He hadn’t rescheduled a Tomato Head lunch. He hadn’t called at all. She thumbed an old wrist scar. She imagined scratching it, scraping it, digging into it, cupping skin, rooting up hair follicles thinner than the money-hanging dental floss, playing Jacob’s Ladder, tower ladder with sweat glands, mushing the fat like banana-filled Jell-O, and finally reaching blood vessels all blue and red in anatomy but more like black, black when sliced railroad tracks, could even make circles on the wrists, going round and round, a racetrack, a carousel, trying to find that tissue. Connective tissue. Then, bleeding all out Daddy’d have to come. Daddy’d come with the pain.

The window clacked again, and Sara twisted the lock shut up. Unsticking her clammy legs from the sleeping bag, she shoved heart sunglasses atop her head, grabbed the napkin with Katrina’s address, and slipped on a wrinkled sundress. Purple, not yellow. Before the full-timers gorged themselves into work, Sara listening for Margaret’s steps, slid a ceiling square, slipped between the metal frame, jimmied the square back on with a broom handle, grabbed a donut, and checked for green on the exit door’s unlock.

Sara’d visited Lynx only once since the tower, since Lynx shuffled home to a house-full of “Fortune,” since the spiders screamed about the blur she’d seen, since Alfonso became nine-
fingered Brew boss. He bided his time, sure, a freakshow cobra around any Knoxville corner. Sara shook her head then crossed Gay Street Bridge toward South Knoxville gutter homes curving away from the Tennessee River into a winding poke of Smokey Mountain. A Lynx blur sat on the top concrete step of the last row’s last house, white awning yawning from plastic siding. Previous outing, she’d been more talkative than today, at least saying, “Hi.” Her hair hung low in her face, eye contact scarce. Aunt still sleeping, Sara rooted round Aunt’s freezer again, today grabbing frozen cherries, Bacardi, and some water, before helping Lynx up.

The two shuffled away from gutter homes and toward sparkling mansions. Address napkin got a bit smudged but not illegible. Homes winked gold with sun’s flicker left and right. Sprinkler systems wet money to greener grass in the hot, Knoxville, summer drought. It all screamed Kinkade with warm tan-grey shingled peaks, railed balcony nooks, and light bleeding out from fancy blanket interiors. Empty arabesque, mosaic driveways showed the owners gone, hard at work in an Edward Jones or BB&T or something remote for that orange ape or another business leech.

Small, yappy dogs in movie-screen windows announced a change in scenery with each step Sara and Lynx took toward the address’s front door. Three thumpy knocks and no answer. Lynx still hadn’t looked at her, and no one peeked through lacey curtains that wiggled inside, no doubt, from air conditioning. Three more knocks and no door open. She cupped her hand to windows round the front, but no life stirred inside. Probably a flight delay or traffic. Round the black fence side, a strike of blue caught the light. Pool water moved diamonds in hot wind.

“Well, if no one’s here.” Sara shrugged, hiking the bag of Bacardi, water, and cherries up her shoulder. “Let’s go for a dip.” She grabbed Lynx’s hand, but Lynx yanked it away.

“What’s up with you?”
“Bad,” Lynx said, staring at her custom shoes.

“I’m sure she won’t care.” She rounded back to the black gate.

“Can’t swim.” Lynx followed. “Will sink.”

“Just touch your toes in, my dear.”

Lynx nodded.

Chlorine waters and a bright pink inner tube beat Sara’s thigh but no bugs, no leaves, no twirly majigs, no feather worms in the sterile glisten. Translucent blue ripples chased away from her then shilly-shallied back to kiss her ribcage. Her sundress fluttered over a seatback, and her heart-shaped sunglasses flashed the Tennessee sky her photo in perfect natural light of afternoon. She cooled her hands under a jet stream return inlet then played Marco Polo with the Bacardi bottle.

“Lynx.” Sara leaned against a pool wall next to Lynx’s thigh. Her bra clasp dug into her back. It itched. “Do you get nightmares?”

She didn’t respond, just kicked her feet in the water.

“For a long time, I used to dream about this guy—this client. He was always dirty.” A dog barked in the distance, and Sara eyed the still-lifeless house. “His knuckles always blackened my stomach with oil until I threw the inn’s soap at him one day. He was so slippery he couldn’t even open the plastic hugging the soap. Every third Wednesday for three years then, more or less, I had to pinch open that damn plastic, twist on the hot knob, and washboard his knuckles against a towel.”

Lynx stopped kicking her legs.

“I said, ‘why the hell don’t you clean before?’ You know what he said to me? Said it reminded him of his dead cousin. How he and his dead cousin used to clean squirrels. I asked
him, ‘You were fucking your dead cousin?’ He didn’t like that a swab. But instead of hitting me, he poured tears into the shag and asked me to go to Mexico with him. Said he’d even got me a passport, and, I almost called him a liar, but he threw it on the bed. Thought he was gonna kidnap me right there.” She hiccupped. “But, we never went to Mexico, and we never talked about his dead cousin again. Ser said, ‘It wasn’t good for the ring’ when I told him, and that ‘I wouldn’t be going anywhere without his say.’”

“Aunt had dreams,” Lynx piped up.

“What?” Sara caught the Bacardi and sipped. “Is it just you and Aunt? She seems like a wench.”

Three crows spread wings altogether and made themselves Icarus outlines. One splat its lunch on the concrete pool deck.

“What were her dreams?”

Lynx paused to the point where Sara knew she wasn’t going to answer. It was never personal. “You dream?” Lynx finally said.

“I used to.” She shrugged. “I wanted to be a dime-maker. Like who does that anymore? They’re so small. I hate to lose anything.” She traced her glasses’ heart outline. Her hand fell into water. “Or a jellyfish trainer. We could have an underwater circus, Lynx.” She laughed.

“Have you ever been to an underwater circus?”

She shook her head, making her hair swish. Something was wrong.

“Darling, pass me the cherries.”

Upon shifting, Lynx’s hair draped back. Her face was purpled with bruises.

“Give me the sack,” Sara said, accepting it. “How many?”

“Fill my belly?”
“Right,” Sara mumbled, ripping a cherry open. “Let’s play a game.”

“No Twister.”

Sara laughed. “No. That would be unfair.” Sara placed a pitted cherry beside Lynx. “You would whoop my ass.”

Lynx laughed, tucking her black bob behind her ear. Her eye’s corner down to her jaw had swelled red and purple. Someone had punched her.

“It’s a different game.”

“Fun?”

“I think it’s incredible. It’s called two lies and a truth.”

“Rules?”

“Yes, we must have some rules.” Sara made a pile of the cherry pits. “You tell me three things about yourself. Two of them must be lies and one must be a truth. Understand?”

She slurped cherry juices and nodded comprehension.

“Okay, Lynx. Which one’s a truth? Once I saw a girl fly off a carousel. I cut off one of Alfonso’s toes. Or Daddy still hasn’t called me back.”

“Daddy true.”

“How’d you know?”

She didn’t say anything.

“I mean, he probably wants to call.” Sara tossed a cherry into the air, but it missed her mouth. She watched it roll away. “There’s just no service. But I’m saving up money. I gonna buy a ticket. I’m gonna find out—”

“Turn?”

“Not yet. Look at this,” Sara tilted her head and dropped a cherry, stem and all, into her
mouth. For seconds she chewed, then produced a perfectly tied knot.

“I try?”

“I mean, you could try, but you’ll probably choke and—”

Lynx snatched a pitted cherry out of Sara’s hand and shoved it whole into her mouth.

“Lynx.” Sara gasped. “That was rude.”

An upturned corner of Lynx’s mouth voiced how little she cared about rudeness.

“Well, while you’re being a diva, I’ll take your turn.” Sara swigged. “One—I, Lynx, joined the Navy overnight, sailed for thirty-four days, dodged those floaty ocean mines, invented a rowing song with burley men, wrestled and killed whoever from wherever, ate shrapnel for a beauty mark, wrapped and unwrapped my own mummy skin, saw the face of God in gauze, then came home to rest, to rest or to die.”

She still worked on the stem.

“Or is it two—I, Lynx, chauffeured party-hopping movie stars, invited cool LA night air to lick my neck as they toastered up through the sunroof, swiveled and switched colored Rubik’s squares while waiting in the limo, hustled out to drag Marie so-and-so in before a nip slip photo, curbed corners with racing backseat driving, rubbed my knuckles raw with scrubbing vomit from the velvet seat fabric, and then lathered, rinsed, repeated with hearing, ‘Hey, driver, how much to Avalon.’”

Lynx stuck out her tongue. Flat, cherry stem still straight.

“Or how about three, I, Lynx, was bruised up by my Aunt.”

Lynx peeled the straight stem off her tongue. The saliva glued it to her wiggling finger.

“So, my dear, which one is true?”

“No.” Violence shook the stem. She beat and scraped her finger on the concrete like
wiping boogers.

“Lynx.” Sara grabbed her hand. “You can tell me Aunt hurt you. Don’t worry.”

“No,” Lynx said, retracting her hand. Then, Lynx started yelling, a trance of noise. “Get off!” Against the concrete, she started beating her hand, the stem long scraped away. “Get off!”

“Lynx, she hurt you, didn’t she? You need to stand up for—”

“Get off!”

“Just tell me, Lynx. Just tell me you were hurt.”

“Get off!” She adopted a boat’s motion, rocking with the sway of her own beating force.

“Get off, get off, getoff, getoff!”

“Lynx, Lynx, Lynx, look,” Sara said, her thumb rubbing circles over Lynx’s kneecap. “Look, it’s off.” A jet inlet fluttered against Sara’s thigh as she glided in moonsteps over the smooth plastic lining. “You got it off.” She pointed to the abandoned cherry strip.

“Yes,” Lynx whispered.

“Yes, what?”

“I hurt.”

“And Aunt?”

Lynx nodded.

“Don’t worry.” Sara tossed up another cherry and chomped it this time. “I know what she deserves.” The concrete hadn’t torn Lynx’s beaten palm. Rough chalkiness of dry skin lined Sara’s lips as she kissed Lynx’s hand.

“What the hell is this?” A voice asked from the sliding back door. Stretched tall, Katrina pointed a handgun at Sara.

“Oh shit.” Sara raised her hands.
Behind Katrina, it seemed like luggage had been thrown down. A thin girl in a robe collected a purse from the luggage pile and then disappeared up some stairs.

“I’m Sara. I’m the one who called you—”

“And you thought you’d just jump into my pool? Help yourself?”

“I just haven’t gone swimming—”

“There are community pools.”

“You’re right.” Sara lowered her hands and glided to the shallow end steps.

Katrina clicked the safety on and shoved the gun between her belt and tucked-in white silk shirt.

“Can you help me?” Sara asked, pulling Lynx’s left arm. Katrina grabbed the right, and they got her up just to all sit down at a patio table. Her purple sundress stuck wet to her skin when she tied Lynx’s shoelaces quick.

“What happened to you?” Katrina asked Lynx while flipping through her phone.

“Lymphedema and she doesn’t talk much—”

“Not that,” Katrina said, pressing record on an app. “Her face.”

“I’m taking care of it.” Sara pressed Lynx’s hand.

Katrina cleared her throat. “So, look, I should have called back, but Bailey doesn’t want to pursue legal action anymore.”


“Yes, we’ve talked about it quite a bit over the past week with my lawyer, and it’s not something she wants to drag herself through.”

“But, there’s more of us. There’re,” Sara stumbled, “they are out there and gonna do it again. To another girl and another and—”
Katrina placed her hand on Sara’s. “I know.”

Sara pulled her hand back. “And you’re seriously not gonna do a fucking thing?”

“It’s not up to me. It’s up to her.” She sighed. “The lawyers have informed us positively that it would be a dirty, drawn-out case where they drag her name through mud—”

“You know who they are?”

Katrina hesitated then nodded.

“Well, then you know you have to fight it. You have enough money to—”

“Sometimes it’s not about money—”

“You fucking kidding? Of course it is.”

Katrina stood up then paced the length of the pool and back. Her chandelier earrings made her neck look so long, tendons tensed. “As much as I know what you’re saying, I’m not the one who’d be in that witness box. It has to be her decision. I told her I’d support her no matter what she wants.” She folded her arms then stood against the sun. “I’m going to respect my daughter’s needs.”

“Then let me talk to her—”

“No.” Katrina waved a hand then clasped them together like the end of a business conversation. “I’ll let you know if anything changes.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Make sure you clean your stuff on the way out.”

Ten degrees seemed to rise fast. Sara shot up and locked her fingers in the patio table’s grate. “Why the fuck were we here then?”

Katrina nodded. “Like I said, I should have called.”

“Unreal,” Sara said, shoving the pit pile into her bag. “I can’t believe you’d just give up.”
“Yeah.” Katrina looked almost as disappointed. “Well, be out of here in ten or I’ll call the cops.” Katrina stepped behind the patio glass door and began sliding it closed. Sara grabbed the glass before it could seal.

“Tell me one thing though,” she said, not letting go. “You know where they live? Where their parents work? Who they love?”

Katrina stared at Sara’s hand with raised eyebrows until Sara removed her hand.

“Everyone knows where they live. The old Bakerfield mansion off 332.” She snapped the glass shut and locked it.

They’d left in under ten, and the Goodbar girl Bailey hadn’t even peeked out a window. Sprinklers ticked typewriter noise without the pleasantness of the ding. Red fire brush in Dr. Seussian spheres aligned a stairway. Each house wore a number or giant scrolled letters, probably the first of the surname. Orange and white UTK banners, the three circled stars of Tennessee, and American flags poked off balconies and beside front glass doors. Everything screamed of cobblestone cha-ching and isolation.

“Goodnight,” Lynx said, leaving the thick, brick entrance sporting the neighborhood’s rock carved name plate. They passed the last shred of landscaping before looking down again to step over cracked concrete.

“It’s goodbye, Lynx,” Sara said, shrugging off Lynx’s arm.

Some bass-booming Mercedes zipped toward them, rounding a mountain corner fast. It dipped into the road’s shoulder then swerved away from Sara and Lynx. Her sundress hem fluttered frantic when the Mercedes swooped past them. She held her breath, following its black whir. Then, exhaled when she saw a pink Breast Cancer license plate and an “I heart mountains” car tattoo. Juliano wouldn’t have any of that shit. No identifiers, just windows all black with a
twisted Ronald McDonald inside. He could lounge on park benches and attract children to interview his looks. All he would have to do is wait until one twist of the parents’ heads before Ser snapped his hand over tiny mouths and carted the future rentals to the black Mercedes. The parents would say, “I looked away for just a second,” and Sara knew they wouldn’t be lying. Sara knew how that backseat stunk of fried chicken. She knew each missing foam seat hole, remnants of children trying to dig their way through the cage. She knew the tiny fingerprints on the window’s fog. She knew one kid had drawn two eyes with no mouth. Sara knew how it all had worked with Ser even. What made Teeter-Totter? Who were any of them anymore? Drapes of skin, connected, unconnected, bones full of currents, tissue moving, always moving.

“Come on, Lynx,” Sara said, shivering. Her dress should of dried by now, and a lot of things should of happened by now.

They started across Gay Street Bridge. “Hey,” Sara said, “will Aunt be awake when we arrive back?”

“Aunt sleeping.”

“Yes, but, it’s later now, Lynx. Will she be awake?”

“Yes.”

“Here’s the plan.” She had to yell over traffic’s busy whir over the bridge. “You go to your room and lock the door.”

“No lock.”

“Fine, bathroom have a lock?”

“Yes.”

“Go to the bathroom then. Lock the door. Understand?”

“Yes.”
“Don’t come out. No matter what you hear.”

“Why?”

“Cause, Lynx, she can’t be allowed to hurt you. She can’t—”

Lynx stopped and stared down at the over thousand foot river drop halfway through the bridge walk. Traffic flowed behind them like ocean’s rustle.

“Lynx?”

“Lie.”

“Lynx?” Sara stood in front of her.

“I lie.”

“What?”

“Aunt.”

“What about Aunt?”

“Bruises not from Aunt.”

“Well, who the hell are they from?”

“Them.”

“Them who?”

“Them.”

“Who?”

“No.”

“Lynx, who? Tell me the truth.”


“McCalisters?” Her vision zigzagged, searching the dark water. “Are you fucking kidding me?”
“No.”

“Lynx.” She grabbed her shoulders. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

“How?” Sara tucked Lynx’s black hair behind her ear.

“How?” She pointed to her face.

“They hit you.”

“And hurt me here.” Her hand moved down, past her neck, past her breasts, past her stomach, and rested in front of her hips.

“Oh, God, Lynx.” Sara closed her eyes. “Come here.”

Shivering after wind gusts, Sara warmed under Lynx’s thick arms.

“Hurt me,” Lynx repeated in Sara’s ear.

“I know.” She stroked Lynx’s hair. “I know.”

Rising, rising from Calhoun’s Barbecue On the River past layers and layers of parking lines, a red balloon rose.

Sara hugged Lynx tighter.

The balloon’s teardrop-shape floated smaller, dipping behind lampposts, straying from the bridge railing, pumping up toward a BB&T.

“You know, Lynx. I tried.”

Not bumping against the windows, the red balloon flew adjacent to glass rectangles of tangled reflections, Market Square’s spinning carousel just a bird’s flap away. It was seven and sun saying goodnight, but the carousel would still be turning.

“I tried to do it with help.”

One day all the yellow carousel horses would melt. The sun would drain their yellow
paint, a slow-dripping process, leaving horse skeletons with unhinged jaws, teeth the length of racetrack tickets.

“I really tried to do it right. The way lawman would.”

But, still, the carousel wouldn’t stop, the calliope steam pumping stale, acrylic tunes. Still, the carousel’d spit its ride, flinging yellow goo but forever trapping its spinners, its life, its memory. Forever rocking children on horses, spinning adults in carriages, retiring old men, old women who’ve long forgotten they were stuck.

“I tried not to get Lena. Tried not to go back there.”

It’d be like fireworks, little late fourth of July. But, maybe even Daddy’d come to see the show. He’d promised, he’d promised he’d come with the pain.

“Hurt me,” Lynx said again. The balloon formed a distant black shade before sinking into a cloud.

“But, no one is listening.” She pulled away from Lynx enough to dab tears off her bruised cheek. “I did it with Alfonso cause no one listened. I’ve done other things cause no one listened. But this—” She touched her own cheek, no longer tender from Mark’s slaps. “This is something I can do.” She’d been invisible enough for so long, and now she could act police. They weren’t gonna do it—the dittly, dirty work it takes to catch tigers by their toes. Inside or outside ring. Even worse, to catch the predators who’d made tigers run. They were little piggies that made tigers run. Nature inverted herself. No, no police. They knew shit. They could strut round in blue vests and tie yellow lines, but what about all the yellow dresses and Goodbar girls? Old Bakerfield mansion now McCalister mansion. Of course they’d live in a mansion, something made of stone she could huff and puff. Eeny. And the real work would begin. Meeny. Maybe someone would care if a banker were dead. Miney. Or a priest or a golfer guy or three college
frats, three piggies inside. Moe.

Kru Blake 3—June 30

Cemetery Católico Calancala gave no rest to Kru Blake. Some others in the group slept like dead men returning worries to dirt. Talbot sliced a broken tree limb into a spear then drew an oval surrounding, what he called, “his fucking space.” Dim’s pink bubblegum popped, slapping gooey stick over his rosy cheeks. He laughed and explained, “It’s sticky.” Along the circular, white plaster perimeter, Espinoza’s flashlight moved. Then, Espinoza drifted between sleeping men, pulling a uniform jacket over the shoulder of some young guy. Cozying up to their small fire, the guy in charge rested on the dirt patch between rows of buried dead.

The four of them round fire shone like summer camp, camps Kru never ventured to because of no money growing up. He had one toy—a green, wooden tractor named Bill. And now he camped with the dead, fake roasting marshmallows over their dirt skulls. All round the plaster walls and atop the broken gate-lock fence were curls of barbed wire, something peculiar for a graveyard. Some spikes dipped down onto the plaster. Built into the plaster wall were square, grey stones each with a center cross and a name and a date. The moon passed over real and artificial flowers resting between cracks in the stones. The real ones had wept some petals onto fallen rosaries. And at the foot of one bottom square, two toy cars and a plastic truck must of marked the death of a child.

“Espinoza, why’re we sleeping in this dump tonight?” Talbot asked, smoothing his jacket for a mattress. “Bad enough sleeping near them alive, let alone their cranny-aye-mami-abuelita-Day-of-the-Dead shit.”

“It’s not November,” Espinoza said, counting Colombian pesos.
“What?” Talbot asked.

“Día de los Muertos—it’s a Mexican celebration after Halloween, so November first and second.”

“Whatever, it gives me the creeps.”

“Heebie-jeebies,” Dim chimed in.

“Dim knows what’s what,” Talbot said, digging a smiley face in the ground.

“Guard accepted our money. Nicer than out with Los Andes and El Recreo gangs, no? Spirits spook them,” Espinoza said, sliding the pesos into an envelope and tilting toward the stars.

“Nicer?” Talbot scoffed. “What happened to that Hotel Caribou or whatever?”

“Caribe—you have deep pockets for that?”

“No.”

“Then we sleep here.”

“With dead shit.”


“I saw a bird today,” Dim said.

“There are lots of birds here, Dim,” Talbot said.

“No, big bird.”

“You saw Big Bird? Tell him I want my childhood back.”

“No, big—”

“He means a zoo bird,” Espinoza said. “We talked earlier—some guy let out animals during the Barranquilla Safari Nocturno.”

“Those words you saying?” Talbot asked.
“A donkey?” Dim asked, hopeful.

“I don’t know.” Espinoza shook his head. “They caught some lemurs, I think.”

“Oh, well, thank Jesus Christ.” Talbot laughed. “Don’t want to get murdered by some lemurs.”

Espinoza counted on his fingers. “I heard big cat, elephant, a cow, maybe zebra, and few birds.”

“There a reward for catching them?” Talbot asked. “Or killing them?”

“I don’t know, but cuidado.” Espinoza pointed to his eye. The peso envelope fell from his grip.

“Better hold onto this,” Kru said, handing him the envelope.

“Yes,” Espinoza said, “careful.”

Kru hadn’t asked Espinoza questions about the hunt, sleeping in graveyards, where his pesos were disappearing to, why they spent time watching boobies at a bar rather than asking the right questions. What questions those were, he had no idea. But, he kept waiting to bring up how his confusion was being rigged into impatience, into frustration, into downright being pissed cause eleven days went by now with nothing to show for it. TodaCura made it sound like he’d fly in, get healed, then go home to find Ian under that magnolia tree. Every day here was another day away from Ian. And, now he ran with these misfit strangers in a healer hide and seek. He’d been lied to and tricked and maybe Espinoza would use all his money passing ghostly through villages and never turning out a healer. Talbot said there’d been “bullshit leads” floating in. Espinoza then chalked those up to the groups not knowing what they was looking for, not having enough men to scout out all Colombia, them trying to find the holy grail or something Biblical-like.
Espinoza tucked the envelop inside his jacket. Then, he stood up quick, clicked on his flashlight, and walked the perimeter again.

“There he goes,” Talbot whispered. “Paranoid fuck.”

“About police?” Kru asked.

“No,” Talbot said, “probably spirits.”

Dim fluffed his jacket into a pillow and stretched himself over the ground. He was out cold quick. Fire smoked up the night. Breaths of snoring, sleeping men sounded with crackles. Noise outside the walls—Spanish calls, dogs calling, fire-cracker gunshot booms, moto’s whiz—killed those nightmare or dreaming sounds.

“Talbot,” Kru said, “how long’ve you been here?”

“In Barranquesadilla?”

“In Colombia. Working for Espinoza—”

“I don’t work for anyone.”

“Well, whatever I reckon. You know what I’m trying to get at.”

He shrugged. “Weeks, months—who gives a shit?”

“What are you hunting for then?”

Talbot pulled a flask from his backpack and unscrewed it. “Well, I’m here for the rub, of course.” He swigged.

“Dunno what that is.”

“The rub’s anything and everything I wanna take.”

“You don’t care about the healer?”

“Oh, I care. I care a shit ton.” Talbot shifted the fire logs. Flames grew. “I care about how much money this healer can make me. About getting the best damn takedown rifle they got.
Getting me some juicy blueberry pie and some nice cut. About that tattoo parlor near Fourth and Gold that’s going under and my dad’s foreclosed home, and I care about getting to Seaworld and Disneyland and all that shit, riding all those rides I never gotta ride. But really, I care about what that healer bud will do for me.”

“What if the healer doesn’t want to help you?”

“I’ll make him.” He swigged again, eyeing Kru. “You’re starting to talk to me like a preachy bastard. You got a rosary hanging around your hips too like Espiñola?”

“No. I’m not judging you neither.” Kru rubbed the seashell in his pocket. “I’m not anywhere near saintly.”

Talbot yawned loud before stretching his arms and asking, “Well, why you here then, bud?”

Kru pondered telling Talbot everything there on the spot. About loving Ian, selling Sara, Diane’s suicide, the Maze, the bodies rotting in Ser’s Egyptian Garden, the pictures he’d saved, all the way back to when his daddy whipped Kru himself for the Mighty Mouse incident. It had been his older brother Tray who squeezed the super glue onto their younger brother, Babby’s, Mighty Mouse cape. But after Babby ran round their burning pit out back and after fire jumped onto that cape Babby couldn’t get off and after Babby had to be put in the hospital for second degree burns, it was Kru who got the belt. He jumbled all this round, but, finally, deciding not to explain a life, Kru just said, “Over three months ago, my son tried to kill himself because of me.”

Fire licked black-toasted wood, and Talbot wasn’t talking.

“His almost suicide note had a lot of things inside, but the gist is ‘Everything bad I am is because of you.’”

“That’s fucked up,” Talbot mumbled, swigging more from his flask. “The hell you tell
me that for? How you expecting the healer to fix your kid?” He offered Kru his flask.

“Not that.” Kru took a sip. “I want the healer to heal me. I’m sick in here.” A finger touched his forehead. “I never had a father who loved me. I just wanted to make my son feel loved. I just want my son to love me again.”

Talbot took his flask back and shook his head. “Can’t get time back, bud.”

“I know,” Kru whispered, “but I don’t want to say someday that I have wasted my life.”

Espinoza jogged toward the fire. “Look here,” he said, swiping the lock on his phone. They gathered to see.

“An incoming video from the national in Minca.”

“Minca?”

“Just watch.” Espinoza pushed play.

A Colombian family hung out lazy on a dirt porch with some kind of bamboo and dried reeds for a roof. An older man rocked his chair next to a nursing woman and two other adults. Some kids tagged each other through laundry lines until another boy entered from jungle brush. They talked Spanish and smiled and drank for a while. The video zoomed in on the boy from the jungle path and another boy with a red, puffy skin, sitting at the rocker’s feet.

“What’s wrong with his face?” Talbot asked.

“Callete,” Espinoza said.

The jungle boy turned to his side, out of camera shot, then rubbed dirt, mud on his hands. It wasn’t until the boy lifted his shirt—that glimpse of smooth, brown belly. The boy touched his skin, tiny stomach rolls from sitting crisscrossed. Monsters in men. Monsters can’t win. Kru thumbed the seashell in his pocket. He couldn’t turn away though. Especially not after the black-brown-eyed, jungle boy grabbed the swollen boy’s hands.
Nothing happened for a while. They just sat legs crossed, silent, meditating, jungle boy twitching a few times. Then, Kru saw it—like a squeezed out berry, the boy’s face returned to normal.

Two eyes deepened in their sockets as the blistered up flesh unstretched itself. Red and purple puffiness all faded to a light brown. A young boy’s face appeared where there had been a human rash. Both boys opened their eyes like they’d been praying and nothing more.

“What the hell they saying?” Talbot asked. “I don’t speak your language.”

“They’re asking him how he feels,” Espinoza said. “They’re asking about blood in his mouth—”

“The jungle boy?” Kru asked.

“Sí,” Espinoza said.

“Blood in his mouth?” Talbot asked.

“Says he’s tired and needs to sleep.”

The video changed, started jerking left and right. “¡Vete, niña!” the national with the camera phone yelled. Soon, the camera face-plant into dirt. All image was dark, and audio just recorded the sound of someone’s slap. Images blurred a little more before the video stopped, the last image pausing on the healer’s face.

Espinoza dragged the video timeline to the beginning and listened again.

“He’s a boy,” Kru whispered.

“No shit,” Talbot said.

“I didn’t know he was a boy,” Kru said.

“Why’s it fucking matter—”

“Silence,” Espinoza said again, lifting his phone’s speaker to his ear.
The full video played again. Then Kru asked, “What is it?”

“They’re calling him Tin.”


“Probably ‘T-I-N,’ but I’m not sure,” Espinoza said. “He talks for a second about his mother and Barranquilla.”

“Wait, the healer and his mom?” Talbot said. “They’re coming to us? Flies and honey, bud. Flies and honey.”

Kru stopped fingering the shell.

“We can’t depend on them coming, but we can prepare,” Espinoza said. “This is the lead we have waited for. In the morning, I’ll send a group to Minca. We’ll recruit some more nationals to ride on Barranquilla buses—Coolitoral, Sobusa, La Carolina, Embusa, Monterrey, San Rafael—hear what they hear, see what they see—”

“Where’s this Podunk village?” Talbot asked. “How do I get there?”

“You’re not going with the group,” Espinoza said, pulling out the pesos again and thumbing through them.

“The fuck I’m not,” Talbot yelled.

Dim stirred in sleep.

“You’re too impulsive. You make bad decisions. You distract too easy—”

“Fuck you. I paid my dues just the same.”

“Yes, and I have your dues.” Espinoza tapped the envelope in his jacket pocket.

“Screw you,” Talbot said quieter.

“You’re not going. You three, whoever else we can spare, and I will stay here, ready for them if they do travel west. Understand?” Espinoza said.

~

Light, night breezes didn’t help a darn to fight off Colombian heat. On his dirt bed and staring up at black, Kru smoothed his thinning hair that the wind was wrecking. He got the seashell out of his pocket and held it toward the moon. It all started so small—like, sand slipping through an hourglass neck. It was just a snake creeping through his mind until that snake took a bite.

Wind blew hard that cloudy, beach day, and Diane didn’t even bother catching her sunhat. The umbrella crashed into the sand beside her, but she didn’t flinch. For her, depression had always been a monster with a face, but this catatonic daze started after miscarriage number three. They would have no child past Ian. She used to whip up songs from the air. Now, the only songs escaping from her lips anymore were ballads of “why me,” medleys of “I’m being punished,” and harmonies of “go talk to your father.”

On that beach, five-year-old Ian chased after her sunhat. He sprinted on sand, his will longer than his arms. He kept scratching the sky for that hat, but Kru knew he’d never catch it, the distance between hand and hat growing with too many gusts. Soon, Ian tripped, spitting sand and digging out the thing that tripped him—a mess of coral and seashells.

“Daddy,” Kru had heard, but not from Ian’s sandy lips.

One, two, three, Ian picked through the shells, tossing some behind him after seconds of inspection. He didn’t uncover the obvious ones, the bright pink or super curly crab homes.

“Daddy,” he heard again, not Ian.

Ian dipped one small, white shell into ocean foam then peeked inside as if looking for a home. His wet hair framed his face, and the sun set fire to the copper strands when light bursts
through clouds.

“Sir.” Someone tapped him on the shoulder. “Is that your daughter?” An older couple pointed to eleven-year-old Sara, poking a jellyfish with her fingers.

Kru sighed. “Yes.”

“That’s very reckless,” the old man said. “She could get stung.”

“She’s quite beautiful though,” the old woman said. “I’m a photographer. Have you ever thought about girl’s catalogue modeling or even frame photography?” The woman turned to the man. “She reminds you of Jan, doesn’t she?”

“I can see it. She’s very lovely.” The old man paused. “But I’m afraid the ocean has washed her top a little too south, if you can catch my drift.”

“Oh goodness!” The old woman turned toward Sara then back to the man. “Oh, ‘drift’! Honey!” She started laughing, clutching her poncho round her neck.

“Sara,” Kru yelled, ignoring the laughing couple and getting closer to his daughter.

“Daddy, look!” Sara said. With two inflamed fingers, she poked the jelly’s tentacles then yelped. “Did you see what I did? It stings so much!”

“Pull your bikini up.”

“Why?” She leaned back, assuming a sunbather’s pose.

“Because you’re a girl. And stop poking that.” He didn’t know what instinct told Sara to do this stupid stuff. She never just yelled or cried like normal kids.

“The old people said I was beautiful. And two other people today told me I’m lovely,” she said, her swollen fingers edging for another strike.

Kru grabbed her hand and pulled her up. “Cover yourself. You’re making people stare.”

“Why does Ian not have to wear a top and I do?”

RIDE/NNUdpike/ 258
“Because it’s the rules.”

“Mom’s mumbling again,” Sara said, pulling up her top. “Says the monsters are back.”

“Just play here. Keep your top up. Don’t be stupid.” More sand and water glided over his feet as he walked toward Ian.

“Daddy,” Sara called, “can we build a sandcastle together?”

“I’ve gotta help your brother right now.”

“He looks fine to me.”

“Just stay here,” Kru said. Sure enough, Diane was muttering as Kru crossed in front of her and sat down next to Ian and his seashell pile. Sand all over his knees and legs, Ian handed Kru the washed off seashell.

“For me, Toot?” Kru asked.

“For a teacup spin!”

Kru’s hands took Ian’s wrists and then began spinning him in circles. The sky’s blue melded with beach’s tan and the whiteness of condos they couldn’t afford. Diane and Sara and passersby all faded to smudges. Ian’s body flattened into a laughing head with swinging bare feet kicking out the back. They were in a giant hair salon, blow dryer hood—they lived in its warm, aluminum arms, a windy bowl cupping them together. Ian’s squeals surrounded the circle—the sound like fading breath on glass colored a spin, and they’d return to the circle’s start, each time chasing laughter. It all dripped and globbed like wet sand through an hourglass skinny, slowing down time. Ian closed his black-brown eyes, but Kru called out, “No, keep ‘em open” before they both fell into the sand.

“Daddy,” Ian said, laughing, catching his breath, “when are we going to real teacup spin?”

Kru scratched his sandy head. “What, I’m not good enough for you?”
“No,” Ian said, “I want to spin in real teacups.”

“Well, Toot, we’re not great on money right now—”

“Teacup spin, daddy,” Ian said.

“Alright, it’s late. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Kru looked to the sky once more. The sunhat had vanished.

That night they’d all slept in the station wagon. Kru didn’t have enough energy to drive back to Knoxville that day, and a flat tire ate up their motel fund. Lying up front, Diane slept, her muttering on pause for a few hours. Sara sprawled the middle seat, but her occasional peeks toward him and Ian in the folded down back said she wasn’t sleeping.

“Go to sleep,” he told her when he caught her eavesdropping. She shrugged in her towel, her head disappearing behind the seat.

Ian, the best sleeper in the family, smiled in dreams. His small body shivered from the wet towel-blanket. Kru drew him close, against his chest. Then, touched his hair, curling a lock in his calloused hands. The kissing started on his forehead and moved down. Kru inhaled the salt and ocean of his skin and tasted sand grit on his lips. Ian still didn’t wake when Kru kissed his baby fat cheek, all the way to the corner of his mouth. And then as not to swallow up his son’s lips, he pecked slow, noiseless kisses in the outline of the tiny lips. Ian’s bottom lip was dry, so Kru licked it.

There was shuffling in the middle seat. He glanced up and saw Sara, just staring, watching.

Kru didn’t move. “How long have you been watching?”

Silent, she kept staring.

“Go to sleep,” Kru said, almost nauseous, still feeling the spin and ocean’s rock.
“Fine, Daddy,” she said then dipped behind the seat again.

Rubbing his finger under Ian’s chin, Kru sighed and cleared his throat. He shifted onto his back, peering through the window’s horizontal lines at lit white condos and pool gates. Sleep started to come after several minutes, but right before he drifted off next to his son, he heard Sara whisper out, “You never kiss me goodnight.”

Espinoza returned from a third perimeter sweep and then clicked off his flashlight.

Kru knew what not to do. He knew he shouldn’t want to see jungle boy’s slick of black-brown eyes. He knew he shouldn’t need to inspect jungle boy’s flutter of eyelashes and thick, black hair. He knew he shouldn’t want to touch jungle boy’s smooth peek of skin playing hide and seek under a white t-shirt. Kru knew all these things and how opposite they’d be to his former therapist’s motto “Monsters in men. Monsters can’t win.”

But, he sat up in the dirt.

“Espinoza,” Kru said, swallowing, “can I see that video again?”

Gabriel Bellamy Isaacs 4—May 17

Four days later Huntings was gone, and Isaacs was burning shit. Having just completed a rotation of shit detail, Destin showed Isaacs the “Latrine Butler” station—three piled cardboard boxes with sayings like “If your seat ain’t clean we get mean” and “Magazines and perfume coming soon!” and “We aim to please!” and “If your not satisfied call 312-555-5555 or tweet cleanupyourowndamnshit.” A Stars and Stripes newspaper sagged against a makeshift table supporting two travel-sized bottles of Purel and a “Tips for Shit” half-bottle with Iraqi dinar.

“So, cornflake, over there ya got the ladies.” Destin pointed at two wooden-box latrines spray painted “WOMEN.” “They only got one honeypot under the seat. Oh, and make sure ya
knock—they get real touchy about that.”

“Yeah, I understand with wanting to poop in peace,” Isaacs said, nodding at the usual latrine boxes. He rubbed his hand over his healing throat.

“Okay, Mr. Poop in Peace, ya know what this is?” He pointed next to him. Leaning against a shaded side of a latrine box painted “MALE” was a long, metal rod with a hook on the end.

“I don’t know.”

“Guess.” Destin grinned.

“A fishing rod.”

“Yeah! Just last week, I caught me a catfish. It came from the burning sulfur hole, swimming up from hell.” He smacked the back of Isaacs’ head then laughed.

Isaacs grinned.

“Nah, this is what we call a ‘shit stick.’ Ya know what we do with it?”

“I can guess.”

“Cornflake, be creative. This job ain’t got no other perks. So, lift that up.” He pointed to the wooden doggie-door-thing behind each latrine. The female’s had one, the male’s two. It was heavier than Isaacs anticipated with his one good arm, the other still slinged.

“So, ya hook it.” Destin paused, demonstrating. “And here’s the hard part.” Both of Destin’s biceps strained as his hands walked up the metal pole, slowly dragging the fifty-pound drum closer. “You wanna make sure ya don’t get any the poop so up slopping out. Cause believe me, ya already gonna be smelling this in ya sleep. I get the other one out a little for ya.” Destin crawled under the doggie-door, hooked it, and began to drag out the other drum. This one fuller, shit slopped onto the sand.
“Woops,” Destin said, throwing down the metal pole.

Isaacs gagged. His slinged arm reached for his stomach while his good arm covered his nose and mouth. The sleeve’s stale sweat body odor and metallic sand smells were not much better, but then the soup overpowered them as Destin dragged the first drum under his nose.

“Makes ya kinda hungry, don’t it?”

Isaacs clamped a hand over his mouth, shaking his head.

“Your stomach will follow ya head. It’s just shit. Oh—” Destin paused, looking into the honeypot. “Maybe more than just shit. Look here. We got some cigs, torn up paper, probably a love letter, cum, and the usual, number two and number one.”

Isaacs looked away. The smell radiated up as the sun cooked the soup.

“Okay, so here the part ya wanna learn. Add four gallons of this.” Destin kicked a ten-gallon diesel jug sitting next to a five-gallon mo-gas jug and a wooden stick. “Then a gallon of this. They got markers on the sides. Light and stir.”

“Why do I have to stir?”

“So it don’t stick to the bottom, of course.” Destin laughed.

“Oh, of course.”

“Nah.” Destin waved a hand. “Ya just don’t wanna let it got out. Be about twenty mins per pot, and some bruhs hauls them to the top of the nearest downwind sand dune. They be fucking with everybody though, wanting them to smell shit for breakfast.”

“That’s where that comes from?” Isaacs asked.

“Yeah, yeah, some fuckers. But you be good here with the smell cause its high and isolated on this dune. But—” Destin scanned Isaacs’ injury. “You be lucky if ya finish before eighteen hundred hour.”
Isaacs nodded. Lightly, he rubbed his shoulder, that phantom grip still beating like a nervous tick.

“I get your first one started.” Destin began pouring the diesel.

“Destin.” Isaacs paused. “Did Brukk talk to you?”

The pouring paused. “He talk to me all the time, cornflake. He our CO.” He resumed.

“Right, but like privately? Like did he threa—”

“Boy, you be poking. Don’t poke the bear. Ya making it all harder for yourself.”

“I filed a grievance against him, Destin.” Isaacs rubbed his sling. “No one’s done anything about it.”

“He immune.” Destin switched to pouring the gasoline.

“What does that mean?”

“It means, some lil’ Private punk like you or me ain’t gonna upset them.”

“You know something I don’t?” Breathing into his sleeve, Isaacs leaned closer to Destin and the shit.

“All I know is he got good reason for everything.”

“He had good reason to kill the deserter from the crystal shop? Or to demolish the faces of those Iraqis? Or to murder that deserter a month ago, the one from the car bombing?”

“He ain’t murder no deserter a month ago.”

“What? Of course he did. He said so himself.”

“Nah.” Destin spilled some gasoline in the sand. “Nah, he told XO and me and Huntings and Minx that they—he and the deserter from before—had a long chat in some old off-base tent and the next day the deserter killed himself. One bullet to the head.”

Isaacs coughed into his sleeve. “When did he tell you this?”
“Right after it happened. Before you got here. I hear they had a closed casket. They family couldn’t get the red stains from his hair.” Destin paused, squinting. “His hair about your color only yours is blonder.”

“Where did you hear about the funeral?”

Destin stepped back and spread his arms open wide. “In the desert.”

“Destin, we’re supposed to be helping people, fighting the good fight or whatever—not just burning shit all day!” Isaacs kicked the rusted honeypot.

“Listen, I know Hunting’s gone and all, your buddy, your gossip girl, but ya can’t just be going around bucking Uncle Sammy. If ya wanna play with fire, play with this one.” Destin handed him the matches.

Isaacs lowered his head. “I won’t ever get used to this smell.”

“You body adapts. That’s what it does. Light it.”

Fumbling with his sling, Isaacs finally scraped the phosphorus to light and dropped it in the drum. Immediate hell fire exploded up and then died down into a wavering lull as if he were at Kumbaya camp instead of burning shit in the desert. The waves already reached to melt his face. Isaacs wiped sweat and backed away.

“Nah, ya gotta stir it.” Destin handed Isaacs the long, wooden stick from the ground.

Isaacs sank the stick in the flame and soft soup below. Leaning the stick against his chest, he struggled to stir, his left arm offering no help.

“Yeah, keep stirring all the time or it’ll go out,” Destin said, walking away from the fire. “But,” Destin called back to Isaacs, almost gone from his view, “but don’t be stirring too much—might set yourself on fire.” Destin disappeared over the dune, and, for a second before his eyes left him, Isaacs could swear he saw in them a reflective glint of silver.
The thought invaded too quickly to filter—*I’m losing my mind*. The Sergeant recruiter had said something about sanity, broken bodies, broken minds. Under the desert heat of midday, the sand all in his teeth, he stared into the fire. Shit bloviating pretend conversations. Propped against his right collar bone was the shit stick. His good arm wrapped around it like some inhumane creature claw, fumbling up and down the wood, catching a splinter. Panting, his shoulder circled in a slow beat-short-of-a-rhythm motion. His neck sunburned and strained.

But then he heard it again, her giggle, her laugh.

“Dammit,” he muttered, swatting the air, the deluding heat, the sound into dissipations.

She was messing with him—something was messing with him. The laugh echoed again—some hallway orphan from his mom’s scary movie collection, one arm wrapped around a one-eyed teddy, the other pointing down the hallway at him, through him and laughing before running away.

He gasped and looked around, searching time for this haunt, this pain. He was some creature in the desert, orange smoke still in his hair. He was some Desert Storm Marine, leaning out a Black Hawk, eyes all searching sand wrinkles for that lost sound. He was a Vietnam Vet, Napalm in his eyes, worms in his slop, looking toward gunfire mountain and straining his ears for anything but ricochet. He was a parachuter, dropping into South Korea, hearing the peace of wind and seeing rows of rice fields and bodies. He was an Enola Gay pilot, his thumb wavering above the button, wondering what laughter existed moments before the drop. He was a trench digger, blinded by mustard gas and only feeling a small body draped over barbed wire. He was a Confederate locked in a gaze with two runaways, glancing down at the black girl and nodding for them to continue. He was a blue coat, waving them along and hearing the Cherokee girl’s tears trailing. He was a revolutionary, rolling cannon fire beside small, dead hands against
civilian front porches and lawns. He was a Glorious Revolutionary, a Rose, a Hundred Years’ War, a capturer of bodies and releaser of souls. He was a 1066 Norman watching Halley’s Comet, casting the same wish—*Bring my sister home*—and calling for the kiss of space. He was a Roman gladiator, shieldless with a spear, her face in every coliseum. He was a Viking prisoner, sweating into the sea, the longboat oar churning up fire, and the Viking song becoming a rhythmic lullaby. He was a nomad, hunting while she gathered, the woods stealing her away, how fairies were born. He was a grunting creature, the butterfly’s murder making him alone. He was an arthropod, squirming in the sea and reaching to connect. He was primordial liquid fire.

Some paper flicked up from the flames, and he heard the giggle again. *I’m losing my damn mind.* All those bodies, all those memories, all those souls were lost, missing, disappeared. And somehow, someway, he felt their weight of fault. The recruiter’s words floated to the surface—*“I will offer you a chance to be something more than anyone else, bound in blood and born in fire.”* *Civilian*, he thought. All those front yards. All those landings and bombs and bullets and smoke and all the people and all their lives.

The paper kept dancing above the fire, somehow defying the heavy pull of gravity. Eliza had been lost in their front yard—the invasion, the storming, he hadn’t even known it was a war. It was a greater war, not political, only human. That thing that festers in humans. *Is this the first violent place?*

Then the paper was falling, pushed gently by the wind, rhythmless, like painters’ hands swimming purple music, imagining, not quite touching the mural. It was dropping, swirling until finally it rested at her feet. The girl, the girl with the injured foot stood before Isaacs, giggling.

“My God,” he said. The giggling existed outside of his mind.

She limped to Isaacs, holding out her hand as an offering.
Over the dune and behind him, Isaacs squinted for other Marines. “What are you doing here? You can’t be here. How’d you get here?” Sweat dripped off of him and sizzled into the fire. Shit fire smell—he coughed into his shoulder.

“Hunaa,” she said, stretching her arm closer to Isaacs.

“What? What is it?”

One by one, the girl uncurled her fingers, revealing an empty right palm. She smiled up at him as if this were the most important thing she’d ever shown anyone. “Hunaa,” she said again, then tugged at his digicams.

“I can’t leave with you. Gotta keep stirring.” Already, his right shoulder threatened to dislocate again regardless of the six or seven more drums to burn.

“Hunaa, shoof.” The girl pulled harder on his digis pants.

They slipped over Isaacs’ hip bone, exposing the rim of his underwear. “Woah.” Isaacs grabbed his belted digis and pulled them up. Until then, he hadn’t realized how much weight he’d lost over the past 40 days.

“You gotta go home. I’ll walk you back whenever I’m done,” he said, still stirring.

“Hunaa,” the girl said again, then smoothed her skirt before plopping into the sand next to him. Opening and closing her hand, she stared in a trance.

“You know? What the hell.” Isaacs let go of the shit stick and sat next to her, sipping from his canteen. He offered her some.

The girl shook her head. “Shoof,” she said again.

“Give me a minute.” Isaacs dug around his pockets, finally pulling out his translator.

“Alright, ‘shoof,’” he said, typing in the foreign word. “You using it as a verb or noun?”

“Shoof.” The girl opened and closed her hand again.
“Never picked up palm reading. But, ‘shoof’ let’s see—‘consider, behold, examine, appearance, manifestation, watch monitor’—weird—‘stare, eye, gander, manhole’—the hell?—‘aspect, term, explore, look.’”

“Hunaa, shoof,” she said, placing her palm under Isaacs’ nose.

“They should of put that last one first. What, you have a splinter or something?” The splinter in his thumb festered. He tried to touch her hand, but she snatched it away.

Suddenly, she reached behind Isaacs’ ear and pulled out something, a marble now rolled in her hand. Her fist clamped shut and then opened, disappearing the marble. She repeated the motion with the milky marble back in play.

Isaacs struggled between coughing and laughing. “Hey, that’s pretty good. Where’d you learn that?” He clapped his knee to give applause.

She clapped slowly as if demonstrating the proper way to applaud. She gripped his good hand, splintered and blistered, then reached for his slinged hand.

“Woah, no, not that one.” He cradled it against his body.

She let go of his good hand. The marble fell onto the sand. Slowly, her hand hovered toward Isaacs’ arm, not touching but outlining the L shape. Then, the hovering moved toward her injured foot where she also didn’t touch.

“‘Ant mathlaa.”

“Yeah, we’re both punching bags. How did that happen?” Isaacs asked, shrugging his shoulder, pointing toward her foot, and then twisting his good wrist as if scooping ice cream.

“Shoof,” she said, picking up and disappearing the marble again.

“Yeah, but how did that happen? How—” Muffled footsteps up the dune. “You shouldn’t be here. Hide—come here.” Isaacs pushed himself up and grabbed the girl by the arm. They
hugged close to the doggie-dog behind the latrine.

Inside the latrine, the wooden creak of a door opening—plastic lid popped up—the other plastic lid thrown open—“What the fuck”—then wooden creak closed—muted boot steps around the latrine corner.

“Hide,” Isaacs whispered, opening the doggie-dog and pushing her in. He held a finger to his lips and a hand out, backing away from her. The door dropped shut.

“You shitting me, pun intended.” Some Marine stormed around the latrine corner. “You took both the honeypots at once?”

“Uh, yeah,” Isaacs said, returning to the first honeypot, his hand slipping over the wood shit stir.

“You’re not even burning this one, dude. Didn’t think to leave it in there?”

“No. This is my first shit stir. What do you want from me?” The girl peeked out of the doggie-dog. He gritted his teeth.

“Damn.” The Marine scanned Isaacs’ slinged arm. “Who the fuck did you piss off?”

“Brukk.”

“CO?”

“The one and only.” Isaacs coughed into his good shoulder, continually stirring.

“Dude, you don’t want to stir it constantly. Takes longer to burn.”

“What?” Isaacs snapped.

“Yeah, just stir like every ten-fifteen minutes or so.”

Isaacs exhaled then shoved the shit stick toward the flames.

“Dude.” The Marine caught it before the flames fully engulfed it. “Just prop it against the side, like this. Burn up otherwise. Then you know what you gotta use.”
“I can guess.” Isaacs paused.

“What’d ya do?” The Marine smirked.

“Have you met Brukk?” Isaacs asked.

“I’ve seen him, heard about him. He’s always going off with this special fire team or something.”

“Special? What do you mean?” Isaacs eyed the girl, gently shaking his head.

“CO’s got a lot of responsibilities, you know? Why would he hang around a fire team, something a Private can be a part of?”

“What do you know about Brukk and a deserter? What versions have you heard—”

“Listen, dude, I gotta take a dump. So it’s been nice chatting with you.” The Marine headed down the dune but called back, “Remember, every ten-fifteen minutes or so, no more.”

“Come on,” Isaacs said, shaking under the weight of the doggie-door. With her brown hair dangling into the sand, she began to crawl out.

“Wait,” Isaacs said, his hand resting against her stomach. He held his breath, straining to hear another set of boots drawing close.

“Someone else is coming.” He gently pushed her back inside just moments before closing the doggie-door.

A shadow stretched long and tall against the latrine. The gaze melted hot into his neck, and he knew without looking who it was. Damn phantoming. His lips tightened when turning toward Brukk. Brukk’s shadowed expression was impossible to inspect. He didn’t know which Brukk would appear today—the caretaker, the vulnerable, the leader, the destroyer, the informal spook, the monster, the strange anatomist, the devil.

Behind him, Isaacs felt the lifting doggie-door. He gasped, leaning against it to close. The
other doggie-dog bothered him, the prospect of the girl crawling out, giggling next to Brukk’s boots. Isaacs swallowed.

“Both drums are out,” Brukk said, Isaacs unable to see his lips move. This great ventriloquist or puppeteer, strings dangling like claws from his fingers.

“Yes, sir, Destin—” Isaacs leaned onto his knees about to push himself up at attention. But Brukk’s hand met his shoulder, pushed him back to his knees. The hand did not leave him. Slowly, it rubbed up his neck and around to the back of his head. And then like throwing a Frisbee, Brukk snapped Isaacs against the wooden latrine. Isaacs’ slinged shoulder became a battering ram into the wood. No screams escaped Isaacs’ sore throat, only muffled growls.

“Sir!” Isaacs called, opening and closing his mouth to mitigate the pulses of pain radiating along the nerves.

Without pausing, Brukk flipped the tan canvas over two metal belt loops, undoing it.

Against the latrine, Isaacs cradled his arm and leaned his back parallel to the wood. Would Brukk whip him? Would anyone believe him or care when he filed a grievance with welts as evidence? He’d have to build a case—he’d have to get organized. Then the zipper. Brukk wasn’t taking off his belt—he was standing next to the full second honeypot, pulling the front of his digis down. Then his briefs went down too.

Isaacs looked away. He put his fingers against the wood grains running up and down the pale latrine. He heard the foaming splatter of piss in the soup. And then he felt it, the flicking of urine on his cheek, on his neck. Instinct pushed him away, trying to move out of the firing. But silently, Brukk caught his shoulder and forced him back into place. Piss splattered in his ear, speckles on his shirt, some stinging his open-cut lips. With three jerks, Isaacs felt Brukk shake himself dry and let go of his shoulder.
The zipper went up, and the metal belt links clinked. He felt the doggie-door try to lift behind him again—he slumped against it harder.

“Gabriel,” he heard then side-glanced to see Brukk adjusting himself. “Gabriel, look at me.” The whispering kindness of his voice was assaulting, fatherly.

Isaacs tilted his head up, fighting against the order with slow, pausing movements. Urine still warm on his face, the heat of inflammation with his reinjured arm, and the hot wave of mirage above the burning honeypot.

The darkness still wiped Brukk’s features. He started to walk away. Light caught his eyes before he curved around the latrine, calling back only three words as he left—“You smell good.”

Brukk’s boot steps muffled, no print in the sand. Isaacs pushed himself up and peered around the corner. Everything in order again, briefs up, shirts tucked, belt fastened, Brukk moved with ease down the dune. It wasn’t until he was a spec in the middle of base that Isaacs stopped watching. A small hand wrapped around his leg, and he turned toward the girl.

It was instantaneous. Hot tears on his sunburned cheeks. He fell into the sand, and stayed hidden with the girl behind the latrine. Then, with no words between them, she raised the hem of her skirt and wiped his tears. Perhaps unknowingly, she wiped away the urine and more. She wiped away moon dust and fire. She wiped away shit smell and heat. Away with the desert as he closed his eyes. The daymares, the memories, the silence, the freezer, his mother’s wrappers. She somehow vanished them—for a moment, it was not Isaacs’ fault. For a moment, he was just a boy, just a boy in a cornfield with a kite. He felt its wind and lifted to a different planet, a different life. He met this different planet’s residents, saying “We did get off to a bad start, but nice to meet you, too” or “Thanks for coming by.” All the pretend space and light webbed his mind, the mapping of a soul. And for a moment, she made it all disappear, and he just was. That
soft giggle would always echo.

“Thanks, Eliza,” he said before opening his eyes, catching himself. The girl was leaning against his chest, trying to braid her hair. She squinted her brown eyes, determined. Had they taken her for her brown eyes? Had they taken her for her laugh? Why had he not searched harder? When does a body choose to give up? How many twenty-four hours had he and his parents waited for her to come skipping back? He could hear it now, the joy-jostled tune with her bouncing step—“We’ve gots the bear necessities, the simple bear no recipes. Forget about your worries and your stripes!” He’d tried to instruct her on the correct lyrics, but her resistance was annoying at first. Now childish, beautiful. Had they taken her for her song? For her step, her skip? For her stubbornness? For her dimpled chin? For her hair? She was a hundred faces, a thousand bodies. He cried under the heat, unable to imagine any further. He would never know. He would never know.

“La tahzan,” the girl said—lost meaning. She held up the marble against his chest. Again, he watched it disappear under his nose. Nothingness in her hand and the nothingness in the tea cups, some antimatter equivalent, some sibling stars. It was all in the universe somewhere, just beyond his understanding.

The girl’s hands dropped back to fumbled with her hair, the brown strands not holding a braid.

“Come on, I’ll walk you home.” He stood up, rubbed the sandy tears from his face, and held out his hand to her. She took it. “Don’t want your family to think you’ve gone missing.” The honeypots stayed where they were, and the drum fire had died.

***

A delicate mosaic of old and new appeared as Isaacs looked through the window. Four
square walls were decorated with framed posters of Arabic phrases, a couple’s wedding photo, and lung-branch fractures all reaching from the ceiling. Breath almost moved as light danced through the window’s curtain, caught like wiggling roots all down the walls’ sides to the concrete floor. It was lumpy, the foundation in sand, but the blue and silver diamond-patterned rug spread the length and width of the room, only rising near the doorframes like a wave. Stains and old books and pillows with frills spotted the space. Three curtains with henna-like intricacies of yellow almost pear-shaped patterns, purple swirls mixed with black dots, and a colorful dance of cobra-like braids led to a back room, probably the kitchen. It was unlike the first raid houses. This family had enough dinar for décor and books but not enough for furniture.

“This is your house, right? Not a friend’s or something?” Isaacs asked, the girl having stopped there moments ago to kick off her flip flops.

Opening the wooden door, she grabbed her shoes and tugged Isaacs inside.

Something was roasting in the backroom kitchen, chicken maybe. Next to a silver water basin at the entry, the girl plopped onto the rug. Her hand was small against his digi pants as she yanked for him to join her.

“I gotta get going. Gotta burn the rest of that shi—” he paused, staring down at her. “That stuff, gotta burn that stuff.”

“Stuff,” he heard. A boy appeared from behind the yellow curtain. Isaacs had seen him before—holding the melon and leaning in their clay doorframe after the IED.

“Oh, hi,” Isaacs said, suddenly feeling his own intrusiveness, the A4 now heavy against his spine.

“You are soldier,” he said. The “r” trailed a rolling flutter. The boy edged closer to his sister.
“Marine, but yeah. I just—she found me when I was on latrine duty, and I just—wanted to make sure she got back home safely with—” Isaacs patted his slinged hand.

“Sorry.” The boy shook his head. “I—I learn English now. Talia is trouble?” Gently, the boy placed his hand on her shoulder and sat next to her. Over the water basin, the boy raised Talia’s injured foot and began washing. The clear water muddied with each wipe of cloth over the wound.

“No, she’s not in trouble or any trouble,” Isaacs said. “She just likes to wander, I guess.”

The girl yelped and nudged her brother, causing him to drop the cloth in the water.

“Talia, tawaqquf. ‘ahawil musaeadatak,” Isaacs heard the boy say.

She squealed into his ear in some kind of sibling revolt.

“Talia,” Isaacs heard from the kitchen area. The curtain snapped back, revealing a woman in a light green hijab. Her eyes widened and thick eyebrows indented. To the boy, she started firing Arabic, gesturing and pointing at Isaacs. He couldn’t help but notice the presence of a double chin when she spoke. He almost smiled, wondering if she’d ever made sand into cinnamon.

“What’s she saying?” Isaacs finally asked, his eyes dizzying between the two.

The boy huffed. “I embarrassing to say.”

“To say what?”

“Ummi say help kitchen with you.” The boy squinted at his mother who was nodding.

“With what?” More Arabic from the mother, nodding and staring at Isaacs.

“She want go to her.”

“Okay?” Isaacs said, walking across the living room, behind the curtain, into the kitchen.

U-shaped ledges six-inches high stretched around three of the four rectangle walls. There
was no, what mom would call “counter-space” or “cabinet space.” Only warped metal pots and pans, oils and spices, some weighing machine and yellow cleaning supplies, rubber hoses and a stack of plates as intricately painted as the curtain designs all decorated these ledges. All of it framed a metal, double sink top, supported by concrete. From the sink, a short plastic pipe stretched into a metal paint bucket, Isaacs assumed, from the yellow and blue waterfall splashes on the side. He was trained to see possibilities, especially after his IED debriefing—warped metal pots from cooking biological weapons, chlorine, hoses and buckets to mass transport explosives onto Marine bases, curtains to disguise car bomb gifts, pipes to pump fumes into public places. But, he suddenly felt stupid and small.

The woman was waving a hand toward the sink, pointing to it and talking to him. Her hands had, unmistakably, been mauled by fire. The wrinkled red and brown skin was taut. There were jagged spherical shapes where it looked like an entire patch had re-grown.

“I’m sorry,” Isaacs said, “I don’t know very much Arabic.”

“Muhan,” she called into the main room.

The boy called back then entered minutes later with his sister on his back. Water dripped from the girl’s foot.

“‘aqul lah ‘urid lah ‘an ‘iislah almasarif,” the woman spoke rapidly.

“Ummi,” Muhan whined, hiking his sister higher on his back. He rolled his eyes.

“What is it?” Isaacs asked. “What’s she saying?”

“She want sink fix,” Muhan said. “She show now.”

The woman tilted water from a small jug into the sink. It swam in a circle then gurgled slowly down the pipe.

“You have a clog?” Isaacs asked.
“What,” Muhan said with scrunched face.

“There is something stuck inside,” Isaacs said, staring into the drain.

“No, already Ummi see. No inside,” Muhan said then fiercely whispered at Talia. She was flicking his ear and giggling. Isaacs couldn’t help but smirk.

“Well, let’s take the pipe out and look,” Isaacs said, starting to detach the short gray pipe from the white plastic u-bar. Seeing what he was doing, the woman helped him wiggle the pipe free. Whiffs of chicken slim and rotten tomato seeds wafted up. A bug flew from the socket.

“Look here,” he said to the woman, their heads leaning close together to simultaneously peer into the tube. “See how thick that is?” She nodded as if firing the same thoughts. There was nearly a pinhole of light, something had evenly calcified the cylinder. She spoke to him again.

“She say how?” Muhan said, setting Talia on the floor and stretching his arms. The woman whispered quickly to him, glancing from him to Talia. He tried to speak back, but was cut off by her supposed instructions. Muhan sighed and scooped Talia off the floor again. With a flutter of the woman’s scarred hand, they disappeared behind the curtain.

Beside them, the woman rotated the cooking chicken on a rack above a metal barrel of fire.

“Do you have a long brush or stick?” Isaacs asked, pretending to shove a Ramrod down the tube like packing gunpowder. Without words, the woman pushed the tube into his chest and grabbed what looked to be a thin walking stick behind the sink. “Perfect,” he said but saw that she was almost crying.

“What is it?” Isaacs asked. But she simply handed him the walking stick and left the room. He stood with a stick and a pipe, wondering again how he’d gotten here.

“I’m going to be a pilot,” he had told Rat one Sunday afternoon. The ritual was solid,
almost pleasant, having a one-year friendship. At thirteen years old, he knew what he was going to do, and, finally, he decided to say it out loud.

Rat’s bruxing—the foofing of air, the teeth grinding and chattering—showed her contentment, according to the Rat Facts website. Always her belly would be sunken until Isaacs uncrumbled three or four crackers from his pocket. They’d split the crackers and the water fifty-fifty. She was a hog, demanding far more than she needed. But, Isaacs always uncapped the converted mouthwash bottle—now a canteen—and made a water bowl for Rat with the four ounce cap. He kept pouring more and more with her commands.

“What do you mean ‘I can’t’?” Isaacs asked, shining the blue light on Rat’s white belly covered in cracker flakes.

She chattered.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Isaacs said. “I can’t understand you.”

Having swallowed, Rat shortled, some high-pitched squeaks like squeezing the voice-box belly of an arcade claw grab.

“Why are you laughing? You don’t think I can do it?”

Rat gnawed away the edges of the next cracker.

“Well, for your information, I’m already reading books about it.”

Turning her body to the side, she almost formed a question mark with her tail.

“Yeah, exactly. My plane is going to be the best. We’ll have free Nintendo 64 hook ups with every seat. Orange or grape pop in every cup holder. We’ll even let people dance on the wings if they want—people like Maddie Perkins with her long black hair and beautiful perky—what? What do you mean I have to follow regulations?”

Scratching her nails over her swollen belly, she brushed off the flakes. One landed on
Isaacs’ nose. Gently, she slid her tail over his nose, knocking the flake to the freezer floor.

“Thanks. Yeah, there’ll be no bedtimes, no freezer visits, no bad attitudes or angst. I swear.”

Rat chattered.

“You still think I can’t?” Isaacs asked. “Well, I almost forgot the most important part.”

She crawled closer to his face.

“We’ll have bright glow-in-the-dark letters painted on the bottom. It’s gonna say ‘This is a plane. Don’t make a wish.’” Isaacs paused, some things still too wordless to articulate, even to Rat.

She curled into a warm ball under his chin. The vibration of her breath rubbed its way like a balm into his throat. Her twitching hind foot told him that she was falling asleep. He didn’t want to swallow too hard for fear that his growing Adam’s apple would interrupt her breathing. It was the calmest, warmest he had felt that year, his entire thirteenth year in a pocketful of fur.

She chattered again, almost at a whisper in the black basement heart.

Isaacs sighed through his nose. “Why, why do you still say ‘You can’t be a pilot’?” He asked almost angry.

Rat curled her body in, forming a tighter ball, sighing out, “Cause then I’ll be alone.”

“I help,” Muhan said, running to the burning chicken and rotating it. He sprinkled water on the flames, eyeing Isaacs with the walking stick.

“I wanted to be a pilot,” he said aloud, his eyes boggling over the dirt floor.

“You have father,” Muhan said, pointing to the stick. “It is father thing.”

“What?”

“My father walk work,” Muhan pointed, almost taking the stick from Isaacs’ hands. “I
want—what is word?”

“Walking stick?” Isaacs asked, confused. “This wouldn’t help a pilot.”

“Pilot?” Muhan wondered, holding out his hand. “I have stick?”

“I’m to clean the pipe with it,” Isaacs said, almost trace-like staring into the curtain.

“No, it is father,” Muhan gingerly pulled the stick from Isaacs’ fingers. “We put here.”

Muhan returned the stick behind the sink.

“Where is he, your father?” Isaacs asked, still holding the pipe.

“You help?” Muhan pulled a melon from a woven bag and put it in the sink. With a knife, he modeled cutting motions to Isaacs without touching the blade to the cantaloupe.

“Yes,” Isaacs said, shaking himself from the trance then grabbing the knife. “Who hurt your sister? Who hurt your mother?”

With a towel, Muhan scooped the chicken off the fire and moved the wooden dish drainer. He placed a porcelain tea pot on the hot wire rack before shredding the poultry into small slivers.

“Muhan,” Isaacs said, next to the boy. He glanced up at Isaacs. “What’s going on here?”

Muhan hesitated, rubbing a dry chicken sliver between his fingers. Then, he simply stated, “We need to eat.” Into a bowl, he tossed the chicken and then grabbed some flatbread from a basket. “Come,” he said. “Take fruit.” He followed Muhan into the main room.

Hobbling with her newly wrapped foot, Talia arranged the pillows into a circle with the food as the centerpiece.

“Open,” Muhan said, pointing to the melon cradled in Isaacs’ good arm. The boy disappeared behind a bedroom curtain—soft mumbling in his mother’s room. Moments later, she reappeared to join the dinner circle—eyes almost as red as her hands.
She kissed Muhan’s head, her smile growing with each of Talia’s claps. There was a pillow for Isaacs.

“I can’t take your food,” Isaacs said, shaking his head and backing away from the circle.


“It’s your food. I have food. I can’t take your food.”

The woman spoke, and they all chuckled.

“What did she say?” Isaacs asked.

“She say soldier is sick, no take food.” Muhan patted his head. “Sick here.”

Isaacs smirked, feeling Talia’s tug on his digis.

“Alright,” Isaacs smiled, setting himself down with the family. “How did you learn English?”

~

Throughout the night, the boy code switched between the two languages. One day, according to Muhan, a line of children formed behind a Humvee. He saw Talia in the line, a swatch of unraveled wrapping behind her foot like a mummy or a toilet paper prank. Originally, Muhan panicked, thinking the “soldiers” were throwing the children into the Humvee, taking them. Talia’s Eliza brown eyes had shined up at Isaacs during the story. But, with the squeals of joy and the passing of the first stuffed animal, Muhan realized it was a donation drive. Standing next to his sister, Muhan watched her receive a purple bunny while the Marine shoved a tiger into his hands. Muhan had pushed the tiger back, pointing at one of the books in the Humvee instead. The Marine had shrugged, then tossed the tiger into the heap behind him and handed Muhan a picture book. Muhan again pushed back the book and pointed to a specific one. The Marine shoved both the picture book and an English-Arabic grammar book then motioned for...
him to leave. Muhan had even found a CD in the back cover. Three weeks later, he fixed a junked Walkman. A few days after that, he discovered a set of earmuff headphones. He’d jimmed the broke arch back together with paperclips and wire. Constantly, he was on the search for batteries.

Every day after the donation, Muhan awaited another Humvee to bring libraries. He’d been listening and reading, on page fifteen, thirty-two, fifty-five, eighty-one, sighing with each passing page and passing day. Then, Muhan explained, a Humvee returned outside the fence with five or six “soldiers” walking with guns tilted down. He had stood in the doorway, wondering why they weren’t driving the Humvee closer—all the children would have to leave the fence to form a line for gifts. The explosion, the chlorine bomb explosion, in the abandoned building a few houses down brought more Humvees as quickly as it sent them away. It had shattered the upper building floor and his hopes of a Humvee visit. There had been no libraries since.

“Jesus,” Isaacs said, not telling them his IED trip was the reason why the libraries disappeared. He shook his head. “But there are lots of books at base. I’ll get you some.” He checked his watch.

The woman retrieved hot tea from the kitchen fire. She poured it into three small crystals.

“Thank you,” Muhan said.

The woman passed crystals to Muhan and Isaacs, then stripped Talia’s chicken into thinner slivers.

“Has Ummi lived here for a long time?” Isaacs asked, nodding to the woman.

“Ummi? Who ummi is?” Muhan replied, confused.

“Ummi is the name of your mom?”
Mauled chicken pieces almost escaped Muhan’s laughing mouth. He translated to the other two, and the woman let out a light laugh.

“What’d I say?"

“Ummi is mother. She name Fatimah.” Muhan chuckled. “You say mom is name mom. Like you are name man. Talia girl.” The humor was lost on Isaacs, but he smirked at Muhan’s contagious laughter.

Talia was preoccupied by digging her tiny fist into the cantaloupe heart. Vicious and beautiful.

“Talia,” Fatimah scolded. Then, with a glass jar, she plunged the rim into the cantaloupe and twisted a chunk free for her daughter. It was perfectly circular—thicker though and larger diameter than the chunk missing from Talia’s foot. The wrapping was already coming loose with her persistent squirming.

“What happened to Talia’s foot?” Isaacs asked suddenly.

Muahnnn stopped laughing.

“madha qal,” Fatimah asked, sipping some tea.

Muhan spoke Arabic whispers as if Isaacs was pretending ignorance. The exchange continued even after Talia had licked the sticky fruit residue from her fingers.

“What—what are you saying?” Isaacs finally interrupted.

Muhan sighed. “Ummi no want to say, but I want to say. You can help?”

“Help with what?”

With pursed lips, Fatimah listened to Muhan’s English explanation. He told Isaacs about the men, the group, the chaotic organization, or Red Wing, an ISIS-copy cat. To Muhan, all the men in the group were the same, copies of violence, some young kids tricked
into a community, wanting to belong, a family business. His father had been involved for only
two months, but 
الجناح الأحمر 
was already trying to spread the family tree. They had no real
political bearing, but their greatest weapons were the civilians. Sporadically, they’d enter the
homes and require family members to deliver messages, making their appearance, their job
invisible. Then, Muhan explained, they’d come in daylight or nighttime, like a casual stroller,
and scoop up the message.

“What’s in the papers?” Isaacs connected stitches in his mind.

“I cannot know. I am scared. They hurt if you read or you not help.” Muhan glanced at
Fatimah’s hands and Talia’s foot. “They try make me solider. My Baba, father. I say no then
they pain Ummi and Talia.”

He described the scenes the best he could. The storm of men surrounded the clay walls.
Both times it was at night. Muhan felt the big hand over his mouth and then the jerk up by his
shirt. Flashlights shined in his face and on Fatimah, kneeling and cradling a crying Talia. A week
before, Muhan had again refused to join their cause or deliver their messages, not knowing their
contents but knowing their violence and seeing the personal message they sent almost a year ago
through his father’s sliced body.

“They kill Baba.” Muhan looked back toward the kitchen. “Baba need stick, men pain
Baba. Men with paper come to here and give. Baba say no. Much days later, Baba death. They
put body in middle town tree.” Muhan paused. “No clothes and cut off it. I see it on ground. I put
it in ground there. I never tell Ummi or Talia. They never can know.” He glanced at them. “Mark
of traitor or not brave. But, Baba was brave.”

Muhan continued. Later, after Muhan refused 
الجناح الأحمر again, flashlights had all jostled
his vision, and Fatimah was yelling. They ripped Talia away, tossing her to Muhan. Then, the
men dragged Ummi into the kitchen. Muhan heard the clanging of warped pots and the glub-glub of oil poured fast from a plastic bottle. The strike of a match lit their kitchen’s small fire barrel, and then the men waited, ignoring her pleas and curses. Muhan had covered Talia’s ears. But nothing could shield her from the screaming, the plunging of hands into boiling oil. Muhan knew what oil did to the skin because, later, he wrapped small pieces of her dangling flesh back around her knuckles, hoping they’d reconnect to form a full hand, ones that wouldn’t shake upon entering bed at night or upon trying to cook dinner or upon looking at her son.

Muhan paused. “I no go with men, you see, Baba say before death—bad, Ummi no stop fight. But I am scared men kill Talia and so I give one paper for them after Talia foot.” They came again in the darkness. Fatima’s hands almost fully healed though they’d be scarred forever. This time, two men with long guns trapped Fatimah in her room while three others dragged Muhan and then Talia from their bedroom to the main area. They kept them separate but across from each other. A man shined light over Talia’s tiny body, tracing from her head to her feet and stopping at her feet. She squirmed in discomfort, and Fatimah’s calls from the adjacent room were silenced with slaps. A sharpened metal cap glinted, entering the light beam. The man called for another copy to hold her foot still, directly in Muhan’s sight line. It was slow—the action of sinking the cap into her foot and then the crying squeals that accompanied the slicing smoothness as if he were cutting dough instead of her sole. Muhan tried to fight them, their grip tight around his arms. He tried to look away, but they snapped his head back by his hair. His spine had popped like knuckles. After that, he explained, his fear for her life. He’d delivered his first message. It was easy, just slipping the paper between the oddly shaped fence surrounding the city. He’d secured it beside one of the main poles supporting the fence and returned home in the early morning light. Days later, he’d heard that four American military personnel had been
blown up. الجناح الأحمر was publically celebrating its responsibility.

“They want me do more in more than week. They say me more papers to give. I do one, you see. But I no want to kill. But I no want family more hurt. I am scared. I want go.”

“Go where?” Isaacs asked. Talia yawned and rested her head on Fatimah’s lap.

“Go Germany—”

Fatimah chimed in.

“What’s she saying?”

“I tell her about go. She say we no can with other people—what name?”

“What?”

“Other people out country run away.”

“A lot of Syrians are leaving.”

“Other name—big group.”

“Like people who are moving through Europe?”

“Yes, but English word, big idea, type people. People in other country. Escape?”

“The people who are leaving? Refugees.”

“Okay, it, she say we can no go. No money and we scared الجناح الأحمر find us. Even Ummi friend Aayun want go.” Muhan paused, Fatimah saying something back and repeating the name Aayun. “But,” Muhan finally spoke again. “You help?”

“I—” Isaacs started, the recruiter’s words haunting him. How many others were being threatened and tortured? How many homes and families broken? The insignia of the eagle, globe, and anchor, the few, the proud weighed heavily against his diaphragm. Was is all pretend—a long con—a world-wide shit stir? The few who could survive under Brukk’s command, the proud who made it home alive. The bird, ball, and chain. Talia’s brown eyes, what had she seen
and lived through? How can people live after that, be whole again after someone cuts pieces of them and stores them in freezers or wastes them like wrappers or staples them to posts or buries them with urine or sand or bricks.

The brick—God—His father had cut out other pieces too. Isaacs’ hair had started to grow back. The stubs prickled and itched. He had wished once that his face was upside down—hair sprouting from his fourteen-year-old chin instead of his temple. The notch from his father’s razor had gotten infected a few days before—late October but not yet her anniversary. Wet ooze pussed under his fingernail upon pushing it like an overripe cherry tomato. He couldn’t stop picking at it even after mom had given him a litany of potential consequences while escorting her to the bathroom for the second time that day.

“Now, Gabriel,” she started as he extended his arms with the routine. “Ya better stop pokin’ that head of yours or it’ll git infestated.” Two, then three great tugs got her on her feet.

“Just the other day, Star-News told me that Leonard Stabb, the actor, you know—”

“Mom, wrap your arm around me,” Isaacs said, his skinny legs shaking.

“Yah.” She plopped her arm on his shoulders. “Leonard Stabb from Guiding Light, he had a head injury from hand gliding—”

“Lucky him,” Isaacs said, shuffling her to the bathroom.

“Well, la-de-da, my Hart Jessup came back with his head wrapped up. I think they woved it into the Guiding Light. But he coulda died, just like you if ya keep pokin’ that head of yours.”

“Mom, grab the door handle,” he said, arriving at the bathroom. This part was the hardest, lowering her gently, slowly, without force, without anger. The plastic seat hinge had once cracked off. He’d spent two hours in the freezer.

“If you keep poking that head of yours, you’ll end up dying of skeptis, that blood disease.
You cain’t heal yourself like Quentin Collins, can you? You’re not a *Dark Shadows* werewolf, are ya?’

“Like you’d know, Mom.” He grunted. Another successful landing on the blue toilet. “Do you want help with your pants?”

“No.” She brushed him away.

Her fingers were dyed orange. Cheetos. Doritos. Cheddar Cheese Ruffles. He didn’t know. “But,” she continued, “if you keep poking that head of yours, you’ll end up just like that fat lady who tripped up Bob Barker’s steps after winning some princess diamond cut watches or a Cherry cabinet or a snow ski. They never showed any blood, but for the sake of that poor lady, why’d they leave that in?”

“Do you need anything else, mom?” he asked. His hand revisited his head, fingers tracing closer to the ooze.

“Uh,” she smacked her lips together then yelled, “I need you to quit playing with your head.” She paused. “And I need me some more toilet paper.”

“Gabriel,” he heard his father’s yell. It was distant, like it issued up the basement’s stairway mouth.

“Here,” Isaacs said, opening the cabinet under the sink and handing a roll to mom. “Just shout when you’re done.”

Before closing the bathroom door, his hand rested on the frame. “Mom,” he said, looking back at her on the toilet. “I love you.”

“Well,” she said, “I love you.” Then she added, “Gabriel.”

He closed the door.

“Ga-bri-el,” his father said, almost weirdly singing it drawn out.
The song led him to the basement stair top. Two yellow bulbs connected the diagonal staircase line, top to bottom. On the backlessness of each wooden stair, his bare foot padded toward his father’s calls. The smoothness of the polished cylinder railing was interrupted by an old fingernail scratch—a day he’d fought back. Futile. And each step he played limbo against the rafters and insulation fluff stuff. But limbo really began when he arrived at the bottom.

“Come ‘ere, Gabriel,” his father said. One bare light bulb backlit his father. The freezer lid was open, and his father’s hands curled around the accordion edge. The plastic and rubber squeaked with his father’s sweaty, ringing hands. He was giving the edge an Indian burn.

“What did I do?” Isaacs asked, patting his pocket for crackers and the flashlight. “Please, I don’t want to go back in there.”

“Come ‘ere, Gabriel,” his father repeated, chilling calmness in his voice.

The basement floor was cold against his bare feet as he walked the foundation’s cracks toward his father. His father’s shadow consumed most of the freezer, faint wings of light projecting on the freezer corners. From his pocket, his father pulled out an empty jerky bag—Jack Link’s Premium Cuts.

“You been eatin’ all my jerky?” his father asked, not looking at him.

“No, Dad,” Isaacs said. “I don’t like jerky. It’s too dry.”

“Mm-huh.” His father burped whiskey. “How you know it’d be dry if ya ain’t eatin’ it?”

“I tasted some once—”

“So, ya have eatin’ it?” His father’s eyes were wide, more alert than usual.

“No, I swear. It was some kid’s at school. I didn’t eat your jerky.”

“Well.” His father placed an arm around Isaacs. The plastic jerky wrapper edge scraped his cheek. His father shifted 180 degrees, forcing Isaacs to turn around with him almost like the
Rockettes he’d seen during a Christmas special. But there was no kicking, no Christmas, the back of the freezer against his bare heels. Across the narrow basement, scaffolding, paint cans, and the unmoved brick stack were dim outlines.

“Someone musta been eatin’ my jerky.” His father swept his free arm, displaying the room. “Ain’t nobody else here.”

“What about Mom?” Isaacs said.

It was quick. His father’s hands around his t-shirt collar and bending him belly up over the freezer edge. Teriyaki jerky whiffs and Jack Daniels in his face—Isaacs tried to grab a freezer edge. He was slipping, sliding back into the dark.

“No!” Isaacs yelled.

His father threw him onto the basement floor. The empty jerky bag brushed his shoulder.

“What’s this?” he asked, reaching into the freezer. Between his fingertips, he pinched Rat’s tail. Her white body writhed under his hand. Her whole weight suspended by the tip of her naked tail.

“Let her go,” Isaacs said. He lunged forward, knocking his father to the floor. Rat fell into the freezer again. Her nails sounded a frenzied scratch, a spider or centipede dancing in a baseboard corner. “Please don’t hurt her.”

“Her,” his father growled, brushing off his pants and standing. “You familiar with this damn thing?”

“Yes, yes.” Isaacs guarded the freezer. “She’s my friend.”

“She your friend.” His father was nodding his head. His dry lips pursed together.

“Alrighty, friend Gabriel. Ya care more about your friend or yourself?”

“What?” Behind him, Rat had stopped scurrying. She crouched in a corner.

RIDE/NNUndike/ 291
“Look at me,” his father said.

Isaacs followed the order.

“Who,” his father continued, “do you care more about? Yourself or someone else?”

“I care about you,” Isaacs whispered. “I care about Mom. I gotta help her up when she hollers—”

“You care. Well, how about you tell me again what you told the police.”

“Dad, I don’t know what you’re talking abo—”

“You were drinking tea, her special brew.”

The empty purple teapot. Of course. It always came back to her.

“Dad, that was nine years ago. You need to go upstairs and sleep it off. I can help you.”

“You cain’t help nobody.” His father stumbled forward, catching himself on the freezer edge.

Then the chill of his father’s hands wrapped around his face.

“Dad.”

“What’d you say to them—you said something—” His eyes were crusted and unfocused, his drunken head bobbing. “You said something—you didn’t say a lot—you let them take her.”

“Please, dad. That was so long—”

“You let them take her.”

“I was so young.”

“You chose you.”

Rat chittered.

“Dad.” His father’s hands left him.

“You been choosing you ever since. I bet you choose you again today.”
“Dad?”

His father walked toward the scaffolding filled with paint cans.

Tundra Black had covered and hidden the Daydream White of Eliza’s bedroom walls, a camouflage to her hair. Now, Tundra lines had leaked down the can’s cylinder. It had blacked out the logo and warnings.

“I make you a deal.” His father bent over. “I’ll never put you in that freezer again,” he picked up a brick, “if you choose you again.”

“Dad, I don’t understan—”

“It’s simple.” His father walked toward him. “You kill that rodent, and I won’t put you in the freezer ever again.”

He pushed the brick into Isaacs’ hand.

His thumb rubbed the gritty edge. “Kill?” Red clay crumbled to the ground. “No, no way, Dad.” He tried giving the brick back to his father.

His father grabbed his shoulder, directing them both to peer into the freezer.

Rat was balled in a corner. Her naked tail cradled around her body. He didn’t know if rats could shake, if she was aware, but she chattered up at him. Something was lost—he couldn’t understand her anymore. Only sharp and shrill squeaks infested his ears. He’d lost his ability to brux with her, listen to her, talk to her—her white fur darkened by his shadow.

“Be smart, Gabriel,” his father said. “You gonna choose this damn thing that’ll probably be dead soon anyway—you gonna choose that over you?”

The brick was heavy.

“No,” Isaacs said.

“No, you ain’t gonna choose it over you?” his father said, wrapping his hand around
Isaacs’ hand—the one holding the brick.

“Yes,” Isaacs whispered. A hot tear seared his cheek.

“I keep my promise,” his father said, gripping Isaacs’ hand with the brick and lifting it up. “I help you start out. You choosing you again, right? You letting Eliza go, right?”

“Yes.” Isaacs cried. “I let her go, but I won’t kill her. Dad, please, I won’t ki—”

The brick crushed. Right on top of Rat. A squeak—she was still alive. His father wound up again. But then he removed his grip—the brick’s weight fully suspended in Isaacs’ hand. It was just a shape in front of the light bulb. The force had already scraped off bits of her fur. Shaggy jags were outlined in the backlight.

“Go on,” his father said, still pressed against Isaacs. “She in pain. I keep my promise.”

“Rat,” Isaacs whispered, his voice cracking, “Rat, you understand.” There were no chitters. Just another crush into blood. The blow was final.

The freezer edge jabbed into Isaacs’ ribcage. He was almost bending to touch his toes. His father had let go. But Isaacs still did not. His fingers around the brick did not move—the fear, any change in position or pressure or space would make him feel new warmth leaving her body. Something poked like a toothpick against his thumb, a diabetic prick, an open ribcage. She almost moved, but he realized it was just her body splitting open under the weight, the river, more blood escaping.

He wondered if he had or would live his whole life here, unable to let go of the brick.

“Gabriel,” his mom’s voice from upstairs.

He felt a pat on his back.

He stiffened, holding the brick still.

“I keep my promise, son,” his father said, patting him once more. “I help your mother this
time.” Then, the familiar shuffle of heavy steps and a closed but not locked door left him in silence.

The four walls, scarred top, and brown-stained floor all too bright. The blood had nowhere to run. No drain, no angling of the floor. Straight, smooth. Maybe the brick had cracked the plastic liner. Insulated, made to keep stuff in.

Her warmth was turning cold. Her wet fur was chilling. And then he saw her foot. Five tiny tendrils of peachfuzz and toenails. All untouched by the brick.

The force of his retching made him let go of the brick. He’d turned his head to miss her, the sick dripping off his cheek.

A five toed mammal. But no thumbs. He wiped his face. A friend. Rats can’t vomit. But they have gag reflexes. All the Rats Facts returned. Soda doesn’t make rats explode. But Rat didn’t like Cherry Coke. Rats like chocolate. She loved her Milky Ways, rarely willing to share. Rats enjoy having their ears scratched. Unless it wakes her up from a nap. Rats clean themselves like cats. Six times a day. The pigmentation from her tongue colored her white fur pink. He always knew if she had bathed or not, even under the blue-wash light. No tonsils, no gallbladders, but bellybuttons and near blind.

“You help?” Muhan repeated, breaking Isaacs from the brick.

“I—” Isaacs said to the family. Swirls of possible responses filled him. He “might” offered no commitment, the uncertainty as good as a slapping “no.” He “could” or “would” showed only the conditional in a land scarred by broken, forgotten future promises. He “should” was just a prescription, a bumper sticker, a refrigerator magnet of change.

Finally, standing up and imagining his request to XO, Isaacs formed his response. “I can help you.”
Muhan tilted his head up. “You yes?” he asked.

“Yes, I will,” Isaacs said, thanking them for the dinner and approaching the door. “I will choose you.”

Rat facts also said rats prefer cage mates, and mischief is a group of rats. Mischief is Rat and a human both chasing and eating fireflies. Mischief is Isaacs training Rat to jump off his thigh and sleep against his neck. Mischief is Isaacs training Rat to chew with her mouth closed. And mischief is Rat training Isaacs to love.

Tin Jimenez 4—July 1

Red eyes stared down at Tin. Morning light flooded through he and Mami’s bamboo window, one the storm had blown open. Mangled palms and twigs and green slippy gunk like seaweed had come through the window during sleep. Now, in fresh, morning calm, a red-crested Cotinga bird perched in the open window’s bamboo hollow. Its red eyes pierced down at Tin as if saying, “Get up, un huevón, you lazy bum.” Cotinga played hopscotch on the bamboo cylinders like demonstrating how alive things should move in morning time. It hopped on one leg, the other curled under its grey breast. There was no song it sang.

“You’re hurt,” Tin whispered. He sat up and threw off the sheet, poor excuse for bed. On normal mornings, sizzling egg smell or hot chocolate steam would fill the air. But this morning, Mami’s wrapped door stayed locked. No hog’s breath snoring came from her room—she had to be awake. Tin wondered if door stayed locked because she couldn’t face his sangre del Diablo, his no-good Devil blood proving too much for morning time. He couldn’t face her either. Those blood-stained eyes, that stolen memory of Diego, the wrapped door lock, ugly, locked, red box and its mystery.
“Come on, bird.” Tin put out his finger. “Get on.”

Cotinga kept playing one-legged hopscotch, playing hard to get, playing ignore him.

“You silly thing,” Tin said, lifting the bird with both hands. “No time for games. I hurt my Mami. I stole from her mind. I have an apology to paint.”

Tin’s paint room suffered no damage, canvas of no-eyed Mami untouched. From his pockets, he dug out all three blue paint tubes and tossed them with his other supplies.

“So, what’s wrong with you,” Tin asked Cotinga, releasing it onto the dirt. Its hops scratched out a line, like it was spelling its history.

“Is it broken?” Tin flipped open his mud container around his waist. “That storm was scary.” Only two fingers needed mud and a thin stripe over his belly. “You were outside for it? Do you have a family? Do you have a mami? Are you a mami?”

Cotinga kept jumping around, the most energetic creature Tin’d ever seen—other than the lizards at Cascada Rosa fish feast, of course.

“Stop moving,” he said. “I got to touch your leg.” He reached for Cotinga, but it hopped just beyond his fingers. Tin tried two hands at once, but Cotinga dodged both.

“Look, you came to me, remember?” Cotinga paused, like it was listening and obeying. Tin’s muddy fingers crept closer and closer, looking like this time Cotinga would stay still, but then it bounced away again. A song, a taunt chirped out. “You tease!” Tin laughed. They played tag and catch for a while longer until Cotinga stayed still, maybe bored or tired or in too much pain, leaving Tin to scoop up the feather ball.

“Okay, this may hurt, but I need to touch your leg.” One finger against the skinny, hollow leg, and Tin was in the storm. Lightening and black thunderclaps and flying backwards away
from the bush—Cotinga had pumped her wings not faster than the wind-speed sky. Then, it came from a distant dot to a wide-spread palm branch. Smack—Cotinga saw the muddy ground in circles as she spun to the earth.

Her hollow bone had cracked inside her leg scales, a ragged-edged line from one side to the other. Tin felt the pain, his own leg broken, like bone sawed in half, marrow opening up in spongy patterns. And then, Tin felt something else, but on his shoulder, someone was pulling him.

“Qué rara,” Emiliano said, yanking Tin’s shoulder. The healing was not complete, and Tin was still connected mentally, physically when Emiliano grabbed Cotinga out of his hands. In his cousin’s other hand was a chameleon, legs squirming, running in place.

“How weird,” Emiliano repeated, his fingers imprisoning Cotinga. Her heart was fast, blood circulating waterslides, talons clutching fear onto Emiliano’s hand, the leg still not healed. Emiliano’s thumb strokes smoothed the bird’s grey feathers, but not the wild flounce of red plumes atop her head, a headdress at Carnival. Her eyes pierced red and alert like she knew. The chameleon shot out its long tongue, sticking to Emiliano’s cheek.

“Yuck!” he yelled, dropping the lizard. It scampered into the jungle. “Oh well, we have this to play with now.” He shook Cotinga.

“Emiliano, I’m healing her!”

“Good, so you’re already playing the game.”

“I’m not playing your stupid torture game,” Tin said. “Cotinga’s already broken, so just let me heal her.”

“You don’t tell me what to do, Devil Blood.”

“Stop calling me that!”
“Listen, I’ll share its blood with you for the eyes of your Mami.” Emiliano pointed to the painting with the red dancing plumes of the bird.

“Mami’s eyes are brown,” Tin insisted, remembering last night’s blood, his stealing. “Not blood red. Give me the bird!”

“No, let’s see what else we can break.”

“I’m not playing, you Culicagao.”

“You want me to tell your Mami you stole paint again? I saw you yesterday, remember?”

“Carlos and I had a deal. You don’t know anything.”

“Really?” Emiliano said. “Why did you take that blue tube when Carlos wasn’t looking?”

Tin swallowed. There was pressure around his shoulders, transference from Emiliano’s grip around Cotinga.

“I bet if your Mami and I asked Carlos,” Emiliano continued, “he will be missing a blue tube.”

“You don’t know anything. Everyone hates you, you Culicagao.”

“Okay, I’m going to tell your Mami.” Emiliano turned.

“No! Yes, I took it. I don’t even know why. I just did.”

“So, you stole from him? That’s not very good, Tin. That sounds bad.” Emiliano smirked.

“Are you bad?”

“Stop pretending you care about Carlos. Leave the bird alone. She’s scared.”

Emiliano stepped forward.

“Don’t,” Tin said. “You know what Tío Fernando will do to you if you touch me.”

“Shut up,” Emiliano said, looking at Cotinga. “I don’t even need to touch you, right? You’re together already. Connected or something. I’ve been watching you.”
“You’re a creep.”

“Just like everyone else—”

“Give me Cotinga,” Tin insisted. “Get out of here. I’m trying to help you. You know if I told my Mami, you’d visit the wax palms again.”

Emiliano exhaled. “Shut up about that!” Quick like playing Jacks, Emiliano pulled one, two, three plumes from Cotinga’s head. She shook her head and pecked Emiliano’s knuckles.

Tin touched his head, hair still there with the pain of follicles ripped out.

“Stop it, bird,” Emiliano shook the bird, violent. “We’re trying to have a conversation.”

“I’m not doing it. You’re a Culicagao. I’m not bad like you.”

With that speech, Emiliano flipped up and twisted her right wing backward. She screamed sharp and ragged.

“Stop it!” Tin screamed. He felt her hollow frame snap in himself and wanted to cry.

“You are evil. You won’t even help this bird—”

“I was trying—”

“What does that make you, Devil Blood?”

Tin started to feel it all, especially as Emiliano came closer. The tickle-pound—which pre-started a nightmare headache—rested in the thatch of his mind. Blood rushed to Cotinga’s injury as the bird’s body tried to heal herself.

“Emiliano, why do you do this?” Tin debated how much he could do for her. A broke wing was like a mangled human body, one-third of the human body crushed. But, Cotinga could recover. Not everything was lost.

Emiliano cracked the bones in the other wing, shattering them in a balled fist like crunching graham crackers in plastic sack. Tin doubled over in pain.
“Emiliano, stop it!” Tin clutched his side. “Stop it—she can’t breathe!”

Laughing, Emiliano opened his palm and rocked the dying and flightless Cotinga side to side.

“So, you want to help it now? Can you heal it now?”

Cotinga had just lost her flight—flightless forever now, never again to look down from above. But, life, life was still there. Still alive.

“Give me Cotinga.”

“Tell me, what hurts you most? What could kill you?” Emiliano plucked a few more red plumes and then threw them down.

“Give me Cotinga,” Tin said, nightmare headache growing stronger.

“What about this?” Emiliano began jabbing his finger into her chest. Her head and thin legs curved up with each pressure.

Tin felt small nail indentations in his own chest. Air escaped, and the bird slowly turned into a balloon creature, deflating, deflating.

“Now, Emiliano, give,” Tin gasped, “bird.”

“I found it. There’s the spot. My father will be proud of me.” And suddenly, Emiliano shoved the bird’s head into his mouth and bit down.

Tin screamed and fell to his knees.

Something wet and soft hit Tin’s cheek. The head of the red-crested Cotinga rolled beside Tin. Dust clung to the wet underneath. Her blood eyes stayed open.

“Well, that didn’t kill you.” Emiliano sputtered bird plumes out of his mouth. “But, you know you could have saved it. You could have just played the game.” With eyes closed and steady breathing again, Tin had lost connection. Never had it gone that far. All the birds, mice,
chameleons had left alive. Today, Emiliano ripped life out, and Tin had let him. Today, Tin felt useless. He’d hurt his Mami. He’d let Cotinga die. Death was on his shoulders, and Emiliano was right.

But Tin could not ride mules in circles forever—Emiliano always came like tropical rain, sudden and fierce. He could creep in doorways everyday forever with new birds, chameleons, mice if he wanted. Tin saw no end, no good, and now death was there—heal animals after their torture or feel them die. Or telling his Mami or his English tutor or Abuelo Pedro was a third option. But Emiliano was right. It wasn’t just about Emiliano not going to the wax palms anymore. It was the jungle whispers, the market looks, the tortured memories of all pain. His sangre del Diablo was doing something to him, changing him. He’d seen it when making Mami cry blood tears. That something violent shook in him as a fourth option appeared.

Tin could hurt Emiliano. He could put his bare hands on Emiliano and make pain. He could cut Emiliano, burn him, make agonizing bubbles in his blood, slow his heart, make his bones crunch, make his arms crippled, steal his air. Tin was capable of all these things. The thought scared him.

“You know I may be a Culicagao,” Emiliano said, “but this is your fault today. You’re an evil no good—you’re Devil Blood.” And with that, Emiliano left the thatch, throwing decapitated Cotinga into the trees.

There was too much quiet in the room with Tin and the stolen paint. Sangre del Diablo, Devil blood coursed through him, swirling and playing with his nightmare head. How could he bleed himself? How could he be good? How could he ever read red box’s mystery? Mami no tiene ojos, Mami doesn’t have eyes—at least she couldn’t see his Devil blood. But his devil tears flowed. He ran out the room, away from the bird, bird head bleeding.
Corazoncito tonto, Tin thought. His stupid, little heart beat faster with each step toward his hiding place. It was not really hidden, just a grown-up place he could be invisible. Vallanato rhythms and chatter from El Tucán Restaurante trailed out back toward the woven-sacks of garbage. Rotting chicken bones and rinds of several scooped papayas bled out of the sacks. Calf blood and blackened rice covered the untiled floor in red-black splotches. Tin sat in a splotch. Folding his knees and rocking, he cried like Mami with the honey. Drunk songs and imagined Cumbia steps roared above his devil tear noise.

Red paint had marred his brown skin from yesterday’s painting. Tin rubbed his palm lines, spitting on himself. He rubbed and rubbed harder into the staining paint. Then he started scratching. Hot friction of his palms to start a fire. Red dirtied the red.

From the container at his waist, he cupped wet mud. He rubbed it under his shirt over his stomach and on his bloody hands. Then, he remembered Mami’s fire eyes, worried he’d healed himself. He had thought about it before but never tried. He’d been cutting tomatoes, supper for Mami and him, their slippery red skin. The knife slipped, and he’d wondered. But Mami’d wrapped the wound closed before he could try. He had to wait for skin to re-grow like normal. That slow process of recovery. Another time, he’d wanted to connect his broken rib bones from Emiliano’s kick. Tin couldn’t lay down to cloud watch for weeks as his body bruised and healed. He’d even offered to heal Emiliano’s bloody ear after Tío Fernando uprooted the nail pinning Emiliano to the wax palm.

Another thought then attacked Tin’s mind. He’d wondered it before, too. Mami worried about him healing himself for some reason, but could he hurt himself? Could he hurt his corazonzito tonto, stupid, little heart?
Mud smeared on his shirt when he wiped it from his hands. Step one was to remove the mud—have his hands be bare. Step two was to touch. He pressed against his chest. His palms pushed hard on his ribcage, left just above his thump-beat-beat, thump-beat-beat.

_Pare_, he thought, telling it to stop.

“Pare,” he then whispered, more pressing.

“Pare, pare, pare,” into thump-beat-beat, thump-beat-beat, thump-beat-beat.

“Pare,” he started shouting, his thin body rocking fiercely against the stone back wall.

“Pare,” he screamed. His small, balled fist crashed above his heart. Curved knuckles smashed and molded into his bruising skin. He ignored his own blood rushing to defend the injury. This was about stopping sangre del Diablo.

“Pare! Pare! Pare!” he screamed.

“Pare,” he said low now, his fist fell to the ground.

_No puedo hacer nada_, he thought. Realization sank in, no hurting, no helping. _No puedo hacer nada_. _No puedo hacer nada_. He could do nothing. He could do nothing.

“Tin, mijo?” Mami’s voice came from El Restaurante’s backdoor.

“Mami, stay away,” Tin said. He pushed his bleeding palm into the air. Blood wasn’t tearing from her eyes. She crouched down. Her dress was so white, clean of Devil blood.

“Tin.” She folded him between her arms, fat and warm.

“Mami, I’m sorry,” he cried, “I didn’t know it’d hurt you, honest.”

“I’m glad you’re safe.” She pushed harder. “You need to stop running away.”

“I’m sorry for everything.”

“Why did you do it, mijo?” Two rips quick, she pulled white strands from her dress. She unclenched his hand from her dress and began wrapping the scratched flesh.
“Because I’m no good.”

“Who told you that?” She wrapped a careful and tight knot in the center of his palm.

“Angelica, Emiliano, Del Real, Jorge, Minca.” He paused. “You.”

“Me? When did I say you’re not good?”

“Last night, when you wrapped your lock—you wrapped it from me.”

Silence stretched between them, only vibrations of Cumbia roar. It sounded like someone stumbled over a chair. “Sometimes people need space, even mamis.”

“Why’d you tell people about my healing lines closing?”

“Because I’m scared for you.”

“You’re not scared of me, then?”

“I love you.”

“I know, Mami. And I used my no-good on you. I’m so sorry.”

“Listen, I’m here, right?” Mami started. “I know that even special boys make mistakes.”

Her head swiveled left and right.

Tin followed her sightline, looking with her. “I don’t think it was a mistake though. I’m just not good.” No one was nearby.

“Well, how do you think you can be good then?”

“I have to heal. That’s why you can’t close my lines.”

“Okay, who do you want to heal?”

“The world.” Tin gestured with arms wide.

Mami laughed. “So specific.”

“Mami, this is my life.” He stared at her collarbone scar. “This is real.”

“I know, love.” She stroked his cowlick. “It’s my life too, remember?”
He rubbed her puckery line of scar tissue. “Will you tell me again?”

“You know it makes me sad.”

“But I don’t want to forget,” he insisted.

She removed his hand from the scar.

She told him again how the men in half-bandanas entered the Cartagena bus when she searched for his father. She explained how they waved their guns in air and yelled for the passengers’ money. They came to each seat with a plain, black hat. One man got a face-full of gun when he didn’t have enough money. His hairy flesh of sideburns wiped inside the window.

Mami sat behind him, her ears full of ring, and the red sliding pressed on her mind. She thought the men would kill them all. One man cleared all the seats, but the man with the warm gun started yelling at the women. He told them to remove their bras. He knew women stuffed phones, lipstick, and most of their money in their bras. Some women unsnapped with no delay. Others got gun smacked but not killed.

Mami sat still and stared at the red sliding. She really thought they would kill them all once they collected the money. The man with the warm gun yelled at her to remove her bra. Mami ignored him. He called her bad names and other words and wiggled the death gun in front of her face. She sat still with pursed lips. He turned his back to her to look at another difficult woman. Then, she jumped on his back. She told Tin how she beat the palm of her hand into his skull, disorienting. Her fingernails scratched around to his eyes. She pressed and pressed into the gooey glob of his right eye. It was like scraping the innards of a grape, she told him. Tin always paused here, scared of her ability to paint real with her words. But she continued, story not done. The man screamed, throwing Mami off of him. He covered his right eye, blood like a small waterfall.
Mami never even saw the knife when it started to cut her. With his bloody hand, the man grabbed her hair and pulled her screaming to carve her more clearly. Pressure started from her shoulder to her collarbone to her throat. She remembered asking him why, why he needed her tiny sum. He said he’d take the sum but not her life if she obeyed immediately. And then unsnap, she joined the rest of the women and gave the man her money. It was 20,000 pesos, baby money to get from Barranquilla to Santa Marta if that bus broke. The man laughed at her, covering his eye, and tried to lift her shirt to see if she hid more money. But the two other men yelled at him to leave. Before the man left, he said back to Mami that he’d let her live this time, but even God requires an eye for an eye.

She got off the bus in Barranquilla, two hours away from Santa Marta, and stayed with Abuelo Pedro that night. Her nails were always cut short after that day. She wouldn’t let anyone paint them but herself. One bad night on that Cartagena bus took two months of honey to heal and a lifetime old scar.

“What did you say it was called again?” Tin asked.

“Self-defense,” she said, making a father-son-holy ghost cross over her body.

“Are you okay, Mami?”

“I will be,” she said low.

“Thank you for telling me. I don’t want to forget.”

“Sometimes,” she whispered then cleared her throat. “Tin, what memory did you see?”

“I’m sorry again, okay?”

“Just tell me, miyo.”

He sighed. “Diego, when he gave you the red box, the paper inside—”

“Did you read it?” She leaned toward his face.
“No, I couldn’t see it.”

“Tin, you have to promise you’ll stop distrusting me. Your Papi left it for me to decide when you’re ready—”

“But I’m ready—”

“No, you’re not.” She twisted the heart-shaped key between pinched fingers. “Last night, if anything, told me you weren’t.”

Tin sighed, rolling his eyes.

“You can roll your eyes, mijo. But I love you and am protecting you.” She looked left and right again.

“Then, why did you ever tell me that story about the scar?”

“Because you asked, mijo. And you need to know that violence for self-defense is something different, something okay, sometimes even necessary.”

“Why won’t you tell me about Diego. Did I make him go? He left because he knew about Devil blood.”

“No. He left to protect you.” She patted his hand. “He left because he loved you even more than I do.”

They sat with Cumbia and sweat.

After a while, Tin spoke, “I would have healed you.”

“I know,” she said, rubbing his shoulders, “and that’s what makes you good.”

She kissed his forehead.

“I’m too old for that now,” he said, wiping the kiss away. “And don’t you dare touch my cowlick.” She had licked her thumb in preparation.

“Okay, come on.” She pulled him to his feet and looked behind her. “We need to go to
Barranquilla.”

Tin paused, wondering if she’d tell him about conversation with Gisela, about running away from Americanos. “Why?”

“To visit Abuelo Pedro.”

“Why?”

“I need to care for him. His gout is back.”

“Again?”

“Yes, mio. It’s chronic. Marina and Luiciana went to Cartegena to visit Diana, so it’s easier if I’m around the house. You know he can’t cook.”

“He cooked me soup once.”

“He heated up Marina’s soup. Doesn’t count.” She smiled.

“Mami.” Tin paused. “I think I can heal him now because of Hippoman.”

“Well, we’ll see.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we’ll see.”

“Healing Abuelo’s the only reason we’re going to Barranquilla?”

“If by healing, you mean caring for him, then—”

“But that’s the only reason?”

Mami paused, looking back at Tin.

“Of course, mio, that and his stories you like.”

“He’s crazy.” No red blinking light was in the distance, but still that red eye lit his mind.

“By the way,” Mami began, walking in front of Tin, “it’ll be nice to be away from Emiliano, that little shit knows nothing.”
Tin’s burst of laughter pained his pare-beaten chest.

Cumbia beats played on, and they left. But Tin noticed something on Mami while walking behind her. The calf’s blood from the floor had stained her dress white-to-red all down the back. It was a long stripe, like a skinned animal side.

She looked like she was bleeding to death.

***

As Mami packed in the main thatch, Tin crept back to the paint room along the dirt trail, looking behind him in case of Emiliano. Culicagao not present, Tin entered without fear. Painting now dry, he unpinned the painting from stiff canvas, rolled it tightly, and tied it in plastic bags. He shoved the paint supplies into his pack and then placed the rolled painting in, too. Light caught a blue edge of the stolen tube. Tin pushed it farther into the pack, into darkness. But, next to him was another reminder, the severed bird head. Only a small pool of blood had leaked out of it, the amount seemed too insignificant to warrant the bird’s death. All of its red plumes sagged to floor, but its red eyes were still open. There was judgment and blame for the now silent bird song. Tin blinked against tears. He scooped up the bird head and ran outside. He ripped through surrounding jungle. Leaves bigger than his head beat back like swinging doors. Something scratched his knuckles, but Tin dug in darkness, only pale glows of light seeping over the thatch top.

“Looking for this,” the voice of Emiliano whispered behind him.

Tin turned to see the bird body dangling by one broken wing.

“Emiliano, give it to me.” Tin stood up against his giant cousin.

“You freak. Why do you want something so strange?”

“None of your business.”
“Tell me, and I’ll give it to you.”

“I need it to experiment.”

“You gonna fry it up like tiny deditos?”

“No! I’m gonna heal her. Make her come alive again. So there, I told you.” Tin held out his hand.

Emiliano smirked. “You can buy it from me.”

“You said—”

“Yeah, I said. But now, you can buy it from me.”

“I don’t have any money. You know that.”

“You can do a dance or sing a song or I have these annoying peck marks on my finger.”

“You know why you got those. You know what you did.”

Wind blew in the sunsetting day.

“Okay, I’ll just make the bird do a dance.” He outspread the bird’s wings and wiggled the headless body in the air.

“Emiliano! Why are you so disgusting? Tío’s fists are bad but—”

He stopped the dance. “My finger really fucking hurts, Devil Blood.”

Tin stepped back. “If I heal you, you’ll give me the bird body?”

“Yes.”

“And stop calling me ‘Devil Blood’?”

“Can’t promise that.”

“Then, no deal.”

“Fine, I’ll stop.”

“You promise?”
“Yes.”

“Sit down then.” Tin unclasped the mud container around his waist. “Put Cotinga down.”

“How do I know you’re not just going to grab—”

“Sit down.”

Emiliano shrugged and sat crisscross on the floor, the bird’s body at his side.

Tin rose his shirt to smear fresh mud on his belly. Then between each finger and palm line, mud settled for another healing. Deep breath and deep breath to calm his furious heart. Between his two muddy hands, he took the peck-marked hand of Emiliano and surrounded it as best he could like a cave. He closed his eyes.

He saw himself and the canvas Mami behind him. Bird was still alive, and Emiliano plucked two, three, four red plumes from the bird’s head. Glee, instant glee, rushed into Emiliano’s body with each violent pluck of plumes. Then with a nip, nip, nip, Tin felt the brief pain, small, almost a playful tapping from the bird to Emiliano. Tin knew what came next, so he tugged away from scene and furrowed his brow to slip-slide back up from the mind to the worst part, the healing process. But, these pricks grew back together as fast as a blink. A blink that absorbed more energy than he expected. Then, when Tin felt the alignment of everything puzzle-right, the four cuts of skin cleaned and hewn together, he broke the connection and fell into dirt.

A crumpled, little thing, he lifted his head from the dirt and wiped his muddy hands on his shirt. Tin felt his eyes roll back in his head heavy. It was the only healing of the day. Three peck marks should not have pulled much energy. The change, Pinto, Mami, Cotinga.

“Oh, shit,” Emiliano said, twisting his healed hand all round in front of face. “It almost is clay, like…” He smelled his finger. “Yeah, it smells like clay. Shit!”

Tin swallowed, scratchy throat. “Bird, Emiliano.”
“No way. I’ll keep this as insurance when I get hurt again. I’m going to go climb that tree now. You know, the giant behind *El Tucán.*”

“Emiliano, not the deal!” Heat formed on the back of Tin’s neck. No more, none, no more circle mule-games with Emiliano.

Emiliano scooped the bird body into his hand, all healed. He shook the body like a stuffed doll. “It’ll be the deal now if you want this back, Devil Blood.”

Tin exploded.

He didn’t know how he tackled his cousin. But he took him down and straddled him. With bare palms, he pushed and pushed hard into Emiliano’s chest. Slowing, slowing, Tin felt the lungs cramp and begin to wither like dead palms. Emiliano’s arms and legs twitched, and his eyes bulged in silence. A perfect oval of his mouth formed but no air could go in or out. It was the quietest Emiliano had ever been. Tin almost laughed. Purple and red painted Culicagao’s face. Blood rushed to fill his eyes. Quiet thump, the bird body dropped from Emiliano’s hand, but Tin kept pushing. He felt Emiliano’s heart not able to take much more as oxygen backups lowered, deflated, collapsed. For a flicker, he wanted to keep pushing and take it all, but he remembered Hippoman’s ball and cup—always keep the ball in the cup.

Tin broke connection. He grabbed the released bird body and jumped up. A quick rush like water coming to the surface, Emiliano took his first breath again and then the coughing fit began. Tin shoved the bird body and head in his pack and then ran to the door. Emiliano was coughing, coughing—Tin saw what he’d done.

He ran, ran fast into emerging moonlight. The pack shuffled side to side and beat his back. Dirt kickup trailed him to Mami’s bamboo home.

She folded clothes and stacked them on the heart box in her pack. Tin jumped onto the
bed next to her pack. He punched his face into her pillow.

“Mijo, why is your mud on your hands?”

“Because I healed someone,” he mumbled into the pillow.

“Tin! We just talked about this. It’s too late for that—”

“I know it’s too late for me.”

“Who? How do you feel? Was there blood?”

“No, I’m just tired.”

“Who was it? Just now?”

“It was,” Tin paused, “a chameleon.”

“Again?”

“Yes.” He sighed.

“No faintness? No hunger?” She grabbed his shoulder and rolled him over. Squeezing his mouth, she peered inside.

“Mami, I’m fine!” He jerked his chin away. “I’m just thirsty.”

She left and re-entered with a water glass.

“Tin, you’ve got to stop. These rules are important.”

“I understand,” he spoke into the glass, amplifying his voice. “I’m too tired to talk.”

She rubbed his shoulder as he drank then slapped a mosquito bloody, making a satisfactory, “Ah-ha!”

“Mijo, look at this one,” she bragged, poking his back. “It’s the most blood I’ve seen in a mosquito before.”

“Mami.” He scooped off the backpack shoulder straps. “That’s gross.”

“But, mijo, look.” She posed her shoulder with the blood smatter. The black blood was
thumb nail sized, almost as wide as the bloody eyes of Emiliano. Tin turned away.

“Impressed?”

“Can I sleep in here tonight?”

She hesitated. “I think—” She wiped her shoulder off and continued folding clothes. “I think it’d be better if I made you a bed in the main room again.”

“But I said I was sorry. I won’t do it again.”

“I know, mijo. But we need some good rest for travel tomorrow.”

“So, the main room?”

“Yes, go wash your hands and stomach. No more mud in the sheets.”

He sighed. The pump outside spilled water into his palms. Behind him, he checked to see if Emiliano was storming to punch off his face. But somehow he knew that Emiliano would not be a problem anymore. Somehow he knew Emiliano would be afraid of him now. Tin’s hands shook, like they were afraid too, under the warm water. It was all new: The pain transference from patient to Tin. The heat plaguing his neck. The attack. Even the ability to reverse the healing he and the mud could do, leaving him with the ability to kill.

He shivered under night sweat, typical of a Colombian summer. Even God needed to go dark once a day. Self-defense. He cupped water onto his belly and washed the mud away.

Then, he understood the mud, understood how he’d hurt Mami, how he’d hurt Emiliano. It was like he and the mud could work together to heal, to help. But, he without the mud could only hurt. The hurt, the violence, then, was in him and him alone. Again, Emiliano was right. He was no good, sangre del Diablo. And he hurt even more with the realization that the strongest emotion he experienced during the suffocation of Emiliano was not heat like in anger or annoyance or need for control out of fear, guilt, power or even lingering pangs of sadness or
pain. It was glee, complete unadulterated, unabashed glee.

Sara Blake 4—June 27

*Hurt me,* Lynx had repeated, and it was so dark on the way to hurt them, the way to the McCalister mansion. Sara and Lynx had wandered round Ijams Nature Center until Lynx calmed down enough to get home. After Sara’d dropped Lynx into a stained-sheet twin bed with Aunt still radiating snores, she took a paring knife and pocketed it. For a second before she left, she wondered about telling Aunt, about those kit-swab things on cop shows, about McCalisters lying about knowing the police force and shit or people lying to her in general, wondered about Daddy with the pain, any pain, about Alfonso, about Ian.

Jimmied images of McCalisters’ bedtime routines stormed each stomp toward the old Bakerfield mansion off 332 where the taxi zipped away. Where she imagined Clayton shelling out bullets and mowing down video game graphics, she discovered him clicking knitting needles like little Red’s granny. He swayed with the oscillating motion in his crisscross sitting, sinking down and bouncing up on a trampoline. A yellow yarn ball, stark again trampoline blackness and twilight sky, kept rolling around the dip of his folded legs. From behind her spying spot of a front evergreen tree, she turned toward the manor, peering all Christmas Carol through the unfrosted glass.

Where she imagined Mark jacking off to a 72 inch money shot, she viewed the exhilarating climax of yellow highlighter traveling from one side of a textbook to the other. Even the cap between his lips and his furrowed brow sparked off vibes more nursery school than sexual. His prostrate posture with crossed, swinging ankles reminded her of Joan and Meriwether. It became the only way they’d stopped squirming and listen to Sara’s or Lena’s
gimmicked up bedtime tales.

Where she imagined Carter mangling a blood steak, its juices dripping onto his crunching abs, she spectated his solitary ping pong match. From a floral vase, he plucked ball after ball, tapping them against the table before working on his serve. Mark paused his swinging ankles and turned toward Carter. Apparently, something smart ass escaped his lips for Carter threw the rubbery paddle and struck Mark’s back. Mark grimaced before his middle finger danced in the air, and then they both returned to their respective spheres.

No parents, no money makers existed in their fairy tale realm tonight.

Rubbing the smooth side of the paring blade still in her pocket, Sara emerged from behind the evergreen. Stay cool and just talk was the plan like a cobra snake. Maybe even charm a little before striking.

“Who’s that?” Clayton asked, his needle clicking paused.

“Remember me?” She approached the trampoline edge and fumbled onto it. Howls almost escaped her throat when the springs pinched her. Waning three quarter moon tonight. No werewolves yet.

“What are you doing?” He searched his jeans pockets probably for his phone but didn’t find it. “What do you want?”

“I just wanna talk.” She tried to scoot back to the edge, but his center weight kept sliding her toward him. “What are you making?”

He stretched the yarn, the beginnings of a yellow baby cap. “Why are you here?”

Cool waves of cicada sex licked summer air.

“I saw you getting really drunk in the tower like you didn’t want to be there.”

He wrapped another thread round and glanced at the mansion.
“I’ve see people drink like that a lot,” she said. “They all do it for the same reason.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“To forget. To erase.” Her hand rest against the pocketed knife. “Why are you with them? Why don’t you turn them in or anything?”

Clayton scoffed. “Is this why you’re here? To convert me?” He pushed away from her but not off the trampoline.

“No.” Sara shook her head. “I’m just trying to understand.”

Clayton paused, needles down. His eyes couldn’t meet hers. It was like very few people had said words to him like that, had tried to understand. He shook his head. “They’re my brothers.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

“What?”

“Do you like it like they do?”

“No.” He rubbed his hands. The needles were loose against the black top. “Not at all.”

“Then why don’t you—”

“Why are you here?”

“Do you believe in fate?” Sara’s hands slid toward the needles.

He grabbed up both needles then shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“I knew a girl who believed in fate to her core.”

He slid the needles against each other. Their bodies hardly made a sound.

“She believed the universe eventually coughs up justice. Could be swift, like a newborn murderer all slashed up and crunched in a car accident the next day. Could take decades, like a patient mother housing and feeding her daughter’s rapist in a soundproof basement for thirty,
forty, fifty years, and all that time no souls spoke a word to the rapist who forgot how to speak. After all, what is the punishment for rape?”

Clayton shifted up the trampoline toward the edge. “Lena, I don’t know what’s—”

“How do you know that name?” Sara asked. “Did you call me?”

“No, I don’t know your number.” He paused. “Isn’t that your name? Was I that drunk? It’s that what—”

“Tell me.” She scooted toward him, sinking lower in the middle. “What do you think the worst crime is?”

He rotated the needles like a spear. “Why does this—”

“Is it killing? Is it really? Because people can die and still be alive, don’t you think?

“I guess, but—”

“But, where is the resuscitation for rape? Where is the everyday smile she wears? Where is the uncomfortable, conformist laughter rape jokes provoke, abuse jokes, victim blame jokes, pedophile jokes? Where is—”

“You’re not right. You need to get back.” He slipped close to the springs and pointed the needles at her chest. “You’re not—”

Sara ripped the needles from his hands and pointed them back.

His eyebrows shot up, and he scrambled close to the edge.

“Don’t you dare get off this fucking trampoline.”

He tried slipping off the edge, but her bouncing jumbled his balance, and he slid toward the middle. Quick she straddled him, both jostling with metal creaks, bouncing bed springs.

“What the fuck is this?” He eyed both needles until she tossed them over the edge. He almost sighed relief until Aunt’s paring knife shone brilliant despite night.
“Woah, no—”

“Everyone should know,” she said, “don’t you think?”

“You’re insane.”

She grinned then slashed his throat. His hands flew to the slit, gripping the blood back in. During his preoccupation, Sara wedged up his polo and rubbed the teenage chest, little acne and no hair except for a happy trail. Blank canvas.

“So,” she started, “I must carve you right. Can’t push too gently or it won’t scar. But, can’t push too deep or I’ll cut your insides out. I know you don’t know this.” His gurgles muffled any calls for help. “But there’s beauty in restraint.” The knife tip folded into his skin and then blurred in darkness when clouds splatted over moon. “Fuck it.” She jabbed the blade in and pulled a clean line down.

The gurgles grew louder.

“The curves will be more difficult,” she said then bit her tongue. To her surprise, the “R” rounded out nicely with the sliced, angled line.

A wet hand slapped her face, blood taste smear on her lips.

“None of that,” she said, dodging his next swipe. The “A” formed quick with three deep stripes.

Seconds before she started the “P,” his bloody hand spiraled up her hair waves before the ripping.

“Get out of my hair,” she screamed. “No one touches my hair!”

He pulled her toward his mouth. His teeth’s spit against her cheek.

“Trying to bite me?” Her thumb drowned in blood as she dug it into his neck slice. Both his hands returned to the slash, and she carved up the “P.” Blood sticky hair caught against her
sundress back with a flick.

“I’m conflicted,” she said, hearing voices and a back door open. “Should I write ‘RAPIST, RAPIST, I AM A RAPIST’ or ‘RAPE, RAPE, THE MUSICAL FUN, THE MORE YOU RAPE, THE MORE YOU RUN’ or ‘RAPE, RAPE, I RAPE MY DATES. HOW MANY DATES CAN A RAPEMAN RAPE’?” A train sounded in the distance, something barreling atop the gravel hill tracks behind their mansion. “How much rape can a body handle?” She reeled the knife back, popping her shoulder blade, and then someone gripped her wrist, shaking the blade from her hand. Mark yanked her back while Carter slid Clayton off the trampoline.

“ Fucking bitch!” Mark yelled.

“I’ll get him to UT Med,” Carter called, running a draped Clayton toward the front yard. “Don’t let her leave—wait, he’s saying something.”

“Who gives a shit what he’s saying,” Mark yelled. “Help him!”

“Miss me?” Sara laughed. Mark slapped her into trampoline center.

“Cut,” Clayton sputtered, “cut her hair.” They disappeared to the front and roared away.

“Can do,” Mark said, licking his lips. “Will do.”

She kicked away from center, stretching toward the edge.

“No way, whore.” Mark sprung onto the metal side. His hand engulfed her ankle and tugged her body back to middle. “We’re just getting started.”

“What? Your ‘quaking’? Your clichés?”

“Nah, we’ll throw out clichés today.” Thick thighs pressed tight against her hips. “Ever heard the saying ‘Don’t hit a girl’? That’s a cliché.”

She tried bucking up her hips and jutting him off. But, the low-hanging trampoline belly just cradled them closer with humping bounces.
Mark laughed. “Baby, baby, we’re not getting frisky tonight.” He backhanded her.

Blood tickled her nose hairs. The line slipped past her lips. Between cicada swells and a train blare, it dripped onto the dewy black like forming a wax seal.

“Why’d you do that to him?” His gripping fingers offered cool-like-aloe touch. But then, he rotated his hand all Indian burn around her sun scalded upper arm.

“Hit me,” she said, biting her lip with the pain, “but don’t kill me.”

“It’s no fun if you tell me what to do.” He released her arm.

“Fine. Don’t hit me.” She sighed. “Oh, please, strong man, don’t hurt me cause we’re Leeeaving On a Jet Plane. I don’t know when I’ll be back again. LEEEAVING ON A JET PLANE.”

“Don’t sing that shit. Shut your—”

“Don’t you get it? You were there.”

“I said don’t sing that shit.”

“Does that upset you?” The three studs of Orion’s Belt shined down at her. He had never dropped his hunter skirt. Boxers or briefs.

“No,” Mark whispered, sliding his hands against her forearms and dragging her arms above her head. “But I know why you’re here.”

“Yeah, tough man?” She poked a spring’s interior.

“Yeah.” Mark leaned closer, breath against Sara’s cheek. “Because of that retard.”

“You disgust—” Warm hand clapped over her mouth. Mark’s other hand dug behind her back. Ripping, tearing, he turned her dress, her body following onto its side. Knuckles cracked against her shoulder blade and her rib cage. He fired punches, flesh bullets, until her cheek skinned Clayton’s blood pool. His jean’d thighs brushed up her body, resituating himself closer. Warm hand left her lips. Cool wind and a sunburn shiver licked her spine when he pulled
the dress hem in uneven jerks toward her neck. The familiar clicking of metallic belt frame against the prong. Hustled motion. But, the zipper frap never came.

“None of this is new, you know, you fucking cog,” Sara said, hearing her voice amplified in her head.

“I can see that.” His finger pressed lines against her back. At first, she wondered if he was playing tic-tac-toe on her skin, but he drew no x’s or o’s. Only lines at random. Some on her shoulder, her lumbar, her sore ribcage, her neck.

“This is the shittiest massage I’ve ever had,” she said.

“I’m not pleasuring you, bitch.” The cold belt buckle dragged against her skin.

“Why?” She licked blood from her lips. “Why did Carter lie?”

“About what?”

“Not messing with her, not hurting her, not—”

“He didn’t.” The trampoline swayed, sailboat motion, water motion. A thud in dirt, Mark had thrown the belt.

“Don’t shit a shitter. She told me herself.” Pressure on her spine. Then, his thumbs circled her neck knots.

“Carter doesn’t know anything.” His hands lifted. “Neither does Clayton.”

“You? You raped a—”

“She loved it—every groaning, grunting second.”

Her scream synchronized with the train’s roar. His fists crazed into her. Blow to her head, pinching ear to skull. Twin fists took turns into her side muscles—the speed, they sped up. They tried to hold hands through her body. They tried to squeeze her waist into pulp. Then, the double back beating. This really bounced them up. Like sadistic popcorn play. Fists rained down, a bear
pouncing, beating, breaking her back. Her screaming did nothing. She felt popping inside. Everything pushed forward to her lungs. Screams became perforated jags of sound. They bounced high now. If only she could turn around. Another hit to the head. The blood dripping, maybe hers. Blood bouncing up from the stretchy weaves. Like water splashing her face. She remembered her blood and the water. She remembered Daddy.

Navy Seal had forced piss water into her hands. All the foam and bubbles popped against the flimsy, ridged inn baby cups. She always wondered why makers wrapped cups in individual, cinched plastic—why motels and inns stocked shot-sized Dixies and not adult amenities. Big girl now.

PBsomething, PBC, PBR, PBS, he had mumbled the drink’s name and something about tasting like piss. That orangey-yellow stank water sank down her guzzler upon his demand. PBS stagnated in her mind like a pneumonic device with the association to Ian’s PBS obsession, rather his yellow, orange, red rascal Puff, the Magic Dragon insatiability. Daddy and Ian had always watched it closed-room together. The dragon frolicked to hippy music toward the arbor mist or autumn trees and sea or arctic waves or open water. She had popped her Bubblicious loud into the keyhole outside.

But, she also remembered PBR for Navy Seal’s acronym—Pretty Big Red. But light, like orange, not Juliano’s deep red. His ginger trimmed mutton chops, his silly blue snake tat wrapping those biceps, and his pectoral-length scar were all on something called left or leave. His skin kept crimsoning sunburnt, deepening its blood boil with each clothing item he slipped off.

After she’d drank forgotten-named-drink, her fingers tingled. Her whole arm fell inert then her neck and torso and legs.
“Zipity fast,” he’d said. “Precisely the money.”

Cigar smoke caught her lungs with the fall. Her eyes trailed down. With thumb and index, he puffed from an inn rocking chair, scratched his folded flab stomach, uncrossed his legs, and kept rocking that wood even after she hit the carpet. Coughing started with dog pee, body odor carpet stink filling her nose.

“Good, you can still breathe.” He crouched in front of her, military green gappy boxers. The wet cigar-end tipped her shoulder until she fell supine. “Skinny little thing.”

Water stained ceiling pucker, her eyes could trace each square. And her lungs moved heavy, straining breath through paralyzed, open lips. Her tongue glued numb against her teeth, and the only sounds pulsing out her mouth were breathy grunts.

His pressure against her shoulder when he plucked her up. The water bed wiggled wild with his toss. “And to think, I rented you for a reduced rate. That yellow eyes kept shaking his red dreds, dreading, his fingers stretching to take you back. He couldn’t of been what? Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen? I heard him whisper, ‘Beautiful, beautiful trick’ or something. And that Kurt, Krook, KooKoo told you not to come with me. He called you, what?” He shoved her parallel to the headboard and pulled his boxers over and off himself. “Soldier Sara, right? ‘Oh, Soldier Sara, Sara, we don’t know this one. He ain’t part of the ring.’ What ring? This is my ring—I rented you. There ain’t no ring anymore. There ain’t anymore anymore, ‘cept you here with me, me and my Felicity.’”

A flip—her mouth kissed the sheet over the waterbed’s plastic. No air, no movement, a toddler in a Walmart sack. She had then realized she would be a martyr—some new vocab. She’d be a martyr for the ring. She’d be a martyr for Ser, for Daddy. She held onto space and air and buzzing lights outside. She held onto herself.
Pretty Big Red moved magic, his world sprinted a different pace than hers. His hand engulfed her face. A twist of her head let her lungs fill, and in the same stroke, he ripped open her belly shirt’s back and blue jeans.

“Soldier Sara, huh? I don’t much like soldiers. Old man was a soldier. Felicity don’t like soldiers or my old man neither. Do you, Felicity?” he’d mumbled as she felt three strange tassels like fringe dragging up and down her back. “Oh, she likes your skin. You know what Felicity means?”

First whip snapped. Sickening sound of leather on her bare flesh. Water bed swayed like sea sickness with stinging. Some muted Warheads Sour Candy commercial faded into a new episode of *Full House*.

“Means happiness.” He laughed.

Snap, snap.

“Twofer,” he said.

Each strike stung more. Either the pills or powder metabolized quick or he doled deeper hits.

“Old man preached full on about duty. He preached mom into her grave, didn’t he Felicity?”

Never before had Sara seen the *Full House* show. Slice. A daughter, sister, cousin, friend slid off a banister and crashed a vase into hardwood. Hit. Two other girls exited a swinging kitchen door and stretched silent tattle-tell faces. Skin splitting, Felicity making love on flesh, painting a blood Pollock. Lots of pointing fingers wavered and blurred with the whips. Pretty Big Red huffed buffalo breaths, his motion, his rhythm, a fleshy force inexorable with human skinning. No speed limit.
“He’d take me to the woods. Yeah Felicity! That tinkling click of his belt. Know what he did on me one time?"

No pausing, no broken rhythm. Even in his silent expectancy of an answer, he whipped Felicity. Creating blood landscape in his image.

Her finger flinched, moved. Feeling wiggled its way into extremities. Whip sliced one of its three forked tongues round her side. Felicity could spill open her cylinder packaging. She couldn’t even grimace with her Novocain forehead and mouth and face. Imagined entrails gooied out.

“Answer me, slut!”

Motion zipped faster like he jumped into overdrive. Two of her fingers now moved, traced a frayed edge of a ripped sheet. Blood sprinkles embossed plastic water bed top. The girls, banister girls, someone cried silent on TV.


Tell her story.

Back weighed heavy on water bed’s belly. Heavy with blood soup, blood syrup all caught in peeled up, flayed up skin mars. Martyr, she’d wondered if that’s why name.

Slipping forward, almost flopped off the bed. Another butcher cut, Felicity cut, executioner cut and the water bed popped. Water, red water licked heat from skinned back, Pretty Big Red’s greatest art. She knew, she knew this is where the camera pans away. But no camera. So, breath of water, taste plastic, blackened TV vision, everything spun back to hearing another’s heart beat. To swimming on a lazy sway inside flesh and a pat pat or two. To kicking
away all lineage but feeling Daddy’s squirming genetics inside. To entangling with ancestry’s trap. And in final black seconds, she’d wondered for the third, fourth time, what if Daddy had been wrong about everything? She’d questioned him before—he’d been right about not knowing Pretty Big Red, but what about zooming out more. The ring. The business. Ser. The children, all those damn sunshine, red balloon children.

She’d helped.

For the first time, she could see past glass sand grain. It grew into a castle, a castle Daddy’d never built with her. Past the paper-cut heart. It unfolded into ripped, red construction paper that Daddy’d never taped back together. Past the bent straw not piercing an apple juice box. It punctured Play Dough with her rough stabs but Daddy never unbent the straw, unmangled her tightened fists, undid the hole inside her. He could be wrong—a blood-loss death in a Knoxville inn would mean shit. Her body remembered her baby teeth potential, her height ticks shrinking toward baseboard, her onesie footie kicking. The womb.

Bed slats hugged her hard against deflated plastic. Young teen boobs squished between slats, and Pretty Big Red hadn’t clocked out. A knee into back, she screamed, could scream now. He grabbed hair, head arching back, neck like a teapot spout up. His knee jabbed into spine, a jockey’s gallop.

“Love it. Fucking love it. This is happiness,” he called over screams. “Whiney. Whiney. Whiney me happy!”

Hand extended out. Fingers latching onto the inn’s bed sheets. Wet, sticky, and just out of reach. If only to pull her back, off the racetrack, off the carousel. Pan away. Pan away.

Then, she felt it. Blood rush. Ripping wild fire. Strands of violent fire launch. A chunk of hair peeled from her skull.
He went quiet for a moment. Everything observed.

Pressure left her back. Head fell.

“Sick! Gross.” Pretty Big Red walked in front of Full House vision. Her passing out eyes couldn’t tell if his red painted body was his skin’s hue or all her blood. He flicked his hands and something wet stuck just under her eye socket. Hairy. Head and Shoulders smell of her own shampoo.

Shower head spattered on. Inhale with open, blurring eyes. Exhale with closed peepers. A knock on the door, maybe real. Someone swept Full House vase into a dustpan. Bang against door. All the girls helped each other. Fading blinks and flickering eyes to see the end. All girls helped, but only one got the Daddy’s hug. Maybe Daddy’s wrong, she thought, Daddy’s an antag—anti—antagonista. Maybe, she wouldn’t martyr. She’d just die, and Daddy’d not even vomit love over her funeral box.

Inn door flew open. Haloed with buzzing yellow mosquito traps or hall lights or a God’s touch, Daddy appeared. Musty smoker hallway hazed swirly round him. Straight line toward Pretty Big Red. Sara just heard fists crack from the bathroom and even porcelain break. Daddy emerged the victor, shaking his hand. The same hand he used to cup Sara’s face. She’d smiled at the moles, the familiar caretakers.

Then, for the first time ever, he’d whispered to her, “I love you, Sara” followed by “But, didn’t I tell ya?”

Between his arms, she tried to muster, “I’m sorry” with no success. In the station wagon back, she attempted to say, “I shouldn’t have doubted you” but couldn’t. Under hospital sheets, she finally managed, “I love you, too, Daddy.” He expressed his concern with a forehead kiss.

“Where’s Ian?” she’d asked, speaking slower from pain killers.
“Sara, you gotta have some rules,” he’d mumbled. “You can’t let it go near that far again. He was gonna kill you. Didn’t Ser and I warn ya about him? Didn’t I say don’t accept? But you got in the car anyhow, yelling ‘Big girl now.’ Don’t you see I’m trying to protect you?”

“Where’s Ian?” she repeated.

“He’s not relevant right now,” Daddy said, rubbing her bandaged head. “Did ya hear me?”

“He’s not relevant.” She smirked.

“No, Sara, about the rules.”

“Where’s mom?”

“Sara, you know what happened to her.” He checked his phone.

“Daddy, you haven’t talked to me in so long,” she whispered.

“No.” He patted her arm. “I was waiting for the right time.”

“You timed it right, Daddy.” She tried to laugh but gripped her ribs. “I was just starting to think bad things.”

“What bad things?”

“Where we go when we die.”

“Why would you pondering that?”

“And other bad things.”

“What, Sara?”

“Yes.”

“You was thinking what?”

“Ser is wrong.”

“Yeah, I know you were.”
“Daddy?”

“I see everything. You know the word ‘omniscient’?”

“No. What’s it, Daddy?”

“Learned it in Bible school long ago.” He glanced out the window. “Means, I know about things even when I’m not there.”

Sara reached to hug him. He stood up and slipped a wad of bills from his pocket, started counting. She lowered her arms.

“Where’s that from?” she asked.

“Guy in Brackbill.”

“You took it from him?”

“Of course.” He spread his arms wide and gestured around the hospital room. “How else we gonna spot for all this damage?”

“Right,” she said. “Good thinking, Daddy.”

“The next time, Sara, you gonna listen to me.” He stuffed the wad back into his pocket.

“In fact, you gonna listen to me from now on.”

“On to what?”

“Don’t be a smart mouth.” He popped his neck.

She picked at the IV tube.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, Daddy. I won’t be mouth smart.”

“And?”

“I love you forever.”

“Good. You been helping Ser? You been a good girl?”
“Daddy.” She held his hand. “It’s me. If I have rules, but it happens again, you’ll come for me?”

“It won’t happen again if you listen to me.”

“But, maybe. If it does, then Ian won’t be revelant—rela—revelant—”

“Relevant. How much drugs they got you on?”

“Right, Ian won’t be that. Mom’ll take a sick day. And we’ll go to the beach all day again?”

“Maybe not all day.” He paused. “Blake Builders is booming. More now than ever.”

“Most of the day then?”

He had pecked her forehead again. A spit bubble had popped like a second kiss. “Sure.” She started laughing, cracking up, cackling, howling. Trampoline blood bounced against her forehead like more spit bubbles.

“Come for me,” she screamed with the approaching night train.

Mark’s punches paused. She rolled herself over, her blood slid into her cackling, wide-spread mouth.

“You’re fucking insane.”

“But, at least, I’m free,” she squealed.

“Alright, come on.” Unstraddling her, Mark dragged her off the trampoline.

“Where we going, Daddy?”

“Not your fucking daddy,” Mark mumbled, pausing to pick up the paring knife.

Dirt mashed all sticky to her bloody arms. Italian bread crumbs round mozzarella sticks. Some rock struck her ankle as Mark dragged her up the gravel incline toward the railroad peak. More cuts and a splinter when he tossed her on twisted crags of wooden ties. Metal rail bruised...
into broken ribs. But, its rustic hum, its rusty warmth, its vibrating lullaby. She almost popped her thumb between blood lips. Train light warmed night from down the periphery.

“Souvenir time,” Mark called, kneeling down and grabbing copper hair, close to her forehead hairline.

“No touch!” she yelled, slapping his hand.

“Stop it.” He sawed while she scratched at him. And both screamed, rivaling horn’s yellow glare on black night.

“Daddy!” Sara called. No rustling in woods for miles and acres and land.

“There.” Sawing stopped. Light tunnel narrowed. “This—” Mark raised a long, pigtail-width of copper hair. “This is for Clayton.”

His kick landed into her side. She flipped over the second rail. And down the gravel decline, toward the dirt-pebble road before the forest opened yawn, away from the trampoline and sex tower and Lynx shuffle and Ian dragon and Ser smile and Patricia and Joan and Meriwether and Tina and Abby and Rhonda and Elyse and Juliano Mustang and mom sad yellow curtains and Daddy, Daddy’s talk of healing, Daddy’s warnings about that client, Daddy’s hospital kisses and salesman compliments “Isn’t she lovely?” and him smiling at her when she went with Ser so easily and, of course, Daddy’s promise to come with the pain—to grandmother’s house she fell. She cackled all the way down. Tonight, she’d see Daddy again.

“Don’t you ever come near us again, psycho bitch,” Mark yelled down. He stayed in a moon silhouette right before the train cut the starred sky with a horizontal zip.

“No,” she whispered, licking iron lips. Wheezing breaths, sky darkness faded closer, closer. Stretched flashes of Daddy played like spinning night light projections. Beautiful star-sky carousel. Star and moon. He’d come for the moon as his sun responsibility. His light alighted.
her. No rustling in the woods yet. But, as sky darkness kept tunneling heavier, she imagined he’d be there when she woke up, when she opened eyes in a hospital again. He’d sweat love with worry until she flicked on lights, until she giggled at his wrinkle face, until she reminded him “I love you forever,” until she popped all the Get Well balloons—until she passed out.

~

Someone shook nails in a coffee tin. Wind brushed Sara’s hair as the rust-bucket truck kicked up dirt. It swirled her lungs and made everything ah-choo. A sneeze into dawning sky. Moon had kidnapped the stars back to darkness. Yet, the sun still hadn’t splayed itself.

Tickling on her arm. “Daddy?” Sara whispered, then yelled while swatting off the silverfish legs. Stomach rumbling, she patted all the caked blood, a spa mask, beneath her nose—still straight, not broken. One dirty arm, palm down, she used the gravel incline to crawl herself into standing. Heart beat sounds mocked her. Already she knew her ribs and back carried the most damage. But, she taught herself to walk again. A step and slip. She needed four arms, two for balance, two to hug herself, hug her ribs, keep everything in her body between skin, broken skin.

Wind flapped her ripped sundress with more tousle. Then, she remembered the knife. Her hands moved toward her hairline. Both palms pushed against the jagged puzzle of receding child-cut bangs. They frayed like rough party streamer. Even sand dirt had embedded itself. She rustled her fingers over the sand dirt in her own personal ash storm as she walked the dirt trail, heading toward the main road.

“Daddy will come,” she assured herself, stepping over sun-glint glass. Sun now arriving, she repeated, “Daddy will come.”

A roar from behind and she turned to see not Daddy. Some lady farmer with a truck bed
full of watermelons slowed, arm draped out the window.

“Hey, hon. You need a ride somewhere?” Even behind sunglassed eyes, the lady farmer’s head tilt revealed her scanning and accessing.

“No, my Daddy will come.” Sara continued walking.
Truck rolled beside her. “You sure? You look real rough.”
“My Daddy will come.” She walked faster.
“Real sure? Maybe not thinking so straight?”
“My Daddy will come, you bitch. Get out of here.”
“Okay, hun.” Lady farmer tilted her cowboy hat. “Good luck to ya.”

Two, three, four more trucks exchanged similar chats, each time Sara scanning the passenger seat and bed for Daddy’s dimple moles, each time Sara walking away from the rolling stranger a little slower, each time Sara saying a little softer “Daddy will come.”

Some cars zoomed by, and she lived in a dust cloud. The cloud blurred her world, and she caught her sole on a plastic bucket handle. Falling back into dirt, sand clung a kiss to her lips. And every grain a memory, every grain a promise.

He’d promised ample horsey rides, his creaky knees clopping over the patterned rug. But, he’d forgotten about her, galloping into Ian’s racecar bedroom and bucking the door closed.

He’d promised tag between billowy, white clothesline sheets. But, he’d forgotten she’d been off the safe base and behind a clean linen drape for ten, fifteen, thirty minutes. In black, silhouetted shapes, Daddy’s hands had smoothed Ian’s hair like a Barbie doll primp, until they fluttered sheet outlines toward another closed room. Tag. Not it.

So, he’d promised house-wide hide and seek every Saturday, to find her tucked behind curtains or covered in a laundry basket or in a quilt chest, a quilt pile innocently displaced next to
the chest, making it easy for him. But, he’d forgotten still to seek two children, that she was alive and had substance. Olly, olly oxen free. Game over.

He’d promised to build a sand city with her. But, he’d forgotten even after she stung her fingers with jellyfish goo. Ian’s seashell excavating proved more interesting for Daddy.

He’d promised to fight away all the gassy villains who tortured her stomach after too much ice cream. But, he’d forgotten and wasn’t even reminded when mom’s fingers massaged her tiny tummy, pushing them all toward a fart.

He’d even promised to read Ian’s favorite book to her so she could also understand where the Wild Things go. Then, maybe she could also sing back to him “I’ll eat you up, Daddy. I love you so!” But, he’d forgotten again even after she ripped pages from their dusty copy and eaten the monsters’ paper faces.

So, when he’d promised he’d come, Sara didn’t realize his track record of empty. In the dust cloud, in the dirt again, she uncovered it, a whole life, a swirling homogeny of lies. Daddy’d come once. And how did he even know when and where to come? Omniscient, he’d said, but the thought tortured her more than Felicity, Pretty Big Red, jackhammers, Juliano’s silence—what if Daddy knew? What if Daddy’d even wanted Pretty Big Red to show her she’s not big girl now, that she couldn’t tell that park police or Mrs. Miller or perfume sales guy with fancy scarf or mall Dippin’ Dots scooper or movie ticket puller the truth about the ring? That could of gotten back time. So much time.

She kicked the dirt, and all of it was too heavy. Too sudden. Omniscient, omniscient her ass. Why had Daddy come once, and she had formed her life around that epicenter, that circling nightlight, that entrapping carousel, that horse-race life? Sun disappeared behind the one cloud in the sky just then. It’d disappeared alright.
“Daddy?” she whispered, a test shot at this point.

“Dad?” she called for the first time without the extra “—dy.” Now like dy—dye—die.

Then, just “Kru.”

More dust spun as another life kicked. Everything creaked. Everything slipped through the cracks, through the grate. The monsters win. The sun clouded up, hazy but clearer now.