

2015

For Quality and Training Purposes: Stories

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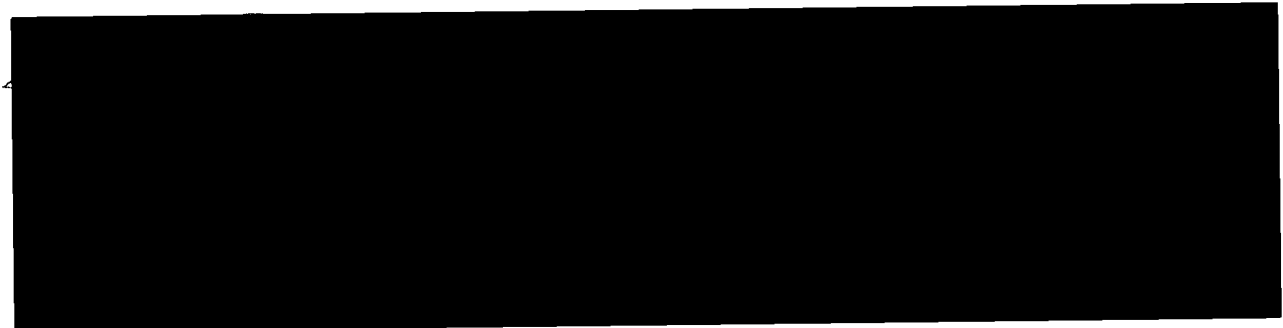
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For Quality and Training Purposes: Stories

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BY

Sean Towey

THESIS

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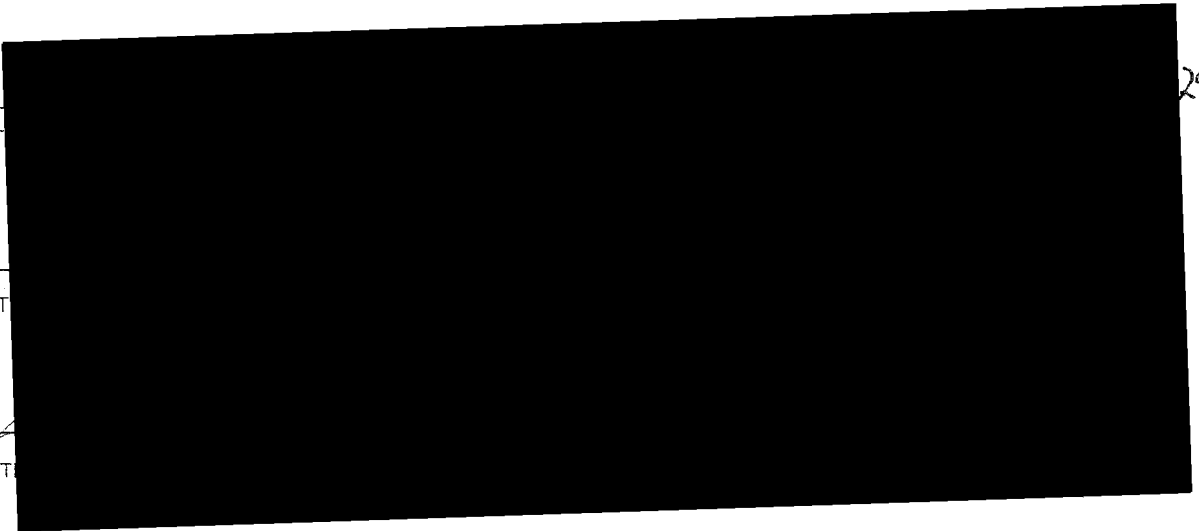
Master's in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2015

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
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For Quality and Training Purposes: Stories

In David Foster Wallace's story "Good Ol' Neon," Neil, the protagonist, recounts to the reader the circumstances of his suicide from beyond the grave. Neil ends his own life because of a deep-seated self-hatred that stems from feeling inauthentic. After his death, Neil realizes that *all* people experience themselves as fraudulent—and that the feeling is only logical: "Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't?" (179). Much of Wallace's writing, most importantly his opus *Infinite Jest*, focuses on the loneliness of human experience in the contemporary world. As philosopher Charles Taylor notes, in our more secular, contemporary society, personal authenticity—being internally and externally consistent—replaces a belief in sets of moral imperatives. For Taylor, this moral relativism "reflects what we could call the individualism of self-fulfillment, which is widespread in our times and has grown particularly strong in Western societies since the 1960s" (14). However, both Taylor and Wallace express the concept that human life contains a tremendous multiplicity of voices, beliefs, and relationships. We are not able to present the whole spectrum of our personal experience to other people at once. Striving toward true authenticity and an absolute individualism leads to separation and isolation because we can never express a perfect authenticity to another person.

Loneliness as a key aspect of human experience is not a new concept in the Western tradition. In *Confessions*, St. Augustine claims that his own loneliness will not cease until he meets his God: "Thou awakes us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee." Over 1,200 years later,

Enlightenment thinker Blaise Pascal expressed a similar notion in his book *Pensées*: “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man that cannot be filled by any created thing.” Many nonreligious people also experience this loneliness, and some would argue the concept of God was created largely to fill the void we feel as human beings. Part of the human experience is a loneliness that stems from being inchoate.

Beyond Wallace, other contemporary writers have taken up this familiar theme. In *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy calls it “the great malaise.” Flannery O’Connor writes about a yearning to be fully united with a cosmic force in “Revelation,” as the main character envisions a host of people marching into Heaven. As even their virtues are burned away, Mrs. Turbin realizes the unity she desires to share with her creator will come at the cost of the frivolous racial and economic distinctions she has built her life upon (508). For both O’Connor and Percy, as well as Augustine and Pascal, loneliness and a desire to connect and unify with others are crucial parts of what it is to be human.

For Irish writer Frank O’Connor, short stories have a unique ability to explore loneliness as a key aspect of the human condition. In particular, he claims that the short story’s success as a form in the United States and Russia stems from the frontier-mentality those two nations share: “Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society... As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness” (87). O’Connor goes on to say that while we read novels for companionship, we often read short stories to understand what Pascal called “the eternal silence of infinite spaces” (87). In O’Connor’s opinion, the best short stories are written by “submerged population groups—tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers, and

suddenly confronts a crucial event or crisis rather than slowly developing over time, the very form and tradition of short fiction militates against the central conventions of realism.” (176)

Realism’s reality stems from a fictional world remaining coherent to itself over a long period of time, in terms of both the length of the novel and the span of time the novel itself covers. The reality of short fiction depends on the reader putting together the nine-tenths of the story’s reality not shown on the page, the bottom part of the iceberg to use Hemingway’s analogy, by herself. In realistic short fiction, verisimilitude is implied instead of shown. In novels, the reader and characters develop a relationship over time, which makes the experience of loneliness different from short stories. While a lonely character within a novel lacks intimacy or connections to other characters, a lonely character within a short story also lacks a history.

James Cooper Lawrence agrees with Mathews that concision serves as the most important characteristic of a short story. However, he places the short story’s pithiness within the history of oral narrative in the Western tradition: “Human impatience insists that a spoken story shall be brief and to the point; and no better line of demarcation than this can be found to set off the literary type with which we are concerned from its brethren, the novel and the novelette” (61). People can only listen to an oral narrative for so long, and thus “short” tales became the norm. Lawrence cites such oral narratives as *Beowulf*, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* to demonstrate that these story cycles actually consist of several “ballad groups dealing with separate achievements of these heroes, which, in their turn, can be, at least theoretically, split up into their component parts—single isolated ballads” (65). The same could be said of the “sin cycle” within the Book of

spoiled priests” (88). These are people who often find themselves on society’s fringes, and thus intimately experience loneliness. Instead of exploring the intricate web of societal relations from within, as, say, Jane Austen does in her novels, short stories attempt to understand what happens when human beings find themselves separated from important personal relationships. O’Connor does not claim that loneliness as a theme belongs solely to the short story as some form of birthright. Novels such as *Remains of the Day*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *Infinite Jest* examine how loneliness manifests in contemporary culture. Instead, O’Connor argues that the short story is especially well-suited to dealing with loneliness.

Due to space constraints, short stories are less able to lean on detailed character developments and complicated plots. As Brander Mathews notes, “The novelist may take his time; he has abundant room to turn about. The writer of Short-stories must be concise, and compression, a vigorous compression, is essential” (53). A lonely character is easier to work with in a short story, because then the writer does not have to expend valuable space creating back stories and providing the details of complicated relationships. The short story portrays loneliness by providing characters with limited back stories who have few strong connections to other people. Unlike novels, short stories are not required to explain the character’s loneliness; they do not have to portray how the character ended up an outsider. Charles E. May notes that, in terms of verisimilitude, the short story is closer to the fable or myth than the novel, which creates the illusion of reality by portraying the passing of time:

The very shortness of the form prohibits the realistic presentation of character by extensive detail, and since the history of the short story is one in which a character

Genesis, which begins with Adam and Eve and ends with Noah's Arc. As H.E. Bates claims, the Bible contains many short stories that often come together on a single theme: "The account in Genesis of the conflict between Cain and Abel is a short story; the parable of the Prodigal Son is a short story, and in itself a masterpiece of compression for all time (73). In Bates's discussion of short story cycles within the Bible, he brings up the two most common ways to unite short stories into a collection. There are short stories cycles that follow a single character or group of characters, such as the Gospels, the Odyssey, or Junot Díaz's *Drown*. Other collections, such as the sin cycle in the Book of Genesis, are unified with common themes. For example, Flannery O'Connor's collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* deals with the effects of sin and sinfulness and the human ability to transcend the dourness of our world.

Several short story collections follow a single character or small set of characters: Hemingway's *In Our Time*, Díaz's *Drown*, and Denis Johnson's *Jesus's Son* is by no means an exhaustive list. Uniting a collection by repeating characters provides the author with the ability to maintain a unique and strong voice, whether it be the terse, dialogue-ridden prose of Hemingway, the fast-paced grittiness of Díaz, or the laid back craziness of Johnson. The greatest strength of all three of those writers is their unique voices. When shown a random page from any of their books, I believe most writers would be able to guess the author. Following a single character or a couple of characters through multiple stories allows the writers to flush out and explore the edges of that voice.

Despite the reader spending more time with a single character, much like in a novel, these works still contain the brevity and totality that Frank O'Connor argues provides the short story with its sense of loneliness. Instead of forming lasting

connections, Díaz's Junior goes through a series of disastrous relationships with girlfriends, friends, and family. Hemingway's Nick Adams bookends *In Our Time*, with the beginning stories such as "Indian Camp" showing childhood trauma and the end stories "Big Two-Hearted River" demonstrating the devastating psychological effects of war. Perhaps most interesting as a collection, *Jesus's Son* progresses from the wildness of drug addiction to the fundamentally healthier lifestyle of sobriety. Johnson's story "Beverly Home" follows a narrator who struggles with sobriety while working at a home for Alzheimer's patients. The narrator ends up spying on an Amish couple who live near the hospital. The couple becomes for the protagonist a symbol of the possibility of a lasting relationship and an end to addiction's loneliness. While working at Beverly Home, the narrator says, "All these weirdos, and me getting a little better every day right in the midst of them. I had never known, never even imagined for a heartbeat, that there might be a place for people like us" (1510). By the end of *Jesus's Son*, the narrator finds both sobriety, and a place where the loneliness that haunts him loses some of its jagged edges.

A downside to writing a collection about a single character is that the book does not have the scope or breadth that comes with writing from a variety of perspectives. Collections that focus more on thematic elements, for example George Saunders's *Tenth of December*, cover more ground. In *Tenth of December*, a middle class couple wins the lottery and uses the money to buy a bevy of servants only to go broke again; a young man risks his safety saving the life of his high school crush; and a prisoner sacrifices his own life in order to stop the medical testing done on other prisoners. The common theme holding the collection together is the ability to transcend the human condition through

self-sacrifice; or, to look at the issue another way, how total self-focus leads to human misery. However, the most interesting aspect of *Tenth of December* is how Saunders uses a wide variety of plots to approach self-sacrifice from different angles, and his ability to inhabit different voices. The daily entries of “The Semplica Girl Diaries” differs dramatically in terms of tone from the teenage voices present in “Victory Lap.”

Two other collections that unite stories by theme are Roxane Gay’s *Ayiti* and Phil Klay’s *Redeployment*. In *Ayiti*, published soon after the massive earthquake in 2010, Gay explores the experience of being both Haitian and American. A short story collection connected by theme allows Gay to play with perspective. In one story, the narrator is a woman who can turn people into zombies, in another story the narrator is a young woman trying to sneak into the United States with her husband. Gay also experiments with form. For example, in “You Never Knew the Waters Ran So Cruel So Deep,” Gay tells the story of the rape of a young Haitian stow away through a list of items needed for the journey. Phil Klay investigates the experience of veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in *Redeployment*. Again, the unification through theme provides Klay with the ability to explore America’s fourteen-year long war through multiple perspectives—marines, military chaplains, and people working for NGOs. The reader finds herself in the middle of a fire fight in Fallujah, as well as in a marine’s head as he goes to the mall with his wife after returning home (the marine finds the mall scarier than Iraq). *Redeployment*, which won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize, gets at the physical, mental and spiritual cost of America’s long-term military conflicts through a variety of plots and narrators.

However, unlike Saunders, the narrators in Gay's and Klay's stories do not differ dramatically in terms of voice. In *Ayiti*, the woman who turns her love into a zombie sounds remarkably similar to the woman reminiscing about her Haitian-born parents while living in Michigan. The same can be said of *Redeployment*. Both the military chaplain and the marine commander have the same rye, detached sense of their surroundings. At times in both *Ayiti* and *Redeployment*, the different narrators do not come across so much as different characters, but as different versions of the same character.

Like Gay and Klay, my own short story collection, *For Quality and Training Purposes*, will be united under a common theme. Each of the stories deals with the issue of loneliness; however, as discussed earlier, all short stories deal with loneliness on some level. Specifically, my stories approach the loneliness inherent to certain aspects of contemporary American life. While our society is more interconnected through social media, the superficiality of online connections can cause a deep loneliness. I suspect that, while many people feel lonely, they may also conclude that their feelings of isolation are unwarranted due to their vast number of online "friendships." The central theme in my work is that loneliness does not stem solely from a lack of connections, but also from a central aspect of what it is to be human. A certain number of Facebook friends or Twitter followers will not dispel the loneliness, because it is not a part of us that can be eliminated.

The narrators and characters in my stories are searching for something that they hope will extinguish the solitude they experience. In "Without Wind Resistance," a former Jesuit seminarian working as a high school religion teacher, who wants to be an

actor, searches for recognition only to find a corporatized educational system and rejection letters from acting schools. In “The Red Door,” a homeless man searching for a long-term residence gets lost in the insanity that occurs when a Catholic seminarian attempts to sabotage a Gay Pride Parade. “Céad Míle Fáilte” follows a young man, a failed professional pool player, whose father is in such desperate need to find a stable identity that he dives head-first into his Irish ancestry, eventually inviting an IRA member to come and live with his family.

Catholicism plays a central role in my stories, and any American writer who identifies as Catholic has to deal with Flannery O’Connor. My stories share with O’Connor a familiar outlook—the world is not as it should be, and humans are powerless to improve it on our own. However, the Catholic presence in my stories is not nearly as subtle as in O’Connor’s work. There are no hidden representations of the Eucharist or secret workings of divine grace. Instead, my work forefronts Catholicism’s cultural elements—there are priests and seminarians in my stories, and they are broken, confused men trying to make sense of their lives. Instead of an emphasis on divine grace, my stories explore free will. My characters do not experience incredible revelations of God’s presence. Instead, they have the freedom to try to end or continue patterns of chaos that lead to separation and loneliness.

Along with Saunders and Wallace, I attempt to use humor as a way to keep the reader engaged. However, I try to limit the type of ironic, self-reflexive humor that serves no purpose beyond tearing down or criticizing world-views and positions with which I disagree. Raymond Carver voices best my discomfort with some postmodern humorous writing: “Writers don’t need tricks or gimmicks or even necessarily need to be the

smartest fellows on the block. At the risk of appearing foolish, a writer sometimes needs to be able to just stand and gape at this or that thing—a sunset or an old shoe—in absolute and simple amazement” (274). Too often, the humor postmodern authors such as Thomas Pynchon and Wallace use serves to highlight their own intelligence instead of to point outward to the mysteries of the world in which we live. I aim to use humor to add to the sunsets I stare at in simple amazement. Writing humorously is the least difficult aspect of my writing process—this stems from my Irish background. My father grew up in Dublin, and I spent many afternoons listening to my father and grandfather tell hilariously macabre stories, or to opine with sardonic wit about politics. In Ireland, it is considered rude to tell a sad story without some humorous, up-lifting moments. A moment in Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* demonstrates the point. While Frank and his youngest brother beg at the doors of their wealthy neighbors, the middle brother climbs over the back walls to steal coal. Irish stories tend to be sad with a humorous gut-punch.

My work falls into the genre of humorous realism. Character development drives my work, as opposed to the plot-driven novels of genre-fiction. My characters find themselves in situations that the reader (hopefully) finds funny, like two brothers harassing a pompous self-appointed security guard at an Arizona retirement community. My work does not contain elements of “magical” realism. Although some of my plot devices are outlandish, they are physically possible, at least technically. Neither are my stories strictly psychological realism—the main thrust of the stories does not take place within a character’s mind. My tenuous relationship with psychological realism comes from the influence of George Saunders, as well as television shows such as *The Wire*, *House of Cards*, and *The Sopranos*. As mentioned above, Saunders’s *Tenth of December*

has incredibly interesting plots. As opposed to the work of a writer such as Don DeLillo, where, beyond a single apocalyptic event, the most crucial happenings occur within a character's mind, the work of writers such as Saunders and Colson Whitehead, along with the influence of incredibly popular television series, demonstrates how events outside of the character's control can also spur forward intriguing character development.

In terms of my development as a writer, I have learned, with the help of my thesis committee, to focus more on plot and scene. Before coming to Eastern Illinois University, I focused my writing process on the exploration of a certain theme. I worked out the themes and motifs first, and worried about plot and character development afterward, an approach that often left me with a lot of interesting ideas without any movement forward. Very little actually happened in my work. After numerous conversations with my mentors, I began to write my stories with the plot and character in mind first, and to worry about theme and motif much later in the process. I began to primarily focus on the reader's expectations, instead of on the questions I desired to answer for myself.

My writing style changed on a sentence level after I committed myself to focusing on plot. Due to the influence of Wallace, Whitehead, and Toni Morrison, I learned early on how to write strong summary. I could cover a lot of ground quickly. However, because my stories were mainly about a character thinking through concepts, I rarely wrote scenes. My characters were often alone and did not interact or converse with other characters. In writing my thesis, I have focused more attention on using summary to develop scenes that both reveal character and move the plot forward. By continuing to learn how to write engaging scenes, I hope to improve my writing and to develop the tools necessary to finish a short-story collection, as well as to someday write a novel.

When completed, I hope *For Quality and Training Purposes* will add to the genres of humorous realism and short fiction a voice that is critical of, and hopeful for, the contemporary age. Although the stories criticize an array of different groups and causes, they also attempt to show paths toward growth and unity in a deeply divided nation and culture. In much of my work, the protagonist's ability to find joy rests on his willingness to understand and accept the worldviews of other people, and to coalesce his numerous, often conflicting identities. While we can never completely understand another person, I do believe literature offers us the best opportunity to reach understanding among divergent groups and a way to mitigate the loneliness of the contemporary age.

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Arizona Sunsets

After not hearing from Mom for two weeks, I started to worry. It was the last time I lost sleep over one of Mom's disappearing acts.

"She'll come back around," said Kevin. "She always does."

It was the summer before I went into the seventh grade and Kevin into the tenth. Dad had formed a conspiracy theory, something about the CIA and fiber optic cables, one of the many theories Dad would develop over the years, and he cancelled our cable subscription, and so Kevin and I re-watched films we had seen a hundred times. Even though I knew it was coming, the sex scene in *Layer Cake* still made me go all hard, and I made sure I had my back to Kevin because I didn't want him to make fun of me. The phone rang, but I was in no position to answer it.

Kevin said "Hey, Grandpa Tim," who was Mom's dad. Kevin hung up the phone before handing it to me.

"Dude, Mom's gone."

"What do you mean?" When Mom and Dad were still married, she'd leave for three or four days at a time, usually twice a year, without any notice, and when we asked where she went she would say "the coast" and that was it. Dad, because he hated both people and the government, rarely left the house. He worked from his room on a laptop.

"Grandpa gets Mom's newsletters from work. She wrote that Grandpa had a heart attack and she needed to take care of him."

"Oh my God! Is Grandpa alright?"

"Jesus, you're an idiot sometimes. Yeah, James, Grandpa's fine."

"It wasn't a serious heart attack?"

“Mom was lying.”

“Mom was lying?”

“Mom was lying.”

Kevin and I stared at each other, sunlight peaking in through the blinds, the childhood screams and cries from the park across the street an echo ringing in through the screen door.

“So where’s Mom?” I asked.

I re-read my favorite mystery novels for tips on how to find Mom. First, Kevin and I would go to the library and search the nation’s major newspapers for her name. We’d have to look through the obituaries, and that would not be pleasant, and it would probably be Kevin’s job. We would go over to Mom’s house, she lived on the other side of town, and search for clues—phone numbers left on the refrigerator, travel itineraries scattered across the desk in the living room. Back then, I still thought people did not act randomly. It was just a matter of figuring out their logic. We would not contact the police, because not talking to the police was Dad’s cardinal rule. “The only thing cops have ever done for this family is put us in jail.”

Mom called before I could tell Kevin about the plan.

“How’s my little angel?”

I wanted to sound tough, but I also wanted to sit down next to her on the couch and have her scratch my head with her long perfectly painted nails and watch a movie on television and chat during the commercials.

“Where have you been?”

“Let’s not talk about the past, honey. What do I always say?”

“Truth is in the eternal present”

“That’s right, honey. That’s right.”

I let it go. There was no use trying to force Mom to do something she didn’t want to do. Kevin was the same way. I told Mom about the soccer games and all the books I had been reading and about how Dad let Kevin have girls in his bedroom with the door closed even though I knew Kevin would punch me for telling but I was jealous. Mom told me Grandpa had bought us tickets to go visit him and Grandma at their new house in Arizona.

When she asked to talk to Kevin, I told her he wasn’t home, because when he had come through the door and saw me talking he knew it was Mom and he made his fingers into a gun and pretended to blow his brains out before he went downstairs to his room in the basement.

In another life, my mother would have been a politician. She’s charming and has short-term memory loss for everything that does not fit with how she sees herself. Or maybe she would have been an Evangelical preacher, the type of Christian minister who can get caught in a whore house and keep raking in the dough.

Mom never held a job for more than six months. In the two years after the divorce, Kevin and I met ten different boyfriends. Kevin started referring to them by their number, in chronological order. Instead of calling the man John or Steven, Kevin would call him Seven or Nine, which neither the men nor Mom appreciated.

Mom's chaos followed a pattern. She would move to a new rental house. She would find a new job. She would get a dog from the Humane Society. She would get a boyfriend. And it would all fall apart, more or less in reverse order. Kevin and I stopped naming the dogs.

Waiting in the airport, I poked Kevin in the shoulder until he took off his headphones and I asked him why Grandpa and Grandma moved to Arizona.

"They moved there to die," he said. "That's why old people move to Arizona. They want to die in the sun."

Grandpa and Grandma used to live two hours north of Tacoma in a town called Marysville, where Mom grew up. They lived in the middle of the forest, and they had a pool in the backyard where Kevin and I learned to swim. Grandpa threw us into the pool, laughed, and once we swallowed enough chlorine to permanently scar our insides, Grandpa tossed us a life-preserver. He called this process "man-training."

I used to walk by myself into the forest surrounding their house. I told the trees the moss grew on their north sides, but sometimes it would cover half of the tree. I scraped and kicked until the moss pointed in a clear direction.

Grandpa and Grandma picked us up in a black Chevy Tahoe. If Mom was nervous about the whole lying-about-a-heart-attack-to-get-out-of-work thing, she didn't show it, at least not right away. The car ride went like every other car ride with Grandpa and Grandma—I talked about all the awesome things I was doing, Kevin played on his phone, and Mom smiled at me and my stories.

Even through the tinted windows the sun seemed too bright in Arizona, like fluorescent lighting. I counted cactuses. I talked non-stop for the first part of the trip, but I ran out of things to say, and Kevin wasn't helping.

“Well, boys,” said Grandma, “I planned trips to three different museums for when you're here, and let me tell you the National Museum of Prosthetics is *just awesome*.” Grandma was a middle-school teacher before she retired, and everything was *just awesome*. She is not my real Grandma, but I have known her my whole life. My real Grandma died before I was born.

I had gone through all of the state capitals in my head for the third time and Mom and Grandpa seemed about ready to start yelling at each other when Kevin slipped his phone into his pocket and grinned. He stared down at his shoes and tapped his leg, which meant he had a plan.

“So, Grandpa,” said Kevin, “how are you recovering from that heart attack? Are you sure you should be driving?” He said it deadpan. I wanted to climb into the back and hide, and I don't think anyone breathed for a good three seconds.

Grandpa laughed first, then Mom, and then we were all cracking up. Grandpa's great big cackles filled up the car.

“Yeah, Kevin, I'm doing just fine. Thanks for asking.”

I added that moment to the short list of reasons I loved my older brother.

The first morning at Arizona Sunsets, the community where Grandpa and Grandma lived, we went on a walk with Grandma. When we got back, Kevin said, “This place is like summer camp for old people.” From 6:00 am to 9:00 pm, the elderly strolled around the community. The men walked by themselves, and the women marched in little

groups in matching velour sweat suits. All of the houses and streets circled a golf course, and the men on the golf course had pot bellies that jiggled as they paced from hole to hole.

Grandpa didn't golf, but he had a bright yellow golf cart with huge wheels for off-roading.

"Biggest engine in the whole community. I could get this thing up to sixty miles per hour."

"Is that safe?"

Grandpa gave me the same look he gave me when I asked him who Ronald Reagan was. I was too old to be asking stupid questions.

"They bring the bodies out at night." That's all I heard Grandpa say before Mom closed the glass sliding door to the back deck. It confirmed all of my worst nightmares about why Grandpa and Grandma moved to Arizona Sunsets.

I looked over at Kevin to see if he had heard Grandpa. He breathed heavily, asleep, and I could see his armpit hairs stretching out, and I checked my own armpit to make sure the three hairs that had appeared, mysteriously and seemingly overnight, were safe. Soon, Kevin's body would press all of the air out of his side of the air-mattress, which would create a hill on my side, and I would roll on top of him. Kevin would wake up and probably punch me in the arm even though there was nothing I could do.

"Kevin. Hey, Kevin, wake up." I shook him by the shoulder.

“Is Grandpa up already?” At 5:30 am the last two mornings, Grandpa had turned on the lights in the dining room, where we were sleeping, in order to work out with him. It was man-training without the swimming.

“Grandpa said they take the bodies out at night.”

“What?”

“They take the bodies out at night! It’s just like you said. Grandpa and Grandma came here to die!”

Kevin rolled over and farted.

“If you wake me up again, I’ll punch you in the dome.”

I shut up because when Kevin punched me in the top of my head it hurt, and I was starting to worry about the long-term consequences of dome-punching. Sometimes I liked going cross-eyed, and I was getting good at it, and it always seemed that right when I was going cross-eyed Kevin would appear and punch me in the dome, and I knew at some point my eyes were going to get stuck, and I would spend the rest of my life staring at the tip of my nose, and my chances of being the first American-born soccer star to play for Brazil in the World Cup would be over, and I did not even want to think about the consequences for my potential love-life, which, because of my new armpit hair, I had high hopes for.

Also, I really didn’t want Grandpa and Grandma to die.

Our second to last night in Arizona, Grandpa grilled steaks and Grandma made a salad and Mom drank screwdrivers. Kevin and I helped with the dishes. Afterward, the adults sat outside while Kevin and I watched television, the only time the television was

tuned to something other than Fox News. It was a total and utter joy to have access to cable. During the commercials, I would glance outside and see the light reflect off of Mom's sunglasses, and Mom was laughing and telling jokes, and I realized how similar Mom and Kevin were. I was more like Dad—introverted and nervous.

They started talking about something else because their voices got quiet. Mom's voice got louder and I heard her through an open window.

"I'll pay you back when I find a job, Dad."

"I'm not doing this again, Kelly, I'm not. What about the boys? When are you going to start caring for the boys?"

Mom's voice raised another decibel level and I listened as hard as I could, but Kevin turned up the volume on the television, not because he was watching the show, but because he was watching me. Grandma came in and shut the window. She stared down at Kevin and me, her hands on her hips, her head tilted to the side.

"You boys need anything? Ice cream?"

"No, Grandma, we're fine."

She didn't say what she wanted to say. Grandma came over and kissed me and Kevin on the forehead and went back outside. When she opened the door to the porch, I heard Mom say, "What about me, Dad? What about me?"

Our last day in Arizona, I got up with Grandpa, but Kevin stayed in bed. I wanted to spend time with him while he was still around. Grandpa "jogged" around the three-mile loop. It was more of a fast walk, but I pretended to jog as well so Grandpa didn't feel bad. He beat the air around him with his arms and knees.

Grandpa worked in sheet metal before getting into real estate. He talked a lot about how things used to be. I never understood what he was talking about, so I would nod my head and agree.

“Used to be, people worked in this country. We actually made things in America. Now, you see James, the Democrats they just hand people everything. A bunch of lazy, good for nothing people.”

“Democrats,” I said emulating the venom in Grandpa’s voice.

Grandpa slowed to a walk. Two foxes stood on the golf course searching for rabbits. I pointed them out to Grandpa, but he didn’t care.

“You know what’s worse than Democrats?”

“Government hand-outs?”

“No, government hand-outs are what Democrats do to get Black people to vote for them.”

“Oh.”

“The worst are all the goddamn environmentalists. See, in Washington, you try and build something like this place, and you got to make sure the water supply won’t be affected, you got to come up with a plan for all the animals that will be displaced, you’ve got to reduce your carbon footprint.”

It was getting cold, and I wanted Grandpa to start jogging again, but he couldn’t rant and jog at the same time.

“Here, in Arizona, they’re building one of the largest cities in the nation, way out in the desert. They’re just going to go out there and build it. That’s America, James. Just go out and build it.”

With all the walking and politics, I started to worry about Grandpa having a heart attack. Sweat fell from his ears.

“And, you know what, here in Arizona, in order to build a town all they have to do is prove that there’s a one-hundred year water supply.”

The foxes watched us. They sensed that Grandpa might keel over.

“What happens after one-hundred years?”

“Who gives a shit?” Grandpa looked at me like I was the worst kind of Democrat-government-hand-out-environmentalist. “Who gives a shit, James?”

In the afternoon, Kevin and I went to play soccer tennis. It got us out of visiting the National Museum of Prosthetics with Grandma.

Kevin was not the type of older brother who let his younger brother win every once in a while. Kevin was the type of older brother who let the game stay close, even let me get ahead, and right at the moment my hopes were highest he would beat me. Sometimes I cried.

“Oh, little baby James!”

“It’s just the dust!”

We started another game. A man in a sea-foam colored polo and khakis walked up to the court. The polo had the words “Arizona Sunsets Judicial Committee” written over the heart.

“Hey, you kids don’t have the right shoes!” We stopped playing.

“What?” asked Kevin.

“Shoes! You need to wear white-soled shoes! You’re ruining the court!” Black rubber scuff marks from our tennis shoes covered the green paint.

“We don’t have any white-soled shoes.”

“Then you need to get off the court.”

Kevin had Dad’s temper and Mom’s disrespect for authority. He played ice hockey for one season. In the one game I watched, Kevin got thrown out for swinging his stick at the head of another player. As he passed by the other team’s bench on his way off the ice, the other players taunted him. Kevin dived head-first into their bench and fought the entire team, including the coach. When the refs finally got a hold of him, Kevin had two black eyes and a broken nose, but so did five of their guys. After that, his friends called him Killer Kevin.

“It’s alright,” I said. “We’ll leave.”

“Yeah, we’ll leave,” said Kevin. Kevin never agreed with me. “But not before we dance.”

Kevin did the moonwalk, leaving massive black rubber streaks on the court as he danced. “*Billy Jean is not my lover...*”

The old guy lost it. He opened the gate and hobbled toward Kevin as fast as he could.

“The court! The court!”

“*She’s just a girl who claims that I am the one!*” Kevin was tone deaf, but it didn’t matter. He could moonwalk faster than the old man could run. But half-way through the second verse, Kevin rolled his ankle and fell to the ground.

“Gotcha, you goddamn little punk!” The man raised his foot to kick Kevin in the side. I had the ball in my hands, and I had to protect my older brother. The ball made that perfect sound of a sweet connection, the physical actualization of a math equation written on a glass windowpane, and I watched it sail over the net and bounce off the old man’s head.

“And he scores! Brazil wins the World Cup!”

When Kevin and I ran past him, the old man was on the ground, his face as red as the mountains at sunset.

Mom wasn’t at the house when we got back, thank God, because she would have known we had been up to no good. She had ways of interrogation only legal in third world countries and Guantanamo Bay. Kevin always got the worst of it.

“Jesus, she’s like the Gestapo.”

“What’s the Gestapo?”

“It’s Mom with a German accent.”

Grandma sat out on the patio. She liked to have a few glasses of white wine and ice in the afternoon. Kevin said it was a holdover from her teaching days.

“Where are Mom and Grandpa?”

“Oh, they had to run some errands. They went to the bank. Your grandpa is getting your mother some money.”

Grandma’s voice did not ring with grade-school inspiration. She looked like Mom when Mom needed a cigarette.

“You boys ever hear about your great-grandfather? Your grandpa’s dad?”

“He worked in sheet metal,” I said. Kevin and I sat down. We had heard about him, briefly, in little snippets. He was a drunk, and he made Grandpa slaughter his pet pig.

“I don’t know why I’m telling you boys this. I’ve had a couple of glasses of wine.” Grandma scratched the back of her calf with her toe. “I guess I’m afraid no one will ever tell you, and I think you should know. I don’t like secrets. I was raised right. Your great-grandpa was very bad to your mother when she was little. You understand?”

Kevin nodded, and so I nodded too.

“Your mother tried to tell your grandfather, but he didn’t believe her. No one believed her, until your grandpa saw it himself.”

Somehow, I knew what Grandma meant, but in a vague way, like cars moving in a fog. It was knowing people did all of the things your parents warned you about.

“I’m not saying it excuses your mother. You have to learn to deal with what life gives you. But maybe it will help you understand.”

Grandma kissed us both on the forehead and went inside. I swear Kevin was crying, but he jumped into the pool before I could know for sure.

Later that night, Grandpa and I sat in lawn chairs in front of the garage. We were flying back in the morning. He drank a Budweiser and I drank a root beer. I have to hand it to Arizona, the place knows how to do sunsets. It was robin-egg blue and violet and the mountains seemed to glow from the inside and the heat from the desert sun seeped up from the ground, warming my feet. Grandpa and I didn’t say much. Every once in a while he ruffled my hair and said he was proud of me and my brother.

A fire truck broke the silence, its engine groaning and breaks squeaking as it turned the corner toward the main road. Grandpa shook his head.

“Hope it wasn’t someone I know.”

“What?”

“The fire truck. It means someone died. They wait until nighttime to bring out the bodies, so they don’t scare us old people. We all know death is coming sooner or later, but we don’t like the reminders.”

“That fire truck is carrying a dead person?”

“Yep.”

The soccer ball had rolled against a palm tree in the yard. That man’s face had been very, very red.

“Do you know who it was?”

“We’ll find out tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow we’ll be gone.”

“I know. I’m going to miss you boys.”

That night, I rolled on top of Kevin again, but he didn’t punch me in the dome. He got up and moved the air mattress. He laid his blanket down on the carpet, and we used my blanket to cover us both.

When Mom woke us up in the morning to leave for the airport, Kevin had his arm around me. She didn’t turn on the lights, like Grandpa, but kneeled down and rubbed my back.

“I’m sorry no one believed you, Mom.”

“What’s that, honey?”

“No one believed you when you were little. I’m sorry.” It was still dark in the room, so I couldn’t see Mom’s face.

“It’s the past, sweetie. What good is in the past? The truth is in the eternal present.”

Céad Míle Fáilte

During his mid-life crisis, my father did not buy a shitty foreign car or start an affair, although either of those options would have been better. Instead, he clambered up our family tree like a convict climbing a fence during a prison break. It turns out we are almost one-hundred percent Irish, going back centuries, ignoring some unfortunate German and Scandinavian branches. At one point, Dad thought he was part Cree, as in Native American, which prompted him to purchase a dream catcher, but he had incorrectly read the handwriting on the PDF of his great-grand uncle's birth certificate. The great-grand uncle was Greek, and my father wasted no time in depositing him at the refuge of relatives he saw no further point in studying. We were Irish, goddamnit, and Dad, aware of white America's deplorable habit of claiming Hibernian ancestry, went about authenticating our Irish identity.

He purchased hundreds of dollars worth of Irish history books. He installed the Irish-Gaelic Rosetta Stone software on the computer in the TV room and spent the quiet hours of the night parroting that strange, forest-noise language. It sounded like he was talking with a mouth full of feathers. He researched the Spillane Coat of Arms and paid a local artist to paint it on our garage door. The shield depicted a lion, gold on the left side and white on the right, roaring above a crimson cross. In the bottom left quadrant was a ship's steering wheel, which I assumed stood for our ancestors' ability to find storms to sail into, and on the other side there was a four-leaf clover, which symbolized the odds of the Spillane Coat of Arms being anything but totally bogus. More importantly, Dad discovered that our last name was not pronounced "spil-lān" but "spil-lan." He started using the new pronunciation in professional settings, to the great consternation and alarm

of his friends and colleagues. Mom and I kept the old pronunciation. He joined the Hounds of Cuchalainn, whose mission statement included the phrase “to celebrate, honor, and continue the heritage of our ancestors in the face of British efforts to extinguish us from the planet, those red-coated, sadistic butchers.” Like the Knights of Columbus, the group was all-male and gathered mostly to drink too much.

For me, Dad crossed the line when he re-felted my pool table to look like the Irish flag—green, white and orange. It was unbelievably hideous, an abuse to both my personal property and anyone with eyes. The orange part of the flag reflected off the glass of my trophy case, making it difficult to read my name on the plaques I won back in my glory days, before I gave up playing pool competitively. Dad’s artistic license with my table felt like someone pissing on a loved one’s grave.

For Mom, Dad crossed the line when he volunteered to host a guest he claimed had direct ties to the Irish Republican Army. From what Mom and I could gather, Dad had offered to take part in a program that housed IRA members who needed to “go on the lamb,” as Dad put it. In a further sign Dad had lost touch with reality, it never occurred to him Mom and I would find the prospect of an IRA member living with us as anything but exciting. After Dad informed us about the guest over dinner one evening, Mom stood up from the table, grabbed her purse, and walked out of the house. She returned two hours later with her mood restored and smelling slightly of marijuana.

“I can’t wait to meet our guest, honey,” said Mom. “He can stay with us for as long as you need.”

“For as long as *he* needs.”

“Right.”

“Great! I’m picking him up from the airport tomorrow night.”

Mom smiled and walked out to the garage, where she smoked enough weed to incapacitate herself for three or four hours of fitful sleep.

Mom and I liked to smoke together at twilight behind the garage. Dad never knew, or if he did he decided not to say anything.

Crab grass and dandelions stretched from the garage’s foundation for several feet to the chain link fence. We kept a one-hitter in Dad’s tool drawer, the safest place to hide something from Dad, along with an Altoids can full of pot. Mom and I would lean against the garage, she with one leg pulled up, knee jutting out from the wall, relaxed. We never said much. Mom kept lemonade in the mini-fridge in the garage, and afterward we would pass the glass bottle back and forth.

The muscles in my back would unwind, one by one, and I would listen to each note in the soft trilling throats of each individual bird. Mom would roll her head slowly, clockwise, counterclockwise, releasing little cracks and pops. That’s how I’ll always remember Mom—back against a wall, head rolling on her neck, escaping from the tension, the sweet-sour taste of lemonade on my tongue.

Mom and I started smoking together during Dad’s Civil War replica days, when every inch of the house smelled like gun powder. We spent more than our normal twenty minutes behind the garage the day Dad threw the typewriter he was using to write his novel through the front bay window. Before Dad and I went to the airport to pick up our Irish guest, Mom took a couple of extra hits. The garage was our home base, the foxhole where we prepared to go once more into the fray of my father’s reality.

Dad and I stood at baggage claim with a cardboard sign written in Gaelic. As far as I could tell, the Irish language made up for in vowels what the Irish people lacked in monetary resources.

I'm not sure what Dad expected from John O'Brien. Maybe it was someone who would stay up with him at night, drink whiskey and reminisce about life and love. Maybe he honestly wanted to help someone in trouble. However, Dad was also running for Grand Shillelagh of the Hounds of Cuchalainn, and I couldn't help but see how John might serve as a powerful symbol of the authenticity of Dad's Irish heritage.

A short, thin man in a plaid shirt tucked into blue jeans with thinning black curly hair snuck up behind us and whispered, "Are you the Spillane's?" Dad and I both jumped.

"Dia duit!" said Dad. "You must be John."

"It's pronounced Spillane," I said.

"No, it's not. John, you said it right."

John did not remind me of a terrorist. He seemed depressed, which made me think he and I would get along. He looked only a few years older than me, probably in his early thirties. His gun-metal gray eyes flitted from car to car along the highway as we drove. He kept his hand on the door handle, either in case he needed to make a quick escape or because he was thinking of killing himself, as my father had not stopped asking him stupid questions about "the old sod," trying out Irish-Gaelic phrases, and explicating our family's genealogical history. At one point, Dad produced from the glove compartment a family tree he had drawn with colored pencils on a piece of paper the size of a road map and handed it to John, who looked seriously confused.

I dropped out of college after one semester. Because I was smarter than everyone else, I figured I could hang around the pool tables in the basement of the student center for most of the semester and catch up at the end. My G.P.A. ended up looking like the economic growth rate in a country suffering from hyper-inflation. I didn't realize a G.P.A. could dip below zero.

I had a corporate sponsor for a while during my professional pool days—Charybdis Condoms. They patched their logo on the black polo I wore when playing in major tournaments. I also had to perform this shtick. Once per tournament, as I was leaning over the table for an easy shot early in the game, a couple of bright red Charybdis Condoms would fall out of my shirt's front pocket and onto the table within the camera's scope. I would count to three, pick up the condoms and say, "Don't ruin your life's voyage—Charybdis Condoms."

For two years, I won enough money to cover my expenses. My stock was on the rise, and a couple of other companies were thinking about sponsoring me. But, in Reno, I lost it all.

Golfers call it the yips. Other athletes call it choking. In pool, we call it cueitis. It was the semi-finals of the Testosterone Supplement Company's Major Invitational. I had my opponent hanging on for dear life, and all I had to do was drop the eight ball. It would be my first appearance in the finals of a major tournament and would guarantee a few calls from some corporate figures.

I missed the sixty degree bank into the side pocket but didn't leave my opponent a look. The second chance I had to win the game was a tap-in, the type of shot I usually

make one-handed with my eyes closed. The eight-ball went wide. I tried to shake off the laughs I heard from the crowd. I got lucky enough to have a third opportunity to end the game, which never happens. I took some deep breaths; I imagined that black sphere dropping into the corner pocket. It was a cross table look without traffic. It was easy. I was going to the finals. I was going to make it.

But my hands wouldn't stop shaking and embarrassing spots of my sweat fell from my face and stained the table. I kept thinking that if I didn't make the shot I would have cueitis, and the more I thought about cueitis the more my arms dangled in their sockets. The word "cueitis" kept flashing across the screen behind my eyes, and it turned into this horrific spiral until the eight ball became my own black-dead career falling into the bottomless corner pocket of life's failures.

I scratched. Game over. Afterward, my opponent refused to shake my hand, rightfully concerned that he might catch whatever disease was circulating through my blood stream. A representative from Charybdis Condoms came up to me after the game.

"It's one game. I'll bounce back."

"I've seen this before, Neil." He ripped the Charybdis Condoms patch off of my shirt. "Take my advice and go into insurance or something."

He was right. In the next tournament I played, I didn't make a single shot. After my early exit, I went comatose, my body as rigid as my cue. They told me I stood like a statue for three hours until someone called the paramedics.

As far as I could tell, John was not engaged in any terrorist activities while staying at the house. The walls were thin, and he was staying in the room next to mine.

He woke up around seven each morning, and I could hear him grunt his way through push-ups and sit-ups for ten minutes. Judging from the lack of steam in the bathroom, he took cold showers.

John mostly kept to himself, but he still emanated a vague, mysterious charm. He didn't teach Dad Irish or stay up late and talk about life and love. However, Mom found out that he was handy around the house, and John began completing the chores Mom had been bugging Dad about for years. He changed the headlights in her car. He hung drapes in the master bedroom. The bathroom faucet had leaked for as long as I could remember, despite Dad's numerous attempts to fix it. John took care of the leak in a single afternoon, and I didn't realize how much I had loved that damn dripping noise, like listening to the dark at a cave's entrance, until it was gone.

I spent my time practicing. The nightmarish puppet master of my annihilation was never around when I played pool by myself in the basement on my Irish-flag table. Each time I leaned over the rails, cue in hand, a watershed of possibilities opened before me, in angles and vectors and cold hard physics.

Dad used John's presence to win the Grand Shillelagh election and spent more and more time with the Hounds, the crookedness of his parking job representative of how much whiskey he had consumed, until one night Dad parked his Prius in the middle of the yard.

John and I both ran downstairs after we heard the brakes screech and the Prius jump over the curb. I had managed to pull on a pair of Charybdis Condoms sweatpants, but John wore nothing but an A-shirt and Kelly green boxers. We peeked through the blinds.

“Is drunk driving legal in America?”

“Not technically.”

Dad stumbled out of the car and dropped his keys in the grass. The tail of his shirt was untucked. I didn't look at John as Dad tried to wrestle his briefcase from the backseat. After the third time he failed to put the key in the lock, I opened the front door.

“Hey, Neil,” he said. “Oh, John, just the man I was looking for! I've got a bottle of Jameson with your name on it.”

Dad tripped over the welcome mat, belched and dropped his briefcase. He took baby-steps down the hallway, and we listened to him slam cupboard doors. Because I felt the mortification Dad never understood, I stared at the ground.

“C'mon, John. There are still a few things I don't understand about Michael Collins.”

I felt John looking at me, his hands on his hips.

“You know, I t'ink I'll just be off to bed. T'anks anyway.”

I waited for a couple of minutes and rubbed my feet against the carpet. As I walked back to my room, I saw Dad sitting at the kitchen table in front of a towering bottle of whiskey. An empty glass sat in front of the chair next to him.

Our family was regaining some normalcy, at least in terms of patterns of predictable behavior. John and I became friends, each of us quiet, introspective and deeply cynical. Dad had the Hounds, and Mom had her house in the type of order she had always wanted.

All of that lasted until I came home from a dentist appointment and heard John taking care of some things for Mom that should've definitely been reserved for Dad. John and Mom were behind the garage and didn't hear me come in, but I could hear them, and I walked right back out the door.

Mom started wearing jewelry again. She wore silver bracelets that jingled when she walked, matching necklaces, emerald encrusted rings she inherited from her mother. She purchased yoga pants and tennis shoes and joined the YMCA. She stopped meeting me behind the garage. I smoked alone.

Mom found an Irish breakfast recipe online, and one morning the kitchen smelled of sausage and fried tomatoes. As I came around the corner, I glimpsed John's hands on her hips and heard her giggle into the frying pan. Dad walked into the kitchen.

"Honey, it smells great in here! You didn't have to go to all this trouble for me."

"I know."

I passed the Sports section to John and the Opinion section to Dad. I've always been partial to the Local News. That's where all the macabre stories are published.

As we were eating, Mom placed the last sausage on John's plate. Dad looked up, confused.

"Sorry, dear, that was the last one. Best to give it to the guest."

Dad didn't respond, but I saw him take note of the bracelets on Mom's wrist and the new coloring in her hair. She walked with a purpose. Dad glanced over at John reading the newspaper, and then he looked at me. I re-read the same sentence about a local man who had survived brain cancer until Dad grabbed his briefcase and left for work.

I did not tell Dad about Mom and John. Part of me believed Dad had cheated on Mom in all of his interests, hobbies and after-work activities. The other part of me figured it was none of my business.

One afternoon, John watched me practice from the top of the stairs without me noticing. After I cleared the table, he started clapping.

“Jaysus, but you can play.” I turned red and put my cue down. “Go on, we should hit the pubs and make it bit of coin.”

“I don’t play with other people anymore.” John nodded from his perch, like some druid with deep knowledge of my interior.

“Yeah, your mother told me about that. The yips they call it, yeah?”

“Something like that.”

John racked the balls, put chalk on his cue and started a game.

“Fucking hideous table.” He made a decent shot. I played with him, and somehow, with John’s silent support, I was hitting shots like in my days with Charybdis Condoms. The pit in my chest disappeared. I was not entirely self-focused. I concentrated on the table, on the game, on the rules that control the table.

The idea that quiet people are nice is some sort of default American setting. During high school, if I stayed quiet and kept my opinions to myself, people thought of me as a decent guy. When I watched John play, I saw my own caustic judgments sitting behind his cheekbones. We were both quiet not because we were nice, but because we deemed those around us unworthy of our time.

Mom came home from a jog, and I imagined her running around our neighborhood with a smile on her face. I prayed he didn't break her heart as I banked the eight ball into the side pocket. If he was going to date my mother, I needed to get to know John better.

“So, what was it like?”

“What was what like?”

“You know.” John shook his head. He was going to make me say it. “Being part of the IRA.” John laid down his cue, and I glanced up the stairs in case I had to make a quick getaway. I had gone too far. Then he started laughing.

“Jaysus, I've never been part of the IRA. Those fellas are fuckin' insane. I put that I was in the IRA on some forms once for a laugh, you know. But you'd have to be an eejit to join the IRA.” John noticed that I wasn't laughing with him. “Is that what your father...?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

The table wasn't level, and my cue wasn't straight. John and I were at a bar downtown. It was the type of place where the men wore brightly colored going-out button downs on a Thursday.

Before we went in, John told me not to do any of the talking. I just had to make the shots when they counted. We played a game by ourselves next to a group of guys who looked ex-military. At first, I was a little rusty, and nervous, so I missed some easy shots.

John missed some as well, but purposefully. Toward the end of the game, John chatted with the guys, who were interested in his accent, before he finally declared, “Go on, I can’t be bothered to play if we’re not going to make it interestin’”

“What?”

“Go on, Neil, let’s put some money on the table.”

“I don’t know...”

John leaned on his cue in exasperation. He took a deep sigh and made sure not to cast a glance in the direction of the jarheads. I couldn’t even count to ten before two of them walked over and put a twenty on the table.

“Two v. Two?”

“Alright. What’s a twenty? But I wish I could have your partner...”

At a certain skill level missing on purpose can be harder than playing for real. That first game, I sank some shots I meant to put off the boards, and each time John sent a death-glare in my direction. He had no problem missing on purpose.

John handed them a twenty. We played double-or-nothing. We lost that game, too.

“Right, well, lads, I did just find a couple of these in my wallet...” John studied two hundred dollar bills. “How much are these worth? I can’t count American money. It all looks the same.”

“You two want to play for two-hundred bones?” one of the guys asked me. “Well, hell yeah, we’ll take your money. That’s a lot of beer!”

One of the jarheads broke, John hit a shot, the other guy made two, and then I cleaned the table. Ball after ball went rolling into the pockets. Combinations, bank shots, I even jumped the cue over a pile and buried one in the corner pocket.

Right before I put the eight-ball home, I realized what had made me choke. It was fear. Not of failure, but of turning into my father. If I didn't excel at pool, I saw myself flying into a hundred other activities, giving it my all until I crashed against the wall separating the gifted from the truly talented. It was all too much. John had this infectious, easy-going attitude, like even failure wouldn't be that bad. He winked at me before I finished the game.

“You two guys fucking hustled us.”

I was prepared to forget about the money. I would have considered it a donation to the armed forces if it kept me from getting my ass kicked.

“We did, yeah. But give us the cash.”

Like everyone else John talked to, they listened. John handed me one of the bills and slipped the other into his wallet. He bought everyone, including the two jarheads, shots of whiskey.

There was something about John. It wasn't that he didn't care about people. It was that he didn't care about consequences. He had faith, maybe, but not in God or anything. He had faith it would all work out. That he could take what he wanted, at every moment, and still continue on his merry way.

As long as he didn't *mean* anyone any harm, he couldn't *do* anyone any harm. Or something like that.

The military guys stumbled out of the bar, and John ordered more drinks for us. We sat alone under the glare of a widescreen television, and I'd drunk enough to open up. To be honest.

"Hey, John, I know what's going on between you and Mom."

I heard him swallow hard and watched him grab the bar to steady himself. Neither of us took our eyes off the television.

"It's whatever. Just, please, don't hurt her. I really just don't want you to hurt her."

John didn't say anything, but nodded his head a little, acknowledged he had heard me, and ordered another round.

"Sláinte," he said.

"Cheers."

A few days later, Dad came home early from his meeting with the Hounds. Luckily, Mom and John were watching television and not doing chores. Dad flew into the house, only half-drunk, and called me up from the basement.

"Family meeting! This is important! Important family meeting to deal with important family business!" Mom turned off the television. She and John sat on opposite sides of the couch like sheepish teenagers. "The spring solstice is coming up, and, as I'm sure John knows, the spring solstice was the most important day of the year for the ancient Celts. Right, John?"

"Definitely." John looked over at me and winked.

“So, as Grand Shillelagh of the Hounds of Cuchalainn, I will be hosting a Celtic Spring Solstice Party, and you are all invited.”

“Do I have to come?” I asked.

“Where is the party?” asked Mom.

“Yes, Neil, you have to come. And we’ll be hosting the party right here at the house, honey.” I could tell Mom was thinking about the Altoids can in the garage.

“When is the spring solstice?”

“A week from this Friday. Family, this is going to be a lot of fun.” John had started tugging on the collar of his shirt and shifting in his seat. “John, I totally understand if all of this makes you a little uncomfortable. But, you should have total trust in the Hounds of Cuchalainn. No need to worry.”

On the night of the party, a guy who called himself Fergus of the Twelve Sacred Stones of Cashel arrived at the door. Above the waist, he wore an emerald jacket and bow tie, his gut pressing against his white shirt’s cloverleaf-shaped buttons. Below the waist, he wore a plaid kilt and cream stockings, his hairy, pimple-covered knees exposed. A leather pouch hung in front of his crotch. He did not have an Irish accent. He carried a messenger bag.

“Hey, I’m looking for the Spillane’s?”

“It’s pronounced Spillane.”

“Whatever. Is this the place? I’ve got like four other Celtic rituals to do tonight.”

The Hounds and their wives were milling about our kitchen and living room, drinking whiskey and Guinness. Some of the Hounds lived in the neighborhood and had walked over. Dad was playing host, carrying a tray of drinks and wearing a James Joyce

costume. The soundtrack from Riverdance played in the background. Fergus dropped his bag on the coffee table, promptly located the bar and took two shots of whiskey.

Afterward, he removed a small drum from his bag and pounded out a beat with a green stick.

“Come, children of the Emerald Isle. Gather around Fergus of the Twelve Sacred Stones of Cashel. He has stories to tell you, from the cliffs of the West, from the stone streets of Dublin. It is our holy day, our feast, when we become one with nature, when we sing to our ancestors.” Hand-rolled cigarettes had ravaged Fergus’s voice.

The Hounds gathered around him, their faces focused on the moment’s holiness. Tears were shed. I was looking for John, so we could share some snide comments. He had made himself scarce as soon as Mrs. Hennessy and Mrs. Whitcut arrived. Mrs. Hennessy and Mrs. Whitcut both lived in the neighborhood and wore low-cut blouses, their hair carefully manicured, heels raising them above the crowd.

Fergus had begun a call-and-response session while banging on the drum.

“The Stag, symbol of grace!” said Fergus.

“Come forth, animal inside us!”

“The Seahorse, symbol of flexibility, of bending but not breaking!”

“Come forth, animal inside us!”

When John finally emerged from his room, Mrs. Hennessy and Mrs. Whitcut eyed him like lionesses stalking their prey, as did my mother. It was like watching a *Planet Earth* episode, bored housewives edition. The three women approached John with drinks for him in their hands, and I finally figured out what about the party had made John so

nervous. John had been doing chores for husbands besides Dad. Unfortunately for John, my mother, Mrs. Hennessy and Mrs. Whitcut all came to the same realization.

“The adder, symbol of cunning and intelligence!”

“Come forth, animal inside us!”

Mom’s chest turned red, and I saw her hold back the tears as she raced into the kitchen. Dad saw her run off and went to find her, his cane tapping the floor, still in character. Fergus stopped banging on the drum.

John tilted his head and smiled. I lifted my eyes to the ceiling and finished my drink. By the time I was done, John had returned to his room.

I peeked my head around the corner and saw Mom crying into Dad’s shoulder. Their bodies opened up hollow places for each other. It didn’t look like the first time.

I don’t know if Dad knew the full extent of what had happened. He had been showing off his Celtic astrological tattoos when the wives brought John the same drink. Maybe he only wanted to comfort his crying wife. Or maybe he knew about the whole thing, and let it happen. I don’t know what kind of relationship my parents have, not really, and I’m definitely not interested in the details. Maybe Dad thought it brought him closer to the Old Country, through some kind of sexual osmosis.

I found John in his room. He was lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling, arms crossed behind his head.

“That was a real dick move.”

“I never said I was a saint.”

“You said you wouldn’t hurt her.”

“I never said anything.”

John sat up. There were no photos of family members in his room. He hadn't received any letters from back home, and I never heard him mention family or friends.

"You know, for a fella who still lives at home and doesn't have a job, you sure have plenty of ideas about how other people should be living their lives."

I didn't have much of a response to that.

"So why don't you fuck off?"

And I did. I fucked off back to my bedroom, grabbed my cell phone, and called our local immigration office. I had to take what I wanted in this world, and I wanted John gone. All he would do was remind me of when I had cueitis. And those days were done.

The Red Door

I'm not saying I can see the future. I'm just saying I could see it coming. I'm talking about the Red Door burning down.

The other day, I was sleeping on a bench by the river letting the sun bake my eye lids. We sleep during the day and walk around at night because it's safer. Sleeping at night is a great way to get all your stuff jacked. Or worse. That's why the guys you see sleeping on the street at night, usually holding an empty bottle of mouth wash to their chests, never have any gear. I heard someone yelling at me and I opened my eyes and it was a cop on a horse, and the cop had on this helmet that made him look like an alien, especially with the sun behind him. For a second, I thought it was an acid flashback.

"Hey, move along," said the cop.

"Alright, hold on a minute."

As soon as I said it, I knew the words didn't come out right. The horse shook its head and whinnied, and the cop reached for his weapon, his face twisted in horror, like the sounds from my mouth assaulted him.

"Move along!" he yelled.

"I heard you. I'm leaving right now."

The horse reared back in fear and spun in a circle, nearly throwing the cop, its hooves scraping across the pavement. As soon as he had the horse settled down, the cop pulled out his Tazor and zapped me in the chest, panic etched across his face. I fell to the ground, and I kept my tongue pressed against the top of my mouth. I didn't want to bite through it like the last time.

I heard the cop speak into his radio. The squad cars arrived, and the cops took me to jail. They released me in the morning.

At least I had a roof over my head that night. It was pissing rain.

My voice stopped working sometime after I fell down the central library's steps and cracked my head. The sounds that come out don't match the words, and the longer I talk the more people become terrified and disgusted, like I'm pulling my guts out through my mouth. I keep hoping one day I'll wake up and the problem will be gone. The weird thing is my voice sounds normal, at least to me. When I talk, I can hear myself speaking English, forming sentences, getting something across to another person. The words get mixed up mid-air.

I've been roaming up and down the West Coast for the last fifteen years, but now I mostly stay in Portland. Never too hot, never too cold, and there are a lot of parks. Portland has so many soup kitchens you'd have to be retarded to go hungry.

It wasn't actually called the Red Door—that was just what we called it. I don't remember the real name, but I know it was a Catholic church because the crosses had Jesus all bloody and dead. We had to line up early because they only had so many seats in the hospitality center, and the fresh pastries went quick.

Most of us homeless liked the Red Door because they never made us go to religious services before eating. We would say the Our Father one time each day, but that was it. See, the other places, like the Salvation Army, made us go to a long church talk before getting any food or a bed to sleep in, and eventually we had to start talking about Jesus. That's why guys said things like, "Man, I've been saved at least four times this

month,” when they were really working the system, faking the Jesus thing for a place to sleep.

Three Our Fathers for a cup of coffee. Ten Hail Mary’s for a muffin. Memorize the New Testament and win a bedroom.

Jessica was the secretary. She dialed the number when I needed to make a phone call, and she gave out bus passes and helped fill out paperwork. She was pretty the way farm girls from Indiana are pretty, like she sprouted from pure dark soil. Her right hand was shriveled up, and she never raised her voice.

I walked up to the counter and worked my charm.

“Good morning, Hal,” she said. I tilted my head to the right to let her know I had a question. “No response to your housing application. I’ve heard there’s quite a wait for the next batch of apartments. But I’m doing my best to work my magic for you. Why don’t you head upstairs and get some coffee?”

The city had been building studio apartments for homeless people, and I finally applied to get one. I’d been on the streets a long time, so I worried about losing my freedom. But winter was coming soon, and the previous two winters I coughed up a greenish-red crud, like something dredged up from the river, for months.

Homeless people are professionals at waiting in line. Upstairs in the Red Door’s hospitality center, I waited in line for some coffee, waited in line for the sugar, and waited in line for a day-old Danish. At dinner time, I waited in line at the soup kitchen down the street.

Some of the volunteers at the Red Door were baby priests. At least that’s what people called them. They were priests-in-training. Right away, I could tell Louis was a

little off. He had one hazel eye and one blue eye, and he wore his priest-shirt like a shield. Louis was skinny and short, always pointing his head around like a bird, little twitchy movements. Even when sitting down he would tap his foot or shake his leg.

Del told me Louis was a psychologist before he was a baby priest. I don't know if Del was right. He also thought the government sent tiny electric shocks through sidewalks in order to brainwash people, which was why he always walked on the street, which was why Del'd been hit by about three cars since I'd known him. Del also told me he once killed a man with a stale blueberry bagel he got from the Red Door.

“No one expects to get attacked with a bagel. Took the guy totally by surprise.”

Del wasn't the most reliable source of information.

Louis had this aura of confidence, like he had done it all before in a previous life. He never hedged his words. He would give little speeches as he walked around the hospitality center. Most of the volunteers served doughnuts and bussed tables, but Louis never did any of that. It was beneath him. Once, he talked for fifteen minutes about the history of Formica tables, and the entire time he rapped his knuckles against the table near my resting head. It was good I was so tired because with more energy I might have ripped his tongue out, pinched it between my thumb and forefinger and pulled until it came loose with a pop.

Most mornings, a group would get in tight with Louis, pulling their chairs over to one side of the room. I was never part of the group, but I listened. I couldn't help but listen, Louis was so goddamn loud. According to Louis, God was pre-Flood pissed off. Whatever temper God was in before he made it rain for forty days, God was in that sort of mood all over again. And Jesus was angry, too.

God was furious, preached Louis, because of the gays. The Almighty expected the righteous to stop gay-sex from happening. People would shout “Amen!” and “Preach, brother!” Draino would pull out his hair and sway back and forth like he needed a fix.

One time, I said, “Maybe God’s angry because you guys never shut up and let a man sleep.” But I could tell from their faces, and from Draino reaching for his switchblade, it didn’t come out right.

“The Lord God will send his wrath upon us!” yelled Louis. “We are square within wrath’s radius, brothers and sisters! He’ll turn us to sand, like he did to Lot!”

“Amen!” yelled Kathleen.

“I thought there was going to be a flood?” asked Bald Michael.

“Yeah, what happened to the flood?” asked Stan. “Who said anything about sand?”

“Sisters! Brothers!” yelled Louis. “Flood or sand or fire or brimstone, it isn’t important. We have to save ourselves from eternal damnation!”

“Flood and sand and fire and brimstone!” cheered Kathleen.

I was walking around trying to stay awake when I saw the boy and his father heading toward the Greyhound station. I’d seen the two of them a couple of times, and I wasn’t sure if they were real or not. The father was a tall, thin man in a black suit with a worn, brown leather cap, and the little boy had straight blond hair in a bowl cut. The man was always worried and hungry but trying hard to look tough for his boy. And the boy, he could tell his father was worried, which meant his father didn’t know everything, which scared him.

I wanted to tell them the Greyhound wasn't safe after dark. The drug dealers come in around 10:00 pm and leave after the morning commute. They sell crack to whores at night and cocaine to lawyers in the morning.

The dad kept peeking over his shoulder at me, and I kept trying to tell him I was a friend. He locked his arm around his boy's shoulders. Finally, right before they reached the station, they stopped, and the father looked down an alley and took off his hat. I broke into a run, keeping my head down so I wouldn't trip. When I arrived, they were gone.

In the alley, I saw Del sitting against a building with a junkie smile on his lips. The off-yellow light from the streetlamps glinted off the needle next to him. I wondered how he got the hit because he was broke when I saw him at the soup kitchen. I looked for Katherine because she and Del were street-married, partners on the pavement.

I heard a woman's pain-filled screech come from behind the dumpster. I saw three guys in puffy coats, dealers from the Greyhound station, all hunched over someone. The boots Katherine had found in a dumpster behind some condos earlier in the week were lying in a puddle. These boots are made for walking, she had told me.

That's how Del had got the hit. He traded Katherine. I tried to scream and scream and scream but all I could do was stare at Del and his smile.

I walked over to the construction site for the new homeless apartments. I tasted the coffee and saw Jessica and felt the warmth of having a place to sleep every night. No more cops with their Tazors. Maybe I would have a view of the river.

The boy and his father sat on some swings in the park across the street from the Red Door. The little boy pointed at the church's steeple.

The next morning, Jessica pulled me aside and showed me into her office. When she was nervous, Jessica rubbed her shriveled hand. She had it in a death-grip as she sat down.

“Hal, I don’t know how to tell you this, but I just got off the phone with people over at the Housing Authority. Do you know those people?”

I nodded.

“So, they don’t have any spots open right now. And they don’t think they’ll have any openings until March.”

That one hurt, but I assumed it was coming. I always expected the worst. Jessica started crying, and she hunted for some tissues.

“It’s alright,” I said. “You don’t have to cry. I’ll be alright.”

Her head shot up and she lifted her hand, as if for self-protection, but then she relaxed.

“I have something else to tell you, Hal. The police found Del’s body last night. He got in a fight. They think it was over drugs. The police said they’ll investigate, but they won’t. Who cares about another dead homeless person? And they can’t find Katherine.”

She burst into tears and put her head in her lap. I always expected the worst. Of course Del was gone. Everyone leaves. I stood up and put my hand on Jessica’s back. She grabbed my hand and held it against her face.

After I left Jessica’s office, I saw Louis leaning against the far wall, arms crossed, tapping his foot. He had been listening to the conversation, and he had this stupid concerned look on his face, like something half-way between constipation and

ejaculation. I wondered if I could slam his head against the wall hard enough to bust through the sheet rock.

I sat alone in the hospitality center, and it was pretty clear I didn't want to talk to anyone, but still Louis came over. He probably felt some priestly need to provide a listening ear, or a shoulder, or whatever, and like all the other volunteers he couldn't understand maybe I didn't want any help.

"Brother, may I have a seat?" asked Louis as he sat down. "I apologize, but I overheard your conversation with Jessica."

I didn't want to talk about death, or the afterlife. I didn't want to talk about St. Peter and his keys or any of the other shit I heard about before I got kicked out of Holy Child Catholic School for spray painting an anarchy sign on the gym wall and selling weed-brownies at a bake-sale raising money for some broke-ass high school in Guatemala where the kids didn't have clean drinking water and wore shitty white shirts with the school's stupid logo over the heart.

"I'm sorry to hear about Del. I know you two were close. And I'm even more sorry to hear about your housing application. But I think I could help out with that. I know some of the guys at the Housing Authority. They'll listen to me."

I lifted my head from the table. I could hear him tapping his foot. To the right, Louis's little group of minions stared at me.

"I could get you to the top of the list. I know people. Would you like that?"

I didn't want to jeopardize the situation by speaking, so I nodded my head. I saw myself on my ass in an alley with a needle, and I didn't want to follow the boy and his father anymore. Del told me the rooms came with a twin-sized bed and a hot-plate.

“But I’m going to need a little favor from you, Hal. Just a little favor.”

It took an hour to walk to the warehouse in the industrial center, a couple miles south of Union Station, and it took another fifteen minutes to pry open the back door. There were no security cameras or rent-a-cops. If I got caught one more time breaking and entering, I was getting locked away for good.

I fucking hated Louis. And I fucking hated hiking in the rain to some shitty warehouse to find some shitty float meant for some shitty gay pride parade. And I hated sneaking around in the dark, my feet splashing in puddles of rainwater and oil, and crawling underneath the float’s carriage with the flashlight and needle-nose pliers Louis gave me. And I hated how I knew exactly what to do and how to do it because my dad taught me, because that reminded me of him, the fucking stupid dead prick.

I shoved the door back into place after I finished, so the gays wouldn’t know anyone had broken in. As I turned the corner back to the main road, I saw the boy and his father. The rain dripped down their blank faces. They had black holes for eyes, and they shook their heads at me in rhythm, left right left right.

“Fuck you, too,” I said.

Every year, the parade comes down the main drag and passes in front of the Red Door. I don’t think it’s organized to purposefully pass churches, like Louis said. I think it’s organized to go down the main drag, where there happens to be a lot of churches. But, I don’t know, because it’s always done on a Sunday, and it starts right about the time people file out from those tall doors.

A little old lady took the stage. She wore a bright purple suit and the broach pinned to her lapel glimmered in the sun. She was introduced as the “First Lady of the Queers,” and I imagined her taking a stroll through the White House lawns tossing a tennis ball to a Shih Tzu.

The First Lady of the Queers had a voice like the wind chimes hanging in the Japanese garden. I closed my eyes and almost fell asleep standing up. Her partner got cancer. In the hospital, she couldn’t visit her partner as much as the other wives. When her partner finally died, she died alone, “with nothing but the cold beeps and colder tubes.” The woman cried a little, but it didn’t seem fake. I bet it was the fiftieth time she gave that speech, but the tears felt real to me, authentic, that hurt and pain of not being there when her love was most alone.

By the end of her talk, people removed their sunglasses to wipe tears away. They held each other tight. No one held me, but that was alright, I wasn’t expecting it.

Dying alone, that’s something I have a grip on.

The parade started after her speech. A group of burly men with long beards called The Leather Bears Motorcycle Club drove down first, and even with the pink motorcycles and sequined leather jackets they looked tough. There were about fifty of them, and their bikes made so much noise passing by it felt like the road might collapse.

A *Grease* float came next, followed by a float of comic book characters. Batman and Robin were making out, and one of the largest men I have ever seen was tossing condoms into the crowd dressed as Wonder Woman.

That was the thing about the pride parade. It was controlled chaos. Which is more or less my whole life. I wasn’t sure which float I had fixed for Louis, because it had been

pitch black in the warehouse. Just to be careful, I stood as far back from the road as possible.

When I first heard Louis's grating voice, it came from the sky.

"I have been called to save you! You will wither in the fire of your eternal damnation if you refuse to change your sodomite ways!"

He was way up in the Red Door's bell tower and spoke through a bullhorn. See, that was the thing about priests. Teachers, too. Everyone thinks they do all this self-sacrifice, but really they just want to be in front of a crowd, speaking through a bullhorn, getting all the attention.

"Bow down to the sanctity of marriage!"

"Bow down to this!" yelled a man as he whipped out his junk and waved it at Louis. The crowd cheered.

Louis's gang from the hospitality center formed a human blockade in front of the Closeted Republican Queers float. The people on the Closeted Republican Queers float wore gray suits and paper bags over their heads. Michael, Bald Michael, Draino and a few others locked arms. Tiffany's face was inches from the front bumper by the time the float stopped.

Some people yelled and screamed but most took out their phones. The float behind the Closeted Republican Queers had a sign painted on its side that read: "Dante's Inferno." It had organ pipes that shot flames twenty feet into the air. When people yelled at the Dante's Inferno float to stop, the driver, who was wearing a Toga with "Virgil" written on his chest, slammed on the breaks but nothing happened. I had snipped the brake wires. Virgil veered the float to the right to avoid a collision with the Closeted

Republican Queers, which sent Dante's Inferno straight for the Red Door. Virgil and several others jumped out of the float, which had "Abandon All Hope All Ye Who Enter Here" spray-painted across the back bumper.

I swear the float picked up speed before hitting the church. It went right through the wall. As soon as it got all the way inside, the organ pipes shot flames out from the float-sized hole in the outer wall, and smoke billowed out from the church. The Red Door's fire alarm went off at the same time as the explosion. The whole building was on fire.

Afterward, a lot of people talked about where the police were during the commotion. My own opinion is they were down by the river kicking homeless people off of park benches.

No one ever found Louis's body, but no one saw him escape, either. I'm saying, it's all a little strange. Reminds me of the conspiracy theories Del used to tell me about. Powers and systems underneath all the other powers and systems, and that was my chance, I had to get down beneath it all, to the core, to what holds everything together.

They're building million dollar condos where the Red Door used to be. I found a gap in the fence and walked around the construction site. I pissed in an open bag of cement. I wasn't sure, but I thought I saw the moonlight shine on the man in the leather cap and his little boy.

"I'm still here" I said. "I'm still here."

A Steel Hulk of Heavy Promise

After serving his twenty-seven month sentence, Reilly opened his bedroom door to find that his mother had turned his room into a storage closet for Avon products.

“Ma, what the hell happened to my room?”

His old room was what he had looked forward to most, with the down comforter and the reading light he had installed into the wall above his pillow by himself when he was twelve.

“I’m sorry, honey, I meant to get all of this stuff out of the way, but I just ran out of time. You know how it is.”

Reilly dropped his bags on the floor and removed the boxes of pink bullshit off his bed and laid down. No, he didn’t know how it was. For the past twenty-seven months, time had belonged to the federal government. His mother walked into the room with a tin-covered pan in her arms.

“I made this mostaccioli the night that horrible mulignan judge sentenced you. I put it in the freezer, and tonight we’re going to eat it.”

“Thanks, Ma.”

When they sat down to eat, Reilly took two bites and realized it was the mostaccioli from Favazza’s Restaurant, where they used spiced sausage they made in-house. She had ordered take-out and put it in her own pan.

In the morning, Reilly took a twenty minute shower and sat down on the couch in his old Saint Louis University High School Varsity Soccer t-shirt and reveled in the awesomeness that was Netflix. On the mantle above the television was a photo of his father, shirtless with Reilly up on his shoulders. Reilly had held a silent grudge against

Kentucky ever since his father drove his truck off a cliff outside Lexington. He never drank bourbon. A car with a ridiculously loud engine pulled up in front of the house, and without looking he knew it was Nick.

From the window, Reilly watched Nick get out of the bright orange Ford Mustang with a black racing stripe down the middle. Even with the overcast skies, the car sparkled. Nick looked the same, which made Reilly wonder how much he had changed. He had spent all of his time inside doing push-ups and jogging around the yard. Nick could have stepped out of a Guido fashion magazine.

“Oh! It’s my boy Reilly! With that jail time buffness!”

Nick jabbed Reilly in the stomach and acted like the punch hurt his hand.

“Hey Nick.”

“You going to let me in?”

Nick laughed at nothing as he sat in Reilly’s spot on the couch. He jingled the keys in his pocket.

“I looked in on your mom a lot when you were inside.”

“Yeah, she told me.”

“It was the least I could do.”

Ma had not mentioned anything about Nick, but that didn’t mean Nick was lying. Either way, Nick could have done a whole lot more, because Reilly was arrested while delivering a box full of Oxy to one of Nick’s clients at Southern Illinois University, across state lines, which is why he got popped with a federal charge. He was driving Nick’s previous Ford Mustang, and the pills were in the trunk, and he could still hear the police dog sitting down and barking, and the cop asking him to step out of the car.

He had told the story of his arrest so many times—to lawyers, judges, fellow inmates—the narrative had taken on a life of its own. The chest pains no longer returned when he talked about the flashing lights in his rearview mirror. When he told the story, he described his face as a mask of fatalism as the cops put him in cuffs, and he didn't cry, and he hadn't taken a hit of heroin before the drive.

Reilly never ratted Nick out. Word got around the prison that Reilly was a man who could keep a secret, and it provided him with an aura of respect that translated into physical protection. At night, Reilly weighed the pride he had saved against the days he had missed—barbeques and late night beers and dropping out of community college two quarters shy of graduation.

With Nick in front of him, in his head Reilly heard the cop say, “Strange that Nick had you drive tonight. Very strange indeed. I mean, he knew his car was hot in Illinois. We were all over that guy. Because of the kid that overdosed a couple months back.”

The cop was probably lying.

“This couch,” said Nick, “is the luckiest couch in the world.”

“For you, anyway.”

Nick had lost his virginity where he was sitting to Katie McCormick, back in high school, while Reilly fumbled around with Dani Fabiano in his bedroom until she gave up and went to sleep.

“Hey, you remember the time with the golf cart?” asked Nick.

“Chucky was like, ‘My leg! It’s broken!’”

Nick, Reilly and another kid named Chucky, who had died in a car crash back in high school, stole a golf cart out of Mr. Minucci’s garage one summer, ripping it around

the Hill, the old Italian neighborhood that had fire hydrants painted green, white and red. When Nick took a corner too hard and nailed a curb, sending the boys and their little bag of shitty weed flying out into the street. Chucky didn't realize his leg was stuck in a storm drain, not broken.

“Listen, Reilly, I came here to offer you a job at the shop. It would be a low-level sales thing, but we'd cut you in on the other business, too. It would be a good way for you to get back in the game.”

“I was never in the game.”

“You were in the game enough to deliver those pills.”

“That was a favor, Nick.”

Until he got to jail, Reilly had never even considered the possibility that people would not do anything for their best friends. Back then, he would have helped Nick bury a body. In the neighborhood they grew up in, loyalty was the last and final measure of self-worth.

“At least let me take you out. We'll head over to the East Side. Get you a lap dance.”

Maybe Nick was helping out a friend that had saved him from a long jail-stint. Or maybe he was trying to make up for something.

“I'll think about it, Nick. Thanks for stopping by.”

Nick started his car's engine while still sitting on the couch using the clicker on his key chain. They bro-hugged, and Nick kissed him on the cheek, like he had been watching too many gangster movies, like he had something to hide.

In the afternoons, he went into the garage and worked on his father's 1964 Corvette. His father bought it before he died, planning on fixing it up with his only son. It had needed a new everything, a rust-covered pipe-dream. A steel hulk of heavy promise.

There were times when Reilly only needed one more part—a flywheel or a timing belt or an axel rod—to get the car running. Instead, he'd yank the carburetor from its metallic sepulcher or wrench a head-gasket loose with needle-nosed pliers. Lately, he liked to crawl underneath the chassis, a paint-spattered radio playing classic rock, and stay down there, softly pressing his foot against the car-jack.

Afterward, he would walk to Milo's during the post-happy hour pre-night lull and order Budweiser by the bucket.

He was three beers deep when Nick walked in with the the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was a hundred different types of perfect browns—skin and eyes and hair. She hugged a skinny blonde girl who had been sitting at the other end of the bar. Soft, feminine actions, like rubbing an arm or cheek, still caught Reilly off-guard. He forgot there was a world without edges. Nick bought a bucket and put it on Reilly's table.

“Your mother said I could find you here.”

“You caught me.”

“You're going to have to get a cell phone, Reilly. It's the twenty-first century.”

“I like being disconnected.”

Nick introduced the women. The blonde's name was Carmen, and she sidled up beside Reilly, and he could smell her strawberry lotion through the engine grease on his hands. The brunette was Adissa, Nick's girlfriend.

“Adissa here is the smartest girl in the entire world.”

“Because she’s dating you?”

“That, and because she can predict football games. She’s my little money-maker. Her grandmother was a Gypsy. It’s genetic. Like micks being degenerate drunks.”

Carmen rubbed some of the grease off of Reilly’s fingers, which meant Nick was probably paying her to be there.

“You look like someone who knows what to do with his hands, Reilly,” said Carmen.

“Reilly here is excellent with his hands,” said Nick, as he jerked off the air in front of him. Carmen laughed too loud, but Adissa just stared at her drink, spinning it on the table, the sleeve of her black long-sleeved shirt absorbing the water running off the empty beer bucket.

Nick had a confident charm women found attractive, at first, until they realized he used it to swallow people whole. He convinced women to love him because then he had control. But Adissa didn’t strike Reilly as the normal type. Usually, Nick dated girls whose need for affirmation rang out in the high squeak of their voices, in their laughs, in their sapling-like need to lean against someone. Adissa took up actual space; she was her own person, not a half-formed thing waiting for directions.

And if she could really predict football games, there was no reason for her to hang around a small-time gangster.

“Let’s go out back and get a little high,” said Nick. Adissa’s shirt sleeve fell to her elbow, just for a second, and she yanked it back to her wrist, but not before Reilly saw the track marks. She was early on in the black-teethed hole, the veins still ripe and blue.

“You coming, Reilly?” asked Carmen.

“No, I’m straight. Kicked it in jail.”

Adissa and Reilly locked eyes before she left. He looked at the beer bucket, but not out of reticence. It was the sadness hiding in the lines around her lips. After they went outside, Reilly left the bar, taking a bottle with him for the road.

As he walked home, something about the conversation at the bar wouldn’t leave him alone. His chest felt tight. And then it hit him—Nick had said he’d called his Mom. But his mother had been at work when he left for the bar. So Nick called her cell phone.

It was probably nothing. Jail had made him paranoid.

Ma was hosting an Avon party. Reilly spied on them through the screen door. The women sat in a circle, their pink blazers casting a garish glow against the white walls. On the kitchen table, Ma had displayed the latest in age-reducing, life-saving products. Reilly felt sick as he looked at the women, smiling as they politely dragged each other down the granite walls of a pyramid scheme.

It was like a tribunal from his childhood. There was Mrs. Antonino, who caught them spray-painting “FUCK” on Sacred Heart Convent’s back wall. There was Mrs. Camillerri, who walked in on them downloading lesbian porn, not because they were especially into lesbians, but because they were terrified of seeing any cocks beside their own. And then there was Mrs. Penington, who caught him and Nick trying to smoke some crank that was mostly baking soda they bought from a homeless guy who lived in a tent down by the river.

“I swear to God, I started putting on this face cream, it’s made with Peruvian sea salt, and Harry’s been *all over me*, if you know what I’m saying.”

There were small laughs and scandalously raised eyebrows.

“They’re coming out with some new concealer that uses stem-cells to rejuvenate your skin. Of course, we won’t be buying it. Against the faith.”

The women glanced up at the framed photograph of Pope Francis hanging on the wall. Mrs. Antonino crossed herself and the gesture spread. But Reilly could tell they were disappointed.

“Did you put the new wallpaper up in the bathroom, Tammy?” asked Mrs. Camilleri. “It looks wonderful.”

“I can’t do anything around the house,” said Reilly’s mother. “Little Nick did that for me. He’s always helping out. Cleaned the gutters last spring. Repaved the walkway in the backyard. He’s a good boy, that Nick.”

“Well, now that Reilly’s back he’ll be able to do that stuff, right?” asked Mrs. Penington. Reilly’s mother shrugged her shoulders, and there was a three-count of awkward silence.

He went around the house to the garage, turned on the radio, crawled underneath his father’s car, and put his foot up against the car jack. His mother’s shadow stalked across the concrete floor. She must have seen the garage light turn on. She stopped by the car door.

“What have you been doing tonight?”

“Nothing.”

He heard her finger through the open toolbox on the counter, the empty scrape of bolts that should have been in the car’s engine.

“Are you high? Don’t lie to me, Reilly. I swear to God, do not lie to me.”

“No, Mom, I’m not high.”

“Look me in the eyes.”

Reilly emerged from beneath the car. He saw his mother’s tights compressing the meat around her calves and looked up, allowing her to search his face.

“I’m not fucking high.”

She didn’t say anything. She slammed the toolbox shut before walking away.

A long buzz greeted Reilly as he walked into Nick’s heating and cooling shop. Adissa sat at a table staring into a cup of coffee. A vending machine rattled against the back wall. Reilly sat down across from her.

“Nick’s not here. He’s been out all night. I’ll tell him you stopped by.”

“Maybe I came to see you.” She smiled like it was a waste of energy. “I need you to read my palm. If you can predict football games, you can read palms.”

He was joking until she grabbed his hand and laid it flat against the table, rubbing his forearm up to the elbow, using the nail on her index finger to trace the lines on his hand. Reilly was embarrassed by the moist sweat gathered in his palm’s crevices, by his splotchy facial hair, by the stench rising from his shirt.

“Interesting,” she said. “Very interesting. You see this line, this big one? Do you know what it says?”

“What?”

“That you have a tiny dick.”

When she laughed, the sadness around her eyes disappeared. She asked if he wanted to get high, and before Reilly knew it he was in a storage garage sitting on a milk

crate watching Adissa perform the ritual of his sure-fire annihilation, needle and spoon and that fucking smell, that metallic burnt-coffee scent from hiding it in Starbucks bags, tying off, and then the blissful wait for a slack-jawed worry-free timeless existence.

They didn't say much, at first. For Reilly, the mandated silence was the best part of heroin. For the first thirty minutes, even if he wanted to say something, his tongue lay in his mouth like a dead fish. Nick still hadn't shown up when they started coming down, and Reilly got up to leave. He thanked her for the hit.

"I do the H because of the headaches," she said. "I get these migraines from the bets. I've told Nick, but he doesn't give a shit. He makes me do it all the time. But lately the H has it made it worse, somehow, makes it so I can't even eat, I'm a fucking zombie, which I think Nick likes even more. Having a money-making zombie."

Reilly didn't respond. His head was still spinning, and his heartbeat was off from his breathing, like his organs had never met. He moved toward the door.

"Hey," said Adissa. "About your palm."

"Yeah?"

"You're a loyal friend. Too loyal."

When Reilly got home, he threw off his clothes and put them in the washer, and took a shower, and thanked God his mother wasn't home. She had put the Avon boxes down in the basement.

He scrounged the kitchen cupboards for something to eat and found nothing but spices and stale potato chips. In the freezer, way in the back, behind the ice cube trays and bottle of Smirnoff, there was a half-eaten carton of store brand gooey butter cake ice

cream, by far the worst flavor on the planet and found only in St. Louis. It tasted like biting into a bag of popcorn's buttered, kernalized dregs.

Reilly only knew one person who ate gooey butter cake ice cream. Nick.

He went into his mother's bedroom. He wasn't sure what he was looking for. Maybe a watch he would recognize, or a cufflink. Anything that would give it away. He opened his mother's underwear drawer but couldn't put himself through that sort of mental anguish and closed it again.

Partly because he didn't find anything incriminating, and partly because it was better for his sanity, Reilly decided that Nick and his mother were not sleeping together. Which meant Nick had just spent a lot of time at the house when Reilly was inside.

Nick went out of town to do some business, and Adissa invited Reilly to her apartment. He told himself he went over for the drugs. It wasn't a typical drug user's apartment. There was furniture, for one, and all the walls she had icons of saints, the Greek kind, where the faces are all angles set on gold backgrounds.

"I want you to prove it," said Reilly.

"Prove what?"

"That you can predict scores," he said.

Adissa brushed his elbow as she walked past him on the way to the kitchen, and it was amazing how she could make even incidental contact electric.

"What's in it for me?" she asked.

"I'll buy you blow," he said. "A lot of it. Only if you're right."

She filled a green glass bong she called Flynn up with water and put it on the counter. Then she squeezed shut her eyes. Her breathing turned shallow, and when she almost fainted she grabbed the counter before Reilly could catch her.

“The Cardinals are going to beat the Padres today,” she said. “By more than two runs. The score will be 6-3.”

Reilly smiled and shrugged his shoulders and she sat on the couch and they got high. Adissa liked to watch cooking shows, and she loved the competitions, when chefs raced around a grocery store with thirty minutes to prepare a world-class meal, or when they had to turn three unrelated ingredients into an edible creation.

“It’s the limitations, you know? Like, that cook probably never thought she would have to make an appetizer out of horseradish, salami, and cocoa powder, but she just did. And it looks fucking delicious. The limits made her think of something she had never even considered. It’s liberating.”

“Do you like to cook?” asked Reilly.

“Fuck no. But I like the idea of limits.”

The first time, he barely got his jeans to his knees, and she kept her hoodie on, and it was all collisions and heartbreak, an attempt to keep out the loneliness. But the second time, she grabbed his hand and took him to the bedroom, and Reilly noticed the string of multi-colored Himalayan prayer napkins above her bed, and they managed to strip, and Reilly noticed her breathing turn shallow right before she came.

The next day, when they ran low, reality returned, whistled in under the door, pulsed like a tumor in the back of their heads, and Reilly knew he should leave, could

feel the emptiness in the pit of his chest. But he sat on the couch for a while longer. For his benefit, she turned on ESPN. He had forgotten about the bet.

“God damn,” said Reilly. The Cardinals had won 6-3, breaking a four game losing streak. They had played in San Diego, too.

“You owe me a lot of coke, Mister,” she said. “My grandmother could do it, too. Except with horse races. She made the family a lot of money. She never got to keep any of it. My grandpa drank it all away.”

“Do you see the numbers in your head? Or a scoreboard or something?”

“No. I just know the score. It’s not even mental, really. It feels closer to my heart. But sometimes I’m wrong. And Nick gets really upset.”

She used a tweezers to pick at something in her fingernails.

“What are we going to do about Nick?” asked Reilly, because that was what he had to figure out, now that he had slept with his girlfriend. She attacked her cuticles with another tool she kept in a black bag similar to the one she used to store her needles and spoon, catching the dead skin on a paper towel on her lap.

His father’s car came to life like Lazarus’s post-death first breath. He smelled oil fumes as they escaped through the ventilation. The radio clicked on, and it was Van Morrison, and the car’s frame rattled from the engine’s strain as he drove it to the gas station, filled it up, and put air in the tires. He parked it in front of the house, and his mother came out to the front porch.

“You look so much like him, Reilly. I swear to God, I thought it was your father driving that car.”

What he liked about the 1964 Corvette was how the wheel wells rose above the hood like two sunsets.

“Do you want go for a ride?” he asked.

She climbed into the front seat, and they cruised around the Hill, Reilly smiling as she waved at her friends, and they drove around Forest Park, and Reilly roared past the rich kids at Washington University, sending a group of back-pack toting students diving back from the curb, his mother pointing and laughing.

When they pulled up in front of the house, the car still running, she placed her hand on his as he gripped the stick.

“We’re going to be alright, Reilly. Aren’t we?”

“Yeah, Ma. We’ll be fine.”

She grabbed his head with both of her hands, her fingernails scratching his scalp, and what gave him away was he didn’t hold her stare. He looked into the windshield, pretended to fumble with the radio. He expected a slap across the face, so when she kicked open the car door and went back into the house he felt disappointed and ashamed.

In her fury, she had left her purse in the back seat. Reilly reached back to grab it. The strap hooked the head rest and spilled a plastic clatter of make-up and breath mints on to the front seat. There was a note written on a scrap of yellow legal paper. It read, “It was the right thing to do.” He recognized Nick’s handwriting. He got out of the car and tossed his mother’s purse at the door step like a newspaper and drove off.

He didn't see Nick's car as he walked up to Adissa's apartment. It took her a long time to get to the door, and he could tell she was high by the way she shuffled her feet against the carpet.

Her left eye had closed shut, and her cheeks were puffed out like her wisdom teeth had been removed. Finger-shaped bruises straddled her neck.

"Did Nick do that?"

"Don't worry. He doesn't know. I got some scores wrong. I guess I've lost my touch."

She tried to smile, and then held her face in pain. There was a glass on the coffee table she used for spitting up blood next to a pile of weed-stems and a resin-covered pipe. Reilly sat next to her on the couch. It wasn't so much he wanted to get even with Nick but that he wanted to protect Adissa. There were wolves and there were sheep and there were shepherds.

"You know, when I was inside, I used to do this thing. I used to pretend my father was behind me, and he was way bigger than me, like he had grown with me. He was twice my height when he died, and he was still twice my height. And nothing could hurt me because my Dad was right behind me."

"That sounds really nice."

"I'm saying, you could try doing the same thing. Just imagine there's this giant standing behind you that everyone can see."

She started to prepare hits for both of them, but Reilly shook his head, said he didn't feel like it. He waited until she passed out tucked into the crook between his arm and chest before leaving, locking the door handle on his way out.

There were things Reilly learned in jail. Like a shot to the kidneys keeled a man right over. That it doesn't take much force to shatter a nose. That he needed to keep his center of weight further back when he pinned Nick's arms to the floor with his knees. That a quick punch to Nick's already broken nose kept him from struggling.

"Why'd you fucking do it? Why?"

The blood Nick wasn't swallowing poured down his face and stained the tile floor. Reilly kept a mental note of the three other people in Milo's Bar, listened to make sure they weren't moving.

"It wasn't me."

"Fuck you."

Reilly pulled back to hit him again, harder this time, enough to pop his head off the tile, add a concussion.

"I swear to God. It was your mother, Reilly. Your mother set you up."

Reilly's body went limp, his air gone, and Nick shoved him off, using his shirt to stop the bleeding. Reilly floated up from his body, seemed like, his organs all twisted up. The checkered tablecloths hung from the tables, swaying above the floor. Neon signs buzzed against the windows.

"She did it to keep you from using. She figured it was either jail or an overdose. So she chose jail."

He drove onto Highway 40 and hit the gas, flying down the fast lane, cutting across semis and slamming on his breaks in front of minivans. He took 270 south, and he counted the cliffs catching the sun before following 55 back to the Hill.

His mother wasn't home, so he carried the Avon boxes to the backyard, careful to watch his head as he went in and out of the basement, and stacked them one by one in a pyramid. The phone rang over and over again and he heard Adissa leaving message after terrified message. She told him not do anything crazy. He found a bottle of liter fluid in the garage. The flames turned green and pink as they engulfed different products, little explosions of sunset.

A tinny voice from somewhere back behind his ears told him that she had done it out of love. She had wanted to save him. But every time he heard the voice the rest of him clamored that there were other ways, unattempted interventions, unpurchased plane tickets to other cities. She had wanted to save him, but she had wanted him out of her life, for a little while, at least. And if a family didn't have loyalty, what did it have? What was the point?

The Corvette still had half a tank of gas. Reilly reversed it up the driveway, nudging the chain-link fence, smiling as he took out the statue of St. Joseph, not caring about the shattered tail light. He revved the engine too high as he steered toward the fire and prepared for the final shot. He needed enough speed to land in the middle of the flames.

A clutch pedal pressed to the floor is the best feeling. Nothing but potential.

He heard his name and saw Adissa standing at the bottom of the driveway. He wiggled the shifter around in neutral, tried to disappear her with his eyes. Instead, she

came up the driveway, not shuffling her feet, not high, and got in the front seat. She removed his hand from the shifter, spread it out on her thigh, and caressed the lines in his palm.

The fire in the rearview mirror was beautiful.

Without Wind Resistance

Mark Alford sits in the faculty meeting and checks his email for the thirtieth time. Still nothing. He loads up the blogs he visits less often than his email. They are blogs about applying to acting school, but people also post about recent gigs and experiences in the amateur acting world. Mark's favorite blog is "Bard None." He scrolls down the page to view new posts. SnackSnackSnack has written again. Mark imagines SnackSnackSnack as a 300 lb man, balding, with a well-kept beard in which he stores hummus and pita chip flakes for later consumption.

"Another exciting season of applications!" writes SnackSnackSnack. "Even though I have never been accepted to a program, I still love this time of year!" Mark cannot tell whether or not the post is ironic.

Mark is glad he does not weigh 300 lbs, but he is not slim. When he plays basketball it feels like he's wearing a backpack. An old college roommate once said that Mark would make a fantastic spy because nothing about him stood out. He constantly reminds himself that not all actors are incredibly good-looking.

The faculty meeting is about to end and Mark closes his laptop. He does not remember when he started checking acting school blogs and watching Ashland Shakespeare productions on silent during faculty meetings.

"One last quick question," says Jeremy, the math teacher. Mark regrets closing his laptop. Jeremy's questions are blatantly pre-constructed teaching manifestos delivered to Mrs. Lee, the vice principal. "I'm just wondering about the school policy regarding drinking coffee while teaching. It states pretty clearly in the handbook that teachers are not to drink coffee while teaching. It is on page 302, for anyone who has their handbook

with them.” Jeremy opens up the handbook he has with him. Jeremy sends frequent glances toward Mrs. Lee to gauge her approval level but does not hold her gaze because he wishes to appear like he is speaking to the entire group. “I have seen at least one colleague drink coffee while teaching and so I guess my question is has something changed and I wasn’t notified, like maybe I missed the email?”

Jeremy wears clip-on bow ties. The clip-on thing bugs the shit out of Mark. If you’re going to wear a bow-tie wear an actual bow-tie, is his thought. The coffee conversation is obviously about Mark. Bristol Bieglar, the art teacher who makes all of the learners call her “Skystar,” her spirit name, starts chewing her nails. Skystar does not spend much time in this particular dimension, and she frequently reminds her coworkers that she suffers from adult ADD. Despite her diagnosis, she keys right in on the passive-aggressive conflict present in the room.

“I’m really glad you brought that up, Jeremy,” says Mrs. Lee. “I think it is important to reiterate the logic behind school policies so that everyone is on the same page, just like we as teachers need to inform our learners why we are teaching them what we are teaching them. We do not allow the learners to drink coffee in class, and so it’s just not very fair for the teachers to drink coffee in class. Of course, feel free to drink non-alcoholic beverages when you are not in the classroom.”

Mrs. Lee smiles at Mark. Mark mentally lists all of the activities the learners are not allowed to do that teachers regularly perform. He thinks, “Running a faculty meeting.” He thinks, “Being vice-principal.”

St. Joseph's Prep is a small, all-boys Catholic high school. The faculty used to consist entirely of priests, but now only one priest, Father John, roams the halls. Father John is in his eighties and racist, especially toward Asians. He wears his Korean War veteran's jacket every day over his clerical shirt and black slacks. The jacket looks similar to a high school letterman's jacket. He smells strongly of prune juice and Jim Beam.

Per St. Joseph policy, underclassmen line up in front of the door and wait to be welcomed into the classroom. The instructor is to greet each learner with a handshake. Mark stands before a line of jostling sophomores. The bell rings. "Gentlemen, eh-um, gentlemen" says Mark. He tries to say it with authority. Sometimes Mark has dreams where he lies supine in a gutter at night with a group of learners standing above him. They kick him in the ribs and groin; every once in a while someone leans over and punches him in the face. In the dreams, Mark is grateful for the learners who take the time to clock him with a fist; he appreciates the extra effort. A barely audible voice screeches "Gentlemen" from the sky.

"Gentlemen," says Mark, a little louder. Normally this would go on for several minutes, Mark eventually yelling, but Mrs. Lee stands several feet away and monitors the situation. The learners know Mrs. Lee has actual authority.

"Thank you," says Mark. "You guys did a real nice job getting ready for class." Another St. Joseph policy is that teachers must say five "positives" for every one "negative." This has the unintended consequence of teachers complimenting kids for fairly basic human behavior, like the time Mark said, "I know we had some trouble not

lighting the garbage can on fire last class, so I really appreciate you guys doing a better job with that today.”

One year prior, Mark was a Jesuit novice embarking on a life destined for sainthood. He imagined himself as the subject of a stained-glass window. It would picture Mark in a priest’s verdant regalia holding up the Eucharist while hordes of heathen children prepared to attack. He prayed for a not-too painful martyrdom. Really, thinks Mark, if he had only returned to his room instead of attending the wedding after-party he might still be a Jesuit.

Seeing as he thought of himself as both extraordinarily bright and destined to be a saint, Mark figured the Jesuits were a perfect fit. He expected faith-filled discussions about the lives of saints while sipping tea and hours of quiet prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Basically, Mark had expected people as destined for God’s perfection as himself.

One of the novices, Ryan, had not informed his girlfriend that he was entering a Jesuit seminary. Instead, he told the girl that he was travelling to Eastern Europe for several months and would be out of touch. Ryan figured that he was not going to make it more than a couple of months in the Jesuits anyway. Another seminarian chain smoked. Almost all of them cursed. Several argued against the teachings of Holy Mother Church.

It was a nightmare.

Mark spent all of his free-time either in the chapel or in his room reading papal documents. Every moment he was forced to spend with the other novices grated against his soul. At night, as Mark was busy perfecting himself for God, the others drank beer and watched *The Sopranos*.

It was alright, he told himself as he grinded his teeth while kneeling in front of a cross. Saints lead by example.

Mark knows about the rejections long before they arrive in his inbox. The acting schools send out acceptances first, and the people with acceptances post messages on Bard None that include a series of exclamation points. The absence of Mark's acceptance email seals his rejection. In some sort of conspiracy to completely unravel Mark mentally, the rejections always arrive right before he teaches his least favorite learners—the sophomores.

The annual school intruder drill will come any minute and Mark is stalling when the school secretary comes over the loudspeaker and says the super-secret code for an intruder attack: "Remember, students, that today is the Feast of St. Joseph." The learners more or less line up against a wall. They are situated out of sight from the door's rectangular window. Mark guesses the idea is that if a shooter cannot see any learners he might hunt elsewhere. Jeremy knows for sure, thinks Mark. It is probably in the handbook.

The boys act like they are playing hide and seek. Mark looks over to tell them to shut up and sees Tony with his cell phone out showing off pictures of his girlfriend. Mark thinks about going over there but is concerned that the photos are nude, which would then require massive amounts of work on his part. The secretary gives the all-clear over the loudspeaker: "May the adopted father of our Lord keep us forever safe." The instructors march the learners to the soccer field. Outside, Mark sees Jeremy chatting up Mrs. Lee.

The learners are easy to watch, and Mark daydreams what he would do in the case of an actual intruder.

He draws up his battle plan. He would turn the desks on their sides and form a barricade. He'd say something very Bruce Willis, like, "Alright, men, time to finally put those books to good use." He would stand beside the door with a metal stool raised above his head. The intruder enters the room, automatic rifle wedged into his shoulder. The learners launch their textbooks from behind the desks. The shooter sprays the room wildly, unable to find a target. Mark brains the intruder with the stool. Mark is a hero. Mark appears on talk shows. Mark kisses Ellen DeGeneres on the cheek. Ellen asks Mark if he thinks of himself as a hero. Mark says, "I think the real heroes, Ellen, are the people who lost their lives that day, especially our math teacher, Jeremy Stapp, who was shot not once but twenty times in the face."

Mark thinks, get real. There is an emergency exit around the corner from your classroom. You would run for it. They're not your kids. Mark thinks about booby traps. Mark tells himself, you would sit there terrified in your classroom awaiting God knows what and you would probably be the first to go not out of bravery but just sheer indecision and terrible luck. You will be stuck, unable to move. Just hope it doesn't hurt too much.

You are not a hero, Mark tells himself. You are not a saint. You should know that by now. You are just as special as the seven billion other people on the planet.

The learners meander back toward the building, and Mark thinks about his profession. Teaching has provided Mark with many important lessons, including that it is

definitely possible to hate a child. The sophomores, along with the general soul-grinding despair, drove Mark to Fr. John for confession.

“Well, Father,” Mark said, “I just keep imagining hitting a child.”

“A student?”

“Yes.”

“One of the Asian ones?”

“No, not one of the Asian ones, Father,” said Mark. “I imagine punching this kid so hard my fist busts through his skull and pops out on the other side covered in gray matter.”

“Listen, it’s normal to want to hit a kid every once in a while,” said Father John. “My mother used to beat me cross-eyed, may she rest in peace. It was good for me, discipline. Kids don’t get whooped enough anymore.”

“Ok,” said Mark.

“My point is, don’t actually hit them. And if these dreams keep up you might want to find a new profession. You would not do well in jail.”

Mark enjoys teaching when it feels like a stage. Occasionally, he dresses up like famous religious leaders: Ghandi, St. Paul, Mother Teresa. He once wore a giant elephant head to school to teach the kids about Hinduism, but Mrs. Lee made him take it off. There are moments in the classroom when Mark makes a movement that goes beyond simple communication. Somehow, during these transcendent times, he manages to convey the necessary information straight into the learner’s brains, and Mark feels like an educator.

In class, the idea crosses Mark's mind that he enjoyed being a Jesuit when it felt like a stage—when the attention focused solely on him and his holiness. It is a difficult thought, painful, and he brushes it away to preserve his precarious emotional stability.

It is Parent-Teacher Conference night. In order to stave off confrontations, Mark gave all of his students an A- on the latest progress reports. He stands with his arms crossed in front of his door and rehearses the lines he has prepared for mothers and fathers. The parents walk into the school with their learners in tow.

Sitting in a chair in the corner of the classroom is Mark as a teenager: Chubby, well-dressed, and prideful. His mother talks to a teacher. It is his mother with her perfect nails and manicured hair and the perfume that follows wherever she goes, a little colony of smells. She berates the teacher and she berates her son. Her son is her entire world, and that is why he cannot fail, she says. He is the man of the house. He is not to waste his many, many talents, like his father did.

She loves him and loves him and loves him, she says, but never comes to a single performance. She has a headache; she works late. She attends the functions in which she takes charge, like parent-teacher conferences and youth group meetings. It is Mark sitting in the corner, arms crossed, thinking if I do not become great and well-known and famous and holy I will be lost.

On Bard None, SnackSnackSnack has been very positive and another contributor named Yakisogood has repeatedly complimented SnackSnackSnack on his attitude. In one post, they exchange recipes for Potato Leek Soup that Mark thinks about trying out.

SSS and Yakisogood share places to eat if they are both accepted into the same graduate program. Mark senses a growing romance.

Someone posts that NYU has sent out all of their acceptances and waitlists and Mark checks his email even though he just did and finds an empty inbox. Mark walks down the hall to the teacher's lounge for coffee. He passes by a science classroom. Mr. B is teaching physics to juniors.

"Einstein figured out that without wind resistance, a person in free-fall would not feel his own weight," says Mr. B as he scribbles eligibly on the whiteboard. "But, here's the interesting thing. If you are falling toward the earth, the earth is also rising to meet you."

Jesuit buzz word: discernment. Choosing between goods. Water dripping on a rock versus water dripping on a sponge. Jesuit buzz word: affect. The Spirit of Darkness, the Spirit of Light. Mark's spiritual director: You need to find a center. Yeats: The center cannot hold.

SnackSnackSnack writes a very sad post on Bard None: "Farewell, my fellow thespians. For the seventh year in a row, I have been denied by all eight programs to which I applied. I should rephrase: My application has been denied from all eight programs to which I applied. For, remember, they do not reject us, but our applications. I wish you all the best. Keep to the stage, dearest friends. Find the role you were born to play. I for one am looking forward to becoming Judas at my church's annual Life of Christ production. This is a big move up from Roman Centurion #7."

Without any positive responses from acting schools, the possibility that Mark may have to spend another year in the classroom becomes very real. When Mark thinks about it his saliva turns sour. It would not be terrible, but it would not bring Mark any closer to greatness.

His 1993 forest green Honda Accord with 240,000 miles dies on the way to school. He is on the side of the road when a senior learner named Chase pulls over in a Porsche Carrera and drives him the rest of the way. Later, he gives Chase a detention for having the tail of his shirt untucked after leaving the restroom.

With his car beyond repair, Mark now commutes on the 70 bus. The bus is not that bad, he tells people. Mark watches sports cars fly past through the tinted glass when he is lucky enough to have a seat by the window. Mark thinks a BMW would be nice. He imagines his problems would be more palatable in patent leather seats.

A cheerful man sells bootlegged DVDs on the bus each day when Mark returns home. He carries a Jansport backpack and hands out laminated lists of his inventory. He spends about thirty seconds hawking movies and the rest of the ride chatting with friends.

The white-collar commuters read magazines or books. Messenger bags lie at their feet. The other commuters work at restaurants. They carry aprons and wear monogrammed polos. They stare at their android phones. Then there are the homeless people, drug addicts, and infrequent riders.

Mark can see before the bus pulls up that it is packed. He slides his card through the console and maneuvers his way to the back. There is the soft press of people; the stop-and-go tide. Mark aims for the landing by the back door; the space is occupied.

“This bus is always jammed.”

“Day and night.”

Mark grabs the railing by a spot next to a pregnant woman. He glances around and sees a young man sitting by the aisle with a backpack filling the window seat next to him. The young man wears ear buds and caresses his phone. He pretends not to notice that a woman who could give birth any second stands next to him.

Maybe it is the young man’s proximity in age to the learners. Or the pregnant woman. Or just the sick feeling of total world injustice he has felt lately.

“Excuse me, your bag does not need a seat,” Mark says loud enough to get through the ear buds. “There is a pregnant woman standing in the aisle, and your bag does not need a seat.” All other conversations have ceased; the crowd is silent in nervous anticipation. Mark is on center-stage but no one looks at him. The learner stares further into his phone. Mark can feel the driver glancing at him through the massive rectangular rear-view mirror.

“It’s really alright,” says the pregnant lady.

“No, it’s not alright,” says Mark, gaining confidence. He is no longer Mark. He is Henry IV, he is Matt Damon in *Invictus*, he is Denzel Washington in every movie Denzel Washington has been in. “Sir, I know you can hear me. I demand that you remove your bag immediately and offer the seat to this pregnant woman!” Mark attempts to remove the bag himself. The learner is faster than he expects.

Through his functioning eye, Mark sees a police officer standing above him. Mark realizes that he is supine on a sidewalk. The young man is not present. Mark notices a sharp pain when he inhales, and not all of the liquid on his face and shirt is blood.

“Some of the passengers spit on you because they had to wait for another bus,” says the officer, as he helps Mark to his feet. “You got worked over pretty good, but I think you’ll be fine.”

“Where’s that guy?”

“He took off. You tried to grab his bag. There’s not a lot we can do.”

The pregnant lady thanks Mark as she walks past. Mark accepts a ride home from the officers.

The back of a police cruiser is pretty comfortable, Mark thinks. He can see his reflection in the window. He touches his eye. The learners will ask questions. You should see the other guy, he will say.

Maybe it is the concussion, but Mark thinks to himself that he has not felt his body in a long time, even if that feeling is one of acute discomfort. That he has not done stupid, ordinary, trite activities like revel in his surroundings or fully breathe in spring’s arrival. There is the feeling that he resides in an actual physical body. He thinks about when he ran cross-country in high school. He remembers sprinting the last four hundred meters of a three mile race. Like breathing didn’t matter. It is a moment and it passes. Mark is grateful, but when he tries to hold the moment, when he diverts the full extent of his mental capacity to recognizing the presence of some sort of cosmic force, the moment is gone.

For Quality and Training Purposes

The Jenny Sue Loan Corporation called him once per hour during the day, but they had never called at night before. Cormac had an M.F.A. in Architectural Design from D.R.E.A.M. College, a for-profit university in Portland that charged \$20,000 per semester.

“This call may be recorded, Mr. Pearse.”

“For quality and training purposes,” said Cormac. “Yeah, I know.”

D.R.E.A.M. also screwed up his schedule, forcing him to stay an extra semester, and together with the loans from undergrad he owed the bastards at Jenny Sue over \$150,000, of which debt Cormac vowed to never pay a single dime.

“Mr. Pearse, our records indicate that you have not made a payment on your student loans for over a year.”

“I haven’t made a single payment on my student loans period.”

Cormac was lying in bed, on top of the covers, and he slid his jeans off of his skinny legs, the hair gone in weird patches from scraping across the denim.

“What did you say your name was, sweetheart?”

“My name is Patricia, Mr. Pearse. Now, we have to get you on some sort of payment plan. The late fees alone have almost doubled...”

“Patricia, that’s a beautiful name. And you sound a little bossy. I love a bossy woman.”

That was true. Sarah used to yell at him all the time.

“Mr. Pearse, if you do not start making payments soon...”

“Call me Cormac.”

“Ok, Cormac, so, when can we get you to start paying?”

“Patricia, are you wearing a thong? I love thongs.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Pearse?”

“Call me a bad boy, Patricia. Call me a very bad boy for not paying back my loans.”

“Mr. Pearse, I’m sorry, but this is inappropriate...”

“What color is it? I’m imagining Kelly Green.”

Cormac exhaled short rapid breaths into the phone. Patricia was a cross between Halle Berry and Lindsay Vonn, a thong wrapped around that perfect ass like a seam on a beach ball.

“Mr. Pearse? Are you?”

The line went dead. Cormac saw the mug shots of men who had slept with Sarah since they broke up. He wallowed in his loneliness before calling the Jenny Sue Loan Division. He asked for Patricia. She was unavailable.

Cormac drove for three days straight from Portland, OR to St. Louis in a teeth-clattering haze of Aderol and gas station piss-flavored coffee when it became clear that Sarah, the heinous bitch, was not going to drop the restraining order. A four-year relationship, a ring-less engagement but an engagement none-the-less, all over, done with, exhausted.

It was fine. It was all fine. She wanted him 100 yards away, so he moved half-way across the country.

St. Louis did not immediately convince Cormac it was the place where he could fulfill the architectural masterpiece that would make him wildly wealthy. It was just the place he happened to be when the head-gasket shot through the hood of his car in an explosion of twisted metal and blue-tinted steam. The mechanic told him it would cost \$2,000 to fix, which was about \$1,700 over Cormac's budget, so he left the car at the garage and walked to the nearest bar, where a middle-aged woman named Helen, who wasn't bad looking except for the lazy eye, took him home.

Middle-aged women had a thing for Cormac. They saw him and thought, "This one can't survive on his own." Cormac stayed with her for almost a week, kicking around her fancy condo as she went to work somewhere downtown. Helen kicked him out eventually, like when she eventually found him in the laundry room nailing a drunk college girl who thought he was in a band.

The worst part was he left his notebook with all of the designs for his architectural masterpiece in Helen's bedroom. Cormac considered breaking-in, but he figured she had already burned it, along with anything that reminded her of curly-haired, wiry Irish kids.

He planned on heading somewhere else, maybe Detroit or New Orleans. But something about St. Louis, in its massive empty structures of post-industrial blight, in the darling conventional morals and tremendous average girth of its people, in the fact that it wasn't Brooklyn or Seattle or Wicker Park or any other well-known habitation of hipster douchebags Cormac wanted to show up, kept him around.

Cormac had his regulars at the spot where he bartended, one of whom was Greg, who everyone called Super G. They watched the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team play

Panama, and Super G was excited about the U.S.A.'s chances in the upcoming World Cup.

“This is the best they’ve ever looked.”

“No doubt.”

Cormac poured a shot for Super G and another one for himself, even though it was against the rules, because that’s what Cormac did to rules, he bent them to his will. They toasted Clint Dempsey.

Normally, Super G had a group of friends with him, but that day he was alone, so Cormac went on at length about his architectural genius. Super G worked for an investment firm downtown, and Cormac mentioned he had an idea, a real big idea, the type of idea that could make the right people enormous sums of money.

“You want to hear about it, Super G?”

“No!”

Cormac’s heart sank.

“What I want, young man, is for you to take my card, call my secretary, and set up an appointment for next week. You’ll present your idea to me and my partners.”

“You sure you don’t want to hear about it first?”

“You’re the type of kid with great ideas.”

Cormac held the business card like a hundred-dollar bill and hid it in his wallet. Super G forgot to leave a tip, but Cormac didn’t mind because he finally, through his own good-natured charm, held the ticket that would lead him to economic salvation.

It felt like the time he won Portland’s Public Design Contest. The competition involved an architectural design that would benefit the most Portland residents for the

longest period of time, and Cormac submitted his plans for the “Bench Home,” which was a type of park bench that could be turned into a shelter for homeless people at night. Cormac won \$1000, but the implementation of the Bench Home had been stalled by the City Council, who were worried the design would cause degenerates to flock to Portland from all corners of the globe. Every time he had doubts about his career, he looked over the Bench Home plans, and he reminded himself of his success, dwelling on his positive qualities, his ability to think outside of the box, to combine ideas from different disciplines. He was going to make it. He was twenty-seven years old, and failure was not an option.

Super G’s timing was wonderful because the bastards at Jenny Sue, in a federally-sponsored program called “Not Our Problem Anymore,” had sold his loan to a local firm by the name of River City Financial. At first none of that mattered to Cormac because he planned on never repaying the loan, until he read in the paper that River City Financial had been investigated for collection practices that bordered on assault. That got Cormac’s attention. The article interviewed a man behind on his car payments. He couldn’t remember what happened, except two men who said they were from River City approaching him at a bar. He woke up in the hospital with a fractured skull.

Sarah had unfriended him long ago, so Cormac resorted to scouring the Facebook accounts of people who knew her for fresh photos. There wasn’t much. But in the backlogged dregs of a former roommate’s profile he found a photo taken at a party months before they broke up. It was a group of them, all crammed together on a couch, and Cormac wore a big cheesy smile and his eyes were closed. He held Sarah’s arm in his

right hand, maybe for balance, maybe he just reached out, as she sat on the couch's armrest, leaning away.

Technically, calling her was against the law, but he did it anyway.

"You're not supposed to contact me."

"Then why'd you pick up?"

"I don't know."

He didn't intend to bring mementos of Sarah across the country, but it happened. She went through a Catholicism phase after her mother died and attended a weekly prayer group, although never Sunday Mass, and one week she made a rosary out of rosewood beads, a silver chain, and an understated silver crucifix. After she gave it to him, Cormac threw it in his messenger bag and forgot about it, until he moved into his new apartment in St. Louis. He fingered the beads absent-mindedly as he talked. Sarah taught him the Hail Mary and the Our Father, but Cormac didn't remember any of the mysteries, or the strange prayers in between decades.

"Listen, Sarah, I miss you, baby. We should be together. This is so silly for us to be apart."

He could hear her breathing, but she didn't say anything.

"I'm going to change. I don't drink as much. In fact, I hardly drink at all. And that thing with the brick through window, baby, that wasn't me."

"You almost killed Hank."

"I did not almost kill Hank. And what was that damn dog even doing sleeping in the living room like that?"

"See, this is what I'm talking about. This is exactly what I'm talking about."

“No, baby, listen, it’s so different now. I met these investment bankers, and they’re going to fund my project.”

“Your thesis? They’re really going to pay for that?”

“Well, we haven’t worked out all of the details, but it looks pretty good.”

Cormac heard a man’s voice in the background. He said something about kale. He heard a door slam.

“Who’s that?”

“I have to go.”

“No, I have a right to know who that is.”

“No, you don’t, Cormac. Listen, best of luck with everything. I sincerely, with all my heart, hope everything works out for you. Deep down, you really are a good person.”

She hung up. Cormac pulled on the rosary until it snapped, the beads scattering across the hardwood floors.

The night didn’t start with him drinking alone but it ended that way. It had started with him getting off work way earlier than normal, which meant he arrived at Hammerstone’s Bar well before closing-time, and also before the packs of middle-aged women enjoying a girl’s night out took off in mini-vans back to their suburban enclaves with British-sounding names—Marlborough and Shrewsbury and Yorkshire.

She said her name was Diana and Cormac didn’t even have to try, she walked up behind him and put her hands through his Irish-fro and said, “Oh my God, I love your hair,” and sat down beside him. Even if Cormac had any self-control, he would have

struggled to keep from staring down her blouse, because Diana's massive tits were pinning his arm to the bar.

He bought her a tall-boy of PBR and shot of Jameson, and they ignored the sound of her friends giggling at them.

"I need to stop by the little girl's room, and then we should talk about what we're doing later."

Cormac turned toward the bar with a dumb-struck smile across his face when someone sat in Diana's seat. He turned to tell the guy to take-off when he felt someone else sit on the other side, and instead of Diana's breasts pushing against him, he felt himself being crushed by huge shoulders and sharp elbows. The two men gave Cormac the distinct impression of grizzly bears.

"Bartender, get my friend Cormac here a shot of Jameson."

"Do I know you guys? Actually, someone's sitting there..."

"Don't worry, this won't take long. This isn't going to take long, right Gibby?"

Gibby had a dent in his head that could have been used to mix martinis, and he didn't respond. Both men wore tailored gray suits and black shoes, and they had the air of former frat boys who had moved effortlessly into the business world. The difference was they joked about date-rape while standing around a water cooler instead of in a beer-soaked basement. They had won consecutive intramural flag-football championships, and they never missed Sports Center.

"I see you bartending all the time downs at Blue Nights. You pour a wicked Hurricane. We've met before but you must have forgot."

"Oh, yeah. I think I do recognize you. Thanks for the shot."

They clinked glasses. Cormac searched behind him and saw Diana talking to her friends, looking impatient.

“You live over at 1412 Menard Avenue Apt. 4, right?” said the man.

“Yeah. How do you know that?”

“And you owe River City Financial around two-hundred thousand dollars, right?”

And that was when panic gripped Cormac by the sternum. He tried to jump from the stool, but Gibby grabbed him by the balls with his frying pan sized hands and squeezed, and everything in Cormac’s body froze.

“Jenny Sue, being a multinational bank, could afford to not collect from you right away,” said the man. “But we at River City, being a local firm more in touch with the lives of St. Louis people, are going to need you to pay back that money. By next week.”

The man stood up and left a twenty on the bar. Gibby released Cormac’s balls.

“Have fun tonight, Cormac Pearse. We’ll see you next week,” said the man. He pointed at the television. “I can’t wait for the home opener. Go Cards.”

Diana had left the bar with her friends. Cormac walked outside to catch his breath, and maybe cry. He didn’t hear the wheels navigating the root-battered sidewalk until the front end of a skateboard carrying a college student with creative facial hair and wearing fluorescent shorts with drum sticks in his back pocket crashed into Cormac’s calf.

“Sorry, brother-man.”

As the kid bent down to retrieve his skateboard, Cormac punched him in the jaw, a solid right, a vibration-less crack like a baseball bound for the right-field stands popping off the bat. A nearby group, which previously had been voicing their displeasure

with the skateboarder, now turned their ire toward Cormac. What the fuck. Whoa. C'mon man.

“Fuck you, fuck your skateboard, and fuck the rest of you guys,” said Cormac as he walked away.

He was twenty-seven years old, and failure was not an option. He had four days to get the money to River City Financial. Super G was going to fund his project, writing him a massive check, and he would be saved.

Sarah and her douchebag new boyfriend would read about his success online. She would regret everything. And when he saw her again, maybe at some lecture he would give at Reed College, he would smile and be so incredibly gracious and would emit nothing but the calm of a man in total control of his future. And her tiny-dicked boyfriend would cry during the car ride home.

A throng of protestors had set up camp in the park across the street from Super G's building. They had been cordoned off, and police officers patrolled the perimeter. The people in the camp wore dreadlocks and played guitars without talent. They were mangy, and it seemed in dire need of new recruits. Cormac felt their eyes begging him to join their ranks. He walked past a woman carrying a sign that read, “Where's the bailout for my student loans?”

He was beyond them with their futile tactics. It was all symbolic. They were sacrificing their identities to some pointless cause. Cormac found a side entrance into the building and walked through the marble lobby that screamed of Greek gods and great deeds. He checked his tie, the one tie he owned, in his reflection as he waited for the

elevator and focused on how his hard work and talent were finally paying off. Going up, he thought.

Super G's office walls were off-white and spotless, and the halls had dark blue carpeting that crunched as Cormac walked up to the door. The secretary, a middle-aged woman in fantastic shape with hair covered in blonde streaks, winked at him as she pointed toward the conference room. He walked into the bathroom and splashed his face with cold water and popped one half of the horse tranquilizer he brought with him into his mouth.

He glided his way into the conference room armed with a flash drive that contained his seven-slide Powerpoint Presentation. Men walked in with their collars open and perfectly-tailored suits wrapped around their substantial midsections. Cormac counted eight men and twelve necks. He pretended to cough and swallowed the rest of the horse tranquilizer.

"Alright, everyone, this is Cormac Pearse," said Super G. "He's here to share an investment opportunity with all of us. Cormac, the floor is yours."

Cormac began his presentation, all smiles and confidence. In his drug induced state, the investors had heads like giant smiley-faces, bobbing slightly on their shoulders, showering him with due praise.

St. Louis had acres of empty factories, the Midwest had tons of cattle, and the country had an insatiable appetite for beef. And that was when Cormac told the conference room of investors, "Just raise the cows in the city!" He showed them the designs for the world's first fully functional, totally indoor beef processing facility. Cormac called it "The Cattle Greenhouse."

They laughed, out loud, in their perfect suits, their collars opened, thinning hair still attractive because their billfolds were thick, and after a minute, Cormac smiling like an idiot the entire time, trying to understand the humor, they told Cormac it was a great joke, now he had their attention, great intro, he should always do something to make them remember him, but go ahead and tell them his actual idea.

Super G noticed Cormac's failure to laugh and shot panicked looks around the table. The other investors began fake-coughing and filing out of the room. Cormac was crushed.

Before he left, Super G handed him a fifty dollar bill.

"I forgot to tip you the other night."

At first, everything in Cormac's body recoiled from Super G's charity. Then he saw the dent in Gibby's head and heard the man's voice reciting his address. He took the money and stuffed it into his pocket before heading to the elevator. Super G called out to him from the conference room.

"Cormac, listen, the smell, you know? The smell?"

He exited the building with his head down, near tears, and passed by the mangy students. He didn't realize it was the same sign until after he ripped it from the girl's hands and smashed it against a light post and saw the word "student" lying on the asphalt. The protestors weren't upset.

"We feel your anger, brother."

Cormac should have used the fifty dollars Super G gave him to help pay for a Greyhound ticket to the farthest reaches of the Western Hemisphere, he'd heard good things about the oil refineries in Point Barrow, Alaska, but instead he stepped into a bar

in a shotgun style building. St. Louis was full of French-style shotgun houses because French property taxes went by how much of the house touched the street, not how much land the house took up. Long and skinny, like Cormac.

A woman named Sandra, probably in her mid-thirties, wearing too much eyeliner, chatted to him at the bar and bought him a shot.

“You look a little lonely, kiddo. Like you need some company.”

Sandra was pretty, but, then again, Cormac found all women pretty, every last one, because there was always a curve he had never seen, or a moan he hadn't heard.

“Sandra, I should warn you that I'm a total fucking failure. And I don't have long to live.”

“That makes two of us, honey.”

When they were dating, Cormac used to leave Sarah messages like he was a mechanic from up-state Minnesota, using this ridiculous accent he picked up from watching *Fargo*. He'd say words like *carburetor* and *catalytic converter*. He had left her a couple of Soter voicemails that morning, because it was the day Gibby and the man were coming to collect the money.

Near the Budweiser brewery was an abandoned three-story brick building that still had “Olson's Shoes” in faded white paint on its side, the “O” in Olsen done in slanted cursive. It was the building he had picked out for the Cattle Greenhouse. That night, he scooted through the back door and allowed his eyes to adjust, listening for homeless people and looking out for needles and piles of human shit. Rabid dog eyes in dark corners.

An emergency ladder went straight to the roof, the rust painting his hands orange. He kicked open a cheap plywood door and walked out into the night. He rolled out the sleeping bag he had brought with him and munched on one of the thirty or so granola bars in his bag, washing it down with cheap vodka he had run through a Brita water filter. He could last for days.

In his dream, he was in bed with Patricia/Halle Berry/Lindsay Vonn, and she was whispering some pretty terrible things in his ear, but her voice still sounded like it did over the phone, and the dream was getting good when he woke up to his eyes and face burning.

Gibby held the bottle of vodka, took a swig, and then splashed some more on Cormac's face. The burning dipped into every pore, scrubbing at gaps in Cormac's skin. At that moment, Cormac realized he couldn't move his arms. Gibby and the man had duct-taped him into the sleeping bag.

Sarah had always said he was a heavy sleeper.

"Nice spot up here, Cormac. Certainly can't beat the rent."

The men wore black suits and leather gloves. Carefully manicured stubble grew on the man's face.

"Listen, man, I'm going to get you your money. I just need a little bit more time. Actually, you know what, how about I sell you my real idea. You could just take it, sell it yourself. It's worth millions."

The man smiled like he appreciated Cormac's creativity. Gibby took another swig of vodka.

"The Cattle Green House?"

The man laughed, and Gibby cracked a smile. Cormac was panicking, and all he could do was think of Sarah, and he imagined himself in the hospital, on his deathbed, and he'd wake up from a coma and Sarah would be by his side, so happy she could be the first thing he saw.

When it happened, Cormac barely had time to think. The man grabbed him by the shoulders and Gibby picked him up by the legs. He screamed and tried to bite the man's hands as he realized they were walking to the edge of the building, had this sickness rise up from his gut because this was it, all over, people really did die too young, and he soared up into the air and tried to figure out how he should land, tucked his chin into his chest, it was all over, God God God, the fall would last forever and not be long enough. And then he felt a rope snap and he was whipped into the building, cracking his head against the bricks. But he wasn't dead.

When he looked up, he saw Gibby and the man smiling. They waved, and then Gibby poured some more vodka on his head, soaking his hair.

"Here's the deal, Cormac. You're going to pay us \$2,000 every month until we have all of our money. If you don't pay, or you try to leave town, there won't be a rope next time."

Cormac was trying to remember how to breathe. The blood trickling down from his skull tickled his neck.

"I think I have a concussion," said Cormac.

The man gave the rope a good shake, swinging Cormac away from the building.

"See you around, Cormac," said the man. "And go Cards."

Gibby tossed the bottle off the ledge, and Cormac watched it sail past his head and shatter on the street below. Then they walked away.

Someone would see him, eventually, as they changed shifts at the Budweiser brewery, hopefully before the rope snapped. The dawn began to rise over the Mississippi River, the light shining on his face.

He had a couple of weeks until the end of the month. He was twenty-seven years old, and failure was not an option.