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PRONE TO WANDER: A NOVEL

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PRONE TO WANDER: A NOVEL

A Thesis

Presented to

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, WA; Spokane, WA

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

in Creative Writing: Fiction

By

Daniel Patrick Mathewson

Spring 2017

Thesis of

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Prone to Wander

A Novel

Dan Mathewson

Prologue

I'm not usually one to tell stories. But my older brother had a story before he was killed in prison. Moms had a story she didn't tell her sons about. And I had a story before I went into foster care. I didn't remember any of these until I went back home for Cole's funeral.

Geographically, no one ever agrees on whether to deem Carbondale, Illinois as a part of the North or an extension of the South. No Man's Land is what I call it: Confederacy of the Confused. It's lodged in the very bottom pocket of Illinois, close to Anna and Paducah, KY. People here talk with a peculiar accent, as if Atlanta and Chicago fused tongues. On the East side where I grew up, they speak a language I have come to call the Grime, a sort of hyper-evolved, perhaps devolved, slang. There are dirt and gravel back roads in the city as well as twisting interstates, paved highways, and asphalt alleys. And each is filled with taxis, buses, lifted pick-up trucks sporting Rebel Flags, foreign sedans with White Sox or Cubs emblems, vans and Jeeps with Jesus fish magnets, and box Chevys with twenty-two inch rims. Downtown, you can spot cars covered in different candy brand decals: a Caprice with the Skittles logo on the doors, a Cadillac with Shock-tarts on the hood, or an Impala with M&M's on the trunk. As a kid, I heard these were like different advertisements for different drug dealers. Central Broadway was sprinkled with red and blue neighborhoods, gang territories that even the cops avoided. Fifteen miles down the highway towards Cobden, and folks grew corn and other crops, driving ATVs decked out in camo. The ghetto had joined in an awkward

dance with the rural in Carbondale, where the broken dream of the South met the exhaust of urbanized America. Meth was as prevalent as crack, and weed was as common as Marlboros. The Dale was host of an eclectic community of people, to say the least. It was as if America spat out all its bastards and addicts and rednecks and hoodlums, all its homeless and confused, the fast-talking Yankees and the slow-spoken Southerners, and they each landed in the same spot, an implosion on the map like Babel reversed. Some called this culture-cluster-fuck the damaged clone of the South; others considered it to be the North's disowned step-child, or the Great Grayness of the Midwest. No Man's Land, indeed. But it was Carbondale; and there was home, if I had such a place. At least, it was my origin. At least, it was where my bus left me. Is an origin by default a home? I hadn't thought much about it.

That is, 'til I retraced my steps back to the church.

Most of the people, places, and events from the first twelve years of my life had been wadded up like an old newspaper and tossed into a dusty corner of my head. I was twenty-four when I stepped off that bus back into the Dale. I was twenty-four when I finally started thinking about my origin. The place had become a black stain in my mind, blotting out most of my childhood. And for the first time in over a decade, I had returned. My brother had died.

The ride into Carbondale was long and cramped, and when the bus finally came to my stop, my legs were numb and my feet swollen. I felt somewhere between hung-over

and asleep, nauseous but too tired to vomit. I got off carrying only a small duffel bag, in which were a couple of books, including an old copy of *Don Quixote*, a toothbrush, a notepad, a padlock, one new change of clothes, a tie, and an empty pint of whiskey that I'd finished on the ride to help me sleep. I packed light as I had no intention of being in town more than a night. My plan was to slip unnoticed into the church service and leave as soon as I could.

I watched the bus drive off through a cloud of dust and soot. As the air cleared, I knew there was no going back. A fog began to lift from my memory. Hazy flashes of my childhood poked at me and shimmered like broken reflections in the shards of a cracked glass bottle. I walked East, and something like ash filled my mouth. I remembered the air here in Carbondale, the same as when I was a kid, but the air was different in Carbondale than other places I'd been, as if it were always trying to leave your chest, like it didn't want to be breathed, and for some reason, every exhale reminded me a little bit of dying. The only other thing that does this to me is when I watch the seconds-hand on a clock, and every *tick-tock-tick* makes me think of the time I'll never have again. Makes me feel like I never had the time at all. Makes my foot tap—an old habit. I glanced at my wristwatch and realized I needed to book it if I wanted to catch the funeral before it ended.

Instinctively, I made my way towards St. Peter's, finding Old Broadway then to Fulton Street, my path summoning all sorts of ghosts from the past that lurched out at me from the smudged windows and neon lights along the roads, floating up from the sewers and saying my name. Jonah, they whispered, Where have you been? Every step like Deja

vu, like a patient re-admitted to a mental ward or a convict checking back in to the pen. Like a boy standing on the charred ground of where his house had burned down.

It's amazing, really, how the quick glimpse of a church steeple, the hotness of taxicab fumes and burnt rubber, the faded lyrics of an ancient hymn, or the squeaking gate to a trembling chain-link fence each unlocked the most specific memories, thought to be long-forgotten, from the deepest part of my brain. It is equally amazing how the better portion of these memories were so intentionally and carefully discarded over the span of many years, yet resurfaced a little more with every step I took towards the church. I walked. My visible breath lingered behind me with every exhale.

I had left—was taken-- from Carbondale when I was twelve years old-- one of the strangest ages for anybody to be. I was certainly not an adult then, or even a teen, really. But I was also not just a kid. It's that in-between age where you're old enough to look back at your life and remember how young you once were, but not old enough to have learned much from the mistakes you'd made. Fortunately, making mistakes with the people I grew up with was common as burping, and I could belch my ABC's by the time I was five. Slowly and diligently as I grew, the Dale began to callous my heart and age my soul. Eventually, I built a coffin in my head, sealed inside it the kid I once was, the forgotten child. Until this return, I had spent my time burying him, my past. But as I turned left out of a back alley onto Fulton Street, I could hear this kid faintly calling from his grave, a barren place in my heart alive with a whisper. I thought I'd forgotten the sound of his voice. My voice.

I walked slowly towards St. Peter's church down the sidewalks of Fulton Street. Every crack in the road became more and more familiar, the sirens of cop cars and ambulances echoing between the buildings around me. When I finally arrived outside the church, I thought I even recognized the drunk lady half-passed out on the steps. But the homeless all look the same after a while. Just homeless. The sky was pregnant with clouds, heavy as the concrete under my feet. By the time I reached the church steps, I was nearly paralyzed with reasons to leave, arguing with myself about whether or not to enter the doors.

Run, Jonah, a pit from inside myself called out. That old familiar feeling in my guts.

The air held a static like the charge between socks rubbed too fast on carpet. I heard the quiet hum of music, organ and soft singing coming from inside the church. It was the lousiest part of a lousy city in a sketchy neighborhood, the kind where doors were always locked and convenience stores had bars over the windows and you didn't wanna get caught too long at the wrong red light. People walked fast with their hands in their pockets, staring at the ground and avoiding eye contact. If you didn't tote a pistol or knife, you at least pretended to. I learned many years ago that people who made eye contact with you were always people who wanted something. What I know now is that everybody wants something, but it takes a desperate body to ask for it. Even more desperate is the man who goes out searching for it alone. A man who has no choice. A man who looks not into your eyes, but past them.

I climbed the front steps and looked up past the woman. The steeple to St. Peter's, I remembered as I saw it, had always had a soft blue glow like some kind of lighthouse

guiding folks to safety. It was the prettiest, not to mention the safest building around for miles. I had passed the church nearly every day as a kid walking to school. Its doors were huge, a dark burgundy with a blue trim that matched the light in the steeple. I'd heard blue is a color that subconsciously soothes people as it's tied to peace and tranquility, or something to do with the ocean. That's why most waiting rooms at hospitals and wall paper in shrinks' and morticians' offices are always some kind of blue. The best blues though, in my opinion, are the Miles Davis kind, all sad and pretty. It's funny how the prettiest things are always a bit sad. The stained-glass windows lined the outside wall of the church facing the street, and I remembered every detail of the pictures in them as I peered from the steps. I had always thought they were nice, I mean, really beautiful even, like the one with Noah's boat and all the animals, or the one with Daniel sitting in a cave full of lions and petting them on their heads like they were just kittens. But I remembered seeing that one of Jesus in the window closest to the doors, and I did not think it was pretty, never-- all the blood, the spear in his side, the nails and thorns. And worst of all, that look on his face. His eyes all droopy and defeated, looking up to the sky and wondering where his Father had gone. The expression on his face there in the glass is one you think of God as incapable of making. And even as a kid, when I glanced up at the windows from the sidewalk, that one made me tremble. It didn't fit with the other pictures. It was too sad, maybe too pretty, but definitely too much of something.

Other than its appearance, I didn't know much about St. Peter's, and it hit me then as I stood there in front of the doors, procrastinating entering the sanctuary. No one's in a rush to get to a funeral. It's almost rude to get there early. I assumed it was a Catholic church as the Catholics are fond of those kinds of titles, what with the popes and mothers

and fathers and sisters and saints and all. But growing up as a kid, I couldn't tell you the difference between a Catholic and a Baptist, a Presbyterian and an Anglican, who was allowed to dance and who was forced to kneel, who handled snakes and who spoke in tongues, who drank wine at Communion and who substituted with grape juice. The only people who can hit the bottle in the morning without being considered addicts are the Christians. They're also the only ones who think drinking will send you to hell. It's suspicious to me, all the different ways people worship the same God. All his different names. All the codes and parables. The Word inside the word, as Wallace Stevens put it. I think religion mostly gets people into more messes than it gets them out of. That's what I heard once, anyway. Also heard that Catholic parents raise fine atheists. I couldn't tell you this as a kid because we weren't a church-going family, or really, a family at all.

I had some change in my pocket left from the bus ride, and I dropped a few coins in the vagrant's empty cup on the stairs.

"God-d-bless," she slurred.

I set down my bag on the stairs beside her and pulled out my wrinkled tie. "You know how to tie one of these?"

She nodded, and I helped her to her feet. I had to stoop down so she could reach my neck.

"Use to do my husband's for 'em every morning," she said. Her breath was like gasoline and bad meat.

I thanked her when she finished even though the knot was crooked and the length was uneven. I stood in front of the doors and realized the music inside the church had stopped. I wanted to leave, to turn around and catch the next bus to Chicago—or

somewhere. But I forced myself forward. I had to pay my respects to my brother. The door was heavy as I shoved my shoulder into the wood, and the hinges groaned through the sanctuary. The people in the pews turned their heads back towards the gray daylight now pouring into the room. I was late for the service and shuffled awkwardly to one of the back pews.

The reverend spoke from his podium, “Colton Thomas Blair was a misunderstood boy, full of passion, of potential, and of hope...”

As he spoke of my brother, I looked around. The sanctuary was quite large on the inside, bigger than I had expected, but the people were few, which came as no surprise. The way everyone was so spread out in their seats made the room look even emptier than it really was. There was a scruffy couple passing a flask back and forth, whispering loudly in a back pew, opposite mine. I thought I recognized an old school teacher or two, and I spotted Miss Barringer, my middle school librarian. She was still very pretty from what I could make out, even with the new streaks of gray in her hair. Cole's basketball coach was there. I never knew his name because Cole only called him “Coach.” He was still bald as ever, and it was the first time I'd ever seen him in something besides a windbreaker suit. Wherever he walked, you knew he was coming by the *swish-swoosh* sound of his clothes. Cole used to say you could tell if he was angry or not by how fast the swooshing was when he walked. The others in the congregation, I didn't really recognize; and I figured they were probably members of the church waiting to clean up after the service ended. I heard that in some places they paid actors to come and cry at funerals if the deceased didn't have many friends or family to mourn for them. But that was a silly thought. Who would've paid to come here? Not me. Not Moms.

Moms wasn't there. But I knew she wouldn't be. I wanted to cry, to feel sad, to feel something other than guilt, anxiety, fear. To feel something, if not out of love, then out of respect. But I could not. Nobody cried. Love was there, but it had no tears.

Once born into the filth, when the sewers and ashy air become familiar smells and tastes, when walking around in the mire and speaking the Grime become natural, when dreams at night derail sleep like a train off broken tracks-- well, that's when I found myself back home, back in Carbondale, Illinois.

Run, Jonah, run, my gut told me, but the reverend spoke over my thoughts, "...Tragically, the innocence of youth was replaced by a deep-rooted coldness, a burning anger that spawned a paranoid and frustrated young man..." he went on.

The Dale has a way of swallowing people up, consuming them whole and never letting them go. So if you ever did find a way out, you would run hard and fast, and then keep running. I started running when I was twelve, and I had run until I was numb. I had run for twelve years until I did a circle all the way back to the pew I was sitting on. I had taken a bus ride back into the belly of the whale wearing my nicest clothes, my tie a mess around my throat and St. Peter nowhere to be found. Only a casket and a strange room full of stranger people. I began to remember as the fragments of my past slowly stitched themselves back together with each breath I took. I almost reached into my bag, but remembered my bottle was gone. I wished the couple in the other row would pass me their flask. The light outside beamed hazily through the windows of the sanctuary and reflected off gray specks of dust floating above the congregation. The stained-glass saints, prophets, and thieves carried a faint glow in their eyes through the glass as they

silently watched the service, their presence hovering in the stillness of the sanctuary. I squirmed in my seat.

“...He became merely a shell of the boy we once knew, smoldering with a rage against his community, his family, and the circumstances surrounding him...,” the reverend maintained his speech despite my disgust.

I picked up a hymnal from the pocket of the pew in front of me. The blue book was almost withered, its binding loose and the paper brittle and yellow like smokers' fingernails. I thumbed through the dry pages until I stumbled randomly upon a song. A poem.

...Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love...

I thought of my old friend Ellis. God bless him.

As I read it, I thought, nobody talks or writes that way anymore. Nobody knows how. Not here, anyway. Rather, the Grime is the native tongue. Unless you're at a damn funeral. The Poetic is reserved for the Dead. I looked over the backs of the peoples' heads to the front of the sanctuary. Three crosses hung above the reverend and his pulpit. Empty choir benches behind the stage. A man at an organ to the side, struggling to keep his eyes open. A small table stood in front of the casket between the two rows of pews, and on it, a candle burned next to a few familiar pictures, none of them recent.

“...And thus,” the reverend concluded, “Colton Blair finally paid for the wayward decisions of his confused youth with his own life. And though we cannot comprehend the will of the Father, God is good. May He have mercy and guide our brother into eternal rest.”

This reverend, this man of God, didn't know my brother. He obviously thought Cole was a common criminal. But why was I offended? Should the reverend have mentioned that Cole was the youngest dope-slinger in Carbondale, making thousands from the bricks he moved in his day? Was it admirable that Cole graduated from pushing bottles in middle school to arranging heavy weight deals by the time he was sixteen? Wasn't it notable that he was scouted nationally for his basketball talents during his junior and senior year of high school? Did anyone say he was a good brother? That he was *my* brother? This priest didn't talk about that. This dude talked about my brother like he was an idea, not a life. Fuck that.

Cole had loved and hated, and he knew wholeheartedly what to do with them. Savvy. Fair. Merciful. Rude. Spiteful. Hilarious. Wrathful. Generous. He'd taught me the differences between mercy and grace. Between violence and justice. But no one here was speaking about that. And what should I care? I hadn't been in Carbondale in over a decade. I suspected my anger towards the reverend and the purple silken scarf slung around his neck was rooted somewhere deeper in my past-- perhaps towards Moms. Or someone else. I couldn't know. I didn't know.

Cole's casket looked more like an over-sized coffee table than a bed for eternal rest. And his casket was closed. I heard he'd been shanked, gutted, stabbed almost twenty times in prison. Cole died a junkie's death. My brother wasn't the most upstanding citizen, but he didn't deserve that. I'd seen great hatred and even greater love from him than I knew existed when I was a boy. No, he didn't deserve to die like that. His coffin should've been open, his face full and pale and wide into the world, his body on display for us all to see that he was real. He was the realest to me. I looked a few pews in front of

me to my left and saw another familiar face grown tired with the years. The Dale does that to a body: Twenty-year-olds look thirty, thirty-years-olds look forty, anything past fifty looks corpsed. I stared at her a moment just to be sure, but it was definitely Marie. Marie had written me a few days before the funeral, saying the prison guard had found Cole naked and bleeding and dead in the showers. That's when I packed my things, stormed through my books for *Quixote*, and I bought the bus fare.

A young boy sat quietly beside Marie as she ran her hand gently through his dark hair. The boy must have felt me staring because he looked back at me over his shoulder, his eyes with just enough color not to call them black. I thought I knew him.

“Let us pray...” the reverend began.

Then as people's heads bowed down, as my own head bowed down and I stared at the old green church carpet, something strange occurred within me. In my mind from the most detached part of my being, I heard myself as a child, the child I had buried long ago in my heart, and that boy began to weep from inside his coffin somewhere from far away. And yet his voice was my own, and it was muffled underneath all the lost parts of myself, swaying like ancient trees around me. But I heard him. I heard his call from somewhere deep in the forest of who I was and who I had been, what I knew and what I'd forgotten; and I had forgotten this child's name, but I remembered it then as the congregation started the Lord's Prayer. His name was Jonah Blair, this child I once was, who I shared a name with, and I had tried to silence him for many years.

But he was not dead. I was not dead. Jonah Blair was alive, gasping for air. As the people around me recited the prayer in eerie unison, I closed my eyes and found myself

on a rusty set of train tracks that led into the woods of my past. I started along the rungs, following the whimpers of the child, and they were my own whimpers, his voice somewhere deep past the trees, the sound of his sobbing faintly reverberating off the rails and up my legs. The trees had grown much taller there in my mind, much thicker, much more twisted since the last time I had ventured into this part of myself. It had been too long, and I did not know my way anymore. It was overgrown and dark. And lost there in my own head, delved into a familiar yet strange darkness, a small light appeared in the distance, gray at first, then turned to a bright white, and it burned down past my heart into my bones, and in my bones, I heard him clearly.

Where have you been? I heard the child ask.

I am coming, I answered. Hold on. I am coming.

1.

Our Father Who art in Heaven...

From what I understand, most stories start at the beginning. In which case, I would tell you that I was born July 3, 1982 at Judith Memorial Hospital on South Broadway in Carbondale to my mother, Lorna Rae Blair. I've called her *Moms* long as I can remember. There was a picture taken the day I was born of me, Moms, and my big brother Cole in Moms' hospital room. Cole is only five then, and he is lying in the hospital bed with Moms as she holds me for the first time. She has a weary and sincere smile on her face, which is pale and red at the same time. She was much prettier then. Veins didn't crowd her neck bones, and her teeth seemed whiter. In the photo, Cole is trying to open my unused eyes. This was one of the photos on the table in the sanctuary at the funeral. I have a different father than Cole, but he and I never used terms like *half-brother*, even though I'm "mixed" and he is white. Cole always said Moms didn't know our fathers, so it didn't ever matter my skin was darker than his.

I think this is all right—so much is static in my memory now.

I was twelve years old in '94. I lived with Moms and Cole in building B of The Lion's Den Apartments, unit eight. It's a piss-stain yellow apartment complex right off Fulton Street in East Carbondale near the outskirts, and if you paid close attention, you could see the thick forest a mile or so behind our building creeping slowly through the

field towards East Carbon's rigid streets and our building. Out front, plastic bags and empty cans collected together like tumbleweeds and wisped down the sidewalks. The gutters of our building sagged, made our place look like its brows were furrowed; and if Tetanus had a color, it'd be the corroded orange of the fire escapes on the side of the apartments. Our building only had two floors, and you were screwed no matter which one you lived on. The top floor had the grungy rising heat in the summer and the forever leaky roof when it rained. But the ground level folks had it different. They had to hear the people above them: every creak, every raised voice, every headboard bang against a wall, every TV turned up too loud. The drywall was more like construction paper.

Cole's high school girlfriend, Marie, lived in the apartment right above us, and the room Cole and I shared was directly below hers. This is how I know about the headboard bang against the wall. She lived with her grandmother, who we all called "Nanna," and you could always tell when Nanna was watching TV. When I was very young, Nanna or Marie would babysit me while Cole and Moms were away. I spent many a night in their apartment sleeping on their fold-out futon while Nanna sat red-eyed in the big leather chair flipping between channels until she fell asleep. Their apartment had all kinds of as-seen-on-TV junk lying around, from coin collections to Panini-makers to air mattresses and so on.

Nanna was as much of a sucker as she was deaf, God bless her. I know it isn't exactly respecting your elders when you call a sick old lady a sucker, but I've learned that you can say nearly anything about a person as long as you follow it with *God bless 'em*. In any case, Nanna was addicted. They must've paid a million dollars a month for all the channels they got, but the only programs Nanna ever watched were infomercials and the

Home Shopping Network. I remember the commercial showcasing how sharp these kitchen knives were. A chef tossed a watermelon into the air and let it fall onto the knife blade, and the melon split into two perfect halves without the chef even moving the knife. The knife set was “essential for any household with a kitchen, for anybody who cooks and eats.” I always hated the way they made it sound like if you had to eat food then you had to have those knives. Nanna probably couldn't even lift a watermelon, much less toss one into the air, but she took out the phone and dialed anyway. When the set came, I tried the same thing the chef did, but with an orange instead. Turned out they were pretty sharp. That was probably the last time anybody even touched those knives.

We didn't get many channels on the TV in my own apartment, so when I was at Nanna's place, I kept alert, waiting for her to nod off before I'd sneak over and pry the remote from her hands. She always had a Riga mortis grip on the thing. It was like jimmying a gun out of a dead soldier's fingers. From a distance, Nanna looked like a normal, sweet old lady-- the type you just know spoils her grandkids and cooks three course meals every night. She was very dark and wrinkly skinned. I didn't know if she was Indian or Mexican or Egyptian or what. When you're a kid, people are brown, black, or white, and it doesn't make much difference to you until somebody says it should. But when I got up close to Nanna to take the control from her, she was not exactly the nice old bird you want pinching your cheek. She had dentures, but they always sat in a glass of bubbling water on the table beside her chair. Her lips seemed to curl inwards as if trying to slide down her throat, and there were always crusted trails of drool around her mouth. Brown splotches peppered her skin, and her hair was so thin I could see her scalp. She had those little tiny whiskers old women get on their chin and upper lip. When she

wasn't calling some 800 number or slicing watermelons, Nanna was always trying to kiss me, and I cringed every time I felt those hairs scratch my skin. I get goose-bumps to the day just thinking about it. But I'd steal the remote from her, finally, and put the channel on cartoons. I loved cartoons, most all of them. Still do, if I'm being honest. But my favorites were the superheroes.

I loved the X-Men, Spiderman, and even Batman was alright even though he technically didn't really have any superpowers. The guy I hated though was Superman. First of all, taking off your glasses and changing your clothes does not make you unrecognizable. I mean, even his voice was the same. Old Lois had to be a pretty dumb broad not to know it was Clark Kent. Even Batman at least lowered his voice when he was in costume. Superman doesn't have any weaknesses, and he has the best powers. He's a cheat. Now I think about it, and it's like if you're in an argument with someone. You go back and forth a while, but instead of settling the issue, whoever you're arguing with just says, "Fuck you." I mean, what can you really say back to it? You can't top it. You can't be more offensive. Any witty or clever retort doesn't do much good. And you can't work with the "fuck you" attitude. "Fuck you" just wins, in a cheap way. Every time. That's how Superman is. He's the "fuck you" to all superheroes. The guy's only weakness is the rarest element on Earth, and his arch-nemesis is some bald, angry billionaire. I mean, take Iron Man, for example. His suit made him powerful and all, but outside the suit, he was just Tony Starke, an unhappy, unsatisfied alcoholic. Bruce Banner turned into the Incredible Hulk and had all the power in the entire world, literally unstoppable. But with all that power, he couldn't control himself and even lost his ability to relate and communicate to those around him. And even Wolverine could heal from any wound

except for his past, which consistently haunted him. So even with all their powers, those superheroes never lost their humanity, but it was because they had deep character flaws. Of course, I didn't really know all that when I was a kid. But something about Superman was always sort of cheap to me, God bless him.

Anyway, Nanna never slept more than two hours at a time, so she'd always demand back her remote and go on shopping. She should've kept her phone in a holster. She was always complaining, though, about the junk she ordered never being delivered. I knew what it was though. The delivery guys always just left the packages outside the door. It doesn't take long for somebody to notice an unopened package in the Dale, and it takes even less time for someone to steal it. People are always stealing and cheating each other. And that happens everywhere, from what I've seen. But in East Dale, crime had almost evolved into a kind of art-- a sloppy Pollock-type mess of an art. Unless you were on the west side where there was a college and the buildings shone brightly and pop songs played loudly in the cars driving up and down the suburban streets, there was always the possibility of getting mugged, shook, or robbed. *Janked* is what Cole called it. And there was a much better chance of getting janked if you lived on the ground floor, like we did.

About a block from our building there was a set of railroad tracks that ran all through Carbondale. The tracks wove between the alleyways and cross-streets and buildings downtown until they eventually turned East and crossed over Fulton Street. From there, they led through the field behind our building into the outskirts towards the woods. I could see the edge of these woods from the big window in the back of our living room. They were probably only a mile or so away from our apartment, but everything

seemed so much farther away then. I remember now, very distinctly, I would follow the tracks with my eyes from the window as they grew smaller and fainter in the overgrowth of the field until they finally escaped the pale lights of Carbondale and disappeared into the forest. The tall trees that swallowed them up in the distance stood dutifully like soldiers guarding the entrance to some sacred place where there were no streetlights, no people. That's where the tracks led, where the trains went and vanished. And I heard stories about those woods in my childhood. They became the center of legends, myths, ghost stories and the tallest of tales. Haunting, frightening, and wonderful stories that have stuck inside me like dried up sap on old bark, stories I became.

Putting the pieces together now, my own story is deeply rooted there in the woods behind our building, behind my old apartment amidst a rail yard, a rock quarry, and a man named Ellis. I skimmed through the hymnal some more as I reminisced in the funeral service. When the engines and their cars would roll through, our entire apartment shook, and the buildings of the Lion's Den roared violently. And thus, I grew used to being shaken.

2.

...Hallowed be Thy name...

There were only two seasons in Carbondale. Hot and cold. By the time I walked to school in the mornings, I was either drenched in sweat or purple on my joints with cold, sometimes both. Cole walked with me down Fulton Street past St. Peter's with its stained-glass windows until we got to Lonsdale Middle School, where I'd just started the sixth grade. When Cole saw me enter through the front doors, he backtracked about two blocks to get to the high school. He was seventeen then, getting close to eighteen.

What I remember most about Lonsdale Middle was the library. Our library, much like any library, had a distinct smell separate from any other part of the building. The school mostly smelled like sweat and spray-on deodorant and perfume used to cover up the sweat, a musty dampness like the inside of a football that's been left out in the rain in a field of wet grass. Middle-schoolers are the smelliest people in America, ignorant on how to manage the newness and hairiness of puberty. I distinctly remember the odor that whoffed up my nostrils every time I opened my locker too fast. It was like rusted metal and blood, what I imagined a knight's sword smelled like after battle. But the library was different. It had a scent reminiscent of an attic, or maybe a basement-- whichever one you used to store away the things you don't need but can't throw away. I hadn't ever spent much time at a church, but the feeling I used to get in the library is what I think people must feel inside church when they *really* go, like when they worship, when they strive to feel a newness of heart and rejuvenation of soul in the midst of the old and ancient.

There was a big cardboard box always outside the library doors marked in bold Sharpie letters DONATIONS, but it looked more like a waste bin than anything else. I have to admit, I remember myself like many other students throwing trash in the box on the way in and out of the doors until Miss Barringer, the librarian, addressed the issue. Under DONATIONS, she eventually wrote in cursive on the box, "Give me your books, not your trash!" The problem was, most kids at my school saw no difference between the two, and on top of that, did she really think we could read cursive?

I remember the poor selection of literature in the library, all the junk the school adopted. They'd put anything short of restaurant menus on the shelves, any reading material that may have only been collecting dust on top of somebody's commode at home. SHIT is what the donations box should have read. I mean, we had eight-year-old copies of *Vanity Fair* and *Sports Illustrated*, newspapers from cities that I doubted existed, biographies of people I still haven't heard of. I've always figured it better to keep a half shelf with ten good books on it than full shelves with *The Giver* placed beside a stack of 1988 editions of *GQ*. Consequently, when you walked down the aisles, you couldn't help but notice the randomness. I always wondered who had previously owned books like *The Seven Keys to Happiness*-- did the owner follow the steps and do the favor of passing it along, or did he assume kids at Lonsdale Middle to be depressed and in need of such a literary gem? We had three different editions of *Al Anon*. I guess alcoholism develops at an early age in those parts. Thus, I learned early: books that tell you the steps and keys to changing your life rarely change your life.

Miss Barringer was probably in her mid-twenties back then, a good decade or two older than I was. But I could hardly distinguish the age of a twenty-something woman

from that of a thirty-something one. It didn't help either that Miss Barringer always dressed like an old woman, even similar to Nanna with those baggy cardigans and turtle necks, pencil skirts and pointy heels that clicked across the floor to let you know she was on watch. She had long brown hair that almost touched the top of her butt when she let it down, and there were three freckles of equal size below her left ear that you could only see when she put up her hair. The Bermuda Triangle, she called them. I didn't get it. Still don't. The palms of her hands were much pinker than the rest of her skin, which was pretty pale anyway, and I noticed it every time she lifted her finger to her lips to shoosh a group of noisy students. Sometimes I'd start talking unnecessarily loud or drag my feet across the ground when I walked down her aisles just so she would shoosh me. Closely then, I'd watch her lips pucker out and smooch against her index finger while her brow got all wrinkled and stretched out like an awning over her green eyes. The green in them was as dark and dense as the forest behind my apartment. A legendary green. I still dream of exploring and getting lost there.

I began checking books out every day after our homeroom class took a tour of the library in August. The way Barringer talked about her books was the way a proud parent probably talks about their kid, and when we got to the Poetry section, she started talking all fast and eager about the wild and unpredictable world of verse the way a crack-head talks about, well, crack. Of course, Barringer was my first crush, and I began routinely checking out books as an excuse to see her. I would only read the descriptions on the

back jacket at first, but then she told me how much I would like *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. She showed me how to check it out. Gave me a library card. It only took me three days to read it.

“So?” she asked when I returned the novel.

“So what?” I knew what she meant, but I was trying to think of something scholarly to say. My communication skills were less than esoteric. Still are.

“So what are your thoughts?”

“I dunno.” My urge to impress her was blatant.

“Don't be absurd. Of course you know. The thoughts you have are quite possibly the only thing you can know for certain. That doesn't mean they are necessarily true or factual, but it is most inevitably true that you *have* them. You cannot help but to have them. Even the thought of not having a thought is a thought. See? Now, if you prefer not to share them-- that's one thing. But unless you have an issue with memory loss, you *must* know your own thoughts.”

“I *thought*... It was all right, I guess.”

“I see. Is there further logic behind this opinion?” she asked with either surprise or disappointment, maybe both. Whichever it was, she tried to hide it and stared up at me from behind her big desk over her glasses frames.

“I mean, it was good and all. Jem is cool. Scout reminds me some of my brother, Cole. And I'd like to meet Scout. I never met a girl like that before, braver than any kid I know, trying to explore all around that creepy place. Nuh-uh. Not me.”

“Her curiosity surpassed her fear. Hence, there was room for courage.” Barringer was always using words like *hence*. “And Boo wasn't so bad either, right?”

“He was nice. Still creepy though. Anybody hides in their house that long, then they got something worth hiding, I think.”

Then Barringer let out a good laugh. “So Scout was your favorite character, then?” She was always asking me about my favorite characters. It didn't seem fair to like one more than the other. And it seemed to me that *not* liking a certain character was just as important as liking one. And anyway, those are just opinions in the end and probably don't matter at all.

“I don't know. Atticus was interesting.”

“What did you like about him?”

“He's what a dad should be. I mean, I think so. He gave good advice. He was fair. Nothing's never fair, but he was. I'd like to meet him.” I felt silly for saying it, wanting to meet these people who didn't exist.

“Me too, Jonah,” she said.

By the beginning of September, Miss Barringer began occasionally writing teacher's notes to get me out of class, and I'd help her put away books. She taught me how to alphabetize by the author's last name, and I learned each section of the middle school library: Fiction, Non-fiction, Children's Literature, Poetry, Young Adult, and Newspapers/ Magazines. Something was always out of place. One thing about kids, she griped, they don't care much for order. And I soon shared her scowls when I would find Dr. Seuss beside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Fiction section. Other times, she

would just want to discuss what I had been reading. I knew she liked it-- talking to me, I mean-- but I could tell she didn't have much practice talking to kids. She was great at talking *about* kids. Miss Barringer could talk about anything, and not only that, but she'd tell you why she was talking about it and then go on to tell you why you should be interested. And by the end of her lecture, you'd find yourself genuinely enthralled, or at least nodding your head up and down pretending to be, like you knew you should be. She could talk for years about *Lord of the Flies* if you got her started. I think she secretly thought children really were little savages. Or maybe she was scared everyone was a little savage-- no use for order, no need for alphabetization. Maybe she was scared people really could eat each other, metaphorically or literally. Or whatever.

As much as I stole glances at her hands, it took me a solid month to realize she had no wedding ring. I was returning some book I had to read for sixth grade English in September, and she was checking in a stack of returned items when I noticed her naked ring finger. Hope filled my blood and my head got light and my stomach floated and I got all antsy and started tapping my foot as fast as it would go. I was really quite antsy. Still am. Leaning against her long desk where she sat across from me, I began to formulate a clever, subtle way to bring up her love-life. But she interrupted my thoughts and asked, "Did you need anything else, Jonah, or are you just procrastinating your trip back to class?"

"See," I began hesitantly, "It seems to me, as I see it..."

"Yes?"

"Well, uh, Miss Barringer, don't you got a boyfriend? Someone to call you 'Baby Girl?'" So much for subtlety. She looked startled by the question, and I started stuttering,

“I mean, d-don't you wanna have kids a-and get a family? They'd call you 'Moms' and you could teach 'em all about Poetry and books and read out loud to 'em every night...”

Truth is, I wanted that for myself. I often found myself daydreaming during class about Miss Barringer stroking my head and reading me to sleep in my bunk-bed. Still do.

She didn't look up, and I kept going on saying these words before I thought them: “...I mean, it's okay if you don't want that. But why wouldn't you, ya know?” Realizing I was prying into the librarian's personal life, I tried to backtrack, to be more eloquent, more manly, but my words spewed like boiling water over a pot, and I couldn't stop them: “You could ask 'em their favorite characters and all, and maybe you could even write your own book, and they could be characters. I mean, I guess you could do that now, you'd just have to make 'em up. It'd be fiction is what I mean, of course. But don't you wanna go with somebody, get a boyfriend, I mean? Or like, a husband?”

I was rambling, and she put her glasses back on and continued checking in the stack of books at her desk. I could see her chewing at the inside of her cheek. I was losing her and cramming my foot into my mouth at the same time. “What are you getting at, Jonah?” she asked, still without looking at me, making a new pile of the returns.

“Well, I guess, you're just, uh, you're so pretty-- pretty smart, I mean, and you talk so good and know everything about everything, and isn't that just what grown-ups do?” I was blushing. She came around her desk and handed me the stack of returns, and the look she finally gave me was a cross between irritation and curiosity. I wasn't finished: “Get married, is what I mean...”

Then a short pause. Sporadic eye contact.

“...I guess I just wonder why you're not married, is all,” I finally blurted, balancing the stack of returns between my hands and my chin.

“I see,” she started with a dismissive sigh, “Jonah, I already know how that story goes. There was no Atticus, I'm afraid. It's all fiction.” She had a way of speaking ambiguously, as if into a mirror, rehearsing lines for some stupid screenplay, and though it annoyed me, I always pretended to follow.

Before I could ask what she meant, she told me to put up the books and head back to class.

We didn't talk very directly about our personal lives after that. Our own relationship was based on those we had with characters in the literature we shared that year. And though my feelings for her, mind you, were undoubtedly as pure and deep and profound as a twelve-year-old boy's heart can permit, I can't help but feeling sometimes as though Miss Barringer was only a bit of fiction herself in my life, a cozy distraction from the grit and reality of Carbondale, The Lion's Den, what was happening, what was to happen.

I began getting a feeling in my guts around this time that my life was wanting for something, missing things that a child cries out for deep in his soul-- someone to show his love to. My heart had holes in it. Maybe it was family or friends. Maybe it was a father. Maybe it was God. But I had awoken to these absences, even if only on a subconscious level then, and I felt sorry for myself. I began to learn the art of replacement, how to shove all the wrong shapes into all the wrong holes. I learned to love characters instead of people, ideas instead of life.

3.

...Thy Kingdom come...

I often found myself alone in our apartment. I had grown accustomed to being alone. Not lonely. Just alone. There's a difference. I'd even learned to enjoy it, in a way. This one night in September though, it felt like I hadn't quit sweating since the walk back from school. Cole had finally come home from pre-season basketball workouts, and it was getting dark outside. September nights in the Dale always had a stickiness about them like colds-sweats, even when we were inside our apartment, so I took my shirt off and opened the big window in the living room. I was always trying to take off my clothes, and somebody was always telling me to put them back on. My bare back stuck to the couch, so I crawled to the floor to watch TV. An anchorman was droning on about an increase in homicides and break-ins in the east downtown area. I hated the local news-- then and now. It's always the same. Or maybe it's just always told in the same way: anchormen have a way of announcing deaths and parades in the same tone. Cole was sitting behind me at the plastic fold-out table in the kitchen with his Walkman blaring, still in his workout gear.

“Do you think anybody will ever break into our house?” I asked over my shoulder.

He didn't look up. The right ear speaker to his headphones was busted, so he had the Walkman cranked and bobbed his head. The music he liked was best enjoyed on full blast, he'd told me: “Let it seep inside you. Let it sink.”

But I didn't have to hear the music to know he was listening to his *Low End Theory* cassette, the way he had his eyes closed, mouthing the words and playing drums with his knuckles and a pencil on the plastic table. He finally caught me staring.

“Huh?” he mumbled, shifting the left headphone.

“Will we ever get robbed?” I repeated. Cole narrowed his eyes.

“We ain't gonna get janked,” he said. “What you think they'd take?”

I looked past him towards Moms' room. She had the big room by the front door, the one with the big closet and her own bath. She needed the extra space to store her clothes, her outfits and jewelry, the big dresser with the vanity mirror.

“Her jewelry's fake,” Cole said, reading my mind. “Her rings turn her fingers green.”

Then I glanced towards our room. I had the bottom bunk. Cole and I stored our clothes in plastic bins and slid them under my mattress. My stomach sank at the thought of somebody stealing my comics or school books, even if I had borrowed most of them from the library. “The Walkman,” I replied. “And our music. Or your stuff. Don't you got stuff you wouldn't want nobody to take?”

He cocked his head to the side and pulled his backpack closer to him under the table and tucked it between his legs. It was full. Cole'd had a bad case of senior-itis since he was a freshman, and with less than a year left to graduate, school was hardly his highest priority, despite the college basketball scouts who came to all his games and practices. A knock on the door.

“Bout time,” he said, getting up to answer it.

I turned back around and flipped the channel to cartoons. The station was fuzzy, and I had to readjust the bunny-ear antenna on the TV. I heard Marie come in and Cole say, “What up, Baby Girl?” like he hadn't seen her in forever. Marie took out a sweaty glass bottle from her bag and handed it to Cole. Half of it was already gone. A *forty*, they called it. I heard their lips smack together something wet and sloppy before they sat down at our plastic kitchen table. Marie had red-brown skin, a little lighter than her grandmother's-- Nanna's was more like wet rocks rubbed together in sand at a river bank. But Marie's was smooth like bacon grease, the color of a lightly toasted marshmallow-- kinda the way Moms' was when she used her bronzer stuff. I guess Marie always reminded me a bit of Moms-- all bony at her collar, knuckles and kneecaps like knots in a tree, hair like mulch. Except Moms' hair wasn't always black. Sometimes it was blonde, and other times it was half and half. When we asked her about it, Moms joked about mine and Cole's different skin colors: she said he was like the sun, all bright and early; said I was like the moon who comes out at night.

It's funny how, when you're a kid, even teenagers seem so much older, so much more mature than you are. I suppose it's all the hair, the boobs, the slang, the cars, the jobs, the independence, the Grime, the grind. The maturity and wisdom. But Marie's boobs were about as big as mine back then, like two ant hills on her chest. When she turned fifteen, I caught her in our bathroom stuffing toilet paper into her bra. She asked me not to tell anyone, but I thought nothing of it at the time. I'd seen Moms cram green bills, cards, receipts, coupons, all sorts of crap into her bra. I figured a bra was like an extra purse, underwear with pockets. Marie was almost two years younger than Cole and four older than me. In '93, I suppose that made her 16. A mature 16, mind you. Her

sophomore year in high school, Marie found out that Nanna was sick, and she dropped out of school to help pay the medical bills. Started working full time at the shoe store in East Carbondale Mall. I think Cole helped her out some, too, with the cash. They were always talking about money and work.

“Hey, Jonah,” Marie called to me with a smile, entering the kitchen. A silver cap covered her bottom left incisor, and it flickered in the light when she spoke.

“Hi,” I answered from the floor. “Nanna watching TV?” I wanted to go upstairs and watch the good stuff myself.

“Always,” she said.

Figured. I had to settle for Wile E. Coyote. He was chasing Roadrunner again.

“I was just telling Jonah we ain't gonna get swooped on,” Cole informed Marie.

She smiled, setting her stuff down at the table. “Aaw, J-Baby, you worried about getting robbed?” she asked me with feigned sympathy.

I shook my head, still staring at the screen as I lay on the carpet.

“He ain't got nothing to worry about, right, Baby Girl?” Cole asked her with a nudge.

Roadrunner set up a trap for Wile E. He painted a black arch on a brick wall in the shape of a train tunnel. Wile E. smacked flat against the brick in the chase. *Beep, beep*, and Roadrunner left him in a cloud of dust as Coyote floated flat as paper to the ground.

“Nah,” Marie reassured as she took a pull from the forty. “But then again, you never know. I had a cousin got jumped uptown by some crack-head bum she used to give spare change to. She didn't have none that day, and he made her get on her knees, give him a blowie right there in the alley. 'Use your teeth and lose em,' he told her.”

“Pssh-” Cole started as he pulled his *Infidel* switchblade from his pocket. He pushed the button on the black handle, and a blade shot out. I'd seen him practice with it before, slashing away at invisible intruders. “I wish they would.”

Marie laughed at him. I pretended to pay no mind, though I could make out their reflections on the tube.

“Listen, Jonah,” Cole began again, putting away his knife, “People rob, jank, kill, and lie because they just desperate. They're desperate because they scared.”

Turning around on the ground, I asked him, “Scared of what?”

“What is it everybody wants most?” he asked. I thought a moment and tapped my foot.

“A nice TV with lots of channels,” I answered in complete seriousness.

“Heard that, J. *And* to be happy. Everybody wants to be happy,” Marie said, less serious than I had been.

“Exactly,” Cole said. “To be happy. Fat or skinny, rich or poor, black or white or orange, people just wanna be happy, and everybody around us is always telling us to be happy-- the TV, teachers, music. And if we ain't happy, something's wrong.”

“You happy?” I asked.

“Sometimes. Other times I ain't. But way I see it, being happy disappears. It's only for a little while that you can be happy. It's just a feeling in your body, chemicals in your brain and shit. It don't last. Being sad is just as important as being happy.”

“Or just as unimportant,” Marie said.

“They're both real, but neither one them lasts long. Feelings come and go,” Cole continued. “Some people remember a time, or maybe just a moment, that they was happy.”

They hold on to it like it's a precious baby, their own child, even. Then they spend they whole life with their nose pointed in the wrong direction trying to get it back, and sometimes they try to take other peoples' happiness for themself. They steal, beg, rob, con, kill, whatever-- anything they gotta do to get back to that one time. And when they finally get it, they get scared they ain't never gonna get it again, you know? When a body chases happiness, he's really just running away from being sad. And holding on to that fake shit is what makes a body desperate.”

“You desperate?” I asked.

“Yeah, you desperate?” Marie added with a smirk. “You seem to know all ‘bout it.”

“Naw. I ain't desperate,” Cole said, taking the bottle. “I ain't thinking back on the past or wondering about the future. I’m only here now, in this room with y'all, and I know what I want and what I need. I just been around plenty a desperate people. They start to love shit that don't love 'em back: Highs, money, ass, cars, clothes.”

“That's a rap song,” Marie said.

“It's all fake,” Cole went on like a street preacher. “None of them things are really real, know what I mean? Truth is, most people don't need half the shit they got ‘cause what they got don't last. A high wears off, paper runs out, cars break down, clothes tear up and go outta style...”

“What about ass?” I asked. He ignored my question.

“They spend they whole life trying to get this shit that don't never fill 'em up, or protect this shit they don't really need. Then they get scared they ain't never gonna get what they want--”

“Or scared somebody's gonna take what they got,” Marie tacked on.

“And the whole time, what they need's right in front of their face. You get what I'm saying, Jonah?”

“I think so. But what do people really need?”

Cole sighed. He was mostly a man of few words, so when he talked like this, it exhausted him. But feeling the duties of the older brother, he felt the pressure of answering my questions even if he didn't know the answers.

“I dunno, J. Mostly people just need to get their head outta they ass. To live the life they got, the one right in front of them, to be-- really be-- in the moment, the now, before life passes them up and they ain't left with nobody or nothin',” he said. Then he smiled at Marie, and his hand disappeared behind her back, and he said, “But everything I need's right here. I ain't gotta go past this room to find it.”

“You think that'll get you laid?” Marie whispered. They kissed again, and I looked back at the TV, wondering what it was I was supposed to chase in life if not happiness. I'd been taught that I go to school to get a good job one day and maybe eventually move to the West side and drive a nice car and get a pretty wife and own a real house. Have my own library. Things that make a man happy. I watched Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote as I thought. Always chasing or fleeing.

Cole spoke up again, “I know that's a lot to swallow right now, J. You'll get it all one day. You're smarter now than I've ever been. But for now, you just gotta remember not to be scared of people. No matter where you go, you're gonna find the beard-face hobo with brown bag in fist, the junkie with his sap story and sad eyes--” he said as he mimed a drunk with the forty bottle at the table.

“The drunk gutter-punk with that open guitar case,” Marie chimed in, “barely knows how to play, can’t sing for shit.”

“The crusted hippie with his matted hair like a beaver tail--”

“The train kid with all the bad tattoos and--”

“The oogle running away from home for no reason.”

They passed the forty back and forth, giggling at the way they finished each other's sentences. It was hardly cute. Marie made both her hands like mouths and crossed her eyes, “Don't forget the loony-toon always talking out loud to himself.”

“And the wannabe thugs, the gangsters still in they moms' crib.”

“Or the corner girls, giving handies for fast food.”

Then the room began to quake, softly at first, plates and cups clicking against each other in the kitchen cabinets. The TV wobbled, and the metal antenna rattled on top of the frame. The cartoons were interrupted with strands of static on the screen. The apartment began to vibrate, to hum, and then it roared. A whistle blew from the tracks outside. The apartment shook. Marie and Cole didn't notice the malted liquid of the forty spurting out onto the table. They sat there and laughed and bantered on. They always had a strange way of flirting, and they shouted over one another until the train finally passed and the apartment settled.

“The just-passing-through and the always-gonna-be-here.”

“The ones who burn and the ones who drown.”

I turned up the TV, and they laughed some more.

“Naw, J, for real,” Cole called, “You ain't gotta worry about nobody. You're my brother. You ain't gotta worry or be afraid because, hey, everybody else is afraid. Bury

the fear, and nobody can touch you. I guarantee that.” He winked and took a swig of the foam. “Nothing to be scared of. Not never. You heard?”

“Nothin' to be scared of. Not never,” I echoed, tuning them out.

They were speaking the Grime, and I hadn't picked up on it yet, not completely. It was a foreign language full of codes and symbols. I didn't know what an oogle or a crack-head was. And I think I'd heard about blowies before, but I'm not really sure. My best friend Tookie was a year older than I was, and he swore up and down he got one in the bathroom at school once. I only pretended to know what it was then, or why anybody'd want that.

Roadrunner led Wile E. Coyote over a cliff. Coyote floated in midair a moment as he pulled out a sign that read HELP! Then he dropped off the screen, and it was midnight. My stomach growled. I knew Moms wouldn't be back any time soon.

I peeked over the back of the couch. Across from where Cole and Marie sat, the stove light in the kitchen lit up the sink where I saw Moms' coffee mug. I rarely saw her make coffee, rarely saw her sit in those quiet hours when she would creep in late or early or whenever and sip it slowly by herself. I knew she had been there though, the way lipstick always smeared against the rim, different shades of red, pink, sometimes blue. I wondered what she was chasing, what she was running from. I wondered if she was tired. If she was alone or lonely. Happy or sad. I wondered if she was disappearing on purpose or by accident. Marie's back was to me by then, but I could see Cole in the dimness of the kitchen light. His black backpack was still tight between his feet under the table, blending in with the shadows. Always full. I saw their mouths moving, but I didn't hear them. Like watching people talk while you're under water.

“Cole,” I called. He looked up from where they sat. “What’s for supper?”

4.

...Thy will be done...

As I recalled my past from the church pew during the Lord's Prayer, I realized that these early memories stuck together like wet pages in a book. It seemed that, as I got older, my childhood memories began to melt together-- whether intentionally or naturally-- and the first ten or so years of my life began to feel and look like one long day I didn't remember so well except for little, silly things.

I remembered my eighth birthday when Cole got me rollerblades, but I was too scared to wear them out-- not because I was scared to skate, though. No-- I learned to fall, to bruise, to hurt and to ignore the pain. But I was afraid somebody would steal them. So I skated in the apartment and in the parking lots of the apartment buildings, or in the field out back near the woods. I remembered the day my first-grade teacher sent me to the principal for saying the *fuck* word even though I didn't know what *fuck* meant. I remembered lying awake some nights on the bottom of the bunk-bed when the bed frame began to rock and creak, when Cole thought I was asleep, and I knew better than to interrupt. I'd wait for him to sigh softly and for the room to get quiet again after he threw a sock or a t-shirt down from the top bunk onto the floor.

I remembered it was a Wednesday when I first heard about the rock quarry in the woods. I met Teddy and his posse on this day in sixth grade, and it must've been October because Cole's basketball season had started. I was always hungry those days.

Sixth graders' mornings went by in a haze at Lonsdale Middle School, and most my energy was spent trying not to nod off on my desk. Even today, I don't formulate very clear sentences until about ten AM. But finally, the lunch bell rang. I didn't have money for lunch, but I went to the cafeteria anyway. Maybe I could bum something from Tookie, I thought; but then again, Tookie was rarely at school-- his moms had been cuffed once before for truancy bullshit.

While I looked for an empty seat in the cafeteria, I passed a group of older kids beating on their table with their knuckles and pencils like I'd seen Cole do so many times before to his music. One dude beat-boxed and another would try to come up with raps. They were whack, nothing like Tribe or Pac. I found an unoccupied spot in the far corner of the cafeteria and took a seat by myself, setting my backpack at my feet. Tater-tot crumbs and globs of ketchup smudged the table top. A group of boys huddled together at the table next to mine. I recognized the huge fat kid with the red buzz-cut. He probably kept it so short because it was so flaming red. I'd seen him before walking around in the streets and the halls at school with an exaggerated swagger in his strut. Looking at his face, it was hard to immediately distinguish his freckles from his acne. His clothes were always too big. Granted, parachute pants were in style during '93, and *The Fresh Prince* was making sure of it. But this dude, he was something like a third-year eighth grader and dang near old enough to drive. He was bigger and taller than all the other boys at his

table, and he wore a thick, gaudy silver chain around his neck that he let hang outside of his white t-shirt.

I sat quietly and alone. From my back-pack I pulled out Barringer's personal copy of *Don Quixote*, which she had just loaned me that morning. Claiming to see “a spirit of great adventure” in me, she insisted that I read the novel. I agreed (solely to see her smile), and she brought me the book that morning. “This was a gift from someone very special to me--” she said before handing it over. “Someone who is gone now, you understand? Lost like Quixote to his own world. Take care of this book. It’s precious to me, and I’m trusting you to read it and to allow yourself to get lost in its pages and befriend its characters and partake in its adventure and most of all-- Enjoy it. Return it to me as soon as you’re finished.”

I placed the book on the lunch table and opened it. On the inside cover was a note that read something like this:

My Dear Daughter--

As you read this story (my personal favorite) of one man's quest, be fearless and full of Love in your own. Seek out the Truth, and your search will be an endless & tiring one, yet a wonderful & worthwhile journey. Explore every nook & cranny and shine your light in every hole & hollow, leaving no stone unturned and no page unread. Never cease looking, and even when you do not find it, maintain your good Hope (the same I have for you!)-- even when the world says there is none left-- because it is in those times that Hope is most valuable to us. And at the end, may you write it all down. May your story be one not that is full of worldly answers, but one that is framed with good questions. May

your words be a roadmap to Hope for others. Remember, to listen is a much greater gift than to speak. I always hear you, even when we are far away. And to love is better than to understand. Even if you do not understand everything I have written, you know that I love you. Even when we are far away.

Pony up, Little Knight-- Your adventure awaits!

Love, Dad

An ember of happiness, perhaps even inspiration, flickered inside me, but was immediately met with a flat sadness. Who would write me my note? One that I could pull out and read when my quest became tiresome, when I grew alone or lonely-- to remind me there was a difference between the two? My thoughts drowned out the clatter and scramble of the cafeteria chatter around me. I turned the page. There were black and white pictures printed sporadically throughout the book as I thumbed through it. I stared at one of Sancho, the squire, helping Quixote put on his knight's armor.

Then my attention was redirected to the table next to mine where the older boys sat.

“My Pops told me about this old rock quarry in the woods behind Fulton Street,” the buzz-cut kid started with a mouth full of food. I couldn't help but eavesdrop. I'd heard every story in the world about those woods. They were local legend, as I've mentioned. But I'd never heard about a quarry.

“Who's Cory?” a short kid sitting across from him asked.

“Not *Cory*, dumbass. It ain't a person. It's a *quarry*-- this huge hole, like a thousand feet or something, that they dug a long time ago with bulldozers and cranes and shit. Pops said they were mining for something when they hit water. Water gushed up from the ground and filled the whole place, flooded the whole quarry in less than a day. They had to *eva... eva-crew-ay...*”

“Evacuate,” a tall kid with glasses corrected.

“Yeah, that.”

A boy with studs in his ears spoke: “So where's this *quarry* at?”

The buzz-cut kid took the last big bite of his Clux Deluxe sandwich and chewed noisily. My mouth watered. Mayonnaise smeared on his upper lip in his peach fuzz. I wondered when I'd get some peach fuzz. When your balls drop, Cole told me once. I had been waiting for them to fall off ever since.

“You just follow the railroad tracks East out of downtown into the limits,” buzz-cut continued after swallowing. “There's a path like two miles off the tracks behind some apartments that goes back in the forest.”

“The forest? No thanks,” Earrings said.

The boys began to murmur, exchanging glances with one another. Buzz-cut took a swig from his milk carton, but it was empty. He reached over and snagged Tom's carton. I had class with Tom the year before at the elementary school. Even when our teacher called on him to answer a question, Tom stayed silent, as he was now. Buzz-cut took a big gulp of the chocolate milk before going on.

“But I didn't get to the best part,” he said, wiping his chubby, acne-riddled face with the back of his hand, savoring the attention he'd earned from his crew.

I turned the page and blankly read Cervantes' description of Quixote's obsession: *He so immersed himself in those romances that he spent whole days and nights over his books; and thus, with little sleeping and much reading, his brains dried up to such a degree that he lost the use of his reason.*

The next page had a picture of Quixote posing like a knight in armor that didn't fit him very well, the visor of his helmet blinding his eyes. He had a goofy but stern countenance, his lips tight like trying to hold back a laugh while somebody's praying. His beard came to a sharp point past his chin. Sancho was in the background with his face in his hands.

All the boys at the table next to me were quiet and leaning in, even Tom, waiting to hear the fat one continue the tale about the rock quarry. He munched on his fries and kept them hanging there in suspense, milking the moment for all it was worth.

“So now,” he finally continued, “they say the machines and stuff are still down there at the very bottom-- too deep for anybody to swim...”

I stared at Quixote, intently listening.

“...!Cause when the water came rushing up, not everybody had time to get out when they eva-cruayed. Almost twenty construction workers died there that day. That's why nobody goes back there...”

Glasses got shifty and started, “You mean, it's--”

“Haunted,” buzz-cut finished, rubbing his hand back and forth against his red head. “Even the engineers in the old railyard station near the place never get outta their cars. They don't stay longer than they hafta.”

“Bullshit,” Earrings said.

“Believe whatcha want,” fatty returned. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his buzzed head some more, proud to have gained every ear at the table, but scared he'd soon lose the spotlight. I felt his eyes shift onto me.

“I heard about that place,” Tom said quietly, “My aunt's boyfriend said he had a friend that went back there on a dare when they was just kids, and he never saw him again. They sent out search parties and put up fliers, and he was even on the back of the milk cartons like they used to do for missing people, you know.”

“So what happened to him?” the small one asked, mouth hanging open.

Tom stared casually at the table and shrugged. “They never found anything. My aunt's boyfriend said he thinks his friend got ate alive-- bones and all.”

Glasses stated matter-of-factly: “No animals native to Illinois-- or anywhere in this region, for that matter-- would eat a human being. Especially without leaving any trace.”

“Not any animal,” Tom continued. “Cannibals. My aunt's boyfriend said escaped people-- fugitives and convicts and crazy people-- all went back there in the woods, in the forest, to be left alone. They eat anything, including each other. My aunt's boyfriend said they probly ate his damn friend and used his bones for jewelry and hid so good they never found 'em when they had the search parties and helicopters and stuff. Long time went by, and they kinda just quit looking for him.”

Buzz-cut was intrigued, but I could tell he was jealous to lose the limelight.

“Shit,” he muttered dumbly, “I'd go back there and make 'em eat bullets. Shit, cannibals.”

“*Cannibals*,” I couldn't help but repeat aloud. I had dropped the book and was plainly looking at the group across from me. I regretted it instantly. The fat one's eyes glowed like the end of a cigar underneath his freckled forehead.

“Who was talking to you, homie?” he asked. He'd been waiting for me to say something since the moment I sat down, waiting to start an easy fight.

“Is that a rhetorical question?” I mumbled. Cole had asked Moms that once, and she slapped him and called him a smartass.

“Yeah, cannibals, son. They eat little faggots like you,” he sneered, getting up from his seat. “They'll chop your tiny dick off and cook it over a fire and eat it like a hotdog.” He talked with his hands and made all sorts of imaginative gestures in my face.

“Wouldn't that make them the faggots?” I said under my breath, zipping up my backpack and preparing for flight. My gut spoke over its hunger. Flee, Jonah.

Glasses, Tom, and the short kid all laughed nervously. Earrings just stared. Fights were a daily occurrence at our school, and the air was getting tense like one was surfacing. I prepared for the worst. A swift punch in the nuts was always my go-to move against Cole. I had my pencil behind my ear, too. I kept it pretty sharp and figured if they ganged me, I could use it like Cole would use his *Infidel*. Plunge and twist.

But then the kid with earrings got up and whispered something in buzz-cut's ear.

“No shit?” buzz-cut asked him, rubbing his head slowly. Earrings nodded, then took his tray to the garbage and left the cafeteria. Buzz-cut relaxed a little and sat back down.

He looked at me with a smile and said, “Bro, you know I was just messing, right? C'mon! We always gotta mess with the sixth graders. You'll get it when you're in eighth grade.”

“Okay,” I replied.

“Hey, why you eatin' by yourself anyways, li'l dude?”

“I'm not eating,” I said.

“You hungry? Come sit over here. I'm not gonna finish these fries.” He made room for me to sit next to him and slid the short kid's unfinished tray of food to the empty spot beside him where I moved.

“Yo, I'm not--” shorty started, but buzz-cut shot him the death eyes. I moved my book bag and picked up *Quixote*, warily taking the seat at their table.

“My name's Teddy,” buzz-cut said. Then he introduced the group: “Skinny with the goggles there is Tino. And that's Tom-- he's in your grade, I think, and he don't say much. And that fun-sized fucker is Frankie; but we call him ‘Pockets’ because, you know, you could fit him in your pockets.”

Pockets looked at me and grunted, “You call me Frankie, though. Or Frank. No, just Frankie. Got it?”

I nodded.

“Listen, man--” Teddy began with that shitty smirk still on his face and shreds of food lodged between his teeth, “What's your name again, li'l dude?”

“Jonah,” I answered.

“Yeah, Gina-- listen man, I was just playing earlier. I mean, you ain't no fag, right?”

I was in love with the librarian, but a simple, “No,” was my only answer.

“Right,” he said, pushing the tray of food closer to me. “I mean, shit, from the looks of you, I bet you already been laid today.”

“Yeah, twice,” Frankie added.

I hadn't laid down since that morning before school, but a nap sounded nice. Something in their laughter, though, told me that's not what they meant, so I was quiet as I eyed the food in front of me.

“I heard you're Colton Blair's little brother,” Teddy said as he dipped a few fries in some ketchup and tossed them down his throat. He grabbed another fry and held it in front of me.

“You know Cole?” I asked, reaching for it.

He popped it into his mouth before I got it and said, “You for real? Shit. Every kid, crack-head, and cop on the East Side knows Cole.”

“Popular guy,” Tino said. “It's a fact.”

“And dude's a baller, too,” Teddy added. “I was at the game where he dunked on Lamar Stevens from Central High.” He took another fry from the tray and held it right to my mouth this time. Tino looked uneasy, and Tom was silent as usual.

Frankie, the one they called Pockets, grinned and said, “Yeah, Cole's got mad game.”

“He's really good,” I replied dumbly, fixated on the food. I again reached for the French fry.

“He better than his dark-skinned brother?” Pockets asked.

“What?” I said.

“You like ketchup?” Teddy asked, taking it away from me again just before I reached it. I shrugged as he dipped it and held it once more to my face, the ketchup now slowly dripping down the side. “Here, open up,” he said.

The smell caught my nose, and as if by reflex, my mouth opened. But again, Teddy ate it, and I was left with a mouth full of saliva. Fool me once, and I'm still hungry; fool me twice, I'm hungry and pissed. The group kinda chuckled, and the air was getting thick again.

“Before my cousin got locked up a few years ago,” Teddy began after swallowing, “he used to hoop with Cole. Heard they even used to sling some together. Had almost the whole East Side locked down before my cousin got ratted out. You in the hustling game, too, Gina—following Big Bro’s footsteps?” he asked, laughing under his breath. Then he picked up *Don Quixote* without wiping his hands.

“What game is that?” I asked quietly.

“You know--” he started, thumbing through the pages with his fat greasy fingers.

“Grinding,” Frankie answered.

“Pushing and peddling,” Tino added, adjusting his frames.

“Trapping,” Teddy said, and looked at me from the corner of his eye as he chewed.

“I dunno what y'all are talking about,” I said. And I didn't.

Teddy laughed. “You will, li'l man. You will. Yours is a family business. At least, it is on your pops side.”

“I dunno my pops.”

“My bad,” Teddy said. “It’s Cole’s pop. He’s the one. Family business and all.”

“Can I get that book back, Teddy?” I asked, watching the filth from his hands smudge onto the pages of *Quixote*. “Please? I mean, I gotta take it back to the library. Right now, actually. Barringer's been on my ass about it. I mean, I'm late. It's due.”

“Sure,” he said, staring at a picture of La Mancha. He flipped a few more pages and asked nonchalantly, “But Gina, you don't believe my Pops about the quarry, huh?”

“Maybe the quarry. But not the cannibals.” My stomach was tight, but my fist was getting tighter under their table.

He flipped a few pages. “You reading this for class or something?” he asked.

“No. Just for fun, I guess.” I was getting agitated and regretted sitting with them. I began to hate Tino's glasses and the way Frankie snickered like one of the flying monkeys from *Wizard of Oz*. I hated Tom's silence. I even hated the other kid's earrings even though he had left before we'd been formally introduced. I began to despise Teddy's freckles and acne, his stupid buzz-cut, the fake silver chain around his neck, the dumb way he walked and his idiotic accent. I imagined dipping my pencil in ketchup and shoving it down his throat.

“Be honest, man, you just like the pictures, don't ya?” Teddy said, turning another page.

“Yeah-- I mean, no. I like the story, too. I mean, I think I will. I just started it. I like it so far.”

“Reading! For fun!” little Frankie gaffed loudly as he slapped the table. “Damn, son. I mean, for real, who reads? *Who reads?*” He looked around the table, searching the eyes of the posse for affirmation.

Something let loose inside me, something that had been building up since I'd sat with them-- but probably long before then, too-- and tired of their games, I retorted back at Frankie, "Most people read, Pockets. Shit, I can even teach you how." I took a hand full of French fries and dipped them sloppily in the ketchup, and the red goo smeared onto my fingers and hand. I chomped loudly as I went off: "It's pretty easy, Pockets-- reading is, I mean. Just words and punctuation marks, really. You go from top to bottom, left to right..." I let morsels of the food fall from my mouth as I gabbed, red coating my lips and teeth, "...And a group of words makes a sentence. A few of those and you got a paragraph. Paragraphs make different sections, and in a novel, those are called chapters."

Everybody quit laughing and stared at me blankly. The whole cafeteria seemed to fall silent, and all I could hear was my pulse.

"Okay, Jonah. You wanna see it for yourself?" Teddy asked out of the stillness.

Remembering that I was outnumbered, I swallowed the fries with a loud gulp and settled back into my shell, the fire returning back into my guts from where it came.

"What? See what?" I asked.

"The rock quarry. We'll all go together. Right?" he asked, eyeing his crew around the table. The boys slowly nodded their heads up and down in unison.

"I, uh, can't. I mean, uh--" I stammered.

"You got a date or something, Gina, or you just a pussy? I thought I might've smelled something funny," Teddy jeered, giving my arm a friendly pat. Usually after school, Cole met me outside on Fulton Street, but he had basketball practice after school in those months. This meant I had to walk home alone, and Cole wouldn't be around until

nighttime. And I certainly had no date, so unless I was a pussy, I had no excuse either. I had to go with them.

“Okay,” I stammered.

“What's today?” Teddy asked.

“Wednesday,” Tino answered.

“Good,” Teddy said, turning to me. “I'll let you know when we're gonna go, Gina. It'll be soon, maybe not today or tomorrow, maybe not even next week. But be ready.” Then he lifted *Quixote* and said, “I'll hold on to this until then. Maybe I'll teach Pockets here how to read,” and he jabbed my shoulder once again.

A fight broke out on the other side of the cafeteria. Teddy and his boys immediately rushed over to watch. I had an uneasy feeling in my stomach. Spotting my chance, I grabbed my bag and bolted out of the cafeteria towards the library.

5.

...*On Earth*...

The library entrance was on the ground floor beside the main doors of the school, one floor above the cafeteria. I sprinted up the flight of steps two at a time and was out of breath by the time I got there. My plan was to lay low until the bell rang. The library had become a sanctuary to me, a holy and safe place, and Miss Barringer was the high priestess and damn near my only friend then, which is exactly why I retreated there after my conversation with Teddy in the cafeteria.

I picked out an empty soda can from the *donations* box as I entered and tossed it in the garbage beside Miss Barringer's desk when I got inside. "How are you today, Jonah?" she asked, looking up from her papers.

"Hungry."

"In your mind or your stomach?"

"Both."

"I'm happy to assist you with the former."

"Is *Moby Dick* any good?" I needed a new book and had a feeling I wasn't getting *Quixote* back any time soon.

"A classic is what they're calling it." She squinted her green beautiful peepers over her glasses frames and asked, "You planning on picking it up?"

"Nah," and I awkwardly began to back away towards the aisles. Please don't ask, I thought.

But then she did: "How many books do you have checked out, Jonah?"

“Just a few, I think,” I mumbled over my shoulder as I turned, hurrying towards the Fiction. It was a lie. I had developed a habit of checking out books and “forgetting” to return them. Really, I think I just liked the way they all looked stacked up together in my room. They were the closest things to trophies I've ever had. I even began to alphabetize and categorize them neatly on the small desk Cole and I shared in our room. Problem was, the Lonsdale Middle School Library had a policy of only allowing a student to check out five items at a time. It was October then, but I had reached this cap shortly after reading *Mocking Bird* back in September, and Barringer knew it.

“And *Quixote*?” she asked as I backed away. She liked me, but she liked her books more, and I wasn't allowed to check anything else out until I returned a few. I must've had a hundred books at that point. I think I even still have *White Fang* somewhere. I wanted to talk to Barringer about that one real bad when I finished it. I thought it was amazing how Jack London describes the wolf in a way that makes it seem almost human. Or maybe it just made me more like a wolf. But I couldn't talk to her about it, in any case, because it was illegally in my possession at the time. See, what I would do when I reached the check-out limit, I would just peek over the aisles to make sure nobody was around and slip whatever book I wanted down into my backpack. I knew thieves. Thieves swooped, lifted, stole, and janked things. I had seen and learned from the best, but I was no thief. I was just borrowing. Sometimes though, I did feel mildly guilty about the whole thing since Barringer trusted me and all. I think my heart would have broken if she'd ever had to scold me. And the thought of being banned from the library made me queasy.

The ceilings of the library were high, a thousand feet, I thought. If anything was too high for me to jump off of, I always figured it was about a thousand feet. Before it was the library, the giant room had been the middle school gym. I imagined Cole stealing a book from me and dunking it through a basketball hoop on the far wall. I walked slowly with my arms spread wing-like between the aisles as I searched. The aisles were just so far apart that my arms could stretch out barely enough for my fingertips to graze the spines of the books on either side of me. I came to the *M's* in Fiction and found Melville, then scanned the different editions of *Moby Dick*. There were three copies, and each was thick as a dictionary. No condensed versions, no pictures. I peered over the aisles. Barringer was nowhere to be seen. The place was always quiet as a morgue-- which I guess a library is supposed to be. Respect for literature isn't much different than respect for the dead. And nobody ever visited the library unless it was for a class or the occasional make-out in one of the back aisles. Coast clear, I slipped the smallest copy of *Moby Dick* into my bag and began zipping it up when I turned around face-to-tits with Miss Barringer.

That was another thing about the librarian: her glasses had this strap connected to them in the back so that when she took them off, she let them rest on her chest. I think I could set a carton of milk on her chest and it wouldn't fall off. She had this tiny little toothpick of a body, but her chest was immaculate. And her posture was so perfect all the time, I don't know how she stood up straight. I wasn't real sure why I was enamored with Miss Barringer's chest, maybe because I figured there had to have been nearly half a tissue box stuffed under there if she situated her bra anything like Marie did. I knew that boys always talked about boobs and tits because they were supposed to, but I didn't know

what was so great about them. Everybody's got nipples, I thought. I always heard the older boys comparing the sizes of different students' and teachers' cans, and I wondered why it mattered. They might as well have been comparing their shoe sizes-- which I heard the girls doing sometimes, talking about what boys had big feet, but this was for an entirely different reason. Sort of.

And there I was, caught red-handed with my eyes buried deep into my librarian's planet-sized melons. "Miss Barringer, I didn't see you. You're stealthy as Spider-man," I laughed, trying hard to be cute. She didn't count Marvel comic books as being a part of the literary cannon, to which I'd said that she was a bit biased. Man, could she be quiet. I guess she had adapted to her environment, like a corpse in a graveyard. Libraries command respective silence in the same way that graveyards do. And Barringer could move like a ghost when she wanted. Her heels had a way of clicking against the tile only when she wanted them to. The rest of the time, I think she floated above the ground. Her shooshes were the loudest thing about her. She must have seen me thieving, I thought: she has mistaken my borrowing for burglary. I did my best not to stare back at her chest. Don't sweat, I thought, don't stare. Stealing a book would get me suspended, but I just knew being a pervert on top of being a thief could get me locked away.

"Why are you breathing so hard?" Barringer asked.

"Moms says I got smoker's lungs. Runs in the family. Need me to put away any books or anything?"

"Not today. Have you had a chance to read *Don Quixote* yet?"

"Reading it right now, Miss B. I only had it for a couple days. How fast you think I read?"

“Who is your favorite character so far?” She always knew how to get me talking.

“Well, it's only my opinion, of course, but I like Quixote pretty good. Only--” and I trailed off, staring at the ceiling.

“Yes?”

“Well, he's a bit... Well, he's kinda like a hobo--”

“That’s a very crass term, Jonah,” she interrupted. “Say *homeless* instead, but do explain what you mean, anyway. Perhaps with more tact,” and she began wiping her glasses lenses with her sweater sleeve. “It is, after all, what separates us from the animals. Tact.”

“And here I was thinking it was guns and porno that separates us.” I smiled.

She did not.

I started tapping my foot again. Moms said I had the most anxious-est brain she ever saw in a kid. Ain’t normal, she’d said. Cole and I were very different that way. You could hold a gat to Cole's temple, and he wouldn't bust a sweat, but me-- I'd piss myself after my foot went ratta-tat-tap. Normally, a kid's inability to stay still and look you in the eye means something suspicious is brewing. But I had always been fidgety ever since Miss Barringer had known me, especially when she made me think hard and speak with tact. “Take your time,” she added patiently.

Barringer’d caught me on the spot, right there in the middle of the aisle doing my best to avoid the physical anomaly below her head. I had to backtrack and think about it for a second, retrace my thoughts about old Quixote and locate un-crass, correct words and utilize them tactfully. I loved reading. Still do. But one thing I never figured I'd do is write a book. And the good books, my favorite books-- the best ones where pages seem to

go by twenty at a time and I started to mix myself up with the characters, when I began to think that I'm the wolf and forget that I'm actually Jonah Blair-- those are the books that I finished and surmised I could never write a book. A good book baffles me when I try to think of how the author could ever make up such a story, map out all those details, embed those little motifs and maintain the hidden symbolism. Sure, I could write non-fiction or keep a journal or even write somebody's biography, but those are stories that have been told and lived already.

I figured writing a story is different than creating one. It's a tough racket for anybody, especially a twelve-year-old, to find the right words to match the thoughts in his brain, because you first have to find the origin of those thoughts, which usually leads to a specific feeling on something. And the real feelings-- the ones a body gets in his guts-- aren't really feelings at all. They're more like knowings, and they refuse to be described with petty adjectives like *angry* or *happy* or *sad*. Those feelings disappear. But the real ones can't be named, won't succumb to the inadequacy of language because simple words won't convey the guts of it all. That's why "Who's your favorite character?" is really a watered-down way of asking the more important questions: *Why is it your favorite character? How is this character human? What are the flaws in this character and how are they beautiful? How are they devastating? Is this character a part of you?*

The only way you can get even close to explaining something so profound and personal is if you can share it in proper grace, and most importantly, if you can do it truthfully in a way others can relate, even on the vaguest level: This is what makes the fictional story the realest form of communication between human beings. Barringer got me thinking, and now, I suppose language in itself is limited to re-creation, re-telling, re-

writing, re-living. But to write your own story, *to author*, is a gift in which one desperately and humbly grasps for the ability to capsule a feeling into a pill. To bottle an emotion and serve it chilled. To melt the guts of life into bite-sized bullets and give them each a name. To paint the field where Reason and Insanity wage war against one another. To place an audience in the stands and construct before their very eyes the ring where Poem and Grime go round-for-round, where Truth and Shadow go toe-to-toe, where we watch with wild eyes and cheer and cry and laugh and mourn. To create a character and make them familiar, perhaps as a part of us, and yet, not us. To fill blank pages with life and un-life. This is the gift of the author. And each good book I read always made me a little more certain it was a gift I didn't have. That gift of creation.

And at that moment, with a god-like set of knockers staring straight into my soul, I was having trouble creating an answer for Miss Barringer, one that expressed my opinions truthfully about the delusional Quixote. Truth seems to be rarely tactful, especially when in the presence of such perfect women. But of course, a twelve-year-old boy doesn't know how to articulate any of what I recollected later in life. He just feels it, knows it.

So what I did instead was, I tapped my foot.

“Well?” Barringer asked.

“Well, when I started *Quixote*--” I began, “I wondered why anyone would pretend to be someone they aren't. Why they'd leave their home and go searching for something that might not be there. Quixote had all the food and money he needed. He had a nice bed. All the adventures he could ever want were in his books. He must've had a million

books. And he had his boy Sancho and that farm girl he was feeling to keep him company.”

“Are you still hungry?” she asked.

I nodded.

Then she motioned for me to follow her down the library’s fiction aisle. She clasped her hands and asked over her shoulder as she walked, “Isn’t reading about someone else’s adventures different than experiencing your own? Isn’t knowing about life different than living it?”

It was probably a rhetorical question-- Miss Barringer could be a real smartass when she wanted to be-- and I avoided telling her that her prized novel she’d loaned me had just been janked from me in the cafeteria by some Irish pestilence and his funky bunch. But staring up at the high windows of the library, I answered her, “Sure. But he had a nice life. Quixote had a nice home. What else could he’ve been looking for? I mean, don’t most people work hard their whole life to get what he already had?”

“Hmm,” she said. “I would assume so. I would also assume that most are equally discontent when they achieve such goals, if not more-so than they were when they first started out. Of course, there is nothing innately wrong with having money or friends or a ‘nice home,’ as you so descriptively put it. But when we seek to attain those things in the pursuit of happiness, they almost inevitably bring about an unsettledness, a stagnancy, an itching deep down in the bones rather than any kind of peace. When one says she is seeking happiness, most often she means she is seeking peace. The two are very distinct. Now, another thing, you keep speaking of Quixote and his home. What is *home*, exactly?”

I thought about it for a second, tried to act like I'd read the whole thing, like I didn't see the note on the front jacket, like I still had it in my backpack. She had a way of making simple questions seem unanswerable. "Home is where you live," was what I settled for.

We got back to her desk, and she pulled up a chair for me beside her own. "So it is strictly geographical, then. Quixote's home, for example, was merely his farm in La Mancha."

I couldn't tell if she was asking or telling. There was a framed photo I hadn't previously noticed on her desk of a young girl, maybe twelve or thirteen, dressed in white standing beside a younger boy who wore a bowtie and a big smile, showing off several gaps where his teeth had fallen out. Behind the children was a woman also in a white dress who resembled an older version of the Barringer I knew, and next to her was a tall man with the thickest mustache I'd ever seen. Her Pop, I thought, the one who wrote the corny note in *Don Quixote*. They were each smiling, except it was hard to tell what the man's mouth was doing under his facial hair. "That your fam?" I asked, nodding towards the photo.

She glanced at the picture, and the left side of her mouth involuntarily shot upwards, then her lips quickly returned to their original pursed, flat position. "It is," she said.

"You look like your moms."

"I've always heard as much."

I was glancing from the photo to the librarian and back to the photo. "It ain't such a bad thing," I commented.

Barringer cleared her throat and took a brown bag from one of the desk drawers. She pulled a Ziploc bag of baby carrots out and handed it to me. It wasn't any Clux Deluxe, and I wasn't the biggest vegetable fan back then. Still not. But I was half-starved. "Got any ranch?" I asked, gnawing a fat carrot stick.

She ignored my condiment predicament and continued her previous thought: "It says that Quixote, before he re-named himself such, spent countless hours in his books, that *his brains dried up to such a degree...*"

"...*That he lost of the use of his reason,*" I finished between chewing.

"Good. A man of reason, as you quoted, would stay at home with his food and bed and make-do with the life he has. But while Quixote was reading all his books, something new must have slipped into his head. An idea profoundly *un*-reasonable. So I wonder, what exactly was he reading?"

I admit, she had me stumped. But I had never enjoyed carrot sticks so much in my whole dang life. Still, I could've used some kind of dip. I considered her question as she bit into a turkey sandwich. I played it safe and stated the obvious: "He read books-- other peoples' stories, I guess."

"Fiction," she said.

"Yup. Fiction, I guess, mostly."

"And in the fiction?" she asked, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

"And in those, he was introduced to characters, read about far away places, learned new things, which all gave him new ideas."

"Precisely," Barringer said, her eyes getting that green crack-head glow in them that made me fall in love with her, and she talked as if only her mirror was present. "He

discovered that home is no more than an idea. A home is not your house, your family, or La Mancha..." She was waving around her sandwich like some kind of wand, putting a spell on my soul as she talked and forgetting she had a mouth full of food: "...Home is not the city you're born in, your school, or your job. It's not your neighborhood or the street you grew up on. It's not even limited to your country or nationality."

I nodded slowly, pretending to follow her, "Okay. But what is it then? How are you s'posed to find home?" I asked as I picked orange strands from my gums. We sat quietly, save the vegetable crunchings.

"You let that word, *home*, do what all great and ancient words do to us..."

I felt a lecture brewing.

"...You let it sit in your brain and you dwell on it, let it seep into your heart and get in your blood. Let it drive you to ask yourself that very question: *What is home?* And then you search for it. You are given a home, but you must explore to find it, then go even deeper to know its many rooms. Many die for it. Many sometimes die just trying to find it. Most get lost in its depths, discerning between what it is and what it is not, deciphering between the analogy and its reality. Home can only be where you are, and it is never where you are not. It is the place you are found. Thus, the internal journey is just as important as the physical one, if not even more-so. The question naturally evolves, then, into *Who am I?* And rather than answers, only more questions come."

"Got that right," I said.

"Eventually, if the seeker is true in her seeking-- whether on her deathbed or early in her quest-- she realizes the answers never mattered, as answers by their very definition imply the end of a search. But the human mind and soul are an endless labyrinth, always

shifting and changing with new ideas, the loves and hates a heart holds on to-- all of it often remaining a mystery even to the very one in which the heart beats. Thus, the right questions must be what matter, true questions that drive one to her core. And there, in the center of all the chaos and beauty that is human, there is home. And it is the place for which you are made, and it is the place from which you came, and it's where you will return."

A carrot cracked loudly between my teeth. I wanted something more concrete than that. I had only just begun to think with the abstract part of my brain. But Miss Barringer seemed satisfied with her own answer as she sat back in her chair and finished eating. And even though I didn't fully understand what she had said, a little fear died inside of me, and I became less nervous about going to the rock quarry with Teddy and his goons. I was damn near a man and had barely explored anything past Fulton Street. A seed was planted then and there as I began to grasp that I was more than Carbondale, more than Lion's Den Apartments, more than a child. It was time that I entered the woods. I realized I wanted more, so much more than what I had and what I saw.

I was still, however, slightly concerned with one issue.

"Miss Barringer," I started, "are there any cannibals around here, I mean, anywhere in Illinois? Like, near here at all?"

She looked at me a bit confused, and the bell rang. "Get to class, Jonah."

I gathered my things and left the library, thankful that she hadn't found *Moby Dick* in my bag or found out where *Quixote* was.

6.

...As it is in Heaven...

A couple of days passed, then a couple of weeks. I only saw Teddy and the others a few times in the hallways. "Today?" I would ask.

All Teddy said was, "Soon. Be ready, Gina. Soon." They never said anything else to me, only nodded as they passed, and I wasn't offered a seat again at their table during lunch. I felt like some ominous plot was in the making, and meanwhile, Barringer was getting pretty sore about her books. I needed to get *Quixote* back. So these few days were spent dodging Teddy, his gang, and the librarian. I didn't linger in the halls when the bell rang, only went straight to class, and at the last bell I bolted out of the school doors and practically ran the whole way home. It was around this time that I noticed a cop car always parked across the street of our building. I didn't think much of it then. Still don't.

I closed the blinds to the big window in the living room so that I couldn't see the woods. Or maybe it was so they couldn't see me. They seemed to come alive, watching me from across the field. Waiting for me. They had grown so wildly in my imagination over the years, but they'd always appeared far away, distant or unfamiliar, until now. They had become a reality, a possibility. I constantly thought about the day Teddy would say, "Today, Gina. Get your shit. We're going today." Part of me hoped he'd forget the whole thing, or thought maybe he'd been joking all along just to mess with me. But part of me was anxious to go searching. I was staying up late nights thinking about cannibals and ghosts, but also about *Quixote* and Scout. Each train that passed reminded me of all

the places I'd never been. The stories I'd heard about but never lived. Deep in my guts, I was ready to wander the labyrinth. Perhaps I'd even be stronger alone.

Most twelve-year-olds would not understand Melville if they read him. And I can assure, I was no different, but I needed something to replace *Quixote*. I finally started *Moby Dick* late one night in October at the kitchen table. With my brows scrunched, I tried to take in and store every word. My eyes slowly followed where Ishmael led them as I started the novel. Although I was slightly disappointed by the lack of pictures, before I was done with even the first page, I noticed the goose bumps blooming up my arms. I was shivering.

Each October day brought with it an increasingly sharp coldness, especially when it began to get dark outside. And we never turned on the heat, so I'd layer up my clothing, mostly Cole's hand-me-downs. He had a habit of only wearing black or grey. "Keeps me safe," he told me once-- "logo-less, colorless. A man without a name can't be tracked." So I'd rummage through our plastic bins, free to take and wear anything with color in it. Some of his shirts went down to my knees. I didn't hit my growth spurt till I was almost eighteen. Kids could crack on me for my top hanging down like a dress if they wanted. That was fine as long as I stayed warm. So I found an old jacket in our room about twenty sizes too big for me and zipped it all the way up, pulling the hood over my head. Then I grabbed *Moby* and jumped in my bunk, wrapping the thin white bed sheets around my body.

I concentrated, reading each page at least twice, mulling over the words I didn't understand as if their definitions were already stored somewhere in the deep part of my head. It wasn't until later that Barringer taught me to keep a dictionary by my side. *Some*

years ago-- never mind how long ago precisely-- having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me at shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. I remember thinking it strange, when I first read it, for a man to carry a purse. I thought of Moms' leopard skin handbag, and the zebra print one for special nights. I thought of Barringer's lips. I didn't know what every word meant, but I still preferred Melville to the *Grime*. I was only a few pages in before my brain felt as if it was oozing out of my skull. Finally, Cole returned home from his game. I jumped out of bed to greet him. I was anxious to pry whatever new information I could from him about the woods, see if he'd heard of the rock quarry. He was carrying a paper bag with grease stains at the bottom.

“What up, Cole?” I asked, Grimy as I knew how.

“What up, bro?” he said, setting the bag on the table.

“Not shit.”

“Only ignorant people curse.”

“You cuss.”

“Who said I weren't *ignant, doe?*” He smiled.

I smelled the French fries and remembered Teddy taunting me a few weeks before.

“Talked to Moms earlier. She won't be home for a while. You hungry?” he asked, going into our room.

“Yeah,” I replied, but I left the food in the kitchen and followed him. “A kid said he knew you the other day.”

“Yeah? Who?” He put his backpack under our desk and kicked off his shoes. The salty sweat smell filled our room immediately.

“Some dude named Teddy.”

“I think I know ‘em. He s’posed to be in high school. Fat white dude, talks black, red hair?”

“Yup.”

“What’d he say?”

“Just that you and his cousin used to play together. Sling some, too. Or hustle, or something like that. I dunno.”

Cole laughed and walked back into the kitchen. “He dunno what he’s talkin’ about.”

We each grabbed a burger from the bag. They were room temperature and delicious, and we used toilet paper for napkins. He went to the couch and turned on the TV. Whenever Jordan played, Cole stayed glued to the seat. Half the time, the games were on channels we didn’t pick up with the bunny-ear antenna. But if you got lucky and placed the furniture in the right position and bent the ears in the right way, you could catch the Bulls on a channel we didn’t receive, number 23, barely discernable, hooping through the static. I tried to ignore Cole’s cheering and cursing and jeering as I sat back at the plastic table and picked up *Moby* again.

“Dammit, Rodman,” he shouted.

I tapped my foot. Cole hated when I did that. What I wanted to do was go into the woods, with or without Teddy. Maybe Cole would go with me. Maybe he’d been before. My foot went faster, vibrating the floor.

“The hell's your problem, J?” he finally yelled.

“The hell's yours?” I retorted.

“Don't cuss, shithead.”

“You ever heard of a rock quarry?” I asked. “The rock quarry near the railroad, I mean?”

He was slapping the TV trying to get the picture back. “You talkin’ ‘bout the one in the—shit--” and he re-adjusted the two antennas before continuing, “the one back in the woods?”

“Yeah.”

“Everybody has.”

“You ever been?”

“Nobody goes back there.”

“Why not?”

The picture to the game was not coming back, but getting worse. The color faded into white, grey, and black static. Cole gave a defeated sigh and sat with me at the table. “Whatcha know about it?” he asked. He put a backspin on his basketball with his foot, rolling it off the floor and up his leg into his hands.

“I dunno. Heard a lot. But probly nothing. Just stories. A hidden gypsy village?” Cole nodded.

“I heard it was an Amish commune that burned down. Or how ‘bout the secret drug ring?”

“Yup.” I nodded.

Truth was, I'd heard all kinds of stuff about what was really in the woods behind our pad. Every kid in Ember had, and as of late, I'd become obsessed with the idea of the place. There it was, right behind our apartment, the mystery swaddled in the darkness of the trees. The same forest I saw every day just outside the window, and yet I had never been or even thought of going. Didn't even know anybody who'd been, or even heard of somebody who had. Made me wonder where all the stories came from. I had asked everyone I knew about it, and almost always, I heard a different tall-tale. Nobody had been, but everyone had a story. *Her curiosity surpassed her fear*, I remembered Barringer saying about Scout.

A gathering spot for deformed inbreeds.

A hideout for criminals from around the nation-- even heard that Baby-face once camped out there.

A barren, quiet, lonely forest, haunted by ghosts and stalked by demons that waited for unwary travelers to wander into their den.

An ancient city that burned down in a fire, now covered up with moss and weeds and plants, piles of bones buried beneath the roots and the water.

“What else have you heard?” I asked.

Cole spun the ball on his middle finger, then transferred it to his index, back to his middle, then to his ring. “Lotta stuff, same as you probly.” He kept his eyes on the ball, his left hand softly slapping against the side to keep it turning. “But I think most of its bull.”

“Me too,” I sighed.

“But I did hear this one story,” Cole said, “about Red Chariot. You ever hear about Red Chariot Health Center?”

“Uh-uh,” I said, leaning towards him. Every story intrigued me, but each only added to the mystery and darkness of the place.

“I think it shut down before you was born.” Cole continued, “Red Chariot was an asylum--”

“A what?”

“An asylum, like a place for loonies-- insane, crazy people.”

“Crazy like, uh, Michael Meyers?” I asked. Cole had let me watch *Halloween* with him once. He and Marie cuddled on the couch making out as I sat crossed-legged on the floor in horror yet unable to look away from the screen, wincing behind the cracks in my fingers. I was a sucker for horror movies.

“Sure,” Cole chuckled. “Red Chariot got its money from the state of Illinois, and one day the state called. Said they couldn’t give no more. So Red Chariot had to release almost half its patients-- the crazies. Some of ems on the streets today, like the ones I was tellin’ you about. But I heard some of ‘em moved back into the forest.” He cradled the ball under his arm and walked to the big window, opening the blinds. I half-expected to see something staring in at us, but there was only the silhouette of the trees in the distance set against the deep blue-black of the night. We both peered outside. “A whole backwards society full of lunatics, still there today’s what I hear,” he went on. “They don’t come here, and we don’t go there. Like an unwritten pact we got with ‘em.”

I looked at him, anxious for more.

“That was a while ago though,” he said as he sat back down at the table. “Maybe nobody’s back there no more. Maybe nobody ever was. Might not even be true at all. I don’t really care to find out. All I know’s Red Chariot shut down a long time ago, just another abandon building now, and nobody goes back there.”

There was a pause between us for a moment that hung there thick over the table before either of us spoke again.

“I guess the loons had to go somewhere though, right?”

7.

...*And give us this day...*

The suburbs of West Carbondale was about the only part of the city considered safe enough on Halloween night for kids to go trick-or-treating. In fourth grade, this kid named Jimmy transferred to my school from the suburbs after his parents got a divorce and his pops moved to the East Side. Jimmy couldn't believe I'd never celebrated Halloween. "You mean you've never dressed up or gotten candy or rolled a house or anything?"

"It's hard to roll an apartment," I told him. "And what do you mean *dress up*, anyway?"

"On Halloween night, you're supposed to dress up--" Jimmy said excitedly, "like, as a ghost or a vampire, a pirate, a zombie or a Viking. You can be anything you want."

"What do you dress up as?"

"Uh--" Jimmy started, "Well, my parents don't like all the scary stuff. They say it's *demonic*. So they make me dress up as a different Bible character every year. So I just wrap a bed sheet around me like a toga and tie a belt around my waist. I'm always Moses or John the Baptist or something."

Without meaning to, I laughed hard in his face, and he got red.

"But when they aren't looking," he said, "I put the sheet over my head and tell everyone I'm a ghost. The candy's all that really matters, anyway."

Jimmy learned quick that nobody goes trick-or-treating downtown or on the East Side of Carbondale. Halloween night is like every other night in those parts; people

double and triple check to make sure their doors and windows are locked at night, and anyone wearing a hood or mask is either gonna get shot or shoot someone.

Halloween night of '93 was no different, and I found myself home alone once again. Moms had picked up an extra shift at work and left me some cash to order a pizza, and Cole was out with Marie. He promised he'd be back to watch the horror movie marathon with me, but I wasn't holding my breath. I called the pizza place, and I was five bucks short on what a small pie cost. I thought about going upstairs to see if Nanna had anything to eat, but I didn't wanna bother her. She had been hooked up to different machines, tubes going into her nose and wrist, and she slept a lot more than normal. I didn't feel much like reading, and I was certainly not going to watch any scary movies by myself. I looked out front towards the street, which was empty except for the cop car still parked there. It made me feel a little safer even though Cole had told me before that cops were usually worse than thieves and murderers, seeing as how they were already both.

The sun was setting and the moon was already out, like they were fighting for the sky on a black and blue battlefield. Cooped up in the apartment, I paced around a bit and went into Moms' room. The sheets to her bed were silky, but they weren't made of silk. Her bed was always made. And clothes I'd seen her wear a week before were in a heap beside her closet. Mascara stains on the pillowcase. The fan on her ceiling rattled with every other rotation, made her room chilly—but she'd always said she couldn't sleep without noise. Cole had told her a million times he'd fix it for her, but he never did. At

least once a night I thought the fan would shake itself loose from the ceiling and kill her while she slept. I shut her door and got a strange idea in my head. I went to my room and took the thin white sheet off my bed, then cut two holes in the middle of it with a kitchen knife. My breath bounced back at my face with the sheet draped over my head. It dragged along the floor as I walked outside the apartment.

The roads were empty, the sidewalks strangely quiet. I could've sworn I blended in with the wind. I felt invisible. Just a ghost. I felt... I felt good. And the glow of the streetlights cast a dull yellowish-orange color, making everything look like malaria. I found the train tracks about a block to the left from our building and began to follow them, stepping on the rungs as I walked past the Lion's Den. I remember being unaware of what I was doing exactly, my guts yelling up at my brain telling me to go back home and wait for Cole. I'd never thought of going into the woods by myself. But I'd grown tired of waiting on Teddy to tell me it was time. And under that sheet, seeing the dark world between the holes I'd cut, I was not myself. I wasn't anyone. Only a ghost with Lion's Den Apartments just behind me. I had counted the fortieth rung by the time I began crossing the field, and my thoughts went something like this:

Rung forty: Maybe I could explore around the woods a bit, get to know my way inside them. *Rung forty-nine:* I could find the old rock quarry by myself, maybe even the Red Chariot building Cole had talked about, I mean, it can't be too far back there. I could hear the sheet dragging behind me as I walked faster, still counting the wooden slats.

Rung sixty: I could see the look on Teddy's face if I was the one leading *them* into the forest, if I was the one who was unafraid. Nothing to be scared of, not never. *Rung seventy-nine:* Or maybe I could dress up like Halloween and hide in some secret spot

after I lead them back there, leaving them lost and afraid. I could scare the piss out of them. I'd show them who the pussy was. *Rung ninety-three*: I wanted that shit smirk on Teddy's face to melt into sheer fright. Something deep down wanted to watch his face change. Make his heart sink. They wouldn't mess with me then. *Rung 110*: And I'd get *Don Quixote* back. I'd return it to Barringer and have my own adventure to tell her about. She'd be proud, and I'd be brave-- the only kid in town who knows what's really in the woods.

“The woods,” I said aloud and looked up.

I hadn't noticed the growth around me getting taller, the grass and weeds sprouting up between each rung a little thicker than the last. I turned around and saw the apartment lights behind me, barely able to make out any details of my building, an unfamiliar silhouette from where I stood in the field. Facing forward again, I took the sheet off and gazed at the woods. I was in the middle of the field, and the dark around me had a kind of weight about it that I'd never felt before. The tracks led into a black hole. The mouth of the forest. The darkness there in front of me wasn't just darkness. It was an impenetrable void. The throat of some ungodly monster. The kind of black that makes you dizzy, makes you forget where you are. Run. Run fast. Flee, Jonah, flee. I dropped my ghost costume and sprinted through the field, slipping back up the bank, and doubling back to the road. It wasn't just a feeling; it was a knowing: I *knew* something was behind me, chasing me. I darted to my apartment, hopped the stairs two at a time, and slammed the door shut behind me, gasping for breath. I closed the blinds and turned on the lights and lay in my bunk.

I had trouble getting to sleep that night. Every creak of the floorboards around me, every car that passed from the road, every tiny shiver of the building was magnified in the darkness I had felt. So much for being brave.

I dreamed that I was floating like a baby in the womb, wrapped in blackness and warmth, unsure if my eyes were open or closed. In the dream, I knew I was the only one alive. I was all that existed. And I was content just floating there in nothingness, until a speck of light emerged from a distance. It grew bigger, and as I squinted, it got closer and closer. It was a piercing light, and it went through me. It interrupted and overwhelmed my nothingness, and I screamed in anger and in fear.

I woke and heard a train whistle from a long way off. I knew Cole wasn't home, couldn't hear his breathing above me. He was with Marie still. Making a blowie, I thought. But somebody was there. I heard noises in Moms' room. Muffled sounds and heavy thuds like she was moving furniture or hanging from her rickety fan. Little low groans and pants, like two deaf kids in a wrestling match. Then I felt the room begin to vibrate softly. Heard the dishes in the kitchen clink together. A moan from Moms' room. Another whistle from the tracks. The train was passing. I tiptoed into the living room and peeked between the blinds. I saw the train chug on into the woods across the field where I had earlier stood as a ghost, and I counted the cars one by one as if they were sheep leaping from the city into the unknown. I counted as the house shook. The TV wobbled on its stand. The table in the kitchen rattled against the wall. I counted until my eyes got

heavy and the room got still again, and I quit hearing the sounds from Moms' room. I thought I saw a white vapor float upwards from the distance.

8.

...Our daily bread...

I got up the next morning and saw Cole passed out in the top bunk with his arm draped over the wooden railing. My eyes were stuck together crusted with sleep, and I rubbed them with my knuckles and yawned as I stumbled into the living room. I was on my way to the bathroom when I noticed something strange. The TV was on. The morning news, the anchorman's disconcerted, monotonous voice. I whipped around and saw a greasy, older man with a scruffy beard sitting on our couch. He was already staring at me, grinning something coy, sipping out of Moms' coffee cup.

“What's your name, little man?” he asked.

I hesitated. “Wile E. Coyote.”

“Guess that makes me Roadrunner, then,” he replied, taking a sip from the mug and staring at me from over the rim. “I'm a friend of your momma.”

He turned back to the TV and lit a cigarette. I kept staring at the stranger, made sure he felt me analyzing him through the gray clouds pluming from his mouth. Rarely did we have company in our house. And Moms hadn't brought a guy over in forever. Last one she brought home made the mistake of calling her a bitch in front of Cole. Dude left with a broken nose and a few cracked ribs, and we never saw him again.

“You know Moms?” I asked the stranger.

“Mm-hm. Sure do. Pretty good, actually.” He looked back at her room from the couch. The door was closed.

“Is she home?”

“Yep, but don’t bother her,” he said in a whisper. “She was up late last night.”

Wink.

I took a wiz in the bathroom, trying to make sense of what was happening. I needed to wake Cole. On my way back to my room, I saw that the man hadn't moved from the couch. The anchorman was still blabbering about the rising number of break-ins in the downtown area.

“S.S.D.D.,” the man said, shaking his head at the tube. “The news has a way of being yesterday's, today's, and tomorrow's news, don't it, Jonah?” he asked without looking at me.

“You know me?”

He inhaled. “I know all about y’all.” Exhaled. “Your momma talks about y’all all the time.” Inhaled. “And that brother of yours is damn near famous.” He looked at me, and his eyes were a vivid blue, like in the pictures I'd seen of the ocean when the day is bright and the water closest to the beach is almost clear. Exhaled.

“Are you gonna jank us?” I asked him.

“Am I gonna what?”

“Swoop on us.”

The smoke burned my eyes. He laughed and kept watching, kept sipping from Moms' cup, kept puffing and blowing the smoke into the room, letting his ashes fall into the carpet and settle between the couch cushions. A fire was bound to break out. Several of his fingernails were a dull yellow color, and under almost each of them was a layer of grime. “Listen, Wile E.,” he said over his shoulder, “Grab me a bowl or a glass or somethin’ to put this cig in, would ya?”

I ignored him and went to my room, shutting the door. “Hey, Cole,” I quietly called, putting on my school clothes. Cole mumbled and crawled out of the top bunk.

Then he looked at me funny and asked, “You been smoking?”

I shook my head. “Naw, not me,” I said and pointed to the living room.

“What the--”

Cole opened the door and got tense, puffing up his chest. He was tall and lean, but you could see his veins and his taut muscles underneath his skin as he flexed in the doorway. He'd played basketball long as I could remember. Even in the off-season, he always found somewhere to play-- with the white kids on the West side or the black kids downtown or by himself in the street, always dribbling in the house, spinning the ball around in the halls at school. He could dunk by the time he was a freshman. And when he wasn't hooping, he was working out. He was toned, quicker and stronger than most seventeen year olds, not to mention about a head taller. He pretty much hated when anyone was at our apartment. Even the people he hung around rarely ever came into our house. So his first reaction towards the stranger on our sofa that morning was less than hospitable.

“You can't smoke that shit in here,” Cole said in his deepest voice.

I poked my head out from behind him, my pants half-on. Cole hated to be disrespected more than anything else in the entire world. Except maybe police.

“You must be Cole,” the man said smiling, eyeing him up and down. His teeth were perfectly white, but crooked in his mouth, like dented guardrails along the interstate. “Heard a lot about you. My name's Finn,” he said with a wave. “Glad to finally meet ya in person.”

“You got about ten seconds to get your white trash ass outta my house--”

“Whoa, whoa, buddy, slow down. Take 'er easy. I come in peace,” Finn said through his smoke, getting up from the sofa. He wore sweatpants and a wife beater tank top. He was as tall as Cole, maybe a bit taller, and a little bit thicker too. And hairier. A trail from his beard disappeared down into his chest.

“Said he's Moms' friend,” I whispered to Cole.

Cole's fists clinched tighter, and they locked eyes. “So you think just 'cause you're fuckin' her that you can stay here and watch our TV, talk to my brother, smoke in our house?”

Finn lifted his hands in protest, “Colton, you got it all wrong, son. I don't want no trouble. First of all, this ain't a house. It's an apartment. And second, me and your momma, we're just--”

“Don't call me by my name. You don't know me. And you damn sure wont call me 'son' again.”

I honestly thought Cole was going to kill him. But then there was a loud *ding*. “Ah,” Finn exclaimed going into the kitchen. “The biscuits are ready.” He eyed Cole as he put on Moms' cooking apron and mitt and opened the oven. “I know y'all are late for school, but I made some breakfast if ya want any.”

Cole went back into our room and began getting ready, but I crept into the kitchen. I watched Finn as I slowly moved towards the plate, like a dog warily sniffing scraps from a stranger's hand. “Go ahead, Jonah,” he said. “They ain't poisoned. I swear on my Great Granddaddy.” I sat at the table with him and scarfed two down while Cole threw on his clothes.

Then Marie walked in the door. "Something smells good in here," she said.

Finn turned around from the table where he sat across from me and whistled.

"Well hell-far, sweetheart, ain't you about the cutest thing I ever saw," he said getting up from his seat and extending his hand to Marie.

She stood still and looked at me. I shrugged; then she looked back at Finn and took his hand.

He bent down and kissed the top of her fingers. I was real glad Cole didn't see that. Then he said, "Lorna told me her son had a little girly, but she didn't say nothing 'bout an angel."

"Uh--" Marie started with her mouth hanging open. "Cole?" she called.

Cole stormed out of our room and said, "Come on," without acknowledging Finn, who was still staring at Marie as he chewed slowly and loudly. I crammed two biscuits in my jacket pockets and followed after them out the door.

"Don't forget your backpack," Finn called.

"Prick," Cole mumbled under his breath and slammed the door shut.

"Y'all have a good day, now. See y'all soon. Great to meet ya," Finn yelled through the door.

This went on for a long time, until it could go on no more. Finn remained in our apartment, our house, for several evenings, evenings that often led into mornings.

Moving furniture around with Moms, no doubt. He was there enough for the walls of our

apartment to suck in the cigarette fume so that it reeked of him even when he wasn't there. We remembered him when we saw the brown cigarette ends floating in the toilet, ash stuck in the sink to dishes and cups, lodged between the fibers of the living room carpet. Finn never cooked breakfast again.

And night after night, I was haunted by frightening and wonderful dreams of the trains and the forest and the quarry, the fires of Carbondale and the dark waters of the mysterious quarry sheltered away from the world in a canopy of green growth, waiting for the promised trip with Teddy.

9.

...*And forgive us our trespasses...*

Along with the ash and odor of Finn, an anxiety settled in the floors and walls of our apartment, and home became less and less like home. What I knew was changing. My thoughts became scattered and dislocated, and even when my body and mind grew exhausted, my foot didn't quit tapping. My voice even began cracking, and I was sprouting hair all over the place. I chewed on the collars of my shirts and ground my teeth when I slept. My grades during these few weeks dropped considerably. I couldn't even read my comic books, much less *Moby Dick*. Every time I looked out of the living room window, the woods seemed to stare back at me, into me; only it had no eyes, only a mouth, deep and dark with trees like crooked teeth, and I stared right back into them, gazed at them for unknown amounts of time. Five minutes seemed to be five years, and hours seemed to slow down into minutes, and I'd begin to feel as though the mouth of the forest was laughing at me. *Scared little child*, I heard it say. I felt the rumble of its laughter when the trains passed by our apartment, and I smelled Finn's cigarettes like gasoline before a blockbuster explosion. Curiosity, wonder, and mystery peaked in my mind and pulled on my heart until I finally decided: I would go to school the next day and tell Teddy I was going to the woods, with or without them. I would demand back *Don Quixote* and return it to Miss Barringer, then give her my farewells in case I never returned. Too long I had been drowning in the silence of the empty apartment. Nothing mattered anymore except finding out what was in the woods, and even if nothing was back there, I had to know what the nothing was.

I packed two of Cole's Gatorades, an extra hoodie, some wool socks, and a pair of sweats in my backpack the next morning as we got ready for school. I noticed a hole in one of my shoes for the first time, and I put on an extra pair of socks. I hadn't been hiking before, but I figured it'd be colder in the woods than it was in the city.

The autumn of '93 was the coldest I remember. So much so, that locals threw up air-quotes when they talked about "the fall." Finn was either gone or still sleeping in Moms' room that morning. Thinking of what else I might need on my excursion, I took the red emergency flashlight from the drawer in the kitchen and tucked it into my bag while Cole was still in the shower. I heard the water in the bathroom shut off as Marie knocked on the door and entered. "Morning, Jonah," she said as I zipped up my bag.

"Hey, Marie."

"Cole still sleeping?"

Then the bathroom door opened and Cole stood in the threshold with a silly grin on his face wearing only a towel. "No, he's awake," Cole said, eyeing her with one eyebrow lifted. Steam poured out of the doorway, and he took Marie's hands and pulled her into the bathroom. They shut the door, and I heard the water come back on.

Seeing my opportunity, I thought of what else I could use in the forest. If there really were cannibals or monsters or crazies back in there, I would need something to defend myself. I went back into our room and ransacked our desk. I found the Infidel. It was light in my hands as I pushed the button on the handle. The knife shot out with a *slink* and I saw a distorted reflection of myself in the blade. I hit the button again, and the blade retracted. "You already dressed?" Cole asked, scrubbing his hair with our towel.

I whipped around startled, and nodded, leaving our room.

Marie and I sat at the kitchen table as we waited for Cole to put on his clothes.

“How'd you sleep?” she asked me. I felt the knife in my jeans' pocket.

“On my back,” I answered.

“Smartass. J, has Cole said anything to you about the winter formal coming up at school?”

“What's that?”

“It's a dance. They're having it in the gym after the basketball game.”

“I haven't heard him talk about it. When is it?”

“Soon. After Christmas, I think.”

“I can't picture Cole dancing.”

“What?” she asked, and her dark eyebrows lifted into thin arches. “He's a great dancer. You never seen em dance before?”

“Nah, not really.”

“Well, he'll have to show you. Maybe even teach you a thing or two. Won't be long before you're going to dances yourself.”

“I dunno.” I took my pencil from behind my ear and doodled on the table with the eraser side.

“Whatcha mean you dunno?” she asked. “Dances are one of the only good things about high school.”

“But don't you gotta have a date?”

“You don't have to, but most people try to find somebody to go with. You worried about dating, Jonah?” I could feel my cheeks getting warm.

“I guess I never really think about it. I don’t really know any girls. Except you and Moms. And Miss Barringer. She’s the librarian.”

Marie laughed. “Oh, I heard ‘bout her. Heard you might got a li’l crush.”

“What? No.” Was it that obvious, I thought.

“So you into them older women, huh, Jonah?”

I changed the subject: “Why you wanna go to the dance anyway? I mean, you don’t go to school anymore.”

Marie's face changed, drooped for a second, and she took three or four quick blinks. Then it went back to normal and she said a bit irritably, “Yeah, so? I can still go to a stupid dance if I get asked.”

“You miss school?” I asked her.

“Sometimes,” she said, her voice growing distant. “Not the homework and reading or that shit. But being with people my own age-- friends, you know? I miss the sound of the lockers and hearing about who's going with who. I miss ditchin’ class and going to the Burger King across the street. Just kid stuff, I guess. But I ain’t no kid, J, not no more. I got work and bills, gotta take care of Nanna or nobody else will.”

“At least you get paid,” I said, trying to cheer her up.

“Not enough. Anyways, I'd take homework over selling shoes any day.”

That reminded me. I lifted my foot onto the table and showed her the hole in my shoe. “I think I need some new shoes, Marie.”

“I’ll see if I can hook you up,” she said. Then she called, “Colton Blair, you go back to sleep or what?”

Cole came out of our bedroom. “Naw, I’m just looking for my knife. I know I put it in the drawer last night—I mean, I think I did. You seen it, Jonah?”

“Nope,” I said, staring at the eraser marks on the table.

“You’re gonna be late. You can look when you get back tonight,” Marie told him.

“I feel naked without it.”

Marie had to open the shoe store that morning, so on her way to the mall she gave me and Cole a ride in Nanna’s Buick. On the way, Cole asked me, “Yo, J, you got lunch money this week?”

“Nah,” I answered from the backseat. I was debating on whether I should ditch class early and go to the woods or just go after. I figured I’d be going alone in any case.

“Here,” Cole said, handing me a wadded five-dollar bill and a few ones. “That enough?”

“Yeah, I still got the meal voucher, too,” I lied.

In the rearview mirror, I could see Marie’s eyes and her paper-thin eyebrows. They still carried that little hint of sadness I’d seen at the table that morning.

“Cole,” I said, “I never knew you could dance.”

He laughed. “I mean, I ain’t no Michael Jackson. Just a little bump ‘n’ grind, for the ladies.”

“You going to that winter formal?” I asked.

He and Marie exchanged glances. “I dunno yet. We’ll see.” Then Marie pulled up to Lonsdale Middle School. “We got late practice tonight, Jonah, so I ain’t gonna get

back 'til late. Buy yourself some food on the way home if you need to. I get paid this week so I can spot you some more paper if you need it.”

He always talked about getting paid, and it was only strange because he didn't have a job.

The first two periods went by faster than usual, and I didn't hear a word any of my teachers said because I was rehearsing what I was gonna say to Teddy when I saw him next. “Today, fat-ass,” I pictured myself telling him in the hall in front of an audience of students. “I'm going to the woods today. You can come if ya want, but I understand if you're scared. I'll letcha know if there's a quarry or not, and if I don't come back, then I guess I got eaten alive. In the meantime, gimme back my book, you shithead. Give me *Quixote!*” The scenario unfolded in my head as I went to my locker. He'd try to hit me, and I'd dodge it and take him down with a combo of punches and kicks. *BAM* and *POW* sprang up with each strike like a scene from a comic book. I'd take my book, Barringer's prized possession, from his bag as he lay bleeding in the hallway, and everyone would cheer for me, the underdog, as I finally gave this scrub what had been coming to him. When I got through with him, he'd have a reason to walk with a limp.

I lost track of time in my daydream, my head in my locker, and the third period bell rang. I grabbed my math book and ducked in the bathroom on the way to class.

While I was in mid piss, little Frankie, the one they called Pockets, came up and leaned

on the urinal next to me. He didn't pee, but instead, kept looking at me. I grew severely uncomfortable and nearly leaked all over myself.

Then I heard a familiar voice behind me: "What up, Gina?"

I zipped up and turned around. Teddy and the kid with diamond earrings stood behind me. I pushed down the feeling in my gut, the one that cornered animals must get. "Oh, you know, just pissing," I said.

A skimpy piece of white, rolled-up paper dangled from Teddy's lips. It was smaller and more crudely designed than a normal cigarette. The kid with the studs handed Teddy a lighter, and the smoke smelled something like fresh skunk when he lit it. It was a familiar odor, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it at the time. Cole just kept coming to mind. I remember wishing he'd been there; not to save me, but rather, to watch me use his switchblade in a way that'd make him proud. I fingered the *Infidel* in my pocket, my fingers tapping against the outside of my pants.

"Ain't seen you around much lately. You been sick or something?" Teddy asked, passing the joint to Earrings, then to Pockets.

"Naw, I been here."

"You're like a damn ghost," Pockets said, still leaning on the wall with the urinals behind me. "We been lookin' for you."

"Yeah?" I asked. "I been looking for you too, Teddy." And I stepped forward. I was about eye-level with his nipples.

Teddy again took the skimp and sucked hard at the end. "You ask Cole if he remembers me? Ask if he knows my cousin?" he said, blowing a thick plume of smoke down into my face.

“Yeah,” I coughed, puffing out my chest like I’d seen Cole do. “He didn’t remember your name though. Just remembered you were s’posed to be in high school by now. ‘Fat white dude,’ I think is how he described you. Didn’t say nothing ‘bout your cousin, neither,” I said, waving off the smoke.

Earrings didn’t say anything. He barely even moved. Just looked at me, his eyes red like a devil’s. This kid with the studs in his ears—I never learned his name, still don’t know it-- his silence was the kind like he was hiding something. The bathroom door swung open, and a kid I didn’t know entered and headed for one of the stalls. Earrings blocked his path and shook his head without saying a word, and the kid turned back around and left without any protest. It was a malicious silence Earrings had about him.

“You said you was looking for me,” Teddy said.

“Yeah,” I answered as I began to tap my foot on the ground. “What’d you think of *Don Quixote*?”

“Of what?”

“My book you borrowed.”

Pockets laughed behind me against the wall. No expression from Earrings.

“Oh,” Teddy started with that shitty smile, “the picture book. I hadn’t got around to reading it yet, but the pages make decent rolling papers.”

What they’d been smoking was nearly completely gone; Teddy held it between his thumb and index fingernails, and extended it towards me. “You wanna hit?”

“No, I already got smokers’ lungs.” They all chuckled except for Earrings. Teddy dropped the paper and put it out on the floor. “You been thinkin’ at all about the woods,

Gina-- what we talked about? Let's dive in there and see what's what. Let's write it all down. Fuck books. We could write our own story."

"I'm ready to go when you are."

Earrings gave Teddy a look, then glanced back to me, then left the bathroom.

"Well get your shit, li'l dude. We're going today. What do you got for fourth period?"

"Mrs. Lee," I answered.

"English!" Pockets exclaimed with a cough. "Good thing you already know how to speak it. You ever skipped class before?"

"Who hasn't?" I said coolly, even though I never had.

"We'll prop the back door behind the cafeteria open for you," Teddy told me.

"Sneak out through the courtyard across Fulton Street. You know where Moe's Deli is right there?"

"Yeah," I said. "Fourth period?"

"Yeah. The first bell after third period. Don't make us wait, homie. We dunno how long we'll be back there, so we need all the daylight we can get. Feel me?"

I nodded my head. As they headed towards the bathroom door, I called, "Hey, for real though, you got my book?"

The door closed without an answer, and my head was light. Get through math, I thought, get through third period, fractions aren't that hard-- only a piece of something that's a part of something. Simple enough. I washed my hands and looked at myself in the mirror. Little red veins in my eyeballs snaked their way towards my pupils, and my eyes were dry. Finally, I thought, it's time. *Just get through this period.* As I splashed water on

my face, I realized I didn't care what was in the forest. I was curious, sure, but I didn't have many expectations. What I mean is, it didn't matter what we found back there or didn't find, if any of the stories were true or not. What mattered was going. What mattered was being somewhere else, anywhere other than the musty halls of this school, the broken streets of the East side, the emptiness of apartment 802. I wanted to enter the woods and roam until I got lost in them. Maybe never even come back. To be anywhere that was not Carbondale became my heart's greatest desire. I was ready.

When I exited the bathroom, Tom was posted up against the lockers beside the door. "Jonah," he said, almost in a whisper.

"What up, Tom? You hear about the quarry? We're going back in the woods today," I said excitedly.

"Yeah, I heard. Listen. You maybe oughtta think about not going."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Don't you wanna know what's back there?"

"There's nothing back there, man."

"There's nothing here, neither, Tom. You scared or something?"

"Yeah, actually. I am. I got a bad feeling, you know?"

"No, I don't know. Ain't you tired of doing the same thing every day, seeing the same crap all the time? It'll be good to do something different. An adventure, a quest—right?"

"Do something different here, man. Where it's safe. We can just go see a movie or something. My pops has the *Robo-cop* movies. You ever seen *Robo-cop*? We can watch

‘em at my house after school if you want. They got all kindsa blood and guts in em, and I think you even see a few titties.”

“We can watch ‘em sometime. But not today. I gotta go, man. I see those woods every day. I gotta go in them at least once. I gotta do something different. I'm going crazy, man. You dunno what it's like. I watch TV every day and see all these people having crazy times, and I never even had one of my own. Watching people live is different than actually living, you know?” I chewed on my shirt collar.

“Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you. Just keep your eyes open. Teddy and them might be up to something. He don't like you much. Well, really he just don't like your brother.”

“Lotta people don't like my brother, Tom,” I said, forcing a laugh. “And even if I didn't wanna go, I gotta get that book back that he took from me. It ain't mine. It's my friend's, and it's real special to her, and I gotta get it back. I think if I go with them, he'll hand it over. It'll all be fine, Tom. You worry too much. You should come with, you know? It'd probly be good for you.”

“I don't think so,” Tom said staring at the hole in my shoe.

“Listen,” I started, checking to make sure nobody was around. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the switchblade. “Even if they do try to pull something slick, I can take care of myself.” I pushed the button, and *zing*, the blade shot up.

“Shit,” Tom said. “Just be careful, man.”

“I'll see you tomorrow and tell you all about it. I gotta get to class.”

We parted ways, and I ran to math, the *Infidel* in my pocket bumping against my leg as I scurried off to class.

10.

...As we forgive those...

After the bell rang, I snuck out of the back door behind the cafeteria and met the goons on the other side of Fulton Street. “Do I need to go grab more supplies?” I showed what was already in my bag.

“Supplies?” Teddy asked, flicking a cigarette into the street.

“Like, uh, another flashlight maybe, some water, you know-- hiking stuff.”

Little Frankie snickered.

“Shut up, Pockets, he's gotta point,” Teddy said. “You didn't even think of that, did you?”

“Naw, I guess not,” Pockets chuckled.

Earrings just kept looking down the street. I felt like every car that passed would screech to a halt, the driver getting out and hauling our sorry asses back to class. I didn't care, I'd book it to the woods from the street if I had to. Nothing could stop me at this point. Cannibals, demons, ghosts-- you name it. I was determined, with or without the goons.

Teddy said, “I don't think where we going is too far down the tracks. We should make it there and be back to school before anybody even notices. No need for them supplies this trip.”

We ducked down an alley behind Moe's Deli, and I felt the gentle push of the breeze glide between the buildings and through the hole in my shoes. I shivered as we walked briskly, snaking in and out of the alleys, over fences, even through them. We had

to cross from one lot to another, but to do so without being seen, we had to get through a thousand-foot-tall chain-linked fence. Earrings took out a blade bigger than the Infidel and sawed a hole big enough for us all to squeeze through, even Teddy.

“Shit,” Teddy said as one of the sawed links tore a hole in his white T-shirt.

I pulled my hood over my head. We were nearing my apartment, The Lion’s Den, and for a moment, I wondered if they knew where I lived. Cole kept few friends, and even fewer had the pleasure of entering our home. I doubted these goons knew where I lived. Then the horrifying thought struck me: What if they'd followed me home before, been tracking me, knew my exact building number and which door was mine, tracing me all this time. What if they were gonna make me watch them jank our shit, break Moms coffee mug, rip up our tapes and kick in our TV, what if they were leading me like Christ to the cross and forced me to watch as they tore out every page of every book I owned or borrowed. But as soon as I started getting antsy at these thoughts there behind the cloak of my hood, I realized we had not only passed my apartments, but also we had passed the train tracks.

“Ain’t the woods that way?” I pointed towards.

“We’re going a different way,” Pockets said in front without turning back.

“Don’t worry li’l dude. You ever heard the saying 'Nut up'?” Teddy asked.

“Naw,” I shook my head. I thought my nuts were supposed to come down, not up. I noticed a cop car parallel parked on the street beside Lion’s Den. I had seen it there for a few days, maybe even weeks. I knew it was supposed to make me feel safer, but Cole's skepticism had bled into my heart, and the thought of police made me angry, standoffish, wary. N.W.A. said “Fuck Tha Police” in 1988. Cole’d said it long as I’d been alive.

Earrings spoke up from the front of the pack again, "We're getting into the woods now," he said.

"What? This ain't-- Did he say the woods? Hey, yo, but the forest is back there, right?"

"Not that forest, man. We're in the East Dale, now. Everybody knows they call it the woods. Get in too deep, ain't no getting out, you feel me?" Teddy said. Teddy's accent was so strained, like he was trying to be calloused and hard, but I could tell from the strain that he was not accustomed to such "forests," and that the deep East was as foreign to him as blowies. I imagined Teddy in a big house with both his parents, and him in his room practicing his ridiculous walk in the mirror of his walk-in closet. I sensed fear in him, in them, sensed it like a pit-bull, like Michael Meyers.

Also, I lived in East Carbondale, and nobody called it "the woods." I was travelling with a group of tourists.

We kept walking East past my building, past the lot and down the street with the cop car, past the K-Mart and Kenjo's, deeper East than I'd been in a long time. I remembered sometimes seeing Cole take strolls down this way and disappear, in my mind at least, into a thick fog beside the naked dead trees lining the sidewalks, the fire-hydrants and squared-off fenced-in houses lining the walkways. I remembered Cole the way I remembered the East. But the group kept walking, mostly in silence. There was some short banter about Barringer's big chest, which prodded me to ask again, "Yo Teddy... My book?" which apparently killed the mood and the conversation simultaneously, and nobody talked anymore.

Frankie sucked on his inhaler. Teddy's strut turned into a kind of waddle the longer we walked. Earrings led us on the trek, and he was the most confident of us all, the most fearless. He didn't only mean-mug me and peers he passed in the hallways at Lonsdale; but he mean-mugged the damn cats running across the street, the fucking butterflies floating from the yards we passed. I wished Tom and Tino could've been there to see it.

The streets seemed to get narrower and the traffic lights appeared to grow slimmer; the air got cooler, and the ground at my feet cracked in different directions like veins and arteries. The houses beside us looked older as we walked. I noticed they grew closer together, more church-like, more haunted-looking. Chain-linked fences lined the yards, and cars began to pass us less frequently.

"There it is," Earrings said, pointing ahead to the biggest, oldest, most haunted-looking, decrepit house we had seen thus far. Boo fucking Radley, I thought.

"There what is?" I asked. "I thought we were going to the woods."

Teddy turned on his heel quickly and grunted through his teeth, "One: we are in the woods, like we told you, you fucking idiot-- keep your voice down and quit whining..." then he just stared at me.

"Was there a two?" I whispered back.

Pockets chimed in, "Yeah, Gina. Two: we're going to this house-- it's a friend of mine's-- to get some 'supplies' for the real trip."

"Oh."

Teddy nodded to Pockets, and we walked towards the house. My guts had always spoken loudly when something was off, and then, they screamed from the pits, *Flee*,

Jonah, flee. But I did not. I needed my book, Barringer's book. I needed *Quixote*, and I knew it was in Teddy's backpack. And if I needed to prove myself to these goons, so be it. I'd also prove myself to Cole. And myself. If anything, this was a practice run. A test trial. If I could venture East into the faux-forest of the deepest parts of the ghetto, then surely I could make my way back into the real woods behind the Den where the trains disappeared. All in time. Swallow the fear. Bury it.

We opened a squeaking black iron fence door and proceeded up the walkway to the front porch of a weary looking house that appeared to be caving in past its frame. What had once been yellow siding were chipping off the place, revealing the dull gray color underneath the paint. I looked around the yard, the brown grass, still following behind the others who crept more cautiously than before. Wood beams framing the porch like bared teeth bent outwards towards the street. We walked up the steps. Everything seemed water-logged, age-logged, abandoned. An old plastic porch swing hung from rusted chains on the end of the porch. A panel of plywood had been nailed over the glass window of the front door. Earrings didn't knock. He turned the handle, jiggled, but it was locked.

"Shit," Teddy said.

"It wasn't locked this morning. You got any kinda card on you?" Earrings asked the group. I searched my pockets, pretending to know what he was up to. Everybody shook their heads.

"Shit," Teddy said again.

"I have my library card," I said, which I would not have blurted if I had known why Earrings asked the question.

“Lemme see it,” he commanded. With one hand, Earrings tried to pry back the wooden slat that covered the entrance door window. With his other, he cupped his fingers over his eyes, trying to peer into the glass.

I handed him my library card.

“Yo, quit tapping your foot,” Teddy whispered. I didn't. I couldn't.

Pockets took out his inhaler again.

Earrings slid my card between the door where the chipped bronze latch hung loosely by the handle. It slid between the crack of the door and its threshold, and he jimmied the thing until we heard a snap, then a creak, and the door came ajar. Earrings handed back to me my card. It was frayed at the end. “Least it's good for something,” he whispered.

I turned to Pockets. “Don't you got keys—”

“Yeah, I lost em,” he interrupted. “C'mon,” he said and brushed past me.

I could swear the porch swing began to rock gently, back and forth, as we entered the house. I was tired of feeling like the dumb girl at the beginning of every horror movie I'd ever seen.

We entered the old house, one by one, single file. The floorboards underneath us creaked as we tip-toed inside.

“Shut the door,” Teddy whispered. I looked back and saw the dim noon light like ash splashing off the porch and up onto my feet.

“But--” I started.

“Do it.”

And I closed the door. The entryway to the house was shrouded in a haze of orange and crimson, like liquefied rust. The floorboards underneath our feet vibrated softly, even when we stood still. It was something below us, like the pulse of the house, like a body buried alive in its own coffin, muffled from the basement. The hallway in front of us was bare of pictures, and what furniture we could see was covered in dusty sheets. I didn't believe in ghosts, still don't, but I began to reconsider then as I looked around the place and remembered Halloween night.

“This way,” Earrings whispered, heading for the stairway.

We followed him up the staircase.

“Are the supplies up here, guys?” I started. “We'll probably need some water, and maybe like, another flashlight, or something for the woods. I heard it's darker in the forest, I mean, when we go a-after this,” I stuttered.

They ignored me. I didn't know darkness like this. It became a feeling and not just an aesthetic in this house as we climbed the stairs. We reached the second floor, and I was breathing harder. But I didn't notice it at first. Everyone was breathing harder. Frankie pulled his inhaler from his jacket pocket and gave it the Darth Vader again. Earrings cracked open the first door on the right. It was a bedroom. We followed him inside. The gray sun bled through the cracks of cardboard that covered the single window of the room. There were newspapers, some clothes piled in a garbage bag against the wall, silverware that shone newer than anything else in the house, an old blanket or two, a dusty lamp, a Bible, a few lighters, some old magazines, cigarette butts and empty forties scattered about randomly, covering the floor. A set of twin closet doors was in the wall directly across from where we entered. It kinda reminded me of Mom's wardrobe. Then

we all turned, and I saw the mattress in the far corner. It had no frame, a single mattress, no bigger than my own, no sheets. Draped across it was a body, a man's body face down, limbs sprawled out in all directions and his long black hair sprawled down his back, dangling down to the floor. His blue and purple arm was draped over the edge of the mattress and had a belt cinched just above his right elbow, his fingers hovering stiffly above the floor.

“Just like I found his dumb ass,” Earrings whispered.

“Who is that?” I began in a panic. “You know him? Y’all know him?” Then I turned the dude and began to walk towards his bed, screaming, “Hey, mister! Hey, dude!” I turned around and faced the crew in the middle of the room. “Whose house is this?” I asked as they eyed me. “I know it ain’t yours, Frankie. Y’all lied to me. What do you want? I wanna go back to--”

“Get him,” Teddy said to the others.

“Wha-- no--” I began to whimper. My knees folded. My feet caved under me. I had heeded the beckon of my gut too late, and there was no more time to flee. It was like one of those dreams where you watch yourself, tell yourself even, to run! Run! But your legs transform into Jell-O right when you need them to be strong, and you watch yourself sink into the ground like quicksand.

Earrings and Pockets grabbed me, constricted my flailing arms, and Teddy closed the bedroom door. Then Teddy set down his backpack. He pulled a roll of duct tape out. “Only supplies we needs...” he muttered.

I began to cry. They wrapped the tape around my head, covering my mouth, then over my eyes. Then they bound my arms together and threw me in the closet behind the

double doors. I heard Teddy over my own cries, “Your brother Cole-- that motherfucker-- your bro's the reason my cousin is locked up right now. You know my cousin raised me? He raised me good. He was good. And Cole recruited him. He was working with Cole—for Cole—that fucking rat! So now your rat brother’s gonna know what it's like to have his fam locked up, too...”

I cried and whimpered underneath the tape. I tried to tell him I didn’t know what he was talking about. Cole was gonna marry Marie and was about to play college basketball. We weren’t crooks or junkies or peddlers or grifters or hustlers. I was trying to say that he had it all wrong, but all the sounds were stifled by the duct tape secured across my face.

“Shhh-- Quiet little dude.” Teddy started. “Can you hear them in the basement? It’s the junkies. And they are fiending right now. If they hear your li’l ass moaning, who knows what they’d do to you. And they’re way worse than the cannibals in the quarry.”

Then Teddy closed the wardrobe, and it was complete darkness.

Muffled behind the door, I heard Pockets ask, “Yo-- Hey, Teddy-- we ain't really gonna leave him here, right? Just scare him real good, right?”

No response-- none I could hear, but I assumed Teddy just flashed his death eyes. And then I heard the duct tape being unraveled again around the closet handles. “Yo, J--” Teddy called from outside the doors, “You ain't passed out yet, right? Listen, I almost forgot about your picture book. *Don Kicks-otee*? Look, if you get outta there before the junkies find you, remember to grab your book...” I heard him unzip his bag and pull something out, then a plop on the mattress, “...I'm gonna leave it with your friend on the bed here. He looks like a reader, too. Y'all should start a book club. Peace out, li'l bitch.”

Footsteps back towards the entrance. Door open then shut. Faint groan of the stairs. Nothing but my own breathing.

I cried. I whimpered. I was no better than a cowering dog. Scout would have eaten through the duct tape; Quixote would have fought off his attackers; White Fang would've never fallen for such a trick in the first place.

I thought of dying. If a body had the ability to turn the switch off, mentally, himself-- I wanted to hit it. Give in. Done for. Hopeless. Alone and lonely. How long would they search for me? Would I be on the back of a milk carton? Would they just give up, assume the cannibals got me? I guess they kinda had. And if they ever did find me, I'd just be a crackle in the static of the late night news as the anchorman said in his anchorman way: "Two bodies. One house. Zero suspects. Crackhead and sixth-grader found dead in abandoned house. Foul play suspected..."

And everyone would think to themselves, "Per usual."

The Newspaper headline would read, "Dead Poet's Society: Junkie, Boy Book Club," and Barringer's book-- if she ever got it back-- would be forever tainted with death.

In the closet, I realized for the first time that I was wet. I'd pissed myself. Barringer's book would be tainted with death and piss. The reporters would have a heyday, and I thought of other headlines.

Anger began to swell inside me. Cole would kill them. And I would die. Moms would cry, maybe a little, but then have another one just like me and start over, probly with Finn. I laid down. I figured dying must be a little bit like being born: you probly don't ever remember either of them, so who cares what people think. I remembered the

picture in our apartment of me in Moms' arms in the hospital bed after I'd just been born-- the one I'd see all those years later at Cole's funeral-- young Cole trying to open my eyes. Why had I not just opened my eyes then? I didn't want to die. Every memory that came to mind there on the floor of the dark house closet, no matter how dark or vague or vivid, only made me want to keep living. A kid can be sad, very sad, even. But a body can't get really depressed until he's 18, right? I think that's the law, or something. So I lay there and lost track of time-- no clocks in the abyss, bound by tape, and I was sad, and I was mad, and I did not want to die. In my duct tape anklets and bracelets, I passed out.

From the closet floor, I dreamed.

In it, I stood gazing out of the big window in my living room waiting for a train. It was late. I was alone, and my apartment was on fire. Everything was in flames all around me. I heard cars exploding outside, people screaming, buildings collapsing. But it was quiet in the living room of our apartment. I was not hot, and I did not choke on the smoke. It smelled of Finn. The carpet had turned black. The couch was down to a charred frame. Fire light reflected off the cracked TV screen which had fallen to the floor beside my feet. I simply stood still, patiently waiting, wearing one of Cole's black shirts that hung to my knees, barefoot and blank-faced, staring out the glass into the woods. The front door opened behind me. I did not turn around, but knew that Moms came in as a faceless silhouette. The pictures melted off the walls. I felt her behind me. She put her bony hands on my shoulders, a ring on each finger, a fresh coat of paint on her nails. I heard the rumble of the earth outside. The screech of tires and sirens. Carbondale set ablaze, crumbling to rubble and ash.

“Jonah,” she whispered.

“We should leave,” I said still, facing the woods.

“We are going to stay.”

“I don't want to burn.”

The room shook. Her hands turned to ash on my shoulders, and I heard a train whistle.

I woke up, still tied and gagged, and I thought of hell and of heaven.

I pushed my tongue against the sticky side of the tape, trying to create some space to breathe from my mouth. It was all dust and must around me, bad smells like bananas right before they turn, and my nostrils were closing up. I pulled hard as I could against my bindings, then tried my best to reach my pocket where I had Cole's Infidel. No use.

The doors to the closet began to shake, and I heard the handles wobbling.

“Shit--” I heard a voice from behind the doors.

I struggled in my bindings, rolling back and forth to loosen the grip of the tape around my limbs and mouth, old clothes hangers dangling over me like riled bats in a cave. I scooted towards the corner of the closet, hoping I was as invisible as I felt. *The junkies might hear you and come for your li'l ass*, I thought. Then the closet doors flung open.

“Sorry, Jonah, but this might hurt,” the voice said—a man’s voice, deep and throaty. And he cut the tape from my mouth, then from my eyes. I squinted through the putrid brightness. I didn’t know how long I’d been there. Five minutes could have been

five hours, or five days— Time gets lost when you're bound and gagged and left with only yourself and the dark of a haunted house on the East Side filled with addicts, the unpredictable, not knowing what they may do to you—Time was lost to me. But as my binds were cut loose and the tape ripped off my eyes, I saw Finn, my savior.

That's when I heard the bed springs behind him. I glanced past Finn into the room where I'd been led. The man with the long hair and belt on his arm was shaking violently, mouth foaming, eyes rolled back into his head, hair covering most of his face. I had woken from my nightmare into a worse one. I screamed.

"Quiet, Jonah," Finn said, ignoring the man behind him. "Now, what happened?" he asked and cut away the last of my bindings, finally my legs loose. He was reaching for my arms when I sprang to my feet, knocking him backwards, and I bolted past him and the junkie.

"Jonah, Wait!" He chased after me and caught me half way down the stairs. "Breathe. Calm down a minute and breathe, bud."

I did. I tried to.

"I saw you walking this way earlier with them boys. I was on the beat. You okay?" He chewed gum as he spoke, which gave his tobacco breath a menthol smell. He looked into my eyes with his hands on my shoulders.

I nodded. I noticed his uniform. His badge. His gun.

"Breathe. You're okay now. Good. My car is outside on the street. Hop in the passenger seat."

"What about the man up there?" I asked looking back towards the hellish room.

“Don't worry, bud. Just get to the car. Your friends are in the back seat. They had your back pack. I put it up front for ya.”

My fucking friends, I thought.

I walked outside onto the porch and saw a cop car idling by the sidewalk. Teddy and Earrings were in the backseat staring at me, hands cuffed behind their backs. I gave them a strong middle finger. They laughed. I looked down and remembered my piss-stained situation.

I waited for Finn on the porch swing. He came out a few minutes later, though it felt like an eternity, and we climbed into his cruiser. He didn't mention the spot on my pants.

“Saw these shit-monkeys haul-ass outta the house,” he nodded towards Teddy and Earrings through the Plexi-glass divider. “And you weren't with ‘em. Figured something dirty went down. They saw me and hid, but I chased down the little one. He told me where they was hiding.”

“Fuckin’ snitch,” I heard Earrings mutter.

Finn banged on the Plexi, “Shut it, back there.” Then he turned back to me as he put the cruiser in drive. “Found ‘em in a tool shed in somebody’s backyard less than a block away. Too small for all three of ‘em to fit in there. So these two sent the little one off to fend for himself. Caught the little dude panting down the sidewalk, sucking on an inhaler like a goddamned addict.”

“How'd you get Pockets to talk?” I asked.

“Who?” Finn asked.

“Pockets-- that's what they call him, but his name's Frankie. They call him Pockets because--”

“You could fit him in your pocket. Got it,” Finn said.

“So he talked?” I repeated.

Finn got stone-faced and answered my question. “So, he wouldn't talk at first. Kept saying he hadn't been to school all day, that he was sick and just out to get some medicine for his asthma or some bullshit. But when I got him in the cruiser, I threatened to cut off his fingers one by one and make him eat the meat off his knuckles if he didn't tell me where you and his partners in crime were.”

“Oh...” I said, tapping my foot on the floorboard and cradling my backpack in my lap to cover the spot.

Finn broke into a big smile at a red light and said, “Naw, bud, I'm just kidding. I put Frankie in cuffs when I caught him. I said I was calling his parents if he didn't talk. He bumped his gums pronto. Told me where you was. Where they was hiding.”

“Fucking snitch,” I said, catching Teddy's eyes in the rearview mirror.

“When he told me where they were,” Finn continued, “I told him if he ever ditched class again, I'd make sure the canines get him next time. Then I sent him back to school. Which is exactly where you're headed.”

The trip back to class was silent after that. I felt Teddy eyeing me in the rearview mirror. My forehead felt hot. We pulled up to Moe's Deli, and Finn unbuckled my seatbelt. “Cross the street and go back in the way you came. Don't say anything. About any of it. This will be our little secret.” And with that he winked and reached across me,

unlocking the passenger door. I turned around to the goons in the backseat and threw them the bird once again.

“Lucky little bitch,” Teddy said. Earrings nudged him.

“Shut the fuck up before I make you stay in big boy jail tonight,” Finn said as he banged the Plexi-glass again. “You'd make some lucky seven-footer named Tyrone the happiest husband in the joint.”

Stepping out of his car, I began to ask, “What's gonna happen to--”

“You ask too many questions, kid. I'll take care of it. They ain't never gonna bother you again.”

I had my doubts. I was closing the door when Finn called to me one last time, “Hey, bud. You might wanna try to wash off in the deli before you head in,” he said, now acknowledging the stain. Snicker from the backseat. Flushed cheeks. “Remember, not a word. Not to nobody. Got it?”

“Got it.” And I shut the door.

I missed all of math class and P.E., but I didn't care. My thoughts were consumed as I traded out my books at my locker in the empty hallway. How did they even know about that house? How long had they plotted against me? I wondered what Teddy had meant about my brother. Why had he called him a snitch? He said multiple things about Cole that made me feel like he knew my brother better than I did.

I could still feel the tape across my mouth, the metallic taste still stuck to my lips. I could still see the convulsing man who wore a belt like a mourning band, hearing the bed springs rattle with his shaking. Even now, I can still see his eyes white against the blackness of the cluttered room. Could still smell Finn's breath, see his badge, see the

congregation of the ghostly-looking furniture watching the entire event unfold in the lonely house. The way I had been led like a sheep to the slaughter. The way I cowered. I was embarrassed of myself. My lack of good instincts. I was no White Fang. No Ishmael. No Quixote.

Damn *Don Quixote*. I had forgotten all about it.

I took off my backpack and double-checked just to be sure, but all that was in there were my piss-stained clothes and a couple of Gatorades. I remembered what I heard Teddy say through the closet door about the book club and how I'd heard him toss Barringer's precious gift onto the junkie. I did not, however remember seeing *Quixote* when I saw the man in his fit after Finn rescued me, when I stormed out of the room. But it was dark-- I couldn't tell, and it wasn't my first priority at the time. Maybe Finn picked it up when he went back into the room. Or, maybe it was still at the house. In the room. On the bed. Maybe the dead man had it? Do the dead read? I punched my locker, which in return opened a few minor cuts across my knuckles. All this, and for what? For the forest. The woods I still hadn't entered. The adventure I was destined for. The tracks I still hadn't followed. I remembered the note Barringer's father had written for her.

...Even when you do not find it, maintain your good Hope (the same I have for you!)...

The message was for the librarian, but her father's words dwelt in my head, too. They're still there, today, and they have grown roots.

I slammed my locker shut and rubbed away the water building in my eyes. My footsteps echoed in the deserted hallway.

I received a tardy in P.E.

The last bell finally rang, and I sprinted the whole way home. Went to the couch, and I pulled a blanket over me. Cole didn't get in until late. Marie had picked him up from practice, and they came barging in, laughing, him with just a wife-beater and sweats on. Marie turned to me, "J Baby, you look like you seen a ghost."

"I need some new shoes," I said, holding my foot up, showing her the worn soles of my current ones, sock wiggling out the front like a worm outside an apple.

"I gotcha," Cole said. "We can go to the mall tomorrow. I'll get us lunch too."

"What about school?" I asked.

"It's Thanksgiving, day after tomorrow. We ain't got school. Extra long weekend, homie"

11.

...Who trespass against us...

I had a dream that night. I think now, it was a dream of heaven and of hell, or maybe a dream more about being torn between the two, one that was recurring. It went like this:

I was in space. I think it was space. It was all black around me, complete space, no light, and I was floating naked save my hiking boots. I mean, I could move my limbs, but there was nothing underneath me, no traction, no gravity, no ground and no sky, just black void, like a baby in the womb. Just floating. I looked beneath me. I saw the Earth. Not a detailed version, more like a globe in a kindergarten room. Then I felt a tug. I felt hot breath on my toes through the boots, up my ankles. I felt claws, rigid fingers, heard hissing below me. I was being pulled downwards into nothingness. I didn't know where I was going, but it was only getting blacker around me. The grip at my feet reached up through my knees. Where I felt one hand before, I felt an army of hands up to my calves, my knees, my thighs, pulling my boots off, yanking at my toes. I felt an immense strength that wanted me to fail. Or to fall, perhaps. An olfactory evil in a stagnant blackness, jerking me towards the darker than dark. I tried to scream, to moan, to squeal, to flail and jerk and toss and turn and jut and move, but I was frozen. My limbs were encumbered, arms and wrists being pulled. I felt fingernails in my skin. I saw the Earth pass. But as I looked up, I saw a mist of grayness. Perhaps a star. I winced, not from the pain of the jagged nails or claws in my soft skin, but from the light of the grayness burning through my retina, though the light was so small. As I was being pulled downwards, and as I

looked upwards, the gray light grew brighter, the gray brightening into a blistering white. I felt the hands around my waist begin to relax their grip, and the gray light above grew bigger, more immense. I felt the light reach down onto my head, on my shoulders, lifting my arms upwards involuntarily. I was being stretched by outer forces, both downwards and up. The down felt familiar. Felt like it was supposed to happen. But this light in my dream, it is unforgettable to the day. It seared and sealed itself my memory-- that is, if memory is the place where dreams are lodged. Stories that you're born with that you can't escape. I was being ripped in half in the dream, and the world was in plain sight. The Light, the gray star above me, nagged, coaxed, tempted, pushed, pulled, dragged, tugged me towards itself, and my body went to it involuntarily. However, the claws at my feet had not ceased, though they had waned in strength; and they yanked me downwards towards themselves into a cosmic abyss. I was being ripped in half with the world in sight. When I felt my body tearing in two, I woke up in the bottom bunk.

“Cole?” I asked. It was still dark outside. No light through the windows, which Cole had covered with an extra bedsheet to further exclude the brightness of the morning.

No answer. I didn't know what time it was. Early or late, I couldn't tell.

“Cole?” I called again.

“Mm?” I heard him mumble through his pillow.

“Do you believe in hell?” I asked.

“Wha--?” he groaned above me.

“Is hell real?”

“Fu... yup.”

“What? For real?” I asked, more alert this time. I spoke over the side of my bed, into the room, so he could hear me better.

“Gotta be,” he grumbled.

“Why? Why would a place like that exist?”

“Cause I’m there now.”

“I’m not playing, Cole.”

I heard him sigh and grunt. “Why you worried about it?”

“Dreams.”

“If there’s hell, there’s gotta be something else, too.”

“Heaven? You mean heaven?”

“Mm-hm.”

“How do you get to heaven?”

“I dunno.”

“Cole. Shit, man, how do you get to heaven?”

“Everybody goes to heaven.”

“No they don’t. How’s there a hell then?”

“People choose to go there.”

“What do you mean? Who would choose hell over heaven?”

“They make hell. People make they own hell. They create it, like art. They design it and decorate their hell, and they choose to live there.”

“Why would people do that?”

“People’s fucked up. People’s hurt. We’re all hell-designers. We all hate home.”

“Why don’t they choose heaven?”

“Nobody knows where they belong. Home ain’t a choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“Damn, J, go back to sleep. Let’s talk in the morning.”

“What do you mean, though, bout home's not a choice?”

Cole grunted. “Heaven is for us. Made for us. It is for us. Has been from the beginning. Satan created hell, and he chose hell. Maybe his looks different than peoples’. But people have a choice in what they do and don’t do in life. Most of the time, they choose hell.”

I’d never assumed my brother was religious. “But that don’t make sense,” I stated.

“Go to bed. I’m gonna get you some new shoes today.”

Hell, I thought. I closed my eyes but didn't sleep. I was thankful for the idea of heaven, though I wondered what my own hell looked like. I'd have to travel back to hell to search for Barringer's book. Then I realized what Cole’d said. “What?”

He began to snore.

That morning before Thanksgiving, I woke Cole up. “Okay,” I said. “Time to go.”

Cole grunted from his bunk.

“We’re gonna miss the bus to the mall,” I said.

“We talked about life and death, heaven and hell, in the middle of the night. And all you can think about is some new shoes?” Cole asked.

“Yeah,” I started, “my toes are getting cold busting outta these kicks. See?” I lifted my foot up to show him and wiggled my digits.

Cole rolled out of bed, hopped down from the top bunk. “Where’s Moms?”

“Snoozing.”

“Time is it?”

“Eight.”

“The mall don’t open until nine.”

“It’ll be open by the time we get there.”

Cole dressed and called Marie. No answer. She was already at work in the mall at the shoe store. Early shift. Before Cole and I left our apartment, he made sure to grab his black backpack. We heard Moms snoring from her room as we left the apartment. We walked to the bus stop.

I followed Cole on the bus and took the aisle seat next to him. The rows were staggered like church pews. We were four stops away. Cole put up his hood and turned up his Walkman, then leaned against the window and closed his eyes. N.W.A. blared through his one good headphone.

As the bus lurched on, I saw a white man sitting across the aisle, one row back. He wore a bowler’s cap and stared at me. I settled back into my seat, but I still felt his eyes. After three stops, I looked back again, and the man still stared towards me. His face was freckled, and a giant wart hung on the end of his nose. He smiled when we made eye contact. “Have fun!” he screamed.

I was used to crazy people in the streets of Carbondale, but crazy people who infiltrated buses—where we normal folks rode—they seemed more malicious just by

being present. I nudged Cole's leg, but he didn't respond. I turned back towards the man in the cap, and he stared at me. "Have fun!" he yelled again.

Everyone the bus ignored him. What is that about people? When we witness someone displaying disturbing behavior in public, we act like we don't see it. Be it in subways, buses, Wal-Mart, etc. When society sees a lunatic, society turns a blind eye. We act like crazy is contagious.

The bus arrived outside its stop by the mall. It halted with the hiss of brakes, and Cole roused awake. He brushed past me into the aisle and edged towards the door. I picked up his backpack from the floor. It was heavy as I slung it over my shoulders. I looked back towards the old man in the cap again, and he winked. Then he slid over to the window seat and began licking the glass. The doors closed behind me when I stepped off the bus, and Cole stretched like a cat. "What kinda shoes you looking for, J?" The bus merged back into the traffic.

"Hiking boots; some that might last a while."

We walked through the automatic doors of the mall entrance. "Hiking boots?" Cole asked. "Where you planning on going, Nature Boy?"

"Just walking to school and stuff. Or if we ever go to the woods. I need something sturdy, you know? Something my toes can't poke out." And I lifted my leg, showed him my toes wiggling outside my shoe.

"Still obsessed with them woods, huh?" Cole yawned. "Yo, thanks for grabbing my pack," he said, nodding towards the backpack I carried. "I totally forgot about it."

I followed him past a coffee stand, past a jewelry store, past a skate shop, and into a shoe store. The shoe store was small and split between women's and men's shoes. On

the left side of the store along the walls, display samples of the women's shoes hung from hooks in the wall. On the right side of the store, the men's shoes did the same. When Cole and I entered, I saw Marie talking with a woman on the left side of the store. Marie was holding a display shoe, an Adidas, and holding it for the other woman to see. The woman was pushing a stroller with a crying baby inside it. Cole pretended he didn't see Marie.

"Look over here, Jonah," he said to me, pointing to a pair of Nikes on the right side of the store. I trekked behind him, trying to hear what Marie was talking about with the woman on the other side of the store. I was interested in how sales worked. How to convince someone to pay for something, convince them they needed something they'd never even heard of. I remembered the infomercials Nanna was addicted to. Cole gravitated towards the basketball shoes and the urban wear. But on the far side of the wall, I saw what I was looking for—the boots.

Marie and the woman met at the cash register in the center of the store, and Marie rang up the woman's total. Marie placed two shoe boxes and a pair of socks into a bag, accepted the woman's cash, and then made change. The baby still whimpered from its stroller. Marie walked around the cashier's counter with the bag. Then she knelt and smiled into the stroller at the crying baby. Marie's eyes got big and she flashed her long lashes, shaking her head back and forth, saying, "Hi there, Princess. Hey, pretty girl." The baby stopped crying. Marie and the woman laughed; then Marie shook her customer's hand, gave her the bag, and the woman left.

"Con artist," Cole said with a smile as Marie approached him.

"I prefer sales-woman," Marie replied.

They hugged. Marie looked over her shoulder towards the back room behind the cashier's desk, the one marked with an "Employees Only" sign over the doorway; then she and Cole kissed beside the wall of basketball shoes. "Still need some new kicks, Jonah?" Marie asked me.

"Boots," I responded, fingering the displays along the wall.

Marie and Cole exchanged glances, smiling curiously. The shoes arranged along the walls in the store reminded me of the books spaced out in Barringer's library at school.

"What you need boots for, J? You talking about, like, some Timberlands?" Marie asked.

"Are Timberlands good for walking?" I asked.

"Depends where you're headed."

"The woods," Cole said. "He's still talking about them."

Marie laughed. "What's back in the woods, J?"

"I dunno. Do you know?"

Marie stared at me blankly, her mouth agape. Then she turned to Cole. Then back to me, and she said, "I mean, I dunno exactly. I heard some--"

"Some stories about them?" I interrupted.

"Yeah. I heard some stories."

"Everybody has."

"We done been through this one," Cole whispered to her. "Trust me."

"Everybody's heard stories. But do you know what's back in there, for real?"

“Jonah,” Cole started, a serious look on his face, his brows furrowed, “it’s funny to joke about and all, but you ain’t going back there.”

“Is there something bad back there?” I asked.

“That ain’t the point.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Of course it’s dangerous,” Marie said.

“How do you know?” I asked, glancing between each of them. “Neither of y’all have been, right?”

“We have these Puma’s on sale right now,” Marie said. She turned around and plucked a display sneaker off the wall. “What size are you?” she asked.

I picked up a brown leather, high-lace boot with good tread and ankle support, examined it, then held it up to show them. “Do you go these in a nine?” I asked.

Marie went into the back room. Cole took the boot from my hands and placed it back onto the wall. “Backpack,” he said, motioning with one hand. I handed it to him.

He walked past the “Employees Only” sign into the room where Marie had gone looking for my boots.

At the food court, Cole and I found an empty table. I took off my busted sneakers. “I should’ve got some socks, too,” I said as I unlaced my kicks.

“Is your socks what smell like shit?” he asked.

“Yup.” I removed my old shoes and opened the bag Marie had given us. I took out the rectangular box and set it on our table.

“What you think about these boots, huh?” I asked.

“I think you’re gonna look like a mixed Indiana Jones in them motherfuckers. Mix-iana Jones. And I think they’re too big.”

“Indiana Jones is a badass,” I said, opening the box and lacing up my new boots. “And they are big. But your old clothes is big, too, and I wear them. Look at this hoodie!” I laughed, stretching out the giant jacket I wore, one of Cole’s black sweatshirt hand-me-downs. “If they don’t fit now, they’ll fit later. I need ‘em to last me.”

“Go get us some tacos,” Cole said, handing me a ten-dollar bill. I stuffed it into my pocket.

I threw on my new boots, not even bothering to tie them, and I sauntered to the nearest trash can, where I tossed in my old shoes. A group of fine women walked by me, and I winked at them. “Hello, ladies,” I said. “My toes don’t shoot out my shoes no more. And it’s all thanks to that guy,” I said, pointing back towards Cole. They giggled and waved at Cole. He turned red and shook his head.

After we ate, we visited the shoe store again, said bye to Marie, and found the bus stop outside. Cole let me wear his backpack again. It wasn’t heavy like it was before. It was empty.

I slept in my new boots that night.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” I heard Moms whisper. I thought I had been dreaming again, but she entered our room, and pulled the blanket from the window. Sunshine streamed into our faces, and I heard Cole groan.

“We ain’t got school,” he mumbled into his pillow.

“It's past ten,” she said. Her eyes glowed like morning suns, eyes she partially gave to me and Cole, and I could see the blue veins like rolling hills across her feet. Her ankle bones skinny as soda-pop straws. No rings on her fingers. No gaudy outfits. Not even the overwhelming plume of perfume that usually floated over her presence. There was another smell, though. A pleasant one that made my mouth water.

“Moms, what’s that?” I asked, sniffing the air.

“Breakfast. C’mon and let’s eat. I need y’all’s help making dinner.”

At this point, I was thoroughly confused. Moms had never done a great job of celebrating holidays, and if she did, it was always a bit late. Most of my Christmas presents from Moms were always late, like, January or February late. Most families made huge meals on Thanksgiving and ate until they felt shameful and napped and then ate some more, but I didn't remember the last time Moms had cooked for us.

“We have a big day today. Hurry up, boys,” she said over her shoulder, exiting our room.

I leaned over and looked up. Cole was already staring down at me. We both shrugged and hopped out of bed. We pissed at the same time.

“What’s up with Moms?” I asked.

“Maybe she’s high,” Cole said, yawning.

“What?”

“Said maybe she's fine. Maybe she just wants to cook for us, you know. She’s thankful for you.”

I nodded my head, but doubted it.

We went out and ate all the eggs, the bacon, the biscuits and jelly. Our fire alarm went off in the kitchen because Moms cooked so much at once, and we opened the front door in a waving motion, trying to send all the bad smoke out. We opened the windows. I opened the big one in the living room. I saw the woods. Tomorrow, I said to myself. Say “tomorrow” enough, and it turns into eternity in a hurry.

“We have a special guest for Thanksgiving,” Moms said, wiping her lips as we all squished together at the plastic kitchen table. She had fried up some scrambled eggs with cheese and bacon, heated up some taco shells and bought the good hot sauce.

“As y’all know, your Momma’s been seeing a man,” she started.

“Surprise,” Cole said, wrapping up another breakfast taco.

“Hush, Cole.”

“Is it Finn?” I asked.

“Yes, it is. He told me he met y’all. Said you two were lovely, that I’d done good.”

“He say that before or after y’all--”

“He’s a good man, Cole,” Moms interrupted. “A man with a noble job. Not just a job, a career. That’s the difference between dressing up for work and suiting up for work. He’s a man in a suit.”

“Or a costume,” Cole said.

“Like superheroes,” I added.

“Like superheroes, Jonah—That’s right.” Moms refilled our orange juices. “Y’all deserve better than this old place. This apartment, the damn Lion’s Den. This city. Y’all is good boys.”

“How would you know?” Cole asked.

“Because I know where y’all come from,” Moms said.

“I come from a man you dunno,” Cole said. “And what about Jonah. You know where he comes from? Damn sure ain’t the same man as me.”

Moms slammed her hand on the table. “Give me a break, you little faggot,” she hissed. I quit chewing and tapped my foot under the table. “Cole, you’re the oldest,” she continued, regaining her composure. “And so I’m talking to you. You’re the leader. I remember what happened last time I brought another man into this house.”

“Me too,” was all he said. The man-- none of us remembered his name-- had called Moms a bitch in front of Cole, who was barely a sophomore at the time, and Cole had sprung on him like a starving lion and took out a chunk of his face. He tackled the guy and bit into his cheek, through the skin, then spit it back onto the guy as he continued pummeling him. It was just instinct, he told me later.

“Now, this is a different kind of man. Finley is a good man. He does good things and protects good people, like us.” She put our dishes in the sink and took the biggest turkey I’ve ever seen, the only turkey I’d seen at the time, out from the refrigerator.

Cole stood at the table. “I’m gonna go grab Marie. See what she’s doing for dinner.”

“You wanna ask me if she’s invited, first?” Moms called, shoving the turkey into the oven.

“You’re bringing your man. I’m gonna bring my girl.”

“And if we don’t have enough, Colton?” Moms asked.

But he was out the door when he responded over his shoulder, “She can have mine.” The door closed.

A few hours went by. I helped Moms make macaroni and cheese. I had never helped her make food before. Hell, I didn't remember the last time she had made food for us before this. I mean, I'm sure she did; it just isn't one of the memories that has resurfaced now. She let me put in the butter and the milk and stir. “Turn the radio on in my room, J,” she told me. I went to her room and switched her alarm clock with the bright red numbers on the face to FM and turned the dial until some sort of music came through. I turned it up. “Leave it,” I heard Moms call. “This is good. Turn it up.”

I did. I came back into the kitchen where she was still stirring, except now she was moving and bouncing along with the music. She looked like an idiot in her dingy nightgown and her hair all strung up in a bun right on top of her head. She looked pretty. I still remember the crows' feet perched beside her eyes when she smiled. Somehow, she looked younger without her makeup.

“I didn't know you could dance,” I said.

“I was the best dancer this side of paradise when I was a girl. Your Moms had the moves.”

“Marie wants Cole to take her to some dance at their school. Cole's a good dancer. They said dancing is important.”

“Only if you plan on getting laid,” she said.

“Wha--?”

“Come over here,” she said smiling. “And take off those clunky shoes. Where'd you get those anyway?”

“They're my boots, Ma.” I took them off by the little table, and she reached her hands out to me, and her gown floated across the floor. “Like this,” she said.

My feet fumbled over one another, trying hard to follow her, trying to catch the rhythm of the big band music coming from her room, music that spilled into the rest of the apartment and filled the kitchen. I gave up and put my feet on hers, forcing my body to mirror her movements. I could feel her slender, fragile bones moving in her feet like hammers and chords in a piano. The apartment began to quiver not just with music, but with the familiar roll of the afternoon train. It must've been a big one. The cabinets flung open, and a few glasses even rattled off of their shelves and out onto the counter and floor, shattering into tiny pieces, and I could see the light and the apartment and myself reflected in these glass pieces. I looked through the window, and the train seemed to roll by in slow motion. I remembered all the promises I had to keep: the one to myself about going into the woods; the one to Finn about him rescuing me; the one to Barringer about her book. Moms laughed through the shattering in the kitchen and held me close and kept me on her toes and we kept dancing until the song ended and the commercial static took the place of the lovely instruments on the radio.

“Okay, J, help me sweep this up,” she said.

I was shoveling the last of the glass into the trash can when there was a knock on the door.

“Shit, he's early,” Moms said, shuffling off into her room. “Jonah, get the door. I'll be out in a minute.”

I opened the door, and there was the man who had littered my house with smokiness and saturated my home with ash. The man who had saved me just the other day. Finn still maintained a scruffy beard, but he'd traded out his cop uniform for black slacks, a V-neck shirt under which his chest hairs sprouted out of, and a black blazer. A bottle of wine was in one hand, and it had a red bow-tie around the top. In the other was a red box. "Happy Thanksgiving, Wile E."

Finn stepped in and closed the door behind him. I walked back to the kitchen, setting the stove on low and stirring the macaroni like a master chef. Finn slipped into Moms' room and gave me a wink.

"Finley!" I heard her shriek before the door shut. I heard some soft muffled sounds, though I tried hard not to listen. I sat at the table and put on my boots. Finn came out carrying only the wine.

"Smells good, bud."

"Macaroni."

"And cheese?"

I looked at him as if there was something besides cheese one could possibly put on macaroni.

"My favorite," he said. "Nice boots you got there. They new?"

I nodded.

Then he dropped all formalities and lit a cigarette, untying the bow from the bottle he brought.

"Y'all don't gotta wine opener, do you?"

“A what?”

“Didn't think so. That's why I got the good stuff,” he said smiling as he unscrewed the cap. He took two small juice glasses and a saucer from the cupboard and sat at the table with me. “So how you doing?”

“Fine.”

“Hell of an experience for a young boy to have like the one you had the other day.”

“Why were you following me?”

“Hell, I wasn't following you. I was on patrol and saw a suspiciously young crew in hoods climbing fences and scampering through alleys. I'd be a shitty cop if I didn't follow. Anyways, how 'bout a thanks? It is Thanksgiving, after all.”

“Thanks,” I said.

He poured some of the wine into his glass. “You tell anybody?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“You told me not to.”

“I guess I did,” he said behind rolls of smoke. “For your own good, too. You wouldn't wanna go to jail, would ya?”

I shot him a glance, my emotions apparently all over my face and said, “Jail? No. I don't wanna go to jail.” I didn't know much about the penitentiary, but I knew that it wasn't for me.

“Good. That's why you can't tell nobody what happened. Anyways, I took care of ya, didn't I?”

“I guess,” and then I asked, “Why was that man shaking on the bed? Why were his eyes back in his head?”

He took a sip of his wine before answering, “I s’pose he was having a nightmare.”

I knew the feeling.

“Is it hard for you to keep secrets, Jonah?”

It was the kind of question that I'd usually expect from Miss Barringer. “No,” I said quite honestly, “I have secrets.”

“Course you do. Everybody has secrets. You, me, your Mamma, Cole...” I heard Momm's shower in her room cut on. Finn's gaze pierced through me. I coughed on his second hand smoke. My foot started tapping up and down underneath the table. Finn continued, “Thing about secrets is they never stay small. You gotta keep covering them up. Gotta keep lying so people don't find out. Then you gotta remember the lies you told so you can keep on lying. You a liar?”

“No.”

“You just said you gots secrets.”

“Well, yeah. So do you.”

“Then you’s a liar, same as me.”

“I feel bad when I lie.” I thought of all the books I'd borrowed from the librarian.

“That's called guilt. It's a young man's game. Really no man's game at all.” He sipped his wine and thought a moment, scratching his chest like a bear. “When you do things you can't tell other people about, things you ain’t proud of, or maybe even ashamed of, them things that give you that pit in your stomach soon’s you do ‘em...” He

ashed on the saucer and stared off. “Yeah, that's what makes hearts heavy. Makes it hard to get up in the morning sometimes.”

“Then why should anybody keep secrets?”

Boo Radley fluttered like a ghost across my thoughts.

“Most folks'll say you keep secrets to protect yourself. But the way I see it--” and he leaned in towards me over the table and lowered his voice, “--Guys like me and you and your brother, we got all kinds of secrets, and we can't tell nobody because the things we been through and the things we've had to do-- well, most people just don't understand. We don't hide them things to protect ourselves. We keep secrets to protect people around us, the ones we love. How you think your brother would feel if he knew what those boys done to you?”

I envisioned Cole with the Infidel in a backdrop of blood in my mind's eye. “He wouldn't like it too much.”

Finn laughed and slapped the table. “Shit, I bet he'd hunt them kids down and put his foot so far up their ass they'd have a mouthful of Air Jordans. So you see, you're protecting Cole by not telling him what happened, not to mention your Mamma.”

“I guess. But that pit you were talking about, the one you get in your stomach...” I began, staring down at the table.

He looked at me carefully and put out his cigarette and nodded. “Guilt,” he repeated.

“Yeah.”

Finn then poured a small amount of wine into an empty glass and pushed it in front of me. “Take a sip,” he said softly.

“Nah.”

“Go ahead. It's alright.”

I held the glass in front of my face and smelled the sour alcohol. “Small sip, go ‘head.”

I put it to my mouth and swallowed. It made my lips pucker, and I whipped my head to the side. The wine's first touch to my tongue hinted of sweetness, but what remained after the swallow was more bitter, like fruit that had been trampled into the dirt and left in the sun.

“You know how old you gotta be to drink alcohol in Illinois?”

“Twenty-one.”

“Twenty-one. You're twenty-one, right?” he asked with a smirk.

I shook my head again and said, “Twelve.”

“Well damn, Jonah, you just broke the law, son. How you feel about that?”

“But, you told me--”

“Never mind that and answer the question. You just broke the law. Twice in two days. You're damn near a felon. How's that make you feel?”

I thought a moment, and I really did feel bad. Guilty. Dirty. Ashamed. The secret thoughts in my head were giving birth to actions, secret actions, and they were piling up all around me. Stealing books, taking Cole's things, lying to my teachers, sneaking out at night, ditching class, almost dying in that hell hole, drinking alcohol. Who the hell was I? I suddenly felt like I had the duct tape back on my mouth, like I was alone in the dark closet of a nightmare. “Bad,” I said. “It makes me feel bad. Makes me feel ugly and guilty.”

Finn laughed. “You feel bad because you got a good head on your shoulders, a good conscience. You know what's right and what's wrong. Are you a bad kid?”

I shook my head.

“Course you ain’t! Most people let that bad feeling, that guilt monster in their gut take hold of ‘em, and it tells them they’s a bad person just because they gotta secret or two, just because they might be a little different than other people. They start believing they really is bad. People let guilt eat at them until there ain’t nothin left but the lies. So you know what you gotta do?”

“What?”

“Look that monster in the face, and cut its fucking head off.”

I took another sip.

“Don't trust nobody,” Finn continued. “Trust Jonah. He knows what's good and bad, and he don't need nobody making him feel bad for being who he is.” Finn poured more wine into our glasses. “Lift up your glass, like this,” he told me, making a toasting motion. I followed. “You do what you gotta do, that's what men do, and screw everything else,” and with that he chugged his whole glass of wine and motioned for me to do the same.

I gulped. It went smoothly down my gullet and warmed my belly, and I flicked my tongue inside my upturned glass to catch any remaining droplets.

“Atta boy,” he said, lowering his voice once again. “And in the meantime, Jonah, guys like me and you, and even your brother, we're good men, but we all gots some secrets. So we have to watch out for each other. That means even when you have the worst kind of thing to hide, you can come tell me, got it?”

“Got it.”

The shower water in Moms’ bathroom cut off.

“Hey, Finn...” I started.

“Yeah, bud?”

“The other day, when you went back into the house, and I was waiting for you outside...”

Finn blinked and crossed his leg, “Yeah?”

“Did you go back to the room? The room where you found me, where that dude was?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you see the man, the one with the nightmares?”

“I did.”

“Did you see a book on his bed?”

He thought a moment, stroking his chin and staring at the ceiling, “Not that I recall. No. Why?”

“They stole my book. They threw it on the bed.”

“Hell, bud, we’ll buy you a new book.”

I shook my head. “No, it isn’t mine. It’s my friend’s, and it’s real *precious* to her. It’s from her dad. I think he’s dead now. But she lemme borrow it, and then Teddy stole it from me. That’s why I went to the house with them.”

“He said he’d give you the book back if you went?”

I nodded.

“Well, shit. Maybe I can swing by tomorrow and ask the folks who live there if they seen it.”

“The guy on the bed, you mean, the dude from the room? You’ll ask him?”

“Sure.”

My insides felt warm, bright and fuzzy. My head was light. I felt brave.

“Hey, Finn...” I started again.

He was amused at this point, openly laughing at me. “Yeah?”

“When you went back into the room, was the man dead?”

“No, bud. I told you he was just having a nightmare. I went in and explained what had happened to him, then came back down to the porch, where I found you.

Remember?”

The door opened behind Finn, and Moms came out in a new dress. “Are y’all gonna help me finish Thanksgiving dinner, or do I have to cook alone in my new dress?” she asked us.

Cole never showed. Moms, Finn, and I ate alone, and we laughed and talked. Finn poured me more wine. He put his hand on Moms’ knee, and they laughed at me. When Moms and Finn finished eating, they went to her room to take a nap, they said. The rest of the night was a dull, quiet haze.

I slept like a rock that night. Not even the trains disturbed me.

12.

...And lead us not...

I woke up with a headache. Cole hadn't come home. I packed my bag again for the woods. I still had Cole's switchblade. I crept out of my room towards the entrance of the apartment. Mom's door was shut. I heard snoring.

I kept my eyes to the ground as my feet led the way. The usual sirens and horns of traffic were stymied against my own pulse, the one I felt beating against my skull with an urgency to find out the mystery of the woods. The sunlight against the dinginess of downtown Carbondale produced a lulling red glow, like campfires that have burned for days, always threatening to go out, but somehow never do.

I walked down the sidewalk in front of Lion's Den, searching for the alley that led to the tracks. An old man sprawled out unconscious on a bus stop bench and snored loudly. Crackhead, I thought, gutter-punk hobo. I saw my apartment building from the sidewalk, the moldy yellow paint chipping off the siding. It looked like one of those motels where you rent rooms by the hour, the kind where your room comes with a girl already waiting. Put in a quarter and your bed will vibrate; open the nightstand drawer and you'll see condom wrappers scattered beside the Bible.

A cop car was parked on Fulton beside the apartments. I figured it was Finn's. I knew that no one was looking for me, but I had the feeling somebody was, like I was being watched. Sought after. Maybe it was just the blackbirds perched beside the many pairs of shoes tied together and strewn over the telephone wires. Regardless, I quickened my pace and ducked into a side alley. The tracks were near.

Hot breath left my mouth and turned into clouds, vanishing before my eyes as I leaned against a brick wall in the alley. I thought of Finn and the cigarette butts floating in our toilet. I felt the wall vibrate, and soot from above misted down onto my head. I looked down the alley and spotted the railroad tracks. A train passed from between the buildings across the alley. After it passed, I stepped onto the rungs and could still feel them shake as the train disappeared. I walked towards the woods, counting the rungs, following the train like a sheep.

Nearing the mouth of the woods, I noticed it had grown darker all around me, that I was walking in shadow, though somehow in broad daylight. Rays of morning light found their way through the cracks and holes of the tree ceiling. I was entering the woods. No ghosts, no stories, just me and my go-bag and my hopes and fears, and the confidence in my new boots. I trekked on. It was the farthest I'd gone down the tracks, and the first time I made it past the wood's opening. I slowed down and looked around. Birds chirped. Dirt and vines sprouted between the track rungs. I opened my granola bar, took a bite, and suddenly didn't feel hungry. I looked back and could still see the entrance I'd wandered through where the trees opened around the railroad, and the gray buildings of Carbondale in the distance began to blur into a cold smog. But the tracks led on.

I had considered bringing a compass, but I would've had to steal it from school, and I didn't really know how they worked anyway. I had no watch either, and I didn't know how much time had passed between when I'd snuck out at six AM and this moment. *About two miles off the tracks is a path*, I kept thinking. Isn't that what Teddy

had said? But what did he know, honestly? On either side of the tracks there was only green shrubbery and thicket and the trees that towered far above me.

The tracks made several turns and twists which I followed obediently, and soon after, I could no longer see the entrance of the woods behind me. I had been keeping an eye out for the path, the one that led back to a quarry, or Red Chariot, or whatever—but I found no such path; only an endless railway snaking through a dark forest. The good news was, there were no ghosts yet, either; no crazy inbreeds; no demons; no lunatics I had encountered-- not yet. But the rungs didn't seem to end, and I'd lost count long ago. I was well into the woods when I decided to veer off the tracks, to blaze my own path towards... Towards what?—I didn't know. And I think that was the point.

I found a small opening in the brush and pushed my way back through the growth. Low branches scratched at me, and I tripped on roots multiple times, losing my footing on the uneven ground. The scrapes and stings of overgrowth and virgin vegetation grew annoying quickly. I stopped to put on the red hoodie, doing my best to ignore the sharp pangs of my scrapes. I'd heard of pioneers like Daniel Boone, paths like the Oregon Trail blazed over several years. I wasn't planning on roaming this forest for years, but curiosity fueled my every step. I would wander as long as I had to wander. Minutes turned into hours, or at least felt like they did.

I came to a rock jutting out from the ground and finally sat down. Little blood stains darkened the wool of my jacket as I wiped my face with the sleeve. I took a Gatorade from my bag and finished my granola bar. I looked around and thought it must've been hours since I'd entered the woods. Everything was the same, only denser, more crushing. The same brush and weeds and trees had seemed to grow thicker the

farther back I went. I had made several turns where the growth was too thick to push through, and my heart sank into my stomach.

I didn't know where I was. I didn't know how to get back to the tracks. My path was lost. It was the first time I missed the stench of car exhaust in Carbondale piercing my nostrils. I wanted Cole. I wanted to go to school, Tookie, Tom, anybody. I wanted my ash tray apartment. I wanted Moms. Hell, even Marie or Finn would've been okay. Tears swelled in my eyes. Birds still chirped. I thought of the big boat in the window at St. Peter's. The promise of land.

Then I heard singing.

It was faint-- a man's voice singing some song I did not recognize, the words distant and unclear. The tune snaked its way softly through the trees. I picked up my bag, and my tears dried on my cheeks like snail tracks. I followed the voice as quietly as I could through the brush, but each twig that snapped under my feet seemed to echo through the forest, rudely announcing my presence. The song was sporadic, the singer stopping and starting again at random, and I would wait and listen for the voice to begin again before continuing to follow the melody. It grew louder and clearer. Then I heard water splash. A clearing of trees was only a few feet in front of me, and sunlight rushed through the opening. When I neared it, I saw that it was a cliff. I ducked behind one of the trees and looked out over the edge. A great pool of water lie below where I stood from the cliff, probably forty or fifty, maybe a thousand feet down the slope. It was still and bright blue, but dark and too deep to see the bottom. There was a small beach beside the water off to the right.

The watery part of the world.

The man's voice rang out louder, charging through the circular pit and reverberating off the earth's walls up to my ears.

"Listen to the whistle of the evenin' train..." his song went, and I heard another splash.

Still crouched behind the tree, I scanned the water below and tried to spot the singer, and I raised my hand above my eyes to block the glaring light. Finally, a head broke the surface of the water, and I saw the source of the song. I couldn't see much from where I spied above the quarry, but the man swam under me, paddling freely, naked in the water. I could see he was bald on top of his head, but a mess of hair in the back stretched down his neck and floated behind him as he swam. He was naked, and alone, and sounded happy. His white butt cheeks went skyward as he dove under again. The water had to be cold. I shivered and looked behind me, suddenly paranoid, but only the trees stood by. When I turned back around, the man had resurfaced.

"...You know you're about to wind up dead..." he sang in between gargles of water.

I inched closer to the edge. He'd moved to the shallow water near the beach closest to me, down below on my right, shaking his wet head back and forth like dog. I couldn't tell if his body was covered in hair or tattoos or both. I crept towards the cliff out from my hiding spot. As I came closer, several rocks came loose and tumbled down the side of the cliff, interrupting the stillness of the blue pool. The man froze like a startled animal and immediately noticed me in my red jacket on the cliff above him. My guts told me to run. It didn't matter where, just go. But my feet were stuck to the ground as if they'd suddenly grown roots. Then the stranger screamed wildly, waved his hands. He

screamed something animal, something savage, which was amplified by the great chasm. It seemed all at once as if the entire forest had just noticed my presence and was not thrilled by my company. Then I screamed too, involuntarily as I recall, and my body wasn't functioning properly. My feet were heavy as I pivoted on my heel to retreat, and I tripped on one of the roots by the cliff. I collapsed on my back and slid over the edge with the loosened ground, tumbling down the slope towards the water.

The last I remember before I went unconscious was everything spinning, all the earth blending into one green and brown and blue blob. This man is going to eat me, I thought, remembering Tom talk about the cannibals. And I don't know if I heard the man still belting that animal howl or if a train had begun to pass in the forest, but either way, I crashed into the pit, splashed into dark, cold waters.

You know you're about to wind up dead. And everything floated before it went black.

My skull throbbed, and I felt my pulse against the back of my eyeballs. My head felt like a fish, yanked out of water, was flopping between my ears; and my vision was blurry when I first cracked open my eyelids. I tried to sit up from where I lay, but hot white light flashed across my eyes and stung my brain. I laid still again and put my hand to my temple. My head was wrapped in cloth. I wiggled my toes and fingers, and I was pretty sure I could still feel my pecker-- I am not eaten, I thought.

“Mighty fall you took earlier,” a voice from a corner said. I turned my head on the thin pillow and saw the singing, screaming, naked-swimmer sitting Indian style on the ground. He was reading a book, and he stared at me over the top. My backpack lay propped up beside him against the wall.

“Where am I?” I muttered.

He turned a page. “Suppose that depends on where you're trying to go.”

Sunshine beamed through cracks in the walls. I had no idea what time it was. The light hurt my head as I glanced around. “I got lost.”

“Ah-” he sighed, setting the book on the floor. His features became clearer as the haze left my eyes. Thick tan skin, wrinkled and hard as bark. Veins tunneled through his forearms and neck like roots wriggling along the earth. He'd put on pants and a gray tank-top, though it was beginning to grow colder. He was a thin man, forty or fifty, maybe sixty years old-- I couldn't tell. Gray and black hairs sprang up in awkward patches across his body, and a faded tattoo across his heart written in cursive, *Nikki*. “I've been lost before, too,” he said. “Kindred spirits, we must be!”

“Do you always talk like Yoda?” I asked.

Then I looked around the room. I had never been in a place like this-- too small to be a cabin, too big to be a shack. A hut. Yes, a hut, I thought. Right after that thought came this one: cannibals live in huts. It was a semi-rectangular den no bigger than the living room at my apartment. The walls were different kinds of wood, thick branches and two-by-four planks, pipes and poles tied together, some molded together with clay, some nailed. The roof was made of the same materials plus some old blankets and clothes and tarps stuffed between cracks in the ceiling, then a green tarp draped over it all from

outside. A hut indeed, and the place kept in little heat. I lay on the bed in only my underwear and the pair of socks I'd slipped into my book bag earlier that morning. Had he put them on me? I pulled the tattered covers up to my chin. They smelled stale, wet leaves. I imagined it's what the inside of a caterpillar's cocoon smells like. The small mattress I lay on was lifted by sawed-down tree trunks. The floor was a collage of floor mats and rugs. I sat up slowly and let my legs dangle off the side of the bed. Below my feet was a door mat that read, *Welcome Home*.

“Take it easy,” he said.

“What is this place?”

The man stood up and moved closer to me, never breaking eye contact. Do I know him, I thought? Does he know me? He towered in front of me like a titan, or maybe the low ceiling made him so giant-like. One of his most frightening qualities was the way he seemed to grow and shrink at the same time. His tongue darted across his lips. His mouth was mostly hidden by a thick gray beard that grew down his neck and blended with his chest hair, but when he opened it to speak, I only saw a black hole, an endless pit down into his throat. Only a few teeth still dangled in their gums.

“This,” and he opened his arms, palms up, “is the high court, the hole in the hill, the mountain refuge.” Slowly, he circled in his place between me on the bed and the doorway behind him where a plastic shower curtain hung down in the entrance. My gut bubbled. Queasy and anxious. Flee. But my body ached at the thought of movement. The man's feet were bare and calloused over with hardened yellow skin. He could outrun me. And even if I darted past him back into the woods and hid, he obviously knew the forest well enough to find me. He'd smell me out. “This is Eldorado,” he said.

A hut, yes. Or maybe a dungeon. Serial killer headquarters. I am going to die, and no one will ever find me, I thought. My bones at the bottom of the quarry sunken deep to the floor where no one can reach them right next to all the other bags of leftovers, the rest of me in his stomach digesting, then eventually dropped off somewhere in the dirt behind a tree. My life is literally going to turn into shit, I thought. My stomach was in ropes, and I stared at the ground trying to hide my thoughts.

“Nothing to be scared of. Not never,” I remembered Cole saying.

A few summers before, we had these neighbors who owned a pit-bull. They swore the dog was trained, that it wouldn't stray out of the yard. That really, it was a nice dog, a family dog. But it barked and snarled at anybody who got close to their property, leash-less. I avoided walking by the house whenever I could, much preferring the grime of the back alleys to the jaws of the beast. “Why you so scared, Jonah?” Cole asked.

Before long, he made me walk-- not run-- past the house down the sidewalk, right beside their yard. “Don't even look at it when it barks, J. They can smell fear.”

Cole promised it'd be ok, that he'd be right there. And he was right there. Good thing too, because if he hadn't run up and started kicking the dog in its ribs when it latched onto me, it might have gotten my whole leg. Still have the scar. Those neighbors moved out about a week later when they found their pit gutted in the yard, split open from its throat to its butthole.

Maybe this skinny-dipping hobo could smell fear, too. Nothing to be scared of.
Not never.

Then the man broke the silence between us, moving his hands as if directing a choir with his eyes closed, and he said, “Gaily bedight, a gallant knight, in sunshine and in shadow, had journeyed long, singing a song, in search of Eldorado. But he grew old-”

“What's that?” I interrupted.

He opened his eyes, and I saw the blue burning behind them in his head. “A poem, of course. A poem by Poe. Yes. A Poe-em.”

“I need to go home.” I stood up but got woozy, had to sit back down on the bed.

“Where is home?” he asked, taking a tin cup from a shelf that was carved into the long wall.

“My apartment. My house, I mean. My brother is looking for me. Moms, too.”

“You should drink.” I cautiously took the cup he handed me, but the water was crystal clear. I saw my reflection in it and realized an old plaid shirt sleeve was the bandage around my head. I took a sip, eyeing him over the brim. The liquid was cool on my throat as it ran over my dry tongue. I didn't realize how thirsty I was, and I began gulping. “What's your name, son?”

I finished my second cup before answering, “Jonah.”

He looked at me blankly for a moment and then burst into laughter. I mean, hee-haw cracking up from the belly kind of laughter. He sucked in air to catch his breath, and I saw his skin hug tight against his ribs as he breathed. A cross was tattooed on his right

ribcage. “So it goes, Jonah took a tumble into the water. I tell you, appropriate. Yes, very. See any whales while you were down there, hmm?”

Then it was my turn to give the blank stare.

“Ok, Jonah from Carbondale, now you ask me.” He grabbed a stool that creaked and wobbled when he sat down, and he crossed his legs and folded a hand on his knee, the other hand twisting his beard.

“Ok. Did *you* see any whales down there?” I repeated.

“Don't be silly. Wales is far away from here. Ask me the *other* question.” He spoke like a school teacher, yet looked like the drunks I passed every day on the streets downtown. I didn't know the face he was giving me. It was one made of eyes that see all the way inside you-- unapologetic, unblinking, uncomfortable. Get out of my brain, I wanted to tell him.

“Oh. Ok. What's your name?” I asked, hoping I got that one right. But really, I knew his name: Michael Meyers. I wasn't worried about getting janked. I had few valuables with me. But getting jumped was another story. *Use your teeth and lose 'em*, I recalled. I hadn't ruled out getting eaten yet, either. Getting eaten is always the worst case scenario, no matter where you are; and as he stared at me, it was the scenario I kept trying to fight off in my mind. At least he didn't have many teeth.

“My name?” He clicked his tongue and wagged his finger. “Little Jonah, no, no- a name is not who I am. A name is only attached to a body...”

Nikki attached to his chest in cursive.

“...And a body is no more a person than the clothes on its back--”

Or lack of.

“You want to know who I am. *Who dost thou be-* ask me that.”

A nut-bag. A loon-fest, I thought. But I obeyed. “Right. Who dost thou be?”

“Good Lord, I'm glad you asked. I'm the keeper of the pit, invisible to the world and alive in its bloom as well as its wither.” He pulled his foot up on the stool and picked at his gnarled toenails. “I am the woods. Yes. I am the custodian of the quarry, if you will.”

I would rather not, I thought. I had heard about meth. Vague antidrug pictures were coming to mind as he spoke. Behind me just above the lofted bed was a window, the only window in the place-- a car windshield, in fact, cut out and fit into the wall with screws and bolts. The pit-keeper propped his elbow on his knee and fit his chin in his palm.

“But, as far as I know,” he said, “my Christian name is Ellis. Yes. But you can call me *Ellis*. Or just Ellis.” He extended his hand to me. The pinky and ring fingers of his right hand were missing their top knuckles with the fingernails. Just nubs. Probably got hungry, I thought.

“So this *is* the quarry,” I said, offering my hand in return to shake like men do. I had just begun to smile when Ellis' own faded behind his beard. He grabbed my wrist and yanked me to my feet off the mattress.

Clutching my shoulders, he began to shake me and said in frenzy, “Why are you here? How did you find me?” His voice was low and trembling.

I shrieked in surprise and fear, and a pain shot down my spine from my head into my big toes. I looked up into his eyes, sad and deep and still searching me out, and there was no fear there, nothing to lose, only the crisp blue circles surrounding the black pits—

He was all skies and quarries. Under his eyes were crevices etched by age and pain, though very alive, lines that creased his skin like wax paper folded over and over till it's worn out. His coarse beard brushed against my face as he shook me, choked me, his thumbs digging underneath my collar bone. And I had no words. Only terror and guttural sounds. I needed Cole's knife, the Infidel. I would've plunged it into his belly and twisted, like Cole did. Where had the knife gone? Ellis repeated louder, "What were you looking for? Who knows you're here? Speak, Lord, or do you prefer to sleep with the whale?"

"Nobody!" I finally choked. "Nobody knows I'm here. I swear. Please don't eat me. I won't never come back. Swear to God. Please don't eat me."

"What do you want?" Ellis asked without blinking, his fingers now gripping hard the back of my arms.

"I want to go home!" I managed to scream through tears. "I'm just lost, I don't know where I am, and you're hurting me, I want to go home!" With that, I tried to knee his privates. But he caught my leg and flipped me onto my back. Dust and dirt whuffed up as I thudded against the ground.

Ellis stepped back towards the plastic curtain that hung from the single doorway of his hut, and he became a silhouette, a shadow, a void. Never would I know what had gone through his mind. I still wonder what world he lived in and how one may get there. "That's a good start," he said quietly. "We can only go home when we know we have one."

The panic that had possessed him vanished as abruptly as it had appeared, and his eyes never blinked, as if he were afraid of missing something in me. He brushed aside the

shower curtain in the doorway and stepped outside, leaving me there shaken on his dumb welcome mat in my underwear and socks.

He lost use of his reason, came up in my mind.

Saliva glands in my mouth started pumping out spit, and my tongue curled involuntarily, the way your body knows before it's about to explode. I clutched my stomach and put my hand over my mouth, then followed Ellis outside where I doubled over and vomited in the grass. He laughed. He leaned against a heavy, low branch of a strange tree that twisted in every direction, folding into itself and then veering away, upwards and out. Ellis' house, shack, hut was enveloped in the trees, nearly invisible, but from where he currently stood and gazed was an opening in the branches and leaves with a clear view to the quarry below. I shivered in the brisk afternoon air, and goose bumps bloomed up my spine. My naked knees knocked against each other as I yacked, the taste of throw-up in my mouth, hot in my nose.

“I had a fire going in the pit behind the house,” Ellis called over his shoulder, “was gonna make some lunch before I had to rescue your nosy ass. Jesus Christ, Good Lord, you scared me pretty good, up there in your red hood like some sort of incubus. I've heard enough strange stories about these woods to sleep with an eye open.” I heard him chuckle before going on, “I laid your clothes and boots by the fire out back. They should be dry by now. Or dry enough.”

“How long was I out?” I asked. I hunched over, hands on my knees letting the last of the spit drip from my lips. He didn't seem to notice my predicament, or remember why I had been stricken with such sudden horror in the first place. Granted, it was a short flash, but enough to leave me nauseous. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and

started to walk around the house, the stupid shack, the damn hut. He had shaken a fear or something like it loose inside me that had been buried deep down, and released an anger that I didn't know I had. He had to be sick. Red Chariot sick. I was angry and hurting and scared and tired and tired of being scared, and I cursed Ellis in my heart with a slew of all the rotten words I knew.

“Nothing like wet britches,” he rambled on as I trudged to the back of the house, “Wet, heavy britches and soaked socks. Everything sloshing and rubbing raw. Guaranteed rash is what it is...”

I pictured Marie making her hands like mouths talking to herself. Looney-Toon.

Thin smoke rose from the fire pit in the back. My clothes were laid out on a wooden bench near the pit. They were still soaked. Several blue and green and black waste bins were lined up in a row. I opened one and saw hundreds of aluminum cans piled inside. Glass shards in one. Plastic bottles and wrappers in another. I don't know why I peeked into his trash bins. Maybe because he didn't have a medicine cabinet. Or a bathroom. I think I half-expected to see a body curled up inside one of them. In which case, I would've thrown up again and bolted, taken my chances getting lost in the woods. I peeked around the corner of the house to spy, and Ellis was still beside the big twisted tree, crouching down and picking up rocks. I wondered when it was that he'd last spoken to someone besides himself.

Get older and you learn how to survive, how to talk, how to read people, interpret their moves and eventually predict their actions-- at least to an extent. This is how to get by, and not just in Carbondale, but everywhere. You begin to understand the importance of adapting to the ways of those surrounding you: wearing their perfume, working out at

their gyms, speaking their language-- be it the Grime or Poetry—it doesn't matter. All the words in the world have the potential to be weightless. Conforming on the surface and rejecting on the inside: it'll keep you comfortable, keep your heart patriotic and medium-sized. We learn this is how to survive. Anyone can be calculative. You just have to put in the time, commit to the practice of being what you're not. Or admitting, *I am not what I am*, as Iago says. Blend in with the blacks and grays and whites, just a crack in the static or a hiccup in the heart monitor. *It keeps you safe*, Cole told me. No room for color. No red hoodies.

I walked towards Ellis, towards the big twisted tree out front. I stood behind and watched him launch a rock over the trees. He shielded his eyes from the sun and followed the stone until it disappeared.

“Wait for it,” he whispered.

Then a plop, a small splash of water from below.

“Aha!” he exclaimed and whipped around to face me. He ran over and grabbed my hands, and we danced in a circle. “Look,” he said.

I followed him to the cliff where the twisted tree hung out. I could see the quarry below, all its different shades of blues glistening in the cold sunlight.

“God's birdbath,” Ellis said, looking out. “Now you try.” He handed me a rock.

I chucked it hard as I could.

Then Ellis grabbed my arm. “Jonah,” he said, “have you ever had possum stew?”

We went back around Ellis' house and sat by the fire. Ellis sipped on an A&W root beer from a can. He brought me a red pair of basketball shorts to wear while my clothes dried by the fire, said he had no use for red back here in the woods. "Red and green don't mix," he said. "Except around Christmas time. And even then, it best serves one like me to remain unseen here in the thick."

"Why don't you wanna be seen?" I asked, holding my palms up towards the flame.

"Gotta blend with the brush if I wanna eat."

"So you hunt."

"You ever had possum stew?" He asked, squatting next to me.

I shook my head. He let out a loud burp and crushed his can on his head.

"How'd you do that?" I asked.

"Lemme show you," and he went back inside for another can. He threw me one, and white foam fizzed out of the top.

"This ain't root beer."

"The root beer is for me. You can have the regular beer," he said, cracking open another can. From up here where Ellis lived, the quarry really did look like a giant's bathtub, or *God's birdbath*. I didn't trust Ellis immediately—especially in lieu of the way his eyes darted about like a paranoid lizard-- but he had saved me, bandaged me, clothed me, and let me drink his beer. All the tall tales about the quarry began to feel more like silly gossip the city had been whispering amongst itself. If this was the origin of

Carbondale's most infamous ghost stories, then I was in the middle, playing friends with the spirit of the quarry himself.

"How long you been back here?" I asked.

He looked startled, as if he'd forgotten I was there with him. His eyes squinted and focused on me; then he dropped to all fours and began crawling slowly towards me. I stood and backed away. His shadow looked like it belonged to some wild dog, not a man. I began to get that feeling in my guts. "E-Ellis?" I stammered with a shaky voice.

A toothless smile spread across his lips. "Oh, it's just you!" he said, standing back on his feet. "Why didn't you say so? Have you finished your beer yet?" he asked, sitting back down in one of the camping chairs beside the fire. He motioned for me to come sit back down.

"Not yet."

He chugged his root beer and said, "The trick is to pinch the can like this, near the bottom," he began his illustration, "and crush the rest with your hand as it gets close to your head; thus, producing the illusion of smashing it against your skull. They don't teach you that in school, huh?"

I tapped my foot when I got anxious, but Ellis rocked his whole body back and forth, staring up and between the tree limbs hanging over us, rocking to and fro: where I tried to hide my apprehension, he seemed to fully embrace his own. He didn't care. Or perhaps he didn't notice. He reached under his gray tank-top and scratched his chest, and I saw the old ink tatted into his breast: *Nicki*. "You are in school, right?" he asked, picking up a stick. "Education is important."

“Tenth grade,” I said, downing the rest of the beer. It left a taste in my mouth like sourdough bread and flat soda.

“Put your can in the recycling over there.” He pointed with the stick to a blue bin near his shack. “And I call bullshit,” he called over his shoulder. “You ain’t no sophomore.”

“Okay...” I said as I tossed the can into the bin. “You got me. I’m not a student. I’m a teacher.” I walked over to where he’d laid out my clothes near the fire. Still damp.

“I would’ve pegged you for a coach,” he said, producing a knife from his jean pocket. “A swim coach, the way you dove into the water earlier. So graceful.” He smirked and began to whittle the stick.

“Yeah,” I started, sitting back in the chair beside him. “About that, thanks for saving me.”

Then I noticed the knife he was using.

“Yo! That’s mine!” I said, lurching for *Infidel*.

Ellis pulled back and grinned. “Far as you knew ‘til now, this little sword was at the bottom of the quarry, wasn’t it?”

I sat back down.

“Besides the fact that it’s illegal, what’s so special about this blade?”

“Nothing.”

He blew chips and bark away from the spear he had sharpened and stood up. His flesh was taut, and I saw blue-green veins like eels swimming down his neck and into his chest hair, into *Nikki*, underneath his tattered gray wife-beater. He wore fuzzy pink house slippers and a pair of black jeans much too short for him. God, what was he—at least 6

and a half feet tall, I thought. But he hunched over when he stood, always appearing big and small at the same time. He clicked the button on the handle; the blade retracted, and he threw it to me. I placed it in my pocket. “What’s the stick for?” I asked.

“Stake,” he answered.

“You’re gonna cook steak?”

“No,” he said. “It’s a stake. The thing you mount heads on.”

“Oh.” I fingered the Infidel inside my pocket.

“But I’m going to use it as a skewer.”

“For what?”

“Have you ever had possum stew?”

“You already asked me that.”

“I did? What did you say?”

“No, I haven’t had possum before.”

He stood and motioned for me to follow. We stepped back through the tree line behind his house. Roots cracked under my feet, and twigs snapped. Somehow, Ellis walked silently. Maybe he was a ghost, like Barringer hovering about in her library. I wondered if Finn had been back to the crack house from the other day, if he’d found *Don Quixote*. Then Ellis stopped.

“Hear that?” he whispered.

I stood still. A high-pitched whining, an animal shrieking in front of us somewhere. “What is it?”

A few yards in front of us, a raccoon dangled from a tree branch, a rope knotted tightly around its hind feet. In a desperate frenzy, the animal tried to wriggle itself loose.

“The more it moves, the tighter it gets.”

“You did that?”

“It ain’t no possum,” Ellis said, approaching the raccoon. Then he raised the sharpened stick. “Ever had raccoon stew?”

Back at the fire, Ellis skinned the raccoon and ran the stake through it from end to end. “Go grab some more wood for the fire,” he told me.

“Where?”

He looked around and smiled. “We’re in the woods. I think you’ll find some. There’s a hatchet in the house propped beside the doorway. Use it if you have to.”

As I walked to his house, he called, “And bring me back a big pot.”

“Where is it?” I hollered back.

“In the kitchen!”

I threw my hands up and said, “There’s only one room.”

“Exactly!”

After a few minutes, I brought him his pot and had the hatchet slung over my shoulder. I crawled back into my former clothes, and they were only slightly damp. It was a small hatchet, but heavier than it looked. Carrying it into the woods to search for something to cut down and burn, I felt like a grown-ass-man, as Cole says. A man who knows how to take care of his business. I felt connected to the quarry, to the forest, as if we shared the same veins and arteries, had the same blood and water flowing through us.

Forty minutes with this self-sufficient lunatic named Ellis had given me more life than I'd felt in perhaps ever. But then I wondered: had it only been forty minutes? Or had it been more like a few hours? Or a full day? After my fall, I had no way of telling what time it was or how long I'd been gone. Moms and Cole would come looking for me. Moms would tell Finn to put out an amber alert.

I hacked away at a small tree I spotted on the forest floor and gathered the pieces in my arms, the hatchet hanging off my belt. When I returned to the fire, Ellis was singing to himself again-- low and slow, words I couldn't make out. "What time is it?" I asked, dropping the wood I'd collected.

He looked up from rotating the raccoon over the flame. He had draped its skin over his head. "Who are you?" he asked in a voice deeper than his previous speaking voice.

"Um, Jonah."

"No, not you. The one behind you." And Ellis pointed.

A chill went down my spine. I slowly turned around. But there was nothing except the woods. "There's nobody else. Just me, Ellis."

"I'd say about five PM, judging from the sun."

"What?"

"I'd say about five PM, judging from the sun. You asked what time it was."

"I have to get back home. They'll be looking for me."

Ellis removed the pelt from his head and stood. "Of course. Don't take advantage of that small joy. The joy of people missing you."

"How do I get back?"

“Back where?”

“Carbondale.”

“There are many entrances; be more specific.”

“Fulton Street, Lion’s Den Apartments, where the train tracks go into the woods.”

Ellis went inside his house and returned with a pencil and a scrap of toilet paper.

He drew a map that he said would lead me right back where I had started.

“Would you like me to save you some dinner for tomorrow, perhaps?” he asked, motioning to the sizzling coon.

“Don’t those things have rabies?”

“Rabies isn’t that bad.”

“You don’t mind if I come back?”

“Sure!” Ellis said. “I get off work around three PM. Just kidding!” But then his playfulness vanished, and he added, “But don’t you dare tell anyone else about this place, or I’ll have to make a very special stew. A you-stew,” he said, followed by a single, emphatic, “Ha!”

“I won’t tell anyone. I swear.”

“Pleased to meet y’all!” he waved.

13.

...Into temptation...

The map was strikingly accurate, with little notes about particular trees and unique rocks to look for on my way back to the tracks. It was after six PM when I finally arrived at the apartment. I'd rehearsed a story the whole way back about how I'd just gone to my friend Tookie's house. But I was a terrible liar. And how would I explain the gash in my head?

But the apartment was empty. No one was looking for me. There was no note on the refrigerator. No money to order a pizza. The joy of being missed. I walked to my room and plopped onto the bed. I landed on something thick. A book. I pulled it out from under me: *Don Quixote*. I opened the book and saw the note. Relief flooded over me. Thank God. Thank Finn.

I propped myself up with pillows and began to read. I was alone, and I was content. More than content. I felt what can only be described as peace, stillness; my spirit felt full and thankful. I'd already decided I'd go visit Ellis the very next day. I could skip English. I felt brave, brave enough even to try his raccoon stew. Maybe he could teach me how to make it. I laid awake for hours that night, fantasizing about all the wisdom, all the stories and adventures Ellis would share with me. I took out the square of toilet paper with the map he'd drawn and held it up to the window, letting the moon illuminate the path. Then I heard a thud from outside the front door.

I folded the map and placed it inside *Don Quixote*. Another thud against the door and muffled noises, lowered voices, panting, whimpers, cursing.

I crept out of bed wearing Cole's old jersey and some whitey-tighties I'd outgrown, following the commotion. Barefoot, I pulled myself up by the wooden beam above my bed to see if Cole was there. He was not. I dropped to the floor. I walked into the living room with the window. The TV was blank—no static. No trains from outside the window. Mom's door was open. She wasn't in her bed. Nobody was in the bathroom. I tiptoed towards the front door, listening for a clue as to what was going on.

I heard Cole. "Fuck yourself! You don't know what you're talking about!" he yelled. I had left the Infidel on the desk. Cole and somebody else were outside on the walkway, near balcony railing behind the door.

"You're about to be eighteen, Cole," I heard a familiar voice say. "And you have enough bricks to put you away a long time. Know how many years this shit costs you? Is it even worth it?" Then another thud on the door.

"Ugh," from Cole.

I heard another gravelly whisper, and I realized it was Finn. I made out the phrases "cut me in" and "secret's safe with me."

I heard Cole's feet shuffling to gain balance. I'd never heard Cole whimper before, but he sounded like the raccoon Ellis had caught earlier. I heard my brother's head slam once again into the door and Finn say, "Quit resisting, motherfucker!" Cole grew quiet after that, from what I heard.

Why was Finn slamming my brother's head against the door? I couldn't tell who was sketchier: My brother who never came in when he said he would, who hid his backpack from me, whose reputation got me beat up at school, who treated me like a kid. Or Finn—the shady cop who followed me and the goons to the crack-house, who slept

with Moms every other night, who lemme know what wine tasted like and insisted I give him info on what my bro was up to. I didn't know who I was supposed to trust as I squatted down behind the door.

Finn had said not to trust nobody. Not never. And Cole had fought with almost all of Moms' boyfriends in the past. Maybe this skirmish was inevitable.

I ran back to bed. Cole wouldn't tell me what was going on even if I asked.

The front door opened and closed, and I pretended to sleep. I heard the freezer door open and buzz from the kitchen. Cole trudged into our room. A plastic crinkling noise followed him. He had a hot pocket pressed against his face. He leapt into his bunk. Once he was settled, he asked, "You awake, J?"

I grunted.

"We gotta big game tomorrow night. We'll be top prospects to win state if we seal tomorrow. Scouts are gonna be there checking me out, too. You gonna come?"

"Sure. How will I get there?"

"Marie will pick you up."

"Ain't Moms coming?" I asked.

"Said she'd come, but I wouldn't count on it."

The silence filling the room held in it a defeat, a familiar despair that janked the joy I'd experienced earlier.

"I'm going to school early tomorrow," I lied.

"Okay."

He didn't even ask why. I didn't have to lie, because nobody cared.

As soon as light hit the curtains, I hopped up and packed. I again followed the map back to Ellis' hidden den. The sun wasn't fully up, and the air was brisk, sharp against my cheeks. As I approached his hut, I called out, "Ellis?! Ellis?" No answer. I had tried to forget about the strange behavior from the previous day, when he crawled on all fours and saw a ghost behind me. Everyone's humor is subjective, Miss Barringer'd said. She'd been trying to explain the humor in *Moby Dick*, which I did not see. I walked cautiously towards the shack. "Ellis?" I called out again.

Then I was tackled, blindsided from behind. All the air immediately disappeared from my lungs, and it felt like I'd forgotten how to breathe. I hit the ground hard. It was a naked Ellis. He pinned me down and screamed, "Who sent you?"

"It's me, Ellis! It's me, Jonah! You saved me from the water yesterday!"

He did not loosen his grip, but lowered his face down into mine. Our noses touched. His breath smelled like rancid pork. A terrible thought flashed through my mind: rabies. I squirmed and fought his grip hard as I could. His nose was pressed against mine, his breath and hair in my face, and his eyes flashed back and forth between mine as I yelled. Then his entire face softened. "I remember you."

He got off me and helped me to my feet. "What the hell," I said "Are you fucking crazy?"

"Sorry, Lord. Sometimes I don't remember so good."

"I just saw you yesterday!"

"Wait," he said, frowning again. "Who are you?"

“Are you kidding?” I braced for another impact.

“Yes! Let’s go for a swim.”

We walked down to the quarry-lake, and he dove into the freezing water.

“It’s too cold!” I screamed.

“No, it’s good for your heart and lungs,” he said, treading water.

“But I don’t have a suit,” I called from the bank.

“It’s not a wedding.”

“A swim suit.”

“Me either. The best way to swim is completely naked,” he informed me, spitting water into a little arch. “It reminds the body of the womb. Connects us with nature.”

“That’s bullshit,” I said.

“Suit yourself.”

I didn’t come all the way back here to watch him have all the fun. I slid out of my clothes and cannon-balled into the water. My chest collapsed. For the second time that morning, I couldn’t breathe. Ellis swam over to me and held me up between my armpits. “You’re ok. Just concentrate on your breath, and your body will adjust. Humanity’s greatest quality is our ability to adapt.”

The water sent a chill through my entire body, then a warm sensation, then numbness. “This is nice,” I said. “How deep is it?”

“Nobody knows.”

“What’s at the bottom?”

“Let’s try to find out.”

Ellis and I spent at least an hour seeing how far down we could dive, but we each failed to reach the bottom. As far as we were concerned, it went down forever.

Back at his hut, we built a fire, and he made coffee. We sat in the chairs wrapped up in blankets. “Your blankets smell like shit.”

“Probably because there’s shit on them.” He poured us some coffees. I hated coffee, but it warmed my hands and gut. “No school today?” he asked.

“I have school. I’m just skipping English.”

“Our native tongue! That’s perhaps the only class worth going to!” He kneeled on all fours and blew into the base of the flame.

“I’m still reading, though. So it kinda makes up for it.”

I pulled Barringer’s book from my bag. “*Quixote*,” I said.

“*Quixote*?” he repeated. “As in, *Don*?”

“Yeah. Cervantes,” I said. “You heard of it?”

“Well, hell. If that isn’t my favorite piece of story ever, I don’t know what is.”

I stood up. “It’s a great story! But it doesn’t make any sense! Why would anybody leave their house, their home, their mansion with everything they need to go in search of...” I trailed off, trying to remember what Barringer had said.

“In search of a destiny that might not be theirs?” Ellis’ eyes were glowing, fire reflecting from his pupils. He motioned for the book.

“Be careful,” I warned. “If it’s messed up at all, Barringer will kill me.”

“I know how to handle a book, Jonah.” Then he sneezed onto the cover. He wiped snot off with this blanket. He opened the book. “This inscription...”

“Yeah, Miss Barringer’s dad wrote it for her when she was little. He had the biggest mustache I’ve ever seen.”

“You met him?” he asked, reading the note.

“No. Just saw a—“

“*Pony up, Little Knight!* How lovely!” Then he set the book down and said, “Jonah, I have a favor to ask.”

Everybody wants something, I remembered Cole saying.

“What favor?”

“At your school, you have a library?”

“Yeah. I mean, it don’t have the best selection, but we have fiction, poetry, nonfiction, magazines--”

“Yes, yes, very good,” he said. His hands shook and his coffee was coming over the edge of his tin cup. “Do you think you could check out books and bring them to me, let me borrow them every once in a while? I’ve read everything in my possession hundreds of time and it’s become so dull. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“How?”

“I’ll teach you to hunt, skin, cook—take care of yourself in the direst situations. I’ll even teach you how to siphon gasoline. You’ll never have to pay for gas again.”

“I don’t drive.”

“What do you say?”

Internally, I was jumping up and down like a girl who just got a pony for her birthday. But I tried to play it cool in front of Ellis. “You gotta take good care of them.”

“On my mother’s life.”

“Yours moms is still alive?”

“Of course she is,” he said and looked back to his house. He waved.

“Okay, deal. I got *Moby Dick* in my bag. You wanna start with that one?”

“Absolutely.”

I took it from my backpack, and we swapped. He skimmed through the pages and lowered his nose into the binding, then took a strong whiff and sighed.

“You know,” I started, “Miss Barringer says this book is loaded with humor, but I don’t see it. I couldn’t even get through the first twenty pages.”

“I’d like to meet this Barringer of yours,” he said. “Now off you go. Back to school. I have reading to do.”

When asked why I missed first period, I said that Moms was sick, and I had to walk to school. I was wet and sweaty, and they bought it. Maybe I was getting better at lying. My foot didn’t even tap. The rest of my classes dragged on. Finally, the bell rang, and I walked home. On the way, I saw Teddy and Earrings. They were drinking chocolate milks outside the Circle K. Teddy pointed at me from across the street and laughed. Earrings slid his pointer finger across his neck from ear to ear. I walked faster, and did a giant loop around Lion’s Den Apartments just in case they were following me and still didn’t know where I lived.

No sign of Moms, and Marie was running late. Finally, she honked from outside, and I ran down the steps two at a time. I hopped in the passenger seat of her Buick.

“Whoa—what you doing? I ain’t here for you,” she said.

“Shut up,” I retorted.

“For real-- Get out, dude.”

“But, Marie--”

“I’m just kidding, J. You ready to watch your bro?” she said as she threw the Buick into drive.

“Yeah, but he’s always good. Why’s this game so special.”

“If they win this one,” Marie started as she swerved out of the lot, “they’ll be top prospects for state finals.”

“Is that pretty good?” I asked.

Marie laughed. “Yeah, that’s good. It means they’re one of the best teams in the state.”

“How big is the state of Illinois?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Bigger than Rhode Island.”

“How big’s Rhode Island?”

“Bigger than you.”

“I’d never guessed you dropped out of school.”

The only parking spots left at the gym were across the street in a gravel overflow lot, about a hundred miles away. There was already a low roar building inside the gymnasium, and I felt it rumbling like the Colosseum before I even unbuckled my seatbelt.

There was a ticket-taker at the door. "Tickets, please," he said.

"No, I'm Cole Blair's girlfriend, and this is his little brother, Jonah," Marie said.

The ticket-taker wasn't buying it. "Look, young lady, these tickets support tonight's fundraiser; so if you ain't got a ticket, I can't let you in."

"But..." Marie started.

"Sorry, ma'am," the taker said, "but you can go buy tickets out front."

"They're all sold out!" Marie told him.

He shrugged and motioned for us to move aside so he could allow others in. I followed Marie back outside. "Motherfu--," she started.

"Marie, please, watch your language around me," I smirked.

She glanced down the side of the building. "Think you could climb through that window if I boosted you up?" she asked.

"What y'all doing out here? I need you cheering for me!" Cole said, coming up behind us. He was in his warmups and basketball kicks, which he never wore outside.

"Come on. Follow me."

He led us inside, past the ticket taker. Marie snapped in his face and cursed at him in Spanish. I mean, it sounded like cursing. Cole was the man. "Okay," Cole started once we were inside. "Y'all go find some seats in the stands, and we'll be out there soon."

Marie gave him a kiss. Then he and I did our hand shake: slap hands, bump fists, back-slap hands. Cole ran back to the locker room. Marie bought some popcorn, and we sat down on the home-team side of the gym. Marie made some extra space on the seat next to hers. When I asked what for, she told me Moms said she might come. I laughed in her face at this, and she scolded me.

“Hey!” she said over the roars of the crowd as the teams began their lay-up lines. “Hey! Your Moms said she’d be here, told Cole she’d be here. And if she ain’t, that’s fine. But if she is, that’s good, too. At least you gotta momma who cares about y’all, Jonah. Hand me that popcorn.”

I passed her the bag and muttered, “*Cares* is a strong word.”

“What you say?” Marie asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

Jump ball. Cole’s team got set on defense. Cole got a steal, made an assist for a lay-up.

After thirty minutes, we were in half-time and Cole had scored fourteen points.

“You want anything to drink?” Marie asked.

“Get me a forty?”

She smiled, flashing that silver cap on her incisor. I loved her cap, because the only time you could really see it was when she smiled big, like, really smiled. And she had a great smile. I hoped Cole would marry her. Marie was cool as hell. Plus, she had a sweet shoe hook-up.

With two minutes left in the game, Cole’s team was down by ten. Cole dribbled up the court. The other team was not pressing, so Cole blew by his defenders. He pulled up from the three-point line and drilled the shot. Cole’s team was within seven points to tie the game, a minute and a half left to play. I was shoving popcorn into my face like no tomorrow. There were two men in burgundy and orange polos in the stands sitting in

front of us on the bleachers. Cole later explained that they were scouts-- that he had a good chance of getting recruited at Southern Illinois University, and they'd come to this game to watch him play. "Southern Illinois University is in Carbondale," he'd explain. "I wouldn't have to move. Nothing would have to change."

With a minute and a half left, the other team missed two free throws. Cole brought the ball up the court and dished it to the shooting guard. Their team was running a motion offense, which Cole always told me is the best offense. Cole ran by a screen to the corner and got the rock. He pulled up for the three, and the ball clinked against the iron, bounced off the backboard, but finally rolled through the rim. They were only down by four points after that.

After multiple timeouts and many free-throws, Cole's team was up by one point with twenty seconds left to go. The other team was bringing it down the court when Marie and I both noticed the gym doors under the far goal open. These were not doors for public access. Moms walked in. She was wearing a green shimmy-shake short dress, and her hair had a fresh strand of purple blazing by her ear. She scoured the stands. Marie stood and waved, and Moms caught her and waved back. I did an awkward duck behind Marie and sat back down on the bleacher, finishing the popcorn. The buzzer sounded, and the rivals had knocked the ball out of bounds. It was still 61-60 with Cole's team in the lead. Moms came and sat beside me in the seat Marie had been saving the entire game. Moms was glowing. She was ecstatic, all grins and bright eyes. She hugged Marie and kissed me on the cheek. "What'd I miss?" she asked.

"Just the game," I said.

"Huh?" she asked, cupping her hand to her ear.

“They’re up by one,” I said.

She went crazy for Cole, jumping up and down, screaming, booing the refs, and even managed to start the wave during a time-out. “Go Cole! You got ‘em, baby! That’s my Cole!” Then she kissed my cheek again. To me, she seemed to be making up for missing the previous—oh-- hour and a half of the game by chanting too loudly. “Go Cole!” She screamed again. She was uncontrollable, and my cheeks grew hot. It’s one of the only times I remember being embarrassed by her.

Cole’s teammate passed the ball in from out of bounds. It was stolen by the other team. There was four seconds left on the clock. Cole raced down the court and blocked the dude’s lay-up. The buzzer sounded. Cole’s team won by one point. Everybody went nuts. And Moms had seen an entire forty seconds of it. For the first time, in the backdrop of all the fans, all the raging and ranting for Cole and his team, I felt the animosity towards Moms he’d always felt. I became Cole. The whole thing was a perfect reflection of what her role as a mother to us had been. Present and absent at the same time. Finally, during this celebratory moment with confetti falling from the rafters and basketball players leaping up and down over one another and fans chanting wildly—I had a small taste what Cole’s anger was. Why Cole’s anger was. I understood Cole separate from his anger, yet I understood then why his anger existed, how it’d become a part of him. Everyone cheered and slapped hands and high-fived. Moms and Marie were hugging and jumping up and down.

“I won!” I heard Moms say.

“What?” Marie yelled over the crowd.

“I won!” Moms said again. Then she looked at me, grabbed my hands and tossed me around in a circle. “I won, Jonah! I won!”

Moms explained that she’d just won three thousand dollars at the casino before Cole’s game. That’s why she was late. “Lemme take y’all out to eat!” she screamed as we celebrated Cole’s victory.

Marie and Moms jumped in a circle together, holding each other’s hands. I was still holding the popcorn bag. We waited for Cole to return from the locker room. Once he emerged, Moms ran up to him, arms outstretched, taking little steps so her dress didn’t ride up over her ass. Lots of men in the stands, left over dudes in the crowds, took notice of her. They always did. She wrapped her arms around Cole. From where Marie and I stood in the bleachers watching their conversation, it was all about as awkward as we’d imagined it’d be. While Moms and Cole spoke down on the gym floor, Marie elbowed me. “How them new boots treating you, J?”

“They’re good,” I responded. “Good traction. Good tread. Comfy. I gotta wear thick socks, else I get blisters.”

“That’s how all good hiking boots work,” she said, though she still eyed Cole and Moms. “Where you hike at?”

“Mostly the woods behind the house,” I answered.

I waited for a response. Then she registered what I said. “You actually gone back there?”

I nodded. “Twice.”

“What you see?”

“Lots of trees. Train tracks. Trails...” As soon as I started talking, Marie had quit listening to me. “Ghosts, demons, crackheads...” She was again gazing downwards at Moms and Cole on the basketball floor, trying to decipher what was happening between them. I continued, “One of the trails leads to Ellis’ house. But it’s more like a hut. But a nice hut. His bed is even lofted, kinda like Cole’s top bunk in our room. He’s gonna start reading all the library books I check out. We also swam together naked this morning.”

“Cool, J...” Marie said distractedly. She was still watching Cole and Moms on the basketball floor, trying to read their lips, their body language. Cole’s basketball shoes were tied together and slung over his shoulder. He’d changed out of his game gear into his street clothes. Their conversation had obviously been tense, even Marie and I could tell that from where we watched them in the bleachers. But Cole and Moms hugged. She rubbed his head and kissed his cheek. Moms looked up and spotted me and Marie in the stands. She waved. We waved back. Cole turned around and wiped his eyes.

Moms took me, Cole, and Marie out to eat at Golden Corral after his big game.

“Order anything you want,” Moms said as we entered the doors.

“It’s a buffet,” Cole responded. “We can eat anything we want.”

“So get whatever you want,” Marie chided him.

“And then get more!” Moms said.

“How many?” the hostess asked.

“Four,” Moms answered.

“Finn ain’t coming?” I asked.

Moms looked at me with an eyebrow raised. Marie pinched my elbow and whispered, “Don’t fuck up a perfectly good dinner, J.”

I got in line and took my plate. I piled it high with orange chicken, rice, and veggie rolls. I scooted these helpings across the plate to make room for the sweet and sour chicken, the General Tao’s, and the wide rice noodles. I took the plate back to our table. Moms sat there, picking at a piece of pecan pie. I went back to build another plate. This time, I put lobster tail and macaroni and cheese on one half of the plate. Then something miraculous caught my attention, something I’d never seen before, something so beautiful that all time and space shut down in my mind. I still remember the dark brown waves folding over one another now: It was a fountain of chocolate, bubbling, spewing downwards, then re-erupting from the spigot in the center, chocolate cascading downwards in dark, milky pools. I put a finger under one of the chocolate cascades. “Hey!” a chef from behind the bar yelled at me. “No touching! Put it on your plate, man!”

“How much can I have?” I asked.

“Much as you want,” he said.

I placed my plate under the chocolate fountain. I covered my lobster tails and mac and cheese in the filmy, dark sweet goo. I took the plate back to my seat. Moms was still there, staring at her slice of pie, picking at the crust. Marie sat quietly across from Moms, munching on a cheeseburger. And Cole was trying to figure out how to crack his crab legs. I sat beside Moms.

“Whoa, J. The hell is that?” Cole asked.

“Chocolate lobster,” I said.

“Gross,” Marie said.

I looked at Cole’s plate. He was cracking different joints on his crab legs, trying to suck out the meat like a straw. Marie and I laughed at him. “It’s better than chocolate lobster,” he said.

“Moms?” I asked. She looked up. “All you gonna eat’s pie?”

“Nah, I’ll get something else soon.”

Cole mumbled with a mouthful of crabmeat, “Dunno what you so glum about, Moms. All that lotto money. All that rent money. All that Finn money.”

Marie stomped on his toe under the table. He didn’t budge.

“Why the hell are you so against your momma dating a decent man?” Moms whispered, not looking up from her pie. She sounded pathetic, but Cole didn’t care.

“I ain’t against you dating a decent man. I’m against this crooked hillbilly you’re dating now.”

“Every fuckin’ time, Cole--” Moms started, noticeably louder this time. She looked up from her plate. “You been against every man I ever brought back to our house--”

“Our apartment,” Cole interrupted. “I been against every man you brought back to our *apartment*. How long you been promising me and Jonah a house, a real house to grow up in?” Cole looked at me. I shrugged and kept eating. Chocolate was all over my face.

“See,” Cole said. “He don’t even remember because you been promising so long. I ‘member when I was his age. You talking all that shit. And now I’m about to move out the apartment—go to college, even!-- and you’re talking about, what, a few thousand

bucks? Your promises don't mean shit, Moms. You can't even make it to a basketball game."

"Ok, Cole, settle down," Marie whispered, patting his leg.

"Damn, Cole. Can't you wait to fight until after everybody's eaten decent?" I mumbled.

Moms sat silently. But Cole was on a role.

"You brought some dudes back to that apartment that, if it wasn't for me, would've killed me or Jonah. Would've killed you, even."

"Where?" Moms said, wiping a crocodile tear from her cheek.

"Where what?" Cole asked.

"Where you going to college?"

"Some scouts from Southern Illinois were there tonight. I have a full ride to play ball."

"So you ain't gonna have to move away?" she asked.

"I got a full ride at SIU," Cole announced to the table. "Talked to the scouts tonight outside the locker room. But I'd have to move into the athlete dorms. And truth is, I don't feel comfortable leaving my little brother in that apartment with you, Moms. You don't know Finn—nothing about him, what he is, how slimy he is. And you didn't even know I was being scouted for college ball. You don't know nothing about us—Including who our daddy's are! We're your only kids—I think-- and you don't give a fuck about us. You spend your whore money on lottery tickets instead of setting up college funds for me and J. Fuck you and that pole you dance on. Only reason I'm even still here is because I care about J."

“Hey, thanks, man. I care about you, too,” I said.

Cole and Moms fought all the time, but this one in the East Side Golden Corral was different. I was watching Cole disown our mother.

Cole stormed away, and Marie followed. He grabbed his plate and loaded it with food before he left. Cole had cussed out Moms before. But never like this.

14.

... *But deliver us...*

Ellis became my best friend over the next few weeks. And I was always scared my best friend would kill me. But it never meant that I was scared enough to stay home.

“Does your father know you’re here,” Ellis asked me once while we were chopping and collecting wood for the fire. “Or that you skip school to come back here and enjoy the company of a homeless, wild, crazy man?”

“You ain’t homeless,” I said. “And you ain’t crazy.”

Ellis pushed me to the ground. “Don’t tell me what I am and what I ain’t, boy. You all say *homeless* like it’s such a bad thing. Like your little apartment is so majestic. I seen where you live.”

One thing I’d learned about Ellis was that his mood, his personality, sometimes even his voice and dialect—they were consistently inconsistent. I mean, he was always still Ellis, but I never knew what version of him I’d get on any particular day. And I remember this day well: asshole day. “C’mon, Ellis. You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Is he dead then?”

“Who? My pop?”

“No-- fucking John Lenin.” He swung the hatchet into a slender, young elm.

“Yes, kid, your dad. He know you’re back here?”

“I don’t even think he knows about me at all. Or if he’s alive, or what.” I gathered thick branches and sticks from the ground—ones we could use for rotisserie stakes and kindling

“So he fucked your mom and left. You were born in the void. Bastard. Guess what? Heard that story. Read that book. Saw that movie.”

I dropped the bundle of sticks I was carrying. “Ellis, I’m gonna take off.”

“Was he white?”

“Was my dad white?”

“Jesus Christ, Lord, kid-- are you gonna echo my questions all day, or what?”

“No.”

“No, he wasn’t white; or no, you ain’t gonna play parrot all day?”

“No, I’m leaving. See you soon.”

Ellis swung the hatchet into the ground and moved in front of me. He put up his hands, palms facing me. “Wait, wait. I’m sorry. You know I’m not always *myself*.” He winked.

I nodded and began to pick back up the branches. “Moms is white. So I assume my dad is black or tan or mixed or something—Egyptian? Nanna’s Egyptian, I think. Or maybe just Mexican. Guatemalan? I dunno. We never talk about it. Why’s it matter?”

“I’m not sure it does. I’ve just been thinking about diaspora recently.”

“Dia-whatta?”

“I just noticed your haircut.”

“What’s wrong with my haircut?” I asked.

“You do it yourself?”

“My brother does my hair...”

Ellis grinned.

“Fuck you. Moms and Cole are white. My pop was something else. I’m something else.”

“You’re aware of the climate in the country, yeah?” he asked. We headed back towards his house.

“No?” I said. Or maybe asked. I didn’t understand the question.

“The climate--” he continued, “it’s one with certain, uh, racial overtones.”

“Hasn’t it always been like that?” I asked.

“Only since the beginning. The beginning of America. People get offended now days when you ask them what ethnicity they are, as if the answer to that question would somehow predetermine the way I treated them. As if it’s racist to wonder about other folks’ backgrounds, roots, heritage, culture, family. I’m just genuinely intrigued. I don’t care about the answer to that question, nor would I treat anyone differently based on their response. Unless, of course, they say they’re white. Then I automatically treat them like a racist asshole.” Ellis laughed. “My grandpa is full-blooded Comanche. *Was* full-blooded Comanche,” he said.

“He’s dead?” I asked, dropping the sticks beside the fire pit.

“Yup, he’s gone now. For all his tricks and everything he taught me-- how to survive and stay alive-- none of them could beat colon cancer.”

Ellis’ knees poked through his tattered jeans. Dark, scarred kneecaps bulging through the denim. He sat, whittled with his large knife, and its sheath was holstered on his belt. I wondered whether or not I was watching him create the spit by which he’d roast me, twirl me over the flame and cook me rotisserie-style one day. Was this the fire I was to die over, literally? Was this the last conversation I was to have? Every time I

visited Ellis, I had that thought run across my brain: *Is this the last time?* And yet, that never kept me from skipping class, from sneaking out of the apartment, from counting the rungs between my apartment and the trail that led to his sanctuary in the quarry forest. I'd memorized the map he drew for me. I could get to his place and mine with my eyes closed. I was always scared, but never scared enough to stay home.

It was almost Christmas.

"Ellis, what's human meat taste like?" I asked him once on a Friday afternoon.

Christmas break was getting close. I'd had no trouble from Teddy and his crew, although I wished they could see me now. I was friends with the soul of the quarry. I was creating my own legacy in the heart of the ghost-story. I was becoming acquaintances with myths and making family of legends. But Teddy never spoke to me again. Neither did his goons. Suppose I had Finn to thank.

I skipped last period, Social Studies, I think, and dipped out of Lonsdale. I crossed the street, followed the alleyways, kept an eye out for Finn or any other grown-ups who might think my hooky-playing to be suspicious. My grades admittedly had begun to suffer with the classes I was missing. But it wasn't my fault I was learning more from a schizophrenic bum than I was at my own school.

I developed a path from school to the back of my apartments which kept me relatively unseen. From there, I'd throw my hood on and skip along the railway rungs two, three at a time into the trees. The path was my own personal underground railroad,

created specifically to sneak myself out of real life and into fantasy, or from out of horror and into comedy. Never sure which was which.

I had *White Fang* for Ellis to read. He moved some decoy tree limbs off the path to his home. We sat outside his house, and I stoked the fire. I went into his house and grabbed the hatchet from the corner of his room. He looked at me like it was a crazy question.

What's human meat taste like? It seemed harmless enough.

It was getting cold outside. Like, flurries and icicles cold. Ellis was quiet and stood behind his camping chair, watching me stoke the fire. Once I noticed the silence, I stood up. It was a gray hazy day, overcast sky, clouds rolling into one another in great dusty collisions. The embers of the fire pit behind his shanty reflected dully off his root beer can, like rainbows recorded on black and white film. He spoke slowly, and he spoke softly, "Kid, I ain't tasted human before, but I've always wondered... You know something I don't?"

I sighed. "No. I bet it don't taste bad though."

"Damn, Lord! I thought I was in for a story! I always wanted to try it."

"You have to think," I began, turning my attention back to the fire, "if all these wild animals eat humans down to the bone, then it can't taste awful. We can't be that bad, I mean. At the very least, we're packed with nutrients."

Ellis laughed.

"Oh, I brought you another book. It's due after Christmas break, so you have like, two weeks."

Ellis began to rifle through my backpack and found *White Fang*. I threw some logs on the fire and sat beside him.

“You know there’s stories about this place. The quarry. About you,” I said. “Or the legend of someone like you.”

“Ghost stories, I’m sure,” Ellis said, thumbing through the pages. “Can I make notes in this one? I haven’t read it in probably fifty years.”

“No, never in the library books.”

“Right. Miss Barringer,” he said, not looking up. “That elusive fox.”

“Ghost stories and stuff, mostly. Everyone thinks they’re real. Even the grown-ups. They say people come out here and never come back.”

“If they never come back, then where do the stories come from?”

I shrugged.

“You been out here how many times now? And you always go back. Then return. Whistle that song through the trees, and I know my little shadow has come again. What’s there to be scared of?”

“People say spirits live out here. Cannibals, too.”

“I guess if we count the souls of the mice and rabbits and raccoons that we eat--”

“And possums,” I added.

“And possums-- those could be spirits, if animals have spirits. So the stories aren’t entirely wrong. But cannibals? I’ve killed the last four men who’ve ventured back here. But Jesus, I’d never eat them, despite being curious about the taste. Especially this one heavy fellow.” Ellis licked his lips. “I could practically taste his meat marinating and

marbling in his own fat. I was practically foaming at the mouth when I slit his throat and wondered if I should chop him up—maybe just an arm.”

We stared at each other. Then a smile crept over his face behind his beard. We both laughed. Then, a snap from the woods. A trap had been triggered.

“Dinner?” I asked.

I didn't wait for Moms or Cole to come home with late night meals in those days. I ate good, consumed the souls of the forest, and I went to sleep early, before anybody knew I'd even been gone. The joys of never being missed.

15.

...From evil...

As Christmas and the new year of '94 passed, I felt I was becoming a man. Finn had fully invaded our house by this time. He and Moms said "I love you" to each other. He spent the night three or four nights a week. He hovered over Cole, and Cole hated him with a ripe fury, reminding us all under his breath about how he'd be moving out soon anyway.

But Finn always proofread my homework for me, double-checked my answers on worksheets, asked what books I was reading, helped me study for vocabulary and spelling tests. For instance, I remember the word *partition* gave me difficulty in one of my spelling lessons, but Finn dissected in terms I understood. "*Part* is over here on the left, and the other part, *ition*, is on the right side. It's a division, a separation. Part here, part there. See? *Partition*"

Finn wasn't *invading* our home as much for me. He seemed more to co-exist with us. Why do I feel guilty, now, admitting that I liked his company? But co-existing with Cole was impossible if you weren't blood. The tension in our apartment had grown nearly tangible.

Moms asked Finn not to smoke in the house, so he began cracking open the big window in our living room late at night and blew his fumes outside when she wasn't around or if she was asleep, when he caught the late-night craving. When I couldn't fall asleep myself—which was becoming more and more frequent in those days—I wandered out into the living room. I'd find Finn there in the corner squatting by the window in his

tank top. He was only a blue-black silhouette against the far wall with a crimson cigarette butt that glowed clementine as he puffed and exhaled, the gray smog drifting out the window into the winter night.

I found him there on his perch one night when I got up for some water. I was excited and couldn't sleep because Ellis had promised to teach me how to use a peace-pipe the next day, like his ancestors did. I'd seen Ellis smoke the pipe before, but he'd never offered it to me. "Too sacred," Ellis explained. "You have to be of Comanche blood to take part."

But after much begging and the turn of the new year, Ellis told me I could be an exception. "Skip your last class—which one is it again?"

"Science," I told him.

"Bah! How vague! That's like me asking you what you want for supper, and you saying *food*."

Naturally, I was too excited to sleep, looking forward to the peace pipe the next day. So I got up for some water. My mattress creaked. I stood and saw Cole, a lump underneath the covers of his top bunk facing the wall. It's funny, as much as I thought of him—think of him—as a real man's man at that time, no man I know sleeps in the top of a bunk bed. No man sleeps in a bunk bed at all, for that matter. The crescent moon outside was throwing enough shadows into our room, penetrating the makeshift blackout curtain over the window, that I could see the hump of Cole, huddled and tucked underneath his blankets, chest swelling up and down. In the relative silence of our room, I could see his silhouette bulge underneath his comforter, then deflate with each exhale. Cole sleeping above me had always given me confidence, security-- like a ghetto-esque

guardian angel. I realized many years later that I'd never had much trouble falling asleep, unlike so many other kids on the East side. I never had to worry or be scared. If any unwelcome being ever crossed the threshold of mine and Cole's room, Cole would jump down in a righteous fury and gut them clean, then hang their brains outside our apartment door warning anyone else who might have any ideas.

It hit me then as I stared at my brother: he was leaving soon, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I crept across the floorboards and opened our bedroom door, holding my breath as I closed it shut. That's when I saw Finn across the living room, perched in the window.

"Wile E.," Finn whispered. "Can you still smell this in your room?" he asked, blowing smoke out into the air.

"Nah."

"Come sit with me," Finn breathed. He scooted over on the window sill. "Why you still awake?"

"Can't sleep," I said, squatting next to him. I could see our breath floating in between us like wispy ghosts, intertwining and dispersing in the same instant. Our thighs rubbed together where we sat. Finn wore white boxers and a Carbondale Police Department hoodie. I wore a pair of whitey-tighties and one of Cole's old shirts that went down to my knees. Goosebumps prickled up my spine and spread over my body. I shivered in the coldness coming through the open window, Finn's cigarette the only source of heat. I scooted closer to him.

"Big day tomorrow?" he asked.

"K-kinda," I stuttered.

Finn removed his hoodie and handed it to me. It smelled like smoke, but smoke is warm. I looked out the open window, saw the train tracks, knew every rung that led from here to Ellis'. "Any of them goons been giving you any trouble in school?"

I shook my head. "Nah. I ain't even seen them, really. Except for Tino. He's been my friend a long time though. He never went to the house or nothing."

"That's good," Finn muttered.

"Can I try a puff of your smoke?" I asked. I wanted to practice smoking before trying Ellis' peace-pipe.

"I could get in trouble," he said. If a tone of voice could manifest itself, Finn's then would've been smirking.

"You already gave me wine, Finn. C'mon," I badgered.

"Nah, cigarettes are bad for you. Don't you know these things give you cancer?"

"Why you smoke them, then?"

He ashed outside the window. Some of the embers flew to the carpet at our feet.

"I ever tell you about Ratki?" Finn asked.

I shook my head.

"I was a rookie, just out of the academy, when me and my partner got a call for a B&E over near Braxton Ave. in North Hills."

"Ain't that where the Krispy Kreme is?"

"Sure is."

"They're the best. Was Krispy Kreme getting janked?" I asked.

"No."

"Thank God."

“The B&E was happening in the neighborhood behind Krispy Kreme. One of the neighbors saw this dude walk right into the house across the street, some stranger in a blue jumpsuit. The neighbor, she called 9-1-1. It was the middle of the day when we got the call, too.”

“Why would anybody jank a house in daytime?” I asked.

“He’d been casing the place for weeks, apparently. He waited until the family that lived there went on vacation, and he dressed up like a plumber, backed his van right up to their garage. The neighbor knew the family was out of town and called them when she saw the guy tinkering with the front door. Family told her they hadn’t called no plumber. And get this—the neighbor, she didn’t call until an hour and a half after the robber had been in the house!” Finn threw his cigarette out the window and reached into the pocket of his hoodie, which I was then wearing. He felt around my stomach, and I felt his searching fingers through the cotton, on my gut. He took out the soft pack of Winston’s and flicked one into his mouth. “The cocky son of a bitch was taking his sweet time, loading everything from TV’s to jewelry to blenders and microwaves all into his van.” Finn put the cigs back in the pocket of the hoodie.

“But you caught him?” I asked, lighting Finn’s cigarette for him.

“Yeah, we caught him. His name was Reggie Atkins. Ratki, they called him. This was the sixth house he’d robbed in two months.”

“Did you have to shoot him; did you kill Ratki?”

“Nah. When we pulled up, he knew he was toast. He tried for all of five seconds to convince us he was just the plumber. When I asked him about the Nintendo in his van,

he laughed and told me the Mario Brothers are plumbers, too. He didn't put up no fight. We booked him, but he was back on the streets in less than six months."

"Wish we had a Nintendo," I mumbled.

"The second time I caught Ratki, he was doing the exact same thing in the exact same neighborhood. The third time Rat got caught, he was in a busted-up Honda Civic, pulling the same shit, only this time pretending to be a cable installer. Thing was, Rat had been a real plumber, had been an electrician. He had lots of handy skills. He could've made an honest living if he wanted to."

"So why was he robbing houses all the time?" I asked, staring at the tip of Finn's cigarette as he exhaled.

"The last time I saw Ratki, he'd just tried to stick up a pawn shop with a cap gun. The owner saw the red tip of the gun and pulled out a sawed-off from below the cash register. Ratki got half his leg blown off on that one. We go to the scene before the ambulance. Rat just lying there, whimpering in his own blood. He was a fucking idiot, but I felt bad for the guy for some reason. I gave him a sip from my flask—I'd started drinking by that time-- only takes a few years in the Dale to do that, make anybody start drinking. But you know what he told me?"

I shook my head.

"Blood was spurting all over the place, and I'd tied a tourniquet just below his knee, a bloody stump by this point, his calf and shin barely hanging on by shredded skin and tendons. The pawn shop owner was screaming in Arab and pacing back and forth. My partner had to sit the owner down and collect the shells from his gun. Sawed-offs are illegal. But Ratki, lying there on the ground, smiled with his head in my lap and tapped

his pocket. ‘He thought I was going for the safe in the back,’ he whispered, coughing up blood. ‘But he didn’t see me swipe the Rolex.’ Me and Ratki both laughed—he had this hee-haw horsey laugh when he really got going-- and when the ambulance showed up, Rat handed me the watch, asked me to keep it for him until he got out.”

“But you gave it back; you gave the watch back to the pawn shop owner, right?”

Finn flashed his wrist in the moonlight. A silver wristband glistened in the twinkle from the window. *ROLEX* on the face.

“You gonna give it back to him when he gets out?”

“He ain’t getting out. Had a heart attack in jail. Buried him last year.”

“You gonna give it back to the pawn shop owner *now*? I mean, since you ain’t holding it for Rat no more?”

“But then I’d have to explain why I was holding it for all this time, and that’d make me look bad. So I’m just gonna hold on to it for now.”

“You ain’t gonna lemme have a puff are you?”

Finn flicked his half-smoked cig out the window and closed the pane. “I’m gonna hold on to them for now.”

I got a glass of water and fell asleep in his hoodie.

I ditched Science and crept along the back alleys towards Lion’s Den, then I lurched onto the train tracks and sprinted into the forest. I removed the decoy branches

from the trail in the forest about two miles back into the woods. When I saw the giant crystal bowl of water in the quarry, I whistled the tune, and Ellis came to meet me.

“Can I have a beer?” I asked him as we sat at the fire behind his hut.

“Absolutely not. Not before the ceremony. But drink this.” He passed me a white bowl that reminded me of a hollowed-out skull. It was full of clear-ish liquid.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Drink it,” he said.

I did.

Then he took out the peace-pipe, a long wooden pipe with a red feather tied to the shaft, which he called Gandalf-esque, and he lit the bowl with a match. Then he passed it to me and told me to do the same, light the bowl like this. It took a few tries to hold the pipe in place between my lips as I reached out and tried to spark a match. I asked him if I could use a lighter instead, but he told me no. That matches were more natural. It took me all of a hundred hours to light the bowl myself, but once I did—once I inhaled—my brain got light and my blood turned into cotton candy syrup, oozing inside my veins, and everything slowed down. I felt like a balloon, floating skywards, becoming a cloud, abandoning the Dale and all the life I’d lived, and I felt happy as I exhaled the Nagasaki from my lungs, happy to leave Moms in the Lion’s Den, happy to leave Cole and Marie and Nanna, happy to leave Ellis and the woods and the quarry. We passed the pipe back and forth on the floor of his hut.

When I came to, I was inside Ellis’ hut, on his mattress and looking outside the car windshield which he’d set as a window beside his bed. Ellis was dressed only in a

loin cloth made of leaves, and he was rearranging the mats on the floor. Again, I saw *Nikki* there on his chest. “Who’s N-Nikki?” I stammered, rubbing my eyes.

Ellis looked up.

I threw my legs over the edge of the mattress and read the mat under my feet once again, *Welcome Home*, it said. “Why are you always naked?” I asked. “It’s freezing.”

“Best to enjoy the peace that the peace-pipe brings while in our natural state, the one Nature gives us. Capital ‘N’ Nature. That’s your science lesson for today.”

“Shit,” I mumbled. My head felt empty. “What was in that thing?”

“The pipe?” Ellis asked. He stood up, and his hair and beard were wild gray and black streaks of lightning, growing into trails of patches leading down his neck, his stomach, snaking around his chest, around his nipples, around *Nikki*. His skin-- his skeleton, it seemed-- was all stitched together by the unending patches of bristly hairs covering his body, like the Wolf-man.

“Yes,” I answered from the mattress, head still fuzzy. “What did we smoke? What was in the peace-pipe?”

“Technically, it’s called *salvia*. But my grandfather used to call it *salvia*.”

“Salvia—I heard about salvia.”

Ellis laughed and scratched his balls. “It’s legal here, so I imagine you have.” He sniffed his fingers. “What’d you think?”

“What about the bowl you gave me? What was in the skull-- I mean, the white bowl? What’d I drink?” I stammered, my legs dangling off his mattress. *Welcome Home*, I read again from the floor mat. It was all like bad *déjà vu*.

“Blood,” he responded, stone-faced.

My stomach sank. “Bl--uhh?” I slurred.

My throat felt thick, and the insides of my mouth had little blisters sprouting along the insides of my cheeks. My mouth felt, tasted different as I tongued along its edges. My tongue was swollen. It was like I’d been sucking on tree branches, or chewing on cud like a cow, regurgitating old grass and roots, chew, swallow, repeat. There were sores underneath my teeth on my gums, and my teeth felt wooden. “Blood?” I repeated. I began dry-heaving.

Ellis laughed again. “Nah, I’m just fucking with you. It was just water in the bowl to clear your pallet. One needs to experience the peace-pipe pure-mouthed and clear-headed,” he said. “But it was definitely salvia in the pipe.”

I ran outside and vomited in the grass. I leaned against the gnarled, twisted tree that overlooked the quarry. The water sparkled in the dusk under the cliff, the night sky with its stars and waning moon, and I thought of the bodies Ellis joked about beneath the water—the ones that might or might not have been sent by him to the bottom—sunken, by his hand. I wondered if I’d ever meet them, join them. Dry-heave, vomit. If I could ever dive down that far. If I’d ever sink deep into the endlessness of somewhere like the quarry, somewhere nobody would ever find me. Ellis came outside, still holding down laughter, still wearing only his Tarzan cloth in front of God and everybody, and he rubbed my back as I vomited. To the day, I don’t know if he was a killer. I don’t know how much of what he said was shit-talk, truth, or jokes.

“Drink some water,” he told me, offering me a plastic bottle. I tried to wave him off, but he kept scratching and rubbing as I doubled over into the weeds. His touch was soothing, and I gulped from the bottle he handed me. “Not too fast,” he said.

I threw up one or two more good hurls before it was all just air and gag reflex, but Ellis kept comforting me. “The peace-pipe ain’t for everyone,” he said. “That don’t mean peace ain’t for everyone. First time I ever tried to smoke—how old are you again?”

“Twelve,” I said, straightening up.

“Right--” he continued. “I was about your age when I sat down to smoke with my own family. We were all huddled around a camp fire, sitting on tree stumps back in the woods of South Kansas.”

“Was the experience just as pleasant then?” I asked.

“No,” Ellis said, staring off into the dusked-over quarry. “I got stung by fucking wasps. The log I sat on was infested with them. Wasps or hornets or yellow-jackets. I don’t know. But whatever they were, they started stinging my ass soon as I sat down.”

“Literally, your ass?” I asked.

I was feeling better, but Ellis still rubbed my back gently, softly, the way Moms used to do when I was a kid and had to stay home sick from school.

“Yes, literally. I tried to run, but when swarms of insects get together like that, they take on a hive mentality. They saw one or two sting me in my ass, and the rest of them followed.”

I chuckled at the thought of this, Ellis, this wild-man vagrant getting torn up by a couple of bees. “So what happened?” I asked.

“Once everybody saw what was happening, saw the horde stinging me, they all ran away. But my grandpa grappled me up, carried me away into the woods to safety.

‘Where’s it hurt, where’d they get you?’ he asked me. ‘My ass,’ I cried. I was blind from

the pain. My eyes swole shut. I tried to open them, but all I remember is red and black spots, neon splotches. Turned out I was pretty allergic.”

“Your gramps must’ve been proud of how tough you were,” I joked. “All that Comanche blood, I guess.”

“Were you a sarcastic dickhead before I saved you from drowning, or did I teach you to be this way?” Ellis asked.

“Are you always naked, or just when sixth grade boys are around?”

“This isn’t naked,” he said. “This is just skin.”

“What’d your gramps do—about the stings, I mean?” I asked as we headed back to his hut.

“He unpacked the peace pipe and applied it to my afflictions.”

“Wait,” I said. “Your grandfather rubbed salvia all over your bare ass?”

“And it sunk in through the wounds. Talk about a trip. I met God that day. She said to say hello for her.”

We reached his house, and I collected my things. It began to snow. He handed me the library copy of *Catcher in the Rye*. “What’d you think about it?” I asked.

“I haven’t finished it yet.”

“Then keep it.”

“When’s it due?”

“Next week. Don’t worry about it. It’s fine. Barringer is cool. And if you finish it before then, just drop it off.” I zipped up my bag and walked past the shower curtain door.

“Drop it off? At your school?”

“Sure,” I called. “Lonsdale Middle. Just put it in the bin outside the library. See ya, Ellis. Thanks for the salvia.”

“It’s called *salvia!*” Ellis yelled.

VITA

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