Support| And other stories

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The University of Montana

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Support and Other Stories

by

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Jumpstart

I remember watching my Unclé Brice burn when I was ten. He had been over at my parents’ house, talking about jobs and money and future plans. After hearing about my father’s promotion to head janitor of Chapman Hall, Uncle Brice walked over to the bar and poured himself a shot of moonshine. He kicked the shot back into his mouth, lit his Zippo, and spurt a mouthful of grain alcohol through the flame. A sheet of fire flew from his mouth towards the ceiling and dissipated. Uncle Brice turned towards the family with this huge smile on, and that’s when we noticed his face was on fire.

Before we could shout anything, Brice glanced down, saw the fire flickering around his mouth, and started screaming. He screamed over and over and began to slap his face, trying to smother the torch of a beard. At first this approach didn’t work too well, but he kept screaming louder and slapping his face so fast that the blaze eventually went out. He walked into the bathroom, locked the door, and stayed there three hours.

When mom and dad grew tired of waiting for him and went into the kitchen to read, I crept towards the bathroom. I placed my ear to the door and heard my Uncle crying. I listened to him, his sobs soft and deep. Then I went to the sofa to watch The A-Team.
Uncle Brice had lost his job the same day my dad was promoted. Brice was a mechanic at the Phillips 66 station on the other side of town. That day, this real pain of a woman (“Who smelled like a pack of sweaty monkeys,” he told me) came in wanting to get her tires rotated. Brice was closing up shop since it was already five o’clock, and he told her so. She told him she had a real expensive watch that received radio signals from Colorado and it told her the exact time of day. According to this watch it was still ten ‘till five, and she wanted her tires rotated. Uncle Brice must have already been drinking that day because he said that his watch received radio signals from God and that it was telling him not to rotate the tires of some stinky-ass bitch.

For a few days, his face looked pink and swollen. But the pink turned brown as his wounds began to crust over. For at least three weeks, Brice had a nasty goatee of scabs. He would have healed faster, but he kept picking at the scabs when he thought no one was looking. He’d scrape his fingernails down his chin and around his lips until blood covered his fingertips.

Uncle Brice’s were the first scars I had to deal with. They bothered me. Whenever I looked at him, I saw that haywire fireball of moonshine and his face burning in my mind. So even when my uncle was happy, I saw him hurt.

About three weeks after his face fire incident, Uncle Brice ran out of money. He said that he tried to find a job, but that his scabs frightened potential employers. Mom and Dad thought his real problem was that he applied for too many positions at bars.

Brice wound up moving into our house until he could find work. We didn’t have a spare room, so he moved most of his stuff in with me.

I liked talking to my uncle in my room after evening television. He gave me some good advice. On women: “If they lean forwards too much when they’re talking to you, you know they’re gonna cause trouble down the road, no matter how good their butt looks.” On food: “Lots of fried okra will keep your hair shiny and your dick stiff.” And
on alcohol: "When the room starts spinning, that's when you know that you'll have to
keep on drinking all night, or else you'll get sick." I fell asleep many nights watching my
Uncle lying on his bed, staring intently at the stucco ceiling, and absent-mindedly plucking
the scabs off his chin.

When it became obvious to my parents that Brice was intentionally preventing his
wounds from healing, they sought out a support group for people in similar situations and
convinced him to join. The group was named Dealing With Extraordinary Lesions and
Wounds, and was called DWEL for short. It met every other Wednesday of every month
at a designated member's house. What went on at these meetings was always a mystery
to me until my Uncle volunteered our house as the gathering place for the second
Wednesday of July.

The night of the meeting, my parents went out to dinner and a movie. They had
wanted me to go along with them, but I pretended I was sick so I could stay home.

I promised to rest in bed all night, but as soon as the guests began to arrive, I crept
to the door that separated the hallway from the living room, cracked it open, and watched
the meeting from beginning to end.

I had envisioned a living room filled with freaks of nature— men with multiple
heads, lobster pincers instead of hands, women with six breasts and hatchets permanently
lodged into their skulls— but everyone looked pretty average. One guy had only one arm,
and another had an eye patch, but everyone else just had some sort of mark on them. In
most cases, it was a large splotch on their face or arm.

Evidently the gathering that night was a special occasion, since there was a new
member attending for the first time. When everyone had arrived, the man with the
eyepatch stood up and faced the rest of the group.

"What the fuck am I supposed to say now?" the man asked.
"Tell us your name, what you do, and why you’re here, honey" said a smiling fat woman with a purple mark that covered her left eye and cheek.

"Name’s Woodrow Eberheart. My friends call me Wood. I guess you can just call me Wood. I work with maintenance at the brewery on the other side of town. Sometimes I have to fix all kinds of machines, but most of the time I just sweep floors and wash windows. I’m here because, well, because my daughter wanted me to come when she heard about you folks. She said I’d gotten meaner since I lost the eye, said she didn’t want to live with me anymore if I didn’t do something to help me deal."

After introductions, the fat purple-faced woman said, “It might help us all get to know you better if you told us how you acquired your handicap. It might be the first step towards healing your pain.”

Wood scratched behind his shoulder. “I dunno.”

“Wood.” Purple-face had a soothing voice, “Scars can be difficult to deal with. All of us here know that. They are constant reminders of what you’ve lost. But they can be lessons, not just deformities. This,” she brushed the large splotch on her face with the tips of her fingers, “used to depress me. Repulse me. But now I’m grateful for it. It taught me caution and how to smile in spite of misfortune.

“I respect scars now. They proclaim to the world that you have a story to tell, that you have seen into the depths of pain and have chosen to keep living. They are fascinating additions to your body, more colorful than tattoos because they’re authentic. Scars teach after they hurt and those are always the best lessons to learn. My scars no longer repulse me. They make me smile. Come on, Wood, let us learn from your scar as well. It is the only way you can begin to heal.”

There were murmurs of agreement throughout the room. I could tell from the woman’s delivery and the group’s reaction that she had made this speech before, but she was still convincing.
Wood looked at his feet, then the ceiling, then he just stared out blankly—like he was focusing on something just beyond the wall in front of him. “All right. Well, it’s a pretty short story, really. I was married, had a daughter, was pretty happy. Then I fell in love with this Chicano woman I worked with. Guess it wasn’t even love, just hormones. I started telling my wife that my shift had been extended by three hours. Every working day, from five ‘till eight, I picked up this chicana and drove her somewhere. Sometimes we went to motels or parks, sometimes we pulled my pick-up off the road out in the country and went at it. We made love like it was our last day on earth, every time. She never asked questions when I drove her home at seven forty-five and she was always ready and willing the next day. It was the most beautiful relationship I ever had.”

Wood took a deep breath. He shook his head and looked at the purple-faced woman. She met his gaze and nodded. Wood continued.

“Anyhow, one day a few months ago I picked up my Latin lover from work and took her into the countryside. I drove my pick-up down this abandoned dirt road I knew about and parked it underneath this huge pine tree. We started kissing and undressing in the cab and then, when we were all excited and hungry for sex, we slid out of the door and walked slowly around my pick-up and got into the back. I had a bunch of old tools for my work back there, and a couple of blankets we’d been using. She laid down on this itchy orange U-Haul moving blanket that was just inside the payload. I remember that because our calves and feet were dangling off the edge of the tailgate. That made the whole thing more exotic. I remember sweating and smiling with my eyes closed, concentrating on the sex and the sting of the pine needles that fell onto my back. And then, right before I was about to come, I opened my eyes and saw my wife staring at us from underneath one of the blankets in the back of the payload.”

Wood’s one eye opened wide as he kept talking, “She must have been laying there
in secret for hours. Laying down with my saws and drills and wrenches all day long just to catch me laying down with my woman.

“Well, I yelled out ‘Shit!’; you know, and pulled out right then and there. Sprayed the tailgate. My wife stood up in the back of the truck. That greasy blanket covered her head and shoulders like some desert nomad mechanic. At first my chicana was just kind of confused, but when she looked behind her and saw a pissed off blanketed white woman running at her with a twelve-inch adjustable pipe wrench, well, she knew what was happening. She jumped up and ran butt-ass naked into the woods. My wife took off after her and I could hear their screams of anger and fear fade into the trees. I ran to the cab to get dressed.

“I thought about leaving them both in the forest and returning home, but I couldn’t think of what I’d tell my daughter. So I sat behind the steering wheel, locked the doors, and took a few long pulls off the pint of Jack Daniels I keep in the glove compartment for emergencies.

“I must have dozed off, because the next thing I remember is being woken up by my wife as she unlocks the passenger side door with her set of keys and sits down. ‘Drive,’ she tells me. So I start driving slow down the dirt road. Everything’s real quiet. A few blocks from the main highway, I look over at my wife and she’s got my chicana’s panties held up to her nose, smelling my lover’s crotch, and crying. I look back to the road and before I know it, she grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls my head back. She leans over me and plunges a stubby short Phillips head screwdriver into my left eye socket.

“I’ve lost control of the pick-up by this point and we drive straight into a cluster of pine trees. We weren’t driving fast, so it didn’t kill us. I couldn’t see anything, and I thought I was about gone, so I just sat there whimpering, blood running off of the handle of that screwdriver onto my leg. My wife was quiet. I couldn’t really tell, but I swear she was smiling.
“About an hour later, a state patrol officer pulls over to see what’s wrong. He thought we had just run off the road. When he walks up to the truck and sees the blood all over the place, I hear him pull out his gun and cock it and order us to step slowly out of the car. I’m light headed and delirious and I couldn’t find the door handle for the life of me. But while I’m searching for it, I hear my wife get out and tell the officer exactly what happened. In detail. She was real calm while she told it. Nice as peaches, actually. The officer handcuffed her and locked her into his back seat, then he called an ambulance for me.

“My wife went to jail at first, but got committed to a crazy house really soon after that. I was in the hospital for a while recovering. I haven’t really seen her since. It’s my daughter, you know, that’s what taken so long to heal. That’s why I’m here, like I said.”

The purple-faced woman wiped tears from her eyes. “Wood, we all know that was extremely difficult for you, but now that we all know the source of your pain, we can begin to support you, to help you. Thank you for opening up to us. We were all moved, I’m sure.”

Wood walked three steps towards my dad’s recliner and practically collapsed into it. His pale face and rushed breath made it look like he’d been running a marathon.

I was stunned. The idea of losing an eye over sex was absolutely terrifying to me at that point in my life. I mean, girls were frightening enough already—it was disturbing to think that at any moment one of them might stab you in the face.

My parents relished the time my Uncle spent with his support group. What they really enjoyed wasn’t the meetings, but the long visits to neighborhood bars that followed every get-together. Not that they wanted Brice to drink as much as he did, they just appreciated the fact that he didn’t spend those nights drinking on their couch.

Uncle Brice took a liking to Wood. I’d hear them shouting and laughing as Wood’s car pulled up every other Wednesday night. I’d listen as Brice clunked up the
front porch and fell onto the sofa in the living room. I liked to listen to him mumble in his sleep—his drunken murmurs soothed me, like a lullaby. I could smell the bar smoke and the alcohol sweat as I walked past him on my way to school Thursday mornings. His shirt untucked, showcasing his jiggly stomach that had grown two sizes since he moved in.

After a few months, Brice told my parents that DWEL had decided to start meeting every Wednesday night. And not too long after that, Brice and Wood started hanging out two or three nights a week. Sometimes they’d invite me to go along with them. They’d just drop me off at the mall, hand me ten dollars, and tell me to chill out or go watch a movie. Usually I’d blow all the money on video games within a half hour of my arrival. Then I’d have to wander around for two or three hours until I got picked back up. They’d always be sucking on peppermints when I climbed into the back of Brice’s maroon Trooper.

At first, Wood and Brice would use me as an excuse to go out only every once in a while. But after about a year, I was being delivered to the mall once a week, usually on Mondays. By the time I was eleven, it was a Monday night ritual. Brice told my parents that he was just trying to spend “quality time” with me, getting to know me like his father never got to know him. I’m not sure if my parents believed him, but they let him take me off of their hands, no questions asked.

I didn’t mind much. I got pretty good at my favorite video games (like Massive Cyber Blood Fight IV and Federal Demon Assassin), and I started to make friends with the arcade regulars. Sometimes we’d hide out by the dumpsters behind the mall and smoke cigarettes stolen from parents. At first the tobacco made me sick, but after a few tries I was able to smoke my Winstons and Camels just as well as the others.

“How’d you like to spend even more time with your favorite uncle?” Brice asked me a few months after our weekly routine had been established.

“Sure, Uncle Brice. You wanna drop me off at the mall more often?”
“Well, no, not exactly. You, uh, you like my friend Wood, right? Wood’s invited us over for dinner Saturday night. Not your folks, just you and me.”

“Wouldn’t you have more fun if it was just you and him like normal? I don’t care if you guys just hang out by yourselves and leave me at home.”

“Oh no, we want you to come over. You see, Wood’s got this daughter, Ione, and she’s about your age and we, Wood and me, we thought you might want to meet her.” I had tried to steer clear of girls after hearing Wood’s story, and this idea intimidated me. After all, it was the child of a face-stabbing woman Brice wanted me to meet. But my Uncle’s voice was so eager, his face glowing with anticipation, that I agreed to go so I wouldn’t hurt his feelings.

That weekend my parents went out of town to celebrate their anniversary, so Uncle Brice didn’t even ask them if it was ok to bring me to Wood’s. We parked the Trooper on the street next to a yellow curb where Brice said the cops never tow.

Although Wood lived on the ninth floor, we had to take the stairs ("Since Wood’s landlord’s a piece of shit that refuses to fix the elevator," Brice explained to me). It seemed to take too long to zig-zag up those steps.

Wood opened the door and smiled at me, “Hey there, little man. Ready for some pizza?”

I expected Wood’s apartment to reek of cigarette smoke or whiskey, but I was greeted by a flowery scent. The apartment looked like it had been decorated by a schizophrenic. The walls were covered with two posters of car engines, a water color of an iris, a framed original-logo Pittsburgh Penguins jersey, a pair of faded pink ballet shoes, and one large tapestry depicting an interlocking pattern of teal elephants and violet women over a sky blue background.

“Sit down and get a few slices, guys. I’ll go get Ione.”
I couldn’t believe Wood had ordered five pizzas for the four of us. It was the sort of variety I associated solely with birthday parties. Brice opened up the boxes one by one and grabbed a slice of pepperoni and pineapple, a slice overflowing with ground meat, and a piece with Canadian bacon and onions. I didn’t want to get too messy eating dinner, so I stuck with the plain cheese. We were both working on our third slice by the time Wood came back in the room.

“Sorry about the wait, gents, but the lady’s on her way.” Wood sat down and grabbed two slices of ground meat. Just as he had his first piece raised to his opened mouth, Ione walked into the room.

She was the first female my body throbbed at the sight of. She wore dark jeans and a brown sweater that was baggy but couldn’t completely hide her developing figure. She moved towards the table quickly and, as she sat down, I realized that she was mad as hell.

She did not respond when introduced to us, but glared at her father before grabbing a piece of the untouched vegetable pizza. Wood offered everyone beverages. He got me a can of coke, a glass of water for Ione, and he placed a six pack of Miller High Life in the center of the table to share with Brice. The meal continued in silence until there were four empty beer bottles and two empty pizza boxes, when Wood and Uncle Brice started talking about last week’s Falcons/49ers game. They tried to include me in their conversation, but I hadn’t seen the game and I was preoccupied with Ione.

Not only was she the most pissed off beauty I had ever seen, she was the hungriest. Her stomach was a void. While she polished off the crust of one slice with her left hand, she’d grab the next piece with her right and she repeated this process until the entire veggie pizza was devoured.

When she was done, after the rest of us had stopped eating but before the football conversation came to a close, she stood up and walked out of the living room window and
onto the fire escape balcony. She leaned on the black metal railing. I watched the wind lift her hair while Wood finished discussing the importance of the Falcons’ secondary.

"Shit, Brice, we just drank all my High Life. Want to come with me to the package store and grab some more?"

Uncle Brice nodded and Wood walked to the living room window. He poked his head outside to tell Ione that he was leaving. She didn’t respond. Wood and Brice then left the apartment with a promise to return quickly. As soon as the front door closed, Ione reached inside her pocket and lit up a cigarette. I saw this as my chance to start up a conversation. I quietly walked across the room and crouched before the open window.

"Hey, Ione," I said. She didn’t move. I cleared my throat. "Hey, Ione," I said a little louder. She still didn’t react, so I climbed out onto the balcony. "Ione?"

"What." Her voice was hard.

"Can I have one of those?"

"How old are you, kid?"

"Almost twelve. Don’t worry, I’ve smoked before." I felt secure in my knowledge of tobacco. She flipped open her pack and handed me one. As she turned to hand me the lighter, I saw two tears streak down her face. She held her arm straight out in front of her, ignited the lighter, and I lit my smoke off of her hand.

"Hey, Ione? You know what? I think Ione is the coolest name I’ve ever heard."

"You think so, huh? I don’t. My crazy bitch ass mom gave it to me. You know who I’m named after? This girl from ancient times who got wild with the king of the world and then got turned into a cow by his jealous wife. I’m named after a damn cow woman. A cow whore." Ione took a long drag and flicked her cigarette away. It tumbled down nine floors to the alley’s asphalt. "After she got cowed, that jealous queen sent this huge horse fly after Ione. She had to run away from that fly for the rest of her life. She could never rest. But she traveled a lot." I could barely see the orange dot of Ione’s
cigarette burning on the ground below. I watched as it faded to black. "Come on, kid. Let's go inside."

Ione clicked off all of the lights in the dining area on her way to the bathroom. I grabbed a can of coke from the refrigerator and poured it over a glass of ice. I walked into the dark living room and sat down in Wood's recliner. I found the remote control and clicked on the t.v. The light from the screen made the room glow. The Pacers were losing to the Bulls in the fourth quarter. My mouth and throat felt rough from the cigarette, so I drank about half of my coke and put my cup on the little table to my right.

I remember thinking how Uncle Brice always told me that the sexiest ladies always play hard to get. I heard Ione come out of the bathroom and go into the kitchen. I figured she was pretty impressed by my smoking ability and was now intentionally toying with my emotions by hiding out in other parts of the apartment. I smiled over my wise observation.

"Hey kid, you got something to drink?" When I told her I did she said, "You need a refill?" I said sure. She was warming up to me now, doing me favors.

I heard her behind me, walking from the kitchen towards the television. I decided to "play it cool" like Brice said and "not look too interested." The only way I could think of to do this was by ignoring Ione as she approached my recliner. It took all of my will power to focus on Reggie Miller and not turn around to watch her. I listened as she filled my cup, the ice cubes rattling as they rose.

When she handed me my glass, our fingers touched. She smiled for the first time that night. I was overwhelmed. She had a glass of her own, with a more translucent liquid, and she bumped it into mine. "Cheers," she raised her cup to her lips. Not wanting to look unappreciative, I pulled my glass towards me, and our drinks touched our mouths at the same time. We took our first gulp and it felt like I had just swallowed a forest fire.
My mouth stung, my whole face convulsed, and my shoulders shook. I thought Ione had poisoned me.

"Jesus," I gasped, "What did you do to my coke?"

Ione laughed. "Oh, I just made it a little bit wilder. With some Wild fucking Turkey." She reached over to the table where my drink had sat and picked up a bottle. The bird on the label stared blankly at me.

"I can't drink whiskey," I was scared, and fear forced words out of my mouth before I could control them. "Your dad and my uncle are coming back any second now. We'll be in trouble."

"Relax. Wood and Brice didn't go to the package store, they went to the bowling alley or a bar Someplace to drink. When they get back, they'll be so shit-faced, they won't be able to tell what we've been up to. Trust me, Wood won't notice it's missing. And I know your parents are out of town, so there's no way you get caught. Come on, kid, get drunk with me. It's a one time offer." She raised her glass again. "Cheers?"

My first response to Ione's proposition was to wish that the recliner would swallow me, leaving me no choice but to lie inside the chair until Wood came home and cut me free. Then I remembered a conversation I had with Uncle Brice one night at about three in the morning. He had been flirting with the wrong girl that night. Her husband saw him touch her shoulder and he came at Uncle Brice with a full bottle of spirits. "That bottle came crashing down on my head and normally all of that broken glass and liquor in my eyes would have distracted me," he explained, "But I had been drunk for a long time at that point and I was real calm about it. I just stood up and smacked that bastard in his face. Knocked him clean out. I tell you, sometimes being trashed comes in handy."

"Cheers," I said and took another scorching swallow. Although my face kept twitching, the taste improved after the third or fourth time. It helped that I had some coke left at the bottom, it gave me something to look forward to.
Ione emptied her glass before I was finished with mine, and she asked if I “wanted to help pick the next round.” I stood up and followed her to the kitchen. My cheeks were flushed and my blood was racing, but otherwise I felt nothing from the drink. So what’s the big deal about booze?, I wondered. She opened the tiny doors beneath the sink and I saw a score of bottles glow dimly in the blue television light.

Ione clinked around beneath the sink until she found two shot glasses and three bottles. One by one, Ione poured, announced its name, and we gulped the stuff down. “Black Velvet.” Gulp. “Beefeeter.” Gulp. “Aftershock.” Gulp. The room had become soft at the edges. Ione’s face was somehow both sexy and fuzzy. I couldn’t stop smiling.

“So you want to pick out the next course, kid?”

I did, I wanted to do anything to maintain her disposition. I squatted down to compare the bottles, but I couldn’t see anything through the shadows and the softness. My balance was at about 70% and dropping, which made beverage selection difficult. I grabbed a bottle blindly, stood carefully up, and placed it on the counter. I tried to sound like I knew what I was doing. I tried to look confident. Sophisticated. “Check this out,” I said.

“Fuck no, we can’t shoot that. That’s Golden Grain.”

“Watch me.” I managed to get the cap off the bottle and the liquid into the glass.

“Hey, kid, I’m serious. That’s some powerful shit. It’s moonshine.” She sounded worried, but her smile was still intact. Her teeth gleamed.

That grin threw me into autopilot. Without inhibition or worrying over wording, I asked for her cigarette lighter. The sounds seemed to come from the back of my brain instead of my mouth.

“No way. No smoking in the house. Not even pot.”

It wasn’t just my words that were out of control now, my whole body was
moving, feeling, thinking without me. I was a spectator to myself, this part of me that had never popped up before was now running the show, and I was my own captive audience.

I walked right up to her, our faces inches apart, and it was like my limbs were on strings. I slowly ran my finger along the stitching of her jeans, tracing her curves from top metal rivet to hip. I plunged my hand inside of her front right pocket, pressed between her denim and thigh. Her eyes widened in curiosity or warning. I let my hand rest still there for a moment, then I suddenly wiggled my fingers in every direction, pinching and pressing her. She burst into apprehensive laughter, her whole body shook, and I removed my hand with her lighter.

She leaned against the counter and collected herself. Her eyes were puffy around the edges. “Well?” She leaned all of her weight onto her arm, and she pivoted slowly on her elbow, “What are you going to do next?”

I should have passed out at this point from anxiety, arousal, or sheer bliss. But the drink was in my blood, and I was somehow calm despite my now-vibrating head.

“Check this out.” I said again, since it had worked so well the first time.

I straightened my arm in front of me and ignited the lighter. The flame, maybe half an inch tall, washed Ione’s face with its warm flickers.

I turned away from her and towards the living room. I took the shot glass between my index finger and thumb. I dumped the liquid into my mouth and it seemed to eat into my cheeks as it pooled there. It felt like lava or deadly acid as it sat inside me while I brought the lighter to my lips. Just when the grain alcohol was about to dissolve through my face, I spit it out as hard as I could. It caught on the lighter’s flame and my mouth was a blowtorch for about one full second. But instead of spraying skyward, the flaming liquid just fell out of my mouth and over my hand. My fingers glowed with blue flames for an instant before they extinguished. The Golden Grain spread across the floor in a blazing
puddle. The room seemed to fill with mild daylight from below, and I couldn't decide if this was brilliant idea or an emergency. Before I could decide, though, the fire vanished.

I fell to my knees to inspect Wood's linoleum, but it wasn't even warm, much less burnt. I felt my face and I was relieved to find my skin still soft. Smooth. Then I turned to see Ione lying on the floor near me. I assumed she was also assessing the damage I had caused, but then I noticed that she wasn't moving.

Her chest rose with her breath and I could feel her warm exhalations on my palm. My brain couldn't line up thoughts. I sat and reflected on my predicament.

Time passed. Either out of a clever brainstorm or sense of desperation, I decided to drag her. My palms and fingers wrapped around her wrists, and I had to lean backwards when I pulled to maneuver her limp weight across the apartment. I'm sure a variety of naughty possibilities crossed my mind, but I only took her to a bedroom, propped her head on a pillow, and covered her body with a blanket. She lay still on the carpet.

I went back into the livingroom and fell into Wood's chair. The basketball game had ended, the Bulls probably won. My eyes began to droop to the opening credits of the Tonight Show. My face felt numb, my stomach warm. The room quaked when I moved my head. I don't remember much of the program, but I know that something was so funny that I laughed out loud until I cried. I laughed so long and hard that it shook my skull, which sent the world tumbling around me.

After I regained my composure, I heard voices at the front door and then keys in the lock. I closed my eyes and tried to act completely dead. I listened to the cautious, heavy footsteps approach.

"Well, Brice, looks like your boy had a case of T.V. overload. And in my best chair, too."
I clinched my eyes shut as Brice leaned over the chair and lifted me up. He held me like a baby against his chest, my head resting on his shoulder. “Thanks for the great time, man. Wow. Killer long islands.”

“Hell yeah, and that waitress was pretty killer, too.”

They both laughed. With my ear touching Brice’s torso, I could hear his laughter originate within his body. “Well, I’ll be in touch tomorrow. I need to get this guy off to bed.” My Uncle’s voice sounded distant and submerged. “If my tight-ass brother doesn’t mind about this kid, maybe we can do it again some time. Sure beats driving across town to the mall.”

I feigned sleep all the way home. Uncle Brice just laid me down on the stiff back seat of his Trooper. When the Isuzu hit potholes or bounced over speed bumps, my stomach went oozing around inside my body. I maintained my false slumber until Brice carried me inside the house and placed me lightly on my bed. As soon as he turned the lights off and left the room, the very moment when my performance had succeeded, I felt incredibly nauseous.

I fought with my sickness, tried to think it away, but it was inescapable. I tumbled out of my bed onto the floor. I tried to stand up, but my knees refused to help me. I crawled as best I could to the bathroom, banging into walls and doors. I stretched my hands blindly out in front of me while I inched across the tile floor. When I felt the toilet, I pulled my head above the bowl and began to vomit. At some point Uncle Brice came into the room to see what was wrong, because he was standing in the doorway with the lights on when I finished.

Brice walked to the toilet, leaned towards it, and took a long whiff. He shook his head. My Uncle wet a towel and placed it on the back of my neck, which felt soothing. He wiped my face clean with tissue and flushed my disgrace down the drain. He helped me up to my feet and walked me back to my room, a hand on each shoulder. When I was
under the sheets, Brice told me, “Not to worry, little man. I won’t talk about this. Remember you’re too tiny to drink like that, ok?”

I slept until four in the afternoon. I walked slowly to the kitchen, where I saw Brice reading the T.V Guide at the breakfast table. I poured myself a glass of water

“Ione’s in the hospital,” he said. His words were measured. “Alcohol poisoning. Asked if she wanted us to come visit her, but Wood said no. Said that was about the last thing he wanted.” Brice smacked his palm into the table. “Shit, boy, that could be you.” His eyes were red and worn.

I tried to say something, but it didn’t happen. I wanted to explain that I didn’t know what I was up to, didn’t know alcohol could turn to poison. I wanted to prove that this wasn’t my fault, to put the blame somewhere else, but I couldn’t. I just made a sandwich and cried. My tears dripped from my eyes, splattering the wheat bread and bologna.

When my parents got home the next night, Brice ordered take-out for the whole family. Over egg drop soup and Mongolian beef, Brice surprised us with the news that he was moving out.

“I’ve got a friend from my old job who works at a garage in Texas now. He always said I could come work with him, like we used to, whenever I wanted. I think it’s time I moved on away from here. I appreciate all that you’ve put up with. I’ll repay you somehow. Should be out of town by the end of the week.”

He spent the next couple of days packing his things and making arrangements. He spent the whole time sober, even went to bed early as I did some nights. He never said anything remarkable during that time, just standard information, nothing like the advice he gave me when he first moved in.

The last night I saw him, right after he had turned the lights out in my room and we had both laid down to sleep, I asked him how things with Ione turned out.
“She just needs to get her head together,” was all that Uncle Brice said. Even though that was the last thing spoken, the mood of the room kept us both awake for hours.

Brice didn’t invite me to accompany him to the airport. He packed his bags into the Trooper, which he had given to my parents as a token of his gratitude, and came inside to say goodbye.

“Hang in there, little man. Life can rough you up, you know, so enjoy what you can.” He opened his mouth to say something more, but reconsidered and smiled instead.

Uncle Brice’s smile, encircled by scars, is what I see when I try to visualize him today. Without Brice around, I never had a reason to associate with Wood or lone again. They all faded from my reality into my memory. I wrote to Uncle Brice six or seven times at the Texas address he left, and he wrote me two brief postcards in return. One was of the Alamo, and the other showed the San Antonio skyline at sunset. He never called. Once puberty hit me full-on, girls became more important to me than family, and we lost touch.

All of Brice’s advice has brought me nothing but trouble, but I don’t blame or resent him for leaving. Fried okra doesn’t grant me sexual prowess, it only gives me diarrhea. Those women who lean into you as they talk have been my only companions, and I’m always trouble for them, not the other way around.

I wonder if the world Brice lived in was just a different realm of existence, if his rules were honestly wise guidelines for living his particular life, or if he was lying to me the entire time he shared my room. Perhaps he just fabricated advice for me because he felt like he should. He was the elder roommate, and he might have felt obligated to be a sage.

Perhaps he was too ashamed to admit what I’ve just recently come to terms with— that there are no rules for life, and no easy way to come to terms with it besides making mistakes. I can never seem to figure out what it is I’m supposed to do, but I’ve
developed an uncanny knack for discovering what it is I shouldn’t try the hard way. But maybe Uncle Brice did know this, too, and he knew I’d be happier in the long haul with all of my missteps under my belt instead of sticking to the straight and narrow. Regardless, he baptized my journey into the unknown, and I suppose I should be thankful for that.
Support

For Ray

Mingus had found a regular sort of refuge on the steps that led up to their apartment. He sat and smoked cigarettes from midnight until three or four, when his throat became dry and rough. Then he would crawl into bed beside Daphne and come as close to sleep as he could get. The steps weren't cozy, but they let his mind wander away from her and the life growing inside her belly.

He focused on the horizon until the dark shapes of pecan trees gave way to the night sky. They had a view of the sanitation department parking lots from the front stoop, and he stared deep into the rows of garbage trucks and the thousands of porta-potties left over from the Olympics. This out-of-use incinerator sat in the middle of the vehicles and plastic toilets, its brick chimney a towering trash sentinel. And Mingus found comfort in these sights.

Occasionally cars moved down the drive between their apartment and the parking lots. White glares of headlamps followed by the red wash of tail-lights. Most of them zipped past in a blur. But others drifted by slowly, enjoying their leisurely pace.
That’s how Mingus saw a man get deposited on the sidewalk. An old Cadillac, with purple neon show-glow underneath and soft R&B sounds leaking through the frame, slowed to a stop right at the sanitation department entrance. The rear door on the far side of the car opened up, the volume of the music swelled, and it slammed shut again. The wheels peeled and the engine growled as the Caddy took off down the street, leaving a crumpled figure on the concrete.

At first Mingus thought it was a jettisoned pet, or something inanimate stirred by the wind. But it crawled to the chain link fence and the man pulled himself up onto his feet. He leaned his body into the wire, and he just stood there for a while, as if he was contemplating how to get past the chain-links and into the lot.

The man eventually turned around, and he began to walk carefully into the street and towards the nearby apartment building. Hidden in shadows, Mingus watched him move across the asphalt lanes. He wanted to know where he was headed. The man appeared to move aimlessly. His steps were haphazard, his path a zig-zag. He wandered past Daphne’s car and he came to a halt at the base of the stairs.

He let out a prolonged cough. Something rattled around inside his lungs. “Man,” he said, “help a brother out.” He wasn’t shouting, but his voice was loud in all that silence. Mingus thought the man was talking to himself, but then he started to climb up the stairs, one deliberate step at a time, leaning into the bannister.

Mingus’s thrill turned into alarm as the man approached, and he stood up to get inside behind a locked door. The neighborhood wasn’t a bad place, exactly— they didn’t
have much crime or rowdy characters about, but they were close enough to the rougher parts of town to worry on occasion.

Before Mingus could turn the knob, though, the man spoke again. “Please. I need some assistance. I’m a Christian, man.” He paused, coughed again. “I need some samaritan shit. I need it bad.”

Mingus opened the door, casting a beam of light down the stairs and onto the stranger. The man’s head was shaved and shiny with sweat. His eyes seemed to float out away from his face. From the way he clutched his side, Mingus could tell that he was hurt.

“Hear me,” he said. “Hear me out.”

“What do you want?” Mingus asked.

“I just,” he said. “Want a ride.”

“What?”

“A ride. Give me a ride home.” His body swayed forward and back. The arm that clung to the banister propped him up like a tent post. Mingus didn’t want him to collapse on the stairs. It would bother Daphne in the morning.

“Look,” Mingus said, “I’m sorry, but I don’t know you. You could kill me and take my car. I can’t just cart around anyone who shows up and asks for it.”

The man forced out something resembling a laugh. “You think I’m dangerous? You think I could whoop your ass? Just down the road. Take me down the road.”

He looked desperate, but not dangerous. His eyes were filled with need and a touch of fear, but his voice sounded certain that this was the right thing to do.
"Still, you could have a knife on you," Mingus said, "or a gun."

"Motherfucker," the man said. He bent down slowly and took off his sneakers. Every inch of movement seemed to injure him further. He worked off his pants and placed them on top of his shoes. He wore boxer shorts with yin-yangs on them. Mingus’s hand fell off the doorknob. "I got no gun," the man said, unbuttoning his shirt, "and if I had a knife, I’d of kept it in my pocket." He dropped his shirt onto the steps. He stood there, his clothes in a pile around him, with nothing on except his boxers and tube socks. "Look at this," he said and he pointed to his side, where a piece of flesh was missing. A stream of blood trickled down from it, the yin-yangs sopping it up. "How’m I going to hurt you with this kind of hurt on me already?" he asked.

"I’ll call an ambulance," Mingus offered.

"No," he said, "I got no insurance. But my woman’s a nurse. Not a hospital nurse, but she can fix me up. I need a ride."

"The police can take you. I’ll call them." Mingus kept his eyes on him. His hand searched until it found the door knob again.

"I don’t need cops in my business. They’d take me to the station before my apartment. And I need to get home. I could die."

"Fine, I’ll take you." Mingus thought he was lying. He walked through the door, then turned around and saw his shadow cast over the man’s body. "I just need to get my keys."

"Bless you, man, bless you."
Mingus closed the door and turned the lock. He had intended on leaving the man outside to bleed. He didn’t think he could let him into his car. He would have to understand, Mingus thought, no one helps strangers anymore.

Daphne had fallen asleep on the sofa with the television on. The sound was turned down to a soft murmur. Her limbs were flung about in a position that looked painfully awkward to Mingus, arms stretched out behind her head, a leg hooked over the back of the sofa, the other dangling down to the carpet. Her shirt was pulled up above her navel, and the sight made Mingus feel anxious. Her exposed stomach was like a billboard advertising what had gone sour between them. Before the pregnancy, Mingus had felt lucky to be with her. Their relationship had blossomed into the sort of ideal situation that you see on cheesy television but that’s never found in real life. They had clicked.

Now, Mingus didn’t know what to make of them. She had refused to consider abortion, even though the body developing inside of her was halfway his, and he wanted it gone. He thought he was too young to be a father, and he had even threatened to leave if she kept the child. But she had, and he was still there. It tormented him because she seemed to have won, and he hadn’t thought parenthood could be something that’s won or lost.

He moved one of Daphne’s legs and squeezed onto the sofa. He tried to watch the infomercial on television, but the Presto One-Piece Vegetable Master couldn’t hold his attention despite its many skills. Daphne’s smell hung thick in the air, an aroma of fresh paper from the copyshop she worked at combined with the scent of garlic pickles, her new nonstop snack. The smell worked its way up his nostrils and triggered intense feelings of
dread. Terrible images of Mingus pushing a baby stroller, his body covered in spit-up and
formula, weary from a lack of sleep. He thought about all of the adjustments he would
have to make if this baby ever came about, the lack of fun, the abundance of
accountability, and he became restless.

He thought about the man waiting for him outside, how he could give him a reason
to escape this smell and forget his predicament for a while. Assisting this stranger now
seemed like an exceptionally good idea.

He reached over and patted Daphne's cheek until she woke up.

"Hey," he said, looking into her puffy gray eyes, "I need to give someone a ride.
I'll be back later on." He stood up and found his keys on the coffee table.

"What?" Daphne asked. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm giving someone a ride home," Mingus said. "He needs it."

“Oh, right. You're just trying to get away again. Trying to burn some gas just to
put some distance between us. That's so wasteful, Min. Go back outside and smoke your
damn cigarettes. That should be enough time out for you."

Mingus wasn't any good at lying, but he tried. "It's Freddy," he said. "He's
downtown and, and he's piss drunk and he needs a ride home. I told him I'd be there in
five minutes." Mingus went into the kitchen to grab some supplies.

"I'm so tired of your act," Daphne called out to him. "You should be in here,
making sure I'm alright, that your baby's alright. But you won't even talk, you don't even
touch me anymore. Some dad."
“It won’t take long,” Mingus said as he opened the front door.

She wouldn’t look his way, her eyes were focused on the Presto One-Piece Vegetable Master, which was dicing tomatoes with superhuman efficiency.

The man’s name was Roger, it turned out, and he lived in Paldo, a housing project on the other side of town. Mingus had laid down sections of saran wrap to protect the fabric seat of his Cassida from the blood, but it just clung tight to Roger’s body like a plastic second skin. It wrapped around him as if Mingus was trying to keep him from spoiling. Roger’s blood dripped down from his torso. Mingus had given him a washcloth to put pressure on the wound, but the soaked towel didn’t stop the blood. It trickled over the saran wrap and onto the seat. Mingus was glad he had chosen not to take Daphne’s car.

His Cassida was an old model. Mingus wasn’t sure exactly how old, since the manual was missing and he had bought it off a friend for three hundred dollars. The car was on its last leg, but it still got him where he needed to go. He cranked up the engine, a painful long mechanical sound. It had to gasp and wheeze for a minute before it completely woke up.

“Car’s not doing too good, is it?” Roger asked as they pulled away from the apartments.

“I guess not. It works, though,” Mingus said.

The streets were deserted.

“So,” Mingus said, “Some night.”
“You being funny with me?” Roger said. “Because there’s nothing to be funny about tonight.” Mingus looked at Roger and nodded. Roger’s eyes seemed to be floating further away from his face, they were about to drift off.

“Only trying to make conversation,” Mingus said. He glanced down towards the wet boxer shorts beside him and the soaked seat underneath. Gore normally made Mingus squirm. He hated horror movies or anything with heavy doses of violence. But his stomach was relatively level. He was helping heal this gore, and not just being subjected to it.

“Sorry about your cushion,” Roger said, “but we’ll fix it up for you before you head back. Be good as new”

“That’s ok,” Mingus said. “No problem.”

“Hell yes it’s a problem. You leave this cushion like that and it’ll stink up your ride to high heaven.”

Mingus took a deep whiff of the air in his car. It didn’t smell that bad. He could smell Roger, the sweat and oils on his body. He didn’t think he could smell blood. But he thought about what would happen to that seat in the weeks to come, how the plasma would start to rot and attach the odor of Roger’s corpse to the passenger side, and he knew that Roger had a point.

They stopped at a traffic light beside a new Blazer. The SUV was filled with a pack of drunken college kids. They all stared in disbelief at the injured half-naked man in Mingus’s car. The designated drunk driver powered down his window and shouted
something. The light turned green, and the Blazer moved forward before Mingus could make out if the driver was offering assistance or an insult.

“Kids,” Roger said. He shook his head.

“Yeah,” said Mingus. They traveled as fast as the Cassida could take them.

“So,” Mingus said, “what happened to you? Do you mind my asking?”

“Well, you know how it goes,” Roger said.

Mingus did not know how it went, but he nodded all the same.

“Just had a misunderstanding between a few of my friends,” Roger said. “They wanted to teach me a lesson, but it won’t do any good.”

“I mean, was it about money?” Mingus asked. “Love? Cheating?”

“All that,” Roger said. “Turn here.” They pulled into the main entrance to The Paldo Housing Development. “You been here before?”

Mingus looked at the rows of two-story brick buildings. They seemed to stretch on for miles. “No.”

“Didn’t think so. Stay on this road for a while. Drive slow, but not real slow,” Roger said. “You drive too slow and people think you’re looking for something you’re not looking for. All kinds of crazy folks will run out to sell you some if you go too slow. But don’t speed.” Roger let out long series of coughs. “There’s children at play, like the sign says.”

They drove by dozens of the two-story complexes. He couldn’t see too much in detail due to the time of night, but Mingus expected the ghetto to look far worse than this. A few garbage cans had been knocked over and the trash blew around in the yards, but
otherwise it looked like a decent neighborhood. Playgrounds. Open space. The buildings were fairly large, and in decent shape, a good value for the rent.

They passed several skinny shaking men on the side of the road, but none of them got in the way or offered any services. I must have found the right speed, Mingus thought.

But about halfway down the street, the Cassida began to shake and kick, and then the car went silent. “Shoot,” Mingus said. The car coasted for about twenty feet before it sat still on the street. Mingus tried to crank it back up again, but the engine only made a series of high-pitched machine-gun sounds.

“That’s no good,” Roger said. A light came on in the complex beside them.

“Look, we’re almost there, I can hold the wheel straight if you get back and push.”

Mingus didn’t like the sound of the plan. The neighborhood might not have been as tough as he’d anticipated, but he didn’t want to be outside in the darkness. He knew they couldn’t reverse roles, though, that Roger wouldn’t even be able to push a tricycle down the street in his condition. Mingus put the stick shift in neutral and got out.

He leaned his body into the trunk, and the car began to creep forward. He put all of his strength into it, but he couldn’t get them moving any faster than an injured parade float.

A voice came from behind, “You want some help with that?” Mingus jumped and dropped his arms from the trunk. He turned around and saw a man in blue pajamas smiling at him. His fat belly pushed the buttons of his top apart.
“No, ah, I can manage,” Mingus said. He caught up to the car and began pushing again. He saw some of the shaking men he had passed on the way in moving towards him.

“I got it,” the man said. He placed his hands beside Mingus’s and the car picked up speed. The pajama man was still smiling. “So,” he said, “what you looking for around here?”

“Roger,” Mingus said, “I’m giving Roger a ride.”

“Yeah, that’s what it looks like.” He nudged Mingus’s side with his elbow. “Hey, now, I don’t know what Roger told you, but I can get it bigger and cheaper for you bro. What you need, I got it next door”

“I think I need a new car battery,” Mingus said. He didn’t like where this conversation was headed.


“No, thanks. I’m just trying to get down the street.”

“Roger’s no good, bro. Trust me. Weed? I got dope so green, some Green Lantern shit.”

“Gideon,” Roger said. Roger’s arm was still on the steering wheel, but his body was twisted around, his head poking out of the window “Gideon, you leave that boy alone. He’s helping me.”

Mingus tried to laugh.

“Roger, shut your mouth, this a private conversation.” He nudged Mingus again.

“You into that trippy shit? Acid? Mushrooms? I got these mushrooms, they’ll blow your mind. Make your woman satisfied, too. They’ll make your jimmy purple and
stand up six feet tall. You could hang your hat on your jimmy, man. How can you say no to that?"

Mingus did not think Daphne would be impressed if he could use his privates as a hall tree. "No thanks," he said.

"Nothing? You don't want none of that?" The man took his hands off the trunk, but kept walking beside him. "Shit. Could you help a brother out, then? I just need a couple of dollars."

"I, well, I, I don't have my wallet on me, you see," Mingus lied.

"For my water bill. I got to pay my water bill tomorrow or they shut me down. Four dollars, I just need four dollars so I can flush my toilet. Come on."

"Sorry," Mingus said.

"Sorry bitch," Gideon said, and he let go of the trunk and stood still. Mingus continued to push the car, moving past Gideon. Mingus sensed Gideon behind him. He clenched the muscles in his back, anticipating an attack from behind. He had read that the best way to survive a bear mauling was to ball up and lie still until the animal lost interest and walked off. He figured this would work well with a Gideon mauling as well, and he prepared to drop to the ground as soon as contact was made. But no punches came. He glanced behind him and saw that Gideon was gone.

"Last one on the right," Roger said when Mingus returned to the car. He pointed to where the projects ended. Beyond the last buildings, thin pines created a dark woods. Mingus pushed for another block, his arms weary and his feet throbbing. "This is it," Roger said when they came to the cul de sac at the end of the road.
Mingus walked around the car and opened the passenger door. "Here, let me help you up," Mingus said.

"Man, I've made it this far, I can make it to my door." Roger swung his legs out and struggled to his feet. He had to pull and push against the frame of the Cassida before he could stand completely up. The saran wrap still clung to his back and rear, and it crinkled as he moved towards his building.

The passenger seat was worse off than Mingus had thought. The fabric was stained dark where Roger had sat, and some blood had smeared onto the dashboard and emergency brake. Marks from Roger's hands were painted on the windshield like glyphs.

Mingus opened the trunk and grabbed the trash bag he had placed Roger's clothes in. It was a heavy load, so he placed one hand underneath to keep the bag from breaking. Soggy fabric squished inside. Mingus walked behind Roger and noticed that he was moving much more slowly than he had earlier, when he'd wandered across the street.

Roger opened his unlocked door and Mingus followed him inside. A young boy sat on the floor of the living room, his eyes glued to the television screen and his hand attached to a video game controller.

"Web, your momma around?" Roger asked.

"On the phone in the back room," the boy said. He looked about six.

Roger stumbled towards the kitchen, his feet leaving slight tracks on the linoleum. He got a green bottle out of the refrigerator and placed it beside a juice glass on the counter. "Have yourself a drink," he said, "and I'll be back in a second." He moved out of the kitchen and slowly maneuvered his way through a door in the rear of the apartment.
Mingus carefully placed the heavy bag of clothes on the floor and made sure the bag wouldn’t tip and spill out. He looked at the bottle on the counter. It said “Night Train” in gold letters with an image of a locomotive speeding through the space of the black label. He poured himself a half glass and took a sip. It tasted terrible, like a rancid version of the cough syrup he remembered as a child.

He heard a raised voice come from the back room and then saw Roger limp out of there. “Damn, Roger, you got no sense coming in here like that,” the voice said. A large woman in a pink sweatsuit walked out of the room, one hand holding a cordless phone to her ear. “Get yourself into the bathroom.” Roger limped into another door and flicked on the light. He sat down on the closed toilet lid with a grimace. “Lord, Bee, let me call you back. Yeah, you know how it is.” She pressed a button on the phone and placed it beside the sink. She looked at Mingus. “So you didn’t have nothing to do with this?”

“I just, I drove him over here,” Mingus said.

“Huh,” she said. “I’m Belinda. I’d say pleased to meet you but I’m not. I’m just meeting you. Well, you set yourself down and we’ll get you back on the road soon as we can. Oh, Roger, baby, look at you. What’s this glad wrap on your ass?” She shut the door.

Mingus walked into the living room and sat down on a sofa behind the boy. He was playing a racing game. Floating jet skis were chasing each other through tunnels. They were apparently military jet skis, for they were armed with machine guns and missiles.

“You drunk?” Web asked, his face still focused on the screen.
“No.”

“You want to play?”

“I don’t know how.”

Web put the game on pause. “Here,” he said. He handed another controller to Mingus. Web had a serious look on his face, and Mingus felt pressured to join in on the game. Web explained what the various buttons and joysticks did: accelerate, brake, rotate, speed burst, back view, damage report, ammunition status, track map, rise, fall, aim, fire. Mingus put down his drink and grasped the controller in his hands. It felt odd, like something he shouldn’t be using. Mingus had an Atari as a child, one big plastic joystick with one big plastic button, but this controller seemed alien-like in its complexity. Buttons were everywhere, dozens of them covered every surface, and his thumb felt clumsy on the movement pad. Web sat back down and said “Go.”

The jet skis were flying past Mingus and he couldn’t seem to keep up. He ran into walls and occasionally turned too hard so that he wound up headed in the wrong direction. Web started to taunt him. “Come on, man, move that thing. You never gonna catch me like that. You can’t compete.”

Mingus tried to figure out what was happening, but before he could, Web had lapped the course and pulled up behind him. “Oh I got you now,” Web said, and his jet ski began to pelt Mingus with bullets. He shot off one of Mingus’s arms, the limb flying off and tumbling out of sight. Web let out a quick burst of laughter “Check this, sucker,” Web said. An unexpectedly large missile shot out of Web’s vehicle and tagged Mingus in the back of his head. A tiny mushroom cloud rose from the base of his neck.
and skull fragments splattered against the tunnel walls. “Oh yeah, I got you,” Web said before speeding on to victory.

“You’re not very good, are you?” Web asked as the next round started without Mingus.

“I guess not.” He watched Web zip past the other jet skis with a newfound respect. He wondered whether or not it was a good idea to give games like this children, to let them take out their anger on electric foes instead of simply playing kick ball. But he had to admit the game gave Web a certain sort of confidence and bliss that he probably couldn’t find elsewhere in Paldo. It must be tough to get a good kick ball game together with shaking skinny men lingering around the fields. Mingus finished his Night Train and enjoyed watching Web squirm in delight as he blew past and blew up his enemies. He wondered whether someone like Web was growing inside of Daphne. How would he feel if his own son cheered after detonating his father’s head?

Belinda walked back into the room. “You should have just put his sorry butt in the trunk,” she said. “He wouldn’t have made such a mess that way.”

“I don’t mind,” Mingus said. “It’s an old car.”

“I mind. I’m the one who has to clean this up. I appreciate your ride, but you gotta use your head more. You drink up all that Night Train?”

“No. Just one glass. I’ll help.”

“I don’t need any help with that. It’ll get drunk sooner or later.”

“With the car I’ll help you clean.”
“Come on.” Belinda had a bucket and several rags, brushes, and bottles of upholstery cleaner and bleach. “We’ll clean up that mess and then I’ll pull my car around and jump that weak battery of yours.”

Outside, it was beginning to brighten in anticipation of morning. The stars had disappeared, and the sky was a dull gray. Belinda got down on her knees beside the Cassida and began to scrub down the seat. Occasionally she would hand Mingus a wet towel and he would wring it out onto the street.

“You got a wife?” Belinda asked.

“No, I’m not married.”


“Yes,” Mingus said, “My girlfriend. Daphne.” Mingus twisted the towel in his hands and watched the pink bubbly liquid fall. It hit the ground with a splat and ran along the gutter in an extending soapy line.

“Any kids?”

“No,” Mingus said. He thought about adding something, but instead said “No,” again.

“They’ll come. You won’t expect it, but they’ll get you.”

Mingus forced out a laugh.

“I’m not joking,” Belinda said, “They’ll get you. She know you’re out here?”

“She was asleep. I didn’t want to worry her.”

“You just took this nasty man clear across town, and didn’t tell her nothing? I
swear Web in there, he’s gonna be the same way I see it already He gonna do what he wants, no respect to me, and some day he’ll wind up with a stranger in my house all cut up and bloody, just like Roger.” Belinda stood up and handed her cleaning brush to Mingus.

“You scrub for a while, my back’s on fire.”

When they were done, Belinda invited Mingus inside for some breakfast. Mingus declined, but he went in to say goodbye to Roger. Web was asleep on the floor, his hand stuck tight to the controller. Roger sat on the sofa watching the weather channel in a fresh pair of gray boxers. He held a plastic quart-sized cup between his thighs, and a white towel against his injured side. His eyes had calmed down and they seemed more firmly attached to his face. A faint smile appeared when Mingus walked in.

“I told you we’d take care of that car. My woman, she can cure anything. Look at this,” he removed the towel and motioned for Mingus to come close. Where he had been bleeding before were dozens of stitches. They weren’t uniform in length, but they looked like they’d hold. Mingus could tell from the haphazard way the flaps of flesh pressed together that the wound wouldn’t heal completely That pain will linger, Mingus thought, and scar

“Now, look,” Roger said, “I should give you something for your help. I’d give you cash if I had it but I don’t. Tell you what, though, you done me right tonight. And I told you I’m a Christian man. That samaritan shit you pulled, that’s your reward one day. It might not happen today or next week, but you’re due a blessing. It’ll come. Just like you helped me out today, somebody gonna do the same to you. You remember that.”
“Thanks, Roger,” Mingus said, “I appreciate it.”

“I’m doing the thanking, dammit,” Roger said. “Now get on home.”

They shook hands. Belinda was frying up bacon in the kitchen, and the smell followed Mingus out the door.

The sun was up by the time Mingus pulled out of Paldo and into familiar sections of the city. The Cassida’s engine gasped and wheezed and the car crawled slowly through the morning rush. At least his engine was working again. He felt almost graceful as he weaved through the traffic. At a stop light, he glanced at his passenger seat, the fabric a design of stains from Roger and bleach marks from Belinda. He ran his hand over the material as he drove, noticing how soft, wet, and clean it felt.

He rolled into his parking lot as the rest of the building was waking up. A man in flip-flops and wrinkled shorts carried two bags of garbage. Mingus got out of his car and watched as he stuffed the bags into the trash cans on the curb. A family of five walked out of their apartment in their Sunday best. The youngest child was crying, his face flushed.

“But I hate these shoes,” he screamed, “They hurt. I can’t wear them anymore.”

Her mother wore a large yellow hat with white flowers attached to the rim. The petals were slender and waved with her movements. She took the boy’s hand and led him to their station wagon. The child would not climb into the car, so the mother lifted up his stiff body and plopped him on to the back seat.

“I thought you said church was fun,” the son said. “How can it be fun with these shoes?”
"Hush. You’ll learn to love it," the mother said before slamming the door

Mingus climbed up the stairs and looked at the sanitation department. The brick incinerator reached up into the sky like a column that once supported some larger structure. It towered over the hundreds of porta-potties, their blue plastic shells bright against the asphalt of the parking lot.

Inside, his apartment felt larger in the sunlight. The windows had been open all night, and the cool air felt refreshing. Daphne had moved from the sofa to the bedroom. She lay on her back, and her stomach pushed the sheet up from her body, making a linen dome. He listened to her soft snores and watched the sheet rise and fall with her breathing. Mingus stripped down and crawled into bed naked beside her. His body pressed into hers. He let his palm rest over her navel, and he slept in her warmth.
The whiskey stung Ty's cracked lips as he maneuvered his old Volvo 240 down Nowhere Road. The street was paved, but time had turned it gray and gravelly. The lines on the edges and down the middle had disappeared, and the road seemed to fade into woods on either side. One of the headlamps had burnt out, so he drove with lopsided illumination.

Ty was making a less-than-grand homecoming. Returning home after a five year absence. And it was not a triumphant return, but a visit of moral necessity. His father could no longer walk. He would probably pass away within the next three months, and this wheelchair visit could be his last.

Ty initially obeyed the 30 mph speed limit, but he was impatient to arrive. His speedometer crept up a little dash here and a big dash there, and soon he was going at least fifty, his body shifting with every bend in the road. He began to enjoy himself, which is why he didn't react in time.
At first he thought it was a refrigerator box, and then a cow laying across the street, and finally he realized that it was the damn hugest dog he’d ever seen. A mastiff, large even by mastiff standards, and this sent chills through Ty. The dog’s head rested on its paws on the left side of the road and its body stretched across to the right, where it tailed into the dark. It was too late to brake, he’d only have crushed it slower, and stands of maple trees on either side of the road made it impractical to swerve. Ty aimed for the head, tires locked on its reflective eyes, and hoped to kill it instantly, so it wouldn’t suffer.

He hit it going sixty and the Volvo used the body as a crude ramp. The car’s front then back wheels hit the animal and lifted up for one moment before it slammed into the ground. The impact knocked the Volvo out of fourth gear and into neutral. Ty slowed to a stop. He leaned his forehead on the steering wheel and took deep breaths. Bluegrass was on the radio, and he tried to make the sounds force the image of the dog’s face from his mind. No good. He grabbed a flashlight from the glove compartment, sat Jack Daniels on the floor board, and walked back to the point of contact.

Its head was crushed, and the twitching body hadn’t determined it was dead yet. It was solid white where unsoiled, an ice berg of a dog. As he ran the spotlight up and down its body, strange memories crept into Ty’s brain.

Daddy and Champ. Falling. Bleach and medication.

Ty was pondering exactly how bad an omen this was when the floodlights came on. They were on either side of a trailer he had not noticed about a hundred feet off the road, and they had enough wattage to make a skyscraper shine. Light spilled all around him, broken only by the shadows of trees which stretched away from the trailer like
monster spook. A door opened and someone yelled, and Ty knew that was his opportunity to leave.

His eyes were held by the dog’s crushed head, though, the way this pancake skull compared to the flashes of memories in his mind. The trailer person approached, a silhouette creating a gigantic shadow. Ty understood that he should flee the scene, avoid any possible unpleasantries, but he was overwhelmed with a desire to apologize for his actions, to defend what he had done. He wanted them to know that it was an accident, that he would have prevented it if he could. He knew their loss, their unexpected grief, and he wanted to explain this.

"I killed your dog," Ty said when the silhouette was ten feet away. "I hit him." Ty had planned on being more eloquent.

"Shit," the silhouette said, "Well." The man was close now, he was still. The length of the dog separated them.

"I’m sorry, mister, I hadn’t been down this road in years and I came around this corner--"

"Hey, it’s ok, it’s ok, this damn pooch had it coming. I kept telling that dumb son of a bitch to keep away from this road, but he wouldn’t listen to me. He’d always sneak off at dusk and lie down here, I guess he thought this was comfortable or smelled good or I don’t know why. We’ve had wrecks here over this before. Yep, twice. Cars come around and saw him in the road and tried to swerve and smacked into those maple trees. Tore up the cars, had to tow them out." He stared at the body in the road. "Name’s Billips," the man said, crossing the street to shake hands.
“Ty. Look, can I do anything to help? Money? Payback?”

“Nah. Got him free as a puppy. My brother up in South Carolina breeds these big bastards.” Billips was wearing a pair of overalls and heavy work boots. His arms were thick and his gut was round. His features were difficult for Ty to make out in the light, but he didn’t seem too angry or upset. “I tell you one thing you could do. Couldn’t help but smell that whiskey. I wouldn’t mind a taste if you’ve got a spare drop.”

“Sure,” Ty walked towards the Volvo.

“Hey, why don’t you back your car up over here, too? We could keep the hazards on, you know, so nobody runs him over again.”

When Ty had moved the Volvo, he noticed that Billips was talking into a cell phone. Ty stood a polite distance away and looked around. The lines of illumination from the floodlights and dark from the shadows reminded him of a giant UPC symbol. He liked the feeling of being in half-night, of hearing the crickets and gazing at the stars, but still able to see. Ty brought Billips the liquor bottle when he folded the phone and stuck it into his front pocket.

“Called animal control,” Billips said, “they’re sending somebody to collect. It’ll take a while, though.” He took a gulp of Jack, recapped the bottle, and handed it back. “You can go on to wherever you were headed, now, I don’t want you to be late because of this mess.”

“Oh. No, that’s ok. No one will care if I’m late.” Ty sat on the hood of the car next to where Billips stood. “We were just going to drink into the night anyways. I figure I can start here and finish there.” He handed the bottle back to Billips.
The Volvo’s hazards bathed the dog’s body in flashes of yellow.

“His name was Henry, named after some king,” Billips said. “My brother names all his dogs after kings. They have names like Charles, and George, and Albert. Never Butch or Rex or Fido or any of that Rover shit. Couldn’t ever understand why he’d give those big ass mean-looking dogs sissy names like that. Dogs couldn’t of liked it.”

“My dad used to have a dog like that. A mastiff, a white one,” Ty said, “We called him Champ.”

“Champ. That’s a good dog name. Not sissy at all.”

Billips took another pull off the bottle. It was half empty. Ty took a few gulps and leaned back onto the hood. The Volvo’s engine warmed him. He gazed up at the stars, the sky framed by branches. He wished he knew constellations, so that the sky could mean something to him.

“Shit. I kept wanting to get a fence put in around the trailer, so Henry wouldn’t come down here at night. I know I needed to. Fences are so damn much, though. They wanted two thousand.”

“Hadn’t really thought about Champ until tonight. Now I can’t get him out of my head.”

“Two thousand and it wouldn’t have even been big enough for Henry to run around in. It would have been more like a jail than a yard for him.”

“All those times he knocked me down,” Ty said, “Like a canine Reggie White. Hurt me, too. Knocked out my wind, scraped my elbows, bruised my back once.”

“I don’t know. Did Champ have a fence?” asked Billips.
“A what?”
“A fence.”
“I thought you said face,” Ty thought of Champ’s face. He sat up and looked at Henry’s head. “Yeah, he had a fence. Dad always had a dog.”
“Sure am glad I didn’t waste my two grand. If Champ could have got out, I bet Henry would have. And now I’d be out of cash and out of dog.”
They passed the bottle back and forth. Ty thought he heard a car approach, but no vehicle appeared.
“You from around here?” Billips asked, “You don’t sound it.”
“I grew up nearby, but my parents are from Oklahoma. I was raised sounding different. Haven’t been through this part of the country in a while. Feels strange to be back.”
“So why you here,” Billips asked.
Ty laughed. “Oh, no.” He drained the bottle. He set it on the hood. “I came back to see my father. We haven’t spoken in a while.”
“You see him yet?”
“No.” Ty shook his head. “He’s a pretty patient guy. I’ll see him sometime.”
Billips laughed. “What, you got to have some appointment to see your daddy?”
“Something like that.”
“Shit.”
Ty scratched the back of his neck and down between his shoulders. “Hey Billips.”
“Yeah?”
“Champ didn’t run off. I made that up.”

“Oh.”

Ty was staring down at the dog. Its body was finally still. It got the message, Ty thought, it just took a while. “I hated that dog. Truly hated him,” Ty said. “My dad would wash him twice a month, walk him twice a day. Took better care of that dog than his car. Than our house. The dishes would pile up, but Champ’s coat was always pure. I guess I wanted some of Champ’s time to be my time.”

“That’s understandable, I suppose,” Billips said.

“He used to scare the shit out of me. Champ would smack me down. He’d come running up to me, just wanting to play, just wanting to be friendly, and he’d try to put his paws on my shoulders. As a greeting. I didn’t know Champ was trying to be nice, I thought he was trying to knock me down. He’d smack me straight into the ground. On to my back. And I’d start crying, every time. I thought Champ was trying to kill me.”

“Don’t sound like the best pet,” Billips said.

“I started to poison him. But I was just a kid, a tiny dumb kid, I didn’t know what would kill a dog. So it took a while.”

Billips shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He tapped his palm against his thigh.

“My dad always said to not feed Champ people food. Said it was bad for him. So I started sneaking my brussel sprouts to Champ. And my meatloaf, and tuna casserole, and sometimes even the stuff I liked. I starved some nights so Champ would die sooner. I did this for weeks, maybe months. Stupid shit, I know
"Then I just fed him anything. My dad’s pills if that dog would swallow them, some bleach in his water, Comet in his food bowl. It took a while, I couldn’t put too much of anything in his food or else he wouldn’t eat it, but it worked. It worked better than I had planned. Champ got sick and slowly sicker for weeks and then one day he wouldn’t wake up. It all looked natural. Nothing like murder at all.

“My dad cried for hours when he found out. Not silent man tears, either, but wailing and sobbing like a girl. Cried so long and so hard he got me crying, weeping with him. And what’s so sad when I look back, is how he thought I was sobbing over Champ. That I was mourning over my friend. But I wasn’t. I was crying because I had made my father cry. It killed me to see him like that, like a little girl, and to know that I did it, that I turned him into that. I felt so scared. Scared at what I was capable of. Scared at what I could make my father do. I always wanted to tell him about that. Confess. But I never knew if he’d hate me for my black heart or appreciate my honesty.”

Billips cleared his throat. “Shit. Well. You can always tell him tomorrow.”

“Or later,” Ty said.

“Later.” Billips rolled his shoulders three times. “Shit, you better get on down to your pa’s. He’s probably wondering about you.”

“Oh, I can stay on until they come get Henry.”

“Nah, that’s ok.” Billips patted Ty’s shoulder “You’ve done plenty. They should be here soon.”

Ty hopped from the hood. “Suit yourself. Nice meeting you, Billips.”

“Likewise. Thanks for the whiskey.”
Ty got in the Volvo, placed the empty bottle on the seat beside him. Billips walked away from the car, across the street, a silhouette again. As he began to near his father’s house, Ty felt this sinking feeling start to drop inside of him, and it didn’t stop for quite a while.
Betha tried not to act it, but I could tell from the way her teeth chattered and the way her eyes pinched that she was worried. It was almost three a.m. some day between Christmas and New Year’s, and we hadn’t moved in three hours, so a little chattering and pinching should have been expected. But this was too much. She was loud, like a machine gun sound in a video game, and her wide hazel eyes were squint into dark dashes. People in the line kept asking if she was alright. I told them she’d be fine once we got inside, and yes she probably should’ve worn more than a haltertop.

She freaked out my friend Tyke, who stood between us. “Way she’s acting, you’d think we were in the north pole or something,” he said. “Girl, it’s Georgia, it’s never cold enough to kill you.”

He told me that my sister needed to chill out. I told him that was the problem, not the solution, but he didn’t get the joke. I said she had a lot on her mind. I asked Tyke again if he would help me sell off some of my bottle, and he told me, “Hell no, you’re in a hole you dug yourself.” So I tried to calm my mind, to ready myself to crawl out of my pit alone. It didn’t help much.
Everybody in line had on dance clothes and looked blue and frozen and miserable. This was the highlight of our weekend, though, so nobody wanted to lose their place to grab a coat or cup of coffee.

The building we waited outside of was an enormous Nike display during the Olympics. When the games left, they vacated the warehouse, leaving no trace but a black tiled floor with a huge red swoop in the center.

A fetish leather fashion show and expo was held inside earlier that day, but the party promoters had arranged for the convention to end at five so that they could haul the displays and samples into storage rooms and then set up their own lights, decorations, and audio equipment. They’d hoped to have everything ready by midnight, but we got there at 12:15 and were still waiting.

I got stung selling dank earlier in the week, and Betha had to use her half of the rent money for my bail. I got out and quickly spent my half of rent on one hundred pills at five a piece from Tyke’s man. I wanted to raise enough funds to put a down payment on a quality lawyer since it was my second arrest and I didn’t do anything right court-wise the first time around.

I was relatively calm since I knew my pills were good. Each one had the silhouette of a rabbit head pressed into it, and they were fresh off the plane from New York. Tyke said he recognized the stamp and had taken two the year before and they were the best he’d done in months. And Tyke would know, he was a good friend and he wouldn’t con me.

I was glad there weren’t any coppers at the door. You know how those off-duty uniformed creeps will get hired out just to look menacing and tough and try to scare you out of going inside? There weren’t any of those. But there was a door man who patted you down. I had my pills in a Pain Away bottle in my pocket. He felt the bottle through the fabric of my corduroys, wiggled his fingers to confirm its bottle-ness, and then let me
go in. Medicine didn’t interest him— he was looking for knives and guns or something dangerous.

Inside, dark curtains dropped from the ceiling and hid the walls. Dozens of white screens hung like rectangle ghosts from the ceiling. Some of the screens had cartoons or flashes of television projected onto them, some were blank. Dozens of pews lined up side to side, their backs pressing the curtains against the cinder block walls. Lights and lasers shot all over the room and sent stars and spirals roaming across the floor. Against the back wall, a stage rose ten feet off of the ground. The dj stood behind this large turntable podium. His head, headphones, shoulders and hands were all we could see—a jack-in-the-box playing vinyl. Above him was an enormous sign that said “Hallelujah” and an exclamation point in gold glitter letters.

There were hundreds of people inside already, and almost everybody was dancing. Their too-big pant legs fanned behind their bounces, kicks, twists, and swirls. They shifted past each other like fish in the ocean. I wanted to get out there and join them, I wanted to dance until the music stopped. I loved being part of the movement. I had to unload those pills, though, so I got to business.

I gave Tyke two freebies for paying our way in, and I gave Betha two for being my sister. My fingers felt strange dropping the capsules onto Betha’s palm. She would always find stuff for us at parties, and she had been the first to give me a free ride. We’d spent so many late nights up together, now every part of it felt routine. She’d give me my first and last hugs of the evening. She’d always brew the tea the next afternoon, as we sat on the sofa in sweats and smiled over how numb the fun from hours before had made us.

“Unchartered territory,” I said, “I haven’t sampled these, so play it safe and take just one first. See what happens.”

Betha nodded and Tyke gave me a thumbs-up.
“When people ask,” I said, “Send them my way. Say they’re thirty tonight and to have the cash when they order.” I told them that I’d catch up with them when I sold out. I expected it to take about an hour. I wandered off to sell to the friends I could find.

When business was getting almost constant, I got hugged from behind. I expected to see Betha, since she was one of the first to swallow and these pills I had were supposed to make you madly happy. Instead, I found this pudgy tan guy wrapped around me. This confused me for a second, but then I recognized him as one of the promoters. He let me go when I didn’t hug back.

“Jones, honey, I’m so glad you could make it out tonight. Could I talk with you in my office for a few minutes?” he asked. His smile was trying to look sincere instead of forced, but it wasn’t working. He led me to a wall and grabbed at part of the curtain. He drew it back to reveal a door and unlocked it with his free hand. He swung it open for me and I went inside.

The room was pitch black. I heard the door close behind me and music from the dancefloor bump softly through the wall. I hoped this wasn’t some sort of erotic proposal since I had a lot of work left to do.

“Ah,” he said through the dark, “There we go.” I imagined him dropping his pants and advancing towards me behind his erection.

The overhead lights flickered on, and their ugly brightness pained my eyes. The fully-clothed tan pudgy promoter had his hand on a switch. The room was large but we were standing in a small pool of open space. The rest of the place was filled with stacks and rows and racks of leather equipment and items. Hundreds of awkward-looking dominatrix suits, saddles, cases of whips and masks, promotional displays, and thigh boots in a variety of colors and styles. There were other items in bulk that I had never seen before. Some of them looked either painful or pleasing depending on where they were used.
He walked up close to me and leaned his head towards mine, his lips inches from my ear. “Listen,” he whispered, “Play it safe. A G.B.I. plainclothes is in there tonight. He’s looking for a big score. The captain called me about it yesterday, they’re waiting in squad cars a few blocks down in case this guy needs backup. I know you’ve got quantity tonight, and I know you’re a reliable kid around here, and I appreciate that. So do me a favor and don’t get yourself busted.” He told me to be discreet, then he bought thirty

I passed past the curtain and back into the sound, into the bodies. The news put a cramp in my plans. Dumb luck. The GBI never shows up to parties unless they think they can catch some kingpin in the act. They usually only come down to venues once or twice a year. They couldn’t be looking for me in particular, I thought, because I never sell pills unless I need some large cash fast. And I’d never tried to sell this many before. I had no big-time rep, but I knew that they’d haul me off all the same if they caught me with my full Pain Away bottle. I thought about tracking down Betha and Tyke to warn them about the cop, but decided they didn’t have much to worry about.

The people were packed in, rubbing shoulders. This was the largest turn-out for a party I’d seen in a long time. It didn’t take long for me to spot the plainclothes. He was leaning against the wall about twenty feet away. Undercovers are easy to see when you know what to look for. They’re always a little too old to be up that late, and they look like they’re dressed more for a Braves game than for an evening of late-night partying. He observed the masses, trying to look casual and hip, but his head moved too much, constantly swiveling, for him to really be somewhere he wanted to be.

I was thinking about how to keep away from him when this kid tapped me on the shoulder. He looked sixteen, and he was already on something heavy. No part of his body could keep still. His feet shuffled, his arms twitched, and his head bobbed off-rhythm.
“Yeah, uh, Tyke told me that you could help me out.” He was looking at me like he was some abused dog and I was an animal rescue unit.

“Sorry. Not tonight.” I tried to walk off, but the kid grabbed my hand.

“Tyke said you had some, said you had bunnies from New York.”

I took his hand off of me and placed it by his side. “Not tonight,” I said again.

When I turned around, there was the plainclothes looking right at me. He had on black work boots and a Whazzit t-shirt tucked into tight black jeans. He nodded his head at me, and I knew I was officially tagged.

I walked through the crowd, right through the middle of the dance floor, and I could feel the cop following me. I tried to walk as fast as I could, so that nobody else would ask me for favors. Folks came up to me, but I ignored them as best I could. But my sudden popularity didn’t make me look too innocent.

I wanted to find Betha. I wanted her to maybe hold on to the bottle for a while. But I couldn’t catch sight of her. I looped around the crowd, I zig-zagged through the crowd, but no luck. I kept looking behind me and, sure enough, this same cop was always within sight. Each time he was half the room away from me, leaning into the wall.

I had my neck craned towards him while walking in a different direction when I tripped over this guy sitting on the ground. The side of my head smacked into the black tile floor, and my first thought wasn’t damn that hurt, but what a relief. I had dropped beneath the surface of this sea of people, and the cop must have lost track of me. All I could see were grooving legs. I sat up and just watched those endless legs move. Legs in jeans and tights and skirts and spandex biking shorts and even a tutu. They were all shifting around me.

I recognized the plainclothes’s black cowboy jeans walk right towards me. He was stumbling forward, trying to look like he was fucked up. He was doing a good job—his legs looked like they hurt to move, and his eyes were sunken in and distant. My heart
was thumping and that bottle full of bunnies felt like an anvil in my pocket. I stared up beyond his Whazzit shirt and right up into his left nostril as he passed by. He kept walking and until he faded into the legs.

I looked around to find the man I’d stumbled over. I was going to apologize, so I started to crawl towards him. But as I approached, I noticed that he was smooching Betha.

I sat down beside him. I contemplated what I was going to say. I tapped him with my elbow. “Excuse me, I need to talk to her,” I said.

He ceased his kisses and turned his head to face me. He did not look amused. “Take off, I was here first.” His lack of smiles told me that he wasn’t on anything cheerful.

“Come back later. She’s my sister, I just need to talk.”

“You’re the brother?” he asked. “I want to buy from you, amigo, this chick is seriously rolling off of that stuff you got.”

“That’s not me, that’s my other brother. Can I talk to Betha now?”

The man whispered into her ear and pecked her on the forehead. When he stood up, he scowled down at me like I had thrown up in the movie theater. What a nasty boy, his face seemed to say. Normally, I would not interfere in Betha’s personal life, I respect her business. But I didn’t mind shooing this guy off her—he wasn’t exactly a winner.

He walked off and I slid next to her. “Hey, I need you to help me.”

“Jones,” she said. She reached her hands out in front of her. They drifted in circles towards my face and wound up between my neck and my shoulder. “Did you take any yet?” I could feel how clammy her palms were through my shirt. “They are. I mean.”

“No, Betha, I can’t right now. Look--”
She started to press down on my shoulder. "It's like I have this energy, these lives inside me, flowing through my body. Little life bugs and moths just circulating under my skin. You should feel this swarm."

"I'm sure. Right. I need you to be quiet." She closed her eyes.

"Jones you should swarm," she said

"Ok. Maybe later."

She rocked a little from side to side.

"Cops are following me, Betha. Well, at least one is. I need to unload this stuff somehow without being seen."

She placed an open hand on my face. It was cool and slick. "Jones."

"What do you think?"

"Swarm." Her hand dropped from my face and she slumped into my chest.

Normally I love to hold my sister close, I see it as my duty as a true brother, and I love the warmth that creates between us. These signs of affection bring us closer than most brothers and sisters get, but I didn't want hugs right then. I was hoping that Betha and I could quickly brainstorm possible solutions to my dilemma, determine how I could still make the cash and not get caught, but there was no way Betha's brain could storm anything anytime soon. I also couldn't trust her to look after my goods when she couldn't even sit up straight. I shifted her body and arms off of me and slumped them over her legs. She looked somewhat safe and comfortable hunched in that position.

My mind was just a mess of stress. Thoughts weren't coming to me straight, and it was like this instinct started to take me over. I stared up at the dancing top halves of bodies surrounding me. Elbows, triceps, and wrists swung above me like a canopy. I watched this false ceiling shift and change and I decided to just do it, get it done and get out on that floor for some fun.

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I got up to find Tyke. I didn’t get all of the way up, since that would reveal my whereabouts. I kept my legs as far apart as possible, and crouched down low as I moved. I felt like a Hollywoodized Vietnam soldier, slowly creeping through this jungle maze of party-goers. Every ten feet or so, I would quickly pop my head up above the shoulder-line like a periscope. I’d take a few glances and then dart back down to continue my search.

This plan would have taken hours to work if I was looking for anyone else. Tyke always dances in the same location wherever we go: as close to the center of things as possible. He loves to get right in the middle of a crowd and then force them to clear out. He dances with his arms flailing like broken windmills, jumping around chaotically as if he were playing some giant version of hop-scotch. Some nights, particularly when he’s found some speed, Tyke will start busting out the old-school breakdancing moves: the topspin, the caterpillar, the butterfly, the whirlwind. Tyke’s actually got a good sense of rhythm, and he’d probably look magnificent if he were doing performance art in a theater. But since he’s on a packed floor, problems arise. He knocks over tiny unsuspecting girls, and bumps the larger ones out of his path. Thinner guys just get out of his way and give him a bothered look. The bigger guys sometimes let him jump around like a maniac and just shake their heads at his movements, and sometimes they shout at him to calm down, but Tyke just keeps on going until he’s had enough showboating.

So it only took me about ten minutes to track him down. I just looked for the open space in the middle of the crowd and headed for the only person in it. I moved towards him, and my crab-like shuffle caught his attention. He wiped the sweat off his face, pulled up his pants from crotch to hip level, and walked towards me.

“Damn, Jones,” he was cooling himself by moving the front of his shirt away and back quickly to cool his chest, “That bunny is setting me off. Did you see me tearing it up out there?”
“You were moving pretty smooth.”

“Smooth? I was tearing it up. Torching the competition. You saw how all those wanna-dancers backed up when I arrived, didn’t you? I can ride the beats on this shit man, damn. Why aren’t you out here?”

“I haven’t taken one yet. I still have half left to sell.”

“Why are you standing all hunchbacked like that?”

I got him to pay attention to me after several similar false starts. I told him about the promoter and the Whazzit cop. And I told him my plan. I said I’d be sitting against the wall ten feet to the right of the dj platform. I asked him to tell his friends where I was, what I had on, what my deal was, and to get down towards the floor before approaching me so that we wouldn’t get busted. Tyke’s eyelids kept flashing shut for seconds at a time while I explained all of this to him. I could see his teeth grinding while I spoke.

“Are you sure you got me?” I asked.

“I got you, I got you. Send them crawling. Thirty a pop. Right of dj.”

“They don’t have to crawl, just tell them to stay low.”

“Stay low.”

“After you talk with your peeps.”

“Stay low. Thirty a pop.”

“Plus something. Can you check up on Betha?”

“Get down to the ground,” Tyke said, “On to the floor. Get down.” He started to dance away, but I grabbed his shoulder.

“Look, she was feeling it pretty hard when I left her.” Tyke looked me in the eye.

“Maybe she took too much. I don’t know what’s up, she was with this man, and it looked like trouble.” He shook his head. Then he nodded. “Did you take both?” I asked.

“Nah, I’m saving one for later. Might split it with the right lady, you know?”

Tyke gave me a double thumbs-up. “No prob with that, just show me where she’s at.” I
pointed her out. Tyke gave me a huge too-tight hug that raised me off my feet. It was the sort of hug that feels like bliss when you’ve been dancing all night on the right thing, but it felt painful and awkward since I was sober and trying not to be noticed.

When I arrived where I told Tyke I’d be, there were already three girls huddled in a clump there. I didn’t want to confuse them, but I needed that particular spot, so I sat down beside them. I thought they’d get up and move if some strange guy plopped down by them and ruined the moment, but they just looked back at me and smiled. They could barely hold their heads up long enough to glance at me, so I knew they weren’t coppers or straight-edges or the type who might mind my business beside them. It looked like they were about to pass out from something, or at least stay put for the next several hours.

I had this view of the stage from where I sat. I could see the dj behind his altar, legs and all, and the “Hallelujah!” flickering behind him. There were others on stage, too. Men dressed in black turtlenecks and blue jeans were moving boxes, stands, and cables onto the stage.

This stranger crawled up to me. I was watching the techies work and a hand grabbed my leg. I turned around and there was this hairy tank top man sprawled out on the floor. His arm was attached to my thigh and his head looked up at me.

“I moved like a snake,” his face twisted out the words.

“I see,” I said.

He bought twenty pills. So far, this was going smoothly. This woman with a black cape held across her nose ninja-walked up to me. A boy with a jacket that said Massive frog-hopped across the room to buy. One guy must have been a circus performer or something, because he somersaulted like a human ball until he bumped into my side.

The business was great, I was down to about ten pills, but the melodramatic way my clients were contacting me had gotten out of hand. It made me wonder what Tyke had
told them, because they certainly weren't trying to be subtle. I was catching glares from nearby dancers.

It was even worse when the music stopped and the lights stood still. The techies had to adjust and add audio lines for the next act. Customers were still waddling up to me, though, and I knew I was attracting attention.

I tried to convince myself that no one was noticing. I figured that even though the speakers were silent, most of the crowd was too trashed to see me.

I had almost tricked myself into not worrying when this tall obese guy steamrolled right through the middle of the dance floor and up to my feet. Most of the people left standing were looking right at me. Folks were yelling, and the man on my toes was just laughing like "heh-heh-heh-heh, yee-ooh, heh-heh-heh-heh." I thought about standing up and moving away and possibly even leaving, but that, I decided, would draw even more attention to myself. So I sat there and hoped the crowd thought I was only an innocent bystander. People helped up their fallen friends. The lights seemed to be getting brighter.

The doorman that patted me down on the way in walked up and slapped the steamroller man in the back of the head.

"Get up," he said, but he wasn't looking at me.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh, yee-ooh, heh-heh-heh-heh."

"Up." He smacked him again.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh, yee-ooh, heh-heh-heh-heh." The tall obese guy pushed up onto his knees. He stood up like he had sandbags on his back. He kept laughing the whole time. The bouncer grabbed his arm once he was on his feet.

The doorman gave me a good long glare before hauling Steamroller towards the exit. I thought about following them outside, just to get out of the spotlight, but I didn't like the idea of me and the huge laughing man alone in the parking lot.
I endured the uncomfortably low noise level until this blonde man with a big necklace of Saturn walked out onto the stage. The huddled girls beside me started screaming and trying to stand up. I was afraid at first that one of them had o.d.'ed or completely lost her shit. Two of them stood, and then they reached down to pull the third to her feet. They ran the dozen steps toward the stage.

The necklace man touched one of the boxes on stage and bass drum kicks rang out. The beat was so deep that the ghosts screens above me shook. He touched another box and bird calls filled the warehouse. The lights started again, the stars and spirals sweeping the room. The next box was waves. Then a trombone joined in, followed by ratchet clicks and a reverse gear warning alarm. The sounds took hold of one another and weaved into music. The three girls began to move in a clumsy dance. Their motion leaked into the people nearby, and the dancing spread until the room was funky again and smiles reappeared.

"Cosmic!" came the screeches whenever a beat changed tempo or type. "Cosmic, Babe-ee!" Things were returning to normal.

I felt a nudge on my leg. I looked down and there was Whazzit, on his back. His belly shook while he tapped my hamstring with his head. The relief I had just began to feel disappeared.

When he made eye contact, he held still.

"Yo, man, I need something," he said. His voice was a raspy buzz. I had to lean down and watch his mouth to understand. Anxiety began to build up beneath my skin. I was so close, and still here he was.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. Usually cops just stake you out and then whisk you away. I didn’t expect him to be this up-front.

"You know what you got, you know what I want."

"Nope," I said.
"What?"

"Nope," I said.

"Help an old man out. I have cancer"

"You do not. You're a cop."

"It's my throat. I have lymph node cancer"

"I'm not selling to a cop."

"I'm dying. This dialogue is making my throat bleed. The blood is making it."

He paused. "Very difficult to talk. I just want some fun." His face really looked pained. His arms were shaking. This guy was an impressive undercover. He should have been an actor.

"No way, healthy cop."

"Why do you keep calling me that?" He took in a long breath. "Why won't you—"

"No." This had gone far enough and I didn't need to get tricked into admitting something that could be interpreted as insulting an officer. "This seating arrangement is not working out." I put my hands under his head, tilted it, and lowered him slowly onto the black tile. "Rest here," I said as I stood up.

I felt taller than the last time I walked standing straight up. The relief that left me earlier bolted through me and grew until I felt my back muscles loosen up and my jaw relax. All the same, I wanted to give the last ten to Tyke to sell for me in case Whazzit called in some of his friends to try to nail me. The Pain Away bottle felt empty except for the tiny rattle inside that shook with my steps. The night was almost over.

I looked all around and near the center of the dancefloor, but I couldn't find Tyke. I assumed he was taking a break, so I started walking past the pews that lined the walls. Couples and larger groups filled the curved wooden benches. Everyone was holding hands or pressing against one another. Some were administering and receiving massages.
The eyes that were still open were on Cosmic Baby. He moved about the stage like a scientist in a lab, monitoring and adjusting his machines as if he was close to the cure for herpes.

I was the only one not enthralled. I kept searching.

The room was sweating. Sweat dripped down, beads streaking down faces and dropping off of chins. It made their faces glow along with the light patterns. Drops flew off of the dancers’ hair and fingertips. I had to slow my search since the tiles had grown slick.

I had almost given up when I saw him on a pew by a corner. Some girl’s legs were wrapped around him and his hands had crept up her sides, under her halter top. Like I said, I normally believe that one of the worst things you can do to a friend is ruin a romantic moment, but I was burning to get those pills away from me, to be done with it.

“Hey, Tyke.” I said, but he didn’t hear me. I tried again, louder, but the music was deafening. I moved my mouth right behind his head and screamed “Tyke, you turkey!” at the top of my lungs.

This got through to him. His startled hands accidentally shoved the girl’s top up over her chest. I caught a glimpse of a breast before he was able to pull the cloth back down. Tyke sat up and twisted his body around to face me. That’s when I noticed that the girl he was with was Betha.

“What the fuck!” he said.

“What the fuck?” I asked.

“Jones?” Her eyes were rolled so far up that all I saw were white slits. She rubbed her shoulders against the pew like she was in heat. “Jones,” she reached out for my face, but I was too far away, “He wanted to be with me. He did. He shared. He said he would look out since you were away.” Her hands dropped and landed on Tyke’s collarbone.

“Hey, Jones, I wasn’t trying anything.” One of his eyebrows was further up his
forehead than the other. “Just hugging, you know how it is. Just making the most of the moment.”

The happy twosome sat there with glossy smiles on their wet faces, and I recognized for the first time how ugly they had become since the beginning of the evening. Their skin was pale and damp. Their hair was filthy and flying about.

I turned my back to them. I needed to think without watching them together. The sight of my sister’s sweaty breast plucked this big thick string in me that I never knew I had. It vibrated until I felt shaken all over.

I was eager for something else to focus on. I tried to be mesmerized by the dancers left on the floor, but their fatigued movements made them look merely exhausted, not exotic. Their zombie eyes and sunken cheeks reminded me of what I was trying to forget. I looked at the curtains falling away from the ceiling, revealing the highest cinderblocks. The stage looked shabby, the “Hallelujah!” cheap and worn. It was all infected with ugliness. Even Cosmic Baby looked miserable behind his rows of metal objects, forced to create until the last one stops dancing.

I felt like I had to get out before I became a part of this. I needed to flee while I could.

“We’re leaving,” I said.

“But Cosmic—” Tyke said.

“You’ve seen him. Let’s go.”

Tyke looked at Betha. Betha chewed on the inside of her mouth. He put her hands in her lap and stood up. He looked cold. “Ok. Whatever” I could barely hear his voice.

“Jones,” Betha said, writhing on the wood. “Jones, help me.” She held her arms
straight above her and wiggled her fingers. Tyke took a step back.

I placed my hands under her armpits and lifted her.

"I can't go Jones," she said. She wasn't just pouting—I could feel her legs wobbling uncertainly underneath her. I wrapped one of her arms across the top of my back, and I wrapped one of my arms around the small of her back.

"Walk with me," I told her.

We tried to walk like this, but her legs would not firm up.

"Let me help you," Tyke offered. "Help."

"You've touched her plenty," I said. I tried to drag her several more steps, and Betha almost slipped off of me and onto the floor.

"Fine," I told Tyke, "Grab an arm."

We carried her out of the club like an injured football player, her feet sliding between us.

Right before the exit, Tyke turns my way and says, "Ok. I don't know over there. Things just got crazy."

"Please," I said. "Please shut up."

I opened the door to outside.

It had snowed. In Atlanta it only snows about once a year, and never during the holidays. I didn't know if it was a miracle or a terrible omen.

The crunch beneath our feet and the coat of white on everything made me feel like I was in some fairy-tale city. The sky was gray, and I could hear church-bound traffic on the interstate nearby. We walked slow so that we wouldn't slip and drop Betha, and I felt my shoes grow icy wet.

We found Tyke's car after trying to open several snow-covered incorrect vehicles with his keys. I held open a rear door and we convinced Betha to fall onto the back seat. We placed her legs inside and closed her in. Tyke got in the driver's seat and I sat beside
him. He started the car, and the sound of the engine was soothing. Tyke put the car in reverse, backed up five feet, and then he put it in park again.

“Jones, man, I can’t stay focused yet.”

I wanted to get away from there. I wanted to get back to my bed, my space. I wanted all of this to be done with. I offered to drive. We both got out of the car, ran around the hood and past one another, and Tyke got in the backseat with Betha.

“Won’t even keep me company?” I asked him. He already held her hand in his, their sides pressed tight together

“I can’t keep my eyes open,” he said.

“Open,” Betha said.

I waited for the car to warm up. I flicked the rear view mirror to night-vision so I wouldn’t have to see them together whenever I looked behind me. I tried to find a radio station I liked, but failed and opted for silence. I slowly moved out onto the clean white street.

The interstate was busy but not hectic. The snow-capped cars moved around one another like swift icebergs. In my side mirror, I could see the skyscrapers retreat behind me. As I put more distance between me and the party, I began to feel partially successful.

Outside the perimeter, the traffic slowed to a trickle, and when I turned on the state highway that led back home, I was the only one on the road. The near-solitude was refreshing.

The car constantly slipped around on the ice. It was one big iceskate gliding through an oil spill. I thought about how the ugliness that frightened me was partially my fault, part my hole I took out on everyone else. How Tyke’s grimy hands wound up all over my sister just because of my mistakes. And how I couldn’t make tea for her the next morning, how our routine was smashed.

I pulled the car to a stop on the shoulder of the road. I pressed the brake gently so
I wouldn’t wake up the couple in back.

I walked several steps away and just stood there up to my shins in snow. A slight breeze cut into my skin. Ice fell between my socks and shoes. The car windows were fogging up. The dusted trees swayed with the air.

When my face began to go numb, I moved a step backwards. I took out the Pain Away bottle and squatted down. I placed it inside of one of my footprints. Its base struck the earth. I covered it up and packed more snow on top. I made the mound as tall as my stinging hands would let me. I stood back up and admired the hill I had made for a moment—tall enough for me to see, but nothing that would attract attention.

I headed back to the car. Tyke and Betha stirred when I slammed the door.

“What are we doing here?” Tyke asked.

“I just needed some air,” I said, “We’re home free now.” They mumbled to each other as I cranked up the engine.

I pulled onto the road and set the cruise control to fifty. It was time to see what would happen to me now.
Cam was not an ugly man, but there was something too eager about his personality that repulsed women. He spent weeks attempting to lure a female into accompanying him to the Celebration. He bought chocolates in foil packages, plastic and actual flowers, wrote original and plagiarized poetry. He invested a small fortune into pastel stuffed penguins. At first, he hand-delivered these tokens of his affection to women he admired. He'd hand them several gifts, remark upon their intelligence, beauty, sophistication, or dimples, and then ask them to consider himself as a date candidate for the upcoming Annual City Celebration Ho-Down and Festival Dance. He would wrap up his presentation with a bow and a flourish and a small business card with a picture of himself along with his more alluring physical, familial, and business information printed in bold and bordered with tiny silver hearts. These women would smile and say thank you and then typically crush or tear up the card with a laugh as Curtis retreated. As the days passed and Cam remained dateless, he became desperate. He began to hawk his goods at any woman he'd encounter along the street.

This was supposed to be a time of joy. The first Saturday of every May, men and women toast and congratulate each other and pay tribute to their lives deep into the night. It's a time to thank friends and family for helping you attain your current status in life, and a time to brag to the community about your role in society. The only catch to the
Celebration is that it’s a heterosexual couples-only affair, and attendance is mandatory for all citizens of Trademark Cola City over age twenty-two. Absentees are tracked down, arrested, and typically deported after being labeled Skilless, Homo, Solipsistic, or Problematic. Never before in the history of Cam’s family had a member failed to attend. This compulsory festival, the Trademark Cola Annual City Celebration Ho-Down and Festival Dance was instituted decades ago by the City Fathers, who envisioned such an event as a way to celebrate the area’s prosperity and continued population growth while ensuring the economic class divisions that had rightfully shaped their culture. It is a gathering to guarantee stability.

Cam had arranged a date three months before the festival, although he hadn’t been enthusiastic about spending time with the woman. Her feet were massive, her personality was both shallow and abrasive, and she had a prominent hair lip. But since Cam was only moderately attractive in physical or financial terms, he saw this woman as a safe bet. Not only would she agree to accompany me to the Celebration, Cam thought, but I won’t have to compete for her. This seemed like an intelligent course of action since Cam had recently turned twenty-two, and even though she would not bring much pleasure into his life, she would save him from the legal and social consequences of remaining single.

The market for top quality female mates must have been incredibly tight, though, for Cam’s prospective date was wooed away by the son of a Neo-Robber Baron. Cam halfheartedly attempted to regain her devotion, but he soon discovered that this man had an expensive small car and exciting large plans for his newfound love. He simply could not match this man’s promises. So he said goodbye to his angry small-minded fuzzy former bride-to-be and began to plan. His approach involved acquiring the candy, business cards, and stuffed penguins mentioned above, but this approach was not particularly effective.

In one last attempt to attract a date, Cam walked to Central City Market the day
before The Dance. There he wept on his knees like a cowardly condemned man, throwing candies and plush water fowl at any lady who would draw near, begging for company through his tears. He hoped that some elderly widow would have mercy on him or that some underage girl would consent to his company, but no such luck. Defeated, he slept beneath a closed bratwurst stand, his trinkets of devotion strewn around him.

That night, Curtis stepped through the debris of flattened candy boxes and trampled cute penguins. He dragged Cam away from the bratwurst stand and shook him out of his dreams.

"Curtis?" Cam said.

"Yes," said Curtis, "You still look single." He brushed some sauerkraut off of Cam’s forehead.

"Where have you been? I stopped calling six months ago."

"I have been preparing for a new future, and now it is time to join me."

"You?" Cam asked. "Oh. What do you mean?"

"Do you have any choice? The Dance begins soon."

Cam looked at the chocolate smudged and smeared along his arms. He looked at the wrinkled business card clutched in his palm. He scowled down on his own mass-produced smiling image. He thought of the police who would drag him off to relocation in a matter of hours if he stayed put. He tried to think of his options, but his lack of financial status gave him few options to meditate upon. As he saw it, he could either allow himself to be apprehended and exiled, probably to some undesirable locale like Macon or the Pork Processing Dormitories, or he could flee. He looked back up at Curtis.

"Ok," he said, "Fine."

Cam and Curtis’s families had vacationed at Berry Lodge for two decades. It
wasn’t really a lodge, just a modestly-sized home surrounded by five acres of woods. Cam and Curtis’s fathers purchased the land from the Unwanted Frontier Office, thinking that it would be nice to own a small slice of solitude in this increasingly chaotic world.

Shortly after Berry Lodge was constructed, however, the Trademark Cola City Fathers began to carry out their master plan for increased economic activity, what they termed The Great Push for Heightened Development and Prosperity. On childhood vacations, Cam would stand at the edge of the property and watch the chainsaws, bulldozers, and back-hoes clear out vast sections of the Unwanted Frontier. Gradually, asphalt replaced the soil and concrete structures towered where trees once stood. Curtis and Cam’s families held onto the lodge and land, but their five acres became an organic island in the midst of giant parking lots.

The City Fathers erected signs just beyond our property lines, facing the areas of Heightened Development and Prosperity that read: “Welcome to the Berry Lodge City Park and Recreation Area,” and, towards the bottom, in very fine print, “Private Property.” Cam’s father spent most of his vacations gathering greasy cardboard and Mega-Sized soda cups from the nearby fast food outposts, trying to uncover the dirt and grass he was so proud to own.

Curtis and Cam loved to climb up into the twisted-leaf pine trees next to the parking lots, and they spent hours watching the action below. They’d gaze down through the limbs and pinecones to watch traffic accidents and automobile problems, the impatient shoppers screaming at one another or into the air, wringing their hands out of their need to go someplace else to do the same thing. They saw hormonally-charged teenagers of all gender combinations undress between the trees and make love like they were siphoning their pain out into each other.

Once they saw a minivan drop off an elderly lady at the edge of the woods. She
spent an hour walking slowly around, occasionally caressing bark with her palms or stooping down to place a pinecone in her purse. When the minivan returned for her, she tried to hide behind a tree trunk. Two young men had to get out and drag her back into the vehicle. Curtis and Cam laughed at the sight of her sobbing, her futility seemed so humorous, but Cam grew to believe that was one of the saddest things he'd ever witnessed.

They drove through the night, munching on what remained of Cam's courting chocolates. They arrived just as the sun was pulling out of its initial rosy rise and into its less glamorous bright shades. The vast parking lots were vacant, the stores dark and locked—everyone had abandoned the area to make the Ho-Down Dance Festival pilgrimage. Moving through all that emptiness made Cam truly feel like a renegade. Every speed bump seemed to jolt up the level of excitement by a notch.

"Such a sight," Cam proclaimed when the twisted pine trees came into view. Their limbs and the familiar "Welcome to the Berry Lodge City Park and Recreation Area" sign sent dozens of pleasant childhood memories, much like those covered above, dancing through his head. Cam smiled for the first time in weeks. "What an idea, Curtis, much better than some date." He let out a weak laugh.

"Do not trivialize our mission," Curtis said.

"I wasn't trying to," Cam said.

"Hush"

As they drew near, Cam began to notice how things at the lodge had changed. There was a roadblock in the middle of the dirt path that led to the lodge. The roadblock wasn't an official Trademark Cola City roadblock—it lacked the mandatory city seals, and it was constructed out of shoddy materials. Old tires and discarded fast food trash were piled up in an enormous mound at the mouth of the path that lead to the lodge. A
weathered piece of particle board hung from the top, with “Do not Entr” scrawled over it. Beyond the mound of debris, a dozen men in brightly colored clothes gathered trash on the ground. Their outfits were mismatched and fit them poorly, some clothes pinching tight to their bodies, while other articles hung baggy from their frames. They dressed only in vibrant colors—boiled corn yellows, electric shock blues, loud oranges—which were muted by the grime and filth that covered them in a dusty glaze. Once their arms were full of hamburger wrappers, hot sauce packets, and plastic utensils, they would walk to the roadblock and add to the pile.

These men and their activity confused Cam, for none of them appeared to be family members, and Berry Lodge was a family affair. “What is this?” Cam asked. “Who are they?”

“You will see,” Curtis said. “I have donated this land to a great cause.”

“Without checking it with anyone? What would your father think?”

“My father’s dead, Cam. Thanks for bringing that up.”

“I know, and I’m sorry about that and all, but—”

“Come,” Curtis said. “You will understand shortly.”

They stepped out of the car and walked past the roadblock. Despite how large and imposing the trash barricade looked, Cam appreciated how clean the ground was around the lodge. The earth was typically filthy, covered with a thick layer of garbage, but now he could see the soil and pinestraw, interrupted only occasionally styrofoam cups or paper wrapper.

Curtis clapped his hands three times, and the men stopped their gathering and paid attention to what he had to say. “Dear friends, fellow repressed citizens, I have brought us a new member. This is an old friend of mine, a man with a good heart, and I rescued him from imminent apprehension by the Trademark forces.”

The men dropped their garbage and applauded loudly. Some even shouted out
their approval of Cam, saying such things as “Bravo, Curtis,” or “Wonderful,” or “Yee, doggy.”

“So welcome, Cam,” Curtis said. “Show him the ways of our tribe, and I will see if the Count has time to meet our newest initiate.” Applause and shouting broke out again as Curtis walked away from Cam and into the lodge.

When the fanfare subsided, a man with a green vest and plaid beret patted Cam on the back and offered to show him “the ways of our resistance.” He showed Cam how to bend over slowly and gently collect the trash that they had dropped when Curtis began to speak. “Gingerly pinch the discarded object between two fingers and cradle it in your other arm. As Count has taught us, just as the Trademark ways of progression are harsh and brutal, our solutions shall be gentle and mild. And from this a new world will emerge.”

Cam had absolutely no idea what this man was talking about, or how such slow garbage collection could help anyone attain anything, but he followed instructions as best he could. Occasionally the green vested man would encourage him to slow down, to appreciate his work and his cause, and soon Cam was collecting trash at an incredibly slow rate, much to the delight of his companions. He heard murmurs as he grabbed plastic straws with the speed of a snail: “This new one sees the power in moderation,” one man said. “Yes, he will be a valuable new tribesman,” and, “Yee, doggy, he gonna rock this shit out,” others noted.

Before Cam had collected two handfuls, the front door of the lodge opened up and Curtis walked out onto the porch. The men around Cam stood up and threw their collections to the ground. Cam did the same, although it pained him to discard the two handfuls of work it had taken him so long to accomplish.

“Fellow tribesmen,” Curtis shouted, “I present to you, our most special equal
opportunity leader, the Count!” The men clapped their hands, but in a polite, measured manner. A short man with a large, flabby torso waddled out of the lodge and stood next to Curtis on the porch.

“Thank you, thank you,” the Count said. “Too kind. Really Curtis tells me he has brought a bright new member to add to our ranks. Where is he?”

Green Vest pointed to Cam and said, “He is here, O Count, and he has vast potential. With little instruction he grasped the zen of our filth collection.”

“My, how wonderful,” the Count said. He moved with deliberate steps down the porch and towards Cam. He kept approaching until he was uncomfortably close, his enormous soft belly pushing gently into Cam’s crotch. “Kneel, Cam,” he said. Cam, not wanting to look impolite, and eager to get his crotch away from Count’s belly, fell to his knees.

“See how he longs to become a part of our ways!” Green Vest shouted out.

The Count cleared his throat. “Gentlemen, let us watch as we test our Cam’s spirituality.” The men formed a tight circle around Cam. Their bodies cast shadows over him. “Cam, you must prove your faith in a greater force than the Trademark Empire,” the Count said. Pray to show us your depth.”

“Pray?” asked Cam.

“Yes,” said the Count.

“About what?” asked Cam.

“Just pray”

Cam stared down into the two fistfuls of trash he had collected and then dropped. Although he did not understand these people who had taken over his family property, he did not want to anger them by denying their requests. Without Curtis and these odd men, Cam had no option. He was not a religious man, but he started to recite all of the prayers he could remember. He made up the words he couldn’t recall. “Oh Father, throughout in
heaven, grant us this day, forgive us our trespasses,” he said.

“Yes, yes,” the men cried.

“Oh Lord, my goodness, great northern pitch,” Cam said, his voice growing with confidence and volume. What his words lacked in meaning, he made up for in the sheer passion of his speech. “Please recognize,” he said, “Toils snakes brakes love!” The Count looked at the other men in the circle, and his eyes wrinkled into slits. “And begat us far, benevolent, forty-four ounce blue raspberry mega-gulp!” His voice was breaking from its intensity, his sounds rash and worn.

The Count placed his open hand upon Cam’s skull. He rotated Cam’s head upwards, as if he was palming a basketball. Cam opened his eyes, and the two stared deep into one another for a moment. The quiet was broken when the Count spoke, his voice gentle and high.

“Yes indeed,” he said. “You will be a valuable addition to our resistance.”

“I, ah, er,” Cam replied.

The Count removed his hand from Cam’s head and turned to address the others. “Now back to your zen-like garbage collection. We must finish before the Trademark forces arrive. The troopers, the tanks, the aircrafts, they will be no match for our spiritual resolve!” The men cheered again, and then fell to their knees and began methodically gathering the trash they had gathered before. Cam began to do the same, but the Count interrupted him. “Not you, Cam. You come with me.”

Curtis tried to follow Cam and Count into the lodge, but Count motioned for him to join the others on the ground. Curtis let out a dissatisfied grunt and turned his back on them.

Inside, the lodge bore little resemblance to the house Cam’s father had carefully decorated over the years. The furniture lay chopped in stacks by the fireplace, the walls were bare, and camping mattresses covered the floor. The Count sat on a stool in the
center of the room. Despite his heavy build, he looked comfortable on his perch. He motioned for Cam to sit down. He sat on a thin cushion near the stool.

"They call you Cam," Count said. Cam stared up over the mass of his body and into his face. "Yes," he said, "Last I checked."

"I spoke a sentence, not a question," he replied. "My given name was also Cam, a common Trademark label, but my tribesmen have re-named me," he took a dramatic pause, "Count No Copy."

"A pleasure to officially meet you Cam, or Count No Copy," Cam said. "Please, forget the formalities, just call me Count," he said.

"Count," Cam said.

"Good. Now, listen, Cam. Brother Curtis has informed of your situation. How your families own the deed to this house, this land. How Brother Curtis led you out of the evil of Trademark. I know I'm giving you the abbreviated version. It is fortunate that you have come here today. For one thing, we were hoping to discover someone who knew the lay of the land, the history of this place, the soul of it all, so that we might enhance our plans of resistance. So now we must talk of your role in our uprising."

Curtis burst into the room. "Count, Count, they are here. The trademark forces have come to squash our rebellion!" The Count plopped off of the stool and onto his feet. He waddled towards the window. Cam imagined helicopters and armored vehicles moving across the parking lots to attack, with smoke and missiles and certain death in the near future.

When he approached a window, though, he saw only an official Trademark Cola City roadster parked at the edge of the woods. Two men with laptops, lab coats, and sharp haircuts got out. They approached the lodge, and Cam ran into a nearby closet to
hide. The men stepped inside without knocking.

“Ok, I don’t think you gentlemen understand,” Count said as they entered the room. Cam carefully cracked open the closet door to watch what follows.

“Sir, this is not a matter regarding your spiritual beliefs or cultural traditions, Trademark Cola City respects your basic human rights,” one employee said. “But you need to abide by the ordinances that the T C.C. D.M.V. sets forth for the universal safety of all citizens. That’s why you just need to remove your garbage heap from the premises. It makes it nearly impossible for emergency rescue vehicles to reach your abode.”

“But it’s a road block, you see,” Curtis said, “That’s what it’s supposed to do. It’s a symbol of our dissatisfaction.”

“Right,” the other employee said, “But it’s an unauthorized roadblock. You need the appropriate paperwork to build that sort of thing.”

“Yes, exactly,” the other employee said, “And its building materials and architectural style are inappropriate for the zoning of this land. So if we could just get you to remove this particular roadblock, and get you to fill out these forms, you’re welcome to build a similar but modified structure at some later date.”

“Exactly,” agreed the other employee, “but not in the middle of the pathway, all right?”

“No,” said Count, “This is a revolution. We are struggling for enlightenment, to break free of your ways. You cannot impose your will upon us.” His eyes burned with the fierce fire of anger and virtue. He pushed his chubby chest out against them to show his resolve.

“Now, sir, we all have our little complaints about T C.C., but in order for us all to coexist happily, we need to follow some rules.”

“Right,” agreed the other employee, “That’s why the City hires people like us, to
make sure that we can all live happily together. You do want to live happily together, don’t you?”

“Well,” Count said, and he let out a long breath. “Yes, but.”

“Then I’m sure you’ll study these informative pamphlets we’ll leave with you regarding the proper channels you’ll need to go through to acquire the building permits required for independent roadblock construction.”

“We will not sign forms, you oppressive,” Count paused, “Trademarkers.” His shoulders shook.

“Now, let’s try to keep this civilized. We’re all adults here,” an employee said.

“Exactly,” the other said, “And there’s this matter with the men on the ground outside. The Sanitation Department has many exceptions for religious groups, but, unfortunately, you are housing an unhealthy number of unbathed persons here.”

“Those are our followers,” Curtis screamed, “You cannot take them away from us.”

“Yes, well, you’re welcome to purchase any number of artificial filthy followers. You’d be surprised at their lifelike resemblance.”

“Indeed,” the other said, “And aren’t fake dirty followers just as helpful as the real deal? And they carry far fewer diseases. So we’ll just leave these order forms here with you and we’ll have a man stop by to check on your progress. Have a nice day, gentlemen.”

“Be gone, you demons of Trademark!” shouted Count.

“Now, now. You remember the Sanitation Department’s motto: Do unto others.”

I heard their footsteps exit the lodge and the door close behind them.

Curtis let out a wail. “Oh, they’re not taking us seriously at all.”

“These must have been powerful individuals,” Count said. “The mightiest men
Trademark City could have sent after us. Others will not be so lucky.” But he sounded uncertain. His eyes had grown mild, purple bags were forming under them.

A knock came at the door “Hi, guys, excuse me, but could I have a word with you?” It was a new voice. “I’m from the T.C.C. Annual Celebration Ho-Down and Festival Dance, you know the A.C.H-D.F.D.?”

Cam gasped. Now was the moment of reckoning.

“And I just had some concerns I wanted to discuss with you.” This new voice was deeper, but had the same inflection as the earlier two. “You see, apparently you two and those fellows collecting garbage outside and this other fellow, first name Cam, who is apparently staying here also, well, apparently you guys didn’t make it out to the Dance today and I just needed to know why. I’m sure you all had very nice excuses, and I just needed to hear your side of the story, so that, you know, I won’t have to call the police and all.”

“We do not participate in your oppressive traditions. We are rebelling against your tyrannical ways and will not tolerate this sort of intrusion into our quest for an enlightened spiritual life,” his words rang true, but Count sounded tired.

“Yep, I see, sounds exciting,” the voice said. “Rebelling, huh? I guess we’d all like to do a bit of that. And how about you, son, what brought you out here instead of the Dance?”

“I have joined this brave fight for freedom,” Curtis said, “It is my way of life now.”

“All right. Well, I’ll tell you guys what. I’m going to just mark you all down as observing some religious holiday, and we’ll just plan on seeing you next year. No need to get the cops involved, right?”

“Bring your police,” Count said, “Bring your armed forces, we will not budge from the ideals of our revolution.”

“My, you two certainly are a riot. Such a funny religion you have going on here.
A regular cult of personality," the voice laughed. "Well, I'll send you your copies of my paperwork as soon as they're processed, expect them in a month or so. And I'm just going to leave these brochures advertising next year's A.C.H-D.F.D. The theme is going to be 'T.C.C. And the Power of Fun!' You won't want to miss that. Well, nice talking to you, but I have other business to attend to today." I heard his footsteps retreat. "Oh, and guys, have a great evening!" I heard the door close behind him.

Expecting additional Trademark visits, Cam stayed put inside the closet. Curtis and the Count must have forgotten his presence, for they discussed the ways to enhance their plans for revolution: how to channel more powerful psychic energies, how to better deal with the minions of Trademark City Cola, and how to draw more attention to their renegade ways. They also discussed their personal matters—why Count wasn't as tender as he used to be, why Curtis didn't seem to listen as well as he had earlier, and why they didn't have as much energy for each other as before.

After about an hour of this, the door came crashing open and Cam heard men stomp into the room.

"No Copy," a voice said, it sounded like Green Vest, "We have become dissatisfied with your leadership abilities, and we are here to overthrow you." The men cheered.

"Yee, doggy," someone cried.

"Please," Count said, "You must give this time, we have only recently fulfilled the legend of our ancestors."

"Good things will come," Curtis said, "We have plans."

"You have grown soft since this boy has arrived," lime vest said, "And your days of power are over." The men cheered.

"But what of the legend?" Count asked.

"Yes, the legend," Curtis said.
“My father told us that legend long ago,” Green Vest said, “He was the first to mention it. But it was a bedtime story, No Copy, not some prophesy. Such a dull tale that it put me to sleep every night. He shared it with his parent friends and then you decided it was the stuff of legend. No, No Copy, it was the stuff of poor parenting.” The men cheered. “And you are the stuff of poor leadership. The Trademark forces have walked all over you, and you cannot fight them off.” The men cheered again. “No more.”

Cam watched as the men pinned Count and Curtis to the ground. Two men produced enormous rolls of duct tape and began to wrap their legs.

“But you don’t understand,” Count said as they wrapped the tape around his huge jiggling thighs.

“We understand all too well,” said Green Vest. He placed a piece of tape over Count’s mouth. “You cannot stop the rebellion of your uprising!” The men threw the piles of paperwork the employees had delivered into the air to demonstrate their joyous feelings. They flew and fell like enormous confetti. “Now this is a revolution,” green vest said. The two men continued to wind the duct tape around Count and Curtis’s torsos until they were completely wrapped in a silver cocoon.

“You shall be an example for the rest of our men. Never again will we succumb to such pitiful measures. We will make the roadblock larger, and we shall soon achieve the spiritual enlightenment my grandfather spoke of to my father every night before he went off to sleep. We shall be victorious!” The danced about while Count and Curtis squirmed on the floor.

“Who will lead you now?” Green Vest asked.

“You will, you will!” the men cheered.

“The first thing we need to do,” Green Vest said, and paused for dramatic effect. “Is go out there and gather that trash even slower than we did before! Go, be one with nature and purify our earth. I will wait inside and meditate on our predicament.” The
other men filed out and Green Vest sat on top of Count’s stool. He closed his eyes and a satisfied grin spread across his face.

He had not been resting long when another knock came at the door. Green Vest replaced his grin with a frown. “Come in,” he said.

A man with a khaki suit and a solid red cap walked in carrying a clipboard.

“Hello, sir, I’m Davie from acquisitions. I got a call this afternoon informing me that you would like to purchase some artificial filthy followers through the sanitation department.”

“What?” asked Green Vest.

“Yep, that’s what it says right here,” Davie said, pointing to his clipboard. “Well, the market for artificial filthy followers has really been on the rise lately, and you have several companies that could suit your needs. There are quite a few styles and quality grades you could choose from. Everything from poor Nineteenth-Century Russian-Style Serfs with Torso Re-enforcements and a Ten-Year Warranty to your Temporary Contemporary General Multi-Purpose Paper-Mache Foreign Impovershed Persons, which look nice but won’t last you long.”

“But we already have real filthy followers,” Green Vest said. His voice tried to sound angry, but his confusion leaked through.

“Yes, sir, but they are in violation of several F.C.C. ordinances. That’s why I came here to help you place your order. Now, are you looking for top-of-the-line mannequins or would cheaper cardboard-based products suit your needs better?”

“Davie,” Green Vest said, “We do not want or need your services. You insult our mission.”

“Well, sir, this is nothing to get grumpy over, although I understand what a big decision this must be for you. Tell you what, I’ll just leave the paperwork here, and you can mail in your order sometime next week. Have a great Celebration Day, ok?” Davie shut the door behind him, but as soon as he had closed it, it opened again and the
followers from outside walked in.

"So what was that all about?" one man said.

Green Vest tried his best to explain, and this resulted in a duct-taped Green Vest laying beside Count and Curtis, the newly delivered paperwork piled over them, the sheets slicing into Curtis’s forehead. This pattern continued throughout the day until every man lay tied and buried beneath a massive mound of pamphlets, brochures, and promotional literature. That last man spent many hours wrapping himself in tape, struggling against himself but ultimately succumbing to the discipline he knew he must administer.

Trademark Cola City personnel continued to visit regularly, lecturing the wrapped men on hygiene and the importance of heterosexuality and punctuality for the advancement of the culture. They continued to leave forms and promotional literature until the door could no longer close. Finally, the Housing Department came to reduce the number of household occupants below the legal limit. A bulldozer broke through the roadblock, sending trash high into the trees. Several City vans pulled up to the lodge, and muscular employees tossed the duct-taped revolutionaries like potato sacks into the vehicles. Cam tried to decide if he would struggle or go along politely when they’d discover him. He listened nervously as the employees finished stacking the wrapped revolutionaries and began to shovel all of the paperwork into a recycling van. Now they have me, Cam thought, now is the time of reckoning. But no one checked the closet and Cam listened in disbelief as the vans drove off.

When the sounds faded into silence, Cam stepped out of the closet and into the empty lodge.