

2018

Beaches without Sand

Connor McElwee

University of Montana, Missoula

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McElwee, Connor, "Beaches without Sand" (2018). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 11126.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/11126>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

BEACHES WITHOUT SAND

By

CONNOR WILLIAM MCELWEE

B.A., Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, 2015

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2018

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

David Gates, Chair
Creative Writing

Robert Stubblefield, Co-Chair
English

Megan Stark
Mansfield Library

ERRANDS

by Connor McElwee

On the ferry from Fajardo to Vieques, Nargis and I licked blocks of frozen lemonade and photographed the sea. We had just graduated from a rough patch, a three-month break in which I'd picked up the habit of church, and it was still too soon to meet each other's eyes. We sat the way siblings do, comfortably apart. We were doing our best to not look bored.

"Let me ask you, Nargis. Do you think I have a problem if I force people to tell me my flaws?" I said. "Maybe not force, but let's say, vigorously suggest. I'm worried it makes me look insecure. Please tell me if it makes me look insecure."

Nargis squinted at me. "You're unbelievable. You're doing it right now."

"Is that so?" I said, amused at the thought.

Nargis was trying to zoom in on a porpoise. The lens wasn't strong enough. I had heard much about this lens since its purchase.

"Maybe fiddle with the aperture, darling," I said.

"It should automatically adjust. The tutorial said—"

“Yes, Nargis. I remember the tutorial.”

The boat pitched over the wake of a larger ship, a cruise liner, and I steadied myself on Nargis's knee. She looked at my hand bewilderedly, as if it were diseased. “Ouch,” she said. “You squeeze too hard. You know how easily my legs bruise.”

I did know, but I had forgotten. We hadn't been together in what felt like a very long time. I was relearning Nargis. I would have to. The porpoise did a terrific jump while Nargis was searching for the bruise.

It was June and I was sweating through my pants. We had been on solid ground for an hour, searching for a restaurant from my childhood, when we decided to call it quits and buy ham sandwiches at a grocery. The taxi raced up the hill and dropped us at the gate to the house. It was large and white and sat on the highest point of the island, with sweeping views of the bay and the technicolor town. With Nargis at my hip, I pointed out the neon reefs, the port where our ferry had docked. Nargis was brilliant, consulted governments and played squash with Condoleezza Rice, but she had never been to this part of the world. The place had the potential to do good for us, to build me up as a vibrant, enviable man. I pointed to the mangrove. There were things I hoped she would see.

After drawing the blinds and removing a dead mouse from the kitchen floor, Nargis went upstairs and changed into her running clothes, the short Nike shorts and form-fitting tank. She looked pert and athletic—she always did—but she wouldn't run here. Without sidewalks, with hills and blind turns and breakfast rum, it wasn't safe to run. In the months before her death, my grandmother had taken to making the two mile trek nearly four times a week, along the snaking road and into town, where she would buy vegetables to bake whole, not seeing the point in

cutting them. During those months, she had had a few close calls. She had been nipped by a Mazda, her gut reaction to invite the driver home for tea. This was my grandmother, wily and kind. Nargis had never met the woman but wept freely the day she died.

Here was the old wicker couch. I sprawled out and inhaled the cushions, the scent of my grandmother, like a diaper basted in moisturizer then left to dry.

Starting to snooze, I was jarred awake by a hot, stinging pain in my ass. The noise came after. Nargis had spanked me as hard as she could.

“Hey! Was that because I made fun of your lens earlier? It’s a damned good lens. Your finest investment yet.”

“You always make fun,” she said coyly, standing in front of the couch. How encouraging, I thought, so I leaned forward and kissed her nose. She made a face of phony disgust and tried to squirm away.

“Now now,” I said. “Any more of that and we won't go dancing.”

She nudged my head with her elbow. I scooted over to make room. “I don't want to go dancing. I want to see the cockfights. Remember what your grandmother said? That's entertainment here, the cockfights. That and TV. Everyone has TV.”

“Correct. TV is number one. Beautiful beaches and the whole island's inside watching *Rush Hour 3*.”

I had planned our appointments for that same day. In my grandmother's will she had asked me to visit her friends. These were people who served her, namely. The woman who massaged her calves, her pharmacist, her obliging Puerto Rican priest.

“Let's leave in an hour or two. Why don't we have some naked until then. I can't be horny when we meet the priest.”

“Why not? You love sinning.”

“Because. Because it's against the rules. I didn't write them, sweet Nargis. I'm only trying to behave.”

She nodded thoughtfully then pointed to my shirt. I placed it on the coffee table then pointed to hers.

It had been so long, there were so many compliments to give. I gave her them all and we had extraordinary sex.

The masseuse lived in a studio apartment above the office of an *abogado*. It was all clutter, with cartons of powdered milk stacked on the kitchenette floor, florescent lights buzzing, and the only window obscured by a bulletin board propped on the back of the couch. She serviced her clients in their homes. She was not expecting Nargis and I when we knocked.

“It's so terrible!” she exclaimed in the doorway. I couldn't tell if she meant my grandmother's passing or the state of her room.

She moved aside a pile of glamour magazines from the couch and told us to sit.

Did we want *croquetas de jamon*? The masseuse pointed to a pot filled with oil, a foot-long thermometer leaning against the rim. Quaint but crude. Nargis and I smiled and shook our heads.

The woman was short, not far behind my grandmother in years. She waddled over to us and took Nargis's face in her hands.

“Look at this. She's almost Puerto Rican, no? Very dark, your woman.”

“She'd like to know where you're from, darling” I said, translating from English to English.

Nargis explained that she was from North America, the United States of America specifically. It was her heritage that reached across the ocean, her parents who had gone to school without shoes.

“You have luck. Very beautiful. The Puerto Rican women are very beautiful,” the masseuse said.

“How lovely,” I said. “She’s saying you’re beautiful, Nargis. I heard the word *reina*. I think she may have called you a Spanish queen.”

Nargis nodded. “Yes. Yes, I heard her.”

I spent the next twenty minutes making up stories about my grandmother, tales about her vigor, which she kept until her final days. I knew that only the masseuse could know if these stories were true, since I hadn't seen the lady in over three years, and the masseuse had touched her legs probably three times in the past month. But I was bored, sweaty, eager to lie, so I used big words and just kept talking so the masseuse wouldn't have the room to disagree. Nargis bit her lip and smiled pleadingly at the woman, alternating between the two. I hated the way she tapped her foot, tried to exculpate herself with that apologetic face. There was nothing to apologize for. The face looked constipated. The masseuse and I were only having a talk.

We decided to walk to our next appointment, further down the hill, and stopped at a *bodega* for ice cream bars along the way.

Nargis wasn't talking. She did this sometimes.

“What?” I asked. “What did I say? Did I say something you didn't like?”

She had finished her bar. She cleared her throat and flung the Popsicle stick into the middle of the street.

“She knew you were talking out of your ass, you know.”

I had never been good at knowing when things would turn.

“Who was talking out of whose ass? We were playing, Nargis. Sometimes it's good to have a little fun.”

“You were playing,” she said. “Not her. She probably thought you were high.”

Nargis was sulking the way she always did. Jaw set at a slight under-bite, wiping her nose though she hadn't cried and had nothing to mop up. We kept walking, not talking. We were passing some kind of cookout on a cement soccer field, probably a hundred people, all of them chirping and chirping in that spiced tongue I could never understand, when Nargis started in on the sniffing. It was fraudulent sniffing and we'd been through this before. I felt an obligation to say something, to tell her that the act was unbecoming at best.

“Oh, and another thing,” she said. “You like to forget that they don't speak English everywhere. You do this macho chacho thing when people talk slower than you. Or with an accent.” I didn't get the chance to say it. She had cut me off.

“Macho chacho?”

She was fuming, unwilling to respond.

“Really. I'm curious. What's macho chacho? I understand the macho, from machismo. But the chacho not so much. Is that a term you made up?”

“Shut up, Paul. You did this in Montreal, too.”

“Everyone speaks English in Montreal.”

“They're Spanish here. Hispanic. It's different.”

“Right. Then why bring it up?”

“Jesus, Paul.” A school bus roared past, and Nargis gave a slutty smile to the boys who waved. It made me sick. “You know what I'm talking about.”

I giggled. “You were miserable when we were apart, weren’t you?”

“No. What makes you say that?”

“Well, I learned to paint in the time we had off—very relaxing. I should show you my watercolors. Did you pick up any interesting skills?”

She exhaled heavily, burped twice, then shook her head. My flip-flops were limiting; they beat uselessly against the ground when I gave them any speed. I had to take them off and carry them to catch up with Nargis, who was jogging now, getting her run in and proving me wrong.

I was superstitious, I still am. I knew, barefoot on the road, that we needed to decompress, that a day at the beach might have the power to salvage things. If I played up my grandmother's death or, better, atoned, we would be talking again, our usual selves by six.

But there was my grandmother, the reason for our trip. I had made these meetings by email two weeks before. I couldn't change them now, cancel at the last minute. My grandmother's will had spoken in religious terms. She wrote haikus in her spare time, had quoted scripture, said she would watch from above, shower the earth with joy as I showed her friends my face, gave peace to the Puerto Rican priest. These were spiritual currents. The big leagues. Nargis and I had been dating for three years. I liked our odds. With the man upstairs I held considerably less clout. Nargis and I would have to wait.

We walked to the pharmacy. Nargis stood by the entrance, thumbing through a Spanish edition of People Magazine, while I asked in English for a young man named Ramón. He was taller than me, wore glasses and had an earring. I introduced myself and shook his hand. I said nothing special. After five minutes Nargis's hand was in mine and we were walking out the door.

“How was that? Did I do better that time?”

She didn't say anything. She looked down, realized her hand was in mine, then pulled it free.

The booze puddled in our guts. Technically speaking, we had made it to the beach. We sat under a thatched roof at a white plastic table, staring at a ketchup bottle that kept clotted against the pull of gravity. Nargis fingered the empty napkin dispenser and dragged her feet through the sand. The day was getting messy and our waiter had asked us three times if we couldn't be convinced to try the banana boat. Each time I rejected him with expert politeness, feigning something like empathy for Nargis's sake. Each time he smiled, brought us our drinks, then asked again.

“You know when I'm happiest?” Nargis asked.

“When?”

“When you're puking. Sometimes you puke when you don't realize they put peanuts in the sauce.”

“Yes, that's right.” I smiled.

I signaled the waiter for the check. We had thirty minutes before we would meet the priest, a short walk through the center of town. A fat boy was sunning himself in the bay, arms stretched wide. He wore a speedo and squinted completely, though the sun was waning and obscured by clouds. These fat boys are funny. I tapped Nargis's hand and pointed at him.

“Here's the real question: would you still date me if I looked like that?” I asked.

“If you were tubby? Or tubby and eight years old.”

“A little fatty. I don't know. Picture me however you like.”

She stared at the boy, blowing notes into her empty Heineken.

“Piggy piggy piggy piggy,” I started, trying to pull her from the trance.

“Hey,” she said. “You can't say that. That's crass.”

“So?”

Nargis went back to blowing in her bottle. The boy was doing some sort of calisthenics now, a total caricature of fat boys around the globe. I almost felt bad.

“Look at you! You're trying not to laugh!”

“Shut up.” She was selling her soul to keep a straight face. “I'm still mad, you know. You just got me a bit drunk. We'll have to talk about it at some point.”

I pulled out my phone, rolled my thumbs against the screen. “Let's see, I can do two o'clock tomorrow or three on Friday. And that's p.m. I like to keep my evenings free.”

She shook her head in mock disapproval, stifling her grin. I knew she liked my jokes. She worked with Harrys and Andrews who took pride in living in Arlington and saw humor as a game attempted on weekends, repeating lines from movies during think-tank softball, one wretched impression after the next.

She drained what was left in my bottle, which was most of the bottle, then, almost instantaneously, grew serious. Serious was not good. Serious meant introspection, and introspection meant our current fight. I had a few jokes ready to go, but I thought better of it.

I put my hand on her hand. She pulled hers away.

“I did yoga,” she said. “I suppose everyone does yoga nowadays, but I did it and I did it good when we were on our break.”

“Very good,” I said. “That's very good.”

“Yes,” she said, “it is. It was nice. Everything was a bit quieter. I think I enjoyed being alone.”

“Well,” I said.

“Well, what? Do you want a medal? We’re back together now. You wanted this.” She started doing her spoiled child’s voice. “I’m Paul. Big Mr. Paul. Resolvifying the conflicts. Mr. Paul, the—“

“Have some water, Nargis.”

“I’m not thirsty. I’m just tired. When was the last time we went to bed?”

But she was thirsty. Walking to our priest, Nargis had reached the stage of drunkenness where every drink of water represents a chance at a better self. Water as redemption, as the runny climax to a good patrician night.

We had found ourselves in the cutest of plazas. The hydrangeas and bougainvillea were expertly manicured, the ground had been swept clean, and it held a sense of history, the plaza, having been dedicated to an indigenous person named Vieqax, who, some five hundred years before, had been offered a trade then torn limb from limb. They were honoring him now with a plaque that told of his courage, of his “insufferable” strength—the words in English and Spanish.

I had decided to be nice. Kindness went a long way for Nargis. Maybe for other people too.

“You want a photo, darling? They named the island after him. This is where they buried his arms.”

“No. God no. Get me water.”

I dipped in to a bodega and searched and searched but couldn’t find a bottle of water anywhere. They had *agua con gas*, the sparkling kind, but that wasn’t water, not quite. And I had to get this right. I thrived on the details. I nailed the details, and, at least in the past, Nargis had loved me for that. As I tried to relay my problem to the cashier, I was reminded of Ramadan, the

previous year, when Nargis had said in passing that her family had been unable to get dates for the holiday's first *iftar*, the big fast-breaking meal. It was a fluke thing, a labor strike, and dates that year were nowhere to be found. Anyway, Nargis had said it, and I had done it; I went on Craigslist an hour before the meal, drove out to some farm in the Amish part of Maryland and simply made it happen. There was a guy named Ted who grew the things, his own personal cache, and for \$200 he said I could take a bunch.

"They have it with the gas!" I yelled, frantic, to Nargis, who was standing on the other side of the bodega's open door. I had been lonely in my months without Nargis. Church had been a poor substitute. Too much standing and sitting down. It had made me afraid, true, it had done well to convert me to its cause, but I didn't want to go back. I preferred Nargis. I yelled to her like she was falling from a cliff. "Nargis! They have it with the gas. Nargis darling, please tell me that you'll have it with the gas!"

She poked her head in. "Yes, fine. Thank you, Paul. Buy it with the gas."

Then we were outside. We could see the church, a beautiful triangle watching us on its hill, and we walked there, passing the bottle of water, our silence no longer so tense.

"I can be a cow," I said.

"What? What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm stupid sometimes. I don't tell you how important you are. I do the thing with the voice. The macho chacho thing. The masseuse. Montreal. All of that."

"Oh," she said.

"Yes. I'm often garbage. Sometimes I resemble a bag of garbage more than a man."

"Paul, don't say that."

"No." I was getting worked up. The feelings were real, frighteningly real, and this kind of

speech had worked in the past. “You’re so right. You’re always so right. I was bullied a lot as a kid. They said I had a punchable face. I think that’s why I’m such an ass. Do you think I’m an ass, Nargis?”

“Paul,” she said.

“No, please. I’ve been so terrible. I feel like the Heat Miser. Why are you so beautiful? Who made you so kind? I love God because of you. You’re the only reason, Nargis. Isn’t that amazing? How someone can read the book and not feel a thing—then BANG, a girl, then YOU, and it’s all so easy and sweet.”

“Thank you, Paul.”

“Oh. Don’t you dare say thank you. Not to me. Don’t be ridiculous, Nargis. No. You’re never ridiculous. Just perfect. That’s all, Nargis.”

We walked up the church’s uneven stone steps. I had done well. I was exhausted. It seemed like a good time to ask for a status update. “Are you still mad?”

“Yes.”

“No way?”

“I think so,” she said. “But maybe a bit less.”

“Less.” I let the word settle in my mouth. “I can deal with less.”

I knocked on the church’s door. No one answered. We let ourselves in.

“Your grandmother was a wonderful Christian,” the priest said. “You know this. I only say this because sometimes it helps.”

We were sitting in the sanctuary. We had planned to meet in his office, but we had found him there, praying, when we entered to look at the stained glass.

“She came here often, I assume?”

“You come here often?” he jested, affecting a New York accent. He was young, not much older than me, and had the drawn face of an addict. “Ah, this is a joke I have many times heard but never used. I'm sorry. *Lo siento*. I get bored sometimes. Even the priests do.” Pulling a handkerchief from a pocket in his cassock, he coughed then spit. “You, *señora*, you are from Philadelphia, too?” he asked, studying the phlegm.

“Florida originally. I've lived in Washington D.C. for the last six years.”

“That's very nice. A very pretty couple, the two of you. We had a parishioner here who married a black man. Two years pass then she divorce and marry another black man. This one's name is Benson. Am I saying this right? Benson? He is from Patterson, New Jersey, a very big man. A good man, too. He is one of our most favorite volunteers at the cafeteria on Saturdays. Their marriage has been without turbulence.”

I patted Nargis's hand. She tolerated the contact this time. “Can I ask you something, father?”

“Well, certainly. Do ask.”

“Is it instantaneous? The transition from death to heaven.”

“Yes. It is so. It happens amazingly fast.”

“Then why pray? For my grandmother, I mean, if she's already there and all. Couldn't those prayers be better spent, you know, on people who need the extra push?”

“You mean those not yet dead?”

“Yes.”

“Certainly,” he said, blinking hard, with determination. “You must pray for both. This is God's word. Give thanks for the passage. Pray for those who have not yet passed.”

I was satisfied. He had answered the only question I'd had. I hoped my grandmother was watching. I'd done as asked, I'd seen the priest, and I was ready to go.

Nargis cut in. There was something she wanted to say. "What's your take on patience, father?"

"Patience? This is a very broad word. Patience is important. Can you make it more narrow a bit?"

Someone entered the sanctuary, a custodian, sweeping in the back. "How patient should one be?" she asked. "You must deal with non-believers almost every day, in town, even here in the church. Do you tolerate their company? How long do you wait for them to understand?"

"What do you mean? To understand the Gospel? You must always wait."

"The stubborn ones, too? The ones who seem to have no desire to change?" Nargis looked to me with empty eyes, lingered on a queer stare. I felt targeted, confused. I thought we'd made progress outside. I didn't want to talk about our relationship with this stranger, this crackpot priest.

"Yes. These ones especially, *m'ija*."

"And forgiveness. How many times should one forgive?"

The priest looked flustered, offended, even. "There is no limit to this, too. God always forgives. We are not God, but we must forgive in the same way. Always forgiving. Here," he said, talking with his hands. "I had a brother who put poison in my soup, the poison for the rats. I was in business that year, and my love of money had become deep. I coveted it, and my brother had lost many dollars and wanted to see me dead. But I taste the soup and know right away. Spit it on the floor. We laugh about this now, the soup, the spit. We have forgiven each other. It is not so hard."

I stood up quickly. It was time to go. “Thank you, father. Thank you so much for your time.”

Nargis and I shook his hand then left the church. It was nearly eight. The sun was fixed on the horizon, burning out, and Americans like us had begun to shout peaceably in the bars.

Nargis kissed my cheek.

“You liked what he had to say?” I asked. “You seemed interested.”

“Yes,” she said. “He stuck up for you. I think he had a soft spot for you, or for your grandma, at least.”

We walked through the center of town and bought t-shirts that read “Pura Vida.” This was Vieques, of course, not Costa Rica, but the mood had turned and we were brushing shoulders and there would be a story in these shirts, proof of something.

“Maybe I’ll become a priest,” I said.

Nargis smiled and shook her head. We were no longer avoiding each other’s eyes. Soon we would have dinner and wine. I wished it all could last.

A GOOD NIGHT'S REST

by Connor McElwee

We cherished that house, though we only ever knew it at night. Mother had a company, spent her days sniffing and pointing at screens, and Nadine and I were middle-school students, strung along in the world of cotillion and sport. We spent long days striving to accumulate things: experience, money—it didn't matter so long as it was more. And to return home was to claim our prize. There was the television with its narcotic glow, and story-hour, when mother would do funny voices, read us Poe in her beautiful red robe.

All was well. Until November of 1988 I had little reason to complain.

I was asleep when I heard a thud. It was a leaden noise, a noise from a dream. I turned over and tried to go back to sleep. Then it happened again, directly above my room.

I sprang from my bed. My heart was pounding and I jogged the long hallway to Mother's room. She was taking a sip of Gatorade, standing in the middle of the room with Nadine at her side.

How cozy she looked in her sweatpants and zippered fleece. Her hair was long and golden, and, due to a surgery, her face would never crease.

“Walker,” she said, “do we call the police? You’re the man here.”

“Yes,” I said. “No, it was probably a suitcase. Doesn’t Leslie stack them when she cleans?”

Mother looked to Nadine for confirmation. Nadine squirmed. It was Mother who had told us this information in the first place.

I took the phone from the nightstand and punched in 911, waiting to call.

Then it happened again. The room shook. Nadine yelped and Mother put out her hands as if she were learning to surf, surveying the ceiling, the cords in her neck taut.

“Dammit.” She never cursed. “Downstairs. In the car.”

For ten minutes we waited there with the garage door open and the engine running, until the police finally arrived.

There were two of them, both men, and I saw them enter the house with their guns drawn. They found nothing. They checked the attic and basement, shined flashlights in the crawl spaces. They didn’t take us seriously. A decorative mother and a pair of of brats raised with a silver spoon. They called the sound a fluke.

That night I was too afraid to sleep on my own, and for the first time in as long as I could remember, I decided to spend it on Mother's couch. I made every effort to avoid detection, waiting until I knew Nadine had fallen asleep to tiptoe down the hall.

I lay awake on the couch while my mother tossed and turned in her bed. “I love you, Walker,” she mumbled woozily, drugged by the sleep.

I wanted morning to come. I wanted Mother to see me through the night. But I was no longer so young. I knew there were certain feelings I would have to graduate from. One could regress if one wasn’t on guard.

“I love you, too,” was all I said.

The following morning proceeded as most mornings did. We didn't talk about last night,

Nadine, my mother and I. There was little to say. It was an eerie night, and we didn't expect to be reminded of it again.

Coming home from school that day, I volunteered to take the dogs for their nightly walk. It was nearly 7:00 p.m., and the sun had already set.

Langston and Stacey pulled me through the pale darkness of the street. Leaves starved since their fall disintegrated beneath my feet, and aside from the panting of the dogs and the patter of our steps, the world was quiet, without wind. Where were our neighbors? I never saw them. They always seemed to be on trips, and their properties were fenced and removed from ours by acres of grass. We all had acres, which we meticulously kept.

When we had finished the walk and reached the edge of our property, I noticed a sedan parked at the end of the driveway. Its lights were off and, at 150 yards, its occupants invisible. The dogs were curious. They strained to pull further up the street, but I had little reason to let them, to investigate something as mundane as a car on a public street. I tried to think rationally and forced the dogs across the lawn.

“Whose car?” I asked. Mother was reading a book, mixing a stir-fry with a wooden spoon.

“What car?”

I assumed it a visitor, a friend of hers.

“The one out front. Hanging by the driveway.”

She put the book down, lowered the heat, then paced to the dining room. Standing with her arms akimbo, she peered through the bay windows out to the street.

“Nothing,” she said.

I nodded then sat at the counter, watched her cook.

“Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Do we own a gun?”

She arched her neck and gave a short, single laugh.

“We? No. I despise guns. They’re for rednecks,” she said. “Do you own a gun, Walker?”

“Todd's dad has one. Mr. Ravenal—he’s got a rifle.”

She plated the food and called to Nadine upstairs. She glanced toward me with cautious eyes. “That's quite the question, Walk. Why are you thinking about guns?”

I didn't say anything. I blew on my food and started to eat.

The bathroom door slammed shut on the second floor, and Mother called again, her voice flagging with the effort.

“Talk to me, Walk.”

“Protection. Some people use them for protection. That's all.”

“I know that, but what do we need protection from? People are friendly out here. There’s hardly any crime.”

“I know, it’s nothing,” I told her.

She kissed my cheek, tussled my hair. Her words had failed to make me less afraid, but she had stoked something with her touch, had softened the blow of the coming night. And again, for the second night in a row, I slept on Mother’s couch.

My performance at school began to dip. It happened quickly. I was firing lacrosse balls over nets, getting B's. I spilled sparkling cider on Emily Dune-Kingsley's chest.

It was that wretched couch, I told myself, a love seat really, that was keeping me from a

good night's sleep. For the past two weeks I had watched the sun rise from Mother's balcony, shivering in my boxers, alone above the frost.

And I owed Mother greatly, for she had worked to keep my scant dignity intact. Each morning she woke me ten minutes before Nadine, gave me time to return to my room and remove the evidence from hers. The arrangement had begun under circumstance, but was building into habit. I couldn't say whether it was only the fear that kept me in her room. I was afraid—certainly—but I loved my mother. I hated the time we spent apart.

We were in the back gardens on a clear autumn day, pulling weeds though we didn't have to, though we had a landscaping team, when Mother pointed toward my eyes and mentioned the bags. She was wearing running clothes, spandex, and they fit her perfectly.

“What about moving back to your room, Walk? It's been a little while.”

I grunted, gritting my teeth as I pulled an innocuous root from the ground.

“Walker?”

“What?”

“I like having you in my room—you're a doll—but it makes me worried. You haven't been seeing your friends.”

I pulled another root.

“Walker.”

“Okay, alright,” I said. “It's done.”

While Mother continued to pick at the ground, I went looking for a sketchbook that had gone missing in the past few days. It contained a semester's worth of work for Intermediate Drawing, and I needed it to pass the class.

I combed my room, searched the house thoroughly, but it was nowhere; the book had

disappeared.

An hour had passed before I went back outside. Mother swore she hadn't seen it, so I left her there in the garden and made my way beneath the pergola and back to the house.

“Weed-wacker! Attic!” I heard her yell from afar. She enunciated very well, and there was no way to pretend I hadn't heard.

I grabbed a flashlight from beneath the sink. I had to do it, to enter the attic, the geographic center of my fear. High school was less than a year away. There was shame and dignity to consider. In two months I would turn fourteen.

The stairs creaked painfully as I pulled them from the ceiling, and a cold mustiness breathed forth.

There were alleys of cardboard boxes and plastic containers, and I meandered through them until I found the light switch. It wasn't so bad in the light. I had a clear line of sight across the space, and my pulse slowed as I wandered and found the weed-wacker. I took it, killed the lights, then lowered the tool through the glowing gap in the floor. The job was done.

“Very good” Mother said. “That was strong of you. It takes a very strong boy to face his fears.”

I shook my head and plugged the thing in. It buzzed maniacally and a familiar heat spread through my face. Mother often made me blush. Sometimes she praised me. Sometimes she tickled my neck. And though I loved these moments, I resented Mother for speaking of my fear in the light of day. The hours we spent in her room, lying together, dreaming and inhaling the same body of air—these hours belonged to the night. They were secretive and beautiful and dangerous and they were not to be discussed.

My school was brimming with girls and I had never had a crush.

The next morning was a Sunday, bright and gusty. I had just returned to my room when Mother knocked at my door.

“I found it,” she said. “I found your book.”

She walked to my bed and handed it to me.

“How about a thank-you for your mother?” she said, leaning in and taking me in a hug.

“Where was it?”

“The attic. It was on the ground in a dusty corner where we keep the old pillows and comforters. I saw it when I was putting the weed-wacker back.”

“That doesn’t make sense. I hadn’t been up there until yesterday. I never go in the attic.”

Mother made a silly face, blew a bubble with her gum. It was big and lewd and it refused to pop.

“Are you listening to me? I don’t go up there. You know I don’t go up there. That’s not where I left my book.”

Finally it popped, then another bubble.

“Mom.”

“What do you want me to say? It was the gypsies that live in the basement! The old sorcerer who’s always hiding behind the couch!”

I didn’t laugh. I glared at Mother until she had no choice but to speak. “I’m teasing! Your mother likes to tease. It was probably Nadine. Or Leslie. She could have put it there the last time she came to clean.”

I was unconvinced. I had already asked Nadine, and Leslie had the conscience of a nun. She wouldn’t have touched my book.

Night came early and I decided to draw.

Beginning at the first page of illustrations, I flipped through my semester's work. The degree of progress was impressive and, for a moment, the dread was gone. I breathed easily and felt something close to pride.

Then it changed. My breathing, my composure—all of it changed.

Someone had been in the book. These stick figures, haikus, venn diagrams and games of tic-tac-toe, none of them were mine. There was a poem written for Janice, a love poem. I didn't know Janice. I had never known Janice. I had never written a poem and I didn't know love.

The book trembled in my hands. I gagged twice then got sick on the floor.

As I hurried down the hall, the photographs of our family seemed malicious and new, like they were taunting me. We had always been the agreed-upon inhabitants of this house, the three of us, but now things had gotten funny, and I was no longer so sure. I thought of the thud in the attic and the idling car, now the sketchbook, and tried to piece them all together. I couldn't.

Mother was beneath the covers when I opened the door. Her nose was whistling and a thin strand of hair divided her face.

“What is it, honey?” She was half asleep but could still see it on my face, the fear. Anyone could.

“Did you have a nightmare, Walk?”

I walked past the couch and sat on the opposite side of her bed, where my father had slept when Nadine and I were small, with a pillow over his head.

Mother pointed toward the couch. “The couch is over there, Walk.”

“I'm sick,” I said, not wanting to talk about the book, for the book was still the stuff of movies, unassimilated, and I was too timid to bring it to voice.

“What is it, honey?”

I pulled the covers back and fit myself beneath them. Slowly, as the night grew, Mother’s warmth drew me across the bed. It was safer on her side of the mattress, and I was no longer concerned with shame. Fear and allure had put shame to rest—it had become irrelevant—and another night passed and we spent it very close.

She was convinced it had been the work of classmates, Mother was, that they had drawn in my book and planted it in the attic. But I hadn’t had friends over in weeks, and I had lost the book only days before.

This was how Mother saw the world. Hers was a world of comfortable truths.

But Mother was nothing if not giving, and she played along with my fear, offered to search the house with her friend and her friend’s husband. And so they came that very night, Jean and Arthur, an identical looking couple that could have just as easily been siblings. After dinner, the adults began to joke about the task ahead. To them, it was a scavenger hunt, nothing more than a game. Arthur asked Mother when was the last time she played baseball, and each of us took our bat.

We started in the basement, which was unfinished and vast, and at every corner we rounded, every cranny we explored, Arthur and Jean giggled in the way of conspirators. I couldn’t be bothered by what Jean and Arthur thought—they were strangers—but Mother’s laughter wounded me in a terrible way. She knew good and well that our little search set my heart to pound, that, for me, each closet door was opened with mortal stakes.

Next we combed the furnished floors of the house. We used these rooms; there were plastic containers beneath the beds and linens lining the closet shelves. Where, physically

speaking, could an intruder think to hide? I was trying to be objective, to think in terms of concrete fact. In the daylight I had this luxury, to look through an unclouded lens. Perhaps the adults were right.

Finally we came to the attic, and I was weak again. Boxes were moved, every square foot of floor passed beneath our feet, and by the time it was through, I was powerless to the truth. There was no man living in our house—there couldn't be. The sketchbook, the constant feeling that I was being watched—these were nothing more than the fantasies of a child. I was clinging to these fantasies. I didn't want to grow up.

Mother and I stood together in the cold night. We waved Arthur and Jean off as they drove away into the dark.

“All better?” Mother asked.

“You were laughing,” I said. “You were laughing at me.”

She hugged me. She used her touch so she wouldn't have to explain.

“It's okay to be afraid, Walker. I am sometimes. It's nothing to be ashamed of.”

“When are you ever afraid?”

We were still outside for some reason, though we could see our breath. Mother wrung her hands then breathed on them. “Last night,” she said. “My eyes were playing tricks on me last night. You were next to me, you had fallen asleep, but I couldn't sleep so I went for some fresh air on the balcony. All of a sudden, I'm standing there and I see what looks like some guy crawling across the yard. I wasn't wearing my contacts. It must have been a deer, of course. But, point is, Walker, your mind will do that. You have to remember what's logical, then your eyes will only show you what makes sense.”

I didn't say anything. My face must have changed because Mother felt the need to make

nice. “Oh no, that was nothing, honey. You know I’d call the police if I ever felt unsafe.”

“Where did you see the deer?”

“Oh, just there.” She pointed to a stand of birch trees in the distance. I had never seen deer in the backyard; it was fenced off from the woods, divided from the land in the front by another fence. She’d suggested that I remember what is logical, and I was struggling to take her advice.

“I’d like to go to sleep,” I told Mother. “Can we please go to sleep?”

She had given up on keeping me away. Her bed was mine now, uncontested, and she hadn’t thought to complain.

“Why yes, my Walks,” she said. “Nadine is staying at Rachel’s tonight. I’ll make milkshakes. We can drink them under the sheets.”

Lacrosse game. A chippy affair against the Haverford School for Boys.

I saw Mother in the stands, wearing an anorak, clapping her gloves when my stick found the ball.

I wanted to prove to her my age, the raw strength of puberty.

I slashed a mid-fielder less than an inch below his throat and was awarded a 1-minute penalty. I was proud and I panted and I looked to the farthest reaches of the stands. Mother. She was making a cute little face. A face of false rebuke. A phony call to behave.

It had been however many weeks. Mother and I were still sharing the same bed. We had enrolled in a French cooking class together; she let me drink the backwash from her wine.

“You’re not still scared, are you?”

“No,” I said, and I wondered if I would ever learn to behave.

We were required, as eighth graders, to attend the final winter cotillion. I didn't care about dancing. I hardly cared about school. But Mother saw this as an opportunity for me, and she was very interested in who I would ask.

My options were technically limitless. My date was not required to be a student at the Academy, and there was no explicit stipulation of age. In the past, I had heard of boys who had brought a beautiful cousin, or even a sister from another marriage. There was a precedent to keeping it within the family, and Mother was comely, kind, and at thirty-five, looked young.

But she laughed at the idea. She was always laughing. "You can't be serious, babe. They'll have a field day. They'll never let you live it down."

"Please," I said.

She stared at me for a moment, waited for the longing in my eyes to break, though it never would.

"That's really what you want? You won't be embarrassed?"

Maybe I would, but I couldn't summon the will to care. Mother would straighten her hair and pad her cheeks in rouge. She would wear a fine red dress and be the envy of the dance.

"Yes," I said, "that's what I want."

I thought of Mother in terms of her beauty, her glowing eyes and pouty lips. It had been weeks since our nights had turned simple, since the fear had gone and left us to enjoy the movements of our sleep. The way our chests were made buoyant then suddenly fell.

No, I would not be embarrassed. I had once heard a man on the television say, "In true beauty there can be no shame."

Nadine was horrified when she heard. She said we were crazy, that she would never forgive Mother, that I could no longer call myself her brother. But why worry about Nadine? She had come out of focus. I never saw her, and I swore that Mother loved her less.

On the night of the dance Mother and I met at the bottom of the house's central stairs. I bowed, she curtsied. We looked splendid, Mother in her red lace dress, and I in the tuxedo that had been tailored to my shape.

We took off in her car and sped through the night. The township had banned streetlights many years ago, so we followed the path of our brights, past hobby-farms and estates, and arrived at the Academy soon after the dance had begun. Without speaking, Mother took my hand and led me into the ballroom.

People stared. Classmates, boys whom I used to call friends—they had met Mother in the past and now they nodded hello. Chaperones whispered to one another. A girl who had kissed me the past summer had a fit of nervous laughter. Mother was a good sport and giggled as if our pairing was some kind of joke.

I offered her my hand and we took to the floor. Then we were off, foxtrotting through clouds of body odor and perfume, multiplying in the room's mirrored walls. We danced the whole night through. Mother commented on the beauty of adolescent malaise. Sweat dripped, collected in the small of her back, so much that it became difficult to keep my hand in place. It was slipping, so Mother took it and wiped it on the front of her dress, less than an inch below the bust. My world history teacher and I locked eyes in that moment, then he lost his nerve and quickly looked away. But there was little reason for weakness in the knees; all was well, my hand was dry, and it stayed on Mother's back until it became wet again.

It was just before midnight when Mother fetched the car and took us home. In the car, she

asked me if it had been a success, if I regretted having asked her to come. I told her of course not, that I would have been miserable without her.

“You were the most handsome of them all,” she told me, and she drove the rest of the way with one hand in my hair, picking away flakes of dandruff then flicking them into the passing night.

The dark was impenetrable when we pulled into our long, snaking driveway. Hardly anything could be seen. Mother parked the car, closed the garage, then kissed my head and yawned as we walked to the door.

It was open a crack. There was a slit of light bleeding through.

“Your mother is silly, Walk,” she said. “I forgot to shut the door all the way.”

We entered. Mother removed her heels and took them by their straps.

“You danced tremendously tonight. You were—” she started to say, when suddenly she, both of us, lost the ability to speak. We could neither move nor breathe.

Cartons of Chinese food littered the kitchen counter. A pair of wine glasses idled next to the sink. A bath towel was draped over the seat of a barstool. There were clumps of mud leading from the breakfast nook to the sliding porch doors. Whistling. Someone was whistling upstairs, but the speed was off. The world was stripped of its normal speed; it reached me in a delay.

“No,” I started.

Mother’s eyebrows were raised, eyes pulled wide. She looked persecuted and embarrassed as if she had been caught at something naughty. As if she were somehow to blame.

“Don’t look,” she said, and we left the house and ran together to the street.

I watched the flashing lights emerge from the dark. Six police cars.

“They must have had a copy of the key,” Mother said. “We looked. We looked, didn’t

we?”

I didn't care about these specifics. It was all too violent and new, and I slipped my arms beneath Mother's coat and found something good and final in her warmth. Her back had dried. The night was cold. I told Mother I loved her and I wondered where we would sleep.

CAKEWALK

by Connor McElwee

After clearing the browser history from his phone, Dane stepped into the shower and looked out the window onto the yard three stories below. Forty or so of his extended family moved leisurely about the grass, picking at hors d'oeuvres, guzzling tiny bottles of water, stealing away and checking themselves for scents.

By the time he'd made it outside the sun had receded behind the pines and the air was no longer so thick. Across the yard Grandma was perched on her toes, trying to light a tiki torch with a glass of wine in her hand. She stopped trying when Dane walked over. She swirled her glass and studied Dane with a squint.

"Have a sip, Daney. Jesus had a taste for the stuff, too, you know."

Always an ally, his mother's mother. In his adolescent years, when Dane was bashful and tall for his age, Grandma had taken a coquettish pride in telling people she'd been his first best friend. She'd taken him to church, dropped him at Sunday school, later youth group, while she drank lemonade and played mahjong with her friends. And they were still close. Two months ago she had laughed when Dane told her he wanted to go to seminary, and it had given him an excuse to laugh, too. But it was nervous laughter if anything, for Dane had lived a life of sin. Seminary,

he reasoned, would be a gesture more than anything else. Studying scripture, seeing life from the pulpit, some four feet off the ground, would be his way of telling God at least he'd tried.

"She wants you to do a thing for Ella," Grandma said, "your Aunt Jill does, before they cut the cake. I told her about your plans, the reverend business, and just like that she asked for a prayer."

"You're serious."

Grandma tilted her head back, a single punchy laugh. "I'm afraid I no longer have the time to joke, my Dane. Next month your grandma will be 81."

Dane circulated and nodded to cousins, wondering what prayer he could give that hadn't been given at the baptism that afternoon. Who—what, even—was this Little Ella anyway? An insensate ball of fat, ululating for sport. When Dane had met her that morning she was snoring like a man.

"Daners!" It was his Uncle Jedd, thick in the neck and dressed in schoolboy attire. The shorts, tie, loafers with argyle socks. "Brighten up, kid, you've got a hymn to sing."

Dane regarded him flatly and bit into a deviled egg.

"Aunt Jill didn't tell you? She wants you to lead us in a hymn before we cut the cake."

"Different from the prayer. A separate task."

Uncle Jedd gulped down his beer in its entirety then stood panting with his hands on his knees. "Oh yeah, as separate as they get."

Dane had nothing in reply, so he left his uncle and continued to move about the yard. How much time did he have to prepare? Was it even an option to say no? People were finishing up with their burgers and pasta salad and the hired hand had begun to clear the buffet trays and bowls of condiments from the serving table. The games of volleyball and horseshoes were

disbanding in the waning light, and a group of barefoot cousins who had been playing run-the-bases searched the grass for their shoes.

“Dane the Brain!”

Dane’s face lit up: Jessa, cousin and old friend. It must have been at least three years, and though Dane wanted to tell her about the prayer and hymn, for her to commiserate and roll her eyes, he didn’t, something stopped him. He asked her about her time in Namibia and then his chance had passed.

“I almost forgot,” Jessa called from the deck after she’d said goodbye, having found an excuse to leave early and get back to the city. “Aunt Jill said she looked all over but couldn’t find you. She asked if you might do a bit of a sermon for Ella. You know how it is. Just a little something before they cut the cake.”

Dane waited in the yard. It was dark now, and he felt the way he normally did, lecherous, guilty, only more so, worse. He was nauseous at the thought that he would soon stand before them as a fraud.

Squinting across the yard, Dane spotted Grandma standing by herself on the perimeter of the grass. With hardly any effort she plucked a tiki torch from the ground and positioned it at her side, holding it like a javelin. Then she began to walk. She walked slowly at first then accelerated into a jog. Dane blinked and tried to clear his eyes, but Grandma kept coming, powering across the yard, chanting something he couldn’t quite make out. Her eyes were red, and in them Dane could see the wobble of the flame. “Sinners burn, sinners burn.” Throaty and sick, the voice grated against the stillness of the night. Pull the air in, press the air out. Dane’s lungs had hardened into cement.

“Help me with the tablecloths, will you?” Grandma held a flashlight. She was smiling,

the Grandma he knew. Dane stuttered out a yes. His brain had done the rest.

Inside now, Dane stared at the television screen and pretended to watch the game. Staring this intently was not unlike being asleep. The sheer fixedness of things had the power to disassociate, to launch one into a trance.

Leaving his post on the couch, Dane went into the kitchen and found a metal spoon and used it to toll the side of the cake. It had been set out to thaw, an ice cream cake, and though hard, it was surely on its way.

Back on the couch Dane was pulled from his trance when a small boy in Superman pajamas emerged from the dark of upstairs, walking sleepily down the steps. He looked lost, aggrieved, and after a long moment of studying the cake he turned and snuggled up next to Dane.

“Hi, Caleb,” Dane said.

“You’re a reverend. You’re God,” Caleb yawned.

Dane looked down at the cozying child, wondering if he had heard him right. Caleb snuggled in closer and wiped his nose on the hem of Dane’s shirt, shutting his eyes.

“How is it being a big brother?” Dane asked. “You must like having little Ella around.”

“I would get tired if I was God.” He yawned again. “All the sad dead people with no money for their shots. Miracles look exhausting. You must travel a lot.”

Dane turned to his left to see if the men had heard the boy.

“You turned five this summer. Why don’t we start there.”

“Why did you let Cain kill Abel? Can’t we learn lessons without a brother having to die?”

“Caleb.”

“And where did Grandpa go? Mom said he’s with you but I have my doubts.”

“I’m not a reverend, Caleb. You know I’m not God.”

Caleb began to snore, fraudulently, his head resting against Dane. Dane moved the child.

“Excuse me.”

Hurrying to the sink, Dane found the spoon he’d used before and tested it against the cake. It hadn’t been long, but the spoon came back runny with white. Time, it was moving, and as he stood alone, marooned in the kitchen’s florescent light, his reflection seemed to pursue him from the back of the silver tool, warped, unfamiliar, the face of a melting clown. Dane checked his pocket for his phone then moved the slider so it vibrated against his leg. He climbed the stairs and let the shower run. He keyed in the site. By the time he was through with his sin the room would be drowning in steam.

The divorce had split the parents the way divorces do, but this must be different, Dane had thought, circumstances likes these must be their own. Within a month both Mom and Dad had found new partners, and they no longer wanted much to do with Dane. They no longer showed up at family gatherings, neither of them, and Dane felt nothing that could be called pain. This was what made it original, their complete and shameless withdrawal, how little Dane was moved.

He took to church in those first months after the cleaving, thinking it good form, a step in some direction. It had been a few years since he’d set foot in the sanctuary, and when he asked Grandma to come he knew she’d see it through the ordinary lens, as a buttress against pain. And just as well. The divorce had given him a reason for taking up the hobby again, and with it no one could call his fervor strange. Dane sweated, prayed in a desperate, physical way. He had begun to find sin in everything he did, not just in the videos but in lurid dreams, in the mornings

he walked from his basement apartment to the deli where he worked, passing people, seeing them as shades, knowing in his heart that he could not give himself for them.

Dane now found Grandma outside, setting tables with fresh plates and silverware. Some of the tiki lights had gone out in the wind but no one seemed to have noticed. The clouds had thinned to a gauze and the moon was bright and full.

“You’re sweating,” she said, blinking her way to the next thought. “Oh, you took a shower. The boy who showers three times a day.”

Dane wiped his forehead with the hem of his shirt. “Tell me something. Can you see me standing at the front of the church?”

“You’re tall. You would be readily visible.”

“That’s it?”

Grandma lifted her shoulders and extended her arms, palms turned upward in theatrical panache. “I’m a heathen. I don’t know Leviticus. How do you spell Leviticus?”

“Grandma—”

“A heathen! You can ask one of the Christians tonight when you’re through with the prayer.”

Together they set the tables. Across the yard a mixed group of children and adults played musical chairs, and in the distance, at the border of yard and woods, Dane saw the protruding backside of a man on his hands and knees. He seemed to be hammering something, working in the glow of an umbrella reflector.

Dane walked over and watched the man struggle to connect two large platforms of wood. It didn’t look like a one-man job, and the man wheezed and sucked at the air like a dying truck. His hair had aged into a horseshoe with a rattail, and his shorts were stained with sweat in two

perfect orbs.

“Excuse me,” Dane said.

“RJ Dunston from RJ Dunston Lighting and Stage. Specialty being event prep, on-demand calls. License being valid since 1971. Escrows housed with Lingman, Moritz and Pike.”

Dane nodded and drummed his knuckles against the stage.

“What can I help you with, kid?”

“What’s it for?”

“Specialty being event prep, on-demand calls.”

“This event. What are the details of this event?”

It didn’t seem like a bad question. The stage was too large to make sense, and Dane’s surroundings were suddenly out of scale. Minutes passed and Dane watched the man work. He watched completely and tried to convince himself he was confused. The lights, the wooden pulpit, the multiplying rows of chairs. He watched as RJ Dunston lugged the ceramic baptismal font up a set of portable stairs. RJ Dunston grinned and filled the font to its brim with a garden hose. Dane wanted to tell someone, to confirm this was all wrong. He waited for a more familiar reality to assert itself. The baptism had taken place that morning, Methodist church, normal Methodist rules.

Walking back to the center of the yard, it seemed like almost everyone had come back outside, the mood boisterous and light. People stood in circles and batted at mosquitos, digesting, teasing. Dane’s pulse batted against his neck and he looked for Grandma in the crowd. He felt feverish, dizzy. Grandma was nowhere to be found, and in the distance Dane heard the scrappy voice of RJ Dunston testing the mike.

“Dunston comma Ralphie James. Dunston comma Ralphie James.”

No one seemed to notice the preparations being made across the way. A group of young cousins shrieked and ran circles around the perimeter of the yard. Carrying foot-long sparklers, they used the things as batons, waving them experimentally, their names vanishing as they etched them into the night.

A recording of organ music began to play, booming and pentatonic. People hardly noticed. Perhaps a rhythmic head nod or two, but no real acknowledgement. Mostly they carried on as before.

Dane spotted Uncle Max leaning out from his circle of relatives, kneeling in the grass to tie his shoe.

“The music,” Dane demanded.

His uncle looked up, seeming not to recognize his nephew at first.

“What’s the music about? Why the baptism stuff and the stage?”

“Oh, that.” Uncle Max gave Dane a breezy look, shrugging and laboring to his feet.

“What’s it for?”

Uncle Max made a face of mock offense, pursed his lips. “So seeeeeerious. Always serious, our dainty dainty Dane.”

Dane shook his head and began to walk away. Uncle Max chuckled and called after him.

“Jesus, Dane. It’s just a little something before they cut the cake.”

It was the ugliest sentence he had ever heard.

Dane made his way through the crowd, and with each question about the stage, the preparations, he sank deeper with its identical reply. And like this his disorientation was proved a purely personal affair. Nothing could be strange so long as it happened before they cut the cake.

Dane climbed the stairs to the deck and threw open the sliding doors. The TV glowed

with its volume on mute, and in a wicker chair sat Grandma's oldest sister, a lost cause, watching commercials and smiling at the screen. Dane knelt in front of the woman and searched her eyes for a sign of intelligent life.

"Where is Grandma?" Dane said.

The woman was apparently mute, or demented. She had the mouth of a horse that lipped back on itself in a self-satisfied smile.

"Now who's that terrorizing my favorite sister?" It was Grandma. Dane stood up and pointed outside.

"Oh, yes. I thought you'd have a problem with that. You'll have to talk to your Aunt Jill."

Dane stammered. Grandma cut him off.

"I know I know I know. She's feeding the baby upstairs, in the big bedroom. Go talk to her."

Dane shook his head. "Why did you tell them all I've been going to church, about seminary?"

"Because they asked. Did you ever think of that? I'm your link to the family, Dane. You don't talk to anyone else."

"Still."

"Still," Grandma mimicked, picking at her nails.

"There's a font," he said. "There's a fucking baptismal font."

Grandma made a face. Dane never cursed. "I don't like that from you, Dane. You're supposed to be the sensitive one. You'll never get away with that once you're at the front of the church."

Upstairs, on the house's highest floor, a light shone faintly from the bedroom at the end of the long hall. The dark was something to swim through, unnaturally thick, and as Dane pushed against it and willed his way toward the light his legs began to grow weak and he struggled to move them forward.

He opened the door. There she was, seated on the end of the California king, rocking the child in dim warm light. A tiny woman with the face of a harridan, a lover of pumice and cold weather, she smiled at Dane and motioned for him to take a seat. He sat, and at once he remembered the fear, how when he was a toddler the woman would pretend they were the same age, walking clumsily, sucking her thumb and snotting into her hand. Dane couldn't have been more than four at the time, but even then he knew there was something horrible in the way she seized the role, how she was given to pouts, would crawl in crazed circles around the tiny room. He remembered it now.

After kissing baby Ella and carrying her to her crib, Aunt Jill sidled up next to Dane.

"I've been hiding," she said. "Isn't that funny?"

"I saw you this afternoon. At the baptism."

"From the party, Dane. I've been hiding from the party."

Dane shifted his weight to the side, away from Aunt Jill. It all felt vaguely illicit, breathing the same air as Jill, having this conversation on the bed.

"How old are you, Dane?"

"Twenty-two." He swallowed, hardly any spit to go down. "I just wanted to ask about what's going on outside, that's all. About the prayer before they cut the cake."

"Twenty-two," she ignored him. "Very young. The perfect age for one to begin his journey to Christ."

Dane didn't say anything

"That's what it is, right, the life of a reverend, a journey?"

Dane nodded at the floor. Aunt Jill smiled, interlacing her fingers in her lap.

A long moment of silence passed, pulling taut, and in his peripheral vision Dane could see that his Aunt had turned toward him. She seemed to be studying the contours of his face, making no apologies. "Tell me, Dane, do you ever suffer from unrighteous thoughts?"

He shifted, gave a wry half-squint.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "I just wonder whether you ever have the sensation of drowning. A poet said it best, some melodramatic Brit. 'Awash in a tidal pool of sin.'"

"No," Dane said quickly, almost in a whisper. "No, I don't."

More silence. "What is it you want me to do for Ella?" Dane said.

"I want you to baptize her, of course. I want her to feel the water from your hands."

Dane got up from the bed. A tinny ringing sounded in his ears. His voice faltered, straining against itself.

"I can't. You know I can't. I haven't been ordained."

Aunt Jill rolled onto her side and propped her head up with her palm. Smiling again, she tried to reach for his hand but he batted it away, and in an instant, the smile disappeared. The color drained out of her face.

"I know about you," she said.

Dane left her on the bed and left the room.

He paced down the hall. He tried his phone for the light but the battery had gone, so he paced blindly, battling the dark. He found his way to the kitchen and no one was there. All the

lights were off. Through the window above the kitchen sink he saw the lighted stage and rows of chairs, which were now all filled. The crowd had swelled to nearly 200 people. They were seated patiently, waiting, organ music blaring from the PA, the baptismal font set next to the cake.

He paced in circles around the kitchen. The music was getting louder, he was almost sure of it. It was so dark. How had it come to be so dark? Dane looked out the window. A milky yellow light flicked on in the shed at the far end of the yard. He saw movement in the shed, someone bending and reaching and busy with a task, not sitting among the congregation, a dissenter, he thought, alone.

He slid open the glass doors and stepped out onto the deck. It was brighter here. He squinted at the shed and tried to make out who was inside, but he couldn't think, see, with any semblance of clarity. The organ keened, overpowering the cicadas and their nightly croak. Dane breathed the air, the limey mosquito coils and distant burning wood. He watched himself glide through the grass. He saw his hand on the flaked wooden plank, pushing open the shed door.

“There's my guy.”

Grandma stood facing a wall of shelves with her back to Dane and neglected to turn when he came in. She was working at something with her hands, swimming them out in a breaststroke motion.

“Sit,” she said. The shed smelled faintly of gasoline. A pair of lanterns glowed in opposite corners, illuminating a menagerie of balls and rackets, Tupperware containers filled to the brim with shuttlecocks. Dane sat in a camp chair.

“I think I'll leave,” he said. “I'll go home.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, it is. Everyone is confused. Look at them out there. It's all wrong.”

“All wrong?” Grandma said then gave a high, gaseous laugh. “What do you mean all wrong? This is your life. And all of them,” she said, gesturing to the window, “are yours as well. What do they say about the sheep? Ah yes, that the reverend is a shepherd, and any good shepherd knows to tend to his flock.”

Dane peered through the small window out onto the lawn. He saw rows on rows of heads, fur-coated, each a container of its own private world, private receptacles of sin. Sin had a stink. He could smell sin, its ripeness, and he smelled it on himself.

“What are you doing?” Dane said.

“Ironing. God knows why we keep the iron in the shed.”

He sat a moment longer then walked to the door.

“Wait, Dane. Please,” she said, “give this a try.”

Dane paused, looked to Grandma. Turning around, she held laid across her forearms a cassock. Tar black, lined with glossy black buttons and a starched white collar, the cassock gleamed. Grandma’s face was knitted with focus as she carried it forward, careful not to wrinkle, delicate and prideful as if it were a sacrificial lamb.

Dane took the cassock from her arms. He had never touched anything so smooth. He felt the fabric with his fingertips, his knuckles, rubbed it against his nose and cheeks, inhaled it deeply along the seams.

“He likes?” Grandma said, grinning.

Dane nodded. The organ music came to a close and Dane pulled the cassock over his clothes.

BEACHCOMBER

by Connor McElwee

That summer Martin spent his days playing bocce by himself, following the wooden balls where they led him, sometimes a full mile down the beach, playing until the sun set and they led him home. At dinner on the deck he and Nana would eat Delmonico steaks and Nana would find something to apologize to him about. She had cooked the wrong carbs, they'd made the dunes too high, the greenheads would stop biting him when the offshore breeze finally came. Then she would attack.

"It's actually quite immature," she would say. "A protest for no good reason. And at your age, a boy with a driver's license." This always followed by a scoff. "Immature!"

Martin would grin, nod and say nothing in defense, nothing at all.

"A hunger strike I could maybe respect, *maybe*. At least then you'd be able to explain the rationale." Nana would then lower her voice and lean forward the way she always did when she mentioned her mahjong friends. "I'm telling you, Martin, Trudy and Jean are very curious about the rationale."

They would clear the plates in silence, and without giving any hint of his destination,

without Nana asking, Martin would vanish into the night.

The parkway would be empty at that hour and he would speed south to Stone Harbor or Avalon or Cape May or some other seasonal South Jersey town. Once he found a beach block that seemed right he would park, kill the lights, then scan the road for any signs of life. Nighttime joggers, bike cops, a soft face in the window of a four-story duplex—he would look for them all and, when he couldn't find them, he would move to the backseat and take off all his clothes. The walk from car to beach was rarely more than 100 yards, and usually Martin could make the walk at ease. Under the glare of the streetlights his parchment white skin would be aglow for eight, maybe ten seconds, his figure spectral in these moments, a floating gas more than a man. And in the towns that were tax-poor or rustically inclined, there would only be the moon, and his form would take the greyish hue of good *bacalao*.

Walking on the planks of wood from the street, through the dunes, and finally to the beach, Martin would slow his breath and take in the stars. Sometimes he felt he could identify the Big Dipper, but he could never be sure. It was all just perspective, he thought, a trick of the eye, and Martin would often stand there for what felt like hours, waiting for one of them to shoot, but they never did, and he would continue his walk without having made a wish.

He couldn't say why he did them, the walks. Perhaps it was something in the guts, a choice as intuitive as his choice not to speak. Not trauma so much as some big, unfunny joke. Sunken cost mentality. It had been over a month now and he felt an obligation to see this through.

He rarely saw other people on his walks, and when he did, he would see them before they saw him, would immediately trot to the dunes and prostrate himself in the sand, wiener, stomach and chest going not unpleasantly cold, and, lying there, he would look over the bunker lip at the

passersby some eight feet below, novitiate pot-smokers more often than not, whose shapes would take form then in a moment's time fade out of sight.

This was the usual, a pattern Martin had come trust. And so it was with equal parts surprise and betrayal when, on the last weekend of the summer, Martin was picked up by the police.

"Put on your pants!" the first cop yelled.

"You're illegal so long as you're not wearing pants!" the other, a female voice, put in for support.

Martin, having no pants on the beach, was left to cover his privates in the way of a soccer player defending a free kick, though nude, of course, and without the comfort of teammates taking their place beside him in the wall. He said nothing, standing in the flashlight's oval beam.

"Quiet as a mouse," the male cop said, barrel-chested and bald. "I don't like it. Something tells me he's bonafide deaf."

"We'll have to Mirandize him in sign language then."

The male cop flinched, the mention of sign language having seemed to poke at an old wound. He moved closer to Martin, and on his shirt, stitched in cursive script, Martin read the name Sciotta.

"DECLARE YOURSELF DEAF SIR IF INDEED YOU ARE DEAF," Sciotta boomed.

Martin gave a vague smile and shook his head. He had begun to shift in place from one leg to the other as if in dire need to pee. He recognized the pair for what they were, rental cops, probably gym teachers on their summer breaks. It would be easier if he spoke, Martin knew, but there was dignity to consider, sticktoitiveness. His silence had become something like a friend.

"I say mushrooms," the lady cop said. "Second guess synthetic pot. Third guess, well,

he's exactly as he seems, a nocturnal mute exhibitionist in the purest sense of the term. Either way he's breaking the law."

Closing in on him as a pair, Sciotta and his partner—Leach, her shirt read—put Martin in cuffs and led him through the dunes to a street he didn't recognize. There were no streetlights here, and the curb on which Leach told him to sit was covered in glossy ska band stickers that must have been applied recently, en masse, as the adhesive was now finding its way onto Martin's bum. With his hands cuffed behind his back Martin was unable to cover himself, so Leach stood in front of him, chewing gum and arms akimbo, while Sciotta spoke into his radio and asked for an ambulance and a patrol car.

"Drink water, young guy," Sciotta said, taking a bottle from his utility belt and holding it up to Martin's lips. Tilting his head back, Martin drank not out of thirst so much as some idea of compensatory respect. He felt he owed it to them, this cooperation, in light of his refusal to talk. He drained the bottle in its entirety then tilted his head forward, drops spilling coldly onto his chest.

It would take twenty minutes or so for the big boys to come, Sciotta told Martin, and in the interval that followed, the distant roar of the ocean and cricket song washing in from the dunes, the three shared a silence that felt too communal for the circumstances. Twenty minutes passed and Sciotta looked at his watch.

"They say anything?" Leach asked.

"The rental line?" Sciotta expelled something that was a mix of a laugh and sigh, picking at a spot of food on his shirt. "No, Leach, they didn't say anything. We're probably better off just dialing 911."

What a world, Martin thought, a naked criminal and nothing to be done. He crossed his

fingers and crossed his ankles. It was his sincerest hope that no one called 911.

The big boys didn't come, ditto the ambulance. Sciotta explained that this was known to happen, dispatch dodging the calls of rental cops unless firearms, high quantity drugs, or some other such excitement was verifiably involved.

Sciotta looked exhausted, Leach was combing through Facebook on her phone, and Martin, still, was nude.

"You from Sea Isle? You live here?" Sciotta asked.

Martin shook his head and pointed north.

"Strathmere? Ocean City?"

Martin nodded at Ocean City then, riding a wave of volubility, moved his hands in the motion of someone steering a car.

"You see that, Leach? Kid drove here." Martin nodded again, this time to confirm. "He drove here. We find some pants for him then we can put him in his car."

Leach, seated on the curb beside Martin, grunted and neglected to look up from her phone.

"Why not just leave?" Leach said. "We were off at 12. He's not ours anymore."

Sciotta furrowed his brow.

"Doesn't that put us in a bit of a grey area, leaving him here? I mean legally. What if he goes and drowns himself or tries to talk to someone's kid. SLAM! Down goes the gavel."

Leach shrugged. "I don't think so. I think that's unlikely."

The rhythmic thwack of a helicopter sounded overhead. A rescue chopper, likely a drunken swimmer, and likely too late. The three of them paused to watch the blinking light as it

buzzed its way up the coast.

“Down goes the gavel,” Sciotta repeated weakly, trailing off, losing his interest to the stars.

Martin shifted soundlessly in place. He did the driving motion again but this time with the addition of someone putting on pants. He must have gone through the cycle four times before Sciotta broke from his reverie and noticed him there.

“Patience, kid. That’s a lesson you’ll do well to learn.”

Martin shook his head, drummed his palms against the curb, straining not to explain. Pants, pants in his car. All they had to do was walk.

“What?” Sciotta said. “Spit it out.”

A speeding jitney roared past, completely vacant except for its driver. Then it was quiet again, and Sciotta sighed and moved his hands in a way intended to make Martin to relax, creeping up behind him and undoing the cuffs.

“Come on,” he said, “I’ve got an idea.”

Martin got to his feet, then Leach, reluctantly.

“First I’ll ask you to be open-minded, Leach. Trust in Sciotta and Sciotta will trust in Leach.”

“Say it.”

“Jog,” Sciotta said. “That’s the idea. With the kid. To the house.”

“For Christ sake,” she said.

“Just two blocks, Officer Leach. We’ll take the alley, and I promise you we’ll be in and out.”

She had nothing for Sciotta, only a frown. They stood staring at each other when a

thought seemed to come to Sciotta. His face lit up and he pointed a finger toward the sky. “The khakis, Leach! I’ll give him the khakis I’ve been meaning for Good Will!”

The home was a depressing bungalow in the shadows of a beautiful Catholic church. *Their* home, Martin thought, spying a wedding photo on the mantle above the fireplace, the smell of which filled the house. He’d never met a married couple that called one another by their last name.

“Don’t let him sit down,” Leach said, rushing through the cramped family room into an even more cramped kitchen. “Lay down an honest layer of newspaper if he absolutely has to sit.”

Sciotta took a Sports Illustrated from the coffee table and tossed it onto a wicker chair in a dark corner of the room, motioning for Martin to sit. Martin sat and watched Leach from the chair. She was hunched over the refrigerator, staring fixedly into its lemon glow.

“Does the kid eat yogurts? We’ve got three types of yogurt. Mango, cherry, and cottage cheese.” Martin didn’t know whether the question was directed at him or Sciotta, who had just vanished into what appeared to be the home’s only other room, closing the door behind him. Martin clapped twice to indicate cherry. Leach yanked herself upright and pitched Martin first a spoon then a half eaten jug of cottage cheese.

Nude, bum to wicker, strange dairy product in hand, Martin decided that he couldn’t have predicted this no matter how hard he’d tried. So specific was the scenario, so obscure, that it would have been empirically impossible to foresee. These were the moments when Martin was in awe of the world, how its variables could combine to an infinite degree, more world than a mind could see, limitless solutions. It was like a trick question on the math section of the SAT.

From behind the closed door came the muffled sounds of drawers being opened and shut,

Sciotta mumbling to himself. “Here you go,” Sciotta said as he reentered the family room, looking pleased, somewhat frazzled. “These are good pants. I wore them almost every day when I worked as an actuary. I was an actuarial intern.”

Martin tried them on and they fit well enough. He was clothed now, only lacking a shirt. He looked down at his bare ribby torso, and Sciotta seemed to read his mind. He hurried back to the other room, shut the door, and the sounds of rummaging and self-mumbling bled through again.

He returned.

“This is a good shirt. Better than the pants.” Sciotta craned his neck and squinted a bit. He seemed to be searching for the shirt’s origin tale but couldn’t find it.

Sleeveless and speckled in that 80’s pale heather grey, the shirt was too big for Martin and, with his gauntness and the misplaced formality of the khaki pants, made him look like a homeless person in a city that’s always hot.

“That’s right. I got that shirt in Wilmington the week my grandma died,” Sciotta said. “She wasn’t supposed to die so I didn’t bring any extra clothes when I came to visit her that night. Then I got stuck there! In Wilmington! It was July and there was a heat wave and me and my brothers had to go to her little house in the ghetto and carry out all her shit. She’d lived there for 51 years and she’d accumulated so many magazines—I mean, the whole basement was filled with them—that me and my brothers had to wear golf gloves on our hands to keep from getting paper cuts. And even with the gloves we still tore up our hands.” He nodded purposefully.

“That’s a good shirt. It will do good by you if you’re someone who sweats.”

A moment passed in which Martin and Sciotta stood looking at each other, the story hanging there, Martin wearing it.

“Let’s get you to your car,” Sciotta said. “It’s the middle of the goddamn night.”

Sciotta made his way to the door and Martin followed, but before he could step outside he looked back into the kitchen and hesitated.

“Leach, you coming?” Sciotta called, but she didn’t answer. Sciotta gave Martin a breezy look and led him into the kitchen. There she was, asleep, snoring heavily, mouth open, head resting on the Formica table.

“I’ll tell her you said goodbye,” Sciotta whispered, looking down at his wife, a fondness in his eyes. “She looks happy, doesn’t she?”

Martin almost said “yes,” it lived for a moment on the tip of his tongue, but he caught himself and followed Sciotta back outside.

The temperature had dropped in the time they had been inside, and now, leading Sciotta to his car, Martin walked the asphalt with his arms tucked into the sleeveless shirt, shivering and barefoot. He didn’t know why Sciotta had to come, a chaperone, unless to write him a citation before he got in his car. But this seemed unlikely. He had begun to speak to Martin in the way of a childhood friend who has been long out of touch, the giddiness, the gameness to relearn the old rhythms of speech. The deeper Martin’s silence the more deeply driven Sciotta was to talk.

“I used to do this, you know. I used to do what we caught you doing tonight,” Sciotta said.

Martin turned and gave Sciotta a face of serious doubt. Too much of a coincidence. As far as he knew he was the only person to walk the beach in the nude at night, presently and ever.

“Well not quite the same, but I would skinny-dip sometimes. I did all kinds of funny shit. I’d take a case of beer out to the basketball courts and play knockout by myself, the two balls and

everything, and this in the middle of the night. Sometimes I'd take the Fung Wah bus up from Boston down to New York then ride it straight on back. I wouldn't even leave my seat. I know what it's like to want to make a point, even if you've got no point and all you really want is for someone to notice you *making* that point. Am I making any sense? Do *I* have a point? Just keep walking, kid, if you think this is all just some crackpot load of crap."

Martin shook his head, slowing his pace so he and Sciotta could walk side by side.

"I never did the silence thing, though, I'll give you that. I always tried to keep my pouting strictly to myself, not so much because I cared about other people as the fact that I was plain shy. But I don't know you. Maybe you have a real problem. I guess there are some people who've got a kind of reverse Tourette's."

Again Martin shook his head, though tentatively this time.

"Didn't think so. Well, that's alright."

The faintest rumor of dawn was breaking in the sky when Sciotta and Martin reached the car, black giving way to a clean glowing blue.

"This must be you then," Sciotta said, grabbing at a something stuck between the windshield and wipers. "Would you look at that? Those bastards had the time to get you for overnight parking but not to send me someone on patrol. Gives me agita."

Martin took the ticket from Sciotta's hand. Thirty dollars. It didn't matter. In twenty minutes he would be back at Nana's and not a soul on this earth would wonder about his night.

Martin rolled down the windows and put the car into reverse.

"Listen, kid," Sciotta said as Martin began to back up, "if I could tell you one thing it would be this: Don't be an island. Give a little more of yourself. You might not think so but you're stronger that way, believe me." He chuckled to himself. "There I go. 'Moralizing,' as

Leach likes to call it. Whatever, kid. You have yourself a beautiful day.”

A closemouthed smile crept onto Martin’s face and he shifted into drive. Then, taking his hand off the steering wheel, he made a gesture he’d never made before, a military salute, tight and quick. Sciotta returned it, they nodded, and Martin drove off into the day.

TAKE FLIGHT

By Connor McElwee

His mother followed his trip on Facebook, and in the photos the son was always smiling, as if travel and culture and dysentery were a blessing he was receiving for the first time.

She refilled his checking account and sent him a text every two or three days, how was the food down there, had the probiotics worked, could he give her the name of the next place he planned to stay. And always, at the end of each brief exchange, she would tell him to be careful. It was not in her nature to worry. As a younger woman, she had let the boy find his way back from McGill to their home in Cote-Saint-Luc. A subway, a bus, then another bus, the boy wearing his cello like a backpack, grinning and proud and handing quarters to the homeless who huddled around the heating vents and sang ballads over the noise. But the fact that he was doing this alone, without a second set of eyes, forcing his mother to put her trust in a continent of people who were hungrier than him, good people, but hungry, worried her. But what was she if not modern, a friend of the world? It went without saying that she was better than such thoughts.

Still, sitting in her office in Old Montreal at ten to nine, working long hours because it was summer and the streets were humid and alive with an energy so youthful it could only make

her sad, she found herself staring at the US State Department travel webpages, the page of each country her son planned to visit. The Americans were always best at these things, reports of abductions, dengue. She bought him a money belt then realized he had no fixed address.

Two months passed and summer gave way to fall, and all those thousands of miles south, in photos, the son was looking thinner, hair to his shoulders, the look of a drummer with long, veiny arms. But he didn't look unhealthy, she didn't think, there was no reason to think of him as a deadbeat percussionist who spent his money shooting drugs. It was a face that was all edge and dark stubbled lines.

Sometimes she would download the photos then send them to her mother in Gatineau. It was a funny way to brag, not knowing where the credit should go, and for the moment she would feel perfectly light, as if some facial hair and a decent jawline had the power to keep him safe.

Spring soon, then soon he would be coming home. Two continents, twenty-three countries. She saw nothing wrong with his calling it a trip around the world.

Another month gone, and though she was talking to him just the same, thin scatterings of text, seeing photos here and there, it wasn't quite enough. The curiosity was real, sometimes desperate, and she found herself making movies in her head.

Her take: He had visited six countries and had lost his patience waiting for his body to adjust. It didn't matter what he ate, either way he would get sick, so he started eating the street food. In Quito it was fruit without a peel, then unleavened pita bread filled with runny scrambled eggs, skewers of heart and potato cooked on a grill attached to a bike. He got sicker. It became unpleasant, the constant taste of bile in the back of his throat, abs sorer than after a dryland workout during hockey season, and finally he swallowed his pride and took the Cipro Dr.

Pederman had prescribed him. The whole thing, she imagined, was enough of a hassle to make him serious about the food

In Manaus he met a Chinese-Swiss girl who spoke to him in French. This much she could confirm. He'd shared it as a confidence, and though half the words were misspelled and the text had come in the middle of the night, she refused to see the moment as anything less than sincere. There was a surge of closeness in this text, something new, and she asked him about the girl the following day but he didn't respond.

So she was left to imagine.

The girl in her movies was uppity and almost cute and made him go on a \$17 city tour. The girl asked him about drugs and if he had tried the cocaine, but he wasn't interested in drugs, so they went to a bar and ate giant sardines and drank soda from scuffed-up glass bottles then walked to the big theater from *Fitzcarraldo*, where they scalped nosebleed tickets for the philharmonic then got bored and left halfway through. Her phone told her that it rained there for six straight days, and though everyone told the son and the girl to go to the beach, that it was a real beach with water even warmer in the rain, they were both too afraid to swim. It was the Amazon River, or a tributary of the Amazon, and the son had grown up watching plenty of TV. The mother remembered him as a boy, maybe nine, covering his eyes and shrieking with laughter while on the screen some urethra-seeking thing swam its way into an actor's shorts.

Instead of swimming they played checkers, maybe backgammon, sitting crosslegged and facing each other on one of the shared room's bottom bunks. Her son lost these games quickly and without disappointment. He let the girl take pity on him and maybe, she imagined, they kissed. She sped through these scenes, not seeing them in detail, but she was heartened for the son. Her own ideas on romance had long been shapeless and hard to recall, and she'd once read

in a silly magazine that almost anything could be inherited, that there was a genetic component to the giving and taking of love.

She decided to meet the son in La Paz. Five days at a resort in the Andes, the week coinciding with her fifty-fourth. “My birthday present to myself,” she wrote in an email to her mother. “He’s very much looking forward to it. He misses his mother!” She booked them a villa with heated floors and live-in help. And how could she know if he was excited or not. He’d developed a habit of responding with one-word answers to nearly anything she sent.

On the night of her flight she texted him saying she would let him know when she landed in Miami, and again when she was on the ground in La Paz. He didn’t respond to the first message. Or the one she sent from Miami. On the flight from Miami to La Paz she drank three glasses of wine. His trip was almost as long as hers, with a stop in Rio then another in Lima; it often took a whole day for his phone to find the cellular network in a new country. It made sense that she hadn’t heard from him yet.

The plane broke through the final layer of clouds and landed in a valley that couldn’t be any more densely packed. Tilting square houses, corrugated sheet metal for roofs, winding rivers of sewage—she made observations like these, the routine cataloguing she fell into when traveling abroad, until at once it felt frivolous. The son hadn’t replied. She could catalogue later.

On the ground, she turned off the airplane mode on her phone and it immediately synced with the Bolivian network. She felt the thinness in the air as she pulled her suitcase, somehow heavier, and tried her best to walk slowly to his gate, arriving with forty-five minutes to kill. The sun was faint and pale as it shone through the terminal’s high glass walls, and as she drank her liter of water, scanning the tarmac for his jet, she walked in little circles and tried to remember

all the questions she had planned to ask him. Would he be interested in riding a horse? The resort had sent her an email advertising horseback riding trips to parts of the national park where you couldn't go by foot. He had loved animals as a boy. On his ninth birthday he'd cried when she gave him a ferret instead of a horse. But now, with a feeling of disaster, she realized it was a question she couldn't begin to answer; she had no instinct apart from these vague glimmerings from the past. It seemed important, this matter of the horse, a segue to the larger question of who the boy was and what did he like, what did he want. It had been four years since he'd lived at home, he'd had a lacrosse-playing girlfriend at his college in Vermont, a redhead, almost two years they were together and somehow she and the girl had never met.

Fifteen minutes ahead of schedule the jet pulled up to the gate, and it was another ten until the first passenger surfaced into the terminal. A few weeks before she'd begged him to send her his flight confirmation. 37 F. He'd be one of the last to get off the plane.

At first people flowed from the jet bridge without interruption, and once or twice, in the stream of faces, she thought she saw his, the dark, thinking eyes, the smallish nose, but only at a distance, and only for the briefest of moments. None of them were smiling like him, a smile breaking to hold back a laugh.

The rush slowed and they started coming in one or two minute intervals, mostly elderly now, a group of fedora-wearing men in wheelchairs, a disabled woman swaddled in a blanket, moaning. Then the flight crew, all beautiful, and next the pilots. Where were these pilots going, deboarding the aircraft in such a rush? She followed them with her eyes as they walked past her, almost tapped one of them on the shoulder.

It could only be a mishap in the back of the plane, stuck in the bathroom, his stomach. She took her phone from her pocket and called him. Nothing. She should have told him about

Imodium. If he was still in the bathroom it was her fault alone.

She called again and the phone rang.

Three men in blue cleaning uniforms and reflective vests made their way down the jet bridge, and by some instinct, she tried to follow them. A woman cut her off.

“This is not permitted,” the woman said in English.

She asked if there was anyone left on the plane. The woman held her hands behind her back and stood with impeccable posture. She smiled and shook her head no.

She’d forgotten about the phone. She walked to the desk with the woman and put the thing to her ear. It had stopped ringing, but the call was still alive, a quiet, almost undetectable static coming from the other end. She said his name, waited, then said his name again.

“You come to La Paz on a warm weather day,” the woman said as she typed. “Typically we are very cold.”

Maybe he couldn’t hear her, a bad connection. She raised her voice and said the name. Then louder.

“Excuse,” the woman said. “Excuse.”

She wasn’t pulling in enough air, or the air she was breathing was too thin for her lungs, something to do with science, and she was gasping now, panting out his name, unraveling.

“Pardon.” The woman behind the counter stopped her typing. “Please your pardon. Please your pardon.”

She found a seat, closed her eyes and let the panic do what it wanted. Time passed and the world became slow again and she realized the phone was still glued to her ear. She pulled it away and looked at the screen. Her stomach dropped. The voicemail she left him was just over three minutes long.

Her son never boarded the plane, the woman behind the counter said, never checked into his flight, and this made the mother angry. To say these things with such composure, shoulders pinned back, like some preening bird.

He must have changed his plans, must be having trouble with his phone, bad reception, a long, spontaneous hike. These were the only explanations that made anything close to sense, though they didn't make sense, for she knew the son as meticulous and responsible and a friend to his mother, because he had always been these things and to change so completely, without warning, would be an assault on everything she knew to be true.

She stayed in the airport, sat on a cold plastic seat. She found the college friends on Facebook and sent them messages, refreshed the screen over and over until night fell and she could no longer see the mountains through the glass walls, the runway now a field of blinking lights. He had sent a Snapchat five days ago, a college friend responded, asking if something was wrong. It was a short video from a hostel in Manaus. A pretty Chinese girl was with him. The friend didn't know her. The son and the girl were making duck faces at the camera, and maybe he looked thinner, his hair long and tied in a bun. The son and the girl appeared to have become good friends.

The mother used the information she had. She made all the calls.

The hostel: The boy has went, no knowledge to where, checked out a few days before. He seemed decent and well.

The local police: We are having 294 missing persons. You wait until the weekend then we add him to the list.

The boy's father: Wait a day. Wait two days. It's likely nothing. I'll call the consulate on Friday if nothing has changed.

She followed the signs out of the terminal into the ticketing lobby. She found the counter of the airline he was meant to fly, and it didn't feel hasty, buying a one-way ticket to Manaus, spending a fortune on it. She called the Brazilian consulate, explained herself, requested an expedited visa, made an arrangement.

In the jet bridge, her phone began to ring. A call from her son's number. She answered the phone. No one spoke on the other end, then she heard giggling that could only be his, and there was a soft voice whispering something to him just out of range. It didn't make any sense. Then it did. The rush of it all almost brought her to the ground.

THE DADDY TOSS

by Connor McElwee

Andrew McCabe and I were beach friends. His family was from Delaware and mine lived in a subdivision near Lancaster, and every summer our parents rented duplexes in Ocean City, where we stayed on weekends and sublet to other families during the week. We would set up our chairs and umbrella next to the McCabes', play bocce with them, help them dig their holes, but otherwise we didn't see them much. At night my parents drank wine with other kids' parents and on Sundays we went to separate churches. I was nine that summer and Andrew was eleven, and the ocean was the most exciting thing in the world.

In early June, the water still had a chill to it. But there we were. Andrew and I were shrieking and laughing and when we turned back to the shore we saw little Kayla, a familiar face, younger than me by three or four years, and she was standing in her board shorts and t-shirt at the water's edge, watching it lap up toward her feet, considering it but afraid of it.

"You know she still pees her pants," Andrew said.

A knot of seaweed floated past me and I grabbed it before it could get away. I set to popping all its little bubbles, then I flung it shoreward, in the direction of Kayla, but it was too light and it died before it could go five feet.

“Her dad’s got titties,” I said. “Fat little ones just like a mom.”

A wave, a big kahuna, was building toward us, and we ducked beneath it before it could smash and churn us.

Andrew turned toward the shore, cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “There’s sharks out here, Kayla! Four little ones and two big chompers!”

Kayla didn’t move. She frowned at him and shook her head no.

“Six sharks, Kayla! And they’re mean! They got an appetite for eatin little girls!”

Kayla inched forward up to her calves, wearing her warrior face.

“I say if she comes out here we dunk her,” Andrew said.

“She won’t do it. It’s too cold.”

“I dunk her and you grab her hands.”

“You’re not supposed to dunk anybody. That’s the rules.”

Andrew slapped the water with both hands, hard. He’d been angry that morning even before we’d drunk our Gatorades and sprinted down into the surf. “You can’t always care about the rules. Half of them are stupid and the other half even our daddies can’t understand.”

I looked at Kayla. She was up to her waist now, jumping every time a wave came.

I couldn’t see her daddy or her mom on the shore, or their rainbow umbrella. Who was watching her?

“It’s warmer out here, little Kayla,” Andrew called. “Come out a little bit further. The sharks can’t eat you if you’re standing with us.”

A breaker came and she plugged her nose and went under. When she surfaced she was making *bur* noises. She met us where we were and stood between us.

“Your mom says you have to come eat lunch, Pat.”

Andrew laughed.

“My mom’s not the boss of me,” I said.

We stood in a line and stared at the coming sets, trying to gauge which would be big and which only looked big.

“You ever been tossed over a wave, Kayla?” Andrew said. “We used to call it the Daddy Toss when I was your age. Your daddy would grab you under the armpits and throw you in the air right before a big wave was about to hit. Pretty neat, right? You can only do it when you’re little.” Andrew leaned back and stroked his chin. “Looking at you, I’d say this is your last summer. After this you’ll never be able to do it again.”

“My daddy doesn’t swim because he has dermatitis,” she said.

An airplane flew past us pulling a sign advertising a Chinese buffet in Atlantic City, and Kayla started jumping and chanting, “*Airplane with a sign, it’s an airplane with a sign.*”

“So on the Daddy Toss you’re flying like a bird, like you’re a seagull or a hawk or an eagle or something, any bird you want. I want you to picture it. Really see it in your mind.”

Kayla closed her eyes tight and bit her lip.

“Do you like birds, Kayla?”

“I like moths. But they’re always flying into lights when it’s dark outside. I like them more than butterflies because butterflies can’t fly if a person touches their wings.”

“So how ‘bout it then? A Pat-Andrew toss. Pat takes one pit and I’ll take the other.”

She tucked each palm into the opposite armpit. “Ticklish.”

Over my shoulder I saw my mom standing on the shore, waving and signaling at me. I nudged Andrew and nodded toward her.

Andrew put his pointer finger in the air, as if to say, Just a minute, and she yelled back something that was lost to the waves.

A cloud passed in front of the sun, and the air turned cold.

I looked to the guard stand. The lifeguards weren't watching us; there was a group of teenagers on boogie boards way out past the breakers, yelling bad words.

"I'm gonna count down from ten, Little Kayla," Andrew said.

Her hands were still in her armpits.

"Unh-uh," she said. "I don't want."

"Now, Kayla."

She shook her head and tried to walk toward the shore. But Andrew grabbed her by the shoulder and started to count.

"No!" She slapped at his belly. Her arms were too short to reach his face

"Seven, six, five..."

"Don't throw me!"

"Three, two..."

She was crying, flailing, trying to worm her way out of his grasp. "Don't let him, Pat! Tell him—"

Then she was under the water, submerged completely, and Andrew's knees were on her shoulders, keeping her down. He had one hand on my shoulder for balance, his nails digging into my skin. "She's grabbing me, you dumbass! Get her hands. Get her hands!"

I couldn't move.

“No,” he grunted, the cords bulging in his neck, all of him looking grey and sick and far away. “No no no no not there, you little bitch.”

“Quit it, Andrew. Come on, man, she can’t breathe!”

Andrew didn’t stop, and I was sobbing. I saw the devil and he was wasn’t how they’d described him at church. He was as a boy, Andrew, the devil masquerading as a friend, and I knew that soon Kayla would be dead forever and, somehow, this meant I would be dead too.

I flailed at Andrew’s face a clenched fist, and he fell backward and grabbed his face and he was no longer on top of the girl. I reached under the water and lifted her up by her ribs, set her on her feet and pulled her body against mine. Her head was tilted back and she was moving her mouth, but the mouth was filled with water. She looked like she’d been asleep for a long time.

The lifeguards came and took her from me—one of them looked like my gym teacher from the year before—and he ran to the shore with Kayla in his arms. I ran after him and Andrew was running too, not far behind me.

The lifeguard put her down and began blowing air into her mouth. My mom must have gone for a walk, because she wasn’t in the crowd that formed in a semicircle around Kayla and the lifeguard. I heard gasps and prayers but mostly it was quiet, except for the ocean, and the squelching of the chest compressions. Then her chest rose on its own and she sputtered and coughed, and the women in the crowd began to weep. Andrew hadn’t destroyed her. She wasn’t dead and that meant neither was I.

As Kayla sat up, blinking as if awaking from a nap, her daddy ran to her from somewhere, fell to his knees and wrapped her in his arms and kissed the top of her head. He was wearing camouflage shorts and black sneakers with mid-calf socks. He stood up, clumps of wet sand falling from his shorts, and pointed a finger at Andrew. He started shouting things that made

the other parents say his name, then he started taking steps toward the boy, and Mr. Dwyer grabbed him around the waist.

A lifeguard was standing behind Andrew, holding him by the shoulders. Andrew's nose was bleeding and he was tilting his head back and plugging his nostrils with two fingers. Mr. and Ms. McCabe were on their way, someone said.

No one attended to Andrew's wounds. The ambulance was for Kayla. Everyone seemed to understand.

SHUTTLE TO ZION

by Connor McElwee

Mick had been on the Big Island for three months, working up the hill at the malasada shop in Waimea, when his cousin Trevor called to tell him he was rich. Log into your wallet, Trevor said, check that shit pronto, like right the hell now. Mick had forgotten about the coins, and the concept of them was too complicated for him to understand. But Trevor had gone to Stanford, ran a coding camp for poor kids in Oakland, worked as a programmer for an app called Zion that streamed visualizers and guided meditations in the accent of your choosing. Trevor had told Mick that in the long term these coins could be worth more than gold. He'd said to throw in a chunk of the money Mick had inherited when his dad died of ALS.

The website looked shady—they were selling Lamborghinis in the ad space—but Mick had bought the coins anyway, trusting Trevor as he always had. He'd done it from his bed in the brownstone in Hoboken, at 11:00 AM on a Wednesday, then ate breakfast and got back in bed. He'd still had plenty to make the move to Hawaii. It was sunny there and as good a place as any to work a random job.

It had been a good year and a half since Mick had seen him in person, and when Trevor walked into the open-air baggage claim at the Kona airport, Mick noticed the change. His dark black hair had receded into a widow's peak trimmed so short that it looked like paint. He wore bright red Toms, and he'd put on twenty or twenty-five pounds, at least three of them in the chin, and when he walked he leaned back more than he used to.

"Where's your tan, buddy?" Trevor said. "You look like David L. Remember that kid? We always said he looked dead."

"I look dead?"

"Not dead, but definitely not Hawaii."

Mick led Trevor across the parking lot to the beat-up Tacoma he'd paid too much for, what with its 120,000 miles and transmission that always clicked. They hoisted Trevor's luggage into the bed and Trevor leaned in and took him in a hug.

"You're rich now, buddy" Trevor said into Mick's ear. "Very, very rich."

Mick drove them across the apocalyptic fields of molten lava that stretched across the western side of the island, then up the long winding road that led away from the coast and the resort communities into the hills, where the landscape looked like the Pacific Northwest, except with banyan trees and more old furniture in the front yards.

"Do you want to go zip-lining or anything like that? Mick said. "You're on vacation."

"If that's what you do on a regular basis," Trevor said. "I want the Mick special—whatever you would normally do."

"I don't think you do. I work like 35 hours a week making these fried little balls."

"He works," Trevor said. "Remind me, why haven't you quit yet?"

Mick turned into his driveway and the truck's front end shook at the transition from pavement to dirt. "Just haven't. Why, have you?"

"Oh, I'm not gonna stop working, Micky. All my friends are at Zion. And the Oakland kids will turn to hot Cheetos and crack if we don't keep them in the class."

Mick carried Trevor's duffel bag into the bungalow and set it in on top of the futon in the second bedroom. He hadn't thought to move his midi keyboard and sampler off the desk, or the pages of lyrics he'd written last weekend. He folded the pages and put them in the back pocket of his shorts.

Trevor pointed to the desk. "Glad to see you're still doing this. I don't play anymore. And when I do it's always with those shitty little brushes." He tried to pantomime a drummer brushing a snare, but it must've been a while since he'd played and he didn't get it right. "One of the tragedies of living in the Urbis, I suppose."

Mick left Trevor in his room and went to the kitchen where he drank a half liter of water. He was always drinking water, always in precise, large amounts, accruing capital he could spend at a later date.

"You have a girlfriend, Mick?" Trevor called.

"No girlfriend."

"You have a house!" Trevor said. "You have a house but no spouse."

Mick refilled the Brita filter and tossed a towel through the open door at Trevor, who was lying on the futon with his legs crossed, staring up at his phone.

It had started to rain, and Mick put the bucket on the kitchen floor where the water always leaked through. Otherwise it wasn't a bad house.

He moved his laptop away from the open window and made sure it hadn't got wet. He

checked his email. There was a message from the Villanova University Office of Institutional Advancement reminding him that Villanova was a Catholic institution and that any donation could be counted toward his tithe, and one from his mother, which he would read some other time. Then he logged into his wallet. The graph had continued its climb, even steeper than before, and still Mick hadn't sold. Selling was the kind of thing Trevor would tell him to do.

He unplugged the laptop from its charger and blew up the graph so he could bring it in to Trevor and ask him what he thought. He stopped in the doorway: Trevor was snoring with his mouth open. He had a hand in his pants and his phone was on his chest, and over the pattering of the rain, Mick could hear the faint voice of an English speaker who had learned the language in school, a wise Jamaican voice: "Mind the breath, good man, you mind the breath." Mick came closer and craned his neck. The visualizer was going on Trevor's screen, blues and reds merging and making triangles that collapsed in on themselves, dissolving into a grainy yellow fuzz. "You mind the breath, good man, then breath become mind."

By the time Trevor woke up it was 9:30, and the only place still open for dinner was the Tommy Bahama restaurant, in the shopping center of a planned community at the bottom of the hill. You could have a couple of Mai Tais and a slab of ahi then walk next door and buy a short-sleeved Tommy Bahama shirt. The Hawaiians Mick had talked to were always excited by the concept. It was either that or his namesake Micky Dee's.

When they got to the restaurant the hostess said they were closing in a half hour and seated Mick and Trevor at the bar. It was a large, dimly lit space, and except for one other table, Mick and Trevor were the only customers. In a dark corner sat an old guy with a dobro and a loop pedal, who looked bored and was using too much reverb.

“I thought this place would suck,” Trevor said. “I mean, it looks like it would suck, but this is a ten. And in SF this sandwich would be like 23 bucks.” He nodded along with the dobro guy and squirted Sriracha on his fries.

Mick tilted his head. “Check the menu. I think here it’s 21 before tax.”

The dobro guy started playing louder, and over the wash of his chords it was hard to talk.

“When are you going to sell?” Mick said. “How much longer are you holding onto your coins?”

“I’m thinking long term, Micky.”

“How long?”

Trevor sighed. “You ever looked at a graph of the Dow since the Depression? No? Well, it’s the simplest graph in the world. It keeps on going up. The graph climbs. There’s blips and gullies—corrections, if you will, a few years of bad oil or a president nobody likes—and then it’s back to the same old. The graph climbs, Mick, the money grows.” Trevor looked up at the bartender and rattled the ice in his glass.

“So? And you think these coins are like the Dow?”

“You can’t always be a pessimist. It’s not good for you. Half the people I work with have their kids’ college funds in these things.”

The music stopped, and the TVs above the bar went dark. Trevor had ordered a scoop of Tahitian vanilla ice cream, but the wait staff were stacking chairs on tables and the bartender appeared to have gone home.

“Look, I could be here for another sixty or sixty-five years. That’s a lot of time for growth.”

“Then what’s even the point,” Mick said, “if you’re never able to enjoy it? Or not until

you're, like, what, 95?"

"I don't see it that way. You're forgetting about Lisa. My guess is in the next couple years the two of us make a kid. Then that kid has a kid. And his kids have kids and so on and so forth."

"And you want to pay for all their schools. Your grandkids' grandkids."

"I've got the opportunity to be real living patriarch. My Bosnian grandpa was like that. You never met him, he was on my mom's side, but he owned every bauxite and iron mine in Bosnia, from when it was still Yugoslavia. And when he died the rights went to my mom and her brothers, and when my mom dies I'll get *her* share. There's about six villages over there named after the guy, and they're all completely indigent, like no running water and a hospital that's also a high school kind of thing. That's how she paid for Stanford."

Mick got up and found the hostess who'd seated them at the bar. She was the only one moving slowly enough for him to catch. He gave her his card and paid for both of their meals.

On the drive back one of the Tacoma's headlights went out and Mick almost hit three separate goats, and when they got home there was a pair of them fucking in his front yard.

For whatever reason, Trevor wanted to see Hilo. It was the biggest city on the island, had a theater where good Hawaiian comics and middling mainland comics played sold-out shows, a Costco, and an airport where you could get nonstop flights to Japan. But that didn't make it a city. Everyone Mick had met who lived in Hilo worked for Habitat for Humanity, making houses for other people who lived in Hilo, or was employed in some vague capacity by the Office of Residential Life at the island's University of Hawaii campus, where nearly everyone commuted.

When they got there it was grey and drizzly, and Trevor was disappointed that the beach was the kind without sand. Mick suggested they go someplace dry, see a movie or something. A

place where they wouldn't have to talk.

On their way to the movies Trevor made Mick stop at a liquor store. The wipers squeaked against the windshield. "Wait here," Trevor said. "I'm getting us little half pints of whiskey we can drink in the theater."

Before opening the bottle, Trevor shook it with both hands on the sides of his face, as if he was making a martini. He started drinking in the car and said *ah* after every sip.

It was the matinee hour and the theater was only showing two films: a black-and-white biopic about Genghis Khan and something with Bruce Willis and a gun from at least ten years ago. They went with Genghis Khan and had the theater to themselves. Mick took a swig of the whiskey during the previews, then, halfway through the movie when Trevor got up to take a piss, poured the rest in a soda cup he'd found under his seat. Whiskey was the one liquor he'd never been able to tolerate.

When the movie was over and the lights were back on, Trevor wanted to take a video of them clinking the bottles. Trevor still had about an inch left, and when he saw that Mick's was empty, he started laughing and patted Mick on the back.

"You leave me no choice but to drive," he said.

"I'm fine," Mick said.

"That's Canadian whiskey, bub. You walk a line and show me you're good."

Mick got up from his seat and walked down the aisle, one foot in front of the other, then he did it backward, counting down from one hundred in increments of seven, saying the number when his foot hit the ground. Trevor shrieked and clapped his hands and tried to do it himself. Somehow his coordination was no worse than Mick's, and he made it all the way to 65, holding his hands above his head like a ballerina, by the time a pair of ushers with brooms and dustpans

walked in.

It had stopped raining, and with nothing else to do, Mick agreed to walk around Hilo's unrivaled Arts and Entertainment District while Trevor sobered up.

Mick couldn't have seen the goat even if both headlights had worked. It had chosen the worst possible place to cross that night, on the far side of a curve in the road. The goat had already somersaulted over the hood when Mick heard the noise, and the impact jolted Trevor awake. Mick bit off a tiny piece of his tongue. He pulled the truck into the shoulder and turned on his hazards.

It was a quiet stretch of the saddle road that cut through the plains between Waimea and Hilo, and no cars passed. The air smelled of wet grass and smoke from a brush fire somewhere on the island where it didn't rain.

Mick got out of the truck and spit a glob of blood. He used the flashlight on his phone and found the goat lying in the opposite shoulder, its eyes peeled back and unblinking, and one of its hind leg tucked awkwardly under its weight.

"Pregnant," Trevor whispered. "I hate it. I hate it"

Mick stepped closer and shined his light on the goat, felt around its belly with the bottom of his sneaker. The summer after his freshman year of college he'd interned on an organic dairy farm. Probably not pregnant. He looked closer. Male.

"Come on, buddy, let's leave her alone," Trevor said. "They breathalyze in these situations. At least they do with deer."

Mick took off his flannel and tried to work it under the goat, to make a sling and move it onto the grass, but the shirt was too flimsy and got trapped under the animal like a bed sheet. He

went down on his knees and tried to cradle the goat in his arms then lift it. The flesh was heavy and dead and hot, and before Mick could fully stand with its weight, he felt a flinching in its tail—he could’ve sworn—and he dropped the goat back onto the shirt. It looked deader than before, its legs splayed in four different directions, and its ear was leaking blood.

He closed its eyelids and mumbled through all he could remember of the Lord’s Prayer. He blinked away his tears and rubbed his eyes with his palms to make it look like allergies before he walked back to the truck.

“This is no good, Mick,” Trevor called, leaning out the driver’s side window. “This goat has done something to your constitution. Why don’t you let me drive from here?”

Mick got in the passenger’s side.

Trevor was breathing into his hand to smell the breath. “You’re okay with this, right? I figure you’re more the lightweight in this scenario.”

Trevor wasn’t doing anything, so Mick reached over and grabbed the gear shift and put the Tacoma into drive. The truck started inching forward, and Trevor took his hands off the wheel and looked to Mick, then back to the wheel, then back to Mick. He did this in silence for the length of a football field then started laughing hysterically and drove them back to the house.

As they ate their cereal on the couch Mick didn’t tell Trevor that when he got up to relieve himself in the middle of the night he also sold the coins. There’d been a dip in the graph—maybe it was still dipping—and Mick had sold them for a price where he wouldn’t have to work or fry dough or do anything at all. It had made him dizzy, the selling, and he’d drunk a full liter of water in the dark as the transaction finalized on the screen. It was more money than his dad had made in his sixty-four years of life. There’d be no way to tell his mom about it when

he finally answered her email or caught her on the phone.

The next day heavy rain and Trevor's hangover from the wine he'd drunk the night before kept them in the house. Mick took an hour to record an arpeggio thing that he would try to sing over once he had the house to himself, while Trevor stayed horizontal and stared up at his phone, answering emails, or watching a movie without the sound.

Sometime after Mick had eaten lunch Trevor walked out of the bedroom with his tablet in hand, clean-shaven and pink-faced, and asked Mick if he wanted to join him for his daily meditation.

It was the Jamaican voice, sage and calm, and it was easy to follow the directions, to isolate the breath and let the body sink deep into the couch, and in little time Mick was falling asleep, but not asleep. He was falling into something warm and surrounding and altogether foreign. He felt like he'd taken a sedative. He hadn't been here before.

Then he was hearing the rain again, against the roof and in the kitchen, dripping into the half-filled bucket. The meditation was over. He was back on the couch.

"Guy's name is Kennedy Ramogi," Trevor said. "He lives in Denver and refuses to get on an airplane."

Trevor had stayed an extra week—they'd visited Molokai and Kauai—his pretense being that he could work remotely, that each island was its own little world and that Mick was more friend than cousin, though these reasons seemed secondary. The crux of his thesis was that there were so few hours in life and so many things to see.

It was Sunday now, and the sky was a clear dark blue and you could hear the traffic

because all the good Hawaiians were on their way to church.

They got to the farmers market in the lull between the beginning and end of church, when the only other people ambling between the tents were late-stage retirees from down the hill, who wore khaki shorts and tucked-in t-shirts and made tender comments to the produce they planned to buy.

Mick and Trevor were sitting in the grass drinking coffee. Trevor's redeye to SFO was scheduled for nine that night.

"How would you like to work at Zion?" Trevor asked. "Something in accounts or strategy. Or wherever you want."

"Where did that come from?"

"You just seem sort of meh on Hawaii is all. And this supposed job of yours, the dough balls—you haven't gone to it since I got here."

"I quit. I called them last week."

Trevor put down his coffee and pantomimed a head exploding from the sides. "'He quit!' Well if he quit then he needs a job. You'll love the Bay, Mick. It's unbelievable. And Lisa and I have this nice extra room with a private entrance and its own kitchenette."

"Thanks, man."

"And we could ride the shuttle together to Zion every morning—it's only forty minutes to Menlo. And you could bring your guitar and your midi controller and have your own space in the office. You could do the music for our new active meditation thing. Hell, I could even do the drums," he said. "I'm seeing this whole thing."

Mick stood up. He stretched his arms and yawned.

"I think I like Hawaii, actually. And there's a frozen yogurt place opening next to the

thrift store. Maybe I'll work there."

"Don't tell me that, Mick. You're better than yogurt."

Mick chuckled and reached down a hand and pulled Trevor to his feet.

"The boy's better than yogurt and he always has been!" Trevor brushed some bits of grass from his knees. "You can at least do me the solid and come for a visit, right? I'll show you around the office, introduce you to everyone. In case you change your mind."

Across the road the big Methodist church had opened its doors and people were streaming out to their cars. The other churches along the road would be doing the same. Soon there would be a line extending down the mountain and it would be impossible to merge.

"I'm serious," Trevor said. "You just shoot me some dates and I'll take care of the flights."

One of the Tacoma's blinkers had been out since the collision with the goat, and the transmission was well on its way. They got into the truck. Mick hung his arm out the window and used it as a signal, waiting to turn left.