

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

2020

### Somebody Told Me You Died

Barry E. Maxwell

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



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

#### Recommended Citation

Maxwell, Barry E., "Somebody Told Me You Died" (2020). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 11606.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/11606>

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](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

SOMEBODY TOLD ME YOU DIED

By

BARRY EUGENE MAXWELL

Associate of Arts in Creative Writing, Austin Community College, Austin, TX, 2015  
Bachelor of Arts with Honors, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, 2017

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in Nonfiction

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

May 2020

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg  
Dean of The Graduate School

Judy Blunt  
Director, Creative Writing  
Department of English

Kathleen Kane  
Department of English

Mary-Ann Bowman  
Department of Social Work

Maxwell, Barry, Master of Fine Arts, Spring 2020

Creative Writing, Nonfiction

Somebody Told Me You Died

Chairperson: Judy Blunt

*Somebody Told Me You Died* is a sampling of works exploring the author's transition from "normal" life to homelessness, his adaptations to that world and its ways, and his eventual efforts to return from it. The collection dovetails into a final essay examining the struggle to comprehend and rise above a racist upbringing.

What if we didn't keep memories under the sink, where we thought other people would never think to look, but burned them and then we could remember the burning but we wouldn't have the thing, just the heat of what it was, which everyone tells us will wane. Yes, I think some memories should be burned, not to make them disappear, but to transform them into something we can choose whether or not we want to cling to.

*~ I Have Blinded Myself Writing This ~*  
Jess Stoner

# Somebody Told Me You Died

## Table of Contents

Halloween, 1969 .....	2
Somebody Told Me You Died .....	5
The Big Chair .....	18
The Leslies .....	22
Breaking and Entering .....	32
Campfires .....	33
Forgive Us Our Trespasses .....	35
Kitty and Blue .....	49
Kill Your Darlings .....	53
What House Were You Raised In? .....	69

## Halloween, 1969

“Hold still,” Mother says. She kneels to smear charcoal whiskers on my chin and cheeks, hikes up my oversized britches and belts them with a rough-knotted rope scavenged from the garage. I slip my arms into a rumpled brown work jacket, threadworn and spotted with paint and grease. The house smells of bayberry candles and whiskey sours, and the jacket smells as warm and kind as the back corner of a hide-and-seek closet. I shove my hands through the ripped-out pockets, exploring the loose threads and grit trapped in the lining while Mother wads newspapers and gathers them into a white handkerchief, twisting the corners together to make a bag.

“This is a bindle,” she says. “*B, I, N, D, L, E.*”

I’ve never heard the word before and ask what it means.

“It’s where a hobo carries his lunch.”

She ties the bindle to the end of a broomstick, longer than I am tall. I stand with the stick in one hand, my plastic pumpkin in the other, in the same attitude I hold when she’s pasting down a cowlick or scrubbing a smudge off my cheek with her thumb.

“You look perfectly terrible,” she says. “Almost.”

She digs into our own bowl of store-bought Halloween sweets and opens a pack of candy cigarettes, placing one to dangle at the corner of my mouth—the most realistic accessory, but I won’t know that for years. She slips the pack in my pocket, and I’m pleased to think that if I run into any other rebellious types among the zombies, ghouls, and Brylcreemed vampires, I can bum them a smoke and we’ll all be cool together.

It doesn’t occur to either of us to slip a child-sized flask into my hip pocket—a habit that would manifest in, and, in part, *create* my future—instead, Mother tugs a wool beanie over my

ears and I'm ready to hit the road like a sugar-rushing bum, a bigger boy than the year before, a regular travelin' man.

"Don't get lost," Mother says as I step toward the streetlight, swimming upstream against a gaggle of pirates and cuddly animals rushing to our porch.

In our well-lit, Wonder Bread world, I know I won't get lost; I'm only traveling the circuit around our block. The Hanaway sisters live on the corner; my best friend Peewee one crosswalk over; our yards crisscrossed with connective paths us kids travel but parents can't see. I know to avoid the two-story house where Bill Nash, the bully the block, is surely hiding in the bushes to pounce and pound and steal my candy. I know to stay wary of my big brother and his friends, all of them with tendency toward bloodless tortures: pinky fingers bent inward, cutdowns beyond my understanding, and pressure applied to points both physical and psychological.

Many of the older kids on the street aren't even costumed, or if they are, they tilt toward the ultra-violent: axes to the skull and clots of oatmeal brain gore, Bella Lugosi accents dripping from bloodied lips like vampires with thirst, but no capes, tuxedos, or class.

Porchstep moms coo over princesses and fairies, reaching out to touch their wings or adjust sequined tiaras.

"And you, little man," they ask. "What are you supposed to be?"

"I'm a hobo," I say, my cigarette bobbing as I squint up to their smiling faces, their backlit bouffant halos. I hold out my plastic pumpkin, remembering at last to shout, "Trick or treat!"

We ate what we wanted then, unsealed and fresh: homemade popcorn balls, Saran-wrapped brownies and oatmeal cookies, apples draped in thick caramel skins, bundled packets of

nuts, loose and dusty with salt. I learned the hustle of a bumbling, endearing charm, and the social rituals of please and thank you. I learned the “aw shucks” and shuffling feet covering the gimme-gimme greed inside. I learned that life gave you sweets, and despite the monsters everything would be okay. That was before the urban myths of sabotaged razor apples and acid-laced Pixie Stix. It was before we knew where the child molesters lived, guessed where breathless alcoholics gulped vodka behind closed doors, or where housebound addicts counted yellow Valiums like sheep. It was before I knew there were *real* hobos downtown, their universe as unimaginable as old age. There were no such things as pimps, crack whores, or meth heads. I had never heard those words, no one had spoken them yet, anywhere in my world.

I miss the handouts, the popcorn balls and cookies. I miss the costume I can scrub off with hot, soapy water. I miss knowing I’m safe and looked out for, and that every porchlight is welcoming. Most of all, I miss having no words for the dangerous, unaware of any evil that wasn’t spoken of in my presence. I miss that quiet space in the small vocabulary of childhood, when that which had no name did not exist.

## Somebody Told Me You Died

### A Conversation

“Holy shit!” an old friend yells over the band. “It’s good to see you, man.”

Beer sloshes from his plastic cup—he slurps the foam and reaches over for a one-armed man-hug. I don’t remember his name (if I ever knew it), but we’d been to the same parties. He squeezes through two layers of oblivious drinkers and raps hard on the bar, points to his cup and then to me.

The bartender holds up a “just a minute” finger, but I shake my head. “I’m good. Thanks!”

The band stumbles into “Little Wing,” a time-killer cover to throw in when the set comes up short—I know, I used to play with them in an earlier life, and I hated that fucking song. My buddy bobs his head and smiles as if he’s enjoying it. At some point he’s fated to turn and say the guitarist is pretty good—not in words, but in the language of air guitar and exaggerated nods, eyebrows raised, inviting me to agree. I scope out the back door, plot an escape path through the crowd, past the men’s room line, and into the alley. I prepare to ghost this place, this guy, and the night.

My friend surprises me. He leans to yell in my ear: “Dude—I forget who—but somebody told me you *died*.”

“Okay,” I yell, like he’d said something else entirely. “I gotta go!” I make walking motions with my fingers and point to the back door.

“All right—later, bro!” my bro says. “Glad you’re back in town!”

I nod as if he’s right, and leave him ignorant, grinning, happy. In the cool air behind the club, depressurized, expanding again into my whole space, I do what I always do: replay the

conversation, rewrite it. In this version, I'd have remembered who the hell that guy was. I would set him straight, explain that I'd been right here in Austin all these missing years, that he might have seen me bumming cigarettes on some downtown corner, or standing in line at the Sally for a sack lunch, or even strolling past the bars on Sixth Street on warm evenings, listening through the walls and windows. I'd explain everything.

I force my thoughts to slow and stop. *The wall I'm leaning on is made of red brick, and it's rough and warm. The ground is pavement and I'm standing on it. It's not really moving. The alley stinks, but there's no crowd here, no noise, no one but me.*

I don't have to care about this guy or what he says.

I don't owe anyone an explanation.

I don't have to prove to him I'm alive.

\* \* \*

My homeless drinking buddies and I called the couple The Flying Saucer Dude and his German Girl. Names didn't matter as much as appearances and actions when it came to people we didn't hang out with. He, long-haired and unnaturally tall, like 7 feet up to the top of him, and she with her cropped white buzz cut and a vaguely Nazi-ish military hat coming almost to his shoulder. Brent dismissed them as "fucking whack-job nuts." But Jason (aka Jason the Kind, Jason the Mellow, Jason the Naïve) tempered the judgment. "She's got great posture," Jason of the Bright Side said. "They're kind of off, but they're good people."

I only knew the couple from one conversation, and it wasn't even a conversation, really. I didn't speak—the guy did. It was a random, bus stop encounter:

"Air Force operatives commandeered the wreckage," the Flying Saucer Dude informed me from his great height. "But I stole this from the crash site. It's a hologram. If you hold it in

the right light the whole galaxy's in it. It's beautiful, just beautiful in there."

The German Girl smiled and closed her eyes, tuned in to star song or the prevailing cosmic vibrations.

"Look," the guy said, holding the black and glassy crystal between the sun and me. "Can you see it? It's all right there, if you look. It's the way out."

\* \* \*

If someone fabricated my death, maybe they wished me dead, or got some pleasure out of killing me in their imagination. Death by gossip. Death by speculation. Death assumed from simple absence. Death by invisibility.

Pinch me, motherfucker. Let me pinch you. What did you have to gain by murdering me? Did you pin down *how* I died? Drunken car crash? Suicide? Short battle? Long battle? Tragic? Unexpected? Or a relief after a prolonged illness? Am I rotting happily at the San Marcos body farm like I wanted? Am I a shriveled cadaver at the med school down in Houston (my second choice for the afterlife), or did somebody waste the real estate and bury me? Did you go to my funeral? Am I ashed out in an alley somewhere?

Show me the receipts, please. Show me the paperwork.

A paper trail is proof enough of life, and when I'm doubtful, it's an objective confirmation that I've had one. Documentation is the basis of a do-it-yourself forensics study. I have hospital records of alcohol poisonings, and a crooked nose (on paper and in the flesh), acquired in a vodka-blackout face plant. Travis County Court searches prove I've broken laws, paid fines, have been married and divorced a couple of times, that I've had addresses, run businesses, and did the normal things normal people do. I can't help but believe those things, no matter how disconnected they feel.

I'm all there in black and white. And I'm forced to believe it all.

\* \* \*

“Them shoes you got on. That coat. They too good. They too new. You ain't homeless. You goddamn po-po is what you is. You undercover, motherfucker. Git the fuck away from me with you fuckin' wire and shit, white boy po-po motherfucker,” says that dude with the trash bags full of cans piled on the shopping cart, stomping around Poncho Park and yelling at me for no good reason.

\* \* \*

The best stories come from the dark places. Not necessarily the evil kind of darkness, but the stuff in the corners where the dust piles up, in the grunge festering behind the fridge, or in the back of the cabinet under our psychological sinks. The light we shine there reflects onto and out of us; we bend that light with craft and technique and heart (or we try, right?), and we hope for some kind of art to come out of it.

There are infinities of both dark and light that we simply can't see from up close. It can't be helped. Columbia University's *Frontiers of Science* reminds us how confined we are by our own limited awareness, speaking of the vast unknown beyond the reach of our vision. Its light hasn't yet found us; we assume it's there, but of its nature we know not a goddamned thing:

We simply do not yet have access to the information. (No matter how prolific a reader you may be, you'd be hard pressed to read a friend's email if it has yet to arrive in your inbox.) As a consequence of this limitation, astronomers often refer to the observable universe, a term referring to the volume of space that we are physically able to detect. The question of what lies outside this observable region is a tempting one to ponder. Yet inspiring though it may be, there is a certain

futility in such a pursuit.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

“It don’t do no good to talk. Ain’t nobody gonna listen. Jump up and down all damn day—ain’t nobody gonna see.”

\* \* \*

Sometimes, when I tell someone I’ve been homeless, they lean into a conspiratorial whisper, like I’ve confessed to doing prison time, like I’ve been holed away and straight-jacketed at the state hospital, or like I carry some untreatable plague. “Homeless? You? Oh, Jesus! I’m so *sorry*,” they say, as though a retroactive apology will either sanitize me or inoculate them.

I whisper back, “It’s not contagious. And, anyway, better me than you, right?”

If they don’t laugh, they’ll nod thoughtlessly in agreement, glancing around to make sure our secret is safe. My past becomes, for the length of our conversation, a minor toothache, a 24-hour bug, a microexpression of concern before normalcy steps in like an antibody to soften their dis-ease.

\* \* \*

“No way. I don’t watch *nobody’s* shit,” says that little guy with the ZZ Top beard and the single giant dreadlock, the one who’d lived at the shelter longer than anyone could remember, this in response to the one and only time I spoke to him there. He set the tone of my worldview for years.

\* \* \*

James: a past-life mortality tale

The last Barry heard from James was Thanksgiving morning, when an automated voice

---

<sup>1</sup> ([http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/frontiers/web/chapter\\_2/8915.html](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/frontiers/web/chapter_2/8915.html))

announced a collect call from a Travis County Corrections inmate. To accept, please press one. To decline, press two. Barry was into his Bloody Marys and accidentally pressed three. He waited for a call back, but it never came.

James was homeless when they met, introduced by a goodhearted friend, a young woman who volunteered for the Catholic charity organization, *Caritas*. Barry owned a successful little painting business, and when she brought James over to meet him at the big Tarrytown house where Barry lived with his fiancée, James wore pristine painter's whites; he had a cotton drip rag and a clean Purdy cutting brush in his back pocket. A well-used tool bag hung from his shoulder. Barry hired him on the spot, and James became his go-to guy, trusted and paid as much as the budget allowed. James lived at the ARCH—the homeless shelter—and hopped a bus to the house every day for work. He served champagne at Barry's wedding, dressed in borrowed clothes and festive in his tattoos. He smiled proudly at the guests, missing teeth and all. Everyone loved James.

Barry let him set up a cot in the garage now and then for respite from the ARCH, and he didn't understand how James could be so grateful for so little. He didn't understand how devastated James was when his duffel bag was stolen, even after Barry offered to replace whatever it had carried.

"It's not that anything in it was a big deal," James said. "It's just that it was *mine*, is all."

The last time Barry and James talked in person was late summer before the missed holiday call. It was after Barry's business had collapsed—he was coasting on hoarded cash, and he and James had gone separate ways. James dropped in unannounced to share that he had tested positive for HIV. They wept together on the back patio of the Tarrytown house.

James said he wasn't afraid of dying, but please, he didn't want to die alone, with no

friends who were worth a shit, no family, and no one to say goodbye to. Barry promised that would never happen, they'd built too strong a friendship, even if it was a boss-employee dynamic. Barry meant his promise, but James never called back that Thanksgiving, and Barry returned to his family without telling anyone who was on the phone.

The holidays were good that year, Christmas came—the last for a while with a wide-open budget, and gifts worth more than anyone in the family let on even to each other. The kids were happy. The parents were happy (again, the last of that for a while). The Christmas card that year was a family photo taken in front of the fireplace, the mantle and trim painted by James, with a fine Purdy brush and not a run or a sag or a droplet of white on the hearth.

\* \* \*

“I'm just waiting for word on work. I'll be outta here in a week, two weeks, max,” says pretty much every newcomer to the shelter, always.

\* \* \*

### The Hill

Like many urban landscapes, the embankment we called the hill looked its best in the soft evening light, but the hill rose gloriously huge and beautiful in my mind: glass bits shimmering like fireflies through the mat of spider grass that bound up the soil; great steps built of stone and slabbed concrete under layers of fill dirt; its steep slopes scarved with the cement spills of some bankrupted, ruined construction.

Our spot on the embankment was a level stretch just below the peak, open to the western Austin skyline, made mostly of hard-packed, rocky soil, with thicker grass in low-dipping hollows that made for good sleeping. We had dragged together a circle of concrete boulders and

piled beer cans and bottles in the center as if it was a fire pit, but we couldn't risk a fire—pastel-painted hipster condos looked down on us from the south, and while we didn't draw much attention, flames certainly would.

Younger guys hung out on the balconies facing the hill, college boys and their dates, up-and-comers who stood sipping craft beer in the evenings with loose ties and elegantly arranged postures. From their perspective, we were too peripheral to matter, but however well off they may have been, our view of the sunset was better.

Uphill from our space, the level ground narrowed to a thin strip at the summit, closed in by tall weeds and a thick growth of shrubs. The crackheads occupied that area. They crashed in the daytime in weedy dens floored with cardboard and layers of stiff, flattened clothing and charity blankets. Dangerous, we assumed, and too evil to disturb. I imagined their ghosts floating above, guarding their undead bodies. After sunset, the bushes rustled with their comings and goings.

I rarely slept alone on the hill unless I'd drunk too much to get into the shelter, or if it was full to capacity and I got turned out. I would sit awake as long as I could, hoping someone safe would join me, but that was rare. Brian and Sunny Dee had a spot behind the La Quinta parking garage where they camped. Sassy made occasional appearances, torturing me with desire and healthy fear of disease. Jason was untrackable. He came and went in circles that didn't overlap, a Venn diagram with few common subsets. Brent slept at the shelter, but not as regularly as I did—he had a son in Houston to visit, and an ex-wife who didn't always despise him. So, sometimes I sat alone for lack of anywhere else to be, or anyone else to sit with. If not self-sedated, I waited out those hours feeling watched, and silently stalked.

When nerves got the best of me, I hid my sleeping bag, slid back into the city and

walked. I migrated from bus stop to bus stop, aiming for the ones with light enough to read, but not too obvious to the cops if I fell asleep, or too dark to see stranger-danger coming. But mainly I walked for the safety of motion and the comfort of streetlights, and to trick myself into thinking I was headed somewhere.

\* \* \*

“I’m digging the beard, dude. It’s a good look. I’ve been meaning to get back to that email, but you know how shit falls through the cracks. I haven’t seen you since what, South by Southwest last year?”

If I’m feeling transparent enough, I’ll answer, even though it’s been more like six or seven years since I’ve seen anyone at all, and South-by-Southwest is an event of nonevents for the homeless—mostly a weeks-long quest for swag and free drinks. And email? Seriously?

“I’ve been around,” I’ll say. “Off the grid. Things got a little rough for a long hard minute there, you know?” I assure them that I’m not adrift anymore (they don’t like to hear the H word), and that I won’t be asking to crash at their place or hit them up for cash. They’ll relax, released to resume their customary orbit, freed from further conversation or obligation to feign concern.

\* \* \*

FYI: “In an effort to prevent as much needless death as possible, House the Homeless carries out an annual health survey in Austin. The 2010 survey was filled out by 85 females, 408 males, and 8 transgender persons. The results were not good. In this group of people experiencing homelessness, over 200 had high blood pressure, more than 120 had diabetes, more than 100 suffered from arthritis, and nearly 50 were subject to seizures. More than 80 had cancer, and more than 80 were brain-injured. Among the respondents, there were 175 diagnosed cases of

mental illness.”<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

### Gore Porn

There’s a postage stamp of a parking lot off 4th Street, tucked unlit between buildings, and during one of those walking nights—a hot September, still, muggy and too thickly hot to sleep—I was walking when someone called out from the darkness to ask if I could “spare a brother a smoke.” I couldn’t see him, but he sounded sincere. “Over here!” the man said in a phlegmy whisper-shout.

I stepped past a couple of cars, and in an empty parking space a grimy old couple lay half-undressed on a bed of greasy cardboard, hands in one another’s crotches, digging into a full-on grope fest. Both had their pants bunched at their knees, their shirts pulled up revealing pimply folds of sweaty skin—his drooping chest and gut; her wide, bare breasts. She pulled her hair over her face, as if her identity was more valuable to hide than her skin, but her fist kept tugging, buried in his salt and pepper pubes.

The old man took a smoke, thanked me, and gestured politely for a light. He held the cigarette between his teeth and pulled his ski hat over his ears, puffing while she yanked away. I stood staring, stunned, a little horrified, but fascinated, too. The woman opened her legs, and the shadow of her thigh hid the details, but a dark patch ranged thick and wild, thinning to a widow’s peak point below her navel. The man patted her crotch as if it was a beloved pet.

We chatted. Small talk, stock prices, Nietzsche, Beatles vs. Stones—I have no idea. I was too enthralled to pay attention. I wanted a car to pass and illuminate the woman, or for her to shift so I could see just a little bit more. Her skin was pale against the dirty cardboard, her

---

<sup>2</sup> “How Austin’s Annual Homeless Memorial Service Began” by Pat Hartman in *House the Homeless*. (<http://www.housethehomeless.org/how-austins-annual-homeless-memorial-service-began/>)

pumping fist so small compared to her pillowy, Earth-Motherly body. I wanted an invitation to touch, as unwholesome as the situation was. I nodded at the man's comments and smoked with him, wondering what would happen if I knelt beside her, if she would reach into my jeans and touch me, too.

The old man finished his cigarette and flipped the butt between cars. He twisted to face his partner, thanked me again over his shoulder—an afterthought, and turned back to business. I walked on, embarrassed, half-hard, and confused. If an erection can suffer an existential crisis, mine did. My hands trembled like I'd witnessed a gruesome accident and been a little too thrilled, or been audience to a divine visitation, my soul shaken with too much uncensored truth.

I told my friend Brent about the encounter the next night. He and I complained for weeks afterward about how if a greasy old fuck like that can manage to get himself laid, then what kind of horrible thing must be wrong with *us*?

\* \* \*

“It was a bullshit charge, but once you're in the database, it don't wash off. It wasn't my fault, anyway. She was 14, sure, but you gotta understand, I was only 20, myself. We were both tweaking balls and drunk as shit, and how's a man gonna check a little lady's ID when she's sticking that pussy in your face and all? I *know* you feel me! She sure as hell didn't fuck like no damn kid, that's for sure,” says every outed sex offender, frantic to cover their ass before it gets kicked or killed. There's always an excuse. Always a flipped script in their story.

\* \* \*

“What's up your ass?”

“Nothing a Four Loko and a shot won't cure.”

“Good morning to you, too.”

\* \* \*

“Shut up, motherfucker. Stop your damn whining.”

“What? I didn’t say anything.”

“You fucking crying like a bitch. Shut the fuck up.”

“I was asleep.”

“You a little bitch, man.”

“I must’ve been dreaming. Sorry.”

“Yeah, you sorry all right. Sorry little bitch is what you is,” says an angry dude trying to sleep, taking shelter from a thunderstorm with me under the awning of Saint David’s Episcopal, just before the cops come and run us out into the rain.

\* \* \*

“Dude—I forget who—but somebody told me you *died*.”

“Fuck you,” I should say, and walk away. But I’m not that bold. Or that bitter.

I turn down the offer of a beer or a shot, sip black coffee and listen to their stories of children and careers and spouses. I envy them. I once had those things myself. I feel superior, too, from a place of spite, for having secret knowledge they will never possess, and from a twisted pride in having fucked up so spectacularly.

They show me pics of the kids, and I can’t reciprocate in kind, but there are things I could share. I could show them where to find good cigarette butts—dry ones, even when it’s wet out. I might lead them to the best free lunches and make winking introductions in stores that’ll sell smokes and beer for food stamps or let you have free coffee if you bring your own cup. But those aren’t things normal people brag about, are they?

I *do* want to know who said that about me, and why I had to die to come up in

conversation. I want to ask them face to face. I want to shake them into believing I'm alive.

## The Big Chair

It was overstuffed in all dimensions, with padded arms wide enough to balance a dinner plate, an ashtray, and a drink if I was steady. A La-Z-Boy classic in 1970's burgundy, with dim gray pinstripes on a fat-ribbed, smoke-soaked corduroy. Smooth spots shone where my body fit, and a tight pattern of cigarette burns on the left arm exposed ovals of foam flesh beneath the skin. Scars of character over a sturdy hardwood frame, built for a lifetime of comfort.

My mother gave me the big chair after my second forever-love divorce. It was a living bequeathal, a hand-me-down awarded like a secretly held heirloom. "You need this more than I do now," she said. "No need to wait till I'm gone." I argued that she loved it, that I couldn't possibly accept it, even as I struggled the thing into my truck and bumped it up three flights to my apartment.

The big chair filled my small space; it became a nest when I couldn't abide the darkness of the bedroom, and formed a cushion of isolation against the loud, bright world. When I was broke, quarters materialized from deep within its folds and crevices, and when I was drunk and exhausted from too many nights awake, I pulled the oak lever and sprawled full length, or curled into a ball to snore like a great domesticated ape.

In time, a new forever love arrived. She took me in, and over the years campaigned through successive downsizings for a chair less overbearing. She forfeited those battles with grace, even through the final move, though the chair was built on too grand a scale for our duplex living room—an area designed not for living, but to move through, a passage from the front door to the kitchen to the back door, and finally, for her, away.

The chair outlasted forever, and outlived Mother. Alone with me again, it held me

together while my seams spread open and split. It rocked me through the hot weeks of middle summer. It cradled me while I chewed Zoloft and drank.

Howard the Stoner lived in the opposite side of the duplex, and when he came over for beers, lines of speed, and company that could not judge, I offered him the big chair as the place of highest honor. “Sit here in the comfy chair,” I would insist, patting the seat, and he’d settle into the cushions like visiting royalty, surrounded by an audience of beer cans and 7-11 sandwich wrappers. After, when he’d stumbled back to his own door, I would return to reshape the space he had occupied, the muscle memory of upholstery taking me back in its arms, no sounds in the room but the springs adjusting to my weight and the soft shush of corduroy against my face.

When the power got cut, I moved the chair beside the living room window. I had good daylight, fresher air, and a clear view of the driveway. I held vigil there through fall and into winter, waiting for some random blessing to drop while I packed for my inevitable removal. I worked in half measures and medicated fogs, pretending to function until at last the morning came when the landlord showed up with the county constable.

The landlord was a kind one. He had let me stay until the last legal moment, and he stood silently behind the young officer whose duties were to inform me of the law, and to escort me bodily from the property.

“Is there anyone else here, sir?” the constable asked.

“No, there’s no one here,” I said. “No one lives here anymore.”

They shook their heads at the sight of me drooping unwashed in the doorway, unprepared despite months of warnings. They scowled at the smell of garbage, at the overfilled boxes and trash bags of clothes and bedding. They frowned at the beer cans and bottles, at the stacks and dismantled jumbles of things—the must-haves and can’t-do-withouts that had, for a time,

congealed to resemble a home.

Out of sympathy for a steady customer, the neighborhood meth dealer had given me his teenager's Honda, a beater the boy had outgrown, and the men stood aside as I packed the trunk and back seat with power tools, home theater components, a bread machine still in its box. Items useless without proper context, pawnable, necessities reduced to collateral.

I sat hunched forward in the big chair, sorting socks, shorts, jeans, and t-shirts, jamming it all into grocery bags while the constable hovered, like I was stealing my own belongings. I packed the bags in the Honda's seats and floorboards, and wedged an ice chest within easy reach. The landlord complained into his phone about the expense of hauling my remaining things away, of the deepening costs of legal fees and re-letting, of the mess I was leaving. He looked directly at me, but spoke as if I was already gone.

I had seen the process before in the neighborhood. Dark windows. Empty driveways. Lives in heaps, dragged in armloads from closets and cabinets. Sagging mattresses leaning on end like spent drunkards holding each other upright, stacks of board games and mismatched plates by the street. Lives gutted, their entrails scattered on weedy lawns. My possessions would lay quarantined until the neighbors grew bold enough to approach. I imagined them kneeling like amateur grave robbers, picking through my bones for treasure, hoping to find something they didn't know they needed: the good hangers, the desk lamps, the copper-bottomed pans. Eventually, once they'd taken what they wanted, the entirety would disappear into the back of a hired truck, committed to the landfill forever.

Inside, I said, "Excuse me" to the officer, nodding him out of my way as I tilted the big chair sideways to manhandle it through the door. No quarters fell out as I dragged it on its heels to Howard's porch. I knocked, knowing he wouldn't answer, not with the constable on the

property. I asked the men to leave the chair there, that it was Howard's now, and they promised they would.

The landlord stood cross-armed on the porch as I buckled myself into the Honda. The cracked vinyl upholstery scratched the backs of my legs. The floorboard was too small for my feet. My knees ached to stretch, but the back seat was too full to recline. My palm missed the big chair's familiar oak lever as I shifted into reverse and eased off the clutch.

The constable kept pace beside the car as I backed down the drive, and I thanked him in that irrational, awkward way one does with the law, the words coming like a confession to crimes only I had witnessed. He tipped his hat and waved me off, as though to say, "You're welcome, Mr. Maxwell. Have a nice day." I took his gesture as absolution, and left that life eviscerated, scattered along a street that was no longer mine.

## The Leslies

Mushroom. Weed. Mutt.

As far as I can recall, I emerged like a mushroom after an overnight storm, sprawled nascent and blank in a rusty lawn chair. I came to, shaded by a thicket of post oak and twisted cedars, like a cast-off human addition to the maze of auto parts and scrap metal in the Leslies' yard. Actually, I was more like a weed than a mushroom. Tough, but wilting in the heat, despondent that I hadn't taken root someplace better, someplace with cool water and strong soil. The most accurate image might be of me as a mutt, not at all tough, a stray slinking in from the woods, bow-legged and bony-ribbed, tail tucked, and head hung low.

I'm trying to find a beautiful (or at least artful) way to admit I can't remember how I found a spot under that oak, but there's no beauty in that fact. Drinkers will understand the feeling of bewilderment, groping through your brain for vestiges of the night before, bluffing the day after to cover your ass, pretending to remember a face, a word, a promise made.

So here I am, a mushroom, a weed, or, at best, a mutt. Once Leslie (the male of the two Leslies—there was one of each) fed me, I wouldn't, or couldn't, go away. I probably would have turned tail and run if someone threw rocks at me and hollered *Git!*, but no one did, and I'm not sure why. It might have been mercy, or that Leslie didn't have the heart to kick me off the porch, being a dog lover himself.

\* \* \*

I can't even say when or how I *met* the Leslies. They were a couple in their early 30s, on the ratty side, and conveniently named. I wondered if they knew of *me* somehow, or if we'd chatted lakeside at some neighborhood holiday gathering, but I'd been too drunk to remember.

They were either crackheads or meth-heads—I don't know which, and it's not because of memory lapses that I don't know this. It's because they never shared, *ever*, even on the rare occasions I had money to lend them for a purchase. Their lot on Miami Drive was around the corner and a block west from where my ex and I had rented (and lost) a house on Saracen Road, and only one lot down from where Kimmie the meth chick's double-wide had once sat. Kimmie had some well-justified paranoid fits, convinced she was being surveilled by the cops, CPS, or her man, Ralph, depending on the number of nights we'd been awake. I had never seen the male Leslie's sunburned, freckled hulk pass while I peeped through Kimmie's curtains. I'd never said hello to either Leslie at Lakehills Grocery, the neighborhood beer and cigarette store. (An encounter with the near-blind and fully unsociable female Leslie would have been a rare occurrence, anyway,) I never noticed their yard, either, their living monument to clutter and rust, as I drove past in the days I still had wheels.

And yet, there I sat.

I'm also at a loss as to exactly *when* I was there, or for how long. Was it a week or two? A month or more? It was in the summer, hot and humid and mosquito cursed, and somewhere around 2007. I remember friends from elsewhere dropping by: Denny and Jan from Lake Travis, Little Mike from my old street. I may have come and gone, using the Leslies' place as a home base, counting on the lawn chair, the TV, the shower and toilet, all as if I had a right or an open invitation. I've had over a decade since then to forget, and I've lived only a portion of that decade sober enough to build solid memories. I do know for a fact that by the time I left, notices from the Travis County Health Department lay in a stack on the dining table, delivering increasingly stern demands to either clear the place out or it would be cleared for them. I heard years later that rather than comply, the Leslies disappeared to who-knows-where, leaving behind

the trailer, the thickets, and all that rusted and rotted on the property. They left their mess for the county and its bulldozers to worry about.

They kept *me* for a while, though, when I didn't yet know how to have nothing, how to belong no place, or how to walk willingly away to who-knows-where. Leslie made sure, at the very least, that I didn't starve on his watch or die in his yard.

### Scrap Metal

Auto parts. Copper wire. Unidentifiable manifestations of *clang*. Stacks, bundles, and slipshod piles, on card tables water-bowed and bent, in greasy boxes like bins in an apocalyptic thrift store, the whole array interwoven with pathways of packed dirt and baked summer dust, weeds thriving wherever they found room to root. The Leslies' front yard was glorious in its disregard for order or conforming to any idea of what a yard should be. It was a delight of disintegration, a confoundment of crashed chrome, of quarter panels and bumpers leaning on trees, a home to conflagrations of carriage bolts and fender washers, and an esteem booster for WD-40. Engine blocks lay like blood-skinned torsos, their cylinders exposed, pistons corroding, dreaming they'd someday be cleaned, polished, and smoothly reunited with their purpose, imbued again with energy, motion, and a second run at utility.

I never made sense of its organization, but in the riot of metal, Leslie knew where to find anything: a specific bolt and a nut, an antiquated tool for some arcane task, a crucial part for the old Ford that might not be the right part, but could damned well be close enough. And just as often, Leslie offered expert advice on how to properly destroy something in order to fix it.

While Leslie minded his inventory, I would sit at the edge of the road, dreading the day someone I'd cheated or failed or angered would drive by and call me out. I reminded myself of

my grandfather in his useless years, sitting in the yard sipping Nyquil. Most days I would have appreciated a bottle myself. I had some basic functionality, though. When by blind luck I landed an odd job in the neighborhood, the Leslies would borrow thirty dollars, forty, fifty. “We’ll catch up when the checks hit. First of the month. Promise.” They knew I’d give it up before they asked—the couple came out with beers for the ride already popped, and those dubious errands were the only times I witnessed the lady Leslie in the open air. I couldn’t resent their asking. I considered the “loans” as rent for a place to sit, for time indoors, for running water. The cash was payment for sausage biscuits and static-blurred Jerry Springer reruns, for shade in the Central Texas swelter, for two a.m. episodes of *Cops*, and for the godawful company of Chihuahuas.

#### Guapo’s Pack

I’m convinced there is a separate reality for Chihuahuas, an inbred sense beyond the human range of knowledge, detecting threats, open to waves of free-floating manic energy that we can’t see or hear. For no obvious reason and on no discernable cue, the Chihuahuas would burst from the Leslies’ wing of the trailer, into the living room like a pack of toothy bullets, impossible to track, impossible to count—are there five? maybe seven? Whether more or fewer they were too many to stop, their miniature claws clattering over plywood patches on the living room floor, leaping like gazelles over trash bags and abandoned dishes, skirting the soft spot of rot in front of the TV, swerving toe-to-tail, shoulder to haunch, sliding through newspapered zones of their own tiny shits, scattering them like shrapnel across the room, then breaking left and spilling upward to the top of the couch, ruthlessly barreling over any unlucky human in their path, negotiating the narrow ridge in front of the windows, the curtains lined with a stripe of

doggish grime, slowing only if Guapo, the biggest and boldest, held fast at the window and declared it an emergency.

At that, all motion ceased and the goddamn yapping would begin.

Eventually, mercifully, Leslie, the alpha of his pack, would yell from the master bedroom: “C’mere pups! C’mere pupper dogs!”

The golfball heads would swivel as one, and Guapo would lunge to the floor with his gang leaping after in a flurry of toenails, curled tails, and tiny black noses, disappearing into the curtained hall that only they and the Leslies ever entered.

### The Curtained Hallway

The passage to the trailer’s master bedroom was marked off limits by ceiling-to-floor drapes that I never went beyond. The dogs and the Leslies passed freely, but no one else. Only rarely did the female Leslie even come into the open to visit the kitchen and living area, as if to make sure everything was as she left it, and no one had disturbed her world. In that small space, Leslie seemed too tall to contain, looming into the room to squint through her oversized, black-framed glasses, evidence of an unstoppable ailment she said would eventually shut down her vision forever. Her skeleton was constructed larger than the flesh stretched over it, leaving her with stark, prominent joints, angular shoulders and hips, swollen elbows and knees. She chain smoked Marlboro Lights 100s, holding the smoke in her lungs like it was pot, pausing for a beat between puffs to survey the room for a visual inventory when she entered, apparently comparing her memory with the shapes before her. She would lean toward me—a dozen or so feet away, and when certain I was a person, rather than laundry, or some clutter brought in from the yard, she would point her cigarette at me and ask, “You—I see you there. Who are you?”

“It’s Barry,” I would assure her, reminding her that I was invited, that Leslie had let me in. If she felt especially sociable, she’d sit on the couch for a time as if I was familiar company, finish her cigarette and talk about the heat, or about how hard Leslie had been working to fix up the place. Her polished finger and toenails pop in my memory, an eggplant shade, rather than red or other common color, and always neatly done. Leslie must have painted them for her. I watched those long fingers touch the surface of the coffee table in search of the ashtray, dark nails tapping, her fingers posed as though playing piano. I was too awkward about the etiquette of blindness to offer help, or to slide the ashtray toward her, and I stared openly, observing her from some immoral place between stifled politeness and petty cruelty. She always found what she needed, so my guilt didn’t last long.

#### Sausage Biscuits and OP’s Orgasms

I didn’t sleep well most nights, and while the Leslies and the Chihuahuas stayed sequestered in their bedroom, often around the clock, I would collect and replace the dogs’ newspapers, straighten the living room, or do the dishes. Their bedroom TV penetrated the walls, actors and game show hosts’ voices numbed and mumbled. Leslie’s deep, womanly laugh would sporadically vibrate through the structure as if cocooning the trailer in sound. I never heard *his* voice from their bedroom, but I learned her sounds, everything from laughter, to anger, to orgasm.

I didn’t want to visualize the Leslie’s having sex, but I did, involuntarily. Him, soft, sweaty, and roundly freckled. She with her eyes the most naked part of her, her Coke-bottle glasses on a TV tray nightstand, and the two of them entangled like a spider embracing a blowfly, bitten and buzzing, but not yet paralyzed. Leslie announced her orgasms in a near-

laughing cough, choked and dwindling as she ran out of breath. Sometimes in the deep night her voice would call out unintelligible phrases in a tone of command, provoking images of Leslie serving her, obeying those commands willingly, while the Chihuahuas stood gathered at the foot of the bed to watch and wait until their master was free.

When the Leslies smoked up, they were silent. I could imagine them in a room lit only by a Bic lighter or a tiny torch flame, blueish shadows on their faces, highlighted by the red glow of a glass pipe. A holy moment, more intimate than sweaty fucking, reaching deeper than an orgasm.

Myself, I was as silent as dust, as though alone in their house. If not for those sounds or the lack of them, I wouldn't have known the Leslies were there. I still wonder how they trusted me so much.

With silence or sex as a soundtrack, I would quietly dump sluggish sausage fat into the trash and scrub the cast iron skillet with Morton's table salt. If there was coffee on hand, I'd get a pot ready. The dishes were plastic, for the most part, and would never quite come clean—the liquid detergent was always thinned to stretch to the first of the month. The sink filled quickly with Leslie-the-male's Big Gulp cups and fast food utensils: black plastic ones from the Lakehills in-store fried food counter, sporks from KFC. A stack of beige Taco Bell napkins in lieu of paper towels. Leslie-the-female's lemonade-n-Lipton's-instant-tea glasses were the only actual *glassware*, big tumblers the other Leslie would mix a potion of powders and ice in and deliver to her beyond the curtain.

On lively mornings, Leslie would emerge to make Jimmy Dean sausage patties and biscuits. He hunched over the stove in too-long cutoff jeans, intentionally frazzled at the knee, flip-flops, and a rotating selection of tank tops and sleeveless Ts. While he flipped sausages and

stooped to check a batch of canned biscuits, he talked baby talk to the dogs bouncing at his feet, and would ask how I was doing. I'd respond to his sunburned, freckled back to tell him I was okay, and thank him again for having me. In those moments I felt like any other guest might feel. Like an old friend from out of town, or a well-liked relative passing through.

He would ignore the begging dogs and feed me first—"You gotta eat *something*"—I would refuse half-sincerely, half out of misguided politeness, then accept a sausage biscuit served on a paper towel, and depending on the level of heat in the trailer, a mug of sweet tea, or a plastic cup of milk on the edge of warm.

"There's plenty. Don't be shy."

Guapo would jump in my lap for a bite if I invited him. He never stayed long, choosing instead to dive back into the pack as they yipped and dashed to the hallway, following their leader and the scent of fried meat, ignoring me once I was no longer of use.

I'd wait to eat until Leslie left the room. To have him see me scarf down a biscuit and go back for seconds would be a betrayal of pride. A confession of need. As if I wasn't need personified already.

### Mental Static, *Cops*, and the Cottage Across the Street

I'd sit upright in the easy chair all night, staring at the one channel that had sound and something of a picture, unwilling to stretch out on the couch for fear of the commitment. Leslie had offered, bringing out a pillow and a sheet, urging me to get some real sleep, but that would mean I was *staying* there. It would mean allowing myself the luxury of relaxation, rest, and to believe I deserved comfort enough to maybe even dream.

When *Cops* came on in an hour and a half block of late-night reruns, I would wad myself up in the chair, threatened, as if the cops could see me through the static and crouched ready to break down the trailer's thin door, throw me to the floor on the shitted and pissy newspapers. I dreaded their cuffing me with a knee in my back and dragging me to some televised perp walk and jail.

When the fear come on too strong to sit still, I crept out the back door, careful to avoid alerting Guapo. In the darkness I carried my case of nerves to a cottage across the street, still under construction but stalled. I had watched the place from my lawn chair. No one worked there, no pickup trucks came in the early daylight to the unlandscaped yard of gravel and fill dirt, no Skil saws shrieked, no nail guns cracked. The unlit house sat stilted on a high pier and beam foundation, the doors four feet off the ground, with no steps or porches built yet. I went there in the night, sneaking around back, jumping onto the threshold to spin around and in. I didn't do any damage—I hadn't been a vandal since high school—and there was nothing inside to steal, though I might not have called it theft. I was beginning to feel comfortable about desperate moves and necessary ethical concessions.

I sat on the plywood floor by the back window, smoked, drank a beer if I had one. I arranged imaginary furniture and settled on a neutral color palette, decided bamboo flooring and area rugs would be nicer than boring wall-to-wall carpet. The house would be cooler that way, I thought, and crisper.

In the bathroom I stuck to beige tile with pewter fixtures, light and airy. The tub was surrounded by a wide bay window overlooking the undeveloped green belt behind the house. I saw myself with some as yet unmet lover, soaking deep in fragrant bubbles and mellowed by

Crown on the rocks, laughing, Rickie Lee Jones singing in the background. The water never got cold, and the bubbles stayed strong and thick.

As the moon rose over the hill country and shadows deepened in the woods, I saw myself again, out there in the darkness, a trespasser and a voyeur to my own fantasy. Part of me had gone feral and blended naturally with the shadows, wiser, more cynical, and smarter, laughing at the ridiculous man in an unfinished house, believing in a dream that no longer made sense.

## Breaking and Entering

I moved through fear as common as clay in those days, all quiet like somebody might burst from hiding and bust us cold while we pilfered the place, sniffing around for we didn't know what, and it's not like the tiny house my amoral benefactor Denny had found in the nowhere fields was hiding big money under the mattresses or caskets of jewels or packets of outbound tickets to some bigger place to be big shots instead of just bloodshot and broken off from the world.

*It's abandoned*, Denny reasoned, talking to himself as much as to his wife Jan and me. *Ripe for the picking. If it ain't us it'll be somebody else.* I bought his bullshit because he had the car and what money there was and somehow, he had me and Jan swept up in his current.

*Go check the medicine cabinet*, he told Jan. *Look under that bed*, he ordered me. He bragged much later that he did this so the diamond ring he'd found in the dresser could end up in his pocket uncounted, along with a Crown Royal bag of silver dollars he stuffed in his pants while Jan shook pill bottles and I scratched around in the leather-brown shoe smell and blown-in dirt.

*What if somebody comes?* Jan asked from the bathroom.

*Tell 'em we're lost*, he said.

*Lost*, we'd say, as if there was nothing in our pockets, nothing in our hands, nothing between us and the big things hidden there somewhere, if we only knew where to look.

## Campfires

The young men came down the hill from their trailer houses some summer nights to sit with the three of us at our fire pit by the lake. Most were little more than boys with sudden-sprung families to provide for, fatherhood stumbling them like some rusted toy truck they'd tripped over, pulling innocent wives and crusty-faced offspring down with them. They could only handle the sight of their own likenesses in the faces of their kids for so long before despair sent them outdoors and away from guilt and responsibility. Their teenage sweethearts aged quickly, growing disappointed and naggish, knowing the babies on their hips wouldn't be diapered or fed and the Blockbuster fees wouldn't get paid if they clung too tightly to their husbands. They stayed home and fried pork chops and Velveeta sandwiches for the children while their manboys carried twelve-packs and whiskey bottles under their arms to our camp. The young men sat on upturned 5-gallon buckets with Denny, Jan, and me, and wished out loud that they could get away with being aimless and lazy and wild for a time. They envied us; we were cool. And they were foolish.

Jan sat nearest Denny's ice chest and away from the circle, seldom speaking other than to toss her man a beer, or to laugh with, and often *at* our guests. The young men watched her closely though they spoke only to Denny and me and one another.

Denny and Jan were sweethearts who stayed in a storage shed with their meth pipe and their hearts full of what they called love, while I slept a ways down the hill aboard an abandoned pontoon boat beached on Lake Travis's muddy shore. The couple had taken me into their care while I was still deluded enough to believe something good would inevitably happen. I hadn't actually accepted my condition; my self-talk convinced me I was just at loose ends for a while,

certainly not homeless. I was optimistic I would be rescued, or that life would repair itself on its own, that roots would grow from my cuts.

One of our visitors that night was in his late twenties—older than the other guys from the trailers. He was a nosy one, a tourist in my eyes, but he brought beer, so he was welcome. After sitting quietly for a Budweiser or two, listening, taking us all in, he spoke. "No offense to anybody else, but—it's Barry, right? Hearing you talk, it don't seem like you belong here. I mean *here*. Like *this*."

I heard Jan whisper to Denny, something about not taking it personally. I killed my beer and helped myself to another from the 12-pack at the boy's knee. I didn't say anything, just pointed to the can, shrugged, and toasted my thanks in answer. I think he understood that the story there was both too simple and too complex to tell. To summarize how 35 years of my nearly 50 had gone to drinking and drugging, with all the tragic twists, hairpin turns, and dead ends intact was impossible. The map of that story would end up bigger than the territory. He didn't speak again.

Denny took over the campfire bullshit after that, bragging about the money he'd made from copper he'd stripped out of a trailer "not too far from you boys' back porches." They all joked that they'd kick his ass if they caught him sniffing around their places, or around their wives. Jan laughed louder than any of us at that.

It was late when they all stood at once, as if a dog whistle called them home at the same time of night. The curious boy slipped me a five before he left, out of pity, I suppose, or beer-buzzed kinship. It may have been kindness, but more likely it was meant to appease the gods of "better you than me."

## Forgive Us Our Trespasses

It's mid-December in downtown Austin. Christmas lights outline the taller buildings, shivering into green and red life as the business day ends. From the west, shafts of bloodshot light scissor between buildings as dusk settles over rush hour, softening the edges of bricks and chrome, the glass towers, the cars, and the people. The eastern skyline is high and horizontal, defined by the double-decker lanes of Interstate 35. A cold blue backdrop falls above the looming highway, pierced by early stars.

A man stands in the Texaco parking lot at the intersection of 7th Street and the access road, across from the police station. Nothing about him is age appropriate. Late forties, longish hair. Worn Levi's and tennis shoes. A Led Zeppelin T-shirt and a borrowed leather flight jacket. He turns one after another to the cardinal points, leaning finally as if to take a step, then pulling back and going nowhere.

He watches cars squeeze into tight formations at the traffic lights, hoping Steve, his friend of thirty-plus years, might come back around the corner, returning with a change of heart to pick him up, to abandon the tough-love, take-it-or-leave-it drop off that had left him there.

"You could talk Becky into it, couldn't you?" he had begged his friend. "You could put your fucking foot down, and she'd let me stay. Tell her to get over herself." He leaned against the truck, stretching a last shot of vodka into two, then three.

"You got some *balls*, dude," Steve said.

"I don't have any choice."

The night before, he had stretched out on Steve and Becky's leather sofa, sipping tap water from a too-delicate glass in a house with more rooms than he could imagine the two could

ever use. He had blinked at the giant TV, centered like an over-sized bay window against the opposite wall, always tuned to the Military Channel, with a remote he couldn't figure out how to operate. He fidgeted and stared as Rommel's *Afrikakorps* panzers trekked across miles of stony, grayscale desert, while the couple, his friends, discussed his fate in the master suite.

Becky was loud, anger-whispering: "He can stay tonight, and that's it."

He pressed the mute button, aiming it at the bedroom door.

Steve didn't defend him or negotiate—his tone said as much, though the words didn't carry.

He had been useful to Becky once. She had come to him when she and Steve separated for a time, dropping in for a covert, off-the-books fuck, an ego stroke when she'd been unsure of herself and they both needed the stroking. Steve knew about the affair. It had ostensibly been forgiven long ago in *mano-a-mano* understanding, a bros-before-hos code of anything-goes bullshit. In the thirty-odd years they'd known each other, lovers and wives had crossed lines between them many times, and Becky was chalked up as just one more.

"Fuck it," the man said. "Fuck her and fuck *you*."

Steve cranked up the radio and scowled. The window slid closed like a wall between them. Liquor and regret burned the man's gut as his friend bounced the truck off the curb and muscled into the flow of traffic, commuter horns blaring.

Hands are washed of him in that moment, doors locked, leaving him alone in the parking lot wondering what would come next.

Texaco customers enter and exit from the access road, but he doesn't go into the store. He moves to a nearby bus stop and sits. His jacket was warm enough in full sunlight but is too thin now; he welcomes the heat of exhaust from the street despite the fumes. On the metal bench, his

body temp falls as the afternoon's vodka loses its punch, and his energy level fades from buzz to heavy fatigue. He nods off.

It's fully dark when he wakes, sober and stiff-backed. The eastbound #4 bus scrapes its tires against the curb, hydraulics hissing. The driver cranks the doors open and yells, "Get in if you're getting in," but the fare costs money the man doesn't have. A leather clad kid slouches at the other end of the bench, smoking, her spiked hair bouncing to the music in her earbuds.

Across 7th Street, a black-and-white cruiser pulls into the police department parking garage. There is a space near the entrance, a human-sized hollow between the shrubbery and the red brick wall. The man dodges traffic, stands casually for a moment on the sidewalk, ducks behind the prickly holly bushes, sits, and pushes with his heels until he's in shadow. He worries there must be a hidden camera, but he can't spot one. No one comes to ticket him or arrest him. It's his first taste of invisibility; no one even glances his way. The tides of police traffic enter and exit with the changing shifts. Officers reach from their cars and swipe pass cards through the electronic gate controller. Radios scratch garbled noise and conversations pass between pairs of cops coming in for the night. The man cups a cigarette to hide the glow, blowing the smoke toward his feet.

Much later he stands, knocks the leaves and mulch from his jeans, wide awake and desperate for a restroom. He looks okay, he thinks. His clothes are still clean enough to pass for normal. His mouth is dry and tastes of a worn-out vodka drunk, but he's not intoxicated or obviously destitute. He trots across the street to the Texaco, toward the friendly light.

"Could I borrow the restroom key, please?" he asks. His tongue behaves as if he's only just learned to speak.

"My key is for customers only. You must buy something."

“Please? I don’t have any cash on me.” He smiles, bounces on his toes. “Could I maybe get a cup of water?”

“Cups are not free. You must buy something or go away.” The clerk frowns and points to the door, then busies himself with straightening the truck driver caffeine pills and Horny Goatweed Hard-on Enhancer displays lining the counter.

There are quarters and dimes in the Take-a-Penny-Leave-a-Penny tray, but the man isn’t bold enough yet to help himself. He backs out, the bell jangling a cheery goodnight.

He follows the shadows to the side of the store, stepping over the trails of liquid seeping from behind the Dumpster. He’s furtive, nervous, and moves too quickly. Drops of urine splatter his Levi’s and run embarrassingly hot against his thigh. He bats at his jeans and looks to make sure no one sees him.

Beyond the Dumpster, the rear parking lot is well-lit and open, and in the center is a sleeping bag, unattended, spread open on the asphalt as though it had floated as a gift from the stars, soft and warm. The man leans against the wall and watches it, a shivering vulture in pissed pants, eying a potential meal. There are no rules posted. There’s no etiquette for this occasion, and finders-keepers may not apply if the owner returns. He imagines it’s a trap, and the sleeping bag the bait, that he will be netted or snared or attacked if he touches it. The wet spots on his jeans are already cold against his leg. He walks deliberately across the lot, tucks the bag under his arm and runs back to his burrow by the police station, where he pulls the cover over his head and sleeps.

Months will pass before Steve and that man—me, of course—speak again, and now, we rarely ever speak, if at all. But after nearly 8 years, I still have that sleeping bag. I keep it rolled up in the closet, just in case.

\* \* \*

The next day, I walked. I looked as presentable as anyone running morning errands or heading out for brunch with colleagues. It was Austin—the fashion bar is set low. The sleeping bag was impossible to hide, though. Invisibility from the night before carried through into the daylight. People going about their business saw the sleeping bag first and didn't look for anything more. Eye contact was only by accident, and when I spoke, saying “Howdy,” or “G'morning,” or daring to ask for a cigarette, the best I'd get in return was a grunt or a shake of the head.

I circled the homeless shelter—the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless, AKA the ARCH—advancing and retreating, passing countless times on the opposite side of the street, stopping, looking, leaving. The crowd on the corner milled like badly-dressed mourners after a funeral, all-cried-out and at a loss for what to do next with their grief. Passersby hurried along with their heads down, protected within a visible aura of discomfort.

The homeless people loitered and leaned, concentrated like the sludge under a leaking drain—stagnant and foul, splattered with their own stink. To me, they were the no-good-bums I had crossed the street to avoid or rolled up the car windows and locked the doors against when they held out their “Please. Anything helps” signs. They were Halloween costumes from childhood, hobos made too realistic, smelling of shit pants and liquor and unbathed armpits. They were walking consequences, the end results of stupid decisions and failures to thrive. They were how you wind up if you don't straighten up and fly right. They were how things turned out if you didn't act your age, cut your damned hair, settle the hell down, grow the hell up, get a damned job, and pull your own weight. They had neither pulled their heads out of their asses, nor pulled themselves together. They were the ones who hadn't listened to wives begging, “Please? Will you please *try* to stop drinking so much?” and who had clamped their eyes shut when

friends demanded, “Look at yourself, man. Just *look* at yourself.”

It still sounds better to hear myself say I was too proud to go in there than to admit my own truths of fear, failure, and defeat. To ask for help was to submit to those truths, and besides, I may have been a fuckup, but I was nothing like those people on the sidewalk. Until I walked in that door, I was still separate, apart from and above those people. I could remain *I*, they could remain *them*, and I told myself repeatedly that anything was possible: some angel of deliverance might still scoop me up to set things right again.

But that didn't happen. That 11th-hour reprieve shit never happens in real life.

\* \* \*

The folks who named the ARCH may have been well-intentioned, but they failed to think it through. The word connotes a strong, rounded structure, sturdy and settled. A bridge, a steady support and a promise of security. But the ARCH has no soft curves. The architecture is angular, built of hard lines and graceless columns. Grease-laden concrete, corrugated metal, tempered glass, sharp aluminum corners. The western wall is two stories of glass and metal, the roof angled back as though to capture as much as possible of the roasting Texas sun. Inside, industrial wiring lies like veins twisted bare against the ceilings, the floors are blackened by thousands of weary steps, and the hard surfaces amplify the shouts and rumbling conversations until it all blends into an overwhelming ambient roar. The ground floor windows are etched opaque, so pedestrians can't rubberneck from the sidewalk, and the humbled can stay out of sight. The second and third floors overlook a block-sized expanse of parking lot and the constant sidewalk parade of the woebegone.

As I came to learn, residents half-joked that it “just like jail, but you can leave.” A common nickname is Hotel Homeless, but if the ARCH was a hotel, it wouldn't win any stars. There are no uniformed bellhops hustling out to tiptoe over the trash and stoned-out addicts on

the sidewalk, to take your bags and usher you past the line, to hurry you away from the odor of urine and slick drug sweat and wave you into the side door like a VIP. There are no painted footprints to guide your first visit, no mentors to show you the ropes. No pamphlets or quick-start guides or “You Are Here” maps. There is no concierge to hail a taxi or arrange a table for dinner, and you can’t call ahead to make reservations for your stay. Admission relies on the luck of a lottery, and if luck isn’t with you, you will be turned away. Once in the doors, no housekeeper fluffs your pillows or turns down the bedding. In fact, there *is* no bedding, no pillows, either. There are no beds, only hard mats on the floor, with a foot or so of free space between you and your neighbor.

The ARCH is not a lot of things, but it’s relatively safe, and though entry is a gamble, the price is right. There is comfort in the shelter’s stout solidity and tombstone permanence. And if the only alternative is to lie vulnerable in a doorway or an alley, to become a shadow behind bushes in a landscape of trespass, or to curl cramped and shivering on a bus stop bench, the accommodations at the ARCH are straight up grand.

\* \* \*

I wasn’t conditioned yet to run toward the sound of someone yelling “Food truck!” I sat stupidly on the corner across the street from the ARCH while the mass of people gathered as one and sprinted whooping around the building, into the alley. Soon, a box truck emblazoned with “Mobile Loaves and Fishes” pulled out and away. The rush over, the crowd filtered back each to their places, carrying brown bag lunches. I hadn’t realized how fantastic a PB&J and a juice box would be until I watched the others eating and drinking.

A graybeard in fatigues and a camo trench coat dumped his lunch on the ground and squatted to tear apart bits of bread, scattering it for the street pigeons. He favored an oddly colored bird, spotty beige and white, and tossed it larger pieces than the rest.

More bags materialized in the crowd, and I watched as people traded items like school kids. The menu went far beyond peanut butter and juice. Some ate standing, others hunkered against the wall to munch on apples, packaged cookies and pastries, sandwiches, chips. Oranges. Pint cartons of cold milk. Cokes and Dr. Peppers. Bottled water. My throat tightened at the thought of swallowing food, but my god, the thirst. I hadn't had anything to drink since the previous afternoon's vodka. More than anything, thirst drove me into the ARCH.

I took a place in line at the entrance, feeling more like a trespasser there than when I'd pissed myself behind the Texaco Dumpster, or slept huddled against the wall of the police station. I focused on silence, moving when the line did, bluffing through the fear. I spoke to no one, and no one spoke to me. Some men in line nodded, simple acknowledgment of our mutual existence, and I nodded back. Women circulated among us, and the men's heads turned in unison to follow them, as though acting on the same limbic command, the stares varying from longing, to lustful, to coldly indifferent, others squinted like lions sizing up prey, making a mental note of a hunt to attend to later. The beige pigeon hobbled and flopped near the line. It had no feet, just calloused stubs.

A young woman at the entry station buzzed me in the door and ran the sleeping bag through a luggage x-ray. I emptied my pockets of wallet and lighter and passed through the metal detector. I waited in a second line and sat for an intake interview where I confessed to poverty, the lack of a permanent address, and an infinite fondness for alcohol. Yes, I had been diagnosed with depression. No, there was no one who might help me. No, I had no communicable diseases, no physician, no money, no wife, no children, no alternatives. I was neither a felon, nor a sex offender. The social worker pointed the way to the restrooms and instructed me to return that evening for the lottery. "Line up in the alley, back of the parking garage," she said. "That's how

you get in.” She scheduled a TB test, checked me into the system as the newly-numbered Client #113119, and I stepped from gifted amateur class into the realm of the professional statistic.

\* \* \*

The ARCH is only a block away from 6th Street, the city’s entertainment and tourist hub, and the clubs and restaurants won’t tolerate ragged folk cluttering up their sidewalks and doorways. To keep the undesirables invisible, the shelter’s parking garage serves as a discrete holding pen, hidden and cave-like with its entry in the alley, the space wrapped on three sides by concrete and tile with a bank of dented lockers against the inner wall. The alley side is gated, fenced with floor-to-ceiling iron bars. Depending on one’s frame of mind, the fence either cages you or offers a safe haven from the civilian world. Fluorescent fixtures saturate the air with a flickering yellowish haze, and at night, light defines the lines between inside and out. The alley is pure blackness, the garage is dim and indistinct, but through the glass doors leading into the shelter, the brilliance inside is blinding.

The garage is neither outside nor in, and weather often rules the moods. Industrial fans help in the summer, but in winter there’s no way to escape the cold. Gusts and rain whip down the wind-tunnel alley and swirl through the fence. Even in dry weather, everyone looks rumped and damp, like they’re stitched together from bundles of dirty laundry, moldy and mildewed in sour layers. Their faces disappear under cheap ski hats and hoodies. Clusters of commonality coalesce in eddies of conversation: voices raised in argument over near the gates; buddies discussing the fresh troubles of their days or the rare news of good things, like an approval letter for a disability case, or making a new connection to sell food stamp credit for cash. Jokers with half-hidden booze gather behind the shelter’s company van, and murmurs of subdued fear float through the crowd like randomly awakened ghosts.

Smoking is allowed. Fighting, indiscreet drinking and drugging are not. Cameras

surveille the garage, and everyone learns for the sake of covert activities exactly which areas the staff can't see. Crazy is admissible—unavoidable, really, but not too much at once, or expressed too loudly. The general rule is that if you can behave yourself and not act fucked up, it'll be okay. Any hint of violence will get the perpetrators permanently banned, but everyone's too drag-ass weary to cause trouble most times. Aggression is usually just impatience with yet another line to stand in, and the knowledge that not all will make it indoors. A fog of apathy solidifies around the ankles if one doesn't keep moving, so motion, however sluggish, can be your friend.

The garage can get pretty trashed, but it's the kind of trash you get used to, like a cluttered desktop or last night's dinner plates stacked in the sink. The floor stays littered with a crop of cigarette and little cigar butts—smoked to the filter—and the outdoor ashtrays are usually twisted open to scavenge snipes. No one cares much to make their shot at the garbage cans, and the men are prone to spitting, too. Whether it's territorial, or meant as an expectorate manifestation of general contempt, I can't say, but it's nearly universal behavior. There are snuff-dipper's splatters spiced with flecks of Timber Wolf Long Cut; green-tinged, hacking sickness accumulated in foamy puddles; and the small bullet wounds of dry, white chaff that tough guys sometimes fire off just to leave a mark. It makes me wonder how these people would live if they had a home.

\* \* \*

On my first night I follow the orders I'd been given when processed into the system, and by 5:30 I'm in line for the garage, waiting and watching, unsure of how that system works. Inside the gates, I find an out-of-the-way spot, minding my own business and keeping my mouth shut.

Rent-a-cops lock the gates at 6:30, trapping everyone in the garage. Soon after, cued by a routine I eventually grew to depend on, everyone moves inward to form a spiraling line, a captive galaxy of men, merging into a self-organizing and cooperative system.

At 7:00 the staffers bring out a plastic bucket of numbers. There are only 150 mats available, and on busy nights, as many as 200 or more men need them. A low number is good, and a high number is bad. A common topic for discussion is whether the odds are better at the head of the line, in the middle, or at the tail, and whether the bucket is kinder at the top, or if it's best to dig in deep. Everyone subscribes to a theory and the outlaws shoulder their way into their ideal position, sometimes spawning shouting matches. (Line cutting is a grave sin when lines are a way of life.) No one holds a degree in the mathematics of probability, but they know in their gut that their theory is the best, and don't consider whether their pet belief system is right one night but wrong the next.

The bucket runs dry before the line does. Those pulling higher numbers try to buy their way down. Some with a good ticket wander off anyway, deciding the freedom to party is worth more than a safe night's sleep. I draw a 23—certain to get in. My first conversations are variations on “What'd you pull?” or, “You make it inside?” I'm offered opportunities to trade my ticket for a blunt, for cigarettes, for dollars. I'm tempted but politely refuse. The winners congratulate themselves on their luck, and sometimes tease the losers, but just as often console them as they are sent away to try again the next night. No one mentions we had already lost the moment we walked in the gate.

\* \* \*

The men's restroom and shower is a big space, a rectangle divided lengthwise, loud, every surface tiled in industrial white, with blackened cracks and crumbling grout stained by

chlorine-resistant mildew. The showers are in the back, and the men wait in the front section, a room lined with sinks against one wall, toilet stalls and urinals opposite. Brags and bombast echo through the stalls, along with flushes and grunts, shouts for toilet paper, and the mingled odors of malnourished shits.

Stainless steel mirrors hang bolted over sinks caked with soap, toothpaste film, and whiskers like tiny mites. Most of the faucets are broken, and either dribble or don't run at all. You bundle your things under your arm. Pull off your shoes and socks and slip into shower shoes if you've got them and try to be ready when your turn comes. You feel as slick as the tile, in need of a scrubbing, and hope you get a good shower, with pressure and some warmth. You can't help but wonder if you'll ever feel clean again.

Some guys are proud and naked; they undress in line and stand casually scratching their pubes and rubbing their guts, but others are more modest. They wait until they're in the shower stall, secluded behind the curtain. Some are considerate and efficient. In and out. Some take too long, and the staff steps in to quiet the complaints and yell at the water hogs to finish up and move on. Sometimes someone sings, and everyone joins in if they're good, but if they're not, the line moans and yells and begs god to please, please, make it stop.

Unless you happen to be the first one in a stall, there is never a *good* shower. Inevitably, the corners are slimed in gray foam, the floor slippery with the cummy horrors left by the last man, and the ones who came before him. Sometimes filthy underwear lies abandoned with gray washrags, and miniature soap bars melted to the floor. You try to focus on scrubbing your own skin and avoiding touching any surface unnecessarily. If you have a towel, you dry off when you're done. If not, a shirt will have to do. You hustle back out to the sinks, and if you have a razor, you shave. If you have clean clothes, you wear them, or save them for another day. When

you're done primping, you head for the sleeping rooms. The staff looks you over to confirm you've really showered. Some guys try to fake it, as though they would rather keep their dirt intact. Like rotting houses in shells of paint, the dirt is all that's left to hold them together.

\* \* \*

No space in the ARCH is wasted. The entire ground floor, the conference rooms upstairs—all are lined with rows of mats each night, readied as the men leave the showers. A spot upstairs is best. The rooms there are carpeted, and everyone sleeps a half-hour longer than down in the main room where the lights come on first at 4:30. Get a place by a door if it's available; the air is fresher there, there's light enough to read by, and if you feel the need to run, you'll know you can even though you won't.

Still damp from the shower, my clothes sticking to me, I zipped my new sleeping bag around my shoulders. My body relaxed into an unexpected state of relief, as though it remembered a safety my mind refused to consider. I slept that night like I was home again—I mean home like when I was a little boy. I slept like a mutt by his master's fire, like a log, like a rock, like a baby.

The lights came on while it was still dark out, and the man beside me said I'd kept him awake in the night. I apologized, but he told me not to worry.

"It wasn't no trouble," he said. "You was laughing, laughing out loud in your sleep."

I don't know why I laughed, but during the time I was a resident at the ARCH, people told me that pretty often. I tried, but never remembered those dreams, and counted them as lost as all the other dreams I'd had. Soon, the strangeness of the man I'd been at the Texaco began falling away, and whoever I had been before then lost his meaning, became as extraneous and useless as those unremembered dreams, and no longer relevant to what life had become. I could

laugh at myself then, I think, at that scared man and all his problems that suddenly seemed so trivial. And those nights laughing in my dreams? I can only guess it was out of joy that I'd found a place to take care of me at my least viable, when nothing about me seemed worth salvaging. All around me walked evidence that it could be worse. That even though I had become one of "them," there was still something left of myself, no matter how deeply buried.

## Kitty and Blue

Interstate 35 drones a baseline of gray noise as predawn commuters crowd each other's taillights, and tractor-trailers roar past in great Doppler vortexes of motion. I come to alone, with the sounds breaking over me, float to the surface and open my eyes. Across the highway, the roof line of the downtown Hilton glistens with a premonition of sunrise. The air is cool and heavy with moisture; my sleeping bag is spread like the night sky for a starfield of dew. Leaning stands of foot-high grasses hold droplets like sparkling galaxies at their tips, poised to splash onto my face and hair.

I feel better than usual, well-rested in spite of alcohol thirst, hunger, and the bullshit disrepair of homelessness. I lie still and listen for unfamiliar voices, the snap of a lighter, or the telltale misstep of someone straining at silence. It pays to be cautious — crackheads gather on this hillside, meth freaks, and honorless thieves. Most are harmless, though, common drunks like me, but you can never be sure of a stranger's intentions. I sense no threats and sit up to stretch, content on my urban hill, as guileless and innocent as McCartney's fool.

A spot-check inventory reveals no damage or loss: reading glasses ... yes, in the grass nearby, unbent. I've got half a pack of smokes. My wallet is still tucked in my sock. The Chevron must've shut down before I'd drunk all the cash; I'm holding seven ones and two-fifty in silver. If I do without coffee, it's enough to finance a couple of pints of Kamchatka. There's an unexpected weight in my pack, and I'll be damned — I'd mustered the blacked-out foresight to hoard the last tallboy.

With no agenda beyond liquor store business, I slide into my shoes, tighten my belt, and kill the beer in three long and merciful gulps. My shoulders relax, and each breath reaches deeper

into my core. I stow my sleeping bag behind a bush, climb aboard the morning like she's a rudderless ship, and drift downhill toward the edge of the world.

\* \* \*

I lie still and heavy as consciousness rises in waves of cold light. Whirlpools of low-voiced laughter swirl nearby. Distant clatters ricochet off tile and glass, the rattle of metal on metal. A voice scratches unintelligibly over a loudspeaker.

I blink. Dry air rushes into my nostrils from a tube draped across my lip. Overhead an IV bag gleams. The needle stings under my skin.

"Welcome back, Mr. Maxwell."

The nurses smile. I'm on a gurney at their station, parallel parked in the corridor like a stalled car.

"Am I okay?"

"You'll be fine," the elderly nurse in blue says.

The younger woman, in wrinkled Hello Kitty scrubs, reassures me: "You behaved yourself, too. Not a lick of trouble."

"I'm a wreck." The sheets are littered with tobacco from a broken cigarette. The corners of my mouth crack when I speak.

"Brackenridge ER," Nurse Blue says. "You remember coming in?"

I remember waking up that morning on the hill by I-35. I remember the liquor store. "I've been here before." I turn away, embarrassed. "Not like this."

Hello Kitty examines the IV bag and jots a note on an aluminum clipboard. "You were too pooped to pop," she says. "Snoring. Not like some of 'em." She asks Nurse Blue, "Remember that cray-cray black boy last weekend? That skinny child with the popcorn hair?"

“I’ve still got the bruise.” She holds her elbow over her head, tilting toward the light. A green-gray array of fingerprints marks the loose skin near her armpit.

“Am I okay?” I ask again. The room feels unsteady; the gurney rocks underneath me.

Nurse Blue leans over the counter and whispers, “You just had yourself a little too much fun, Mr. Maxwell.”

Kitty untangles the oxygen tubes. She pulls the IV free, and applies a cotton ball and Band-Aid. Blue plops my backpack beside me and reaches into her breast pocket. My glasses. They’re intact, and I thank her.

Hello Kitty opens a pre-packaged turkey sandwich and pops the straw into a carton of OJ. She crosses her arms and watches me eat. The sandwich is too moist and the juice makes me queasy, but they’re delicious and free.

“You know you could *die* gettin’ up to this foolishness,” Kitty says.

“I’m sorry.”

“Could be worse,” Blue says. “You could’ve landed in jail without us to babysit.”

It’s late, after closing time, and I wish I’d rolled over and drifted back to sleep without letting on I’d come to. Once they turn me out, I’m *out*.

Kitty hands over my paperwork while Blue administers a rote lecture on acute alcohol intoxication.

“You steer clear of trouble, Mr. Maxwell.”

Kitty asks if I’ve got someplace to go.

“I’m all right,” I say. I’ve got a place, but not like she means. “Thank you both—for the sandwich and all.”

Outside, I peel off the blood-spotted Band-Aid and toss it. The sidewalk heaves gently

under my feet. I worry if someone has claimed my spot by the overpass, if my sleeping bag is still stashed in the bushes. I wonder where a body might score a drink this time of night.

## Kill Your Darlings

I've come close to achieving what my AA sponsor called the Holy Trinity of manly recovery: a job, a car, and a girlfriend. I have a GED and a Pell grant, a bus pass, and a woman to keep company with. Angela's in my room tonight, holding down the fort, her presence radically against the sober-house rules. My room there is small, but private and well equipped—grants and scholarship money helped to reacquire the luxuries I'd taken for granted before I'd devolved to living from a backpack. I own a coffee pot. I have computers and electro-gadgets, an alarm clock and floor lamps. I have a favorite sauté pan and a silicone whisk for gravies and sauces. I have shelves of hardback books and community college texts. And a woman on the bed clicking the remote, waiting like a familiar and comfortable knick-knack.

I call home from the sidewalk at the mouth of the alley off Neches Street, where the hopeful gather in the parking garage at the back entrance to the shelter. It's hard to hear, and I struggle to keep from yelling. The parking garage contains most of the voices, but they swell through the alley in unimpeded waves, rendering the open air claustrophobic. I feel as though I'm drowning.

“You have everything you need?” Angie asks. “Warm enough?”

“All good,” I say. “I loaded up on munchies. Plenty of smokes, and a copy of *Desolation Angels*.”

“Sorry you had to go.”

“I'm afraid I might get stuck here.”

Escaping homelessness is like trying to walk in thick mud, your feet sucked deeper with each struggling step, and even if you break free, your soul will still be caked with muck from the

journey. Charity had been the only way out for me. So, yes, I'm a charity case, I'll own that, and being deserving of charity counts for something, right? At least I'm off the liquor, and off the streets. I'm not a bum anymore. But the sober house I live in is shutting down, the donations dried up with the economy. Cash flow trumps even the most charitable of intentions.

My case manager, Greg, swears it's going to be okay. "Solutions abound," he claims, and I trust him, mostly. He had come by the house a week before with a tote bag of paperwork, spread my files on the kitchen table, and rolled up his sleeves. "Got a smoke?" he asked. It's against house rules to smoke indoors, but he knows when to bend the rules, and we both lit up. I'm sure he'd have been less helpful if he'd known Angie was upstairs in my room, keeping still and quiet until he left.

He peered at each stapled stack of documents, pulling his glasses a half-inch off his nose when a specific point warranted closer focus. "We can do this," he said, tapping reports and lining them up neatly.

I felt like I was waiting for a grade on a final exam, but the goal was F for Failure, a consistent and predictable failure to thrive, a failure to pass from being a ward of the state into self-sufficiency, a failure to meet even the minimum of social standards.

"To the Feds, living here isn't any better than sleeping on a bus bench. You're couch hopping. Still homeless, but you're not on record as such." He dropped his cigarette butt in a coffee cup and rubbed a hand over the white bristles of his head and chin. "We can get you housing. Permanent

Supportive Housing. I can't promise anything, but there isn't a snowball's chance unless you spend some time downtown. You need something on the books to maintain a chronically homeless status.

That's your ticket, right there."

I asked him what he meant.

"One night in the shelter will do it," he said.

*Permanent Supportive Housing.* The phrase sounds comforting. It *is* comforting, an offer of a forever home, simply for being too ill-equipped to manage a normal life. It also feels like one more humiliating failure to add to the heap, but failure is better than being lost again, and it doesn't mean I'd have to stay institutionalized forever, following the rules and giving myself over to the system. And, my god, I need the breathing space. When I let myself admit it, I'm scared out of my mind to imagine life without a safety net. I'll take it, with gratitude. Yes, please and thank you.

"You won't get stuck," Angie says.

Civilians amble past me on their way to downtown clubs or restaurants, laughing, ignoring me and anyone outside of their immediate circle. Homeless men duck into the alley. They ignore me, too; I'm obviously not one of them.

"It might rain more tonight, but I've got my good coat. It'll be all right. I'm going in—the garage is filling up."

Muscle memory tells me *being* at the shelter is easy, but the process of *arriving* is not an

easy thing at all. It's the four blocks from the bus stop to the door, the approach to the building itself, and to the crowded corners around it. I plan my trip early. I factor in time to stall, to have a last-minute smoke, to stare at posters for psychedelic road shows I won't attend. I fight an urge to bail.

After more than a year of away time, I'm still welcome to stand in line and draw a number. The familiarity is both nerve-wracking and comforting, and it's more like a homecoming than I expect. I'm warm this time; I'm ironed and combed, with no leaves in my hair, and my teeth are scrubbed and smooth and my breath smells of coffee instead of booze. I'm clean, in clean clothes: dry socks, jeans with no holes, and I'm layered for comfort, not because I have to wear everything I own at once.

If Greg is wrong, the lottery may become a way of life again. There is no Plan B, no fallback strategy. Despite my optimistic opinion of myself, a free roof forever sounds pretty sweet. Permanent is a concept I've lost faith in when applied to any of my normal life expectations, and to wrap myself in that blanket of security is like some heaven I can hardly imagine.

*Permanent Supportive Housing.* I let it become an earworm, a mantra to get me in the gates. I hold the thought as the alley grows dark, letting the hope have a moment to nest. The program is a boon for the working poor, a term some prefer to "homeless." While I was on the street, I wasn't that noble. I was a drunk, plain and simple, and to attain the level of the "housed" meant no more than having a safe place to drink. It has become something different now, but "housed" is still an odd and awful word I hate to use, loaded with connotations of zero-sum choices between security and dignity, counterbalancing relief in opposition to independence. It's a blessing that can bring with it psychological disintegration and learned helplessness if that's

what someone truly wishes for. I've never seen the word used other than as stubborn institutional vernacular, often stained by condescension no matter how sincere the source. After all, no one in the real world, when renting an apartment or moving into a new home, happily declares themselves "housed." No one in the real world calls themselves housed unless they have been *un-housed*.

I had once depended on the shelter to hold me inside my skin, to pull my head together when I'd blown it apart with vodka. I would come crawling back from binges, ashamed and humbled, and I imagine I shared those feelings of shame with other failures at slow-motion suicide—like waking sheepishly in a hospital bed, wrists stitched and bandaged or stomach freshly pumped, facing your loved ones the morning after. The staff had welcomed me then when I checked in at the front desk; their faces had shown genuine concern.

"You okay, Mr. Maxwell?"

"A little worse for wear," I'd say. Or I'd force myself into cheery, devil-may-care brightness, "Any day above ground is a good one, you know."

"There's an AA meeting this afternoon, Mr. Maxwell, on the second floor."

"Thanks." *But no thanks*. I'd sleep for a while with my head on a table in the parking garage, find a sandwich and some water, and heal from the self-poisoning I'd administered.

Since those days there has been some turnover in clientele, but all through the crowd are characters I've seen before, most with slightly deeper wrinkles, different colored do-rags and new Wal-Mart backpacks, but with the same three-day beards and an air of toxicity. The ratio of working poor to die-hard bums, to the mentally ill or otherwise psychically damaged leans toward the bum end of the continuum. A bloodshot blankness behind the eyes gives the drunks and hopeless ones away. A liquor-sick vibe floats with them, and they ease through my space as

if to sniff my air, instinctively suspicious of someone with clean clothes and a recent shave. I want to ask them for a shot of whatever they've got, but also want to shoo them away before they suss me out as a fraud. They can see through me as clearly as I see them, and it leaves me feeling threatened.

A saggy-pants gangster boy materializes at my shoulder, bouncing lightly from his waist up, tapping my arm like I should know him.

"Lemme have one of them smokes, old school."

I ignore him for a beat and ask "What?" as if I'm not hearing him right.

"A smoke, *vato*. You got one."

"What's the magic word?"

"I don't know, man. What do even you *mean*? *Shazam*?"

"That's Captain Marvel. Think about it."

His bouncing stops.

"Aww, *dude*! I *get* it! It's *please*!" He straightens his slouch like a schoolboy thrilled to impress his teacher. "Please, boss. Would you let me have one of them smokes?"

It doesn't bother me when the cocky little punk struts off, lighting my cigarette without so much as a nod of thanks. Only after he's disappeared do I notice how careless I'd been, letting him slip up beside me in a place where being aware of your surroundings is essential. I've lost any edge I once had.

I find a clear spot on the floor and sit cross-legged against the wall, my heavy coat overstuffed and draped like a black tent over my shoulders. I'm a rock, I imagine, in a whirlpool of noise. I've been spoiled by the quiet of my room, tamed, re-domesticated, and the sharp-toothed racket is irritating. It doesn't sound like language to me anymore, only a surging tide of barks

and grunts. The tsunami of animalistic noise echoes and amplifies until it breaks and crashes around me.

The cold finds its way down my back, and I shiver, taken without warning by an urge to shout, to rise like thunder at these people. If I had a bullhorn, I'd use it. I'd stretch tall and roar over their heads: *I've got a warm bed at home with a real live woman in it. I've got Wi-Fi, motherfuckers, with a Roku streaming Netflix on the flat screen!* I want to shake these pathetic excuses for men by their filthy necks and shout until they get it, until they understand I'm better than all this, that I don't *do* this shit anymore.

But I don't thunder. I don't rise up. I don't do any of that. I breathe the mantra: *Permanent. Supportive. Housing.* I mind my business and keep my mouth shut, recalling lessons learned from the day I'd first slouched into the shelter. Conscience, arrogance, and discretion all agree on silence. Silence is safer than any kind of attention in this place. I had some therapy after rehab, and I try to remember to relax into the flow, to stop resisting the experience, but part of me keeps shouting: *Don't you understand that I can leave anytime I want? I've got folding money in one pocket and a smart phone in the other. I feed the neighbor's cat when she's out of town, for fuck's sake!*

I repeat to myself as I get up and join the line that it's only one night, not forever, and I'm only revisiting the past, not looking into my future.

The smell of the crowd tonight reminds me of when I'd first come to the shelter, near Christmas in 2009. The odor of body grime and sweat is different in chilly weather, not like the slightly rancid, robust and grassy funk of summer. It's more like the smell of an abandoned refrigerator, closed too long, slick with condensation, and preserving nothing anymore but stale, dead air.

The spiral line unwinds from its central singularity, and at the other end of line those who have drawn compare numbers, celebrating or commiserating over their relative levels of misfortune. The routine hasn't changed. Slips with the highest numbers join the litter on the floor, the losers wander into the alley, their odds so bad they have no reason to wait.

I'm one of the lucky ones, though my stay is prearranged, the lottery rigged in my favor by case management. I draw a 57, and the young man holding the clipboard remembers my name from over a year ago. He scribbles *B Maxwell* on the back and nods me out of the way. There was a time I'd wondered what I'd done to deserve being stuck in such a jacked-up place, and I realize I'm no longer good enough to earn my entrance. I don't deserve to be here anymore. I'm an impostor, without even the integrity of failure to pay my way in the door.

A kid, a skatepunk type, comes in late. He goes limp at the staff's feet, teary-eyed, begging for a spot, but too green to know begging never works. He's young, and dresses tough in hanging chains, leather, and studs, but the tough isn't as deep as his piercings and he breaks open.

"But I don't have anywhere to go!"

Some of the crueller guys laugh.

"Where am I supposed to sleep?"

"Out," the rent-a-cop tells him, and points to the open gate.

The kid had been in line behind me, talking loudly, brashly, laughing and scared behind the bluff. My good draw came before his bad, and I consider giving him my ticket but realize I can't. My name is on it now. He puts his bad-boy face back on and kicks the gate on his way into the dark alley.

A familiar voice muscles through the hubbub, booming something about monsters and pets and the secrets of secrecy. It's Jason, one of the good guys, a reliable drinking buddy from

the old days, if there ever was such a thing. He's a madman hippie, with strings of uncombed blonde hair and dirty clothes—no, that's too kind—*filthy* clothes. And when he's had too much of whatever it is he's having, Jason performs either a lecture on the Benjy section of *The Sound and the Fury*, or a tie-dyed Derrida routine.

Jason had been reading *The Sound and the Fury* the morning we met. The book was already tattered then from his compulsive attention, held together with rubber bands and hair ties. He'd covered the pages with meticulous highlighting—points of view and shifting tenses systematically and obsessively underlined and annotated until the text itself was hardly visible. The narrow margins were filled with notes and question marks, as though Faulkner had encoded a private cabalistic truth only Jason could crack.

Tonight, though, it's a Derrida night, and I follow Jason's act from memory as he summarizes his lecture with a flourish. "To pretend," he says, "I actually *do* the thing—" Here he pauses and spreads his arms for dramatic effect. "I have therefore only *pretended* to pretend!" The men around him nod like they're in the presence of Christ on the mount or the Buddha beneath the Bodhi Tree. *I'm the one pretending*, I think. I've pretended myself into another life, pretended this one never happened, but here it is, in my face. However strongly I've compartmentalized this place and these people as part of a denied past, I'm in it now, and it feels uncomfortably *right*, as if I've returned to where I truly belong.

Jason's audience stands quietly, wishing for more plagiarized wisdom, I imagine. It's obvious they love Jason and his performances, and as much as I've let myself miss him, I don't want to love anyone tonight. I want to be left alone. Jason spots me before I can turn away, and I wave as though I hadn't noticed his show.

He strides over and wallops me with bear hugs and a scratchy, flower-child kiss on each

cheek. He's been kicking it with his buds, he says, over on the east side. I'm tempted to ask if they don't have showers east of IH-35, or laundromats, or shampoo, but I let it go.

I ask about his screenplay, a project he worked on every day at the library and could never get quite right. It's almost done, he tells me. "Just ten words to cut, and it's finished." It's only a matter of deciding which ten that stops him short of completion. It always has been.

"That's great!" I pat him on both shoulders. "Only ten?" *What are you still doing here?* is the question I can't force myself to ask. "I remember what you always said: Kill your darlings, bro."

Jason attributes that line to Faulkner, but I've learned since that it's been credited to various others. It's an instruction in ruthless focus, in merciless editing, and prescribes a willingness to cut the excessive or unnecessary, no matter how you love them. It applies to so many situations: to words, to friends, to self-definitions we can't, or won't, shake.

Jason has a hopelessly high number, 165, and he congratulates me on my 57.

"Stay dry," I tell him. "Just ten more words!"

He hugs me again, hard enough to hurt. "Love you, my brother. Miss you."

"You, too," I say, and then there's nothing left to talk about.

I try to imagine Jason announcing his screenplay finished, and I can't. Without it, who would he be? I can relate to his indecision. Despite trying so hard to cut homelessness from my script, it remains for me to resent, and paradoxically, to cling to. It has become a permanent before-and-after time stamp in my life, an uncuttable passage, and a darling—albeit an ugly one—who I can't bring myself to kill.

Within half an hour the numbers are all drawn and the line degenerates into a milling, impatient crowd. Jason is off into the night, and the staff begins to usher us lucky ones indoors in

groups of 20. The rationalizations come easily: It's only raining a little. It isn't that cold—forties, low fifties. He'll be all right. Only ten more words to cut. Kill your darlings, bro.

The leftover men mostly wind up in the parks, or hidden behind bushes, or in darkened alleys, or stretched like rows of corpses on cardboard-padded church steps. They might get drunk and tossed in jail. They might end up at the dope house or pounding on the door of the woman who'd put them out. There are plenty of options for the resourceful.

Some might obsessively walk, like I used to, cruising benches all night from one spot of light to the next, looking for a sense of safety. I don't know why I was driven to keep moving those nights, why I couldn't do as the others and find a hole in a hedge to burrow into, or curl up in a doorway and crash until the downtown rangers or a shop owner shooed me away at sunrise. I think it was penance, or self-pitying martyrdom, or possibly the hope that I would walk off the edge somewhere and lose myself once and for all.

Inside at last, the room is filled with rows of plastic chairs. I take one at the back and wait for the call to the showers. It'll be another half hour before there's any action, and the men use the time to catch up on gossip, use the restroom, repack and inventory their belongings, and have a snack if they've got it.

The guy next to me, a stranger, doesn't look career homeless. He isn't particularly dirty; I don't smell alcohol or rotted teeth or infected lungs. His eyes tell his age, maybe forty, but it's hard to pin down. Tired eyes, but alive and still open, and sane enough for small talk. He isn't the full-time loser I'd been—more of a traveling type, his backpack and duffel packed neatly and tight, with a purpose for every compartment, I imagine—a place for everything, but probably no room for knick-knacks or silicone whisks.

I watch him wipe the grime from his work boots with a wad of brown paper towels. His

hair is healthy and is well cut. He's come from somewhere, I suppose, and is simply on his way elsewhere, maybe looking for work, or maybe he's one of those mythical rambling men who don't stick for long wherever they are. I can envision a forlorn lover in every trailer park he's left behind.

He says, "Howdy," and I nod. We bump fists and he says his name is Geoff, pronounced "Jeff" with a G-e-o-double-eff. To my ear, it doesn't suit him and I have him spell it again before I tell him my name, and then I shut up. If I say anything else, my mask will slip and he'll know I'm not really *here*, that I'm up to no good. He'll see how I click through faces to suit the audience of the moment; he'll somehow sense that I'm taking the place of someone like Jason, or like any anonymous and invisible nobody who'd been turned away.

I sneak my phone from my pocket to make sure the ringer is off. On top of the pillow and blanket in my gym bag, underneath the clean towel, I've got Skittles, Nature Valley trail mix, and *Desolation Angels*. My community college film professor had given me the book, along with an A, and a handshake to send me on my way. "For a real beat (but not beaten!) cat!" he'd written on the title page. I could open it anywhere, read a random passage or two, and not feel lost.

I'm crunching a mouthful of trail mix while Kerouac complains about success, and Geoff unzips his duffel. He pulls out a plastic grocery bag—a food-truck meal from Mobile Loaves and Fishes, folks who'd fed me more times than I could count. Geoff tips the duffel on end, settling it in place for a table. There's a sandwich, ham with mustard it looks like, Cheetos, and an apple. He peels a boiled egg with some trouble before he pops it whole into his mouth.

He breathes through his nose and says "umph" after he swallows. "You been fed today?" he asks. "Want half my sandwich? An apple?"

Domino's had delivered an artisan pizza before I left the house—spinach, mushrooms, and feta. I'd tipped the driver in change, and Angie and I sat on the bed sharing a Caesar salad and finishing the whole pizza. I had a bowl of Rocky Road for dessert before I caught the #2 downtown.

I can't look at Geoff. "No—no thanks," I tell him. "I had a bite earlier. I've been fed."

"Let me know if you change your mind." He settles into his chair, stretches his legs in front of him, and crosses his ankles. I hear the crunch as he takes a bite of apple, and he looks calmly around the room, his posture at ease, comfortable with who he is, and where he is.

His generosity ruins me. I collapse my aura tight and small, pulling myself inward, wrapping myself in a cloud of isolation, trying to appear absorbed in my book. Kerouac's words are empty, and I don't see any angels while I sit and stare, pretending to read, pretending to have earned my place in line. Through the front windows I glance at the men who didn't make it in. They stand on the corner, illuminated by the streetlights and the glare of passing headlights sparkling in the fog; they look in all directions as if trying to make one last good choice, when no particular way is better than any other.

I sweat inside my jacket, and I feel my edges blur as though I was made of steam and everyone could see my naked ghost, my soul drifting away. The staff takes forever to call us upstairs, and I grow smaller with each unread page, until I'm hardly there at all.

In the morning I stop in the men's room on the way downstairs, and Jason stumbles in and unzips at the urinal next to me. He'd made it inside after all, and was clean and brushed out, looking more Woodstock rock star than burned-out bum. I tell him I'm heading out for a smoke and would wait around. "I'll see you in a minute," I lie. I skip the coffee line and the withered oranges in the breakfast box. They'd been frozen, it looked like, written off as spoilage and

served up here for breakfast.

I walked in the dark rain away from downtown, across the I-35 overpass to Denny's, where I waited for the buses to start the Sunday morning run. I smiled at the waitress and asked please and thank you for a third cup of coffee, loading it with milk and sugar, which I never did. I read *Desolation Angels* though I didn't like it much and ordered a chicken-fried steak and eggs with hash browns, and later a side of grits with orange marmalade. I drank ice water and more coffee with milk and still felt thirsty and malnourished and couldn't take in enough to satisfy.

Simon and Garfunkel's "America" played over the restaurant sound system, and it felt like fate, or a god I didn't believe in speaking to me. For months during my homeless time, I'd been both comforted and tortured by songs that rarely left my head. "America" was a constant, in Simon and Garfunkel's mellow version, but often in a mashup with Yes's prog-rock take. Some mornings I'd wake in the middle of a verse, as though in my sleep I'd been listening without knowing it. While the rain gathered strength outside the restaurant, I remembered the Paul Simon lyric, and welcomed it back to my thoughts. *Kathy, I'm lost, I said, though I knew she was sleeping.* I texted home that I was out, done with the ARCH, and would be on my way soon. *I've got some real estate here in my bag.* I lied for the second time that morning and added that I was doing fine.

Before I left the table, I slipped a twenty under my plate. It was financially stupid—a misdirected gesture, and more than I could afford even when I'd had money, but it was the only thing I could do to convince myself I was less of a thief. The eastbound #2 would pull up soon, and I walked to the corner to huddle in the rain at the stop. It was too late to go snatch the twenty back and buy breakfast for Jason, or Geoff, or anyone who had earned it. I'd missed that chance to make good, but I knew I'd taken on a debt and had to pay it somehow, to someone, or to

anyone. A waitress would go home happy, I supposed, and that might be the best I could manage.

\* \* \*

I'm sure Geoff wouldn't remember me today, or recall our conversation. I wouldn't recognize him if he hit me up for a smoke or offered to share another meal. And though I can never re-enact that interaction, there's still hope that if I keep paying my debt in small amounts or large, in any way I can, one day I will have finally paid the price of admission that night, and earned the right to finally leave.

I wasn't then who I've become, for better or worse. I bumble through my days in the civilian world, bluffing that I'm at ease, hoping my insecurity comes off as endearingly awkward, or that I'm just paranoid, and not even on the social radar. Sometimes I miss the invisibility of the homeless. Often, I try too hard, and the awkwardness gets real; it infects everyone in the room. But I can't imagine that happening in my other world, now, not at the shelter. Not in the garage. I'm comfortable with those people I once decided were inferior. And it would be so effortless to rejoin them. I could shake off all my clutter and disperse my belongings on Craigslist. Student loans? Let 'em try to collect. I could sell my books and forget about exams, lit-crit papers and thesis committees. No problem—I've failed in epic style before. I've got plenty of practice. Failure is *always* an option.

Tie-dyed Jason turned up on the bus not long after that final night, with his customary hugs and kisses. He skipped his stop and rode with me as I headed downtown on some real-world errand. He'd cut his hair; the mane had become an odd-looking pageboy bob he must have done himself. He was clean shaven, clean clothed, and damp from a shower somewhere. He had developed some health problems. Thyroid troubles. Toothaches. Enough issues to worry me,

concerned that he would never learn to take care of himself. Otherwise, the same old Jason, but washed.

It was early enough that he hadn't been drinking much, so Faulkner and Derrida didn't make any appearances. He promised he'd try to keep in touch, but I know he probably won't, and no, the screenplay was still not done.

“Kill your darlings,” we reminded each other as I got off the bus. Sift through the words, save those that hold the most meaning, and let the others go. To Jason and me the phrase feels like a secret handshake between fellow outcasts, an homage to who we are, and who we've been. I'm only just learning where the meaning is in my story, and I know some parts must still be cut away. I'm finding, also, that if it takes years to learn which darlings must die, then maybe there's a reason for that. It could be they're not meant to die at all.

“Today we have a cultural norm that insists we hide our racism from people of color and deny it among ourselves, but not that we actually challenge it. In fact, we are socially penalized for challenging racism.”

— Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*<sup>1</sup>

### **What House Were You Raised In?**

In 1967 I had already learned to fend for myself in small ways. I turned seven that summer and was skilled enough in the kitchen to rustle up a meal without burning the house down or making an irredeemable mess. I was capable of slicing open a boil-in-bag Salisbury steak, whipping up a pan of Kraft mac and cheese, or peeling back the foil on a Swanson's TV dinner. Still, with Mother working late most nights, I needed an official babysitter. The task fell to my sister and her girlfriends, a trio of going-on-17 Beatles gals in bouffant hairdos and baby-blue eyeshadow, and to my mind, adults. My older brother was around, too, closer in age, but more distant emotionally and physically, already pushing for his own independence. He was fast becoming a cipher to me, spending his time at friends' houses, or “out” and “nowhere,” as every generation's sullen kids say. We siblings lived in different worlds from the start, born in five-year increments: Lana in 1950, Terry in 1955, and me, the baby, in 1960. Our ages spanned eons in the reckoning of children, when a five- or ten-year gap is the difference between playing with Hot Wheels and sitting behind the wheel, between learning cursive and furnishing your first apartment.

Lana and her girlfriends were free to ignore me on those babysitting nights. I wasn't

---

<sup>1</sup> DiAngelo, Robin. *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. Allen Lane, an Imprint of Penguin Books, 2019.

much trouble, shy and introverted. For the most part, the girls spent their evenings gathered at the wide mirror in the hall bath swapping outfits and chatting about bands or boyfriends, happy in a fog of Aqua Net. They fascinated me, though I didn't yet understand exactly why, working on my imagination like an early prototype of *Charlie's Angels*: Betty the bubbly brunette, Sharon the tall, sultry blonde, and Lana, the boss of me, and my mother-by-proxy.

While the girls did their girl things, I sprawled on the shag carpet in front of the TV, turning the knob past PBS newscasts of race riots, assassinations, and the Vietnam War, tuning instead to the *Gomer Pyle Show*, or my favorite, the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, though I didn't understand how subversive their humor was, or how relevant their guests were to the social climate and the news I couldn't comprehend. Mother would usually be home by nine, and we would sometimes watch the *Dean Martin Show* together while she had her nightly Canadian Club on the rocks. Sammy Davis, Jr. was a frequent guest of Martin's, a hip, quick-witted foil to the host's tipsy schtick. Davis often stole the show, equaling and surpassing Martin performance-wise, joking and singing with him and the Rat Pack charmers who dropped by the piano-bar set.

"That Sammy's pretty talented for a colored fellow," Mother would say, while she shimmied ice in her glass. I agreed about Davis' talents. I didn't know it yet, but percussion was in my future, and in addition to his other gifts, Davis was an awesome drummer, whenever the variety-show tuxedo crowd cut the tap-dancing routines and wisecracks to let the man play.

Our suburban haven welcomed "colored fellows" on television only—never in *our* neighborhood or attending *our* schools. (My school was directly across the street, almost an extension of our front yard.) And the "male gaze," even for me as a preteen, was the default viewpoint, and never questioned, though the more accurate term would be the "white male gaze," given how oblivious we were to our color and its privilege.

Our world was whitewashed and colorless, other than wall-to-wall shag in Harvest Gold, and Avocado-tinted kitchen appliances. There was no real danger from any “other,” and no immanent threats. There were no dark alleys where darker men lurked, no violence, rioting, or war protests on our quiet streets. My second-grade boundaries were defined by my mother and siblings, the adventures of Dick and Jane, and the *Weekly Reader* magazine, culturally isolated in the limited landscape of a tidy North Austin neighborhood.

In-house familial dangers were also negligible. Mother was divorced, and her boyfriends caused no trouble—at least not for long if they acted up. One short-term stepfather was an alcoholic, but usually of the maudlin and sappy type, desperate for love despite his flaws. My brother, Terry, was busy being a boy on the verge of his teens, hanging with his buddies. “A hellion running wild” as Mother would say, blowing through the house for food and money, doling out some big-brother torture of the “Indian rugburn” type along the way, or headlocks coupled with noogies and wet willies. The boyfriends Lana and her friends gossiped about weren’t threats, either. The girls spoke of them as though they were crew-cut heroes, more inclined to defend their honor than rob them of it.

\* \* \*

In *Racetalk: Racism Hiding in Plain Sight*, sociologist Kristen Myers explores whiteness as perceived by whites as well as by people of color.<sup>2</sup> What are the defining factors of the white? Blandness. Soullessness. Bland food, bland character, bland clothes, bland music, bland culture. “Whiteness is cultural vacuity.” Harvest Gold shag may have been comfortable for a kid to stretch out on, but it’s also a fine marker for the cultural vacuity my family embraced.

Myers’ studies for *Racetalk* gathered anecdotal evidence from college students,

---

<sup>2</sup> Myers, Kristen. *Racetalk: Racism Hiding in Plain Sight*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

examining language that normally flies under the social radar, talk that's not for public consumption outside tight circles of friendship. She quotes Patricia Hill Collins' astute statement that "a choice of language transcends mere selection of words—it is inherently a political choice."<sup>3</sup>

My mother—apolitical as far as I was aware—would have insisted we were middle class, maybe even upper middle, but a glance into her childhood put us within spitting distance of poor white trash, born of no specific ethnicity or national heritage. The twisted branches of my Ancestry.com family tree are peopled with West Texas poor folks, some of whom migrated to Central Texas and made *lots* of country babies. I never followed the trail of names far enough to find out much about myself, but various branches extend north, east, and south, too, to Louisiana slave owners, and marriages recorded where the undocumented wife is designated as "Noname," described as an indication that there might be an unacknowledged Native American or African-American contributor to the family's genetic makeup.

Were my ancestors more racially liberal than my immediate family when it came to marriage? As to interracial marriage, if it had happened in our distant past, I could not see it happening in the Maxwell household of the '60s, '70s, or ever. It would have been an unfathomable affront to who we were.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, in *Racism without Racists*, sees no mystery in this, asking "how can whites fall in love with people whom they never see, whom they regard as 'different,' and with whom they hardly associate?" It's a matter of environment, in the sense that "whiteness as a lifestyle fosters whiteness as a choice for friends and partners." People of color were so rare in my life, that had I known to long for diversity, finding it would have been impossible.

---

<sup>3</sup> Collins is the Distinguished University Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park.

\* \* \*

The summer of my seventh year was the first summer I remember any talk of “them damn hippies.” Sixty-seven was the flower-powered Summer of Love. Timothy Leary had already pronounced the mantra of the younger generation; his “tune in, turn on, drop out” had taken hold, providing the chemical momentum driving tens of thousands to San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district for free love, anti-establishment protests, and partying. The political aspects of the hippie paradigm were lost on our household, with the tone being *us*—middle class, well-groomed, manageable types—versus *them*, the unwashed peacenik parasites. The artistic revolution of colorful Day-Glo extravagance crept in later, as cultural cues once owned by the movement (including hairstyles, clothing, music and visual art) were absorbed into the mainstream, rendered toothless, resulting eventually in such palatable products as the Broadway musical *Hair*, and *Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In* on prime time television.

The male hairstyles in our house were either a summertime buzz cut, or the “Regular Boy’s” look, a staple of the barbershop menu. Art during the Maxwell’s Summer of Love was limited to furniture-store color pieces the size of a dining table or “Big Eyes” waifs, and music for me was whatever bled through my siblings’ walls into my room, the lighthearted pop of the Monkees, or elevator music on Mother’s car radio. Even Lana, despite her adoration of the Beatles and their “All You Need is Love” message, was not one whit a hippie. To my recollection, she never wore a peace sign, a tie-dyed T, or even a peasant shirt. She never ran into trouble with drugs or protested for a counterculture ideology, and Terry leaned more toward becoming a shit-kicker than a hippie-freak, in the schoolyard terms of the time.

The summer of ’67 was also the furthest thing from a love-fest; it was the Long, Hot Summer of more than 150 major race riots across the nation, including:

- The Avondale riots, June 12–15, Cincinnati, Ohio
- The Buffalo riot of 1967, June 27, Buffalo, New York
- The Newark riots, July 12–17, Newark, New Jersey
- The Plainfield riots, July 14–21, Plainfield, New Jersey
- The Cairo riot, July 17, Cairo, Illinois
- The Detroit riot, July 23–29, Detroit, Michigan
- The Cambridge riot of 1967, July 24, a.k.a. the H. Rap Brown riot, Cambridge, Maryland
- The Saginaw riot, July 26, Saginaw, Michigan
- The Milwaukee riot, July 30, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

I have faint memories of news images of baton-wielding cops, National Guard troops storming urban war zones, bloodied black faces, Molotov cocktails bursting in high-contrast black and white, flames splashing city streets. Malcolm McLaughlin, in *Long, Hot Summer of 1967: Urban Rebellion in America*,<sup>4</sup> draws a line between plain theft or vandalism and the purposeful lawlessness of the riot as protest:

The extent of community complicity in lawbreaking, and particularly in looting, was one of the most striking aspects of the summer unrest. [...] By the time it became a social event like this, looting could not be explained in terms of individual criminality. At a fundamental level ... looting, vandalism, and arson, taken together, represented a response to ghetto grievances about consumer exploitation and unfair credit arrangements. [...] The riots were a certain kind of 'street justice.' (McLaughlin)

---

<sup>4</sup> McLaughlin, Malcolm. *Long, Hot Summer of 1967: Urban Rebellion in America*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

White social opinions took aim at the looters with TVs, stereo equipment, or appliances in their arms, with news coverage painting the whole phenomenon as simply criminal, dismissing nuance in favor of a broadly brushed view, despite legitimate underlying motives.

\* \* \*

My family must have been aware of these revolutions, if substantially untouched by them. Our foundations weren't shaken, other than by tremors of "what's the world coming to?" and variations of the aforementioned "damn [fill in the blank]s are takin' over" rant. Which would have been the biggest threat to our status quo, the "Damn Hippies" or the "Damn Coloreds"? Either would have been a suitable Other in my family's us-or-them world and putting them down served to keep us from seeing ourselves as the ones on the bottom.

Though my immediate reality was unaffected by the widening cracks in the nation's façade, the uprisings did infiltrate our neighborhood fears. Lana, Betty, and Sharon were alone at Betty's house on a weekend night that August of '67; a girls-only sleepover while Betty's parents were away. According to the family story, while the girls were going about their sleepover business, a terrible banging filled the house, an intimidating, insistent fist-pounding, rattling the walls and window glass. Betty's house was a notch fancier than ours; her front door had arched lights in the upper panels, and the girls swore that through the frosted glass they could make out the silhouette of a huge black man's head and shoulders, the man towering as tall as the door itself.

Of course, the girls didn't answer the door. They cowered behind the sofa until the knocking stopped and the threat moved on, then they dialed the police. Officers took their statements and searched the surrounding yards, peering behind shrubs, into and under cars. They found no one, and nothing came of the incident, as far as I've ever known, but our neighborhood

and the world beyond began to interact that night. Boundaries became smudged, and the girls' story set loose a current of defensive watchfulness and thinly veiled hostility.

\* \* \*

From Paris, in September of 1967, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) issued their *Statement on Race and Racial Prejudice*.

Paragraph 1:

‘All men are born free and equal both in dignity and in rights.’ This universally proclaimed democratic principle stands in jeopardy wherever political, economic, social and cultural inequalities affect human group relations. A particularly striking obstacle to the recognition of equal dignity for all is racism. Racism continues to haunt the world. As a major social phenomenon it requires the attention of all students of the sciences of man.

As clear a message as UNESCO sent, few seemed to heed it, and many who did fought it. A year later the statement was recanted and rewritten. “Significantly,” according to Michelle Brattain, chair of the history department at Georgia State University, “[the revision] also affirmed older scientific traditions (and languages) by noting differences between ‘non-literate’ and ‘more civilized’ people on intelligence tests.”<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

In the school year of 1971-72 and the summer that followed, I was 11, in sixth grade at last, at the top of the Lucy Read Elementary food chain. By then Mother allowed my hair to grow a little longer, the Beatles had disbanded, and my brother, Terry, then 16, had gone to live with our grandmother where the supervision was laxer than at home. Lana married Charlie, one

---

<sup>5</sup>Brattain, M. “Race, Racism, and Antiracism: UNESCO and the Politics of Presenting Science to the Postwar Public.” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 112, no. 5, Jan. 2007, pp. 1386–1413., doi:10.1086/ahr.112.5.1386.

of her white knights from high school, and moved on to start their life in San Antonio, where Charlie trained to become a highway patrolman for the Texas Department of Public Safety.

With Lana, Betty, Sharon, and my brother gone, I was essentially an only child from that point on, a latchkey kid—happily so—with company from a handful of geographically convenient friends. The radio was our connection to the wider world, and we listened to the Top 40 stations and album-oriented rock on KRMH, aka Karma, 93.7 on the FM dial. Our world was small, confined to our stereos and the streets around home, with feelers reaching only to a safe distance, a few blocks in any direction, to Taco Bell, Jack in the Box, and Gibson’s Department Store.

Gibson’s was a prototypical superstore where we bought cigarettes from an unattended vending machine and shoplifted the Top 40, stuffing 45s down our pants and waddling stiffly out the doors. The Rolling Stones released *Sticky Fingers* in ‘71, with pre-digital album art that was scandalous and ingeniously interactive: an Andy Warhol concept cover, featuring a black and white image of a man’s jean-clad crotch, with a working zipper. Every copy on the rack had the plastic ripped open and the zipper pulled down, exposing bulging tighty-whities inside the cover.

“Brown Sugar” danced its way to number one as the biggest hit from the triple platinum album, the public blithely ignorant of (or possibly reveling in) the misogynistic and racist lyrics:

“Brown Sugar”

*Gold Coast slave ship bound for cotton fields  
Sold in the market down in New Orleans  
Scarred old slaver knows he's doin' all right  
Hear him whip the women just around midnight*

*Brown Sugar, how come you taste so good  
Brown Sugar, just like a young girl should*

*Drums beatin' cold, English blood runs hot*

*Lady of the house wonderin' when it's gonna stop  
House boy knows that he's doin' all right  
You should have heard him just around midnight*

*Brown Sugar, how come you taste so good  
Brown Sugar, just like a young girl should*

*Brown Sugar, how come you dance so good  
Brown Sugar, just like a black girl should*

*I bet your mama was a Cajun Queen,  
And all her boyfriends were sweet sixteen  
I'm no school boy but I know what I like  
You should have heard them just around midnight*

*Brown Sugar, how come you taste so good  
Brown Sugar, just like a black girl should*

*I said, yeah, yeah, yeah, wooo  
How come you, how come you dance so good  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, wooo  
Just like a, just like a black girl should  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, wooo*

Songwriters: Keith Richards / Mick Jagger  
Brown Sugar lyrics © Abkco Music, Inc

\* \* \*

**Jann Wenner & Mick Jagger**  
***The Rolling Stone Interview, 1995***<sup>6</sup>

**JW:** *All right . . . Why does “Brown Sugar” work like mad?*

**MJ:** [ ... ] I mean, it’s a good groove and all that. I mean, the groove is slightly similar to Freddy Cannon, this rather obscure ’50s rock performer – “Tallahassee Lassie” or something. Do you remember this? “She’s down in F-L-A.” Anyway, the groove of that –

---

<sup>6</sup> “The Rolling Stone.” *The Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone, LLC, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/mick-jagger-remembers-92946/>.

boom-boom-boom-boom-boom – is “going to a go-go” or whatever, but that’s the groove.

**JW:** *And you wrote it all?*

**MJ:** Yeah.

**JW:** *This is one of your biggest hits, a great, classic, radio single, except the subject matter is slavery, interracial sex, eating pussy ...*

**MJ:** [Laughs] And drugs. That’s a double-entendre, just thrown in.

**JW:** *Brown sugar being heroin?*

**MJ:** Brown sugar being heroin and –

**JW:** *And pussy?*

**MJ:** That makes it ... the whole mess thrown in. God knows what I’m on about in that song. It’s such a mishmash. All the nasty subjects in one go.

**JW:** *Were you surprised that it was such a success with all that stuff in it?*

**MJ:** I didn’t think about it at the time. I never would write that song now.

**JW:** *Why?*

**MJ:** I would probably censor myself. I’d think, “Oh God, I can’t. I’ve got to stop. I can’t just write raw like that.”

\* \* \*

Charlie Watts’ “drums beatin’ cold” on *Sticky Fingers* inspired me. When Mr. Leonard, our twice-a-week music teacher, began organizing the 6th graders into an elementary school

band, I rejected his recommendation that I take up the trumpet or the clarinet. (*No one* wanted to play the clarinet.) I insisted on the snare drum, taken by the easy *bzzzz bzzzz* when I pressed the tips of those fat, beginner-sized sticks near the rim, and awestruck at the volume when I inadvertently cracked a rimshot, my sudden shy-kid power startling everyone in the cafeteria.

Three boys emerged as the percussion section. There were me and Andy, whom I'd never really spoken to, despite being in the same grade. He had a classic blue-eyed-blond look, the sturdy bone structure you'd see in milk commercials or in fabricated families who lived only in picture frames. Andy was nice enough, but too well-mannered for me to relate to. I was still years away from striving to be a *real* bad boy, but my aversion to Andy's wholesome vibe may have been an early indicator that propriety wasn't going to be my jam.

Our third player was Lawrence. Lawrence was a bit gangly, with Buddy Holly glasses lending him a nerdish look to go with the clumsy-making height. He wore dress shoes, pressed slacks, and plaid shirts with sleeves a smidge short for his long arms. He was an amiable, buttoned-down curiosity in our classrooms. A curiosity because, of the entire school, Lawrence and his little brother were the only Black students in attendance.

In our first competition for chair positions, Andy won first chair and Lawrence got second. I ended up last and was fine with the low-pressure role. In the school year to come, Lawrence and I maintained our slots in second and third chair, while Andy held onto first. His serious attitude showed in his accuracy and posture, the precision of his sticking. Lawrence also showed evidence of practice, and he was easily as good as Andy, but never quite made it out of second place. I remained aloof to Andy but buddied up some to Lawrence. I liked him, and I think he liked me, too, but outside of the cafeteria and band hall our friendship never grew. We kept our laughs and common joy in playing restricted to the back row of the band, an hour every

Tuesday and Thursday, packed away in drum cases at the end of each session. Or was it only me who kept us compartmentalized, segregated? I can't know now, but I suspect so, whether I was aware of it or not.

\* \* \*

The city of Austin bused students from their home neighborhoods for the first time in 1971. Desegregation was not embraced by the populace. In fact, the city only undertook the program because the feds would cut substantial funds otherwise. The atmosphere among parents communicated a “how dare they make us do this” mentality, an anger over upset apple carts and forced change. It didn't always go well. Front page news accounts include that “tension under the strain of forced integration sets off a series of fights and boisterous student confrontations that disrupt A.N. McCallum High School and shut down classes shortly after noon.”<sup>7</sup>

While Lawrence and his brother were curiosities to my circle of friends, they weren't a part of our “us,” even when we played our parts in unison, locked in 4/4 time, tied to the same tempo. And as I describe the brothers now, I realize my white friends and I weren't curious enough to find out anything about them. Robin DiAngelo points out in *White Fragility* that “the most profound message of racial segregation may be that the absence of people of color from our lives is no real loss. Not one person who loved me, guided me, or taught me ever conveyed that segregation deprived me of anything of value.” We never asked where they lived, what they were into, or any of the friend-making questions you would expect of children in a “new kid in town” situation. Circumstance put us all in the same classrooms, but once the bell rang at the end of last period, any connection beyond the polite and friendly-but-not-a-friend was over and forgotten. We never had any “boisterous student confrontations” in 6th grade, but, like

---

<sup>7</sup> “Five Decades of Social Change: A Timeline.” City of Austin - Desegregation in Austin, <http://www.austinlibrary.com/ahc/desegregation/>.

DiAngelo, “I was raised in a society that taught me there was no loss in the absence of people of color—that their absence was a good and desirable thing to be sought and maintained—while simultaneously denying it.”

\* \* \*

The band directors held year-end trials the last day of school, a final chance to prove our percussive efficacy before moving on to junior high and a fresh level of competition among the older musicians. Our judges sat at a lunch table, stern and intimidating at the opposite end of the cafeteria, and us boys took our turns at the front of the stage, existentially alone with two sticks, sheet music to sight read, and a Ludwig snare drum. I nailed my part, sight reading dotted eighths and thirty-second notes, my seven-stroke rolls smooth and my tempo precise, triplets slicing fours into thirds and back again on the one, my demeanor calm and in charge. I upset the directors’ expectations, surprised myself, and stole Andy’s first chair position. Lawrence held steady in second chair and seemed happy for me. Andy was stunned, deflated, but civil as always. To celebrate, I invited them both to my house after school to show off the new Ludwig snare Mother had bought me in a fit of maternal masochism.

The three of us stood on my front porch and I realized with gut-heaving certainty that Lawrence could not come inside my house. Even with no one home to see us, they—my mother, the neighbors, my absent siblings—would know somehow, and there would be hell to pay. Something bad would happen, either to me, or to Lawrence, or to both of us.

I don’t remember telling Lawrence he couldn’t come in or explaining to him why. He must have understood the dynamic in that place much better than I did. I must have made some “only one person inside at a time” or other stuttering excuse, leaving him there waiting. I can still feel a helpless and horrible relief as Andy and I went into the house without Lawrence, as if I’d

dodged a bullet, but let it find my friend instead.

\* \* \*

A colleague, a woman of color, read an early draft of this essay and questioned my motives for writing it, suggesting I've engaged in a plea for unearned forgiveness or a convoluted ducking of personal, racial, and colonial responsibility. "We can't address what we don't talk about," I responded, a little proud of myself for quoting DeRay McKesson, an author, podcaster, and civil rights activist once prominent in the Black Lives Matter movement. The line, as generic as it could be, is from a 2016 interview with Stephen Colbert about education, Black Lives Matter, and Colbert's white privilege. (I didn't notice at the time how white of me it was to turn to Stephen Colbert for a connection to Black Lives Matter.)

My friend directed me to "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," an article by K. Wayne Yang and Eve Tuck,<sup>8</sup> in which the authors delineate how the usurping of "decolonization discourse ... evidenced by the increasing number of calls to 'decolonize our schools,' or use 'decolonization methods,' or 'decolonize student thinking,' turns decolonization into a metaphor." To reduce the term and its connected (in)actions to metaphor "makes possible a set of evasions, or 'settler moves to innocence', that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity."

The authors define my personal evasions with humbling clarity, and among the several moves to innocence described, Tuck and Yang's "Settler Move Number IV" is the most concerning, since I'm sitting in the middle of it. The motto of this move to innocence is "Free your mind and the rest will follow." Like a horoscope hitting closer to home than I'd like to believe, the authors "wonder whether [this] settler move to innocence is to focus on decolonizing

---

<sup>8</sup> Yang, K. Wayne, and Eve Tuck. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.

the mind, or the cultivation of critical consciousness. [...] This is not unimportant work,” they write, and I agree—if only in my own futile defense. “However,” they continue, “critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism. So, we respectfully disagree with George Clinton and Funkadelic (1970) and *En Vogue* (1992) when they assert that if you “free your mind, the rest (your ass) will follow.”

Cheryl Strayed and Steve Almond, aka *The Sugars* (both white, by the way), address in their NPR advice podcast<sup>9</sup> a reader’s quandary over whiteness:

I consider myself an ally, “Whitey” writes. I research proper etiquette, read writers of color, vote in a way that will not harm P.O.C. (and other vulnerable people). I engage in conversations about privilege with other white people. I take courses that will further educate me. I donated to Black Lives Matter. Yet I fear that nothing is enough. Part of my fear comes from the fact that privilege is invisible to itself. What if I’m doing or saying insensitive things without realizing it?

Almond recommends that Whitey “heed the words of the writer bell hooks. ‘Privilege is not in and of itself bad; what matters is what we do with privilege. We have to share our resources and take direction about how to use our privilege in ways that empower those who lack it.’ You’re not going to empower others by disempowering yourself.”

Strayed adds: “What Steve and I are suggesting is that you need to own [your white heritage] first. As you seem well aware, your race granted you privileges that were and are denied to people who are not white. [...] Every white person should be ashamed of that injustice. Which is different than being ashamed of being white.” Strayed goes on to advise that “you don’t

---

<sup>9</sup> “Dear Sugar Radio.” *NPR*, NPR, <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/469249288/dear-sugar-radio>.

have to relinquish your heritage to be an ally to people of color, Whitey. You have to relinquish your privilege.”

What does this mean to me, here and now? How far am I willing to go, driven by a guilt so often denied or dismissed, along with the simple knowledge of what’s right? What am I willing to give up, other than ephemera like attitudes and ingrained training? It feels like quitting drinking, or coming off of meth, or putting down cigarettes for good. It’s frightening, and it’s humiliating that the very idea scares me.

So, I’m walking on eggshells, but walking, nonetheless, finding my way to an honest appraisal of where I am in this story, and to making a choice as to where I’ll go next. As Stephen Colbert claimed at the close of McKesson’s segment, “Baby steps! Baby steps!”

But are baby steps another excuse for crawling when I could and should be in a sprint?

\* \* \*

In the late ‘90s I had been assimilated by marriage into a ready-made family consisting of my wife Donna and her two sons: Winslow, 5 or 6, and Dave, leaning into his tweens. We were doing all right, as folks who are doing better than all right love to say, with a nice house in an old, well-regarded west Austin neighborhood, and between us and the boys’ trust-fund-wealthy father, money was never an issue when it came to private schools and offering an exceptionally rich, well-traveled childhood to the kids. We were the picture of privilege. Dave, who suffered from a mild case of cerebral palsy and not-so-mild issues from a closed head injury as a little boy, had the best in medical care, as well as a live-in helper to cover for his mom and me when we felt stretched too thin. Winslow was the shy, tow-headed, unintentional charmer, the one everyone wanted to pick up and squeeze, to his introverted dismay.

The marriage was young, and we had yet to settle into our own holiday traditions, so

when my sister Lana asked us to join her family for their Thanksgiving feast, we welcomed the opportunity.

In her senior year of high school Lana had been a grade-A home economics student, who wound up commandeering our mother's kitchen. A meticulous cook, there wasn't a dish Lana wouldn't attempt and master, far outstripping Mother's woman-on-the-go, ready-made, magazine-trendy meals. Lana excelled in baked desserts, sifting flour into a big glass mixing bowl, scooping it into measuring cups and scraping the tops perfectly level with a flat-backed knife, never straying from the recipe without reason.

I hadn't spent time with Lana's family in years—I had tangled with the whole sex, drugs, and rock and roll lifestyle through my twenties, and though I'd outgrown most of it, decades had passed with little familial contact. My niece and nephew, Ashlea and Johnny, were in high school, living the dream as a dance troupe leader and a star football player, and Lana's second husband, John, (who had introduced himself to the family as “an American Indian, not an *Indian* Indian”) made a living selling industrial goods, business to business. We all looked forward to the holiday. It would be an chance for the families to bond.

A massive Christmas tree dominated my sister's living room, sparkling against dark paneling and a rustic-themed leather and wood decor. The tablescape was welcoming and impeccably arranged. Lana had upped the game on the tired dishes we'd been served at our late grandmother's gatherings. Turkey and dressing, of course. A ham with cloves and pineapple bits. A version of the marshmallow-covered sweet potato casserole that somehow didn't suck, and Granny's Velveeta mac and cheese transformed from redneck to refined. The family culinary traditions hadn't been abandoned; they'd been upgraded. And the pies were amazing.

The kids hit it off, and with Johnny and Ashlea entertaining the boys, the gang headed

outdoors to toss a football and romp in the cool Texas fall.

Around the table, with the children outside, parenting war stories dominated the conversation, the trials of raising teens, the tribulations of parenting and step-parenting.

Lana leaned forward, lowering her voice. “Johnny was dating this girl,” she said. “Mary. But we never could meet her. It was always something.” The day finally came, she went on, when Mary and her brothers were set to pick up Johnny for a Saturday outing. “This gal Mary and her brood of brothers pulled up packed into some beat-to-hell car, honking for Johnny to come out. Mary, it turned out, was *Maria*. They were a bunch of damn spics!” She leaned back in her chair, satisfied with herself. “You can bet your britches we put a stop to *that* little romance.”

I kept my mouth shut, shocked at the overt racism, but reasoned that this wasn’t our table, our home, or our kid. It wasn’t my place to criticize.

My sister’s stories kept coming, all on the same theme, with John joining in at times, and with no concern for their language when the kids returned—racial slurs were as common as salt at their Thanksgiving table.

And still, I kept my mouth shut.

Lana set her children to work clearing the table, while John and I headed to the back porch for cigarettes and “man” talk. He spoke of his business, mostly, since we had nothing much in common. His occupation involved a lot of travel, he told me, a lot of sit-downs and happy hour sales meetings. “You have to play the hand you get in sales,” he said. His complexion and thick black hair worked to his advantage, he told me, as well as his Old West-sounding surname: Sweatlock. “I’m not really an Indian,” he said, pinching the dark skin of his forearm, and lowering his voice like my sister had at the table. “I’m really *Polish*.” He smirked,

as if proud of his scam. “It’s better for business. People are more likely to work with an Indian than a Polack.”

When it was time to leave, Donna and I smiled, loaded down with leftovers, regrets, questions, and way too much to think about.

At home, she and I shut the door on the holiday, relieved we’d made it through, and hopeful that the boys hadn’t picked up too much of the adult conversations. I couldn’t let it go, though, and fumed while we tried to relax with Crown Royal and quiet time. I can see now how the holiday ran in the same gutter as my treatment of Lawrence when we were boys, but at the time I was simply angry and disappointed. I was embarrassed by my kin, puzzled and stunned that Lana and I had diverged so far from each other over the years.

I’ve never been good at confrontation, but the responsibility for my new family won out over nerves. I called Lana, trying to stay calm while demanding she and her family reel in the racist language around Winslow and Dave. “As far as we’re concerned, the n-word is as bad as the f-word to the kids,” I told her. “If y’all could just hold off that sort of thing when the boys are around, we would really appreciate it.”

Seconds ticked by in silence; I heard Lana draw a deep breath. “When did you get so high and mighty?” she asked. “What house were *you* raised in?”

I don’t recall my response, but I know it was heated. I know it was loud. And I remember Lana’s ultimatum when I was done: “You call ‘em whatever you want,” she said before hanging up, “but a nigger’s a nigger in *my* house.”

I paced the living room after the call, shaking, more drunk on anger and adrenaline than bourbon. Drunk on shame, too, over my own family’s behavior.

Winslow had been in the living room, listening, near tears as I’d shouted his and his

brother's names into the phone, cursing at his newly met aunt about topics he surely could not understand.

“Mom?” he said.

Donna put her arm around him, urging him to speak.

The boy hesitated, struggling for words. “What’s a *nigger*?” he finally asked. He’d never heard the word, at least not in his home.

His mom explained while I gulped the last of my drink, cooling down from my confrontation, one that would prove permanently divisive, setting up a wall between my sister and me that hasn’t been breached to this day.

\* \* \*

A couple of months ago, a couple in their early twenties with two little girls moved into the apartment next door. In their first days here, the young man introduced himself as Joel, but afterward, the couple rarely spoke beyond a nod, though the girls—about six and three years old—got over their shyness quickly, chattering when they played in the tiny yard in front of our apartments. The youngest took to calling me and my roommate Grandma and Grandpa. (I’ve tried to get the girl to call me Barry, but she refused. “Okay, Grandpa!” she promised. I’ve surrendered.)

The couple’s dented red Mustang foundered with its hood open most days, the young father hunched over with sockets lined up on the fender, alternately cursing and coddling the engine, sometimes with friends and beer at hand to help. When the car was entirely out of commission, a series of trucks appeared, one bent in the middle, apparently t-boned, giving it a hunchbacked, crab-like gait, and another multicolored one, every body part scavenged from the junkyard, so many cobbled-together parts it was impossible to tell which color was the original.

For a three-week stretch they had family visiting in a pop-up camper, parked on the street with an orange extension cord running to their door.

A big white dualie rolled up one afternoon, driven by a tiny wire of a woman, delivering groceries. Mom, perhaps? Or the *real* Grandma? She appeared with her mini-Dachshund mix, “Jackson,” I learned, from the yelling when he got loose from his rope. Mom/Grandma stayed on for some weeks, and while her pup lounged in the sun, her hand occasionally emerged from within the apartment—where no smoking is allowed—just far enough to stub out a cigarette on the sidewalk, then withdraw, like Thing, the disembodied hand from *The Addams Family*.

The dualie, Jackson the mutt, and the ostensible mom eventually disappeared, and for some time, there was peace. Never much noise other than the kids playing, and that’s not a sound one can resent. But soon the family’s waking hours gradually shifted toward the late-night; normal life sounds not starting until noon, sometimes hours after. Occasionally the voices of partiers and faint bass lines rumbled the building—not *too* loud, and nothing to complain about, but riffing to midnight and beyond. Sometimes the music still boomed on mornings when I was up early. As the rhythms of my neighbors’ lives changed, I might have recognized the pattern from my own past, but I didn’t until later on. It was the cycle of meth use, of sleeping through the day and taking up furious activity through the night. Bursts of energy. Over-emotionality. Paranoia. Near-comatose crashes.

Soon after the shift in waking hours, the fights began. The young dad would slam into the apartment in the evening and rage at full volume for 30 minutes, 45 minutes and more. Recognizable words cycled through his rants: *kids, money, job, lazy, no—you!* and *bitch*. Objects were thrown or knocked over. Small objects, it sounded like, but objects. Sometimes the girls were silent. Other times they cried.

I don't remember hearing their mom's voice. Perhaps it was there but overwhelmed. I never heard her clearly until what I call "the night of the body slam," when someone hit the wall hard enough to rattle the pens on my nightstand, snap me bolt upright from sleep, and send the cats hiding under the bed.

"I'm gonna call the cops on you! I'm gonna call the cops on you!" she screamed in a frantic, high-pitched loop, spinning in identical iterations with her every step from the upstairs bedrooms down to the front door. The little girls' wailing cries filled the space when their mom took a breath, and their father's replies—weak and subdued for once, punctuated the accusatory repetition but could not stop it.

I watched through the window as Joel, ducking as if his wife's words were stones, ran to the Mustang, along with three or four women I'd never seen. The tires didn't screech—the beat-down muscle car didn't have any screeches in it. They limped into the darkness, tilted, running a donut spare on the front right wheel. The taillights disappeared around the corner as I called the cops myself, hands and voice shaking, somehow feeling that *I* was in danger. Where Joel went, I had no clue. It was "away," a place I'm familiar with, and had run to many times when I was drinking and drugging. When there is no defensible stance left, running away is the only logical choice.

The cops came in a half-hour or so. A light knock on their door. Muffled conversation. Gone in minutes as if nothing had happened.

It's been my custom to sit in my truck for the first cigarette of the day, sipping coffee with the driver's door open, my feet propped on the running board. The next morning, the Mustang was back, still on its donut, the original tire leaning in the bushes, strips of shredded tread curving outward like steel-belted talons. I felt as worn and exposed. I worried I'd made

enemies by involving the police, and I rushed through my cigarette to get back inside. It's a rare event that isn't worsened by cops stepping in, especially in our age of race-based, unfettered and too-often deadly escalation, and I expected stink-eye, at least, from my neighbors. Angry words, at worst. Silence, at best.

A young woman stepped squinting into the sunlight from their apartment. "You got another one of those?" she asked, waving a tilted peace sign in the universal *Got a smoke?* gesture. She took a cigarette and a light, sucking the smoke between glittering braces.

"Everybody okay this morning?" I asked.

She didn't know what I meant, and I told her there'd been a pretty hellacious fight. I didn't mention I'd called the cops and didn't intend to.

"Really? I was asleep. Everybody else is *still* sleeping."

"I was worried about the girls," I said, feeling I had to justify myself somehow.

She glanced up to the front bedroom window and shook her head. "Native couples shouldn't drink together." She thanked me again for the cigarette. "I'm late for my GED class," she said, and headed toward the bus stop.

I didn't wait for anyone else to appear. I was oddly embarrassed for knowing what I knew about the night before, and the only reasons I can imagine are that I've always been a smidge over the line when it comes to respect for authority—to call the cops is to sell out, and also, the couple's night had sounded too familiar, a flashback to when meth and liquor had ruled my behavior and that of everyone around me.

The next time I saw Joel, the sunset chill had settled, golden light mellowing over the mountains. He unloaded groceries from the white truck, the wiry woman supervising. As they worked, he called the woman Mom, confirming what I'd thought. When they finished, he came

back to shake my hand, reintroduce himself, and apologize.

“Indians and alcohol never are any good.” He looked at his shoes, like a shy kid. “We stopped all that. It’ll be better.” His mom rushed out to her truck, silently grabbed a pack of cigarettes, and went back inside. “But, man, one beer and it’s *on*, you know? It’s gotta be no drinking at all from here on.” He and his family were from Browning, he told me. “Blackfeet. We used to be all over this place, you know. Lords of the plains, man. Warriors.” And out of nowhere, “Do you like meat?”

“Yes,” I told him. “I do.”

“I’m going on a hunt this weekend. For elk, I hope. I’ll bring you some. I’ll make you some dry meat.”

“Like jerky?”

He disappeared into their apartment and returned, scrolling through photos on his phone. He held the cracked screen close for me to see better. “I shot this one last year. See that point there? If that one hadn’t been broke, he would’ve been a record.” He stopped on a picture of him standing behind the elk’s severed head, the antlers taller than him.

He spoke about Browning, their hometown on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, about how it was easier there in a smaller town, while Missoula was so big by comparison, and hard to live in. “There’s lots of work, but it’s hard to keep a job. People don’t like Indians. They’ll fire you as soon as looking at you, you know?”

It took multiple photos of horses and elk and family members and over twenty minutes of nodding along to his breathless monologue for me to realize he might be wired, buzzing on meth. The words kept flowing nonstop, and I must have been the only fresh set of ears available. He looked to the last of the sunset and talked about Browning again, so obviously homesick it

slowed my plan of escape, of coming up with some “pot on the stove” excuse to leave him there.

“Look at this,” he said, and pulled a buffalo nickel from his pocket. “See this dude? That’s my wife’s great-great grandfather. No shit. She’s got the blood of Two Guns White Calf in her.”

“Your girls, too,” I said, wondering if he was sincere, or if he was playing me, bullshitting the old white dude next door. Then again, the nickel in his pocket was no accident.

“The girls got history in ‘em,” he said.

I made my excuses at last, leaving him under his porchlight promising enough dry meat for everybody, and me promising an afternoon at the barbecue pit in return, some Sunday before the snows hit. I closed the door behind me and stood relishing the silence. His voice came softly through the wall, loud but not shouting this time, roller-coastering on, caught in its own unbridled momentum. The smallest of the girls squealed in glee, a rare sound from that apartment, and a comfort.

He must carry that nickel all the time, I thought. Like I carry my distrust and racial issues, tucked out of sight, but within easy reach.

\* \* \*

The friend who called me to task for my moves to innocence ended her comments by paraphrasing Dr. Cornel West: “Everyone who is participating in pop culture in any way is inherently racist.” She says that in this way, no one gets to say they are not racist, but can still be anti-racist. It’s taking some time for that to soak in, meanwhile, I’m holding onto a passage from *White Fragility* where DiAngelo offers this thought:

If I believe that only bad people are racist, I will feel hurt, offended, and shamed when an unaware racist assumption of mine is pointed out. If I instead

believe that having racist assumptions is inevitable (but possible to change), I will feel gratitude when an unaware racist assumption is pointed out; now I am aware of and can change that assumption.

\* \* \*

During one of my “I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual” phases, it was my practice to aim prayers at strangers, little blasts of benign goodwill. I can’t be color-blind (it would be a failure if I were), and I tend to take note of any person of color in Missoula. It’s hard not to, as the population in 2019 is 91.49% white, and it provokes a small internal nod when I see someone who doesn’t blend into the beige background. I like to tell myself these goodwill wishes are a psychic note of allyship, but I know they are no better than a Facebook thoughts-and-prayers meme. No amount of good vibes can equal positive action, any more than cutting off the relationship with my sister does.

\* \* \*

My memory of Lawrence is nearly 50 years old, and the memory has inevitably removed itself from the reality. I don’t possess an image of the event itself anymore, not after so much time has lain its sediment over it, burying the truth deeper with each layered year. I do remember the anxiety, the confusion, an impasse of competing certainties. But there was no confusion. I knew where we all stood. In memory I’m not on my mother’s front porch at all, and when I close my eyes and watch, I’m across the street, looking through the chain-link schoolyard fence. Lawrence waits alone at the door. I see him there, while Andy and I have gone inside, and from my vantage point I hear the crack of the snare drum, a rimshot, a paradiddle, flam taps. Muffled to me, but to the boy on the porch it must be earsplitting. Andy snaps off a series of precisely executed five- and seven-stroke rolls and between the rolls Lawrence raises his hand to knock

but doesn't. He puts his hands in his pockets, shuffle-kicks at something on the ground, and that's where the image ends.

I was a child, and I can allow some forgiveness in that, but I knew right from wrong, and still I wasn't strong enough to act on that knowledge. It seems essential to this aging perspective that I rebuke the actions and inactions of the boy. After all, he could shoplift. He could sneak cigarettes in the back yard and steal gulps from his mother's liquor cabinet. He, *I*, could lie with grace and facility. But I couldn't invite Lawrence inside. I was neither helpless nor innocent, and neither am I now. My visions have mingled, hopefully strengthening what was good in that boy, that part which knows remorse, has a conscience, and despite long-ingrained habits of thought, is still teachable.

I worry about my troubled neighbors and have to fight to reconstruct my image of them, one where stereotypes do not supply definitions. My academic friends warn me that to repeat a stereotype reaffirms it, that I have no right to tell anyone else's story, and that it "can only come across as a retelling of the myths white men create to hold power," even if the story is part of my own. Terese Mailhot of *Heartberries* fame shares that conviction in a *Mother Jones* article titled "Native American Lives Are Tragic, But Probably Not in the Way You Think."<sup>10</sup> She asks "what of us Native authors and artists who want to express the truth of our lives, which are sometimes affected by, yes, poverty and alcohol? These conditions are not unique to Native people, of course, but when they are applied to us it feels definitive." Mailhot points to how "white people can turn our stories into weapons, an excuse to be paternalistic." I'm unqualified to judge, but I don't feel I'm weaponizing anything, and yet there is an urge to pigeonhole Joel and his family. I

---

<sup>10</sup> Mailhot, Terese. "Native American Lives Are Tragic, but Probably Not in the Way You Think." *Mother Jones*, 26 Nov. 2018, <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2018/11/native-american-story-tragic-terese-mailhot-tommy-orange-poverty-porn/>.

try to treat it like a wandering thought during meditation. Note it. Don't give it power it doesn't deserve. Let it rise and pass. Carry on. The paternalism I feel is not quite the same as what I think Mailhot writes about. Mine is a "been there, done that, and I get it" commonality in having been meth addicted and drunk, poor to the point of homelessness as a result. Those are troubles I can relate to, human conditions without a racial component. What worries me is that it's easier to see the problems, taking the negatives as common ground, and not the virtues.

That boyhood Barry, he's still here, for better or worse. And when I close my eyes again to revisit that childhood scene, young Barry's friend Lawrence is dressed anachronistically, in pleated dress slacks—a bit too long—and a white, short-sleeved, button-down shirt. He wears a thin black tie, loosened. His collar's unbuttoned in the heat. The shirt is too large, coming untucked in the back, wrinkled, and marked with sweat. It's an image I've attached to civil rights workers of the time, though I can find no solid visual reference for that attachment. This mythologizing of Lawrence is a concern, replacing the human with the symbolic, and I can't understand if it's a good thing or another unconscious wrong. Perhaps it can be both.

I spoke to my sister briefly after Mother died in 2005. Lana and my brother came to the memorial, begrudgingly. I thanked them for coming, and that was the last time I've seen either of them. There was bad blood between them and Mother, a secret I've never learned the truth about. Whatever the secret is, it's in their houses, not mine, and I don't want to break bread there again, neither literally nor figuratively.

I worry about Johnny and Ashlea, if they think their dad is Native American, and if they believe they carry that blood in their veins simply because their last name sounds like "sweat lodge." Are they carrying on the Thanksgiving tradition of hatred? My sister's attitudes affected Winslow—he's told me they did, and he still remembers the holiday as a turning point in his

childhood, a turn toward the inclusive that left him grateful for that day, despite its ugliness. Winslow's humanity and compassion makes me wonder about my own, and whether I've wronged my sister and her family. After all, an unanticipated result of our estrangement is that, after so much time, I wouldn't know if they've changed since then. I haven't given them the chance. I use them to claim a higher moral ground, as a step away from those ways of thought, but if they weren't there to push against, where would I be? Am I now so opposed to the idea of the family reuniting that the wall has become too solid to break? I don't know—and I'm not ready to try. Not yet. I'm more afraid they *haven't* changed than curious to see if they have.

I do know that if Lana were to ask me today what house I was raised in, I would tell her I was raised in the same house she was, a house I'm still trying to outgrow. I was raised in the house where Lawrence waits on the front porch, excluded, certainly hurt, and likely angry. It's a house I wish I could leave behind, but equally one I'd like to return to, to swing the door wide for Lawrence, my friend, to come inside.