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Admissions & Bitterroot

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ADMISSIONS & BITTERROOT

By

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This thesis contains two distinct projects: *Admissions* and *Bitterroot*. *Admissions* comprises the opening chapters to a novel about the Korean college application essay. *Bitterroot* is the beginning of a collection—or, perhaps, a novel in stories—bout an unnamed narrator and his girlfriend driving around the American West.

ADMISSIONS

My engines sang into the salty sky / I didn't know if I would live or die / I bombed Korea every night

—Cake

Prologue

Debt brought me to Korea.

But I was not the first to flee to the peninsula.

Each day, hundreds arrived to disappear in the heat of the monsoons. To taste the orange pollen of pollution blown in from Shanghai and across the Yellow Sea, where it dusted the endlessly repeating Hyundais. I arrived in July, at the beginning of jangma, or the Plum Rain. Across Seoul, students fled the clouds and pressed their noses into textbooks, preparing for a long summer of study.

I had never before left North America. As a child, I had hoped to travel the world as a television magician, or, failing that, a celebrity surgeon. My mother said I was gifted. I did well enough in school and, though it was more expensive than the state college, I went to the best university that accepted me. There, I made the mistake, like many before me, of taking a literature class with a brilliant professor. I gave up microbiology for writing stories. I got a tattoo of Vonnegut's asterisk on my wrist. When the smoke cleared I had a masters in fine arts and a hundred-twenty-six thousand dollar debt. I was twenty four.

Afterward, I moved to New York, like everyone else. Blame my parents. They were too supportive. Someone needed to take responsibility for my mistakes, and back then it wasn't going to be me. I spent the next five years in and out of filthy kitchens and minimalist cafes. I scrubbed spit from aioli ramekins and ran an unsuccessful social media account dedicated to experimental latte foam art. Don't hate me, I was young. Between shifts, I sold drugs to little acclaim. I was never much of a self starter. During the day, I slept. At night, I wrote, eschewing the lavish cafes of my professional life for

unlimited refills on hot brown water at the twenty-four hour Greek diner, where Athena bagged me the leftover spanakopita they'd otherwise scrape into the trash. I had little money and fewer friends. Still, for the most part, I lived.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Here is what matters: after some years, I met a man who I believed would change everything. He was a customer at the cafe. A regular. A genteel Korean man who ran a literary agency in midtown. I traded a ginger-and-currant scone for an email address and sent him three chapters, a query letter, and a resume that included an honorable mention for a flash fiction contest at a now defunct magazine. To my surprise, he asked for more.

Suddenly, I saw life in a new light. Merely surviving was no longer enough. Worldly concerns—food, shelter, relationships—disappeared. As I completed my masterpiece, I made only the minimum payments on my loans. Then I stopped making payments at all. The true interest on my loans was words. Every shift I skipped and job I quit meant lines on a page. My credit fell and my debt rose. I ignored second warnings and court summons. The joke was on them. They could not garnish my wages if I had no wages to garnish.

I sold my belongings and what I couldn't sell I left on the street. I fled my apartment without notice and rented a couch from a tolerant friend-and-sometimes-lover for a hundred dollars a month. I just needed a little more time, I told the agent. So I borrowed money from a man I should not have borrowed money from. A prep cook and professional dog fight organizer who made clear that I was but a dilettante in degeneracy. The day I submitted my manuscript, the lender arrived at my door. He had a length of piano wire coiled between his hands, a threat so literary I laughed in his face. Then he

made sure I wasn't laughing any more. Despite my protestations, this man was not interested in the slow pace of the publishing industry. I promised royalties and listed my accolades. But creditors are not much convinced by honorable mentions.

That evening, as I defrosted a steak on my bruised jaw, I received a phone call. It was a fine story, the agent told me, but he could not help me. Please, I told him. I was desperate. I needed money. Anything. What could I do?

The agent paused.

He knew a man, he said, who might be interested in my particular skill set. If, of course, I was willing to make a few changes in my life.

He forwarded me a listing for a position in Seoul. The benefits were enticing. The pay was suspicious. I sent an updated resume and a writing sample. The next day, I talked to a man who spoke loudly and quickly and brushed past my concerns with disinterest. At the end of our conversation, he had just one question: when could I leave?

I remembered the large piano wire man at my door. Not even my door, really. Just trouble, as always, at the door of someone trying to help me. What reason did I have to stay? What did I even have to leave behind?

Now, I said. I could leave now.

There was no time to wonder why it had been so easy.

A week passed. I kissed my landlord-lover goodbye and wrote her a check I knew would bounce. I piled my bags into a car she paid for with a mobile app, one final favor I did not deserve.

On the drive I pulled up pictures of Seoul on my phone. I practiced saying hello and excuse me and I'm sorry, arming myself with the many apologies that had dragged

me through life. I pictured the city waiting for me, foolishly imagining it gave a damn about me at all.

Months later, when all my mistakes had become clear, I would ride the tram up Mt. Namsan and climb Seoul Tower. From there, if the Air Quality Index blared a moderate yellow, I could gaze into Itaewon, where swarms of English teachers vomited in Nigerian clubs and heckled Turks selling doner. Where, in the evening, I passed the cracking boots of American NCOs as they raided bars and brothels for teenage soldiers breaking curfew. Or I'd look east, across the Han River to Apgujeong, to my office, where the elite sliced their faces and pumped their children through academies as the summer sun glistered in the haze. Where students erupted from relentless hagwans to SAT class afterparties at exclusive Gangnam clubs, just south, the glittering avenues awash with Vera Wang and Cartier, foreigners puffing hookah in its dark alleys, breaking their fingers at BYOB batting cages to impress their girlfriends.

Seoul, I would soon see, she was a mobster of a city. Where the industrial revolution blossomed across a single generation beneath the shadow of the bomb. Men who grew artillery range cabbage raising children with wifi implanted in their skulls. A gargantuan circuit board city of glass and steel. Its army ten million strong (hundreds of thousands more undocumented, Thai and Filipino and Kazakh), twice as dense as New York, home to megachurches of a half million worshippers, where bodhisattva clinked glasses with round-faced Catholic saints in the storied Hanguk branches of a single family tree. A city of smells. Of dried squid and fried chicken and barbecue and hot asphalt and the stinking Han. Of ancient Joseon palaces and high speed railways and old women lugging blood sausage carts strapped to their hunched backs. Seoul, that sparkling

slum, that poisonous jewel, without a democratically elected civilian leader until after the fall of the Soviet Union, where power moved like million won chips at the underground casinos filled with Pekingese businessmen and Davidoff smoke. Where a lonely American could disappear and all it took time.

But I did not yet know these things yet. My work would teach me these secrets. For now, I consulted my seatback pocket for safety protocols and credit card deals. Keep in mind that the nearest emergency exit might be behind you. But no, that way was no longer an option. I would go forward, no matter where it led.

I arrived in the Plum Rain, like so many others, thankful for clouds. Thankful for neon, for makgeolli, for alleys and riverwalks. Thankful for a city blinded by both darkness and light. Like so many others, just when all seems lost, I found Seoul, like a cartoon tunnel drawn on the brick wall of my life.

Now, my plane lifts into the sky. I careen at this tunnel full speed. I hope that, for once, the magic is real.

1

I'm just saying, you bomb the motherfucker.

For reasons I don't understand, people have always talked to me. I'm not that interesting. Then again, maybe that was my virtue. Whatever the cause, as I disembarked the jet bridge, I was not so surprised to find myself listening to the fat, white traveler lecture me on Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un.

What if he bombs you back?

He's got the bombs and you're squatting here on his doorstep, pants down with your dick your hands.

We stepped into the terminal and the fat man scanned the departures board for his connection to Phuket. Makes Bangkok look like a nunnery, he said, winking, though he was sure I already know all about that.

Not really, I said, and he offered his hand, surprising me by pulling me into a one-armed embrace.

Good luck with the new gig, son.

Thanks.

Tell these people what I said about them fuckers up north.

I'll pass it along.

I followed the signs to border control, where I stood in the line for foreigners. Before me, two American soldiers in military dress popped gum and flexed their camouflage duffels.

We'll take you out tonight, said one.

I've been waiting.

Curfew, yeah, but you can get around that.

I tell you, I've been waiting.

Curfew hours the hours you're gonna want to be off base, that's for sure.

Had this on my calendar, counted the days.

The line limped toward the glass plated booths. One by one, visitors removed their caps and glasses to reveal the secrets of their travel. The line shuddered forward like an injured caterpillar. The soldiers capered for a beautiful customs officer behind the glass.

What brings you to the Republic of Korea?

Business.

Smile.

Stamp.

I removed my hat and stared into the camera, trying to look like there was nothing wrong with me. Which there wasn't, I reminded myself. But it was no use. Airports made me nervous. As if security would discover some horrible crime that I had repressed until that very moment. That the whirring machine would tap into a mysterious international network of transgressions and reveal my secret life as an axe murderer, a layabout, a pervert, a fraud.

I smoothed my hair.

What in God's name are you doing here?

Pleasure, I said, smiling a normal smile. My new boss, Justin Lee, had said not to mention work.

Don't worry, he had told me over the phone. The visa is only a technicality.

At baggage claim, I watched lonely suitcases circle the terminal like children lost in a supermarket until none remained. A young woman at the customer service desk called her supervisor. My bags, two herringbone spinners I'd purchased with the last of my graduate loan, were delayed.

With nothing but my carry-on, customs was efficient and brief. Across the terminal, repeating signs advised me that Airports Council International had ranked Incheon the best airport in the world for the eleventh year running. I stepped onto the moving walkway. From the PA, a soothing feminine voice warned me that any unattended luggage was almost certainly a bomb. Ahead, sleigh bells tinkled on the collar of a drug-sniffing labrador. I glided past an ice skating rink, where a small girl dressed as an elf did circles around support beams stuck through the ice. It was July.

I stepped from the track (The moving walkway is coming to an end, cooed the loudspeaker woman) and into the main concourse. At a line of telecom stalls, I bought a sim card and a data plan I did not understand for a price I did not understand. The saleswoman handed back my credit card, still active only by clerical error or divine grace.

How long will you be saying in Seoul? She asked.

One year, I said, those words as much a contract as the actual contract I'd signed just last week.

I connected to the internet. I'd heard Korean wi-fi made 4G look like ham radio. I checked my email, but I didn't know what I was looking for. I never expected anything particular. Still, every day I didn't receive an email awarding me a large cash grant for my undiscovered genius was a disappointment. Congratulations, it would say, you've

done it. No need for work anymore, all that writing and struggle. We see what you were going for and we love it.

Instead, all I had was a message from Rachel, my ex-something, my sofa-bed benefactress, wondering if I'd arrived okay. I marked it as spam. There was nothing more shameful than unconditional love. Some days, I thought, I'd give anything to stop getting more chances. Besides, I bet she hadn't yet tried to cash the check.

At the currency exchange, I handed the teller sixteen dollars and eighty-one cents. After much gesticulation, the cashier accepted my penny and returned me nineteen thousand won. Holy shit, I thought, I'm rich. I turned triumphant, a real adult task completed in a foreign country, the multicolored notes clutched as proof in my hand. The scene was overwhelming. A dozen angry men stretched behind me, brandishing their cash. Behind them, a thousand travelers darted across the terminal, shouting and laughing and shaking hands and eating instant noodles. For the first time, I realized the magnitude of my decision, the great ways in which I did not belong. I had spent so much time worrying about escape I hadn't thought about arrival.

I was starving. In fifteen hours I hadn't eaten anything but a single novelty-size Toblerone. I went into the airport convenience store and spent seven minutes translating flavors of potato chips, choosing between spicy crayfish and salted egg.

I chose egg.

What the hell, I thought, live a little.

Outside the terminal, I found the company driver dusting a welcome sign with white-gloved fingers. Sean Moon, the sign said, confusing because my name was Shane Mune, but I was happy to get reverse-Ellis-Islanded if it made everyone's life a little

easier. The driver bowed and loaded my bag into the trunk. On the curb, the two American soldiers from customs waited and watched the traffic.

Like the skirts, said one.

Sure, said the other. You miss cleavage, but you'll get leg straight from here to the thirty-eighth parallel.

The ride to Seoul would take forty minutes give or take. The driver turned and offered me a stick of gum and a miniature bottle of water. Did I need anything else? Was I comfortable? The driver was sorry, he said, but he didn't speak very good English.

Better than my Korean, I said.

Thank you very much for lying, said the driver in perfect English. He had, in fact, lived in the United States once, many years ago. Had even taken a few courses at Connecticut College. He had wanted to study engineering, but his father had died and though he had six brothers and sisters still living in Korea, he was the eldest. He did not always like living in Korea, but he was proud to be Korean. Proud to come from a people that respected one's roots. Proud to work for a great man like Justin Lee, sajangnim, my new boss.

And what about me, the driver wanted to know. Was I pleased to move to Seoul?

I rolled down the window and ran my fingers through the air.

To be quite honest, I said, the move took me by surprise.

I leaned forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder.

Do you want these egg chips? I asked. They're very bad.

The driver smiled and shook his head.

And what did you do in America? he asked.

I was a writer, I said.

Which was not entirely a lie. Though my novel had, so far, come to nothing, the previous year I had sold two stories to prominent literary journals, for which I received, commensurate with my talent, a total of nine-hundred dollars, six contributor's copies, and a complimentary subscription to *The Iowa Review*. But writing was not always about writing. Writing was a lifestyle. I wore the right glasses and owned the right notebooks. I formed a monthly writer's workshop with college friends, though they all eventually betrayed literature for law school. But that was fine with me then. There were too many lawyers, but dishes always needed washing. Besides, at the time I'd had no problem quitting work at the first sign of a dollar in my pocket. With a fully belly, it was ever so easy to sit down and begin drafting the novel that would change everything. Or so it had seemed for so long.

The driver pointed to the sign on the passenger seat, where my name was misspelled.

You name is Korean, he said. Moon, from the hanja meaning writing. It is a sign.

The driver smiled. I didn't correct him.

You must be a very good writer, he said. To make it here.

Or a very bad one, I said but the driver raised his hand.

No, he said, with confidence. Our boss, he does not make mistakes. It is destiny.

I considered his words. Was his faith really so crazy? After all, who was I to make decisions about my own life? Not that my outcomes ever seemed to correlate with my actions. Try one thing, and I was sure to get another. This, perhaps, was my virtue: a knack for failing upward. Five years of depravity and I'd never truly suffered, never

starved, never been thrown out of somewhere they didn't let me back in, never paid my debts, never worked hard if someone made the mistake of paying me, worked hard only on that most shallow and egotistical of projects, fiction. Writing was a sham, I knew, an indulgence, a moral failing, but even in disappointing that most perverse of gods, I had milked my deficiencies into work all the way across the sea. This, I guessed, was why I called myself a writer: I could justify anything. All pain, all suffering, all confusion, every failure or betrayal, every broken bone or broken heart. All of it would be grist if I could only bring myself to the mill.

I ate an egg chip, chewed, and spit it back in the bag.

Maybe you're right, I said, skin prickling at the thought. Maybe, after all this, destiny has found me.

In the mirror, the driver lifted his eyes to mine.

I believe we understand each other, he said, though my English is not so good. Sometimes you must do not what you want, but what is necessary. It is like my coming back to Korea. I had wanted to be an engineer, but I needed work and I became a driver. Now, after many years, I am still a driver.

At first, he admitted, this upset him, but now the driver understood that it was not for him to see what the Lord sees. While as an engineer he may have achieved greater personal glory, working for a for a man like my new boss, who strove tirelessly for the honor and progress of their nation, had allowed him to better fulfill the glory of His vision. It was His will, enacted on Earth, which moved through their great men, among which our boss surely numbered, no matter what it was that I might hear people say.

I had not heard anything, of course. I had only just arrived.

Well, the rumors weren't true, the driver assured me, whether I had heard them or not. Great men attracted rumors. There were those in the city who were jealous of all that our boss had accomplished and they said things that anyone with half a brain knew were lies. Of course, as I had mentioned, I'd only just arrived. For work, and what an honor, such work. Everyone in Seoul knew the company, or, at least, everyone with children and the means to afford such services. Though the boss's son, Jong-bum, was only fifteen, it would soon come time for the boy to begin preparations himself.

The driver adjusted the brim of his cap.

He was worried about Jong-bum, the driver confessed. The boy seemed unfocused. He was spending time with people, new people, and not always of the sort that the driver approved, given his father's position in society. Not to mention the boy's own ambitions, which were once prodigious, and now, he feared, concerned little more than girls and drinking with his friends. Not that the boss knew of such things, of course. The driver was loyal to the boy's father, but he knew how to keep a secret. In fact, after all these years of driving, he sometimes felt like a second father to Jong-bum. He had seen the boy grow up. The driver did not have any children of his own, you see. He had married late. Of course, he'd had a few girls here and there in his youth. Don't mistake it. He had even had a woman in Connecticut for a time. A good woman and she had wanted to marry him, but then his father passed. She had wanted to come with him, this woman, to Korea, but he couldn't do that to his mother. He was the eldest and he had responsibilities.

Do you have a girl? asked the driver.

Not anymore, said Sean. I had one, but things happened.

Good, said the driver. Your American girls, they are good for a while. No one can deny they are fun, your American girls. But they're not the type of girl you want to settle down with. Not the type of girl to bring home to your mother at the end of her life.

I'm not sure any type of girl solves that problem, I said. But he seemed not to hear me. He stared out the window at the passing lights. We were downtown now. I was surprised. I had expected the city to emerge from the distance like the great wave of a tsunami, building in height and power until it overwhelmed me. But suddenly, without fanfare, here I was. A man in Seoul, as if it were just that easy.

We exited the highway and turned into a neighborhood of high-rises and bright glass. We passed a vast park filled with old women in matching sweat suits dancing beneath flood lights. Strange. The one color I hadn't pictured in the city was green. I watched the streets unfold, trying to create meaning from the pedestrians and the neon signs, but the city offered nothing. The driver was silent now. As if the city had robbed him of any curiosity about the stranger in his car. I understood. My problems were now far way. His were at the door.

We passed a subway station. The driver slowed. He opened his mouth to speak but thought better of it. He pointed out the window. A large building trembled in from the darkness. What could it mean to him? The home, perhaps, of an old friend, an estranged relation, a lost lover? Suddenly, I was filled with benevolence. This man needed to speak. I could sense it. For once in my life, when someone needed me, I would step up.

I reached out and touched his shoulder.

It's okay, I said. You can tell me.

He took my hand and nodded at the building.

No, he said. We've arrived.

We stepped out of the car. The driver unloaded the bag and pressed the strap into my hand.

Thank you for the conversation, he said, gripping me by the forearm. I'm sorry my English is not so good.

2

My new employer, Eclipse Education, had provided the apartment. The building also contained a Chinese restaurant, a hair salon, and a twenty-four hour convenience store. The complex was called Kooboo, which I gathered meant cube. I could not tell whether the name intended humor or whether the building's owners simply valued accuracy. I took the elevator to the seventh floor, checked my email for the door code, and let myself in. The apartment was, generously, a cube.

I set down my carry-on and went to the bathroom, a sunken tile box with a handheld shower installed above the toilet. Outside the bathroom was a kitchenette with a miniature fridge and two-burner electric stove. The lone window, a rectangular slit two hands wide, looked onto an identical gray high-rise. I sat down onto the bed, which was built into the floor, its frame blending into matching panels of faux wood. The management had generously sealed my new mattress in plastic to prove its sterility.

After disgorging the mattress, I crossed the street to Kkanbu Chicken, where I ordered a plate of wings and a liter of Cass by pointing at the pictures on the menu.

Spicy, the waitress told me, shaking her head. Too spicy.

The waitress was older, with a stooped back and at wide smile. When I pointed again at the chicken she laughed and hobbled off toward the kitchen. I couldn't tell if she actually looked like my mother or if I was just in the mood for people to look like people. Not her face, but something in her presence, the way she moved, halting and lopsided, as if she were constantly missing the phantom final step of a staircase. Or maybe just in the way she knew better than me.

I joined the wifi. The city had dusted unconnectivity from every cranny and nook. I reread an email from my boss explaining how to reach the office the next morning. Another employee had left rather suddenly and my arrival was eagerly anticipated. In all the commotion, I had almost forgotten about work. It had been a long time since I'd done something legitimate. It seemed disreputable, all that working for money. Wasn't I a man with a higher calling? I rubbed my jaw, where a man interested in money had rather vehemently disagreed.

I sipped my beer and tried to experience a significant emotion. I was alone, far from home, and it seemed I ought to feel something large and sharp, awe or dread perhaps, but all I could manage was a mild interest in my circumstances. Objectively, I was in a difficult situation. But rock bottom was only bleak if you minded the rocks. For years, I'd dug my hole happily. Failure wasn't just acceptable; it was essential to my plan. That I knew this formulation was a cop out didn't change the results. Studies have shown placebos have palliative effects even when the deception is known. Rejecting society, even nominally, was an easier pill to swallow than society rejecting me.

But that was the past. Now, here I was was, ejected halfway across the world. For all the pomp of leaving, who would really care if I didn't come back? Rachel had every reason to hate me. My friends had all stopped texting after I turned on read receipts. I hadn't even told my parents I was leaving. My mother was supposed to visit New York in the fall. I'd told her not to buy the ticket, that I didn't know where I'd be. I guess you lie enough times and eventually you'll be right. It didn't seem that she'd be bothered by just one more disappointment.

I was the only person in the restaurant eating alone. A few couples, but mostly groups. Classmates cooling off from a night of studying, tired, smiling, and wild. A restaurant where every tooth was visible but mine. So, I had finally found it. The happiest place on earth. Mother-waitress buzzed about, pollinating cups with beer and plates with chicken. Here, they shouted, come here. Ajumma, auntie, old woman, here. But I couldn't bring myself to shout and she darted around my raised hand like water around oil. I emptied my beer as my chicken grew cold. It was too spicy. Here, I thought at the waitress, auntie, mother, come here. She scurried and provided, a chicken sorceress, an octopus with a beer in each hand. We made eye contact. I did the thing where you pretend to write on a notepad. She materialized with a mobile card reader and I resolved to practice my airplane Korean.

Where is the bathroom? I asked.

What?

The bathroom, I said again.

She shook her head and yelled at another waitress for help.

I sighed and asked in English.

She laughed and patted me on the shoulder, pointing toward a large sign showing stick figure men and women tucking their knees to prevent pissing their stick figure pants. I was an infant, charming and incapable. But my waitress didn't care. You Americans, she seemed to say, yes, you're all idiots. But it's not your fault. And she smiled at me with a pity reserved for someone whose life was too easy to teach him anything at all.

I thanked her and wondered if I would ever outgrow women taking care of me.

And then I did feel dread, but it wasn't as nice as I had hoped.

I left a tip and went to the convenience store beneath my apartment. Outside, three middle-aged men in navy suits sat on plastic chairs around a lopsided table gutted by an unopened umbrella. Five empty bottles of soju lined the table. Two stood, hugged the third, and stumbled off down the street holding hands. Inside, I bought a pack of light cigarettes and plastic carton filled with an unidentifiable yellow liquid that turned out to be banana milk. Outside, the final suited man had passed out face first on the plastic table. In the street, a horn blared and brakes squealed. I looked up to see mother-waitress in the middle lane, stooped and shaking her finger at a taxi. The driver rolled down his window to yell but she reached through the door and twisted his ear. When she was satisfied, she turned and saw me watching. She waved and hobbled across the street, traffic obediently stopped. She reached the sidewalk and shook her fist at me, and for a moment I thought she would beat me down right there on the street. But instead she opened her fist and took my hand and pressed something into my palm. It was my tip, all meaningless five thousand won of it, whatever the hell that meant. A week ago, I would have given anything for money. Now, it all seemed fake. The idea that anybody could find me here, demand something of me, hurt me, was preposterous. What efficacy had bills or piano wire or publishing contracts in a place where I couldn't even piss in the right spot without the help of an old woman. Generosity was easy when nothing was real.

No, I told her, it's for you.

She laughed and shook her head.

Please, I said, take it.

But she was already off across the street again, ancient Korean Moses parting traffic, all of Seoul's drivers having learned their lesson.

I looked at the money in my hand. Five blue bills. Five white-bearded Korean men in robes and tall cloth hats, calmly dispensing wisdom from the back of about eighty-three cents.

Don't look at me like that, I thought. You have no idea what I'm up against.

I dropped the cash in front of the passed out man and took his elevator to the top floor. The elevator doors opened to a finished deck, wooden benches, and a row of planter boxes protecting residents from the edge. To my left, a young couple whispered close and still. I lit a cigarette and looked out across the city, blinking to life. A half dozen neon crosses shone through the darkness, blood red. In the distance, a holographic woman in a short skirt and high socks danced gigantically on the side of a building.

I lit another cigarette, not so much because I wanted one but because I was in the mood to be the type of guy that smoked two cigarettes back to back. I looked out at the red crosses and thought about mother-waitress, stooped and wrinkled, waiting tables at Kkanbu Chicken. I thought about my actual mother arriving in New York with no one to welcome her. I thought about debt and loyalty and what it meant to owe anyone anything and wondered if I wouldn't just be better off declaring my whole life bankrupt and beginning anew. I thought about work tomorrow, which was strange and interesting, but in time would become one thing among many things. Or maybe, just maybe, this would be enough—to do a thing and do it well and get paid and be happy. What reason did I have to hold on so desperately to sadness and solitude? Never once had writing solved anyone's problems.

Downstairs, in my room, my fingertips stank like cigarettes. I had not yet bought soap. I lay down on the bed, freshly disrobed and still smelling of plastic. I had no sheets or pillows, so I balled up a sweater and stuck it beneath my head. A dog yipped through the wall. I could smell my fingers. I rose and rubbed toothpaste into my hands and then ran my fingers beneath the faucet for a very long time. I lay back in bed, too short, my feet dangling off the edge, and looked through my window at the featureless wall of my sister high rise, cubes stacked on cubes, each filled with a man or woman in a too small bed, windows that looked at nothing, cabinets that opened to nothing, showers that hung above toilets, and alarm clocks set for morning. I closed my eyes and dug toward a depth not unlike sleep. Outside, the crosses blinked. All around me the cube glowed red.

3

I woke to a dog yipping through the wall. I stretched and looked out my window at the nothing. So, I thought. Still here. No longer a fugitive in a foreign land gazing at the magic of glowing red crosses. Just another guy running late for work.

I opened the weekender beside my bed. My father had taught me to travel with toiletries and a change of clothes in my carry-on, the only inheritance I'd ever receive. I found my toothbrush, padded the five steps to my toilet, and took a shower in my bathroom that was either entirely shower or not a shower at all. I was tired and sat on the bowl and lifted the shower head to spray myself as I defecated. Less because I needed to than because I thought it was funny.

I finished and dried myself with an old t-shirt. As I dressed, I connected my phone to my speaker and played Pimsleur Korean language learning tape number one. A woman said phrases and I repeated them. Nice to meet you, I said. I am from America, I said. I owe seven thousand dollars to a man with a tattoo of the pope on his neck, I said. The weather is good today, I said. No, I said, the weather is bad.

In the bathroom mirror, I inspected my blue-and-white striped button down, bought for an unpaid internship at an experimental theater, whose two other employees wore Andean ponchos. After the theater closed unexpectedly—unexpected only to those who worked at the theater—the shirt had followed me unworn through life like a barnacle cleaved to the hull of a ship, toted from apartment to apartment where it hung untouched in unfamiliar closets, a merry-go-round of uselessness, packed and repacked until its smooth, unwrinkled face reminded me at all times that I was not a professional who

required professional shirts. The weather is good, I repeated to himself. The weather is good.

Outside, the monsoons had begun. Men in expensive suits rushed past beneath their umbrellas, splashing through the puddles in cheap plastic slides. In seconds, my armpits darkened with perspiration. I waded onto the sidewalk, crowded with headless, umbrella-crowned commuters. They moved like starlings, systematic and capricious, their mysterious murmurations known to all but me. One after the other, I crashed into the umbrella-headed ajummas, their metal ferrules lanced at precisely nostril height.

I'm sorry, I said over and over again, the phrase Pimsleuring through my brain. The weather is bad.

I arrived wet at the station. The hall was bright and clean. Rows of fashionable shops stretched in both directions, shapely silver mannequins baring their midriffs. I bought a red bean bun and ate it on the platform. Against the walls stood a glass locker of gas masks adorned with smiling instructional cartoons of children successfully surviving a surprise attack from the north.

In the car, no one spoke. Though the train was packed, the final three seats of each row were empty, reserved for the elderly, injured, and pregnant. At Express Bus Terminal, a middle-aged man entered the car, considered the empty seats, and sat. He closed his eyes and lowered his head. I had the impression that I had witnessed a momentous occasion. There comes a point in every man's life when he must surrender to the elderly seats for the first time. The decision was irreversible. From now on, he would be a man who sits.

The doors opened at Apgujeong Station to reveal a barrage of hideous women plastered beside their own flawless twins. Plastic surgery ads, dozens, showcasing the magic of scalpel and graft. Handsome male surgeons smiling beside their living oeuvre, beauties stunning and symmetrical, tamed jawbones and wrangled chins. I searched the overhead signs for the direction of my exit. Beside the stairs, an elderly woman prostrated on a rattan mat, her head lowered to the floor. A small bowl of change sat beside her outstretched hands. I dropped in a five-hundred won coin and left, emerging from the birthing canal of Apgujeong Station into the sticky Gangnam air.

I arrived at a bright, many-windowed tower overlooking a six-lane shopping avenue. Eclipse Education was located on the fourth floor, between a daycare for precocious toddlers and the Second Coming Plastic Surgery Clinic. On the phone, Justin had been tight lipped about my duties, but at the time, escape was more valuable than knowledge. You'll work with Korean students who want to come to America, he'd said. Great, I'd said. Where's my ticket? That evening, I'd received a digital preview of my business cards via email. Writing Instructor and College Admissions Consultant. It was my first job with a title, unless you counted Day Shift Barista of the Month. Consultant. It had nice ring to it. Something my dad could tell his drinking buddies without qualifying that I'd actually gone to a very good college and was living my bohemian (read: degenerate) lifestyle on purpose. Every father wants their child to pursue their dream, until he realizes what that dream actually is. Whether or not I could actually do the job seemed secondary. Help students write? Sure, why not? I was an adult, they were teenagers. What could they know that I didn't?

I entered the building and stepped into a small cafe and cosmetic surgery exposition. Young couples held lattes and milled about the three-dimensional displays, running their fingers across disembodied noses and chins, examining the various parts they might improve upstairs. While the public fondling of plastic cheekbones struck me as odd, I tried not to pass judgement. After all, I was their guest. I checked my watch and squeezed two silicone breasts. Hey, when in Rome.

Sean Moon?

A tall American stood before me, pale with black hair and mirrored aviators. The top two buttons of his shirt were unfastened, opened to reveal a thin golden chain draped across his chest.

Shane Mune, I said.

He reached out his hand.

Ricky, he said, smiling. Let's go meet the team.

Ricky guided me across the floor and gestured at the displays, his laugh overlarge and startling, like a coiled spring bursting from a can of nuts. Everywhere we walked, eyes followed. His voice was gaudy. His footsteps barbaric. In a building of identically elegant patrons, we did not just stand out—we were freaks. He called for the elevator, which already contained a stylish woman and a little girl dressed as a princess. Ricky stood beside the girl, who stared open-mouthed at the tall white man, his sunglasses shining, bleached teeth bared.

Annyeonghaseyo, said Ricky, his accent impeccable. The princess faced the corner and covered her eyes. Ricky laughed and reached toward the girl, pulling a five hundred won coin out from behind her ear. The mother pointed and the girl looked up,

eyes wide with delight. Ricky smiled and held out his hand. She reached out and Ricky stuffed the coin into his closed fist. He made a show of it, grunting and squeezing, and when he opened his hands, the coin had disappeared.

Maybe next time, kiddo.

The elevator opened onto an office of sparkling glass. Two matching secretaries typed beneath a gargantuan golden logo. Ricky stepped out, twirling the coin across his knuckles. I followed, my face cloned in every mirrored surface. I leaned forward and smoothed a cowlick in the golden D of Education.

This is Min-Ji, said Ricky, gesturing at one of the secretaries, and Min-Ju. They'll get you set up in your office.

The secretaries inclined their heads politely. They were mirror images, thin and prim in twin black skirts, except one suffered a slight squint. I turned to the closest, wide-eyed Min and smiled.

Busy day so far?

She nodded and inclined her head.

Wet outside.

She nodded and inclined her head.

Min-Ju doesn't speak English, Ricky explained, taking me by the shoulders and leading me down the hall. But she's worked here so long, she'll know what you need before you do.

In the hall, bright black granite walls reflected bulbs of incomprehensible wattage. Every ten feet, warm glass cubes glowed with yellow light. Inside each cube, a lone teenager typed at a laptop, intermittently scrawling notes or equations on the walls,

apparently designed for John Nash style brainstorming. Banners draped the walls listing the previous year's graduating class and their eventual institutions—Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, Brown. Ricky pointed out photos of the most prestigious alumni, an Olympic rifleman, a renowned physicist, two National Assembly members. He rolled the coin between his fingers.

You're pretty good at that, I said. With the coin.

Oh, he said. For girls.

Like, little girls?

Not so little, he said. Eighteen, at least.

Ricky opened the door to a large conference room, bedazzled with video screens and white boards and floor-length windows cut into the back wall. The sky had cleared, and a pink haze of fine particulate matter had draped itself across the city. Ricky sat and withdrew a sheaf of papers from a leather briefcase. The wealth was astounding. The table was crystal. The chairs were ergonomically designed. I sat and ran my hands across the velvet-coated splat. My ass had never savored such opulence. Ricky gestured at a tower out the window, but I could only skink my skull into my headrest, sleek and plush. The door opened behind us. Min-Ji or Min-Ju entered carrying a thick spiral-bound notebook and Ricky thanked her in Korean, another unsettling touch of professionalism. What right had he to such language? A foreigner like me, but entirely antithetical—arrogant, attractive, and fluent. The weather is bad, I wanted to tell him. That was what mattered.

He slid me the notebook.

This is your training manual, he said. Justin has a few parents to meet with, prospective clients, a Samsung executive and then the foreign minister to Tanzania, so I'll walk you through the basics. You'll start meeting students right away. Interview them, get their stories. You're taking over for Eli, who left last week, so here are his notes. Worth reading, probably, but you're mostly starting from scratch here. Need to build up a relationship with the kids. Have them trust you.

I flipped through the binder. Pages of resumes and outlines, all organized, labeled, and annotated. I examined a page, its white space filled with unintelligible marginalia and obscure figures, scientific formulas and algebraic equations, notes on Heidegger and Lavoisier, family trees of ancient Korean nobility, and a single note in all caps: ASK ABOUT THE MOTHER. I closed the notebook.

What happened to him? I asked.

Family emergency, said Ricky, shaking his head. Unfortunate, very sudden, but we understand. Of course, that means that we need to get up to speed as quickly as possible. Eli was working with several of our more high profile clients. Normally, we'd let you get comfortable, but we're going to have to throw you in to the deep end right away.

The deep end, I thought. I was twenty-four hours into dodging debt collection in a foreign country by illegally working a job I didn't understand. How much deeper could it get?

I cleared my throat.

To be honest, I said, Justin wasn't exactly specific about my, well, responsibilities.

Ricky smiled.

You went to college? he asked.

Yes.

And not just any college. A good college.

Sure.

What were your SAT scores?

High.

And what did you write about for your essay?

I don't know, I said.

What do you mean you don't know? he said, suddenly angry. You wrote about something.

Yeah, of course, I just—

You didn't just show up, lay your sack on the table, and say let me in.

I wrote about a backpacking trip, I said. I don't know. Nature and hard work or something.

And why were you accepted?

I thought for a moment. It seemed like a trick question. This whole inquisitional onslaught to end up here, at a notion of acceptance. What it a meta-query? An attempt to help me understand what it would take for me to be accepted here, in Korea, in this office? I flailed wildly.

Because I was a good student? I said.

Wrong, he said. You were accepted because you were a decent enough white boy from a small town with nothing else to offer. I'm not trying to play identity politics. I

don’t care about that woke shit. I’m trying to make you understand where we’re coming from. I read your resume. I know your story. Top of your class, hometown hero turned slacker, a couple published stories to your name. Don’t look so shocked. This is all just the first page of Google. This matters because you think getting into to college is a simple: good grades and a drama club vice presidency and a varsity letter. But go to some shit high school in a two-horse town and it’s easy to look like Einstein. Here, though, that’s not the case.

Ricky stood and began to copy figures onto a whiteboard. I reeled. Was that much of me really online? I tried to be offended, but really I was flattered. It had been so long since the big fish/small pond days, they were nice to remember. Five years of dish washing was enough time to convince anyone the kitchen was your destiny, no matter what nice things your college counselor might have said about you. Mostly, I was embarrassed my digital footprint wasn’t bigger. Hadn’t I done anything useful since college? Though commencement was about when my father had stopped updating the family newsletter. If you only got your news from Christmas cards, you’d think I’d just graduated college for six straight years. Across the room, Ricky finished scrawling and circled numbers with a flourish.

About a million international students enrolled at American colleges every year, he said. Roughly half are undergrads, which takes us to a hundred twenty-five thousand international freshmen each year. China and India take care of about two-thirds of that, but there, in a strong third place, is half a peninsula that got the shit blown out of it more recently than we invented the credit card or Mr. Potato Head. And these kids, he said, they’re not fucking around. Our grandparents bombed their grandparents into the Goryeo

dynasty and now they're taking their revenge on APs and SATs. But the thing is, it's not enough. They look up and every other kid on their block is sporting a sixteen-hundred, tripping over chess tournament honorable mentions and Scholastic Keys. You want to go to an elite American university, nothing tougher to be in this world than Korean. You're white rice. Hay in a haystack. That, he said, looking at me, is where we come in.

I looked at the numbers on the board. The numbers were big. Bigger, frankly, than I preferred. A million students. I'd never been involved with a million of anything. I felt like a child on a high dive who was suddenly underwater without even knowing he had jumped.

I coughed my throat.

So you're saying we're, like, tutors?

No, grinned Ricky. I'm saying this is an arms race, and we are the atom bomb.

Eclipse Education, he explained, offered a comprehensive college admissions experience. First we interviewed. Then we outlined. Then we edited. At the end, they didn't just have a strong application essay—they had a comprehensive, holistically balanced admissions profile, which emphasized each candidate's unique qualities and ensured their best possible outcome.

But that was just the web copy, he told me. What I needed to know is this: Eclipse Education was part of a long, intricate history. Barring a slight wartime blip, private education had steadily swelled in the country for over a century, since missionaries founded the first hogwans in the 1880s as a beard for their illegal proselytization. These academies provided Korea's elite with a convenient bridge between Confucian rigor and Western capitalism until former president and military strong-man, Chun Doo-Hwan

outlawed all for-profit academies in 1980, arguing the very notion of private education was inherently unequal. Public outrage, however, overturned the ban in the 1990s, and less than three decades later Korea was home to over 70,000 hogwans, 25,000 alone in Seoul and 6,000 in the fifteen square miles of Gangnam district, the sparkling Mecca of Korea's aristocracy, where they currently sat.

But why am I telling you this? asked Ricky. Because the parents who send their children here are not limited in their extracurricular options. They are kids in the world's worst, most expensive candy shop, and they can take their business wherever they choose. We don't survive here by being good. We survive by being the best. We survive by kicking teeth in. By sending their kids, like little astronauts, to places no one in their family has gone before. You want to know why you're here? Because in the eyes of a rich hanguk housewife, five brilliant Koreans isn't worth one American with an Ivy League degree. Because when your students leave your office, they will tell their moms we didn't just pull some unemployed PhD student off the street, we sent them a writing expert from across the world.

He smiled.

Which brings us to your eleven o'clock.

Ricky browsed through some files and opened them to a picture of a handsome Korean teenager, silky black hair down past his ears.

First up is Jun-Jang Kim, goes by Clint. Very bright, strong resume. Borderline HYPS candidate.

Hips?

Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford. The moneymakers. Need a few of those on the board every year to keep us going. Realistic ceiling is more like Penn, plus he's got an uncle with a name on a men's room or something. All in the file. He's a STEM wiz so we're looking for something humanizing. Plays music, but only violin. Still a little too bleep-bloop, zero-one-zero-one if you ask me. Did a charity program in Costa Rica, you know, volunteer tourism, parents drop a couple thousand so their kid can misbuild an orphanage or something. Don't want to get too We-Are-the-World-y over here, but if you squeeze the stone hard enough, you might accidentally wring out an original thought.

So what am I supposed to actually do with him? I asked.

Take a look at the provided materials, the questionnaire, the recommended exercises. Or just chat. You know the goal now. Doesn't matter what you do as long as you get him talking. If it's not useful, move on. You're not their therapist. Don't get stuck in a confession unless there's something juicy you can force into six-hundred fifty words.

Ricky smiled and slid the papers across the desk.

I'm sure you'll get the hang of it.

My Min walked me down the hall to a bright glass room. A small swivel chair twirled behind a wooden desk. I sat down. The chair groaned and hugged my thighs. My knees pressed against the underside of my desk. Everything seemed built to remind me I was an overlarge freak.

The receptionist bowed goodbye and I opened my manual to a page titled *Significant Experience Essay*. It told me that all students, no matter their age or background, have had significant experiences. It was my job to help the student recognize these significant experiences, process these significant experiences, and ultimately shape

these significant experiences into digestible essays between one-hundred and six-hundred-fifty words depending on the university, prompt, and application.

I turned the page to a drawing of a whirlpool.

Americans, the manual explained, had a peculiar and indirect method of communication. Rather than begin by stating one's argument, Americans spoke around a topic before revealing their true intentions. In conversation, this manifested in polite small talk, to which many Korean students had trouble adjusting upon moving to the United States. In essay writing, the same protocol applied. Korean writers had a tendency to begin by declaring the meaning of their experience and only afterward describing the experience itself. However, for Americans—who, after all, were the intended audience—it was necessary to delay articulating the student's realization, both to create suspense and to demonstrate how the experience altered the student's character and was, in fact, significant. Hence the whirlpool—one begins with expository information and only afterward spirals into the heart of tale.

I stared at the drawing. It was mesmerizing. Simple, but penetrating. Why, I wondered, did I always begin with the unimportant? In neither relationships nor writing could I be forthright. I presented always one type of person, one type of story, inevitably more conventional and less offensive than reality, until I revealed my true intentions only once the lover/reader was too committed to flee. I'd always assumed my compulsive avoidance was a character flaw, but perhaps it was merely a symptom of my nationality. There did not exist a chore I could dodge today I did not put off until tomorrow. Was I simply afraid that my lover/reader would reject the real me? Was New York, graduate school, my entire childhood merely the tepid outer rapids, while Korea was the vicious

cyclone of true experience? The room spun. I felt dizzy. I recalled my craft lectures in graduate school, my ancient professors bemoaning the decline of Updike and complaining they could no longer fuck their students without a light administrative scolding. Forget rising action and climax, I wanted to yell, have you heard of the whirlpool? For two years, my classmates had called my writing elliptical, my characters shallow, my plots cowardly. This is just the prelude, I should have told them. Soon you will spiral into the depths.

A boy knocked on the glass. He was handsome, well-dressed, and broad shouldered. He wore a white linen shirt rolled to the elbows, cuffed pastel slacks, and tassled leather moccasins. He looked as if he had just descended from the poop deck. Though there was no breeze, his hair blew gently around his shoulders.

Clint, he said, offering his hand. May I sit down?

We exchanged pleasantries. I told him where I went to college and his eyes widened. Clint told me he attended Philips Exeter in New Hampshire. He had good grades. He held leadership positions in various clubs and sports teams. Yes, he did play violin, though all of this was on the file of course. As Ricky had made clear, no one was paying me to read a resume.

I surveyed the list of conversation topics Eclipse Education had provided.

What are you most proud of?

What are you most ashamed of?

What is your greatest success?

Your greatest failure?

What embarrasses you most?

What do you hate about yourself?

When did you last sit up all night crying?

If you had a gun, would you hold it to your head, just to feel the rush?

I shuffled the papers and looked at Clint. He seemed like a good kid, which mostly just meant handsome and polite, but that was something. How could I be the one to tell him what of his life did and did not matter? I closed the notebook.

What do you want to write about? I asked.

What? said Clint.

For your college essay. Do you have any idea what you'd like to say?

I don't know what you mean.

Have you thought at all about what you'd like the admissions committees to know about you?

Clint smiled and shrugged his shoulders. His teeth were white and straight like picket fence posts.

Isn't that what you're here for?

So I began with the basics. I asked about violin (I learned the value of hard work) and his service trip to Costa Rica (I learned to appreciate what I have). I asked about his interest in biology (I'm just good at it, I guess) and his earliest childhood memory (none). We discussed the nuances of lacrosse positioning in intricate, horrifying detail and how he had courageously founded a mock investment club for stock exchanges throughout East Asia. As Clint spoke, I thought about what Ricky had told me. Which of these would make good stories? What was better or worse about lacrosse or building an orphanage or

violin? What, when considering Clint's holistic student profile, most emphasized his unique qualifications for leadership? `

I looked at my watch.

That's our time for today, I said, glaring in a way that seemed professional. Thanks for coming in.

Clint stood and looked me expectantly. I could tell that he was used to succeeding. That it was rare for him to speak so long and not receive some form of praise. And what was wrong with what he said? Nothing, really. Only that it was perfectly empty. In fact, I was jealous. I had worried my entire life, and when I didn't worry, I worried about that. Clint was seventeen and, by all appearances, had never had a single thought that troubled him. But now, he frowned.

Do you think any of these are good stories? he asked. He was very handsome. I wanted to like him. I wanted him to succeed. I wanted him to attend to the university of his dreams. But this very desire for his success made me suspicious of Clint. I had known this type of boy in high school. Frictionless. Someone for whom affection was valued, but easily won. Oh, Clint wanted to be liked. Desperately. But I had made it a point never to like anyone too likable.

We'll have to see, I said.

You'll tell Justin I did a good job?

Sure, I said. Home run.

Clint smiled, bowed a little, and left the room. Then it was lunch.

Ricky was in meetings, so I ate alone at a nearby restaurant and accidentally ordered sizzling octopus in a hot stone pot. The waitress handed me a large white cloth

with white strings which I placed on my lap. Two women in facial bandages sat beside me. They leaned over and draped the cloth across my chest and knotted its strings behind my back.

I played on my phone. Seven thousand miles, but at least the internet had remained the same. Russians crashing cars and cats scared of cucumbers. Worried missives from my parents. Rejections from literary agents. A new message from Rachel: a man was looking for me. Good. Let him look. If he found me out here, I didn't deserve my knee caps. I pictured Clint, his billowing hair, his boat shoes. What would he say if he knew what I owed? Not just financially, but morally, spiritually. Would his eyes still widen at my credentials? Would he still want what I had? I stabbed at an octopus tentacle, a thick noodle of dimpled flesh. Back at the office, a gang of eager teens awaited, desperate to reach where I'd just fled. I looked around the restaurant. My whole life, I'd eaten surrounded by people just like me. Now, my closest ally was a man who did magic for little girls.

By the end of the meal, I had turned my bib red with octopus sauce. The women beside me smiled, though I couldn't see their mouths behind the bandages. I saw only the joy in their eyes. I wondered what they had looked like before and what they looked like now. Monrovian moles liberated from lips. Palates unclefted or lips enlarged. I thanked the women and returned to the office. On the ground floor, I ordered an Americano and eyed a display of various ocular models available for a reasonable fee. Ten eyeballs atop ten wooden dowels, like appetizers skewered for a party. Some were wide and some were thin and some were almonds and some were pecans and some were cartoonishly large and some were disturbingly feline and one, the most beautiful, its lower lid lightly

curved, its upper an elegant and effortless arc, was dimpled at its rim like a tear. I blinked and took the elevator to my floor.

In the office, a small, elegant woman waited at reception. She wore a cream colored jacket with a matching skirt, patterned with tiny, repeating Hs, also cream, so minute as to be barely visible. Her tapered heels were black and fine, like a polished finger nail. Her handbag was green crocodile leather clasped with gold. The two Mins waited on her attentively. The left Min slid a form across the white counter as the right Min handed her a burnished wooden coffin containing a fountain pen with a golden nib. The woman read the contract, nodded, and opened her handbag, removing a dusty pink lambskin pocketbook. Her credit card was metallic and thick. Left Min accepted the card with both hands. The woman stood back from the desk and peered down the hallway at the banner of successful applicants. She frowned, the lightest wrinkle etched into her cheek. Harvard, Stanford, Yale. Where would her child go? What future could her money buy? She turned her head and saw me. She smiled and I bowed my head. The left Min handed her a receipt as the right glided from behind the desk to guide her to an office off the main corridor, its door opaque with frosted glass. The secretary knocked and the door opened from within, smooth and pneumatic, hissing as it slid behind the wall. A man sat behind a desk. Small, in a blue tailored suit, black hair glossy and parted at the side. He stood as the woman entered and offered his hand, difficult because his desk was so large, the expensive suit sliding up his wrist to reveal a golden watch with a white face and leather band, tasteful, though too loose on his thin wrist, the watch knocking against the heel of his palm, as if did this rarely, stand for a customer, lean across the desk, offer his hand. The door closed behind them. They moved like ghosts behind the frosted glass.

Ricky emerged from the hallway carrying a stack of papers and I gestured at the office.

Do you know who that woman was? I asked. At reception.

Oh, said Ricky. Her. He grinned. Don't even think what you're thinking.

I'm not thinking anything.

Whatever you're not thinking, you're already thinking it too much.

I don't think. I don't have thoughts.

Husband works at LG. Mister LG, basically.

I knocked on my head. See, hollow like bird bones.

She could buy you a thousand times over and she'd still pay more for her skin care routine.

I don't cost very much.

Ricky laughed and clapped me on the back.

Clint must have really charmed you, he said. One session and you're already thirsting for mommy.

That's Clint's mom?

What did he tell you? Is she stern? Does she offer bad boys some much needed discipline? He winked and took me by the shoulder, guiding me into his office. Tell me what he gave you, good lookin.

Ricky's office both chaotic and entirely bare. Loose papers covered his desk. Unlabeled folders were stacked against the wall, bookended by a canister of cryptic nutritional supplements and a large bag of raw almonds. A single framed picture stood on his desk, young Ricky in a Red Sox cap with two beautiful dark-haired women.

Are those your sisters? I asked.

Stock photo, he said. Edited myself in. I believe those young ladies are both Bengals cheerleaders.

He opened the canister and scooped the ambiguous powder straight into his mouth.

Clients don't trust someone without family photos, he said, and I've got fourteen siblings, which is a bit much for your average Gucci-sporting housewife. Fertility rate is about .8 here so even the Catholics here won't exactly be fruitful and multiply. Plus, he said, looking at the photo, my family isn't quite as photogenic.

I pointed to the canister.

Why don't you at least mix it with milk or something?

Got to balance my macros, he said. One cup of milk, and my caloric ratios are totally fucked. I'm a perfectly calibrated machine.

The door opened and a Min entered, carrying a stack of files. They spoke in quick Korean until Ricky raised his voice and she nodded, bowed her head, and left.

Your Korean is pretty good, I said.

Not as good as my Russian, he said.

And your Russian?

Not as good as my French, but I learned mostly for Proust.

I looked at digital Ricky in his Boston cap with his fake sisters. Strange to know he had come from somewhere. He had seemed the type of person to have arrived fully formed, no hometown, no family, unbound to such paltry notions as flesh and blood. For the first time, I understood there was a time in Ricky's life before Korea. A reason,

perhaps not so different from mine, that he had come: back home, wherever that was, he was not wanted. Because despite the coin and tattoos and chains, he was still a man who counted calories and quoted Proust, and that didn't get you anywhere in America.

I've never read Proust, I said.

I'll save you four thousand pages: the present is worse than the future is worse than the past. But that's just fine for us. Our job is not so different Proust's. Examine a life, distill it, capture the mystery of living all while reconciling childhood with a burgeoning intelligence that can only now reflect on its past experiences. Only we get 650 words instead of one and a quarter million.

He gestured at my notes.

So, he said, tell me about the life of young Clint?

There wasn't very much to tell, I explained. Just what you'd expect. I regurgitated the babble about the violin and Costa Rica and lacrosse positioning, detailing the various ways that Clint had grown or matured or empathized for the first time, but Ricky only shushed me and tented his fingers.

The violin is trash, Shane.

Alright, I said, flipping through my notes. Investment club?

Filth.

I closed my notebook.

I'm not sure what you want, I said.

Yes you are, he said. I want a blockbuster.

These are just his stories, I said. I mean, he's smart, but he hasn't cured cancer or anything. He's just a kid.

And kids don't know shit. If kids understood anything, they wouldn't need us.

I don't disagree with the general notion, I said, but what's there to do? If that's who he is, that's who he is.

No, said Ricky. He is who we say he is.

Ricky swiveled in his chair and looked out the window.

None of the windows on this floor open. Do you have any idea why?

The air conditioning is on.

Because the Republic of Korea, blessed be, has the highest suicide rate among all OECD countries. We like to trade places with Lithuania now and then, but mostly we got it locked down at twenty-three per hundred thousand. Worse among the elderly and adolescents, but not just any adolescents. Our adolescents. Kids who prefer counting pi digits to sheep at bed time. Kids who've squeezed themselves into so many boxes they don't know which end's their asshole. And you're the one who's got to tell them where to shit. You're a writer, an editor, a consultant sure, but you're also someone who needs to get them to believe that their rote, wearisome lives have been worth living. Only then will they believe their lives are worth writing about, in six-hundred-fifty words or less.

Ricky leaned over me and rolled up his sleeves. A gold watch gleamed on his wrist and purple veins pulsed like eager earthworms beneath his skin.

You know how to waltz, Shane? he asked.

No.

Tango, foxtrot, swing?

I did square dancing in middle school P.E.

Because getting these kids to write a good college app essay, it's like dancing. You lead them, but you can't make them move their feet. They'll answer your questions, sure. But you want real thought, something better than soccer taught me to never give up or once I helped a poor kid and now I appreciate what I have, you're going to need to twirl them around the dance floor. Make them love life for the first time. Make them see their experiences as unique, particular, exquisite, vibrant, and not the hollow paint-by-numbers crap it actually is. College admissions, our jobs, are predicated on the lie that everyone is special. But as long as they're our clients, it's no lie. Anyone who can pay gets to be a perfect snowflake from the day their check clears until January first, when we hit send and dust our little hands.

He twirled the coin across his fingers.

College essays are the lowest form of writing outside museum placards. Everyone hates them because they don't say shit. But your essays, Shane, they're going to say something about these kids. They're going to say something about living. God damn it, your essays are going to be fucking literature. So don't fuck around with fucking violin anymore unless grandpa died during his last recital and it taught him what it means to feel. Forget about the gold star. Poke 'em where it hurts. Keep a box of tissues at your desk and make sure they use it. Get me?

Yes, I agreed, I got you.

Good, said Ricky, laying the coin in Sean's hand. Now don't spend it all in one place, sugar. He slid me a stack of files. Names and resumes and a schedule of interviews for the coming week. Spreadsheets with SAT scores and GPAs and prospective majors. Avenues of attack for top candidates, some of whom Justin had worked with at Eclipse

since they were eleven, preparing their applications to elite junior boarding schools, Eaglebrook and Bement and Fay. The files detailed what qualities the students' Significant Experience essays should emphasize, given their resume—humanitarian and physical skills for the science nerds, entrepreneurship and business acumen for the book worms, and, as always, leadership. The papers also contained information on the other essays each student would need to write for the various supplements—the Vision & Goal Essay, linking their proposed area of study with professional development aspirations and past areas of volunteer/extracurricular/internship/competitive experience; the Activity Essay, elaborating on a single serious leadership activity not featured in the other major essays; not to mention the school-specific short essay appendices, including the Letter to Your Future Roommate for Stanford, How Do You Have Fun? for MIT, the 217th Page of Your Autobiography for UPenn, Describe an Unpopular Opinion for Notre Dame, and whatever horrifying, eccentric horseshit the University of Chicago forced their students to vomit onto their application that year in the name of quirk.

I set down the files.

What am I supposed to do with all this? I asked.

He opened the door and guided me out of his office.

I know it's a lot to take in, he said, nodding, his lips tight in an imitation of sympathy. New country, new job. So why don't you take a load off? Relax, make a coffee, and when you're feeling up to it, prep for your interviews tomorrow.

I'm off at six, I said.

Check your contract, he said, smiling at the watchful Mins. Hours are subject to change during the busy season.

When is the busy season?

It’s always busy, he said, and stepped into the elevator. See you tomorrow, sunshine.

BITTERROOT

Opportunity

As we drove back from ice fishing outside Anaconda, my girlfriend saw a dead black bear on the median. Pull over, she told me, but we were already late for class.

When else in your life will you get to touch a black bear?

At Drummond, I pulled off the highway to fill up the truck. We passed Parker's Restaurant, which served 150 different burgers. We argued about bears and death and decency and when I paid she held up my gas cap, which I had forgotten in the bed.

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity, she said.

I got back on 1 south. We passed the Ohrmann museum, and its gargantuan iron animals. A bison. A crane. An enormous grizzly of patchwork steel. He stood on his hind legs and leered at my truck. Inside, grey-haired Ohrmann the younger watched over the sculpture garden his father had tended until his nineties. Usually Open, the sign said, but not today. My girlfriend crouched behind the door of the truck and pissed into the slush.

The bear was another mile up the road. We pulled onto the shoulder. I put on my wool mittens and we ran across the highway. The bear was small and black against the snow. We approached slowly. The bear did not look dead. We circled it, and my girlfriend touched its heel with the tip of her boot.

It's dead, she said.

She knelt down and touched her fingers to the fur. I watched the bear from a distance. Its ears were round and pink. Its balls were huge. She pointed out the curved foreclaws, a trick for telling a black bear from a grizzly. She had learned this from her father, a retired motocross racer who killed enormous mammals with longbows. I stepped

closer. She took the mitten off my hand and pressed it to the bear. Its skin was hard, but the hair was still glossy and thick. A semi passed and blared its horn. I jumped and replaced my mitten. I kept waiting for the bear to stand and drive its claws into my chest.

My girlfriend stood and took my mitten in her bare hand.

It's sad, she said.

As we drove, she told me about Ashville, NC, where she had lived in a share house on Montana Street. They had forsworn money and waste and rifled through restaurant dumpsters for discarded food. Sometimes, strangers called them about roadkill. If the animal was mostly intact, the boys drove into the hills to scrape the asphalt for meat.

So I've tasted bear before, she told me. But I'd never touched one.

At Parker's, full of ground cow, I asked the waitress if anyone had ever eaten all 150 burgers.

She thought for a moment.

Him, she said, and pointed at a man in a corner booth the vinyl red of Coca-Cola. He was in his thirties, thin, no stubble on his cheeks. Not the type of man I would have expected to eat 150 different burgers.

The waitress asked if we wanted dessert. Her husband had been a pastry chef in Paris before retiring to the mountains. We told her we'd best be going but she gave us a slice of cheesecake in a styrofoam box and her husband came out to shake our hands.

Did you know Grand Teton is French for Big Tits? he asked.

As we left, I stopped at the corner booth. A cartoon polar bear drinking soda winked at me from a metal placard. The man set down his burger and looked at me.

150 burgers, I told him.

The man shrugged and bit into a french fry.

I never miss an opportunity, he said.

Tree'd

Another time we were driving through the Nevada desert. It was twilight in alien country. All day we'd passed signs for extraterrestrial jerky. The sun peeked red over distant mountains and onto the dirt and scrub. No cars passed. A billboard bragged we drove the Loneliest Road in America.

I couldn't see. The light was soft and flat. We had no service. My girlfriend asked if I had a spare. I didn't know, I told her.

They sell it to you with a spare, she said.

I don't know, I said. I don't know and I didn't ask.

I was driving fast. We didn't know where we were going, but we wanted to get there. The radio was static and Jesus and Elvis. There was cocaine in the glove box and amphetamine diet pills and two tabs of gel acid we were afraid to take with each other.

Under the bed, she said. That's where they keep it.

I don't have the tools, I told her. Even with the tire, I don't have the tools.

Lights appeared in my rearview mirror. Three cars moving fast. The dust from their wake plumed and caught the light. I remembered what they said about objects and mirrors and closeness. The cars were two-seaters, loud and quick. They lined up behind me like goslings. Then one passed me without signaling. It had Washington plates. I checked the mirror. They all had Washington plates. Matching decals decorated their windows, a geometric tangle of loops and lines, like the cross section of a brain. Then they all turned off their lights. It was not yet dark, but almost dark, the desert pale with lavender and gray, and the cars lavender and gray against the rock. They began to trade places. They pulled in front of me or darted into the oncoming lane and moved from back

to front to back again like children playing red rover. I waited for one of them to slam on the brakes and force us off the road. My girlfriend gripped my leg. She had just painted her nails bright red. I began to sweat or realized suddenly that I had been sweating for hours. I slowed down to let the cars pass me and they slowed down. I sped up to pass them and they sped up. We were four cars doing a hundred through the desert at night with only one set of lights between us.

A jolt of adrenaline shot through my veins. My eyes dilated and my breathing slowed. Dark cars surrounded us on a near invisible road and suddenly I remembered a night, only a few months before, when we'd gone hiking in the Bitterroots. When we'd left, it was night and the roads were icy and black when an elk had stepped into the road. My girlfriend shouted and held up her hands. Elk were killers in that country. But I didn't even slow. I crossed lanes and curved around the bull like a figure skater preparing a Lutz. It was enormous. A trophy buck. The kind a certain type of man waits his whole life to kill. Eight point monarch with a crown of bone, built by God for ripping car doors off hinges. But we swung by with grace, kissing our nose to the elk's stubby tail, and roared off and into the night. My girlfriend cracked a beer and handed it to me and we laughed all the way home, like maniacs who had just been freed. It was then as it was now. I was a man driving a truck with a beautiful girl. Whatever would happen, I would handle.

Then, without warning, the cars sped off. We were doing triple digits and they left us in the dust. I slowed down and caught my breath.

What the fuck was that, said my girlfriend.

Drug run, maybe, I said, though I didn't know what drugs were coming down from Washington.

Aliens, she said.

Then we hit something.

The glove box slammed open. I pulled over. Pills and baggies scattered across the floor.

Are you all right? I asked.

She held up her hands.

I did it, she said. The flat. I talked it into happening.

She looked at her hands, eyes wide with fear of her own power, like a boxer who had just killed a man in the ring.

Fuck, she said, looking at the pills on the floor. All uppers, when what we really need is downers.

I stepped outside and circled the car. The tires were full. I turned to my girlfriend who stared into the desert.

Jesus Christ, she said and pointed.

Lying on the shoulder was a seven-foot wooden oar. It was ancient and thick. Less for rowing than for parting seas. My girlfriend picked up the oar and held it to the taillights, where exhaust condensed like the heavy breath of an injured animal. The oar was solid, barely marked, though its paddle was cracked and the handle was scratched in rows, as if gnawed by some desert dog. I looked around for a sign of anything that made sense. I don't know what I expected. A lost oasis. A boat broken and capsized in the desert. Finally, I looked up at the stars.

What the fuck, I said.

My girlfriend ran her hand slowly along the oar.

What the fuck, she said.

We threw the oar into the truck bed.

A trophy, she said.

But the truck was lame. I started the engine and it shook like an addict going dry. It whimpered and coughed and drifted to the shoulder, as if it couldn't bear to leave. I stopped the truck but I didn't cut the motor.

We have to move, I said. There's no one out here.

My girlfriend nodded.

That's what I'm hoping for, she said.

We limped forward along the Loneliest Road in America and watched the sun set behind the mountains. About seven miles outside a town we'd never heard of, I curved around a rock pass and the truck gave up. There was a jolt and a thud and a smash, like a heavy ceramic plate shattering to pieces. We pulled over. We put on the hazards and walked back up the highway, lighting the road with our phones. A couple hundred feet back we found a steaming chunk of metal still slick with oil, cut smooth in half.

Whatever that is, I said. My guess is we want it on the truck.

We'd passed into service about a mile back. Thank god, I wanted to say, but it felt strange given the circumstances. We got my insurance on the phone and paced the road for landmarks to guide the tow truck, describing the shadows of peaks and valleys we could barely see. The operator said we couldn't ride in the tow cab and told us to get a ride share or call a taxi. We told her we didn't think she exactly understood the situation.

We're in the middle of nowhere, I said.

There aren't taxis in the daytime, I said.

My girlfriend had a tattoo kit in the back. While we waited, she sterilized the needles with a lighter and stabbed a box into my wrist. One big box and a smaller rectangle attached to its spine. It could have been a book, but also a television or a sandwich bag. Or just a box.

By now, we were coming down. I was jittery and wired and exhausted and scared. I knew if I didn't sleep immediately, I'd never sleep again. I got out and went to the truck bed to pop a soda. That week I'd bought six cases of Mexican mineral water because it was cheaper close to the border.

The tow truck arrived and he let us squeeze into the cab though it was against the rules. He was a nice boy, full of energy and Red Bull, and he gave us a tour of the town, pointing out the mine and the state prison. When he finished, he dropped us at the White Pine Motel, where a man with half a thumb cut us a deal. In the morning, we asked about car shops. The clerk and two maids argued about the mechanics in town. They all agreed one was a drunk, but they couldn't agree which one.

In the end, I chose the first guy who answered.

Look, he told me, I can't tell you what's wrong, but I can tell you this. Last guy come in here wants an oil change. Engine's completely shot. But he doesn't listen. Tells me he just wants it quick and cheap and to hell with the engine. All right, I say. Your life. Next day, he gets fifteen miles out into the desert. Boom. Car explodes.

I looked out, past the dog groomer and the gas station, into the endless dry heat.

Well, I said. I wouldn't want that.

We stayed in town five days. Tough to get parts in that corner of the world. Plus the mechanic's son got married that weekend. The mechanic was just glad the new wife had made bail. We angled for an invitation, but he didn't take the hint. As we turned to leave, a man with the name Rocky stenciled onto his shirt walked in smoking a cigarette. He was dismayed to learn the wedding was at three in the afternoon.

You expect me to stay sober until then? he asked.

No, said the mechanic. I just expect you to look it.

Outside, I grabbed a box of mineral water for the hotel and smashed half the bottles on the garage floor, which fizzed the cement clean.

We spent the next week doing coke in the mornings and drinking mineral water in the afternoons before we wandered around the desert. We went to the cemetery to shop for baby names. Alonzo 'Two Hat' Yuley and Christ Orphan. We stopped at his grave. Another day's work done, it said. Then we went to the White Pine museum and saw fossils of the giant short-faced bear, which was twelve feet tall and weighed eleven hundred pounds. We went to a church where the preacher sang songs and played bass drum with his feet and his wife couldn't pronounce the name Zachariah. We were edgy from the coke and the church basement coffee, but we stuck around for the father's day barbecue and told everyone my girlfriend was pregnant so we could get bags of homemade beef jerky. The salads all had mayo. The ribs were plentiful and free.

When we told the locals about the oar, they weren't surprised.

Used to be a lake around here, they told us, as if that explained anything at all.

On our last day, we went to an old fashioned pharmacy and soda fountain. You could get marshmallow syrup added to any drink. The girl behind the counter was sixteen but had gotten her GED that summer and was now attending college online.

We're expecting, we said with a smile, and patted my girlfriend's belly.

You're lucky, the girl told us when we described getting stuck outside town. These hills got lions.

She showed us a picture of a dead cougar draped across her shoulders.

We wait for the snow, she said, and go quadding through the hills for prints. Then the dogs track em and tree em. But that doesn't make it easy. Nothings scarier than a lion's been tree'd.

Tree'd, I thought, sadly. But we'd been oar'd.

I tasted my soda, which was sticky and sweet and more delicious than I'd ever imagined.

That doesn't seem very fair, my girlfriend told the girl. Shooting a helpless thing in a tree.

She flipped through the pictures on her phone and showed us a picture of a dead dog, its throat ripped out and its stomach open.

Lions don't kill cause it's fair, she said. Lions kill cause they're lions.

Then I asked her if she ever saw aliens out this way.

I'm no dummy, she said. No reason for them to bother us all the way out here.

I thanked her, added marshmallow to my soda, and left a five dollar tip.

A few months later, my girlfriend dislocated her shoulder stripping in a pole fitness class. We celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day by driving to a hot spring just across the border in Idaho. On the way, we told elk stories.

Last semester, I said, I assigned my students a personal narrative essay. One girl wrote about a drive she took with a friend out past Darby. They took a corner when a herd of elk crossed the road. The boy driving swerved and caught one hard in the back of the car. It ripped the rear passenger door right off, she said. Two seconds after they got out, the whole car caught fire.

No, said my girlfriend.

It's true, I said. And the thing is, the elk wasn't dead. It just lay in the middle of the road screaming. And all the other elk had left this one sad elk to die alone. So they just stood there, elk screaming, door missing, car on fire, and waiting for someone to get them.

What was the point? she asked.

The what?

The moral of the story. In the essay. What did she learn?

I don't know, I said. I guess that was part of the problem.

Okay, said my girlfriend, I've got one.

I turned down the radio. The station was half static as we passed into the mountains. Since I'd got to Montana I'd started listening to country, but my girlfriend didn't like it much. She said country was the luxury of someone not from here.

Before I left college, she said, the first time, we were cruising back from Lolo. I'd eaten about five tabs of acid and Coco'd probably eaten five more. We'd been out skiing the pass all day and it was five degrees and fucked with snow. You know, I never drive high.

You drove high two days ago.

Sure, she said, but not high high.

She opened the window and lit a joint. It had been raining in town, but as we climbed, the mist turned to light, flaky snow which tumbled through the window. We passed the state line and the valley opened up before us. There were only three colors: white and black and green. Trees like headstones thrust out of the snow and the road twisting along the mountain's edge. She flicked the joint out the window.

Anyway, she said, driving high was Coco's job. She could barely get her car out of the lot sober. But tripping she was Danica Patrick. She was the Matrix meets Ricky Bobby. And this herd of elk materialized in front us. The road was empty and then they were everywhere, pitching and diving like an asteroid field. We were going to die. There was no other way. But Coco jerked the wheel one way and then the other and all of a sudden we were on the other side. And sitting there with the elk behind us I knew for a second that we were already dead. That we didn't dodge the elk so much as pass through them. Like ghosts.

She coughed and pointed out the window.

Pull over.

We parked on the shoulder and crossed the highway to the trailhead. It was two miles through the woods into the hot springs. We crossed a wooden slat bridge that

swayed over the Lochsa. Rafts of ice floated in bands down the river. Two women crossed from the other side. My girlfriend and I had stopped in the middle to take pictures. She posed bent over the rope rail, blowing a kiss from her hand, her arm cradled in a sling.

The women shuffled toward us, tapping their trekking poles across the bridge.

It gets icy about halfway back, said one.

She pointed at my girlfriend.

Careful with that busted flipper.

It took half an hour to reach the hot springs. It was cold and slick but we went slow. At a toy store, my girlfriend had bought a birchwood and steel bird call. Every few minutes she stopped to grind the call, which twittered and whistled into the trees. A chickadee trilled back to us and my girlfriend laughed with glee. When the call went silent, she opened her pocket and removed a pill capsule of powdered rosin.

The label read: A small pinch of rosin will renew the bird call's voice.

And we grinned together about all the poetry in the world that goes unseen.

As we walked, I held my girlfriend by the good elbow. We slipped and flailed down the slope, but I held tight.

Careful of my flipper, she said.

We emerged from the forest into a clearing. The air was filled with steam. The river ran into a soft fen filled with pools excavated into the rock. The springs were packed. Each pool was brimming with bodies and beer cans and joints.

Jesus, said my girlfriend. Where did they all park?

A teenage boy in a speedo walked by carrying an insulated backpack of Coors.

Bros, he said. Beers?

I took one.

What? I said to my girlfriend. It's what MLK would have wanted.

We climbed down past the crowd into our favorite pool.

It's not as hot as usual, she said, glaring at the distant bathers as if the temperature were their fault.

I dunno, I said, I think it just comes out of the rocks.

Lying in the pool, we could not see the others, only the white river and white trees and birds shaking off a fine dandruff of snow. We picked rocks from the bed and searched the appaloosa spotted stones for glints of fool's gold. We discussed a piece my girlfriend was writing on the Thunderbird Motel, whose neon sign glowed red through my apartment window each night. We made plans for a drive that summer to my parents in the east. Yes, driving! we agreed. That was what we were meant for.

But as we got dressed, we got into an argument.

The argument was bad. It didn't have to be, but it was. One of those tsunami fights, where nothing is wrong until the water is already twenty feet high.

I'd been sitting in the pool looking at the mountains. Over my girlfriend's shoulder, a woman was changing. She removed her bikini and stood there naked in the cold. Steam rose all around her. And the whole scene, the steam, the mountains, the snow, the river, the girl, the trees seemed something extraordinary. The hallucinations of a traveler, lost in the snow, granted a last reprieve before he died. Then my girlfriend looked over her shoulder.

Were you? she asked.

No, I said, but it was too late. I explained about the mountains and the steam and the snow, but even to me it sounded ridiculous. Quickly, it was no longer a fight about another woman. It was a fight about how I said things I didn't mean. How I would rather lie than talk about anything difficult. How I didn't listen to or trust her the way she listened to and trusted me. And I kept thinking about the woman and the mountain.

Which was I looking at?

I didn't know.

We only had one towel, so I waited in the pool as we argued. My girlfriend dried herself very slowly. When she was dressed, she packed her things and stood by the trail. The towel was so wet it was barely useable. The damp fabric had already rimed with frost.

You must be very dry, I said, too softly for her to hear.

As she waited an old man approached us wearing only a t-shirt. He was holding a beer and his long, thin cock dangled past his balls like a question mark. He was an architect, he said, who specialized in designing fake waterfalls for hotel lobbies. He had built fountains modeled on these springs in Hawaii, Hong Kong, and Dubai, but had stopped listening. We were impatient to return to fighting. When you believe you are right, what you fear most is losing the anger necessary to prove it.

My girlfriend walked ahead of me. The trail was icy and I struggled to keep up.

Careful, I wanted to call out. Your flipper.

But I was the one who was in danger. I clung to the rocks and trees and slipped on the ice as I fell more and more behind. We argued from a distance, me shouting nothing convincing and her words lost to the wind, only her anger remaining. My girlfriend was

clumsy. She crashed cars and bikes and was the only adult I knew with perpetually scraped knees. But righteousness had made a mountain goat of her. She yelled and scuttled with an adroitness I'd never before seen. I scrambled down a slope knotted with frost and tree roots before I gave up and slid down on my ass. I tore a hole in my pants, exposing the wool long johns beneath. Here was the evidence. She was strong and I was weak. She was right and I was wrong. If I were right, would I not have glided, like Jesus, across the ice?

She waited for me on the bridge. She looked out at the river which stubbornly refused to freeze.

I don't know what to do, she said.

She pulled a vape from her pocket and blew a cloud of smoke.

Say whatever you want, but I know what I know.

So do I, I said, but I was no longer sure. I held onto the rope railing, desperate to remain standing.

We stopped at Jack's Saloon on the way home. It was a good place for the silence after a fight. There was no service and we couldn't check our phones so there was no choice but to make up. Without data, we were too bored to not be in love.

The exposed wooden beams were covered in names and dates. The names were always in pairs. The earliest date was from the fifties, carved into crossbeam twenty-five feet in the air.

How do you think they got all the way up there? I asked.

Didn't you see the sign, she said, pointing. This is Bigfoot Country.

We played pool with two large, ugly men. Scars covered their faces. They were in town for an annual snowmobile race up the pass. My girlfriend was terrible at pool, but that night she sank ball after ball, another sign that she'd been right. The large men bought us drinks and we asked, from politeness, about the race.

Dangerous sport, said one, indicating the scar that cut across his right eye. He clapped me on the back. You think we were born this ugly?

When we left, we dropped a big tip as a thank you for saving us. We got in the truck and my girlfriend held my hand and everything was as it always was except we were so dog tired we could scream.

On the way out, we saw an elk standing beside the road. It was shoulder high. I rolled down my window and let in the cool air. I knew if it stepped into the road, we would die.

So what was the point? I asked her.

The what?

The moral of the story, I said. With you and Coco and the elk. What did it mean?

Oh, she said. That's just for essays.

She stuck her arm out the window and wiggled her fingers.

This is life.

Wild

Out in the middle of Flathead Lake is Wild Horse Island. We went there in the summer. We drove out to rent kayaks in Big Arm.

You don't want to do that, the proprietor said.

She was right.

It was a two hour kayak against the wind. The sun was high and there were no clouds. Most people go in the morning, she had told us. But we were late and the waves were strong. When we arrived we were tired and burnt but the rowing had saved us from fighting. Too difficult to shout over the waves.

We moored our kayaks at an inlet on the southern shore. The water was filled with boats, old men fishing and teenagers drinking. A pontoon shuttle was docked at the shore.

I hadn't really looked at the island yet. A thin forest crept up to waterfront, which was more rock than sand. Steep hills emerged from the dry prairie in the distance. Beyond that, past the island and across the lake, the Missions kept careful watch. They were young mountains, their sharp ridgelines and craggy peaks not yet rounded by wind, the serrated summits still dotted with the frail white of spring snow. Beside me, my girlfriend surveyed the island and dipped her Little Mermaid bandana in the lake, squeezing the cool water over her forehead.

So where are the horses? she asked.

We were dehydrated. We lugged our kayaks onto the beach beside the pontoon. A boy was piloting the boat, nineteen or twenty. We caught our breath and ate sandwiches and the boy told us about the island.

The horses come from the Indians, he said. The Kootenai swam their horses out here every fall to keep them pastured over the winter and protect them from thieves. Then they'd come back in the spring and swim them home.

That's a long swim, I said.

Ayuh, he said. If swimming were guns, they'd still be king.

There were five horses left, he told us. Tiny from inbreeding. Hard to find, he explained, because they were skittish, confused. More feral than wild at this point, moved on and off the island by the Bureau of Land Management to keep the population healthy. Come down to the water to drink in the evenings, but, aside from that, it was like looking for ghosts.

We'll find them, said my girlfriend, finishing her sandwich. I had a vision.

You'll have better luck with the bighorns, he said. Largest in North America.

My girlfriend shook her head.

I'm here for horses, she said.

We walked into the forest and the other tourists disappeared. Ten feet off the shoreline and we were alone. We peered through the trees, alert to any sign of movement, but the island was still. After a few minutes, we emerged into a long, low prairie. The grass, too, we'd heard was endangered. An abandoned ranger cabin stood dilapidated in the meadow. We peered through the windows at a naked bed frame, a busted radio, copper pots green with verdigris, torn runway model pinups, a collapsed wood stove.

As we snooped, we heard a murmur in the grass. Down the hill, dark shapes crossed from the meadow into a copse of trees, where they disappeared. I pulled out my binoculars but my girlfriend ran ahead through the pasture and down the hill.

Come on, she yelled.

I ran behind her. I was wearing sandals, which flapped like duck bills beneath my feet. I passed through the trees and down to the shoreline, where my girlfriend crouched with disappointment

Sheep, she said.

The herd was massive. Rams sprawled on the shore in their harems. They looked like aliens. Their enormous crowns coiled into trumpets of rough, corrugated bone. Their lean, rectangular pupils glittered in the sun. I crept through the trees and filmed the herd with my phone. The ewes ignored me, but a large ram glared as I snapped a picture. He stood and pawed the ground. A reminder that I wasn't supposed to get this close to nature while it was living.

We left the sheep and walked along the shore until we came to a cabin. When the island became a state park several homesteads were grandfathered in. Mostly private homes but also a luxury bed & breakfast for families interested in a unique, off-grid vacation. The cabin was empty. We tried the doors, but they were locked, which surprised us. Wasn't an island protection enough?

When we grew bored of spying, we took off our clothes and lay on the dock. We talked about owning a house, which at that time in our lives seemed utterly impossible. How did one own anything? Impossible to imagine coming out here to sit on the porch and look out on the lake and the forest and the bighorn sheep and think, yes, of course, this is mine.

My girlfriend jumped in the water and I followed. The lake was warm and clear. Perfect water. The rocks glistened like gemstones on the lakebed. Beside the dock, we kissed as spotted brown trout swam around our ankles.

She took my face in my hands.

I want to find a horse, she said.

We dried ourselves off with the mermaid bandana and made a plan. My girlfriend wanted to walk through the lowlands and forest, but I wanted to climb the large hill that we'd seen from the shore.

We'll be able to see the entire island from there, I explained.

My girlfriend shook her head.

That's just like boys, she said. It's big so you have to get on top of it.

It was a difficult climb. The path was steep and cut across the hill in zippered switchbacks until the slope leveled and we ascended along the ridge. I was hot and tired and burnt when we reached the top. My girlfriend lagged behind, picking individual almonds from a baggy, slow from exhaustion as much as spite.

There's no horses up here, she said.

I took out my binoculars and scanned the island for signs of movement. The valley opened up before us, the yellow of the prairie running like paint into the green trees to the lake, which sparkled blue and white in the sun.

Incredible view, I said, offering her the binoculars.

My girlfriend crossed her arms.

Views don't do it for me, she said.

That's crazy, I told her. Everyone likes views.

I'd rather be in it than look at it, she said.

It was getting late. We only had another hour or two before we needed to set off back across the lake. I turned to start back down the hill, but my girlfriend laughed with incredulity.

After all that, we're just going back the same way?

No, I said, looking around. That's a path right there.

But I knew it wasn't. It was just a patchwork of game trails and flattened grass. I walked on anyway, through the brush down the side of the hill, my girlfriend following behind me, jumping from plateau to plateau. The straps on my sandals dug into my feet and the grass and scrub scraped at my ankles. I began to bleed. My girlfriend grabbed me by the shoulder.

We're lost, she said.

No, I said. I know where we are. We're just slowed.

It was getting cooler. The sun set late, but we weren't prepared for a two hour row in the dark. We were barely prepared to row at all. As we reached sea level, we dropped into a sparse pine forest. There was still no path, but the ground was spongy with water and dead needles and we could move without shredding our already battered shins. Quietly, we inched toward the shore, which we could follow back to the kayaks. As we walked, the trees shivered with wind and the soft rhythm of hooves.

Look, my girlfriend shouted, but it was just a mule deer, a single large ear twisting like a radar dish.

Scram, my girlfriend said, this is horse country.

As we walked along the shore we came to a large billboard advertising a lot for sale. Half an acre for five hundred thousand dollars. My girlfriend took a pen from her pack and drew a mustache on the realtor.

Let's buy it and build a house, she said.

With her boot, she drew a floorplan in the dirt. She pulled an invisible hammer from her pocket and pounded invisible nails into invisible boards. She extended her open palm to me.

What's that? I asked.

A construction helmet.

I put it on and clicked on my tool belt.

Okay, I said. Let's buy it and build a house.

As we built, we heard a squeak from a bush. A baby bird lay inside, blind and bald. My girlfriend wrapped it in her bandana, its soft beak peeking out from Ariel's red hair.

It's dying, she said.

Yes, I said, it is.

She set the bird in a branch among a tuft of moss that could have been a nest. We resumed our walk along the shore and my girlfriend took my hand. When I turned to her, I saw that she was crying.

When I was in middle school, she said, we used to jump off these bridges. There were three bridges in town. It was usually fine but every once in a while someone jumped and broke their neck. We all saw Coco Brusseau's father go off in winter and nearly drown beneath an ice drift. But this one time we were swimming off the north bridge and

I found this baby bird on the river bank. I wrapped it up in my shirt and brought it home, hiding it from my parents. For a week, I kept it by a lamp and fed it worms I dug up in the back yard. Then, in the middle of the night, I crept out and left it in a bush behind the shed. In the morning it was gone. It wasn't until I moved away that I realized it probably just got eaten by a fox or a possum. For years, I was sure it flew away.

Then we sat down in the dirt and she lay between my legs. Suddenly, it didn't matter it was getting late. We lay on the rocky, muddy beach and watched the sky grow orange over the most beautiful water I'd ever seen.

Tell me how the horses got on the island, she said.

You already know, I said. They swam.

No, she said. Tell me how they *really* got here.

So I told her that a long time ago, there was a family of horses. And the family was famous for galloping like fire across Montana's plains. But one horse didn't want to be a horse. He wanted to be a dolphin. So one day while his parents were gone he swam out to the island where he met another horse, a beautiful mare, who all her life had felt like a whale. And they stayed out on the island and laughed and played and swam and had children, who are the horses that are still there today, but when people come to look for them, they slip beneath the waves, part horse, part whale, part dolphin, and hide, afraid that their families will force them to return to being just horses, and they stay down in the water, impossible to find.

When we got back to the inlet, it was late and we were too tired to row. The boy was still waiting with the pontoon boat for a few other tourists so we asked if we could

take the shuttle back. Sure, he said. It was supposed to cost money, but he was just on break from college in Arizona, and they didn't give him shit for pay, so what did he care. We tied the kayaks to the back of the pontoon and sat next to a family all wearing identical red shirts that read, The Texas Way.

Can you guess where we're from? asked the father, grinning.

Texas? I said.

Nope, he said. Delaware. But I told the boys we're seeing the country this summer and screw me if Texas isn't just as big as they say.

The boy started the engine and piloted the boat out onto the lake, dragging the kayaks behind us. He flipped down his shades and turned to my girlfriend.

Did you see any horses? he asked.

No, she said.

I told you, he said. He steered the boat toward a distant town, gray and tiny on the shore. But I'll let you in on a little secret. Everyone goes crazy for the horses. Once you're up close, though.

He looked at us seriously. Behind him the sun set and the lake caught fire.

Up close, well, all they are is horses.

Three Places

When I drive out to Flathead, I stop at three places: Windmill Bakery, the Amish Store, and the Garden of One Thousand Buddhas.

1. An old couple runs the Windmill Bakery. They have run the bakery since they moved to Montana almost forty years ago. The bakery is off the highway, constructed in the style of a Swiss chalet. A large white clock runs its hands slowly across the facade. Its gabled roof and wide eaves shade a wraparound wooden deck overlooking a green pond. Across the pond, a dilapidated windmill, yellow paint peeling, sits still. The Windmill Bakery is open Thursday through Saturday, seven to three, though not always those days and not always those hours. If you come early, you can get huckleberry turnovers, huckleberry tartlets, huckleberry muffins, and cowboy cookies. If you come late, you get donuts.

The donuts are served hot. There is only one flavor of donut. They come out of the frier glistening with white glaze. Sometimes, my girlfriend and I wake early to drive the forty minutes from town to reach the bakery before dawn. We drink coffee on the deck and watch the sun rise over the rotten windmill and the algae green pond. We bite into the hot donut. And it is one of those special moments that tortures you because you know, soon, it will end.

Online, the reviews of Windmill Bakery are all five stars except one. This review reads: ONLY ONE FLAVOR OF DONUT!!!!

Janet, the baker, responded to the comment.

I'm sorry you were disappointed, she wrote. It was my mother's recipe. It is the only one I have.

2. The Amish Store is not Amish. It is Hutterite. The Hutterites live on the rez in St. Ignatius at the feet of the Missions. Sometimes, on the way, we pass a single buffalo in a green field. We do not know where the buffalo goes when it is not in the field. In the Amish store, you can buy fresh nut butters and ten pound bars of chocolate. The cashiers wear bonnets and ankle length white dresses with plaid aprons. My girlfriend took me there on our third date. In the store, she excitedly dragged me down the aisles, showing me homemade yogurt pretzels and exotic Hutterite sauces. But I didn't understand; to me, it was just a grocery store.

Then, in the refrigerated section, an old man approached me.

Excuse me, young man, he said, but you look like someone who knows how to use a phone.

He needed help texting a link to a friend. He'd spent all morning trying to send the link. He'd even asked another friend for help, but they did not succeed. I took his phone and showed the man how to copy the link and send it. The link was to an article about the upcoming football season. It said their team was sure to win it all.

See, I told him. Perfectly simple.

I'll never remember all that, he said. But at least this one got to him.

I handed the phone back and looked around. I hoped my girlfriend had seen me help the old man, but I walked through the aisles and she was nowhere to be found. I went outside and saw her sitting alone with a sandwich.

I found out, many months later, that the entire date she was mad at me. I wasn't paying enough attention. I was on my phone too much, texting friends. I didn't understand the magic of the place, which was not just a grocery store, but a strange artifact of a strange land that existed only there at that time for us.

But, outside the store, I took a picture of her. In the picture, she is sitting at a bench beneath a wooden gazebo beside a field of brilliant green. Her little dog runs beside her, his eyes glistening, his tail blurry with movement, wearing a fleece lined denim jacket. The Missions rise like a wave in the distance. Her hair is long, past her shoulders. She is surprised to see me taking the picture. She is smiling.

Looking at the picture, you'd never know we were anything other than happy.

3. The Garden of One Thousand Buddhas has more than one thousand Buddhas. The name represents the thousand Buddhas it is believed will be born in our religious age. Yum Chenmo, the Primordial Mother, sits in blue and gold at a central shrine, from which radiates eight concrete spokes. Each spoke bears one-hundred-twenty-five identical concrete Buddhas reposed in meditation. These Buddhas have surprising names. One is named Giving Flowers. One is Banner of Supernormal Cognition. One is Putting an End to Disease. The eight spokes represent the Noble Eightfold Path, as well as the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. No dogs are allowed.

The garden sits in the town of census-designated place of Arlee, population six-hundred-thirty-six, named for a Salish chief. The Salish arrived in Arlee after they were forcibly removed from the Bitterroot Valley as part of the Hellgate Treaty. Now, volunteers await the completion of the garden, even as the harsh weather reduces the

existing Buddhas to rubble. The volunteers believe that soon the garden will become a major pilgrimage destination for the Western hemisphere, and earn a visit and consecration from Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama. If he comes, he is sure to be greeted by the wild and exuberant strays that occupy Arlee, where the per capita income is eleven thousand dollars. It is not uncommon, upon visiting, to find dead dogs lining the road to the shrine, but inside, the garden is clean. The donation boxes are full.

The garden is most beautiful in winter. A vast valley extends beyond the shrine to gently sloping hills. The wind is brisk and carries snow through the air, depositing a fine white powder alongside coins and toy cars and other offerings on the laps of the small Buddhas, who are undisturbed. When I come, I dust the snow of the brass translations of the Heart Sutra, which famously states: form is emptiness, emptiness is form. This insight, among its many interpretations, argues for the interconnectedness of all things. If I am empty of myself, I may be full of the world, full of you. Another interpretation argues that all we observe and describe, while authentic depictions of ordinary truth, are mere statements about reality rather than reality itself.

Therefore, I will no longer attempt to describe the Garden of One Thousand Buddhas. As always, we must content ourselves with mere statements about reality.

When I Fell in Love

We cut down a tree at Fort Fizzle. My girlfriend said we didn't need a permit.

It's only five dollars, I said.

It's the principle, she said. They don't own these trees.

The number astounded me. Five dollars to cut down any tree in the forest. We walked through the snow holding mittens, pointing at only the largest, most ancient trees.

How about that one? I said, wrapping my arms around a forty-foot fir, my fingers unable to touch. My girlfriend hid in its broad skirt of needles.

How about that one?

We picked a thin pine, homely and plain. My girlfriend pulled a saw from her duffel bag.

No one else will love him, she said.

Where did you get that saw? I asked.

We took pictures. It was my first manual Christmas tree. I posed with the trunk and the saw. My fingers were cold and sticky with sap. Her dog, Tom Snout, ran through the trees and across a frozen stream, sliding on the ice. I took a picture of her squatting behind the severed stump, her bottom bare and white. We dropped the tree into my truck bed. We didn't have any twine.

Will it be all right back there? I asked. On the highway?

My girlfriend shrugged.

Sure, she said. Why not?

As I drove, I checked my rearview mirror. At any moment, I expected the tree to fly from the truck bed. A sedan appeared behind us, a father and two children. The tree

stirred in my mirror and I imagined the branches piercing their windshield, impaling the father through the heart. I hit ninety. Needles blew away in the wind. We passed car after car in the oncoming lane with freshly cut trees tied to the roof. Every time, my girlfriend sighed and shook her head.

Very irresponsible, she said. I can't believe you'd just leave the tree back there like that.

After a few miles we saw a man standing beside his truck on the side of the road. We pulled over. He'd stopped to call his girlfriend about some useless crap and now the engine wouldn't start. I got the jumper cables from a roadside emergency kit her father had given me when we first met.

That's very kind of him, I'd told her after we left his fishing cabin.

Don't you get it? she laughed. Out here, that's an insult.

My girlfriend chatted with the man while I attached the cables. I found his battery and clipped red to red and black to black. My battery didn't have colors so I clipped something to something and started the truck. I sat in the cab and listened to their conversation. He was a bartender up at Lolo Hot Springs. He was heading out there to meet a friend who was in some trouble and had come a long way. Then my battery began to smoke. The man stopped talking and walked over to switch the cables.

Weird, I said out the window. That doesn't normally happen.

After the man pulled away, my girlfriend told me to follow.

He's a bartender, she said. That's a free drink for sure.

We tailed his truck to Lolo Host Springs Bar, Grill, & Casino. Half a billboard advertised cottages to rent. The parking lot was wide and covered in snow. It crept lightly up the slopes thickly coated in evergreens, each only a five dollar permit from death.

I used to come to festivals here, said my girlfriend, looking around. Saw a guy on acid fall into a fire. She pointed at a cabin with a single neon sign that said open. Drinks there, she said and pointed at another cabin. Springs there.

The bar was nearly empty. Two old men sat at the slots picking quarters from a pile. A young woman stood at the bar, a curly haired baby crawling at her feet. We waved at the bartender who poured us something pink on ice. I put some quarters on the pool table and we shot around for a while. The baby yelled and slapped his hand on the floor. He had found a pair of dice and threw them and cried when they didn't come back.

I picked up the dice and held out my hand.

Snake eyes, I said to the baby.

The woman approached us. Her name was Faith and she wondered if we'd like a game. I racked the balls and broke as Faith asked my girlfriend where we were from. My girlfriend named her town, which was small, even for out here. Faith took a drink and turned to me. She had a bruise on her neck. Red scratches covered her arms.

I'm still new here, I said, and passed Faith the cue stick.

Between our feet the baby threw the dice and cried. Faith pinched the cue in her armpit and hoisted the baby onto her hip. Then my girlfriend filled her drink and started asking questions. Faith balanced the baby and lined up her shot. She closed one eye and pursed her lips, but my girlfriend could make anyone talk.

Came from Helena, she said. Wasn't in a good situation.

She struck the cue and sank a stripe.

I could put up with it. But didn't seem good for him.

She jerked her head at the baby, rocked to sleep on her hip. She sank another and popped the boy up her waist, cooing as she circled the table, looking for her shot.

Sensitive, she said. Don't tell me I can't tell that sort of thing yet. Cries at a pin drop. Takes things to heart.

She missed the shot and passed my girlfriend the cue . She pointed at the bartender.

Met Charlie at the Indian Rodeo last year. Said the cabins didn't fill up in winter if I needed a couple nights.

What will you do? I asked.

Work, she said. What anyone does.

She scratched at her chin.

I figure that's not so different, here or there.

We shot back and forth and Faith told my girlfriend the guy from Helena wasn't worth the air in her lungs, but she talked anyway. After a while, my girlfriend made the eight ball and Faith said congrats and gestured at Charlie for a round, but he was talking to the old slots man so she walked behind the bar and poured us all shots herself.

So, she said. Do you want to play for real?

I could tell she was sharking us. That this had been a set up from the start. That the second we walked in she could tell which one of us belonged.

Sure, I said, putting my cash on the table. I'll take you for ten.

The game was over quickly. I sank a ball then she sank eight. I went to the bar and bought a round and the man from the slots walked over so I bought him one too. His name was Huckleberry and he wore a grizzly claw necklace.

People call you Huck? I asked.

No, he said. People call me Huckleberry.

We turned and watched the girls at the pool table. My girlfriend was holding the baby and pressing the cue into his hands. He swung the stick and whacked the balls across the felt. My girlfriend applauded and cheered. The baby excitedly smashed the cue into the table.

You got any? asked Huckleberry.

No, I said.

I got four, he said. Washington, Ohio, Delaware.

I didn't ask about the fourth. My girlfriend bounced the baby across the bar stools. She gave him the dice and when he threw them she cheered and found the dice and helped him throw them again. Huckleberry watched and turned to me.

I'll tell you what, he said. The one thing that matters in life is patience.

He laid his hand on my knee.

That's what makes them stick around. That's what keeps them.

He removed his hand and fished for his drink, nodding at my girlfriend.

You do what it takes to keep her.

I nodded. It was the first time someone had said that to me about her. Some variation of you're a lucky man or she's too good for you. The first time a stranger had believed she was mine, that she might be kept. And that I might let her slip away.

I'll do that, I said.

I finished my drink and my girlfriend and I went outside to smoke a cigarette and walk Tom Snout through the snow. Faith followed, asking to bum, her baby crawling down the icy ramp. His clothes were wet, his nostrils dripping. I passed her a cigarette. In a snowdrift, my girlfriend found a crumpled paper. Inside was a poem about the North Pole and a drawing of Santa.

Christmas magic, she said, and gave the paper to the boy. He cried and threw it to the ground, but my girlfriend picked it up and smoothed it and put it in her pocket. Then we poured our drinks into plastic cups and carried them through the snow to the hot springs across the lot. Inside was a high school gym locker room, wet and tiled and dank. The springs smelled like old egg. We changed into our bathing suits and floated in the water.

Lay, she said, placing her hands beneath my back. I'll show you what the Hawaiians do. And she moved me through the water like a ship, mothering me to shore. We traded places and I held her by the head and waist. She closed her eyes

Did you know I'm really a selkie, she said. Years ago an evil man stole my seal skin. Now I'm trapped in this human form.

Her dark hair plumed behind her like squid ink.

Will you help me find it?

No, I said. I won't help you leave.

We took our drinks to the outdoor pool. The water was cooler but we were alone. We held each other still in the water. Ice crystals formed in our hair. The night had gone deaf. The water was too cold, but the night was blind and deaf and we were alone.

Some time passed and we went back inside. Outside the locker room she slipped and fell on the tile, smashing her hip. She was embarrassed. She made me promise that if I ever told anyone this story, I would leave out her fall.

I promise, I said, lying to her for the very first time.

As we towled off, we discussed plans for our tree. Neither of us had ornaments. That was a thing for families.

Let's go to Walmart, she said, and buy every light in the store.

We made a list. Baubles and garlands and tinsel and tree skirts. Fat naked angels to top the tree. I lifted her dress and squeezed. Already, a giant yellow bruise had formed on her thigh.

I'll tell them you beat me, she said.

We grinned and held hands, but I didn't miss the lesson. The body kept a record of everything that's done.

We paid for our soak and went back to the truck. Outside, Faith stood alone smoking a cigarette. Had she taken two? Or had she always had her own. Inside the bar, the baby began to cry, calling her in from her moment of solitude. She saw us and raised her hand and dropped her half-smoked cigarette into the snow. And as she returned inside, I was overcome by a sense that for her, everything in life was ending, while for us every door was open.

I started the truck and pulled onto the highway.

I didn't strap down the tree.

The whole way home I sped through the mountain dark.

And I knew if death was coming, it wouldn't come for me.

Still the Only Bar in Dixon

Fifty years later, nothing had changed. The only difference was now they had a plaque: designated a property of historic significance by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

We were halfway back from the Yaak. I wore a hat from its most famous bar: The Dirty Shame Saloon. It was Sunday and the weekend wasn't quite through. We thought why not see one more famous place.

Cats littered the lot. A grey, three-legged tom and a brood of kittens. My girlfriend pet the cats but they were all points, a throng of teeth and claws.

Outside, smoke hung in the air. The fires had crept in like ants, marching to our door. All day our phones had pinged with pictures of red suns and ash. We were safe despite the sky. The flames were distant. The danger was cosmetic. We coughed and covered our noses, but we knew hot air meant beer.

We stepped inside. The bar was dark and filled with forgotten trophies: an old motorcycle, a wooden leg, a striped barber pole. Smoke filled the bar and I thought the fires had arrived until I saw the large woman in the corner building a tower of butts.

I coughed and sat on a red vinyl bar stool, partially disembowled, its yellowed upholstery spilling out onto the floor. I ordered two Rainier and looked around at the walls, covered in signs that said things like, No Working During Drinking Hours. We'd heard not to ask about the poems. We'd heard that asking about the poems was asking for trouble.

From the piled junk, a grey kitten jumped onto the bar. Its eyes were bright blue. It played with our coasters, tearing at the wet paper. My girlfriend gave the kitten a dime.

It pushed the coin across the bar, jumping, startling itself, shooting into my girlfriend's arms. She cooed at the kitten's pink belly and asked the bartender how long she'd had the place.

My husband's bar, she said. Can't make the walk now.

She cracked a beer. We sat there together quietly as my girlfriend played with the cat, pulling it across the counter by its tail. It batted its paws and tried to draw blood. She pat its head and looked out the window, almost opaque with dust.

The smoke is bad today, she said.

The woman nodded.

Makes you thirsty, said the woman and raised her can.

We raised ours.

Nowadays, after two, I only drink beer, she said. For my health.

Oh, yeah, I said. Sure.

A couple years ago, she said, I was behind the bar and had a splitting headache. There was a nurse in here. She told me ninety percent of headaches are dehydration. So I drank glass after glass after glass of water until I feinted and nearly cracked my head. Woke up in the hospital half dead. Water poisoning they told me. I couldn't believe it. Water isn't anything at all. Nearly destroyed my kidneys. They told me to take it easy on the Perrier. I told them I worked at a bar. Avoiding water shouldn't be a problem.

She sipped her beer and looked around the bar.

Anything's poison if you got enough of it, she said.

We all raised our cans again and fell quiet. After a moment she sighed and looked at us.

I guess you want to see the poems, she said.

Yes, I said. If you don't mind.

She pointed at the corner. All three poems hung on the wall. Written half a century before as a challenge to three famous poets, to make something grand out of a place like this. The poems were published in a well-known magazine. Now, people like us came to take a look.

Did it help at all? my girlfriend asked. Getting customers.

People come and have a beer and leave, said the woman. I don't mind. I'll take anyone's money.

She lit a cigarette.

You can keep being famous, she said. I'll take being rich.

Then the grey kitten bit my girlfriend. She swore and dropped the cat as her finger began to bleed. The woman came around the counter and gave her a dirty bar rag. The cat purred and rubbed itself against her leg. My girlfriend blotted the wound and asked for the bathroom. The woman shook her head.

Take the sink, she said. What's in the bathroom's no good for a bite.

My girlfriend cleaned the wound and wrapped it up in a paper towel. I took a picture of the poems and the cat and my girlfriend at the sink, flipping me off with her good hand. She dried her hand on her jeans.

We'd better get going, she said.

The woman nodded.

Give us a call if that thing swells up on you, she said.

She smiled and watched us out the door, already forgotten. We were just like everyone else: one beer and gone.

We walked to the truck. The smoke had come closer, the sky now a vibrant pink. We checked our phones. No danger, they assured us. Nothing to fear.

I started the engine and pulled out of the lot. I got back on the highway and as I drove off I looked down at my phone for the picture of the famous poems.

Home, one writer had said of the bar, but we were just passing through.