LIGHT LIKE GUNSHOTS: STORIES

by:

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EPIGRAPH:

“Call no man happy till he is dead.”

- Aeschylus

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I.

Chucklehead rents an apartment in Brooklyn where Al Capone used to live. He says that Capone's spirit haunts the building.

I say the only spirit that exists is the spirit of Chucklehead's landlord trying to scare up the three months past due rent. I tell him that eviction is a very real thing. That the landlord will not think twice about changing the locks. Put his shit on the street. It's not like he has a car for collateral. Poor bastard.

Chucklehead chews on the end of a stick of pepperoni as he tells me about shit. He tells me that sometimes late at night he can hear Capone whistling in the front hallway near the kitchen. He says he's not sure of the song, but it's in perfect pitch.

I mention to Chucklehead, casually, that Capone didn't die in Brooklyn, but in Florida of syphilis, instead.

He says that when a person dies the spirit doesn't haunt the place where he or she died, but the place where he or she was born, instead.

First, I tell the prick to stop saying *he or she*. Then I double-back on our conversation and ask him when he plans on paying his rent again.

Chucklehead tells me that I am arguing semantics.

I ask him where he learned that word.

He tells me to fuggetaboutit.

I ask him if Deirdre has filed the divorce papers yet.

He whistles an unfamiliar ditty, hideously so and out-of-tune.

I tell him that divorce is a means to an end and something he should consider.

He says that Al Capone said the same thing about booze and Prohibition.

II.

His name, in actuality, is Charles, but when we were kids he was given the name Chucklehead. When he'd laugh his whole head would bobble like one of those bobblehead dolls. I would have called him Bobblehead, except that a kid three blocks over already had that name. I have no idea what that kid's real name was, or even how he got Bobblehead.

Regardless, an unique identity is important to a child and to prove all is fair in love and all that bullshit, my nickname came later that year. I drank rotten milk from one of those school-issued cartons and threw up all over myself. Chucklehead gave me the name Milk Boy. Chucklehead and Milk Boy and that was that.

III.

I stand on the bottom step of the stoop to his brownstone building.

Chucklehead locks the front door; turning the knob like a madman, quadruple checking.

"Seriously? It's locked, man."

"It doesn't always."

"You never did answer my question—how are things with Deirdre?"

"You should ask her."

"Where is she staying?"

"Hungry? I'm hungry."

"Did she move out for good? Did she move upstate?"

"I think I want Chinese. I have a hankering for an egg roll."

"Is this, like, a trial thing? What's the word—separation? Or is it dead in the head?"

"Beef with garlic sauce. Wonton soup. And some pork dumplings."

"Deirdre, bro." I clap my hands together. "What is happening with that?"

Chucklehead grabs my shoulder. "Drop it," he says. Then, "Chinese."

IV.

I call Kitty at work to let her know I am eating Chinese with Chucklehead, but her office line is busy. I dial zero for her secretary, the only secretary in the office—Kitty's own business.

"Brooklyn Real Estate Solutions. Good afternoon, this is Jeannine speaking."

Jeannine is a single parent, mother of three, and has been Kitty's secretary for the past three years. I've had more than the casual sexual fantasy about her, so much so, in fact, that I've had to physically stop going in to the office—out of sheer embarrassment that she knows about my fantasy, like she can smell it on me or see it in my face. The fantasies have become annoyingly repetitive, yet somehow not completely predictable. Usually it involves one of those leather sex swings, a leopard-print feather duster, and a jar of maraschino cherries with stems. She's not your ideal fantasybang girl—not terribly tall, not terribly thin, not terribly attractive, stringy hair, and frumpy clothes—but for the past year it's been all about her and uncomfortably often.

"Jeannine. Hello."

Sex swing.

She tells me Kitty's out and won't be back in the office.

Leopard-print feather duster.

She tells me Kitty will be calling in for her messages.

Jar of cherries.

She asks if I want to leave a message or try her cell.

With stems.

"Gabe? You there? You want to try her cell?"

"I don't want to bother her. Just tell her that I am thinking about her even on Sundays."

"Even on Sundays?"

"It's a saying. A thing. Something I say," I say. "Just jot it down."

"Will she understand it?"

"She'll expect it."

"When can we expect to see you again? It's been a long time."

Before I have a chance to answer, Chucklehead says, "nope," and slaps my cell phone out of my hand, the phone bouncing across the sidewalk into the wet gutter.

"If there is an explanation, I'd love to hear it," I say.

"Phone taps."

"Is this that whole Capone thing again?"

"For real." Then, points to the sky. "Satellites."

"Not for real. For fake." I pick up the phone and dry it on my jeans. Jeannine is still talking, but can't figure out what the hell she is going on about, so I say, "Jeannine? Hello? Can you hear me?"

She says, "I can hear you just fine."

Chucklehead reaches for my phone again and, blocking him with a stiff arm, I say, "Jeannine? Hello? Hello? Hello? Why can't she hear me?"

V.

Chucklehead and I work as collections agents for a collections company in midtown Manhattan—a crumbling four-story building off of Times Square. Our job, as ridiculous as it seems, is to sit in a cubicle and call random people, asking them to pay their hefty debt.

Before lunch, I call a woman who owes eight hundred dollars on her credit card. With lovely diction and a seemingly sweet demeanor, she answers and I ask for a Ms. Templeton. The woman waits a beat before hanging up. I call her back, but the phone goes to voicemail. My message is, resoundingly, three words: Please pay us.

I grab my brownbag lunch—two slices of leftover cheese pizza—and walk to the staff lounge. Chucklehead, who works in the cubicle next to me, follows behind, whistling an unfamiliar tune. He wears a white button-down shirt under a grey pinstriped vest with matching suit pants.

"You look like a New Yorker cartoon?" I say, taking a bite of my slice.

"Look at me when I am talking to you." He towers over me.

"But you didn't say anything."

"What am I invisible over here? Look at me."

"This is me. Looking at you. And you. Didn't say anything."

Chucklehead laughs, his head bobbling around, his cheeks jiggling like Jello. He slaps the pizza from my hand, which hits table and flips to the carpet, cheese-side down. Damn.

Another collections agent and two secretaries look up from their newspapers and magazines. I have never fantasized about either of the secretaries—Carla or Peter. I have tried

to fantasize a three way—Jeannine, Carla and me—but no cigar. Always ends up back on Jeanine—pun intended.

"I said fucking look at my eyes when I talk to you." Chucklehead breathes heavy—garlic and something else. Sardines.

"Like I said, you didn't say anything."

Chucklehead hurdles plastic chairs, like an Olympian, grabs a fistful of my hair and lifts me out of my chair. "I'm going have you and your whole family whacked," he says. "You hear me? WHACKED."

The collections agent drops his sandwich. Peanut butter and jelly. Sad.

The two secretaries freeze and stare.

"This isn't a Scorcese film," I say. "Easy up on the hair, Chucklehead Corleone."

I stomp on his feet until he lets go.

VI.

Peter knocks on the bathroom stall—witness protection—and hands me my slices. Holding both like Lady Justice, I ask him if he knows which one fell on the floor.

"With all due respect," he says. "That's all you want to know?"

VII.

After work, I run into Chucklehead crossing 53rd Street.

"I'll fight back," I say, lifting fists to my face.

"I don't want to fight you."

"I mean it. I'll clock you cold." I shake them.

"Are those your *dukes*?"

"Sledgehammers," I say.

"Look, Milk Boy, I'm sorry. When I woke up this morning I was Capone," he says, looking around like the FBI was listening. "He must have entered my body while I was asleep."

"If you're Al Capone, you know what that makes me?" I ask. "The ghost of Eliot Ness?"

"Not a joke," he says. "It happened. He entered me."

"Like," I say, making a sexual gesture pumping my hips. "Entered you?"

"Am I a clown? Is this funny?"

"You want my advice? Move to a different apartment," I say. "Maybe one formerly owned by less violent people. Like Martin Luther King or Ghandi. Hell, move in with me and you can become the old man that used to live in my apartment. He owned his own moving company." I lower my sledgehammers. "Don't expect me to start calling you Scarface."

Chucklehead tells me that Capone once killed for calling him Scarface.

"Good thing you don't have any scars," I say.

"Let me buy you a coffee," he says. "To make amends."

"Fine," I say. "But no funny business."

In the restaurant, Chucklehead asks for a menu, tapping a finger over the items as he orders. "Eggplant parmesan hero with extra marinara sauce and a side of fried calamari and a quarter-cut of fresh mozzarella." He says *mozzarella*, but sounds like *mootz-a-rell*.

I order an espresso.

"You want the calamari out first or with your hero?" The waitress licks the tip of a pencil before she scribbles the order on her pad.

"Just bring it out when it's ready."

"It'll be ready at different times."

"WHEN IT'S READY!" Chucklehead grips his silverware in fists and bangs the table. The empty plates rattle against glasses of water and empty coffee saucers as the waitress walks off to bus an empty table nearby.

"Seriously, Charles, your bananas," I say, re-parting my hair in my reflection in the napkin dispenser.

"Charles?" Deirdre sits at a table with another man, frankly, a good-looking dude with sideburns. "Are you stalking me?" she asks.

"Oh, wow." Chucklehead's Capone *thing* generously disappears, as the Charles I know burns back into focus. "Hey, Deirdre."

"Charles, were you outside my house last night?"

"I haven't been myself lately."

"Literally," I say, sipping my espresso. So good.

"Is that why you're dressed like a gangster?" she asks. "You look ridiculous."

"Please come home." Chucklehead sounds more like Charles than ever before.

"Want to go, babe?" Sideburn touches her arm. He chews on a toothpick.

"Who was talking to you, Sideburns?" Chucklehead gestures with his hands like a cliché.

"Don't listen to him," Sideburn says. "He's obviously cracked."

"Cracked?" Capone stirs. "I'll fucking crack you upside your fucking sideburns."

Deirdre swings her purse over her shoulder before pulling back the chair of a little boy.

"Jason." Chucklehead simmers down the Guinea. "Didn't see you there, buddy. How's my big boy?"

A fat plate of fried calamari slides onto the table in front of Chucklehead that knocks a glass of water into his lap. Waters runs everywhere.

Sideburn ushers Deirdre and Jason out of the restaurant.

The waitress apologizes and brings a dishtowel to soak up the water.

Chucklehead finally looks up, but can't find his family. To me about the waitress, he says, "Fucking broads." He pinches a cluster of calamari into is mouth. "I need to get me a good goddamn whore." He says *whore*, but it sounds like *who-er*.

VIII.

I am playing solitaire in bed when Kitty gets home.

She says I shouldn't have waited up, something she's been saying a lot lately.

"I wanted to win one," I say, placing a two of hearts on a three of clubs. "I would have gone to bed if I had won."

"I always win when I play that game." Kitty undresses in the bathroom with the door closed and turns on the shower.

"You'll never guess what happened today." I flip through the cards in my hand one more time, before I bust. "I think Deirdre is dating a new dude."

Kitty says something and I walk to the bathroom door.

Steam fogs the room. It reminds me of a horror movie, full on expecting an axe to split the air as it flips end over edge into my head. I poke my head through the steam and see her clothes folded on the toilet seat.

She is on her cell phone in the shower, the water wetting her feet. Her hand traces the caulk between the white tiles on the wall. "I had fun too," she says.

IX.

We used to watch live music at a Japanese jazz club in the Kitano Hotel at 38th and Park. After the show, we'd sit on a gold bench in the lobby and wait for the doorman to hail us a cab. Kitty would rest her head at my shoulder. We don't do that anymore.

X.

I wake early the next morning to watch Kitty sleep. Didn't dream about Jeannine last night. First time in weeks. I wonder if she gave Kitty my message.

I ask Kitty if she's happy.

She snores in soft sighs.

I ask her if she still loves what we have.

She rolls away from me and says the word *holiday*.

I make coffee and bring her a cup.

"You were talking in your sleep," I say.

"You were watching me?"

"Does it matter?"

"What'd I say?"

"Holiday?"

Kitty stops blowing steam from the surface of her coffee and walks into the bathroom, locking it behind her. I crawl under the covers and whip up Jeannine. I can almost feel the stems of the maraschino cherries.

XI.

I meet Chucklehead for lunch in Brooklyn and he tells me that he only eats pasta now. He says that DeNiro ate pasta for every meal to gain weight to play Capone in *The Untouchables*. Chucklehead orders linguini with an Alfredo mushroom cream sauce and fresh imported prosciutto.

I order the Chef Salad.

Through the window, I watch a father teach his son how to ride a bicycle in the street. He holds the seat and runs behind the boy whose feet barely touch the pedals.

"Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*," I say.

"It was definitely *The Untouchables*."

"Six dozen of one, really."

"Whichever it was, I want to be committed like that," he says, scratching a prosthetic scar stuck to the skin, stretching from his nose to his left eye. When our food is served, he asks the waitress if his scar is on crooked. "If it's on straight, it's no good."

"Why not commit to making amends with Deirdre?" I ask.

Chucklehead lowers his face to his plate, slurping up the linguini. Alfredo sauce splashes across his cheeks. He gulps from a goblet of wine. The white napkin tucked into his shirt catches the residual splatter.

"Don't you care that you don't see your son anymore?" I stab at an egg in my salad. The hard-boiled yolk pops out of the white and hides beneath a slice of cucumber. "That you have this whole personality crisis-thing going on?" I point to his scar with my fork, a piece of lettuce stuck in the prongs.

"These two clowns outside better not scratch my car." Chucklehead wipes garlic bread across his plate and rips a section off in his mouth.

"Since when do you have a car?"

The father, still trying to teach the son to ride a bike, lets go again as the boy navigates the sidewalk, the bike in a wino-wobble.

"Charles, how did you know that Deirdre was cheating on you?"

"You think Kitty is outside the marriage?"

The boy's helmet slides over his eyes.

"I don't know how to know for sure."

The handlebars cut left, driving the nose into a parked black Cadillac.

"Fucking mut." Chucklehead stands, dropping a roll of twenties on the table. "MUT." Chucklehead or Capone, not sure which, but definitely not Charles, approaches the father who is checking his son for injuries.

I step between them, pushing Chucklehead back, feeling a thickness in his chest. I guess the bastard really is only eating pasta.

"You call yourself a father? You," he says, wheezing. "Are dead."

"Now you're just being ridiculous," I say.

"Dad, why is that man's face so red?" the boy asks. "He looks like a red balloon."

"He thinks he's a hoodlum," the father says, moving his son to a nearby stoop before returning to Chucklehead. "Some wiseguy."

"Got something to say to me, pencil dick?"

"No one threatens my son," the father says.

"I am protecting your son. From you."

My hand now on the father's chest too, leaner than Chucklehead, I say, "Okay, Charles. Okay, sir. Let's take a minute. Just one minute. To think this out."

Chucklehead swings wide with a wild right that misses the father completely, but catches me square on the nose.

Both men watch as I stumble back like a boxer on the ropes. I tap my nostrils, but don't see any blood. My legs quake, before giving out altogether. I reach for the trunk to catch myself, but misjudge and, instead, plop down into the gutter.

All I can think is, how the fuck did Chucklehead get a Cadillac?

XII.

At work I speak on the phone with a college kid about the balance on his credit card.

"You're not listening," he says. "I can't pay it."

"Not even half?"

"Not even," he says. "Not ever."

"What *can* you pay?"

"It's the reason I have the credit card in the first place, sir. To pay for shit," he says. "If I could pay with *real* money I wouldn't need the stupid thing."

"Twenty-five percent of the balance and we'll eat the rest."

"I can't pay twenty-five cents."

"Ten percent?"

"Five."

"Sold," I say, peeking over the top of my cubicle.

Chucklehead exits the elevator with three men flanking him, each larger than the next. They walk past Chucklehead's cubicle and stop at mine. He waves the men back with a snap of his wrist, then sits on my desk. He rests his wrists on his knee and presses his finger to the phone, ending my call.

"I was negotiating," I say.

"Federal wire tap," he says. "They're all bugged," he whispers.

"He was going to pay, Charles."

"They never pay. They say they will, but they don't."

"Fan club?" I point to the men.

"Formal introductions. Parm—because he puts Parmesan cheese on everything. Killer—because he's deadly with a gun. And Tiny," Chucklehead says, straightening his necktie. "Tiny for obvious reasons." To be fair and for all practical purposes, Tiny is an elephant of a man.

"I'm not going anywhere with you or your hoods."

"This place isn't safe."

"You're not safe."

"Five minutes. All I ask. You're going to want to hear what I have to say," he says, snapping his fingers.

Coworkers peek over their cubicles as I am ushered out of the office by Capone and his enormous henchmen. They smell like Old Spice and raw meat.

Tiny, Parm and Killer force me into the Cadillac parked outside. They burn the engine and cut out into traffic.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"We got a rat in the house," Capone says.

"In case you haven't noticed, you're fucking nuts," I say.

"Don't be crass," he says. "It makes you sound slow."

"I can't buy what you're selling anymore," I say. "You're selling damaged goods."

"This thing of ours is only as strong as our hearts." He adjusts my shirt.

"*This thing of ours*? Is it Cosa Nostra week on A&E?"

"Your wife, Kitty, I'm sorry to say, is a rat."

"How?"

"This is an unappealing shirt on you," he says.

"Who? Who is the guy?"

"Who is your tailor? That is the real question." He snaps his fingers again at the henchmen and points to a street. "Make a right," he says. "Handmade suits. They're a thank you from a guy I did a thing for some time back."

All five of us enter the shop, welcomed by a migraine-inducing chime.

"Charles. Tell me what you know about Kitty."

"Vincenzo," Capone says to the tailor. "My dago friend. Where are they?"

"I'm sorry, sir," a bearded man with red hair says, looking at me, then to Capone. "My name is Ronnie and, not to be rude or anything but, I have no fucking idea who you are or what the fuck you are talking about."

XIII.

At home, I call Kitty's cell.

"When will you be home?" I ask.

"Don't bother. I have dinner plans with a new client," she says. "A business man is looking to invest in some commercial real estate."

"It's not Chucklehead, is it?"

"Oh, Christ! I hate that name," she says. "Why would I eat dinner with Charles?"

"You hear about Deirdre?" I ask. "She left him."

"Can't say I blame her."

"She won't let him see Jason."

"Clean break."

"How is that clean?"

"Cut out the cancer."

"He's in rough shape. You should have seen him today. He thinks he's someone else."

"He'd be better off as someone else."

"How can you say that?"

"How can you stand that?"

"I don't understand you anymore."

"You never really have," she says.

XIV.

The next morning I walk the few blocks to Chucklehead's building.

The hallway and stairs smell like take-out and ammonia. His apartment is empty of everything, except for a mattress on the floor and a gutted rotary phone in the corner, its insides dangling out.

Charles stands in his kitchen wearing only his red robe, open in the front. His sides show much of the new weight he's packed on, thick rolls of fat down to his barrel-like gut. I step closer and see a divorce document, a stack of stapled papers with a yellow backer. He turns to face me, revealing the new change—a cut under his left eye, a zigzag line from his nose to his ear. Blood streaks down, but not nearly as much as I expected.

Charles says, "It's time to go to the mattresses."

XV.

Jeannine and I stare at each other, while Kitty finishes up a conference call.

Jeannine wears a black pants suit with a blue blouse and sips from a coffee mug with the photo of her three kids on it. Over their picture reads: Mom Rulz.

I keep my hands folded in my lap like a good little boy..

Kitty's door opens. She peaks out, a headset stuck over her ears, a microphone by her lips. She waves at me, then to her ear and her mouth, ending with a sharp finger to the door.

Jeannine shrugs.

Kitty says, "Egregious. Rectify this or the deal is dead."

XVI.

Chucklehead invites me over to his apartment to play cards. He wears a tuxedo and looks like a link of spicy Italian sausage. His self-inflicted wound on is face is now a scab, but with a little help will soon become a real scar. Chucklehead's sweat forms in penny-sized drops on his forehead. He has thinned out his thick black hair to reveal a balding crown.

I tell him that unlike most bald men, his hair will grow back.

Six women in black dresses drink martinis and smoke cigarettes in his living room.

"Milk Boy, walk-and-talk," he says, taking me into the kitchen. "I am resurrecting a once powerful and influential organization—the Brooklyn Rippers."

"You're starting a gang?

"An organization," he says.

"Why don't you tell me what you know about my wife?"

"Not starting, so much as resurrecting." He sips espresso from a tiny cup and holds the saucer, careful not to clink.

"How far are you gonna take this Capone thing?" I ask. "Did you know Capone died of syphilis?" I point to the whores in the living room, singing along to some Sinatra song.

"I hate to be the one to do this, but I have some bad news," he says. "Your bitch of a wife is cheating on you. A fucking rat."

"What did you say?"

"I had my men check her out." He snaps and the fat henchmen appear. "Tiny was the one to bring this matter to my attention."

"Yes. This is true. I am the one," Tiny says in a shitty Italian accent.

"Tiny, is it?" I am awash in the irony of it all. Tiny he is not. "Tell me, Tiny, what did you see, exactly."

"I saw your bitch of a wife with her foot on another man's *cacchio*."

"*Cacchio* means penis in *Italiano*," Chucklehead says, dabbing his new baldness with a handkerchief.

"You don't speak Italian," I say, waving my hands like I'm flagging down a cop.

"Something needs to be done about this," Chucklehead says. "*Capisce*?"

I point to Chucklehead's hand. "Are you seriously wearing a pinky ring?"

XVII.

Tiny tells us it's a sushi bar on the Upper Eastside, but when we get there it's not. It's a Japanese jazz club—the Kitano Hotel.

A woman sings standards under a white spot of light while a man accompanies her with an expert piano. The five of us stand in the back and survey the room for my wife when Capone grabs me by the neck and points me in the direction of Kitty.

"I can't see her foot, but I bet I could tell you what it's on," he says.

Kitty and an unfamiliar man kiss over a tea light in the corner.

"Fucking whore," Tiny says.

Who-er.

"He's right," Chucklehead says. "A whore she is."

Who-er too.

It takes Kitty a moment to realize who she is looking at—*me!*—but when she does—*your husband!*—she says, "Fucking Jeannine told you, didn't she."

"Jeannine?" I ask.

"She told you."

"She knows?"

Even my fantasybang has betrayed me.

The man sitting across from my wife says, "Kate, you know this clown?"

"This clown," I say, "is her husband."

"Easy, pal," he says, standing. "Let's not make this awkward."

"I'm her husband." I raise my sledgehammers, right to my face.

"Let's not make a scene."

"Kitty?" I ask.

"Kate?" he asks.

Kitty, giving up and giving over to the scene, watches the woman sing and says, "God, I used to love this place."

Her date feints a punch, before releasing a one-two combination to my chest and chin, propelling me, surprisingly, forward, settling into a sad slump at his feet.

Feet shuffle next to me as I roll out of their way.

Tiny throws a table aside, candle wax slopping to the floor. Parm and Killer play control the crowd, keeping them back. The hoodlums are embroiled.

Capone walks up to the man, my wife's date, like a Roman Catholic receiving communion from a priest. Capone says, "You're a fucking rat, you know this?"

"Who are you?" he asks, looking for me on the floor.

"Before we begin," Capone says, smiling. "I want you to know something. You will not enjoy even a moment of this." Capone chokes the man with his thick hands, taking moments to slap him hard across the face. "Fucking his wife. What kind of man does that?"

The man scratches Capone, gunning for his eyes, his scab, but is unsuccessful at an escape.

Capone lifts the man, body slamming him onto a table, forcing his forearm across the man's throat like a knife lopping off his head. Their combined weight forces the table legs to snap, collapsing in a crash of bodies and broken furniture. Capone crawls on top of the man, using his new weight to pin him to the floor.

The man gags for air, his hands searching for a weapon on the hardwood floor, but only finding broken glass.

"Fucking my wife." Capone kneels on the man's chest, thumping his neck and chest and head with fat fists. "Playing father to my son. Playing house."

The man covers his head with his arms. His voice goes horse from the screaming.

Capone stops and stands and stomps the man with the heel of his boot. "This. Is not. Your life. You. Are not. Me."

The man goes silent and still, his arms dropping away from his face, losing the fight and control of his own faculties.

Capone, a heaving sweaty mess, steps away from a pool of urine from the man on the floor and looks into his hands splotched with another man's blood. He wipes them on his shirt. Thick red stains smear down his chest. "I need to blot this with club soda before it sets."

Police officers appear and wrestle Capone, who is at the bar blotting his short with a cloth napkin dipped in club soda, into handcuffs and read him his rights.

Medics hustle into the bar to attend to the man, a puddle on the floor. They do some medical tricks with smelling salts and hand-pump respirators before the man comes to again.

He thanks Heaven he's alive, but feels like Hell.

Capone lies on his side, his hands behind his back, suit wrinkled. His wheezing increases.

A cop says Capone has the right to an attorney. That one will be appointed for him, if he cannot afford one, which I know he can't. The cop then asks Capone if he understands his rights. I think he means Capone's parental rights, as in seeing his son, Jason.

Capone tempers his bark and before they guide him into the back of a patrol car, almost inaudibly, he says, "Please, I can't breathe."

XVIII.

In the lobby of the Kitano Hotel, I sit on a gold bench, waiting to be interviewed by the police. Kitty stands nearby, waiting to be released.

"I still love you," I say to Kitty. "Even on Sundays."

"This was the last nail in our coffin," she says.

I don't see the doorman anywhere.

XIX.

Charles sits on the stoop outside his brownstone in a tight t-shirt barely covering his gut and jeans unbuttoned at the waist. He no longer wears any pinky rings, his bald spot has a thick shadow, and the scab under his eye continues to heal. He has lost some weight, noticeably in his face. His house key sits in the lock of the door below a public eviction notice posted outside.

A mattress lies in the street, parked where his Cadillac should be, an evidence bag of Al Capone's clothes on top. I kick the bag into the gutter and lift up a corner of the mattress, steering it onto the sidewalk. Charles approaches, presses his palms together on either side of the open end, and lifts with his legs.

"I'll never make it to your apartment without wheezing," he says.

"A new reality," I say.

The End is Bear
J.R. Angelella

Exterior—Christian County Cornfield.

A bolt of lightning killed my wife.

She was a photojournalist, covering the negative effects of global warming on Midwest farms. I tagged along, an unemployed and undisciplined screenwriter, writing a never-ending script, about death and its existential companion grief. Going on four hundred pages, the bear didn't have a title. It hibernated in a cardboard box, waiting to be fed more words. After I'd finish every new section I'd write the words **THE END IS NEAR.** Joke was on me—the end never came.

We had been in Christian County only a week, eating at local diners, floating through pawnshops like ghosts haunting graveyards, absorbing the nature of a small town, the nurture of America. She was a method photojournalist, much like an actor, sucking in her surroundings like a sponge, transferring that energy to an image captured on film. She called what we were doing now seeking the tangible nature of freedom.

Interior—Bed of Endings.

We had sex every day.

She called it *mating*—two animals charged with the ambiguity of self, seeking out the companionship of another in flesh. There were never outfits, or lubricants, sex toys or props. Only two bodies, twisted together in unbearable heat.

I called it *ending*—inevitable, a lovely death.

She would climb up from the foot of the bed like a tiger, pinning me down with her hands, calloused from handling her camera equipment. I would flip her onto her back and slide down her smooth skin, kissing section after section of her familiar body. I would go down, sucking at her, lapping at her. We devoured each other, wholly, our teeth tearing at nipples and bends of flesh. Sex was, like the local Christian County farmers said of their fields, a ritual of celebration to the gods for the bounty of companionship.

My husband, my wife would whisper.

My wife, I would whisper back.

Interior—Hotel Room.

The day she died I waited for her in our hotel room.

I cooked up a fresh batch of words to calm and quell the bear in the box, but stopped when I began writing the same sentence over-and-over: My god, will this ever end?

On television, there was a game show marathon. I became a contestant over time, testing my collective knowledge of Americana, question after question. If my math was correct, which I'm sure it was, I had won sixteen million dollars.

Evening came and my wife never came back to the hotel. I called her phone and it rang, perfunctorily, until finally someone answered.

My wife, I said.

Nope, bro, he said.

Who is this, I asked.

The kid who found this phone, he said.

This is my wife's phone, I said.

Who is your wife, bro, he asked.

A photojournalist, I said.

The pretty lady with the camera, the kid asked.

Put her on, god-dammit, I said.

The kid laughed.

Please, I said.

No can do, bro, the kid said.

Please do, I said.

Here, bro, the kid said, handing the phone off to someone else.

Who is this, a woman asked.

This is the husband, I said. Who is this?

The paramedic on site, she said. Is this her phone, she asked.

I'm sure it is. I dialed her number, I said. The kid answered. Then handed it to you.

I'm so sorry, sir, she said.

Why, I asked. What have you done?

Sir, she said. Your wife is dead.

The host of the game show asked the following question: What is the psychological reaction in which a person is faced with a truth that is too painful to believe and opts, instead, to believe that it is not true despite what may be overwhelming evidence?

A contestant with thick-frame glasses buzzed, but I could not hear her answer.

Interior—Christian County Coroner's Office.

I drove to the Christian County Coroner's Office of Missouri to identify her remains.

Empty slabs of steel gurneys and unused equipment rested on trays. The floor was checkered with alternating red and black squares. It smelled like Chinese food—hot and sour soup and garlic beef. A woman stepped out from an office, wiping her mouth with a napkin. She was short with long blonde hair. She wore a white lab coat and when she finished wiping her mouth, she crumpled the napkin and threw it at a trashcan. The napkin missed and fell to the checkered floor.

I'm the coroner. You the husband, she asked.

I'm here for my wife, I said.

I want to prepare you, she said. It's not the same person you remember.

But still my wife, I said.

Your dead wife, the coroner said.

My dead wife, I said, repeating the words.

She'll look the same, but different too, she said. So take your time.

Different how, I asked.

She opened a tiny hatch and pulled out a long body-sized tray. I felt like I was in an airplane, lowering a tray for my tiny cup of Coke and bag of peanuts. She pulled back a sheet. My wife's body was burned blue and the hair on her head had been sheered clean off. Her face still held an angelic charge that only an animal in love could recognize. I touched her lips.

Take your time, the coroner said again.

It's her, I said. But barely. I could never mistake that face.

It never makes sense, she said.

Death, I asked.

Being left behind, she said. The coroner handed me my wife's duffle bag filled with a notebook, torn maps, cash and prescription medicine. She had been fighting bronchitis for months, but never heeded the doctor's advice to take time off from work.

We'll ship the body back for the funeral, she said.

Thanks for keeping her warm, I said, pulling on the sheet. I hugged the coroner, resting my chin on her shoulder. Her hands pulled me close to her chest. She felt warm and smelled of garlic beef. I pressed my nose into her neck below her ear. I kissed her neck, dotting a line to her lips, finally latching onto hers, hungrily.

The coroner rested her hands at my shoulders, eased our bodies apart, and said, "I have another body to examine."

I said, I'm sorry. I said, I'm not exactly sure who I am anymore.

Exterior—Street Corner in Christian County.

Outside the coroner's office, I waited for my cab to take me to the airport. The sky was bold with bright blues, not a cloud in sight. I had expected it to rain—a bleak and angry sky, a harsh wind slicing through Midwestern streets—but weather rarely parallels a state of being. I stood on the corner near the metal statue of a soldier with a rifle slung over his shoulder. The plaque at the base read: William Christian, a Kentucky soldier of the American Revolutionary War and founder of our simple town. Christian County, Missouri.

A wad of gum stuck on the butt of the statue's rifle.

Interior—Airport Terminal.

At the airport, I waited by the gate for the plane to arrive. My bear was my baggage and slept nearby in its box.

Every hour the flight attendant in a navy blue pants suit pulled on the bungee cord of the intercom to tell us our flight would be delayed another hour. The reason was always the same—visibility. I sat at the end of a long line of hard chairs; the kind that drives people to commit acts of violence. The giant window looking onto the tarmac had smudges of tiny fingerprints on the glass. A woman with headphones danced in our plane's parking spot. She twirled an orange stick in the air, the kind that guided planes. Another plane taxied out. It lifted up, tucking its wheeled feet in like a sleeping cat on the arm of a couch. The sky was still clear, but the excuse was the same—visibility.

An older woman with an oval-shaped head next to me retied the scarf around her neck—something she did after each delay. The flight attendant told us we're delayed and snapped the microphone back onto the wall. The oval-headed woman pulled the scarf from around her neck, smoothed out the wrinkles in her lap before tightening a perfect bow under her chin.

The intercom crackled. An announcement. Grief or boredom chewed at the soft center of my bones. The flight attendant held the intercom to her lips, but did not speak. Passengers sat on the edge of their seats.

Good evening, passengers, the flight attendant said. We apologize for any inconvenience. Our plane has been grounded due to visibility. We anticipate being back on schedule soon. Please remain in the gate area for further updates and instructions.

The oval-headed woman reached for her scarf.

Excuse me, Ma'am, I said, with a fake Southern accent. It would be an absolute shame if, in my humble-pie opinion, you were to undo that seemingly perfect purple knot again. My

accent was spot-on, disarming, pleasant, polite. Not rebel flag Republican, but more of an Independent voting Republican. I wasn't sure what I was doing. The voice was certainly mine, but had nothing to do with me.

Really, the oval-headed woman asked, her hand hovering above the knot.

My mamma always said, if a lady's looks look bad, you keep shut, I said, accent thick. But if a lady's look looks right, then by all means speak up and speak often. And, ma'am, that knot looks mighty right. I wanted to strangle the old coot with the goddamn thing.

My, my, my, aren't you a polite young man, the oval-headed woman said.

Mamma raised a Southern gentleman proper, I said.

Where are you headed, she asked.

Off to war, I said.

You a soldier, she asked.

Yes ma'am, I said. Like my daddy and my daddy's daddy and my daddy's daddy's daddy.

You here with the rest of your platoon or group or whatever they call it, she asked, looking around.

Sadly, my mamma died yesterday, I said. I have to bury her back home before I ship out.

Ship out, she asked.

Fly out, I said, correcting.

I am so sorry, the oval-headed woman said. If you don't mind me asking, how did she die?

Gator, I said.

Gator, she asked.

Gator got her, I said.

My word, she said.

Gruesome, I said, nodding.

The oval-headed woman shook her head and wrapped her arms around me, pulling me into her bosom. She rubbed my back like my mother never did when I was little. The oval-headed woman smelled like fresh-cut flowers. Her tears soaked through my shirt to my skin. Well, at least she's free now, she said.

Free, I asked.

Free to be free, she said.

I faked a sob to ease the oval-headed woman's sadness, but the sobs continued to come until they could not be controlled. We cried together in the airport, waiting for the plane that never came.

She gave me her number in case I ever needed to cry again.

I gave up on the plane, rented a car, and drove back to my empty home in Baltimore County.

Interior—Empty House in Baltimore County.

There were dishes still in the sink. Two purple plates. Two purple coffee mugs. And a butter knife. Coffee slept inside the lip of the mugs, one holding more coffee than the other. A substance curled like an oil slick at the surface.

I tipped the mugs over and ran hot water in and out of the hollow, rinsing them with foreign and immediate vigor. Before long, the sink was empty and clean. I could see my

reflection in the porcelain well, a shadow of myself too dark to see the exact features of my face, but clear enough to know I looked different.

My wife had asked if we should wash them before we left to catch our flight.

Nah, I said, waving her away.

They'll grow mold, she said.

You're not old, I said.

Mold, she said, pointing at the sink. They'll grow it.

Mold can be cleaned, I say. Now let's go!

Re-entering, the air in the house felt heavy like an evening fog, a staleness hovering over nothing. On the couch, crushed into the corner cushion, was an orange blanket she used to cover her legs with at night while she scribbled notes in her notebook. At the bottom of the staircase were her house slippers—pink, fuzzy monsters larger than some cats. Her black raincoat hung on the doorknob of the closet, never quite making it to a hanger. A stack of travel magazines spilled out of a paper bag, in route to the curb to be recycled, but held up like a truck at a weigh station. Unopened bills and the last book she read waited for me in the foyer. It was hardcover and thick. *The Collected Works of Freedom*, historically annotated—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, Bill of Rights and all amendments.

I pushed through the screen door and ran outside to be sick in the gravel driveway. I knew if I ran to the bathroom, there would only have been more of her to fuck me up.

Exterior—Unfamiliar Field in Western Maryland.

Her funeral was a small affair. Family and friends attended. It was an eco-friendly burial, sans formaldehyde and solid oak casket with white ruffle trim and lavenderscented

padding. Instead, she was wrapped in gauze and boxed up in a biodegradable coffin and buried deep in a field of wild weeds and sunflowers in Western Maryland, far from any supermarket or gas station or highway, a baby mulberry bush planted as her headstone.

My mother didn't attend the funeral. She had been missing for years, but in a non-alarming way—more of an escape from responsibility and the real world. It had happened after she survived a car accident. A woman had run a red light and crashed into the driver's side of my mother's car, which rolled over and spun sideways. Mother was hospitalized for minor injuries and before I could get to her private room, she had checked out, against doctors' wishes, and disappeared. I still wonder if she called a cab to drive her to the airport, or if she walked.

My father didn't attend the funeral either, but only because my father had been dead for a while—heart attack in the waiting room of a dentist's office—his six-month checkup.

At the funeral, people asked about her.

Where's your mother, my dead wife's mother asked.

Unknown, I said.

Out of town, she asked.

Out of her mind, I said.

Okay, little one, she said, rubbing my back like the oval-headed woman, like my mother never did. She moved her hand in smaller circles.

Interior—My Eulogy.

In my eulogy, I spoke of the time, years before, when my dead wife and I drove to a casino to gamble the last hundred dollars in our bank account, in hopes of making money, at least enough to make rent for the month. It was cocktail hour. Drinks were two for one. We

each gambled with fifty. I lost my share in minutes and drank mine and the one that was free. My wife won fifty bucks and didn't drink at all. We left with what we came with minus a bit of pride. On the way home she took pictures of me driving, buzzed, ranting about being broke and angry. We missed paying rent that month, got evicted, rented a room in a boarding house, and never gambled again. Soon after, my dead wife's photos of her husband were published in a local magazine, supporting an article about an impending recession. The article and photos soon found life in a national. Then, her jobs never stopped coming.

My screenplay sprawled on, never revised, only appended. I bought a second box to keep it contained. **THE END IS NEAR**.

Interior—Envelopes.

The day after the funeral I stood on my stoop, thumbing through a pile of past due bills like a well-worn deck of cards. The street was quiet, except for some kids skipping rope and an ice cream truck playing that damn tune. I opened my credit card bill and it read like a pulp novel—oxygen tanks, harpoons, wet suits, and goggles; revolvers, shotguns, cigarettes, and cash withdrawals; tuxedoes, flowers and single malt scotch.

I called the credit card company.

I didn't buy any of these, I said.

It appears there has been some unusual activity on your wife's account, the account manager said, a woman with a child's voice.

My wife is dead, I said.

You should have notified us. We are authorized by law to flag your account, she said.

I am not responsible, I said.

Of course not, sir, she said.

Who did this, I asked.

Unknown, she said. You should call the authorities. It seems someone has stolen your wife's card and is using it, egregiously.

Egregiously, I asked.

To an extraordinary degree, she said.

But what is there to steal, I asked.

Whatever is left, she said.

Exterior—An Officer in Plainclothes Driving an Unknowable Car.

I called the police and they sent an officer in plainclothes. He said that if someone had stolen my wife's identity that it was a serious crime. He classified the thief as a Level Eleven terrorist.

How many levels are there, I asked.

Thirteen, he said. One is the worst.

If identity theft is Level Eleven, then what is Level Thirteen, I asked.

That's classified, the Plainclothes Cop said.

I've lost everything, I said.

You still have your health, he said, walking away. The hole in my heart opened and I collapsed at his feet, screaming into the gravel of the driveway.

Don't leave, I begged the Plainclothes Cop.

I balled up the credit card bill and stuffed it into my mouth to swallow.

If the thief calls, contact me, he said. He dropped his card to the ground. His phone number was all sevens. He drove off in an unknowable car.

Exterior—Doggone Desert.

It was Mother's Day, so I called my mother. Her phone rang, but no one answered, so I left a message.

I said: My mother, It's your son. I'm not sure. Where you are. Call me. If you can.

I replayed my message in my head and felt like I was going crazy.

I called the oval-headed woman, southern accent and all.

My goodness, she said. Are you back from war already?

I'm actually still over here, I said. And if I may be so bold, I would have to say you sound younger than when we met, if that is at all possible.

Oh, you are such a doll, she said. Did everything go as planed with your mamma?

They did, ma'am, I said. Thanks for asking.

Oh, I am so happy to hear that, the oval-headed woman said. I said so many prayers for you and for her and for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to keep her safe on her journey home. Where are you stationed, she asked.

I can't say for security reasons, I said.

Me and my nosy self, she said.

If they can get to you, then they can get to me, I said.

Ten-four, she said. Roger that.

Are you still tying your scarf with perfection, I asked.

I can't tell you that. A lady keeps her secrets hidden. Confidential and all, she said.

I recon, I said, slipping into cliché. I don't know if you have kids, but I was out here in the heat and the sun and got to thinking about you and wanted to give you a call, I said. Wanted to wish you a happy Mother's Day.

My, she said. Don't make them like you anymore.

Ma'am, I said. It's simply, doggone miserable out here.

Interior—Formless clouds outside.

The sunset sat on the horizon.

I didn't sleep, even though that's what everyone told me to do. I sat on the couch instead, eating rigatoni and sauce from Vacarro's in Little Italy off the Inner Harbor, waiting for the sun to rise again. I finished my pasta and drank the rest of the wine, then rolled the empty bottle across the room to the trashcan like a bowling ball, which veered left and got stuck under the kitchen cart next to the first of two bear boxes.

When the sun finally rose, it held high behind buildings, but didn't shine—smothered by formless clouds, filled with a tiny inevitable death. *A Tiny Inevitable Death*—this, I determined, would be the title of my screenplay, now five hundred pages.

Interior—A Weak Moment.

I flipped to the back of one of those free magazines.

When she arrived, the prostitute said, Let's fuck.

Instead, I asked her to leave.

Interior—A Proposition.

My phone rang. It was a woman I didn't recognize. She sounded rough and ragged, perpetually pissed off or perplexed, I couldn't tell which.

A proposition—meet me for a drink, she said.

Why would I, I asked.

Come alone, she said.

I am alone, I said.

I want to talk, she said.

I thought you wanted to have a drink, I said.

Both, she said.

Who are you, I asked.

I am not your wife, she said.

My wife is dead, I said.

Depends on your perception, she said.

I buried her in a box in beautiful place, I said.

You buried a body, she said.

You're the thief, I said.

Depends on your belief these days, she said.

I wish to believe in anything these days, I said.

Interior—A Neighborhood Place.

At my dead wife's favorite bar, The Cat's Eye Pub, the thief sat at a table under an orange cone of light. The bar was small, serving drinks, but no food—a neighborhood place, but not my neighborhood.

Thin black hair hung over her eyes as she sipped a single malt scotch and lit a cigarette.

What do you want, I asked. A plainclothes cop said you stole her identity. Well, I said.

I didn't know she had died, she said. Which is why I called.

Morbidly curious, I asked.

Honestly concerned, she said.

A thief with grief, I said, shaking my head. Well, I asked.

You seem lost, she said.

Not lost, I said.

Stuck, she asked.

I shatter every night and spend the time to piece it back together. I know exactly where I am. I just can't keep it together long enough to move forward.

Which is why I wanted to meet you, she said. I can help.

Answer me this: what did you do with all the stuff you stole, I asked.

Started a new life, she said.

You run away from something, I asked.

I transition. Transferred from an old thing to something brand new, she said.

You followed the life plan of a bank account, I asked.

I am surviving the only way I know how, she said.

Change is overrated, I said. Boredom is more dependable.

Your parents teach you that, she asked.

My father's dead, I said.

Your mother, she asked.

My mother might as well be, I said.

The thief knocked ash from her cigarette and blew a thin stream of smoke out of the corner of her mouth.

I don't need any more women in my life right now, I said. But thanks.

A woman can help set things right again, she said.

How are things wrong, I asked.

Not wrong, the thief said, standing, thumbing the cigarette out. Just sideways.

The room bent like a piece of paper.

She touched my cheek with her fingers, which stunk of tobacco, then kissed my lips with the bite of scotch still on her breathe. I sucked in the air around her and kissed back, standing too; our tongues touched like torches.

Interior—My Heart.

A fragile organ. A muscle, laughably so. An organ possessed. Some better than others. The muscle flexes, some say *contracts*, and pumps blood through the body via an intricate system of tiny vessels and valves. Others better than some. Blood vessels. Heart valves. This is the cardiac cycle.

Should I write this into my screenplay?

Four chambers the size of a fist. Aortic. Mitral. Pulmonic. Tricuspid.

The human heart suffers and one sees a cardiologist, a doctor of hearts, to batter away at a battery of tests. To find answers.

But then the human heart breaks and a cardiologist is irrelevant. Instead, one sees a mortician. Or a stranger at a bar.

Exterior—Parking Lot Ending in Darkness.

The day was finished, dark and dead. It had rained, everything wet and worried with weight. We crossed the parking lot to my car in the back by an abandoned building. Her heels sunk through the wet gravel. She stumbled and fell to her knees. I lifted her up. She limped behind me, trying to keep up.

I cupped her tits, lifting them in my palms. My hands slid up to her head. I made two fists in her beautiful black hair and pulled her towards me. Our lips crushed together with forgetfulness, not forgiveness, before I set her ass on the hood of the car.

Her stocking ripped. Her voice weak.

My pants bunched at my ankles. Belt scraping the gravel.

Her panties dangling from one heel. The other heel knocked off and on its side.

My hands in her hair. My face in her breasts. My hips thrusting into darkness.

Her hands at my neck. Her nails tearing at skin.

My dead wife's words remembered like a prayer.

My husband, my wife whispered.

My wife, I whispered back.

This was the ending I'd been avoiding.

Interior—My Dead Wife's Notebook.

The last notes in my dead wife's notebook drove home a sense of urgency and commitment. I was not exactly sure to what end, but it all somehow felt directed at me. Her research into freedom led her to that cornfield. To that wicked bolt of electricity dropped from the sky with a shrug. Was her research into freedom a cosmic joke?

Fact: a single bolt can race upwards of 130,000 miles per hour.

Maybe it's time to write myself into my screenplay. Speaking of cosmic jokes.

How many times can I write **THE END IS NEAR** before I start to believe it?

Perhaps, instead, I should write **THE END IS BEAR**.

The last notes in my dead wife's notebook:

According to reports, William Christian never lived in Christian County, Missouri. His name is all that exists. Politician and soldier in the American Revolutionary War. Born in Virginia. Died in Kentucky. Hardly any connection with Missouri. But fought for independence and our right to freedom and, honestly, aren't those the only real things that we have left anyway?

Beneath the Bench on Barnaby Street
J.R. Angelella

1.

You play possum under the bus bench. You have one leg left, the other torn off years ago in an accident on the train tracks. You're alive, but right now you play dead. The heat cooks the asphalt of the street and you cannot move until the sun goes down and the pavement cools.

2.

You look up. The bus bench is splintered and chipped with graffiti. Two wood planks are missing from the back and one from the bottom. Gnawed balls of gum stick between planks. At one time the bench was white. You liked it then, a fine place to meet up with friends and family. The community you remember no longer exists.

3.

A lamppost hangs over the bench. It is plastered with moving sale signs and lost and found flyers. The mesh trashcan on the corner hasn't been emptied in a week. Used condoms hang from the holes in the mesh. Crumpled bags of fast food, empty bottles of beer and old newspapers overflow. You're happy when you find sesame seeds from hamburger buns to eat.

4.

A woman walking on the sidewalk sets her dog down. It runs over to the base of the bench and squeezes its wet nose between planks to smell you. The woman yanks on the leash, pulling the dog away from you. You've played dead for so long, you begin to believe it.

5.

A man with wild white hair asks the woman with the dog for directions to the library. His speech is crippled and incoherent. She shrugs. Her dog yips and kicks back its legs. They cross the street to a beauty salon. The man with wild white hair sits on the bench. He peeks between the planks and sees you dead on your side. You know the way to the library, but stay still instead.

6.

A bus stops and opens its doors. The man with wild white hair mumbles at the bus driver for directions to the library and the bus driver says that a homeless shelter is nearby. The bus shuts its door and hisses, easing into traffic. You watch black smoke pour out from the tail pipe and it reminds you of the time you ate a cigarette.

7.

Looking down, the man with wild white hair sees you playing possum. Like you've been shot dead stiff. Eventually, you and your one good foot hobble out from under the bench. You chortle and choke from the black smoke of the bus. You flap your wings, but fly nowhere. The man with wild white hair scoops you up in his hands. He holds you to his chest and says, "Pigeon, I thought you were dead." You nestle into his shirt near his heart. You say, "The library is just around the corner."

Face Down in Baltimore, 1998
J.R. Angelella

Rhymes

Forgive me father. I have sinned. I don't remember my last confession and for some reason the only thing I can pull from my memory right now are childish rhymes.

Appreciate

Kneeling on the carpet of the video store with a gun to the back of my head, he tells me to count. Says he'll rip a whole in my head if I don't count. I name numbers as he empties the register. *Two. Four. Six. Eight. Who do we appreciate?*

Truth

Cash spills from his pockets unlike in the movies. He says that there has to be more money. He says this to himself, I think. He wants me to open the safe. I tell him we don't have one. *Eenie, meanie, miney moe. Catch a tiger by its toe.* He knocks over the *Staff Picks* section. Empty video boxes flip to the floor. He forces his gun into my cheek. Says he'll blast me in the fucking face if we don't have a safe. I tell him I can't keep counting if he does that. *If he hollers let him go.* I wonder at what point he will decide that I am telling the truth.

Line

He tells me to be face down on the carpet or he'll shoot. When I put my face down, he tells me that he can't hear me counting. He presses the gun to my neck. I repeat a number and a number and a number. *One. Three. Five. Nine. We travel down the railroad line.*

Gunner

Chaos lights cut through the front window and whip around the walls the video store. He believes I tripped a silent alarm. He drops to the floor next to me. To hide from the police. He swears, but being a born-and-bred Baltimore boy, instead of rushing the word, he splits it into two distinct syllables—*po-leece*. It's not the police and I didn't trip the alarm because the store doesn't have one. An ambulance passes and the lights fade out. He tucks the gun into the elastic waistband of his sweatpants that gives under the weight and reveals his greasy-black pubic hair. He grabs my hair in a fist and tells me I'm a goner, but as a Baltimore boy does, instead of goner, he says *gunner*.

Evening

He pushes my head back into the carpet and scrambles to his feet. Crossing the room, he steps on my foot, I think, by accident. I think I hear him apologize. If he did apologize, I think it was sincere. If it was sincere, I wonder if he still thinks about me. When he opens the door to leave, he welcomes an incoming customer. He tells them to enjoy Baltimore's best video store. Then, to have a lovely evening.

Begin

The customer walks in with a glass of red wine and tells me I am holding a movie for him—the one with the talking pig. He asks why I am on the floor, but puts a ten in my hand as I stand and asks for his change. I look in my empty drawer. I tell him all I have are pennies. I tell

him he'll have to wait for change. I pick up the phone to dial that number, but don't know where to begin.

Crime

The police arrive with cold coffee and holstered guns. They point to movie boxes on the floor from the *Staff Picks* section, then draw and aim at the empty shelves where the boxes had been as they do their best DeNiro impression: *I'm standing here; you make the move. You make the move. It's your move*. Finally, one of the officers approaches me for questioning. He asks me my name and I tell him it is Clarence. When I get to the part about him tucking the gun away and his pants coming down a bit, I quote our hometown hero, John Waters, from one of his nicer movies, but they don't get it: *Pubic hair causes crime*. Cops only ever see what other cops how them. They never see anything else, let alone any*one*.

Tape

The three unrelated owners arrive, separately, each in bathrobes and slippers. They tell me not to worry. That I'm still on the clock. They tell the police that they feel bad. That they had a panic button, a silent alarm, installed last week, but forgot to tell the employees about it. The button is beneath the register and covered in duct tape. I could have pressed this alarm. Things could have gone differently.

Room

Forgive me, father. I can't stop the rhyming and I never stopped counting. I just keep on repeating myself because anything new is too scary. *One little, two little, three little po-leece.*

The number of repeated questions. *Four little, five little, six little po-leece.* Money I owe the customer for his movie with the talking pig. *Seven little, eight little, nine little po-leece.* How many times the *pleece* officers burp, because *pleece* is the plural of *po-leece* in Baltimore. *Ten little pleece in the room.*

Gasoline

They ask: *Was he black? Latino? Mixed? Right handed or left? Kind of hair—the hair on his head. Curly and short? Long and straight? Buzzed? Brown or black—the hair? His height? His weight? What kind of shoes did he wear? The gun—was it big? Did he hold it correctly? Or, to the side like in the movies? What did he say? How did he say it? Where did he stand? What did he touch? How much did he take? What did his teeth look like? Tattoos? Piercings? Birth marks? Moles? Pimples? Pockmarks?* I tell them all that I remember: he smelled like gasoline.

Mess

The police, eventually, leave, but leave behind a mess of black fingerprint powder on the counter, carpet and doorframes. The owners leave me too to clean up the mess.

Store

I straighten the shelves. Pick up the video boxes. Wipe away the fingerprint powder. Vacuum the carpet. File the night's credit card receipts. Refill the register with cash from the safe hidden under a false floor panel in the children's room. Wipe down the counter. Then again with bleach. Tie up and take out the trash. Shut down the computers. Reset the security alarm.

Turn off the lights. Lock the front door behind me. And wait under our video sign for my girlfriend to pick me up. Under the store name, the slogan reads: *Baltimore's Best Video Store*.

Thing

In the car, after she kisses me on the cheek, I don't mention a damn thing.

Floor

At home, I lie in bed under covers, fully clothed. I hear my girlfriend running water into the tub. We won't be together much longer. It reminds me of all the baptisms I served as a young altar boy at my family's church. Saving children from original sin. *He sent his Son to save us from all evil.* Water pours into other water, filling in the white space. *In Baptism, he gives us a new life in union with himself.* Steam sneaks out from behind the partially closed door. *To welcome and receive you with love and expectation.* The water cuts to a trickle. A body displaces it, separating and collapsing over bends and folds of a body. The bath is for her—not me. I kick off the covers and kneel on the floor.

Me

Sign of the cross. Face down on the mattress. Forgive me father. Someone has sinned. I don't know why, but it feels like me.

Dire Fire
J.R. Angelella

1.

After returning my tray and chair to their full and upright positions, I brace to be sick into a thin paper bag held between my knees, but the feeling passes like a thin fog.

The plane tips forward, descending through gray.

I apologize to the little boy sitting next to me who is flying by himself for the first time.

He calls me *lady* and says my skin looks *see through*. He offers me a stick of gum and tells me next time I shouldn't fly sick.

I bend a stick into my mouth and agree with a nod.

"My name's Jonathan," the little boy says.

"My name's Carrie," I say.

Plane. People. Pain.

Land passes by beneath us as we glide, drift. Highways hold cars below, driving slow.

Ponds. People. Pain.

A baby cries inside the plane and a mother shushes her. A short man stands and walks to the bathroom, but the flight attendant stops him, turns him around, sends him back to his seat. She says that we're landing soon and for his safety and the safety of the passengers he must remain seated. We pass through a cloud and everything goes grey, a dark charcoal that could cut teeth, before returning to normal, passing houses, land, water, people.

Wyatt knew I was flying today and refused to leave the house, refused to escort me, drive me, carry my bags.

Pills. More pills.

The ones they gave him at the crazy center.

He wasn't asleep when I left, just not awake, not aware. I gave him my flight information and all he did was swallow.

We pass a parking lot of yellow school buses. Rows of them, parked.

Plane. People. Pain. Pills. Please.

2.

Jonathan says he is ten years old and wants to be a pediatrician when he grows up, so he can help sick babies.

"I help babies," I say.

"You a pediatrician?" he asks.

"Nurse," I say. "I deliver babies."

"Where do you deliver them?" he asks, chewing peanuts.

"To their Mom and Dad."

"Oh."

"When I was your age I wanted to be a pilot," I say.

"Why didn't you?"

"Things changed."

A flight attendant stops at our aisle and tells Jonathan to wait on the plane until everyone has left. She tells him that she will take him to his next flight.

"Where you going?" I ask.

"To see my Dad," he says. "My Mom says I have to see him sometimes."

"I'm going to see my Dad too," I say. "I'm going home. To visit my parents."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"A brother—George."

"I don't have a brother. I have a half-sister, though."

"George wanted to be an astronaut," I say.

"Why an astronaut?"

"He wanted to save the planet."

"Is he an astronaut?"

"He's a hero," I say.

The wheels of the plane touch down on the black asphalt runway. There is no snow on the ground, but it is raining. It was snowing this morning when I left for the airport. Had to shovel a path from my house to the sidewalk where I waited for the cab to pick me up. I thought about shoveling out the car for Wyatt, but didn't think he would be going anywhere. But now that I am here and it is no longer snowing, but raining and the ground and weather warmer, I am worried that I only packed sweaters and heavy socks.

Jonathan tucks his gum wrapper into his pocket and rests his elbows on the armrests, higher up than is comfortable for him. He looks like a boy in his father's boots.

"Got any kids?" he asks.

"No."

"Husband?"

"His name is Wyatt," I say.

"A doctor?"

"Lawyer."

"Hero?"

“He’s at home,” I say, practicing.

3.

I exit the plane to the terminal.

A flight attendant escorts Jonathan to his connecting flight.

I duck behind a family of six and follow Jonathan and the flight attendant to his departing gate. He checks in at the counter and tucks his ticket into his coat pocket. He sits by the window with his carry-on bag in his lap, his feet dangling above the carpet. He watches the tarmac as a plane lands and another takes off. He continues to chew peanuts. His feet never touch down.

4.

Mom sits in her car; parked outside the airport, engine running. "Carrie, you look pale,” she says. She wastes no time.

I sit in the passenger seat, but wish I were in the back, curled up.

“You get sick?”

“Why didn’t you park?”

“In this weather? My hair! And do you know how much they charge to park? I might as well lie down and die." Her hand pats her chest, her heart. Mom says she *might as well lie down and die* about most things.

I slide out of my winter coat and fold it on my lap.

“Where’s Wyatt? He not get on the plane?”

“He didn’t come.”

“Is he sick again?”

“He’s at home.”

“You’re not getting divorced, are you? Because if you are, my goodness.” Mom watches me the way she did when I was younger, before I left the house to go on a date, asking me leading questions: if my dress was too low-cut, too short, too red. Mom pats her heart and merges into traffic without signaling.

"Where's Dad?" I ask.

"Didn’t want to come.” Mom straightens her white blouse under her seat belt. She runs her hand up to her face to adjust her glasses. “He’s your father. What am I going to do about it?” Mom weaves her head in a figure eight. She does this when she’s uncomfortable.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“You won’t believe it if I told you.” She waits, and then tells me. “Your father, bless his heart, doesn’t wear a shirt anymore.” Mom checks her mirrors.

Mom tells me the story that I wont believe.

It’s more about her than it is about him.

5.

Mom had been dusting around the living room bay window. She was wearing new house slippers and leaning up high on the tips of her toes, batting at the curtain rod in the window with her feather duster. She was chewing her tongue the way she does when she’s in a focused concentration, aiming the duster at her target like a missile. *Because dust leads to sinus infections*. Regardless, she was dusting when she saw it happen—Dad outside. He was getting the mail when he found a flyer taped to the side of the mailbox. Later, Mom found out that the letter said the County was paving over the dirt path in the woods behind their house.

The flyer said they were turning it into a *utility access road*.

6.

Dad disappeared for three days.

"Without a word, without a peep," Mom says. "I called the police. Filed a report. Everything a good wife does—that's what I did." She fans herself with her hand, cooling down. "He got a tattoo," she says. "On his chest. A big one. Big and black. Permanent," she says. "A burning sun tattooed across his chest and stomach." Mom grips the steering wheel with both hands again "He named it, you know. Like a pet. He calls it *The Source."*

"Why didn't you call?"

"You dyed your hair again, didn't you? I miss those cute blonde braids you used to have, blonde as Chester's coat, remember. Now it seems too—what's the word—red."

The four-lane highway merges to two, the surface wet, a thin sheen of grease coating everything. I press a button to lower my window half way; cool air spilling over the glass, pouring into my face like water into a sinking car. We pass houses, each flying an American flag—oversized and skimming the brown grass of shared lawns.

7.

The morning Wyatt heard of his brother Finn's death, I woke to find Wyatt standing at the foot of our bed, his hand bleeding. He had cut it with a carving knife. I pushed him to the bathroom and wrapped it in a pink towel, before sitting him down on the edge of the tub.

"I'm sorry," he said. He retrieved the knife from his waistband, and cut his other hand across his palm. Blood pushed to the surface.

“Wyatt. Why?”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I know,” I said. I pressed my hands into his, applying pressure, and kissed his hands.

“I am afraid,” he said.

“You will be okay,” I said. “You are not your brother.”

“I am afraid that I can’t feel anything,” he said. “He’s gone and I don’t feel a damn thing.”

“Wyatt,” I said.

“He came back wrong, Carrie,” he said. “Everyone who comes back from that place—they always come back wrong. His neighbor found him in the garage, in his truck, dressed in fatigues,” he said. Wyatt made a gun with his hand and held it in his lap.

“I don’t know what to say,” I said.

He looked at me with long lost eyes—vacant.

“Promise me,” I said.

“There’s no need to promise,” he said and I said nothing back. “Like it never even existed,” he said.

Eventually, he received stitches from a male E.R. nurse the size of a small car.

I made a few calls and committed him to a center.

8.

Mom changes lanes, exiting off the highway, as a plane glides overhead. She doesn’t smile, but, instead, says, “Oh my sweet, little girl is home—let’s only focus on that.”

9.

The house hasn't changed a spec.

Antique furniture in the same arranged space, covered in plastic. Hand-carved end tables decorated with doilies. The house still smells of burnt toast and lemon Pledge. Chester's collar and leash still hang from the hooks next to the back door in the kitchen, next to a vase of the same fake plastic sunflowers. George's telescope still rests on the tripod next to the couch, still pointed at the empty space in the sky where the moon will later rise. Dad bought it as a Santa gift one Christmas, so George could track the stars and the moon. George spent each night in living room at the bay window, one eye closed, one eye open.

"Harold," Mom says, setting her purse on the kitchen table.

"Come quick," he says. "I've made a breakthrough."

I follow Dad's voice into the den where he sits shirtless at the coffee table, legs crossed, piecing together a jigsaw puzzle. The tattoo on his stomach and chest is an empty black sun with wavy rays curling around. I sit next to him on the Oriental rug, but not too close.

"Where's Wyatt?" he asks.

"That's a big tattoo," I say and lean toward the sun—the one on his chest, not in the sky.

"Like it?" he asks, touching his stomach, slapping the sides. "Didn't hurt all that much. No more than some things do." He pulls back his old man skin, smoothing out the folds, to show it in full. "Took me three days. That's less than God can do."

A jigsaw puzzle has a frame on the table in front of us, and I pick at the corner. The edges are pieced together, but there's nothing in the middle. I look for Mom, but she has disappeared, moving around upstairs now. I hear sheets shaking out, making a bed.

"The puzzle is framed," he says, tapping at my hand, shooing me away. "Now all I have to do is figure out its core." Dad taps his finger against his chin, his free hand rubbing the sun on his chest. "The puzzle is supposed to be Earth," he says. "All blues and greens and whites of our planet." Dad pushes another piece into the corner of the puzzle, spinning it around, forcing two together. "The core is where it began, and is also where it will end." His skin hangs loose from his body. His thin white hair reflects the mid-morning sun, the sun in the sky, not on his chest. He elbows the table, forcing two more pieces of puzzle together that would never fit.

"Dad, I thought you hated tattoos," I say. "Thought you called them *inkjobs*."

"This one just seemed inevitable."

"It's really *big*," I say, like I was talking to a child, singing the word *big* a bit. My hand touches his shoulder. His skin turns white from my grip. I look into his tattoo.

"Small if you think about it," he says. "Smaller than the real one."

Mom passes behind us carrying a tub of unfolded laundry—the whites. "Harold, when are you going to stop piecing together that silly puzzle?" Mom asks. "That's your father for you, always got his head in some puzzle." Her head weaves in a figure eight as she rolls a pair of white underwear into a ball. "I hate those things, those tiny jagged pieces everywhere. They always get stuck in the vacuum."

Dad flips pieces, working on the core. Dad flips a piece and it fits into place. His face shines with excitement. He makes guns with his hands, aims them over his head and silently fires them as he squeezes his trigger fingers.

Mom moves from the kitchen into the den, sitting on a chair across from us. The plastic farts under her as she sits. She knits—a scarf or a blanket.

"I think I'm gonna lay down," I say.

10.

The staircase creaks in all the same spots, in all the same ways, bending like a weak bridge, but in my bedroom things have changed.

My encyclopedias, horseback riding ribbons and basketball trophies have been taken away. My comforter is no longer green, instead white. Even the carpet—as it no longer exists. It's been ripped up to expose the faded hardwood floors. My desk has been cleared of prom photos and highs school art projects. Now it's covered with African violets in bloom—pinks and purples. My diplomas are missing from the walls, replaced with framed prints of sunsets and waterfalls. My closet is empty of clothes and, instead, houses seasonal decorations and patriotic paraphernalia.

When Wyatt and his brother both deployed for the war they flew an American flag from their porch and told everyone about their son-in-law and son-in-law's brother and how proud they were of both boys and our troops. When they cycled back home from their tour they took down the flag and took up a petition to impeach the president. They were the sons my parents no longer had.

A wedding photograph of Wyatt and I standing outside a church sits next to a pink phone on the nightstand—the only remaining artifact of my past in this house. I dial and it rings and, finally, Wyatt picks up. He doesn't sound like Wyatt, but rather farther away.

"Landed safely," I say. "And home now."

He says nothing.

"Hello?" I ask.

"I'm here," he says.

"Been resting?" I ask.

"Resting."

"That's good. I'm about to do the same."

"I don't know what you want me to say," he says.

"I don't want you to say anything," I say.

"I don't know if I know anything anymore," he says.

"I think you know more than you know," I say.

"I know that I miss him," he says.

I know that I miss Wyatt, I think, but instead what I choose to say, "I know."

Neither of us speaks.

I hear a click and Wyatt is gone again.

11.

Mom sets the table for three, serving each plate with rice and chicken and salad. Dad stands in close proximity, sure to stay out of her way.

"Harold, what are you drinking?" she asks.

"Not water," he says. "Water will dampen *the source*," he says, sitting.

Mom pours a glass of milk for Dad and two glasses of wine. "These are for us," she says, looking at me.

Dad sits shirtless, his sun staring at me. "Carrie," he says, "I am going to be frank, you deserve that much. Everyone deserves something." Dad doesn't looks at me. "I guess the real backbone of the thing is that your mother doesn't approve of me anymore. She doesn't seem to be on the same plane as me. Am I right, Rebecca?"

"No, Harold," she says. "Not now."

"Now. Tomorrow. Yesterday. Does it matter?"

"I think it does," she says.

"Does *what* matter?" I ask.

"Carrie, your mother and I, we're getting a divorce."

"This isn't how I wanted to tell you, but here we are," Mom says.

I sip my wine.

Dad shovels food into his mouth.

Mom takes small bites, a bit of everything on her fork.

"When was this decided?" I ask.

Dad arches his back, stretching his arms up over his head. "The night I came home with my tattoo." Dad says this like he had already told me. Like I should have remembered.

"But really it's been there all along," Mom says.

"Did you know that almost eighty percent of marriages end in divorce?" Dad leans forward again, nodding at hearing his own statistic, elbows back on the table.

"That's not right," I say.

"Eighty percent," Mom says. "Your father's correct. Elbows, Harold."

"I really wish Wyatt were here," Dad says, removing his elbows. "He'd understand."

"Wyatt would understand *what*?" I ask.

"He would understand my point," Dad says, staring at his hands folded in his lap, no longer chewing.

"Why won't you look at me?" I ask him.

"I am," he says, not.

"Carrie, dear, I'm sick," Mom says. She points her fork at Dad's stomach and shrugs. "Just sick of looking at it."

"I won't wear a shirt," Dad says. "I have to shine."

I push back from the table and walk into the kitchen. Chester's collar hangs next to the door. "Not this too," I say. "This is easy. This is fixable. This is cosmetic. You tell me you are getting a divorce because Dad cheated on you—fine. But this is temporary."

"Eternal," Dad says. "This fire is extremely dire," he says, pointing to the tattooed sun-flame ripples.

Mom turns away from everything at the table and faces me in her chair.

"Mom, tell me something real. Tell me that being here makes sense. I need this place to be *one* place that isn't gone too."

"I see the problem," Dad says.

"I'm surprised you can see anything at all with all that dire fire in your eyes," I say.

Mom laughs.

Dad smiles.

"He's right, you know," Mom says to me. "His fire is quite dire."

"This house has gone completely mad," I say.

"Not this house," Dad says. "It's this whole damn world." He stands and returns to his puzzle, forcing pieces together that will never fit. He taps his chest. "Global warming—think about it."

12.

I leave the house and cross the backyard to the dirt path behind the house. Years ago, things were different, back when the utility access road was a dirt path. The path is not a path anymore, but a utility access road through a vacant lot.

13.

Black asphalt snakes through the gutted woods. The smell of blacktop—that sick soot smell—sinks into my lungs. The rain has stopped—the air warmer than back home. The faint growl of a plane rumbles overhead, leaving in its path a white line in an arch across the grey sky. I lose sight of the plane behind a group of trees. Just past the trees are backyards with wooden swing sets, camping tents and over-turned bikes, wheels still spinning, the multi-colored, plastic tassels blowing in the wind. There is a neighborhood porch party nearby. I hear ice cubes clinking against cups. Two boys throw a baseball back and forth, the ball slapping hard against the leather of their gloves. A woman calls to them to stop playing games and come inside.

I am thrown back to it all.

George and I had gone out into the woods on the dirt path in search of Chester who had run away from the thunder. Rain assaulted the woods. A mudslide gushed behind us, rolling over the rocks and around the base of trees. Thick Z-shapes of lightening lit up the sky through the branches. George called out, but our voices were drowned in the storm. We held hands, fingers interlocked, calling out for Chester, screaming his name. Another roll and slam of thunder. Lightening struck behind us. We turned and saw a man.

He was tall—big in black boots and jeans. He wore a yellow hoodless raincoat. That's all I remember about his appearance. I have tried to remember more many times. He stood on

the muddy path. We couldn't see his teeth, but could see his smile. Black rain poured off his head. The man was close enough to run us down if we had tried to run.

I looked to George, his small, peachy face.

"Can I help you find your dog?" the man shouted through the elements.

George replied to the man with a nod.

The man walked toward us. The man said, "I think I saw your dog farther back." He made a chopping motion with his arm like an axe, pointing past us.

George said, "His name is Chester."

"Lester?" the man asked, moving closer.

"Sure," George said. Then George turned to me and said, "Carrie, go home."

And as no other hero would ever do, George pushed me over the edge of the path into the mudslide pouring down the hill. The slide carried me to a street below where an old woman stopped her car to help.

The police never found George.

And Mom and Dad never found Chester.

14.

This day is nowhere close to night and I am nowhere close to home.

Light Like Gunshots
J.R. Angelella

1.

The cops release me after they review the surveillance footage.

I sign a paper that says I was treated with respect and dignity while incarcerated.

Annie picks me up from the police station.

Jack and Nicole are both asleep in the back seat of the car.

Annie turns the key in the engine. "Do I have to ask?" she asks.

"We should probably go back for my car," I say.

"Is it still at the whore shop?" She shakes her head and hands me her sweatshirt. "You're all bloodied." Her sweatshirt is baby blue. "Just pull it over your head." Her sweatshirt is short in the sleeves and tight around my waist with the slogan *Just Do It* printed in pink across my chest. "You okay?"

"Not my blood."

"Are you going to tell the kids?" Annie drives with both hands on the wheel. She checks her side mirrors.

"They won't understand."

"You underestimate them. Clarence, you underestimate me." She stops at a red light.

"How do I underestimate you?"

"You think I don't know." She rolls through a green light. "About Rachel."

"We were just kids."

"She told me about the game," she says.

"That was a long time ago."

"Not that long ago." Then, "you played the game with me."

"That was different," I say.

She pulls up alongside my car in the parking lot.

"Why were you here? What's the reason this time?"

I watch a man and woman from the crime scene clean-up crew exit with yellow biohazard bags slung over their shoulders. The two climb inside a black van, their brake lights burning in the dark. They signal before easing out into traffic.

I see my reflection in the windshield, streaks of blood still on my face. I lick my thumb and scrub them away. I am unsuccessful.

"What are we talking about here?" I ask.

She looks at the kids in the rear-view mirror, both still asleep, slumped bodies.

"Can we leave my car here and just go home?" I ask.

Annie hands me the manila envelope from the police station with my personal effects inside. She shifts the van into reverse and faces me.

"It's time for us to go home. It's time for you to get into your car," she says.

"Is this it?"

"You tell me." Then, "you detect the difference."

I exit the family car and enter my own.

In the passenger seat is a white paper bag from the pharmacy. I call out her name—*Annie!*—and, in *my* rear-view mirror, watch as she speeds through a yellow light, leaving her painkillers behind in my passenger seat.

My fist in my lap turns to a revolver against my head. I pull the trigger, making a gunshot sound with my mouth.

2.

I parked in the porn shop parking lot on the way home from my lecture on *Great Expectations*. Inside was an old man sitting on a stool behind the counter, watching *Wheel of Fortune* on a tiny black-and-white television without sound. He tossed a handful of popcorn into his mouth, kernels missing and rolling down his chest.

"Movie booths?" I asked.

"They take tokens." More kernels.

"All I have is a five."

"Then I'll give you five tokens." He stacked them on the counter.

I pinched the tokens into my palm.

"Movies are fifteen minutes long. Booth on the right is broken. Be sure and clean up after yourself. Enjoy."

I glanced up to see a man standing next to a shelf of pumps for different parts. This reminded me to rotate my tires the next time I get my oil changed.

The man standing next to a shelf of pumps for different parts was Hispanic.

3.

Nicole lost her first tooth today. The tooth had not been loose. The playground bully—Ryan Bishop—had tugged her down from the monkey bars by her ankles.

Annie called me from the dentist's office to ask if I knew what legal action could be taken against a six-year-old.

She called during my Hemingway class to say that Nicole's tooth was gone for good.

She called while I was at a banquet for the Dean of Humanities and Sciences and said she had a good phone conversation with Ryan Bishop's mother, Rachel Bishop. Annie said Rachel understood how a mother feels and invited her over for tea.

She called later and said that her pharmacists called to say her pain-*stopper* prescription was ready. She asked if I could pick it up.

Annie hates the word *killer*.

4.

I know Rachel Bishop better as Rachel Ballard.

5.

The man was Hispanic, but spoke without an accent.

"You will watch your thoughts spray out in front of you." He tilted the gun from side-to-side, touching it to the tip of my nose.

"Please. I have kids: Nicole and Jack. Please don't shoot me. Please."

"No wife?"

"And a wife."

"What's her name?"

"Annie."

"Annie short for anything?"

"Elizabeth."

"Annie wants you to count to three hundred, motherfucker."

The red carpet in the porn shop smelled of lemon-scented ammonia and cigarette smoke.

I counted into the carpet with my eyes closed and only got to ten before the Hispanic man left. I stood and walked to the door, still counting. I saw my reflection in the mirror and could barely see my eyes under all the gore. I continued to count, watching the wet street under the green and red changes of the traffic light. I counted to one hundred and five before the cops pulled into the lot.

What the Hispanic man really meant to say was my brain. Or what surgeons call grey matter. That I would watch my brain spray out in front of me. My grey matter.

6.

I met Annie twelve years ago when she was a student in my Literature of the Jazz Age seminar. She came to my office one afternoon after Spring break and asked me to accompany her to breakfast. We ate runny eggs and burnt toast with coffee and little conversation.

She asked me if I was married.

I said I was divorced.

She said she was sorry to hear that.

I said that I had lied. I had never been married.

She paid the bill.

I drove us back to campus.

She said this had nothing to do with her grade.

I said she hadn't done anything to warrant a higher grade.

She smiled.

I had hoped for a laugh. I walked her back to her dormitory. She grabbed my hand and pulled me through the door to a stairway. We pushed out through a maintenance exit to the rooftop. A giant silver fan spun next to us as Annie pulled her shirt over her head and I unbuttoned my pants. We stood naked together next to a silver fan under a blue sky and fucked.

I pressed up off of her.

"Annie. Are you faking?"

"Do you want me to?"

"You're not faking?"

"I *can* fake if you want me to."

"Why would I want you to?"

"I have faked it before."

7.

Annie and I sleep in separate rooms now at the suggestion of our therapist. This is called *sexual reintegration therapy*.

8.

The Hispanic man bent his arm around my neck like he was putting me in a sleeper hold and, with his other arm, raised the gun, firing into the clerk's face four times.

The gunshots thundered, spitting yellow flashes with each bullet.

I looked to the television next to a row of pink and purple vibrators.

The old man dropped to the floor.

I watched a commercial for a new extra-strength dish detergent.

9.

I was fifteen when Rachel Ballard asked me to be her first.

Both her parents had gone to a parent-teacher conference at our school. She made a bed out of blankets in her back yard, facing the Pacific. The stars watched us from above. I focused on her face as she lifted her skirt and climbed onto my lap. She moaned and tossed her black hair about as she bounced.

I grabbed her hips, stopping her.

"Rachel, are you faking?"

"Does it matter?"

"It does if you're faking."

"If I tell you, how will you know I am being honest?"

"I trust you to be honest."

Every time after that first time I made it a game: to detect the difference.

We were together until graduation when she left for college in New York. We promised we would never forget the game.

This is why I stopped at the porn shop. After all the messages from Annie and the one about Rachel Bishop. I stopped to see if I could still detect the difference.

10.

The cops asked me my name and then about the weapon.

I handed them my license.

One cop said my name out loud to hear how it sounded.

"Clarence."

I told them I couldn't remember how it looked, but could tell them how it felt. I told them it felt undefeatable.

One cop unbuttoned his holster and displayed a black pistol, aiming the muzzle at my face. "Is this how he held it?" He turned the pistol on its side. "Or did he hold it *gangsta*?

Another cop asked, "Did the gun look smaller or bigger than the one in his hand?"

"Smaller when he shot the old man. But bigger when he held it to my head," I said.

"Gangsta?"

"No. I think he held it regular."

This acted as an echo in my life, something happening again. Not my first time.

A cop whispered into the ear of another cop with a thin mustache who nodded to a woman cop who slapped handcuffs onto my wrists.

"You have the right to remain silent," she said.

"But I have more to say," I said.

She said, "You have the right to an attorney." Then, "you are a person of interest."

11.

Jack joined the percussion section of his school band four months ago.

The music director insisted that we special-order his drum kit from a company in Switzerland. He said that they made the tightest frames. I called the company and found it would cost two hundred dollars to ship to the states. I hung up the phone and drove to the mall.

There, in the percussion aisle, next to a ten-piece drum kit, a store clerk asked if I needed any assistance.

I told her I was looking for a snare drum for a nine-year-old.

She showed me two models.

I asked which had the tightest frame.

She asked me to rub the skin of both drums and feel if I could tell the difference.

I asked her if she wanted to get coffee.

She sold me the tighter of the two frames.

Instead of coffee, we went into the back of her band's van; the ceiling stuck with neon green glow-in-the-dark stars, and had sex.

I forgot to ask her if she was faking.

Annie found the condom wrapper in the pocket of my jeans.

12.

The Hispanic man stood between the old man and the door. The Hispanic man fondled a keychain with a picture of two tits on it, hooked on a display rack.

"Old man, you sell any dolls?" the Hispanic man asked. He had a bulb of a nose and fat lips. He wore a black sweat suit with red stripes down the sides.

"What you see is what we got." More kernels.

"So you don't got any dolls?"

"What you see," the old man said.

The Hispanic man smiled at me, his teeth like a necklace strung with Vicodin.

I spun the five tokens in my palm and walked towards the movie booths when something smashed into the back of my head. My sight blinked out. My hearing got muffled.

A hand grabbed my shirt and pushed me up against the counter.

I opened my eyes and saw the old man standing in front of me. The old man yelled and pointed with a lit cigarette pinched between his fingers.

Sound cut in and out.

"Open the safe," the Hispanic man yelled back, emphasizing his words by slapping his gun against my head.

"The cops are on their way," the old man said.

"I will blow his fucking head clean off. Open the fucking safe," the Hispanic man said.

"They have a three-minute response time," the old man said. Then, he reached for his shotgun under the counter.

13.

We went on vacation to Huntington Beach.

It was evening and had been a long day spent under the sun, in and out of hard waves. Annie went to cover her sunburn with lotion when she discovered she had not packed it. So I drove to the store.

At the counter, a young woman—no older than Annie when I first met her—bought a pack of mentholated cigarettes, turned and bumped into me. She smelled like watermelon.

I purchased my lotion.

Walking to my car, I was approached by the young woman who asked if I would join her on the beach to watch the full moon rise into the summer stars.

I followed her to a beachfront apartment. We stumbled out onto the cool sand and lay under the dark sky with the soft growl of the crashing waves invisible in front of us.

She said her name was Harmony. She said that I looked safe. She said she wanted to feel good again.

I asked how.

She said she wanted to make love.

When she climbed off and lay in the crook of my arm, I pointed to the sky and the stars.

A cone of light clicked onto my chest. Another clicked onto my uncovered crotch. Another clicked onto my feet.

The cop who clicked my chest arrested and charged me with illegal public acts of a lewd and lascivious nature. The cop who clicked my crotch added the charge of corruption of a minor. The cop who clicked my feet slapped handcuffs on my wrists.

At the station, they told me that Harmony was eighteen and a known prostitute.

I told them that no legal tender had changed hands.

I called Annie at the hotel.

On her way to bail me out, Annie was in a car accident.

She called me at the station from her gurney in the emergency room.

I asked her what had happened.

She said she had broken both legs. She said the cops told her some drunk kid gunned his mother's car out from a side street and crashed into her, rolling her and the family car six times. She said the only thing she remembered were his headlights.

I asked if the kids were okay.

She said the kids were asleep in the hotel room.

A doctor prescribed Vicodin to stop the pain, which has never seemed to stop.

14.

The Hispanic man slapped the gun to my temple. He held his breath.

The muzzle burned my skin, still hot from the four shots fired into the old man's face. I knew that the gun and the old man and all the blood and grey bits were not props and this was not some kind of prank.

The Hispanic man watched the door, his gun set on me, his face splattered in blood.

"Get face down on the carpet and count to three hundred."

I remembered this same scenario many years ago in a video store back in Baltimore. My life was repeating itself on a nightmarish loop.

I looked into the gun. Then, laughed.

He returned it.

We laughed, honestly, together: a real moment.

He said, "If you stop counting, you'll watch your thoughts spray out in front of you."

I spread out on the carpet.

Brain and grey matter.

15.

Somehow, I guess, I am going to live.

The Hard Ones
J.R. Angelella

Clarence, I have one question, was she good? And I don't mean versus bad, but was she? Was she better? Does she do the thing I swore I'd never do again?

Why are you so quiet? These are the easy questions, you see that, right? Clarence, you hear me talking? Should I be nicer? Is my tone unpleasant? You see I haven't gotten to the hard ones yet?

How's your drink? Need another? Less ice? Water? You sure, because I bought a new bottle, so you have no excuse?

Okay then, answer me this: why?

Is she thin? Bendable? Isn't that what mistresses are supposed to be these days?

How about your friends? They meet her? They love her?

What about your mother? She probably loves her, huh?

That woman ever step foot in my house? How about our car? When? Are you crazy? After you dropped them off at school? Or before? Are you crazy?

I can't find the diamond studs you gave me for Christmas and I want to know, did you give them to her? Was there a time limit on them? Were they temporary? Am I?

Were you with her yesterday?

What's her name?

Where does she work? What does she do? How many different ways can I ask the same question? What is her occupation? How does she make a living? Is she salaried? Does she have insurance? Dental? A good 401K?

Does she have kids? You think *that* was a ridiculous question? How is asking if she has

kids more ridiculous than you having kids?

You understand you can't stay here, right? You thought I'd let you stay? Why would you? Why would you even?

Let me ask a different question; are you ready for what's next? Are you ready for child support and alimony? I'm sorry you feel that way, but I didn't fuck around, did I? Would you call it that, fucking around? Or would you call it something else? Falling in love?

Clarence, how long has this been happening? No, I don't want to know, do I? So it's serious? You and her? Do I have to spell it out for you? Do you love her?

I'm not crazy?

Am I?

When I take you to my doctor tomorrow, what will you tell him is the reason for my STD test? Better yet, what will you do when she finds out you've been cheating on her with someone else? Clarence, if it happened to me, it'll happen to her, no?

What do you want to tell the kids? You understand that they need to know?

What kind of question is that? You realize you are no longer making sense? You realize how ridiculous you sound?

Clarence, are you sleepy? Then why did you make that face?

You think this is hard?

Oh boy, can you imagine?

Honey, sweetie, baby, love—if these are the easy questions, how will you manage the hard ones?

In Memoriam
J.R. Angelella

1.

It was early morning. Maybe Monday. The city braced for rain, but all anyone saw was sun. Some stores were open, but most were mostly closed. I was in a hardware store when my mother text-messaged me: *Dad died today*. I got on line to buy a bolt cutter. I text-messaged her back: *Is this another joke? Your darkness is never really funny.* I was the angry Lady Justice of hardware—bolt cutters in one hand and a cell phone gripped in the fist of my other. The cell phone held the greatest weight of all. Before I reached the counter girl, before my mother had a chance, I text-messaged her again: *Your dad or mine?*

She called and said, "Not mine."

Then it was mine.

I handed the bolt cutter to the counter girl, who scanned it multiple times like a knuckleheaded before his machine registered a price.

I said, "I don't know how to engage right now."

She said, "My greatest failure in life is how I raised you."

"What does that say about me?" I asked, and slid cash across the counter.

"I see him in you," she said. "Like a figure in a wax museum."

The counter girl put my bolt cutter in a paper bag. She wore an apron. She wore protective goggles. She wore a nametag. She wore a diamond stud. Her nametag read: *Serenity*.

The hardware store was clearly in on some kind of joke with my mother.

"Who you are has everything to do with what I did," she said.

"As a mother?" I asked.

"And a wife," she said.

Serenity the counter girl said, "Do you want your change, sir?"

My mother said one more thing and so did I.

2.

I walked west on Fourteenth Street, the butt of my bolt cutters bucking out of the bag. No cop stopped me, but any one of them could have. Maybe said: "Sir, step aside. Can I see what's in the bag?" I could have been arrested for carrying a concealed weapon, a sawed-off shotgun, especially in how I slung the thing. I yearned for someone to tempt me. I wanted to use the thing on someone somehow.

I passed a used mattress shop, promoting their fall sidewalk sale with a coin-operated mechanical horse for children to ride. It was tethered to the shop by a long, thick chain. I passed a man kicking the metal security gate of a bank not yet open, stopping only to catch his breath, before resuming his heavy heeled kicks.

Either one of these two could have used my purchase.

The day was bright. A blue sky pushed down the buildings. A construction crew leaned against some scaffolding, drinking coffee. On the corner, a payphone, tagged with juvenilia.

I knocked the paper bag off the bolt cutter, slapping at the sides.

I tipped the phone off the cradle. It fell and snapped back like a noose and a neck. The bolt cutter severed the hardwired spine of the phone. The phone in my hand, I whipped the spine in circles over my head like the blade of a helicopter.

"The fuck you doing?" a construction worker asked.

“This is no way to get attention, son,” another construction worker said.

“My father used to make collect calls to save a buck,” I said.

“You’re wrong up here,” a third construction worker said, tapping her temple.

“This is me mourning,” I said and ran against traffic on Fourteenth to Sixth Avenue. I worked my way north, bolt cutter in one hand, phone with the whirligig spine in the other.

3.

On East Fifty-Six and Sixth, I severed four more, stuffing the phones into my pockets, silver spines spiraling out.

I was mad. I was a mad man.

I approached another and held the phone.

A sidewalk waitress poured coffee for patrons sitting under umbrellas.

“If you have to make a call,” she said, holding a cell phone the size of a water bug, “you can use mine.”

“Do I look like I need help making a call?” I asked.

“Looks like you haven’t had much success,” she said.

“This is not a joke,” I said, shaking my bolt cutter.

“And those?” she asked, pointing at the phones and spines poking out from my pockets.

“Why do you care?” I asked.

“I’m an artist waiting tables,” she said. “I’m always stuck in some stage of grief.”

“Why is it that all the women in my life think they are stand-up comedians?” I asked.

“The better question is this: why all the pay phones?” she asked.

I snapped another spine.

4.

At the Engineer's Gate entrance to Central Park, a man clown asked me to donate a dollar to a children's charity. Some kind of cancer, maybe. Could have been orphans. The man clown thumped a tub of coins with his thumb.

"Sorry," I said. "My dad died. I am my own orphan now."

"You no longer have a mother?" he asked.

"Her I still have," I said.

"Would you like to donate in his or her name?" the man clown asked.

"She would want me to ask about your health. He would want me to honk your nose," I said, pinching air between my fingers. "He never stopped loving every fundamental aspect of the circus. Especially, the acrobats. They fell so far and so fast."

"What about me? What about the clowns?" he asked, gnawing on his fist, making a *yuk-yuk* sound.

"And the clowns. And their cars," I said.

"I'm a father too," he said. "It's hardest on the mothers. They can never give what the father inherently knows." He clicked the heels of his over-sized shoes.

"My mother hates the circus," I said.

"My wife does too," he said.

"Does your wife make jokes? Does she darken your world with her humor?" I asked.

"She looks at me different when I'm dressed like this," he said.

"Do you feel different?" I asked.

"I'm almost a lawyer," he said, pulling at his polka-dot lapel. "Or a pro at failing the bar. Depends on how you look at it. Depends on the month of the year."

"You want me to donate in his name?" I asked. "Because I won't donate in hers. She is still alive and hates for how she raised me."

"*He* wants you to," he said, squirting water at a businessman from a fake plastic flower.

"I can give you buckets," I said.

"Buckets?" he asked.

"Beaucoup buckets," I said.

"Of what?" he asked.

"See," I said, and pressed the lower beak of the bolt cutter into the keyhole of the payphone and twisted. Coins poured onto the sidewalk. "Beaucoup buckets."

5.

As I left the hardware store, my mother said one more thing and so did I.

She said, "I need to tell you something I never told your father."

I said, "Absolutely never."

The Saddening State of Sammy the Speechwriter
J.R. Angelella

TRUSTED

My meeting ends and I exit into the shade of a crabapple tree outside the church. Tiny red and green crabapples explode under my steps. Mother meets me beyond the wrought-iron gate. She uses her umbrella as a cane. "Mother," I say. Mother says, "My sexaholic son." She allows me to hug her, but doesn't hug back. We walk in the empty street. I tell her I can't stay long because I'm on deadline. Mother says, "I don't want to hear about it." Mother says, "I don't want to know what that means." I say, "It's a speechwriting gig." I say, "I'm writing on deadline." As if I had forgotten, Mother reminds me we are going to Becca's birthday. Mother says, "We need not spend time talking about ourselves." I say, "In case you were wondering, I'm thirty days clean." She questions the word clean. I tell her clean means I haven't engaged in that kind of activity in the past thirty days. She says, "Addicts cannot be trusted."

BIRTHDAY

The sky is blank but ready for a change. Blue balloons twist from a knot tied to a mailbox. Mother says, "I notice you're wearing hobo clothes." I look to my jeans and see a hole that jags around my knee. White strings dangle from the edges. I tell her I must've grabbed the wrong pair. Mother says, "If you weren't an addict, you might've taken more care." I tell her it was dark in my apartment. I tell her I thought they were a different pair. Mother says, "Fine way to start your niece's birthday."

SENSITIVE

My cell phone buzzes. Mother asks, “A vibrator?” She steps back. I tell her it’s a cell phone. To the phone I say, “This is Sammy.” It’s Miranda and Miranda likes to swear. She says, “Sammy, where the fuck is my fucking speech?” Mother points at me and says, “Watch yourself.” I cover the phone with my hand. “Please,” I whisper to Mother. “I mean it,” Mother says. Miranda asks, “Where the fuck is my fucking speech?” Mother asks, “Are you having phone sex?” I hang up on Miranda. Mother says, “Addicts are so predictable.” I say, “That was the woman who hired me to write the speech.” Mother says, “Aren’t we being sensitive?”

HANDS

I run my hand through the curl in my hair. It leans to the left. I lick my palm and pull it to the right. Mother raps the doorknocker. It’s a silver lion’s head. Becca answers the door. “Uncle Sammy,” Becca says. I say, “Happy birthday, kiddo.” I kiss the top of Becca’s head and smell an aggressive perfume. It smells of urinal cakes—an ammonia punch. I pinch my nose, a surgeon twisting off blood from a leaky vein. The scent knifes its way up my nose. I say, “That’s an aggressive perfume.” Becca says, “I’m not wearing any.” Becca ties her hair into a ponytail, tighter than a tourniquet. Gold hamburger-bun-sized earrings hang from her earlobes. Matching bracelets jangle at her wrists. Mother says, “Samuel, watch your hands.”

STEPS

Becca grabs Mother’s hand and escorts her up the steps and inside the house. I lean Mother’s umbrella next to the door. Chrissy exits the kitchen, carrying a platter of tiny sandwiches and tiny plates. Chrissy says, “Thought you had your class.” I say, “Not a class.” Chrissy points to the hole in my jeans. She says, “Don’t let Mother see that.” I ask, “Chrissy, you

smell something?" She asks, "Do your meetings have steps like drunks do?" I say, "Yes, we have steps."

MISTAKE

Chrissy sets tiny plates on the table to serve the tiny sandwiches. The urinal-cake smell spikes the air in the living room. Becca sits on the couch with her feet under her butt. She holds her plate under her chin as she eats the sandwiches. I sit in the wicker chair next to Mother, my exposed knee nearest to her. She pokes a fork at the rip. The rip spreads. I ask, "Does anyone smell that?" Becca says, "Nope." Mother says, "Don't be a bully." I tell Mother I am not a bully, and she says, "Well then, my mistake."

DIAMONDS

Becca decides to open her gifts. She shreds the white wrapping paper and tosses a bow to the floor. A tiny jewelry box. It opens with a soft snap. Becca squeals and slides a diamond ring over her finger. "Is it real? Or a Trojan Horse?" Becca asks. "Trojan Horse?" I ask. "A Trojan Horse is a fake," Becca says, rolling her eyes. "A lady never asks such a thing," Mother says. Then she says, "If you are asking about the diamond, the diamond is, of course, real." "Princess cut, too," Becca says. I taste ammonia in my throat. Becca asks, "What's the clarity? VVS1? VVS2?" Mother says, "It's of the highest of quality. My jeweler hand-picked it himself." I say, "Please tell me they don't teach you about diamonds in school?" Becca says she learned it from one of her mom's boyfriends. "Gil?" I ask. "Richard, the concert pianist, taught me about diamonds," Becca says. Then, "Gil was the high school counselor." Becca asks, "Carats?" She turns the ring under the lamp. "One full carat," Mother says. I say, "Chrissy, you never got a

diamond from Mother, did you?" Mother says, "Samuel, never joke about diamonds."

DRAFT

"How does it feel to finally be a teenager?" I ask. "Like I should have a later curfew," Becca says. Chrissy says, "We'll talk when you're sixteen." I hand Becca a white envelope from my back pocket. She tears along the top and slides out the card, which is a folded page of the speech I was working on. She reads the first line out loud: "What's the difference between a Republican and a cat? A cat covers its shit." I say, "Sorry. That's an old draft of a speech I'm writing. Read the back." Becca reads: "Happy B-Day. Love, Uncle Sammy." Becca plucks the ten-dollar bill from her lap that slid out from the card. She holds it like a wet sock. Mother says, "Isn't there something called making amends? Are you at that step yet?" "Step nine," I say. I say, "I'm not there yet." "That's your card—a copy of your speech?" Chrissy asks. I say, "Not a copy. A draft."

BATHROOM

Mother stands and walks to the kitchen, sighing the whole way. Chrissy follows. Becca thanks me for the ten. "You sure you don't smell anything?" I ask. Becca chugs her soda and burps. She says, "I think I smell pizza." I know there is no pizza and excuse myself to the bathroom.

APARTMENT

The bathroom is larger than my apartment. I redial Miranda. I say, "Miranda, sorry we got disconnected." Miranda calls me names. I pick apart the rip in my jeans and run my thumb

around my knee. I tell her I am working on a draft as we speak. She says that she stopped by my apartment, but I wasn't there. I tell her I'm at my niece's birthday party but will finish the speech tonight. She tells me I have one hour or will be terminated. I sigh and Miranda asks, "What did you call me?" "I didn't call you anything," I say. From outside the bathroom, Mother says, "Samuel, come out this instant." I say to myself, "Fuck." "What did you say to me?" Mother asks. "Fuck you," Miranda says. Mother says, "I don't understand your choices." Miranda says, "Terminated." I open the door and say, "Why does it smell like urinal cakes in this apartment?"

SPEECH

Mother slaps my cheek and exits the house without her umbrella. Becca asks, "What happened to Grandma?" I say, "Grandmothers cannot be trusted." Chrissy enters the kitchen, her knees smudged black with soot. I say, "You got some shmootz," and point to her knees. She knocks at the dirt with her hands. I grab a sponge from the sink and wipe her knees clean. I finish and she holds my face in her hands. I say, "Glad I could come." She says, "Sammy, what did you do?" I say, "Do you want me to go after Mother?" She says, "My apartment didn't smell until you arrived."

ME

I wait on the subway platform, the rotten stench of urinal cakes still on me. A nanny pushes a little girl in a stroller. The nanny points to the hole in my jeans. I say, "I know." The hole hangs open, exposing my hairy knee. A train moans and lurches in the distance, approaching. The little girl in the stroller asks, "Why does it smell like a bathroom in here?" I say, "It's not me."

The Art of Apology
J.R. Angelella

1.

Bibiana teaches me to make a different sauce every Sunday.

This is why I'm standing at her door with a bag full of groceries, waiting for her to answer my knock. She verses me on authentic Italian cuisine, so long as I pick up the ingredients. She calls making sauce an art form.

"It'll win you a wife someday," she says.

Our weekly weekend tradition would be wonderful if she ever remembered that we did it the week before. But she never does. The next week comes and the last week goes. Every Sunday is always my first Sunday school of sauce with Bibiana.

Her sickness keeps her from remembering things.

Bibiana lives in the apartment across from me and has lived in the building for fifty years. It is a studio, like mine, with a TV and bed and tiny kitchen with a table for meals. She keeps it clean and clutter-free. She hates dirt and dust and believes it leads to cancer. Bibiana doesn't remember many things, but she remembers me and she remembers cancer.

I kick her door, trying to make it sound less furious and more like a knock. The tip of my shoe sounds too immediate and serious. The side of my shoes seems softer and sweeter, the echo of a family visit. My arms strain under the weight of her groceries. She wants to teach me to make her famous veal-based marinara sauce over stuffed shells, the main consistency of which calls for all kinds of cans—paste, puree, crushed and whole.

She doesn't remember that we made this two months ago. The veal, she says, is one meal. The stuffed shells another. And the left over sauce is yet another.

"Three meals in one," she says.

I kick her door again with the side of my shoe, louder in case her hearing aid is set on low. I rest my head on her door and catch my breath. I kick again and still no answer inside. She could have died, which wouldn't surprise me, but would annoy me. No one wants to carry three paper bags of canned goods ten blocks to a dead woman's apartment.

Chains and locks unhook as Bibiana opens the door.

Bibiana walks with a cane and big, bag lady glasses. Her skin is surprisingly young and unwrinkled with the hue of young woman, not the rust of a senior. Not yellowy as most old people appear. She moves with the grace and speed of a golden aged-ballerina, although she has a tiny hump in her back, which makes her bend forward and clutch her waist when she walks.

She reaches into the metal mailbox on the wall.

"Oh my, Felix," she says, stepping back, clutching her chest, one hand on the wall next to an oil painting of a garden. She painted this in her old lady art class and always asks me for my opinion on it. She never remembers she has done this many times before.

"Sorry, Bibi," I say. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"What?" she asks, adjusting her hearing aids. "I can't hear a thing with these dern gizmos." Her apartment smells like Vaseline.

"I have your groceries," I say, showing her the bag.

"Look how strong you are," she says. "You can put them in the kitchen, hon."

I step inside and kick off my shoes by the door.

"Don't forget to take off your shoes," she says.

I set the groceries down next to an egg timer and tiny coffee bean grinder.

"That dirt under your shoes get on the floor and can cause cancer," she says.

I kiss the back of her hand and point to her groceries.

"We're going to eat like royalty tonight," she says. She touches her silver hair and begins unpacking the bag. "What do you think of my painting by the door, Felix."

"Effortless," I say.

"You're full of shit, but a sweetheart for not stinking of it." She pinches my cheeks. "Now, let's get this sauce on the go, shall we. We don't have all day." She gets more excite with every word.

On her two-burner stove, Bibiana boils water for shells in one and sautés chopped garlic, virgin olive oil, basil leaves and thick cut onion in the other. She slaps the counter when I don't pay attention. "Felix. Did you see what I did? Get up and stir it," she says. "How are you going to learn if you don't pay attention?"

"Should I let the sauce burn to know when it's done?" I ask, fueling her.

"No. Don't let it burn," she says. "Does burned sauce sound good to you?"

"No, ma'am."

"Righty. It's terrible," she says. "My son Barry always burns his sauce. Never pays attention to the dern garlic and onions. Great sauce has everything to do with the garlic and onions. And the olive oil. And the tomatoes. But you got to be careful with the olive oil—too much and it's greasy. No good. Can't eat it. Then again—too little and it's dry. No good. Can't eat it."

Bibiana doesn't have a son named Barry. Bibiana never had a son, period. In fact, I'm quite sure she has never met a person on this earth named Barry.

"Extra virgin, right?" I ask, holding the bottle of olive oil. "Like I like my women," I say to myself, but not really with any worry that she'll hear me, and if she does hear me, it's not like she'd understand it.

"Extra virgin like all young ladies should be," she says. She slaps my side. "My husband Nathanial always uses too much oil, but his sauce at least doesn't taste burned like Barry's."

Like with Barry, Bibiana has never married.

"Right," I say, still stirring, the kitchen filling with steam and salivating scents. "What does *extra virgin* mean?"

"It means cold pressed olives are bottled with no refined oil. It is superior in every way," she says. "And don't be a smart ass. Keep stirring."

"Bibiana," I say, "how would you like some hot tea while we work?"

"Deary, that sounds terrific," she says. "I have some English cookies that my son Barry gave me too. Some nibbles so we don't spoil our appetites."

I kiss Bibiana on the back of her hand again and tell her I'll be right back before I cross the hallway to my apartment. As I leave and slip back into my shoes, she stands at her stove, stirring with her wooden spoon, hunched and happy.

2.

I set my copper teakettle on the stove and ignite the gas flame when a shotgun blast shatters my second story window. Shards of glass rain down on my studio apartment and scatter across the hardwood floor, which reminds me I need to buy an area rug for the foyer.

Another blast sprays through my apartment as I stretch out across the cold linoleum of my kitchenette. A section of glass snaps loose from the windowpane and shatters on the floor.

Another blast shreds the walls of my apartment. Wooden beams appear hidden underneath the drywall. The structure.

The Victorian table lamp encrusted with faux-gems that Bibiana gave me the first time we made sauce together explodes like a stick of dynamite. The lampshade flutters to the floor, riddled through like a voting card of a thousand hanging chads. Sparks spit and pop from an electrical outlet. I hear the subtle shift of energy buzz as the power blinks off. My refrigerator goes quiet.

I cat-crawl on my elbows and knees over broken glass and shattered molding, past my closet and grab a baseball hat, tugging it down over my eyes for protection.

Another blast strikes the milk carton on the counter, milk leaking over the linoleum.

Anxious dogs in my building bark at the gunshots.

I push myself up and, hunched over like Bibiana, walk over to where my window used to be. Leaning close to its blown-out edges, I listen for sirens or spectators pleading for the gunshots to stop.

Kemper Tuttle stands in the middle of the street, aiming a shotgun at my apartment building. I wipe plaster from my forehead and remember that I have to pick up my dry-cleaning today.

"Kemper, the fuck you doing?" I ask, obviously.

"Felix," he says, clearing his throat. "I see you, you disease."

Another blast scatters over me.

I fling my body back, my head hitting the end table where Bibiana's lamp used to sit.

"Felix, you're the cancer of creativity," Kemper says. "You have no consideration for anyone other than yourself."

"Kemper, how long do you think you can do this until someone calls the police?" I ask. I touch my body for blood—nothing. But decide to start a diet tomorrow.

"I can try and kill you forever," Kemper says. His defiance reminds me of a six-year-old arguing his case for staying up past bedtime.

“What if I call the police?” I ask.

"I am not leaving until I shoot out every beam in that building. Until I shoot it down to you, you savage!" Kemper fires into the building. The shotgun spray riddles the ceiling. Pieces of heavy plaster crumble down in sheets.

“Kemper, just how drunk are you?”

“Fairly loaded. Like my shotgun.” He reloads.

A cloud of dust and debris expands throughout the room.

Kemper says good morning to someone passing by outside. “I hope I didn’t wake you, sir,” he says. “I know it’s early. I know it’s Sunday.” Kemper explains that he is, in fact, not crazy, that he is merely a defender of art, fighting against the injustice of tyranny.

“I disagree,” I say, leaning through the giant hole in my wall. “He’s like a superhero in reverse,” I yell. “Superhero by day and bad artist by night.”

“You should know,” Kemper continues, “that the person living in that building, in that apartment there, is a passionless vessel of thought.” Kemper, probably pointing his shotgun up at the hole in my wall, clears his throat. “He is the seed of cold steel,” he says. He speaks the way a woman speaks to her mother on the phone when throwing her husband out of the house—loud enough so he can hear every word as he packs a duffle bag full of work shirts and toiletries.

Hollowed shells plunk and rattle against the street.

Kemper wishes the passer-by a nice day, then reloads, snapping the barrel back into place.

"I don't have all day," I say, checking all of my finger.

My front door opens and Bibiana steps inside.

"You forgot the veal, Felix. How can we make a veal-based marinara sauce when you forgot the veal!"

"Bibi, get down." I kick out her cane and pull her down. She was right. I did forget the veal. First time I forgot anything at all.

"Oh deary," she says. "All this mess. You're going to get cancer."

"What do you know about art, anyway?" Kemper asks. "*You* disgust me," he says, firing again.

The sides of the window frame splinters like a compound fracture of bone. I inhale chunky air and gag, wiping dust and plaster from my face. He shoots again as single malt scotch bottles on top of my refrigerator shatter. Damn. That shit was expensive. Aged 30 years.

"I'm sorry I called you a superhero in reverse," I say, covering Bibiana's ears.

Two more shells clink to the ground outside. Then a tight snap. Then another blast.

"What is happening?" she asks.

"God, you really fucked my security deposit," I say, coughing from the debris. I pick at a hair that has wrapped around my tongue. "How do we settle this?" I scream over my shoulder to the hole in my wall.

"Indignant bureaucrat!" Kemper says. "You soul-suck. You hardened sickness of cold death."

"I hope you have money because this shotgun damage isn't covered under my renters' insurance," I say.

Kemper yells back, "You infected cell. You misguided mouth of ego."

"I did nothing wrong," I say.

"You forgot the veal, Felix," Bibiana says.

"But you did," Kemper says. "And you—you slouch—cannot begin to see the roots of my existence." Kemper takes a breath. "I want an apology," he says.

"He's sorry he forgot the veal," Bibiana says. "Please stop shooting."

"I'm sorry, but I can't say I'm sorry," I say.

"Apologize," Kemper says.

"It was an entire gallery of white canvas," I say. "It didn't make sense as a collection. It didn't make sense as art."

"Why is he shooting at you?" she asks. "It's only veal."

A shotgun blast sounds and misses my apartment, but strikes the apartment below.

"I was doing you a favor," I say. "Affording you the opportunity of press," I say. "*No such thing as bad press*?"

Kemper drops two more shells to the ground. Snaps the barrel shut.

"Bibi, I was giving him what he wanted—recognition. Was all he wanted," I say.

I sweep my forearm across the floor, clearing a path, spreading the glass and plaster and dust and ceramic apart. I roll to my back on the hardwood floor and see my ottoman standing in milk. "Did you hear any of what I just said?" I ask.

Kemper doesn't respond.

"I'm sorry you are upset with my review," I say.

Kemper is silent. I don't hear empty shotgun shells.

"Kemper?" I ask. "You're gonna shoot at me again, aren't you?"

Another blast assaults my room, tearing up my quilted three-thousand-count Egyptian cotton bedspread.

"How dare you apologize for *my* reaction," Kemper says. "Who are you to judge art anyway, you glorified elitist fuck. It's people like you that need the satisfaction of art to fill the void of something else."

I am excited, looking around, that after construction I will get to re-paint my room. Maybe a forest green. Maybe plum. That I might even get a one-bedroom apartment out of the deal when it's all said and done.

Bibiana barely moves on the floor.

"You don't even own any art," Kemper says.

"Good thing too, cuz you just shot up my apartment pretty bad," I say. "It'd be worthless, if I did."

"I have art," Bibiana says.

"Let me up. To talk," he says.

"Absolutely no," I say.

"You mean absolutely not?" he asks.

"No. I mean absolutely no," I say.

"No shotgun then. Just me. Alone. Let me come up," Kemper says. "Let's talk. See if you can convince me. The police are on their way. I don't have much time."

I stand and step into the blown-out frame of the window.

"Stay down, Bibi," I say.

Kemper looks up from the street.

The sun shines shafts of light through the city buildings.

"I'm sorry, Kemper," I say.

A grateful smile stretches across his face, slow at first like a sunrise.

"I'm sorry that I can't say I'm sorry. And I'm sorry I don't see things your way."

Red and blue lights twirl in the distance. A siren screams.

Kemper faces the approaching police as the muzzle and stock of his gun hit the ground.

"One cannot apologize for how one feels," I say. "We see things differently."

"Can I come up so we can settle this?" he asks.

"No gun," I say.

"A gun should be the least of your worries," he says.

I push the security buzzer as Kemper enters the injured building, climbing the stairs several at a time, his feet pounding the metal stairs, giving off a deep echo in the hallway. I pull back from the hole in my wall. It's amazing to me that our front door is better fortified than the building itself. Goddern, lazy landlord not keeping the building up to code. But the door is new!

Bibiana pushes herself up with her cane and, surveying my apartment, says, "Oh deary me, so much cancer."

3.

The Sunday morning sun casts shadows of the city onto the blank walls.

"My God," Kemper says, entering my apartment. "It's my finest work yet." Tiny waves of milk and scotch ripple under his boots.

I stand behind a chair, holding a wedge of glass in my hand, keeping Bibiana behind me.

"No shotgun," Kemper says, raising his hands.

"Knife," I say, showing the glass. "I'm not afraid to use it."

Kemper laughs and kicks a wet clump of ceiling that had fallen to the floor. He sees my kettle still on the burner. "Oh, fantastic, you're making tea. How lovely. Can I have some?" he asks, grabbing his throat. "So parched. All that bourbon I downed earlier."

I shake the wedge at him as he sits in the chair.

"Painfully parched," he says. "Honey, too, if you have it. Just a dab."

"That reminds me, Felix," Bibiana says. "Some people use honey in their sauce. Don't ever use honey in your sauce. If I ever catch you using honey in your sauce, I'll whack you. Barry uses honey. Silly boy."

"Who's the old lady?"

"You should apologize," Bibiana says.

"I really love the mess," Kemper says. "Can I come back later to take some pictures?"

"Are you crazy?" I ask.

"This will cause us all cancer," Bibiana says.

"Not crazy. Honest," he says, kicking off his shoe and rubbing his bare foot with his hand.

"I don't have moisturizer," I say, wanting to stick the glass in his foot to show him, from real pain, instead of this art pain.

The teakettle whistles.

Kemper smiles and nods towards the kettle. "Please?" he asks.

"Please," I say.

"I should really go and check on the sauce," Bibiana says. "Felix, I already stuffed the shells. All that's left is to let the sauce simmer eight hours. But I must go and stir the sauce so it doesn't burn."

"She shouldn't leave," Kemper says, walking to the kettle and pouring himself a cup of tea. When he walks across the floor, he is careful not to cut his foot. He stops halfway back to the chair. "Milk?" he asks, pinching his fingers together.

"You shot it," I say. White liquid marinates the floor with shattered plaster, glass and wood.

"Oh drats," he says, snapping his fingers.

"Remind me that we should practice a cream sauce, Felix," Bibiana says. "It's a delicate balance to maintain, but if you can make a rich cream sauce, you can conquer the world."

"You realize how crazy this is?" I ask him.

"I realize how crazy *she* is," Kemper says.

"Eccentric," I say. "Not crazy."

He surveys the damage. "It's funny. She says I will cause cancer and I say you are cancer." Kemper sits down. "Even though we do disagree on the merit and intention of art."

"WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?" I ask.

"I feel you need a tutorial," he says, crossing one leg over the other, resting the teacup on his knee.

"You used a shotgun," I say.

"Heavy handed, yes, but a tutorial nonetheless," he says. "Am I slurring my words? I don't feel like I am, but I sure did drink enough to knock out my speech all together."

"I think you both need to learn to cook a nice *puttanesca*," Bibiana says.

"Tell me," he says, poking his thumb about the room. "What do you see?"

"Costly, random destruction," I say.

"And cancer," Bibiana says.

"I see post-modern, real-time disaster art," he says. "Real estate art."

"The cops are here," I say, looking at the hole in my wall, red and blue flashing outside.

"My Barry is a cop. He will help," she says.

"Cops will raise this moment of transgressive art from mediocre to infamy. An installation for the ages," he says, sipping tea.

"This is vandalism," I say. "Attempted murder."

"Then you can write about it," he says.

"I will not apologize for my review," I say. "Your art was trite."

"Like a pesto," she says. "You need to learn to cook a nice walnut pesto."

"Your art *is* trite. Answerable only by shotgunning my apartment," I say, nodding to the mess as proof.

"My Barry was very dramatic as a child. We enrolled him in cooking classes at the local college and he learned to make the most delicious cannoli and tiramisu."

Kemper sets his teacup on the floor and stands. "I see." He sighs, then stomps the teacup under his foot. Porcelain shatters under his heel. Tea splashes into the river of liquid on the floor. Everything mixes. Kemper's foot begins to bleed, mixing with the remaining elements of life pooling in my apartment.

I swing the wedge of glass at him, slicing his hand.

Bibiana says, "Oh my. He needs gauze."

Kemper reads from the paper in his hands. My review. I look around my apartment. The conveniences of a privileged life are buried beneath rubble. Kemper says that I am a danger to the youth of America. Kemper tells me that my life is a shallow stream of sewage. Kemper runs across the room and turns a knob to one of the burners as it flickers to a roar. He dips the corner of the review into the flame and tosses the burning paper to the floor.

Blue flames stand like a line of dominoes in reverse, running across the floor, over ceiling and wood and glass. The flame is small at first, before snapping into six separate lines of fire. Embers spit sparks in arcs.

Kemper throws his hands over his head like a boxer claiming victory and says, "I am the public defender of art," before disappearing out the kitchen window and down the fire escape.

4.

I fumble past cleaning products under the sink to my fire extinguisher. I squeeze the handle as white foam smothers the room in a fog, which chases the fire up the curtains and comforter and onto the upholstery of the chair. I stand in the doorway, hosing the fire with little effect. A stiff finger pokes me in the back.

"Felix?" Bibiana stands behind me. "What happened here? Is our tea ready?"

"Bibiana, go downstairs," I say.

"Oh, I never go anywhere," she says.

"There's a fire. You need to leave," I say.

"I'll call my son, Barry. He'll know what to do," she says, heading inside for the phone. "Did I ever tell you that he's a cop?"

I grab her wrist. "Bibiana, it's not safe anymore," I say.

"I just had a nap. I'm raring to go," she says, patting my hands. Her skin feels cold and rubbery.

"You didn't have a nap, Bibi," I say. "We were cooking. Sauce and shells."

Bibiana walks across the hall and back into her kitchen. Her sauce on the stove ha burned and pan of stuffed shells sits half-covered in tin foil. "We can't leave it all out," she says.

Black smoke fills the hallway as three firemen in full gear run toward us. One carries an ax. The other two hold a hose.

"Oh my deary," Bibiana says.

A fireman yells for us to evacuate.

"Not unless you bring me my sauce and shells," she says. "Otherwise, I'm not leaving."

Another fireman arrives and the first fireman says, "She won't leave without her sauce and shells."

"I don't care what it takes. Get it for her and take her out," he says.

The firemen are about to enter when Bibiana puts a hand up like a stop sign.

"You must remove your shoes before entering my apartment," she says. "You boys stand in a lot of bad places and I don't want it putting cancer on my floors."

I grab a napkin from her table and place it to her mouth, shouldering her out of her apartment, away from the fire. Two firemen follow behind us—one carrying the sauce, the other balancing the tray of stuffed shells. They do not take off their shoes.

An explosion rumbles behind us as one of the firemen drops a tray of shells, which shatters across the stairs.

Bibiana turns to me and says, "Felix, it's the sauce that matters most."

5.

Outside, we sit in the back of an ambulance parked across the street and suck air from oxygen tanks. The sauce is on the ground, still bubbling, surrounded by empty shogun shells. We watch the fire rip through our building.

Bibiana coughs and taps my forearm.

"There are worse things, Felix. My Nathanial was trapped in a fire just like this once," she says.

"Your husband?" I ask.

"Trying to save our pictures. More important than sauce," she says.

"Why did he save the pictures?" I ask.

"Story of one's life. Very important, pictures." Bibiana nods.

"Did he?" I ask.

"Wouldn't you know, he put them in the oven," she says. "Saved every one. We lost everything that day. Except those pictures."

"Where are your pictures now?" I ask, the building burning badly behind us.

"If my Nathanial hadn't put those pictures in the oven, I never would have had the opportunity to give them to my son," she says.

"Barry," I say.

"The story of our lives."

"Can I call someone for you? Let them know about this," I say.

"No. I'll be fine," she says. "We saved the sauce today."

We breathe from our tanks. We watch the fire devour our building and black smoke pump up into the air. Crowds gather to watch water cannons pour gallons per minute onto the flames. A helicopter hovers nearby shooting footage for the nightly news.

"What happened?" Bibiana asks me, removing the oxygen from her nose and mouth. "Why is there a fire? Why are so many people watching us?"

I tell her not to worry. That I called her son, Barry. That he is on his way.

My Old Man Never Taught Me A Thing
By: J.R. Angelella

I remember my grandfather. I called him Poppop.

My Dad is still alive. Dad called him *Old Man*, but never to his face.

Now Dad avoids the topic of his father at every turn.

Poppop's speech was gone. It had all but disappeared.

It was a Baltimore blizzard twenty-two years ago. The neighborhood plow had cleared away the snow, but not the black ice alive underneath. He ventured down the driveway to grab the waiting mail when he slipped and fell. He hit his head on the frozen asphalt. They were hard and fast thuds. White ice, then red. He didn't make a sound. He never said a thing. He just closed his eyes and blanked out. After his fall, I ran to the kitchen and told them he was dead.

I remember. I was six. I was there.

Poppop refused speech therapy and, in turn, lost it all, but five words. Those five words communicated two things: *What the hell* and *Damn thing*. He never said anything else until many years later on the day he met my wife.

The family gathered at his house for holidays. We would find him tucked away on his faded beige recliner in the living room by the fireplace, hand snuck barely in the waist of his pants. Mouth open. Throat-snoring. Poppop hated that fireplace. "Damn thing," he'd say, pushing his old body out of the recliner. He'd turn on the ceiling fan, his face red. "What the hell," he'd say.

Poppop chewed his tongue like a cow on cud. When he was: bored, lost in thought, listening to a story, about to go to sleep. My Dad never did. "I never did that dumb thing," Dad says when he sees me chewing my tongue now too.

Is this genetic? Or another thing never taught?

Poppop looked at Mommom, like she was his first of three wishes. She called him *hon*. He called her *babe*. I never saw them fight or engage in any kind of argument, in large part due to his limited speech of those five words. If he ever got frustrated, which was often in his life, Poppop would simply drop his hands by his sides, like sleeping hammers, and resume a hearty chew on his aging tongue. Soft chews. Slow chews. Careful not to bite.

His three brothers and sister would sometimes travel down to Baltimore to visit their younger brother, slapping backs, kissing cheeks, the brothers calling him *strunz*. His family lived in a tiny country town in the middle of Pennsylvania—the only Italians there, I am told. Once I asked Poppop what *strunz* meant. "It means they love me," he said. One of his older brothers overheard my question and shouted, "It means that you grandfather is worthless." Another chimed in, "It means your grandfather is an idiot." Poppop chewed down on his tongue and smiled, before retreating to his recliner in the living room by the fireplace.

His sister was a Carmelite nun. We called her Mother Anna. She left her family to join the order when she turned 18. My Dad said that Mother Anna joined the order to save the soul of her family that her father was a bad man and needed all the salvation he could get. When I asked him what he meant, Dad shrugged and said that the First World War had changed him. "My grandfather did the best that he could and taught his sons valuable skills," Dad said. Poppop's brothers were all tradesmen—electrician, plumber, and a mechanic.

Poppop was not. Poppop sold mattresses. He sold Sealy mattresses and was the best Sealy salesman in all of Western Maryland.

It was late summer—hot, but becoming overcast. Poppop had finished mowing his acre of lawn and sat on a bench in the shade at the top of his driveway. He sipped ice tea with a

wedge of lemon that Mommom had just made. He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and combed over a few wisps of white hair. His teeth gently chewed the soft edges of his tongue. Then, he sighed and sweetly slapped my back. He and I simply sat together, quiet, surveying the empty driveway where we had been four years prior. I still wonder if, like me, he was thinking about his fall that day too. Even then I believed there was something more I could have done to save him.

Dad gave Poppop an Italian flag for Christmas. I was ten. I remember Poppop rose out of his recliner by the fireplace and draped the flag over his body like a toga, then danced around the room, stopping only to drink his homemade sangria. For years when I would visit, I'd find the flag folded neatly on the shelf in the back of his coat closet. The Christmas I turned thirteen Poppop gave me the gift of an Italian flag too. When I went looking for his flag folded neatly on the shelf in the back of his coat closet all I found were coats. I never found his flag after that, but I still have mine and keep it over the television in the living room of my house. I do not have a fireplace and my wife wont let me get a recliner, otherwise the flag would hang right there.

He used make gargantuan sandwiches for lunch—toasted Italian bread, but closer to burnt; thick cut tomatoes; honey-glazed ham; buttersnap pickles; yellow mustard; Swiss cheese. His trademark move though was to take one big bite of his finished sandwich, before he left the kitchen and when he'd see my sandwich, he'd ask for a bite from mine too. The reason for this? "Your sandwich looks so much better than mine. Here—let me try it. Make sure it isn't better than mine."

I will never forget his bites being bigger than mine.

Later in my teens, I remember something else small. Poppop awoke from a nap—disheveled, disoriented, displeased he was no longer napping. He awoke and saw me playing

catch by myself outside, tossing the ball high into the air and catching it, or almost catching—no one else around. He stumbled onto the front yard and shouted at me to come in. "Do you know who Bob Feller is?" he asked, his shirt twisted, his pants twisted too. "No," I said. I said, “I don’t know anyone who knows who Bob Feller is.” “Are you kidding me? Stand back,” he said, taking the baseball from me. “I should beat you for saying that. I should beat your father for you saying that. I said, stand back. Okay. Now let me teach you how to throw a Bob Feller curve ball.”

I remember Poppop teaching me how to throw a Bob Feller curve ball, but I don't remember the Bob Feller curve ball ever really curving. It broke, more than curved. I remember saying something to that effect. Poppop said, “It’s a Bob Feller breaking ball, kid. Who said anything about a curve?”

I never really learned anything about Bob Feller the person, but also never really asked. In my twenties, Poppop’s brother—the plumber—told me that Bob Feller visited their hometown in Pennsylvania. He pitched batting practice for the local little league team and taught all the boys how to throw his famous breaking ball. I always wondered what the girls learned that day. I wondered who visited with them.

Sometime between his fall and drinking iced tea with him on his driveway, Poppop chased me through his house with an electric razor. He loved to threaten to shave my face. Instead of shave, he would sometimes say *cut*. I am going to cut your face. I always let him catch me, or never really ever had a chance of getting away. He would hold my face in one hand, like a vice gripping wood, as he pressed the flat side of his razor to my cheek. He never shaved me. It never cut. But I swear it felt so real. I swear I have been shaving since before turned a teen.

Dad likes to tell me how Poppop chased him through the house when he was a kid. The difference between Dad’s story and my own is that Dad’s story involved a gold buckled belt.

There were more differences too. I never minded getting caught. Dad never wanted to be caught. When I was caught, he would pretend to give me a shave. When Dad was caught, he would shout and scream and wiggle until he could get away. Once the gold buckled belt came off, so would Poppop's pants, helping Dad to get away for a while.

Dad bought me my first electric razor. He bought it from one of those discount-clothing stores. He opened up the box and assembled the various parts. He plugged it into the wall for 30 minutes until it held a strong charge. Then he handed it to me to try. I sat on my bed and turned it on, the familiar lightweight machine buzzing in my hand. I flipped it over and pressed the flat, side to my face. I remember it didn't feel the same, but it reminded me of running, being chased, and held still by Poppop's hands.

My Dad never wore a belt.

I don't ever remember Poppop making wine in the basement, crushing grapes through a grinder with a crank. The juice dripped into plastic vats. I only know these things because Dad told me. I don't remember his shirts always stained with splotches of purple, but I do remember his skin always smelling of sweet, sweet juice.

Poppop couldn't attend my wedding due to his dementia.

I love the story of how Dad met Mom and Mom met Poppop.

Dad met Mom in Baltimore. He saw an advertisement in the newspaper for a mattress and went to check it out. The advertisement was placed by one of Mom's roommates. Dad visited the apartment to inspect the mattress "for sale" and this was how they met. Mom met Poppop a few months later. He heard the story about the mattress. He looked at Dad and made a fist with his hand. He shook his fist at him and said, "What the hell."

My Mom divorced my Dad. Or Dad divorced Mom. I am not sure who did what to whom, legally. I do know it was kind. I had just graduated from college. One did not have to do with the other. At least, I don't think. No one cheated. No one yelled. No one stole. No one did drugs or got drunk or disappeared for periods of time. They simply just stopped knowing how to love one another. Mom moved away, out-of-state, to western New York. I spent a lot of time with her and have so much to say on her and her family, but that is not what this is about.

But what does matter is what Mom said to me.

Mom said to me, "This is what love looks like when you fall asleep at the wheel."

When Poppop met my wife, he got down on one knee and kissed her hand. He said a new word that day. No one will ever forget. Poppop kissed her hand and then said "thank you." He wanted to say more, but because of his condition nothing more came out. His five words grew that day to seven. After a while, he tapped his head above his ear and said, "Damn thing."

I showed him my wedding album. He flicked a picture of me with facial hair and he said, "What the hell."

Poppop had another stroke and his body went to sleep. The doctors sent him to hospice to die because according to them nothing else could be done. The day his body and belongings were moved into hospice, I got a call from Dad. I was driving home from the movie theater. I don't remember what film I saw. Dad cried. He cried hard. He didn't say anything for a few minutes. He couldn't catch his breath. Finally, he did and when he did he said something I will likely never forget. At least, I will never forget, so long as I can avoid being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and suffering from dementia and avoid falling and whacking my head on the ground and, thus, refuse to receive speech therapy. If I can navigate these waters well, I shall remember what he said forever.

Dad said, “My old man never taught me a thing.”

He said this to me on the phone. He told me he was standing in the doorway to Poppop’s tiny hospice room, looking down on a man that was completely helpless, hopeless and weak.

Dad said, “He made me feel how he looks right now.”

Poppop had his last stroke and the doctors never came. It was a Sunday and we were all there. Most sick people, like animals, wait for their loved ones to leave, before they give up on life and finally pass on for good. Not Poppop. He waited for us all to be gathered together in his sad little hospice room, before he suffered another grand and difficult setback that took away his life. He moaned and shook. An awful death rattle escaped from his chest. Mommom moved away from the bed to the corner of the room and turned her back to it all. She whispered sharp directions to herself. Dad stood over him as these things passed and took a picture of his corpse on his cell. Poppop’s sister, Mother Anna, had died before him, as had his mechanic and plumber brothers. His youngest electrician brother was there though, too. He sat in the only chair in the room. It rocked. He went with it, easily. Keeping time with the syncopating sounds of dying breath and camera phone clicks and whispered pleas and me.

Poppop passed away and it took two hours before anyone came to his room to remove him. That was okay. Because we were all there. Each person suffering in some way, except for him.

In the corner of the hospice room, Mommom whispered this to herself, “Get it together, Jinny. Get it together. Stop it. Stop it. Stop this right now.” I never told Dad this, but she almost slapped herself at one point, but she stopped when she saw me smile at her.

After he died, they told me he didn’t fall. He never fell. They told me he had had a stroke first. Stroke first, fall second. They said that there was nothing I could have done. I was too

young anyway. They questioned whether I really even remember it anyway. He was going to fall and hit his head no matter what, no matter whether I was there or not, no matter if there was snow or ice or rain or sand.

I will always wonder why they waited twenty-five years to tell me it wasn't my fault.

Dad likes to tell people how Poppop's jaw hung open after he died, except he says *drooped*. Dad took that picture of the corpse on his cell phone and shows it to anyone dumb enough to look when he says, "Check this out." The guy stocking produce at the grocery store handed the phone back to Dad and said, "I hear eggplants help with grief."

I found Dad sitting on the front steps of his house, very much gone in his thoughts, his mail courier standing nearby. I approached and the mail courier handed me Dad's phone—Poppop's corpse prominent on the screen. The mail courier, kind and sweet, she said, "Tell him no good can come of this."

The funeral director handed Mommom a laminated list of casket selections; she placed it on the table and said, "I don't care what we bury him in, so long as it isn't a pine box." The funeral director said, "Ma'am, I don't think anyone makes pine box caskets anymore." She said, "No pine box. You are not just going to throw him away." Dad spoke up and said, "Mom, he will be remembered."

I remember the last time I saw Dad's *old man*. Poppop was in a rosewood casket trimmed with gold-plated piping. His jaw was wired shut and he looked translucent.

I remember, mostly, what the old man said most.

What the hell. Damn thing. Thank you.

Traumarama
J.R. Angelella

1.

There's a monster in the darkness. I am tired of running from it. I am too far-gone for help now.

2.

At home, I'm on my back in an empty tub like it's a bunker. Black mold eats up from the bottom of the shower liner and onto the tiled walls. A bar of soap disintegrates in the elbow nook of pink tile and porcelain. A shower caddy hangs crooked from the neck of the showerhead. A spider spins up into the nose of the tub, nesting its eggs away.

In these moments of alone, I talk to my dead brother Finn.

Finn, is it me or have things gone kind of biblical lately?

3.

When I was three months old, my mother threw me to the floor.

This is what I tell strangers and friends.

When I ask her about it now, Mom says *dropped*.

When I ask Dad, he says *thrown*.

Dad says, "You never saw a doctor."

Mom says, "You were fine."

Dad says, "There was no real trauma."

I say, “Define trauma.”

4.

Carrie calls from downstairs. “Wyatt, who are you talking to? What are you doing up there?”

“Shaving,” I say, climbing out of the tub.

I pull back the drapes above the tank of the toilet.

Wind whistles through cracks in the windowpane. A leafless tree pokes out of the sidewalk. In a gust it shakes like an angry fist. There are no birds, but there is a squirrel. Black and skinny. It drops from a branch onto the hood of a parked car. It scratches at acorns trapped underneath the windshield wiper.

Finn—this is, I believe, where the hallucination begins.

A man waits on the corner for a bus. He breathes into his hands, checks his watch and steps into the street. A van parallel parks into its spot and cuts its engine. It settles. A door opens and reveals that no one is driving. Smoke drifts out from inside. Smoke billows thicker now. A little girl walks by, wrapped in a coat and scarf and earmuffs. Wind strikes against her and a clutch of hair snakes loose. She squints. The little girl approaches the driver’s side, tips up on her toes and leans in. She says something to the man waiting for the bus who stands next to her.

Then, the van explodes. Heat rises in a geyser. Plumes of black and red. Fire eats out from inside. Metal fury rages in in a pyre.

Here is where everything stops and plays in reverse.

The smoke, the fire, the explosion. It rewinds like a movie. They all move in reverse, settling back into the heart of the van. The man waiting for the bus walks backwards. The empty

van backs out of the parking spot and down the street. Everything returns to where it began, all except for the little girl. She stands in the empty space.

I push my knuckles into my eyes and count to ten before I look outside again. The van is gone. The little girl is gone. The man standing in the street waiting for his bus is gone too.

Finn, did you ever have hallucinations?

My doctors call these manifestations. They tell me they are manifestations of trauma. They say that I was in survival mode, that I did the things I did to survive. Between you and me, Finn, calling it survival mode is just a nice way of saying *forget about it*.

Finn, I don't know about you, but I can't forget about anything.

Dad once told me war was like sex with a whore. He said it fucks you and costs more money than it's worth. Now I've never been with a whore, but the rest of it I can get on board with.

The medicine cabinet is open a sliver.

I pluck Carrie's razor and bottle of shaving cream from her shower caddy. Blue foam puffs into my palm. I smear it over my body. Hot water pours from the spigot. It pools at the pit of the seashell-shaped sink. I wet the razor and cut lines in the foam, shaving away black hair from my skin. I shake the razor in the pool of water and watch the hairs float. I finish my chest and legs and do my arms. My body is bare as a baby's. Hair is an accelerant. No more candlewicks. All that's left now is to shave my head.

Finn, I will not burst into flame.

I have a job interview tomorrow as a dock loader at a lumberyard. This is the job you had waiting for you too, Finn. This is not why I went over there. Not for this. This is enough to make me disappear altogether. Never find me then.

Finn, my wife had a miscarriage when I was fighting their war. A physiological trauma manifesting in a miscarriage. Trauma, trauma, trauma.

"Your father's on the phone," Carrie says from the bedroom before going downstairs.

I flush the toilet for effect.

The phone lies on its side, shot down, guts twirling back to the receiver. I close the door. Light dims through the bedroom blinds, the sun ducks behind a cloud.

The little girl from the explosion is now sitting in our neighbor's swing set. Her feet barely touch the ground. She leans back, then forward, gaining momentum.

An airplane cuts through the sky, leaving a trail of white behind it.

"Dad, I'm talking to Finn," I say.

"Son," he says, "what about?"

"About the war," I say.

"Wyatt," he says, "We've gone over this."

"Pops, I'm seeing things that I don't believe exist. I see the little girl. The one from the alley back before I came home."

"I told you to leave the past behind," he says.

"I did, but it somehow got out in front," I say.

He says, "Well, I only called to wish you luck on your interview."

"You ever watch an airplane fly across the sky?" I ask.

"You want to take up flying, son?" he asks.

"That white stuff it leaves behind," I say.

"I'll pay for the lessons," he says. "If that'll help you."

"They're chem trails. I think Finn is trying to tell me something," I say.

Light shifts up through the blinds like in a theatre at the end of a movie.

My foot stubs something hard and sharp under the bed. Under the box spring and behind a ten-pound dumbbell, I see a long black canvas bag. Metal clinks together. I reach for the zipper when my father says, “Maybe I’ll fly with you. We’ll fly far, far away.”

5.

Carrie cuts coupons from the Pennysaver at the kitchen counter and counts them into a pile. She stuffs them in an envelope and doesn’t lick it.

I stand in the doorway, hairless, naked, watching her.

The little girl sits next to Carrie. She doesn’t help with the coupons. She stares at me, then raises her hand to cover a cough. Black hair spills out of her mouth into her palm. She sets it on the table in mounds. She coughs again, as more hair appears. The little girl gags and coughs. More black hair.

More coupons cut.

I grab my keys from the vestibule and leave my home behind. I run naked to the car. I feel heat that I haven’t felt since over there—a green plant under a clear cup on a ledge of sun. My skin burns. I listen for a sizzle. Now that my body is bare, the only thing left to do is rid my head of hair.

Another plane arcs across the sky. Thick white lines crisscross each other. Chem trails follow me.

I cover my nose and mouth and drive to the pharmacy with one hand.

The neighborhood is quiet for a Saturday. No children playing in the street. No cars passing by. Each house stands cold and empty. American flags flying from porches. How funny.

For civilians, the flag is a symbol of freedom and sign of patriotism. For soldiers, a flag is what your body is draped in when you die. For wives, it's what is handed over as a sign of condolence.

A *Help Wanted* sign hangs in the window of the store.

The man behind the counter reminds me of an insurgent—head wrapped up tight with a towel, a thick black beard, and beady unpredictable eyes. I move through the aisles, undetected.

I pass the milk and cheese refrigerator.

I pass light bulbs and trash bags.

I see more protection printed on boxes of tampons in the feminine hygiene aisle than I ever saw over there.

Finn, you should have been alone.

I duck down another aisle, still naked, still hot. We used to call this *streaking* in high school. The teachers called it offensive. I wonder what my teachers would call this now? Doctors call it posttraumatic stress disorder. I wonder how people measure offences these days.

An old man sees me and gives me two thumbs up.

A mother covers her teenage daughter's eyes and screams the words *rape* and *police*.

A man flipping through a magazine takes off his orange hat and slaps it against his leg. He rubs his eyes and looks at me again, before tugging his hat back on his head.

I run into the deodorant, toothpaste and condom aisle, where a security officer in a blue vest approaches me with his hand on his flashlight at his belt.

It was easier to get toothpaste over there than body armor. We would brush our teeth five times a day.

The little girl is behind the security officer in the aisle. She dances what I think is ballroom dancing with an invisible partner.

“Woah,” the security officer says. “Hold on, buddy.”

“I’m okay,” I say, raising my hands above my head. “I’m not as crazy as I look.”

“No shirt. No shoes. No service. Must go,” the security officer says.

The little girl wags a finger at me.

“All I want to do is shave my head,” I say.

“Electric clippers, aisle six,” he says. “Then you got to go.”

I slap a newspaper on the counter with my clippers. I haven’t read an American paper since I left and am curious to see what is being reported.

The insurgent behind the counter pokes the register with his finger. He doesn’t make eye contact and counts out change, stacking three quarters on the counter. He hands me the cash. My instinct is to question the man with force, with the authority to detain and torture for information.

“Need a bag?” he asks.

“I’ll ask the questions,” I say and knock the stack of quarters over. One drops to the floor and rolls around my foot.

The man restacks the quarters. “You got ‘em?” he asks, holding the coins.

“I said *silence*,” I say, leaving the store with only the cash, but not the quarters.

The headline above the crease in the newspaper reads: *President Sick With Stomach Flu*. I flip it over to see the rest. Below the crease reads: *Bloodiest Bombing Offensive Underway*. I read every headline on the front page of the paper and then tuck it under my arm. My motto is to always judge the news by its cover.

6.

Outside, I drop the dollars in the can of a man sitting next to a stack of newspapers. He slices an apple with a paring knife. The can is pinched between his knees. He pulls out the cash and tucks it in his pocket. He combs his beard with his fingernail.

A cat hunkers next to him, licking an empty tin of tuna.

A bag of Barbie heads spills out of a nearby dumpster.

"Hey, pal," he says. "Got any coins?"

"Cash not enough?" I ask.

"Coins make more noise," he says. He shakes his can, but there is only cold air.

"Sorry," I say. "Fresh out."

A bus surfs over uneven streets and sewer grates behind him.

"Pal," he says. "You know you're necked, right? Not cold or nothin'?"

"No. Hot," I say.

He whistles in perfect pitch. Then asks, "That your little girl?"

The little girl in the coat and scarf and earmuffs stands next to me.

"She's my hallucination," I say.

"Manifestation," she says, waving a fat mitten at the man.

"Is that today's paper?" He points to the one under my arm.

"Just finished," I say and hand it to him.

"I collect them," he says, placing in the stack next to him. "In case they try and lie to say none of this ever happened." The homeless man points to the sky. "Been back long?" he asks, tipping a sliver of apple into his mouth.

"Feels that way," I say.

“You know what gave it away?” he asks. “Your lips. You keep ‘em tight to block out the sand.” He chews, showing his teeth. He spits out a seed and then pinches his lips together, showing Wyatt what he means. Then, “Like that.”

“You?” Wyatt asks.

“Nah. I fought the last one ten years ago,” he says.

“Different now,” I say.

“That’s what I hear,” he says.

“What do you hear?” I ask.

“That we lost before the damn thing even began,” he says. The man stands, wiping down his pants. “Wanna cut of apple?”

“Something is happening,” I say.

“You need help getting home?” he asks.

“I feel like a fire is sparking inside,” I say, thumping my chest with my fist. “You think I’m crazy?”

“I think you’re a soldier,” he says. “Soldiers are crazy. You have to be to want to fight.”

“I am not sure how I feel about that,” I say.

“We are the only ones who can see your hanger on,” he says, pointing to the girl. “I think that makes us crazy.”

“Enlightened?” I ask.

He says, “They want everyone to forget and be forgotten.”

“How could we forget?” I ask.

“Go home, soldier, and dig in. This is how they come at you,” he says, taping his head.

Immediacy takes hold, a sudden fear of the present, of the possibility of change. I hold the electric clippers in my arms like a newborn and run back to a place I had left behind and hoped to never leave again, either by admission or force, surely.

7.

In the car and on the road, I see that the surface is cracked, fractured from years of neglect and assault, ice storms and garbage trucks. A white billboard hangs high above a used car lot with the image of the Twin Towers on it. Above the image of the towers the billboard reads, *No Need To Repair*. Except as I get closer, the sign reads, *No Need To Despair*.

At the last red light before I merge onto the highway, the little girl walks in front of my car. Her arms are out like she is an airplane and she is flying. I look behind her as thin streams of white smoke trail from her hands. The streams separate into fingers of smoke, poking at the windows of my car, trying to squeeze through the glass. The little girl stands on the corner, black smoke pouring off her charred skin.

Finn, have you seen what a mortar round will do to a girl carrying a basket of bread? Have you ever smashed your neighbor's pumpkin in the street on Halloween? Crushed San Marzano tomatoes in your hands?

On the highway heading north, a shredded tire lodges under my car.

The little girl sits in the car next to me. She wears a seatbelt and shoots her fingers like a shotgun at birds in the trees. She makes a gunshot sound with her mouth.

I wear a seatbelt too, but keep tugging at the strap pinched tight to my neck. I change lanes and hear the lodged tire tread shake loose. A bird flies across the highway from the median to the bordering woods.

The little girl shoots it with her invisible shotgun.

The bird explodes mid-flight in a puff of feathers and blood.

I turn on my wipers and spray fluid on the windshield glass, clearing away the vision.

The little girl has stopped speaking to me. Now she'll only communicate in sign language. I don't understand her hand movements, so she supplements them with white subtitles like in a foreign film. She signs and the subtitles read: *Where are we going?*

"North. Heading home," I say.

She signs and the subtitles read: *Not south?*

White lines crisscross the sky, but no planes.

"I think the President controls the weather with those lines," I say. "He's tracking me. Keeping tabs."

The little girl signs and the subtitles read: *You're paranoid*.

"But not crazy," I say.

She signs and the subtitles read: *But crazy*.

The little girl shoots a black bird with her shotgun fingers, this one pecking in the grass for worms.

The highway is empty, escaping north, except for a car racing past on my left.

The little girl signs and the subtitles read: *Vrooooom*!

The car fishtails, screeching. Smoke shoots out from the tires. It spins and rolls, the front end crashing into an enormous lamp pole. The car wraps around it like an accordion. Black smoke pours from the engine. The smoke is not moving in reverse like before. I think this is really happening, but cannot be sure.

The little girl signs and the subtitle reads: *This car crash is a metaphor for your life!!!!!!!!*

No one moves inside the car. Windows have been smashed. Glass covers the asphalt in a blanket. Black smoke chokes the air. Music buzzes and thumps through blown speakers in the car. The singer sounds as if her throat has been ripped out. She gurgles and chokes through the song and into the next.

Someone moans and moves.

I see the mess. The steering wheel. The dashboard. The armrest. The seats. Clumping pools, clogged with twisted hair. Ripped fabric. Sliced vinyl. The glove box is open. I blow into my hands, warming them, then rub my cheeks.

The little girl draws squares on the highway with pink chalk and plays hopscotch.

Finn, I haven't seen carnage like this since Blood Alley.

There are two girls in the car: one in the driver's seat, strapped in by her seat belt; the other wedged in the windshield, head on the hood, legs in the car, body barely intact. They both have blond hair splattered red. The girl in the driver's seat has a face of shredded meat. The girl in the windshield has a broken arm, snapped bone poking through the skin.

I pull on the driver's side door, but the crash has wedged the door stuck. The girl in the driver's seat opens her eyes, bloodshot and bruised.

"I can't get you out," I say. I brush her tangled hair away from her face.

She breathes small, slow breaths. A sick stench wafts out from inside the car, a familiar one, darkness closing in.

The little girl vomits black hair into her hands.

"My mother's gonna kill me," the girl in the driver's seat says.

The little girl throws black hair into the air, watching it turn to birds. She waits, letting the birds fly a bit before shotgunning them with her fingers. Feathers and black blood everywhere.

The little girl signs and the subtitle reads: *Ask her for her name*!

"What's your name?" I ask the girl in the passenger seat.

"Lisa," she says.

The little girl signs and the subtitle reads: *Tell her yours*.

"My name is Wyatt," I say.

"I don't think I can see," Lisa says. "Everything's fuzzy. Where's Meg?"

The little girl points to Meg who is in the windshield, then signs and the subtitles read: *Tell her Meg is fucked*.

"Lisa, I want you to be still. Can you try that for me?" I ask.

"Meg?" Lisa asks.

The little girl stands next to me, shotgunning Meg and Lisa and me with her fingers, but we do not explode.

Lisa's teeth chatter. Her body begins to shake.

"Do you have a cell phone?" I ask.

Lisa doesn't answer and closes her eyes.

"CELL PHONE," I yell.

"I want to go home," Lisa says.

The little girl signs and the subtitles read: *I want to go home*. She mocks Lisa.

"Can you take me home, please?" Lisa's voice vibrates as blood runs into her eyes.

I see a cell phone next to Lisa and grab it.

“Are you naked?” Lisa asks. “I must have really banged my head.”

The music in the car has stopped and turned to a frequency of static.

I dial the number no one ever wants to dial and wait for them to answer.

“What is your emergency?” the voice asks.

“I need an ambulance. Accident on highway 9. Two girls—one dead, the other critical,” I say. The words feel familiar, loaded and on the tip of my tongue. “Teenage girl with severe head and chest trauma. Possible spinal injury. Sight damage, as well as broken ribs and possible collapsed lung.” I press Lisa’s neck for a pulse. “Pulse weak and fading. I’d say she has ten minutes, maybe.”

“Who am I speaking with?” the operator asks.

“I am a soldier,” I say and hang up the phone.

Lisa’s eyes flutter and close. Her head nods.

An ambulance wails far off in the distance.

“Someone is coming, Lisa,” I say.

“Mom?” she asks.

“Paramedics,” I say. “To help.”

A helicopter pitches up over the trees, aiming in our direction.

“They called a helicopter,” I say.

“I’m afraid of heights,” she says.

“They only call helicopters for super important people,” I say.

“Am I super?” she asks.

“The most important,” I say.

“Can you call my mom,” she asks. “Tell her about the car.”

I scroll through the names on her phone and dial her mother. Her voicemail picks up and she asks me to leave a message. I do and tell her that her daughter was in an accident and was being brave. In my car, I buckle my seat belt and accelerate. Glass crunches under my tires. I wipe sweat from my face. In my voicemail to Lisa's mom, all the verbs in my sentences were in past tense.

Finn, Heaven and Hell have lost their polarity, their borders and boundaries invisible, disintegrated. I am on highway 9, heading north, and, as far as I can tell, Hell is here and Heaven nowhere to be found.

8.

At home, I plug my razor into an outlet and rest the flat metal razor to my hairline. I run it over my scalp, the way my father taught me to cut straight lines in the grass with the lawnmower. Hair falls to the floor in sections, floating like black snow.

I see the little girl's reflection in the mirror.

She balances on the edge of the tub like she is walking a balance beam. She whistles like the man slicing an apple. Thick, black musical notes jumping from her lips. The notes bounce in the air, fading as they reach the ceiling. She hops from the tub to the toilet and draws a dotted yellow line in the air, making an unfamiliar shape somewhere between a triangle and a hexagon.

"Connect the dots," the little girl says.

The unfamiliar shape explodes into a flock of white doves, flying in all directions.

9.

Carrie finally sees me for the first time since my shaves and screams when I enter the kitchen.

"What did you do to yourself?" she asks. "You're hairless."

"I can't catch fire now," I say. "I'm uncombustible."

"My love," she says. "Put on a hat. Some clothes." She sits down at the dinning room table. "What did your Dad say to you?" she asks.

"He wished me luck on the interview," I say.

"You can't interview like this," she says, touching her stomach. "You have no hair."

"Hair on skin causes friction and friction causes fire," I say.

Carrie sits on the couch and holds her hair back in her hand. "You need help. You need to go back to the hospital so they can sort you out." She reaches for the phone and looks to the kitchen where the little girl sits at the table. Carrie growls like she has something stuck in her lungs. I expect to see more black hair, but there is none. She continues to moan low and howl a horrendous sound. "I'm losing you just like you lost Finn."

I rip the phone from the wall and throw it at the lamp. Blue sparks spit from the outlet.

The little girl does a cartwheel, and then walks across the room on her hands.

"Lie," I say. "I didn't lose Finn."

10.

Finn, have you ever seen an execution? Do you know what they do? With an injection they strap him down and stick him in the arm. But if they want to electrocute him, they shave his head and leg and arm. Know why? So he doesn't catch fire when they juice him.

I have been to an execution. It was overt there. This bearded barrel of a warden instructed his guards not to strap her down—a female with long brown hair, her head wrap ripped away. He didn't order them to shave her head or arm or leg. The bellied-warden simply ordered one of his men to do one simple thing: lop off her head. This warden carried an axe—the kind used to chop wood—and he handed it to the one man and, like every great soldier, the one man followed every order rightly. The one man lopped off her head. He lopped it off clean and he lopped it off savage. Over there, it's considered a custom.

11.

On the eve of my first departure, Carrie and I went on a picnic.

I was to depart with my battalion that evening. No one knew when or where we were going. We had no information to give our families, no destination to seek. That afternoon, Carrie made a basket of cucumber sandwiches and walnut brownies. I unfolded fleece blankets and set out plastic plates. We sat out on the blacktop of the parking lot behind our house. A waterfall fell into the nearby stream at the bottom of the hill. We ate our lunch in the shade and said nothing, watching the water never stop falling.

A snake slithered out from the summer grass, passing our blanket.

A car backfired down the street.

An ice cream truck rang its simple song on repeat.

I touched Carrie's stomach, a seed of a baby.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I feel strong," she said.

"You think I'll be back for the baby?" I asked.

"You can leave, Wyatt, but that doesn't mean you aren't always here," she said.

Carrie leaned against me, kissing my shoulder. We watched the neighbor's cat shake a dead mouse in its mouth and carry it home, a trophy celebrating the kill. We made love on the blanket to celebrate the birth.

But like I said, that was before the war.

Tonight, Carrie cried herself to sleep on the couch. I take a fleece blanket down from the closet and drape it over her legs.

12.

In the bedroom, I flip the mattress and box spring over and barricade them against the window. I push the desk up to the door and wedge the chair under the doorknob. The television sits on the dresser across from the empty bed frame and a pile of blankets and sheets.

On the television is news program showing the tally of a local mayoral race. The votes split three ways and no one is the winner. Each candidate makes a victory speech, using words like *change* and *substantial*.

The news program ends and a film about a terrorist blowing up the world begins.

I lay in the empty bed frame like an open grave, one hand on the black canvas bag. The little girl snuggles into me as we drift off together to someplace safe.

13.

When I wake, music plays over the credits to the film and four white men in pinstriped three-piece, business suits stand over me. The smell of starch and cigarette smoke hangs in the air. The desk is still in front of the door, the chair under the doorknob.

“Mr. Wyatt Coldwall,” one man says.

“Do not be alarmed,” another says.

I sit up and push my back against the wall.

“Mr. Coldwall, we are here to discuss your faith,” one man says.

“Please don’t send me back,” I say.

“We are sympathetic to your situation, Mr. Coldwall,” one man says.

“We want to help you,” another man says.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“We are the agents of an executive branch that governs all religious activity,” one man says.

“Past and present,” another man says.

“Known and otherwise,” another man says.

Each man says a word and hands me their business card. Each card is white with only the word printed on it. The word is printed in a sparkly blue font.

“Eastern,” one says.

“Western,” another says.

“Unknown,” one says.

“Forgotten,” another says.

The little girl sleeps on the floor, her limbs spread out like she’s making a snow angel.

“We are agents of the religion commission,” Eastern says.

“The only four,” Forgotten says.

“I don’t believe in anything,” I say, still holding the cards.

“We know,” Western says.

"It's our job to know," Unknown says.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"It has come to our attention that you no longer believe in the sanctity of the State," Western says.

"It is our duty to assist you in finding it again," Unknown says.

"By whatever means necessary," Eastern says.

"Preferably peacefully, though," Forgotten says.

"We're apprised of your situation," Western says. "We want to help."

"How?" I ask.

"Faith is based in love and trust," Forgotten says.

"Please excuse, Forgotten," Western says.

"What Forgotten means to say is that Faith is important to the betterment of mankind. Humankind," Eastern says. "It's the foundation from which all life is born."

"Without it you will certainly die," Unknown says.

"And death without Faith leaves you lost forever in an empty world of pain," Western says.

"You want me to find faith," I say. "But not in a religion."

"Correct," Western says.

"Exactly," Eastern says.

"Perfect," Unknown says.

"But if you did find God—any God, really—that would help you too," Forgotten says.

The other three look at him in unison. Eastern and Unknown light cigarettes. Western adjusts his tie.

"Faith in my State," I say.

"Better than currency," Western says.

Eastern and Unknown nod.

Forgotten folds his arms over his chest.

"I want you gentleman to understand that my faith lies in this," I say, making a shotgun with my hands. "I trust that it will do what I ask of it and that it will protect me against evil and all things unwanted."

The agents say nothing.

The little girl is awake now and standing next to me. She points her fingers at the gentleman. Her shotgun.

I pump my invisible shotgun with one hand like an outlaw.

I aim the imaginary shotgun with both hands and squeeze the trigger. I say *click* as the four men explode like fireworks—four Roman candles.

Finn, am I making any sense?

14.

I dream of drinking drinks with the marines in Bravo Company of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion. In the dream, the bar is empty except for us. I am the bartender and the bar is stocked full with everything brown and clear. I know I am not supposed to, but I have a few drinks throughout my shift because when a marine drinks for someone who no longer can drink, then everyone drinks, no matter who you are, and the drinks take hold until everyone is drown. The night rages on as the Bravo boys turn my tiny tavern into a landfill of sadness and broken glass. I

pour one last shot for everyone, for the road, for those who can no longer drink, and that's when it happens—the boys of Bravo take the bar.

I also dream of Bravo Company, but the dream was a remembrance, a recollection, a symphony in celebration of the dead.

We were pinned down in a dead-end alley half a *klik* inside the southern border of Fallujah. Bravo Company was sent on a routine scout mission inside the city walls. Turned out to be an ambush. This area of the city, especially this alley, had been bombed out with cement, clay and metal infrastructure collapsing in on itself. Bodies of Bravo Company marines scatter along the entrance to the alley in bloody sections of awful carnage. After the onset of the attack, we lost most of our men.

The air reeked of rotting skin, the stench of ripe garbage. Mangy, scabbed dogs roamed in packs past the entrance, ribcage thin, but never growled. The attack commenced at an open-air market, when several snipers engaged from a nearby burned-out building. Only four marines remained: me—Private First Class Wyatt Coldwall, Private First Class Mitchell "Alabama" Evans, Captain Edgar "Fitz" Fitzgerald and Lance Corporeal Jeremy "Zombie" Barker.

I led the four us to that alley, which I believed to have a back exit. Instead, there was a cement wall too high to climb. Fitz and Alabama Evans kept watch at the entrance to the alley, guns aimed and alert.

"They're coming," Alabama Evans said, falling back.

"Stay low," Fitz said.

"Don't wait. Just blast 'em," I said.

"I see them," Zombie said.

A herd of children enter the alley. Boys and girls.

“Shoot,” I said.

“Hold your fire,” Zombie said. “Don’t fucking shoot. They’re just kids.”

“It’s a trap,” Alabama Evans says.

The children stood at the entrance, their faces caked in dirt, streaked with tears. They shuffled toward us. Behind them were women. Their faces uncovered. Some were praying. Behind the women, old men. They, too, were praying. The insurgents has harnessed a crown of innocents as their human shield and bottlenecked them into the alley—the tip of their spear.

“Shoot,” I said.

“Hold your god-damn fire,” Zombie said.

“They’re baiting us,” Alabama Evans said.

“Keep low,” Fitz said.

“It’s what they want,” Zombie said. “Don’t shoot.”

The children dug their heels into the loose dirt, pressing their backs to the women behind them. The women collided with the old men who turned to run when bullets ripped through the crowd of innocents. A bullet struck Fitz. His neck exploded like a watermelon under a sledgehammer. It reminded me of that comedian who smashed fruit as part of his shtick. Alabama Evans dove on Fitz, covering him with his body, pressing his hand into the wound.

“I’ve got your fucking neck, Fitz. You’re gonna be okay,” he said, crying. “You’re gonna be okay.” Alabama Evans screamed into his radio for an *evacuation* as a spray of bullets ripped up his left leg and into his back. He twitched before going limp in a heap over Fitz.

Zombie opened up his assault rifle. As did I. We both let loose with our weapons, releasing guttural cried in line with our suppression. We unloaded into the mass of civilians and hostiles. Hands covered faces and bodies dropped to dirt. Dust kicked up. It all appeared fake.

Inside the plume, screams and wails and prayers ascended as bullets mowed through them. Eventually, all sound disappeared, except for crumbling buildings.

We could hear the other's breath, racing away, as we took deep inhalations and long exhales to regain control.

An insurgent's bullet clipped my ankle, knocking me to my knees. Another hit Zombie in the chest, leaving a pink mist above his falling body. He hit the ground hard, but I couldn't see if he could survive it.

A brown bottle rolled in the dirt and settled in front of me. Liquid sloshes inside. There was a wick and a fire. I lobbed it back into the crash of bodies at the entrance to the alley. It exploded in a tower of red rocky dust. Heat burned off the bodies.

The insurgents pulled back.

A helicopter twirled overhead, whipping up tiny tornadoes.

As his last action, Fitz, now a gurgling puddle, rolled a grenade into the pile like a baby rolling a marble.

The limp pile rippled from the explosion like a crashing wave of body parts, all ages.

Shots fired back, skimming my arm. I spun like a top into the wall. I stepped forward, past my men, to the tiny bodies in the alley. Some still moved. An arm. A head. Dark puddles collected. A child rolled over and tried to stand, but collapsed from shock. The child was small and leaned its back against the wall. The child was a little girl—fractured and bloody. It was my little girl, the manifestation. I lifted my rifle and aimed it at her face. I thought that I was sorry, but didn't say a word, before I blasted her back into the pile, begging God for swift and sudden forgiveness for my actions.

More bottles landed around me, dropping from the sky like a flock of dead birds. More heat and glass and fire swell around me.

This is Hell and I am too far-gone.

15.

My life has been a bad black hole ever since.

16.

In the bedroom, I open a black canvas bag. Inside are well-oiled pieces. I close my eyes and recall the movement. Under a minute, I snap it together. I extract a single round from a box of ammunition, slide it into the chamber and lock it into place.

I knock the mattress to the floor and lift the window. A spider web snaps loose from the windowpane and dangles, the spider nowhere to be seen. The air outside doesn't move.

My breath is visible.

Finn, I don't know which to fear more: the memory of things or myself.

An airplane cruises across the sky but the chem trails are invisible at night.

"He's out there," the little girl says, sitting on the bed.

"He's in here too," I say.

"Will you ever let him go?" she asks.

"If it were easy I would," I say.

"What's easy and what's hard are sometimes the same thing," she says.

The bedroom is pristine, like it had never been upturned. Finn's canvas bag is still under the bed, a pile of metal pieces that I will never know how to use. My unborn baby is gone, but this little girl, I know, is here.

"Carrie will leave soon," the little girl says.

"I'm trying to give her a reason, so she can no longer feel any guilt."

"Your brother was never meant to die in that alley," she says.

"What should I do?" I ask.

"Explode," she says.

"It's dark out," I say.

"Not so dark," she says.