

Cambridge Royalty

by Mary Clark, from *J Journal: New Writing on Social Justice*

There's a house on Whittier Street that's not too hot and not too cold. It's not too rich and not too poor, not too exposed and not too tucked away, not too willing, but willing. The house has been calling Jackson. *Come in. Come in.* It's a six family, three floors high and double-sided, with two front doors holding leaded oval windows, labeled in sequential odd numbers, and flanked by a stack of three mailboxes. Together they're one clapboarded powder blue Victorian with creamy trim on the sashes and along the moldings and cornices. The same cream's smoothed thickly over the railing posts turned to squat, shapely vases, and with a finer brush, applied to the decorative garlands that string along the top of the curved bays, and wind into wreaths in the triangle of dormers. *Come in* says Number Five. *Come in* says Number Seven. The color makes her look fragile. In the front, she's a piece of china, finely-restored Wedgwood. In the back she's a code-compliant tenement-style twin stack of porches in treated stock of ready-to-install stretches from Home Depot: monkey bars in the playground for criminals.

Since he first saw her, a week ago, taking the cut on a delivery to Ratchet, China Blue's been ringing him up. *Come in. Come in.* Jackson's walked by a dozen times on his way to sell to a few guys at that site, a bulldozed lot on Walden Street sprouting a group of low-rise residential buildings, six dwellings in each, with little walkways to and fro, same as the projects, but these are affordable housing, sort of condos, sort of projects: clean, easy work that should have been Jackson's. Six months ago, who'd've thought Ratchet's white Everett ass would still be getting on jobs, while Jackson's full-time chaining a series of hustles.

Screw it. Keep your fucking condo-project plumbing job.

Come in. Come in. They want him inside them. He's waiting for the snow to melt. Jackson likes nearly everything about Ms. Blue. He likes that she's old. He likes that she's familiar. He's well acquainted with the layout, the reliable branches of rooms off the main hallway, the standard oak-floor kitchen with an alcove to the pantry, and the brick spine between Number Five and Number Seven from the foundation to the attic. He likes that she provides him with options: six private dwellings split down the middle with two stairwells each, one in the front all the way to the top, and one in the back all the way to the basement. He likes that she's loaded with escape hatches: a set of front double doors, and back basement doors, and for each apartment, a front door and two back doors, one off the kitchen to the stairwell, and one off the bedroom to the porch. He likes that the house is in a neighborhood the police care about, but mostly, what he likes about his sweet china baby is she's in Cambridge, sitting pretty just outside of the big riches feeding Harvard and MIT, not too west as to be old money secured down tight, not too north as to be the hopeful middle class, and not too close to the projects where he grew up, as to be scraping at the end of the month. She's beautifully square with the wealthy-end of students, the second and third generation Ivy Leaguers and the foreigners paying full fare. She's right there, in the sweet juncture with them and the professors shy of tenure but on the regular, and the directors, and the endowment raisers, and the scientists on research at the labs and hospitals for the sake of the real money that rains on the software and biotech companies germinating nearby. *Psssh! She's with them too,* the project managers, the critical-trial administrators, and the superstar coders and testers working down by Kendall Square. Baby Girl's in there, the Goldilocks location, in the spot with the people who came for

college and stayed, ninety-nine percent of them white. *Well, not Black*, Jackson corrects himself. *A few Asians and Indians live there*. She's right with the double-incomers loaded down with degrees, nice folks working at the universities, or the hospitals, or the start-ups gone public, spawned from the universities, who put their children in the public schools for a brush with diversity, before giving-in to private institutions, and boarding the train that powers along from there.

The slower foot pace lets Jackson take a longer look. He's got an eye on three units. The contents of the back porches tell him the prizes inside. The European stroller folded and leaning by the door of the first floor of Number Seven says Mommy. The red plastic Big Wheel on its side in the virgin snow of the yard says Mommy with two kids, says three, maybe four years apart, says maybe a boy and a girl. The edged-out shoveled path says Daddy, says cameras and computers, says watches, says tennis bracelet and diamond earrings in a pint of Ben & Jerry's, says widescreen with built-in sound system behind door number one. On the floor above Mommy and Daddy, the artificial flowers reaching through a bed of snow in baskets hung on the rail say Grandma. The single white wicker chair peeking under a tarp says widow, says maybe Daddy from downstairs helped her out. The prisms splashed on the bedroom ceiling say chandeliers, say silver place settings, say pearls, say stash of bills under the mattress behind door number two. One up and over from Grandma, on the railing of the third-floor porch of Number Five, stands a single brown beer bottle. Jackson's seen it there for days, out in the air like a soldier at his post, withstanding nor'easters. Its not toppling over says it's fused in ice. Sargent Major's guarding empty boxes tossed in a sagging heap that couldn't be more blatant, literally say xBOX, say Apple, say Sony and Bose—maybe the height gives the kid nerve—say chump

with nothing to spend his money on but toys, say lonely motherfucker, say man cave with massive sectional seating, say wall of electronics, say islands of gadgets in every room tethered by cords running across polished hardwood floors.

Come on. Come in. They beg him to enter and leave them raw. He staggers the hour for selling to Ratchet and, some days, returns with no excuse as to why. After seven, a Saab's in the left driveway, and a Volvo wagon's in the right. After eight, an orange BMW sits on the street. He knows the BMW belongs to Lonely Boy. The other night, a shadowed shape in a winter coat slung with a computer bag got out, went into Number Five, and lit the top floor after that. The bike locked to the finely turned railing on the other side is sometimes there and sometimes not. *Who's bike? Whoever at the top of Seven? A visitor? A sleep-over visitor? Why did he pick a multi-family with so many moving parts!*

But he didn't pick her. She picked him. He made a note of trash day, and that emptied barrels were put away by four. He took a stack of free papers from the bin on Mass Ave. to top-off the six mailboxes. When he climbed her steps, the air of her porch, still and charged, turned-up the sound of his boots on the wood, and the creak from the cold brass lids. The closeness of the first-floor windows rang in his throat. He stepped over the center rail and stamped a half footprint in the snow shoveled to the side. Any mailman could have done that, but when he saw it, his blood rose. The next day, back with fliers at three o'clock to take inventory, he confirmed their weekday daily.

Come in. Please come in. He would not have picked up the call, not heard it to begin with, if not for Lucia. He was listening for a call from her. Hard to believe, the morning he last left Lucia's house, he didn't take her call. He was all go. He was driven, crazy driven, crazy on a mission driven. *Go. Go.* After six clean days, the itch dug in deep to get him back. *Go, go, go.*

He locked Lucia's door with the spare key and took the direct route to Freddie's, bought thirty grams on credit, and spent the first two on himself around the corner. God almighty! Those first sniffs made the whole hiatus worth it, like shooting an adolescent nut, rewarding his return. *I missed you what can I do for you do you feel good do you feel good*, those sniffs said, wrapping him in loving arms, white washing all his failure into triumph, shifting his defeat as intention, as self-imposed restraint designed to freshen his receptors. *Go, go, go*. He went from boy to rock to boy again. He ran so hard he flipped his balance sheet along with his consciousness into the black.

Jackson plowed toward Freddie's, irritated. *And Lucia! Fuck her! Wanting him clean before he was ready. Now he's further back than he would have been done his way*. He took off his gloves, unfolded the last of the powder he kept in a Quick-Pick slip, held the platter up to his face, took a long pull off creases, and waited for the sensation in the back of his neck. After that, he covered serious ground, stepped over snow banks shrunk to gray mounds, and avoided the sludge from those before him. It was hard to walk his city without feeling swindled. Restoration especially pained him, and nowhere more than passing by the estates of Harvard. It made him sick to see the heavy, black shutters hinged beside the crisply-pointed brick, the clean lines of the massive moldings at the soffits, and the layered slate above. The audacity of the yellow clapboard! Standing outside, looking in at the jeweled patterns on the ceiling of one of the many libraries, pissed him off. Such beauty stank of injustice. The windows infuriated him. For each sash, someone glazed a dozen rectangles, even for the smaller dormers. Everywhere, the cost of keeping the old new insinuated itself. He resented the precision of the clock, the fortitude of the iron gates, and the cobbled sidewalks, deliberately left bumpy over roots of ancient trees, slanting him

toward the curb.

Wealth rang all around him, serious deep wealth, the kind of treasure that came from ancestry. Set in motion, it snowballed over generations, impossible not to grow. *Got that right*, Jackson said to himself. His inheritance would have grown fat during his mother's lifetime, packing on outer layers throughout his and his daughters' lives, compounded by now from a century of snowballing, starting out from when his grandfather owned a block of property on Putnam Street, enough to fit at least eight China Blues, three on Putnam and five on Magee. That land was gone, sold, more like taken. Jackson's grandfather's farm went to expand the elementary school to fit bigger batches of kindergartners and first graders from the new families working in the colleges, and the hospitals, and the companies spawned from graduates who came on a one-way ticket.

Some of the school and all of the playground had been his grandfather's land, the very location of Jackson's last job, upgrading the boiler room. He was clean back then, even though he was filthy. They put him in the crawlspace, the dirtiest, most punishing job at the site, but it felt good to kneel on the ground that belonged to him, even if it wasn't his.

The city erected a marker with an engraved dedication to his grandfather at the entrance. Jackson pointed it out to Bob one day on a break, and the two of them bent down to read from the three-foot marble post. "Carlton, that's not your name," Bob said.

"It's my mother's maiden name. He was her father," Jackson explained. "All this used to be his farm. Right here, where we're standing."

Bob stood back to survey the area with his arms crossed. "Look at that, will you? You're Cambridge royalty, my man," he said, and punched Jackson on his shoulder.

Be he a prince or a king, it didn't matter. Jackson was laid off before everyone else, and

after that, he wasn't filthy anymore, but he stopped being clean.

Fine. No wealth-snowball for him, but he's royalty. Royalty is in the blood. It cannot be lost because the battle is lost, and the subsequent battles. Jackson took off his gloves again, unfolded the slip, nodded in for remnants, wet his finger, traced the creases, and stuck it under his tongue. He feels his grandfather with him when he works the grab bag. Doggie, they called him, the man who gave Jackson his handsome. He was a baby when his grandfather died, but his mother told stories. "Son, you'll do me proud," his grandfather roared, when Jackson upended a bucket to scale and sank his fingers into his birthday cake. "Resourceful boy! He'll get his!"

Therefore, nudging wrongs into balance, Jackson slapped down one beautifully restored house at a time. In September he hit two spots on Shepard, one on Chauncy, four on Appleton, and one on Hutchinson. In October he cleaned out three more off Huron and swept along Mount Auburn. *Love those privacy fences!* By November he was over on Kirkland, deciphering homes from classrooms, and since he was in the neighborhood, blasting the dorms themselves, making new friends and jacking up prices. Dealing at the dorms was the best because the impact on the crusade was direct. The tunnels were closed up now, but the buildings themselves hadn't changed since his twenties, way back when he supplied parties with his wares and his dick. The prizes were limited, too many eyes close by, but it didn't matter, the high was supreme. He got a clean cut, put on his cashmere topcoat, set aside for himself from a house on Shepard, caught a resident, steps away from the door, and tailgated in, tracking salt like everyone else in the perpetually mopped hallways. He made deliveries, ducked into open rooms on his way out, and took what he could slip in his pockets. When campus police stopped him, he said he was a friend of the

parents of one of his customers, a white girl who verified the story, and that was that.

Two blocks from Freddie's, Jackson's throat juiced, his bowels shifted, and his mood soared. *Lucia. Okay, not "fuck her."* He's sorry. She was still at the end of all his days. She hadn't called him once since that last morning. He was getting to the point of too long between phone calls. He dropped off an apology, a pair of Louboutins from a condo off Upland, and she hadn't called to thank him. Maybe he got the size wrong. Those sizes are European.

After the long trek across town, Jackson splurged on a finger of boy. He poked his X-ACTO knife in, sniffed off the point, and went for seconds, but it didn't splurge back. The thrill of his return was gone, and life wasn't good anymore. He took the Red Line to the Orange Line, back to the drill of moving drugs to do drugs, of moving property to do drugs, to his car and his room at the headquarters of his operation.

"How's everybody!" he boomed coming in the door with his key. Moms and Pops were in the living room watching TV, the curtains drawn to block the light of day.

"Where have *you* been?" Moms asked in the direction of Jackson, keeping her eyes on the tube. It was *The Bold and The Beautiful* time. At a glance, Moms is a standard senior citizen sorting cocktails into plastic slots for the week: blood thinners; pain alleviators; shaking steadiers; dementia clearers. Better than standard. She wouldn't know pain if she had it, and she's still in business with her husband beside her.

"Flew to Paris and back," Jackson said.

"Paris, France?"

"Why wouldn't I? I bust my ass on this rigamarole." Jackson bumped Pops on the back of his shoulder. "How ya doin', Old Man? Gettin' it in?"

“Same ol’, same ol’,” said Pops. When Pops was a contributing member of society, he worked in the Tip O’Neill building. Now he lives with his wife on both their pensions, supplemented with a scrape of social security, supplemented with the income from renting rooms to fiends.

Jackson looked around. The yellow wash applied to the walls and curtains could be the smell of fried fish from the kitchen, mixed with the hot-engine tone that comes off the pipe. “Anyone take my spot?” he asked, putting his backpacks on the floor.

“We saved it for you, you still had the key so...”

Jackson lifted under his parka and took the fold of bills from his jeans’ pocket, sheared off five twenties, and handed them to Moms. “Merry Christmas.”

Moms took the cash and counted it like the professional she was. “Happy New Years,” she said.

It was the middle of February. Moms might not know which month it was, but she knew the weekly iterations. Social security on the first, and pension on the third. “Wake up day,” Jackson calls the first of the month, when the streets get busy, the downtrodden come alive, the stemmers leave their posts, and the broke go shopping, when Jackson’s first order of business is getting right with people who owe him. “Payday is lay day,” the union guys used to say.

“Take a load off,” Pops said, setting up his glass pipe, old-school style, dipping a cotton ball into 101 rum and lighting it with a Zippo torch. Pops doesn’t like ashes.

“I’m good.” Jackson stood, pocketing his bills, and twitching.

After a period of silence, everyone gazing at the beautifully-styled actors in the opulent living room, Moms blurted, “Paris, my ass!”

“Damn right, Paris! The Eiffel Tower, the French doors, the cafes, the Notre Dames, the strolls along the river, the cheese,” Jackson said. “Cheese like three-day old pussy!”

“Please! You get your French fries at McDonald’s like everybody else,” said Moms.

“Shysta,” said Pops, placing his vintage setup in the ashtray.

“We got the French cheese from France at Star Market,” said Moms.

Jackson’s arms itched. He took off his coat.

“Well, you look good,” said Moms. “What’d’cha put on some weight?” She scanned him up and down, then drifted back to her show. “Look-it,” she said about the drama on the set.

“Yes, she didn’t!”

“Yeah. I was at a spa, got a facial, put the life back in my cheeks,” Jackson said.

“No shit!” said Pops, watching the show.

“Canyon Ranch,” said Jackson.

“Ha!” said Pops. “Rustle some cows, did ya?”

“Yeah,” said Jackson.

Nobody said anything else. God, he missed Lucia. Everyone who wasn’t her annoyed him. *I’m not expecting PhDs, but can I get some comprehension up in here?* he thought, shouldering his backpacks, grabbing his coat, and heading upstairs to his demoed bathroom.

Sissy was curled up on her futon next to his sofa cushions. He let her sleep and sidled up to look at her. Three inches of black hair, fringed in blonde, covered her face. He pushed it back to see her cute turned-up nose.

She breathed in and woke up. “Joey?” she hugged him. “I missed you.”

“My Sista.”

"I'm not a sister."

"Nonsense," he said and rolled her over. "Come on," he said. "I missed your bony butt." He had people to see, but this was a homecoming. After a few in-and-outs, she went limp. "Get up girl," he said, but she squirmed away, rolled over, and passed out.

Fine, he thought. *Welcome home*, he thought.

Addicts bored him, healthy productive people bored him, celebrities and newscasters bored him with their pathetic sorry. Drop-by parties bored him. The Super Bowl came and went and got a little rise. Paychecks boosting parties everywhere, and him the caterer, that Sunday was a great day, hardly anyone on the roads but him, popping in for deliveries—everybody thrilled to see him—grabbing a glimpse of the score all over Boston and Cambridge, as the Patriots gradually threw their perfect season.

By Monday everyone was depressed, and life went back to boring. Suffering NFL withdrawal, he and Pops took up Wii boxing in the afternoons, making their own men-on-men athleticism to sit back and witness. They set up the cartoon versions of themselves, squat, golden brown guys, Pops with his glasses and mustache, and Jackson bald, with an edged-out goatee and chinstrap, ideal him, not real him with his head and shadow grown wooly. The men virtually slugged each other for hours every day for a week, taking bumps after knockouts. When pushing buttons grew too roundabout, Jackson put the clicker down, raised his fists to the old man, and they went real-them. "Not bad for an old-timer," Jackson commended after the upshot to his jaw.

Even hand-to-hand combat failed to deliver a sustainable rise, and Jackson was back to not giving a shit about anything, pushing away the bag of ice Sissy held to his face. She was so annoying, and she was turning to dust. "Will you please drink some water, please?"

Punching his landlord didn't get him thrown out of the house. There seemed to be no consequence to anything: no consequence but the drill of buying and selling and taking and selling and using and taking and selling and buying and using. He slogged through each day, breaking for bumps, getting slightly ahead, pocketing the remains for nighttime, going from cash black and drugs red, to cash red and drugs black, back to cash black and drugs red.

The night before the break-in, after his after-midnight reward, finishing leftovers and scrounging for jollies, he got the call. *Come in. Come in.* His head and his extremities were ringing. Was he cold or just numb? He could feel his heart pounding in his throat. He coughed but his heart was still stuck there. He lay back on his cushions. His fingertips burned, but his hands were cold, right? He put his hands on his face. Was his face cold? Everything was unreliable. Something cold can be hot, his father had taught him that. He was a boy, in from the snow, a kid with no mittens, standing at the sink, the cold water burning. *You can't trust the body, Son.* You can't go by feel. You have to go by thoughts. *Come in.* The call was coming from the porch with the beer bottle. He laid back into the thought of scaling the monkey bars. *Go, go.* She was a playground. She was a long, lost love in the distance. A long, lost playground. He ran to her, grabbed on, wrapped his legs around her posts, and rode, setting his sights for Lonely Boy's tethered arrangement of toys.

The clouds were loaded with snow but holding on the morning of the robbery. The ground was hard. Jackson huffed down to the corner, his white breath fading. He started his car and let it warm. He got out, knocked his back tire free, and moved a lawn chair saving a spot to the sidewalk; the chair rule had been lifted for weeks.

He drove. He stopped by Lucia's house for his tools from the basement, and used the spare key to go in. "Oh, really!" he said to himself about the two dozen red roses in a vase

on her dining room table. "I know who's giving you flowers." He crossed the kitchen.

"Somebody be gone when I get back; that's who." He went to the basement for his tools and on his way out, took one of the roses, and laid it at the head of the table.

"Check," he said back in the car, seeing the stop as a practice round, efficient and clean. He drove. He crossed into Cambridge, stopped by Freddie's, got back in his car and headed east then north, directly to a spot on Raymond Street. He cut the engine, put the keys in his front pocket, took two bumps of high-grade octane, put on his leather gloves, grabbed his tools off the passenger seat, popped the trunk, got out, unlocked all the doors, and left the trunk ajar. He came up on China Blue from the back, holding a nail bar and wire cutters in his left hand under the sleeve of his parka.

In the backyard, the cold firmed the wintered grass. Nobody in sight, he climbed the porch steps, looked in the window at Mommy and Daddy's, took off his coat, put it against the glass, tapped hard with the nail bar, and ducked. The branches of the tree in the yard clicked. The wind blew a low moan. He raised his head and looked. He rose, picked up his coat, put his hand through the broken glass, flipped the bolt, turned the nob, and wiped his feet before he went in.

The kitchen was silent, but for a ticking. The second hand shivered on the clock. Awareness brightened. He panned for value. On the wall by the hallway something had merit: a row of keys on hooks, labeled Back Door, Front Door, and Mrs. Taft on a ring with two. He remembered Taft on the empty mailbox. *Are you kidding me? Hello Grandma!* He opened the freezer, untwisted bags of corn and peas, and lifted the lid to a box of burgers. In the living room, he placed one boot in front of the other, adding give in his knees. Every entrance was a charge. He looked for prizes, keeping his ears and eyes wide open. He

passed on the thirty-six-inch flat screen and the Bose stack for what Lonely Boy would offer.

In the bedroom, he opened closets looking for luggage, and because there was none, he stripped the bed to the sheets. Next, he swiped jewelry off the top of the dresser into the hammock of his pulled-out T-shirt, stepped to the bed, and let the contents fall. He tossed a watch onto the bed, and a camera wrapped with its cable and plug. Digital cameras were worthless without their cords. He learned that the hard way. Back when he started, prepping for a sale, he paged through the pics to delete them, the hardest part of the take. He doesn't look anymore, just hands them over, loaded, and warns the buyer.

He opened drawers and added a box with a ring to the pile on the bed, then a box with a bracelet, then a box with earrings, and then three pairs of boxers for himself. Back in the closet, pushing hung clothing into view, he heard shoes march across the floor above. Grandma cutting-short his take. She was supposed to be out. Disappointed, he pulled down three suits and a leather jacket. He lit his phone, aimed it at the floor, and selected a pair of men's dress shoes, maybe Italian, and wrapped them face to face with a pillowcase.

In the living room, he unplugged the TV, making the most of the subpar heist, and thinking on his escape, when he heard shoes clomping down the front stairway. His ears opened inside out, brightening the shaded room. He ducked behind a sofa. He could outrun anyone, that wasn't the fear. The fear was being seen in the act of something private. The heavy front door slammed. He rose and coughed and looked out the window. There she was, as he knew she'd be: a gray-haired hunch in a fur coat getting into a cab. *Are you kidding me!* He had been right. It was a shame no one knew how right. *Fuck this tiny ass TV.* He quickened to the bedroom, tied the corners of the sheets together, hauled the sack and

his tools to the back stairway, taking the Taft keys from the hook, and closed the door behind him.

Jackson took the steps to the second floor and opened the back door with the first key he tried. He crossed the kitchen and opened the closet by the front door. He pulled the mink and the fox from their hangers and slung them over his shoulder. In the living room, he removed photographs from silver frames and left them face down on the mantel. In the dining room, he pulled more silver from the breakfront, then dumped everything onto the bed. He stuck his arm in deep between the mattress and box spring and pulled out a flattened wrap of forks, knives, and spoons at the foot. He swished clothing around the dresser until he found cash in with girdles and bras. He took a shoebox of gold, a single diamond ring, pearls, and crap jewelry from the closet floor, loaded everything into two pillowcases, added those and the coats to the bundle downstairs, grabbed his tools, then went back up to Grandma's and out her back porch.

He breathed in cold air and crossed the deck. The inside of the apartment next door was vacant, and though the railing was not the jungle gym he hoped for, he landed softly on that porch. Getting to the top was a chain of entrances and exits gassing his blood. He broke the second-floor window, passed through the bedroom to the kitchen to the back stairway and up the steps. He caught his breath at the third-floor kitchen door, worked the bar into the jam, and yanked the lever until the threshold spread.

Lonely Boy's apartment was as he imagined. He found two matching duffel bags in the hall closet and filled one with toys, shelving them gently between fresh t-shirts from a laundry basket, and adding cables, power strips of plugs, and CDs that might have been music or games or movies, some with printed bootleg covers. He found a watch and camera

in the bedroom, stepped into the living room, panned the area, and that's when he saw them on the mantel. Family photographs. Black family photographs. *Are you kidding me?*

He looked away, and then looked closer. He picked out the kid, a tall, happy brother in his cap and gown, his arm around his father maybe, and in the next shot, him again in the same robe, same pose with definitely his mother. There he was, a little younger, at a birthday party for a brother, or a cousin, and there again, in a suit and tie at a restaurant, nudged up to maybe his girlfriend, maybe his sister, *wait, definitely the girlfriend*, because there were two more of her, and only her. Jackson stood in the silent apartment. He was already packed. If he had seen the photographs right when he came in, things would have been different. *Not meant to be. Sorry kid.* He went to the dining room, zipped up the bags, strapped the full one on his back across his chest, hung the other on his arm, grabbed the TV, and left through the kitchen door.

From then on, everything was downhill. *Fuck.* Jackson thought about Lonely Boy all the way down the interior stairway to the back basement. He put the full duffel and the TV just inside the door and left it ajar. He walked around the back to the first-floor kitchen on the other side, opened the door, filled the empty duffel with the sheet sack, pillowcases and firs, and zipped it up, then trotted all the way down the stairs, out the basement door, crossed the backyard, and loaded up. *Fuck.* He walked purposely to the car with two duffel bags strapped on, side-by-side lengthwise down his back, holding the fifty-two-inch flat screen out in front of him.

No one was on the street that time of day. He put the TV down, opened the back door, and slid it across the floor, tipped back and scraping the ceiling. He closed the door silently and breathed. He went to the trunk, put in the duffel bags, and pushed it shut with a click.

Fuck. He got in the front seat, started the car, and drove. Thoughts of Lonely Boy cluttered the brilliance, burdening the best part of the job. *Fuck him!*

Jackson turned left at Walden, then took lefts and rights to Memorial. He grabbed a sniff at the light, shaking his head, disappointed in the caliber of the rush, and vowed not to dig into how the kid would take it, the apartment not in a shambles, at least. Just past the second bend of the river, it started to snow. He drove. He floated blocks from the grounds he ran as a boy and the buildings he forged as a man, the spot where it seemed his whole life played out. Jackson thought of himself at that age—what was Lonely Boy, twenty-five?—young enough to recover. He'll be the last to return home, long after the grandmother and the family below, the father called home from work, the police there and gone by then. The mother will keep watch. When she sees him on the porch, she'll open the massive wooden door, sick with leaded glass, and gently soften the blow.