

J O N  
L I N D S E Y

# BODY HIGH



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— B U D S M I T H

## *Body High*

“Jon Lindsey is a wild man. *Body High* is the best novel about Los Angeles I’ve ever read.”—BUD SMITH, author of *Double Bird*

“To say that Jon Lindsey is fearless would be wrong because he feels the fear—he just writes the damn thing, anyway. I read [*Body High*] with my eyes bugging out. He shocked me. He moved me that way. He showed me where my understanding of love and human nature were lacking, but did it with such empathy for the reader that I laughed—a lot—while he did it. This book is touching and disgusting and brilliant as the noonday Los Angeles sun. Lindsey’s is an explosive debut.”—SARAH GERARD, author of *True Love*

“Jon Lindsey is the new gleefully heartbreaking voice of California’s broken world. The darkening caper at the core of this novel of griefs and raucous self-discoveries unfolds in rioting prose that bursts into crazed poetry around every curve. *Body High* is the debut of a remarkably gifted writer.”—GARIELLE LUTZ, author of *Worsted*

“An absolute banger.”—SEAN THOR CONROE, author of *Fuccboi*, and host of 1Story Pod

“My new favorite author...Think Sam Lipsyte if he’d been born 20 years later and raised in LA, but don’t get it twisted, Lindsey has his own voice.”—GIANCARLO DITRAPANO, Tyrant Books

“One of the funniest, saddest, and most troubling books I’ve read in a long time.”—ANDREW MARTIN, author of *Cool for America*

“*Body High* is explosive. An anti-glamour anthem of grief and restitution.”—ELLE NASH, author of *Nudes*

“A pus-filled tale of love, loss, doped-up wrestlers, home dialysis, a giant dwarf, and a celebrity corpse—all heralded by a lovable scumbag on his way to ruin or redemption. A modern classic.

Jon Lindsey is a real deal mutherfucker if ever I knew one.”—STEVE ANWYLL, author of *Welfare*

“Jon Lindsey’s *Body High* gives Los Angeles, that land of decadent dreams and banal nightmares, a double-barrel blast of pure riotous heart. His characters blunder through the harsh California sunlight, wracked with weepy wounds and undigested grief, while Lindsey infuses their hopes and delusions and botched schemes with so much rampant feeling, finding pathos and compassion in the ludicrous shit people will do when they can’t bear to lose one more thing.”—DAVID NUTT, author of *The Great American Suction*

“[*Body High*] made me ache. It made me laugh and cry. It’s alive with sadness and regret and the most beautifully foolish hope. Jon Lindsey writes like he has nothing to lose—radiant and distinctly striking.”—LINDSAY LERMAN, author of *I’m From Nowhere*

“A drug-addles, grief-stricken, gross and incestuous Frankenstein’s monster of a novel, lit up like stained glass by a pure and yearning heart.”—BEN LOORY, author of *Tales of Falling and Flying*

“I not-so-soberly walk the line Jon Lindsey draws (and then crosses) between the many terrors and beauties of life. His debut, *Body High*, is no doubt the most provocative book of 2021—a debauched, high-speed come-down into the darkest depths of love, family, friendship, drug abuse, suicide, kidnapping, prostitution, pro wrestling, and above all, redemption. Almost cried while reading it, and I might cry more after publishing it, but either way it’ll be worth it.”—  
BRIAN ALAN ELLIS, author of *Bad Poet*

# BODY HIGH

A Novel by **Jon Lindsey**

A HOUSE OF VLAD BOOK

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*For me. And you.*

BODY HIGH

Though it's been years, I remember visiting this cemetery with my mom to lay costume jewelry on the family plot. Fires burned in the foothills. The sun slunk through the smoke. If I close my eyes, I can see my candy wrappers being swept off headstones by the Santa Anas, wrinkled cellophane and ash from the Garden of Ascension to the Vale of Memory.

I want to share the memory with FF, my best friend. But he's busy. He sits beside me on a loveseat in the lobby of the funeral chapel, crowding me with his big gym muscles. A powerful odor of pomade. Hunched over his phone, he types the word *love*, which is code for *MDMA*.

"Thanks for this," I say.

"What time does the service start?" he says.

"Let's wait for more bodies to show."

"Yeah but I need to be somewhere."

He acts like my mom's death isn't hard for him too. As if he isn't still mourning his own long dead mom. But now we are brothers. We are our own mothers.

I stare out the funeral chapel's split-paned window. Squint. Hard shadows cut through the glass and chop me to pieces. It's impossible to get comfortable and I shift between the cheeks of my ass, worried the wound there is infected. Beneath my Goodwill suit, I can feel it pulsing. Weepy and sharp.

Through the window, I watch a gardener on a riding mower. He manicures the graves in tight meditative rows, Dodger-blue bandana set low on his brow to mop the sun out of his eyes, and it makes me think of my mom. Her headaches. A wet towel compressed to her forehead in her bedroom, so sensitive to seasonal allergies, sound and the unceasing summer light. People seem to think it's impossible to feel sad



under the Southern California sun, but I have seen otherwise. Once, I had a girlfriend who confessed that on summer days she would sit at her bedroom window and rub herself to the rev of the gardener's leaf blowers. People here are desperate to live. They'll do anything. They'll eat organic. They'll buy gym memberships. They'll do hot yoga and hang upside down. They'll set intentions.

Other people though, they just want the medicine, not the cure. My mom bought supplements off infomercials. Each week a new life-extending miracle pill she'd try once and never again.

She didn't want to live, not really.

Not her life.

A lot of people feel that way.

Maybe you do too.

FF types *girlfriend* into his phone, meaning *cocaine*, then walks outside to make a call.

The funeral service is supposed to start, but the pews are nearly empty.

Why didn't my mom have friends who were women?

I walk the aisle and take a headcount of ex-boyfriends. Their mustaches more gray, their names too plain and biblical to remember. They greet me like an old friend. Everyone is their friend, these sunned men. My mom collected a menagerie of mustachioed Lotharios on two-seater bicycles. Men she met at the pier. At church services in office complexes. At the laundromat. Self-medicating men who stuck around until my mom stopped fronting them pills or payday loans, only to pop up again months or years later in the same wandering way.

"I can't believe she's gone, Leland," says Michael, or Matthew. Head lowered, he shakes his sandy surf-sprayed hair at the lobby carpet.

"Yeah," I say, in a way that means no.

If he loved her, he would know my mom has been gone for years.

I'm taking a last tour of the lobby, looking for stragglers, when I get crushed in a hug.

"I loved her too," Gickle says, and squeezes me tighter. Wet with tears, my mom's ex-boyfriend sniffles against my chest.

At four feet eleven inches, a hair above the cut-off for a dwarf, Gickle is a giant who held Pee-Wee Championships in his pro-wrestling heyday. For a time, he held my mom's heart. Then he got sober, moved out of our apartment, got a business loan, got a neon sign, and opened his wrestling academy. FF was his first student.

So Gickle wasn't there to see how fragile the nonstop drug use made my mom. How incapable, or unwilling she was to care about herself. He didn't visit her in emergency rooms, or psych wards, or halfway houses. And I'm still bitter about how he tossed aside my script, *Wrestling With Blood*, without a second look.

"What the hell happened to her?" The expression on Gickle's smashed face suggests the last decade caught him by surprise. I can see he wants someone to blame. He can blame me. I blame him. All her boyfriends. I blame myself. And her.

"I don't know," I say.

Because how can I ever explain how hard I tried to keep her alive?

Now, the pastor is onstage alongside my mom's casket. He checks the time on his wristwatch. All these years later, he looks the same, just paunchier. Still bearded. Still conforming to my mom's facial hair preferences, from which she never deviated. Even Gickle in his day grew a fabulous mustache to woo her.

Sometimes I thought my mom deserved what she got. She gave up. She hadn't done anything to save herself. No savings. Just assumed I would save her. And I did. I saved her from homelessness, but I never let her move in with me. And for that, I feel guilty. Like I abandoned my mom. She said as much, in the hospital, plump with donor blood, skin flushed every shade of sunset, after her first try at suicide. She did it to punish me and get my attention. Well, she has it now, onstage, under the house lights. And her casket is gorgeous. A dark reflective wood I can lose myself in. I did good.

The pastor clears his throat. The microphone feeds back. "Today we gather to mourn the passing of Joy Bonny Lessing," he says. "Who was born and came into our lives in the summer and, like the summer, brought us warmth."

I try to focus on the pastor's words but I'm zoomed in on his throat. The priestly collar that barely conceals a big-ass

hickey. The blue bruise makes me remember the pastor's Bible study group on the beach: my mom tugging on her blue bikini top between sets of beach volleyball, me corn-dogging on my belly in the warm sand. As the day cools to night, my mom and I bundle in the pastor's Baja blanket around the bonfire. The pastor's wife eyes my mom scornfully through the flames, as though my mom has betrayed some deep woman-code. The wife's protective arm wraps around her husband's hairy leg as he strums his acoustic guitar and leads his flock in a hymn.

I worry he's brought the guitar with him today. But when I don't see it on stage, I'm disappointed. I wish he would strum his thumb down the strings like he did on the beach. So I can feel like that child again, nuzzled up against my mother next to the bonfire, held passively to her breast.

"Amen," the pastor says.

On cue, two young ushers enter from the wings of the stage and wheel away my mom.

FF lifts me from the pew and says, "Everything's gonna be alright."

"I don't know," I say, as he walks me through the chapel, out the doors, into the sunbaked parking lot.

Most of my mom's ex-boyfriends have already jetted. I watch one reverse out of the parking lot with a surfboard on his roof rack. Two fingers flash *Peace*.

A few other exes congregate in the shade, asking about after-parties.

The ushers load my mom's casket into the hearse. "Fucker's heavy," says the one with the faux hawk.

I want to feel proud of that heavy wood casket, to mourn its magisterial sadness. But can't.

FF's auction-bought police cruiser makes a coffee grinder noise as the engine starts. The radio comes on full volume.

The Doors. “Waiting for the Sun.” The sound system cost more than the old crap cop car. *Waiting for the sun...*

The funeral procession forms and the long black hearse leads the way on tires so flat they melt. FF and I are behind in the cruiser. Gickle looks down on us from the cab of his lifted pickup. Behind him there’s a Jeep, a Civic, a panel van with a peeling electrician’s decal. Trailing at a distance is the pastor’s Astro Van.

The hearse leads us through the cemetery, along the Garden of Remembrance, a lane lined with jacaranda trees, flowering purple. We enter a meadow of graves. Bouquets and stuffed animals decorate the headstones. A few pinwheels whirl as we drive uphill.

The procession stops at the top of the hill. Over the parking lot’s edge and far down, I see my mom’s open grave. Surrounded by too many folding chairs, several tipped and lying flat. Beyond the cemetery wall run high-tension electrical wires. Beyond the wires, the freeway. Past the freeway, jutting above the suburban sprawl, cutting into the smog, is the snowy peak of the Matterhorn mountain at Disneyland.

FF and the two meathead ushers argue over the best path to the grave. The usher with the bright blue eyes says, “Straight shot.”

“Too steep,” FF says. “And what’s with these sprinklers?”

I scan the few remaining ex-boyfriends and search in vain for an able body among my sad-sack surrogate dads. My face gets hot with disappointment. I think of FF’s dad, the dad I wanted—the perpetually sunburned dad planted on the living room couch, Modelo in hand, smelling of mowed lawns, and mutely watching the Weather Channel.

Sweat drips down my back and stings the wound on my ass. I grab the gilded handle of my mom’s casket. “Let’s effing do this,” I say, and begin to free her from the hearse.

FF and the ushers grab the other handles. The sun flexes in the casket lacquer. My mom is nearly free.

“Watch the wet ones,” FF grunts, meaning the flat gravestones touched by the sprinklers. Each footstep sucks into the saturated grass. I fight for my loafer and almost lose it. The sun curses me, an evil eye shining on the casket. Sweat drips down my armpits, down my shirtsleeves, and pools in my grip.

The handle begins to slip.

I look to FF for strength. He is the picture of equanimity. A pharmaceutical commercial. I try to be him. For a moment, I am him. I scan the horizon and pull strength from the sound of the sprinklers, the rivers of traffic on the freeway, the smog, the Matterhorn, the cemetery hills, the graves. The death.

Death is nothing to the hills.

Like the hills, I hold my mother’s death inside me.

Bring me death, I will carry it.

In the distance, across the sopping graves, I see her—a weird angel who walks through the shade of the jacarandas trees, struggling with the wheels of her luggage.

Mom?

“HERE I AM,” I want to cry. “TAKE ME WITH.”

The handle continues to slip. Here I am, I think, trying to hold on. Take me with. I lose my grip and the casket crashes to the grass. The lid swings open and out rolls the corpse of Jack Nicholson.

“Thirsty?” asks the funeral director.

Steve.

We walk through the showroom and into his cinder block office. He removes his sport coat. His undershirt is soaked sheer with sweat. It clings to his body. Saddled by a crippled spirit. He hangs the limp sport coat on a hook: “Water, coffee, Diet Pepsi?”

“No, Steven,” I say. No. “Where’s my mom?”

During the chaos at the gravesite, after the reveal of Jack Nicholson’s corpse—a Jack Nicholson tribute artist, actually—I’d been in such a state of shock that Steve’s swift arrival hadn’t even registered.

“Taquitos?” Steve says.

He gestures to the mini-fridge in his office. His body language is anxious, like gristle squirming away from cutlery. But I haven’t eaten all day and somehow the thought of taquitos is a relief.

“Okay,” I say.

Immediately, I’m ashamed.

On his knees, Steve digs through the mini-fridge, and I realize: this guy is a lot like me. He’s a step deeper into decay, but there’s still so much of his squinge and general air of defeat in me. Before I can change my mind, he slinks out of the office carrying a tray of frozen taquitos.

I want to be furious with Steve for losing my mom, mixing her up with a celebrity impersonator, but somewhere along the drive I began to feel sorry for the funeral director. He started to hyperventilate, whimpering about his wife and kid, his small family-owned cemetery, and the debt he carried like a sickness in his shoulders. He wanted to settle with me, then

and there, but I wanted to avenge my mom. I was set on making Steve pay for not taking care of her. I was going to use him as a scapegoat for every person who had failed her. But Steve's story was a real tearjerker.

Sadder still, is how quickly I accepted the fate of my mom's body. In a passive way, it feels natural. On some level, I'm thinking, of course my mom's body disappeared. She'd lost control of her body as a child and never recovered it.

All my life it's been confusing: my mom's relationship to her body, her pain, the drugs, was a love at least as messy as her relationship to me. At the end, my love failed her too.

In the other room, the microwave hums.

FF texts, *U wont believe whos here.*

He doesn't know that I don't care who is there, because I'm here, in Steve's office.

Steve returns holding two paper plates soaked see-through with grease.

He says, "Good news."

I slump in Steve's golf cart, mute, still confused by the documents I just signed. I should try to vomit. To purge the taquitos. That's what I would make my drunk mom do. Sit with her on the bathroom floor as she spit up another story of her father. The rented camper in Santa Barbara, the torn strap of her bathing suit, her father like a high school boy. Or the hotel on Catalina, overlooking Avalon bay, giving in to her father again. Biting her own tongue until it bled.

I force two fingers into my mouth, down my throat, but nothing comes up. I want Steve to say something. Instead he focuses on the long shadows that fall across the cemetery, following them to my mom. On some higher functioning level, I know Steve has taken advantage of me. I know that I should have held out for cash. And yet, I accepted his offer to comp my mom's funeral and knock thirty percent off my next visit.



“You’ll be back,” he said.

When we reach the parking lot, it’s nearly empty. By the lights of the freeway, Gickle supervises the ushers who handle my mom’s no-frills casket. No mahogany. Pine.

I stumble out of the golf cart. “Where do we go from here, Steven?”

He deflects the question by offering me a handshake. I take hold of the thing: unguent, lotioned. He tries to pull away but I hold tight. He looks scared. He reminds me of me. I want to punch him.

But actually, Steve’s not like me. He’s a father, and I’m nothing but a sperm donor, and I’ve never met my father.

Steve seems to realize I’m too much of a coward to hit him. And he looks disappointed. Slips his hand from mine like a girl at the end of a date who wanted to be kissed.

He drives away in the electric cart. Noiseless. Taillights like distant, nothing-eyed fires.

I watch from the edge of the parking lot as my mom’s casket sinks into the grave. Somehow I felt more free when her body was lost. The possibility that she might never be found meant I could deny that she is finally, truly, gone. And I am alone.

Music bumps from FF’s car. I can feel the subwoofer is in my stomach.

I hope my friend will front me something. And not try to tell me how I feel.

I look through the passenger window.

FF says, “Leland—”

A woman is sitting shotgun. Except, right away I see she’s not a woman, only a teenager.

She opens the car door quick, whacking my knees. “LELAND.” She leaps out the car in a way that makes me

think of lighter fluid. Puts her arms around my neck, then pulls away. An awkward high school hug.

She waits for me to react.

“It’s Jolene,” she says.

Her red hair and bad skin.

She’s like my mom. But not.

I worry this is going to get in the way of me getting high.

“Your auntie.” She drops her arms. “*Hello.*”

Jolene sings *Ay-yai-yai* from the car as we speed past a mariachi band at a bus stop. Wind-strung strands of her hair reach me as I retch out the window, painting the car in an embarrassing stripe of emotion. Everything is coming up—my mom’s grave, every word I left unuttered there, every feeling that went unhonored—coming to the surface in a mess.

I lose another mouthful of taquito, and the intimacy of the act, the stink and sadness of it, makes me wonder about the wound on my ass, my spinal tap, and what it took from me.

The neon boulevard blurs—*agua pura*, pre-paid cellphone stores, 98 Cent stores. I try to focus on the last few days: the hospital, the spinal tap, the cemetery, and now this sketchy neighborhood in East LA where I’ve come with my best friend and my seventeen—“Almost eighteen”—year-old aunt to score.

FF swerves off the boulevard, and a new pain, bright and white, shoots up from the wound on my ass.

It’s getting worse.

We slow and enter a neighborhood of thick shadows. The streetlights are burned out, or shot out. The wide body of the Crown Victoria rolls along the narrow street of rundown apartment complexes decorated by graffiti buff-outs. The street is empty except for a circle of three boys passing a blunt. FF double-parks.

Jolene says, “*These* are your hookups?”

“Sit tight.” FF leaves the engine running and jogs across the street with a reusable grocery bag. He greets each kid with a dap. Waves off the blunt. The tallest of the boys, head level to FF’s pecs, leads FF into the apartment complex through a propped-open security gate.

The two remaining boys continue to pass the red cherry as I reach for the door handle, ready to walk into the rotation and eek out a hit. But the rear doors only open from the outside. The old cop car is designed to detain. I'm about to ask Jolene to open the door, but she starts laughing.

A drunk caught in our headlights is peeing against a tree.

"Oh wow." Jolene hides her face behind her big phone. "You gotta read these tweets." She hands me the phone. "Strippers in Florida. Shit's crazy."

What do I care about Florida? Anything outside of the car feels incomprehensible. But I am interested in Jolene, and strippers. Why does this teenage runaway keep alluding to them so casually in conversation? When I asked where her mom was, she said, "At an ashram. With her guru. In Bali. Or maybe stripping." And again, when I reluctantly said she could crash with me until we found her something more permanent, but that I was short on rent and would need her to contribute, she showed me her dad's stolen credit card and pretended to jerk off in a few quick strokes, throwing her seed at me, making it rain strip club dollars.

I scroll through a few of the stripper's tweets then click to Jolene's bio. Her handle, @reallylilwayne, makes me smile, but her posts are all celebrity bullshit. I open her Instagram. The newest photo is a selfie, tagged today at the cemetery. In the picture she's splayed out, with her wheeled luggage, on the grass next to my mom's headstone. In the caption below the image she's typed the skull emoji, the rose emoji, and the two dancing girls emoji. The post already has 242 likes from her 3113 followers, and 41 comments from girls and boys, and also men. They ask about her emotional state, or say she looks fire.

Further down her Instagram timeline, I see more selfies shot under flood lights in amateur marijuana grow rooms, or topless and cupping her small breasts in front of a red-lit bathroom mirror, or at the beach with other teens pouring vodka into a watermelon, or as a toddler flashing a peace sign from the arms of a young woman, and pictures of various cats,

and a screen capture of a text: “*Are you okay?*” “*Haha no.*” Certain characters reappear along the timeline: the girl with the Black Flag tattoo, an androgynous Asian kid in Adidas warmups, images of Britney Spears with a shaved head, pictures of pink cars, the hashtag #wokeupcrying. All of which amounts to the cultivated image of a girl trying to seem like she is not trying for likes, when in fact these pings of validation are important prizes.

“Did your dad ever say anything about me?” I ask.

“Nah,” she says.

“Nothing?”

She shakes her head. “I only found out about your mom from the checks.”

“What checks?”

“He changed his password. But I can crack the new one too.”

“What checks?”

“The checks he sent every month,” she says, like *duh*.

“My mom didn’t get any checks,” I say. “She wouldn’t take his money.”

Jolene turns on the dome light and angles the rearview mirror to inspect the splotchy makeup covering her acne.

“You know what your dad did,” I say. “Right?”

All my mom’s stories scroll through my head: the ripped bathing suit strap; the blood-spotted bed sheets; his nude body on the hotel balcony, shoulders slumped, hairy ass.

“Hey, lemme see my—” Jolene grabs for the phone, but I hold it out of reach.

“You know what he did to her, right?”

She rolls her eyes. “I mean, she said some shit. But you gotta admit, she was whacky. Lemme have my phone.”

I slap her hand away. “What did my mom say?”

“He never tried that shit with me if that’s what you think.” Jolene makes a fist. “Give it.”

“I’m not done reading about those strippers.”

“Let me see yours then,” she says.

I hand her my phone and descend further down her timeline. I stop on a photo of my mom. She poses with a burrito, one blue eye looking crazy. It pisses me off, this tourist snapshot with its feckless caption: *Fam*.

FF plows into the driver’s seat and slams the door. I listen to the pills—*cha-cha-cha*.

“Little beaners,” he says.

“Easy *esé*,” Jolene says, like a chola, for some reason. “*No quiero oír nada de esa basura*.” I guess she doesn’t realize he’s half-Mexican.

FF glares at her.

In the backseat, I pretend to be absorbed in the phone. I’m not involved. I’m not paying attention.

“You’re *basura*,” FF says to her, and almost spits the word, *trash*.

“What’d you call me?” It’s a shock, the sharp slap of Jolene’s hand on his jaw.

The outburst feels so foreign and unrelatable, like I can’t be related to this girl. My mom was a bottler. She would have pinched that emotion into a frown, scrunched it into a gel cap. *Scrunch*. My mom’s word. Everything scrunched: feelings, faces, car crashes.

FF doesn’t flinch. Not even the one dimple in his cheek. He just gives Jolene a hard stare from deep-set eyes, which might look small if they weren’t so dark.

“Sorry. But suck it,” Jolene says, and crosses her arms. She turns to the window to look out at the night, the boys on the corner.

FF tunes to a ranchera radio station as we drive west to Echo Park. He says the bouncy polka music is “immersion therapy” for Jolene.

Gradually the geography becomes more familiar. Cesar Chavez runs into Sunset Boulevard. Into hipster bars with long lines out the door.

FF drives to the supermarket where my favorite taco truck parks. I order extra, because Jolene is paying. She sulkily swipes her dad’s credit card and glances over her shoulder to track FF. “Wait up.” She tears off after him to the supermarket and leaves me to sign the credit card receipt. I hold the pen with my fingertips and scribble *Leslie Lessing*, like the name is a curse I’m endorsing.

At my place, on the futon, FF counts out the pills. I pop the cork on a merlot Jolene stole from her dad. She’s on the floor, crouched in front of my video game collection. I expect she’ll choose one of the new games, but I’m wrong. She picks *Dr. Mario*.

I blow dust out of the cartridge and the game starts. Pixelated pills cascade down the television screen as Jolene and I play amateur pharmacists, dropping antiretrovirals and multivitamins on the plague of villains that she names Anal Warts, Anal Herpes, and Abstinence.

While we play the game, I try to interpret Jolene’s chewed cuticles, eye rolls, and dismissive *pfft’s* to my questions about her father. I want answers from Jolene, but she just wants to play *Dr. Mario*. So I infect her. I solve the puzzles on my gaming screen and hers grow more complex. A sneeze becomes a pandemic. When she’s overrun with viruses, she throws the controller at me. She goes into the kitchen to pour more of her father’s wine. “Hook me up,” I whisper to FF.

I know the Mexican oxy he scored is just fentanyl, but I also know he’ll give me the pills gratis because he feels bad about my mom.

“What about me?” Jolene says from the kitchen, killing the wine into a coffee mug.

“Nah,” I say. “I don’t think so.”

“Don’t try to be my dad,” she says.

“I try not to everyday,” I say, and nudge FF.

“You don’t have cash,” he says to her.

“I just bought you a case of Muscle Milk.” She flails her arms and wine splatters on the floor. She doesn’t make any effort to clean up the mess.

She whines but I stay strong. Shut her down in a way that feels familiar.

It’s FF who submits. He opens the Ziploc and puts a pill in her palm. It isn’t pretty. Not like the jazzy pills on the video game. More like something to plant, to sprout and grow.

“Like Orange County?” Jolene says, examining the pill stamped *OC*.

I crush mine into a powder. Like stuff you’d pay extra for to boost a smoothie. Jolene watches me roll a dollar bill into a tooter. It makes me uncomfortable, how attentive she is. So instead of snorting, I sweep the powder into a Zig-Zag paper and parachute it. The pill floats down my esophagus and lands softly in my stomach, where it fits.

Jolene does the same. Then holds the wine bottle to FF’s lips and says, “Time for your medicine.”

“No, I’m good,” he says.

She smears a wine wet finger on his bottom lip. He doesn’t flinch in fear for his sobriety, like I expect, or maybe want. But neither does he lick his chops.

The evening wears on and I continue to win. Jolene and FF fight for their lives and I riddle them with 8-bit disease. I blanket them both in poxes. Jolene throws her controller at me in frustration. She staggers into the kitchen for more wine. I whip FF easily enough to watch her tour the apartment. Beverage in hand, she scrutinizes my books and records. She



wipes a finger through the dust on my drum machine and synth. To her, this place must seem like a dump. But the rent is cheap, and the wine stays mellow, the potatoes blossom from their eyes and everything I own is covered in a fine layer of soil, as though the Earth is working to reclaim me.

Jolene lingers on a picture of me and my mom, snapped by one of my mom's exes in one of the swimming pools at one of the apartment complexes of my childhood. In the photo I ride my mom's back, our heads just above the surface of the chlorine pool. Under the waterline our bodies deform, become even more melded, and it's impossible to tell where she stops and I start. Jolene looks at me. Looks back.

"What?" I say.

FF laughs.

Jolene sticks up her middle finger. Stumbling to the bathroom, she passes the desk in the closet where I wrote *Wrestling With Blood*. She slams the bathroom door.

We don't see her again for a long time.

When she comes out, she seems even more wasted. I wish I was as high as her. I must be close because the wound on my ass has stopped hurting.

Jolene slumps against me on the floor.

"You should maybe drink some water," I say.

She sticks her tongue out. Snatches the controller from FF. She can hardly sit up. Even so, she purges her screen. Soon I am infested, infected, dead.

"How did she do it?" I asked FF, on the phone that day from my hospital bed. I was getting paid good money to participate in the human experiment, but the doctors had botched my spinal tap and I could feel fluid leak from the hole in my lumbar and dribble down my open johnny.

FF told me what he knew. I pictured my mom's bedroom at the halfway house. In the glow of flames I saw her in bed, hiding under blankets, swallowed slowly by smoke and

the lights of fire engines, the discharge of hoses that washed her clean away, in sluices of ash that rushed through the hallways, under doors, into gutters, down the storm drains of Los Angeles, and out to sea.

That day I dreamed my body fluids were abandoning me in the same way: escaping through the hole in my spine, following my mother to the ocean, leaving my body beached in the brine and fish stink of low tide, gull beaks jabbing.

I come out of the bathroom, worried by the tint of Jolene's piss. Of course she didn't flush. "Hey, auntie," I say. "You need to drink some—"

The living room is a cool blue beam. By the light of the television, FF hugs Jolene. His hands, her hips. They sway to the video game music. I want to get between them. "GET OFF HER," I almost shout. But as they turn, I see there's vomit down the front of her shirt. She heaves. More.

FF rushes her past me into the bathroom.

"What did you do to her?" I say.

He turns on the shower. Her eyes roll white and green and white again. Her mouth open like she has something to say.

He slaps her under the shower water falling.

"WAKE UP."

On the bathroom floor beside her, I'm back where I thought I never wanted to be. Back to kneeling on the tile, picking vomit out of tangled red hair. I thought that with my mom gone I could finally rest, finally take care of myself, instead of her. I roll a bath towel into a pillow and prop Jolene against the wall so she doesn't choke to death.

FF is stripped to his boxers. His wet clothes hang on a chair and the futon is unfolded. He shakes out a blanket.

“She’s cut off,” he says.

“I don’t know what to do with her,” I say.

Together we put sheets on the futon.

Sometime before dawn, a sugary headache punctures the pills and wakes me. Jolene is beside me on the futon. FF on my other side, warm and snoring. I slip out of bed and steal a few of my best friend’s pills. Dry swallow one, hide a few in my shoe, and sneak back into bed.

When I wake again, the sun is up and FF is gone. Jolene is still asleep against me with the bed sheet over her head.

I peel my underwear off in the shower. My wound has popped. Pus dried in a crust. I linger under the water, soaping myself and the weeping wound. Sadly, I think of Jolene and imagine her in the shower with me. It’s like the water is washing away my sense of self, stripping me to the meat. I dry myself. Disinfect the wound with mouthwash.

On the coffee table there’s a note written in FF’s murderous penmanship, reminding me about his wrestling match tomorrow. He says it’s important—*Don’t flake this time!*—but I don’t want to make the trip down to Orange County. I haven’t been to one of Gickle’s shows since he passed on *Wrestling With Blood*.

In the refrigerator, I find yesterday’s coffee and dump in creamer. The day ahead takes on a beige hue. I walk outside in my towel, with my phone. Birds and insects screech from overgrown trees. Vines of ivy slog up the old house and retrofit its broken bricks and rotting planks. On my phone, I google *child protective services*. I can’t send Jolene back to her dad, but it’s no good having her live with me.

At the fence, my landlord’s French bulldog, Flubber, *snorts*. His paw rattles the chain-link. My landlords travel a lot, so in exchange for cheap rent, I take care of their dog. Truth is, I’d do it for free. He’s a friend.

I've renamed him Flaubert.

I open the gate, he rolls onto his back, and I do as he asks. I rub his belly. His leg kicks like he's pedaling.

"Tour de France," I say.

Jolene staggers out the front door, squinting.

"Who's this?" she says.

The dog sniffs her toes.

"Flaubert," I say. "He killed Romanticism."

"Well." She scratches the dog behind the ear. "I'm sure he had a good reason."

On my phone, I close the Child Protective Services homepage.

"What's that?" She points at the scar that runs from my ribcage to love handle.

"Nothing vital," I say.

I know it was stupid to sell my kidney, but I had fun with the money.

"You'd be surprised how much I've given to the world," I say, reciting dialogue I practiced. "Most people come into the world with little, and take from everyone on their way out. But with me it's the other way." I scratch my ass under the towel. "I only give." Scratch. "A sort of apprentice to God, cleaning his paint brushes, touching up the lines he's forgotten to connect."

Jolene looks unimpressed.

"I need some medicine," I say, and scratch my ass as hard as possible.

"Obviously," she says. "What's wrong with you?"

"I'll tell you on the way to Chinatown."

The wound is fussy. Oozing. I need medicine, but I'm running out of money. There's a low-cost pharmacy in Chinatown, but unless Jolene hurries, we won't make it before they close.

She flops on the futon.

To get her out the door, I tell her about my spinal tap. And the other human research experiments. The experiments to which I volunteer my body. I shape the trials into a sob story of sacrifices I made to help my mom. "She was helpless," I say, "and those assisted living places, they aren't cheap." In reality, government disability checks covered my mom's rent. "That's why I sold my kidney." I leave out the part about the Armenian scammers who strong-armed me into the operation.

Jolene holds up her hand to signal *no more*, and says, "Dude, you're kind of an idiot."

She slips a bottle of white wine into her purse. The dog and I follow her out the door, through the garden, to the street. In my pocket, I finger the pills I stole from FF. Count them. Recount. It's a relief to be out of the apartment, out in the world, walking.

"Which one's your car?" she says.

"I don't drive," I say. "We can catch the bus."

She shakes her head, "Uh-uh no way." Pulls out her cellphone. Tries to hail a rideshare service, but her dad's credit card won't work.

"He cut you off," I say, because I want to highlight their separation.

"It's a glitch," she says. "Let's try yours."

"Uhm, that won't work, I—"

"You're such a loser."

I flinch. Because I know it's true.

She's already stomping down the middle of the street.

"Don't step on a crack," she sings-songs. "Or you'll break your momma's back."

I try to ignore it. The implication of the rhyme, that I'm to blame for breaking my mom. Up in the sky, the sun is beginning to burn. A pill now would blot it out. Stop my wound's ache. Fill the cracks in the street.

"So what's up with FF?" Jolene says.

"Don't," I say.

"What?" She hooks her arm in mine and synchs our footsteps.

"You're too young."

"Does he have a girlfriend?"

I could mention FF's last girlfriend. The engagement ring. The gun. "Why do you care?"

"Why's he so into you?"

"I'm a great guy."

I finger the pills in my pocket.

Truth is, I ask myself the same question about FF, and each time I think back to one night. Red and blue flashing lights, the cops searching his car, finding what he'd lost between the seat cushions. I remember FF's face draining of color. Both of us suddenly sober, handcuffed on the curb. The sheet of LSD, sealed in an evidence bag, dangled from the cop's fingers. Enough hits for a felony. But because FF was eighteen, I said the acid was mine. I still remember the look FF gave me: guilt mixed with what I guessed was love. He mouthed the words, "I love you," or "I owe you," as they cuffed me.

Flaubert tugs the leash, pulling me to a traffic island. He pops a squat on yellow grass. Pees like a girl dog. I watch the traffic

on Figueroa and look for the bus. Jolene takes the rollies from my hip pocket. She tries to roll a cigarette and drops tobacco everywhere.

My phone rings. It's FF. Receiver to ear, I roll Jolene a cigarette. FF is fired up about some wrestling scout who'll be in the audience for his match.

"This could be *it*," he says.

"This could be it," I say.

"Is that FF?" Jolene rips the phone from my ear. "What up?" she says. "Oh yeah." She turns her back on me. "That's cool, I'll be there." She lights the cigarette. "What are you listening to? Is that Madonna?" She takes a drag. "I'm not stupid, *you're* stupid, I'm gonna make you a playlist."

Overhead, the sun is burning. At my feet, Flaubert is breathing heavy. Overheating. I should take him to the shade, but I'm transfixed by Jolene on the phone with my friend. I want her to look at me. To see me. I turn toward the curb and watch the bus pull away.

"Leland wants me to get off the phone," she says. "Okay, smell you later."

"We missed the bus because of you," I say. "We'll have to catch the next one. At the next stop."

"Uhhh." Her boots scuff the sidewalk.

We keep seeing signs posted on telephone poles that say *VILLAINS*. Those yellow signs used by cast and crew to locate movie shoots. The signs point toward Chinatown.

"I should swing by the shoot," Jolene says. "Since I'm going to be an actress and all."

I laugh. I can't help it.

"You don't believe me?" she says. "I start NYU in the fall."

She curtsseys, as if to applause.

I'm at a loss. Not only because of the privilege she seems to have enjoyed at the expense of my mom, but also because of what Jolene's acting career implies about every interaction she and I have shared.

"Great," I say. "And your dad is paying?"

She rolls her eyes. "So what?"

"He should be in prison, that's what," I say. "He raped my mom."

I need Jolene to know this.

But the way she glares at me, eyes narrow, says she already knows. Says she knows better than I ever will. For the first time, her act falters, and she doesn't seem so untouched.

She walks away, and I let her, until the distance between us grows too large and I feel a tug. I need to be near her. I chase after her. Nearly trip on a crack in the sidewalk. The dog's long tongue wags. We pass a street mural of an Aztec Jesus steering a lowrider across the galaxy.

"Wait," I say.

"What?"

I catch my breath. "Do you really think you're pretty enough to be an actress?"

The words leave my mouth, smarmy and warm, like I've won some unspoken argument ongoing beneath the one we've already had. In a single sentence I've shown her, this dumb teen, that she's not only the daughter of a monster, but a monster herself. She must be. Because what else could live through abuse and still make plans to move away, go to college, build a life?

But at the sight of Jolene's tears, the grim satisfaction of my victory gives way to remorse.

She turns and runs. I count each crack she steps on as the distance between us opens.

I lose sight of her. Call her phone. Hang up before the voicemail. Call again. I only wanted her to see me. To



understand that, in a way, I was also abused.

*SORRY!* I text Jolene. Attach a sad cat face emoji.

I follow the *VILLAINS* signs until I find Jolene at the picnic bench of a taco cart in the parking lot of a gas station.

“My friend, you want?” the man behind the grill says. His gold chain necklace shines yellow. “We got tripa, lengua, cabeza.” He seems like a good guy because he holds his shoulders back and pushes out his heart.

“I’m sorry,” I say to Jolene. “I was a jerk. You’re beautiful.”

I mean it. She is. Even here at the gas station, near the pumps. Especially here. The sun in her hair. My mother’s hair.

Flaubert scavenges meat off the greasy concrete.

“Tell me how wrong I am,” I say. “Tell me you’re going to be famous.”

“I don’t feel like it,” she says. “The Leland I was looking for wouldn’t have said that.”

The letdown in her voice shows how tenuous our link is. Barely twenty-four hours. Our separation, her displeasure, it panics me.

“I was angry,” I say. “I don’t—”

“The lengua is good, amigo,” the grill guy says to another customer.

“I don’t want you to leave.”

*Again*, I almost say.

“This is something special,” I say to Jolene, as we cross the bridge into Elysian Park. “Nobody walks like this in LA.”

“Don’t start singing classic rock,” she says.

It’s a short walk from the bridge to the streets of Chinatown: pagoda buildings, peach stucco strip malls, art galleries, noodle-houses, and stalls selling whatever that spill

onto the sidewalk. But when we reach the storefront I remember, the low-cost eastern medicine pharmacy is gone. Its jars of herbs, yeast, and fungi have been replaced by a marijuana dispensary–slash–hipster apothecary.

My ass clenches. Throbs. No way this place will be cheap like the old one. I'm ready to turn around and go home, but Jolene stops me.

“We hoofed it all this way.”

“Yeah but...” I want to tell her that I'm running out of money, but I feel like she won't get it. “Fine.”

I ring the bell. The door buzzes open. I leave Jolene outside with the dog.

The woman at the counter is about my age. Blonde. No bra. On trend. She tucks her hair behind her ear. “Can I help you?”

She's pretty, like she could have rough palms and hairy legs and it wouldn't matter. The more I look at her, the more I feel she is someone I could love.

I glance out the window at Jolene hunched over her Big Gulp of wine. Let her wait.

I explain my problem to the woman. She leans over the display case, listening intently. Her face shows concern. She cares. I hesitate when she asks to see the wound. We've only just met. Shyly, I unfasten my belt. Then my jeans. My face is hot with modesty. I squint to look out the shop window, glad that Jolene is nowhere to be seen.

The woman kneels to inspect the wound. She frowns. Whips her head around in the direction of the stockroom. “Ben?”

A guy with a beard emerges. I pull up my pants. The woman describes my wound in terrifying detail. She twists the ring on her ring finger. Ben smooths his crop of facial hair. I see his matching ring.

“It's a pimple, probably,” I say, and turn toward the door. “Sometimes I get ingrown pubes too.”

I'm desperate to extricate myself from the shop, but Ben blocks my way. He jabbers on about his Ayurvedic medicine. He shows me the syllabi for the class he's taking. He is so earnest, so sincere, and pushy. I relent. I drop my pants again. The shop goes deathly quiet. Over my shoulder, I see Ben stroking his face farm. He looks up and down my exposed ass, seemingly in contemplation of something bleak. His wife leans closer, as if she is savoring my wound's rank bloom.

From faraway I hear laughter. Jolene is at the window with her phone pointed at me.

"You should see a doctor," Ben says.

His wife agrees.

But in the meantime, he says, they have something that will help. Maybe. He shows me an expensive salve on a shelf next to beard oil and mustache wax. I'm skeptical, of course, but he assures me it is organic, fair-trade, locally sourced, and a string of other descriptors that only make me feel foolish for being poor and sick. For being desperate and unwell around this happy, healthy couple. I guess a part of me wants what they have, even a token, and I'm afraid to go back to Jolene empty-handed, so I purchase the jelly with most of my remaining cash.

Jolene makes a few lame jokes at my expense. Infantile stuff. Pathetic, really. Jabs that wouldn't sting at all if I didn't feel so exposed. My failures with women laid as bare as my wounded ass.

Jolene doesn't dwell on my shame though. She's too excited about having found the movie set of *VILLAINS*. I follow her to the parking lot of a Chinese restaurant where, sure enough, a big budget film shoot is in progress. We gawk from behind a steel barricade. But the longer we stand, the more I can sense Jolene's mood crash.

"We're so close," she says.

Across the street, at the craft service table, the film crew eats hummus.

“I thought being this close would make it feel more real.” Jolene sits down on the sidewalk next to Flaubert and lets the dog lick her face. She reaches into her purse and pours more white wine into the Big Gulp.

Seeing Jolene sulk reminds me of my mom. How she’d mope around the apartment, wanting to talk about another dirtbag who’d stopped calling, about the money he owed her, about his dog-dick promises. I’d try to ignore her, try to tell her without words that my morning cartoons were important to me, that I was only five, seven, ten years old. But she had no boundaries. “Why doesn’t he call?” she’d cry from her chair by the phone. “Scooch over,” she’d say, and nuzzle up to me on the couch, resting her head in my lap. “You know I love you more than anything in the whole world, right?” she’d say. I’d stroke my mom’s hair, and offer love advice I’d learned from rom-coms.

In these situations, part of me felt lucky. Very adult. Like a child prodigy, wise beyond my years. Trusted by my mother to hold forth on complicated adult subjects.

Then again, another part of me never needed to know that the guy who worked at the liquor store where we bought Skittles gave her herpes.

Damnit, I’m sick of being belittled, sick of being stuck in this sick cycle that disconnects me from my own needs. I need to escape my family once and for all. I need to ditch Jolene.

Without saying a word to her, I walk across the street, and into the Chinatown library.

I’m at ease among the smell of old books and unwashed crotches. A few wise men nap in armchairs. One snores with a sports magazine splayed over his nose.

I grope the bathroom wall for a light switch. A motion sensor trips and the light turns on, showing a small room with

a single toilet. I drop the pills I stole from FF on the diaper changing table and lay a dollar bill on top. I crush the pills into powder. Use my debit card to chop lines. The bathroom light clicks off. The room is totally dark. I windmill my arms. The motion sensor trips. On come the lights. I roll the dollar into a tooter. Inhale the dust of the pills like I'm vacuuming up the high desert, the coastline beaches, the alluvial gold in the mountain streams of California.

Even with the pills, my ass aches as I apply the jelly. Once I'm good and lubed, of course, I need to use the toilet. I'm hovering above the bowl when the bathroom lights click off again. I swing my arms. The lights won't turn on. I fumble for my phone. Greasy fingers slip across the screen. Instagram opens. Jolene's account.

Today she's posted photos of my futon, her lengua tacos, and my ass. The newest post is of Flaubert in the library parking lot, posed beside the Big Gulp.

The caption below the photo reads: *Relationship Status: in a #crushationship.*

I nearly drop the phone in the toilet. I read the word again—*crushationship*—and feel it squeeze. A hug. Like I'm being held against her heart.

Someone knocks on the door.

Is it the pills I'm feeling? Or is a *crushationship* what I want from Jolene? My aunt Jolene? My sister Jolene? Teenager Jolene?

The knocking gets louder.

"No," I say. But in the bathroom, in the dark, I had hoped my voice would resonate with more conviction.

Drunkness rides me, a dumb weight on my back as we walk a desolate stretch of Sunset Boulevard.

Flaubert sniffs a shattered bottle of Sauza.

“Boulevard of broken dreams,” I say.

“That’s Hollywood Boulevard,” Jolene says.

Nearby, on Echo Park Lake, the lotus are blossoming, but we bypass the flowers for a liquor store. Sip in shifts from a bottle of Bling-Bling Blue Raspberry wine. Shortcut up a steep residential street toward Dodger Stadium.

In the front yards of the renovated homes, the citrus trees are full of oranges, lemons, and pomelos. Young palm trees shoot from cracks in the concrete. A prog rock band is practicing in a garage. Guitars and synthesizers noodling.

Jolene picks a tangerine and hands me the ripe fruit. Again she jumps up. Plucks.

“They’re organic,” she says.

She peels the ripe fruit. Holds out a wedge for Flaubert. He sniffs. She wipes the rope of drool that swings from his jowls. “He needs water.”

At a drinking fountain in the park, Jolene cups water in her hands, but Flaubert will only lick what falls through her fingers. Dumb dog. She’s still mothering him when I walk away to the bathroom and set up shop in a stall with no door.

I re-anoint the wound. Through the ventilation ducts that connect the two bathrooms, I hear Jolene coax Flaubert. Hear her fumble with her belt. She tells the dog he is a “good boy.” I don’t want to eavesdrop. I’m not a perv. But I can’t shut out the tinkle of water on water as she pees.

I dry my hands on my jeans. Jolene is reclining on a grassy slope and letting Flaubert lick her face. It's gross. Soon the dog gets bored and wanders off to accost a young couple with a rat terrier. I lay down beside Jolene and she hands me the Bling-Bling wine. Blades of grass bend beneath us but don't break. The sky is changing colors and the sun has dipped behind the walls of the canyon. The steep sides separating us from the city are actually fault lines, the site of some tectonic trauma.

Jolene lays on her stomach. I roll over to do the same and my t-shirt rides up to expose my love handle's smooth pink scar. She pokes me there, where my kidney was, and her finger is warm. She draws it down the incision. Her expression is serious, almost sad. Like she mourns the loss.

Letting her touch me like this feels vulnerable. Like she's prepping to cut me. But underneath, some part of me wants her to reopen the wound, reach into its emptiness and feel that inside we are selfsame, that she shouldn't be touching me like this, that touching like this is reserved for people in love. I roll away, out of reach, and drink from the Bling-Bling, hoping it will... I don't know what.

A cold desert wind whips down the canyon, carrying with it the hostile noises of the baseball stadium, its organ and the animal noises of the crowd.

Finally, tentatively, I say, "The sunset makes me think of this one-armed kid I knew in elementary school who—"

"Why'd he only have one arm?" she says.

"I think a dirt bike accident with his dad, but I don't \_\_\_"

"I'll bet you were a cute kid."

Her face is splattered with new freckles. I wonder if she has sun poisoning.

"Anyways, I used to shoot marbles with this kid, and his marbles were the same color as the sky right now. All purple. Like bruises. He called them 'naked ladies.'"

Jolene scooches close. Hugs me. Her face presses against my sunburned neck. Not kissing. Just hugging. Crushing.

“It’s okay,” I say, and smooth her hair. It smells like hot sauce.

I’m annoyed at Jolene’s affection. Annoyed at needing to resort to the old tricks I used to comfort my mom. But at the same time, it feels right. Totally genuine. And I’m relieved Jolene is finally being real, out of costume, showing me her bruises. Now, I hope, we will finally be able to talk honestly about the trauma we share, the cycle we are caught in, and how it’s being replayed in our crushationship.

My fingers get stuck in her hair. This is the right moment to talk. But I worry that if we do, the two of us might never share another moment like this.

Alcohol and sugar decaying on our breath, our lips touch.

She pulls away. Retreats behind a look of indifference. She turns her attention in the direction of the stadium, the obscene noise that signals a win, while I catch my breath and recover from the kiss. If that’s what it was.

Up until this point, I have only witnessed Jolene oscillate, frictionless, between the poles of boredom and wildness, so this is a new look of composure.

She unstraddles me and smooths her hair, soberly, as though the curls can be solved.

“I’m sorry,” I say. Although I don’t know why I’m apologizing. I didn’t kiss her.

“Let’s go,” she says.

She stands and walks up the hill, killing the last of the Bling-Bling.

Night comes on while we walk along the fault lines, out of the canyon, and join up with a mass of Dodger fans exiting the stadium. The ground seems to vibrate under my feet. A



seismic shift has occurred between us. Jolene staggers through the crowd and it is finally, undeniably, apparent that we are wasted. Flaubert is tired too, and he drags his toenails. I sling an arm around Jolene to prop her up. I feel her stiffen.

The night has cooled considerably, as it does in Los Angeles. White jasmine flowers yawn open and perfume the air. If they weren't so little, I would pick a flower and offer it to Jolene, as a way to start the conversation we need to have. Our relationship. Its boundaries. But that seems weird and inappropriate.

Flaubert sniffs the flowers. Sits. *Plop*.

I tug his leash. "Let's go."

He's stubborn.

"He's pooped," Jolene says, standing on the sidewalk, staggering in the headlights of passing cars. "You should carry him."

"He's lazy," I say. "You can't coddle him."

I jerk the leash. Drag him for a few feet over the concrete, but he digs in, and I worry about tearing his soft paw pads.

The dog and I both groan when I lift. "I can't carry him all the way."

Jolene takes his hind legs. "Better?"

And it sort of is, but most of the weight is in the dog's massive head, the size of an obese toddler's. With his flat face and semi-soulful eyes, the dog even looks like a baby. An ugly one. Gassy, too. I suppose this appeals, on a hormonal level, to childless couples like my landlords.

Together Jolene and I carry the sleeping dog through the streets of Northeast Los Angeles, over the bridge, past a woman steadying the stack of blankets in her shopping cart, past the Home Depot and the all-night IHOP, past the graveyard shift workers at the bus stop, past the bouncer on his bar stool outside Footsie's, past the donut shop window display where the maple bars, powdered cakes and churros are

crusty and flaking, inherited from this morning, which may as well be a lifetime ago. So much is different since Jolene and I struck out on this walk. And yet, here we are returning to where we began, our circuitous route home almost complete.

“So,” I say. “About this crush-tationship.”

Jolene laughs.

I laugh too. Like I’m in on the joke.

“I guess I’m into heavy breathers.” She slaps Flaubert’s ass.

The dog. Of course, the dog. Her post was a picture of the dog. This stupid snoring dog in my arms.

*Wooosh.* A fast food soda cup detonates on the sidewalk. Laughter peels from a Honda. Jolene waves her middle finger in the air. Cola fizzes in the sidewalk cracks, and I can’t help but think of this morning, the way Jolene callously hopscotched atop the cracks. She will leave for college. She rejects me even now.

What about me is so hard to love? The question cycles through my head as we walk. We come to the traffic island, its inhabitants decamped, chased off by the sprinklers which Jolene now uses to wash soda off her boots. Together we walk up my street, up the garden path.

The lights are off in the main house. Flaubert’s owners are on another getaway to wine country. Or cheese country. Or entrée country. I open the gate and lay him in his dog house. I scoop food into his dish. The tin water bowl reflects the moon. The moonlight touches everything here: the house perched on flagstones, the rusty cafe table where I sit most mornings and read, the sage and salvia, weeds and wildflowers, the palm fronds half concealing the neighbors and half not, even the two washed out stars—maybe planets—hung on the fence beside the moon, irreligious as the damp drizzling of Jolene urinating in the lavender. All of it contributing to the sadness of the hour, the feeling of losing, and love.

Jolene seems to want an audience, squatting in the moonlight, unabashed of the neighbors. She laughs idiotically

when she falls in the shrubs. She's drunk. She is so drunk. I am too, I suppose. For her, though, drunkenness has been a thing to exit and enter according to cue, so I'm suspicious of this new scene with Jolene, helpless and bare-assed under the moon, so out of control.

Jolene says, "Help me up." So I try. But she springs on me with sudden life. Sends me toppling backward. Together, we land on my ass. To my relief, the wound feels dull, buried almost.

Seizing the moment, Jolene mounts my chest, pins me, and from this vantage, under these influences, splinters of lavender and moonlight in her hair, she has the half-animal look of some goddess found on a wine label at the supermarket. I try to fight her off, ineffectually, feeling childish and surprised by the exhausting effect of the pills, if that's what it is.

"What are you going to do, macho man?" Jolene slaps the dirt next to my head. "1..."

She lifts the hand with all the romance of a wrestling referee. She holds it there, in the night sky, like a new constellation. In the eternity between the 1 and 2 count, I can't help but think of FF. Where is he right now? Alone. In his sad apartment, probably mixing a protein shake and visualizing his big match tomorrow. Why do I want him here now? To save me? To stop me?

"2 ..." Now is the time to kick out. Her hand descends.

But when her hand fails to touch earth, when I catch it, she looks shook. At least I imagine. It's very dark. She wants to break my grip, and I want to release her hand, but also I don't want to let go. I can't let her leave, not again. Not without showing her that I am lovable, crushable even.

I pull her to me. At the instant our lips touch, I know I've fucked up.

I've made a terrible mistake. *I'm sorry*, I practice saying in my head, as her lips begin to pronounce themselves

against mine, her tongue rearing up, priapic, desperate to communicate something I can't understand.

Which is to say: she's a bad kisser.

I remember kissing my mom with tongue. As a child. Eating spaghetti in my underwear, I was imitating lovers on television. Asking for a kiss. Then forcing my noodles into her mouth. She threw me from the couch.

"Kissing like that is for people in love," she said.

"I love you," I said.

I push Jolene off. Standing now, I tower over her. She smiles in a way that I guess she thinks is seductive. I want to kick her. She starts to take off her shirt.

"Don't," I say. "You're my mom's sister."

The word *sister* lands in the space between us, significant and suggestive, and I leave it there, storm into the house, head for the bathroom.

I'm proud of myself, truth be told, as I stand at the sink and splash water over my face in an effort to sober up. I cup water in my hands, and think of Jolene doing the same for the dog.

When I burst out of the bathroom, erection tucked and hidden in the waistband of my jeans, I'm determined to put an end to this loser's game of grab-ass. She can have the futon and I'll blow up the air mattress. The night will be as innocent as a slumber party. Once the lights are out, maybe we can have an honest heart-to-heart about our family's history and my worst fears about my father, and hers.

This is before I find her on the futon, topless.

My conversion is immediate, my love lit by a bare breasted light so white I fear I might blackout. I fall at her feet ready to confess, under the sigil of her nudity, all the awful feelings of my love.

"Don't you want to kiss me?" she says.

“No,” I say.

I can't look at her. Instead, I pick at the garden dirt and frayed fabric around a tear in her jeans. My finger circles a cut on her knee and I want to press it like a button. As though, if pressed, a nurse might enter the room and check on my well-being. Or perhaps pressing this button, this abrasion, will open the deeper, truer trauma we are about to perform.

Jolene takes my hand and together we unbutton her jeans. I peel the stretch denim down her thighs and expose the inconsolable whiteness. Of white noise and wedding dresses and everything pure enough to snort. Milk. I strip her jeans down to her ankles. The cuffs catch on her socks. I tug. She falls off the futon, onto the floor. Legs open in a *V*, spread to the home which is not home, the elemental burning home.

She mumbles something, like “Nothing to lose,” or “Born to lose,” or “Lose lose,” and puts her mouth on mine with unloving directness.

On my knees, on the polished concrete floor, in the rented room, amid the mess of my possessions, my life, everything is her. I would burn it all for this drunken negotiation of how she will share herself with me, dictate the terms, moving my hand to her breast, so soft I worry it may break. My concern goes deeper still, as does my hand, and I find myself agonizing about her other sexual experiences. Her father, yes. But mostly other boys. Boys her own age, which in this moment seems like my age too. The noises that escape Jolene, pressed against me, seem calculated for the benefit of these boys. Ego boosting porno flick noises. Her moans advertise drunkenness, and welcome like a *Sorry, We're Open* sign in a shop window, enunciated in a way that invites questions about her viewing habits and my epistemological beliefs in truth. I wonder what happens afterward with the boys. I try not to wonder about her father.

She does that spastic thing with her tongue again and I nearly spit it out onto the floor. She directs my hand, humps against it, and I get annoyed.

I want to show her my love happens spontaneously and unscripted, not in predetermined positions like some sex video. I want to show her that I'm not one of those boys, that I am sensitive to the touch, sincere in my love. I want to ask her if it feels good, the love. If I make her feel good and loved. But also explain to her, like an adult, all the reasons this should not feel good. To save her from my love. I worry that if I don't act brave, don't show her what my love has to offer, she'll get bored. Perhaps because I'm getting bored.

And then I'm no longer inside myself. The room is very hot. And I'm still not inside of her. And then I am, one finger. But it's not enough, not even close.

But it could be, or should be. If I were truly outside myself and audience to myself, if I could see myself, if I were standing behind myself jerking off to my reflection in the TV, or sitting on the floor fingering myself, I would not be unzipping my jeans, rolling on a condom. I would not ignore the fact that Jolene has stopped making noises. That she stares at the ceiling.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she says.

“What is it?”

“Nothing, you can keep going.”

On the train to Orange County, I wonder about our future, if I can survive in New York as a tag-along boyfriend. All morning Jolene has been quiet and hungover and I've been picturing myself walking, rain-soaked, through the city streets, wearing a parka and Woody Allen eyeglasses, schlepping groceries back to the apartment where she studies, a one-bedroom nest where our love steadily grows.

She looks over her phone at me. She blinks. Slumps in her seat. "I don't remember anything after Chinatown."

A lump lodges in my throat, approximately the size and shape of my heart. How could she forget last night?

"Sorry I was so wasted," she says. "I don't usually let myself go there."

"Where?"

"You know. Blacked out."

The pause makes me wonder if she's faking. But somehow, this feels like a question I'm not allowed to ask. Maybe she's ashamed. Of herself. Of me. Of what we did. I should be ashamed, too. I keep forgetting. She's only seventeen. Just a kid.

She rests her head on my shoulder. It's heavy as a death. She scrolls through her phone. "I didn't talk about New York all night, did I?"

My reflection in the window glass is dull, smeared by hands. Jolene's too. Fingerprints all over us. Outside, a blurred landscape of industrial tracts. Parking lots and square block buildings. A mound of dirt, tarp blown loose to reveal its hump.

Jolene nestles into me. "I'm still so tired."

"Me too."

FF isn't there to greet us at the train station, so I text him. He says it's not a far walk to the wrestling venue, an old movie theatre, but by the time we arrive the matches are already underway. The marquee advertises tonight's main event in big block letters: *CALIFORNIA KID vs. FREEDOM FIGHTER*. The line below is for tomorrow's church service: *DISCIPLES OF CHRIS*.

Jolene is happy about the typo. I should be happy seeing FF's name on the signage. *FREEDOM FIGHTER*, the nickname I gave him, bordered in bulbs of white light. But instead, a meanness rises in me. It's glaringly clear how FF's success highlights my failure. He's on the cusp of his life goal, but after giving up my dream of writing for wrestling, I don't know what my goal is.

Wrestling a legend like The California Kid will be FF's ticket to the big show, cable television, a fat contract. Dumbstruck, I stare at The Kid's name on the marquee.

As a boy, I watched The Kid feud with the Fabulous Freebirds on our big screen TV. A gift from my mom's best friend's husband. He appeared at our door late one night, the TV box in his arms. I kneeled beside him while he hooked it up. I lay on the carpet in my pajamas, close to the screen as I could get, to see The Kid. He took on three men that night, while my mom and her best friend's husband sat at the kitchen table talking. Chairs scuffed the floor. The husband followed my mom to her room. The Kid really gave it to the Freebirds that night.

Jolene scrunches her hair for the boy at the box office window. FF left us tickets. She hands me mine, torn. I feel jealous. Not of the high school boy in the booth, but of Jolene, who has victimhood to define her. Whatever Jolene goes on to do, however she decides to fuck up her life, it will, in one way or another, be about the abuse. And she will be blameless. She will always be the victim. She will always be who the abuse



requires her to be. Like my mom. At least that's what I've told myself all these years—that it wasn't truly my mom saying, “You're a fuck up, just like me.”

But as Jolene confidently guides me into the lobby, along the psychedelic carpet, past the concession line of middle-aged men who leer, down the aisle, into the arena, to our seats in the front row, it occurs to me: she's not like my mom. Or me. Jolene is not a fuck-up. This girl is going to make something of herself. And me expecting her to fail, believing that she's a fuck-up too, is me trying to resuscitate my mom.

I'm dizzy as we follow the spiral carpet to our seats in the first row. In front of us, the ring's canvas is a flat grey plane. *Stomp* go the green and red boots of a masked luchador who waves a Mexican flag. The audience cheers. Then boos his opponent, a race-baiting anti-immigrant who threatens the crowd with deportation.

Gickle is at the ringside announcer's table. He's seated next to a guy with a beard who does tech support. The unsophisticated storyline in the ring has Gickle's stamp all over it. He never even bothered to read my edits to *Wrestling With Blood*. The years I spent writing the first draft were the surest I've ever been of who I am and what I wanted. But he said the script was too weird, that it wouldn't get over with fans, and that his audience didn't want an epic, five-year melodrama about Oedipal anxiety. He offered me a job doing tech support for the event's livestream. Sure, I could have used the cash. But I was hurt. I haven't allowed myself to want anything since. Until now. Until Jolene.

“Want snacks?” she says.

“Beer me,” I say, forgetting she can't. Reminded again she's just a kid.

Finger down throat, she gags.

It's the first buzz I've seen her pass up, and it makes me remember how drunk she was last night. She sways up the aisle to the concession stand and I watch men's heads swivel.

I search her purse. Cellphone, celebrity perfume, diet pills, and a mini wine bottle. I laugh when I imagine what it would feel like to protect Jolene. I've been lying to myself.

I twist the cap on the mini bottle of pinot.

The ring announcer says, "BATTLE ROYALE!" And one by one, men race toward the ring: nightclub bouncers, national guardsmen, cellphone salesmen.

Jolene returns with gummy worms. A soda. Somehow no longer sick, she pours the pinot into the soda. I ask where she learned the recipe.

"Last summer," she says. "Studying in Barcelona."

The cola disguises the sour wine, but the concoction and the far-flung city it comes from is another bitter reminder of how large her world is, how different from mine. She laughs at the men in the ring who job their way through botched maneuvers not covered by HMO plans. She laughs at their ham-fisted theatrics and everyman bodies sausaged into costumes outlining average Joe genitalia.

I say, "Their costumes reveal complex inner lives."

She says, "They're playing out childhood fantasies."

I laugh, or try to. I suck down cola-wine. Part of me, a bigger part than I want to admit, wishes I had these guys' courage.

The last man in the ring whips his long, ladylike hair in victory. If I had his bravery, this Guitar Center employee, I would tell Jolene the truth. That I have always suspected the reason my mom wouldn't talk about my father, is because he was her father too. Which would make Jolene my sister. I'm in love with my sister. I'm going to tell her. Aren't I? I'm about to go to the concession stand for a beer, and tend to my ass, which has started to ache, when I hear FF's music.

He enters through the backstage curtain. There's the kick drum beat of Duran Duran's "Wild Boys." He walks to the ring with an animal sexuality, decorated by all the tattoos he's poached from *National Geographic*. His shoulders are smooth, newly waxed, and that recognition gives me an

embarrassing feeling of intimacy. *FREEDOM* is stenciled suggestively over the muscle of his butt.

Jolene stands on her chair and swings her sack of gummy worms. Chanting. “FF! FF! FF!”

The announcer says, “Free–dom Fight–errr!”

The lights go out. Cellphone screens flicker in the dark theatre. Spanish guitars strum “Hotel California” over the speakers.

“Boooooo!” Jolene spills gummy worms on my head.

A spotlight hits the backstage curtain, and three leggy blonde women emerge, carrying ragged bouquets of poppies. The orange flowers clash with the women’s red lipstick. They blow kisses to the crowd, who whistle when the one in the rear tugs down her mini skirt. For Jolene’s benefit, I make a revolted face, like the beautiful girls gross me out. I want to show her that I’m not that type of guy, that I don’t objectify women.

Behind the women stalks The California Kid. Spotlit and sashaying down the causeway to the ring, The Kid exudes braggadocio and basks in the enormity of the half-capacity crowd, receiving the smatter of applause with stadium pomp.

The ring announcer takes a big breath and says, “He is the Sensualist, the Essensualist, the Bigamist, the Biggermist, the Drive-By Amorist, the Sentimental Recidivist, the Postfeminist Gynecologist, the Sizemologist...”

Bulk undulates beneath The Kid’s golden robe. Embroidered on the robe’s back: the state flag of California with The Kid’s own face superimposed on the body of the grizzly.

“...Snoop Dogg’s Herbalist, L. Ron Hubbard’s Psychologist, Magic Johnson’s Antiretroviralist...”

FF paces inside the ring. Spots me in the front row and winks.

Jolene cries out, “We love you, FF!”

The exclamation makes me a child. The whole scenario—Jolene’s games; my best friend, godlike in the altar of the ring; seeing The Kid again, my childhood idol—flashes me into the past where I am stupid and vulnerable, still tethered to my mom’s whims, still eyeing the front door for her date to arrive, still watching her take off with a stranger, still sitting in front of the TV alone, stewing in the confusion of longing.

“...Silicon Valley’s Anesthesiologist, San Francisco’s Progressive Proctologist, the Golden Gate’s Locksmith, Wine Country’s Gastronomist, Surf City’s Hydrologist, the Nude Beach Sartorialist, West Hollywood’s Stylist, the City of Angel’s Evangelist, Tinseltown’s Metallurgist, the Rose Parade’s Florist, the Uncut Semiticist, the Sunshine Supremacist, the Land of Fruits and Nuts’ Nutritionist, THE CALI—FOR—NIA—KID.”

He stoops through the ropes, but his foot hooks, his braced knee wobbles. He plays off the misstep with a strut. Snatches the microphone away from the announcer. The audience’s cheers subside. The Kid smooths the wisps of his receding, beach-blond mane. A pause for gravitas.

“Listen up, all you California dreamers,” he says, and swivels his wide hips for the women, but also the men and boys. “I’m staying in the penthouse at the Hotel California. And when I’m done with this cocktail shrimp, I wanna see every mother and daughter in Orange County, between the ages of eighteen and eighty-eight, up in my room to celebrate.”

The Kid is not handsome. Everything about the man screams *expired*, left out in the sun to rot. Still, a part of me worries that Jolene will fall under the sway of his sexual charisma, sneak off to his suite, and cuck me. So why is it that I can’t help rooting for the old cockblocker? His bloated misogyny makes me sit up straight. It gives me permission not to care so much about Jolene.

The Kid drops the mic. *Thump*.

The three sexy valets drop to their knees and begin to untie The Kid’s robe, sash slung low over his junk.

Jolene stares, an untouchable confusion in her eyes.

One of the women takes the robe's sash in her teeth and simulates oral sex on The Kid. She bites until the silk knot slips. The Kid's hips gyrate. The robe falls open to expose his body's tan ruin.

Jolene flinches.

"You okay?" I ask.

But she doesn't acknowledge me, just eyes the old man's grotesque physique. I touch her shoulder. She shies away. My hand hangs in the air. And I see it for what it is. This hand. Its relationship to last night.

In my head, I argue my case. A toggle between self-righteousness and sympathy. There is annoyance too, but mostly guilt. Hadn't Jolene launched herself at me in the park? It's difficult to now know the details of that kiss, if that's what it was, so soft and out of focus. In any case, it was *she* who kissed *me* last night in the lavender, in the garden, in the moonlight. Hadn't she? When I came out of the toilet and found her topless on the futon, what did she say? "Don't you want to kiss me?" Like that? A question?

In the ring, FF and The Kid circle. FF is childlike in comparison, as though not quite fully formed. The Kid wiggles his meaty fingers. A challenge. A test of strength. The two men lock horns.

Last night, her words seemed an invitation. Now they sound like an indictment of my weakness. And she's so young. And was so drunk.

The Kid rewards FF's sportsmanship with a kick in the dick. FF cradles his testicles. The Kid celebrates, bobbing and weaving around the ring. The Kid chops FF across the chest. Chops again. And again. The blows sing, clear and credible. Reverberate to the crowd. Broken blood vessels erupt on FF's chest. But somehow he summons a punch that quakes The Kid's gut. The old man staggers. Answers with a chop. FF gives one of his own. *Chop*. The Kid. *Chop*. FF. *Chop*. Chop. Chop. Chop. A flurry. Two more.

Afterward, half naked on the futon, I asked if it was okay to hold her. “Yeah,” she said. But now this also seems coerced.

FF whips The Kid across the ring. On the rebound, he hits the big man with a dropkick. The Kid crashes to the canvas. The ring trembles. The shaky structure seems ready to collapse.

Jolene’s forehead scrunches. The look of worry reminds me of her face last night on the futon.

What other signals did I miss? What did I choose to ignore?

In the ring, FF lays in a heap.

“What happened?” I say, remembering where I am.

Jolene ignores me. Gnaws her thumbnail.

The Kid entwines his legs with FF’s in a complex knot. The torque puts pressure on the connective ligaments of FF’s knees. Or maybe his ankles. It’s difficult to tell why the move is painful, but FF suffers. That’s obvious.

“Want to quit?” the referee asks FF.

But if Jolene was too drunk to consent, what do words even matter?

Choke slam. Chicken wing. Bulldog. Backcracker. Brainbuster. Facebreaker. Apache cutter. Bear hug. Bell clap. Frog splash. Monkey flip. Pile driver. Belly-to-back piledriver. Argentine piledriver. Spike piledriver. Oriental spike. Arm twist ropewalk chop. Stump Puller. Figure Four Leglock. Scorpion Death Lock. Trailer Hitch. Death Valley Driver. DDT. STF. Pedigree. FU. Crotch claw. Barely Legal. Power bomb. Hell’s Gate. Atomic drop. F-5. Doomsday Device. Frankensteiner. Steiner Recliner. Bronco buster. Camel clutch. Cattle Mutilation. Texas cloverleaf. Lasso from El Paso. Cactus Clothesline. Electric chair. Gutwrench. Guillotine. The People’s Elbow. Famouser. Neckbreaker. Facebuster. Musclebuster. Gutbuster. Diamond Dust. Stone Cold Stunner. Big Boot. Leg Drop. Booty Bop. Mushroom Stomp. Shooting Star. Moonsault. Sunset Flip. Pepsi Plunge. Sharpshooter.

Rings of Saturn. Space Tornado. Polish Hammer. Inverted Swastika. Alabama slam. Hurricanrana. Hangman. Wings of Love. Go to Heaven. Crucifix. Pentagonam Choke. Razor's Edge. Suicide. Straight jacket. Surfboard.

And even if Jolene had given me consent, wasn't she too young to consent? And without consent, what had I done?

The Kid hoists FF in the air like a trophy, an heir; sweaty, amniotic, newly born to signify what—strength, virility, sweat, semen, spinal fluid, water, milk, lakes, rivers, the sea, softness, hardness, purpose, a statuesque and abstract state of masculine grandeur?

Last night, I assaulted my sister, my aunt, a girl. A girl I love.

FF slips away from The Kid, then hoists the huge man for a belly-to-back suplex. *Slam*. In a daze, The Kid crawls on hands and knees, an infant escaping an angry parent. He reaches into his tight's bulging crotch. A foreign object. But FF catches him. Stomps on The Kid's hand. Grinds his boot. The Kid howls. He drops the object, whatever it—

A roll of pennies. FF shows the crowd the coins.

On his knees, The Kid begs for mercy.

FF busts him in the head like a piñata. Pennies and blood, everywhere.

Here he is, Jolene. Our father, the source of all our trauma getting his due. That should be relief on her face, but it's definitely not.

The Kid is in shock too. A look of horror. Blood pours from his head wound. The old man lurches around the ring wearing a crimson mask. He falls through the ropes, out of the ring, and onto the theatre's surreal carpet. Flat on his back, he seems exhausted. Sucks air. Bleeding.

The referee threatens to disqualify FF.

The Kid sits up and primps his blood-slick hair. Blows kisses to the crowd. They love him. He demands kisses from his girls, who look revolted. This wasn't part of the agreement.

The Kid feigns hurt feelings. The crowd *boos*. The girls relent to the pressure and the old man gets what he wants.

The referee wags a finger in FF's face. The Kid conspires in the corner with his girls. FF pleads with the referee. Neither man notices The Kid sneak back into the ring. Neither man notices the shadow of The Kid raising the woman's stiletto heel like an axe. Under the bright lights it throbs, the red leather pump.

Jolene's kicks over our cocktail and it sloshes into my shoe. By the time I look up, she's hopped the guardrail and climbed into the ring, swinging the mini wine bottle, aiming for murder.



I watch the cops drive off. Sweating in the parking lot, I've imagined all kinds of aggravated assault charges against Jolene. So it's a relief to see she isn't in the cop car in handcuffs.

Gickle busts through the theatre's back door, flanked by wrestlers wearing regular clothes. The men bullshit, rough each other up, and reenact Jolene's bludgeoning of The Kid with her mini wine.

I flick my cigarette, ready to flag down Gickle for answers. Before I reach him, someone shouts my name.

And there she is, Jolene, riding FF piggyback.

"Did you see me?" she says, perched on FF like a cyst.

"Everybody saw you," he says. My friend has a happy pep in his step that I don't like.

"I didn't even hit him that hard," Jolene says. "He was faking."

"You hear the crowd pop?" FF says. "They loved it. Even Gickle."

"And I got p-p-p-p-paid." Jolene waves two twenty dollar bills in my face.

I grab the money. "Now you can pay rent."

She comes after the cash and I shove it in my pocket. She gropes my jeans.

"If we don't leave soon," I say, "we're gonna miss the last train."

"Umm, actually," she says, stepping away without the money, "I'm gonna, like, stay and hang with FF."

The pair share a look. The headlights of a car approach. The three of us move aside to let it pass, but the

statement remains, self-possessed, a new thing between us. The Sedan bottoms out as it leaves the lot. Metal scrapes concrete and reminds me of FF learning to ride his motorcycle.

The Honda-Davidson was his first big purchase once he started selling weight. He rode it straight up the freeway to my house, setting off car alarms with the chopped exhaust. The bike looked like it might explode between his legs, but instead it just hummed there, an untouchable energy. New veins pulsed in FF's arms. His denim vest, so blue it was electric. Nuts-to-butts, we rode to a bar that doesn't exist anymore. He drank Red Bull and told me about his other new purchases: the engagement ring and the gun. His plan was: ride to Vegas and surprise his ex-girlfriend. But he wasn't sure she would be alone. Thus, the gun. I said it was stupid. He said it was chivalry. Said he'd do himself after. Put a finger to his temple. Cocked his thumb. By the end of the night I thought I'd changed his mind, but the next morning, of course, he was gone. He came back two days later on the chopper, alone. Wouldn't talk about the desert. And part of me was glad. But as soon as he was out the door again, I checked all the Las Vegas crime blotters for homicides. Then I checked social media and found photos of the ex with her new dude and a newborn.

That was a few years ago. FF hasn't had a girlfriend since.

"We'll give you a lift to the train, brother."

*We'll*, he says. *Brother*, he says.

I scan the parking lot for Gickle's truck, but only a few undercard wrestlers remain, tailgating.

A mini-motorhome lurches through the parking lot. Side to side it sways in the ruts. The window rolls down.

"Got any aspirin?" The Kid says, holding a beer to the lump on his head.

"I've got something better," FF says.

On the motorhome's dashboard a plastic hula girl gyrates.

The Kid points at Jolene. “You lucky you cute.” His accent is like none and nowhere in California. He looks her up and down. She looks away. He turns his attention to me. Head to toe. “What’re y’all kids doing tonight?”

FF passes the pills to The Kid in a hand slap, a fist bump.

I imagine FF and Jolene bumping.

“You want to party?” I say to The Kid. “Give me a ride to LA.”

I didn’t know they still printed *Swank*, but here they are, on the floor with the soda straws and Slim Jim wrappers, everything trembling as the motorhome picks up speed.

“Thought she was your girl, huh?” The Kid says. His whole torso moves with his neck, like a Sasquatch. “You oughta wrestle.”

Does he see me, lanky and low on testosterone, in the passenger seat?

He flexes his large, undefined bicep into a lump and kisses it lovingly. “Wrestlers get all the ass they want.”

His cologne is somehow gaining strength.

The hula girl’s hips swing.

I pull a tallboy off the six-pack ring. On the floor beside the beer, the *Swank* centerfold presents herself, legs spread, like an escape route.

My knuckles close around the beer’s plastic rings. I imagine swinging the beers. Our heart-to-heart interrupted by the froth of Coors and blood as I break The Kid’s face.

“Relax.” He puts his huge hand on my thigh. “I like you, I’m gonna get you laid.”

“Toots,” he calls them, not prostitutes, which somehow makes our cruise seem, if not harmless, cartoonish. They are out on

the sidewalk, the women, and as we drive the strip, he tells me what he would do to each of them, especially what they won't enjoy. We pass a gas station and a group of three women who wear ass-asphyxiating miniskirts. We pass a Latina girl that he likes, standing under the lights of a Del Taco. We pass a woman in front of a motel with Jacuzzi rooms who "Walks like she has a yeast infection."

"I tell you what," he says. "I'll just watch."

He makes a U-turn and pulls up at the Del Taco to order the girl.

She can't be much older than Jolene, and as she approaches the motorhome, The Kid whispers in my ear what he would do to her, if he was me.

And then I'm sitting beside her on the bed in the back of the camper, among The Kid's laundry that smells like ear wax, and she is removing from her purse an accordion of condoms.

"*Me llamo, Leland,*" I say, my hand on my heart.

"Khloe," she says.

I'm disappointed by the fake name. Maybe other guys encourage it, but I want to know what's underneath.

I ask if Khloe wants a drink. "*¿Tienes bebes?*"

She says, "Babies?"

"*Si,*" I say. "*¿Bebes?*"

I hold up the beers.

"*Tomas,*" she says, laughing.

We both laugh at my mistake. The absurd idea of us having a baby together. But for a moment I think maybe the idea isn't even so bad. Maybe a baby would solve all my problems, give us both something more.

The Kid laughs too as he lumbers into the RV's cabin and sits across from us at the banquet table. The two of them share the joke at my expense.

“Baby I have,” she says. “*No quiero mas.*”

She doesn't look old enough to have a child, and suddenly I feel protective, imagining a little girl. How old is she? Who is watching her? And the father?

“*¡Trabajas, trabajas!*” The Kid says. “Jesusfuck, I'm not paying for your telenovela.” He unzips his fly. Tugs his cock. “*Chupa la verga.*”

Khloe's smile vanishes. Immediately she goes to work, handling me with grim professionalism. Across the camper, The Kid tries to make eye contact. I can't stand to look at him, but also part of me wants to make him proud, so I stare at the back of Khloe's head as she labors to prevent the complete retreat of my penis. Her hair clip is a palm tree, but the shape could just as easily be a toilet scrubber. And all the palm trees in Los Angeles might be toilet brushes scouring the sky. Scratching at the shit bits clinging to the bowl of heaven. And the girl continues to suck in vain, and I think of Jolene vomiting into my toilet. Now it seems like a happy memory, lying beside her on the bathroom tile. And it occurs to me that it felt good because it felt like caring for my mom, and that I always felt best when I was a good son.

With acrylic nails, Khloe jerks me out of the reminiscence, back into the motorhome. She's annoyed, I can tell. I don't want her to be annoyed. I want to spontaneously fulfill my end of the job, get her paid, and get her home to care for her baby. But also I want her to care for me. And no one ever will. Not like my mom.

I start crying.

Khloe stops.

The Kid stops too, reluctantly.

I expect them both to be angry. But instead they're consoling, if a little dismissive. They seem to remember, or so I imagine, the pain of being in love.

I open the last beer in the front seat of the motorhome, while in the rear Khloe and The Kid grunge fuck. I crush OCs on the

dashboard, toot the dust with Jolene's twenty-dollar bill, and watch the hula girl's hips grind.

Days later I get a call from a hospital that needs "healthy normal" test subjects for a new study that pays twenty thousand dollars. I agree, of course. Even after they tell me the test entails stopping my heart for three minutes. I worry that my ass wound will affect my eligibility, so I don't tell them that, for instance, I lay face-down on the futon most days, drinking to keep away the ache.

Monday morning a Town Car arrives to pick me up.

"You okay, bro?" the driver says.

"I'm fine," I say, with my face slumped against the cool leather seat cushion. But I don't feel fine. My heart throbs in my ass.

When we stop, the driver peels me off the upholstery.

"I'm fine," I assure the hospital staff as they lay me on a gurney. "Fine," I say, relenting as they wheel me into the emergency room.

I wake not in the hospital but on a lawn. The grass wet, the neighborhood smeared in a morning marine layer of fog that blurs the squat sun-weathered homes on the street. A broken sprinkler bubbles. Its runoff floods a sidewalk etched with anarchy symbols, equality symbols, and a shapely derrière exploding with the words: *BUTTS IN YOUR ASSES*.

It's then that I recognize I'm in the yard of FF's childhood home. The front door is ajar. Behind the bug screen is a woman's silhouette. She walks outside, as though she's been waiting, and steps barefoot on the welcome mat. Moving with her in a voluptuous wash across the lawn, her nightgown clings like water, sweeping her toes, whose manicured gloss float atop the groomed grass, and bring to mind the slim and luminous bodies of grunion, which spawn like schools of knives, cutting up the California coast and onto the beach, to fuck under the moon, in the killing sand.

I say, "I'm Leland."

I stand to meet FF's mother for the first time. I recognize her from the shrines kept in the home, the pictures in brass frames. "Rosa," his father would burble in the backyard, into Modelos. *Rosa* in faded blue ink, FF's first tattoo.

Now she is here, Rosa in the flesh.

"OW," I say.

She pinches my ass. Holds her fingers like she's got a crumb.

I smile, polite. I feel obligated to treat her with the deference shown to a friend's parent, though our ages can't be too far apart.

Rosa tackles me and knocks us both to the lawn. My ass breaks our fall, but this time I don't cry out. Somehow it feels as if the ass is no longer a part of me, no longer protrudes from my body in two cheeks, and is instead a hole, like a storm drain, down which I might fall into the sea.

Rosa mounts me. Her hands pin my shoulders to the lawn. My hand takes a stab into her cleavage, its unfathomable depth, to pull a heavy breast free from the gown's décolletage. Without tact, I take the breast into my mouth. Eyes shut, I can sense the shadow of FF's father loom over us.

Modelo in hand, even at this early hour, Dave's guayabera is unbuttoned to his navel. From this vantage, on the lawn, I look up his shorts at legendary testicles. The breast falls from my mouth and I brace for the kick I'm sure is coming.

Instead, Dave falls to his knees beside me and his wife. Rosa offers him a mollifying kiss, but he brushes her aside and leans forward to thrust his mouth on mine. The stubble of his beard grinds my lips as we kiss. His strong tongue carries flavors, beer, cigarettes. I spit up. He pulls away and wipes his chops with a suntanned hand. *Whack*. He slaps his wife's ass, forcefully but also with affection. He stands up and wobbles to his truck. The pick-up's bed is filled with the lawn mowers,

leaf blowers and weed whackers of his trade, and as he speeds into the distance of the residential street, he leaves in his wake a feathery tail of grass clippings.

When he's gone, Rosa takes my hand and leads me across the lawn, up the front steps of the house, then through the screen door. On the other side of the door, I'm shocked to see the interior of my own apartment.

She lays in repose on the futon. From across the room, I watch her one exposed breast rise and fall with each breath. I join her at the edge of the futon. She drops the gown's spaghetti straps, presenting me with the second breast.

I recoil, confronted by the sickly counterpart, unable to hide my unease at the asymmetry. The right breast is round and healthy; the left shrunken, tubular, evincing mortality.

Rosa looks heartbroken by my reaction, and I am too.

Considering the two fraternal breasts, I begin to see my life not as it is but as it could be: free from the limitations of symmetry. Free from the circle's false promise of the infinite. A life lived free from the stress of incestuous sameness. Would it have more value?

The cycle of my thoughts is broken when Rosa lifts the gown and exposes herself in more depth. The hair seems possessed of its own articulated life and like an anemone it withdraws from my touch. A deep pleasure escapes Rosa's mouth as my finger enters, sinking. I consider the notion that I ought to moan too, in solidarity. But my fingers have come up against an obstruction. The object, whatever it is, presses forward. I push against it, but sense there is no stopping its inevitability. As it comes closer, surfacing, I feel the hair, the lumps and divots of a crowning skull. Then I know the blockage is FF.

I palm his head. Retard his progress. With effort I begin to force him back past the breach. His mother moans. Pain or pleasure, I can't tell. In the moment, I am stronger than my friend. I follow him deeper. And after strains, he is gone.



I'm in a hospital bed, hooked up to tubes and hoses that snake from embarrassing orifices.

"You've been asleep," the nurse says.

He uses words like *septic shock* and *induced coma*.

But he's wrong.

I was dead.

And now I'm not. Days later, how many I don't know, when they've got me up and pushing a walker, I stand at the window of my hospital room counting the ribs of the coast. Between the tit of Malibu and the chode of San Pedro, I watch the planes depart from LAX and fly off my map. Every evening the sun sets again, in a fever. Then the oil derricks light up and wink, bloody in the septic anus of night. And the thing that confuses me the most is why I didn't see my mom. Why didn't she come find me when I was dead?

It's only in the visitor's lounge, where I drink tea and read gossip magazines, when I realize my mom hadn't sought me out in death because she wanted me to live. She wanted me alive to grieve her every day of my life.

Well, forget it.

I think of Rosa. My feelings for her linger. When I return to her memory, it gives me solace and reminds me that I'm not so unlovable. That I'm not so alone. That I might make a happy life for myself outside my incestuous family. It's usually then that I think of Jolene. As my wound heals, she starts to seem like something dreamed, or dead too. Other times, in the bathroom, I fantasize her and Rosa into a threesome. My thoughts are broken by the intrusion of nurses. Sometimes the nurses bring drugs, but never the good kind, which is fine.

I spend days looking out the hospital's high-rise windows at the Pacific. Did it care that it was alone, stuck on the Westside of Los Angeles? Did it care who it touched? Or what went on under its surface, secret, salty, and corrupt?

Now that I've died, I see with clarity that I've treated my life as an afterthought. Out of guilt I've abused myself,

sold my body little by little, to pay into my mother's wound. Bottomless. Devoured. I'll never get loaded enough to fill the wound. Likewise, I'll never get high enough to escape it.

To truly heal, I need to cut off my family.

The day I'm released, an orderly rolls me through the hospital in a wheelchair. We pass the pharmacy, the cafeteria, the prosthetics shop, the wig shop, and all the while he scrolls a dating app on his phone. Talks big about the weekend rendezvous he has lined up with three different girls.

I say, "I recently got out of a relationship."

He says, "It's rough out there, my man."

He describes the tribulations of his love life, the sinking feelings, the total rejection, the bewilderment of being ghosted and left to wonder if you were too complimentary, too aggressive, not aggressive enough, wondering at what point your date decided you were ugly as butt.

He wheels me into the lobby where sunlight drenches the leaves of potted trees. The dating scene can't be as bad as he describes, not compared to what I've survived. He pushes me through the automatic doors, into a salt breeze that blows off the infinite expanse of the Pacific. My wound is healed. I hop out of the wheelchair and fist bump my orderly goodbye.

It's been days since I've turned on my phone. There are texts and double-digit voicemails from FF, which I ignore. He was my family, as much as any of them, and after my brush with death, I know I need to cut him off too.

"Wait." The orderly emerges from the hospital's sliding doors. He holds up his phone. "What do you think about her?"

"She's perfect," I say. "Beautiful." I don't point out the masculine name tattooed in script on her breast, or the baby crib reflected in the mirror.

We bump fists again and I start off in the direction of the beach. Ahead of me, the excitement of the Santa Monica

Pier, its Ferris wheel and roller coaster that jut into the ocean.  
The sun is out and vitamin D soaks into my bones.

A new text from FF pops up on my phone.

*Where r you? She's dying.*

Across the city, in another hospital, in an elevator going backward, I rise away from myself and my future, with the disorienting feeling of being pulled from the world of the present and dragged into the gravity of the past. This is the hospital of human research experiments. The same hospital where my mom came for psych ward stays and electroshock therapy.

The elevator doors open like a curtain to reveal the Intensive Care waiting room and FF sitting alone, head in hands. It reminds me of how I prevented his delivery into the world, head in hand, and forced him back up the birth canal. Makes me wonder whether we have been doing this to each other for years. Whether this is what old friends do: thwart rebirth.

FF looks up. My feet feel instantly unsteady. He sweeps a magazine off the chair beside him, onto the floor. *Flop.*

My impulse is to press the elevator button to a lower floor. Instead I pass through the doors, sensing again that I am dying.

At FF's feet, the glossy pages of the magazine open to expose a broken celebrity marriage. I look from the divorce into his sleepless eyes.

Some part of me likes seeing my friend, my drug-dealer, this thin, this pitiful.

"She needs a kidney," he says.

It confirms what I already know. That what Jolene needs, I can't give her.

"You gotta call the Armenians," he says.

I sit beside him. We stare at a painting on the opposite wall. A high desert landscape, arid and silent. I stand up and

walk across the room, as if the fact that the painting hangs crooked is my fault. I straighten the painting. It's still aslant. The indifference of the desert is something to admire.

FF confesses to me. Recounts the details. His re-up. His bad feeling. Driving to my apartment after the buy to get Jolene's luggage. The bump he cut for her off the new brick. Her seizures. Convulsing on my kitchen floor. The emergency room. Her blood work that came back showing PCP, borax, and livestock de-wormer.

FF knew his plug, Angel, was stepping on his drugs. I told him. Angel was cutting FF's product within an inch of its life. Even if Orange County didn't notice, FF should have.

"Angel's a dead man," FF says.

He sounds like his wrestling character.

But I've stopped doubting his capacity for violence and stupidity.

I pace around the waiting room. The other art on the walls depicts saddle-back mountains and point break beaches, but I keep returning to the high desert. I imagine FF in the pastel landscape, among the Joshua trees, spiky yucca standing sentinel as he shovels a grave.

"Which one is Angel?" I ask.

"The little one."

"They're all little."

The nurse says Jolene is getting a bath. So FF and I take the elevator down to the cafeteria. Between floors, I realize it is him that smells like cat. I had hoped the ammonia odor was hospital disinfectant. Now I know the fumes are coming from his pores.

I don't want to cause a scene by confronting him here about the smell and what it reveals. Already I'm worried about being recognized. I'm terrified we might run into one of my former nurses, or worse: one of my mom's. I don't want to explain what happened to her. I don't want them thinking less

of me. We both felt proud when her nurses would say, “You’ve got a good son.”

“Wouldn’t anyone?” I’d say, in the psych ward, and run a hairbrush through the rat’s nest of tangles in my mom’s hair, like she was my daughter. I was so enmeshed with her that even as I looked around at the other visitors, parents and spouses, I didn’t understand there were other options, boundaries, limits. Or maybe the truth is, I didn’t want limits. I wasn’t comfortable setting limits, and didn’t know who I would be if I did. Of course I resented my mom for using her illness to control me, but also I was proud of myself for not dumping her. I needed to be who she needed me to be: The One Who Stayed.

The elevator ticks down the hospital floors, each one a different memory. 4: was where I received a toxic dose in a lithium experiment. My hair came out in clumps and everything I ate tasted like licking batteries. 3: was where my mom was treated for a bladder infection that sent her into paranoid psychosis. 2: was where she stayed when she fell and broke her elbow, on accident or on purpose, all I know is she got her morphine refilled.

The elevator counts down to the cafeteria and I stare at the *B* button, dare the elevator to plummet all the way. *B*, basement, the psych ward where she was transferred after her first attempt at suicide.

The hope was, electroconvulsive therapy would change the chemistry of her brain. The doctors said the electric shocks induced seizures that might open new synaptic pathways. They said these paths could lead to happiness. And it worked, for a while.

For a few months, she was happy. Mostly due to the memory loss. She couldn’t recall much of the last three years. She didn’t remember trying to kill herself with pills the week after I moved to Los Angeles. Didn’t remember the voicemail she left me that night saying, “I’m sick again. I have diarrhea. I can’t eat or drink. I have headaches, from dehydration. Because I can’t eat or drink. I don’t know what to do. I don’t have any pain medicine left. It’s all gone. And you’re not here.

I need to be with you. You're probably... I really need *you* with *me*. I need to be with you, wherever you are. You really need to come back and get me. Please. Please come and get me."

She didn't remember calling, she said, and I pretended to believe her.

When she was discharged, the psych ward social worker found her a shared room in a halfway house. It was supposed to be temporary, but living in Emerald City only left her more aslant. Each time depression returned, she visited the psych ward for more electric shocks. She lost more and more. She forgot about the boyfriend who copied the pin code to her debit card and stole the money I gave her from the sale of my kidney.

It seemed there was nothing left worth remembering, so I wanted her to forget more. I joked about it at the picnic tables in the high-walled courtyard where the nurses dispensed cigarettes, saying I wanted the electricity to erase her childhood, her father.

She held her cigarette between her thumb and forefinger like a joint. She took a drag that burned too near the filter. "Then I would forget your childhood too," she said. "I could never do that."

It was during this hospitalization that the ECT seizures splintered my mom's teeth. Her mouth was wrecked and I wanted to know what the doctors were going to do about fixing her fucking teeth. "How's she going to chew food?" I said, as the psychiatrist she crushed on, Dr. Powers, pulled his long, healthy hair into a ponytail.

She signed a waiver, he said. She smiled at me from the gurney, lips curling over gums and nubs. She was embarrassed, but also giddy. Happy to be in the middle of two men fighting. I felt guilty for failing to protect her, and I resented her for needing me to protect her. It was the same at the funeral home. And it's how I feel now. Jolene in the hospital, needing too much.



In the cafeteria, I tear sugar packets to dump in my coffee. Take my sweet time. Wait for FF to buy his energy drink and pay my bill. Oil rainbows in the burnt roast. The smell of the hospital's coffee reminds me of the spinal tap and FF's phone call. The fire.

When I see my mom, I see her in bed. The bed is burning, her own mother's quilt is tucked under her chin, the manic, skeletal grin of her second-hand dentures beside her in a glass of water—but then it's not my mom, it's Jolene on the futon, body like a gummy worm, seizures from electroshocks—hot coffee burns my hands—the heat of Jolene saying, “Don't you want to kiss me?”—and my mom's feet touching me in bed, so ice cold they were on fire.

FF grabs my arm, and says, “You gotta call your Armenian friends.”

Coffee spills. “What? No.”

He pursues me across the cafeteria. “Call the fuckin Armos,” he says, in my ear. “She needs this thing right—fucking—sooner than now.”

“People can live without kidneys,” I say. My memory is still fresh with the infection that almost killed me and how those internet scammers forced me into the surgery. “You just, like, need dialysis all the time.”

“I've got the internet too, asshole,” FF says. “You think I don't know? Donor lists take years. She gets sick, gets an infection, eats a peanut and her whole system shuts off. People die every day waiting.”

“So give her yours, she's your girlfriend.”

“Of course I would.”

Of course, he's not a match.

Of course, I am.

I can feel it under my skin. In my blood. Who else? Her mother. Where is she? Her father. The thought of stealing from Leslie, the way he stole from his daughters, excites me.

If I tell FF what Leslie did, what I'm almost certain he did to Jolene, then I wouldn't be able to stop FF, even if I wanted to.

"I bet her dad's a match," I say.

FF rolls his eyes like a teen. The annoyed display says more than words about his connection to Jolene. "Her old man's out of the country. Thailand, or one of those."

I imagine Leslie on a crowded Bangkok street, one more sunburned sex tourist moving through the throng of men in flip-flops who scope underage prostitutes. "Did you call him?"

"Plus, you want the ages to be close," FF says. "He's too old, probably."

The more I think of it, the less I want Jolene's father inside her, even to save her.

More time is what I really want. To google and find out what life is like without kidneys. To find out whether I can give her my last one.

"Listen, shit stain," FF says. "You either make the call, or I break your fingers, take your phone, and call the Armadillos myself."

It occurs to me now. Despite all our years of friendship, I have never felt entirely safe with FF. I was never honest with him about my fear that Leslie is my father. I didn't trust that my friend wouldn't use the information to hurt me. In fact, he's been hurting me for a long time. If we were best friends, he should have stopped treating me like a customer.

"I need to think," I say, because I want to do whatever I can to keep Jolene away from the Armenians. Remembering what happened when I tried to back out of the deal. The handgun on the desk. Lying on its side, barrel pointed at me. The calm voice behind me, saying it would be best if I signed the waiver. I felt like I didn't have a choice. Like I didn't have any control over what they did with my body.

Jolene is asleep. The Dilaudid drip has her slouched in the hospital bed, loosely suspended from consciousness in an opioid slack. She's hard to look at, slumped and scoliotic, so high. Wires and tubes attached like cables to lower her from bed, down the sanitized hospital floors, through grass, into a hole. Jolene will be covered then too, asleep with my mom. And this somehow feels right, the two of them safe together in the earth.

FF strokes Jolene's hair, scraping across her scalp like he's shoveling sand.

Her nose and high cheekbones have broken out in zits. The sickness, all of it, has made her emerge more fully to me. The heart monitor chirps and I imagine it sounds like the smoke alarm in my mom's room. A warning unheeded. I see them both now. I see that this illness is familiar. Even familial. Jolene's failing body is a body I understand, or want to understand, to return to, despite its sickness. Her body is my mother's body. Jolene's is my last connection. And I failed them both. Betrayed them both.

I say, "I'm sorry."

I squeeze her toes. They're cold.

FF's eyes swing between me and the freeway.

I hold the cellphone sideways. I point to the windshield and the other cars. I want FF watching the lunch hour traffic—the 2, the 5, the 710, the 405, the 73, the 55—freeways that open in long stretches, like lotto numbers, then screech to a standstill, sudden as lost luck.

“Mom is good?” Shant's heavy accent is even more strange on speakerphone. “You move her to nice place?”

“Yeah.” It unnerves me that he remembers. “Great place.”

I should have stayed at the hospital with Jolene. This drive to Orange County is too long to leave her alone.

“The reason I called is,” I say. “Uh, the thing I sold you, I need that thing.”

“Bro,” Shant says. The word rolls. *Bddrro*. “This is not a pawn shop.”

He sounds disappointed.

“I mean, I need the thing for someone else, my aunt.” I almost say sister.

Shant goes quiet. Probably trying to figure out whether or not I'm working with the FBI.

“Hello Leeman,” says a different voice, close to the phone. “It is good to hear you.” The tone is fatter than his brother's. A thick neck. *Raffi*. Raffi with the big desk. Too big, too Byzantine for his office. It was Raffi who lay the handgun on the desk. “Tell me again, how we can help you?”

I explain in as much detail as I can over the phone.

Raffi interrupts and cuts in with the price. In his accent, the amount rolls like he is swimming in it.

I close my eyes.

It's over.

There's no way.

"We got it," FF says.

Shit. He wasn't supposed to talk.

"Who the fuck, *bddrro?*" one of them says. Maybe both. It's loud.

"It's cool," I say. "He's cool."

These guys are paranoiacs.

"No, no, no," Raffi says. "No."

"This is my brother, FF."

"Lee, we have relationship." Shant sounds hurt. Like I've betrayed his trust.

"We've got the cash," FF says, leaning towards the phone.

He veers into the next lane. The car beside us swerves.

"It's our sister," I change the story, hoping they won't notice. "She's the sick one."

Family is important to these guys. Everyone who works in their office seems to be related.

The phone is muffled, but I hear the brothers in their other language.

I look at FF in the driver's seat. Face hard, handsome, touched with something incurable.

Shant says, "Send us blood work." He's unhappy.

I send pictures I took of Jolene's hospital charts.

Shant texts back. *Bad blood bro. Hard 2 match. Will b miracle.*

"Tell him, we'll pay," FF says. "We'll pay."

I close my eyes and sunlight seeps through my eyelids. Everything turns the color of blood.

FF's slaps my chest. "Hey, come on."

Out of the sun, Triangle Square materializes, a forgotten city of gold. The shopping mall of my youth fills me with something like hope. Driving closer, I'm reminded how many years have passed. Sun-bleached stucco with varicose cracks. Only a few shops are free of *For Lease* signs: a discount sushi, a fake-n-bake tanning salon, a nightclub where FF sometimes picks up shifts as a bouncer. Where in the bathroom he sells to some of the same right-wingers we knew in high school, who still roofof each other for fun.

The boulevards around the mall are choked in beach traffic. I don't even ask where FF plans to get that much money. I don't think he knows. Like so much in this place, it's a fantasy. When I was growing up here, by the beach, I imagined never leaving the ocean. Then, almost overnight, I had to get away. Still, I stayed. There was always something. A girlfriend. A job at a comic book store. My mom breaking her wrist rollerblading. My mom getting another DUI. My mom needing to make rent. My mom.

FF makes a couple turns off the boulevard and we arrive at his apartment complex. A bland barracks, built in a Spanish style. He swings the car into the parking lot and sticks it crooked in a numbered spot. On the ground below his car is cat litter. Poured to sop an enormous oil stain.

We walk past a swimming pool, and the manager's office. I follow FF up a staircase to the second story. The pool is kidney shaped. Onshore wind blows off the Pacific. Palm tree foreskin shakes in dry, whispering susurrations.

A child screams.

In the courtyard below, a little girl hydroplanes across a Slip n' Slide, laughing like she's high. Her mom sits in a beach chair, wearing a hot pink bikini. Mom's hair is buzzed. Only bangs. Barely older than Jolene and already she's got a kid. I wonder if my mom looked this way when she would lay out, sunning with C-section scar showing.

FF's apartment door opens with a Tupperware *suck*. The odor is brown bananas. Sunlight through the window

blinds, in lines on the white leather sofa. A Cure poster on the wall. *Boys Don't Cry*. A mosaic of DVD cases on the carpet. Action flicks. Years and years of Wrestlemania.

FF leaves the bathroom door open while he pisses.

I sit on the couch. How long did Jolene spend in the apartment? Which movies did they watch? On the coffee table are several wine bottles, melted candles, and a DVD disc coated in powder. I rub a finger over the reflective surface. Against my gums. A bad taste. A little rush.

FF flushes and heads for the bedroom. In the blacklight, his skin has a blue hue. I watch him turn the dial on the fireproof safe. He still trusts me enough. He doesn't have to do that. He could ask me to leave the room.

The safe opens. Pills. Cash. Maybe half a brick. FF unwraps the cellophane and cuts the brick with a kitchen knife. Scrapes two lines onto a handheld mirror. A makeup mirror.

He holds up the mirror that must be Jolene's. "*Hermano?*"

"I'm good."

FF plugs a nostril and snorts both. I should say something. He shuts his eyes like he's losing or finding God.

Mom and kid are still in the courtyard. When Mom sees us, she puts her Bud Light between her knees. Itches her arm. Beyond her, a first-floor apartment is open. A TV is on. The kid runs inside.

We never lived on the ground floor, my mom and I. She didn't want people walking on top of us.

From the darkened apartment, the kid yells.

Mom yells back.

We pass the manager's office and the kidney-shaped pool. Into the parking lot. FF carries a gym bag. My shoes

crunch cat litter. My phone rings.

“Good news, *bddrro*.”



“Hold up,” FF says, and offers me the makeup mirror.

Through the windshield, we watch the sign for Gickle’s gym strobe in green neon

This time I do a line. And another. I deserve it. I need it for what comes next.

According to the Armenians, Jolene will need dialysis. I thought of Emerald City. The room in the back with the La-Z-Boys and blood cleaning machines.

I’m in Gickle’s office, talking too fast. The story I concoct is ridiculous: a phone call in the middle of the night from an anonymous source at the Fire Marshall’s office, claiming that faulty electrical wiring started the fire that killed my mom.

Gickle looks skeptical. Scar tissue on his forehead scrunches.

“Whistleblower,” I say, knowing the word will stir the conspiracy nut in Gickle, paranoid of government, desiring answers about my mom’s death. “I need your help,” I say. “Collecting evidence.”

Gickle doesn’t say a word. Just spins in his big office chair. Motion synched with the turning of the gym’s neon sign. In the ring, Gickle played to the crowd’s fear of otherness, in miniature. His body symbolized the smallness of every spectator, he liked to say, their perceptual limitations. Gickle continues to spin in slow circles, unhurried, feet several inches off the floor.

I can tell he isn’t going to help.

“Signal before you turn,” Gickle says, buckled into the passenger seat, ensconced on his hemorrhoid pillow.

“I know,” I say, and steer his truck out into the street. FF is behind us, riding my bumper.

In my teens, when all my friends were getting their driver’s licenses, eager for that supposed freedom, I decided I had enough freedom. I had all the freedom I could handle. Buying a car, paying for the gas, the maintenance, the insurance—that looked like work. It seemed adult.

“You can speed up,” Gickle says.

To avoid traffic, he has me take a shortcut. Which is fine. Whatever gets us to Emerald City the fastest. Because I can’t wait to get to Emerald City. Can’t wait see my mom’s old haunt. Can’t wait to see my mom’s ghost in the halls, in her pink Crocs, looking to bum loosie cigarettes. Can’t wait.

We stop to fill up at a gas station, and Gickle comes out of the mini-mart with two tall cans of iced tea. The one habit he couldn’t kick. He offers me a can, and I crack it. The saccharine lemon taste returns me to those Sunday mornings when he and I would watch wrestling on the couch, my mom in bed, the apartment suffused with softhearted after-sex sloth. His iced tea and vodka sweating a ring on the coffee table. My can in hand. Still a little loopy from the night before, Gickle would press the mute button on the television and add his own off-color commentary.

In my young mind, he was grooming me for the ring. He didn’t dissuade me of the notion until I got older, bluntly saying I wasn’t built for it. Never elaborating. Instead leaving me to wonder whether it was my body that failed, or something deeper. Still, he was good to me. To her. Better than others.

He had wanted to stay, wanted to make a family, be a dad, add a kid of his own. I wanted that too, a father, a brother, a sister, someone, anyone, to make my mom’s attention diffuse. They tried. There was a miss. For my mom, it was another excuse. But it got Gickle sober.

He shuffles through his music player and puts on “Roadhouse Blues.”

He says, “Still have that book of Jim Morrison’s poetry I gave you?”

“The one you promised would get me laid?” I merge onto the freeway and enter the flow of traffic. “I’m still waiting,” I say.

He laughs. Looks out the window at a billboard advertising cosmetic surgery. “Let me ask you a question.”

I’m ready to answer anything. I want to recapture his trust. To go back to those Sundays. I want to tell him the truth about this trip we’re taking to Emerald City, what happened with Jolene on the futon, my suspicions about my father.

“You notice anything odd about our boy FF?”

*Our boy*, he says. Like we are parents.

“No.”

I switch lanes with a jerk of the wheel. Less than an hour ago, FF and I were doing lines.

“Why?” I say.

But I know.

If FF gets a wrestling contract, it means a kickback for Gickle. Maybe even a tag-along to the big show.

“That kid has *it*. Scouts like flies on his ass, and he doesn’t give two craps,” Gickle says. “I hope to gawd he’s not messing with your mom’s little jailbait sister.” He tears the metal ring off his iced tea. “And what about you?”

The seatbelt strap is tight against my throat.

“What the hell are you doing with your life?”

“Nothing,” I say.

“No shit, nothing. Why don’t you go back to school?”

“Did you read the edits to my script?”

“Get a degree in computers, or something. I told you, you can pay me back.”

He rolls the can over the scars on his forehead.

“She was too good for the world,” he says, out of nowhere. “You know? What her dad did. That fucking chomo, I should have...” He rubs the cold can on his eyebrows, as if the condensation will smudge the memory. “I don’t think she ever got over it.”

“She didn’t,” I say. It’s the only thing I’ve ever really been sure of.

Through the windshield, the skyline of downtown Los Angeles rises into view, the handful of skyscrapers huddled together. Soon suburban Glendale spreads out before us in a boulevard of car dealerships. Balloons. Floodlights that halo the colored bodies of cars waiting to be borne into traffic. We pass a cemetery. A hospital. We arrive at Emerald City.

Here at Emerald City, the sun is gone but the air still burns with color.

On the top floor of the three-story building, a black smoke stain blots my mom's bedroom. I stand on the sidewalk and wait for Gickle to parallel park. To cover the bedroom's broken window, someone has taped up a black garbage bag. Like a lung the bag breathes. Exhales. Inhales. With the breeze. My own lungs rise and fall with the rhythm of the bag, and the motion reminds me how as a child I would press against my mom as she slept, holding my breath to stay synced.

Out of habit I look for her on the smoking patio. Just maybe, I think. Normally, this time of night, the halfway house's residents have gummed their boiled dinners and retired to the patio where they socialize, bathrobes cinched, before the onset of sedatives. But tonight, only the smoke of a solitary stubbed-out cigarette corkscrews. Plastic flowers hang like chandeliers, dripping from a recent watering. The patio is empty.

Gickle and I walk down the wheelchair ramp that slopes gently to the entrance of Emerald City. He holds the handrail, practicing an exaggerated clubfoot. I open the heavy Alzheimer's security door. Study his reaction to the halfway house, awaiting his anger. He scans the green lobby, the fingerprints on the walls, the carpet and its suspicious stains. His look of disgust expresses all my failures. He glares at me like he knows all of it. Inside me, the look presses a button of shame.

“And how do you do?” Antonio says.

He crouches, eye-level with Gickle, like you would a child.

I've asked him to give us a tour, told him Gickle is a prospective resident.

"Fine," Gickle says.

"It's a little crazy today, but I think you'll like it here."

"Think so?" Gickle says.

Over their heads, down the hallway, I see FF. Dressed in khaki coveralls, moving door to door, he looks like a plumber who can't find the toilet.

"I'm sorry about your mother," Antonio says. "Despite everything, she was a lovely woman."

"Lovely," I say. "Thanks."

The dining room doors swing open and the residents of Emerald City march down the hall toward FF. Cake on paper plates. Some still singing. "Happy birthday."

Antonio turns in the direction of the noise, and FF.

"Can I see my mom's room?" I say.

"Ehh..." Antonio returns his attention to me. He runs a hand through his hair, which looks wet but isn't.

FF is gone, submerged in the parade.

"Alright," Antonio says. "Since the detectives are done."

The elevator doors peel open, a painful parting.

"Here we are," Antonio says.

Same pea soup walls and popcorn ceiling, but the smell is of something on the stove burning, smoking and setting off alarms.

At the end of the corridor is my mom's bedroom. A warning sprayed in bright paint on the makeshift plywood door: *KEEP OUT*. The smell of fire gets louder as we approach.

Do Antonio and Gickle feel it? The fire, the heat, the guilt, the helplessness of having no one, no other choice; the dread every time she ended up in the emergency room, the psych ward, the back of a police car, lost in her own neighborhood, so high she couldn't find her way home; my anger that she would take any tinge of joy in my voice as a threat, as a sign of my leaving, as something to be extinguished.

“Inside?” Antonio says. “Are you sure?”

Together, we drag aside the wood slab and open the tomb of my mom's bedroom. Over the room's threshold, all light is snuffed. The fluorescents in the hall, the penlight on Gickle's keychain, the little rips in the trash bag covering the window: all devoured. I stare into the formless dark and wait for something to appear.

Why did I come back here? Why did I keep returning to my mom? To Jolene? It was so easy for them to blackout. Like flipping a switch. That easy to forget. Why can't I?

“Um, can I have a minute alone?” I say.

The fire investigator's report, the real one, not the fake I hyped to Gickle, says that, judging by the burn patterns, the fire started in my mom's bed. It spread fast, the blaze, the heat, the sound—released with sudden shocking force that engulfed the bedroom. Smoke poured down her throat. Water for a woman drowning. Who knows how long the smoke alarm had been disabled, whether the battery ended up in the TV remote, or if she removed it to smoke cigarettes in bed. There was evidence of accelerants, newspapers, magazines, VHS tapes, all hoarded at her bedside. It led investigators to wonder. Nothing could be proved.

I shine the penlight over the residue of my mom's life. It's almost impossible to distinguish anything. Gusts of ash flurry through the light beam. It reminds me of how she seasoned her food. Salt raining over the plate.

I pull my t-shirt up. Cover my mouth.

Fire is a stomach. It eats. It shits.

I sit on the bed. What's left of it. The coiled metal springs. I light a cigarette. The flame is delicate, inconsequential. I ash on the floor, kick around in the debris. Soot slips into my shoes, like beach sand. My foot hits a lump the size of a human head. Semi-worthless stones of costume jewelry melted into a mass. They glint in the penlight. An awful disco ball. The garbage bag on the window rustles. Taunts me. I tear it off.

The cold lights of the car dealerships across the street cut into the room. On the floor, in the indistinguishable black mass of the room, some other thing reflects light. The smooth plastic puddle of my mom's melted VHS tapes. The complete films of Heath Ledger, along with the works of other lesser heartthrobs, liquefied, cooled, and hardened in a pool. I pick up the black hole of plastic. Toss it like a Frisbee. It flies oblong through the air, across the room, a void. I find myself hoping it might stick to the wall, and like a cartoon, open a portal. Where would it lead? To my mom? To Jolene? To my death? It shatters.

"Bed bugs!" Gickle yells, all the way out of character, surrounded by staff members and curious residents in the lobby. "Cockroaches! I saw a turd in the—"

I grab Gickle's arm and drag him through the security door. He continues to yell, unable to ever let anything go.

"I'm calling the police now, sir," Antonio says.

"No, I am!" Gickle screams, from the sidewalk.

"The what?" I roll down the window and cough. The night speeds by in streetlights.

"The evidence," Gickle says, from the driver's seat.

The truck screams through a red light.

"Oh yeah," I say. "Yeah, I got pictures."

"Shoulda snapped some of the john," he says. "How could you dump her there?"



I want him to know how guilty I feel, but worry he'll make my crying a new source of shame.

He stops the truck at a red light. "I hate to say it, but you're a quitter, kid. You always have been. You quit on your mom when you stuck her in that shithole."

Above the stoplight, the sky without stars is a black bag. I want to rip it open. Tear a hole in the night. Tell all the secrets. Let loose the garbage.

"And where did you stick her?" I say. "What hole?"

"Watch your mouth." He pokes a finger in my chest.

"Watch me go." I get out. Slam the truck's door.

He yells something about the fire investigator, then drives off.

Almost a month has gone by since I've been home. The garden is overgrown with weeds. The lavender is dry and dead. My landlords haven't picked up the mail. Shit. How am I going to pay rent?

I fumble with my house keys. Flaubert doesn't bark. Must be asleep. I walk to the backyard and find him in the middle of a dream. Chasing bitches, for sure.

"Hey, Flaubs." It seems selfish to wake him. But he just lays in the dirt.

His food dish is upside down. His water bowl empty.

He twitches.

I open the gate and cross the yard. It's maggots moving him. Flies infest the air.

I sit with my friend for hours. I'm crying when I load Flaubert into a garbage bag. I'm wiping tears out of my eyes while I dig a hole in the garden. I change my mind. I decide to tell my landlord that their dog escaped. I'm carrying him to the street, to dump him in a neighbors' trashcan, when I hear someone coming up the garden path. Shoes scuff, heavy, up the steps.

I toss the bag with my friend Flaubert into a bush.  
FF, and in his arms: Jolene.

FF seesaws the steering wheel through morning traffic, and says, “We’re gonna save her.”

All week he’s been saying it, “We’re gonna save her.” Since he rescued her from the hospital, “We’re gonna save her.” Like that’s all it takes. Just believing it. Believing the fairy tale. The princess, locked in the prison of her body. He knows the story, his role, and he charges down Santa Monica Boulevard like a white knight.

He barely ever hits the brakes, but checks on Jolene in the backseat, constantly.

“How’s she doing?—How you doing back there, babe? —How’s she look?”

Part of him is seeing Rosa in the backseat, probably. Lucky him. He’s watching his mother die all over again. Or we both are. I do a bump off my house key.

Even with the dialysis, Jolene is only barely here. I wonder if I’ve been doing it wrong. The process is complicated and the YouTube videos are for a newer model. Maybe the machine is broken. That’s Emerald City for you.

Gickle is still in my head with his *quitter*.

I do another bump.

It doesn’t get rid of him, just drowns him out by turning up the volume on everything else.

Yeah, I could be doing it wrong, but probably she just needs the kidney.

We thought we had one.

“Two days, tops,” the Armenians said, every day, all week.

Then last night, “Sorry, *bddrro*.”

I wanted to check her into the hospital.

“You call an ambulance, you better call two,” FF said, and rolled the pipe over the lighter until it cooked.

So now it’s this—this new drive, this new plan I came up with to save Jolene. But it’s so fucking stupid. So dumb and immoral. I don’t know.

Headed west on Santa Monica, we pass the pawn shops and the cross-fits, pass the pot dispensaries and the Whole Foods, pass the gay bars and 665 Leather, pass the Troubadour and the Beverly Hills sign. For the last six years, I rode the bus on this boulevard, across Los Angeles, to shoot loads at a sperm bank for \$100 a pop. It was good going, but today will be my last visit, which makes me a little sad. Not because I’m probably going to jail. Even though I am. What makes me sad is the passage of time. How it’s gone, how she’s gone, and I’ve got nothing to show.

Sometimes I feel guilty about the lies on my sperm donor application. Dicking over prospective parents. They just want a healthy baby. A kid who isn’t a poo flinger or high school shooter. Along with everything else—depression, addiction, this kidney thing—do I have any good in me? I don’t know.

So I lied.

We all lie.

It’s all lies.

FF stops at a red light, reluctantly, like he wants to blast it. His leg is geeking. And then I see mine is too. And it’s like he and I are in a race.

Outside it’s getting hot. The marine layer is burning off to reveal the bright blue Los Angeles sky. Every day, every year, the clouds burn earlier. Everything is getting hotter, and hotter, until you think it can’t get any hotter. And soon it’s all going to burn. And sometimes it makes me want to cry,

because there are people and animals that aren't made for the heat. Like me. And then I am crying. But it's not me crying, it's the baby in the stroller, in the crosswalk, pushed by the woman in the straw hat.

"Is that chick famous?" FF says. "She looks fucking famous."

"Nope," Jolene says.

She scares the shit out of me. She does that now. Horror stuff. You don't know if she's awake or asleep or dead. Maybe she can't help it, but sometimes it feels like she wants to kill me.

She lays down again in the backseat. Shuts her eyes.

On the hunt for a parking spot, FF rips around the sperm clinic. Then says, "Fuck it," because there's none and there isn't ever any. He drives into a parking garage, pushes the button, complains about the cost, takes the ticket, and the arm goes up like a castle drawbridge. He drives over the spikes, past the sign that says *DO NOT BACKUP!* And there is no going back. Not for us. Not anymore.

He parks on the third level, by the stairwell.

I do a bump.

Then he does a bump.

He leans into the backseat and fondles Jolene's leg.

"Babe," he says.

I wish he wouldn't wake her up. On her pillow, so swollen, she looks like the fattest angel in heaven. With her eyes shut, you can't tell they've gone yellow from kidney waste.

"Leland?" she says.

"I'm here," I say, already out of the car.

FF tucks her in. Pulls the Mexican blanket to her chin. Kisses her mouth. "Be good, baby."

"Okay," she says. "I miss you."

He opens the trunk, then opens his gym bag. He takes off his boots and laces up his running shoes.

“Don’t you think you should crack a window for her?”  
I say.

FF goes over the plan. I have trouble following, but nod along, like I’m with him completely. Like everything is understood. Because I’m thinking: it either works or doesn’t. And I’m not completely sure I want it to work. Because if it does work, we’re even more fucked.

“I do the intake interview, take my sweet-ass time with the forms,” he says. “You come in, act like you’ve got a massive nut to bust, go in the back room, do the thing with the camera, come out acting like a spazz, cause a scene. I pull the fire alarm. Everybody evacuates. I go through the computer, find your babies. We meet back at the car, we get a kid, we get the kidney. All good, right?”

“Yeah.” Not really. “For sure.”

“You’re good, right? Good to go.”

“I’m good.” But I’m not. I don’t want to do this. Not at all.

“Alright, let’s do this.” He claps his hands like a coach.

“Okay, but...”

“No buts, you can do this.”

“I know, but...”

“Don’t puss out on me. Not this time, Leland.”

“I’m not, but what if they have a security camera on the fire alarm?”

He hadn’t thought of that.

We’re walking down a quaint street with lots of leafy trees and old-timey lampposts. With bars and restaurants and Starbucks for college kids and homeless people. He’s going, “Fuck, fuck,

fuck.” And I’m a couple steps behind because people on the street are looking at him.

He turns around and walks back to the Starbucks where a guy wearing a drug-rug sits cross-legged by the door and holds out a coffee cup for spare change. FF looks him over: no shoes, dreadlocks.

“Okay, Ziggy,” FF says. “How’d you like to earn ten bucks?”

The way he says *earn* is embarrassing.

The guy looks up at FF, shakes the cup, coins jingle-jangle, as he thinks the offer over.

“I need coffee,” I say, and go into the Starbucks. The place is full of college students. Crammed into every corner with their laptops. Lots of flip-flops and UCLA schwag.

I can’t help but think about Gickle’s offer to send me back to school. How impossible that feels. How I have more in common with the Ziggy Marley bumming change than I do with these college kids. I think about what my mom would want. Think about the spikes in the parking garage and the *DO NOT BACKUP!* sign, which seems like the truest statement about where I am in life, where she was. I know where she went, but what about me? Where am I willing to go? How far?

In front of me, in line, there’s a guy in a fraternity hoodie, on his cellphone, talking about his internship at Netflix. He’s proud. He’s going places. The barista with bad acne scalds her hand steaming his latte. The headlines of the newspapers at the register say a teenager, just a year older than Jolene, shot and killed nine people at a mall in Germany. Everything is bad. Nothing to be done except go over the spikes.

I order a Frappuccino. That’s the last of my cash.

Outside, FF and Ziggy seem to have worked out an arrangement.

“I’m serious as bad acid,” FF says, tearing a twenty-dollar bill down the middle. “You better pull that alarm.”

FF is late for his intake appointment. He jogs off in his sneakers.

Ziggy Marley asks me for a cigarette. I roll him one. “I’m Mike,” he says.

At the sperm bank door, I talk into the intercom, wave at the security camera. The receptionist buzzes me into the lobby. I act natural. So natural. I’m so fucking nervous. But also, I have an erection. Which doesn’t seem right. My junk should be sucked up in my guts. My body should be protecting itself. Instead, I’m stiff as shit. Something isn’t right with me. I walk upstairs to the office. Tuck it into the waistband of my jeans. Almost like a gun.

FF is there, seated in the waiting room between two young sperm guys. Good genetic specimens. Lottery winners. Hung on the waiting room walls are diagrams of the male reproductive system. They are super detailed. Also on the walls are hotrods, women in bikinis, and bikini women on the hoods of hotrods.

FF looks up from his paperwork. The stack of forms and waivers. He acts like he doesn’t know me. The receptionist is leaning over the countertop, flirting with one of the sperm guys. She has on big hoop earrings. Under her white lab coat, a tank top and one of her famous push-up bras.

“Yo,” she says, to me.

She squats behind the counter and emerges holding a book full of porno DVDs. She smiles, showing me bubblegum.

“None for me, thanks.” I push away the book.

“No butt stuff?” She snaps her gum.

“Actually, I’m not into butt stuff.”

“*Shindler’s Fist, Buttman and Rob—*” she reads from my history on the computer, loud enough for the guys in the waiting room.

Even FF laughs.



I smile, like it's all good. But she keeps reading the titles and it makes me feel bad about myself.

I take a sample cup and carry it like a cocktail down a hall. Sex actresses moan from inside the jack shack rooms, but on the doors are action movie posters. In each poster, the hero is in the act of escape: escaping a car crash, escaping an exploding building, escaping one apocalypse or another. It makes me wonder about the clinic. What are they trying to say? Because it seems like they are saying, "Shoot your load into something, anything, and then run, escape, because the bed is on fire, and you are going to die!"

I try the *Die Hard* room. It's empty. The light is off. I raise the dimmer switch to see a small room dominated by a big office chair and a television. In the corner of the room is a rack of porno magazines. Above the sink is a laminated sign.

*To maintain sample integrity: NO LUBE or SPIT.*

It's a turn-on, the sign.

I drop my pants and wait. Collect myself. Then shuffle out of the room with my jeans around my ankles.

"HELP," I scream. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth. "HELP ME!"

A guy in the *Taken* room sticks his head into the hallway. Another guy pops out of *Bourne Supremacy*.

"Pull up your pants, Leland," the receptionist says, from down the hall.

Her coworker is there too, a stocky, middle-aged woman with tattoos. The third woman must be the manager. She's got chopped grey hair and looks like someone's menopausal mom. Her pantsuit has pinstripes to make her look slim but she is thick. She is about as mad as you can get. And all three are coming down the hall, at me, and look way too heroic.

I point behind me at the *Die Hard* room. "Video camera," I say. "They're filming us."

“Pull up your pants or I’m calling the campus police,” the menopausal mom says. And fuck if those pinstripes don’t look like jail.

“They’re using us in sex tapes,” I say, to *Taken* and *Bourne Supremacy*.

“Stop acting hysterical,” the menopausal mom says.

She puts a hand on my arm with a death grip and the receptionist goes into my room to investigate. This is getting out of control.

“Don’t tell me hysterical,” I say. “I take the bus here, I give you my body, my children, and you treat me like shit. You say, ‘Calm down.’ I’m hysterical? I’m a victim. You did this to me. You and you. You.”

Then the fire alarms goes off in bright white sirens.

Everyone looks around as everything strobes. People cover their ears. My heart is beating like it wants to kill me.

I yell, “FIRE.”

I forget about my jeans, and fall on my face on the floor. The sperm donors and staff hurry for the exit. They don’t care about me anymore. I pull on my pants. Everyone is escaping. I walk down the hall, through the waiting room, downstairs. I don’t see FF anywhere. I go out a back door, into an alley where a few office workers smoke vapes.

I expect to hear the sad sirens of fire engines. But they don’t come. I’m on my way back to Jolene when around the corner, into the alley, come two cops. They’re on mountain bikes. In short shorts. They’re wearing bicycle helmets. They’re goofy as fuck. Serious as death. And their shorts are so fucking short. And their legs are hairy as beasts. And I’m gonna get caught. And I’m gonna go to real jail. And I’m gonna be somebody’s girl. And there’s my ass, juicy as any in *Big Butts*. And I can’t hear the birds anymore. I can’t hear anything except my heart, my blood, trying to kill me.

The call comes in over their cop radios. “Rodger.”

I watch them pass me, switch gears, pedal faster.

And then I'm just another jerk-off on the sidewalk with sperm for sale.

I get in the passenger seat. Jolene is playing on her phone. My heart still hates me. The car smells like piss, but maybe that's me; I've sweated the armpits out of my t-shirt. I start looking for where FF hid the shit. I open the glove box. Inside is a roll of duct tape and a gun.

"I want to go," Jolene says.

On the pistol are deep scratches where the serial numbers should be.

"I know." I shut the glove box. "Me too."

The Mexican blanket is wet but I don't say anything because I can see she's already embarrassed.

"The keys are in the ignition," she says. "Let's go."

I give her a look.

She asks if I'm scared.

"Yes, I am, very," I say, "incredibly, scared."

She pulls out a Ziploc of flowers and stems from under the pissed blanket. "Roll me a joint."

Sirens are wailing as I start breaking the weed into the rollie paper.

FF is coming. He holds a piece of paper over his head. "ONE KID!" His yells are amplified in the concrete parking garage.

She whispers, "I know the combination to his safe."

"ONE—FUCKING—KID!"

You can hear the ash—*shhh*—on the wide windshield of the Crown Victoria.

On the news, they say the fire is dying.

Since the sperm bank, we've been living in this car—FF, Jolene, and me.

It's been three days of being bored out of our brains with nothing to do but hate each other, and watch the fire rage out of control in the national forest, raze half a decade of drought, rush at the edge of suburbia. Three days of watching the tract house in the Santa Clarita Valley where my daughter lives with her milf mom and old-ass dad. Three days of watching dad leave for work in his Bimmer, watching mom leave with her briefcase, dragging my little red-haired daughter by the arm into the Volvo, then watching the nanny pick my little girl up from first grade and take her back to the tract house, out of the bad air.

Today, people are venturing out of their homes again, going back to routines. Finally the air is clear enough for the kids to come out and play. On the playground, in action, are stir-crazy children. Some wear little paper respirator masks. The air still maintains the quality of Hell, triple digit temperatures and a sulfurous yellow firmament.

I roll down my window and spit. The children's cries leak in.

"This is so fucked," I say, for the hundredth time.

"Shut up already," FF says, and smacks the dashboard.

The glove box falls open. There is the gun. I want to point it at FF and make him take Jolene to the hospital.

He catches me staring.

"Go ahead," he says, and nods at the gun. "Pick it up."

Like I don't know how to use it.

"You're paranoid," I say.

In the lenses of his cop sunglasses, I can see myself reflected. How skinny I look. The sores I can't stop picking.

He says, "I know you want to."

He's right. I want to. I'm going to. I'm about to do it. Make him see I'm not afraid. But obviously I am afraid. I'm so fucking afraid. For me and for him. And Jolene. But maybe, especially, for the little girl we're about to grab.

I want to believe FF is scared too, that he isn't such a meth monster. But he's different now, and so is our relationship. He only cares about Jolene, and as her life slips out of his control, he puts the squeeze on me. All Jolene seems to care about, atop her pillows, is getting our attention. How it makes her special, chosen, how it gives her power.

"Don't be a jock, Jamie," she says.

It's weird to hear her use his Christian name. I haven't called FF that since the seventh grade, when he saved me from skinheads at the skate park, swinging his skateboard like Captain America's shield. A real fucking freedom fighter.

"Leland's just scared," Jolene says. "He's always scared."

FF has been feeding her oxys, for pain, and it makes her mean. With effort she rises off her pillows. Runs a swollen hand through FF's hair, smoothing the pomade. The pills get Jolene feeling better, then she gets bored and wants to play. She casts a side-eye at me. Eyelids flutter as she hits him with a kiss. Lips and tongue, slopping.

"I am kind of scared," I say.

Why am I bothering to lie? I've never been more scared in my life.

"Either you are, or you aren't." FF's voice is cold as the a/c blowing. And bored. He turns his attention to the playground.

“I’m *kind of* scared,” I say. “Like how your sneezing powder kind of gets me high.” This isn’t true. I’ve been high for days. I am uncomfortably high. “And how it’s only kind of crank because you’ve got to take into consideration all the baby laxative and laundry detergent, all the hands it passes through, all the lower intestines and sphincters.”

FF stares out the windshield and smiles. The depression of his dimple makes an appearance on his cheek. He lifts his shades.

“That’s her,” he says. “That’s *our* girl.”

And there she is: my daughter. She swings from her nanny’s hand. Lightly hops. Yattering. Red hair pom-pom. She is even more pale and freckled than me. I have cursed my daughter to a lifetime of sunburns.

This close to her, all the reasons I have for being here burn away. Jolene, my mom, myself, every excuse is meaningless. I realize now that I was never meant to come in contact with this child.

The girl and her nanny, a short and sturdy woman in brown leather huarache sandals, settle in at a picnic table of other nannies. These other women slump at the table, surrounded by strollers and toys, looking exhausted and eyeing their phones. Every now and then, one of them looks up and scans the playground. My daughter’s nanny smears sunscreen over the little girl’s freckles.

Thank you, I want to say.

Released by the nanny, my daughter runs to the playground. Without fear. Without undue self-consciousness. Without having rubbed in the sunscreen.

I feel a substantial, maybe idiotic, sense of accomplishment. I’ve done almost nothing to help my daughter grow, but there she is, my little girl, my great triumph. I am her father.

I glance at FF, my best friend, to share the moment.

The cracks in his smile are full of plaque. He doesn’t see the little girl as anything but a kidney. I’d like to smash

him in the mouth. Jolene's reaction isn't any better. She's not even watching the girl. Instead she stares at me, trying to gauge my reaction. It's pathetic.

Into my lap, FF drops a pair of latex gloves and a Mexican wrestling mask. He holds up Jolene's makeup mirror. I do a line. He turns the key in the ignition and the engine throbs to life.

"If you get rolled," FF says, "you don't know us."

"I don't know you," I say, believing it to be mostly true.

Outside the car, the dry heat folds over me like someone else's skin.

Through the window, Jolene blows me a damsel's kiss.

"Remember, don't get caught," FF says. "In prison they'll wear your ass like a condom." He starts to reverse the car out of the parking space. "And those bunks aren't comfortable like futons."

Even after he's down the street, only the dinged bumper visible, I can't stop shaking.

Alone, it's easier to breathe. But no joy. The air so choked with ash.

I roll a lopsided cigarette, light it, and turn my attention to the playground. The red-haired girl is playing with a half-dozen kids atop a jungle gym built to resemble a pirate ship. She seems popular with the other kids, playing sea captain at the ship's wheel, and barking demands at her crew. I find a bench far off from the playground and sit, conscious of how I must appear: lonely, lurking.

The burnt San Gabriel Mountains loom over the playground and the children. The mountain's soft slopes and summits like contours of a giant, shrouded body. I try to view the children and the fire with detachment, but it's impossible to escape the enormous image of the corpse.

I take another drag, but everything feels too terrible. I imagine my lungs burning like my mother's bedroom.

Disgusted, I flick the cigarette into the dry grass and head to the water fountain. The spout is clogged, so I stoop down to the child's fountain and drink. Hunched over, I let the cool water drench my face.

How is it that I have ended up here?

Head under the water, I think back to my baptism: Sunday afternoon in an office park church, my mom in a floral dress, the eternal life that was promised. And what kind of life am I promising my daughter? As her father, about to traumatize her, aren't I cursing her to a life like my mom's?

I can't do it.

I hear Gickle's voice like a drum beat. *Quitter, quitter.*

But it doesn't have to be like that. Not if I pick up the phone and call the police. Tell them about the gun with no numbers in FF's glove box. I would lose my friend. Maybe worse when he gets out. But I'd save Jolene. And isn't that what she wants? To be saved? Suddenly it dawns on me that I don't know what she wants—I've never bothered to ask.

"1-2-3-4-5-6-7—"

Water goes up my nose.

"8-9-infinity," a little brat says, behind me. "Water hog."

I'm about to tell this jizz squirt what's up, but when I turn around, it's her.

"There's a drought," she says.

She squeezes past me and dives on the faucet. Lips touch water in a kiss.

I can't help but be in awe of her, what I've made—a living, drinking person, embodying such astounding beauty. With the gentleness of a humming bird descending on a sugar feeder, my daughter indulges at the fountain.

Yes, drink, drink deeply, I think.

But her mouth is coming too close to the spout. Perilously close. Then finally her lips engulf the entire spigot.



The whole apparatus. Who is raising this kid to fellate water fountains? A burp rumbles out to announce she's done. It's impressive. She skips away in unrhythmic hops.

I watch her go for a few yards, then stretch on the latex gloves with a hard *snap*. I try not to think about prison, but the rubber gloves have the unhappy odor of a condom, and I can't not think about what FF said. I can't not think about my ass being worn like a condom.

The hot pink wrestling mask slips over my head, easy as anything. Too easy. It's at least two sizes too big and smells like microwaved fish. I adjust the eyeholes and trot off after my daughter. The poisonous air burns my lungs. But I run. My knees, sore from the long hours in the car.

She skips ineptly, lacking coordination, and I wonder if this too is my fault. The mask slips a little into my field of vision, but I can still see her clumsy hops. She's oblivious. I'm getting closer. The mask continues to creep into my eyes. Closer. Across the playground, a woman's scream shreds the afternoon. So close.

I'm blind. Everything is hot pink.

In the collision, my daughter and I entwine. For an instant that I will remember until the day I die: we embrace. Our first touch. Our relationship deepens. Because even though the touch is a violent twisting of our bodies, it is born out of love. For her. For Jolene. For my mom. And I want to believe this moment is the first on the way to healing, the start of our convalescence.

I also know this can't be true.

“*MOLESTADOR*,” the nannies cry.

They rush across the playground like the forest fire swept down from the mountains. Through the mask's eyeholes I see their huaraches kicking up sand. I scoop my daughter and run into the street, five short-legged nannies in pursuit. Sandals *slappppping* blacktop. I carry my daughter through the intersection, sprint across the lush lawns of anonymous tract

homes. With so much sameness camouflaging the homes, I feel all the more visible, pursued, carrying a lifeless child.

Up the block, I see FF's car drool exhaust fumes out of the tailpipe, a burrito wrapper taped over the license plate. That cop car with its spray-paint paint job is the shittiest, most beautiful car in the neighborhood. I feed my daughter through the open window and into Jolene's waiting arms.

I want my daughter to know how much pain this is causing me. Want her to know I feel her anger, fear, and pain. And that I understand. I understand the pain of every living thing. I'm alive with pain.

I fall to my knees and scream. A Taser barb in my back.

*"VIOLADORS!"* the nannies cry.

On my knees, paralyzed by electric jolts, I'm cold-cocked with a toy dump truck. It drops me to the street. Under the car, through the wattage, I see FF's boots. He's surrounded by huaraches. Before my eyes slam shut, a nanny collapses to the asphalt. Then another.

With my head propped against the window, I watch the San Fernando Valley speed past: sunshine and palm trees, a landfill, a reservoir, unsayable graffiti that climbs the freeway wall, and over the wall a blur of apartment complexes where worn-down workers go to rest their bodies under billboards that offer fat freezes and stomach stapling, augmentations and reductions, and FF weaves us through red, white, and silver cars, the blare of their horns lost in my child's long wail for her mother.

“MOMMMY!” Her fists beat on the window.

I'm here, I want to tell my daughter, like a good dad. But that's not who I am. I'm just the guy who accidentally gave her a life, then irrevocably fucked it up.

She keeps screaming. Jolene sits beside her in the backseat, fingers corking ears. My daughter has a powerful pair of lungs.

“Shut that kid up.” FF reaches across me and opens the glove box.

And there is the gun.

He laughs at me.

“Not that,” he says. “The duct tape.”

This isn't what we agreed on. This isn't how it was supposed to go. We were going to talk to the kid, convince her to help us save Jolene. But I must be stupid. I should have known. A part of me did, probably. That it would happen like this. That FF is out of control.

“Hold the wheel,” he says.

He opens the Ziploc. Does a big bump off the back of his hand. He thinks he's the hero of this story, but that's what every bad guy believes. Maybe I'm doing it too. But it's

obvious I'm no hero. He hands me the Ziploc. I lick the bag. Turn it inside out. To get the rest out. I want to believe the drugs are an excuse for what I'm doing.

I crawl over the center console, into the backseat, holding the duct tape. My daughter kicks me with clean white tennis shoes. Screams.

"Easy, easy," I say.

Her marshmallow shoes thump my arms. Part of me wants the kicks. Needs them. More.

My daughter squirms against the door. Cornered. Her eyes dart around the car, but keep landing on Jolene.

"Nobody's going to hurt you," I say, and lean in, wishing the words were true.

"EEEE—YAH." Her karate chop comes straight out of a strip mall dojo.

"I'm okay." I tilt my head back. Swallow blood. "It's not your fault."

The kid pulls her knees to her chest and tucks into the shape of a rock. It breaks my heart, that rock.

"Try not to bleed on me," Jolene says, and presses fast food napkins to my nose.

I guess because Jolene's a girl, I expect her to act more motherly, to me and the kid. But I'm reminded again that she is practically a kid herself.

FF turns on the radio. Pop. Ranchera. Hip hop. He doesn't stay on any a station long enough to finish a song. Up and down the dial.

I close my eyes and wait to stop bleeding. The sounds of the freeway. Hiss of wheels spinning in circles. FF lands on the classic rock station and I think of my mom. Her press-on fingernails running through a boyfriend's greasy mane, while I look on from the backseat, feeling like I'm losing her. I fantasize about how I would introduce myself to my daughter, under better circumstances, if somehow we had met another way.

I peel the wad of bloody napkins off my nose.

“I’m Leland,” I say, to my daughter.

“No you’re not,” FF says.

I don’t care anymore. I’m sick of being scared. I’ve been so terrified of losing Jolene, my last connection to my mom, that I’ve lost myself in the fear. I can’t let the same thing happen to my daughter. If she is going to help us, it has to be out of mercy.

“I want my mommy,” my daughter says, in desolate little sobs.

“I know,” I say. “I lost my mom too.”

She peeks at me through the gap between her knees.

I set the duct tape down. “What’s your name?”

She snuffles. Wipes her nose on her arm.

“Brooklyn,” she says.

Poor girl. I’m embarrassed for her.

“Can I call you Brook?” I ask.

“My name is Brooklyn,” she says.

“How about Lynn?”

“That’s not my name.”

I say, “What about... BK?”

She shakes her head.

“Crooklyn?”

She likes this game.

“Okay, here’s the deal, *Brooklyn*.” I say. “If somebody you cared about, I mean really loved—”

Jolene *snorts*.

“Like my mom?” Brooklyn says.

“Like your mom,” I say. “Imagine if your mom was sick and only you could help. You would try, wouldn’t you?”

She nods.

“I thought so. You’re brave,” I say.

It’s unnerving how easy, how natural it comes, the seduction.

“Well, Jo-Jo here is very sick. Without your help she’s going to die.”

Jolene twists her ballooning cheeks into a grotesque smile.

My daughter’s forehead scrunches like my mom’s.

I want Jolene to take this seriously, but her rotten attitude says her life isn’t actually depending on any of this. She’s acting like a teenager with a stomach bug, not nephrotic kidneys. It makes me see how young she really is. Like a true teenager, she doesn’t believe she can die.

But she is dying. I can see it. And FF is dying with her. At least the part that makes him human. And me? I feel like every time I look at Brooklyn, I die a little. I can’t not think about the life I’m stealing from her. She wants to trust me. I can see it when she pokes her face between her knees. She’s never had a reason not to trust an adult.

I feel insane lying to Brooklyn. Saying: Jolene is an actress who was cast as Ariel in a live-action rendition of *The Little Mermaid*. Brooklyn likes *The Little Mermaid*. I do too. Sadly, the severity of Jolene’s suffering keeps her up all night, in tears, wetting the bed, unable to memorize her lines for *The Little Mermaid*, and did I mention *The Little Mermaid*, and so on.

Even in Jolene’s swollen, sour state she retains enough of her Disney princess looks to make my story convincing. From inside her shell, Brooklyn eyes Jolene as if any second the actress might break into song. The more I talk, the more Brooklyn emerges. She stretches her legs out on the seat. I feel something intimate between us. I suspect she feels it too. I would even guess that, despite our first encounter, Brooklyn is warming to me. It makes me want to tell her not to.

And then the Amber Alert is on the radio. And at the same time, it comes over our phones.

“You’re famous,” Jolene says, full of snark.

*Two men and a teen girl in a black, late model, Ford Crown Victoria or Chevrolet Caprice.*

I reach for Jolene’s hand. She pulls her hand away.

FF takes the next exit off the freeway, checking his mirrors religiously. He takes backstreets through back alleys and residential neighborhoods of brown lawns and shaggy palm trees that abut industrial parks with chain link and razor wire fences. Tall weeds grow through the cracks in the asphalt. Eighteen wheelers loaded with heavy machinery idle outside salvage yards and auto upholsters and auto body shops and taco trucks.

At last, FF drives into the gravel lot of a pick-a-part junkyard. Inside the compound’s gates are several acres of cars that will never run again. Long lines of cars. A traffic jam rusted shut.

Brooklyn stares out the window at the carcasses. The scrapped cars, stripped for spare parts. My stomach hurts. The innards of the engines in the dirt. The ache reminds me of waking naked on the gurney in the walk-in clinic. The old Armenian doctor. The wide surgical bandage around my waist.

“We can’t do this.” I grab the knotted muscle of FF’s shoulder. “We can’t go through with it.”

“Go through?” He shuts off the engine and looks at me. “We’ve already gone through,” he says. “We’re on the other side.”

Through the windshield, I can see an office trailer. Parked in front are two black cars, Range Rover and Benz, washed and waxed.

“Besides,” FF says. He takes off his sunglasses and I’m surprised by the emotion in his eyes. “The kid wants to help. Don’t you, Brooklyn?”

Unsure, Brooklyn nods yes.

“Think of it this way,” FF whispers. “She would’ve died on a sock, or washed down the shower drain, or vacuumed up at Planned Parenthood like every other little Leland.”

“Just take us to a hospital,” I say.

“Baby,” Jolene says. “Maybe he’s right. This place is dirty.”

“Don’t you start too,” FF says.

He slams the car door and walks across the gravel to the trailer. His gym-built shoulders slump.

The trailer door opens and FF is greeted by a small man in a tight t-shirt. On the shirt are skulls with wings, elaborate lettering, and iron crosses. His designer jeans are distressed in a way that looks like he pissed himself. Next out the door is another guy, bigger, fatter with equally elevated fashion. I recognize both these turds, Shant and Raffi, the most tragic clothes horses in the Valley. They shake hands with FF. Shant waves at me. Narrows his eyes to look into the car. What he sees changes the cordial tone of the conversation.

Voices raise. Both brothers gesticulate with their loud wrist jewelry.

I crawl into the driver’s seat. The keys are gone. I open the glove box. My hands won’t stop shaking as I pick up the gun.

In the backseat, Jolene holds Brooklyn and strokes her hair. I see my mom in both of them.

“I want to go home,” Brooklyn says.

“I know,” I say. “I do too.”

I stare at the gun in my hands, surprised it’s so light. Surprised to be holding it.

“The secret about home,” I say, “is that it doesn’t actually exist.”



The gun feels different than the ones I shot with FF in the desert. I can't find the safety.

“Home is just a foundational state of being,” I say. “You’ll spend your entire life trying, and failing, to return to it.”

Brooklyn breathes fast, loud gasps. Jolene hugs her.

“But in a way, home can be anything,” I say. “Even Jolene can be home.”

For me, she is.

I rack the slide to see if the gun is loaded. Flash, pop, it fires.

FF wants to hit me again. But he can't let go of the steering wheel. We merge onto the freeway and the car shakes as it picks up speed.

"What was your dumb ass thinking?" he says.

"I told you," I say. "You can't trust those Armos."

I'm laying low, out of sight, across the backseat. Brooklyn is on the floorboards with the empty Topo Chico bottles and bags of chicharrones.

Even if I hadn't put a bullet through the windshield of the Crown Victoria, Raffi and Shant weren't going to operate on the kid. They said it was a sin. Said we were "shit eating dogs that rats wouldn't ejaculate on."

They also said they had a new donor. If we had the money.

But they're going to screw us. It's so obvious they're going to screw us, just like they did on the deal for this white Camry, convulsing on the freeway. We have no leverage. They've seen we're desperate.

"Leland was just watching your back, baby," Jolene says, in the passenger seat. It's good of her to say a thing like that. It makes me feel protected. Like maybe she's finally starting to realize how serious this all is and that FF is in full blown psychosis.

Jolene arches her back. Moans. The waste is accumulating in her blood and the cramps are getting worse. "I need some, baby."

"Baby," he says. "I just gave you one."

"I hurt so bad..." She sounds like my mom.

"Okay, okay." FF opens the glove box. And there is the gun. And there are the oxys. He shakes the bottle. Nothing.

“Where are the pills?”

“I didn’t touch ’em,” I say.

Truthfully, I only ate one this morning while he was in Del Taco shitting. There should be two pills left.

“Why are you blaming me?” I say.

The mix of uppers and downers has evened me out, so I feel a semblance of equilibrium. Self-preservation kicking in. I say, “She must have eaten them.”

“LIAR,” Jolene says. “He’s lying, baby.”

“I know, baby. I know.” He rubs her thigh like he’s starting a fire. “I’ll get you more.”

Jolene moans again. Kicks the dashboard.

FF turns the music up. Harsh static over the Camry’s blown-out speakers. He says, “You like that, Brooklyn?”

She shakes her head no.

“Huh?” he says. “I can’t hear you, Brooklyn.”

She’s catatonic. She hasn’t said anything since the gun went off.

“I’m asking you a question,” he says. “What kind of music does your daddy like?”

“Fuck off,” I say.

“Watch the language,” he says. “Brooklyn comes from a good family. Don’t you, honey?”

“Leave her alone,” I say.

“I’m worried about your daddy, Brooklyn-honey. I’m worried I’m gonna have to hurt your daddy.”

The kid starts to cry.

“Shut up, man.” I’m ready to shatter a Topo Chico on his skull. “She didn’t do shit to you. You wanna talk, talk to me.”

“Oh,” he says. “We’re gonna talk.”

He says it like we aren't only going to talk.

"Baby, stop," Jolene says.

It seems like we've been driving a long time. We're past the last exit to my house. We're on the 110 freeway merging onto the 101 freeway. We're driving through downtown. There's LA City jail. There's LA County jail.

"Where are we going?" I say.

He doesn't say anything.

"Where?" I say.

"To get cash. Angel owes us."

"Angel's just a bagboy," I say.

FF smiles like he knows something I don't. But the smile looks different, his one dimple deeper, dire.

"They will shoot—and kill—your ass," I say.

We exit the freeway and pass Mariachi Plaza and new condos rising. We pass a man in a cowboy hat selling fruit under an umbrella, pass the 98 Cent Store, pass the prepaid cellphone stores, pass Jim's Mexican Food, pass the DaVita Dialysis, pass the *agua puras*. The signal is yellow, now red. FF blows through. We are drifting over the line in the road and into oncoming traffic. He makes a left at the next intersection without slowing. Tires squeal. Brooklyn slams into me. "Owww." She rubs her head.

FF turns down a side street and into an alley. The white Camry's belly scrapes on the speed humps. We creep down the alley squeezed on both sides by apartment buildings. A man stands waist deep in a dumpster. A woman waits for him with bags of empty soda cans. A stray Chihuahua.

FF stops the car alongside a *NO PARKING* sign.

He opens the glove box. "Twenty minutes." He picks up the gun. Counts the bullets in the clip. "I'll be back."

He kisses Jolene. But she looks at me. It makes me feel like none of this is worth it.

“I’ll wait,” she says.

He gestures with the gun for me to get out of the car. The keys are still in the ignition. He gives Brooklyn a last look, as if she was an impulse purchase he regrets. He hugs me. Calls me “brother.” Says, “Get rid of the kid. There’s a park down the street, ditch her there.”

“Don’t do this,” I say.

“She needs me. We’re connected in a way you can’t understand.” He lifts his shirt and sticks the gun in his waistband. He walks to the other end of the alley. Disappears into an apartment complex.

I pull out my phone and narc. I dial 911. I tell the police dispatcher where FF is headed with the gun. I tell them that he is mentally ill. That he is going to kill drug dealers. That he’s white. I’m talking too fast. She tells me to slow down. “He’s the son of a cop,” I say, telling them anything I can think of to keep him from getting shot. Snitching is no thing to do to a friend. But here I am trying to save our lives.

I pull the white Camry over on a residential street and try to read the GPS on Jolene’s phone. The car is quiet except for the noises of Brooklyn playing a video game on my phone.

“I want to go home,” Jolene says.

“We’re going to the hospital,” I say.

She says, “My dad will know what to do.”

I figure she’s sick, so I try not to take it personal. It doesn’t make sense, what she’s saying. She doesn’t want to see her dad. She doesn’t want anything to do with that piece of shit who raped her, raped my mom. He is the cause of all this. His blood has been fucking us from the beginning.

“You’re not listening, you never listen to what I want.” Jolene grabs for the phone. “You can’t help me, so take me home.”

“I’m the *only* one who can help you,” I say.

“Is that what you’ve been doing?”

The phone lights up. I see the name Daddy and a long line of texts.

She rips the phone away from me.

“Who is that?” I’m trying to stay calm.

“Were you helping me when you tried to fuck me?” she says.

“But I didn’t...” I say. “I don’t know. No.”

“I’ll have him pick me up,” she says, and starts to text, holding the phone in a way that almost invites me to take it from her.

I grab the phone. On the screen are a series of messages from Daddy.

*Home!* Daddy sent yesterday. *Having fun?* he sent with a happy face. *Call me* he sent a minute ago. *So I know you’re okay* he sends now.

“Give it back,” Jolene says.

Brooklyn pauses the video game.

“Everything’s fine,” I say. “Play your game.”

I scroll Jolene’s phone with my thumb. Discover texts between Daddy and daughter throughout the summer. Intimate photos of Jolene and FF together. Photos sent in reply: Daddy posed with a monkey atop his head at an Asian temple. Daddy at a crowded bar, hands cupping a transsexual girl’s perky tits. I search his face for myself. But his features share the bland sameness of many white guys past middle age, colorless hair, skin abused by exposure to the sun. There are texts about me too, a surreptitious photo taken of me in Chinatown. *I want to meet him!* Daddy says. I scroll further back in time, months, a year, fights and reconciliations blur, banal, intimate, obscene words.

I stop on a photo dated sixteen months ago: Jolene asleep on her back in an unmade bed, her body framed by a tangle of sheets, bra barely disguising the shadow of nipples,

panties low on hips, a puff of pubic hair. Above the bed, in the mirror, a camera flash burns a void in the photo, and I think of my mom, and the man behind the light's abyss, obscured, ominous, shirtless, sagging, wearing board shorts and flip-flops.

I turn the phone around and show Jolene the photo.  
“Are there more?”

“What are you going to do to him?” she says.

“What’s the exit again?” I say.

The white Camry plunges us down the freeway, and I cling to the steering wheel like it’s a life preserver. Jolene is slumped in the backseat with her eyes shut. The cramps are so bad she doesn’t want to talk. But both our phones are dead, so I’m counting on her directions.

“You never listen to me,” she says.

I keep my ear tuned to the radio newscaster over the freeway’s white noise purling. I’m praying to God I don’t hear anything about FF and police shootings. Instead, I get news of the world: “50 die in suicide bombing at wedding—”

“Are the waves going to be big?” Brooklyn asks.

“Maybe.” I sip from the Styrofoam cup and pass it to her. She’s acquired a serious, somewhat foreign vibe since she started drinking my coffee. “Want me to teach you to surf?” I ask.

I can imagine me and my daughter in matching wetsuits, waiting for the right swell of whitewater for her to ride. A gentle push sending her onto the wave. I can see her walking on water, the tide rising, the coastline changing, the waves coming to reclaim us.

Jolene spasms into a fit of coughs that ends in a whimper. She curls into the fetal position. She needs a hospital. I should be driving to a hospital. An hour ago, all I could think about was getting her to a hospital. Nothing else mattered. I was so scared of losing Jolene that I sent my best friend to jail. But now it’s different.

We exit the freeway in Newport Beach, and the steering wheel slips a little in my sweating hands as the boulevard curves in the direction of the ocean. Palm trees fan overhead like



fireworks. For a second, I feel celebratory. Like I'm being welcomed home. I was born just a couple miles away, but this place couldn't wait to get rid of me, and yet still won't let me leave.

"Keep going," Jolene says. She leads me deeper, down the boulevard of palm trees. In the distance is the ocean, pure and polluted with life. "Turn here."

I swerve into a neighborhood. The big homes obscure the ocean, but I can still feel it pull.

"A little further," Jolene says, more lively. "That's it."

Her home is modern, three stories, with walls of windows and a sloped, asymmetrical roof. Among the older houses on the street, her's looks perverse. Like the architect designed the home for Leslie too literally. But it also feels like I've been here before. Like a place dreamt.

The white Camry's wheel bites the curb as I park.

"Welcome home," Jolene says.

I check her in the rearview mirror. She's gotta be kidding. My heart stops. Coming up the street is a police cruiser. And I'm a kidnapper. I'm a sexual predator. I'm going to prison for a million years. The cruiser is nearly alongside us. But I can still run. I can make it to the house. If I can get to Leslie then I can take him with me. I keep waiting for the red, and blue, and white siren. Why hasn't this cop lit us up?

Oh NO. NO. NO. No, Jolene. Don't wave. Fuck NO. Do not wave. Why are you waving? Stop waving.

But the uniform in the cruiser returns the wave. *Hello*. He recognizes her. The rent-a-cop rolls on by. I'm not getting arrested. I'm not going to prison until I die. I've got my whole life ahead of me. And I'm about to blow it all the way up.

"I'm going inside," Jolene says.

"Just a second." I'm still wondering how to stop my heart from beating me to death. And what to do next. I've been so focused on getting us here that I don't really have a plan.

I pop the trunk.

Whoever used to own the white Camry must have worked with his hands, because inside the trunk is a hard hat, a safety vest, an ice cooler, and loose tools. I pick up a screwdriver. My hands are shaking. I imagine sticking the Phillips-head in Leslie's windpipe. Letting the air leak out. I open the cooler. How long can a kidney keep on ice?

Brooklyn pokes her nose in the trunk. "I'm hungry."

"I told you to wait in the car." I slam the trunk shut.

"No you didn't."

"Why is she still here?" Jolene says. She can barely stand, so I prop her up as we cross the street. She can't find her house key. She drops her purse.

"Wait—" I say.

Too late. She's already knocking on the door.

Now what? What am I doing? What if he's bigger than me? Her knocks become more and more listless, until she shrugs in defeat. Leslie isn't home. She leads us to a side gate that opens into a backyard. Wind chimes clink like ice in a glass. Fallen tree leaves, dry and star-shaped, shatter underfoot. On the patio table, an uncorked bottle of sauvignon blanc. Stuffed in the ashtray, the roach of a joint. A path leads down to a lawn where flat stones form a circle. Viewed from above, it's not difficult to imagine the circle of stones as the gate to some astrological observance, some hooded figure summoning the future from constellations of orgiastic bodies.

I pull Jolene through the open patio door. The home is sleek with modern furnishings, but occupied by an old, almost bodily odor. Leslie? No, the smell is coming from the kitchen, where a crock-pot simmers.

"Why are you fighting me?" I say to Jolene. "I'm trying to help you." She's gone jelly-legged and passively resists. I drag her into the living room and lay her on the leather sofa.

She says, "I hate you," and laughs.

On the bookshelves are photos of Jolene. Here, she sits between the humps of a camel. There, in diapers, reaching to touch a birthday candle's flame. Behind the photos are oversized architecture and design books. Alongside these are hardcover reprints of comic books. I stare at the display of superhero comics and remember how my mom described Leslie, the way he pawed at her, like a teenage boy. It isn't fair that he's been allowed to indulge in this comic book juvenilia, free to act like a kid, when he never gave my mom the chance.

I hear a *sukk* as Brooklyn opens the refrigerator.

I walk into the kitchen. Take a look at the timer on the crock-pot. Two hours to go. Leslie is on his way home. Must be. I lift the lid. It's chicken and rice soup.

The way Brooklyn's nose scrunches at the warm smell of the soup makes me wonder about her mother. In another version of my life, I would be holding that woman on the couch as we sit in shock, anxiously awaiting word from the police, moving funds to pay a ransom, appearing on TV to beg for our daughter's safe return.

"I want cereal." Brooklyn's voice has an edge. Too much coffee.

"How about soup?" I fan the smell at her with the lid.

She sticks out her tongue.

"Cereal is basically soup," I say.

I take a bowl from the cupboard. It feels good but also mystifying to prepare the hearty soup for my daughter. For so much of my life, I've avoided the role of caregiver. Now here I am, nourished by the job. I'm comfortable in the kitchen, being a father. Is this how Leslie feels? I move around the kitchen and fix the snack, following in his footsteps. The coffee in the Mr. Coffee is warm. I pour it into a mug that says #2 DAD.

"Coffee me, please," Brooklyn says, slurping soup.

I cut her coffee with oat milk and agave syrup. Set it in front of her with Leslie's *Life Extension* magazine. "Read this.

I want a full report.”

I walk on hardwood floors from the dining room into a sitting room walled with windows. Brazen, spotless, the windows invite the outside world into the home. They say *What is there to hide?* I suppose this is the home of a second marriage. Of reinvention. Its modern shape the declaration of an owner who is at odds with the natural state of the world, yet at the same time, its master. It makes sense, somehow, that this is Jolene’s home too. Open, but shut off. Unknowable, but on display.

“Hey,” I say. “I need the password to your dad’s computer.”

Silence.

“Hey, did you hear me?” I say.

I run to the living room. The sofa is empty. Only a depression made by her body remains.

“JOLENE.” I search the patio, kitchen, living room.

I walk upstairs, but before I reach the top, a heavy *thud* comes from the house’s lower level.

I don’t want to, but I turn, and go down to Leslie’s bedroom. Tiptoe. Each stair, a hole. I am falling toward Leslie. I hold the screwdriver in front of me like a crucifix.

At the bottom of the stairs are two doors. One is ajar. I nudge it open. A garage. A Porsche. Surfboards in the rafters: longboards, a paddle board, and a big wave gun. Hung from hooks in the walls are mountain bikes and a child’s Razor scooter. All of it speaks to a lifestyle of healthy living, a healthy upkeep of the body and mind that feels impossible.

I put my ear to the other door, and hear only my heart.

The door brushes the carpet as it opens: *shhhhhh*.

“Jolene?” I whisper.

Her name feels sacrilegious, here in Leslie’s bedroom with its California King. Imagine the satisfaction of lighting the big bed on fire. Flames licking up the headboard, the walls, the painting—sea frothing over rock tide pools—that feels out of place in Leslie’s stiff and modern home. The seashore is too impressionistic. Too primordial. In the room’s bad lighting, my eyes strain to find the signature of the artist, though I already know the painter is Leslie’s mother.

Sometimes, when my mom was exactly the right amount of high, she would say we had artist’s blood, she and I. My mom drew beautiful still lifes in charcoals, when her depression allowed, but said they were “junk” compared to the landscapes painted by her grandmother. When my mom was more sober, she would curse her grandmother, “the crazy perverted bitch,” for doing what she did to Leslie. When the

old woman was a girl, someone in the family had done it to her too. Probably.

The sunlight through the blinds, what little there is, has the murky quality of photographs shot deep underwater, through cathedrals of kelp forest. And I still can't find the artist's signature on the painting.

Upstairs, music starts to play. Jolene. I should check on her, but I'm not ready to leave the bedroom.

I feel close to Leslie here, like I'm starting to understand him. On the nightstand are earplugs, reading glasses, and a sci-fi novel. On the floor, three different pairs of sandals. On the bureau, several framed photographs: my mom, younger than Brooklyn, squinting without smiling; Jolene and her girlfriends in front of high school lockers, arms folded across their breasts, looking tough, wearing matching shirts that say *THE FUTURE IS FEMALE*.

The last photo drops me. I sit on the bed. A prepubescent boy with buzz-cut red hair and a fat face stares out from the frame. I open it, to rip up the photo of me. But behind the photo are more. Me in first grade. Third. Fifth. Tenth. On the back of each school photo is the date, written in my mom's lassoing cursive. Smooth loops of years that tie me to Leslie.

Upstairs, the music stops. I tear the photos to shreds and remember the rent checks. Jolene was telling the truth. I run upstairs to find her. When I reach the top, I see the front door is wide open. I can see the cacti in the garden, and beyond those, the street. And I think of Brooklyn in the street. And I'm shitting myself because this means I'm about to get caught. But also because she's alone.

I run toward the door and stop. There she is: my daughter. But with her in the living room is an old man. Not old-old. He holds out his hand to Brooklyn. All her childish innocence has its opposite in the old man with the mustache and silvery skin cancer scars.

"Get away from her," I say.

It surprises me and the old man. He stumbles to his feet. And just like I worried, he's bigger than me. A pumped up HGH gym body under a USC alumni shirt. Even so, our resemblance is obvious.

"Who the fuck are you?" Leslie says. Fists up. Neck flexed. He is a horror in his highlighter yellow running shoes.

"You tell me," I say.

"Leland?" Brooklyn says.

"*Leland?*" Leslie says. Recognition dawns, pulling his facelift tighter. "Oh Jesus Christ, Leland." He opens his arms. "Come here, son."

And for an instant, I almost do. In spite of everything, I almost walk right into his arms.

"Daddy?" Jolene says.

She stands at the top of the stairs. Lipstick. Eyeliner like black holes.

"Baby," Leslie says, looking up.

"I'm happy to be home," Jolene says, like a fucked up baby.

She starts to descend the stairs.

"Stay where you are, baby," Leslie says.

Barefoot, her legs shake.

"NO, BABY."

She slips, but catches herself on the handrail. She smiles. Lipstick on her teeth too.

She says, "Aren't you glad I'm home?"

Her legs buckle. Down the staircase she falls—over and over. Leslie rushes to where she lands on the hardwood and takes her in his arms.

What do I do? Do I stop him?

"Has she been taking her pills?" he says, holding her limp body.

I stare, dumb. What pills? I want to ask.

And this is where I really get it: All the power I've given Jolene has been misplaced. She's just a kid. Not a savior or a source, only a sick kid. She was headed to college and a future. She could have taken her pills, taken herself to the hospital, whatever. But she stayed with us wastoids, doing drugs and wearing her body out.

And at the same moment I want to scream, "DON'T TOUCH HER, I'LL KILL YOU."

But it's too late. Leslie strokes her hair and pleads, "Stay awake."

He sounds like he's never needed anything so bad.

He says, "We need a hospital."

Exactly what I'd been screaming at FF for days.

"I'll call an ambulance," I say.

Immediately I'm cooperating. I'm submitting to the weight of the need in his voice. And even as I do, I realize this is how he manipulates people—that his power comes from need. This is how the abuse has been passed down, how victims are kept in check.

"No time, we can go to Hoag," he says. The hospital where I was born. "Help me lift her." Arms entwined, we carry Jolene out of the house and down the driveway to lay her in the reclined passenger seat of the Prius. Leslie motions to the backseat. "Get in."

"...I'll meet you there," I say. "I have to get the kid."

Leslie nods. Climbs into the driver's seat. They pull away and I realize that I may never see either of them again, that I am letting them both go.

Back at the house, Brooklyn watches from the doorway. I didn't know she was a thumbsucker. Her free hand rubs her ear lobe.

"She'll be fine," I say. "She's going get the operation she needs."



Not that Brooklyn asks.

In the kitchen, I pour her a glass of oat milk and sweeten it. I sit her on the couch, where the imprint of Jolene's body is still stamped. I turn on the television and hand Brooklyn the remote. "Don't watch any adult stuff," I say.

At the end of the hall is an office. Golden summer sun makes itself at home in the room through a picture window that overlooks the ocean. I can see Catalina Island far outside the oil rigs and the troughs of summer swells. The view sweeps all the way up the coast. All the way to the Long Beach skyline, where past the breakwater at the Port of Los Angeles a blocky cargo ship idles, and I lie to myself and say I can see the federal prison on Terminal Island and Long Beach Community College, and for the first time in a while, I let myself wonder, really wonder, which one I'll end up at.

Under the panoramic window, laid out on a drafting table, are detailed architectural drawings. Blueprints for an amusement park in Ohio, an outlet mall in Antelope Valley, and a remodel of Triangle Square. Alongside the drafting table is a computer in sleep mode. Screensaver in psychedelic colors. I move the mouse and the screen comes to life with children.

The photos and videos open on the desktop like someone has pulled them up to show me. But right now I wish they hadn't. Before, I needed to see these images more than anything. Now, confronted by all these kids, I can hardly look. And yet I click through the exposed bodies of boys and girls with the light going out in their eyes. I feel like they hate me for looking at them. For not being them. Because it's not happening to me. Because, in among the bodies, I won't find myself. I wasn't there. I won't ever be there, in those rooms. And I wonder whether, in some way, my mom hated me for that reason.

I click the mouse through the bodies, in the hope that I will find her. As if somehow that will save her. As if exhuming her from the mass of images will finally allow me to bury her.



The beach is close enough to walk, but we drive. I steer the white Camry away from the house, safe in the knowledge that we won't return. Summer traffic is thick in the ritzy beach town. Classic rock plays on the radio. Brooklyn sings along and lisps through her newly loose tooth. It feels weird, but not wrong, how comfortable my daughter is with me now.

“If every body was an ocean,” she sings, “Across the USA...”

And it occurs to me that I've been promising the ocean to myself for a long time. And now that we're here together, my daughter and I, it's apparent that the end to our story begins in the sea. That this is where I'll start my new life, however long it lasts. And this is where I'll leave her behind.

In the jam-packed parking lot, I scavenge through the backseat of the car for beach supplies. I can only muscle a single squirt from the wheezing bottle of sunscreen. I try to rub the dollop on Brooklyn's nose. “Hold still.” But my daughter wriggles out of reach. She pushes her uprooted incisor out at me with her tongue. It makes me feel ridiculous for trying to act like a good father.

Together, bare skinned and vulnerable, we set out across the parking lot, over the sand dunes. Brooklyn laughs at me for shouldering Jolene's purse, but especially the flip-flops I stole from Leslie to blend in.

“Beach bum,” she says in a sing-song sneer.

And I want to tell her that this bum is her father. To have a little respect.

“I used to come here with my mom,” I say, instead. “When I was a little fart like you.”

“Fart fart fart,” she sings.

We trudge over the soft sand dunes made hot by the all-day sun. I squint and scan the beach, busy with sunbathers. At the north end of the shoreline, a long rock jetty forms a breakwater that opens to the harbor mouth, and at the end of the jetty a lone fisherman casts his line, arcing with grace, into the sea. A few sailboats, sails low, motor into the vast open ocean. Across the strand, at the beach's southern end, a sheer escarpment of cliffs jut into the water where swells of white caps froth in rock tide pools.

“Let's practice again,” I say. “When you're with the police and they ask where you've been, what are you going to say?”

“I don't remember.”

“Exactly,” I say. I'm glad she understands the consequences her words have for me.

The sand is hot and Brooklyn is jumping. Fire dance.

“I told you to keep your shoes on,” I say.

She makes a mad dash for the waterline. Between hot sand and tender foot, my memory fills the gap with Jolene hopscotching atop the cracks in my mom's back, breaking it again and again. Brooklyn gets further away and her body begins to shrink. She could be either of them, my mom or Jolene. But she is neither. She is her own girl.

The water is too far and Brooklyn turns back. She runs to me, yowling. To save herself from the burning sand, she leaps into my arms. I hoist her up. Piggyback.

“I'm sorry that we don't have towels and bathing suits like everyone else,” I say.

Brooklyn eyes the other children who swim in the shore break. “I have my chonies.”

She starts to strip to her undies. I avert my eyes. I'm paranoid that the entire beach is scrutinizing us. Definitely it's crazy to be walking around with what's inside Jolene's purse. But the other beachgoers are oblivious. They're concerned with their smartphones, their children, and the oddity of other beach bodies.

I steal a glance at Brooklyn. I try to imagine her many years from today, a grown woman, having lived through whatever is about to happen with the cops and her parents, looking in the mirror at the delicate melancholy that complicates her face, and studying our features, hers and mine, mixed in the mirror. I want, and don't want, her to forget me.

She throws her clothes at me, runs, over the tideline wet sand, escaping into the ocean.

My cellphone rings and the caller ID says *LA County Corrections*. I let it ring to voicemail. I'm glad FF is alive. But also relieved he's locked up. I stretch out in the sand and wonder where to sell Leslie's comic book collection. However much I get, it probably won't be enough to start a new life.

Through the slits of my eyelids, I can see the mansions on the cliff, up there among the diving sea birds, the brightly-lit blue sky. I remember coming here, to this beach, with my mom, and I remember the look of longing she would cast up at those homes on the bluff. Now I understand better. It wasn't just a look of longing for what she didn't have, it was for what she had been denied. Wealth and privilege, yeah, but also happiness. I rejected that fantasy like I did so many others she retreated into. I wanted her with me on the beach, not up there, out there, at sea in the clouds. I remember saying a silent prayer for an earthquake. I begged God to shake those houses off the cliff, cast them out of heaven, like fleas off a dog.

On my back, in the soft sand, I strain my neck and see Brooklyn has made fast friends with the kids of a big Mexican family. Together, the girls build a castle and conjure spires and minarets with drips of wet sand. Free in their nudity, the girls are so blissfully unaware of the Leslies of the world who would devour their childhood. The girls scream. A surge of whitewater washes away their fantasy castle. The incoming tide extends all the way to my flip-flops. Soaks my toes. I take it as my cue to stand up and go.

I don't walk far before I hear Brooklyn cry out. But when I turn, she's splashing in the surf with the other kids, not

paying any attention to me. She's already adapted to the new situation, as if she's just along for the ride and doesn't care anything about my mess. Why would she? I'd have to be crazy to think she would care about me, the guy who kidnapped her.

I turn back toward the parking lot. Trudge across the dunes to a group of lifeguards. Bronze, and young, but prematurely wrinkled from the sun. The boys hang idly on the hood of a lifeguard truck and, with professional vigilance, watch girls. They're admiring a MILF in a whale tale bikini, when I drop Jolene's purse into the truck bed.

In among their lifeguard gear, the purse will be impossible to miss. So will its contents: the black and white printouts of naked children; the thumb drives; and the business cards, reading: *L.L. Architects*. The lifeguards will turn it over to the police who will come knocking on Leslie's door.

Maybe I'll visit him in prison.

Maybe we'll be cellmates.

Back in the parking lot, I open the car and sit in the driver's seat. I stick the key in the ignition. It's time to go, to drive forward, to leave the old Leland behind. I've been hanging onto the past, I see that now. I've lived like my own shadow: passenger Leland; drop-out Leland; Leland who waits; Leland who wants to return to childhood, close to his mother where he was oneself, not two. This is the Leland who would fuck his own blood to get there, back to her, back to whole. I'm not that Leland anymore. I turn the key.

The engine comes to life, a healthy whir. And I think of Jolene, how I left her with Leslie. And I think of my mom, of sleeping alongside her, afraid to leave her alone; and of her first try at suicide, how she wanted to leave me, how she wanted to get even with me for abandoning her; and how I felt when she was finally gone, how part of me never wanted her to be found. And I think of Brooklyn, only half protected by sunscreen, alone on the beach, burning.

I shut off the car and stare across the beach. Towards the horizon, the invisible line where two become one. The sun is starting to sink now. Ever so slowly, it disappears into that unity.

JON LINDSEY lives in Los Angeles. This is his first book.



*Allie, always.*

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