

ALONG THE HORSESHOE

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Abstract

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This thesis is a major component towards a completed short-story cycle. The author's work uses a multi-faceted aspect of storytelling by employing its many characters and isolated chapters in a mosaic form. All stories operate independently while simultaneously linking together through familiar characters and setting. Every story involves characters who reside on the same suburban cul-de-sac, which forces them to interact with each other and influencing their lives. By having these characters return, sometimes by a brief presence only and other times by mention of their name, creates a concrete social atmosphere. The author's work provides several glimpses into the lives of characters who struggle with their past and future decisions. As a collective text, this work echoes themes of family turmoil, grief, dependency, and forgiveness. Moments of broken friendships, teen angst, and infidelity reconcile through character introspection as witnessed from the psychic distance of a third-person limited narrator. Each story leaps to a different month in 1994, creating a non-linear time line of self-contained narratives. References from that year, such as music, film, and important events help construct the character's fictional universe.

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The Writing Corner

If you glance in the front window on any normal Thursday evening in the Banks' home, you will see, near the fireplace, a woman relaxing in a recliner, her nose deep in the pages of a book, reading, always reading. Beyond viewing her unbounded contentment, you will recognize the raggedy blanket of identical tabby cat embroideries that drapes over her, a gift her husband gave to her as an anniversary present many years ago. You will notice her husband periodically check on the fire, prodding the burning contents with a poker, replacing each new log when it turns to blackened fragments unworthy of holding even the slightest spark. You will see him leave the room, making sure not to be too loud while doing his nightly chores so as not to disrupt his wife. After he empties the garbage behind the garage, you will see him turn quickly, agilely, as if still a young twenty-something for a glorious second, and hide near the bay window, peeking at Sheila, like you now, and smiling.

This is early afternoon though, a Tuesday, and certainly not, by any stretch of the husband's imagination, normal. Something has happened, something expected and unavoidable, but not this way and not this soon. When this experience is over, an urn of ashes, with its simple but intricate designs of handcrafted magnificence will rest atop the mantle and the fireplace will not burn anymore in Conrad's home.

Across the living room, away from the populace of disregarded faces and forgotten names, Conrad Banks, a widower as of four days ago and slightly shorter than the five-tier bookshelf he stands near, gazes into the ceiling of his deserted writing corner. An attractive and barely visible web in its middle stages of marvelous completion, abandoned for the time being by its tiny engineer, captures his attention. The builder of the silk mesh, a professional seamstress, an alien in a land not her own, conceals herself

in a corner as she watches the innards of the house, while one leg of eight, strategically extended upon a thread, awaits the pathetic tremble of possible food. She takes refuge for now, back against the wall, alert with her six eyes while a spun home of glistening strands rests before her.

The white toupee, given as a present by a wife to her husband, doesn't fit where it should today: it slides further back towards the nape of the neck, revealing slightly too much of Conrad's never-ending, shiny, and brown-spotted scalp. The untouched cocktail in his left hand sweats onto the carpet, marking his area in quickly disappearing, irregular patterns of sprinkles on the rug. The light sensation of each droplet over the creased, aged skin of his fingers reminds him he's still alive, and worse, Sheila is not.

Conrad breaks his concentration on the web. He repositions his bifocals and with cane-in-hand, approaches the others lounging on the sofa and folding chairs he reluctantly brought from the garage. Like the reaction to the first rumbles of an incoming thunderstorm, an immediate quietness occupies the living room. The elephant is visible. The pressure from the others in the room—their stares—instantly envelop Conrad. He can read their thoughts: a bad father, a crazy ol' coot, Conrad was never right in the head to begin with.

Conrad turns to see people in the kitchen, laughing, enjoying the food he decided to cater at the last minute to have the expected get-together after the church ceremony. Why are they laughing? There is nothing entertaining here today. Only death. He wants them out of his house, now. Less, far less is the amount he cares for their presence. He was never a host. He left those responsibilities to his wife. Sheila was the one who took pride in conjuring events, the planning of birthday parties for Vincent, or congregating family and friends by mail invites for barbecues on summer holidays. He wants to yell, scream *something* (Get out!) at the crowd of faces he cannot remember the names to and instead coughs a phlegmy grumble. Conrad finishes his drink, grips his cane handle of

worn masking tape, stomps it several wobbly times and stands with a tremble in his right knee. He suspects they want him to fall, finish what the car accident started.

The half-empty bottle of Scotch, the only thing he bought with any true concern for this occasion, rests on the counter, alone, a wallflower, away from the other bottles of liquor and wine. He grabs it. He pours his glass over the brim (no ice) and tears of dark but transparent brunette cascade to the salt and pepper speckled granite surface. The smell of fiery brilliance, a scent only those who indulge in liquid sins can appreciate, hits him before the actual sting on his taste buds.

The window frame shakes. The April wind picks up in a sudden burst, slightly, enough to ruffle a few stray maple leaves from his backyard. They skim past the screen of his kitchen window in controlled butterfly gestures, each nearly touching the other in an invisible linkage, guiding them wherever nature decides she wants them.

Amongst the ocean of people in the Banks' home, a woman waves her lean hand. This woman, his sister Sabrina, approaches in her usual, proper demeanor. At sixty, she is slender in the waist with a grandiose, toothy smile ("an *older* version of Julia Roberts," Sheila had joyfully coined one evening after her third Chardonnay). Sabrina places her glass of Merlot on the countertop, stands by Conrad, and rests her head of hair the neutral shade of used charcoal on her brother's shoulder.

A long minute of quiet comfort transcends the two siblings before one, now, speaks, taking the reins as usual. "Have you spoken to Vincent?" Sabrina says, still in the same position. Her voice has a stern resonance, a naturally authoritative tone, military-like, especially when pronouncing vowels.

Conrad sips his drink. "I *tried* at the funeral parlor. He won't speak to me, Sabrina. And you know what," he pauses, "I don't care, either. He has a grudge against me for something from twenty years ago. Fine. I don't even know what it is. We gave

that kid everything he ever wanted. Sheila and me. We bought him *everything*. Why, have *you* spoken to him?"

"Yes, Conrad," she says matter-of-factly, straightening her posture. "He *is* my nephew."

"Don't condescend, Sabrina. What did he say?"

She sighs. "That Robert and Emma both go the same high school now and Robert is on the school newspaper and the baseball team. Emma joined the key club. He didn't want them to come to the funeral, so Christine stayed."

Conrad thumps his cane, bares his false teeth. "Christine, there's another one. Because she hates me for no reason, I haven't seen my grandchildren in years. She only took his side because she's married to my son."

Sabrina's eyelids close slowly and she finishes her wine, returning the empty glass in the sink with a quiet *clank*. "He should be here soon."

"Bah." He points the end of his cane towards the front door as if challenging fate. "He won't show. He's probably already on his way back to California by now."

Sabrina says in an uppity tone, "You'll be retiring next year, brother. The big six-five is around the corner. Any plans? My timeshare in Fort Myers is calling you. It's a nice place. Roger and I enjoyed ourselves. The trailers are big. They have a golf course, a pool, shuffleboard."

"I don't know."

She takes him by the crook of his arm as they dodge through the crowded house. She walks with sophisticated poise, head high, confident as the day the dean handed her her Ph.D. And Conrad, with his great limp and a natural frown of white stubble on his coarse face, staggers slightly behind her, the thump of his cane becoming lighter on the carpet and louder again when hitting tile.

Conrad has droned out Sabrina, who, apparently was speaking the entire time. He catches her last few words mentioning, again, Vincent and his possible coming. Doubtful, he thinks. He's probably on his way home by now.

"You never know," she says, standing at the threshold of the front door. "He *could* show."

Before Conrad can shake his head and combat her argument, a Mercedes, metallic silver, turns from a few streets away and continues towards the cul-de-sac. Conrad, suffering from myopia and without his glasses, observes a mobile blob he accepts is an automobile. As the car comes closer, Sabrina's conversation becomes quiet. The Mercedes logo (a quasi-Peace insignia) built into the grill is clear now.

"Vincent," she says. "He *did* show. You see?"

Conrad does see. He sees the forced walk of his son, Vincent Bartholomew Banks, when he exits the car. With the stocky frame he inherited from Sheila's side of the family, he strides to the door in a hurried fashion, head held higher than his aunt's, acknowledging Sabrina *only* by an unfaltering stare and no eye contact with his father. It is this blank look, a form of emotionless leadership in a time of his own mother's death, that allows Conrad to realize that Vincent, his only son, indeed has taken after him. Seeing his own traits in his son pleases him and saddens him.

Conrad hurries away from his sister, leaving her to greet his son. He stumbles around his own furniture and ends up by his writing desk again. This time he sits. He removes the thin transparent cover that fits loosely over an abandoned typewriter. The white block letters of the *F* and *A* and *M* keys are gone, faded to broken outlines. He has spent nights here "bleeding," as his idol Hemingway would put it, pouring his imagination into each confident strike of the keys and an enthusiastic left push of the platen. Was he ever a good writer? He hopes so, but he *more* than has his doubts.

Sabrina's smooth palms cup Conrad's cheek and slide to his shoulders, caressing him, lightly. "Conrad, your son is here." A smile, ever so slight, delights her lips.

This forty-ish man with short-cropped hair, a head you might consider too big for his body, and a thin moustache you would instantly attach to a French painter at a sidewalk café in Paris, stands here. Who is this boy? It is someone unknown, from a different time. This is a youth pretending to be a man. The Vincent that Conrad remembers didn't have gray strands of hair. The son Conrad knew liked sneakers and jeans, not khakis and button-down shirts.

Vincent frowns, sighs, and looks across the room in one hurried movement. "Still drinking, I see."

"Yes, your father loves his Scotch." Sabrina fills the awkward moment with a polite chortle and a sway of her shoulders.

Conrad's cane skids across the floor. Sabrina catches her brother, stands him straight. The possibility of motioning first to grab Vincent and hug him never occurs to Conrad. "You're here," Conrad says. "I am beside myself."

"Are you really, Dad? You appear more involved *in* yourself."

The term *Dad* seems appropriate but also fake, unworthy. Conrad hasn't heard Vincent refer to him by any name, let alone *Dad*, in years. It offends, mocks, the tone of the word, that is, instead of acting as a connecting vein uniting two souls. Only a son who chooses to spend time with his father, who calls him, checks up, should speak such a term.

Conrad bangs his cane against the tile surrounding the writing station. "I waited for you to come, to say something to me for years. Where were you when your mother needed you, Vincent?" Conrad never liked Vinny or Vin or any other nickname the world may bestow upon his son. "You never even visited her in the hospital, Vincent. Your mother asked for you *every* day. And every day I had to find a lie."

“The lying part must have been easy for you. And I called her every day,” Vincent says. His hands move in front of him, cutting the air in nervous gestures. “My work makes it hard for to take time off —“

“Your *work*,” Conrad says, lifting the cane higher. “You’re a teacher, too. They could have given you time off. You didn’t *want* to see your mom, your own mother, Vincent. She did everything for you. We did.” He pauses, keeps his drunken stare on his son. “It *is* our fault you turned out this way.”

“*This way*,” Vincent says before Sabrina interrupts. She leads Vincent out of the living room and through the front door.

Conrad sits. He shifts the toupee on his scalp a few times before throwing it across the room. When the effects of the alcohol wear off he knows he will come to feel regret. He will break down in his living room with pictures and photo albums of Sheila and Vincent. For now, though, he will bask in knowing what he said is right.

The apologies from Sabrina to the guests fill the house. Conrad will block the image of Sheila from his mind with any liquor left in the kitchen. If he dies from alcohol poisoning tonight, who will miss him? Maybe his sister will, maybe Sabrina will shed a tear before going back to her life. What is left?

The gritty scrapes of shoes against the front steps grow loud. Then there is a sudden, but expected, slam of the door. She stands parallel to him, hands on her hips.

“Well, I tried.” An obvious essence of frustration exudes from her. “I tried. You cannot blame me.”

The cane slips to the floor, making a double bang on the tile. “Nobody’s blaming you, Sabrina. It’s *him*. He’s spoiled, he expects too much. You heard how he talks to me. I wonder if he even will miss his mother.” He tries to use the wall for leverage, but falls to the same spot again. “Oh, forget it. Just leave me here, Sabrina. Just get me a blanket.”

Pushing the cane away, Conrad rolls into a ball, hands together under his face. The room spins every time he opens his eyes. Here is fine. Sabrina kneels. She covers her brother with a blanket like he asked.

“He doesn’t have respect, that’s his problem?” Conrad mumbles, getting one last look at his sister before sleep takes him.

“Respect?” she says. Her lips move, twitching, as if they are about to speak more. Sabrina walks away, past the couch and chairs. She pauses for a moment at the candle, its wax melted in a hardened, gray puddle around the wick. She leaves. The quiet click of the front door comes. The aroma of vanilla fills the house.

Hours later, it’s the touch of the blanket covering his shoulders that awakens him to the silence of the house. The corridors and rooms still light empty chairs and overflowing trash bags. Using his cane and the wall, Conrad stands on shaky ground. His head hurts. When he looks to the floor, the blanket catches his attention. He doesn’t remember Sabrina putting Sheila’s blanket over him. He calls out for his wife. He waits for her to respond, knowing she is probably preparing the morning coffee. Nothing returns his call. Conrad is without anyone. Dawn breaks through the still open shades, making a portion of the ceiling shine. The spider, centered within her web, looks back.

The Boy They Call Crazy

Each time they pass the oval mirror in the hallway, the driver of the wheelchair, Xavier Hart, ignores his quick reflection. He knows the mirror is there. He helped his mother put it on the wall when nobody else would. The younger sibling by three years, the passenger, Tucker, holds onto the armrests, screaming in high notes as he is whipped, recklessly, and against his will, around the innards of his house. Xavier skids the

wheelchair into a kitchen stool, and immediately laughs, hard and loud, then continues his romp. He zigzags through doorways and cluttered rooms attempting to hit Spike while he scatters about near his bowl waiting for his forgotten morning feed. This type of Saturday morning performance amongst the brothers is common, to Xavier anyway, who picks when and where these moments of ruckus will take place.

Tucker yelps for his older brother to stop. He seemingly does this with extra sadness and helplessness in his whiny voice when they near their uncle. The uncle, Kato, lounges on the torn couch he has been sleeping on for the past month, decked in his faded black robe, the only thing Reba allowed him to take when she kicked him out. Kato rubs his scrubby face of white and dark stubble, maybe about to say something parental, something caring to his rowdy nephews but instead lights another menthol cigarette, then, sips a mug of sugar-filled coffee.

A dozen times now, or so it would seem (Xavier lost track after three), he has wheeled his brother around the interior, zooming past the mirror so fast he doesn't see the pasty white skin of his face and short-buzzed platinum blonde hair and mauve irises. He never allows himself to gaze into the hallway mirror, or any mirror in his house or at school – when he goes – or in the car. It's an evil twin staring back.

If Xavier has the appearance of a child abandoned on the doorstep by an unwilling parent, then Tucker, although forced by recent fate to endure his twisted-ness, is somehow the Christ baby of the two. Tucker is borderline chubby, innocently likeable in his ways, held in high regard by those who meet him with genuine smiles they present as if destined and expected.

“One more time,” Xavier says. He crashes into the stove, clanging the pots and pans inside.

“No, stop, Zave,” Tucker yells to his chauffeur. “Please, let’s eat, I’m hungry.” He grips the armrests tighter, leaning to the side as Xavier rounds the corners of the kitchen.

Hard steps, rapid and fierce, stomp towards the brothers. “Xavier,” Kato says, blocking the doorway connecting the eating area to the living room. His robe hangs loosely over his shoulders, untied, draping his twiggy frame, a diseased superhero. Kato points, once, twice, obviously signaling to Xavier to wheel Tucker to the table. “And feed the dog, too.”

At fifteen and unnaturally big for his age, broad shoulders and bi-ceps, Xavier knows he could break his skinny uncle in half, if it ever came down to it. One-twenty, tops, maybe one-thirty. Xavier’s step-uncle, Kato, with a stare of someone who is constantly in a fog, would fit nicely and evenly over his knee. When the spine snaps, making a crack of falling timber, Xavier imagines a grin on his face as if someone was there to take a special photograph of the moment.

Small, fat hands clap. “You heard him, Zave,” Tucker says.

Xavier scowls, soars the wheelchair toward the kitchen table. He looks to see Kato sitting back on the couch, dousing that cigarette and lighting another. Xavier rummages through the cupboards. He flings half-empty boxes of wheat cereal and pancake mix and powdered sugar to the floor. “There,” he says, motionless.

“What?” Tucker asks.

The older boy ignores the younger, sits atop the counter. He would rather daringly climb than grab a kitchen chair. He reaches in the back of the top tier of the cupboard. Xavier pulls the creased skin of the paper bag down, slowly reveals an unopened bottle of coffee-flavored brandy. He doesn’t say anything but only stares at Tucker as thoughts of nighttime mischief by the railroad tracks with his friends arise, and then, the possibility of

Tucker squealing to his stepfather - like so many times in the past – comes to mind and his smirk straightens.

“What *is* that? Juice?” Tucker asks, tilting his head like Spike when someone speaks to him in an inquiring tone.

A flushing toilet answers the question instead, and Xavier, in a rush, places the bottle back, jumps down, and throws the boxes of cereal into the cupboard without looking. He slams two pieces of bread in the toaster oven.

“What was that?” Xavier says.

“Juice. What kind of juice was that?”

Xavier exhales. “Oh. It was grapefruit juice. Gross, right?”

“Gross is right.”

Xavier doesn't move when he sees David walking toward him. His stepfather David, a devout drinker but somehow able to function during work hours, has taken his frustrations out on the boy, many times. Only Xavier he hits though, never Tucker, especially not Tucker, not now. Tucker is an honorary saint in the Hart house after the car accident. Tucker is the genuine son, untainted by distance and time, the *real* boy to Xavier's' wooden puppet.

David Hart, a man of burly size and equal girth, sits down. He doesn't speak (he barely does), only crosses his arms - the usual demeanor. A grim look falls over his face. “Do either of you remember what today is?” He shifts his gaze to Tucker and Xavier, until he stops at the older of the two.

Xavier bites his bottom lip. “I do. A week from now I'll be sixteen.” The thought of turning older, especially driving age, finally, will be a major accomplishment in Xavier's' life. The plans he made with his fellow high schoolers over the past few months appear in vivid detail. The hopes of summer weekends spent driving around the neighborhood, blaring “Regulate” by Warren G, is nearing.

Xavier looks to his stepfather, prepared. He knows this wasn't the answer he was looking for. And he doesn't care either. He breaks David's stare to see Tucker slicing the air with his chin to signal the burning toast.

The insides of the toaster oven begin to fume, first with puffs of gray and then darker until black smoke seeps from its sides. David unplugs the device, opens the latch, removes the blackened slices of bread, scrapes butter - low fat - across them both and places them in front of his children with a napkin underneath. "No," he says to Xavier, and then turns to Tucker, "do *you* know?" before taking his seat.

Tucker shakes his mopy, light brown hair and bites into the toast with a crunch like a stepped-on leaf in autumn. Xavier replies in the same manner, but lets his toast sit there, not wanting it suddenly. He wants to hurt someone. These games, these questions from his stepfather and the direct orders from his dead-beat uncle anger him. He feels it growing, making its way through his chest. "At times like these remember to breathe, Xavier," he recalls hearing from Dr. Ramos, the obese psychiatrist who kicked him out of his office when Xavier cornered him for yawning while Xavier spoke of his mother.

The older boy breathes, closes his eyes, and exhales loudly.

"Did you take your medication, Xavier?"

Xavier shakes his head, says, "No, David."

His stepfather stands. His seat makes an unpleasant sound across the tile as he points to Xavier. "What did the doctor tell us? Tell *you*?" A moment of awkward stillness passes in the kitchen before David speaks again. "He said to take the pill at night, always at night. And if you forget, which I knew you would, Xavier," extra bass in his voice now, "then you take them in the morning. It's hard enough to look after your brother," his big, calloused hands motions to Tucker, "without you making problems for us, too. When you're eighteen, Xavier, you better have found a place to live because you're gone. I don't want you here." His hands slam the table, knocking off Xavier's toast.

Xavier breaks eye contact and stares into the ground under the kitchen table. A broken tile slides along the others whenever David takes a step. The vibrations make the piece tremble, but barely. More of the black grime beneath the square reveals itself as the portion moves farther away from its designated spot. What it would be like to disappear into the black hole, right now, and never come back. Would they notice? Would they actually care? Absolute silence takes over and Xavier is alone in the kitchen, in the hole. No Tucker living helpless, sitting idle in a wheelchair by a driver who got away. No stepfather Xavier knows who wants nothing to do with him. No conduct disorder he can't control. Nothing. Only Xavier and his thoughts. It's a life without anything, without responsibilities. He likes it there, in the hole, in the blackness. Alone. The rage he feels, an irrepressible desire, at times, right now, in the hole, is gone. He wants his mother. He wants her to hold him to her bosom like she told him she did when he was a crying newborn and too young to remember. He yearns for the only person who even barely understood and cared about him to come back. Come back. Here in the hole, Xavier can feel her with him, somehow, he can't see her, but he feels her – she's here! - cheering him on from the bleachers at little league baseball. She is here screaming and yelling, not at him, for him. Mom. He rounds third base and slides into home plate, dust clouds consume him, a second of absolute quiet, then, exclamations from everywhere – safe! - they hold him up, carrying him. He feels her embrace, the darkness hugs him, it's her, and she tells him everything will pass in time. She's proud. Don't worry. He feels the love squeeze one last time, a kiss onto his forehead and then the darkness slips away until it's gone. The silence sets him loose and he begins to float in the hole. Inaudible mutters, deep, begin to grow until David's words rise into hard shrieks echoing off the walls.

Xavier, sweating, dizzy, returns to the reality of the kitchen. He pictures himself throwing the empty wheelchair at David, somehow without Tucker in it.

A shriek from Tucker resounds throughout the house, and Xavier opens his eyes to see crimson drips fall from David's nose, pouring on his chin and on the tile, quickly pooling near his light blue slippers, making the fuzzy material a sticky maroon. David stands there, as if nothing happened, as if the pain Xavier knows his stepfather feels doesn't affect him. Xavier glimpses the red smears over the knuckles on his right hand. He doesn't remember punching his stepfather. But he must have. The marks contrast into a faded pink, a peach, against the morning brightness in the kitchen. He knows those are his hands but he doesn't recognize them. They are alien to him, something not his, uncontrollable and dangerous, another person's hands.

Words begin to peep from Xavier's mouth, and then he stops, not forming a word, timid, ashamed, and afraid that he can't control his ways. He tries again to speak, both hands by his shoulders this time, fingers spread wide. "I don't—"

The noise of the smack registers in Xavier's mind before he feels the pressure. The knuckles of David's backhand slap hits Xavier during his stutter spell, across his albino face, his chalk-colored lips, sending him through the room in a double twirl, spit flicking in the air. Xavier's flailing body lands between the microwave stand and the stain-covered refrigerator. Two letter magnets from the fridge door, I and L, drop, shatter to the tiles, displacing the magnets from their red encasements. The tires of Tucker's wheelchair come into view, slowly, blurry. "Spokes," Xavier whispers for some reason and then "chair," but what he really wants to say is "why" but can't produce the power to form the word. Xavier moves his jaw a few more times, drool - and probably blood, too - spill down his chin and onto his T-shirt, saturating his chest with immediate stickiness. He laps his tongue over his teeth to make sure they still root in in his gums. He knows David is still somewhere in the vicinity, but he cannot focus on anything for too long except Tucker's wheelchair. Each time he closes his eyes, the need for sleep wants to

take over. He fights it. He doesn't want anyone – even his own family, *especially* his stepfather - to think he can't take a hit.

Xavier lifts a weak hand to his cheek. It's frozen pain, numb like in the winter when his friends gang up and whitewash each other after they get bored of throwing snowballs at passing cars driven by elderly and playing football in the street. He visualizes himself suddenly standing, charging the person responsible, but some force – fright? the gravitational pull of the Earth? – keeps him curled in a shivering ball, a fetus on the floor.

The sounds of laughter, low at first - who? - until Xavier hones in on the person, and it becomes clear whose rough throat voices it. "You deserved it," Kato says, expelling smoke from a cigarette pull. "You've been acting crazy all morning."

There's that word: *Crazy*.

Two hands grip Xavier's shirt collar, and, with ease, lift him to his feet. The indistinct sounds of David's voice finally begin to make full words and Xavier flinches, squinting, bringing his hands to his face for cover. The hazy outline of his stepfather helps Xavier to his seat and pets his hair before giving him a towel with a few ice cubes in the teenager's hand, and helps him bring it to his face. David washes his hands and face in the kitchen faucet and strides out of the room and upstairs. A slam of his bedroom door reverberates throughout the house. The kitchen is quiet, save for Tucker finishing his toast. The sight of his blood on the floor excites Xavier. As bad as the hit was, he knows he is only stronger now. Kato is gone, too.

"I saw that coming, Zave," Tucker says. "I did." His eyes go to the toast on the floor and back to his brother. "Why?" he says in a whisper, scanning the doorway. "Why do you always have to fight?"

Xavier shrugs. "I don't know, Tuck." His face throbs. He repositions the ice near his eye.

“Did you take your medication or were just lying to make Dad mad?”

Xavier stops listening. The constant barrage of Tucker’s questions tire him. Always with the questions. Xavier stands. His knees are weak as he holds on to the counter and stares out of the kitchen window. A few squirrels race scurry up the neighbor’s Maple tree in the back yard, and disappear within its branches. Xavier, blinded by the May sun, takes his free hand and covers his face. He stays in that position. “Am I...” the pressure to ask Tucker if he thinks he is crazy is too much and he begins to sob through his fingers. If Xavier finishes the question then Tucker will know he, as confident he comes off at times, has a weakness.

The pain in his cheek begins to decline and he takes the now warm cloth away and drops the thin remains of the ice cubes into the sink. He turns, wipes his face clean in time to see David and Kato at the front door.

“It’s Saturday, Xavier,” David says and opens the door. Trash day. Hurry.”

Kato grabs the doorknob. “Hurry. Crazy boy.” He shuts the front door with a bang, shaking the walls.

This time, the urge to fight is not as strong. He still feels like pursuing the smart-ass uncle who takes every opportunity to insult him. The fury and rage diminish for the present, hopefully gone forever, or at least, for a while. Xavier snuffles, looks around the room, and peers out of the kitchen window again. “You ever think about Mom, Tuck?” Xavier asks in monotone, still facing the window, although not looking at anything specific.

A moment passes. “Yeah,” Tucker says. “Sometimes. I wish she was here to make me breakfast again, I miss that.”

A smile comes over Xavier’s face, and he nods, missing her food, too. Betty, mom, has been deceased for five years, going on six next February. “Is that all?”

Breakfast? What about when she bailed me out of jail for beating up that kid who was picking on you at school?"

Tucker says, "Oh, yeah, that too. But, I didn't ask you to do that, Zave. You did it on your own."

Xavier takes a seat next to Tucker and enjoys the calm of the house now. The walls of the kitchen have ceased closing in. "She was there for us though, Tuck, she was there." He grabs his jaw and attempts again to move it in circles to see if there is still pain. There is. He closes his eyes and wishes he is someone else - Spiderman; Batman; Superman – any one of the characters in his comic collection he has stacked in plastic sleeves, lining his bedroom walls in cardboard boxes. The older leans towards the younger and, like a gentle giant, places his hand on Tucker's shoulder.

Beyond the Ether

Certain things stay with you and some are easy to forget. As Ethan Curran finishes his morning jog, a name from a regretful past returns, a woman's name, the woman not his wife, not Jennifer. It was the rose bush. It's not a secret, this woman's name, an ex-girlfriend from years past. Her name, Rose, for weeks, echoed throughout the interior of the Curran residence, accompanied by curse words and threats. During that time, Ethan tried to erase her name from his mind. Thus, eventually, it did fade, as did most words with his wife.

On this chilly Thursday morning, the sparrows that haven't left for warmer climates chirp along the gutters of houses, squirrels wearing their full coats forage at the base of leafless maple trees, and a familiar canine awaits Ethan by his curb. Spike, the Hart family's Pit bull from the other side of the street, wags his stubby tail. Spike should be on a leash. Ethan knows this. Everyone in the neighborhood knows this. The police have confronted Spikes' owners, many times, regarding this issue. Still, the dog goes free. Yet, Ethan doesn't care when it comes to Spike. He pats the dog's forehead. Spike returns the greeting with a lick to Ethan's hand. It's all in how you treat them.

Just as Ethan left it, the front door is unlocked, as is the back. They never lock their doors. Their community doesn't harbor criminals. The town, in general, has a low crime rate. Maybe once a year, you would hear about some kid stealing another's bicycle, but for the most part, their area is safe. And his street, Sherwood Way, a cul-de-sac of similar-looking houses and flawless asphalt and sidewalks, is a pristine location for those looking to purchase real estate. From their backyards lie considerable amounts of woodland followed by a cemetery where most of Pawtucket's inhabitants end up.

The grand piano Jennifer inherited from her dead grandfather years ago, who taught her how to play when she was eight, rests in the middle of the hallway. A cumbersome thing, other have called it, in the midst of a house that already contains multiple bookshelves and desks. Ethan passes by, skimming his fingers over the piano's slick surface, and for a moment, imagines the deep, pulsing resonance of a single note. For hours, he would listen to his wife play as she suddenly shifted from Mozart to Bach, Elton to Liberace, before ending their night with a nocturne from Chopin. She was truly happy then. They both were. While she neglects her art now, the piano and the solitary picture on its lid never go a few days without her dusting its surfaces. The photograph from their honeymoon, the one taken by Ethan when he nearly fell down the side of a mountain taking it, is of a Maine horizon atop a pine tree-laced landscape at sunrise. Although there were many Polaroid pictures from that week—mostly of themselves, smiling and goofing—Jennifer decided to frame this one, one they are not in, saying that the orange dawn and the sea of green foliage spoke volumes of hope, more so than any of the others.

Upon the refrigerator, hidden behind bowls, something beige and white silently moves while Ethan checks the area for his wife. The indoor cat, Jennifer's cat, Pussy Gato, a large feline of jelly-like proportions, purrs and rubs her side along the largest pan. How does she not knock them over? She jumps to the countertop, sniffs the bowl of fruit. The apples are his. The grapes are for Jennifer.

"Damn cat," Ethan whispers. "Someone outside wants to meet you." He pets Gato's head. Unlike Spike's warm greeting, Gato meets Ethan's touch with ready claws. "Damn cat," he yells. Gato runs off. He flicks the faucet on cold, submerging his bloody hand under the rush of water. It's not deep. Gato's cuts never are.

He notices Jennifer's coffee sup in the sink. He thinks of the days when they had their morning coffee together. Back then, when they first moved to Sherwood Way, being

with one another as they watched the day awaken was something new and special. They wouldn't speak. They would just sit there, in their beds, watching the dark room turn golden with sunlight. Ethan washes her cup and goes upstairs. They have grown apart. They pass one another in the hallway, sleep in the same bed, yet live as if strangers. Sometimes, days will pass without any exchange of words. Though rare, on good days, Jennifer and Ethan may plan to order take out—usually Chinese, sometimes Italian, never fast food—only to bicker about the most common of fights: having children. Last night, just before they both retreated to their cold sides of their beds, they fought about the future of the Curran crest. Ethan wishes to have an heir. And Jennifer does as well. But his affair last year has changed things. She claims now isn't the right time. She is up for promotion at the firm. How would it look if she gets this big raise only to go out on maternity leave a few months later? It's more than that, Ethan suspects—she doesn't trust him anymore. He knows he must prove himself a worthy husband again before she considers having kids.

Ethan has thought of leaving his wife, often enough, to the point he has even made an appointment to see a lawyer of his own to which he cancelled. After his affair, he thought, the marriage should have corrected itself, bygones forgiven and forgotten, but it hasn't. Although Jennifer has taken him back, their bond is not the same. Her trust is gone. They live in a static universe, its dark matter not progressing, existing rather than living. It took them the better part of a year to regain their sexual relationship, which, even at this point is still awkward.

He enters his room. Jennifer Curran readies herself, latching earrings to lobes, buttoning blouses, and primping her bangs. She places the comb onto the bureau. She reaches for her birth control pills, pops one in her mouth, washes it down with a glass of water, and walks past him as if he isn't there. There she goes.

“Pivot, guys,” Ethan says. “You don’t want to break your ankles.” He runs with them, sneaker squeaks echoing against the walls as he monitors the pick-up basketball game.

“Xavier,” Ethan says to one of the students. “Pay attention, pass the ball.”

The object of Ethan’s remark is the albino boy, Xavier Hart, one of Spike’s owners who only participates in gym class if absolutely forced. He scowls at Ethan before kicking a door open to leave.

An alarm buzzes. “Five minutes,” Ethan says to the others. He withdraws to the small office he shares with the other gym teachers. The perpetual funk of sweat and dust fills the room. Photos of the instructors’ families cover the desk. He opens the drawer, and shuffles through bitten pens and empty staplers before removing a picture frame. The dusty photo, black and white, is the profile of a woman reading a thin book, a Robert Frost collection, while sitting on a large rock that overlooks the Atlantic. After the picture, Jennifer squirmed and giggled and told Ethan to stop when he kissed her collarbone, only to expose her neck, again, so he would try once more, which he did.

Ethan remembers: Jennifer, at one point, during their formative years in college, was a charismatic spirit that would run down the block naked if only on a whim. She was a free spirit then, a bird incapable of caging, someone who kept Ethan interested. Men wanted her. Girls hated her. He married Jennifer with hopes of producing a family to show the world how much he loved her. He painted her toenails, gave her back massages, always held her hand in public—if Ethan could help her, he would. When she would ask him to purchase her feminine products at the market each month, Ethan, at first, would shake his head, playing coy with his precious wife in a little game married couples play, only to bring her close and kiss her, reassuring Jennifer of his reliability. Then Rose came around. At the dollar store, aisle 13, looking for manila folders for his wife’s supply, he saw a face from the past who was also looking for stationary items. Rose was always

dirty-blond, as she was that day, though she grew her hair long. It fell to her back in a tight braid. She looked new to Ethan, something familiar yet unseen to his eyes. When he thinks about that affair with Rose, he doesn't know how to rationalize it. Was it fate? They, Rose and Ethan, while dating, fantasized constantly of meeting in the future and having sexual romps simply for the thrill. But Ethan never expected anything of the sort to happen. Jen did take him back, though she does not want to have children. When he brings this up, she claims it could threaten her career. Though, he knows deep down, she doesn't trust him enough to put herself in such a position to have kids. After she took him back, she went on birth control pills.

If they did conceive, Ethan thinks the child would be a son. Only a majestic name would do. Alexander would have Ethan's fair complexion and Jennifer's heart. Ethan would groom his son to love the Yankees, hate the Red Sox, and only purchase Ford Mustangs. Jennifer would instruct her son to chew with his mouth closed and use napkins to clean his fingertips. At nineteen, Alex (*not* Alexander) would enjoy his carnivorous appetite while ridiculing vegetarians after proudly announcing his support for the Republican Party. Finding molecular equations and matrimony as a must for success, Alex would major in chemistry in college and marry a woman ten years his senior with blonde highlights. In his thirties, when Alexander could not sleep, worried about the future of his own children, he would call his father. Ethan would tell his son to practice patience and always show his kids the positive. Then, Ethan realizes, that he would never bring his son to a Yankee game or have late night discussions about his grandchildren, because Alexander would never be.

A woman of slight build and auburn hair steps in the office doorway. "Hey there, buddy," Cindy Healey says. Her Irish accent never ceases to dazzle Ethan.

"Right back at you," Ethan says to the fellow gym teacher. Before he stands, he shoves the picture back inside its drawer. Cindy looks different today. He scouts her

person, fast. “I like it.” He gestures to her auburn hair. “Different. Short.” He truly doesn’t like her hair—long and curly looked better.

“What’s new, Ether?” Cindy says.

He points to the now-dented door. “That kid’s a problem.”

“Xavier? He is rather quiet. Maybe he just needs someone to look up to. Probably has father issues.”

Don’t we all, Ethan almost says. His own father never stuck around. He’s like a dead leaf skipping from place to place before it finally decays somewhere, alone and forgotten, Ethan’s mom used to say. Ethan stops short his sigh of pity before Cindy catches him. “I had a good run this morning. Some construction thing near my house, so I had to take a different route. Saw a rose bush.”

“A rose bush?” She looks around the room as if the answer to her question is on the walls. She retrieves a photo among the others on the desk—her brother, Brian. On Sundays, when driving for recreation in the countryside, Ethan suspects Cindy is the type that debates whether to return to Dublin to live with her family whom she left for a career in the States. Cindy often speaks of her family, always telling Ethan bits of news about her brother. Ethan sees her bring the picture closer to her face, and suddenly remembers Cindy’s love for Nirvana. She was so distraught when Cobain took his own life. She called out of work the next day. Ethan smiles at her devotion to something so out her control.

“I spoke to Brian’s nurse today,” Cindy says, placing the picture back. “Not good.”

A few students pass by talking about a movie. A bell rings.

“Well, that’s me,” she says. “Lunch?”

“You know it.”

Ever since Ethan has worked with her, some six years now, he has thought, on many occasions, of telling Cindy his feelings for her. What would she be like outside of work? Many times, your fellow associates are just fixtures of their real selves. Other times, once they clock out, they turn into other people, sometimes for the worse—though, he cannot imagine Cindy in a negative light. She seems sincere.

#

The school's head secretary, Ms. Farnsworth, cleans the plastic utensils she brings every day to eat her yogurt and microwavable pizza. She is known to sit through her lunch break not speaking a word to anyone, cutting her slices into small pieces. Ethan stands behind her, awaiting his turn at the sink. Ms. Farnsworth stuffs the dry utensils in her purse. When she turns, she makes brief eye contact with Ethan and he returns it with a nod. What *is* her first name?

The apple goes under the faucet, rotating counter-clockwise while the water gushes over its uneven sphere. A napkin smothers its exterior, drying it before Ethan takes a bite. He twirls the apple in his palm, trying to remember what it was like when he was single. He can't. He dated Jennifer right through college, and then up to the altar, that's how it happened, as if it were destiny—an alignment of planets reminding the gods that Jennifer Craft and Ethan Curran were the chosen ones at that moment, allowed for compatibility, let it be known. How amazing it was: emotion pouring from one another, the way they cried together, lying heart-to-heart when making love the night he slid the engagement ring on her finger.

“Starving,” Cindy says, approaching the table.

They sit. Cindy eats her sandwich. Ethan juggles the apple.

“What happened?” she says, pointing to his wounded hand.

“I'm more of a dog person.”

“You should cover that, Ether.” Cindy stands, rummages through a drawer and returns. “Here,” she says, applying a small bandage over Gato’s mark.

When Cindy places her hand on his, her touch is gentle, the inviting charm of a pastel artist lightly shading the depths of background scenery on a canvas that was off-white. Cindy and Ethan stare at one another. Her green eyes never falter. For those several seconds of muted silence, her nails, manicured to perfection, white tips gracing each digit with a glossy finish that captures the fluorescent lights of the break room, transport Ethan. He thinks of the shores of Ireland, the breaking waves launching the scent of salt in the air, where only yards away a cottage sits on a cliff. A man and a woman exit the doorway, a newborn baby draped in blue blankets in her grasp. The husband reaches over, kisses his wife’s cheek, and wraps his arms around her waist. They watch Alexander sleep.

As tenderly as Cindy nurtured his hand, she places it on the table. They eat. Minutes pass. Other teachers arrive and leave.

“You’re quiet,” she says.

“Thinking. Hungry.”

“Well said, caveman. Me. Think. You. Lie.”

He throws the apple core into a nearby trashcan. “I was just thinking about Jennifer.” He immediately regrets mentioning his wife.

“Still won’t budge, will she?”

Ethan looks around the room, holding his breath, praying nobody else heard her. They are alone. He exhales. A trickle of sweat drips from under his arm. “No,” he whispers.

“I’d like to have a family one day. Maybe not right now, but definitely sometime soon. I’d think I’d be a good mom.” She smiles.

As much as he appreciates Cindy's concern, Ethan fears it. He fears it because it makes his attraction to her even tougher to ignore. From the first day she began working at the school, Ethan had an interest in her. Many times, *many* times, Ethan has pondered what Cindy would be like with him, alone. He stands, returns the chair to its position.

She grasps his forearm. "I know you're not a big movie fan like me, but there's a new one playing tonight. Come with me?"

"I'm married." Ethan, surprised by his response that came as if trained, tries to say a different reason not to go. "I'm married."

"Jennifer can come, too. We'll make it a double date. It will be nice to meet her. There is this new movie out. It's about prison. They say it's *the* movie of the year. It's playing at nine o'clock. I have ballet at six."

"Are you still with that guy?" He forgets her boyfriend's name, but recalls Cindy saying she met him at ballet class.

"Kevin. Over a year." She reveals a bare ring finger. "So, yea or nay, Ethan? Should I expect you?"

She called him by his name. He fumbles for words, coughing into the crook of his arm, searching for any extra seconds to think of a lie. Cindy's expression is not one of anger, but uncertainty. Though naturally pouty, when she offers a genuine smile, her lips bloom to pollenate those around her with delight, but now, it's as if the petals of that flower have shriveled, gone comatose, realizing that its future has limits while waiting for Ethan's response.

"Sure," Ethan says.

The layers blossom, stretching outward again, illuminating its ruby shine and exquisite aroma upon Ethan.

#

It is October and although Eastern Standard Time begins tomorrow, the days are noticeably shorter. The neighborhood smells different, crisper, Halloween-air. Winter is approaching. Now is simply a precursor, a countdown. The sun that rises above the Hart residence now sets behind the Curran's home. Nightfall comes, and with it a question.

Clangs of pots and pans fill the house. Jennifer prepares food in the kitchen. He knows the smell: steak with a tinge of spice. Jennifer likes to sprinkle the meat she cooks with an array of herbs only to drench the meal in steak sauce before the first bite.

Ethan peeks around the corner. A maroon dress hangs loosely over her slim figure. Her hair is out of her face and brushed back. She hustles, dumping rice in a pan and corn in another. She uncorks a wine bottle, a red, and pours two equal size glasses, placing them near the plates where they will sit.

A few recognizable piano notes play from an old radio on the counter. She stops in mid-stride. Jennifer closes her eyes. Her head sways. Her fingers type the air, waltzing the arpeggio of *e d e d e b d c a* until her arms and shoulders move in unison with her hands. This woman before Ethan is not his wife—she is someone else, somewhere outside the invisible where only the human essence in its simplest form exists. He thinks of interrupting, and almost does with a step forward, but stops when he notices her eye. The teardrop, only one, doesn't touch her face, but instead dives perfectly and with seemingly guided purpose to the tile and disappears. *Fur Elise*, one of Beethoven's many masterpieces, as mentioned by the radio announcer, ends.

#

Ten minutes later, after changing into formal attire, Ethan joins her in the kitchen. A candle rests on the table. Each dish Jennifer cooked is in symmetrical order. Pussy Gato is not around.

"How come you didn't let me know you were home?" Jennifer says. "I looked outside and saw your car."

“Seemed like you were hitting your stride by the smell of it. Where’s your cat?”

“Gato’s your cat, too,” Jennifer says.

“That cat hates me.”

“They say animals can sense things.”

For a moment, neither speaks.

“That dog out there?” Jennifer says.

“No. He must be inside.”

“For once.”

She dims the kitchen lights. They sit. The flicker from the candle bounces off their faces. They eat. They drink. Ethan passes the bowl of sweet corn to her. She passes a bowl of cranberries to him. They speak at the same time. They laugh.

“I was thinking we could take a short vacation this weekend,” she says. “Go to Maine, the mountains, near Moosehead Lake. I know how much you love it there. It would be perfect for the both of us.”

A napkin seesaws to the ground. Jennifer catches it, proffers a smile, all teeth, something Ethan hasn’t seen in a long time. He leans towards her. They touch lips and their wedding day appears. He remembers the way Jennifer’s bottom lip trembled when they sealed their union.

“Sure,” he says before taking a sip of wine. “It will be good to get away.” He looks at her. “I have a question for you.”

“Go.”

“Are you tired?” Ethan says.

“I don’t know. Not really.”

“Want to go see a movie?”

“A movie?” Jennifer’s eyes leave Ethan, probe the nearly empty bowl of corn, his plate of half-eaten steak, the label on the wine bottle, the bandage on his hand and back to her husband’s face. “What’s that?”

“*Our* cat did this.”

“I thought we were all out of Band-Aids.”

“We are,” Ethan says. “I got it from work. The nurse.”

Jennifer stares at her husband. “When was the last time you cared about a movie, Ethan?”

“I promised someone at work we would go to a movie tonight. Meet them there. *Shaw*-something it’s called.”

“Promised, did you?” Jennifer straightens. “Who?”

He finishes his wine. “Cindy. Cindy Healey. She’s a gym teacher, too. She’s bringing her *boyfriend*. They’ll meet us there. It’s okay, Jennifer.”

“It’s okay?” She rises quickly, disturbing the candle’s flame, making shadows morph across her face. Her chair slides back. Without anything further, no loud arguments, no accusations, she walks away.

He manages a weak, “Jennifer—”

Ethan, knowing not to make matters worse by apologizing—a gesture she will definitely, at this moment, never accept as truth—grabs his keys. And when he looks to the kitchen to make a final plea for peace, she isn't there. He leaves the house.

#

They meet in the parking lot. Cindy is alone, wearing jeans and mules, a red flower sticks out from her hair.

“Where is—?”

“We broke up.”

“I thought you were looking to tie the knot,” Ethan says.

“Kevin and I, it came out during ballet practice tonight, are apparently different.” She says this with a monotone boredom as if she has explained it before, perhaps to her family and close friends.

Standing idle, trying to ignore the growing freeze of the evening wind, Ethan debates: should he still enter the movie theatre now that her date isn't here? Or should he turn around and head home? The right choice, he knows, is to leave without any physical contact, say good-bye, and walk away.

The movie tickets cost him twenty dollars. The distinct odor of buttered popcorn fills the lobby.

“Oh,” Cindy says.

“What?” Ethan pans the area.

“Ms. Farnsworth had a heart attack this afternoon. Bad one, from what I hear.”

For a moment, Ethan doesn't have any sorrow for Ms. Farnsworth. They never spoke besides a hello and goodbye as they passed one another in the halls. How many people do this on a daily basis? Then, he sees in Cindy's eyes, between a squint and a blink, sympathy. I'm sorry, he almost says.

“Do you know her first name?” Ethan says. “Is it Mary?”

“I'm not sure. It starts with an M, though.”

The ushers begin taking tickets. People line up. A man hollers for them to hurry. They enter. They sit in the middle of the middle. He gives her the armrest. People talk. Ethan doesn't know what to say. Several minutes of awkward silence pass. He didn't expect her to arrive alone. Pressure is there, around them, making Ethan struggle for words.

Ethan prepares to inquire about her sick sibling, about the treatment process for multiple sclerosis, but the lights dim, previews show, and the movie begins. Freeman, a neutral narrator, tells his story of jail life, of Robbin's character who is unjustly confined

for crimes he didn't commit. And though Ethan sees other theatregoers wipe away tears when Robbins finally escapes, he notices that Cindy does not—not at that particular moment anyway. Nearly three hours later, after the film and a much needed bathroom break, they exit the building. It's colder. The pressure returns. Ethan isn't sure how to end this night. He figured their other halves would be here to block any uncomfortable moments like this. They start down the steps. Cindy trips. Ethan catches her. She smells like the sugary syrup you drench your morning waffles with. Her lips tastes the way fresh blueberries do when they burst. The scene lights in one flickered flash as if the paparazzi are watching. It's a long kiss, passionate, overdue. They break at the same time, stand back, and grin. And then, as if on cue, they hug. She is warm. Goodbye, they whisper in each other's ear. He knows her farewell means so much more. Hope. He knows Cindy wants to settle down, have a family. She said it earlier today. He watches her as she walks away, the red flower behind her ear bouncing gracefully with each step. Cindy zigzags through the parked cars. The gleam of her headlights shine. Ethan waves. She honks.

The first chance he gets, Ethan calls home, leaving a lengthy message on the answering machine. He will stay at a motel for the night, and how Jennifer shouldn't worry. He even suggests she can stop by if she wishes. In his motel room, allowing the heat from his argument with his wife to desist, Ethan expects to see a demon in the mirror, hovering behind him as he readies for bed, preparing to swoop down with its leathery wings and pointed talons to take him to a place where he knows he belongs. Is Cindy the one, the real *one* Ethan shall spend his life with? Is this really happening? He thinks of the next time he will see her and the certainly shy, yet fun moment they will have. He barely sleeps.

#

When he awakes this next morning, Friday, Ethan is filled with an elation that he hasn't felt in years. If he went home right now and found that Jennifer filed for a divorce

with a snarling attorney by her side, threatening to take everything, Ethan, with enthusiasm, would grab the papers and sign each one. Glowing, beaming: that's how Ethan recalls the way Cindy looked after they kissed. It was her walk, her bangs covering her forehead. If her presence could have made a sound, it would have sizzled. Ethan will see her later today and confess his feelings for her. She will reciprocate and the world will rejoice for them. Everything about her is right.

Ethan wears the same slacks, shoes and dress shirt he wore for dinner with Jennifer. He thought of returning home this morning to change, but reneged when he arrived at the stop sign that turned to Sherwood Way. He wasn't ready to face the quarrel.

First period ends. He sits at his desk, looking at the picture of Cindy's brother: she and Brian share the same oval jawline. Does Brian have kids? Ethan thinks of his own two brothers and their families. They must secretly pity him. He thinks this because they never bring up the possibility of Ethan having kids after his affair with Rose. They say you can always recognize envy in others but never in yourself. Ethan is the exception to this rule. He feels the pang of jealousy when he goes to barbecues and watches his older brother Randy and the younger Phil play horseshoes with their children, laughing with their wives while teaching their sons how to arc their throw just right so it has the best chance of landing around the stake in the sand pit. Alexander would be a natural at horseshoes, tossing each with genius precision and going on to win championships if he wished.

His thoughts overflow with what he will say to Cindy. Should he tell her outright he has had feelings for her for some time now? No. He doesn't want to scare her away. If she is game, which he knows she obviously is by the reciprocating kiss last night, then they will fall into one another's arms again. Ethan opens the drawer, preparing to discard the photo of his wife when he notices a small envelope with his name written in cursive on its front.

Slow steps approach his office. Xavier Hart walks by the doorway.

“Xavier, have you seen Ms. Healey this morning?” Ethan says.

Xavier shakes his head.

“Everything okay, Xavier?”

The boy stops for a moment, turning slightly as if about to speak, and then continues.

Ethan opens the envelope:

Ether,

I miss you already. Just writing this to you makes me want to cry. I have bad news. I must catch the next flight back to Dublin. Brian’s getting worse. The last few hours for him were bad. Foolish me for thinking that things may actually get better one day. You know me, always the optimist. I miss you, Ethan. I know you are married. And I know my part in your life shouldn’t have gotten as far as it did the other night, but I think upon my return we should forget what has accumulated between us and stay as we were. You’re my friend. I believe we will be happier this way. I do not know when I will return to Rhode Island. Maybe within the next year. Maybe sooner. I don’t know. I may not return at all. I don’t know if you had noticed, but during the movie, I almost cried several times. Tim Robbins in jail like that, condemned for no reason, it made me think of my brother. Brian doesn’t deserve his fate. Then to go home and get a phone call from my mom about Brian was just too much. I belong there. I will miss you. I will miss the way you look at me. I will miss the way you listen to me when I speak.

Your Friend,

Cindy

#

Ethan pulls in his driveway. He shuts the car off, but doesn’t get out. He watches the sunset dip an hour sooner behind his house, the woods, the incinerator. Up until a few

hours ago, Ethan Curran was ready to file for divorce, to bring the storm of separation to Jennifer and hold nothing back. But now, what does he have left? Cindy went back to Ireland, probably for good. And if she does return, who says she would spend her life with Ethan. It was only a kiss, one kiss, special at the moment, at least to him. Does anything change by its own will or is it all part of a plan? Destiny, something he has always fought against, he guesses, must be real.

Furious barks greet him as Ethan steps from his car. He halts. He's never seen Spike with this rage. He proffers a hand but quickly pulls it back. Spike growls, his drool trickling to the sidewalk. Ethan inches away in small steps, quiet, trying not to excite the dog any more than he already is. Spike mirrors Ethan's movements. Again. Again. Ethan pivots, locking his ankles. He breathes—once—before Spike charges. With each step his loafers make hitting the asphalt, Ethan can see the back gate becoming larger until it is feet away. The jingle of Spike's tags dangling from his metal-pointed collar coincide in perfectly timed moments to the beast's gallops, letting Ethan know just how far behind Spike was and now is. Ethan runs faster, sprinting. The image of the rose bush comes and goes. He drops what is in his hands. He flips the latch, springs through the entrance and locks the gate in one motion, surprised he has made it unscathed. He expects to see the dog breaking through any openings. Instead, Spike, the Pit bull Ethan has notoriously defended in debates, but won't anymore, sits.

Yearning to get inside his home, Ethan doesn't notice the trashcan in his way and tips it over, spilling its boxes and unfinished food from the night prior. He approaches the back door. It's locked. He reaches for his keys. Where—? He pats his pockets several times, hoping that with each touch they will magically appear, alerting him to his dream, waking him up. He realizes he dropped the keys in the driveway. He looks to the gate, seeing Spike still there, panting, waiting for Ethan's next move.

Only the front entrance has a doorbell. This one, the back, has nothing, just a screen door that protects an inner door with a glass window. The inside of the house is black, growing dimmer by the second. Where is she? She should be home. Her car is here, the used Toyota sedan with a better tape player than his rust-laden Subaru. Sleeping, that's it. He knocks, hard, making the door shudder. A shape, tightly wrapped in its robe, comes to focus.

Smiling, he puts his hand to the doorknob and sees a small, flimsy object in her grip. For a moment, she stands there, expressionless, not touching the lock. Jennifer looks away and holds the item to the glass. Ethan peers at the note until he understands it is a photo. It is a Polaroid of two people kissing on concrete steps, bright letters of what appears to represent a movie theater in the background. Ethan shimmies the doorknob again, calling out to Jennifer in a high-pitched tone he doesn't recognize. Jennifer turns away. For whatever reason, Ethan may never know, the name Margaret comes to mind—a heart attack, Jennifer's heart, I broke it.

Ethan walks in circles. He puts his face in his hands. Shame in the form of sweat splashes his hairline. He looks to the mess of the trashcan: the kitchen radio rests on its side. He steps on a box covered with remnants of the last night's cranberry sauce. Ethan picks it up—a clear container of little pills, Jennifer's pills she takes every day. She threw them away. The container drops from his grasp as if in slow motion. He runs to the door, banging the window with his fist. He calls to his wife, wanting to talk to her of the future, of their family. He wants to talk to Alexander and about what he thinks of his old man who would do anything for him if only given the chance. Ethan would never leave his son, never show him how to hurt. He would tell Alexander to take after his mom.

The interior lights turn on. Through the glass, a figure of a woman wearing a green robe and orange slippers sits on a bench. She holds a grapevine to her mouth and eats each berry before putting her dancing fingers to the ivory keys, soft and slow, until

her groove maintains, growing quick and sure. Gato leaps upon the piano's lid, inspects the picture with a few inquisitive sniffs, rubbing her side against it. The photo falls. Ethan hears nothing, not the crack of the picture frame of their honeymoon or which piece Jennifer plays.

Our Blood

Forty-three years ago, on a similar day when the weather conditions were tundra-cold, a child, a boy that would grow to have an upturned nose and teeth the color of twenty-four karat gold, exited the womb, screaming that he was here to change things. This boy would go on to cure cancer, shelter the homeless, end world hunger—all before the age of twenty. That is the way Sebastian likes to think of his impact on the world. Although, now, as the days of middle age continue to fall upon him, he considers, more and more, that his life is anything but special.

He chose to live in his mother's basement some years back. Being as old as he was, then twenty-five, he knew he would catch flack for it. But why not stay? he still

proposes to himself when he imagines the responsibility of independence. If he failed, he would have to move back home, anyway. Why not take advantage of what he has? What if he were to move out with roommates who live wild, throw parties, and never clean up after themselves? No way. Low rent (sometimes none at all), free food, cable, privacy—why leave? Sib has made his peace with his current residence some time ago and if you have issues with that, then that's your problem.

The clock turns to 10:31. Five minutes until Sebastian officially turns a new age. He mutes his morning cartoons. Sib will now sit in quiet amity, a birthday ritual he has been practicing for years. And with this tradition, he thinks of his childhood, grade school. When teachers would ask him what he would like to be when he grew up, he would say a racecar driver, mimicking the hand movements as if steering around a track. Even now, with eyes closed and not a sound to interrupt his fantasy, Sib can see the pavement as it disappears under his tires, and feels the rumble of the high-octane engine all around him. As the minutes pass and forty-three settles itself, a brief smile appears, Sib has a sense of pride for reaching such an age. He straightens his posture, pans the basement. Nothing has changed.

Sebastian maneuvers around the miniature racetrack that borders the walls of his bedroom to near his window. A few years back, when he decided that buying a racecar track was a good idea, he gathered his possessions—bed, couch, TV—to the center of the room so the track could run against the walls, making a circle within the better part of the basement, save for the washer and dryer. This enables him to enjoy his hobby without too much effort. He can sit on his ass, most times still in his bed, and control the single car across the plastic lanes.

He moves the curtain of the small cellar window that faces the driveway. Snow. A thin layer of white accumulates along the ground, blowing in swirls and streams before finally slowing down, only to move again. It is early. This storm, expected as the worst of

'94, though only mid-January, was to begin later today, afternoon-ish, and continue into the night. As Sebastian prepares his first cup of java with more cream and sugar than coffee, he realizes, once again, he should not have put much trust in the news.

He follows the dropping snowflakes until they merge with the others. If the snow keeps with this momentum, he will surely shovel today. To mow the lawn in the warm months is bad enough, bits of grass and dirt in your eyes until you wash your face, but shoveling snow is the worst. The layers of clothes, the heavy-ass boots, and the awaiting back pain from lifting the loads of wet snow—please, no.

What Sebastian really loves, what he really desires more than if sudden independence were handed to him without paying for it, is a life filled with speed. He dreams of sitting in the driver's seat of a racecar as it hurtles itself at top speed over the pavement of some tropical city's track. To live this life would have been ideal, nothing but road and RPM's. As he stands here, looking out of the window at the growing white snow on the black asphalt, disappointment fills his heart. A regret appears: Why didn't he take that job in New Hampshire? He'll never forgive himself. Mallory pulled strings with her then boyfriend, Barfly Billy, to get Sib working on the sidelines of a drag-race contest in Concord. Laziness, she said after Sib reneged, claiming he was sick that weekend. He wasn't ill—it was racecars in the basement all day. He knows, deep down, through all the lies and bullshit, he missed his chance. And people only get a few of those chances, one, maybe two, is all. After that, they must accept their lives regardless of how unappealing they are. As satisfied with things as he claims, not a day goes by that he wished he didn't make a choice.

The basement door opens. He cannot see Mallory, his mother, in her early tipsy glory, atop the steps, surely glaring down with her look of disgust.

"*What, Mom?*" Sib closes the curtain.

“You’re up. Good.” Mallory’s voice is more hoarse than usual (her willful ignorance to the dangers of smoking cigarettes has been catching up to her over the past year). “Your brother is coming over soon. Remember to thank him for coming to see you. Oh, the restaurant down the street is hiring bus boys for second shift. You can borrow my car to go job hunting. Tomorrow, too. And the next day. And the one after that.”

“Bus boy,” he says under his breath. He cannot go search for a job that emasculates him, that draws attention to his age, on his birthday no less, in the snow. He wants to say *sure*, just to gratify her and *no* just to defy her, but thinks *Yoda*, and returns his attention to the television. She shuts the door.

Sib has not seen his brother, Thomas, in quite some time. Too involved with work, Thomas will say if Sib asks him, which is true. Thomas always was a hard worker and was proud to prove this every chance he could. It will be nice to kick back though, tell some jokes, and watch some movies. Sib will make sure Thomas’ visit is short, as he relishes his privacy and the stillness of his room throughout the day.

There are never any interruptions here in “Salem’s Lot”—the name he gave his home, specifically his poorly-lit basement—save for his mother periodically coming down stairs, unannounced, to do her laundry, catching him in compromising positions involving risqué movies. His life, otherwise, revolves in satisfying monotones. All is done, when it is done, without a rush. Only Lou, his pet iguana in the far corner, nearly forgotten most times until he steps away from his branch, keeps him company. Sebastian is himself when he is alone and not a representative for first impressions. Mastering the art of small talk, to say the least, is not on his to-do list. The outside world is too busy, too fast. In here, within an enclosed circle of the moth-eaten couch Mallory gave him two Christmases ago and the twin-size bed that makes creaks from every corner, it is not.

Although alone, Sebastian is not a lonely person. He does not crave adventures into the wild unknown nor lust for a woman’s embrace, both of these, while desirable in

essence, are not a top priority. He is alone by choice. Though, sometimes, like later today, his only friend, Byron, will stop by. He has the power to repel others from his presence rather than attract them. He knows this because he has tried several times to display traits of an extrovert, like talking loudly for no good reason but to gain attention and standing with his legs apart and arms crossed. These all failed. “My youngest is socially inept, nothing like Thomas,” he heard his mother say to someone over the phone some years back. At first, his mother’s comment hurt him, made his heart ache to the point he ignored her for the following week. But the more he realized just how much being alone provided peace for him, how life’s responsibilities seemed to slip away, the more he stopped dwelling on such remarks and accepted his place in the world.

He sips his coffee. It is cold.

It is after eleven when Sib hears the shutting thump of a car door.

“Your friend’s here.” Mallory yells through her living room floor and his drop ceiling. He watches Byron’s snow-covered sneakers almost slip down the stairs. Byron balances a pizza box on his palm and a liter of grape soda under his arm.

“Cold out there,” Byron says. He glances in the glass tank. “Does Lou *ever* move?”

“When he wants.”

Byron places the cardboard box on a table, tears off a pizza slice. “Happy birthday, buddy. Forty-three.” He laughs, covering his mouth. “Still got your hair.” Byron runs his fingers over his own balding scalp a few times.

“By the way,” Byron says, “thank you for the pizza, *Byron.*”

“I don’t have to say thank you to you.”

“And your job? What happened?” Byron says, reaching for soda.

“They said they had me on camera eating stolen fries.” Which they did. But Sebastian will not admit it. He certainly denied it when his manager confronted him. So,

why should he confess to it now? It's only a little white lie. Everyone lies. They come in different degrees.

“No burgers this time?”

“No burgers,” Sib says, feinting a slap in Byron's direction. “They were lying, obviously. My boss just didn't like me from the start. The very first day he had me cleaning toilets. I don't do toilets.”

“Come work for me at the store. You can help make sandwiches,” Byron says.

Sebastian always could count on Byron to take his side. A true friend, loyal to the core. Sib throws his crust into the pizza box, wipes his hands on his shorts, and retrieves a video from the pile of VHS cassettes near his feet. “*A New Hope* or *Empire Strikes Back*?”

“No *Jedi*?”

“I have it, but it's not an option. Ewoks are lame.”

“Understandable. *Empire* then, of course,” Byron says. “Did you talk to your dad today?”

Sib slides the tape into the VCR. “Why would he call? Because it's my birthday? I haven't talked to my father in a long time, Byron. Years. We have nothing to say to each other anyway.”

“I know,” Byron mutters. “I just wanted to know if—“

Sebastian turns slowly, owl-like, towards his friend. The friend goes quiet. The credits to the movie begin.

Byron stands. “Gotta go out to my car. Forgot something.” He bundles his scarf around his thin neck and ascends the stairs.

Sib pauses the movie and makes his way over to the window. He grabs the car controller and pulls the trigger. The Ferrari moves an inch, and then dies. The battery

expired last night. He grabs the car, bringing it to his face, wondering if he will ever have the money to purchase such a car. Probably not.

Byron's sneakers shuffle by, kicking up puffs of white snow. They have known one another for so long they might as well be brothers. And although Tommy is blood, they have nothing in common nor do they seem to care about issues within their own family. Religious holidays are virtually ignored by Sebastian while Thomas helps Mallory cook the turkey during Easter and Christmas ceremonies. Regarding politics, Sebastian, who voted for a saxophone-wielding Democrat in the last election, still suffers insults for his liberal ideologies from his Reagan-loving brother.

Byron, Sebastian's family outside of blood, is different, yet similar. Sib enjoys anything with NASCAR. Byron listens to Bach. Sib hates meeting new people. Byron likes frequenting the occasional tavern. On the surface, they're opposites. How they connect is through seeing themselves as outcasts. They trust very few—that few being one another. Byron remembers the good, only says the good, and acts on the good, so much so that even Sib, sometimes that is, must remain calm when Byron's positive—"Love is all you need"—philosophies become too much to bear. Byron, Sib thinks as he hears a car door close, should be his sibling. Somewhere, somehow, things screwed up.

Byron walks by the window, followed then by a pair of boots that give a hard knock to the snowy asphalt. That's Thomas' walk, a walk that says move, a walk that tells others he has been to war and has seen things normal civilians couldn't handle.

The basement door opens. The cluttered sounds of footsteps trample near. "Lou," Thomas says, banging the glass with his thick knuckle. "You still got this thing?"

Byron sits on the sofa. Sib approaches his brother. He, Sib, not Thomas, proffers a hand, which Thomas doesn't automatically shake, but instead waits a second. Other than their similar complexions of olive skin they have from Mallory, their facial features are unrecognizable. Mallory claims, through and through, that her sons have the same dad,

the one that never calls, lives out in some Texas trailer park with his new family, but Sib thinks not. As always when this close, Sebastian notices Thomas' scar splitting his eyebrow in two even halves. A mark of courage, Thomas termed it when he got back from war, though he never fully explained its origins.

They shake hands, hard. As always, something the brothers do each time they greet one another, they stare. Neither has ever brought this up, though it is done, it seems, mutually. It began when Thomas returned from war. It was something, like the scar, he picked up overseas, a way to intimidate until the weaker breaks eye contact. As always, Sib pictures Tom with an M-16 at his waist, extra magazines slung around his chest, a flashlight and bug spray in his belt with his face painted the color of Vietnam jungles as he crawls through muddy waters and massive anthills. The screams of Tom's comrades screech out when the bombs drop and their limbs separate from their bodies, crying for their mothers in their last seconds, trying to remember special moments to take them out of the reality of pain, like losing their virginity in the backseat of their first car. And the scar: was it hand-to-hand combat? Shrapnel? Maybe it was a bayonette. If the future is anything like the past, Sib will never know. Thomas only spoke of Vietnam a few times after returning. He would get angry when Mallory and Sib asked him for details. He would leave the room, throwing things against the walls until the questions stopped.

Sib turns away.

"How's Mom?" Thomas says. "The same, right?"

The last statement has contempt, a declaration of war packed within it like a trip-wire explosive. Sebastian will, for the time being anyway, give the situation a pass. Why give in to his fight? Even when it's bad, life is good, remember that, Byron said when his own mother died.

Sib says, "I think she's calming down on the drinking."

"And you?" Thomas looks to Byron.

Byron, hearing his name, sits up. “Good, actually. My girlfriend,” he coughs, “Felicia, the catalogue model, has been talking of marriage a lot lately. I really think we have something good planned. Oh, and my district manager wants to promote—”

“Life on the air base is good,” Thomas says, standing up, walking to the window for a peek and sitting back down in one fluid movement. “Mailroom supervisor. Making money. Saving money. The key is to live poor and save money. That’s your plan. Right, Sib? Isn’t that what you’re doing, just sitting on that mound of cash in the bank, waiting to splurge on a Porsche someday?”

Before Sebastian restarts the movie, he lends a tired “yup” to his brother. Does Byron really think they bought that super model girlfriend line? Please. Thomas, too. He’s at the casino in Lincoln so often he has a reserved seat by the Monopoly slot machines. He’s not saving any money. Lies.

It’s nearly three o’clock.

“The Ewoks are my favorite,” Thomas says, looking to Byron first and then to his brother, both of whom don’t respond. “They should have had them in the other two movies.”

Sib opens the curtain to see winter’s progress. Close to twelve inches so far. Each bit floats like the innards of a shredded pillow that land in no rush to join their family and friends as they rest near the other.

Thomas reaches for an inside pocket and pulls out an envelope.

“We’re too old for presents, Tommy.”

Thomas hands Sebastian the pieces of paper. “Too old for the 500?”

Daytona! Sebastian inspects the tickets, bringing them closer to his face, flipping them over, smelling the paper, reading the seat numbers and the date several times, telling himself they must be fakes.

“For us.” Thomas looks around the room. His chest puffs. The tone of his voice grows. “I got them last night. Waited in line for hours.”

“Thank you, Tommy. Seriously, thank you.”

From the corner of his eye, Sib thinks he catches Byron releasing a large exhale.

“We’re brothers.” Thomas looks to Byron, who looks away.

Sebastian recognizes the brow-heavy stare of Thomas. It’s one he has seen many times while growing up. Fights over toys that forced Mallory to take sides and in the process created never-ending grudges. It is that same look that Thomas gives Byron now. It’s a look of power over another, of warning. It is a glare of jealousy disguised by his arrogance. Since the schoolyard, this rivalry has followed them both.

Byron brandishes his own envelope. “What I went out to my car for.”

Placing the tickets on his lap, Sib opens Byron’s gift. A birthday card. The cover is of an open road. On the inside it reads: “To a brother from a brother. Happy Birthday. B.” Sebastian feels his face contort as he wishes like hell his tears don’t overflow. He can’t speak to acknowledge Byron. If he does, he will lose his composure. Sib keeps his eyes on the card, nodding his appreciation in his friend’s direction.

Byron nods at Sebastian. “I gotta go.” He leaves.

Still nervous, but calming his emotions, Sib places the tickets inside the card and exhales. He coughs, rubs his cheeks, and coughs again, before finally glancing at Thomas who shakes his head. He shuts off the movie and flips to news anchors predicting that the snow will melt by tomorrow.

“Getting all teary-eyed on his birthday,” Thomas says to his brother. “Let me read it.”

Does Thomas care? After seeing the emotional exchange just now, maybe, just maybe, Thomas will think differently about Byron and begin to treat him with respect. And when the card transfers from his grasp to Thomas’, he immediately regrets it. It *will*

anger him. There isn't any changing his brother. If Thomas can be changed, it isn't by seeing Sebastian choke up over a birthday card. Thomas takes the tickets out of Byron's card and places them back in his pocket. He, Thomas, the older brother, scans the card, rolling his eyes and then tightening his lips, frowning when he reads what Byron wrote. The card goes from whole to pieces in seconds. They fall, Sebastian will recall in the future, like drifting snow outside his window, down the carpet.

"What do you plan on doing with your life, Sib?" Thomas says. "Play with your racetrack and work odd jobs?"

Sebastian stutters. "The tickets," he manages to say.

Thomas pats his pockets. "I bought the tickets."

Lou leaves his branch, whipping the glass with its tail.

"And that thing over there." Thomas points to the lizard cage before looking around the room. "Your entire life is one race track." He makes circles with his fingers. "Round and round."

The brothers stand close, face-to-face. Sib looks at Thomas' scar. He thinks: It's a lie, isn't it? It isn't from combat. It isn't from saving someone's life. Whatever it is, it is not a result from an act of courage, but cowardice. He ran.

Thomas turns away.

Sib leaves, climbing the stairs two at a time. "Keep the tickets."

Mallory lounges on her recliner, phone-in-hand, watching a soap opera on mute. A small grin shows on her rosy-cheeked face. She stands when Sib walks by.

"Wait a minute," she says. She signals to Sebastian the phone in her grasp, and mouths, "It's *your* father."

Sebastian stops with one hand on the knob of the side door. A gust of wind hits his face. Why would he call now, after so long? Sib takes a step back into the house, thinks of talking to his father, who deep down he truly wants to reconcile with, find out

why he left them for another family. He has so many questions that need answers. For when might Sib get another chance to speak with his Dad? He needs to know if his life would have been different if his father was around. Would he have a family of his own, with a house and a white picket fence? Would Mallory have turned to drinking if he were still here? Sib turns to take the call. He hears the soft thump of a car door. An engine roars to life. With only the shirt he woke in, shorts and no shoes, Sebastian goes outside.

The air smells of ice. The snow is deep, much deeper than Sib thought. The thickness of the fallen snow is such that it covers Byron's sedan in a perfect white mold. Plumes of smoke exit the muffler in dark clouds that turn shades lighter as they rise. Snowflakes begin to cover him, lightly touching his face, some sticking, others immediately melting.

Xavier Hart, the albino kid from the other end of Sherwood Way, walks by, his Pit bull by his side. The teen, dog, and the forty-three year old glance at one another, so quickly you could say they didn't even notice each other. The moment, though in continuous motion from the pumping car smoke and flurries, halts as if a camera clicks, freeze-framing the street scene. Neither acknowledges the other. Sebastian looks at the boy and wonders if he has managed to, or will, make a change when he is his age. He hopes so. The dog barks once as if somehow responding to what Sebastian is thinking with an answer that holds the teen's fate before following his owner away.

Byron sits there, not moving, a blurred image. Sebastian knocks on the car window. As the glass lowers, Sib expects to see a jealous, hurt Byron with concerns as to why he didn't stick up for him when Thomas played the bully. Sebastian has the answers ready for explanation: There is no talking to Thomas—he's one way. Byron should know that by now. Don't be mad. Byron, you are family, a brother, even if our blood says differently. When the window lowers, what Sib sees is the same man he knew all of his life, a man that does not need to get things off his chest in a way that resorts to

arguments. He sees Byron, a half-smile expression on his face, indicating that he already knows the unimportance of brothers saying thank you.

Whispers in the Desert

When Xavier first found his stepfather's handgun, he was on a mission for cash. The cost of rifle pellets had risen dramatically in the past year. A box of one-hundred had been ten dollars, a price not completely out of reach for a then unemployed fourteen-year-old. At the time, baseball cards were his top priority. Within the past year though, the thoughts of collecting and spending time and money on such a hobby grew boring and tiresome. And the sport of shooting appealed to the older Xavier. Now, the price of pellets has skyrocketed twice the normal amount, making it much harder for the still unemployed kid sixteen-year-old. Xavier and his friends used to scrounge chore money together and buy a box that would last a few days, before having to chance stealing again from their parents' piggy banks, or worse, mowing lawns for five bucks only to fight over who gets to shoot the last pellet.

Rather than finding employment, Xavier turned to something easier: thievery. He steals, in part, because his conscience tells him not to. It's a natural talent he never knew he had until he tried. It is effortless, something he has since molded into an art. Staking out the area, knowing routines, the right attire to wear: these are all factors that come without any effort to Xavier. For other thieves, he imagines, the treasure is the prize. This reason is similar to Xavier's, but slightly different. The item at the moment, whatever it is—jewelry or money, anything—is simply the cherry on top. For Xavier, it is the thrill, the rush, his growing heartbeat reinforcing his nature of taking things that aren't his to take. This, he feels, is the journey to becoming a man. Real men do what they want.

His thievery gives him personal knowledge of others. Kato, for instance, his step uncle, probably considers he has everyone fooled thinking he is without money. He claims his wife took it all when she left him, emptied their mutual bank account, and ran off with a black man. In actuality, Kato keeps several rolled up, red-stained cash wads of twenties and fifties and hundreds in a tear on the inner lining of the living room couch where he sleeps. Xavier knows if he takes his uncle's money all at once, he will be the center of accusations. To solve this dilemma, he has been lifting one bill at time, though not too often, every other week, so the amount doesn't seem to shrink.

The things Xavier takes, from practically everyone on Sherwood Way—with the exception of the old man, Conrad—he immediately trades at pawnshops. Usually the adults at those shops are hip to his game, and deny any possible trade. Some, though, call Xavier's attention to their uniqueness. As to why he chooses to keep certain possessions and not others he isn't particularly sure. These items he does decide to keep, rather than passing them on to others, serve as cleverly hidden clusters of memorabilia. Sometimes, when his medication keeps him from sleeping, which is most nights, he will remove the panel under his bed that covers the drainage pipes and valves, and imagine what importance the items mean to their owners. He wonders if the Currans miss the bronze

bust of Chopin he took from their foyer. From their loud arguments Xavier hears while walking Spike, he suspects they have other things on their mind than an absent statue. And Xavier is waiting for Alexis to realize he took the small snow globe from atop her mantle. Knowing how manipulative her mother is, Angela probably already blamed it on her daughter.

Xavier, now, makes sure he has a good view of Tucker, David, and Kato gathering inside the Lincoln Town car. They are to attend the zoo for the next few hours. Xavier has the house to himself. Nobody asked Xavier if he wanted to go, even Tucker. They just left. He uses the clock above the refrigerator to time their departure. He will wait five minutes. If they do happen to come back, they will see him in the kitchen drinking milk from the carton or feeding Spike his daily slop. He stays by the window. A squirrel runs by, an acorn or peanut in its mouth. It leaps upon the bark of a tree, stops upside down, examines its surroundings, and jumps to the grass again. It buries the nut. The squirrel looks around, quickly, before disappearing under the fence. The clock hands flatten at 9:15. Xavier sprints upstairs.

David's room has a break in its complete darkness from a splinter of hallway daylight. The space is black, drapes closed, with a stale smell of dirty laundry mixing in every crevice of the room. He lifts the Ottoman's cover to find crumpled receipts from hardware stores and an old cassette Walkman. The two drawers of the nightstand reveal empty liquor bottles, wrenches, screwdrivers and various sizes of rusty bolts. Last time it was here, right here. Where *is* it?

The gun was in the Ottoman the first time, not disguised amongst the hills of clothes or even recklessly shoved to the bottom from a nervous interruption. It sat in plain sight upon opening the lid. Its sudden presence sent Xavier back a step. Other than on television or in video games or his comic collection, Xavier never saw anything like it. When he finds it, he will show the McGavern's, Peter and Marcus, maybe. Peter, the

graffiti artist of the three, will probably want to draw it, test its proportions in his black book before spraying its likeness on a wall. Marcus will certainly twirl it, point it, and shout some ridiculous line he heard from a movie—*Yippee-Ki-Yay!*—before dropping it.

The closet and bureau are empty except ripped stonewash jeans and faded muscle shirts of *Aerosmith* and *Van Halen*. It is never in the same spot. Maybe David sold it, pawned it, got too scared and finally gave it away. Xavier would never pawn this, though. He would keep it, as his father does (or did), away somewhere, out of sight, better than David. Xavier is a master when it comes to concealing things. He knows better than to store anything valuable in one spot: cash in the comics; jewelry in the mattress. The gun, if he were brave enough to take it for himself, would stay with him at all times. It would never leave his side. He would wear it in the small of his back.

Xavier checks under the bed, blindly swinging his arm for something, anything, snatching handfuls of dust bunnies and decades of old dirt. Next, the hope chest: first drawer, socks. Second drawer, oil-stained T-shirts. When he fiddles with the knobs of the bottom drawer, he finds it is heavier than the others are. He digs, left to right and back again, until his fingertips nudge solid material. He grabs it. Its cold mass—an unbelievable weight for something so small, so knowingly hurtful—mesmerizes Xavier as he palms its curvy surface. It seems old and unused. A scent of raw metal, true steel, consumes him when he brings it to his face. Has it ever been fired? Has it killed someone? It is petite, off-black and plain with scratches across its muzzle. In his comics, they called it a “snub nose,” due to its short barrel.

Is it even real? Xavier has held it several times, but has never shot it nor heard David use it. It could be a fake, like the BB gun Marcus brings for target practice at the sand dunes behind the incinerator. No, Xavier thinks as he unlatches the chamber. It is real, dangerous, loaded, ready. There is something about the gun that tells him it is the real thing. Its presence is authentic when Xavier looks at it. If it were a fake, David would

not have stashed it around his room in different places. If it were a fake, David would not have even kept it. Why have a fake gun? What purpose would that even serve? You cannot defend yourself from an intruder with a fake weapon. No, this small, heavy gun is real.

Xavier is careful, not pointing it in his direction, and not touching the trigger or hammer. This feeling of freedom, of power, of what it could do to someone, is overwhelming. Xavier lifts his glance to his reflection in the mirror, an act of self-realization he usually tries to avoid, long enough to view his pale figure encompassed by the dark.

It is not Xavier Douglas Hart he sees in the mirror. He is a man with this gun, not a boy, not a kid whose mother took her own life in her bathtub. Others will respect him now—if only through fear. And worst, Xavier's pigment ("the albino at the end of the street," he imagines people must say) reminds him every day he is different. Random clerks at convenience stores and teachers have told him repeatedly over the years that the stares and expressions will become irrelevant, and he will fit, one day, into his skin. One day. One day it will all end.

Each time he touches the gun he has the dreadful thought that he must give it back to the room. To hold it is temporary. He cannot visit the gun in the middle of the night. He cannot hold it whenever he wants like the other things he has taken. It is not his to keep. Xavier wants it. And like the other instances when handling the gun, Xavier, curious to know what awaits him after death, impatient since last year and wanting to talk to his mother, raises the barrel to his ear. What will it say? Maybe it sounds like Marcus' BB gun—a soft, barely audible click of metal touching metal. Maybe it will just whisper to him, telling him to find out, pull the trigger. No. It will make a ruckus. Neighbors will know the gun spoke. It will tell them Xavier's secret, that Xavier couldn't handle the pressures of life, couldn't take living without his mother. And when they come to

investigate, they will find the other stolen things. They will say he was the thief of Sherwood Way and that he got what he deserved.

The rolling sounds of skateboard wheels against the cul-de-sac pavement muffle the voices from outside. The doorbell rings. Spike barks.

#

The afternoon heat blazes. They reach their destination. The incinerator has a ghost town vibe. Slim shadows grow fat. Soiled napkins and bent Q-tips drift against the ground, barely tapping the weeds growing from the cracked concrete as they scamper away to the other side of the property. The smokestack, three stories high and midnight black around its spout from decades of burnt debris that thrust poisonous vapor into the air, is now a sleeping dragon, shut down until summoned by the wizards of waste management on Monday morning.

“What’s with the clothes?” Marcus says. “Why do you want to look like an abstract painting, Peter?”

“You wouldn’t understand, little brother,” Peter says. “It’s an art thing.”

Xavier’s fellow walkers, the identical twins Peter and Marcus McGavern, Xavier’s best friends, are his *only* friends, from a time of recess tag and kickball. Their size and mannerisms are similar. Even the barely noticeable facial hair above their upper lips are exact. Everything is the same, from the moment of entering this universe (Peter first by two minutes thirty-nine seconds) with separate umbilical cords somehow tied around both of their necks to their desire to fistfight one another when they disagree.

Marcus chuckles. The backpack he wears gives a rattle. “You call that art? You’re wearing a neon green shirt and yellow sneakers.”

“So? It’s called style,” Peter says. “Something you obviously do not have.”

Xavier blocks out their words. He walks ahead, seeing the peak of the incinerator’s roof getting larger. He doesn’t need to turn around. He knows that by the

dust kicking up, Peter and Marcus have begun their fighting session. This will go on for a few minutes until one of them (usually Peter) pins the other to the ground and makes him apologize.

“I thought your girlfriend was supposed to come,” Marcus says, out of breath. He drops the backpack and stretches. “You didn’t have to hurt my wrist, Peter.”

“Hey, you asked for it.”

“She’s *not* my girlfriend,” Xavier says, unzipping one of the pack’s compartments and pulling out the BB gun. The orange safety tip is gone. None of them could take shooting seriously when they saw the bright, orange barrel. Xavier takes a walk, away from the others, rifle-in-hand. He hears Marcus and Peter in the background mention Alexis again. This is typical of them. They always try to test Xavier’s patience by talking about Alexis, until he snaps, and approaches one of them (usually it’s Peter) and they back off only to play this teasing game again. That is what friends do: they joke; they tease; they test each other’s patience with ridicule. While Xavier, Marcus and Peter have always acted this way with each other, it is Xavier who grows weary of the constant humor. His desire to laugh has diminished since he found his mother, floating lifeless.

It is true—he likes his neighbor, Alexis Dexter, and everyone knows it. She likes him, he suspects. Her oceanic blue eyes tell him. The way she puts an extra high pitch in her giggle tells him. And when she playfully smacks his arm to get his attention, he becomes nervous. Why does she like *him*, though? He doesn’t see why she would or could. Alexis is out of his league. She is a cheerleader, *the* popular girl amongst other popular girls. She is known for dating the football jocks or track stars (once, she dated a tennis captain and endured mockery by her peers every day until she broke up with him).

He points the BB gun, scanning the walls of the incinerator. He looks through the scope at the rusty ladders and their steps hanging by loose rods. Multiple decks lead to different platforms in zigzag designs. The crosshairs pass over the chipped walls where

the paint has eroded from the smoke. He scouts the foliage of nearby bushes until he stops on a brown animal. The rabbit hides, half behind the bush, a nearly perfect camouflage of the roots and the dunes. Its nose, pink, white, and certainly soft to the touch, like velvet, moves at a rapid rate. The memory of failing his driving test comes to his mind. It wasn't his fault, he told the instructor, the guy, some naïve pedestrian who thought crossing the street on a green light was a good idea, just ran out in front of the car. Didn't matter. He failed it. The pressure of an anxious index finger slides over the trigger, applying pressure, more, debating. Failed. Failed.

“Are you crazy, Zave?” a voice yells out. The bunny runs away. “You were gonna shoot that rabbit?”

Lowering the BB rifle, Xavier looks to the boy, Peter. “What did you just say?” He has never told Peter and Marcus of his hatred of being called crazy.

Peter hesitates, shakes his head, quickly, tightly. “Nothing, Zave.” He rattles a can. “I brought red, what's left of it anyway. I got a full can of true blue, white, and some forest green. I think I can manage.”

Xavier unzips a compartment of the backpack and takes the empty bottles he took from David's nightstand. He lines them up against a wall. “All yours.” He hands Marcus the rifle.

Peter has taken to his art, doing what he does best. Some would call him a vandal. Peter would disagree and call himself a real painter, an artist. Peter tried to show his brother and Xavier how to use spray paint to create abstract letters and characters. When Xavier attempted, only scribbly, amateur waves appeared on the wall, and Marcus held the can backwards, spraying his face yellow. Peter now begins his first all-white outline of something unreadable, yet a masterpiece.

Marcus fires a shot, misses, grazing dirt in the background. “I never miss,” he says to Xavier, his voice high.

Xavier grabs the rifle. “Did now.” In one fluid motion, as if a professional marksman, Xavier brings the scope to his eye, and destroys the first bottle, a whiskey. He aims a few centimeters to the left, pulls the trigger, the rum shatters. Then a vodka.

Marcus sighs. “Damn, Zave. You didn’t leave me any.”

It feels good to shoot, to pull that trigger and destroy something, to change and alter something. The surge resounds over his body. The rush pushes its way into his mind, clearing it. Xavier turns, takes a step back, still pointing the rifle in the direction of the twins, not realizing it. He wants to tell them about these feelings, about how when he holds a gun something happens to him.

Marcus puts his hands up. Peter does the same. It isn't words that they say, but more like gasps of disbelief. Xavier notices their eyes: they look around the area, probably checking for exit routes, maybe up the hill, maybe it would be faster to just turn and run the way they came in. Marcus mumbles something that Xavier cannot understand. It is a word, the only word that can bring this kid back down to his reality. And, as the emotions from the word sink in, Xavier, as with the rabbit and the three bottles he just demolished, caresses the trigger, harder and harder, sliding his index finger over it.

The twins both begin speaking now. Xavier cannot hear them. He only sees their lips moving. He raises the scope to his eye, swaying the tip of the BB gun from brother to brother. Their lips move faster now. The scope magnifies everything. And that is when Xavier sees their look. It is in their eyes. The look of fright. He has never seen this on them before, not on anyone.

Throwing the rifle down, Xavier snatches the can from Peter. He throws it against the wall, hitting the nozzle, and scarring the white wall with streaks of red. The dark green bursts in waves against the wall, leaving a trail of sprinkled dust in the air. Then the

blue smacks the wall, pissing dots, making a splattered mark contrasting the whiteness before rolling to the ground.

Their voices, the twins, are not made of words, but murmurs of static that Xavier hears. Their expressions are angry, but when Xavier lifts his gaze to Peter and Marcus, he sees, behind their confusion, a sense of fright in their faces. They pack the BB gun away, speaking again to Xavier in muffled words.

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For the next hour, Xavier lingers on the quiet property alone. Smashed televisions, pools of motor oil, plastic tubing, and empty containers are scattered everywhere. The windows along the incinerator are broken, smashed by other kids like him. And when he walks by, he sees the half reflection of his face; the other half is black, detailing the innards of the building. He walks by another, and another. They distort their reflections, making impossible angles of the dunes they face.

Dusk in July is a unique time of the year. There is a peacefulness of the Earth during these few minutes. It is as if Father Time and Mother Nature have reconciled their differences and merge as one again. The stars show themselves.

There is something serene about the incinerator that Xavier has always liked. Sometimes, he skips school to sit on the hills of the sand dunes and watch the smokestack. There is a beautiful corruption about it. It fills the sky with its resurrected creation. It takes the garbage the world doesn't want and transforms it into something gorgeous, an always changing artwork of vapors, black at their beginnings, then a colossal tornado of grays.

He wonders what the others at his house are thinking. Where is Betty's brat kid? David must be saying by now, feeling slightly responsible for when Betty died, yet uncaring all the same. Haven't heard from your crazy brother all day, Kato must be mocking of Xavier's absence to Tucker, who is surely reading a book. Tucker, in all of

his innocence will feel sympathy for his brother when he realizes Xavier isn't coming back. Tucker will see the problems that Xavier suffered and it won't be a surprise to him anymore. That is how they will question his whereabouts, which, Xavier thinks, they will put only minor emphasis on, until morning comes and they search the house, then the street, the block, then the neighborhood and finally here. They know he comes here. How can they not? It is a short walk through the woods of their backyards. Follow the dirt path past the pond, make your way through the hole in the chain link fence and you're here. The dunes are only a few feet away. The sand borders the incinerator's property. From here it doesn't look like the sand stops. It keeps on. They will find his body, here, atop a dune that resembles the others—a sea of beige with vague traces of crimson seeping into the sand. Xavier imagines when it happens tomorrow, it will be Kato, the uncle who he despises. Kato (he hates to think), will find his lifeless body, much the way that Xavier found his mother, Betty, in the tub. But, rather than fall to his knees, not knowing what to do, grabbing his head to stop any bleeding like he did to his mother's wrists, Kato will probably smirk and think of the craziness that Betty had passed on to her son. And this is where it will happen. Right here.

The gun sits on his lap. It has been here, hidden all the while in his belt. Sharing this information to the twins was an option, but not a sincere one. Xavier took David's gun from his room for one reason. He brushes off the particles of sand that have made their way onto the gun's frame. He looks up, straight up, to the black eternity, seeing only the pure brilliance of the distant stars. Everyone lets him down. Xavier Hart doesn't have anyone to talk to. Not anymore. His mother was the only one. Why did she do that? Xavier just wants to be with her, with someone who can love him, understand him, that was Betty, his rock, his shoulder, his mom. She is gone and now only the whispers remain, whispers of a possible future if he listens to them. And the more he listens, the more he believes that is the way to be with her again.

The stars continue their shine, all are bright. But one, directly above him, does not pulse with life the way the others do. This one seems to sit idle, part of the group of other stars, though not participating in the night sky. Why does it look so different from the others? Why doesn't it shine? It can. It should. But, it doesn't. Maybe it thinks it is alone. But, it isn't. It just can't see the others around it. He blinks, hoping the star will move, twitch, something that will show him it is alive. The whispers grow louder and louder until their soft voices begin to yell. His index finger touches the cold trigger. Crazy, they call him now. And crazy, they will call him afterwards. The screams turn to a high pitch, deafening the scene. The lone star fades, then pulses, then shines.